



Service Climate and Service Quality of Sri Lankan Public Service: A Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling Approach (PLS-SEM)

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between service climate and service quality of public service in Sri Lanka. For that, two questionnaires were distributed. The first questionnaire was distributed using random sampling method among 500 employees in 83 Divisional Secretariats to collect data to recognize the level of service climate. The second questionnaire was distributed customers to identify the level of service quality using same sampling method to 2500 customers in the same divisional secretariats. Data were analyzed by SEM using Smart Plus software. The findings revealed that the relationship between service climate (SEC) and perceived service quality (PSQ) is not accepted at 5 percent significance level ($P > 0.05$). It means that the relationship between service climate and perceived service quality is not significant in the context of the Sri Lankan public service. Then it deviates from the previous literature. This empirical finding will help to enhance the body of knowledge in the area of the service quality in the context of the Sri Lankan public service. Similarly this paper filled the important gap in the Sri Lankan literature.

Keywords: Service Quality, Service Climate, PLS-SEM, Public Service, Sri Lanka

JEL Code: E58, G01, G21

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1. Introduction

Public service is the work someone does on behalf of the government. The main task of the public service is to create policies and to put these policies and decisions into action to reach government objectives. For that, they implement rules and regulations. To that end, the public service delivers a wide range of services, which are used to apply the strategies that are



generated from the decisions of public policy. Bakhtiari (2007) has identified that “government services could be considered being of high quality and excellence, if people receive a high degree of satisfaction” (as cited in Nilwala et al., 2017). The public service delivers goods and services, most of which are free at the point of use. However, in the implementation of these policies and the delivery of services, the Sri Lankan government has faced some issues that necessitated public sector reorganization, for example, poverty, unemployment and most significantly, fraud and corruption. Therefore, public officials were compelled to find ways to provide high quality services to meet citizens’ expectations. According to the literature, many Sri Lankans are unhappy with the public service of the country (Wijesiri, 2016; Dissanayaka, 2022). Further, in 2022, Sri Lanka has one public servant for every 17 citizens; though, the world average is to have one public servant for every 250 citizens (Dissanayaka, 2022). However, there is a dearth of studies on measuring the service quality of public services in Sri Lanka, and even the few extant research studies have used the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) to measure the level of service quality.

In order to provide a quality service, it is essential to have a strong organizational service climate. The service climate is created by the leadership of the organization (Schneider et al., 1993) and it is the practice and procedures that a leader emphasizes and rewards. Further Schneider et al. (1998) has defined the “service climate is employees’ shared sense of the service quality, focused policies, practices and procedures they experience and the service quality emphasis they observe in behaviors that are rewarded, supported, and expected”. Therefore, it is necessary to communicate to employees what is important in the organization. Thus, service quality is influenced by several aspects of service practice and procedures, including the ‘moment of truth’ of the organization (Schneider et al., 1993). Therefore, customers perceive service quality through the ‘moment-of-truth’ episodes, which they encounter in any aspect of the organization. A former President of the Sri Lanka Association of Quality, Amaradasa (2012), stated that in relation to the ‘moment-of-truth,’ it ‘is a foregone conclusion to say that public sector organizations have a long way to go’. Moreover, asks ‘how long will public services personnel from the best tiers consisting of secretaries to the lowest inclusive of clerks and workplace-aides- take to embrace the culture of a quality service?’. This query indicates that there is a conscious need for a massive personal transformation of public officials countrywide. It emphasizes that public service organizations in Sri Lanka do not possess a strong service climate in which to serve their citizens.

Therefore, Amaradasa (2012) suggested establishing a clear vision to provide a quality service. For that, it is necessary to obtain feedback from customers, including customer responses, criticism, and customer support requirements. After analyzing these factors, service providers must act according to customer expectations and make sure such behavior is exhibited by all who serve the public. Further, he mentioned that these are customer support behaviors need to be taught to all employees as a part of their introductory training, since it will then cause a substantial cultural transformation. To this end, a strong leadership is a must. Schneider et al. (1993) revealed that the leadership creates the climate of service since the leaders of the organization who communicate the practices, procedures and rewards that are important for the organization to employees. Thus, it is important to identify the service climate, in order to understand how public servants perceive their service quality. However, there are no studies available in the Sri Lankan literature on the manner in which the service climate affects service quality. Therefore, the objective of the study is as follows.

To identify the impact of service climate on service quality of the public service in Sri Lanka.



2. Literature Reviews

2.1 Service Climate

Tagiuri (1968) refers (as cited in Curry & Flett, 2009) service climate as “the quality of the organization’s environment as experienced by its members”. Furthermore, it can be described as a way of perception and interpretation of a particular set of characteristics of the organizational environment by its employees (Johnson, 1996). Schneider (1986) suggested that for employees, service climate would be: “...the nest of policies, practices, procedures and reward, support and expectations, as a whole, (that) are thought to create a sense of imperative.” Employees behave according to the policies, practices, and procedures of an organization to achieve organizational goals as well as to provide a quality service, which has been mapped out, by the organization (Schneider & Bowen, 1993). Since employees always attempt to behave in the manner that is supported, recognized and rewarded by management (Schneider & Bowen, 1993, 1995; Schneider et al.; 1998; Bowen et al., 2000; Schneider et al., 2000). Hui et al. (2007), it must be emphasized that employees’ perceptions of the service climate should contain clear performance standards, proper training and information, support in job performance, lack of obstacles to service, and the distribution of rewards for good service to customers. The concept of service climate has been developed based on the Gestalt psychology introduced by Lewin in 1936. Later, numerous studies, those of Scheinder et al. (1992), Scheinder et al.(1993), Johnson (1996), Scheinder et al. (1998), Garcia et al. (2013).

2.2.1 Foundation to Service Climate

According to Schneider et al. (2009a), a positive service climate creates the foundation for employees to feel engaged in their work, since engaged employees are keen to do the things that the service climate requests of them. Salanova et al. (2005) also found the converse that employee engagement is an essential foundation for a positive service climate, and they have proven empirically that engaged employees’ impact on customer experiences through the service climate.

2.2.2 Antecedents of service climate

The antecedents of service climate such as leadership, HRM practices and systems support from operations, marketing, and information technology (Schneider et al., 2009a).

2.3 Perceived Service Quality

The conceptualization of service quality first appeared in the literature in 1980. It was based on the characteristics recommended for service in the field of cognitive psychology (Hoffman, 1986). First, the comparison of real service performance to established standards became the basis for conceptualizations of service quality (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Grönroos (1984) defined perceived service quality as “the outcome of an evaluation process where customers compare their expectations with the service they have received” (p.37). Parasuraman et al. (1988) reinforced this view of service quality as “a form of-attitude related but not equivalent to satisfaction that results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions and performance” (p. 15). Zeithaml (1987) introduced a more general definition for service quality, terming it “a consumer’s judgment about an entity’s overall excellence or superiority” Service quality is also explained as a form of attitude that is not equal to satisfaction, which is generated after the comparison of expectations and actual performance (Parasuraman et al., 1988).



2.4 Service Climate and Customers' Perceived Service Quality

Objective is to identify the impact of service climate on perceived service quality in the public service in Sri Lanka. Schneider et al. (1993) found that when employees have identified that their organization has a positive service climate; customers also feel that the organization provides a quality service to them. Therefore, it can be seen that service climate is actually the employees' shared sense of service quality. Service climate theory and research also emphasizes that these employee experiences are reflected in customer reports of service quality (Bowen & Pugh 2009). Schneider et al. (1993) found that when employees have identified that their organization has a positive service climate; customers also feel that the organization provides a quality service to them. Therefore, it can be seen that service climate is actually the employees' shared sense of service quality focused policies, practices and procedures they experience and the service quality emphasis they observe in behaviors that are rewarded, supported, and expected (Schneider et al., 1998). As well, Tagiuri (1968) refers (as cited in Curry & Flett, 2009) service climate as "the quality of the organization's environment as experienced by its members". Service climate theory and research also emphasizes that these employee experiences are reflected in customer reports of service quality (Bowen & Pugh 2009). Accordingly, numerous studies done by Scheinder et al.(1992), Scheinder et al. (1993), Johnson (1996), Scheinder et al. (1998), Gracia and Guru (2010), Little and Dean (2006), Ruyter and Lemmink (2004), Davidson (2003), Gupta and Gannon (2002), Drach and Somech (2013) empirically proved the positive correlation between service climate and perceived service quality.

This relationship is depicted in Figure1.

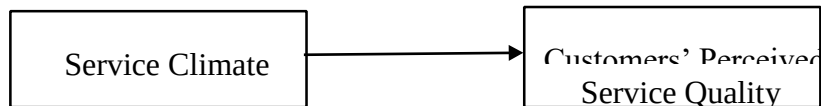


Figure 1. The Relationship between Service Climate and Customers' Perceived Service Quality

Therefore, the Hypothesis of this study is consider as follows.

H1: There is an association between service climate and customers' perceived service quality of the public service in Sri Lanka.

2.5 Measure of Service climate and Perceived Service Quality

The 7- item service climate measure developed by Schneider et al. (1998) is frequently used by researchers around the world to measure the service climate (Boewn & Schneider, 2013). As well the SERVQUAL which is developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) is the scale generally used by researchers to measure service quality. However, several critiques of the SERVQUAL model is also evident in the literature. These critiques are based mainly on the application and interpretation of the scale (Arasli et al., 2005). The dimensional structure of the SERVQUAL is different for expectations and perceptions in different contexts. Therefore, some researchers have modified, developed and replicated this scale for different services. For this study, a scale



developed by Wijesekera and Fernando (2016) for the Sri Lankan public service was used. The dimensions and number of items of these scales are separately set down as follows.

Table 1: Scale for Service Climate and Customers' Perceived Service Quality

Variable/Dimension	Items	Item Code
Service Climate (SC)	How would you rate the job knowledge and skills of employees in your business to deliver superior quality service?	SC_Q1
	How would you rate efforts to measure and track the quality of service in your business?	SC_Q2
	How would you rate the recognition and rewards employees receive for the delivery of superior service?	SC_Q3
	How would you rate the overall quality of service provided by your business?	SC_Q4
	How would you rate the leadership shown by management in your business in supporting the service quality effort?	SC-Q5
	How would you rate the effectiveness of your communications efforts to both employees and customers?	SC_Q6
Perceived Service Quality (PSQ)		
Responsiveness (RE)	Openness - Employees are willing to accept complaints or criticisms at the same time	SQ_RE_Q1
	Employees are always available to deliver the service.	SQ_RE_Q2
	Employees are efficient.	SQ_RE_Q3
	Employees always ready to provide services	SQ_RE_Q4
	Employees are never too busy to respond to customers' requests	SQ_RE_Q5
Cooperation (CO)	Unit functions are well-coordinated as a team	SQ_CO_Q6
	Employees should have one to one effective communication	SQ_CO_Q7
	Employees are polite and friendly	SQ_CO_Q8
Tangible (TA)	Allows the implementation of services that do not distinguish the class or status of the communities –Fair in service.	SQ_TA_Q9
	Should be maintained in a clean and tidy manner.	SQ_TA_Q10
	Provides sufficient waiting areas for customers.	SQ_TA_Q11
	has sufficient service providers to provide the services expected by customers	SQ_TA_Q12
	Has modern technology.	SQ_TA_Q13
	Empathy	
Empathy(EM)	Employees have the capability to answer customers' questions	SQ_EM_Q14
	Employees provide explanations and instructions to their customers in a friendly manner	SQ_EM_Q15
	Employees respect their Customers.	SQ_EM_Q16



Assurance (AS)	When a customer requires a service, it is easily accessible by telephone.	SQ_AS_Q17
	Employees treat customers courteously on the phone	SQ_AS_Q18
	Maintains trustworthiness	SQ_AS_Q19

3. Research Methods

This study aims to investigate the relationship between service climate and perceived service quality in the Sri Lankan public service. To investigate this, the researcher was selected Divisional Secretariats to represent the Sri Lankan public service. This is because Divisional Secretariats are the organizations that dispense more than 90 percent of government related services provided to citizens in Sri Lanka (Herath, 2008). To collect data, two self-administered questionnaires were used. One questionnaire was distributed among employees and the other among customers. These data sets were collected from 83 Divisional Secretariats chosen from among 330 Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka. For that, a systematic random sampling technique was used. Front line employees were selected from three branches, namely, land, administration and social services, which provide services within the premises of a Divisional Secretariat. To measure service climate 500 responses (from employees) were selected from 83 Divisional Secretariats and to measure perceived service quality, each of the 500 employees was evaluated by 5 customers. Then the customer sample is 2500. Random sampling methods were used to select employees and customers.

During analysis, descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and the SPSS version 22.0 software package were used. Afterwards, the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was used in order to find the causal relationships expected from this study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Out of 500 questionnaires from employees 495 found to be useful. When considering employees, majority of respondents are female (73%) and aged between 31-40 years (57%). 59% of the respondents are degree (undergraduate and post graduate) holders. The demographic characteristics of employees indicates in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Employees

Demographic	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	360	72.7
	Male	135	27.3
	Total	495	
Age	Below 20 years	1	.2
	21-30 years	64	12.9
	31-40 years	284	57.4
	41-50 years	111	22.4
	51 -60 years	35	7.1
	Total	495	
Education Level	GCE O/L	9	1.8
	GCE A/L	164	33.1



	Diploma	32	6.5
	Degree	265	53.5
	Post Graduate Diploma	25	5.1
	Total	495	
Total experience in government service	Below 1 year	27	5.5
	1-5 years	96	19.4
	6-10 years	205	41.4
	11-15 years	81	16.4
	Above 15 years	86	17.4
	Total	495	
Experience in the current organization	Below 1 year	102	20.6
	1-3 years	142	28.7
	4-6 years	185	37.4
	7-9 years	47	9.5
	Above 10 years	19	3.8
	Total	495	

Then the customers sample is 2475. Majority of respondents are male (54%) and aged between 38-47 years. 58% of the respondents have qualifications above that of the GCE A/L, and 68% of the respondents are employed. The demographic characteristics of customers indicates in Table 3.

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Customers

Demographic	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	1144	46.2
	Male	1331	53.8
	Total	2475	100.0
Age	18-27	457	18.5
	28-37	588	23.8
	38-47	714	28.8
	48-57	539	21.8
	58<	177	7.2
	Total	2475	100.0
Education Level	Below GCE O/L	188	7.6
	GCE O/L	506	20.4
	GCE A/L	1081	43.7
	Degree	542	21.9
	Above degree	158	6.4
	Total	2475	100.0
Doing a Job?	Yes	1686	68.1
	No	789	31.9
	Total	2475	100.0

4.2 Assessment of Measurement Accuracy



Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Internal Reliability Analysis of Scales

Construct	Item Code	Scale Item		Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Factor Loadings
		Mean	SD				
SC		5.29	0.97	.857	0.897	0.555	
	SC_Q1	5.7418	1.15073				.740
	SC_Q2	4.9640	1.50850				.726
	SC_Q3	4.5657	1.56225				.647
	SC_Q4	5.8101	1.09949				.773
	SC_Q5	5.5644	1.32241				.815
	SC_Q6	5.5261	1.20378				.858
	SC_Q7	4.8630	1.40080				.632
SQ_RE		4.07	1.166	.851	0.894	0.628	
	SQ_RE_Q1	3.9289	1.45194				.721
	SQ_RE_Q2	4.0723	1.50720				.815
	SQ_RE_Q3	4.1604	1.51406				.831
	SQ_RE_Q4	4.1499	1.43146				.826
	SQ_RE_Q5	4.0420	1.46001				.764
SQ_CO		4.15	1.230	.781	0.873	0.696	
	SQ_CO_Q6	4.0137	1.53187				.800
	SQ_CO_Q7	4.1406	1.47151				.866
	SQ_CO_Q8	4.3152	1.42108				.837
SQ_TA		4.48	1.024	.754	0.819	0.478	
	SQ_TA_Q9	4.0448	1.57897				.642



SQ_TA_Q10	4.813 7	1.3331 7				.839
SQ_TA_Q11	4.503 8	1.4676 1				.642
SQ_TA_Q12	4.711 9	1.4306 4				.702
SQ_TA_Q13	4.344 2	1.3947 4				.610
SQ_EM	3.97	0.906	.618	0.788	0.568	
SQ_EM_Q1 4	3.468 3	.62882				.479
SQ_EM_Q1 5	4.313 1	1.3651 0				.864
SQ_EM_Q1 6	4.140 2	1.4450 8				.854
SQ_AS	3.89	0.972	.601	0.741	0.499	
SQ_AS_Q17	3.800 4	1.5528 2				.785
SQ_AS_Q18	3.649 3	1.3370 9				.477
SQ_AS_Q19	4.243 6	1.4119 4				.810

The mean scores of these dimensions in perceived service quality are indicates in Table 4. Each dimension was measured using a 7- point Likert scale. The highest mean score of 4.48 ± 1.024 was for the tangibility dimension. The lowest mean score of 3.89 ± 0.972 was for the assurance dimension. However, there are no significant differences in the respondents' frequency of agreement on the perceived service quality dimensions.

Service climate construct contained seven items which was measured on a 7- point Likert scale ranging 1=strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. As indicated in Table 3 all items have above 4 mean scores. The highest mean scores of were for SC_Q1, SC_Q4, SQ_Q5 and SQ_Q6. The lowest mean value of 4.57 ± 1.56 was reported for SC_Q3. This item explains how employees rate the recognition and rewards they receive for the delivery of superior service. However, there are no significant differences in respondents' agreement with items in the service climate variable. This indicates the respondents (employees) tend towards the notion of service climate.

To ensure reliability of all constructs of this study Conbach's alpha, Coposite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)were calculated. All items reported Conbach's alpha values above 0.7 and it indicates that all dimensions have high internal consistency.The cut-off value of $AVE \geq 0.5$ (Hair et al., 2014) and the cut-off value of $CR \geq 0.6$. (Hair et al., 2014) It also indicates that all constructs ensured the reliability of these constructs. The Convergent Validity determines "the degree to which two measures of the same concept is correlated" (Hair et al., 2014, p.124). Higher factor loadings represent higher convergent validity, and it should be 0.5



or higher (Hair et al., 2014). The factor loadings of all the items included in these two scales were above 0.5. Therefore can be ensured the convergent validity of these constructs.

4.3 Path Model

The PLS estimation results for the structural model , path coefficients values as well as the item items loadings for study constructs are shown in Figure 2.

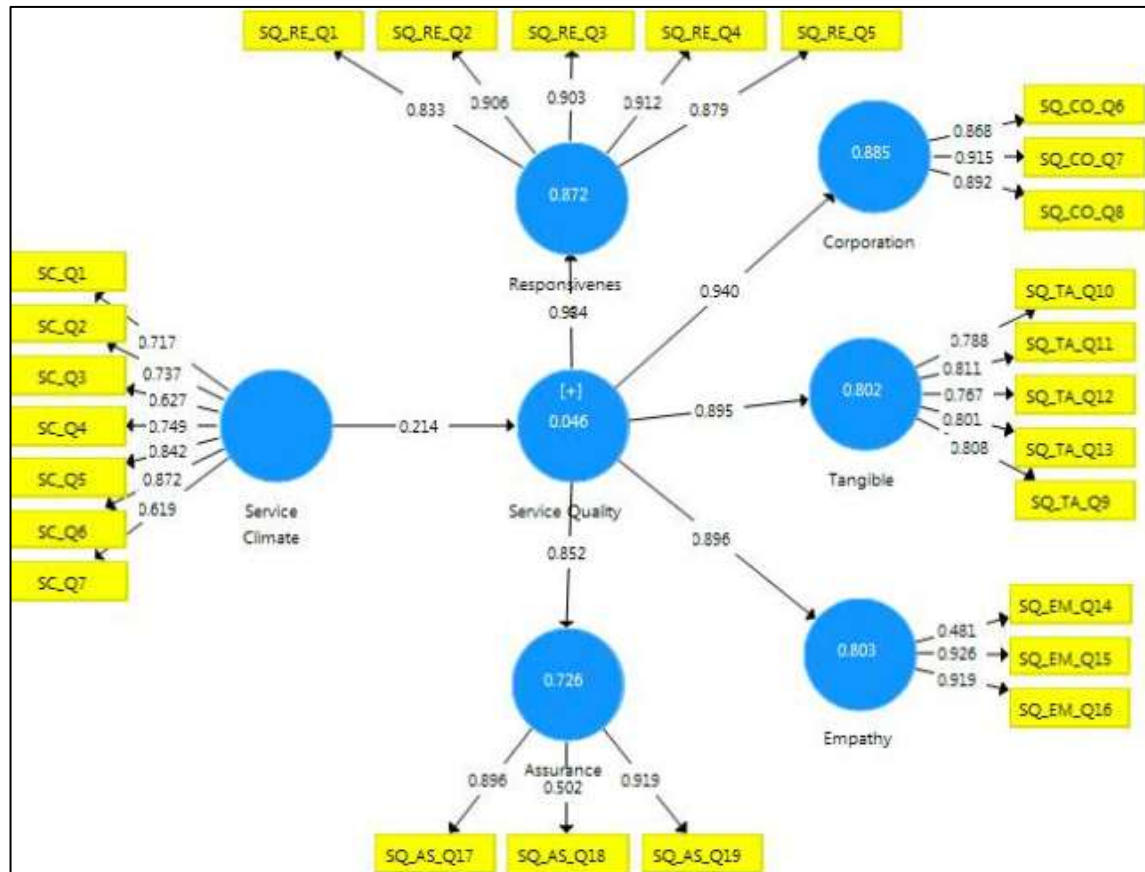


Figure 2: Results of Measurement and Structural Model

Table 5: Outcomes of the Structural Equation Model Analysis

Path	Path coefficient (β)	T -Statistic	Decision
Service Climate -> Service Quality	0.214	5.189	Positive and not significant
Service Quality -> Assurance	0.852	55.448	Positive and significant
Service Quality -> Corporation	0.940	185.267	Positive and significant
Service Quality -> Empathy	0.896	99.425	Positive and significant
Service Quality -> Responsiveness	0.934	120.722	Positive and significant
Service Quality -> Tangible	0.895	97.533	Positive and significant



According to Table 5, the relationship between service climate (SEC) and perceived service quality (PSQ) is not accepted at 5 percent significance level ($P > 0.05$). Then it deviates from the previous literature. The study titled 'Front Line Employees (FLE) versus customers' perception of quality attributes' conducted by Julien and Tsoni (2013) found a mismatch between FLE's perception of quality and customers' perception of quality. Since, according to Nilsen and Campbell (1993), FLEs evaluate quality attributes which they consider to be direct indicators of their job performance while customers do not always assess service encounters on the basis of employees' assessment of their performance during the encounter (Julien & Tsoni, 2013). To explain the mismatch, researchers used the concept of self-efficacy which is a concept borrowed from social cognitive theory (Julien & Tsoni, 2013). According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy is "people's judgments of their capacity to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance". Social cognitive theory says that 'people's perceptions have always been constructed depending on their personality and context. Moreover, people seem to have stable and durable perceptions, which are often different from other people perceptions' (as cited in Julien & Tsoni, 2013). Therefore, employees' perceptions of service quality may not always match with customers' perceptions. Similarly, Cui et al. (2004) found a mismatch between employee and customer perceptions in the banking sector in China. Subramony et al. (2004) have mentioned that the relationship between service climate and customers' perceived service quality is not clear. This is because, often, the customer is the image of the employee's experience with the organization, and whether the employees' experience of the service climate is a positive one or a negative one, they can hardly hide what they feel about it (Schneider et al., 1980; Schneider & Bowen, 1985), and customers' service experience reflects those feelings. By confirming this, among the items that measure service climate in this study, SC_Q4 reports the highest mean value of 5.81 ± 1.1 . This item explains how employees rate the overall quality of service provided by them.

5. Conclusion

The findings revealed that the relationship between service climate and perceived service quality is not significant in the context of the Sri Lankan public service. Hence, these empirical findings will help to enhance the body of knowledge in the area of the service quality in the public service. When employee evaluate the service climate the lowest mean scores were reported the items 'how employee rate the recognition and rewards they receive for the delivery of superior service' and 'how would you rate efforts to measure and track the quality of service in your organization'. This indicates that there is no proper way to recognize the employees who deliver superior service and there is no proper way to evaluate the service quality of the organizations.

In this study, Divisional Secretariats were selected to represent the whole public service. Therefore, to generalize the findings more effectively, further studies can be carried out with provincial administration and other public sector organizations. Further, the service climate concept is not a familiar one to the Sri Lankan context of the public service, and therefore, a customized scale is needed. As well employees' experience of the service climate is a positive one or a negative one, they can hardly hide what they feel about it when filling the questionnaires. Then it is more effective to conduct a qualitative study to identify the actual feeling of employees.



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