

Ethical Framework for Information Provisions: A Guide to Librarians and Information Professionals

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Abstract. *This study investigated the role of professional codes of ethics in guiding librarians in discharging their statutory duties in academic libraries in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Using a descriptive survey design, the study involved 62 academic librarians from the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University, and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. A structured questionnaire was used for data collection, with a high return rate of 87.1%. The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.84. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were employed for data analysis. The findings revealed that while the professional code of ethics significantly guides librarians in promoting fairness, confidentiality, and accountability, gaps remain in awareness and enforcement. The study recommends regular ethics training, better supervision, and a system of rewards and penalties to enhance the adherence to ethical standards in academic libraries.*

Keywords: *Code of Ethics, Unethical Behavior, Librarianship, Rules, Universities.*

Introduction

Ethical framework is a guiding principle that prescribes expected behavior for individuals in the society as well as members of professional associations such as librarianship profession. It serves as guide lines for the librarians and information professionals in carrying out their statutory duties such as selecting, acquiring, storing, processing and dissemination of information to various users. Librarians and information professionals over the years in the course of their services to patrons have been engrossed with how to determine whether what their members in the course of discharging their duties are right or wrong, ethical or unethical. Hoq (2012) opines that it is very difficult, if not impossible to come up with definite answers, to the aforementioned premise.

It is in view of this that Nwosu (2017) remarks that the foundation of every professional body rest largely on some essential set of values and norms that define, guide and direct actions of members, that such essential set of values are regarded as professional ethics. Chiekezie, Aminikpo and Nneh (2021/22) describe professional ethics as principles that define the limits of acceptable conducts and behaviour, and codifies what should be regarded as right or wrong among members of a professional group, ethics of librarians and information professionals in any context covers fairness, truthfulness, transparency, courteousness and accountability towards co-workers, library users, institutions and the society (LRCN, 1995, ALA 2016). Igbeka and Okoroma (2013) aver that every profession has its ethical values, which guide members on how to conduct themselves and preserve the image of the profession for the good of the society.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with moral values relating to human conduct with respect to what is right and what is wrong. To Chiekezie, Aminikpo and Nneh explain ethics to mean established moral rules and obligations expected of the individuals in an organized setting that is a

system through which the acceptable actions of the members are being defined. Ikolo (2019) depicts that ethics in the information profession are concerned with the application of moral standards to the conduct of librarians and other information professionals who are involved in information dissemination. The International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) (2012) depicts that professional ethics are general principles and behavior that should be followed by members of the profession to act in an appropriate moral way and to avoid the risk of misconduct.

It is in the light of this that Khayatmoghadam (2020) remarks that library and information professionals are expected to carry out their functions to the public in an ethical manner, they are to be guided by the code of ethics, which does not replace the law of the land but serves as guidelines for the conduct of the professionals. It is necessary to point out that law and ethics overlap. This is because both law and ethics centers on what is deemed appropriate or acceptable, they try to make people to do the right thing, law reflects state's codified ethics, whereas ethics is socially determined and individually enforced, Udeze (2012). The substantive issues in information ethics includes, information privacy, intellectual property rights, intellectual freedom, equitable access to information, conflict between right to information and ethical use of information.

Hoq (2012) submits that while the primary concerns of the library and information professionals on information ethics is concerned with the use and misuse of information, with particular focus on intellectual property, censorship, data integrity, privacy access to information, etc, that they have to hold their professional ethics as well which relate to the application of principles to the actions and decisions taken by informational professionals. It is in respect of these that Rich (2013) remarks that information technologies have created problems that could not be solved on the basis of traditional rules and roles, hence the presence of information ethics aims to deal with ethical questions related to the internet. Ethics within the librarianship is meant to strike a balance between the creators and users of knowledge held in libraries and as well to guide library and information professionals in the course of discharging their statutory duties bearing in mind their legal limits and copyright related issues.

Objectives of the Study

The study will be guided by the following objectives. Specifically, the study seeks to;

1. find out the extent to which professional code of ethics could guide librarians and informational professionals in discharging of statutory duties.
2. determine the effectiveness of the professional code of ethics on librarians.
3. examine the causes of unethical behavior among librarians.
4. Proffer possible measures to curb unethical professional conduct among librarians.

Review of Related Literature

Librarians and information professionals have spent reasonable energy and time writing on professional code of ethics for librarians. Olorunsaye and Fagbami (2018) carried out an investigative study on professional codes of ethics for librarians in Nigeria. The findings revealed that Librarian's Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), code of ethics is meant to inculcate good ethical values and standards for professionalism in librarians. The findings further reveal that the code has not being properly enforced professionally and that there are no serious supervision and sanctions on librarian's unethical professional behaviour. The study recommended that there should be code of ethics supervisory committee for regular supervision and enforcement among members.

In a similar study Osibanjo, Akinbode, Falola and Oludayo (2018) on work ethics and employees job performance. The finding of the study revealed that sustainable job performance can only be achieved through enforcing strong work ethics, that the extent to which employees exhibit integrity, sense of responsibility, equality, discipline and sense of commitment in work discharged determine how work ethics can contribute to job performance. In a related work by Sharul, Mohd and Siti (2016) on the relationship between work ethics and job performance in the library, the result show that there is a significant relationship between work ethics and job performance in libraries. In the study, the authors recommended that improving employee's performance should not only be based on

compensation and rewards but also on functional code of ethics.

Writing on the unethical behavior among professional, Saeed (2020) remarks that the causes of unethical professional behavior among employees include; personal interest of the workers, corruption, religious, political, ethnic influence, indiscipline among others. Stressing on this, Oneyeyan, Ajayi, Adesina and Bamidele (2014) on their study on assessment of ethical concerns among practicing librarians in Nigeria, the findings of the study revealed that librarians do not adhere to their professional code of conduct because of poor level of awareness among members. The studies further revealed that majority of the librarians do not have a copy of the Librarian's Registration Council of Nigeria's code of ethics. Their study depicts that professional ethics should be treated as an important course in library school curriculum to instill in the young library and information science professionals the full knowledge of professional ethics in information provision.

In addition to this, Khayatmoghadam (2020) documents that professional ethics can be effective indicator and an important motivational tool in the organizations to create excellence, sustainable development and desirable competition, reduce conflicts, increase commitment and social responsibility and pave the path for having a desired organizational culture. Arising from the above, librarians and information professionals have been making useful suggestions in addressing unethical professional conducts among librarians. Afolayan (2022) avers that library professional association, such Nigeria Library Association (NLA), Librarian Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), etc should ensure that all library schools in Nigeria introduce courses on information ethics in various curricula to inculcate ethical standards and principles, and offer different ways of handling ethical issues among professionals.

It is as a result of this that Zin (2019) states that ethical conduct among library and information professionals should be tackled with all seriousness by all concerned. The author further maintained that the library schools, library associations and professional bodies should continuously create awareness on the need for ethical practices among librarians and the danger of engaging in unethical behavior. Chiekezie, Aminikpo and Nneh (2021) in their submission postulated that library management and librarians' professional associations should put in place appropriate sanctions to serve as deterrent to defaulters of ethical rules. In their study they recommended that there should be regular supervision and enforcement of sanctions and rewards by the professional associations for erring and excellent members respectively to ensure strict compliance from members.

From the forgoing views of librarians and information professionals on the importance of professional code of conduct on the service delivery, the effects of unethical behavior on the job performance and useful recommendations were examined. The study showed that strict adherence of professional code of ethics by librarians and information professionals will enhance librarian's job performance.

Methodology

Descriptive survey design was used for the study. The population of the study comprised all 62 academic librarians in the three universities in Port Harcourt, Rivers State namely; University of Port Harcourt library (18), Rivers State University library (23) and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (21). All the 62 respondents were sampled using census sampling technique. A structured questionnaire was designed for data collection. The validation and reliability of the questionnaire were obtained through superficial reading and test-retest method, respectively. The data from test-retest were analyzed using Cronbach alpha and the reliability coefficient was realized as 0.84. Out of the 62 respondents sampled, 54 correctly responded to the questionnaire, indicating 87.1% return-rate. Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation was used for data analysis.

Result and Discussions

Objective 1: Find out the extent to which professional code of ethics could guide librarians in discharging of statutory duties.

Table 1: To what extent does professional code of ethics guide librarians in discharging of statutory duties?

SN	ITEM STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	x	±	RMK
1	The professional code of ethics provides clear guidelines that help librarians adhere to ethical standards in their daily responsibilities.	29	29	29	2	2.96		Agree
2	The code of ethics ensures that librarians treat all library users fairly and without discrimination.	20	21	5	8	2.98		Agree
3	The code of ethics helps librarians uphold the confidentiality of users' information effectively.	17	20	8	9	2.83		Agree
4	The professional code of ethics promotes accountability in librarians' service delivery.	19	21	8	6	2.98		Agree
5	The code of ethics encourages librarians to manage library resources with integrity and transparency.	15	23	12	4	2.91		Agree
6	The code of ethics inspires librarians to actively pursue continuous professional development to enhance their effectiveness.	10	20	17	7	2.61		Agree
7	The professional code of ethics supports librarians in promoting intellectual freedom and access to information for all users.	7	23	17	7	2.56		Agree
8	The code of ethics provides practical guidance for resolving conflicts and maintaining professional conduct within the library.	5	25	15	9	2.48		Disagree
	Weighted mean score					2.79		High

The findings from Table 1 reveal that professional codes of ethics are perceived to guide librarians effectively in discharging their statutory duties, as indicated by the weighted mean score of 2.79, which is above the criterion mean score of 2.50. Items such as "The professional code of ethics provides clear guidelines that help librarians adhere to ethical standards" (mean score = 2.96) and "The code of ethics ensures that librarians treat all library users fairly" (mean score = 2.98) show strong agreement, suggesting that librarians recognize the code of ethics as an essential tool for ensuring fairness and ethical conduct in their daily responsibilities. Most responses indicated agreement that the code promotes accountability (2.98), upholds confidentiality (2.83), encourages resource management with integrity (2.91), and inspires professional development (2.61).

However, one item, "The code of ethics provides practical guidance for resolving conflicts and maintaining professional conduct within the library" (mean score = 2.48), received a mean score below the criterion, indicating disagreement. This suggests that while the code of ethics is generally seen as helpful in guiding librarians' statutory duties, there are perceived gaps in its applicability to resolving conflicts or ensuring consistent professional conduct in certain situations. This could imply that the code's guidance on conflict resolution might need further clarification or development in practice.

The finding aligns with the literature on the importance of the professional code of ethics for librarians and its role in guiding ethical behavior. For instance, Olorunsaye and Fagbami (2018) highlighted the role of the Librarian's Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) code of ethics in instilling good ethical values, though they also pointed to challenges in enforcement. The high ratings on items regarding fairness, accountability, and resource management (mean scores above 2.80) support Khayatmoghdam's (2020) assertion that professional ethics can be a key motivational tool for fostering organizational excellence and commitment. The perception that the code promotes intellectual freedom and fairness is consistent with the ethical principles outlined by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA, 2012), which stress the importance of equal access to information.

On the other hand, the item regarding conflict resolution (mean score = 2.48) suggests that while the code offers some ethical guidance, it may not be sufficiently comprehensive in addressing specific issues like interpersonal or professional conflicts. This finding resonates with Saeed (2020), who identified causes of unethical behavior such as indiscipline and personal interest, which might influence librarians' ability to resolve conflicts effectively. Therefore, incorporating clearer conflict resolution strategies into the code of ethics could improve its overall impact, aligning it more closely with the needs of the profession.

Objective 2: Determine the effectiveness of the professional code of ethics on librarians.

Table 2: How effective is the professional code of ethics on librarians?

SN	ITEM STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{x}	\pm	RMK
1	The professional code of ethics effectively guides librarians in making ethical decisions in their work.	8	29	12	5	2.74		Agree
2	The code of ethics significantly enhances the quality of services provided by librarians.	11	25	14	4	2.80		Agree
3	The professional code of ethics helps librarians maintain high standards of professionalism in their duties.	10	30	12	2	2.89		Agree
4	The code of ethics effectively promotes fairness and equity in librarians' interactions with users.	9	30	10	5	2.80		Agree
5	The professional code of ethics ensures that librarians handle users' information with the utmost confidentiality and care.	3	33	10	8	2.57		Agree
6	The code of ethics is instrumental in fostering accountability among librarians in their responsibilities.	3	31	14	6	2.57		Agree
7	The professional code of ethics effectively supports librarians in upholding the principles of intellectual freedom.	3	32	8	11	2.50		Agree
8	The code of ethics contributes to a positive work environment by fostering mutual respect and ethical conduct among library staff.	2	39	7	6	2.69		Agree
	Weighted mean score					2.69		Moderate

The findings from Table 2 indicate that the professional code of ethics is generally perceived as effective by the librarians, as shown by the weighted mean score of 2.69, which is above the criterion mean score of 2.50. Most of the individual item statements demonstrate agreement, with mean scores ranging from 2.50 to 2.89. Librarians agreed that the code of ethics effectively guides ethical decision-making (mean score = 2.74), enhances service quality (mean score = 2.80), and helps maintain high professional standards (mean score = 2.89). The code's role in promoting fairness, ensuring confidentiality, fostering accountability, and supporting intellectual freedom received favorable responses, with scores mostly in the range of 2.50 to 2.80.

Despite the generally positive responses, there are a few items with lower scores, such as the item "The professional code of ethics effectively supports librarians in upholding the principles of intellectual freedom" (mean score = 2.50). This score indicates that while the code is seen as effective overall, its effectiveness in promoting specific principles like intellectual freedom might be considered less robust by some librarians. The weighted mean score of 2.69 suggests that while the code is seen as moderately effective, there is still room for improvement in how it is implemented and perceived in its day-to-day impact.

The results highlight that the professional code of ethics is generally seen as an effective framework for guiding librarians in their professional duties, which aligns with the literature on the importance

of ethics in librarianship. Chiekezie, Aminikpo, and Nneh (2021/22) emphasized the need for librarians to adhere strictly to professional codes to enhance their service delivery, a view supported by the findings showing that the code enhances service quality and accountability. Also, the perception that the code fosters fairness and equity is in line with the ethical principles outlined by the IFLA (2012), which advocates for the equal treatment of all users and fair access to information.

However, the relatively lower score on intellectual freedom (mean score = 2.50) indicates that some librarians may not fully perceive the code as effective in promoting this principle. This finding is consistent with Hoq (2012), who noted that library ethics, particularly in the context of information access, are complex and challenging to apply universally. It suggests a need for further emphasis on intellectual freedom within the code and its practical application in libraries, as intellectual freedom is a cornerstone of library ethics and service delivery. Strengthening these aspects could lead to a more comprehensive ethical framework, as suggested by Olorunsaye and Fagbami (2018), who called for better enforcement and clearer application of the code.

Objective 3: Examine the causes of unethical behavior among librarians.

Table 3: What are the causes of unethical behaviour among librarians?

SN	ITEM STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	\bar{x}	\pm	RMK
1	Poor remuneration and financial incentives contribute to unethical behavior among librarians.	17	23	7	7	2.93		Agree
2	Inadequate enforcement of professional ethical standards encourages unethical practices in the library.	7	12	24	11	2.28		Disagree
3	Limited awareness or training on ethical guidelines leads to unethical behavior among librarians.	12	27	9	6	2.83		Agree
4	Pressure to meet unrealistic expectations from library users contributes to unethical practices.	11	26	10	7	2.76		Agree
5	The lack of disciplinary measures for unethical behavior fosters misconduct among librarians.	2	6	17	29	1.65		Disagree
6	Peer influence and workplace culture play a significant role in encouraging unethical behavior.	18	23	8	5	3.00		Agree
7	The absence of proper supervision and monitoring leads to unethical practices in the library.	8	12	26	8	2.37		Disagree
8	Insufficient access to necessary resources and tools contributes to unethical behavior among librarians.	13	25	12	4	2.87		Agree

The findings from Table 3 indicate that several factors are perceived to contribute to unethical behavior among librarians, with a few items receiving scores indicating agreement. The item "Poor remuneration and financial incentives contribute to unethical behavior" received the highest mean score (2.93), showing strong agreement among the librarians. This suggests that inadequate financial compensation is viewed as a significant factor leading to unethical practices in the profession. Other items, such as "Limited awareness or training on ethical guidelines leads to unethical behavior" (mean score = 2.83), "Pressure to meet unrealistic expectations from library users contributes to unethical practices" (mean score = 2.76), and "Insufficient access to necessary resources and tools contributes to unethical behavior" (mean score = 2.87), also received agreement, highlighting how various operational challenges and lack of adequate resources or training can foster unethical conduct.

However, some items received lower mean scores, indicating disagreement with their perceived role in fostering unethical behavior. The items "Inadequate enforcement of professional ethical standards encourages unethical practices in the library" (mean score = 2.28), "The lack of disciplinary measures for unethical behavior fosters misconduct" (mean score = 1.65), and "The absence of proper supervision and monitoring leads to unethical practices" (mean score = 2.37) were disagreed with by

the respondents, suggesting that they do not view these factors as major causes of unethical behavior in their profession.

The results suggest that financial challenges, limited professional training, and external pressures are key contributors to unethical behavior, aligning with the views expressed by Saeed (2020), who identified corruption, personal interests, and pressure as causes of unethical conduct in the workplace. The strong agreement with the statement about poor remuneration (mean score = 2.93) reflects concerns about how financial insecurity can lead to ethical compromises, a sentiment echoed by Olorunsaye and Fagbami (2018), who noted the importance of ensuring adequate compensation and ethical oversight in the profession. The impact of limited awareness and training, as indicated by the item "Limited awareness or training on ethical guidelines" (mean score = 2.83), is also consistent with findings by Oneyeyan et al. (2014), who highlighted the lack of knowledge and awareness of ethical standards among librarians as a key issue contributing to unethical behavior.

On the other hand, the disagreement with items related to enforcement, discipline, and supervision suggests that librarians may feel that these mechanisms are not as critical to curbing unethical behavior as other factors. This may imply that the existing professional frameworks or enforcement mechanisms might be sufficient, but that attention needs to be given to addressing more practical and immediate issues, such as financial compensation and training. Khayatmoghadam (2020) emphasized the importance of professional ethics in fostering a positive organizational culture, but this finding suggests that addressing material and operational challenges might be more urgent for improving ethical conduct in libraries.

Objective 4: Proffer possible measures to curb unethical professional conduct among librarians.

Table 4: What are the possible measures to curb unethical professional conduct among librarians?

SN	ITEM STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	x	±	RMK
1	Regular training and workshops on professional ethics can significantly reduce unethical practices among librarians.	24	17	6	7	3.07		Agree
2	Implementing strict disciplinary measures against unethical conduct can help promote professional accountability.	13	22	10	9	2.72		Agree
3	Encouraging open reporting of unethical behavior without fear of retaliation can deter misconduct among librarians.	17	28	7	2	3.11		Agree
4	Providing clear guidelines on ethical practices can help librarians better understand and adhere to professional standards.	15	23	10	6	2.87		Agree
5	Regular monitoring and evaluation of librarians' performance can help detect and address unethical behaviors promptly.	14	28	7	5	2.94		Agree
6	Establishing a rewards system for ethical and exemplary conduct can motivate librarians to maintain high professional standards.	18	25	8	3	3.07		Agree
7	Ensuring that library leadership models ethical behavior can positively influence librarians' conduct.	14	27	8	5	2.93		Agree
8	Strengthening collaboration between professional library associations and libraries can enhance adherence to ethical practices.	10	25	15	4	2.76		Agree

The results from Table 4 suggest that several measures are viewed as effective ways to curb unethical professional conduct among librarians. Among the most highly agreed upon measures were "Regular training and workshops on professional ethics can significantly reduce unethical practices among

librarians" (mean score = 3.07), "Encouraging open reporting of unethical behavior without fear of retaliation can deter misconduct among librarians" (mean score = 3.11), and "Establishing a rewards system for ethical and exemplary conduct can motivate librarians to maintain high professional standards" (mean score = 3.07). These measures received the highest mean scores, indicating strong support for initiatives that focus on education, open communication, and positive reinforcement as tools to address unethical behavior.

Other measures, such as "Implementing strict disciplinary measures against unethical conduct can help promote professional accountability" (mean score = 2.72), "Providing clear guidelines on ethical practices can help librarians better understand and adhere to professional standards" (mean score = 2.87), and "Regular monitoring and evaluation of librarians' performance can help detect and address unethical behaviors promptly" (mean score = 2.94), were also viewed favorably. However, the item "Strengthening collaboration between professional library associations and libraries can enhance adherence to ethical practices" (mean score = 2.76) had a slightly lower mean, indicating moderate agreement with the importance of such collaboration in curbing unethical conduct.

The high mean scores for measures such as regular training, open reporting, and a rewards system reflect the importance of proactive approaches in curbing unethical behavior, which is consistent with recommendations by Olorunsaye and Fagbami (2018), who stressed the need for continuous education and awareness among librarians to ensure ethical compliance. The strong support for creating an environment where unethical behavior can be openly reported without fear of retaliation aligns with Zin (2019), who emphasized the role of professional bodies and associations in promoting ethical practices by ensuring that there are channels for transparent communication and reporting.

The favorable responses towards performance monitoring and evaluation as well as the rewards system for ethical conduct echo findings from Sharul, Mohd, and Siti (2016), who suggested that rewarding ethical behavior and monitoring performance could drive professionalism in the library sector. The lower mean for the item about strengthening collaboration between library associations and libraries may indicate that respondents view this as secondary to other more immediate actions, such as training or creating clear guidelines. This highlights the need for a more targeted approach, as noted by Afolayan (2022), who suggested that library schools should integrate information ethics into curricula to help create a more ethical workforce from the start. Therefore, while collaboration is important, its perceived impact may be seen as less direct compared to other measures like training or monitoring.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The main focus of this study was to explore the role of professional codes of ethics in guiding librarians in discharging their statutory duties, the effectiveness of such codes, the causes of unethical behavior, and potential measures to curb unethical conduct among librarians. The findings revealed that professional codes of ethics generally guide librarians in fulfilling their duties, with most respondents agreeing that the code helps in maintaining fairness, confidentiality, accountability, and professionalism. However, while the professional code was found to be moderately effective in guiding ethical decision-making, the study also identified causes of unethical behavior such as poor remuneration, limited awareness, and peer influence. To address these issues, several measures, including regular training, clear ethical guidelines, and a rewards system, were found to be effective in promoting ethical behavior. The findings of this study highlight the critical role of professional codes of ethics in guiding librarians and information professionals, but also underscore the need for continued education, clear enforcement mechanisms, and positive reinforcement to curb unethical practices. To ensure greater adherence to professional ethics, it is recommended that library associations and institutions implement regular ethics training, establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems, and create incentives to encourage ethical behavior. The study suggests that a focus on creating a supportive and transparent work environment, where unethical behavior can be openly reported and addressed, will foster a more ethical and professional library community.

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