



Farm Tourism in Kerala – An Empirical Analysis of Service Quality

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Farm tourism is an integral part of eco-tourism. Being an agricultural nominated state, Kerala has huge potential for developing farm tourism without incurring much additional cost. This study aims to examine the service quality of farm tourism spots in Kerala and to analyse its relationship with the overall satisfaction level of tourists. This is a descriptive paper based on both primary and secondary data. The study used a perception-based SERVPERF scale for measuring service quality. The dimensions of the SERVPERF scale include tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The study collected data from 100 farm tourists visiting farm tourism spots in the Wayanad district of Kerala using a convenience sampling method. Cronbach's alpha values for service quality dimensions were high, and hence the SERVPERF scale used in the study is proven to be highly reliable. Findings revealed that the majority of the respondents prefer farms of service quality, empathy has the highest mean score, which is followed by assurance and responsiveness. The result further shows a significant difference between domestic and foreign tourists regarding their perception towards various dimensions of service quality. The study also highlighted a significant positive relationship between the service quality dimensions of tourism spots because of their eco-friendly nature, among the dimensions of tourist satisfaction. The outcome of the study can be used to improve the service quality of farm tourism spots in Kerala. Tourism planners can take the findings of the study to develop marketing strategies to attract new tourists and retain existing tourists.

Keywords: *Farm Tourism, Service Quality, SERVPERF, Perception, Tourists' Satisfaction.*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is recognized as an engine of economic growth in various countries of the world. Many countries have renovated their economies by developing their tourism potential.

Tourism is a fast-paced industry with rapid developments and trends. Today the concept of traditional tourism has changed, and some new areas of tourism have emerged. The recent concept of sustainable tourism lies on the premise

that it can be achievable through the development of alternative forms of tourism. Farm Tourism is one of the recent trends in the tourism industry that promotes sustainable tourism development, and it is increasingly popular among the tourist. Farm tourism is an important component of eco-tourism. It has many features of eco-tourism, such as meeting the criteria of environmental friendliness and contributing to the protection of nature. Today's farmers offer various services to motivate tourists to visit the agricultural field. The activities involved in farm tourism include educational visits, staying on a farm, outdoor sports, participation in the rural lifestyle and local community, enjoying locally produced food, enjoyment of the natural environment and rural heritage, cultural activities, gift shop, processing and production tour, tree house, multi-cuisine restaurant, fishing, house boating, hunting, trekking, etc. The major reason to move forward with this concept is that it can contribute to the overall income, profitability and cash inflow of farm-based businesses. Farm tourism is one of the best practices in sustainable tourism through which the farmers can earn a lot of money by selling a variety of things to visitors. The techniques used by successful farming enterprises include the demonstration of agricultural activities, participation of tourists in agricultural activities, farm store, exhibition of farm equipment, selling fresh farm products and craft items, educational tours for school children, officers and progressive farmers, farm Schools to teach a particular skill, cooking demos to satisfy homemakers, pick- your item and cook it, moonlight activities, etc. Proper management of farm tourism helps to create a harmonious relationship between the rural and urban communities.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This paper attempts to examine the service quality of farm tourism in Kerala. Studies on service quality and customer satisfaction in the tourism industry have received considerable attention from the part of tourism marketers and research scholars in recent years. In this context, it is highly essential to examine the available literature related to the topic to identify the areas already covered and also to identify the research gap.

Barbieri(2013) compared 1 compared the sustainability of agritourism farms with other farm entrepreneurial ventures in the United States with the help of sustainable development and farm enterprise diversification frameworks. Data collected from 873 US farms with a diversified entrepreneurial portfolio indicated that agritourism farms approach more sustainability than their counterparts by producing multiple environmental, economic and sociocultural benefits for their farms, households, and even for the society as a whole. Results showed that when compared with other farm entrepreneurial ventures, agritourism is more successful in increasing farm profits, conserving the natural and cultural heritage and creating employment opportunities.

Busby and Rendle (2000)², in their article titled "The transition from tourism on farms to farm tourism," reviewed the nature of farm tourism according to the literature, drawing on international examples and illustrating some of the ways in which the products have been categorised. The article describes that the transition from tourism to farm-to-farm tourism is a complex process involving a range of factors.

Edward (2005)³ conducted a study on the quality attributes of Kerala as a global tourism destination. The focus of the study was to understand international tourists' activities and benefits sought, destination quality perception, and vacation satisfaction factors in Kerala as a tourist destination. The assessments of tourists' overall quality perception ratings showed that tourists were generally likely to be satisfied, impressed with, and intend to recommend the destination to others. Separate assessments for the selected 24 destination attributes showed that major quality gaps occur in the areas of hygiene, basic amenities, tourist information, and local transportation, which point to the need for further enhancement of quality in these areas.

Liu and Yen (2010)⁴ in their study, pointed out that in a highly-competitive leisure service industry, improving service quality to gain competitive advantages is the only key to sustainable management of leisure agriculture. The research results show that there are positive relationships among service quality, positive tourism impact and total tourist satisfaction and some demographic variables may lead to significant differences in the perception of service

quality, tourism impact, and total tourist satisfaction.

Mahaliyanaarachi (2015)⁵ in his study, states that agritourism farmers try to make their production more extensive and environmentally clean because these criteria motivate the tourists to visit farms. He suggested that the service provider at the farm stay must give more attention to feedback from the customer and should use all responses, both positive and negative, to improve the quality of service delivery.

From the literature review, it can be understood that several studies have been undertaken in different parts of the world to measure the quality of services offered by the tourism industry. But little or no effort has been undertaken to examine the quality of services offered by farm tourism units in Kerala. So, this paper is an initiative for analysing the service quality of farm tourism units in Kerala by using appropriate statistical tools and models.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The tourist is the central point of any tourism industry. In a highly competitive market like Kerala, a tourist destination can flourish only by delivering quality services and improving tourist satisfaction. To improve the service quality of the farm tourism spots in Kerala, it is important to understand the perception level of tourists towards various dimensions of service quality. This study attempts to analyse the quality of services provided by farm tourism providers in Kerala and the resulting tourist satisfaction.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Service quality has received considerable attention in the last few years. While service quality is well documented in the literature review, fewer studies have investigated the relationship between service quality with tourists' satisfaction in farm tourism, particularly in Kerala. This study aims to analyse the service quality of farm tourism and to examine the impact of service quality on tourist satisfaction. It will further provide information on the type of consumers willing to go for farm tourism. The outcome of this study will be a stepping stone for further research and help in realising the dream of promoting farm tourism in Kerala.

5. OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the tourists' perception towards the quality of services offered by farm tourism units.
- To analyse the relationship between various dimensions of service quality and the satisfaction level of tourists.

6. HYPOTHESIS

- **H01:** There is no significant difference between domestic and foreign tourists regarding the perception towards the service quality of farm tourism units of Kerala.
- **H02:** There is no significant relationship between the service quality of farm tourism and the satisfaction level of tourists.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive 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 district of Kerala using Google Forms. Respondents are selected through a convenient sampling method. The sample size of the study is 100, which includes 50 domestic tourists and 50 foreign tourists. The modified SERVPERF scale is used for collecting data relating to service quality. The dimensions used in the SERVERF scale are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. - five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to disagree strongly, is used for assessing the level of perception and satisfaction of tourists. The SERVPERF instrument used in the study involves 13 statements. Five variables are used for measuring the satisfaction level of tourists, such as accessibility, infrastructure, accommodation facilities, behaviour of staff, and shopping facilities. In addition to these statements, the tourists were asked to report their socio-demographic details such as age, gender, nationality, educational qualification, occupation, monthly income, and purpose of visit. Data were analysed using SPSS and appropriate descriptive and inferential statistical techniques such as frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation, correlation analysis, and independent sample t-test.

8. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

8.1. Reliability Analysis

The reliability of the statements under the SERVPERF scale and satisfaction is assessed using Cronbach's alpha

Table-1: Reliability Analysis

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha
Tangibility	.845
Reliability	.800
Responsiveness	.714
Assurance	.707
Empathy	.683
Overall Service Quality	.876
Tourists' Satisfaction	.924

Source: (Primary Data)

The reliability of the statements in the questionnaire is assessed by using Cronbach's coefficient alpha. Cronbach's alpha values for all the statements under the SERVPERF Scale are

above 0.6. Similarly, Cronbach's alpha value of the statements measuring tourists' satisfaction is .924. Therefore, the survey instrument is reliable.

8.2. Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table-2: Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Age Category	Up to 20 years	10
	20–40 Years	46
	40–60 Years	32
	Above 60 Years	12
Gender	Male	72
	Female	28
Nationality	Domestic	50
	Foreign	50
Educational Qualifications of the Respondents	Plus-Two and Below	20
	Graduation	44
	Post-Graduation	30
	Others	4
Monthly Income	Below Rs. 20000	4
	Rs. 20000 - Rs. 40000	16
	Rs. 40000 - Rs . 60000	34
	Above Rs.60000	46
Occupation	Business	34
	Professional	18
	Govt. Employee	20
	Private Employee	22
	Others	6
Purpose of Visit	Entertainment	24
	Education And Research	13
	Interest In Agriculture	19
	Eco-Friendly nature	44

Source: (Primary Data)

Table 2 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 (46%), and most of the respondents are male (72%). Among the respondents, 50% are domestic tourists, and the remaining 50% are foreign tourists. Most of the

respondents are educated, qualifying for graduation and above. 34% of the respondents are business people, and the monthly income of most of the respondents is Rs. 40000 and above. 44% of the respondents visited farm tourism spots because of their eco-friendly nature, and 24% for entertainment purposes.

8.3. Satisfaction Level of Tourist

Table-3: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Variables Measuring Tourists' Satisfaction

Sl. No.	Variables Measuring Tourists' Satisfaction	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Accessibility	3.06	.973
2	Infrastructure	3.46	.947
3	Accommodation facilities	3.38	.940
4	Behaviour of staff	4.04	.803
5	Shopping facilities	3.49	.882
6	Overall satisfaction	3.49	.798

Source: (Primary Data)

Five factors have been used for measuring farm tourists' satisfaction. Descriptive statistics showed that the factor behaviour of staff has the highest mean score (4.04), followed by shopping facilities (3.49), and infrastructure (3.46). The factor accessibility has the lowest mean score (3.06).

8.4. Testing of Hypothesis

❖ Perception Towards Service Quality of Farm Tourism Unit

H01: There is no significant difference between domestic and foreign tourists regarding the perception towards the service quality of farm tourism units of Kerala.

Table-4: Results of t-test for Significant Difference between Domestic and Foreign Tourists with regards to the Perception towards Service Quality of Farm Tourism Unit

Service Quality Dimensions	Types of Tourists	Types of Tourists			t value	P value
Service Quality Dimensions	Domestic	Domestic	Foreign	Foreign		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation		
Tangibility	3.88	.465	2.53	.606	12.461	<0.001**
Reliability	2.76	.517	2.39	.658	3.155	<0.001**
Responsiveness	3.95	.454	3.20	.504	7.787	<0.001**
Assurance	3.96	.570	3.59	.780	2.707	<0.001**
Empathy	4.18	.569	3.97	.584	1.821	0.072
Overall Service Quality	3.75	.292	3.14	.262	10.986	<0.001**

Source: (Primary Data)

** denotes significance at the 1% level

An Independent sample t-test is used for testing the significance of the difference between domestic and foreign tourists regarding the

service quality of farm tourism units of Kerala. Since all P values of service quality dimensions except empathy are less than .01, the null

hypothesis is rejected at the 1% level. Hence, there is a significant difference between domestic and foreign tourists regarding their perception towards various dimensions of service quality, except for empathy. Based on the mean score, domestic tourists have a better perception towards various dimensions of service quality than foreign tourists. Both for the domestic and foreign tourists, the lowest mean scores are found with respect to dimension reliability. For the

domestic tourists, the mean score under reliability is 2.76, and for the foreign tourists, it is 2.39. The mean score under empathy is 4.18 for domestic tourists and 3.97 for foreign tourists.

❖ Service Quality of Farm Tourism and The Satisfaction Level of Tourists

H02: There is no significant relationship between the service quality of farm tourism and the satisfaction level of tourists.

Table-5: Results of Correlation Analysis

	Tangibility	Reliability	Responsive ness	Assurance	Empathy	Overall service quality	Tourist Satisfaction	
Tangibility	R	1	.131	.615**	.306**	.266**	.820**	.388**
	Sig.		.194	.000	.002	.007	.000	.000
Reliability	R	1		.216*	.213*	.209*	.406**	.236*
	Sig.			.031	.032	.034	.000	.018
Responsiveness	R		1		.234*	.258**	.770**	.281**
	Sig.				.019	.010	.000	.005
Assurance	R			1		.238*	.505**	.268*
	Sig.					.017	.000	.011
Empathy	R				1		.477**	.288**
	Sig.						.000	.004
Overall service quality	R					1		.334**
	Sig.							.001
Tourist Satisfaction	R						1	
Tourist Satisfaction	Sig.							

Source: (Primary Data)

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 5 shows the correlation among various dimensions of service quality and between service quality and tourists' satisfaction. The correlation coefficient between overall service quality and tourists' satisfaction is .334, which indicates (coefficient of determination = $r^2 = .111$) that 11.1% of the variation in tourists' satisfaction is explained by service quality. In other words, there is a 11.1% positive relationship between service quality and tourist satisfaction, and it is significant at the 1% level. Among the various

dimensions of service quality, the Pearson correlation coefficient is the highest between tangibility and tourists' satisfaction (.388), which is followed by empathy and tourists' satisfaction (.288). As per this analysis, all correlation values are significant.

9. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study found that most of the farm tourists are young people, and the majority

are highly educated and are engaged in either business or private/government employment. Most of the tourists are male and have a monthly income of above Rs.40000.

- The main motive of visiting for most of the farm tourists is the eco-friendly nature of the farm tourism spots. The mean scores of the items under the SERVPERF scale show that the perception towards the reliability dimension is very low, it is only 2.57.
- The result of the independent sample t-test shows that there is a significant difference between domestic and foreign tourists regarding the service quality of farm tourism spots. Compared to foreign tourists, domestic tourists have a better perception towards various dimensions of service quality. The mean scores of the reliability and tangibility dimensions are very low in the case of both foreign and domestic tourists. It shows that the farm tourism spots are not providing the services which are promised through their advertisement. Similarly, the physical facilities at the farm tourism destinations are not as per the expectation by tourists.
- The study recognised the importance of improving the service quality for increasing the satisfaction level of tourists through correlation analysis. The correlation analysis showed a significant positive correlation between service quality and tourist satisfaction. So, the farm tourism providers should take maximum effort to improve the service quality to make the tourists feel satisfied. Only the satisfied tourist can become loyal, and the loyal tourists will revisit the destination and recommend the spot to their friends and relatives.

10. CONCLUSION

The paper explains the perception level of farm tourists towards service quality with the help of the SERVPERF scale. The study has also explored the role of service quality on the satisfaction level of farm tourists. Since farm tourism has an important role to play in the sustainable development of the local community, it must be promoted. Tourism departments and farm tourism entrepreneurs can use the findings of the

study to design the destination and plan their marketing activities. Topics such as the factors influencing the revisit intention of farm tourists and the role of farm tourism in the sustainable development of the local community can be studied in future.

11. SUGGESTIONS

- Since most tourists select farm tourism due to its eco-friendly nature, importance should be given to maintaining a high level of natural beauty, greenery, and a clean and peaceful atmosphere at the tourist spot. Organic farms are to be promoted to offer tourism services.
- The basic amenities and infrastructure in the destinations, entertainment experience, educational activities, events and recreational activities, direct marketing of good quality agriculture products, etc., are to be improved to satisfy both domestic and foreign tourists.
- Employees at the farm tourism spots should be adequately equipped with knowledge and skills in handling queries from tourists.
- Farm tourism services should be offered at a reasonable price to attract both domestic and foreign tourists.

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