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"Impact of service quality on tourists' satisfaction in Agri tourism destinations in Kerala"

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Abstract

This study identified key determinants of agri tourism for the assessment of perceived service quality, regression analysis used to examine the impact of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction. Utilizing a self-administered questionnaire and judgemental sampling technique, 100 responses from both domestic and foreign tourists were collected and analysed. The factor analysis identified seven indicators of quality of services, those are products and services, price (price worthiness), place (accessibility), promotion, people (service personnel), physical evidence (ambience) and process (customer services). The results of regression study showed that these variables have favourable effect on customer satisfaction, and that perceived service quality.

Keywords: Agri tourism, Perceived service quality, Quality of service, Tourists' satisfaction

Introduction

In India, the hospitality and tourism industry emerging as key contributors for shaping nation's economic progress. The tourism business is characterized by swift advancements and trends. Numerous nations have renovated conventional tourism concepts by utilizing their potential as a tourist destination, as a result some new forms of tourism have emerged. One of the most recent developments in the tourism sector that encourages sustainable tourism development is agri tourism, which is growing in popularity among travellers.

American Farm Bureau Federation (2004) makes a definition of the concept as:

"Agri tourism refers to an enterprise at a working farm, ranch or agricultural plant conducted for the enjoyment of visitors that generates income for the owner. Agricultural tourism refers to the act of visiting a working farm or any horticultural or agricultural operation for the purpose of enjoyment, education or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation that also adds to economic viability of the site."

''Any practice developed on a working farm with the purpose of attracting visitors'' (Barbieri and Mshenga (2008).

Kerala, is referred to as "God's Own Country," is one of Asia's most popular travel destinations. As Kerala, is a agriculture dominated state, has enormous potential to significantly expand farm tourism with little further funding. The agri tourism in Kerala offers great experience to tourists as well as farmers for promoting agricultural interest and learn about farming activities. Kerala has more than one-third of its cropped area under tea, coffee, rubber, pepper, cardamom, and ginger plantations, with another one-third under coconut plantations. The villages in Kerala offer a feast to the eyes of the travellers by way of its panoramic view of the fields, farms, hillsides, rivers and lakes. In light of these advantageous conditions, a lot of travelers choose to visit and stay in Kerala's many agri tourism locations. Some well-known farm tourism spots in Kerala are Blooms Green Farm, Kenichira; Green Aqua Fish Farm, Vypin; KFDC Floriculture Centre, Munnar; Thanima farm life, Palakkad, Rasa gurukul, Chalakudy, Mango Meadows Agricultural Theme Park, Kottayam, etc. Farm tourism has fast become an integral part of eco-tourism in Kerala and is beneficial to both farmers and visitors. For farmers, agritourism offers alternative sources of income and job prospects. It promotes agritourism and gives farmers access to new revenue streams and job opportunities. It safeguards the natural resources, which will benefit society, and it encourages farmers to modernize and diversify their farmland for tourists.

The service quality and customer satisfaction have been one of the one of the subjects of greatest discussion in tourism and hospitality sector. When a user evaluates a service to see whether it meets expectations at the desired level that evaluation is referred to as service quality. The dynamic character of tourism research and exploration must be ongoing in order to understand the dynamics and behaviour of destination image and service quality. Nevertheless tourism is experiential due to its blend of tangible and intangible elements, and destination service quality has a significant impact on this. The present study is an attempt to analyses the quality of services experienced by the tourists and the satisfaction level of tourists towards quality of services provided by the agri tourism destinations in Kerala.

Literature review

In the field of tourism, the notion of service quality has received substantially more attention. Customer satisfaction is a key factor in business enterprises being able to turn a profit, hence it is imperative for any company, and tourist businesses in particular, should satisfy its clients by offering high-quality services. (Zabkar, 2010). The studies have shown that customer satisfaction is the antecedent of service quality or customer's perception of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Anderson and Fornell et al., 1994). Zabka, V., Brencic, M. M etal., (2010), considered customer satisfaction as a yard stick for measuring the service quality. The service providers in the tourist and hospitality sectors have realized that understanding the shifting demands and preferences of consumers is essential to long-term survival in fierce competition (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Orlic and Brscic (2012) emphasized the significance of hospitality in the agritourism industry. The expression of hospitality can take many forms, such as serving supper, keeping things simple, adopting an amiable demeanor, and fostering relationships within the family, using various forms of communication, sending greeting cards, and so forth. Apart from everything else, the best way to experience hospitality is to feel like a visitor at home. This plays a major role on the happiness of visitors and their propensity to make more purchases. Thus, it follows that the foundation of any tourism industry is hospitality. Petroman et al., (2012) made an effort to research destination management strategies for agritourism farms. According to the report, agritourism is a system for managing farms and tourism together through the application of knowledge management. The study also concentrated on destination management, which was founded on management theories and techniques that would support the growth of the agritourism sector. Al-Ababneh (2013) evaluated the opinions of visitors regarding the high-quality tourism services offered at the Petra historical site. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the impact of quality tourism products on overall satisfaction of visitors. The results demonstrated that visitor satisfaction with destination amenities, accessibility, and attraction is directly impacted by service quality. Thus, this study made the case that providing high-quality services to visitors can significantly raise their degree of happiness. The study's findings confirmed the evidence that some elements of the tourism offering positively affect visitors' satisfaction.

Statement of the Problem

Kerala's distinctive agricultural production is strongly connected to the state's many tourist attractions. Munnar serves as a prime example, with its Unique Selling Proposition (USP) being the tea estates situated on the hillsides that roll inward. Similar circumstances exist in Wayanad, where the distinctive produce from the bamboo tree and spices reign supreme. The government's decision to allocate 5% of farm areas for tourism purposes has been encouraging for the industry. Some of the special features of agri tourism in Kerala involves diverse cropped areas, positive image of farming, activities and experiences, farm stays and activities, which provides a unique way to connect with the land, culture, and traditions. In order to prepare farms and plantations in Kerala to receive tourists it is necessary to analyse the perception of tourists to design their strategies in such a way as to present a positive image of farming and

agriculture through tourism. Agricultural practices in Agro-tourism in Kerala goes beyond agriculture. Many homestay operators have already added farm tourism to their itinerary even though not on a scientific basis. Even though many farm tourism entrepreneurs have set up farms in the State, it needs to be standardized so that it is necessary to analyse the service quality dimensions from the perspective of tourists.

Significance of the Study

Tourist happiness and their overall experience are greatly impacted by the quality of services provided by the tourism sector. Analysing tourists' perception regarding the service quality provided by agritourism destinations in Kerala might reveal important information about the tastes, habits, and expectations of travellers with relation to agriculture and tourism experiences of tourists. These results can be used to create strategies that will both promote agri tourism and raise the standard of the service providers as a whole. As a result, this research has the potential to be extremely important in developing an economically viable and sustainable agri tourism sector in India. Along with these agri tourism might present a distinctive and alluring idea to boost travel to the various destination in Kerala. This research study can help with the development of focused promotional strategies for agri tourism by providing an awareness of the expectations and preferences of travellers about agri tourism services. It provides great scope for innovation and entrepreneurship in this sector through the creation of innovative and distinctive tourism products which attract tourists and provide competitive advantages to the particular destination.

Objectives of the Study

The present study "Impact of service quality on tourists' satisfaction in Agri tourism destinations in Kerala" is based on the following objectives.

1. To analyze the perception of tourists towards the dimensions of quality of services offered by agri tourism destinations in Kerala.
2. To analyze the satisfaction of tourists towards quality of services provided by the agri tourism destinations in Kerala.
3. To develop a Structural Equation Model showing the relationship between the dimensions of quality of service and tourists satisfaction.

Research Methodology

This study "Impact of service quality on tourists' satisfaction in Agri tourism destinations in Kerala" is descriptive in nature and based on both primary and secondary data. Data required for the study is collected from the tourists visiting farm tourism spots in the Wayanad, Palakkad and Kottayam Districts of Kerala using structured questionnaire. Respondents are selected through purposive sampling method. The sample size of the study is 100, which includes both domestic tourists and foreign tourists.

Reliability and Validity

In this study the researcher used questionnaire based surveys to collect data with regard to the latent variables. Before testing the hypothesis the proposed study confirmed the reliability and validity of associated survey instrument or scales used through construct wise Cronbach's alphas and construct wise validity checks using confirmatory factor analysis CFA in order to adequately measure the variables. The researcher has performed the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test after the final data collection. The final values of Cronbach's Alpha are found to be greater than 0.9 which confirms the reliability of the variables used to measure the construct. The Composite Reliability values are found to be higher than 0.9 which indicates the

constructs' high level of internal consistency reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are also found to be above the recommended threshold value of 0.5. Thus, it can be inferred that the constructs have high levels of convergence As all the parameters meet the prescribed value, the data is appropriate for further analysis.

Data Analysis

The study fixed three objectives, i.e, to assess quality of services experienced by the customers and to analyse the satisfaction of tourists towards quality of services provided by the agri tourism destinations in Kerala and to develop SEM showing the impact the dimensions of quality of service and tourists satisfaction. In order to measure these objectives, the researcher used various statistical tests like mean, standard deviation, one sample t test, and independent sample t test and correlation analysis. Also, the researcher used structural equation modelling in order to assess the impact of quality of services on satisfaction.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 provided below depicts the demographic characteristics of the respondents chosen for the study.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

		Gender	
		Male	**Female**
		Count	**Count**
Age	Up to 20 years	14	4
	20-40 years	27	14
	40-60 years	10	12
	60 & above	10	9
Nationality	Indian	49	36
	Foreigner	12	3
Marital status	Single	29	25
	Married	31	15
Education	Illiterate	2	2
	Below Matric	7	3
	Matric	3	1
	Senior secondary	21	17
	Graduate	17	11
	Master degree& Above	10	6
	Others	0	0

Source: Primary data

Table 1 provides data relating to the socio- demographic profile of the respondents. The majority of the respondents belong to the age category of 20–40 years, and most of the respondents are male . Among the respondents, 61% are domestic tourists, and the remaining 39% are foreign tourists. Most of the respondents are qualified for senior secondary.

Quality of Services

The study identified seven indicators as dimensions of agri tourism for assessing quality of services, those are Products and services, Price (price worthiness), Place (Accessibility),

Promotion, People (service Personnel), Physical Evidence(ambience) and Process(customer services). All these variables were measured on a five points Likert's scale where 1 indicates strongly disagree and 5 indicates strongly agree. The table 2 provided below represents the result of one sample t test.

Table 2

Dimensions of Agritourism for the assessment of Quality of Services- One Sample T test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T test	P Value
Products/services	100	3.94	.649	.065	14.494	.000
Price	100	4.42	.606	.061	23.431	.000
Place	100	3.94	.679	.068	13.844	.000
Promotion	100	3.38	.693	.069	5.483	.000
People	100	3.54	.784	.078	6.888	.000
Physical Evidence	100	3.36	.959	.096	3.754	.000
Process	100	3.46	.784	.078	5.868	.000
Test Value= 3						

Source: Primary data

From the result of one sample t test shown in table 2, it is observed that the mean scores of all the dimensions of agri tourism activities are higher than the test value (i.e, 3). Among the dimensions of agri tourism activities, the dimension 'price' scored the highest mean score followed by place, products/services, people, process and price. Whereas, the dimension 'physical evidence' had the least mean score.

Dimensions of Ari-tourism and Nationality of the Respondents

In order to assess whether the dimensions of agri tourism differ significantly with the nationality of the respondents or not, the researcher applied independent sample t test. For this, the study formulated the following hypotheses.
- There is no significant difference in products or services with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in price with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in place with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in promotion with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in people with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in physical evidence with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in process with respect to nationality of the respondents
  Table 3 provided below represent the result of independent sample t test.

Table 3

Dimensions of Ari-tourism and Nationality of the Respondents- Independent sample T Test

	Nationality	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T Value	P Value
Products/ services	Indian	85	3.93	.651	.071	-.360	.720
	Foreigner	15	4.00	.707	.196		
Price	Indian	85	4.45	.627	.068	.767	.445
	Foreigner	15	4.31	.480	.133		
Place	Indian	85	3.88	.680	.074	-1.745	.084
	Foreigner	15	4.23	.599	.166		
Promotion	Indian	85	3.36	.652	.071	-.096	.924
	Foreigner	15	3.38	.961	.266		
People	Indian	85	3.61	.788	.085	2.328	.022
	Foreigner	15	3.08	.641	.178		
Physical Evidence	Indian	85	3.42	.956	.104	1.496	.138
	Foreigner	15	3.00	.913	.253		
Process	Indian	85	3.48	.811	.088	.742	.460
	Foreigner	15	3.31	.630	.175		

Source: Primary data

From table 3, it is observed that the 'Indians' scored the highest mean scores in 'price', 'people', 'physical evidence' and 'process'. Whereas, foreigners scored highest mean scores in 'products/ services', 'place' and promotion'. From the result of independent sample t test, the significant values of all the dimensions are higher than 0.05, except 'people'. Hence, accepted all the null hypotheses, except 'people'.

Satisfaction of Tourists towards Quality of Services

The study explored twenty one variables in order to measure the satisfaction of tourists towards quality of services provided by the agri tourism destinations in Kerala. All these variables were grouped into six factors, namely, Destination characteristics (DC), Services and facilities (SF), Attitude of personnel (AP), Surrounding environment (SE) and Price level (PL).

Table 3

Satisfaction of Tourists towards Quality of Services-One Sample T test

Factor	Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	T Value	P Value
Destination characteristics	Arrangement of the destination	4.2000	.77850	15.414	.000
	Number of educational programmes	4.1500	.80873	14.220	.000
	Number of entertainment activities	4.2000	.79137	15.164	.000
	Level of direct sales of the destination	4.2200	.70467	17.313	.000
Services and facilities	Quality of farm products	3.9400	1.08078	8.697	.000
	Variety in farm activities	4.1000	.92660	11.871	.000
	Level of accommodation facilities	3.9900	.99995	9.901	.000
	Photography, audio, and video facilities	4.0700	.93479	11.446	.000
Attitude of personnel	Reliability	4.1200	.79493	14.089	.000
	Assurance	4.1700	.77921	15.015	.000
	Empathy	4.1500	.71598	16.062	.000
	Responsiveness	4.1200	.79493	14.089	.000
Surrounding environment	Natural beauty and greenery	4.2400	.62150	19.952	.000
	Friendliness and courtesy of local residents	4.1900	.66203	17.975	.000
	Hygiene and sanitation of the farm environment	4.2100	.65590	18.448	.000
	Safety and protection of the area	4.2000	.65134	18.424	.000
	Road condition to the destination	4.2800	.63691	20.097	.000
Price level	At the destination	4.4000	.56854	24.625	.000
	For food and drinks	4.4000	.56854	24.625	.000
	For accommodation	4.4000	.56854	24.625	.000
	Off farm products and other item	4.4000	.56854	24.625	.000

Source: Primary data

From the result of one sample t test shown in table 3, it is observed that the mean scores of all the dimensions of satisfaction are higher than the test value (i.e, 3).

Satisfaction of Tourists towards Quality of Services and Nationality of the Respondents

In order to assess whether the Satisfaction of Tourists towards Quality of Services differ significantly with the nationality of the respondents or not, the researcher applied independent sample t test. For this, the study formulated the following hypotheses.

- There is no significant difference in 'destination characteristics' with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in 'services and facilities' with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in 'attitude of personnel' with respect to nationality of the respondents
- There is no significant difference in 'surrounding environment' with respect to nationality of the respondents

- There is no significant difference in 'price level' with respect to nationality of the respondents

Table 4 provided below represent the result of independent sample t test.

Table 4

Satisfaction of Tourists towards Quality of Services and Nationality of the Respondents-Independent Sample T test

	Nationality	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T Value	P Value
Destination Characteristics	Indian	87	4.1580	.69269	.07426	.016	.900
	Foreigner	13	4.4231	.59848	.16599		
Services and Facilities	Indian	87	4.0460	.87482	.09379	.186	.667
	Foreigner	13	3.8846	.82674	.22930		
Attitude of Personnel	Indian	87	4.1839	.66958	.07179	6.835	.010
	Foreigner	13	3.8462	1.07790	.29895		
Surrounding Environment	Indian	87	4.1908	.62499	.06701	.590	444
	Foreigner	13	4.4462	.46299	.12841		
Price Level	Indian	87	4.4138	.58173	.06237	3.343	.071
	Foreigner	13	4.3077	.48038	.13323		

Source: Primary data

Results of independent sample t test are provided in table 4. From the table, it is observed that the Indians scored the highest mean scores in 'services and facilities', 'attitude of personal' and 'price level'. Foreigners scored the highest mean scores in 'destination characteristics' and surrounding environment'. From the test independent sample t test, significance values of all the variables are higher than 0.05, hence accepted the null hypotheses. It is indicating that there is no significant difference in satisfaction with respect to nationality of the respondents.

Satisfaction of Tourists towards Quality of Services- Structural Equation Modelling

In order to assess the impact of quality of services on satisfaction of tourists, the researcher used structural equation modelling technique. The structural model consisted of six unobserved variables, twenty eight observed variables and twenty nine error variables.

1. There is no significant relationship between 'services' and 'destination services'
2. There is no significant relationship between 'services' and 'services and facilities'
3. There is no significant relationship between 'services' and 'attitude of personnel'
4. There is no significant relationship between 'services' and 'surrounding environment'
5. There is no significant relationship between 'services' and 'price level'

The results shown in table 5 provide a quick overview of the model fit. Goodness of Fit index (GFI) obtained is 0.93 as against the recommended value of above 0.90. The Normed fit Index (NFI), Comparative Fit index (CFI), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) are 0.95, 0.93, 0.95 respectively as against the recommended level of above 0.90. RMSEA is 0.042 and is well below the recommended limit of 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1990). Hence the model shows an overall acceptable fit.

Table 5

Model Fit Indices

Variable	CFI	GFI	TLI	NFI	RMSEA
Measurement model	0.95	0.93	0.95	0.93	0.037
Recommended Range	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.05

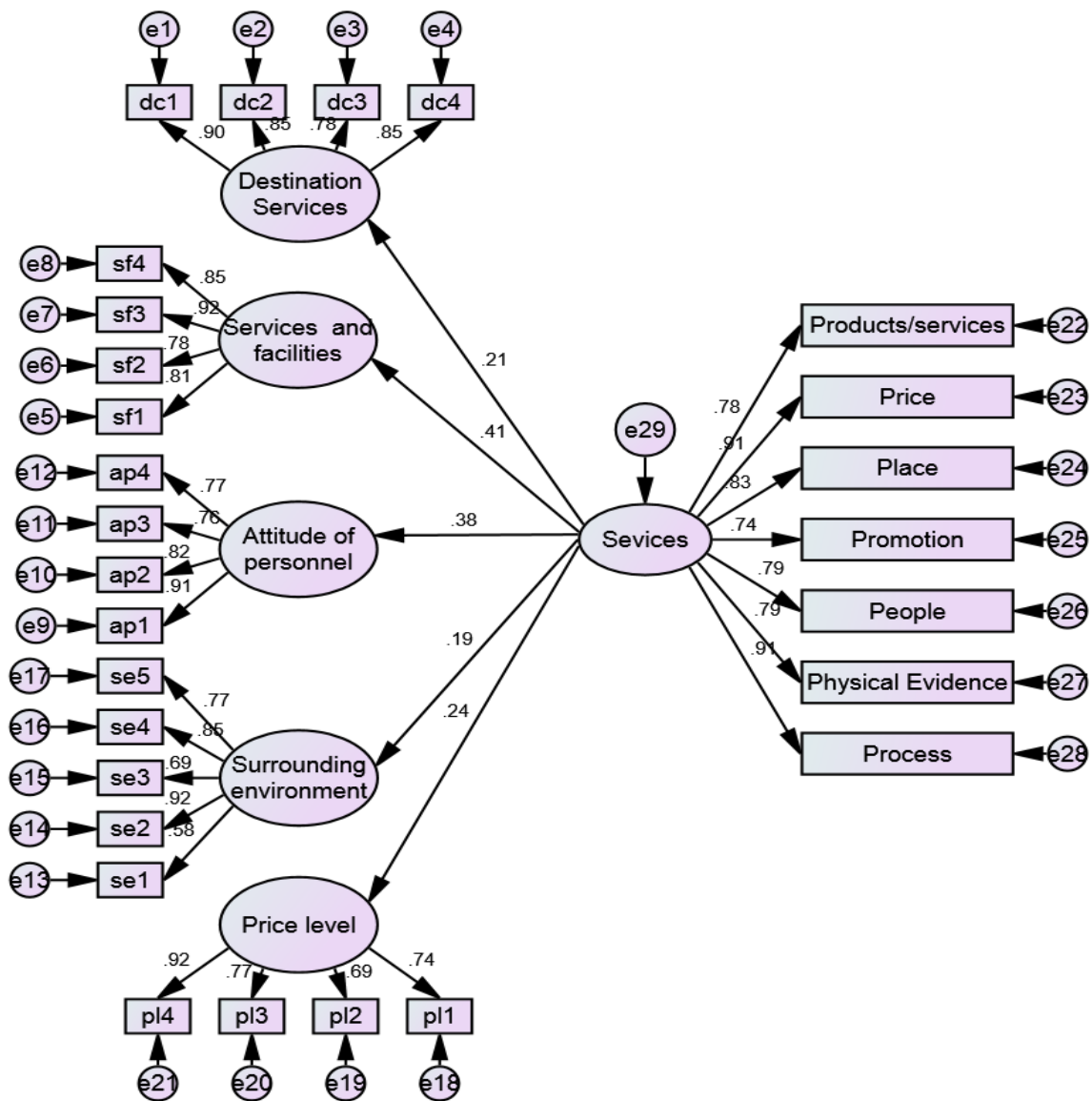*Note: Model fit indices reported here were generated from CFA*

Fig 1: Satisfaction of Tourists towards Quality of Services

By analysing the path diagram (Figure 1), the beta coefficient value from 'services' towards 'destination services' is 0.21, which is significant at 5 percentage level. The beta coefficient value from 'services' towards 'services and facilities' is 0.41, which is significant at 5 percentage level. The beta coefficient value from 'services' towards 'attitude of personnel' is 0.38, which is significant at 5 percentage level. The beta coefficient value from 'services'

towards 'surrounding environment' is 0.19, which is significant at 5 percentage level. Finally, The beta coefficient value from 'services' towards 'price level' is 0.38, which is significant at 5 percentage level

Findings

1. There is no significant difference in products or services with respect to nationality of the respondents
2. There is no significant difference in price with respect to nationality of the respondents
3. There is no significant difference in place with respect to nationality of the respondents
4. There is no significant difference in promotion with respect to nationality of the respondents
5. There is significant difference in 'people' with respect to nationality of the respondents
6. There is no significant difference in physical evidence with respect to nationality of the respondents
7. There is no significant difference in process with respect to nationality of the respondents
8. There is no significant difference in 'destination characteristics' with respect to nationality of the respondents
9. There is no significant difference in 'services and facilities' with respect to nationality of the respondents
10. There is no significant difference in 'attitude of personnel' with respect to nationality of the respondents
11. There is no significant difference in 'surrounding environment' with respect to nationality of the respondents
12. There is no significant difference in 'price level' with respect to nationality of the respondents
13. There is significant relationship between 'services' and 'destination services'
14. There is significant relationship between 'services' and 'services and facilities'
15. There is significant relationship between 'services' and 'attitude of personnel'
16. There is significant relationship between 'services' and 'surrounding environment'
17. There is significant relationship between 'services' and 'surrounding environment'

Conclusion

The research sought to explore and understand the relationships between service qualities, customer satisfaction. The research has successfully identified seven key factors that influence the perceived service quality. The findings highlight the importance of focusing on perceived service quality factors that have significant relationships with customer satisfaction, such as 'Quality of Services &destination services', 'services' and 'services and facilities', services' and 'attitude of personnel' services' and 'surrounding environment' services' and 'surrounding environment.

Implications

The study provides a number of key points that have practical implications. Ensuring service quality in agri tourism being the most important task of service providers. The study's conclusions have broader implications for the tourism destination's efficient management and marketing. Creating marketing campaigns and unique initiatives oriented towards the quality of services and experiences offered to visitors in order to draw in tourists will have broader effects. It can be utilized by the tourism department, destination management companies, and agritourism business owners to segment the market and create marketing campaigns and advertisements that are based on the experiences and behavioural intentions of travellers.

Limitations

The study focused on tourists visiting the agri tourism destinations in Kerala. However, the findings derived from the study may not be directly applicable to other tourist destinations. To

enhance generalizability, future research should include samples from various regions and sites. The empirical data were collected from 100respondents. While this sample size is reasonable, larger samples could provide more robust insights.

Scope for further Research

In the current study, the investigator looked at fresh angles on the following subjects that were deemed worthy of additional study.

- Impact of loyalty on agri tourism developments-A comparative analysis between local and foreign tourists.
- Agri tourism entrepreneurship- A way for sustainable rural development

Acknowledgements

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