



ISSN:2714-2248



Volume 2,
2021

NIGERIAN JOURNAL

OF LOGISTICS & TRANSPORT

Journal Nigerien De Logistique Et Du Transport

A PUBLICATION OF
Nigerian Institute of Transport Technology (NITT),
Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria.

CUSTOMERS SATISFACTION ON SERVICE RENDERED IN A PRIVATELY OWNED AIRLINE. A CASE OF AERO CONTRACTOR.

Mr. Seun Ogundipe
Department of Transport Management
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.
Email: ogundipe.oseun@gmail.com
Telephone: 08167494677

Adeniyi O. Oluwakoya PhD CMILT RFF
Department of Transport Management
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.
E-Mail adeniyioluwakoya@gmail.com
Telephone +2348055381535

Abstract

This paper assessed the customer satisfaction level with the service rendered by a privately owned airline, a case of Aero Contractor. It also evaluates the level of patronage on the quality of services rendered to passengers in Muritala Mohammed Airport. A quantitative technique was used in analyzing the collected data. One hundred and thirty respondents travelled local routes where Aero Contractors fly, including Abuja, Calabar, Kaduna, Enugu, Owerri, Port Harcourt, etc. Two hypotheses were tested. The first hypothesis states, there is no relationship between the level of service and the level of customer's satisfaction, supported by the findings (with the significant level at 0.00). While the second hypothesis states, there is no significant relationship between customer's patronage and services offered and supported by the findings (significant level at 0.019). Both hypotheses were tested using Chi-square. The study recommends that the airline (Aero contractors) should adjust their time management to improve service delivery to their customers. This will go a long way to change customer's perspectives on their airline's management towards achieving customer satisfaction.

1.0 Introduction

In the last 25 years, the aviation industry has been snowballing. In addition to its technological developments, the airline industry's growth due to its role in supporting world trade, international investment, and tourism activities. Because of these roles, it is evident that the aviation industry is the centre of globalization for other sectors (Hanlon, 2000)

For any business organization that operates in a competitive environment, it is essential to pay due attention to the quality of service (Lowndes and Dawes, 2001). According to Sachdev and Verma (2004), customers demand high-quality service, which pushes companies to compete with each other and

technological up-gradation. An organization has to enhance its service quality to decrease the gap (negative gap) between customers' expectations and perceptions.

Customer satisfaction is the customer's evaluation of a product or service regarding whether that product or service has met their needs and expectations; failure to meet the needs and expectations will result in dissatisfaction with the product or service (Zeithaml, 2004).

Aviation is one of the most fundamental aspects that affect global development significantly in the new century. It is the "global connectivity that ultimately strengthens productivity and economic growth as a whole".

The Aviation industry is regarded as industry directly related to transporting people and goods by air from one location to another (Chikwendu, 2012).

One of the means of competition among airlines is efficient service quality delivery (Haryono et al., 2015). In 1963, the Nigerian Federal Government established Nigeria Airways as the national carrier, which operated successfully for over two decades. However, at some point, the airline faced several problems and operational shortcomings, which made the government deregulate the aviation sector in 1985. This deregulation allows private airlines into scheduled domestic air services in Nigeria to replace the dying national carrier. Presently, several scheduled passenger Airlines are operating in Nigeria. They include; Air Peace, IRS, Aero Contractors, Azman Air, Arik Air, Dana Air, Dornier Aviation, Kabo Airline, Associated Aviation, Discovery Air, Allied Airline, Max Air, TAT Nigeria, Med-View Airline, and Overland Airways (Aviation in Nigeria, 2021).

Various studies in Nigeria have discovered that air travellers lament poor customer service by private airlines (Chikwendu et al., 2012; Adeola & Adebisi, 2014). This paper intends to investigate Customers Satisfaction on Service Rendered in a Privately Owned Airline. This paper examines how airline operators in Nigeria create achievable service expectations within their customers by rendering quality services to their customers. On the other hand, help service providers in the air transport deliver and meet customer expectations.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is one of the objectives of marketing activity linking purchasing and consumption with post-purchase phenomena. Satisfying customers is an essential element in the marketing

concept (Kotler & Armstrong, 2004) as it affects future consumer purchase behaviour, profitability and shareholder value. (Chitty et al., 2007). There are many definitions given to customer satisfaction, with one early given stresses on cognitive process. While scholars have presented other variations of the definition of customer satisfaction, most of the reports agree that satisfaction is a complex human process involving cognitive, affective and different undiscovered psychological and physiological dynamics (Bhattacharya & Singh, 2008).

Customer satisfaction research in various services contexts is classified into two categories. The first category is research that measures the level of guest satisfaction and identifies the shortfall of the service delivery, e.g. Gu and Ryan (2008), Ryan and Huimin (2007), and Barsky and Nash (2003). These tend to be more for managerial purposes as they are diagnostic. The second category is research that examines customer satisfaction in a multivariate model, including its antecedent factors such as service quality, perceived value, brand image, and its consequences such as customer loyalty (Li & Petrick, 2008; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Overall, researchers agree that service quality and perceived value (including price) are important determinants of customer satisfaction.

2.2 Service Quality

Service quality, a consumer's judgment about the overall superiority of a product or service (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2009), is widely acknowledged as one of the critical determinants of brand loyalty. Service quality is an essential strategy for the success and survival of any business organization, as it can influence customer purchase behaviour and organization performance (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). In considering the importance of service quality for any business, much service quality research in

recent decades is devoted to examining this construct across industries. Despite several service quality studies, there has been a little consensus in its conceptualization, measurement, dimensionality, and consequences.

Customer satisfaction is the outcome of a customer's assessment of a service based on customers' expectations before the service is delivered and their perceived performances of service delivery (Johnston and Clark, 2005). One of the main reasons that firms give more attention to the issues such as customer satisfaction and loyalty is because customers are the reason for their survival. But the major challenge that companies face these days is how to provide the best service, which can enhance customer satisfaction to make their customers happy and stay with them, which is the only way service providers differentiate themselves from their rivals (Torbica and Stroh, 2000).

A review of the service marketing literature indicates that there are mainly two types of service quality conceptualizations: Nordic and American. The Nordic approach proposes that a customer's overall perception of service quality consists of functional and technical quality. This quality is what customers get after the service delivery process in buyer-seller interactions, and applicable quality is the interaction between employees and customers during the service encounter (Lau, Akbar, & Fie, 2005). The American approach proposes that service quality consists of reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurances, and tangibles dimension, known as SERVQUAL (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Based on Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory, this model views that service quality as a gap between customers' perceptions and expectations of service performance. Although researchers tend to use the American approach over the Nordic system,

neither approach has been deemed universally superior.

Customers heard about the service by different means, such as previous experience. Recommendations from others who know the service or advertising all help them develop expectations of the service in mind. Once customers experience a service, they compare their perceived performances of that they experience to their expectations. If their perception performances meet or exceed their expectations, they are satisfied; conversely, if perceived arrangements do not meet expectations, they are dissatisfied (Waters, 2010).

2.3 Price

Price is what customers pay in exchange for a product or service. If there is little or no difference between the services offered in the marketplace, customers may choose the cheapest (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). Thus, the price can be an effective way to influence demand. Price carries a message; lower prices in off-peak periods may stimulate demand at that time but put off other customers. Pricing is one of the intriguing aspects as buyers tend to use price as an indicator of both service costs and service quality – price is at once an attraction variable and a repellent.

Depends on several factors, price is an indicator of customer quality, one of which is the availability of information to them (Zeithaml et al., 2009). Customers react to products or services, and their prices imply their quality. Customers often consider purchasing the item only when the products meet minimal quality standards and rarely purchase with the highest quality. Many observers assume that quality is directly associated with price. That is, a higher price serves as an indicator of higher quality. If such a relationship exists, it would seem to complicate the ability to determine value. The customer often sees price as an indicator of service quality, so that price impacts the degree of quality (Zeithaml &

Bitner, 1996). To the airline industry, pricing strategy is used to maximize profit by targeting different market segments; vacationers, business travellers and group operators. Segmenting customer lead to price differentiation in the airline industry (De Pew & Stripling, 2003). Low-cost airlines serve basic accommodation and operate single aircraft types, which are different strategies adopted by full-service airlines. Those factors indicate that common-cost airlines pricing strategies lead to relatively low fares.

The literature review on the airline industry and other services industries shows that customer satisfaction is strongly influenced by how a business provides services and how the price paid by consumers (Suhartanto, 2000; Doganis, 2002; Noor, 2005). Further, the literature also indicates that service quality and price are directly related both to customer satisfaction. Thus, it is hypothesized that service quality and price significantly affect customer satisfaction in full-service airlines and low-cost airlines.

2.4 Managing Customer Satisfaction

Chen and Chang (2005) suggested that a service process is a descriptive service process from a customer's perspective, which covers inputs to outputs through service steps that each customer takes when using air transportation. To measure customer satisfaction, Airlines should use each service process step to measure customer satisfaction. Consequently, it will help them to measure customer satisfaction as well as service process improvement. When it comes to airline transportation, it is essential to remember that the services are provided by the carrier and several other service companies. The airline offers actual transportation and ticket sales (although not in all cases) and onboard services; an airport offers shopping services, check-in services (not in all cases), and baggage handling services. A subcontractor chosen by the airport often provides baggage handling,

catering and technical services. In this environment, so heavily relying on outsourcing the benefits, it is often hard for an airline to keep service quality in control.

2.5 The Importance of Service Quality in the Airline Industry

Quality has become a significant concern for those in the service industry, specifically the airline industry. Flight safety, the good appearance of the flight crew, and offering the highest possible quality services to customers 24 hours a day are the most critical airline service quality factors in customers' eyes. In their study, Chan and Yeh (2002) noted that many airline companies had lost track of the actual needs of their passengers and were trapped in outdated views of what airline services were all about. In a highly competitive environment, where all airlines have comparable fares and matching frequent flyer programs, the airline's competitive advantages lie in the service quality perceived by customers (Chan and Yeh, 2002).

Continuous quality improvement strategies are one of the methods employed by service providers to obtain service quality standards and deliver on their promises. The measurement and testing quality signifies the organization's commitment to quality to the customer.

To remain competitive in the marketplace and be recognized as a leader in service quality, an organization must continue to utilize different forms of formal and informal measurements (James, 2014). Regarding the airline industry, service quality is considered a composite of other interactions between customers and airlines, with employees seeking to influence customers' perceptions and the carriers' image (Gursoy et al., 2005).

i. Frequency and Timings

In short-haul markets, frequency and timings are all critical for the business traveller. Alongside the question of flight

frequency, the timing of flights will also be a vital consideration. A high frequency of flights will be of no value if all the flights are concentrated during the weekend or the middle of the day (Shwan, 2007).

ii. Punctuality

On the other hand, Shwan (2007) described Punctuality of flights as evident, crucial importance to the business traveller, with flight delays meaning inconvenience, missed appointments and, perhaps, the loss of customers. No airline can hope to obtain a large share of the available business travel market if it is crippled with the handicap of a poor punctuality reputation.

iii. Airport Location and Access

Shwan (2007) described the other factor on short-haul routes: passengers prefer service from a local, easily accessible airport rather than a more distant hub.

iv. Seat Accessibility/Ticket Flexibility

"Seat Accessibility" is a piece of aviation jargon that refers to the probability of a passenger being able to book a seat on a flight shortly before it is due to depart. It is a crucial product need for the business traveller. Some business travel is undertaken in response to a crisis, which requires someone to travel on a "next flight out" basis. A flight may be booked well in advance in other situations, but at the last minute, a change of plan means that the booking must be cancelled and a new one made on an earlier or later flight. This requires that the ticket held by the passenger should be a flexible one and that seats should be available near to flight departure time on the alternative service. An airline can be giving a very high frequency on a route, but this frequency will be of no value to the business traveller if all the flights are fully booked days or weeks in advance. A further aspect of ticket flexibility is that many business travellers expect the right to no-show for a flight and then be re-booked on a later one without a penalty being charged (Shwan, 2007)

2.6 The Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Kotler and Armstrong (2012) advocate that satisfaction is the post-purchase evaluation of products or services considering the expectations. Researchers are divided over the antecedents of service quality and satisfaction. Whilst some believe service quality leads to satisfaction, others think otherwise. The studies of many researchers suggest service quality leads to customer satisfaction. To achieve a high level of customer satisfaction, they indicate that the service provider should deliver a high level of service quality as service quality is usually considered an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Mesay, 2012). As service quality improves, the probability of customer satisfaction increases. Quality was only one of many dimensions on which satisfaction was based; satisfaction was also one potential influence on future quality perceptions (Clemes, 2008). Cronin and Taylor (1992) asserted that consumer satisfaction appeared to exert a more substantial impact on purchase intention than service quality and concluded that the strategic emphasis of service organizations should focus on total customer satisfaction programs. Based on the survey result Siddiqi (2011) described that all the service quality attributes are positively related to customer satisfaction, and customer satisfaction is positively associated with customer loyalty. Furthermore, Parasuraman et al. (1988) found that customer satisfaction is the outcome of service quality.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study involves a quantitative secondary analysis of data drawn from Aero-contractors airline based on their survey of passenger's perspective on their level of services. The variables used to evaluate customer's satisfaction includes Mis-handled baggage, ticket over-sales, delay of flight, i.e. passengers denied actual time of take-off of flight.

3.1 Data Collection Procedures

The primary data used for the purpose of this study was from the questionnaires which were administered to the respondents; which were administered to 130 respondents (passengers). The items in the questionnaire were based on service attributes gained from studies in the past. It also included some questions relating to the SERVQUAL methodology, being if the passenger's expectation level was met by services being provided by the airline. The questionnaire also contained items about general information of passengers such as sex, age, the purpose of travelling, level of education and average use of airline in the past one month.

3.2 Population for the study.

The study covered both recent and subsequent patronizers of the airline in Muritala Mohammed Airport. It included only passengers travelling locally, routes where Aero contractors fly, including Abuja, Calabar, Kaduna, Enugu, Owerri, Port-Harcourt etc. The passengers had males and females- working-class, Students, aged people going on vacation, Married, Single, and unemployed.

The passengers were selected using the simple random technique, ensuring that all passengers had an equal likelihood of being selected.

3.3 Method of Data Analysis.

The data retrieved were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. These statistics are essential in explaining the sex, age, occupational status, marital status, and other respondents' socio-economic characteristics.

The suitable method used in the test of the two hypotheses of the study was by adopting Chi-Square method of data analysis.

3.4 Hypotheses

3.4.1 Hypothesis 1

H_0 : There is no relationship between the level of service and the level of customer's satisfaction.

The level of service and customer satisfaction is measured by asking the respondents the following questions in the questionnaire.

How would you rate your level of satisfaction derived from the services of the airline?

Does the service being provided by the airline meet your desired satisfaction?

3.4.2 Hypothesis 2

H_0 : There is no significant relationship between customer's patronage and services offered.

Customer's patronage and service offered are measured by asking the respondents the following questions in the questionnaire;

Personally, how well have the services of the airline influenced your patronage? And Does the level of services being rendered by the airline influence customers patronage?

The chi-square method of analysis was used to test the two variables in the hypothesis (nominal and ordinal variables) to make sure that the variables cross-tabulate with each other.

4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the results of the data obtained during this survey to be helpful in decision making through its interpretation. The research studies the level of customers' satisfaction with the service of Aero-contractors airline as an airline operator and its impact on the airline operation and services to suggest some measures to improve the services rendered.

Table 1 showing Socio-Economic Characteristics

	Variable	Frequency N=130	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	75	57.7
	Female	55	42.3
Age	< 18	10	7.7
	19-32	65	50.0
	40-45	45	34.6
	>45	10	7.7
Educational Background	o/levels	30	23.1
	HND/B.sc	45	34.6
	M.Sc.	50	38.5
	PhD	5	3.8
Marital Status	Single	65	50.0
	Married	55	42.3
	Divorced	5	3.8
	Widowed	5	3.8
Employment Status	Unemployed	30	23.1
	part-time employed	5	3.8
	fully-employed	35	26.9
	self-employed	20	15.4
	Others	40	30.8
Monthly Income	< 50,000	45	34.6
	50,000-100,000	25	19.2
	150,000-200,000	5	3.8
	200,000-300,000	15	11.5
	>300,000	40	30.8

Researchers' Field work, (2019)

Table 1 above shows the distribution of the respondent's genders; 57.3% are male while 42.3% are female. The analysis shows that there were more male respondents than females. The age distribution of the

respondents indicates that the majority of the respondents, about 50%, fall into the age bracket 19-32; 34.6% are between 40-45 years of age, while 7.7% of the respondents are below 18 years and above 45 years.

respectively. The distribution of the respondents by their marital status is shown: 50% single, 42.3% married and 3.8% divorced and widowed, respectively. The implication of this is that single and married people frequently travel than the rest of the respondents, mainly for recreational activities with their family, business purposes and even schooling, as many parents travel alongside their children back to school. 38.1% of the respondents have master's certificates for educational background, 34.6% have a B.Sc./HND degree and 23.1% have ordinary level certificates while a low percentage of 3.8% is indicated as a PhD degree. Which depicts that majority of the respondents are learned. The respondents' employment status shows that 26.9% are fully employed, 23.1% unemployed, 15.4% self-employed, and 3.8% are employed on part-time basis. This percentage indicates that many travellers are from the working-class section of the economy and can afford air travel because

of their steady income. And also embark on most of these trips for business purposes. For monthly payments, 30.8% of the respondents earn 300,000 Naira and above as income. In comparison, 11.5% earns 200-300 Naira, which confirms once again that majority of them are likely to be working class, 34.6% below 50,000 Naira majority of the respondents in this category being students/children with their parents, 19.2% also earn between 50,000-100,000 which explains that it has to do with their income level relating to the affordability of the flight.

4.2 Test of Hypotheses

4.2.1 Hypothesis I

H₀: There is no relationship between the level of service and the level of customer's satisfaction.

H₁: There is a relationship between the level of service and the level of customer's satisfaction

Table 2: Showing Hypothesis testing stating the relationship between service and level of customer's satisfaction.

Question	Chi-square	Sig. (0.05)	Df	Decision Rule
There is a relationship between the level of service and the level of customer's satisfaction	22.956	0.000	2	Reject H ₀

Source: Researchers' field survey, 2019

At 95% confidence interval, the chi-square value gives 0.000 sig. Value for a degree of freedom 2, which is far lesser than 0.05 and considered statistically significant, so we reject the null hypothesis and accept the

4.2.2 Hypothesis II

H₀: There is no significant relationship between customer's patronage and services offered.

alternative hypothesis, which states a significant relationship between the level of service and the level of customer's satisfaction.

H₁: There is a significant relationship between customer's patronage and services offered.

Table 3: Hypothesis testing the relationship between customer’s patronage and service offered

Question	Chi-square	Sig. (0.05)	Df	Decision Rule
There is a significant relationship between customer’s patronage and services offered	7.973	0.019	2	Reject H ₀

source: Researchers’ field survey, 2019.

The result from Table 3 shows a significant relationship between customer’s patronage and services offered

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

From the study’s findings, it was observed from the source of the primary data that the expectation created by the customers exceeds the actual services offered. However, the airline still meets customer service demands despite the service expectation and the existing service received.

It was also gathered during this study that the majority of the services rendered by the airline were the regular scheme of services (cargo/luggage handling, safety, in-flight services etc.), as very few customer’s admitted to the upgrade of their flight services. Although, regular customers agreed to seasonal promotions, leading to price reduction, thereby creating a special kind of service.

Based on the evaluation of customer’s perceptions of the airline’s services, most of their opinions were on the average side. Each customer’s individual needs are insatiable, but there is a need to make conscious effort to meet most of these customers needs.

Furthermore, the study carried out depicted a relationship between the airline’s level of services and customer patronage level. This explains that the services being provided by the airline influences the level of patronage by the customers. This is possible because the airline service does not satisfy patronage

of the customers but meets their satisfaction level generally. The airline also provides opportunities for higher patronage by providing some services like ‘promo services’ that allows for a reduced price of air travel than the average price given.

During the cause of the study, some customers also offered their suggestions on how to improve the airline’s services.

5.1 Recommendation

Below are the following recommendations got from the study for more efficient and effective service delivery by Aero contractors airline to its customers:

1. Communication gaps on giving flight delays should be significantly resolved and improved upon by the management of the airline. The aviation industry in Nigeria is a very competitive one, so the issue of flight delay should be avoided so that the airline customers will not be encouraged to take an alternative airline as a result of so much uncertainty.
2. Aero contractor airlines should work on their cargo/ luggage handling techniques. The complaints by customers on damaged properties as a result of improper management of goods has to be considered.
3. The airline (Aero contractors) should adjust their time management to

improve the delivery of services to their customers. This will go a long way to

5.2 Conclusion.

In the light of this study, the customer's derive satisfaction from the services being rendered by Aero contractor airline. However, the airline should work on their time management, flight scheduling, resulting in delays and luggage handling, which can discourage the patronage of customers, especially when in a hurry.

change customers' perspective on their airline's management.

Also, customer satisfaction should be taken with utmost importance as it is easier to regain existing customers than the search for new ones. Finally, without airline customers losses will be incurred to the economy, thereby impacting economic development even on the aviation industry. Hence they should be treated well, and value be given for their money spent.

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