FACTORS AFFECTING BOOK SELECTION IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of rival media as the preferred source for knowledge acquisition, libraries needs to justify and register their continuous contribution to the academic enterprise as it is regarded as a centre-piece for the institution’s effectiveness. Getting the precise material in a single search using related keywords is currently not feasible. Though users may eventually locate the material of choice, but this only happens after scanning irrelevant materials returned during the search process. Service in the library environment is similar but a bit specific about whom the customers are, what their needs are including the risks and costs the customers are shielded from. The Library service could be defined as a set of value propositions delivered to patrons in the form of book loans, on-line renewal and reservation of books, interlibrary loan, viewing or borrowing of multimedia items, reference and advisory services etc. Hence, in building an effective library system, there is need to understand the factors that influence users’ search pattern. This paper looks into the factors that affect book selection in academic libraries. A survey was carried out on UTM Library users as a case study to identify the most influential factor in book selection.

KEYWORDS: Library Information System, Academic libraries, Database, Book search

1 INTRODUCTION

The challenge of information overload, which is prevalent in academic environments, for students and lecturers, is a major issue that requires urgent attention in the library community. The availability of copious resources provides a wealth of accessible materials and beneficial information having the required capacity to provide quality information thereby aiding teaching and research. However, access to the substitute catalogues over the web has widened the scope of scholarly materials and services users can patronize at the expense of the physical library. This without doubt is of huge advantage to patrons because of the ubiquitous access.

Furthermore, it became clear that traditional methods of information retrieval in the library have regularly failed to provide materials based on user profiles during a query session [1]. These situations generally put the library in a vulnerable position.

Zhen (2007) also suggested that traditional library systems have failed to meet up with the demands of readers due to advancement in Information technology. He argued that the university library has gradually transformed into a digital library hence providing recommendation to individual users based on their interest is the way forward [2]. Therefore, we need to know what factors influence books selection and also how library patrons search for books on a visit to the library.

It’s important to note that the phenomenon of convergent or divergent information search pattern largely influences the manner adopted by patrons in selection of book(s) in library. Björneborn (2008) highlighted in his study that, “A pattern was discovered in those he interviewed. The first group performed goal-directed search for materials...
needed for tasks such as work, studies or exam etc while the other group browsed for enjoyable and pleasurable materials for inspiration and relaxation.” [3].

By inference, goal-directed searches are convergent while enjoyable and pleasurable browsing is divergent in nature. However, we must reiterate that in academic settings such as universities, goal-directed searches are much more preferable given the discipline of each patron. Therefore, if students are conscious of their skill level and research scope in comparison to their peers, factors such as:

- what books their peers are reading?
- what are the expertise levels of such books? and
- Of what relevance or usefulness the books could be to them?

will largely influence patron’s book selection. Given the premise just mentioned, it will be very helpful for them if their library provides services that recommend books they might want to study. To make reading more interesting to these students, the library may estimate the duration needed to read the material based on the student’s profile [4]. This approach will definitely aid learning skills and over time add considerable growth to the university image as it breeds students that learn progressively and compete healthily amongst each other. This will also aid the book procurement and acquisition process by the officials. Fore knowledge about students skill level and interest will also aid efficient stocking of useful materials on the shelf in the affected library.

Also information such as book reviews and ranking according to their level of importance which may be low, medium or high will assist in providing fewer search results that are more useful, less computation intensive and preference-based. Although, the attributes of library books in most libraries is not exhaustive more attributes such as relevance, flagging [5], autograph, expertise level etc are additional features that could improve book recommendation.

2 Attributes That Can Affect Book Selection

This section sheds more light on the definition of the suggested attributes.

i Difficulty or Expertise Level

The difficulty or expertise level is a very important factor as recognized in this thesis. It tends to categorize books on the shelf into groups such as beginner, intermediate and expert. The terms for classification are unbounded and could also be low, medium and high etc. Generally, it’s believed that the best way to improve one’s level of reading skills is to read. Secondly, students are believed to make remarkable gains in reading effort when the material studied is close to their instructional or reading capacity. At this pace, the material is perceived to be neither easy nor difficult but appropriate [6].

Over the years, an NGO, MetaMetric created Lexile® Framework to measure people’s reading ability. It was a systematic method to reading which examines both reading skills alongside text ensuring an unbiased standard of comparison between the text and its readers. This Framework contains both the Lexile measure and scale. The former is a score for either a person’s reading ability or the text difficulty preceded by “L” (for example 550L). This framework also features a Lexile scale which has readings for both starters and experts between values less than 200L and values greater than 1700L [7]. Although, MetaMetric’s product was being criticized by Prof. Stephen Krashen of the University of Southern California in his article, “The Lexile framework: Unnecessary and Potentially Harmful”, it was widely believed that the odds identified doesn’t justify abandoning the entire framework. The figure below summarizes the framework.

Figure 1: The Lexiles Reading Framework

ii Peer Pressure

Students’ ability to independently base their studies on self-selected reading during a career build-up is a very important skill for growth and a demonstration of their keen interest for success on that path. However, challenges such as competition amongst his/her peers, limited job opportunities, scarcity of materials etc. could limit him to carefully select materials from library repositories taking a cue from his immediate environment especially his peers. [8] sighted fourteen major tactics for book
selection by students emphasizing peer pressure in six of these tactics namely:

- Talking to a friend
- Seeing someone else’s reading
- Talking to a teacher or librarian
- Using a book club list
- Receiving a book as a present
- Working on a school unit such as poetry, mythology etc.

Bogel (2011) in his survey of 4182 respondents sought to understand the idea of shared reading which was mainly about book selection based on recommendation from friends, family members, public or school librarian or other adults. The result from his study was stunning as recommendation from friends stood at 81.6% while cumulative recommendation from school or public librarians was between 3 to 6%. Although, this doesn’t mean other factors influencing borrowing from library collection are ineffective, it only emphasizes the importance of social interaction with peers as a motivating factor to identify not just what to read but why these books are borrowed [9].

iii Cover Art

The idea of borrowing a book having sighted its cover might sound unreasonable but studies have revealed that visual effects on attractive cover arts of books create a book-appeal sort of feeling in patrons during their visit to the library. Kies (1995) examined the effect of cover art on teens, booksellers, teachers, librarians and patrons in general and concluded in his study that modifying the cover arts in coming editions of selected book samples need to be current and in tune with the future to be appealing to the public. A recent study by Bogel (2011) also confirms Kies assertion whereby young readers were interested more in books with visual appeal such as interesting cover or illustrative contents. Furthermore, Moss and Hendershot (2002) while analyzing borrowing patterns of non-fiction trade books by sixth grade students discovered some motivators which influenced their decision to borrow these materials. Asides curiosity about topic and patron’s personal connection with the book, its visual feature was also a motivating factor that contributed in the book selection process.

You will agree that this has affected the interior décor of libraries where books are arranged on attractive stands with their cover arts noticeable in the library lobby.

iv Author’s Personality and Writing Style.

An author’s personality is defined by his/her choice of words, fluency and voice which are presented in written form. This is the author’s brand that defines his personality. In effect, a writing style is an art of dressing up a written text to suite a unique context, audience or purpose [10]. In the same vein, Kathleen posits that authors must choose their words and sentence structures carefully to achieve the desired effect and carry the audience along ensuring there’s flow of idea from the beginning to the end.

Although, Robinson (1985) has a different view from Kathleen with regards to an author’s writing style being a pointer to the author’s personality, both researchers agree that the former consists of nothing but a set of verbal elements and concrete nouns to depict certain kinds of vocabulary, sentence structure and imagery [11].

In essence, to select appropriate materials from the library collections, students mostly in the Arts discipline, might have specific authors in mind [9] given their unique communication skills via writing. Chris (2012) emphasized that the tactic, “following an author” was the most popular strategy of book selection by students in their research because authors had peculiar motivators as their guiding principles for writing. Examples are:

- a gripping opening
- an engaging cover
- fairly short sentences
- a recognizable and contemporary setting etc.

Therefore, authors who can communicate effectively, painting the appropriate pictures in the minds of their readers will attract patrons’ attention to their books for both purposes of learning and leisure.

v Relevance Rank

In the perspective of the patron, this is a measure of how helpful the material borrowed is and it is highly influenced by peer review and user rating on popular book sites like Amazon or Goodreads. It is also important to note that materials recommended by peers, lecturers or supervisors in teaching or discussion sessions prove to be very useful for patrons when they borrow them.

It is also a measure of the correctness of the response given to a search query by an indexed page. When you have many query matches after a search, the search engine must rank the results based on their relevance ranking or scores.
Therefore, we define relevance ranking as an attempt to measure how closely a web page or entry fits the search terms [12].

vi  Flagging

This is a phenomenon that highlights the level of importance, sensitivity or rareness of an item. An important application of flagging is its use by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI in the USA. Checking out some flagged books in public libraries, online book stores or websites might cause the patron to be on their watch list [13].

vii  Autograph

This is a practice by notable personalities whereby they append their signature to any items presented to them by their admirers or fans. In the perspective of academic world and library science, autograph otherwise called Book Signing was defined by Wikipedia as, “a practice of whereby an author appends his signature to the title page of a book.”

It’s an event, occasionally held at a bookstore or library where by the author presents himself to readers of his book to append his signature to their copies. It’s a popular practise as collectors crave for books signed by the author because this increases the book’s value. The importance of autographing is that authors and bookstores indirectly promote books for high sales. Furthermore, we must bear in mind that no matter how impracticable this may seem, the electronic autographing of library books in the web 2.0 or 3.0 era by renowned scholars or lecturers of a particular institution would eventually raise interesting patterns in students’ attitude to reading and borrowing in the library. The overall effect of this is that students will learn at a faster pace as they know that their lecturers or supervisors have certified same materials as valuable.

viii  Sales Publicity and Popularity.

The “Tim Ferris Effect” [13] is a phenomenon that occurs rarely but gives aspiring authors the will to succeed, gain popularity for their books and increase sales publicity. It’s an idea that addresses the huge potential behind activities that equip the authors with the opportunity to identify their audience, carve a niche to understand them better and thrill them passionately with their style of communication.

It’s important to state that book attributes such as popularity and sales publicity go together as increase in one causes an increase in the other and vice versa. For instance, if a book gets lots of sales publicity and the book becomes popular, the chances of borrowing such a book from the library will increase drastically.

ix  Shelf Life

According to Wikipedia and Encarta dictionary, Shelf life is defined as the length of time a stored commodity becomes unfit for use. Therefore, the shelf life of a book describes the period during which the content of the book is deemed relevant for contemporary use. However, the advent of EBook, a recent technological innovation, has changed the way in which shelf life is defined.

Catherine (2012) stated that the EBook revolution hinders the shelf life of the existence of the library itself meaning no matter the level of relevance of the library collections, electronic copies of such materials will cause a general decline in the number of patrons visiting the library since the materials can be accessed remotely. This not only endangers the library institution but also put publishers in great dilemma [15].

In order to survive this threat and extend the shelf life of its collections including the library itself as a symbolic institution of learning, the modern library must:

- identify her customers such as casual, researcher, students and
- integrate information technology with its current systems in such a way that it meets the demands of its readers [16].

3 CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA, UTM LIBRARY

In order to identify and emphasize on the relevance and of the attributes discussed in Section 2, a survey instrument was designed and administered to postgraduate students both online and physically in the Faculty of Computing. The questionnaire was pilot tested in order to strengthen the survey instrument. The survey was carried out to examine the most influential factor(s) affecting book selection in the Faculty of Computing among postgraduate student during their visit to UTM library. During the exercise, a total of 50 responses were collected and analyzed as shown in Table 1.
Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was discovered that two factors namely, (a) relevance of the material and (b) influence of peer pressure on book borrowing were most effective. It was discovered after extensive studies that these two attributes have numerical weight as seen on popular book selling sites such as Amazon and Goodreads in their recommendation / review section where the number of stars (5 stars, 4 stars etc) depict the book’s relevance while total number of people who chose a particular star signifies the extent of peer pressure which could influence others to buy such books. Both sites combined these weights to determine the average rating of every book sold. The result is summarized in figure 2.

Figure 2: Influential factors affecting book selection in UTM Library

4 CONCLUSION

Having identified the influential factors, it is important to note that the ultimate objectives of studying these factors are to enhance both user experience and the quality of interaction with library users when they access the library information system. The next phase of this research is to employ a data mining technique that will use the identified factor(s) along with transaction logs of books borrowed by students to provide recommendation of better books when the library information system is put to use. To achieve this, mining tools that can automatically analyze these data in huge databases for valuable information must be exploited [17].

In conclusion, the successful libraries will be those that give the feeling of a dynamic building which provides a high level of interaction between its books and readers while putting into consideration the factors that influence users’ search.

REFERENCES


