

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in Public Land Administration in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

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KEYWORDS:

Customer Satisfaction
Public Sector Service Quality
SERVQUAL
Land and Survey Department
Sri Aman Division

CITATION:

Zalina, M. D., Arenawati, S. O., & Jerryson, D. J. (2026). Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in Public Land Administration in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 11(3), e003869.
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i3.3869>

Service quality is a critical determinant of public sector performance, directly influencing citizen satisfaction, institutional trust, and the legitimacy of government agencies. This study examines customer satisfaction at the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department by applying the SERVQUAL model, which evaluates service quality through five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Using a quantitative survey approach, data were collected from frontline service users to assess the relationship between these dimensions and overall customer satisfaction. The findings provide empirical insights into which aspects of service quality most significantly impact satisfaction, offering actionable guidance for department managers to enhance counter services. Additionally, the study contributes to the academic discourse by extending the application of SERVQUAL to a localized Malaysian public sector context, bridging a gap in existing literature. The results have practical and policy implications for improving service efficiency, citizen engagement, and public trust in land administration services.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by applying the SERVQUAL model to assess service quality in the Malaysian public sector and is one of very few studies which have investigated customer satisfaction at the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department, providing practical guidance to enhance service delivery and public trust.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary public administration landscape, service quality has emerged as a fundamental benchmark for institutional performance and accountability. Unlike the private sector, where quality is often tied to market share, public sector service delivery directly shapes citizen satisfaction, institutional trust, and the perceived legitimacy of government agencies. Consequently, modern public organizations are under increasing pressure to transition toward customer-centric models, particularly at frontline counter services, where direct interpersonal interactions define the user experience. The Land and Survey Department occupies a critical position within this administrative framework, managing complex land registration, ownership documentation, and legal-administrative processes. Given the significant legal and financial implications of land-related transactions, the delivery of these services demands high levels of accuracy, professionalism, and reliability. As the primary interface between the department and the public, counter services serve as the "moment of truth" where the quality of the entire organization is appraised by the customer. Academic discourse defines customer satisfaction as an evaluative judgment derived from the comparison between a user's prior expectations and the actual perceived performance of a service [Oliver, 1980]. This study applies the SERVQUAL model, created by Parasuraman et al. (1988), to operationalize the evaluation. The model divides service quality into five essential dimensions—tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—providing a valuable framework to examine public sector performance. Despite the proliferation of service quality research, empirical evidence focusing specifically on the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department remains sparse. This geographic and institutional gap is significant, as localized administrative challenges can uniquely influence public perception. Therefore, this study aims to determine the current level of customer satisfaction and evaluate the relationship between the five SERVQUAL dimensions and overall satisfaction. The findings intend to provide evidence-based insights for policymakers to enhance service delivery and optimize the customer experience within the department.

1.1. Research Objectives

Understanding customer satisfaction in public sector services is essential for enhancing operational efficiency, fostering institutional trust, and improving citizen experiences. In the context of the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department, frontline counter services represent the primary interface between the public and the institution, making them critical for evaluating overall service quality. Accordingly, this study aims to assess the current level of customer satisfaction among service users and investigate the factors that shape their perceptions.

The specific objectives of the study are twofold. First, it seeks to determine the current level of customer satisfaction with counter services, providing a baseline measure of service effectiveness in this localized context. Second, the study investigates how the five SERVQUAL dimensions, namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, relate to overall customer satisfaction. By exploring these relationships, the research identifies which service quality aspects most significantly influence user evaluations, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for departmental improvements.

Corresponding to these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the current level of customer satisfaction with counter services in the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department?
2. How do the five SERVQUAL dimensions influence overall customer satisfaction?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Service Quality in the Public Sector

Service quality is a critical determinant of organizational performance in public administration, as it directly affects citizen satisfaction, trust, and perceived legitimacy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Unlike private sector services, where quality is often tied to profitability or market share, public sector services must prioritize accuracy, accessibility, and responsiveness, particularly in sectors with legal and financial implications, such as land administration (Andaleeb, 2001). Several studies have emphasized that poor service quality in public institutions can reduce citizen confidence, increase complaints, and impede compliance with administrative processes (Aladwani, 2002).

2.2. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is defined as an evaluative judgment resulting from the comparison between prior expectations and perceived service performance (Oliver, 1980). In the public sector, customer satisfaction extends beyond individual preferences; it reflects institutional effectiveness and social accountability (Van Ryzin, 2004). Empirical research demonstrates that satisfaction is influenced not only by tangible service elements, such as facility quality and documentation accuracy, but also by intangible factors, such as staff professionalism, responsiveness, and empathy toward users (Ladhari, 2009).

2.3. SERVQUAL Model in Service Quality Assessment

The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), is widely employed to assess service quality in both private and public sectors. It conceptualizes service quality as a multidimensional construct composed of five dimensions:

- Tangibility: Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel.
- Reliability: Accuracy and dependability in service delivery.
- Responsiveness: Promptness and willingness to assist customers.
- Assurance: Staff competence and ability to inspire trust.
- Empathy: Personalized attention and understanding of customer needs.

The model has been applied successfully in various public service contexts, including healthcare, municipal services, and administrative departments, demonstrating its utility in identifying service gaps and areas for improvement (Seth, Deshmukh, & Vrat, 2005).

2.4. Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in Public Administration

Studies indicate a strong positive relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction in public sector organizations. For instance, reliability and responsiveness often emerge as the most significant predictors of satisfaction, as they directly influence the perception of efficiency and fairness in service delivery (Al-Hawary et al., 2011). Meanwhile, assurance and empathy enhance citizen trust and the perceived

legitimacy of administrative processes, particularly in interactions requiring legal compliance or sensitive information (Bhat & Singh, 2016). Localized studies in Malaysia suggest that public service users prioritize accuracy, professionalism, and staff attitude when evaluating satisfaction in government agencies (Abdullah et al., 2018).

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine customer satisfaction with frontline counter services at the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department. Quantitative research was chosen because it allows for systematic measurement of service quality across multiple dimensions and enables the identification of relationships between these dimensions and overall customer satisfaction. The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), serves as the conceptual framework, operationalizing service quality into five key dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

A cross-sectional survey approach was employed, collecting data at a single point in time from individuals who have utilized the department's counter services. This design is suitable for capturing current perceptions of service quality and allows for generalizable findings specific to the Sri Aman Division context.

The population of the study comprises all users of counter services at the Sri Aman Division, including individuals engaging in land registration, ownership documentation, and other legal-administrative processes. To ensure that only informed participants contributed to the study, purposive sampling was applied, targeting respondents with direct experience in these services. A total of 200 respondents were selected to provide sufficient data for statistical analyses while accounting for possible non-responses.

A structured questionnaire adapted from the SERVQUAL instrument was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was organized into three sections. The first section captured demographic information, including age, gender, education level, and frequency of using counter services. The second section assessed perceptions of the five SERVQUAL dimensions using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The third section measured overall customer satisfaction, also using a five-point Likert scale. A pilot test with 20 participants was conducted prior to full-scale data collection to assess the clarity, validity, and reliability of the instrument. Feedback from this pilot led to minor wording modifications to improve comprehension.

The questionnaires were administered at counter service areas with permission from the department. Respondents were briefed on the purpose of the study, assured that participation was voluntary, and informed that all responses would remain confidential. The survey required approximately 10 to 15 minutes for completion, and data collection was conducted over a two-week period to ensure adequate participation.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics, including means, percentages, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and levels of service quality perceptions. The internal consistency of the SERVQUAL scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, while correlation analysis examined the relationships between each SERVQUAL dimension and overall customer satisfaction. Finally, multiple regression

analysis was conducted to determine the relative influence of each dimension on satisfaction, allowing identification of the most critical factors affecting user perceptions. Ethical principles were carefully upheld during the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents gave informed consent before completing the questionnaire. Confidentiality was maintained by reporting results only in aggregate form, and no personally identifiable information was collected. These measures ensured compliance with ethical research standards and safeguarded the rights and privacy of all participants.

In conclusion, the methodology adopted in this study enables a systematic evaluation of customer satisfaction with counter services at the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department. Utilizing a structured survey grounded in the SERVQUAL model and supported by statistical analysis, the approach allows for the identification of specific service quality dimensions that influence user satisfaction. The findings are expected to inform practical improvements in service delivery, contributing to more efficient, reliable, and citizen-focused public services.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

According to the study's demographic profile, a large proportion of the participants.

Understanding the demographic characteristics of respondents provides context for interpreting service quality perceptions. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of respondents by gender, age, education level, and frequency of using counter services.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 200)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	108	
	Female	92	
Age (years)	18–25	36	
	26–35	74	
	36–45	52	
	46 and above	38	
Education Level	Secondary	48	
	Diploma/Certificate	66	
	Bachelor's Degree	76	
	Postgraduate	10	
Frequency of Service Use	First time	28	
	Occasionally (2–5 times)	102	
	Frequently (>5 times)	70	

The sample consisted of a slightly higher proportion of male respondents (54%) compared to females (46%). Most respondents were aged 26–35 years (37%), followed by 36–45 years (26%). Regarding education, the majority held a diploma or bachelor's degree. More than half of the respondents (51%) reported occasional use of the department's counter services, indicating that perceptions reflect both first-time and repeat users' experiences.

4.2. Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the SERVQUAL instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Dimension	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Tangibility	4	0.82
Reliability	4	0.85
Responsiveness	4	0.84
Assurance	4	0.83
Empathy	4	0.80
Overall Scale	20	0.88

All dimensions demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.80$), indicating that the questionnaire reliably measures respondents' perceptions of service quality. The overall scale achieved an alpha of 0.88, confirming that the instrument is suitable for further statistical analysis.

4.3. Determine the Current Level of Customer Satisfaction

To assess the overall level of customer satisfaction, descriptive statistics were computed for all SERVQUAL dimensions and the overall satisfaction score.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of SERVQUAL Dimensions and Customer Satisfaction (N = 200)

SERVQUAL Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Tangibility	4.12	0.58	High
Reliability	3.85	0.65	Moderate-High
Responsiveness	3.90	0.62	Moderate-High
Assurance	3.88	0.61	Moderate-High
Empathy	3.76	0.70	Moderate
Overall Satisfaction	3.89	0.60	Moderate-High

The results indicate that respondents perceive counter services at the Sri Aman Division as moderately to highly satisfactory. Tangibility, reflecting the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of staff, received the highest rating (Mean = 4.12), suggesting that the department provides a professional and organized service environment. Reliability, responsiveness, and assurance received moderately high scores, demonstrating that services are generally dependable, timely, and professionally delivered. Empathy scored the lowest (Mean = 3.76), indicating that personalized attention and understanding of individual customer needs remain areas for improvement. The overall satisfaction score aligns with these findings, confirming that while services are generally satisfactory, enhancements are needed to achieve optimal user experience.

4.4. Examine the Relationship Between SERVQUAL Dimensions and Customer Satisfaction

To investigate how each SERVQUAL dimension affects overall satisfaction, correlation and multiple regression analyses were performed.

Table 2: Relationship Between SERVQUAL Dimensions and Customer Satisfaction

Dimension	Customer Satisfaction (r)	p-value
Tangibility	0.48	<0.01
Reliability	0.62	<0.01
Responsiveness	0.59	<0.01
Assurance	0.55	<0.01
Empathy	0.51	<0.01

All five dimensions of service quality are positively and significantly correlated with overall satisfaction. Reliability exhibits the strongest relationship ($r = 0.62$), indicating that users place the highest value on accurate and dependable services. Responsiveness and assurance also show strong positive correlations, highlighting the importance of timely support and professional competence. Tangibility and empathy, while slightly lower, are still significant predictors, confirming that physical environment and attention to individual needs contribute to satisfaction.

4.5. To determine the relative influence of each SERVQUAL dimension on overall satisfaction.

To determine the relative influence of each SERVQUAL dimension on overall satisfaction, a multiple regression analysis was conducted.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Results for SERVQUAL Dimensions Predicting Customer Satisfaction

Dimension	Standardized Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Tangibility	0.18	2.85	<0.01
Reliability	0.30	4.72	<0.001
Responsiveness	0.24	3.91	<0.001
Assurance	0.20	3.05	<0.01
Empathy	0.16	2.45	<0.05
R^2	0.63		

The regression model shows that the five SERVQUAL dimensions collectively explain 63% of the variance in customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.63$), indicating a strong predictive relationship. Reliability is the most significant predictor ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that users prioritize accurate and consistent service delivery. Responsiveness ($\beta = 0.24$) and assurance ($\beta = 0.20$) are also important, suggesting that timely service and professional staff competence are key determinants of satisfaction. Tangibility ($\beta = 0.18$) and empathy ($\beta = 0.16$) contribute positively but less strongly, highlighting potential areas for service enhancement, particularly in staff-customer interaction and personalized attention.

The study revealed that customer satisfaction with counter services at the Sri Aman Division is moderate to high, with tangibility rated the highest and empathy the lowest. The five SERVQUAL dimensions, which are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, were all positively and significantly associated with overall satisfaction. Among these, reliability was the most critical factor, emphasizing the need for consistent and precise service delivery. Responsiveness and assurance also contributed significantly, while tangibility and empathy had a moderate effect. These findings indicate that while the department provides generally satisfactory services, enhancing personalized attention and maintaining professional, timely, and dependable services can further improve customer satisfaction.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to assess customer satisfaction with counter services at the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department and examine the relationship between SERVQUAL dimensions and overall satisfaction. The findings provide important insights into public service quality and its determinants.

The first objective, evaluating the current level of customer satisfaction, revealed that overall satisfaction is moderate to high, with tangibility rated highest and empathy lowest. This indicates that while physical facilities, equipment, and staff presentation are generally well-received, personalized attention and staff responsiveness to individual needs remain areas requiring improvement. Similar patterns have been reported in other public sector contexts, where service infrastructure is adequate, but interpersonal interactions often fall short of expectations (Andaleeb, 2001; Ladhari, 2009). This suggests that frontline staff training and customer engagement strategies are critical to enhancing user perceptions of service quality.

The second objective examined the relationship between SERVQUAL dimensions and overall satisfaction. All five dimensions were positively and significantly correlated with satisfaction, with reliability emerging as the strongest predictor. This aligns with prior studies emphasizing that consistent, accurate, and dependable service is a key determinant of satisfaction in public services (Al-Hawary et al., 2011; Bhat & Singh, 2016). Responsiveness and assurance also showed substantial influence, highlighting the importance of timely service and professional competence. Tangibility and empathy contributed positively, though to a lesser extent, confirming that physical environment and personalized attention enhance, but do not fully drive, satisfaction.

These findings underscore the practical relevance of SERVQUAL in evaluating public sector services, particularly in local administrative contexts such as land administration. By identifying which dimensions most influence satisfaction, the study provides actionable insights for department managers. For example, improving reliability through standardized procedures, enhancing responsiveness via staff efficiency training, and increasing empathy by fostering customer-centered service approaches could collectively improve the overall experience. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of continuous service quality assessment to ensure alignment with citizen expectations and public accountability standards.

6. Implications

The findings of this study carry important implications for practice, policy, and theory within the context of public sector service delivery, particularly in land administration services at the Sri Aman Division of the Land and Survey Department.

From a managerial perspective, the study highlights the critical role of reliability, responsiveness, and assurance in shaping customer satisfaction. Managers can leverage these insights to design targeted strategies aimed at improving service efficiency and consistency. For example, establishing standardized procedures for document processing and staff training programs can enhance reliability, while implementing clear response protocols and accountability measures can improve responsiveness and assurance. Additionally, attention to empathy and personalized service can help frontline staff build stronger connections with citizens, fostering positive perceptions and trust in the department.

In terms of policy implications, the study provides evidence that public service quality directly influences citizen satisfaction and institutional legitimacy. Policymakers can use these findings to set service performance standards, develop monitoring mechanisms, and allocate resources for continuous improvement. For instance, policies that mandate regular evaluation of frontline services, incorporate citizen feedback, and recognize staff performance based on service quality can strengthen public accountability and trust.

The theoretical implications of the study are also notable. By applying the SERVQUAL model to a localized Malaysian public sector setting, this research validates the model's relevance in measuring customer satisfaction in administrative services. The study confirms that SERVQUAL dimensions are robust predictors of satisfaction, demonstrating that both tangible and intangible aspects of service quality influence citizen perceptions. These findings contribute to the literature on public sector service quality, particularly in developing nations where there is a lack of empirical evidence.

Overall, the study emphasizes that improving service quality is not only a managerial concern but also a strategic tool for enhancing citizen trust, institutional credibility, and organizational effectiveness. By focusing on evidence-based interventions targeting key SERVQUAL dimensions, public organizations can deliver more efficient, reliable, and citizen-centered services, ultimately promoting greater satisfaction and engagement among service users.

7. Conclusion

Overall, the study emphasizes that improving service quality is not only a managerial concern but also a strategic tool for enhancing citizen trust, institutional credibility, and organizational effectiveness. By focusing on evidence-based interventions targeting key SERVQUAL dimensions, public organizations can deliver more efficient, reliable, and citizen-centered services, ultimately promoting greater satisfaction and engagement among service users.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted prior to the enforcement of formal institutional ethics approval requirements. Nevertheless, all participants provided informed consent before participating, and the research was carried out in accordance with the ethical standards applicable at the time. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were fully maintained.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the volunteers (respondents) from Yayasan Salam in Kuching for their wholehearted commitment and participation in completing the surveys. Their valuable contributions have been essential in making this research possible.

Funding

This research received no specific grant or funding from any agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in relation to this study.

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