Impetuses for First and Third Year Law Student 
Information Seeking Behavior and Plagiarism

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ABSTRACT 
In this poster presentation, I describe an ongoing ethnographic study that is examining how first and third year law students’ age, comprehension of plagiarism, and previous exposure to information literacy training affects the information sources law students select, and their choice of whether or not to give appropriate attribution to utilized information sources. Although law student information seeking behavior has previously been analyzed, past research did not examine the above-mentioned factors and how these factors affected law student information seeking behavior and potential plagiaristic behavior. 

Previous research indicated law students’ information seeking behavior was affected by academic task and the relevant substantive area (Leckie, Pettigrew, & Sylvain, 1996). Some tasks assigned to law students consist of drafting memos, briefs, and complaints. Additionally, law students are often required to complete multiple drafting assignments during one academic period. Thus, time restrictions and task assignment often determine which sources a law student selects when completing assignments. Some of the sources law students consult are commonly referred to by the law school community as primary sources, and they include items such as federal and state statutes, case law, and regulations (Chandler, 2000, p. 158). Additionally, law students also consult materials commonly referred to as secondary sources, which consist of law review articles, bar journals, legal encyclopedias, legal dictionaries, Restatements of the Law, form guides, and practice guides (Chandler, 2000, p. 159). These primary and secondary sources generally provide more reliable and valid information; however, law students may not consult these items because locating and extracting information from them is more time consuming compared to using a tertiary source, such as Google. For example, in our age of expecting instant access to information, a law student can access some type of legal information in less than a minute via a search engine (tertiary source), whereas, locating legal information via an electronic legal database or from a print source (primary or secondary source) could take an hour or more. However, the conundrum created when juxtaposing information found via a search engine and information mined from a primary or secondary information source, is that the information extracted from the primary or secondary source is probably more valid and reliable.

Despite locating more valid and reliable information via a primary or secondary source, using the path of least resistance (e.g., a search engine) to locate needed information is not restricted to law students. Regardless of the substantive area, human nature often dictates the utilization of the most efficiently located sources to find needed information, regardless of the validity and reliability of the content included in those quickly obtained information sources. For example, Zipf (1949) demonstrated how humans tended to complete the least amount of work possible to finalize various tasks. Zipf illustrated his point via linguistic studies and showed that humans preferred to choose short and common words for as many communication tasks as possible, rather than selecting esoteric, bigger words to make their point. Zipf termed this type of behavior as a case for least effort harmonic distribution. Zipf’s research has been replicated by other researchers. For example, Case (2012) showed that library patrons tended to use 20% of the books located in the library to complete 80% of their information need tasks. Leckie et al. (1996) additionally conveyed that some of the most frequent motivators of using information sources included convenience, timeliness, and the accessibility of the source.

This ethnographic study uses Zipf’s least effort harmonic distribution paradigm and the Lecki et al. (1996) information seeking behavior model as a guide to learning more about what information sources law students utilize to obtain needed information. For example, are they using sources that obtain the most reliable and valid information?
Or, are they simply using the most easily obtainable information? Further, how does their age, understanding of plagiarism, and previous exposure to information literacy training affect their information behavior seeking process?

Plagiaristic behavior of law students is also examined in this study because recent research suggests academic plagiarism is increasing. For example, Austin et al. (2006) found 80% of respondents to a questionnaire of self-reporting plagiarism confessed to committing plagiarism at least one time. Therefore, while also examining how age, understanding of plagiarism, and previous exposure to information literacy affect law student information seeking; the researcher is also seeking to discover how these factors affect students’ choices of when to and not to give attribution to the information sources they utilize. Exposure to information literacy is examined because most law students participate in an information literacy course such as Legal Research and Writing in their first year of classes. Subsequently, law students usually participate in an ethics class, which discusses plagiarism, in their second year of study. Thus, it is interesting to determine the effect of these classes and any other information literacy training has on plagiaristic behavior.

The methodology used in this study consists of a quantitative and qualitative approach utilizing surveys and focus groups. The subjects included in this study include first and third year law students from four separate law schools in the state of Texas (Baylor Law School, the University of Texas School of Law, Texas A&M University School of Law, and Thurgood Marshall School of Law). A preliminary survey gathers information to help craft survey questions. Subsequently, an online survey is delivered to first and third year law students at the four above-mentioned law schools. Then, based on the data collected from the online surveys, two focus groups are conducted at each law school (one focus group consisting of first year laws students, and one consisting of third year law students) in an attempt to corroborate the information garnered in the online survey. The gathered data is then analyzed via SPSS, NVivo, and a thematic approach. In essence, at least 100 subjects from each school, for a total of 400 subjects, are included in the law student survey pool. Additionally, each focus group will have at least six subjects participating. Having such a multitude of subjects from schools that matriculate students of diverse race an age increases the representativeness of the study.

Therefore, in sum, this study discovers how age, comprehension of plagiarism, and previous exposure to information literacy training affects the information seeking behavior of law students, and whether they decide to give appropriate attribution to the information sources utilized.

**Keywords**
Law students, information seeking, sources, plagiarism, information literacy, age

**REFERENCES**

