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Research Article

INSIGHT INTO THE BEHAVIORAL INFLUENCE OF SERVICE QUALITY ON DIVERGENT GROUPINGS IN SOUTH AFRICAN OWNED AIRLINES

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A B S T R A C T

This study analyses the effect of passengers' service quality expectations and perceptions among divergent groupings in respect of South African owned airlines (). The study wasintended to gain insight into the behavioral effect of service quality ondivergent groupings, namely gender, race, age, level of education and occupation,using South African owned airlines.Primary data was collected from 684 passengers at O.R.Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg and King Shaka International Airport in Durban using quantitative research and a cross-sectional analysis (sample survey) approach. The SERVQUAL model was adapted to design an instrument for the study. The major findings were: (1)The gender expectations and perception were the same for all the dimensional variables as no significantgaps exist in the dimensional variablesof tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy;(2) Irrespective of the races of the participants, there were gaps in service quality expectations, although some races recorded higher expectations than others; (3)Irrespective of the ages of the participants, they all expected the same levelof service quality from the airlines, however, the age group 31-40 years expected differentand higher service quality in South African owned airlines, hence the statistical significance value of $p<0.05$. In conclusion, the divergent groupings have different expectations and perceptions towards service quality. The findings of this studyprovide an opportunity for South African owned airlines to design appropriate marketing strategies for services to suit the divergent passenger groupings in order to meet passengers' requirements.

INTRODUCTION

This study examined service quality perceptions from the perspective among divergent groupings in respect of South African owned airlines (SAOA). Thisanalysis intended to determine how the various divergent groupings interrelate to service quality. While South African owned airlines may have their own internal assessment criteria on service quality management, this study was conducted from an academic perspective, using an empirical research methodology to provide additional insight into passenger service quality delivery, especially among divergent groupingsusing South African owned airlines. The research problem focuses on the behavioral effect of service quality on divergent groupings namely gender, race, age, level of education and occupation groupings using South African owned airlines in terms of their service expectations and perceptions.

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The importance of this study is thatthe managementof South African owned airlines can compare their internal assessment criteria with the findings of this study.

This study answered the following questions

- What is the statistical significance in the gap scores/variables between male and female passengers'service expectations and perceptions?
- What is the statistical significance in the gap scores among the races with regard to the dimensional variables of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy?
- What is the statistical significance in the gap scores in the age groupingswith regard to the dimensional variables of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy?
- What is the statistical significance in the gap scores in the occupation of passengerswith regard to the dimensional variables of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy?

This study provides an insight into service quality delivery to passengers, revealing whether South African owned airlines

are meeting passengers' expectations. Service quality is vital to the client or the passenger as succinctly described in this statement: "Quality in service or products is not what you put into it. It is what the client or customer gets out of it" (Peter Drucker, (n.d.). **"**The customer is the most important visitor to our premises. He is not dependent on us. We depend on him. He is not interruption of our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider of our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favor by serving him. He is doing us a favor by giving us the opportunity to do so."(Mahatma Gandhi)

The inference from these statements from an airline's standpoint is that the airline passenger is a very important customer to the airline. The judgment of the passenger on the quality of service is what is supreme, not what the airline decides that the passenger desires. In every research endeavor there are motivational factors which drive the conducting of the research study. This study is positioned on two key standpoints namely, the theoretical and the practical standpoints. The theoretical significance of this study is its contribution towards the advancement of academic knowledge and providing further information. The practical significance of this study is its contribution to society, the global airline industry in general and the airline industry in South Africa in particular as well as by understanding the behavioral outlook, expectations and perceptions about service quality of passengers of South African owned airlines

Theoretical Models

This study was anchored on the SERVQUAL-Gaps modelof Parasuraman *et al.*(1985:41-50; 1988:12-40) and Lovelock and Wirtz (2011) that was devisedto measure service quality expectations and perceptions. The five dimensional variables of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy were used to evaluate service quality in the environment of South African owned airlines. Prior studies on service quality have used the SERVQUAL-Gaps model as their theoretical framework in evaluating service quality in the airlines (Pakdil and Aydim, 2007:227-237; Chikwendu, Ejem & Ezenwa, 2012:117-126; Huang, 2009:1-20; Aydin and Yildirim, 2012:219 – 230). This new study was therefore conducted using constructs from these early studies.

Literaturereview

Service quality to passengers in the airlines is not a new topic, and may appear an insignificant issue to many people. However, scholars such as Erdil and Yıldız (2011:132-1242), Wang, Hsu, Lin & Tseng (2011:419-437) and others take service quality in the airline industry very seriously. These scholars have recognised the intrinsic value of service quality to the airline, devoting studies to its impact on the overall performance of airline companies. Likewise, from the consumers' or air passengers' perspective, service quality is a vital issue. Passengers pay hard-earned money to the airline companies in exchange for efficient and comfortable travelling services and experiences. Additionally, from an airline-management perspective, South African owned airlines stand to benefit strategically if the airlines provide excellent quality service to passengers (Erdil and Yıldız, 2011:1232). However, the determinants or measurements of service quality in the service industry in general, and in the airline industry in particular, are a subject of intense debate among scholars and researchers. The debate is centred on the intangibility, inseparability, perishability and heterogeneity dimensions of service, a subjective view of what constitutes service quality (Prakash and Mohanty, 2011:1051). For example, what may constitute service delivery is subjective: two different service firms may not deliver their service(s) at the same level, which therefore raises a debate on quality of the service, and satisfaction of the customer (Prakash and Mohanty, 2011:1051). The level of satisfaction may not be the same for two passengers who are served by the same airline using the same method in delivering the service: passengers may have different expectations and orientations. Therefore, the subjective composition of service quality in the airline industry poses problems for strategic management, marketing and customer relationships in terms of designing service quality programmes, packaging and distribution of the service (Lusch and Vargo, 2014:159; De Meyer and Mostert, 2011:79).

However, amidst the ongoing debate, this study posit that: service quality is fundamental to both the air passenger and the airlines, therefore the passenger should be provided with excellent service quality, which ultimately may, to some extent, hold the answer to the survival, competitiveness, sustainability, and profitability of SAOA (Mantey, 2015:14). Because there are different views on passenger satisfaction/dissatisfaction with services, Gilbert and Wong (2003:519) propose that the degree of expectation and perception of the passenger in terms of service quality delivery should be empirically measured. This provides the basis for conducting this study. Consequently, this study is more concerned with airline passengers' service quality from the point of view of the passengers and the airlines, than with the protracted scholarly debate among academics and practitioners.

Implication for poor service quality in airlines

Service quality is critical to both the passenger and the airline company/industry. The passengers invariably expect airlines to provide a certain level of comfort and quality service during the travelling experience. For the airline company, its sustainability and profitability depends on the number of passengers recruited and strategically retained (Zikmund, McLeod and Gilbert, 2003:88; Steven, Dong and Dresdner, 2012:744). Thus, the service quality of airline companies is essential; any negative perceptions by passengers apropos of an airline company may be spread so damaging the image of the airline company (Munusamy, 2011:718; Kim, Kim & Kim, 2009:51-62). The disparagement can be so disastrous that it eventually impacts on the operation, profitability and even the sustainability of the airline company (Wu and Chen, 2003:13; Steven *et al.,* 2012:743; Munusamy, 2011:718). An airline company may struggle to maintain profitability and sustainable growth when management fails to address passengers' negative perceptions of the quality of service of the airline company.

Therefore, the researcher believes that, from both the perspectives of the passenger and the airline company, service quality is critical. It is worthwhile to investigate empirically the interplay between the passengers' expectations of service quality and the desire of the airline company to maximise profit. The passenger wishes for comfort on the journey−the airline company demands profit. Both parties should find common ground in meeting each other's expectations (Chen and Chang, 2005: 79). Ethically, and morally, this researcher contends that airline companies should not sacrifice excellent

service quality for mediocre services to the passenger in an attempt to increase profitability. In the service-centric enterprises environment (including airlines), companies should strive to create and sustain a culture of service excellence (Asif and Gouthier, 2014:511; Gilbert-Jamison, 2005:10), without which these companies may struggle to exist. According to Gilbert-Jamison (2005:10) service companies should move from offering customer services to offering service quality excellence. Earlier studies consider service excellence or service quality as offering services that exceed customer expectations, affording them pleasure (Gouthier, Giese and Bartl, 2012:447; Heracleous and Wirtz, 2010:145; Johnston, 2004:129). Service excellence is pivotal in the sustainability of an organization, as it enhances customer loyalty and profitability (Asif and Gouthier, 2014:511).

Behavioral intent of passengers of South African owned airlines

Gaining insight into passengers' behavior, decision-making influences and perceptions on SAOA's service quality among the groupings (gender, race, age, occupation) may assist SAOA in designing appropriate marketing strategies to meet passengers' expectations and build better customer relationships between the airlines and their passengers (De Meyer and Mostert, 2011:79; Grönroos, 2006:395). For example, the service quality expectation and perception of female and male passengers may not be the same and, therefore, offering a generalised service package for both parties may be inappropriate and ineffective in sustaining passenger loyalty (Timm, 2008:3). Similarly, service expectations for a passenger on a two-day business trip may not be the same as those of a family on a two-month holiday. The passenger travelling for two days on a business trip may use only hand luggage, and would be allowed to board the plane with such. Passengers on long holidays will be concerned about the handling efficiency of the family's large amount of luggage: will it be efficiently handled and promptly delivered to the ultimate destination? (Milne and Kelly, 2014:93).

The airline's failure to deliver the family's luggage at the destination at the time of arrival may ruin the planned family holiday, making for a bad service-delivery experience and perception of the airline. The question is why some SAOA are airlines of choice for some passengers, while others may dislike travelling with SAOA, even at an affordable or reduced price. Choices may be attributed to past satisfactory or unsatisfactory service quality experiences, amongst other factors (Milioti, Karlaftis and Akkogiounoglou, 2015:119; Ukpere, Stephens, Ikeogu, Ibe& Akpan, 2012:5442). An empirical research study may answer these decisions and behavioural intentions of the passenger, together with other vital research questions, hence the justification for this study.
An investigation into passengers' service quality experience of SAOA may enable management to assess weaknesses, strengths and gaps in service quality delivery, allowing the necessary interventions for improvement (Kim 2013:31-50; Milioti *et al.,* 2015:119). The empirical outcomes of this study may enable SAOA to address specific service-delivery shortfalls, and complement SAOA's internal evaluation on passenger satisfaction. Consequently, there is the need for empirically determining whether there are significant disparities between SAOA passengers' expectations and perceptions of service quality in the South African airline industry among the various groupings.

METHODOLOGY

Using a quantitative research and cross-sectional analysis (sample survey) approach, primary data was directly collected from some 684 passengers at O.R.Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg and King Shaka International Airport in Durban. The SERVQUAL modelof Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithmal (1984) was adapted to design a five-point Likert scale questionnaire for this study.The Airport Company of South Africa annual report (2014:114) sets the target population for this study at seventeen million four hundred thousand passengers (domestic and international) (Mantey, 2015:133). Since population was extremely large, a sampling method was deployed for this study.The sampling method used for this study was a non-probability convenience sampling- a type of non-probability sampling in which people are sampled because they are "convenient" sources of data for the researcher (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013:252; Mostert, De Meyer and van Rensburg, 2009:118).

The instrument used for this study was subjected to rigorous validation and reliability processes: through internal consistency Cronbach alpha testing, pilot testing, content validity and expert opinions. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient test was calculated as 0.900 which was within the expected levels of 0.00 to 1 (Drost, 2012:111; Raut and Veer, 2014:68; DeVellis, 2003; Nunnally, 1978; Sekaran and Bougie, 2013:228). Cronbach alpha testing was performed on the data reliability of this study and the results were 0.810 which was within the range of 0.00 to 1, therefore the data was reliable (Mantey, 2015:136).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Socio-demographics

Table 1 Distribution of Socio-demographic Information

Gender			Age group			Monthly income		
Female	312	45.6	18 - 30 years	213	31.1	Less than R50001	603	88.2
Male	372	54.4	31 - 40 years	273	39.9	50001 – 100000	54	7.9
Total	**684**	**100.0**	41 - 50 years	137	20.0	>100000	27	3.9
Education			51 - 60 years	43	6.3	**Total**	**684**	**100.0**
Primary	14	2.0	>60 years	18	2.6	**Race**		
Secondary	93	13.6	**Total**	**684**	**100.0**	African	434	63.5
Tertiary	577	84.4				Colored	93	13.6
Total	**684**	**100.0**				Indian	67	9.8
						White	90	13.2
						Total	**684**	**100.0**

The socio-demographic results revealed that most SAOA's passengers (71%) were in the younger age bracket (below 40 years). A large number of the respondent passengers (84%) had attended tertiary institutions. The results showed that about half of the passengers (59.9%) were at middle-income level. This age bracket earn an income of up to R50 000 per month. Potentially this young age bracket grouping may be likely to demand airline services on electronic devices since this age grouping are known to be technologically savvy (Lock, Fattah and Kirby, 2010:3).

Participants' gender and gap scores

This analysis was done to determine whether there wasa statistical significance in the gap scores/variables between male and female passengers with regard to the dimensional variables of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Table 2 below analyses the gap scores.

Table 2 T-Test Analysis on Gender in relation to Gap scores

Group Statistics					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Tangibility Gap score	Female	312	16.580	10.7135	.6065
	Male	372	15.685	12.3505	.6403
Reliable Gap score	Female	312	13.189	7.5248	.4260
	Male	372	12.371	8.2803	.4293
Responsive Gap score	Female	312	9.881	5.6950	.3224
	Male	372	9.266	6.3038	.3268
Assurance Gap score	Female	312	8.580	4.8634	.2753
	Male	372	7.978	5.2531	.2724
Empathy Gap score	Female	312	5.503	3.3422	.1892
	Male	372	5.272	3.5287	.1830

Using the inferential statistics t-test (Table 2), the gap analysis revealed that the average gap score for tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy were similar in male and female participants ($p>0.05$), showing no significance for females and males in the dimensional variables.This finding suggests that SAOA's female and male passengers have the same service quality expectations. However, this finding contradicts the assertion by Timm, (2008:3) that female and male passengers' travelling expectations are not the same. According to Timm (2008:3), providing generalised service packages for both sexes may not be appropriate to sustaining loyalty and patronage. Generalised marketing strategies are ineffective because they do not meet the specific or unique expectations of customers (Kotler and Keller, 2012:32; Timm, 2008:3). Therefore De Meyer and Mostert (2011:80) proposed customer relationship management (CRM) for the airlines, as an appropriate platform on which to identify the unique requirements and service expectations of passengers, whether female or male. Identifying the unique service expectations of both females and males and satisfying such needs would increase the competitiveness of the airline, guarantee passenger loyalty and expand market share (Chen *et al.,* 2013:1087; Archana and Subha, 2012:51; Ahadmotlaghi and Pawar, 2012:3*)*.

Participants' race grouping and gaps

With regard to race, this study attempted to answer the question: Is there a statistical significance in the gap scores in the race grouping with regard to the dimensional variables of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy? Figure 1 depicts the socio-demographics among the race groupings.

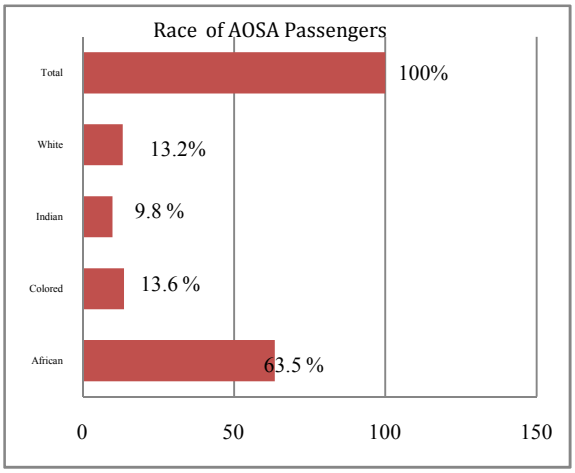

Figure 1 Race of AOSA Passengers

In terms of race, 63.5% Africans participated in the study, a higher proportion than other races. The Coloured race totaled 13.6%, Indians made up 9.8% while Whites constituted 13.2% of the survey**.**

AVOVA-Tukey HSD multiple-comparison test on groups

Further tests were conducted on the gaps scores using an AVOVA-Tukey HSD multiple-comparison test on the race groups apropos tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 AVOVA -Tukey HSD Multiple-Comparison Test on Race

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Tangibility Gap score	Between Groups	3656.923	3	1218.974	9.338	<.01
	Within Groups	88765.089	680	130.537		
	Total	92422.012	683			
Reliability Gap score	Between Groups	1898.850	3	632.950	10.431	<.01
	Within Groups	41261.376	680	60.678		
	Total	43160.227	683			
Responsiveness Gap score	Between Groups	770.976	3	256.992	7.244	<.01
	Within Groups	24122.527	680	35.474		
	Total	24893.503	683			
Assurance Gap score	Between Groups	624.700	3	208.233	8.314	<.01
	Within Groups	17030.544	680	25.045		
	Total	17655.244	683			
Empathy Gap score	Between Groups	323.611	3	107.870	9.429	<.01
	Within Groups	7779.073	680	11.440		
	Total	8102.684	683			

The gap scores were $p<0.01$ for all the dimensional variables. The gap scores were statistically significant. The Tukey HSD multiple-comparison test highlighted that Africans had low tangibility gap scores compared with Coloured and Indian participants ($p<0.05$). Similarly, on the gap score for reliability and empathy, it was found that African participants had significantly low scores compared with all other race groups ($p<0.05$). For responsiveness and assurance, African participants had significantly lower gap scores compared with Coloured and Indian participants ($p<0.05$).

The interpretation of these findings is that, irrespective of the races of the participants, there were gaps in service quality expectations, although some races recorded higher expectations than others. Irrespective of race, service quality to passengers is a need for all passengers. Similarly, with reference to literature, (Baker, 2013:67-77; Wu and Chen, 2013:15; Arif, Gupta & Williams, 2013:1-7), airline service quality needs are applicable to all race groups.

Participants' Age Grouping and gaps

The participants' ages were evaluated against the gaps in relation to tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy with the intention of finding their statistical significance (see Figure 2)

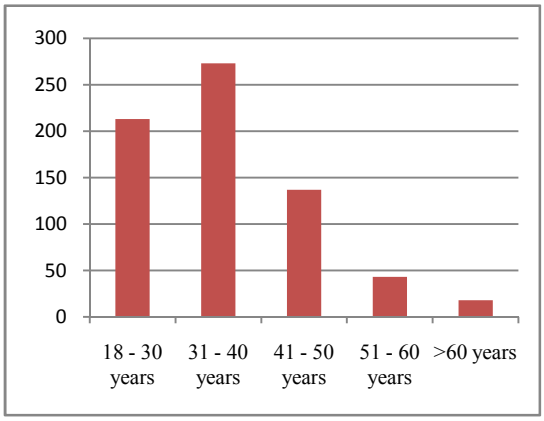

Figure 2 Age Group of the passengers

The results revealed that most of the South African owned airline passengers (71%) were in the younger age bracket (below 40 years).

AVOVA and gap scores within age groups

Further tests were conducted with ANOVA to determine the statistical significance within the group, as per Table 4

Table 4 ANOVA and Gap scores within Age Groups

		ANOVA Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Tangibility Gap score	Between Groups	2223.803	4	555.951	4.185	.002
	Within Groups	90198.209	679	132.840		
	Total	92422.012	683			
Reliability Gap score	Between Groups	455.588	4	113.897	1.811	.125
	Within Groups	42704.639	679	62.893		
	Total	43160.227	683			
Responsiveness Gap score	Between Groups	309.089	4	77.272	2.134	.075
	Within Groups	24584.414	679	36.207		
	Total	24893.503	683			
Assurance Gap score	Between Groups	375.244	4	93.811	3.686	.006
	Within Groups	17280.001	679	25.449		
	Total	17655.244	683			
Empathy Gap score	Between Groups	217.745	4	54.436	4.688	.001
	Within Groups	7884.939	679	11.613		
	Total	8102.684	683			

The results of this analysis showed that, while some of the gapsvalues between the dimensional variables werestatistically significant, others were not statistically significant.

The interpretation of these findings is that, irrespective of the ages of participants, they all expected the same service quality from the airlines. This explains the significant differences in the gaps across all the variables: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. However, the age group (31-40), expected higher service quality from SAOA, hence the statistical significance value of ($p<0.05$), especially in the dimensional areas of tangibility, assurance and empathy. With reference to prior studies, airline service quality is a universal requirement for all passengers, who have high expectations that the airline company will fulfil this requirement (Arif *et al.,* 2013:1-7, Chikwendu *et al.,* 2012:117-126; Naidoo, 2015: 40-60; Wu and Chen, 2013:15). However, the socio-demographic information in this study, as discussed above, points to the fact that SAOA has a young generation (71%) of passengers who are likely to demand services using technological devices because this age is technologically savvy (Lock, Fattah and Kirby, 2010:3; Mantey, 2015: 90)

Occupation

This question was designed to determine the occupation of SAOA's passengers as per Table 5.

Table 5 Occupation

`Variable	Frequency	Percent
Occupation		
Unemployed	62	9.1
Student	110	16.1
Lower level staff	65	9.5
Middle level	322	47.1
Executive level	69	10.1
Top Executive level	26	3.8
Others	30	4.4
Total	684	100.0

The results showed that about half of the passengers (47%) were of middle-income level. Others were working at various levels of employment. Some 4% were top executives; 10% were working at executive level, while 9% of the passengers were unemployed, and 16% were students.

Participants and Occupation

Analysis was also conducted on the gaps scores and the employment status of participants in relation to tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, as per Table 6.

Table 6 Participants and Occupation

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Tangibility Gap score	Unemployed	62	13.274	12.6026	10.074	16.475
	Student	110	13.109	12.8936	10.673	15.546
	Lower level staff	65	18.646	11.2200	15.866	21.426
	Middle level	322	18.000	10.4607	16.853	19.147
	Executive level	69	16.580	9.9001	14.201	18.958
	Top Executive level	26	12.654	16.0423	6.174	19.133
	Others	30	8.733	10.6930	4.741	12.726
	Total	684	16.094	11.6326	15.220	16.967
Reliability Gap score	Unemployed	62	11.790	8.7948	9.557	14.024
	Student	110	11.591	8.7475	9.938	13.244
	Lower level staff	65	14.092	6.4608	12.491	15.693
	Middle level	322	13.307	7.6314	12.471	14.144
	Executive level	69	14.174	6.8362	12.532	15.816
	Top Executive level	26	10.538	10.4661	6.311	14.766
	Others	30	8.600	7.4584	5.815	11.385
	Total	684	12.744	7.9493	12.147	13.341
Responsiveness Gap score	Unemployed	62	8.935	6.2223	7.355	10.516
	Student	110	8.573	6.7586	7.296	9.850
	Lower level staff	65	10.985	4.8202	9.790	12.179
	Middle level	322	9.963	5.6518	9.343	10.582
	Executive level	69	10.174	5.5518	8.840	11.508
	Top Executive level	26	8.769	8.2477	5.438	12.101
	Others	30	6.033	6.6565	3.548	8.519
	Total	684	9.547	6.0372	9.094	10.000
Assurance Gap score	Unemployed	62	7.468	5.5359	6.062	8.874
	Student	110	7.055	6.0938	5.903	8.206
	Lower level staff	65	9.077	4.5356	7.953	10.201
	Middle level	322	8.773	4.6679	8.262	9.285
	Executive level	69	8.928	4.2783	7.900	9.955
	Top Executive level	26	8.654	5.5853	6.398	10.910
	Others	30	5.000	4.9896	3.137	6.863
	Total	684	8.253	5.0842	7.871	8.635
Empathy Gap score	Unemployed	62	5.097	3.5330	4.200	5.994
	Student	110	4.545	4.0787	3.775	5.316
	Lower level staff	65	5.462	3.4282	4.612	6.311
	Middle level	322	5.748	3.2606	5.391	6.106
	Executive level	69	5.870	2.7489	5.209	6.530
	Top Executive level	26	5.885	3.0506	4.652	7.117
	Others	30	3.267	3.3930	2.000	4.534
	Total	684	5.377	3.4443	5.119	5.636

It was found that the average gap score for all the sections was significantly different when comparing participants' levels of occupation ($p<0.05$). Tukey's HSD multiple-comparison test showed that unemployed participants had a low gap score for tangibility compared with working middle-class participants ($p=0.044$) Table 3 &4). Also, the student participants had a low average gap score for tangibility compared with working middle-class participants ($p<0.05$). With regard to other groups, the average gap scores for reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy of upper (executive) levels were low compared with the lower and middle-class levels ($p<0.05$).

Occupation of SAOA's passengers

The question on occupation was based on Table 5, and was intended to determine the sources of income of passengers which make it possible for them to afford to buy air tickets and travel with SAOA. The results showed that about half of the passengers (47%) were of middle-income level. The unemployed passengers were at 9%, with executives and top executives at 10%. The student respondents contributed 16%. Further test data manipulation was conducted (Table 6) using the dimensional variables: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The results indicated that the averages for all dimensional attributes were significantly different on the participants' level of occupation ($p<0.05$).

The interpretation of these results means that almost half of South African owned airlines passengers are gainfully employed, which potentially will provide sustainable revenue and patronage to SAOA. Students and the unemployed passengers' have different scores for the dimensional variables that could be a result of individual orientation rather than statistical phenomenon. The fact that someone is a student or unemployed could not support an argument that they evaluate the dimensions differently from a middle-income earner or an executive. However, since the majority of passengers of South African owned airlines (Table 5) were either employed or students, this means that South African owned airlines will continue to conduct sustainable business with these groups of passengers for the foreseeable future. South African owned airlines should consider offering a special marketing package to the employed group and students, while considering reduced prices for the unemployed and the economically disadvantaged in society.

Managerial implications

This study provides the opportunity for passengers of South African owned airlines to suggest what they expect SAOA management to provide for them in order to improve service quality. Since passengers are the main stakeholders in the airline industry in terms of revenue generation, this study argues that SAOA passengers should be given the opportunity of suggesting specific service quality improvement.From an academic standpoint, this study was important in bridging the literature gap and expanding on the academic body of knowledge in service quality research within the airline industry of South Africa. Specifically, there is a research gap on air passengers' views of service quality in South Africa. Currently, few academic articles exist on the subject (De Meyer and Mostert, 2011:42-79; Lubbe, Douglas, and Zambellis, 2011:224-227; Campbell and Vigar-Ellis, 2012:97-119; De Jager, Van Zyl and Toriola, 2012:19-21).

Marketing strategy standpoint

Most service firms, including the airlines, are now utilising technologies such as CRM, Business intelligence (BI), BIG DATA, data warehousing, data mining systems and other similar systems to track customers' behavioural patterns in terms of the kind of goods and services they buy. The motivation for firms to deploy the aforementioned systems is to gather information about the customer in order provide what the customer really wants (Kotler & Keller, 2012:28). The insightful information about passengers'behaviors towards service qualityas unearthed in this study provides an opportunity for the airlines to develop rigorous marketing strategies to meet the expectations of passengers. For marketers, understanding or discerning the behavioral intent of the customer/client is one of the key determinant factors in corporate strategy formulation, implementation and marketing the right product and services to the customer (Grönroos, 2006:395). Different marketing strategies approaches could be deployed depending on the circumstances of the passengers. Varied strategies should be deployed instead of using a one size–fits-all approach for sustainability and retention of passengers (Siu, Zhang & Yau, 2013:675–686). For example, thisstudy shows that about half of the passengers (47%) were of middle-income level. The marketing strategy towards this group of passengers will be retention strategySiu, Zhang & Yau, 2013:675–686. Others were working at various levels of employment. Some 4% were top executives; 10% were working at executive level, while 9% of the passengers were unemployed, and 16% were students. Specific-designed strategies could be deployed to market to the divergent groups depending on their expectations.

Recommendations

The researcher's findings, based on this study, provide the following theoretical recommendations to close the gaps between passengers' expectations and perceptions in all areas namely, tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. This study recommends that the management of SAOA should design products and services that meet the requirements of the divergent groupings of gender, race, age and occupation. Specific passenger-centric services should be designed and marketed towards the divergent groupings. Such targeted marketing will ensure that passengers' specific needs are satisfied. This study recommends a Customer Relations Management (CRM) system as an ideal tool that is able to assemble vital information about customers and provide solution to the needs of the customer.

Limitation of the study

The limitation of the research methodology was that only passengersfrom South African owned airlines were sampled for the study. Therefore, this study cannot be generalised as a true reflection of the situation on the ground. However, the study provided insightful information for marketing South African domestic airline services.

Future research

This study provides an empirical insight into passengers' perceptions of SAOA services and, likely, future expectations of SAOA passengers. Other researchers should consider conducting research in the area of marketing airline services to divergent groupings. Another area worth investigating is whether young persons aged below forty years'have a

preference for services using electronic devices. This should provide vital information to airline management in packaging product and services to divergent groupings. This study used the SERVQUAL model to evaluate service quality in SAOA. A study could be conducted by researchers, pitching the various evaluation standards against one another to untangle all the intricacies of service quality in the local airline industry of South Africa.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the criticality and the importance of the airline segment of the transport sector in the South African economy have been reviewed. Extensive narratives from literature were examined with emphasis placed on service quality in the airlines.By identifying the particular needs of each grouping, strategically customizing their individual needs and designing services to meet such segments will go a long way to providingSAOAwith a better chance of offering a superior quality service to their passengers, thereby gaining continuous patronage and loyalty, not to mention increased profitability.

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