

The Impact of Tourist Satisfaction on Loyalty in Ecotourism Destination: A Mediation Approach

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Abstract

Travelers are increasingly interested in ecotourism in India, though it is still a niche. It is becoming significant for environmental and societal well-being. Tourist satisfaction is vital for tourist loyalty and repeat visits. This paper examines factors affecting tourist satisfaction and loyalty in the ecotourism of Sundarbans, the world's largest delta. Data were gathered by a questionnaire-based survey from travellers in Sundarbans, India, employing systematic sampling. The hypotheses were examined using covariance-based structural equation modelling and the mediation method. Findings from 468 tourists highlighted the effect of ecotourism dimensions, i.e. reliability, service quality, destination image, price, and tourist facilities, on tourist loyalty, with tourist satisfaction playing a key mediating role. To boost tourist loyalty, ecotourism destinations should enhance their destination image, reliability, service quality, facilities, and affordability. Insights from this study will help the stakeholders of Sundarbans tourism to understand tourists' satisfaction and loyalty levels and suggest strategies for improving tourism infrastructure and services to encourage future progress.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sundarbans, tourist loyalty, tourist satisfaction, mediation approach.

1. Introduction

Travelers are increasingly interested in ecotourism in India, which is still a niche. It is becoming significant for environmental and societal well-being (Pujar & Mishra, 2020). The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India estimates that ecotourism could account for up to 20 per cent of the total tourism market in India by 2028, driven by increasing demand for sustainable

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travel options among both domestic and international tourists. Ecotourism involves a form of tourism centred on the people who live in it and the environment. Ecotourism can help to protect natural areas, support local communities, and raise awareness about environmental issues. According to Bimonte and Punzo's (2016) study, ecotourism supports expanding small indigenous businesses, enhances income diversity and economic growth, encourages the perpetuation of traditional lifestyles among local communities, safeguards indigenous culture, and preserves societal values.

To offer the best ecotourism products and services, destinations for ecotourism must comprehend all the elements that draw tourists. This understanding can help service providers and ecotourism operators more efficiently support their locations and draw in more visitors. According to Lalicic and Weismayer (2017), the tourists' inclinations to engage, select, and remain in ecotourism settings embody responsible travel practices, cultural multiplicity, and environmental sustainability. Based on the concept of Dwyer et al. (2003), tourists are primarily motivated to visit ecological destinations because of natural or endowed resources. As a result, these natural resources serve as key attractions, driving the desire to visit such destinations. Consequently, tourism destinations aim to effectively manage their natural resources and environment to stand out and sustain competitiveness (Hu & Wall, 2005). The community is an essential part of any ecotourism. They are the ones who live in the area, know the land and its resources best, and can help to ensure that tourism is sustainable. In the tourism and travel industry, sustainability has grown significantly in recent years. This is because travellers want to make a respectable influence on the places they visit and are becoming more conscious of how tourism affects the environment. Consequently, there is a growing demand for environment-friendly tourism options (Sharma et al., 2022). Tourist satisfaction is crucial for national park marketing and management (Hwang et al., 2005). Recognising its importance enables managers to align facilities and services with visitor expectations (Tonge & Moore, 2007). Marketing methods that address visitor satisfaction and behavioural objectives remain a prominent research focus in tourism studies (Prayag et al., 2013). When visitors have a decent encounter, they are bound to return or propose the establishment to their friends. Thus, there is an upturn in the loyalty of tourists (Lee et al., 2011). When it comes to a destination, ecotourists are most impressed with its cultural and ecological elements, as well as the level of treatment they receive. These are the most important considerations for ecotourists when deciding whether to get back to an objective or prescribe it to others. In ecotourism, understanding what tourists are satisfied with is key to understanding what factors will make them loyal to a destination (Carvache-Franco et al., 2022). If tourists are pleased with the standard of the services they get, they are more disposed to revisit a similar spot (Bichler et al., 2020).

Previous studies have primarily examined various relationships, such as customer satisfaction and price, price and tourist loyalty, tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty, service quality and satisfaction, reliability or trust and loyalty, destination image and loyalty, tourist facility and tourist satisfaction, as well as service quality and tourist loyalty (Ali et al., 2015b; Vu et al., 2020; McDowall, 2010; Žabkar et al., 2009; Cai et al., 2003; Huwae et al., 2020; Febriyana et al., 2020; Han et al., 2019). However, these studies often fail to address the mediating role of tourist satisfaction in the relationship of all the constructs analysed in their research. The author has identified a research gap concerning the mediating role of tourist satisfaction. Thus, this paper was meant to make a model that could be used to measure tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty in Sundarbans, India. Therefore, we have done here an investigation on the relationship between tourist loyalty (LOY) and five constructs of ecotourism – destination image (DI), reliability (RL), service quality (SQ), tourist facilities (TF), price (PR) through the mediating effect of tourist satisfaction (SAT) to achieve the objective of this research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourist Loyalty

In a meta-analysis of previous studies, Watson et al. (2015) defined loyalty as a combination of consistent purchasing patterns and attitudes that prefer one firm over its competitors. In current retail and advertising writing, buyer reliability has frequently been discussed as a theoretical term (Pan et al., 2011). Customer loyalty is sometimes measured behaviorally and attitudinally, representing a favourable inclination towards a service relative to competitors (Kaura et al., 2015). Businesses view Loyal customers as a valuable resource (Shankar & Jebarajakirthy, 2019). Loyal customers contribute to a company's profitability by making frequent purchases, exploring new products or services, endorsing products to others, and providing authentic feedback to the company (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Two categories of loyalty are distinguished by Selin et al. (1988): attitudinal and behavioural. Subsequently, Backman and Crompton (1991) extended this by presenting composite loyalty, a third kind. One interpretation of client reliability in the travel industry is that it is an outgrowth of regular customers' devotion (Backman & Crompton, 1991). Regarding the various types of loyalty, Zhang et al. (2014) defined behavioural loyalty as the intention to visit or revisit, attitudinal loyalty as the intention to suggest, and composite loyalty as the combination of behavioural and attitudinal intents. Zhang et al. (2013) have also viewed the tourist event as a product and returning or recommending the experience to others as an indicator of loyalty. Customers find it difficult to maintain loyalty in tourism due to its inherent qualities, and visitors typically show little devotion to particular places (Kozak et al., 2002). Hotels, travel agencies, tour operators, and

even specific locations might inspire loyalty from travellers. However, it is unlikely that they will show the same level of devotion to every facet of the industry (McDowall, 2010). Tourist loyalty is important to a place since it is a good predictor of future behaviour (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

2.2. Destination Image

According to (Crompton, 1979), the concept of destination image entails the collection of a person's views, opinions, and feelings regarding a particular location. Understanding a destination significantly influences tourists' choices and subsequent travel actions. (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). In their study, Janchai et al. (2020) featured four qualities of an objective's picture as a tourist destination: its natural uniqueness, its historical uniqueness, its architectural uniqueness, and its product uniqueness. Scholars and professionals in the tourism industry have been fiercely focusing on the connections between destination image, vacationer loyalty, and their connections. Therefore, proactive management of tourists' satisfaction is necessary to nurture a lasting and mutually beneficial relationship. Tourists' intentions to suggest a place are positively influenced by its cognitive, emotive, and general images (Zhang et al., 2014). Destination image positively impacts loyalty to that destination and contributes to tourists' satisfaction with their destination (Wu, 2016) and, in the words of Cai et al. (2003), enhances tourism revenue. Government revenue and international tourism contributions are key strategies for developing tourism destinations, underscoring the pivotal role of destination image in tourists' final assessments of these places. Destination images influence the perception of destination values, consequently impacting tourist satisfaction. This suggests an improved perception of destination image would elevate destination value, ultimately enhancing tourist satisfaction (Huwae et al., 2020). Place dependency, place identity, and destination loyalty are strongly correlated with destination image (Chiang, 2016). This study sought to evaluate the following hypotheses on the relationship between DI, SAT, and LOY:

H1. The image of ecotourism destinations positively affects tourist loyalty.

2.3. Reliability

Reliability is a critical mediating factor in interpersonal interactions (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). One way to describe a service provider's dependability is by looking at their credibility and goodwill (Doney & Canon, 1997). This, in turn, affects the supplier's capacity to earn the trust of its customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). According to research by Galetzka et al. (2006), it significantly affects customer satisfaction with credibility services. The effectiveness of tour guides positively influences visitors' perceptions of their kindness, reliability, and general contentment. Notably, the relationship between

tour guides' performance and visitors' purchasing habits is directly mediated by perceived kindness, trust, and contentment (Chang, 2012). Travellers' intentions to recommend the place are positively impacted by their confidence level in the objective specialist organisations (Su et al., 2016). Tourists' sense of safety is determined by how well external safety conditions align with their personal safety needs. (Zou & Meng, 2019). Trust is essential for building lasting relationships between service representatives and customers (Coulter & Coulter, 2002). The reliability of existing, non-deteriorating structures can be assessed by considering past service loads as proof loads, which reduces the probability of low strength compared to new structures (Hall, 1988). The dependability of tourism information services is strongly correlated with the network's redundancy level, information services' quality, diversity, and format, as well as the user's experience in accessing them (T. Hu & Jiang, 2014b). Service reliability can be enhanced by conducting customer research and addressing customer feedback and complaints (Van Raaij & Pruyn, 1998). The goal of this study was to examine the following hypotheses concerning the relationship between RL, SAT, and LOY:

H2. The reliability of ecotourism destinations positively affects tourist loyalty.

2.4. Service Quality

In the words of Ramya et al. (2019), the degree to which a specific help meets the client's expectations is important in determining service quality. The quality of service scale, which includes tangibility, empathy, reliability, assurance, and responsiveness, can be used in the travel agency industry, according to Setó-Pamies (2012), adding to the discussion on the dimensionality of service quality. It is acknowledged that customers encounter more significant challenges in assessing service quality than product quality. This difficulty arises from the need to evaluate the outcomes and the intricacies of the course of administration conveyance (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The factors influencing tourist satisfaction and service quality exhibit a strong interconnection, notably encompassing six elements: tourism infrastructure, environmental aspects, workforce capabilities, safety measures, pricing, and cultural engagement (Vu et al., 2020). According to Parasuraman et al. (1985), the nature of the service encompasses various dimensions, including accessibility, politeness, proficiency, communication, trustworthiness, dependability, promptness, safety, tangible aspects, comprehension, and familiarity with the customer's needs. This, in turn, fosters success by heightening their intent to revisit (Liu & Lee, 2016). Furthermore, consumer loyalty is a mediating mechanism between these antecedents and client loyalty (Kaura et al., 2015; Ahmed et al., 2022). Regarding the degree of service travel agents provide, tourists visiting the Mirissa coastal tourism

zone are somewhat satisfied (Jayampathi & Punchihewa, 2019). Consumer expectations and actual performance are compared to determine the quality of service (Mackay & Crompton, 1990). The excellence of service delivery significantly contributes to a service provider's competitive advantage and helps establish key differentiating factors (Gogoi, 2020). The following are some hypotheses proposed to examine the link between SQ, SAT, and LOY:

H3. The service quality of ecotourism destinations positively affects tourist loyalty.

2.5. Tourist Facility

According to Nugraha and Feny M. A. Fallo (2021), tourist facilities include all types of amenities explicitly designed to ensure tourists feel comfortable, convenient, and safe while engaging in tourism activities at a destination. All amenities created to accommodate visitors' demands and enable them to unwind, enjoy, and engage in local activities are called tourism facilities (Yoeti, 2003). In the words of Shidiq Darajat and Susilowati (2018), conditional facilities like parking spaces and restrooms enable tourism activities to draw tourists. Primary facilities include site and event attractions, while secondary facilities include hotels, restaurants, and souvenir stores. Facilities and services in national parks should always be well-maintained and meet the needs and enjoyment of visitors at any time, regardless of the location (Sahabo et al., 2020). Tourism facilities significantly impact satisfaction at natural tourist attractions (Fakari et al., 2023). Providing adequate primary, supporting, and complementary facilities is essential to ensure tourist satisfaction, all backed by quality services encompassing tangible evidence, dependability, responsiveness, affirmation, and sympathy (Riwu et al., 2024).

Mandalia et al. (2023) discovered that the facility factor significantly influences the level of interest in visiting. According to Shidiq Darajat and Susilowati's (2018) research, improving tourism facilities is imperative to stimulate economic activity, augment local revenue, and optimise the available environment. Tourist attractions directly impact tourist loyalty and indirectly through customer satisfaction, while accessibility does not directly affect tourist loyalty but indirectly influences it through consumer satisfaction (Surya & Ningsih, 2020). Improvements in tourist attractions' attractiveness, location, and facilities significantly contribute to the formation of revisit intentions among tourists, with each enhancement having a cumulative effect on their likelihood to revisit (Khairi & Darmawan, 2021). To investigate the correlation among TF, SAT, and LOY, the researchers formulated the subsequent hypotheses:

H4. Tourist facilities of ecotourism destinations positively influence tourist loyalty.

2.6. Price

Customers may see price discrimination and demand-based pricing as standard in revenue management and conflict with their beliefs regarding the dual entitlement principle. In contrast, price acceptance directly correlates with customer satisfaction and tourist loyalty, which is proportionally influenced by perceived fairness in pricing (Asadi et al., 2014). The assimilation-contrast theory, which holds that people assess a novel stimulus based on their prior experiences within the same category, provides the foundation for price acceptability, as proposed by Sherif et al. (1958). The outcomes of an additional investigation in this research show a noteworthy correlation between service encounters and emotions, collectively shaping customer satisfaction, which impacts customers' willingness to accept prices (Ali et al., 2015). According to Chua et al. (2015), price sensitivity moderated, indicating that innovation had a more substantial impact on satisfaction for those with low price sensitivity and a more significant influence on raising perceived value for those with high price sensitivity. Han et al. (2019) investigate how customers' perceptions of pricing justice, airline image, and contentment are positively impacted by standards of the flight meals and drinks, ultimately impacting their desire to fly again. They also point out that satisfaction, image, and pricing all have an arbitrating function. Ali et al. (2015) assert that the physical environment significantly influences price perceptions and consuming emotions, affecting consumer satisfaction. When the price aligns with performance, expectations positively influence performance and satisfaction evaluations; however, when price and performance diverge, expectations do not impact performance and satisfaction evaluations (Ali et al., 2015). The researchers formulated the hypotheses to investigate the relationship between PR, SAT, and LOY:

H5. The price of ecotourism destinations positively influences tourist loyalty.

2.7. Mediating Effect of Tourist Satisfaction in Loyalty of Ecotourism

Tourists were delighted with low expectations and positive experiences, moderately satisfied with both positive expectations and experiences, less satisfied with low expectations and negative experiences, and least satisfied when high expectations were unmet (Chon, 1992). Rehman et al. (2023) found that regenerative tourism, perceived affordability, participation, leisure, and escape did not directly affect tourist pleasure. Positive destination image and tourist contentment can boost tourist trust. Although these may not apply to all visitors, Pizam et al. (1978) recognised a few unique characteristics determining visitor satisfaction: price, hospitality, dining, accommodations, campgrounds, environment, and commercialisation. Zabkar et al. (2010) establish that visitor satisfaction has an encouraging association with conduct expectations. The connection between productivity and fulfilment might

make sense of how satisfaction affects trust, underscoring satisfaction's crucial role (Osman & Sentosa, 2013). Among the two competing factors that affect visitors' happiness, the impression of quality has a much more significant positive impact than the impression of price: an adverse effect stemming from perceived detriment and an encouraging outcome indicating price as a quality pointer, with the former demonstrating a nonlinearly detrimental impact on satisfaction and the latter estimated by the range of acceptable prices (Campo & Yagüe, 2009). According to Seto-Pamies (2012), customer loyalty is boosted when customers are satisfied and trust the service provider. According to Wu (2016), while destination satisfaction and customer experience have a significant association, destination image favourably impacts both destination loyalty and satisfaction. Tourism administration, tour guides' effectiveness, lodging quality, and food accessibility (Augustyn, 1998). The quality of services within tourism supply chains and logistics bolsters tourist commitment, directly impacting loyalty (Cheunkamon et al., 2021).

The study participants generated the following theory after examining the relationship between SAT and several parameters, such as PR, TF, DI, RL, and SQ.

H6. Tourist satisfaction mediates the relationship among (a) destination image, (b) reliability, (c) service quality, (d) tourist facility, (e) price, and tourist loyalty in ecotourism destinations.

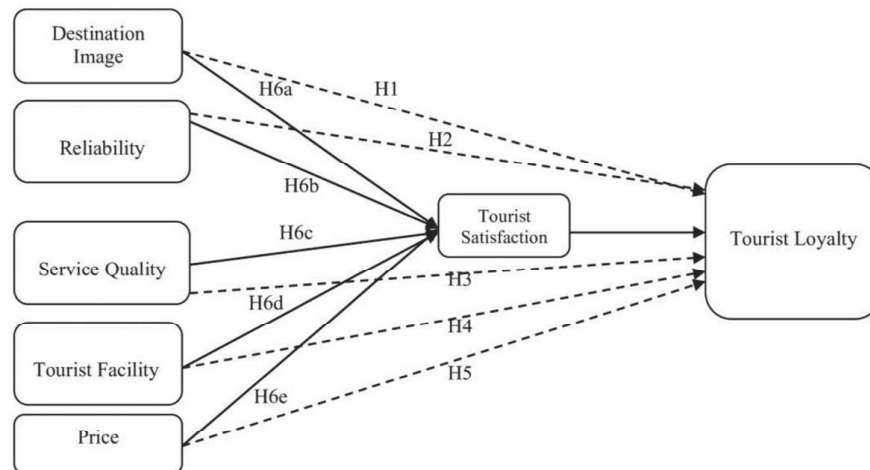


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3. Research Method

3.1. Sample and Survey Process

The data collection took place at various popular tourist spots in the Sundarbans, India by the questionnaire using a systematic sampling

during January and February, 2024. Out of 800 surveys, 332 incomplete questionnaires were removed, leaving 468 for further examination. Table 1 presents the respondents' demographic information.

Table 1: Demographic Profiles

Category	Number	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	282	60.25
Female	186	39.74
<i>Age</i>		
18 - 28 years	103	22.00
28- 50 years	207	44.23
50 - 60 years	97	20.72
60 years and above	61	13.03
<i>Earnings (each month)</i>		
Below INR 20000	135	28.84
In between INR 20000 - 35000	187	39.95
In between INR 35000 - 45000	89	19.01
Above INR 45000	57	12.17
<i>Educational Qualification</i>		
Up to Secondary	42	8.97
Higher Secondary	97	20.72
Under Graduate	216	46.15
Post Graduate or above	113	24.14
<i>Occupation</i>		
Unemployed	73	15.59
Government Job	62	13.24
Private Sector Job	162	34.61
Business	113	24.14
Retired	58	12.39

Note: n = 468

3.2. Measures and Instruments

There were three sections to the survey. Inside the first part, there was a screening question. Following that, the subsequent portion gathered demographic details from the participants. Lastly, the third section encompassed items concerning the research constructs. The research constructs were measured using pre-validated measures, which were then modified as needed to fit the Indian ecotourism perspective.

Five questions from Ali et al. (2015), Zabkar et al. (2010), Su et al. (2016), Cheunkamon et al. (2021) and Setó-Pamies (2012) were utilized to assess tourist satisfaction. A total of five items from Cheunkamon et al. (2021), Setó-Pamies (2012), and Wu (2016) were used to evaluate tourist loyalty. The destination image was evaluated utilizing three ascribes inferred from Wu (2016), Su et al. (2016), and Chi and Qu (2008). Three indicators from Coulter and Coulter (2002), Seto-Pamies (2012), and Su et al. (2016) were utilized to examine reliability. Service quality is assessed using three items sourced from Seto-Pamies (2012), and Rahman and Shil (2012). Tourist facilities were evaluated using three elements from Cai et al. (2003). Three questions from Chi and Qu (2008) were utilized to test the price.

All of the dimension items were graded from 1 to 5 on a five-point Likert scale. Tourist demographics like age, gender, income, and occupation that potentially affect interest in ecotourism were not included in the hypotheses but were instead regarded as control factor in this paper. Additionally, data on these control variables was collected using the survey tool.

4. Results

4.1. Measures and Instruments

To assess the reliability, validity, and dimensionality of the components, AMOS version 20 was used in a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The findings may be shown in Table 2. The research found that all construct factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and surpassed the minimum edge of 0.7. The research conducted by Hair and Anderson (2010), it was determined that constructs may be accurately measured when the composite reliability values exceed 0.7 and the average variance extracted (AVE) is more than 0.5. When using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) method to assess discriminant validity, we see that the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each paradigm (values in Table 3) is greater than the correlation coefficients between the constructs.

The reliability of the measures linked to each of the components in Table 2 was further supported by Cronbach's alpha coefficients that were higher than 0.7. As shown in Table 2, the model fit was adequate, demonstrating that the measurement model is unidimensional (CMIN/DF = 2.707, $p < 0.001$, GFI = 0.902, AGFI = 0.870, CFI = 0.967, NFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.959, RMSEA = 0.06) (Hair & Anderson, 2010). The Table 3 results reveal that a good amount of proportion of the correlation coefficients fall between 0.12 and 0.50. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2012), the fact that all correlation coefficients were below 0.9 indicates that these constructs do not exhibit multicollinearity.

Table 2: A model for Measurement

Construct	Statements	Factor Loading
Destination Image (DI) AVE (0.841), CR (0.94), $\alpha = 0.940$	DI 1: My visit to Sundarbans left me with a positive impression and good image.	0.882
	DI 2: Sundarbans stands out as one of the most beautiful places to visit, renowned for its stunning natural scenery.	0.952
	DI 3: I think that Sundarbans is renowned for its superior reputation compared to other destinations when it comes to Mangrove Forests.	0.917
Reliability (RL) AVE (0.881), CR (0.957), $\alpha = 0.956$	RL 1: My service provider/ tour operator reliably delivers the promised services.	0.887
	RL 2: The service provider/ tour operator genuinely prioritizes my well-being and takes good care of me.	0.965
	RL 3: The service provider/ tour operator in Sundarbans demonstrates a strong commitment to integrity.	0.962
Service Quality (SQ) AVE (0.922), CR (0.972), $\alpha = 0.973$	SQ 1: The boat/hotel provides comfortable accommodations, quality staff, and prompt service.	0.978
	SQ 2: The tour operator/service provider consistently delivers timely services for arrivals, departures and sightseeing.	0.963
	SQ 3: The tour guide has promptly delivered their service with great efficiency.	0.939
Tourist Facility (TF) AVE (0.824), CR (0.933), $\alpha = 0.934$	TF 1: There are numerous quality hotel and boat options available in Sundarbans. TF 2: Sundarbans provides well-connected transportation facilities and excellent options for motorboat trips.	0.856
	TF 3: There are sophisticated food and beverage facilities available in Sundarbans.	0.958
		0.906
Price (PR) AVE (0.906), CR (0.966), $\alpha = 0.966$	PR 1: The pricing for accommodation services in Sundarbans is reasonable. PR PR 2: The pricing for food in Sundarbans is reasonable.	0.983
	PR 3: The costs for transportation and motorboat trips in Sundarbans are reasonable.	0.930
		0.941
Tourist Satisfaction (SAT) AVE (0.749), CR (0.937), $\alpha = 0.940$	SAT 1: I found my time in Sundarbans to be both enjoyable and delightful. SAT SAT 2: My visit to the Sundarbans met my expectations and left me satisfied.	0.823
	SAT 3: The service provider/ tour operator fulfills my needs.	0.898
	SAT 4: I'm pleased that I decided to hire the service provider or tour operator. SAT 5: I was satisfied with my visit to the Sundarbans overall.	0.917
		0.887
		0.799

Construct	Statements	Factor Loading
Tourist Loyalty (LOY) AVE (0.659), CR (0.906), $\alpha = 0.911$	LOY 1: I want to revisit the Sundarbans in the future.	0.784
	LOY 2: I shall discuss the favourable attributes of the Sundarbans with the others..	0.865
	LOY 3: I shall discuss the favourable attributes of the service provider/tour operator with the rest of the group.	0.858
	LOY 4: I will endorse this Sundarbans tourist destination to my close friends, relatives, and loved ones.	0.763
	LOY 5: I will endorse this service provider/tour operator to anyone who asks for my recommendation.	0.784

Note: Cronbach's α (α), construct reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and are all terms related to reliability and validity, respectively.

Source: Authors' own calculation

Table 3: Discriminant Validity

	SAT	LOY	DI	SQ	RL	TF	PR
SAT	0.865						
LOY	0.423**	0.811					
DI	0.41**	0.508**	0.917				
SQ	0.239**	0.3**	0.241**	0.960			
RL	0.322**	0.401**	0.241**	0.159**	0.938		
TF	0.18**	0.426**	0.177**	0.182**	0.419**	0.907	
PR	0.206**	0.214**	0.28**	0.176**	0.21**	0.124**	0.951

Notes: The diagonal value corresponds to the square root of the average squared error (AVE) for each latent component.

** Correlation is considerable at $p < 0.01$.

4.2. Common Method Bias (CMB)

According to Bowal and Ghosh (2023) and Shankar and Jebarajakirthy (2019), common method bias (CMB) is more likely to occur when respondents supply data for both the independent and dependent variables. This is because CMB might influence the projected relationships between the two sets of variables. To test for CMB, multiple approaches were employed. The survey included items assessing a marker variable, which Malhotra et al. (2006) identified as having no apparent association with other variables. Initial findings showed a low correlation between the marker variable and other components. However, when controlling for confounding variables, including CMB, A statistically significant link between the marker and the other variable was found in the correlation matrix. Thus, CMB does not adequately explain the empirical evidence, as noted by Lindell and Whitney (2001).

They also used Harman’s one-factor test (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986) to look for CMB. A dataset of nineteen variables was subjected to factor analysis, which yielded six components. The KMO proportion of test sufficiency was 0.869, and these components explained 86.45% of the total variance. A notable point is that the first component could explain only 16.55% of the variance. The lack of a discernible unique factor and the limited explanatory power of the first factor suggest that CMB is unlikely in the dataset. The presence of CMB in the data is improbable because there is no apparent identifiable singular factor. Also, the principal factor did not make sense of a substantial proportion of the variance. This paper employed a mediation model to tackle the problem of CMB, as respondents could not recognise these connections through psychological maps (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

4.2. Testing Hypothesis

The research analysed two sets of hypotheses: direct impacts (H1 - H5) and mediation effects (H6a - H6e). The results are displayed in Table 4. There was no evidence of multicollinearity as the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all model variables were less than 5.0. The results displayed in Table 4 indicate that the ecotourism constructs positively influence tourist loyalty: destination image ($\beta = 0.310^{***}$), reliability ($\beta = 0.138^{***}$), service quality ($\beta = 0.115^{***}$), tourist facility ($\beta = 0.245^{***}$) and price ($\beta = 0.003$ ns). As a result, hypotheses H1, H2, H3 and H4 were supported. However, price ($\beta = 0.003$ ns) had a negligible impact on tourist loyalty. As a result, it can be said that H5 has partial support.

Table 4: Results from the Structural Model

Proposed hypothesis/path relationships	(β)	SE
<i>Direct effects</i>		
Destination image → Tourist Loyalty	0.310***	0.039
Reliability → Tourist Loyalty	0.138**	0.035
Service quality → Tourist Loyalty	0.115**	0.029
Tourist Facility → Tourist Loyalty	0.245***	0.034
Price → Tourist Loyalty	0.003 ns	0.029
Destination image → Tourist Satisfaction	0.324***	0.047
Reliability → Tourist Satisfaction	0.205***	0.045
Service quality → Tourist Satisfaction	0.132**	0.037
Tourist Facility → Tourist Satisfaction	0.005 ns	0.043
Price → Tourist Satisfaction	0.051 ns	0.038
Tourist satisfaction → Tourist Loyalty	0.185***	0.039

Indirect effect				
Destination image	→ Tourist Satisfaction	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.082***	0.017
Reliability	→ Tourist Satisfaction	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.069**	0.014
Service Quality	→ Tourist Satisfaction	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.061***	0.014
Tourist Facility	→ Tourist Satisfaction	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.039**	0.013
Price	→ Tourist Satisfaction	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.058**	0.015

4.5. Summary and Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis utilised the Process Macro, specifically model 4, with 5000 resamples of data for bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs), employing a 5 per cent significance threshold. Prerequisites for mediation were met when the mediator and the outcome variable had substantial relationships with the predictor and the mediator (Schneider et al., 2005). Thus, the direct impacts of each ecotourism construct on satisfaction were examined. The findings indicated that all ecotourism constructs, including destination image ($\beta=0.324^{***}$), reliability ($\beta=0.205^{***}$), and service quality ($\beta=0.132^{**}$) have significantly influenced satisfaction. However, tourist facilities ($\beta=0.005ns$) and prices ($\beta=0.051ns$) have not significantly influenced satisfaction. In turn, satisfaction considerably impacted loyalty ($\beta=0.332^{***}$).

Additionally, the direct effects of various ecotourism constructs on tourist loyalty were investigated. The results showed that all ecotourism constructs, such as destination image ($\beta=0.310^{***}$) and tourist facilities ($\beta=0.245^{**}$), significantly impacted tourist loyalty. Furthermore, reliability ($\beta=0.138^{***}$) and service quality ($\beta=0.115^{**}$) had notable effects on tourist loyalty, whereas price ($\beta=0.003ns$) did not significantly influence loyalty. Mediation entails two types of effects: partial and complete effects. Cheung and Lau (2008) state that when there are significant direct and indirect impacts, it is likely that there is partial mediation. On the other hand, when only indirect influence is considerable, it is assumed that there is complete mediation.

The results presented in section 5 indicate that the connection between PR and LOY is completely influenced by SAT. The direct impact of price on tourist loyalty is negligible (0.003ns), whereas the indirect effect via tourist satisfaction is significant (0.058***). The sentence suggests that it serves as an intermediary in the relationships between the following factors: DI and LOY ($\beta=0.310^{***}$; $\beta=0.082^{***}$ direct effect), RL and LOY ($\beta=0.138^{***}$; $\beta=0.069^{***}$ indirect effect), SQ and LOY ($\beta=0.115^{***}$; $\beta=0.061^{***}$ indirect effect), and TF and LOY ($\beta=0.245^{***}$; $\beta=0.039^{***}$ direct effect). Consequently, hypotheses H6a, H6b, H6c, H6d, and H6e were supported. Table 5 offers a comprehensive overview of the results obtained from the mediation procedure.

Table 5: Effects of Mediation

Hypothesis			Direct effect	Indirect effect	Result
Destination image	→ SAT	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.310***	0.082***	Partial Mediation
Reliability	→ SAT	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.138**	0.069**	Partial Mediation
Service Quality	→ SAT	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.115**	0.061***	Partial Mediation
Tourist Facility	→ SAT	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.245***	0.039**	Partial Mediation
Price	→ SAT	→ Tourist Loyalty	0.003 ^{ns}	0.058**	Partial Mediation Full Mediation

5. Discussion

This paper intends to address a gap in the current literature on tourism to establish the mediating variable of SAT between the independent variables, namely DI, RL, SQ, TF and PR, concerning the dependent variable of LOY. The data analysis confirmed the validity of all six research hypotheses proposed in the study. The results of this research specify that in ecotourism destinations, the level of “tourist loyalty” is impacted by several aspects, including “destination image, reliability, service quality, tourist facilities, and price.” The interplay of tourist satisfaction mediates this effect. These results show that visitors are more expected to promote the place, return, and discuss its encouraging elements when satisfied with its image, dependability, service quality, and cost. Building on earlier research regarding the mediating function of tourist satisfaction, Battour et al. (2012) examined this role between pull and push motivations and tourist loyalty, Jiang et al. (2017) and Albaity and Melhem (2017) inspected the connection between the satisfaction of the tourist and loyalty about destination image, novelty seeking, and loyalty.

Consistent with Xu & Gursoy’s (2015) findings, their overall satisfaction increased when they obtained the desired quality of service, additionally with faith. Consistent with previous research demonstrating that most visitors were pleased by the services they got, this study found that customer satisfaction significantly influenced visitor loyalty (Syakier & Hanafiah, 2021). Satisfaction among tourists increases their likelihood of returning. This study’s results support the notion that devoted consumers are more inclined to revisit a site they have loved, which is in keeping with earlier studies undertaken by Chen and Tsai (2007) and Cronin et al. (2000).

Also, this study shows that factors like pricing, reliability, service quality, destination image, and tourist facilities determine how devoted tourists are to a specific place. Previous studies have shown that these variables favourably affect tourist loyalty (Albaity & Melhem, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2022; Cakici et al., 2019;). These studies emphasise the importance of these research constructs

and their pivotal role, particularly in ecotourism-based destinations where prioritising these factors poses a challenge while ensuring the sustainability of the location. The challenges arise from adhering to the two fundamental principles of ecotourism: conserving the natural environment and providing benefits to local communities (Muzvidziwa, 2013).

6. Implications

This research aims to add to the theoretical knowledge of tourist behaviour by inspecting the direct and indirect impacts of pricing, reliability, service quality, destination image, tourist facilities, and visitor satisfaction and loyalty in Sundarbans, India, by examining how visitors act while at an ecotourism site, this study contributes significantly to existing literature. In addition to supporting other studies in several industries, the latest study offers compelling proof of the connection between visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

Stakeholders in destination management, including travel agencies, boat owners, tour operators, hoteliers, and local government officials, will learn how price, trust, service quality, tourist facility and destination image affect travellers. This understanding will enable them to tailor their strategies accordingly. Contrary to what many in the destination management industry believe, visitor fulfilment plays a massive role in deciding traveller dependability. This casts doubt on the idea that these factors directly affect destination loyalty. This study is relevant for service providers or tour operators devising effective commercial strategies. The findings suggest that the cornerstone for service providers to secure loyal customers is delivering products with a balance of pricing and service quality. Businesses established solely due to ecotourism at a destination rely heavily on customers for long-term growth and development. Enhancing service quality improves customer satisfaction, resulting in loyal customers in natural tourist destinations.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The work has a few limitations that should be fixed to make it more comprehensive for scholars in the future. In order to look at the intervening impact of guest fulfilment on traveller reliability, the research first focuses on a single ecotourism-based location. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised to all ecotourism-based destinations. Hence, additional studies could explore how applicable the model is to various ecotourism destinations. Second, considering five factors, this research aimed to analyse the effects of satisfied tourists on their loyalty. However, there might be additional dimensions influencing destination loyalty. Identifying additional dimensions could serve as an area of exploration for future

researchers. Thirdly, the study did not include demographic variables that could act as moderators, such as age, gender, income, occupation, and level of education. The conceptual foundation for future research into these variables' moderating effects and linkages might be developed in the same vein as such investigations.

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