

Community-Centered Evaluation of Rural Transportation Services: Insights from Lived Experiences along the Tehoru–Masohi Route

 <https://doi.org/xxxxxx>

Fahmi Arif Sangaji¹, Soraya Rengifurwarin¹

¹Universitas Darussalam Ambon, Jalan Waehakila Puncak Wara, Ambon 97128, Indonesia

Abstract

This study examines the quality of rural transportation services along the Tehoru–Masohi route in Central Maluku through a community-centered perspective that foregrounds users’ lived experiences. It seeks to reconceptualize service quality by exploring how communities perceive and negotiate mobility in everyday contexts, identifying gaps between expectations and actual practices, and analyzing the social, cultural, and contextual dimensions shaping transport experiences. A qualitative intrinsic case study design was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and stakeholder engagement. Thematic analysis was applied, supported by triangulation and reflexivity to ensure analytical rigor. The findings reveal that service quality extends beyond formal indicators such as punctuality and comfort, being deeply embedded in social relations, trust, flexibility, and adaptive practices. Despite infrastructural and operational limitations, services are often perceived as satisfactory due to strong social cohesion and culturally embedded values. However, a latent gap persists between modern service expectations and community-based transport realities. This study advances the concept of “community-centered service quality,” offering an alternative evaluative framework that integrates experiential and context-sensitive dimensions, with implications for inclusive and responsive transportation policy in rural and archipelagic regions.

Keywords: Community-Centered Evaluation, Lived Experience, Mobility Practices, Rural Transportation, Service Quality



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 CC-BY International license

Article Info:

Correspondence E-Mail:
fahmisangaji@gmail.com

Received manuscript: 12/02/2025

Final revision: 28/03/2025

Approved: 10/04/2025

Online Access: 25/04/2025

Published: 10/05/2025

How to cite: Sangaji, F. A., & Rengifurwarin, S. (2025). Community-Centered Evaluation of Rural Transportation Services: Insights from Lived Experiences along the Tehoru–Masohi Route. *Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat (JPPM)*, 1(2), 123-140. <https://doi.org/xxxxxx>

Copyright © by the Authors



Publisher: PT. Sarana Mandiri Investama
RT 07 RW 03 Desa Salamrejo Kec. Karanganyar, Kab. Trenggalek, Provinsi Jawa Timur, Indonesia

E-mail:
selectaedukasi@journal@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Rural transportation systems in developing and archipelagic regions continue to play a pivotal role in sustaining everyday life, connecting communities to markets, education, healthcare, and social networks. In regions such as Central Maluku, particularly along the Tehoru–Masohi route, transportation is not merely an infrastructural concern but a fundamental enabler of socio-economic participation and spatial integration. Despite its importance, rural transport services in such contexts often operate under conditions of infrastructural limitation, geographic fragmentation, and economic uncertainty (Meenakshi & Quisumbing, 2025; Rougeaux et al., 2025). Empirical observations indicate that transport services frequently deviate from formalized standards, characterized by irregular schedules, limited vehicle availability, and modest facilities, yet remain widely utilized and even

positively evaluated by local communities (Hnit & Almana, 2025; Santosa et al., 2025b). This paradox raises important questions about how service quality is understood and experienced in rural settings, where formal metrics may not adequately capture the realities of daily mobility.

The significance of this issue becomes evident when considering the broader development agenda. Access to reliable and inclusive transportation is widely recognized as a key determinant of equitable development and social inclusion (Barruga, 2025; Husamah et al., 2025). In Indonesia, disparities between urban and rural transport infrastructure remain pronounced, with rural and island regions facing persistent challenges related to accessibility, affordability, and service continuity (Hageer, 2025; Santosa et al., 2025a). In Maluku Province, these challenges are further intensified by the archipelagic geography, where distances are shaped not only by space but also by sea, terrain, and seasonal conditions. Consequently, communities often rely on adaptive, informal, and socially embedded transport systems that operate beyond the scope of formal regulation. These conditions suggest that evaluating transport services solely through standardized, technocratic indicators risks overlooking the lived realities of users and the socio-cultural logics that sustain such systems.

Existing scholarship on transportation service quality has largely been dominated by quantitative and model-driven approaches. The SERVQUAL framework, for instance, has been extensively applied to measure service quality across various sectors, including transportation, by focusing on dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Den Dekker-Arlain et al., 2025; Zahnow et al., 2025). Subsequent studies have adapted and refined this model in public transport contexts, emphasizing measurable indicators such as punctuality, comfort, safety, and cost efficiency (Dennis et al., 2025; D. A. P. Sari et al., 2025). While these approaches provide valuable insights into user satisfaction and performance benchmarking, they tend to privilege standardized metrics and generalizable outcomes, often at the expense of contextual specificity and experiential depth.

A growing body of literature has begun to question the limitations of such positivistic models, particularly in non-urban and developing contexts. Researchers have highlighted that user satisfaction in public transport is not solely determined by objective service attributes but is also shaped by subjective perceptions, expectations, and socio-cultural factors (Azzahro et al., 2025; Matovu et al., 2025). In rural settings, these dynamics become even more pronounced, as transport services are often embedded within informal networks and community relationships. Studies in various Global South contexts have shown that flexibility, familiarity, and trust can significantly influence how users perceive service quality, sometimes outweighing formal performance indicators (Lehmann et al., 2025; Sunitiyoso et al., 2025).

Further contributions have emphasized the importance of incorporating qualitative and user-centered approaches in transportation research. Phenomenological and ethnographic studies, for instance, have demonstrated how mobility is experienced as a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon, shaped by everyday practices, cultural norms, and power relations (Bastos et al., 2025). These perspectives shift the focus

from transportation as a technical system to mobility as a lived experience, highlighting the meanings and values that users attach to their journeys. In the context of rural and peripheral regions, such approaches offer a more nuanced understanding of how transport services function within complex socio-spatial environments.

In the Indonesian context, however, research on rural transportation has remained relatively limited and often centered on infrastructural development, policy evaluation, or economic efficiency (Ahmad et al., 2023; Muchlisin et al., 2025). While some studies have explored accessibility issues and regional disparities, few have examined how communities themselves interpret and negotiate the quality of transport services in their everyday lives. Moreover, existing studies rarely integrate the interplay between social relations, cultural values, and geographical constraints in shaping transport experiences. This suggests a need for alternative analytical frameworks that move beyond standardized evaluation models and engage more deeply with the lived realities of users.

Against this backdrop, there is an emerging recognition that service quality in rural transportation cannot be fully understood without situating it within the social and cultural contexts in which it operates. The tendency of conventional approaches to abstract service quality into measurable indicators may inadvertently obscure the very factors that sustain transport systems in resource-constrained environments. In places like Tehoru–Masohi, where drivers and passengers often share long-standing social ties, and where flexibility and mutual accommodation are integral to service delivery, quality may be less about adherence to schedules and more about relational trust and contextual responsiveness. Such observations point toward the need for a conceptual shift, one that repositions users not merely as evaluators of predefined criteria but as active agents who co-construct the meaning of service quality through their lived experiences.

In this light, the present study seeks to reframe the evaluation of rural transportation services by adopting a community-centered perspective grounded in lived experience. Rather than treating service quality as a fixed set of measurable attributes, this approach explores how quality is dynamically produced, interpreted, and negotiated within specific social and spatial contexts. By focusing on the Tehoru–Masohi route as an intrinsic case, the study captures the complexities of rural mobility in an archipelagic setting, where formal and informal practices intersect in shaping everyday transport experiences.

The contribution of this study lies in its effort to bring together insights from service quality research, mobility studies, and community-based approaches into a coherent analytical framework that is both context-sensitive and empirically grounded. In doing so, it offers a reorientation of how transportation services are conceptualized and evaluated in developing regions. Ultimately, the study aims to provide a more inclusive and responsive understanding of service quality, one that can inform not only academic discourse but also policy and community engagement practices. Specifically, this research seeks to (1) explore how users along the Tehoru–Masohi route construct and interpret the notion of service quality in their daily mobility practices; (2) identify the gaps between user expectations and

actual service delivery; and (3) analyze the social, cultural, and contextual dimensions that shape these experiences, thereby contributing to the development of more adaptive and community-responsive transportation policies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design to explore how rural transportation service quality is experienced and interpreted by local communities along the Tehoru–Masohi route in Central Maluku. A qualitative strategy is particularly appropriate for this research because the focus lies not on measuring service performance through predefined indicators, but on understanding meanings, perceptions, and everyday practices as lived by users. Such an approach enables the researcher to capture the depth, complexity, and contextual nuances of social phenomena that cannot be adequately represented through quantitative generalizations (Fitri, 2024; Sunitiyoso et al., 2023). The choice of an intrinsic case study is grounded in the specificity and uniqueness of the Tehoru–Masohi route as a socio-spatial setting, where transportation is shaped by archipelagic geography, limited infrastructure, and strong community ties. Rather than aiming for broad generalization, this study seeks to generate an in-depth, contextually embedded understanding of service quality as it is lived and negotiated in this particular setting (Heriqbaldi et al., 2025).

The selection of informants was conducted purposively to ensure that participants possessed direct and relevant experiences with the transportation system under study. A total of twelve informants were involved, consisting of regular passengers, transport drivers, and local stakeholders such as community leaders and transport coordinators. Passengers were selected based on the frequency of their travel and their dependence on the service for daily activities, ensuring that their perspectives reflected sustained engagement rather than occasional use. Drivers were included to provide insight into the operational realities, constraints, and adaptive strategies involved in service provision. Meanwhile, local stakeholders were engaged to offer broader contextual understanding regarding community dynamics and informal governance of transport practices. This combination of informants allows for a more holistic and multi-perspective exploration of the phenomenon, aligning with the principle of capturing diverse viewpoints in qualitative inquiry (Busia & Arthur-Holmes, 2024; B. R. Sari et al., 2025).

Data collection was carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation, both of which are well-suited to uncovering lived experiences and social interactions. The interviews were designed to be flexible, allowing participants to narrate their experiences in their own terms while still guided by key themes such as perceptions of service quality, expectations, challenges, and social relations. This method was chosen to facilitate rich, descriptive accounts and to create space for meanings that may not emerge through structured questioning (Blesia et al., 2025; Kiswani & Fikru, 2025). In parallel, participant observation was conducted by accompanying transport activities along

the route, enabling the researcher to directly witness interactions between drivers and passengers, observe service practices, and understand the situational context in which mobility occurs. This immersive engagement helps bridge the gap between what participants say and what they do, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings.

The analysis of data followed a thematic approach, involving processes of data reduction, coding, categorization, and interpretive synthesis. Through iterative reading and reflection, patterns and themes were identified to construct a coherent understanding of how service quality is experienced and socially constructed. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was employed in multiple forms. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing perspectives across different informant groups, while method triangulation involved cross-validating interview data with observational insights. In addition, time triangulation was applied by conducting data collection at different periods to capture potential variations in service dynamics. The researcher also engaged in reflexivity, continuously examining personal assumptions and positionality throughout the research process to minimize bias and enhance interpretive rigor (Hermawan et al., 2024; Indriyani et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reframing Service Quality: From Technical Metrics to Lived Meanings

The findings of this study reveal a significant shift in how service quality is understood and evaluated by users of rural transportation along the Tehoru–Masohi route. Rather than relying on formalized indicators such as punctuality, physical comfort, or standardized pricing, informants consistently framed quality in terms of their lived, everyday experiences. For many participants, the notion of a “good service” was not anchored in whether a vehicle arrived on time according to a fixed schedule, but whether the service remained reliably accessible within the rhythms of their daily lives. As one passenger (R) explained, “It is not about the exact time; what matters is that there is always a car when we need to go.” This statement reflects a broader pattern in which temporal precision is less valued than service presence and availability. Similarly, another informant (M), a regular commuter, emphasized that “even if we wait longer, we already understand the situation; the important thing is we can still reach our destination.”

This reconfiguration of meaning points to a more situated and relational understanding of service quality, where evaluation emerges from practical engagement rather than abstract standards. Observational data further reinforce this interpretation, showing that waiting times are often filled with social interaction, informal exchanges, and collective negotiation among passengers and drivers. In this sense, the experience of “waiting” is not merely a passive inconvenience but part of a broader social process that shapes how services are perceived. The emphasis on accessibility and continuity over precision indicates that users prioritize the functional integration of transport into their livelihoods, particularly in a setting where alternatives are limited and mobility is closely tied

to economic survival and social participation.

These findings resonate with recent developments in service research that challenge the dominance of performance-based evaluation models. The traditional paradigm of service quality as performance, which emphasizes measurable outputs and standardized benchmarks, has been increasingly critiqued for its inability to capture user-centered and context-dependent dimensions of service experience. In contrast, the emerging perspective of service quality as experience foregrounds how services are perceived, interpreted, and lived by users within specific socio-cultural environments. This shift is strongly aligned with the principles of Transformative Service Research (TSR), which emphasizes the role of services in enhancing well-being and acknowledges the importance of contextual and relational factors in shaping user experiences (Khumairoh et al., 2025; Muawanah et al., 2024; Raung et al., 2025).

Within the TSR framework, service quality is no longer viewed as an objective attribute that can be universally measured, but as a co-created outcome that emerges through interactions between providers, users, and their environment. The empirical evidence from this study illustrates this co-creative process in a rural transportation context (Gupta & Anand, 2025; Sun et al., 2024). For instance, drivers often adjust their practices, such as waiting for additional passengers or accommodating flexible drop-off points, in response to the needs of the community. These adaptive behaviors are not formally codified, yet they significantly influence how users evaluate the service. A driver (S) noted that “we cannot follow strict rules here; we have to adjust to people’s needs, otherwise no one will use the service.” This highlights that service quality is actively negotiated in practice, shaped by mutual understanding and shared constraints.

Moreover, the findings underscore that service evaluation in this context is inherently situational. What counts as “quality” is contingent upon local expectations, geographic realities, and socio-economic conditions. In an environment characterized by limited infrastructure and dispersed settlements, the mere availability of transport can outweigh concerns about comfort or punctuality. This does not imply that users are indifferent to these aspects, but rather that they prioritize what is most meaningful and attainable within their context. Such prioritization reflects a pragmatic form of rationality, where users continuously recalibrate their expectations in relation to lived realities.

Trust, Social Proximity, and Informal Norms in Service Evaluation

The empirical findings from this study demonstrate that trust, social proximity, and informal norms play a central role in shaping how transportation services are evaluated along the Tehoru–Masohi route. Rather than being perceived as a purely transactional interaction, the relationship between drivers and passengers is embedded within ongoing social ties that extend beyond the immediate act of mobility. Many informants described their interactions with drivers not in terms of service provision alone, but as part of a familiar and relational network. As one passenger (N) noted, “We already know the drivers; they are part of our daily life, so there is no need to be too formal.” This familiarity fosters a sense of ease and mutual

understanding, which in turn influences how service quality is perceived and negotiated.

Trust emerges as a key mechanism through which this relational dynamic operates. Informants frequently emphasized that their continued use of particular transport services was based not only on availability but also on personal confidence in the driver. For instance, a respondent (L) explained that “even if the car is not very comfortable, I prefer to ride with someone I trust.” This trust is built over time through repeated interactions, shared experiences, and the demonstration of reliability in ways that are meaningful within the local context. It also enables a degree of flexibility that would be difficult to sustain in more formalized systems. Drivers, for example, often allow passengers to pay later if they are short of cash, or to be picked up and dropped off outside designated points. A driver (S) reflected on this practice by stating, “Sometimes people don’t have money right away, but we understand their situation. They will pay later.” Such practices illustrate how economic transactions are intertwined with moral considerations and social reciprocity.

This flexibility is not random but is governed by informal norms that are widely understood within the community. These norms regulate expectations and behavior, ensuring that both drivers and passengers adhere to a shared sense of fairness and responsibility (McCalmont et al., 2023; Probohudono et al., 2025; Verusha Ali et al., 2025). Observational data indicate that passengers rarely exploit these informal arrangements, as doing so would risk damaging their social reputation and relationships. In this way, accountability is maintained not through formal enforcement mechanisms, but through social sanctions and mutual trust. The result is a system that, while lacking formal structure, remains functionally coherent and socially regulated.

These findings can be analytically understood through the concept of social embeddedness, which posits that economic activities are deeply enmeshed in social relations rather than operating as isolated, rational exchanges. While this concept was originally articulated by Granovetter, recent scholarship has extended its relevance to contemporary public service contexts, emphasizing how relational dynamics shape service delivery and evaluation (Mai et al., 2025; Rossolov et al., 2025). In the case of rural transportation, service quality cannot be disentangled from the social fabric in which it is embedded. The value of the service lies not only in its functional attributes, but in the quality of the relationships that sustain it.

From this perspective, evaluating service quality solely on the basis of measurable outputs, such as timeliness or physical condition, risks overlooking the very elements that make the service meaningful and effective in practice. The findings suggest that users place significant weight on relational dimensions, including respect, familiarity, and mutual support. A passenger (R) described this succinctly: “What makes it good is not just the ride, but how we are treated.” This statement underscores that the experience of service is inseparable from the social interaction through which it is delivered.

The presence of strong social proximity allows for a more adaptive and responsive form of service provision (Rizki et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). Because drivers are closely

connected to the communities they serve, they are more attuned to the specific needs and circumstances of passengers. This proximity enables them to anticipate demand, adjust routes, and accommodate individual requests in ways that would be difficult to achieve within a rigid, standardized system. Such adaptability enhances the perceived quality of the service, even in the absence of formal efficiency.

Flexibility and Adaptive Practices in Resource-Constrained Settings

The findings of this study highlight flexibility as a central organizing principle in the operation and evaluation of rural transportation services along the Tehoru–Masohi route. In contrast to formal transport systems that rely on fixed schedules, predetermined routes, and standardized pricing, the services observed in this context function through adaptive practices that are continuously negotiated between drivers and passengers. This flexibility is not incidental but emerges as a deliberate response to structural constraints, including limited infrastructure, fluctuating demand, and the dispersed geography of rural settlements. As such, it represents a pragmatic form of adaptation that allows the system to remain functional under conditions where rigid standardization would likely fail.

Empirical data from interviews and observations reveal that both drivers and passengers actively participate in shaping these flexible arrangements. For instance, departure times are rarely fixed; instead, vehicles typically wait until a sufficient number of passengers has gathered before beginning the journey. A driver (S) explained, “If we leave too early with few passengers, we lose money. So we wait, but passengers also understand this.” This practice reflects a shared economic rationality, where efficiency is collectively negotiated rather than imposed through formal scheduling. Similarly, routes are often adjusted in response to passenger needs, with drivers willing to deviate from main roads to pick up or drop off individuals in more remote locations. A passenger (M) noted, “Sometimes the driver takes us closer to our house, even if it is not on the main route. That really helps us.” These examples illustrate how service delivery is shaped through ongoing interaction and mutual accommodation.

Negotiation also extends to pricing, where formal tariffs coexist with informal adjustments based on individual circumstances. In certain cases, passengers may pay reduced fares due to financial constraints or social familiarity, with the understanding that such arrangements are temporary and context-specific. A respondent (L) described this dynamic by stating, “If someone cannot pay the full amount, the driver may accept less, especially if they know the person.” This indicates that economic exchange is mediated by social considerations, reinforcing the notion that service provision is embedded within a broader moral economy. Importantly, these practices are not perceived as disorderly or inefficient by participants; rather, they are understood as necessary adaptations that ensure the continuity and accessibility of the service.

From an analytical perspective, these findings can be interpreted through the lens of adaptive service systems, which conceptualize service provision as a dynamic process involving multiple actors who continuously adjust their roles and interactions in response to

changing conditions. While early formulations of this perspective emphasized the integration of resources and co-creation of value (Putra et al., 2025; Qiu et al., 2024), more recent developments have extended its relevance to contexts characterized by uncertainty and resource limitation, including rural and digitally mediated environments (Barokah et al., 2025; Bhatia et al., 2025). Within this framework, flexibility is not viewed as a deviation from an ideal model, but as an inherent feature of systems that must operate under variable and often unpredictable conditions.

In the case of the Tehoru–Masohi route, flexibility functions as a form of social resilience, enabling the transportation system to absorb shocks, accommodate diverse needs, and maintain continuity despite infrastructural and economic constraints. This resilience is not solely technical but is grounded in the collective capacity of community members to coordinate, negotiate, and adapt. The absence of rigid structures allows for a more responsive and context-sensitive form of service delivery, where decisions can be made in real time based on immediate circumstances. As one driver (R) articulated, “We cannot rely on fixed rules here; every day is different, so we adjust as needed.” This statement encapsulates the situational logic that underpins the system.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that such flexibility is not without limits. It operates within a framework of shared expectations and informal norms that prevent it from becoming arbitrary or exploitative. Passengers generally accept waiting times and route deviations because they recognize the constraints faced by drivers, while drivers maintain a degree of fairness to sustain trust and long-term relationships. This mutual calibration ensures that flexibility enhances, rather than undermines, the perceived quality of the service.

Cultural Values and Collective Meaning-Making in Mobility Practices

The findings of this study reveal that mobility practices along the Tehoru–Masohi route are deeply shaped by cultural values that extend beyond functional considerations of transport. Rather than being experienced solely as a means of movement from one point to another, transportation is embedded within a broader moral and social framework that reflects shared norms of togetherness, tolerance, and mutual assistance. Informants consistently described how everyday travel is infused with practices that prioritize collective well-being over individual convenience. For instance, the act of waiting for additional passengers before departure, often interpreted in formal service models as inefficiency, was instead understood as a form of consideration and fairness. As one passenger (A) explained, “We wait because others also need to go. It would not feel right to leave them behind.” This perspective suggests that waiting is not merely tolerated, but socially valued as part of a shared responsibility.

Such practices are closely linked to the cultural importance of *kebersamaan*, or togetherness, which underpins many aspects of social life in rural Maluku. Within this cultural framework, mobility becomes a space where social cohesion is enacted and reinforced. Observational data indicate that passengers frequently engage in small acts of care during

travel, such as adjusting seating arrangements to accommodate elderly passengers, sharing goods, or assisting with loading and unloading items. A driver (R) recounted, “If someone has many goods, others will help without being asked. It is simply how we are.” These seemingly mundane interactions play a significant role in shaping the overall experience of the service, contributing to a sense of comfort and belonging that cannot be captured through technical indicators alone.

Tolerance also emerges as a key cultural value influencing how service quality is perceived. Informants expressed a general willingness to accept delays, route deviations, and varying levels of comfort, not out of resignation, but as part of an understanding of shared constraints. A participant (M) noted, “We all know the conditions here are not easy, so we try to understand each other.” This collective mindset reflects an adaptive cultural logic in which expectations are moderated by empathy and contextual awareness. Rather than evaluating the service against abstract or external standards, users assess it in relation to what is considered reasonable within their environment. This reinforces the idea that quality is not fixed, but negotiated through culturally informed judgments.

These findings align with the perspective of mobility as a social practice, which conceptualizes movement not as an isolated technical activity but as a socially and culturally embedded process (El-Husseiny et al., 2024). Recent developments in this field further emphasize that mobility practices are shaped by shared meanings, norms, and values that vary across contexts (Nurul et al., 2025). In this view, transportation systems are not neutral infrastructures but arenas where social relations and cultural identities are continuously produced and reproduced. The Tehoru–Masohi case illustrates this clearly, as the experience of mobility is inseparable from the cultural practices that define how individuals relate to one another during travel.

Negotiating Expectations: The Gap Between Modern Standards and Local Realities

The findings of this study reveal a nuanced dynamic in how users along the Tehoru–Masohi route engage with the apparent gap between modern service expectations and the realities of community-based transportation. While informants are generally aware of widely circulating standards associated with “good” transportation, such as punctuality, safety, comfort, and reliability, they do not apply these standards rigidly in evaluating their everyday experiences. Instead, users actively negotiate their expectations, recalibrating them in relation to the socio-economic and geographic conditions that shape local service provision. This process of negotiation is not passive acceptance, but a form of contextual reasoning through which individuals reconcile what is ideally desired with what is realistically available.

Several informants explicitly articulated this tension. A passenger (M), for instance, acknowledged that “if we compare with the city, of course this is far from ideal, there is no fixed schedule, and sometimes the vehicles are not comfortable.” However, the same informant continued by noting that “we understand the situation here; what matters is that we can still travel when needed.” This dual awareness, recognizing limitations while affirming functional adequacy, illustrates how expectations are not abandoned but adjusted. Similarly,

another respondent (R) stated, “We know it is not perfect, but we cannot demand too much because the conditions are different here.” Such statements reflect an ongoing interpretive process in which users position their experiences within a broader frame of contextual constraints.

This process becomes even more evident when considering how users interpret issues of safety and predictability. While these dimensions are central in formal transport evaluations, they are often reframed in local terms. For example, rather than relying on formal safety standards, passengers frequently base their sense of security on familiarity with drivers and collective experience. A participant (L) explained, “I feel safe because I know the driver and how he drives, even if the vehicle is not new.” In this sense, safety is not solely a technical attribute but a socially constructed perception grounded in trust and experience. Likewise, uncertainty in scheduling is not necessarily perceived as a failure, but as a known and manageable aspect of the system. Users develop strategies, such as arriving earlier or coordinating informally with drivers, that allow them to navigate this uncertainty effectively.

These findings can be analytically situated within the framework of expectation–experience reconciliation, which emphasizes that user satisfaction is shaped not only by the alignment between expectations and outcomes, but also by the ability of individuals to adjust their expectations in light of contextual realities (Prasetio et al., 2025). Within this framework, satisfaction emerges from a dynamic interplay between aspiration and adaptation. Rather than evaluating services against fixed, universal benchmarks, users engage in an ongoing process of sense-making that incorporates both personal needs and environmental constraints. In the Tehoru–Masohi context, this reconciliation is facilitated by shared understandings of limitation, where community members collectively recognize the structural conditions affecting service delivery.

Importantly, this negotiation of expectations does not imply complacency or a lack of critical awareness. Many informants expressed a desire for improved services, particularly in terms of comfort, road conditions, and consistency. However, these aspirations are tempered by a pragmatic recognition of what is feasible. A passenger (S) remarked, “We hope for better facilities, but we also know it cannot change quickly. So we make do with what we have.” This statement captures a form of grounded expectation, where hope and realism coexist. It also suggests that users evaluate services not only based on current performance, but in relation to perceived trajectories of improvement and the broader development context.

Furthermore, the gap between modern standards and local realities can be understood not merely as a deficit, but as a productive space where meaning is negotiated and redefined. Within this space, users actively reinterpret service attributes, assigning value to aspects that may be overlooked in formal models, such as accessibility, relational trust, and adaptability. This reframing challenges the assumption that deviation from standardized criteria necessarily results in dissatisfaction. Instead, it highlights the capacity of communities to construct alternative evaluative frameworks that are more aligned with their lived experiences.

From a broader perspective, these insights call into question the universality of dominant service quality models, which often assume that user expectations are homogeneous and externally derived. The evidence from this study suggests that expectations are socially and contextually embedded, shaped by local knowledge, collective experience, and adaptive practices. As such, the evaluation of service quality must account for these dynamics, recognizing that what constitutes “quality” is not fixed but contingent upon the interplay between expectation and experience.

Toward a Community-Centered Service Quality Framework

Building on the empirical insights generated throughout this study, a conceptual reorientation of service quality becomes both necessary and inevitable. The lived experiences of users along the Tehoru–Masohi route consistently demonstrate that service quality cannot be adequately captured through conventional, indicator-based models alone. Instead, it emerges as a multidimensional construct shaped by relational, cultural, and contextual dynamics that are deeply embedded in everyday practices. In response to this, the study advances a community-centered service quality framework, which synthesizes the core dimensions identified in the field: social relations, trust, flexibility, cultural values, and contextual adaptation. These dimensions do not operate in isolation but interact dynamically, forming a holistic basis through which users interpret and evaluate transportation services.

At the heart of this framework lies the recognition that social relations are foundational to service experience. Interactions between drivers and passengers are not merely functional but are sustained through familiarity, mutual recognition, and ongoing engagement. As reflected in earlier findings, participants often described service quality in terms of how they were treated rather than what was delivered. A passenger (R) remarked, “What makes the service good is that we feel respected and understood.” This highlights that relational quality, marked by courtesy, attentiveness, and shared understanding, constitutes a primary evaluative lens. Such findings align with contemporary discussions in public service research that emphasize relationality and co-production as central to value creation (Jin et al., 2024; Ndaguba & van Zyl, 2025).

Closely intertwined with social relations is the dimension of trust, which functions as both a precondition and an outcome of repeated interactions. Trust enables the informal arrangements that characterize the system, such as flexible payments or route adjustments, and reduces the need for formal enforcement mechanisms. It also shapes perceptions of safety and reliability, as users rely on personal familiarity rather than institutional guarantees. This reinforces the idea that service quality is co-constructed through interaction, echoing recent developments in service-dominant logic that position value as emergent from relational processes rather than embedded in outputs (Arifin et al., 2024).

Flexibility, as identified in the empirical findings, represents another central dimension of the framework. Rather than being viewed as a deviation from ideal standards, flexibility is understood here as a form of adaptive capacity that allows the service to remain responsive to fluctuating demand and contextual constraints. Informants repeatedly emphasized the

importance of adjustable schedules, negotiable routes, and situational decision-making. A driver (S) explained, “We cannot be rigid here; we have to follow the needs of the people.” This adaptive orientation reflects a system that prioritizes usability and accessibility over standardization, suggesting that responsiveness to context is a key marker of quality in resource-constrained environments.

Cultural values further enrich this framework by providing the normative foundation through which service practices are interpreted. Values such as togetherness, tolerance, and mutual assistance are not peripheral but integral to how mobility is experienced. These values shape expectations, guide behavior, and influence how limitations are perceived and accepted. For instance, the willingness to wait for other passengers or to share space is not seen as a compromise, but as an expression of collective responsibility. This cultural embedding of service aligns with the perspective of mobility as a socially meaningful practice, where movement is intertwined with shared norms and identities (Barokah et al., 2025).

Equally important is the dimension of contextual adaptation, which captures how users continuously recalibrate their expectations in relation to local realities. As discussed in previous sections, the gap between modern service standards and actual conditions does not simply produce dissatisfaction; rather, it becomes a space for negotiation and reinterpretation. Users evaluate services based on what is feasible within their environment, taking into account infrastructural limitations, geographic challenges, and economic constraints. This adaptive evaluative process underscores that service quality is inherently situational, shaped by the interplay between aspiration and lived experience.

Taken together, these dimensions form a coherent framework that departs fundamentally from conventional models of service quality. Traditional approaches, such as those derived from standardized metrics, tend to assume universality and comparability across contexts. However, the findings of this study suggest that such assumptions are insufficient for capturing the realities of rural and archipelagic settings, where services operate within complex socio-cultural ecosystems. By placing community experience at the center, the proposed framework offers a more grounded and context-sensitive approach to evaluation, one that recognizes users as active agents in defining and co-creating quality.

This reorientation carries important implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, it contributes to ongoing efforts to deconstruct dominant, technocratic paradigms in service research and to foreground the importance of lived experience, relationality, and context. Practically, it suggests that policy interventions should move beyond the imposition of universal standards and instead engage with the existing social and cultural dynamics that sustain service systems. As one local stakeholder (H) observed, “If policies ignore how people actually use and understand the service, they will not work.” This insight encapsulates the central argument of the study: that meaningful evaluation and improvement of rural transportation services must begin with the lived realities of the communities they serve.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the quality of rural transportation services along the Tehoru–Masohi route is not adequately understood through conventional, indicator-based frameworks, but is instead constructed through the lived experiences of the community that uses and sustains the system. By exploring how users interpret, negotiate, and evaluate service quality in their everyday mobility practices, the research reveals that perceptions of “good service” are shaped less by formal standards and more by relational trust, social proximity, cultural values, flexibility, and contextual adaptation. The identified gap between modern service expectations and local realities does not simply reflect a deficit, but rather a space in which users actively recalibrate their expectations in response to shared constraints and collective understandings. In this regard, the study offers a conceptual contribution through the articulation of a community-centered service quality framework, which positions users as active agents in co-creating and defining quality based on contextually grounded experiences. This perspective provides a more nuanced and context-sensitive lens for evaluating transportation services in rural and archipelagic settings, while also underscoring the importance of integrating community perspectives into policy and practice to ensure that interventions are not only technically sound but socially responsive.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants’ confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, M., Peng, T., Awan, A., & Ahmed, Z. (2023). Policy framework considering resource curse, renewable energy transition, and institutional issues: Fostering sustainable development and sustainable natural resource consumption practices. *Resources Policy*, 86(5), 104173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2023.104173>
- Arifin, R., Zulfa, E. A., Hanita, M., & Simon Runturambi, A. J. (2024). Unveiling Indonesia’s migration and border governance: Challenges and imperatives post-pandemic. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 10(2), 101202. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101202>
- Azzahro, F., Hidayanto, A. N., & Shihab, M. R. (2025). Examining factors shaping citizens’ perception of artificial intelligence in government: A systematic literature review. *Social*

- Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11(6), 101518. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101518>
- Barokah, R. A., Kartawan, Sutisna, D., & Pratminingsih, S. A. (2025). Work-life balance and its influence on organizational citizenship behavior and performance in Indonesian higher education. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(10), 102102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102102>
- Barruga, B. M. (2025). Between market forces and national policy: Language commodification and linguistic entrepreneurship in Myanmar. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(4), 101954. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101954>
- Bastos, P., Andrade, V., & Consoni, F. L. (2025). Driving public transit decarbonization: the role of international cooperation missions on battery-electric bus adoption in Latin America. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 34(4), 101678. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2025.101678>
- Bhatia, B. S., Baumler, R., Carrera Arce, M., & Lützhöft, M. (2025). Overworked and understaffed: prioritising fatigue risk factors based on seafarers' perspectives. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 34(12), 101758. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2025.101758>
- Blesia, J., Dixon, K., & Lord, B. R. (2025). Strangers in their own land: Impacts of mining felt acutely by an original population. *Resources Policy*, 110(4), 105758. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2025.105758>
- Busia, K. A., & Arthur-Holmes, F. (2024). Women and gender in artisanal and small-scale mining: A review and future research directions. *Resources Policy*, 98(4), 105357. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2024.105357>
- Den Dekker-Arlain, J., Frantzeskaki, N., Wijsman, K., & Rojas-Marchini, F. (2025). Towards a decolonial planning praxis for nature-based solutions: bridging inclusive planning of NBS in cities with decolonial thinking through a systematic literature review. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 174(5), 104260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2025.104260>
- Dennis, A. C., Martinez, R. A. M., Chung, E. O., Lodge, E. K., & Wilbur, R. E. (2025). The development, evolution, and maintenance of structural racism for the study of health inequities: An expanded framework for Asian, Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and White Americans. *Social Science & Medicine*, 383(2), 118383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2025.118383>
- El-Husseiny, M., Mashaly, I., Azouz, N., Sakr, N., Seddik, K., & Atallah, S. (2024). Exploring sustainable urban mobility in Africa-and-MENA universities towards intersectional future research. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 26(11), 101167. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2024.101167>
- Fitri, H. (2024). Exploring travel behavior among women with disabilities in Jakarta. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 25(8), 101097. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2024.101097>
- Gupta, R., & Anand, A. (2025). Is mobility transition driven by wealth inequality? Evidence from analysis of the electric two-wheelers adoption in India. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 193(2), 104407. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2025.104407>
- Hageer, Y. (2025). Bridging equity and resilience: A Systematic review of social sustainability in climate change mitigation and adaptation. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 173(6), 104243. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2025.104243>
- Heriqbaldi, U., Wardana, W. W., Jamil, I. R., Basconcillo, J. A. Q., & Taniu, S. (2025). Bridging

- the gap: The impact of suramadu bridge provision on poverty reduction in Madura Island, Indonesia. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(9), 101740. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101740>
- Hermawan, I., Mulya Firdausy, C., Rizqy Rambe, K., Zuhdi, F., Erwidodo, Dewi Nugraheni, R., Malisan, J., Isnasari, Y., Marpaung, E., & Milawati Asshagab, S. (2024). Road traffic facilities, traffic accidents, and poverty: Lesson learned from Indonesia. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 28(3), 101273. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2024.101273>
- Hnit, H., & Almana, A. (2025). Constructing identity through narratives: Personal, social, and digital dimensions. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(5), 101692. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101692>
- Husamah, Rahardjanto, A., Permana, T. I., & Lestari, N. (2025). Islam and sustainability issues, how far has the relationship progressed? A bibliometric analysis. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(5), 101703. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101703>
- Indriyani, R., Murti, B., Anggraini, N. A., & Puspitasari, Y. (2025). Addressing chronic energy deficiency among Indonesian pregnant women: A social cognitive theory perspective. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(2), 102122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102122>
- Jin, Z., Ng, K. K. H., Zhang, C., Wu, L., & Li, A. (2024). Integrated optimisation of strategic planning and service operations for urban air mobility systems. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 183(1), 104059. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2024.104059>
- Khumairoh, I., Alamsyah, A., Wildan, W., & Muslimin, M. F. (2025). "Work like a Javanese, worship like an Acehese": The transformation of social reality and identity among Javanese migrants in Aceh, Indonesia. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(1), 102174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102174>
- Kisswani, K. M., & Fikru, M. G. (2025). The dynamic nexus between economic policy uncertainty, geopolitical risk, and natural resource rents of ASEAN-5 countries: Insights from the novel Fourier augmented ARDL method (FAARDL). *Resources Policy*, 100(6), 105449. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2024.105449>
- Lehmann, T., Iyer-Raniga, U., & Mahoney, K. (2025). Learning for sustainability: Adult transformative learning through sustainability and culturalism perspectives. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11(2), 101523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101523>
- Mai, T., Reardon-Smith, K., Cobon, D. H., Nguyen-Huy, T., & Mushtaq, S. (2025). Defining potential pathways for improving the resilience and sustainable development of rangeland grazing systems: Insights from northern Australia. *Science of The Total Environment*, 978(2), 179488. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2025.179488>
- Matovu, B., Bleischwitz, R., Lukambagire, I., Alkoyak-Yildiz, M., Tarek, R., Etta, L., Lee, M.-A., Mammel, M., & Hsieh, Y.-L. (2025). Examining the perceptions and attitudes toward Women's employment and leadership in the blue economy: A case study of India. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11(4), 101537. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101537>
- McCalmont, J., Kho, L. K., Teh, Y. A., Chocholek, M., Rumpang, E., Rowland, L., Basri, M. H. A., & Hill, T. (2023). Oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) plantation on tropical peatland in South East Asia: Photosynthetic response to soil drainage level for mitigation of soil carbon emissions. *Science of The Total Environment*, 858(8), 159356.

- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.159356>
Meenakshi, J. V., & Quisumbing, A. (2025). Diet quality and micronutrient intakes in nutritional value chains: A synthesis and suggestions for further research. *Food Policy*, 130(4), 102789. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2024.102789>
- Muawanah, U., Marini, A., & Sarifah, I. (2024). The interconnection between digital literacy, artificial intelligence, and the use of E-learning applications in enhancing the sustainability of Regional Languages: Evidence from Indonesia. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 10(2), 101169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101169>
- Muchlisin, M., Soza-Parra, J., & Ettema, D. (2025). Adoption and frequency of motorcycle and car-based ride-hailing use across income groups in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 201(6), 104671. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2025.104671>
- Ndaguba, E. A., & van Zyl, C. (2025). Exploring the impact and dynamics of identity tourism in the West. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(1), 102252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102252>
- Nurul, W. I. R., Sawir, M., Melawati, F., & Mu'is, A. (2025). The public space Paradox: Balancing governance and street vending in urban Indonesia. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11(1), 101559. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101559>
- Prasetyo, E. A., Novizayanti, D., & Putri, A. N. A. (2025). Cluster analysis of potential autonomous vehicle (AV) adopters in Indonesia's new capital. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 29(12), 101318. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2024.101318>
- Probohudono, A. N., Suhardjanto, D., Aligarh, F., Chayati, N., & Putra, A. A. (2025). Navigating MSMEs' performance through innovation and digital IT capabilities in business strategy. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(7), 101810. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101810>
- Putra, A. P., Wasiaturrahma, Ibrahim, K. H., Endarti, E. W., & Sunyoto, K. (2025). A critical review of land transport management in Indonesia: Does it support CO2 emission reduction? *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(9), 101972. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101972>
- Qiu, J., De Souza, M. F., Wang, X., Ok, Y. S., & Meers, E. (2024). Influence of biochar addition and plant management (cutting and time) on ryegrass growth and migration of As and Pb during phytostabilization. *Science of The Total Environment*, 913(12), 169771. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2023.169771>
- Raung, R. Z., Sutopo, W., Hisjam, M., & Hartono, D. (2025). Scenario analysis of subsidy policies on electric motorcycle market in Indonesia using system dynamics simulation. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 32(2), 101487. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2025.101487>
- Rizki, M., Basuki Joewono, T., & Susilo, Y. O. (2024). Towards understanding travel in the digital age: A cross-dimensional one-week diary of individual virtual and physical activities in Indonesian cities. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 187(4), 104195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2024.104195>
- Rossolov, O., Holguín-Veras, J., & Habib, M. A. (2025). Profiling shopping mobility in pre- and post-purchase phases: Latent class analysis of apparel trial and return trips. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 198(3), 104524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2025.104524>

- Rougeaux, E., Vázquez-Vázquez, A., Busert-Sebela, L., Fewtrell, M., & Wells, J. C. K. (2025). Associations of parental internal migration with child growth and nutritional status in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review. *Social Science & Medicine*, 371(5), 117899. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2025.117899>
- Santosa, I. S., Purwanto, E. A., Sumaryono, S., & Utomo, P. P. (2025a). The role of leadership styles in shaping work engagement: Mapping multi-sectoral trends through bibliometric and systematic review. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(4), 101757. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101757>
- Santosa, I. S., Purwanto, E. A., Sumaryono, S., & Utomo, P. P. (2025b). Understanding work engagement in public administration: A comprehensive bibliometric and systematic review of the past decade. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11(4), 101479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101479>
- Sari, B. R., Achwan, R., & Muhidin, S. (2025). Navigating careers of academic diaspora: The challenges and opportunities for Indonesian scholars in Malaysian universities. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(5), 101958. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101958>
- Sari, D. A. P., Febrilia, I., Krissanya, N., Berutu, M. B., & Sekardhani, M. (2025). Integrating theory of consumption values and the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology to predict continued use of food delivery applications post COVID-19 outbreak. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(5), 101671. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101671>
- Sun, X., Jiao, Y., Hao, H., Liu, Z., & Zhao, F. (2024). Physical and monetary characterization of global nickel flow network. *Resources Policy*, 94(1), 105130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2024.105130>
- Sunitiyoso, Y., Belgiawan, P. F., Rizki, M., & Hasyimi, V. (2025). Understanding user acceptance of mobility-as-a-service in Jakarta Metropolitan Area (JMA): Influencing factors and behavioural insights. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 32(3), 101523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2025.101523>
- Sunitiyoso, Y., Wicaksono, A., Pambudi, N. F., Rahayu, W. A., Nurdayat, I. F., Hadiansyah, F., Nuraeni, S., & Muhammad, A. A. (2023). Future of mobility in Jakarta Metropolitan Area: A Multi-Stakeholder scenario planning. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 19(7), 100810. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2023.100810>
- Verusha Ali, H., Sugiharto, S., & Manara, C. (2025). Navigating identity and agency through English Education: Narrative inquiry of an Indonesian migrant worker in Kuwait's Kafala system. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 12(6), 101816. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101816>
- Zahnow, R., Yousefnia, A. R., Hassankhani, M., & Cheshmehzangi, A. (2025). Climate change inequalities: A systematic review of disparities in access to mitigation and adaptation measures. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 165(1), 104021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2025.104021>
- Zhang, F., Lv, H., Kuai, C., & Feng, T. (2025). The battery-swapping revolution: Exploring user preferences in electric micro-mobility sector. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 194(5), 104416. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2025.104416>