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THE EFFECT OF SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION TOWARDS CUSTOMER CONSUMPTION ON WATER SERVICE PROVIDERS IN OMAN

Mohammed Said Awadh Salumi[1]
Zaharuzaman Jamaluddin[2]
Norhayah Zulkifli[3]
Omar Durrah [4]

[12 3] Faculty of Business and Accountancy Universiti Selangor (UNISEL), 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. Email: mohd1om@gmail.com
[4] Department of Management, College of commerce and business administration, Dhofar University, Salalah, Oman

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Abstract: *Oman's water service sector faces a number of challenges, including water shortages, energy-intensive desalination, high residential water consumption, inappropriate groundwater use in agriculture, misdirected subsidies, and decision makers' lack of knowledge of integrated water resource management principles. Furthermore, due to a scarcity of natural water resources, desalinated sea water is the principal supply of tap water in Oman. However, there are indications that many customers do not trust the government's drinking water and would rather buy filled bottles from commercial water providers. Bottled water use in Oman has increased in recent years, owing to growing consumer knowledge of wellness and healthcare, as well as a lack of trust in tap water. The diminishing customer The contentment of Omani citizens with the water service industry has resulted in an increased market share for bottled water. Customer happiness is an important aspect in determining a company's success or failure, as well as its overall performance at various levels. In the past, most research on customer satisfaction and consumption concentrated on a number of businesses, including telecommunications, hospitality/tourism, healthcare/hospitals, and financial services, among others, but the water service industry received less attention. Furthermore, the importance of service guarantee in the water service industry remains restricted, particularly in Oman. Previous talks and perspectives show that proper consumption models for various locations and situations are required to better understand and improve client consumption. As a result, the current study provides a paradigm for service quality research and adds to the understanding of the complicated links between service quality, service guarantee, customer satisfaction, and customer consumption towards water service providers in Oman. Data for the present study is collected through questionnaire survey from 400 residents residing in Oman, and data is analysed using PLS-SEM. The findings of this study will contribute to the understanding of the influence of service quality and service guarantee on customer satisfaction*

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and consumption to water service providers in Oman, hence, extending the current consumption model by adding service guarantee as a predictor of customer satisfaction and consumption provides additional knowledge to the literature and theory

Keywords: *Service Quality, Service Guarantee, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Consumption, Water Service Providers, Oman.*

Introduction

Background Of The Study:

Oman is one of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the majority of the population being Muslim. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are arid and with limited water resources. In arid and semi-arid areas, the availability of good quality water is extremely low in comparison to its utilization (Abulibdeh et al., 2021). They face the severest water shortages in the world, yet they exhibit the highest global water consumption (Al Shueili, 2014; Al-Maskti, 2011). In this regard and globally, Oman has been facing severe water shortage .

Oman, an Arab country with a population of 4.5 million,((Human Development Report, 2020; National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2022). Oman is experiencing rapid growth due to its booming oil industry. Living standards and water quality are improving, with access to better water sources increasing from 81% to 93.5% in the last 20 years. However, concerns remain about future water service, particularly in rural areas, despite the improved water quality. Oman's rapid growth, averaging 4% annually between 2000 and 2016 (Ahmed, 2020), has significantly increased water demand in urban and rural areas. This growth, coupled with a 9.5% increase in consumption, necessitates increased demand for renewable water resources and infrastructure, including storm water facilities (Anderson, 2021).

Oman's water quality is facing significant challenges due to drought, coastal pollution, and extreme weather conditions (Dugan, 2020). Despite progress in promoting renewable energy and water sources, the Omani government still lags in regulating pollution and water quality. The future is expected to be significantly impacted by drought and limited rainfall (Deigmology, 2021). Despite the PAEW's readiness to provide clean water, the government must be prepared to face other challenges to protect citizens' health.

The increasing awareness of wellness and healthcare has led to a rise in bottled water consumption in Oman(Sajjala et al., 2019), resulting in a larger market share. This is due to customers' low confidence in the quality of government-provided water(Sajjala et al., 2019; Al Aamri et al., 2017), leading them to opt for bottled water as an alternative(Amran & Al-Maamari, 2016). Below Figure depicts The market revenue share of bottled water is projected to remain steady until 2027.

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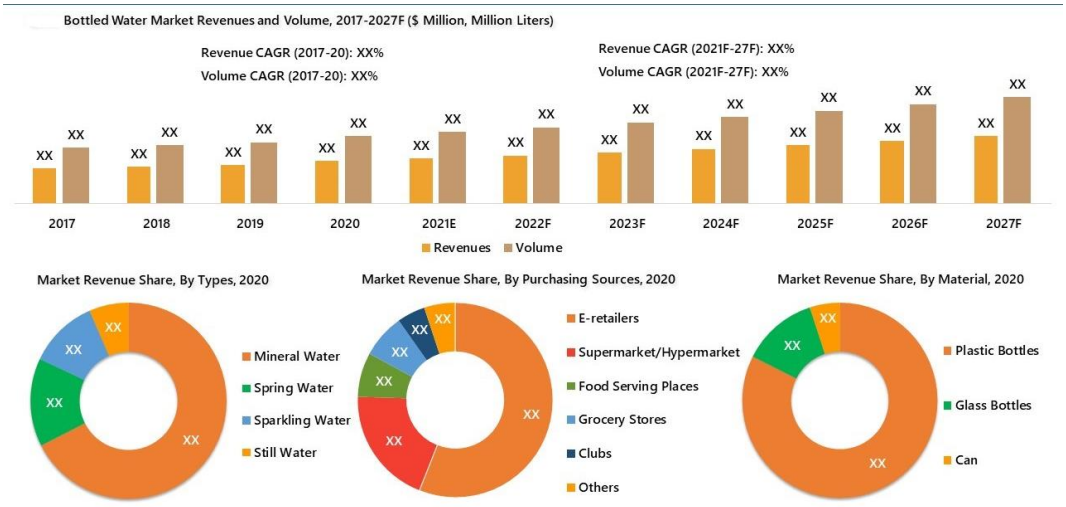

Figure 1 : Omani Bottled Water Market Synopsis

Source: Persistence Market Research, 2021

Oman's water service sector faces challenges (Ahmed, 2020; Prabhu, 2021),such as water shortages, energy-intensive desalination, high residential water consumption, inappropriate groundwater use in agriculture, misdirected subsidies, and a lack of knowledge of integrated water resources management (IWRM) principles. The average per capita consumption in Qurm and Seeb exceeds the international average. Domestic water demand has risen due to lack of conservation measures, cheap water prices, misdirected subsidies, and a lack of knowledge. Desalinated sea water is the primary source of tap water in Oman(Ahmed & Al Sakiti, 2019; Al-Maamari, 2016; Sajjala et al., 2019).

Problem statement

Water is crucial for modern society's well-being and sustainable growth, and the water supply sector faces challenges in the coming years(Naamani & Sana, 2021). The water services industry is the heart of any economy, manufacturing products like semiconductors, food, and energy(Murrar et al., 2020). However, the sustainability of water has been threatened due to increasing demand and overexploitation(Motevalli et al., 2019; Rawat et al., 2018). The Sultanate of Oman, one of the fastest-growing economies in the Gulf countries(Dhanalekshmi et al., 2022) , relies on desalinated sea-water for tap water supply due to unavailability of sufficient natural water resources. The country has experienced rapid and persistent growth in water demand due to strong economic and demographic growth (Atkinson, 2018), with data from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) revealing significant changes in water demand over the years 1990, 2000, and 2025.

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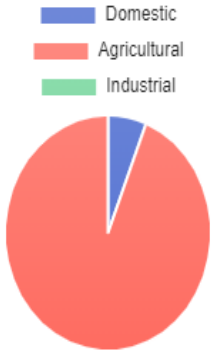

Figure 2: Water demand in million cubic metres (MCM) for the year 1990.

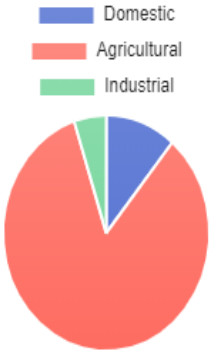

Figure 3: Water demand in million cubic metres (MCM) for the year 2000.

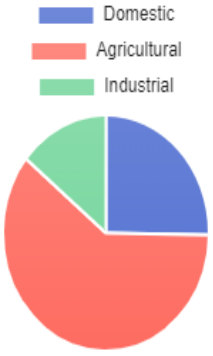

Figure 4: Water demand in million cubic metres (MCM) for the year 2025.

Figure 2: Water demand in Sultanate of Oman over years; Source: Fanack Water report on Oman, 2018

In Oman, domestic, industrial, agriculture, and the environment are the main industries consuming water. Agriculture consumes 1,872 MCM per year, with 83% of overall use coming from wells and aflaj. The agricultural sector's returns on water are poor, contributing only 3% of GDP to the national economy(MRMWR, 2013) .

Oman's water service industry faces challenges like water scarcity, energy-intensive desalination processes, high domestic water usage, improper groundwater use, misdirected subsidies, and lack of knowledge about integrated water resource management(Ahmed & Kharraz, 2018) . Desalinated seawater is the primary source of tap water due to limited natural resources. Population and economic growth have surpassed water resources, and water scarcity is expected to worsen due to faster evaporation of open water reserves.

In Oman, the water services sector faces challenges such as inadequate household water supply, low service standards, high non-revenue water levels, pipeline ruptures, revenue collection difficulties, and defective water meters (Al-Mamun et al., 2021) . To improve, water service providers must prioritize customer consumption, as it significantly impacts customer satisfaction(Kotler & Keller, 2016). .

Hence, further research may focus on customer consumption in order to better target marketing plans and methods. Despite the use of other criteria, the importance of service guarantee in the water service industry is still restricted, notably in Oman (Al-Khamisi & Ahmed, 2019). Previous discussions and viewpoints demonstrate that adequate consumption models for diverse areas and situations are required to better explain and improve customer consumption (Abedniya & Zaeim, 2020; Abraheem et al., 2020; Brady & Cronin, 2021; Buttle, 1996; Choi & Chu, 2018). In conclusion, scholars have looked into a variety of antecedents for customer consumption, but there is still a need to understand customer consumption from several angles (Othman & Owen, 2019). The researcher aims to close this gap in this thesis by investigating the impact of service quality on customer consumption, with customer satisfaction acting as a mediator between service quality and customer consumption and service guarantee and customer consumption.

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Significance of The Study

The research is significant academically, theoretically, and practically. It adds to the literature on service quality and customer satisfaction in Oman and offers practical insights for water service providers to improve their services. The study aims to bridge gaps in understanding customer perceptions and provide a foundation for other researchers and organizations.

Literature Review

This study explores the development of a comprehensive model that links service quality, service guarantee, customer satisfaction, and customer consumption specifically within the context of water service providers in Oman. Service quality has been shown to be a crucial determinant of customer satisfaction across multiple industries, and the current study aims to adapt and expand upon existing frameworks, like the SERVQUAL model, to better suit the unique needs of Oman's water sector.

Importance of Customer Satisfaction and Consumption

Customer satisfaction is essential for the growth and sustainability of businesses, including public services like water provision. Studies (Hoe & Mansori, 2018; Alzoubi et al., 2020; Gerpott et al., 2021) indicate that satisfaction affects whether customers recommend services, repurchase, or remain loyal. Given the challenges faced by Oman's water sector—such as low household coverage, frequent pipeline issues, and high non-revenue water—enhancing customer satisfaction is critical. Research across various sectors in Oman, including hospitality and finance, highlights the importance of understanding customer consumption behaviors to retain and attract customers (Chadha & Kapoor, 2019; Song et al., 2013).

Role of Service Quality and SERVQUAL

Service quality, especially through the **SERVQUAL model**, has been widely studied as a determinant of customer satisfaction. SERVQUAL measures service quality based on five dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Numerous studies have customized these dimensions to fit specific industries, including water services (Brady & Cronin, 2021; Baker & Crompton, 2018). In Oman, the Public Authority for Electricity and Water (PAEW) is responsible for water services, which makes meeting customer expectations essential for its operational success.

Studies have shown that high-quality service not only enhances customer retention but also supports competitive advantage (Akhtar & Zaheer, 2014; Al-Tamimi & Al-Amiri, 2003). Service quality helps retain customers and fosters positive word-of-mouth, a significant factor for businesses aiming for long-term success (Alipour, 2020; Amin et al., 2013).

Service Guarantee as a Factor

Service guarantees are promises made by companies to deliver a certain level of service, providing compensation if these expectations are not met. Guarantees can act as quality signals to customers, influencing their satisfaction and loyalty (Othman & Owen, 2019; Brady & Cronin, 2021). Studies have found that a service guarantee motivates customers to report issues, thereby allowing companies to address and improve service quality (Kashyap, 2001; Mayaux, 1999). However, studies focusing on service guarantees within Oman's water sector remain scarce, representing a gap this research intends to fill.

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Global and Regional Studies on Water Service Quality

Global studies in countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Malawi have used SERVQUAL to measure water service quality, highlighting common issues such as inadequate service delivery and customer dissatisfaction (NWSS, 2014; Kassa & Chernet, 2017; Gowela et al., 2017). In Kenya, customer satisfaction with Naivasha Water Services was low, emphasizing the need for better customer communication and responsiveness. Similarly, Ethiopian studies revealed significant gaps in water service quality, with customer satisfaction levels below acceptable standards.

Past Studies Using SERVQUAL in Water Services

The SERVQUAL model has been widely adapted to assess water service quality in various regions. In Saudi Arabia, Alghamdi et al. (2021) identified reliability and empathy as key dimensions affecting satisfaction. In Jordan, Alkhalafat & Al-Shatanawi (2020) highlighted efficiency and tangibles, while in Malaysia, Yusof et al. (2021) emphasized the five SERVQUAL dimensions in assessing water service quality. The SERVQUAL model's adaptability to different settings underscores its relevance to the current study's context in Oman.

Service Quality Dimensions

The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988), is a widely-used framework for measuring service quality across various industries, including water management. The model evaluates five key dimensions: reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions originated from an earlier version with ten criteria but were refined to assess service quality more concisely (Gibson, 2009). The model's core principle is that service quality is evaluated by comparing customer expectations with their perceptions of the actual service received (Wang & Shieh, 2006).

Studies have shown that service quality significantly impacts customer satisfaction and consumption. For instance, Abraheem et al. (2020) found that responsiveness scored highest among Jordanian bank customers, illustrating that quick service responses can enhance customer satisfaction. Other research in the airline and postal sectors (Amiruddin, 2013; Roopchund & Boojhawon, 2014) corroborates the SERVQUAL model's applicability across different service settings, reinforcing the role of reliability and responsiveness in driving customer satisfaction.

Scholars often adapt SERVQUAL's dimensions to fit specific industries due to the model's flexibility. For example, Grzinic (2007**)** used SERVQUAL to evaluate water management services, finding that reliability was a top priority for customers in that sector. Additionally, studies in non-traditional service areas, such as library services and e-commerce, have modified the model to address unique service contexts (Li & Suomi, 2009; Wang & Shieh, 2006). Research also indicates that SERVQUAL, while popular, is best utilized with some adaptation to align with industry-specific characteristics (Llosa et al., 1998).

Despite its widespread use and validation, some researchers argue that SERVQUAL's reliance on perception-expectation gaps may not suit every context. Alternative models like SERVPERF and DIA exist but are less commonly adopted due to their limited diagnostic utility (Negi, 2009; Rajab et al., 2012). Overall, SERVQUAL remains the most recognized tool for evaluating service quality, particularly due to its applicability across different cultural and industry settings (Ladhari, 2008; Ramseook et al., 2009). It continues to be valuable for understanding customer

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satisfaction, especially when tailored to specific service environments such as water management (Baksi & Parida, 2020).

Reliability

Research on water management reveals that customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction significantly influence their intentions to reuse water services.Alegre and Garau (2010) emphasized that Customer frustration is more influential than satisfaction, and perceived service quality positively affects satisfaction and consumption(Cam (2020) . Reliability is crucial in delivering services as promised, as highlighted in Oman's water management systems.

Responsiveness

Service quality measures customer satisfaction and consumption(Parasuraman et al., 1985) , influenced by customer expectations and perceptions(Grzinic, 2007) . However, measuring satisfaction and consumption is challenging. A structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale provides insight into satisfaction and consumption. Improving areas of dissatisfaction can help businesses retain customers(Amiruddin, 2013) . Respondentness, the readiness of employees to provide service, is rated least by customers(Saraie and Amini (2012)

Assurance

Assurance refers to employees' ability to inspire trust among customers through politeness and friendliness

Empathy

Empathy refers to attention given to customers in terms of understanding individual customer's personal or specific needs. Saraie and Amini (2012) in their study found that there was significant difference among the means of five categories which can be influential on the quality. In other words, the dimensional aspect of empathy on the service quality was not the same.

Tangible

Reimer and Kuehn (2005) found that Parasuraman's original scale covered technical equipment, facility appearance, employee fit, and service type. The revised scale replaced redundant aspects with service-related materials and included only tangible aspects of physical surroundings.

Service Guarantee

A service guarantee can be viewed as a promise to the customer and is frequently sold as such (Amy, 2016; Mei, Kong, Ke & Yang, 2017). A guarantee is a specific form of financial recovery mechanism (Fabien, 2015).). Water services are frequently related with guarantees since they cover the substance of service offers when the service is being consumed (Abraheem et al., 2020). While guarantees have been used in the water service industry for a while, the concept of incorporating a service guarantee into the SERVQUAL model to improve customer satisfaction is relatively new. Abraheem et al. (2020) note that service guarantee has received less attention in the water industry compared to other service industries. Therefore, there is a need for further research to explore the effectiveness of service guarantee in improving customer satisfaction in the water service industry.

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Customer Satisfaction

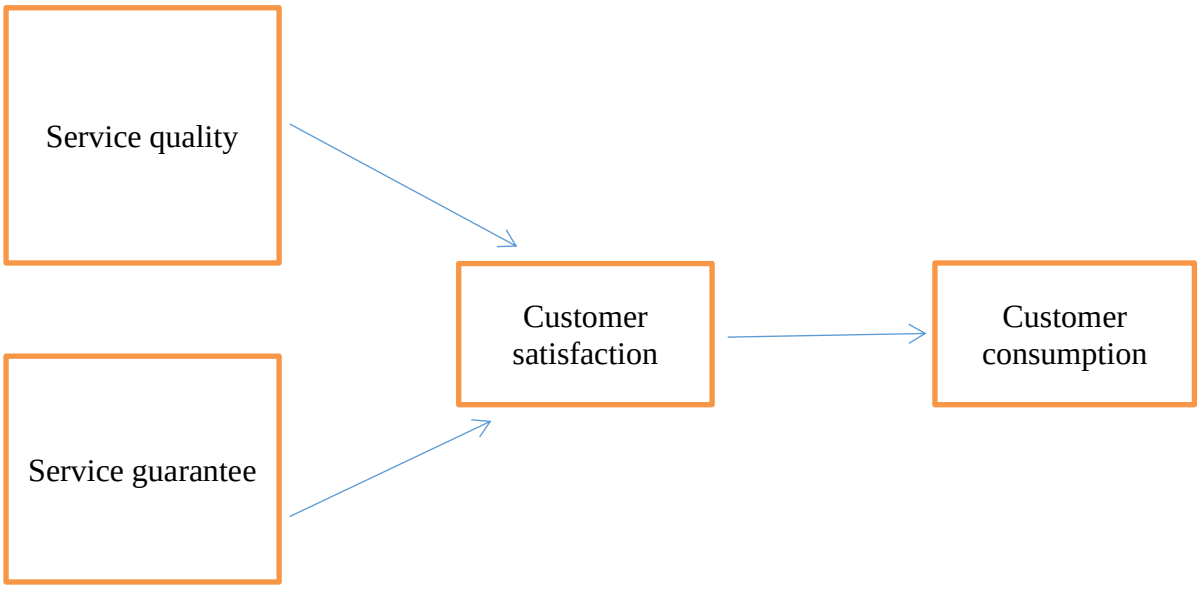
Many companies thrive on satisfied customers, who are the key to their existence and growth. To compete, firms must provide unique and valuable experiences to satisfy their needs. Studying customer satisfaction is crucial for service provider performance improvement and long-term retention. High satisfaction creates loyalty, business stability, growth, and development, making it a vital goal for modern companies facing contemporary challenges. Customer satisfaction, according to Chen and Chen (2019), is defined as the contrast of customer expectations and post-visit experiences with the service

Customer Consumption

The usage of products and services by a household is characterized as consumption (Campbell, 2005). It is a complicated social phenomena according to Firat et al. (2013), in which consumers use things or services for reasons other than their fundamental utility value. Consumption involves social and economic links that are also linked to time and geography, and is based on demands such as needs, wants, and desires, as well as commodities, services, and money (or another value substitute for money) that are required to meet those demands (Orçan, 2008). As a result, consuming may be described as the expenditure of material and intangible assets to fulfil a demand, whether actual or imagined (Torlak, 2000). Simply said, consuming is having a thing or a service, owning it, using it, or disposing of it to meet certain requirements (Ritzer, 2003).

When it comes to behavioural intentions of Omani citizens, they no longer trust their water providers (Amran & Al-Maamari, 2016), which is why they switch to substitutes such as bottled drinking water. People who reside in areas where standards for the quality of tap water have been violated, think that bottled water is safer, better in taste and a healthy alternative to tap water (Aslani et al., 2021).

Proposed Conceptual Framework :



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Methodology

This research employs a quantitative approach to investigate the influence of service quality and service guarantee on customer satisfaction and customer consumption among water service providers in Oman. The quantitative approach was chosen for its reliability and ability to analyze large datasets using statistical methods, allowing the testing of established hypotheses. The study is designed to test the relationships between service quality, service guarantee, customer satisfaction, and customer consumption. It uses a deductive method, where hypotheses are formulated and tested based on existing theories, with data collected through structured surveys. A survey-based approach will be employed for data collection, as it is efficient, cost-effective, and suitable for gathering large-scale data. A structured questionnaire will be used to ensure consistency and reliability. To address potential drawbacks (e.g., respondent unwillingness or bias) . The collected data will be analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). This method is suitable for testing causal relationships and identifying the factors influencing customer satisfaction and consumption. The analysis will ensure robust and generalizable findings.

This methodology ensures that the study is scientifically rigorous, addressing the research objectives effectively while maintaining high reliability and validity in its findings.

Results

Normality

The application of Skewness and Kurtosis are used in the tests for normality. A normal population distribution, according to Malhotra (2001), has a skewness between 1 and -1. As shown in the results from table below, all the dependent and independent variables were normal since all the skewness values of all of their items were distributed between 1 and -1. Another way to determine whether or not the variables were normal was to measure their kurtosis.

Construct Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability)

Based on the outputs in the below table below, the assessment of the reliability of the service quality dimensions produced positive outcomes because of a satisfactory level of internal consistency, as evidenced by the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.878, 0.883, 0.790, 0.942, and 0.908 for the dimensions of Assurance, Empathy, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Tangible, respectively. Furthermore, the items that identified the variable of service guarantee demonstrated a high level of internal consistency since they produced a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.912. Nevertheless, the remaining two explanatory variables (customer satisfaction and customer consumption) had excellent internal consistency, as indicated by their respective Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.965 and 0.949, respectively. Thus, it can be inferred that the data collection equipment was highly reliable and improved the acquisition of trustworthy data. In addition, as shown in the table above, all the composites reliability values were more than 0.80, indicating that the items of each latent variable were reliable. The results of both Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and composite imply that the items of these variables have higher internal consistency and could be used in this study.

Hypotheses Testing

Service quality has a strong impact on customer satisfaction, especially through responsiveness, empathy, tangibles, and reliability. However, its influence on customer consumption is limited to assurance and reliability. Service guarantee plays an important role in driving both customer satisfaction and consumption, though its negative link with satisfaction needs further study.

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Interestingly, customer satisfaction does not directly lead to customer consumption. Instead, customer consumption is mainly influenced by assurance, reliability, and service guarantees.

Coefficient of Determination: R^2 Value

The Coefficient of Determination (R^2) measures the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables. For customer consumption (CC), the R^2 value is 0.533, meaning 53.3% of the variance in CC is explained by customer satisfaction (CS) and service guarantee (SG), with an adjusted R^2 of 0.524, indicating minimal bias from additional predictors. For customer satisfaction (CS), the R^2 value is 0.786, showing that 78.6% of the variance in CS is explained by the predictors, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.783, highlighting a strong and reliable model.

Predictive Relevance (Blindfolding) Q^2

The Predictive Relevance (Blindfolding) Q2 measures whether a model have predictive relevance or not. This means that Q2 greater than 0 is good. Based on the findings , all the values are above 0 indicating that they are well reconstructed and the model has a predictive relevance.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve service quality, service guarantee, customer satisfaction, and customer consumption for water service providers in Oman:

Focus on Service Quality Dimensions:

Reliability and Assurance: These dimensions had the most positive influence on customer satisfaction and consumption. Water service providers should prioritize delivering reliable and consistent services while ensuring clear communication and assurances about the quality and safety of their water supply.

Tangible Improvements: Investments in physical infrastructure, such as modernized water delivery systems, improved pipelines, and digital monitoring, can enhance the tangible aspect of service quality and positively influence customer satisfaction.

Empathy and Responsiveness: Training staff to demonstrate empathy and improve responsiveness to customer needs and complaints is crucial. Quick responses to service disruptions or inquiries can rebuild customer trust and loyalty.
Revise the Approach to Service Guarantee:

The negative relationship between service guarantee and customer satisfaction suggests a need for clearer communication and execution. Service providers should ensure that guarantees are not merely perceived as marketing strategies but are backed by actionable outcomes.

Service guarantees should be designed to build customer confidence by addressing common concerns, such as water safety, healthiness, and affordability, through transparent mechanisms.
Enhance Customer Satisfaction as a Mediator:

Since customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality, service guarantee, and customer consumption, efforts should be made to align services with customer

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expectations. Regular surveys and feedback mechanisms can help service providers identify gaps and areas for improvement**.**

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