

Abuse of Library Materials in Academic Libraries: A Study of the University of Cape Coast Main Library

Harry Akussah

hakussah@yahoo.com

and

Winifred Bentil

winnycoop@yahoo.com

Department of Information Studies

University of Ghana

Legon, Ghana

Abstract

The study examines the extent to which materials in the University of Cape Coast (UCC) Main Library are abused. Using questionnaire, interviews and a collection survey, the various forms of document abuse, causes of abuse, and categories of documents mostly abused, categories of users that mostly abuse documents and the extent of physical damage to the documents were investigated. The findings of the study indicate that UCC main library materials are under serious threat of abuse through acts of vandalism, mutilation and theft, particularly by student users. The study recommends orientation and awareness programmes for new and old users, periodic stocktaking, better security and supervision, provision of multiple copies and investment in electronic resources.

Introduction

The threat to intellectual property through theft, mutilation and other forms of abuse has posed tremendous challenge to the library profession

worldwide. According to Jackson (1991) incidents of theft, non-return of materials and mutilation of library stock are on the increase. Lorenzen (1997) in his study of security issues of Ohio public and academic libraries in America showed that 62.5% of university libraries in Ohio believed that periodical mutilation was a problem, whilst a considerable number of public libraries (60%) did consider this a problem. This shows that periodic mutilation is a big problem for both public and academic libraries. He further states that 12% of library books in Ohio were missing while 3% had become unusable due to deterioration. Switzer (1991) in his survey of libraries revealed that with a collection size of 5000 items, a library can lose 3% per year. Sornam and Shyla (1997) reported that the theft and mutilation of library materials was common in many libraries and only the magnitude of the crime differed from place to place. Lorenzen's (1997) report on security in the public libraries in Illinois indicated that over half of the respondents believed their library had a problem with security and theft of its materials. Covington (1996) reported that in De Soto Public Library in Louisiana, computer monitors and virtually all other equipment had been stolen. In a report by Burrows and Cooper (1992), books not returned from loan accounted for almost a third (29 per cent) of all losses across the sectors of UK libraries.

Studies reveal that these anti-social activities are more pronounced in the Third World countries. Ajegbomogun (2004) states that theft and mutilation of books and non-books is a common phenomenon in Nigerian university libraries and if not checked will create a serious threat to Nigerian libraries' collection and preservations. Alemna (1992) having considered abuse of library materials in Ghana, found out that there was a general agreement by the university libraries in Ghana that students make up about 90% of the book thieves and vandals;

library staff 5% and other users 5%. Students steal popular textbooks and mutilate pages from journals, whilst staff steal unprocessed books. In a survey of security, book theft and journal mutilation within the library system of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Senyah(2004) identified the scarcity of needed books (90.9%) and selfishness (81.81%) as being the main cause of book theft and mutilation. His study was however not conclusive on the perpetrators of the abuse. He concluded that the absence of regular stock-taking or inventory has made it practically impossible for the libraries to quantify the extent of losses.

Various writers have expressed their views on what contributes to the causes of different forms of abuse in the library. However, many researchers base their argument on economic depression and security as the main causes of abuse of library materials. These include Ajegbomogun (2004), Agboola (2001), Afolabi (1993), Akinfolarin (1992) and Bello (1997) among others. Some other studies reveal that theft is motivated by societal problems. Verner (1983) listed a series of factors that contribute to library malpractices, which include inadequate service staff at night and during the weekends, lack of multiple copies of library materials in high demand and inadequate photocopying facilities. Any shift from this, may cause a negative impact on users' disposition to library materials.

A study conducted by Ajegbomogun (2004) reveals that the focus of abuse is predominantly on reference books and journals. The results of the study tallied with those of Bello (1997) and Luke (1991). Abuse of library materials is not confined to hardened criminals. It spans all categories of users. In a survey of high schools in London, Brian (1993) found that 43% of the sample reported having stolen, mutilated or marked library materials during their school years, an indication that security problem developed in early life among students. Most researchers are of the view that students are the guiltiest in this area. Library staff however are also guilty. A number of researchers agree to this fact and these include Ewing (1994), Omoniyi (2001) and Gerlenter (2005).

According to Holt (2007), every profession has its "closed areas" which are little studied and seldom discussed publicly. In librarianship, theft by staff is one of those "closed areas." He further states that

staff theft is a "hot-potato" issue from a manager's perspective because any action around this issue is complicated. The complications arise from allegation of illegal behaviour and, therefore, arrests and court cases; union contract negotiations, risks of bad publicity, loss of public support; possible changes in policy or procedures; recruitment of replacement employees; problems with staff morale; changes in training; and the possibility of new costs of increased security whether through technology or additional staff. All of these issues have economic dimensions. Taken together, these studies offer a significant body of evidence to suggest that the abuse of library materials is prevalent in all types of libraries in all parts of the world. The intensity may vary from library to library. This article discusses the results of a study of the abuse of library materials in the University of Cape Coast (UCC) Main Library in Ghana.

The University of Cape Coast Main Library is one of the largest academic libraries in Ghana. The collections are housed in a magnificent five-storey library complex in the heartbeat of the University popularly called 'New Site'. It has the capacity for holding 750,000 volumes excluding pamphlets and journals. It can seat 2000 users at a time. It is a hybrid library with approximately 227,414 hard copies of books and a substantial number of e-books and databases to be accessed on the Internet. Its main function among others is to assist in the advancement of learning, research and dissemination of knowledge, serving the information needs of the University and its communities. Its resources have been grouped into six collections: Ghana Collections, Ghana Medical Schools Collections, Student Reference Collections, General Reference Collections, Digital Collections, and Development Information Collections. Some of the services the library renders include library orientation for fresh students, loaning out books and receiving them when they are due, inter-library lending/document delivery (ILL/DD) and book binding. The library also supports the departmental and hall libraries of the University (University of Cape Coast Library, 2007)

The vision of the Library is to create an intelligent library for the University of Cape Coast that will meet and satisfy the information needs of the community without any forms of discrimination so as to provide effective leadership in Ghana and elsewhere.

The Objectives of the Study

The study was designed to examine the extent to which materials in the UCC main library are abused. Specifically, the study investigated the following amongst others:

- The various forms of documents abuse.
- The causes of abuse.
- The categories of materials mostly abused.
- The category of users that mostly abuse library materials.
- Suggestions to curb the abuse of library materials.

Methodology

The study covered the post graduate students of the University of Cape Coast, the library staff and the collections of the library. It concentrated on paper documents, specifically on the reference collection since this category is usually on high demand and mostly used and thus suffers mostly from the various forms of abuse. The study was undertaken in August, 2008.

Four professional library staff out of eight (8) and the University Librarian were interviewed by one of the researchers. The interviews were used to collect data on policy issues, procedural matters, and matters relating to the general management of the library collection. Twenty (20) other library staff out of seventy-five (75) and one hundred (100) postgraduate students out of a total of three hundred and ninety (390) were administered with questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to solicit data on a wide range of issues such as the use of the library; forms of abuse; motivation for abuse; documents mostly abused and the most offenders of abuses. The focus was on postgraduate students because of the research oriented nature of their study which requires them to use the library more often. Also, they had passed through the undergraduate system and thus were better informed on the abuse of library materials and their precipitating factors as compared to the undergraduate students.

As stated earlier, the total population of hard copy documents in the library was approximately 227,414 as at the time of study. This was made up of textbooks, reference books, fiction and non-fiction books, periodicals, journals and newspapers. The target population of this study was the reference materials located at the reference section of the

library. This is because this category of documents is usually on high demand and is mostly used. The approximate number of items in the reference collection was 14375.

In order to assess the physical state of the documents in the library, a systematic sampling method was used to select two hundred and fifty (250) documents for examination. Two hundred and fifty items were used because it was a manageable figure which could be handled within a short period without disrupting reference services of the library. Shelves were used as clusters on the basis of which the selection was made. In all, there were 125 shelves in the reference section. Each shelf had 5 bays with an average of 23 documents on a bay giving an average of 115 items per shelf. Two documents were selected from each shelf to give a total of 250 items. The 2nd and 4th bays of each shelf were used in the selection whilst the 12th items on the 2nd and 4th bays were selected. Specially designed survey sheets were completed for each item to describe their physical state after thorough examination. Items on the survey sheet include among others missing pages, stains, and markings in books, creases, torn pages and metallic objects.

Findings

The findings of the study as presented are derived from the analysis of data collected from students, staff and the examination of the collections. The findings are presented separately in terms of the results from the surveys of students, library staff and collection items.

Students Survey

Frequently Used Materials

Materials most frequently used by respondents were reference books (61%). Journals (27%) and textbooks (12%) follow closely. Since reference materials were the most frequently used, it can be deduced that there is a high probability that this category of materials were the most abused. (See table 1).

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Reference books	61	61.0
Journals	27	27.0
Textbooks	12	12.0
Total	100	100

Library Materials Mostly Abused

As shown in table 2, most of the respondents (55%) pointed out that reference books were the ones mostly abused. The rest (45%) agreed that text books are materials that were mostly abused. This compares favourably with the views of Ajegbomogun (2004), Bello (1997) and Luke (1991) who stated in the findings of their researches that the focus of abuse was predominantly on reference materials. The possible reason for this could be the strict control imposed on them and the fact that they are mostly on closed access and are normally not lent out for home use

Table 2: Respondents' Views on the Category of Library Materials Mostly Abused

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Reference books	55	55.0
Textbooks	45	45.0
Journals	—	—
Fiction	—	—
Total	100	100

Forms of Abuse

As shown in Table 3, 35% of respondents cited writing in books, as the major form of abuse. This was followed by hiding of books which formed 32%, with 24%, 8% and 1% indicating tearing of pages, mutilation and stealing of books respectively (table 3).

Table 3: Forms of Abuse Mentioned by Students

<i>Forms of Abuses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Torn out pages	24	24.0
Writing in books	35	35.0
Stealing of books	1	1.0
Mutilation	8	8.0
Hiding of books	32	32.0
Total	100	100

Motivation for Abuse

Majority of the respondents (47%) intimated selfishness as the number one motivation. This compares favourably with the views of the Librarian of the library who also indicated selfishness as the key reason. This was followed by 33% who said it

was due to the inadequate number of library materials. This finding however contrasts with the views of the Librarian who stated that inadequacy of materials was not a problem at all in the library. The high cost of photocopying which at the time of conducting the study was five Ghana pesewa (0.5 US\$) per page was cited by 16% of respondents, while 4% intimated that it was as a result of the fear that one may not find a particular book at the next visit to the library (table 4).

Table 4: Students' Opinions on the Reasons for Abuse

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Selfishness	47	47.0
Inadequate number of library materials	33	33.0
High cost of photocopying	16	16.0
Fear that one may not find the material at the next visit	4	4.0
Total	100	100

Collection Protection Strategies

When asked as to what library authorities could do to curb the problem of document abuse in the library, most of the respondents (56%) called for the running of educational programmes on the use of the library for prospective patrons as well as the current users. Other responses indicated in table 5 included the need for the library authorities to constantly exhibit abused and mutilated books (26%), encouragement of users to be each others watchdogs (8%), installation of security cameras (6%) and the provision of electronic materials which will not be handled (4%). These suggestions compare favourably with the recommendations made by Ajegbomogun (2004), Opaleke (2002), Lorenzen (1997), Bello (1997) and Ewing (1994).

Disciplinary Measures

On disciplinary measures to be meted out to abusers of library materials, most of the respondents (31%) said that offenders should pay for the full cost of the abused materials. This compares with

<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Education on the use of the library	56	56.0
Library must constantly display mutilated books	26	26.0
Encourage users to be watchdogs	8	8.0
Installation of security cameras	6	6.0
Provide electronic resources	4	4.0
Total	100	100

Ajebomogun's (2004) when he called for full cost recovery for abused books. Those who asked for the banning of offenders formed 28% and this also compares with Fox's (1991) view. In an interview with the Librarian of the UCC Main Library, he also opined that offenders should be banned from using the library. Respondents who called for the need to exhibit photos of the abusers for all to see formed 24%. This also compares with the view points of Ajebomogun (2004). The remaining respondents, constituting 17% asked for the suspension of abusers from the library for a period of time. Table 6 vividly reflects the views of respondents.

Library Staff Survey

As stated earlier, it was prudent for the research to investigate the views of staff (professional and non-professional) in the direction of collection abuse since they have the mandate to manage the library. Some of the findings conform with the views of the students whilst the rest point to new revelations.

Forms of Abuse

As summarised in Table 7, the majority of staff (70%) indicated that tearing of pages from books was the most widespread manifestation of the abuses of library books. This confirms Kisiedu's (1993) conclusion that mutilation, the worst type of physical damage was common in Ghanaian libraries. This position may be more tenable than that of the

students that scribbling in books was the most prevalent abuse since the library staff are more conversant with the collection and they fish out the abused copies for restoration.

Category of Users that Abuse library Materials

Fifteen (75%) of the 20 sampled library staff perceived that students were the most frequent abusers of library materials (Table 8). This agrees with the views of Antwi (1989) Alemna (1992) and Bello (1997), as well as the Librarian of UCC who stated that students were the category of users who mostly abuse library materials. Students of the University (17,000 regular, 4,000 sandwich and 20,000 distant learners) constitute a greater number of users of the library and as such it is not too surprising that they are most often mentioned as the most liable to abuse library materials. Lecturers, external users and staff were respectively identified by 15%, 5% and 5% of respondents as other categories that abuse library materials.

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Pay for the full cost of the abused material	31	31.0
Banned from using the library	28	28.0
Exhibit their photos with names	24	24.0
Suspend them for some time	17	17.0
Total	100	100

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Tearing of pages	14	70.0
Stealing of books	4	20.0
Writing in books	2	10.0
Total	20	100

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Students	15	75.0
Lecturer	3	15.0
External users	1	5.0
Staff	1	5.5
Total	20	100

Materials Most Frequently Abused

The opinions of most of the library staff (65%) concurred with those of the students that reference materials were the materials mostly abused (Table 9). Other studies such as Ajegbomogun (2004), Bello (1997) and Luke (1991) also concurred. Other materials that were abused, according to the library staff, were textbooks (15%), journals (10%) and fiction (10%).

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Reference books	13	65.0
Textbooks	3	15.0
Journals	2	10.0
Fiction	2	10.0
Total	20	100

Motivation for Abuse

Contrary to the views of the students, 70% of the library staff who were surveyed with the questionnaire asserted that limited copies of library materials being the main factor accounted for the abuse of library materials (Table 10). Most of the students mentioned selfishness as the key motivating factor. The views of the library staff conflicted with the position of the University Librarian. The Librarian was of the view that the library was financially sound; hence, the inadequacy of materials could not be a major factor for abuse. The four professional librarians who were interviewed mentioned diverse factors: high demand, influence by friends, inadequate photocopying machines and fear of not finding materials on the next visit as motivating factors. All these factors are connected

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Limited copies of library materials	14	70.0
Strict control of library materials	2	10.0
High cost of photocopying	1	5.0
Fear that one may not find a particular material at the next visit	1	5.0
Inadequate supervision	1	5.0
Photocopying procedure too bureaucratic	1	5.0
Total	20	100

with the inadequacy of materials, and have been highlighted by earlier researchers, including Akinfolarin (1992), Afolabi (1993), Bello (1997), Agboola (2001) and Ajegbomogun (2004). These researchers agree that financial constraints had deprived librarians of the opportunity to acquire adequate number of essential books in high demand, thereby exposing the few available ones to theft or mutilation.

Effect of Abuse of Library Materials on Services

The majority of the library staff (30%) indicated that the abuse made it difficult for the staff to assist users effectively. Another 25% of them said that other users were unable to get access to the materials they needed easily. In addition, shelving of abused materials was made difficult, as indicated by 20% of the library staff (Table 11).

Table 11: Staff’s Opinions on the Effects of Abuse on Services

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Makes it difficult to assist users	6	30.0
Other users do not get needed materials	5	25.0
Makes shelving difficult	4	20.0
Valuable materials are lost	3	15.0
Makes it difficult to retrieve information	2	10.0
Total	20	100.0

Security of Library Materials

Respondents were asked to suggest ways in which the abuse of library materials could be minimised. As indicated in table 12, the need to improve supervision in the library formed the highest response of 25%. Other measures suggested were the installation of surveillance cameras (15%), mounting of orientation programmes for users (15%), and the provision of multiple copies of materials.

Collection Survey

Documentary materials are prone to deterioration because they are organic in nature. Certain factors, however, determine the rate of deterioration. According to Harvey (1992), the rate of deterioration is determined by two factors and these are the inherent chemical stability of the material and the external actions that affect the material. The major objective of the collection survey was to identify and establish the physical, structural and biological damages to the collection of the UCC Main Library using a sample of 250.

Physical Damages

The mismanagement and abuse of documentary materials contribute greatly to physical degradation. These include mutilation, careless handling, excessive photocopying, mis-shelving, and flicking documents over. The results of the survey revealed a high degree of physical damage to the collection. Out of the 250 books surveyed, 80% had underlined

Table 12: Staff’s Opinions on How Library Materials can be Secured

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Improve supervision	5	25.0
Provide regular orientation to users on library use	3	15.0
Provide enough library materials	3	15.0
Provide surveillance cameras	3	15.0
Search users	2	10.0
Janitors and security officers should do their work well	2	10.0
Books should be examined after return	1	5.0
Abusers should pay huge fines	1	5.0
Total	20	100

Types of Damage	No.	%
Underlined words or scribbles	200	80.0
Marks in document	193	77.2
Stain in document	168	67.2
Books having spilt ink	152	60.8
Books tightly Shelved	144	57.6
Creased books	135	54
Books with torn or removed covers	118	47.2
Books having missing pages	116	46.4

words or scribbles in them, while 77.2% of the books had marks in them in the form of highlighting and insertion around the text. Also, 60.8% had ink stains and 67.2% had stains other than ink in them. In addition, 57.6% of the books were found tightly shelved, 54% had been creased, 46.4% had torn pages, and 47.2% had their covers torn or removed (Table13). On the whole, the problem of physical damage was serious, as also observed by Kisiedu (1993).

Structural Damages

The method used to hold documents together also determines the rate of deterioration of the paper. For instance, the use of paper clips stains the pages through rusting, and the practice of using strings to tie-up books facilitates brittleness and damages fragile covers. Only 17.2% of the documents surveyed had steel pins in them.

Biological Damages

Biological agents are a major cause of deterioration of documentary materials. Some of the agents are fungus, insects and rodents. The damages they cause include staining, tearing, chewing up of the documents and weakening of paper. They thrive in conditions where there is poor ventilation and lighting, dust, high temperature and high relative humidity. The analysis of the data collected revealed that 39.2% of the documents surveyed were defaced by insects. This is an indication of poor environmental where the documents are being stored.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that for as long as library materials are physically handled and are intellectually explored, there is bound to be some form of abuse or the

other. The results of the study have clearly indicated that the documents of the UCC Main library are under serious threats of abuse. These documents are variously under the threats of theft, mis-shelving, vandalism, non-return and mutilation – tearing of pages, highlighting, among others.

The following are being recommended to prevent or minimise the abuse of library materials in the UCC Main Library in particular, which would also be useful to other libraries.

- (a) Users should be conscientised on the harmful effects of library abuse on reading and research. The use of signs, notices, circulars and newsletters would be of help. Mutilated materials should be exhibited with focus on the damages done, and how expensive it will be to repair or replace them.
- (b) Many thefts occur in libraries because of difficulties in getting access to the materials. It is recommended that efforts should be made to provide multiple copies of materials as well as adequate facilities for photocopying. Further, a much more liberal lending policy should be embarked upon by the library. This may call for an amendment of policy which will ultimately lead to an increase in the number of books library patrons are allowed to borrow.
- (c) A library collection can be more properly secured if there are proper records on the stock of the library at any particular point in time. It is recommended that the library should embark on periodic stock taking. It is only through this that information on actual losses can be ascertained and proper measures adopted to arrest the situation. In addition, computerised methods of checking or detecting offenders should be adopted. An example is the electronic theft detection

system. Young and energetic security personnel could also be engaged to man the entrances of the library. Again surveillance cameras could be used to monitor the activities of both staff and patrons.

- (d) It is recommended that library staff should vary their periods of supervision by making it part of their duties to patrol the stacks and reading halls from time to time. This is because, when patrons know that they are under the surveillance, they will be discouraged from acts of abuse. The circulation desk should also be properly supervised. In addition, staff should also be monitored. Again, exposures of book theft and mutilation should be rewarded in cash or kind in order to encourage whistle blowers.
- (e) Disciplinary measures relating to theft, document mutilation, refusal to return borrowed books, and keeping books long after they are due should be enforced. Offenders should be made to replace or pay for lost books irrespective of their status and to pay fines for over-due books.
- (f) Finally, it is recommended that the library should invest more in electronic resources which will reduce to a large extent the incidence of users physically handling documentary materials. This will also enhance multiple accesses to library materials with little damage.

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***Harry Akussah** is an Associate Professor and the Head of the Department of the Information Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. He is a professional Archivist



***Winifred Bentil** is a Master of Philosophy (Library Studies) student in the Department of Information Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.