



What Insights Does Service Quality Gap Analysis Offer for the Wellness Tourism Sector in Kerala?

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Abstract

The quality of services in tourism is one of the aspects of the industry that has drawn considerable academic attention. The empirical study on the service quality and satisfaction of the wellness tourism sector is underexplored. The present study empirically examined the expectations and perceptions of service quality in wellness centres, assessed the level of satisfaction of tourists, and identified the factors influencing service quality and satisfaction. The study has been conducted among selected Ayurvedic resorts in Palakkad, Kerala. The data were collected by distributing questionnaires to tourists who had used wellness treatments. The research outcome shows a discrepancy between wellness tourists' expectations and perceptions of service quality. There is a negative gap in the service quality of wellness centres; the perception level of wellness centres is lower than expected. Recommendations to reduce the gap have been discussed. Bridging the negative gap in this aspect can significantly boost guest flow and contribute to the overall growth of Kerala's tourism industry.

Keywords: Wellness tourism, Ayurveda, Expectation, Perception, Service Quality, Satisfaction, Kerala.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is a vital economic activity supporting regional and global economies, improving wages, living standards, and employment opportunities (Mondal, 2020). Tourism provides socio-cultural benefits to local communities by preserving traditional customs, promoting cross-cultural understanding, and enhancing social welfare, quality of life, leisure, and shopping options (Gilbert & Clark, 1997; Mondal, 2020). Wellness tourism, a rapidly growing sector, accounted for an astonishing “US\$639 billion” in global spending in 2017 (Kazakov & Oyner, 2021; Romão et al., 2022). This specialized segment of the tourism industry has experienced rapid growth and is expected to continue (Csirmaz & Pető, 2015). Notably, the growth rate of wellness tourism continues to overtake that of global tourism (Nello Andreu et al., 2021). Consequently, resorts, hotels, wellness retreat amenities, and unique travel packages increasingly incorporate health and wellness services into various activities (Koncul, 2012). Most surveys indicate that post-COVID, wellness is a primary goal for vacationers (Choudhary & Qadir, 2022; Goffman, 2020; Wen et al., 2021). Previous studies highlight critical characteristics such as rest, recovery, healing, well-being, and meditation, which are expected to drive tourism during its post-pandemic resurgence (Gamage & Samarathunga, 2020). A wellness tourism experience offers guests an uplifting experience, mental health benefits, shared experiences, and a wellness-friendly environment (Dillette et al., 2021). The sustainable development of wellness tourism in the post-pandemic era hinges on several factors, including the desire to visit the location, the need for relaxation, and the cultural and natural attractions of the destination (Damijanić & Šergo, 2013).

The Asia-Pacific region boasts significant wellness tourism destinations, with India standing out prominently (Romão et al., 2022). India has evolved into a sought-after wellness tourism hub, redefining travel experiences by promoting Ayurveda as an integral part of the wellness industry (Telej & Gamble, 2019). The country’s popularity in wellness and medical tourism can be attributed to competitive pricing compared to other nations, the incorporation of non-toxic and safe herbal therapies, and notably shorter waiting times (Muralidhar & Karthikeyan, 2016). To stay competitive, businesses in the tourism

industry must surpass mere reliance on discounts and sales. Pleasing and retaining customers necessitates a focus on new objectives and the establishment of quality-focused practices (Silvestri et al., 2017).

Customer satisfaction (CS) is a pivotal concern in tourism and the associated service sector, with customer pleasure playing a crucial role in developing long-term customer-business relationships (Wu, 2007). Widely regarded as a key indicator of the success of the company, customer satisfaction significantly influences brand loyalty and consumer behaviour. Recent studies in the tourist industry conclusively demonstrate that most visitors seek a “good balance of body, mind, and spirit” (González-Mansilla et al., 2019; H. Park et al., 2021). This desire forms the foundation for the emergence of wellness tourism in the travel industry, positioning it as a “fashionable tourist product.”

Research indicates a strong correlation between the quality of services, customer satisfaction, and business success. Hence, investigating wellness tourists’ expectations and viewpoints on service quality is imperative. The subsequent sections of this paper delve into the concepts of customer satisfaction, service quality, determinants of service quality, and the potential of wellness tourism in India, particularly in Kerala. The research technique is detailed in the second section, followed by the analysis findings, discussions, and their implications in the third section. The paper concludes by outlining the implications and limitations of the study.

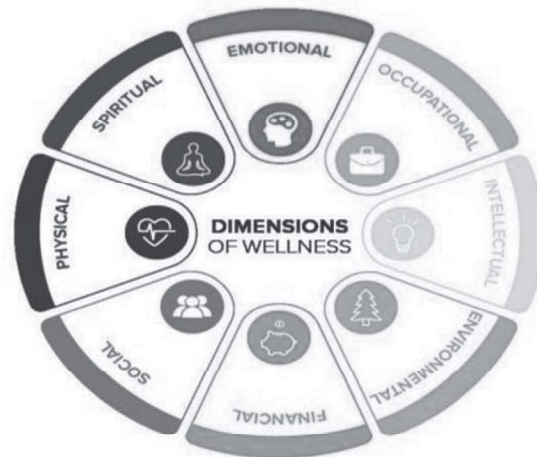
2. Literature Review

2.1 Wellness Tourism

Wellness tourism is one of the fastest-expanding market categories, defined as travel aimed at ensuring or improving physical and mental well-being (GWI, 2018). This type of health tourism is embraced by individuals without medical problems, with the primary goal being the assurance of long-term health and the enhancement of overall well-being (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001). Wellness tourism involves a balance of physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social, and environmental health aspects, offering experiences that cater to these diverse dimensions to promote overall well-being and a healthier

lifestyle (Liao et al., 2023). For wellness tourists, crucial considerations include a general desire to explore the destination, the need for relaxation, and the appeal of the destination's culture and nature (Damijanić & Šergo, 2013). Key characteristics identified in previous studies—rest and recovery, healing, well-being, and meditation—are anticipated to play pivotal roles in motivating tourism during its post-pandemic resurgence (Gamage & Samarathunga, 2020). In wellness tourism, three push motivation factors—health trend, relaxation, reward, and novelty—have been identified, along with seven pull motivation variables—essential wellness, intangible wellness, well-being, heritage (both natural and cultural), leisure and recreation, and scenery. These factors significantly influence the expectations and perceptions of wellness tourists. There are eight important dimensions of wellness: physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social, environmental, occupational, and financial (Illustrated in Figure 1). Each factor enhances a holistic experience that fosters general well-being and improves travelers' overall quality of life. A balanced, integrated wellness strategy is crucial for tourism (Myers et al., 2000).

Figure: 1 Framework of wellness dimensions



Source: UCDAVIS, Student health and counseling service

2.2 Wellness Tourism in India

India has long been celebrated as the birthplace of Ayurveda, Yoga, and Meditation, establishing itself as a prominent destination for wellness tourism (Choudhary & Qadir, 2022). As a popular tourist destination, the country is renowned for its diverse landscapes, encompassing the majestic Himalayas and abundant flora and fauna. At the heart of health tourism, Yoga and meditation play a pivotal role, facilitating self-detoxification and heightened awareness (Charak, 2019; Manhas & Kour, 2020). With its wealth of Ayurveda, meditation, and yoga facilities, among others, India holds the potential to become a global epicentre for wellness and spa tourism. According to the Global Wellness Tourism Survey, India, Thailand, and Malaysia are recognized as leading wellness tourism destinations in Asia. This recognition stems from the availability of economic surgeries, cosmetics, and resources related to wellness tourism. Most travellers seek Ayurveda treatments to counteract the challenges posed by their increasingly hectic lifestyles. In response to the growing demand for promoting Ayurveda, the Government of India established the AYUSH ministry in November 2014. Initiatives such as the healthcare portal “www.indiahealthcaretourism.com,” and the “Services Export Promotion Council,” underscore India’s commitment to becoming the world’s fastest-growing wellness and medical destination (Kumar, 2019).

2.3 Wellness Tourism Overview of Kerala

Kerala, a state that practices traditional Ayurveda, is experiencing a rise in the number of people visiting its wellness centers. The state’s agro-climatic conditions, rich cultural heritage, and natural beauty have perfected the Ayurvedic method. These facilities are evolving into hubs for brand image and global access to wellness, combining various tourism features (culinary, spiritual, cultural, and backwater) to provide guests with an unforgettable experience (Bipithalal, 2019). Kerala Tourism government has announced a categorization system for Ayurvedic centers, regardless of whether they are located in the state’s hospitals, hotels, or resorts. The validity of the treatment, the staff’s training, the comforts and facilities, and the furniture quality would all be considered when assessing the Ayurveda Centres’ quality, safety, and service standards (Manju, 2023). Research has

shown that the state is a competitive destination for wellness due to the existence of an alternative medical system (Thanuskodi & Naseehath, S. 2016) and established a strong reputation in the health tourism industry due to its therapeutic properties, affordability, and ability to combine traditional and modern medical practices like as Ayurveda, yoga, meditation, and homeopathy.

2.4 Service Quality

Service quality in tourism stands as one of the most extensively researched aspects in the field. Despite its considerable impact on travellers' destination choices, the overall quality of tourism experiences is yet to receive widespread acclaim (J. Park & Jeong, 2019). According to (Bebko, 2000) service quality is defined as "the outcome of a process in which consumers' expectations for the service are compared with their impressions of the service delivered." Consumers formulate expectations based on various factors such as previous experiences, recommendations from others, news articles, advertising campaigns by specific service providers and competitors, as well as their individual needs. These expectations then serve as a benchmark or standard against which the performance of a service provider is evaluated. The perception of service delivery is influenced by three key factors: the technical quality of the service (what is supplied), the functional quality of the service (how the service is delivered), and the consumer's view of the service provider. While evaluating the quality of healthcare services, consumers often rely on operational aspects of the service delivery process, such as "doctors' and nurses' attitudes toward the patients" and the duration of the procedure's waiting period, as they may lack the expertise to assess technical quality (Guiry & Vequist, 2011; Wong, 2002) (Wong, 2002).

2.5 Determinants of Service Quality

Assessing the quality of intangible services is complex due to the variability in service performance, which often depends on the individual providing the services. Consumers evaluate quality by comparing the positive discrepancy between their expectations and the service delivered. Previous studies are instrumental in developing a questionnaire on the various determinants of service quality.

The quality of service in wellness tourism is intricately tied to the alignment between a customer's expectations and their experience. The SERVQUAL model, established by (Parasuraman et al., 2009) identifies eleven distinct service quality dimensions: Reliability, Responsiveness, Competence, Access, Courtesy, Communication, Credibility, Security, Knowledge/Understanding, and Tangibles. (Anwar, 2017) identified five fundamental dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. Mishra and Panda (2021) explored dimensions of wellness tourism service quality based on customers' quality perceptions. They employ different statements under seven dimensions for sentiment analysis: Assurance, Empathy, Overall satisfaction, Reliability, Responsiveness, Tangibles, and Uncategorized aspects.

2.6 Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is an assessment that compares real customer experiences with products and services against their initial expectations. This comprehensive concept encompasses customers' expectations, disappointments, norm and equity perspectives, and their perceived overall performance (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Achieving customer satisfaction with a service or product is notably challenging unless a company or sector thoroughly understands what customers truly want (Subashini & Gopalsamy, 2016; Surahman et al., 2020). In tourism, a tourist location is perceived as a service to which travellers can return and recommend to others (Han et al., 2018; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). The capacity of a product or feature to provide a satisfactory level of consumption-related satisfaction, considering levels of under and over-fulfilment is referred to as being satisfied (Han et al., 2018). The meticulous planning of marketable tourism products and services undeniably significantly influences satisfaction (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Tourist satisfaction is pivotal for efficient destination marketing as it affects destination selection, the consumption of goods, and the likelihood of future visits. Several researchers have proposed various service quality and customer satisfaction measures, comparing the criteria employed in these sectors. Ultimately, customer happiness is an essential metric for evaluating the efficacy of destination products and services (Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

2.7 Research Gap

Visitors opt for wellness trips to Southern Kerala, but Central Kerala still needs to be explored in practice and empirical service quality gap research. Previous studies predominantly focused on southern Kerala, neglecting the quality gap in the central. Despite the industry's expansion, more empirical research is needed on the disparity between expected and actual services in this region. Studies on service quality from the customer's point of view need to be conducted utilizing the SERVQUAL measurement in India's wellness tourism sector, especially in central Kerala. Given the service-oriented nature of wellness tourism, a thorough gap analysis is essential to fulfill visitor expectations.

2.8 Objective and Focus of the Study

The research objective is to evaluate the quality of the resorts' services, encompassing elements such as accommodation standards, the expertise of wellness practitioners, and the variety and authenticity of wellness programs. The study further tries to identify the key factors influencing visitor expectations, perceptions, and overall satisfaction.

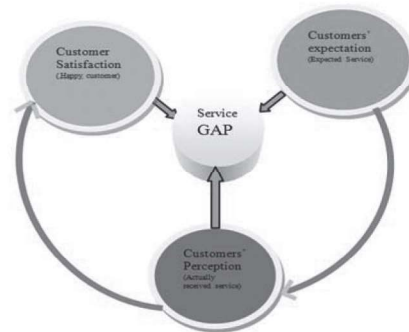
This study focuses on identifying strengths and areas for improvement, providing insights that can help resorts enhance their offerings and align with international wellness tourism standards. Through surveys and on-site evaluations, the research will gather data to assess how well these resorts meet the expectations of wellness tourists and contribute to Central Kerala's reputation as a premier wellness destination.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a descriptive method, focusing on an extensive literature review to establish a theoretical foundation. The chosen theories encompass wellness tourism, service quality, determinants of service quality, and 'customer satisfaction'. The study was conducted in Kerala, where Ayurveda and wellness tourism are inseparable. Ayurvedic wellness resorts of the Palakkad district of Kerala were chosen for data collection. Palakkad has become a significant centre for conventional Ayurvedic treatments. Ayurvedic resorts in this district provide a distinctive fusion of absorption in local culture

and natural scenery, which makes them the perfect destination for wellness travel. Palakkad was chosen as the focal point because of its importance in Ayurveda, making it a popular travel destination for people seeking wellness treatments. The selected centres included Au Revoir Wellness Resort at Malampuzha, Kairali Ayurvedic Healing Village at Olassery, Udaya Ayurvedic Resort at West Yakkara,. The selection of these resorts for the study is grounded in their high footfall and positive guest reviews. These resorts have emerged as prominent destinations within the Ayurvedic wellness sector in Palakkad, attracting a significant number of visitors due to their reputed service quality and unique offerings. Guest reviews highlight their comprehensive wellness programs, and serene environments, which contribute to high levels of customer satisfaction.

The primary goal of this study was to assess the service quality gap and the factors influencing Expectations, Perceptions, and Customer Satisfaction. An extensive literature review was conducted, delving into service quality, customer satisfaction, customer expectations, and customer perception in tourism. This review aimed to identify keywords used to describe the service quality gap and related attributes, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Source: (Hossain, 2019)

3.1 Development of Questionnaire

This study aimed to assess the quality of services provided by the selected wellness centres in the Palakkad district of Kerala. The researcher adopted the SERVQUAL model from the studies of Parasuraman et al., 2009, Mishra and Panda (2021), and Manhas et al. (2020) to evaluate service quality. It used 37 statements about

wellness tourists' expectations and perceptions of service quality. Respondents were asked to rate the 37 statements on a 5-point Likert scale. Additionally, respondents provided demographic information, including gender, age group, marital status, occupation, annual income, sources of information about the resort, family size, purpose of the visit to the resort, and frequency of visit.

3.2 Data Collection Method and Analysis.

The survey was conducted among wellness tourists visiting resorts in Palakkad, utilizing a convenience sampling approach. This approach was chosen as direct and onsite communication with customers was restricted in some establishments, adhering to the wellness centre's privacy policy and COVID-19 protocols. Through this procedure, 235 completed questionnaires were collected. Upon validation, 200 of these questionnaires were deemed suitable for analysis. The study utilized the SERVQUAL model to assess service quality, employing a quantitative analysis approach. The statistical methods used in the analysis included descriptive statistics, an independent sample t-test, one-way ANOVA, and a paired sample t-test. These methods were selected to yield comprehensive and anticipated results.

4. Results

4.1 Demographics of the Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents is outlined in Table 1. Key demographic traits observed among the respondents include 62% male, with a predominant age group of 16-25 years; 51% were married, while 49% were unmarried; 51% were employed; 39% reported an average income below 1,00,000, and 29% had an income in the range of 1,00,000-3,00,000. Additionally, 63% belonged to nuclear families.

Table: 1 profile of the sample +

Gender	Percentage	Purpose of Visit	Percentage
Male	62	Medical and Health	34.5
Female	38	Preventive Medicine and Wellness	14.0
Age Group		Leisure And Relaxation	25.5

16 - 25	54.0	Active Vacation	15.0
26- 35	27.0	Beauty And Attraction of the Resort	11.0
36-45	10.0		
46-55	7.0		
Above 55	2.0		
		Frequency of Visit	
Marital Status		First time	48.0
Married	51.0	Two times	27.0
Unmarried	49.0	Three times	13.5
		More than three times	11.5
Occupation			
Employed	51.0	Sources of information about the resort	
Unemployed	9.5	Internet	30.5
Student	34.5	Newspaper and magazines	21.5
Retired	5.0	Word of mouth	29.0
		Travel agent	11.5
Annual Income			
Below 1,00,000	39.0		
1,00,000 - 3,00,000	29.0	Family Size	
3,00,000 - 5,00,000	14.0	Joint Family	36.5
Above 5,00,000	18.0	Nuclear Family	63.5

Source: Authors Calculation

Based on the sample's purpose of visit to the resort, it is concluded that 34% visited the resort for medical and health programs, 25% were there for leisure and relaxation, and 48% visited the place for the first time. 30% of the sample got information about the Ayurveda resort online, and 29% got it through word of mouth. Internet and word-of-mouth tools significantly impacted the publicity of the Ayurveda centre.

4.2 Gap Analysis

Table 2: Tourist Expectation and Perception of service quality in wellness centres.

Statements	N=200	Expectation Mean	Perception Mean	Gap
Staff are Dressed neat and tidy		4.22	3.74	-0.48
Resort was clean and neat		4.18	3.95	-0.23
Treatments were clean and hygienic		4.31	3.77	-0.54
Not hesitant to answer for any queries		4.12	3.86	-0.26
Provided service with a smile		4.16	3.84	-0.32
Willing to help guests		4.23	4.00	-0.23
Easily accessible		4.17	3.65	-0.52
Service delivered in the promised time		4.19	3.70	-0.49
prompt services		4.10	3.75	-0.35
Courteous		4.40	3.81	-0.59
Trustworthy		4.31	3.92	-0.39
Quick problem solving		4.14	3.94	-0.2
Language of Communication		4.21	3.85	-0.36
Imparts confidence in the guests		4.20	3.87	-0.33
Comfortable and appealing ambiance		4.18	3.80	-0.38
Awareness of time of service		4.23	3.84	-0.39
Understanding guests' interest		4.26	3.73	-0.53
Solving the guests' problem		4.15	3.52	-0.63
Handling modified treatments		4.16	3.79	-0.37
Understanding the needs of guests		4.17	3.70	-0.47
Feeling safe and secured		4.31	3.83	-0.48
Personal service by the staff		4.40	3.96	-0.44
Timely service		4.23	3.78	-0.45
Treatment met the expectations		4.28	3.79	-0.49
Satisfaction with the services		4.29	3.82	-0.47
Choice of sports and recreational programs		4.17	3.82	-0.35
Quality of products		4.28	3.84	-0.44

Statements	N=200	Expectation Mean	Perception Mean	Gap
Entertainment programs and social activities		4.08	3.69	-0.39
High-standard quality food		4.02	3.88	-0.14
Natural and green environment		4.15	3.86	-0.29
Visually appealing physical facilities		4.11	3.86	-0.25
Appropriate equipment and facilities		4.12	3.71	-0.41
Eco-friendly and green environment		4.32	3.86	-0.46
Sustainable use of resources		4.17	3.67	-0.5
Relaxing and soothing environment		4.14	3.72	-0.42
Unique architecture		4.31	3.72	-0.59
Comfortable and satisfying stay		4.22	3.92	-0.3
Valid N (listwise)		200	200	

Source: Authors

Descriptive statistics reveal that guests hold high expectations for 'personalized service by the staff' and their 'courteousness,' scoring a mean value of 4.40. Additionally, guests anticipate more from the resort's eco-friendly practices and green environment, with a mean value of 4.32. On the other hand, the attribute 'high standard quality of food' has the lowest expectation, with an average value of 4.02, closely followed by 'Entertainment programs and social activities,' which scores the lowest expectation with a mean value of 4.08. Furthermore, guests highly perceive attributes such as 'willingness to help guests', 'personal service by the staff', 'resort cleanliness and neatness', and 'quick problem solving'.

The study highlights a notable disparity between the expectations and perceptions of service quality among wellness visitors at Ayurvedic resorts in Kerala. Table 2 clearly illustrates that the perception level of wellness tourists is lower than their expectations, as indicated by all attributes exhibiting a negative gap. The attributes with the highest negative gaps include 'solving guest problems', 'unique architecture', 'courteous', 'treatment cleanliness and hygiene', 'understanding guests' interests', and 'easily accessible'.

4.3 Socio-Demographic factors influencing the level of Expectation, Perception, and Satisfaction

Table 3 identifies and explains the considerable difference between the degree of tourist expectation, perception level, and level of satisfaction with the service offered by Ayurveda resorts and various demographic characteristics.

Table: 3 Level of Expectation, Perception, and satisfaction with gender and marital status.

FACTOR		MEAN	t	Sig
Level of Expectation	Male	158.3600	2.387	.018
	Female	151.2568	2.307	.023
	Married	162.0392	4.586	.000
	Unmarried	149.2211	4.571	.000
Level of Perception	Male	138.2480	-2.971	.003
	Female	144.9200	-3.041	.003
	Married	138.5980	-1.966	.051
	Unmarried	142.9688	-1.957	.052
Level of satisfaction	Male	33.3680	-2.685	.008
	Female	35.0133	-2.757	.006
	Married	33.2549	-2.685	.016
	Unmarried	34.7188	-2.757	.017

Source: Authors

Table 3 reveals a statistically significant difference in the expectation levels between males and females. The mean values suggest that males have higher expectations than females. Similarly, concerning marital status, the results indicate a statistically significant difference in expectation levels between married and unmarried guests. The means indicate that married visitors have higher expectations than unmarried guests.

When comparing the level of perception based on gender, a significant difference is evident. The perception level is higher for females than for males. However, there is no significant difference in the perception level between married and unmarried tourists.

Comparing the satisfaction levels of Ayurveda tourists based on gender and marital status reveals statistically significant differences.

Females exhibit higher satisfaction than males. Additionally, there is a significant difference in satisfaction levels between married and unmarried tourists, with unmarried guests reporting higher satisfaction than their married counterparts.

4.4 Influence of occupation on the level of Expectation and Perception.

Table 4 indicates a significance value of less than 0.05, signifying a statistically significant difference in the expectation and perception levels among Ayurveda tourists with diverse occupations. Individuals with various professions, such as government employees, may have distinct expectations for services compared to private employees. Moreover, the perception levels also vary among individuals with different occupations.

Table 4: Level of Expectation and Level of Perception with Occupation

FACTOR		MEAN	F	Sig
Level of Expectation	Between Groups	2216.790	5.632	.001
	Within Groups	393.620		
Level of Perception	Between Groups	901.261	3.825	.011
	Within Groups	235.601		

Source: Authors Calculation

Changes in Level of Expectation and Perception

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to assess changes in the expectation and perception of service quality at the wellness centre. The results indicate a significant difference in both expectation and perception levels, with a notable decrease in perception. The expectation level (M = 155.7, SD = 20.5) compared to the perception level (M = 140.7, SD = 15.7) shows a negative gap. The t-value is 8.046, with p = 0.00 (two-tailed). This suggests that the resort’s services did not meet the guests’ expectations, signifying a negative gap between their expected and perceived service levels.

Table 5: Result of paired sample t-test for expectation and perception of service quality

			Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
						Lower	Upper			
score_LE	155.7525	20.57065	15.08586	26.36059	1.87337	11.39143	18.78028	8.053	197	.000
score_LP	140.6667	15.72995								

Source: Authors calculations

5. Discussion

The SERVQUAL Model (Parasuraman et al., 2009) defines “perceived service quality” as the “difference between customer expectations and perceptions.” According to this model, a customer experiences high satisfaction when the perceived service exceeds their expected service, and vice versa (Ali et al., 2019). This relationship highlights the critical role of meeting or exceeding customer expectations in achieving high satisfaction.

This study reveals a notable disparity between the ‘expectations and perceptions’ of Ayurveda-based wellness tourists regarding the service quality offered by Ayurvedic resorts in Kerala. The findings strongly suggest that Ayurvedic resorts, catering to a diverse global clientele, should prioritize and emphasize service quality. The gap analysis presented in Table 2 is a reliable indicator of the overall service quality perceived by wellness customers. From Table 2, it becomes evident that the perception level of Ayurveda-based wellness tourists is faintly lower than their expectations across all attributes, resulting in a negative gap; this result agrees with the results of previous studies. Even though the patients were on the whole satisfied with the level of service quality in the healthcare industry, a negative SERVQUAL gap was evident, which means that perceived service quality was lower than expected (Marković, 2014). Gap analysis conducted among the tourists visiting Himalayan spa resorts, also in line with the result of our study, showed a negative gap, and there is a need for enhancements to spa services (Manhas et al., 2019). The attributes with the higher negative gaps include ‘solving guest problems,’ ‘unique architecture,’ ‘courteousness,’ ‘treatment cleanliness and hygiene,’ ‘understanding guests’ interests,’ and ‘easily accessible.’

The difference in expectations and perceptions among wellness tourists is particularly pronounced in “solving guest problems,” indicating a high expectation for the Ayurveda center to assist in problem resolution. However, the analysis reveals a failure to meet this expectation. According to the study of Mishra and Panda (2021), the staff was least empathetic with customers and slowly progressive in solving their issues. In contrast to a study on Croatia’s wellness tourism service quality, where “promptly solving problems” showed a positive gap (Marković et al., 2012), our study indicates a shortfall in this attribute. Empathy demonstrated by service professionals during experiences with clients improves commitment, perceived quality of service, and satisfaction. Empathy from the staff members is essential for building trust and loyalty among tourists (Jones & Shandiz, 2015; Richard et al., 2016; Meneses & Larkin, 2012; Wieseke et al., 2012).

Additionally, “unique architecture” and “courteous” are the second and third attributes with the most significant negative gaps of -0.59. The design or setting of the treatment facility is crucial in wellness tourism, and the guests had high expectations that were not met in terms of the predicted uniqueness of the centre’s architecture. This highlights the importance of service providers being attentive to creating an environment that aligns with customer expectations.

Moreover, the negative gaps in “cleanliness” and “understanding guest interest” reveal shortcomings in maintaining hygiene and providing personalized services. Employees play a crucial role in satisfying wellness customers, but the analysis suggests that they are not perceived as courteous, and cleanliness falls short of expectations.

Furthermore, the negative gap in “Accessibility” indicates dissatisfaction with the ease of reaching the wellness centres. This emphasizes the significance of improving accessibility as a crucial factor in enhancing service quality.

The study also explores differences in expectations and perceptions based on various socio-demographic factors. The findings indicate a gender-based disparity, with males having higher expectations than females and females exhibiting lower levels of perception. Understanding and addressing these gender-specific expectations are essential for satisfying both male and female customers.

Additionally, marital status influences the level of expectation, with married guests having higher expectations than unmarried guests. Recognizing the distinct needs of married individuals is crucial, necessitating a focus on enhancing service quality to meet their expectations.

The result indicates a statistically significant difference in both expectation and perception levels among Ayurveda tourists with diverse occupations. This suggests that individuals, such as government employees and private sector workers, exhibit distinct expectations and perceptions regarding wellness services

6. Implications of the Study

As indicated by the study's significant negative gaps in characteristics like "solving guest problems," "unique architecture," and "courteousness," Ayurvedic resorts in Kerala urgently need to prioritize and improve the quality of their services. Prioritizing employee training initiatives, guaranteeing improved accessibility, and implementing guest-centric problem-solving procedures are crucial to closing these gaps. Because consumer expectations are dynamic, it is necessary to monitor them continuously, allowing resorts to modify their offerings in response to shifting client preferences. Resorts looking for "unique architecture" could think about strategically enhancing their designs with specialised architects and designers that resonate with themes of wellness and culture. Management can implement strict cleaning procedures, hold frequent staff training sessions, and spend money on premium cleaning materials to remedy the "treatment cleanliness and hygiene gaps." Resorts may create a robust system for individualised visitor profiling to "understand guests' interests." They can also encourage employees to interact with guests to customise services and activities. Finally, to make sure that all visitors have a smooth and stress-free experience, a thorough accessibility audit that assesses both digital and physical platforms is advised for "easily accessible." Ayurvedic resorts can close the service quality gap and raise overall guest satisfaction by following a collective set of practical recommendations.

Understanding the specific characteristics that contribute to the negative service gaps, such as gender, marital status, and occupation,

can guide targeted efforts to improve the overall service experience. With focused initiatives, Ayurvedic resorts in Kerala can improve guest satisfaction by addressing the gender gap in wellness tourists. Alternatives should use specialised marketing and communication techniques to manage females' and males' lower perceptions and higher expectations, respectively. Creating messaging that is gender-centric and emphasizes services and amenities that are tailored to the individual tastes of each gender is one way to achieve this. Adding gender-specific wellness packages can ensure a more individualised and fulfilling experience for male and female guests. Furthermore, regular feedback channels tailored to gender-related elements allow ongoing monitoring and service adaptation to changing expectations.

Additionally, to address high expectations of married people, resorts can customise their offerings to create a more engaging and personalised experience to address the higher expectations of married guests. Creating customised wellness packages meant only for couples has one crucial implication. These packages include the option to have extras that cater to married people's particular tastes. Enhancing the guest experience can be achieved by providing customised services that honour the marital vows, such as exclusive accommodations and wellness initiatives for couples. Adding surprise and delight elements, such as free upgrades and festive presents, gives the treatment a more individualised touch.

The observed statistically significant differences in expectation and perception levels among Ayurveda tourists based on diverse occupations have essential implications for resort management. To enhance guest satisfaction, crafting marketing strategies that directly address the unique stressors and preferences of specific occupations can attract a more targeted audience. Implementing occupation-specific training programmes for staff ensures they are well-equipped to meet guests' expectations from different professions effectively. Establishing feedback channels specific to diverse occupations enables resorts to gather insights for improvement, continuously fostering a guest-centric approach. Introducing amenities that cater to certain professions, such as facilities conducive to remote work for business-oriented guests, can enhance the overall experience.

7. Conclusion

Travellers are increasingly seeking destinations that offer exemplary health and wellness services, reflecting the growing global emphasis on well-being. This trend is prevalent in both developed and developing nations, where understanding travel motivations, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and visitor loyalty in the context of health and wellness has become commonplace. The primary objective of this study is to pinpoint disparities between the expectations and perceptions of wellness tourists and the ensuing levels of customer satisfaction. Additionally, the study seeks to propose sustainable business practices, considering sustainability indicators as pivotal tools for resort development. The determinants influencing the Level of Expectation include gender, marital status, and occupation, while for the Level of Perception, gender and annual income emerge as significant factors. Gender and marital status are identified as determinants of the Level of Satisfaction.

The study's findings reveal an unfavourable gap between the expectations and perceptions of visitors to Ayurvedic resorts. Notably, the most crucial expectation attributes are identified as "courteousness," "personalized service," and an "eco-friendly and green environment." Wellness tourists anticipate courteous staff, personalized services tailored to their preferences, and treatments in an environmentally conscious setting. On the other hand, guests exhibit a high level of perception regarding attributes such as the "willingness to help the guest," "personal service by the staff," "resort cleanliness," "quick problem-solving," and "trustworthiness."

Successful realization of these attributes by the wellness resorts in Kerala is acknowledged. However, the study recommends that service providers consider factors such as income, gender, marital status, annual income, and occupation when designing packages and services. This strategic approach can enhance service delivery, thereby reducing service gaps, elevating satisfaction levels, and fostering customer retention—ultimately contributing to sustainable business practices within the resort.

8. Limitations and Future Study

The current study is subject to several limitations. The negative gap identified in the study may have limitations in generalizability due to the small sample size and the confined geographical area. The statements employed in this study may not comprehensively represent all five dimensions of service quality. Future research could expand to include additional destinations in Kerala, introducing changes to the service quality attribute statements deemed relevant.

The evaluation of expectations and perceptions of service quality was conducted simultaneously within the sample. To enhance accuracy, future studies could adopt a two-stage approach, with the first stage involving the assessment of expectations upon arrival at the wellness centre and the second stage focusing on understanding perceptions after experiencing all treatments and facilities offered at the destination (Guiry, Vequist, 2011).

Convenience sampling was utilized in this study due to restrictions on onsite interactions imposed by privacy policies and Covid-19 protocols in certain establishments. In future studies, alternative sampling techniques could be explored to gain a more in-depth understanding of the respondents and enhance the study's robustness.

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