

Exploratory insights into service quality and tourist perceptions in Fiji's tourism sector

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The service sector has become an integral component of the economy in both developed and developing nations. The role of service in tourism and hospitality is particularly profound. This paper reports on service quality across the attraction, accommodation, and transportation industries in Fiji, making it the first of its kind to examine this topic comprehensively in the country. With a 40 percent gross domestic product (GDP) contribution, tourism is Fiji's major foreign exchange earner and leading economic sector. We collected data from visitors and industry representatives using in-depth interviews and participant as well as non-participant observations. Unlike attractions, critical service quality gaps were identified in the accommodation and transport components. Tourists specifically suggested improvements in areas such as overall hygiene, room functionality, and staff quality, among others. Research findings make substantial theoretical and practical contributions. Implications are discussed, and avenues for future research are suggested.

Keywords: *destination competitiveness, human capital development, hygiene and cleanliness, memorable experience, qualitative research, seamless service, service culture, Fiji islands*

1 INTRODUCTION

The service sector constitutes a significant share of the global economy and substantially shapes consumers' intentions, behavior, and wellbeing (Ostrom et al., 2021). In an increasingly competitive global market, tourism destinations' success depends on the ability to deliver a high-quality and seamless experience across the various

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components of the sector (Agyeiwaah et al., 2016; Crouch, 2011). Thus, providing a consistent and memorable tourist experience becomes a source of competitive advantage (Ma'ruf, 2021; P.J. et al., 2023) as it can increase a destination's market share (Cronjé and du Plessis, 2020). In the tourism and hospitality sector, service quality includes critical elements such as: the quality of services delivered by customer-facing employees; the promptness in resolving complaints; the quality and cleanliness of accommodation; the appeal of tourist attractions; and the efficiency of built infrastructure and transportation services (Rahmiati et al., 2020; Tsang and Ap, 2007). As service quality involves a broad range of factors, industry players need to take extra care to coordinate service delivery and ensure customer satisfaction. Research shows a strong and positive correlation between service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty (Fida et al., 2020; Priporas et al., 2017).

This study was conducted in Fiji, an archipelago comprising 333 islands – gateway to the South Pacific (Kundra et al., 2022; Prentice et al., 2023) and a leading tourist destination in the region (Wondirad, 2023). Pre-pandemic, tourism contributed to nearly 40 percent of the country's GDP (Slack, 2019; Nair and Pratt, 2024). Currently, tourism is driving Fijian economic performance, surpassing pre-pandemic visitor arrivals by 4 percent (Tourism Fiji, 2024).

The country's tourism slogan – 'Fiji, where happiness comes naturally' – relies on three critical pillars: its people, the place, and the experience. Given there are numerous other destinations in the region that provide comparable tourism attractions and experiences (Pratt, 2013), the country needs to identify its competitive edge and differentiate itself. Service quality is one of the crucial areas in which Fiji can excel and further enhance its regional and global tourism competitiveness.

Research participants, particularly tourists from Asia and Europe, unanimously underline the need to improve service quality in the country's accommodation, transportation, and catering establishments if Fiji is to strengthen its regional and international competitiveness. There is also an immediate need to train and upskill human capital to provide world-class service because human capital is the lifeblood of the sector (Elsharnouby and Elbanna, 2021). As tourism and hospitality combined form an integrated sector (Agyeiwaah et al., 2016; Song et al., 2011), various actors are involved in producing and delivering relevant goods and services (Davidson, 2003; UNWTO and Griffith University, 2017). Therefore, for destinations such as Fiji, where tourism is a major economic pillar (Nair and Pratt, 2024), assessing and monitoring service quality is extremely important to identify and tackle gaps in tourists' expectations and perceptions. To this end, the current study investigates tourists' perceptions of service quality within the attraction, accommodation, catering, and transportation services in Fiji.

Although the tourist satisfaction literature has matured and been widely discussed over the years, there are only a few studies in the context of Fiji. While Lück, (2011) used importance-performance analysis to examine the satisfaction of backpackers at Robinson Crusoe Island Resort, Mafi et al., (2020) examined ecotourism satisfaction attributes in the case of a specific ecolodge. Despite these studies' significant theoretical and managerial implications for consumer satisfaction, they are narrow in scope and focus on a particular case study. Moreover, as an isolated island nation in the center of the South Pacific, Fiji has a distinctive service culture (including *Fiji time* and *Bula spirit*) that merits further research. 'Fiji time' is the belief that there is no need to hurry since everything will happen when it does, and life should be enjoyed in the present. There is no reason to worry because there is always tomorrow, and life is full of beauty, love, and

happiness (Eräsaari, 2018). *Bula* (literally, 'life') is a popular Fijian term, and 'when used as a greeting, it implies wishes for good health' (Phillips et al., 2021: 2).

Therefore, the current study advances our understanding of how Fiji's service culture is perceived by global consumers, and will inform tourism and hospitality stakeholders in Fiji on how to reconcile international tourist expectations with the local service culture. This research identifies areas for improvement so that the country can look after its vital tourism and hospitality sector and remain competitive in the region.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

While the service sector accounts for two-thirds of GDP in developed economies, in developing countries its importance has been steadily increasing (Narayan et al., 2009; UNCTAD, 2018). Although there is a common understanding regarding the importance of 'service quality' in boosting competitive performance (Davidson, 2003; Latif et al., 2020), thus far there is no common definition of the term, largely due to the intangible nature of the concept (Mendes, 2016). According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2022b), a service is the 'occupation or function of serving', the 'act of serving', and the 'work performed by one that serves', while 'quality' refers to a 'degree of excellence and superiority' (2022a). Parasuraman et al., (1988) describe service quality as a concept that implies excelling in service and product delivery. Hence, service quality is an antecedent of satisfaction, essentially stemming from the comparison between expectations and perceptions (Marković et al., 2013).

Service quality is a multi-dimensional construct co-created during a service, or product delivery and consumption, through interactions between customers and providers (Mendes, 2016; Sørensen et al., 2020). Subsequently, active customer engagement is extremely important for improving service quality and customer experience (Campos et al., 2018; Dong et al., 2015). This is linked to value-based principles, which are pertinent in the tourism and hospitality sector (Buswell et al., 2016; Sørensen et al., 2020). As per the customer-oriented philosophy, customers play a central role in overall service production and operational procedures, and their engagement is paramount to maintaining consistency and continually improving service delivery (Kim and So, 2022; Menguc et al., 2020), managing customers' experience (Arici et al., 2022; Rahimian et al., 2021), ensuring satisfaction (Çetin et al., 2022; Kandampully et al., 2018), and triggering the intention to return (Ebrahimipour and Haghkhah, 2010; Khan and Hashim, 2020; Tapar et al., 2017). Therefore, service quality is a process whereby providers strive to deliver services and products in a professional, standardized, and consistent manner to meet dynamic customer desires, or even to evoke delight (Gong and Yi, 2018).

For many developing countries, the service sector, where tourism constitutes a larger share, is one of the leading sources of foreign exchange (Park and Shin, 2013). Therefore, service quality in tourism is regarded as a crucial impetus for a competitive tourism sector (Park and Jeong, 2019). Given that the current competitive global tourism market is driven by constantly changing tourist demand and consumption patterns, excelling in service quality provides a path forward (Ardani et al., 2019).

Service quality consists of two principal dimensions – technical and functional quality (Gronroos, 1983) – and five components – reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988). While 'technical quality' refers to the quantifiable aspects of a service or product, 'functional quality' concerns how the service is delivered (Zaibaf et al., 2013). Therefore, to boost consumers' experience and

perceived satisfaction, it is extremely important to ensure that both the technical and functional aspects of the tourism and hospitality service are met (Ali et al., 2017).

However, it is also worth noting that tourists' satisfaction and evaluation of service quality can be influenced by their cultural background, prior travel experience, and economic status, requiring the hospitality and tourism sector to personalize service even further in line with customer profiles (Tsang and Ap, 2007). Service quality is also correlated with several other important performance indicators, such as customer retention and loyalty, price elasticity, positive word-of-mouth, improved market share, and return on investment (Narayan et al., 2009; Parasuraman et al., 1985).

To assist in the process of ensuring service quality, the integration and use of technology in the hospitality and tourism sector becomes crucial (Law et al., 2014; Leung, 2019). Fundamentally, integrating technology into hospitality and tourism helps the sector improve operational practices, support sustainability practices, and transform marketing efforts (Ezzaouia and Bulchand-Gidumal, 2023; Jayaraman and Makun, 2020). In sum, tourism and hospitality is a service-intensive sector that relies heavily on the consistent delivery of excellence in service (Chen et al., 2020; Kim and So, 2022; Leung, 2019). Therefore, ensuring premium-quality products and services is regarded as a necessary and winning strategy for businesses (Davidson, 2003; Lai, et al., 2018; Wu and Ko, 2013).

3 METHODOLOGY

We employed a qualitative research approach with an exploratory design, and collected data from hospitality and tourism industry representatives, transport providers, government officials responsible for hospitality and tourism, and international and domestic tourists. Similar to previous research (Waligo et al., 2013; Roxas et al., 2020), we consider tourists as key stakeholders in a destination because they have a vested interest in the quality of the services provided as it directly impacts their tourism experience. Although local residents are also important tourism stakeholders, we did not include them as such because (unless they are domestic tourists) they do not experience, deliver, or have responsibility for hospitality and tourism service quality.

3.1 Data collection

A combination of key informant interviews and participant observation was used for primary data collection, and the interviews are discussed in more detail below. While collecting data from domestic and international tourists, the first and third authors stayed in several accommodation offerings and used the same transport services as the tourists to experience the same services (Bowen, 2002). The researchers also joined group tours both at sea (island hopping and day cruises) and on land (village tours and overnight hiking), during which field notes were made. Further, guest comments on Tripadvisor relating to service quality for different accommodation places and activity providers were examined. These participant observations and reviews were then used to enhance trustworthiness by triangulating the data.

3.2 Interview guide

The interview guide covered two main sections: (1) an introductory section covering the background of participants, including standard demographics such as gender, age,

educational background, and nationality; (2) a section focused on service (product) quality and tourist perceptions (experience) of the accommodation, attractions, and transportation. Participants were advised that their participation in the research was entirely voluntary, allowing them to discontinue involvement if they so desired, without needing any justification and without adverse consequences. Participants were also informed that their contributions and any personally identifiable data would be regarded as confidential and accessible only by the researchers.

3.3 Sample and sampling

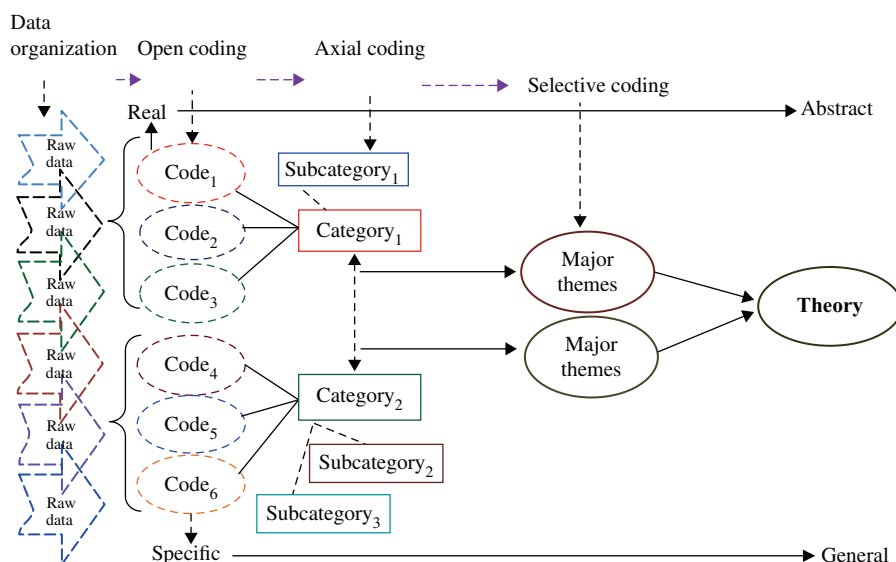
Participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball techniques due to the qualitative nature of the research objectives. That is, participants were approached because of their suitability to provide relevant data to help achieve the research aims (Table 1). Moreover, the researchers solicited similar contacts from participants who could potentially supply additional information (snowballing). Data collection took place between August 2022 and April 2023 in six major tourist destinations in Fiji – Denarau, Nadi and its surroundings, the Mamanuca Islands, the Yasawa Islands, the Coral Coast, and Suva City and its surroundings. These sites were selected according to current tourist arrival distribution as data from the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Tourism (2020) showed that these destinations attract almost 90 percent of tourist arrivals in the country.

3.4 Data analysis

This study adopted a content analysis technique to analyze data and address its objectives. Before conducting the interviews, the researchers reached out to potential key informants, briefed them about the objectives of the study, and sought their consent. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes, and the audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim and prepared for subsequent analysis with observation notes and guests' comments. The raw data was first coded at the basic level using open coding, and then concepts with conceptual proximity were categorized under sub-themes using axial coding (Grossoehme, 2014). Finally, the highest-level themes with abstract meanings were formulated through selective coding, where sub-themes with similar implications were grouped together, as in Figure 1

Table 1 Demographic profiles of key informants (N = 50)

<i>Gender</i>		<i>Highest Level of Education</i>	
Female	22	Secondary school	7
Male	28	Tertiary education	43
<i>Age (Years)</i>		<i>Home Country (International Tourists)</i>	
18–30	10	Australia	5
31–40	18	New Zealand	3
41–50	16	USA	3
51+	6	Europe	3
<i>Cohort</i>		China	2
Industry and government	15	Korea	2
International tourists	22	Other	4
Domestic tourists	13		



Source: Wondirad et al. (2021).

Figure 1 Stages of inductive analysis

(Attride-Stirling, 2001; Christou, 2022; Filep et al., 2021; Wondirad, 2023). MS Excel and QDA Miner software helped with data organization and analysis.

4 FINDINGS

To understand and interpret the findings, we summarized them into themes categorized by hospitality and tourism service components: attractions and the natural environment; accommodation and catering services; human resources and service delivery; transportation and mobility; and destination marketing and promotion. All these themes are mediated by balancing service culture and tourist needs.

4.1 Attractions and the natural environment

Fiji officially reopened its international borders on 1 December 2021 after nearly two years, since when the tourism sector has seen a successful recovery, as indicated by data from the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, (2023). Our research findings indicate that Fiji's tourist attractions currently predominantly revolve around nature-based experiences, boasting excellent conditions. Furthermore, tourists expressed satisfaction with the quality of service received during visits to these natural attractions. This is corroborated by various observations made by the researchers as well as by feedback from tourists during interviews. The following quote demonstrates tourists' general perceptions of Fiji's natural attractions:

As far as my experience is concerned, the quality of services delivered in terms of price, transport facilitation, and personal care while visiting tourist attractions in Fiji is satisfying.

I believe this might be due to the recent opening of Fiji to international tourism after almost two years of lockdowns. (Tourist, New Zealander)

Nevertheless, considering Fiji's abundant resource potential, the tourism sector aims to expand its offerings by providing tourists with a diverse array of product packages while ensuring continued high service standards. This perspective is echoed by a local government official who emphasized the importance of diversifying products and establishing a robust value chain to drive economic growth across the board. The following is what he stated in this regard, which echoes the opinion of others:

As our international visitor surveys demonstrate, tourist movements are constrained to certain destinations in the country. For instance, the 2019 international visitor survey shows that five destinations (Denarau, Coral Coast, Suva, Nadi, and the Mamanuca and Yasawa Islands) account for nearly 90% of tourist arrivals in Fiji, despite the country has a lot more to offer. I hope we will see some concrete actions taken in this direction by the new coalition government to develop infrastructure and new tourism routes that help diversify the country's tourism product base to further boost the contributions of the sector.

4.2 Accommodation and catering services

While the majority of participants expressed positive perceptions of Fiji's service quality regarding attractions, concerns surfaced about the overall hygiene, cleanliness, and functionality of the accommodation sector. According to one respondent:

My hotel room had bed bugs and was not very clean. My colleague's hotel room door was not functional. The hotel should pay more attention to cleanliness. Although the cleaning staff cleans the rooms every day, they should regularly change mattresses, chair cushions, bathroom tiles, etc. to keep the rooms nice and tidy. Clean does not necessarily mean luxurious or expensive. Therefore, I think it is all about the hotel investing in its space, service quality, and ultimately the customer experience. (Tourist, Estonian)

Similarly, a Korean tourist shared her experience and frustration regarding accommodation quality, cleanliness, and hygiene as follows:

In the case of Fiji's tourism and hospitality sector, I am always very happy with its nature and attractions. However, to me, the level of service quality is below standard. Especially when it comes to accommodation, except for some high-end international chain resorts located on the Coral Coast and Denarau Island, there is a lot to improve in terms of their room cleanliness, and overall hygiene. Therefore, based on my assessment, the country's tourism sector problem lies in the absence of well-trained and qualified staff and in the overall service culture and attitude. This is particularly significant for Asian tourists who are always curious about details and who have other alternative destinations with less cost, time, and energy.

The above claims were also validated by some resort managers, business owners, and employees at the supervisory level. The following statement from a local resort manager, who has been in the industry since 1999, substantiates the challenge:

As a hospitality establishment, our value lies in treating our guests as the most important people in our enterprise. We do understand that guests are paramount, and they are the

reason for our existence. Our principle is, therefore, to make sure that every customer who comes to our resort is regarded as a very important person, is well treated, and is looked after so that he/she leaves as a satisfied customer with a positive image. However, as guests come with high expectations, we frequently receive complaints concerning accommodation and food, especially from European, US, and Asian tourists. These are high-end markets that are quite demanding and very particular about details.

4.3 Destination marketing and promotion

Another resort manager (an Australian) emphasized that the heightened image of Fiji, propagated through enticing promotions, negatively impacts visitors' experiences by raising their expectations to unrealistic levels:

From my experience, once customers plan a trip to Fiji, they do their own research. They gather information from social media and other promotional outlets, and they want the 'WOW' experience they have seen on promotional materials. Their expectations are very high, and when they arrive, they might not be able to exactly experience what was marketed/promoted, and this affects their experience.

The above confession was also reflected by a tourist from Australia, pointing out the gap between what is promoted about Fiji and the reality on the ground:

I would say my perceptions of Fiji so far have not met my expectations. Many of the marketing materials display only the high-end resorts and beautiful settings, despite there being more to Fiji than that. I think some of the places I have stayed at and operators I have engaged with have not met my expectations. However, the natural attractions and the islands I visited certainly exceeded my expectations.

4.4 Human resources and service delivery

Furthermore, a Fijian catering business owner in Port Denarau admitted that they regularly received guest complaints stemming from various factors, as illustrated by the following:

In fact, we receive customer complaints in our business, and I believe that in business, it is practically impossible not to have complaints at all. Most of the complaints stem from staff negligence, such as misunderstandings in taking orders, especially on details such as cooking style, recipe, and dietary information. Some other minor issues also arise from the absence of required ingredients on guests' tables as well as cooking time. The fact that most of our clients do come from advanced countries such as Australia, New Zealand, America, Canada, Europe, and Asia, to them, every little detail matters, and they always expect perfection.

Field observations also identified certain shortcomings within catering businesses, particularly in areas such as time management, staff availability and attentiveness, hygiene practices, and overall ambiance management. The results also point to a lack of flexibility in serving tourists and a poor understanding of the significance of first and last impressions. Furthermore, in contrast to large chain hotels and resorts, findings suggest a lack of proper integration of contemporary service delivery with traditional Fijian hospitality.

A domestic tourist also shared her perspectives on the importance of ensuring service quality, and suggested potential areas of improvement to enhance the tourist experience and make the sector socially inclusive:

I think the service quality in our tourism and hospitality sector has some drawbacks. Therefore, additional work is needed to ensure high service quality, since it is critical to the competitiveness of the sector. I particularly suggest the following areas for improvement:

The first and most important one is related to human power since high service quality is correlated with the availability of well-trained and skilled employees with the right attitude and communication skills. Secondly, further improvements in tourism infrastructure, such as quality roads, access to inland attractions and villages, and the development of activity-oriented tourism to enhance the tourist experience and boost the sector's contribution. Finally, to make the tourism sector more inclusive for locals, prices in most resorts should be readjusted in line with domestic tourists' disposable income.

Therefore, the significance of improving service quality and tourism workforce capacity was highlighted by research participants. In this respect, an American tourist stated that:

A focus on the importance and practice of front-facing customer service would improve any future trips I might make to Fiji. The country, its natural environments, and its people and culture are beautiful in so many ways, with seemingly endless offers and experiences to enjoy. However, service/product quality is sometimes lacking and can become especially frustrating when said services or products are expensive.

4.5 Transportation and mobility

Findings reveal that tourists use a wide array of transportation modes – including taxis, rental cars, buses/minibuses, motorbikes, boats (ferries, cruises), and planes – during their holiday in Fiji. This is in addition to various transportation services provided by several all-inclusive resorts, which are of a high standard according to tourist opinion. While tourists are generally content with the quality of transportation offered by airlines, ferries, cruises, and other boats, they expressed disappointment in the quality of bus and taxi services in the country. More precisely, buses are considered irregular, slow, and dirty, while some taxi drivers lack communication skills and local expertise, as the following statement explains:

I enjoyed the transportation services provided by the resort. The ferries and cruises I took to visit some of the islands were also good. The only improvement I would like to suggest is regarding taxi drivers in terms of cleanliness and interaction, as well as improvements in bus services such as availability, punctuality, and hygiene. (Tourist, New Zealander)

The findings of the current study also revealed a disparity between Fiji's mainland and island destinations regarding service quality:

Based on my observation, the service quality on the islands is far better than what I experienced on the mainland. Compared to the mainland, employees on the islands are more accommodating, very friendly, and helpful, and they strive to get to know guests on a personal level. Additionally, the hygiene and sanitation conditions are much better on the islands. (Tourist, Indian)

Participant observations conducted by the researchers reinforce the above sentiment: while resort staff on the islands are prompt and professional, those on the mainland tend to lack such qualities. In summary, despite the shortcomings reported in this study, it appears that, generally, most tourists enjoy their holiday in Fiji.

Overall, I am very satisfied with my experiences in Fiji. Most places I have stayed in have held a high standard with friendly staff, and customer service. Many of the areas I visited were easily accessible by boat, bus, or taxi. The attractions evidently paint a beautiful picture of Fiji. (Tourist, Norwegian)

These research findings also indicate that tourists from the USA, Asia, and Europe have varying demands for higher-quality service. Asian tourists, for example, prioritize staff understanding, dependability, and effectiveness in responding to guest inquiries. In contrast, Western tourists prioritize proactive aspects, while Asian tourists tend to prefer basic and practical service dimensions. Additionally, female tourists prioritize hygiene and room functionality, while younger tourists value not only clean facilities but also supplementary services such as free Wi-Fi.

To create memorable experiences, the tourism and hospitality sector in Fiji must consolidate its strengths and address any existing gaps. This can be achieved by focusing on local culture and involvement. Guest reviews also provide positive feedback. For instance, family groups from the USA recounted that their stay at the sampled resort was delightful in every aspect. They noted that local babysitters (*meimei* in Fijian) took excellent care of their children, allowing the adults to relax without worry. Additionally, they expressed satisfaction with the food, staff, natural surroundings, and water activities on the island, all of which met their expectations and contributed to a memorable overall holiday experience.

4.6 Balancing service culture and tourist needs

The *Bula* spirit refers to the warm and welcoming hospitality characteristic of Fijian culture. It embodies friendliness, openness, and a genuine desire to make guests feel at home. This has a positive impact on tourists as it creates a welcoming atmosphere and fosters memorable experiences. However, challenges arise with the concept of Fiji time, which refers to a more relaxed and flexible approach to timekeeping – where schedules may be more fluid and punctuality is not as strictly adhered to as in some other cultures. While this can contribute to the laid-back and stress-free atmosphere that many tourists appreciate, it can also lead to frustration and inconvenience for those who expect more punctuality and efficiency, as expressed by a German tourist: ‘On the first day we arrived at our hotel, we had to wait more than 40 minutes to have our lunch due to very slow service. We then realized the concept of Fiji-time and started placing our orders far in advance.’

Reconciling the local service culture, characterized by the *Bula* spirit, with the expectations of tourists who value punctuality and efficiency requires finding a balance. This might involve: training staff to understand and accommodate different cultural expectations; implementing systems to ensure timely service delivery without compromising the warm and welcoming atmosphere; and effectively communicating with tourists about local customs and practices. Ultimately, it involves respecting both local culture and the values and preferences of tourists to create a positive and enjoyable experience for all. Table 2 presents a summary of key strengths and areas for improvement in Fiji’s tourism and hospitality sector.

Table 2 Areas of excellence in service and areas for improvement

Areas of excellence	Areas for improvement
	<i>Functional Service Quality</i>
Outstanding entertainment (traditional dance and music)	Staff should refrain from asking tourists personal questions, and be more informative with customers
Friendly and helpful staff on islands	Reconcile Fiji time with tourist time value (find a balance) and further improve destination safety
Friendly and welcoming locals	
Relaxed atmosphere (Fiji time, no hurry, no worry) and sense of safety	
	<i>Technical Service Quality</i>
Clean, well-protected environment and deep blue ocean	Introduce activity-oriented tourism; diversify product offers by developing and marketing the mainland; implement environmental protection campaigns, especially on plastic pollution
Pristine island experience	Keep authenticity and accurately transfer knowledge to the youth
Well-crafted package tour services with a single payment	Pricing issues, especially for local consumers – make offers available to domestic tourists
Wellness tourism (mud/thermal pools and indigenous therapeutic services)	Set up local restaurants and shops and package wellness products; train more locals to boost wellness tourism
The use of electronic transactions	Improve cleanliness and hygiene, especially in accommodation and catering businesses
Shuttle services at most resorts, which makes traveling smooth	Increase payment options and reduce surcharges on foreign cards
Child-friendly resorts	Better training required for staff, especially on the mainland
Traditional/local cuisines	Train taxi drivers to treat tourists professionally and respectfully; provide reliable and consistent public transportation options
	Monitor marketing and promotions regularly to avoid unrealistic expectations
	More children's activities and learning platforms, including cultural exchanges with local children
	Diversify variety and maintain authenticity; provide quality as well as value for money; ensure food safety

Source: Authors' analysis.

5 DISCUSSION

The tourism and hospitality sector is marked by a notable interdependence of its various actors (Sørensen et al., 2020). Consequently, the creation and delivery of seamless experiences across the sector hold significant importance (Kim and So, 2022; Wu and Ko, 2013). In contemporary business practices, customer loyalty hinges on the provision of seamless, personalized, consistent, and coherent experiences throughout the customer service journey (Jaakkola and Terho, 2021). In this context, the majority of tourists who visited Fiji expressed satisfaction with the country's natural attractions, a sentiment that was consistent among participants regardless of socio-demographic background. Therefore, the natural environment serves as a distinctive selling point for Fiji's tourism sector.

Indeed, Fiji was designated Oceania's top adventure tourism destination in 2022 by the World Travel Awards due to its pristine natural beauty.

However, concerns have been raised about accommodation services in Fiji, particularly regarding hygiene, room functionality, staff responsiveness and attitude, promptness in issue resolution, and pricing. These issues have been consistently reported across a range of accommodations, from budget hostels to high-end resorts, with more complaints typically attributed to lower-scale accommodations. This aligns with a recent report by the Fiji Hotel and Tourism Association (2023), which underscores the need to enhance the quality and standard of accommodations and activities.

As highlighted by Lockyer, (2003), among the various factors influencing the selection of accommodations, hygiene emerges as the most crucial. Hygiene encompasses the overall cleanliness of the premises, including guest rooms and other areas – bathrooms, kitchens, beds/bed linen, floors, ceilings, furniture, equipment, toilets, corridors, and verandas, among others (Gu and Ryan, 2008; Lockyer, 2003). Other studies investigating customer complaints regarding service quality in resort and hotel accommodations also found that most concerned guest rooms (Sangpikul, 2013). Therefore, accommodation providers must address hygiene issues in order to meet international standards, especially given the increased importance of hygiene, cleanliness, and overall quality standards in post-pandemic tourism (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2022; Muskat et al., 2019).

Poor hygiene aside, issues related to limited meal variety (especially local cuisines), substandard food quality, and inadequate time and ambiance management have also been reported within catering businesses (Laeis, 2019; Mafi et al., 2020). Addressing these concerns is therefore essential for enhancing the overall visitor experience and ensuring the sustainability of Fiji's tourism and hospitality sector.

In terms of human resources, a significant challenge facing Fiji's tourism and hospitality sector is the shortage of well-educated and qualified employees. Tourists have expressed perceptions of inadequacy in professional staff culture and attitude, particularly regarding front offices, food and beverage services, and housekeeping departments. Given that the tourism and hospitality industry is labor-intensive (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023), its future prospects heavily rely on the availability of well-trained and talented employees exhibiting the right attitude and a strong work ethic (Dogru et al., 2022). This underscores the need to invest more in tailored training and education initiatives aimed at enhancing employees' skill sets. Such efforts are vital not only for improving service standards but also for ensuring a standardized, high-quality customer experience across the sector.

This perceived deficiency in training extends across all segments of the tourism sector. For example, field observations revealed a notable absence of highly qualified local tour guides capable of interpreting and expounding on tourist attractions. This not only contributes to a lack of quality experiences but also may lead to tourists' inadequate understanding of Fiji's history, culture, nature, and heritage. Tour guides play a vital role in enhancing tourists' overall local understanding and experience, which are crucial elements in shaping and promoting a destination's image (Sahin and Balta, 2007; Teshome et al., 2022). Consequently, education and experience are paramount in improving the skills and knowledge of tour guides, benefiting both tourists and destinations alike (Látková et al., 2018).

Significant concerns have also been raised about transportation in Fiji, particularly taxi drivers attempting to overcharge tourists and the inadequacy of public transportation options. Transport challenges hinder tourists' ability to smoothly navigate between regions in Fiji, and likely contribute to the disproportionate concentration of visitors in specific areas, such as Denarau and Nadi. As discussed by Mendes et al., (2022),

mobility is one of the primary challenges tourists encounter in developing countries, with the majority preferring to use public transport. Moreover, public transportation aids in reducing visitors' carbon footprint, aligning with sustainable tourism initiatives (Ercan et al., 2016). This underscores the imperative for Fiji to enhance its public transport system by providing tourists with more comprehensive information and ensuring a reliable and consistent service.

The *Bula* spirit, emblematic of the distinctive service culture within Fiji's tourism and hospitality sector, profoundly enhances the visitor experience, whereas the concept of Fiji time may have the opposite effect. Given that time is the most valuable resource for foreign visitors, service providers must strike a delicate balance and comprehend the significance of time for international tourists.

Promotion within Fiji's tourism and hospitality sector has been identified as having a negative impact due to its tendency to inflate tourists' expectations. This is primarily because promotional materials often showcase high-end resorts and picturesque landscapes, leading to heightened expectations among potential visitors. As emphasized by Morrison, (2022) and Narayan et al., (2009), success in tourism relies not only on offering the right products but also on genuine marketing, monitoring, and continual improvement in service quality. Li et al., (2023: 1) further suggest that 'inaccurate promotional information about tourist destinations may result in tourists' negative evaluations' by creating unrealistic expectations. Hence, there is a pressing need to (re)design marketing efforts to accurately portray Fiji's tourist attractions and service performance standards. This would help align tourists' expectations with the actual experiences they encounter, ultimately leading to greater satisfaction and more positive evaluations.

6 CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Fiji's tourism sector has shown remarkable resilience and recovery since the COVID-19 crisis. In 2022, the island nation welcomed 636,312 tourists, as reported by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, (2023). Furthermore, recent data from Tourism Fiji, (2024) reveals it received 929,740 international tourists in 2023, a 4 percent increase over 2019. Despite the pandemic's devastating impact on Fiji's tourism and hospitality sector, it also provided respite and an opportunity for the natural ecosystem to recover.

While tourism in the wider Asia and Pacific region is projected to undergo robust growth in the coming years, the ability of Pacific island countries to deliver quality services that meet international standards remains a challenge. As a regional tourism hub and a leading tourist destination in the South Pacific, Fiji must excel in its tourism and hospitality service quality. Moreover, as emphasized by Ulusemre and Lam, (2022), the economic contributions of tourism in the small Pacific islands are measured not just by overall revenue generated but also by the amount of value retained within the local economy. Enhancing service quality across the entire tourism system therefore has the potential to improve consumer spending patterns and consequently enhance the trickle-down effects of tourism.

6.1 Contribution to knowledge

In terms of contributing to knowledge, this study sheds light on the inherent 'tension' between the delivery of technical service quality and functional service quality, as proposed by Gronroos, (1983). Participants in the study recounted instances of service

failure where various aspects were executed poorly, representing shortcomings in technical service quality. However, the genuine hospitality displayed by tourism and hospitality employees, often referred to as the *Bula* spirit, was effective in mitigating dissatisfaction, highlighting the importance of functional service quality.

Conversely, there were instances where technical service quality performed well but functional service quality was lacking (as indicated in Table 2). This was especially evident in cases where the concept of Fiji time was employed. While Fiji time is embraced as a cultural characteristic promoting a relaxed and laid-back approach to life, it is crucial to discern when to apply this notion appropriately – for instance, ordering meals versus engaging in entertainment activities, or waiting for transportation versus interacting with locals during a village tour.

While previous literature has empirically confirmed that technical and functional service quality are distinct constructs (for example, De Keyser and Lariviere, 2014), there has been limited research examining how these constructs interact with each other. The present study contributes to filling this gap by exploring the interplay between technical and functional service quality in the context of Fiji's tourism and hospitality sector. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study allows us to understand service quality in the country's tourism sector in real time from the perspectives of providers and customers.

6.2 Contribution to practice/management

Except for long-haul visitors with high expectations, participants in this study generally reported having satisfying holidays in Fiji. This is partly because visitors from distant markets may have invested more money, time, and effort in their trip compared to those traveling to alternative destinations for less cost and energy. Therefore, personalizing services – such as tailoring experiences for Asian versus Western consumers, treating tourists professionally, and promptly and effectively addressing their queries – is crucial to ensure a positive experience and encourage repeat visits.

This is particularly significant for Fiji, whose economy relies heavily on tourism, and which markets itself as a destination of authentic happiness with the friendliest people on Earth. In line with this, the findings of this study suggest the need for improvements in areas such as accommodation quality, functionality, and hygiene, as well as excellence in catering businesses, human resource development, and diversification of offerings. The following points highlight interventions required to tackle the current challenges of the tourism and hospitality sector in the country:

1. Organize and coordinate staff training programs that are in line with dynamic industry needs, and improve employees' skill sets across the tourism and hospitality sector regularly.
2. Improve overall hygiene, cleanliness, room quality, and functionality in the accommodation industry.
3. Catering businesses also need to emphasize authenticity, food quality, variety, safety, promptness (punctuality), interpretation, and affordability.
4. Every tourism and hospitality business should establish quality standard indicators and controlling mechanisms, involving customers in the process to co-create a satisfactory service experience.
5. Marketing and promotional material needs to be carefully (re)designed to accurately reflect a holistic picture of the country.

6. Product diversification is a key to dispersing and keeping tourists active during their vacation.
7. Provide more public transportation and improve service reliability to encourage use.
8. Adopt technology in key areas of the sector, such as ecological conservation, destination interpretation, transportation, and catering.

While some of the service quality issues discussed in this study may be unique to Fiji's tourism sector, many are common challenges faced by other destinations in the Pacific region and beyond. The intangible and experiential nature of tourism services makes delivering consistent and high-quality experiences a universal challenge for destinations (Mendes, 2016; Sørensen et al., 2020). Factors such as human capital development, infrastructure, and destination marketing have been identified as critical determinants of service quality across the tourism value chain (Elsharnouby and Elbanna, 2021; Li et al., 2023; Morrison, 2022).

Research has shown that service quality is a multi-dimensional construct, comprising both technical (outcome-related) and functional (process-related) aspects (Gronroos, 1983). The findings from Fiji highlight the 'tension' between these two dimensions, where high technical service quality in natural attractions was undermined by functional service quality gaps in accommodation and transportation (De Keyser and Lariviere, 2014). This dynamic is not unique to Fiji, as destinations worldwide struggle to align their service delivery processes with tourist expectations (Ardani et al., 2019; Park and Jeong, 2019).

Furthermore, the disparity in service quality between island and mainland destinations in Fiji mirrors the regional variations observed in other Pacific island countries, where remote and less-developed areas often lag in service standards (Pratt, 2013; Ulusemre and Lam, 2022). Addressing these geographical imbalances through targeted infrastructure development and human capital investment is a common challenge faced by tourism-dependent economies in the Pacific (Narayan et al., 2009; Wondirad, 2023).

6.3 Limitations and areas for future research

Like any research, this study has its limitations, which suggests avenues for future research. This qualitative study collected data from various tourism stakeholders. A logical progression would involve quantifying the extent to which international and domestic tourists are satisfied and have their expectations met. Moreover, Pacific island destinations are often perceived as generic and interchangeable in terms of their product offerings and image. It would therefore be valuable for tourism operators and policymakers to explore how perceptions and experiences of service quality vary among South Pacific island nations. Additionally, understanding which components of the travel experience generate the most satisfaction or need the most improvement in the broader region would provide valuable insights.

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