

## AN EVALUATION OF PASSENGER SATISFACTION ON SERVICE QUALITY DELIVERED AT AN AIRPORT IN NAMIBIA: A QUALITY PERSPECTIVE APPROACH

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### **ABSTRACT**

Passenger expectations keep on changing and especially now with the advances of the internet, airports must brace themselves in delighting the passenger for survival and profitability. This paper seeks to investigate and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on customers' perceptions of the quality of services offered by an airport in Namibia. The study utilizes a quantitative design involving the use of a modified version of the SERVQUAL measurement instrument. A total of 141 passengers were selected using the systematic random sampling technique, completed the questionnaire after consultation.

The evidence revealed from a factor analysis points to the fact that customers are concerned about very specific aspects of service quality relating to reliability, assurance and responsiveness. The implications of this study are that Customer Relationship Marketing (CRM) is a prerequisite to success. Management and staff should thus focus on passenger satisfaction, modifying aspects of their service delivery to minimize behaviours leading to dissatisfaction and providing training to continuously meet or exceed passenger's expectations needs to attain a profound service delivery at the airport. The findings of this study are expected to assist airline management, government and regulating authorities in evaluating and improving the levels of existing services being offered to airline passengers. In this paper customer and passenger is used interchangeably.

**Keywords:** Airport, Passenger Satisfaction, Service Quality, Servqual

## Introduction

Research on passenger satisfaction levels of airports using the servqual is insurmountable DeMarco [1]; Venkatesh and Nargundkar (n.d.)[2]; Oyewole, Sankaran and Choudhury [3]. In a similar study, Barabino, Deiana and Tilocca[4 ] used the servqual to measure the service quality in the urban bus transport. Sultan and Simpson [5] examined the airline service quality, passenger satisfaction and behavioural intentions. However, the weaknesses in the above studies, is that they only address aspects of customer service satisfaction and fail to deal with the entire scope of customer satisfaction which include; customer perceived value, customer loyalty, customer relationship management and data mining, complaint handling process, contact employees and rewards, website services customer attraction and retention strategies. This study differs from earlier research in that it covers most of the customer satisfaction attributes to derive a lacuna that needs to be bridged between perceptions and expectations.

Most customer satisfaction research has used U.S. subjects to develop and test the satisfaction theory Spreng and Chiou [6].Such measures may not be applicable to other countries, i.e. Namibia and hence a country specific measure that takes into account the culture construct needs to be undertaken. Review of literature conducted to the present study has revealed that the majority of extant literatures on customer satisfaction are confined to the US, Europe, with only a few in South Africa and none on Namibia. Regarding research on Passenger Service, Fodness and Murray [7] state that not much research has focussed on the passenger satisfaction but instead researchers have focussed on measuring airport service. This study was prompted by the need to find a solution to the continuing problem of low passenger satisfaction at this airport.

## Research Objectives

The research objectives for the study were to examine customer satisfaction levels regarding the quality of service at the airport, examine dimensions of service most important to passengers and to examine the customers' perceptions and expectations about quality of services at the airport.

## The use of Servqual as a measure for airport service

Many studies on airport and airline service quality have used the servqual as a model for measurement (Bunzi and Maes [8]; Fodness and Murray [7]; Nadiri, Hussain, Ekiz and Erdogan [9] Atalik [14] Lubbe and Zambellis [10] A study by Sultan and Simpson [5] further validates and demonstrates the servqual's usability and reliability in the international airline setting. The

servqual has five dimensions namely tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness and empathy.

### **Reliability**

Reliability is about dependability and consistency in the provision of service and meeting customers' needs. In the area of airline services, this relates in meeting its promises. Passengers will choose to use airports that will perform the service right first time and also provide that service at the right time that they have promised to do it. According to Atalik [11] customers attach a great deal of importance to fulfilment of their wants and needs. Sultan & Simpson [5] state the importance of reliability to passengers in the airlines' operations.

### **Responsiveness**

Passengers expect to be given this prompt service and for airport staff to be willing to help should the passenger require assistance in any area of need. For example, the aged or the physically impaired passengers may require assistance in getting into the plane as well as folding their wheel chairs and first time fliers, for example may eagerly look forward to when the service will be performed.

### **Tangibles**

Tangibles assume great importance because often the services are not tangible but intangible. The tangibles always communicate a message about the level of quality to be expected. Berry, Wall and Carbone [12] posit that customers form perceptions based on technical performance of the service (functional clues), the tangibles associated with the service (mechanical clues) and the behaviour and appearance of service providers (humanic clues). Ambient conditions also play a role in the interpretation of the tangibles, e. g .temperature, lighting and the scent around the airport. In a study Nadiri, Hussain, Ekiz and Erdogan [9] findings showed that among the quality dimensions, airline tangibles was found to be the most significant to affect both customer satisfaction and repurchase intention.

In the case of music, this needs to be piped through the entire airport including the restaurants and it is important that the choice of the music is pleasant and soothing. In this aspect it is imperative that the airport management avoid playing music that may negatively influence the

passengers perception of the quality of service. A customer involvement into what is acceptable regarding type of music will go a long way in avoiding the perception.

### **Assurance**

An employee who conveys the required skills and knowledge will assure the passenger that he or she is in “good hands”. The failure of employees having lack of knowledge in answering passengers’ questions may give the customer a sense of insecurity as pointed out by Sultan and Simpson [5].

According to a number of researches done on airlines, the passengers concerns are on safety and security (DeMarco [2] Sultan and Simpson [5]). This aspect is now more profound after the 9/11 incident which has created major changes in customer reaction.

### **Empathy**

Customers have been found to evaluate quality of service based on the level of concern and civility (Winsted [13]). Airport staffs are expected to give customers individual attention and understand the specific needs of the customer. For example, assisting the aged or physically impaired to access the aircraft will be seen as caring for the passenger.

In order to manage service quality effectively, one must measure (Kellen [12]). The best customer service systems are doomed to deteriorate unless they are supported by an effective measurement system. The service gap is one approach to measuring customer satisfaction. It measures this gap in various ways: between customer expectations and perceptions; between customer expectations and managers’ perceptions of those expectations, and so on. According to Fodness and Murray [7] the gap theory is a reliable and valid scale. Using this approach in conjunction with the servqual the service gap can be measured as the difference between the expectations customers have about the service and their perceptions of the quality of the service that they received.

### **Airport Passenger Service Expectations**

Customers form service expectations from many sources Kotler and Keller [15]. Meeting rising customer expectations has proved to be one of the most difficult challenges to the service business Sultan and Simpson [5]. In other words, customers are hard to please due to their changing attitude but nevertheless, receiving service quality of a high level is important to customers.

### **Service Quality**

Due to the intangibility of service, a firm may find it more difficult to understand how customer perceive the nature of their service quality. This means that the service must strive to meet the ever changing customer needs and wants to remain competitive. In order for airport service quality to yield the desired results, service quality of airports must be defined (Fodness and Murray [7]).

Relating to the airport sector the following may affect the passengers' expectations:

### **Personal Needs**

The personal needs and desires of passengers also determine their expectations. Some passengers desire very personalised service and this will affect their expectations. A first time flier might expect personalised service after having saved for the flight and the same may apply to a frequent flier.

### **Word of Mouth**

According to Brown, Dacin and Gunst [14] the customer-to –customer advocacy through the word of mouth (WOM) communication can have a profound influence on customer attitudes and purchasing power. No customer, therefore, should be treated poorly or with disrespect as this can be costly to the airline through word of mouth communication from affected passengers. Brown, Berry, Dacin and Gunst [14] add that word of mouth has an influence on customer attitudes and purchasing behaviour.

Since customer satisfaction is positively related to repurchase and word of mouth intentions. Airports can use word-of –mouth as a proactive marketing strategy Rosen [16] McConnell, Huba and Kawasaki [17] (Nadiri, Hussain, Ekiz and Eedogan [9]).

### **Past Experience and complaint handling**

Expectations do not form in a vacuum. For example, where a customer experienced a negative situation regarding the quality of service, resolving a complaint and providing feedback about the complaint may lead to a change of negative opinions about the airline (Atalik [11]). The importance of complaints and its handling results in customer satisfaction but more importantly leads to operational improvements and improved financial performance. According to Atalik [11] the complaint process should be “staff friendly”(p.1) rather than simply trying to satisfy customers. In this case service organisations that ignore the operational value of complaints do so at their own peril.

### **Travelling Frequency**

Business travellers and leisure travellers have different opinions regarding the importance of services offered by the airports and the airports' level of performance according to Lubbe, Douglas and Zambellis [10]. They found that there is a significant difference in the perceptions of frequent travellers and infrequent ones and that the passenger trip purpose and frequency of travel can influence the level of importance they place on specific service quality attributes. For example, a frequent business traveller will like individual attention while an infrequent traveller may not. The opposite may be true, where a first time flier looks forward to a very personalised service after having saved for the flight.

### **Research Design and Methods**

The study employed quantitative methodology. Stratified random sampling was used to sample 141 passengers. Strata were arranged according to age and gender. The research instrument was a questionnaire, which comprised of 10 questions on each objective. Section A comprised of demographic data of the respondents, that is gender and age group.

Section B requested respondents to indicate their travelling frequency. In this section respondents were asked to indicate how many times they had used the airport's services and the aim was to establish repeat buyers and service experience.

In Section C, there were two questions to cover each dimension of the servqual instrument. These questions were designed to measure customers' expectations of the airport services. The passengers were requested to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with given statements on customer expectations.

Section D contained ten questions. There were two questions for each dimension of the servqual. These questions were designed to measure customers' perceptions of the service they get from the airport. The respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with certain statements designed to solicit information on customer perceptions. Both sections c and d made use of a Likert 5 point scale requesting respondents to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with certain statements.

In Section E, the customers were requested to allocate 100 marks to the five dimensions of the servqual model. The aim of this section was to measure the relative importance of each dimension in the minds of the passengers.

### **Administration of the Questionnaire**

Once a passenger was identified as fitting into the target group he/she was approached. After the aim of the research was explained and the introductory letter was given to the customer, he/she was then requested to participate in the research. An assurance was given that the participants did not have to identify themselves and that the data given were to be used for the purposes of the research only. Questionnaires were only handed out to those that consented to participate in the research.

### **Results and Discussions**

A total of 145 questionnaires were sent out and 141 of them were returned. This represents a 97% response rate. This was deemed adequate in keeping with literature that advocates for a response rate of at least 40% for this kind of study. Of the 141 respondents 47.5% were female while 51.8% were male. One respondent did not indicate his or her gender.

Of the respondents 32.7% were above the age of 50 while a further 16.3 % was between the age of 41 and 50. While the above 50 age group had the lion's share of respondents with 32.7% all the other age groups contributed between 14 and 18% of the sample. The reason for the lions share relating to the above 50 age group could be attributed to retired pensioners or couples visiting the tourist centres in Namibia.

Of the 141 respondents only 54 (i.e 38.6%) were visiting the airport for the first time. The other 61.4% was made up of customers that had used the airport more than once. The customers that have visited the airport more than once are in a better position to assess the quality of the service than the first timers. The fact that there is a preponderance of repeat customers lends validity to the findings of the study.

### **Customer Satisfaction Levels**

In line with SERVQUAL approach and gap analysis customer satisfaction levels was calculated as the gap between perceptions of the service received and the expectations of the service on a particular customer service dimension. The perception of the service score was calculated by summing the perception scores for all the respondents for that particular questionnaire item. The same approach was used to calculate the expectation score. Since each dimension had two questionnaire items the mean satisfaction score was calculated as the mean of the scores of the two items.

The perceptions of the service delivered in all dimensions and for all items were invariably lower than the expectations of the customers. Thus there is a negative disconfirmation on every

item and also on every service dimension. The worst disconfirmation was recorded for the Assurance dimension which recorded a mean score of -106.5, while the least was recorded for the Responsiveness dimension with a score of -88.5. The overall satisfaction level was calculated as -956.

### **Relative Importance of Customer Service Dimensions**

Section E requested the customers to rate the importance of the service dimensions by allocating marks up to 100 to five different questions with each question representing a specific dimension. The relative importance of the dimensions was calculated by simply calculating the sum of the marks allocated by the different customers to each service dimension. Customers rated the tangibles dimension highest with 3445 points followed by the Reliability dimension with 3005, which is then followed by the Responsiveness dimension with 2579. The least ranked dimensions were the Empathy dimension with 2150 and 2542 points respectively. It is worthy underlining that the empathy dimension was 1259 points less than the top scoring Tangibles dimension and a good 392 points less than the fourth placed Assurance dimension. Thus in this sample of customers Empathy was rated and valued much less than the other customer service dimensions.

### **Expectations and Perceptions on Tangibles**

On both the tangible items an overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the given statements. 105 out of the 141 respondents indicated that they expected soothing music, while 124 out of 141 indicated that they expected the airport staff to be always neat. The respondents therefore, had high expectations in so far as the tangible aspect of the service was concerned. This is in keeping with Kotler's [15] assertion that customers tend to look for cues on the quality of services to be offered from tangible things such as buildings, equipment and personnel. Regarding the neatness of staff, this finding is consistent with Fortune, Gallagra, Miller, Stemeler and Whitmann [18] and also Laabs [19] who reported anecdotal evidence to the effect that casual business dress created the perception of lower service quality thus implying that customers expected employees to dress neatly and in business attires. According to Sureshchandar, Rajendran and Anantharaman [20] tangibles are a service factor critical from the customers' point of view.

### **Expectations and Perceptions on the Reliability of the Service**



On both the reliability items a total of 125 of the 141 respondents voiced strong expectations by indicating that they either agreed or strongly agreed with the given statements. Performing service right the first time means that errors are minimized, which in turn means the reliability, security and credibility of transactions is guaranteed.

#### **Expectations and Perceptions on the Responsiveness of the Airport Staff**

Out of the 141 respondents a total of 128 indicated that they expected the employees at the airport to give them prompt service. Exactly the same number of respondents also indicated they expected the employees at the airport to be always willing to assist them. This again indicates the high expectations that the customers have of airport staffs.

#### **Expectations and Perceptions on Assurance**

Out of the 141 respondents to this 127 expected to feel safe that their language would be secure, while 131 expected that the airport employees would have the requisite knowledge to answer their questions. This is again reflective of an environment characterized by high expectations on the behalf of the customers of the airport.

#### **Expectations and Perceptions on Empathy**

A total of 118 out of 141 customers expected to be given individualized attention, while 127 expected the airport employees to understand their specific needs.

#### **Overall Impressions on Expectations and Perceptions**

On all the dimensions a majority of the customers indicated that they expected highly from the airport and its employees. However and quite to the contrary the perceptions that the customers had after experiencing the service fell well short of these expectations resulting in negative disconfirmation.

The environment within which the airport authority is operating is characterized by high customer expectations. The conclusion that flows from this data is that in this sample of customers of the airport the expectations the customers have far exceeded the perceptions of the service they received. This results in dissonance and dissatisfaction. The customers are most dissatisfied with the lack of assurance from the airport staff. Specifically the customers do not feel that their luggage is secure and are also not convinced that the airport staffs are knowledgeable enough to attend to their needs. Baggage safety is a major quality issue. Customer dissatisfaction is very pervasive.

#### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings presented in the results and discussion section, the following recommendations are made:

- **Intensive Customer Service Training Be Given to the Staffs**

The pervasiveness of the disconfirmation scores indicates that the airport staffs are ill-equipped to meet the needs of the customers. The training should be at two levels. At the first level the staffs should be made conscious and aware of the expectations of the customers including the relative importance of the service dimensions to the customers. At the second level, the staffs should be put through a program that addresses their customer service skills with particular emphasis on the service dimension.

- **The Corporate Culture Should Be Change to make it More Customer Centric**

The customer dissatisfaction is indicative of the fact that the airport authority is not focused on the needs of the customer. There is therefore an urgent need to address this by adopting a more customer-centric culture. To support this culture the airport authority should introduce regular customer satisfaction surveys and also deliberately engage the customers to find out what is important to them. The panacea to this problem is to develop a customer centred culture in which products and service designs are a product of extensive customer consultation and involvement.

- **Introduce On Line Services**

The lack of promptness of service can be cured by introducing on line services so that when the passengers arrive at the airport most of their needs would have already been catered for. This can reduce the waiting time and also reduce the queues. According to Laudon and Laudon [21] information systems are not only essential for organisations but are needed for prosperity and survival.

In order to avoid disappointing customers using the online or web sites, the airport management must ensure that these are always in a functionally operating order. In these days of ultra fast telecommunication and wireless communication methods, consumers expect real-time action.

- **The Airport Authority Should Rebrand**

The airport should spruce up its image by totally changing its brand and attempting to reconfigure itself in the eyes of the market Kotler and Keller [15]. This rebranding should include a changing or refurbishing of the airport facilities as well as changing the corporate colours including the staff uniforms. The airport authority should seek to include its customers in

the rebranding exercise and incorporate their views in such issues as corporate colours and services to be offered.

- **Enhanced Baggage Security**

The airport should as a matter of urgency take steps to enhance the security of the baggage of the travelers passing through the airport. This could involve investing in new security equipment and also hiring the services of reputable security companies to augment existing security arrangements.

### **Redesign its Service offerings**

The airport should design its service offerings around this age group of 50 years and above. For example more information displays should be made available to this group. More entertainment could be designed for the age category below 20years old. For example, video games.

### **Conclusion**

Customer satisfaction is a dynamic concept that changes as the tastes of customers change. It therefore, recommended that regular customer satisfaction surveys be done so that the airport authority remains abreast with the customer needs. Presently, the majority of the customers as represented in this sample are dissatisfied with the current quality of the service offered by the airport.

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