

## Impact of Service Quality Dimensions on Customer Satisfaction towards Growing Travel Agencies

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### ABSTRACT

Service quality plays a crucial role in sustaining and growing travel agencies. However, despite its significance, prior research has not adequately explored travel service quality and its outcomes. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to compare the influence of perceived service quality on customer satisfaction across online and offline service settings through an empirical analysis conducted among growing travel agencies. The widely recognised SERVQUAL framework is employed to examine differences in the impact of service quality dimensions in both online and offline service contexts. The findings reveal that in the online service environment, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy significantly influence perceived service quality, whereas in the offline environment, assurance, empathy, and tangibles emerge as the key determinants. Based on the existing survey data, the offline context reflects one fewer service quality dimension than the online context. This study provides valuable insights into the distinct effects of service quality across service channels. The results offer practical implications for travel agency managers by highlighting the critical factors shaping service quality in both online and offline booking contexts. Notably, assurance and empathy are identified as the most influential dimensions affecting customer satisfaction....

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Service quality is widely recognized as a critical determinant of success in the service sector (Torres, 2014). Enhanced service quality not only leads to customer satisfaction and delight but also helps reduce customer attrition and ensures stable revenue streams (Ciunova-Shuleska et al., 2013). Within the tourism industry, travel agencies play a vital role by catering to clients' business travel requirements, managing travel expenditures, and offering customized travel solutions (Chircu et al., 2001; Morrison et al., 1994; Gustafson, 2012). Although travel constitutes a substantial segment of the tourism market, existing research has largely focused on service quality in leisure travel agencies (Martínez Caro and Martínez García, 2008; Ciunova-Shuleska et al., 2013; Kaynama and Black, 2000; Kim and Lee, 2004; Riel et al., 2004; Tsang et al., 2010). While the adoption of online booking platforms has increased compared to traditional travel agencies' offline booking systems, travellers continue to depend heavily on conventional booking services provided by in-person travel agents and approximately 70% of bookings are still conducted through traditional offline channels, underscoring their enduring importance in travel planning. The trend suggests that online and offline booking modes are likely to coexist within the travel agency sector for the foreseeable future, despite the growth of online travel services.

Although service quality has been extensively examined in prior research, comparative studies analysing its impact across online and offline service environments remain limited. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the differences in the influence of service quality on travel agencies' booking services across both online and offline contexts. To achieve this objective, the study employs the well-established SERVQUAL measurement framework developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). This instrument has been validated in both online (Ho and Lee, 2007) and offline service settings (Marinković et al., 2013), making it suitable for the current investigation. Accordingly, the study aims to identify the specific dimensions of service quality that influence customer satisfaction in online and offline travel services.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Service Quality

The concept of service quality has been extensively examined and implemented across a wide range of service sectors, including banking (Ali and Raza, 2017), healthcare (Al-Neyadi et al., 2018), airport baggage handling (Rezaei et al., 2018), hospitality (e.g., Devi Juwaheer, 2004; Stefano et al., 2015), and travel agencies (Marinković et al., 2013). However, research specifically addressing service quality within the travel agency industry remains limited. Service quality is commonly defined as customers' evaluation of the overall excellence of a service (Parasuraman et al., 1988) or as a global judgment formed through customer perceptions

(Grönroos, 1984). Prior studies have consistently identified service quality as a key antecedent of customer satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

Services differ fundamentally from goods due to three defining characteristics: intangibility, heterogeneity, and the simultaneous production and consumption of services, also referred to as inseparability (Schneider and White, 2004; Xu et al., 2013). Intangibility implies that, unlike tangible goods, services cannot be seen, touched, or evaluated before purchase, making quality assessment more challenging (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). This is because services consist primarily of processes and performance rather than physical objects (Schneider and White, 2004). The absence of physical manifestation complicates customers' understanding and evaluation of service quality (Ding and Keh, 2017).

Heterogeneity reflects the variability inherent in service delivery, as customer expectations and experiences may differ, and service personnel may deliver the same service in inconsistent ways (García-Quevedo et al., 2011). Even when standardised procedures are in place, service outcomes may vary, making service quality difficult to control (Schneider and White, 2004). Consequently, the service delivered may differ from what the organization intends to provide (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Inseparability refers to the fact that service production and consumption occur simultaneously, requiring close interaction between service providers and customers. Because customer participation is deeply embedded in the service process, firms cannot exercise complete control over service quality, making customer experience a critical factor in evaluating service performance (Moeller, 2010; Parasuraman et al., 1985).

### Service quality measurement

The inherent characteristics of services contribute to the complexity of measuring service quality. As a result, numerous studies have focused on developing models and scales to assess service quality. In their foundational work, Parasuraman et al. (1985) emphasised that service quality is more difficult for consumers to evaluate than product quality, as service quality perceptions arise from comparisons between customer expectations and actual service performance. Fonseca (2009) argued that service quality is closely aligned with customer satisfaction, reflecting subjective perceptions shaped by prior experiences and expectations. Similarly, Schneider and White (2004) proposed a user-based approach to service quality assessment, emphasising customers' personal experiences as the basis for evaluation.

Grönroos (1984) introduced a service quality framework distinguishing between technical quality and functional quality. Technical quality refers to what customers receive from the service, whereas functional quality relates to how the service is delivered and how customers perceive the service process. Building on these perspectives and the core characteristics of services, Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model, a five-dimensional instrument designed to measure service quality. The dimensions include: tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel), reliability (the

ability to deliver promised services accurately and dependably), responsiveness (willingness to assist customers and provide timely service), assurance (employees' knowledge, courtesy, and ability to inspire trust), and empathy (the provision of caring and individualized attention to customers).

Parasuraman et al. (1988) empirically validated the SERVQUAL scale through factor analysis and confirmed its validity using one-way ANOVA. Since its introduction, SERVQUAL has been widely adopted and tested across various industries. Building on the expectation-perception framework proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), LeBlanc (1992) suggested that customer expectations significantly influence perceived service quality. His exploratory study in the travel agency context utilised customer databases from two agencies and focused on measuring the gap between customer perceptions and expectations. Kang et al. (2002) applied SERVQUAL to internal service quality and demonstrated its suitability as a measurement instrument.

Their confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that the five SERVQUAL dimensions, reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness, were conceptually distinct and well defined. In the travel agency sector, Marinković et al. (2013) examined the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction and found that all SERVQUAL dimensions except assurance had a significant impact on satisfaction. Xu et al. (2013) explored service quality in the context of electronic services and concluded that service quality remains a critical success factor in traditional offline environments as well as in online settings. Their findings further supported the applicability of SERVQUAL in measuring service quality within emerging online service domains. The SERVQUAL framework has also been empirically tested in online environments by Kim and Lee (2004) and Kaynama and Black (2000). Nevertheless, Van Dyke et al. (1997) cautioned that industry-specific adaptations should be considered when applying SERVQUAL, emphasising the need to account for contextual differences in service delivery.

### Service Quality and Travel Agency

The management of travel plays a crucial role in supporting organisations across industries where employees are required to interact with clients, partners, and colleagues (Senkane, 2018). The travel agencies primarily deliver services to organisations operating under a business model. As these services are typically governed by long-term contracts, the relationship between travel agencies and clients tends to be stable and enduring (Gustafson, 2012). However, despite the contractual framework, service delivery largely follows a Business-to-Customer (B2C) orientation, as interactions occur directly between travel agencies' counsellors and individual travellers. In this context, the SERVQUAL model, with its five dimensions, represents an appropriate framework for evaluating service quality in travel agency services.

Travel agencies are responsible for managing travel requirements in alignment with client objectives and

financial controls, facilitating compliance with travel policies, achieving cost savings through negotiated agreements, serving as key information hubs, and ensuring efficient travel arrangements. Given the contract-based nature of the business, maintaining a high level of service quality is a fundamental requirement. The incorporation of service quality and customer surveys to evaluate the quality of services delivered. Higher levels of perceived service quality enhance the competitive positioning of travel agencies within the market.

The travel agency industry is inherently dependent on effective communication among travel agents, customers, technology service providers, and travel suppliers. With the advancement of digital technologies, the internet has become a primary communication and service delivery channel for travel agencies. Online booking systems enable clients to access consolidated travel information and enforce travel policies directly. A comprehensive framework like this should better explain consumer perception in the context of using OTAs. In addition, other characteristics of consumers, like Openness to change and Compatibility, which are widely used in interpreting consumer behaviours, have not been considered in the OTA context. In other words, previous studies ignored the importance of differences in personal traits of consumers and did not consider both positive and negative perceptions. Consequently, the existence of online and offline service channels in travel agencies necessitates an examination of how each service mode influences customer satisfaction.

## Measuring Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

### Measuring Customer Satisfaction

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that higher levels of service quality result in increased customer satisfaction (Cronin et al., 2000; Brady and Robertson, 2001; Yang et al., 2009). Zeithaml et al. (1996) further established that customers' perceptions of service quality act as a key antecedent to satisfaction. In the context of the travel industry, Marinković et al. (2013) recommended examining the relationship between each SERVQUAL dimension and customer satisfaction. Drawing on these findings, the present study develops a research model linking the relevant variables and examines the relative contribution of each variable to overall customer satisfaction.

Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) introduced the SERVQUAL model, which conceptualises service quality across five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions collectively capture customers' evaluations of service performance. Prior research suggests that service quality and customer satisfaction are positively and reciprocally related (Riel et al., 2004). Building upon the SERVQUAL framework, this study proposes a research model comprising six latent variables: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and satisfaction. Satisfaction is incorporated as a dependent variable, consistent with Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988), to empirically test the relationships between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction.

Considering the operational characteristics of travel agencies, this model is applied in both online and offline service contexts within the present study.

## Service Quality Dimensions

### Assurance

Assurance refers to the extent to which travel agency services inspire trust and confidence by providing sufficient and secure information. In travel services, security and privacy are commonly ensured through secure login systems and encrypted websites. Travel agency services are required to support policy compliance and act as reliable information centres. Assurance in offline services reflects the accuracy, reliability, and trustworthiness of information provided by travel agents, as well as their ability to ensure compliance with travel policies. Accordingly, it is hypothesised that:

**H1:** The assurance of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards offline travel agencies.

**H2:** The assurance of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards online travel agencies.

### Empathy

In online services, empathy is expressed through the availability of support channels and the extent to which customers feel assisted when encountering issues. Given the travel agency's role as a key information source, access to timely help and personalised assistance is essential. Empathy in offline services is demonstrated through personalised attention and the accessibility of travel counsellors. As travel agencies function as information providers and problem solvers, individualised care and understanding of client needs play a significant role in shaping perceptions of service quality. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H3:** The empathy of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards offline travel agencies.

**H4:** The empathy of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards online travel agencies.

### Reliability

In the online booking context, reliability refers to the ability of the travel agency's information technology systems to provide accurate, relevant, and policy-compliant travel information. Corporations regulate travel expenditures through travel policies to maximise travel safety and efficiency by securing the most appropriate fares (Guizzard et al., 2017). Travel agencies act as information hubs by offering negotiated fares across flights, hotels, and car rentals that align with preferences. Accordingly, it is hypothesised that:

**H5:** The reliability of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards offline travel agencies.

**H6:** The reliability of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards online travel agencies.

### Responsiveness

Responsiveness in the online context reflects the speed and accuracy with which tickets and itineraries are delivered. In many travel agencies, faster service delivery is often linked to higher service fee levels. Prompt and accurate responses to customer requests enhance perceived service performance. In the offline booking context, responsiveness refers to the speed with which travel agencies respond to client inquiries and deliver tickets and itineraries. Ensuring timely responses is essential for travel efficiency and achieving objectives. Therefore, it is expected that:

**H7:** The responsiveness of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards offline travel agencies.

**H8:** The responsiveness of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards online travel agencies.

### Tangibility

In an online context, tangibility is reflected through website accessibility, ease of navigation, and design and presentation quality (Ho and Lee, 2007; Kaynama and Black, 2000). Since client profiles and travel policies are primarily managed through IT systems, the ease of accessing and updating traveller information is critical in shaping customers' evaluations of service quality. Tangibles in offline services represent the visible and physical aspects of service delivery that enhance customer satisfaction (Panda and Das, 2014). In the travel agency context, this includes the professionalism and effectiveness of travel agents in ensuring compliance with travel policies and selecting preferred suppliers and fares. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

**H9:** The tangibility of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards offline travel agencies.

**H10:** The tangibility of travel agency services is positively related to customer satisfaction towards online travel agencies.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research instrument was first validated by academic experts and then tested to add value to the survey. In total, 592 questionnaires were distributed, of which 515 were returned, yielding a response rate of approximately. Among the returned questionnaires, 295 pertained to valid responses from those who have experience in online travel agencies. Some of the participants met certain standards and were therefore asked to contribute to the study via e-mail. The survey instrument was developed using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (5). In addition, information and examples such as age, gender, education, and occupation were collected using

convenience sampling methods. Initially, 361 participants were targeted via online survey using email, but after removing missing responses, the data was reduced to 295 participants. Primary data was collected with the help of a well-structured questionnaire, which was prepared based on relevant literature (Suganthi et al., 2001)

The offline survey consisted of five items, whereas the online survey included eight items. Both surveys contained a customer satisfaction measure, asking respondents to rate their overall satisfaction. To test the proposed conceptual framework, partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed. PLS-SEM was selected for two primary reasons. First, it enables the simultaneous estimation of both measurement and structural models, providing robust path estimates among latent constructs (Barclay et al., 1995; Chin, 1998a, 1998b). Second, PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate for exploratory research and complex models with relatively small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2014). The analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 3.0.

**Table 1: Demographic details**

Demographics	Frequency	%
Age		
21–30	80	27
31–40	118	41
41–50	51	17
Above 50	46	15
Gender		
Male	163	55
Female	132	45
Education level		
Under Graduate	62	19
Graduate	129	45
Post Graduate	103	36
Occupation		
Private Organisation	128	44
Public Organisation	67	23
Business	47	16
Students	53	17

### Data analysis and results

This research utilises SEM as a part of Smart PLS 3.2. (Sarstedt et al., 2014), by utilising a bootstrap resampling methodology of 5,000 (Hair et al., 2011). This technique is used to evaluate both the estimation and structural



model. PLS-SEM is very rational and effective to use for breaking down complex models. Moreover, the incorporation of two developmentally measured constructs of the research model makes the utilization of PLS, i.e. Partial Least Squares, because it can give assessments to the model, rather than SEM, structural equation models, which are unable to assess complex models (Hair et al., 2011; Hair et al., 2012). PLS is capable of explaining the connection between dormant variables. A latent variable is an unnoticed variable which is connected with the other identifiable factors. Hence, this technique can function with the unnoticed factors and determine the measurement error in the improvement of such unnoticed variables (Chin, 1998). The assessment of single-item reliability is done by evaluating simple correlation. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), items are considered to be reliable when their value is above 0.55, and according to Table 2, all the items are regarded as reliable. Furthermore, convergent validity is determined by using (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE).

### Offline Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated by assessing construct validity, comprising convergent and discriminant validity and reliability. Convergent validity was examined by verifying whether factor loadings exceeded the threshold of 0.70 (Chen, 2010) and whether the average variance extracted (AVE) values for each construct were above 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Chen, 2010). In the offline context, each construct was measured using a single indicator; consequently, factor loadings for all constructs were equal to 1. Discriminant validity was assessed by examining factor cross-loadings and ensuring that the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs (Chin, 1998b; Chen, 2010).

**Table 1:** Hypotheses Testing (Offline)

Hypotheses	Beta ( $\beta$ )	T statistic	p	Result
<b>H1:</b> Assurance > Satisfaction	0.476	7.767	0.001	Supported
<b>H3:</b> Empathy > Satisfaction	0.307	3.045	0.002	Supported
<b>H5:</b> Reliability > Satisfaction	0.325	2.231	0.017	Supported
<b>H7:</b> Responsiveness > Satisfaction	0.039	0.231	0.484	Not-Supported
<b>H9:</b> Tangible > Satisfaction	0.173	3.160	0.005	Supported

Reliability was assessed using composite reliability, which accounts for actual indicator loadings when estimating internal consistency (Werts et al., 1974). All constructs exhibited composite reliability values above 0.80, indicating strong reliability. The structural model for the offline context explained 57.5% of the variance in customer satisfaction. Hypothesis testing results are summarised in Table 1. Assurance emerged as the strongest predictor of customer satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.476$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by empathy ( $\beta = 0.307$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ), reliability ( $\beta = 0.325$ ,  $p < 0.017$ ) and tangibility ( $\beta = 0.173$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ). Responsiveness, however, was not found to significantly influence customer satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.039$ ,  $p = 0.484$ ). Thus, the research hypotheses H1, H3, H5 and H9 were accepted while H7 was rejected by the researcher.

### Online Measurement Model

In the online context, assurance and tangibility were measured using two indicators each. Therefore, both constructs were evaluated for validity and reliability. SmartPLS results indicated that all factor loadings exceeded 0.70 and AVE values were greater than 0.50, confirming acceptable convergent and discriminant validity (Chen, 2010). The online structural model explained 53.9% of the variance in customer satisfaction (see Table 5). Assurance was the strongest predictor of satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.542$ ,  $p < 0.031$ ), followed by responsiveness ( $\beta = 0.199$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and empathy ( $\beta = 0.210$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). In contrast, tangibility ( $\beta = 0.055$ ,  $p = 0.247$ ) and reliability ( $\beta = 0.114$ ,  $p = 0.087$ ) did not exhibit statistically significant effects on customer satisfaction, consistent with findings reported by Tsang et al. (2010). Thus, the research hypotheses H2, H4 and H8 were accepted while H6 and H10 were rejected by the researcher.

**Table 2:** Hypotheses Testing (Online)

Hypotheses	Beta ( $\beta$ )	T statistics	p	Result
<b>H2:</b> Assurance > Satisfaction	0.542	3.261	0.031	Supported
<b>H4:</b> Empathy > Satisfaction	0.210	2.505	0.002	Supported
<b>H6:</b> Reliability > Satisfaction	0.114	0.231	0.087	Not-Supported
<b>H8:</b> Responsiveness > Satisfaction	0.199	0.231	0.001	Supported
<b>H10:</b> Tangible > Satisfaction	0.055	3.160	0.247	Not-Supported

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The results of the PLS-SEM analysis indicate that the relative importance of SERVQUAL dimensions varies across online and offline service contexts. In the offline context, assurance, empathy, and tangibility were found to significantly influence customer satisfaction. These findings are consistent with prior research on traditional travel agencies (Marinković et al., 2011), which highlights the importance of personal interaction and visible service attributes. In the online context, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy emerged as significant predictors of customer satisfaction. Assurance was identified as the most influential factor in both service contexts, supporting earlier studies emphasising the role of trust, information accuracy, and security in travel-related services (Tsang et al., 2010). This result underscores the importance of travel counsellors' expertise and the quality of information systems in shaping customer satisfaction (Martínez Caro and Martínez García, 2008).

Responsiveness was particularly salient in the online environment, where timely delivery of fares and itineraries via digital platforms directly affects customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Li et al., 2009). Empathy was found to positively influence customer satisfaction in both contexts, reflecting the importance of accessibility, individualised attention, and customer care (Riel et al., 2004; Kang et al., 2002; Marinković et al., 2013). These findings align with Holma et al. (2015), who emphasise the role of caring interactions in complex service environments.

Tangibility was a significant determinant of satisfaction only in the offline context, highlighting the importance of physical facilities, professional appearance, and well-trained counsellors in face-to-face service encounters (Marinković et al., 2013). Overall, the findings confirm the applicability of the SERVQUAL framework in evaluating service quality in both online and offline travel agency contexts, despite ongoing critiques of the model (Cronin and Taylor, 1994).

#### Managerial Implications and Recommendations

The findings offer important insights for travel agency managers seeking to enhance customer satisfaction across service channels. Both assurance and empathy were identified as critical drivers of satisfaction in online and offline contexts. This highlights the need for travel agencies to invest in staff training, data security, privacy protection, and customer-centric service cultures. Managers should ensure that travel counsellors possess up-to-date knowledge and skills to provide accurate, trustworthy, and personalised services. In the online context, particular emphasis should be placed on improving system responsiveness, itinerary delivery speed, and platform reliability to enhance customer experiences and sustain competitive advantage.

#### Limitations and Future Research

This study is among the few to examine service quality across both online and offline contexts within a single industry. The use of real-world operational data from a leading travel agency enhances the practical relevance of the findings. However, reliance on secondary data constrained the number of measurement indicators available for each SERVQUAL dimension. Future research should employ primary data collection methods to allow for more comprehensive measurement of service quality constructs. Additionally, SERVQUAL dimensions may be further refined or adapted to better capture the distinct characteristics of online and offline travel agency service formats.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

Service quality is essential for sustaining and expanding client bases in the travel agency industry. This study demonstrates that, in the offline context, assurance, empathy, and tangibility are key antecedents of customer satisfaction, emphasising the importance of trust, personalised attention, and professional service delivery. In the online context, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy play a dominant role in driving satisfaction, underscoring the need for secure, efficient, and customer-oriented digital service platforms. The findings confirm that SERVQUAL remains a valid and useful framework for evaluating service quality in both online and offline travel agency environments and provide actionable insights for practitioners seeking to enhance service performance and customer satisfaction.

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