Are Domestic Tourists Satisfied with the Service Quality of Travel Agencies in Kathmandu?

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Abstract

In view of the important role service quality plays in customer satisfaction this paper aimed to examine the relationship between domestic tourists' satisfaction with service quality of travel agencies in Kathmandu. Descriptive as well as causal comparative research design was adopted. The research was administered to 120 respondents using purposive sampling technique. The findings of this research were based upon the primary survey. The paper shows that out of five hypotheses there is no significant impact of tangibility on customer satisfaction whereas reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy have a significant impact on customer satisfaction. This study contributes invaluable information for both academician sand managers for their theoretical and practical purposes.

Key Words: *Customer satisfaction,domestic tourists, SERVQUAL, travel agencies.*

Introduction and Study Objectives

Tourism is the short-term movement of people for any purpose outside their general place and the activities they conduct may include long tours, day visits or excursions whereas a travel agency can be defined as a service provider organisation basically providing such services as ticketing, hotel reservation, transport arrangements, travel insurance, package tours etc. As every organisation, travel agencies aim is to meet the needs and the requirements of its stakeholders and consumers. Meeting the needs and the requirements of these both will not only ensure the survival of the organisation but also flourish it. Customer is presumed to be one of the most important stakeholders in any organisation because without him, organisations are not likely to succeed.

Travel agents are the engine of this tourism movement. The services offered by travel agencies include organising sightseeing tours and package tours, providing travel information, serving as middleman for accommodation and transportation bookings, issuing air tickets, and arranging car rental services. Whereas service quality plays an important role to gain customer satisfaction. Godbey (1997) describes service quality as a standard used to assess the effectiveness of a particular leisure service agency, including the tourism service sector. Johns et al. (2004) discovered that the highest service gaps were associated with the 'modern' appearance of the service and service-scape, whereas the smallest were associated with the interpersonal aspects of service

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offered by travel agents in Northern Cyprus. Respondents prioritised efficiency over individuality in their service offerings.

Ilić et al. (2016) found that the cost of travel arrangements is regarded as the most important consideration in travel arrangement selection. Other criteria influencing the choice of a travel arrangement were judged differently by respondents with varying levels of education. Respondents of all ages agree that the quality of travel plans given by travel agents in Leskovac. Similarly, Rosha and Kaur (2017) revealed that overall satisfaction of perceived service quality has a low positive relationship with overall satisfaction from the services delivered by travel agents of Panjab State of India.

Domestic tourism plays a vital role in sustaining the industry, especially in times of global economic challenges or international travel restrictions. The level of service quality provided by travel agencies meets the satisfaction of domestic tourists or not has to be examined by research works. To fulfil the demand of this gap, scientific research aiming to examine the relationship between domestic tourist satisfaction with service quality of travel agencies in Kathmandu is essential.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of service quality factors on the customer satisfaction of domestic tourists using travel agencies in Kathmandu. The research focuses on five key service quality dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, and their influence on customer satisfaction of domestic tourists using travel agencies in Kathmandu.

Review of Literature

Fick and Ritchie (1991) state that providing high quality service is increasingly recognised as a critical factor for maximising customer satisfaction in the success of firms of the travel and tourism industry. Travel agencies need to assess their service quality to identify the level of their customer satisfaction in the travel business. The perception of service quality has been extensively studied during the past three decades.

The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) is one of the most widely applied frameworks to measure service quality. It identifies five key dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions collectively contribute to customer satisfaction by meeting or exceeding their expectations. In the travel agency sector, tangibles such as physical facilities and technological resources, as well as intangibles like responsiveness and empathy from employees, play crucial roles in shaping customer perceptions (Othman et al., 2019).

Providing superior service quality is crucial in achieving long-term success in the service industry (Shahin & Dabestani, 2010). According to Maula (2016), customer satisfaction is achieved when the perceived quality of services aligns with customer expectations. This alignment not only fosters customer loyalty but also enhances the agency's reputation and market share. Several studies have investigated the relationship between service quality

and customer satisfaction. For example, Gounaris et al. (2003) revealed that service quality has a significant impact and positive relationship with customer satisfaction.

The SERVQUAL instrument items consist of the following the five dimensions and are explained below:

a. Reliability. This dimension denotes the potential to perform the service reliably and accurately.

b. Responsiveness. This dimension represents the willingness to help customers/ guests while providing prompt service.

c. Tangibles. This dimension refers to the visual factors, i.e. the Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of employees.

d. Assurance. This dimension refers to employees' awareness/knowledge of the service in addition to courtesy and their ability to communicate trust and confidence.

e. Empathy. This dimension refers to the extent to which the employees care and provide personal/personalised attention to his customers.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is very important for creating and reinforcing customer loyalty and the long-term relationship between the service provider and the customer. Customer satisfaction acts as a key mediator between service quality and customer loyalty. Studies reveal that higher service quality leads to greater satisfaction, which in turn fosters loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) (Soleimani & Einolahzadeh, 2018).

Vargo et al. (2007) address that the satisfiers are concerned with the intrinsic needs of the customer while dissatisfiers meet the extrinsic needs of the customer or their functional requirements. This suggests that the basic needs of the customer must be taken care first, and intrinsic needs be provided subsequently, for him or her to experience customer satisfaction.

Angelovaa and Zekiri (2011) state that a satisfied consumer tends to buy more than a less satisfied one. In a highly competitive market, customer satisfaction is, indeed, a crucial key that builds strong and long-term relationships between the customers and the firm. Kotler (2008) addresses that if the perceived performance does not meet the expected performance, then the customer will feel disappointed or dissatisfied.

Research Hypotheses: To find the relationship between dependent variable (Customer Satisfaction of domestic tourists) and Independent Variable (Dimensions of Service Quality), following research hypothesis was set:

H1. There is a significant impact of reliability on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.

H2. There is a significant impact of responsiveness on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.

H3. There is a significant impact of assurance on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.

H4. There is a significant impact of tangibility on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.

H5. There is a significant impact of empathy on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of Customer Satisfaction and Service Quality
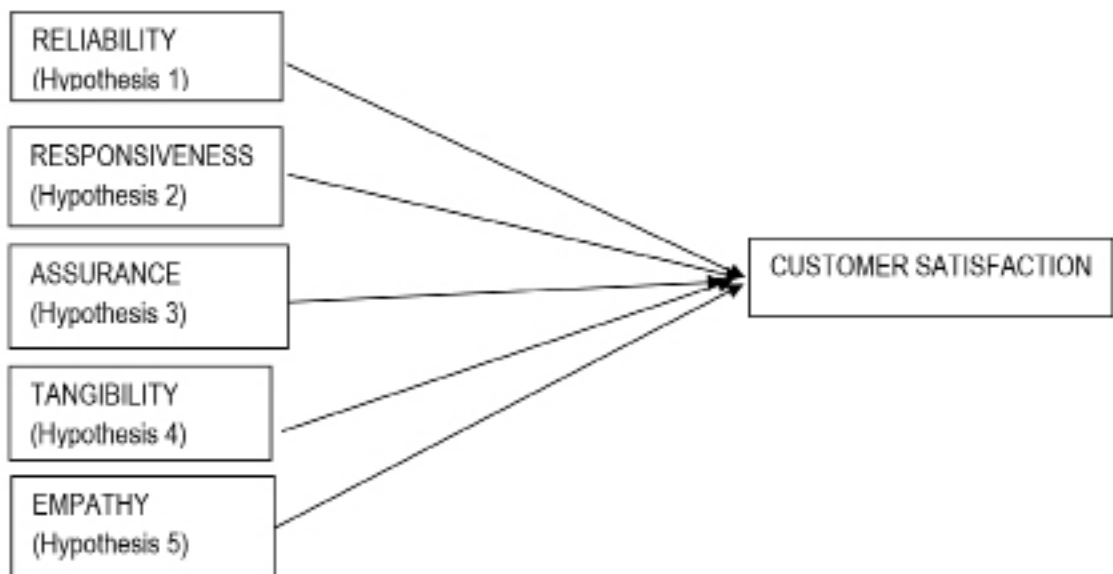
Note. *Adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1998)*

Service quality and customer satisfaction are very important concepts that companies must understand if they want to remain competitive and grow. In today's competitive environment delivering high quality service is the key for a sustainable competitive advantage. Satisfied customers form the foundation of any successful business as customer satisfaction leads to repeat purchase, brand loyalty, and positive word of mouth.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) state that service quality has a significant effect on customer satisfaction. The SERVQUAL framework developed by Parasuraman et al. in 1988 is a method of evaluating service quality for service industries which suggests that customer satisfaction is based on multiple factors rather than one factor. Parasuraman et al. (1988) came up with five dimensions which cut across various industries. The five dimensions identified to measure service quality are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance

and empathy.

Satisfaction can be expressed in many ways, like positive word-of-mouth, giving compliments to the service provider and brand loyalty to the service organisation. Quite often it is assumed that satisfied consumers will be brand loyal. It is important to understand customers' attitudes towards the quality of the service provided by travel agents, before implementing any service-improvement programs (Lam & Zhang, 1999).

Research Methods

The findings of this research were based upon the primary survey. The major tool used as an instrument for primary data collection was questionnaire set using the theoretical framework.

The study is based on various statistical tests such as descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analysis. The reliability of scales is analysed using Cronbach's alpha since Cronbach's alpha test is the best measure for multiple scale items and it is also the most popular test for the inter-item consistency reliability.

The research methodology used was based on primary data collected through questionnaire surveys. The study was descriptive and used both personal and online methods for administration. The personal method involved interviews with respondents, while the electronic method involved sending links to respondents via the internet.

Sampling Design and Size

A descriptive as well as causal comparative research design was carried out for the purpose of carrying out this research. Hair et al. (2010) suggest that for studies employing multiple regression or similar methods, a sample size ranging from 100 to 200 is adequate for reliable statistical analysis. The researcher distributed questionnaires to a total of 150 respondents but only 120 respondents responded to the distributed questionnaire. The respondents are travellers who use the travel agency in Kathmandu. The sampling technique used is non-probability purposive sampling.

Questionnaire Design and Instruments

A structured questionnaire was prepared and distributed to the respondents. The questionnaire was distributed on a convenient basis according to demographic factors. The source of data was primary in nature and after collecting the data, it was calculated by using mathematical tools and the results were presented in graphs, charts, and tables for the clear understanding of the reader. The conclusion was drawn from the finding and the analysis of the research. The questionnaire contained close-ended questions using five-points rating Likert scales to create an easy to answer an unbiased questionnaire. Scores on the scale vary from a low of 1 (strongly disagree) to a high of 5 (strongly agree), with disagree, neutral, and agree as interval points.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected were coded and analysed with the help of descriptive statistics. In the same way, correlation and regression analysis were done to examine the relationship between domestic tourist satisfaction with service quality of travel agencies in Kathmandu. On the other hand, social demographic profile was analysed through an descriptive analysis.

Demographic profile of Respondents

The table below presents the demographic profile of the respondents:

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Below 20	9	7.5
	20-30	96	80.0
	31-40	14	11.7
	41-50	1	0.8
Gender	Male	61	50.8
	Female	59	49.2
Marital status	Married	28	23.3
	Unmarried	88	73.3
	Others	4	3.3
Education	School Level	11	9.2
	Intermediate	18	15.0
	Bachelor	54	45.0
	Masters	33	27.5
	Above	4	3.3
Occupation	Employees	45	37.5
	Businessman	26	21.7
	Entrepreneur	15	12.5
	Public Service	3	2.5
	Others	31	25.8
Duration of travel	1 to 7 Days	72	60.0
	7 to 14 Days	26	21.7
	14 to 21 Days	7	5.8
	21 to 28 Days	8	6.7
	Above	7	5.8

Note. From the author's survey, 2023

Out of 120 respondents, most of the respondents (80%) aged between 20 and 30 years. The gender distribution of respondents shows that most of the respondents were male (50.8%), and unmarried (73.3%). Similarly, most of the respondents were the bachelor level students associated with different colleges, and employees (37.5%) and most of them (60%) travelled for 1 to 7 days.

Reliability of Instrument

Reliability refers to the correlation of an item, scale or instrument with a hypothetical one which measures what it is supposed to. P value is compared in terms of 0.01. If p value is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is rejected, else if it is equal to or more than 0.01, the null hypothesis is accepted.

Means were also compared to assess the reliability of scales. The value ranges between 1 to 5 and mean is 3. Generally, it is thought that the mean value more than 3 is positive response, the mean value 3 means adequate and less than 3 is negative response. The values are if above 3 it can be concluded that the scales are reliable. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for the reliability test. If the calculated Cronbach's alpha is above 0.7 then collected data are reliable. From the test, it can be inferred that the questionnaire prepared was reliable for the study as each Cronbach alpha is more than 0.7.

The reliability of the questionnaire is considered as very good reliability if the coefficient alpha value is ranged from 0.80 to 0.96. On the other hand, the coefficient alpha value of 0.70 to 0.80 is considered to have good reliability. For the coefficient alpha which ranged from 0.60 to 0.70, the level of reliability is considered as reliable.

Table 2

Reliability Test

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of items
Customer Satisfaction	0.964	6
Reliability	0.932	5
Responsiveness	0.924	5
Assurance	0.865	4
Empathy	0.754	4
Tangibility	0.828	6

Note. *From the author's survey, 2023*

Customer satisfaction has the highest Cronbach's alpha value standing at 0.964 which range from 0.80 to 0.96, it is considered as good reliability. The factor of 'Reliability' posted the second highest value of Cronbach's Alpha at 0.932. The third highest was Responsiveness with the Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.924. Similarly, the fourth variable was Assurance, fifth Tangibility and Empathy with the Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.865, 0.828 and 0.754 respectively.

In this study there were many sub-variables within the employee engagement variable and other variables. Descriptive statistics help us to simplify large amounts of data associated with these variables in a sensible way. For this purpose, "Five Point Likert Scale" questions were asked to the respondents which ranged from strongly disagree (1), to strongly agree (5).

Customer Satisfaction (CS)

The central tendency measurement results of customer satisfaction are as follow:

Table 3

Customer Satisfaction

S.N.	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
CS1	I would recommend this travel agency to other people.	2.93	1.35
CS2	I am satisfied with the service provided.	2.98	1.33
CS3	I would consider this travel agency as my first choice when I need agency service.	3.09	1.33
CS4	I intend to continue using this travel agency.	2.99	1.32
CS5	I am satisfied with the performance of this travel agency.	2.98	1.34
CS6	I am satisfied with the service of staff.	3.09	1.35

Note. From the author's survey, 2023

Table 3 shows the relatively high mean for CS6 suggests that customers are particularly satisfied with the staff service, which could be a key strength for the agency. Items such as CS1 ("I would recommend this travel agency to other people") and CS4 ("I intend to continue using this travel agency") have lower mean scores (2.93 and 2.99, respectively), indicating that the agency needs to work on customer loyalty and advocacy. The mean satisfaction scores across items are moderate, which suggests the travel agency is meeting expectations but has significant potential to enhance its services to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Reliability (REL)

The table 4 outlines customer opinions on five items related to the reliability of the travel agency. The mean scores range from 2.83 to 3.10, with standard deviations between 1.30 and 1.37, indicating moderate satisfaction levels with some variability in responses. The result directs for the plan to enhance error-free record-keeping, trustworthiness, service delivery as promised, maintain or improve the reservation system, and address high standard deviations in responses to ensure consistent service quality. The results from the central tendency measurement of 'reliability' are as below:

Table 4

Opnions on Reliability

S.N	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
REL1	Service was provided as promised.	2.90	1.31
REL2	The employees provide error free records.	2.83	1.30
REL3	Organisation kept my personal information confidential.	3.03	1.37
REL4	The reservation system is easy to use.	3.10	1.36
REL5	Service providers were trustworthy in terms of providing service.	2.92	1.36

Note. From the author's survey, 2023

Responsiveness (RES)

The table 5 shows courtesy of staff (RES5) stands out with the highest mean and relatively low variability (Std. Dev.: 1.24). Flexibility of service (RES2) received the lowest score, suggesting this area requires the most attention. High variability (e.g., RES4, Std. Dev.: 1.38) indicates that guest experiences vary significantly, which might reflect inconsistency in service delivery. Items such as timely information (RES1), special attention (RES3), and willingness to help (RES4) suggest decent performance, but there's room for improvement.

The central tendency measurement results of responsiveness are as follows:

Table 5

Opinions on Responsiveness

S.N	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
RES1	Service providers always inform me when the services will be provided.	3.03	1.34
RES2	Flexibility of service was according to my demand.	2.82	1.25
RES3	Staff gave me special attention.	3.07	1.30
RES4	The staff are willing to help guests.	3.12	1.38
RES5	Staff were courteous.	3.38	1.24

Note. From the author's survey, 2023

Assurance (ASS)

The central tendencies measurement result of responsiveness are as follows:

Table 6

Opinions on Assurance

S.N	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
ASS1	The staff were friendly.	3.84	0.87
ASS2	The staff have the ability to perform service.	3.85	0.87
ASS3	The staff have knowledge to answer my queries.	3.83	0.85
ASS4	The staff members made me feel safe and secure.	3.87	0.82

Note. *From the author's survey, 2023*

Table 6 shows the central tendencies measurement of assurance. All items scored above 3.8, reflecting a strong perception of assurance among respondents. Safety and security (ASS4) emerged as the strongest area, with the highest means (3.87) and the lowest variability (Std. Dev.: 0.82). Staff friendliness (ASS1) and competency (ASS2) are also strong contributors to assurance. Standard deviations for all items are below 0.90, indicating a high level of agreement among respondents.

Tangibility (TAN)

The central tendencies measurement result of tangibility is as follow:

Table 7

Opinions on Tangibility

S.N	Tangibility	Mean	Std. Deviation
TAN1	The interface and art design of website is visually appealing.	3.90	0.77
TAN2	The website conveys the message in various ways with words and pictures displayed.	3.78	0.85
TAN3	Staff were operated at a convenient time.	3.89	0.82
TAN4	The brochures and pamphlets are visually presented.	3.90	0.84
TAN5	The facilities are up to date.	3.94	0.88
TAN6	Staff were professional.	3.92	0.98

Note. *From the author's survey, 2023*

Table 7 show that up-to-date facilities (TAN5) scored the highest mean (3.94), showing customers value modern amenities. Items related to visual appeal, including website design (TAN1) and brochures/pamphlets (TAN4), also received high satisfaction. Responses are generally consistent across items, with most standard deviations below 0.90, except for staff professionalism (TAN6) (Std. Dev.: 0.98), indicating some variability in experience. Website communication (TAN2) scored the lowest mean (3.78), suggesting the need to improve the website's effectiveness in delivering messages.

Empathy (EMP)

The central tendencies measurement result of empathy is as follow:

Table 8

Opinions on Empathy

S.N	Empathy	Mean	Std. Deviation
EMP1	Staff understood the customer requirements.	3.79	0.84
EMP2	Staff understood my needs and provided service accordingly.	3.81	0.76
EMP3	Staff quickly apologise when service mistakes are made.	3.80	0.96
EMP4	Staff listen carefully when I complain.	3.86	0.90

Note. *From the author's survey, 2023*

Table 8 shows that listening to complaints (EMP4) has the highest satisfaction score (3.86), showing that staff attentiveness to complaints is a standout strength. Understanding needs and providing service accordingly (EMP2) has a high mean-value and the lowest variability, reflecting consistent performance in meeting customer needs. Apologising for mistakes (EMP3), while rated positively, has the highest variability (Std. Dev.: 0.96), indicating that not all customers feel this behaviour is consistent.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was used to test how strong the relationship between dependent variable and independent variables. Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis, the value range is from -1 to +1. When the Pearson Correlation Coefficient value showed +0.1, there is a perfect positive correlation but if the value showed -1, there is a perfect negative correlation. Besides that, when the Pearson Correlation Coefficient value shows 0, it means there is no correlation between dependent and independent variables.

Table 9 represents the correlation matrix between customer satisfaction (CS) and other variables: reliability (REL), responsiveness (RES), assurance (ASS), tangibility (TAN), and empathy (EMP). All variables related to SERVQUAL of travel agencies are positively correlated with customer satisfaction (CS). Among the variables, reliability (REL) has the highest correlation with customer satisfaction (0.87), followed by responsiveness (0.86) and empathy (0.71). Assurance (0.68) and tangibility (0.68) also have moderate to strong positive correlations with customer satisfaction. Strong correlations between customer satisfaction and service quality dimensions (REL, RES, ASS, TAN, EMP) suggest that improving these aspects could enhance customer satisfaction. Responsiveness and empathy show significant correlations with each other and other dimensions, highlighting their interconnectedness in customer perceptions of service quality.

Table 9

Correlation Matrix

Variables	CS	REL	RES	ASS	TAN	EMP
Customer Satisfaction	1					
Reliability	0.87**	1				
	(0.000)					
Responsiveness	0.86**	0.84**	1			
	(0.000)	(0.000)				
Assurance	0.68**	0.55**	0.34**	1		
	(0.002)	(0.006)	(0.000)			
Tangibility	0.68**	0.26**	0.32**	0.64**	1	
	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
Empathy	0.71**	0.58**	0.66**	0.73**	0.70**	1
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	

Note. *From the author's survey, 2023*

Regression Analysis

This section presents the results of regression analysis. The table below illustrates the regression analysis results for the dependent and independent variables:

Table 10

Model Summary for Multiple Regression

	Beta	T-statistics	p-value
(Constant)	0.082	0.247	0.805
Reliability	0.534	6.923	0.000
Responsiveness	0.453	5.457	0.000
Assurance	0.122	7.462	0.001
Tangibility	0.002	0.016	0.987
Empathy	0.033	3.117	0.001
R-Square	0.814		
Adjusted R-Square	0.805		
F-statistics	99.47		
	(0.000)		

Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

Note. From the author's survey, 2023

Table 10 shows the model is statistically well-fitted [F-statistics=99.47 (0.00)], explaining a large portion of the variance in customer satisfaction. Reliability and responsiveness have the largest positive impacts on customer satisfaction. Improving these areas will likely yield the greatest benefits. Assurance and empathy have smaller but statistically significant impacts, suggesting they are also important but secondary factors. Tangibility does not have a significant effect on customer satisfaction, indicating that physical attributes may not be as critical as service-related factors. At the same time, the model's high adjusted R-squared value (0.805) indicates that 80.5% of the variation in customer satisfaction is explained by these variables, making it a robust framework for evaluating service quality in travel agencies.

The table 11 illustrates the hypothesis results for the paper concluded from the regression analysis:

Table 11

Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	T-statistics	p-value	Result
There is a significant impact of reliability on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.	6.923	0.000	Accepted
There is a significant impact of responsiveness on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.	5.457	0.000	Accepted
There is a significant impact of assurance on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.	7.462	0.001	Accepted
There is a significant impact of tangibility on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.	0.016	0.987	Not Accepted
There is a significant impact of empathy on customer satisfaction of travel agencies.	3.117	0.001	Accepted

Note. Based on the Table 10 results

Reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are the key drivers of customer satisfaction for travel agencies, confirming the importance of service quality dimensions. Tangibility (physical aspects of the service) does not significantly impact customer satisfaction, suggesting customers prioritise service-related interactions over physical attributes. Improving reliability and assurance may yield the most substantial benefits, given their high t-statistics and significance.

Conclusion and Implications

The study aimed to assess the factors influencing customer satisfaction with travel agencies using SERVQUAL dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, and empathy. The findings confirm that customer satisfaction is predominantly driven by service-related dimensions rather than physical attributes.

Customer satisfaction is significantly influenced by reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility. Reliability is the strongest factor, with a beta value

of 0.534 and a correlation of 0.87. Responsiveness, on the other hand, has a significant positive impact, with timely and flexible service provision and attentive staff enhancing customer satisfaction. Assurance, with a smaller beta value, it still significantly impacts satisfaction, with friendly, knowledgeable staff inspiring trust and making customers feel secure. Empathy, on the other hand, is also significant, with staff who listen, understand their needs, and respond effectively to complaints. Tangibility, on the other hand, has no significant effect, suggesting that physical attributes are less critical in shaping customer perceptions.

Travel agencies should prioritise reliability and responsiveness by maintaining error-free records, ensuring prompt service, and enhancing reservation systems. Staff training should be invested in to improve customer service and foster a customer-centric culture. Tangibility should be de-emphasised, with physical aspects complementing service quality improvements. A data-driven approach should be adopted, measuring customer satisfaction and comparing it with service quality dimensions. Feedback should be used to refine service delivery and address pain points. Long-term relationships should be built through consistent, high-quality service delivery, leveraging the influence of reliability and responsiveness.

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