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Evaluation of Customers' Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality Dimensions: A Study of South African Post Office in the North-West Province

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ABSTRACT

The study seeks to measure customers' expectations of service quality provided by managers and frontline employees against their perceptions of service quality in post offices in the North-West province of South Africa and to determine the gap between customers 'expectations and their perceptions of service quality using the five service quality dimensions. Data were collected by SERVQUAL questionnaire to examine the areas of tangibility, reliability and responsiveness, assurance, and empathy from 384 post office customers. To select respondents for this study, non-probability sampling techniques were used, mostly convenient approaches. Using factor analysis, five characteristics of service quality were identified: Tangibility, reliability and responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. According to the study's findings, a negative gap was observed in consumer expectations and perceptions of the quality of postal services delivered to consumers. This means that the quality of services delivered to postal consumers in the five-post offices was less than what they expected. The highest gap was related to tangibles and assurance. Therefore, it is mandatory for management to focus on tangibles and assurance in order to improve postal services. The study argues that managers should strive to improve the frontline employee's willingness to help, respond quickly to queries, competence in providing efficient services, making customers feel secure when receiving services, schedule appointments on time, having customers' best interests at heart, and be of good behaviour. These qualities instils confidence in customers. These qualities that need to be renewed are categories under the post office's reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, and assurance characteristics.

Keywords: Expectation, Perception, Service Quality, SERVQUAL, Five Dimension of Service Quality
JEL Classifications: M1, M12, M19

1. INTRODUCTION

Dealing with clients and consumers respectfully and helpfully is often considered an indication of good service. According to Lal et al. (2014), service quality refers to how clients are treated when receiving services. Service quality is a synthesis of many interactions between consumers, staff, and the organisational environment (James, 2011; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Biscaia et al., 2023). According to Voorhees et al. (2017) and Roy et al. (2019), the service encounter is a vital stage for consumers to perceive the service quality. They can simply record the difference between prior and current experiences and quantify the total service quality through service interactions. It is challenging for a company to detect its flaws, assess the quality of its services, and improve in response to consumer expectations. Understanding the service qualities and prioritizing the customer's attention is the simplest technique to assess service quality (Murali et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2020).

As the consumer's perception of service quality and employee job satisfaction are interrelated, the concept of service quality also applies to the negotiation process between customers and service providers in which resource allocation and management are done equally to satisfy both parties' interests (Sultana and

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Rana, 2010; Shin et al., 2021). Service production is not feasible for some services without the assistance of consumers. Consumer engagement is an essential aspect of service delivery. This simultaneous engagement of service providers and consumers in the service delivery process has a significant influence on the consumer's opinion of the service (Chen and Chen, 2017). Customers typically expect service quality in the SAPO in the North-West province to be consistent with the acceptable levels of service quality. However, considering the lack of customer service strategy and a myriad of other difficulties SAPO is experiencing, which currently threatens its existence, one wonders the extent to which the services rendered meet the expectations of the customers. As such, the study uses the SERVQUAL methodology to compare customer expectations and perceptions of service quality at five post offices in South Africa's North-West province. This was done to assess customers' perceptions and expectation levels for the five post offices in the North-West province.

1.1. Motivations for the Study

The composition, operation, and development of South Africa's postal services are clearly outlined in the country's constitution and laws, but it appears that SAPO falls short of expectations in providing residents who use these services with high-quality services. The organization's poor service delivery has impacted customers' perceptions of the quality of the SAPO's services. Customers of the post office have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of service received, the delivery of postal items to the correct addresses, delays brought on by traffic, and network issues. Furthermore, it is noted that customers' use of post offices has significantly decreased because of the failure to adapt to their changing needs. Customers frequently express their dissatisfaction with long lines in advance of receiving services (SAPO, 2014). Customers' satisfaction and the quality of service are suffering as a result of the SAPO branches' declining service delivery. According to the SAPO Annual Report (2016), there is also no adequate customer service strategy regarding what must be done to enhance customer welfare. Msosa and Govender (2015) notes that customers complain about poor service quality, including having to wait several days to receive mail due to inadequate postal networks and being unable to access services due to traffic and network outages.

The South African postal service must work to overcome obstacles that prevent the organization from succeeding. It is quite alarming how badly the South African postal system is managed strategically and in terms of customer service. The post office industry has been acknowledged as a significant factor in the expansion and transformation of the South African economy, according to a report issued by the SAPO in 2016 (SAPO, 2016). However, concerns are raised in the report about the level of service quality that SAPO is providing, to the point where SAPO is not performing at its best. Anette and colleagues (2016) confirms that consumers generally find SAPO's service quality to be subpar and fall short of their expectations. This paper's goals are to measure customers' expectations for service quality in the five post offices and their perceptions of that quality, to identify the discrepancy between customers' expectations and their perceptions of SAPO's service quality, and to identify the factors that contributed to that discrepancy.

1.2. Problem Identification

Customers always want services and products that are cutting-edge, dependable, affordable, and of the highest quality, with the ability to satisfy their individually changing needs, regardless of the size or type of business (Chesbrough, 2011). Several issues threaten the survival and expansion of the South African postal services; these issues range from intense market competition to internal operational problems that severely impede the organization's development. According to Mburu (2016), postal organizations are under a lot of pressure and need the industry to react quickly and aggressively to meet the needs of their customers. According to Botha and King (2010), Hlekane (2013), the SAPO Annual Report from 2015, and the SAPO Annual Report from 2018, some issues and challenges the SAPO faces in achieving its overall goals include a lack of basic infrastructure, ineffective employee coordination, a lack of staff, operational difficulties, a lack of skill, and declining mail volumes. According to the SAPO Annual Report (2015/2016) and the SAPO corporate plan (2018/19–2020), post offices face significant difficulties in providing their extensive service offerings, including strategic issues, revenue declines, consumer losses, poor work ethics, materials, and equipment. According to Musikavanhu (2017), poor work ethics, poor knowledge, and poor employee attitudes all contribute to problematic service quality. Due to the poor performance of post offices as a result of the aforementioned issues, postal services experienced a significant decline, which in turn led to a significant decline in postal customers.

The main aim of the study is to evaluate customers' perceptions and expectation levels of service quality for the five post offices in the North-West province.

Objectives of the study:

- To measure the customers' expectation levels of service quality in SAPO and their perceptions.
- To identify the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions of SAPO service quality.
- To identify the most important service quality dimension for customers in evaluating service quality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section looks at postal services in South Africa, the meaning of service quality, the dimension of service quality, customer perception of service quality, customer expectations of service quality, service quality model and SERVQUAL.

2.1. Postal Service in South Africa

Four operational departments, also known as business units, make up the South African post office. Considering that different units may have different definitions of service quality; various strategies may be used to raise it. Each business unit has unique skills that add to the post office's overall revenue (SAPO, 2016). Retail, mail, Postbank, and logistics make up these units. The SAPO's highest revenue-producing units are its mail and retail divisions,

which provide services to the greatest number of customers. They are, however, the most impacted by changes in the market environment and competition, as well as the macro-environment dynamics. Consequently, a decline in revenue and service level. A decline in mail volumes has resulted in a decrease in revenue for the postal service around the world. The numerous electronic media communication options that customers have at their disposal have directly contributed to this (SAPO, 2014).

Two of SAPO's business units, retail, and mail, are the subject of this investigation. Because the current paper measures the customers' expectations and perception levels of service quality offered by managers and frontline employers in the post offices in the North-West province, South Africa, using the five service quality dimensions, the retail division of SAPO is the primary point of contact for customers to access the various products and services they require. In order to restore confidence in SAPO and rebuild its reputation, this unit must lead the way in offering top-notch customer service. On the other hand, the SAPO mail unit aids in the delivery of SAPO mail, special promotion letters, parcels, cards, and documents. The mail operation is still SAPO's main business activity, and it continues to deliver about 8 million letters per day. The two units, which, as was already mentioned, provide the services with the broadest customer bases and generate the highest amounts of revenue for SAPO, are greatly impacted by the macro-environmental dynamics. As a result, changes in the service quality of the two units have an immediate effect on the SAPO as a whole. These two business units helped the study achieve its goals because it aims to increase the quality of services provided by the SAPO. Following is a description of the characteristics of service as defined by SAPO.

2.2. Service Quality Defined

The phrases "service quality" are a combination of "service" and "quality." Quality end-user services were the main priority (Bhargava, 2019). The output of the service delivery system is frequently used to gauge service quality in pure service systems. According to the customer's viewpoint, this is because they are satisfied. However, perceptions on service quality depend on many different elements in addition to just one resource. It should be highlighted that resources that go above and beyond client expectations and expanded service possibilities are the result of high levels of satisfaction with service quality. Service quality is also seen to be separated into two categories: Technology and function.

According to Ramya et al. (2019), the level to which a service matches a customer's expectations is a measure of service quality. In order to enhance their offerings, rapidly spot issues, and more accurately determine customer satisfaction, commercial service providers typically review the quality of the services they offer to clients. When evaluating service quality, there are five dimensions to consider.

The dimensions include tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are the dimensions. In addition, it has three crucial qualities: credibility, experience, and search. Today, any service organisation must prioritise service quality above all else. This is partly owing to increased worldwide competition and the size of the service market. According to Maisarah et al. (2020), there is a strong correlation between customer satisfaction and service quality. From the above explanation of service quality, it is clear that service quality based on the notion that consumers always have an expectation of such services, and this expectation may vary from country to country, culture to culture, and person to person, which makes measuring service quality a challenging task. Hence, service quality is an obligation for all post offices to remain competitive, have good revenues, and meet their customer needs and wants. The SERVQUAL model, which measures service quality based on five dimensions and is briefly discussed, forms the basis for the measurement of service quality in this study. It is depicted in Figure 1.

The service provider, as shown in the figure, has some control over external factors that affect customers' expectations. Gap 5 on the diagram represents the perceived service quality and illustrates the contrast between consumers' perceptions and expectations (Kumar et al., 2009). This study focuses on the gap between consumers' expectations and perceptions of service at SAPO Figure 1. The five dimensions of service quality are also illustrated above, and an effort has been made to connect the dimensions to postal services.

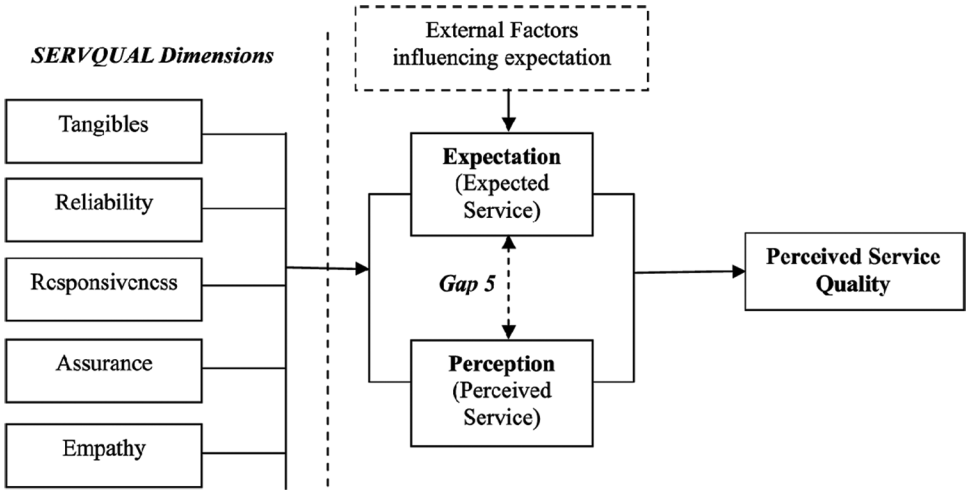
2.2.1. Tangibles: Representing the service physically

Tangibles are used to physically and visibly represent service quality because services are generally intangible and can only be known to have quality or not after purchase and usage (Hashem and Ali, 2019; Awara et al., 2022). This refers to the physical facilities at the organization and its units, staff appearance, equipment personnel, communication materials, and customer-facing visual materials (Minh et al., 2017; Wirtz et al., 2021). Cleanliness, space, atmosphere, the server's appearance, and location are examples of tangible dimension components (Awara and Anyadighibe, 2014; Mutinda, 2020). The SERVQUAL model also measures customer perceptions of service quality and expectations. By deducting the expectation (E) value from the perception (P) value, the quality gap (Q) is calculated. e. P-E=Q. The sum of the Q values yields an overall quality rating, which serves as a gauge of the relative weight assigned to the factors affecting customers' perceptions of service quality. A standardized tool called SERVQUAL is used in a wide range of service-related industries. Concerning appearance is this dimension. Physical evidence informs consumers' perceptions of high-quality care (Amoah et al., 2016; Makanyeza and Chikazhe, 2017; Modica et al., 2020). The setting in which the service is provided falls under this category. Post offices can communicate quality to their customers by enhancing the facility's physical appearance (Chiang and Trimi, 2020). Therefore, the tangibles in the service unit of SAPO must offer consumers added value.

2.2.2. Reliability: Delivering on promises

According to Ocampo et al. (2019), Reliability is connected to the following sub-dimensions: empathetic and comforting, dependable, offer services on schedule, and quality of records agreed. Ocampo et al. (2019) continue by saying that businesses should employ qualified staff who can serve clients, conduct themselves correctly, and assist consumers as needed. Famiyeh et al. (2018) also mentioned that the single most significant

Figure 1: Service quality dimensions



Source: Adapted from (Kumar et al., 2009)

factor influencing customer satisfaction has been described as an employee's reliability, which was a measure of the employee's capacity to handle conflicts directly, their competencies, their actions, the provision of sound advice, and the provision of error-free services. Sricharoenpramong (2018) also added that reliability refers to the situation when the service is performed accurately on the first occasion, records are up-to-date, and timetables are maintained correctly, and the efficiency of reliable services is when the expectation of the customers that the promised services must be completed on time and without any errors. Shokouhyar et al. (2019) also mentioned that the quality element of reliability is not only the scope and extent of the services provided by the organization, but also the consistency of the quality of services provided in the organisation. As for the organization's efficiency, clients expect the agency to be consistent with workers who are qualified and experienced in their field of work (Ocampo et al., 2019). Therefore, the reliability discussions on reliability as explained by various authors in the service sectors can be applied in the postal sector to deliver reliable services in line with postal consumers' promises.

2.2.3. Assurance: Inspiring trust

Assurance refers to the employees' attitudes and behavior, as well as the competence of the staff to deliver friendly, confidential, courteous, and knowledgeable services (Pakurár et al., 2019). This dimension would probably be especially relevant for the services that customers see as highly growing and/or uncertain as to the ability to assess. Therefore, employees should be aware to gain customer trust and confidence to achieve a competitive edge and customer loyalty. Ramya et al. (2019) explains that employee expertise, courtesy, and the firm's and its employee's ability to instill trust and confidence in their consumers are all examples of assurance. Assurance can also be a promise made by the management of the company to a customer in exchange for a service, such as security and safety (Machrus, 2015). Thus, postal sector must prioritize safety and security. It is the responsibility of postal office management to provide adequate security for the benefit of all customers. It will be considered negligent management if the post office fails to provide adequate security to it postal consumers. A high level of security and protection ensures that customers feel safe and comfortable and are satisfied with the quality of service provided by the post office.

2.2.4. Responsiveness: Being willing to help

Responsiveness refers to "the ability and willingness of service providers to be always in customers' service and their ability to perform service for them when they need it. Responsiveness concerns the willingness or readiness of employees to provide service" (Parasuraman et al., 2015; Othman et al., 2019). This dimension is concerned with dealing with the customer's requests, questions, and complaints promptly and attentively. A firm is known to be responsive when it communicates to its customers how long it would take to get answers or have their problems dealt with. To be successful, companies need to look at responsiveness from the viewpoint of the customer rather than the companies' perspective (Chen et al., 2021). Responsiveness is defined as the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service (Nahida Afroz, 2019). Lai et al., (2022) defines responsiveness as the speed and timeliness of service delivery. This consists of processing speed and service capabilities to respond promptly to customer service requests, and shelter waiting times in queues. More specifically, responsiveness is defined as the willingness or readiness of employees to provide services. It contains the timeliness of service (Parasuraman et al., 2015). It also contains "understanding of the needs and requirements of the customer, easy operation time, individual attention provided by the staff, attention to the problem and customers' safety in their dealings" (Kumar et al., 2010). This might entail quick responses to requests from customers and prompt resolution of their issues and concerns by postal service frontline staff.

2.2.5. Empathy: Treating customers as individuals

This is related to the caring personal attention extended to customers, as well as the level of understanding personnel demonstrated relative to customer needs (Kurdi et al., 2020) and the consideration, individualized attention the service provided to consumers (Eshetie et al., 2016; Kleisari and Markaki, 2019). Waddington (2016); James and Montgomery (2017); Pakurár

et al., (2019), are in agreement that empathy is reflected in an organization's ability to facilitate access, communication, and understanding of the consumer. Thus, empathy is an act that should give consumers a greatly satisfying experience as they seek and request the service from a provider (Babin et al., 2021). Skourtis et al. (2019) clarify that individualized services concern the provision of equal access and opportunity to service delivery by establishing flexible alternatives to customers that do not fit into standardized structures. This is further agreed upon by Karami et al. (2016) and Engdaw (2020), who said that personalization of employees' services is a significant predictor of consumer satisfaction. Service delivery should not in any way inconvenience the consumers to strongly influence the degree of consumer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Eshwarappa, 2014; Selvakumar, 2015 and Phan et al., 2021). Tweneboah-Koduah and Farley (2016) and Tan et al. (2019) are of the view that empathy is evaluated on the following: Individualized attention, convenient operating hours, understanding of the staff, and the knowledge employees have about the needs of consumers. When employees express these, positive and satisfied consumers are generated (Xu et al., 2019). On the other hand, unfavorable and discriminatory actions have an impact on a company within the community it serves (Pullen et al., 2017). Even worse, when front-office employees speak for the public sector, discrimination hurts the organization (Cech and Pham, 2017). Knowing the factors that affect customer evaluations of service encounters is crucial in today's competitive world, where there is a general decline in the perception of service quality, according to Bolton et al. (2022). Customers may conclude that the business is incompetent if the primary service is not delivered consistently and may choose to work with another company. Dimension thus assesses ways to improve the efficiency of customer service. Postal service managers and front-line staff members can show empathy by giving customers their undivided attention while listening to their concerns and reassuring customers that they do care and understand their situations. Customers who do not receive personalized service will go elsewhere; thus, it is postal service managers and front-line staff members job to do everything it takes to meet their needs (UK Essays, 2020).

2.3. Customer Perception of Service Quality

Perception is one of the important components used to evaluate service quality and involves making judgments using the mind or emotions, beliefs, culture, language, past experiences, values, interests, and assumptions (Özkan et al., 2020). Consumer perception is not always driven by common sense and can be influenced by other factors such as depression, anger and dissatisfaction. Therefore, perception is a puzzle, and it is necessary to anticipate customer resistance based on previous service encounters and always strive for superior service so that current perceptions are positive. Customers cannot remember all the details of their past experiences, they only retain general feelings, and these feelings combine with other experiences to form perceptions about the service provider (Pham and Sun, 2020). Here, customer acquisition plays an important role in a company's (SAPO) ability to attract new customers and retain existing ones. As such, SAPO can control many of the factors that determine individuals' perceptions of a company's products and services.

2.4. Customer Expectations for Service Quality

Customers have certain expectations of the product or service they wish to purchase, and these expectations are a personal vision of the outcome of the experience which could either be positive or negative (Nam et al., 2020). Or more plainly put, customer expectations are the wants and needs of customers (Chesaina and Gitonga, 2019). Customer expectations are defined as guidelines for product evaluations, brand evaluation standards, or for comparison to a subsequent purchase experience Mason et al., 2021). An expectation of a product is similar in that a customer expects certain attributes to exist in that product, whereas a service is foremost a service environment where customer and service provider interact, thus, there are variations in customers' expectations of the service encounter (Malik et al., 2020). Comprehensive descriptions of the service quality model are discussed in the following section.

2.5. Service Quality Model

The gap model is a very helpful tool for determining whether a company meets customers' expectations and their perceptions of its level of customer service. This model identifies the customer and provider gap as a contributing factor and offers strategies a company can use to maintain focus on the needs of its customers (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Yadav and Rai, 2019).

The model's consumer perception of overall service quality "results from a comparison between expectations and perceptions of the different components of service," according to Akdere et al., (2020). Thus, Gap 5 represents the overall quality and is determined by subtracting expectations from perceptions (Peitzika et al., 2020). The Gap model emphasizes the significance of first understanding customer expectations in order to close the gap between expectations and perceptions. This will lead to the discovery of additional gaps that the SAPO must close in order to offer customers high-quality service.

2.6. SERVQUAL

The SERVQUAL model is a multi-dimensional customer satisfaction research tool that includes five service quality dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Pakurár et al., 2019). Tangibility is determined by comparing the tangibles related to the service supplied to the customer's perceptions of service quality. Physical facilities, equipment personnel, and communication materials are all considered tangibles. Reliability means the ability to deliver on a pledge with consistency and accuracy. An entity must have the ability to keep its promise to perform its service dependably, especially in terms of delivery, service provision, problem resolution, and pricing. Customers would be satisfied if the company kept its promises, especially regarding service outcomes and key service qualities. Thus, companies must be acquainted with customers' expectations of reliability.

Assess customer perceptions and expectations. It is necessary to understand the quality of services. Communication between the customer and the service provider (Zeithaml et al., 2009; Bashir et al., 2020). According to Darmawan and Grenier (2021). It is a reliable indicator of service quality required to identify service

components. Decide how to improve performance. All areas need a lot of improvement. Evaluating the results of improvement work is a real problem. At SERVQUAL independent characteristics of the service. A pattern was created to identify customers. According to Zeithaml et al., 2009; Amegayibor and Korankye, 2021).

According to Gopi and Samat (2020), the SERVQUAL scale is a survey that includes 22 service attributes broken down into five service quality dimensions. The SERVQUAL model's service quality dimensions include: Tangibles, which refers to the physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and written materials; reliability, which is the capacity to deliver the promised service dependably and accurately; and assurance, which refers to employees' knowledge and courtesy as well as their capacity to inspire trust and confidence, responsiveness, which is the willingness to assist customers and provide prompt service, and empathy, which refers to the company's caring, individualized attention given to customers (Limna and Kraiwanit, 2022). Based on their perceptions and expectations, customers evaluate claims about service attribute statements (Zeithaml et al., 2009; Vera-Martínez et al., 2022). To calculate the level of service quality, the average scores from the expectations and perceptions sections are subtracted (Alemseged, 2019). The calculated difference between expectations and perception ratings is a reliable indicator of service quality (Cheng et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2020). The SERVQUAL Scale has been utilized by numerous organizations, naturally with adjustments to fit the research context.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By distributing questionnaires to a select group of postal customers, this study used a quantitative methodology to address its research problem. A sample of 384 customers was selected from the five post offices in the North-West Province using research advisor's (2006) sample size calculator by following a 95% confidence interval and a 5% degree of accuracy/margin of error. The study's participants were selected through non-probability sampling. Using non-probability, also referred to as convenient sampling, the researcher was able to locate and provide questionnaires to individuals who had a service encounter with the SAPO that the study was focused on. Since no element of the population had a known, nonzero chance of being included in the research, a non-probability sampling technique that was chosen because it bypasses time, location, and financial constraints associated with research (Stratton, 2021). The research sample, however, was limited to SAPO customers who had recently used their services and were open to participating in the study.

The survey instrument that was used to collect primary data was the SERVQUAL questionnaire and Belisario et al. (2015) and Mahdum et al., (2019) explained that questionnaires can be used to collect data for different training fields. It is relevant to design a questionnaire in such a way that it collects the desired facts from respondents to address the research problems competently (Gray, 2014; Hansen, 2022). The SERVQUAL questionnaire, which has been used in numerous studies with established validity and reliability, was used to collect the data. Two sections make up this questionnaire, which was created to investigate the service quality of five post offices in the North-West province. The first section focuses on the demographics of postal consumers, and the second sections ask questions about measuring the quality of the postal service in terms of expectations and perceptions using a five-point Likert scale. Regarding the perceptions, postal customers were asked to respond to a questionnaire by checking one of five options, with 1 denoting strongly agreement, 2 agreeing, 3 agreeing, 4 disagreeing, and 5 strongly disagreeing. Consumers evaluated the four areas of postal service quality using 22 items, including seven on tangibles, five on dependability, five on responsiveness, and five on assurance. The scores of the consumer expectations were subtracted from those of their perceptions in order to calculate the gap in postal services. Positive scores were regarded as positive gaps if the services were said to have been provided in an ideal, higher-than-expected manner, and zero was regarded as no gap. A negative score was considered a negative gap if the current situation was far from the desired situation. The service quality scale was at least 0.6. The "acceptable values of 0.7 or 0.6" (Ursachi et al., 2015; Jain and Angural, 2017) except for the empathy construct. This implies that all the constructs are reliable except for the empathy construct.

The empathy construct was thus excluded from further analysis due to poor reliability. Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 24 was used to analyze the data using both descriptive and inferential statistics. There are three methods for conducting an analysis of descriptive statistics: Tabular, graphical, and statistical. Inferential statistics, which have two components—interval estimates and tests of statistical significance—help to extrapolate results from a sample to the entire population. This necessitates that the results of the analysis are correspondingly highlighted in tables, graphs, and a single number that has no other information attached to it but can provide meaning. With the aid of interval estimates, one can draw conclusions or inferences about the entire population from a given sample by calculating the margin of error for the sample data relative to the likely position of the true population. According to the goals of the study, the information gathered through the questionnaire was examined. Additionally, the fundamental ethical principles of research—including informed consent to participate in the study, voluntary participation and withdrawal, anonymity of responses, and protection of participants' interests—were always upheld. The presentation of results and discussions comes next in the discussion.

4. PRESENTATION RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

By quantifying respondents' responses to the statements used to gauge customers' expectations for and perceptions of service quality at SAPO in the North-West Province, data were analyzed. The levels of expectations and perceptions for service quality were calculated using the average scores for each statement. On each statement, the scores resulting from averaging expectations were subtracted from the scores resulting from customer perceptions. In relation to the issue raised in the article—that "customer expectations are typically expected to be in line with the acceptable levels of service quality in the service delivery sector"—the study's

findings provide highly significant new information. The research revealed that, for every service attribute used to gauge consumer expectations, consumers had higher expectations than what they thought of SAPO's level of service. Gap 5: Expected service-perceived service gap was thus identified as the discrepancy. The management's responsibility to ensure that the quality provided meets or exceeds consumers' expectations presents a challenge with Gap 5. (Parowicz and Parowicz, 2019). The average expected scores consistently fell between 1 and 5, the highest possible score on the five-point scale used in the questionnaire, which represented a highly agree response. Customers have higher expectations for the services they will receive, according to Cook (2002) and Lemy et al., 2019, because they are more intelligent, educated, confident, and aware. As consumers become more aware of excellent service, their expectations are rising (Chen et al., 2019). Customers' perceptions of the service they receive are significantly influenced by their expectations (Cook, 2012; Lefebvre et al., 2019). The gaps in all of the unfavorable statements appeared to be caused by the average perception scores being closer to 2, where 2 indicated moderately agree on answers.

- Section one focuses on the demographics.

A total of 384 participants were included in the study, with 70% of them being female and 20% being male. The average consumer age ranged from 21 to 60 years. The highest level of education is a bachelor's degree (86.3%), earned with a Grade 12 certificate. The outcome also shows that only 16% of respondents with less than a PhD and a grade 12 diploma use the post office. Most customers are well-educated. This is further supported by the NDP (National Development Plan) (2015) of the South African government for the higher education sector, where graduates are primarily encouraged to pursue entrepreneurship. The outcome of a job that brings in money. The findings also show that only 51% of post office customers are unemployed. According to Furnham (2015), an individual's reaction to a situation may depend on the type of work they do. These findings suggest that a larger percentage of respondents do have a connection to using post office services. Household income per month for respondents: 73.5 percent of respondents earn between R10,000 and R20,000. The findings also show that 26% of post office customers make less than R5,000 annually. This suggests that a larger percentage of respondents are able to pay for their post office services. According to Mahapatra (2013), higher income groups both pay more for an organization's products and services and respond more beneficially to them. Therefore, it can be inferred from the data gathered that most consumers earn between R10,000 and R20,000, indicating in every way that they can afford SAPO services. Location: 25.7% of respondents reside in Mafikeng, and 25.7% do so in Potchefstroom. Klerksdorp came in second with 19%, Zeerust with 14%, and Lichtenburg with 14%, respectively. The findings indicate that the majority of postal consumers are from the Potchefstroom post office, while the minority is from the Lichtenburg post office. According to Mbonyane (2013), the choice of a business location is influenced by the proximity of the business to its customers and the type of business operation because the majority of customers move toward the business, while some business owners move their businesses closer to their customers. Because people with white-collar jobs are the majority in this service, Potchefstroom has a concentration of customers.

- Sections two ask questions about measuring the quality of the postal service in terms of expectations and perceptions.

4.1. Reliability Test: Service Quality

Reliability testing was done to ensure consistent measurement across the different items in the questionnaire created for this study. The reliability of a measure refers to the stability and consistency of an instrument (Field, 2013). This method, consequently, determines reliability by examining the internal consistency of the research questionnaire presented in the form of a scale (Jamal and Anastasiadou, 2009). The most widely used method of testing the reliability of an instrument is through Cronbach's Alpha, where the value can range from 0.0 to 1.0 (Altinay et al., 2012; Field, 2013). A value that is closer to 1.0 indicates a high degree of instrument reliability, ultimately pointing to the consistency and stability of the survey. Table 1 demonstrates the reliability test result for the study's service quality.

Table 1 shows that the Cronbach's Alpha for the items under each construct of the service quality scale was at least 0.6. The "acceptable values of 0.7 or 0.6" (Ursachi et al., 2015; Jain and Angural, 2017) except for the empathy construct. This implies that the constructs are reliable except for the empathy construct. The empathy construct was thus excluded from further analysis due to poor reliability.

4.2. Construct Validity Analysis Using Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Construct validity confirms the reliability of all variables measured in a particular construct. In this study, a construct validity analysis test was applied to all the sections of the questionnaire and the results are presented in Table 2 and note that empathy is excluded from the results.

Below is a presentation of the findings and a discussion of what postal consumers expect and think of the postal services in each category of quality.

- Tangibility

The respondents in this study were asked to express their experience with the SAPO in terms of the appearance of the physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials at the local post office and if the postal branches made their consumers understand the tangible aspect of their services. The measurements used to capture the responses ranged from strongly agree (SA) to strongly disagree (SD). Their responses are captured in Figure 1.

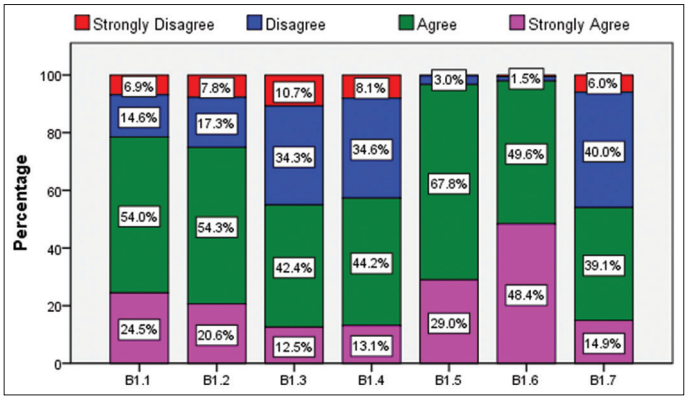
Table 1: Reliability test: Service quality

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
Tangibility	0.600	7
Reliability	0.669	5
Responsiveness	0.611	5
Assurance	0.760	5
Empathy	401	21

Table 2: Validity test statistics: Service quality

Tangibility	Estimate	SE	z-value	P-value
B1.1 The waiting area was clean.	0.463	0.056	8.260	0.000
B1.2 The waiting area is well -lit and ventilated.	0.480	0.058	8.269	0.000
B1.3 The atmosphere and décor appearance of the waiting room are attractive. B1.4 The equipment is functional.	0.378	0.059	6.417	0.000
B1.5 The post office staff are neat in appearance.	0.326	0.056	5.784	0.000
B1.6 The staff working at the post office are easily identified by their uniform	0.120	0.036	3.328	0.001
B1.7 The post office provides detailed information packs about the services provided	0.145	0.038	3.809	0.000
B1.1 The waiting area was clean.	0.258	0.057	4.523	0.000
Reliability	**Estimate**	**SE**	**z-value**	**P-Value**
B2.1 Services are provided at the promised times	0.381	0.058	6.525	0.000
B2.2 Services are provided in a dependable and accurate manner	0.359	0.047	7.684	0.000
B2.3 The post office staff are competent in providing efficient services	0.517	0.052	10.022	0.000
B2.4 The staff kept my records up-to-date	0.289	0.047	6.153	0.000
B2.5 Staff schedule my appointments in such a way that I do not have to wait an unreasonable time to receive attention	0.608	0.048	12.691	0.000
Responsiveness	**Estimate**	**SE**	**z-value**	**P-value**
B3.1 The staff are always willing to help me when I need their assistance	0.614	0.051	12.011	0.000
B3.2 The staff responded quickly to my queries	0.582	0.046	12.552	0.000
B3.3 The staff provide me with detailed information on the process that I should follow when I enter the post office	0.257	0.048	5.310	0.000
B3.4 The staff are never too busy to assist me	0.454	0.052	8.744	0.000
B3.5 The staff always set up follow-up appointments quickly and professionally	0.449	0.088	5.133	0.000
Assurance	**Estimate**	**SE**	**z-value**	**P-value**
B4.1 Staff know the services the post office offers	0.335	0.046	7.226	0.000
B4.2 I feel secure when receiving services from the staff at this post office	0.524	0.043	12.224	0.000
B4.3 The staff are consistently courteous when they dealt with me	0.526	0.040	13.168	0.000
B4.4 I trust the staff as I feel they have my best interests at heart	0.516	0.043	11.886	0.000
B4.5 The behavior of the staff instills confidence in me	0.481	0.038	12.707	0.000

Figure 1: Perceptions of tangibility



The dimension with the highest expectation level but the lowest gap between expectations and perceptions was found to be the tangible dimension. Tangibles refers to the appearance of the organization and its staff members, equipment personnel, physical facilities at the organization and units of the organization, communication materials, and visual materials for customers (Minh et al., 2017). The results in statements B1 to B7, the respondents were asked if the waiting area is clean, well-lit and ventilated and the atmosphere and décor appearance attractive. (B1.1) 78.5%, (B1.2) 74.9%, and (B1.3) 54.9% support the statement that the waiting area is clean, well-lit, and ventilated and the atmosphere and décor appearance attractive. On the other end, 21.5%, 25.1, and 45.1% respectively do not support the statements. The above statements indicate a positive gap, suggesting that the majority of the customers were satisfied with the physical facilities. The physical environment is a visual impetus for service quality despite not being directly related to the provision of financial services.

In statements B1.5 and B1.6, the respondents were asked if post - office staff are neat in appearance and can easily be identified by their uniform. (B1.5) 96.8% and (B1.6) 98% respondents agree/strongly agree that post - office staff are neat and can easily be identified by their uniform. The other extreme show that 3.2% and 2% respectively do not support the statements. The above statements indicate a positive gap, suggesting that customers were satisfied with the appearance of postal service staff.

Finally, (B1.4), 57.3%, and (B1.7), 54% support the statement that equipment is functional and that the post office provides detailed information packs about the services provided. This stands against 42% and 46% respectively does not support the statements. This gap was slily big, suggesting that customers were fairly satisfied with post office equipment and service information. However, post office equipment and service information are not on the levels that customers would expect from an excellent post office. As such, it is the responsibility of managers to ensure that the equipment is working with minimal interruptions due to breakdowns or defects. Generally, equipment impacts service quality evaluation. By improving the physical appearance of the facility, post offices can signal quality to its consumers (De Jager and Du Plooy, 2007; El Saghier and Nathan, 2013). Hence, the tangibles in the service unit of SAPO must provide added value to consumers.

- Reliability dimension

The responses were obtained from the respondents on the understanding of reliability aspects on service quality in the five postal branches. A four point Likert scale measurement with strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree was used to obtain the views of the respondents. For the statement below the respondents were asked their perceptions on the service reliability of the postal branches. The responses from this category are captured in Figure 2.

Wilson et al. (2008), Lemke et al. (2011), and Moletsane et al. (2014) state that reliability means that the organization delivers on its promises about service delivery, service provision, and problem resolution. The results in statements (B2.1) the respondents were asked if postal services are provided at the promised times, and 65.7% of the respondents were not in support of the statement, while 39.7%, are in support. The above statement indicates a negative gap. The reason why they may have been a highly neutral response to this statement may be because of what Cook (2000) refers to as under promise, over deliver. The respondents were asked if services are provided in a dependable and accurate manner, and (B2.2) 60.3% of the respondents disagree with the statement, whereas 34.3% respondents concur with the statement. The above statement indicates a negative gap. In statement (B2.3), the respondents were asked if staff are competent in providing efficient service as well as keeping consumer's records up-to-date and in this regard, 58.9% are not in support with the statement, while 41.1% are in support with the statement. The above statement indicates a negative gap. It can be confirmed that most of the respondents see the post office as not delivering on time and accurately what it promises to offer.

In statements B2.4, respondents were asked if staff keep consumer's records up-to-date, a majority of 64.5% of the respondents support the statement, while 35.5% are not. The above statement indicates a positive gap. Finally, (B2.5) 64.2% disagree that staff schedule appointments in such a way that consumers do not have to wait an unreasonable time to receive attention, while 35.8% support this statement. The above statement indicates a negative gap, suggesting that customers were not satisfied with the Post Office's ability of staff in keeping their records up-to date, while on the order hand, customers do not see staff competent in providing efficient services. Often, the customer is ready to spend money if only the service provider will show up and conduct the transaction as promised Trevinal and Stenger (2014) and Nizam et al. (2019). Here, more assurances need to be given on the reliability aspect to improve postal services in the five postal branches.

- Responsiveness dimension

Responsiveness involves convenience of operating hours, personalised service, having customer welfare at heart and employee's ability to understand customer specific needs. A four point Likert scale measurement ranging from strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree was used to obtain the views of the respondents. In statements B3:1 to B: 3:5, the respondents were asked about the various experiences on the responsiveness aspect in their postal branches. Figure 3 reflects the responses to the questions relating to the responsiveness dimension.

This refers to the service sectors' willingness and flexibility to serve and help customers (Minh et al., 2017) in a timely, efficient manner and includes items such as helpfulness, friendliness, and warmth of the service staff (Rauch et al., 2015). Wang (2015) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) point out that if the waiting time that the customer experience is shorter than expected, the consumer will have higher satisfaction. The results show a positive gap, responses from items B3.1 (59.4. %), support that post office staff are always willing to help when clients need their assistance. These findings show that they were somehow satisfied with staff are willing to help. The following statements indicates a negative gap, the responses from items B3.2 (74.3%), B3.3 (68.9%), B3.4 (75.5%) and B3.5 (80%) indicate that respondents disagreed that staff respond quickly to queries, staff provided them with detailed information on the process, the staff are never too busy to assist clients and that staff always set up follow-up appointments quickly and professionally. Resulting to a gap of 80%. This gap was negative, implying that post office service quality was less than what customers expected. Customers were not satisfied with this service attribute at the five postal branches. In other words, an act of helps with deep emotions. Thus, the willingness of the employee to spend extra time and effort in helping the consumer is a cause

Figure 2: Responses to reliability

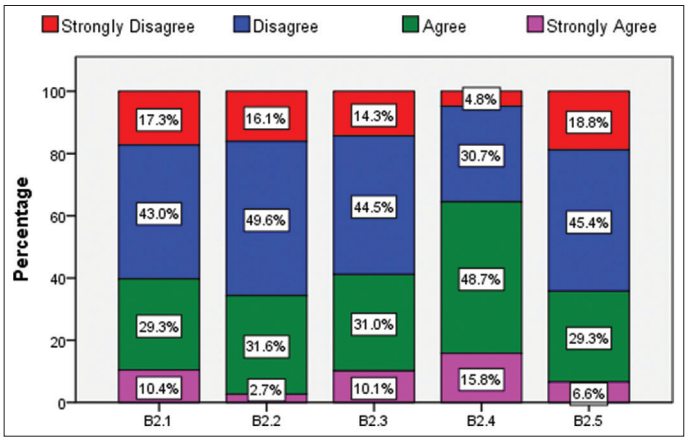
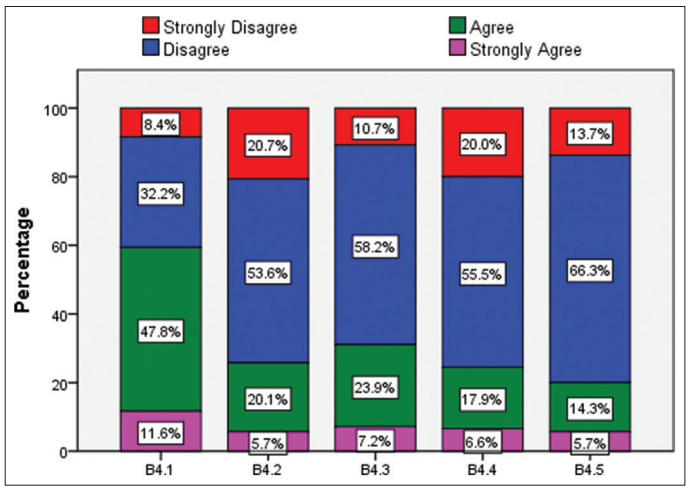


Figure 3: Responses on responsiveness



of delight (Liu and Lee, 2016; Xu et al., 2019). This may include postal service frontline employees responding to a consumer's request promptly and dealing with consumers' problems and queries immediately to improve customers' perceptions of their responsiveness.

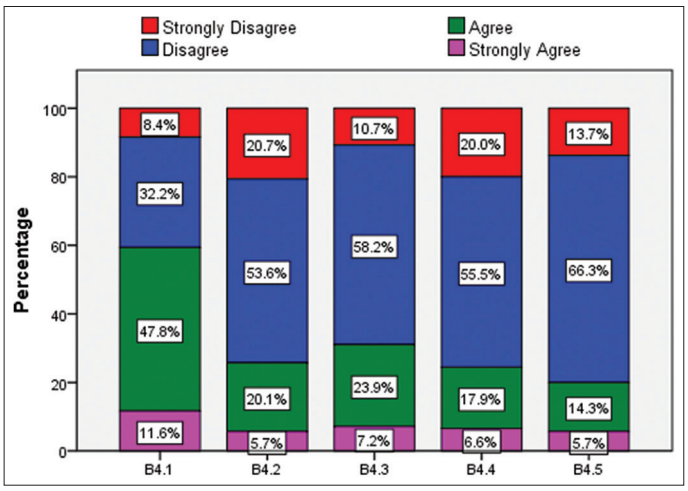
- Assurance dimension

Assurance encompasses the feeling of safety, courteousness by employees, sufficient knowledge to respond to customer queries and providing individual attention to customers. Respondents were asked about employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence to consumers with regarding to service delivery. Figure 4 shows the responses to questions relating to the assurance dimension. A four point Likert scale measurement with strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree was used to obtain the views of the respondents.

Assurance is one of the most important factors for service quality. This is because customers want to deal with people they can trust (Cook, 2000). The results in statements (B4.1) suggest that 59.4% of the respondents agree/strongly agree that the post office employees know the services, followed by 40.6% who disagree/strongly disagree with the variable. This gap is slightly big, suggesting that customers were fairly satisfied with post office employee's knowledge of responding to customers. For statement (B4.2), the findings show that 25.8% of the respondents agree/strongly agree that they feel safe to transact or receive services through the post office, followed by 74.2% who disagree/strongly with this variable. The above statement indicates a negative gap. The levels of customers' expectations of the statement that customers should feel safe in their transactions with excellent postal employers were also found to be high. However, their perceptions of feeling safe to transact or receive services through the post office were lower than their expectations, resulting in a negative gap. This suggests that customers are not entirely comfortable in their transactions with the five postal branches, which means that postal branches must find ways to earn customers' trust.

Expectations for employees who are consistently courteous with customers were also high. Customers' expectations exceeded their perceptions of this service attribute, leaving a negative gap. The behaviour of employees, their attitudes, and emotions are visible to customers and affect the service experience either positively or negatively (Wang et al., 2023). Postal employees must improve in being courteous to customers to improve customers' perceptions of the service quality and close the existing gap. As it has been argued that if a service provider is irritable or seems frustrated, whether from personal problems or from interactions with customers, the mood affects the quality of the service delivered (Zeithaml et al., 2009; Wu and Gao, 2019).

Figure 4: Responses to assurance



Finally, for statements (B4.4), 24.5% and (B4.5), 20% are in support that staff have their best interests at heart, as well as the behaviour of the staff instils confidence in consumers, followed by 75.5% and 80% who disagree/strongly disagree with the variables. The above statements indicate a negative gap. Customers highly expect the staff to have their best interests at heart and behaviour of employees of excellent postal service to instils confidence. However, their perceptions of the behaviour of postal employees as instilling confidence and having their best interests at heart were below their desired service levels. Responses reflected lower service quality perceptions about the behaviour postal employees as instilling confidence and having best interests.

In summary, many researchers have investigated the quality of postal services using the SERVQUAL questionnaire [23-26]. SERVQUAL has greatly contributed to determining the strategies to identify and measure critical areas influencing the postal consumer students' satisfaction in service sector organizations. In the four domains of quality of postal services, there was a negative gap between the customers' expectations and perceptions of the offered postal services in the five postal branches. This means that the quality of the delivered services was lower than what the customers 'expected. Therefore, post office management should seek to eliminate the gap between the customers' expectations and perceptions.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In South Africa, the SAPO is a service sector that should manage client expectations (Mudie and Cottam, 1999). Customers have high expectations for the caliber of service provided by SAPO, according to the study's findings. As a result, there is a need for SAPO and other postal sectors to improve service attributes that show significant discrepancies between customer expectations and perceptions.

The conclusion suggested that post office management should adjust its reliability component by making sure that, before services are provided to postal consumers, a specific time frame depending on the type of services required should be designed in a specific and accurate manner that ensures consistency by the staff.

Additionally, it is advised that SAPO management should improve its responsiveness component by establishing a suitable communication network with its postal customers. For example, the company could create a WhatsApp group for its customers that would be run by the post office administration and used to

communicate essential notifications and changes that take place there. This app should be redesigned so that only the post office administration can send messages; customers should only read the update; if they have any complaints or questions, they should visit their local post offices for more information. This would lessen the frustration felt by postal customers who enter the post office hoping to receive assistance only to be told that, due to changes that they are unaware of as customers, they must first present an additional document.

Additionally, it is advised that management, as front-line employers, work to foster confidence and trust among postal consumers. This can be done by developing courier services that deliver mail and packages directly to postal consumers after calling them to find out what time they can be at home to receive them. This helps to avoid using delivery of mail to incorrect addresses. The majority of customers complain about missing mail, bills, and packages, so post office management should take this seriously.

Additionally, SAPO management must empower its employees how to treat customers with respect, be courteous to them, and notice when they have questions in the store. Management should develop plans for winning and retaining customer loyalty, according to advice. Among them are urging employees to consistently provide high-quality customer service and lowering customer churn through efficient complaint handling and service recovery. To improve relationships with customers, loyalty programs that offer incentives, appreciation, and recognition can be introduced. It is suggested that the SAPO management combine various leadership philosophies and situational controls to achieve high-caliber performance that will give it a competitive edge over its rivals. The contingency model of leadership is structured, making this possible. Finally, if there are any issues that prevent customers from receiving excellent service at postal branches, the customer care unit in the post office that is in charge of handling complaints should be notified right away.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study's findings enable this article to draw the conclusion that customers have higher expectations for the quality of the services they receive at all five of the North-West province's post offices than they do for SAPO. This demonstrates that customer expectations of service quality are out of step with what is considered acceptable in the postal service industry. Customers have higher expectations for the caliber of their services, and if SAPO doesn't live up to them, customers may become dissatisfied and switch to competitors. Although customer expectations are still higher than SAPO's levels of service quality, it's possible that SAPO's service is at the bare minimum that customers will accept before venting their displeasure. Furthermore, it can be inferred that the five post offices do not meet the standards postal customers expect from this sector in terms of service quality. SAPO and other postal service sectors should improve the standard of all the factors that were discussed in this study as being the primary causes of the discrepancy between customer perception and expected service in order to meet customers' expectations. The researcher also suggests that in the future, there might be periodic studies on how managers' and front-line workers' strategic management skills affect service quality in the private sector. Additionally, research should be done to create a framework that would modernize the information flow in the postal industry in order to gather trustworthy data for use in informing managers, staff, and postal customers about new and updated postal information within postal branches.

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