



# Exploration of Service Quality, Satisfaction, and Behavioral Intentions of Inbound Visitors in Nepal

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## Abstract

*The tourism industry of Nepal has been kept the priority all the time but the importance of service quality for visitors' satisfaction is the neglected subject of investigation. For getting loyal visitors they must receive quality service and be satisfied with the services. This study aims to explore the service quality of the Nepalese tourism industry in the visitors' perception level of satisfaction and behavioral intention. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been employed to collect primary data from the inbound visitors. There were 457 full-respond questionnaires and 12 in-depth interviews for the sources of data. The study found that Nepali tourism service quality has been perceived as moderate service above the average. Destination attractiveness and employee behavior are the positive indicators while prompt service management, transportation, and other infrastructural indicators are slightly below the average. A significant number of visitors are satisfied and loyal and would like to convey positive word of mouth to their friends and family about the destination Nepal.*

**Keywords:** Service Quality, Satisfaction, Behavioral Intention, Nepal, Tourism, Inbound Visitors

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## Introduction

Services are deeds, processes, and performances. Service marketing strategies differ from physical goods as they focus on delivering experiences, processes, and intangibles to their customers. According to Wilson et al., (2016) in many cases, satisfaction and service quality are found using interchangeably but they are different satisfaction is a broader concept while service quality is the result of five dimensions namely reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles from the service provider. Satisfaction is the fulfillment response of the service receivers on their judgmental evaluation as per their needs and expectations. Service quality is the fundamental antecedent of satisfaction and satisfaction is the consequence of service quality. They have further mentioned that referring to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) that these five dimensions of service quality were proposed after the exploratory and quantitative study of financial services, repair and maintenance services, security services, and other services like retail store services. Thus, this philosophy in tourism services would be a worthwhile matter of investigation.

For improvements in service quality and establishing Nepal as a popular tourist destination, understanding customer behavior, and providing services as per the customers' expectations is crucial. There are very limited studies on the tourism industry of Nepal those studies that have been carried out are limited on the other aspects like the vulnerability of the Nepalese tourism destinations because of not protecting the environment and focusing on adventure tourism (Genç, 2021). Sharma, (2021) limits his study to tourism as the external stimulus that is playing the role in transformational change in Nepalese society.

Tourism is a totality of experiences rather than a set of services. The tangibility dimension of service quality influence domestic tourist and the responsiveness dimension influence foreign tourist (Ramya, Kowsalya, and Dharanipriya 2019; Prabhakaran et al., 2008). The customer-centric marketing philosophy is undoubtedly found to be an important driver for the service industry that envisages establishing lasting business relationships with customers (Kotler et al., 2019).

Service quality, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions are the most researched area of service marketing discipline but in the case of Nepal such research is neglected while the government and other service providers particularly tourism services pronounced for qualitative tourism services for visitors' satisfaction and getting a positive behavioral intention from the inbound visitors. Service providers will be able to address the customers' expectations more precisely which may lead to satisfaction and loyalty (positive behavioral intention) to the destination of Nepal. The identified gap will help to understand the customer and formulation inter change appropriate strategies for customer satisfaction. The findings of the research will also be helpful to policymakers who design programs in different aspects of tourism. It is an attempt to explore how visitors perceive the Nepalese tourism service quality, and satisfaction, and demonstrate the behavioral intention. The main objective of the study is to explore visitors' perception of Nepalese tourism service quality, level of satisfaction, and behavioral intention of the inbound tourists of Nepal.

## **Review of literature**

Bolton and Drew (1991) develop a model for measuring service quality based on expectation, perceived performance, and disconfirmation experience. They have proposed satisfaction and perceived quality as the antecedent of perceived value. Customer satisfaction can be determined by different situations because of the complexity of the extrinsic and intrinsic cues. Mattsson (1992) has proposed a model for measuring service quality based on idea value. Customers perceive the quality against the value standard they laid on it. He further explains attributes, consequences, and relationships as the mean-end-chain model to identify customer categories. Mattsson's model is for value base measurement rather than attribute base measurement.

Service quality measurement techniques provide the basic idea for quality improvement strategies. The techniques provide a base for performance measurement. There is a need for applying the need for scale validity and reliability before using the important performance analysis technique for measuring attributes. The critical incident technique (CIT) is more applicable when content analysis is the method for

analyzing the information. Conjoint methods are also used for service quality measurement as per the demand of the situation. Service quality and customer satisfaction are interdependent. It is primarily based on the disconfirmation theory. This theory is considered more neutral than the gap theory but from a psychological perspective, the desired service is treated as the want of the service receiver, and adequate service as the willingness to accept the proposed service and predicted service is the likely hood of occurrences of the service point of view, the gap theory is more compatible than the disconfirmation theory (Ekinci, 1999). Rust and Chung (2006) have suggested the three-component model service quality model cooperating with Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991), Gronroos (1984) Berry, Parasuraman. and Zeithaml, (1994) have proposed as a process or a functional quality with customer employees' interaction, the environment of service delivery and the outcome as technical quality as the overall perceived service quality.

The performance base measurement triggers service quality research. The five dimensions of service quality namely tangibility, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy were criticized which will make it complicated to replicate in different situations of services. The expectation of the service receiver plays an important role in service quality and the technical and functional dimensions may be difficult to segregate (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1988). They proposed that the service performance scales as efficient scales to appropriately address the service quality measurement and reduce the items.

Bitner, (1990) has highlighted the importance of frontline employees in the delivery of superior service quality. The frontline employees are generally underpaid and undertrained and have a low level of motivation and they frequently leave the organization, which leads to customer dissatisfaction. Thus, training motivating, and rewarding frontline employees are very important in every service business. They conducted a study to identify events and related behaviors of contract employees and found the important role of contract employees in customer satisfaction in a service organization. Kim and Lee, (2011) in a Korean study of low-cost carriers show that perceived service quality is derived from word-of-mouth

communication, purchase intentions, and complaining behavior regarding satisfaction. There is no relation between price loyalties with the perception of the perceived quality of services.

Wilson et al., (2016) mentioned that perceived service quality may determine customer satisfaction. Marketing of services always pays due attention to the customers' expectations and satisfaction, service, as affected by many factors, can occur at any time from inquiry to see off service providers must be aware in every step. Service recovery generally gets little attention in the eyes of marketers and scholars of the area, but it is very important for customer satisfaction (McCollough et al., 2000). The service sector is important in modern business. It plays a dominant role in every economy. Clifton et al., (2014) conducted an empirical study about the impact of socioeconomic background on satisfaction in the service sector of twelve European nations and found that the socioeconomic condition of consumers has a greater effect on satisfaction. Having lower education, elderly not employed consumers have a lower level of satisfaction with their peers' mates and vice versa. So suggested that policies should be adopted as per the socio-economic background of the customer while determining the price of the service and "one size fits all" policies should not be adopted. Reasons for dissatisfaction are important for adopting a particular policy based on socio-economic background.

A study in Japan shows that local visitors have a more positive evaluation of the destination than non-local visitors. Which is according to the perceived service quality and satisfaction of the visitors about the destination (An, Harada, and Sato, 2020). Satisfaction must lead to positive behavioral intention in the Triathlon event visiting behavior. Service providers' care and lesion have the greatest impact on visitors' satisfaction with the Chinese visitors in Hong Kong (Chan, Hsu, and Baum (2015) behavioral intention of the visitors has been determined by the tour guides' behavior. According to Hwang, Asif, and Lee (2020), the motivation of the visitor strongly influences the tour quality of Chinese visitors to South Korea which leads to satisfaction and pronouncing positive word of mouth with other potential visitors.

Behavioral intention (BI) is the customers' response after service consumption. It may be a positive or negative response like complaining behaviors or negative word of mouth on the contrary loyalty building activities like positive word of mouth or recommendations of other people about the consumption of the service or revisit intention. The higher the perceived service quality, the higher the positive word of mouth, and the lower the perceived service quality lower the positive word of mouth, or vice versa. The attribution theory or cost-benefit theories explain the experience-based norms. Satisfaction may lead to loyalty and positive word of mouth at the same time dissatisfaction switch the destination and negative word of mouth. In some cases, satisfaction may cause attitude formation and behavioral emotion toward the destination. Both situations bring perceptual change and word of mouth. Behaviorists' view is based on behavioral psychology like motivation on doing or not doing. Better motivated consumers buy the product and show loyalty to the service providers. The cognitive approach is rooted in individual, cognition, and social psychology (Decrop, 2014). It assumes that consumers are not passive, they show choices, reactions, and behaviors. It has a huge influence on perception and individuals' information processes.

## **Methodology**

A cross-sectional survey method was employed to collect both interviews as well as questionnaire data for the study. The understanding that the quantitative approach alone may not be appropriate to generate tourism results thus including the qualitative approach can add to generating more reliable results from the tourism study (Hewlett Brown, 2018). The mixed method has been considered the more appropriate method for a comprehensive study to minimize the limitations of both qualitative as well as quantitative methods. Thus, the research design of the study has been based on a mixed research approach (Creswell 2013; Veal, 2018; Hewlett and Brown, 2018). Veal (2018) further argues that the mixed method has been getting popular these days because of pragmatism in social science research. It is having both methods that fare a deeper understanding of the subject matter and a quantitative method for statistical validation of the result of the study.

For the quantitative study, 3500 printed questionnaires were distributed to visitors in the year 2021 from January to April in the tourist areas of Pokhara and Kathmandu. It was also a convenient sampling method for collecting data at the places where tourists were waiting for services and willing to give their responses to the questionnaire. Questionnaires of five-point Likert scales were developed for the collecting of the quantitative data from the respondents. Items of the questionnaire are based on Parasuram Zeithaml, and Berry's (1988) psychometric batteries after the adjustment of the tourism-related items into the five service quality dimensions namely reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. A 20-response pilot test was also carried out to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire. There were 413 full-response questionnaires received for the analysis of the study. 44 responses were online Google forms during the pandemic lockdown in September- December 2020 by collecting emails of visitors who visited in previous years as a tourist in Nepal. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) had been employed to ensure sampling adequacy. KMO measure greater than .7 ( $KMO > .7$ ) is considered the sampling adequacy for the further process. A sample of 12 visitors was interviewed to verify the questionnaire as the triangulation of the study on convenient sampling. Most of the interviews were carried out by taking prior permission from the visitors and a few were intercepting visitors while they were waiting for services and having time to talk with the researcher. All 12 interviews were after the preliminary result of the questionnaire survey.

Means, standard deviation, ranking, t-statistics, and p-value have been employed to analyze the quantitative data collected from questionnaire responses. Cronbach Alpha was calculated to ensure the reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire responses, and all are equal to .7 or above. Manual narrative content analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. Manual narrative content analysis is a way of identifying patterns, concepts, themes, and the word stress of the respondent's responses on the mentioned topic and their deeper understanding of the subject matter and identified themes and categories (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Thus, both quantitative as well as qualitative analyzing techniques have been employed according to the requirement of the data and result.

## Result

The analysis has been made with all the responses of 457 questionnaires, the service quality dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles as Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) which is the foundation of the study. The satisfaction-related items are developed with the different literature and interviewing the key informants of the service providers. Behavioral intentions are the loyalty status that is positive or negative behavioral responses after the service.

### Examination of Service Quality Dimensions

The service quality dimensions are the tested dimension indicators in the various service industries of the world. This research is testing according to the Nepalese tourism industry indicators for inbound visitors. There are five dimensions of service quality according to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) named reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles.

### Reliability Dimension

These are the dimensions to explore the perceived reliability of the visitor. Like the reliability of the promise made to the visitors at the initial sales talk, service failure during the service delivery, and other such indicators that denote the reliability of the service. Table one shows the indicators and corresponding values of the perceived service reliability of the Nepalese tourism service for inbound visitors.



**Table 1** Reliability Dimensions

Statements	$\bar{X}$	SD	Rank	t-statistics	p-value
I always delivered what I promised at the beginning visit to Nepal.	3.91	.960	1	20.224	.000
I found Nepalese tourism services error-free.	3.37	1.058	4	7.472	.000
The service providers understand my problems precisely.	3.29	1.169	5	5.364	.000
Service providers delivered timely what they promised.	3.83	.893	2	19.809	.000
There is a proper compensation system if any deficiency in the delivery of the stipulated service.	3.43	.962	3	9.578	.000

*p-value Significant (2-tailed)*

*Source: Field Survey 2021 (N=457)*

Reliability has five items for ensuring the visitor’s perceived reliability, like how far the service providers’ promise can be fulfilled to the customer. How frequently do visitors face service failure? How far do the service providers precisely understand the visitor’s expectations and timely delivery of the service? Table one shows that the average reliability is ( $\bar{X}=3.57$ ) which represents that Nepali tourism services are perceived as reliable however it is not high reliability perceived by the visitors.

### Responsiveness Dimension

Responsiveness is another dimension of service quality that is widely practiced in service quality research after Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), which indicates the demonstration of responsive behaviors to visitors during the actual service delivery. Table two demonstrates the indicators of the responsiveness dimensions and the resulting mean, standard deviation, and t-statistics.

**Table 2** Responsiveness Dimensions

Statements	$\bar{X}$	SD	Rank	t- statistics	p- value
Nepalese service providers are properly committed to pleasing visitors.	3.98	.818	1	25.632	.000
The tourism service employees explained all the necessary information at the entrances of the stipulated services.	3.66	1.076	4	13.123	.000
I got properly explained with energy when I asked about any doubts.	3.90	.986	2	19.412	.000
The services in various activities were prompt and organized.	3.03	1.146	6	.612	.541
They promptly rectify the problems if any occurred.	3.86	.971	3	18.973	.000
I found all charges transparent on the package.	3.26	1.227	5	4.538	.000

*p-value Significant (2-tailed)*

*Source: Field Survey 2021 (N=457)*

The main responsiveness indicators are commitment to pleasing the visitors, right and sufficient information on time, properly explaining the questions and doubts of the visitors, timely and organized ways of service delivery, promptly rectifying the problems raised, and transparent pricing policies adopted in various service deliveries. From table two the average responsiveness of the items is ( $\bar{X}=3.62$ ) which shows that Nepali tourism service providers are more responsive toward their guests. The mean responsiveness is a little higher than the reliability meaning Nepalese service providers are more responsible than reliable. But visitors point out that services are not delivered promptly in an organized way.

## Assurance Dimension

Assurance is the perception of reduced risk for the service receiver from the service provider, especially the providers' demonstrated confidence, knowledge, and professional behavior.

**Table 3** Assurance

Statements	$\bar{X}$	SD	Rank	t-statistics	p-value
The staff of Nepalese tourism services is properly trained for customer services.	3.92	.964	4	20.375	.000
I found confidence in their performance.	4.06	.890	3	25.432	.000
I felt safe while traveling to Nepal.	4.11	.879	2	26.973	.000
Nepalese service providers are polite and courteous.	4.17	.891	1	28.035	.000
Nepalese service providers have knowledge of their service.	3.39	1.240	5	6.791	.000

*p-value Significant (2-tailed)*

*Source: Field Survey 2021 (N=457)*

From table three Nepali tourism service providers are being able to win the visitors' confidence by having training and performance, polite and courteous sales talk, demonstrating the appropriate knowledge while delivering the services, and assuring the visitors' safety is the main concern in the assurance dimension of the service quality. The average ( $\bar{X}=3.93$ ) shows that visitors are assured and easily accept the tourism services of Nepal.

## Empathy Dimension

Empathy has been considered the fourth important dimension of service quality. To justify empathy there are five items namely caring for the guest, understanding the matter the guest looking for, timely availability of the service

providers, the best interest of the service provider the guest, and being willing to handle visitors' complaints precisely and properly. Table four the result of the five indicating statements of empathy demonstrating significantly positive results.

**Table 4** Empathy

Statements	$\bar{X}$	SD	Rank	t- statistics	p- value
I got always care from the service providers.	4.03	.843	1	26.040	.000
Service providers understand what I was looking for.	3.97	.854	2	24.318	.000
Employees of the service sectors of Nepal are always available.	3.21	1.220	5	3.720	.000
Employees of Nepalese services have the tourist's best interests in their mind.	3.77	.913	3	17.936	.000
Nepalese tourism service providers handle tourist complaints promptly.	3.76	.941	4	17.255	.000

*p-value Significant (2-tailed)*

*Source: Field Survey 2021 (N=457)*

The average empathy dimension is ( $\bar{X}=3.75$ ) which provides evidence of better empathetic service providers. The calculated result of t-statistics is significantly higher. However, the availability of the service employees is just above the average, it is also significantly higher on the statistical calculation only.

### Tangibles Dimension

Tangibles represent the items that visitors can notice or observe while receiving and evaluating the service. Table five depicts the items and resulting values of the respective item of the tangible dimensions.

**Table 5** Tangibles Dimension

Statements	$\bar{X}$	SD	Rank	t-statistics	p-value
Vehicles and devices for Nepalese travel and tourism are good in condition.	3.46	1.057	2	9.337	.000
I found all service providers' neat and professional dress up.	3.80	.951	1	17.812	.000
Sites are visually appealing.	3.29	1.183	3	5.296	.000
Nepali hotels have modern amenities.	3.29	1.169	3	5.241	.000

*p-value Significant (2-tailed)*

*Source: Field Survey 2021 (N=457)*

The observed conditions of vehicles and devices used to deliver service to the visitor, the professional appearance of the service providers, the visually appealing of the destination sites, and modern amenities in hospitality services are the primary determinants of the dimensions of tangibles. The average of the tangible dimension is ( $\bar{X}=3.46$ ) showing moderately convincing visitors to attract Nepal as the destination. All the items except, “the services in various activities were prompt and organized have a significantly positive impact on enhancing the Nepalese tourism industry to the inbound visitors.

### Dimensions of Satisfaction

It is visitors' felt pleasure from the destination based on monetary payment and other efforts made to fulfill the destination's expectations. These indicators are from the theory of satisfaction, other literature related to satisfaction, and interviewing the key informants.

**Table 6** Satisfaction

Statements	$\bar{X}$	SD	Rank	t- statistics	p- value
The accommodation services are as per my expectation	3.84	.982	6	18.300	.000
The food and beverage services are as per my expectation	3.84	.942	5	19.118	.000
I get transportation services as per my expectations	3.31	1.106	9	6.046	.000
I like friendly and polite service providers in Nepal	4.24	.773	1	34.191	.000
I am safe and comfortable while staying in Nepal	4.19	.852	2	29.921	.000
I got professional services from service providers	4.01	.852	4	25.368	.000
I got a pleasing environment in Nepal	4.18	.937	3	26.973	.000
I got service delivery on time	3.54	1.106	7	10.493	.000
I found cleanliness as per my expectation in Nepal	3.49	1.157	8	8.978	.000

*p-value Significant (2-tailed)*

*Source: Field Survey 2021*

The parameters of satisfaction dimensions are for identifying visitors' level of satisfaction with different services like accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, friendliness and courteous behaviors with the guest, punctuality, and professionalism of the service employees, and cleanliness of the places they have visited. Table six demonstrate that Nepali service providers are friendly and polite toward their guest with a maximum mean of visitors' response ( $\bar{X}$ =4.24) and a minimum standard deviation (SD=.773). Nine items in the satisfaction item are significant in positively defining construct.

## Dimensions of the Behavioral Intentions

The behavioral intention here means visitors' response to the received services. Chances of pronouncing positive or negative word of mouth and demonstrating behaviors about the destinations. These indicators are also developed through interviewing key informants and related literature. Table seven presents the indicators and results.

**Table 7** Behavioral Intentions

Statements	$\bar{X}$	SD	Rank	t-statistics	p-value
How likely will you again visit Nepal	3.50	.927	4	11.550	.000
How likely do you recommend your friends and relatives to visit Nepal?	3.76	.767	2	21.111	.000
How likely do you recommend your friends and family to follow the listed price of the tourism services of Nepal?	3.13	1.085	5	2.630	.009
How likely will you pronounce it as Nepalese tourism services are of good quality?	3.51	.770	3	14.098	.000
How likely will you share with your friends/family about the good experience of your visit to Nepal?	3.86	.763	1	24.020	.000

*p-value Significant (2-tailed)*

*Source: Field Survey 2021*

Behavioral intentions are the level of loyalty towards the destination Nepal after visiting it. Though many of the interviewed entrepreneurs had claimed that about 40% of the visitors are repeating visitors, table seven confined that visitors' likelihood of the revisit is just above the neutral response ( $\bar{X}=3.5$ ). Whatever their personal intention to revisit the response result demonstrates that there are chances

of recommending and sharing the positive experience to friends and relatives to visit Nepal and another positive word of mouth about the destination Nepal. The indicators of behavioral intention also have a p-value significance that justifies the significant impact of all items on the dimension.

From the interview result, almost all respondents found having quite reliable services as promised, especially in the case of trekking, the guide services were good and informative. They found rural areas more reliable than the cities. transportation services are not reliable, which made them unhappy. Service personnel are quite responsive to their duties. Nepalese tourism service providers are quite knowledgeable about performing their duties with appropriate support and understanding to their guests. They were not happy with the mechanical condition of the vehicles and the cleanliness of the surroundings, but the natural beauty appealed to them to revisit the decision. Visitors are quite satisfied with the individual services of the tourism service provider and the virgin naturalness of the destination, but the pricing and urban activities are not encouraging for the revisit intention. Most of the respondents pointed out the proper garbage management system as the immediate action for improvement.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) named five service quality dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. for surveying service quality of the Nepalese tourism industry. The reliability dimension of the Nepalese tourism services is found above the average of it having t-statistics 20 at a 99% confidence level showing the encouraging result of the service quality of Nepalese tourism for the positive further advancement in a moderate way. The service quality dimension of responsiveness also shows a positive result indicating that Nepalese service providers are relatively responsible for delivering the services to their guests. As Bitner, (1990) suggested that service employees, especially frontline, are not found to demonstrate prompt and organized service delivery. Other dimensions are also positive on the visitors' response, but the tangible dimension has not been found so encouraging. It is because of the work cleanliness of the destination, not proper vehicles and not having demonstrated professionalism at the work, as mentioned in the interview with visitors.



## Conclusion

The service quality dimension of the Nepalese tourism service sector was found significantly positive on visitor perception. Visitors perceived Nepalese service providers to be reliable in their promises. The responsiveness construct was also found significantly positive, demonstrating the service providers' responsiveness behavior except for prompt and organized service delivery. The assurance and empathy perspective of the visitor's evaluation of the service providers is significantly positive, but the tangibility of the service provider is found least evaluated by the visitors. The research objective was to explore visitors' perception of Nepalese tourism service quality, level of satisfaction, and behavioral intention. From all measured variables visitors of the constructs' reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles perception of Nepalese tourism quality is above the average indicating they have rated as a quality service destination. Visitors are found satisfied with the service offered in the Nepalese tourism industry. Though the satisfaction level varies in different variables, employees' behavioral aspects variables are rated high, and transportation aspects variables have been rated low. From the calculation, we can conclude that tourists demonstrate positive behavioral intentions about Nepal's destination. They found willing to visit again, recommending to friends and family by sharing a positive experience about the visit but they found suspicious about the listed price of the tourism services of Nepal. It could be because of different discounts and the nature of lowering the listed price of the services.

## Implications of Research

This study has both theoretical as well as practical implications. The findings of the study are based on both quantitative and qualitative data to justify the higher degree of reliability. The finding of the study will contribute to the generalization of the service quality dimensions, factors affecting visitor satisfaction, and behavioral intention in the tourism industry of a least-developed country. It will equally be important to the practitioners who are involved in the tourism industry of Nepal and want to understand the current situation of the Nepalese tourism service quality,

level of visitor satisfaction, and how likely they will be pronounced a positive or negative word of mouth with the probable visitor.

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