Air Travelers' Perception Towards Service Quality Of Indian Domestic Airlines

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ABSTRACT

This study makes an attempt to measure the customer satisfaction level based on service quality as perceived by air travelers among five Indian domestic airlines. Service quality attributes included in the study are Ticket booking experience; Check-in process; Luggage handling; In-flight experience; Cabin crew; Arrival services and Complaint handling approach of domestic airlines operating in India. A questionnaire was designed with above set of attributes and responses of 120 travelers of five domestic airlines viz., Go Air, Jet Airways, Indigo, Spice Jet and Air India (Domestic) were recorded on a five point Likert scale. About 120 respondents were interviewed from different tourist destinations in the four districts of Sikkim state of India. A convenient sampling method was followed. Perceptions of only those travelers were captured who had actually undergone the experience of travelling by at least two domestic airlines. Using Kruskal-Wallis test, it was checked whether travelers perceive any significant difference between satisfaction levels among five airlines for each of the above sevem identified attributes. The domestic airline preferences of customers with respect to each of the service quality attribute were also traced during the study. It was observed that Spice Jet has scored highest preference on 'ticket booking', 'in-flight experience' and 'cabin crew' service attributes; whereas the perception of travelers towards 'check-in process', 'luggage handling', 'arrival services' and 'complaint handling' attributes of Jet Airways, was significantly different from the others. Indian customers also see the quality of services in connection with the value to money.

Key words : Air travelers' perception, Service quality, Indian domestic airlines, Customer satisfaction, Normality, Kruskal-Wallis test

INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, Indian civil aviation sector has seen a significant increase in the number of air travelers due to the low cost of traveling. Today, air travel is no more the monopoly of the rich carriers in India; air travelling has become simpler and cheaper. Private players including Spice Jet, Indigo, Jet airways etc, are coming up with attractive offers for their passengers, thereby making domestic civil aviation lucrative. Now, airline has become a common man vehicle and revolutionized the way a common Indian traveler used to travel. The airlines are adding more and more cities to their list of destinations covered throughout the country. Therefore, it can be said that the domestic airlines of India have made travelling easier for the masses. More and more people are opting for traveling by air, because they save a lot of time in traveling, as compared to other means of transportation at reasonable cost.

As of March 2009, private carriers accounted for around 82% share of the domestic aviation market. The players in the current Indian

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domestic market include low cost carriers like SpiceJet, GoAir, Indigo along with Premium airlines like Jet Airways and Air India (domestic). Some of the factors that have resulted in higher demand for air transport in India include the growing middle class and its purchasing power, low airfares offered by low cost carriers, the growth of the tourism industry in India, increasing outbound travel from India, and the overall economic growth of India.

With the increase in the number of air travelers through domestic airlines, the competition has also increased in the sector. The airlines are trying their best to attract customers by offering lucrative product offers and by differentiating themselves from the rest in terms of quality of services. Customer satisfaction service arises when a company can provide passengers with benefits that delight the customer and this is considered value-added. If customers are satisfied with the product or service, they will buy more and do so more often. Passenger gratification is an essential goal for each airline providing passenger services. The on board experience is still something special for the customer. The customer has a wide choice to select the suitable airline product according to their requirements. Therefore, airlines are continuously working on improving the services with quality embedded product development and innovation to differentiate themselves from competitors. If the passenger is not satisfied, due to the negative experience, the client will reconsider the buying decision for further flights and will probably switch to another airline.

In this study a comparison between the perceptions of travellers toward various services quality of five Indian domestic airlines, has been done using nonparametric test. Responses were recorded from frequent fliers across seven variables which are most important for any airline customer. A questionnaire was designed in such a way that the same sets of variables were measured among the customers of the five domestic airlines under study. The objective of this study was to understand the satisfaction levels of the airline customers on the select

criterions of the service quality. The study measured the perception of travellers towards the expected level of service quality using a 5 point Likert scale. The seven attributes considered for the study are: Ticket booking experience; Check-in process; Luggage handling; In-flight experience; Cabin crew; Arrival services and Complaint handling.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The entry of low cost carriers in air travel business and deregulation has created an intense competition in the aviation sector. In recent past, passenger satisfaction with respect to services quality in airline operations has become critically important and has also received more attention (Dennet, Ineson, Stone, & Colgate, 2000). Ticket booking experience for the customers has also been enhanced through the use of computerized reservation systems which were also designed to create customer loyalty in the distribution channels (Lee & Cunningham, 2001). 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.

(Gronroos, 1984) and (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985) were the pioneers in the conceptualization of the service quality construct, these authors maintained that the overall perception of quality was a disconfirmation of a customer's expectation and evaluation of a services delivered. In an empirical study (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) perceived service quality to lead to satisfaction and as an actual antecedent of consumer satisfaction. Providing high service quality is not a concern of manufacturing companies alone, but the delivery of high-quality service has become a marketing requirement among air carriers as a result of competitive pressure (Ostrowski, Terrence, & Geoffrey, 1993). (Chang & Keller, 2002) argued that quality in airline service is difficult to describe and measure due to its heterogeneity, intangibility, and inseparability, and only the customer can truly define service quality in the

airline industry (Butler & Keller, 1992).

While evaluating customer's perception towards five dimensions of SERVQUAL with respect to Etihad and Air Arabia of UAE, (Masarrat & Jha, 2014) pointed out that Customer satisfactions get highly influenced by perceptions of service quality. In particular, higher service quality leads to positive customer response, cross selling and word of mouth communication which make the customer decision making process a complex area of study.

Delivery of effective Service quality has been recognized as a strategic tool for surviving and thriving in the present days cut throat competitive markets (Aker & Jocobson, 1994; Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Danaher, 1997; Headley & Miller, 1993; Clemes, Gan, Kao, & Choong, 2008; Aydin & Yildirim, 2012). Studies have also been carried out using SERVQUAL as one of the most widely used and applied scales for the measurement of perceived service quality in recent years (Bigne, Martinez, Miquel, & Andreu, 2003; Aydin & Yildirim, 2012).

In view of its strategic importance, service quality has drawn considerable attention of the researcher in the past. Although several researches are conducted to develop and validate the scales to measure service quality and establish its linkage with customer satisfaction and preferences over purchase or repurchase decisions. This study is an attempt to identify the pattern of preferences of travelers over Indian domestic airlines with respect to various service quality attributes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to compare perception of the travelers towards the services quality delivered by the Indian domestic airlines. Further, following sub objectives are also kept in mind for achieving the purpose of the study.

a) To know the inherent causes behind the ratings of the services offered by an airline?

b) To identify the factors considered for evaluating the experience of domestic air travel?

c) To know whether travelers perceive any significant difference between services rendered by different airlines?

d) To give Suggestion for the improvement of Domestic Airlines in India.

SETTING OF HYPOTHESES

In order to know the preference of travelers about the service quality attributes, it is important to test if there is significant difference in service quality as determined by the perception of travelers towards seven variables among five airlines. To establish the presence or absence of significant difference in satisfaction level, following seven null hypotheses are framed:

- H_{01}: There is no significant difference among five Indian domestic airlines as far as the experience of the travelers, with respect to ticket booking, is concerned.
- H_{02}: There is no significant difference among five Indian domestic airlines as far as the experience of the travelers, with respect to the check-in process at airport, is concerned.
- H_{03}: There is no significant difference among five Indian domestic airlines as far as the experience of the travelers, with respect to luggage handling, is concerned.
- H_{04}: There is no significant difference among five Indian domestic airlines as far as the In-flight experience, is concerned.
- H_{05}: There is no significant difference among five Indian domestic airlines as far as the experience of the travelers, with respect to the cabin crew members, is concerned.
- H_{06}: There is no significant difference among five Indian domestic airlines as far as the experience of the travelers, with respect arrival services, is concerned.
- H_{07}: There is no significant difference among five Indian domestic airlines as far as the experience of the travelers, with respect to complaint handling mechanism, is concerned.

For each of the above seven null hypotheses, the alternate Hypotheses (Ha) will state that 'At least one of the airlines is different from the rest'.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Research Design
The research design in this study was descriptive in nature. The research paper carried out measuring service provided the primary data. Textbooks, journals, internet websites and other magazines provided the secondary data for the project. Hence both primary and secondary data were collected during the project. Stratified convenient sampling

Research Approach
This study is mainly based on primary Data which was collected through a structured questionnaire from the various tourist places of Sikkim state of India. The respondents for the study were drawn by means of convenient sampling method. The questionnaire was administrated on the seven attributes of service quality using five point Likert scale to measure the customer satisfaction level.

The primary service quality dimensions that formed the basis of this survey are:
1. **Ticket booking experience:** This attribute included accessibility of staff, overall experience in call centre transaction, staff courtesy, staff efficiency and overall experience in booking the tickets through online transaction.
2. **Check-in process:** Seven services were considered under this attribute, including Check-in Crew Appearance & Grooming, Check-in Crew Service & Warmth, Flight Delay Handling, On-time Arrival & Departure, Overall Experience in Checking-in, Time Taken For Check-in- Time spent at the check-in counter and Waiting Time in Queue - Time Spent in the queue at the check-in Counter.
3. **Luggage handling services:** This consists of different aspects of baggage handling, including efficiency, assistance provided by the airline staff, care taken etc.
4. **In-flight experience:** This includes aspects such as quality of landing and takeoff, feeling of safety, cleanliness, comfort, perceived quality of maintenance etc.
5. **Cabin crew:** Four services were considered in this attribute including language diction and clarity, professionalism, responsiveness, and courteous/friendly services.
6. **Arrival service:** Three services taken into account were regular announcements about flight arrival and departure, assistance from crew in arrival lounge, time taken to get baggage and waiting time for bus in the aircraft.
7. **Complaint handling:** This included aspects such as the way the complaint was handled, and the time taken to sort out the complaint.

Data Collection
The survey was carried out in the month of May 2015 among 120 tourists visiting Sikkim, each of whom had taken at least two flights in the past one year. The sample was spread across the various tourist destinations of four districts of Sikkim. To measure the overall customer's satisfaction towards various airlines in the Indian skies today, certain specific service quality attributes were considered, which were further broken down into multiple service and quality attributes.

Tools Used for Analysis
The responses were recorded in SPSS statistical analysis software and processed to draw the conclusion. In order to find out the difference in level of satisfaction relating to the attributes of service quality of Indian domestic airlines, tabulation and analysis was done using non-parametric testing procedure (Kruskal-Wallis Test).

Limitations of the Study
Although the present study took a positive approach in reviewing previous literature of perceived service quality among airlines and a comparative analysis of the satisfaction level among them using advanced statistical tools, there are some limitations worth acknowledging. Firstly, the geographical distribution of the respondents is confined to the Sikkim state only. If the responses had been taken from the wide

coverage of tourist destinations of India, the results would have been much significant for use. Secondly, the survey was conducted during one month duration only which may not reflect overall perception of travelers throughout the year.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS
Demographic Profile of Respondents
    From table 1, it was found that the proportion of male travelers to female travelers was 63.3% to 36.7%. Further, it is observed that most of the respondents (47.5%) belong to the age group of 25 to 34 years, followed by 35-45 years and below 25 years at 25.8% and 20.8% respectively. According to income level, majority of respondents (41.7%) fall under the category of Rs 35-50000 per month, followed by 20-35000 and above Rs 50,000 per month at 35.8% and 15% respectively.

Table 1: Demographic Features of Respondents

Demographic Feature		N	%
Gender of Respondent	Male	76	63.3%
	Female	44	36.7%
Age group	Below 25	25	20.8%
	25-34	57	47.5%
	35-45	31	25.8%
	Above 45	7	5.8%
Income Level	Below 20,000	9	7.5%
	20-35,000	43	35.8%
	35-50,000	50	41.7%
	Above 50,000	18	15.0%]

6.2 Preference of Travelers based on the Service Quality Attributes
    From Table 2, it is observed that majority of travelers (35%) prefer spice jet for its good ticket booking experience followed by jet airways and go air at 27.5% and 25% respectively. Jet airways was the highly preferred domestic airline based on check-in process, luggage handling arrival services and complaint handling mechanism offered by it to its passengers. On the basis of Cabin crew and in-flight experience, spice jet was mostly preferred domestic airline followed by Indigo on the basis of same service quality attributes.

Table 2 : Service Quality Wise Preferred Domestic Airline

Service Quality Parameter & Count		Preferred Indian Domestic Airline				
		Go Air	Jet Airways	Indigo	Spice Jet	Air India
Ticket Booking	N	30	33	13	42	2
	%	25.0%	27.5%	10.8%	35.0%	1.7%
Check-in Process	N	22	38	37	15	8
	%	18.3%	31.7%	30.8%	12.5%	6.7%
Luggage Handling	N	21	46	29	19	5
	%	17.5%	38.3%	24.2%	15.8%	4.2%

Service Quality		Preferred Indian Domestic Airline				
Parameter & Count		Go Air	Jet Airways	Indigo	Spice Jet	Air India
In-Flight Experience	N	19	31	33	35	2
	%	15.8%	25.8%	27.5%	29.2%	1.7%
Cabin Crew	N	23	24	32	35	6
	%	19.2%	20.0%	26.7%	29.2%	5.0%
Arrival Services	N	23	34	29	32	2
	%	19.2%	28.3%	24.2%	26.7%	1.7%
Complaint Handling	N	24	43	36	15	2
	%	20.0%	35.8%	30.0%	12.5%	1.7%

Test of Normality of Data

Table 3 presents the results from two well-know tests of normality, namely the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test and the Shapiro-Wilk Test. We can see from the table that the responses of travelers with respect to the various service quality attributes of Indian domestic airlines, was not normally distributed. In all cases the p-value of both the tests is less than 0.05, thus the data significantly deviates from a normal distribution.

Table 3 : Test of Normality of Data

Test of Normality and test statistics		Ticket Booking	Check-in Process	Luggage Handling	In-Flight Experience	Cabin Crew	Arrival Services	Complaint Handling
Kolmogorov-Smirnova	Statistic	0.235	0.195	0.239	0.182	0.182	0.189	0.214
	df	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Shapiro-Wilk	Statistic	0.836	0.902	0.894	0.886	0.894	0.885	0.894
	df	120	120	120	120	120	120	120
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Results of Testing of Hypothesis

Since, data for analysis is not normally distributed; it was decided to perform non-parametric analysis to test the hypothesis. In order to test the hypothesis, Kuskal-Wallis test is performed to draw the conclusion about acceptance or rejection of null hypothesis.

Ticket booking experience for the travelers is significantly different for Go Air ($?2$= 11.766, p-value=0.019) from the rest of the domestic airlines at 5 percent level of significance. Therefore, except for Go Air, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected for perception of satisfaction level regarding ticket booking experience among Jet Airways, Indigo, Spice Jet and Air India.

Table 4 : Kruskal-Wallis Test Statistics (?2) for Various Service Quality Attributes

Domestic Airline	Ticket Booking	Check-in Process	Luggage Handling	In-Flight Experience	Cabin Crew	Arrival Services	Complaint Handling
	x^2 (p-value)	x^2(p-value)	x^2 (p-value)	x^2(p-value)	x^2(p-value)	x^2(p-value)	x^2(p-value)
Go Air	11.766 (.019*)	4.060 (0.398)	2.560 (0.634)	1.258 (0.868)	0.792 (0.940)	4.102 (0.392)	3.302 (0.509)
Jet Airways	3.137 (0.535)	3.589 (0.465)	1.541 (0.819)	2.291 (0.682)	3.559 (0.469)	13.027 (0.011*)	4.153 (0.386)
Indigo	3.020 (0.554)	1.145 (0.887)	2.799 (0.592)	8.911 (0.063**)	2.627 (0.622)	1.768 (0.778)	4.744 (0.315)
Spice Jet	3.396 (0.494)	1.570 (0.814)	1.474 (0.831)	11.688 (0.020*)	4.543 (0.337)	4.243 (0.374)	5.062 (0.281)
Air India	0.358 (0.986)	6.915 (0.140)	1.328 (0.857)	3.070 (0.546)	3.099 (0.541)	1.679 (0.794)	3.201 (0.525)

Note: *,** show that the figures in parenthesis are asymptotically significant at 5 percent and 10 percent level of significance respectively.

As far as check-in process and luggage handing experience for travelers is concerned, the null hypothesis (H02 and H03) could not be rejected at 5 percent level of Significance. Thus we conclude that there is no significant difference in the level of satisfaction towards the check-in process and luggage handling mechanism adopted by five domestic airlines.

On the other hand, travelers' perception towards the experience in the flight (In-flight experience) is significantly different for Indigo and Spice Jet at 10 percent and 5 percent level of significance. Thus, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected for Go Air, Jet Airways and Air India. Hence, it is concluded that there is no significant difference in the perception of travelers, as far as in-flight experience is concerned, except for indigo and Spice Jet.

So far as the travelers' experience related to cabin crew and complaint handling procedure adopted by the Indian domestic airlines, is concerned, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected and we conclude that there is no significant difference in the satisfaction level of travelers about the 'cabin crew' and 'complaint handling' procedure adopted by Indian domestic airlines.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study are consistent with the previous studies in concluding that in the wake of increased number of travelers and intense competition in the aviation sector, maintaining of quality services plays a crucial role. In this study, customers' perception towards the various service quality attributes are evaluated which also influences the customer satisfaction level. Spice Jet has scored highest preference on 'ticket booking', 'in-flight experience' and 'cabin crew' service attributes; whereas the perception of travelers towards 'check-in process', 'luggage handling', 'arrival services' and 'complaint handling' attributes of Jet Airways, was significantly different from the others. Indian customers also see the quality of services in connection with the value to money. Thus, air India (domestic) was least preferred airlines among the respondents on all attributes of service quality. The study entails that the low cost domestic airlines such as go air and indigo are doing far better than air India on the select attributes of service quality under the study. But, at the same time it is the good time for air India to retrospect its services quality and develop

various policies to guarantee value for money to its passengers. On the selected attributes of service quality, the Indian domestic airlines can develop a complete service blueprint to delight the customers, which will finally enhance the business profit margin as well as long term growth and success of business. Future research may also be taken up to explore each the role of each factor considered in the service quality attributes as well as studying the gap between perceptions and expectations of air travelers.

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