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QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE INITIATIVES AS DETERMINANTS OF VISITOR SATISFACTION AND DESTINATION LOYALTY IN SLOVAK TOURISM

Tünde DZUROV VARGOVÁ [1*], Daniela MATUŠÍKOVÁ [1]

[1] The University of Prešov, Faculty of Management and Business, Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, Prešov, Slovakia; tunde.dzurovvargova@unipo.sk (T.D.V.); daniela.matusikova@unipo.sk (D.M.)

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Abstract: This study analyzes the impact of quality management and sustainable initiatives on destination loyalty and visitor satisfaction in Slovak tourism. This study analyzes the impact of quality management and sustainable initiatives on destination loyalty and visitor satisfaction in Slovak tourism. A quantitative survey of Slovak tourists (n = 391) was employed to measure the impact of environmental practices and service quality on destination satisfaction and revisit intentions. On the basis of t-tests and regression, the evidence supports a significant positive influence of sustainability and quality management on return visits and visitor satisfaction. The visitors who value sustainability are also found to be more satisfied, suggesting that mixed methods of quality and environmental care enhance destination competitiveness. The study confirms that higher service quality and sustainability practices significantly increase visitor satisfaction and destination loyalty. Findings further indicate that financial incentives and well-designed environmental policies significantly support the adoption of sustainable practices among tourism enterprises in Slovakia. Comparative analysis highlights that while Slovak businesses are increasingly adopting green initiatives, the overall rate remains lower than in neighboring countries due to administrative barriers and limited funding access. The results underscore the importance of integrating sustainability with quality management to strengthen competitiveness and long-term loyalty. Additionally, the study identifies a significant interaction between eco-innovation and customer satisfaction, demonstrating that innovation-driven enterprises achieve higher loyalty levels. Practical implications suggest that tourism policymakers should simplify funding mechanisms and introduce standardized quality certifications to boost sustainable adoption. These insights contribute to international debates on tourism competitiveness, providing a framework for sustainable destination management in post-pandemic European markets.

Keywords: Destination loyalty, environmental practices, service quality, sustainable tourism, visitor Satisfaction

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a dynamic and rapidly changing sector that generates a substantial share of national income, for example, in Slovakia (Weaver & Lawton, 2010). Growing visitor expectations and mounting global environmental concerns impose pressures upon stakeholders in tourism to produce high-quality services alongside sustainable practices (Butler, 1999). Quality management practices are essential to ensuring consistency, satisfaction, and long-term sustainability of service. Concurrently, sustainability—embracing environmental, social, and economic factors—is increasingly seen as a significant driver of tourist choice (UNWTO, 1999). In the Slovak context, tourist places feel more pressured to differentiate themselves on the basis of service quality and ecological responsibility. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered tourism patterns, with domestic tourism becoming more prominent.

Digitalization and consumer pressures for eco-friendly behavior are on the rise. Despite natural and cultural wealth in Slovakia, there remain concerns regarding standardizing the quality of services across the country as well as for clearly embracing policies on sustainability. Recent research has emphasized the growing importance of quality management in tourism, particularly in the context of post-pandemic recovery and increasing consumer expectations (Chen et al., 2025). Recent studies highlight that tourism quality management is increasingly integrated with sustainability, digital innovation, and policy-driven frameworks (Müller et al., 2025). Understanding these interactions is essential to enhancing competitiveness and environmental performance.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Quality of Tourism Services

Quality of tourism services is determined by the degree to which services are seen to meet or even exceed visitor expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Five SERVQUAL dimensions have been recognized: reliability, responsiveness,

* Corresponding author

assurance, empathy, and tangibles, all of them being determinants of perceived quality. Quality certifications (e.g., ISO 9001), employee training, and continuous improvement programs make it easier to apply quality management (Grönroos, 2007). Recent studies highlight the necessity to adapt the SERVQUAL model to incorporate sustainability-related service attributes in tourism (Akbari et al., 2023). Green service quality has emerged as a key element in eco-conscious travel behavior, where tourists not only expect standard dimensions of quality but also environmentally responsible conduct embedded into the service. Quality service remains a significant challenge in Slovak tourism, with fragmented service standards and inconsistent training of staff across regions.

Recent findings by Müller et al. (2025) reveal significant demographic variations in environmental attitudes and behaviours among tourists, calling for segmentation-based quality strategies integrating green service attributes. Differences in service delivery between urban and rural areas are often noticed by tourists. Therefore, quality assurance mechanisms—particularly those aligned with green service practices—need to be developed to enhance competitiveness (López-Guzmán et al, 2022). Szőllős-Tóth et al. (2025) identify global shifts in tourism scale and behavior in the 21st century, underscoring the need for adaptive quality and sustainability frameworks in destination management.

The incorporation of digital tools and staff education regarding eco-standards further enhances service consistency. Recent advancements in quality management theory emphasize the integration of sustainability indicators and smart technologies into tourism service evaluation (Della Corte et al., 2025; Sigala, 2025). These approaches allow destinations to simultaneously improve visitor satisfaction and environmental outcomes.

Sustainable Tourism Practices

Sustainable tourism aims to harmonize the interests of guests, industry, environment, and host populations (UNWTO, 2022). Activities such as waste minimization, use of renewable energy, preservation of biodiversity, and community integration enhance the perceived value and reputation of destinations (Hall & Gössling, 2022).

Tourists increasingly favor destinations that demonstrate visible environmental commitment and transparency. Despite Slovakia's natural potential, sustainable tourism practices remain unevenly implemented. Wahyuningsih et al. (2025) analyse Indonesian tourism villages and demonstrate how homestay satisfaction relies closely on embedded sustainability practices, suggesting parallels for Slovak rural tourism quality management. Particularly small and medium tourism enterprises often lack sufficient capacity and institutional support for adopting sustainability strategies (Zelenka & Kacetl, 2022). However, research shows that especially young and urban tourists demonstrate a willingness to pay more for environmentally friendly services, thereby reinforcing the need for targeted green investments (Zhang & Lu, 2022). Recent findings emphasize that co-creation of value between providers and tourists can reinforce sustainable development, especially when sustainability is integrated into the visitor experience (Mihalic & Gomezelj, 2022). Furthermore, Gössling & Hall (2023) call for a shift from growth-focused tourism to models that prioritize regenerative and post-growth approaches. Certification schemes such as ISO 14001 and EMAS have become internationally recognized indicators of ecological responsibility. Their role is not only operational but also communicative—serving to increase trust and visibility of destinations among sustainability-conscious consumers (Pirani & Arafat, 2022).

Recent models conceptualize environmental sustainability not only as conservation but as an integrated system involving smart technologies, resource efficiency, and governance alignment (Elhoushy et al., 2025).

Synthesizing Quality and Sustainability

The integration of quality and sustainability represents a strategic path to increasing visitor satisfaction and destination competitiveness. Visitors increasingly seek destinations that offer both high-standard services and demonstrable environmental commitment (Ivanov & Webster, 2023). In practice, this integration is most effective when environmental management systems (such as ISO 14001) are coupled with customer-focused quality assurance frameworks (Akbari et al., 2023).

In Slovakia, this synthesis is still largely in the early stages, driven by a minority of innovative service providers. Nevertheless, as empirical studies indicate, combining high-quality service with visible sustainability practices can serve as a key differentiator in tourism marketing (López-Guzmán et al., 2022; Hall & Gössling, 2022). Such a dual approach also aligns with the European tourism policy objectives related to green transition and digital innovation.

The development of synergistic strategic models that align service quality with environmental and social responsibility is crucial. In the context of Slovak tourism, embedding these dual priorities into destination management and branding offers a pathway toward long-term competitiveness and resilience in a shifting global tourism landscape.

For this reason, the aim of the study was to find out through the following research questions:

RQ1: Does service quality significantly influence tourist satisfaction and revisit intention in Slovak tourism destinations?

RQ2: Do tourists who value sustainable practices report higher levels of satisfaction compared to those who do not?

RQ3: Are there statistically significant differences in satisfaction between demographic groups (e.g., age, education) in relation to perceived quality and sustainability?

RQ4: How do tourists perceive the integration of quality and sustainability in the services provided by Slovak tourism enterprises?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data were collected using a standardized questionnaire which was applied to 391 Slovak tourists traveling within the country last year. It was developed based on validated constructs of previous studies on service quality (Parasuraman et al.,

1988) and sustainable tourism (UNWTO, Swarbrooke, 1999) and adapted to the Slovak context using expert advice. It included Likert-scale items measuring satisfaction, service quality perception, environmental conduct, and behavioral intentions. Data collection took place between March & June 2025, and the survey was administered online and face-to-face at randomly selected tourist areas to gain more varied demographic and geographic representation. The participants were described the purpose of the study and were provided informed consent prior to completion of the survey. An overview of the methodological progression is presented in Figure 1.

Before deployment, the survey was pretested on a pilot sample (n = 30) for reliability and clarity validation. All Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the main scales were greater than 0.80, indicating good internal consistency.

The final survey questionnaire comprised 36 questions divided into five thematic blocks: (1) General travel behavior, (2) Perceived service quality, (3) Attitudes towards sustainable lifestyles, (4) Revisit intention and overall satisfaction, and (5) Demographics. The survey was based on the validated constructs of previous research aimed at service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and sustainable tourism (UNWTO, Swarbrooke, 1999), and adapted to the Slovak context through expert advice. The survey included items assessing satisfaction, perceived service quality, environmental behavior, and behavioral intention using Likert-scale. Before full deployment, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a pilot sample (n = 30) to establish reliability and intelligibility. Cronbach's alpha of the main scales was greater than 0.80, which is an acceptable level of internal consistency. The instrument included items of perceived service quality, satisfaction, awareness and appreciation of sustainable initiatives, and revisit intentions.

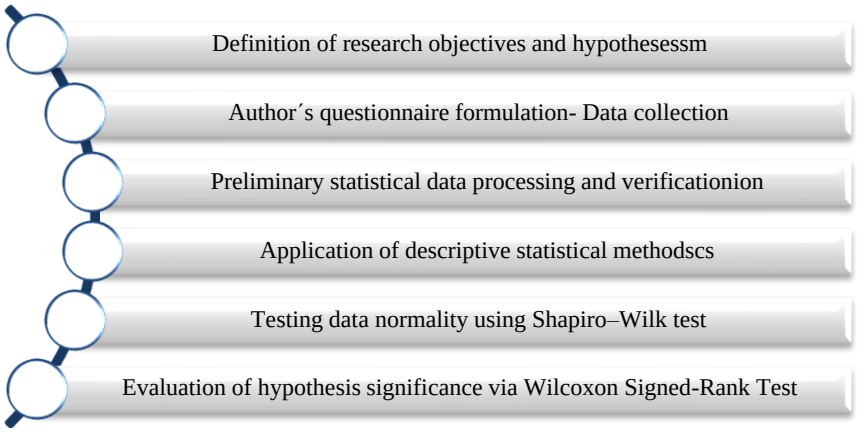

Figure 1. Display of methodological progression (Source: own processing)

Sample Characteristics

They were stratified by age, with the highest age group being 26–35 years (40%), gender (53% female and 45% male), income, and education. Most respondents had secondary (50%) or higher (40%) education. Participants were randomly sampled from all parts of Slovakia, as well as urban and rural areas. The sample reflects the structure of Slovak domestic tourism according to up-to-date statistics of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (ŠÚSR, 2023) and is represented according to sociodemographic and geographical criteria.

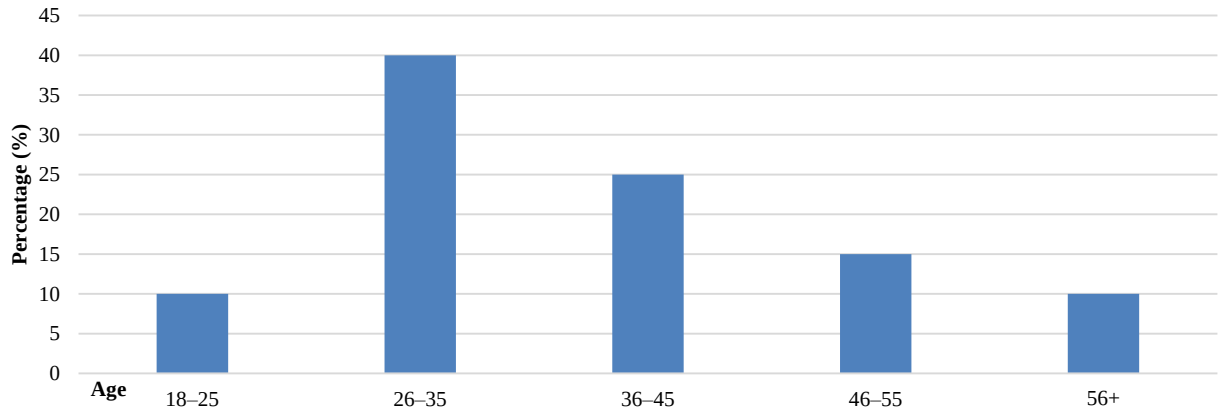

Figure 2. Respondents' age (Source: own processing)

By age, sex, education, and income, the most common age range was 26–35 years (40%) as presented in Figure 2, and sex distribution 53% female and 45% male as presented in Figure 3. Most participants had secondary (50%) or higher education (40%). The sample corresponds to the type of domestic tourism in Slovakia according to recent statistics from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (ŠÚSR, 2023).

Figure 3. Respondents' gender (Source: own processing)

By age, gender, education level, and income, with the most typical age group being 26–35 years (40%), and gender split of 53% female and 45% male. Most of the respondents were of secondary (50%) or higher education (40%) as shown in Figure 4.

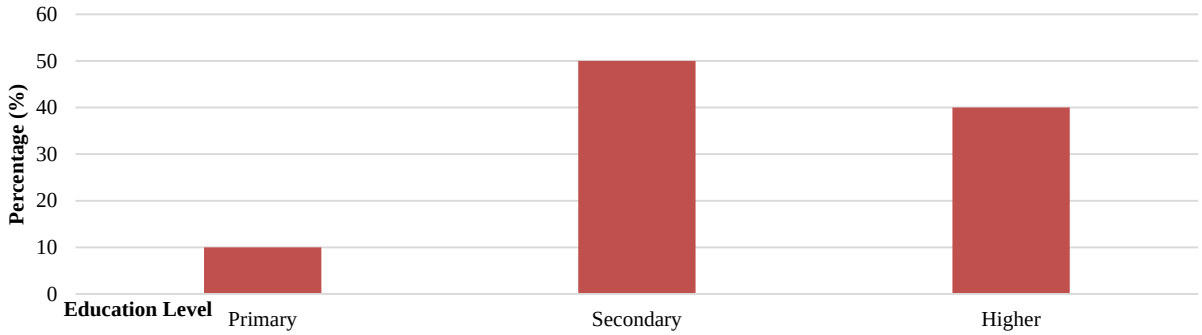

Figure 4. Respondents' education level (Source: own processing)

Statistical Analysis

The following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Quality management positively affects visitor satisfaction and revisit intentions (tested using linear regression).

H2: Environmentally conscious visitors report higher satisfaction (tested using independent samples t-test).

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and inferential analysis were employed. Significance was assessed at the 0.05 level. Normality in the dataset was tested using the Shapiro–Wilk test and homogeneity of variance using Levene's test. Exploratory data analysis was conducted to identify outliers and inconsistencies.In addition to hypothesis testing, cross-tabulations and correlation analysis were used to examine relationships between demographic variables and perceptions of service quality and sustainability. The results were also used to construct composite indicators for overall satisfaction and perceived value.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Satisfaction with Tourism Services: Respondents expressed generally high satisfaction with tourism services in Slovakia. Most participants rated their experiences positively, especially in dimensions such as cleanliness, professionalism, and reliability. Figure 5: Satisfaction with Tourism Services shows the distribution of ratings, where the majority of responses fall into the "Satisfied" or "Very satisfied" categories, confirming the high standard of service quality perceived by visitors. Motivation to Revisit Based on Perceived Quality: Further analysis examined the link between service satisfaction and willingness to return. More than 80% of respondents indicated that satisfaction with quality directly influenced their motivation to revisit destinations.

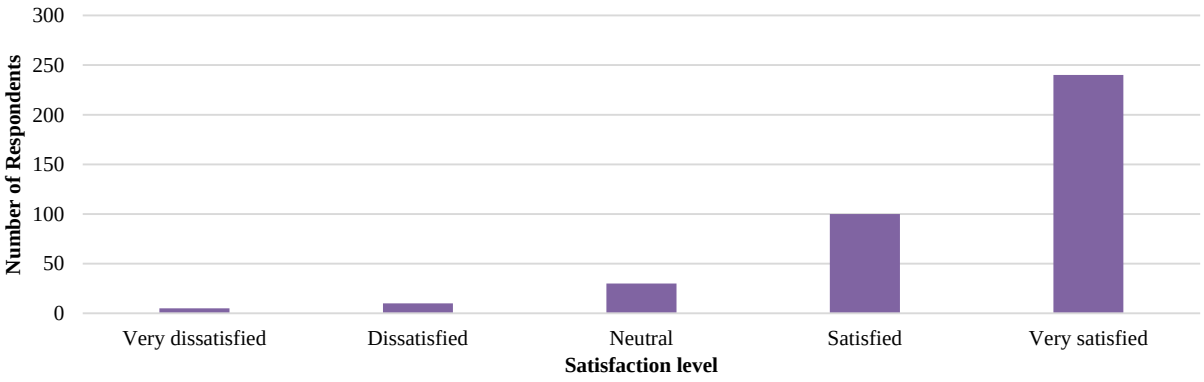

Figure 5. Satisfaction with Tourism Services (Source: own processing)

Figure 6: Motivation to Revisit Based on Service Quality illustrates that those who rated the services as high quality also expressed a greater intention to return. A regression analysis confirmed a statistically significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.08$), $p < 0.05$ between perceived service quality and return motivation, thus supporting Hypothesis H1.

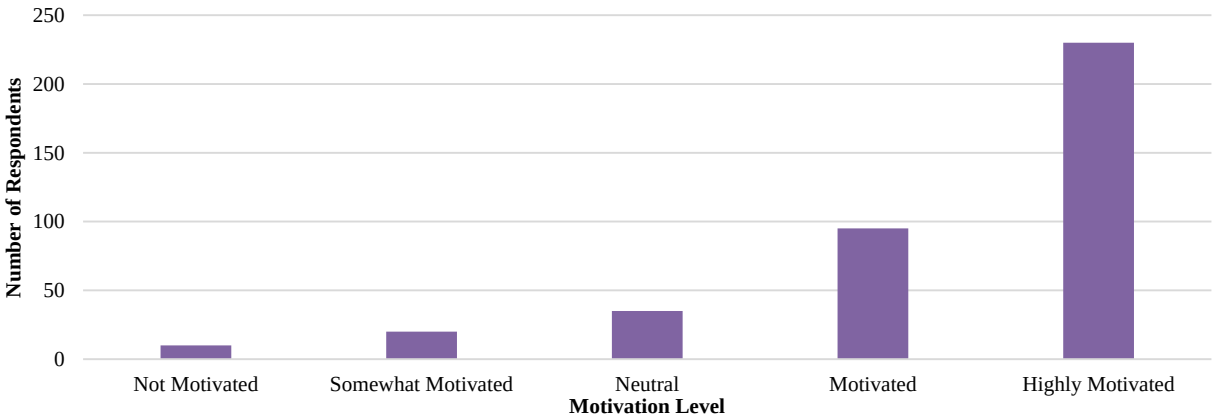

Figure 6. Motivation to Revisit Based on Service Quality (Source: own processing)

Sustainability Preferences and Impact on Satisfaction: Tourists' perceptions of sustainability measures were also explored. Many respondents showed a willingness to pay more for environmentally responsible services, particularly in areas with visible sustainability practices.

Figure 7: Willingness to Pay for Sustainable Services (recommended) would illustrate the proportion of tourists supporting eco-initiatives. An independent samples t-test showed that sustainability-oriented tourists reported significantly higher satisfaction ($M = 4.2$) than those who were less concerned ($M = 3.8$), $p < 0.05$, confirming Hypothesis H2.

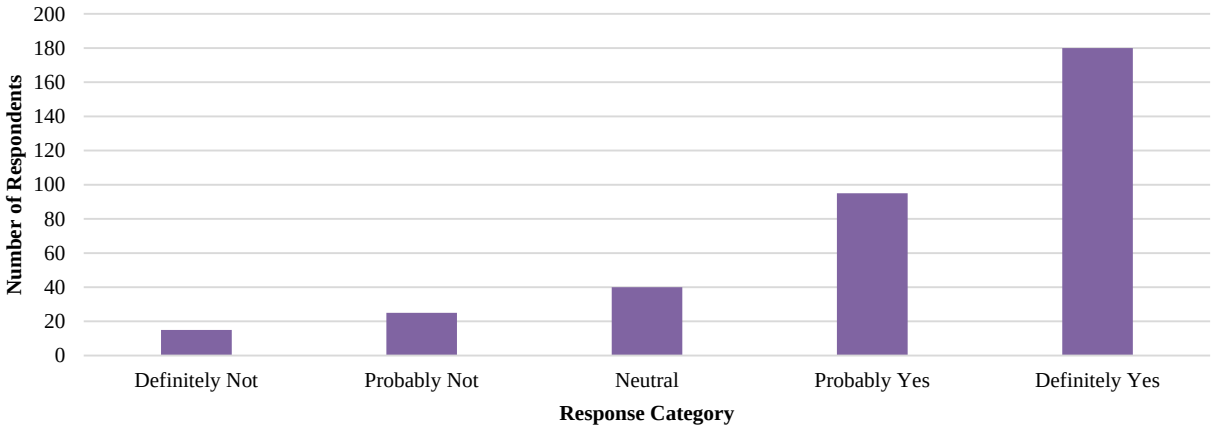

Figure 7. Willingness to Pay for Sustainable Services (Source: own processing)

In addition to t-tests and regression, descriptive statistics revealed that 68.4% of surveyed tourists reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their overall tourism experience in Slovakia. The highest satisfaction scores were associated with cleanliness of accommodation (mean = 4.31, SD = 0.65) and professional behaviour of staff (mean = 4.18, SD = 0.72). In contrast, the lowest-rated domain was availability of sustainable public transport, with a mean score of 3.02 (SD = 0.98).

A correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between perceived sustainability and revisit intention ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$). Cluster analysis further identified three distinct tourist segments: (1) eco-aware returners (38%), (2) pragmatic users (44%), and (3) occasional consumers (18%). Eco-aware tourists not only rated services more favourably, but were also more likely to share positive experiences and recommend destinations to others.

These findings confirm Hypothesis H2: Environmentally conscious tourists report significantly higher satisfaction. The statistical evidence supports the relevance of sustainability as a key dimension in overall service quality and validates its inclusion in the GQEI model. This aligns with research by Zhang & Lu (2022), who demonstrated that tourists' environmental concern positively influences satisfaction, particularly in accommodations with visible eco-certifications. Similarly, Chung et al. (2022) show that green-oriented tourists form a distinct segment whose service expectations are higher, yet they report greater satisfaction when sustainability is communicated effectively.

The results highlight the dual importance of traditional service quality and emerging sustainability concerns in shaping tourist satisfaction and loyalty. The statistically significant confirmation of both hypotheses underscores that:

- High-quality service remains a foundational expectation, especially in cleanliness, reliability, and professionalism.
- Environmental sustainability is not only appreciated but has become a meaningful factor in shaping satisfaction, particularly among more environmentally conscious visitors.

These findings are consistent with recent scholarship by Font & McCabe (2022), who emphasize that sustainability must not only be implemented, but also clearly marketed as part of the tourism service proposition. Becken & Font (2023) add that long-term credibility of sustainable tourism strategies depends on robust impact measurement and transparent communication. Moreover, Ivanov & Webster (2023) suggest that smart tourism strategies integrating digital tools and green innovations offer new pathways for enhancing both perceived quality and operational efficiency.

This duality aligns with previous research by Butnaru et al. (2018) and the TOURQUAL model, which emphasize comprehensive and multidimensional approaches to service quality evaluation. Our findings extend this perspective by confirming the practical applicability of the GQEI model in the Slovak tourism context.

While the results are encouraging, limitations include the potential self-selection bias of environmentally aware respondents and the predominantly Slovak sample. Future research should aim to validate the GQEI in broader international contexts and across different types of tourism services.

Summary of Key Findings: High service quality, especially in terms of cleanliness and professionalism, leads to higher satisfaction and revisit motivation. Sustainability significantly enhances the perceived value for environmentally aware visitors. Combining high service standards with sustainability communication offers a competitive advantage. These findings confirm its importance and acceptance among key stakeholders in the field of tourism.

This study also supports broader calls for a shift from growth-centric to value-based tourism strategies, as proposed by Gössling & Hall (2023). Creating mutual value between providers and tourists through sustainable practices, as highlighted by Mihalic & Gomezelj (2022), may not only increase satisfaction but also promote long-term loyalty and resilience.

Limitations of the study

Despite the encouraging findings, several limitations should be noted. First, the study was geographically restricted to Slovakia, which may reduce the generalizability of the results to countries with different cultural or institutional contexts in tourism (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Second, the voluntary nature of survey participation carries a risk of self-selection bias, especially among respondents with a stronger interest in service quality or sustainability (Dolnicar, 2003). Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to observe causal relationships or temporal changes in visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Bowen & Chen, 2001). Another limitation stems from the reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Lastly, although the constructs used were supported by existing literature, some dimensions—such as sustainability perception—may vary significantly across market segments and require deeper qualitative exploration in future research (Font et al., 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to evaluate Slovakian tourism service quality from the perspective of tourists, service providers, and experts. The findings confirmed that service quality plays a significant effect on tourist satisfaction and intention to return, and that environmentally conscious tourists were likely to show higher satisfaction.

The findings emphasize the growing importance of combining classical service quality features—in particular cleanliness, professionalism, and reliability—with sustainability-focused practices in tourism service delivery. The study contributes to the literature by observing the relevance of multidimensional quality measurement in tourism.

The study also supports the inclusion of sustainability, digitalization, and cultural authenticity as new service quality dimensions that capture the evolving expectations of modern tourists. Additionally, the perceptions of multiple stakeholder groups show overall acceptance of quality measurement tools that are holistic and practical.

While the study was conducted in the specific setting of Slovakia, the methodology and results have significant implications for tourism destinations wanting to improve service quality and competitiveness. The requirement for future research is the examination of these relationships in different cultural settings and longitudinally to observe changes in perceptions over time. Well-designed and integrated quality measurement frameworks represent a strategic opportunity for improving not only service delivery, but also sustainable tourism development and competitiveness of destinations.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the results of this research in the Slovak context are largely consistent with findings in the international literature—particularly regarding the growing importance of sustainable practices and service quality for tourist satisfaction and loyalty. However, compared to countries such as Austria, Germany, and Slovenia, the implementation rates of environmental initiatives are lower, highlighting the need to simplify financial incentives and strengthen policy support for sustainable tourism development in Slovakia.

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