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Article

SERVICE QUALITY AND PASSENGER SATISFACTION IN PUBLIC BUS TRANSPORTATION: EVIDENCE FROM KALUTARA DISTRICT, SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the service quality and passenger satisfaction in public bus transportation in Kalutara district. A sample of 150 passengers was selected for this study using convenient sampling technique and data were collected through structured questionnaire. Service quality was measured using key dimensions, including consistency, responsiveness, cleanliness, confidence, compassion and accessibility. Correlation and multiple regression analysis were employed to investigate the relationship between the variables. The findings revealed that service quality has a significant impact on passenger satisfaction. In particular, cleanliness and consistency have a statistically significant positive impact on service quality, whereas responsiveness, confidence, compassion and accessibility were found to be statistically insignificant impact on service quality. The study contributes to the literature by clearly distinguishing between service quality and passenger satisfaction and empirically confirming that service quality act as a key antecedent of satisfaction. The findings provide important policy implications for improving public transport services in developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

Motorized transportation, including motorcycles, three-wheelers, cars, vans, buses play a vital role in modern societies by facilitating the movement of the people and goods. Among these modes, public bus transportation is particularly important for daily commuting, providing mobility to millions of low and middle-income individuals in Sri Lanka (Ranawana & Hewage, 2015).

Globally, public bus transportation system is a core component of national transport infrastructure by offering affordable, efficient and accessible mobility for all diverse population groups. Efficient bus services contribute to reduce traffic congestion, environmental pollution and transportation cost while promoting sustainable urban development Atombo and Wemegah, (2021). In developed countries such as Singapore, Germany and South Korea, a well-managed public bus transport services provide reliable and integrated transport services, making them preferred mode of travel (Murambi and Bwisa, 2014; Islam et al., 2018). Furthermore, technological advancements such as electronic ticketing, contactless payment and systems and mobile based travel information platforms have enhanced operational efficiency and passenger convenience (Champahom et al., 2020). These improvements significantly contribute to time saving, reduced operational cost and improved service quality.

In Sri Lanka, public bus transportation remains the most widely used mode of transport, particularly among rural and low-income communities. The extensive bus network connects urban centers with remote areas, facilitating access to employment, education, healthcare and other essential services (Gunarathne and Santoso, 2014). As a result, an efficient public bus system is crucial for promoting economic development and social inclusion. Despite ongoing government efforts to improve the service reliability, passenger comfort, operational efficiency challenges such as overcrowding, delays and inconsistence service quality persist.

Public bus transport plays an important role in urban areas and is less expensive than private- owned transport. It helps to attract customers and provide high satisfaction (Amponash and Adams, 2016).

From a theoretical perspective, service quality refers to the extent to which a service meets or exceeds the needs of a customer expectation (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In the context of public transportation, service quality is a multi-dimensional construction encompassing attribute such as punctuality, frequency, reliability, cleanliness, safety, comfort accessibility and staff behaviour (Champahom et al., 2020; Yadav et al., 2024; Manandhar, (2023). Importantly, service quality is widely recognized as a key determinant of passenger satisfaction, which reflects passengers' overall evaluation of their travel experience.

Despite the significance of public bus transportation in Sri Lanka, empirical evidence on service quality remains limited, particularly at the district level. Existing studies have largely focused on border or urban contexts, with insufficient attention to localized passenger perceptions. In particular, there is a lack of empirical research examining the determinants of service quality and their impact on passenger satisfaction in the Kalutara District. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the key dimensions of service quality and their impact on passenger satisfaction in public bus transportation in the Kalutara District.

This study is based on following objectives:

1.To evaluate the level of service quality in public bus transportation.
2.To investigate the impact of service quality on passenger satisfaction of the bus transportation.
3.To identify the key service quality dimensions influencing on passenger satisfaction of the bus transportation in Kalutara District.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the existing literature on service quality and passenger satisfaction in public bus transportation, with a particular focus on identifying key determinants, theoretical relationships and existing research gaps.

Service quality and Passenger satisfaction

Service quality in public bus transportation is widely recognized as a multiple dimensional construct, typically encompassing attributes influencing passengers' perceptions of service performance. According to Parasuraman et al., (1988) service quality consists of multiple dimensions that shape customers' cognitive evaluations of a service. In the context of public bus transportation, these dimensions commonly include reliability, responsiveness, cleanliness, safely, comfort, accessibility, and information availability (Yadav et al., 2024). These attributes represent passengers' assessments of specific operational and interpersonal aspects of transport services and serve as essential indicators of overall service performance.

In contrast, passenger satisfaction refers to the overall affective response of passengers to their travel experience. While service quality focuses on the evaluation of individual service attributes, passenger satisfaction reflects a broader judgement based on the cumulative travel experience. The existing literature consistently supports the view that service quality is a key antecedent of passenger satisfaction, implying a causal relationship where improvements in service quality led to higher satisfaction level Champahom et al., (2020); Manandhar, (2023).

The relationship between service quality and passenger satisfaction is strongly supported by the expectation-disconfirmation theory, which proposes that satisfaction is determined by the extent to which perceived service performance meets or exceeds passengers' prior expectations.

A substantial body of empirical research has consistently confirmed the positive relationship between service quality and passenger satisfaction across different geographical contexts. For example, Morton et al. (2016), in their study conducted in Scotland, found that enhanced service quality dimensions significantly improved passenger satisfaction in public transportation.

Despite this broad consensus, some studies have failed to clearly distinguish between service quality and passenger satisfaction, often treating them interchangeably. This conceptual overlap creates ambiguity in empirical investigations and may weaken the theoretical precision of research findings. Therefore, maintaining a clear distinction between these constructs is essential for ensuring theoretical alignment and analytical clarity. Service quality should be understood as the cognitive evaluation of specific service dimensions, whereas passenger satisfaction should be viewed as the broader emotional outcome of the service experience.

Determinants of Service quality in Public Bus Transportation

Existing body of literature identifies operational and physical attributes as critical determinants of service quality. Studies conducted in Sri Lanka Ranawana and Hewage (2015) and Malaysia Norhisham et al. (2018) consistently emphasizes reliability, travel time, services frequency and on time performance as core determinants. Similarly, Bakar et al., (2021); Danthanarayana and Welarathna (2021). highlight the importance of the service frequency and on-time performance, while Tumsekcali, and Taskin, (2025) demonstrate that affordability and service availability significantly influence passenger's reliance on bus transport. Considering various contexts, there is a strong agreement that basic service delivery

attributes (punctuality, frequency, reliability) from the foundation of perceived service quality.

Role of Comfort, Safety and Physical Conditions

Beyond operational factors, several studies emphasize the importance of comfort, safety and cleanliness. Susilawathi and Nilakusumathi (2017) portrayed comfort and safety as most influential determinants of passenger satisfaction. Similarly, Manikandan and Vanniyarajan (2016) identified that cleanliness, comfort, and vehicle condition significantly enhance service quality perception of public bus transportation in Tamil Nadu, India. Yadav et al. (2024) further confirms that information, availability, safety and comfort play a significant role in shaping both service quality and passenger satisfaction. Passenger place strong emphasis on tangible service elements, particularly those directly affecting their physical travel experience.

Interpersonal and Behavioral dimensions

Amponsah and Adams (2016); Govender (2014) focuses on interpersonal aspects, such as responsiveness, empathy and staff behavior using SERVQUAL based framework and suggested that assurance, responsiveness and empathy significantly influence passenger satisfaction.
Despite extensive research on public bus transportation, the present study identifies several important gaps in the existing literature. Existing studies treat service quality and passenger satisfaction interchangeably, leading to conceptual ambiguity. Moreover, inconsistent findings regarding the relative importance of service quality dimensions are also found another gap of this study. While operational factors (reliability, punctuality, and service frequency) are consistently identified as key determinants, the role of interpersonal dimensions (responsiveness, empathy, and assurance) remains inconclusive and appears to vary across contexts. Furthermore, there is a limited localized and context-specific evidence. Most of the empirical studies have been conducted at national or urban levels, with limited attention to localized transport settings. In the context of Sri Lanka, existing research primarily focuses on general transport issues, with insufficient emphasis on passenger-level perceptions in specific districts such as the Kalutara District.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The present study employed a quantitative research design to examine the impact of service quality on passenger satisfaction in public bus transportation. This approach was selected because it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data to identify relationships between service quality dimensions and passenger satisfaction. The study was conducted in the Kalutara district, where public transportation serves as a primary mode of mobility for a large proportion of the population. The district provides an appropriate context for this research due to its combination of urban and semi-urban transportation demand, making it relevant foe assessing the quality in public bus services.
The study clearly distinguished between service quality and passenger satisfaction as separate constructs. Service quality is measured using six dimensions such as consistency, responsiveness, cleanliness, confidence, compassion and accessibility. These dimensions captured both operational aspects of service delivery such as consistency and cleanliness, and interpersonal aspects such as compassion and responsiveness. Passenger satisfaction was defined the overall evaluation of the travel

experience based on passenger's perceptions of service performance and their actual experiences.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through structured questionnaire administered to 150 respondents who frequently use public bus transportation in the Kalutara District. Respondents were selected using convenience sampling method due to the absence of comprehensive sampling frame work for public bus users and dynamic nature of the passenger population. This method enabled efficient data collection within existing time and resource constrains while ensuring access to relevant perceptions from frequent bus users.

Data collection was conducted through both online and physical methods. The online questionnaire was prepared using Google Forms and distributed through social media platforms such as Face book, WhatsApp, and Instagram, while printed hard copies were also distributed in physically to increase response coverage.

The survey questionnaire was prepared to the respondents using social media such as Face book, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. Section One collected demographic information from respondents while, Section Two measured service quality dimensions and passenger satisfaction. All items were measured using a five – point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), enabling respondents to express their level of agreement with each statement systematically.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 showcases the conceptual frame work of the study, based on the premise that service quality is multidimensional construct that influence on passenger satisfaction. Service quality is measured through key dimensions of consistency, responsiveness, cleanliness, confidence, compassion and accessibility. These dimensions are treated as independent variables, while passenger satisfaction is considered as the dependent variable. The framework assumes that improvement is service quality dimensions lead to higher level of passenger satisfaction.

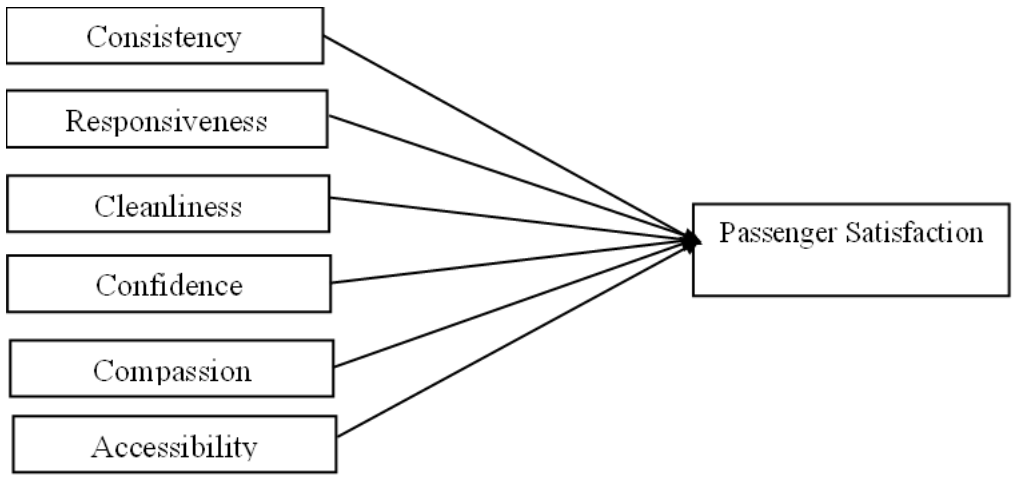

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (version 22). Descriptive analysis was performed to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents and to examine the general perception levels of service quality dimensions. In addition, reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of measurement scales. A threshold value of 0.70 was considered acceptable for reliability. Pearson correlation analysis conducted to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between services quality dimensions and passenger. Furthermore, multiple regression analysis was employed to estimate the impact of service quality dimensions on passenger satisfaction. SPSS software was selected because it provides appropriate statistical tools for conducting both correlation and multiple regression analysis. Correlation analysis was used to identify the association between passenger satisfaction and individual service quality variables while, multiple regression analysis assessed the extent to which service quality dimensions influenced passenger satisfaction. The multiple regression analysis can be summed up as follows:

Model Specification

The following regression model is used in this study.

$$PS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Consistency} + \beta_2 \text{Responsiveness} + \beta_3 \text{Cleanliness} + \beta_4 \text{Confidence} + \beta_5 \text{Compassion} + \beta_6 \text{Accessibility} + \varepsilon$$

where,

PS = Passenger Satisfaction

β_0= Intercept

$\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4, \beta_5, \beta_6$ = coefficients of service quality dimensions

ε = Error term

Decision Criteria

Mean values were used to determine the average response for each independent variable. The following decision criteria were applied to interpret the mean scores.

Table 1 Decision Criteria

Criteria	Decision
$1 \leq \bar{x} < 2.5$	Low level
$2.5 \leq \bar{x} < 3.5$	Moderate level
$3.5 \leq \bar{x} \leq 5$	High level

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reliability Test

A reliability test is used to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales using Cronbach's Alpha. As results are shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.844 to 0.871, indicating a high-level e of internal consistency.

All constructs exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, confirming that the measurement items are reliable and consistently capture the underlying constructs.

Table 2 Cronbach's Alpha

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Passenger Satisfaction	.877
Consistency	.871
Responsiveness	.871
Cleanliness	.844
Confidence	.849
Compassion	.852
Accessibility	.844

Source: Data from Field Survey, 2025

The highest reliability values were observed for consistency and responsiveness (0.871), while other variables such as Cleanliness (0.844), confidence (0.849), compassion (0.852) and accessibility (0.844) also indicate strong reliability.

The conceptual distinction among constructs such as Consistency, Responsiveness, and Compassion ensures that each dimension reflects a unique aspect of service quality. Therefore, the measurement scales can be considered both reliable and valid for the purpose of this study.

The demographic profile of the respondents

The sample consists of 150 respondents from the Kalutara District.

Table 3 Demographic profile

Variables	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Gender		
Male	56	37
Female	94	63
Age		
Under 18	7	4
18-25	95	63
26-35	20	13
36-45	14	10
Above 45	14	10
Occupation		

Student	70	47
Government employee	6	4
Private sector employee	44	29
Business owner	4	3
Retire	3	2
Other	23	15
Usage of public bus		
Yes	149	99
No	1	1
Usage of the public bus		
Daily	78	52
Weekly	31	21
Monthly	8	5
Occasionally	33	22
Purpose of Travel		
Work	47	31
School/Education	55	37
Shopping	5	3
Personal errands	43	29
How usually travel per km for trip		
1-5 km	19	13
5-10 km	31	20
10-20 km	45	30
Above 20 km	55	37

Source: Data from Field Survey, 2025

The majority of the respondents (63%) fall with in the 18-25 age group, indicating that younger individuals are the primary users of the Bus transportation in Kalutara District.

In terms of gender, female respondents account for 63%, while male represent 37%. Regarding occupation, students constitute the largest group (47%), while followed by private sector employees (29).

Further, a significant proportion of respondents (99%) reported using public transportation, with 52% indicating daily usage. The primary purpose for travel was school Education, followed by work (31%). Additionally, most respondents travel distances above 20 km (37%), highlighting the importance of public bus for long distance commuting. Regarding the usual travel distance per trip, the analysis of 150 valid responses indicates that the largest proportion of respondents (36.7%) travel above 20 km. This is followed by those who travel between 10-20 km, representing 30.0% of the respondents. A smaller percentage (20.7%) travel between 5-10 km, and the least frequent travel distance (12.7%) is between 1-5 km. The total number of valid responses for this question was 150.

Research Information

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the service quality. The results indicate that passengers perceive service quality at a moderate level overall.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics

Independent Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Consistency	3.8033	.72096
Responsiveness	3.5817	.63754
Cleanliness	3.3850	.90609
Confidence	3.5500	.68112
Compassion	3.6117	.67028
Accessibility	3.6583	.70438

Source: Data from Field Survey, 2025

To investigate the service quality of public bus transportation in Kalutara District service quality dimensions are incorporated in this study. According to the Table 4, mean value of consistency is 3.80 indicates highest perception suggesting that passengers relatively agree that bus services operative consistently. Accessibility (Mean = 3.66 and Compassion (Mean = 3.61), also reflects highly positive perceptions.

The descriptive statistics for responsiveness (Mean = 3.58) and confidence (Mean 3.55) indicate moderate satisfaction levels. In contrast, cleanliness (Mean = 3.3850) records the lowest mean, suggesting that passengers are comparatively less stratified with cleanliness.

Overall, the descriptive statistics revealed that service quality is acceptable, significant improvements are needed, particularly in cleanliness.

Correlation Analysis

To identify the relationship between independent variables and dependent variable, correlation analysis was performed. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Findings of the Pearson Correlation

Independent Variables (Service Quality)	Dependent Variable (Passenger satisfaction)
Consistency	.533** (.000)
Responsiveness	.400** (.000)
Cleanliness	.671** (.000)
Confidence	.578** (.000)
Compassion	.560** (.000)
Accessibility	.538** (.000)

Source: Data from Field Survey, 2025

The Pearson correlation analysis was applied to examine the relationship between service quality dimensions and passenger satisfaction. The results, based on a sample size of 150 (N=150), reveal that all service quality dimensions are positively and statistically significantly associated with passenger satisfaction.

Among the variables cleanliness exhibits the strongest positive correlation with passenger satisfaction ($r = 0.671$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that improvements I cleanliness are strongly linked to higher levels of satisfaction. This is Followed by confidence ($r = 0.578$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that trust in service providers contributes significantly to passenger satisfaction.

Similarly, compassion ($r = 0.560$, $p < 0.001$), accessibility ($r = 0.538$, $p < 0.001$), and consistency ($r = 0.533$, $p < 0.001$) also demonstrate moderately strong positive correlations with passenger satisfaction. These findings indicate that improvements in these service dimensions are associated with increased satisfaction levels.

The weakest, yet still statistically significant, positive correlation is observed for responsiveness ($r = 0.400$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that while responsiveness contributes to satisfaction, its influence is comparatively lower than other dimensions.

Overall, the results confirm that all service quality dimensions are important determinants of passenger satisfaction, although their relative strength varies. These findings provide preliminary evidence supporting the hypothesis that improvements in service quality lead to higher passenger satisfaction.

Regression Analysis

Multiple Regression analysis is performed to examine the impact of service quality dimensions on passenger satisfaction using consistency, responsiveness, cleanliness, confidence, compassion and accessibility as the independent variable The following Tables 6, 7 and 8 explains the findings of the regression.

Table 6 Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Sig.	Durbin-Watson
.724[a]	.524	.504	.000	1.987

Table 7 ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	F	Sig.
Regression	35.981	26.207	.000[b]
Residual	32.722		
Total	68.704		

The ANOVA table confirms that the overall regression model is statistically significant ($F = 26.207$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the independent variables jointly influence passenger satisfaction.

Table 8 Findings of Regression Analysis

Variables	Beta	Std. Error	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
					Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)		.285	3.260	.001		
Consistency	.222	.068	3.082	.002	.641	1.561
Responsiveness	-.003	.077	-.044	.965	.642	1.557
Cleanliness	.393	.071	4.121	.000	.366	2.730
Confidence	.113	.086	1.301	.195	.443	2.255
Compassion	.138	.085	1.634	.104	.469	2.133
Accessibility	.001	.087	.012	.991	.411	2.435

Source: Data from Field Survey, 2025

The findings of this study provide important insights into the key determinants of service quality in public bus transportation in the Kalutara district. According to the Table 8, among the variables examined, cleanliness ($\beta = 0.393$, $p < 0.001$) and consistency ($\beta = 0.222$, $p = 0.002$) have strongest positive and statistically significant impact on service quality at the 1% significant level, indicates that a one unit increase in cleanliness and consistency leads to a 0.293 and 0.222 unit improvement in perceived service quality respectively, holding other factors constant. This further, suggests that maintaining reliable bus schedules, regular service frequency, and well-structured routes significantly enhances passengers' perceptions of service quality. These findings highlight the critical role of operational reliability such as punctual departures and predictable service—in shaping user satisfaction, and are consistent with the findings of Bakar et al. (2021); Manikandan and Vanniyarajan (2016); Kewate and Gandhewar, (2025).

In contrast, responsiveness exhibits a negative and statistically insignificant relationship with service quality ($\beta = –0.003$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that factors such as staff behavior, willingness to assist passengers, and responsiveness to complaints do not significantly influence overall service quality in the study area. This may reflect differing passenger expectations or a context in which operational factors outweigh interpersonal service elements. However, this finding contrasts with Susilawathi and Nilakusumathi (2017), who highlight the importance of responsiveness in shaping customer satisfaction, suggesting that its impact may vary across regions and service contexts.

Furthermore, confidence ($\beta = 0.113$, $p = 0.195$), compassion ($\beta = 0.138$, $p = 0.104$), and accessibility ($\beta = 0.001$, $p = 0.991$) are found to have positive but statistically insignificant effects on service quality. These results indicate that although these factors may contribute marginally to passengers' perceptions, they are not key determinants in this context. The insignificance of confidence may reflect passengers' relatively low trust in drivers' skills and safety standards, while the limited impact of compassion suggests that emotional and interpersonal aspects are less influential compared to operational efficiency. Similarly, the negligible effect of accessibility implies that existing service coverage may already meet basic passenger expectations. These findings are consistent with the work of Eboli and Mazzulla (2007), who also observed variations in the importance of service quality dimensions across different transport

settings. Additionally, the model does not suffer from multicollinearity issues, as indicated by acceptable VIF values.

The overall results suggest that operational and tangible service attributes particularly consistency and cleanliness play a more decisive role in determining service quality than interpersonal factors in the Kalutara district and policy makers and transport authorities should prioritize improving schedule reliability, service frequency, and physical conditions of buses to enhance overall service quality.

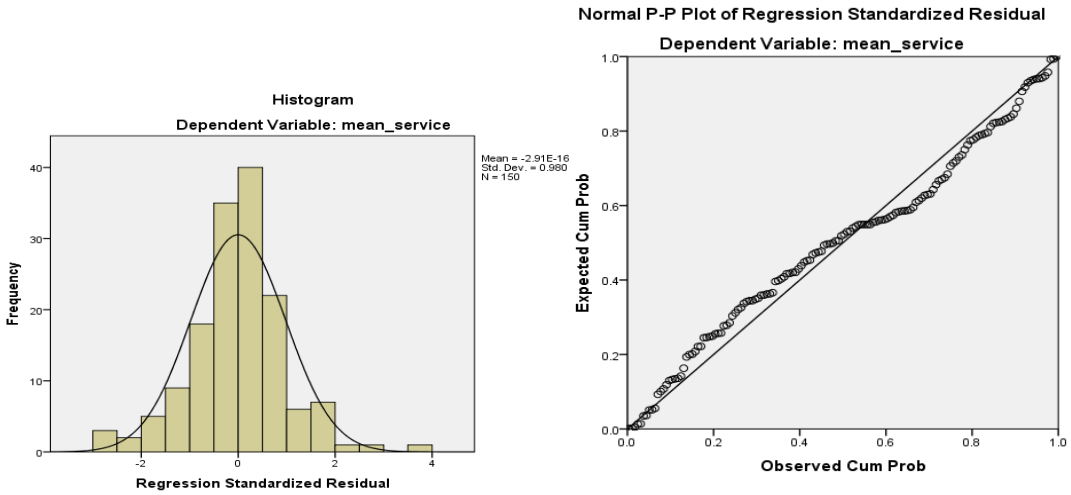

Figure 2 Residuals Normality

The figure 2 explain the histogram f standardized residuals and normal P-P plot indicate that the residuals are approximately normally distributed.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examined the impact of service quality on passenger satisfaction in public bus transportation in Kalutara district. Using primary data, the study employed descriptive statistics, correlation and multiple regression analysis.

The findings reveal that service quality dimensions are positively associated with passenger satisfaction. However, regression results indicate that only cleanliness and consistency have a statistically significant impact on service quality.

The model explains 52.4% of the variation in passenger satisfaction, indicating a satisfactory level of explanatory power. The results highlights that passenger prioritize reliability and physical service conditions over interpersonal service attributes.

The findings suggest that improving cleanliness, punctually and serve consistency is essential to enhance passenger satisfaction and encourage greater use of public transportation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide several important practical and policy implications for improving public bus service quality in the Kalutara district. These implications are directly derived from the empirical results, which identify consistency and cleanliness as the only statistically significant determinants of service quality.

First, given the strong and significant effect of consistency ($\beta = 0.209$, $p < 0.01$), transport authorities should prioritize improving operational reliability. This includes ensuring adherence to bus schedules, maintaining regular service frequency, and optimizing route planning. Enhancing punctuality and reducing service delays would directly improve passengers' perceptions of service quality. Investments in scheduling efficiency and better coordination of bus operations would therefore yield substantial improvements in overall service performance.

Second, the significant positive influence of cleanliness ($\beta = 0.393$, $p < 0.001$) highlights the importance of maintaining the physical condition of buses. Policies should focus on ensuring regular cleaning, proper maintenance of seating arrangements, and overall hygiene within buses. Since cleanliness has the largest coefficient among the variables, improving this dimension is likely to generate the greatest marginal gains in perceived service quality.

In contrast, variables such as responsiveness**,** confidence**,** compassion and accessibility were found to be statistically insignificant. This suggests that, within the context of the Kalutara district, these factors are not primary drivers of service quality perceptions. Therefore, while improvements in staff behavior, training, or accessibility may still be desirable from a broader service perspective, they should not be prioritized over operational reliability and cleanliness, which have been empirically shown to have a stronger impact.

Further, the results indicate that policy efforts should be strategically focused on improving operational efficiency and tangible service attributes**,** rather than allocating disproportionate resources to areas that do not significantly influence passenger perceptions in this specific context.

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