

The Effect of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction in Afghan Post: An Empirical Study Using the SERVQUAL Model

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Abstract

Service quality has become an important factor in improving performance and customer satisfaction in public service organizations. Customer satisfaction is widely used to evaluate how well public organizations meet user expectations for efficient, reliable, and customer-oriented service delivery. This study investigates the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction in Afghan Post by applying the SERVQUAL model as a theoretical framework. Specifically, it examines the influence of five service quality dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy on customer satisfaction. A quantitative approach was used and data were collected through structured questionnaires from Afghan Post customers in Kabul and selected central provinces. The collected data were analyzed using statistical techniques such as correlation and regression analysis to determine the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. The results show that service quality is positively associated with customer satisfaction. Among the five dimensions, responsiveness and empathy have the strongest impact, highlighting the importance of timely service and personal attention. Furthermore, reliability, assurance, and tangibility also show significant positive relationships with customer satisfaction by improving trust, service consistency, and customers' overall perceptions of service quality. The study concludes that improving service quality can enhance customer satisfaction and improve organizational performance at Afghan Post. It recommends investing in employee training, improving operational processes, and adopting modern technologies, such as digital tracking systems, to enhance service efficiency and meet customer expectations. The findings offer valuable implications for postal service managers and policymakers seeking to improve public service delivery in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, SERVQUAL, Postal Services.

Introduction

Providing quality services is essential for improving organizational performance and achieving higher levels of customer satisfaction in today's service-oriented environment. Service quality plays an important role in shaping customers' trust, loyalty, and perceptions of organizational

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performance. Organizations that deliver reliable, efficient, and customer-focused services are more likely to build positive relationships and achieve better outcomes (Zeithaml et al., 2018; Kotler et al., 2022). Service quality refers to customers' evaluation of a service based on their expectations and actual service experiences (Kant & Jaiswal, 2017).

Evaluating service quality from the customer perspective is challenging because perceptions vary among users (Arora & Arora, 2015). Service quality has received significant attention due to its influence on customer behavior and organizational outcomes. The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) is one of the most widely used frameworks for measuring service quality through five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions allow organizations to evaluate customer perceptions and recognize weaknesses in service delivery (Ladhari, 2009; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2022). Previous studies have shown that improved service quality positively affects customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty across different sectors.

Customer satisfaction indicates whether a service meets or exceeds customer expectations and is an important indicator of service effectiveness (Oliver, 1997). Enhancing service quality has become increasingly important due to technological changes, rising customer expectations, and the need for efficient and transparent service delivery in public service organizations (Bovaird & Löffler, 2016). Postal services remain a critical component of communication and logistics systems. Although digital transformation has created challenges for traditional postal services, postal organizations continue to adapt through modernization, technological innovation, and customer-oriented approaches (Universal Postal Union, 2023).

Afghan Post, as the national postal service provider, plays an important role in supporting communication and logistics development in Afghanistan. However, Afghan Post faces challenges related to improving service accessibility, operational efficiency, digital systems, and responsiveness to changing customer expectations. Nevertheless, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how specific service quality dimensions influence customer satisfaction in Afghan Post. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction using the SERVQUAL model and provide recommendations for improving postal service delivery in Afghanistan.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

- To assess the service quality of Afghan Post and examine its impact on customer satisfaction.

Specific Objectives

- To measure customers' satisfaction with the overall service quality provided by Afghan Post.
- To analyze the relationship between service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) and customer satisfaction.
- To identify service quality dimension that has the strongest influence on customer satisfaction.

- To provide practical recommendations for improving service quality and customer satisfaction

Literature Review

The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has received considerable attention in service management literature due to its influence on customer loyalty and organizational performance. Customer satisfaction reflects customers' evaluation of whether a service experience meets or exceeds their expectations (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Among the different approaches used to measure service quality, the SERVQUAL model proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) remains one of the most influential frameworks. Previous studies have shown that stronger performance in service quality dimensions is positively associated with customer satisfaction and service outcomes across different sectors.

In the postal sector, customers particularly value timely, reliable, and efficient service delivery, as these factors significantly influence customer satisfaction and loyalty (Gerelmaa et al., 2020; Aji & Qastharin, 2023). Although Afghan Post serves as an important provider of postal and delivery services in Afghanistan, limited empirical research appears to have examined the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction within the organization. Therefore, this study applies the SERVQUAL model to examine the effect of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in Afghan Post.

Service Quality

Service quality represents customers' overall evaluation of a service based on their expectations and actual experiences. Since services are intangible and cannot be evaluated before consumption, customers often rely on their experiences to form judgments about quality. Parasuraman et al. (1988) explain that service quality is determined by the difference between customers' expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance. In contrast, Grönroos (1984) emphasizes that service quality consists of both the technical outcome and the manner in which the service is delivered. Service quality is a multidimensional concept that depends on several aspects of service delivery, including responsiveness, reliability, communication, and employee behavior. In service organizations such as postal providers, maintaining high service quality can contribute to greater customer satisfaction, stronger loyalty, and improved organizational performance.

Customer Satisfaction

Kotler and Keller (2016) define customer satisfaction as the outcome of comparing perceived service performance with prior expectations. Similarly, Oliver's (1980) Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory suggests that satisfaction occurs when actual performance meets or exceeds customer expectations. Customer satisfaction is strongly linked to service quality and plays a key role in determining organizational success and customer loyalty. Higher service quality leads to greater customer satisfaction, which in turn encourages continued service use and positive word-of-mouth (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2018). In the postal sector, customer satisfaction is influenced by factors such as timely delivery, reliability, employee behavior, and

service accessibility. These factors are essential for building trust and improving organizational performance in institutions such as Afghan Post.

SERVQUAL Dimensions

The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) measures service quality through five dimensions. These dimensions explain how customers assess services based on their experiences. Tangibility refers to the physical facilities, equipment, employee appearance, and communication materials used in service delivery. Reliability refers to the ability to deliver services accurately and consistently as promised. Responsiveness refers to the willingness of employees to provide prompt and helpful service. Assurance relates to professionalism, employee knowledge, and the ability to build trust and confidence. Empathy refers to providing caring and individualized attention to customers. These five dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for assessing service quality. Strengthening these dimensions can improve customer satisfaction, build trust, and enhance overall service performance in Afghan Post.

Relationship Between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Service quality and customer satisfaction are closely interrelated concepts in service industries. Service quality reflects customers' evaluation of specific service attributes, while customer satisfaction represents their overall assessment of the service experience. Parasuraman et al. (1988) argue that satisfaction occurs when service performance meets or exceeds expectations, while Oliver's (1980) Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory also explains satisfaction as the result of comparing expected and actual performance. Previous research consistently indicates that higher service quality leads to greater customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. In the postal sector, customers primarily evaluate service quality based on timeliness, reliability, employee behavior, and responsiveness. Therefore, improving service quality is crucial for increasing customer satisfaction, building trust, and encouraging continued use of postal services.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

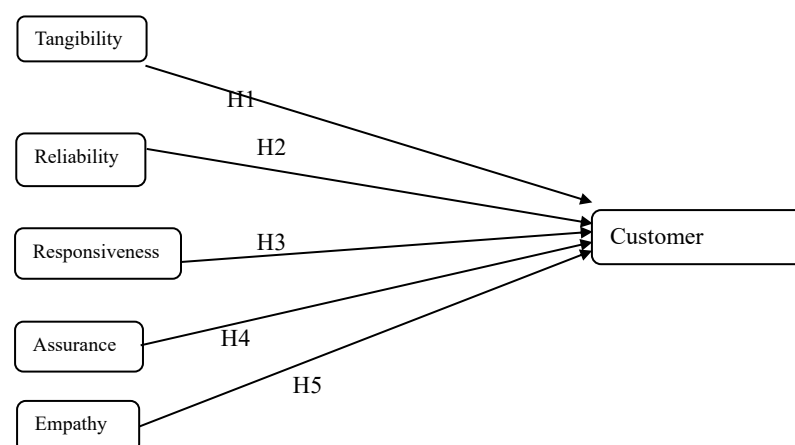


Figure 1: The theoretical framework of the SERVQUAL model and customer satisfaction

Figure 1 shows the proposed framework modified from the Parasuraman et al. (1991). The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of service quality elements, which are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, towards customer satisfaction.

Historical Development of Postal Services in Afghanistan

The development of postal services in Afghanistan has closely followed the country's political, administrative, and institutional changes over time. In the early periods, communication relied on organized messenger networks used to deliver official information across different regions. These systems were similar to communication networks used in ancient and Islamic civilizations (Universal Postal Union, 2018). The modern postal system in Afghanistan began in 1871 during the reign of Amir Sher Ali Khan, with the introduction of structured postal services and the issuance of the first Afghan postage stamps (Lion Head). After independence in 1919, postal services expanded as part of national institution-building. Afghanistan's membership in the Universal Postal Union in 1928 further strengthened its integration into the international postal network and improved global mail exchange (UPU, 2018).

However, decades of political instability, particularly after 1979, negatively affected postal infrastructure and institutional capacity. Limited investment and damaged facilities reduced service efficiency and accessibility (World Bank, 2005). After 2001, Afghan Post began modernization efforts aimed at improving service delivery and reconnecting Afghanistan with international postal systems, including the expansion of postal operations and gradual adoption of modern communication and logistics practices (UPU, 2018). Despite these improvements, Afghan Post continues to face challenges related to infrastructure, technology, and rising customer expectations. Overall, the evolution of postal services in Afghanistan highlights how institutional development and technological progress have influenced service quality in the sector.

Empirical Review of Previous Studies

Previous empirical studies have extensively examined the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction across various service industries. The findings consistently indicate that service quality is a strong predictor of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and organizational performance. Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model, identifying five dimensions of service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Their study established that reducing the gap between customer expectations and actual performance improves customer satisfaction.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) further confirmed that perceived service quality significantly influences customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions, although they focused on service performance rather than expectation gaps. Similarly, Sureshchandar et al. (2002) found a strong relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction, particularly reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Caruana (2002) highlighted that customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, making service quality important for long-term customer retention. Ladhari (2009), in a comprehensive review, confirmed the wide application of

SERVQUAL across industries, while noting that the importance of its dimensions may vary by context.

In public service settings, Grönroos (2007) and Osborne (2010) emphasized that improving service quality enhances customer satisfaction, trust, and organizational effectiveness. In the postal sector, studies indicate that reliability, speed, responsiveness, and accessibility are the most critical factors influencing customer satisfaction, especially under increasing competition and digital transformation (UPU, 2021).

Although previous studies confirm the positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, limited empirical evidence exists regarding public postal services in Afghanistan. Therefore, this study extends the existing literature by examining the influence of SERVQUAL dimensions on customer satisfaction in Afghan Post.

Importance of Service Quality in the Postal Sector

Service quality plays a critical role in the success of postal organizations, as it directly influences customer satisfaction, loyalty, and trust. Customers expect postal services to be reliable, timely, secure, and responsive, which makes service quality essential for maintaining a positive organizational image. The SERVQUAL dimensions tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy provide a useful framework for evaluating and improving service performance (Parasuraman et al., 1988). For Afghan Post, delivering high-quality services can improve customer satisfaction, build public confidence, and enhance overall organizational effectiveness.

Research Hypothesis

Based on the objectives of the study and relevant literature on service quality and customer satisfaction, the following hypotheses are formulated for empirical testing in Afghan Post.

- H1:** Tangibles have a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.
- H2:** Reliability has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.
- H3:** Responsiveness has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.
- H4:** Assurance has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.
- H5:** Empathy has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.

Research Gap

While service quality and customer satisfaction have been widely studied, limited research has examined their relationship in the postal sector, particularly in developing countries such as Afghanistan. Many previous studies have focused on private service industries, including banking, telecommunications, and hospitality, while public postal services have received relatively little attention. Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence on how the SERVQUAL dimensions influence customer satisfaction in Afghan Post. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by investigating the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction in

Afghan Post, contributing to the literature and improving postal service delivery in Afghanistan.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative research design to examine the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction in Afghan Post. It applies both descriptive and explanatory approaches. The descriptive aspect focuses on customers' perceptions of service quality using the SERVQUAL dimensions, while the explanatory aspect examines their impact on customer satisfaction. A cross-sectional survey design was used, collecting data from Afghan Post customers at one point in time through a structured Likert-scale questionnaire. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. This approach offers a clear and systematic way to achieve the study objectives.

Research Approach

This study uses a deductive research approach to examine the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction in Afghan Post. This approach is grounded in established theories, particularly the SERVQUAL model, to test the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. The study develops hypotheses on the impact of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy on customer satisfaction. Data collected through a structured questionnaire are statistically analyzed to test these hypotheses. By connecting theory with empirical findings, the deductive approach provides a systematic and objective framework for understanding customer satisfaction in the Afghan postal sector.

Population and Sampling

The target population of this study includes customers using Afghan Post services in Kabul and other central provinces of Afghanistan. As the exact number of customers is unknown, the population is assumed to be infinite. A sample of 384 respondents was selected through convenience sampling based on participants' availability and willingness to take part in the study. Data were collected from Afghan Post customers to capture a range of customer responses and to analyze the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Sample Size

In this study, the population of Afghan Post customers is considered large and undefined (infinite population). Since the exact number of customers who use Afghan Post services is not known, the sample size is determined using Cochran's (1977) formula, which is suitable for large or infinite populations.

The Cochran formula is expressed as:

Cochran's Formula

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p)}{e^2}$$

Where n = sample size

Required sample size = (n_0)

Z = level of Confidence, which is usually 95%

p = Estimated proportion of the population (when unknown we use $p = 0.5$)

e = Margin of error (e)

By substituting these values into the formula, the sample size is calculated as follows:

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{(0.05)^2}$$
$$n_0 = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.0025} = 384.16$$

In the context of Afghan Post, customers use various services such as mail delivery, parcel handling, and bill payments. Since there is no exact record of the total customer population, it is considered large and undefined. Therefore, Cochran's (1977) formula for an infinite population was used, applying a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a required sample size of 384 respondents.

Data Collection and Measurement of Variables

This study uses a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in Afghan Post. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to Afghan Post customers. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study to address ethical considerations.

Secondary data were gathered from books, journal articles, previous studies, and official reports related to service quality, customer satisfaction, and postal services, including publications from the Universal Postal Union (UPU) and Afghan Post. Service quality and customer satisfaction are measured using a SERVQUAL-based framework.

Service quality is the independent variable and is measured through five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Each dimension is assessed through multiple items reflecting customers' perceptions of service performance. Customer satisfaction is the dependent variable and is measured based on respondents' overall evaluation of Afghan Post services, including service experience, timeliness, and service outcomes.

Data Analysis Techniques

The following statistical methods are applied for data analysis using SPSS Software:

- Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, standard deviation).
- Reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha.
- Correlation analysis to test relationships between variables.

- Multiple regression analysis to measure the effect of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction.
- ANOVA/t-test to find the differences in satisfaction across demographic groups.

Results and Findings

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Characteristics of respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Customer Type	Individual	297	77.3
	Institution	87	22.7
Gender	Male	331	86.2
	Female	53	13.8
Age Group	18–25	98	25.5
	26–35	195	50.8
	36–45	72	18.8
	46–55	13	3.4
	56–65	6	1.6
Education Level	Bachelor	247	64.3
	Master	54	14.1
	12th Passed	83	21.6
Service Usage Period	Up to six months	62	16.1
	Six months–1 year	62	16.1
	More than 1 year	260	67.7
Types of Service Used	Sending Parcels	91	23.7
	Receiving Parcels	79	20.6
	Document Processing	214	55.7

Descriptive Statistics

This study used descriptive statistics to summarize respondents' characteristics and key study variables. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe demographic data, while means and standard deviations were used to assess customers' perceptions of service quality and customer satisfaction based on the SERVQUAL dimensions. This helps to present overall trends, satisfaction levels, and response patterns regarding Afghan Post services.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of SERVQUAL Quality Dimensions

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Tangibles	384	12.8776	2.29499
Reliability	384	13.3516	2.20463
Responsiveness	384	13.5391	2.11880

Assurance	384	13.7187	1.93202
Empathy	384	12.8516	2.33183

Interpretation:

Assurance recorded the highest mean score ($M = 13.72$, $SD = 1.93$), indicating strong customer trust in staff knowledge and courtesy. Responsiveness ($M = 13.54$, $SD = 2.12$) and reliability ($M = 13.35$, $SD = 2.20$) also recorded high mean values, reflecting satisfaction with timely and dependable services. In contrast, tangibility ($M = 12.88$, $SD = 2.29$) and empathy ($M = 12.85$, $SD = 2.33$) were slightly lower, suggesting potential areas for improvement. Overall, the low standard deviations show that responses were relatively consistent across all dimensions.

Regression Results:

Regression analysis was conducted to determine the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction.

Table 3: Regression Analysis

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.518 ^a	.268	.258	.59679	1.797
a. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Tangibles, Responsiveness, Assurance, Reliability					
b. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction					

Interpretation: Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction in Afghan Post. The results indicate a moderate positive relationship between SERVQUAL dimensions and customer satisfaction ($R = 0.518$). The model accounts for 26.8% of the variation in customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.268$), while the Adjusted R^2 (0.258) suggests a reasonably good model fit. The Durbin–Watson value (1.797) indicates that there is no serious autocorrelation issue in the data. Overall, the findings show that service quality has a meaningful effect on customer satisfaction.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation

		Tangibles	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy	Customer Satisfaction
Tangibles	Pearson Correlation	1	.680**	.592**	.565**	.527**	.376**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
Reliability	Pearson Correlation	.680**	1	.754**	.706**	.661**	.396**

	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
Responsiveness	Pearson Correlation	.592**	.754**	1	.785**	.653**	.471**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
Assurance	Pearson Correlation	.565**	.706**	.785**	1	.683**	.414**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	.527**	.661**	.653**	.683**	1	.457**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
Customer Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	.376**	.396**	.471**	.414**	.457**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Interpretation:

The Pearson correlation analysis shows that all SERVQUAL dimensions are positively and significantly related to customer satisfaction at the 0.01 significance level. Among the dimensions, responsiveness had the strongest correlation with customer satisfaction ($r = 0.471$), followed by empathy ($r = 0.457$), assurance ($r = 0.414$), reliability ($r = 0.396$), and tangibles ($r = 0.376$). These results suggest that higher perceived service quality is associated with greater customer satisfaction, with responsiveness being the most influential dimension.

Table 5: ANOVA Table

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	49.280	5	9.856	27.674	.000 ^b
	Residual	134.626	378	.356		
	Total	183.906	383			
a. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Tangibles, Responsiveness, Assurance, Reliability						

Interpretation:

An ANOVA test was used to assess the overall significance of the regression model in Afghan Post. The results indicate that the model is statistically significant ($F = 27.674$, $p < 0.01$), showing that the SERVQUAL dimensions have a significant combined effect on customer satisfaction. Overall, the findings suggest that service quality plays an important role in influencing customer satisfaction.

Discussion

This study examined how service quality affects customer satisfaction in Afghan Post using the SERVQUAL model. The findings show that all five SERVQUAL dimensions have a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction. Among them, responsiveness was the most influential dimension, highlighting customers' expectations for prompt assistance, timely service delivery, and effective responses to their needs. Reliability also had a significant effect, emphasizing the importance of accurate, consistent, and secure postal services.

Furthermore, assurance and empathy contributed to customer trust and improved employee customer relationships, while tangibility influenced customers' overall perceptions of service quality. These findings are consistent with previous studies that identify service quality as a key determinant of customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Cronin & Taylor, 1992). The results suggest that Afghan Post can improve customer satisfaction by enhancing responsiveness through faster service delivery, better communication, and staff training, while also strengthening reliability and other service quality dimensions. Overall, this study adds to the limited research on service quality in Afghanistan's public postal sector.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction in Afghan Post using the SERVQUAL model. The findings show that all five dimensions have a positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction. This suggests that higher service quality is associated with greater customer satisfaction and improved trust in postal services. Among the dimensions, responsiveness was the most influential, followed by empathy, highlighting the importance of timely service, effective communication, and personalized attention. Assurance, reliability, and tangibility also had positive effects by strengthening trust, ensuring consistent service delivery, and improving overall service quality.

Based on these findings, Afghan Post should prioritize improving responsiveness by reducing waiting times and handling customer complaints more efficiently. Employee training should also be strengthened to enhance communication skills and customer service behavior. Improving service reliability is equally important to ensure accurate and consistent delivery of services. In addition, adopting modern technologies such as digital tracking systems and online service platforms can enhance efficiency and improve customer experience. Regular customer satisfaction assessments are also recommended to identify service gaps and support continuous improvement.

In conclusion, service quality is a key determinant of customer satisfaction in Afghan Post. Strengthening all SERVQUAL dimensions, especially responsiveness and empathy, can

significantly improve service performance, customer satisfaction, and public trust. Future research could consider larger samples and additional factors such as digital transformation and customer loyalty.

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