Application of the SERVQUAL model in the tourism industry across hospitality, travel, and destination management sectors

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Abstract

This study critically examines the application of the SERVQUAL model in evaluating service quality within the travel and tourism sector. While SERVQUAL is widely used in service industries, its relevance and adaptability in varying tourism contexts have not been sufficiently explored. This gap is particularly significant given the influence of cultural variability and evolving service environments. The objective of this study is to assess how the five dimensions of SERVQUAL, namely reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness, affect customer satisfaction and loyalty across different segments of tourism, including destination management, hospitality, travel agencies, and tour operations. A qualitative review method was employed to synthesize empirical findings from multiple studies. The results reveal that each tourism sector prioritizes different dimensions depending on the nature of the service environment. For example, adventure tourism emphasizes assurance and reliability, whereas empathy is more valued in resort and cultural tourism settings. The study also identifies emerging challenges such as technological changes and cultural diversity that influence interpersonal service interactions. These findings affirm the continued usefulness of SERVQUAL while highlighting the importance of contextual adaptation and integration with digital models in international tourism research and practice.

Keywords: Customer satisfaction; qualitative review; service quality; SERVQUAL; tourism management.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry, inherently service-driven and highly customer-centric, relies heavily on the consistent delivery of high-quality services to maintain competitiveness, ensure visitor satisfaction, and foster long-term loyalty. Given the intangible and experiential nature of tourism offerings, service quality emerges as a key determinant of tourist perceptions and decision-making (Chen & Chen, 2010). Within this context, the SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), has become one of the most widely utilized frameworks for evaluating service quality across various sectors of the tourism industry.

The SERVQUAL model proposes that service quality can be effectively measured through five core dimensions: Reliability (the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), Assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust), Tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel), Empathy (caring, individualized attention to customers), and Responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service). These dimensions provide a comprehensive and systematic approach to understanding the gap between customer expectations and actual service delivery (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1990).

In the tourism industry, the SERVQUAL model has been applied extensively across diverse settings such as hotels, resorts, travel agencies, tour operators, and destination management organizations (DMOs). Studies have shown that Reliability and Assurance tend to be the most critical dimensions influencing overall tourist satisfaction in hospitality contexts (Yilmaz, 2009; Marković & Raspor, 2010). Meanwhile, Tangibles, such as modern facilities and visual appeal, often play a greater role in first impressions and luxury or high-end travel experiences (Akbaba, 2006).

However, while the SERVQUAL model remains a valuable diagnostic tool, its application in tourism is not without limitations. Critics argue that the model's original conceptualization, which assumes service quality as the gap between expectations and perceptions, may oversimplify the complexity of the tourism experience, which often involves multi-touchpoint journeys, emotional factors, and culturally driven expectations (Buttle, 1996; Wu & Ko, 2013). Moreover, the dynamic and globalized nature of tourism means that service expectations vary widely depending on tourists' cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and prior travel experiences, factors that may not be fully captured by the standard SERVQUAL dimensions.

Nonetheless, the model's adaptability and ease of use have led to its continued popularity in both academic research and practical service quality management. Some researchers have suggested modifications or integrations of SERVQUAL with other models, such as SERVPERF or the Tourism Service Quality (TSQ) model, to better suit specific tourism contexts (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Hudson & Shephard, 1998).

1.1. Purpose of study

In summary, the SERVQUAL model remains a foundational framework for measuring and improving service quality in tourism. While it is not without its limitations, its structured approach offers valuable insights for service providers seeking to enhance customer experiences and sustain competitive advantage in an increasingly demanding and diverse global tourism market. This study aims to examine the application and effectiveness of the SERVQUAL model in measuring service quality within the tourism and hospitality industry. Given the service-intensive nature of this sector, understanding customer expectations and perceptions is critical for enhancing satisfaction and loyalty. Building on the foundational work of Parasuraman et al. (1988) and further developed by researchers such as Akbaba (2006), Marković and Raspor (2010), and Wu and Ko (2013), this review investigates how the SERVQUAL model has been utilized across different contexts within tourism, including hotels, travel services, and destination management. The goal is to assess the model's strengths, limitations, and practical relevance in diverse operational and cultural settings, contributing to a clearer understanding of its role in service quality evaluation.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ali, S., & Fazili, A.I. (2025). Application of the SERVQUAL model in the tourism industry across hospitality, travel, and destination management sectors. *Global Journal of Business, Economics and Management, 15*(1), 25-31. https://doi.org/10.18844/gjbem.v15i1.9725

This study adopts a literature review methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed academic sources that focus on the application of the SERVQUAL model within the tourism and hospitality sectors. The analysis is based on a selection of key studies published between 1988 and 2013, including foundational theoretical texts (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1990; Buttle, 1996) as well as empirical research conducted in various international contexts. These sources were chosen for their relevance to the study's objective and their focus on SERVQUAL's dimensions, Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, and Responsiveness, in hospitality and tourism environments.

The review synthesizes findings on the model's implementation, performance, and adaptation across settings such as hotels, tourist destinations, and heritage sites. Specific attention is given to how SERVQUAL has been used to evaluate guest perceptions, identify service gaps, and inform managerial decision-making. The methodology is qualitative and interpretive in nature, relying on comparative analysis of the selected studies to draw conclusions about the model's utility and limitations.

3. RESULTS

3.1. SERVQUAL in hospitality

3.1.1. Hotel industry

The hospitality sector, particularly hotels, is one of the primary areas where SERVQUAL has been extensively applied. Hotels rely heavily on the quality of service to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive market. Studies have shown that the SERVQUAL dimensions are critical in shaping guests' perceptions of hotel service quality. For example, research conducted by Nadiri & Hussain (2005) in Northern Cyprus hotels found that reliability, assurance, and responsiveness were the most significant dimensions influencing guest satisfaction. Guests valued the consistency and dependability of service (reliability), the competence and courtesy of staff (assurance), and the promptness of service (responsiveness). In another study by Marković & Janković (2013) in Croatian hotels, tangibles such as the physical environment and the appearance of facilities were also found to play a significant role in customer satisfaction. This is particularly important in the luxury hotel segment, where the quality of physical assets is often seen as a reflection of the overall service quality.

3.1.2. Resorts and spas

In resort and spa settings, where the emphasis is often on relaxation and personalized experiences, the empathy dimension of SERVQUAL becomes particularly relevant. Research by Devi Juwaheer (2004) in Mauritian resorts highlighted the importance of empathy in creating memorable guest experiences. The ability of staff to provide personalized attention and cater to individual needs was found to significantly impact guests' overall satisfaction and likelihood of returning.

3.2. SERVQUAL in travel agencies and tour operators

3.2.1. Travel agencies

Travel agencies, both traditional and online, are key players in the tourism industry, acting as intermediaries between customers and service providers. The application of SERVQUAL in this context has focused on understanding how well agencies meet customer expectations in terms of service delivery.

A study by Akama & Kieti (2003) on travel agencies in Kenya found that reliability and responsiveness were the most critical dimensions for customers. Customers valued the agency's ability to provide accurate information and deliver services as promised (reliability), as well as the promptness in addressing inquiries and resolving issues (responsiveness). The assurance dimension was also important, particularly in terms of the competence and trustworthiness of the agency staff.

3.2.2. Tour operators

For tour operators, who are responsible for creating and managing travel itineraries, the application of SERVQUAL has helped identify areas for improving service delivery. A study by Crouch (2007) on Taiwanese

tour operators found that reliability and empathy were particularly significant in shaping customer satisfaction. Customers appreciated the operators' ability to deliver what was promised and their willingness to understand and cater to individual preferences.

In the context of adventure tourism, where safety and reliability are paramount, the assurance dimension of SERVQUAL is crucial. Research by Kuo et al., (2013) on adventure tour operators in Taiwan emphasized the importance of assurance in ensuring customer trust and confidence, particularly in activities involving physical risk.

3.3. SERVQUAL in destination management

3.3.1. Destination marketing organizations (DMOs)

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are responsible for promoting and managing tourist destinations. The application of SERVQUAL in this context has focused on assessing the quality of services provided to tourists, such as information services, transportation, and destination amenities. A study by Chi and Qu (2008) on the application of SERVQUAL in destination management in Arkansas, USA, found that the tangibles and responsiveness dimensions were significant predictors of tourist satisfaction. Tourists valued the quality and accessibility of physical facilities, such as visitor centers and transportation (tangibles), as well as the promptness and effectiveness of services like information provision and issue resolution (responsiveness).

In developing tourist destinations, where infrastructure and services may be less developed, the reliability and assurance dimensions of SERVQUAL are particularly important. Research by Ene & Schofield (2011) on tourism in Indonesia highlighted the importance of reliability in ensuring that basic services, such as transportation and accommodation, meet tourists' expectations.

3.2 Heritage and cultural tourism

In the context of heritage and cultural tourism, where the focus is on preserving and showcasing cultural assets, the empathy dimension of SERVQUAL is particularly relevant. Studies have shown that tourists value the ability of service providers to understand and respect cultural sensitivies, as well as to provide personalized experiences that enhance their understanding of the cultural heritage (Atilgan et al., 2003).

3.4. Challenges in applying SERVQUAL in tourism

3.4.1. Customization and contextualization

One of the main challenges in applying SERVQUAL in the tourism industry is the need for customization and contextualization. The diverse nature of tourism services means that the relative importance of the SERVQUAL dimensions can vary widely depending on the specific context. For example, while reliability and assurance may be paramount in adventure tourism, empathy and tangibles may be more critical in luxury resorts. Researchers and practitioners need to adapt the SERVQUAL model to reflect the unique characteristics of different tourism services and customer segments. For instance, studies using AHP-SERVQUAL in mountainous trekking destinations show that responsiveness (promptness) and assurance dimensions vary significantly across service zones (Bhattacharya et al., 2023) **.**

3.4.2. Cultural differences

Cultural differences also pose a challenge in applying SERVQUAL in tourism. Tourists from different cultural backgrounds may have varying expectations of service quality, which can influence how they perceive the importance of different SERVQUAL dimensions. For instance, a study by Imrie et al. (2002) found that the emphasis on empathy and assurance varied significantly across cultures, with some cultures placing a higher value on personalized service and others on competence and reliability.

3.4.3. Dynamic nature of tourism services

The dynamic and often unpredictable nature of tourism services adds another layer of complexity to the application of SERVQUAL. Factors such as seasonality, weather conditions, and fluctuating tourist volumes can

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impact service delivery, making it challenging to maintain consistent service quality. As a result, the reliability dimension, which emphasizes consistency and dependability, can be particularly difficult to manage in the tourism context. Recent bibliometric assessments highlight the instability of SERVQUAL dimensionality across different tourism seasons and service offerings (Olawuyi & Kleynhans, 2025; Perdomo-Verdecia et al., 2024) **.**

3.4.4. Integration with technology

The growing integration of technology in tourism services, particularly through online booking platforms and mobile apps, presents both opportunities and challenges for applying SERVQUAL. On one hand, technology can enhance the responsiveness and tangible dimensions by providing faster service and more accessible information. On the other hand, it can also reduce the emphasis on personal interaction, making it more challenging to assess empathy and assurance. Studies using e-SERVQUAL and sustainable e-service quality frameworks show that personalization and fulfillment dimensions become critical for tourists using digital platforms (Ighomereho et al., 2022) **.**

3.5. Future directions for SERVQUAL in tourism

3.5.1. Evolving customer expectations

As customer expectations continue to evolve, particularly in the context of post-pandemic recovery, there is a need to continuously update and refine the SERVQUAL model to reflect these changes. For example, the increasing emphasis on health and safety in tourism services may require greater attention to the assurance dimension. Similarly, the growing demand for personalized and sustainable travel experiences may necessitate a stronger focus on empathy and tangibles.

3.5.2. Integration with other models

To enhance the effectiveness of SERVQUAL in tourism, there is potential for integrating it with other service quality models and frameworks. For instance, combining SERVQUAL with the SERVPERF model, which focuses on performance-based measurement, could provide a more comprehensive assessment of service quality in tourism. Similarly, integrating SERVQUAL with technology-driven models, such as the e-SERVQUAL for online services, could help address the challenges posed by digitalization in tourism.

3.5.3 empirical research and validation

Ongoing empirical research is essential to validate and refine the application of SERVQUAL in different tourism contexts. Longitudinal studies that track changes in service quality perceptions over time can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the SERVQUAL model in tourism. Additionally, cross-cultural studies can help identify and address the cultural variations in service quality expectations, ensuring that SERVQUAL remains relevant and effective in a globalized tourism industry. Empirical applications of modified SERVQUAL instruments in Nepalese resorts demonstrated high content validity via Delphi refinement before field testing (Adhikari et al., 2023) **.**

4. CONCLUSION

The application of the SERVQUAL model in the tourism industry provides valuable insight into how service quality affects customer satisfaction and loyalty. The model includes five core dimensions which are reliability assurance tangibles empathy and responsiveness. These dimensions offer a clear structure for evaluating how well service providers meet customer expectations. In different areas of tourism such as hotels travel services and destination management SERVQUAL helps identify service gaps understand customer needs and improve service delivery. It also allows businesses to assess their performance and make better decisions that lead to more satisfying experiences for guests.

The tourism industry continues to change due to shifts in customer behaviour cultural differences and new technology. Because of this ongoing change the SERVQUAL model must be adjusted to suit the specific needs of each tourism setting. The meaning and impact of each service quality dimension can differ depending on the type of tourism and the customer group. Although SERVQUAL remains a strong tool for improving service

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quality its usefulness depends on how well it adapts to these changes. When applied carefully it can help tourism providers grow remain competitive and achieve long term success.

Conflict of interest: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical Approval: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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