

Factors Considered by Holiday Makers in Selecting a Guesthouse in the Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Era

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Abstract

The tourism sector in South Africa has experienced significant adverse consequences owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the economy begins to reopen, guest houses are concentrating on enhancing their facilities to attract more tourists. This study examines the factors that impact holidaymakers when selecting accommodations on the South Coast. To conduct this research, data were gathered from TripAdvisor.com and through two unstructured interviews. ATLAS.ti software was used to analyze a total of 186 reviews and interview data. The study revealed that the provision of amenities such as air conditioning, private beach access, interconnected rooms, safety, microwaves, refrigerators, cable/satellite TV, walk-in showers, 24-hour security, and free parking significantly influences the customer experience. Moreover, the quality of service provided by guest houses plays a crucial role in customer satisfaction. However, this study had certain limitations, including its design and data collection methods. It is suggested that guest houses recognize and effectively manage service quality to ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Keywords

South Africa, Guest house, COVID-19, Tourism, TripAdvisor.com

1. Introduction

The tourism industry worldwide has experienced a substantial impact owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the tourism sector in South Africa identified as one of the most severely affected regions (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020; Assefa, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the South African government implemented strict lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus. These measures were in line with international trends, and resulted in a decline in tourism activities. Unfortunately, many businesses, regardless of size, had to close their doors, lay off staff, and sell assets to stay afloat. The global pandemic has resulted in a decline in economic growth and employment prospects, especially among individuals engaged in informal industries in the Global South, such as South Africa. The tourism industry, which plays a major role in the South African economy, has experienced substantial repercussions as a result of the ongoing pandemic. International travel restrictions and concerns regarding virus transmission have resulted in a decrease in the number of tourists visiting South Africa, particularly the South Coast region. This has led to a significant reduction in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and disruptions in the supply chain of the tourism sector.

The worldwide outbreak has also affected the behavior and intentions of individuals who engage in holiday travel. During the initial phase of the pandemic, a research investigation was conducted in South Korea, wherein it was observed that the perception of the risk associated with COVID-19 had a significant impact on individuals' behavioral intentions, which gave rise to "untact" tourism. The term "untact tourism" refers to the type of tourism where physical touch is minimized and human-to-human interaction is replaced by human-to-machine interaction (Bae & Chang, 2020). This observation highlights the significant disparity in technological access and adoption among business

owners during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a division between those who possess the financial means to invest in technology and those who lack resources and strive to sustain their operations. Most individual guesthouse owners in the South Coast struggled during the pandemic.

As the economy begins to reopen, individual guest houses are taking measures to ensure that their properties stand out in the market. When choosing a place to stay in, holidaymakers must consider several factors that can affect the comfort and enjoyment of their trips. These factors include amenities, such as smart TVs and Internet connectivity, as well as the location of accommodation. It is essential to understand the factors that affect holidaymakers' decision-making processes in the South Coast area, as this region depends heavily on tourism for survival. These factors can significantly influence tourists' final destination choices. The main objective of this study was to investigate the complaints and satisfaction of holidaymakers and comprehend the factors that motivate them to choose a guesthouse in the post-COVID-19 era. This study focused on private guest houses located on the South Coast, specifically in Margate. This research analyzed customer reviews published on TripAdvisor between 2022 and 2023, and 189 reviews were included for analysis using Atlas.ti 23 for qualitative data analysis.

1.1 Objectives

The central aim of this research is to gain in-depth knowledge about the various elements that impact the decision-making processes of holidaymakers when selecting accommodations on the South Coast. This region relies heavily on tourism for survival. The area selected for this study was Margate, a small town situated between Shelly Beach and Ramsgate, in the KwaZulu Natal region (Figure 1). Margate has gained recognition as a popular tourist destination owing to its attractive beaches, well-equipped amenities, and diverse recreational activities. In 2019, the estimated number of tourists entering and departing from this region was 4.29 million, with an annual estimate of 783,962 foreign arrivals (as cited by Brett, 2019). Moreover, the total value of the profits generated by tourism activities is estimated to be 4.4 billion per year. Therefore, the findings of this study will aid business owners in aligning marketing strategies with customer needs.

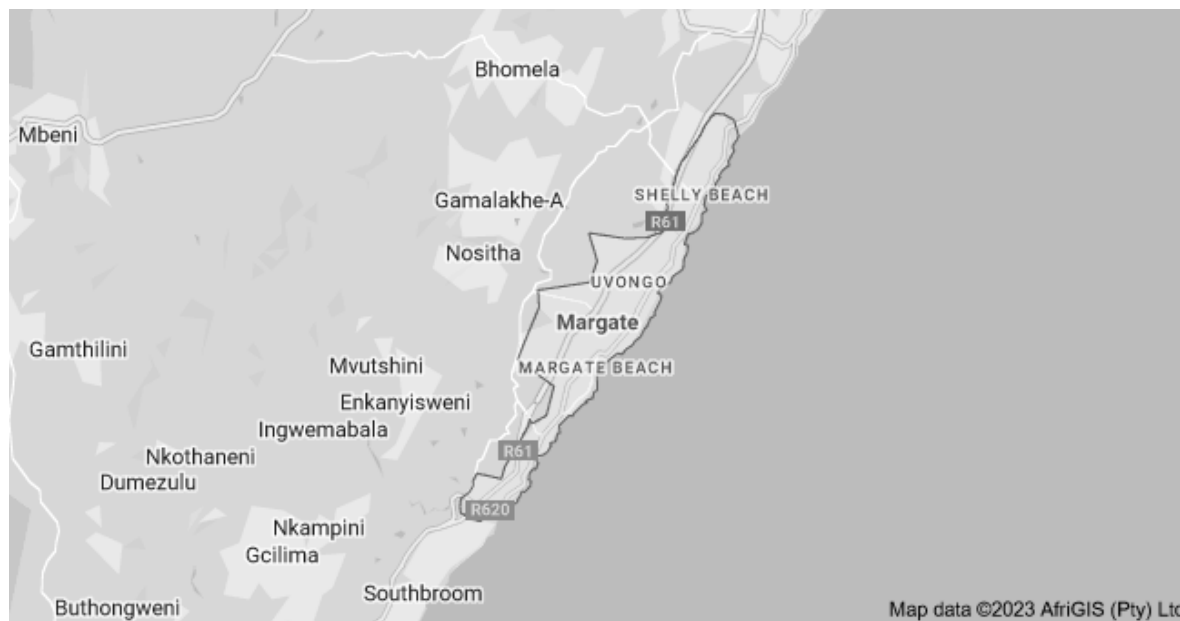


Figure 1. Current study area (Margate, South Coast, KwaZulu Natal)

2. Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on private business owners and small businesses has been widely documented (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020; Vukelića et al., 2021; Assefa, 2023; Sharma and Rai, 2023). Some of the consequences include unprecedented job and revenue losses, as well as business closures. Fairlie (2020) observed a shift in product demand owing to social distancing and movement restrictions. The COVID-19 crisis forced small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to adapt to new business practices and methods. In a study conducted by Assefa (2023), data were

gathered from eight cities, namely, Addis Ababa, Adama, Dire Dawa, and Jigjiga, to examine the effects of COVID-19 restrictions on small businesses. The findings reveal that during the first month of the lockdown, a significant proportion of small businesses (44 %) experienced bankruptcy. In a study conducted by Rogerson and Rogerson (2020) that examined the effects of COVID-19 on the tourism industry in South Africa, it was found that a significant proportion of businesses (approximately 69 %) opted for temporary closures during the first month of lockdown. Additionally, some enterprises choose to cancel their planned improvement projects, downsize their workforce, or implement salary reductions. Sharma and Rai (2023) studied the resilience of 225 Indian companies to understand the impact of COVID-19 on small- and medium-sized businesses, and approximately 96% of the companies reported a decrease in turnover and employment, the age of the company, and the size of the company were some of the determining factors of survival. Established companies have a higher chance of survival than start-ups and smaller enterprises. Fairlie (2020) analyzed the effects of lockdown restrictions in the United States of America from February to April 2020. The study revealed a significant decline in the number of African American, Latinx, and Asian business owners, by 41 %, 32%, and 26 %, respectively. The results demonstrated that the consequences of the epidemic were not evenly distributed, as certain groups faced unique challenges. Based on the research findings, it can be observed that medium-sized businesses encountered the greatest challenges throughout the pandemic.

During a pandemic, psychological resilience is crucial for the survival of small businesses (Hadjielias et al., 2022; Sharma and Rai, 2023). Psychological resilience refers to a well-known concept in psychology that pertains to an individual's ability to successfully cope with and recover from challenging situations or adversity. Individual owners and managers with psychological resilience have considered the pandemic's negative impacts as challenges that need to be addressed. They participate in a reflective process in which they rely on their past knowledge and experience to change their actions and establish proactive business plans. Resilience has aided companies in recovering from the pandemic's detrimental consequences (Hadjielias et al. 2022).

Policymakers across the globe have tried to combine different types of financial assistance for small businesses in their respective countries during the crisis (Sharma and Rai, 2023). For example, the South African government has implemented a debt relief scheme, which is a short-term loan designed to support small and medium businesses (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that the provision of loans by policymakers to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) was inadequate (Sharma and Rai, 2023). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated considerable variability among firms, particularly about its impact on developing and small businesses (Vukelića et al., 2021; Assefa, 2023). According to Vukelić et al.(2021), the pandemic has resulted in career shocks for small business owners, who are currently grappling with the various difficulties arising from the crisis. A recent study by Vukelića et al. (2021) found that some business owners regretted starting their businesses, lost their entrepreneurial drive, and began searching for paid jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and widespread impact on small business owners. This crisis resulted in numerous small business closures, financial losses, and the adoption of innovative strategies by business owners. The ability to cope with adversity has been crucial in helping small businesses recover from the negative consequences of the pandemic. To respond to these challenges, government bodies and politicians have implemented various financial support measures to assist small businesses. However, research has shown that the level of support provided by policymakers to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is insufficient. It is also important to recognize that the impact of the pandemic has not been evenly distributed, with certain sectors, such as tourism, facing unique challenges. Consequently, it is imperative to understand the preferences and requirements of tourists when selecting accommodations to help small business owners effectively prepare their guesthouses to stand out in this highly competitive market.

2.1 Factors Tourists Consider When Booking Accommodation

When making travel plans, tourists consider various factors that influence their decision-making process. Several academic studies have investigated these factors and revealed the underlying motivations and preferences of tourists (Zhang et al. 2011; Pertiwi and Sulistyawati 2020; Andika and Baiquni 2021; Estêvão et al. 2023). For example, Pinto and Castro (2019) analyzed the determinants influencing travelers' decisions to book a particular accommodation online in Northern Portugal. This study found price, online reviews, promotions, and photos to be some of the influencing factors in this context. Zhang, Ye and Law (2011) analyzed customer feedback sourced from TripAdvisor.com, focusing on hotels located in New York City, United States. This study revealed that factors such as room variety, cleanliness, location, and services significantly impact the decision-making process of travellers and influence the cost of accommodation.

This study (Pertiwi and Sulistyawati, 2020) was conducted in Ubud, Bali, Brazil. The results showed that safety and location were the top concerns of foreign travellers. Location is an essential factor that affects tourists' decision to choose accommodation. Tourists prefer accommodations that are conveniently located near attractions and that offer easy access to transportation (Andika and Sulistyawati, 2020; Andika and Baiquni, 2021). The amenities and facilities offered by accommodations also play a vital role in the selection process. According to Andika and Baiquni (2021), tourists look for accommodations that provide specific amenities, such as Wi-Fi access, parking availability, swimming pools, and fitness centres. The availability of these facilities can significantly affect tourists' satisfaction levels and overall experience. In Estêvão et al.'s (2023) study, socio-demographic factors (age, gender, education, and income levels) significantly influenced travellers' destination and accommodation choices over other factors.

In addition to price, location, facilities, and sociodemographic factors, additional factors must be considered. One important factor tourists consider is the perceived health risk at their destination, particularly given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Shin and Kang, 2020). According to Shin and Kang (2020), there is a decreased likelihood of tourists visiting destinations perceived as having elevated health risks.

When booking accommodations, tourists typically consider a range of criteria, such as price, location, amenities, potential health risks, safety measures, and customer feedback. Among these factors, adherence to health and hygiene standards by guest houses is of particular importance and greatly influences tourist preferences. All of these factors collectively contribute to shaping tourists' decision-making processes and ultimately affect their accommodation selections.

3. Methods

This study is exploratory as it relies on existing data sourced from the TripAdvisor.com database. The methodology used in this study, commonly known as archival research, involves the analysis of historical events and materials to gain insights into social phenomena. The significance of digitalization in archival practices has been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic (Netshakhuma, 2020). The provision of online access to archival materials has become more prevalent among universities and other institutions as physical archives have been closed. Therefore, this study capitalizes on the opportunity to analyze customer reviews on TripAdvisor.com from 2022 to 2023. The aim was to acquire in-depth knowledge of the factors that contribute to customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. By doing so, it was possible to gain insights into the considerations customers consider when making accommodation bookings. It is worth noting that there are other databases that customers use to leave reviews about their travel experiences, such as Booking.com and Hello Peter, but TripAdvisor.com was found to be simple in setting parameters such as selecting the area, selecting between holiday homes, hotels, and more. This study exclusively focused on the analysis of guest house reviews, thereby excluding hotels, bars, and restaurants from consideration. Reviews not written in English were excluded from the analysis. In our analysis, we deliberately omitted the names of the reviews and any identifiable information regarding specific guesthouses. Reviews that used inappropriate languages for academic publications were also excluded.

4. Data Collection

Figure 2 details the systematic process used to acquire the relevant information. First, the parameters were set, specifying the timeframe from 2022 to 2023, area, and type of accommodation. Next, a spreadsheet with three columns—the dates of comments, comments, and ratings—was created. The initial search yielded 2357 reviews, which was too many to read. Therefore, a random sample of 331 reviews was selected based on the guideline of a 95% confidence level, with a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$ and a population proportion of 50% (Field, 2009). The sample size was determined using a random number generator in Excel and subsequently subjected to quality assessment. The assessment focused on evaluating the language used in the reviews and verifying that it met the standards for academic publication. Any names of reviewers, properties, and comments deemed inappropriate were removed, resulting in 186 remaining reviews for further analysis.

In this qualitative study, it was crucial to randomly select a sample size to demonstrate how reviews were chosen for further analysis. Although selecting a random sample size is generally more applicable in quantitative research, it still played a significant role in this qualitative study. The sample size of 186 reviews was analyzed qualitatively using the ATLAS.ti software for thematic coding and categorization of the identified themes. This study used an inductive thematic coding approach, with the research team assisting in the generation of codes from the data using the artificial

intelligence built into ATLAS.ti. This system enabled us to gain insights that would have been impossible to obtain through manual coding. After the themes were generated, a manual process was used to remove duplicates and exclude themes deemed unclear.

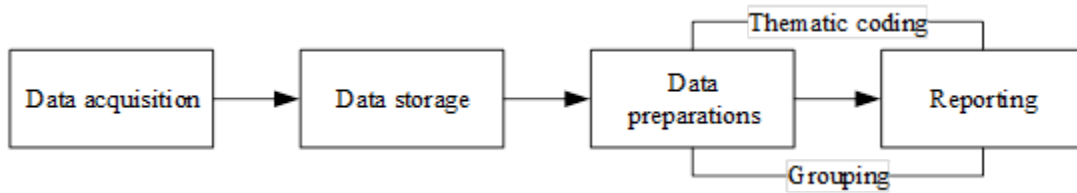


Figure 2. Data preparation and report

The research methodology involved enhancing and verifying archival data through unstructured interviews using open-ended questions. Specifically, a guesthouse owner and principal manager responsible for managing holiday rentals in Margate were interviewed. The owner had more than 15 years of experience in the industry and was well known for their scholarly work. The manager established a holiday-renting company in 2015 at Uvongo after resigning from their previous job at a government agency. They were invited to participate in the study because of their extensive industrial experience and insights. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The study did not involve the disclosure of any personally identifiable information about the participants. Participants were asked to suggest a suitable time and location for the interviews. The duration of the interviews varied, with the guesthouse owner taking approximately one hour and the manager taking around 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the locations of participants' employment, which were their respective offices.

5. Results and Discussion

The software Atlas.ti This produced 540 codes, which were subsequently evaluated and eliminated if they lacked coherence or were duplicates. This process results in a final code structure consisting of 236 codes, as shown in Figure 3. It is important to acknowledge that, in Figure 2, we exclusively depicted themes that emerged on multiple occasions to emphasize the themes that exhibited a higher frequency of occurrence. The overall frequencies of customer experience (n=22) and hotel amenities (n=20) were higher than those of other themes.

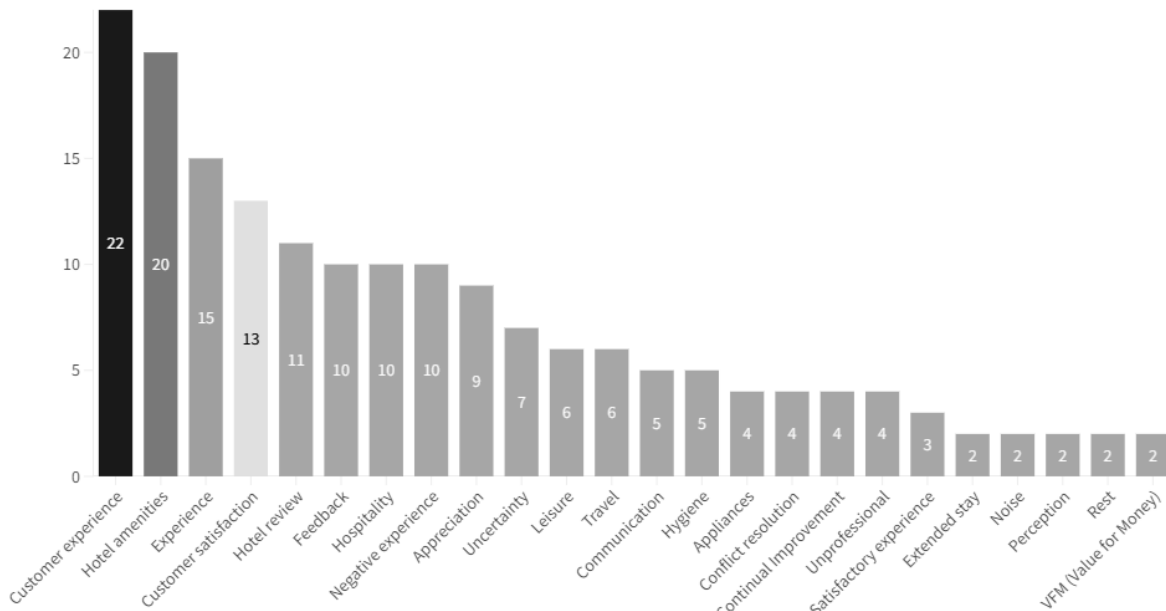


Figure 1. The factors that customers consider when making a booking

Customers are highly interested in amenities and services provided by guesthouses. This was evident from their feedback; for instance, they suggested improving property amenities such as free parking, free high-speed Internet, pools, free breakfast, beach boating, a business center with Internet access, and 24-hour security. Additionally,

customers were pleased with room features, such as air conditioning, a private beach, interconnected rooms, a safe, microwave, refrigerator, cable/satellite TV, and a walk-in shower. They also preferred room types with ocean or pool views and non-smoking or family rooms. This view was supported during the interview with the owner *"It is important to note that customers' demands have evolved. Nowadays, customers like to check their emails while travelling and engaging in leisure activities simultaneously. Therefore, the inclusion of Internet access as part of the package is crucial. The manager also supports the view that " it is imperative to ensure that all amenities advertised are available and functional when guests arrive at the property. Also, be visible in the pictures, I cannot stress enough the importance of pictures"*

Apart from amenities and services, customers also value the maintenance and positioning of the guesthouse as well as information about the surroundings. One of the customers stated that the sea views from their room were breathtaking, and they were impressed by the well-maintained swimming pool, Jacuzzi, and the braai area. Private entry into the beach was a bonus. Moreover, the staff provided useful information about the highlights of the South Coast, which enhanced their experiences. Another customer praised the top-floor room with magnificent 180-degree sea views and the quality of breakfast served on their terrace by friendly waitresses. The customer emphasized the importance of understanding their needs and professional behavior to improve the overall customer experience. *Interviews with the owner revealed that he saw the ocean as a major selling destination. He mentioned that people come to the South Coast to visit the beach, so having a sea view, even if it is a small one, is important. This was further supported by the statement "The area was beautiful, and the surrounding scenery was breathtaking. The size of our room was just right for a family of three, and the staff were extremely welcoming and helpful. Overall, our hospital stay was relaxed. After each event, we looked forward to returning to this haven and relaxing with a cup of coffee while taking in view and enjoying the delectable breakfast that was served each morning. We had a good time with our son looking for ghost crabs on the beach, which was only a short walk away"*

Experience (n=15) was also a frequently appearing theme. The guest enjoyed the area with the low noise levels for example *"I was very impressed with the fact that our hosts made that extra effort to find me a comfortable low noise room, and I left with good memories..."* This creates a long-lasting experience and good memory. Despite the aforementioned factors that can influence the overall customer experience, it is important to note that the booking process itself can also have an impact. For instance, one of the reviews stated, *' We spent a single night at the accommodation while participating in a bridge competition. The rooms exhibited a high degree of cleanliness and notable level of comfort. Additionally, the scenic vistas of the sea are aesthetically pleasing. The hosts exhibited a high degree of warmth, friendliness, and helpfulness. We encountered some initial difficulties in making the booking because of our attempt to contact the owners when they were unavailable. However, booking was promptly confirmed upon receiving a return call from the owner"*.

Based on a review of 13 customers, it was found that their satisfaction largely depended on the service quality provided by the guesthouses. However, customers expressed their discomfort with pets on the property, stating *"The place was well cleaned, and the staff provided good welcoming. We enjoyed our stay. We thank the owner for providing information on the nearby places to visit. We didn't like the dogs, but the owner did a good job of keeping them away from us."* Additionally, customers expected the guest house employees or owner to have good knowledge of the area, as noted by comments like *"the location was perfect, not in the middle of the city's hustle and bustle, but still close enough to reach in a 3-minute drive. The rooms were clean, and secure parking was available. The staff was very friendly and provided us with valuable information about the area."*

Another factor that was found to have an impact on customer satisfaction was the modernization of property. *"We had an amazing stay at the Penthouse which had breathtaking views of the sea. The king-sized bed was extremely comfortable, and the en suite bathroom with the shower and bath was clean and spacious. The location is excellent, with many nearby local attractions. We originally booked for one night but ended up extending our stay to four nights. The breakfast was great, and the warm swimming pool was a nice touch. The owners and staff were friendly and helpful, making our stay even more enjoyable. The only disadvantage was that the room appeared slightly outdated and could use refurbishment. However, this did not detract from our overall experience, and we will return again. Thank you for your hospitality."* There were differing opinions about the modernizing property during the interview. Based on the owner's personal experience, some elderly tourists still like the vintage finish because it reminds them of the bygone times. He says it all comes down to knowing your customers, and that the most crucial thing is to make sure the property is tidy and that everything is functioning as it should, and that the manager shares the same opinion.

When deciding on a place to stay, tourists consider the comments of people who have visited the area to be very important. The review mentioned, *“If you are from outside of South Africa, it is recommended to shop around and be cautious, especially during tough economic times. Some establishments take advantage of foreign visitors. It is best to read reviews and do your research before making a decision”*.

Feedback from the customer shows that changes in weather conditions did not affect their stay. *Even though the weather was not good, the stay was enjoyable, nice room, good service, and breakfast could do with more diversity. (How about a few slices of cheese for the continental breakfast) All in all, we have nothing else to "complain" about - so that must be good.*

5.3 Proposed Improvements

During the study, it was found that customers' experience with a guesthouse is greatly influenced by the amenities provided by the property, such as air conditioning, a private beach, interconnected rooms, a safe microwave, refrigerator, cable or satellite TV, and walk-in showers. These findings are consistent with the work of Andika and Baiquni (2021), who listed free parking, high-speed Internet, a swimming pool, free breakfast, and 24-hour security as factors that contribute to customer experience. During the study's interview, a participant revealed that customers nowadays prefer to have access to functional Internet so that they can work while on vacation. This implies that property owners should ensure that their business offers the Internet, TV, air conditioning, and other amenities to enhance their customers' experience. The study found that customers expected property managers and staff members to have information about their surroundings and be able to provide guidance. The location and maintenance of a property are the factors responsible for a positive customer experience. During a survey of customer comments, it was found that the presence of animals and excessive noise levels hurt guesthouses. To avoid this, it is highly recommended that owners of guesthouses prevent their animals from interacting with visitors. In addition, they should maintain their properties well and offer a sea view while ensuring that the noise levels are kept at a minimum.

This study found that service quality plays a significant role in customer satisfaction when selecting a guesthouse. Service quality refers to the overall assessment of a service's performance and ability to meet or exceed customer expectations (Torres 2014). It is a dynamic, multidimensional concept that includes various dimensions and aspects of both past and present service experience. It is often described as the result of an evaluation process in which customers compare their expectations with those of the service and perceive that they have received.

The dimensions of service quality are multifaceted and include factors such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. These dimensions are crucial in shaping the overall perception of service quality, and are often used as a framework for evaluating and improving service delivery. Additionally, service quality is influenced by various factors such as social capital, cultural values, and customer expectations. The impact of these factors on service quality highlights the complex nature of service quality assessment and management in various contexts.

Moreover, service quality encompasses meeting customer expectations and creating value for customers (Li et al., 2017). This emphasizes the importance of meeting customer needs and delivering values that surpass expectations. In conclusion, service quality is a complex concept that includes various dimensions and is influenced by factors, such as customer expectations, social capital, and cultural values. Guesthouses must understand and manage service quality effectively to ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty in diverse industries.

5.4 Validation

One limitation of this study was its design. Exploratory research is vital for producing new knowledge and understanding, particularly in under-researched areas or where specific research problems lack definitive answers (Van Cauter et al., 2014). It is important to recognize the limitations of this type of research. These limitations include the use of unvalidated scales, small sample sizes, and undefined populations, all of which can affect the reliability and generalizability of the findings (Jansen et al., 2006). Furthermore, exploratory research is broad in scope and seldom provides conclusive answers to specific research questions, thereby limiting its conclusiveness. Despite the limitations in the research design, the findings provide insights for property owners interested in using their properties as guesthouses or improving them.

The second limitation of this study was the data collection method and type of data used. Secondary data research offers advantages such as cost-effectiveness, larger sample sizes, and increased generalizability, but it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations (Harpe, 2009). One of the primary limitations is the potential inadequacy of data sources, which can affect the reliability and quality of the findings (Areco *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, secondary data research may not address specific research questions as it is confined to existing datasets, thus restricting the scope of research. In this study, we removed irrelevant data and supplemented the secondary data through interviews. Although secondary data research has advantages, researchers must carefully assess the quality, relevance, and limitations of the data sources they use. To ensure the validity and reliability of research findings obtained from secondary data sources, it is important to address these limitations. Another challenge is related to the number of interviews conducted. However, this did not affect the data because the interviews were selected sources of data to validate the findings from the secondary data.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously affected the global tourism industry, with the tourism sector in South Africa being one of the hardest hits. As the economy reopens, individual guesthouses take measures to ensure that their property stands out in the market. When choosing a place to stay, holidaymakers must consider several factors that can affect comfort and enjoyment. The main objective of this study is to gain a deep understanding of the factors that influence the decision-making process of holidaymakers when selecting accommodation in the South Coast area, which relies heavily on tourism.

This study is exploratory and based on existing data obtained from the TripAdvisor.com database and interviews. The parameters were set, specifying the timeframe from 2022 to 2023, area, and type of accommodation. A spreadsheet was created with three columns: date of comments, comments, and ratings. The initial search yielded 2357 reviews, which was too many to read. Thus, a random sample of 331 reviews was selected based on the guideline of 95% confidence level, with a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$ and a population proportion of 50%. The sample size was chosen using a random number generator in Excel and subjected to quality assessment to ensure appropriateness for academic publication.

The names of the reviews and properties were removed, leaving 186 reviews for further analyses. These 186 reviews were analyzed qualitatively using ATLAS.ti software for thematic coding and categorization of the identified themes. During the study, it was found that customers' experience with a guesthouse is greatly influenced by the amenities provided by the property, such as air conditioning, a private beach, interconnected rooms, a safe microwave, refrigerator, cable or satellite TV, a walk-in shower, 24-hour security, and free parking among other factors. The study also found that service quality plays a significant role in customer satisfaction when selecting a guesthouses.

One limitation of this study was its design. Exploratory research is vital in producing new knowledge and understanding, particularly in under-researched areas or where specific research problems lack definitive answers. The second limitation of this study was the data collection method and type of data used. Secondary data research offers advantages, such as cost-effectiveness, larger sample sizes, and increased generalizability; however, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations.

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Biography

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