INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' SATISFACTION WITH SERVICE QUALITY AT SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK IN TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT
Quality of service is undeniably an important aspect to consider while assessing performance of any tourist destination. Visitors who experience service of good quality tend to be satisfied and may remain loyal to the specific destination. Cognizant of these facts, this study assessed tourists' satisfaction with service quality at Serengeti National Park (SENAPA) located in the northern part of Tanzania. The study adopted a cross-sectional research design and it involved a total of 1148 respondents who were international tourists. Data were collected by using structured questionnaire adapted from SERVQUAL tool. The findings revealed that tourists were satisfied with quality of tangibles found at SENAPA, reliability of service providers, responsiveness as well as empathy of service providers. Findings also showed that tourists were not satisfied with the assurance dimension of service quality which was concerned with service providers' knowledge, courtesy and ability to inspire trust and confidence to visitors. The study concluded that customer care services among services providers in SENAPA were poor. The study recommends service providers at SENAPA to use modern and relevant facilities and improve customer care services through training their employees.

Key words: Tourists, Service quality, Satisfaction, Serengeti, Tanzania

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Globally, international tourism is one of the major sources of economic growth. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTCC) the sector accounted for10.3% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 10.4% of total employment in 2019 (WTTC, 2020). In Tanzania, tourism is an unquestioned source of economic growth. According to the Bank of Tanzania (BOT), the sector contributed to 17% of GDP while accounting for about 25% of export revenue (BOT, 2017). In the near past, international tourists' inflow to Tanzania has been on the increase especially before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. For example, evidence from Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (MNRT) indicated that the number of those arrivals increased from 612,754 tourists in 2005 to 1,527,230 in 2019 (MNRT, 2019).

Most of the international tourists to Tanzania visit Serengeti National Park (SENAPA). For instance, 34% of tourists who came to Tanzania in 2019 visited the park compared to 24.9% and 19.2% who visited Tarangire and Manyara parks respectively (MNRT, 2019. Thus, SENAPA is one of the key attractions for international tourists compared to other destinations in Tanzania. However, evidence show that performance of SENAPA, as a tourists' destination, is poor compared to other parks with a similar ecosystem in the East African region. Evidences suggest that SENAPA receives fewer visitors per square kilometre than other surrounding parks in East African region like Maasai Mara in Kenya (TANAPA, 2017; Bhandari, 2014; KBS, 2017). Given these evidences, a question arises as to whether or not tourists who visit SENAPA were satisfied with services offered by different providers operating in the park or not.

Customer satisfaction is defined as extent to which products or services provided meet or surpass customer expectations (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). In the tourism sector, satisfaction is when a tourist's perceived

experience with services offered at a specific destination exceeds his/her expectation. Service quality is defined as discrepancy between customer's expectation and perceived experience with a product or service (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1985). It is brilliance of services as evaluated by purchaser (Zeithaml, 1988). In the tourism context, service quality is the extent to which visitors' perceived experience exceeded their expectations.

Quality of service is unquestionable attractive factor for tourists to visit specific destination. The rationale for provision of high-quality services in the tourism sector is based on the conviction that such services are likely to lead to customer satisfaction (Dhingra *et al.*, 2020; Sanjar *et al.*, 2020). Studies show that there is positive relationship between service quality and tourist satisfaction (Jeong *et al.,* 2020; Sangpikul, 2018; Han & Hyun, 2015; Wu & Li, 2015; Cheng *et al.,* 2014). Mostly, those studies revealed that services of high-quality influenced satisfaction among tourists who visited different destinations. For instance, findings of a study by Wu & Li (2015) involving visitors to the Museums of Macau in China revealed that service quality enhanced satisfaction. Similarly, evidences from another study conducted in Malaysia showed that tourists who enjoyed services of high quality in hotels were more likely to be satisfied (Cheng *et al.* 2014). Further evidences from Thailand revealed that the quality of service facilities, safety and cleanliness positively affected tourist's satisfaction in the city of Phuket. Evidences from another study conducted in South Korea on sport tourism revealed that quality of services influenced satisfaction of tourist attending sport occasions (Jeong *et al*., 2019).

Literature also revealed few specific studies assessed customer satisfaction using SERVQUAL model (Mowla, 2019; Ibrahim *et al*., 2015; Marinković *et al.,* 2011; Mohamed, 2006). These were studies that had adopted Parasuraman (1985) approach of measuring customer satisfaction by considering the difference between expectations and actual perception of services after a visit to specific destination. A study conducted in Serbian involving customers of travel agencies revealed that tangibility, reliability, responsiveness and empathy had significant effect on customer satisfaction (Marinković *et al.,* 2011). Another study focusing on Maldives Tourism Industry revealed that three dimensions including responsiveness, tangibles and reliability had significant impact on tourists' satisfaction (Ibrahim *et al*., 2015). Mohamed (2006) assessed tourists' satisfaction with service quality of travel agents in Egypt and found that customer expectations of service quality exceeded perceived experience on five dimensions namely responsiveness, reliability, empathy, resources and corporate image, and tangibility. Specifically, results of regression analysis revealed that responsiveness, reliability and tangibility had significant positive effect on customer satisfaction. Yet, another study Mowla (2019) on the impact of service quality on customers in Bangladesh tourism industry revealed that four dimensions including reliability, responsiveness, empathy and tangibles had significant effect on customer satisfaction. Specifically, reliability had a negative effect while the rest of the three dimensions had positive effect. The study also showed that assurance had no significant effect on customer satisfaction.

As indicated in above, there was a rich literature on relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Some of the previous studies used SERVQUAL model in the assessment of relationships between service quality and tourists' satisfaction in different destinations. However, this study was conducted because apparently empirical evidences about relationship between service quality and international tourists' satisfaction in Tanzania were missing. Given that the SERVQUAL model used in this study had five dimensions namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, the study intended to test the following five null hypotheses.

> H_1: *Tourists were not satisfied with quality of tangibles in the park*
> H_2: *Tourists were not satisfied with reliability of services*
> H_3: *Tourists were not satisfied with service providers' responsiveness*
> H_4: *Tourists were not satisfied with service providers' assurance in services' delivery*
> H_5: *Tourists were not satisfied with service providers' empathy*

2.0 THEORETICAL GUIDE

This paper was guided by Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (EDT). The proponents of this theory argue that those consumers form satisfaction judgments by evaluating extent to which actual product or service exceed their expectations (Van Ryzin, 2013; Ekinci *et al*., 2007; Oliver, 1980). Disconfirmation is the difference between expected performance and perceived performance of services or products (Bhattacherjee & Premkumar, 2004). Expected performance pertains to pre-purchase period and it constitutes what the customer desires about specific product or service. Perceived performance comes after the consumption of a product or service and it constitutes an evaluation whether or not the expectations were met.

Depending on the nature of the difference, disconfirmation can either be positive, neutral or negative. Positive disconfirmation occurs when customer's perception about quality of service or product is better than the

expectation. Conversely, a negative disconfirmation occurs when customer's perceived quality of service or product is worse than what was expected. According to this theory, positive disconfirmation leads to customer satisfaction while negative disconfirmation leads to dissatisfaction with service or product (Van Ryzin, 2013). Relationships among expectations (E), perceived Performance (P), disconfirmation and satisfaction are diagrammatically presented in Figure 1.
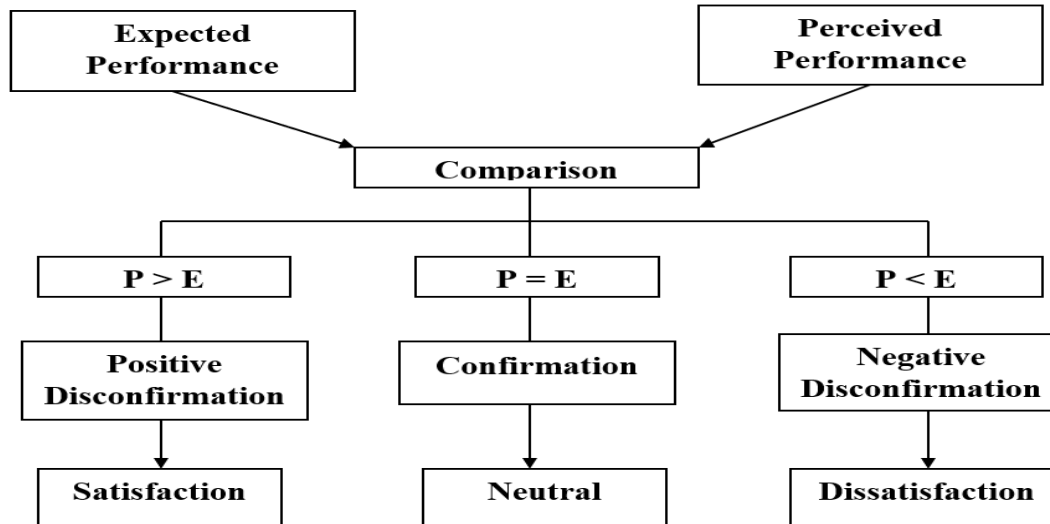

Figure 1: Diagrammatic demonstration of expectancy disconfirmation theory
Source: Adopted from Oliver (1980)

In the context of this study, tourists were satisfied if they experienced higher quality of services while at SENAPA than their expectations before visiting the park. This is when there was positive disconfirmation between perceived experience and expectations on the five dimensions of service quality which were tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy

Literature shows that EDT was used in various fields to guide studies designed to determine customer satisfaction based on pre-purchase quality expectations and post-purchase experience. Specifically, the theory was used in marketing (Meirovich *et al.,* 2020), information technology (Salahshour *et al.,* 2017), repurchase behaviour and retention (Picazo-Vela, 2011), airline industry (Ban & Kim, 2019) and tourism (Agyeiwaah *et al,* 2016).

3.0 METHODOLOGY
This study adopted a cross-sectional research design. The study was conducted in SENAPA which is located in the Northern Part of Tanzania. SENAPA was chosen because it is one of major tourists' destinations in Tanzania. Target population were tourists who visited SENAPA between March and September 2018. The study adopted non-probability convenience sampling technique and a total of 1,148 respondents were included.

The study relied on primary data collected by using standard SERVQUAL questionnaire proposed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988). The tool focused on five dimensions of service quality which include tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Tangibility involved physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel. Reliability was operationalised as ability of service providers to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Responsiveness was taken as willingness to help customers and provide prompt service while assurance constituted knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. Lastly, empathy constituted caring and individualised attention that service providers extended to the tourists including such aspects as access, communication and understanding of customer needs.

The SERVQUAL tool involved 22 items that were intended to measure expectations and perceptions of tourists across the aforementioned five service quality dimensions. This tool was selected because it had been used in previous similar studies that assessed tourists' satisfaction with quality of services in different destinations in the globe (Mowla, 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2015; Marinković *et al.,* 2011; Mohamed; 2006). During data collection, respondents were asked to rate their opinions in a seven-point Likert scale; where 1 = very strongly disagreed and 7 = very strongly agreed. A seven-point scale was selected because it would provide respondents with wider options of rating their opinions (Gallarza & Saura, 2006).

Paired sample t-test was used to compare expectation of tourist before visiting the park with perceived performance on specific items of service quality during their trips in the park. Positive mean difference between perceived and expected performance, which was also referred as positive disconfirmation, indicated that tourists were satisfied. Accordingly, negative mean difference indicated that tourist were dissatisfied.

Reliability tests at EFA stage were conducted in order to check for internal consistency for constructs under each of the five service quality dimensions. Results showed that Cronbach's alpha values were above the threshold of 0.6 (Memon *et al.*, 2020). The values for tangibility (0.762), reliability (0.919), responsiveness (0.769), assurance (0.767) and empathy (0.840) were above the suggested threshold meaning that there was high consistency among statements use measure those constructs.

4.0 FINDINGS

As indicated earlier, paired t-test was used to determine whether or not tourists were satisfied with service quality experienced at SENAPA. Service quality was measured using five dimensions of abovementioned instrument which included tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Findings on the mean difference between expectations and perceived service quality among tourists on each of the five service quality dimensions are presented in the subsequent sections below.

4.1 Tangibility and satisfaction

Results showed that there were positive disconfirmations for all four constructs that were used; meaning that tourists' perceived quality of tangible was higher than expectations. Specially, those differences were significant for two constructs including one on possession of up-to-date equipment (t = 7.373; p < 0.001) and another on visual appealing of physical facilities at the park (t= 4.114; p < 0.001). The results further indicated that mean difference for the rest of the two constructs related to employees' dressing and neatness, and appearance of physical facilities were positive but not statistically significant.

Table 1: Tourists' expectations and perceived quality of tangibles

Attribute	Perceived mean (P)	Expectation mean (E)	Mean difference (P – E)	SD	t	Sig.
Presence of up-to-date equipment	5.24	4.76	0.483	2.222	7.373	0.000
Appealing physical facilities	5.28	5.03	0.251	2.066	4.114	0.000
Well dressed and neat employees	5.41	5.31	0.099	1.948	1.727	0.084
Physical facilities match services	5.43	5.35	0.086	1.909	1.531	0.126
Summated mean scores	*5.341*	*5.111*	*0.230*	*1.543*	*5.050*	*0.000****

*** Significance at 0.000, ** Significant at 0.001, * Significant at 0.05

Findings in Table 1 showed that on average perceived quality of tangibles including physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel at the park was significantly higher than tourists' expectation (t = 5.050, p < = 0.001). The findings, therefore, revealed presence of positive disconfirmation which implied that tourists were satisfied with quality of tangibles at the park. These findings lead to rejection of the first null hypothesis (H_1) which stated that *"tourists' were not satisfied with quality of tangibles in the park".*

4.2 Reliability and satisfaction

Results showed that there were significant positive disconfirmations for four out of the five statements used to measure quality of reliability of services. Positive and significant differences between perceive quality and respective tourists' expectations were obtained in statements related to employees' sympathy and reassurance (t = 2.849, p = 0.004), dependability of firms offering services at the park (t = 4. 816, p < 0.001), timeliness of services as promised (t = 2.315, p = 0.021), and firms' ability to accurately keep records (t= 2.189, p = 0.029).

Table 2: Tourists' expectations and perceived reliability of services

Attribute	Perceived mean (P)	Expectation mean (E)	Mean difference (P – E)	SD	t	Sig.
Firms fulfil their promises timely	5.639	5.563	0.077	1.657	1.567	0.117
Employees are sympathetic and reassuring	5.735	5.592	0.143	1.699	2.849	0.004**
Service providers are dependable	5.828	5.589	0.240	1.685	4.816	0.000***
Services are timely as promised	5.748	5.620	0.128	1.874	2.315	0.021*
Customer records are kept accurately	5.736	5.620	0.116	1.794	2.189	0.029*
Summated mean scores	*5.738*	*5.561*	*0.177*	*1.360*	*4.405*	*0.000****

*** Significance at 0.000, ** Significant at 0.001, * Significant at 0.05

Based on the summated mean score values, perceived reliability of services provided was significantly higher than expectations of tourists (t = 4.405, p< 0.001). This finding implied that there was positive disconfirmation which was an indication that tourists were satisfied with reliability of services. The finding led to rejection of the second null hypothesis (H$_2$) which stated that *"tourists' were not satisfied with reliability of services"*.

4.3 Responsiveness and satisfaction

Findings presented in Table 3 showed that there were positive differences between tourists' perceived responsiveness of employees and their respective expectations on three out of four items used. Statistically, significant differences were found on two items including employees' provision of information to customers on exact time of delivering services (t = 6.851, p < 0.001) and on promptness of services from employees (t = 2.798, p = 0.005).

Table 3: Tourists' expectations and perceived responsiveness of services

Attribute	Perceived mean (P)	Expectation mean (E)	Mean difference (P – E)	SD	t	Sig.
Employees tell customers exactly when services will be offered	5.294	4.842	0.451	2.232	6.851	0.000***
Employees provide prompt service	4.808	4.591	0.217	2.627	2.798	0.005**
Employee's willingness to help customers	4.469	4.357	0.111	2.922	1.293	0.196
Employees respond promptly to customer's requests	4.236	4.280	-0.044	2.770	-0.533	0.594
Summated mean score	*4.702*	*4.518*	*0.184*	*1.940*	*3.214*	*0.001**

*** Significance at 0.000, ** Significant at 0.001, * Significant at 0.05

Generally, findings revealed that there was positive disconfirmation between tourists' expectations and perceived quality of employees' responsiveness. This difference was statistically significant (t = 3.214, p = 0.001) indicating that tourists were satisfied with quality of services on the aspect of responsiveness, which constituted willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Given this finding, the third null hypothesis (H$_3$) which stated that *"tourists were not satisfied with service providers' responsiveness"* was rejected.

4.4 Assurance and satisfaction

Results presented in Table 4 there was positive disconfirmation on only one out of four constructs used to assess quality of services on the aspect of assurance. This was indicated by statistically significant difference between tourists' expectations and perceived experience on the feelings that employees got adequate support from their firms (t = 2.548, p = 0.011). Mean differences for the three other three constructs were statistically insignificant. Although the findings revealed negative disconfirmation on two items that are employees' trustworthiness and safety during transaction with employees, the differences between perception and expectation were not statistically significant.

Table 4: Tourists' expectations and perceived assurance in services' provision

Attribute	Perceived mean (P)	Expectation mean (E)	Mean difference (P – E)	SD	T	Sig.
Employees are trustworthy	4.757	4.761	-0.004	2.848	-0.052	0.959
Customers feel safe while transacting with employees	4.936	5.035	-0.099	2.776	-1.212	0.226
Employees are polite	5.176	5.036	0.140	2.671	1.779	0.075
Service providers support employees to offer the best services	5.367	5.164	0.203	2.699	2.548	0.011*
Summated mean score	*4.702*	*4.518*	*0.060*	*1.942*	*1.045*	*0.296*

*** Significance at 0.000, ** Significant at 0.001, * Significant at 0.05

As shown in Table 4, summated mean difference between expected and perceived assurance was positive but statistically insignificant (t = 1.045, p = 0.296). The findings imply that tourists were not satisfied with assurance of with service quality on the aspect of assurance. The findings, therefore, lead to acceptance of the fourth null hypothesis (H$_4$) which stated that "*tourists' were not satisfied with service providers' assurance in services' delivery"*.

4.5 Empathy and satisfaction

Findings in Table 5 showed that there were positive and statistically significant mean differences between expectations and perceptions of tourists for all five constructs that were used to assess empathy. In other words, there were positive disconfirmations in all of those five items.

Table 5: Tourists' expectations and perceived empathy of services' providers

Attribute	Perceived mean (P)	Expectation mean (E)	Mean difference (P – E)	SD	T	Sig.
Service providers give individualized attention to each customer	5.178	4.679	0.499	2.670	6.335	0.000***
Employees give personal attention to each customer	4.903	4.458	0.445	2.789	5.408	0.000***
Employees know what real needs of customers are	4.641	4.249	0.392	2.810	4.727	0.000***
Service providers have customers' best interest at heart	4.432	4.076	0.356	2.679	4.507	0.000***
Service providers operate at hours convenient to all customers	4.247	3.963	0.285	2.641	3.654	0.000***
Summated mean score	*4.680*	*4.285*	*0.395*	*2.048*	*6.542*	*0.000****

*** Significance at 0.000, ** Significant at 0.001, * Significant at 0.05

Summated mean score showed that perceived quality of element of assurance exceeded tourists' expectation before visiting the park. This was evidenced in statistically significant positive disconfirmation (t = 6.542, p < 0.001) which indicated that tourists were satisfied. This specific finding leads to rejection of the fifth (H_5) null hypothesis which stated that *"tourists were not satisfied with service providers' empathy"*. Given the context of empathy used in this study, the findings implied that tourists experienced better care, individualised attention from service providers than they expected prior to their visit to the park.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study was guided by the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) which assumes that customers are satisfied with service quality when the outcome of their evaluation results into positive disconfirmation that is perceived quality exceeds the expected quality (Van Ryzin, 2013; Ekinci *et al.,* 2007; Oliver, 1980). The findings of this study revealed that there was positive disconfirmation in four out of five dimensions of service quality that were reliability, tangibility, responsiveness and empathy. In the context of EDT, the tourists were satisfied with quality of tangibles, reliability of services as well as service providers' responsiveness and empathy during service delivery. It is also noted that tourists were not satisfied with assurance dimension of service quality. The findings are supported by those of a study conducted in Serbian involving customers of travel agencies whose findings also showed that tangibility, reliability, responsiveness and empathy had significant effect on customer satisfaction (Marinković *et al.,* 2011).

In this study, quality of tangibles was assessed by presence of up-to-date equipment, appealing physical facilities, well-dressed and neatness of employees and presence of physical facilities that matched with services provided. However, mean differences for neatness of employees and presence of physical facilities that matched services provided were not statistically significant (see Table 1). This means that employees' neatness was not at an appreciable quality. Similarly, service providers did not use facilities that matched the types of services offered. In other words, it could be said that service providers lacked relevant facilities that could be used to provide services.

Findings showed that tourists were satisfied with reliability of service providers at SENAPA. Specifically, they appreciated employees' sympathy, their dependability, timely provision of services and their ability to keep customer records accurately. Nevertheless, mean difference between expectations and perceived performance on the ability of firms to fulfil promises timely was statistically insignificant (see Table 2). This means that tourists' judgment of ability of service provider to fulfil promises was below their expectation.

It was also observed that generally tourists were satisfied with assurance dimension of service quality which constituted willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. However, mean differences between expectation and perceived performance for two aspects that related to wiliness to help customers and prompt response to customers' requests were not statistically significant (see Table 3). More specifically, mean difference on promptness of employees was negative meaning that tourists' expectations exceeded perceived performance. These findings, therefore, imply that some aspects of customer care at SENAPA were not of appreciable quality.

Lastly, findings also showed that tourists were not satisfied with assurance of service providers. This was evidenced in the statistically insignificant summated mean difference for assurance dimension of service quality (see Table 4). It is worth noting that assurance, which in the context of this study related to courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence, was missing among service providers at SENAPA. Finding is similar to that of a pervious study conducted in Serbian which showed that while tangibility, reliability, responsiveness and empathy had significant effect on customer satisfaction, assurance did not (Marinković *et al.,* 2011).

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings showed that tourists were generally satisfied with service quality offered at SENAPA. However, a number of aspects of service quality were below tourists' expectations. Some of those aspects include unappreciable neatness of service providers, lack of relevant service provision facilities, untimely fulfilment of promised services, and general poor promptness of service providers. Furthermore, service providers lacked assurance meaning that they did not have knowledge, courtesy and ability to inspire trust and confidence to visitors. Based on those findings, this study concludes that customer care services among services providers in SENAPA were poor.

This study makes the following recommendations. First, SENAPA management should strive to improve quality of physical facilities and equipment used to match the global standards. This can be achieved by modernising the available structures or by putting up new ones with higher standards than ones that are currently available using TANAPA ISO 9001:2015. Second, service providers in SENAPA (tour companies, hotel and lodge operators) should use relevant modern service provision facilities which meet the demands of their customers. They too should improve neatness of employees by providing them with uniforms and other relevant attires. Third, service providers should train their employees on customer care services so as to improve their promptness during services' delivery, courtesy, and ability to inspire trust and confidence to visitors.

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