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Service quality of airports' food and beverage retailers. A fuzzy approach

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays the profitability of airports is largely based on non-aeronautical or commercial activities, and particularly on retail and food and beverage services. Further, researchers concur that shopping, eating and drinking in airports have to be considered an important part of tourists' experience and activities that can significantly enhance or damage the tourist destination image. Despite this, there is still little research that analyses how service quality (SQ) is perceived by passengers consuming food and beverages (F&B) in airport areas. This study aims to deepen the scientific debate on this topic. Specifically, this study applies fuzzy numbers with a sample of 551 passengers flying from Olbia-Costa Smeralda Airport (Sardinia Region, Italy) with the aim of determining how they perceive the SQ delivered by F&B retailers and whether age plays a determinant role in segmentation. Findings reveal which F&B features outperform others; furthermore, they show that age is a moderating factor in consumer satisfaction, with older passengers being less satisfied than their counterparts. This study adds knowledge to the literature devoted to SQ, applying a fuzzy number approach to the under-investigated research area related to F&B consumption in airport areas. Further, it provides information useful to airport managers on the features of F&B services that are most important in shaping consumer satisfaction, based also on their age. Limitations of the study are also discussed and suggestions for future research are given.

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1. Introduction

Forsyth (2006, p. 73) contends that the links between aviation and tourism are becoming recognized more explicitly and that these exert a considerable influence on the role of governments' aviation policies. This is particularly relevant to some islands within the European Union (EU), where bilateral agreements outside the EU unequivocally affect the nationalities of tourists that can be targeted in promotional activities by destination marketing organizations. Most of the islands in the EU do not have country sovereignty rights to negotiate aviation bilateral agreements freely and thus tourism development can be highly constrained. In islands, for obvious reasons, tourism development depends to a great extent on airport infrastructures and tourism policy makers and airport managers are very conscious that to be competitive in tourism,

aeronautical fares need to be low. The airline industry has exerted some pressure on airports to control the level of aeronautical charges, so airports have been obliged to find new ways of obtaining revenues through the development of new and more sophisticated commercial activities, with shopping and restaurant services being among the most important ones also in terms of their ability to affect airport operations (Rhoades et al., 2000).

Graham (2009) argues that there are some similarities and differences between high street and airport retailing that need to be analysed. Customers at airports tend to be more price-inelastic than high street customers because they are usually a captive market and belong to a high socio-economic group. The stress and shock customers experience at airports are not comparable. Another important difference is based on the primary function of airports as a modal interchange within the transport system that should not be compromised by the development of commercial activities. It is well known that many global brands with a good reputation operate in many of the airports around the world, e.g. Starbucks and McDonald's. However, airports have recently started to introduce a new revolutionary strategy, opening up to new local

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brands that are changing the uniformity observed in the past. [Assies \(2014\)](#) analyses these strategies in some European airports and finds that they are increasingly giving more relevance to local brands as a way of fulfilling the needs of consumers by providing an experience that reflects a sense of community and place.

Over the past few decades, globalization has played a major role in modifying habits of eating out ([Warde and Martens, 2000](#)). Eating out is an activity that has more than economic implications as it is influenced by consumers' social and cultural backgrounds and has become an important habit in the modern way of life. This trend is also relevant to companies managing food and beverage (F&B) services in airport areas, where eating and drinking has to be considered an important part of tourists' experience and thus can enhance or damage the tourist destination image. Every year, more than 900 million people, including businessmen, commuters, tradesmen, occasional travellers and tourists, use airports around the world. In 2010, non-aeronautical revenues worldwide made up 46.5% of industry revenue. Specifically, they accounted for USD 35 billion, with F&B having a market value of USD 10 billion ([The Foodie Report, 2011](#)), thus generating higher profit margins than aeronautical activities ([ACI, 2012](#)). It is estimated that the number of airport passengers may reach 7.3 billion by the year 2017, thus determining a significant increase in the F&B sector, which may be worth up to USD 18 billion in seven years' time ([The Foodie Report, 2011](#)). According to ACI ([FAB, 2011](#)), this market may even double in size by 2027, reaching up to 11 billion passengers with an annual revenue of USD 35 billion.

To date, there has been very little research examining the consumer F&B behaviour in airport areas ([Geuens et al., 2004](#)), which are often the main gate and the first service encounter for tourists visiting a tourism destination. Prior research has analysed the influence of emotions ([Volkova, 2009](#); [Martinelli, 2012](#)), stress ([Thomas, 1997](#)), length of stay prior to embarkation ([Torres et al., 2005](#)) and type of flight ([Appold and Kasarda, 2006](#)). With regard to the latter, [Graham \(2009\)](#) claims that F&B services are more important in airports that have a very high number of low-cost carrier flights and that do not offer free in-flight catering. Finally, recent research has started to analyse consumers' valuations of their experience and perceptions of the service provided. For example, [Han et al. \(2012\)](#) examined the influence of service quality (SQ) on overall satisfaction and intentions to revisit airline lounges and discovered that the quality of F&B was the strongest predictor of satisfaction and revisit intention. However, it can be argued that the literature on SQ in F&B retailers is still scarce.

Knowing that airport passengers are in some sense a captive market, airport managers might be tempted to misrepresent the relative importance that SQ plays in maximizing the benefits of all the commercial activities, in particular, those of F&B retailers. To this end, the overall goals of this study were to: (1) analyse SQ in the F&B retailers in one Sardinian airport (Olbia Costa Smeralda Airport) by employing a method based on triangular fuzzy numbers and the similarity to ideal solutions; (2) examine the different department dimensions under analysis distinguishing the areas that require an immediate enhancing SQ program from those that are currently well managed; (3) analyse the dimensions whose SQ performance is more or less heterogeneous in order to develop possible contingency procedures; (4) study whether age acts as a moderating effect of the SQ experienced at the F&B retailers; (5) analyse the SQ elasticity over each of the dimensions included in the study obtaining this for each of the age-segments; (6) provide some policy recommendations to airport and F&B retail managers on the department dimensions that are critical in shaping consumer satisfaction where age has been used to segment the market.

As mentioned above, the research importance of the sector of F&B retailers in airports has been neglected and this paper fills

somehow this evident gap. The originality of this paper resides in the application of a well-known methodology that is based on the fuzzy logic and the similarity to ideal solutions to analyse the SQ on the F&B retailers in airports, a sector that has been scarcely studied. Specifically, this paper contributes to the existing strand of literature on SQ applying fuzzy numbers with a sample of 551 passengers with the aim of determining how they perceive the SQ delivered by F&B retailers and whether age plays a determinant role in segmentation.

2. Literature review

As [Graham \(2008, p. 187\)](#) has pointed out, "there have been a number of factors which have contributed to the growth in dependence on non-aeronautical revenues". The main factors can be listed as follows: (1) paradigmatic moves towards commercialization and privatization within the industry have given airports greater freedom to develop their commercial policies and diversify into new areas; (2) competitive forces in the airline industry have led them to exert increasing pressure on the airport industry to control the level of aeronautical fees which are being levied; (3) passengers nowadays are more sophisticated and experienced airport shoppers, who demand not only good SQ, but also outstanding value for money with regard to the commercial facilities on offer; (4) a trend of increasing airport competition, especially between tourism and hub airports, has also played a determinant role in the development of non-aeronautical revenues.

Commercial revenues cannot be optimal if an offer is made without listening to the customers. Airport managers, as with other commercial and F&B retail managers, need to win the hearts and minds of particular segments of passengers at airports. As noted by [Whiteley \(1994\)](#), great companies do not just focus on the customers but develop a relationship with them. They listen to customers and customers become an integral part of all company processes and decisions. Every decision is driven by giving customers what they want. [Wireback \(2001\)](#) contends that the success of business today is heavily dependent on the adaptability and flexibility to adjust to the changing requirements of customers. The author concludes that good companies are customer-focused, but great companies are customer-driven. [Shen et al. \(2000\)](#) point out that dynamics are also important as listening to customers' needs and wants cannot be simply made with a static horizon, but rather there is a need to anticipate long-term customer needs and preferences in the future. Similarly, [Shamma and Hassan \(2013\)](#) contend that companies need to use more customer-driven benchmarking techniques as a way not only of providing a clear direction and methods for learning from customers by initiating value-added services that exceed their expectations, but moreover helping to sustain a company's performance and competitiveness in the long term. Thus, airports need to be engaged in research to analyse (i) the passenger profiles of those shopping at airports and where, when and what they buy, (ii) the profiles of those who do not shop and why and (iii) the SQ provided by different retailers with an analysis of the value for money of the products. This type of research needs to be updated on a regular basis to adapt offers dynamically to the passengers' changing preferences ([Graham, 2008](#)).

As airports have evolved far beyond the pure functional infrastructure facilities of earlier decades, the number and variety of retail businesses has increased substantially in venues such as shops, restaurants, convention centres and even entertainment facilities, for example museums or cinemas ([Fuerst et al., 2011](#)). This trend is part of a strategy to expand commercial services at airports that has been observed particularly in international departure terminals ([Rowley and Slack, 1999](#)). In line with this trend, the ratio

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