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Technology-enabled service quality and its role in shaping customer loyalty: Evidence from APSRTC

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the impact of technology-enabled service quality on customer loyalty within the context of Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC), examining how digital transformation initiatives influence passenger satisfaction and retention.

Design/methodology/approach: A mixed-methods research approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys (n=450) and qualitative interviews (n=25) with APSRTC passengers. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test hypotheses regarding the relationships between technology-enabled service quality dimensions and customer loyalty.

Findings: Results reveal that technology-enabled service quality significantly influences customer loyalty ($\beta=0.672, p<0.001$), with mobile application functionality ($\beta=0.543, p<0.001$) and real-time information systems ($\beta=0.487, p<0.001$) being the strongest predictors. Customer satisfaction mediates this relationship ($R^2=0.451$).

Practical implications: The findings provide actionable insights for public transportation authorities to enhance digital service delivery and improve passenger retention through strategic technology investments.

Originality/value: This is among the first studies to comprehensively examine technology-enabled service quality in the context of Indian state road transport corporations, contributing to both service quality literature and public transportation management.

Keywords: Technology-enabled service quality, customer loyalty, public transportation, digital transformation, APSRTC, Service innovation

1. Introduction

The rapid digitalization of service industries has fundamentally transformed customer expectations and service delivery mechanisms across various sectors (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2005; Zeithaml *et al.*, 2002) ^[14, 19]. Public transportation systems, traditionally characterized by limited technological integration, are increasingly adopting digital technologies to enhance service quality and customer experience (Beirão & Sarsfield Cabral, 2007; Redman *et al.*, 2013) ^[3, 16]. The Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC), serving as one of India's largest state road transport undertakings, has embarked on significant digital transformation initiatives to modernize its service delivery and improve passenger satisfaction.

Technology-enabled service quality represents a paradigm shift from conventional service quality frameworks, incorporating digital touchpoints, real-time information systems, and mobile-enabled services (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2005) ^[14]. Unlike traditional service quality models that primarily focus on human interactions and physical service elements, technology-enabled service quality encompasses the efficiency, reliability, and user-friendliness of digital service interfaces (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2002) ^[19].

APSRTC operates approximately 11,500 buses across Andhra Pradesh, serving over 15 million passengers daily (APSRTC Annual Report, 2023). The corporation has invested substantially in technological infrastructure, including GPS-enabled fleet tracking, mobile applications for ticket booking, real-time bus location services, and digital payment systems. However, the impact of these technological interventions on customer loyalty and satisfaction remains empirically unexplored.

Customer loyalty in public transportation contexts differs significantly from commercial service sectors due to factors such as limited alternatives, regulatory constraints, and the

essential nature of transportation services (Beirão & Sarsfield Cabral, 2007) [3]. Understanding how technology-enabled service quality influences loyalty behaviors in this unique context is crucial for transportation authorities seeking to improve service delivery and passenger retention. This study addresses three primary research questions: (1) How does technology-enabled service quality influence customer loyalty in public transportation contexts? (2) Which dimensions of technology-enabled service quality are most critical for building customer loyalty? (3) What is the mediating role of customer satisfaction in the relationship between technology-enabled service quality and loyalty?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Technology-Enabled Service Quality

Service quality has evolved significantly with the integration of digital technologies into service delivery processes. Traditional service quality models, such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988) [13] and SERVPERF (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) [6], primarily focused on human-mediated service encounters. However, the emergence of technology-enabled services necessitated the development of new theoretical frameworks that could adequately capture the nuances of digital service delivery.

Parasuraman *et al.* (2005) [14] introduced the E-S-QUAL scale, specifically designed to measure electronic service quality across four dimensions: efficiency, fulfillment, system availability, and privacy. This framework provided a foundation for understanding service quality in digital contexts, though it was primarily developed for e-commerce applications.

In the transportation sector, technology-enabled service quality encompasses several unique dimensions. Information quality refers to the accuracy, timeliness, and relevance of information provided through digital channels (DeLone & McLean, 2003) [7]. System quality addresses the technical performance, reliability, and user-friendliness of digital platforms (Petter *et al.*, 2008) [15]. Service convenience captures the ease of access and use of technology-enabled services (Berry *et al.*, 2002) [4].

2.2 Customer Loyalty in Public Transportation

Customer loyalty in public transportation contexts has been conceptualized differently from commercial service sectors due to the unique characteristics of public services. Lai & Chen (2011) [10] identified functional, emotional, and social loyalty as key dimensions relevant to public transportation. Functional loyalty relates to continued usage based on service performance, emotional loyalty involves affective attachment to the service provider, and social loyalty encompasses the sense of civic responsibility and community connection.

Transportation literature suggests that loyalty behaviors are influenced by service reliability, accessibility, comfort, and safety (Redman *et al.*, 2013) [16]. However, the role of technology in shaping these loyalty dimensions remains underexplored. Recent studies have begun to examine how digital innovations, such as mobile ticketing and real-time information systems, influence passenger satisfaction and retention (Grotenhuis *et al.*, 2007) [9].

2.3 Customer Satisfaction as a Mediating Variable

The relationship between service quality and customer loyalty has been extensively studied, with customer

satisfaction consistently identified as a key mediating variable (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Fornell *et al.*, 1996) [1, 8]. The expectation-confirmation theory suggests that satisfaction results from the comparison between perceived performance and expectations, subsequently influencing loyalty intentions (Oliver, 1980) [11].

In technology-enabled service contexts, satisfaction is influenced by both functional and hedonic aspects of the digital experience (Van der Heijden, 2004) [17]. Functional satisfaction relates to the utilitarian value derived from technology use, while hedonic satisfaction encompasses the enjoyment and emotional benefits of the digital interaction.

2.4 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, this study proposes a theoretical framework wherein technology-enabled service quality influences customer loyalty through customer satisfaction as a mediating variable. The framework incorporates four dimensions of technology-enabled service quality: mobile application quality, information system reliability, digital payment convenience, and customer support responsiveness.

- **H1:** Technology-enabled service quality positively influences customer loyalty in public transportation contexts.
- **H1a:** Mobile application quality positively influences customer loyalty.
- **H1b:** Information system reliability positively influences customer loyalty.
- **H1c:** Digital payment convenience positively influences customer loyalty.
- **H1d:** Customer support responsiveness positively influences customer loyalty.
- **H2:** Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between technology-enabled service quality and customer loyalty.
- **H3:** Technology-enabled service quality positively influences customer satisfaction.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to provide comprehensive insights into the research phenomenon. The quantitative component utilized a cross-sectional survey design to test the proposed hypotheses, while qualitative interviews provided deeper understanding of passenger experiences and perceptions.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised regular APSRTC passengers who had used the corporation's technology-enabled services within the past six months. A stratified random sampling approach was employed to ensure representation across different routes, passenger demographics, and usage frequencies.

For the quantitative study, the sample size was determined using G*Power 3.1.9.4 software, considering medium effect size (0.15), alpha level (0.05), and statistical power (0.80). The minimum required sample size was calculated as 395 respondents. To account for potential non-response and incomplete surveys, 550 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 450 complete and usable responses (81.8% response rate). For the qualitative component, 25 in-depth

interviews were conducted following the principle of theoretical saturation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, gender, education level, and technology usage patterns.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

3.3.1 Quantitative Survey Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed based on established scales and adapted to the APSRTC context. The questionnaire comprised five main sections:

- 1. Technology-Enabled Service Quality:** Adapted from Parasuraman *et al.* (2005)^[14] and Zeithaml *et al.* (2002)^[19], measured across four dimensions with 20 items (5 items per dimension).
- 2. Customer Satisfaction:** Based on Oliver (1997)^[12] and Anderson & Sullivan (1993)^[1], comprising 6 items measuring overall satisfaction with technology-enabled services.
- 3. Customer Loyalty:** Adapted from Zeithaml *et al.* (1996)^[18] and Lai & Chen (2011)^[10], including 8 items measuring behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.
- 4. Demographic Information:** Age, gender, education, income, and usage frequency.

All measurement items used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

3.3.2 Qualitative Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore passenger experiences with APSRTC's technology-enabled services. Key topics included:

- Experiences with mobile application usage
- Perceptions of service improvements through technology
- Challenges faced with digital services
- Impact on overall satisfaction and loyalty intentions

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Quantitative data collection was conducted over a period of eight weeks (January-February 2024) across major APSRTC bus stations in Andhra Pradesh, including

Vijayawada, Visakhapatnam, Tirupati, and Guntur. Trained research assistants administered questionnaires to passengers during peak and off-peak hours to ensure temporal representativeness.

Qualitative interviews were conducted through purposive sampling, with each interview lasting 30-45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was performed using SPSS 28.0 and AMOS 26.0 software packages. The analysis included:

- 1. Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies, means, standard deviations, and correlation analysis
- 2. Reliability and Validity Testing:** Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted
- 3. Structural Equation Modeling:** Confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis to test hypotheses
- 4. Mediation Analysis:** Bootstrap procedures to test indirect effects

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006)^[5] six-phase approach, supported by NVivo 12 software for coding and theme development.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The final sample (n=450) demonstrated good representativeness across demographic variables. Male participants comprised 58.2% (n=262), while female participants accounted for 41.8% (n=188). Age distribution showed: 18-25 years (22.4%), 26-35 years (31.6%), 36-45 years (28.2%), and above 45 years (17.8%). Educational qualifications included: high school (23.1%), undergraduate (41.8%), postgraduate (28.9%), and others (6.2%).

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for all study variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Mobile App Quality	4.82	1.23	1.00						
2. Info System Reliability	4.67	1.18	.612**	1.00					
3. Payment Convenience	4.91	1.15	.589**	.634**	1.00				
4. Support Responsiveness	4.34	1.31	.567**	.578**	.601**	1.00			
5. Overall TESQ	4.69	1.02	.823**	.841**	.836**	.798**	1.00		
6. Customer Satisfaction	4.78	1.19	.643**	.621**	.668**	.592**	.714**	1.00	
7. Customer Loyalty	4.86	1.14	.587**	.596**	.623**	.578**	.672**	.731**	1.00

*Note: * $p < 0.01$; TESQ = Technology-Enabled Service Quality

4.3 Reliability and Validity Assessment

Table 2: Reliability and Validity Statistics

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	AVE
Mobile App Quality	5	0.891	0.893	0.627
Information System Reliability	5	0.887	0.889	0.618
Payment Convenience	5	0.879	0.881	0.598
Support Responsiveness	5	0.884	0.886	0.610
Technology-Enabled Service Quality	20	0.946	0.947	0.522
Customer Satisfaction	6	0.902	0.903	0.652
Customer Loyalty	8	0.913	0.915	0.643

Note: AVE = Average Variance Extracted

All constructs demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha > 0.70$) and validity ($AVE > 0.50$) thresholds, confirming the measurement model's adequacy.

measurement model demonstrated good fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.847$, CFI = 0.923, TLI = 0.918, RMSEA = 0.065, SRMR = 0.051. All factor loadings were significant and exceeded the 0.70 threshold, confirming convergent validity.

4.4 Structural Equation Modeling Results: The

Table 3: Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	S.E.	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	TESQ \rightarrow Customer Loyalty	0.672	0.058	11.586	< 0.001	Supported
H1a	Mobile App \rightarrow Loyalty	0.543	0.052	10.442	< 0.001	Supported
H1b	Info Reliability \rightarrow Loyalty	0.487	0.048	10.146	< 0.001	Supported
H1c	Payment Conv. \rightarrow Loyalty	0.421	0.045	9.356	< 0.001	Supported
H1d	Support Resp. \rightarrow Loyalty	0.398	0.047	8.468	< 0.001	Supported
H3	TESQ \rightarrow Satisfaction	0.714	0.051	14.000	< 0.001	Supported

The structural model explained 45.1% of the variance in customer loyalty and 51.0% of the variance in customer satisfaction.

4.5 Mediation Analysis: Bootstrap analysis (5000 resamples) confirmed the significant mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between technology-enabled service quality and customer loyalty.

Table 4: Mediation Analysis Results

Effect	Estimate	Bootstrap SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
Direct Effect (TESQ \rightarrow Loyalty)	0.312	0.047	0.220	0.404	< 0.001
Indirect Effect (TESQ \rightarrow Satisfaction \rightarrow Loyalty)	0.360	0.041	0.280	0.441	< 0.001
Total Effects	0.672	0.058	0.558	0.786	< 0.001

The indirect effect accounts for 53.6% of the total effect, confirming partial mediation (H2 supported).

4.6 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed five major themes:

- Enhanced Convenience:** Passengers appreciated the ability to book tickets, check schedules, and track buses through mobile applications.
- Improved Trust:** Real-time information systems enhanced passenger confidence in service reliability.
- Digital Divide Challenges:** Older passengers and those with limited smartphone literacy faced difficulties adapting to technology-enabled services.
- Service Recovery:** Responsive customer support through digital channels improved problem resolution experiences.
- Future Expectations:** Passengers expressed desires for additional features such as seat selection, journey planning, and integration with other transportation modes.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes several significant theoretical contributions to the service quality and customer loyalty literature. First, it extends technology-enabled service quality theory to the public transportation context, demonstrating the applicability of digital service quality frameworks in public service settings. The findings confirm that established relationships between service quality and loyalty remain valid in technology-mediated environments, though the specific dimensions and their relative importance may differ.

The identification of mobile application quality as the strongest predictor of customer loyalty provides important insights for technology adoption theory in public services. Unlike commercial contexts where multiple service

providers compete, public transportation's quasi-monopolistic nature creates different dynamics for technology acceptance and loyalty formation.

The partial mediation effect of customer satisfaction suggests that technology-enabled service quality influences loyalty through both direct and indirect pathways. This finding enriches our understanding of the service quality-loyalty relationship by highlighting the complex mechanisms through which digital technologies influence passenger behavior.

5.2 Practical Implications

The research findings offer several actionable insights for APSRTC management and other public transportation authorities:

- Mobile Application Priority:** Given the strong relationship between mobile app quality and customer loyalty, transportation authorities should prioritize investment in user-friendly, reliable mobile applications with comprehensive functionality.
- Real-time Information Systems:** The significant impact of information system reliability on loyalty underscores the importance of accurate, timely information provision through digital channels.
- Digital Payment Integration:** The positive relationship between payment convenience and loyalty suggests that seamless, secure digital payment options are crucial for enhancing passenger experience.
- Responsive Customer Support:** Technology-enabled customer support channels require adequate staffing and training to ensure prompt, effective problem resolution.
- Digital Inclusion Strategies:** The qualitative findings highlighting digital divide challenges suggest the need for parallel traditional service channels and digital literacy programs for excluded passenger segments.

5.3 Comparison with Previous Studies: The findings align

with previous research on e-service quality in commercial contexts (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2002; Parasuraman *et al.*, 2005)^[19, 14] while revealing unique characteristics of public transportation services. The stronger emphasis on information reliability compared to commercial e-services reflects the critical importance of schedule adherence and real-time updates in transportation contexts.

Unlike studies in competitive markets where service quality primarily influences switching intentions, this research demonstrates that technology-enabled service quality in public transportation contexts influences positive loyalty behaviors such as recommendation and continued usage preferences.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that present opportunities for future research. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, suggesting the need for longitudinal studies to establish temporal relationships between technology adoption, service quality perceptions, and loyalty development.

The focus on a single transportation authority (APSRTC) limits generalizability to other public transportation contexts. Comparative studies across different transportation modes and geographical contexts would enhance external validity.

Future research could explore moderating variables such as technology readiness, demographic factors, and usage contexts that may influence the strength of relationships identified in this study. Additionally, investigating the long-term sustainability of technology-enabled service quality improvements and their impact on operational efficiency would provide valuable insights for transportation management.

6. Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence for the positive relationship between technology-enabled service quality and customer loyalty in public transportation contexts. The findings demonstrate that strategic investments in digital service infrastructure, particularly mobile applications and real-time information systems, can significantly enhance passenger loyalty through improved satisfaction.

The research contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application by extending service quality theory to technology-mediated public services and providing actionable insights for transportation authorities seeking to improve service delivery through digital transformation.

For APSRTC and similar public transportation organizations, the results suggest that continued investment in technology-enabled services, coupled with attention to digital inclusion and user experience design, can yield substantial benefits in terms of passenger satisfaction and loyalty. As public transportation systems worldwide grapple with challenges of sustainability, efficiency, and passenger retention, this study provides a roadmap for leveraging technology to enhance service quality and build lasting customer relationships.

The partial mediation effect of customer satisfaction highlights the importance of not only implementing technological solutions but ensuring they genuinely improve the passenger experience. This requires ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and refinement of digital services based on user feedback and changing passenger needs.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Technology-Enabled Service Quality Scale

Mobile Application Quality

1. APSRTC's mobile app is easy to navigate and use
2. The mobile app provides all necessary functions for

ticket booking

3. The mobile app loads quickly and operates smoothly
4. The mobile app design is visually appealing and professional
5. The mobile app provides clear instructions and guidance

Information System Reliability

1. Bus arrival/departure information is accurate and up-to-date
2. The real-time tracking system provides reliable location updates
3. Schedule information is consistently accurate
4. Service disruption notifications are timely and informative
5. The information systems are available whenever I need them

Digital Payment Convenience

1. Online payment process is simple and straightforward
2. Multiple payment options are available (cards, wallets, etc.)
3. Payment transactions are processed quickly
4. Digital payment is more convenient than cash payment
5. Payment security measures provide confidence in transactions

Customer Support Responsiveness

1. Customer support responds quickly to queries through digital channels
2. Support staff are knowledgeable about technology-related issues
3. Problems are resolved effectively through digital support channels
4. Multiple support channels are available (chat, email, phone)
5. Support staff are courteous and helpful

Customer Satisfaction Scale

1. Overall, I am satisfied with APSRTC's technology-enabled services
2. These digital services meet my expectations
3. I am pleased with my experience using APSRTC's technology services
4. The technology-enabled services have improved my travel experience
5. I would rate my satisfaction with digital services as high
6. These services fulfill my transportation needs effectively

Customer Loyalty Scale

1. I will continue using APSRTC services in the future
2. I would recommend APSRTC to friends and family
3. APSRTC is my preferred choice for bus transportation
4. I speak positively about APSRTC to others
5. I am willing to pay slightly more for APSRTC's improved services
6. I feel loyal to APSRTC as a service provider
7. I would choose APSRTC even if other options become available
8. I consider myself a loyal customer of APSRTC

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Qualitative Study

Opening Questions

1. How long have you been using APSRTC services?
2. How frequently do you use APSRTC buses?
3. When did you first start using APSRTC's digital services (app, online booking, etc.)?

Technology Experience

4. Walk me through your typical process of using APSRTC's mobile app or website
5. What features do you use most frequently?
6. What aspects of the digital services do you find most helpful?
7. What challenges or frustrations have you experienced?

Service Quality Perceptions

8. How has technology changed your experience with APSRTC?
9. In what ways do the digital services make your travel more convenient?
10. How reliable do you find the real-time information provided?
11. How would you compare APSRTC's digital services to other transportation apps?

Satisfaction and Loyalty

12. How satisfied are you with APSRTC's technology-enabled services overall?
13. Has your loyalty to APSRTC changed since they introduced these digital services?
14. What would make you more likely to recommend APSRTC to others?
15. What improvements would you like to see in their digital services?

Future Expectations

16. What additional features would you like to see in the app or website?
17. How important are these digital services in your decision to continue using APSRTC?
18. What concerns, if any, do you have about APSRTC's digital services?

Closing

Is there anything else about your experience with APSRTC's technology services that you'd like to share?