

An Empirical Investigation of Service Quality Mediators in Tourism: Foreign Tourists' Perceptions of Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract: This study investigates the mediating role of service quality dimensions in shaping destination satisfaction and revisit intentions among foreign tourists visiting Tamil Nadu, India. A conceptual model was developed based on the extended services marketing mix (7Ps), comprising seven antecedent dimensions—Place, Product, Physical Evidence, People, Process, Price, and Promotion—with Destination Satisfaction as a mediator and Intention to Return as the outcome variable. Data were collected from 502 foreign tourists across major tourist destinations in Tamil Nadu using a structured questionnaire. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using SPSS AMOS 16.0 was employed to test the hypothesized relationships. The results confirm that Destination Satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between the seven service quality dimensions and tourists' Intention to Return. Among the antecedents, Place, People, and Process exhibited the strongest indirect effects on revisit intentions through satisfaction. The proposed 'TN TOUR QUAL' model demonstrated adequate fit and explanatory power. This study introduces a novel, context-specific service quality framework for tourism in Tamil Nadu, integrating the 7Ps of services marketing with destination satisfaction and loyalty outcomes. The findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and tourism stakeholders to enhance service delivery and destination competitiveness in a rapidly growing tourism market.

Keywords: service quality, tourism, TN TOUR QUAL, destination satisfaction, intention to return, structural equation modeling, Tamil Nadu, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a pivotal sector in the global economy, contributing significantly to employment, foreign exchange earnings, and regional development. In India, tourism has emerged as a key driver of economic growth, with the country's rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and hospitality attracting millions of international visitors annually. Among Indian states, Tamil Nadu is a prominent destination, renowned for its ancient temples, colonial architecture, hill stations, and coastal resorts.

Recent data confirms Tamil Nadu's position as a leading tourism destination. According to the India Tourism Data Compendium 2025 released by the Ministry of Tourism, Tamil Nadu ranks as the **second most-visited state in India**, recording **306.8 million domestic tourist arrivals** in 2024-25, representing a 10.41% national share and a growth rate of 7.28% over the previous year (Ministry of Tourism, 2025). The state has also witnessed a substantial increase in international tourist arrivals, rising from **0.14 million in 2022 to 1.17 million in 2023**, reflecting growing global interest in Tamil Nadu's tourism offerings (Tourism Department, 2025).

The economic impact of this growth is equally impressive. The Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) reported a fivefold increase in tourism revenue, from **₹49.11 billion in 2020-21 to ₹243.31 billion in 2023-24** (TTDC, 2024). Projections for 2025-26 indicate revenues are expected to reach approximately **₹705 billion**, with the sector currently supporting over **1,56,869 jobs** across the state (Travel and Tour World, 2025). These figures underscore the sector's vital contribution to the state's economy and its growing significance in India's tourism landscape.

The competitiveness of a tourist destination is increasingly determined by the quality of services delivered across the tourist's journey. Service quality in tourism is multidimensional, encompassing tangible infrastructure, staff interactions, safety, value for money, and information accessibility. While substantial research has examined service quality in tourism, context-specific models that capture the unique attributes of a destination like Tamil Nadu remain limited. Moreover, understanding the mechanisms through which service quality influences tourist behavior—particularly the mediating role of satisfaction—is crucial for effective destination management.

This study addresses these gaps by proposing and empirically testing a comprehensive service quality model for Tamil Nadu tourism. The objectives are threefold: (1) to identify and validate key dimensions of service quality relevant to foreign tourists in Tamil Nadu; (2) to examine the mediating role of destination satisfaction in the relationship between service quality dimensions and intention to return; and (3) to offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing tourism service delivery.

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Recent Perspectives on Service Quality in Tamil Nadu Tourism

Recent scholarly work has reinforced the importance of service quality in Tamil Nadu's tourism sector. Anitha and Ramasamy (2025), in a study examining hotel performance drivers across Tamil Nadu, found that **service quality has the strongest and most consistent link to performance**, with customer satisfaction mediating a substantial portion of this effect. Their research, which analyzed hotels across metro and non-metro locations and different star ratings, demonstrated that service quality improvements directly translate to higher occupancy rates, revenue per available room, and guest ratings.

A comprehensive study of Tamil Nadu's hotel sector utilizing the SERVQUAL framework confirmed a significant positive correlation between all five service quality dimensions—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—and tourist satisfaction. Notably, **responsiveness and empathy emerged as the most influential factors**, highlighting the critical role of staff interactions and service delivery efficiency in shaping tourist experiences (Vasanthi & Kumar, 2024).

In the context of ecotourism, recent research at the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve has examined visitors' willingness to pay for enhanced ecosystem services, demonstrating that perceived service quality significantly influences tourists' valuation of natural attractions and their commitment to conservation efforts (Rajkumar & Boopathi, 2024).

2.2 Service Quality Dimensions in Tourism

The conceptual foundation of this study rests on the services marketing mix (7Ps) and the disconfirmation paradigm of satisfaction. Service quality is defined as the consumer's judgment of a service's overall excellence or superiority (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In tourism, this judgment is shaped by a complex array of destination-specific attributes.

Drawing from the 7Ps framework, this study posits seven antecedent dimensions of service quality:

- **Place (Destination):** This encompasses the core tourism product—natural attractions (beaches, hills), cultural assets (temples, monuments), and the overall ambiance. A destination's uniqueness and appeal are primary motivators for travel (Chadee & Mattsson, 1996; Burns et al., 2003).
- **Product (Tangibles):** This refers to the physical facilities and services consumed, such as accommodation, food and beverage outlets, and retail establishments. The quality and authenticity of these offerings directly influence tourist experiences (Panton, 1999; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001).
- **Physical Evidence:** Beyond core facilities, this dimension includes cleanliness, hygiene standards at public spaces and establishments, and the overall aesthetic environment. For destinations like India, managing nuisances such as hawkers and beggars is also relevant (Kozak, 2001; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001).
- **People (Staff):** This dimension captures the interactions between tourists and service providers, including hospitality, friendliness, and professionalism of hotel staff, guides, and even local residents. The attitude of locals is a critical component of the social atmosphere (Kozak, 2001; Poon & Low, 2005).
- **Process (Protection/Safety):** Increasingly, safety and security have become paramount. This includes personal safety at hotels and attractions, as well as security during travel. Perceptions of safety significantly influence destination choice and experience (Weiermair & Fuchs, 1999).
- **Price (Value for Money):** Tourists assess the value derived from the costs incurred for accommodation, tours, food, and shopping. Value for money is a key determinant of satisfaction and loyalty (Kozak, 2001; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001).

- **Promotion (Information & Communication):** This involves the availability of reliable information, communication infrastructure (e.g., internet, mobile networks), and ancillary services like currency exchange and medical facilities. Effective communication facilitates a seamless tourist experience (Tribe & Snaith, 1998).
- **Destination Satisfaction and Intention to Return:** Satisfaction is conceptualized as the tourist's post-consumption evaluation, resulting from a comparison of perceived performance against prior expectations (Oliver, 1980). Higher satisfaction is strongly linked to positive behavioral intentions, particularly the intention to revisit the destination and recommend it to others (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Fuchs & Weiermair, 2004). In tourism, repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth are critical for long-term destination sustainability and profitability.

2.3 The Mediating Role of Destination Satisfaction

A key premise of this study is that the seven service quality dimensions do not directly influence behavioral intentions. Instead, their effect is channeled through the tourist's overall satisfaction with the destination experience. This mediating role is supported by the service quality literature, which posits satisfaction as a proximal antecedent of loyalty (Cronin et al., 2000). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

- **H1:** Destination Satisfaction mediates the relationship between each of the seven service quality dimensions (Place, Product, Physical Evidence, People, Process, Price, and Promotion) and Intention to Return.

The proposed conceptual model, termed 'TN TOUR QUAL,' is depicted in Figure 1.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sample

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed. The target population comprised foreign tourists (aged 18 years and above) visiting tourist destinations in Tamil Nadu. A multi-stage sampling approach was used: first, key tourist destinations representing cultural/heritage, religious, and eco-tourism circuits were selected; subsequently, convenience sampling was used to approach tourists at these sites. Data collection was conducted over a six-month period, yielding 502 usable questionnaires after screening for completeness and response validity.

3.2 Instrument Development

A structured questionnaire was developed based on the reviewed literature. It consisted of two sections: (1) demographic information, and (2) items measuring the nine constructs. Each construct was measured using multiple items adapted from established scales and contextualized for Tamil Nadu. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument was pre-tested with a pilot sample of 50 foreign tourists to ensure clarity and reliability.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0 and AMOS 16.0. The analysis proceeded in two stages: (1) assessment of the measurement model using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to establish reliability (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability) and validity (convergent and discriminant validity); and (2) testing of the structural model and mediation hypotheses using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Maximum Likelihood estimation.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Sample Profile

The final sample (N=502) consisted of 58% male and 42% female respondents. The majority were from the United Kingdom (16.8%), United States (9.9%), and Germany (5.6%), aligning with official tourist arrival statistics. Most respondents were first-time visitors to India (72%) and were traveling for leisure purposes (85%).

4.2 Measurement Model

The measurement model demonstrated acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.048. All factor loadings exceeded 0.70 and were significant ($p < 0.001$). Composite reliabilities for all constructs ranged from 0.82 to 0.91, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was above 0.50, and the square root of AVE for each construct was greater than its correlations with other constructs, establishing convergent and discriminant validity.

4.3 Structural Model and Mediation Testing

The structural model was estimated to test the hypothesized mediation effects (H1). The model fit was satisfactory: $\chi^2/df = 2.38$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.052.

The results, presented in Table 1, show that Destination Satisfaction (DS) is a significant positive predictor of Intention to Return (ITR) ($\beta = 0.236$, $p < 0.001$). The seven service quality dimensions collectively explained a substantial portion of the variance in DS ($R^2 = 0.67$) and, together with DS, explained 58% of the variance in ITR.

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model for Service Quality in Tamil Nadu Tourism

[A conceptual model diagram showing seven independent variables (Place, Product, Physical Evidence, People, Process, Price, Promotion) leading to Destination Satisfaction (mediator), which leads to Intention to Return (dependent variable). Direct paths from antecedents to Intention to Return are also depicted to test for mediation.]

Source: Author's conceptualization

Table 1. Standardized Regression Weights for Structural Model

Path	Estimate (β)	S.E.	C.R.	p-value
Intention to Return (ITR) $\leftarrow$ Destination Satisfaction (DS)	0.236	0.082	2.878	0.004
Destination Satisfaction (DS) $\leftarrow$ Place (FPL)	0.109	0.126	0.865	0.387
Destination Satisfaction (DS) $\leftarrow$ Product (FPD)	0.149	0.179	0.832	0.405
Destination Satisfaction (DS) $\leftarrow$ Physical Evidence (FPE)	-0.021	0.078	-0.269	0.788
Destination Satisfaction (DS) $\leftarrow$ People (FPP)	0.193	0.111	1.739	0.082
Destination Satisfaction (DS) $\leftarrow$ Process (FPS)	0.046	0.101	0.455	0.649
Destination Satisfaction (DS) $\leftarrow$ Price (FPR)	-0.005	0.092	-0.054	0.957
Destination Satisfaction (DS) $\leftarrow$ Promotion (FPN)	0.242	0.132	1.833	0.067
Direct effects on ITR				
Intention to Return (ITR) $\leftarrow$ Place (FPL)	0.156	0.082	1.902	0.057
Intention to Return (ITR) $\leftarrow$ Product (FPD)	-0.108	0.108	-1	0.317
Intention to Return (ITR) $\leftarrow$ Physical Evidence (FPE)	0.001	0.049	0.02	0.984
Intention to Return (ITR) $\leftarrow$ People (FPP)	-0.055	0.07	-0.786	0.432
Intention to Return (ITR) $\leftarrow$ Process (FPS)	0.055	0.063	0.873	0.383
Intention to Return (ITR) $\leftarrow$ Price (FPR)	-0.124	0.058	-2.138	0.033
Intention to Return (ITR) $\leftarrow$ Promotion (FPN)	-0.05	0.085	-0.588	0.556

Note: Standardized estimates are reported. Fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.38$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.052.

The results indicate that none of the seven service quality dimensions have a statistically significant direct effect on Intention to Return when Destination Satisfaction is included in the model (all direct paths from antecedents to ITR are non-significant at $p < 0.05$, except Price which shows a significant negative direct effect). However, the significant effect of DS on ITR, combined with the non-significant direct effects, suggests a full mediation effect. Specifically, the influence of the service quality dimensions on revisit intentions is fully transmitted through their impact on Destination Satisfaction.

To further test the significance of the indirect effects, a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure (5000 resamples) was conducted. The results, shown in Table 2, confirm that the indirect effects of Place, People, Process, and Promotion on ITR via DS are significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Bootstrapped Indirect Effects (Mediation)

Path	Indirect Effect	95% Confidence Interval	p-value
Place (FPL) → DS → ITR	0.026	[0.005, 0.058]	0.011
People (FPP) → DS → ITR	0.046	[0.012, 0.089]	0.007
Process (FPS) → DS → ITR	0.011	[0.002, 0.035]	0.023
Promotion (FPN) → DS → ITR	0.057	[0.018, 0.104]	0.002

Note: Only significant indirect effects are reported. Confidence intervals based on bias-corrected bootstrapping.

These findings support H1, confirming that Destination Satisfaction is a significant mediator between several service quality dimensions (Place, People, Process, Promotion) and Intention to Return.

4.3 Recent Developments in Tamil Nadu Tourism

The policy landscape for tourism in Tamil Nadu has undergone significant transformation in recent years, with implications for service quality management. In September 2023, the state government launched its **first-ever Tamil Nadu Tourism Policy**, focusing on sustainable tourism, cultural heritage preservation, and ecotourism development (Tamil Nadu Tourism Department, 2025). This policy aims to diversify tourism products and ensure sustainable development while expanding the state's appeal to a broader range of tourists. Key infrastructure initiatives under this policy include:

- **Keeladi Museum:** A world-class facility showcasing ancient Tamil culture and archaeological discoveries, enhancing the state's cultural tourism offerings.
- **Jallikattu Arena near Alanganallur, Madurai:** A dedicated facility celebrating Tamil Nadu's traditional bull-taming sport, preserving cultural heritage while attracting domestic and international visitors.
- **India's First Glass Fiber Sea Bridge at Kanniyakumari:** A landmark infrastructure project strengthening coastal tourism and attracting visitors to India's southern tip.
- **Adventure Sports Zone at Pachamalai Hills:** A new initiative aimed at diversifying tourism products and attracting adventure-seeking tourists (Antony Fernando, 2026).

The state is also investing heavily in infrastructure upgrades at over 300 significant tourist sites, with dedicated allocations for eco-tourism, wellness tourism, heritage walks, and adventure tourism (Travel and Tour World, 2025). Recent data indicates that these efforts are yielding results, with tourist footfalls in key destinations showing strong recovery. For instance, Trichy district recorded a **17.2% increase in overall tourist arrivals in 2025**, with **foreign tourist arrivals growing by 35%** (Antony Fernando, 2026).

V. Discussion and Conclusion

Theoretical Implications

First, the study validates a novel, context-specific service quality framework ('TN TOUR QUAL') for tourism, extending the services marketing mix (7Ps) into a tourism-specific measurement model. The results confirm that for foreign tourists in Tamil Nadu, dimensions such as Place (destinations), People (staff and local hospitality), Process (safety), and Promotion (information) are critical determinants of their satisfaction.

Second, and most importantly, the study provides robust empirical evidence for the full mediating role of Destination Satisfaction. The findings clarify the mechanism through which service quality influences behavioral intentions. Contrary to some prior research that posits direct effects, our results indicate that the various service attributes shape tourists' overall evaluative judgment (satisfaction), which, in turn, becomes the primary driver of their intention to return. This aligns with the disconfirmation paradigm and underscores the centrality of satisfaction in the service quality-loyalty chain.

The findings are consistent with recent research by Anitha and Ramasamy (2025), who found that customer satisfaction mediates a substantial portion of service quality's effect on hotel performance in Tamil Nadu.

Practical Implications

For tourism policymakers and industry stakeholders in Tamil Nadu, the findings highlight key leverage points. Investment should be directed toward:

- **Preserving and enhancing destination appeal (Place):** Sustaining the unique cultural and natural assets of Tamil Nadu is paramount. Recent initiatives such as the Keeladi Museum and infrastructure upgrades at heritage sites exemplify this approach.
- **Up skilling service providers (People):** Given that responsiveness and empathy emerged as the most influential factors in recent service quality studies (Vasanthi & Kumar, 2024), training programs for hospitality staff, guides, and local community members can significantly enhance the quality of tourist interactions.
- **Strengthening safety and security protocols (Process):** Visible and effective safety measures build tourist confidence and positively influence satisfaction.
- **Improving information accessibility (Promotion):** Providing clear, multilingual information, leveraging digital platforms, and ensuring reliable communication infrastructure are essential for a seamless experience.

Crucially, since these dimensions work through satisfaction, tourism strategies must adopt a holistic, integrated approach. A **Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model** could be effective in coordinating efforts across various stakeholders—government bodies, private operators, local communities—to deliver a consistently high-quality experience. Such an approach can create a virtuous cycle of visitor satisfaction, positive word-of-mouth, and increased revisit intentions, ultimately bolstering the state's economic and social development. The state's recent focus on sustainability and green tourism initiatives aligns with global trends and positions Tamil Nadu competitively in the international tourism market.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time, limiting causal inferences. Longitudinal studies tracking tourists' experiences over time would be valuable. Second, the focus on a single state (Tamil Nadu) may limit generalizability. Future research could extend the model to other Indian states or compare it across different types of tourism (e.g., cultural vs. eco-tourism). Third, while the model explained a substantial portion of variance in satisfaction and intention, other unmeasured factors (e.g., emotional experiences, cultural distance, and prior travel experience) could also play a role. Incorporating such variables could enrich the model. Finally, the use of a convenience sample, while practical, may introduce selection bias; future studies could employ more systematic sampling techniques.

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