

Service Quality of Airlines and Satisfaction of Passengers: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: Indian aviation industry has transformed significantly, transitioning from centrally regulated sector to more liberalized one. Studying service quality is important for continuously enhancing passengers' experiences, creating competitive advantages and attaining operational efficiency in the age of competition. The present study analyses the service quality and passengers' satisfaction and their interrelationship in airlines flying from Silchar airport as no study has been undertaken on service quality of airlines operating from Silchar airport. Further, the study also examines the impact of service quality and passengers' satisfaction. The study focuses on 286 individuals who have travelled from Silchar Airport. To collect data, a structured questionnaire with seven-point Likert scale was utilized. Statistical tools, such as, descriptive statistics, one way ANOVA, correlation coefficient and multiple regression have been used for the present study. The study reveals that service quality dimensions have positive and significant impact on passenger satisfaction.

Keywords: Competence, Empathy, Reliability, Responsiveness and Tangibility

Introduction

Quality can be defined as state of being superior or excellent. Perceived service quality, in turn, can be defined as customers evaluation or judgement about services overall excellence or superiority. Service quality can be perceived as a combination of multiple characteristics. It not only consists of tangible features which can be observed and measured, but also intangible/subjective features which are challenging to quantify precisely. Different people usually have

different perspectives regarding service quality, depending on their experiences. Parasuraman et al. (1988) defined service quality as capability of a business organization to meet or surpass expectations of the customers. It is the variance between customers anticipated service and the perceived service. In recent times, the importance of quality has gained considerable priority. Numerous research endeavours have highlighted the importance of service quality in service

industry, especially in the era of fierce competition. Identifying and delivering the quality service has become the key differentiator for the service provider seeking to excel and thrive in the highly competitive market. In the airline sector, the significance of service quality has been gradually increasing throughout the years. The enhancement in quality of service is expected to uplift satisfaction levels of customers, leading to greater customer retention for airlines in a highly competitive regime. Indeed, service quality has evolved into a significant differentiator and a powerful competitive weapon for service organizations. The competitiveness of an airline company heavily relies on the way it provides service to its esteemed clients. Providing quality services consistently and with a caring approach becomes a crucial approach for the success and existence of any airline organization (Adhikari and Paul, 2016). Service quality and customer satisfaction are closely interconnected and holds extreme importance in case of service industry. A robust and positive relationship exists between service quality and customer satisfaction, implying that higher levels of service quality are strongly correlated with increased levels of customer satisfaction (Parasuraman, et. al, 1988; Cronin and Taylor 1992). Customer Satisfaction occurs when actual outcome meets or surpasses customer's expectations. On the other hand, customer dissatisfaction arises when there is a negative discrepancy between the client's anticipated outcomes and the actual outcome experienced. Moreover, Customer satisfaction is positively related to market share and profitability. Therefore, it is essential to prioritize customer satisfaction to achieve business success. (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990). Customers' satisfaction and loyalty are directly influenced by the level of service they receive, making it crucial for airlines to prioritize service quality as a core element of their business strategy.

Service quality is a multifaceted concept which can be studied from different perspectives. Previous researchers have applied the concept of service quality in different service industries. But there is a notable gap in research concerning

to service quality of airlines, especially focusing on domestic airlines operating from Silchar Airport. In India, the airline industry is growing at a rapid pace. Due to the entry of private players in the airline industry, there exists a fierce competition in airline industry. The number of passengers has notably increased in recent years. So, it is crucial to understand the perception of passengers about the service quality of airlines and the service provided by the airlines in this context. Consequently, the present research aims to investigate the perception of passengers about service quality of airlines and relationship between service quality and satisfaction of passengers.

Review of Literature

Service quality refers to an overall evaluation of the effectiveness and performance of services provided by a service provider (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The significance of quality in services and goods is increasingly acknowledged as a strategic factor for enhancing efficiency and effectiveness in business operations. As the importance of quality continues to be acknowledged, efforts in the services marketing area have increased to improve the quality of services (Phillips et al., 1983; Babakus and Boller, 1992). Moreover, substantial efforts have been given for conceptualisation and scale measurement. In particular, elements of service quality are extensively studied across various sectors, such as, healthcare, banking, online education, tele-communication, hotel, tourism etc. (Shetty et al., 2022; Darzi, et al., 2023; Kalia et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2019; Nyagadza et al., 2022; Shyju et al., 2023). To assess service quality, Parasuraman et al., (1985) advocated a model which is comprised of ten dimensions namely, "tangibles", "reliability", "responsiveness", "understanding the customers", "access", "communication", "credibility" "security", "competence" and "courtesy". Later on, number of dimensions was reduced to five by Parasuraman et al., (1988). SERVQUAL Model as developed by Parasuraman et al., (1988) has been extensively employed for evaluating service

quality across various sectors globally, standing as a land mark work frequently cited in service quality studies (Gilbert and Wong, 2003; Shetty et al., 2022; Purcărea et al., 2013; Sumi and Kabir, 2021). In airline sector studies has been done extensively on service quality using SERVQUAL model. Chou et al., (2011) applied the fuzzy weighted SERVQUAL model in Taiwanese airlines case. The study found that passengers prioritize the reliability and assurance dimension as their top consideration. Conversely, tangibles dimension and the flight pattern dimension emerge as the least significant service dimensions. Gilbert and Wong (2003) conducted a study to identify the dimension that matters the most in airline industry. The findings demonstrated that passengers consistently prioritize 'assurance' as the most important service dimension, indicating a heightened concern among passengers for safety and security aspects. Abdullah et.al. (2007) using SERVQUAL measurement highlighted that crucial dimension in the perception of service quality among Malaysian passengers are Empathy, Tangibles, and Assurance. Dolekoglu et al., (2016) found that passengers give more attention to employee's competence and hence they perceived that reliable and adequate staff is the most significant aspect of service quality. Thapa et al., (2020) found that the factor that influences most in selection of airlines is security they assure and timely flights. Service quality is crucial because it has an immediate impact on customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and the long-term success of companies across a range of industries, including banking, retail, and aviation. In other words, perceived service quality refers to how well a company fulfils its customers' expectations and meets their needs (Adhikari and Paul, 2016). Ensuring high service quality is crucial for organizations to gain a competitive advantage in the market and create a long-term customer relationship (Zeithaml et al., 1990). The competitive advantage of a company is influenced by service quality, which plays a crucial role in maintaining customer loyalty and thereby increasing market share. Ensuring the provision

of quality services is imperative for the growth of business of airlines (Agarwal & Gowda 2020).

The phrase 'customer satisfaction' does not simply proclaim a happy consumer, but it is much bigger and multidimensional. Customer satisfaction is a post purchase evaluation, where perceived performance of the product matches or surpasses the expectations or desires. If the perception doesn't match or exceeds the expectation, dissatisfaction occurs (Kotler and Keller, 2016). The satisfaction of passengers is closely linked to the service quality provided by the airlines. Customer satisfaction is characterized as the positive feeling or experiences that customers have after consuming the product (Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). Moreover, a numerous studies have validated a strong association between customer satisfaction and intention to repurchase (Fang and Wang, 2011; Mittal and Kamakura, 2001; Majeed et al., 2022; Cronin and Taylor 1992). A substantial number of studies have been conducted investigating the relationship between service quality and passengers' satisfaction in airline sector. Studies conducted by (Karunaratna, 2018; Ganiyu, 2016; Hisam, et al., 2016; Farooq et al., 2018) have opined that satisfied customers can enhance the financial performance of organizations by facilitating business growth through the acquisition of new customers via referrals and the retention of existing customers through repeat business. Passengers' satisfaction in airlines is directly influenced by the quality of services they receive throughout their travel experience (Farooq et al., 2018). This relationship has been studied extensively in the literature (Hussain et al., 2015; Agarwal & Gowda, 2021; Chen, 2008) with research showing that service quality has a significant impact on passenger satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, studies have found that customer satisfaction acts as a mediator between service quality and customer loyalty (Park, 2007).

The literature highlights the significant focus on service quality among researchers in India and internationally, with numerous studies conducted worldwide. A very few literatures have been found on service quality of airlines operating from

domestic airlines especially in Northeast India Region. The need for research arises as there were no significant studies carried out on service quality of airlines in Northeast India especially in Assam or Barak Valley of Assam. Various researchers have employed different dimensions to assess service quality. However, it is

noteworthy that the SERVQUAL Model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry in 1988 remains relevant in the current era. In the present study, six service quality dimensions have been used namely Reliability, Responsiveness, Courtesy, Competence, Tangibility and Empathy.

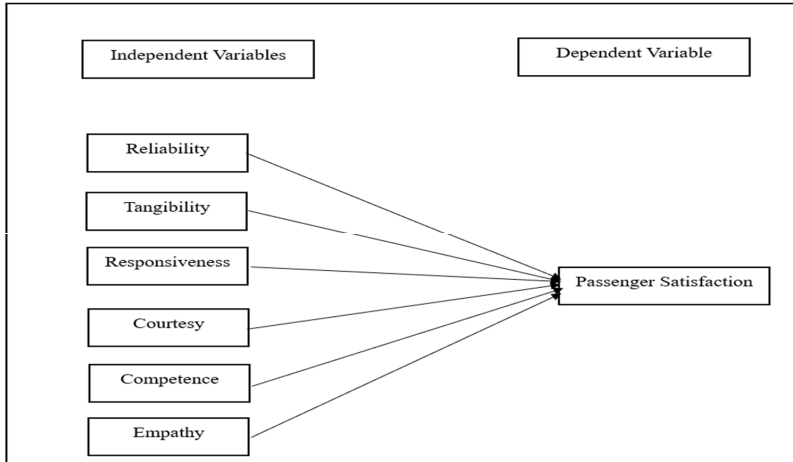


Figure 1: Conceptual Model Showing Relationship between Service Quality Dimensions & Passenger Satisfaction

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the perception of passengers about service quality of airlines moving from Silchar Airport of Assam.
2. To analyse the association between airlines’ service quality and satisfaction of passengers moving from Silchar Airport of Assam.
3. To analyse the impact of airlines’ service quality on satisfaction of passengers moving from Silchar Airport of Assam.

Hypotheses of the Research Work

1. There is no linear association between select service quality dimensions and satisfaction of passengers.
2. Perception of passengers does not vary significantly across different airlines.
3. There is no influence of select dimensions of service quality on passengers’ satisfaction.

Research Method

The present research is based on primary data. The study considers the passengers who have travelled from Silchar Airport only which constitutes the population of the study. To identify the dimensions that are capable of influencing service quality and passengers’ satisfaction, an in-depth literature review has been carried out. The measurement of service quality is based on six service quality dimensions. A well-structured questionnaire consisting of six dimensions of airlines service quality has been prepared.

A sample of 286 respondents from Silchar who have travelled from Silchar airport have been considered for the study. Seven-point scale has been used for collecting responses from the passengers. Studies conducted by Kalaiarasan, et al., (2015); Ganiyu, (2016); Vuthisopon and Srinuan, (2017); Lerrthaitrakul, & Panjakajornsak, (2014) also used seven-point Likert type scale for assessment of service quality of airlines.

Table 1: Airline Company Wise Classification of Respondents

Airline Company	Frequency	Percent
Air India	78	27.3
Indigo	110	38.5
Spice Jet	98	34.3

Source: Field Survey

Statistical tools, such as, descriptive statistics, one way ANOVA, correlation coefficient and multiple regression have been used to analyse the data. It is worthwhile to mention here that the previous research work carried out by Murugeswari, and Kanagaraj, (2017); Thapa, et al., (2020); Gambo, (2016); Namukasa, (2013) also used multiple regression technique to assess the

influence of service quality on passengers' satisfaction.

The dimensions of service quality have been used as independent variable in the study and passenger satisfaction has been used as dependent variable

The regression model developed for the study is shown as follows

$$PS = \beta_0 + \beta_1REL + \beta_2TANG + \beta_3RES + \beta_4COU + \beta_5COM + \beta_6EMP + \epsilon_i$$

Where, PS= Passenger Satisfaction

REL= Reliability

TANG= Tangibility

RES= Responsiveness

COU= Courtesy

COM= Competence

EMP= Empathy

ϵ_i is the error term

Table 2 discloses the mean score and standard deviation of service quality dimensions and passenger satisfaction. Table shows the mean score of passengers' satisfaction is 5.211 with SD of 1.0494.

Out of six dimensions, competence received the maximum mean score of 5.271 followed by responsiveness (5.207), courtesy (5.201), reliability (5.120) tangibility (4.994) and empathy (4.986) respectively.

Mean scores of the dimensions indicate that competence dimension of service quality is the most important dimension while Empathy contributes least.

However, tangibility has the least standard deviation of 0.9403 indicating the consistency in responses.

On the other hand, empathy dimension exhibits highest standard deviation indicating higher level of inconsistency in responses.

Analysis & Results

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reliability	5.120	1.0901
Tangibility	4.994	0.9403
Responsiveness	5.207	1.1046
Courtesy	5.201	1.0965
Competence	5.271	1.1276
Empathy	4.986	1.2710
Passengers' Satisfaction	5.211	1.0494

Source: Field Survey

Table 3: Airline Wise Perception of Passengers

Variables	Airline company	Mean	SD	F Value	p Value
Reliability	Air India	5.315	1.0517	13.872	.000
	Indigo	5.382	0.9740		
	SpiceJet	4.671	1.1116		
Tangibility	Air India	5.008	0.7819	4.018	.019
	Indigo	5.162	0.9989		
	SpiceJet	4.796	0.9589		
Responsiveness	Air India	5.512	1.1323	6.519	.002
	Indigo	5.243	1.0727		
	SpiceJet	4.923	1.0566		
Courtesy	Air India	5.532	1.0163	15.473	.000
	Indigo	5.384	1.0485		
	SpiceJet	4.732	1.0626		
Competence	Air India	5.560	1.1239	12.726	.000
	Indigo	5.461	0.9780		
	SpiceJet	4.826	1.1617		
Empathy	Air India	5.323	1.2155	9.021	.000
	Indigo	5.115	1.2510		
	SpiceJet	4.571	1.2373		
Satisfaction	Air India	5.657	0.9566	23.132	.000
	Indigo	5.357	0.9378		
	SpiceJet	4.693	1.0328		

Source: Field Survey

Table 3 depicts the airline wise value of mean and SD for perception of passengers about service quality of airlines. In case of reliability and tangibility dimension Indigo has received highest mean score followed by Air India and Spice Jet. Besides this, Air India has received highest mean score in all other dimensions.

It is to be noted that, Spice Jet has received lowest mean score which means that Spice Jet has failed to provide good services in relation to other Air India and Indigo. One way ANOVA have been employed to test the hypothesis if the perception of passengers on different dimensions varies across different airlines.

Table 4 shows that all the dimensions have p value less than 0.05. which implies that perception of passengers about service quality of airlines varies significantly across different airlines.

Table 4: Correlation Between Passenger Satisfaction and Select Service Quality Dimensions

Service Quality Dimensions	Correlation Coefficient
Reliability	0.754*
Tangibility	0.674*
Responsiveness	0.790*
Courtesy	0.834*
Competence	0.868*
Empathy	0.853*

*Significant at 5% level of significance

Source: Field Survey

Table 4 reveals the correlation between select service quality dimensions and passenger satisfaction. Notably, all the dimensions demonstrate a positive relationship with passengers' satisfaction. Among the dimensions, competence exhibits the highest degree of correlation (0.868) with passenger satisfaction, followed closely by empathy (0.853), courtesy (0.834), responsiveness (0.790), reliability (0.754) and tangibility (0.674). The p-values associated

with each dimension indicate statistically significant correlations between all the dimensions and satisfaction of passengers,

emphasizing the importance of these service quality dimensions in influencing passengers' overall satisfaction.

Table 5: Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.934 ^a	.873	.870	.37831952	1.664
a. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Courtesy, Competence					
b. Dependent Variable: Passenger Satisfaction					

Source: Field Survey

The R² value in Table 5 indicates that approximately 87.3% of the variation in the degree of passenger satisfaction is accounted for by the explanatory variables used in the study. The value of adjusted R² also indicates that 87% of the variability in the degree of passenger satisfaction is explained by chosen predictors. The Durbin-Watson statistic, measuring the presence of

autocorrelation in the residuals, is 1.664, indicating a lack of significant autocorrelation (Belsley & Welsch, 1980). Overall, the model demonstrates a strong explanatory power, with the service quality dimensions collectively accounting for a substantial portion of the variance in Passenger Satisfaction, while the low Durbin-Watson value suggests minimal residual autocorrelation, enhancing the reliability of the regression estimates.

Table 6: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	273.974	6	45.662	319.037	.000
	Residual	39.932	279	.143		
	Total	313.906	285			
a. Dependent Variable: Passenger Satisfaction						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Courtesy, Competence						

Source: Field Survey

The high significance of the regression model is indicated by the F-statistic of 319.037, along with a p-value of 0.000. The findings suggest that the data effectively demonstrate the influence of the

selected service quality dimensions on the satisfaction of passengers. Hence, the overall predictability of the model is favourable, indicating its ability to provide valuable insights and explanations regarding passenger satisfaction.

Table 7: Result of Multiple Regression

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.224	.130		1.722	.086
	Reliability	.089	.033	.093	2.696	.007
	Tangibility	.082	.036	.073	2.256	.025
	Responsiveness	.157	.037	.165	4.220	.000
	Courtesy	.104	.042	.108	2.457	.015
	Competence	.252	.042	.271	6.025	.000
	Empathy	.288	.030	.349	9.479	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Passenger Satisfaction						

Source: Field Survey

Table 7 shows that all the six explanatory variables have positive influence on passenger satisfaction as all the predictors have positive b value. Among the independent variables empathy has the highest standardized coefficient (Beta), which implies that impact of empathy dimension is highest on passenger satisfaction if the effect of other dimensions remains unchanged. Likewise, the impact of tangibility dimension is lowest on passenger satisfaction as it has the lowest beta value. The computed value of t and its corresponding p value clearly depicts that there exists a statistically significant impact of all the six select service quality dimensions and passenger satisfaction.

Table 8: Collinearity Statistics

Dimensions	Tolerance	VIF
Reliability	.385	2.598
Tangibility	.431	2.323
Responsiveness	.297	3.373
Courtesy	.234	4.277
Competence	.226	4.428
Empathy	.337	2.965

Source: Field Survey

Table 8 shows the result of multicollinearity statistics to judge the individual impact of explanatory variables on explained variable. Variation Inflation Factor (VIF) is commonly used measure for detecting multicollinearity, with a conventional threshold suggesting that of VIF exceeding 10 may indicate collinearity issue (Mason et.al., 1989). Table 9 also shows Variation Inflation Factor (VIF), which ranges between 2.323 to 4.428 and thus there is no problem of multicollinearity. Tolerance value exceeding 0.10 is considered as a yardstick for assessing the impact of explanatory variables in the model and signifies that explanatory variables are independent from each other (Kennedy, 1992). The computed tolerance value suggests that regression model is free from multicollinearity of the explanatory variables since all the tolerance values are well above this threshold, ensuring the absence of multicollinearity in the model.

Conclusion and Implications

In the modern business landscape, customers are hailed as kings, and their satisfaction holds paramount importance. In this era of intense competition, no organisation can afford to be hesitant about delivering superior customer service, as companies that prioritise customer care gain a competitive edge. Service quality serves as the measure that propels businesses ahead of their competitors. Therefore, providing exceptional service becomes an essential imperative for every company, leading to increased passenger satisfaction, customer loyalty, and ultimately a positive impact on the firm's profitability. The present study attempts to find out the effect of service quality on satisfaction of passengers of Silchar town of Assam. All the dimensions demonstrate a positive relationship with passengers' satisfaction. The previous research works carried out by Mahmud, et al., (2013); Geraldine, and Chikwendu, (2013); Hasan, et al., (2019); also revealed similar findings. The study reveals that dimensions of airline service quality selected for the study demonstrate statistically significant impact on passenger satisfaction. This aligns with the research work carried out by Murugeswari, and Kanagaraj, (2017); Shanka, (2012); Huang, et al. (2009).

Measurement of service quality should be on a continuous basis to ensure the best quality. Airlines officials should take these evaluations seriously to enhance service quality, thereby increasing passenger satisfaction and confidence. The findings of the study suggest that the management needs to take every dimension of service quality seriously. Corrective measures can be taken in the dimensions that exhibit weaknesses in meeting customer expectations. To enhance the experience of the passengers, the airline company should provide additional training to front-line staffs, enhancing their skills and knowledge to ensure fast and reliable service. Additionally, upgrading the physical aspects is also necessary to enhance the experience of the passengers.

Scope for Future Research

1. Similar study with a larger and more diverse sample could be conducted to ensure that the findings can be applied to a broader population.
2. In addition to those six dimensions of service quality, more dimensions can be identified to measure the association between those dimension and satisfaction of the passengers.
3. A comparative study can be conducted to evaluate and compare the performance of different airlines. This analysis can provide valuable insights for policy-making and offer opportunities for enhancing guidelines and strategies within the industry.

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