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The Impact of Service Quality on Passenger Satisfaction and Loyalty in the Indian Aviation Industry

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Abstract *Recently, air industry has been focusing on a continuous need and importance for improvement in the quality of services so as to provide maximum satisfaction to the passengers In fact, Being dynamic and customer centric in nature, airline business always has scope for innovation in the service operation. The efficiency of airlines majorly depends on service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The current paper therefore examines the variety of factors involved with quality of airline services which have direct and significant relationship with the satisfaction of airline passengers. Due to the rapid development and competition of service quality, both in developed and developing nations it has become crucial for the airlines to measure and evaluate the quality of service on a regular basis. There have been many characteristics identified by the brand managers working for airlines industry to consistently please their customers. Efforts have been taken for developing mechanisms in order to monitor customer satisfaction to promote their loyalty towards airline brands. This paper proposes a conceptual framework to investigate the impact of passengers perceived service quality, on satisfaction and loyalty. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is used to analyze the data collected from 154 passengers travelling on domestic airlines from Indira Gandhi International (I.G.I) airport Delhi. The results of the study indicate that service quality passenger satisfaction is significantly and positively related to loyalty. Also, passenger satisfaction has found to be an important mediator between perceived service quality and passenger loyalty.*

Keywords: *Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Loyalty, Airlines, India*

INTRODUCTION

The aviation industry is a very dynamic and competition-driven, it has expanded rapidly in the past two decades and is still poised for growth both at domestic and global levels. The open sky policy of the government has led to the entry of private airlines in the market making the competition fiercer. Survival in today's competition-driven service industry such as aviation services is not possible without impeccable and exquisite services to passengers. (Zeithaml et al., 1996). According to Park et al., 2004 increasing market share by retaining passengers by the means of exclusive and high-quality services leads to the ultimate result i.e. profitability. The critical determinants of business performance and means to gain competitive advantages in such businesses are nothing but improved service quality and passenger satisfaction (Li et al., 2017). Thus, intense competition between various airlines to increase their respective market share has led to a greater interest and focus in quality of services being provided to their passengers. Previous studies were generally confined to confirm that good service quality can lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty, Aksoy et al. (2003); Park et al. (2004). According to Szwarc P et al. (2005) the satisfied customer's expectations coincided with actual received outcome i.e. the result exceeded their expectations and dissatisfied if the expectations were not met with.The areas in which the aviation companies should focus at are in-flight comfort, baggage handling, the excellence of airline employees, internet use, airport proximity, added services, number of destinations that are accessible, and safety

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(Dostaler & Flouris, 2006). According to Park et al., 2005 "Measuring customer satisfaction in the airline industry is becoming ever more frequent and relevant due to the fact that the delivery of high-quality service is essential for airlines' survival and crucial to the competitiveness of the airline industry." Service quality is a composite of various interactions between customers and airlines, with employees seeking to influence customers'perceptions and the image of the carriers (Gursoy et al., 2005). In the past couple of decades, airlines have been implementing new strategies to make their company more profitable (MacLennan, 2014). Chen and Chang (2005) explain service quality as a chain and the delivery of it as a series of processes. International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) (2017) classifies airlines, into full-service or low-cost category depending on the services provided the airlines. Various studies have been conducted to investigate the causes that determine a passenger's decision in choosing an airline and these include the reason for undertaking the journey, individual traits and socioeconomic background (Mason, 2001; O'Connell & Williams, 2005), perceived value, airline image (Park et al., 2004), value-for-money and passengers' satisfaction (Rajaguru, 2016). The current situation is an opportunity for aviation companies and academicians for growth and learning.

In the current paper related to aviation service quality and loyalty, a detailed theoretical model is constructed for the formation of the interrelationships of airline passengers' perceived service quality, satisfaction and loyalty which forms the basis of formulation of hypotheses for this study. The methodology used to contrast the theoretical model by means of empirical research is described and results are interpreted further to indicate practical implications and suggestions for future research.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is the most crucial and researched area for the successful operation of any airline. Academicians, scholars and industry personnel are similarly anxious to learn its various aspects due to its importance and direct association to the economic aspects the airline companies and their objectives and profitability. According to (Karamata et al., 2017) customer satisfaction is the benchmark of quality standard and excellence for any organisation. Heymann (2019) believes in the maxim "The customer is always right". According to (Hutahayan & Wahyono, 2019) the service quality is something that definitely fulfils or reinforces customers' needs. The literature on service management depicts Service quality scale (SERVQUAL) as the most extensively cited and used parameter (Carman 1990, Saleh & Ryan, 1991; Atilgan et al., 2003; Martinez Caro & Martinez Garcia, 2008; Chand, 2010; Ryan & Cliff, 1997). This is because of the fact that service quality has very high impact on customer satisfaction which in turn leads to customer loyalty. (Clemes et al., 2008). It has been witnessed that since the 1990's there is a sharp competition amongst airlines which has forced the service providers to focus on passenger requirements so as to build a loyal customer base. Power, 2017 has reported an ever-increasing attention for customer satisfaction has been seen in aviation industry since past five years. This competition has also affected manufacturers of air carriers, who face stiff pressure to help companies to gain and maintain customer loyalty (Chen et al., 2011). Law (2017) describes satisfaction is an instant reaction of service consumption; however, the service quality is inferred as the holistic image of a company in the mind of customers with regard to the airline industry. (Prentice et al., 2017) holds the view that with digital media the views of satisfied and dissatisfied passengers spread rapidly satisfied customers increase profitability, and dissatisfied customers destroy the image of the organisation and effect the reputation and economic aspects. It is also seen from the previous research that satisfied customers exhibit loyalty and even provide positive word-of-mouth for propagation of good services amongst their peers (Kim, Lee & Yoo, 2006). Thus, being strongly service-oriented industry, there is a need to define and analyze relevant factors in order to increase customer satisfaction in the aviation industry which seeks for specific knowledge of its antecedents from the customers' points of view (Ringle et al., 2011). According to (2017) loyalty can be described as the voice and commitment of an individual to buy any particular service or product every time. The customer satisfaction and customer loyalty are interchangeable in high-quality service organizations; moreover, the customer satisfaction leads to the customer loyalty through positive word of mouth in the airline industry (Chow & Tsui, 2017), The research in this field thus is focused around a basic model of hypotheses relating to service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

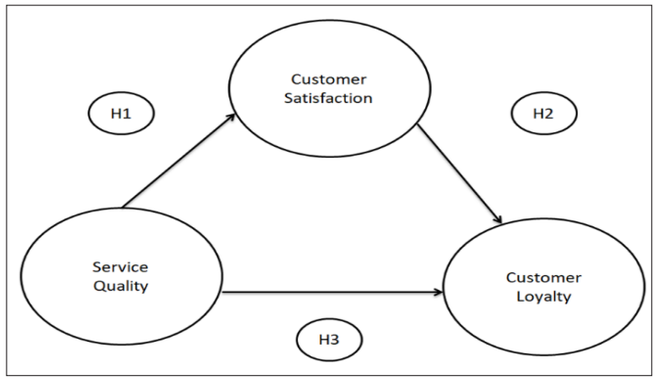

Fig. 1: Conceptual Model

The theoretical and empirical discussion and to test the proposed research model led to the development of the following hypotheses:

H1: Service quality is positively related to passenger satisfaction in airlines.

H2: There exists a positive relationship between passenger satisfaction and loyalty.

H3: There exists a correlation between service quality, passenger satisfaction and loyalty.

RESEARCH METHOD

The respondents included the passengers at the Indira Gandhi International Airport Delhi during the period January – February 2020 and were willing to participate in this academic activity. The sample of this research is 154 respondents. Due to the heterogeneity of the research population and based on the weight/ratio of each group viz. Gender, Education, and their Age, the stratified random method was used to distribute the questionnaire to the research sample.

To check the sample size required for the final study, G*power software will be used to calculate the minimum sample size based on statistical power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner & Lang, 2009). To gain statistical power of 0.8 we need a minimum sample size of 85. Therefore, we have an adequate sample size to perform statistical analysis.

DATA CLEANSING

According to Schumacker and Lomax (2004), data screening is a very important first step in structural equation modeling. The following section outlines the data used for analysis, initially considering sample size and variable type before discussing the importance of and methods of dealing with missing data, outliers, non-normality and nonlinearity.

A complete data set is a key requirement of SEM, but most research options have the issue of missing data. As the statistical analysis of data is significantly affected by missing data, thus the data analysis must proceed with examination of data entry and handling of missing data. There are many options to cope up with missing data such as deleting subjects who have missing values, replacing the missing data values or using robust statistical procedures that accommodate for the presence of missing data. Even SEM software programs have many options for dealing with missing data like Listwise deletion "deletes all subjects with missing data on any variable". It has also been observed in many cases that reduction of sample size can result in inefficient parameter estimates which ultimately lead to bias if deleted respondents differ significantly to those that contain complete data (Malhotra, 1988).

Furthermore in multivariate analysis, the assumption of normality is the most fundamental assumption. It has been seen in earlier researches that most of the estimation techniques used in SEM assume the data has been drawn from a continuous and multivariate normal population (Ullman, 1996; Kaplan, 2000). Multivariate normality refers to the shape of the data distribution for an individual metric variable and its correspondence to the normal distribution (Hair et al., 2006). Visual examination of histogram that compares the observed data values with a distribution approximating the normal distribution is the most common and simplest diagnostic test for normality (Hair et al., 2006). A histogram of standard residuals must roughly have a normal curve. Other than this, statistical examination of the data's normality in addition to a graphical examination of the data is also a preferred option.

SPSS calculates the Skewness and Kurtosis for each variable. Skewness is defined as the index that reflects the symmetry of a univariate distribution. Kurtosis has to do with the shape of the distribution in terms of its peakedness. An extreme value for either measure indicates that the data is not normally distributed; extremes values for skewness and kurtosis are values greater than +3 or less than -3. Under normality, the univariate skewness and kurtosis coefficients should be zero (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000). It is observed that invalid statistical hypothesis-testing which refers to the normal theory test statistic may not reflect an adequate evaluation of the model being studied happens when there is violation of the above-stated assumptions (Byrne, 2001). A large difference in the chi square test, undermining its utility could be observed even with a small departure from multivariate normality. In such cases, Chi-square values get inflated which corresponds to a lower model fit, biasing toward a Type I error, which ultimately rejects a model that should not be rejected. Anderson and Gerbing, 1988 reported that maximum likelihood estimation is not as sensitive to non-normality as previously thought. Moreover, Skewness and Kurtosis tests indicated that the data used in this research can be taken to be normally distributed.

Hung-Che Wu (2013) in their research gave scale for service quality of airline industry which had 4-second order constructs followed by 11 first-order constructs. The details are as follows: Interaction Quality (Conduct, Expertise, and Problem-solving); Physical Environment Quality (Cleanliness, Comfort, Tangibles, and Safety & Security); Outcome Quality (Waiting Time, Valence).

Access Quality (Information, Convenience)

The segmentation of the collected data for this study was done on the basis of education, age, gender, and work experiences of the respondent. The detail explanation of the demographic profile is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristic of Research Population

Demographic Characterics of Passengers			
Sr. No.	**Demographic Factors**		**Response**
1	Gender		
	a)	Male	65
	b)	Female	89
2	Age		
	a)	20-35 Years	85
	b)	From 35- Less than 45 years	30
	c)	From 45 and above	39
3	Status		
	a)	Married	47
	b)	Single	107
4	Education level		
	a)	Lower than bachelor degree	29
	b)	Bachelor degree	87
	c)	Higher than bachelor degree	38
5	Monthly income		
	a)	30,000 Rupees or lower	28
	b)	30,001 – 40,000 Rupees	56
	c)	40,001 – 50,000Rupees	32
	d)	50,001 – 60,000 Rupees	22
	e)	Higher than 60,000 Rupees	16
6	Nationality		
	a)	Indian	154
	b)	Not Indian	0
7	Profession		
	a)	Business	27
	b)	Corporates officials	44
	c)	Government Officials	18
	d)	Retired	6
	e)	Students	61

Source: Articulated by Researchers

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha and Test for Skewness and Kurtosis

A measure of internal consistency depicting whether all items within the instrument measure the same thing is determined as Cronbach's alpha (George & Mallery, 2006). Cronbach's coefficient alpha value between 0.0 and + 1.0 is considered as the normal range, and the higher values reflect a higher degree of internal consistency. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha was calculated for each field of the questionnaire and documented in Table 3 & Test for skewness & kurtosis are listed in Table 4, and Test for Correlated Item Total Correlation & Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted listed in Table 5.

Table 2 shows the values of Cronbach's Alpha for each field of the questionnaire and the entire questionnaire. For the fields, values of Cronbach's Alpha were in the range from 0.746 and 0.932. This range is considered high which confirms the reliability of each field of the questionnaire.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Tangibles (4)	TAN1	3.42	.941	-.462	.195	-.432	.389
	TAN2	3.72	.771	-.598	.195	.654	.389
	TAN3	3.32	.989	-.240	.195	-.625	.389
	TAN4	3.40	.932	-.398	.195	-.623	.389
Safety & Security (3)	SS1	3.77	.763	-.663	.195	.885	.389
	SS2	3.88	.699	-.176	.195	-.157	.389
	SS3	3.85	.721	-.085	.195	-.411	.389
Cleanliness (3)	CLE1	3.77	.771	-.535	.195	.177	.389
	CLE2	3.66	.820	-.152	.195	-.461	.389
	CLE3	3.75	.770	-.677	.195	.822	.389
Comfort (3)	COM1	3.50	.909	-.476	.195	-.061	.389
	COM2	3.64	.876	-.890	.195	.958	.389
	COM3	3.64	.898	-.437	.195	-.281	.389

Construct	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Expertise (3)	EXP1	3.99	.566	-.659	.195	2.543	.389
	EXP2	3.86	.657	-.409	.195	.578	.389
	EXP3	4.11	.632	-.563	.195	1.369	.389
Conduct (5)	CON1	3.23	1.002	-.248	.195	-.453	.389
	CON2	3.30	.998	-.511	.195	-.296	.389
	CON3	3.25	1.005	-.318	.195	-.350	.389
	CON4	3.30	1.030	-.446	.195	-.330	.389
	CON5	3.34	1.049	-.404	.195	-.457	.389
Problem Solving (3)	PSO1	3.68	.862	-.495	.195	.261	.389
	PSO2	3.73	.834	-.407	.195	.061	.389
	PSO3	3.74	.831	.035	.195	-.782	.389
Information (3)	INF1	4.12	.714	-.502	.195	.152	.389
	INF2	4.17	.624	-.298	.195	.212	.389
	INF3	4.18	.715	-.814	.195	1.719	.389
Convenience (3)	CONV1	3.45	.957	-.371	.195	-.431	.389
	CONV2	3.45	.950	-.516	.195	-.212	.389
	CONV3	3.40	.999	-.426	.195	-.451	.389
Customer Loyalty (4)	CL1	4.45	.658	-1.087	.195	1.238	.389
	CL2	4.50	.597	-.748	.195	-.401	.389
	CL3	4.46	.648	-.948	.195	.483	.389
	CL4	4.40	.771	-1.339	.195	1.651	.389
Customer Satisfaction (3)	CS1	4.35	.621	-.573	.195	.280	.389
	CS2	4.35	.589	-.274	.195	-.664	.389
	CS3	4.23	.780	-.841	.195	.368	.389
	Valid N (list wise)						

Table 3: Assessing Measurement Model Validity

Tangibles (4)	.769
Safety & Security (3)	.711
Cleanliness (3)	.708
Comfort (3)	.831
Expertise (3)	.698
Conduct (5)	.899
Problem Solving (3)	.804
Information (3)	.711
Convenience (3)	.811
Customer Loyalty (4)	.732
Customer Satisfaction (3)	.711

Table 4: Total Statistics

Constructs		Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Tangibles	TAN1	10.45	4.471	0.63	0.423	0.68
	TAN2	10.15	5.409	0.519	0.296	0.742
	TAN3	10.55	4.132	0.685	0.476	0.647
	TAN4	10.47	5.048	0.465	0.235	0.769
Safety & Security	SS1	7.73	1.559	0.463	0.215	0.707
	SS2	7.62	1.57	0.551	0.329	0.596
	SS3	7.65	1.484	0.58	0.352	0.558
Cleanliness	CLE1	7.41	1.838	0.521	0.276	0.625
	CLE2	7.53	1.663	0.562	0.317	0.572
	CLE3	7.43	1.88	0.497	0.249	0.653
Comfort	COM1	7.29	2.624	0.675	0.468	0.801
	COM2	7.14	2.568	0.749	0.561	0.728
	COM3	7.14	2.646	0.68	0.477	0.795
Expertise	EXP1	7.97	1.097	0.507	0.258	0.484
	EXP2	8.1	1.022	0.425	0.189	0.591
	EXP3	7.86	1.051	0.438	0.205	0.569
Conduct	CON1	13.18	12.921	0.623	0.435	0.903
	CON2	13.12	12.039	0.777	0.638	0.871
	CON3	13.17	11.88	0.797	0.667	0.866
	CON4	13.12	11.764	0.791	0.67	0.867
	CON5	13.08	11.811	0.763	0.652	0.874
Problem Solving	PSO1	7.47	2.198	0.646	0.424	0.738
	PSO2	7.42	2.205	0.683	0.467	0.7
	PSO3	7.4	2.321	0.625	0.395	0.759
Information	INF1	8.34	1.338	0.505	0.262	0.653
	INF2	8.29	1.515	0.505	0.267	0.653
	INF3	8.29	1.238	0.585	0.344	0.548
Convenience	CONV1	6.85	3.174	0.703	0.504	0.801
	CONV2	6.84	3.074	0.753	0.567	0.754
	CONV3	6.9	3.056	0.696	0.49	0.81
Customer Satisfaction	CS1	8.58	1.461	0.381	0.2	0.693
	CS2	8.58	1.239	0.636	0.405	0.395
	CS3	8.7	1.061	0.468	0.304	0.618
Customer Loyalty	CL1	13.36	2.584	0.464	0.233	0.705
	CL2	13.31	2.608	0.536	0.308	0.668
	CL3	13.35	2.321	0.636	0.409	0.606
	CL4	13.42	2.284	0.481	0.256	0.706

SEM RESULTS

The model fit indices like the comparative fit index (CFI), the goodness of fit index (GFI), normed fit index (NFI), tucker lewis index (TLI) and root mean square of error approximation (RMSEA) were selected to evaluate the model fit (Hair et al., 2010). The statistics reveal that the model is acceptable as it satisfies the required fit criteria.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper investigates the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The empirical results and findings suggest that there is a significant impact of service quality on passenger satisfaction and loyalty in the Indian aviation industry. The result further shows that empathy and responsiveness are the prominent factors of service quality which is a vital prerequisite for customer satisfaction.

This paper also recommends various suggestions for airline managers regarding the problem solving attitude in flight operations keeping in mind that satisfied traveler is the key factor in developing loyalty. Thus airline personnel need to excel so as to make the passengers satisfied. This is an important factor to survive in this competitive industry. Therefore, manager should device strategies for passenger satisfaction.

The findings of the study thus support the proposed model in terms of the following relationships:

H1: Service quality is positively related to passenger satisfaction in airlines.

H2: There exists a positive relationship between passenger satisfaction and loyalty.

H3: There exists a correlation between service quality, passenger satisfaction and loyalty.

The paper with its results makes a remarkable positive contribution to academic literature and airline management practices as it highlight the key operational aspects of this industry by emphasizing on the significance of interpersonal competences and by specifying on improving service efficiencies and subsequently passenger loyalty. This study paves an innovative way to direct future research towards analyzing progress in service quality with regards to passenger satisfaction and in the Indian aviation industry.

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