

EMPATHY IN MODERN LIBRARIANSHIP: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE BETWEEN NIGERIA AND INDIA

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Abstract

Libraries are rapidly evolving from traditional information repositories into dynamic, community-centered spaces that foster inclusion, learning, and social engagement. Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, has emerged as a vital competency for modern librarians seeking to meet the diverse needs of their users. This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis to examine the role of empathy in contemporary librarianship, focusing on libraries in Nigeria and India. Secondary data were obtained from academic journals, government reports, and professional studies, with particular emphasis on emotional intelligence (EI), user satisfaction, and institutional support structures. The analysis explores EI levels among librarians, the expression of empathy in service delivery, and the influence of cultural and institutional factors on empathetic practices. Comparative tables are used to highlight differences and similarities between the two countries. Findings indicate that Nigerian libraries emphasize culturally driven, individualized empathy rooted in communal values, whereas Indian libraries benefit from structured institutional frameworks and systematic EI training programs. Both contexts share common challenges, including limited resources, diverse user populations, and organizational barriers. The study concludes with practical recommendations for integrating empathy into professional development, policy-making, and service delivery. Positioning empathy as a core organizational priority, libraries can create inclusive, user-centered environments that effectively respond to the complexities of modern information services.

Keywords: empathy, librarianship, Nigeria, India, emotional intelligence, library services

Introduction

Libraries have transformed from mere custodians of books into dynamic centers for knowledge exchange, innovation, and community building. In today's digital and socially conscious environment, librarianship has expanded to include not only the management of information resources but also the emotional and social dimensions of user engagement. Modern libraries are expected not only to provide information but also to foster inclusive environments that support lifelong learning, creativity, and social belonging. This evolution has redefined the professional role of librarians—from information gatekeepers to facilitators of knowledge and emotional support. Effective library service now depends on understanding users as individuals with unique needs, emotions, and experiences. As a result, empathy and emotional intelligence (EI) have emerged as vital competencies that empower librarians to connect meaningfully with patrons and to create inclusive learning environments.

Empathy, within the context of modern librarianship, represents more than a display of kindness or emotional sensitivity; it is a professional skill that directly influences how librarians interpret, respond to, and anticipate user needs. It involves the ability to perceive and understand the emotions, perspectives, and challenges of library patrons, and to adjust communication or service delivery accordingly (Phillips, 2017; Goulding, 2016; Sengupta & Sunil, 2023). Empathy allows librarians to connect with users on a human level, ensuring that services are not only efficient but also emotionally supportive and inclusive. In this study, empathy refers to the librarian's capacity to engage in active listening, show patience during inquiries, respect diverse perspectives, and offer assistance that reflects both cognitive understanding and emotional awareness. This quality becomes especially crucial in academic settings, where users often

experience stress, anxiety, or frustration while conducting research or navigating digital platforms.

Emotional intelligence (EI) embodies a broader framework of emotional awareness, regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness that shapes professional behavior in library environments. It refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions while perceiving and influencing the emotions of others in constructive ways (Goleman, 2020; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Within librarianship, EI plays a fundamental role in maintaining composure during stressful situations, handling user complaints with professionalism, and promoting cooperation among colleagues. In this study, emotional intelligence denotes the librarian's capacity to balance rational decision-making with emotional understanding, manage conflicts with empathy and fairness, and sustain motivation even in resource-constrained or high-pressure work environments. A librarian with a high level of EI can communicate more effectively, adapt to diverse user personalities, and maintain emotional stability in interactions that might otherwise become tense or unproductive. Beyond interpersonal benefits, EI also contributes to organizational harmony by improving teamwork, job satisfaction, and service quality.

In modern librarianship, emotional competencies complement traditional technical skills, enabling librarians to provide well-rounded, user-centered services. Librarians today are expected to demonstrate both intellectual expertise and emotional awareness. An empathetic approach not only enhances the quality of reference and information services but also reduces library anxiety, promotes user loyalty, and strengthens institutional reputation. In multicultural

societies such as Nigeria and India, empathy also serves as a bridge between cultural values and professional ethics, promoting inclusive and responsive library environments.

This study, therefore, explores how empathy influences modern library services in Nigeria and India. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) assess the integration of empathy into library service delivery, (2) examine the impact of cultural and institutional factors on empathetic practices, (3) identify challenges faced by librarians in fostering empathy, and (4) propose strategies for improving empathetic approaches in library settings.

Literature Review

Emotional Intelligence and Empathy

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate emotions in one self and others (Goleman, 2020; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Empathy, a key component of EI, enables individuals to recognize and respond appropriately to the emotional states of others. Within the context of librarianship, empathy allows librarians to interpret users' emotional cues, tailor services to meet individual needs, and foster positive, supportive interactions (Phillips, 2017; Sengupta & Sunil, 2023).

Studies indicates that librarians with high levels of EI tend to experience greater job satisfaction, improved stress management, and enhanced professional effectiveness (Yaya & Opeke, 2022; Sengupta & Sunil, 2023). These skills are particularly valuable in library environments where patrons often seek not only informational resources but also emotional support during periods of stress or difficulty. According to Phillips (2017), Librarians who

cultivate empathy can build trust and boost user satisfaction, ultimately strengthening their relationships with the communities they serve.

In practical terms, initiatives such as the Libraries Transforming Communities: Models for Change project by the American Library Association (ALA) demonstrate how empathy and EI can be operationalized in professional practice. These programs help librarians engage in community dialogues that enhance understanding; surface user needs, foster personalized services, and manage tensions or conflicts through facilitation (American Library Association, 2018). According to Goulding (2016), Recognizing and responding to patrons' emotional signals helps librarians create environments that support information-seeking behaviors and facilitate positive learning outcomes.

Empathy in Library Services

Empathy in library services consists of two interconnected dimensions: affective empathy and cognitive empathy. Affective empathy involves sharing and resonating with the emotions of users, while cognitive empathy focuses on understanding users' perspectives without necessarily sharing the same emotional state (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Phillips, 2017). When applied together, these forms of empathy allow librarians to anticipate patrons' needs, provide tailored support, and establish meaningful relationships built on trust. In academic libraries, empathetic practices are especially important for supporting students who may feel overwhelmed by complex research tasks or academic pressures. Empathy enables librarians to identify and respond to students' stress-related inquiries while guiding them toward appropriate academic resources and services (Sengupta & Sunil, 2023).

Public libraries also rely on empathy to design and implement community outreach programs, literacy initiatives, and services for underrepresented groups, thereby ensuring equitable access to information and resources (American Library Association, 2018; Goulding, 2016). According to Goulding (2016), integrating empathy into all aspects of library operations enables librarians to break down access barriers, enhance user experiences, and strengthen the library's role as an inclusive, community-centered institution.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative comparative analysis of empathy practices in libraries in Nigeria and India. Secondary data come from academic journals, government reports, and professional studies, focusing on emotional intelligence, user satisfaction, and support structures. The analysis includes EI levels among librarians, how empathy is shown in service delivery, cultural impacts, and institutional policies. Data are presented in tables to facilitate comparison between the two countries.

Empathy in Nigerian Librarianship

Emotional Intelligence and Job Satisfaction

Studies conducted in Nigerian academic libraries demonstrate a strong positive relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and job satisfaction among librarians. Findings indicate that librarians with higher EI levels exhibit greater confidence in managing users interactions and experience increased workplace satisfaction (Yaya & Opeke, 2016; Odewole, 2023). Recent findings also highlight that empathy, as a core component of EI, plays an important role in enhancing professional fulfillment and well-being. Librarians with higher EI

are better equipped to handle stressful situations, build rapport with users, and foster collaborative work environments (Sani & Oladipo, 2021). Similarly, studies have also shown that emotional intelligence significantly influences library work productivity, with librarians who exhibit higher EI demonstrating stronger user engagement and improved service outcomes (Olaojo & Oyeboade, 2016).

Empathy in Service Delivery

Empathy plays a central role in shaping service delivery in Nigerian libraries. Librarians employ active listening, customized assistance, and proactive problem-solving strategies to address both the informational and emotional needs of users. During research consultations, librarians often consider factors such as students' stress levels, prior knowledge, and preferred learning styles to provide effective guidance (Yaya & Opeke, 2016). In special libraries, empathetic service delivery is essential for supporting users with disabilities or specialized needs. Providing accessible formats for materials or offering personalized assistance ensures equitable access to resources. Similarly, public libraries integrate empathy into community outreach programs, literacy campaigns, and services for underrepresented groups, thereby reducing barriers to information and promoting social inclusion (American Library Association, 2018; Goulding, 2016).

Cultural and Institutional Influences

Ezeani and Igwesi (2012) noted that Nigeria's collectivist culture emphasizes communal values, interpersonal relationships, and collective welfare. These cultural traits naturally foster empathetic behaviors, as librarians often adopt nurturing and relational approaches that reflect these social norms. However, significant challenges persist due to resource shortages and limited institutional support. Studies in Nigerian university libraries report a positive association between emotional intelligence, job satisfaction, and productivity, although evidence of systematic, institution-wide EI training programmes remains limited in the literature (Yaya & Opeke, 2016; Odewole, 2023). Consequently, while empathy is evident in day-to-day service

delivery, its application remains inconsistent and is not systematically embedded into organizational policies or performance metrics.

Table 1. Key Characteristics of Empathy in Nigerian Libraries

Characteristic	Description
Emotional Intelligence	Moderate to high; linked to job satisfaction
Service Approach	Personalized, responsive
Cultural Influence	Community and hierarchical values
Institutional Support	Limited professional development programs

5. Empathy in Indian Librarianship

Emotional Intelligence and User Interaction

According to Sengupta and Sunil (2023), librarians with higher emotional intelligence (EI) are more effective in understanding patrons' needs and providing high-quality services. In India, librarians' growing EI levels, supported by structured training programs and professional development initiatives, enable them to manage stress, communicate effectively, and respond empathetically to diverse user needs. These skills contribute to enhanced user satisfaction, stronger reference services, and improved teamwork among staff. The growing recognition of emotional competencies highlights their importance in strengthening relationships between librarians and patrons. Librarians who display high EI are not only more attuned to users' informational needs but also better equipped to provide emotional reassurance and encouragement, particularly in high-pressure academic environments.

Empathy in Service Delivery

Empathetic practices form the foundation of service delivery in Indian libraries. Librarians provide personalized reference services, customized information retrieval, and

proactive engagement strategies that address patrons' unique requirements (American Library Association, 2018). According to Sengupta and Sunil (2023), special consideration is given to students during high-stress periods, such as examinations or thesis submissions, when librarians offer tailored guidance and supportive services to address both academic and emotional challenges. In addition, public libraries also demonstrate empathy through outreach initiatives, literacy programs, and digital literacy workshops designed to meet the needs of various user groups. These community-centered efforts reflect a commitment to reducing barriers to information access and promoting social inclusion (Goulding, 2016). Through such programs, Indian libraries extend their role beyond information provision to fostering well-being, lifelong learning, and community development.

Institutional Support and Cultural Factors

Indian libraries benefit from strong institutional frameworks that actively promote empathy and emotional intelligence among library personnel. Many institutions conduct workshops, mentoring programs, and performance evaluations focused on EI competencies, ensuring that empathy is systematically integrated into library operations (Sengupta & Sunil, 2023; Baba, 2020). Moreover, Indian cultural values that emphasize inclusion, respect for diversity, and sensitivity to others' experiences further reinforce empathetic practices. This alignment between cultural principles and institutional structures enables libraries to deliver user-centered services that balance emotional understanding with informational expertise (Sengupta & Sunil, 2023). As a result, empathy in Indian librarianship is not only a personal attribute but also a professionally cultivated skill embedded in the organizational ethos of library practice.

Table 2. Key Characteristics of Empathy in Indian Libraries

Characteristic	Description
Emotional Intelligence	High; systematically developed
Service Approach	Tailored, proactive, user-focused
Cultural Influence	Inclusive, supportive
Institutional Support	Strong training and development programs

6. Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Nigeria	India
Emotional Intelligence	Moderate to high; linked to job satisfaction	High; developed through formal training
Empathy in Service	Delivery Personal,	Responsive Proactive, user-focused
Cultural Influence	Communal and hierarchical	Inclusive, supportive
Institutional Support	Limited professional development	Strong professional development programs

Both countries show strong empathetic practices. However, India has a more institutionalized approach, while Nigeria depends on cultural norms and individual effort.

Challenges in Implementing Empathy

Despite its recognized importance, several challenges hinder the effective integration of empathy into library services in both Nigeria and India. These challenges span resource limitations, diverse user needs, and institutional barriers.

Resource Constraints

Limited funding remains a significant challenge for libraries in both countries. Insufficient financial resources restrict the ability of libraries to implement essential initiatives such as professional development programs, community outreach projects, and technology upgrades that support more user-focused services (Irenoa, Bribena, & Eru, 2019). In Nigeria, underfunding has been linked to declining budgetary allocations for academic libraries, which reduces their capacity for infrastructure upgrades, staff development, and innovative service delivery. Similarly, in India, studies on emotional intelligence (EI) and professional competencies among university librarians reveal both strengths and gaps that targeted training could address. However, systematic, institution-wide EI training remains inconsistently documented across institutions, and competing institutional priorities often limit investment in such programs (Baba, 2020; Sengupta & Sunil, 2023).

Diverse User Needs

Library users represent a wide range of educational, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Addressing these differences requires librarians to adopt flexible, culturally sensitive approaches to service delivery (Gogoi, Singson, & Thiyagarajan, 2021; Munshi, Ansari, & Barsha, 2022). Librarians must often navigate language barriers, varying literacy levels, and the unique needs of marginalized or underrepresented populations. Without adequate training and resources, libraries risk providing inconsistent services, which may negatively affect user satisfaction and diminish trust in library institutions (Egunjobi & Ajani, 2019; Gogoi, Singson, & Thiyagarajan, 2021).

Institutional Barriers

Institutional challenges also restrict the consistent application of empathy in library operations. In Nigeria, the absence of structured emotional intelligence training programs means that the development of empathetic competencies often depends solely on individual initiative rather than formal professional development (Yaya & Opeke, 2016; Odewole, 2023). Although Indian libraries benefit from stronger institutional programs and national initiatives promoting staff development, bureaucratic procedures, administrative hurdles, and heavy workloads often constrain librarians' ability to dedicate time to user-centered innovations (Chakraborty, 2021; Potnis, 2021; Times of India, 2025). These institutional barriers can undermine efforts to embed empathy into organizational culture, policies, and daily practices.

Recommendations

- i. Professional Development: Offer ongoing EI and empathy training for librarians.
- ii. Resource Allocation: Obtain funding for empathetic service initiatives, including community engagement and support programs.
- iii. Policy Integration: Include empathy and EI skills in library policies, job descriptions, and performance evaluations.
- iv. Cultural Sensitivity: Raise awareness and training on cultural diversity to better understand user needs.
- v. Technology Integration: Use digital tools to improve empathetic interactions, such as virtual reference services and AI-assisted user support.

Conclusion

Empathy is a vital element of modern librarianship, influencing service quality, user satisfaction, and the overall well-being of library professionals. Findings from this conceptual

study demonstrate that while Nigerian libraries emphasize empathy through community-driven and interpersonal practices, Indian libraries highlight the advantages of systematic, institutionalized approaches to fostering empathy among librarians. Addressing challenges such as limited resources, diverse user needs, and institutional barriers is essential for embedding empathy into library services. Ultimately, empathy should not be viewed merely as a “soft skill,” but rather as a core professional competency in modern library practice. Integrating empathy into library operations strengthens the role of libraries as dynamic, community-centered institutions capable of responding effectively to the complex informational and emotional needs of today’s society.

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