



# Service quality of DoT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City, Philippines

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to assess the service quality of DOT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City and to identify areas that required improvement to enhance customer satisfaction, thereby increasing their competitiveness and success. The study was anchored in the SERVQUAL theory proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which expanded the understanding of service quality by categorizing it into five essential dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, forming the SERVQUAL model. The respondents of the study consisted of one hundred twenty-five (125) individuals, specifically customers who had availed themselves of the services of DOT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City. The study employed probability-stratified sampling. The results revealed that DOT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City performed exceptionally well in terms of service quality, exceeding customer expectations across all five SERVQUAL dimensions. Furthermore, the application of the SERVQUAL model indicated a highly positive customer experience, with high satisfaction levels reported in all dimensions.

**Keywords:** *service quality, customer satisfaction, Department of Tourism, travel agency*

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## 1. Introduction

The Philippines, an archipelago known for its stunning natural beauty and warm hospitality, has a vibrant tourism industry. Travel agencies are crucial in enhancing a tourist's overall experience within this sector. In the Philippines, travel agencies are classified as primary tourism enterprises and are subject to periodic accreditation by the Department of Tourism (DoT) to uphold certain quality standards. Several organizations in Lucena City, Quezon Province, have gained prominence due to their DoT accreditation. Their services go beyond basic bookings, offering carefully designed itineraries, seamless flight arrangements, and accommodation reservations. Customer satisfaction is largely influenced by service quality, as happy customers are more likely to remain loyal and contribute to long-term customer retention (Torres, 2014). As the success of travel agencies, and the tourism industry as a whole, relies heavily on consumer satisfaction with service quality, it is crucial to recognize its importance in today's highly competitive business environment.

Service quality is essential for businesses providing services to customers. It has the potential to improve customer satisfaction and contribute to increased customer loyalty and profitability (Minh et al., 2015). According to Vidyalakshmi and Nannore (2023), tourism is a vital component of the economy, making the study of customer satisfaction in this sector a significant endeavor. Therefore, assessing customer satisfaction, tourism companies can better understand how their services and performance are perceived by customers and clearly identify the areas that need improvement. Acop et al. (2020) highlight the growing prominence of travel agencies and tour operators, which aim to provide support and guidance for customers' travel plans. As a result, travel agencies and tour operators are continuously seeking to offer the most convenient and suitable travel packages to meet and exceed customer expectations.

A survey conducted by Rakuten Insight in June 2023 revealed that 26% of both male and female participants chose not to use online travel agencies (OTAs) because they found lower prices directly from offline or traditional travel agencies. Additionally, 29% of male respondents indicated a preference for using offline/traditional agencies. Popular OTAs include Agoda, Skyscanner, Booking.com, and TripAdvisor. Despite the growing use of OTAs, traditional travel agencies remain relevant, as many customers prefer gathering information before making a purchase, such as visiting a physical store, speaking to a travel agent, and obtaining all necessary details to make an informed decision (Dincu, 2021). In connection with this, Gaurav (2018) claims that good customer service, customer focus, and

service quality are the primary factors contributing to customer satisfaction with a travel agency. Therefore, travel agencies must continuously implement improvements to ensure customer satisfaction. This is supported by Kumar (2016), who states that travel agencies need to evaluate their service quality to identify areas for improvement and enhance customer satisfaction.

The rise of travel agencies has significantly influenced customer expectations for service quality. As competition grows, there is an increasing emphasis on customer satisfaction. According to Zhou (2016), travel agencies act as intermediaries connecting travelers to the main providers of tourism services. Therefore, it is critical for travel businesses to ensure customer satisfaction by delivering high-quality services. Assessing the gap between customer expectations and actual experiences is a key element of service excellence. Kobero (2022), citing Parasuraman et al. (1985), notes that a service must meet or exceed a customer's expectations to be considered of high quality. On the other hand, customer satisfaction measures how well a company's services meet client expectations and should be the central concern for all types of enterprises (Razaka & Shamsudin, 2019). Providing high-quality service and prioritizing customer needs are crucial for gaining and maintaining a competitive advantage.

Lucena City, a highly urbanized area in Quezon Province, is home to numerous travel agencies, though not all are accredited by the DoT. According to the Department of Tourism (2024), there are currently only four (4) DoT-accredited travel agencies operating in Lucena City. These agencies have strategically located physical stores, making them accessible to customers looking to plan their trips with the assistance of a travel agent. To support the sustained growth of the travel agency industry in Lucena City, ongoing evaluation and improvement of service quality is essential. Taking all of this into account, this study aims to bridge the knowledge gap by examining the quality of service provided by DoT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City. Through the analysis of customer satisfaction and service quality, the research aims to yield pertinent data that can help these travel agencies better align their services and strategies with customer needs and expectations, thereby increasing their competitiveness and success. In addition, the study examines whether these agencies comply with industry regulations, as a means of ensuring that customers receive high-quality and professional services. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of service quality and

customer satisfaction in the tourism sector, providing valuable insights for industry stakeholders and policymakers.

The study utilizes the Service Quality Gap Model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) to assess service quality. This model outlines five dimensions of service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. It calculates a “gap score” by subtracting the customer’s expectation score from their perception score. According to Khan and Fasih (2014), the SERVQUAL model helps businesses identify where to focus their efforts for service enhancement. It serves as a tool to assess and improve customer satisfaction, while also helping companies understand and fulfill customer expectations more effectively.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Theoretical Framework*

The SERVQUAL theory proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) serves as the foundation for this investigation. According to Asa et al. (2021; 2014), customer satisfaction, achieved when a company's service delivery exceeds client expectations, is the key to long-term business success. Since satisfied customers often become a company’s primary advocates and informal sales agents, it is essential for businesses to provide high-quality services that maximize customer satisfaction (Fida et al., 2020).

The conceptualization of service quality began to take shape in the 1980s. The customer satisfaction hypothesis was influenced by the works of Churchill and Surprenant (1982), Kano et al. (1984), and Parasuraman et al. (1985). These scholars emphasized the importance of evaluating the actual quality of services provided, rather than merely focusing on perceived quality. Parasuraman et al. (1988) further developed the concept by introducing five key dimensions of service quality: assurance, empathy, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility, which collectively formed the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Originally tested in the restaurant service industry, the SERVQUAL methodology has since gained widespread attention from scholars and practitioners across various sectors. Many have applied it to examine customer satisfaction in their respective domains. Sanjuq (2014) describes the five dimensions in the SERVQUAL framework in detail. Tangibility refers to the physical aspects of service, such as facilities, equipment, personnel appearance, and communication materials. Reliability is the ability to deliver promised services accurately and consistently. Responsiveness involves the promptness and willingness to help customers.

Assurance encompasses the knowledge, courtesy, and credibility of staff in instilling trust and confidence. Lastly, empathy evaluates the individualized attention and care the company provides to its clients.

A critical component of the SERVQUAL model is identifying the gap between customer expectations and their perceptions of the service actually delivered. When these expectations are met or exceeded, the service is deemed satisfactory. Conversely, any discrepancy may result in perceived service quality deficiencies. The SERVQUAL model outlines five potential gaps, with Gap 5, the difference between customer expectations and perceptions, being the only one directly measurable. The SERVQUAL instrument was specifically designed to assess this fifth gap. Although Gaps 1 through 4 are not directly quantifiable, they offer valuable diagnostic insights for service improvement. For example, if feedback indicates that staff are slow to address customer concerns, the organization might consider providing training to enhance responsiveness and efficiency. By measuring these gaps, the SERVQUAL model enables businesses to identify areas needing improvement, ultimately enhancing overall customer satisfaction.

The SERVQUAL framework has been instrumental in establishing the link between service quality and customer satisfaction, particularly in the hospitality industry, where it was first applied. This study aims to examine whether the five SERVQUAL dimensions, tangibility, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy, significantly influence customer satisfaction in the context of travel and tourism services. Given the increasing competitiveness of the tourism industry and the growing expectations of informed travelers, service excellence has become a strategic imperative for travel agencies.

*Tangibility.* Ismagilova et al. (2019) noted that the tangible components of a service have a substantial impact on how the service is perceived, as these factors relate to the service's physical infrastructure and influence customer satisfaction. Tangible factors include price, competitive positioning, marketing communication and execution, and the influence of word-of-mouth in shaping customer perceptions of service quality. These elements reflect the satisfaction derived from the physical environment, including a company's workforce, infrastructure, physical buildings, and communication tools. Al-Ababneh (2016) emphasized that tangibility also includes the staff's appearance. Govender (2014) described tangibility as physical signals in the service process, while Khan and Fasih (2014) defined it as anything perceptible by touch or visibly apparent. Anwar (2016) further explained tangibility as the

visible features of buildings, machinery, personnel, and communication materials, encompassing the aesthetic appeal of facilities, staff presentation, and equipment. Cleanliness also plays a crucial role in the service experience (Islam et al., 2014), and Tjiptono (2014) emphasized that a company's visibility, its ability to demonstrate its existence to internal stakeholders, relies on its physical infrastructure. Naidoo (2014) stated that service firms place great importance on tangibles as they are critical in forming positive customer relationships through their unique physical assets. Tangibility is often viewed as one of the most important service quality dimensions, particularly for new customers who use it to evaluate service caliber. Many firms integrate tangibles with other elements to develop a comprehensive service quality strategy, using them to reinforce brand image, ensure consistency, and communicate quality to clients (Anwar & Balcioglu, 2016). As a key dimension of service quality, tangibility provides concrete evidence of a service's value, shaping customers' first impressions and influencing their perceptions of travel agencies. Well-presented and professional employees, clean facilities, and well-maintained equipment all contribute to a positive service image. By focusing on these physical aspects, travel agencies can enhance the customer experience, improve perceived service quality, and ultimately boost customer satisfaction.

*Reliability.* The reliability component of service quality refers to a service provider's ability to consistently deliver services to clients as promised (Khan & Fasih, 2014). It assures customers that the provider can maintain a consistent level of perceived service quality, delivering dependable and exceptional service within the specified timeframe (Al-Ababneh, 2016). As a core element of service quality, reliability ensures that services are accurately and consistently performed to meet client expectations. Customers expect uniform service quality from all travel agencies regardless of timing, and any inconsistencies or failures in service delivery can negatively affect satisfaction. Delivering services as promised with accuracy is essential to building trust and loyalty. Tjiptono (2014) emphasized the importance of having reliable and competent employees who demonstrate knowledge, professionalism, and independence, resulting in service outcomes free from complaints or negative impressions. Similarly, Johnson and Karlay (2018) highlight that a service provider's ability to consistently deliver perceived quality instills customer trust. Anwar and Ghafoor (2017) define reliability as the ability to provide services in a consistent and correct manner—essentially, doing it right the first time. According to Anwar and Climis (2017), a reliable company is one that fulfills its commitments regarding service delivery, problem-solving, pricing, and timelines. Travel

agencies that consistently meet these promises are more likely to be favored by customers, as reliability signals operational competence and a strong commitment to fulfilling customer needs. Meeting consumer expectations promptly further reinforces this perception (Hameed & Anwar, 2018), making reliability a critical factor in determining a travel agency's success.

*Responsiveness.* The term "responsiveness" refers to an organization's ability to provide prompt and high-quality service (Nambisan et al., 2016), which involves minimizing client wait times during every interaction. Enhancing clients' perceptions of service quality requires a responsive approach, where companies quickly and professionally address issues while offering alternative solutions to meet customer needs. Nambisan et al. (2016) further define responsiveness through four essential actions: providing timely service, demonstrating a proactive willingness to help, offering individualized attention, and ensuring employee availability. These elements collectively enhance how clients perceive service quality. Al-Ababneh (2016) supports this by emphasizing the importance of employee readiness to assist customers and provide prompt responses. Omar et al. (2021) describe responsiveness as the willingness to help customers and deliver immediate service, reflecting the provider's preparedness to meet client needs swiftly. According to Johnson and Karlay (2018), response time, how quickly service providers address client concerns, is crucial, with responsiveness signifying the efficient handling of issues within a set time frame. Jayawardena's (2017) study in Sri Lankan travel agencies reveals a negative correlation between responsiveness and customer satisfaction, stressing the importance of timely replies and clear communication from employees. Farhani (2023) explains that making customers wait without justification creates negative perceptions of service, and Tjiptono (2014) highlights the value of offering fast, clear, and appropriate service responses. Hossain (2017) emphasizes employees' readiness to assist and deliver timely service, while Anwar and Qadir (2017) underscore the organization's responsibility to resolve issues and meet service expectations. Failure to respond can result in complaints, making responsiveness a key indicator of quality. The time customers wait for replies reflects service efficiency, and the ability to adapt services to customer needs enhances satisfaction. Responsiveness plays a crucial role in building strong customer relationships by addressing inquiries, requests, and complaints efficiently. It also involves proactively assisting clients, anticipating their needs, and providing expert guidance. Ensuring sufficient staff availability is essential for meeting customer expectations, and when travel agencies

demonstrate effective responsiveness, they receive positive feedback, boosting their market competitiveness.

*Assurance.* According to Wu et al. (2015), the concept of assurance refers to the aptitudes and competencies employed when delivering services to clients, emphasizing the importance of personnel skills in fostering customer trust and confidence, thereby making service delivery feel secure and comfortable. When customers trust in employees' abilities, they are more likely to return, highlighting how staff behavior can instill a sense of trust and safety within the organization. Employees who consistently demonstrate friendliness and effectively address customer inquiries further enhance this assurance (Al-Ababneh, 2016). Tabuyo et al. (2019) stress that quality assurance strongly depends on employees' knowledge, skills, and capacity to fully respond to customers' questions and provide a satisfying experience. Training plays a critical role in showcasing the organization's commitment to employee development, enabling confident staff to appropriately handle customer concerns. According to Kotler (2012, as cited in Farhani, 2023), assurance encompasses employee competence and courtesy, as well as their ability to inspire confidence and trust, while Tjiptono (2014) emphasizes that employee expertise, politeness, and skills are crucial in building customer assurance, involving factors such as communication, safety, competence, and courtesy. Jayawardena (2017) found that assurance has the greatest impact among the five service quality variables on customer satisfaction, suggesting that organizations should focus on enhancing staff politeness and hospitality through targeted training and development programs. Safety measures, such as emergency responses, first aid, ambulance access, and efficient scheduling, must also be addressed. Anwar and Louis (2017) highlight that assurance lies in staff competence, friendliness, and their ability to foster trust. Khan and Fasih (2014) add that when staff demonstrate their expertise during service delivery, it reassures customers of their professionalism and ethical responsibility. However, Naidoo (2014) notes that not all customers can independently assess service quality and may require clear communication or tailored explanations to fully appreciate the value provided. Overall, assurance as a dimension of service quality is vital for building customer confidence and trust; travel agencies must demonstrate expertise and reliability in managing trips, providing accurate information, and handling unexpected issues to foster strong customer relationships, encourage repeat business, and ensure long-term loyalty.

*Empathy.* According to Bahadur et al. (2018), empathy involves providing clients with individualized attention, where service providers go above and beyond to ensure that clients feel valued and appreciated during their interactions. Murray et al. (2019) state that empathy requires understanding the customer's needs and placing oneself in their position, and is influenced by traits such as staff friendliness, courtesy, awareness of customers' unique requirements, offering additional attention, and taking the time to explain service procedures. This reflects the staff's ability to understand, respond to, and treat each customer as an individual. Al-Ababneh (2016) also emphasizes that empathy includes ensuring that the business maintains suitable operating hours. According to Farhani (2023), empathy is essential for providing personalized care and attention, requiring sincere and individual engagement with customers to understand and meet their needs. Organizations are thus expected to demonstrate awareness and understanding of their customers, recognize specific demands, and offer services at convenient times. Additionally, Khan and Fasih (2014) assert that empathy entails closely attending to the distinct concerns and demands of individual customers and effectively addressing them, either on an individual or group basis, which enhances how the company is perceived in terms of empathetic service delivery. As a dimension of service quality, empathy reflects the ability to understand and compassionately respond to customers' needs, involving respectful and attentive interactions such as active listening, emotional validation, and customized solutions. This demonstrates the travel agency's dedication to providing thoughtful, client-focused service and ultimately strengthens positive customer relations and satisfaction.

## ***2.2. Service Quality***

The SERVQUAL scale is widely accepted as a reliable framework for evaluating service quality (Khan & Fasih, 2014). It measures the gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the actual service received. Initially, the model included ten service quality dimensions, later refined to five: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, which are directly linked to customer expectations. Marnovita (2020) emphasized that businesses use service quality assessments to continuously improve their operations and enhance customer satisfaction. Customers tend to be more satisfied with companies that offer higher service quality, and management should foster personal skill development through training or customer service strategies (Librianty & Yulianto, 2019). The SERVQUAL model's

focus on the discrepancy between expected and actual service delivery helps businesses identify improvement areas. Employee training and development are also crucial in achieving service excellence and boosting overall satisfaction.

Numerous studies have applied the SERVQUAL model to assess customer satisfaction in travel and tourism services. Lian (2019) found that assurance was the most valued SERVQUAL dimension among Chinatour.com customers, with respondents citing the importance of knowledgeable agents and prompt responses. While responsiveness also had a strong impact, reliability and empathy had less influence, and tangibles were not a significant factor. Similarly, Rosha and Kaur (2015) reported only moderate satisfaction levels among customers of travel agencies, with tangibles ranking highest in specific service features. Jayawardena (2017) emphasized that responsiveness had the strongest influence on satisfaction, followed by assurance and empathy, noting that delays in staff support negatively impacted customer experience. Monterey and Borbon (2021), studying online travel agencies in CALABARZON, highlighted empathy and innovation as key factors in enhancing service quality and customer loyalty. The study suggested establishing feedback mechanisms, continuous staff training, and regular marketing campaigns. Cueto (2021) also assessed market orientation and service quality in DOT-accredited agencies in CALABARZON, concluding that dimensions like empathy, responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, and customer orientation were significant predictors of agency performance and customer loyalty.

Given the importance of customer satisfaction in the tourism industry, service providers, especially travel agencies, must clearly identify and address customer expectations across different market segments. They should use feedback to improve services and exceed customer expectations. As De Luna and Menez (2014) noted, service quality involves both the production and delivery processes, making employee engagement vital to the delivery of tourism services. Kaura et al. (2018) argued that service quality is a long-term source of competitive advantage that improves market share and profitability. Zalatar (2017) also highlighted the fluctuating nature of the service industry, recommending the SERVQUAL model as one of the most effective tools for measuring service quality. Emia et al. (2022) reinforced that aligning customer expectations with actual service performance strengthens competitiveness. Thus, the SERVQUAL model remains a valuable tool for understanding and enhancing customer satisfaction in travel agencies. In this study, it will be used to evaluate how DOT-accredited travel agencies fulfill customer expectations and to identify areas for

service improvement. This approach is vital in fostering customer loyalty, improving agency performance, and driving long-term success in the tourism sector.

### ***2.3. Customer Satisfaction***

Kotler and Armstrong (2018) define customer satisfaction as the extent to which goods and services meet or exceed the consumer's expectations. It results from a process where clients evaluate the perceived benefits of using a service. Similarly, Zameer et al. (2015) emphasize that a business must satisfy customers to ensure a positive perception of its goods or services. Satisfied consumers are more inclined to remain loyal to products that meet their needs (Mohd Suki, 2017). Numerous studies have shown that customer satisfaction, influenced by service quality, affects behavioral intentions. For example, Saleem et al. (2017) argue that in the airline industry, customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and repurchase intentions. Hussain (2016) adds that customer satisfaction and service quality significantly encourage positive behavioral intentions. As noted by Ma et al. (2014), maintaining satisfaction is essential because it leads to increased sales and customer retention. Monitoring satisfaction is a key goal, especially since it is determined by the gap between customer expectations and perceived performance (Osman et al., 2018; Kotler, 2016). Improving service quality is a practical method for enhancing competitiveness, as customer happiness can boost purchase intentions. In this light, travel agencies must prioritize satisfaction to remain competitive in a crowded market.

Customer satisfaction plays a vital role in the travel industry, as clients are more likely to return or refer others when their expectations are met or exceeded. Sumi and Ahmed (2017) found that men tend to use agencies for international travel, while women prefer them for domestic trips travel agencies in Bangladesh. Despite the demand, the average satisfaction level is low, with only 10 out of 22 factors significantly impacting satisfaction. This suggests traditional service models fall short, lacking personalized services and current information. Davras and Caber (2019) note that satisfied customers are more loyal and more likely to make repeat purchases. Razak (2016) adds that price and quality influence satisfaction, customers often associate high prices with higher quality and discounts with lower quality. Similarly, Dutta (2018) found positive correlations between Indian customer satisfaction and factors like expectations, trust, perceived value, and perceived quality. These insights show the importance of continually assessing and improving service quality to meet customer expectations, build

trust, and maintain satisfaction. For travel agencies, this means delivering consistently high-quality, personalized services that foster loyalty and provide a strategic advantage in a competitive market.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

The study employed a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach. This type of research utilized numerical data and statistical analysis. A descriptive research design was used to describe the current state of service quality among DOT-accredited travel agencies. It helped identify and define problems that needed to be addressed, as indicated by gaps, inconsistencies, or areas of concern. By uncovering these aspects, the study provided a basis for problem-solving and informed recommendations.

#### 3.2. Research Population and Sample

The respondents of the study were composed of one hundred twenty-five (125) individuals, specifically, customers who had experienced the services of the four DOT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City. The target respondents came from different backgrounds who had experienced the services of travel agencies and were best suited to provide accurate responses regarding the services offered by these agencies. In terms of sampling, the sample of this study was selected through probability-stratified sampling. In stratified sampling, members were chosen at random from each group or stratum after the population was initially split up into subgroups known as strata based on similarities. These guaranteed that the sample fairly represented the wide range of traits seen in table 1.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of the respondents*

Travel Agency	No. of Clients	No. of Respondents
Travel Agency A	40	28
Travel Agency B	50	35
Travel Agency C	30	21
Travel Agency D	60	41
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>125</b>

**Table 2***Demographic characteristics*

<b>Age Range</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
18-24 years old (Gen Z)	52	41.6
25-40 years old (Gen Y or millennials)	49	39.2
41-56 years old (Gen X)	22	17.6
57-75 years old (Baby Boomers)	2	1.6
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	81	64.8
Male	42	33.6
LGBTQIA+	2	1.6
<b>Highest Educational Attainment</b>		
College Graduate	86	68.8
High School or Less	31	24.8
Post Graduate	8	6.4
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Employed	77	61.6
Unemployed	28	22.4
Business Owner/Entrepreneur	20	16
<b>Monthly Income</b>		
Below 10,000	60	48
10,000-30,000	35	28
Above 50,000	19	15.2
30,001-50,000	11	8.8
<b>Purpose of travel</b>		
Leisure	66	52.8
Family Visit	25	20
Educational Travel	18	14.4
Business	11	8.8
Missing	4	3.2
Others	1	0.8
<b>Frequency of travel</b>		
First Time Traveler	59	47.2
Occasional Traveler (1-2 per year)	56	44.8
Frequent Traveler (3 or more times per year)	9	7.2
Missing	1	0.8
<b>Type of travel</b>		
Domestic Travel	69	55.2
International Travel	28	22.4
Both	28	22.4
<b>Travel Budget</b>		
Below 10,000	57	45.6
10,000-30,000	41	32.8
Above 50,000	19	15.2
30,001-50,000	8	6.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100%</b>

**3.3. Research Instrument**

The SERVQUAL model put forth by Parasuraman et al. (1988) served as the basis for the modified questionnaire that the researchers employed. Statements about the particular

service quality requirements of travel agencies were included in the questionnaire. These statements were based on the five SERVQUAL dimensions. There were three sections to the questionnaire. Data on respondents' age, gender, highest level of education, occupation, income, reason for travel, frequency of travel, type of trip, budget, and travel agency or agencies were gathered in Part I. Based on the SERVQUAL model's expectations for tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, Part II examined the service quality of DOT-accredited travel businesses in Lucena City. In Part III, the SERVQUAL model's perceptions of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy were used to gauge the service quality of DOT-accredited travel businesses in Lucena City. Respondents were then questioned about the level of service they expected from travel agents. They were asked again, using the same set of questions, whether they were satisfied with the level of service that travel agents offered.

The researchers utilized printed Google Forms to conduct the necessary data gathering. The survey proper was composed of eighty (80) items, in which forty (40) items contained questions about respondents' expectations of the service quality of the travel agency, and the remaining forty (40) items contained questions about their perceptions of the service quality of the travel agency. The continuum rating of the Likert scale used for expectations ranged from (4) strongly agree, (3) agree, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree. For satisfaction, it used (4) highly satisfied, (3) satisfied, (2) dissatisfied, and (1) highly dissatisfied. The research instrument underwent content validation. After validation, the researcher's pilot-tested the questionnaire among thirty (30) individuals outside the study population, including travelers, tour operators, and customers of various travel agencies, to ensure understanding and clarity. The researchers then distributed the questionnaire to these thirty (30) respondents and assessed the reliability of their answers.

### ***3.4. Data Gathering Procedures***

The study used printed Google Forms to distribute the verified survey questionnaires to the participants. After identifying potential participants, the researchers personally visited each travel agency to locate respondents who met the study's eligibility criteria. The data collection process was efficient, as the respondents were given sufficient time to complete the survey questionnaire.

Throughout the study, ethical considerations were given top priority. The researchers obtained consent to use adapted instruments and secured informed consent from the respondents, ensuring that participants understood the study's purpose while maintaining their privacy and the confidentiality of the information provided. Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act, is a law that protects personal, private, and sensitive information. The researchers were committed to using the collected data solely for the purposes of the study, thereby upholding anonymity and confidentiality.

### 3.5. Statistical Analysis

The study used frequency distribution, weighted mean, weighted average mean and SERVQUAL formula to analyze, and interpret the data gathered.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

**Table 3**

*Gap between customer expectations and perceptions in terms of tangibility*

Indicators	Expectation Score	Perception Score	Gap Score (P-E)	Average Gap Score
1. An excellent travel agency will have modern and well-maintained equipment such as communication devices, computers, and air conditioning.	4.000	3.952	-0.048	
2. An excellent travel agency will have physical facilities such as furniture, decoration, and lighting that are visually appealing.	4.000	3.912	-0.088	
3. Employees at an excellent travel agency will maintain a neat and professional appearance.	4.000	3.944	-0.056	
4. An effective travel agency will have aesthetic materials associated with their service (such as welcome and no smoking signs).	4.000	3.88	-0.120	
5. An excellent travel agency's physical location will be clean, well-kept, and easy to access.	4.000	3.968	-0.032	-0.064
6. An excellent travel agency will have an office space that will be comfortable, fostering a welcoming and professional environment for clients.	4.000	3.952	-0.048	
7. An excellent travel agency will make use of advanced technology, like interactive displays or virtual reality presentations, to highlight travel destinations.	4.000	3.92	-0.080	
8. An excellent travel agency will offer tangible examples of travel products, including sample travel guides, maps, or souvenirs from different locations.	4.000	3.96	-0.040	

Table 3 presents the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of DoT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City in terms of tangibility. According to the respondents, the expectation scores reached 4.000 across all indicators, suggesting a high level of expectation among customers. The perception scores ranged from a high of 3.968 to a low of 3.880. The gap scores in tangibility, calculated using the P-E (Perception - Expectation) formula, revealed minor differences, ranging from -0.120 to 0.032, with an overall average gap score of -0.064.

The findings indicate that the travel agencies are facing considerable challenges related to tangibility, as reflected by the negative gap scores across all indicators. For instance, the indicator “modern and well-maintained equipment” had a gap of -0.048, suggesting the need to upgrade and consistently maintain technology and communication tools to improve customer perceptions. Modern customers expect up-to-date technology; failing to meet this expectation can result in frustration and decreased satisfaction.

The most significant gap, -0.120, was observed in the area of aesthetic materials, indicating an urgent need to enhance visual branding elements, such as signage, to create a more inviting environment. An unappealing space can leave a poor first impression and lower overall customer satisfaction. A gap of -0.088 for visually appealing physical facilities highlights the need to invest in better furniture, decorations, and lighting to improve the ambiance. While the agencies maintain cleanliness, additional training could enhance staff professionalism and raise satisfaction levels.

Although employees present themselves neatly, the gap score of -0.056 suggests that further training in professional presentation could improve customer perceptions even more. The cleanliness and accessibility of physical locations, with a gap of -0.032, can be enhanced through regular maintenance and the installation of clear signage to improve ease of access. Dirty or hard-to-locate facilities can negatively affect the customer experience.

To create a more comfortable office environment, the -0.048 gap indicates the need for comfortable seating and visually pleasing interiors. An uncomfortable waiting area can diminish the overall customer experience and potentially lead to dissatisfaction. Regarding the use of advanced technology, a gap of -0.080 suggests the importance of integrating modern tools, such as interactive displays, to engage clients more effectively. A lack of engaging technology reduces customer involvement and satisfaction.

Lastly, a gap of -0.040 was observed for tangible examples of travel products. It is recommended that agencies provide more physical materials, such as travel guides and souvenirs, to enhance the customer experience. For example, the absence of brochures, souvenirs, or similar items can make the overall experience less memorable and less satisfying. By implementing these recommendations, the agencies can significantly improve their tangible aspects, better aligning customer perceptions with expectations and boosting overall satisfaction.

As noted by Ismagilova et al. (2019), the perception of service quality is significantly influenced by the tangible elements of a service, particularly the physical facilities that impact customer satisfaction. Additionally, numerous studies have shown that cleanliness plays a vital role in the overall service experience (Islam et al., 2014). According to Tjiptono (2014), the concept of visibility within a company refers to its ability to demonstrate its presence to internal stakeholders through its physical facilities and reliable infrastructure. Similarly, Naidoo (2014) emphasized that service delivery firms place great importance on tangibles, as these play a critical role in establishing positive and meaningful customer relationships and experiences through unique physical assets.

Furthermore, tangibility is considered one of the most important dimensions of service quality from the customer's perspective. It provides a physical representation by which new clients, in particular, assess the quality of service. Although organizations often use tangible elements to enhance their image and convey consistency and quality, many also combine these elements with other service quality dimensions to develop a comprehensive strategy (Anwar & Balcioglu, 2016).

Table 4 presents the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of DOT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City in terms of reliability. According to the respondents, expectation scores reached 4.000 for most indicators, with only one indicator scoring slightly lower at 3.992. Perception scores ranged from a high of 3.984 to a low of 3.960. The gap scores, calculated using the P-E (Perception - Expectation) formula, show the highest gap at -0.032 and the lowest at -0.016. The overall average gap score is -0.024.

The findings indicate that while the travel agencies perform reasonably well in terms of reliability, notable gaps remain in several areas that require attention. For example, a gap score of -0.016 for timely service suggests a need to enhance consistency in fulfilling

commitments. Customers expect prompt service and reliable delivery of promised outcomes. Delays or missed deadlines can lead to frustration and diminished satisfaction.

**Table 4**

*Gap between customer expectations and perceptions in terms of reliability*

Indicators	Expectation Score	Perception Score	Gap Score (P-E)	Average Gap Score
1. When an excellent travel agency promises to do something by a certain time, they do.	4.000	3.984	-0.016	
2. When a customer has a problem, an excellent travel agency will show a sincere interest in resolving it.	4.000	3.984	-0.016	
3. An excellent travel agency will perform the service correctly the first time.	4.000	3.968	-0.032	
4. An excellent travel agency will provide the service at the time it promises to do so.	3.992	3.96	-0.032	
5. An excellent travel agency will keep records accurately.	4.000	3.976	-0.024	-0.024
6. An excellent travel agency makes sure to keep customers updated about any changes to their travel plans.	4.000	3.976	-0.024	
7. Employees of an excellent travel agency will be dependable in handling customer problems.	4.000	3.968	-0.032	
8. An excellent travel agency will stand by its commitments, ensuring a trustworthy and reliable service experience for its customers.	4.000	3.984	-0.016	

Similarly, the agency's ability to show genuine interest in resolving customer issues also has a gap of -0.016, indicating a need for enhanced staff training in customer service and empathy. Customers want to feel acknowledged and understood when problems arise; a lack of empathy or genuine effort can result in a negative experience and lower satisfaction.

A more concerning gap of -0.032 in delivering services correctly the first time suggests a need for stronger quality control and staff training to reduce errors. Customers expect services to be performed correctly on the first attempt. Repeated mistakes can lead to frustration, wasted time, and reduced satisfaction.

The same gap of -0.032 in providing services as promised indicates that clearer communication and improved follow-up procedures are needed to ensure timely and accurate service delivery. Effective communication and regular updates are essential for building customer trust and increasing satisfaction.

Gaps of -0.024 in record-keeping and keeping customers informed about changes highlight the need for better data management systems and proactive communication

strategies. Proper record-keeping and timely updates help prevent confusion and customer dissatisfaction.

Lastly, the -0.032 gap in employee dependability underscores the importance of continuous training and support to enable staff to address customer concerns effectively. Customers expect knowledgeable, reliable personnel. Without adequate training and support, inconsistent service delivery and lower satisfaction are likely outcomes. By focusing on these key areas, the agency can better align its services with customer expectations, ultimately increasing satisfaction and loyalty.

The reliability aspect of service quality refers to a service provider's ability to consistently deliver promised services to its customers. As noted by Tjiptono (2014), achieving reliable service requires competent employees who possess knowledge, expertise, independence, mastery, and a high degree of professionalism. Their performance should result in satisfactory service delivery, free of complaints or negative customer impressions.

According to Khan and Fasih (2014), the reliability dimension also reflects a service provider's commitment to consistently meet customer needs. Johnson and Karlay (2018), referencing Abd-El-Salam et al. (2003), highlight that a service provider's consistent ability to deliver perceived quality reinforces customer trust and perception of reliability. Reliability shapes the overall impression a customer forms after availing of a service.

Furthermore, Khan and Fasih (2014) emphasize that the people component is essential in perceiving the reliability of service quality. Dependability assures clients that the provider can consistently deliver quality service. As Al-Ababneh (2016) explains, reliability means that services are delivered accurately, dependably, and within the expected timeframe—ensuring customers receive consistent, high-quality service from the start.

Table 5 presents the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of DoT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City in terms of responsiveness. According to the respondents, expectation scores reached 4.000 for most indicators, with only one indicator scoring slightly lower at 3.992. Perception scores ranged from a high of 3.984 to a low of 3.960. The gap scores, calculated using the P-E (Perception - Expectation) formula, showed the highest gap at -0.048 and the lowest at -0.016. The overall average gap score was -0.034.

The data indicates that while the travel agency generally meets customer expectations for responsiveness, there are specific areas across all indicators that require improvement. For instance, the indicator related to clear communication about service timelines has a gap score

of -0.024, suggesting that the agency should enhance clarity in communicating service delivery timelines to better align with customer expectations. When customers clearly understand service timelines, they can manage their expectations more effectively. Without this clarity, frustration and dissatisfaction may arise.

**Table 5**

*Gap between customer expectations and perceptions in terms of responsiveness*

Indicators	Expectation Score	Perception Score	Gap Score (P-E)	Average Gap Score
1. Employees of an effective travel agency will clearly communicate when services will be performed.	3.992	3.968	-0.024	
2. Employees of an effective travel agency will always be willing to assist customers with their needs.	4.000	3.976	-0.024	
3. Employees of an effective travel agency will provide quick service to customers.	4.000	3.968	-0.032	
4. Employees of an effective travel agency will prioritize responding to customers' requests in a timely manner.	4.000	3.96	-0.040	
5. An excellent travel agency will use various communication channels to ensure customers can easily reach them.	4.000	3.952	-0.048	-0.034
6. An excellent travel agency will offer easily accessible information, such as FAQs, online resources, and contact information.	4.000	3.96	-0.040	
7. Employees of an excellent travel agency will anticipate customer needs to minimize wait times.	4.000	3.952	-0.048	
8. An excellent travel agency will keep customers informed about any potential travel delays in advance.	4.000	3.984	-0.016	

Similarly, the willingness of employees to assist customers also shows a gap of -0.024. Although the agency is viewed positively in this regard, additional training in customer service could further improve customer perceptions. Customers value a supportive and helpful staff; if employees appear less willing to assist, it can negatively affect the overall experience.

The provision of quick service reveals a gap of -0.032, indicating a need for increased efficiency in service delivery. Efficiency is vital for customer satisfaction, as long wait times or slow responses can lead to impatience and annoyance. A more notable gap of -0.040 is observed in prioritizing timely responses to customer requests, highlighting the importance of streamlining response processes. In the travel industry, timely responses are essential, delays can make customers feel neglected or undervalued, thereby lowering satisfaction.

Furthermore, the agency exhibits a gap of -0.048 in the effective use of various communication channels, suggesting a need to expand these channels to improve customer

access to support. Customers prefer having multiple avenues to seek assistance, and a lack of communication options can limit accessibility and increase frustration.

The indicator for easily accessible information, which also shows a gap of -0.040, underscores the necessity of enhancing online resources, such as FAQs. Providing easily accessible information empowers customers to find answers independently. When information is difficult to locate, it can lead to over-reliance on customer service and potential dissatisfaction due to response delays.

The gap of -0.048 for anticipating customer needs suggests that staff training should include strategies to proactively address customer concerns and reduce wait times. When staff are trained to anticipate needs and respond promptly, customers feel valued and understood, which significantly boosts satisfaction.

Lastly, the agency performs relatively well in keeping customers informed about potential travel delays, with a smaller gap of -0.016. Nonetheless, maintaining a strong focus on proactive communication in this area is essential. Customers appreciate being kept informed, and consistent updates can help sustain or improve satisfaction levels. By addressing these areas of concern, the agency can significantly enhance its responsiveness and overall customer satisfaction.

Table 6 presents the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of DOT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City in terms of assurance. According to the respondents, expectation scores ranged from 4.000 (highest) to 3.992 (lowest). Perception scores ranged from 3.992 (highest) to 3.960 (lowest). The gap scores, calculated using the P-E (Perception - Expectation) formula, showed a highest gap of -0.032 and a lowest of -0.000. The overall average gap score was -0.019.

The findings indicate that while the travel agencies perform well in terms of assurance, there are still notable gaps that need to be addressed to further strengthen customer confidence. Specifically, the gap of -0.032 related to employee behavior, which is essential in building trust, suggests a need for additional training focused on enhancing customer interactions and perceived professionalism. Employee behavior is a key factor in establishing trust with customers. By providing targeted training to improve communication and service delivery, agencies can enhance the professionalism of their staff. This, in turn, boosts customer confidence and increases overall satisfaction with the services provided.

**Table 6***Gap between customer expectations and perceptions in terms of assurance*

Indicators	Expectation Score	Perception Score	Gap Score (P-E)	Average Gap Score
1. The behavior of employees in an excellent travel agency will inspire confidence in customers.	3.992	3.96	-0.032	
2. Customers of an excellent travel agency will feel safe in making transactions.	4.000	3.976	-0.024	
3. Employees of excellent travel agencies will always be courteous to customers.	3.992	3.992	0.000	
4. Employees of an excellent travel agency will have the knowledge that is able to answer customers' questions.	3.992	3.984	-0.008	
5. An excellent travel agency will clearly demonstrate its commitment to customer safety and security.	3.992	3.968	-0.024	-0.019
6. An excellent travel agency will ensure the accuracy of every information about the quality of their services.	4.000	3.976	-0.024	
7. An excellent travel agency will inspire confidence in its customers through its accreditation.	4.000	3.968	-0.032	
8. An excellent travel agency will have employees with proven experience and qualifications in the travel industry.	3.992	3.984	-0.008	

Customers generally feel secure when making transactions, as reflected by a gap score of -0.024. This suggests that reinforcing security measures and clearly communicating these safeguards could further enhance customer trust. Strengthening these protections and effectively informing customers about them can reassure clients, improve their confidence, and alleviate concerns regarding financial security.

Employee courtesy scored highly, with no gap observed, demonstrating that the agency excels in this area and should continue to prioritize it. Maintaining this high standard helps reinforce positive perceptions and significantly contributes to customer trust and satisfaction. However, employee knowledgeability shows a slight gap of -0.008, indicating that ongoing training and improved access to informational resources would enhance staff members' ability to effectively respond to customer inquiries. Continuous professional development empowers employees, resulting in more confident and informed interactions, which ultimately lead to higher customer satisfaction.

The commitment to customer safety and security, as well as the accuracy of service information, both show gaps of -0.024. These findings suggest that the agency should reinforce its safety protocols and ensure all communications regarding services are clear and accurate. Enhancing the accuracy of information and prioritizing customer safety can significantly boost

customer trust and satisfaction. Although the agency's accreditation inspires confidence, it still shows a gap of -0.032. This indicates a need for more effective promotion of its credentials to reassure customers of its legitimacy. Proactively promoting the agency's accreditations can strengthen perceptions of reliability and professionalism, thereby increasing customer confidence and satisfaction.

Lastly, while employees are experienced, as indicated by a small gap of -0.008, the agency should continue to highlight staff qualifications to further strengthen customer trust. Showcasing employee expertise reinforces confidence in the agency's capability and contributes to higher overall customer satisfaction.

As stated by Wu et al. (2015), the concept of assurance pertains to the abilities and skills utilized in providing services to customers. It highlights that employee competence plays a crucial role in instilling trust and confidence, leading to a sense of security and ease during service delivery. When customers feel confident in employees' capabilities, they are more likely to return to the business, reinforcing the importance of staff actions in building trust. Additionally, Al-Ababneh (2016) notes that employees consistently demonstrate friendliness and the ability to respond to customer inquiries effectively. According to Tabuyo et al. (2019), quality assurance emphasizes the importance of employees' knowledge, skills, and their ability to fully address customer questions to ensure a positive experience. Continuous employee training is essential, as it reflects the organization's commitment to professional development. Well-trained and confident employees are better equipped to resolve customer concerns. Moreover, Tjiptono (2014) emphasizes that the knowledge, courtesy, and competence of staff are essential for building customer trust. This encompasses key elements such as effective communication, security, skill, and politeness. According to the study by Jayawardena (2017), assurance should be prioritized, as it has the greatest impact among the five service quality dimensions. By focusing on this area, the organization can improve service quality and enhance customer satisfaction.

Table 7 presents the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of DoT-accredited travel agencies in Lucena City in terms of empathy. As agreed by the respondents, it shows that the expectations achieved 4.000 for the highest and 3.992 for the lowest. The perception score achieved a range of 3.992 for the highest and 3.944 for the lowest. To obtain a gap score in empathy, P-E formula is utilized. The highest gap score achieved is -0.056 and for the lowest is -0.000. The overall average gap score is -0.025.

**Table 7***Gap between customer expectations and perceptions in terms of empathy*

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Expectation Score</b>	<b>Perception Score</b>	<b>Gap Score (P-E)</b>	<b>Average Gap Score</b>
1. Employees of an excellent travel agency will actively listen to customers' concerns.	4.000	3.968	-0.032	
2. An excellent travel agency will offer operating hours that are convenient to its customers.	3.992	3.976	-0.016	
3. An excellent travel agency will offer operating hours that are convenient to its customers.	3.992	3.992	0.000	
4. An excellent travel agency will have their customers' best interests at heart.	3.992	3.984	-0.008	
5. Employees of an excellent travel agency will understand the specific needs of their customers.	4.000	3.968	-0.032	-0.025
6. Employees of an excellent travel agency will express genuine concern for customers' situations.	3.992	3.968	-0.024	
7. Employees in an excellent travel agency will adjust their communication styles to meet the unique needs of each customer.	4.000	3.968	-0.032	
8. An excellent travel agency will make an effort to resolve any issues that come up.	4.000	3.944	-0.056	

The findings indicate that while the travel agency generally demonstrates empathy, there are specific areas across all indicators that require improvement to enhance customer satisfaction. For the indicator related to actively listening to customers' concerns, which has a gap score of -0.032, the agency should prioritize training employees in effective listening skills to ensure that customers feel fully heard and valued. Customers who feel acknowledged and understood are significantly more likely to be satisfied with the service they receive.

The indicator for convenient operating hours shows a smaller gap of -0.016, suggesting that while the agency is performing well, it could still benefit from regularly assessing and possibly adjusting its operating hours to better meet customer needs. Proactively reviewing and refining business hours enhances accessibility and convenience, thereby further improving customer satisfaction. The second indicator on operating hours shows no gap, indicating that the agency is successfully meeting this particular customer expectation.

Regarding the indicator for having customers' best interests at heart, the gap of -0.008 implies that the agency is performing well but should continue emphasizing a customer-centric approach. Maintaining and highlighting this strong commitment to prioritizing customer interests remains a key driver of satisfaction. However, the gap of -0.032 for understanding specific customer needs highlights the necessity for more in-depth staff training focused on

recognizing and addressing unique customer requirements. Meeting these personalized needs demonstrates empathy and significantly enhances customer satisfaction. Employees should work on strengthening their empathetic skills to convey genuine concern, which helps build rapport and trust, ultimately leading to improved service experiences.

The gap of -0.024 for expressing genuine concern for customers' situations further supports the need to cultivate empathetic communication. Staff who exhibit sincere concern foster stronger emotional connections with clients, which positively influences satisfaction levels. Additionally, the gap of -0.032 for adjusting communication styles indicates a need for staff to be trained in adapting their communication to suit varying customer preferences. Tailoring communication styles enhances mutual understanding and increases the likelihood of a positive and satisfying interaction.

The largest gap, -0.056, was found in making an effort to resolve issues, highlighting a critical need for improved problem-solving strategies and empowering employees to proactively take ownership of customer concerns. Effective issue resolution is a core component of empathy and has a direct impact on customer satisfaction. Empowered employees who take initiative in addressing concerns contribute greatly to a more satisfying customer experience. By implementing these recommendations, the agency can significantly improve its performance in the empathy dimension, fostering stronger relationships with customers and driving higher overall satisfaction.

According to Bahadur et al. (2018), providing customers with individualized attention is a fundamental component of empathy. Service providers are expected to go above and beyond during interactions to ensure clients feel valued and appreciated. Murray et al. (2019) emphasize that empathy involves understanding customers' needs and putting oneself in their position. They also note that empathy is reflected in staff friendliness, politeness, understanding of unique customer needs, offering extra attention, and clearly explaining service procedures. These actions reflect how well employees comprehend, respond to, and treat each customer as an individual.

Al-Ababneh (2016) adds that providing convenient operating hours is also an essential element of empathy. As cited by Farhani (2023) from Kotler (2012), empathy requires personalized care and attention. It involves sincerely and individually attending to customer needs by making an effort to understand what they truly want. Organizations are expected to demonstrate awareness and understanding of their customers by recognizing specific needs

and offering services, such as convenient operating hours, that cater to those needs. Moreover, Khan and Fasih (2014) explain that empathy involves service firms paying close attention to the specific problems and demands of individual customers and responding effectively. They argue that a company is seen as empathetic when it demonstrates genuine concern and care in handling customer issues, whether on an individual or group basis.

## **5. Conclusion**

The overall average gap score indicates that customers generally perceive the service quality of these travel agencies as falling short of their expectations across all evaluated areas. This highlights a pressing need for the agencies to address key deficiencies in their service delivery. The data clearly show that customer expectations exceed their perceptions of service quality. Although perception scores are relatively close to expectation scores, they still fall short, resulting in dissatisfaction. While there are strengths in areas such as reliability and assurance, the overall negative average service quality score underscores the need for substantial improvements, particularly in tangibility, responsiveness, and empathy. Closing these gaps is crucial to increasing customer satisfaction and ensuring that service delivery aligns with customer expectations. Based on the findings, it is recommended that travel agencies prioritize upgrading facilities, enhancing communication strategies, and personalizing customer interactions to improve overall service quality and better meet customer needs.

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