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## Information Search Strategies Among Theological Faculty Members in Tamil Nadu

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# Information Search Strategies Among Theological Faculty Members in Tamil Nadu



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## **ABSTRACT**

This research article studies the information seeking search strategies used by theological faculty members in Tamil Nadu. It is based on a structured questionnaire sent to 120 select faculty members, of which 101 questionnaires were returned, achieving a response rate of 84%. Major findings of this study contribute to understanding the awareness and use of search options among respondents. Basic and keyword search options are commonly used by respondents in online sources while preferences for references from books and journals are more popular among faculty members to locate bibliographic information in print sources. This study further noted that faculty members are generally seeking information for preparing class lectures and preaching sermons and respondents indicated that Google searching is highly used by them for locating online information. The respondents expressed that borrowing books and using reference books and journals are the most compelling reasons for visiting libraries. Reading table of contents and reading specific articles are common strategies used by faculty members while looking for information in print resources. The non-availability of full-text articles, lack of scholarly national publications and retrieving irrelevant articles are problems faculty members commonly face while searching online resources. The findings of this study have impact on library instruction, and for improving library services and collections in theological institutions in Tamil Nadu.

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## **Introduction**

Information seeking is a continuous activity that involves searching, locating and using information for one's needs. Information seeking behaviour, as described by Wilson (1999), includes "those activities a person may engage in when identifying their own needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information" (p. 249). Information seeking strategies is one of the Big6 skills in information processing models proposed by Eisenberg and Berwowitz (1990). Information seeking is also represented in Lowe and Eisenberg's (2008) methodology. Wilson (1999) defines the various methods used to locate information in print and online digital environments.

Information searching behaviour also involves use of Boolean search methods and others interacting with information systems (Wilson, 2000). Information Communication Technology (ICT) has changed the way information is created, acquired, stored, searched, and retrieved. ICT has enabled information seeking process to be easier, and more convenient, saving the time of the seeker. For this article, we have researched information search methods used by faculty members in theological colleges in Tamil Nadu. This study has further revealed that among other print sources, references from books and journals are highly used to locate bibliographic information, whereas the Google search option is *always* chosen by faculty members in searching online resources.

### **Purpose of this study**

The purpose of this study is to identify the information seeking strategies employed by theological faculty members in Tamil Nadu, noting their awareness and use of various online and print sources to locate bibliographic information. More specifically, the following are the objectives of this study:

- To identify the search strategies familiar to and used by theology faculty members in Tamil Nadu.
- To study the print sources familiar to and used by respondents to locate bibliographic information.
- To study the online sources (i.e. search engines, online catalogues, and others). familiar to and used by respondents to locate bibliographic information.
- To study the search patterns used by respondents for locating information in print sources.
- To identify the major problems faced by respondents while searching for online information.
- To identify the various purposes and techniques used by respondents to begin their search for information for various purposes.
- To offer suggestions to improve faculty information search process and over problems faced by them while searching for information.

### **Need for the study**

Although extensive research has been carried out to study the information seeking behaviour of social science faculty members, no study has been carried out to assess the information search strategies of theological faculty members in South Asia or India and, more specifically, South India. Therefore, this study is important and unique for theological libraries to understand the information search strategy of an understudied community.

## Review of literature

Several studies on information seeking behaviour have been carried out, and a few select studies in social science and theology are listed below to represent the previous literature in this research area.

Al-Squri's (2011) study found that social science scholars in Sultan Qaboos University skim important elements such as table of contents, indexes, and abstracts of resources to reach relevant parts of resources (p. 7). However, this study has not identified how often above techniques are applied to search for information in print resources. The search engines such as Google and Yahoo are widely used for online information searching. George, Bright, Hurlbert, Linke, & St. Clair (2006) conducted a study that noted that 73% of respondents prefer Google for their information seeking. Washington-Hoagland and Clougherty (2003) studied faculty use of academic libraries in the University of Iowa and noted that 74% of respondents use the internet to locate answers or documents needed for their work.

The previous studies conducted among theological students and faculty members in various contexts provided a glimpse of their preferred information search process in online and offline settings. Siong Ngor Ng (2013) studied theology students in distance learning and found that 70% of participants use Google to look for information related to their academic work. Although the study by Ng was on theology students in distance learning, it did not touch upon how theological faculty members' information search strategies differ from online learners. Lipton and Nyrose's (2011) study regarding theological students in Alberta Bible College noted that Google and Google Books are heavily used to find information for course-related projects.

Milas' (2015) study of information behaviour of theology students in advanced programs found that they begin gathering information with online resources and the library catalogue. In her study among graduate students in Slavic Studies on information literacy, Wallach (2009) noted that the students often begin their research using Google. A similar study by Matsveru (2013) noted that Namibian pastors rely on the Internet when they need information. Gaba (2009) in her study interviewed 65 seminary students and noted that students prefer Google and searching inside books to utilizing journal databases for their information needs. A number of factors influence theologians to prefer Google and Google Books for information searching, these include but are not limited to the ability to preview the table of contents and the ease of ability to download.

A study on the information-seeking habits of Southern Baptist Ministers, emphasizing their roles as administrator, preacher, and caregiver found that they most often sought information in order to prepare for sermons (Lambert, 2010). This worthwhile study shows remarkable similarities to theological faculty members in Tamil Nadu, who

often utilize online resources to search for information related to mentoring and preaching. Tanner (1994) in his research notes that pastors prefer biblical reference works second to their personal library collection for their information need.

Wicks' (1996) study of pastors' information seeking behaviour found a preference for formal sources for their preaching tasks. Lacović, Badurina, and Džinić (2017) in their study on the use of information technology among Catholic Priests found that 70.7% of them found religious webpages useful for their role as caregiver. Gorman's (1990) study on the information seeking behavior among theologians in seven theological colleges in Adelaide, Australia revealed that the primary method of locating information is browsing in libraries and scanning the contents of journals (p. 155). This brief literature review appears to suggest that Google and Google Books are preferred to locate online information. The literature also suggests that glancing through preliminary pages is another venue utilized to locate information.

## **Scope and Methodology**

This study was conducted using a structured questionnaire method. Apart from general information such as age, gender, years of experience, academic rank, level of teaching, and area of specialization, the questionnaire included five sections. The first section includes questions on the familiarity and use of print sources to locate bibliographic information. The second section consists of questions on the familiarity and use of online sources such as online catalogues, various search engines, and others. The third section had questions on familiarity and use of various search methods employed to locate information. The questions in the fourth section were on techniques, such as browsing an entire book or journal, reading tables of contents, consulting indexes, and others techniques to scan print sources. The fifth section included questions related to the types of problems faced by respondents while searching for online information.

## **Sampling**

For this study, a simple random sampling technique was followed. Faculty members from 12 graduate theological colleges in Tamil Nadu were chosen for this study. It was estimated that at least 10 faculty members from each institution are involved in teaching graduate-level courses and above. The reason for choosing this group was because they are more exposed to teaching at a higher education level and their information searches will likely be distinct from those who teach at the diploma or bachelor's degree level. Questionnaires were distributed to 120 selected theology faculty members who are teaching at the graduate level or above. Of these 120 distributed surveys, 101 questionnaires were filled in and returned, reaching an 84% response rate. Participants were asked to respond anonymously in order to ensure factual answers. Collected responses were statistically analyzed using SPSS 24 and the QuestionPro ([www.questionpro.com](http://www.questionpro.com)) online survey tool.

## Results and discussions

Table 1 shows respondents' demographics. 91% of respondents are male and 9% are female. The reason for the smaller number of female respondents may be that fewer female faculty members are involved in theological education. This confirms the trend observed in a study by Sellan and Sornam (2017) conducted in Karnataka researching the awareness and use of electronic resources, suggesting that theological education is still dominated by males (p. 92).

**Table 1: Demography of respondents**

Gender	Percentage (%)	Count(N)
Male	91%	92
Female	9%	9
Total	100%	101

Table 2 below shows that 46% of respondents belong to the age group 31-40 years, 17% of respondents belong to the age group below 30 years, and 17% are 51 years old and above. The highest number of respondents who participated in this study belong to the age group of 31-40 years.

**Table 2: Age of the respondents**

Respondents age	Percentage (%)	Count(N)
Below 30	17%	17
31-40 Years	46%	46
41-50 Years	21%	21
51 Years and above	17%	17
Total	100%	101

**Table 3: Qualification of the respondents**

Degree	Percentage (%)	Count(N)
Masters	73%	74
Doctorate	27%	27
Total	100%	101

Table 3 above shows that 73% of respondents have either a Master of Theology (MTh) or a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree. The MTh is the minimum qualification for appointment as Assistant Professor in theological institutions in India.

**Table 4: Academic rank**

<b>Academic Rank</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>Count(N)</b>
Professor	21%	21
Associate Professor	24%	25
Assistant Professor	55%	55
Total	100%	101

Table 4 shows the academic rank of the participants. More than 50% of respondents are Assistant Professors and 24% of the participants are Associate Professors. Below, table 5 shows the distribution of respondents by the departments in which they teach. The highest number of respondents (21%) represent specialization in theology and ethics.

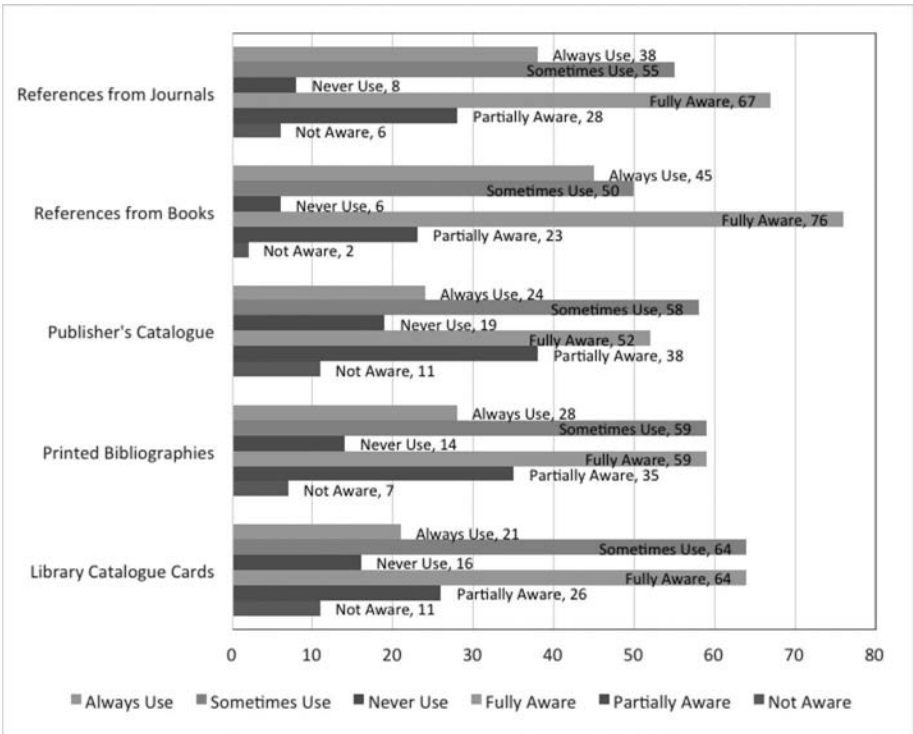
**Table 5: Respondents' area of specialization**

<b>Department</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>Count(N)</b>
Biblical Studies - Old Testament	12%	12
Biblical Studies - New Testament	14%	14
Theology and Ethics	21%	21
Pastoral Theology	14%	14
Missions	12%	12
History of Christianity	8%	8
Religions	12%	12
Philosophy	1%	1
Other	7%	7
Total	100%	101

In order to understand the respondents' awareness level and frequency of use of various print sources for locating bibliographic information, the questions were asked to note their level of awareness of print sources and frequency of use. Figure 1 shows that 76 respondents are fully aware of references from books and

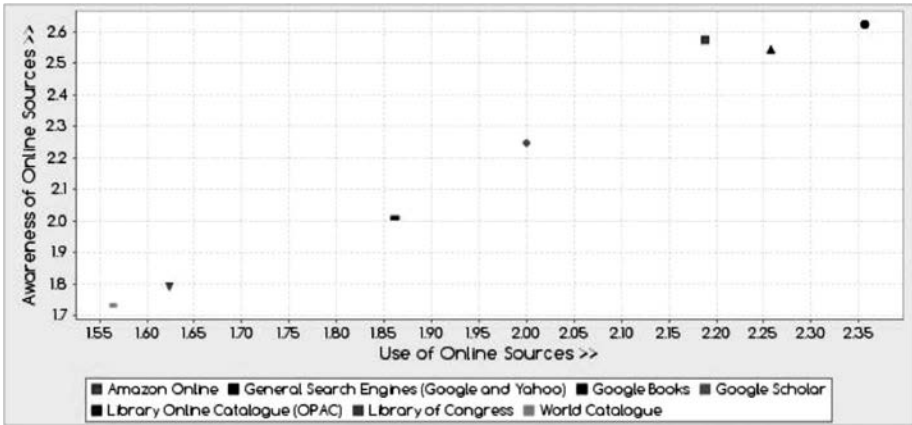
followed by journals compared to other print sources for bibliographic information search. This result concurs with a study by Ellis (1989) who noted that extracting information from journals represents a very effective means of identifying material. Penner's (2009) study among theological students found that books and journals are preferred sources of information. A frequently critiqued study by Leckie, Pettigrew, and Sylvain (1996) noted that awareness is one of the three factors which impact the overall information search process. Figure 1 also notes that 64 respondents are familiar with library catalogue cards, yet they are used only sometimes compared to all other sources.

**Figure 1:** Awareness and use of print sources to locate bibliographic information





**Figure 2: Awareness of online sources to locate bibliographic information**



Left quadrant Awareness Level : High / Low  
 Right quadrant Use : High / Low

**Right Quadrant**

Amazon online : Highly familiar / Highly used  
 General Search engines (Google/Yahoo) : Highly familiar / Highly used  
 Google books : Highly familiar / Highly used  
 Google scholar : Partially familiar/ sometimes used

**Left Quadrant:**

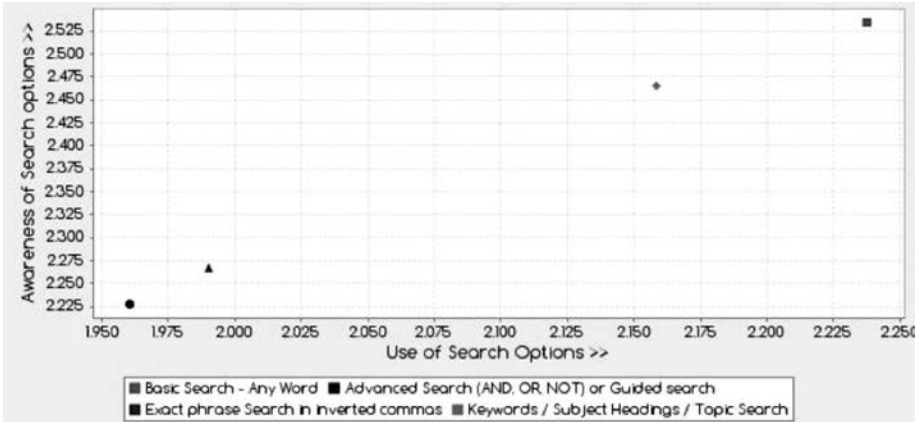
Library online catalogue : Less familiar / less used  
 Library of Congress : Less familiar / less used  
 World catalogue : Less familiar / less used

Figure 2 provides a GAP analysis report. It shows the awareness versus use of online sources (e.g. search engines, library catalogues, etc.). It was found that general search engines (e.g. Google and Yahoo) are highly familiar to respondents and highly used; Amazon and Google Books follow at a close second as resources used to locate bibliographic information. In contrast, library catalogues, WorldCat, and the Library of Congress catalogue are partially known to the respondents and used only sometimes or never. It was further found that Google Scholar is partially known to only 45% of respondents, yet 55% of respondents sometimes use it to locate bibliographic information. Google or Yahoo appear to be the most preferred online sources next to Amazon. This study affirms the findings of an earlier study by Bauder and Emanuel (2012) which noted that faculty members prefer Google. Penner’s (2009) study found that compared to students pursuing master’s level degrees, doctoral students more often use search engines and indexes when engaging in referencing bibliographies for their research.

Figure 2 indicates that there is need to create adequate awareness among respondents about online catalogues such as WorldCat, the Library of Congress catalogue, and the catalogues of the institutions represented in this survey. Theological librarians

in Tamil Nadu should include regular instruction about WorldCat and the Library of Congress catalogue to its patrons, which would widen their communities' knowledge, perception and use of these resources.

**Figure 3:** Awareness and use of search options



Left quadrant Awareness Level : High / Low  
Right quadrant Use : High / Low

**Right Quadrant**

Basic Search (any word from anywhere) : Highly familiar / Highly used  
Keyword / Subject headings search : Highly familiar / Highly used

**Left Quadrant:**

Exact phrase (use of inverted commas) : Less familiar / less used  
Advanced Search (AND, OR, NOT) : Less familiar / less used

Figure 3 shows the GAP analysis of awareness and use of various search options among respondents. It was found that theological faculty members are very familiar with utilizing basic search (i.e. any word from any field), in searching for information in online resources. They were also aware of keyword searching, subject headings and topic searches. This result concurs with a study by Brunton (2005) which assesses utilizing information seeking behaviour of theology students and discovers that they prefer to use structured queries to search for information. It is noteworthy that basic search and keyword search are commonly used by faculty members to locate online information. It can be noted that although advanced search and Boolean search (use of AND, OR, NOT) are powerful search tools to retrieve information in online databases, they simply are not utilized frequently by respondents in this study. This indicates the need for training on the use of various search methods. Therefore, theological librarians need to make conscious efforts to educate faculty members in this area.

The survey questionnaire asked the participants to indicate their preferred technique to search information in print resources. Figure 4 shows that reading the table of contents is the most commonly used method to search for information in print resources. This supports the research findings of a study by Bauder and Emanuel (2012). Reading a specific article, referring to front page matters such as author, publisher, date and foreword are also commonly used by faculty members to locate information.

Figure 4: Search techniques in print resources

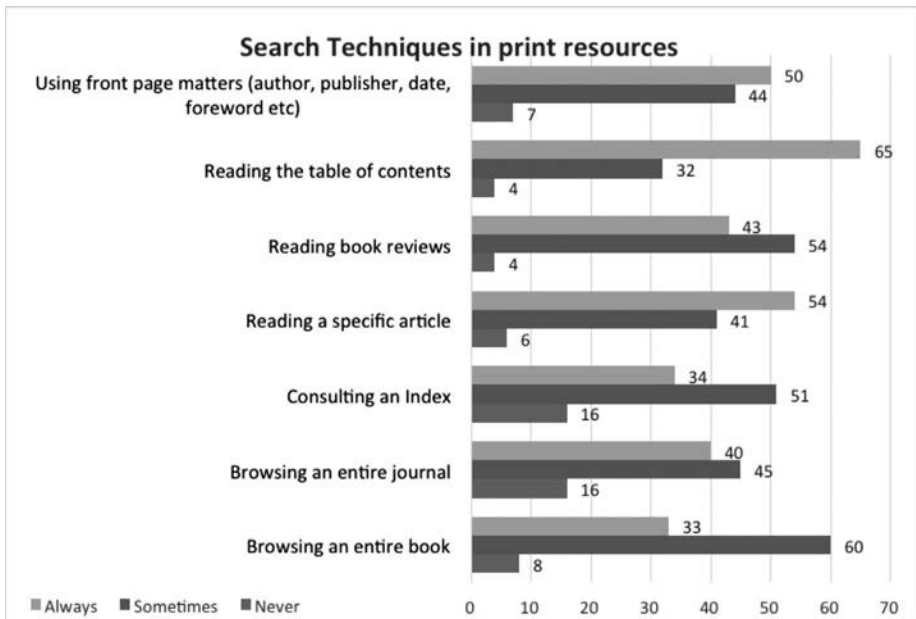


Table 6: Techniques used while searching for information in print resources

	Browsing an entire book	Browsing an entire journal	Consulting an Index	Reading a specific article	Reading book reviews	Reading the table of contents	Using front page matters (eg. author, publisher, date, and foreword etc.)
NValid	101	101	101	101	101	101	101
Mean	2.25	2.24	2.18	2.48	2.39	2.60	2.43
Std. Deviation	.590	.709	.684	.610	.565	.567	.622
Sum	227	226	220	250	241	263	245

Respondents were asked to identify their reasons/purposes for information seeking. Table 7 shows their various reasons for searching for information. It is noteworthy that preparing for class lectures ( $M=2.72$ ) is one of the primary reasons which faculty search for information. This is a clear indication that teaching is the main reason that theological faculty members search for information. Preaching sermons or Bible study ( $M=2.70$ ) and updating subject knowledge ( $M=2.60$ ) are others reasons faculty look for information.

**Table 7:** Information use for various tasks

Tasks for which information is sought	N	Sum	Mean
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Preparing class lectures	101	275	2.72
Preaching sermons/ Bible study	101	273	2.70
Updating subject knowledge	101	266	2.63
Performing role as pastor, counsellor, care giver, spiritual mentor	101	249	2.47
Guiding research scholars, thesis writers	101	242	2.40
Writing an article, book, conference paper etc	101	229	2.34
Pleasure reading	101	231	2.29

Respondents were asked to identify sources when they are in need of information, especially for the tasks mentioned above in table 7. Table 8 shows that respondents prefer to use Google and/or Yahoo ( $M=2.72$ ) to begin their search for information needed for various tasks in which they are involved. Respondents' next preference was to contact library staff members for information ( $M=2.17$ ). This finding concurs the findings of Kumar and Kumar's (2013) study on search engines and their use among Indian academics, which notes that 91.3% of respondents most often prefer using Google to locate information (p. 292). It was further found that online databases such as ATLA religion database and others are less preferred by respondents for their information need.

**Table 8:** Sources for information search

	N	Sum	Mean		Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Online - Google / Yahoo Search	101	275	2.72	.047	.472
Contact Library Staff	101	219	2.17	.056	.567
Library Catalogue (OPAC)	101	216	2.14	.068	.679
Contact Colleagues	101	210	2.08	.061	.611
Search Online Database eg ATLA Religion Database and etc	101	206	2.04	.066	.662

Figure 5: Frequency of library visit

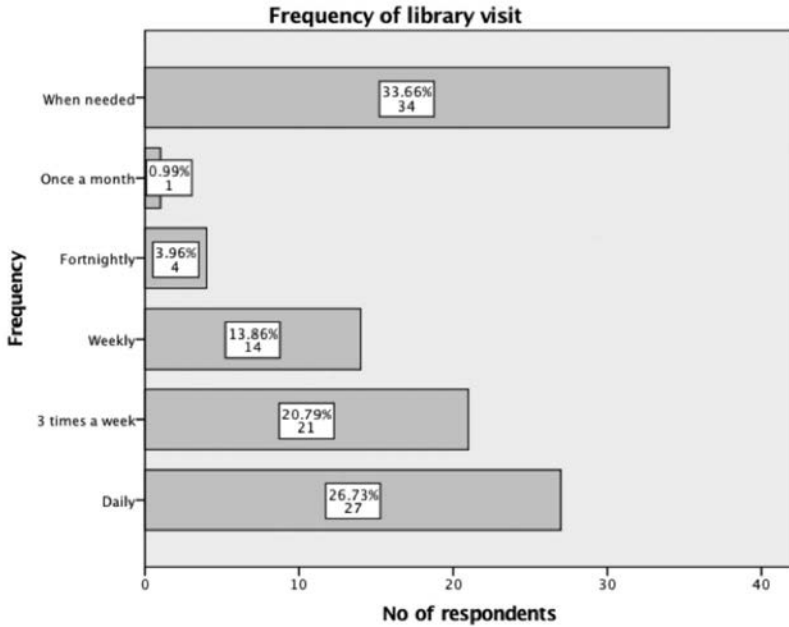


Figure 5, above, indicates the frequency of library visits by faculty members, showing that 34% of respondents visit the library when needed, while 27% of respondents visit the library daily.

Table 9: Table Reasons for visit to library

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
To borrow books	101	398	3.94	1.047	1.096
To use reference books	101	387	3.83	.991	.981
To use periodicals	101	354	3.50	1.064	1.132
To read newspapers	101	308	3.05	1.459	2.128
To use undisturbed/ quiet study space	101	292	2.89	1.363	1.858
To use other library services	101	256	2.53	1.331	1.771
To access online resources	101	251	2.49	1.419	2.012
To photocopy materials	101	238	2.36	1.301	1.692
To meet a friend, student	101	229	2.27	1.248	1.558
To check email	101	204	2.02	1.349	1.820

Table 9 indicates the various reasons faculty members visit the library. The top three reasons respondents visit the library are to borrow books, to use reference books and to use periodicals.

**Table 10: Reasons for using other libraries**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Deviation</b>
	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Statistic</b>
My personal library collection is inadequate	101	3.41	1.226
My Library resources are not adequate	101	3.20	1.296
My library facilities are inadequate (reading space, ventilation, lighting etc)	101	2.92	1.155
My library staff are not helpful or unable to help me	101	2.74	1.119

Table 10 lists various reasons respondents offered for using library resources outside of their own institution. The lack of personal library collections ( $M=3.41$ ) is their most important reason for using other libraries, while inadequate institutional library resources is a moderately important reason for using other libraries.

**Table 11: Problems/Barriers affect while searching online information**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Sum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	
	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>
Non-availability of full text articles	101	215	2.13	.057
Lack of national scholarly publications	101	214	2.12	.065
Non-availability of relevant articles	101	209	2.07	.057
Too many results shown	101	207	2.05	.065
Long time to download because of file size	101	205	2.03	.068
Incomplete or poor abstracting of articles	101	205	2.03	.059
Not easy to download articles	101	203	2.01	.055
Slow internet connection/ Slow response by the content provider	101	202	2.00	.061
Scattered Information	101	200	1.98	.051
Unfamiliar search options	101	193	1.91	.058
Unfamiliar subject terms used in describing the documents / articles	101	189	1.87	.050
Misspelling of title, author, subject headings, keywords	101	176	1.74	.054

Table 11 above, indicates problems respondents faced while searching for online information. Nonavailability of full text articles ( $M=2.13$ ) and lack of national scholarly publications ( $M=2.12$ ) are the problems most commonly faced by the respondents, followed by nonavailability of relevant articles. This concurs with a study by Ge (2010) on information seeking process in the social sciences and humanities. It is noteworthy that unfamiliar search terms used in describing the articles ( $M=1.87$ ), unfamiliar search options ( $M=1.91$ ) and misspelling of title, author, subject headings and keywords ( $M=1.74$ ), are the least faced problems by the respondents. It is assumed that respondents are very familiar with search terms used for describing journal articles.

**Table 12:** Ranking on quality and usefulness of library collections, services, facilities, and library staff

	<b>N</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Mean</b>
	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Statistic</b>
Print - Books and Reference books	101	4	3.79
Library Staff Behaviour	101	4	3.74
Library Staff Availability to help	101	4	3.68
Library Lighting, ventilation, ambience	101	4	3.56
Circulation of books	101	4	3.55
Library Staff Knowledge on library resources and services	101	4	3.54
Infrastructure – reading space	101	4	3.52
Library Staff – skills and efficiency	101	4	3.51
Reference services	101	4	3.40
User Education (orientation/ Training)	101	4	3.28
Printing, scanning, photocopying	101	4	3.20
Current journals (print)	101	4	3.07
Archival Collections	101	4	2.86
Inter-Library Loan (books from other libraries)	101	4	2.80
Online Databases (ebooks / journals)	101	4	2.73

Table 12 above, shows that respondents feel that print books and reference books are satisfactory in their institutional library. While respondents found library staff behaviour, availability to help, their knowledge on library services, and circulation services to be acceptable. It can be further noted that respondents are of opinion that inter-library loan (ILL) services and availability of online databases are below acceptable. There is a need for development of ILL services among theological libraries in Tamil Nadu to enable library users to borrow books from other libraries.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The current research has revealed that theological faculty members in Tamil Nadu are aware of various bibliographic information sources. They also use Google, Google Books, and Google Scholar for their information needs. Although Boolean searches, using combinations of AND/OR/NOT, are powerful tools for information retrieval, our study showed that this advanced search method is least used by faculty members compared to other search options. This could be due to lack of awareness of this search method. In collaboration with faculty members, theological libraries should conduct short training programs to create adequate awareness on available bibliographic information sources and resources on the web. Library instructions should include major catalogues such as WorldCat, the Library of Congress catalogue and others. Faculty members should be given hands on training to be familiar with various search techniques, particularly using Boolean search methods to retrieve appropriate results. Feedback from faculty members will help theological librarians improve user training. Reaching out to theological faculty members and equipping them to become more information literate will enhance the use of library resources.

It is further noted in this study that respondents prefer referring to the table of contents to identify information they need. Therefore, it is a wakeup call, more than ever to theological librarians to give careful attention to cataloging, making sure to include the table of contents when describing resources. Development of networks among theological libraries will further improve ILL facilities and subsequently enhance the research activities of faculty members.

The findings of this study also impact user education offered in theological libraries in Tamil Nadu by providing some necessary steps to evaluate and improve the content and delivery of library services. This study also contributed to the existing literature on information literacy for theological education and the unique contribution to theological education in South India.

The successful library instruction includes short interactive videos on various search methods and a useful training manual showing how to search and various instructional posters. Theological librarians should be trained in information literacy, in order to offer quality library instruction and user training.

This is only a small step towards understanding how theological faculty members in Tamil Nadu search for information. A further study extended to all India will help in further understanding the needs of theological faculty members and their knowledge, perception, awareness and use of information search strategies. A study on what types of sources are used for specific tasks and why do they prefer will yield useful results. It is worth conducting a study among theological librarians to assess their awareness level on information resources and search skills they know. †



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