

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Foreign Students Perceptions on Selected Service Quality Dimensions, Customer Satisfaction and Future Behavioural Intentions within Visa Facilitation Services Centres in South Africa

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Abstract

Outsourcing the management of migration services has grown globally in recent years. With particular reference to South Africa, Department of Home Affairs(DHA) followed this trend d by outsourcing visa issuance to Visa Facilitation Services (VFS) in 2014 to enable more secure and efficient service delivery in the permitting arena. The purpose of the study was to address a need to understand better the effect of service quality dimensions that are critical in assessing customer satisfaction and future behavioural intention in VFS centres within South Africa. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the convergence of three theories. The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional quantitative research design and reports on the results from a survey of foreign students in a selected higher education institution (HEI) in South Africa. Descriptive statistics, correlations and regression analysis were used to evaluate relationships between constructs. In terms of predictive relationships, except for tangibility, the other four service quality dimensions showed significant relationships with customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction in turn showed significant relationships with the future behavioural intentions of the respondents towards VFS. In addition, the outcome of this study provides a useful tool for gaining insight into service quality dimensions that foreign nationals requiring visas consider as important. The study concludes by alluding to the limitations and implications for further research.

Keywords: service quality; theories; VFS; customer satisfaction; future behavioural intentions

Introduction

The provision of government services in an orderly, efficient and caring manner has been a matter of huge concern within the public domain and largely a contentious topical area within media and other institutions that observe such functions. In the case of foreign nationals who wish to reside in South Africa, the relevant documentation is a visa that allows such persons to visit, study, work or run a business in South Africa, amongst others. The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) is mandated to perform two core services being civic services and immigration services (Department of Home Affairs, 2021; Makgautsi, 2017). With respect to immigration services, DHA is responsible for processing the entry and exit documents to all persons travelling to or from or through South Africa via designated ports of entry or borders. Moreover, most government departments rely on the services DHA provide in order to offer their services to clients, for example the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) rely on DHA for the issuance of visas to foreign students who wish to study in South Africa. In the case of the current study where the focus is on foreign students, it may be argued that foreign students bring benefits to the University and the community in which the institution is located in by bringing financial benefits through purchases in the local economy, cultural diversity, research support and transformation (Lee *et al.*, 2018).

Outsourcing the management of migration services has grown globally in recent years (Sanchez-Barrueco, 2017). With particular reference to South Africa, DHA followed this trend by outsourcing visa issuance to Visa Facilitation Services (VFS) to enable more secure and efficient service delivery in the permitting arena (Department of Home

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Affairs, 2015). According to de Gruchy (2015), outsourcing to VFS is one of the attempts of DHA to deal with corruption and service delivery challenges. Furthermore, VFS centres establishment since 2014 can be seen as a radical approach by DHA to address a significant number of grievances paraded by the public regarding delays in the issuance of visas through the manual application process that existed hitherto. In his budget vote in May 2015, the Minister of Home Affairs, Honorable Malusi Gigaba, confirmed that the introduction of VFS improved amongst others, reduced adverse publicity and negative perceptions towards customer service, realised significant efficiencies and improved systematic flaws that were previously inherent in the migration system. The theoretical justification for the linkages between the study constructs, namely quality service, satisfaction and behavioural intentions is derived from Bagozzi's (1992) framework. The framework suggests that the primary service evaluation (service quality in this instance) leads to an emotional reaction (satisfaction in this instance), which in turn drives or determines behaviour (future behavioural intentions). The adoption of the framework in this study, implies that cognitively oriented service quality precedes satisfaction, which subsequently predict future behavioural intentions. It is thus not surprising that extant literature affirm the notion that service quality incidentally affect behavioural intentions through customer satisfaction (Kuo *et al.*, 2009; Tian-Cole *et al.*, 2002). It is thus pivotal for VFS management to comprehend the extent to which customer satisfaction will generate the future behavioural intention to revisit and share the pleasant referrals to others

The dearth of existing literature on the relationship between service quality dimensions, customer satisfaction and future behavioural intentions in the VFS services centres in South Africa has provoked the researcher to narrow the research gap by pursuing this empirical study. Against this background, the study examines the influence of service quality dimensions on university students' customer satisfaction and the influence of customer satisfaction on students' future behavioural intentions to re-visit the selected VFS centres. In addition, the study aims to provide a unique understanding of the effect of service quality dimensions that are critical in assessing customer satisfaction and future behavioural intention in VFS centres within South Africa. Hence, this study is an attempt to bridge the knowledge gap to this area of literature. Customer satisfaction can only be achieved by provision of quality service which in turn can be improved when all the quality service dimensions are taken into account (Sandhu *et al.*, 2013). This refers to the experience of the service (such as whether it was pleasant and efficient) and other aspects related to the service (such as how one sees the organization that is delivering the service).

Literature Review

The literature review is restricted to underlying theories of the study as well as the dimensions of service quality that may have the propensity to trigger customer satisfaction and future behavioural intentions of VFS customers.

The service quality concept is closely associated to customer satisfaction in terms of both concepts being grounded in the expectancy disconfirmation theory (EDT) (Grönroos 1982; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). Furthermore, the literature within the domain of services marketing suggests that EDT has been most widely used and supported among researchers to underpin service quality and customer satisfaction (Khalifa and Liu, 2002). EDT is founded on the premise that consumers arrive at satisfaction decisions through appraising actual products or service quality (Vavra 1997; Yuksel and Yuksel, 2001). Accordingly, EDT is composed of two variables, namely expectations or desires and experiences or perceived performance (Elkhani and Bakri, 2013). First, consumers would form expectations prior to purchasing a product or service (Spreng and Spreng, 2003). This expectation or desire is related to the pre-purchase time period the customer has about a specific performance or service quality. The theory further postulates that consumers form an initial expectation or desire prior to purchase (Eid, 2011). The study adopted the theory of reasoned (TRA) since the core of the theory relate to individual behavioural intention, (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Similarly, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), as an extension of TRA, is one of the most explored theories among social psychologist to foresee behavioural intentions (Ajzen, 2011). The essence of both theories is prediction of behavioural intentions (Ajzen, 1991).

Service quality gained more prominence after the seminal work of Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) with the development of the SERVQUAL model for measuring service quality (Veloso and Monte 2019). In their research on the executives and focus groups, Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) identified ten determinants in this quest of evaluating service quality which were later refined to five factors adopted in the study (Khattab, 2018). For this research, service quality is

conceptualised as the difference between consumers expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985), namely how well the organisation that provides the service meets the needs of customers and customers perceptions on what is delivered. The extant literature has established that service quality variable is best represented by multiple dimensions that have a direct positive relationship with customer satisfaction (Pakurár *et al.*, 2019; Watthanarat and Sripongpun, 2019).

Reliability is the first key service quality dimension identified for the VFS sector and refers to the ability to perform the services as promised accurately and on time (Chen, 2010). In the case of VFS, there is an online service provided as well as a visa issued. Therefore, the organisation should be dependable by providing the service without disruption to fulfil the reliability dimension of service quality (Iberahim *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, reliability of the institution, in VFS case, can be seen in the institution's ability to perform the service as promised (Turay *et al.*, 2017). The antecedents to reliability in this study include services provided right for the first time, services provided in the promised time and reassurance when the customer has problems. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Reliability has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction towards VFS services

The second service quality dimension identified for this study is assurance, which refers to employees' courtesy and knowledge and their ability to convey confidence and trust to customers (Pakurár *et al.*, 2019). Assurance for students in this instance, is having trust and confidence in the service they are seeking and the employees they will deal with as they will be handing information that can assist them in obtaining a visa or renewing their visa that will secure their continued stay in the country (Turay *et al.*, 2017). As a dimension of service quality, assurance ensures that customers feel secure with systems and satisfied with the services at the same time (Sureshchandar *et al.*, 2002). Based on these notions, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2 Assurance has a positive relationship with customer satisfaction towards VFS services

The third service quality dimension identified for this study is tangibility, which refers to all things that have a physical existence or appearance, which can be seen and touched (Othman *et al.*, 2019). Other benefits associated with tangibles are appearances, such as the counters in the facility and opening hours (Pakurár *et al.* 2019). The look and functionality of its physical facilities and infrastructure is also descriptive of tangibility (Yusup, 2019). As a dimension of service quality, it is expected that benefits of tangibility will influence customer satisfaction. The researcher, therefore, hypothesises the following:

H3: Tangibility has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction towards VFS services

The fourth service quality dimension identified for this study is empathy, which refers to an organisation understanding its customers' issues and putting their needs first (Amelia, 2018). According to Akinyi (2018), it means the employees' being good at understanding their customers' challenges and responding to their needs and letting them feel valued. Therefore, staff giving clients individual attention is also an aspect of empathy and so is understanding customers, which also involves having operating hours that are convenient (Amelia, 2018). Empathy is considered an antecedent for customer satisfaction, as the VFS services are customer-centric and require that applicants feel that their needs are understood and responded to. Based on the preceding discussion, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H4: Empathy has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction towards VFS services

The fifth and final service quality dimension identified for this study is responsiveness, which refers to a situation when a supplier promptly responds to a customer's request (Pham and Ahammad, 2017). The importance to foreign students who require a visa to continue their studies and the information and assistance required for this purpose renders responsiveness as an important dimension of service quality for this study. It involves the eagerness and readiness to help customers and provide prompt service, in other words, attentiveness and promptness when engaging customer needs, enquiries, complaints and problems (Bayyurt, 2019). In the case of VFS centres, this involves the interests of students at the heart of the staff, in other words, involving the willingness of staff to respond to customer requests and give a prompt service (Boadi *et al.*, 2019). Other benefits associated with responsiveness include staff being able to identify problems, responding to clients timeously and providing help and support to clients

(Nonthapota and Nasoontorna, 2020), which all have a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction. Consequently, the following hypothesis is posited:

H5: Responsiveness has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction towards VFS services

Customer satisfaction has been a subject of great interest in marketing and academia (Pizam and Ellis, 1999) and has derived much importance from its function as a consumer behaviour predictor (Hazra, 2013). This notion is reinforced by Ghandi and Kang's (2011) view that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction. Traditionally, customer satisfaction has been conceptualised in two different ways, namely transaction-specific satisfaction and cumulative satisfaction (Fornell, 1992; Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Boulding *et al.*, 1993). The transaction-specific notion views satisfaction from the customer's experience and assessment of a particular transaction, episode or service encounter (Lervik-Olsen and Johnson, 1991). This can assist in understanding what are the factors at play in such encounters, such as when applying for a visa at VFS. Cumulative satisfaction, on the other hand, refers to overall satisfaction over a number of encounters or purchases with service providers over a certain period (Shankar *et al.*, 2000), in other words, it is based on transactions and occurrences that happen at different times. This relates to the results of quality assessments of several past interactions between customer and supplier (Agbor, 2011), which is more likely to lead to positive word-of-mouth or repeat purchases (Gustaffson *et al.*, 2005).

Customer satisfaction has been identified as evidence of customer-supplier relationship quality (Moliner *et al.*, 2007) and a key predictor of behavioural intentions (Bag *et al.*, 2021). Various researchers have emphasised the reliance on future behavioural intentions in predicting consumers' actual behaviour (Ali and Amin, 2014). It is argued that a decision to return to an organisation to continue purchases is due to customer satisfaction (Feick and Lee, 2001; Huddleston *et al.*, 2009). To this end, behavioural intention is defined as an individual's planned future behaviour (Fi and Cai, 2012) and can be an immediate determinant and predictor of behaviour (Li and Cai, 2011). Positive word-of-mouth and remaining loyal are some of the favourable intentions, while leaving the service provider and negative word-of-mouth refers to unfavourable intentions (Abu-Bakr *et al.*, 2016, Bag *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, the following hypothesis is posited:

H6: Customer satisfaction has a significant positive relationship with future behavioural intentions towards VFS services.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The study proposes a conceptual framework where the five service quality dimensions were treated as predictors (independent variables) to customer satisfaction (intervening variable), and future behavioural intentions (dependent variable). Figure 1 illustrate the framework as well as its related hypotheses.

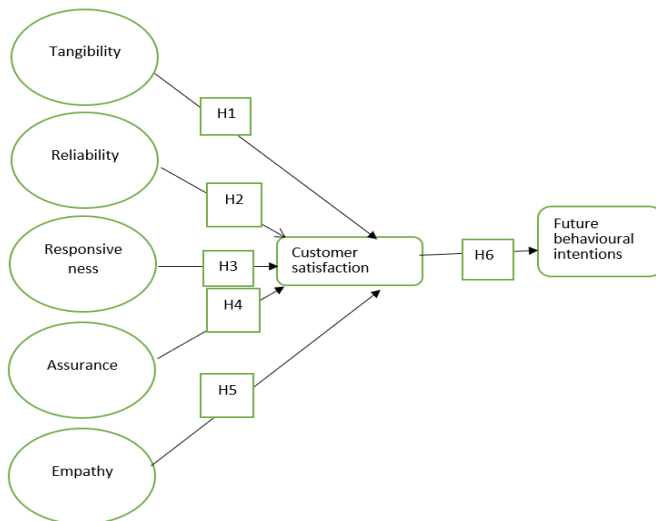


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design. The researcher selected a quantitative research approach as it is most appropriate and applicable in cases where there are clearly framed hypotheses (Alamro and Rowley, 2011). The target population was restricted to registered foreign students consisting of individuals from both genders at the Vaal University of Technology. The selection of this HEI in South Africa was viewed as the most effective way to attend to and address the research objectives due to time and resource limitations. A sample is defined by Alvi (2016) as a smaller group of people selected from the population for investigation. The researcher deemed a sample size of 350 adequate in this study due to time constraints and budgetary considerations. Furthermore, Malhotra (2010) recommends that the size of the study sample should be between 200 and 400 when conducting multivariate statistics such as regression analysis. A non-probability convenience sampling procedure was adopted in the study as it allows the researcher to contact many respondents in a very short period of time (Hair *et al.*, 2010). A structured self-administered questionnaire was used to survey respondents. A pilot study was undertaken and the measuring instrument was further modified to fit the study's context. The scale items for the service quality dimensions were adapted from Brown (2012) which reported reliability ranging from 0.75 to 0.93. The items that made up the scales for customer satisfaction were adapted from Kiyani *et al.* (2012) with a reported reliability of 0.87.

Finally, the instrument for the future behavioural intentions scale was adapted from Tan and Bigman (2014) with a reported reliability of 0.93. The questionnaire also included information relating to the demographic profile of the respondents such as gender and age. A two-stage data collection procedure was adopted. In the first stage, a pilot test was undertaken with 40 participants possessing similar characteristics to that of the target population. During this process, minor changes were made to the questionnaire. A total of 249 usable questionnaires (out of 350 initially administered questionnaires) were used for final analysis. The data collection took place from January 2021 to May 2021 and all the ethical protocols involved were upheld accordingly. Descriptive statistics were first used to establish a demographic profile of the respondents to express the means and standard deviations. Thereafter, the data were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis to investigate the factor structure of the SERVQUAL instrument in the South African setting. The data was then further subjected to a correlation analysis to examine the level of association between the constructs and, lastly, regression analysis was undertaken to examine the predictive relationship of the study constructs.

Results

The respondent profile analysis shows that there were more male participants (54.6%; n=136) than female participants (45.4%; n=113). Most of the participants (52.6%; n=131) indicated that they were in the age group of less than 30 years of age, followed by participants who fell in the age group of between 30 and 39 years (31.7%; n=79), followed by participants who fell in the age group of between 40 and 49 years (10%; n=25), followed by participants who fell in the age group of between 50 and 59 years (4%; n=10), and, finally, participants who were 60 years and above (1.6% ;n=4).

The confirmatory factor analysis procedure was specifically performed for the service quality dimensions in the questionnaire to confirm the factor structure of the SERVQUAL measuring instrument this scale, which was used to collect data. All variables were entered as exogenous variables in the proposed model using LISREL software. The results are shared in Table 1.

Table 1 : CFI indices

CFI Indices	Acceptable levels	Current study fit results	Decision
Chi-Square Value: χ^2/df	<3	2.891	Acceptable
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	> 0.900	0.960	Acceptable
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	> 0.900	0.960	Acceptable
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	> 0.900	0.940	Acceptable
Relative Fit Index (RFI)	> 0.900	0.930	Acceptable

Random Measure of Standard Error Approximation (RMSEA)	< 0.080	0.076	Acceptable
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The Spearman’s correlation coefficient (r) was calculated to affirm the pattern of association between the study constructs. The results are shown in Table 2

Table 2: Correlation analysis and descriptive statistics

CONSTRUCTS	TAN	REL	RESP	ASS	EMP	SAT	FBI
TAN	1	.555**	.349**	.431**	.434**	.440**	.455**
REL	.555**	1	.597**	.565**	.548**	.606**	.579**
RESP	.349**	.597**	1	.645**	.607**	.606**	.557**
ASS	.431**	.565**	.645**	1	.695**	.634**	.641**
EMP	.434**	.548**	.607**	.695**	1	.707**	.600**
SAT	.440**	.606**	.606**	.634**	.707**	1	.699**
FBI	.455**	.579**	.557**	.641**	.600**	.699**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Key: TAN=tangibility; REL=reliability; RESP=responsiveness; ASS=assurance; EMP=empathy; SAT=customer satisfaction; FBI=future behavioural intention.

Table 3: Reliability and validity analysis

Research construct		Descriptive statistics		Cronbach’s test	
		Mean	SD	Item-to-total-correlations	α Value
Tangibility (TAN)	TAN ₁	4.77	1.24	.627	.832
	TAN ₂			.647	
	TAN ₃			.611	
	TAN ₄			.715	
	TAN ₅			.568	
Reliability (REL)	REL ₁	4.50	1.16	.556	.815
	REL ₂			.540	
	REL ₃			.608	
	REL ₄			.665	
	REL ₅			.567	
	REL ₆			.532	
Responsiveness (RES)	RES ₁	4.67	1.28	.627	.801
	RES ₂			.646	
	RES ₃			.633	
	RES ₄			.560	
Assurance (ASS)	ASS ₁	4.62	1.13	.461	.784
	ASS ₂			.609	
	ASS ₃			.582	
	ASS ₄			.628	
	ASS ₅			.539	
Empathy (EMP)	EMP ₁	4.55	1.28	.690	.817
	EMP ₂			.479	
	EMP ₃			.689	
	EMP ₄			.690	
	EMP ₅			.691	
Customer satisfaction (SAT)	SAT ₁	3.7711	1.22	.797	.915
	SAT ₂			.816	
	SAT ₃			.758	
	SAT ₄			.731	
	SAT ₅			.811	

Future behavioural intention (FBI)	FBI ₁	4.52	1.39	.764	.938
	FBI ₂			.877	
	FBI ₃			.850	
	FBI ₄			.849	
	FBI ₅			.830	

The reliability for the various scales was analysed for internal consistency using the Cronbach alpha values. Cronbach alpha values shown in Table 3 authenticate that each construct accomplished the minimum cut-off value of 0.70, as recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Furthermore, a cut-off points of 0.50 on the item-to-total correlations was maintained. The pilot test facilitated the improvement of content validity since it was able to ascertain respondent's level of understanding. Construct validity was ascertained through the computation of Cronbach alpha values Convergent validity was assessed through the computation of correlations among the various constructs. The results of the correlation analysis provided support for convergence. Predictive validity was established through multiple regression analysis for both models.

To eliminate the likelihood of multi-collinearity, the tolerance value (Tol) (>0.1) and the variance inflation factor (VIF) (<10) were inspected for each study construct. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, all the independent variables had tolerance value of >0.10 and VIF values of <10, thus dismissing any multicollinearity risk (Malhotra, 2010). Furthermore, inter-factor correlations, as reported in Table 2, were below 0.80 and hence, do not signify collinearity problems (Pallant 2010). Regression analysis was then performed and subsequently two regression models were run. In regression Model 1, SAT was entered as the dependent variable while the five predictors (TAN, REL, RES, ASS and EMP) were entered as independent variables. In Model 2, FBI was entered as the dependent variable while SAT was entered as an independent variable. The results for the regression models are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Regression model 1: predictors towards customer satisfaction

Dependent variable: SAT Independent variables	Standardised Beta	T	Sig	Collinearity statistics	
				Tol.	VIF
TAN(H1)	.050	0.986	.325	.658	1.519
REL(H2)	.202	3.425	.001**	.482	2.073
RES(H3)	.143	2.418	.016*	.477	2.096
ASS(H4)	.129	2.042	.042	.419	2.385
EMP(H5)	.39	6.546	.000**	.451	2.216

R = 0.771 R² = 0.594 Adjusted R² = 0.586 F change 71.086 **sig at <0. 000.Tol. = tolerance value, VIF= variance inflation
Key: TAN=tangibility; REL=reliability; RESP=responsiveness; ASS=assurance; EMP=empathy.

The R² value (0.586) points that approximately 59% of the variance in customer satisfaction was accounted for by students' perception of the service quality dimensions towards VFS.

Table 5: Regression model 2: Predictor towards future behavioural intention.

Dependent variable: FBI	Standardised Beta	T	Sig	Collinearity statistics	
				Tol.	VIF
SAT (H6)	.699	15.368	.000	1.00	1.000

R = 0.699 R² = 0.489 Adjusted R² = 0.487 F change 236.174 **sig at <0. 000.Tol. = tolerance value; VIF= variance inflation.

The R² value (0.489) points that approximately 49% of the variance in future behavioural intention was accounted for by students' perception of customer satisfaction towards VFS.

Discussion of Results

As indicated in Table 3, all the mean scores returned for all the constructs range (>4-<7), confirmed the participants perceptions towards the significance of these variables within the retail outlet. The standard deviations range (<2) also affirm that the mean values precisely reflect the majority of the average participants perceptions. The

forementioned results shown in Table 1, thus confirm the existence of five factors as originally conceptualised i.e the initial factor structure of the SERVQUAL measuring instrument for the study.

The results of the correlation analysis showed a significant moderate positive association between TAN and SAT ($r=0.382$; $p<0.05$). This result implies that an increase in tangibility among students in VFS centre may slightly improve their SAT. Furthermore, REL showed a notable positive association towards SAT ($r=0.594$; $p<0.05$). This indicates that an increase in REL may result in a strong positive change in SAT. There was a notable positive association between RESP and SAT ($r=0.579$; $p<0.05$). These results suggest that an increase in RESP may trigger an improvement in SAT. There was a significant strong positive association between ASS and SAT ($r=0.584$; $p<0.05$). This indicates that students ASS of VFS services is positively associated with SAT. The results of the correlation analysis further revealed a notable positive association between EMP and SAT ($r=0.625$; $p<0.05$). This result implies that an increase in students' EMP may stimulate an improvement in their SAT. Further analysis of the correlation matrix indicates a notable positive association between SAT and FBI ($r=0.705$; $p<0.05$). This indicates that as SAT becomes stronger among consumers, they will experience a higher FBI

From model 1, the TAN dimension does not seem to be a significant predictor of CS, despite the correlation results in Table 2 ($r=0.382$ at $p<0.01$) indicate a modest association between the constructs. The results in Table 3 ($\beta=-0.050$; $t=-0.986$; $p=0.325$) indicate that tangibility has a positive but insignificant effect on customers' satisfaction. *H1: TAN has a significant positive relationship with students' customer satisfaction towards VFS services* is, therefore, rejected. Tangibility is, therefore, an insignificant predictor of customer satisfaction in this study on VFS services. This finding is in contradiction to Boadi *et al.* (2019) and Akram *et al.* (2020) studies, which concluded that tangibility indeed predicts customer satisfaction. As a result, hypothesis one is rejected. The REL dimension seems to be a significant predictor of SAT ($\beta=0.202$; $t=3.425$; $p=0.000$). These results indicate that $p<0.05$, providing evidence that reliability has a significant influence on customer satisfaction. *H2: REL has a significant positive relationship with consumer satisfaction to VFS services* is, therefore, accepted. This finding agrees with results emanating from Turay *et al.* (2017) studies, which indicate that reliability was considered critical on the basis of the interest VFS employees had in solving international students' problems. Customers need to be assured of the suppliers' reliability in delivering the service (Ogiemwonyi *et al.*, 2020), therefore, they require a service that they can trust and rely on (Girma, 2016).

The RESP dimension seems also to be a significant predictor of SAT ($\beta=0.143$; $t=2.418$; $p=0.005$). These results indicate that $p<0.05$, confirming that RESP does influence students' SAT towards VFS services. Therefore, *H3: RESP has a significant positive relationship with SAT towards VFS services*, is accepted. This finding confirms the results of Ahmed *et al.* (2020) as well as Akram *et al.* (2020), who support the assertion that responsiveness contributes significantly in a positive way to customer satisfaction.

Further, model 1 indicates that ASS dimension is a significant predictor of SAT ($\beta=-0.129$; $t=2.042$; $p=0.042$). These results indicate that $p<0.05$, confirming that ASS indeed influence customer satisfaction towards VFS services. Hypothesis *H4: ASS has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction towards VFS services*, is, therefore accepted. This is not surprising as the study by Zhou (2019) also found similar results in that the time taken to apply for a visa and the outcome could be guaranteed. Model 1 indicates that the EMP dimension is a significant predictor of SAT ($\beta=-0.396$; $t=7.074$; $p=0.000$). These results indicate that $p<0.05$, confirming that SAT positively influences students' FBI attitude towards VFS services. *H5: EMP has a significant positive relationship with students' FBI towards VFS services* is, therefore, accepted. Empathy is, therefore, considered an antecedent for customer satisfaction, as the VFS services are customer-centric and require that applicants feel that their needs are understood and responded to. These results corroborated both Akinyi (2018) and Watthanarat and Sripongpun (2019) findings that empathy significantly predict service quality construct. From model 2, SAT emerged a strong predictor of FBI ($\beta=0.699$; $t=15.368$; $p=0.000$). These results indicate that $p<0.05$, confirming that SAT positively influences students' FBI attitude towards VFS services. *H6: SAT has a significant positive relationship with students' FBI towards VFS services* is, therefore, accepted. The results are congruent with findings from Abid and Abbasi (2014), where positive and significant outcomes were revealed on the impact of SAT on FBI. Over the decades, customer satisfaction has gained attention and been used as a predictor of consumer behaviour (Hazra, 2013).

One way for an organisation to satisfy its client base and ensure customer satisfaction, is to develop a customer-focused service quality strategy called customer relationship management (CRM). An increasing number of organisations have realised the importance of becoming more customer-centric and have invested time and resources in a CRM system. This would allow for more information that could assist in improving customer satisfaction. Interview questionnaires or satisfaction surveys could also be considered as a way of contributing to strategies for enhancing customer satisfaction. Another recommendation could be for the staff at VFS to be offered more training in the relevant skills required for effective interaction with clients as well as in improving expertise in the product/service being offered. A further recommendation is the upgrading of software to increase the ease of use of the online system and mobile application systems. Allowance for uploading documents and conducting more digital processes to assist with the gathering of information to assist with the timeous receipt and investigation of applications should be explored. Finally, universities should seek to develop a relationship with VFS that improves relations with student clients by emphasising the areas of importance to students.

Management should consistently monitor these recommendations to ensure that the provision of services improve customer satisfaction. The most notable limitation is that the study population was restricted to students within a selected HEI in South Africa; thus, the possibility to generalise the findings were limited. It will therefore not be possible to assume that the findings of this study are reflective of all students who use VFS services in South Africa. In order to circumvent this, a more extensive sample, which includes students from the other 28 HEIs in South Africa, could be considered in future research. Another possibility could be to include other visa holders within different multinational organisations. The reliance of data collected from self-administered questionnaires was another limitation. Using self-reported questionnaires has a shortcoming, as responses could be irresponsible in that there are no controls on how to respond, in other words, it becomes almost impossible to control respondent behaviour. Whilst the study considered student demographics, other factors such as household income and country of origin were not considered. These additional items could assist in dealing with the concerns raised. The relevance and importance of visas within critical economic sectors in South Africa suggests that this study could be expanded and contribute to research on immigration matters.

Conclusion

It is in the interest of South African government, investors, businesses, academia and ordinary travellers to gain knowledge and understanding on the immigration processes in South Africa. Therefore, the relevance and importance of the subject matter of this study provides a positive contribution to existing knowledge and literature within the administrative processes of VFS immigration decision-making. The findings of this study also act as a baseline to assist with formulation of effective strategies in government and businesses that want to identify service quality dimensions that contribute to customer satisfaction. The tourism industry as well could benefit from the knowledge gained in the study in identifying trends that could assist in marketing South Africa as a preferred destination.

This study has shown that there are a number of critical issues that influence the respondents' perceptions of service quality dimensions towards customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions within VFS centres. The results provide a basis for further research and identification of areas that must be built on and maintained as important aspects regarding the study constructs. In addition, the findings of the study indicate that VFS, as the institution that issues visas, should make continuous improvements to build on the perceptions of its clients. Despite the limitations identified, VFS remains a critical sector in the South African public discourse. In addition, this study could be used by business and marketing students as well as practitioners for future research on immigration services and for policy development in immigration. Finally, this study would provide a framework for further studies in this very important area and act as a guide for those who are passionate about the subject.

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