



Exploring different nationality perceptions of airport service quality



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ABSTRACT

In order to attain a sustainable competitive advantage, airports should strive to enhance multicultural passenger satisfaction through the provision of high quality services. The purpose of the current study is to determine the specific service quality components that can lead to increased traveler satisfaction in an international airport environment, and to evaluate the degree to which passenger perceptions of airport facilities, as well as levels of satisfaction, vary according to different nationalities. In order to achieve this objective, this paper examines the equivalence of service quality and satisfaction measures by applying the Rasch modelling technique. Airport service quality is found to be comprised of three distinct dimensions, namely "Servicescape and Image", "Signage" and "Services" and significant differences with service quality perceptions are exhibited among travelers of different nationalities. Overall, the results highlight the need to assess scale equivalence across different nationalities.

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1. Introduction

The continuous rise of international air traffic and the presence of fierce competition among different airports led the General Assembly of Airports Council International (ACI), to recognize that the quality of service at airports is a "vital factor in its own right" (Airports Council International, 2004). It has resulted in a call for an increased management effort towards adopting customer oriented management practices in the airport industry and initiatives to improve customer satisfaction (Arif et al., 2013). Moreover the multicultural nature of this industry, where millions of passengers coming from different nationalities and cultures interact and experience the same airport services, necessitates increased effort to be devoted towards understanding their multicultural standards and evaluations, creating appropriate physical environments, designing efficient services and finally offering satisfaction. It is further emphasized that airport facilities and airport services are the first experiences that a passenger receives upon arrival, and some scholars (e.g. Rendeiro Martín-Cejas, 2006) state that these experiences may even influence quality perceptions for the overall voyage.

Today the role of airport service quality is recognized as one of several attributes that contribute to airport attractiveness (others

include routes, scheduling, location and prices) and its importance is highly valued towards the creation of an overall customer orientation and competitive advantage in the airport industry. The need to further explore the nature of airport service quality and its components is therefore evident in the relevant transport and marketing literature (Fodness and Murray, 2007) and is considered to be relevant for airport authorities for better allocating resources and organizing their investment strategies (Liou et al., 2011). However the very nature of airport services, where many cultures and nationalities interact, further complicates passenger satisfaction measurements and airport quality evaluations, as customers from different countries of origin tend to differently evaluate the same service quality they receive (Kuo, 2007; Pantouvakis, 2013). Recent research has focused on the issue by exploring quality perception variations between different nationalities travelling on-board airlines (Lu and Ling, 2008). However multi-national quality and satisfaction measurements and comparisons are very rare inside the environment of an airport. Moreover there is a lack of unanimity among scholars regarding the quality components that can generate high passenger satisfaction at an international airport.

Drawing evidence from 911 multinational passengers departing from Fiumicino Airport in Rome, Italy (Aeroporti di Roma), this study attempts to make several contributions to the airport research agenda. First, by synthesizing the relevant literature it attempts to empirically investigate and introduce a model for measuring airport service quality. Second, this research –for the first time in airport industry– investigates airport user satisfaction

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from a cross-cultural perspective diverting from taxonomies of frequent-infrequent travellers. Third, it is among the very few studies (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Wooliscroft, 2013) that examine cross-cultural differences in response styles by considering and measuring the equivalence of satisfaction and quality measures among passengers/airport facilities users of different nationalities. This is achieved by employing Rasch Modeling (RM) techniques in order to examine users' perceptions, independently of the instrument used to measure them, or their nationality. This way cultural differences or cross cultural equivalence, both qualitatively and quantitatively, is established prior to any further analysis to ensure that semantic meanings, and familiarity with the scale type and scale gradation, does not produce any measurement bias (Mullen, 1995).

A key final feature of our study is that we explore and compare the satisfaction and quality perceptions of airport users before and after the RM to identify and show whether this discrimination among nationalities produces meaningful and comparable results. Two sets of underlying dimensions of airport service quality (without and with RM) have been produced and potential differences in perceptions of satisfaction of group of users have been clearly identified.

The paper is divided into five sections. The next section presents a literature review on the Rasch method, airport service quality and nationalities issues. The data collection process is described in the methodology section, while the data collected are analyzed in the results and discussion section. Finally, the paper's conclusions and implications are summarized in the last section.

2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

2.1. Airport service quality

Considering the rapidly changing nature of the airport industry, airports should place a strong emphasis on improving the service quality, or in other words the perceived level of service delivered to their passengers (Francis et al., 2003) by meeting or exceeding airport users' demands (Fodness and Murray, 2007). Service quality improvement strategies can be effective if based on an appropriate identification and selection of quality attributes to be improved (Lin et al., 2009). In this regard, airport service quality literature has attempted to highlight the complicated nature of airport services, either through the development of conceptual models that reflect the different dimensions of airport service quality (Fodness and Murray, 2007), or by focusing towards revealing the quality drivers that lead to airport users' satisfaction (Bogicevic et al., 2013). However most of the existing literature deviates from classical service quality measurement by focusing at an attribute level and by forming the passenger's perception of quality mainly from surrogates of other stakeholders' opinions. For example the works of Rhoades et al. (2000), Chen (2002) and Yeh and Kuo (2003) considered customer perceptions through the views of airport operators or consultants. On the other hand recent studies (Tsai et al., 2011; Liou et al., 2011) have tested conceptual models by taking responses from passengers of one context (Taiwan), arguing in favor of a more cultural focused examination. Finally Fodness and Murray (2007) used a sample of frequent flyers with an annual income of \$50,000 from the US to provide insight into the process of airport service quality measurement.

In discussing their conceptual models, authors have noted that airport quality may be decomposed into a number of discrete but different dimensions, even though every author has argued in favour of their own model. Some authors have discussed that airport service quality can be aggregated into a small number of dimensions, such as function, interaction and diversion (Fodness

and Murray, 2007) or physical environment and interaction and outcome attributes (Tsai et al., 2011), while others have argued that the complicated nature of an airport context can be captured through the use of a more extended set of quality factors. For example, Liou et al. (2011) investigated passenger perceptions of the overall landside level of airport service and extracted eight distinct dimensions of airport service quality, while Yeh and Kuo (2003) utilized six service attributes for passenger evaluation of Asia–Pacific international airports, namely comfort, processing time, convenience, courtesy of staff, information visibility and security. All research, however, tends to coincide with a number of dimensions, commonly and discretely identified by scholars, which are considered as best descriptors of airport quality.

Those dimensions are:

- The “**Servicescape**” of the airport.

In line with Bitner (1992) several authors have investigated the servicescape dimensions in an airport context and concluded that these may include airport facilities circulation planning attributes (Tsai et al., 2011) and other features such as cleanliness and lighting conditions, the congestion level and the overall ambience of the airport (Yeh and Kuo, 2003). Moreover, in their recent study, Jeon and Kim (2012) identified the constructs that constitute an international airport servicescape and argued that they include the ambient, functional, esthetic, safety, and social factors.

- The “**Signage**” or the level and quality of information and guidance available at the airport.

The availability of signs and flight displays (Liou et al., 2011) as well as the provision of clear and frequent information for flights and guidance for airport facilities (De Barros et al., 2007) are assumed to be necessary prerequisites contributing to high-perceived service quality.

- The “**Service**”

Along with the provision of an ambient environment and a proper orientation system inside and outside an airport building, the airport should be directed towards minimizing the passengers' throughput time. As the passenger is physically present in all airport operations the facilitating or frustrating way that time is spent within facilities is crucial in forming an overall service level perception. It can be related to average waiting time and crowding levels for airport facilities (Rendeiro Martín-Cejas, 2006) or to the waiting time at the airport's security screening points (Gkritza et al., 2006) and thus efficient control procedures and proper training of staff (Correia and Wirasinghe, 2007) is crucial. Apart from the time dimension, other attributes that form the passengers' perception of the speed of control procedures are the skills and quality of airport staff during daily airport control processes. The existence of certain attributes of airport staff, such as courtesy, helpfulness and competence, has been emphasized by various authors (eg. Yeh and Kuo, 2003; Liou et al., 2011). Specifically, De Barros et al. (2007) asserted that transfer passengers tend to appraise the politeness of the security check employees to a great extent.

In summary, the servicescape elements, the signage or the availability of information and guidance facilities, as well as the service or efficacy of control inspections and service provision, have been introduced as factors that can shape the overall service quality as perceived by air travelers. Moreover, in line with Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991), this current study incorporates a fourth dimension of airport service quality representing the users' evaluations of

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