Influence of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction in Higher Learning Institutions: Evidence from Catholic University of Mbeya

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya, Tanzania. Guided by the SERVQUAL model, the study assessed five dimensions of service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. A mixed-methods approach was employed using a descriptive research design. Data were collected from 44 respondents selected from students and staff through questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that respondents were generally satisfied with institutional services (overall mean = 3.92). Among the SERVQUAL dimensions, tangibility and assurance received the highest ratings, while empathy recorded the lowest score, indicating limited personalized attention to students. Qualitative findings further identified challenges related to administrative delays, communication gaps, and inadequate individualized support. The study concludes that service quality significantly contributes to customer satisfaction in higher learning institutions. It recommends improving administrative efficiency, strengthening communication systems, enhancing staff professionalism, and adopting student-centered service delivery approaches to improve institutional performance.

Keywords: Service quality, customer satisfaction, SERVQUAL, higher learning institutions, student satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Higher education institutions operate in an increasingly competitive knowledge economy where institutional success depends not only on teaching, research, and innovation, but also on the quality of services provided to students and other stakeholders. Universities are increasingly adopting service-oriented approaches that emphasize efficient academic, administrative, and support services to meet users' changing expectations (Kotler, Keller, & Chernev, 2022). Consequently, service quality has become an important determinant of institutional reputation, student recruitment, retention, and long-term sustainability (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019).

Customer satisfaction has emerged as a key indicator of institutional performance in higher education. Students, as primary beneficiaries of university services, evaluate institutions based on their experiences with academic, administrative, and support services. High levels of satisfaction enhance student retention, institutional loyalty, and positive recommendations, while poor service experiences may result in complaints, reduced trust, and student attrition (Alves & Raposo, 2009). According to Expectation Confirmation Theory, satisfaction occurs when perceived service performance meets or exceeds users' expectations, whereas dissatisfaction results when service performance falls below expectations (Oliver, 1980).

Service quality measurement has been widely informed by the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988). The model identifies five dimensions of service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Tangibility relates to physical facilities and resources; reliability

concerns the ability to provide accurate and dependable services; responsiveness reflects prompt assistance; assurance involves staff competence and confidence-building; while empathy emphasizes individualized attention to users' needs (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for assessing service delivery in higher education institutions.

Research across different service sectors demonstrates that service quality significantly influences customer satisfaction. In higher education, service quality extends beyond classroom instruction to include administrative efficiency, communication, student support services, learning facilities, and staff interactions. Universities are therefore expected to provide accessible, reliable, and responsive services that enhance students' overall experiences. Studies conducted in Tanzanian higher learning institutions have shown that SERVQUAL dimensions significantly influence student satisfaction, with factors such as infrastructure, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy affecting perceptions of institutional performance (Mashenene, 2019; Ackim, Rugeiyamu, & Msendo, 2024).

Despite ongoing improvements in service delivery, higher learning institutions continue to face challenges such as administrative delays, inadequate communication, limited learning facilities, and insufficient attention to students' individual needs. These challenges may negatively affect satisfaction, retention, and institutional reputation (Yeo & Li, 2014). Although previous studies have examined service quality and customer satisfaction in various sectors, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the contribution of individual SERVQUAL dimensions within Tanzanian university contexts, particularly in the Mbeya Region.

Therefore, this study investigated the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya, Tanzania. Guided by the SERVQUAL framework, the study examined the extent to which tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy influence customer satisfaction among students and staff. The findings provide evidence for improving service delivery strategies and enhancing institutional performance in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service quality and customer satisfaction are central concepts in service management because they influence organizational performance, customer retention, and competitive advantage. In higher education, universities are increasingly viewed as service-oriented institutions where students and other stakeholders evaluate institutional effectiveness based on the quality of academic, administrative, and support services provided. This section reviews the theoretical foundations underlying the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Theoretical Foundations of Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Service quality refers to customers' overall assessment of the excellence and effectiveness of services received. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) explain that service quality is determined by the comparison between customers' expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance. Thus, service quality is largely perception-based and depends on how users evaluate their service experiences.

The Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) developed by Oliver (1980) provides a foundation for understanding customer satisfaction. The theory proposes that satisfaction results from comparing prior expectations with actual performance. When perceived performance meets or exceeds expectations, customers experience satisfaction; when performance falls below expectations, dissatisfaction occurs. The disconfirmation perspective further explains that positive or negative differences between expectations and actual experiences determine satisfaction levels (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982).

The relationship between service quality and satisfaction has been widely supported in service research. Cronin and Taylor (1992) argue that improved perceived service quality enhances customer satisfaction and encourages positive behavioural outcomes, including loyalty and continued service use. Similarly, Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) emphasize that superior service quality strengthens perceived value and long-term relationships between organizations and their users.

This study is guided by the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which measures service quality through five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Tangibility concerns physical facilities, equipment, and staff appearance; reliability refers to consistent and accurate service delivery; responsiveness involves prompt assistance; assurance reflects staff competence, courtesy, and trustworthiness; while empathy focuses on individualized attention to customers' needs. The model provides a comprehensive framework for examining how different service quality dimensions influence customer satisfaction in higher education institutions.

SERVQUAL Dimensions as a Measure of Service Quality

The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) is one of the most widely applied frameworks for assessing service quality. The model conceptualizes service quality as a multidimensional construct consisting of five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions enable organizations to evaluate users' perceptions of service performance and identify areas requiring improvement.

Tangibility refers to the physical aspects of service delivery, including facilities, equipment, learning resources, ICT infrastructure, and staff appearance. Reliability concerns the ability to provide accurate, consistent, and dependable services, including effective administrative processes and timely service delivery. Responsiveness reflects the willingness and ability of staff to provide prompt assistance and address users' concerns. Assurance relates to staff competence, professionalism, courtesy, and their ability to build trust and confidence among service users. Empathy emphasizes individualized attention, care, and understanding of users' specific needs (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

In higher education, these dimensions are particularly relevant because students interact continuously with academic, administrative, and support services. Effective physical facilities, reliable procedures, responsive communication, professional staff conduct, and personalized support contribute significantly to students' perceptions of institutional service quality and satisfaction. Previous studies have validated the usefulness of SERVQUAL in measuring service quality across various sectors, including education (Ladhari, 2009).

Therefore, this study adopted the SERVQUAL model as the analytical framework for examining how tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy influence customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya.

Concept of Customer Satisfaction in Service Contexts

Customer satisfaction refers to users' evaluation of whether a service experience meets or exceeds their expectations. Kotler and Keller (2016) define satisfaction as a comparison between expected performance and actual perceived performance. In higher education, students evaluate satisfaction based not only on teaching quality but also on administrative services, communication, facilities, ICT support, and staff interactions.

Student satisfaction reflects perceptions of whether institutional services are reliable, accessible, timely, and responsive to their needs. Factors such as effective communication, professional staff conduct, efficient administrative processes, and supportive learning environments contribute to positive student experiences and institutional relationships.

Customer satisfaction is also associated with loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and institutional reputation. Satisfied students are more likely to maintain positive relationships with their institutions and recommend them to others (Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994; Alves & Raposo, 2009). The Expectation Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980) explains that satisfaction occurs when service performance meets or exceeds expectations, while dissatisfaction results when performance falls below expectations. Therefore, improving service quality is essential for enhancing student satisfaction and strengthening institutional performance.

Empirical Evidence on Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that service quality is a significant determinant of customer satisfaction across different service contexts. Previous research highlights reliability, assurance, and responsiveness as important factors because users value accurate services, competent providers, and timely support (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Ladhari, 2009). Effective communication, prompt responses, and consistent service delivery have also been identified as key contributors to positive customer experiences (Kumbhar, 2011).

In higher education, studies show that SERVQUAL dimensions significantly influence student satisfaction. Research conducted in Tanzanian higher learning institutions indicates that factors such as adequate facilities, reliable administrative services, professional staff behaviour, effective communication, and responsiveness contribute to positive student experiences, while service delays, inadequate infrastructure, and poor communication reduce satisfaction (Mashenene, 2019; Ackim, Rugeiyamu, & Msendo, 2024).

Similarly, international higher education research demonstrates that students evaluate universities based on the overall service experience, including academic support, administrative efficiency, ICT services, learning facilities, and staff interactions (Yeo & Li, 2014). Institutions that provide reliable, responsive, and student-centred services are more likely to achieve higher satisfaction and stronger institutional relationships.

The current study builds on this evidence by examining how SERVQUAL dimensions influence customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya. Consistent with previous findings, the study considers physical facilities, administrative reliability, staff responsiveness, professionalism, communication, and individualized support as important factors shaping students' service experiences.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature indicates that service quality is a key determinant of customer satisfaction in higher education. Existing studies confirm that SERVQUAL dimensions—tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—influence users' perceptions of institutional performance. However, important gaps remain.

First, while service quality and satisfaction have been widely studied in sectors such as banking and healthcare, fewer studies have examined higher education institutions, particularly in developing country contexts. Universities provide unique services involving academic support, administrative processes, communication systems, infrastructure, and staff interactions, making institution-specific investigation necessary.

Second, some studies examine service quality generally without adequately determining the relative contribution of individual SERVQUAL dimensions to customer satisfaction. Understanding how specific dimensions influence satisfaction is essential for identifying areas requiring improvement in university service delivery.

In Tanzania, although previous studies have examined service quality in higher learning institutions, limited evidence exists at institutional and regional levels, particularly regarding the Catholic University of Mbeya. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining the influence of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy on customer satisfaction. The findings provide context-specific evidence to support service improvement strategies and enhance student experiences in Tanzanian higher education.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the assumption that service quality influences customer satisfaction in higher education institutions. Guided by the SERVQUAL model, the framework identifies five service quality dimensions; tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, as independent variables, while customer satisfaction is the dependent variable.

Tangibility represents physical and technological facilities; reliability reflects accurate and consistent service delivery; responsiveness concerns timely assistance and feedback; assurance relates to staff competence, professionalism, and ability to build trust; while empathy represents individualized attention and understanding of students' needs.

The framework proposes that improvements in these service quality dimensions enhance customer satisfaction, reflected through students' overall satisfaction, positive service experiences, willingness to recommend the institution, and fulfilment of expectations. Conversely, weaknesses in facilities, administrative processes, communication, staff responsiveness, or student support may reduce satisfaction levels.

Thus, the study examines how SERVQUAL dimensions collectively contribute to customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya.

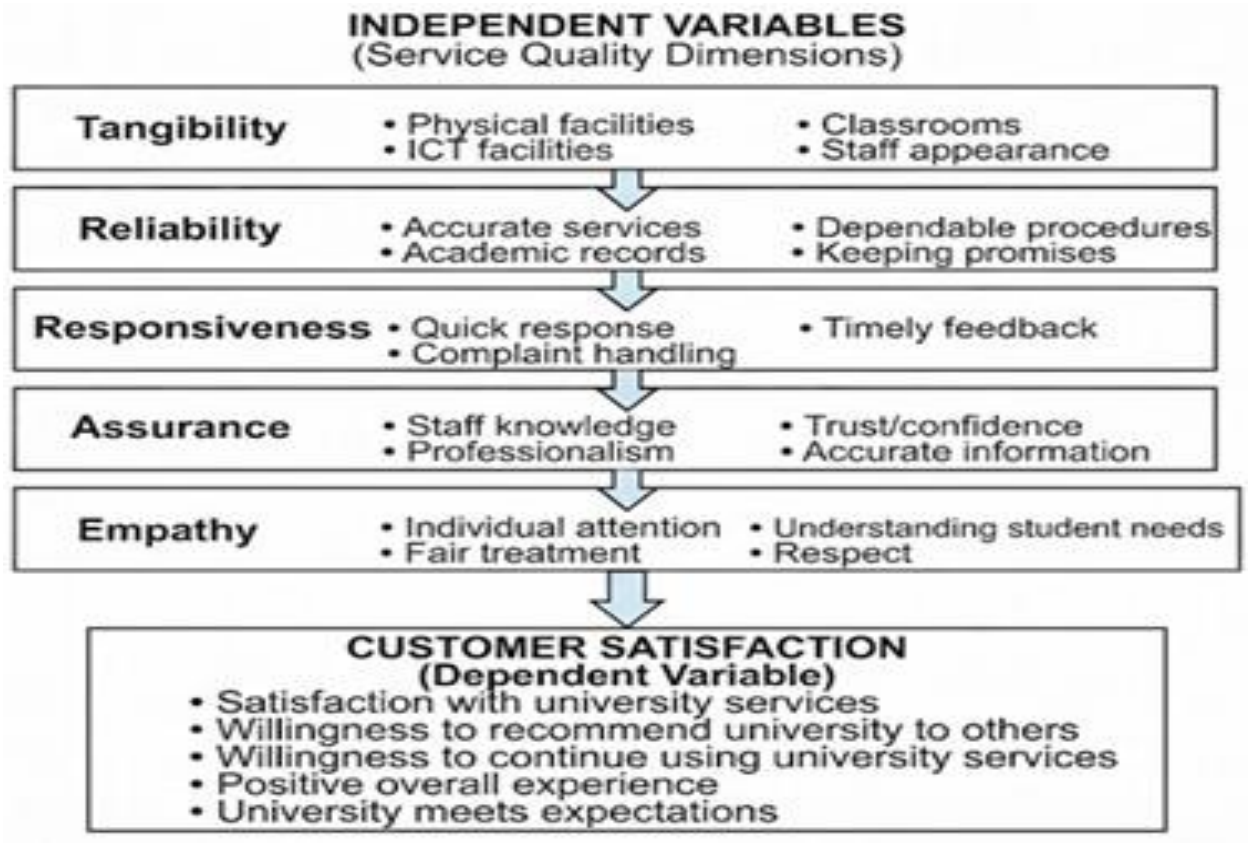


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework Showing the Relationship between Service Quality Dimensions and Customer Satisfaction

Source: Adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1988) SERVQUAL Model

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional research design to examine the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya (CUoM), Tanzania. Guided by the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative responses from an open-ended question to obtain a comprehensive understanding of respondents' perceptions.

The study was conducted at CUoM, a higher learning institution providing academic, administrative, and support services to students and staff. The target population consisted of students and staff who interact directly with university services. A total of 44 respondents participated in the study. Students were selected through simple random sampling, while staff members were purposively selected based on their involvement in service delivery.

Data were collected using a questionnaire adapted from the SERVQUAL framework. The instrument assessed five service quality dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Customer satisfaction was measured through overall satisfaction, willingness to recommend the university, continued use of university services, overall service experience, and fulfilment of expectations. Closed-ended items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), while an open-ended question collected suggestions for improving service delivery.

Content validity of the instrument was established through expert review, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. A value of 0.70 and above was considered acceptable for internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize responses, while multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of SERVQUAL dimensions on customer satisfaction. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify key areas for service improvement.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Permission was obtained from relevant university authorities, participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and collected information was used exclusively for academic purposes.

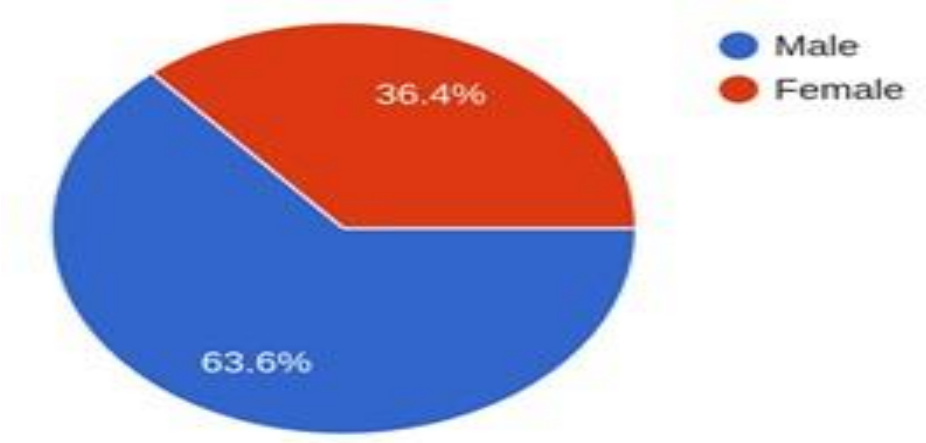
RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the findings on the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya (CUoM). Results are organized according to the SERVQUAL dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, followed by findings on customer satisfaction. Quantitative results are presented using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses are analyzed thematically to complement the survey findings.

Response Rate and Respondents' Characteristics

All 44 distributed questionnaires were completed and returned, representing a 100% response rate. The respondents included students and staff members of CUoM, with students forming the majority as primary users of university services. The participants represented diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, and length of university experience, providing varied perspectives on service quality and satisfaction.

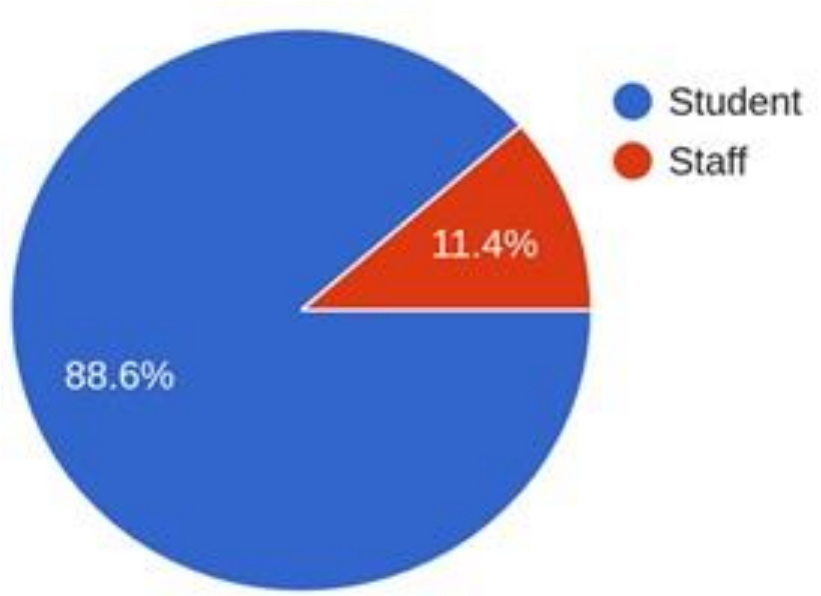
Figure 4.1: Gender Distribution of Respondents



Source: Field Data, 2026

The respondents included both male and female participants, with males slightly outnumbering females. This provided perspectives from both gender groups on service quality and customer satisfaction.

Figure 4.2: Category of Respondents



Source: Field Data, 2026

Students constituted the majority of respondents, reflecting their role as primary users of academic, administrative, and support services.

Descriptive Findings on Service Quality Dimensions

Respondents' perceptions of service quality were assessed using the five SERVQUAL dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. A five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was used, and mean scores were calculated to summarize responses. Mean values above 3.0 indicated positive perceptions, while values below 3.0 reflected negative perceptions. The findings present respondents' ratings of service quality indicators and highlight areas of strength and improvement at the Catholic University of Mbeya.

Tangibility

Tangibility was assessed through physical facilities, classroom conditions, administrative offices, and staff appearance.

Table 4.1: Respondents' Perceptions of Tangibility Dimensions

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
The university has adequate physical facilities	18	41	23	14	4	3.55
Classrooms are well equipped and comfortable	16	39	25	14	6	3.45
Administrative offices are well organized	20	36	27	11	6	3.53
Staff appearance is professional	22	43	18	12	5	3.65

Source: Field Data, 2026

The findings show positive perceptions of tangibility, with all indicators scoring above the neutral mean of 3.0. Staff appearance received the highest rating (Mean = 3.65), followed by physical facilities (Mean = 3.55), administrative offices (Mean = 3.53), and classroom conditions (Mean = 3.45). The overall mean score of 3.54

indicates satisfactory perceptions of the university's physical service environment, although classroom facilities require further improvement.

Reliability

Reliability was assessed through service accuracy, academic record processing, timeliness of services, and fulfilment of commitments to students.

Table 4.2: Respondents' Perceptions of Reliability Dimensions

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
Services are delivered accurately	17	38	20	18	7	3.40
Academic records are processed correctly	15	35	25	18	7	3.33
Services are provided on time	14	36	24	18	8	3.30
Staff keep promises made to students	16	34	22	20	8	3.28

Source: Field Data, 2026

The findings indicate positive perceptions of service reliability, with all indicators scoring above the neutral mean of 3.0. Accuracy of service delivery recorded the highest rating (Mean = 3.40), while fulfilment of commitments received the lowest (Mean = 3.28). The overall mean score of 3.33 suggests that respondents generally considered university services dependable, although timeliness and consistency require further improvement.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness was assessed through staff response to requests, complaint handling, willingness to assist students, and communication effectiveness.

Table 4.3: Respondents' Perceptions of Responsiveness Dimensions

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
Staff respond quickly to student requests	19	37	21	16	7	3.46
Complaints are handled promptly	18	35	24	17	6	3.42
Staff are willing to assist students	21	39	20	14	6	3.60
Communication is timely and clear	17	36	23	17	7	3.39

Source: Field Data, 2026

The findings indicate positive perceptions of responsiveness, with all indicators scoring above the neutral mean of 3.0. Staff willingness to assist students received the highest rating (Mean = 3.60), while communication timeliness and clarity recorded the lowest (Mean = 3.39). The overall mean score of 3.47 suggests that respondents generally viewed university services as responsive, although communication and feedback systems require further improvement.

Assurance

Assurance was assessed through staff knowledge, professional behaviour, student trust, and confidence in staff services.

Table 4.4: Respondents' Perceptions of Assurance Dimensions

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)
Staff are knowledgeable in their duties	23	40
Staff behave professionally	24	42
Students trust staff services	20	38
Staff inspire confidence	19	37

Source: Field Data, 2026

The findings show positive perceptions of assurance, with all indicators scoring above the neutral mean of 3.0. Professional behaviour received the highest rating (Mean = 3.68), followed by staff knowledge (Mean = 3.61), while confidence in staff services recorded the lowest (Mean = 3.45). The overall mean score of 3.56 indicates that respondents generally perceived staff as competent and professional, although further strengthening of staff–student interactions may enhance trust.

Empathy

Empathy was assessed through individual attention, understanding of students' needs, staff care and concern, and fair treatment.

Table 4.5: Respondents' Perceptions of Empathy Dimensions

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
Staff give individual attention to students	18	34	25	17	6	3.41
Staff understand students' needs	20	36	22	15	7	3.47
Staff show care and concern	21	38	20	14	7	3.56
Staff treat students fairly	22	40	19	13	6	3.62

Source: Field Data, 2026

The findings indicate positive perceptions of empathy, with all indicators scoring above the neutral mean of 3.0. Fair treatment of students received the highest rating (Mean = 3.62), while individual attention recorded the lowest (Mean = 3.41). The overall mean score of 3.52 suggests that respondents generally viewed staff as supportive and considerate, although personalized attention requires further improvement.

Overall Summary of Service Quality Dimensions

The overall service quality assessment compared the mean scores of the five SERVQUAL dimensions.

Table 4.6: Summary of SERVQUAL Dimensions

SERVQUAL Dimension	Mean Score
Tangibility	3.54
Reliability	3.33
Responsiveness	3.47
Assurance	3.56
Empathy	3.52

Source: Field Data, 2026

All SERVQUAL dimensions recorded mean scores above 3.0, indicating generally positive perceptions of service quality. Assurance received the highest rating (Mean = 3.56), followed by tangibility (3.54) and empathy (3.52), while reliability recorded the lowest score (3.33). The findings suggest that staff professionalism and physical service attributes were perceived positively, whereas reliability-related aspects such as consistency and timeliness require further improvement.

Customer Satisfaction Indicators

Customer satisfaction was assessed through overall satisfaction, willingness to recommend the university, intention to continue using services, and overall experience.

Table 4.7: Respondents' Perceptions of Customer Satisfaction Indicators

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
I am satisfied with university services	21	39	20	14	6	3.55
I would recommend the university to others	23	38	19	14	6	3.58
I am willing to continue using university services	24	40	18	12	6	3.66
Overall experience at the university is positive	20	37	22	15	6	3.50

Source: Field Data, 2026

The findings indicate positive levels of customer satisfaction, with all indicators scoring above the neutral mean of 3.0. Willingness to continue using university services recorded the highest rating (Mean = 3.66), while overall positive experience recorded the lowest (Mean = 3.50). The overall mean score of 3.57 suggests that respondents were generally satisfied with university services.

Inferential Findings (Regression Analysis)

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) on customer satisfaction.

Table 4.8: Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
0.78	0.61	0.58

Source: Field Data, 2026

The model results indicate a strong positive relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction (R = 0.78). The five SERVQUAL dimensions explain 61% of the variation in customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.61$), indicating that service quality is a significant predictor of satisfaction.

Table 4.9: Regression Coefficients

Service Quality Dimension	Beta (β)	Sig.
Tangibility	0.21	0.032
Reliability	0.34	0.001

Responsiveness	0.29	0.004
Assurance	0.38	0.000
Empathy	0.25	0.018

Source: Field Data, 2026

The regression results show that all SERVQUAL dimensions had a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction ($p < 0.05$). Assurance was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.38$), followed by reliability ($\beta = 0.34$), responsiveness ($\beta = 0.29$), empathy ($\beta = 0.25$), and tangibility ($\beta = 0.21$). The findings indicate that staff professionalism, trust-building, and dependable service delivery are the most influential factors shaping customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya.

Qualitative Findings (Thematic Analysis)

Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically to provide additional insights into respondents' experiences with university services. The emerging themes complemented the quantitative findings and reflected the SERVQUAL dimensions.

Service Reliability and Administrative Efficiency

Respondents identified delays in academic records, examination results, fee payment procedures, and administrative processes as key concerns. They emphasized the need for accurate, timely, and consistent service delivery.

Staff Professionalism and Assurance

Participants highlighted that staff competence, professionalism, and supportive interactions strengthen trust and satisfaction. However, they suggested improvements in customer care practices and staff attitudes.

Communication and Responsiveness

Effective communication was considered essential for service satisfaction. Respondents noted challenges related to delayed feedback, unclear information, and limited communication regarding institutional decisions, suggesting the need for stronger communication channels.

Facilities, ICT Services, and Learning Environment

Respondents emphasized the importance of adequate infrastructure, ICT facilities, internet accessibility, and conducive learning environments. Continued improvement of these areas was viewed as important for enhancing service experiences.

Student Support and Empathy

Participants indicated that individualized attention, fairness, and understanding of students' needs contribute to satisfaction. Greater student involvement and personalized support were recommended to strengthen university–student relationships.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings show that all SERVQUAL dimensions positively influenced customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya. Assurance recorded the highest mean score (3.56), followed by tangibility (3.54) and empathy (3.52), while reliability had the lowest score (3.33).

Regression analysis confirmed that all dimensions significantly predicted customer satisfaction, with assurance

(β = 0.38) and reliability (β = 0.34) being the strongest predictors. The model explained 61% of the variation in customer satisfaction.

Qualitative findings reinforced these results, highlighting the importance of staff professionalism, reliable services, communication, ICT facilities, infrastructure, and personalized student support. Respondents also identified areas requiring improvement, particularly administrative efficiency and communication.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings in relation to the SERVQUAL model, Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT), and previous studies on service quality and customer satisfaction. It examines how tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy influence customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya.

Influence of Tangibility on Customer Satisfaction

The findings show that tangibility positively influenced customer satisfaction, with an overall mean score of 3.54. Respondents perceived physical facilities, classroom conditions, ICT resources, and staff appearance as important aspects shaping their evaluation of university services.

These findings support the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), which identifies tangible elements as important indicators of service quality because users often judge institutions through visible service attributes. In higher education, facilities, learning resources, and technological infrastructure influence perceptions of institutional quality and commitment to service delivery.

The findings are consistent with previous studies showing that adequate infrastructure and supportive learning environments enhance student satisfaction. However, qualitative responses highlighted the need for continued improvement in ICT accessibility and teaching facilities. Therefore, while tangible aspects were positively evaluated, further investment in infrastructure and technology remains important for improving service quality and customer satisfaction.

Influence of Reliability on Customer Satisfaction

Reliability recorded the lowest mean score among the SERVQUAL dimensions (3.33), although it remained a significant positive predictor of customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$). The findings indicate that accurate, consistent, and timely service delivery is essential in shaping users' satisfaction.

The results support Expectation Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980), which suggests that satisfaction depends on whether actual service performance meets users' expectations. Delays or inconsistencies in services such as academic records processing, fee management, and administrative procedures may therefore reduce satisfaction.

Qualitative findings further identified concerns related to examination results, fee payment systems, and administrative delays. These findings reinforce previous research that reliability is a critical component of service quality because users value dependable and efficient service delivery.

Influence of Responsiveness on Customer Satisfaction

Responsiveness positively influenced customer satisfaction, with a mean score of 3.47 and a significant predictive effect ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$). Respondents generally perceived staff as willing to assist students, although communication delays and response time remained areas for improvement.

The findings support the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988), which identifies responsiveness as the ability and willingness of service providers to provide timely assistance and address user needs. In higher

education, responsive services are essential for effective academic support, administrative assistance, and communication.

Qualitative findings emphasized the need to strengthen communication between management, staff, and students, as well as improve feedback mechanisms. Enhancing communication channels and response processes would therefore contribute to improved student satisfaction.

Influence of Assurance on Customer Satisfaction

Assurance recorded the highest mean score among the SERVQUAL dimensions (3.56) and was the strongest predictor of customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). The findings indicate that staff competence, professionalism, and ability to build trust are key factors influencing satisfaction.

These results support the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988), which identifies assurance as employees' knowledge, courtesy, and capacity to inspire confidence. In higher education, students rely on staff for accurate information, guidance, and support, making professional service delivery essential.

Qualitative findings reinforced the importance of staff behaviour and supportive interactions, while also indicating the need for continuous staff development and improved customer care practices. Strengthening professionalism and trust-building practices can therefore enhance student satisfaction.

Influence of Empathy on Customer Satisfaction

Empathy positively influenced customer satisfaction, with a mean score of 3.52 and a significant predictive effect ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$). The findings indicate that individual attention, fairness, care, and understanding of student needs contribute to positive service experiences.

The results support the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988), which emphasizes the importance of personalized attention in enhancing service quality. In higher education, students have diverse needs that require supportive and responsive institutional practices.

Qualitative findings highlighted the need for greater consideration of individual student circumstances, fairness, and student involvement in institutional decisions. Strengthening student-centred practices and staff–student relationships can therefore improve satisfaction.

Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

The regression results demonstrate a strong relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, with SERVQUAL dimensions explaining 61% of the variation in satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.61$). All five dimensions significantly contributed to satisfaction, with assurance ($\beta = 0.38$) and reliability ($\beta = 0.34$) being the strongest predictors.

The findings support Cronin and Taylor's (1992) view that perceived service quality influences satisfaction outcomes and are consistent with Expectation Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980), which explains that satisfaction increases when actual service experiences meet or exceed expectations.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that SERVQUAL dimensions significantly influence student satisfaction in higher education. Mbise and Tuninga (2013), in their study of Tanzanian business schools, confirmed the applicability of SERVQUAL in assessing service quality perceptions within higher education contexts. Similarly, Magasi, Mashenene, and Ndengenesa (2022) found that SERVQUAL dimensions significantly contribute to students' satisfaction in Tanzanian higher education institutions.

The present study further supports these findings by demonstrating that assurance and reliability were the strongest predictors of customer satisfaction at CUoM. This finding suggests that students place particular

importance on competent staff, professional conduct, accurate services, and dependable institutional processes. This is consistent with the broader higher education literature, which emphasizes that service quality extends beyond academic instruction to include administrative support, communication, and student–staff interactions (Bartolo & Tınmaz, 2024).

However, the relative strength of individual SERVQUAL dimensions may vary across institutions depending on institutional context, student expectations, and service delivery practices. The current findings therefore provide institution-specific evidence on the factors shaping satisfaction at CUoM.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings confirm that service quality significantly influences customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya. All SERVQUAL dimensions contributed positively to satisfaction, although their relative influence differed. Assurance emerged as the strongest determinant, followed by reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and tangibility.

The findings demonstrate that staff professionalism, trust, dependable service delivery, effective communication, and student-centred support are key factors shaping service experiences. The study provides empirical support for the SERVQUAL framework and Expectation Confirmation Theory while offering institution-specific insights for improving service quality and customer satisfaction in Tanzanian higher education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction at the Catholic University of Mbeya (CUoM) using the SERVQUAL dimensions of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The findings demonstrate that all five dimensions positively influence customer satisfaction, although their relative contribution differs.

Assurance emerged as the strongest determinant of satisfaction, highlighting the importance of staff competence, professionalism, trust, and confidence-building behaviour in higher education service delivery. Reliability was the second most influential dimension, although its comparatively lower rating indicates the need for improvement in service consistency, accuracy, and timeliness, particularly in administrative processes.

The study further established that responsiveness, empathy, and tangibility contribute to positive service experiences through effective communication, personalized support, and adequate physical and technological facilities. The regression results confirmed a strong relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, with SERVQUAL dimensions explaining a substantial proportion of satisfaction variation among respondents.

The study concludes that improving service quality across all SERVQUAL dimensions is essential for enhancing customer satisfaction at CUoM. Institutional efforts should therefore focus on sustaining professional service delivery while strengthening administrative reliability, communication systems, ICT support, and student-centred practices.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Strengthening Staff Professionalism and Service Competence

Since assurance emerged as the strongest determinant of customer satisfaction, CUoM should continue investing in staff development programmes focusing on professionalism, customer care, communication skills,

and student-centred service delivery to strengthen trust and confidence among service users.

Improving Reliability and Efficiency of Institutional Services

The university should enhance the accuracy, consistency, and timeliness of academic and administrative processes. Improving workflows, reducing service delays, and establishing clear service standards would strengthen reliability and improve user satisfaction.

Enhancing Communication and Student-Centred Support Systems

CUoM should strengthen communication channels, feedback mechanisms, and complaint-handling procedures to improve responsiveness. Greater attention should also be given to personalized support and understanding students' diverse needs.

Investing in ICT and Service Infrastructure

Although tangibility was positively perceived, continued improvement of ICT facilities, classrooms, and other learning resources is recommended to support effective service delivery and enhance students' overall experiences.

The university should also establish regular assessment mechanisms to monitor service quality and customer satisfaction, enabling continuous improvement based on evidence.

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