Measuring Service Quality In Terms of Passenger Satisfaction of Front Office Personnel in Private Airline Companies, India

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Abstract: This study measures service quality on terms of passenger satisfaction of front office personnel in Indian private airlines. It aims to assess the passenger level of expectations and perceptions towards front office personnel working in private airlines. It also analyses the gap between passengers' expectation and perception level towards service quality of front office personnel working with private airlines in India. Based on the SERVQUAL instrument (**Parasuraman 1985, 1991**), the 5 dimensions; Tangibility, Empathy, Responsiveness, Reliability and Assurance are used here. The findings of this study showed highest level of passenger satisfaction to be Assurance (Mean – 4.05); and, in terms of passenger perception the highest score is found to be Tangibility (Mean – 4.45). The findings also showed that the SERVQUAL gap was analysed as the positive disconfirmation where the airline passengers perceived service performance has exceeded passengers' expectation towards the service quality of front office personnel of private airlines in India.

Key words: Passenger Satisfaction; model; Front office personnel; Private Airlines

1. Introduction

Passenger satisfaction is the stimulating factor to all businesses and managers strive continuously to identify methods to create passengers satisfaction. All their strategies aim at exceeding customer expectations in order to maintain customer loyalty. **Shostack (1977)** asserted that service provided can be tangible or intangible, if it is failed to meet the requirements of the passenger, the service stands rejected. For this reason, passenger satisfaction should be measured and translated into number of measurable parameter. Thus, passenger satisfaction may be considered as a base line standard of performance and a possible standard of excellence for any airline company. It is generally agreed that service quality is a multi dimensional concept which diverges from various people. **Chang and Keller (2002)** argue that quality in airline service is difficult to describe and measure due to its heterogeneity, intangibility, and inseparability, and only passengers can truly define service quality in the airline industry **(Butler and Keller, 1992).**

Delivering high-quality service to passengers is essential for the sustainability of airline companies in the aviation market. Service quality can be defined as a consumer's overall impression of the relative efficiency of the organization and its services. Understanding exactly what customers expect is the most crucial step in defining and delivering high-quality service. SERVQUAL model is one of the best models for evaluating customers' expectations and perceptions (**Brown and Bond 1995**). The delivery of high – quality service becomes a requirement among air carriers as a result of competitive pressure (**Ostrowski et al., 1993**). This study analyzes on the level of passengers' expectations and perceptions towards the service quality of the front office personnel of the private airline companies in India. The study measures the SERVQUAL gap that exists between the passengers' expectations and perceptions regarding the employee's level of service quality'.
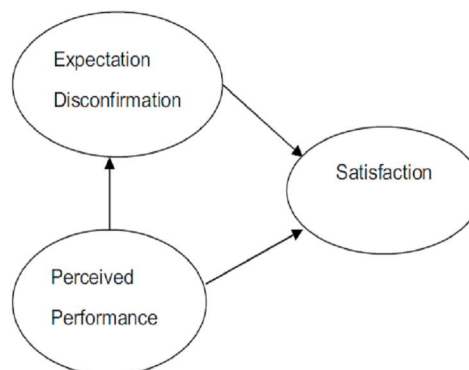
This study will be a practical guideline for the airline companies especially to reduce the gap that prevails between expectations and perceptions of the passengers. The front office personnel play an important role in the airline office as they are the first group who greet and welcome the passengers on arrival. Apart from the staffs in other departments front office personnel play a foremost task in providing appropriate service and meeting their needs and expectations (**Kunakitkumjorn, 2003**). Front office personnel also act as relationship officers. Therefore, it is essential to assess the expectation and perception level of passengers towards service quality of the front office personnel with respective to the following five dimensions – Tangibility, Empathy, Reliability, Responsiveness & Empathy (**Parasuraman 1985, 1991**). Also an attempt is made to analyse the gap between the passengers' perception and expectation towards service quality, of the front office personnel working with private airlines in India.

2. REVIEW OF PAST WORKS:

Competitive environment in the airline industry has made passenger satisfaction a critically important factor. Service quality is the result of the comparison that customers make between their expectations about a service and their perception of the way in which the service has been performed **(Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988)**. A number of experts define service quality differently. **Parasuraman et al. (1985)** defines it as the differences between customers, expectation of services and their perceived service. If the expectation is greater than the service performance, perceived quality is less than satisfactory and hence, customer dissatisfaction occurs. Based on **Parasuraman et al. (1988)** conceptualization of service quality, the original SERVQUAL instrument included 22 items. The data on the 22 attributes are grouped into five dimensions: Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. Numerous studies have attempted to apply the SERVQUAL. This is because it has a generic service application and is a practical approach to the area. This instrument has been used to measure service quality in a variety of services such as Hospitals **(Babakus & Glynn 1992)**, Hotels **(Saleh & Rylan 1991)**, Travel and Tourism industry **(Fick & Ritchie 1991)**, Telephone companies, Insurance companies and Banks **(Parasuraman et al. 1991)**. Airline companies also attempted to differentiate their services through the use of computerized reservation systems which were designed to create customer loyalty in the distribution channels **(Lee and Cunningham, 1996)**. However, despite the airlines' efforts to differentiate their services, an extensive survey of frequent fliers conducted by **Ott (1993)** revealed that consumers did not perceive any difference from one carrier to another. In this study, the researcher uses SERVQUAL approach as an instrument to explore passengers' expectations and perceptions levels of service quality towards the front office personnel of the Airline Company. **Dennett, Ineson, Stone, and Colgate (2000)** suggest that as competition created by deregulation has become more intense, service quality in the airline industry has also received more attention.

In marketing literature (**Churchill and Surprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1980**) as well as in recent information system studies (**McKinney et al., 2002**); the disconfirmation theory emerges as the primary foundation for satisfaction models. **Chang and Keller (2002)** argue that quality in airline service is difficult to describe and measure due to its heterogeneity, intangibility, and inseparability, and only the passenger can truly define service quality in the airline industry. According to this theory, satisfaction is determined by the discrepancy between perceived performance and cognitive standards such as expectation and desires **(Khalifa and Liu, 2003).** Disconfirmation theory was declared that satisfaction is mainly defined by the gap between that exists between perceived performance, expectations and desires which is a promising approach to explain satisfaction. This theory was proposed that satisfaction is affected by the intensity (or size) and direction (positive or negative) of the gap (disconfirmation) between expectations and perceived performance as shown in the figure below;

Expectation disconfirmation theory by Khalifa & Liu (2003).

Park et al. (2004) developed a conceptual model to understand of air passenger's decision making process, the model considers service expectation, service perception, service value, passenger satisfaction, airline image and behavioral intentions in analysis of Korean international air passengers, the result shows that service value, passenger satisfaction and airline image have direct impact on passenger decision making process. All of these previous studies have used the SERVQUAL approach to measure service quality in airline and other service industries. This study will explore passengers', expectation and perception levels towards service quality which is focusing on the front office personnel of the private airlines in India.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY:

The researcher explored passengers' expectation and perception levels towards service quality of the front office staff personnel of the private airlines in India like Jet Airways, Spice Jet Airlines, Go Air, Indigo Airlines, and Jet Konnect Airlines. The degree of satisfaction towards service quality of front office personnel is set from 1 to 5 (5 is from the highest expectation/satisfaction, whereas, 1 is the lowest expectation/satisfaction). In addition, the translation level of ranking was analyzed which shows the criteria of passengers' satisfaction which was designed by **Best (1977: 174)** is adopted in this study.

S.No	SCORE	LEVEL OF SATISFSACTION
1	1.00 – 1.80	Lowest satisfaction
2	1.81 – 2.61	Low satisfaction
3	2.62 – 3.41	Average satisfaction
4	3.42 – 4.21	Good satisfaction
5	4.22 – 5.00	Very good satisfaction

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

This section presents the personal data of 300 passengers who directly booked the tickets with the airlines. The profile covers the gender, age, occupation; purpose of trip and the frequency of passengers using this airline (see Table 1). The findings showed that the sample comprised more of male passengers (59.3%) than females (40.6%). Majority of the passengers are between 25 and 35 years of age (32.3%). Majority (32%) of the passengers are private employees. The main purpose of their travel included vacation (29.6%), business (26.6%), personal (22.6%), and seminar/conference (14.3%). Majority (54%) of the passengers had used these airlines twice while only (16%) had used it up to 4 times in terms of frequency of the travel made through these private airlines.

Table 1. Simulation results with developed model

S No	Personal Data		No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	178	59.3%
		Female	122	40.6%
2		Below 25 years old	38	12.6%
		25 – 35 years old	97	32.3%
	Age	36 – 45 years old	52	17.3%
		46 – 55 years old	65	21.6%
		Over 56 years old	48	16%
3		Government Employees	61	20.3%
		Private Employees	96	32%
	Occupation	Entrepreneurs	80	26.6%
		Students	39	13%
		Others	24	8%
4		Vacation	89	29.6%
		Personal	68	22.6%
	Travel – Purpose	Seminar/Conference	43	14.3%
		Business	80	26.6%
		Others	20	6.6%
5		Once	68	22.6%
		2 Times	92	30.6%
	Previous Visits	3 Times	70	23.3%
		4 Times	48	16%
		More than 4 Times	22	7.3%

(Source – Primary Data)

LEVEL OF PASSENGERS' EXPECTATION AND PERCEPTION TOWARDS SERVICE QUALITY OF FRONT OFFICE PERSONNEL:

This section presents the passengers' expectation and perception towards service quality of front office personnel of private airlines in India. The findings of service quality dimensions in terms of passenger satisfaction are as follows:

Tangibility:

Tangibility is the physical evidence of the airline office such as the appearance and ambience of the front office and which exhibits the professionalism of the personnel.

S No	Dimensions	Passengers' Expectation			Passengers' Perception		
	TANGIBILITY	Mean	S.D	Level	Mean	S.D	Level
1	Uniform of the Personnel	3.85	0.68	High	4.43	0.53	Highest
2	Clean Ambience	**3.97**	0.68	High	**4.53**	0.56	Highest
3	Service provided with smile	3.92	0.82	High	4.45	0.56	Highest
4	Attractive appearance	**3.97**	0.78	High	4.40	0.64	Highest
	Overall Mean Score	3.92	0.52	High	4.45	0.41	Highest

The above table shows the overall satisfaction of expectation towards Tangibility which is high (3.92). Clean ambience and appearance of staffs received a high ranking at 3.97. Passenger perception of Tangibility dimension is also ranked at the highest level (4.45). The findings are supported by **Wong et al. (1999),** who studied SERVQUAL dimensions in the hospitality industry in Malaysia and found that service quality is related to the tangible behaviour and appearance of employees. The best predictor of overall service quality is Tangibility dimension.

Reliability:

The reliability dimension refers to the ability of front office personnel to provide services dependably and accurately (**Dabholkar et al., 1996**). Reliable service performance has to meet passengers' expectation. Service must be accomplished on time, every time, in the same manner and without errors.

S No	Dimensions	Passengers' Expectation			Passengers' Perception		
	RELIABILITY	Mean	S.D	Level	Mean	S.D	Level
5	Promised Service	3.95	0.685	High	**4.38**	0.533	Highest
6	Accurate Information	3.88	0.688	High	4.33	0.566	Highest
7	Correct Service on the 1st time	3.88	0.829	High	4.25	0.565	Highest
8	Exact information reg Service	**4.02**	0.780	High	4.25	0.643	Highest
	Overall Mean Score	3.93	0.554	High	4.30	0.451	Highest

The above table shows the overall satisfaction of expectation concerning Reliability dimension is high (3.93). Overall satisfaction of perception towards reliability dimension is also at the highest level (4.30), with the personnel who provides service as promised, receiving the highest score (4.38). This is because the front office personnel do provide the services correctly the first time of their booking and also they live to their promises.

Consequently, they feel satisfied with the reliability of service.

Responsiveness:

The Responsiveness dimension involves willingness to help the customers and provide prompt services (**Zeithaml et al., 1988**). It is essential that front office airline personnel should help the passengers and to provide prompt service and meet their expectation.

S No	Dimensions	Passengers' Expectation			Passengers' Perception		
	RESPONSIVENESS	Mean	S.D	Level	Mean	S.D	Level
9	Quick Response	**4.12**	0.761	High	**4.38**	0.533	Highest
10	Prompt Service	3.83	0.827	High	4.23	0.566	Highest
11	Willingness to help	4.02	0.770	High	**4.38**	0.565	Highest
	Overall Mean Score	3.98	0.604	High	4.33	0.545	Highest

The above table shows the overall expectation towards Responsiveness dimension is high (3.98). It shows that personnel respond to the passengers' request quickly and therefore which has received the highest ranking of expectation at 4.12. It is highly possible that passengers' are satisfied when they receive a quick response from the airline personnel. The two highest ranking points are; quick response and willingness to help the passengers. These findings are consistent with **Parasuraman et al. (1998),** who measured consumer perception of service quality. They found that Responsiveness is the most important factor in determining passenger satisfaction with service.

Assurance:

The Assurance dimension refers to the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence including competence, courtesy, credibility and security (**Parasuraman et al., 1991).**

S No	Dimensions	Passengers' Expectation			Passengers' Perception		
	ASSURANCE	Mean	S.D	Level	Mean	S.D	Level
12	Service Product Knowledge	4.10	0.706	High	**4.62**	0.640	Highest
13	Skills to perform service	3.95	0.746	High	4.37	0.610	Highest
14	Communication Skills	3.95	0.832	High	4.35	0.606	Highest
15	Personnel are trustworthy	**4.17**	0.806	High	4.30	0.671	Highest
16	PAX feel safe to choose airline	4.10	0.752	High	4.22	0.640	Highest
	Overall Mean Score	4.05	0.752	High	4.37	0.440	Highest

The above table shows the overall expectation towards assurance dimension is high (4.05), with trustworthiness ranking most important (4.17). Most of the passengers' expect the front office personnel to make them feel safe for choosing this airline. Perception of Assurance dimension is ranked at the highest level (4.37), with product knowledge being the most important factor (4.62). It is essential that the front office personnel have knowledge, skills, capacity and experience about the airlines and their services offered to their passengers.

Empathy:

The Empathy dimension represents providing care and individual attention to customers including access or approachability and ease of contact, effective communication, and understanding the passengers **(Parasuraman et al., 1991)**.

The above table shows the overall expectation concerning assurance dimension is high (4.02). As per the analysis it is seen that effective communication is considered to be the most important (4.17) expectation. It also shows that overall perception of the Assurance dimension high (4.28). Perception of the personal attention of the staff is ranked highest at (4.37). The

results indicated that the front office personnel are enthusiastic to help the passengers. According to Crompton et al. (1991), staffs should make the customers feel like they are close to the company. This statement is consistent with the definition of Empathy.

OVERALL PASSENGER SATISFACTION TOWARDS SERVICE QUALITY:

The result of passengers' expectation shows that 'assurance' dimension is at the high level (4.05), followed by empathy (4.02), responsiveness (3.98), reliability (3.93), and tangibility (3.92). Most of the passengers expect that the front office personnel to be trustworthy because they are responsible for the productivity of the entire process, thereby indicating the quality of airlines. Overall satisfaction of perception towards the five dimensions is 4.35. Passengers perceived tangibility as the most important dimension which is the most vital factor. Passengers identified the importance of the appearance and cleanliness of the front office personnel is essential. The SERVQUAL gap is calculated between the mean score of expectation and perception and shown in the table:

S No	Dimensions	Passengers' Expectation			Passengers' Perception		
	EMPATHY	Mean	S.D	Level	Mean	S.D	Level
17	Communication in regional lang	4.00	0.736	High	4.28	0.524	Highest
18	Effective language delivery	**4.17**	0.693	High	4.22	0.739	Highest
19	Personal attention to PAX	4.05	0.790	High	**4.37**	0.663	Highest
20	Specific needs of PAX known	3.88	0.825	High	4.28	0.783	Highest
	Overall Mean Score	4.02	0.563	High	4.28	0.530	Highest

S No	Attributes	PAX Expectations	PAX Perceptions	SERVQUAL GAP
1	Tangibility	3.92	4.45	0.53
2	Reliability	3.93	4.30	0.37
3	Responsiveness	3.98	4.33	0.35
4	Assurance	4.05	4.37	0.32
5	Empathy	4.02	4.28	0.26
Overall Mean Score		3.98	4.35	0.37

It is clear that the passenger expectation exceeded than their percentage level in all dimensions of SERVQUAL. This positive gap indicates the passengers are satisfied with the services offered by the front office personnel working in private airlines. Among all dimensions, Tangibility is most important dimension having a high positive gap (0.53). This study reveals that physical evidence such as uniforms, appearance and behaviour of front office personnel, yields passenger satisfaction.

CONCLUSION:

Airline business is growing rapidly with increase in competition and has been growing rapidly in recent decades, where passengers demand for high quality service. To remain competitive, airlines need to constantly analyze passengers' expectation and perception towards the service quality of its staff. This study focuses on the gap that prevails between passengers' expectation and their perception with respect to front office personnel and their quality of the service. The results show that the overall mean score of perception was higher than expectation in all dimensions, yielding a positive SERVQUAL gap. Hence, passengers' are satisfied with all the dimensions of service quality. Since Empathy found to be the weakest dimension of satisfaction, the airline companies can arrange for special training courses to improve in that dimensions. Tangibility is strong in providing passengers' satisfaction and therefore the attributes of tangibility and ambience of the airline office has to be maintained.

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3/6/2013