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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
SERVQUAL; service quality; online freelancing; sustainable client relationships; client loyalty; client trust; responsiveness	Background: Online freelancing increasingly relies on digitally mediated interactions in which the quality of services, communication, credibility, and personalized attention may affect the sustainability of freelancer–client relationship. The five SERVQUAL dimensions Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy, were studied to investigate the relationship between them and the Sustainable Client Relationship (SCR) indicators Client Loyalty, Client Trust, and Client Reviews and Ratings. Methods: The research used a quantitative cross-sectional design. Data was gathered from 250 active freelancers in digital labor platforms and professional services markets using a structured online questionnaire. The data were analyzed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, exploratory factor analysis, and multiple regression. Results: All five SERVQUAL dimensions were positively and significantly correlated with SCR. Responsiveness showed the strongest correlation with SCR ($r = .629, p < .01$), followed by Assurance ($r = .619, p < .01$) and Empathy ($r = .592, p < .01$). The regression models explained 42.7% of the variance in Client Loyalty, 40.8% in Client Trust, and 39.7% in Reviews and Ratings. Responsiveness was the only dimension that significantly predicted all three outcomes. Assurance significantly predicted Client Loyalty and Client Trust, Empathy significantly predicted Reviews and Ratings, and Tangibles significantly predicted Client Loyalty only. Reliability did not significantly predict any of the three outcomes. Conclusions: The findings show that communication- and relationship-oriented dimensions of service quality are especially important in online freelancing. Effective communication, credibility, and client touches seem to play a pivotal role in maintaining trust, loyalty, and positive client reviews. The research justifies SERVQUAL's adaptation requirements to digital labor markets and exposes that dimensions make different contributions to outcomes of long-term freelancer–client relationships. The findings offer practical tips for freelancers aiming to build better, more sustained client relationships.
ARTICLE HISTORY	
Date of Submission: 13-08-2026 Date of Acceptance: 29-09-2026 Date of Publication: 06-10-2026	
	
	2026 Journal of Social Research Development
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Email:	sabaqayyum920@gmail.com
DOI	https://doi.org/10.59075/jsrd.v7i8.569
Volume/Issue	7(8), 2026, 183-205

Introduction

The gig economy has been in a dynamic growth phase and has transformed the nature of work by aligning technology and flexible working methods to different productive activities (Baitenizov et al., 2019; Alauddin et al., 2025). Online platforms like UpWork, Fiverr, and Freelancer.com make it easy for the users to advertise their niche services and get in touch with paying customers from anywhere in the world (Stephany et al., 2021). These platforms have created job opportunities in areas like information technology, programming, graphic designing, writing, data analytics, digital marketing, and business consulting. Quality and professionalism have also grown to be more important to freelance survival as competition has increased over time due to the increasing number of freelancers and entrepreneurs (Gautam et al., 2024; Barlage et al., 2023). Freelancers function as service providers as well as paid employees and have to manage customer requirements, communicate with customer, address requests for revision, provide professional legitimacy to the service they give. Client ratings and reviews matter and so does repeat hiring and the comments from online freelancing markets, for visibility, reputation, and future opportunities (Ren et al., 2023). Therefore, service quality is an important factor in maintaining professional performance and sustaining endurance with clients.

Relationships and communication, and how they're managed, are even more crucial in the virtually connected freelance environment. Interactions with a freelancer can occur in numerous countries and cultures, and in different time zones, and the clients assess a freelancer based on digital and behavioral signals: profile quality and presentation, response time, professionalism, and previous feedbacks (Fiers, 2024). The SERVQUAL model is a five-dimension model that can address these factors namely Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy. These are the dimensions that are seen in freelancing, such as professional digital presentation, timely communication, competence, credibility, consistency of delivery, flexibility, and personal service. Thus, Sustainable Client Relationships is, in this study, defined as Client Loyalty, Client Trust and Client Reviews and Ratings, which is defined as the ability of freelancer to build relationships beyond the first sale (Rani & Furrer, 2021).

Although quality service has been a topic of study in various traditional service industries such as the banking sector, retailing sector, education sector and health-care sector, this is not true for on-line freelancing. Freelancing can be conceptually described as a virtual and project-oriented service interaction, as geographically distributed, and as mediated by digital (Duggan et al., 2020). Freelancers also operate without any quality control processes of any organizational body and use customer satisfaction, feasibility and the rating system, and customer reviews as their improvement indicators. Despite this, few studies have addressed the freelancer's perspective and management of service-quality practices in service delivery. This raises an important research question as freelance behaviors affect communication, project delivery outcomes, responsiveness, professionalism, and customizing client interaction, while the interdependence between these behaviors and sustainable client relationships is under-researched. Hence, it is important to explore how SERVQUAL can

apply to the field of freelancing, and which service qualities are most clearly linked to long-term client relationships (Beerepoot & Oprins, 2022).

Although the SERVQUAL is widely applied in several traditional service businesses, the application of the SERVQUAL is sparse in the context of online freelancing. The digital aspect of freelancing carries a format that is both different and different than the one of a service (Yusuf et al., 2025) as is the digital representation and quantum of the model's role, which are replaced by digital profiles, portfolios, interactions, etc. and digital products. Most research has been done in terms of the client's or consumer's perspective, leaving little interest in the freelancer's own thoughts or the experience of service quality. Some quantitative correlation work is also available here between freelancers and their perceptions of the sustainability of the long-term relationship and SERVQUAL practices. However, research has tended to explore elements of trust, satisfaction, communication or reputation in isolation. This study takes a different angle by treating the SCR relationships as three distinct parts: Client Loyalty, Client Trust and Reviews and Ratings, and explores the relationship between the SCR as a whole by analyzing the strength of the SCR relationship between all five of the SERVICE dimensions.

The main objective of this study is:

To examine the influence of Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy on Sustainable Client Relationships in online freelancing.

The study aims at meeting the objective and an assessment is provided on the versatility of SERVQUAL for digitally mediated freelance work and which dimensions of service quality influence the outcomes measures in longer-term client relationship. This study is valuable in theory, in the empirical field as well as in practice (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). It theoretically expands the scope of the SERVQUAL on the traditional service industry and applies the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL to online freelancing. The study offers some insight in the application of traditional service quality concepts in a traditional virtual service relationship, thus representing an important contribution to the literature on service quality, digital labour, relationship marketing and platform work.

It presents quantitative evidence from an empirical study, involving 250 freelancers, regarding the relationship between the five dimensions of service quality and sustainable client relationships. Thus, the study will seek to address the current lack of quantifiable research content regarding the freelancer's service quality perception and also test for relationship sustainability by examining the dimensions of loyalty, trust and reviews and ratings (Lukac & Grow, 2021). In practical terms, results have implications for maintenance-oriented behaviors in service that are relevant to freelancers. The study may also enable freelancing platforms to create training programs, quality guidelines, and mechanisms to support communication, professionalism, responsiveness, and client-centred service provision. It provides noteworthy recommendations for both the worker and the digital labor platforms that can enhance sustainable participation in more competitive online markets.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Service quality is the extent of the service provision to customers and the extent to which the service meets the customers' expectation. Services are largely intangible and its rate of measure occurs at the end of the process as well as in respect of how the service is delivered. Communication along with being professional, consistent and responsive, with credibility and individualized attention are hence essential aspects of perceptions of service quality. These become particularly salient in the context of clearly digitized environments, where customers contact with service providers does not occur face to face (Oprins, 2025).

The SERVQUAL model was one of the most commonly used models for evaluating service quality and is composed of 5 dimensions Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. Traditionally Tangibles are tangible evidence from the provision of the service and Reliability is the delivery of the promised services accurately and consistently. Responsiveness is the ease with which a customer can be served, Competence is the ability to perform skills and tasks; reliability; ability to develop customer trust; and individual attention and awareness of customer needs is Empathy. SERVQUAL is used extensively in the conventional industry such as banking, health care, education, hospitality, and retail industry the dimensions of SERVQUAL should be re-interpreted in digital service industries. Physical service cues less influential, online presentation, digital communication and response more influential, credibility more important, privacy more important, personalization more relevant. Ighomereho et al. (2022) suggest that traditional dimensions of the service quality need to be revisited in the technology-mediated environment, while Fan et al. (2022) show that service quality in the electronic environment is shown to influence customer engagement and behavioral response.

A context should be appropriate for adapting SERVQUAL when freelancing workers are independent service providers who can do the whole service regularly. Online sites, such as Upwork, Fiverr or Freelancer.com, allow geographically spread freelancers and clients work together who don't meet in person. Freelancers will be expected to find work, talk through proposals, finalize jobs, give updates, give revisions, solve problems, and maintain their professional image for themselves. They are dependent on their service behaviours, client assessments, ratings, reviews and repeat commissions/orders (Gussek & Wiesche, 2024; Seifried et al., 2024).

Online freelancing also refers to Tangibles such as the outer appearance of a freelancer and his service that is evident online. This includes the creation of on-line profiles, portfolios, proposal forms, professional writing, and the sharing of finished products. These digital signals can shape the first impressions of competence and professionalism. Htang (2021) is in relation with service attributes dealing with presentations and Roy and Shrivastava (2020) are in relation with professional positioning and reputation in the gig economy. Reliability, however, relates to being thorough and giving assurance to consistently work well, perform this correctly and agreeable and produce work to agreed requirements. Risk reduction and professional reliability can be met

through timeliness, keeping delivery of promises and quality and minimizing error. Huđek et al. (2021) also emphasize consistency and skill in job performance when working freelance jobs.

Responsiveness is particularly important due to the fact that most interactions between freelance customers will be digital. Prompt responses, regular progress reports to prevent uncertainty, clarification of needs, quick resolution of issues can demonstrate engagement. Fan et al. (2022) responsiveness is correlated to higher customer engagement, and Bhattacharya and Mulay (2024) consider it to be a key aspect of electronic service quality that is tied to retention and loyalty. Similarly, in freelancing situations, clients may not feel certain about the credentials and reliability of services that they have not previously used. Freelancers can demonstrate care through expertise, honesty, transparency, confidentiality, and realistic commitments and professional conduct. Yao et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of trust between professional and consumer in a platform-based communication and Ho et al. (2024) identify the contexts of digital services in which the professional and customer are required to demonstrate competence and credibility.

As an independent contractor, Empathy is understanding what another needs. Freelance will require to adapt their services based on the objectives of the client, their line of business enterprise, culture, preferred news and public representation strategies, and the job they are delivered. Empathy involves active listening, flexibility and patience with revisions and tailored solutions. Toth et al. (2020) draw attention towards the attitudes of trust and engagement on digital work, while Hsieh et al. (2022) report that personalization can affect performance in online freelancing. The five SERVQUAL dimensions involve operational service behaviour and relational service behaviour, Tangibles (professional digital presentation), Reliability (dependable performance), Responsiveness (prompt, timely interaction), Assurance (competence) and Empathy (individual service attention).

Freelancers are going to look at Sustainable Client Relationships (SCR) for professional success in the future and hence these practices for service quality are extremely important. SCR involves long-term and mutually advantageous freelancer-client relationships that extend beyond a one-time client request. The partnerships can also help address income security, minimize the incumbent need for persistent consumer acquisition, enhance client acceptance, and generate a referral network (Marth et al., 2022). The constructs of this study refer to SCR in terms of Client Loyalty, Client Trust, and Client Reviews and Ratings. Client Loyalty: Repeat hires and continued relationships, client confidence in freelancer honesty, competence and reliability. Reviews and Ratings give visible proof of former client encounters and effect digital trustworthiness and potential future hiring possibilities (Chen et al., 2022).

Previous studies have shown that high service quality has a positive influence on the sustainability of the relationship. Professional presentation, delivery reliability, responsive communication, assurance, empathy will give opportunities for further collaboration, and reduce uncertainty which will add to credibility and create a chance for relationship building (Ashiq & Hussain, 2024). These dimensions are not the same in online work though because online relationships are less about service and more about communication, trust, confidence and customized service. Thus, it is

essential to examine the five dimensions of SERVQUAL in concert to evaluate their comparative importance for SRCs and determine which service behaviours are most important to support long-term freelance-client relationships (Peña-García et al., 2024).

The conceptual model of this study puts Sustainable Client Relationships as the dependent construct and Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy as the independent variables in congruence with the SERVQUAL framework and the literature. Client Loyalty, Client Trust, and Client Reviews and Ratings are other forms of Sustainable Client Relationships.

The conceptual framework can therefore be expressed as:

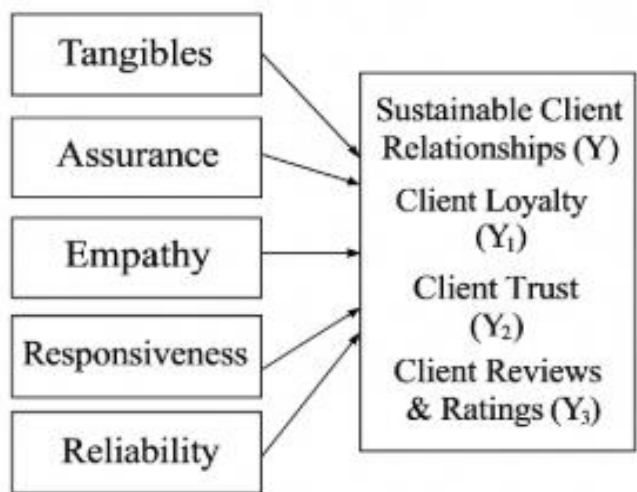


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Diagram

This framework serves as a foundation to examine the relative contribution of each service quality dimension to sustainable relationships in online freelancing.

Based on the theoretical arguments and empirical literature discussed above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Tangibles have a positive and significant effect on Client Loyalty in online freelancing.

H1b: Tangibles have a positive and significant effect on Client Trust in online freelancing.

H1c: Tangibles have a positive and significant effect on Client Reviews and Ratings in online freelancing.

H2a: Reliability has a positive and significant effect on Client Loyalty in online freelancing.

H2b: Reliability has a positive and significant effect on Client Trust in online freelancing.

H2c: Reliability has a positive and significant effect on Client Reviews and Ratings in online freelancing.

H3a: Responsiveness has a positive and significant effect on Client Loyalty in online freelancing.

H3b: Responsiveness has a positive and significant effect on Client Trust in online freelancing.

H3c: Responsiveness has a positive and significant effect on Client Reviews and Ratings in online freelancing.

H4a: Assurance has a positive and significant effect on Client Loyalty in online freelancing.

H4b: Assurance has a positive and significant effect on Client Trust in online freelancing.

H4c: Assurance has a positive and significant effect on Client Reviews and Ratings in online freelancing.

H5a: Empathy has a positive and significant effect on Client Loyalty in online freelancing.

H5b: Empathy has a positive and significant effect on Client Trust in online freelancing.

H5c: Empathy has a positive and significant effect on Client Reviews and Ratings in online freelancing.

Methodology

Research Design

The research lines used in this study are quantitative and cross-sectional research to analyze the relationship between service quality and sustainable client relationship (SCR) in online freelancing. A quantitative method was thought appropriate because it would be concerned with measuring the five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, and statistically examine the client's experience with these dimensions and experience outcomes. The cross-sectional design allowed for data collection with freelancers at one point in time, which also resulted in an empirical assessment of the patterns and relationships between the study variables.

This study employed a positivist philosophy that focuses on systematic observation, measurement and statistical analysis of phenomena that can be observed. This philosophy was appropriate due to the fact that the study was based on standardized answers to the questionnaires and objective statistical methods to assess the proposed relationships. A deductive method was also adopted by

deriving hypotheses from the previously developed SERVQUAL framework with regard to the influence of each SERVQUAL dimension on Sustainable Client Relationships. These hypothesized relationships were then tested using data gathered. The methodology therefore employed a structured empirical approach with the theoretical conceptual framework, processes of measurement, and the analysis of statistical data.

Population and Sampling

The target group of this study consisted of active users on online professional service marketplaces such as Upwork, Fiverr, Freelancer.com or similarly geared online markets for digital labour (Stephany et al., 2021; Kässi et al., 2021). Freelancer was taken as the unit of analysis because the freelance route is well distributed across services, communication with clients, project activities, revisions and overall relationship with client. The assessment of their practical experiences was therefore deemed appropriate for the study of the relationships between service-quality practices and Sustainable Client Relationships. This study relied upon a purposive non-probability sampling method because a complete sampling frame of active freelancers was not available. The list of participants was selected based on their online freelancing engagement, projects' experience and customer interactions. Preference was given to freelancers who had completed freelance projects and received client feedback or ratings through digital platforms.

Total numbers of the responses received for the study were 250 and these were regarded as the valid responses for final analysis. The respondents come from a wide variety of work sectors, ranging from information technology and programming to data science and artificial intelligence, graphic design, writing, digital marketing and services for businesses. They also varied across education, freelancing experience, type of employment, and weekly working hours, with differences in client markets. This variation added a large number of professions from the free-lance world and allowed studying of concepts related to service quality in varying work settings. The results may not be construed statistically representative of all freelancers worldwide owing to the use of purposive sampling.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected by using structured online questionnaire with a Google form. In such study online survey was considered because the targeted people were also behaving online and adapted to such a survey through online process. Survey questions were disseminated in freelancing forums, business sites, social media and personal correspondence to individuals involved in online freelancing venues. The survey sought to collect information regarding the socio-demographic profile, professional characteristics of the respondents, their conception of service quality practices and its Sustainable Client Relationship indicators. The standardized structure meant all respondents were asked the same questions and provided with the same response options allowing quantitative comparison and statistical analysis. The respondents filled up a self-examined instrument voluntarily. Responses that were not used and incomplete were not included in the final

data set. After data collection had been completed the answers were encoded and tabulated for analysis in SPSS. A total of 250 cases were valid and were used as the final dataset.

Measurement of Variables

The study investigated 5 dimensions of SERVQUAL as independent variables namely Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy (Yusuf et al., 2025). A total of 25 service-quality items representing the each SERVQUAL dimension. The outcome variable was Sustainable Client Relationships (SCR), which was measured by Client Loyalty and Client Trust, and Client Reviews and Ratings (five items each). The operational definitions and key indicators of each of the study variables are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Variables and Measurement

Variable Type	Variable	Definition in Freelancing Context	Key Indicators
Independent Variable (IV)	Tangibles	Digital and visible elements of service quality, including the freelancer's online profile, portfolio, communication style, and presentation of work	Profile quality, portfolio updates, professional tools, communication format, presentation of deliverables
	Reliability	Ability to deliver work accurately, on time, and according to client requirements	On-time delivery, error-free work, meeting commitments, consistency of quality
	Responsiveness	Speed and willingness of the freelancer to communicate and support clients	Response time, progress updates, handling urgent requests, resolving issues
	Assurance	Professional competence, honesty, and ability to build client confidence	Expertise, professionalism, confidentiality, credibility, clear communication
	Empathy	Ability to understand client needs and provide personalized service	Flexibility, customized service, patience, understanding client preferences
Dependent Variable (DV)	Client Loyalty (Y1)	Continued preference of clients to work with the same freelancer	Repeat hiring, relationship duration, income from repeat clients
	Client Trust (Y2)	Client's confidence in the freelancer's honesty and ability	Advance payments, minimal monitoring, sharing sensitive data, referrals

Client Reviews & Ratings (Y3)	Public evaluation of freelancer performance on online platforms	Star ratings, written reviews, feedback on professionalism
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The items of the SERVQUAL were measured using structured five-point response scales. A service-quality dimension score was compiled for each dimension. The whole construct of Sustainable Client Relationships was also merged into Client Loyalty, Client Trust and Client Reviews Ratings.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency and percentage, mean, and standard deviation values were calculated and displayed for describing the characteristics of the respondents and major study variables. Internal validation of the measurement instruments was checked and validated using cronbach alpha to see if items measuring common constructs measured the same concept. A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to study the direction and intensity of the relationships between Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, and Sustainable Client Relationships. Multiple regression analysis was then performed to test the results from the study hypotheses and in order to assess the unique contribution of each SERVQUAL dimension, other predictors were kept constant. The significance values and standardized beta- coefficients were used to calculate the relative importance of the predictors and to verify the proposed hypotheses. The descriptive data, reliability data, Pearson correlation and Multiple regression tests were therefore the key analysis employed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns throughout the process of data collection were considered. The participants were free to take part and were briefed on the educational context of the study prior to taking part in the questionnaire. Participants consented and had the right and opportunity to stop taking part in the survey if they wished. (Arli et al., 2024) The information would not be captured or reported personally, thereby retain, protecting confidentiality. The data were processed for the sole purpose of the research and results reported in aggregated format to ensure the confidentiality of individual data contributors.

Results

Respondent Profile

The demographical and professional profiles of the 250 respondents are outlined in Table 2. Gender distribution in the sample was fairly even (55.6% males and 44.4% females). The professional respondents depicted a large proportion of young (15 to 24 years) to middle aged (25 to 34 years), followed by the middle aged (35 to 44 years) category (31.2%).

Table 2: Demographic and Professional Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	139	55.6
	Female	111	44.4
Age	Below 25 years	63	25.2
	25–34 years	71	28.4
	35–44 years	78	31.2
	45–54 years	30	12.0
	55+ years	8	3.2
Education Level	High School / Diploma	51	20.4
	Bachelor's Degree	78	31.2
	Master's Degree	81	32.4
	Doctorate	33	13.2
	Other	7	2.8
Freelancing Experience	Less than 1 year	58	23.2
	1–3 years	112	44.8
	4–6 years	70	28.0
	7+ years	10	4.0
Freelancing Status	Full-time freelancer	67	26.8
	Part-time freelancer	129	51.6
	Agency/Team-based freelancer	54	21.6
Weekly Working Hours	Less than 10 hours	53	21.2
	10–20 hours	96	38.4
	21–40 hours	80	32.0
	41+ hours	21	8.4
Primary Skill Category	IT & Programming	74	29.6
	Data Science & AI	56	22.4
	Graphic Design & Creative	54	21.6
	Writing & Translation	24	9.6
	Digital Marketing	25	10.0
	Business & Consulting	7	2.8
	Other	10	4.0
Main Client Market	Local (same country)	76	30.4
	Regional (same continent)	106	42.4
	Global (multiple continents)	68	27.2

Educational attainment was comparatively high, as 32.4% of respondents held a Master's degree and 31.2% held a Bachelor's degree. In terms of freelancing experience, 44.8% of people had 1 to 3

years' experience and 28.0% had 4 to 6 years' experience. More than half of the respondents (51.6%) worked as part-time freelancers. Regarding workload, 38.4% of respondents worked 10–20 hours per week, and 32.0% had a workload of 21–40 hours per week. The top three professional categories were IT and Programming (29.6%), Data Science and AI (22.4%), and Graphic Design and Creative Services (21.6%). When it comes to markets serviced, 42.4 percent of respondents primarily focused on regional clients, 30.4 percent on local, and 27.2 percent on global. The sample as a whole demonstrated a good level of diversity in terms of age group, professional experience, working history, skill level and client exposure.

Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 shows the reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics of the study variables. The internal consistency scores of most measurement scales were acceptable (Cronbach's α values ranged above the accepted threshold of .70). Assurance recorded the highest reliability among the five SERVQUAL dimensions ($\alpha = .810$), followed by Responsiveness ($\alpha = .797$), Tangibles ($\alpha = .790$), and Empathy ($\alpha = .769$). Reliability produced a comparatively lower coefficient ($\alpha = .638$), indicating weaker internal consistency than the other service-quality dimensions. Client Loyalty ($\alpha = .756$), Client Trust ($\alpha = .762$), and Reviews and Ratings ($\alpha = .751$) also demonstrated acceptable reliability, while the composite Sustainable Client Relationships measure showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .872$).

Table 3. Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Tangibles	5	.790	1.00	5.00	2.9808	0.88719
Reliability	5	.638	0.94	3.80	2.5384	0.69144
Responsiveness	5	.797	1.00	5.00	2.8976	0.86693
Assurance	5	.810	1.00	5.00	3.1088	0.90230
Empathy	5	.769	1.00	5.00	3.0664	0.85564
Client Loyalty	5	.756	0.80	4.80	2.7336	0.79592
Client Trust	5	.762	1.00	5.00	3.0200	0.83233
Reviews & Ratings	5	.751	0.80	4.80	2.8448	0.78821
Sustainable Client Relationships (SCR)	3	.872	0.87	4.80	2.8661	0.71874
Overall Model	9	.926	—	—	—	—

The descriptive results reveal moderate level scores on the major constructs. Assurance recorded the highest mean among the SERVQUAL dimensions ($M = 3.1088$, $SD = .9023$), followed by Empathy ($M = 3.0664$, $SD = .8556$). Reliability had the lowest mean ($M = 2.5384$, $SD = .6914$). The mean ($M = 3.0200$, $SD = .8323$) for Client Trust was the highest of all the relationship outcomes,

whereas the overall mean ($M = 2.8661$, $SD = .7187$) was moderate. The results indicate moderate perceived service quality and client relationships among the sampled freelancers.

Correlation Analysis

Table 4 shows Pearson correlations among the SERVQUAL dimensions and Sustainable Client Relationships. The results indicate that all the service quality dimensions were significantly correlated with SCR at $p < .01$ level. Responsiveness exhibited the strongest relationship with SCR ($r = .629$, $p < .01$), followed by Assurance ($r = .619$, $p < .01$) and Empathy ($r = .592$, $p < .01$). Moderate positive correlations with SCR were observed for Tangibles, $r = .532$, $p < .01$ and Reliability, $r = .493$, $p < .01$.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix

S.#	Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Tangibles	250	2.9808	0.88719	1					
2	Reliability	250	2.5384	0.69144	.639**	1				
3	Responsiveness	250	2.8976	0.86693	.530**	.512**	1			
4	Assurance	250	3.1088	0.90230	.606**	.534**	.631**	1		
5	Empathy	250	3.0664	0.85564	.596**	.560**	.559**	.745**	1	
6	Sustainable Client Relationships (SCR)	250	2.8661	0.71874	.532**	.493**	.629**	.619**	.592**	1

Note. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

The correlations between all the SERVQUAL dimensions were also positive and significant. The highest intercorrelation was seen between Assurance and Empathy ($r = .745$, $p < .01$) and the remaining correlation levels ranged from .512 to .639. The overall results suggest that the greater the perceived service quality, the stronger the Sustainable Client Relationships. However, the stronger correlation for Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy indicates that communication skills, professional confidence, and special consideration to the client may play a significant role in sustaining the client-freelancer relationship in the long-term.

Factor Analysis

The suitability of the data for exploratory factor analysis was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value was .925, representing excellent sampling adequacy and implying an acceptable pattern of correlations for the items tested. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was also statistically significant, $\chi^2(300) = 2523.700$, $p < .001$, confirming that sufficient correlations existed among the variables for factor extraction.

Table 5: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Adequacy.	Measure of Sampling	.925
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2523.700
	df	300
	p	<.001

The scree plot indicates that many of the eigenvalues drop significantly for the first few components and level off after that. The Kaiser criterion and the point where the scree plot flattens out suggest the presence of about four components that represent a significant amount of variance. This suggests that the empirical factor structure might be more compact than the theoretically prescribed five-dimensional SERVQUAL structure. The findings must accordingly be interpreted with caution and the difference between the model of five dimensions proposed by the literature and the factor pattern obtained in the empirical study recognized when talking about measurement structure.

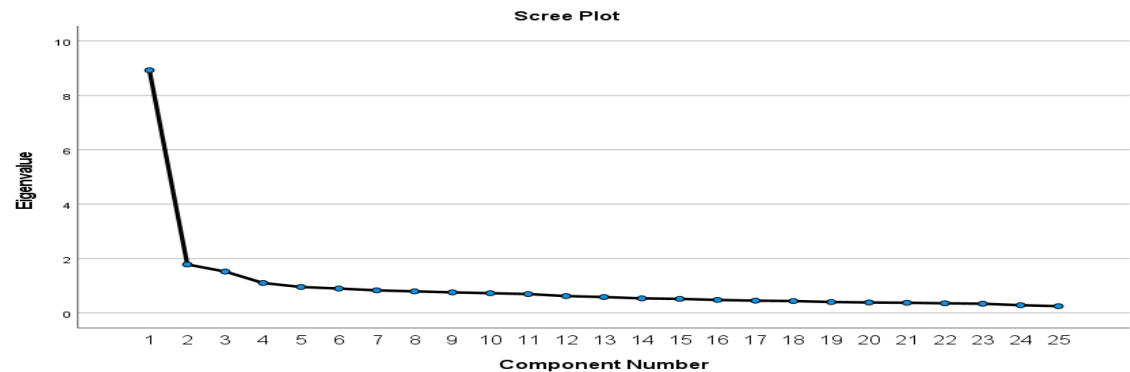


Figure 2. Scree Plot of Exploratory Factor Analysis

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 6 displays the overall fit of the three multiple regression models testing how Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy relate to Client Loyalty, Client Trust and Reviews and Ratings. The Client Loyalty model accounted for the highest level of variance $R^2 = .427$, and exhibited the highest R of .654 with the five SERVQUAL dimensions collectively explaining 42.7% of the variance in Client Loyalty. The model is still very good, considering five predictors (adjusted $R^2 = .415$). The Client Trust model obtained $R = .638$ and $R^2 = .408$ showing that the five SERVQUAL dimensions explained 40.8% of the variance in Client Trust. Similarly, the Reviews and Ratings model produced $R = .630$ and $R^2 = .397$, indicating that 39.7% of the variance in client feedback was explained by the predictors. Overall, the explanatory power of the three models ranged from moderate to good.

Table 6: Summary of Multiple Regression Models for Client Relationship Outcomes

Dependent Variable	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	Std. Error	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Client Loyalty (Y1)	.654	.427	.415	.60854	36.389	< .001
Client Trust (Y2)	.638	.408	.395	.64714	33.581	< .001
Reviews & Ratings (Y3)	.630	.397	.385	.61826	32.141	< .001

The ANOVA results for Table 7 were also found to be statistically significant for all three regression models. The Client Loyalty model was significant, $F(5, 244) = 36.389, p < .001$, while the Client Trust model was also significant, $F(5, 244) = 33.581, p < .001$. Likewise, the model predicting Reviews and Ratings was statistically significant, $F(5, 244) = 32.141, p < .001$. The overall results suggest that the five SERVQUAL dimensions, taken together, accounted for significant variance in each of the three client relationship outcomes.

Table 7: ANOVA Summary for Multiple Regression Models

Dependent Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Client Loyalty (Y1)	Regression	67.578	5	13.476	36.389	< .001
	Residual	90.359	244	0.370		
	Total	157.738	249			
Client Trust (Y2)	Regression	70.316	5	14.063	33.581	< .001
	Residual	102.184	244	0.419		
	Total	172.500	249			
Reviews & Ratings (Y3)	Regression	61.430	5	12.286	32.141	< .001
	Residual	93.269	244	0.382		
	Total	154.698	249			

The regression coefficient/s are available as individual values on Table 8. For Client Loyalty, Responsiveness emerged as the strongest significant predictor ($\beta = .272, p < .001$), followed by Assurance ($\beta = .215, p = .008$) and Tangibles ($\beta = .164, p = .020$). Reliability ($\beta = -.003, p = .961$) and Empathy ($\beta = .126, p = .104$) were not statistically significant. Within the theme of Client Trust, Responsiveness had the most robust significant association ($\beta = .263, p < .001$) followed by Assurance ($\beta = .185, p = .025$). Tangibles, Reliability, and Empathy were not found to be statistically significant.

Table 8: Multiple Regression Coefficients for SERVQUAL Dimensions

Predictor	Client Loyalty β	<i>p</i>	Client Trust β	<i>p</i>	Reviews & Ratings β	<i>p</i>
Tangibles	.164	.020*	.081	.258	.020	.781
Reliability	-.003	.961	.129	.060	.044	.525
Responsiveness	.272	< .001***	.263	< .001***	.344	< .001***

Assurance	.215	.008**	.185	.025*	.101	.225
Empathy	.126	.104	.113	.150	.229	.004**

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Empathy also showed a positive effect ($\beta = .229, p = .004$), but at a lower level, and with Reviews and Ratings being the strongest predictor ($\beta = .344, p < .001$). Tangibles, Reliability and Assurance were not significant predictors. Responsiveness was the only SERVQUAL dimension that significantly explained all three outcomes, highlighting the importance of timely communication, progress tracking, and problem solving in sustaining effective client relationships in online freelancing.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 9 summarizes the results of the fifteen hypotheses developed for the three client relationship outcomes: Client Loyalty, Client Trust, and Reviews and Ratings. H1a was supported due to Tangibles significantly predicting Client Loyalty ($\beta = .164, p = .020$) while the effects of H1b and H1c on Client Trust and Reviews and Ratings were not statistically significant. H2a, H2b, and H2c were not supported for Reliability. The relationship between Reliability and Client Trust was close to significance ($\beta = .129, p = .060$), but failed the conventional .05 level of significance.

Table 9: Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	SERVQUAL Dimension	Outcome	β	p	Decision
H1a	Tangibles	Client Loyalty	.164	.020	Supported
H1b	Tangibles	Client Trust	.081	.258	Not Supported
H1c	Tangibles	Reviews & Ratings	.020	.781	Not Supported
H2a	Reliability	Client Loyalty	-.003	.961	Not Supported
H2b	Reliability	Client Trust	.129	.060	Not Supported
H2c	Reliability	Reviews & Ratings	.044	.525	Not Supported
H3a	Responsiveness	Client Loyalty	.272	< .001	Supported
H3b	Responsiveness	Client Trust	.263	< .001	Supported
H3c	Responsiveness	Reviews & Ratings	.344	< .001	Supported
H4a	Assurance	Client Loyalty	.215	.008	Supported
H4b	Assurance	Client Trust	.185	.025	Supported
H4c	Assurance	Reviews & Ratings	.101	.225	Not Supported
H5a	Empathy	Client Loyalty	.126	.104	Not Supported
H5b	Empathy	Client Trust	.113	.150	Not Supported
H5c	Empathy	Reviews & Ratings	.229	.004	Supported

The most sustained and extensive support was for responsiveness. H3a, H3b, and H3c were all supported, indicating that Responsiveness significantly predicted Client Loyalty ($\beta = .272, p < .001$), Client Trust ($\beta = .263, p < .001$), and Reviews and Ratings ($\beta = .344, p < .001$). Assurance

demonstrated outcomes-specific effects: Client Loyalty (H4a) was supported; Client Trust (H4b) was supported; and Reviews and Ratings (H4c) was not supported. There was also an outcome-specific effect for empathy. H5a was not supported, H5c was supported, and Empathy had a significant level of influence on Reviews and Ratings ($\beta = .229, p = .004$). Overall, it was concluded that the dimensions of Communication and Relationship service quality were more consistent in their occurrence and in explaining behavior compared to the operational ones.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the correlation of the five SERVQUAL dimensions such as Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy to Sustainable Client Relationships on online freelancing. Client Loyalty, Client Trust and Client Reviews & Ratings Sustainable Client Relationships. The results broadly confirm the importance of service quality in digitally mediated freelancer-client relationships and reveal that not all service quality dimensions are equally contributing to various outcomes of the relationship. For example, communication-related and relationship aspects were more explanatory than presentation and procedure aspects. This has connection to the essence of an online freelance as it heavily relies on communication, professionalism, reactivity, and customized service (Huang et al., 2024).

The descriptive results revealed that the mean for the dimension of Assurance was the highest among all the dimensions of SERVQUAL, followed by Empathy and then Reliability was the lowest mean. This is a trend that suggests freelancers feel they are good at interpreting customer requirements, establishing trust and being able to deliver good quality work, perhaps less good at providing on-going, predictable, service levels for projects. This happens frequently in freelance industry where Work descriptions, Work volumes, deadlines of work and customer requirements may vary from one person to another. Assurance and Empathy scores are relatively high, reflecting the need and value of establishing trust and personalized human interaction in digital labor markets. The professional credibility, trust and personalization of technology-mediated service relationships are also cited features identified in the previous literature used for this study, namely those by Yao et al. (2022) and Ho et al. (2024).

The correlations found after that pointed to a positive relationship between all five SERVQUAL dimensions and Sustainable Client Relationships. Responsiveness was found to be the strongest relationship with SCR, while Assurance and Empathy were both in the same category, and Tangibles and Reliability in lesser but positive relationships. The results indicate that service quality in general is salient for long-term freelancer-client relationships. The significant relationships observed in Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy, however, indicate that these service behaviors might especially be important for clients in uncertainty-reducing and building confidence between people in virtual contexts (Marth et al., 2022). This finding aligns with prior research that suggests digital freelance relationship relies more heavily on instrumental cues (communication, trust, professional confidence, and personalization) than service context with more physical cues (Huang et al., 2024).

Multiple Regression results are used to illustrate these relationships in more detail. The five SERVQUAL dimensions then explained 42.7%, 40.8% and 39.7% respectively of the variance in Client Loyalty, Client Trust and Reviews and Ratings. All three regression models were found to be statistically significant, which explains the three dimensions of service quality in terms of online freelancing relationship outcomes. The contributions of each SERVQUAL dimensions, however, differed in the three dependent outcome measures. This distinction is important because other dimensions may not have meaningful unique contributions if they are correlated positively with SCR.

Responsiveness was the most consistent variance predictor for all three outcomes. It was a strong predictor of Client Loyalty, Client Trust and Reviews and Ratings given, which had the highest standardized effect. This represents one of the key findings of the study. Digital freelancer clients rely on messages, emails, platform communication and progress reports to be sure of the freelancer's involvement in the project. Responsive responses, frequent updates, clarification of needs, and timely problem solving can minimize confusion and build client confidence. The finding coincided with that of Fan et al. (2022) who correlate responsiveness to customer engagement and that of Bhattacharya and Mulay (2024) that core of E-service quality is responsiveness, associated with customer retention and loyalty. The current findings corroborate this line of reasoning, through responsiveness' importance comes not only from loyalty, but also from trust and public evaluation.

Assurance also was found to be an important predictor, especially for Client Loyalty and Client Trust. Freelancers that show experience, professionalism, transparency, and credibility will help build more confidence with clients. This aspect is particularly significant when working online where one client might hire a freelancer without encountering him/her. This strong association between Assurance and Client Trust suggests that competence and credibility diminish perceived risk in virtual service relationships. There is a focus on trust in platform-based relationships between others in Yao et al. (2022) and on competence and credibility in-platform by Ho et al. (2024). The dimensions of SERVQUAL were controlled, however, Assurance was not significant in predicting Reviews and Ratings, indicating that possibly public evaluations rely more on response behaviors as they are experienced in the immediate interaction.

Emotional empathy resulted in more outcome specific effect. It greatly predicted Reviews and Ratings, and did not independently predict Client Loyalty or Client Trust. This can mean flexibility, customization, patience and understanding of client's needs may be particularly visible when analyzing client reviews at the completion of the work. When freelancers react positively to changes and adjust to client needs, the client may be more generous with their positive comments. This definition matches Toth et al. (2020) and Hsieh et al. (2022) which talk about the concept of commitment and personalization in digital workplaces. Empathy is not the only factor needed to help create trust or loyalty, but its unique role in the model changes when responsiveness, assurance and the other factors of SERVQUAL are included simultaneously.

Tangibles had a significant positive impact on Client Loyalty, but not on Client Trust or Reviews and Ratings. Tangibles for freelancing are digital profiles, portfolios, professional communication

output and showcasing completed work. There are some tools which could help articulate professional behaviour and support successive cycles of collaboration, particularly at the beginning of a client relationship. The result is similar to that of Htang (2021) and Roy and Shrivastava (2020), both of whom highlight the importance of service attributes (presentation) and professional positioning. When a working partnership has been put in place, however, showing in digital format can be less important than what happens to the presentation through communication and self-confidence.

The predictive abilities of the reliability factor were not significant at the conventional .05 level for the three relationship outcomes, though, the relationship between Client Trust approached significance. This isn't an indication without relying on dependable delivery. SCR was overall correlatively highly with reliability in positive conditions and there were indications of stronger correlations at bivariate level. A possible interpretation is that the reliable delivery is understood as an implicit prerequisite in freelancing, the dimensions of Responsiveness and Assurance offer more differentiation when all dimensions are taken together. This understanding is an initial one, not an explicit one without testing, and do not provide formal evidence of a "hygiene factor".

Overall, the findings showed that despite the fact that SERVQUAL was still applicable to measurement of service quality in online freelancing, its dimensions were found to play different roles in digitally mediated relationships. The most consistent dimension was Responsiveness, with Assurance being particularly relevant for Loyalty and Trust and Empathy being particularly relevant to Reviews and Ratings. Tangibles and Reliability allowed just few runs. Therefore, the results indicate that besides the technical aspects of delivery, sustainable freelancer-client relationships rely much more on timely communication, professional credibility, and client-focused interaction. These findings serve to support the over-arching research conclusion that SERVQUAL must be interpreted in the context of a virtual labor market and this context is far removed from that of a traditional service.

Conclusion

The current study examined the relationship between Service Quality and the formation of Sustainable Client Relationships in an online freelancing context. The results suggest that in digital marketplaces where communication, trust, professionalism and client experience play a role in repeat work and long-term involvement, high relevance of service quality is crucial. Responsiveness was the most consistent and influential dimension of the five SERVQUAL dimensions. Effective client relationship outcomes had strong relationships with timely communication, regular progress reports, ongoing dialogue with the client about requirements, and problem solving. This further illustrates the need for keeping the conversation open while in the process of the freelance service. Responsiveness can be a significant part of a freelancer's tracking commitment and professionalism in a virtual setting, where in-person meetings are unavailable. However, Assurance and Empathy were also salient and not consistently across all outcomes of the

relationship. Assurance helped maintain client confidence, whereas Empathy helped in creating more positive client opinions due to customized care.

Tangibles and Reliability were seen to positively correlate with Sustainable Client Relationships, but their specific contribution diminished when the other SERVQUAL dimensions were taken together. This means that in freelancing, the expectations of professional presentation, portfolio quality, proper delivery and consistency continue to be relevant but not positively formative factors in a competitive digital market. The following findings suggest a very important factor in regard to maintaining freelancer client relationships in a sustainable manner is the relationship based and communication related behavior. Developing trust, rapport, addressing concerns, communication and understanding every client's needs all fall under the category of technical and aspects of long-term projects. The study therefore validates the use of SERVQUAL Inventory in freelancing context and also emphasizes the need for digitization of the classic service quality attributes in freelancing work. Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy seem particularly salient in enhancing existing professional relationships and the quality of freelancer-client relationships.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of limitations inherent in this study that are worthy of consideration in interpreting results. First, the study employed a cross-sectional design which precludes analysis of how the quality of the services and client relationships change over time, and offered no ability to provide causal explanations. Secondly, a purposive non-probability sampling technique was used and a sample size of 250 freelancers were used hence careful interpretation should be done when the results of the study are translated to the larger population of freelancers at large. Additionally, self-reported data was used for freelancers, which potentially is subject to personal perceptions, recall bias, or social desirability. In addition, freelancer matched responses were not received for comparison with client evaluation. The differences between platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, Freelancer.com were not mentioned. While geographic or cultural differences were not examined, they may influence the freelancer-client relationship, such as communications, building trust and expectations of services offered.

These limitations are addressed by future research through longitudinal design that will study the development of service quality and Sustainable Client Relationships. In freelancer-client dyadic studies, it is also possible to collect matched data from freelancer and client sides, which enables the understanding of the relationship quality from both sides. Cross country analysis of the different components of the SERVQUAL can be analyzed and platform specific research can be conducted to assess the differences in service quality practices between the predominant freelancing platforms. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) may also be used for further studies to ensure more complex relationships between study variables. The moderation influence of service-quality relationships in relation to other factors such as freelancer experience can be examined in terms of the type of platform, project size, industry, and culture. Indirect variables like client trust, client satisfaction, client engagement,

or the client's sense of value might also be studied to better understand the role of Service Quality within sustainable freelancer-client relationships.

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Declarations

Ethical Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with appropriate ethical research principles. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout the research process.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants before completing the questionnaire. Respondents participated voluntarily and were free to withdraw at any stage. No participant was forced or pressured to take part in the study.

Competing Interests: The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Funding Statement: This research did not receive any external financial support or research grant. All research-related activities were conducted without funding from public or private organizations. Therefore, no funding agency influenced the research process or findings.

Data Availability Statement: The data used in this study were collected through a structured questionnaire from online freelancers. The dataset is not publicly available due to confidentiality considerations. However, it may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.