

# Unveiling Key Service Quality Dimensions in Container Shipping: Enhancing Freight Forwarder Satisfaction in Tanzania

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## Abstract

The container shipping industry is vital to global trade, yet in Tanzania, freight forwarder satisfaction often hinges on specific service quality dimensions that are overlooked. This study investigates key factors, speed, reliability, responsiveness and value affecting Tanzanian freight forwarders' experiences, using Inchcape Shipping Line as a case study. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study applies the SERVQUAL model to identify significant satisfaction gaps and priorities, revealing that enhancements in responsiveness and reliability are crucial for fostering customer loyalty and trust. Findings demonstrate that Tanzanian shipping lines must prioritize consistent communication, timely delivery, and transparent pricing to align more closely with freight forwarder needs. These insights offer actionable strategies for service improvement, informing both industry practice and policy. In an era of rapid digitalization, this research provides a path forward for Tanzanian container shipping lines to enhance service standards, boost competitive resilience, and support sustainable growth in the nation's maritime sector.

## Keywords

Freight Forwarder Satisfaction, Service Quality Dimensions, Container Shipping, SERVQUAL Model, Tanzanian Maritime Industry

## 1. Introduction

Container shipping has emerged as the backbone of global trade, driving economic growth and development worldwide. In Tanzania, the shipping industry plays a critical role in facilitating both imports and exports, with container shipping lines working continuously to optimize service quality to meet the expectations of freight forwarders and their clientele. Quality of service is pivotal in determining

freight forwarder satisfaction, which, in turn, is essential for fostering customer loyalty, repeat business, and a positive reputation in the market (Ho et al., 2017). As service quality is inherently challenging to quantify due to its intangible nature, researchers often utilize service quality models, such as the SERVQUAL model, to assess its impact on customer satisfaction (Tas & Yorulmaz, 2021). The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is complex, requiring shipping lines to prioritize service quality dimensions that directly affect freight forwarders' experiences and, ultimately, the industry's competitive edge.

Tanzania's shipping industry has experienced significant transformation as digitization and customer expectations continue to evolve (Hirata, 2019). Freight forwarders, key intermediaries in the logistics chain, play a crucial role in maintaining efficient cargo movement from origin to destination, while their satisfaction depends on specific service quality dimensions such as reliability, speed, responsiveness, and value (Yuen & Thai, 2015). According to studies conducted in similar contexts, responsiveness and reliability are often highlighted as primary drivers of satisfaction, particularly when freight forwarders rely on timely and dependable service to support complex logistics operations (Riitho, 2018). Despite these insights, there remains a gap in knowledge regarding which service quality dimensions are prioritized by freight forwarders in the Tanzanian market, highlighting the need for further exploration within this local context.

The SERVQUAL model provides a robust framework for evaluating these dimensions of service quality, with prior research underscoring its applicability in various settings. For instance, studies in Türkiye and Singapore have used SERVQUAL to reveal that dimensions like speed and reliability significantly impact customer satisfaction within container shipping services, driving customer loyalty and enhancing positive word-of-mouth promotion (Yorulmaz & Tas, 2022; Yuen et al., 2018). These findings are consistent with research conducted in Kenya, where responsiveness was found to be essential for improving satisfaction among freight forwarders in the shipping industry (Riitho, 2018). However, the unique attributes of Tanzania's shipping industry, including its regional dynamics, infrastructure, and customer base, demand an in-depth investigation into which service quality dimensions freight forwarders value most.

This study focuses on identifying preferred service quality dimensions in Tanzania's container shipping sector, using Inchcape Shipping Line as a case study. By analyzing freight forwarders' preferences, it aims to align service delivery with local expectations. The findings will guide policymakers and companies in enhancing satisfaction, market positioning, and sustainable growth. A blend of qualitative and quantitative methodology approaches will address knowledge gaps and provide insights into effective service quality management.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Role of Service Quality in Container Shipping

Service quality in the shipping industry significantly impacts customer satisfac-

tion and loyalty, especially among freight forwarders whose business models rely on consistency and reliability (Huang, Cheng, & Xu, 2019). Research indicates that freight forwarders value service dimensions such as reliability, speed, responsiveness, and value, as these aspects directly influence their ability to fulfil commitments and maintain positive client relationships (Yuen & Thai, 2015). In East Africa, however, infrastructural challenges, port congestion, and limited digitization further complicate service delivery, affecting the speed and reliability of shipping operations (Riitho, 2018). For Tanzanian freight forwarders, delays and inefficiencies not only affect operational costs but also erode confidence in the logistics chain, making service quality a paramount concern in the region's shipping industry.

## 2.2. SERVQUAL Model in Shipping Industry Research

The SERVQUAL model, initially developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), is widely regarded as a comprehensive framework for evaluating service quality across multiple dimensions. This model examines five core aspects of service tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy that influence customer satisfaction. Studies applying SERVQUAL in the shipping industry reveal that reliability and responsiveness are among the most critical factors in determining customer satisfaction. For instance, research in Singapore's shipping sector by Yuen et al. (2018) found that reliability, coupled with swift and responsive customer service, significantly enhanced customer satisfaction and fostered loyalty. Similarly, Yorulmaz & Tas (2022) found in Türkiye that service reliability is a strong predictor of customers' behavioral intentions, indicating its vital role in building long-term client relationships. These studies underscore the importance of adopting service quality models like SERVQUAL to identify which dimensions most effectively drive freight forwarder satisfaction.

In Tanzania, the application of SERVQUAL is particularly relevant given the logistical challenges faced by the country's shipping industry. Freight forwarders operating in Tanzania prioritize reliability and responsiveness to mitigate risks associated with delays and unpredictable port operations. However, the practical application of the SERVQUAL model in Tanzania remains limited, with little research directly examining the specific dimensions that drive satisfaction for Tanzanian freight forwarders. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by applying the SERVQUAL model to understand which service aspects freight forwarders in Tanzania value most, with the aim of informing strategies for improving customer satisfaction.

## 2.3. Service Quality in the East African Shipping

In the East African shipping industry, service quality challenges are often compounded by infrastructural and operational limitations. Previous research within the region suggests that responsiveness and speed are particularly crucial for meeting freight forwarder expectations, as delays and logistical inefficiencies are

common obstacles in African ports (Riitho, 2018). Riitho's study in Kenya found that responsiveness and speed were highly valued by freight forwarders due to the unpredictability associated with port operations and cargo delays. Furthermore, Vandayar's (2005) research in South Africa indicated that superior service quality led to positive client perceptions and reduced service switching, highlighting the importance of consistency and reliability in service delivery. These findings underscore the unique challenges and expectations within East Africa's shipping industry and reinforce the need for Tanzanian container shipping lines to align service quality with the specific needs of local freight forwarders.

#### **2.4. Container Shipping Service Quality in Tanzania**

While research on service quality in Tanzanian container shipping is limited, studies on related areas, such as port service quality and logistics governance, offer useful insights. Juma & Jin (2021) highlight delays in cargo handling, lack of transparency, and inadequate digitalization as key challenges affecting freight forwarder satisfaction in Tanzanian ports. Other studies emphasize the need to enhance logistics systems and adopt customer-focused service standards to boost growth and efficiency. However, research specifically addressing freight forwarder satisfaction with container shipping lines in Tanzania remains scarce. This study seeks to fill this gap by identifying the most valued service quality dimensions, focusing on the services provided by Inchcape Shipping Line.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employed a case study design to investigate the service quality dimensions that influence freight forwarder satisfaction with Inchcape Shipping Line in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The case study approach allows for an in-depth, context-specific exploration of the factors shaping customer satisfaction within the Tanzanian container shipping sector. Focusing on Inchcape Shipping Line as a representative shipping company enables a detailed examination of the practical experiences and expectations of Tanzanian freight forwarders, who play a central role in the logistics chain. This section outlines the sampling approach, data collection methods, and analytical techniques used in this study, alongside a discussion of potential limitations and strategies to enhance methodological rigor.

#### **3.1. Sampling Approach**

The study population comprises employees from six freight-forwarding companies purposely selected because 1) Each handled  $\geq 5000$  TEU with Inchcape during FY 2023/24, together representing 67 % of Inchcape's Tanzanian throughput; 2) The set covers multinational, regional and locally-owned firms, ensuring ownership diversity; 3) All maintain current contractual agreements with Inchcape, guaranteeing recent, first-hand experience; 4) Each operates full-service offices at Dar es Salaam Port, giving comparable exposure to port-side constraints. From an estimated population of 800 employees, a purposive sample of 260 respondents

was selected based on their specific expertise and direct involvement in container shipping operations. This selection strategy ensures that only those with substantial experience and relevant knowledge of Inchcape's service quality participate in the study, thereby enhancing the relevance and accuracy of the findings.

The choice of 260 respondents is justified by considering the need for both diversity and depth in the responses. With a sample size that represents 32.5% of the total population, this study achieves a balance between statistical significance and practical feasibility. Furthermore, this sample size is large enough to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives across different roles and organizational levels, providing a comprehensive view of freight forwarder satisfaction in relation to service quality dimensions. The inclusion of employees from multiple companies also helps to reduce potential biases that may arise from a single organizational perspective, thereby increasing the generalizability of the findings within Tanzania.

### 3.2. Justification for Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was selected as it allows for the targeted inclusion of individuals who possess specific knowledge and expertise related to the research objectives. In the case of this study, freight forwarders with direct experience in container shipping interactions with Inchcape Shipping Line were deemed essential for generating insights into service quality dimensions.

However, purposive sampling can introduce selection bias, as the sample may not fully represent the entire population of freight forwarders in Tanzania. To mitigate this risk, several measures were implemented:

*Diversity in Roles and Levels:* Respondents were selected from various roles within each freight forwarding company, including operational staff, supervisors, and managers, to capture a range of perspectives on service quality.

*Inclusion of Multiple Companies:* By involving employees from six different freight forwarding companies, the study minimizes the likelihood of company-specific biases and enhances the overall representativeness of the sample within the Tanzanian shipping industry.

*Experienced Respondents:* Only individuals with substantial experience and direct involvement in container shipping activities were included in the sample, ensuring that responses reflect informed insights on service quality.

Through these measures, the study aims to maintain rigor and reliability while leveraging the advantages of purposive sampling in capturing specialized expertise.

### 3.3. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of freight forwarder satisfaction with Inchcape Shipping Line's service quality.

To ensure cultural and infrastructural relevance, the original five-dimension SERVQUAL scale was first pre-tested through eight semi-structured interviews

with senior freight-forwarder managers in Dar es Salaam. Port-specific service attributes (e.g., “cargo-release transparency” and “ICT accessibility”) were mapped onto the SERVQUAL dimensions and a factor analysis (KMO = 0.81; Bartlett  $p < 0.001$ ) confirmed a parsimonious four-dimension structure Speed, Reliability, Responsiveness and Value that captures Tanzanian logistical realities such as intermittent power supply, limited track-and-trace infrastructure and documentary bottlenecks.

*Questionnaires:* Structured questionnaires were administered to the selected respondents, focusing on key service quality dimensions such as reliability, speed, responsiveness, and value. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = Least important to 5 = Most important) to quantify respondents’ ratings of each service quality dimension. This quantitative approach enabled the collection of standardized data, allowing for comparative analysis across dimensions.

*Interviews:* In addition to questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 key informants, including supervisors and managers. These interviews provided qualitative insights into service quality challenges and specific expectations, offering a nuanced understanding of the factors driving satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Interview questions were designed to probe deeper into the themes identified in the quantitative data, ensuring a cohesive analysis across both data sources.

*Documentary Analysis:* Secondary data were gathered from academic journals and industry reports, to provide context and background information. This analysis allowed for a comparison between the primary data findings and established insights from previous studies on service quality in container shipping.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted through both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to effectively interpret the quantitative and qualitative data gathered. The objective of this analysis was to identify the most valued service quality dimensions for freight forwarders at Inchcape Shipping Line and to understand the relationship between these dimensions and satisfaction metrics. Quantitative data was processed using SPSS software, where measures such as mean, standard deviation, and variance are calculated to determine preferences for service quality dimensions like reliability, speed, responsiveness, and value. Inferential statistics, including the Wilcoxon signed-rank test and Spearman’s rank correlation test, were employed to assess satisfaction gaps and analyse correlations. Additionally, qualitative data obtained through interviews undergoes thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes in service expectations and perceived quality.

#### 3.4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide a clear summary of the data and an initial understanding of the responses to service quality dimensions. The primary descriptive measures used include mean, standard deviation, and variance, which highlight the central tendency and variability of responses. Each service

quality dimension reliability, speed, responsiveness, and value are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Least important, 5 = Most important). The mean score for each dimension is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\sum X}{N} \text{Mean}$$

where:

$X$  is the score for each response;

$N$  is the total number of responses.

The variance ( $s^2$ ) and standard deviation ( $s$ ) are also calculated to understand the distribution and consistency of responses:

$$s^2 = \frac{\sum (X - \text{Mean})^2}{N}$$

$$s = \sqrt{s^2}$$

Using SPSS, descriptive statistics for each dimension are computed, with the resulting table displaying mean scores, standard deviations, and variances for each service quality dimension.

From the **Table 1**, “Speed” emerges as the most preferred dimension based on its higher mean score, followed closely by “Reliability”, “Responsiveness”, and “Value”. The consistency of responses is indicated by the lower standard deviation and variance in the “Value” dimension, suggesting more agreement among respondents regarding its importance.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of service quality dimensions.

Service Quality Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Reliability	4.22	0.93	0.87
Speed	4.28	0.92	0.85
Responsiveness	4.22	1.01	1.02
Value	4.22	0.83	0.69

### 3.4.2. Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test for Satisfaction Gaps

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to analyze gaps between customer expectations and perceived service quality, comparing ordinal data from paired responses to identify satisfaction discrepancies. For each service quality dimension, respondents provided ratings on both expected and perceived service (**Table 2**).

**Table 2.** The resulting wilcoxon signed-rank test output from SPSS.

Service Quality Dimension	Z-score	p-value
Reliability	-7.96	0.000
Speed	-6.44	0.000
Responsiveness	-7.08	0.000
Value	-6.43	0.000

With  $p$ -values below 0.05 for all dimensions, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating significant gaps between expected and perceived service quality across all dimensions. The negative Z-scores show that perceived service quality generally falls short of expectations, highlighting areas for improvement in meeting freight forwarder needs.

### 3.4.3. Spearman's Rank Correlation Test for Service Quality and Satisfaction

Spearman's rank correlation was employed to assess the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction metrics, such as repeat purchase and positive word of mouth. The test calculates the correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) as follows:

$$\rho = 1 - \frac{6 \sum d_i^2}{n(n^2 - 1)}$$

where:

$d_i$  is the difference between ranks of each pair,

$n$  is the number of pairs.

Spearman's rank correlation output from SPSS provides insight into how each service quality dimension correlates with satisfaction measures (**Table 3**).

**Table 3.** Spearman's rank correlation output from SPSS.

Service Quality Dimension	Repeat Purchase ( $\rho$ )	Word of Mouth ( $\rho$ )	Overall Satisfaction ( $\rho$ )
Reliability	0.41	0.58	0.62
Speed	0.23	0.28	0.48
Responsiveness	0.48	0.33	0.54
Value	0.53	0.55	0.65

These results show that "Reliability" and "Value" have moderate to strong positive correlations with overall satisfaction and word-of-mouth promotion, indicating their significant impact on customer loyalty and positive impressions.

## 4. Results and Findings

The findings from this study provide an in-depth understanding of the service quality dimensions most valued by freight forwarders in Tanzania, specifically in their dealings with Inchcape Shipping Line. By combining quantitative survey data and qualitative interview insights, this study identifies critical aspects of service quality that impact satisfaction and areas for potential improvement. Each dimension speed, reliability, responsiveness, and value were analyzed in terms of perceived importance, satisfaction gaps, and correlations with overall satisfaction metrics, while thematic analysis of qualitative data offered a richer contextual understanding of these findings.

#### 4.1. Quantitative Analysis of Service Quality Dimensions

Quantitative results reveal that “Speed” is the most valued dimension among freight forwarders, with the highest mean rating, indicating that timely delivery is crucial to their operational needs. Freight forwarders rely heavily on timely service to manage logistics efficiently, avoid delays, and meet commitments to their own clients. This high prioritization of speed aligns with the logistical demands of the industry, where any delay in container movement can have cascading effects on the supply chain, resulting in increased costs, customer dissatisfaction, and potential reputational risks. “Reliability”, “Responsiveness”, and “Value” also received high mean ratings, reflecting freight forwarders’ need for consistent performance, prompt support, and a comprehensive service offering. The relatively low variance in responses, particularly for the “Value” dimension, suggests strong agreement among freight forwarders regarding these expectations.

The inferential analysis of satisfaction gaps using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test further highlighted areas where Inchcape Shipping Line may be falling short of meeting customer expectations. Significant gaps were identified across all service quality dimensions, with “Reliability” and “Responsiveness” showing the largest discrepancies. This finding indicates that although freight forwarders highly value these dimensions, their expectations are not fully met, especially regarding consistent service delivery and responsive customer support. These satisfaction gaps suggest that while Inchcape may be providing generally satisfactory services, there are notable areas where improvements are required to align with freight forwarders’ high standards and specific needs.

A Kruskal-Wallis test compared expectation–perception gaps across the six firms. No significant difference emerged for Speed ( $\chi^2 = 4.87, p = 0.43$ ) or Reliability ( $\chi^2 = 6.12, p = 0.19$ ). Responsiveness showed modest heterogeneity ( $\chi^2 = 11.05, p = 0.05$ ); post-hoc Dunn tests indicated that the narrower gap reported by BOLLORE chiefly drove this effect. Thus, satisfaction gaps are broadly consistent across firms, with only minor variance in responsiveness perceptions.

#### 4.2. Correlation Analysis: Link between Service Quality and Satisfaction

The Spearman’s rank correlation analysis revealed meaningful relationships between the service quality dimensions and key satisfaction metrics, such as repeat purchase, positive word-of-mouth, and overall satisfaction. Among the dimensions, “Reliability” and “Value” showed moderate to strong positive correlations with overall satisfaction and customer loyalty indicators. This underscores that freight forwarders place substantial importance on reliability having services delivered as promised, consistently and without unexpected disruptions. Similarly, “Value”, which encompasses the combined benefits of the service package (including documentation quality, cargo tracking, and cost-effectiveness), was also closely linked to satisfaction. These correlations highlight the strategic value of investing in these dimensions, as improvements in reliability and value could lead

to higher customer loyalty and favorable recommendations.

“Responsiveness” also demonstrated a moderate correlation with repeat purchase, reflecting that freight forwarders are more likely to continue business with a shipping line that is responsive to their needs and quick to address issues. Speed, while highly valued, showed a relatively lower correlation with loyalty metrics, which may indicate that while it is essential for immediate operational efficiency, other dimensions like reliability and responsiveness are stronger determinants of long-term satisfaction and customer retention. These insights suggest that Inchcape Shipping Line could benefit from focusing on these areas, particularly enhancing service reliability and responsiveness, to foster deeper customer loyalty.

### 4.3. Qualitative Analysis of Thematic Insights

The qualitative analysis of interview responses provided additional insights into freight forwarder expectations, offering a nuanced understanding of service quality dimensions from a customer perspective. Three major themes emerged as crucial factors influencing satisfaction: “Timely Delivery”, “Responsiveness to Customer Needs”, and “Consistency in Communication”. These themes reflect the practical experiences and expectations of freight forwarders and provide essential context for understanding the quantitative findings.

*Timely Delivery* emerged as the most emphasized theme, consistent with the high importance placed on “Speed” in the quantitative analysis. Freight forwarders highlighted that timely delivery is vital for ensuring smooth operations and maintaining their reputations with clients. Delays in service not only affect the immediate shipment but also disrupt the broader logistics chain, leading to increased costs and time losses. Freight forwarders noted that they depend on reliable, on-schedule service to prevent costly delays, avoid penalties, and uphold commitments. This theme underscores that while “Speed” is highly valued, it is the broader impact of timeliness on the supply chain that makes this dimension particularly critical for freight forwarders.

*Responsiveness to Customer Needs* was another prominent theme, reflecting the necessity for prompt, attentive service. Freight forwarders emphasized that they expect quick and effective responses from customer support, especially when unforeseen issues arise, such as documentation adjustments, cargo tracking updates, or unexpected scheduling changes. The responsiveness of customer service builds trust and confidence, as it reassures freight forwarders that their needs will be met promptly and that their operations will not be hindered by lack of support. Many respondents expressed frustration with delayed responses or limited availability of support staff, indicating that improving responsiveness could greatly enhance customer satisfaction. This theme aligns with the significant satisfaction gap identified in the quantitative analysis, confirming that responsiveness is an area where Inchcape could make impactful improvements.

*Consistency in Communication* was a third critical theme, illustrating the im-

portance of clear, transparent, and regular updates from the shipping line. Freight forwarders stated that they rely on consistent communication to manage their operations effectively, as it enables them to anticipate and prepare for any disruptions or delays. Many respondents highlighted that regular updates on shipment status, proactive notifications of potential delays, and accessible communication channels are essential for managing expectations and providing accurate information to their own customers. This theme supports existing research on the role of effective communication in customer satisfaction and underscores that clear, reliable communication channels are a foundational aspect of a high-quality service experience. Freight forwarders suggested that digital communication tools, such as real-time tracking and automated notifications, would be particularly helpful in enhancing communication consistency.

To enhance clarity, a summary **Table 4** has been developed to map these themes to the SERVQUAL dimensions, offering a structured perspective on the qualitative findings.

**Table 4.** Mapping of thematic findings to SERVQUAL dimensions.

Thematic Finding	Description	Related SERVQUAL Dimension(s)
<b>Timely Delivery</b>	Freight forwarders emphasized the critical role of timely delivery in maintaining efficient logistics and preventing costly delays. This theme highlights the need for shipping lines to uphold dependable delivery schedules to support the smooth functioning of the supply chain.	Reliability
<b>Responsiveness to Customer Needs</b>	Respondents noted the importance of receiving quick and attentive responses from the shipping line, especially when unexpected issues arise. This theme reflects freight forwarders' reliance on prompt support to manage their logistics operations effectively.	Responsiveness
<b>Consistency in Communication</b>	Regular, clear communication was cited as essential for managing expectations, particularly regarding shipment status and potential delays. Consistent updates build trust, enabling freight forwarders to plan operations and communicate accurately with their own clients.	Assurance and Empathy
<b>Proactive Problem Resolution</b>	Freight forwarders value the shipping line's proactive approach in anticipating and resolving issues before they escalate, allowing them to maintain operational timelines and client trust. This proactive stance in addressing problems is seen as a key aspect of reliable service.	Assurance and Responsiveness
<b>Digital Tracking and Updates</b>	There is a strong preference for digital tools, such as real-time tracking and automated notifications, to stay informed and ensure efficient logistics management. This theme reflects the evolving expectation for technology-driven services in the logistics industry.	Tangibility and Responsiveness
<b>Transparency in Service Pricing</b>	Freight forwarders expressed the need for clear and upfront information on pricing and additional fees, allowing for better budget planning and improved client relations. Transparency in pricing is viewed as integral to fostering trust and enhancing customer satisfaction.	Tangibility and Empathy

The mapping of thematic findings to SERVQUAL dimensions underscores how specific service quality elements impact freight forwarder satisfaction in Tanzania.

*Reliability and Timeliness:* The theme of *Timely Delivery* directly correlates with the SERVQUAL dimension of *Reliability*. Freight forwarders view on-time

delivery as fundamental to their operational efficiency. Delays disrupt the entire supply chain, leading to increased costs and potential reputational risks. Reliability, therefore, is not merely an expectation but a necessity in maintaining the freight forwarders' own commitments to their clients.

*Responsiveness:* Both *Responsiveness to Customer Needs* and *Proactive Problem Resolution* map to the *Responsiveness* dimension. Freight forwarders appreciate shipping lines that not only respond quickly to inquiries and disruptions but also demonstrate foresight by addressing potential issues before they arise. This proactive responsiveness is particularly valuable in a context where delays and logistical issues are common, making it essential for shipping lines to be agile and customer-focused.

Common operational problems that frequently trigger these proactive measures include late issuance of delivery orders at the port (which stalls haulage scheduling), mismatches between customs EDI records and physical cargo status, unexpected roll-overs of containers to later vessels, and intermittent downtime of the Tanzania Customs Integrated System (TANCIS). By anticipating such issues and notifying forwarders in advance, Inchcape can help customers resubmit documents, reroute cargo, or book alternative equipment before penalties accrue, thereby reinforcing its reputation for hands-on, solution-oriented service.

*Assurance and Communication Consistency:* The importance of *Consistency in Communication* aligns with both *Assurance* and *Empathy*. Freight forwarders rely on regular updates to manage their logistics effectively and reduce uncertainties. This need for clear, transparent communication reflects a deeper requirement for trust and assurance, especially given the unpredictable nature of shipping logistics in Tanzania. Consistent communication channels, such as notifications of potential delays, help to mitigate customer anxiety and strengthen the service relationship.

*Tangibility and Technological Support:* The preference for *Digital Tracking and Updates* links to the *Tangibility* and *Responsiveness* dimensions. Freight forwarders increasingly expect digital solutions, such as real-time cargo tracking, which represent tangible enhancements in service visibility and accessibility. This finding highlights the evolving nature of service quality expectations in Tanzania, as customers now expect technology-driven tools that enhance efficiency and communication.

*Empathy through Transparency:* *Transparency in Service Pricing* reflects both *Tangibility* and *Empathy*. Freight forwarders value transparency as it allows them to manage budgets effectively and provides a sense of fairness and openness in the business relationship. Transparent pricing practices demonstrate empathy, as they show an understanding of the freight forwarders' need to plan and avoid unexpected costs.

Freight forwarders consistently pointed to four recurrent operational disruptions that impede timely cargo release and inflate their costs: 1) Delivery orders are often issued late in the afternoon, forcing trucks to queue overnight and incur

trailer-standby fees; 2) Discrepancies between the customs-release status displayed in TANCIS and the physical availability of containers in the yard create unplanned storage charges; 3) Unannounced 24-hour outages of the CargoSmart online-tracking portal deprive agents of real-time shipment visibility; and (iv) last-minute changes in vessel schedules are communicated only after revised manifests reach the port, leaving forwarders unable to reschedule haulage resources. Interview respondents stressed that each of these disruptions could be substantially mitigated if Inchcape were to adopt a proactive problem-resolution posture specifically, advance notification via a single escalation desk and automated alerts that anticipate rather than merely report delays.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study underscore the critical role that specific service quality dimensions particularly reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and tangibility play in shaping freight forwarder satisfaction within Tanzania's container shipping sector. By integrating insights from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study offers a nuanced understanding of freight forwarder expectations and satisfaction levels regarding Inchcape Shipping Line's services.

The emphasis on reliability and responsiveness in this study aligns with findings from global research, which consistently highlight these dimensions as fundamental to customer satisfaction in the shipping industry. For instance, studies conducted in Singapore and Türkiye have shown that reliability and responsiveness significantly influence customer loyalty and satisfaction, as they directly impact logistics efficiency and operational continuity (Yuen et al., 2018; Yorulmaz & Tas, 2022). In Tanzania, however, these dimensions are even more critical due to infrastructure constraints and operational inefficiencies that increase the need for dependable, responsive service. Unlike regions with advanced digital infrastructure and established supply chain networks, Tanzanian freight forwarders experience more frequent disruptions, making reliable and proactive service essential for maintaining trust and minimizing operational risks.

The importance of consistent communication, as identified in this study, also aligns with Vandayar (2005)'s findings in South Africa, where regular, transparent updates were found to reduce service switching and foster positive client relationships. Tanzanian freight forwarders, similarly, value clear and consistent communication channels to keep them informed and enable better planning within a challenging logistics environment. However, the Tanzanian context diverges in its limited adoption of digital tools for real-time tracking and automated updates, which are more commonly utilized in other regions. This gap in technological integration highlights an area for improvement, as increased access to digital communication tools could enhance service transparency and responsiveness, thus improving overall satisfaction.

This apparent paradox mirrors the "threshold" or hygiene-factor effect observed in service research: once a basic level of timeliness is achieved, additional

gains have diminishing influence on loyalty because clients take speed for granted. By contrast, reliability and value remain differentiating factors and therefore display stronger statistical ties to repeat patronage and word-of-mouth (Oliver, 1980).

Furthermore, this study's findings on the importance of transparent pricing reflect a growing trend in customer expectations within developing economies, where clear, upfront cost information is valued for its role in budget planning and fostering trust. Existing literature on service transparency in East Africa also points to similar conclusions, with studies indicating that transparent practices can mitigate customer anxiety and enhance satisfaction (Juma & Jin, 2021). These findings collectively emphasize that while Tanzanian freight forwarders share common priorities with counterparts in other regions, they also have distinct needs shaped by the operational challenges within Tanzania's shipping sector.

## 6. Actionable Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for Inchcape Shipping Line and other container shipping stakeholders to enhance service quality and address specific expectations of Tanzanian freight forwarders:

*Invest in Timeliness and Reliability:* Given the high value placed on timely delivery, Inchcape Shipping Line should prioritize improvements in operational reliability. Enhancing scheduling accuracy, minimizing delays, and implementing performance monitoring systems could help Inchcape meet the timeliness expectations of freight forwarders. This approach aligns with global best practices, where consistency in service delivery has been shown to improve customer loyalty and reduce complaints.

*Enhance Responsiveness and Customer Support:* Freight forwarders in Tanzania require prompt responses to operational challenges. To meet this need, Inchcape could consider expanding its customer support team, particularly during peak operational hours, to ensure timely responses to freight forwarder inquiries. Additionally, training customer service representatives to handle urgent requests effectively would help build trust and improve satisfaction levels. Introducing a centralized platform where freight forwarders can quickly access support resources and updates may also enhance responsiveness.

*Implement Consistent and Transparent Communication Channels:* Regular and clear communication is crucial in mitigating uncertainty for Tanzanian freight forwarders. Inchcape should establish standardized communication protocols, ensuring that clients receive consistent updates on shipment status, potential delays, and any changes in schedules. Moreover, adopting automated notification systems and digital tracking tools would allow Inchcape to provide real-time updates, enhancing transparency and reducing client anxiety about shipping timelines.

*Expand Digital Solutions for Real-Time Tracking:* Freight forwarders increasingly expect access to digital tools that allow for better tracking and management

of shipments. Inchcape Shipping Line could invest in digital tracking solutions and automated communication channels that enable real-time updates and allow customers to monitor their shipments directly. This enhancement would not only address the need for transparency and responsiveness but also position Inchcape as an innovator in Tanzania's shipping industry.

*Assess technological and financial feasibility.* A preliminary cost-benefit scan suggests that integrating Inchcape's ERP with the Tanzania Customs Integrated System (TANCIS) is financially attainable: development of an API bridge would cost about USD 25,000, with recurring cloud-hosting expenses near USD 800 per month figures that fit within the IT-upgrade envelope in Inchcape's 2025 capital plan. Even under conservative assumptions of a 5 percent reduction in demurrage penalties, the pay-back period is roughly 18 months. During the build phase, a low-cost GSM-based SMS alert service deployable in under six weeks offers a pragmatic interim step, delivering quick wins while the full digital solution is rolled out.

*Provide Transparent Pricing Information.* Transparency in service pricing was identified as a valued factor among freight forwarders, as it enables better financial planning and enhances client trust. Inchcape Shipping Line should consider implementing clear, itemized pricing structures and communicating any additional fees upfront. Providing transparent information on costs will help avoid unexpected charges, reducing potential dissatisfaction and fostering a more trustworthy relationship with clients.

*Develop Proactive Problem-Solving Protocols.* Freight forwarders appreciate proactive problem resolution, as it prevents minor issues from escalating and disrupting the logistics chain. Inchcape could benefit from establishing protocols that empower staff to address issues quickly, anticipate potential challenges, and implement solutions before clients are affected. This proactive approach would reinforce Inchcape's reputation as a reliable and customer-oriented shipping line, enhancing freight forwarder loyalty.

## 7. Implications for the Tanzanian Shipping Industry

By adopting these recommendations, Inchcape Shipping Line can better align with the expectations of Tanzanian freight forwarders and contribute to raising service standards within the industry. The study also holds broader implications for Tanzania's container shipping sector, underscoring the importance of responsiveness, transparency, and technology-driven solutions in achieving customer satisfaction. For policymakers and industry leaders, these findings highlight the need for investments in infrastructure, digitalization, and capacity-building initiatives to support a competitive, resilient maritime economy.

As the Tanzanian shipping industry continues to evolve, addressing the service quality dimensions valued by freight forwarders will not only improve customer satisfaction but also enhance the sector's contribution to national economic growth and global trade competitiveness (UNCTAD, 2021). By prioritizing relia-

bility, responsiveness, and transparent communication, Tanzanian shipping lines can better navigate the challenges of a developing logistics environment, positioning themselves as trusted partners in the international supply chain.

This case-study approach focuses exclusively on Inchcape Shipping Line; service designs and customer-engagement models differ among other carriers (e.g., Maersk, CMA-CGM). Consequently, the gap magnitudes and dimensional priorities reported here should not be extrapolated wholesale to the wider liner market. Future studies that incorporate multiple carriers or extend the analysis to additional Tanzanian ports would provide a more robust basis for generalizing service-quality insights across the national shipping landscape.

## 8. Conclusion

This study highlights key service quality dimensions which are reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and transparency that influence freight forwarder satisfaction in Tanzania's container shipping sector. By analyzing Inchcape Shipping Line's services, it identifies areas for improvement, including communication consistency, digital tracking, and timely delivery. Enhancing these dimensions can strengthen customer loyalty, foster positive client relationships, and improve Tanzania's global competitiveness. Policymakers are urged to support digital infrastructure and promote transparency to align the industry with international standards and boost the maritime economy. Future research could explore digitalization's impact on service quality and the role of technologies like blockchain, or conduct comparative studies across East African ports to uncover best practices and synergies for regional improvements, guiding a resilient, customer-focused shipping sector.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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