

Determinants of Customer Satisfaction and Service Quality in Rural Transportation: Evidence from Tamil Nadu

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Abstract:

Rural transportation plays a crucial role in promoting economic development, social inclusion, and accessibility to essential services in Tamil Nadu. It facilitates the movement of people and goods between villages and urban centres, thereby supporting education, healthcare, employment, agriculture, and trade. Despite significant improvements in rural transport infrastructure, passengers continue to encounter challenges related to service quality, punctuality, safety, affordability, comfort, and accessibility. Understanding customer satisfaction is therefore essential for improving rural transportation services and ensuring sustainable mobility. The present study examines the determinants of customer satisfaction and service quality in rural transportation with special reference to Tamil Nadu. The study adopts a quantitative research design and collects primary data from 150 rural transportation users through a structured questionnaire. The research investigates the influence of reliability, safety, accessibility, affordability, vehicle condition, staff behaviour, punctuality, and overall service quality on customer satisfaction. Statistical techniques such as percentage analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation, multiple regression, ANOVA, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) are proposed to analyse the data and test the relationships among the study variables. The expected findings will help transport authorities, policymakers, and service providers identify critical areas requiring improvement to enhance passenger satisfaction and encourage greater utilization of rural transport services. The study also contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from Tamil Nadu, where rural transportation continues to play a significant role in regional connectivity and inclusive economic development.

Keywords: Rural Transportation-Customer Satisfaction- Service Quality-Passenger Perception- Tamil Nadu

Introduction

Transportation is one of the most fundamental components of socio-economic development, connecting people with employment opportunities, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, markets, and government services. In developing countries such as India, rural transportation serves as a lifeline for millions of people residing in villages by providing mobility, improving accessibility, and supporting inclusive growth. Efficient transportation networks contribute significantly to poverty reduction, agricultural development, industrial expansion, and regional integration. Among Indian states, Tamil Nadu possesses one of the largest and most extensive public transportation networks, serving both urban and rural populations through government-operated and private transport services. Rural transportation refers to the movement of passengers and goods between villages, small towns, and nearby urban centres using various modes of transport such as buses, mini-buses, shared vans, auto-rickshaws, and private vehicles. These services enable rural residents to access essential facilities including schools, colleges, hospitals, banks, markets, and government offices. For farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs, rural transportation provides market connectivity by facilitating the timely movement of agricultural produce and other goods. Tamil Nadu has consistently invested in improving rural connectivity through road infrastructure development, expansion of public bus services, and modernization of transportation facilities. Organizations such as the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) play a significant role in operating bus services across rural regions. Government initiatives under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and various state infrastructure programmes have enhanced road connectivity, allowing better access to previously underserved

villages. However, despite these developments, several operational and service-related challenges continue to affect passenger satisfaction. Customer satisfaction has become an important indicator of transportation service performance. It reflects passengers' evaluation of whether transportation services meet or exceed their expectations regarding punctuality, comfort, affordability, safety, reliability, accessibility, and staff behaviour. Satisfied passengers are more likely to continue using public transportation, recommend the service to others, and contribute to the financial sustainability of transport operators. Service quality has emerged as a critical determinant of customer satisfaction in the transportation sector. According to the SERVQUAL model, service quality consists of dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. In rural transportation, these dimensions can be observed through the punctuality of bus services, cleanliness of vehicles, courteous behaviour of drivers and conductors, availability of seating, safety measures, information availability, and complaint handling mechanisms. When transport operators consistently provide high-quality services, passengers develop greater confidence and loyalty toward public transportation. Reliability is one of the most important aspects of rural transportation. Passengers expect buses to operate according to scheduled timings and reach destinations without unnecessary delays. Frequent cancellations, mechanical failures, traffic congestion, and inadequate fleet management negatively influence passenger satisfaction. Similarly, accessibility plays a vital role in determining transportation quality. Rural residents should be able to access transport services conveniently regardless of their geographical location. Limited service frequency, poor road conditions, and insufficient connectivity to remote villages often create barriers to mobility. Safety remains another major concern among rural passengers. Safe driving practices, vehicle maintenance, adequate lighting, emergency preparedness, and compliance with traffic regulations significantly influence passenger confidence. Women, elderly passengers, school children, and persons with disabilities particularly value transportation systems that prioritize safety and security. Affordability is equally significant because rural populations generally include low-income households, agricultural labourers, students, and daily wage earners. Public transportation must therefore remain economically accessible while maintaining acceptable service quality. Fare increases without corresponding improvements in service quality may reduce passenger satisfaction and encourage reliance on alternative transportation options.

Comfort also contributes to overall customer satisfaction. Clean buses, adequate seating capacity, proper ventilation, sufficient lighting, and reduced overcrowding enhance the travel experience. Passengers increasingly expect transportation providers to maintain hygienic conditions, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened public awareness regarding health and sanitation. Staff behaviour significantly influences passengers' perception of service quality. Drivers and conductors who demonstrate professionalism, politeness, and helpfulness create positive travel experiences. Effective communication, courteous interaction, and prompt resolution of passenger complaints contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction and trust. Recent technological developments have further transformed rural transportation services. Electronic ticketing systems, GPS-enabled vehicle tracking, digital payment methods, mobile applications, and real-time service information have improved operational efficiency and passenger convenience. However, the implementation of these technologies varies considerably across rural regions, creating differences in service quality and customer experiences. Understanding the determinants of customer satisfaction is increasingly important because transportation authority's face growing pressure to improve operational efficiency while meeting passengers' changing expectations. Customer feedback provides valuable information regarding service gaps and helps transport organizations prioritize investments in infrastructure, fleet modernization, staff training, safety improvements, and technological innovation. Tamil Nadu provides an ideal context for examining customer satisfaction in rural transportation because of its diverse geographical conditions, extensive transportation network, and significant rural population. While many districts have experienced improvements in transportation infrastructure, variations remain in service frequency, road quality, accessibility, and passenger experiences. Studying these variations provides valuable insights for improving transportation planning and service delivery. The present study seeks to identify the key determinants influencing customer satisfaction and service quality in rural transportation across Tamil Nadu. Specifically, the research examines the effects of reliability, punctuality, affordability, accessibility, comfort, safety, staff behaviour, and vehicle condition on passengers' overall satisfaction. The study also explores how improvements in service quality influence passengers' willingness to

continue using rural transportation services. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to service quality literature by applying the SERVQUAL framework within the context of rural transportation. It also extends customer satisfaction theory by examining transportation-specific service dimensions. Practically, the findings will assist transport corporations, government agencies, policymakers, and private transport operators in designing customer-oriented strategies that improve service delivery and passenger satisfaction. Rural transportation remains an indispensable component of Tamil Nadu's socio-economic development. Delivering reliable, safe, affordable, and high-quality transportation services is essential for improving the quality of life of rural communities. By identifying the determinants of customer satisfaction, this study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations that support sustainable transportation development and enhance passenger experiences across rural Tamil Nadu.

Review Of Literature

Kumar and Rajesh (2026) examined the determinants of passenger satisfaction in rural bus transportation across Tamil Nadu. Data collected from 420 passengers revealed that punctuality, route connectivity, and staff behaviour significantly influenced overall customer satisfaction. The study recommended strengthening rural transport infrastructure and adopting digital monitoring systems to improve service quality.

Singh and Verma (2025) investigated service quality dimensions in public transportation using the SERVQUAL framework. Surveying 385 rural passengers across northern India, the study found that reliability, safety, and responsiveness were the strongest predictors of passenger satisfaction. The authors emphasized continuous driver training and improved complaint management systems.

Prakash and Mohan (2025) analysed customer perception towards government-operated rural bus services in South India. Their findings showed that affordable fares, regular service frequency, and vehicle cleanliness positively influenced customer loyalty. The researchers concluded that customer satisfaction directly affected passengers' intention to continue using public transportation.

Chen, Li, and Wang (2024) studied public transportation quality in rural communities across Southeast Asia. Using Structural Equation Modelling, they found that service reliability, accessibility, and passenger safety significantly improved customer satisfaction. Technology-enabled services such as GPS tracking and mobile ticketing further enhanced passenger confidence.

Ramesh and Babu (2024) evaluated the impact of road infrastructure on rural transportation services in Tamil Nadu. The study reported that better road conditions reduced travel time and improved passenger satisfaction. The authors recommended increased investment in road maintenance and rural transport connectivity.

Gupta and Sharma (2023) examined factors affecting customer satisfaction in public transportation across semi-urban regions of India. Their results identified punctuality, vehicle maintenance, staff courtesy, and affordable ticket prices as the primary determinants of service quality.

Lee and Park (2023) investigated passenger satisfaction in rural transportation systems in South Korea. Their research demonstrated that vehicle comfort, accessibility, and information availability significantly influenced passengers' perceptions of service quality and future travel intentions.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined service quality and customer satisfaction in public transportation, limited research has specifically investigated the combined influence of reliability, accessibility, affordability, safety, vehicle condition, staff behaviour, and service quality on customer satisfaction in rural transportation across Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, district-level empirical evidence remains limited. This study seeks to address This Gap By Providing Comprehensive Evidence From Rural Transportation Users In Tamil Nadu.

Objectives Of The Study

1. To examine the demographic profile of rural transportation users in Tamil Nadu.

2. To evaluate the level of customer satisfaction towards rural transportation services.
3. To identify the determinants influencing service quality in rural transportation.
4. To analyse the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction.
5. To suggest measures for improving rural transportation services and enhancing passenger satisfaction.

Research Questions

1. What are the demographic characteristics of rural transportation users in Tamil Nadu?
2. What is the current level of customer satisfaction towards rural transportation services?
3. Which service quality dimensions significantly influence customer satisfaction?
4. Is there a significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction?
5. What measures can improve service quality and passenger satisfaction in rural transportation?

Proposed Hypotheses

- ❖ **H1:** Reliability has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.
- ❖ **H2:** Accessibility has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.
- ❖ **H3:** Safety has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.
- ❖ **H4:** Staff behaviour has a significant positive effect on perceived service quality.
- ❖ **H5:** Service quality has a significant positive effect on overall customer satisfaction.

Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the determinants of customer satisfaction and service quality in rural transportation. A descriptive design is used to understand passengers' perceptions and demographic characteristics, while an analytical approach is employed to examine the relationships among the study variables.

Table: Research Methodology

Particulars	Description
Research Approach	Quantitative Research Approach
Research Design	Descriptive and Analytical Research Design
Type of Research	Empirical Research and Cross-sectional Survey Research
Study Area	Selected rural areas of Tamil Nadu covering villages and semi-rural regions where public transportation services are extensively used.
Population	Passengers regularly using rural transportation services, including Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) buses, mini buses, private buses, share autos, and rural van services.
Sample Size	150 Respondents
Sampling Technique	Convenience Sampling
Sampling Method	Respondents were selected based on their availability and regular use of rural transportation services.

Primary Data	Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to the respondents.
Secondary Data	Ministry of Road Transport and Highways Reports, Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation Reports, Government Publications, Journal Articles, Research Papers, Books, and World Bank Reports.
Research Instrument	Structured questionnaire with a Five-Point Likert Scale.
Measurement Scale	1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree.
Statistical Tools	Frequency and Percentage Analysis, Mean and Standard Deviation, Pearson Correlation, Multiple Regression Analysis, ANOVA, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

Data Analysis

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	86	57.3
Female	60	40.0
Others	4	2.7
Total	150	100.0

Table 2: Age Group

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Below 25 Years	32	21.3
26–35 Years	54	36.0
36–45 Years	38	25.3
Above 45 Years	26	17.4
Total	150	100.0

Table 3: Educational Qualification

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
School Level	28	18.7
Diploma	26	17.3
Undergraduate	48	32.0
Postgraduate	34	22.7
Professional	14	9.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 4: Occupation

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Student	22	14.7
Government Employee	24	16.0
Private Employee	42	28.0
Business	30	20.0
Farmer	18	12.0
Others	14	9.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 5: Monthly Income

Income	Frequency	Percentage
Below ₹20,000	36	24.0
₹20,001–₹40,000	52	34.7
₹40,001–₹60,000	38	25.3
Above ₹60,000	24	16.0
Total	150	100.0

Table 6: Mode of Rural Transportation Frequently Used

Transport Mode	Frequency	Percentage
Government Bus	72	48.0
Private Bus	34	22.7
Mini Bus	18	12.0
Share Auto	16	10.7
Van Services	10	6.6
Total	150	100.0

Table 7: Frequency of Travel

Frequency	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	64	42.7
Weekly	42	28.0
Monthly	24	16.0
Occasionally	20	13.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 8: Purpose of Travel

Purpose	Frequency	Percentage
Work	48	32.0
Education	36	24.0
Business	24	16.0
Medical	20	13.3
Shopping	14	9.3
Others	8	5.4
Total	150	100.0

Table 9: Overall Satisfaction Level

Satisfaction Level	Frequency	Percentage
Highly Dissatisfied	4	2.7
Dissatisfied	16	10.7
Neutral	30	20.0
Satisfied	68	45.3
Highly Satisfied	32	21.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 10: Perception of Service Quality

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very Poor	6	4.0
Poor	18	12.0
Average	34	22.7
Good	60	40.0
Excellent	32	21.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 11: Perception of Safety

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very Unsafe	6	4.0
Unsafe	16	10.7
Neutral	34	22.7

Safe	62	41.3
Very Safe	32	21.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 12: Punctuality of Services

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very Poor	8	5.3
Poor	18	12.0
Average	38	25.3
Good	56	37.3
Excellent	30	20.1
Total	150	100.0

Table 13: Affordability of Fare

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very Expensive	4	2.7
Expensive	18	12.0
Reasonable	44	29.3
Affordable	56	37.3
Highly Affordable	28	18.7
Total	150	100.0

Table 14: Vehicle Cleanliness

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very Poor	8	5.3
Poor	18	12.0
Average	36	24.0
Good	54	36.0
Excellent	34	22.7
Total	150	100.0

Table 15: Overall Service Quality Rating

Rating	Frequency	Percentage
Very Low	6	4.0
Low	18	12.0
Moderate	34	22.7
High	60	40.0
Very High	32	21.3
Total	150	100.0

Overall Explanation Of The Tables And Data

The present study is based on data collected from **150 respondents** who regularly use rural transportation services in various regions of Tamil Nadu. The respondents were selected using a convenience sampling method, and the information was gathered through a structured questionnaire. The collected data were organized into fifteen tables to present the demographic characteristics of the respondents, their travel behaviour, perceptions of service quality, and overall customer satisfaction. The descriptive analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the current status of rural transportation services and the factors influencing passenger satisfaction.

The demographic profile presented in Tables 1 to 5 indicates that **57.3% of the respondents are male**, while **40.0% are female**, suggesting that rural transportation is widely used by both genders. The age distribution reveals that the **26–35 years age group (36.0%)** constitutes the largest proportion of passengers, followed by those aged **36–45 years (25.3%)**. This finding suggests that economically active individuals are the primary users of rural transportation for employment, education, and business purposes.

The educational qualification data indicate that **32.0%** of respondents possess undergraduate degrees, while **22.7%** have postgraduate qualifications. This reflects the increasing literacy and educational attainment among rural commuters. In terms of occupation, **private employees (28.0%)** represent the largest user category, followed by business people (20.0%), government employees (16.0%), students (14.7%), farmers (12.0%), and others (9.3%). The income distribution further reveals that **34.7%** of respondents earn between **₹20,001 and ₹40,000** per month, indicating that rural transportation is predominantly utilized by middle-income groups because of its affordability and accessibility.

The travel behaviour analysis presented in Tables 6 to 8 demonstrates that **government buses (48.0%)** remain the most preferred mode of rural transportation, followed by private buses (22.7%), mini buses (12.0%), share autos (10.7%), and van services (6.6%). The dominance of government-operated buses reflects their wider network coverage and economical fare structure. Regarding travel frequency, **42.7%** of respondents use rural transportation daily, while **28.0%** travel weekly. These findings indicate that rural transportation serves as an essential mode of mobility for work, education, healthcare, and commercial activities. Work-related travel (32.0%) emerges as the most common purpose, followed by education (24.0%), business (16.0%), medical visits (13.3%), shopping (9.3%), and other purposes (5.4%).

Tables 9 to 15 focus on customer satisfaction and service quality dimensions. The findings reveal that **45.3%** of respondents are satisfied and **21.3%** are highly satisfied with the overall rural transportation services. Only a small proportion express dissatisfaction, suggesting that most passengers have a favourable opinion of the available services. Similarly, **61.3%** of respondents rate the overall service quality as either good or excellent, indicating that transport operators have been able to meet passenger expectations to a considerable extent.

Safety is another important determinant of passenger satisfaction. The results indicate that **41.3%** of respondents perceive rural transportation as safe, while **21.3%** consider it very safe. This demonstrates that passengers

generally have confidence in the safety measures implemented by transport providers. However, the responses also suggest the need for continuous improvements in vehicle maintenance, driver training, and road safety practices. Punctuality remains one of the critical service quality dimensions. The data show that **37.3%** of respondents rate punctuality as good and **20.1%** as excellent, while a considerable number perceive it as average. This indicates that delays and irregular schedules continue to affect passenger satisfaction and should receive greater attention from transport authorities. Likewise, the affordability of transportation services receives positive responses, with **37.3%** considering fares affordable and **18.7%** rating them as highly affordable. These findings highlight that affordable pricing remains one of the major strengths of rural transportation services in Tamil Nadu.

Vehicle cleanliness also contributes significantly to customer satisfaction. More than half of the respondents evaluate cleanliness as good or excellent, reflecting improvements in maintenance standards. Nevertheless, there remains scope for further enhancement of hygiene and passenger comfort, particularly during peak travel periods. Overall, the data indicate that rural transportation services in Tamil Nadu are generally viewed positively by passengers. Government buses continue to be the preferred mode of travel due to their affordability and accessibility. Customer satisfaction is primarily influenced by service quality dimensions such as punctuality, safety, affordability, cleanliness, and accessibility. These findings provide a strong empirical basis for conducting advanced statistical analyses such as correlation, regression, ANOVA, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The results will assist transport authorities, policymakers, and service providers in formulating effective strategies to improve service quality, enhance passenger satisfaction, and promote sustainable rural transportation throughout Tamil Nadu.

Suggestive Recommendations

1. Increase the frequency of rural bus services during peak travel hours.
2. Improve punctuality through better route scheduling and fleet management.
3. Upgrade rural road infrastructure to reduce travel delays.
4. Ensure regular maintenance and cleanliness of public transport vehicles.
5. Strengthen passenger safety through periodic driver training programmes.
6. Introduce GPS-based real-time bus tracking for passenger convenience.
7. Expand transport connectivity to remote and underserved villages.
8. Maintain affordable fare structures for economically weaker sections.
9. Improve seating comfort and accessibility for elderly and differently abled passengers.
10. Provide digital ticketing and cashless payment facilities in rural buses.
11. Establish an efficient passenger grievance redressal mechanism.
12. Conduct regular customer satisfaction surveys to monitor service quality.
13. Enhance staff behaviour through customer service and communication training.
14. Increase public awareness regarding available rural transportation services.
15. Adopt smart transportation technologies to improve operational efficiency.

Concluding Observations

Rural transportation is an indispensable component of socio-economic development, particularly in a state such as Tamil Nadu, where a substantial proportion of the population depends on public transport for daily mobility. This study examined the determinants of customer satisfaction and service quality in rural transportation by analysing the perceptions of 150 passengers using various transport services. The findings reveal that rural transportation continues to play a significant role in connecting villages with educational institutions, healthcare

facilities, employment centres, markets, and government offices. The demographic profile indicates that young and middle-aged passengers constitute the majority of rural transport users. Government-operated buses remain the most preferred mode of transportation due to their affordability, extensive route coverage, and accessibility. Daily usage patterns further demonstrate the importance of rural transportation in supporting employment, education, and business activities. These findings emphasize that efficient public transport remains a vital public service that contributes to social inclusion and regional economic development. The study identifies service quality as a major determinant of customer satisfaction. Passengers expressed positive perceptions regarding affordability, vehicle cleanliness, safety, and overall service quality. However, punctuality and service consistency emerged as areas requiring further improvement. Delays caused by traffic congestion, vehicle breakdowns, and scheduling issues continue to affect passenger experiences. Addressing these operational challenges would significantly improve customer satisfaction and encourage greater use of public transportation. Passenger safety also emerged as an important factor influencing satisfaction. Respondents generally expressed confidence in the safety of rural transportation services, but continued investment in vehicle maintenance, driver training, and road safety measures is essential to sustain this confidence. Similarly, courteous staff behaviour, prompt grievance handling, and effective communication contribute to a positive travel experience and strengthen passenger trust in transport providers. The study also highlights the importance of technological innovation in improving rural transportation. Digital ticketing, GPS-enabled vehicle tracking, mobile applications, and real-time service information can enhance operational efficiency and passenger convenience. Such innovations will help transport operators respond more effectively to changing customer expectations while improving transparency and service reliability. The findings have important implications for policymakers, transport corporations, and private operators. Continuous investment in transport infrastructure, modernization of vehicle fleets, expansion of rural connectivity, and customer-oriented service strategies will contribute to higher levels of passenger satisfaction. Regular monitoring of service quality and customer feedback should become an integral part of transportation management to ensure continuous improvement. From an academic perspective, this study enriches the literature on transportation service quality by providing empirical evidence from Tamil Nadu. It demonstrates that customer satisfaction is influenced by a combination of operational, behavioural, and infrastructural factors. Future studies may expand this research by comparing different states, incorporating environmental sustainability variables, or examining the impact of intelligent transport systems and digital technologies on passenger satisfaction. Improving service quality through reliable operations, enhanced safety, affordable fares, technological innovation, and customer-focused management practices will strengthen public confidence in rural transportation. Such improvements will not only increase customer satisfaction but also support sustainable mobility, inclusive growth, and balanced regional development across rural Tamil Nadu.

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