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Assessing Service Quality Attributes of Rural Tourism in Bangladesh: Avenues for Improvement

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Abstract

Although Quality service in a rural setting is an essential aspect of rural tourism, service quality attributes are less discussed in rural tourism literature. This study investigates tourists' perceptions to identify important factors and existing levels of performance to provide a quality service in rural settings. Accordingly, we use Importance Performance Analysis (IPA) as an analytical frame of reference. Through a rigorous process, 25 service quality attributes were selected to generate tourists' perspectives on the importance and performance of rural tourism in Bangladesh. Data have been collected via a structured questionnaire from 500 respondents. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The investigation reveals that despite having all-natural resources, Bangladesh failed to flourish in rural tourism due to lacking human-made elements such as infrastructure and tourist facilities. This study will help the tourism stakeholders who provide services in rural settings understand the expectations of tourists. It will also help the policymakers to (re)shape tourism policy to make constructive decisions in developing rural tourism across the country.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Service quality attributes, IPA, Tourism policy, Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism involves temporary movement (24 hours to less than a year) to an unusual place or environment (not counted for daily or usual travel). Given the engagement of busy urban life, people are nowadays prone to escape within a rural landscape; accordingly, 'rural tourism' as a specific type of tourism evolved (Osti & Cicero, 2018; Rahman et al., 2018). Providing excellent tourist services can generate promising income in rural tourism destinations (Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2010).

As a driver of development and well-being, rural tourism increasingly contributes globally and specifically to the Asian economy (Winter, 2007; Zoto et al., 2013). In Bangladesh, rural tourism is still at the early stage of development, with an enormous prospect of employment creation and income generation for local people (Howlader, 2020; Rahman et al., 2018; Rahman et al., 2021). Although specific data in this regard are mainly missing, a general trend has been evident in the temporary movement of urban residents to rural areas of Bangladesh (The Financial Express, 2022).

As an industry, tourism is considered a part of the broader service sector. In the service sector, quality is considered one of the most important factors, depending on which the success or failure of the service is determined (Tabaku & Cerri, 2016). The relationship between quality and services has been studied previously, and the results repeatedly portray that service quality is directly related to customer satisfaction, which eventually leads to repeated and loyal customers of the business (Choi & Ann, 2013). In the tourism industry, improved service quality can play an important role in developing the competitive advantage of a tourist destination (Han & Radder, 2011). In this competitive business world, tourists are becoming more demanding and information-driven (Chang, 2013).

Such a situation is no different in the case of a rural tourism setting (Ramseook-Munhurrun et al., 2016). Some important issues need to be

accommodated while designing rural tourism development initiatives, for example, the expectations of the tourists (Cho et al., 2014) and the misconception regarding the tourists' motivation to visit a rural tourism destination (Tomić et al., 2020). On this note, a dearth of knowledge has been evidenced in the extant literature to assess service quality attributes that could shape rural tourism development initiatives and thereby realise the potential of this increasing tourism segment. Correspondingly, this research aims to explore the service quality attributes of rural tourism within a study context of Bangladesh.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural tourism and Bangladesh context

Rural tourism is mainly provided by residents in a rural and/or peripheral destination with small lodging and ancillary facilities (Ara et al., 2021; Negrusa et al., 2007). Although Bran et al. (1997) identified people, space, and products as the core elements of rural tourism, an interdependent social system also plays a crucial role (Rahman et al., 2018). From a broader outlook, physical, social, cultural, environmental, infrastructural, demographic, and economic factors influence rural tourism (Alipour & Varaki, 2013). Agro-based tourism, nature-based tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, riverine tourism, etc., are significant forms of rural tourism in a country (Sasu & Epuran, 2016). Together with these elements and/or forms of existing resources, available facilities and quality services set the base of rural tourism (Suchana et al., 2020). Rural tourism development is possible by preserving rural and traditional values and norms, creating jobs for employees, providing income scopes for residents, and developing infrastructure facilities (Ahamed, 2018). Thus, an integrated and all-encompassing perspective is essential for evaluating rural tourism.

Bangladesh, a South Asian country, possesses potential for rural tourism with a total of 87,182 villages where the 'riverine beauty, colourful tribal life

and simple village life of the friendly millions' remain a few motivational factors for visitors (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2018: XXVII). Islam and Carlsen (2012) claimed that rural tourism can alleviate Bangladesh's poverty by creating job opportunities for local communities. From a holistic viewpoint, the country should develop rural tourism as a form of sustainable tourism by creating a bridge between the visitors and community people while ensuring economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits (Ahmed & Jahan, 2013; Rahman et al., 2021).

Service quality attributes in rural tourism and assessment tool

Rural tourism has unique characteristics, including harmonising with nature, local culture and traditions (Albacete-Saez et al., 2007). These characteristics considerably impact the design of rural tourism products and services, thereby influencing overall service quality. According to Chin and Lo (2017), service quality at a rural destination is significantly influenced by three core factors: climate, relaxed environment, and community support. Djeri et al. (2018) utilised 32 destination attributes grouped into seven broad heads (accommodation, dining, environment, accessibility, activities/events, shopping, and attractions) to investigate tourism destinations' competitiveness. Acknowledging the differences between urban and rural lodging facilities, Choi et al. (2018) assessed the service quality of rural accommodation based on 18 attributes. In developing sustainable rural tourism evaluation indicators, Park and Yoon (2011, p.406) highlighted 'accessibility' and 'convenience' to signify service quality. Similarly, Kortoci and Kortoci (2017) explored several factors that potentially decide the fate of rural tourism at a particular destination. Most of these factors were equally emphasised in earlier studies mentioned here.

Over time, various methodologies and frameworks have been adopted to assess service quality with a generalised focus on service businesses (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Caro & Garcia, 2008; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et

al., 1985, 1988; Vena-Oya & Parrilla-González, 2024). Perhaps, SERVQUAL remains the most widely used tool to assess service quality across numerous industries including tourism (Batabyal et al., 2023; Choi & Ann, 2013; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Parasuraman et al., 2005). However, the model has limitations regarding accommodating some important factors for rural tourism development given its one-dimensional assessment feature (Arie et al., 2000). Subsequently, as an alternative assessment tool Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) has been adopted in tourism literature (Boley & Hammett, 2017; Choi et al., 2018; Vena-Oya & Parrilla-González, 2024). Martilla and James (1977) proposed the IPA model for determining marketing performance based on which decision-makers can support their decisions in different conflicting evaluations. The main aim of this model is to highlight the conflicting areas and provide a possible solution through a transparent process of evaluations. Thus, the tool facilitates dual foci by prioritising key attributes while identifying performance gaps and suggesting implementable actions.

Accordingly, we consider IPA an assessment tool in this research to evaluate the service quality attributes of rural tourism in Bangladesh. In similar research situations, the usefulness of IPA has already been acknowledged (Choi et al., 2018; Djeri et al., 2018; Dwyer et al., 2012). Furthermore, the IPA model can indicate areas for improvement based on which decision-makers can make strategic decisions. As shown in Figure 1, IPA assesses service quality on a two-dimensional grid: importance and performance. Such a grid eventually forms four quadrants to represent the intensity of importance and the performance of the attributes in consideration.

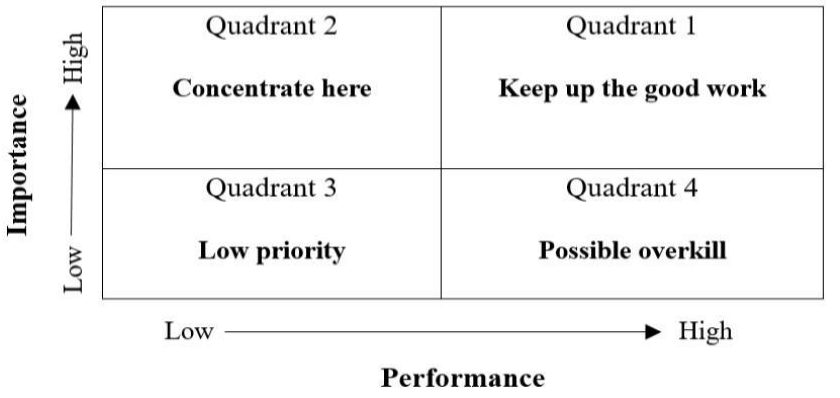

Figure 1: Adapted IPA matrix
Source: Developed based on the work by Martilla and James (1977).

Although all four quadrants are equally important from an explanatory point of view, the key focus from policy perspectives is to investigate the issues of concern to indicate the important attributes in which performance is not up to the mark (Quadrant 2). This study evaluates tourists' perceptions of the services currently available at rural settings in Bangladesh. Using the two-dimensional grid facilitates insights into areas that may require improvement, enhancing overall visitor experiences by exploring effective service delivery strategies aligning with tourist expectations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Selection of attributes for the IPA questionnaire

In this research, we utilised 25 selected attributes of service quality reflecting rural tourism destination competitiveness. Later, a three-phase survey was conducted to collect data to measure the importance and performance of the selected attributes with two parallel five-point Likert scales. Initially, we developed a set of 36 attributes following the works of Chin and Lo (2017), Choi et al. (2018), Djeri et al. (2018), and Kortoci and Kortoci (2017). Afterwards, we discussed these with an expert group of six members (one University Professor, one Hotel Manager, two Bangladesh Tourism Board

officials, one Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, and one Tour Operator). After consulting them, we finalise the 25 attributes for this research encapsulating broader environmental factors imposing policy conditions (Rahman et al., 2020). In the questionnaire, the scale for 'Importance' started from "not so important" to "very important", and for 'Performance', it started from "strongly disagree" and ended with "strongly agree". Instead of a bi-directional measure, a uni-directional measure has been used to directly compare the same attributes via the IPA grid (Dwyer et al., 2012; Oh, 2001).

Study settings and data collection

According to recent census data, 87,182 villages in Bangladesh have unique beauty, culture, and lifestyle (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In total, 98 villages and/or tourism sites were initially considered as a frame of inclusion in this study. After discussing this number with a group of 220 tourism students from a top University in Bangladesh, we came up with this number. Finally, we prepared a list of 62 villages and/or tourism sites for our research. Data have been collected from respondents who visited at least two villages and/or tourism sites from the list no more than two years earlier, counting from the first phase of data collection. Additional inclusion criteria include the popularity of those selected villages and/or sites among tourists and selection covering eight divisions of Bangladesh.

We employed a group of tourism students to collect data using a convenience sampling technique, where each student was assigned to fill out three responses randomly. The students were briefed before collecting survey data, and a pilot study was conducted on some of them to refine the questionnaire. The first data phase was collected from October 2019 to February 2020. A group of 90 students were assigned to record 270 responses (one response represents one survey). Later, data collection activity got stuck due to the outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The second phase

started from March 2022 to April 2022. The second data collection phase began when the number of new COVID cases decreased to 1% (Johns Hopkins University, Center for Systems Science and Engineering: JHU CSSE, 2022), and all the travel restrictions were withdrawn. We involved 40 students and produced 102 responses; six could not complete the task. This time, data were collected over the phone. The final phase of data collection took place from July 2023 to October 2023. During this phase, 50 students were assigned to conduct the face-to-face survey; however, two failed to survey, while 16 responses were filled out, violating the inclusion criteria. During this phase, we found 128 filled-out survey questionnaires. Thus, the final sample size (N) counted for 500.

Data analysis

The collected data was analysed using Microsoft Excel 2016 (v16.0). Overall, there were two primary foci for analysing data in this study. Firstly, the internal consistency or reliability of the items in the research instrument was measured using Cronbach's alpha as a yardstick. This analysis covers 50 items, including 25 for 'Importance' and 'Performance' indicators. Cronbach's alpha for 'Importance' was 0.920, and Cronbach's alpha for 'Performance' was 0.836. Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) proposed that a good Cronbach's score should be 0.70 and above. In this connection, the 'Importance' and the 'Performance' scales used in this study have evidenced high internal reliability, indicating that the items are internally consistent and correlated.

Secondly, IPA was administered to explore managerial and policy implications (Martilla & James, 1977). The grand means of 'importance' and 'performance' were used to make the crossover point on an IPA grid in which the vertical axis represents importance. In contrast, the horizontal axis labels it as performance. Afterwards, the mean score of individual attributes of importance and performance parameters was placed within the two-dimensional plot.

In the IPA graph, the first quadrant represents a good position, indicating that the attribute is essential to the visitors and that rural tourism is performing well. The quadrant is labelled as "Keep up the good work". However, the second quadrant, "concentrate here, " emphasises that the attributes are essential to the participants or visitors but are not performing well from a rural tourism perspective. Accordingly, it identifies attributes which require more effort and policy attention to improve rural tourism performance. The third quadrant signifies the "low priority" area where the attributes are unimportant to the visitors and the performance status is not up to the mark. The fourth quadrant emphasises attributes of low importance, as marked by the visitors; however, rural tourism is performing well. This quadrant is marked as "possible overkill".

RESULTS

The analysis results have been discussed in three sections: analysing respondents' profiles, revealing the IPA result, and exploring managerial and policy implications.

Respondents' profile

Table 1 illustrates the respondents' profiles following this research's inclusion criteria. Among 500 completed forms, 37.2% (186) respondents were female, while 62.8% (314) respondents were male. Most respondents belong to the 21-29 age group, accounting for almost 77% (386). Only 7% (36) of respondents were below 20, and 0.4% (2) were above 60. Among other age groups, 9% (45) belonged to 30-39, 4% (20) represented 40-49, and 2.2% (11) denoted 50-59 years old. Of 500 respondents, 374 were students, symbolising three-fourths of the total respondents.

Table 1: Profile of the respondents.

Variables		Frequency	%	Variables		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	314	63	**Age**	20 or below	36	7
	Female	186	37		21-29	386	77
	Total	**500**	**100**		30-39	45	9
Occupation	Student	374	75		40-49	20	4
	Service holder	63	13		50-59	11	2
	Self-employed	45	9		60 or above	2	1
	Unemployed	18	3		**Total**	**500**	**100**
	Total	**500**	**100**	**Travel Companion**	Alone	39	8
Monthly Income (BDT)	Less than 15000	359	72		Family (spouse, kids, parents, relatives, etc.)	159	32
	15001-30000	74	15		Friends	277	55
	30001-45000	30	6		Colleagues	25	5
	45001-60000	20	4		**Total**	**500**	**100**
	60001-75000	9	2				
	Above 750001	8	2				
	Total	**500**	**100**				

Source: Authors' own

Since most respondents were students, the average monthly income of 359 respondents (72%) was less than 15,000 BDT. The survey data showed that more than half of the tourists (55%) visited the destinations accompanied by their friends, and 31.8% (159) respondents visited with their families. Only 8% (39) visited the destination alone, and the rest, 5% (25), went with their colleagues. These statistics are meaningful given the respondents' demographic features as presented above.

IPA result

Table 2 exhibits the IPA results, including ranking service quality attributes in descending order based on the mean scores of 'importance' and 'performance' indicators.

Table 2: Importance-Performance analysis for rural tourism of Bangladesh.

Label	Service Quality Attributes	Rank by Importance	Mean (N=500) Overall Importance (I) Mean=4.50	Overall Performance (P) Mean=3.58	Rank by Performance
12	Natural relaxing environment	1	4.68	4.22	2
19	Roads for better access facilities	2	4.64	3.67	9
11	Natural refreshing environment	2	4.64	4.23	1
23	Outside weather conditions	2	4.64	4.06	4
8	Restroom and bathroom facilities	3	4.63	3.24	18
7	Cleanliness of the accommodation facilities	4	4.62	3.52	12
25	Water quality	5	4.61	3.84	6
14	The calm and soothing atmosphere	5	4.61	4.07	3
15	Resident's kindness and support	6	4.60	3.78	7
1	Fresh and hygienic local food	7	4.59	3.72	8
20	Transportation services for better accessibility	7	4.59	3.58	11
24	Air quality	8	4.57	4.06	4
22	Organising tourists' activity without compromising the local community's lifestyles	9	4.53	3.98	5
13	Physically active tourism activities	10	4.52	3.27	17
2	Modern and advanced technology, such as the Internet and mobile network	11	4.43	3.28	16
16	Supporting visitor services (e.g. home stays, entertainment, transport, etc.) arranged by the local community	12	4.42	3.42	13
6	Reservation system	13	4.40	3.42	13
5	Price level	13	4.40	3.42	13
3	Standard tourism facilities	14	4.38	3.28	16
10	Experiential activities for adults	14	4.38	3.40	14
18	Tour guide services provided by the local communities	15	4.36	3.62	10
17	Local communities' support and participation in cultural and folk events (e.g. arts and crafts)	16	4.35	2.78	21

21	Tourists' capacity	17	4.33	3.36	15
4	Availability of Tourism-related information (e.g. tour map)	18	4.30	3.20	19
9	Experiential activities for children	19	4.27	2.97	20

Source: Authors' own

In the table, the label indicates the initial order of the attributes, as shown in the survey questionnaire. In Figure 2, data are plotted following these labels. All 25 attributes were significant, ranging from 4.27 to 4.68, which signifies that the respondents found the attributes necessary for rural tourism development in Bangladesh. Among all the service quality attributes, the most significant five attributes are relaxing environment (12), accessibility (19), refreshing ambience (11), weather feature (23), and restroom facilities (8). On the other hand, the least significant five attributes are: "18-tour guide services provided by the local communities", "17-Local communities' support and participation in cultural and folk events", "21-tourists' capacity", "4-availability of tourism-related information", and "9-experiential activities for children".

Results evidenced that attributes perceived as less critical also performed poorly, whereas attributes with higher importance and 'natural' features performed equally well. For example, the top five performance attributes are: refreshing ambience (11), relaxing environment (12), calm and soothing atmosphere (14), weather feature (23), and organising tourist activity without compromising the local community's lifestyles (22). It is noticeable that out of the five attributes, four attributes are associated or linked to the broader natural environment. Another important finding is that the respondents identified accessibility and infrastructural issues as high priority; however, those are not performing up to the mark, leaving scopes for improvement. This is to generalise from the findings- tourism infrastructural development is needed more to ensure smooth accessibility than other tourism facilities such as tour guides, information, activities for children, cultural events, or crowd

management in rural destinations of Bangladesh.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The following scatter plot of IPA provides a clear picture for management to develop further strategies for developing rural tourism in Bangladesh. The grand means of importance and performance of 25 attributes are used to draw an intersecting point, which eventually helps to plot and identify the quadrants (Choi et al., 2018).

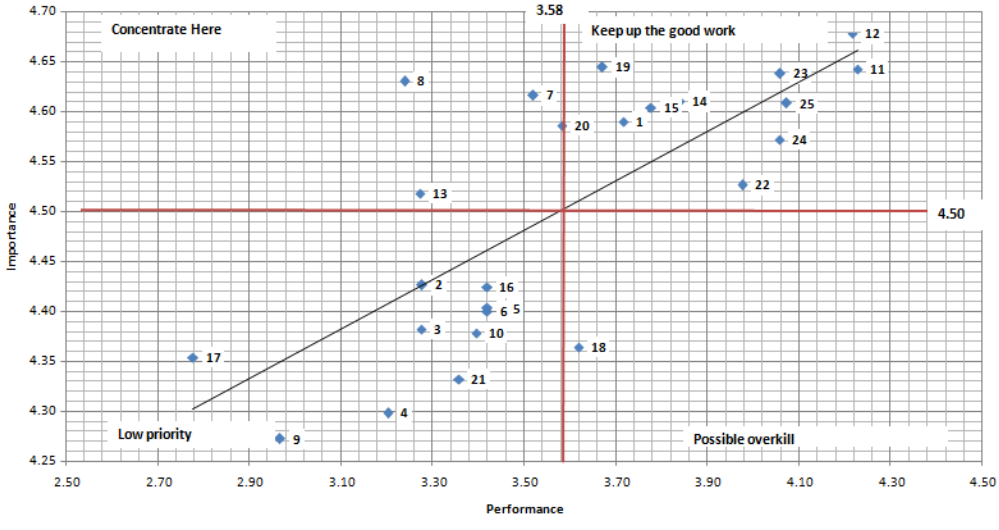

Figure 2: Importance performance analysis grid.
Source: Authors' own

Each quadrant has unique managerial and policy implications. Thus, the following sub-sections explore the necessary consequences of this study.

Keep up the good work.

Among the 25 attributes, ten attributes fall in Quadrant 1, "keep up the good work", indicating that these attributes are equally essential and performing well. Thus, efforts should be directed to at least maintaining the status quo. The characteristics in this quadrant are: water quality (25), air quality (24),

organising tourist activities without compromising the local community's lifestyles (22), outside weather conditions (23), resident's kindness and support (15), calm and soothing atmosphere (14), fresh and hygienic local food (1), roads for better access facilities (19), natural refreshing environment (11), and natural relaxing environment (12).

It is noteworthy to mention that, out of these ten attributes, seven are related to the natural environment or, more specifically, to 'physiography and climate', and the strength of these attributes can enhance overall service quality as well as the competitiveness of a destination (Ritchie & Crouch, 2010). The other three attributes reflect the built or human-made environmental component and spirit of hospitality (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2011). Regarding importance and performance, natural ecological components were in much better positions than human-made components. The ultimate implication reveals that service quality attributes of the built environment must be given due attention to improving rural tourism performance. This is mainly a case for better road facilities to ensure smooth accessibility to a rural destination.

Concentrate here

Quadrant 2 is labelled as 'concentrate here' and includes four essential attributes to visitors but performs poorly. Thus, attention is required from both policymakers and practitioners to these attributes. The attributes are restroom and bathroom facilities (8), cleanliness of the accommodation facilities (7), transportation services for better accessibility (20), and physically active tourism activities (13). To develop rural tourism effectively, the performance of these attributes must be improved. The first two attributes are related to individual property and directly influence the perception of service quality. Managerial and supervisory roles can help to enhance performance in these connections. The engagement and collaboration of the private and public sectors must be ensured to improve transportation services. Finally, the design of tourism activities should be well planned to engage visitors meaningfully and

render a lifetime experience. The lack of activities in the rural tourism context of Bangladesh is visible, given the mean score falling below the grand mean of the 'performance' indicator.

Low priority

Quadrant 3 is the 'low priority area' covering ten attributes, signifying that the respondents gave these attributes less importance than others. Also, these attributes are not performing well enough to boost rural tourism in Bangladesh. The attributes entail modern and advanced technology (2), supporting visitor services arranged by the local community (16), reservation system (6), price level (5), standard tourism facilities (3), experiential activities for adults (10), local communities support and participation in cultural and folk events (17), tourists' capacity (21), availability of tourism-related information (4) and experiential activities for children (9).

Although these attributes demonstrate a low-performance position, experts' opinions highlighted a few attributes that can improve overall service quality and a destination's competitiveness at a rural tourism destination. Firstly, in this age of technology, using modern knowledge to explore information is inevitable and in rural Bangladesh, the lack of network facilities primarily constrains this initiative. Secondly, active community involvement is believed to enhance a sense of ownership and accountability. Finally, engaging everyone actively is essential to grow interest among the visitors.

Possible overkill

Only one attribute falls within Quadrant 4, labelled as 'Possible overkill', indicating a situation where the respondents marked the attribute as less important while the attribute performed above par. The attribute under this category is 'tour guide services provided by the local communities' (18). This is quite an interesting finding, mainly when contemporary research focuses on communities' active involvement in tourism development. The underlying reason for giving less importance to this attribute may be linked to the spirit of

hospitality of local people in Bangladesh. It has been assumed that rural people will be helpful and cooperative. However, the performance of this attribute is marginally above the grand mean of the performance indicators, highlighting the need for policymakers to design initiatives to engage communities efficiently and effectively.

CONCLUSION

This research determines 25 service quality attributes to evaluate the prospect of rural tourism in rustic Bangladesh. With a particular reference to policy governance, all these attributes are associated with broader environmental factors. In rural tourism, most tourists search for relaxation and a natural atmosphere, which eventually refreshes their minds with the soothing purity of nature. Findings reveal that natural environmental components are doing better in rural contexts. However, (re)shaping and (re)arranging human-made components representing service quality attributes may facilitate rural tourism development in Bangladesh. Better transportation facilities and infrastructure development ensure better accessibility to a rural destination. In summary, the result indicates that rural tourism development in Bangladesh is complex and challenged by the performance criteria of service quality attributes. Service quality is usually considered good when the 'Performance' values are more significant than the 'Importance' values, which is quite the opposite, as evidenced in this research.

Based on the findings, four attributes require the immediate attention of policymakers and practitioners, while one attribute receives less attention. Ten of the remaining qualities align well with customer satisfaction, and the same number of attributes reflect low-prioritised areas that do not require immediate concerns.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This research provides a benchmark for studying and identifying practical service quality attributes to develop rural tourism in a developing nation, particularly Bangladesh. However, the research fails to incorporate the viewpoints of the destinations' communities, which are considered a core stakeholder group. A future researcher may consider this while upholding the overall validity of the findings through data triangulation. Moreover, this study predominantly adopts a quantitative research approach; future research can follow a qualitative approach to validate and generalise the findings of this study. Such an approach will generate in-depth understanding and critical insights.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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