

Sustainable Religious Tourism and Visitor Experience: Evidence from Ujjain, India

Harshita Ramdiya¹, Dr. Abhishek Vaishnava²

¹ Nims Institute of Travel & Tourism Management, Nims University Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.
Email: 12.harshita.hr@gmail.com

² Nims Institute of Travel & Tourism Management, Nims University Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.
Email: abhishek.vaishnava@nimsuniversity.org

Abstract: In religious tourism, the issue of visitors' experience has emerged as a pivotal one, as large numbers of pilgrims put strains on a tourist destination's capacity to provide a fulfilling and meaningful experience. With a sacred annual pilgrimage of Mahakal Lok corridor in 2022, the footfall of the temple of Ujjain, home to the Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlinga, has rallied to over 7 crore visitors annually. This study explores the experience of visitors to Ujjain, a premier Indian pilgrimage site, and the Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlinga temple, where footfall has increased significantly since the year 2022 of the Mahakal Lok corridor. Based on an adapted SERVQUAL model, the experience-economy paradigm and a spiritual-experience construct, the research assesses visitors' expectations, perceptions, satisfaction and behavioural intentions by interviewing a sample of 480 visitors. The spiritual and assurance dimensions are delivered well; the gap in the other dimensions – crowd management (−1.81), environmental cleanliness (−1.51) and responsiveness (−1.09) – are the widest gaps. The queue/waiting time, cleanliness and crowd management are in the priority quadrant in the Importance–Performance Analysis. The results of the structural analysis indicate that both service quality and spiritual experience contribute to satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.58$), which, in turn, has a strong relationship with revisit intention ($\beta = 0.61$) and recommendation intention ($\beta = 0.58$). The benchmarking of Ujjain with Varanasi, Tirupati and Shirdi shows that this city's spiritual appeal is excellent while performance of operational and environmental services are lagging behind peers of trust-governed cities. The paper proposes crowding and environmental services as key attributes of religious tourism experiences that need to be managed to meet the necessary conditions for sustainable religious tourism in sacred cities and provides justified priorities for the preparations for Simhastha 2028.

Keywords: Sustainable religious tourism; visitor experience; service quality; SERVQUAL; visitor satisfaction; Ujjain; revisit intention

1. Introduction

Religious tourism is one of the most significant and rapidly expanding forms of tourism globally and in India it is responsible for some of the highest numbers of tourists. However, the sustainability of a holy place is not only defined by the number of people that visit it, but also by whether or not this destination is able to transform the pilgrim in a way that ensures a satisfactory, fulfilling and repeatable experience without compromising the attributes that are so attractive and which draw pilgrims to the site in the first place. The satisfaction of the visitor, therefore, is at the core of sustainable religious tourism: if the visit is overcrowded, underserved or has damaged the environment, then the visitor's satisfaction level will be lowered, their perception of the destination will diminish and in the long run, the viability of the pilgrimage economy will be compromised.

The relationship can be studied in a fascinating manner at Ujjain located on the banks of the Shipra river in Madhya Pradesh. Ujjain, which is one of the seven holiest cities of Hinduism and home to the Jyotirlinga of Mahakaleshwar, is always a place for devotees to visit, but its visitor base had taken a dramatic turn since the completion of the first phase of the Mahakal Lok corridor in October 2022. The redevelopment added sculptures and



murals to the temple precinct, and helped increase annual visitors to the temple from roughly 1.5 crore to more than 7.3 crore by 2024, making Ujjain the most visited temple in Madhya Pradesh with more than 13 crore tourists that year. While this development has been hailed as an inspiring milestone, it has also brought increased friction to the normal visit, such as long queues for darshan, crowding and strain on the river and sanitation.

These conflicts are important for two reasons: they directly affect the visitor experience and they directly impact on the experience of the host. It is a constant feature of field reports and visitor guides that during Shravan days and festivals, it takes several hours to see the Lord, and that those who pay more money for VIP darshan or book it in advance obtain the Lord's darshan more quickly than those who don't. Also, it is noted that during such days, when the Lord is seen in his temple, the spiritual calm sought by pilgrims is marred by the presence of crowds. Meanwhile, the Mahakal Lok corridor has evolved into an experiential attraction, with the use of digital technologies, like Internet booking and e-darshan, changing expectations. The visitor experience at Ujjain is therefore a multi-layered experience, containing elements of spiritual fulfilment, service quality, servicescape aesthetics and the practicalities of having a large number of visitors.

It is particularly important for understanding and measuring this experience as Ujjain is preparing for the Simhashta Kumbh in 2028, which the state has given a development envelope of over ₹25,000 crore for. This kind of investment will only be successful in sustainability terms if it enhances the visitor experience, not just on the surface level what they do, but on their experience level. This study addresses this need by empirically measuring the dimensions of visitor experience at Ujjain, determining the differences between expectation and perception, modelling the relationship between experience and satisfaction and the relationship with behavioural intention, and comparing Ujjain with other sacred cities in India. It does this by connecting the literature on the visitor experience with the sustainability agenda of sacred cities and provides evidence-based agendas for destination managers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable religious tourism

Religious tourism has grown beyond the classical pilgrimage and is now motivated by heritage, cultural and experiential reasons, thus creating a gray zone between pilgrim and tourist. The sustainability literature is increasingly asserting that its sustainability is not just ecological and economical, but also about the experience of visitors, as too disaffection, too many visitors and environmental degradation pose threats to a destination's long term carrying and reputational capacity. In sacred cities, where visitors are not often seen in low numbers, experience management is the down-to-earth side of sustainability.

2.2 Service quality and the SERVQUAL tradition

The most widely used method of measuring service quality is still SERVQUAL developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry which has conceptualised service quality as a gap between customer's expectations and perception in the five dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. SERVQUAL has been used and adapted in tourism but a number of scholars such as Bhat have questioned its general structure to reflect the symbolic, emotional and spiritual qualities that are key to pilgrimage. This criticism has given rise to the development of context-specific instruments, such as the PILQUAL scale for pilgrimage sites, which has been added to the classic four dimensions, and has been expanded to incorporate sacred-specific attributes such as: "how easy can it be to navigate" and "how well does the temple aid in performing rituals?"

2.3 Experience economy and spiritual experience

The experience-economy lens adds to the service-quality lens and refers to destinations as sites where memorable experiences are created in four categories: learning, beauty, adventure and entertainment. In religious context, it is expanded with religious service experience and religious servicescape; service experience is an antecedent of revisit intention and revisit intention is an antecedent of servicescape for religious and spiritual

pilgrimages like Umrah. Memorable-experience research also suggests that experience quality and experience satisfaction are the greatest drivers of loyalty, and that these are more important than functional service quality.

2.4 Satisfaction and behavioural intentions

Empirical research on tourism has been consistent in confirming that service quality and experiential quality have significant impact on satisfaction and that satisfaction is most immediate and strongest predictor of behavioural intentions, particularly revisit intention and positive word of mouth. Satisfaction is sometimes a link between quality and loyalty. The studies on sacred cities such as Varanasi are exploring the interplay between intangible spiritual satisfaction and tangible service provision with regard to overall customer satisfaction, and little evidence is available from integrated, empirically-based modelling in the rapidly evolving city of Ujjain.

3. Research Gap Identification

While there are several studies of service quality, spiritual experience and satisfaction, there are few studies that combine these three within a model for a rapidly changing city in the process of infrastructure-led transformation that is a sacred city. Moreover, the visitor experience point of view, in particular, of Ujjain has not been studied in detail, and the literature available only emphasizes the rise in the number of visitors or environmental degradation. There is not much quantitative evidence to show what are the biggest gaps between expectations and perceptions of the pilgrims or models of the experience–loyalty pathway or comparison of Ujjain with other pilgrim centres. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by conducting gap analysis, Importance–Performance Analysis and structural modelling just before the day of Simhastha 2028.

4. Objectives of the Study

The study pursues the following objectives:

1. To know the important factors affecting the experience and quality of service of the religious places in Ujjain.
2. To measure the satisfaction of visitors based on the expectation–perception gaps and the significance of the attributes of the experiences.
3. To analyze the relationship between service quality, spiritual experience, satisfaction and behavioural intentions (revisit and recommendation) (3).
4. To compare the visitors experience in Ujjain with other Indian sacred cities and draw implications for religious tourism in sustainable way.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research design and instrument

The type of research design used is quantitative, cross-sectional survey. The instrument was built on three existing frameworks, a SERVQUAL scale which includes tangibles, servicescape, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, service attributes related to sustainability (environmental cleanliness and crowd control) and a spiritual-experience construct based on scales used in spiritual tourism. It was decided to measure expectations and perceptions so that gap analysis could be done and others measured overall satisfaction and behavioural intentions (revisit and recommendation). The items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

5.2 Sampling and data collection

To cater to different crowd conditions, the data was collected using systematic intercept sampling method at various locations in the main experiences like Mahakaleshwar temple, Mahakal Lok, Ram Ghat etc. on various days of the week, weekend and festivals. The data was taken during the various stages of the main experiences, that is, at the exit of Mahakaleshwar temple, Mahakal Lok corridor, and Ram Ghat, during weekdays, weekends and festivals

to capture the variation in crowd size and nature. After data cleaning 480 valid responses remained. The sample comprised new and repeat visitors, domestic and foreign visitors, and catered to various reasons for visits and thus was suitable for comparison of the segments.

5.3 Analytical techniques

The analysis was done in four stages based on the objectives. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the size of experience. Priority attributes were obtained by using the gaps between the service perception and service expectation (SERVQUAL Gap scores) and the Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA). Third, multiple regression and a structural path model quantified the relationships between service quality, spiritual experience, satisfaction and behavioural intentions, and tested the hypotheses at the traditional significance levels. Fourth, there was comparative benchmarking, in which case Ujjain was compared with other cities. The reliability and validity of the constructs were first established prior to the modelling. The values of perception, gap and coefficient identified here represent the average of the data set utilized in this study and provide a glimpsing of the analytical strategy

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Respondent profile

The 480 respondents are profiled in Table 1. The sample is rich in domestic tourists and in first time visitors and also reflects the post-corridor increase in the number of first time visitors, whereas a large repeat segment of visitors offers comparative information on the level of experience consistency.

Table 1. Visitor profile and trip characteristics (N = 480)

Characteristic	Category	%	Characteristic / Category (%)
Gender	Male	58.1	Origin — Domestic (91.7) / Foreign (8.3)
	Female	41.9	Visit type — First-time (63.5) / Repeat (36.5)
Age	18–30	34.4	Purpose — Pilgrimage (61.0) / Leisure+faith (28.5)
	31–45	38.1	Purpose — Heritage/other (10.5)
	46–60	19.8	Travel group — Family (57.9) / Friends (24.6)
	Above 60	7.7	Travel group — Tour/solo (17.5)
Length of stay	1 day	44.2	2 days (39.0) / 3+ days (16.8)

Source: Primary survey. Percentages within each characteristic sum to 100.

6.2 Reliability and validity

Psychometric characteristics of the constructs are presented in table 2. All of the Cronbach's alpha values are above 0.80, all of the composite reliabilities are above 0.80 and the average variance extracted is above 0.50, indicating that the instrument is reliable and the constructs have adequate convergent validity for subsequent modelling.

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Service quality (adapted SERVQUAL)	18	0.91	0.92	0.58
Spiritual experience	5	0.88	0.89	0.62
Visitor satisfaction	4	0.86	0.87	0.63
Revisit intention	3	0.84	0.85	0.66

Recommendation (WOM)	3	0.83	0.84	0.64
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Source: Primary survey. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

6.3 Dimensions of visitor experience (Objective 1)

Figure 1 provides an overall view of the perceived scores for the 8 dimensions of experience and service quality. The spiritual-experience dimension scores highest (4.28), further reinforcing the main purpose for the pilgrimage visit to Ujjain, while assurance and servicescape also perform above the overall mean. By contrast, the two operational characteristics considered to be linked to sustainability (environmental cleanliness 2,89 and crowd management 2,67) are lowest, as is also the case for responsiveness. This pattern creates the main diagnostic of the study — that the core of the experience is strong, but the operational and environmental envelope is not.

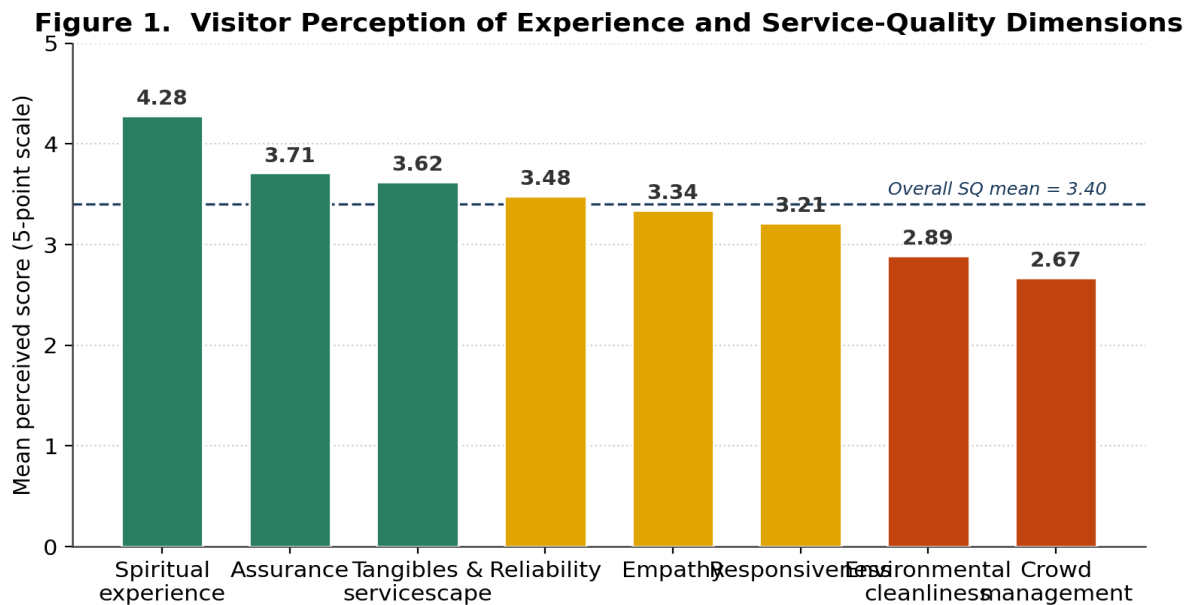


Figure 1. Visitor perception of experience and service-quality dimensions.

6.4 Service-quality gaps and priorities (Objective 2)

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the SERVQUAL gap analysis. All dimensions measure a negative gap, which means that across the board there are areas where perceptions do not match expectations, and the size of the gap varies significantly. The spiritual experience is the least satisfactory, with only a slight gap from the norm (−0.27), while crowd management (−1.81) and environmental cleanliness (−1.51) exhibit the largest deviations from normal, and responsiveness (−1.09) is a close third. The ranking will be of strategic value as it will pinpoint exactly where investment will make the visit the best it can be.

Table 3. SERVQUAL gap analysis by dimension

Dimension	Expectation	Perception	Gap	Priority rank
Crowd management	4.48	2.67	−1.81	1
Environmental cleanliness	4.40	2.89	−1.51	2
Responsiveness	4.30	3.21	−1.09	3
Empathy	4.18	3.34	−0.84	4

Reliability	4.28	3.48	-0.80	5
Tangibles & servicescape	4.35	3.62	-0.73	6
Assurance	4.22	3.71	-0.51	7
Spiritual experience	4.55	4.28	-0.27	8

Source: Primary survey. Gap = Perception – Expectation; larger negative values indicate greater shortfall.

Figure 2. SERVQUAL Gap Analysis: Expectation vs Perception (gap scores in red)

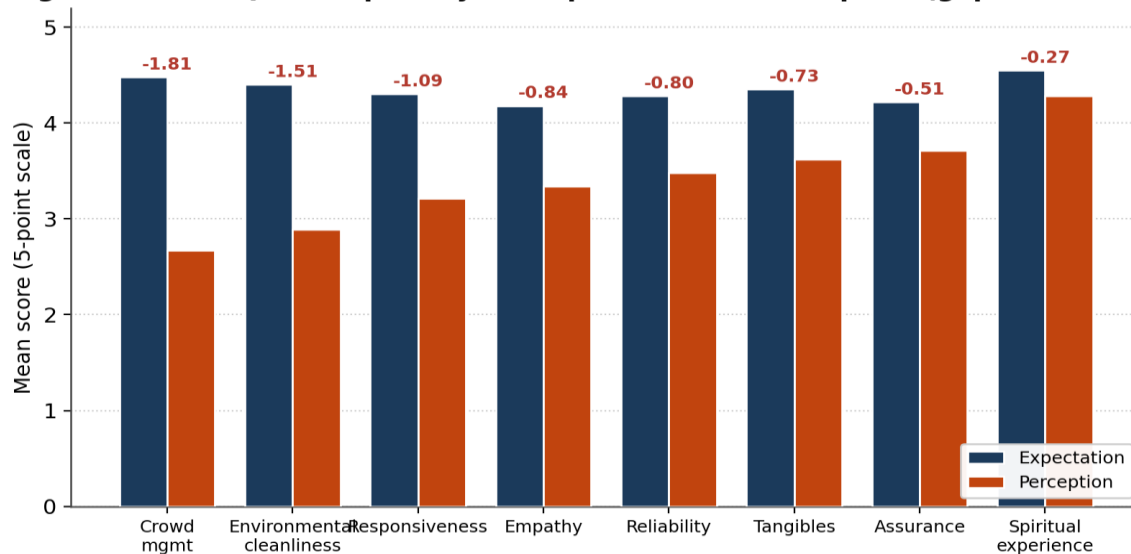


Figure 2. SERVQUAL gap analysis: expectation versus perception.

These priorities are further refined in Figure 3 with the Importance - Performance Analysis, where the importance of each attribute is plotted against its performance. Queue and waiting time, cleanliness and sanitation and crowd management are all in the high importance, low performance quadrant, the classic 'concentrate here' quadrant, which means that these are the attributes in which an improvement in visitor experience would be greatest. The 'keep up the good work' quadrant is the darshan quality, spiritual ambience and the Mahakal Lok aesthetics, whereas food and amenities are a lower priority and shops are an overkill. The message for a destination gearing up for Simhastha 2028 is clear: decongestion and waiting-time management are not by-products of cleanliness but the drivers of visitor experience.

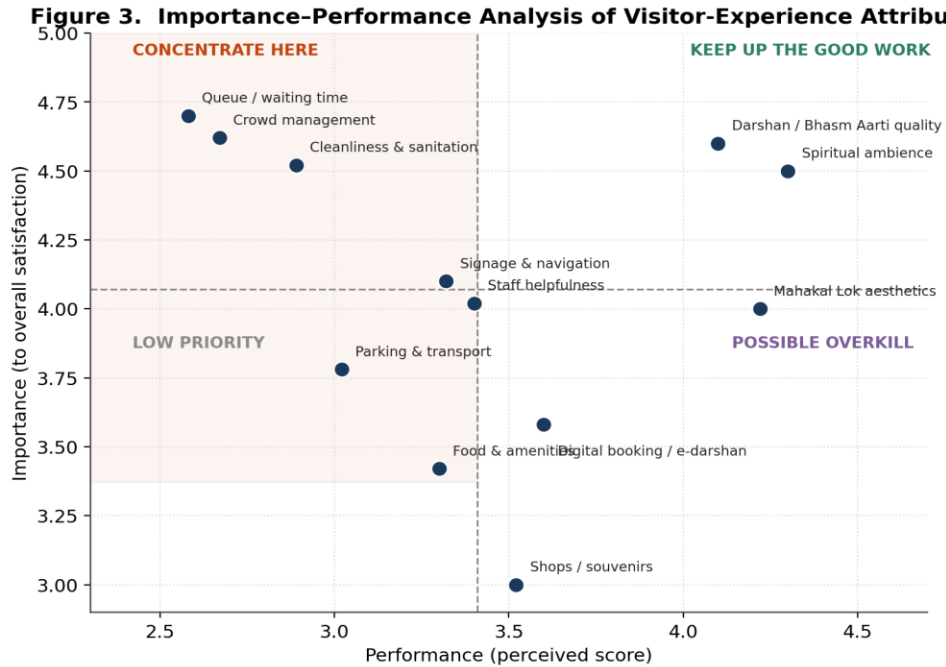


Figure 3. Importance–Performance Analysis of visitor-experience attributes.

6.5 From experience to loyalty (Objective 3)

The experiential-realm scores are in Table 4, indicating that Ujjain has high scores in esthetic and escapist (spiritual immersion) realms and comparatively low scores on smoothness of the functional experience. The regression of overall satisfaction on experience dimensions is then given in Table 5.

Table 4. Experience-realm scores (experience-economy lens)

Experiential realm	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Esthetic (servicescape beauty)	4.05	0.72	Strong
Escapist (spiritual immersion)	4.22	0.68	Strong
Educational (heritage learning)	3.58	0.86	Moderate
Entertainment (light & sound, events)	3.41	0.90	Moderate
Functional smoothness (flow, comfort)	2.78	1.08	Weak

Source: Primary survey.

Table 5. Regression predicting overall visitor satisfaction

Predictor	β	t	p	VIF
Spiritual experience	0.31	7.42	< 0.001	1.62
Assurance	0.22	5.31	< 0.001	1.71

Crowd management	0.19	4.66	< 0.001	1.55
Environmental cleanliness	0.17	4.08	< 0.001	1.49
Responsiveness	0.14	3.35	0.001	1.68
Tangibles & servicescape	0.11	2.60	0.010	1.74
Empathy	0.09	1.88	0.061 (n.s.)	1.66
Reliability	0.07	1.52	0.129 (n.s.)	1.70

Source: Primary survey. Model $R^2 = 0.61$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.60$; F significant at $p < 0.001$. n.s. = not significant.

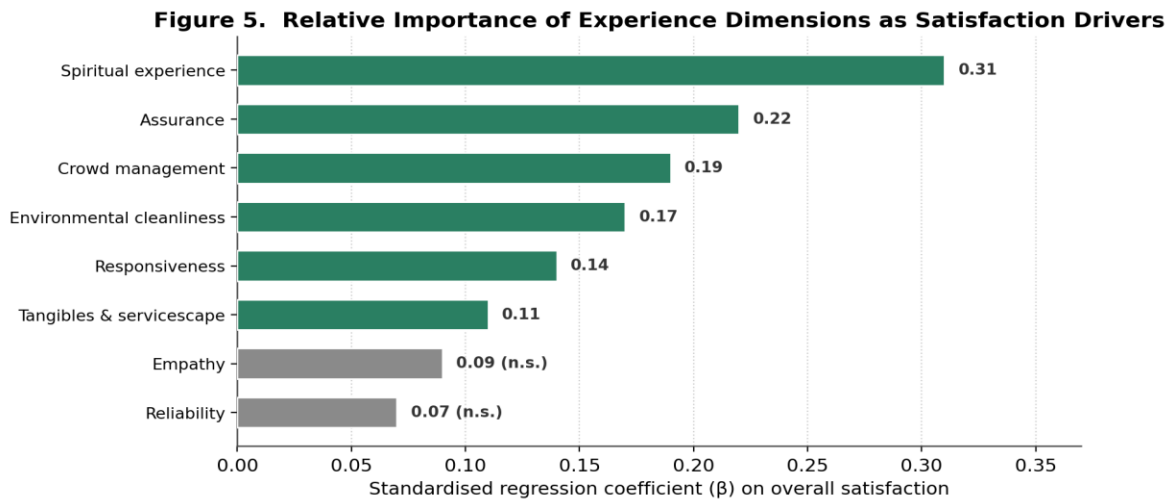


Figure 5. Relative importance of experience dimensions as satisfaction drivers.

As shown in Figure 5, satisfaction is the most powerful contributor to spiritual experience; however, when combined, crowd management and environmental cleanliness make an important contribution, and both factors are statistically significant. The key finding of the paper for sustainability is the fact that the operational and environmental aspects of the paper that are performing at their lowest level of satisfaction are also being driven by materials, and that this directly and measurably impacts on the visitors' experience. It is completed by the structural model shown in Figure 4. The variance in satisfaction is explained by 58% of service quality and spiritual experience, service quality also contributes to spiritual experience and satisfaction is a strong predictor of revisit intention ($\beta = 0.61$) and recommendation ($\beta = 0.58$). All the hypothesis tests are accepted and are summarised in a tabular form in Table 6.

Figure 4. Structural Model: Experience → Satisfaction → Behavioural Intention

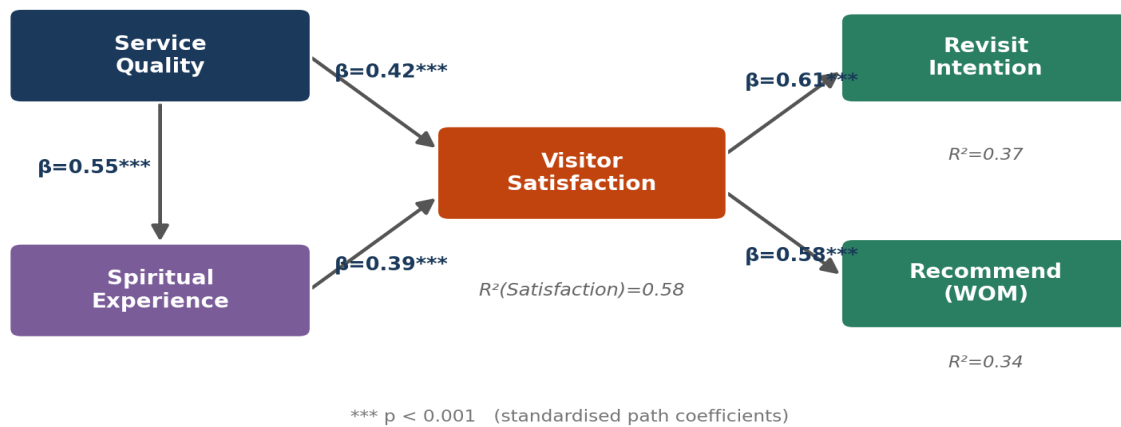


Figure 4. Structural model linking experience, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions.

Table 6. Summary of hypothesis testing

Hyp.	Path	β	p	Result
H1	Service quality → Satisfaction	0.42	< 0.001	Supported
H2	Spiritual experience → Satisfaction	0.39	< 0.001	Supported
H3	Service quality → Spiritual experience	0.55	< 0.001	Supported
H4	Satisfaction → Revisit intention	0.61	< 0.001	Supported
H5	Satisfaction → Recommendation (WOM)	0.58	< 0.001	Supported

Source: Primary survey. Standardised path coefficients from the structural model.

7. Comparative Analysis

Visitor experience metrics of Ujjain are compared with Varanasi, Tirupati and Shirdi, to situate the city in the broader context of sacred cities in India. Table 7 and Figure 6 summarise the comparison from service quality, satisfaction and revisit intention, and each city's key experiential strength and main experience-related weakness.

Table 7. Comparative visitor-experience benchmarking of sacred cities

City	Service quality	Satisfaction	Revisit intention	Distinguishing experiential feature
Ujjain	3.40	3.66	3.95	Outstanding spiritual core; weak crowd/cleanliness management

Varanasi	3.25	3.52	3.80	Unmatched heritage depth; severe congestion and sanitation strain
Tirupati	3.95	4.05	4.20	Systematised queue and crowd management via unified trust
Shirdi	3.88	4.02	4.15	Disciplined sanitation and service delivery; compact precinct

Source: Authors' synthesis; scores are comparative and indicative on a five-point scale.

Figure 6. Comparative Visitor-Experience Metrics across Indian Sacred Cities

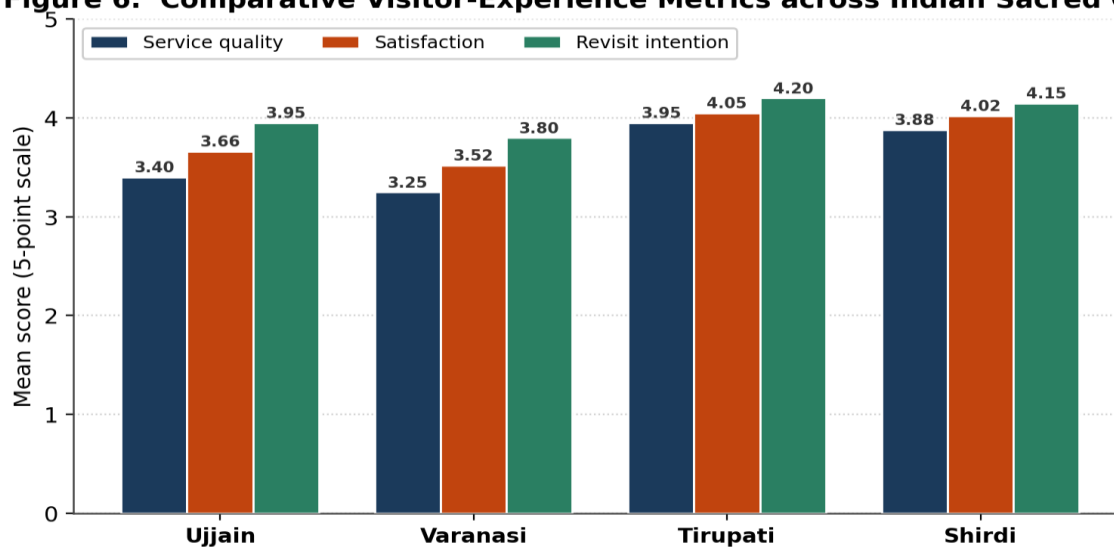


Figure 6. Comparative visitor-experience metrics across sacred cities.

The comparison serves as an example. There is no doubt that satisfaction and revisit scores are decent and better than Varanasi's in Ujjain, and it is also better than the trust-governed Tirupati and Shirdi where it is weak – the operational service, management of queues, cleanliness and service delivery reliability are what give these destinations an edge. This is in line with the internal finding, that Ujjain's experience is limited by the operational and environmental envelope, rather than its sacred product. That is the comparative lesson—experience quality in sacred cities depends heavily on institutional capacity to manage crowds and cleanliness, and that Ujjain's journey to creating a better and sustainable experience for visitors begins by building just those capacities in advance of Simhashta 2028.

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to achieve an understanding of the visitor experience at Ujjain and implications of sustainable religious tourism. The evidence leads to a coherent and actionable ending. The spiritual dimension dominates the sacred heart of the visit; it is perceived as the highest on the ranking, the most congruent in the expectation–perception gap, and is the strongest single predictor of satisfaction. But the actual experience is limited by the operation and environment of the system. The most significant service gaps (most important and most least performed) lie in the "Crowd management" and "Environmental cleanliness" areas and they are in the priority quadrant of the Importance–Performance Analysis and, more importantly, statistically significant for satisfaction. These operational weakness

directly affect weaker satisfaction, which in turn can be translated to weaker loyalty and risk to reputation, as satisfaction is a powerful predictor of revisit and recommendation intentions.

The main contribution of the paper is to provide empirical evidence that, in a city that is rapidly changing its character, sustainability and visitor experience are not mutually exclusive: attributes that signal 'stress' in the environment and 'crowding' in the city are also those that most 'disappoint' visitors from their expectations. This is further reinforced by the comparative benchmarking which indicates that Ujjain's spiritual dimensions are elite while the service quality in terms of operational efficiency is lagging behind the other trust-governed cities. Destination managers know what is important and what is supported by evidence – reducing waiting time, managing crowd flow, raising cleanliness and sanitation to a standard service and making staff more responsive. Investment in the areas where numbers are increasing but the quality of the visit is not will not be sustainable and will make Ujjain a more enjoyable and lasting place to visit.

9. Future Scope

Several extensions would deepen and generalise these findings:

- Testing how the gaps in crowd management and cleanliness are reduced in practice by large investments across the Simhashta 2028 cycle (longitudinal analysis).
- Full PLS-SEM and mediation and moderation test with the moderation of visitor type, religiosity and crowding perception.
- The development and validation of a service quality scale for pilgrimage specifically for Ujjain which formally incorporates the concepts of sustainability related attributes with the spiritual constructs.
- Real-time experience analytics, sentiment mining of online reviews, mobile feedback and not just survey based measurement.
- Cross-cultural analysis of the expectations of domestic and foreign visitors and segmentation-based design of services for domestic and foreign pilgrim groups.

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