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The Influence of Service Reliability on Customer Satisfaction: A Case of Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority

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ABSTRACT :

The study assessed the influence of service reliability on customer satisfaction at Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (Mbeya UWSSA). A mixed-methods approach employing a convergent parallel design was adopted, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. The study involved a sample of 124 participants, including 102 customers selected through stratified random sampling and 22 staff purposively drawn from the Customer Service Directorate. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics via SPSS v.20 for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative responses. Findings revealed that service reliability significantly influenced customer satisfaction, with frequent water supply interruptions, delayed responses, and inaccurate billing identified as the major weaknesses. Customers expressed that inconsistency in service delivery and failure to fulfill promised timelines undermined their confidence and trust in the utility. The study concludes that improving customer satisfaction requires strengthening reliability through preventive maintenance, timely response mechanisms, and transparent billing systems. It recommends modernizing infrastructure, enhancing accountability, and improving communication between Mbeya UWSSA and its customers to build lasting trust and satisfaction.

Keywords: Service Reliability, Customer Satisfaction, Utility Services, Water Supply, Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority, Tanzania

1. Introduction

Service reliability, one of the most critical dimensions of service quality, refers to the ability of a service provider to deliver promised services dependably and accurately over time (Hussin et al., 2022). It represents consistency in performance, timeliness, and accuracy of service delivery, especially in sectors where continuity and dependability are vital, such as water utilities (Djunaid, 2023). Reliable service ensures that customers receive services when needed, free from frequent interruptions, errors, or unexpected fluctuations. According to Maleyeff (2022), reliability directly determines customer perceptions of quality and trust, forming the foundation of satisfaction and loyalty in service-oriented industries. High service reliability minimizes consumer complaints and operational inefficiencies, leading to improved institutional credibility and performance.

Globally, water utilities face increasing expectations from customers who demand uninterrupted, safe, and affordable water supply. Studies indicate that the reliability of service is the single most important predictor of satisfaction in the water sector, surpassing other factors such as responsiveness and empathy (Vilarinho et al., 2024). For instance, the International Water Association (IWA, 2023) reports that consistent water availability and accurate billing systems are key determinants of positive public perception in utilities across Europe and Asia. In developing countries, however, service reliability remains a major challenge due to aging infrastructure, poor maintenance, and limited investment in monitoring technologies (World Bank, 2022). The African Development Bank (2024) further highlights that inconsistent water supply and unreliable billing systems significantly undermine consumer confidence and willingness to pay, creating a vicious cycle of poor service delivery and low revenue collection.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, unreliable service delivery in water utilities has been a persistent issue driven by infrastructural decay, rapid urbanization, and weak governance systems (Kansal et al., 2017; AfDB, 2024). Frequent interruptions, rationing schedules, and low pressure levels have been identified as key contributors to dissatisfaction among urban water consumers (Njeru et al., 2023). The World Bank (2021) emphasizes that poor reliability not only reduces consumer trust but also limits socio-economic development, as inconsistent water supply disrupts households, schools, hospitals, and industries. Similarly, research in Kenya and Ghana showed that water service reliability had the strongest correlation with customer satisfaction compared to responsiveness or communication quality (Osei & Mensah, 2024). These findings underscore that reliability is not merely a technical factor but a determinant of customer confidence, compliance, and willingness to cooperate with service providers.

In Tanzania, despite government efforts to improve urban water services, reliability remains a major concern in utilities such as the Dar es Salaam Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DAWASA) and Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (Mbeya UWSA). According to the Ministry of Water (2023), many urban areas experience intermittent supply, inadequate water pressure, and frequent pipe bursts due to aging infrastructure. The Tanzania Water and Sanitation Network (2022) revealed that over 45% of urban households experience weekly service interruptions, while billing complaints remain among the top three consumer grievances. In Mbeya city, rapid population growth has increased demand on outdated water systems, leading to inconsistent supply and consumer frustration. Moreover, delayed fault responses, unclear billing, and limited communication channels further erode consumer trust (Jacome et al., 2019; Lubawa & Litt, 2025).

Given this situation, it is essential to examine how service reliability influences customer satisfaction in Tanzania's water sector, particularly in Mbeya UWSA. While national and regional reports have discussed infrastructure and financial challenges (World Bank, 2022; AfDB, 2024), few studies have analyzed reliability as a specific service-quality dimension affecting satisfaction at the utility level. Understanding this relationship is vital for guiding customer-centered reforms and improving utility accountability. Therefore, this study assessed the influence of service reliability on customer satisfaction, focusing on Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority.

Reliable water service is fundamental to customer satisfaction and public trust in utility companies. In the context of Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (Mbeya UWSA), service reliability involves consistent water supply, accurate billing, timely response to faults, and minimal interruptions. However, despite ongoing efforts by the Tanzanian government and local utilities to improve water accessibility, service reliability remains inconsistent and poorly understood at the local operational level (Ministry of Water, 2023). Many residents of Mbeya continue to experience frequent interruptions, low pressure, and prolonged rationing, forcing them to rely on unsafe or informal water sources (Tanzania Water and Sanitation Network, 2022).

Empirical evidence suggests that customers in Mbeya perceive service delivery as unreliable, with irregular water flow and unaddressed technical faults causing significant dissatisfaction (World Bank, 2021). The AfDB (2024) reported that 57% of urban water users in Tanzania rated reliability as their lowest satisfaction factor. In Mbeya specifically, water rationing schedules and delayed maintenance responses are recurrent issues, while outdated infrastructure leads to frequent leaks and pipe bursts. Moreover, unclear billing and estimated meter readings have intensified customer complaints, eroding confidence in the utility's efficiency (Jacome et al., 2019).

Existing literature on Tanzanian utilities mainly addresses infrastructure and governance challenges but provides limited empirical insight into how service reliability specifically affects customer satisfaction at the local utility level (Kansal et al., 2017; Lubawa & Litt, 2025). Previous studies have not sufficiently explained whether consistent water delivery, timely fault repair, and accurate billing directly shape customer satisfaction outcomes in urban centers like Mbeya. This knowledge gap hinders evidence-based improvements in service management and customer engagement. Therefore, this study assessed the influence of service reliability on customer satisfaction, focusing on Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority.

2. Literature Review

This section presents both theoretical and empirical literature related to the study. It reviews key concepts and frameworks underpinning service quality, particularly the SERVQUAL model, which guides the assessment of service reliability and its influence on customer satisfaction. The section also discusses findings from previous studies conducted in different contexts both globally and regionally to highlight existing evidence on the relationship between service reliability and customer satisfaction. Finally, it identifies the research gap that this study seeks to address within the context of Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (Mbeya UWSA).

2.1 Theoretical Review

The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) remains one of the most widely applied frameworks for evaluating service quality across sectors. It measures the gap between customer expectations and perceptions using five key dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Gregory, 2019). Among these, reliability the ability of an organization to deliver promised services accurately and consistently has been identified as the strongest determinant of customer satisfaction, particularly in essential services like utilities (Prakash, 2024). The SERVQUAL model has been successfully applied in diverse contexts, including education, healthcare, banking, and public utilities, demonstrating its adaptability in identifying service performance gaps (Manunggal & Afriadi, 2023). Although some scholars have critiqued the model for cultural limitations and lack of applicability in digital contexts (Rojas & Coluccio, 2021; Hasan et al., 2024), it continues to provide a solid theoretical foundation for understanding customer perceptions and improving service quality in traditional service environments such as water supply authorities.

2.2 Empirical Literature

Empirical research consistently supports the positive link between service reliability and customer satisfaction. For instance, Rizkina et al. (2025) found that reliability significantly enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty in Indonesia's consulting sector. Similarly, Chege (2021) reported that reliable service provision in Kenya's insurance industry led to improved customer confidence and retention. In the Nigerian banking industry, Abdullah et al. (2018) revealed that convenience and reliability were key predictors of satisfaction, although unreliable electronic systems negatively affected trust. In public utilities, Vilarinho et al. (2024) and Njeru et al. (2023) confirmed that consistent and dependable service delivery directly contributes to customer satisfaction, especially where consumers rely on daily access to essential resources like water and electricity. Studies in South Africa and Ghana (Mwangi & Boateng, 2022) further emphasize that reliability enhances trust in utility organizations, strengthens payment compliance, and reduces customer complaints. In contrast, studies from Ethiopia and Uganda (Woldemichael, 2024; Namara et al., 2023) indicate that irregular supply, inaccurate billing, and poor complaint resolution are the main sources of customer dissatisfaction in water utilities.

2.3 Research Gap

Despite extensive literature on service reliability and customer satisfaction globally, few studies have examined this relationship within Tanzania's water utility sector. Existing research primarily focuses on infrastructure challenges, financial performance, or policy frameworks (World Bank, 2021; AfDB, 2024), with limited attention to the customer's perception of reliability as a driver of satisfaction. Moreover, prior studies have not adequately explored how reliability elements such as frequency of water supply interruptions, billing accuracy, and timeliness of problem resolution influence satisfaction at the organizational level. Specifically, there is insufficient evidence from medium-sized urban utilities like the Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation

Authority (Mbeya UWSA), which faces unique operational challenges due to rapid urbanization and aging infrastructure. Therefore, this study addresses this empirical gap by examining the influence of service reliability on customer satisfaction in Mbeya UWSA, applying the SERVQUAL framework to generate locally relevant insights for improving service quality and trust in public utilities.

3. Research Methodology

The study was conducted at the Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (Mbeya UWSSA), located in Mbeya City, Tanzania. This site was chosen because of its strategic importance in providing water and sanitation services to a rapidly growing urban population and its persistent challenges related to service reliability and customer satisfaction. The study employed a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel design, which allowed for the simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data to enhance the validity and depth of findings.

The study population comprised two main groups: staff members of Mbeya UWSSA, specifically within the Customer Service Directorate, and customers who receive water and sanitation services from the utility. A combination of purposive and stratified sampling techniques was used. Purposive sampling targeted staff members who possess direct knowledge of service delivery operations, while stratified sampling ensured that customers from different service zones within Mbeya city were adequately represented. Questionnaires were administered to customers to collect quantitative data on perceptions of service reliability and satisfaction, whereas semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members to gather qualitative insights into operational challenges and institutional efforts to improve reliability and customer service.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the help of SPSS version 20 for quantitative data, while thematic analysis was employed to interpret qualitative responses. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to summarize and present the quantitative findings, providing a clear overview of patterns and trends. Thematic analysis helped identify recurring ideas, perceptions, and experiences from interview data, offering deeper insights that complemented the quantitative results.

4. Results and Discussions

This study was to evaluate the influence of service reliability on customer satisfaction at Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (Mbeya UWSSA). In the SERVQUAL model, reliability refers to the ability of a service provider to consistently perform promised services accurately and dependably. This dimension is critical in utility services where interruptions, inaccuracies, and delays can directly impact customer trust and satisfaction. This study measured service reliability using five indicators: frequency of weekly water supply interruptions, occurrence of inaccurate water bills in the past six months, response time to reported service issues, failure to deliver promised services within agreed time, and frequency of first-attempt resolution of service issues.

Table: The Influence of Service Reliability on Customer Satisfaction

Statements & choice options		Frequency	Percentage
Frequency of Weekly Water Supply Interruptions	None	13	12.7%
	1 -2 times	13	12.7%
	More than 2 times	76	74.5%
Occurrence of Inaccurate Water Bills in the Past Six Months	Yes	90	88.2%
	No	12	11.8%
Response Time to Reported Service Issues	Within 24 hours	11	10.8%
	2 -3 days	76	74.5%
	More than 3 days	15	14.7%
Failure to Deliver Promised Services Within Agreed Time	Yes	78	76.5%
	No	24	23.5%
Frequency of First-Attempt Resolution of Service Issues	Always	22	21.6%
	Sometimes	40	39.2%
	Rarely	40	39.2%

Source: Field Data (2025)

The findings in Table reveal that 74.5% of respondents experienced water supply interruptions more than twice a week, 12.7% reported interruptions once or twice per week, and another 12.7% indicated they did not experience any interruptions. These findings suggest that frequent disruptions were the dominant experience among customers, pointing to serious challenges in maintaining consistent water delivery. The high proportion facing repeated interruptions underscores how reliability in supply is compromised, affecting both households and businesses.

Inaccurate billing emerged as another widespread issue, with 88.2% of respondents reporting that they had received incorrect bills in the past six months, compared to only 11.8% who had not encountered such problems. This reflects a critical challenge for Mbeya UWSSA, as the majority of customers have faced inconsistencies in charges. The dominance of these reports indicates that billing accuracy remains a major weakness that undermines customer confidence in the utility's dependability.

Response time to reported service issues was also highlighted as a concern. About 74.5% of respondents indicated that it typically takes two to three days for the authority to respond, 14.7% reported waiting for more than three days, while only 10.8% said they received a response within 24 hours. Although the majority of issues are addressed within a few days, a significant proportion of customers still face prolonged delays. This inconsistency shows that timeliness of response remains a key area of dissatisfaction, particularly during service disruptions when prompt action is most critical.

Delays in fulfilling promised services were another notable finding. A total of 76.5% of respondents stated that they had experienced situations where services were not delivered within the agreed timeframe, while only 23.5% reported that commitments were honored as expected. This suggests that many customers have had their expectations undermined by missed deadlines, which weakens confidence in the authority's reliability. The high proportion experiencing delays points to challenges in meeting agreed timelines and ensuring consistent service performance.

With regard to resolving issues on the first attempt, only 21.6% of respondents confirmed that their concerns were always resolved immediately, while 39.2% said their issues were resolved sometimes, and another 39.2% stated they were rarely resolved on the first attempt. These findings demonstrate that most customers must make repeat visits or follow-ups before receiving full assistance. Such inefficiencies in conclusively addressing problems not only prolong inconvenience but also reduce trust in the effectiveness of the service process.

During an interview, one customer service officer explained that:

"We ensure customers are informed of their rights and obligations by clearly displaying policies in the service hall and offering verbal explanations when necessary. This dual approach allows both visual and direct communication, helping customers understand key procedures. However, we have noticed that not every customer takes time to read the posted notices, which can lead to misunderstandings. To address this, we make an effort to explain policies during transactions, ensuring clarity and transparency. This not only prevents disputes but also builds trust, as customers feel respected and confident that the organization values open and honest communication in its service delivery" (Customer Service Officer 2, 07/08/2025)

Another officer emphasized the role of institutional support:

"If a customer experiences an issue such as receiving a high bill or facing a disconnection, we do not simply ask them to return at another time. Instead, we take immediate action to assist them by helping fill out the necessary forms, clearly explaining each step of the resolution process, and ensuring they understand the expected timelines. We also follow up directly with the technical department to track progress and confirm that the matter is addressed promptly. This hands-on approach not only resolves problems more efficiently but also reassures customers that their concerns are taken seriously and handled with genuine commitment" (Customer Service Officer 5, 08/08/2025).

A senior officer reflected on institutional trust:

"Trust is built when our actions consistently align with our promises. For example, if we assure a customer that reconnection will take place within 24 hours, it is essential that this commitment is fulfilled without delays. Failure to meet such expectations quickly erodes customer confidence and creates doubt about our reliability. Consistency in delivering on our word not only strengthens our credibility but also fosters long-term customer relationships. Every fulfilled promise reinforces the belief that we are dependable, while even a single unkept commitment can undo months or years of trust. Therefore, maintaining consistency is central to sustaining customer loyalty and satisfaction" (Customer Service Officer 1, 09/08/2025).

The findings indicate that service reliability at Mbeya UWSSA is one of the most critical dimensions shaping customer satisfaction, with several weaknesses identified across the indicators used to measure this construct. A significant proportion of customers reported experiencing frequent water supply interruptions, often occurring multiple times per week, which illustrates that consistency in water provision remains a pressing challenge. These results show that although the utility has invested in expanding access to its network, stability of infrastructure and preventive maintenance programs have not yet kept pace with demand. Consistent water supply is central to both household well-being and business continuity, and its absence undermines confidence in the authority's dependability. This finding strongly aligns with Rizkina *et al.* (2025), who argue that reliability exerts a significant and positive influence on satisfaction and loyalty, since consistent service performance strengthens trust and long-term commitment.

For Mbeya UWSSA, addressing recurrent interruptions would not only stabilize supply but also reinforce its credibility as a reliable service provider. Inaccurate billing emerged as another major concern; with many customers stating they had received incorrect bills within the past six months. This indicates that while billing systems exist, they are not functioning to the level required to guarantee fairness and trust. Inaccuracies in billing create unnecessary disputes, delay payments, and damage perceptions of transparency. Such weaknesses align with Abdullah *et al.* (2018), who found that although accessibility and convenience positively shape satisfaction, unreliability in transactional services such as billing negatively influences customer perceptions of dependability. Similarly, Rizkina *et al.* (2025) emphasize that errors in core service processes reduce satisfaction and weaken loyalty, as customers perceive them as breaches of reliability. These studies support the finding that billing accuracy is not simply an administrative function but a central component of perceived reliability. For Mbeya UWSSA, restoring confidence requires transparent, accurate, and timely billing, supported by modernized systems and clear channels for resolving disputes.

Response time to reported issues was also highlighted as a serious challenge. Many customers reported waiting between two and three days for their complaints to be addressed, with some experiencing even longer delays. Although the utility eventually resolves issues, the extended time frame damages perceptions of efficiency and dependability. For a service as essential as water, time is a critical factor, since prolonged delays increase inconvenience and can disrupt both domestic and institutional routines. This finding clearly aligns with Chege (2021), who found that timeliness of responses strongly influences satisfaction, as customers equate speed with competence and reliability. The Mbeya UWSSA findings confirm that slow responses erode trust, underscoring the need for structural reforms such as decentralized response units, real-time monitoring, and rapid response teams. Faster issue resolution would improve customer confidence while reducing dissatisfaction linked to service breakdowns.

The findings further revealed that delays in delivering promised services within agreed timeframes are a recurring issue. Customers expressed frustration that while commitments were communicated, actual delivery often fell short. This gap between promises and performance erodes trust and credibility. The evidence aligns with Rizkina *et al.* (2025), who showed that adherence to promised timelines is vital for sustaining customer satisfaction and loyalty, since unmet commitments are interpreted as breaches of reliability. Similarly, Abdullah *et al.* (2018) argue that failures to honor service promises can overshadow otherwise positive attributes, leading to dissatisfaction even when the eventual outcome is acceptable. For Mbeya UWSSA, failure to consistently meet agreed deadlines reinforces perceptions of unreliability and suggests weak accountability. Enhancing planning systems, increasing oversight, and providing transparent communication about unavoidable delays could help mitigate negative customer perceptions.

The study also showed that most respondents did not experience first-attempt resolution of their complaints, with only a minority reporting immediate resolution. This indicates inefficiencies in diagnosing and resolving problems, forcing customers to make repeat visits or follow-ups. Such inefficiencies frustrate customers and increase operational strain on the authority. This finding aligns with Rizkina *et al.* (2025), who demonstrated that successful first-attempt resolution enhances satisfaction and loyalty by minimizing effort and inconvenience. It also resonates with Chege (2021), who observed that when customers are forced into repeat interactions, satisfaction levels drop sharply, as unresolved problems are perceived as incompetence or lack of seriousness. For Mbeya UWSSA, improving staff training, enhancing diagnostic procedures, and ensuring adequate resourcing at service points would improve first-attempt resolution rates, strengthening perceptions of reliability.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that service reliability significantly influences customer satisfaction at Mbeya Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Authority (Mbeya UWSSA). Findings indicate major weaknesses in the consistency of water supply, billing accuracy, response timeliness, fulfillment of promised services, and first-attempt issue resolution. These challenges collectively undermine customer confidence and satisfaction, suggesting that service reliability remains a critical area for institutional improvement.

It is therefore recommended that Mbeya UWSSA strengthen preventive maintenance programs to reduce service interruptions, modernize billing systems to enhance accuracy, and establish rapid-response mechanisms for timely resolution of customer complaints. Furthermore, improving internal accountability for promised timelines and providing staff training on effective problem-solving can enhance first-attempt resolution rates. By implementing these measures, Mbeya UWSSA can improve its operational reliability, rebuild customer trust, and achieve higher levels of satisfaction and service efficiency.

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