

Information seeking behaviour of beggars in Accra

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Abstract

Purpose – It is evident that human existence is highly dependent on information. Information is considered to be an essential right of every single individual to sustain life and enjoy it as well. The benefits of looking into the information behaviour of people can, therefore, not be overemphasised. However, there is a yawning gap in research conducted into the information behaviour of marginalised groups such as beggars. This study aims to investigate the information seeking behaviour of beggars in Ghana.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a case study design, the study used a qualitative approach and interpretivist paradigm to look into this phenomenon. In total, ten beggars were sampled from the beggar population in Accra through the use of convenient and snowball sampling techniques. A semi-structured interview schedule was used as data collection tool to solicit responses from the participants.

Findings – The study revealed that beggars in Accra lacked understanding of their information needs, although they were heavily dependent on information for their tasks and survival. Again, the findings of the study showed that beggars were faced with information seeking barriers such as illiteracy, lack of information literacy skills and financial resources. The study recommends the need for stakeholders to look into the social welfare and literacy needs of beggars.

Originality/value – The authors consider the study original both in conceptualisation and design. The main question being interrogated stems from identified gaps in the literature and the study intends to fill these knowledge gaps. The study's originality also stems from the fact that there is a paucity of information on the subject of study in the context of Ghana.

Keywords Beggars, Information access, Information need, Barrier, Information seeking, Behaviour, Ghana

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As [Case and Given \(2016\)](#) suggests, studies of information behaviour have increased exponentially. Researchers in this area are applying critical theory to the range of activities comprising information behaviour. For example, the contexts, people and situations that information is studied continue to grow and evolve. [Mansour \(2017\)](#) implicitly opines that there is some sort of bias towards conducting information behaviour studies that involve formal and professionals to the neglect of other sections of the society.

There is ample evidence detailing the relevance of information in the life of every single individual irrespective of context, location or situation ([Rubinic, 2012](#)). The need for information, in almost all cases or instances drive persons to access them from available information sources ([Case and Given, 2016](#)). In fact, there is a growing interest in using a multi-disciplinary approach to understand the concepts surrounding information needs, information seeking behaviour, information systems and channels, and how these concepts and in many cases, variables do interface or interact ([Gordon et al., 2018](#)).



Problem statement and research objectives

Extensive research has been conducted into the information seeking behaviour and information use of different groups. However, there is a yawning gap in research conducted into the information seeking behaviour of marginalised groups, for example, beggars. According to [Mansour \(2017\)](#), very few studies, unfortunately, have focussed on workers in the informal sector. This attests to little or no knowledge on the information needs and behaviour of such groups and not to talk of investigating the obstacles to their information use.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the information seeking behaviour of beggars in Accra and make recommendations based on the finding for effective provision of services to meet their information needs. The study sought to understand and outline the barriers to accessing information by beggars in Accra and suggest strategies that could be implemented to make information readily accessible to beggars.

This study is very relevant in many ways. It highlights the information needs of a socially marginalised group – beggars – and the challenges they face when seeking information. The findings of this study inform policymakers on how to satisfy the information needs of marginalised groups in the country. The objectives of the study, therefore, were to as follows:

- RO1: Investigate and determine the information needs of beggars in Accra.
- RO2: Identify the various sources and channels of information used by beggars in Accra.
- RO3: Look into the barriers that impede beggars' information access and use.

Methodology

The case study design enabled the study to qualitatively investigate the information seeking behaviour of beggars. The case for this study was, therefore, beggars of Accra. Because of the nature of the study, the qualitative research approach was used for an in-depth understanding of beggars' information seeking behaviour. The interpretivist research paradigm was, therefore, used for this study, as it is noted to be commonly associated with qualitative research ([Kankam, 2019](#); [Creswell and Clark, 2007](#)). The application of interpretivism enabled the study to “emphasise understanding of people’s [beggars] experience of information, individually or collectively, such as how they use, feel, think and communicate information among themselves” ([Kankam, 2019](#), p. 90).

There seems to be a number of complexities in relation to ethics and methodological issues, especially, sampling from a population of beggars. Particularly, applying a random or reliable sampling procedure for beggars in Accra was seemingly impossible, as they were mobile, and a significant number of them did not have a definite address. The study, therefore, sampled 10 beggars through the use of convenience and snowball sampling techniques. According to [Asrese and Mekonnen](#), “by combining different [sampling] approaches, it may be possible to generate empirical information about the beggars with reasonable assurance”.

For the purpose of this study, the 10 sampled beggars were drawn from three public places in the central business district of Accra – Kaneshie market, Abbosey Okai central mosque and the Makola market. It was common to see many beggars in these areas, but it was very difficult securing their consent for interviews. The researchers needed to invest much effort to build trust before they consented for interviews. Some of the beggars

regarded the interviewers as strangers and intruders and were, therefore, unwilling to consent for interviews.

The study designed and used a semi-structured interview schedule for the interviews. This helped not only the interviewers to have control over the line of questioning but also allowed the interviewees enough space to provide in-depth information where necessary (Creswell, 1998).

Theoretical framework

Wilson's (1981) information behaviour model was adopted as a theoretical base for the study. According to Wilson (1999), information-seeking behaviour concerns the act of actively or passively seeking and using information to satisfy information need. This is the behaviour that stalks from the information user's interaction with information sources to retrieve relevant information that will satisfy his/her information needs.

In relation to this study, six attributes of Wilson's (1981) model were used for the mapping based on the objectives of the study as follows:

- The attribute "information user" for the purpose of this study maps to the beggars of Accra;
- The attribute "need" maps to the information needs of beggars of Accra;
- The attributes "information seeking behaviour", "demands on information systems" and "demands on other information sources" map to the activities and sources that beggars of Accra used to acquire information; and
- The attribute "failure" maps to the barriers that impeded beggars' access to information.

These attributes of Wilson's (1981) model of information behaviour guided the conduct of the study and the discussion of the findings related to beggars' information seeking behaviour.

Literature review

Conceptualisation of information

Kundu (2017) defines information as processed data into a form that is meaningful to the recipient and of real or perceived value to take present or future decisions. This definition of information underscores the importance of information to humanity's existence. Chiefly, information is important to all people all over the world, irrespective of their beliefs, situations and conditions of work. According to Mansour (2017), people should be provided with free access to information that can help them become better informed citizens and productive members of society. Indeed, information literate individuals have the capacity to improve society's quality of life.

Information is considered as an essential right of every single individual to sustain his/her life and to enjoy it as well. This right across the globe is guaranteed by most international agreements, charters and constitutions. Access to information and freedom of expression are international human rights. For example, Article 19 of both the UN Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that the right to freedom of expression includes not only freedom to "impart information and ideas of all kinds" but also freedom to "seek" and "receive" them "regardless of frontiers" and in whatever medium.

It is evident that human existence is highly dependent on information. For example, when persons decide to visit places, perplexed about the side effects of a medication,

overhear conversations or receive a new assignment, they are all information-related activities (Case and Given, 2016). Information, thus, plays a key role in achieving success in these situations. People in different fields of endeavour or professions are also found to use information for a variety of purposes. Das (2008) argues that free flow of information is fundamental for bridging the knowledge gaps between the privileged and the underprivileged communities.

Information need

The term “information need” is often understood as an individual or group’s desire to locate and obtain information to satisfy a conscious and unconscious need. Hjørland (1997) posits that it is closely related to the concept of relevance; thus, people will consider something relevant if it is related to a task to be performed.

The concept of information need was coined by an American information journalist Robert S. Taylor in his 1962 article “The Process of Asking Questions” published in *American Documentation* (renamed *Journal of American Society for Information Science and Technology*). Taylor attempted in his paper to describe how an inquirer obtains answers from an information system by performing processes consciously or unconsciously.

Information need has attracted a plethora of research work especially in this era of information overload. A review of literature on information need has revealed slight discrepancies with the measurement of information need. To Afzal (2017), there is no clear agreement on how information need should be measured. The evaluation of selected literature shows that there are terminological issues associated with defining information need; lack of theoretical foundations underpinning empirical research; and use of weak proxies such as information seeking behaviour and information use in the measurement of information need (Rubinic, 2012; Afzal, 2017; Gordon *et al.*, 2018).

Information sources

Technological advancements have increased the availability of information and its generational process. This has led to the creation of enormous information sources, especially in digital formats. For example, the use of the internet provides many channels by which an information user could access huge amount of information. Although information in print sources or format is still significant, electronic sources of information are providing many advantages such as speed of access to the information used as compared to the print sources.

Information behaviour

The discipline of information science offers us different ways of conceptualising information but articulates many of the same issues (Johnstone *et al.*, 2004). An interdisciplinary paper by McCreadie and Rice (1999) established a taxonomy classifying a range of previous studies examining information seeking behaviour. In one classification, access to information is described in terms of the technology used to produce it. They note that such an Information Technology-centred perspective leads to a common, however, mistaken postulation that access to technology equals access to information. Information behaviour is thus perceived, not as physical or cognitive activities separate from work (McCreadie and Rice, 1999).

Wilson (1997) in an attempt to conceptualise information behaviour, developed a revised general model of information behaviour, based on an integrated review of information seeking behaviour in various disciplines outside information science. The model was

essentially made up of two constructs, information seeking and information processing and use, represented in a circular, iterative system. This review comprehensively expanded upon the former construct of information behaviour, while more or less ignoring the latter.

Allen (1996) in his book *information tasks*, merges much of the academic literature advocating the need for user-centred approaches to information system development. A user-centred approach is one where the needs of the information users seemingly play a more influential role than data or technological systems (Allen, 1996). He provides a worthy insight into how a user's "knowledge structures" and "abilities, styles and preferences" influence their information behaviour. He argues that these factors must be incorporated into the system design process.

Technology and information-seeking behaviour

The advent of technology has brought different dimensions to information search, information use and information seeking behaviour (Case and Given, 2016). These rapid changes have attracted the interest of scholars and researchers, investigating the interface between technologies, for instance, social media and information-seeking behaviour. For example, Hamid *et al.* (2016) conducted a study to investigate the information-seeking behaviour of international students in terms of their information needs. The study highlighted the role that social media played by serving as a source of information for some respondents.

Literature on information seeking behaviour among some selected professionals

Gordon *et al.* (2018) studied the information seeking behaviour, attitudes and choices of academic chemists with revealing outcomes. About 35.5 per cent of chemists under this study confessed they were unable to keep up with information flow although they are consistently seeking for information.

Chatterjee and Dasgupta (2016), in their research into information seeking behaviour of farmers in India, suggested information needs must be considered essential for proper policy. Ellis *et al.* (1993) conducted a study seeking and analysing information behaviour patterns of a group of research physicists and research chemists. The aim was to use a similar methodology to that used in a previous study of the information seeking activities of a group of social scientists and to affect a comparison between the information seeking patterns of the scientists and the social scientists.

According to Singh and Satija (2006), information seeking behaviour is an essential component in the designing and developing of need-based information centres for meeting the information requirements of users. They conducted a comprehensive review of research scanned in international contexts in the field of agricultural sciences. The study covered various facets related to information seeking behaviour, findings and conceptual meanings. It includes about 65 research studies undertaken by foreign researchers in the agriculture sector. The findings of the studies were organised into various categories i.e. theories of information seeking; information needs; users characteristics; information browsing; information seeking; and information seeking behaviour.

Duta (2013) reviewed research that has been done on the information needs and information-seeking behaviour of indigenous people in developing countries. The paper focussed on two types of user groups as follows: urban dwellers and rural dwellers. By comparing their information-seeking behaviour, conclusions about human information behaviour in the developing world, as well as key factors that play a role in their information needs and behaviour, are drawn. Findings revealed that while a weak economy has a

profound effect on the availability and accessibility of resources, the information and communication divide is not defined as much by the economic status of a geographic location as it is by an individual user's educational background.

Begging and beggars

Beggars are noted to be part of the socially maligned and vulnerable groups in society with begging seen as an activity that is derived from poverty and hardship (Khan and Menka, 2014). Begging is mostly regarded as an activity that is unregulated and falls within the informal economic sector (Adriaenssens and Hendrickx, 2010).

The begging "job" has been found to be unprofitable, as it produces far less income as compared to a full-time job (Smith, 2005). According to Roblee-Hertzmark (2012), a number of countries, including India, Morocco and the USA have prohibited begging by law, and thus, consider it to be a criminal offence.

In Ghana, it is common to see people from diverse background engage in begging across the streets and markets in major cities such as Accra and Kumasi. Factors such as the high cost of living, unemployment, migration, among others have been found to be the causes of begging in Africa (Demewozu, 2005). It is important to point out that laws of Ghana, specifically the Children's Act 560, as well as Beggars and Destitutes Act – 1969 prohibit all forms of begging in Ghana. The Beggars and Destitutes Act (1969) of Ghana state that:

Any person found begging and any person wandering or placing himself in any premises or place for the purpose of begging may be arrested by a police officer without warrant and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding fifty new cedis or to imprisonment not exceeding three months or both (Section 2(1)).

Notwithstanding this law, the activities of beggars are very common in Ghana. Police and other law enforcement agencies seem helpless in dealing with the situation. A possible reason is that the law permit "religious" and "charity" begging:

A person shall not be deemed to be begging by reason of soliciting or receiving alms in accordance with a religious custom or the custom of a community or for a public charitable purpose or organized entertainment (Section 2(2)).

Earlier studies on beggars' information seeking behaviour

There is a serious literature gap in relation to the information seeking behaviour of marginalised groups such as beggars. Most literature focus on the information behaviour of high esteemed groups such as lawyers, parliamentarians, students, engineers and among others. Previous studies on beggars looked into their demographical characteristics and their control as against their information behaviour.

For example, Asrese and Mekonnen (2014) looked into the demographic characteristics and socio-economic factors of begging in Bahir Dar (Ethiopia). They found poverty, unemployment and physical handicap as the main causes of begging in Ethiopia. Khan and Menka (2014) also examined the demographical characteristics, literacy, employment, household infrastructural facilities and their socio-economic status in relation to the spatial pattern of beggars' in the urban areas of the Aligarh district of Uttar Pradesh (India). Moreover, Ahamdi (2010) conducted a study on beggars in Shiraz (Iran) and found that two-thirds of the beggars had no secondary education and none of them had had tertiary education.

The only literature on information seeking behaviour of beggars that were available to this study was Mansour's (2017) study conducted on beggars in Egypt. Obviously, this study relied

on Mansour's work for comparative analysis, as there existed paucity of literature on the information behaviour of beggars and as [Mansour \(2017\)](#) opines:

This study is a serious attempt to meet a gap in recognizing and assessing the information needs of beggars, specifically in Egypt, as well as their information-seeking behaviour. It is the first study of its kind to address, systematically, this marginalized group in society toward the determination of their information needs as well as the identification of their behaviour followed to seek information (p. 103).

His study found that the Egyptian beggars' needs for information were "simple and complex at the same time depending on the understanding of the beggars' behaviour" (p. 104). The study further indicated that for Egyptian beggars to satisfy their information needs, they "relied heavily on some informal information channels such as personal contact with their peers, friends, families and relatives" (p. 104).

Public library services to vulnerable populations

Extension of public library services to marginalised persons such as beggars would improve their information consciousness. It is however, important for public library service providers to appreciate that the facet of support for vulnerable persons does not suggest homogeneous groups, "but rather an unambiguous reflection of the growing emphasis on providing access to [library] services for people who might not be able to otherwise access these social supports" ([Stenstrom et al., 2019](#), p. 357). Public libraries are, therefore, encouraged to connect with stakeholders in the care of these vulnerable persons "to offer them as efficient and sustainable services as possible" ([IFLA, 2017](#), p. 13).

It is evident from the literature that public libraries are increasing their social work, but "it should be recognised that it still only reaches a small part of the total population who find themselves vulnerable" ([Gómez-Hernández et al., 2017](#), p. 31). For example, a study by [Agyei et al. \(2018\)](#) among vulnerable persons in Ghana revealed participants' lack of awareness of libraries and their role in disseminating information. Evidently, for a public library to be effective and efficient in its delivery of services to vulnerable persons such as beggars, there is the need for the library to appreciate that vulnerable populations "are a social group that includes people of different races, ethnicities, ages and genders. The needs of one group may differ significantly from the needs of another group" ([IFLA, 2017](#), p. 14). Thus, one of the effective ways is to organise targeted library services in the library or outreach programme for these persons.

Results

The qualitative research analytical approach adopted for this research was the inductive approach. This approach was considered suitable for many reasons, dominant among them is the small size of the sample. Three themes emerged after the rigorous analysis of responses by participants. These themes were formed based on the objectives and research questions for this particular study.

A total of 10 respondents were sampled for the study. The 6 (60 per cent) of the participants were women and 4 (40 per cent) were men. The study found that almost all the participants (80 per cent) had no formal education and the remaining two had "some primary education". The findings of this study support [Mansour's \(2017, p. 101\)](#) study that found that beggars "are mostly with no formal education".

RO1: information needs of beggars of Accra

The analysis of the data gathered revealed that a greater proportion of the respondents were not aware, in detail, the relevance of information to their day-to-day activities. It would not be far from the truth to say that beggars did not know their information rights as enshrined

in the 1992 constitution of Ghana. Analysed data showed a worrying trend regarding participants' dependency on information:

Well, I don't know if I depend on any information or not. You know we have been marginalised by society, so what is the essence of going in for information the same people who have neglected us produce?, one participant said when asked of his dependency on information (a male beggar opined).

Does what I do require any information before doing it? I am not too sure I can say I depend on a lot of information because of what I do? (a female beggar retorted).

Almost all, 8 out of the 10 participants, showed a sketchy understanding of their dependence on the information. In total, 2 of the participants showed semblance of understanding of their dependence on information for their daily activities. They say it is inevitable as humans to not source for information irrespective of one's creed, orientation or occupation:

Information is an inalienable component of life. You cannot do away with it. No matter what you do, you have to in one way or the other depend on information. For example, you would have to know how the weather is going to be like before setting out to be on the streets. You can't just move about like that without some sort of information. So, I do depend a lot on information – (a female beggar responded).

It was evident from the analyses that the majority of the participants are somewhat unaware of their dependence on information although it could be gleaned that they unconsciously relied on information. Fewer of them, just two of them, have been aware of this right, knowing well how to address their needs for information through the use of appropriate ways and tools to reach their determined goals.

The information needs of participants, such as physical, personal, social and among others, which were contextual or in some case situational were found to lead beggars to depend on not so variant sources to meet these needs. Participants were found to depend on unofficial means for information, especially informal sources:

Talking to colleague friends on the street, I think is the norm. We share experiences, and in some cases, take advice from each other. In our state it is difficult for someone to offer us assistance in such terms, (a female beggar explained confirming their resort to informal channels for information on specific situations and contexts).

The beggars' needs for information, according to the analysed data, could be described as basic. Taking into consideration their level of importance; information related to begging, communication, security and family were the most common in demand by almost all the beggars.

The findings of the study further illustrate that most of the beggars could not put a tag on the number of times they access information. The general consensus was that they more than often interact with a number of person whiles in the trade. Also, they were in constant contact with colleagues on the streets regarding their personal information needs. They defined these interactions and sourcing of information as frequent. The responses revealed that beggars relied mostly on the constant verbal communication with peers, friends and families for information. These were the most popular and informal source of information they followed.

Data obtained from the beggars interviewed in this study showed that "beggars" source for information that relates to their trade – begging – such as searching for new and free places to beg rather than places that are monitored and manned by security. They also indicated that they sought for information relating to their physical well-being, like finding safe shelters to sleep or to rest, especially those that do not have permanent shelter. Responses from the beggars revealed that they sourced this information through constant interactions with other beggars they work with.

Interestingly, despite the lack of knowledge of beggars on their dependence on information and to a large extent their information needs, most of them described as essential the need for information. Some mentioned that it would have been difficult for them to sustain their trade if they had not created alliances with other beggars who had developed the knack to fish for information regarding the right spots and techniques used to make enough from their trade.

Obviously, the beggars that participated in the study had challenges appreciating their dependence on information – their information need. This, however, did not limit the relevance they placed on information by citing examples of how sourcing information from other colleagues helped them to manoeuvre their way through the city and ensuring sustenance in their trade.

RO2: information sources used by beggars in Accra

Findings revealed that information sources used by beggars varied between oral and written sources. Almost, all the beggars were found to prefer the use of oral or informal sources – described also as interpersonal sources. These information sources included communication with their peers and friends, especially those who were geographically close to them and with their family through mobile phones or face-to-face meeting. Such categories of informal sources were described as the most popular sources of information. All the participants indicated that they learned from each other and shared many different experiences, particularly begging-related experiences.

Findings from the analysis also revealed that verbal communication with peers and friends were the most dominant means or information sources used by beggars:

You know most of us cannot read nor write. So, we always try to fish out the one who is a bit educated to help with the explanation of certain constructs when the need arises. But mostly, we communicate verbally, and we share information too verbally, especially regarding our trade as beggars – (a female beggar responded shared).

Talking to each (verbal communication) is what most of us are engaged in, I am illiterate. I even have a phone, but when someone sends a text, I hardly can read to understand. So, I prefer meeting people one-on-one and then we can talk and exchange information – (a male beggar responded).

The emphasis on the use of verbal communication was overwhelming, particularly because according to the beggars most of them were illiterates and there was no better way of sharing information than through the verbal form.

Despite the verbal channel being dominant, it was discovered that beggars also used other formal sources of information. It could, perhaps, be considered as the secondary source of information to beggars. The respondents revealed that when the day drew nigh and they returned to their respective abodes, they sometimes sought information from other sources such as television or radio programmes. Mostly, the types of information they sourced from these channels included information about their trade, weather, political and religious events, etc.

It could be deduced that most of the beggars preferred the verbal channels of formal sources for their information. According to the beggars, they used the verbal channel because it makes intelligibility easier compared to the other channels. Also, it was identified that yet some beggars could not afford the tools needed to source for information from these channels:

I don't have a TV or Radio. I can't have that at where I live. So sometimes I have to get to know what is going on from people, especially my colleague beggars who might have the opportunity to have watched television or listened to radio for information – (a female beggar disclosed).

In my state as a beggar, for example, I hardly can afford television to enjoy like the way others are enjoying. Once in a while I get the chance to get glimpse of what's going on on TV, when I pass by one joint where they sell food. – (a male beggar indicated).

My choice for asking from friends or speaking to friends is very simple. I can't afford to buy a TV or purchase a newspaper every day, unless you would want to help me get that. Hahaha – (another male beggar responded).

Most of the beggars also did not have any kind of devices for storing and retrieving information, and many of them demonstrated that they did not know how to use a storage medium for information or know how to save information on their mobile phones.

To those who had these devices such as mobile phones, however, reading and the English language was a challenge for them to effectively use the devices. They found it difficult to understand whatever was being disseminated. And they indicated that because of their state, people failed to have time to explain how to use the devices to them. One of the participants revealed being turned down by a passer-by when he wanted a little help with a text that was sent to him. His colleagues, however, could not do anything to help, as they could not understand the text themselves.

The study further found that beggars' over-reliance on the verbal channel of information was primarily due to illiteracy, economic condition, as well as accessibility in relation to both availability and competency. The responses revealed that; illiteracy affected beggars' choice of information sources, as most of them neither read nor write. The economic condition also in the sense that most of the beggars indicated during the interview that they did not make enough money to be able to afford them certain luxuries as paying for rent or purchasing television and also paying for all the recurring costs that the acquisition of these things bring.

Most of the beggars, per the analysed data, described and perceived the verbal and informal sources of information as effective means of accessing information. Although, they claimed that not all the types of information sourced from these channels were beneficial or useful:

I can describe the verbal source as effective because I have depended on it for a very long time and it has helped me avoid certain negative situations – (a female beggar responded).

I remember a colleague beggar of mine mentioned once to me to follow him to a particular spot during a festive season, and I tell you, I made a lot of money. It was unbelievable! – (a female beggar responded shared).

You know sharing information with other peers helps us a lot and most of us have used such information, normally gotten through simple advice, to our benefit. I am not sure without it we would have had the chance to know certain things – (a male beggar opined).

The findings of this study further reveal that participants understanding of effectiveness was purely defined by their familiarity with the verbal channel of information. There was no comparison or whatsoever with other sources of information, especially the formal information sources – books, internet, newspapers, etc.

In relation to the variables that affect their choice of information channels, the responses from the beggars showed that cost and easy access to information influences their access and use of information. The respondents opined that the ease with which they were able to obtain information from the informal sources satisfied their information needs:

It is easy for me to have specific information I need about what I do from my peer as compared to going to an authorized person. They sometimes fail to grant us audience. I avoid that hassle and

the eventuality of being turned down and be embarrassed. I, therefore, call on my colleagues to tell me what I need to know – (a male beggar indicated).

It is convenient for you to have the information you need but the source must matter. Certain authorized people will prefer to hide the information and make you go through a lot of stress before the information is released to you. Sometimes when that is done it becomes too late for one to act on. I prefer the convenience that comes with when a colleague shares information with you or other beggars. It just flows – (a male beggar responded).

Again, the respondents lamented not having the resources to enjoy the luxury of acquiring modern electronics that could help them access information from electronic sources. From the above, it could be gleaned that beggars' over-reliance on the oral and other informal sources of information is buoyed by factors including accessibility (both availability and competency), as well as illiteracy and economic standings.

Nevertheless, beggars described the informal sources of information as effective. This definition by the beggars, per literature and analysed data, is defective, as most of the beggars have not had the chance to comprehensively experience the other sources of information. Their "effective" definition could thus be considered bias.

RO3: information seeking barriers of beggars in Accra

There exist a number of barriers that inhibit information access and use. In some cases, actors in need of information are left with no option than to abandon their quest to seek information due to barriers. This study sought to identify some of the barriers that hindered beggars' quest to access information. The assumption was to identify what could be the perceived or real barriers and how they normally dealt with such obstacles.

The results of this study revealed that there were a number of challenges faced by beggars while seeking information. It could be deduced from the responses that illiteracy and time were the most important barriers that prevented them from accessing information. They confirmed that these challenges had a significant impact on their access and use of information to satisfy their information needs.

As almost all the participants had no formal education, it was of no surprise that the respondents indicated their inability to access formal sources of information. Also, most of the participants mentioned time as one of the obstacles to their information. Per their trade, most of the beggars tend to spend a lot of time on the streets. Their routine is such that they have little or no time to sit and reflect on pieces of information they might have gathered:

For me I don't have a lot of time to sit and listen a lot to radio or watch television. My major concern, when I wake up in a day is how to survive or make a living – (a female beggar retorted).

If you are to ask me about TV and radio shows, I would not be able to answer. I seldom make time for those. I sometime sit or walk the street all day. I get home tired. I am not sure my preoccupation when I get home must be to find a place to watch TV. I rather rest and prepare for the next day – (a male beggar shared).

Time, to most of the participants of this study, was of great essence to their trade or occupation and they would not trade their survival with any other thing. Other challenges, such as psychological burdens they suffered about their image of being beggars, lack of awareness about basic rights including information rights, lack of financial resources, lack of training and skills were also significant barriers to beggars when seeking and accessing different sources of information.

Participants, as per the analysed data, revealed that they most often discontinued their information search when such obstacles come their way. This shows that the respondents were mostly unable to access needed information for decision-making when they encounter obstacles, making most of the beggar's information deficient.

Discussion

Information is considered very important and required by all human beings including beggars. It is really needed as it is closely linked to the development and enjoyment of life (Mansour, 2017). Information use, in any situation or context, is largely determined by its need. As maintained by Ingwersen and Järvelin (2005), information need is identified as a potential factor that leads to information seeking and formulation of requests for information. Particularly, information need arises when a person gist problematic circumstance or information gap "in which his or her internal knowledge and beliefs, and model of the environment fail to suggest a path towards the satisfaction of his or her goals" (Case, 2007, p. 333).

This study looked into the information seeking behaviour of beggars in Accra. The beggar population in developing countries have been found by Khan and Menka (2014, p. 349) to be highly potential victims of unbalanced socio-economic system. Their study on beggars further opined that the necessity for a greater understanding of the effects of beggars' "demographic factors on socio-economic development has become a matter of prime concern with the emergence of new demographic trends in the developing countries in recent decades".

Nonetheless, it must be stated that this research paid little attention to demographics and its impact or influence on the information-seeking behaviour of participants. But a cursory look at population description for this particular study to some extent shows the demographic dynamics of beggars in Accra. This study found beggars in Accra to be persons with different gender, educational background and literacy level. Obviously, studies like Adedibu and Jelili (2012) and Asrese *et al.* (2014), arguing that the begging population is dominated by men cannot be regarded as entirely sacrosanct by this study due to the changing dynamics.

Findings of this study show that beggars in Accra are unable to identify their information needs in a clearly defined manner. This is as a result of beggars' failure to understand their information rights as citizens. Many are unaware of their inalienable right of being provided with information when the need arises. Awareness is, therefore, a key issue. Here, awareness means having knowledge of one's right to demand and push for legislation to ensure equal access to information. The study obviously reveals that most beggars can be said to be information deficient, especially on matters that critically affect them and their status as vagrants. Their lack of awareness could be regarded as an influential determinant to their information-seeking behaviour.

In addition to lack of awareness and beggars' inability to clearly define their information need, findings of this study reveal beggars' preference for informal information sources over formal sources. Beggars used information sourced from these sources in solving different problems and challenges they face during their begging activity. This finding is consistent with Monsour (2017) findings when he identified in his research that almost all the beggars (97.6 per cent) who participated in his research revealed that the verbal communication with peers, friends and families were the most popular information sources they used. Again, most of the participants of this particular study could be considered as illiterates and were found to prefer the use of the verbal channel as means to source for their information. Another possible reason for their over-reliance on informal sources could stem from participants' lack of awareness of libraries and the information services they provide (Agyei *et al.*, 2018).

A number of studies on information needs and seeking behaviour "have shown that a person's level of education determines his/her information needs, how he/she confronts an

information system and subsequently uses that information” and this depicts “a positive correlation between the level of education and access to information” (Mansour, 2017, p. 102). The level of illiteracy of participants of this study limited beggars’ ability to access and use information (Mooko and Aina, 2006). As almost all the participants had no formal education, they were unable to use or explore most formal sources of information, for example, internet sources, libraries, newspapers, etc.

A study by Duta (2013) maintained that illiterate information users in developing countries have challenges in accessing formal information sources to satisfy their information needs and this corroborates the findings of this study. Mansour’s (2017) findings also support this particular finding. In his study, illiteracy and limited education forced most of Egyptian beggars not to use libraries. The use of the library, which he described as an information system was noted to relate to education and skills, but such skills were not possessed by many Egyptian beggars who indicated that they did not consider the library as a source of information.

In fact, information literacy is very important owing to a large amount of information available in our contemporary life. Information literacy, as well as “the right of access to information are interrelated and interconnected” and information literacy skills are noted to be helpful to everybody, including beggars, to achieve their daily goals to some extent (Britz and Lor, 2010, p. 8). Beggars in this study, unfortunately, showed little or no information literacy skills owing to their inability to use modern technological gadgets that could help them search and retrieve information from technological channels. However, it has been found that vulnerable persons highly rate their “desired benefits of digital and social inclusion”, hence, the need to look into developing such persons’ information literacy skills is critical in this era of technology (Gómez-Hernández *et al.*, 2017, p. 31).

Like any other professionals, beggars are greatly in need of information literacy skills to have their daily work done successfully. An earlier study conducted by Collins (2014) had found that the use of mobile technology has enabled about 250,000 Egyptian illiterates – 70 per cent of whom are women – learned and acquired information literacy skills for reading and interacting with others. This finding underscored the importance of information literacy to equip beggars to navigate their trade or profession. Despite the fact that almost all the beggars interviewed in this research had mobile phones, almost all of them were not too skilled in its basic use, not to talk of using it to surf the internet in search of information relevant to their conditions.

Beggars in their attempt to seek for information are faced significant problems and challenges. Some of these factors include illiteracy, time and cost and financial resources. This finding is similar to Mansour’s (2017) study which found that high illiteracy and the lack of awareness about basic rights to information, as well as information needs were the most important problems and challenges Egyptian beggars faced. Unfortunately, however, beggars in this study confirm that they normally retreat when faced with such challenges. This keeps them out of the loop of getting fresh information that could help them elevate their standard of living or change the situations altogether.

It is thus incumbent on actors in the information space to design mechanisms that can target, mostly, marginalised groups in society. It seems as revealed in this study apparently that information dissemination is not even across the different demographics and systems are designed and skewed towards those with the wherewithal, in terms of literacy and access.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study investigated the information seeking behaviour of beggars in Accra – Ghana. A literature search conducted by this study revealed that it was the first study to investigate the information needs and behaviour of such a marginalised group of people in Ghana.

Recommendations designed for this study were based on its findings and other literature that were sourced for the purposes of this study.

The findings of the study reveal a lack of understanding of information needs on the part of beggars and this could be the case for many other marginalised groups in the country. Nonetheless, dependence on information by beggars cannot be over-emphasised given that most beggars revealed that they were heavily dependent on information to ensure they achieve their tasks on daily basis. This is irrespective of their lack of information literacy and inability to access formal sources of information (Duta, 2013).

As mentioned by Mooko and Aina (2006) and Agosto and Hughes-Hassel (2005), information literacy is important because of the amount of information, which is available in our contemporary society. Simply being exposed to a great deal of information will not make people informed. The need to be skilled in how to access and use information cannot be ignored. The study, therefore, recommends that steps be taken by authorities to provide avenues to train and educate marginalised and vulnerable groups like beggars.

It was evident from the study that beggars were faced with a number of barriers in their quest to access information. Dominant among these obstacles included illiteracy, financial resources and to some extent time at the disposal of beggars to engage in other activities other than their trade. Other challenges included psychological burdens, the social image of being a beggar and the lack of accessible (in relation to availability) information channels, etc.

It is worth noting that the study encountered difficulties in accessing up-to-date information about the research population of marginalised groups like beggars in Ghana. It is, therefore, recommended that appropriate authorities and stakeholders help in building a statistical database for marginalised groups. This will help identify the demographic characteristics of groups such as beggars to help in policies to enhance the living conditions of such groups. The study also recommends that beggars' awareness of their information rights should be promoted through educational programmes that will help them value the role of information in their lives.

There is the need to establish social welfare systems to cater for beggars. Also, stakeholders such as public, private or non-governmental organisations could assist beggars by organising educational and literacy training for them. Chiefly, government and other stakeholders are recommended to adequately resource public libraries to enable them to extend their services to vulnerable populations like beggars to make "them important for social inclusion" (Gómez-Hernández *et al.*, 2017, p. 30).

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Further reading

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