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## Information for inspiration: understanding information-seeking behaviour and library usage of students at the Hong Kong Design Institute

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## **Abstract**

The process of information- and inspiration-seeking behaviours amongst artists and designers often involve direct observation, note-taking, collecting materials and image samples, recognizing styles, analyzing movements, patterns, textures, as well as experimenting with different materials and techniques, etc. 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 aims to report an empirical study of the inspiration-seeking process and other information-related behaviours amongst the students at the Hong Kong Design Institute (HKDI).

An online questionnaire was created via SurveyMonkey.com asking the HKDI students specific questions: the types of library preferred, students' comfort level with the HKDI Library, student respondents' information needs, as well as their preferred sources for inspiration, etc. They were also asked which media and venues they look to for information, which was important to their creative process. The duration of this study was 3 months, with data collection being conducted between September to December 2013. A total number of 327 current students at the HKDI completed this survey. The research findings suggested that information-seeking behaviours amongst the HKDI students were reflective of the fluid and creative nature of the art and design domain. The HKDI students were regular users of the traditional printed resources as well as the physical libraries. They also placed heavy reliance on the Internet and social networks when it came to inspiration seeking. Inspiration was found from a very diverse and 'idiosyncratic' set of sources, and often via accidental discovery. Their status as emergent practitioners also suggested a strong need for career advice and interactions with peers practicing in the art and design field.

## **1. 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 behaviours 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 institutions 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 in Hong Kong offering professional studies in visual arts and design. The studio-based programmes are based on 6 subject specializations; in digital animation, digital filmmaking, digital photography, interactive media, product design and visual communication. The curriculum is based on creativity, ideas, innovation, exploration, and developing professional skills. Thus, it places more emphasis on the visual studio practices than the conceptual text-based curriculum.

### **1.1. Aims of Study & Research Questions**

The information-related behaviours of art and design practitioners have rarely been examined explicitly or systematically. For this reason, their use of libraries and their inspiration-seeking process are often described as an ‘enigma’ by many LIS professionals. As highlighted by Mason (2009), artists traditionally possess sophisticated skills in creative, critical and analytical thinking, etc. Investigating the ways these creative and intellectual skills are translated into information behaviours is likely to be of great benefit to the LIS community. As described by Cowan (2004), these creative and visually-oriented art and design users may not have the same information needs or look for library materials according to the same logic as other regular users, which might result in an entirely different way to use the library space, as well as its services and collection, etc. 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 attempts to investigate the information needs and information-seeking practices amongst the students at the HKDI, in order to improve the library services to this group. In other words, the major purpose of the study was to determine if the participants used the HKDI Library, as well as the other libraries and/or art archives in Hong Kong, how much they used them, and

what information they sought there. My hypothesis was that art and design students may differ in their information needs as well as library use, when compared to students of other academic disciplines. I wanted to understand whether and how the nature of art and design might influence the way they sought information for their artistic and creative endeavours. In other words, 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, as well as visual literacy instructions, etc.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

Studies of information behaviours and practices amongst designers and studio artists are rare and hard to find. As noted by Hason (2009), artists in general are considered financially poor. Unlike other well-established professionals, e.g., lawyers and medical doctors, most art and design practitioners would not pay for the products or services that result from the LIS research. For this reason, LIS professionals in general do not see the need and the benefits of investigating into their information needs.

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 (1983, 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. 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. Meanwhile, other studies identified a need by artists and art students, for a wide range of formats and materials, including text, images and other multimedia forms, etc.; but a limitation in the value of traditional library services and the printed collection (Reed & Tanner, 2001; Visick, Hendrickon & Bowan, 2006; Bennett, 2007; Gregory, 2007, Hemmig 2009).

According to Teague (1987, p. 101), it is the “expensive data” - finding the information to inspire creativity, i.e., the need for direct observation of the original objects and the excitement derived from accidental discovery of information/inspiration, which bewilder many LIS professionals. Teague (1987), 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.”* Design students have also been referred to as “pariah(s) of library instruction” (p. 99). Previous research into the information practices and library use of art and design students has been limited, and often hindered by the assumptions that artists in general had no need for the physical libraries or were unable to use the printed collection and OPAC effectively and efficiently, even when they needed to use them. 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 (Pacey, 1982; Day & McDowell, 1985; Stam, 1995; Frank, 1999; Reed & Tanner, 2001).

According to Wilson and McCarthy (2010, p. 185), art and design students are referred to as “visual and kinesthetic learners”. Via the use of focus group interviews, Frank (1999) attempted to develop a deeper understanding of the student artists’ creative process and concerns under the academic library setting. Findings of Frank’s study indicated that some student artists simply abandoned the effort of searching the OPAC and chose to randomly browse the physical collection instead. Meanwhile, both Littrell (2001) and Lorenzen (2004) further emphasized the significance of on-shelf browsing. As described by Wilson and McCarthy (2010), *“visual and kinesthetic learners retrieve information via screens, but also via physical engagement with objects. This is a unique learning style. We have a lot more browsing in the art and design stacks... 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”* (p. 185). For this reason, open stacks in art and design libraries are almost a necessity. Furthermore, providing immediate access to library materials for art and design students were is equally important.

In a recent article published in 2011, Mason and Robinson discussed the information-related practices of emerging artists and designers. 78 practicing artists and designers in the United Kingdom participated in the online questionnaire survey. Survey results revealed that these emerging artists placed strong reliance on Internet and social networks, while at the same time using the traditional printed tools and the physical libraries for finding information. Students' status as emerging practitioners implied that their information behaviours and library use were governed greatly by financial factors, and also by their need to interact with their peers. Meanwhile, inspiration was found from a range of very diverse sources in various formats, and often via 'serendipitous' means – in other words, seeking items that “forest original observation through accidental discovery” (Bennett, 2006, p. 38).

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 individualized range of information and inspiration needs. As highlighted by (Glubizzi, p. 135), *“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, for they are looking for something that evokes a certain quality or that coheres with an ideal image they hold in their minds. 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?”* Cobbledick (1996) identified 5 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; (3) marketing and career guidance; and (4) 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’, etc. Teague (1987) also noted that student designers in particular need information on techniques, plus information to ‘stimulate’ and ‘motivate’ for their creative endeavours.

Previous research in this area has generally been conducted on small numbers of studio artists. Furthermore, no significant research has been carried out with the aim of discovering the library experiences and information practices amongst practicing designers. Finally, studies in to the information needs in relations to the ‘business’ sides of being a student/professional artist or

designer are also limited.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

This study was set out to answer the following research questions:

1. To identify what information sources the HKDI students would like to consult, and whether or not they needed to go outside their own institution's Library for information and inspiration.
2. Boundaries of art information and sources of inspiration – to identify the scope of subjects and media of use amongst the HKDI students, especially for 'inspiration' for their own work.
3. To discover the patterns of information-seeking behaviours amongst the HKDI students as compared to other arts and humanities students in general, specifically, the role of social and personal contacts with the other HKDI students, and influence of availability of library resources. For example, did students' behaviours inform a lack of resources, or were their behaviours shaped by the convenient access, resourcefulness or appropriateness of the library collection.

### **1.4. Values & Significance of the Study**

Information-related behaviours amongst art and design practitioners have been little studied. Previous studies were limited to small numbers of practicing artists and designers. This is one of very few papers considering the information needs and behaviours of current art and design students in Asia. In fact, this is one of very few empirical studies reporting the information practices and inspiration needs amongst art and design students in Hong Kong, and has a large sample size of any such study.



## **2. Research Methods**

### **2.1. Research Population & Data Collection**

The method of distributing the questionnaire online was chosen, as it would enable to reach as many respondents as possible. The online questionnaire generated both quantitative and qualitative data. This questionnaire survey was created via using SurveyMonkey.com, and was available from September to December 2013, for a total of 3 months. A link to the questionnaire was emailed via the HKDI Library to each individual student, with a brief note explaining the aims of the project and requesting their participation. The online survey asked the HKDI students specific questions: the types of library preferred, visiting hours, students' comfort level with the HKDI Library, respondents' information needs, as well as their preferred sources for inspiration, etc. They were also asked which media and venues to look for information that was important to their creative process. A total number of 331 respondents from HKDI completed this survey. 4 responses were eliminated as not falling within the scope of the survey, as they were HKDI staff, and not students. The relatively high number of student respondents (327 in total) to the questionnaire survey increased the reliability of the overall findings.

### **2.2. Limitations**

The survey results of this study were collected from one single art and design college library in Hong Kong. No observations or interviews were carried out. Hence, the collected survey results would not allow for accurate generalizations about the student experiences at other art and design colleges across the same region. Furthermore, this survey approach was limited to respondents who had access to the Internet. Some students might find online questionnaires off-putting. In addition, some HKDI students simply did not read batch emails sent out by the Institute's central system. Since they did not take part in the actual survey, their perceptions were not represented in the survey results of this study. Finally, the closed-ended questions might have forced the respondents to give overly simplistic responses to complex issues, e.g., 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, etc.

## **3. Data Analysis**

### **3.1. Respondent Profile**

The HKDI Library exists to serve the teaching mission of its parent institution. For this reason, the user demographics (e.g., average age and education background) strongly influence the information needs in the Library. For this study, a total number of 327 responses were collected through the online questionnaire survey. Of all the student respondents, 219 (67%) were female and the remaining 108 (33%) were male (see Table A). In addition, close to 76% of the total surveyed population had high school qualification (see Table C). With reference to the age distributions amongst the respondents, 201 (61.5%) were under the age of 20; meanwhile, 125 (38.2%) were aged 20 to 30 (see Table B). With reference to the status of these student respondents, 317 (96.9%) were full-time students, while only 8 (2.5%) were studying at HKDI on a part-time basis (see Table D). A full list of media / specializations amongst the student respondents is shown in Table E.

### **3.2. HKDI Library & Usage Patterns Amongst the Respondents**

A large portion of the student respondents indicated that they used their institution's Library (the library space & the physical collection) "frequently" (i.e., 2 visits / week) (see Table F). Their reasons for using the HKDI Library are shown in Table G. The range of purposes for using the HKDI Library are reported in Table H. It could be because students tended to use the most convenient and accessible source, and the HKDI Library is its central and convenient location on campus, i.e., being close to the classrooms and students' studios. For this reason, the HKDI Library appeared to be the best and most convenient option for these students. Another reason could be that these art and design students preferred the methods of browsing for information, as well as acquiring information for free. 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.*" 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 G). Other factors contributing to the popularity amongst the students could be the design of the physical environment of the Library itself (Shill and Tonner, 2004). In fact, the findings in an earlier qualitative study conducted by Lo *et al.* (2014) and the results of the current study both indicated that the students considered the physical comfort and convenience inside the HKDI Library to be very important (see Table K).

### **3.3. Sources & Boundaries of Inspiration & Art Information**

This part of the survey sought to identify the sources of inspiration for this group of art and design students. Questions on the questionnaire were categorized into 3 main groups, i.e., by media, venues, and artistic/cultural activities, etc.

#### **3.3.1. Media for Finding Inspiration**

The answers to this question yielded almost 18 different media, which the HKDI students could use as sources of inspiration, covering various media, as well as social activities (see Tables H & H-1). This diversity can be summed up by saying, for art and design students, many things can become information sources or inspiration for creativity. Survey results indicated that the Internet was the most-chosen medium for finding inspiration amongst the student respondents (selected by 234 respondents) - demonstrating that the Internet was of huge importance to these students at HKDI. In fact, over a decade ago, Van Zijl and Gericke (2001) already 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, as well as no need for any special or prerequisite skills. Meanwhile, findings indicated that printed art magazines and books were the second most popular medium after Internet (selected by 207 respondents). Films/movies (selected by 172 respondents), and television (chosen by 105 respondents) were identified to be the third and fourth most popular media amongst the respondents (see Table H), but so was wandering around aimlessly on the streets (chosen by 11 respondents) (see Table H-1). As explained by Downey (1993), artists use books for 2 primary reasons: to obtain technical information, and to find inspiration. While searching for inspiration,

artists do not just limit themselves to books about art. At the same time, using books does not necessarily require that they have to use libraries. HKDI students' access to books and other printed resources will be further discussed in the subsequent sections. It can be seen from the list of items that a library could never fulfill all the needs of an artist or designer (see Tables H & I).

### **3.3.2. Places for Finding Inspirations: Art Museums, Bookstores, Shopping Malls & Public Libraries, etc.**

According to Cobbledick (1996), printed resources are the most important information sources for artists. Parallel to what Cobbledick has noted, survey results indicated the HKDI students depended heavily on the HKDI Library for current information found in printed magazine and periodicals (see Table G). Results conveyed the notion that students at HKDI, in general, often read printed books and journals for their own practice (see Table G), and very likely that they do not restrict their reading to the field of art and design. Findings also suggested that many HKDI students used more than one type of venue for finding inspiration. The questionnaire asked which libraries and other public venues the students preferred to use, and they were allowed multiple answers. Results indicated that a majority (169 (60.1%)) of respondents would use their own institution's Library as the primary source for finding inspiration (see Tables I & I-1). 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%) of the total respondents would use them for finding inspiration (see Table I). Student respondents also considered the HKDI Library and its services to be "Important" to their studies (see Table J). Interestingly, similar findings were also reported by both Stam (1995) and Reed & Tanner (2001), i.e., artists liked to browse bookstores, and bookstores were often used as an alternative to a library for finding images of visual references.

### **3.3.3. 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 archiving this purpose (see Table I). As mentioned in the previous section, it may be because of its central and convenient location on campus. One must admit that ease of access could be as a major factor in determining where the HKDI students would go for information. In addition, the student respondents considered the physical comfort and the attractive surroundings of the HKDI Library to be very important (see Table K). According to Lo *et al.* (2014), the HKDI students shared a strong preference for their own institution's Library, which they felt was more comfortable and friendlier, and with helpful staff who would not prevent them from talking openly inside the Library. In addition, as mentioned in the previous section, students depended on the HKDI Library for current information found in printed journals and periodicals (see Table G). Students also expressed a desire to use the HKDI Library resources more extensively if it had more printed books and magazines (see Table L). According to Littrell (2001), art students tended to use the library for books relating directly to their area of study for inspiration. She attributed this 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.

#### **3.3.4. Students Participating in Other Artistic / Cultural Activities**

Art and design students see the world in distinctive ways, and the list of activities in Tables M and M-1 fully justify the view of art and design students as responding an almost unlimited range of inspirations, both abstract and concrete; as well as reflecting the fluid and tangential nature of art and design. Many of them would step outside of their regular 'routine', and tried some other forms of artistic/cultural expressions and collaborations on a regular basis (see Tables M & M-1) with the aim to develop new techniques and creativity, as well as to experience the inspiration across a wide array of artistic/cultural disciplines. Findings indicated that a large number of them had wide-ranging 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 M). Attending a live concert/theatre performance could be an incredibly fulfilling and stimulating experience. It does not only allow students to experience the energy and excitement of

being part of an audience, but such experience also provides them a range of stimuli, through which they could make creative leaps and connections, when a whole ‘fest’ of theatre arts and design trends are laid out before them. Most importantly, it would enable the students to develop a better understanding of the interrelationship between different forms of creative arts, as well as to catch a glimpse of the professional reality of the art and design world. Such results conveyed the notion that the students also took part in other artistic/cultural activities, with the aim of drawing inspiration and creative ideas from other disciplines, which may not be part of the HKDI’s formal curricula. Experiences in the other artistic and cultural activities involve no doubt inspire new ideas and ways of creative self-expression. It would also provide the opportunities for the students to get a glimpse of the wider professional design world.

### **3.3.5. Career Advices & Development**

With reference to the information needs specific to careers development and professional practice, it seemed that many respondents already realized the need of having knowledge of areas like marketing and employment before graduation. Results indicated 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 their interest in workshops on job opportunities related to art and design, while another 114 (42.1%) expressed an interest in trainee programmes (see Tables N & N-1). Such findings conveyed the notion 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) also reported that the most practical information needs of artists are those relating to competition opportunities, grants, fellowships, residencies, and the “business” of art, etc. Bennett (2006) also noted that art and design students in general appreciated help when they were provided some in this area. A similar number of respondents also felt they need advice on how to write proposals and funding applications. Findings indicated that all these different up-to-date and business skills are necessary for preparing these art and design students for the opportunities available to them upon graduation.

### **3.3.6. HKDI Library & Social Networking**

### **3.3.6.1. Online Social Networking**

The information-seeking activities of art and design students are generally private endeavours. Meanwhile, online social platforms are gaining increasing importance as methods for communication, networking, and promotion amongst artists and designers. Findings indicated a high percentage 79.5% (260) of the respondents used online social networking tools daily (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Blog, etc.) to communicate with others (see Tables O & O-1). The questionnaire did not ask explicitly whether they used such online social platforms for promoting or developing their own artwork, and it certainly would be an interesting area for further research. Although these students might have very little contact with art and design professionals outside of the Institute, 164 respondents indicated they would “sometimes” read blogs by other designers/artists; while another 31 of them stated that they would “follow” such blogs regularly. 70 respondents said they did not read any of such blogs (see Table P). Online social networking applications allow students to share messages, images, as well as videos, etc., whether they are inside the Library, in their own homes or elsewhere. It would therefore be interesting to find to what extent art or design was being discussed in any of these online communications, and the usefulness of Facebook for publicizing, exhibitions, and private views amongst the student respondents. It certainly would be an interesting area for further research.

### **3.3.6.2. Social Networking in Person**

Other surveys on usage and library design have indicated that the design of the physical environment can have significant impact on library users (Shill & Tonner, 2004). Good physical design for the library is no doubt critical to the success of it. When the students were asked, “*What do you usually use the HKDI Library for?*”, findings indicated that in addition to using the Library to work on assignments and to look for books and articles for reference, 102 (31.2%) 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 G). The HKDI Library may be the first and most convenient and comfortable place for ‘hooking up’ to the institutional network. Furthermore, as highlighted by Lo *et al.* (2014), 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 (see Table G). 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.”*

#### **4. Discussion of Main Findings**

The purpose of this study has 3 goals. The first was to determine the information-seeking practices of the HKDI students. The second purpose was 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. The final purpose was to find out whether the HKDI students preferred to use and whether wanted to go outside their own Library for information. The 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. Today, however, online images resources are the norm for image access amongst art and design practitioners. In the digital era, the Internet is no doubt integral to the artists’ and designers’ practice, and is often the first resource consulted when searching for either information or inspiration. The student respondents were seen as enthusiastic users of the traditional printed resources, and also of their own institution’s Library. Such findings have disproven the earlier studies that the physical libraries and printed collection were of little value to artist and design practitioners. Furthermore, the preferred methods of the HKDI students surveyed used a variety of sources and multiple venues, rather than indicating a general avoidance of the physical libraries. Findings of this study reflected themes that were similar to the study by Cobblestick (1996), i.e., inspiration, visual images, marketing, and career guidance appeared to be the most sought-after information amongst artists. Older assumptions that artists did not read books and were interested only in images might have proven to be overly simplistic. The realization that a high percentage of respondents did use the HKDI Library is indeed a very encouraging finding. The results conveyed the notion that the HKDI Library’s printed collection remained the most important information and inspiration source



for most HKDI students. Student respondents also expressed a desire to use the resources even more if the Library had more printed books, journals, and magazines (see Table L). At the same time, libraries in general can be seen as 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 also used multiple venues including art museums, bookstores, shopping malls, and local public libraries (see Table I). Such findings were parallel to another study by Ferguson (1986), i.e., emerging artists utilized a wide range of inspirational materials which extend far beyond books of different genres, and confirm the concept of “obscure sources” of inspiration – that are only available outside the physical library.

The variety of media, venues listed in Tables E, H and I fully explained the views of these art and design students as responding to an almost unlimited range of inspirations. As described by Ferguson (1986), inspirational sources are both abstract and concrete; some are truly “obscure sources”, i.e., 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. And the reason for these HKDI students seeking information and inspiration in so many areas/venues, it is very unlikely that any library collection could fulfill all their wide-ranging needs (Ferguson, 1986). 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 inspiration. Furthermore, information sources could range from ‘subjective’ and ‘systematic,’ from ‘popular’ culture to ‘high’ culture, etc. (see Tables I & I-1)

As art and design information is dominated by visual images, the motives and methods of art inquiry may vary greatly amongst individual students. For this reason, there is no surprise that the ‘accidental discovery’ of art information and inspiration is a usual phenomenon amongst the art and design students. In fact, it is a highly diverse activity where the process seems more ‘intuitive’ than ‘systematic’. In short, the art and design students used a diverse pool of resources, many of which often exist outside the collections and services of the physical library.

With reference to social networking, various social networking tools such as Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and Flickr, etc., are becoming increasingly integrated into educational practices. Findings

indicated that these student respondents were also increasingly employing such social networking applications for a variety of learning, as well as information-/experience-sharing purposes. Findings were parallel another study by Lo *et al.* (2014), i.e., 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, either through having someone to talk about ideas, and exchange concepts and arguments, etc. Hemming (2008) also noted that visual arts students could benefit from using the library as a communal gathering place, and acquire information via socialization. By embracing many perspectives from other people, the potential for innovation and originality could be unlimited. In fact, the concept of “socialization as information retrieval” has also been brought forth by Payne. According to Payne (2010, p. 287), *“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.”*

#### 4.1. Challenges Faced by Art & Design Librarians

*“Like all libraries, art libraries are currently undergoing collections upheaval: art librarians are attempting to stay on top of the latest technology and digital information while concurrently maintaining our print and heritage collections. Unlike other libraries, however, art libraries are in a delicate position. Good art information is not necessarily digital art information, particularly because images in digital formats can often be unreliable or, in the case of many databases, not included at all.”* (Glubizzi & Glassman, p. 49) *“Art and design librarians have one of the thickest jobs in the profession. Because our users are so different from the average as librarians are distinct from those of our library colleagues. I often find that I spend as much time explaining what I do to other librarians as I do to my users. Our roles are simply different.”* (Glubizzi & Glassman, p. xiii)

Works of art and design often reflect the whole of human experience and creation. As a result, “information-seeking” is not an ideal concept to use in the investigation of what informs an artist’s / designer’s creative work. 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.”* What are the information needs and inspiration sources of art and design practitioners? There is no simple answer to this question. According to Cowan (2004, p. 19) *“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.”*

Art and design communications use a multiplicity of approaches. 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 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-accession anything with pictures....”* (Phillips, 1986, p. 9). *“The information needs of artists are too diverse to be addressed solely within the confines of art librarianship.”* According to Cowan (2004), the concept of information seeking can be a creative process, driven by curiosity, pleasure or sensory feedback, rather than being motivated by a

particular need. Results also conveyed the notion that visual images remained the central focus and unique method through which these art and design students to communicate or express themselves. However, these students often needed images and other, specific, information, which often a single source, such as a library, cannot supply. 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.”* Art and design students are highly visual and kinesthetic learners. As suggested by Haras (2010, p. 201), when serving these art and design students, librarians should be aware of the following visual grammar they may use to structure their thinking: medium (sculpture, painting, photograph, etc.), colour, black & white, texture, composition, perspective, scale, objects, figures, background, use of words and title of piece. Haras further emphasized that although their information-searching approach is not necessarily dependent on the use of library, students should also need training on how to use the library properly. As highlighted by Gluibizzi (2010, p. 134), *“what is essential for art librarians, and for those users art librarians serve, to keep in mind is that even viewers who have reached a high degree of visual literacy may not see all the possibilities available to them for understanding images... By their very natures, visual literacy and the art student’s experience of the library are qualitative and individual experiences; therefore it is important that librarians respond in kind with personalized, responsive services.”*

There was also the notion that the HKDI students were facing pressing needs for career guidance, as well as other information on developing both the technical and professional aspects of practice. According to Harbour (2005), there are many opportunities that could enable art and design graduates to use their skills that they have acquired through their studies in the areas of marketing, advertising, film, television, management, publishing, education and research, etc. Unfortunately, many art and design schools simultaneously expect their students to graduate as professional ‘artists’ and ‘designers’, without giving them any means to achieve this. As highlighted by Aston (1999), there is a need to encourage students to be more proactive in their career preparation. As suggested by Harbour’s (2005), what is offered [in art education] needs better contextualization in terms of possible employment opportunities. In other words, as emerging artists, they need to be

taught how to write a CV; how to present a portfolio; how to market their work and themselves; how to establish contacts with other professionals in the industry, etc. For this reason, the HKDI Library, as an information service provider, should also acknowledge the different areas of employment opportunity available to the students. In order to tackle this, the HKDI Library could consider developing library workshops for providing careers advices tailored to the subject specialism, and thereby encouraging students to be more pro-active in their career preparation. Resolving their information needs for both the creative and the business sides would no doubt create important incentives for the Library to provide ongoing programmes and services, which are valuable to the HKDI students.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study examined how art and design students acquire information and inspiration relevant to their studies at HKDI, as well as established a base from which for conducting further study. General patterns of library use are also described. Findings suggested that the library has a significant role to play in education institutions for art and design, since 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 and inspirational materials, but also as an important place for social networking. Furthermore, having all of this information available at a single venue did not seem to be a concern for these art and design students. Findings also suggested that there is an increasing preference for a less structured but more user-centred, collaborative environment for library services and collections.

Studio art and design students are unique library patrons, and their information needs are not the same as those of other humanities students. They used multiple venues to find very diverse set of information resources, which serve as a 'springboard' for their creative inspirations. The findings also indicated that seemingly anything could be considered art information or inspiration. This study may serve as a point of departure for further examinations of information practices amongst art and design practitioners and their library use. Since 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 organizing the resources (both printed and online) to

which they refer. It is hoped that this study contributes to the overall knowledge of the information-seeking behaviours of artist and design practitioners, and that the information collected will be useful to the LIS professionals.

## **6. Recommendations for Further Research**

Unlike typical academic students, their art and design counterparts prefer to communicate ideas through images and thrive on ‘accidental’ discovery. For this reason, their usage patterns and information needs cannot be expected to be the same as other traditional library users. LIS professionals in all types of facilities – public, academic, and specialized libraries – should acknowledge the presence of artists and designers amongst their users and become more acquainted with their unique needs. Further research should include the following:

1. To conduct small focus group interviews with the HKDI students who do not use a library in any capacity.
2. A variety of art and design libraries need to be studied for a more objective conclusion, as well as utilizing a more direct approach research on this community of practicing artists and designers, such as focus group interviews, observations, etc.
3. Expanding research to include faculty members from HKDI and other art education institutes. It would allow a comparison with the responses of art and design students and indicate which information-seeking behaviours of art and design students are unique to them.
4. The Internet is integral to the artists’ practice and it is often the first resource consulted when searching for information. On the other hand, artists’ use of the Internet has only been cursorily investigated. It would be interesting to find out whether art or design was being discussed in any of these communications, or used for exhibiting their own artwork.

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