



TOURIST SATISFACTION AND SERVICE QUALITY IN NORTHERN PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF GABRAL VALLEY, SWAT KOHISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the levels of visitors' satisfaction and service quality in northern Pakistan with particular focus on the Gabral Valley in Swat Kohistan. Despite the limited research on visitors' experiences and service levels, the area is recognized for its natural beauty, which is increasingly becoming a popular tourist attraction. This study's main objectives are to identify the level of satisfaction of visitors and quality of services provided, including accommodation, transport, food and beverages, and local facilities. The study also aims to identify the key factors which influence visitors' overall impressions in the area. The data was collected through structured questionnaires in Gabral Valley where the study was conducted. Demographic data, travel habits, pleasure levels, and opinions of service quality were all included in the questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using simple statistical methods such as percentages and graphical representation. The study's conclusions show that the standard of the infrastructure and services offered is directly related to visitor happiness. The area is of high natural value and cultural diversity for tourists, but there are also issues with facilities and services delivery. To boost the enjoyment by tourists and to promote sustainable tourism development in the area, the study suggests strengthening the infrastructure and the tourism services of the Gabral Valley.

Key words. Tourism, Tourist Satisfaction, Service Quality, Swat Valley, Gabral Valley

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an industry that is among the fastest growing in the world economy, and plays a vital role in socio-economic development, employment generation, and cultural exchange. It is widely recognized that tourism is a powerful catalyst for sustainable development and socio-economic growth in developing countries such as Pakistan, with its ability to stimulate local economies and promote the conservation of cultural heritage (UNWTO, 2019).

Pakistan's rich tourism potential is related with its diverse physical setting, historical past, archaeological sites and cosmopolitan traditions. The country offers many tourist sites in all the regions from the Himalayan and Hindu Kush mountain ranges in the north, to the coastal districts in the south (Government of Pakistan, 2020). The government's tourism promotion efforts, infrastructure upgrades and improved security have led to a renewed tourism growth in

northern Pakistan over the past few years (Khan et al., 2020).

Swat Valley and Kohistan are especially important of the northern areas due to its natural beauty, pleasant climate, riverine system, forests and rich cultural heritage (Ali et al., 2018). Swat Valley is the "Switzerland of Pakistan" and is famous for its beautiful scenery and ancient archeological sites associated with the ancient Gandhara culture. Likewise, Swat Kohistan's rugged terrain and relatively intact indigenous culture presents a great opportunity for adventure sports and ecotourism. Gabral Valley is a developing tourist resource which has been overlooked in the wider of the geographical and cultural contexts in tourism studies (Hassan et al. 2017).

The valley is a popular destination for nature lovers and adventurers, with its rich forests, rivers, alpine meadows, and traditional lifestyle. Despite these draws, the area has a number of problems, such as inadequate transportation infrastructure, few lodging options, shoddy communication systems, and a lack of tourism services, all of which could affect visitor happiness and the entire experience (Kozak, 2001).

Visitor satisfaction is typically defined as an important indicator of the success of tourism and is important since satisfied travelers are more likely to return to and recommend the area. Likewise, customer satisfaction and their decision to return to the service provider are greatly affected by service quality. The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman is a model that focuses on five factors of service quality that directly affects customer satisfaction: reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al 1988).

In view of this, the current research adopted the empirical methods in the field to measure the satisfaction of the visitors and the service quality in the Gabral valley. The survey specifically focuses on the perception of the visitors towards accommodation, transportation, food quality, hospitality, cleanliness, safety, and other facilities related to tourism. In addition, the study is looking to identify those elements that shape

visitors' experiences and will recommend ways that the region can develop more sustainable tourism.

1.1 Introduction to Swat valley

One of the most well-known mountainous areas in northern Pakistan, Swat Valley is well-known for its beautiful scenery, lush valleys, and diverse culture. The Swat district is located in Malakand division of KPK and has been a center of trade, cultural exchange and human settlement since time immemorial. Due to its proximity to the foothills of Hindu Kush mountain range and traversal by Swat River, the valley is a hot tourist spot for both domestic and foreign tourists. In the last few decades, Swat has regained its popularity as a tourist hotspot thanks to the improvements in its infrastructure and security systems (Khan et al., 2020).

1.2 Geographic and Cultural Importance

This section is a review of the geographical and cultural value of plants for human wellbeing. The geography of Swat Valley is varied, ranging from mountains up to high altitude to green plains. In addition to offering chances for many types of tourism, such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, and cultural tourism, this variance promotes a rich biodiversity. Its allure is enhanced by the weather, summer especially, in the valley. The uniqueness of the cultural status in Swat is its historical associations with the ancient Gandhara culture from the 1st Century BC to early century AD. The region has several archaeological sites, Buddhist monasteries and stupas that represent the history of the region (Ali et al., 2018). It is still a place of culture, with regional customs, languages, crafts and hospitality that still attract tourists and scholars, and its archeological heritage

1.3 The Valley of Gabral

The Gabral Valley is situated in the higher part of Swat in the region called Swat Kohistan. This is an area of difficult terrain with limited access, hence it has historically been somewhat remote. Consequently, much of its native culture, traditions and ways of life are preserved. Gabral Valley has gotten less scholarly attention than

central Swat, which has been thoroughly examined in the context of Gandharan archaeology. Its historical significance, however, is seen in the persistence of regional customs and its place in northern Pakistan's larger cultural landscape. The valley's natural heritage and intangible cultural practices are just some examples of traditional architecture, pastoral livelihoods and centuries-old customs (Hassan et al., 2017).

1.4 Tourism Potential of the Region

The Gabral Valley has a large potential for tourism that has not yet been fully exploited. It is endowed with natural features, such as rivers, snow-capped mountains, forests, and alpine meadows, that make it an ideal place for adventure and nature-loving activities. Perfect for outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, fishing, and ecotourism.

Despite these benefits, the Gabral Valley's tourism industry is still in its infancy. However, it is stunted by a number of problems such as bad roads, lack of organized tourism facilities, lack of adequate facilities and few lodging facilities. With thoughtful planning, investment and sustainable management, however, the valley can be a major tourist destination within the overall context of the Swat Valley (UNWTO, 2019). In this regard, the current study intends to investigate how visitor satisfaction is impacted by current tourism services and to pinpoint areas for improvement the overall tourism experience in Gabral Valley.

2. Research Questions

Based on the aims of the study, the researcher developed the following research questions:

1. What are visitors' perceptions of satisfaction at the Gabral Valley?
2. What is visitors' perception of the quality of services provided in the area?
3. What are the prime factors in the Gabral Valley visitor experience?

These questions are similar to the ones found in existing literature on tourist research, which link consumer satisfaction and behavioral intentions to the quality of the service.

3. Research Objectives

The current study aims at systematically exploring the experiences of the visitors to Gabral Valley with a focus on customer satisfaction and service provision. Specific objectives are:

1. To assess the tourist's satisfaction in Gabral Valley with reference to overall tourist experience, environment and hospitality services.
2. To determine the quality of service, which is an important factor to affect tourists' opinion, including lodging service, food service, transportation service and basic amenities.
3. To identify weaknesses and issues in tourism services that might affect the sustainable development of tourism in the region and its effects on the satisfaction of tourists.

4. Significance of the Study

Current study is significant due to the following reasons:

4.1 Academic Importance

This work not only provides real-time data from a comparatively under-researched region of northern Pakistan but also contributes to the field of tourism studies. Though places like Swat valley have attracted much scholarly attention, the emphasis has been on these places rather than others, such as Gabral Valley. The study contributes to the understanding of visitors' satisfaction and service quality in the development of travel destinations (Khan et al., 2020).

4.2 Practical importance

The study findings could be beneficial for policymakers, tourism departments, and local stakeholders. Based on visitor perception, authorities can enhance infrastructure, service levels, and develop new visitor regulations. The organizations such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa culture and tourism authority can utilize this study to develop specific plans for development of regional tourism.



4.3 Contribution to Local Economic Development

Rural and remote areas are particularly important areas where there is a close relationship between local economic development and tourism. Improved service quality and higher levels of visitor satisfaction may lead to higher levels of tourism, employment and income generation in local communities. This study shows the potential of Gabral Valley economy to benefit from the sustainable development of tourism (UNWTO, 2019).

5. Review of Literature

5.1 Previous Research in Pakistan

This section summarizes the research and studies done in Pakistan on tourism. Many aspects of the tourism industry have been studied from the perspectives of cultural heritage, destination image, tourist satisfaction and economic development. Few studies showed that the natural beauty, cultural diversity, historical heritage of Swat, Hunza and Kaghan valleys in North of Pakistan has attracted many domestic and foreign visitors to the area. Yet, there are some challenges confronting the sector such as low level of infrastructure, service quality, weak destination management, environmental problem (Hassan et al., 2017). Likewise, a study conducted in Kaghan Valley shows that the lack of roads, proper accommodation facilities, healthcare and recreational facilities, high density during peak seasons and improper waste disposal are drawbacks affecting growth of tourism (Arif, A. M., Hameed, A., & Anwar, A. 2022). These problems are having a negative impact on visitors' satisfaction and on the sustainability of tourism resources. The study highlights the importance of better infrastructure, efficient tourism planning, environment protection and better management of visitors as a vital way to ensure sustainable development of tourism in the region (Khan & Khan, 2020). Moreover, some scholars state that community participation and local stake holders' engagement play a crucial role in the successful tourism development in Pakistan (Ali et al. 2018), and Ahmad and Hussain state that the quality of

services, access and environmental sustainability are vital to the competitiveness of a tourist destination (Ahmad and Hussain 2019).

5.2 Tourist Satisfaction Theories

A theory that is often cited to explain visitor satisfaction is expectation confirmation theory, which suggests that satisfaction will be determined by how well expectations are met (Oliver, 1980). A number of elements, such as the appeal of the destination, the caliber of the services provided, and individual experiences, affect satisfaction in tourist contexts. Positive word-of-mouth and repeat business are frequently associated with high levels of satisfaction (Kozak, 2001).

5.3 Models of Service Quality (SERVQUAL Model)

This Models of Service Quality (SERVQUAL Model) introduces basic ideas from the field of customer service. One such most used model for assessing service quality is SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman. The approach focuses on the five broad dimensions - tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and dependability - to evaluate the quality of services. It has been extensively used in research on tourism and hospitality to determine service gaps and gauge consumer attitudes (Parasuraman et al. 1988).

5.4 Research Gap

Although literature on tourism in Pakistan is growing, there is limited literature that has specifically explored remote areas such as Gabral Valley. Few studies have been conducted on smaller and developing tourism sites, as most studies are conducted on well-developed tourist sites. Besides, the factual information regarding the service quality and satisfaction among the visitors is also lacking in Swat Kohistan. By offering field-based data and analysis, this study seeks to close this gap.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The present study employed structured questionnaire survey method and quantitative research design. The measurements of visitor perception, satisfaction and service quality in quantitative research can be measured using numerical and statistical analysis (Creswell, 2014).

7.2 Data Collection

Primary data was collected from the field surveys of the visitors on Gabral Valley during the study period. Respondents were contacted in tourist destinations, lodging facilities, dining establishments, and public meeting places to obtain a variety of opinions regarding travel experiences, service quality.

7.3 Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was used, because the area of study was too inaccessible and tourists were too dispersed. The sampling technique is frequently used in the tourism field especially when the samples are obtained from respondents who are available and willing to respond (Etikan et al., 2016).

7.4 Sample Size

Thirty-three people completed the survey. It is a small survey, but has provided some initial insight into the satisfaction of tourist in the Gabral Valley and service offered to them.

7.5 Analyzing Data

The data collected were coded and analyzed in Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistical techniques like frequencies, percentage, tables and graphics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and visitors' perceptions. However, inferential statistical analysis was performed by using Chi-square test to study the relationship between the service quality related variables and the pleasure of the visitors. Chi-square analysis was used to determine whether there was any significant effect on total satisfaction among visitors when it came to aspects of service quality like cleanliness, hospitality, lodging, transportation and safety.

8. Results and Analysis

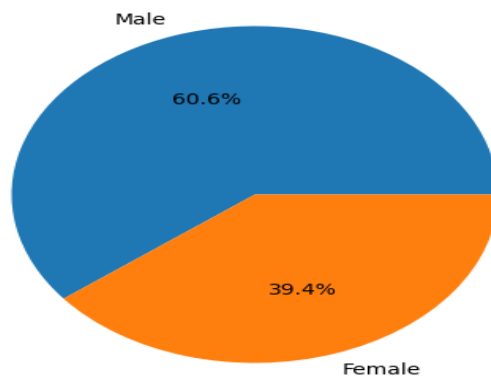
8.1 Demographic Analysis

The majority of respondents were male (60.6%), young (19-35 years), and domestic tourists (81.8%). Most visits were for family trips and adventure purposes.

Table 1: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	20	60.6%
Female	13	39.4%
Total	33	100%

Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents





Description

According to the table, 39.4% of participants were female and 60.6% of participants were male. This

implies that male tourists are more likely to participate in the study region.

Table 2: Age Distribution

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Under 18	5	15.2%
19-25	12	36.4%
26-35	10	30.3%
36-50	6	18.2%
Total	33	100%

Description

The majority of respondents belonged to the 19-35 age group, indicating that young adults

represent the dominant tourist segment visiting Gabral Valley.

Table 3: Nationality

Category	Frequency	Percentage
National	27	81.8%
Foreigner	6	18.2%
Total	33	100%

Description

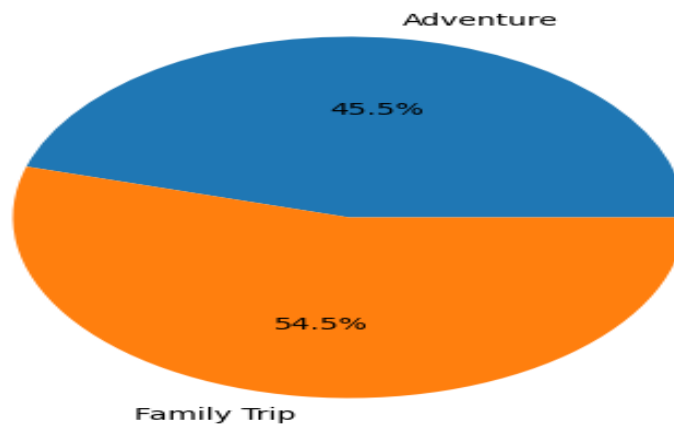
The findings indicate that the majority of respondents were domestic tourists (81.8%), while international tourists represented only 18.2% of

the sample. This suggests that tourism activities in Gabral Valley are currently dominated by local visitors rather than foreign tourists.

Table 4: Purpose of Trip

Purpose	Frequency	Percentage
Adventure	15	45.5%
Family Trip	18	54.5%
Total	33	100%

Figure 2: Purpose of Tourist Visit



Description

The table demonstrates that family trips constituted the primary purpose of visits among respondents (54.5%), followed closely by

adventure tourism (45.5%). This indicates that Gabral Valley attracts both leisure-oriented families and adventure-seeking tourists due to its natural beauty and mountainous environment

8.2 Service Quality Analysis

Table 5: Service Quality Evaluation

Variable	Poor (%)	Neutral (%)	Good/Excellent (%)
Cleanliness	15.2	9.1	75.7
Hospitality	9.1	9.1	81.8
Accommodation	18.2	15.2	66.7
Food Quality	9.1	33.3	57.6
Transportation	57.6	6.1	36.4
Road Conditions	72.7	3.0	24.3
Info Services	30.3	27.3	42.5
Safety	12.1	9.1	78.8
Internet	66.6	6.1	27.3
Washrooms	21.2	21.2	57.6
Waste Management	21.2	39.4	39.4

Description

The results show that visitors had generally favorable opinions about safety, cleanliness, and hospitality. However, comparably lower scores

were given to internet connectivity, road conditions, and transportation amenities, suggesting that the study area's infrastructure is lacking.

Findings indicate:

• **Strengths:**

- Hospitality (highly rated)
- Cleanliness
- Safety and security

• **Weaknesses:**

- Transportation (48.5% poor rating)
- Road conditions (72.7% poor/very poor)
- Internet connectivity

8.3 Tourist Satisfaction Analysis

Table 6: Tourist Satisfaction

Statement	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)
Overall Satisfaction	9.1	21.2	69.7
Value for Money	12.1	27.3	60.6
Recommend to Others	9.1	15.2	75.8
Revisit Intention	12.1	15.2	72.7
Expectations Met	18.2	39.4	42.4
Tourist-Friendly Environment	21.2	21.2	57.6

Description

The findings show that the majority of respondents were happy with their travel experiences and indicated a desire to suggest and

- 69.7% of respondents expressed overall satisfaction

return to the location. This illustrates the Gabral Valley's promising tourism potential in spite of its infrastructure constraints.

- 75.8% would recommend the destination
- Majority showed willingness to rev

8.4 Inferential Analysis (Chi-Square Test)

Table 7: Chi-Square Test Results Between Service Quality and Tourist Satisfaction

Service Quality Variable	Chi-Square Value	p-value	Result
Cleanliness	24.933	0.000	Significant
Hospitality	33.000	0.000	Significant
Accommodation Services	23.925	0.000	Significant
Food Quality	33.000	0.000	Significant
Transportation	13.590	0.009	Significant
Road Conditions	1.523	0.823	Not Significant
Tourist Information Services	10.817	0.029	Significant
Safety and Security	24.933	0.000	Significant
Internet Connectivity	2.200	0.699	Not Significant
Washroom Availability	15.858	0.003	Significant
Waste Management	23.320	0.000	Significant

Description

The majority of the factors showing the service characteristics indicate a statistically significant relationship with the visitors' satisfaction ($p = 0.05$) at the Gabral Valley. The total tourist satisfaction is in strong correlation with cleanliness, hospitality, lodging, food quality and food safety, which all have a significant effect on

the tourists' experiences. There was, however, no statistically significant correlation between internet connectivity, road condition and visitor happiness, suggesting that visitors might tolerate some infrastructure limitations as long as their overall travel experience is good.



Limitation: Small sample size (n = 33) reduced the statistical robustness.

9. Discussion

The study's findings reveal that the experiential and service aspects play an important role in visitors' enjoyment of the Gabral Valley, in addition to infrastructure. The valley has a great tourism attraction because of its natural beauty, tranquil surroundings, and hospitable local culture, as evidenced by the majority of respondents' overall pleasure with their stay. Based on the Chi square analysis at a 5% level of significance, there are statistically significant relationships between the variables and visitor satisfaction namely, hospitality, cleanliness, food services, lodging quality, and safety. The findings suggest that positive human interaction and ambient factors play a key role in tourists' perceptions and their experience. This is also highlighted in studies of tourism in which destination atmosphere and hospitality are considered to be critical variables impacting on the tourist's sense of enjoyment and loyalty (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Chi & Qu, 2008).

Hospitality was one of the top strengths cited in the study that impacted visitor satisfaction. The local and service providers were very friendly and made this a pleasant area for tourists to enjoy. Another significant consideration was safety, as the majority of respondents said Gabral Valley was a safe place to travel and have fun. The effects of cleanliness and the natural scenery on the visitor experience is an indicator of the importance of environmental quality in touristic places in the mountains.

However, there were also a number of infrastructure issues identified by the survey. Poor internet connectivity and poor road conditions were cited by many respondents as weaknesses. While these did not statistically correlate with overall satisfaction figures, they are all important for tourism development in the region in the future. It means that if there is something interesting to see and do and the environment and the emotions are and are not so bad, one might accept less than ideal infrastructure. But this infrastructure neglect may have a negative effect on the future development of tourism, its access, and comfort levels.

The results also show that visitor satisfaction is directly and significantly impacted by service quality. Visitors' experiences are enhanced through better accommodation, clean food and efficient management methods, and the opportunities to return and give positive feedback about the trip. So, the long-term tourist viability in the Gabral Valley is dependent on development of tourism infrastructure in the Valley without degrading its natural environment and uniqueness.

10 Key Findings

- ✓ Most visitors are pleased with their whole Gabral Valley experience.
- ✓ The destination's main advantages are its cleanliness, safety, and friendliness.
- ✓ Visitors are drawn attracted by the serene settings and natural beauty.
- ✓ The primary problem is still infrastructure, especially internet access and road conditions.
- ✓ A number of factors related to service quality, including lodging, food quality, and hospitality, have a big impact on visitor satisfaction.
- ✓ Due to the destination's natural and cultural attractiveness, visitors continue to have favorable opinions despite infrastructure constraints.
- ✓ Enhancing transportation, accessibility, and communication infrastructure while maintaining regional culture and



environmental quality is necessary for the Gabral Valley's sustainable tourism growth.

11. Challenges

- Small sample size
- Remote location
- Limited accessibility
- Data limitations in statistical testing

12. Recommendations

This study recommends a few measures to improve the development of tourism in the study area based on the outcomes of this study. To ensure the safe, comfortable, and convenient access to tourist destinations, the government should first improve the road network and transportation infrastructure. Tourist information centers should be established at the main tourist spots to provide correct and adequate information on the attractions, facilities, transportation and services offered. Likewise, the communication facilities and Internet connection should be enhanced to accommodate the requirements of modern travelers and also for emergency communication. The environmental protection efforts, waste management, and sensitization campaigns for tourists and locals need to be encouraged to support sustainable tourism practices. In addition, a more active role of the government is required in the field of tourism planning, policy making, infrastructure development and destination management, which will lead to sustainable development and growth of the tourism sector.

13. Conclusion

Gabral Valley's exceptional natural beauty, tranquil surroundings, and rich cultural legacy make it a region with substantial tourism potential. According to the study's conclusions, visitors to the valley are generally rather satisfied with their entire trip. Hospitality, safety, cleanliness, lodging, and food quality are examples of elements that have a good impact on tourists' opinions and greatly increase their level of satisfaction. Gabral Valley is becoming a popular destination for nature-based and cultural tourism

in northern Pakistan because of the friendly locals and the stunning natural scenery.

Notwithstanding these advantages, the study also found a number of obstacles that prevent the region's tourism industry from reaching its full potential. Visitors continue to have serious concerns about poor internet connectivity, poor road conditions, and transit challenges. These infrastructure constraints may have an impact on the destination's long-term competitiveness and accessibility even though there was no statistically significant correlation between them and visitor happiness. If these problems are not resolved, there may be fewer visitors and fewer economic prospects for the local community that depends on tourism.

The study also comes to the conclusion that visitor satisfaction and destination perception are significantly influenced by service quality. The Gabral Valley's tourism industry can be further strengthened by upgrades to lodging facilities, clean food services, tourist advice, and environmental management. Sustainable tourist planning that strikes a balance between infrastructure growth and the preservation of natural and cultural resources should be the main emphasis of local authorities and tourism stakeholders. Investments in trash management, roadways, communication infrastructure, and visitor safety measures will greatly enhance visitor experiences and promote return travel.

Additionally, encouraging community involvement in tourism-related activities can support regional economic growth and cultural conservation. A more polished and visitor-friendly atmosphere might be achieved by awareness campaigns, workshops for tourism education, and assistance for nearby companies. To preserve the ecological beauty of the valley for future generations, environmental conservation should be a top priority in sustainable tourism plans. All things considered, if appropriate planning, infrastructure development, and high-quality tourism services are successfully carried out, Gabral Valley has a great chance of becoming one of the top tourist destinations in northern Pakistan.



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