African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure 2025, Vol. 14 No. 5 pp. 1118-1126
ISSN: 2223-814X

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction at Visa Application Centres in South Africa

Madiseng M. PHORI
Department of Tourism Management.
Tshwane University of Technology,
Email, phorimm@tut.ac.za
Corresponding Author

Tshepiso M. MOLAI
Department of Hospitality Management,
Tshwane University of Technology,
Email, molaitm@tut.ac.za

Abstract

The study examined the link between service quality and customer satisfaction at Visa Application Centres in South Africa. A quantitative design was applied using the SERVQUAL model. Data were collected from 262 applicants through a structured questionnaire and analysed with SPSS using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling. Four dimensions of service quality; reliability, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness showed a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Assurance showed no significant effect, indicating a weakness in staff trust, knowledge and professionalism. Managers should strengthen reliability with strict quality checks and staff training. Tangibility requires modern and accessible facilities. Responsiveness needs clear service standards and empowered staff. Empathy should be improved through multilingual support and sensitivity training. Assurance needs urgent attention through professional communication and privacy protection. The study provides evidence on service quality in outsourced visa services in South Africa. It offers practical steps for improving applicant experiences and informs policy and management decisions in a sector with limited prior research.

Keywords Service quality; Customer satisfaction; Visa Application Centres; SERVQUAL; South Africa

How to cite this article: Phori, M.M. & Molai, T.M. (2025). Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction at Visa Application Centres in South Africa. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 14(5):1118-1126. DOI: https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.702

Introduction

The economic growth in South Africa and globally has largely depended on tourism, one of the most important sectors of the service industry (Hermann et al., 2012; Phori & Mbali, 2020). A citizen wishing to travel to and enter a foreign country typically needs to obtain a travel visa first, which provides temporary permission to enter the destination for tourism purposes. The traveller then begins the process of applying for a visa at a Visa Application Centre (VAC) in their country of residence. In this modern landscape, hospitality and tourism organisations and businesses focus on ensuring and improving service quality because they believe that perceived service quality and customer satisfaction are vital for achieving their goals. According to Nimsith et al. (2017), service quality in the tourism industry can be assessed within the context of the service provided. In this competitive era, every business entity seeks a competitive advantage and a way to dominate the market or simply survive (Nikou et al., 2016). Hospitality, leisure, and tourism, as service sectors, play a crucial role in every economy, whether developed or developing (Thevisuthan & Tharjanan, 2016). Indeed, as Ahmed et al. (2010) have noted, service sectors are a fundamental part of most modern economies. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction at various VACs in South Africa, using the SERVQUAL model. Service quality and customer satisfaction in the visa applications sector are relatively under-researched topics. Regarding service quality and customer satisfaction in VACs, Matthews & Mokoena (2020) conducted a similar study recently, which further limited their research by using a very small sample of foreign students from a single university attending VFS Global-operated centres. This limitation raised questions about how representative their sample was of the broader population of VAC users. This study, however, includes a larger sample, involving more visa applicants from VACs operated by several visa-outsourcing companies such as Capago International, TLScontact, VFS Global and BLS International across various provinces in South Africa. Additionally, Matthews and Mokoena (2020) did not address the formalisation and commercialisation of visa facilitation services by embassies and consulates worldwide, a focus this study will incorporate. One of the most urgent issues faced by VACs, not only in South Africa but globally, is the need to provide a high-quality or consistent visa application process to minimise customer dissatisfaction and excessive complaints (Quinn, 2011). Nimsith et al. (2017) highlight that it is increasingly challenging for companies, whether large or small, to acquire new customers compared to retaining existing ones. Furthermore, research by Safwan et al. (2010) suggests that it costs significantly more in terms of budget and employee time to convert a new customer than to retain an existing one.

Literature review

Service quality

Service quality is a vital concept in tourism and hospitality research, yet scholars continue to debate how best to measure it. Over time, various models have been created, such as SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, INTSERVQUAL and INSQPLUS, all designed to capture the multidimensional nature of service delivery (Jain et al., 2017; Parasuraman et al., 1988). In tourism-focused research, tools like HOLSERV and LODGSERV are used for accommodation services, DINESERV for restaurant

services and CASERV for casino services (Marković & Raspor, 2010). INTQUAL and INTERSERVQUAL, however, include employees' expectations and perceived service quality. Despite the numerous measurement models available, SERVQUAL remains the most widely used across service industries, including tourism, because it emphasises aspects such as intangibility, inseparability and variability (Ali et al., 2021; Butt & de Run, 2010). According to Molai et al. (2020), SERVQUAL assesses service quality by measuring the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions of the service delivered across five dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibility, responsiveness and empathy. The adaptability and validity of the SERVQUAL framework have made it prevalent in hospitality, leisure and travel-related industries (Amin et al., 2013; Sánchez-Rebull et al., 2018).

Figure 1: Conceptual model
Source: Authors' own compilation

In the visa application industry, where applicants encounter both administrative and people-oriented scenarios presented as service delivery, SERVQUAL serves as a valuable framework for assessing service quality. The multidimensional nature of this framework enables researchers to provide a comprehensive overview of the service delivery process in a VAC, from the accuracy and timeliness of document processing to the professionalism and empathy demonstrated by VAC staff. The service involves various sub-processes necessary for delivery (Ganiyu, 2016). Information services related to visa application dimensions can be categorised into four types: explanation of the application process, website usability, appointment accessibility and VAC accessibility. Meanwhile, VAC services include parking facilities, entry through security, centre atmospherics, privacy, professionalism, staff competence and overall service quality, among others. During the service experience, such data shape customer expectations regarding how they anticipate to be treated (Ganiyu, 2016). To remain within a zone of tolerance, customers must also recognise the differences between their expectations and perceived performance (Zeithaml et al., 1990). As Noel (2011) mentions, the measures employed by customers influence how they perceive service quality. Consequently, the relative importance assigned to the five dimensions of quality service varies depending on context (Noel, 2011) and draws upon different stakeholder value chains. Therefore, this study aims to utilise the SERVQUAL framework to elucidate the dimensions of service quality and the attributes influencing customer satisfaction in South African VACs.

Customer satisfaction

The concept of customer satisfaction has been examined across various fields worldwide, highlighting the need for further investigation in the tourism and hospitality sectors. This is mainly because consumers serve as the primary source of revenue for these industries. Consequently, research has demonstrated that customer satisfaction plays a vital role in the future success of tourism and hospitality (Ariya et al., 2020; Pivac et al., 2011). These industries are highly competitive, and one key approach to remaining competitive is delivering quality service, as it directly influences customer satisfaction (Liat et al., 2017). Previous studies suggest that success in today's tourism and hospitality markets depends on businesses consistently meeting customers' needs (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Customer satisfaction is defined as the extent to which a product or service fulfils the customer's needs and expectations. According to Abdallat & Emam (2014), customer satisfaction reflects the post-purchase thought process, revealing how much the customer likes or dislikes the service received. In the tourism and hospitality sectors, Sánchez-Rebull et al. (2018) noted that customer satisfaction involves aligning the buyer's needs and expectations with the service provided by the host establishment or destination. Oliver's (1980) disconfirmation theory states that if the service quality experienced by the customer is less than their expectations, satisfaction will not be achieved, and only disconfirmation occurs; however, if the destination or establishment meets or exceeds expectations, the customer will be satisfied, resulting in positive fulfilment of expectations.

Eid (2015) explains that customer satisfaction is essential for the tourism and hospitality sectors to retain customers and foster loyalty. When a customer is pleased with their overall experience at a host venue or location, they are likely to return for further purchases of the product and service (Maunier & Camelis, 2013). One benefit of fulfilling customers' needs and expectations is that the tourism and hospitality industries benefit from free advertising and promotion, as satisfied customers tend to spread positive word of mouth and recommend the tourist site or hospitality venue to friends and family (Wang et al., 2017). Additional advantages of satisfied customers include, but are not limited to, increased competitiveness, efficiency, profitability and market share (Chand, 2010). For this reason, customer satisfaction should be a top priority in the tourism and hospitality industry. Cengiz (2010) states that by confirming customer satisfaction within a venue, management can assess and improve the service and product experience of a lodging facility, ensuring that offerings align with customer needs and expectations, as well as those of competitors (Agyapong, 2011). Mnisi (2014) noted that when measuring customer satisfaction, it is vital to identify what the customer perceives as the core offering of the venue.

Amin et al. (2013) conducted a study on hotel industry service quality and customer satisfaction. The constructs measured included reservation services, value for money, staff presentation and knowledge, food and beverages, and hotel ambience, all of which significantly predicted customer satisfaction. Chen et al. (2011) explored the behavioural intentions of consumers in tourism and hospitality, extending beyond mere service quality satisfaction. They found that higher customer satisfaction is more likely when destination and location quality are high. Consequently, managers in tourism and hospitality should focus on delivering high-quality services, as customer satisfaction can influence future behaviour positively or negatively. The Kano Model, created in the 1980s, best illustrates customer satisfaction by categorising customer needs into basic, one-dimensional, attractive and attribute groups (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015). This model also helps monitor customer expectations about service features. Madzík (2018) notes that the model is based on the idea that excellent products and services must meet customer needs, shifting away from a linear relationship to focus on specific attributes that truly satisfy customers.

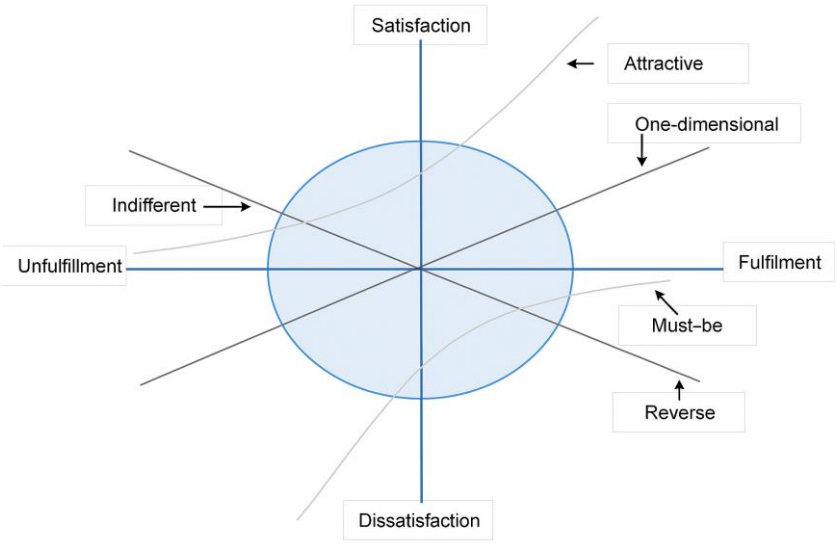

Figure 2: Kano's model of customer satisfaction
Source: Yang, 2005

Visa application regulations

Over recent decades, border controls have become significantly more important (Baysan, 2013). As Salter (2008) notes, countries need to manage entry control even before individuals reach the border. This shift has led consular and embassy officials, along with private visa outsourcing firms, to take on critical border enforcement roles. Internal security now extends beyond domestic police forces to include consulates in travellers' home countries. Unlike visible police officers, these measures are less apparent (Bigo, 2006). Visa officials are now better positioned to protect their countries from unauthorised entry through new border control strategies (Whyte, 2008). Recently, economic growth in emerging nations such as China, India, and South Africa, along with globalisation, has increased the number of people travelling abroad for business, leisure or visiting family and friends (Economist, 2016). As a result, demand for visas has surged. Before March 3, 2009, South Africans and many other nationalities could visit the United Kingdom (UK) for up to six months without a visa (Traveller24, 2020). A stricter immigration security policy was implemented when the UK reviewed its visa rules and reinforced borders by urging neighbouring and other countries, whose passports and immigration controls didn't meet UK standards, to improve their security (Traveller24, 2020). Despite warnings, nations such as South Africa, Swaziland, Bolivia and Venezuela did not meet the visa-national deadline and were subsequently added to the controversial visa-national list.

According to the UK government (2020), UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) oversees decisions on who can visit or stay in the UK, balancing security with customer satisfaction. UKVI (2016) states that various visitor visas are available, including options for general and family visitors, children, business professionals, entrepreneurs, sports and creative professionals, individuals seeking private medical care (up to six months), those taking the PLAB test, clinical attachments,

dental observations and those expecting payment for attendance. Visa costs vary based on validity, from six months to ten years (UKVI, 2020); longer visas cost more. The European Union (EU) has updated its visa code to streamline applications for genuine travellers, aiming to boost travel, trade and safety while reducing irregular migration and security risks (European Union, 2020). This code covers short-stay visas for the 28 Schengen Area countries, including Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, - home to over 400 million people (Baysan, 2013). Visitors need visas to stay up to 90 days within any 180-day period. Applications are usually submitted in the applicant's home country, either in person at a diplomatic mission or at a VAC operated by an external service provider. Applicants are also required to give fingerprints in person every 59 months.

Visa application outsourcing

In recent years, visa processing has increasingly been outsourced to external companies such as Tlscontact (TLScontact, 2020). This shift has helped governments manage the rising demand for visas amid a surge in international travel. Peachey (2020) notes that outsourcing visa services can improve customer experience and reduce processing times for travellers. Within the tourism sector, visa application outsourcing is a niche market dominated by a few specialised firms worldwide, including VFS Global, CSC, TLScontact, Intergate Visalink and BLS International (HDFC Securities, 2016). These organisations handle all administrative and non-judgemental tasks of the visa application process for their diplomatic missions and consulates globally, allowing these missions to concentrate on the core part of the process: evaluating visa applications. VFS Global is recognised as the leading global application processing provider. Part of the Kuoni Group, a Swiss tourism company established in 2001, VFS Global initially handled American visa applications at one Mumbai location, where applicants often waited about five hours in the hot, humid weather outside the American consulate (Economist, 2016). Later, the American Embassy partnered with VFS Global to manage visa processing, cutting the wait time to around one hour (Gailliot, 2016). This period marked the shift of visa application services to outsourcing. Antony Phillipson, the British High Commissioner to Singapore (2013), observed that outsourcing visa services to private partners allows for higher quality service and a customer-focused approach, aligning with the public sector's goal of delivering excellent service (Diedericks & Tiba, 2015). Today, visa applicants globally are familiar with private visa outsourcing providers (Geiger, 2016). According to VFS Global (2020), consular support services encompass operational, informational and financial platforms that streamline the entire consular process, customised to specific needs. These services help diplomatic missions provide an integrated process from application submission to delivery. Diplomatic missions reduce the complexity and costs involved in visa application processes by outsourcing these services to private organisations. Escott-Carrington (2020) highlights that offering smooth and simple visa procedures is becoming increasingly important in the visa processing industry. Such procedures can increase the influx of tourists, students and business travellers to a country. Peachey (2020) argues that travellers abroad must follow immigration rules, so they should be treated as 'customers' with an emphasis on enhancing their overall experience.

Methodology

This study aimed to examine the link between service quality and customer satisfaction at five VACs in Pretoria, South Africa. A quantitative approach was employed, using a non-probability convenience sampling method, suitable for exploring relationships between service quality constructs (Creswell, 2014; Hair et al., 2019). The participants included visa applicants, both those applying and those collecting passports. Data was collected outside the VAC premises through a self-administered SERVQUAL questionnaire consisting of two parts: demographic information and 20 items measuring service quality dimensions. Participants rated these items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), providing detailed perceptions of service quality. A total of 262 valid responses were obtained. To verify validity and reliability, Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency across the SERVQUAL constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM) were also used to evaluate construct validity and explore hypothesised relationships between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction (Hair et al., 2019). This approach aligns with recent service quality studies in tourism and hospitality, where access to random sampling is limited (Amin et al., 2013; Matthews & Mokoena, 2020). While other tools like SERVPERF, INTSERVQUAL, and INSQPLUS exist, SERVQUAL remains the most widely used model in service and hospitality sectors (Jain et al., 2017; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Sector- specific models such as HOLSERV, LODGSERV, and DINESERV are applied in hotels and restaurants, with CASERV used in casinos (Marković & Raspor, 2010). Given the unique characteristics of services in tourism and visa facilitation- such as intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability- SERVQUAL was considered the most appropriate tool. Its five dimensions - reliability, assurance, tangibility, responsiveness, and empathy - provide a comprehensive framework to assess customer perceptions and expectations of service delivery (Ali et al., 2021; Butt & de Run, 2010).

The following hypotheses were developed to test the relationship between the constructs.

H1: Reliability has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction.
H2: Assurance has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction.
H3: Tangibility has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction.
H4: Empathy has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction.
H5: Responsiveness has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction.

Results of the study

The study is descriptive in nature, and the survey data employed frequency tables, descriptive and correlation statistics in this research data analysis. The SPSS computerised programme was used for data analysis.

Demographic analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the demographic profile of the participants. Out of the total of 262 participants in the study, the results showed that more females, at 56%, took part. Male participants made up 44%. In terms of age groups, most participants were between 31 and 40 years old, accounting for 29%, while most indicated a diploma as their minimum level of education at 43%. The majority of respondents, at 63%, reported being employed, with most participants, at 62%, stating that their purpose of travel or type of visa applied for was a leisure or family-visit visa.

Table 1: Demographic data

GENDER	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Male	115	44%
Female	147	56%
TOTAL	**262**	**100%**
AGE	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
< 20	33	13%
21–30	42	16%
31 – 40	77	29%
41 – 50	55	21%
51 – 60	31	12%
61 >	24	9%
TOTAL	**262**	**100%**
EDUCATION LEVEL	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
High School	28	11%
Diploma	112	43%
Degree	91	35%
Post Grad. Degree	31	12%
TOTAL	**262**	**100%**
OCCUPATION	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Employed	166	63%
Unemployed	28	11%
Retired	32	12%
Student	36	14%
TOTAL	**262**	**100%**
TYPE OF VISA APPLYING FOR	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Business visa	64	24%
Tourism/Leisure/Family-visit visa	162	62%
Student visa	21	8%
Transit visa	9	3%
Other	6	2%
TOTAL	**262**	**100%**

Validity and reliability

The study adopted dimensions of the service quality from the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The model is still widely used as an instrument to measure service quality, thus confirming the content validity (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Carman, 1990). Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the test scores for the scale items. Cronbach alpha scores range between 0.0 (meaning no internal consistency exists) to 1.0 (absolute internal consistency). In most social sciences literature, reliability was acceptable when the alpha score of the test scale was equal to 0.60 or above. The Cronbach's Alpha value for each construct for this study is shown in Table 2. The Reliability construct scored an alpha value of 0.6215, Assurance construct scored a value of 0.6554, Tangibility construct scored an alpha value of 0.6047, Empathy scored an alpha value of 0.8485 and the Responsiveness construct earned 0.8247.

Table 2: Instrument reliability

Scale	**Number of items**	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**Type**
Reliability	4	0.6215	Moderate Reliability
Assurance	4	0.6554	Moderate Reliability
Tangibility	4	0.6047	Moderate Reliability
Empathy	4	0.8485	High Reliability
Responsiveness	4	0.8247	High Reliability

Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was constructed to measure goodness of fit amongst each Latent variable or construct against all other items or statements. CFA for each individual construct was measured, then CFA was constructed after validating each construct. Three criteria were used, with several cut-off points used to measure goodness-of-fit when applying CFA. The following are used to measure CFA: Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), Comparative fit index (CFI) and Standardised root mean squared residual (SRMR). For the goodness-of-fit to be observed, the majority of the criteria should be significant with the following cut-off points: RMSEA <= 0.08; CFI >= 0.90 and SRMR <= 0.08. The latent variable was not observed and predicted using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). In SEM, the higher the coefficient (Coef.), the lower the variance error (Var(e)) and the lower the coefficient, the higher the Var(e). SEM 1 covered the presentation of Structural Equation Modelling for SERVQUAL constructs. No measure was noted for the path of items for REL1. The interaction between Latent variables and item 4 (REL4) had a coefficient of 3.69, the lowest observed coefficient, with a variance of Var(e.Rel4) of 1.07. The coefficients for the paths REL2 and REL3 were 5.22 and 4.80, respectively. The paths for

REL2, REL3, REL4, REL5, and REL6 were significant because their p-values were less than 0.05. RMSEA was below 0.08; these criteria indicate a good fit. CFI was 1.000, exceeding the cut-off of 0.90, which also suggests a good fit. Additionally, SRMR had a value of 0.004, under the threshold of 0.08. Therefore, all three measures indicate a good fit. Consequently, the constructs and items are valid.

Table 3: Confirmatory factor analysis

	Coef.	Std.	z	P>|z|	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Measurement						
REL1 <-			1 (constrained)			
Reliability	4.068702	.0480923	84.60	0.000	3.974443	4.162961
_cons						
REL2 <-						
Assurance	5.216719	1.852313	2.82	0.005	1.586253	8.847184
_cons	3.454198	.0756602	45.65	0.000	3.305907	3.60249
REL3 <-						
Tangibility	4.79905	1.679001	2.86	0.004	1.508268	8.089831
_cons	3.339695	.0681452	49.01	0.000	3.206133	3.473257
REL4 <-						
Empathy	3.688646	1.335477	2.76	0.006	1.071159	6.306133
_cons	2.51145	.0743507	33.78	0.000	2.365726	2.657175
REL5<- Responsiveness	3.656646	1.335477	2.67	0.005	1.062159	5.506122
_cons	2.50145	.0723504	34.76	0.000	2.324724	2.657171
REL6<- Customer	3.688646	1.335477	2.76	0.006	1.071159	6.306133
Satisfaction	2.56532	.0743565	33.74	0.000	2.365726	2.457162
_cons						

Correlation analysis

In determining the model's descriptive power, a correlation analysis method was utilised to evaluate the developed theoretical model about the link between SERVQUAL constructs and customer satisfaction at various VACs in South Africa and test the hypotheses for this study. Findings of the correlation analysis and hypotheses are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: The Constructs' relationship is significant

Hypothesis	Beta-Value (β)	R Value	P Value	Results
Reliability - Customer satisfaction **(H1)**	0.205	0.172	0.017	Supported/Significant
Assurance - Customer satisfaction **(H2)**	0.034	0.034	0.617	Not supported/Not significant.
Tangibility - Customer satisfaction **(H3)**	0.203	0.361	0.000	Supported/Significant
Empathy - Customer satisfaction **(H4)**	0.207	0.143	0.043	Supported/Significant
Responsiveness - Customer satisfaction **(H5)**	0.143	0.186	0.010	Supported/Significant

As shown in Table 4, it is clear that service quality dimensions positively correlate with customer satisfaction within the VACs, except for assurance, which is not supported or not significant. Therefore, all hypotheses are positive except assurance. The hypotheses for the study were tested using the results of Pearson's Correlation Analysis.

H1: Reliability has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction

The results in Table 4 show that there is a significant relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction at Visa Application Centres in South Africa ($\beta = 0.205$, R-value = 0.172, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, H1 is supported. This finding supports Matthews and Mokoena (2020), who also identified reliability as a strong determinant of satisfaction in South African VACs.

H2: Assurance has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction

The results of this hypothesis test ($\beta = 0.034$, R-value = 0.034, $p > 0.05$) indicate that assurance did not have a significant relation with customer satisfaction. Thus, the hypothesis (H2) was not supported. Again, the finding is in agreement with the study by Matthews & Mokoena (2020), which acknowledges that there was no significant relationship between assurance and customer satisfaction. This could be due to VACs not taking the assurance dimension into full and serious consideration. Naik et al. (2010) show that the assurance dimension relates to customers' perceptions of security and privacy, as well as the perception that staff are knowledgeable and have the ability to instil trust in them, which the VACs need to pay attention to.

H3: Tangibility has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction

The results of the study ($\beta = 0.203$, R-value = 0.361, $p < 0.05$) indicated that customer satisfaction and tangibility share a significant positive relationship within the VAC environment. Modern facilities, accessibility, and comfort strongly influence applicants' perceptions of quality, confirming the importance of physical evidence in service delivery (Gouws & Motala, 2019; Parasuraman et al., 1988). The hypothesis is therefore supported.

H4: Empathy has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction

As shown in Table 4, these results ($\beta = 0.207$, R-value = 0.361, $p < 0.05$) clearly indicate that customer satisfaction and apathy are positively correlated. Friendliness, willingness to assist, and attentiveness from staff were vital factors in creating positive applicant experiences, aligning with Eid (2015). Therefore, the hypothesis is supported.

H5: Responsiveness has a significant positive relationship with visa applicants' satisfaction

According to these results (β = 0.143, R-value = 0.186, p < 0.05), as shown in Table 4, there was a positive significant relationship between responsiveness and customer satisfaction found. Prompt service delivery and proactive problem-solving contributed to applicants' favourable evaluations of VACs, consistent with Wang et al. (2017). Therefore, the hypothesis is supported.

Discussion

The results indicate that four dimensions of service quality (reliability, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness) significantly impact customer satisfaction at VACs, whereas assurance does not. Similar patterns have been observed in African tourism research, where the importance of each SERVQUAL dimension varies depending on the service environment (Gebremichael & Singh, 2019; Molai et al., 2020; Meshack & Prusty, 2021). The prominent influence of reliability aligns with earlier findings that procedural accuracy and dependability are critical for satisfaction in tourism and public services (Matthews & Mokoena, 2020; Ali et al., 2021). In African settings, reliability is often the most vital factor for customer trust, as it provides predictable outcomes and reduces perceived risks (Fuyane, 2021; Basera & Mwenje, 2021). Tangibility also positively correlates with satisfaction, confirming that the physical environment of VACS affects applicants' perceptions of service quality. This supports Gouws & Motala's (2019) research, which highlights that modern, comfortable, accessible facilities signal professionalism and enhance perceived quality. Empathy and responsiveness are crucial emotional dimensions of service delivery. Their importance echoes Eid' s (2015) assertion that interpersonal sensitivity and prompt assistance enhance satisfaction. In the African context, empathetic and locally responsive services are particularly valued because they promote inclusion and fairness (Brett, 2019). Conversely, assurance was not a significant factor, consistent with Matthews &Mokoena (2020), who found that South African VAC applicants did not strongly link assurance-related traits such as staff confidence and privacy to satisfaction. This may reflect a systemic trust gap: applicants tend to trust the embassy or consulate more than the outsourcing company. As Matthews & Mokoena (2020) noted, government services are intangible, requiring both officials and frontline staff to build trust with customers to boost satisfaction. This study extends the SERVQUAL model by testing it within a hybrid public–private administrative context. The insignificance of assurance indicates that traditional service quality constructs may function differently in highly regulated, compliance- focused environments. This supports Fuyane's (2021) call for adaptable, context-sensitive models that modify existing frameworks for emerging African service sectors, such as visa processing.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study investigated the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction at VACs in Pretoria, South Africa, using the SERVQUAL model. As observed, SERVQUAL is an appropriate instrument for assessing perceived service quality in the visa outsourcing industry (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; 1988). The findings showed that reliability, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness significantly affected customer satisfaction, whereas assurance had no significant impact. This highlights that visa applicants value procedural accuracy, responsiveness, and empathy more than perceived staff competence or confidence. These results align with previous research in African tourism and public service sectors, which identify reliability and responsiveness as key predictors of satisfaction (Matthews & Mokoena, 2020; Fuyane, 2021; Gebremichael & Singh, 2019). The study essentially extends the use of SERVQUAL to include hybrid public–private service settings. The lack of significance in assurance suggests that traditional service quality factors might operate differently when institutional trust is more significant than interpersonal trust, as seen in visa facilitation processes. These results support Escott-Carrington (2020) and Peachey (2020), who highlight the need to improve customer experience and feedback systems in outsourced visa services. Overall, the research adds to African service quality literature, demonstrating that the SERVQUAL model should be adjusted to account for the regulatory and procedural nature of outsourced administrative tourism services.

Practically, the findings identify several key areas for managerial action. Firstly, reliability can be improved by implementing digital verification systems, strict process standards, and transparent tracking to reduce errors (Negi, 2009; Agyapong, 2011). Tangibility can be enhanced by maintaining modern, accessible, and comfortable facilities that convey professionalism and efficiency, aligning with Gouws & Motala's (2019) research. Responsiveness requires empowering frontline staff, establishing clear communication protocols, and setting measurable turnaround times to boost applicant trust and satisfaction (Wang et al., 2017). Additionally, empathy should be fostered through multilingual support and staff sensitivity training to meet applicants' diverse emotional and cultural needs (Eid, 2015; Brett, 2019). Although assurance was not statistically significant, it remains essential. Focus should be on improving staff professionalism, confidentiality, and competence to strengthen applicants' confidence in VAC services. These actions can help address the institutional trust gap highlighted in this and other African studies (Matthews & Mokoena, 2020). In summary, this research provides empirical evidence that perceived service quality in the visa facilitation sector significantly influences satisfaction and shapes South Africa's international image regarding its administrative tourism infrastructure. It highlights the importance of flexible service frameworks and continuous professional development for VAC staff to enhance trust, efficiency and satisfaction, aligning with global standards. Future studies should adopt mixed methods and cross-country comparisons to explore how trust and assurance evolve in outsourced public services across different governance environments.

References

Abdallat, M. M. & Emam, H. E. S. E. (2014). *Customer Satisfaction.* Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Archaeology and Archaeology, King Saud University.

Agyapong, G. K. (2011). The Effect of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction in the Utility Industry: A Case of Vodafone (Ghana). *International Journal of Business and Management, 6*(5), 203–210. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v6n5p203

Ahmad, A., Arifin, A., Arifuddin, S., Ravi, K. & Hendricks, A. (2016). Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction of Budget Hotel: A Case Study of De Palma Hotel Shah Alam, Malaysia. *International Conference on Humanities (ICH 2016)*, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 22–23.

Ahmed, I., Nawaz, M. M., Usman, A., Shaukat, Z. M., Ahmad, N. & Iqbal, H. (2010). Impact of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction: Empirical Evidence From Telecom Sector of Pakistan. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business, 1*(12), 98–113. https://doi.org/10.30845/ijbss

Ali, F., Kim, W. G., Li, J. & Jeon, H. M. (2021). Make It Delightful: Customers' Experience, Satisfaction and Loyalty in Malaysian Theme Parks. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 20*, 100561. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2016.05.003

Amin, M., Yahya, Z., Ismayatim, W. F. A., Nasharuddin, S. Z. & Kassim, E. (2013). Service Quality Dimension and Customer Satisfaction: An Empirical Study in the Malaysian Hotel Industry. *Services Marketing Quarterly, 34*(2), 115–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332969.2013.770665

Ariya, G., Sempele, C. & Wishitemi, B. (2020). An Evaluation of Wildlife Tourism Destinations' Attributes, Overall Satisfaction and Revisit Intentions: A Tourist Guides' Perspective. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 9*(6), 1220–1237. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-79

Basera, V. & Mwenje, J. (2021). Stakeholders' Awareness of Quality and Quality Management Systems in Zimbabwean Hotels. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 10*(1), 682–697. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-126

Basfirinci, C. & Mitra, A. (2015). A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Airlines Service Quality Through Integration of SERVQUAL and the Kano Model. *Journal of Air Transport Management, 42*, 239–248. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jairtraman.2014.11.005

Baysan, A. (2013). Multiple Arenas and Diverse Techniques of Securitisation: The Case of the EU's Visa Regime Towards Turkey. *Journal of Contemporary European Research, 9*(5), 740–758. https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v9i5.566

Bigo, D. (2006). Globalized (In)Security: The Field and the Ban-Opticon. In D. Bigo & A. Tsoukala (Eds.), *Illiberal Practices of Liberal Regimes* (pp. 5–49). Paris: l'Harmattan.

Brett, M. R. (2019). Customer Service Dimensions in State and Private Game Reserves in Northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 8*(3), 1–34.

Butt, M. M. & de Run, E. C. (2010). Private Healthcare Quality: Applying a SERVQUAL Model. *International Journal of Health Care Quality Assurance, 23*(7), 658–673. https://doi.org/10.1108/0952686101107158

Cengiz, E. (2010). Measuring Customer Satisfaction: Must Or Not. *Journal of Naval Science and Engineering, 6*(2), 76–88.

Chand, M. (2010). The Impact of HRM Practices on Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Performance in the Indian Hotel Industry. *International Journal of Human Resource Management, 21*(4), 551–566. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585191003612059

Chen, C. M., Lee, H. T., Chen, S. H. & Huang, T. H. (2011). Tourist Behavioural Intentions in Relation to Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in Kinmen National Park, Taiwan. *International Journal of Tourism Research, 13*(5), 416–432. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.810

Coetzee, S. E. & Rothmann, S. (2007). Occupational Stress, Organisational Commitment and Ill-Health of Employees At a Higher Education Institution in South Africa. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 31*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC89035

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Cronin, J. J. & Taylor, S. A. (1992). Measuring Service Quality: A Re-Examination and Extension. *Journal of Marketing, 56*(3), 55–68. https://doi.org/10.2307/1252296

Diedericks, M. & Tiba, J. K. (2016). Partnership and Outsourcing As Tools For Increased Access to Consular Services: A Case of the South African High Commission in the United Kingdom. *African Journal of Public Affairs, 8*(4), 119–133.

Du Plessis, L. & Saayman, M. (2019). Determinants of Visitor Satisfaction in South African National Parks. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 8*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720

Eid, R. (2015). Integrating Muslim Customer Perceived Value, Satisfaction, Loyalty and Retention in the Tourism Industry: An Empirical Study. *International Journal of Tourism Research, 17*(3), 249–260. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.1982

Escott-Carrington, A. (2020). Enhancing Customer Care With Enterprise Feedback Management. Available from https://www.tlscontact.com/enhancing-customer-care-with-enterprise-feedback-management/ [Retrieved November 5, 2020]

European Union. (2020). *New visa regulations.* Regulation (EU) 2019/1155 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 amending Regulation (EC) No. 810/2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas (Visa Code). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2009/810/oj/eng

Fraser, L. & Lawley, M. (2000). *Questionnaire Design and Administration: A Practical Guide.* Brisbane: Wiley.

Fuyane, N. (2021). The Importance of Service Attributes Between Low-Cost and Full-Service Carrier Customers: A Case of Airline Type Hybridisation. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 10*(6), 1741–1757. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-190

Ganiyu, R. A. (2016). Perceptions of Service Quality: An Empirical Assessment of Modified SERVQUAL Model Among Domestic Airline Carriers in Nigeria. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Economics and Business, 4*(1), 5–31. https://doi.org/10.1515/auseb-2016-0001

Gebremichael, G. B. & Singh, A. I. (2019). Customers' Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality Dimensions: A Study of the Hotel Industry in Selected Cities of Tigray Region, Ethiopia. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 8*(5), 1–15.

Gouws, E. & Motala, T. (2019). Quality of Service Delivered By Alcoholic Beverage Suppliers to Customers in the South African Hospitality Industry. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 8*(3), 1–16.

Grissemann, U. S. & Stokburger-Sauer, N. E. (2012). Customer Co-Creation of Travel Services: The Role of Company Support and Customer Satisfaction With the Co-Creation Performance. *Tourism Management, 33*(6), 1483–1492. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2012.02.002

Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J. & Anderson, R. E. (2019). *Multivariate Data Analysis* (8th ed.). Andover, Hampshire: Cengage Learning.

Hermann, U. P., Du Plessis, L., Coetzee, W. J. L. & Geldenhuys, S. (2012). Socio-economic Impacts of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance, 12*(3), 64–75.

Jain, S. K., Aagja, J. P. & Bagdare, S. (2017). Customer Experience: A Review and Research Agenda. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice, 27*(3), 642–662.

Kano, N. (1984). Attractive Quality and Must-Be Quality. *Hinshitsu (Quality, The Journal of Japanese Society for Quality Control), 14*, 39–48.

Lee, J. S. & Choi, M. (2020). Examining the Asymmetric Effect of Multi-Shopping Tourism Attributes on Overall Shopping Destination Satisfaction. *Journal of Travel Research, 59*(2), 295–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287519832373

Liat, C. B., Mansori, S., Chuan, G. C. & Imrie, B. C. (2017). Hotel Service Recovery and Service Quality: Influences of Corporate Image and Generational Differences in the Relationship Between Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty. *Journal of Global Marketing, 30*(1), 42–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/08911762.2016.1262932

Lin, F. H., Tsai, S. B., Lee, Y. C., Hsiao, C. F., Zhou, J., Wang, J. & Shang, Z. (2017). Empirical Research on Kano's Model and Customer Satisfaction. *PLoS ONE, 12*(9), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0183888

Madzík, P. (2018). Increasing Accuracy of the Kano Model – A Case Study. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence, 29*(3–4), 387–409. https://doi.org/10.1080/14783363.2016.1194197

Marković, S. & Raspor, S. (2010). Measuring Perceived Service Quality Using SERVQUAL: A Case Study of the Croatian Hotel Industry. *Management, 5*(3), 195–209.

Materla, T., Cudney, E. A. & Antony, J. (2019). The Application of Kano Model in the Healthcare Industry: A Systematic Literature Review. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence, 30*(5–6), 660–681. https://doi.org/10.1080/14783363.2017.1328980

Matthews, M. & Mokoena, B. A. (2020). The Influence of Service Quality Dimensions on Customer Satisfaction Within Visa Facilitation Centres in South Africa. *International Journal of eBusiness and eGovernment Studies, 12*(2), 122–135. https://doi.org/10.34111/ijebeg.202012203

Meshack, H.E. & Prusty, S. (2021). Service Quality, Satisfaction and Loyalty of Customers in Hotels: The Case of Northern Tanzania. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 10*(4), 1430-1451. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-171

Molai, T. M., Roberson, J. R. & Roeloffze, A. (2020). Service Quality and Customer Loyalty in Restaurants in the City of Tshwane. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 9*(4), 434–448. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-29

Mtapuri, O. & Giampiccoli, A. (2023). Community Participation and Service Delivery in Tourism Enterprises in Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 12*(1), 57–71. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720

Negi, R. (2009). Determining Customer Satisfaction Through Perceived Service Quality: A Study of Ethiopian Mobile Users. *International Journal of Mobile Marketing, 4*(1), 31–38.

Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry, L. L. (1988). SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item Scale For Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality. *Journal of Retailing, 64*(1), 12–40.

Rogerson, C. M. (2020). Tourism, Service Quality and Competitiveness in South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 9*(3), 123–138. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720

Zeithaml, V. A., Parasuraman, A. & Berry, L. L. (1990). *Delivering Quality Service: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations.* New York: Free Press.

Zikmund, W. G. (2003). *Business Research Methods* (7th ed.). Sydney: Thomson South-Western.