



A Qualitative Inquiry of Perceived Service Quality and Consumer Satisfaction among Health Tourism Consumers in India

Pratibha Pandey¹, Dr. Vimal Chandra Verma²

¹(Research scholar, Faculty of commerce, Siddharth University, Kapilvastu, U.P, India)

² (Assistant Professor, Siddharth University, Kapilvastu, U.P India)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study attempts to examine the perceived service quality (PSQ) and its influence on consumer satisfaction among health tourism consumers in India. In this study, semi-structured interviews with 25 participants was done, who sought healthcare services at recognized health tourism destinations in India, the study investigates how consumers evaluate healthcare experiences in terms of reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibility. Thematic analysis identified five core themes that further explained how service quality dimensions shape satisfaction and trust. Findings suggest that interpersonal care, institutional reputation, and cultural accommodation play pivotal roles in influencing satisfaction. Implications for healthcare managers and policy-makers are discussed.

Keywords: Consumer Satisfaction, Health Tourism, India, Perceived Service Quality, Qualitative Study.

1. Introduction

Medical tourism, that is also known as health tourism, medical travel, or global healthcare, refers to the rapidly expanding practice of individuals traveling across state, national, international borders to obtain medical care and health-related services. This phenomenon has gained significant attention in recent years as patients from developed as well as developing nations increasingly seek high-quality healthcare services at affordable prices abroad. These services commonly pursued by these travelers include elective procedures such as cosmetic and dental surgeries, complex and specialized surgeries like cardiac bypass, orthopedic replacements, organ transplants, fertility treatments, and various alternative therapies. A major strength of India's healthcare sector lies in the competence and expertise of its medical professionals. A large number of doctors and surgeons practicing in India have received their education or undergone specialized training at prestigious medical institutions in the India Their global demand ensures that patients receive world-class treatment that adheres to international medical standards. Indian hospitals are well equipped with state-of-the-art medical and diagnostic technologies sourced from leading international manufacturers. Modern infrastructure, advanced operation theaters, robotic surgery units, and digital imaging systems enable healthcare providers in India to perform sophisticated medical procedures with precision and reliability. Medical procedures in India often cost a fraction of what they do in Western countries, without any compromise on quality. Even travelers with modest budgets can access world-class healthcare facilities while enjoying luxurious amenities, personalized care, and comfortable accommodation. The rise of health tourism in India reflects the country's growing reputation as a cost-effective and quality-driven healthcare destination (Connell, 2021). As medical travelers seek high-quality healthcare combined with hospitality and cultural familiarity, perceived service quality (PSQ) has become a key determinant of satisfaction and loyalty (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Service quality perceptions are particularly critical in health tourism because patients often evaluate not only medical outcomes but also the holistic service experience—including empathy, communication, and environmental comfort (Lee & Fernando, 2015). Despite the rapid expansion of India's health tourism sector, qualitative insights into how consumers perceive and interpret service quality remain limited. Most existing research adopts quantitative approaches, leaving a gap in understanding the subjective meanings and lived experiences of patients who travel for medical care. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how health tourism consumers in India conceptualize and experience service quality, and how these perceptions influence their satisfaction and future intentions.

2. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study were-

1. To explore how health tourism consumers perceive the quality of healthcare services in India.
2. To examine the influence of perceived service quality on consumer satisfaction.
3. To identify key themes shaping satisfaction in health tourism experiences.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of health tourism consumers. Twenty-five participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring representation across gender, age, and treatment types (cosmetic, orthopedic, cardiac, and wellness procedures). Interviews were conducted both in person and via online video calls between August and September 2025. Each interview lasted between 40 to 60 minutes and was audio recorded with consent.

The interview included questions based on service expectations, hospital experience, communication, empathy of staff, and overall satisfaction. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach—familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting. For this purpose manual sorting and selection of patterns were done with care.

4. Sample Description

The sample consisted of 25 health tourism consumers aged between 25 and 60 years (14 females, 11 males). All participants which were interviewed, received wellness and medical treatment in hospitals across Delhi, Chennai, and Varanasi. Most had tertiary education and moderate to high income levels, allowing them to make independent healthcare choices.

5. Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis revealed five key themes: (1) Responsiveness and Accessibility, (2) Professional Competence, (3) Empathy and Personal Care, (4) Tangible Hospital Environment, and (5) Trust and Assurance.

Theme 1: Responsiveness and Accessibility

Participants emphasized prompt responses, ease of booking, and coordination as indicators of service quality. A 45-year-old participant from Lucknow remarked,

“The hospital replied to my emails within hours and arranged my visa invitation immediately—that gave me confidence even before arriving.”

Such responsiveness was associated with perceived organizational reliability.

Theme 2: Professional Competence

Medical expertise and professionalism were central to satisfaction. One participant shared,

“The doctors were thorough and confident. They explained the procedure step by step, which made me trust the system” (Participant 7, Prayagraj).

This aligns with previous studies highlighting competence as a primary factor influencing service evaluation (Dagger, Sweeney, & Johnson, 2007).

Theme 3: Empathy and Personal Care

Many respondents emphasized emotional comfort and care. A patient from Varanasi stated,

“The nurse held my hand before surgery and told me not to worry—it meant a lot.”

Empathy was seen as bridging the cultural gap between patient and provider. Such affective interactions contribute directly to satisfaction and perceived value (Berry, 2019).

Theme 4: Tangible Hospital Environment

Cleanliness, modern equipment, and comfortable surroundings were repeatedly mentioned as crucial indicators of quality. A participant from Azamgarh noted,

“Everything was spotless—the rooms, the bedsheets, even the cafeteria.”

These observations are consistent with the 'tangibility' dimension of the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Theme 5: Trust and Assurance

Trust emerged as the most influential theme linking service quality to satisfaction. Several participants indicated that accreditation, transparent pricing, and ethical practices shaped their confidence. As one participant from Gazipur described, “When I saw international accreditation on the hospital's wall, I knew I was safe.”

Assurance reinforced the perceived legitimacy and safety of medical tourism in India.

6. Overall Discussion

The findings demonstrate that perceived service quality in health tourism is multidimensional, combining functional and emotional evaluations. While technical quality remains essential, interpersonal and contextual factors—such as empathy, trust, and responsiveness—play equally critical roles in shaping consumer satisfaction. These results resonate with existing literature emphasizing the holistic nature of healthcare experiences (Han & Hyun, 2015; Chen & Chen, 2019).

7. Implications

For healthcare providers, enhancing service quality requires integrating medical excellence with hospitality values. Training programs emphasizing empathy and communication can substantially improve patient satisfaction. Policy-makers should ensure consistent accreditation and transparency to strengthen international trust in India's medical tourism industry.

8. Conclusion

This qualitative inquiry provides nuanced insights into how health tourism consumers in India perceive and evaluate service quality. The study highlights that responsiveness, professional competence, empathy, environment, and assurance collectively define satisfaction. Future research could explore comparative perspectives across destinations or include longitudinal follow-up to examine post-visit behavioral intentions.

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