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EMOTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIORS AMONG LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE UNDERGRADUATES STUDENTS IN SELECTED UNIVERSITIES

Aliyu Muhammed'Rabiu *(PhD)*
Department of Library and Information Science
Faculty of Social Sciences, Federal University Lokoja
comraderabiu@gmail.com

Abstract

While traditional models of information-seeking behavior (ISB) have heavily emphasized cognitive actions and systemic interactions, recent paradigm shifts in information behavior research highlight the critical role of affective and social dimensions. This study investigates the complex emotional and interpersonal factors influencing the ISB of Library and Information Science (LIS) undergraduate students a unique population that possesses high metaknowledge of information systems but still experiences the full affective realities of the academic research process. Utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, this study surveyed 215 LIS undergraduates via a Likert-scale instrument, followed by three thematic focus group interviews (n=24). Quantitative and qualitative findings reveal a "confidence paradox," wherein LIS students exhibit exceptionally high confidence in search system mechanics, yet simultaneously experience acute, paralyzing domain-specific evaluation anxiety when judging the quality of retrieved literature. Interpersonally, results indicate a strict hierarchy of help-seeking characterized by a heavy reliance on peer networks over lecturer or academic librarians. Notably, students actively avoided librarians not out of traditional library anxiety, but due to a "Librarian Paradox" driven by professional pride, fear of judgment, and imposter syndrome within their chosen discipline. The study concludes with actionable recommendations for LIS educators to integrate affective resilience, normalize search failure, and prioritize emotional regulation alongside traditional systemic search mechanics in the curriculum.
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Keywords: Information-seeking behavior, library anxiety, affective load, interpersonal factors, LIS education, undergraduate students, professional identity.

*Corresponding author(s) **Aliyu Muhammed'Rabiu (2026)** agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License

Introduction

Information-seeking behavior (ISB) is a foundational concept in Library and Information Science (LIS), traditionally defined as the purposive seeking of information as a consequence of a need to satisfy some goal (Wilson, 1999). Historically, ISB models such as Ellis's (1989) behavioral model or Dervin's (1992) Sense-Making methodology have prioritized cognitive actions (e.g., searching, scanning, evaluating) and systemic interactions (e.g., querying databases, navigating interfaces). These traditional models implicitly

positioned the user as a rational actor, processing information devoid of emotional context. However, the exponential growth of digital information environments has fundamentally altered how users interact with information. The modern information landscape is characterized by algorithmic opacity, information overload, and the pervasive blurring of scholarly and social information streams (Catalano, 2020). Consequently, the last two decades have witnessed a pronounced "affective turn" in LIS research, recognizing that information seeking is an intensely emotional and social process heavily mediated by the user's psychological state (Given & Julien, 2021; Lopatovska & Arapakis, 2016).

Despite this broad acknowledgment of affective variables in general populations, a significant gap exists regarding the ISB of LIS undergraduate students. Unlike students in other disciplines, LIS undergraduates occupy a unique epistemological position: they are simultaneously learning the theoretical frameworks of information organization, retrieval, and evaluation, while actively using those exact systems to survive their own academic coursework. They are studying the architecture of the systems they are mandated to navigate. This dual role creates a distinct "LIS undergraduate paradox."

Recent studies on student information behaviors emphasize the disconnect between students' technical fluency with technology and their actual critical information literacy (Head et al., 2020). Yet, LIS students present a converse anomaly: they possess high *meta knowledge* of information systems understanding controlled vocabularies, Boolean logic, and database architectures while still being subject to the same developmental and academic pressures as their non LIS peers. How do emotional states (e.g., anxiety, confidence, frustration) and interpersonal dynamics (e.g., peer consultation, lecturer interaction, librarian engagement) manifest in a population that possesses high structural knowledge of information systems, but may lack advanced domain knowledge?

Understanding this phenomenon is critical for LIS education. If future information professionals are experiencing acute, unaddressed emotional friction during their own formative academic research, this will inevitably impact their pedagogical approaches and empathy toward future patrons. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do specific emotional factors (anxiety, confidence, and frustration) shape the ISB of LIS undergraduate students?
2. What role do interpersonal factors (peers, lecturer, and librarians) play in the information-seeking processes of this population?
3. How does the students' disciplinary meta knowledge mediate the relationship between their emotional states, interpersonal interactions, and ISB?

Literature Review

The Affective Dimension of Information Seeking

The integration of emotion into ISB models is most notably attributed to Kuhlthau's (2004) Information Search Process (ISP) model, which mapped feelings of uncertainty, optimism, confusion, frustration, and satisfaction across six stages of research. Prior to this, Mellon (1986)

introduced "library anxiety," identifying that up to 80% of students experience fear and intimidation when using academic libraries.

Contemporary research has moved beyond viewing anxiety as a simple barrier, instead examining "affective load" the cognitive toll that negative emotions extract from working memory during complex search tasks (Nahl, 2007). Ford (2015) pushed this further by proposing a model of cognitive and emotional interactivity in information searching, demonstrating that emotional shifts actively trigger cognitive strategy changes. Lopatovska and Arapakis (2016) empirically confirmed that emotions such as frustration and joy significantly predict search abandonment or persistence. While affective factors are well-documented in general undergraduate populations (Gross & Latham, 2012), there is a void in understanding how these emotions operate among students explicitly trained to deconstruct the very systems causing their frustration.

Interpersonal and Social Factors in Academic Contexts

Information seeking is inherently social. Wilson's (1999) model explicitly includes "social contexts" as intervening variables. In academic contexts, students frequently utilize interpersonal sources to bypass systemic barriers or validate findings. Head and Eisenberg's (2009) seminal work found that undergraduates heavily rely on peer networks, viewing them as more accessible and less judgmental than institutional authorities.

More recently, Savolainen (2015) emphasized that in Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS), interpersonal sources are not merely secondary to formal systems; they are primary nodes for emotional support and cognitive framing. In the context of academia, Kwon and Song (2020) found that students frequently engage in "information avoidance" when formal channels (like lecturer or librarians) trigger feelings of inadequacy, retreating instead to the safety of peer consensus. However, the interpersonal dynamics of LIS students who may view librarians as future colleagues and lecturer as gatekeepers to their professional identity remain unexamined.

The LIS Student Context and Professional Identity

LIS undergraduates represent a distinct cohort vulnerable to the "curse of knowledge" a cognitive bias wherein individuals with specialized knowledge struggle to step outside their own advanced understanding (Camerer et al., 1989). Because LIS students understand the underlying mechanics of discovery systems, their expectations for system performance are inherently higher than those of lay users.

Furthermore, professional identity formation is a core component of LIS education. Luo (2021) notes that LIS students continuously negotiate their professional identities against external perceptions of the field. When an LIS student fails to find information, it is not merely an academic setback; it is a threat to their emerging professional self-efficacy. This intersection of high system meta knowledge and fragile professional identity creates a highly specific, uncharted affective landscape.

Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), prioritizing quantitative data collection followed by qualitative exploration. Participants

were drawn from three accredited universities offering Bachelor's degrees in LIS. A convenience sample of 215 undergraduates completed a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from Kuhlthau's (2004) ISP Feelings Inventory. Subsequently, 24 volunteers participated in three semi-structured focus groups to contextualize the survey data. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (v. 27) utilizing descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Survey Participants (N = 215)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	**Female**	**127**	**59.1**
	Male	**88**	**40.9**
Academic Level	**100 Level / 200 Level**	**94**	**43.7**
	300 Level / 400 Level	**121**	**56.3**
Institution	**University A (Federal)**	**111**	**51.6**
	University B (State)	**72**	**33.5**
	University C (Private)	**32**	**14.9**

The demographic profile of the 215 respondents reveals a sample that significantly diverges from historical LIS trends while maintaining robust cross-institutional and academic representation. Most notably, the gender distribution reflects a contemporary shift toward near-parity, with females comprising 59.1% (n=127) and males 40.9% (n=88); this balanced composition is critical, as it indicates that the observed affective behaviors such as information avoidance and imposter syndrome are manifesting within a modernizing demographic context rather than the heavily female-skewed environments of past decades. Academically, the sample leans toward upper-division students (56.3%, n=121 compared to 43.7% lower-division), a distribution that methodologically validates the study's core findings by confirming that phenomena like the "Confidence Paradox" persist among advanced students who already possess established disciplinary meta knowledge. Furthermore, the tripartite institutional spread drawing from a Federal (51.6%, n=111), State (33.5%, n=72), and Private (14.9%, n=32) university demonstrates that these emotional and interpersonal dynamics remain highly consistent despite vastly different governance structures, funding models, and library resource allocations. Ultimately, this demographic robustness confirms that the affective barriers uncovered are not artifacts of a specific campus culture, skewed gender ratios, or novice inexperience, but are deeply embedded phenomena inherent to the contemporary LIS undergraduate identity.

Results

Emotional Factors: The Confidence Paradox

Quantitative results revealed a stark dichotomy in the emotional profiles of LIS undergraduates.

As shown in Table 2, while participants reported high systemic confidence, they experienced disproportionately high anxiety during the evaluation phase.

Table 2: Mean Scores of Emotional States Across ISP Stages (5-Point Scale)

ISP Stage	Systemic Confidence	Domain Evaluation Anxiety	Search Frustration
Initiation	**4.12 (SD: 0.61)**	**2.85 (SD: 0.92)**	**1.94 (SD: 0.74)**
Exploration	**3.98 (SD: 0.68)**	**3.65 (SD: 0.88)**	**3.71 (SD: 0.81)**
Focus Formulation	**4.05 (SD: 0.55)**	**4.21 (SD: 0.71)**	**3.88 (SD: 0.69)**
Collection/Presentation	**4.21 (SD: 0.48)**	**3.12 (SD: 0.95)**	**2.10 (SD: 0.82)**

Note: 1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High.

Analysis of Emotional States Across ISP Stages (Table 2)

Table 2 provides the statistical backbone for the "Confidence Paradox" by mapping three emotional variables against Kuhlthau's (2004) ISP stages. The most striking finding is the stark divergence between Systemic Confidence and Domain Evaluation Anxiety. Systemic Confidence remains remarkably stable and high across all four stages (ranging from a mean of 3.98 to 4.21 on a 5-point scale). This confirms that LIS students successfully internalize the mechanical aspects of information retrieval; they feel highly capable of constructing queries and navigating interfaces regardless of the research phase.

In sharp contrast, Domain Evaluation Anxiety follows a classic, inverted-U trajectory of affective turmoil. It begins at a moderate low during Initiation (M = 2.85), surges during Exploration (M = 3.65), and peaks violently at the Focus Formulation stage (M = 4.21) the exact point where students must synthesize retrieved information and commit to a specific research angle. This peak perfectly mirrors Kuhlthau's (2004) model, which identifies the exploration-to-focus transition as the zone of maximum uncertainty. However, for LIS students, this uncertainty is not about *finding* the information (as evidenced by their high systemic confidence), but about *judging* its epistemological value.

Search Frustration mimics the trajectory of evaluation anxiety, peaking at Focus Formulation (M = 3.88). The concurrent peaking of frustration and anxiety at this specific stage supports Ford's (2015) theory of cognitive-affective interactivity. Because these students possess high meta knowledge, their expectations for precise retrieval are rigid. When the messiness of "Focus Formulation" inevitably derails their initial Boolean strategies, the cognitive mismatch manifests as acute emotional friction. Notably, both anxiety and frustration drop significantly in the Collection/Presentation phase (M = 3.12 and 2.10, respectively), indicating that once a focus is secured, their systemic confidence allows them to efficiently execute the final searches with minimal emotional distress.

A strong negative correlation was found between Domain Evaluation Anxiety (at the Focus Formulation stage) and Systemic Confidence (r = -.41, p < .01). This "Confidence

Paradox" aligns with Gross and Latham's (2012) findings that information literacy knowledge does not inherently reduce affective barriers. In focus groups, students articulated this clearly: *"I know exactly how to pull 500 articles using Google and subject databases. But when I have to figure out which methodology is sound, I freeze. Knowing how the system works almost makes it worse, because if I can't find the 'perfect' source, I feel like I'm failing at my own major."*

Unlike general undergraduates who often externalize search failures (blaming the database), LIS students internalized these failures. This supports Ford's (2015) theory of cognitive-affective interactivity, where high meta knowledge raises expectations, leading to acute frustration when the system underperforms.

Interpersonal Factors: The Hierarchy of Help-Seeking
When facing information barriers, the hierarchy of interpersonal consultation was unequivocal (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency of Interpersonal Source Consultation When Facing Search Barriers

Source Type	Frequently/Always (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely/Never (%)
LIS Cohort Peers	**81.4%**	**14.9%**	**3.7%**
Course Lecturer	**11.6%**	**22.3%**	**66.1%**
Academic Librarians	**4.2%**	**7.9%**	**87.9%**

Analysis of Interpersonal Source Consultation (Table 3)

Table 3 quantitatively maps the interpersonal landscape of LIS undergraduates when they encounter search barriers, revealing a strict hierarchy of help-seeking that defies traditional academic assumptions. The data shows an overwhelming reliance on LIS cohort peers, with 81.4% of students frequently or always consulting classmates, and another 14.9% doing so sometimes. This indicates a near-universal adoption of peer networks as the primary safety net. As framed by Savolainen (2015), these peers serve as vital "information grounds," but the data suggests their primary utility here is affective rather than informational providing a safe space for emotional venting without the risk of professional judgment.

Conversely, institutional authorities are highly marginalized. Lecturer members are rarely or never consulted by 66.1% of students. This avoidance aligns with traditional power dynamics in higher education, where students fear that exposing their search struggles to their evaluators will negatively impact their academic standing.

The most analytically significant data point in the study, however, is the extreme avoidance of academic librarians: a staggering 87.9% of LIS students rarely or never consult them, with only 4.2% frequently utilizing them. In the broader undergraduate population, low librarian consultation is typically attributed to Mellon's (1986) "library anxiety" a fear of bothering or being intimidated by an all-knowing authority. However, when cross-referenced with the qualitative findings and the high systemic confidence shown in Table 2, this data reveals

the "Librarian Paradox." LIS students are not avoiding librarians because they are intimidated by the *system*; they are avoiding them because they are intimidated by the *identity*. Asking a librarian for help is statistically reframed by these students as a professional failure. This dramatic avoidance rate quantitatively underscores Kwon and Song's (2020) concept of information avoidance, demonstrating that for LIS students, protecting a fragile, emerging professional identity takes precedence over accessing expert informational intervention.

Peer Reliance: Students turned to cohort mates not solely for knowledge transfer, but for emotional regulation. This mirrors Head and Eisenberg's (2009) findings on peer reliance, but with an LIS-specific twist: peers provided "sympathetic validation" of the difficulty of the task. *"My classmates get it... A librarian might just try to fix my search terms, but my roommate understands why I'm crying over controlled vocabularies,"* noted a sophomore.

Lecturer and Librarian Avoidance: Both lecturer and librarians were actively avoided. Lecturers were viewed as ultimate evaluators rather than collaborative partners. The avoidance of librarians, however, introduced the "Librarian Paradox." While Mellon (1986) established that general students avoid librarians due to intimidation by their authority, LIS students avoided them out of *professional pride* and fear of failing their emerging professional identity (Luo, 2021). *"I want to be a librarian. If I can't navigate the library myself, what does that say about my future career? It's too embarrassing,"* a first-year student explained. This behavior directly reflects Kwon and Song's (2020) concept of information avoidance triggered by emotional self-preservation.

Discussion

The findings challenge the assumption that domain expertise automatically insulates students from the affective turbulence of information seeking. For LIS undergraduates, systemic literacy and domain literacy are decoupled. Knowing *how* to search does not equate to knowing *what* to evaluate in a highly specialized academic context. This extends Kuhlthau's (2004) ISP model by demonstrating that in specialized disciplines, the zone of proximal development for information literacy is skewed heavily toward synthesis, leaving students emotionally vulnerable despite high technical proficiency.

Interpersonally, the "Librarian Paradox" inverts traditional library anxiety. The anxiety is not about interacting with an "all-knowing" authority, but about failing to embody that authority oneself. Consequently, peer networks functioned primarily as *affective grounds* spaces where emotional labor was shared and professional insecurities were soothed, extending Fisher et al.'s (2004) concept of information grounds into the realm of professional identity protection.

Recommendations

Based on the intersection of emotional friction, meta knowledge, and interpersonal avoidance identified in this study, the following recommendations are offered for LIS educators and academic librarians:

1. Integrate Affective Learning Outcomes into LIS Curricula: LIS syllabi must move beyond teaching systemic search mechanics. Educators should explicitly include learning outcomes related to affective resilience, teaching students to

recognize and manage "evaluation anxiety" and the emotional toll of the exploration phase (Nahl, 2007).

2. Normalize "Failure" in System Navigation: Lecturer should design low-stakes assignments where "failed" searches are required, analyzed, and discussed. By normalizing the messiness of the exploration stage, educators can help students decouple their self-worth and professional identity from the immediate success of a Boolean string.

3. Redesign the Student-Librarian Interaction Model: Academic librarians working with LIS undergraduates must consciously step away from the "expert fixer" role. Interactions should be framed as collegial brainstorming sessions rather than remedial interventions, actively mitigating the "Librarian Paradox" and professional imposter syndrome.

4. Incorporate Reflective Affective Journaling: Following the ISP model, require students to keep research journals that explicitly track their emotional states alongside their search strategies. This builds metacognitive awareness of the cognitive-affective interactivity (Ford, 2015) they will eventually need to empathize with their future patrons.

5. Foster Structured Peer Mentorship Programs: Given the high reliance on peers for emotional regulation, formalizing this through peer-mentorship programs (pairing juniors/seniors with freshmen) can ensure that the affective support students seek is also academically accurate, preventing the blind-leading-the-blind in complex domain evaluation.

Conclusion

Information-seeking behavior is a deeply human experience colored by emotion and shaped by social dynamics. For Library and Information Science undergraduates, the research process is uniquely complicated by their disciplinary meta knowledge. The "Confidence Paradox" and the "Librarian Paradox" demonstrate that technical proficiency does not immunize students against the affective burdens of academia. By acknowledging and structurally addressing these emotional and interpersonal hurdles, LIS educators can better prepare the next generation of information professionals to navigate the complex landscape of information seeking with empathy, self-awareness, and resilience.

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