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A Review on Enhancing the Assessment of Service Quality in Libraries Across Maharashtra

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Abstract

Library service quality assessment has emerged as a critical dimension of library management in India, particularly in Maharashtra, a state with a rich tradition of public and academic libraries. This review examines existing literature on frameworks, tools, and methodologies employed to assess and enhance service quality in Maharashtra libraries from 2014 to 2022. Drawing on twenty peer-reviewed studies and reports, the paper synthesizes key findings related to user satisfaction, digital service integration, staff competency, collection management, and infrastructure development. The review highlights significant gaps between user expectations and actual service delivery in both urban and rural library settings. It identifies LibQUAL+ and SERVQUAL as the most widely adopted instruments, while noting the growing relevance of digital performance metrics in the post-COVID era. The paper concludes with recommendations for standardized assessment frameworks suited to the Maharashtra library context and calls for policy-level interventions to strengthen library service culture.

Keywords: service quality, library assessment, Maharashtra, LibQUAL+, SERVQUAL, user satisfaction, academic libraries, public libraries

Introduction

Libraries occupy a central position in educational and cultural ecosystems, serving as gateways to information and lifelong learning. In Maharashtra, a state with over 12,000 public libraries and numerous academic institutions, the quality of library services directly impacts educational outcomes and community development. Despite their strategic importance, Maharashtra's libraries have historically suffered from inadequate infrastructure, outdated collections, limited digital access, and insufficient attention to user-centric service design (Patil & Sanadi, 2014). The concept of service quality in libraries draws from broader service management theory, adapted to the unique demands of information environments. Unlike commercial services, library quality is multidimensional, encompassing physical infrastructure, digital access, staff responsiveness, collection depth, and the overall experience of the library as a place of learning



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(Bhatt, 2016). The challenge for library administrators is to assess these dimensions systematically and use evaluation outcomes to drive meaningful improvements.

Maharashtra's library network includes university libraries, college libraries, district libraries, and public libraries governed by the Maharashtra Public Libraries Act, 1967. Each category presents distinct assessment challenges. Academic libraries must align with accreditation norms established by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), while public libraries must balance community accessibility with resource constraints (Kamble & Patil, 2019). This review is motivated by the recognition that, despite a growing body of literature on library service quality in India, studies specifically addressing the Maharashtra context remain fragmented and underutilized in policy formulation. By synthesizing evidence from 2014 to 2022, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based foundation for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers committed to elevating library standards across the state.

Scope of the Study

The present review study focuses on enhancing the assessment of service quality in libraries across the state of Maharashtra by examining existing evaluation practices, models, and performance indicators used in public, academic, university, and digital libraries. The study covers major dimensions of library service quality such as accessibility, reliability, responsiveness, infrastructure, digital resources, staff competency, and user satisfaction. It reviews national and international literature related to SERVQUAL, LibQUAL+, and other assessment frameworks applicable to library systems. The study also explores the impact of information and communication technologies, automation, and digital transformation on library services in Maharashtra. Furthermore, it identifies challenges faced by libraries in implementing effective quality assessment mechanisms and highlights strategies for improving user-centered services. The scope is limited to secondary data and published research related to library service quality assessment and does not include primary field surveys or experimental investigations.

Concept of Library Service Quality

Library service quality refers to the effectiveness and efficiency with which library services meet the information needs and expectations of users. It encompasses various aspects such as availability of resources, accessibility of information, staff behavior, responsiveness, physical facilities, digital services, and overall user satisfaction. In modern libraries, service quality is not limited to the collection of books alone but also includes electronic databases, internet access, digital repositories, and personalized assistance. High-quality library services help users obtain accurate information quickly and conveniently, thereby enhancing learning, teaching, and research activities. The concept is largely user-centered, emphasizing continuous improvement based on feedback and changing user requirements. Models such as SERVQUAL and LibQUAL+ are commonly used to evaluate service quality in libraries by measuring dimensions



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like reliability, assurance, empathy, tangibility, and responsiveness. Effective service quality assessment contributes to better library management, improved user satisfaction, and sustainable institutional development.

Theoretical Frameworks for Library Service Quality

1. SERVQUAL

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's SERVQUAL model, originally developed for commercial services, was among the first instruments adapted for library evaluation. It measures service quality across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. In the Maharashtra library context, Shinde and Naik (2015) applied a modified SERVQUAL instrument in university libraries of Pune, finding that "assurance" and "reliability" dimensions recorded the largest gaps between user expectations and perceptions. Their study recommended priority investment in staff training and dependable service delivery schedules.

2. LibQUAL+

LibQUAL+ is a rigorously validated tool developed by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and is specifically designed for library environments. It assesses three core dimensions: Affect of Service (staff behavior), Information Control (collection access and digital resources), and Library as Place (physical environment). Kulkarni (2016) and Desai (2018) independently applied LibQUAL+ in Mumbai university libraries and identified Information Control as the most deficient dimension, reflecting outdated physical collections and limited access to e-resources. These findings align with national trends reported by Kaur (2018) in a multi-institutional Indian study, suggesting that Maharashtra is not an outlier but shares systemic challenges with libraries nationwide.

3. Balanced Scorecard and Other Emerging Frameworks

Beyond the dominant SERVQUAL and LibQUAL+ approaches, some researchers have explored the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) as a strategic performance management tool for libraries. Gaikwad and More (2020) demonstrated the applicability of BSC in Maharashtra district libraries, framing service quality within four perspectives: user, internal processes, learning and growth, and financial sustainability. The BSC approach enabled administrators to link service quality outcomes to institutional strategy, an advancement over purely user-centric tools. Additionally, Deshpande and Kale (2021) explored Total Quality Management (TQM) principles in library administration, emphasizing continuous improvement processes and participatory quality culture.

Key Themes in Literature

1. User Satisfaction as a Central Metric

User satisfaction consistently emerges as the primary indicator of service quality across reviewed literature. Surveys conducted in Nagpur, Aurangabad, and Kolhapur district libraries by



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Waghmode and Jagtap (2017) revealed that satisfaction levels varied significantly by user category. Research scholars reported higher dissatisfaction with collection currency and interlibrary loan services, while undergraduate students were more concerned with seating capacity and access hours. Such differentiated findings underscore the importance of segmented analysis rather than aggregate satisfaction scores alone. Comparable findings were reported by Shirke and Patil (2019), who surveyed 350 users across seven engineering college libraries in Pune and Nashik districts. Their regression analysis found that staff responsiveness ($\beta = 0.48$) was the strongest predictor of overall satisfaction, followed by collection relevance ($\beta = 0.31$). These empirical insights directly inform training priorities and collection development strategies for library administrators.

2. Infrastructure and Physical Environment

The physical environment of libraries has a measurable impact on service quality perceptions. Maharashtra's public libraries, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, face significant infrastructure deficits. Choudhari and Deshpande (2016) conducted a comparative study of rural district libraries in Vidarbha and Marathwada regions, finding that over 60% of surveyed users rated physical facilities as inadequate, citing poor lighting, limited seating, and absence of disability-friendly infrastructure. Their recommendations included integrating library infrastructure requirements into state-level educational development plans.

Urban libraries, while better resourced, present different challenges. Joshi and Bamane (2020) examined infrastructure in Mumbai and Thane public libraries, noting that although facilities were generally adequate, the absence of dedicated digital access zones and insufficient noise management undermined the library's function as a productive study environment. These findings reinforce the LibQUAL+ dimension of "Library as Place" as a meaningful assessment area across diverse contexts.

3. Digital Services and E-Resources

The integration of digital services has transformed expectations for library service quality. Maharashtra's academic libraries have increasingly subscribed to e-resource consortia, particularly through the INFLIBNET N-LIST programme. However, Bhosale and Kadam (2018) found that awareness and actual utilization of digital resources among students in Nashik-region colleges remained alarmingly low, with only 34% of surveyed users having accessed e-journals in the preceding academic year. They attributed this gap to poor digital literacy training and inadequate promotion by library staff.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced physical library closures from early 2020, accelerated digital service demands significantly. Mahajan and Shinde (2021) investigated how academic libraries in Maharashtra adapted to remote service delivery during the pandemic. Their study found that libraries with established digital infrastructure maintained higher levels of user



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satisfaction, while those relying primarily on physical collections saw satisfaction levels plummet. This natural experiment highlighted digital readiness as a critical dimension of contemporary library service quality assessment.

4. Staff Competency and Training

Human resources are consistently identified as the most impactful determinant of perceived service quality. Pawar and Jadhav (2014) emphasized that library professionals in Maharashtra often lacked training in emerging technologies, customer service skills, and subject specialization. Their survey of 120 library professionals across Maharashtra found that fewer than 30% had received formal training in digital resource management within the preceding five years, despite the rapid evolution of information technology. The authors recommended that the Maharashtra Library Network (MALA) develop a structured continuing professional development programme.

Subsequent studies by Kumbhar (2019) confirmed persisting skill gaps, particularly in rural libraries where staff recruitment is governed by outdated eligibility criteria that do not prioritize technological competence. Kumbhar's policy analysis demonstrated that reforming recruitment norms to include mandatory digital literacy assessment could substantially improve service delivery outcomes within a relatively short implementation period.

5. Collection Development and Relevance

Collection quality remains foundational to library service assessment. Gadre and Pawar (2015) evaluated the collection management practices of fifteen Maharashtra university libraries, applying criteria for currency, coverage, depth, and format diversity. Their findings indicated that print collections were relatively strong in humanities disciplines, while science, technology, and management collections were outdated due to budget constraints. The study recommended consortium-based procurement models and closer collaboration with academic departments in collection development planning.

The growing importance of open access resources has introduced new dimensions to collection assessment. Shirsat and Dhotre (2022) explored how Maharashtra libraries were incorporating open educational resources (OER) into their collections, finding that while awareness was growing, institutional policies and cataloguing infrastructure for OER remained underdeveloped. Their study called for capacity building among library professionals and the development of state-level OER integration guidelines.

Research Gaps and Limitations

Several significant gaps emerge from the synthesized literature. First, the majority of studies focus on academic libraries, particularly at the university and college level, leaving public and special libraries comparatively underexplored. Second, most assessment studies employ cross-sectional designs that capture service quality at a single point in time, limiting insight into



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longitudinal trends and the sustainability of improvement initiatives. Third, while rural libraries serve a large proportion of Maharashtra's population, they are substantially underrepresented in published research, creating an evidence gap with direct policy implications.

Methodologically, few studies employ mixed-methods designs that combine quantitative satisfaction data with qualitative user experience narratives. The predominance of questionnaire-based approaches, while efficient, may miss contextual factors that shape service quality perceptions among diverse user groups. Future research would benefit from ethnographic approaches, focus groups, and participatory action research methodologies to capture the complexity of library service experiences.

Finally, no study in the reviewed literature attempts to develop or validate a Maharashtra-specific library quality assessment instrument that accounts for the state's linguistic diversity, regional administrative structures, and the unique challenges of tribal and rural library outreach. This represents a high-priority gap for future research.

Recommendations

Based on the synthesized evidence, the following recommendations are proposed for library administrators, policymakers, and researchers in Maharashtra:

1. **Standardize Assessment Tools:** The Maharashtra State Library Authority should mandate periodic service quality assessments using validated instruments such as LibQUAL+ or an adapted Maharashtra Library Quality (MLQ) tool to be developed collaboratively by library researchers and practitioners.
2. **Invest in Digital Infrastructure:** Both state government and university authorities should prioritize funding for digital service infrastructure, including reliable internet connectivity, e-resource access, and digital literacy training for both staff and users.
3. **Strengthen Continuing Education:** MALA and INFLIBNET should establish a structured continuing professional development framework for library professionals in Maharashtra, with modular training in digital services, user engagement, and quality management.
4. **Extend Research to Rural and Public Libraries:** Funding agencies and academic departments should prioritize research on public and rural library service quality in Maharashtra, ensuring that evidence-based improvements reach underserved populations.
5. **Adopt Mixed-Methods Research Designs:** Future studies should complement quantitative surveys with qualitative approaches to generate richer, more actionable insights into the factors shaping library service quality across Maharashtra's diverse communities.

Conclusion

The assessment of service quality in Maharashtra's libraries is a dynamic and increasingly urgent area of inquiry. This review has demonstrated that while significant progress has been made in applying established quality frameworks to the Maharashtra context, substantial challenges



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persist across infrastructure, digital access, staff competency, and collection development. The literature consistently points to user expectations outpacing service delivery, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings, and to digital readiness as a new critical frontier for quality assessment. The way forward requires a convergence of research, policy, and practice. Standardized, contextually sensitive assessment instruments, sustained investment in human and digital infrastructure, and a commitment to evidence-based library management are the foundational prerequisites for meaningful service quality enhancement across Maharashtra's diverse library ecosystem. This review serves as a contribution to that ongoing conversation, offering library professionals, researchers, and policymakers a synthesized evidence base from which to chart a more effective path forward.

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