

Elevated Bus Transport Quality: How KSRTC's 'BOND', Traditional Services, And Private Bus Services Compare in Commuters' Experience ?

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the service quality of Kerala State Road Transport Corporation's demand responsive transit initiative, Bus on Demand (BOND) Services and to compare the service experience provided it with that of traditional state owned and privately owned bus services. 120 bus passengers were selected by simple random sampling centred at two main depots of KSRTC in Kerala. This study follows a mixed analysis approach. To assess the quality of BOND service, the primary data collected directly from passengers and to compare the service experience of passengers, results of a recent study conducted in Kerala relating to service quality of public bus transportation is combined with primary data. Adapted SERVQUAL gap analysis, mean score, radar diagrams were applied for data analysis purposes. The study assessed that Bond Service offers better service quality to Kerala passengers. Also, the study found that the bond service outperformed the conventional bus services in different dimensions of service experience. The study indicated that the decision of the operator to withdraw the bond service, which was widely accepted by providing a better service experience to the passengers, should be reconsidered and this would help the loss-making operators to recover.

Keywords: Bus on Demand (BOND), Service Quality, Service Experience, KSRTC, Gap Analysis, Demand Responsive Bus Transport.

INTRODUCTION

India's passenger transport for short and medium distances is predominantly bus-oriented, with buses having an edge due to their flexibility and accessibility. Around 90% of total passenger movement is served by road transport, especially buses. In Kerala, both the public sector (through Kerala State Road Transport Corporation, KSRTC) and the private sector provide bus services, with KSRTC dominating local public transportation (1). KSRTC was founded in March 1965 to improve efficiency and fulfil social obligations by enhancing passenger mobility. Several legal frameworks were enacted, including the Road Transport Corporation Act (1950) and the Motor Vehicle Act (1956, amended in 1988), which address nationalization, licensing, road safety, and passenger protection (2). Additionally, KSRTC has established institutions

such as the Motor Accident Claim Tribunal and the Consumer Dispute Redressal Forum to protect passengers' rights (3). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, KSRTC launched the "Bus on Demand" service on May 1, 2020. This initiative aimed to provide safe and convenient transport while adhering to physical distancing measures (4).

Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC): KSRTC, founded in 1937 as Travancore State Transport Department, organized state transportation with 60 buses and nationalized key routes. King Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma was the first passenger in 1938. KSRTC is currently dealing with financial difficulties, such as operational losses and heightened competition from private transport companies. In spite of these challenges, KSRTC still offers crucial transportation services throughout the state, concentrating on both urban and

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rural regions. Recent initiatives involve updating its vehicles, adding electric buses, and broadening demand-responsive services such as "Bus on Demand" to enhance operational efficiency and customer contentment (5).

Bus on Demand (BOND) Services: The "Bus on Demand" (BOND) service by KSRTC was introduced in 2015 as a trial initiative to offer passengers personalized and customizable routes. Initially, the service ran on specific routes, mainly catering to government offices and important locations at peak times. Nevertheless, because of operational difficulties and decreased interest, the BOND service was ultimately terminated in 2019. Throughout its operation, BOND was utilized on a small selection of routes, mainly in Thiruvananthapuram, Kozhikode and a couple of other regions (6). During the COVID-19 pandemic, KSRTC activated "Bus on Demand" (BOND) to provide safe transportation. Initially available during peak hours, BOND allowed passengers to book buses for customized routes and flexible timings. Enhanced safety measures, such as regular sanitization, mandatory masks, and social distancing, were implemented. Passengers could book in advance and track buses via an app, while trained staff ensured a smooth experience (7). Though, KSRTC received good responses from commuters towards BOND services, now these services seem to be terminated by KSRTC for various reasons.

Service Quality Analysis: It is a Multi-dimensional research instrument designed to capture consumer expectations and perceptions of a service along five dimensions that are believed to represent service quality. SERVQUAL is built on the expectancy-Disconfirmation paradigm, which, in simple terms, means that service quality is understood as the extent to which consumers' pre-consumption expectations of quality are confirmed or disconfirmed by their actual perceptions of the service experience (8).

This paper aims to understand the quality of service delivered by KSRTC's BOND services and explores passengers' perceptions of the services provided and also to examine whether the KSRTC BOND service provides better service (as intended while launching it) to passengers than the existing traditional KSRTC services or private bus services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Demand Responsive Bus Transport (DRBT) also called as Bus on Demand (BOND) has appeared as a

creative way to tackle the constraints of traditional fixed-route bus services by providing passengers with flexibility and efficiency according to real-time demand. Different research has investigated the quality of service, customer contentment, and operational effectiveness of DRBT systems around the world. Researchers analysed the important characteristics of service quality in public transportation, highlighting that reliability, frequency, and route flexibility are critical factors for satisfying customers (9). These characteristics are particularly important for DRBT services because they provide more flexibility than traditional bus systems. In a similar manner, another study examined how DRBT can be combined with Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS), finding that the use of real-time data from ITS greatly improves service efficiency and customer satisfaction (10). Their research suggests that employing real-time tracking and flexible routing in DRBT services leads to decreased wait times and enhanced reliability.

A study in Kerala context investigated the use of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools in transportation systems, suggesting that CRM can effectively monitor customer behaviour and preferences in DRBT. Transport agencies can use CRM to customize services for passengers, leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty in the end (11). Wang et al. (12) conducted research on operational performance, examining the economic and operational advantages of DRBT systems in urban settings. According to their study, DRBT systems boost efficiency of resource use by aligning service capacity with passenger demand, thus lowering operational costs and environmental footprint in contrast to conventional buses. In a study of factors that impact customer loyalty in DRBT services discovered that loyalty is greatly influenced by service quality, particularly through communication, reliability, and personalization. The said research indicated that DRBT systems can increase passenger retention and usage frequency through reliable, customized services (13). Murugan and Jyothi (7) further examined the correlation between service quality and customer satisfaction in DRBT. Their research employed the SERVPERF model to assess service quality aspects like comfort, reliability, and convenience, underscoring the direct link between superior service quality and higher customer

satisfaction in DRBT. Nair and Nair (14) examined the use of DRBT services through the application of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Their results showed that the intention to use DRBT services was positively affected by the perceived ease of use and service quality. The research highlighted the importance of incorporating technology, like app-based booking platforms, to enhance user satisfaction and boost service utilization. In their study (15) investigated how service quality affects customer satisfaction in DRBT services by conducting a survey with a structured questionnaire. Their research showed that factors like punctuality, comfort, and quick responses greatly influenced customer satisfaction, indicating that DRBT systems should prioritize these aspects to improve service quality as a whole.

Rajan and Pillai (16) examined how passengers perceive and anticipate DRBT services. They pinpointed important factors like safety, cleanliness, and convenience that greatly impact passenger happiness. The research found that matching DRBT services with passenger expectations is crucial for building customer loyalty and keeping them coming back. Bus on Demand (BOND) is a creative transportation solution with the goal of improving public transit systems through providing customizable and adaptable service (17). This idea combines the ease of ride-sharing apps with the effectiveness of conventional bus systems (18). Customers are able to ask for a ride using a smartphone app, indicating where they are starting from and where they want to go. The system adjusts bus routes in real-time to match passenger needs, optimizing routes to accommodate several passengers going in the same direction (19). This method decreases waiting times, decreases unused capacity, and offers a more personalized service in contrast to fixed-route systems (20). Bus on Demand can enhance accessibility, ease traffic congestion, and lower costs for transit agencies in regions with fluctuating or minimal ridership by aligning with current travel needs and trends (21).

Praveen (5) in his study of comparing service quality between KSRTC and Private bus services, observed that Private buses score higher than KSRTC buses in terms of reliability, cleanliness, good bus station ambience, and route and time design based on average scores for factors impacting service quality. Whereas, KSRTC provides more comfortable trips and better

staff attitudes compared to private buses. The extensive review hint that there exist ample research gap, as there were no serious studies carried out to examine the service quality and commuters' experience on BOND services by comparing it with traditional state owned service and private bus services.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Statement of the problem: The public bus transport system in Kerala has experienced a notable drop in ridership as more passengers are opting to use private vehicles. This pattern is intensifying economic, social, health, and environmental issues for both the general population and the government. Although receiving a good response, the Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) has decided to stop its 'Bond Service,' which was implemented to improve the quality of passenger's journey. In this scenario, gaining insight into how passengers perceive the BOND Service can offer valuable information on whether keeping it could have helped increase ridership and enhance the sustainability of public transportation.

Scope of the study: This survey study was conducted among one hundred and twenty regular passengers of KSRTC's two depots, Thamarassery (Kozhikode District) and Thiruvananthapuram. To study commuters' perception on service quality, and experience, it records the responses of commuters on important seven dimensions such as Cleanliness & Tangibility, Journey Comfort & Safety, Staff Behaviour & Response, Empathy, Information quality & Digitisation, Sustainability and Reliability

Sampling: Sample size-120 commuters and sampling method-simple random sampling

Research Objectives: There are two objectives behind the study such as:

1. To examine the service quality of KSRTC's BOND services, and
2. To compare the service experience of BOND services, KSRTC's traditional services, and prevailing private bus services in Kerala.

Research design: The study follows a descriptive research design as it explain the current experience and perception of commuters on bus services. It applies a hybrid research approach that, to study the passenger perception towards the BOND service, primary data collected from the passengers by using a structured questionnaire. For comparison purposes, in

addition to the primary data, the secondary data, passenger feedback on traditional KSRTC bus services and private services was drawn from the most recent study (Praveen, 2023) conducted in the Kerala context.

Tools: Various analytical tools were employed in the study to thoroughly evaluate the data. Included in these tools is gap analysis which finds differences between passenger expectations and service delivery. The adapted SERVQUAL model applied to evaluate service quality. Moreover, tables were utilized for systematic organization and presentation of the data, radar charts were employed for visual representation of key findings, enhancing accessibility and insightfulness of the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Commuters’ Perception towards BOND services dimensions

Service Quality Statements	Perception							
	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	TS	Mean Score
Tangibility & Cleanliness								
Good infrastructure	66	34	12	4	4	120	257	4.02
Facilities visually attractive	28	52	22	16	2	120	224	
Staff appeared neat and professional	43	61	10	4	2	120	248	
Materials are visually attractive	36	56	16	9	3	120	237	
Reliability								
Timely and prompt service	39	61	12	3	5	120	242	4.00
Handling passengers service problem	28	62	22	8	0	120	235	
Performing service right the first time	17	30	10	2	1	120	240	
No break down on the road	44	44	26	4	2	120	242	
Staff behaviour and Responsiveness								
Provides timely and efficient service	39	58	17	2	4	120	243	4.01
Communication of staff is clear and helpful	34	61	22	3	0	120	243	
Staff always willing to help passengers	46	58	6	4	6	120	247	
Staff always polite and courteous	38	44	22	11	5	120	230	
Journey Comfort and safety								
Staff behaviour instill confidence in passengers	54	52	8	6	0	120	257	4.13
Feel safety in transit	54	54	4	6	2	120	256	
Seats and driving of the bus is comfortable	38	56	14	6	6	120	237	
Comfort in access and booking	44	55	12	5	3	120	242	
Empathy								
Staff gives individual attention to passengers	24	60	22	10	4	120	225	3.86
Operating hours are convenient to all	32	59	14	9	6	120	231	
Staff look after Passengers best interest at heart	37	61	18	4	0	120	239	
Information Quality and Digitization								
Fast and error free online reservation	42	39	18	15	6	120	228	3.80
Digital display of time and stop alert	34	56	16	10	4	120	233	
Frequent message through email/SMS	36	48	22	12	2	120	232	
E-travel card, Cashless ticketing	32	40	28	16	4	120	220	
GPS tracking system	24	66	20	6	4	120	230	
Sustainability								
Service are sustainable alternate for private means of transport	32	56	22	4	6	120	235	

The result and discussion are given here in two parts. The first part is an analysis (SERVQUAL-Gap analysis) and explanation of the service quality of the KSRTC BOND service based on primary data. The second part is a comparative study and explanation of passengers' experiences of Bond Services, KSRTC Traditional Service and Private Bus Services, using primary data as well as secondary data.

A. Service Quality of KSRTC BOND Services

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between expectation and experience of commuters towards KSRTC Bond Services. To analyse the service gaps (differences between service expectations and service experience of commuters) adapted SERVQUAL Gap Analysis technique is applied.

Optimal fuel efficiency and reduced emission	18	64	21	12	5	120	216	3.68
Uses clean energy sources	56	52	24	4	10	120	219	
Adequate measures to reduce plastics	22	52	28	10	8	120	215	

(Source: Primary data)

Discussion: The table 1 offers an analysis of passengers' views on the quality of BOND services, presenting scores for various dimensions of service quality. An analysis of every dimensions of service quality given here

- 1. Tangibility and cleanliness:** The majority of respondents agreed that infrastructure is positively perceived, with a mean score of 4.02 (SA: 66, A: 34). Facilities with visually appealing aesthetics received a score of 224, averaging 3.73, indicating a moderate level of satisfaction. The perceived satisfaction levels for staff appearance and the visual attractiveness of materials are higher, with average scores of 4.13 and 3.95, respectively.
- 2. Reliability:** Passengers value on-time service was reflected in the average score of 4.00, indicating they value punctuality. The perception of handling service problem is highly favourable, with a score of 3.91 indicating trust in BOND's problem-solving capabilities. Scoring high (mean: 4.00), the reliable performance of services without any road breakdowns on the first attempt was evident.
- 3. Staff behaviour and responsiveness:** In general, passengers have a positive perception of staff behaviour, with timely and efficient service and clear communication both receiving a score of 4.01. Nonetheless, the politeness of the employees received a slightly lower score of 3.83, suggesting there is an opportunity for enhancement in terms of courtesy.

- 4. Comfort and safety:** This dimension received highly favourable responses, especially regarding staff inspiring trust and safety during transportation. Amenities such as bus seats and reservation systems are also highly regarded, although not quite as much, with average ratings of around 3.95.
- 5. Empathy:** Passengers believe bus staff gives individual attention but at a lower score of 3.86, suggesting a slight gap in personalised service. Operating hours and staff concern for passengers' best interests received relatively decent scores of 3.86 and 3.98, respectively
- 6. Information Quality and Digitization:** In terms of digitization of bus service like online reservations, the perception of commuters is moderate with a mean score of 3.80. Features like GPS tracking of buses and digital/online alerts were better perceived, with scores around 3.88.
- 7. Sustainability:** Sustainability-related dimension had the lowest mean score, particularly on fuel efficiency and plastics usage reduction measures, with scores ranging from 3.68 to 3.55, indicating a commuters' perception that more effort could be put into making BOND services more eco-friendly.

Commuters generally perceive BOND services positively, especially in areas related to reliability, safety, and staff behaviour and responsiveness. However, there is room for sufficient improvement in empathy (personalised attention), digitization, and sustainability measures. The average mean scores across dimensions reflect that service quality is satisfactory but can be enhanced in specific areas.

Table 2: Gap Score Analysis of KSRTC Bond Service

Service Quality Dimensions	Dimensions	Expected Max Score	Perceived Mean Score	Average Gap Score
	Tangibility & Cleanliness		5	4.02
Reliability		5	4.00	1.00
Staff Behaviour & Responsiveness		5	4.01	0.99
Journey Comfort & Safety		5	4.13	0.87
Empathy		5	3.86	1.14
Information & Digitization		5	3.80	1.20
Sustainability		5	3.68	1.32
Average Cumulative Gape Score= (8.73/8)				1.09

(Source: Primary Data)

Discussion: The mean cumulative gap score is determined by dividing the total gap scores (8.73) by 8 dimensions, resulting in a value of 1.09. This suggests that commuters' actual experience with the KSRTC BOND service generally falls moderately short of their expectations. The gap score of 1.09 indicates a notable difference between passengers' expectations and their actual experience, implying that the hypothesis of "there is no significant difference between expectation and experience of commuters towards BOND services" can probably be rejected after analysing this data. The service constantly underperforms in every dimension of service quality, but with a moderate degree of deviation (nearly 20 per cent deficiency).

It should be noted that, though there are deficiency in BOND services of KSRTC, it cannot be merely argued that there is serious lacuna from the part of operators. To examine whether KSRTC Bond service shown justice to its intended conceived objective of service improvement, commuters' service experiences with BOND services should be compared with prevailing bus services in Kerala. Here, is the attempt to compare the Commuters' service experience with the BOND service with that of KSRTC conventional service and private bus service.

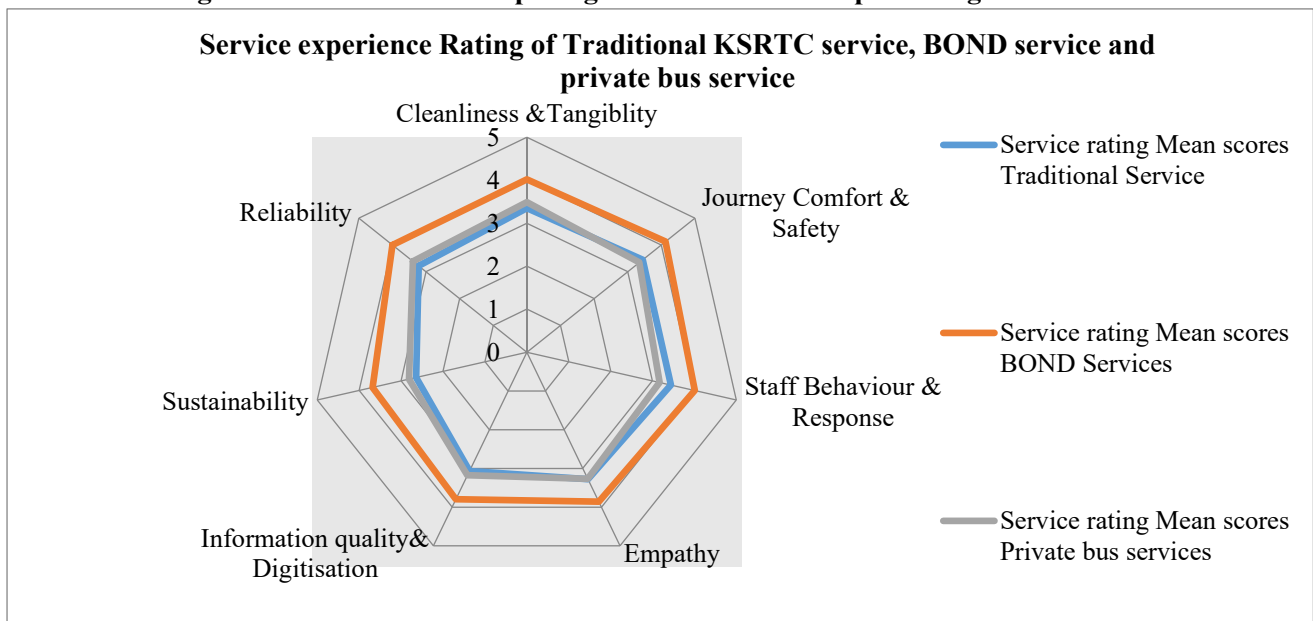
Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between commuters' service experience with BOND services and prevailing bus services in Kerala.

Table 3: Comparison of Service Quality of KSRTC traditional service, KSRTC BOND Service and Private Bus services

No	Service quality dimensions	Service rating Mean scores		
		Traditional Service	BOND Services	Private bus services
1	Cleanliness & Tangibility	3.35	4.02	3.49
2	Journey Comfort & Safety	3.45	4.13	3.35
3	Staff Behaviour & Response	3.44	4.01	3.17
4	Empathy	3.28	3.86	3.27
5	Information quality & Digitisation	3.07	3.80	3.18
6	Sustainability	2.64	3.68	2.81
7	Reliability	3.22	4.00	3.39

(Source: Praveen MV, 2023 & Primary data)

Figure 1: Radar Chart comparing BOND service with prevailing bus Services



Discussion: The table 3 and figure 1 compares the service quality of three categories of bus services- KSRTC Traditional Service, KSRTC BOND Service,

and Private Bus Services-across seven dimensions of service quality, utilizing mean scores to gauge passenger perception. Cleanliness and tangibility are

important factors to consider. Commuters rate KSRTC BOND Service (4.02) higher than KSRTC Traditional Service (3.35) and Private Bus Services (3.49), showing that they believe BOND services provide superior cleanliness and tangibility. Private Bus Services are ranked slightly higher than KSRTC Traditional Services but still fall behind BOND Services. While comparing travel comfort and safety, the highest ranking service is once again KSRTC BOND Service (4.13), with KSRTC Traditional Service (3.45) and Private Bus Services (3.35) following closely behind. This demonstrates that passengers have a much higher sense of safety and comfort when using BOND Services as opposed to other choices. KSRTC BOND Service surpasses KSRTC Traditional and Private Bus Services in staff behaviour and responsiveness with a score of 4.01 compared to 3.44 and 3.17, respectively. Private Bus Services are given the lowest score, indicating potential for enhancing customer interaction. In terms of empathy, KSRTC BOND Service is the top performer with a score of 3.86, followed by KSRTC Traditional at 3.28 and Private Bus Services at 3.27. Both KSRTC Traditional and Private Bus Services exhibit similar levels of empathy, but BOND is viewed as being more empathetic. BOND Service (3.80) stands out in terms of information quality and digitization, surpassing both KSRTC Traditional Service (3.07) and Private Bus Services (3.18). This shows that BOND Services excel in digital integration and clear information delivery. BOND Service (3.68) is significantly higher in ranking compared to KSRTC Traditional (2.64) and Private Bus Services (2.81), indicating that passengers perceive BOND Services as more sustainable. Both KSRTC Traditional and Private Bus Services have received poor sustainability ratings, indicating the necessity for enhancements. KSRTC BOND Service outperforms both KSRTC Traditional Service and Private Bus Services across all seven dimensions, with consistently higher scores. This suggests that passengers perceive BOND as delivering superior service quality, especially in critical areas like cleanliness, comfort, staff behaviour, and sustainability. Private Bus Services generally perform better than KSRTC Traditional Service, except in journey comfort and safety. However, both these services trail far behind BOND in most dimensions. The areas where KSRTC Traditional and Private services fall short, such as

digitization, sustainability, and empathy, highlight key areas for improvement to enhance their overall service quality. Hence, there is significant difference between commuters' service experience with BOND services and prevailing bus services in Kerala.

Insight: Passengers clearly prefer KSRTC BOND Service over the other two options across all quality dimensions, indicating that this service model is perceived as a higher standard in public Bus transport. Both KSRTC Traditional and Private Bus Services need to focus on improving reliability, digital offerings, and sustainability to meet evolving passenger expectations to ensure more effective and sustainable transport system in Kerala.

CONCLUSION

The present study attempting to examine the service quality of the bus on demand service initiative launched by KSRTC (state owned public bus operator) on an experimental basis and to compare the demand responsive transport (BOND) experience of Kerala commuters with the experience provided by the existing traditional KSRTC service and private bus service. Though there is difference between commuters' expectation and experience, a rating of nearly 4 of BOND services shows that the service meets a majority of customer expectations, leading to high satisfaction levels. It shows an 80 per cent satisfaction rate, suggesting the service is almost excellent but can still be better. Most likely, customers value most aspects of the service. The service is considered trustworthy, efficient, and upholding important quality benchmarks and outperforms traditional KSRTC services, and private bus services on many vital dimensions of service quality. But, unfortunately, it has been reported that operators are withdrawing the BOND services which have been so well accepted and rated among commuters community in Kerala. Operators need to have a rethink in this regard as passenger satisfaction ratings can be seen as a good sign of recovery for loss-making KSRTC services.

Implication: This study put forth the facts that demand responsive transport mode is more satisfying to passengers than the existing traditional bus service. This study provides an indication to all including public and private transport services which are currently running at huge losses and operating inefficiency to revise their service provision policy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST: Nil

LIMITATIONS: The study faced time constraints, limited cooperation from some respondents, and potential generalization issues.

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