

THE INFLUENCE OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ON PERCEIVED PUBLIC SERVICE QUALITY: SPOTLIGHT ON ROMANIAN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

The research is based on an analysis of the quality of public services and the influence that consumers have on the factors and dimensions that characterize quality. In order to assess the level of quality of public services in local government, a SERVQUAL instrument was used, which analyzes from the dual perspective of expected and perceived quality, tangible elements, reliability, trust, empathy and responsiveness. A sample of 317 respondents was considered for the collection of data from the beneficiaries of local services. The results indicate a direct link between consumer behavior and improved quality of public services. The study demonstrates the importance of taking users' perspectives into account in the process of public service delivery in order to increase user satisfaction and improve the quality of public services. The study also provides a better understanding of how consumer behavior can influence the quality of public services and provides useful information for the development and improvement of public services. The results of the research can be used to explore ways to improve local government services, to identify ways to increase citizen satisfaction, and especially to build loyalty and trust in public institutions.

Keywords: consumer behavior; public services quality; expected quality; perceived quality; SERVQUAL; local public administration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of consumer behavior and its influence on perceptions of the quality of public services is a key theme for understanding how public institutions can respond more effectively to citizens' demands (Sønderskov & Rønning, 2021). The topic becomes particularly relevant in the context of local public administration in Romania, a sector often criticized for its lack of efficiency, low transparency and a significant mismatch between the services offered and the real needs of the local population.

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The interactions between consumers' expectations, their experiences and the perceptions formed provide valuable insights into how local governments can improve performance and enhance public satisfaction in cities (Nigro & Gonzalez Cisaro, 2016; Sabie, Bunea & Popescu, 2024). The need to explore this topic stems from the growing demand for accountability and improvement in local service delivery as a prerequisite for increasing citizen satisfaction (Chatterjee & Suy, 2019).

Citizens are increasingly aware of their rights and expect public institutions to operate with the same efficiency, availability and customer orientation as in the private sector. Zhu et al. (2018) find that this shift is fueled by the globalization of standards, technological progress, and expanded access to information, which enable citizens to demand better services and hold authorities to account. In Romania, these expectations are all the more pressing given the historical challenges of public administration, such as excessive bureaucracy, insufficient digitization and inconsistent quality of services in different regions (Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, 2019). The topic is particularly topical given the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the digital transformation of public services. It has heightened citizens' expectations of service accessibility, transparency and efficiency (Mina & Melenciuc, 2022; Androniceanu, 2023). Parahoo et al. (2018) show that the gap between the expected and perceived quality of public services has a direct impact on trust in institutions and civic engagement, making public service reforms a priority for government policies at both central and local levels.

Assessing the quality of public services is essential to identify areas for improvement and to ensure efficient use of resources to meet citizens' needs. Continuous quality assessment is a tool to improve organizational performance, but also a mechanism to strengthen the trust and legitimacy of public institutions (Roos & Gustafsson, 2011). In Romania, local public administrations play a crucial role in the provision of fundamental services such as urban planning, waste management, water supply, social assistance, etc., making continuous quality assessment an essential aspect of local governance.

The analysis of the influence of consumer behavior on the perceived quality of public services provides a valuable framework for the reform of local public administration in Romania. It emphasizes the importance of aligning public services with citizens' expectations in order to build trust, increase satisfaction and thus contribute to a more resilient and efficient public sector.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. *Customer behaviour*

The literature describes public service consumer behavior as complex, influenced by personal, social, economic and contextual factors specific to the public sector. This behavior is defined as a decision-making process by which individuals or groups select, use and evaluate services offered by public institutions with the aim of satisfying specific needs (Singh et al., 2023). In this context, the study of consumer behavior involves the analysis of preferences, perceptions and attitudes towards service quality and their impact on user experience.

Consumer behavior refers to the actions and decisions that individuals or groups of individuals make when choosing, buying and using products and services and is the study of how consumers interact with companies and markets. From this point of view, a pronounced transdisciplinary character of the concept can be observed in the literature, with consumer behavior being the subject of studies in areas such as public administration (Parasuraman et al., 2022), government policies (Ahmed et al., 2023), education (Hadi et al., 2024), sustainable development (Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2023), the Covid-19 pandemic (Kirk & Rifkin, 2022), data security (Huang & Song, 2023), sustainable transportation and renewable energy (Gao et al., 2022). But regardless of the domain addressed, Singh et al. (2023) suggest that the goal of consumer behavior is to analyze the choices customers make to achieve their goals and satisfy their wants, needs.

According to Harrigan et al. (2017) marketers consider consumer behavior as a distinct part of customer engagement, including those behaviors that transcends purchase and transaction to encompass activities involving co-creation and other types of active contribution. Ho & Chung (2020) also opine that consumer

behavior is affected by a complexity of actions, offline and online subsequent customer engagement. Different approaches in the literature refer to customer engagement with some believing it to comprise both in-role and extra-role customer emotions, behaviors and thoughts (Kumar et al., 2019).

Service quality assurance has a significant impact on consumer loyalty and experience in the service industry and serves as a mechanism to build trust in brand image (Singh et al., 2023). Brand influence and brand trust are also positively correlated with consumer ethical behavior. Brand trust is a driver of influence, is positively related to brand loyalty and plays an important role in influencing consumer behavior.

Public service user behavior is influenced by factors such as quality perception, service accessibility, level of digitalization and institutional transparency. Recent studies show that in the digital era, technology integration plays a key role in shaping consumer behavior, improving accessibility and personalization of services (Deloitte, 2023). The literature groups the factors that influence consumer behavior into two categories: individual factors (what pertains to the individual, his personality, cognitive as well as lifestyle styles) and environmental factors (to mention those socio-demographic factors of the person that are determined by his family, the influence of the groups that surround him, his social class, as well as his economic situation). From this point of view, perhaps the most complex approach to the factors that determine the behavior of consumers of public services belongs to Qazzafi (2020), according to which purchasing behavior is influenced by personal factors (age, occupation, lifestyle, personality, psychological factors (motivation, beliefs, preferences of the individual, perception), cultural and social factors (family, culture, subculture, social status) and economic factors.

The factors that can influence citizens' perception of public services and implicitly their behavior are analyzed in detail by Hosu, Deac & Mosoreanu (2012), who capture several variables: the degree of dependence on the service offered, the level of service quality, the ethical conduct of officials, socio-demographic factors such as the skill level of the population, the level of economic development in the region, the size of the city, etc. Other variables that may influence the behavior of consumers of public services are: media, level of transparency, degree of public consultation, e-participation, attitude of decision makers, situational factors, lifestyle, general and specific needs and social groups. Dam & Dam (2021) also states that, customer satisfaction is the key aspect that managers should focus on. The competitive advantage of the organization is to satisfy its customers better than its competitors, exceed their needs and fulfill their desires better than other service providers in the market.

The study of public service consumer behavior contributes to improving service delivery strategies, optimizing resources and increasing user satisfaction, which are essential for achieving sustainable development goals (Singh et al., 2023). Thus, consumer behavior is active and complex. Therefore, it becomes difficult to understand and assess the changing consumer behavior as the public service sector is dynamic and diverse and service quality difficult to assess in terms of consumer needs and expectations.

2.2. Public services quality. Expected quality and perceived quality

According to Chen et al. (2020) services have long been distinguished from products by three characteristics: intangibility, simultaneous production and consumption, and co-production. The literature provides multiple perspectives on the criteria by which consumers evaluate service quality. For example, Mauri et al. (2013) group these criteria into three main categories: searchable quality (refers to characteristics that the customer can anticipate and evaluate before using the service), experiential quality (encompasses characteristics that the customer can evaluate only after using the service), and credible quality (refers to characteristics that the customer cannot directly evaluate but has confidence in the reputation of the company or service provider).

In the area of banking services, Atiyah et al. (2017) discuss the key aspects they consider relevant for measuring service quality: reliability, responsiveness, competence, easy access to safe, reliable, trustworthy services, and an emphasis on customer knowledge and understanding. Similarly, to analyze the quality of e-government services, Li & Shang (2020) use criteria grouped dimensions such as reliability, security, accessibility, information quality, service capability, interactivity and responsiveness. The results of the study suggest that those technical characteristics such as system quality, accessibility and reliability have only very

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weak effects on citizens' perceived value of services. But dimensions such as information quality, service capability and interactivity play a more important role in explaining citizens' perceptions of value.

Dimensions of service quality are intensively debated in the literature. Thus, Barrows et al. (2016) emphasize responsiveness in their study, concluding that the ability to respond quickly and efficiently to citizens' requests and complaints is a decisive factor for perceived quality. Zeithaml et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of reliability in creating a positive customer experience, arguing that a reliable service reduces uncertainty and increases customer trust, especially in health or transportation services, where mistakes can have severe consequences. Furthermore, Ladhari (2022) extends the concept of reliability to the digital environment, arguing that in online services, reliability implies the correct functionality of platforms and the delivery of the service exactly as described, without technical interruptions or errors. Reliability is another dimension of service quality, contributing to customer satisfaction and loyalty; Ali et al. (2021) showed that well-trained staff who can answer questions promptly and correctly are essential for positive experiences in the hospitality industry. Empathy and user orientation are two other dimensions analyzed by Latupeirissa et al. (2024) and refer to the concern of public institutions to understand and address the needs of citizens, treating each user with care and respect. The authors conclude that in the modern era, the integration of digital technologies to streamline processes and improve interaction with citizens is another essential aspect. Digital transformation projects enable faster, more personalized and transparent services, but raise challenges of inclusiveness and data security.

Expected service quality is defined as the level of performance anticipated by a customer before actually experiencing a service, influenced by factors such as individual needs, previous experiences and marketing communication. Recent literature indicates that customer expectations are shaped by several dimensions, including reliability, accountability, responsibility, tangibility, safety, and empathy, which are fundamental elements of the SERVQUAL model (Kim, 2022). These dimensions determine the extent to which services meet or exceed customers' initial expectations. For example, in education, research has shown that students expect a safe learning environment, competent teachers, and modern resources, expectations that influence their satisfaction and loyalty to the educational institution. At the same time, in the hospitality sector, customers expect high standards of hygiene, personalized service and assurance of their safety, which are essential for satisfaction and subsequent recommendations. Thus, expected service quality is a critical component of the satisfaction assessment process and a key predictor of consumer behavior. Consumer expectations are formed on the basis of previous experiences, recommendations from others, marketing information and personal perceptions. The concept is essential because customer expectations are a touchstone against which they perceive the actual quality of service.

The customer's subjective assessment of the level of service offered in relation to their expectations captures perceived quality, a central concept in service marketing, as it influences customer satisfaction, loyalty and further consumer behavior. Researchers consider perceived quality as the difference between customer expectations and the actual perception of the service received. Kotler & Keller (2022) state that perceived service quality is a key determinant of customer loyalty and long-term organizational success. Perceived quality can serve as a competitive advantage in service-based industries. For example, in tourism services, research shows that dimensions such as safety, cleanliness, and compliance with health measures, especially in the post-pandemic period, are critical factors for perceived quality (Luo & Li, 2024). In addition, perceived quality influences service reuse intentions and customer loyalty, highlighting the close relationship between quality, satisfaction, and customer behavior (Abdou et al., 2022). On the other hand Ladhari (2009) showed that perceived quality is determined by cultural, personal factors and the specific context of the interaction, which makes measuring service quality more complex.

Poor service quality management can lead to a number of negative consequences, caused by mismatches between customer expectations and the perceived reality of the service provider. This results in low customer satisfaction, loss of customers, poor reputation of the service, negative impact on employees and even high costs to remedy these image problems. The possible causes of these discrepancies between consumer expectations and actual perceptions may result from a lack of understanding of customer needs, poor communication, lack of transparency and lack of feedback.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

One of the most important dimensions of the quality of public services, and at the same time a key indicator in its measurement, is the level of satisfaction of the beneficiaries (customers) of the services. For this reason, the purpose of this research is to identify the extent to which citizens' behavior influences their perception of the quality of public services provided within a local public administration institution in Romania. In this sense, the study aims to analyze the difference between the expectations and perceptions of citizens regarding the quality of public services provided by the Public Domain Administration District 2 (ADP2).

Research questions:

Q 1: What are the main factors that influence the perception of beneficiaries regarding the quality of public services provided by the Public Domain Administration District 2?

Q 2: Are there any significant differences between the quality expected and the quality perceived by the beneficiary regarding the services provided by ADP District 2?

Q 3: Can the behavior typology of the public service beneficiaries influence their perception of the quality of public services? What about their satisfaction level?

3.1. Sample

In order to respond to the research purpose, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to citizens who benefit from the Public Domain Administration District 2's services. The total population of District 2 is 291,557 inhabitants (Population, 2022). The sampling method was one of convenience.

The questionnaire was distributed in the online environment through Facebook and WhatsApp groups of which the citizens of Bucharest District 2 belong. The respondents are residents of District 2, who are familiar with the services provided by the Public Domain Administration District 2 and have benefited from them. The link for completing the questionnaire was available online for a period of approximately three weeks, between August 9 and 31, 2024. Of the total responses received, only 317 were validated, processed, analyzed and interpreted.

In Table 1 it can be seen the socio-demographic distribution of the respondents who willingly participated in this study. It can be noted that a little over half (55.6%) of them are female (175), 43.6% male, scoring a total of 139 participants, and only 0.8% of the respondents did not declare their gender, respectively 3 people. Regarding the age range, we note that the majority are the 25-30 age groups with a percentage of 38.2% (121 people); 31-40 years old, with a percentage of 28.7% (91 people); 18-24 years, with a percentage of 15.8% (50 people) and 41-50 years, with a percentage of 13.9% (44 people). The age groups with the fewest respondents are the groups 51-60 years with 2.5% (8 people) and over 60 with only 3 respondents.

Regarding the respondents' occupation, six categories are presented. The majority category is that of employees in the private sector - 50.8% (161 people), followed by the category of student 15.5% (49 people), the category of unemployed with a percentage of 14.7% (47 people), the category of civil servants or contractual staff from a public institution 11.7% (37 people) and the last categories, pensioners 1.6% (5 people) and other occupations with 5.7% (18 people).

3.2. The instrument

The present study used as a research tool a questionnaire structured in three main sections. In the first part of the questionnaire, the SERVQUAL method developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) was used to assess service quality, more specifically the difference between respondents' expectations and perceptions in relation to the quality of services provided by ADP2. The SERVQUAL model helps to determine the relative impact of dimensions such as: tangibility (Hoque et al., 2023), reliability (Ong et al., 2023), responsibility (Alemu, 2023), trust (assurance, credibility) (Sangpikul, 2023) and empathy (Ammar & Saleh, 2023), on the perception of beneficiaries (Yaşar & Özdemir, 2022). The second part of the questionnaire includes items that contributed to

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the identification of the dominant type of behavior among the beneficiaries of public services (Hoyer, MacInnis & Pieters, 2013; Burbulea & Dombrowschi, 2021), as well as their level of satisfaction (Kurniasih et al., 2023; Butkus et al. 2023), and the third part includes questions specific to the respondent's profile. The items were rated using the Likert scale, where 1 meant strongly disagreement and 5 meant strongly agreement.

TABLE 1 - THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Item	Categories	Percent
Gender	Feminine	55,6%
	Masculine	43,6%
	Not reported	0,8%
Age	18 – 24 years	15,8%
	25 – 30 years	38,2%
	31 – 40 years	28,7%
	41 – 50 years	13,9%
	51 – 60 years	2,5%
	over 60 years	1,2%
Education	Highschool and post-secondary education	34,7%
	Bachelor degree	46,1%
	Master degree	18,3%
	PhD and post-university	0,9%
The main occupation	Employee in private sector	50,8%
	Employee in public sector	11,7%
	Unemployed	14,7%
	Student	15,5%
	Pensioner	1,6%
	Others	5,7%
The origin's environment	Urban – District 2	99,8%
	Other districts	0
	Not reported	0,2%

Source: Authors results, 2024

The assessment of service quality is determined by calculating the difference between customer perceptions and expectations, according to the formula $SQ = P - E$. (SQ is the overall quality of services, P is the perception of the quality of services provided and E is the expected quality of services). SERVQUAL is a standardized quantitative method specifically designed to measure users' opinions about service quality, thereby allowing comparison between users' expectations and perceptions of a given service. It consists of a number of predefined questions divided into two categories that refer to users' expectations of the service and their opinions on different aspects of the service. The questions applied to each type of service allow for the separate measurement of perceived quality and expectations for the five dimensions that the authors consider essential for assessing service quality. The dimensions are: tangibles (the physical appearance of facilities, equipment and personnel), reliability (the ability to reliably and accurately deliver promised services), responsiveness (the aspiration to help customers and provide them with prompt service), reinsurance skills (assurance, competence) and personal support provided to beneficiaries (empathy). Beyond specific or tangible factors, reported factors include communication, security, competence, friendliness, ability to understand customer needs, as well as the possibility of quick and easy access to public service.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Figure 1 illustrates the main factors that characterize the tangible aspects of the Public Domain Administration District 2, such as: progress regarding the digitization of the institution; the internal environment of the institution; attractiveness of the institution's image; accessibility of travel to the institution's headquarters; the clarity and accessibility of the information on the institution's website; the use of high-performance technological equipment. This provides a general picture of respondents' expectations regarding various tangible aspects of the institution.

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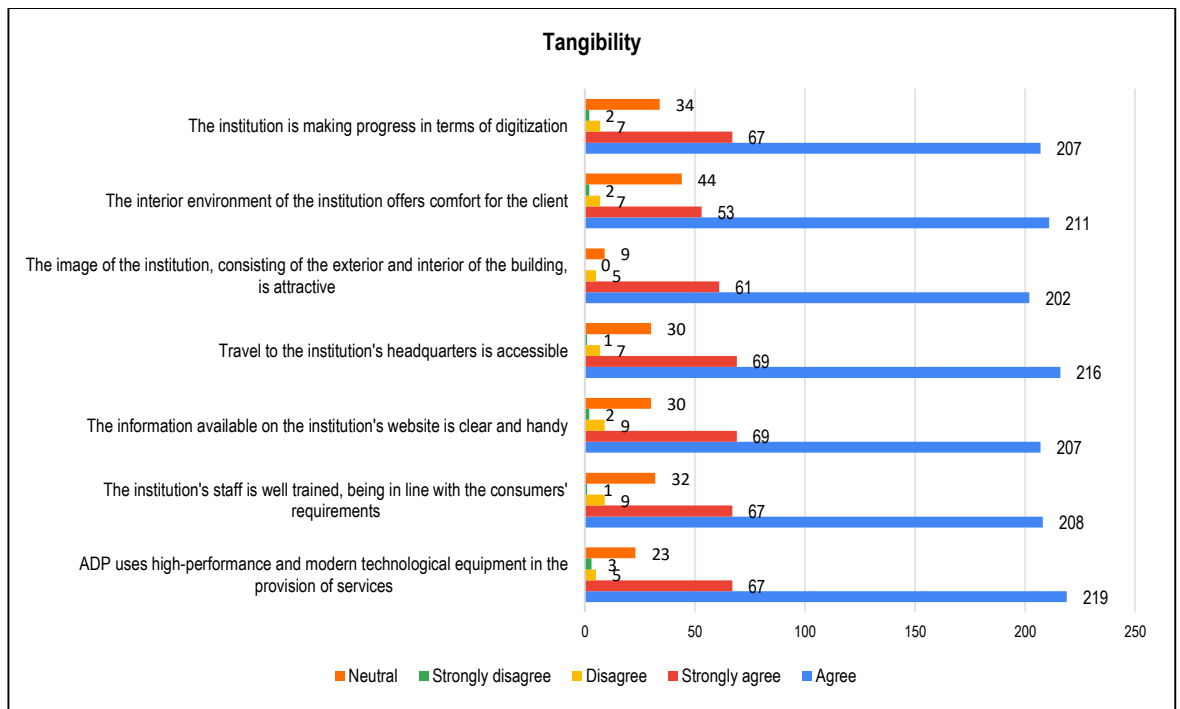


FIGURE 1 - RESPONDENTS' TANGIBILITY EXPECTATIONS REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

Thus it can be seen that the majority of respondents want ADP2 employees to use high-performance and modern technological equipment in the provision of services (67 – strongly agree; 219 – agree), like the institution's headquarters to be accessible (69 – strongly agree; 216 – agree), the interior environment of the institution to offer comfort for the client (53 – strongly agree; 211 – agree), or like the institution's staff to be well trained and to meet the consumers' requirements (67 – strongly agree; 208 – agree).

The second dimension that contributes to the measurement of quality is the reliability of services (Figure 2), which implies that the institution has the managerial and administrative capacity to provide the service correctly, safely and always at the promised performance level. Respondents have high expectations and most of them strongly agree or agree regarding the factors that can contribute to a high level of reliability of the public service. The respondents wish to be satisfied with the way in which the services provided contribute to increasing the quality of life, with the work schedule with the public, with the correctness of the documents issued, with the affordable price of the services and that the services are consistent and in line with the ADP 2 objectives and purposes.

In Figure 3, the responsiveness rating scale indicates that respondents have high expectations regarding promptness in solving their requests and meeting deadlines. It is also desired that the interaction with the institution's staff to be positive, characterized by respect, kindness and support. The link between the beneficiary and the institution must be achieved through a functional, clear communication and dialogue supported by relevant information.

Figure 4 illustrates that respondents want to have a high degree of trust in the services provided by ADP 2. The beneficiaries' loyalty, the data's security and the safety provided by the services are intended to be consistent with the respondents' expectations, which will lead to a good reputation of the institution due to the quality of the provided services.

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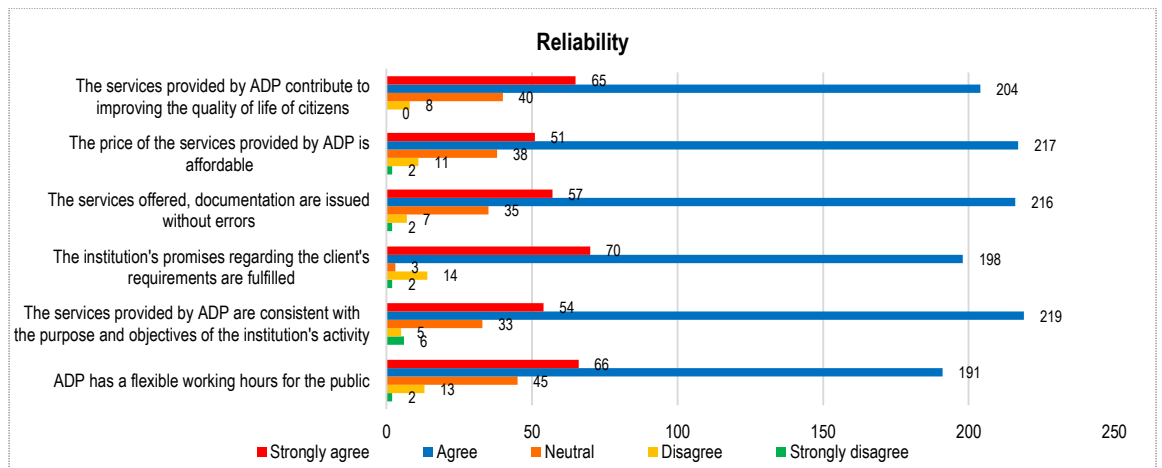


FIGURE 2 - RESPONDENTS' RELIABILITY EXPECTATIONS REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

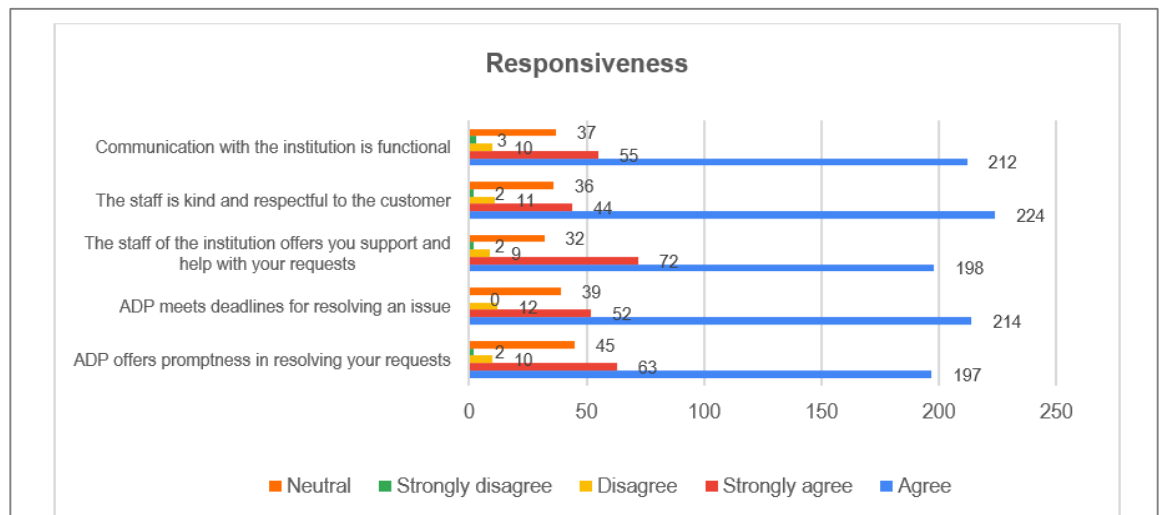


FIGURE 3 - RESPONDENTS' RESPONSIVENESS EXPECTATIONS REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

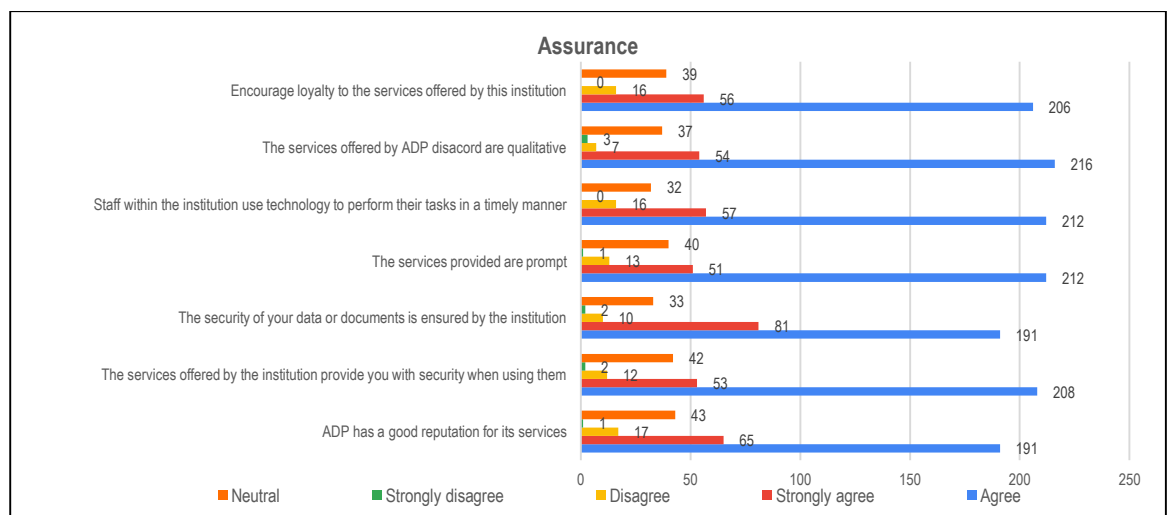


FIGURE 4 - RESPONDENTS' ASSURANCE EXPECTATIONS REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

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According to Figure 5, empathy results from the institution's actions in relation to the beneficiaries. Respondents want the institution to ask for feedback, solve problems, pay attention to them, and be treated with compassion and individual attention. In the figure below, it can be seen that the respondents do not fully understand the aspects related to an empathetic relationship between the provider and the beneficiary, many of them remaining neutral in specifying the expectations specific to the factors of this dimension.

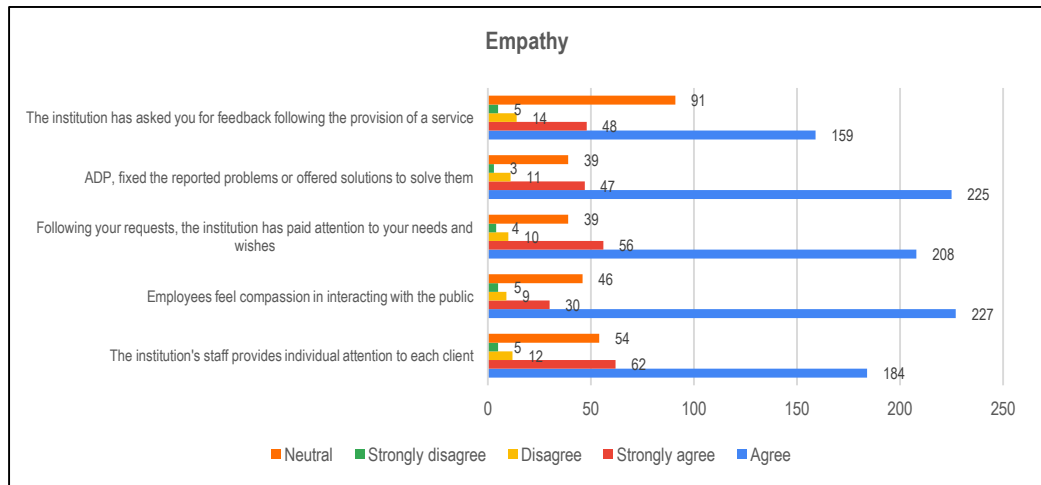


FIGURE 5 - RESPONDENTS' EMPATHY EXPECTATIONS REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

Next, we evaluated the beneficiaries' perception of the current state of public services provided by ADP2. As in the previous section, the dimensions targeted were: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. If in the previous section, the dimensions and the component factors were appreciated as playing a predominantly positive role in the provision of a qualitative public service, in the following a notable difference can be observed, the perception of the beneficiaries being visibly different from their expectations. The respondents' neutral position is dominant, followed by disagreement and agreement, which shows that the institution does not fully meet their expectations. Evaluating the perception of the respondents, it is observed that the majority do not have a clear perception regarding the use of technological equipment by ADP2 (150 respondents are neutral), nor regarding the training of the institution's staff (157). This may indicate either a lack of information on this aspect, or a lack of relevant personal experience.

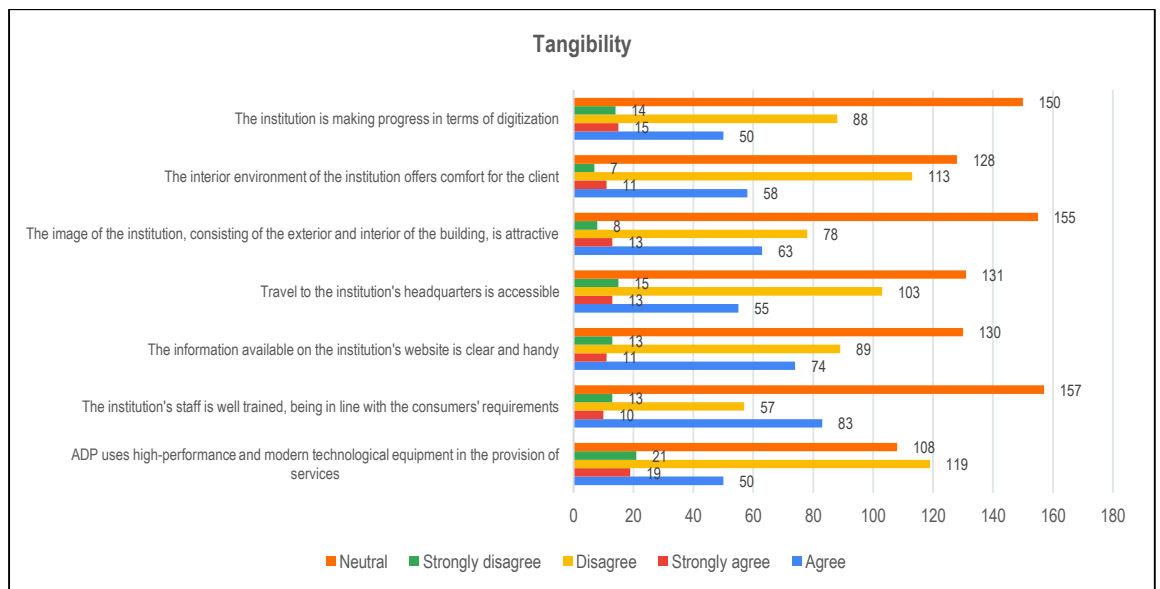


FIGURE 6 - RESPONDENTS' TANGIBILITY PERCEPTION REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

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Reliability, as it follows from Figure 7, is evaluated as neutral with respect to all the factors that characterize it and determine the quality of services provided by ADP 2. The factors that stand out are the price perceived as relatively high (152 – neutral, 71 – disagree), the services provided by ADP2 do not contribute to improving the quality of life (152 – neutral, 69 – disagree), and the work schedule with the public is not considered by the respondents to be flexible (106 - disagree, 115 - neutral).

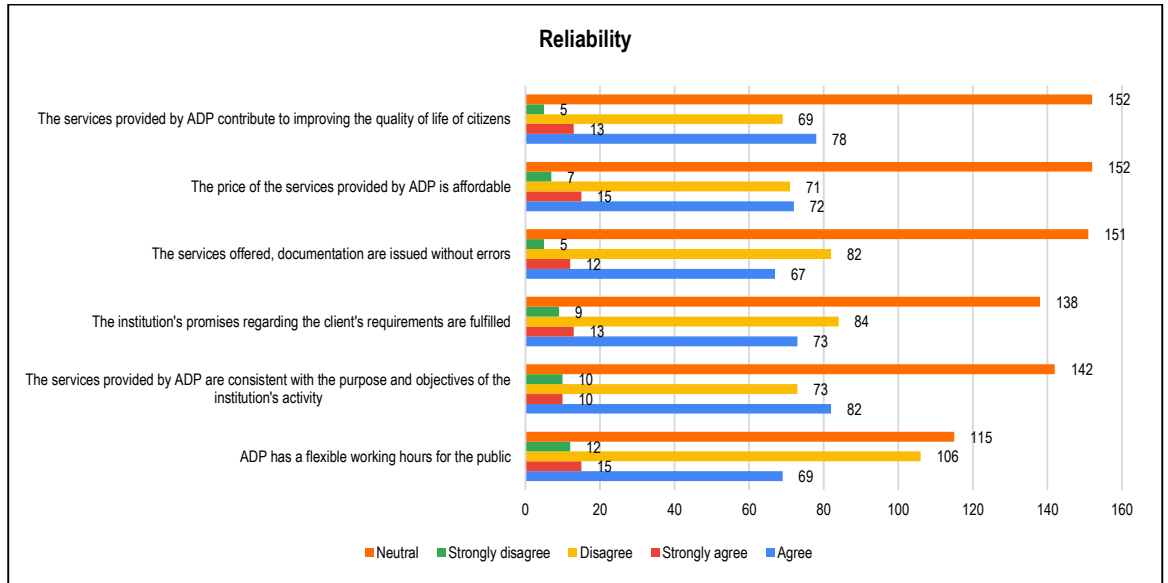


FIGURE 7 - RESPONDENTS' RELIABILITY PERCEPTION REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

The respondents' perception of the main composing factors like responsiveness (Figure 8), assurance (Figure 9) and empathy (Figure 10) towards the public services provided by ADP2 maintains the same trend, the majority being neutral or disagreeing in regard to the quality generated by the attitude of the staff towards the beneficiaries, compliance with the communicated deadlines and the use of technologies by employees in order to resolve requests.

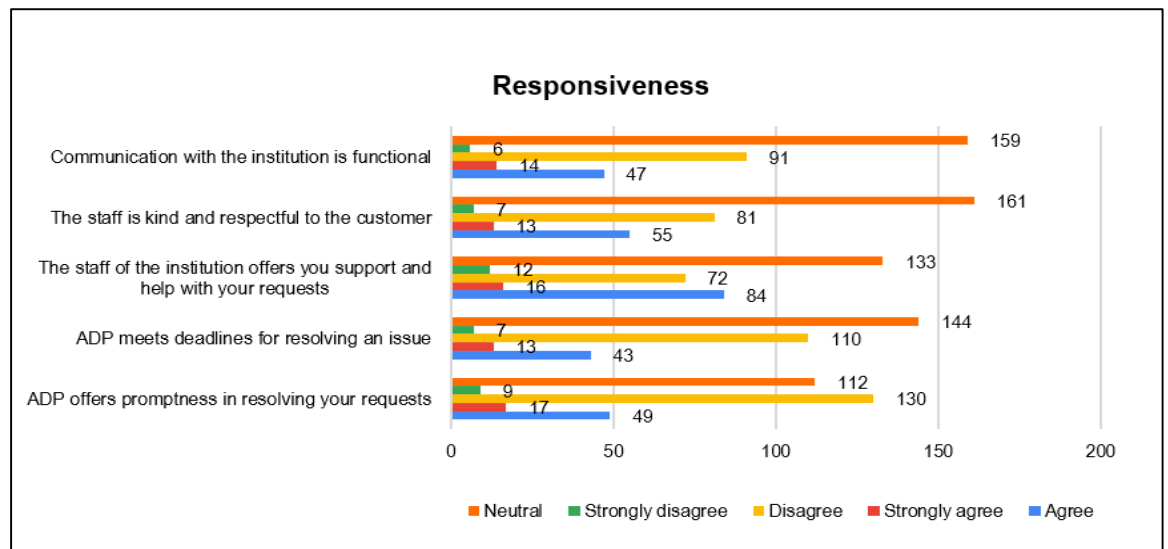


FIGURE 8 - RESPONDENTS' RESPONSIVENESS PERCEPTION REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

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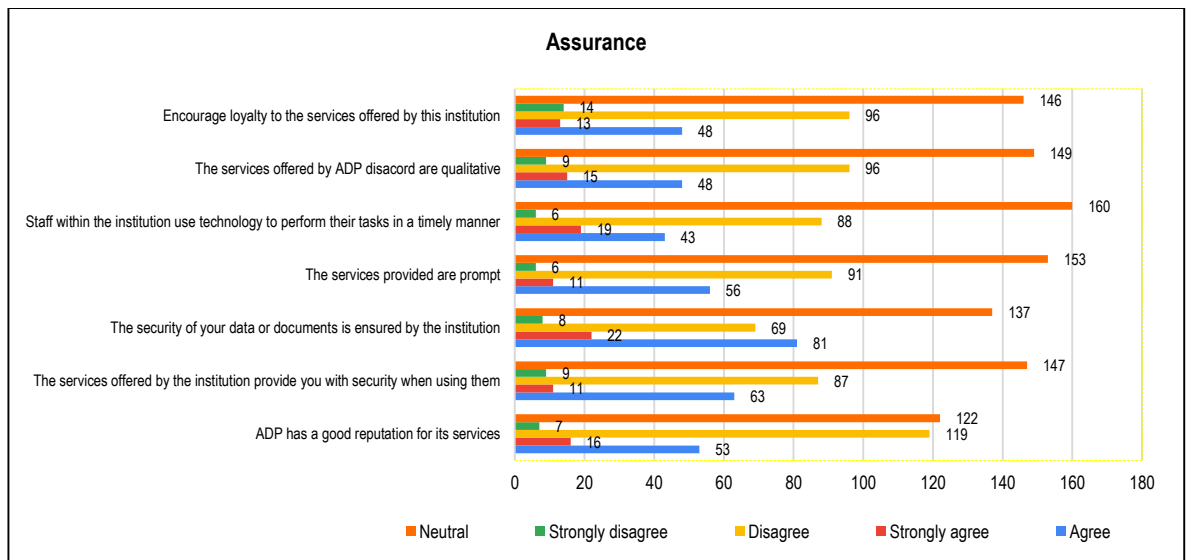


FIGURE 9 - RESPONDENTS' ASSURANCE PERCEPTION REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

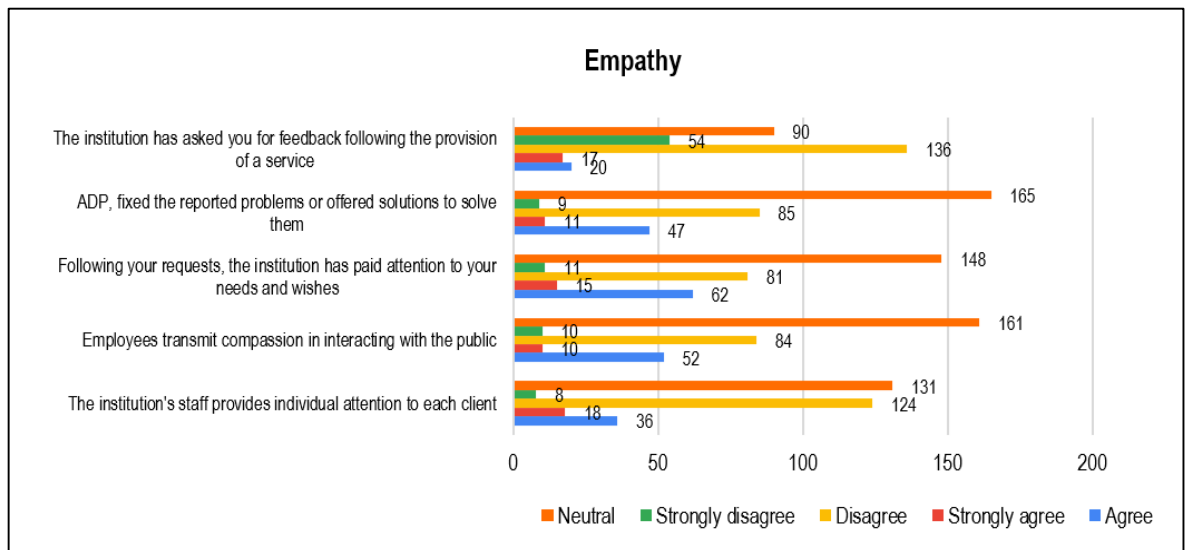


FIGURE 10 - RESPONDENTS' EMPATHY PERCEPTION REGARDING ADP2 QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

Out of a total of 317 respondents, 80% continue to use the public services provided by ADP2, being loyal and satisfied with their quality standards. However, as we see in Figure 11, there are also respondents who state that they will give up using these services because the quality standards do not meet their needs (8%), and 12% are undecided.

Figure 12 shows the types of behavior, and complex behavior was the most frequent type of behavior, with 40% of respondents choosing it (127 people, out of 317 respondents). Dissonance-reducing behaviors ranked second (63 respondents), followed by habitual, normal behaviors (52 respondents). Variety-seeking behavior (13.5%) and impulsive behavior (6.9%) had the lowest percentages among the participants. Analytical behavior was the least common type of behavior, accounting for only 3.1% of participants. This chart shows that the majority of participants (80%) exhibit purchasing behaviors that involve deeper analysis and informed decision making. The remaining 20% exhibit impulsive or variety-oriented behaviors. The complex behavior chosen by the beneficiaries of the public services provided by ADP2 answers the research question no. 3 "Q 3: Can the behavior typology of the public service beneficiaries influence their perception of the quality of public services?"

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What about their satisfaction level?". The specific characteristics of this type of behavior show that respondents inform themselves, collect relevant information from authorized sources, discuss with specialists in the field and adopt decisions based on the results of a documented analysis. Thus, it can be observed the high influence of this type of behavior in relation to the perception of the services' quality provided by ADP2. Beneficiaries' habits of seeking information and discussing with experts in the field lead to high expectations on their part, and to a predominantly negative perception regarding the quality of services, which implicitly leads to a low level of their satisfaction.

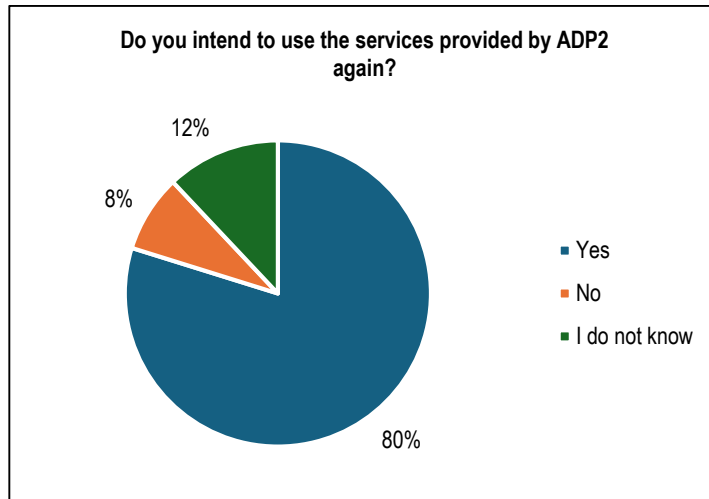


FIGURE 11 - RESPONDENTS' LOIALITY ON USING ADP2 PUBLIC SERVICES
Source: Authors results, 2024

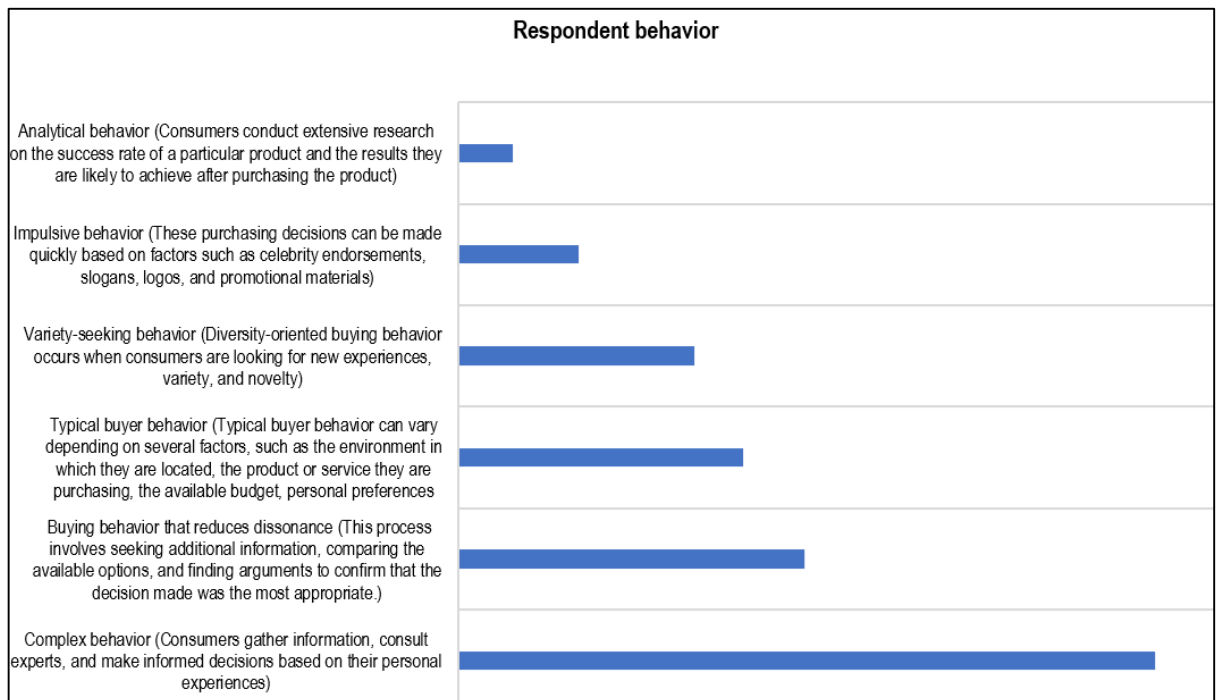


FIGURE 12 - RESPONDENTS' TYPE OF BEHAVIOR
Source: Authors results, 2024

The results presented above give us an answer to the research question "Q 1: What are the main factors that influence the perception of beneficiaries regarding the quality of public services offered by the Public Domain Administration District 2?". Thus, within each dimension that measures the quality of public services, several

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factors stand out, which in the opinion of the respondents play a more important role than the others. Tangibility has as the main factors that influence it the use by employees of modern and high-performance technical equipment in the provision of quality services (67 – strongly agree; 219 – agree), the accessibility of the institution's premises (69 – strongly agree; 216 – agree), as well as and the level of staff training (67 – strongly agree; 208 – agree). Reliability has as the main factors that influence it: the services provided by ADP2 are consistent with the purpose and the objectives of the organization (54 – strongly agree; 219 – agree); and the documents are issued without errors (57 – strongly agree; 216 – agree). The main factors that influence the responsiveness of the respondents are: the staff is kind and respectful to the customer (44 – strongly agree; 224 – agree) and ADP2 meets deadlines for resolving an issue (52 – strongly agree; 214 – agree). The assurance (trust) of the respondents is mainly influenced by factors such as: the services offered by ADP2 are qualitative (54 – strongly agree; 216 – agree); services provided are prompt (51 – strongly agree; 212 – agree) and staff within the institution use technology to perform their tasks in a timely manner (57 – strongly agree; 212 – agree). The last dimension, that of empathy, is obviously influenced by two important factors: employees should feel compassion when interacting with the public (30 – strongly agree; 227 – agree) and ADP2 should fix the reported problems or offer solution to solve them (44 - strongly agree; 225 - agree).

TABLE 2 - DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EXPECTED AND PERCEIVED PUBLIC SERVICES

Dimension	Item	Citizens' expectations		Citizens' perceptions		Gap
		Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.	
Tangibility	T1	4,08	0,65	2,77	0,99	-1,31
	T2	4,04	0,67	3,06	0,85	-0,98
	T3	4,05	0,69	2,94	0,90	-1,11
	T4	4,05	0,64	2,84	0,91	-1,21
	T5	4,01	0,64	2,98	0,84	-1,02
	T6	3,97	0,67	2,85	0,86	-1,11
	T7	4,04	0,68	2,89	0,89	-1,15
Reliability	Ry1	3,97	0,76	2,90	0,94	-1,06
	Ry 2	3,98	0,71	3,03	0,86	-0,95
	Ry 3	4,01	0,75	2,99	0,88	-1,02
	Ry 4	4,01	0,66	3,00	0,83	-1,01
	Ry 5	3,97	0,65	3,05	0,85	-0,92
	Ry 6	4,03	3,08	3,08	0,83	-0,95
Responsiveness	R1	3,97	0,72	2,79	0,92	-1,18
	R2	3,97	0,66	2,83	0,84	-1,14
	R3	4,04	0,71	3,06	0,92	-0,97
	R4	3,94	0,67	2,96	0,83	-0,98
	R5	3,97	0,71	2,91	0,83	-1,05
Assurance	A1	3,95	0,76	2,85	0,90	-1,10
	A2	3,94	0,71	2,94	0,85	-1,00
	A3	4,07	0,73	3,13	0,92	-0,94
	A4	3,94	0,69	2,92	0,82	-1,02
	A5	3,98	0,70	2,94	0,85	-1,03
	A6	3,98	0,68	2,89	0,86	-1,09
	A7	3,95	0,71	2,84	0,88	-1,11
Empathy	E1	3,90	0,81	2,79	0,89	-1,12
	E2	3,85	0,69	2,90	0,82	-0,95
	E3	3,95	0,73	2,97	0,88	-0,99
	E4	3,95	0,69	2,89	0,81	-1,06
	E5	3,73	0,83	2,40	1,02	-1,33

Source: Authors results, 2024

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The differences between the respondents' expectations and perceptions presented in the figures above answer the research question "Q 2: Are there any significant differences between the quality expected and the quality perceived by the beneficiary regarding the services provided by ADP District 2?".

The mean of the presented perception data was 2.91, indicating that participants rated their service perceptions below the average expectations (Table 2). The three most important items of the perception questionnaire were: A3: "The security of your data or documents is ensured by the institution" (mean= 3.13), Ry 6: "The services offered by ADP 2 contribute to improving the quality of citizens' life" (average = 3.08) and R3 "The staff within the institution offers you support and help with your requests" (average = 3.06).

The mean of the expected data was 3.98. In the top results regarding expectations were T1: "ADP 2 uses high-performance and modern technological equipment in the provision of services" (average 4.08), A3: "The security of your data or documents is ensured by the institution" (average 4.07), T4: "Traveling to the institution's headquarters is accessible" (mean 4.05). The biggest difference between expectations and perception was in E5 "The institution asked you for feedback following the provision of a service", where there was a difference of -1.33. It can be seen that the differences are negative for all factors from all dimensions that evaluate the respondents' expectations and perceptions regarding the quality of the public service.

The negative value recorded by the Public Domain Administration District 2 (p-value for R2 is - 0.02, which indicates a statistically significant difference), is due to the fact that it did not meet the expectations of customers, because the institution does not meet the deadlines for solving the customers problems. This value indicates a significant difference between the two dimensions regarding expectations and perceptions.

A significant difference is found between the expectations and the actual perceptions of the respondents, all gaps being negative. Some differences are statistically significant (eg T7, Ry3, R2), suggesting that there are specific aspects that need improvement. The biggest discrepancies are observed in the items of the category Empathy (especially E5) and Tangibility (T1).

Tangibility (T1-T7). The disparity varies from -1.31 (T1) to -1.02 (T5), signifying that present perceptions fall short of expectations for all items within this category. The P-value signifies the statistical significance of the disparity. Values below 0.05 signify a statistically significant disparity. In this instance, items T3 (p = 0.05) and T7 (p = 0.01) exhibit statistically significant gaps between expectations and perceptions.

Reliability (Ry1-Ry6). The gap varies from -1.06 (Ry1) to - 0.95 (Ry6), signifying that perceptions fall short of expectations. Item Ry3 (p = 0.05) demonstrates a statistically significant disparity.

Responsiveness (R1-R5). The disparity spans from -1.18 (R1) to -0.98 (R4), signifying a divergence between expectations and perceptions. The P-value for R2 (-0.02) signifies a statistically significant difference.

Assurance (A1-A7). The variation spans from -1.10 (A1) to - 0.94 (A3), signifying perceptions that fall short of expectations. All items have p-values beyond 0.05, indicating the absence of statistically significant differences for this dimension.

Empathy (E1-E5). The discrepancy, which varies from -1.33 (E5) to - 0.95 (E2), is another indication that perceptions are lower than expectations. For every single item, the p-value is less than 0.05, which indicates that there are no statistically significant differences.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Comprehending consumer behaviour, especially that of public service users, can enhance service quality by identifying key factors that encourage citizen engagement in addressing community issues. The influence of the beneficiaries' behavior on the quality of public services should be analyzed in detail, so that public institutions can be more responsive to the needs and preferences of citizens in order to meet their expectations and improve the quality of the provided services. The case study conducted within the Public Domain Administration District 2 illustrates that the selection of a service is influenced by its utility and accessibility in the relevant region.

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Consumer behavior has a significant impact on the quality of public services provided by the Public Domain Administration District 2. Consumers influence the quality of a service through the choice they make, through feedback and the way they interact with the providers of those services. When choosing a service, the consumer balances the tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and trust. Hence, the provider institution must pay attention to the desires and needs of people to fulfil requirements and deliver the wanted quality, since the study of expectations and perceptions indicates a low degree of satisfaction in this instance.

Among the specific elements of quality, we mention communication and transparency as essential elements, which contribute to building a relationship of trust between the institution and the citizens. In order to ensure the continuity of service delivery, the institution needs field surveys, feedback to adapt to the current demands of citizens and to meet their needs in an efficient way, consistent with the asking price. The digitization and technologization of the institution, of most of the activities carried out, are essential variables of the service's quality. This contributes to the activities' efficiency, as well as to the reduction of the time for resolving requests.

In conclusion, the analysis of the results showed that consumers' expectations are higher than their perception of quality expectations, which indicates a lower quality of services provided by ADP 2. It is therefore important that public administration invests in research and understanding consumer behaviour, collects and analyzes their feedback and implements changes that reflect these needs and preferences. In this way, a continuous improvement in the quality of public services will be ensured, which will lead to an increase in the trust and satisfaction of citizens.

This research emphasizes the relevance of analyzing the influence of consumer behavior on the quality of public services, showing that a high quality of these services has a direct impact on citizen satisfaction. In addition, the consistent provision of high-quality services strengthens citizens' loyalty to public institutions and increases their willingness to support them and trust in their performance. The research findings unequivocally indicate that enhancing the quality of public services positively influences citizen well-being and loyalty, while substantially augmenting trust in the public sector.

There are some limitations of our research, including the small sample size of respondents and the fact that the study was conducted within a single institution, namely at the level of one territorial administrative unit. We propose to modify the dimensions and items of the SERVQUAL model to align with the characteristics of public services, enabling the objective identification and measurement of stakeholder perceptions while minimising their neutrality in option selection.

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