
Expected versus Perceived: Service Quality Gap among International Passengers

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Abstract

Airports are powerful engines of many economies, and over millions of international passengers arrive at and depart from major airports daily. Accordingly, airports play a significant role as the most important hub in the world, connecting people from all over the world that contribute massively for the development of each country, also providing many countries an opportunity to earn a greater amount of foreign income by supplying utilities to international passengers. This study was conducted to evaluate the expected level of service quality with the perceived level of service quality of the international passengers who use the airport of Sri Lanka. Convenience sampling technique was adopted, and the data was collected from 205 international passengers from the regions of Europe, USA, Australia, New Zealand and Asia, using a structured questionnaire. The independent sample *t*-test was employed for the major purpose of evaluating the difference between the expected level of service quality and the perceived level of service quality in airports. The results of the study show a significant difference between the expected and the perceived level of service quality. Thus, it is concluded that the expected level of service quality of all the three components, namely pre-flight services, inside services and post-flight services, among international passengers, is relatively high compared to their perceived level of service quality.

Keywords: Airport services, International passengers, Service quality

1. Introduction

The air travel industry in the world has been changing at an exceptional rate. Due to the increasing demand of the tourism industry, the airports of the country need to be fully organized in order to provide an excellent customer service for the purpose of creating good

impression on the visitors. Recently, rapid improvements in travel comfort and updated technology, as per the expectations of passengers, can be identified. Nowadays, air passengers are exposed to multiple service attributes that help them distinguish the performance of chosen transportation providers. However, in many instances, the performances of air service providers are not evaluated as per the expectations of customers. Air transport acts as a facilitator for the development of global businesses and tourism industry. Through its speed, convenience, and affordability, air transport has increased the opportunities for both leisure and business passengers to experience a host of geographies, cultures, and markets. In this context, airport service quality has been identified as a critical area for profitability and growth of this industry (Archana & Subha, 2012). Due to the increasing demand for airports, an effective customer service plays a critical role in increasing passengers' satisfaction and loyalty. Many countries, where airports are not treated as a tourist destination, but they play a significant role as a transit point for tourists, invest to develop infrastructure to attract more tourists (Fodness & Murray, 2007). The aviation industry has faced dramatic changes in recent years forcing airports to focus more on the efficiency of airport operations, and find innovative strategies to enhance the satisfaction of passengers.

1.1. Problem identification

Many researchers have provided evidence that service quality plays a significant role in fulfilling the needs of the customers in the relevant industry (Gronroos, 1984; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996; Firdaus, 2006; Namukasa, 2013; Ali & Raza, 2017). Accordingly, in the services domain, service quality plays a vital role in satisfying customer needs, and has drawn attention as a focal point of interest for many marketing researchers and practitioners (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Abdalla & Al-Neimat, 2016; Melo, Hernandez-Maestro & Munoz-Gallego, 2017). Service quality can be evaluated as either superior or inferior (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). Superior service quality stimulates favorable behavioral intentions, which direct customer retention, while inferior service quality causes unfavorable behavioral intentions, resulting in customer defection. Accordingly, delivering superior service quality at airports has become an essential element of an effective marketing strategy to attract international community, and build a good impression & strong image of the country, so as to boost the tourism industry. Airport passengers can basically be divided into three groups based on their purpose of departing, arriving and transfer; and each group expects different types of services and benefits based on their purpose of using the airport. However, this study focuses on the perceptions of airport passengers, who visited the country to enjoy the benefits that it has to offer as a tourist destination. Airport passengers are treated as a group of customers whose needs are greatly assessed, and find the ways and means of satisfying the expectations of passengers, since the airport services have become a million-dollar business. At the major international airports, over millions of passengers enjoy the

services on any given day. Service quality is treated as an important issue in the airport management, where international tourism and business activities in the corresponding country is largely dependent on the overall airport experience perceived by international passengers (Park & Jung, 2011). Accordingly, this study was conducted with the key objective of evaluating the expected level of service quality with the perceived level of service quality as a case with reference to the international passengers who used the airport of Sri Lanka.

2. Literature review

2.1. Service Quality

In marketing literature, measuring and managing service quality has become a commonly addressed phenomenon. Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988, and 1994) have paid more attention to service quality and have developed widely accepted tools to measure service quality. Parasuraman et al. (1988) presented five broad dimensions of service quality which include tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, and introduced the tool, SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale to measure consumer perceptions of service quality. Accordingly, the SERVQUAL model is recognized as one the most popular and widely used tool to measure service quality. At first, they introduced ten dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding, and tangibles, to measure service quality. Later, they reduced the ten dimensions to five as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. This model has been used to measure service quality in various service industries around the globe. Meanwhile Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005) have developed a multiple-item scale to assess electronic service quality. Accordingly, two different scales have been developed to evaluate electronic service quality. The basic electronic service quality (E-S-QUAL) scale, is a scale with 22-items of four major dimensions such as efficiency, fulfillment, system availability, and privacy; while the second scale of electronic recovery service quality (E-RecS-QUAL) with 11 items in three dimensions such as responsiveness, compensation, and contact, is applied only for customers who exhibit non-routine encounters with the sites. Cronin and Taylor (1992) have presented a model called SERVPERF, which can be considered a derivative of SERVQUAL framework. Gronroos (1984) has developed a service quality model to evaluate the perceived service quality comparing expected service and perceived service, and introduced a model highlighting two important components of service quality, namely technical quality and functional quality. Technical quality is treated as the quality of what consumer receives as a result of his or her interaction with a service firm, while the functional quality corresponds to the expressive performance of a service.

2.2. Airport Service Quality

The passengers experience a number of tangible and intangible customer services at airports. Accordingly, for the purpose of evaluating the service quality of airport services, especially, in terms of passengers' expectations, different models have been developed identifying the key dimensions with sub-dimensions associated with each key dimension; for instance, function, interaction, and diversion (Fodness & Murray, 2007), and pre-flight service quality, in-flight service quality, and post-flight service quality (Namukasa, 2013). According to Joanne (2008), excellent customer service is the synergy created when an airport's ability to exceed its customers' needs and expectations consistently matches its customers' perceptions. Meanwhile Joanne (2008) further states that customer satisfaction with the airport experience can be significantly improved and airport net revenues can be tracked to show direct relationship with increased customer satisfaction, if airport management takes a strategic and holistic approach to customer service and airport branding. Lubbe, Douglas and Zambellis (2011) have investigated passengers' perceptions of airport service quality in South Africa.

The three important dimensions of function, interaction, and diversion have been used to measure service quality in airport services. The respondents have rated interaction as the most important feature of airport service quality, while function as the second, followed by diversion. The results indicate that business passengers and leisure passengers have different opinions regarding the importance of services offered by airports, and of the level of performance. At the same time, significant differences have also been reported in the perceptions of frequent passengers and infrequent passengers. The empirical study on transfer passengers' perceptions of airport service quality conducted by Jin-Woo & Se-Yeon (2011) present that airport service quality would raise the level of transfer passengers' satisfaction, value perceptions, and airport image formation.

Moreover, airport service quality has an indirect impact on transfer passenger behavior by means of value, satisfaction, and airport image. Han, Hamb, Yang, & Baek (2012) studying the passengers' perception of airline lounges concludes that the food and beverage service is the most important factor influencing customer satisfaction and repeat patronage. Gupta, Arif, and Williams (2013) put emphasis on service quality improvement in airports, like any other sectors, where airport infrastructure is treated as the first and last point of tourists' contact in their trip to a country.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted with the purpose of evaluating perceived level of service quality of international passengers at airports with respect to their expected level of service quality. Accordingly, three dimensions of pre-flight service quality, inside service quality and post-flight service quality were used to measure overall service quality. Accordingly, the service quality gap between perceived service quality and expected service quality, as illustrated by the conceptual framework, was evaluated with respect to the three major dimensions of pre-flight service quality, inside service quality and post-flight service quality among international passengers. Convenience sampling technique was adopted to collect data, and passengers were contacted through hotels, transport service agencies and tour guide services. In addition, the international passengers who were waiting to depart from Sri Lanka after clearing immigration were also contacted. The data was collected from international passengers, who visited Sri Lanka from different regions such as Europe, USA, Australia, New Zealand and Asia, using a structured questionnaire. For the purpose of data collection, 300 questionnaires were distributed among international passengers. However, only 220 passengers responded to the questionnaire. Due to the incompleteness of the questionnaires, only 205 usable questionnaires were selected for the analysis. The responses were ranked by using 5-point likert-type scale as: strongly disagree denoting 1, disagree denoting 2, moderate denoting 3, agree denoting 4 and strongly agree denoting 5. Independent sample *t*-test was employed to test the differences of service quality between the perceived level and the expected level.

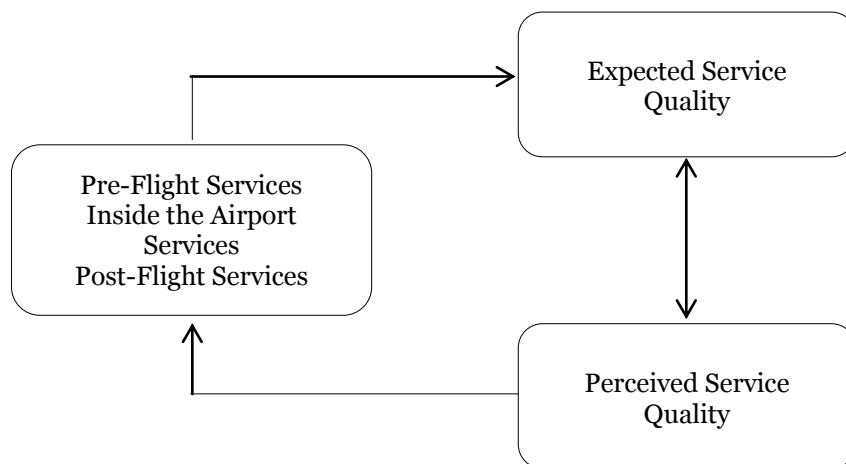


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

4. Results and Discussion

Table 01 shows the demographic statistics of the respondents. Accordingly, the percentage of respondents over age 50 years represented 30.3% and 18-35 category stands at 31.2% of the total sample. 27.3% represents the age category of 35-50 years, while less than 18 years is identified to be 11.2%. Meanwhile, the sample comprises of 81% male, and 19% of female, which means that most of the international passengers are male.

Table 1: Demographic Statistics of the Respondents

Variable	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Age Category		
<18	23	11.2
18-35	64	31.2
35-50	56	27.3
50<	62	30.3
Total	205	100.0
Gender		
Male	166	81.0
Female	39	19.0
Total	205	100.0
Region		
Asia	94	45.9
Europe	68	33.2
Australia/New Zealand	32	15.6
USA	05	2.4
Other	06	2.9
Total	205	100.0
Nature of Passengers		
Frequent	171	83.4
Infrequent	34	16.6
Total	205	100.0
Purpose of Travel		
Tourism and leisure	106	51.7
Business	54	26.3
Cultural Interest	32	15.7
Conference	13	6.3
Total	205	100.0

Source: Survey Data (2017)

The highest number of passengers, that is 94(45.9%) have come from the Asian region, while 68(33.2%) visited from Europe, and 32 (15.6%) from New Zealand. On the other hand, only 05 represent USA and the other 06 represent different countries in Africa and South America.

The nature of passengers was evaluated as frequent and infrequent. Accordingly, 171 (83.4%) respondents are frequent passengers, while 34 (16.6%) respondents were identified as infrequent passengers.

The majority of the passengers in the sample, 51.7% (106 respondents) in percentage, have visited Sri Lanka for tourism and leisure activities, while those in the next category, which is 26.3%(54 respondents) of the sample, have arrived for business purposes. At the same time, 32 passengers reported that they have arrived due to cultural interest, and another 13 have come to participate in the academic conferences.

4.1. Perceived versus Expected Service Quality of Passengers

The service quality offered passengers was evaluated using three dimensions, namely, pre-passenger service quality, airport inside service quality and post-flight service quality. The reliability test was employed to test the internal consistency of the items of the variables of the study. Table 02 shows that the Cronbach Alpha value is above 0.7 for each dimension of the service quality.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics of Study Dimensions

Dimensions of Service Quality	Alpha value	No of Items
SQ: Pre-Flight Services	0.952	26
SQ: Inside the Airport	0.872	16
SQ: Post-Flight Services	0.744	5

The service quality of pre-passenger services was measured using the five sub dimensions of passenger processing (with 02 items), speed of service (with 06 items), physical facilities (with 09 items), reliability (with 03 items), and responsiveness (with 06 items). Table 03 shows that the mean values of all the sub dimensions of perceived service quality are less than the expected level of service quality. Accordingly, independent sample *t* test results confirm the existence of a significant difference ($P < 0.05$) between the perceived level of service quality, and the expected level of service quality.

The service quality inside the airport was measured using two important components, namely, the experience at duty free shopping and experience at food and beverage offering. Table 04 shows the perceived level of service quality and the expected level of service quality, in terms of experience at duty free shopping, which was measured using the attributes of selection of outlets/shops, selection of products, the quality of products, value for money, speed of service, friendliness of the staff, ease of finding shops and atmosphere of shops.

Table 3: Perceived versus Expected Service Quality in Pre-Passenger Services

Construct	Mean (Perceived)	Mean (Expected)	Mean Difference	t- Value	Significance Level
Passenger Processing	3.84	4.04	0.20	-2.204	0.028
Speed of the Service	3.56	4.16	0.60	-12.077	0.000
Physical Facilities	3.61	4.16	0.55	-9.097	0.000
Reliability	3.69	4.17	0.48	-8.206	0.000
Responsiveness	3.67	4.16	0.49	-9.494	0.000

Source: Survey Data (2017)

Mean value of each attribute of perceived service quality was at a moderate level, while the expected level of service quality is reported to be a higher-level. Accordingly, *t*-test results confirm that a significant difference ($P < 0.01$) exists between the perceived and the expected levels of service quality of duty free shopping.

Table 4: Perceived Service Quality versus Expected Service Quality at Duty Free

Attributes	Mean (Perceived)	Mean (Expected)	Mean Difference	t - Value	Significance Level
Selection of Outlets	3.66	4.31	0.65	-10.916	0.000
Selection of Products	3.33	4.31	0.98	-13.85	0.000
Quality of Products	3.83	4.29	0.46	-8.255	0.000
Value for Money	3.01	4.43	1.42	-21.678	0.000
Speed of Service	3.51	4.46	0.95	-15.447	0.000
Friendliness of Staff	3.84	4.46	0.62	-8.797	0.000
Ease of Finding Shops	3.50	4.31	0.81	-13.221	0.000
Atmosphere of Shops	3.48	4.29	0.81	-10.85	0.000
Grand Mean	3.52	4.83	1.31	-50.77	0.000

Source: Survey Data (2017)

Table 5 shows the perceived level of service quality and the expected level of service quality inside the airport in terms of experience in food and beverage offering, which was measured by the service quality attributes of selection of restaurants, menu selection, the quality of foods/drinks, value for money, speed of service, friendliness of staff, availability of seating, and atmosphere of facilities. The mean value of each attribute shows a moderate level with

respect to the perceived level of service quality, while the expected level of service quality has reported a higher value. Accordingly, when the experience of tourists is compared with the services provided in the food and beverage offering, they have expressed that the importance of providing such benefits is high. For the purpose of identifying whether there is any significant difference between the perceived level and the expected level of service quality, independent samples *t*-test was employed. Accordingly, *t*-test results as shown in table 05, illustrate that a significant difference ($P < 0.01$) existed between the perceived and the expected level of service quality with respect to the food and beverages enjoyed.

Table 5: Perceived Service Quality versus Expected Service Quality of Food and Beverage

Attributes	Mean (Perceived)	Mean (Expected)	Mean Difference	<i>t</i> - Value	Significance Level
Selection of Restaurants	2.99	4.31	1.32	-13.972	0.000
Menu Selection	2.99	4.30	1.31	-14.043	0.000
Quality of Foods/drinks	3.12	4.34	1.22	-13.604	0.000
Value for Money	3.46	4.43	0.97	-10.302	0.000
Speed of Service	2.98	4.46	1.48	-15.570	0.000
Friendliness of Staff	3.63	4.46	0.83	-7.565	0.000
Availability of Seating	3.31	4.45	1.14	-12.381	0.000
Atmosphere of Facilities	2.97	4.29	1.32	-15.532	0.000
Grand Mean	3.18	4.85	1.67	-22.496	0.000

Source: Survey Data(2017)

The post-flight service quality of airport services was measured with the attributes of waiting time for baggage clearing, efficiency of check-out staff, time taken to leave the airport, courtesy of the airport staff and the overall baggage claim experience. As shown in table 06, the results of the independent samples *t*-test illustrate a significant difference ($P < 0.01$) between the perceived level of service quality and the expected level of service quality in post-flight services.

Airports play a significant role as the most important hub in the world, connecting people from all over the world, contributing massively for the development of each country by providing many countries an opportunity to earn a greater amount of foreign income supplying utilities to international passengers. Accordingly, it is evident that the airports are powerful engines of many economies, and over millions of international passengers use major airports daily. Specially, infrastructure and amenities of airports have a great impact on developing hospitality and tourism industry, as it is the place where international passengers are first welcomed, and the first impression of the country and its hospitality is developed. In

this context, the essential requirements of the international passengers should be seriously assessed to guarantee the satisfaction of them.

Since service quality has been identified as an essential component to satisfy customers, many organizations attempt to deliver a high level of quality of service, and they monitor to upgrade the service quality level on continuously. However, the results of this study illustrate that the expected level of service quality in airports among international passengers is relatively high compared to their perceived level of service quality.

Table 6: Perceived versus Expected Service Quality in Post-Flight Services

Attributes	Mean (Perceived)	Mean (Expected)	Mean Difference	t- Value	Significance Level
Waiting Time for Baggage Clearing	3.94	4.80	0.86	-16.604	0.000
Efficiency of Check-out Staff	3.98	4.34	0.36	-6.656	0.000
Less Time to Leave the Airport	3.69	4.33	0.64	-8.710	0.000
Courtesy of the Airport Staff	4.62	4.80	0.18	-3.853	0.000
Overall Baggage Claim Experience	3.87	4.65	0.78	-13.250	0.000
Grand Mean	4.02	4.58	0.56	-14.069	0.000

Source: Survey Data (2017)

All three components namely pre-flight service quality, inside service quality and post-flight service quality, which were used to measure the overall service quality have reported the same result. Therefore, it could be noted that the outcome of the study is decisive, and it also indicates that the decision makers should be committed to develop the infrastructure of airports and upgrade the level of services at all levels, including pre-flight services, inside services and post-flight services to develop a good impression among international passengers, and build a solid image, so as to promote the hospitality and tourism industry.

5. Conclusion

The study was conducted for the purpose of evaluating the perceived level of service quality of international passengers at airport against the expected level of service quality. The three dimensions, namely pre-flight service quality, inside service quality and post-flight service quality were used to measure the overall service quality. Data was collected using a structured

questionnaire from international passengers from different regions such as Europe, USA, Australia, New Zealand and Asia. Convenience sampling technique was adopted and 300 questionnaires were distributed among the international passengers. However, only 220 passengers responded to the questionnaire, and 205 usable questionnaires were selected for the analysis. The sample includes both male and female passengers from 18 to over 50 years old in age. The majority (171 passengers) were identified to be frequent passengers, while 34 were identified to be infrequent. In the case of evaluating the purpose of travel to Sri Lanka, it was identified that the majority of international passengers have visited for tourism and leisure activities, while some have visited due to cultural interest, and others visited for the purposes of engaging in business activities, and participating in educational and other conferences. The independent sample *t*-test was employed for the main purpose of evaluating the difference between the expected level of service quality and the perceived level of service quality of airports. The *t*-test results show a significant difference between the expected and the perceived level of service quality. Thus, it is decisive that expected level of service quality among international passengers of all three components, namely pre-flight services, inside services and post-flight services, is relatively high compared to their perceived level of service quality.

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