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Perceived Service Quality in Airline Services: An Empirical Assessment

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ABSTRACT

In today's world of fierce competition, service sector organizations strive to stay ahead by offering quality services to their customers and aviation industry is no exception to this. Since the air transportation market has become more challenging, many airlines have turned to focus on airline service quality so as to have sustained growth and profitability. In view of the growing importance of service quality, the present study was undertaken to measure the service quality of airline service providers in Kashmir. To achieve this, a well-structured questionnaire was designed in line with SERVPERF scale to capture the opinion of the passengers about the services rendered to them. A sample of 402 airline passengers was chosen at International Airport,Srinagar on the basis of number of statements in a questionnaire as propounded by Hair, et. al., (2010).The study concludesthat the passengers are relatively satisfied with their overall quality of airline services; however, an improvement is needed in one of the dimension of service quality namely inflight service so as to enhance the overall quality of airline services.The study recommends that airline operators should recognize the changing needs of passengers and customize their range of services particularly inflight services by identifying unique service requirements of the individual passengers according to theirdesires.

Keywords: Service Quality, Convenience and Accessibility, Customer Service, Inflight Service, Reliability and Value.

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Introduction

The aviation sector is one of the major economic drivers forprosperity, development and employment in any country. India is one of the fastest growing aviation markets in the world. The civil aviation industry in India has emerged as one of the fastest growing industries in the country during last three years. India has become the third largest domestic aviation market in the world and is expected to overtake UK to become the third largest air passenger market by 2024. India's passenger traffic stood at 341.05 million in financial year, 2020 registering a growth of 11.13%. Domestic passenger traffic stood at 274.50 million in financial year, 2020 with growth rate of 12.91% over financial year, 2016 (IBEF, 2019). To cater to the rising air traffic, airlines need not to pay keen attention to their competitors, they must understand their passengers. They have to believe that passengers are core concept of their business. Providing quality service to customers is important for many airlines because it retains customer support and market share and ultimately the profitability of the organization. Passengers' opinions can truly define service quality in the airline industry. To stay ahead in the business, superior service quality is a major determinant and acts as an order winner in the market place (Singh and Sushil, 2013). Since service quality is an important factor for airlines, the research related to service quality in the airline industry has been growing. It is, therefore,important to

examine the service quality perception of passengers regarding the services rendered to them by the airlines.

Objectives of the study

In view of growing importance of service quality an effort was made to measure service qualityof the airlines operating at Srinagar International Airport. The analysis will come up with the actual perception of passengers regarding the quality of the services and to offersuggestions, on the basis of study results, to airline service providers to improve the quality of service that can go a long way in improving/maintaining their customer base.

Literature Review

Growing demand for the presence of higher quality services in an organization has become the vital trend among the consumers (Chen, et. al., 2019). Quality services are essential to differentiate the organization and gain competitive advantage (Mahmoud, et. al., 2019). Kotler and Keller (2012) stated that service quality leads to cost savings, better profits, higher market share and more satisfied customers.Delivering high quality service to passengers is essential to survive and strengthen their competitiveness.

The most remarkable research towards the assessment of service quality has been conducted by Parasuraman, et. al., (1985) as cited by many researchers(Brown and Swartz (1989); Carman (1990); Lewis (1991); Pitt,et.al., (1992); Young, et. al.,(1994); Kassim and Bojei(2002); Witkowski and Wolfinbarger(2002); Park, et. al., (2004); Park et. al., (2005); Park, et. al., (2006) and Singh, 2015). They defined service quality as the discrepancy between consumers' perceptions of services offered by a particular firm and their expectations about the firms offering such services (Chou, et. al., 2011). Similarly, Kasper, et. al., (1999) defined service quality as the extent to which the service, the service process and the service organization can satisfy the expectations of the user. Service quality is a consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority/superiority of the organisation and its services (Park et. al., 2006).Similarly, Cronin and Taylor, (1992) described service quality as a form of attitude, as it is a global judgment relating to the superiority of the service.

Parasuraman, et. al., (1985) investigated the concept of service quality in four service sectors (retail banking, credit card, securities brokerage and product repair and maintenance) and came up with 10 dimensions of service quality (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, understanding the customers, access, communication, credibility, security, competence and courtesy). Later, they reduced the original 10 dimensions to five (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy), resulting in the widely used instrument known as SERVQUAL. The SERVQUAL scale has been applied tothe airline industry by earlier researchers (Gilbert and Wong, (2003); Park, et. al., (2004). However, this scale has been highly criticized. Park, et. al., (2006) argued that five dimensions and 22 item scale is difficult to apply to the airline industry because this scale has not addressed other important aspects of airline service quality such as in-flight meals, seating comfort andseat space. Similarly, Cronin and Taylor (1992) argued that it is unnecessary to measure customer expectation and came up with a new scale called SERVPERF. They contended that measuring perceptions of performance alone is sufficient. This scale was less tedious than SERVQUAL as it consists of only 22 items instead of 44 items. In view of the growing superiority of SERVPERF over the earlier models of service quality, the use of performance-based scale has been chosen to measure the service quality of airlines, under study.This study used modified SERVPERF instrument for airline settings and validated the instrument using data from domestic passengers at Srinagar International Airport.

Sample Design

Due to privacy and security concerns, it was practically not possible to obtain list of passengers who have flown via domestic airlines. Thus, the sample frame comprised real incoming and outgoing domestic passengers at Srinagar International Airport (Srinagar, J&K) as they had the immediate picture of the airline services used by them. The size of the sample was limited to four hundred and two (402) respondents only andthe systematic sampling method was chosen by administering the questionnaire to every 5th respondent in the airline passenger queue at check-in counters. All the important demographic characteristics like gender, age, educational qualification, income level, occupational status, travel preference, travel frequency, class and purpose of travel were taken into consideration while seeking the response from the passengers regarding their perception of service quality. An effort was made to give a balanced representation to above demographic characteristics to make the sample representative. The present study constitutes a sample where the number of male respondents (57.7%) was greater than female respondents (42.3%). In terms of age, majority of respondents (43%) belonged to the age group of 21-30 years, followed by the age group of 31-40 years (28.9%), 41-50 years (18.2%) and above 51 years (10.0%). As per the educational level, mass of the respondents were graduates (21.6%) followed by post graduates (33.3%) and up-to higher secondary (21.6%).Income wisecategorization of the sample respondents shows that 36.6 % of the total respondentsfall in the income bracket of Rs. 20,001- Rs.50,000, 32.3%fall in up-to Rs. 20,000andremaining 31.1% have income above Rs 50,001 per month.Regarding the occupation of the respondents, 25.6% were businessmen, 39.8% were employees and 34.6% were students. Further, there were six airlines flying from the Srinagar International Airport at the time survey was conducted. All the six airlines were approached in order to assess the perception of respondents regarding service quality.18.7 % of the total respondents belonged to IndiGo, 18.2 % belonged to Jet Airways, 16.9 % belonged to Vistara, 15.9 % belonged to Go Air, 15.7%belonged to Air India and remaining 14.7%belonged to SpiceJet.As far as the travel frequency of the passengers is concerned, it was observed that most of the respondents have travelled 1-3 times (43.0%) in a year followed by 4-6 times (32.6%) and more than 6 times (24.4%).Respondent's profile reveals that vast majority were flying through economy class 956%) followed by business class (44%). Furthermore, out of total respondents, most of the participants were Leisure/Tourism seekers (26.4%) followed bythe participants who had come for education purpose (18.2%). Furthermore, 16.9% belonged to official group, 13.7% belonged to visiting friends/relatives, followed by the participants belonged to business group (12.7%) and the respondents who had come for medical treatment (12.2%).It can be seen that majority of the respondents were from leisure/tourism group when the data collection was done as it was the peak time in Kashmir for spending holidays/vacations.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was developed based on previous research. The present study used modified SERVPERF instrument to measure service quality and, therefore, reliability of the measurement scale was assessed first.Apart from the items from the SERVPERF (in a modified form), additional items of value (pricing) as suggested by Bahia and Nantel (2000) were taken. Value (pricing) was measured by three items adopted from the previous work of Park, et. al., (2006) and Martensen and Gronholdt (2004).All the items were measured on a five-point Likert type scale where 1 was strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree.

Factor Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Science, SPSS-20 was used to analyze the data and descriptive statistics was used to measure respondents' perception. To explore the dimensionality of the scale, the study used Principle Component-Analysis (PCA) with a varimax rotation and eigen value equal to or more than 1.The result of principal component analysis for the service quality scale extracted 5 factors properly explaining around 67.720 percent of the variance. These five factors were labeled as **'convenience and accessibility'**, **'customer service'**, **'inflight service'**, **'reliability'** and **'value'**. The first factor (convenience and accessibility) contains most of the items and explains most of the variance (18.636%), thus, it is animportant determinant of perceived airline service quality.After the deletion of items (SQ2, SQ7, SQ11, SQ18), remaining factor loadings were found above 0.50 as suggested by Hair et. al., (2009) which implies a reasonably high correlation between the factors and their items. Likewise, communalities were also assessed and no major issues were encountered. The results are presented in the Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Summary of Factor Loadings, Communalities and Variance Explained

Items	Communalities	Factors				
		1	2	3	4	5
SQ1	.627		.764			
SQ3	.687		.801			
SQ4	.546		.670			
SQ5	.613		.692			
SQ6	.697		.761			
SQ8	.860				.863	
SQ9	.784				.806	
SQ10	.690				.781	
SQ12	.777	.867				
SQ13	.809	.876				
SQ14	.552	.651				
SQ15	.597	.685				
SQ16	.709	.791				
SQ17	.630	.748				
SQ19	.674			.797		
SQ20	.718			.817		
SQ21	.645			.796		
SQ22	.709			.815		
SQ23	.616					.749
SQ24	.688					.714
SQ25	.593					.751
Eigen value		5.602	2.900	2.685	1.676	1.358
% of variance		18.636	14.640	13.318	11.395	9.730
Cumulative variance		18.636	33.276	46.595	57.990	67.720

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

In order to prove the internal reliability of the research instruments used, the researcher performed Cronbach's Alpha Test of Reliability on each dimension, which was

extracted from principal component analysis. A value of Cronbach's alpha between 0.6 and 0.8 is acceptable (Wim et. al., 2008). The results showed that all the Cronbach's alpha coefficient fall within the range which indicated higher level of internal consistency, i.e., the items that make up the scale are all measuring the same underlying attributes (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2: Overall Cronbach's alpha Score

Variables/Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha Score
Customer Service	0.808
Convenience and Accessibility	0.870
Inflight Service	0.835
Reliability	0.849
Value	0.681
Overall Service Quality	**0.844**

The adequacy of the sample size was examined by using both the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) Sampling Adequacy Test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO measure for sample adequacy for service quality scores is 0.783 which exceeds satisfactory value of 0.6(Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001)and revealed a Chi-Square at 1375.794, ($P \leq 0.000$) which verified that correlation matrix was not an identity matrix, thus validating the suitability of factor analysis (Table 1.3).

Table 1.3: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.783
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square df **Sig.**	1375.794 210 **.000***

** Significance at 1% level*

Results of the study

In line with the objective of the study, the main focus of analysisconsistedrespondents' perceptions regarding service quality and its dimensions (customer service, convenience and accessibility, inflight service, reliability and value) received from airline service providers, under reference. Perceptions of respondents were measured on a 5 point strongly disagree/strongly agree likert type scale. Mean score of respondents' perceptions were computed for each dimension separately, results of which are presented in following Tables 1.4-1.9.

Over-all Service Quality in Airline Services

To measure the overall service quality, mean scores averaged on all dimensions were calculated separately. It is evident from Table 1.4 that all airlines provide relatively better service quality (3.66) to their respective customers. The analysis clearly reveals higher levels of service quality as is reflected by the respective mean scores on all dimensions –

customer service (3.88), convenience and accessibility (3.76), inflight service (3.28), reliability (3.64) and value (3.61) respectively. There are many other studies who found higher levels of service quality in airline industry (Fick and Ritchie, 1991; Abdullaha, 2007; Duttt, 2008; Ahn and Lee, 2011; Campbell and Ellis, 2012; Khraim, 2013; Ansari, 2015;Jiang and Zhang, 2016; Liu and Lee, 2016; Rahim, 2016; Singh et. al., 2016; Nedunchezhian and Thirunavukkarasu, 2018; Sah, 2018; Atalik et. al., 2019; Siu, 2019;Singh and Nika, 2020).

Table 1.4: Service Quality scores Averaged on all Dimensions

Dimensions of Service Quality		**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Rank**
1	Customer Service	3.88	0.65	1st
2	Convenience and Accessibility	3.76	0.63	2nd
3	Inflight Service	3.28	0.79	5th
4	Reliability	3.64	0.75	3rd
5	Value (Pricing)	3.61	0.77	4th
Overall Service Quality (Averaged on all dimensions)		**3.66**		

Dimension-wise Analysis

Customer Service Dimension

Data on Table 1.5reveals satisfactory mean score on customer service dimension (3.88) meaning thereby that airline service providers provide individual attention to their respective customers. It's item-wise analysis reveals relatively low service quality score on 'airline employees give personal attention to passengers' (ranked 5th), followed by 'behaviour of staff instills confidence' (ranked 4th) and 'employees have the knowledge to answer passenger's questions in a satisfactory way' (ranked 3rd).However, the said dimension scores high on 'employees are willing to help' (ranked 1st) followed by 'employees are caring and courteous' (ranked 2nd).

Table 1.5: Service Quality scores on Customer Service Dimension

S. No.	**Elements of Customer Service**	**Mean Scores**	**Standard Deviation**	**Rank**
1	Employees of your airline are caring and courteous.	3.92	0.78	2nd
2	Employees of your airline are willing to help its passengers.	3.97	0.78	1st
3	Employees of your airline give personal attention to passengers.	3.78	0.85	5th
4	Employees of your airline have the knowledge to answer passenger's questions in a satisfactory way.	3.88	0.79	3rd
5	The behaviour of staff of your airline instills confidence in their passengers.	3.84	0.81	4th
	Total (Averaged on all Elements)	**3.88**	**0.65**	

Convenience and Accessibility Dimension

Relatively better service quality (3.76) has been reported by the respondents on convenience and accessibility (Table 1.6) which means that airlines render prompt and accurate services to their passengers with ease. Its element-wise analysis brings to light relatively higher service quality (ranked Ist) on reservation and ticketing followed by prompt and accurate baggage delivery (ranked 2nd). Keeping customers informed about when services will be performed ranked 3rd. Relatively low service quality score has been observed on 'good flight safety and security measures' (ranked 5th) followed by 'convenient flight schedule' (ranked 6th).

Table 1.6: Service Quality scores on Convenience and Accessibility Dimension

S. No.	Elements of Convenience and Accessibility	Mean Scores	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	The reservation and ticketing of your airline is prompt and accurate.	3.85	0.76	1st
2	Your airline has prompt and accurate baggage delivery.	3.79	0.81	2nd
3	Your airline offers a convenient flight schedule.	3.67	0.83	6th
4	Your airline operates in all major cities of India.	3.75	0.82	4th
5	Your airline has good flight safety and security measures.	3.69	0.87	5th
6	Your airline keeps customers informed about when services will be performed.	3.78	0.83	3rd
	Total (Averaged on all Elements)	**3.76**	**0.63**	

Reliability Dimension

The mean score on reliability dimension (3.64) indicates that the employees of airlines perform the promised services efficiently and accurately (Table 1.7). It's element-wise analysis shows highest mean score (3.66) on good on-time performance (flights are mostly on time) followed by sincere interest of employees in solving problems (3.63). However, low service quality score (3.62) has been observed on promises of airlines to do something by a certain time.

Table 1.7: Service Quality scores on Reliability Dimension

S. No.	Elements of Reliability	Mean Scores	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	The employees of your airline show sincere interest in solving problems (baggage loss, flight cancellation, etc).	3.63	0.91	2nd
2	When your Airline promises to do something by a certain time, they do so.	3.62	0.87	3rd
3	Your airline has good on-time performance (flights are mostly on time).	3.66	0.94	1st
	Total (Averaged on all Elements)	**3.64**	**0.75**	

Value Dimension

Passengers of the airlines usually compare the overall benefits with the sacrifices or costs paid by them, called as Value. It is one of the most important dimensions of service quality but is often neglected by the researchers while assessing service quality. From the analysis of Table 1.8, it is evident that comparatively better service quality (3.61) has been observed on the value dimension, which indicates that passengers are satisfied with the ticket prices and quality offered relative to price charged. It's element-wise analysis brings to fore relatively high mean score on reasonable ticket pricing (ranked 1st) followed by makes sense to fly in your airline even if price is same instead of any other airline (ranked 2nd). However, relatively low mean score (3.57) has been observed on ticket price of your airline.

Table 1.8: Service Quality scores on Value (Pricing) Dimension

S. No.	Elements of Value (Pricing)	Mean Scores	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	It makes sense to fly in your airline instead of any other airline, even if price is the same.	3.58	1.00	2nd
2	The ticket price of your airline is reasonable.	3.67	0.95	1st
3	The ticket price of your airline is worth what I pay for (value for money).	3.57	0.91	3rd
	Total (Averaged on all Elements)	**3.61**	**0.77**	

Inflight Service Dimension

The inflight service dimension showed relatively low service quality (ranked 5th) among all the dimensions of service quality (Table 1.4) which means that airline passengers are relatively dissatisfied with the quality of service on this dimension. From the Table 1.9, it is evident that element-wise analysis reveals relatively low service quality on great in-flight entertainment services (books, newspapers, movies, magazines etc.) (ranked 4th) followed by 'high seating comfort' (ranked 3rd). However, respondents have reported comparatively better scores (3.39) on your airline offers updated aircraft and has up-to date in-flight facilities followed by good meal services (ranked 2nd).

Table 1.9: Service Quality scores on Inflight Service Dimension

S. No.	Elements of Inflight Service	Mean Scores	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	Your airline offers good meal service (items, tastes, freshness, quantity, appearance etc.)	3.33	1.05	2nd
2	Your airline offers great in-flight entertainment services (books, newspapers, movies, magazines etc.)	3.08	1.06	4th
3	Your airline offers high seating comfort.	3.31	0.99	3rd
4	Your airline offers updated aircraft and has up-to date in-flight facilities.	3.39	0.93	1st
	Total (Averaged on all Elements)	**3.28**	**0.80**	

Conclusionand Suggestions

In view of the growing importance of service quality, the present study was undertaken to measure the service quality of domestic airlinesin Kashmir. A modified SERVPERF instrument was used and an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed which identifiedfive dimensions namely: 'convenience and accessibility', 'customer service', 'inflight service', 'reliability' and 'value'.Convenience and accessibility was found to be the most important factor of perceived airline service quality as it contains most of the items and explains maximum variance among all dimensions i.e., 18.64%.

The findings related to overall service quality revealed relatively satisfactory score (3.66) implying that fairly better airline services are being provided by airline service providers in Kashmir,operating at Srinagar International Airport. Dimension wiseanalysis reveals relatively better service quality on customer service dimension (ranked 1st), howeverinflight service is relatively low (ranked 5th). Comparativelylow satisfaction score has been reported on inflight service dimension(3.28), which suggests an improvement in said dimension particularly on in-flight entertainment services(books, newspapers, movies, magazines etc.)to augment the overall quality of airline services.Consistentwith previous studies (Tsaur, et. al., 2002; Milioti, et. al., 2015; Sebjan, et. al., 2017; Tsafarakis, et. al., 2018),the least vitalelement was found to be in-flight entertainment services with a low mean score of 3.08. Hence, it canbe concluded that even though in-flight entertainment services are important for travelers, they are notprioritized sufficiently. However, as in-flight entertainment systems are a fairly recent innovation,airlines have the opportunity to differentiate in this area. In other words, by making some innovations,airlines can gain a competitive advantage and create value for their passengers.Therefore, findings of the present study suggest that the airline operators should try to customize their inflight services by identifying distinctive service requirements of individual passengers especially regarding inflight entertainment services (books, newspapers, movies, magazines etc.), which demands more focus from the airline authorities under reference, to enhance the overall service quality of airline services.

Furthermore, this study was limited in the context of airline services for domestic passengers. International passengers' perception might be different from that of domestic passengers. Hence, an empirical examination needs to assess how international passengers' perception is different from domestic passengers. Similarly, the current study is based on the passengers' perception (customers) of service quality.The managerial perspective of service quality can be tested in domestic airlines. Airline employees' perception may vary from that of passengers' perception.

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