

Measuring Tourists' Satisfaction with Forest-Based Tourism Attractions in Sylhet: The Case of Lawachara National Park

Nazwa-Al-Zannat*

Lecturer (Part-time), Dept. of Business Administration, Fareast International University

House: 50, Road: 11, Block- C, Banani, Dhaka-1213.

Tel: 01913520990

* E-mail of the corresponding author: nazwaalzannat@gmail.com

Abstract

Lawachara National Park (LNP) has good potentials to develop as a valuable tourism product with its own uniqueness. This paper aims to identify factors that affect the satisfaction and loyalty intention of tourists to visit Lawachara National Park in Moulvibazar as their forest based tourism destination. A questionnaire survey was conducted with 138 tourists who visited Lawachara National Park. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the tourists' satisfaction. Factors, intended for measuring tourists' satisfaction, were divided into five main constructs: accessibility, hospitality, expenditure attraction and entertainment facilities and environmental factor. The findings of this study indicate that LNP has a strong position only in attraction whereas it is lacking in facility and services. A great majority of tourists are mesmerized by the captivating beauty of this park. On the other hand, they express their displeasure with such issues as lack of basic infrastructural facilities such as public toilet, washroom and toilet facilities, expensive accommodation, lack of recreational facilities, cleanliness of the park and shopping facilities. This study has implications for policy planners and private stakeholders to take necessary measures for developing and promoting Lawachara National Park as a forest-based tourism attraction in our country.

Keywords: Tourist satisfaction, Loyalty intention, Forest based tourism attractions, Lawachara National Park, Likert scale.

1. Introduction

Forest-based tourism, popularly known as 'ecotourism' that blends 'ecology' and 'tourism', is defined as environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples (The Nature Conservancy, 2009). Forest-based tourism is regarded as an effective tool for sustainable conservation of forest resources and its biodiversity. It plays both conservation and revenue earning roles. Conservation roles are played in two ways: by keeping intact, and somewhere by improving, the existing forest resources to attract the tourists and secondly by involving the poor forest dwellers, who were removing trees and other non-timber products for their livelihood, in different income generating activities within the ecotourism area².

Bangladesh, one of the countries of South Asia, is located in north-eastern part of this region. Bangladesh is a country in South Asia bordering the Bay of Bengal to the South, India to the West and North, and Myanmar to the Southeast. Bangladesh is a land of diverse forest-based natural attractions throughout the evergreen, semi-evergreen, and mangrove forest ecosystems. If the country is known at all in the world with respect to tourism, it is simply because of the world's longest unbroken sandy beach of 120 kilometers at Cox's Bazar, the largest single block of tidal halophytic mangrove forest in the world, the home of the Royal Bengal Tiger and spotted deer at Sundarban. Apart from these, she has many incredible travel destinations and attractions, including historical and archaeological sites, historical mosques and monuments, resorts, hilly areas and forests and wildlife in the Chittagong hilly area, tribes, miles of rolling tea gardens, lush tropical forests, different tribal communities, natural water falls, crystal clear water lakes bordered by ever green hills, haors etc. Bangladesh is a land of mighty rivers and tributaries. As such it is widely recognized that Bangladesh is very rich by the natural

² Alam, M., Furukawa, Y., & Akter, S. (2010). Forest-Based Tourism in Bangladesh: Status, Problems, and Prospects. *International Multidisciplinary Journal of Tourism*, 163-164.

beauty and panoramic views, what a tourist wants to enjoy.

In a nutshell, she has many potentials of developing adventure tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, ecotourism and/or forest based tourism, community based tourism, halal tourism etc. Despite immense potentials, the country cannot reap the benefits of this industry. Realizing the potentials, this study particularly aims at forest based tourism attractions in Bangladesh that can be responsible for considerable economic gains to both host communities and tourism businesses.

The heart of tourism is undeniably the tourists and their travel experiences. The essence for the success of tourism industry is certainly tourist satisfaction because it ensures the long-term viability of this industry. That's why tourists' satisfaction is one of the parameters of tourism industry development. Indeed, it is imperative to evaluate tourists' satisfaction with forest based tourism attractions to ensure the long-term survival of this industry and also for enhancing the experience of tourists with the attraction.

2. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to measure the level of tourists' satisfaction with forest-based tourism attraction in Sylhet particularly who visits Lawachara National Park. Specific objectives of this study are:

- To present forest based tourism attraction in Sylhet.
- To find out the factors that influence tourists' satisfaction with tourism products and services who visit Lawachara National Park.
- To put forward some suggestions for developing forest-based tourism attractions in Sylhet.

3. Literature Review

Satisfaction is recognized as one of the key judgments that consumers make regarding a tourism service (Yüksel and Yüksel, 2002). According to Walker (1995), satisfied customers are believed to affect the long-term viability of an organization through repeat purchase and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. Therefore, an evaluation of tourists' satisfaction with nature based tourism attractions is crucial to ensure the long-term survival of this industry as well as for enhancing the visitors experience with the attraction. Such assessment may also assist in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of these attractions and thus help in improving the services being provided.

Tourist satisfaction is important for successful destination marketing because it influences the choice of destination, the consumption of products and services, and the decision to return. Satisfaction is basically the comparison of the customer's expectation before and after consumption. Tourist satisfaction is the difference between tourist's expectations and the actual perceived value (M. Kozak & M. Rimmington, 2000). It is important to identify and measure consumer satisfaction with each attribute of the destination because satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one of the attributes leads to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the overall destination (Parasumaran, V.A. Zeithaml, L.L. Berry, 1985; Pizam, Y. Neumann & A. Reichel, 1978).

Satisfaction is the evaluation of the performance of the overall services provided by the firm received by the customer (Skogland & Siguaw, 2001). Satisfaction is an important factor to be taken into account by the customer in deciding whether to continue a purchase or otherwise. Satisfaction results when performance exceeds the requirements (Bitner, 1990). On the other hand, when the requirements exceed the performance, dissatisfaction will result (Parasumaran et al. 1990). From a tourism perspective, the same concept applies to tourists because tourists are also subscribers to the services provided. Thus, their decision to visit again also depends on the satisfaction factor. In the discussion of the concept of tourist satisfaction, another term often used is travel satisfaction, which is a result of a tourist's satisfaction after their own experience or the experience of a product or service provided (Gunderson et al., 1996; Heide et al., 1999; Heung, 2000).

Ahsan, M. K., Roy, D., & Mokta Dhir, M. G. (2017), in a recent article, investigate the core factors that can influence satisfaction level of tourists with specific reference to tourism industry in Sylhet region. They found that the tourists' satisfaction greatly depends on natural beauty, transportation and accommodation facilities, safety and security, and costs. This study also revealed that tourist satisfaction depends on a complex process where the role of every actor is fundamental and those actors should be harmonized with each other.

Fathema (2016) tried to find out pull factors that affect tourists' decision when they chose a destination for tourism. To Fathema, proper knowledge about the pull factors helps the tourism marketer to build destination

image. Therefore, she found seven aspects that are to be given special importance and these are: easily reached and cleanliness of the destination, availability of hygiene food and beverages, pleasant and safe accommodation, personal security, reasonable rent of accommodation, personal security, availability of recreation facilities.

4. Methodology of the Study

The study applied quantitative approach of investigation. The quantitative survey was carried out using a structured questionnaire consisting of two parts. First part includes demographic information along with recent travel behaviors of tourists. The second part of the questionnaire relates to measuring tourists' satisfaction with forest based tourism products and services. The survey was conducted at Lawachara National Park. Considering the earlier similar studies, five dimensions were used to measure the level of tourists' satisfaction in this study namely accessibility, hospitality, expenditure attraction and entertainment facilities and environmental factor. Each of these dimensions was further divided into related attributes. About 26 variables (items) were placed before tourists to rate their level of contentment. Each category is measured by using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. 1 stands for "highly dissatisfied", 2 stands for "dissatisfied", 3 for "neutral", 4 for "satisfied", and 5 for "highly satisfied".

Data were collected from 138 tourists using a structured questionnaire survey. Convenience sampling technique was used to collect data from tourists. The survey engaged 5 field researchers for collecting the data. The data was collected using android mobile application. Due to not having actual population size and proper sampling frame, the present study used non-probabilistic judgmental sampling as sampling process, thus, the selection of the sampling units (tourists) is left primarily to the interviewer. The collected data were tabulated and processed through SPSS software. The data is analyzed with simple conventional statistical tools such as frequency distribution, percentage, and weighted average.

5. Overview of the Study Area

Sylhet, located in the north-eastern part of Bangladesh, is popularly known as "*The land of two leaves and a bud*". Apart from the picturesque tea gardens on the undulated high and low hillocks in the borderland, the scenic beauty of the innumerable extensive haors, baors, reserved forests and water bodies in the basin of Sylhet attract a tourist easily. Sylhet is also well known for its lush tropical forests, different tribal communities, and natural water falls, crystal clear water lakes bordered by ever green hills, and shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (R.) and Hazarat Shahparan (R.).

Lawachara National Park (LNP) is located on about 1250 hectares of land in Kamalganj upazila 30 kilometres away from the Moulvibazar district. It was declared the National Park on 7 July 1996 under the Wildlife Act of 1974. The stems of the trees grow much high without branches. This is one of the rain forests. In this forest there are about 167 species of plants, 4 species of amphibians, 6 species of reptiles, 20 species of mammals, and 246 species of birds are there. This forest is surrounded by some big and high hills. There are 3 walkways. This is the oldest of the 17 reserved forests in the county. This forest, which is naturally beautiful and full of diverse animals, has various species of trees and plants. Besides these, there are slow loris, gibbons, langurs, wild-fowls, leopards and along with kul banar a good number of birds and animals of rare species. Lawachara Khal (canal) is one of the attractions of the forest.

6. Forest-Based Tourism Spots in Sylhet

A number of reserved forests, national parks, eco parks and water bodies are there in the basin of Sylhet which can be a potential ground for developing forest based tourism and/or eco-tourism in Sylhet. Following table shows popular forest based tourism attractions in Sylhet.

Table 1: Popular forest-based tourism attractions in Sylhet

Names	Location	Forest Types	Area (ha.)	Establishment Year
Lawachara National Park	Moulvibazar	Hill forest	1250	7 July 1996
Satchari National Park	Habigonj	Hill forest	242.91	10 October 2005
Khadimnagar National Park	Sylhet	Hill forest	678.80	13 April 2006
Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary	Habigonj	Wildlife Sanctuary	1795.54	7 July 1996
Ratargul Swamp Forest	Sylhet	Swamp Forest	204.25	31 May 2015
Madhabkundu Eco-Park	Moulvibazar	Eco park	265.68	2001
Borshijora Eco-Park	Moulvibazar	Eco park	326.07	2006
Tilagar Eco-Park	Sylhet	Eco park	45.34	2006

Source: Author compilation

7. Findings and Discussions

7.1 Demographic and Travel Behavior Information of Tourists

The tourist demographic and socioeconomic survey result (Table 2) of this study shows that the majority of the male tourists belong to 20-29 age group (47.1%) followed by 30-39 years age group (34.1%). In contrast, the least number of tourists (4.3%) are of above 50 years age group. Out of 138 tourists, the number of male tourists was higher (75.4%) than that of female tourists (24.6%). The survey revealed that the majority of the tourists (26.8%) are in private service. It is worth mentioning that education level of tourists was relatively high, with 46.4% are post-graduates and 24.6% are graduates. It was found that about 37.7% of the tourists belong to the income over Tk. 50000, followed by the income range Tk. 30001-40000 (32.6%).

The survey found that majority of the tourists (71.7%) come from another district to visit the park. About 63.8% of the tourists stay at the destination for 0-1 day followed by 30.4% for 2-3 days. The survey revealed that friends and relatives were common groups during a tour in most of the cases, accounting for about 60.1%. It is to be mentioned here that the majority of the tourists stayed at the hotel during their traveling period, accounting for about 65.2%. The result shows that greater part (34.5%) of the tourists used the bus as a transportation mode. It is also apparent from the table that friend and relatives were marked highest percentage (36.4%) for the source of information about the destination.

Table 2: Socio-demographic profile of the tourists

Variables	Sub-Variables	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	104	75.4%
	Female	34	24.6%
Age	Up to 19 years	9	6.5%
	20-29 years	65	47.1%
	30-39 years	47	34.1%
	40-49 years	11	8%
	50+ years	6	4.3%
Education	No education	0	0%
	Primary	4	2.9%
	SSC	10	7.2%
	HSC	26	18.8%

	Graduate	34	24.6%
	Post Graduate	64	46.4%
Occupation	Students	33	23.9%
	Self Employed / Business	25	18.1%
	Professional (Teaching, Doctors, Engineer etc.)	11	8%
	Government Officer	14	10.1%
	Private Service	37	26.8%
	Unemployed	4	2.9%
	Retired	2	1.4%
	Others (Expatriate, Housewife)	12	8.7%
	Household Income	Less than Tk. 20,000	7
Tk. 20001 - Tk. 30,000		34	24.6%
Tk. 30001 - Tk. 40,000		45	32.6%
Tk. 50,000+		52	37.7%
Tourists' Area of Living	From different upazilas of the same district	7	5.1%
	From different districts of Sylhet division	13	9.4%
	From another district	99	71.7%
	From another country	19	13.8%
Length of Stay	0-1 day	88	63.8%
	2-3 days	42	30.4%
	4-5 days	4	2.9%
	6 or more days	4	2.9%
Person Accompanied	Travel alone	12	8.7%
	Spouse and children	38	27.5%
	Friends/relatives	83	60.1%
	Others (Colleagues, students, Cyclist, Sports team)	5	3.6%
Type of Accommodation	Hotel	90	65.2%
	Resort	17	12.3%
	Bungalow	2	1.4%
	Own house	19	13.8%
	Friends / family	8	5.8%
	Others	2	1.4%
Mode of Transportation	Car	62	31%
	Bus	69	34.5%
	Air	12	6%
	Train	57	28.5%

Source of Destination Information	Internet	46	14.2%
	Friends & Relatives	118	36.4%
	Media	51	15.5%
	Social Media	73	22.5%
	Books & Guides	17	5.2%
	Travel Agency	10	3.1%
	Fairs & Exhibitions	5	1.5%

Source: Field survey

7.2 Tourists' Satisfaction on Tourism Products and Services

With regard to measuring tourists' satisfaction, five dimensions were used, namely accessibility, hospitality, expenditure, attraction, and entertainment facilities and environmental factor. Each of these dimensions was further divided into related statements in order to get greater insights into tourists' satisfaction. The summary of the results is shown in the following table.

Table 3: Mean scores for tourists' satisfaction

Dimension	Items	Mean Values
Accessibility	Availability of adequate tourist information	2.74
	Availability of local transportation services	3.34
	Quality of local transportation services	3.01
	Convenience to travel	3.10
	Accessibility to basic medical treatment	2.32
Hospitality	Appealing accommodation	3.62
	Safe accommodation	3.70
	Variety of food and beverage	3.54
	Quality of food and beverage	3.65
	Hygiene at the restaurants	3.43
	Friendliness of hotel staff	3.46
	The warm and welcoming attitude of local people	3.91
	Availability of tourist guide	3.05
	Cooperation of tourist police	2.43
Expenditure	Price of accommodation	2.51
	Price of food and beverage	3.10
	Fare of local transportation	2.88
	The overall cost of their stay	2.95
Attraction and entertainment facilities	Variety of cultural and natural attractions	4.19
	Availability of quality souvenirs	3.07
	Activity oriented tourism place	2.83
	Special events/festivals	2.59
	Availability of music club, cinema hall, bar facilities	2.17

Environmental factor	quality of water supply	3.17
	Availability of clean public toilet in the tourist spot	2.04
	Cleanliness of the streets and public places	2.88

Source: Field survey

According to the table 3, satisfaction on different dimensions varied a lot, of which apparently accessibility, expenditure, attraction and entertainment facility and environment dimensions are with dissatisfaction except hospitality dimensions. Here, the higher the mean value, the greater the tourists' satisfaction.

However, factor referring to "quality of local transportation services" indicates tourists' neutrality and their average score is 3.01 out of a total of 5. In addition to the availability of local transportation services in Moulvibazar, it was found that majority of the CNG being the popular and available mode of transportation is more spacious compared to other public transport. But the study found that there is no counter bus service that has specified stoppages for boarding and alighting of tourists and the tickets are sold at the counter of those stoppages.

Through descriptive statistics of tourists' satisfaction towards nine facets under hospitality dimension it was found that except one attribute namely "cooperation of tourist police", local people are hospitable towards the visitors. Particularly, the hospitality of the Bangladeshi people has greatly inspired foreign tourists. Foreign tourists expressed that local people have welcomed them wherever they visit. Some people also offered them to have a cup of tea which surprised them greatly. But majority of the foreign tourists were highly displeased with the official complexities of Visa office whenever they go for Visa extension. In fact, some of them called 'Terrible Visa office'. However, domestic tourists visiting LNP claim that there is no surveillance of tourist police inside the park let alone their cooperation. With regard to appealing accommodation, the study found that there is a limited number of mediocre accommodation facility nearby the park. Although a range of hotels, resorts, and cottages with multiple facilities are available, they are expensive and therefore fail to satisfy mass tourists.

With regard to expenditure dimension, the study found that domestic tourists perceived pricing at the Moulvibazar expensive. It was found that the expatriates of London feel safe and comfortable staying in the hotel rather than at their own home when they come in Sylhet. In fact, local hotels are full of people arriving from London throughout the year. That's why, rent of hotel is costly. Domestic tourists were found unhappy with accommodation cost, local transportation cost except for food cost. Conversely, few foreign tourists expressed that it is a common practice that a "tourist price" is charged for several services as it is believed that tourists have higher purchasing power than locals. The study also revealed that drivers give no chance to bargain about the fare they demand despite having the better conditions of the road compared to other districts, easy travel routes as well as the availability of vehicles.

The highest mean value for 'attraction and entertainment facilities' dimension is 4.19, which is for "variety of natural and cultural attractions". It means that lush green tropical forests and scenic tea plantations along with diverse tribal communities with colorful lifestyles make the park a wonderful pleasure ground of natural beauty. However, foreign tourists suggested that the attractions tend to lack beautification despite being satisfied with the uniqueness of the natural resources. Moreover, it was found that majority of the tourists have a tendency to spend their day at Moulvibazar for maximum one day due to lack of recreational facilities. Few high-class hotels and/or resorts have the arrangements for such recreational facilities as cultural show by the local tribal people and outdoor activities that cannot be availed by mass tourists. Furthermore, there were not enough places to sit and relax inside the area while discovering the attractions.

The dimension of 'Environmental factor' consisted of 3 statements. The lowest mean value is 2.04 out of a total of 5 for the statement "availability of clean public toilet in the tourist spot". Tourists feel that public toilet services are very sporadic and of poor quality. Although some public toilets are seen inside the park, they are not usable due to the wrecked door, unhygienic condition, scarcity of water, and no soap. Keeping this in view, there is a need to address this issue to solve the problem of public toilets in tourist spots. Results also reveal that litter remains a problem because in most of the tourist spots there are no litter bins available to avoid littering. Visitors throw waste packets and bottles etc. inside the park without the slightest care for the environment or local communities.

7.3 Destination Loyalty

Despite all hardships and complaints of tourists regarding their travel at LNP, they are still willing to revisit it.

Following table shows the percentage distribution of tourists' willingness to make a repeat visit to the park. Results show that overall majority of the tourists (68.1%) want to revisit it, while 31.9% are reluctant to revisit.

Table 4: Percentage distribution of tourists' willingness to make a repeat visit in LNP

Response	LNP
Yes	68.1%
No	31.9%
Total	100%

Source: Field survey

Though tourists are not fully satisfied with the cleanliness status, accommodation, transportation system, recreational facilities etc., they want to revisit the park. In fact, they will also recommend other to visit the park. This is shown in a pie chart given below:

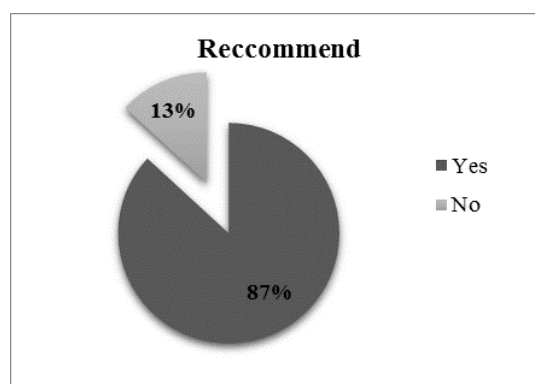


Figure 1. Tourists' willingness to recommend others for visiting LNP

8. Conclusion & Implications of the Study

As a forest-based tourism product, Lawachara National Park has good potentials to develop as a valuable tourism product with its own uniqueness. Additional revenue plus preserving heritage, forest resources and its biodiversity are the main motivational factors in becoming an operator in such type of tourism. But some challenges have come into limelight while talking with visitors inside the park. In the course of the study, it was found that various challenges, such as poor maintenance of the park, lack of beautification, inadequate infrastructural facilities, lack of forest-based tourism activities, lack of cleanliness, callous activities of both the visitors and community people etc. are crucial for the development of forest-based tourism in Bangladesh. However, all these challenges have to be seen as a positive implication to develop, improve and promote Lawachara National Park as a forest-based tourism attraction in our country. In this regard, adequate infrastructural facilities, more shopping opportunities, especially local arts and crafts should be ensured inside and nearby the LNP to ensure longer stay of tourists and to enhance their satisfaction. Capacities of government tourism agencies and local stakeholders also need to be strengthened. Additionally, the creation of a tourism-friendly environment and the commitment of the government policy planners and collaborations with private sector entrepreneurs and general visitors are also vital for the growth and sustained development of tourism. Sustainable tourism takes place if home grown resources and natural settings are effectively served to the tourism as well as preserved. Forest-based tourism leads to sustainable development that protects the natural and cultural resources of a community while delivering financial benefits to the local community as well as delivering satisfaction to tourists.

Based on the above analysis and discussion, some specific recommendations are put forward for the development of forest-based tourism attraction in Bangladesh:

- Adequate infrastructural facilities such as mediocre hotels need to be built, separate articulated or air-conditioned bus services for tourists can be launched and local transportation fare should be fixed and monitored by the concerned authority.

- A resting place for tourists having minimum facilities for drinking water and/or snacks/light food, toilet etc. can be built inside the park.
- Depending on the destination a specific fare chart should be in place, so that some opportunistic people cannot exploit tourists.
- Considering the seasonal pattern of tourism, i.e. winter tourism and monsoon tourism, there should be an arrangement for different recreational and outdoor activities for satiating tourists' desires and ensuring their longer stay.
- A clean campaign titled "Let it be clean" can be launched to sensitize all about the importance of cleanliness and hygiene in tourist destinations.

References

- Ahsan, M. K., Roy, D., & Mokta Dhir, M. G. (March, 2017). Factors Affecting Tourist Satisfaction: A Study in Sylhet Region. ABC Research House.
- Alam, M., Furukawa, Y., & Akter, S. (2010). Forest-Based Tourism in Bangladesh: Status, Problems, and Prospects. *Tourismos: International Multidisciplinary Journal of Tourism*, 163-164.
- Bitner, M. J. (1990). Evaluating Service Encounters: The Effects of Physical Surroundings and Employee Responses. *Journal of Marketing*, 54, 69-82.
- Gundersen, M.G., Heide, M. & Dan Olsson, U.H. (1996). Hotel guest satisfaction among business travelers-what are the important factors? *Cornell hotel and restaurant administration quarterly*, 36 (2), 72-81.
- Hani, F. F. (2016), Exploring Pull Factors of Travel Motivation: An Exploratory Study in Sylhet Region. Asian Business Consortium.
- M. Kozak, M. Rimmington (2000). Tourist satisfaction with Mallorca, Spain, as an off-season holiday destination. *Journal of Travel Research* 38, 260-269.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. & Berry, L. (1990). *Delivering Quality Service*. New York, Free Press.
- Parasuraman, V.A. Zeithaml, L.L. Berry (1985). A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research. *Journal of Marketing*, 41-50.
- Pizam, Y. Neumann, A. Reichel (1978). Dimensions of Tourist Satisfaction with a Destination. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 314-322.
- Walker, J. L. (1995). Service encounter satisfaction: conceptualized. *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 5-14.
- Yüksel, A., Yüksel, F. (2002). Measurement of tourist satisfaction with restaurant services: a segment-based approach. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 52-68.