



# Tourist Services Quality in the Simien Mountains National Park, World Heritage Site, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

Service quality in the hospitality industry becomes one of the vital contributing factors in tourism marketing. Quality is created by the process of service delivery, such as friendliness, courtesy and efficiency, and the outcomes of services such as accommodation, food, attractions and leisure facilities. The objective of the research was to assess the quality of products and services being delivered within the Simien Mountains National Park (SMNP). A cross-sectional study design was used to describe the quality of products and services being delivered to visitors in the SMNP. The target population in this study was 4,767 foreign tourists and foreign residents who visited the SMNP and from this total, 268 individuals were taken as the sample size. Both probability and non-probability sampling methods were employed. Data were collected for foreign tourists and foreign residents who visited SMNP in the year of 2017. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 was employed to analyze the quantitative data. To describe the survey results, descriptive statistical tools such as frequency distribution, percentages, mean graphs, and tables were used. To triangulate quantitative information, qualitative data generated from open-ended questions were employed. Visitors who visited the park were satisfied with an overall mean value of 3.6, relating to the major qualities of the tourism product such as weather conditions, the value for money of visitor attractions, accessibility, safety and security, and cleanliness of the local environment. Service quality had an overall mean value of 2.69, based on services delivered by tour guides; cooks; hotels, lodges and restaurants; scouts; car and field equipment rental services; and the value for money of the service delivery in the SMNP was considered poor. Tourists were not satisfied by accommodation quality with the overall mean value of 2.87, and with an overall mean value of 2.65 park visitors were not satisfied with the park infrastructure. The quality of tourist information delivered by service providers was poor, failing to satisfy tourists who visited the destination. With the overall mean value of 3.62 visitors were satisfied with park community hospitality such as courtesy, the friendliness of local people and employees and their willingness to help.

**Keywords:** Tourist service quality, Simien Mountains National Park, Ethiopia

## Introduction

Service quality in the hospitality industry has become one of the vital factors for contributing to a competitive advantage and visitors' confidence in what has become a highly competitive global marketplace (Al-Abrha, 2017). Service quality is the result of an evaluation process where the



visitor compares his/her expectations with the service he/she perceived and which he/she has received. This includes delighting visitor expectations with quality product features and service delivery that satisfies stated wants and needs; fulfils particular requirements and is fit for purpose (Chelladurai and Chang, 2000). The rise of travel and tourism has shown significant resilience globally (World Economic Forum, 2015), and the sector continues to be one of the best positioned economic sectors to drive inclusive socioeconomic growth, promote peace and understanding, and contribute to environmental protection (WTO, 2017). Visitors in the Simien Mountain National Park have been increasing in number since 1999 and there are now some 26,000 arrivals per annum with most of the visitors coming in the drier months, which is during November - May (SMNP office annual report, 2016). Related to this escalating tourist flow over time, the SMNP management is facing multifaceted problems such as poor facilities, poor infrastructure, and lack of standard service quality (Teshome, Worku and Asteray, 2015). Service quality refers to the difference between customers expectations for service performance prior to the service encounter and their perceptions of the service received (Patrick et al., 1996; Grönroos, 2001). Quality in the tourism sector is created by the processes of service delivery, such as friendliness, courtesy and efficiency and outcomes of services such as accommodation, food and attractions, and leisure facilities (Ramseook-Munhurrun *et al.*, 2015).

Service quality has attracted the attention of many researchers and tourism practitioners in many countries around the globe (Ćirić, *et al.* 2014; Munhurrun *et al.* 2016; Wang, 2016; Setiawan and Sayuti, 2017; Permatasari, Murwani and Suharto, 2017; Al-Ababneh, 2017; Hayati and Novitasari, 2017). The ultimate goal of maintaining a high service quality and customer satisfaction levels is to survive in today's highly competitive marketplace (Ramseook-Munhurrun, *et al.* 2016). From the tourism perspective, a destination remains competitive only if it provides quality products and quality services that offer full satisfaction to visitors (Hunt, 1977; Ruell, Campbell, and Frei, 2016). All tourism businesses wish to gain a competitive advantage, reinforce customer loyalty, increase business performance and technical quality, enhance corporate image and functionality and retain the existing customer base (Wang, 2016; Gronroos, 1984).

According to Zeithaml et al. (1990) there are five main dimensions of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility. These are vital to making a valid and reliable service quality measure as a cornerstone of an effective marketing strategy (Asubonteng *et al.* 1996). This may be done by using the most popular service quality measure for different service industries - the SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Wang, 2016). SERVQUAL helps to measure the quality of the service provided as perceived by the end users, that is the customers (Mersha and Adlakha, 1992; Cook and Thompson, 2000; Coulthard, 2004). It would be especially important to measure customer perceptions of quality before and after the quality action is taken by developing the service dimensions from the customer's perspective (Gulc, 2017).

Currently tourism creates employment and generates revenues for the Simien Mountains National Park communities, through participating in different tourism related activities such as working in hotels, lodges and restaurants, providing transport services, making and selling souvenirs, and other services (EWCA, 2013; WTTC, 2017). To increase and maintain local communities' benefits from tourism activities, understanding the level of service delivery is an important task of the tourism manager. According to Kumar (2007), revenues generation and job opportunities from tourism sectors were affected by quality of services along with other factors. Several studies have been conducted in the Simien Mountains National Park focused on conservation, human wildlife conflict, biodiversity surveys, tourism potential and development, land degradation and livelihood, species regeneration and revenue sharing mechanisms (Hurni, 1986; Hurni, 1993; Nievergelt, 1998; Teshome, 1999; Puffand Nemomissa, 2002; Yihun, 2009; Teshome and Glatzel, 2011; Asteray, 2015; Yohannes and Teshome, 2013; Melak, Teshome and Girma, 2016; Teshome and

Demissie, 2018, *etc.*) None of these previous studies addressed the issue of tourism service quality. The aim of this study was to assess the tourist product and services quality (i.e. accommodation, hospitality, infrastructure and tourist information provision) in the idyllic Simien Mountains National Park in Ethiopia

## Research Methods

### Discription of the study area

The Simien Mountains National Park is found in the northern highlands of Amhara National Regional State, 122 km northeast of Gondar city. The park extends from longitudes 37°51'26.36"E to 38° 29' 27.59" E and from latitudes 13°06' 44.09" N to 13° 23' 07.85" N. It was established in 1969 and after nearly ten years in 1978 it was registered as a World Heritage Site owing to its grand scenery, rare and endemic mammal species along with the ancient traditional living style of the people resident in this remote area. The park lies within five districts i.e. Debarq, Adi Arqay, Beyeda, Janamora, and Tselemt, bordering 38 Kebeles of these woredas (Teshome and Demissie, 2018).

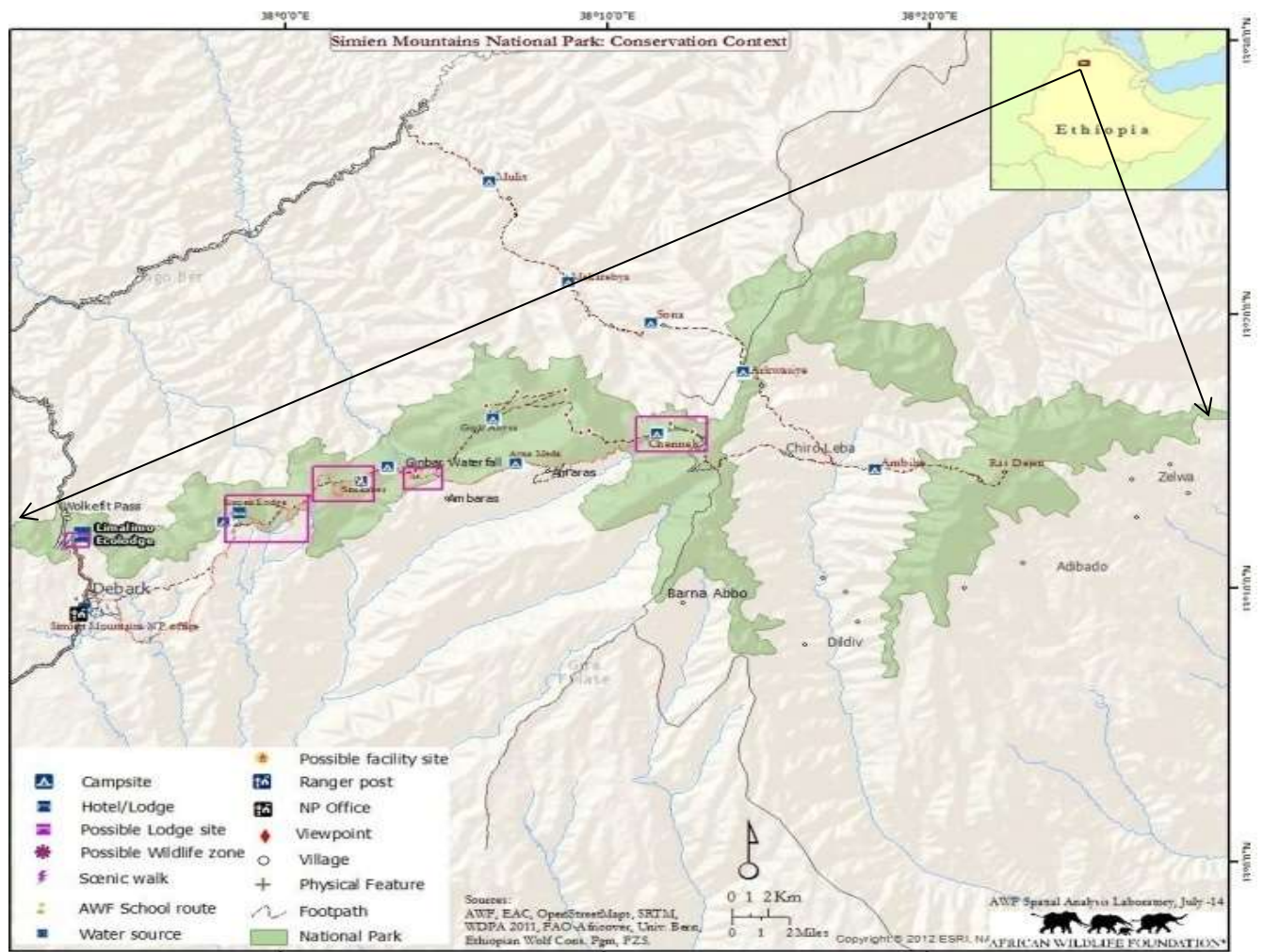


Figure 1. Map of SMNP (Source: EWCA)



Topographical ruggedness with steep escarpments, rolling hills in the highlands and flat terraces dissected by rivers in the lowlands are the peculiar characteristics of the park (Hurni, 1993). It is composed of a vast undulating plateau dissected by forested rocky valleys, and dominated by the rugged peaks of the mountains, including Ras Dejen, which is the highest peak (4,543 m absl) in Ethiopia, and situated to the east of the park (Hurni, 1986). This topographic scenery is the spectacular feature of the park. The climate of the park drops below 0°C in some months and the mountains are covered by snow lasting for a couple of days (Nievergelt, 1998).

The SMNP is part of the Afro-alpine centre of plant diversity, with about 550 higher plants species of which 12% are endemic species (Puffand Nemomissa, 2005). This unique natural feature is home and thus also a shelter to a number of endemic and threatened species of animals, especially mammals, for example *Walia ibex*, *Ethiopian wolf*, *Gelada baboon* and *Menilek's Bushbuck* (Nievergelt, 1998, Teshome, 1999). It is known that these precious animals are the flagship species of the country. The park has also habitats for 182 bird species of which six are endemic (Nievergelt, Good, and Guttinger, 1998, Teshome and Glatzel, 2011 ).

### Research design

A cross-sectional study and survey research design was used to describe characteristics of visitors to the SMNP. A questionnaire-based survey was designed in order to address the objectives of this study.

**Population of the study:** The target population considered in this study was 4767 foreign tourists and foreign residents who visited SMNP.

**Sample and Sampling Techniques:** Both probability and non-probability sampling methods were employed. Of the fifteen campsites the researcher selected four camp sites i.e. Buyit Ras, Sankaber, Gich, and Chenek using non-probability sampling technique, because these three sites are frequently visited by tourists, while in selecting respondents, simple random sampling technique was used in all three sites.

**Sample size determination:** According to SMNP office annual report (2016), on average there were 4767 foreign tourists who visited the park between the months of October-December from 2012 to 2016, the peak season for the area. In order to determine the sample size of this study, Yemane (1967) formula was used  $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$ .

Where, n = Sample size

N = Total population

e = Level of precision

$n = 4767 / (1 + 4767 (0.05)^2) = 369.032$ ;

therefore, 370 respondents were taken.

### Data collection tools and procedures

Primary data were collected through the survey of foreign and foreign resident tourists who visited SMNP in 2017. Researchers used self-administered structured questionnaires for quantitative aspects of the research. For the qualitative aspects of the study, data was collected using open-ended questions, which were attached with the close-ended questionnaire. This helped to triangulate data which is not addressed by the close-ended questionnaire.



**Methods of data analysis:** Descriptive statistical tools such as frequency distribution, mean, percentages, tables, and graphs were utilized. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 was used to analyze the quantitative data. The qualitative data generated from open-ended questions were categorized in themes in accordance with the research objectives to triangulate quantitative information.

### **Reliability and validity of the questionnaire items**

Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of the items included in the questionnaire. Both Field (2009) and Hair et al. (2010) recommended that the coefficients of Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.70 are considered as a reliable indicator of the constructs under study. Therefore, using SPSS version 20, the reliability test of all items used to measure the independent variables in this study were above the minimum threshold of 0.70 limits.

**Table 1.** Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the research items

No of items	Cronbach's alpha value	Degree of reliability
30	0.940	High reliability

**Source:** Survey questionnaire (2017)

In order to check validity of the questionnaire being used in this study, a pretest was carried out on 5 % (19 visitors). This helped to evaluate the questionnaire format and to avoid ambiguity of chosen variables for the survey. After receiving feedback from this pilot survey, the questionnaire was revised for greater efficiency of use.

### **Result and Discussion**

Out of the 370 questionnaires distributed to tourists who visited SMNP, 90 questionnaires were not returned because of different reasons. In addition, 12 questionnaires were not correctly filled by the respondents. Therefore, the analysis was made on 268 questionnaires, which accounted for a response rate of 72.43%.

#### **Tourism product quality of the SMNP**

Some major aspects of the tourism product such as weather conditions, the value for money of visitor attractions (i.e. tourism resources both natural and cultural, accommodation, food and entertainment), accessibility, safety and security, and cleanliness of the local environment at destination level were evaluated. Regarding weather conditions in the park, the majority 63% of the respondent visitors replied they were satisfied and strongly satisfied, while 32.9% of the respondents were not satisfied. This dissatisfaction may have resulted from unseasonal rainfall making the trekking route very slippery so that it was difficult to walk properly, and the cloud covering the mountain scenery during daytime if the visitors did not rise early enough in the morning made it difficult to move. Regarding the evaluation of value for money of visitor attractions (i.e. tourism resources both natural and cultural, accommodation; food and entertainment) 58.3% respondent were satisfied and strongly satisfied, but 31.3% respondents visitors were not satisfied (Table, 2). The level of visitors satisfaction was relatively high because the SMNP is one of the most outstanding natural areas and thus one of the few natural heritages of the world which have huge values to attract visitors from all over the earth (IUCN, 1978, Teshome and Demissie, 2018), and this area is gifted with rich biodiversity, endemic wild species, as well as unique and stunning bio-physical features (Hurni, 1986, Puff and Nemomsa, 2005).



**Table 2.** Product quality

Variable / Attributes	Very dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very satisfied		Mean
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Weather condition of the attraction	25	9.3	63	23.5	11	4.1	69	25.7	100	37.3	3.58
The value for money with visitor attractions (i.e. tourism resources both natural and cultural feature, accommodation; food & entertainment)	17	6.3	67	25.0	28	10.4	50	18.7	106	39.6	3.60
Accessibility of the visitor attraction	29	10.8	67	25.0	19	7.1	38	14.2	115	42.9	3.53
Safety and security of the attraction	27	10.1	67	25.0	40	14.9	1	0.4	133	49.6	3.49
Cleanliness of the local environment	23	8.6	63	23.5	11	4.1	27	10.1	144	53.7	3.77
Average total mean											3.60

Source: Own survey data (2017)

Regarding the quality of accessibility 57.1% of respondents were both satisfied and strongly satisfied. This is because although the 40km road in the park is bumpy, the national park is accessible by an all-weather road. Moreover the new and upgraded Gondar airport which is only 100km away, makes the national park more accessible. While 35.8% respondents were not satisfied this may be because the road is bumpy and uncomfortable for the older visitors. Regarding the quality of safety and security 50% of respondents were satisfied and strongly satisfied. However, 35.1% of the respondents were not satisfied. This may be because the country was lying under emergency rule at the time and military personnel were observed there and across the entire tourist destination. Regarding evaluating the level of SMNP cleanliness of the local environment, the majority 63.8% of respondents were satisfied and strongly satisfied. This is because the SMNP is found in remote highlands far from industrial zones and is relatively free of pollution. However, 32.1% respondents were not satisfied with the cleanliness of the local park environment even although park janitors could be found at each campsite who were tasked with cleaning and collecting the garbage left by visitors. Unfortunately, sometimes the Gelada baboon and some scavenger birds such as the thick billed raven and crow, dig out the rubbish from the rubbish pit and throw it anywhere in the view point, making the view points and the trekking route ugly to behold. The overall mean of product quality was 3.6 so that many respondents were satisfied with park product quality. This result is similar to the findings of Binyam (2011) who found that product quality affects overall tourist satisfaction in Ethiopia.

### Service quality delivery by service providers in SMNP

The major services deliveries in the SMNP are: tour guides; cooks; hotels, lodges and restaurants; scouts, car rentals and field equipment rentals. In this research paper those service delivery service qualities were evaluated. Table 3 shows of the total 268, majorities 53%, 50.1%, 55.2%, 43.3%, 56%, and 44.6% of respondents were not satisfied with service quality delivered by: tour guides; cooks; service delivered in hotels, lodges and restaurants; scouts; car and field equipment rentals services; and the value for money with the service delivery, respectively. Although SMNP has the best quality of attractions to make most visitors happy, their happiness is incomplete with



the low service quality they are receiving. The best quality of attractions, accommodation, transportation, amenities, and activities may not satisfy tourists if the service quality is poor and tourists feel unwelcome (Reisinger, 2009).

**Table 3.** Level of service quality

Variable / Attributes	Very dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very satisfied		Mean
	Frequenc y	%	Frequenc y	%	Frequenc y	%	Frequenc y	%	Frequenc y	%	
Quality of service with tour guides	67	25.0	65	24.3	21	7.8	101	37.7	14	5.2	2.74
Quality of service with cooks	94	35.1	47	17.5	21	7.8	88	32.8	18	6.7	2.59
Quality of service in hotels, lodges and restaurants	91	34.0	50	18.7	26	9.7	87	32.5	14	5.2	2.56
Quality of service with scouts	81	30.2	56	20.9	19	7.1	98	36.6	14	5.2	2.66
Quality of service with car rentals and field equipment rentals	64	23.9	70	26.1	17	6.3	103	38.4	14	5.2	2.75
The value for money with the service provided	71	26.5	55	20.5	7	2.6	114	42.5	21	7.8	2.85
Average total mean											2.69

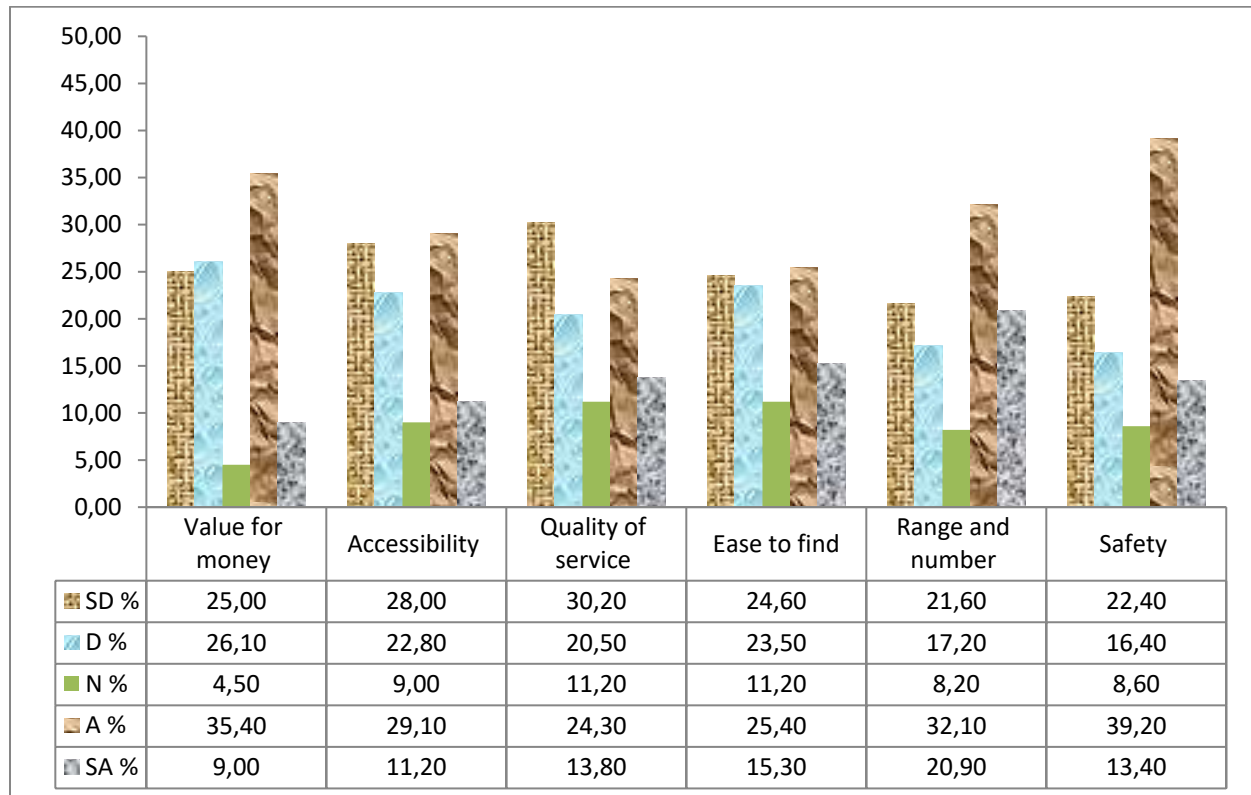
Source: Own survey data (2017)

The level of agreement on quality of service delivery by service providers were found to be below the average, for example respondents satisfaction with quality of service delivered by tour guides was 42.9%; quality of service supplied by cooks 39.5%, quality of service provided by hotels, lodges and restaurants 37.7%; quality of service delivered by scouts 41.8%, quality of service with car rentals and field equipment rentals 43.6%, and the value for money with the service delivery 45.35% respectively (Table 3). In the tourism business, quality is created by the processes of service delivery, such as friendliness, courtesy and efficiency and outcomes of services such as accommodation, food and leisure facilities (Ramseook-Munhurrin et al., 2015). To increase the flow of tourists and enhance the income level to the community, visitors must be satisfied by the service they obtain. Therefore, these results suggest there is a serious need for capacity building of service providers. Overall mean of service quality was also 2.69 demonstrating that many respondents disagree regarding the availability of service quality in the SMNP. This result indicated that service quality in and around SMNP is poor and hence leads to generally high levels pf tourist dissatisfaction.

### Quality Accommodations in the SMNP

In this study, accommodation quality such as value for money for the given information, entertainment, accessibility, quality of service, easy to find location, range and number of services, and safety were evaluated in the study area. Measuring the quality of accommodation product can lead to potential conflicts between customers and service providers that should be avoided. In the hotel industry, service quality received much attention from both researchers and practitioners because of its positive impact on financial performance, customer satisfaction, and

retention (Hung and Yong, 2013). While relatively high number of respondents 53% on range and number of services, and 51.6% on safety quality were agreed and strongly agreed respectively. These show that more than average tourists who visit the SMNP were happy with diversified service and safety of the accommodation. Some respondents 44.4% agreed and 40.3% strongly agreed on the statements of value for money (includes information, entertainment), accessibility, 38.1%, quality of service 40.7% on the easy to find location respectively (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** . Level of accommodation quality **Source:** Own survey data (2017)

Overall mean of accommodations is 2.87 demonstrating that many respondents were unsure about their level of satisfaction on accommodation at SMNP (Figure 2). However, Binyam (2011) found that accommodation has no impact on overall tourist satisfaction.

### Hospitality

Courtesy of local people, friendliness of the local people, willingness of local people to help, courtesy of employees, and willingness of employees were evaluated. In this evaluation the majority of respondents were satisfied with the courtesy of the local people (64.2%), and willingness of local people to help (62.7%), courtesy of employees (61.2%), and willingness of employees to assist (72.4%). While the percentages of respondents who were dissatisfied and strongly dissatisfied (Table 4) were: 29.4% courtesy of local people, 31.3% willingness of local people to help, 33.9% courtesy of employees, and 26.5% willingness of employees. Measurement of quality in tourism and hospitality must be a continuous and meaningful process, focused on the detection and elimination of non-compliance with the customers' requirements.





**Table 4.** Level of hospitality quality

Variable / Attributes	Very dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very satisfied		Mean
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Courtesy of local people	6	2.2	73	27.2	17	6.3	97	36.2	75	28.0	3.60
Willingness of locale people to help	7	2.6	77	28.7	16	6.0	103	38.4	65	24.3	3.53
Courtesy of employees	6	2.2	85	31.7	13	4.9	102	38.1	62	23.1	3.48
Willingness of employees	6	2.2	65	24.3	3	1.1	93	34.7	101	37.7	3.81
Average total mean											3.61

**Source:** Own survey data (2017)

Overall mean of hospitality in this study was 3.61, demonstrating that many respondents agreed that the local people and employees of service providers were hospitable. This could increase the overall satisfaction of tourists who visited the SMNP, because hospitality is the most significant factor that could affect tourist satisfaction (Suanmali, 2014; Teshome and Demissie, 2018)

#### Tourist information center service quality

As table 5 shows, the majority of the respondents were strongly dissatisfied and dissatisfied on the availability of tourist information (52.6%), on speed of service (50.8%), on helpfulness of information provided (52.1%) and pre-arrival information (45.5%). However, a few respondents were satisfied and strongly satisfied: 35.9% on the availability of tourist information, 31.4% on speed of service, and 27.6% on the helpfulness of information provided and 40.2% with pre arrival information.

**Table 1 .** Tourist information/ Visitor centers

Variable / Attributes	Very dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very satisfied		Mean
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
The availability of tourist information	47	17.5	94	35.1	31	11.6	46	17.2	50	18.7	2.84
Speed of service	53	19.8	83	31.0	48	17.9	38	14.2	46	17.2	2.78
Helpfulness of information provided	57	21.3	104	38.8	33	12.3	32	11.9	42	15.7	2.62
Pre arrival information	41	15.3	81	30.2	38	14.2	54	20.1	54	20.1	3.00
Average total mean											2.81

**Source:** Own survey data (2017)

The overall mean of tourist information was 2.81 demonstrating that many respondents were either dissatisfied or unsure about their satisfaction level regarding tourist information provided at pre-arrival and arrival at SMNP (Table 5).

## Infrastructure

Of the total 268, a large number of respondents were not satisfied with quality of infrastructure (55.8%), quality of roads (60%) and public transport (69.7%) respectively (Figure, 3). However, relatively small numbers of respondents were satisfied with the current SMNP infrastructure including 40.3% related to value for money of transportation, 30.3% with the range and amount of infrastructure, 33.9% with the current quality of roads and public transport. Similarly, poor infrastructure and high transport costs were often identified as key constraints for industrial development in low income countries (Bloom and Sachs, 1998). Poor level of infrastructure in Amhara Regional state including historical route tourist destinations was also reported (Tafese, 2015)

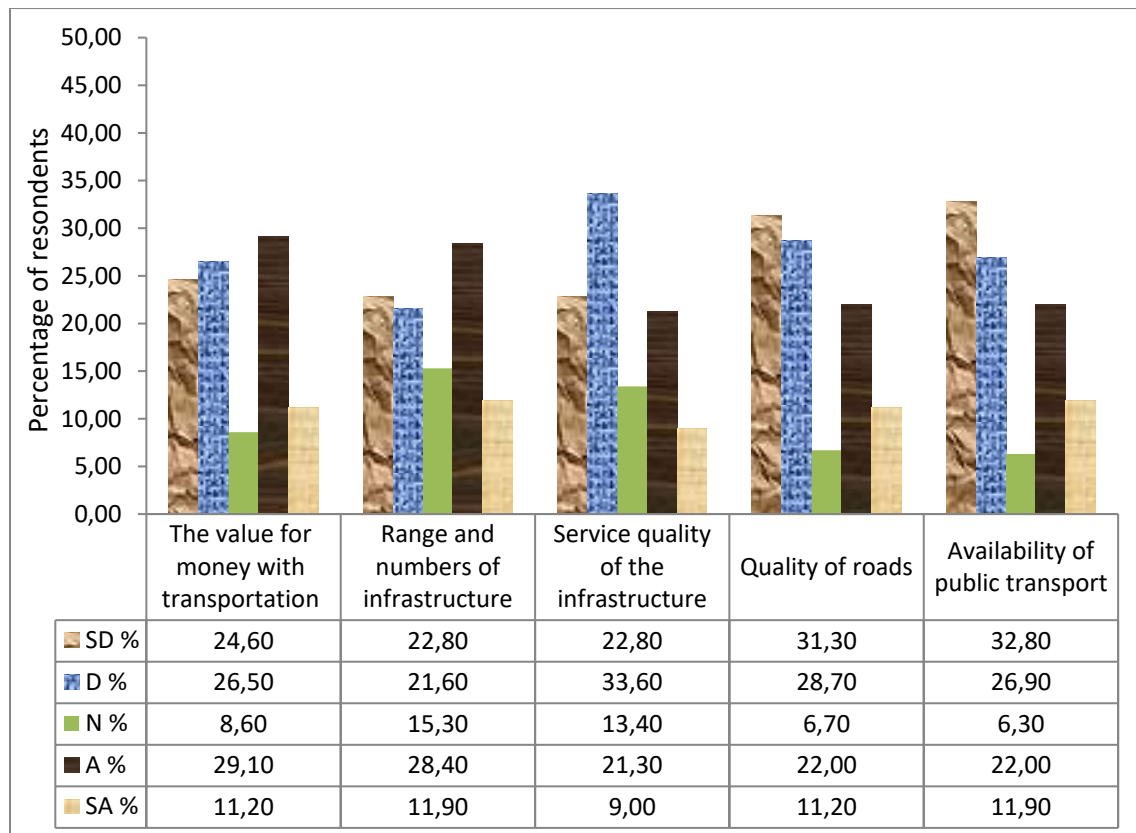


Figure 3. Quality level of infrastructure Source: Own survey data (2017)

Overall mean of infrastructure was 2.65, which implies that many respondents were dissatisfied with the infrastructural facilities found in and around SMNP. This shows SMNP infrastructure is generally considered to be inadequate to satisfy tourists, and the infrastructure of a destination highly affects overall tourist satisfaction (Suanmali, 2014).

## Conclusion

The quality of a major tourism product such as weather conditions, the value for money of visitor attractions (i.e. tourism resources both natural and cultural, accommodation, food and entertainment); accessibility, safety and security, and cleanliness of the local environment were all acknowledged by the majority of tourists who visited the SMNP. Service quality delivered by



tour guides, cooks, service delivered in hotels, lodges and restaurants, scouts (guides), car and field equipment rentals services, and the value for money of the service delivery were generally found to be poor in the SMNP, and hence led to tourists' dissatisfaction. SMNP visitors were unsure about their level of satisfaction on accommodation quality such as value for money for the given information, entertainment, accessibility, quality of service, easy to find location, range and number of services, and safety in the study area. Courtesy of local people, friendliness of the local people, willingness of local people to help, and willingness of employees could increase the overall satisfaction of tourists who visit SMNP, while the infrastructure and the quality of tourist information deliveries were found to be insufficient to satisfy tourists who visit the destination.

## Recommendations

In order to increase the tourist flow and enhance the income to the local communities, training sessions on quality service provision should be provided to stakeholders such as tour guides, cooks, hotel employees, lodges and restaurants, scouts (guides) and also car and field equipment rental services providers. To improve tourist satisfaction level in the SMNP, accommodation quality needs to be drastically improved. Infrastructure and tourist information quality needs to be improved in the SMNP.

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