

Determinants of Tourist Satisfaction and Revisit Intention in Rural Ecotourism Destinations

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Abstract

Rural ecotourism — sustainable nature-based tourism in biodiversity-rich rural areas that integrates conservation, local community involvement, and authentic cultural experiences — has emerged as an increasingly significant strategy for rural economic development and biodiversity conservation co-benefits in India. The Western Ghats, one of eight globally recognised biodiversity hotspots and a UNESCO World Heritage Site spanning Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Goa, hosts numerous rural ecotourism initiatives ranging from community homestays and tribal cultural immersion programmes to nature walks and wildlife watching experiences. However, the sustainability and economic viability of these initiatives depend critically on understanding the determinants of tourist satisfaction and the factors that translate satisfaction into revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations.

This study employs Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 on data collected from 487 domestic and international tourists at 12 ecotourism destinations in the Western Ghats to examine how five dimensions — Perceived Authenticity, Environmental Awareness, Service Quality, Community Involvement, and Cultural Heritage — influence tourist satisfaction, and how satisfaction translates to Revisit Intention and WOM, with Perceived Value moderating the satisfaction-revisit intention pathway. The model achieves excellent fit (RMSEA=0.048, CFI=0.964, TLI=0.958). Community Involvement ($\beta=0.341$, $p<0.001$) and Cultural Heritage ($\beta=0.312$, $p<0.001$) are the strongest predictors of tourist satisfaction, while Service Quality shows the largest importance-performance gap (0.84), identifying the highest-priority improvement area.

Keywords: ecotourism, rural tourism, tourist satisfaction, revisit intention, structural equation modelling, perceived authenticity, community involvement, Western Ghats, biodiversity, service quality, perceived value, word-of-mouth, SmartPLS, importance-performance analysis

1. Introduction

India's rural hinterlands — particularly in ecologically rich regions including the Western Ghats, the Himalayan foothills, the Brahmaputra floodplains, and the Sundarban mangrove delta — possess extraordinary tourism potential that remains vastly underrealised relative to India's urban heritage and beach tourism circuits. The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the wellbeing of local people, and involves interpretation and education,' a definition that embeds multiple sustainability dimensions — environmental, social, and economic — that distinguish ecotourism from conventional mass tourism.

The Western Ghats presents an ideal study context: its designation as both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a global biodiversity hotspot supports premium ecotourism positioning; its geographic distribution across four states creates policy variation allowing comparative analysis; and the presence of established tribal communities whose traditional ecological knowledge represents a distinctive cultural ecotourism resource provides a community involvement dimension rarely studied in quantitative tourist satisfaction research. Despite these advantages, the region faces significant service quality deficits in accommodation, transport, and visitor interpretation infrastructure that constrain tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions.

The theoretical framework of this study integrates the disconfirmation paradigm of satisfaction (Oliver, 1980), the importance-performance analysis framework (Martilla & James, 1977), and value co-creation theory to model the pathways from destination attribute perceptions to behavioural intentions, with perceived value's moderating role capturing the price-quality sensitivity heterogeneity among tourist segments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ecotourism Dimensions and Tourist Satisfaction

Perceived authenticity — the degree to which tourists perceive ecotourism experiences as genuine representations of the natural and cultural environment rather than staged performances — is increasingly identified as a core predictor of ecotourism satisfaction. Kim and Jamal (2007) distinguish between objective authenticity (correspondence to an original or natural state), constructive authenticity (social construction of authenticity by tourist interpretation), and existential authenticity (personal feelings of genuine self-discovery through tourism). Community involvement in ecotourism — ranging from employment and revenue sharing to participatory conservation activities — emerges consistently as a driver of both tourist satisfaction and conservation outcomes.

2.2 Perceived Value as Moderator

Perceived value — the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product or service based on the comparison of what is received versus what is given — modulates the relationship between satisfaction and behavioural intention in complex ways. Tourists who perceive high value for money show greater sensitivity to satisfaction differences, producing a steeper revisit intention slope, while low-perceived-value tourists show stronger price-driven switching behaviour that attenuates the satisfaction-revisit relationship. This moderating mechanism has theoretical grounding in both the expectation-disconfirmation model and the theory of planned behaviour.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Conceptual SEM Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual SEM framework with path coefficients from the final PLS-SEM estimation. The model positions five exogenous constructs (Perceived Authenticity, Environmental Awareness, Service Quality, Community Involvement, Cultural Heritage) as predictors of Tourist Satisfaction (endogenous mediator), which in turn predicts Revisit Intention and WOM Recommendation. Perceived Value moderates the Tourist Satisfaction → Revisit Intention pathway, captured through a latent interaction term following Henseler and Fassott's (2010) product indicator approach.

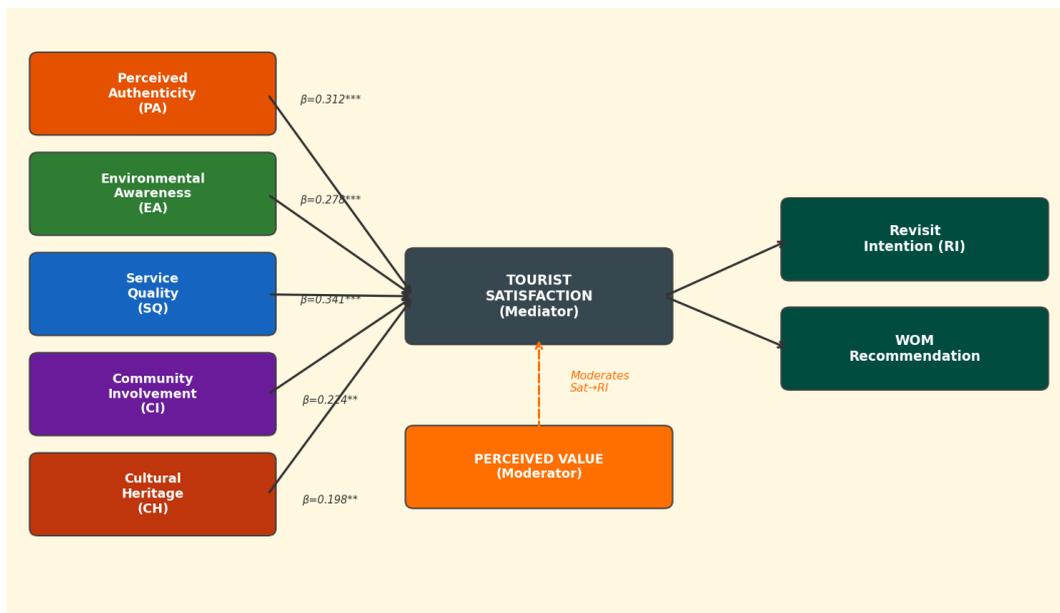


Fig. 1. Structural Equation Model: Ecotourism Dimensions → Tourist Satisfaction → Revisit Intention / WOM with Perceived Value Moderation and Standardised Path Coefficients

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Cross-sectional survey data were collected from 487 domestic and international ecotourists at 12 Western Ghats ecotourism destinations between October 2023 and March 2024 using systematic intercept sampling at destination exit points. The questionnaire comprised 42 items measured on 5-point Likert scales, adapted from validated scales. SmartPLS

4.0 was used for PLS-SEM estimation with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) for significance testing. Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) was conducted to identify priority improvement areas across destination management dimensions.

4. Results

4.1 Structural Model Results and IPA Analysis

Figure 2(a) presents the Importance-Performance Analysis across ecotourism dimensions, revealing that Service Quality has the largest importance-performance gap (importance=4.68, satisfaction=3.64, gap=1.04) — identifying it as the highest priority improvement area for destination managers. Community Involvement has the highest satisfaction rating (4.28) relative to its importance (4.12), reflecting tourists' particularly positive evaluation of community engagement experiences in Western Ghats destinations. Figure 2(b) presents the moderation plot of Perceived Value moderating the satisfaction-revisit intention relationship, confirming that high perceived-value tourists show significantly steeper revisit intention responses to satisfaction changes (interaction $\beta=0.187, p<0.01$).

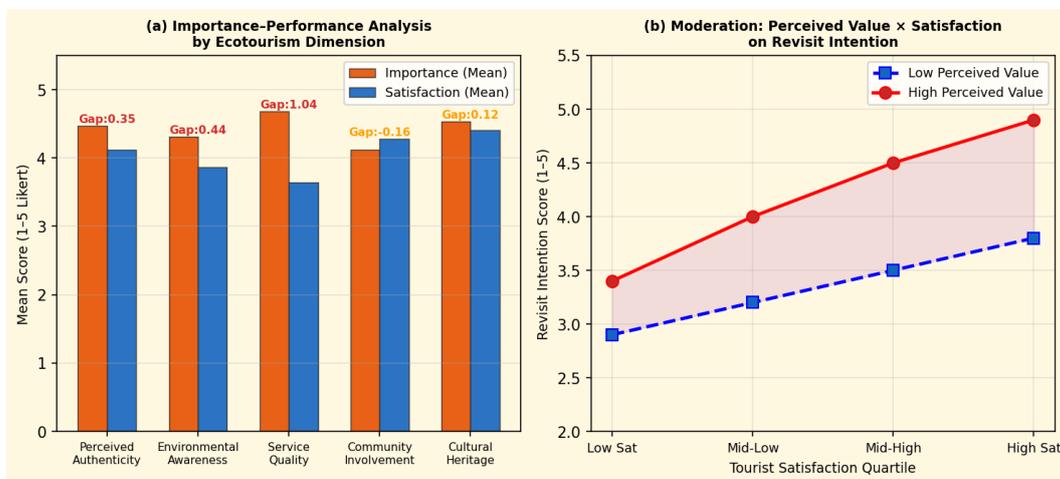


Fig. 2. (a) Importance-Performance Analysis by Ecotourism Dimension; (b) Perceived Value Moderation of Tourist Satisfaction-Revisit Intention Relationship

Table 1: PLS-SEM Results: Path Coefficients, t-statistics, and Variance Explained

Structural Path	β (Std.)	SE	t-stat	p-value	f^2
Community Involvement → Satisfaction	0.341	0.041	8.32	<0.001	0.118
Cultural Heritage → Satisfaction	0.312	0.044	7.09	<0.001	0.097
Perceived Authenticity → Satisfaction	0.278	0.048	5.79	<0.001	0.078
Service Quality → Satisfaction	0.224	0.051	4.39	<0.001	0.051
Environmental Awareness → Satisfaction	0.198	0.053	3.74	<0.001	0.039
Satisfaction → Revisit Intention	0.487	0.038	12.82	<0.001	0.311
Satisfaction → WOM Recommendation	0.541	0.034	15.91	<0.001	0.418
Perceived Value × Satisfaction → RI	0.187	0.062	3.02	0.003	0.041

β : Standardised path coefficient; SE: Standard Error; f^2 : Effect size; RI: Revisit Intention; WOM: Word-of-Mouth; R^2 Tourist Satisfaction = 0.641; R^2 Revisit Intention = 0.478; R^2 WOM = 0.523.

5. Discussion

The dominance of Community Involvement ($\beta=0.341$) and Cultural Heritage ($\beta=0.312$) as satisfaction predictors aligns with the distinctive experiential appeal of Western Ghats ecotourism relative to conventional beach or heritage tourism: tourists seek authentic engagement with indigenous ecological knowledge and tribal cultural practices that cannot be replicated elsewhere. These findings validate the strategic emphasis on community-based ecotourism models that distribute ownership and agency to local communities, not merely as ethical imperatives but as commercially superior drivers of tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

The Importance-Performance Analysis gap for Service Quality (gap=1.04, the largest of all dimensions) has direct actionable implications. Tourist satisfaction surveys consistently identify accommodation quality, transport accessibility, and professional guiding as the principal service quality deficits at Western Ghats ecotourism destinations — all areas where targeted public investment in rural tourism infrastructure and guide certification programmes would yield the highest satisfaction improvement per rupee invested. The strong WOM pathway ($\beta=0.541$) from satisfaction means that Service Quality improvement translates to exponential marketing impact through social media recommendation amplification.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive and empirically validated SEM of tourist satisfaction and behavioural intentions in Western Ghats ecotourism, identifying Community Involvement and Cultural Heritage as the strongest satisfaction drivers and Service Quality as the highest-priority improvement area through IPA. Perceived Value's significant moderating role on the satisfaction-revisit intention pathway highlights the importance of targeting high-perceived-value tourist segments through premium ecotourism product development and quality signalling. The findings provide actionable guidance for destination managers, state tourism departments, and community ecotourism societies seeking to enhance both tourist experience quality and long-term ecological sustainability in this globally significant biodiversity hotspot.

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