Abstract

In order to address new demands from citizens and companies, public agencies are developing new ways of delivering public services within a multi-channel logic. In this context, Citizen Shops have been designed to increase speed of response, to simplify procedures and, above all, to improve service quality. This article aims to evaluate the perceptions of users of public services in order to improve their quality. The article follows a marketing perspective, paying special attention to citizens' expectations and perceptions and to the role of emotions in the encounter. Given the nature of the research issue, the investigation followed a case-study methodology. The authors present an adaptation of the Critical Incident Technique and analyse extensive qualitative and quantitative data collected in six Portuguese Citizen Shops. The findings show that expectations are extremely dynamic and play a relevant role in users' satisfaction. Satisfying and neutral attributes were identified, and the Critical Incident Technique also revealed the importance of emotions in the encounter.

Key words
Public services, Citizen Shops, quality, satisfaction, expectations, emotions

ASSESSING USERS' PERCEPTIONS ON HOW TO IMPROVE PUBLIC SERVICES QUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

Public services have a significant impact on both citizens' daily lives and on the competitiveness of economies. For this reason, modern societies increasingly demand better efficiency and effectiveness from public agencies. New Public Management (NPM) defends a set of strategies to fulfil those objectives: cutting costs, disaggregating traditional bureaucratic organizations into smaller agencies, decentralizing management authority within each public agency, separating provision and purchase of public services, introducing market and quasi market-type mechanisms, requiring staff to work to performance targets, indicators and output objectives, establishing greater flexibility in public employment and, finally, increasing emphasis on service quality and customer responsiveness (Pollitt, 1995). In this sense, we can say that NPM aims to meet the needs of citizens and firms and not those of bureaucracy. In this context, public service quality has become a priority for most governments (Ling 2002; Roy and Seguin 2000), satisfying the needs of different publics, with a clear focus on favouring good governance and national economic competitiveness.

Although NPM does not recognize some very relevant principles – citizenship, justice, equality and political dependence (cf. Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000; Fountain, 2001; Frederickson, 1994; Mintzberg, 1996; Moe, 1994; Walker *et al.*, 2011) – assessment by citizens has become a central issue in the literature (cf. Head, 2010; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Vigoda, 2000; Wirtz and Tomlin, 2000). As in the private context, there has indeed been increasing pressure to assess the performance of public service. It is not, however, an easy challenge. The primary reason for this is that we are dealing with services. The concept and measurement of service quality has caused some controversy in the services marketing debate (Brady and Cronin, 2001). In effect, assessing the quality of services is much more complex than assessing the quality of products, because services are 'deeds, acts or performances' (Berry, 1980), and have specific characteristics – intangibility, inseparability between production and consumption, perishability and heterogeneity (cf. Berkowitz *et al.*, 1986) which make them unique when compared to products (cf. Grönroos, 1990; Kotler and Andreasen, 1995).

There has also been an organizational change. Modern public administrations have been taking on an increasing number of significant responsibilities, in which more and more actors take part – private and semi-private entities – resulting in a growing fragmentation of a huge public sector. But as citizens have demonstrated a clear preference for dealing with a number of issues with the minimum possible contact with the Administration, coordination between public organizations has become a central issue in the last decade (cf. Bovaird, 2001; Hagen and Kubicek, 2000; Pollitt, 2003; Windrum, 2008). Indeed, there has been a trend for the concentration of public services on the basis of one-stop-shopping, significantly enhanced by major advances in both information and communications technology (Toonen and Raadschelders, 1997) and service delivery (Janssen and Gortmaker, 2010).

This article aims to evaluate the perceptions of the users of public services in order to improve public service quality on the basis of a relational framework. The main research question is: how to assess users' perceptions in order to improve public service quality? The study followed a case-study methodology, considering the context of the Portuguese Citizen Shops.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The literature review highlights the importance of listening to the citizen and addresses the central aspects of public service quality and performance management. The section which follows presents the model of investigation. The methodology section clarifies the use of the Critical Incident Technique in examining citizens' perceptions and presents the context of the study and the methods of data collection and analysis. The subsequent section describes the findings. The article ends with a synthesis of the main contributions and some suggestions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Expectations, perceptions and satisfaction

Since the reforms anticipated by the proponents of NPM and Reinventing Government, listening to citizens has been seen out as an important source of information for improving the quality of public services. Questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, complaint management and other methods have been adopted to gather information about citizens' needs and preferences (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). This also matches the growing pressures for the improvement of accountability of public entities (Vigoda-Gadot, 2000).

Some researchers have shown that results from internal objective performance indicators and those obtained directly from citizens, reflecting a marketing orientation, are not always coincident, which may be explained by the differences between the two perspectives (Kelly and Swindell, 2000; Roch and Poister, 2006). In this sense, perceived quality – what citizens think about the quantity and quality of the public services they receive – rather than objective internal measures has been considered the antecedent of satisfaction with public services (Van Ryzin, 2004).

This means that if we aim to understand the level of service quality, the relationship between expectations and perceptions is important, and the literature on gap analysis should be considered. The service quality literature is based on two main paradigms: the expectation-disconfirmation paradigm and the performance paradigm. The former considers that perceived service quality results from the gap between performance and expectations (Oliver, 1980), whilst the performance paradigm argues that expectations are irrelevant and only performance should be considered. These two perspectives gave rise to two alternative frameworks: SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al., 1988) and SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Although they are widely used

in service quality assessment, some authors believe that they are too generic and, consequently, a number of adaptations should be made for each specific context (cf. Carman, 1990; Dabholkar *et al.*, 2000; Ladhari, 2008; Finn and Lamb, 1991; Zhao *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, it is possible to adapt these frameworks, which were designed for private services for use in assessing public service quality and citizens' expectations and perceptions.

It is also important to clarify the relation between quality and satisfaction. Although it is consensual that customer satisfaction is essential for organization success (cf. Andrews *et al.*, 2011; Dabholkar *et al.*, 2000; Fornell *et al.*, 2006; Keiningham *et al.*, 2003; Stradling *et al.*, 2007; Vavra, 1997), not everybody agrees about the relation between those two constructs (Luo and Homburg, 2007) and what is more, there is no universal definition for satisfaction (cf. Peterson and Wilson, 1992; Yi, 1990). For some authors satisfaction is an evaluation process (cf. Fornell, 1992; Hunt, 1977; Oliver, 1980), but for others it is the response to that evaluation process (cf. Howard and Sheth, 1969; Oliver, 1980, 1997; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Westbrook and Reilly, 1983). It can also be viewed as a cognitive response (cf. Bolton and Drew, 1991; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Tse and Wilton, 1988) or an emotional response (Cadotte *et al.*, 1987; Westbrook and Reilly, 1983). Some authors argue that satisfaction precedes quality (Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988), while others support the opposite, in the sense that it is perceived service quality that leads to satisfaction (Brady *et al.*, 2002; Cronin and Taylor, 1994; Fornell *et al.*, 1996; Grönroos, 2000; Oliver, 1993; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1994). In this context, the relation between disconfirmation of expectations and satisfaction with public services is still barely explored (Roch and Poister, 2006), although there has been some research in this area, concluding that disconfirmation is positively related to satisfaction with public services (cf. Beck *et al.*, 1990; DeHoog *et al.*, 1990; Van Ryzin, 2004).

Satisfaction versus dissatisfaction

There is still no consensus on the relation between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Most service quality literature attempts to identify the dimensions or attributes that generate positive evaluations of quality by customers, neglecting the negative dimensions that result in dissatisfaction (Dawes and Rowley, 1999; Liljander, 1999; Owusu-Frimpong *et al.*, 2010). However, satisfaction and dissatisfaction with services cannot simply be considered opposites (Bleuel, 1990; Johnston, 1995), because controlling dissatisfaction may not necessarily lead to satisfaction. In the same way, researchers from other fields of knowledge have also pointed out the importance of dissatisfaction analysis, without considering it merely the opposite of satisfaction (cf. Herzberg, 1968; Kano *et al.*, 1984). In effect, when we consider the concerns of customers with information accuracy, waiting time, length of encounter, bad attendance, and so forth (negative incidents) satisfaction becomes, to some extent, a secondary concern (cf. Dawes and

Rowley, 1999; Johnston, 1995). In short, it is important to identify both the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

The degree of tolerance is also a central element when we analyse users' perceptions, in particular in the context of public services (Hu, 2010). In practice, they usually recognize that it is not always possible for their expectations to be met, and accept service heterogeneity (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996), admitting a lower service level without feeling dissatisfied. The concept of 'zone of tolerance' – accepted service performance level somewhere between the adequate and the desired level of expectations – was introduced by Berry and Parasuraman (1991). Situational factors, service positioning, previous experiences and word-of-mouth may help to redefine their expectations.

Emotional issues

Customers are now better informed, more networked and deeper involved in co-creating value with the firms (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). In this sense, because the experience itself is very important when we deal with services, the role of emotions is especially important to assess the service quality. Emotions exert a great influence on tolerance and, consequently, on satisfaction, because individuals may already have a predisposition to see incidents as positive or negative (Wu, 2011a, 2011b). The evaluation of a particular episode may not, in effect, be the result of an incident, since satisfaction can be strongly related to the customer's mood when he or she receives the service (Johnston, 1995). The positive and negative emotions that customers associate with the service, as well as their intensity and frequency (Friman *et al.*, 2001), have growing importance in literature in the creation of satisfaction, and it is extremely important to understand citizens' feelings and reactions when they are dealing with public services (Vigoda-Gadot, 2000). In spite of that, there is a lack of research on the linkage between emotions and satisfaction in the public service context, where emotion management may change negative emotions into positive ones.

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

This investigation aims to assess the perceptions of users of Citizen Shop in order to improve the quality level of the service provided. Thus, the central problem of the research is to identify the determinants of public service quality from the user's viewpoint. An innovative and successful channel of public service delivery – the Portuguese Citizens Shops – frames the research context.

In order to understand the specific context of public services, the model considers the relationships developed during the public service encounter between the citizen, the public agency and society (all other stakeholders), considering the public service encounter as a succession of episodes involving those three parts. Considering the

specificities of this context, the paper focuses on quality perceived by citizens, comparing perceptions and expectations, which can result from previous experiences, word-of-mouth, suggested positioning and personal needs. Additionally, because the encounter seems to be strongly relational, emotions are considered to have an important influence on the evaluation of each episode. Moreover, the research considers the existence of a zone of tolerance, in the sense that citizens may admit that their expectations may not always be met, and therefore accept a service performance level somewhere between the adequate and desired level of expectations, without feeling dissatisfied. These relations are considered in the framework for analysis presented in Figure 1.

Since the research focuses on the case of the Citizen Shops, the research question also implies exploring the following issues: knowing the organizational processes, identifying the positive and negative aspects of delivering public services through the Citizen Shops, exploring how citizens' needs and demands can be more effectively addressed and also understanding the value of physically delivered public services without real service integration.

METHODOLOGY

According to Yin (1994), exploratory research is the most suitable when the research questions are of the type 'how?' and when the main purpose is to understand a subject that is still almost unknown. Therefore, this research follows a predominantly explanatory qualitative methodology based on a case-study approach using multiple sources of empirical evidence since this is considered an appropriate methodology for exploratory and explanatory research (Yin, 1994). This section aims to present and justify the interest of the case studied and to explain the methodological options of the empirical research.
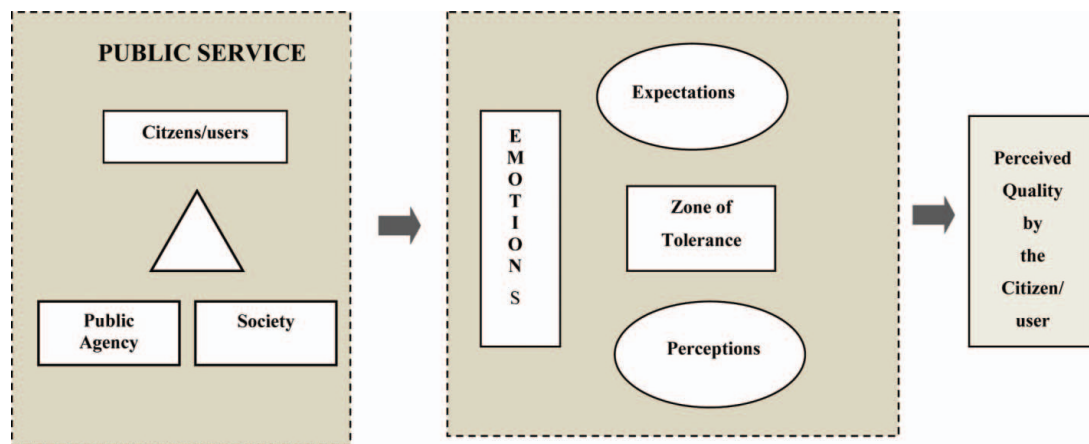

Figure 1: Framework for analysis

Critical incident technique

From the literature of service marketing there are basically two ways of evaluating the quality of a given service: attribute- and incident-based measurements. The first provide a general evaluation of the service quality – the customers evaluate more than only the result of the service, they also evaluate the process of service delivery and its dimensions or attributes. Incident-based measurements rely on the analysis of critical incidents. Bitner *et al*. (1990 p. 73) define these as 'specific interactions between customers and service firm employees that are especially satisfying or especially dissatisfying'. Critical incidents are used to identify the determinants of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Traditionally, attribute-based models have been preferred for assessing the quality of private services, but the specific nature of public services justifies a specially designed framework for their evaluation. In fact, CIT allows a holistic understanding of how citizens feel the public service experience, because it is regarded as a sequence of incidents rather than a sum of abstract attributes (Stauss and Weinlich, 1997). From a managerial point of view, this may bring up a few interesting areas for improvement.

The Critical Incident Technique originally proposed by Flanagan in 1954 was introduced into the marketing literature by Swan and Rao (1975) and into the service marketing arena by Bitner *et al*. (1990). Since then, many studies on service marketing have been conducted on the basis of this technique (cf. Bitner, 1990; Bostschen *et al.*, 1996; Decker and Meissner, 1997; Edvardsson, 1988, 1992; Keaveney, 1995; Olsen, 1996; Stauss, 1993; Stauss and Hentschel, 1992; Standvik and Liljander, 1994; Stauss and Weinlich, 1997; Roos, 1996, 1999; Roos and Strandvik, 1996). Since services are mainly a process, observational methods would seem to be useful to analyse the interactions during the service encounter, complementing the more traditional methods of data collection (Grove and Fisk, 1992). Therefore, despite some limitations, such as validity, reliability (Chell, 1998) and bias (Michel, 2001), the Critical Incident Technique enables the researcher to collect rich and vivid data and a free range of responses, without the possibility of any preconception or formatted answering, showing how participants really think. However, except for a few works, namely on public transportation services (Edvardsson, 1998; Friman *et al.*, 2001) and school libraries (Radford, 2006) not much research on public services has used this technique (Fountain, 1999; Gremler, 2004), which is especially useful when we really want to get to know gain a deep knowledge of the citizens' perceptions. It is a means of completing the data gathered by other techniques, because the researcher gains awareness of the real situations that lead to perceptions.

Empirical context

The context used in the empirical work was the Citizen Shop case. The choice of this particular case-study was based on four main reasons that account for its uniqueness.

Firstly, because despite its growing importance in the daily lives of urban populations, there is still scarce research on this public service channel, as Osborne (2010) put in evidence. Secondly, because it follows the one-stop-shopping trend in public management. On the other hand, because it is an innovative approach that combines traditional Public Administration and e-Government. Finally, due to its organizational diversity and complexity.

The first Portuguese Citizen Shop was opened in Lisbon in 1999. The idea came from the Citizen Attendance Service ('Poupa Tempo'), in Bahia a huge Brazilian state, where citizens have to travel long distances to access some public services. Since then, nineteen further Shops have been created in Portugal, firstly in the major Portuguese cities and more recently in smaller locations.

Citizen Shops were designed to implement the administrative modernization started in the 1980s inspired by the main principles of NPM. This aimed at breaking with the traditional slow, bureaucratic delivery, following a logic of concentration, accessibility, simplification and speed of response. Citizens Shops aim to be citizen-focused, in order to deliver better service quality and to improve the relationship between the Administration and the citizen. In practice, they are like a shopping centre where the citizen can find a broad variety of public and private services (about 60% / 40%) that have great importance for their daily lives and, consequently, are in great demand: Water, Electricity, Gas and Telephones; Banks; Certificates and Registrations; Post-office; Personal Documents; Taxes; Labour Relations and Professional Training; Social Security; Health Services; Services for Public Servants; Communications and Transport, among others. Conditions, processes and staff are agreed between the respective central public agency and the Citizen Shop management unit.

Great care is taken with the physical infrastructures. The building for each Citizen Shop has good accessibility, including easy access for disabled people, good working conditions and a modern layout. Some support services are also available, such as coffee shops, cash machines, photocopying, photo booths and special areas for the disabled to wait and to be attended. The opening hours are longer than those of traditional offices, and there is a special emphasis on recruitment based on skills and competence, which is supposed to be constantly improved by training courses and motivation techniques. There is also extensive use of information technology facilities and databases. A call centre and an information service, contactable through SMS, have been created, which allows the user to know the estimated waiting time for his/her ticket.

Citizen Shops are managed by a Management Unit that is responsible for the management of the facilities and relations with all public and private entities present in the Shop. Since 2007 the Management Units report to a superior agency ('AMA – Agência para a Modernização Administrativa' – 'Agency for Administrative Modernization'). They do not have administrative or financial autonomy. Relations between AMA and the Shops tend to be informal. All agencies present in the Shops have to respect the rules defined for the Shop, and there is very close contact between them and the Management Unit in order to improve internal quality indicators. The manager

is also in charge of managing complaints, as well as suggestions and appraisals, and there are regular meetings with the local service coordinators in order to improve service quality levels. At least twice a year users are invited to assess a service quality through a questionnaire filled in the Shops. AMA is responsible for processing all this data and also, together with Management Units, for defining measures to improve service quality levels.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection is presented in Table 1. The empirical work consisted of an extensive questionnaire, personal interviews and focus groups. Since the research was mainly exploratory in nature, a good deal of data were collected by means of verbal reports (Ericsson and Simon, 1980). The first part of the questionnaire was used to assess satisfaction, expectations and loyalty of users. The second part focused on the incident analysis and here an adaptation of the Critical Incident Technique was used. The incidents were collected from the citizens using a questionnaire and were then categorized according to the five dimensions proposed in SERVQUAL (Zeithaml et al., 1988). Qualitative data were also obtained by means of personal semi-structured interviews of managers and public employees and we also conducted four focus groups. Focus groups have been extensively used in services marketing research, and in a few cases their advantages have also been explored in the analysis of public services. Listening to managers and public servants allowed the researchers to better understand the specific context of the Citizen Shops. Qualitative data gathered from interviews and focus groups was coded in categories intimately related with the conceptual framework and research questions. QSR Nvivo 2.0 was used to help in the analysis of qualitative data.

The third and last part of the questionnaire was used to make an importance/performance analysis (Martilla and James, 1977). This procedure does not conflict with the case-study methodology, which allows the use of qualitative and quantitative

Table 1: Data collection sources

Interviews	Focus groups	Questionnaires
Top manager	Citizen shops users	Pre-test
Citizen shop managers	Front-office personnel	Random sample
Service coordinators		Answer rate = 84.7%
Front-office personnel		Structure: 3 parts
Support services		No. of incidents = 130
Total interviews = 59	Total F. G. = 4	Total questionnaires = 340
Recording time = 28.5 h	Recording time = 5 h	

methods (Amaratunga and Baldry, 2001; Jensen and Rodgers, 2001). Indeed, data diversity may be considered one of the main contributions of this research, since triangulation strengthens constructs and hypotheses (Eisenhardt, 1989). The analysis followed the principles of the grounded-theory approach aiming at the emergence of new theoretical constructs on the basis of the data analysed (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

In practice, data were collected from November 2004 until May 2007 by means of interviews, focus groups and questionnaires. The evidence was collected in six Citizen Shops, located in the major Portuguese cities: Aveiro, Braga, Coimbra, Lisbon, Porto and Viseu. This option aimed at assuring robustness of analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989) and saturation (Smith, 1990). All participants were previously informed about the purpose of the investigation, were asked permission for tape recording and guaranteed absolute anonymity. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: the first part inquired about users' satisfaction, expectations and loyalty. Then, the second part of the questionnaire was used to collect incidents (both positive and negative). We not only considered the incidents that were really critical, but also all other moderately relevant incidents. The aim of the last part was to gather data to be used in the importance/performance analysis (on a 5-point Likert scale, the participants were asked to rate 29 items that resulted from the qualitative data analysis).

FINDINGS

General perceptions

Relationship analysis within the shop as a point of departure of the empirical work led to a number of interesting findings. We divided those relationships into two main categories: internal relationships (between the management unit and the entities that operate in the Citizen Shop) and external relationships (relating to citizens/users). In the case of the former, management units appeared as an essential link between all independent entities present at the shop, promoting a partnership among all of them and focusing on using effective leadership to support high quality service to the citizen. We identified a unique 'Citizen Shop culture', which pays particular attention to employees' motivation and commitment. They feel proud of working in the shop and accept their responsibilities with a great sense of involvement, mainly due to the considerable autonomy they enjoy from the central offices. Team work is encouraged and the members of the staff tend to feel committed to service objectives and strongly supported by the management unit. This is evident in the following statements:

> "The Shop works better if we work as partners ..."
> G (4) (UA 65)
> "Everything is based in dialogue. So, we sit down, talk to each other, define guidelines
> and it works! And people are very surprised with the success of this model. I can get

results without imposing anything to the entities that are present at the Shop . . .”
G (1) (UA 106)

Frequent meetings between managers and service coordinators enhance this spirit, as one of the interviewees has referred:

“Our relationship with the Management Unit is very focused on responsibility,
exchanging opinions, decision participation, sharing results and knowing that the Unit
supports us not only in successes but also when things do not go so well . . .”
G (4) (UA 86)

Despite of the diversity of the services provided in the Shop, the purpose is to develop an image that should be distinctive. The coordinating agency (AMA) puts a lot of effort in promoting this ''culture'' as a means of attaining a high service quality level.

However, we also found some episodes of lack of motivation among staff, mainly due to contractual conditions and stress in coping with some difficult clients and also shortage of human resources. The average waiting time is very long for some services, and employees are under stress during a significant part of their working day:

“This Shop should never have got the name of Citizen Shop because it encourages
the citizens to assume their rights, but very often they forget we workers are also
citizens . . .”
DGRN BI (5) – 7 (UA 41)
“And many times the client doesn’t understand the situation, and we have to explain
it again and again. It is very stressful”
DGRN – BI (5) – 8 (UA 53)

Secondly, considering external relationships, although we expected them to develop as a sequence of independent episodes, there could be noticed some true relationships and not a mere set of episodes:

“Some people prefer to come here because they already know most of us
DGRN – BI (5) – 9 (UA 12)
“Some of them tell me that I solved a specific situation last time, and so they prefer
me to help them again. They create a certain relationship with us . . .”
SS (5) – 3 (UA 34)

In addition, there was a great diversity of profiles and behaviours among the users, who were shown to be increasingly demanding and, sometimes, causing conflicts in the interaction. However, this largely depended on the type of Shop, and was more common in the big cities because people in the other Shops tended to be more tolerant.

> "*It is not possible to standardize the shops. Clients are different, especially if we compare Shops in big cities with those located in the small towns. The first tend to be increasingly demanding, sometimes impatient, the others know everybody in the Shop and tend to be more cooperative ...*"
> G (6) (UA 160)

It was also found that the main motivation for going to a Citizen Shop is not related to the attendance quality itself, but rather because the services are concentrated in one place and due to the extended working hours. Another interesting finding has to do with the 'culture of the shop' identified in all Shops, encouraged by the management units that focus primarily on serving the citizen.

> "*Here we are fully dedicated to our job. It's different from traditional public offices. We cannot leave the chair or pick up the phone to solve our personal problems. We are instructed to serve the client and put him or her at the top of our priorities ...*"
> G (4) (UA 35)

Finally, at a time of economic downturn, relationships in the Shop seem to be intimately related to economic and sociological aspects of the population served, mainly due to the nature of some services provided, namely social support.

Considering the central part of the model, we found that users' perceptions are very sensitive to expectations. The original positioning suggested by the Citizen Shops and word-of-mouth were found to be the two main sources of expectation disconfirmation and, consequently, primarily causes of dissatisfaction. Moreover, citizens' expectations are extremely dynamic, tending to be gradually more demanding.

> "*In fact I thought that everything would be solved more rapidly, but it's not bad ...*"
> "*Advertising gave the idea that we could solve more issues in the Shop, but some services aren't really provided.*"
> FG (1) (UA 20 - 21)

With regard to perceptions, no homogeneous pattern was found in the six Shops where the empirical research was undertaken. The results of the importance/performance analysis (Table 2), based on a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, showed that most of the items scored a good average both for importance and performance, with the best scores for opening hours, physical concentration, confidence concerning the information, and competence and courtesy of contact personnel. On the other hand, tangibles (both physical evidence and personnel presentation) and supporting services (bar and copy centre) appeared as neutral attributes as they showed positive scores on performance despite being considered less important subjects. On the other hand, waiting time showed a low average score, as it was the most criticized aspect of the service and showed up as a primary source of dissatisfaction:

"*Yes, because quickness of response was widely advertised, but in fact the best thing about the Shop is having everything under one roof.*"
FG (3) (UA 48 – 49 - 50)

Two other items – parking and waiting conditions – were also considered to be poor, despite their importance to the users.

Considering the qualitative data collected in the interviewees, the users of Citizen Shops tend to show a positive judgement, but this appreciation was still very limited by the poor image they have of Public Administration as a whole.

Table 2: Importance/performance average scores

Attribute	Description	Performance	Importance
1	Physical concentration	4.52	4.76
2	Accessibility	3.97	4.59
3	Parking	2.56	4.60
4	Localization	4.11	4.22
5	Hygienic conditions	4.27	4.50
6	Climatization	3.87	4.29
7	Sitting places	3.03	4.57
8	Waiting time	2.76	4.84
9	Communication and advertising	3.45	3.92
10	Courtesy at the reception desk	4.10	4.52
11	Courtesy at the front office	4.04	4.73
12	Commitment	4.05	4.86
13	Competence and courtesy	4.12	4.86
14	Personnel dressing and presentation	4.10	3.58
15	Confidence on information	4.31	4.87
16	Privacy	3.49	4.39
17	General behaviour	3.64	4.24
18	Easy of service	3.71	4.57
19	Responsiveness	3.81	4.63
20	Inside signage	4.08	4.29
21	Outside signage	3.41	4.19
22	Working hours	4.41	4.73
23	Bar service	3.09	3.80
24	Copy service	3.77	4.34
25	Information desk	4.14	4.42
26	Decoration	3.92	3.88
27	Call-centre	3.64	4.13
28	Internet	3.78	4.21
29	Short message service	3.47	4.17

CRITICAL INCIDENTS FINDINGS

The interviewees were asked to recall situations that had happened in the previous six months. A total of 138 incidents were collected: 46 positive incidents and 92 negative ones (Table 3). They were classified in seven categories of incidents (five from the SERVQUAL model, and emotions and a residual category). The difference between the number of incidents indicated in Table 1 (130) and the sum of positive and negative incidents in Table 3 results from the fact that eight of them were coded in two different dimensions.

A very uneven pattern among the six shops was found, as the shops located in the big cities showed higher scores on negative incidents. Considering the positive incidents, it was found a even pattern among the entities presents in the shops, but for the negative ones there was a greater incidence for certain services, with social security at the top (29,2%).

Tangibles, which refer to the appearance of physical and human elements, did not register any positive incident, which is in accordance with the results on Table 2, where the scores for items 14 (personnel dressing and presentation) and 26 (decoration) present significant performance but moderate importance. The three negative incidents were related to parking (item 3) and sitting places (item 7).

Confidence comprises the perceptions of an accurate service at first time, with no mistakes, and is related to item 15 (confidence on information). Table 2 shows a high score for both performance and importance and data collected from interviews and focus groups showed 17 quotes with positive comments and only 6 negative ones.

> "*I prefer coming to the shop. The service is more customized and I have more confidence.*"
> *FG (1) (UA 32)*

Table 3: Positive and negative incidents collected

Dimension	No. of positive incidents	No. of negative incidents
Tangibles	–	3
Confidence	1	16
Responsiveness	16	41
Security	13	11
Empathy	15	7
Emotions	–	7
Others	1	7
Total	46	92

*"If I have any complex question, like last time in social security, I am sure that in the
Shop they will solve it completely."*
(I#1 - Loja 5)

Nevertheless, a deeper analysis shows that there are some problems in the confidence dimension, most of them derived from incongruous information given by different employees in complex situations, which may result from lack of training.

Responsiveness refers to the capacity of helping the citizen and speed of response. This dimension includes physical service concentration (item 1), waiting time (item 8) and working hours (item 22), which are especially important in the Citizen Shops model. Items 1 and 22 presented high scores both for performance and importance, but waiting time had a poor punctuation for both, and most of the negative incidents collected referred to this item. This problem was also highlighted in the interviews by managers and public servants, especially in big shops, where the need for more human and technological resources is more urgent.

Security refers to the feeling about the service provided by the organization given by dedicated employees. This means that employees' behaviour make Citizen Shops' users feel safe. Item 13 (competence and courtesy) had good scores on both performance and importance, and it was found 13 positive incidents that support those findings, most of them referring to episodes of dedication to the client. However 11 negative incidents were collected, which were mostly related to errors in documents.

Empathy showed up as a predominantly satisfying dimension, and the interviewees reported enthusiastically a few episodes were the employees revealed a high ability to listening to and comforting them. The negative incidents referred to specific situations when employees were not so dedicated, but most of them involved personal mismatching, which were also coded as negative emotional incidents.

In sum, although users tend to be very critical of public services in general, they also tend to demonstrate a reasonable degree of tolerance in relation to the limitations they find in the Shops, mainly due to the dimensions they value positively and as they get used to the Shop. Situational items, word-of-mouth, previous experiences and the compulsive character of the service shape the level of expectation. Finally, emotions appear to have a predominantly negative influence on the interaction process between the citizen and the civil servant. Because users' perceptions and satisfaction depend not only on the service process itself but also on their mood before and during the interaction, the front-office personnel have a crucial role on moderating emotions. Because in the big Shops employees are subject to great stress, training in this area is particularly important. Nevertheless, except for the smallest Shops, encounters in the Citizen Shops appeared to be less emotional than those that occur in traditional agencies, because the relation is more functional than emotional, which is similar to the trends in other distribution channels, such as the Internet and the big stores.

CONCLUSIONS

Public Administrations are facing new challenges both from citizens and firms. Public service quality is viewed as essential to national development and international recognition. Doing better with less, in a very specific context where justice and equality are important values and stakeholders are very diverse and sometimes have conflicting perspectives, would appear to be a difficult challenge. Society as a whole plays an important role, due to the intrinsic features of public services, and management decisions often give rise to contradicting opinions and judgements.

In this context, it is essential to assess public services from the users' viewpoint, and public managers have the mission to handle the users' experiences in two ways: focusing on preventing the occurrence of negative incidents and on recovering the service when dissatisfaction arises, and using positive incidents as learning experiences for the organization. Constructs and frameworks designed to assess the quality of private services seem to be useful to the public context, but they need to be adapted to the specificities of the public service arena. Thus, the central purpose of this research was to assess users' perceptions in order to improve public service quality. We believe that the focus on the citizens' perspective within a highly relational framework provided some new insights into public service performance improvement. In fact, Citizen Shops involve a special context, where relationships among management unit, employees and citizens are stronger than in traditional public services and play an important role on the overall users' assessment.

In our opinion, the paper encompasses three main contributions: theoretical, methodological and practical. The first group derives from each part of the model that resulted from the research question and framed the empirical work. Firstly, the research confirms that public services are a peculiar type of relationship involving three agents: the citizen, the public agency and society itself. Secondly, public service quality was considered from the citizens' perspective, in view of their expectations and perceptions. Additionally, the attributes were classified as primarily a source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, or neutral. The research confirmed the existence of a certain degree of tolerance in citizens' assessments of public services. Concerning emotions, their impact on citizens' satisfaction was not evident, which suggests that relationships that occur in the Citizen Shops are less emotional than those that develop in the traditional public agencies, in the same way that new methods of delivery of goods and services tend to become less emotional. Another contribution is the selected case-study of the physically concentrated delivery of public services. It is a trend in the most developed countries but in spite of its growing importance there is still a lack of research.

Secondly, the research makes some methodological contributions, mainly due to the combination of attribute-based measures and incident analysis, which was very useful in the understanding of how citizens' perceptions are created. A great variety of data were collected which was used in multiple ways, qualitatively and quantitatively, in order to

obtain as much information as possible. This made it possible to answer the research question in spite of barely knowing the subject at the very beginning.

Lastly, there are also a number of contributions to management. Firstly, it was found extremely important to manage citizens' expectations because they have a relevant effect on their perceptions. A pro-active communication strategy can be useful to get the user to know his/her Shop better, especially because they are not totally standardized and have a few differences, namely in the services provided. Secondly, the research highlighted the importance of identifying the factors that are mainly sources of dissatisfaction, as a means of designing focused and effective strategies not only to improve satisfaction, but also to act on dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the organizational culture in the Shops showed up to be a very motivating for the employees and have good impacts on performance scores. Therefore, public services ought to consider the potential of this area and develop adequate strategies to create and strengthen team work and compromise with high service delivery standards. Lastly, despite the development of e-government, and similarly to the major trends of goods delivery, one of the most valued aspects of Citizen Shops is physical concentration. However, this model heavily depends on the possibility of coordinating all services delivered and the operations with the back-office, which in turn rely on strong investments in technology.

Nevertheless, this research also has some limitations. The first one results from not being possible to generalize the conclusions of a single case-study. Secondly, confidentiality prevented the use of certain controversial subjects that could enrich the research. Some difficulties were also encountered in collecting, classifying and interpreting incidents. Moreover, due to time restrictions, it was not possible to apply a question on expectations confirmation/disconfirmation in the questionnaire. Further research should compare perceptions and expectations for each service quality dimension. Finally, the researchers were not permitted to obtain any internal quantitative performance indicators that would enrich the conclusions.

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