

Factors Affecting Customer Perceptions of Service Quality in Rural Tourism of Bangladesh



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ABSTRACT:

Purpose: This paper aims to investigate the perception of rural tourists regarding the present service attributes of Bangladeshi villages.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This research involved a preliminary data collection of 532 respondents who visited different touristic spots of Bangladesh situated in the rural areas. The collected data further processed through factor analysis and five factors have been identified.

Findings: The analysis reveals that the respondents are mostly neutral about the Cleanliness and Hygiene; Quality of Service and support from the local community. On the other hand they positively reacted about the calm and pleasant environmental condition but mostly dissatisfied about the recreational activities arranged for tourists.

Practical Implications: This research will guide the managerial areas of the rural tourism development in the perspective of Bangladesh.

Originality/Value: this is the first ever article focusing the overall development of service quality of rural tourism in the context of a developing county

KEYWORDS: Bangladesh, rural area, rural tourism, and service quality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the independence in 1971 Bangladesh economy is seeing an impressive track record of growth and poverty reduction. In the year 2015 this country reached lower-middle-income status, from being one of the poorest nations at birth. Bangladesh is now focusing more on diversified economy and overall development of the country. In Bangladesh majority of the country's population live in villages. Bangladesh is the land of 86038 villages (Source: Census 1991). Each of these villages has resources to offer unique tourist attraction. Specifically Nature-based, agricultural, cultural and riverine tourism have the prospect to grow in the rural areas of Bangladesh (Ahmed & Jahan, 2013). The economy of rural Bangladesh mostly depends on agriculture (Rahman, 2017). The diversification of the economic sector helps the poverty stricken population of this country to improve their economic condition. In this process tourism can play a vital role (Howlader, 2020, November 19). Each year thousands of backpackers and holiday makers visit rural destinations to enjoy their holidays. These movements during holidays play a vital role to speed up the economic condition of this country (The Financial Express, 8 July, 2022).

Tourism potentiality of these rural areas has recently come into focus. Rural tourism in Bangladesh is a prospective sector as recently the government of Bangladesh initiated projects to develop villages to have a range of civic amenities (The Financial Express, September 18, 2022). This article aims to identify the factors of the service quality of rural tourism of Bangladesh and the perspective of tourists regarding the present scenario of service attributes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Providing quality services to rural tourists is a challenging task in the perspective of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh rural tourism basically developed as a form of eco-tourism, Ahmed & Jahan (2013). Besides agro-based tourism, nature-based tourism,

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cultural tourism, heritage tourism, riverine tourism etc. has major prospect. According to Negrusa et al (2007) rural tourism is kind of tourism which is provided by local residents in a rural destination with small lodging and other facilities. The study shows that village people are reluctant to switch their traditional occupation to other for lack of proper knowledge (Islam & Carlsen, 2012). Rural tourism can create job opportunities for local community that alleviates poverty of a state. However providing quality service and other necessary amenities are a fundamental task to develop rural tourism. Following discussion develop the conceptual background and hypothesis of this research.

Stakeholder theory

In this research stake holder theory has been used to form the study framework as this theory is widely accepted by the scholars and the relevancy with this research topic makes it more suitable. According to Freeman (1984), any group of individual who is related the development of a tourism project is considered as a stakeholder. For tourism development the perceptions of stakeholders need to be understood both demand and the supply side (Dorcheh & Mohamed, 2013). Considering previous studies it reveals that there are number of actors in supply side (local government, community people, entrepreneurs etc.) but in the demand side tourists are the solo representative (Byrd, Bosley, & Dronberger, 2009). This study use stakeholder theory as the prominent theory to understand the perception of rural tourists to improve the service quality for the rural tourism destinations of Bangladesh. Thus the findings of this study will extend the literature of stakeholder theory through understanding the demand side of tourism business as well as tourists' point of view to improve the service quality of the rural tourism of Bangladesh.

Service quality

Service quality or the quality of a service is defined by the customers. They compare the delivered service with their expectation and determine the quality of a service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985). The quality of the services is measured not only by the technical elements but also by the functional elements. Assessing the quality of services is sometimes a difficult as the consumer may perceive it in different ways. However in tourism sector, destinations success is largely determined by the quality of service (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Go & Govers, 2000; Tozser, 2010). In service attributes division lies between tangibility and intangibility. The tangible components include infrastructure and technologies on the other hand intangible components includes security, convenience, friendliness, and competence etc (Williams & Zigli, 1987). Besides environmental components of the destination (e.g. natural scenery, friendliness, and cleanliness) is also important to determine the destinations service quality (Murphy, Evans, & Storfer, 2010). Despite the importance of service quality in tourism sector very little study has been done to understand the perception of tourists regarding the service attributes of a tourist destination in the context of a developing country.

Measuring service quality

There is no such specific measurement technique to measure the service quality of rural tourism. Different authors highlighted different issues in previous literature. The most significant problem is how the dimensions are going to be established in case of rural tourism. The foremost study conducted by Grönroos, C. in 1984. He suggested three dimension of ensuring service quality technical quality, functional quality, and image. Later Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1985) improvised it from ten to five which were tangible elements, reliability, response capability, assurance, and empathy. Besides many more researchers took attempt to establish a concreat dimension of service quality but none can agreed upon same point. In the year of 1992 Babakus and Boller sate that the dimensions of service quality may differ in accordance with different pattern of services. Specifically functional qualities are subject to change for example the attitude of the service provider (Reichel, Lowengartand Milman, 2000).

Measuring service quality regards some concern. Mostly SERVQUAL analysis is the research instrument used to analyze the service quality and consumer perception about the services in tourism sector (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; LeBlanc, 1992; Stevens, Knutson, & Patton, 1995). However, there are variations based on the nature of the business. Particularly RURALQUAL was first ever model designated for rural tourism (Loureiro & Miranda, 2009). It was based on the SERVQUAL model of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1985) model consisting 22 items. But this model was only focusing on the rural accommodation not on the overall experience of a customer. Other models related to rural tourism service quality include HISTOQUAL for historical houses (Frochot & Hughes, 2000) and ECOSERV for ecotourism (Khan, 2003). The summery of the articles fromwhich each items are being extracted are given below.

Table 1: Sources of the Measurement Items

Variables	Measurement Items	Sources
HE_01	Fresh and hygienic local food	Choi et al. (2008)
HE_02	Cleanliness of the accommodation facilities	Choi et al. (2008)

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HE_03	Restroom and bathroom facilities	Choi et al. (2008)
HE_04	Water quality	Mihalic (2000); Health (2003)
SQE_01	Modern, advanced technology such as the internet and mobile network	Fleischer et al. (1993)
SQE_02	Standard tourism facilities.	Fleischer et al. (1993)
SQE_03	Availability of Tourism-related information documents (e.g. tour map provided).	Fleischer et al. (1993)
SQE_04	Price level	Fleischer et al. (1993)
SQE_05	Roads for better access facilities	Fleischer et al. (1993)
SQE_06	Transportation service was good	Fleischer et al. (1993)
REE_01	Experiential activities for children	Choi et al. (2008)
REE_02	Experiential activities for adults	Choi et al. (2008)
REE_03	Physically activities in the natural setting.	Choi et al. (2008)
REE_04	Local communities' support and participation in cultural and folk events (e.g. art and crafts, dances, festivals)	Hamele (1988); Gebhard et al. (2007)
EE_01	Natural refreshing environment	Park and Yoon (2009)
EE_02	Natural Relaxing environment	Park and Yoon (2009)
EE_03	Calm and soothing atmosphere.	Mihalic (2000); Health (2003)
EE_04	Outside weather condition	Mihalic (2000); Health (2003)
EE_05	Air quality	Mihalic (2000); Health (2003)
CSE_01	Local resident's kindness and support	Jurowski (1994); Yoon (1998)
CSE_02	Supporting visitor services (e.g. home stays, entertainment, transport) arranged by local community	Jurowski (1994); Yoon (1998)
CSE_03	Tour guide services provided by the local communities.	Jurowski (1994); Yoon (1998)
CSE_04	Organizing Tourist's activity without compromising the local community's lifestyles.	Hamele (1988); Gebhard et al. (2007)

The measurements items are taken from different sources but the base of all this sources are basically SERVEQUAL. As SERVQUAL needs modification in response of the rural tourism context of Bangladesh the above mentioned items are organized to measure proper construct.

4. METHODOLOGY

To understand the tourist's perceptions about the service quality of the rural tourism sector of Bangladesh a survey was conducted among the tourists who have recently visited different tourists spots located in rural areas of Bangladesh. The main focus of this survey was to identify the managerial areas in the service quality of rural tourism which needs immediate attention. SERVQUAL technique is most appropriate to measure the quality of any services. This research is also rooted in Fleischer et al.'s SERVQUAL. However the researcher has modified the measurement statements based on the suitability of rural tourism of Bangladesh. Besides Fleischer et al.'s (1993) items some contemporary researches (Choi, Ann, Lee, & Park, 2018; Chin & Lo, 2017) have also been investigated to make the measurement statements more satisfactory (Table-1). In total 23 items were selected and the responses were measured in 5-point likert scale.

The data collection was conducted on line and a questionnaire was used as the data collection tool. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of the demographic variables including – gender, age, occupation, monthly income, whether they have visited any rural tourist destination within the last six month, name of the visited destination, region of the visited destination and travel companion. The other half of the questionnaire was consisted of the statements about the service quality of rural tourism where they ranked their perception on a scale of 1 to 5; where 1 mean “highly dissatisfied” and 5 means “highly satisfied” This study used convenience sampling technique to collect data from the respondents. Close-ended questions were used in the questionnaire and a pilot test with random 100 samples was done before the actual survey. There was no concern arise at preliminary testing. Among 600 distributed questionnaires 532 were considered for this research. 67 were rejected due to missing information. The following table represented the demographic profile of the respondents.

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Table 2: Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage	Region people visited	Frequency	Percentage
Female	196	37%	Barishal	37	7%
Male	336	63%	Chittagong	170	32%
Age			Dhaka	119	22%
20 or below	38	7%	Khulna	58	11%
21-29	413	77%	Mymensingh	35	7%
30-39	46	9%	Rajshahi	51	10%
40-49	22	4%	Rangpur	22	4%
50-59	11	2%	Shylhet	40	8%
60 or above	2	0.3%	Travel companion		
Occupation			Friends	296	56%
Self-employed	46	9%	Family (spouse, parents, relatives or children)	167	31%
Service Holder	67	13%	Colleagues	26	5%
Student	400	75%	Alone	43	8%
Unemployed	19	4%			
Monthly Income					
Less than 15,000				382	72%
15001-30000				78	15%
30001- 45000				32	6%
45001-60000				21	4%
60001-75000				9	2%
More than 75000				10	2%

The collection of data period frames between June to August. The survey questionnaire link was shared among different travel group and the respondents were asked to fill up the answer if they visited a rural tourist spot of Bangladesh within the last six months. Among 532 respondents 37% are female and 63% are male. The majority of the respondents (77%) are in 21-29 age groups. Most of them are students and their income level is less than 15,000 per month. In regional distribution of rural touristic spot it reflects that Chittagong division possesses majority number of destinations 32% followed by Dhaka 22%, Khulna 11%, Rajshahi 10%. The least visited division for rural tourism is Rangpur which consists only 4%. Analysis of the result further reveals that more than half of the respondents visited the destinations with their friends (56%), Rest 36% visited either with colleague or with friends. Only 8% of the respondents visited alone.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The perception of the visitors about the service quality of rural tourism of Bangladesh was mostly neutral. Most of the components range from 2 to 4 where majority lies in 3. This indicates tourists are not clear about their present situation of service quality they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. However the respondents are satisfied with the environmental elements as all components get 4 score in this category. This also indicates the main resource of rural tourism which is a calm and serene environment is present in our villages. Recreation and entertainment elements scored very poor which means tourists are not please about the present condition of entertainment activities designed for them. Besides in other categories - hygiene, local community support and service quality elements range 3.2 to 3.9, indicating the neutral position of the tourists.

Table 3: Perception of rural tourists about the service quality attributes (means and standard deviation)

Code		N	Mean*	Std. Deviation
Hygiene elements				
HE_01	Fresh and hygienic local food	532	3.7011	1.05363
HE_02	Cleanliness of the accommodation facilities	532	3.5094	1.11060
HE_03	Restroom and bathroom facilities	532	3.2143	1.21010
HE_04	Water quality	532	3.8271	1.07364

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Service quality elements				
SQE_01	Modern, advanced technology such as the internet and mobile network	532	3.2650	1.18499
SQE_02	Standard tourism facilities.	532	3.2594	1.06670
SQE_03	Availability of Tourism-related information documents (e.g. tour map provided).	532	3.1955	1.23177
SQE_04	Price level	532	3.4135	1.10896
SQE_05	Roads for better access facilities	532	3.6353	1.06233
SQE_06	Transportation service was good	532	3.5677	1.05281
Recreation and entertainment elements				
REE_01	Experiential activities for children	532	2.9643	1.32506
REE_02	Experiential activities for adults	532	3.3722	1.17916
REE_03	Physically activities in the natural setting.	532	3.2538	1.36870
REE_04	Local communities' support and participation in cultural and folk events (e.g. art and crafts, dances, festivals)	532	2.7650	1.37890
Environmental elements				
EE_01	Natural refreshing environment	532	4.2256	.92357
EE_02	Natural Relaxing environment	532	4.2124	.94181
EE_03	Calm and soothing atmosphere.	532	4.0714	.99081
EE_04	Outside weather condition	532	4.0489	1.04578
EE_05	Air quality	532	4.0451	.98474
Community support elements				
CSE_01	Local resident's kindness and support	532	3.7857	1.02655
CSE_02	Supporting visitor services (e.g. home stays, entertainment, transport) arranged by local community	532	3.4192	1.05188
CSE_03	Tour guide services provided by the local communities.	532	3.5996	1.14629
CSE_04	Organizing Tourist's activity without compromising the local community's lifestyles.	532	3.9756	.98452

*This responses are based upon a 5-Likert scale range from 1 (Highly dissatisfied) to 5 (Highly satisfied)

The appropriateness of this study has been analyzed by Bartlett's test of sphericity. In Bartlett's test of sphericity examine the hypothesis that the variables are uncorrelated in the population

If each variable correlates perfectly with itself ($r = 1$), the population correlation matrix is considered as an identity matrix in other cases it means there is no correlation with other variables ($r = 0$) (Malhotra & Dash, 2011:590). Furthermore to test statistic for sphericity which is based on the conversion of the correlation matrix's determinants to a chi-square and null hypothesis can be rejected if the value of the test statistic is large. In case there is a failure to reject the null hypothesis will raise the question of the suitability of the factor analysis. The suitability of the factor analysis can also be confirmed by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy. According to Malhotra and Dash (2011:592), this index (KMO measure of sampling adequacy) compares the magnitudes of the observed correlation coefficients to the magnitudes of the partial correlation coefficients. Small values of the KMO statistic indicate that the correlations between pairs of variables cannot be explained by other variables and that factor analysis may not be appropriate. (Table 4)

Table 4: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.841
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3072.734
	df	253
	Sig.	<.001

The appropriateness of this research has been clarified in Table 3. Here we can see that the Bartlett's test of sphericity is rejected the null hypothesis which means the population correlation matrix is an identity matrix. The approximate chi-square statistics is 3072.734 with 253 degrees of freedom, which is significant at the <.001 level. Furthermore the KMO statistic is 0.841

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which is also large (>0.5). The appropriateness of this data set been proved by this test so this data set can be considered for further analysis and in this case factor analysis technique will be used to reveal the important factors about the perception of the tourists about the service quality of rural tourism Bangladesh.

Five factors were extracted. All these factors met Kaiser's criterion with an eigenvalues greater than one and retained for the further analysis. The relative weight of each factor in the total variance was calculated, taking into account proportion of total variances explained by each factor, while cumulative variance showing the amount of variance explained (Escofier & Pages, 1988).

Table 5. Factor analysis of tourists' perception about the service quality of rural tourism of Bangladesh

Component*	Factor Loadings**					Communality***
	1	2	3	4	5	
Factor 1: Calm and pleasant environmental condition						
Natural Relaxing environment	.801					.653
Natural refreshing environment	.772					.628
Air quality	.684					.547
Calm and soothing atmosphere.	.639					.468
Outside weather condition	.615					.542
Factor 2: Quality of service						
Availability of Tourism-related information documents (e.g. tour map provided).		.666				.525
Transportation service was good		.612				.517
Roads for better access facilities		.578				.430
Modern, advanced technology such as the internet and mobile network		.564				.457
Price level		.525				.333
Standard tourism facilities.		.515				.485
Factor 3: Cleanliness and hygiene						
Restroom and bathroom facilities			.739			.629
Cleanliness of the accommodation facilities			.692			.559
Fresh and hygienic local food			.560			.452
Water quality			.539			.552
Factor 4: Support from the local community						
Tour guide services provided by the local communities.				.662		.543
Local resident's kindness and support				.632		.502
Supporting visitor services (e.g. home stays, entertainment, transport) arranged by local community				.535		.496
Organizing Tourist's activity without compromising the local community's lifestyles.				.520		.331
Factor 5 : Recreational activities arranged for tourists						
Local communities' support and participation in cultural and folk events (e.g. art and crafts, dances, festivals)					.648	.564
Physically activities in the natural setting.					.634	.473
Experiential activities for children					.551	.488
Experiential activities for adults					.544	.416
Eigenvalues	5.182	2.558	1.547	1.186	1.117	
Percentage of total variance****	22.531	11.123	6.727	5.157	4.855	
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.						
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization*						
Here,						
**Factor loadings => 0.50						
*** Communality => 0.50						
****Total variance Explained = 50.393%						

The first factor labeled as "Calm and pleasant environmental condition" accounts for 22% of variance. This consist attributes related air quality, weather condition and condition of the natural purity. Most respondents have reported positively regarding this issue. The second factor "Quality of service" includes some essential service elements which are required at this stage of

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rural tourism development of Bangladesh. Respondents seem to have neutral position regarding this issue which also indicates there is room for improvement. The third factor “Cleanliness and hygiene” include attributes which is required to provide a safe and pure accommodation for the villagers it includes attributes like – water quality, restroom facilities, food accommodation. The examination of raw scores reveals that tourists are neutral regarding these things. Factor four, “Support from the local community”, relates to the community support in different activities including accommodation, co-operation, tour guiding etc. Factor five, “Recreational activities arranged for tourists” relates to the activities arranged for the tourists to enjoy their spare time during travel period.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study reveals that rural tourism in Bangladesh has possibilities to explore as a profitable sector. The identified factors reveals that villages of Bangladesh has all required natural resources essential for developing rural tourism. Each of the tourist spot has refreshing, relaxing, calm environment with favorable weather condition. The local communities are supportive towards tourists which is another positive factor in terms developing rural tourism. The service quality and hygiene elements marked average by the tourists which indicates a managerial focus needs to be enhanced to maintain better hygiene and service. The factor that is mostly negatively marked by the tourists is the experiential activities arranged for the tourists. An immediate attention needs to be drawn to increase the number of experience based, cultural and physical activities for tourists.

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