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A Comparative Analysis of Service Quality Gaps and Citizen Expectations: Evidence from Different Municipal Districts of Gilan Province

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Abstract

The pursuit of excellence in urban governance necessitates a rigorous evaluation of service delivery mechanisms within local government frameworks. This study investigates the multidimensional nature of service quality gaps across diverse municipal districts in Gilan Province, Northern Iran, utilizing an adapted SERVQUAL methodology. By analyzing the discrepancy between citizen expectations and their perceptions of actual performance, the research identifies critical areas requiring strategic intervention. Data were collected in 2025 through a structured questionnaire administered to a stratified sample of 1,200 residents across various districts characterized by differing socio-economic profiles. The findings reveal significant disparities in service quality dimensions—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—indicating that geographical and administrative factors heavily influence citizen satisfaction. Specifically, districts with higher population density and aging infrastructure exhibit wider quality gaps, whereas newly developed administrative zones show higher levels of perceived efficiency despite rising expectations. This paper provides a comprehensive theoretical and empirical framework for municipal authorities to optimize resource allocation and enhance public trust through evidence-based policy adjustments.

Keywords: *Service Quality Gap, Municipal Governance, SERVQUAL, Citizen Expectations, Gilan Province, Urban Management.*

I. Introduction

The conceptualization of urban governance in the twenty-first century has shifted fundamentally from a traditional bureaucratic model toward a service-oriented paradigm that prioritizes citizen satisfaction and administrative transparency. In the context of Gilan Province, a region characterized by a unique intersection of rapid urbanization, ecological sensitivity, and a robust tourism economy, the performance of municipal institutions is under

increasing scrutiny. The core of this scrutiny lies in the perceived quality of services, which acts as the primary interface between the state and the citizenry. Service quality in the public sector is not merely a measure of technical efficiency but a reflection of the social contract, where the fulfillment of citizen expectations fosters institutional legitimacy and social cohesion. However, the heterogeneous nature of municipal districts within Gilan—ranging from densely populated urban cores with historical infrastructure to newly developed administrative zones—presents a complex challenge for standardized service delivery. This diversity often results in significant "service quality gaps," where the resources provided by the municipality do not align with the specific needs or expectations of the local population.

Theoretical frameworks for evaluating these disparities often rely on the gap analysis model, which posits that satisfaction is a function of the difference between what a citizen expects to receive and what they perceive they have actually received. In Gilan, these expectations are shaped by a variety of factors, including socio-economic status, digital literacy, and the historical performance of local government units. For instance, residents in more affluent or modern districts may have higher expectations regarding digital municipal services and environmental aesthetics, while those in marginalized or older districts might prioritize basic infrastructure, waste management, and reliability. When the perceived performance falls short of these baseline expectations, a quality gap emerges, leading to decreased public trust and potential civic friction. This research seeks to provide a comprehensive, comparative analysis of these gaps by examining multiple municipal districts across the province using data collected during the 2025 fiscal year.

The significance of this study is underscored by the current transitions in Iranian local governance, which increasingly demand evidence-based decision-making. By identifying which dimensions of service quality—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, or empathy—are most deficient in specific geographical contexts, municipal leaders can move beyond "one-size-fits-all" policies. Instead, they can adopt a targeted approach to resource allocation, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the specific grievances of each district. Furthermore, this analysis contributes to the broader academic discourse on public sector management in developing economies by providing a localized empirical application of the SERVQUAL model within a highly diverse provincial setting. The ultimate objective is to establish a diagnostic roadmap that allows Gilan’s municipal authorities to bridge the expectation-perception divide, thereby enhancing the overall quality of urban life.

The research is structured to first explore the theoretical foundations of service quality before transitioning into a rigorous methodological explanation of the 2025 survey data. Subsequent sections will detail the empirical findings, highlighting the statistical significance of the gaps identified across the studied districts. By integrating these findings with contemporary urban management theories, the paper concludes with a series of strategic recommendations designed to harmonize municipal performance with the evolving needs of the citizenry in Gilan Province.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The evolution of service quality theory represents a significant shift from traditional manufacturing-based metrics of "zero defects" to a more nuanced, perception-based approach characteristic of the modern service economy. Early conceptualizations of service quality, primarily rooted in the Nordic school of thought led by Christian Grönroos in the early 1980s, introduced the distinction between technical quality—what the customer actually receives—and functional quality—how the service is delivered. Grönroos argued that the consumer's perception of quality is a result of a comparison between the expected service and the perceived service, a foundational concept that shifted the focus toward the psychological state of the user. This "disconfirmation paradigm" became the bedrock for almost all subsequent service quality research. In the context of municipal governance in Gilan Province, this means that providing a service, such as waste collection or urban landscaping, is only one half of the equation; the manner in which municipal staff interact with citizens and the reliability of those interactions form the functional basis upon which the institution is ultimately judged.

Building upon this foundation, the North American school, led by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, developed the Gap Model of Service Quality, which later culminated in the SERVQUAL instrument. This model identifies five specific discrepancies, or "gaps," that can lead to poor service quality: the knowledge gap (management not knowing what citizens expect), the standards gap (wrong service-quality standards), the delivery gap (service performance not meeting standards), the communication gap (promises not matching delivery), and finally, the service gap (the difference between citizen expectations and perceptions). This fifth gap is the primary focus of this research, as it represents the cumulative effect of the previous four. Within the municipal districts of Gilan, these gaps are often exacerbated by bureaucratic silos and a historical lack of real-time feedback mechanisms. By applying the SERVQUAL dimensions—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—

researchers can systematically decompose the abstract notion of "good governance" into measurable, actionable data points.

The transition of these models from the private sector to public administration has not been without academic debate. Critics argue that "citizens" are not merely "customers" because they often have no choice in service provider and are co-producers of public value. However, contemporary public management theory suggests that adopting a service-quality lens is essential for modernizing local government. In Gilan, where the 2025 socio-economic climate demands higher efficiency from limited provincial budgets, the application of SERVQUAL allows for a sophisticated analysis of how different demographic groups perceive the state. For instance, the "tangibles" dimension—encompassing the appearance of municipal offices, the state of public parks, and the condition of road infrastructure—often serves as the most immediate cue for quality in urban districts. Yet, as this study will explore, "reliability" and "responsiveness" often hold greater weight in determining long-term civic satisfaction and political trust.

The theoretical framework for this study also incorporates the "Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory" (EDT), which provides a psychological explanation for why citizens in different districts of Gilan might report varying levels of satisfaction even when receiving identical service levels. EDT suggests that satisfaction is a relative state; a resident in a rural-urban fringe district may have lower baseline expectations and thus feel "satisfied" with basic road grading, whereas a resident in a high-density administrative center in Rasht or Lahijan may have elevated expectations regarding digital permit processing and rapid response to utility failures. This comparative analysis is vital because it acknowledges that the "quality gap" is a moving target, influenced by the rising digital literacy and globalized expectations of the 2025 Iranian citizenry. Consequently, the literature suggests that municipal performance must be evaluated not in a vacuum, but against the evolving socio-technical landscape of the province.

The empirical application of service quality models in the public sector has seen a surge in scholarly attention, particularly within the Middle Eastern administrative context. Previous studies conducted in various Iranian provinces have consistently highlighted that the "Reliability" and "Responsiveness" dimensions often carry the highest weight in determining overall citizen satisfaction. In the specific context of Gilan Province, the socio-economic landscape of 2025 presents a unique set of variables that influence these dimensions. Gilan is characterized by a high population density, a significant transition toward a service-based

economy, and a sophisticated citizenry with high levels of educational attainment. Consequently, the "Knowledge Gap"—the discrepancy between what municipal managers believe citizens want and what citizens actually expect—has become a focal point of recent administrative critiques. Empirical evidence suggests that as urban centers like Rasht, Lahijan, and Bandar Anzali expand, the traditional methods of top-down service delivery are no longer sufficient to meet the nuanced demands of a digitally integrated population.

A critical aspect of the theoretical framework for this study is the "Spatial Heterogeneity of Service Quality." This concept posits that the physical and social geography of a municipal district directly impacts the efficiency of service delivery and the resulting citizen perceptions. In Gilan, the older, central districts often struggle with "Tangibles" due to aging infrastructure and narrow, historical thoroughfares that complicate modern waste management and traffic control. Conversely, the peripheral or newly developed districts may lack established "Reliability" in public transport or emergency response times. Previous research in similar provincial settings indicates that residents of marginalized districts often report a higher "Empathy" gap, feeling that municipal authorities are less attuned to their specific socio-economic struggles. This research builds upon these findings by specifically examining how the geographical location within Gilan acts as a moderating variable between service inputs and perceived quality outcomes.

Furthermore, the "Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory" (EDT) must be viewed through the lens of modern digital governance. By 2025, the proliferation of smart city initiatives and mobile-based municipal applications in Northern Iran has fundamentally altered the baseline of citizen expectations. When a municipality introduces a digital platform for paying tolls or requesting maintenance, the "Responsiveness" expectation shifts from days to minutes. If the backend administrative processes do not match this front-end digital speed, the resulting "Communication Gap" leads to a sharper decline in perceived quality than if the digital service had never been offered. This study integrates this technological reality into its theoretical foundation, suggesting that service quality in Gilan's districts is now intrinsically linked to the "Technological Readiness" of both the provider and the user.

The synthesized theoretical model for this research therefore combines the classic five dimensions of SERVQUAL with contemporary variables of "Administrative Transparency" and "Digital Accessibility." By doing so, the study moves beyond a static measurement of satisfaction and instead provides a dynamic analysis of the "Public Value" created by municipal actions. This approach aligns with the "New Public Service" (NPS) paradigm, which

emphasizes that the role of the public administrator is to serve and empower citizens rather than merely "steer" them. In the following sections, this framework will be operationalized through the 2025 survey data to identify where the most significant "Service Quality Gaps" exist among the diverse municipal districts of Gilan, providing a data-driven basis for future urban policy interventions.

Building upon the comprehensive review of theoretical models and the empirical evidence discussed in the preceding sections, this study identifies several critical dimensions that define the service quality landscape in Gilan Province. To systematically address the research objectives and evaluate the alignment between municipal outputs and citizen needs in the 2025 context, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- Hypothesis 1 (H_1): There is a statistically significant negative gap between citizen expectations and their perceptions of municipal service quality across all five SERVQUAL dimensions in Gilan Province.
- Hypothesis 2 (H_2): The magnitude of the service quality gap significantly varies between central urban districts and peripheral administrative zones, with central districts exhibiting larger gaps in the responsiveness dimension.
- Hypothesis 3 (H_3): There is a significant positive correlation between the level of digital literacy/engagement of citizens and the height of their service quality expectations in municipal districts.
- Hypothesis 4 (H_4): Among the five dimensions, "Reliability" and "Responsiveness" are the strongest predictors of overall public trust in Gilan's municipal governance framework.

III. Methodology

The methodological framework of this study is grounded in a quantitative, cross-sectional research design aimed at measuring the discrepancy between citizen expectations and perceptions of municipal service quality. Given the geographical and demographic diversity of Gilan Province, a descriptive-analytical approach was adopted to facilitate a comparative evaluation of different municipal districts. The study utilizes the SERVQUAL multidimensional research instrument, which has been rigorously adapted to fit the specific socio-political and administrative context of Iranian local government in 2025. This research design allows for the empirical testing of the "Service Quality Gap" (Gap 5) by quantifying the distance between the desired service level and the actual experienced service level across five primary dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy.

The target population for this research consists of all adult residents (aged 18 and over) residing within the municipal boundaries of selected districts in Gilan Province, including major urban centers such as Rasht, Bandar Anzali, and Lahijan, as well as smaller administrative units. To ensure a representative sample, a stratified random sampling technique was employed. The province was divided into three primary strata based on urbanization levels and economic activity: High-Density Urban Cores (Stratum A), Developing Administrative Zones (Stratum B), and Suburban/Rural-Urban Fringe Districts (Stratum C). A total of 1,200 valid responses were collected during the first two quarters of 2025. This sample size provides a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of approximately 2.8%, ensuring the statistical robustness of the comparative analysis between districts.

Data collection was conducted using a structured, three-part questionnaire. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, education level, and length of residency in the district. The second and third sections consisted of 22 pairs of Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). The first set measured "Expectations" (the level of service citizens believe they should receive), while the second set measured "Perceptions" (the level of service they believe the municipality actually provides). To ensure the instrument's suitability for the 2025 socio-technical landscape, additional items were included regarding digital service accessibility and environmental sustainability efforts. The reliability of the instrument was verified using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of SERVQUAL Dimensions

Dimension	Items	Cronbach's Alpha (E)	Cronbach's Alpha (P)
Tangibles	4	0.84	0.81
Reliability	5	0.89	0.87
Responsiveness	4	0.82	0.80
Assurance	4	0.86	0.85
Empathy	5	0.85	0.83

The validity of the questionnaire was established through a panel of academic experts in Urban Management and Economics, followed by a pilot study of 50 residents to refine the phrasing of technical terms. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 29 and AMOS

for structural equation modeling. Descriptive statistics were used to profile the sample, while paired t-tests were utilized to determine the statistical significance of the gaps between expectations and perceptions. Furthermore, a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the mean gap scores across the different municipal districts, followed by Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests to identify specific regional variances. This rigorous statistical approach ensures that the findings reflect genuine administrative disparities rather than random sampling fluctuations.

The 2025 data collection process also integrated a hybrid distribution model. While 60% of the surveys were administered through face-to-face interviews in public squares and municipal offices to capture a diverse range of age groups, 40% were distributed via a verified municipal mobile application to ensure the inclusion of younger, tech-savvy citizens. This dual approach was critical for capturing the full spectrum of citizen-government interaction in Gilan. Ethics approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and all participants were provided with informed consent forms ensuring anonymity and the voluntary nature of their participation.

IV. Empirical Results and Data Analysis

The analysis of the 2025 survey data provides a comprehensive overview of the service quality landscape across the municipal districts of Gilan Province. The initial stage of the analysis involved a descriptive profiling of the 1,200 respondents to ensure the sample's representativeness. The demographic breakdown indicated a balanced gender distribution (52% male, 48% female) and a significant representation of the workforce, with 64% of respondents aged between 25 and 55. Educational attainment was notably high, with over 41% holding a university degree, reflecting the sophisticated nature of the Gilan citizenry. These demographic factors serve as a backdrop for the varying levels of expectations recorded, as higher education and professional engagement often correlate with more stringent demands for administrative efficiency and transparency.

The core of the empirical findings lies in the calculation of the "Service Quality Gap" for each of the five SERVQUAL dimensions. The gap score is calculated by subtracting the mean expectation score from the mean perception score ($G = P - E$). A negative gap score indicates that expectations exceed perceptions, highlighting a deficiency in service quality. The data reveals that in every single dimension across all surveyed districts, the gap was negative, suggesting a systemic challenge in meeting citizen demands. The "Responsiveness" dimension exhibited the largest overall gap, followed closely by "Reliability," while "Tangibles" showed

the smallest, though still significant, discrepancy. This suggests that while physical infrastructure and the appearance of municipal facilities are relatively well-maintained, the functional and behavioral aspects of service delivery—such as the speed of resolving complaints and the consistency of service—remain the primary sources of dissatisfaction.

Table 2: Mean Scores and Service Quality Gaps by Dimension

Dimension	Expectations (E)	Perceptions (P)	Quality Gap (P-E)	t-value
Tangibles	6.12	5.45	-0.67	-12.45
Reliability	6.48	5.20	-1.28	-18.92
Responsiveness	6.55	5.12	-1.43	-21.10
Assurance	6.30	5.38	-0.92	-15.67
Empathy	6.22	5.15	-1.07	-17.34

Note: *$p < 0.001$; All items measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

To address the comparative objective of the study, a One-Way ANOVA was conducted to identify variations in the total service quality gap across three distinct types of municipal zones: Central Urban Districts (High Density), Peripheral/Newly Developed Districts, and Suburban Administrative Units. The results, summarized in Table 3, indicate statistically significant differences in how these regions experience service quality. Central Urban Districts, despite having more established infrastructure, reported the widest gaps in "Responsiveness" and "Reliability." This can be attributed to the high volume of service requests and the strain on aging systems. Conversely, Peripheral Districts showed smaller gaps in "Tangibles" due to newer construction and modern facilities but struggled with the "Assurance" dimension, as residents felt a lack of established administrative presence and safety.

Table 3: Comparison of Total Quality Gaps across Municipal Zone Types

Municipal Zone Type	Mean Total Gap	Standard Deviation	F-Value	Sig.
Central Urban Districts	-1.24	0.45	8.74	0.002
Peripheral/New Districts	-0.98	0.38	-	-

Municipal Zone Type	Mean Total Gap	Standard Deviation	F-Value	Sig.
Suburban Units	-0.85	0.52	-	-

The analysis further utilized the 2025 digital engagement data to correlate service quality perceptions with the frequency of use of municipal mobile applications. Interestingly, a positive correlation was found between frequent digital users and higher "Expectation" scores, particularly in the "Responsiveness" dimension. This suggests that the digital transformation in Gilan has indeed "raised the bar," making the perceived "Reliability" of traditional, non-digital services appear even lower by comparison. These empirical findings provide a robust foundation for the subsequent discussion, where the socio-economic drivers behind these regional variations will be explored in depth, leading to specific strategic recommendations for the province's urban planners.

V. Discussion

The empirical findings derived from the 2025 survey data elucidate a critical misalignment between the administrative outputs of Gilan's municipalities and the normative expectations of its residents. The presence of negative gap scores across all five SERVQUAL dimensions—Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy—indicates that the "Service Quality Gap" (Gap 5) is a systemic rather than isolated phenomenon. The most pronounced deficiency was observed in the "Responsiveness" dimension (Gap = -1.43), which underscores a pervasive citizen perception that municipal bureaucracies are slow to react to public needs and complaints. This finding is consistent with contemporary studies in Middle Eastern public administration, where traditional, hierarchical structures often struggle to adapt to the agility required by a modern, digitally-connected citizenry. In Gilan, where urban centers are evolving into complex socio-economic hubs, this delay in responsiveness is not merely a logistical failure but a significant barrier to institutional trust.

A more granular analysis of the "Reliability" gap (Gap = -1.28) reveals that inconsistency in service delivery remains a core grievance. In districts like Rasht and Bandar Anzali, residents expressed high expectations for the timely execution of routine services such as waste management and infrastructure maintenance. However, the perception scores suggest that these services are often subject to unpredictable delays. When contrasted with international benchmarks for municipal excellence, where reliability is often the highest-rated dimension

due to standardized protocols, Gilan's performance indicates a need for rigorous process re-engineering. The "Tangibles" dimension, while still reflecting a negative gap (Gap = -0.67), represents the area where municipalities have made the most significant progress. The investment in 2024 and 2025 toward beautifying urban spaces and upgrading municipal buildings has been recognized by the public, yet the empirical data suggests that "aesthetic quality" cannot compensate for "functional inefficiency."

The comparative analysis across different municipal zones reveals a "Spatial Inequality" in service quality that has profound policy implications. Residents in central urban districts reported the widest gaps in "Responsiveness," likely due to the sheer volume of service demands and the complexities of managing high-density populations within aging urban grids. Interestingly, the smaller gaps observed in suburban administrative units do not necessarily indicate superior performance, but rather a lower baseline of expectation among the residents. This "Expectancy-Disconfirmation" effect suggests that as these suburban areas continue to urbanize and as digital literacy spreads, their quality gaps are likely to widen unless proactive administrative measures are taken. Furthermore, the 2025 data highlights that "Digital Accessibility" has become a double-edged sword; it provides a faster interface for citizens to lodge complaints (enhancing expectation), but if the municipal staff cannot process those digital requests with equivalent speed, the resulting perception of "Responsiveness" plummets further.

Finally, the "Empathy" and "Assurance" gaps (Gaps of -1.07 and -0.92, respectively) point toward a human-centric deficit in Gilan's municipal offices. Citizens do not feel that municipal employees fully understand their unique socio-economic challenges, nor do they feel a high degree of confidence in the expertise and courtesy of frontline staff. Bridging these gaps requires a shift from a "rule-based" to a "value-based" administrative culture. Comparing these results to the "New Public Service" (NPS) model, it is evident that Gilan's municipalities are still in transition. To close the service quality gap, the province must move beyond infrastructure-led development and prioritize "human-infrastructure"—the training, motivation, and professionalization of the public workforce. The findings presented here serve as a critical diagnostic tool, suggesting that future resource allocation must prioritize the functional dimensions (Reliability and Responsiveness) over the purely technical or aesthetic ones.

VI. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The comprehensive evaluation of service quality across the municipal districts of Gilan Province in 2025 reveals a critical juncture for urban governance in Northern Iran. This research has empirically demonstrated that while physical infrastructure and municipal "Tangibles" have seen measurable improvement, a significant "Service Quality Gap" persists, particularly in the dimensions of Responsiveness and Reliability. The analysis confirms that citizen expectations are no longer static; they are dynamically influenced by digital transformation, higher educational attainment, and a growing demand for administrative accountability. The persistence of negative gap scores across all dimensions indicates that the current bureaucratic model is struggling to keep pace with the evolving needs of a sophisticated provincial population. Furthermore, the spatial variations identified between central urban cores and peripheral zones suggest that "one-size-fits-all" administrative strategies are increasingly ineffective in addressing the localized grievances of Gilan's residents.

To bridge these gaps and enhance public trust, the following strategic policy recommendations are proposed for municipal authorities in Gilan Province:

- **Implementation of Real-Time Responsive Systems:** Given that "Responsiveness" showed the widest quality gap, municipalities should transition from passive complaint-logging to active, real-time tracking systems. Integrating AI-driven triage within municipal mobile applications can ensure that urgent citizen requests are prioritized and assigned to the relevant department with automated deadlines, thereby reducing the "Delivery Gap."
- **Standardization of Service Reliability Protocols:** To address the inconsistency in service delivery, local governments must adopt International Organization for Standardization (ISO) frameworks tailored for public services. Establishing "Service Level Agreements" (SLAs) for routine tasks—such as waste collection, street lighting repairs, and permit processing—will provide a predictable baseline for citizens and a performance metric for staff.
- **Human Capital Development and Empathy Training:** The significant gaps in "Empathy" and "Assurance" suggest a need for a cultural shift within the municipal workforce. Professional development programs should focus on "Soft Skills" training, conflict resolution, and citizen-centric communication. Moving toward a "New Public Service" model requires employees to view citizens as partners in urban development rather than mere recipients of administrative orders.

- **District-Specific Resource Allocation:** Urban planners must move toward a decentralized resource model that accounts for the "Spatial Heterogeneity" identified in this study. Central districts require heavy investment in "Process Efficiency" to handle high volumes, while peripheral and suburban zones require "Tangibility" investments and an increased physical presence of administrative offices to build institutional assurance.
- **Digital Inclusivity and Feedback Loops:** As digital engagement grows, municipalities must ensure that the "Communication Gap" is minimized. This involves not only providing digital tools but also ensuring that the backend human processes are synchronized with the front-end technology. Regular "Citizen Perception Audits" should be institutionalized to provide a continuous feedback loop, allowing for agile policy adjustments based on 2026 and future trends.

In conclusion, the path toward excellence in Gilan's urban management lies in narrowing the distance between the perceived and the expected. By prioritizing functional reliability and behavioral empathy over mere physical construction, the municipalities of Gilan can foster a more resilient, satisfied, and engaged citizenry. This study provides the empirical evidence necessary for such a transformation, offering a diagnostic framework that can be replicated in other provinces to ensure that the evolution of Iranian local government remains aligned with the highest academic and professional standards.

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