



# Do the SERVQUAL service dimensions differ in the tourism sector? A case study of Bonamanzi Game Reserve, Hluhluwe, KwaZulu-Natal

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## Abstract

The study investigates if there are differences in customer expectations of the SERVQUAL service dimensions in the tourism sector compared to other economic sectors which have been previously researched. Social media provides new repositories of data which can be analysed by researchers, and a total of 205 online guest reviews were accessed. Of this number, 92% of respondents rated the level of service they received. Of these customers, 79% rated the service received as being of a very high standard, while 8% rated the service received as being of a poor standard. Complaints posted by customers were allocated to the five SERVQUAL service dimensions and compared to the banking, insurance, fast-food, hair salon and university sectors. As tourism involves intangible products, where a suite of experiences is being sold, the researcher found that Tangibles were rated at 32%, which is higher than in other sectors. A high Tangibles score has been recorded in the fast-food, hair salon and university sectors as well, and for fast-food it was the most important dimension. The study suggests that the appearance of the reception office, other buildings, gardens, swimming pool and staff uniforms is critically important in tourism, and of greater importance that it is in the banking and insurance sectors. Tangibles represent the initial interface between a tourism business and the customer. When customers perceive the standard of Tangibles to be lower than the expected standard, this creates an immediate negative impression which will be difficult to modify at a later date. The importance of ensuring high standards of this service dimension, is possibly of greater importance in tourism than it is in other economic sectors.

**Keywords:** SERVQUAL, customer satisfaction, service reliability, tangibles, tourism

## Introduction

The quality of service that a customer receives, and the resultant level of customer satisfaction, is of crucial importance to any business. This is particularly true where a business is part of the tertiary sector of the economy, where the product being sold is not always tangible, and where service excellence is a prerequisite for business success (Kulasin & Fortuny-Santos, 2005:133). In an increasingly competitive global economy, service excellence is essential for both the survival and growth of any company in the service sector. In tourism the product the customer is purchasing is usually a suite of experiences and memories. The product on offer cannot normally be displayed, touched, examined or tested before it is purchased (Keyser, 2011; Jaume, 2013). As tourism has expanded throughout the world, customers are now offered a plethora of destinations to choose from, both locally and internationally (Aynalem, Birhanu, & Tesefay, 2016). The advent of the internet has made it



easier to obtain information, and to access both positive and negative reviews of a particular tourist destination.

The SERVQUAL model is a well-known measurement instrument of customers' perception of service quality. It was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). The authors identified 97 attributes which were found to have a major impact on the customer's assessment of service quality. The authors categorised these attributes into ten dimensions which are important for evaluating service quality, namely: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer, and tangibles (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985:47).

These measurements of service quality suggest that the customer is capable of evaluating the level of service received, ranging from excellent to unacceptable. The authors argue that of the ten dimensions, only two can be known by customers in advance of the purchase of an item. The quality of service received by the customer will exert a major influence over customer satisfaction. Where a customer receives a level of service which is lower than the expected service level, then the customer will rate the service as unsatisfactory. Similarly, when expected service is equivalent to perceptions of the service received, the customer will rate the service as satisfactory. And finally, when the quality of the service received exceeds the customer's expectations of the service, the customer will rate the level of service as excellent (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985:48). Perceived quality is therefore the customer's assessment of the service received and results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988:15).

Important elements which will exert an influence over service expectations include: the customer's personal needs, past experience, word-of-mouth recommendations and communication, such as a website and brochures (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985:45). The authors found that customers assess the dimensions at the time of purchase and may re-assess the service level they receive each time a purchase is made, even when they have previously purchased the item (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985:48). In their later work, the authors reduced the 10 service dimensions to five, namely: Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy and Responsiveness (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988:23; Kulasin & Fortuny-Santos, 2005:35).

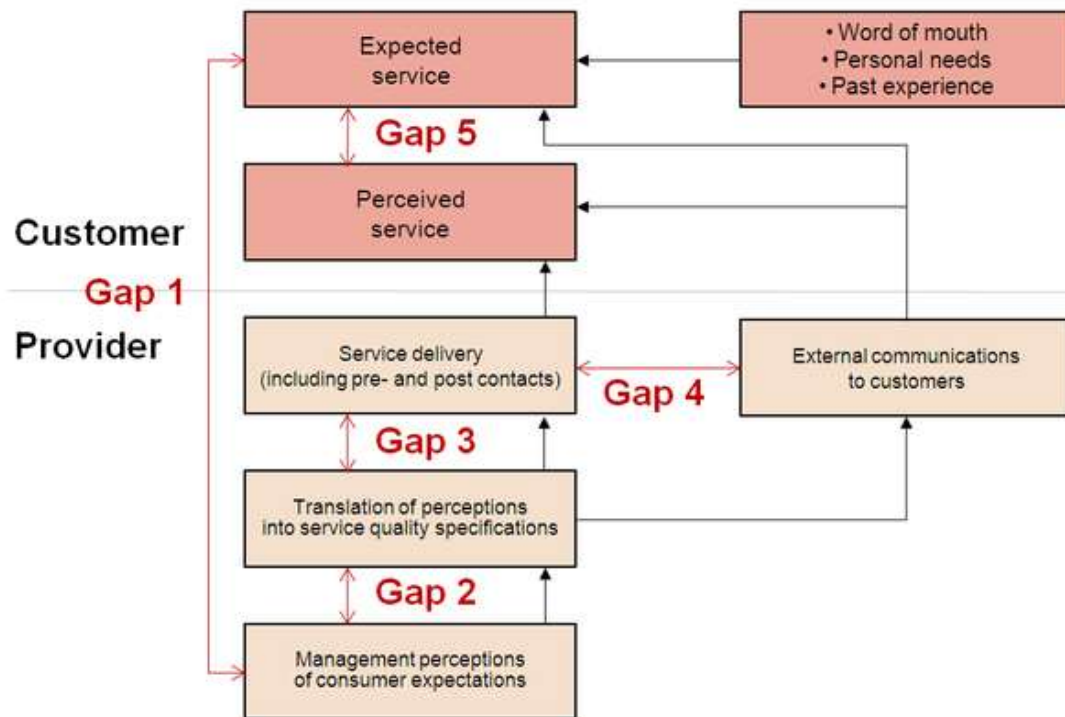
Empirical research for the SERVQUAL model was conducted in five service sectors: retail banking, securities brokerage, credit card services, repair and maintenance of electrical appliances, and long-distance telephone services (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988:18). The five service dimensions' relative importance to each other can be assessed by asking customers to assign 100 percentage points to the five dimensions. A low score for one service dimension does not suggest that it is unimportant, but rather that other sectors are relatively more important (Sachdev & Verma, 2004:104).

The five SERVQUAL service dimensions which customers consider to be important are summarised as follows (Arlen, 2008):

- **Tangibles** - The appearance of physical buildings and infrastructure, equipment, personnel uniforms, and communication materials.
- **Reliability** - The ability to perform the promised service reliably and accurately.
- **Responsiveness** - The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- **Assurance** – The knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence
- **Empathy** – The caring and individualised attention employees provide their customers.

The research by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985) identified four gaps in service which impact on the customer perception of service quality (Kulasin & Fortuny-Santos, 2005:134). These four gaps then result in a fifth gap, which is a gap that occurs when there is a deficit between customer expectations of the service and perceptions of the standard of service received (Figure 1).

## Gap Model of Service Quality



**Figure 1: The five gaps in service delivery**

Source: <https://avaremy.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/parasuaman-1985-servqual-gaps-model.png>

A number of studies have confirmed that the SERVQUAL model is an effective instrument to use for measuring service quality. Although the SERVQUAL model was initially designed for use by service-orientated companies, in reality all economic sectors need to offer some form of customer service (Arlen, 2008). The SERVQUAL model has been applied as an instrument for measuring service quality in a number of sectors, including banking, insurance, telecommunications, fast-food, a grocery store, a hair salon, health services and education (Saleh & Ryan, 1991; Handrinis, Folinas & Ribeiro, 1993; Sachdev & Verma, 2004; Daniel & Berinyuy, 2010; Pena, da Silva, Tronchin & Melleiro, 2013; Temba, 2013; Brandt, 2014; Tegambwage, 2017).

Sachdev and Verma (2004) researched service levels in four services: banking, fast-food, insurance and a beauty salon. In insurance the results revealed performance as inadequate in all five service dimensions. The authors came to the same conclusion for fast-food. The beauty salon performed adequately on Assurance, which customers rated as the most important service dimension for this sector. The authors found that in banking, the level of service is below an acceptable standard in four out of the five dimensions, and in the insurance industry only Tangibles achieved adequate service levels. For Responsiveness, or the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service, banking and insurance performed particularly poorly. For fast-food, all five of the five dimensions were rated as below adequate service levels (Sachdev & Verma, 2004:19).



Education is a tertiary economic activity and Tegambwage (2016) examined the responses from 500 students at two universities in Tanzania. The author states that focusing only on the academic product being delivered, ignores the quality of the services used to deliver the product. Teaching is only a part of the educational process, and the academic experience is therefore more than just the sum of the teaching received by students (Tegambwage, 2016: 77). This observation can be applied to other sectors. For fast-food the product being assessed by the customer is more than just the sum of the food being consumed (Sashdev & Verma, 2004:111).

Tegambwage argues that the standard of services delivered by both Tanzanian universities does not meet customer expectations, and that there is considerable room for improvement across all five service dimensions (Tegambwage, 2016:80). The author suggests that possible explanations for the negative gap scores include: inadequate resources, rapid increases in the number of students compared to available resources, and a lack of customer orientation among management and employees in Tanzania (Tegambwage, 2016:82).

The negative assessments based on the SERVQUAL model are evidence of students' dissatisfaction with the standard of services delivered by their universities. This could, in turn, result in negative reputations which will eventually impact on student enrolment numbers. It is necessary for both institutions to use students' feedback to improve their service delivery, so that they may be able to meet and exceed students' expectations (Tegambwage, 2016: 82). When examining which is the most important of the five dimensions, the author states, "these results suggest that Reliability is the most important dimension in an evaluation of service quality in higher education in Tanzania" (Tegambwage, 2016:83).

While Tangibles were given the second highest score in Tanzania, in a study of a private American business school this dimension was ranked last. Tegambwage (2016:83) suggests that this is due to the lack of adequate infrastructure in developing countries compared to the United States of America, where students will take a certain standard of buildings and infrastructure for granted. For management, the greatest improvement in service quality needs to be achieved in the Service Reliability dimension. Research has shown that concentrating efforts and resources on the most important dimension, will have the greatest impact on perceived service quality and customer satisfaction (Tegambwage, 2016:84).

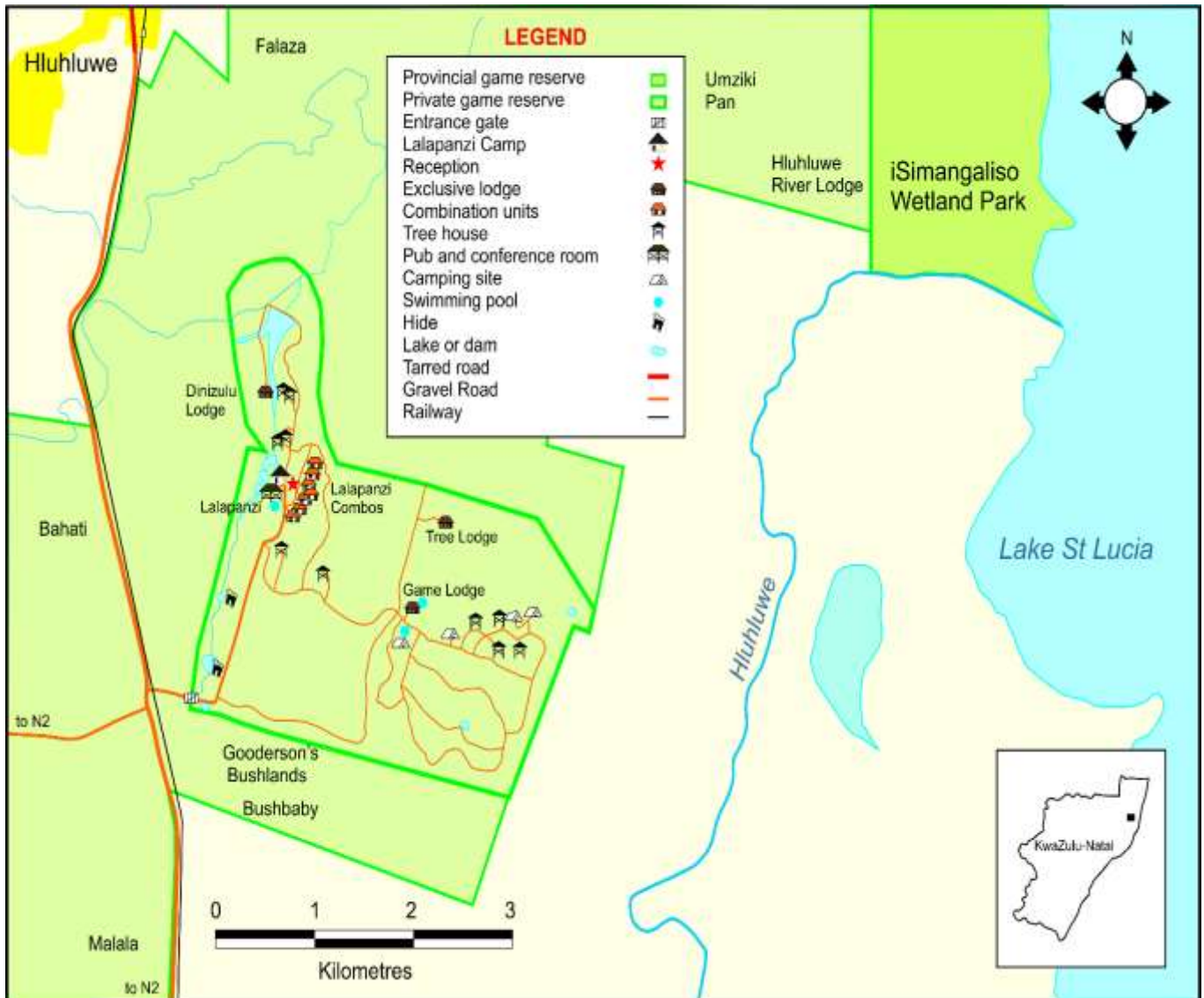
### **Location of the study area**

Bonamanzi Game Reserve is a private game reserve located three to seven kilometres west of Lake St Lucia, and the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and World Heritage Site, in northern KwaZulu-Natal (Map1). The game reserve was established in 1971 (Pooley and Player, 1995) and the indigenous vegetation is described by Mucina and Rutherford as SVI 18: Tembe Sandy Bushveld and CB 1: Maputaland Coastal Belt (2006: 502-503, 576-577). These two vegetation types contain a number of endemic trees and shrubs, and the underlying geology consists of leached and infertile sands of a marine origin.

The managers of Bonamanzi Game Reserve market the destination as a "Big Four game reserve" and wildlife includes elephant, buffalo, white rhino, leopard, hippo, giraffe, zebra, blue wildebeest, nyala, impala, kudu, bushbuck, waterbuck, grey duiker, warthog and spotted hyaena. (Pooley & Player, 1995). Threatened mammal species present include such species as the four-toed elephant shrew, white rhino, suni and red duiker (SA Venues). In total, 385 bird species have been recorded. The bird list includes four East Coast endemic species or near endemic species. A number of Southern African endemic bird species and 29 Red Data book species have been recorded. For ornithologists, the area is significant as a number of range-restricted species, whose southern limit coincides with the Hluhluwe district, have been recorded (SA Birding).

Accommodation consists of lodge units, tree houses, private lodges and campsites. Apart from the variety of accommodation options, and a restaurant and wedding hall, the game reserve offers a variety of activities including game drives, bush braais (barbecues), guided walks and boat rides on the nearby Hluhluwe River (Map 1).

As a private game reserve, an important competitive advantage, compared to many state-run protected areas, is that the accommodation units are situated in the bush and wild animals can often be seen around the units. The reception area, restaurant, many of the accommodation units, and the pub and conference rooms, adjoin a dam, which provides habitat for water birds and crocodiles. (Map 2, Figures 2-5).



Map 1: Location of Bonamanzi Game Reserve



**Map 2: Layout of Lalapanzi Camp, Bonamanzi Game Reserve**  
Source: Adapted from Google Earth images



**Figure 2: Conference room overlooking a dam at Bonamanzi** Source: Author's own



Figure 3: Interior of a two-person Lalapanzi unit, Bonamanzi Game Reserve Source: Author's own



Figure 4: Lalapanzi Lodge's two-person units Source: Author's own



Figure 5: Pelican Conference Room at Bonamanzi Game Reserve Source: Author's own

The overnight rate for the accommodation units is listed in Table 1. The overnight tariff is quoted in US\$.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1: Accommodation categories at Bonamanzi Game Reserve

US\$ per night per unit unless indicated	Accommodation Category
\$688.50	<b>Dinizulu Lodge</b> – 6 people in 1 double and 2 twin thatched rooms.
\$1053	<b>Bundu Rustic Camp</b> - Rustic private camp accommodates 24 people in 12 chalets.
\$117.50 pp (sharing) and \$126 (single)	<b>Lalapanzi Lodge</b> (DBB) - These units are grouped in clusters of 4.
\$132 pp (sharing) and \$153 (single)	<b>Deluxe Lalapanzi Lodge</b> (DBB) - includes satellite TV, air-conditioning, Wi-Fi and room fridges.
\$17.80 pp (low season) and \$22.30 pp (high season).	<b>Executive Caravan Site</b> – 14 executive caravan sites and 2 secluded sites.
\$13.40pp (low season) and \$17.80 (high season)	<b>Caravan Site</b> - 6 caravan sites, each with communal ablutions, braai area and scullery. Each site has its own electricity supply. Minimum of 2 people per site.

<sup>1</sup> Exchange rate calculated on 15 January 2018.





\$137.70	<b>Rustic 2-sleeper Tree House</b> - each of these self-catering units sleeps 2. Kitchenette equipped with a 2 plate mini oven, microwave oven, fridge, crockery and cutlery. Towels are provided for showering. Braai area available for use.
\$198.50	<b>Rustic Family Tree House</b> – each of the self-catering units has 1 twin room and 1 double room and sleeps 2 adults and 2 children under 16 years. The kitchen has a stove and oven, fridge, crockery and cutlery. Towels are provided for showering. Braai area available for use.
\$587.25	<b>Game Lodge</b> - this unit accommodates 10 people in the 5 en suite bedrooms. This self-catering lodge has a private pool and Braai area, Lounge is equipped with satellite TV.
\$417.15	<b>Tree Lodge</b> - three air-conditioned rooms accommodate 6 in total (2 double beds, 2 twin beds)., Towels are provided for showering. Private Braai area and lounge has satellite TV.

### The importance of the service dimensions for Bonamanzi's customers

The tourism sector has a number of identifiable characteristics (Keyser, 2011, 200-209). There are a number of intangible elements, such as inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability, which are vitally important in determining the quality of service perceived by the consumer. Intangibility suggests that as there is no physical product being sold, the product cannot be touched, tested or transmitted before it is purchased, and many aspects of the experience are intangible (Albayrak, Caber & Aksoy, 2010:141; Jaume, 2013).

A tourism product is a complex experience consisting of a process where tourists are making use of many travel services during the duration of a visit, including information, transportation, accommodation, and attraction services (Albayrak, Caber & Aksoy, 2010:140). One of the assumptions underpinning the development of the SERVQUAL model is the unique characteristics of services as compared to physical products. It may therefore be difficult to understand the customer's service requirements before the product is purchased. This implies that an intangible product needs to be well defined by a tourism business if the owners are to understand service excellence as perceived by consumers (Arlen, 2008).

These unique characteristics may make it more difficult for a company to objectively assess its service quality level (Kaiser, 2012). It is much easier, for example, for a motor manufacturer to inspect and assess the standard of a vehicle on the production line.

### Methodology

The advent of social media (Ellender, 2017; Phillips, 2017) offers the researcher new perspectives and repositories of data which is what this research used. The website TripAdvisor ([www.tripadvisor.co.za](http://www.tripadvisor.co.za)) is a repository of customer reviews for the tourism sector. A total of 205 guest reviews of Bonamanzi Game Reserve have been posted on TripAdvisor to date. Of this number, 189 respondents, or 92%, quantified their visit (Figure 6).

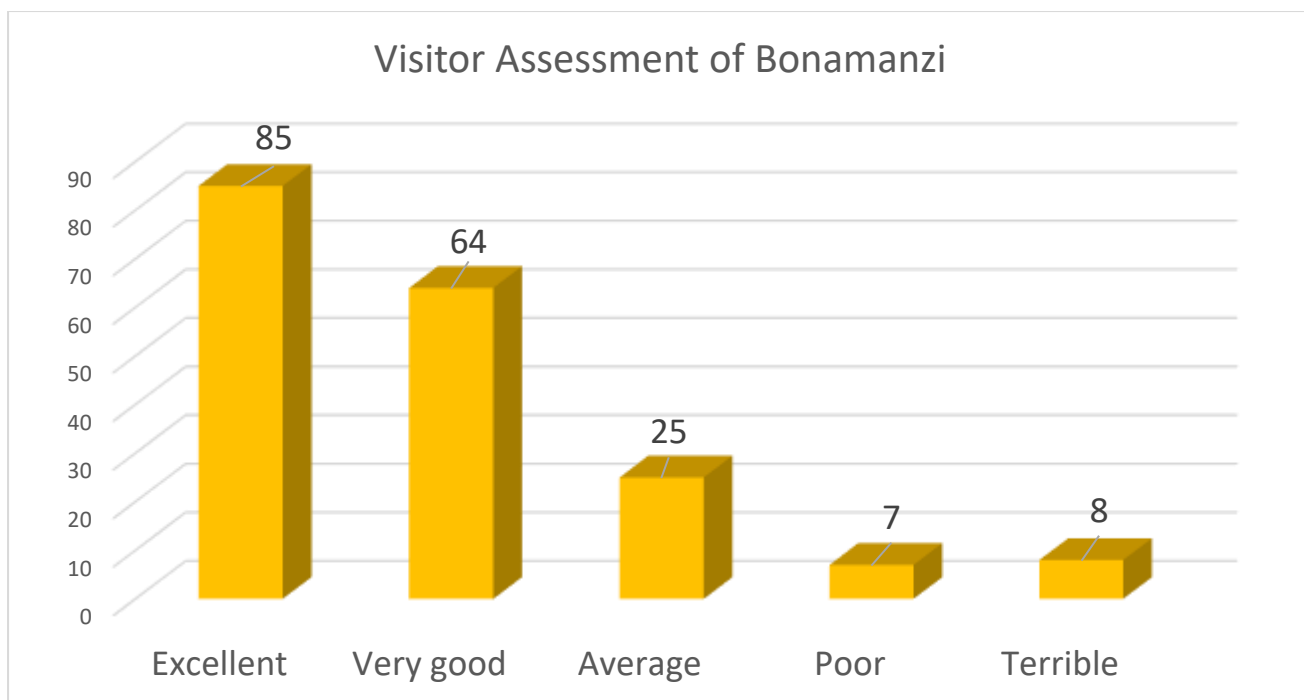


Figure 6: Customer assessments of Bonamanzi’s standard of service

If reviews for a single year are analysed, the greatest number were posted during the period December to February. However, this is also the only period reviewed where a rating of “average” and “terrible” was recorded (TripAdvisor) (Figure 7). This period coincides with the busy Christmas holidays where staff are often stretched, and it is to be expected that gaps in service delivery could take place during these months. The number of reviews received for this period is more than twice the number recorded for the period May–June, and almost twice the number received in July- August.

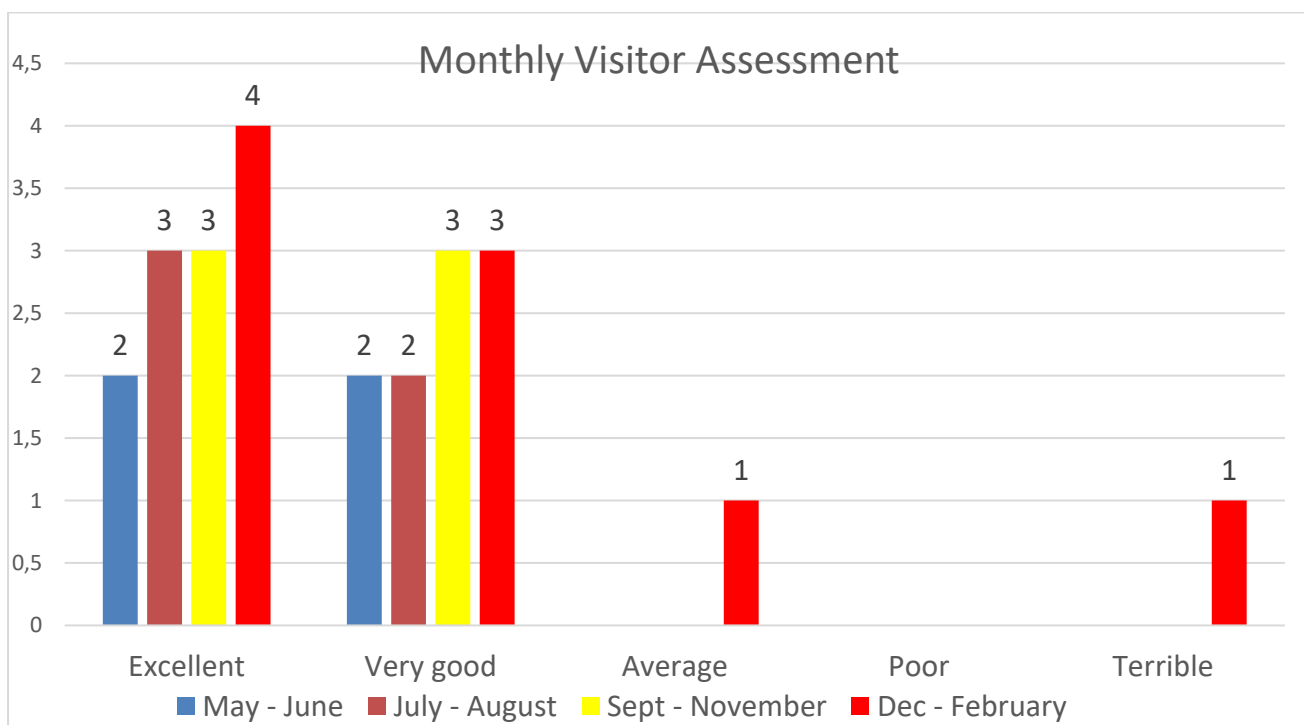


Figure 7: Visitor assessment of Bonamanzi service divided into 4 periods



## Positive Guest Reviews

In total, 79% of customers rated the service received as “very good” or “excellent.” A university research writing workshop in late November 2017 rated the service as “very good” and wrote, “staff members were more than willing to assist when called upon to. The staff member who cleaned my room was very professional” (TripAdvisor). The reviewer added, “Although the service was very good, it’s unfortunate that one could not converse with the staff freely because of poor English communication (I do not speak IsiZulu)” (TripAdvisor).

In terms of the SERVQUAL service dimensions, the above service deficiency falls within three dimensions: Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy (Marketing Study Guide).

Poor education levels, and poor remuneration amongst service staff, is an ongoing challenge in the tourism sector in many countries. A number of studies have assessed education levels and staff training and their importance for the success of the tourism industry (Wang, 2008; Ejiolor, O, O & Elechi, 2012; Bartoluci, Hendija & Petratic, 2014; Tkalčič, 2014; Aynalem, Birhanu, & Tesefay, 2016). A study by Liu, Vogt, Luo, He and Frank (2012) found that even in a rapidly expanding economy, such as in China, “a large proportion of high-wage tourism jobs were held by non-local residents.”

A review of Bonamanzi posted by a visitor from Ipswich in the United Kingdom in December 2017 stated, “great place to getaway with family and friend. We thoroughly enjoyed the sunset and the sundowners at the Bush braai area” (TripAdvisor).

Another reviewer from December 2017 called the experience, “Peaceful haven in the 'Bundu” and wrote, “the ranger was polite and very knowledgeable and thoughtful in his attempts to search for what we wanted to see on the game drives...Huge variety birdlife and wildlife...Staff are friendly and polite :) accommodation in the self-catering tree house is rustic but beautiful and still everything you need, even dishwashing liquid is provided” (TripAdvisor).

Management replied to the above review and wrote, “thank you for the feedback, your conference was the first to use our new facility so we are excited that our vision has come to fruition and has had the desired effect.

You will be happy to know we are converting the bathrooms with tubs, into showers and therefore creating more space for our guests. We would love to see you again, maybe next time having one of our famous Bush Breakfasts?” (TripAdvisor).

The above review, and the response from management, conforms to the SERVQUAL dimensions of Assurance and Empathy, or the knowledge and courtesy of employees and caring and individualised attention paid to customers (Sachdev & Verma, 2004:102).

## Negative Guest Reviews

The above reviews are positive and display a high level of customer service. The researcher analysed reviews that were not positive and these are summarised below.

A customer from Canada posted a review on 16 January 2014, “this place is beautiful and has great potential. Unfortunately, it is not managed well and the staff in some areas are quite poorly trained, nor is some of the lodging up to code” (TripAdvisor).

In this instance, the response by management was swift and on 18 February 2014 the manager responded,



“Many thanks for taking the time to write this review. I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the Directors and staff of Bonamanzi to express our sincere apologies for the unacceptable treatment you received during your visit. Without going into too much detail I would like to assure you that I...have replaced the GM that was here during your stay. This is my second tenure at Bonamanzi, after a short break – hence I completely agree with your comment “could be brilliant”....I have a huge passion for Bonamanzi and can assure you Bonamanzi will, and has already since my return hit the heights of brilliance. Please contact me directly, as I would love to offer you the opportunity to visit again and see the real Bonamanzi and experience the warmth and hospitality that should have been afforded to you during your last stay. Once again, please accept our apologies, and my assurance that the Bonamanzi that you experienced is no longer!” (TripAdvsior).

Another reviewer evaluated the level of service received as “overall bad” and wrote on 5 February 2015:

“During our 6-night stay we had no or interrupted supply of water for 4 out of the 6 nights. It meant no shower or toilet when you wanted / needed to and it is extremely inconvenient during the humid December months... Long story short it has to do with incorrect pipeline (and valve) installation and took us getting upset numerous times during our bush breakaway before getting staff out to get the water supply running again every night. After numerous complaints by all fellow campers, did Bonamanzi install a temporary pipe line on our 5th night...Animal sightings were on the contrary limited to few buck species. No sighting of any of the 4 of the big 5 mentioned to occur at Bonamanzi” (TripAdvsior).

A dissatisfied customer from Delmas, Mpumalanga, wrote a review in 2015 which said, “we go to the restaurant to find its closed for a wedding, so no food available for other guests. The wedding music was so loud that we couldn't fall asleep until 2h30 the next morning” (TripAdvsior).

The above negative review was written on 21 April 2015. In this case, management responded more than two months later and on 10 July 2015 and wrote,

“We are very, very sorry about your bad experience at Bonamanzi. We are very grateful for the time you have taken to review your stay. It has enabled us to investigate and unearth a problem that we had within our room allocation and reservation department. This has now been corrected and I can confidently assure you that this department has been revamped and strict procedures and regulations put into place to ensure guests would never again be disturbed by events such as weddings happening at the property” (TripAdvsior).

A response time, in this instance, of 2.5 months does not comply with the SERVQUAL dimension of Service Responsiveness.

In a negative review written on 26 January 2017, a reviewer wrote, “we were hugely disappointed with Bonamanzi for the following reasons:

- 1) the website, first thing, pops up LUXURY on the description and we were shocked to see that the lodgings are only 3 stars. Our "tree house" (not a tree house at all!) was in a very poor state of repair and decoration, particularly the bathrooms which look like they haven't had refurbishments since the 1980s! .
- 2) the website advertises, misleadingly, that Bonamanzi offer boat cruises on the river. We were shocked not that they have been cancelled as a result of the drought (fair enough), but that the website has not been updated nor are client informed of this situation.



3) the tap water is unpalatably salty and clients are expected to collect "sweet" drinking water from the main bar.

4) the last straw was the swimming pool. When the boat trip did not transpire as an activity, we had time to kill before heading off in the morning. Our plan was that the kids would swim in the communal pool but we were shocked at the state of it...to the extent that it did not look hygienic and we could not allow our kids to swim" (TripAdvisor).

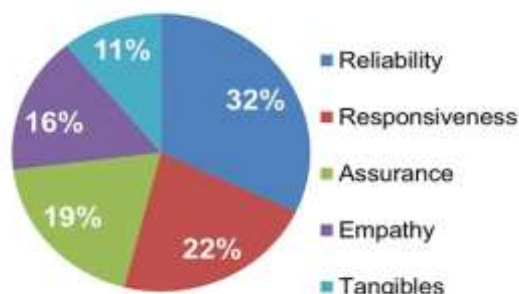
In the category of "Terrible", a reviewer wrote on 17 April 2017, "we were expecting so much more from our stay at Bonamanzi than what we received. We were staying in one of the self-catering Tree Houses. They clearly hadn't prepared anything for our stay. The path to our unit was completely overgrown, the geyser and fridge hadn't been turned on and the outside table and chairs were stacked in the kitchen. The unit clearly hadn't been accessed by any staff for quite some time, not the welcome one wants to receive. Then there were heaps of disappointments with regards to activities. You can't do boat trips on the river as the river is dry and will be for the foreseeable future. They should remove this from their website if it is no longer offered....We wanted to book a game drive one afternoon (admittedly we tried to book on the day) but were told there is only one ranger on duty and he was already booked for a game walk that afternoon. One ranger on duty? Catering for 15 odd tree houses? Over the Easter break? That's just bad management, I can't put it any other way. There were good sides to our stay. The game reserve is lovely to drive through and there are a wide variety of animals to see...The tree houses are nicely spaced out so there is a real sense of being in nature completely undisturbed" (TripAdvisor).

Complaints posted on www.tripadvisor.co.za, which highlighted deficits in service quality, were analysed and assigned to the five SERVQUAL dimensions (Table 2).

**Table 2: Service deficiency issues identified by Bonamanzi guests**

<p><b>Tangibles</b> refer to physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel</p>	<p>Fridge broken          Geyser switched off          Overgrown paths          Swimming pool dirty and water was green          No braai grids at camping sites          Dry river and no boat cruise          Water undrinkable          Flooring not in good condition          Spa is not really a spa and there are only 2 massage beds          None of the Big Five species were seen</p>
<p><b>Reliability</b> is the firm's ability to perform the promised service accurately and dependably</p>	<p>Website contains false information          Place is not well managed          Restaurant was closed because of a wedding          Claim of a luxury resort but actually is only 3-stars          Units are not serviced frequently          Staff in some areas are poorly trained          Only 1 litre of drinking water provided for 3 days          Only 1 ranger on duty          Masseur has to be booked days in advance          Game drives cannot be booked on same day</p>
<p><b>Responsiveness</b> is the firm's willingness to help customer and provide prompt service</p>	<p>General Manager did not deal with issues in a professional manner          No response received from emails sent to manager          Only after numerous complaints was the water problem fixed</p>
<p><b>Assurance</b> is knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence</p>	<p>General Manager did not discuss complaints privately          The person on the phone was impolite</p>
<p><b>Empathy</b> is caring and individualized attention paid to customers</p>	<p>Person on the phone showed no empathy          Loud music from wedding which made it impossible for other guests to sleep          General Manager did not deal with issues in a caring manner          Not enough rangers for all the tree houses          No flexibility when it comes to booking the masseuse or game drives</p>

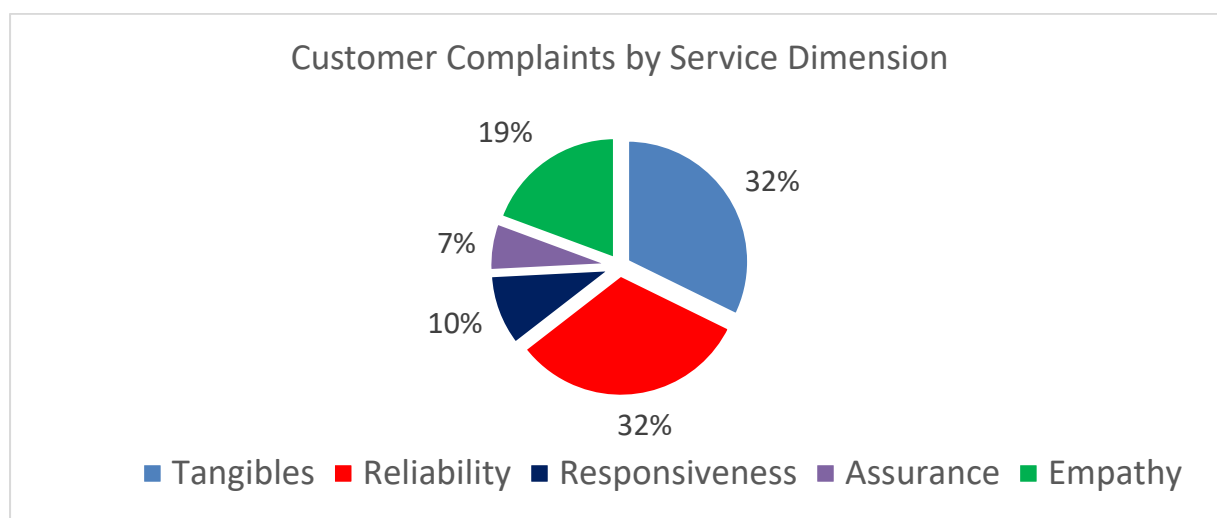
Arlen (2008) cites SERVQUAL research which suggests that Service Reliability is the dimension that is most important to customers, followed by Service Responsiveness. The least important service dimensions, Service Empathy and Service Tangibles, account for only 27% of percentage point allocations by customers (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: The five service dimensions all customers care about**

Source: [www.serviceperformance.com/the-5-service-dimensions-all-customers-care-about/](http://www.serviceperformance.com/the-5-service-dimensions-all-customers-care-about/)

In the case of the negative reviews posted for Bonamanzi, complaints were concentrated in the Service Reliability and Service Tangibles dimensions, with 2/3rds of complaints occurring in these dimensions. Or, in other words, what is the appearance of the lodge's physical infrastructure, and were the services and activities promised in brochures and on the website available and delivered by employees? (Figure 9).



**Figure 9: Customer complaints at Bonamanzi categorised by SERVQUAL service dimension**

### Comparing Bonamanzi guest reviews and the economic sectors researched by Sachdev and Verma (2004) and Tegambwage (2016)

Research by Sachdev and Verma (2004) examined customers' ratings of the SERVQUAL dimensions for four economic sectors. Of significance is that these were all service industries, as is tourism, and did not include primary or secondary economic activities. The economic sectors were: banking, insurance, a fast-food outlet and a beauty salon. In addition to the work done by Sachdev and Verma (2004), a total of 500 university students were surveyed by Tegambwage (2016) at two universities in Tanzania. Results of these studies, and the data

from Bonamanzi’s customers, are depicted in Figure 10. Of the six sectors investigated, Service Reliability, or the importance of keeping to what you have promised you will do and when you promise to do it, ranges from 22% to 32% for the six sectors. In four of the six sectors, it was rated as the most important dimension. The relative importance of Service Responsiveness ranged from 10% to 23% and was ranked as the most important service dimension in the banking and fast-food sectors. Service Assurance, which has been found to be the third most important dimension (Arlen, 2008) ranged from 7% to 21% and was ranked as the third most important service dimension only for banking and university students only (Sachdev & Verma, 2004, 106; Tegambwage, 2016, 83).

Service Empathy, which has been ranked as the fourth most important service dimension (Arlen, 2008), ranged from 14% to 19%. For the beauty salon and tourism, Service Empathy was ranked third, and obtained the lowest score of the five service dimensions in the insurance industry (Sachdev & Verma, 2004:111). For Service Tangibles, the fast-food outlet and the university sector recorded the highest rating, after tourism, of 25% and 23% respectively. Although in tourism the product on sale is often intangible, this does not suggest that tangibles are unimportant. In the fast-food industry, which can in certain destinations be considered as part of the tourism industry during peak holiday seasons (Keyser, 2011:198), Tangibles were rated as of far greater importance than in the insurance and banking sectors (Sachdev & Verma, 2004:112). The importance of Tangibles in tourism, would suggest that managers should pay careful attention to the appearance of gardens, swimming pool, buildings, decorations, staff uniforms, and the condition of accommodation units. As in the fast-food sector, Tangibles convey an immediate and lasting impression. An untidy or dirty fast-food outlet will discourage customers, who may interpret this as also being an indication of the quality of food on offer.

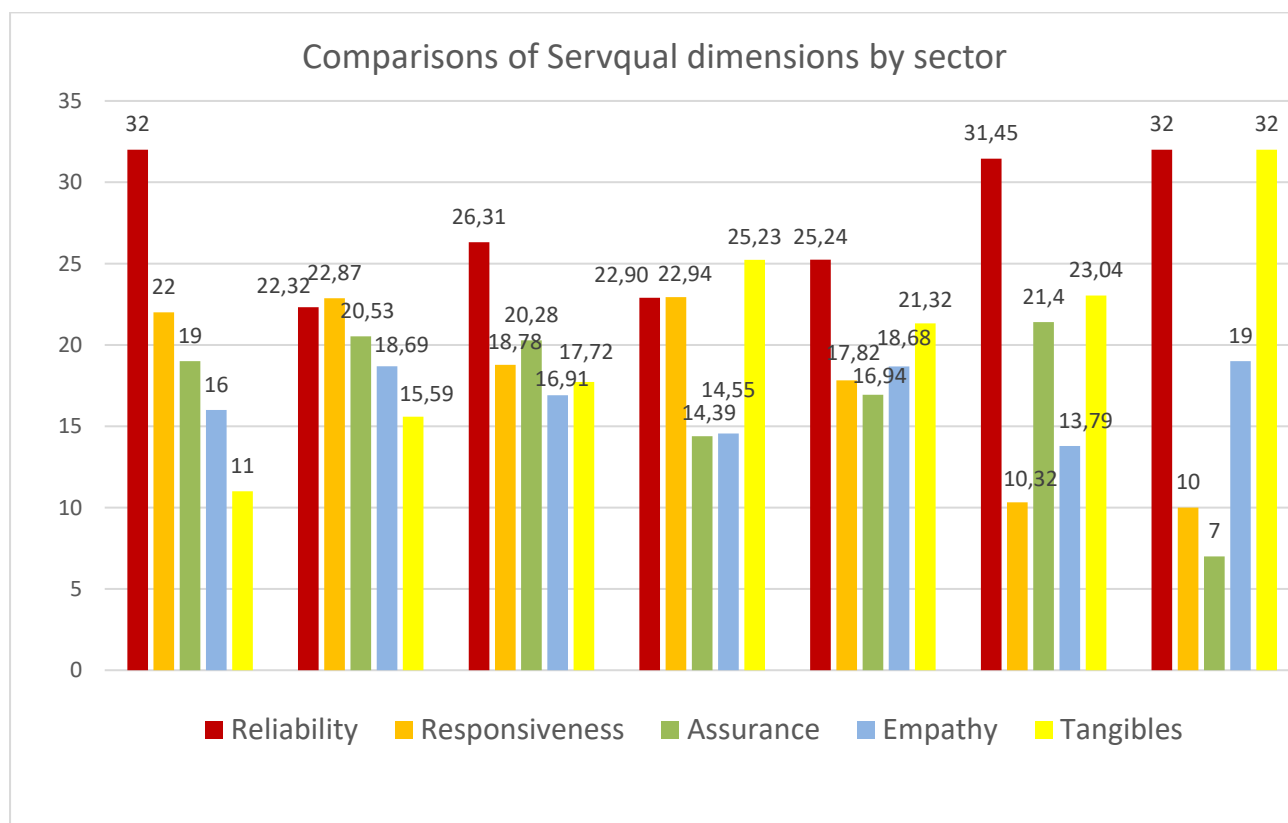


Figure 10: Differences in the service dimensions between general customer and customers to Bonamanzi Game Reserve (Bonamanzi, 2008)

From the comparison between customers’ ratings of the five dimensions in the five economic sectors depicted in Figure 10, a number of tentative conclusions are presented.



Firstly, Service Reliability showed no significant difference between customers surveyed in the other sectors and tourism customers. Apart from banking, Service Reliability, or the company's ability to deliver what it promised, is rated as the highest service dimension.

Service Assurance achieved a low score for tourism compared to the other sectors. This, however, does not suggest that Service Assurance is unimportant in the tourism sector. The graph demonstrates guest ratings distributed across 100 percentage points, and extreme dissatisfaction with Service Tangibles will tend to lower the relative importance of the other four service dimensions. What the results demonstrate, and this cannot be overstated, is that Tangibles are of extreme importance in the tourism sector. Service Empathy also achieved a higher rating for tourism than for insurance, fast-food and university students. This suggests that when there is a problem at a tourism destination, as is bound to occur, the timeous response of staff is of utmost importance. Employees must respond immediately and with empathy to any problem which occurs on site. A tourist is often far from home, in unfamiliar surroundings and often in a foreign country, so staff must respond with empathy to every request. Managers in the tourism sector, therefore, need to set specific customer service goals informed by the relative importance of the five service dimensions (Sachdev & Verma, 2004:96).

## Conclusion

Tourism is a service industry where intangibles are usually being sold and not a tangible product, however, it is suggested that Service Tangibles are extremely important in this sector. A customer is usually purchasing an experience and not a physical product that can be taken back home, except in the format of photographs or a video recording. In a game reserve the guest is purchasing an experience where the general ambience, and appearance and upkeep of infrastructure, such as chalets, gardens, reception areas, swimming pool, conference rooms, bar and restaurant, are key components. As the customer is buying an experience and not a tangible product, a dirty swimming pool or an untidy garden will have a direct impact on customer perceptions of the experience. A fridge that is not turned on is going to have a far greater impact on the customers' experience than, for example, an untidy reception area at a tyre dealership will have. Of interest, Service Assurance, or the need for employees to be experts in terms of the service they are delivering, scored very low. It is suggested that except where customers are purchasing expert-led activities, such as bird walks or game drives, a large component of an eco-tourism experience is self-generated, providing that the expected levels of service have been already met.

In tourism, the customer is accumulating a suite of memories based on the overall experience, as they interact with the facilities and experiences on offer. Much of the duties carried out by staff, such as cleaning rooms and maintaining gardens, do not require a high level of skill (World Tourism Organization). This is one of the criticisms levelled against the tourism sector, where critics suggest that tourism developments often create only low-level jobs for local communities (Aynalem, Birhanu & Tesefay, 2016:2; World Tourism Organization). In the example of a game reserve, Service Assurance, or being an expert in what one is doing, is of less importance than it would be, for example, in a hospital or insurance company.

This study examined the responses posted online by 189 guests to Bonamanzi Game Reserve, Hluhluwe. Guest responses suggest that Service Tangibles are possibly of greater importance in tourism than in other economic sectors. Managers in the tourism sector therefore must at all times ensure a high level of standard for Tangibles. This requires a high standard of attention to detail, which is not at present the norm in much of the industry. It is also vitally important that staff are trained to show empathy, and that no indifferent responses are received by customers (Wang, 2008:52; Albayrak, Caber & Aksoy, 2010:141). A





worldwide increase in well-informed tourists also places increasing demands on tourism managers (Tkalčič, 2014:68). If customer satisfaction is to be achieved, tourism managers need to maintain a close and continuous scrutiny of their employees' adherence to the five SERVQUAL service dimensions.

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