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Comparative analysis of domestic and foreign tourists' perceptions of destination service quality: Evidence from the Buddhist Circuit in India

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Abstract

The Buddhist Circuit holds significant spiritual, social, cultural, and economic value and attracts a diverse range of tourists. Understanding the perceptions of tourists regarding the destination service quality is crucial for enhancing the overall tourism experience. This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of domestic and foreign tourists' perceptions of destination service quality in the Buddhist Circuit of India. A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a structured questionnaire to collect data on tourists' perceptions of destination service quality. Four hundred thirty two tourists were surveyed to determine their perceptions of destination service quality. The data was analyzed using statistical techniques to uncover similarities and disparities in the perceived attributes of destination service quality. The findings of the research reveal that tourists generally had a positive perception of the overall destination service quality in the Buddhist Circuit. The findings of the study contribute to the existing literature on destination service quality and provide valuable insights for destination managers, policymakers, and tourism stakeholders.

Keywords: Buddhist Circuit; Destination service quality; Domestic tourists; Foreign tourists

1. Introduction

The quality of services offered by a destination plays a vital role in captivating visitors and tourists, shaping their travel experiences [1]. When choosing a destination, travelers are naturally inclined towards those that excel in providing exceptional services and facilities. These remarkable service encounters have the potential to create lasting impressions, leading to higher levels of tourist satisfaction [2], increased repeat visits, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations [3]. In today's fiercely competitive travel market, destinations that prioritize and deliver high service quality gain a significant advantage over their counterparts, attracting the attention of potential visitors [4]. Such destinations have the ability to attract larger numbers of tourists, stimulate tourist spending, generate employment opportunities, enhance the destination's image and competitiveness, foster stakeholder engagement, and yield direct benefits for the local community while reducing costs for operators. Consequently, these aspects contribute to the catalytic growth of the local economy [5].

In recent years, the Buddhist Circuit in India has gained significant attention as a prominent pilgrimage and cultural tourism destination. It comprises several sacred sites associated with the life and teachings of Lord Buddha, attracting a wide range of visitors, including domestic and foreign tourists. The Buddhist Circuit offers a unique blend of historical, religious, and natural attractions, coupled with the cultural heritage of the region [6]. As tourism in the Buddhist Circuit continues to grow, it becomes essential to assess and analyze the perceptions of tourists regarding destination service quality to enhance the visitor experience. In light of this, the present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of domestic and foreign tourists' perceptions of destination service quality within the iconic Buddhist Circuit of India. By delving into these perceptions, the study seeks to identify areas of strength, potential gaps, and opportunities for improvement in destination service quality service. This research endeavors to make a significant contribution to the

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field of tourism by providing valuable knowledge that can enhance the overall tourism experience and contribute to the sustainable development of destinations.

2. Literature Review

Several authors have provided definitions of service quality, emphasizing various aspects and perspectives. Gronroos [7] defines service quality as the comparison customers make between their expectations and perceptions of a service. According to Parasuraman et al. [8], service quality is defined as the difference between the expected service and the customer's perception of the actual service received. Cronin and Taylor [9] view service quality as a long-term overall assessment, exemplifying a form of attitude. Oliver [10] defines service quality as the actual performance of a service in terms of specific service attributes within the particular service context. In the realm of tourism, Tosun et al. [11] expressed the notion that destination quality encompasses not just physical products, but also the services provided, emphasizing a holistic perspective. The World Tourism Organization [12] provides a comprehensive definition of destination quality. According to their definition, destination quality is the result of a process that encompasses fulfilling the desires, demands, and anticipations of consumers regarding tourism offerings and services. This is achieved while maintaining a reasonable price range and adhering to mutually agreed contractual terms. Additionally, destination quality encompasses implicit factors such as safety and security, hygiene, accessibility, communication, infrastructure, and public amenities and services. Furthermore, it includes ethical considerations, transparency, and respect for the human, natural, and cultural environment [12]. A brief description of destination Service quality indicators is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Destination Service Quality Indicators

Reference	Destination Service Quality Indicators
Ghosh and Sofique [13]	Civil attractions (music and dance performances, organized trips, events, and theatres) and heritage attractions (architectural marvels, historic buildings, and monuments)
Tosun et al., [11]	Accommodation, local transport, cleanliness, hospitality, activities, language communication, airport services, location, culture, and beauty
Rajaratnam et al. [14]	Logistics and accessibility, amenities, hygiene, the core tourism experience, security, information, hospitality, and value for money
Cong [15]	Destination brand, transportation, attractions, entertainment, and hospitality
Mukherjee et al. [16]	Quality of safety, quality of information, quality of regulatory factor, quality of staff, quality of food, quality of transport, quality of accommodation, quality of attributes, value for money offer, quality of emotional responses, quality of uniqueness, (quality of people, and quality of climate
Fajriyati et al. [17]	Activities, entertainment and attractions, destination cleanliness, image, safety and infrastructure, availability of local transportation, tourist information, appropriate facilities for children and the elderly people, and friendliness of the local people

Source: Literature Review

3. Research Methodology

The study was conducted at five prominent destinations along the Buddhist Circuit: Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali, and Sarnath. These destinations were chosen due to their historical and religious significance, attracting both domestic and foreign tourists. The sample consisted of domestic tourists who were Indian residents and foreign tourists representing various countries. The selection criteria ensured that participants had visited at least one destination within the Buddhist Circuit and had experienced the destination services. The sample size was determined based on the principles of representativeness and statistical power. A total of 307 domestic tourists and 125 foreign tourists were included in the study.

The research instrument included variables related to tourists' demographic information and destination service quality. Destination service quality was measured using 48 items derived from previous studies in the tourism field. Demographic information was collected through four items. The Likert scale was utilized to assess the respondents' agreement or disagreement with specific statements related to destination service quality attributes. The respondents

were asked to rate the destination service quality attributes on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was administered to participants in person at the selected destinations of the Buddhist Circuit. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of respondents to ensure its clarity, relevance, and validity.

The data were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were employed to summarize the demographic information and provide an overview of the sample characteristics. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to evaluate tourists' perceptions of destination service quality. Independent sample t-tests were conducted to compare the perceptions of domestic and foreign tourists. The data analysis was performed using SPSS 23 software, which facilitated the statistical calculations and analysis of the research findings.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Demographic profile of respondents

Table 2 provides information on the frequency and percentage of respondents based on several variables: gender, age, marital status, and country of residence.

Table 2 Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender			Marital status		
Male	305	70.6	Single	172	39.8
Female	127	29.4	Married	242	56.0
Age			Others	18	4.2
18-24	97	22.5	Country of residence		
25-34	139	32.2	India	307	71.1
34-44	105	24.3	Other countries	125	28.9
45-54	56	13.0			
55-64	29	6.7			
65 or over	6	1.4			

The majority of respondents were male, accounting for 70.6% of the total sample. Female respondents constituted 29.4% of the total sample. The largest age group among the respondents was 25-34, representing 32.2% of the total sample. The second-largest age group was 18-24, accounting for 22.5% of the total sample. The remaining age groups (34-44, 45-54, 55-64, and 65 or over) comprised smaller proportions of the total sample, with percentages ranging from 1.4% to 24.3%. The majority of respondents were married, making up 56% of the total sample. Single respondents accounted for 39.8% of the total sample. The remaining respondents, classified as "Others," represented 4.2% of the total sample. The majority of respondents resided in India, constituting 71.1% of the total sample. Respondents from other countries accounted for 28.9% of the total sample. These demographic variables provide valuable insights for analyzing the characteristics and composition of the sample population.

4.2. Comparative analysis of domestic and foreign tourists' perceptions of destination service quality in the Buddhist Circuit of India

Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation values for different service quality attributes in relation to domestic tourists and foreign tourists. Each attribute is rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with a higher score indicating higher satisfaction. It also includes t-statistics and p-values for comparing the means between the two tourist groups.

Table 3 Significance tests between domestic and foreign tourists on the importance of items concerning destination service quality of the Buddhist Circuit.

Destination Service Quality Attributes	Domestic Tourists		Foreign Tourists		t-stat	p-value
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
Vibrant culture and rich heritage.	4.4267	0.69804	4.5280	0.54737	-1.605	0.110
Exciting and interesting attractions.	4.3583	0.78087	4.3920	0.55206	-0.507	0.613
Breathtaking scenery and natural attractions.	4.0782	0.76296	4.3200	0.53280	-3.236	0.001**
Wide variety of events and entertainment activities.	3.8632	1.01340	4.1760	0.74123	-3.555	0.000**
Variety of things to do and see.	4.0261	0.92495	4.0800	0.61696	-0.706	0.480
Unique and authentic local experience.	4.1466	0.81730	4.3200	0.59024	-2.154	0.032**
Good connectivity/network with roads, rail and airports.	3.9511	0.79678	4.0320	0.81256	-0.951	0.342
Transportation facilities.	3.8143	0.82529	3.8240	0.86196	-0.109	0.913
Traffic congestion.	3.3453	1.00554	3.3120	1.17375	0.278	0.781
Convenient parking spaces.	3.2671	1.05424	3.4080	1.21214	-1.205	0.22
The travel to and from the destination is hassle-free.	3.6026	0.92446	3.7680	1.03282	-1.629	0.104
Adequate basic facilities.	3.1694	1.10138	3.0480	1.19039	0.982	0.327
Adequate way side amenities.	3.4658	0.97080	3.1040	1.19017	4.355	0.000**
Dedicated tourist facilities.	3.1531	1.10525	3.0400	1.17364	0.947	0.344
Quality restaurants/ eating outlets.	3.4821	1.04889	3.1520	1.24470	2.611	0.010*
Clean and comfortable dining environment.	3.5147	0.95774	3.1040	1.19693	3.416	0.001**
Well trained tour guides.	2.9023	1.08926	2.7920	1.14509	0.940	0.348
Multi-lingual audio guide facilities.	2.3388	1.12426	2.0800	1.08954	2.189	0.029*
Skilled manpower.	2.4365	1.08993	2.5920	1.11512	-1.323	0.187
Availability of quality food and beverage services.	3.5114	1.08271	3.2960	1.23147	1.706	0.090
Wide varieties of cuisines.	3.6287	1.06591	3.6640	0.97504	-0.320	0.749
Good name and reputation in national and international markets.	4.0358	0.97452	4.0400	1.08806	-0.039	0.969
International awareness of destination products.	3.8208	0.96193	3.8800	1.00483	-0.572	0.568
Characteristics of the destination.	3.8893	0.86741	4.1280	0.62186	-3.206	0.001**

Appropriate signage.	3.7036	0.89301	3.8400	0.91051	-1.432	0.153
Local maps are user-friendly.	3.6808	0.87207	3.7200	0.96386	-0.411	0.681
Service providers are knowledgeable.	3.8078	0.88867	3.9200	0.82891	-1.213	0.226
Infrastructure of the destination.	3.6906	0.90677	3.8480	0.79368	-1.792	0.074
Aesthetically attractive destination.	3.7492	0.84344	3.9760	0.76690	-2.707	0.007*
Service providers dress professionally.	3.3746	1.01286	3.4480	0.96266	-0.693	0.489
Tourist facilities.	3.3453	1.00554	3.2240	1.03069	1.129	0.260
Neat and clean tourist areas around the destination.	3.2573	1.04267	3.1760	1.11488	0.700	0.484
High public safety, particularly for vulnerable groups.	3.5375	0.94682	3.7680	0.94302	-2.298	0.022*
Local stakeholders actively develop tourism.	3.5342	0.93653	3.7040	0.80346	-1.896	0.059
Safe and secure destination.	3.8860	0.82250	4.0080	0.70134	-1.557	0.121
Polite, friendly, and helpful service providers.	3.9023	0.81863	4.0800	0.64258	-2.399	0.017*
Knowledgeable and experienced tour guides.	3.8013	0.83799	3.9760	0.78765	-2.052	0.041*
Service providers are always eager to serve.	3.8599	0.78586	4.0320	0.73983	-2.098	0.036*
Service providers are prompt and always available to offer quick assistance.	3.9088	0.75287	3.9120	0.75151	-0.040	0.968
Best possible service from tourism service provider.	3.8143	0.84098	3.8320	0.81058	-0.200	0.842
Service providers pay attention to the tourists' needs.	3.7524	0.73026	3.8320	0.76975	-1.011	0.313
Polite and friendly service providers.	3.8893	0.76746	3.9360	0.81065	-0.565	0.573
Service providers aim to satisfy tourists.	3.8762	0.83489	4.0080	0.81810	-1.496	0.135
Destination managers provide clear direction.	3.7655	0.79852	3.8720	0.79287	-1.260	0.208
Reliable Service providers.	3.7231	0.75292	3.6000	0.94186	1.302	0.194
Suitable visiting hours for tourists	3.7199	0.90732	3.6320	1.04369	0.873	0.383
Promptness and hospitality in services.	3.8274	0.77512	3.7200	1.05188	1.033	0.303
Street vendors, kiosks, and souvenir stalls are well-managed.	3.7459	0.86354	3.4480	1.05078	2.807	0.006*

Note. *Significance at 0.05; **Significance at 0.01.

Breathtaking scenery and natural attractions, wide variety of events and entertainment activities, unique and authentic local experience, adequate way side amenities, clean and comfortable dining environment, characteristics of the destination, aesthetically attractive destination, high public safety, particularly for vulnerable groups, polite, friendly, and helpful service providers, service providers are always eager to service attributes received higher mean ratings from foreign tourists compared to domestic tourists. This indicates that these attributes are more positively perceived by foreign tourists. Knowledgeable and experienced tour guides attribute showed no significant difference in mean scores between domestic tourists and foreign tourists. The t-test result suggests no statistically significant difference in perception between the two groups. Street vendors, kiosks, and souvenir stalls are well-managed attribute received a higher mean score from domestic tourists compared to foreign tourists. The t-test result with a p-value indicates a significant difference in perception. Domestic tourists find street vendors, kiosks, and souvenir stalls to be better-managed compared to foreign tourists. The t-tests reveal statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between domestic and foreign tourists' perceptions for several attributes: "breathtaking scenery and natural attractions", "wide variety of events and entertainment activities", "unique and authentic local experience", "adequate way side amenities", "quality restaurants/eating outlets", "clean and comfortable dining environment", "multi-lingual audio guide facilities", "characteristics of the destination", "aesthetically attractive destination", "high public safety, particularly for vulnerable groups", "polite, friendly, and helpful service providers", "knowledgeable and experienced tour guides", "service providers are always eager to serve", and street vendors, kiosks, and souvenir stalls are well-managed. These attributes have distinct differences in perception between domestic and foreign tourists. These findings suggest that there are differences in perception between domestic and foreign tourists regarding various destination service quality attributes. Understanding these differences can help in tailoring the services and improving the overall tourist experience to better meet the expectations of both domestic and foreign visitors.

5. Conclusion

The mean scores for most attributes are higher among foreign tourists compared to domestic tourists. This suggests that foreign tourists generally perceive the destination service quality attributes more favourably than domestic tourists. It is worth noting that the mean scores for both domestic and foreign tourists were generally above the neutral point of 3, indicating a positive perception overall. By analyzing the means, standard deviations, t-statistics, and p-values, destination managers can identify attributes where there is a significant difference in ratings between domestic and foreign tourists. This information can help destination managers and service providers understand the areas where they may need to focus on improving the experience for either group of tourists. Furthermore, attributes with no significant differences in ratings can be considered areas of strength where both domestic and foreign tourists are equally satisfied. This comprehensive analysis enables destination managers and service providers to make informed decisions and allocate resources effectively to enhance the overall tourist experience and meet the specific needs of different tourist segments.

The findings of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, the study contributes to the existing literature on destination service quality by exploring and comparing the perceptions of domestic and foreign tourists. The findings provide insights into the specific attributes that play a significant role in shaping tourists' perceptions of destination service quality in the Buddhist Circuit. Secondly, the research helps identify specific attributes of destination service quality that are of greater importance to domestic and foreign tourists. This information can be used to enhance the competitiveness of the Buddhist. Lastly, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers and destination managers to improve service quality within the Buddhist Circuit. By focusing on identified gaps and areas of improvement, specific measures can be implemented to enhance attractions, amenities, dining options, safety measures, hospitality, and tour guide services.

This study has certain limitations that open up avenues for further investigation. First, communication barriers arising from language differences between domestic and foreign tourists could pose a limitation. These barriers may impact the accuracy, reliability, and understanding of data collection, interpretation, and service quality perceptions. Second, the study relies solely on questionnaire surveys, which may limit the scope of data collection. Incorporating qualitative methods could provide richer insights into tourists' perceptions and enhance the research findings. Lastly, analyzing online reviews and social media platforms could provide real-time insights into tourists' perceptions and experiences, thus offering a valuable direction for future research.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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