

Understanding Tourist Preferences and Satisfaction: The Role of Perceived Value, Cultural Heritage, Infrastructure, Environmental, And Experiential Factors in India

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| KEYWORDS | ABSTRACT |
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| Tourist destination, Perceived Value, Culture, Heritage, Past experience and Satisfaction | The objective of this research is to understand the determinants that affect destination preference and improve the satisfaction of tourists in India. In light of competition, the tourism industry needs to comprehend the primary factors contributing to tourists' contentment or discontent. The impression that tourists have about the places they visit is significant to consider. A total of 409 Indian tourists participated in a survey for primary data collection, which was subsequently analyzed using structural equation modelling and confirmatory factor analysis. The results show that the cultural and heritage perspective, infrastructure safety and security, local attractions, past experience, perceived value, tourism, leisure and recreation have positive and significant impacts on tourists' Satisfaction. Meanwhile, the natural environment does not have any measurable impact on tourist satisfaction. Overall findings confirm the effect on tourist satisfaction through the factors. It is suggested through the study that managers and the supply side of tourism need to undertake combinations of factors or antecedents to enrich tourist satisfaction and experience. The research will provide a deeper insight to understand of the factors that influence the tourists' satisfaction. |

1. INTRODUCTION

Deciding on a travel destination is often challenging, given the abundance of beautiful and adventurous places to explore. Tourism has become one of the most successful industries worldwide due to the quick development of tourist infrastructure, internet knowledge, exclusive deals, and referrals from friends and family. As of January 2024, 1.3 billion globetrotters travel internationally each year (World Tourism Barometer, 2024). Tourist destination selection is affected by various factors, which can be categorized as transportation, safety, shopping, culture, heritage, festivals, entertainment, and prior experiences (Chung et al., 2015). These decisions reflect tourists' planning, behavioral intentions, and preferences (Bronner & de Hoog, 2020). Tourism not only drives economic development but also encourages governments to prioritize destination development (Li et al., 2008). The digital era has transformed how destinations are marketed. The Internet, social media, online and virtual content like photos and videos have significantly shaped destination images and influenced visitor behavior



(Kou et al., 2015; Chung et al., 2015; Su et al., 2016). Destinations now strategically promote their unique identity through websites, guidebooks, banners, and other media (Liou et al., 2020). A tourist destination is a complex product comprising both natural elements, such as climate, landscapes, heritage, and culture, and man-made features like hotels, transport, recreation, and shopping opportunities. These attributes attract tourists seeking relaxation, adventure, novelty, health, social interaction, or self-actualization (Chung et al., 2015). The tourism industry thrives on intangible experiences and services, building emotional connections and loyalty (Bronner & de Hoog, 2020). Tourists often share their travel experiences online, creating a ripple effect that influences potential tourists' preferences (Su et al., 2016). Understanding what influences destination preferences is crucial, especially in a culturally diverse and geographically rich country like India. In order to provide a thorough understanding of how tourists make choices, this research attempts to assess the major psychological and external (push and pull) aspects that influence their preferences for destinations.

With an emphasis on India's historical relevance, aesthetic appeal, natural beauty, accessibility, and popular attractions, this research attempts to investigate the major elements affecting tourist choices for Indian destinations. It seeks to understand how both external factors, such as marketing strategies, infrastructure, accessibility, and destination attributes, and psychological factors—including personal motivations, preferences, and perceptions—influence tourists' decision-making processes. The primary aim is to evaluate the influence of these variables on tourist satisfaction, which is crucial for promoting repeat visits and improving destination competitiveness. Greater visitors' satisfaction contributes to increased destination appeal, more effective marketing strategies, and ultimately, higher tourism revenue. The study also evaluates how experience quality and satisfaction are impacted by specific elements such as cultural and heritage value, perceived value, safety and infrastructure, local attractions, past experiences, and recreational opportunities. The factors are essential in influencing positive experiences for tourists and promoting sustainable development within the tourism sector. (Jauhari & Sanjeev, 2010; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Kaurav et al., 2024).

The preliminary review of existing literature indicates a significant gap in the exploration of tourist preferences and satisfaction levels in India. To our knowledge, no research has been conducted by taking all these factors in one analysis. The key factors identified that can influence the tourist decision are as follows: Cultural and Heritage Perspective, Infrastructure, Safety and Security, Local Attractions, Natural Environment, Past Experience, Perceived Value and Tourism, Leisure and Recreation.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 examines the current literature, whereas Section 3 presents the conceptual framework. Section 4 discusses the survey description, constructs, research methodology, and the model analyzed through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Section 5 presents the conclusions, discussions, and implications. Section 6 discusses the limitations of the study and outlines directions for future research, providing valuable insights for marketing practitioners and policymakers aimed at improving tourist goods and services..

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A thorough investigation reveals that the preferences of tourists regarding destinations in India are influenced by a multifaceted interaction of cultural, psychological, and infrastructural elements. Historical and cultural elements significantly enhance destination attractiveness and stimulate local economies (Tripathi et al., 2010; Murdy et al., 2018). Past experiences, perceived value, and infrastructure—including transportation and communication—are critical in determining tourist choices (Barman & Nath, 2019; Dey & Sarma, 2010; Chen & Gursoy, 2001). Destination awareness and emotional engagement are found to be positively affecting tourist behavior, influencing both cognitive and affective destination images and ultimately shaping perceptions and behavioral intentions (Josiam et al., 2015; Sharma & Nayak, 2019a). The role of safety is consistently highlighted as a determining factor, with security concerns deterring tourist arrivals and impacting foreign exchange earnings (Dhariwal, 2005; Chen & Gursoy, 2001). In order to develop destination loyalty, place authenticity, place attachment, and trust are essential. These are driven by destination image, nostalgia, social media engagement, and regional identity (Rather et al., 2019; Arya et al., 2018; Verma & Rajendran, 2017; Bose et al., 2022). Natural attraction, cultural attractions, tourist satisfaction, and perceived value all affect repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth (Saqib, 2019; Kaushal et al., 2019; Dey & Sarma, 2010). Also, Community involvement, education, cleanliness, and infrastructure contribute to tourist satisfaction and engagement (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019). Cultural distance and values also affect tourist behavior and destination choices (Hashemi & Hanser, 2018). Destination image, shaped by marketing, social media, and experiential offerings, impacts consumption behavior and destination branding (Kumar & Nayak, 2018). Natural environments, weather, recreational opportunities, socio-political stability, and overall atmosphere are also decisive in selecting tourist destinations (Dwivedi et al., 2009; Ryu et al., 2020; Alam et al., 2020). Notably, while services and tourism products may support satisfaction, the broader cultural and environmental context plays a more pivotal role (Alam et al., 2020).

Cultural and Heritage Perspective and tourists' preference

India's rich diversity of cultural beliefs, languages, customs, and practices makes cultural tourism a significant factor influencing destination preference (Saqib, 2019). Tourists are attracted to rituals, traditions, and festivals that reflect a destination's historical and spiritual essence, driven by a desire to connect with cultural narratives and the past (Verma &



Rajendran, 2017; Tripathi et al., 2010). Heritage tourism fosters emotional connectivity, self-exploration, and learning, especially among those seeking ancestral roots or historic sites (Murdy et al., 2018). Key motivators include enjoyment, experiential learning, and immersion in local arts, myths, and built heritage (Verma & Rajendran, 2017; Sharma & Sarmah, 2019). Tangible cultural assets such as monuments, archaeological sites, and artefacts attract tourists while promoting community learning and cultural preservation (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019). Religious tourism exemplifies this connection through sacred sites' historical and symbolic significance (Tripathi et al., 2010). Effective heritage tourism integrates architectural, cultural, and historical elements into socio-economic frameworks to support sustainable development (Vu Hoang, 2021). Consequently, cultural heritage shapes tourist satisfaction through cultural identity, novelty, memory, and learning, reinforcing its positive influence on destination preference.

H_{1a}: "Cultural Heritage Perspective of the tourism destination in India significantly influences the tourist satisfaction"

Infrastructure, Safety and Security and tourists' preference

Infrastructure, safety, and security are pivotal determinants in tourists' destination choices and overall satisfaction (Madhavan & Rastogi, 2011; Saqib, 2019). Tourists consistently prioritize these factors when evaluating potential travel destinations, as they significantly impact the perceived value, comfort, and experience during their travel (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; George, 2003). Tourism infrastructure includes essential public services such as transportation, public safety, healthcare, ICT, banking, and education, each contributing to the overall accessibility and appeal of a destination (Khuong & Phuong, 2017; Nguyen, 2021). Adequate infrastructure, aligned with effective safety measures, enhances quality of life and contributes to a positive travel environment, encouraging both first-time and repeat visits (Mamirkulova et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2021). Safety and security protocols—ranging from protecting personal belongings to ensuring public order—are critical in shaping tourist perceptions and preferences (Verma & Sarangi, 2019). Additionally, robust infrastructure is vital for sustainable tourism development and delivering high-quality service experiences (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019). Thus, the integration of safety, security, and comprehensive infrastructure forms a foundation for tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty, supporting the hypothesis that these factors significantly influence destination preference.

H_{1b}: "Infrastructure, Safety and Security of the tourism destination in India significantly influences the tourist satisfaction"

Local Attractions and tourists' preferences

Local attractions encompass street food, homestays, cuisine, aroma, traditions, local values, cleanliness, local products, artefacts, natural beauty, entertainment, and events (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019; Murphy et al., 2011). Tourists favor destinations with stunning scenery, exotic beauty, and distinctive features, enhancing their satisfaction and embedding these qualities in the local culture (Saqib, 2019). Such attractions inspire tourists to seek authentic and memorable experiences. Sharma and Sarmah (2019) noted that local community participation in attractions builds trust, empowers consumer value, fosters emotional connections, and strengthens tourist attachment to the destination. In addition to addressing the social and economic needs of the community, this collaborative involvement encourages community-based tourism. Thus, local attractions significantly impact tourists' preferences and satisfaction, leading to the hypothesis that local attractions influence tourists' satisfaction.

H_{1c} : Local Attraction of the tourist destination significantly influences tourist satisfaction

Natural Environment and tourists' preference

Natural attractions offer visual pleasure and satisfaction, serving as a key strategy (Saqib, 2019; Khuong & Nguyen, 2017; Roy, Dhir, & Ahsan, 2016). India showcases remarkable biodiversity, featuring a variety of ecosystems that support an extensive array of animals, flora, birds, national parks, and wildlife sanctuaries. (Bhandari & Heshmati, 2010; Deb Burman et al., 2007). The natural environment captivates and draws in visitors, who have a profound yearning to immerse themselves in nature. They want to be near nature, so they can view things and adore them like flowers, birds, and animals, rarely seen in their daily lives (Dey & Sarma, 2010). Natural attractions became the most effective positioning strategy that influenced tourists to visit the destination (Saqib, 2019). Furthermore, tourists' happiness is a key factor in determining ecologically responsible behavior. Cleanliness and freshness of natural sites contribute to a positive surrounding for both the community and tourists (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019). This discussion highlights the significant impact of the natural environment on tourist preferences and satisfaction, leading to the hypothesis examining this influence.

H_{1d}: Natural Environment in the tourist destination significantly influences the tourist satisfaction

Past Experience and tourists' preference

Customers' perceptions and satisfaction are derived from their experiences (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Saqib, 2019), which are inherently subjective (Sharma & Nayak, 2019a). Experiences significantly shape destination brands, as they reveal the personality of a place linked to people's characteristics and consumption patterns (Kumar & Nayak, 2018). Past experiences gauge cognitive responses that motivate tourism participation and become memorable through gratitude, engagement, fun, surprise, tranquility, and pleasure of tourists (Kao et al., 2019). The destination's goods and services provide



something special that tourists will remember for a long time, which may lead to revisiting the destination and affect how their future travel behavior (Helkkula, 2011). This is the ultimate atmosphere derived from experience (Saqib, 2019). Experience generates tourist satisfaction, which in turn generates positive behavioral intentions (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019). The evolution of experience quality has become a crucial element in assessing the success of the tourism industry, significantly influencing the value and satisfaction that tourists perceive. (Loureiro, 2014; Sharma & Nayak, 2019a). An in-depth examination of past experiences is essential for enhancing the success of the tourism sector and for fostering a greater understanding of visitors' experiences at the destination. (Chen & Chen, 2010). The following hypothesis is framed to examine the impact of past experiences on the satisfaction levels of tourists..

H_{1c}: "Past Experience of the tourists significantly influences tourist satisfaction"

Perceived Value and tourists' preference

The perceived value is characterized as an individual's comprehensive evaluation of the quality or usefulness of a product or brand. (Zeithaml, 1988), significantly influences tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty (Boo et al., 2009; Chen & Chen, 2010; Sharma & Nayak, 2019). This indicates a tradeoff between positive benefits and perceived expenses (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Chen & Chen, 2010), encompassing enjoyment, comfort, and experiential benefits (Verma & Rajendran, 2017). This assessment is shaped by tourists' evaluation of a destination's economic, comfort, and safety aspects (Madhavan & Rastogi, 2013). Studies show that perceived value significantly influences behavioral intentions more than quality or satisfaction by themselves (Ha & Jang, 2010; Oh, 2000; Baker et al., 2002; McDougall & Levesque, 2000). Tourists are likely to feel satisfied or dissatisfied based on whether their experiences positively or negatively disconfirm expectations (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Consequently, the perceived value significantly influences destination preference and satisfaction. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed to examine its influence on tourist satisfaction.

H_{1f}: "Perceived Value of the destination significantly influences tourist satisfaction"

Tourism, Leisure and Recreation and tourists' preference

This part of the variable includes various activities based on sports, self-determination, shopping, comfort, convenience, affordability, sightseeing of the tourist destination, etc. From the perspective of tourism marketers, it is essential to understand the information sources utilized by leisure tourists (Dey & Sarma, 2010). Tourists are largely driven by having a desire to escape daily life, seek rest and relaxation, and spend quality time with their families. (Dey & Sarma, 2010). Tourism, leisure, and recreation encompass accessible shopping, high-quality products, and a relaxing environment, which serve as a significant factor influencing tourist behavior. (Saqib, 2019). From the above discussion, Tourism, Leisure and Recreation significantly influence tourists' preferences and satisfaction. The hypothesis is formulated to investigate the impact of Tourism, Leisure, and Recreation on the satisfaction levels of tourists.

H_{1g}: "Tourism, Leisure and Recreation significantly influences the tourist satisfaction"

Satisfaction

Consumer satisfaction is built on the relationship between expectations and experience, where expectations represent pre-purchase perceptions and experience relates to post-purchase evaluations (Tribe & Snaith, 1998; Zeithaml, 1988). Tourist satisfaction arises when the experience at a destination aligns with or surpasses expectations, resulting in a sense of gratification (Chen & Chen, 2010; Sharma & Nayak, 2019a). Conversely, when expectations are not met, dissatisfaction arises (Oliver, 1980; Chen & Tsai, 2007). Satisfied tourists tend to speak for the spot, share positive experiences, and revisit, thereby becoming informal promoters of the destination (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Verma & Rajendran, 2017). Factors such as inadequate infrastructure, poor air and water quality, noise pollution, traffic congestion, vandalism, and lack of sanitation negatively impact tourist experiences (Abbas et al., 2024; Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015). Issues related to social environment, personal security, and governance also influence destination satisfaction (Tripathi et al., 2010). In tourism, the concept of experience holds greater significance than service quality, as it directly affects perceived value and satisfaction, which in turn fosters trust among tourists (Bose et al., 2022).

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The global tourism sector is highly competitive, with destination marketing companies striving to understand why tourists choose one destination over another, their preferred activities, and shopping behaviors. This research contributes to marketing management by exploring consumer behavior through factors such as perceived value, cultural and heritage perspective, infrastructure, safety and security, local attraction, past experience, natural environment, and tourism, leisure, and recreation, and their impact on tourist satisfaction. Understanding these factors helps marketers focus on key elements influencing destination choice (Sharma & Nayak, 2019a). Prior studies have examined antecedents affecting tourist preferences and their interrelationships across various destinations and contexts (Saqib, 2019; Sharma & Nayak, 2019a; Verma & Rajendran, 2017; Beerli & Martín, 2004). Based on these discussions, the hypotheses and conceptual model have been developed (Figure 1).



4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research objective

This study investigates the factors that affect tourists' destination preferences during holidays in India. The key factors identified from existing literature—perceived value, cultural and heritage perspective, infrastructure safety and security, local attraction, past experience, natural environment, and tourism, leisure, and recreation—are analyzed for their impact on tourist satisfaction. A conceptual framework is introduced to examine the connection between these factors and tourists' satisfaction as influenced by their perceptions. (Figure 1).

4.2 Sampling design

Primary data was collected from 409 Indian tourists using a structured questionnaire developed for the study. A non-probability sampling method that involves judgment was utilized, guided by three criteria: (1) the respondent must have visited at least three destinations in the past three years, (2) each tour must have lasted more than five days, and (3) the trips must have been undertaken as family tours. The questionnaire was disseminated both online, via Google Forms disseminated across social media platforms and tourism-focused communities, and in physical form. A total of 409 valid responses were collected and incorporated into the final statistical analysis and hypothesis testing. The sample size is considered adequate as it meets Nunnally's (1978) criterion of at least 10 responses per indicator included in the model.

4.3 Questionnaire design and scale development

The questionnaire was adapted from existing literature and developed through a multi-stage process to ensure content and face validity. An initial draft was created based on prior research and then reviewed by tourism industry and academic experts with over 15 years of experience. In response to the feedback received, essential adjustments were implemented to improve clarity and relevance. A pilot survey was conducted with 76 tourists to assess face validity, leading to further refinements in language, elimination of redundant items, and inclusion of additional relevant statements. The revised version was finalised for data collection. References for the items representing various factors in the conceptual model are listed in Table 1.

4.4 Statistical methods

This section outlines the statistical methods employed to analyze the data and evaluate the hypotheses. The frequency distribution was conducted to analyze the sample demographics, subsequently accompanied by descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the questionnaire responses (Table 1). Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, and construct validity was analyzed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with SmartPLS 4. Multicollinearity was checked using VIF values (Table 3), and the assessment of common method bias was conducted using Harman's single-factor test, which revealed that it accounted for 39.76% of the total variance, significantly below the 50% threshold. The structural model, derived from the proposed conceptual framework, was analyzed utilising the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) approach in SmartPLS to evaluate the hypotheses.

Table 1: Shows the references, mean, and standard deviation of the items incorporated in the scale.

| Factor | Statements | Reference | Mean (SD) |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---------------|
| Perceived Value | PV1 - The complete tour is a good value for money | Sharma & Nayak (2019), Verma & Rajendran (2017), Dey & Sarma (2010), Kaushal et al. (2019), Chen & Chen (2010), Kumar & Lata (2022) | 3.76 (1.162) |
| | PV2- The tour is affordable | | 3.77 (1.183) |
| | PV3- The tour is well organized and reasonably in budget | | 3.743 (1.128) |
| | PV4- I enjoy visiting the tourism destination | | 3.741 (1.208) |
| | PV5- The destination is authentic for all tourists | | 3.731 (1.145) |
| | PV6- The tour destination do not exceed the travel budget | | 3.557 (1.194) |
| Cultural and heritage perspective | CHP1- The destination increases my eagerness to travel back into the history of time. | Verma & Rajendran (2017), Sharma & Sarmah (2019), Chand (2010), Tripathi et al. (2010), Bose et al. (2022), Dey et al. (2020), | 3.667(1.169) |
| | CHP2- I fantasize about the past while watching the monuments of the heritage destination. | | 3.641 (1.145) |
| | CHP3- During the visit, I imagine that I was living in the time period in which the Monuments of heritage destination were built. | | 3.616 (1.218) |
| | | | 3.609 (1.153) |



| | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | <p>CHP4- When I see the monuments of the heritage destination, I get lost in the ancient time period.</p> <p>CHP5- The destination is authentic for all tourists</p> <p>CHP6- I like to experience our culture</p> | <p>Ryu et al. (2020), Verma & Sarangi (2019), Chakravarty & Irazábal (2011), Saqib (2019), Beerli & Martín (2004)</p> | <p>3.665 (1.118)</p> <p>3.606 (1.215)</p> |
| Infrastructure Safety and Security | <p>ISS1- I expect the safety at the tourism destination</p> <p>ISS2- Infrastructure of the tourism destination attracts my interest</p> <p>ISS3- I expect the tour destination as a safe place to visit with good quality of accommodation and value for money</p> <p>ISS4- The destination must have well-connected constructed roads and infrastructure</p> <p>ISS5- The destination is easily connected with affordable travel modes</p> | <p>Chand et al. (2015), Chakravarty & Irazábal (2011), Kaushal et al. (2019), Dwivedi et al. (2009), Jauhari (2010) Dey et al. (2020), Ryu et al. (2020), Madhavan & Rastogi (2013), Verma & Sarangi (2019), Sharma & Sarmah (2019), Saqib (2019), Bhat et al. (2020), Roy et al. (2016), Beerli & Martín (2004)</p> | <p>3.812 (1.128)</p> <p>3.733 (1.207)</p> <p>3.746 (1.235)</p> <p>3.709 (1.147)</p> <p>3.758 (1.21)</p> |
| Local Attraction | <p>LA1- I prefer to buy the local products from the destination</p> <p>LA2- The local traditions of a destination attract me to visit it.</p> <p>LA3- The local community participates in tour activities and is friendly with tourists</p> <p>LA4- I am attracted to the scenic beauty of the tourism Destination</p> <p>LA5- Local facilities and infrastructure make the destination a good attraction for tourists</p> | <p>Sharma & Sarmah (2019), Sharma & Nayak (2019b), Arya et al. (2018), Saqib (2019), Roy et al. (2016)</p> | <p>3.787 (1.045)</p> <p>3.919 (1.077)</p> <p>3.914 (1.11)</p> <p>3.809 (0.963)</p> <p>3.897(1.046)</p> |
| Past Experience | <p>PE1- Past thrilling experience motivates me to go to the destination again</p> <p>PE2- I want to visit the same destination again to explore the new areas, which I missed last visit</p> <p>PE3- I feel relaxed and secure to visit the destination again</p> <p>PE4- I am well-informed about the destination due to my past experience</p> <p>PE5- My good experience with the destination motivates me to visit the destination again</p> <p>PE6- I recommends and encourage my friends and relatives to visit this destination</p> | <p>Jyotsna & Maurya (2019), Verma & Rajendran (2017), Kaushal et al. (2019), Dey et al. (2010), Kumar & Lata (2022)</p> | <p>3.726 (1.2)</p> <p>3.57 (1.185)</p> <p>3.636 (1.198)</p> <p>3.599 (1.191)</p> <p>3.577 (1.264)</p> <p>3.567 (1.269)</p> |



| | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---------------|
| Natural Environment | NE1- Tourism at this natural destination is developed in harmony with the environment | Chand et al. (2015), Dwivedi et al. (2009), | 3.577 (1.11) |
| | NE2- The natural climate of the destination is the main attraction for tourists | Sharma & Sarmah (2019), Dey et al. (2020), Saqib (2019), Roy et al. (2016), Kumar & Lata (2022), Beerli & Martín (2004) | 3.597 (1.122) |
| | NE3- The presence of sightseeing locations of the destination is excellent | | 3.709 (1.113) |
| | NE4- There is plenty of natural scenic beauty in the destination, which makes tourists happy | | 3.677 (1.146) |
| | NE5- The presence of natural sites (beautiful gardens, flowing water/lakes, springs/glaciers etc) attracts my interest | | 3.658 (1.117) |
| | NE6- I like to go to a destination close to nature and have a natural environment | | 3.709 (1.126) |
| Tourism, Leisure and Recreation | TLR1- I feel enjoyable with the different recreational activities available at the destination | Dwivedi et al. (2009), Dey et al. (2020), Sharma & Nayak (2019b), | 3.748 (1.024) |
| | TLR2- I like destinations with Shopping opportunities | Madhavan & Rastogi (2013), Tripathi et al. (2010), Saqib (2019), Beerli & Martín (2004) | 3.736 (1.027) |
| | TLR3- I like to explore all the entertainment possibilities at the destination | | 3.782 (1.006) |
| | TLR4- I like the tourist destination with distressing-relaxing, and fun activities | | 3.721 (0.972) |
| | TLR5- I need a comfortable and affordable stay, looking for new experiences | | 3.731 (0.997) |
| | TLR6- I like local cuisine (food and drink), local products, Local Arts and Craft etc | | 3.792 (1.005) |
| | TLR7- I like to go to the destination that provides me with a feeling of enthusiasm, delight, cheerful pleasure and joy | | 3.773 (0.986) |
| Tourist Satisfaction | SAT1- I feel satisfied with the tour visit | Verma & Rajendran (2017), Verma & Sarangi (2019), Chen & Chen (2010), Kumar & Lata (2022), Kumar & Nayak (2019) | 3.768 (1.005) |
| | SAT2- I am satisfied with the contribution that I am making to arrange my trip. | | 3.812 (1.012) |
| | SAT3- I will recommend this destination to my friends and relatives. | | 3.746 (0.976) |
| | SAT4- I am satisfied with the tourism experience | | 3.746 (1.051) |
| | SAT5- I would like to revisit this destination | | 3.831 (1.08) |

Source: Various Authors

Note: SD = standard deviation

4.5 Reliability and Validity Analysis

Table 2 presents the findings of the reliability analysis, as well as the construct validity, including both convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement scale:

**Table 2: Construct loadings of items included in scale**

| Factor Name | Item code | Construct Loadings | Cronbach Alpha | CR | AVE | VIF |
|------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Cultural Heritage Perspective | CHP1 | 0.763 | 0.882 | 0.882 | 0.555 | 2.141 |
| | CHP2 | 0.681 | | | | 1.988 |
| | CHP3 | 0.763 | | | | 2.226 |
| | CHP4 | 0.75 | | | | 2.14 |
| | CHP5 | 0.734 | | | | 2.042 |
| | CHP6 | 0.777 | | | | 2.158 |
| Infrastructure Safety and Security | ISS1 | 0.756 | 0.898 | 0.899 | 0.64 | 2.044 |
| | ISS2 | 0.848 | | | | 2.735 |
| | ISS3 | 0.829 | | | | 2.259 |
| | ISS4 | 0.756 | | | | 2.108 |
| | ISS5 | 0.808 | | | | 2.642 |
| Local Attraction | LA1 | 0.745 | 0.869 | 0.869 | 0.571 | 1.82 |
| | LA2 | 0.728 | | | | 1.825 |
| | LA3 | 0.759 | | | | 2.286 |
| | LA4 | 0.771 | | | | 2.023 |
| | LA5 | 0.775 | | | | 2.173 |
| Natural Environment | NE1 | 0.753 | 0.884 | 0.884 | 0.561 | 1.932 |
| | NE2 | 0.729 | | | | 1.771 |
| | NE3 | 0.746 | | | | 2.392 |
| | NE4 | 0.702 | | | | 2.104 |
| | NE5 | 0.793 | | | | 1.995 |
| | NE6 | 0.765 | | | | 2.236 |
| Past Experience | PE1 | 0.812 | 0.899 | 0.899 | 0.598 | 2.406 |
| | PE2 | 0.746 | | | | 2.168 |
| | PE3 | 0.674 | | | | 1.956 |
| | PE4 | 0.793 | | | | 2.306 |
| | PE5 | 0.804 | | | | 2.169 |
| | PE6 | 0.8 | | | | 2.398 |
| Perceived Value | PV1 | 0.818 | 0.892 | 0.892 | 0.579 | 2.503 |
| | PV2 | 0.776 | | | | 2.35 |
| | PV3 | 0.753 | | | | 2.013 |
| | PV4 | 0.723 | | | | 2.613 |
| | PV5 | 0.736 | | | | 1.734 |
| | PV6 | 0.754 | | | | 1.821 |
| Tourist Satisfaction | SAT1 | 0.76 | 0.883 | 0.883 | 0.519 | 2.022 |
| | SAT2 | 0.751 | | | | 2.214 |
| | SAT3 | 0.736 | | | | 1.961 |
| | SAT4 | 0.808 | | | | 2.482 |
| | SAT5 | 0.817 | | | | 2.368 |
| Tourism, Leisure and Recreation | TLR1 | 0.689 | 0.882 | 0.882 | 0.601 | 2.317 |
| | TLR2 | 0.701 | | | | 1.721 |
| | TLR3 | 0.71 | | | | 1.832 |
| | TLR4 | 0.719 | | | | 2.091 |
| | TLR5 | 0.708 | | | | 1.883 |
| | TLR6 | 0.79 | | | | 1.956 |
| | TLR7 | 0.721 | | | | 1.912 |



(Source: Output using SmartPLS 4)

Note: AVE = average variance extracted, CR= composite reliability, VIF= variance inflation factor

Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the measuring scale's internal consistency reliability, and all variables affecting tourist preferences reported values above the acceptable cutoff of 0.7 (George & Mallery, 2003). Specifically, Cultural Heritage Perspective (0.882), Infrastructure, Safety and Security (0.898), Local Attraction (0.869), Natural Environment (0.884), Past Experience (0.899), Perceived Value (0.892), Tourism, Leisure and Recreation (0.883), and Tourist Satisfaction (0.882) demonstrated strong reliability. These results confirm that the constructs included in the scale meet the criteria for internal consistency reliability, ensuring the robustness of the responses collected in the study.

The assessment of convergent validity for the measurement scale involved analyzing construct loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). All item loadings were greater than 0.7, CR values exceeded 0.7, and AVE values were above the 0.5 threshold, thereby confirming sufficient convergent validity (Hair et al., 2011). Specifically, the results were as follows: Cultural Heritage Perspective (CR = 0.882, AVE = 0.555), Infrastructure Safety and Security (CR = 0.899, AVE = 0.640), Local Attraction (CR = 0.869, AVE = 0.571), Natural Environment (CR = 0.884, AVE = 0.561), Past Experience (CR = 0.899, AVE = 0.598), Perceived Value (CR = 0.892, AVE = 0.579), Tourism, Leisure and Recreation (CR = 0.883, AVE = 0.519), and Tourist Satisfaction (CR = 0.882, AVE = 0.601). These findings affirm that the scale effectively captures the constructs influencing tourist preferences in India.

The HTMT ratio and Fornell-Larcker criteria were used to evaluate the scale's discriminant validity. The HTMT ratio results (Table 3) showed that all inter-construct values were below the threshold of 0.85, confirming discriminant validity. The Fornell-Larcker analysis (Table 4) indicated that the square root of the AVE for each construct surpassed its correlations with other constructs in the model, thereby confirming discriminant validity. The findings validate that the constructs employed to assess factors affecting tourist destination preferences in India are both distinct and reliable.

Table 3: HTMT ratio

| | Cultural Heritage Perspective | Infrastructure Safety and Security | Local Attraction | Natural Environment | Past Experience | Perceived Value | Tourism, Leisure and Recreation |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Cultural Heritage Perspective | | | | | | | |
| Infrastructure Safety and Security | 0.655 | | | | | | |
| Local Attraction | 0.691 | 0.78 | | | | | |
| Natural Environment | 0.679 | 0.637 | 0.657 | | | | |
| Past Experience | 0.496 | 0.565 | 0.555 | 0.596 | | | |
| Perceived Value | 0.708 | 0.684 | 0.699 | 0.655 | 0.557 | | |
| Tourism, Leisure and Recreation | 0.454 | 0.494 | 0.481 | 0.657 | 0.553 | 0.468 | |
| Tourist Satisfaction | 0.671 | 0.748 | 0.729 | 0.696 | 0.695 | 0.706 | 0.693 |

(Source: Output using SmartPLS 4)



Table 4: Fornell-Larcker Criteria

| | Cultural Heritage Perspective | Infrastructure Safety and Security | Local Attraction | Natural Environment | Past Experience | Perceived Value | Tourism, Leisure and Recreation | Tourist Satisfaction |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Cultural Heritage Perspective | 0.745 | | | | | | | |
| Infrastructure Safety and Security | 0.654 | 0.8 | | | | | | |
| Local Attraction | 0.69 | 0.778 | 0.756 | | | | | |
| Natural Environment | 0.678 | 0.637 | 0.657 | 0.749 | | | | |
| Past Experience | 0.497 | 0.566 | 0.554 | 0.597 | 0.773 | | | |
| Perceived Value | 0.706 | 0.684 | 0.697 | 0.654 | 0.558 | 0.761 | | |
| Tourism, Leisure and Recreation | 0.452 | 0.493 | 0.48 | 0.654 | 0.552 | 0.467 | 0.72 | |
| Tourist Satisfaction | 0.673 | 0.749 | 0.73 | 0.697 | 0.695 | 0.706 | 0.693 | 0.775 |

(Source: Output using SmartPLS 4)

4.6 Hypothesis Testing

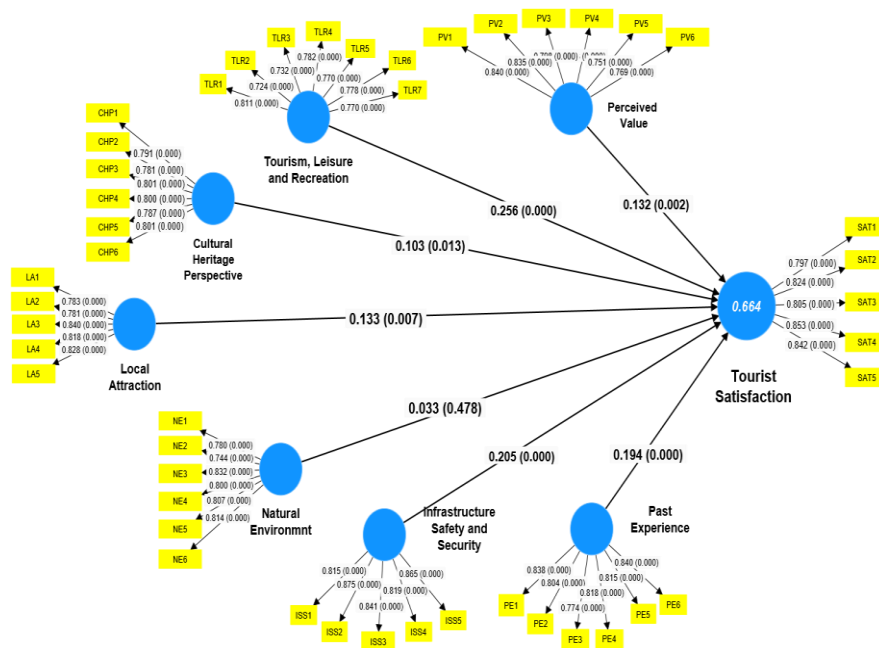


Figure 1: Model of Tourism Satisfaction

Based on the existing literature, seven key factors influencing domestic tourists' preference and satisfaction in India were identified: Cultural and Heritage Perspective, Infrastructure Safety and Security, Local Attraction, Natural Environment, Past Experience, Perceived Value, and Tourism, Leisure and Recreation. These reflective constructs were measured using a structured questionnaire. A structural model was developed with these seven factors as exogenous constructs and tourist satisfaction as the endogenous construct. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with SmartPLS was utilized to analyze the



model.. The formulated hypotheses were tested accordingly, with results presented in the following table and the structural model illustrated in the accompanying Figure 1.

Table 5: Result of the Hypothesis testing

| Exogeneous Construct | Endogenous Construct | Path Coefficient | Standard Error | T stats | P values | F Square | R ² (Q ²) |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------|---------|----------|----------|----------------------------------|
| Cultural Heritage Perspective | Tourist Satisfaction | 0.102 | 0.042 | 2.489 | 0.013 | 0.017 | 0.672 (0.647) |
| Infrastructure Safety and Security | | 0.207 | 0.051 | 3.998 | 0 | 0.058 | |
| Local Attraction | | 0.136 | 0.049 | 2.726 | 0.007 | 0.026 | |
| Natural Environment | | 0.034 | 0.046 | 0.71 | 0.478 | 0.004 | |
| Past Experience | | 0.192 | 0.048 | 4.032 | 0 | 0.07 | |
| Perceived Value | | 0.131 | 0.043 | 3.05 | 0.002 | 0.026 | |
| Tourism, Leisure and Recreation | | 0.255 | 0.048 | 5.375 | 0 | 0.123 | |

Source: Output using SmartPLS 4

The SEM analysis confirms that the Cultural and Heritage Perspective significantly influences tourist satisfaction (path coefficient = 0.102, t-statistic = 2.489). This perspective encompasses monuments, festivals, carnivals, religion, and historical buildings, all of which enhance the tourist experience (Dwivedi et al., 2009). Compared to purely religious sites, destinations rich in cultural and heritage assets hold greater appeal, as tourists tend to have higher expectations from them (Madhavan & Rastogi, 2013). These sites often require longer stays, emphasizing the need for comfort, convenience, and affordability. Spirituality, as an intangible aspect, also contributes to tourist attachment and satisfaction (Arya et al., 2018). Moreover, cultural heritage reflects broader societal elements, such as local customs, laws, moral values, arts, and traditions, that significantly enhance the tourist experience (Ryu et al., 2020). The results align with earlier research and reinforce the idea that cultural heritage perspectives play a crucial role in boosting tourist satisfaction. (Alam et al., 2020; Kaurav et al., 2024).

In a similar vein, the analysis supports the hypothesis that “Infrastructure, Safety, and Security at the tourist destination significantly influence tourist satisfaction,” evidenced by a positive path coefficient of 0.207 and a t-statistic of 3.998. This suggests that robust infrastructure and a safe environment at tourist destinations play a crucial role in enhancing tourist satisfaction. Key components of this factor include airports, transportation (both public and private), hotels, restaurants, and accommodations (Dwivedi et al., 2009). A strong infrastructure significantly boosts a destination's attractiveness to visitors while also fulfilling wider functions, including agricultural, residential, commercial, industrial, and recreational uses (Ryu et al., 2020). Additionally, factors like physical safety, a sense of belonging, ease of communication, and overall comfort play a crucial role in how significantly infrastructure, safety, and security influence tourist preferences (Dey et al., 2020; Madhavan & Rastogi, 2013). A positive perception of a destination is also closely tied to the country's economic and political stability. Security, therefore, is not just about protecting the country's borders but also safeguarding the tourist spots and their resources. (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

The findings support the hypothesis that local attractions at the tourist destination significantly influence tourist satisfaction, evidenced by a positive path coefficient of 0.136 and t-statistics of 0.136. This indicates that nearby attractions enhance the overall satisfaction of tourists. The attractions encompass aspects like community engagement and the warm hospitality offered by local residents (Dwivedi et al., 2009). Engagement with local communities and immersion in cultural heritage are significant factors influencing tourists' destination choices (Dey et al., 2020).

The findings from the SEM analysis did not support the hypothesis that the natural environment in the tourist destination significantly influences tourist satisfaction, as indicated by a low path coefficient of 0.034 and a statistically insignificant t-value of 0.71. This suggests that, in this study, the natural environment does not significantly impact tourist satisfaction. This implies that natural locations may be physically and environmentally attractive, but they may not increase enjoyment without sufficient infrastructure, accessibility, and management. High visitor expectations from natural places may lead to lower satisfaction (Sahabuddin et al., 2024). Nonetheless, earlier studies have highlighted the significance of natural attractions as



primary drivers for tourists (Heinen & Shrestha, 2006; Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007; Saqib, 2019). Bhandari and Heshmati (2010) argue that natural attractions, as part of natural heritage, should remain accessible to all without excessive entry charges, which often serve as congestion control but may discourage visitors. According to traditional economic theory, higher prices can reduce demand, meaning only a specific segment of tourists may be drawn to such sites. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the value of nature-based tourism, which remains essential for sustainability and environmental education. Dwivedi et al. (2009) highlight that a destination's natural appeal, combined with engaging activities, enhances its overall image. Issues such as littering, seasonal variability, and unmet tourist expectations may explain the reduced significance of natural environment (Beerli & Martín, 2004).

The hypothesis stating that "Past experience of the tourists significantly influences tourist satisfaction" is corroborated by the SEM analysis, which reveals a positive path coefficient of 0.192 and a t-statistic of 4.032. This suggests that the prior experiences of tourists have a beneficial impact on their overall satisfaction. Supporting literature suggests that such experiences enhance customer engagement and contribute to brand experience (Barman & Nath, 2019; Ek Styvén & Foster, 2018). Authenticity, attachment, and involvement with the destination foster emotional bonds, encouraging trust, commitment, and loyalty (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019; Rather et al., 2019). These emotional connections form a psychological state of customer engagement, which hinges on the authenticity and originality of the place. A positive past experience not only motivates repeat visits but also strengthens destination loyalty (Chen & Gursoy, 2001).

The hypothesis that "Perceived value significantly influences tourist satisfaction" is supported by SEM results, showing a positive path coefficient = 0.131 and a t-statistic = 3.05. This indicates that an increased perceived value contributes to greater satisfaction among tourists. Elements such as direct connectivity, trip duration, and affordability shape tourists' perceptions of a destination (Madhavan & Rastogi, 2013). Perceived value also influences destination loyalty, as tourists invest time, money, and resources expecting a rewarding experience. Factors like advertising awareness, online reviews, and community engagement further strengthen the destination image and perceived value (Arya et al., 2018). Additionally, the involvement of local communities improves both tourist satisfaction and residents' quality of life by fostering loyalty, trust, and meaningful feedback mechanisms (Ryu et al., 2020).

The hypothesis that "Tourism, Leisure and Recreation significantly influence tourist satisfaction" is supported by SEM results, with a positive path coefficient = 0.255 and a t-statistic = 5.375, indicating the strongest impact among all independent variables. This confirms that engaging in tourism, leisure, and recreational activities significantly enhances tourist satisfaction. As discussed by Dwivedi et al. (2009), attractions extend beyond natural beauty to include diverse experiences such as nightlife, bars, clubs, shopping, parties, and outdoor adventures like golf, water sports, and trekking. Additionally, shopping for local handicrafts—such as brassware, carved wood, bamboo artefacts, and furniture—adds to the destination's appeal, making this factor a crucial driver of tourist preference and satisfaction.

5. CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis offers a valuable understanding of the factors that shape tourists' destination choices in India. The result suggests that key attributes such as cultural and heritage perspective, infrastructure, safety and security, local attractions, past experience, perceived value, tourism, leisure, and recreational opportunities significantly affect tourist satisfaction. These linkages were confirmed through the structural model, which demonstrated how these variables interact to shape visitor experience and satisfaction. The analysis revealed that the natural environment, which includes aspects such as scenic beauty, climate, and biodiversity, did not show statistical significance within this model; though it can be an important factor through targeted planning and marketing (Saqib, 2019). Cultural and heritage perspectives, including India's rich legacy of historical monuments, traditional arts, and festivals, were found to strongly influence destination selection, consistent with earlier research (Verma & Rajendran, 2017; Sharma & Sarmah, 2019; Chand, 2010; Dwivedi et al., 2009; Saqib, 2019). Infrastructure and safety were also crucial in enhancing satisfaction and remain fundamental in attracting tourists, as supported by Chand et al. (2015), Kaushal et al. (2019), and Verma and Sarangi (2019). The presence of entertainment options such as theme parks, shopping centers, and recreational activities increases the appeal of destinations and positively contributes to local economic development. Tourists' past experiences significantly impact their intention to revisit, as destinations associated with positive memories encourage repeat travel (Chen & Chen, 2010). Perceived value, defined by the balance of cost and quality, also emerged as a major determinant of satisfaction and destination preference, aligning with findings from Sharma and Nayak (2020), Jyotsna and Maurya (2019), Verma and Rajendran (2017), and Bose et al. (2022). Ultimately, destinations that provide a variety of tourism, leisure, and recreational options tend to draw visitors from various demographic groups. The study also highlights the multi-dimensional nature of tourist destination preferences in India. Cultural and heritage perspectives, perceived value, past experiences, and opportunities for tourism, leisure, and recreation emerge as strong pull factors, reflecting the appeal of India's rich history, traditions, and cultural identity (Verma & Rajendran, 2017; Sharma & Sarmah, 2019; Saqib, 2019). Simultaneously, modern infrastructural developments and safety considerations are equally important, indicating that tourists seek a balance between traditional experiences and contemporary comforts (George, 2003; Khuong & Phuong, 2017; Nguyen, 2021). Positive past experiences contribute to



favorable perceptions and word-of-mouth promotion, supporting long-term tourism growth (Chen & Chen, 2010). The findings highlight the significance of providing competitive pricing while maintaining quality, emphasizing how perceived value influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty to destinations (Sharma & Nayak, 2020; Jyotsna & Maurya, 2019; Bose et al., 2022). In conclusion, the study affirms that tourist preferences in India are shaped by a multidimensional interplay of cultural richness, infrastructure quality, safety, experiential satisfaction, perceptual factors and economic value, offering key insights for sustainable tourism development and strategic destination marketing.

The study suggests that tourism managers and stakeholders must integrate various factors to enhance tourist satisfaction and overall experience. Marketers should craft consistent and safety-oriented destination images in their promotional campaigns, while emphasizing value-for-money offerings that highlight cultural heritage, natural beauty, and local attractions. The government must prioritize investment in infrastructure, transportation, accommodation, and the preservation of cultural and heritage sites to improve destination appeal. Strategies for sustainable tourism are crucial for the enduring preservation of cultural and natural resources, all while providing exceptional experiences for tourists. Additionally, feedback and review systems play a crucial role in guiding destination managers toward continuous improvement and stronger customer relationship management, ultimately fostering greater tourist loyalty and preference.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study offers valuable insights into the factors that shape destination preferences among tourists in India; nonetheless, it is important to recognize several limitations. First, while the study addresses key variables such as perceived value, experience quality, cultural heritage, infrastructure, safety, and natural attractions, other influential factors like health and wellness tourism, adventure tourism, culinary preferences, and technological advancements were not explored. Future investigations could integrate these elements to expand the breadth of understanding. Secondly, while tourist emotions and perceptions were examined throughout various stages of travel (pre-visit, during visit, and post-visit), adopting a longitudinal approach could yield more profound insights into the evolution of preferences over time. Third, due to India's vast geographical and cultural diversity, regional biases may exist, such as differences between northern and southern or urban and rural areas, that are not fully captured in the current dataset. Future studies should use larger, more demographically and regionally diverse samples to improve generalizability. This study focuses on tourists' satisfaction, it does not assess behavioral intentions or the role of mediating variables, which could significantly influence tourist decision-making and loyalty. Future research could develop more comprehensive models, incorporating these mediators to better understand sustainable tourism development. Including specific, behavior-oriented questions could also enhance understanding of how tourists influence and engage with destinations.

Disclosure Statement

There was no conflict of interest among the authors.

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