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MANAGEMENT OF ELECTRONIC-BASED GREY LITERATURE FOR REFERENCE SERVICE DELIVERY IN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

Chimezie Kingsley Okoroafor, Ph.D.
University Library, University of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences,
Umuagwo, Imo State

Abstract

This study examined the management of electronic-based grey literature for reference service delivery in federal university libraries in South-East Nigeria. Three research questions guided the study. A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population comprised 172 respondents, including 139 librarians and 33 IT professionals in five selected federal university libraries in South-East Nigeria. The entire population was used as the sample for the study because it is not too big, and as well relatively manageable. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while independent-samples t-tests were used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings showed that online search and downloading, donation, subscription, exchange, resource sharing, gifts, and library consortia were identified as acquisition sources. The organization methods identified were OPAC/Web OPAC, online classification, online indexing and abstracting, online classification using MS Word, online compilation of bibliographies, customized Google search engines, and digitization. Staffing provisions included grey literature librarians, data analysts, data managers, research data librarians, subject specialist librarians, data curators, digital-skills librarians, and data emulators. A significant difference existed between librarians and IT professionals in their ratings of acquisition sources, whereas no significant differences existed in their ratings of organization methods and staffing provisions. The study concludes that effective management requires coordinated acquisition, systematic organization, appropriate staffing, adequate ICT infrastructure, reliable power supply, funding, clear policies, and collaboration between librarians and IT professionals.

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Keywords: Electronic-based grey literature; Grey literature management; University libraries; Reference services; Acquisition; Organization; Librarians; IT professionals

Introduction

University libraries support teaching, learning, research, and community service by providing users with information that is relevant, accessible, and usable. Their collections now extend beyond commercially published books and journals to include materials generated within universities and other organizations. These materials, generally described as grey literature, include theses, dissertations, conference papers, technical and research reports, working papers, government and policy documents, and institutional records, which Farace and Schopfel (2013) and Gelfand and Lin (2017) identify as materials produced outside conventional commercial publishing channels yet essential to specialized academic communication.

Grey literature is particularly useful in academic environments because it often contains specialized, current, and locally generated information that may not be available through commercial databases. Theses and dissertations can provide detailed local research, while reports, conference papers, policy documents, and institutional records can provide evidence on emerging issues. Evidence from academic libraries also indicates that access to grey literature can be constrained by weak collection-development policies, limited budgets, and low awareness of available resources (Ashiq et al., 2022). For this

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reason, deliberate management is required if grey literature is to support research and reference activities effectively.

The movement from print to electronic information has changed how grey literature is produced, stored, distributed, and accessed. Electronic-based grey literature can be searched, transmitted, linked, and accessed remotely when appropriate systems and permissions are available. Digital libraries and institutional repositories have consequently as Chowdhury (2012) and Howard (2019) observe, created opportunities for universities to collect, organize, preserve, and disseminate research outputs more efficiently than earlier print-based systems allowed.

Electronic availability, however, does not by itself guarantee accessibility. Digital documents may remain difficult to discover when metadata are incomplete, organization is inconsistent, indexing is weak, or search facilities are inadequate. Effective management therefore requires identification, selection, acquisition, digitization where necessary, description, classification, indexing, storage, preservation, retrieval, and access. Choi and Rasmussen (2019) and Gerolimos and Konsta (2018) both stress that these activities require a combination of professional library knowledge and technical competence to carry out effectively.

Acquisition is an important part of this process because electronic grey literature is often dispersed across institutional, governmental, professional, and research websites. Libraries may obtain such materials through online searching and downloading,

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subscriptions, resource sharing, gifts, exchange, donations, and library consortia. Organization is equally important because acquired resources must be described and arranged so that users can discover and retrieve them through OPAC/Web OPAC, online indexing, classification, bibliographic tools, and other discovery systems.

Reference service depends substantially on the availability and accessibility of reliable information resources. Reference librarians respond to factual, bibliographic, research, and referral questions, and electronic grey literature can provide useful evidence for these tasks. When theses, reports, conference papers, and other specialized documents are properly managed, they can be located and supplied more efficiently. Conversely, poor searching skills, inadequate information organization, weak ICT facilities, unreliable electricity, and insufficient funding can limit access to these resources.

Against this background, the present study examines the management of electronic-based grey literature for reference service delivery in federal university libraries in South-East Nigeria. The study is limited to the sources used for acquisition, the methods used for organization, and the staffing provisions for managing electronic-based grey literature.

Statement of the Problem

Electronic-based grey literature has become an important source of research, technical, and institutional information in university libraries. In electronic form, theses, reports, conference papers, policy documents, and related materials can support reference

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librarians in responding to users' information needs. Their usefulness, however, depends on how effectively libraries acquire, organize, preserve, and make them accessible.

In some university libraries, the management of electronic grey literature may be affected by poor searching skills, inadequate bibliographic information, limited access to appropriate websites, high network and subscription costs, slow downloading, unreliable power supply, inadequate computer access, weak policies, insufficient funding, and shortages of ICT specialists. These conditions may make useful materials difficult to locate, organize, preserve, and disseminate.

When such materials are poorly managed, users may experience delays in obtaining relevant evidence, while reference librarians may spend additional time locating resources. The practical problem is therefore not merely the existence of electronic grey literature but the ability of federal university libraries to acquire, organize, and provide appropriate staffing for its management. There is consequently a need to determine the acquisition sources, organization methods, and staffing provisions used in the selected libraries and to establish whether librarians and IT professionals differ in their ratings of these practices.

Research Questions

1. What are the sources of acquiring electronic-based grey literature for reference service delivery in the selected federal university libraries?

2. What methods are employed in organizing electronic-based grey literature for reference service delivery in the selected federal university libraries?

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3. What staffing provisions are made for electronic-based grey literature collection and management in the selected federal university libraries?

Hypotheses

H01: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of librarians and IT professionals on the sources through which electronic-based grey literature is acquired.

H02: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of librarians and IT professionals on the methods employed in organizing electronic-based grey literature.

H03: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of librarians and IT professionals on the staffing provisions made for electronic-based grey literature collection.

Review of Literature

Concept of Grey Literature

Grey literature refers to information resources produced and distributed outside the conventional commercial publishing system. It includes theses, dissertations, conference papers, research and technical reports, government publications, policy documents, working papers and institutional records. Recent literature recognizes grey literature as an important source of research information because it provides access to specialized, current and locally relevant materials that may not be available through conventional scholarly publishing channels (Lee et al., 2023). Grey literature can be difficult to identify, acquire

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and organize because many of its sources are not systematically indexed in major bibliographic databases.

This makes deliberate library management necessary to ensure that such resources remain discoverable and accessible to researchers. Lawal et al. (2023) reported that university libraries encounter factors that affect the selection and acquisition of grey literature, indicating the need for systematic approaches to its management. Similarly, Idiedo et al. (2024) identified theses, dissertations, conference papers and other institutional research outputs as important forms of grey literature in Nigerian university repositories. Therefore, effective management of grey literature is essential for improving access to valuable research information in academic libraries.

Electronic-Based Grey Literature

Electronic-based grey literature refers to grey literature that is created, received, stored, distributed or accessed in digital form. It includes electronic theses and dissertations, research reports, conference papers, policy documents and other institutional publications. The electronic environment has increased the speed and volume of information production and provides opportunities for libraries to improve the accessibility, dissemination and use of grey literature.

Recent studies show that institutional repositories have become important platforms for collecting and providing access to electronic scholarly and institutional outputs. Idiedo et al. (2024) found that theses and dissertations, journal articles, and

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conference or workshop papers were among the major contents of institutional repositories in Nigerian university libraries. Ezema and Eze (2024) also reported that institutional repositories in South-East Nigerian universities were at different levels of implementation, with ICT infrastructure and skilled personnel influencing their development. These developments demonstrate the growing importance of electronic systems in the management and accessibility of grey literature.

Acquisition of Electronic-Based Grey Literature

Acquisition of electronic-based grey literature involves identifying, selecting and obtaining digital information resources that are relevant to the needs of the library and its users. Such resources may be obtained from institutional repositories, university departments, research centres, government agencies, professional organizations and other online sources. The process requires librarians to identify reliable sources, assess the relevance of materials and maintain appropriate records.

Recent evidence indicates that the acquisition of grey literature can be affected by difficulties in identifying relevant sources, inadequate funding, limited cooperation from content producers and insufficient institutional support. Lawal et al. (2023) found that university libraries face factors that inhibit the selection and acquisition of grey literature. Idiedo et al. (2024) also emphasized the importance of institutional repositories in collecting and providing access to research outputs in Nigerian universities. Effective acquisition therefore requires cooperation between libraries, academic departments,

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researchers and other content-producing units to ensure that relevant electronic grey literature is systematically captured and made accessible.

Organization of Electronic-Based Grey Literature

Organization of electronic-based grey literature involves arranging, describing and providing access to digital resources in ways that enable users to identify and retrieve relevant information. It includes cataloguing, classification, indexing, abstracting, metadata creation, digitization and the use of institutional repositories and other electronic discovery systems. Proper organization is important because the availability of electronic resources alone does not guarantee that users can easily discover and retrieve them.

Recent studies indicate that institutional repositories provide important platforms for organizing and providing access to institutional research outputs. Idiedo et al. (2024) reported that Nigerian university repositories contain various research outputs, including theses, dissertations, journal articles and conference papers. Ezema and Eze (2024) also found that institutional repositories contribute to the visibility and accessibility of scholarly outputs in South-East Nigerian universities. Effective organization of electronic-based grey literature therefore requires appropriate metadata, efficient search facilities, functional repository systems and personnel with relevant technical skills.

Institutional Repositories and Access

Institutional repositories provide structured environments for universities to collect, preserve, and disseminate research outputs. Evidence from academic libraries in

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Tanzania indicates that repositories can increase the collection, preservation, and visibility of grey literature, although clear policies and sustainable institutional support are required (Samzugi, 2018). Repositories are especially relevant because universities generate theses, dissertations, conference materials, reports, and other institutional documents. Their effectiveness depends on content quality, metadata, search facilities, preservation arrangements, policies, and access controls.

More recent evidence across African university libraries shows that institutional repository development remains uneven, with inadequate ICT infrastructure, unstable internet connectivity, and a shortage of skilled personnel continuing to constrain implementation (Baro & Nwabueze-Echedom, 2023). Ezema and Eze (2024), in a study focused specifically on South-East Nigeria, similarly found that only a minority of university libraries in the zone had fully implemented institutional repositories, largely because of limited ICT infrastructure and skilled staff, although libraries with functional repositories recorded better visibility and ranking outcomes for their institutions.

Staffing Requirement

Electronic grey literature management requires personnel with complementary professional and technical competencies. Technical-services workflows involve selection, acquisition, cataloguing, preservation, and promotion of grey literature, making coordinated professional roles important (Leonard & Thomas, 2022). Relevant roles

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include grey literature librarians, research data librarians, data analysts, data managers, subject specialists, data curators, and digital-skills librarians.

The changing digital library environment also requires librarians to develop competencies in technology, data, and digital information systems (Choi & Rasmussen, 2019; Gerolimos & Konsta, 2018). Makhafola et al. (2025), in a recent scoping review of digital literacy, competence, fluency, and dexterity in academic libraries, similarly stress that continuous professional development in these areas is essential if academic librarians are to keep pace with digital service delivery, including the management of electronic grey literature.

Grey Literature and Reference Service Delivery

Reference service involves assisting library users to identify, locate, evaluate and use information resources that meet their information needs. Grey literature can contribute significantly to reference service delivery because it provides access to specialized, current and locally relevant information that may not be readily available in conventional published sources. Theses, dissertations, technical reports, conference papers and institutional publications can therefore assist librarians in responding to users' specific information needs (Idiedo et al., 2024).The electronic environment has further increased the usefulness of grey literature in reference services by enabling librarians to search digital collections and institutional repositories and provide users with remote access to relevant information. Ezema & Eze (2024) reported that institutional repositories enhance

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the visibility and accessibility of university research outputs in South-East Nigeria. Effective management and organization of electronic-based grey literature can therefore improve the ability of reference librarians to locate and provide relevant information to users efficiently.

Gap in Literature

Existing literature establishes the importance of grey literature, digital organization, institutional repositories, and professional competencies. However, the present study addresses a practical gap by examining how federal university libraries in South-East Nigeria acquire, organize, and provide staffing for electronic-based grey literature management. The study also compares the ratings of librarians and IT professionals, thereby providing empirical information on areas of agreement and difference in current management practices.

Research Method

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design because information was collected directly from librarians and IT professionals concerning acquisition sources, organization methods, and staffing provisions for electronic-based grey literature. The study was conducted in five selected federal university libraries in South-East Nigeria. The population comprised 172 respondents, consisting of 139 librarians and 33 IT professionals, based on nominal staff rolls for 2025.

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The entire population of 172 respondents was studied through a census approach because the population was considered manageable. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire containing items on acquisition sources, organization methods, and staffing provisions for electronic-based grey literature. The researcher administered the questionnaires with the assistance of research assistants selected from the participating university libraries, and the assistants were briefed on the administration procedure before distribution.

Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. A four-point rating scale was used, with a criterion mean of 2.50; items with mean scores of 2.50 or above were accepted, while items below 2.50 were rejected. Independent-samples t-tests were used to test the three hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. A significance value below .05 was interpreted as statistically significant, while a value above .05 indicated that the null hypothesis was not rejected.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the sources of acquiring electronic-based grey literature for reference service delivery in the selected federal university libraries?

Table 1

Sources of Acquisition of Electronic-Based Grey Literature

Source	Librarians M	IT M	Overall M	Rank	Decision

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1. Online search and downloading	3.32	2.89	3.11	1st	Agreed
2. Subscription	3.09	3.01	3.05	3rd	Agreed
3. Resource sharing	2.42	3.02	2.72	5th	Agreed
4. Gifts	2.6	3.12	2.86	6th	Agreed
5. Library consortium	2.65	3.06	2.86	6th	Agreed
6. Exchange	2.94	3.0	2.97	4th	Agreed
7. Donation	3.19	2.94	3.07	2nd	Agreed
Cluster mean	**2.89**	**3.01**	**2.95**	—	—

All seven sources recorded overall means above the 2.50 criterion mean. Online search and downloading had the highest overall mean (3.11), followed by donation (3.07) and subscription (3.05). The finding indicates that the selected libraries rely on multiple channels for acquiring electronic-based grey literature rather than a single acquisition route. The use of several channels can broaden the range of electronic materials available to librarians for responding to users' information needs. This finding is consistent with Chisita & Fombad (2024), who reported that academic libraries in Southern Africa use resource-sharing and collaborative approaches to improve access to library resources, particularly in environments affected by financial and technological constraints. The present finding therefore suggests that diversified acquisition practices can support access to electronic grey literature for reference service delivery.

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Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of librarians and IT professionals on the sources through which electronic-based grey literature is acquired.

Table 2

Independent-Samples t Test of Librarians' and IT Professionals' Ratings of Acquisition Sources

Group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal.	Sig.	Decision
Librarians	139	23.64	2.09	170	2.121	0.035	Reject H01
IT Professionals	33	22.4	2.14				

The significance value of .035 is below .05; therefore, H01 is rejected. There is a statistically significant difference between the ratings of librarians and IT professionals on acquisition sources. The difference may reflect their different professional responsibilities and experiences with collection development and technical access, although the present study did not test the reasons for the difference. This is consistent with Mugridge and Waterhouse's (2023) finding that responsibility for information-technology functions in research libraries is often organizationally separated from core library duties, a division that can produce differing perspectives between librarians and IT personnel on shared processes such as acquisition.

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Research Question 2: What methods are employed in organizing electronic-based grey literature for reference service delivery in the selected federal university libraries?

Table 3: *Methods of Organizing Electronic-Based Grey Literature*

Method	Librarians M	IT M	Overall M	Rank	Decision
1. OPAC/Web OPAC	3.04	3.0	3.02	3rd	Agreed
2. Online Classification	3.08	3.27	3.18	1st	Agreed
3. Online Indexing and Abstracting	2.68	2.79	2.74	5th	Agreed
4. Online Classification Using MS Word	2.59	2.76	2.68	7th	Agreed
5. Online Compilation of Bibliographies	3.09	3.15	3.12	2nd	Agreed
6. Customized Google Search Engines	2.96	2.88	2.92	4th	Agreed
7. Digitization	2.69	2.76	2.73	6th	Agreed
Cluster mean	**2.88**	**2.94**	**2.91**	—	—

All seven organization methods had overall means above the 2.50 criterion mean. Online classification ranked first (3.18), followed by online compilation of bibliographies (3.12) and OPAC/Web OPAC (3.02). The findings show that the selected libraries employ a combination of electronic and bibliographic methods to organize electronic-based grey literature and make it accessible to users. This finding agrees with Idiedo et al. (2024), who found that Nigerian university institutional repositories contain research outputs such as

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theses, dissertations and conference or workshop papers, demonstrating the importance of organized digital systems for preserving and providing access to institutional information resources. The use of different organization methods in the present study therefore provides multiple access points through which users can discover relevant electronic grey literature.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of librarians and IT professionals on the methods employed in organizing electronic-based grey literature.

Table 4

Independent-Samples t Test of Librarians' and IT Professionals' Ratings of Organization Methods

Group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal.	Sig.	Decision
Librarians	139	23.41	2.56	170	0.029	0.977	Do not reject H02
IT Professionals	33	23.42	2.5				

The significance value of .977 is greater than .05; therefore, H02 is not rejected. There is no statistically significant difference between librarians and IT professionals in their ratings of the organization methods. The finding indicates broad agreement between the two groups regarding the methods used to organize electronic-based grey literature.

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This agreement may support coordinated workflows in which librarians contribute their expertise in information organization while IT professionals provide the technical support required for electronic systems.

Research Question 3: What staffing provisions are made for electronic-based grey literature collection and management in the selected federal university libraries?

Table 5

Staffing Provisions for Electronic-Based Grey Literature Management

Staffing provision	Librarians M	IT M	Overall M	Rank	Decision
1. Digital-skills librarians	2.96	2.88	2.92	7th	Agreed
2. Data analysts	2.81	3.12	2.97	2nd	Agreed
3. Data managers	2.88	3.0	2.94	3rd	Agreed
4. Subject specialist librarians	2.75	3.12	2.93	5th	Agreed
5. Research data librarians	2.81	3.06	2.94	3rd	Agreed
6. Grey literature librarians	3.33	2.7	3.02	1st	Agreed
7. Data curators	2.92	2.94	2.93	5th	Agreed
8. Data emulators	2.34	3.15	2.75	8th	Agreed
Cluster mean	**2.85**	**2.99**	**2.92**	—	—

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All eight staffing provisions had overall mean above the 2.50 criterion mean. Grey literature librarians ranked first (3.02), followed by data analysts (2.97). The results indicate that the selected libraries recognize the need for both library-specific and data-related personnel in managing electronic-based grey literature. This finding is relevant to the digital library environment, where effective management of electronic resources requires appropriate technical support and specialized personnel. Ezema and Eze (2024), in their study of institutional repositories in South-East Nigeria, identified ICT infrastructure and skilled personnel as important factors affecting repository implementation. The present finding similarly highlights the importance of personnel with relevant library, digital and technical competencies for the effective management of electronic-based grey literature.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of librarians and IT professionals on the staffing provisions made for electronic-based grey literature collection.

Table 6

Independent-Samples t Test of Librarians' and IT Professionals' Ratings of Staffing Provisions

Group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal.	Sig.	Decision
Librarians	139	23.69	3.3	170	0.94	0.349	Do not reject

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				H03
IT Professionals	33	24.27	2.43	

The significance value of .349 is greater than .05; therefore, H03 is not rejected. There is no statistically significant difference between librarians and IT professionals in their ratings of staffing provisions. The result indicates broad agreement between the two groups regarding the importance of personnel with complementary library, digital and data-related competencies in the management of electronic-based grey literature.

Recommendations

1. Federal university libraries should establish clear acquisition policies covering online sources, subscriptions, donations, exchanges, resource sharing, and library consortia.

2. Libraries should strengthen OPAC/Web OPAC, online classification, indexing, abstracting, bibliographic compilation, and digitization to improve the discovery and retrieval of electronic grey literature.

3. Universities should provide adequate computers, reliable Internet connectivity, suitable storage facilities, and stable power supply to support access, preservation, and delivery of electronic grey literature.

4. Libraries should designate or employ personnel with expertise in grey literature, research data, digital librarianship, metadata, and data curation.

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5. Librarians and IT professionals should jointly plan, implement, and evaluate electronic grey literature management systems in order to integrate professional and technical competencies.

Conclusion

The study examined the management of electronic-based grey literature for reference service delivery in federal university libraries in South-East Nigeria, with attention to acquisition sources, organization methods, and staffing provisions. The findings show that the selected libraries use multiple acquisition channels and organization methods and recognize a range of professional and technical staffing provisions. A significant difference was found between librarians and IT professionals in their ratings of acquisition sources ($p = .035$), while no significant differences were found in their ratings of organization methods ($p = .977$) or staffing provisions ($p = .349$). The findings indicate that effective management of electronic-based grey literature depends on coordinated acquisition, systematic organization, appropriate staffing, adequate ICT infrastructure, reliable power supply, funding, clear policies, and collaboration between librarians and IT professionals.

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