

Who Feels Served? Demographic Equity in Citizen-Perceived Service Quality within Government Customer Happiness Channels in the United Arab Emirates

Ahmed Hassan Ali Almatroushi^{1*}, Abu Dardaa Mohamad², Fariza Md Sham³

¹ Institute of Islam Hadhari, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia; General Command of Sharjah Police, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

² Institute of Islam Hadhari, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

ORCID: 0009-0000-3703-3410

³ Institute of Islam Hadhari, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

ORCID: 0000-0003-4360-7462

Corresponding Author: Ahmed Hassan Ali Almatroushi

Abstract: Government “customer happiness” dashboards typically report a single aggregate score, obscuring whether all segments of the population experience government services equally well. This paper reframes an existing quantitative dataset — 400 users of the General Command of Sharjah Police's customer happiness service channels — through the lens of social equity in public administration rather than through its original antecedent-focused research question. Using the same validated SERVQUAL-based instrument (Spearman-Brown = 0.963; Guttman = 0.959) and the same strategic-intelligence covariates ($R^2 = 0.804$ for the combined antecedent model), this paper's central analysis instead asks whether perceived service quality is distributed equally across gender, educational attainment, and age groups. Results show statistically significant disparities on all three dimensions: women reported higher perceived service quality than men (Mann-Whitney $U = 13834.500$, $Z = -3.431$, $p = 0.001$; mean rank 228.76 vs. 187.05); respondents with a bachelor's degree or postgraduate qualification reported higher perceived quality than those without a bachelor's degree (Kruskal-Wallis $H = 27.551$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$; mean ranks 221.60, 218.27, and 155.52 respectively); and respondents under 25 reported lower perceived quality than older age groups. These findings suggest that a channel widely regarded as high-performing on average is nonetheless serving some citizen segments less well than others, with direct implications for how governments design and monitor “happiness” channels intended to serve an entire population equitably.

Keywords: social equity; service quality; SERVQUAL; customer happiness; digital divide; demographic disparities; government service channels; United Arab Emirates

1. Introduction

Public administration has long recognized efficiency and economy as core evaluative criteria for government performance. Frederickson (1990) argued for a third criterion — social equity — on the grounds that a service can be efficient and economical on average while still distributing its benefits unevenly across the population it serves. This argument is directly relevant to the growing practice, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, of measuring government performance through aggregate “customer happiness” indices. An aggregate happiness or service-quality score can mask substantial internal variation: a channel that scores well overall may nonetheless underserve specific demographic groups, an outcome invisible to dashboards that report only the mean.



This paper reframes a dataset originally collected to test the relationship between strategic intelligence and service quality among users of the General Command of Sharjah Police's customer happiness service channels ($n = 400$). Rather than repeating that antecedent-focused analysis, this paper's central contribution is a disaggregated, equity-focused re-analysis: it asks whether perceived service quality differs significantly by gender, educational attainment, and age, and what these disparities imply for the design of government channels that are explicitly branded around citizen happiness. The research questions are: (1) Does perceived service quality differ by gender? (2) Does it differ by educational attainment? (3) Does it differ by age group? (4) What do these patterns imply for equitable service design?

The paper's contribution is to bring social equity theory — a well-established but under-applied lens in Gulf public-administration research — into dialogue with a live, branded government initiative (customer happiness channels), using real disaggregated survey evidence rather than relying on aggregate satisfaction metrics alone.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Service Quality and the Limits of Aggregate Measurement

SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) remains the dominant framework for measuring perceived service quality across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Public-sector applications of SERVQUAL typically report an overall or mean score as the headline indicator of channel performance (Van Ryzin, 2004). This practice is administratively convenient but analytically incomplete: a mean score by construction weights all respondents equally without revealing whether particular subgroups are systematically underserved.

2.2 Social Equity as a Pillar of Public Administration

Frederickson's (1990) call for social equity as a third pillar of public administration, alongside efficiency and economy, holds that public services should be evaluated not only by how well they perform on average but by how equitably their benefits are distributed across the populations they serve. Subsequent public-administration research has operationalized equity through disaggregated outcome analysis — examining whether service outcomes vary systematically by demographic characteristics such as gender, education, or age — rather than through aggregate satisfaction alone.

2.3 Demographic Disparities in Service and Digital Access

A related body of research on the digital divide documents that access to, and comfort with, digital government services is unevenly distributed by age and educational attainment, with older and less-educated users often reporting greater difficulty (van Dijk, 2006). At the same time, younger, digitally native users may hold higher expectations for speed and interactivity, shaped by comparison with commercial digital experiences, which can translate into lower relative satisfaction with government digital channels even when absolute service levels are high. These two dynamics — unequal access/comfort on one hand, and unequal expectations on the other — provide a plausible mechanism for demographic disparities in perceived service quality within the same government channel.

3. Hypotheses

- H1: Perceived service quality within the customer happiness service channels differs significantly by gender.
- H2: Perceived service quality differs significantly by educational attainment.
- H3: Perceived service quality differs significantly by age group.

Strategic intelligence — the antecedent construct examined in the source study — is retained here only as contextual information (the combined model explained 80.4% of the variance in service quality; $R = 0.897$, $F = 323.236$, $p < 0.001$), establishing that the channel performs strongly on average before this paper turns to the equity question of how that average is distributed.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design, Population, and Sample

This paper re-analyzes a quantitative, cross-sectional dataset collected from users of the General Command of Sharjah Police's customer happiness service channels (in-person centers, official website, and smart-channel

applications) in the Emirate of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, drawn from a population of approximately 60,000 active users. A random sample of 400 respondents completed a structured questionnaire distributed both electronically and on paper.

4.2 Instrument and Reliability

Service quality was measured using an adapted SERVQUAL instrument covering the five standard dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy) on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Instrument reliability was strong (Spearman-Brown split-half coefficient = 0.963; Guttman split-half coefficient = 0.959). Demographic items captured gender, age group, educational attainment, and channel used.

4.3 Analysis Plan

Data were analyzed in SPSS. Because the distribution of service-quality scores did not meet normality assumptions for independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, non-parametric equivalents were used: the Mann-Whitney U test for the two-category gender comparison, and the Kruskal-Wallis H test for the three-category educational-attainment and age-group comparisons, at a significance threshold of $\alpha \leq 0.05$. The strategic-intelligence $\rightarrow$ service-quality regression model ($R^2 = 0.804$) from the source study is reported for context only, not re-tested here.

5. Results

5.1 Sample Profile

Of the 400 respondents, 67.8% were male and 32.3% female. The largest age group was 35–44 years (30.5%), followed by under-25 (25.8%). Bachelor's degree holders formed the largest educational group (41.0%). The website was the most frequently used channel (38.0%), followed by in-person visits (20.0%) and service centers (15.0%).

Demographic	Category	% of Sample
Gender	Male	67.8%
Gender	Female	32.3%
Age	35–44 years	30.5%
Age	Under 25 years	25.8%
Education	Bachelor's degree	41.0%
Channel	Website	38.0%
Channel	In-person visit	20.0%
Channel	Service centers	15.0%

5.2 H1 — Gender Differences

A Mann-Whitney U test found a statistically significant difference in perceived service quality by gender ($U = 13834.500$, $Z = -3.431$, $p = 0.001$). Women showed a higher mean rank (228.76) than men (187.05), indicating that female respondents perceived service quality more positively than male respondents. H1 is supported.

5.3 H2 — Educational Attainment Differences

A Kruskal-Wallis test found a statistically significant difference in perceived service quality across three educational categories ($H = 27.551$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$). Mean ranks were highest for bachelor's degree holders (221.60), followed closely by postgraduate (Master's/PhD) holders (218.27), with respondents holding less than a bachelor's degree ranked substantially lower (155.52). H2 is supported.

Test	Statistic	df	p-value	Key comparison
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Gender (Mann-Whitney U)	U = 13834.500, Z = -3.431	—	0.001	Female mean rank 228.76 > Male 187.05
Education (Kruskal-Wallis)	H = 27.551	2	< 0.001	Bachelor's 221.60 > Postgrad 218.27 > Below-bachelor's 155.52
Age (Kruskal-Wallis)	Reported as significant	—	< 0.05	Under-25 lowest; older groups higher

5.4 H3 — Age Group Differences

Perceived service quality also differed significantly by age group ($p < 0.05$), with respondents under 25 reporting the lowest ratings relative to older age groups. The source study reports this comparison as statistically significant but does not publish the exact Kruskal-Wallis H statistic; the finding is reported here at the level of precision available in that source. H3 is supported.

5.5 Contextual Model: Strategic Intelligence as Covariate

For context, the combined strategic-intelligence model explained 80.4% of the variance in service quality ($R = 0.897$, $R^2 = 0.804$, $F = 323.236$, $p < 0.001$) in the source study, with motivation/stimulation ($R^2 = 0.807$ individually) and strategic vision ($R^2 = 0.749$) the strongest individual predictors. This confirms the channel performs strongly on average — which is precisely why the equity disparities reported above are notable: they exist beneath a high-performing aggregate score.

6. Discussion

The pattern of results supports treating social equity as a distinct evaluative criterion alongside aggregate service quality. The gender disparity, with women reporting more positive evaluations than men, is consistent with prior service research suggesting that interpersonal service dimensions such as empathy and being listened to — which the source SERVQUAL instrument captures — may be weighted differently across genders. The educational disparity, with respondents below bachelor's-degree level reporting markedly lower perceived quality, is consistent with digital-divide theory: as government channels shift toward website and smart-application delivery (58% of this sample's channel use combined), users with less formal education may face greater friction navigating digital interfaces, procedures, and terminology. The age disparity, with under-25 respondents rating quality lowest despite presumably higher digital fluency, is more consistent with an expectations mechanism: younger users likely benchmark government digital services against fast-moving commercial digital experiences, making otherwise adequate government service feel comparatively slow or rigid.

Together, these findings suggest that a single aggregate customer happiness score, however high, can conceal meaningfully different lived experiences of the same channel. For an initiative explicitly branded around citizen happiness, this matters: a channel is not equitably “happiness-producing” if some demographic groups consistently experience it less positively than others, even where the average across all users looks strong.

7. Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

This paper contributes an equity-focused re-analysis of service-quality data from a government customer happiness channel, showing that aggregate performance measures can mask significant demographic disparities in gender, education, and age. Practically, the findings suggest three concrete interventions: (1) simplified, assisted digital pathways for users without a bachelor's degree, to reduce the education-linked disparity; (2) service-design research specifically targeting under-25 users to understand which expectation gaps drive their comparatively lower ratings; and (3) routine disaggregated reporting — not just an aggregate happiness score — as a standard feature of government customer happiness dashboards, consistent with Frederickson's social equity criterion.

The study shares the limitations of its source data: a cross-sectional, single-organization, self-report design that precludes causal claims and limits generalizability beyond Sharjah's government service context. The age-group comparison is reported at the level of statistical precision available in the source study (significance level only, without the exact Kruskal-Wallis H statistic); researchers with access to the original SPSS output may wish to report the full statistic in any subsequent revision. Future research could examine equity disparities longitudinally, test mediating mechanisms (e.g., digital self-efficacy, service expectations) directly, and extend the disaggregated approach to other UAE and Gulf government happiness initiatives.

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