



A cross cultural investigation of airlines service quality through integration of Servqual and the Kano model



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the service quality attributes of airlines with regard to their effect on customer satisfaction in a cross-cultural context. The applicability of a modified Servqual instrument as a means of measuring customers' perceptions and expectations is explored using respondents from USA and Turkey. The study is unique as it integrates the Servqual scale and the Kano model in a complementary way. The findings reveal that the Servqual gap scores are negative in both USA and Turkey, in all areas of service quality, indicating that customers' perceptions fall far short of their expectations. For the Kano model, it is demonstrated that the general structure of the scale is the same for both countries. However, the two countries differ in certain service quality attributes as far as prioritization. This has implications for the formulation of airline marketing strategies. While some degree of standardization is necessary for certain service elements, especially if the airline is catering for the international market, there are certain service attributes that should be designed to meet local needs and expectations.

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1. Introduction

In the air transport sector, where the environment is intensively competitive, airlines need to develop a better understanding of the needs, expectations, and priorities held by their customers. Thus the efforts of measuring service quality within the sector have become increasingly important to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage by creating consumer satisfaction.

However, to measure service quality constitutes only the first step in differentiating an organization from its competitors. The traditional approach implies that the higher the perceived service quality, the higher the customer's satisfaction. Today it is widely accepted that the relationship between the dimensions of service quality and customer satisfaction may exhibit a nonlinear pattern which means that paying more attention to a particular dimension of service quality may not always lead to higher customer satisfaction (Kano et al., 1984). Thus, categorizing service quality elements according to their effects on customer satisfaction is also required.

Moreover, for the airlines that aim to expand their markets in the international arena, comparable data about customer perceptions and their effect on customer satisfaction will be needed from the expanded markets. However, in the airline sector, the studies that measure the relative importance of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in a cross-cultural context are relatively limited.

Therefore, the primary purpose of this paper is to examine service quality attributes of airlines with regard to their effects on customer satisfaction in a cross-cultural context, with the countries studied being the United States and Turkey. Further, this topic is addressed by integrating the Servqual scale into the Kano model.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, a conceptual background and literature review are presented, followed by a section outlining the methodology and design of the research. Subsequently, results are presented followed by a section discussing the findings as well as the conclusions.

2. Conceptual background and literature review

2.1. Service quality

The most commonly used measure of service quality has been the "Servqual" scale (Ladhari, 2009:172) originally developed and

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refined by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988, 1994). They (1985) developed the gap theory to measure the service quality construct and conceptualized service quality as the difference (gap) between the customers' expectations about a service and customers' perceptions of the actual performance of this service. Consequently, in contrast to objective quality, service quality can be assessed through measurement of the extent to which the offered service performance meets customer expectations. Originally tested in five service settings: retail banking, credit card services, repair and maintenance of electrical appliances, long-distance telephone services, and title brokerage (Ladhari, 2009:172), the scale consists of 22 items representing five dimensions, which are "tangibles", "reliability", "responsiveness", "assurance" and "empathy". Subsequently, the scale has been widely used to measure service quality in a variety of service industries.

Increasing interest has been paid to the Servqual scale in the airline sector as well. Sultan and Simpson (2000) conducted an empirical examination of passengers of airlines competing on the trans-Atlantic corridor using a Servqual scale. The results revealed that Americans and Europeans believe that reliability is the most important aspect of airline-service quality and tangibles is least important. Tsauro et al. (2002) found tangibles to be of most concern and empathy to be the least. Meanwhile, comparing the differences in passengers' expectations of the desired airline service quality, Gilbert and Wong (2003) found that there were statistically significant different expectations among passengers of different ethnic groups/nationalities. The findings also indicated that passengers consistently rank 'assurance' as the most important service dimension. Park et al. (2004) also considered the Servqual scale and emphasized the significant effects of service value, passenger satisfaction, and airline image on air passengers' decision-making processes.

Using the gap model as well as Servqual, Chen and Chang (2005) indicated that there were significant differences between the passengers' service expectations and actual service received. Park et al. (2006) examined the effects of airline service quality on passengers' future behavioral intentions and showed that it was a significant driver of passenger satisfaction and perceived value, which impact passengers' behavioral intentions. In addition, Pakdil and Aydin (2007) measured airline service quality for a Turkish airline using weighted Servqual scores derived from factor analysis. The results demonstrated that the responsiveness dimension was most important, while availability was the least important element. Lu and Ling (2008) showed that although the same culture and language exists in Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, perceptions of airline service quality varied among Taiwan and Mainland China travelers.

Huang (2009) also explored air passengers' decision-making processes by testing a conceptual model that considered service value, airline service quality, satisfaction, perceived sacrifice, and behavioral intentions via structural equation modeling (SEM) and importance-performance analysis (IPA). The SEM results showed that service value is the major factor that may influence behavioral intention. As a nonlinear approach, IPA results indicated that responsiveness is the most important airline service quality attribute.

Meanwhile, using Servqual and fuzzy Topsis approaches, Nejati et al. (2009) reviewed the most important airline service quality factors in the eyes of Iranian customers. Chau and Kao (2009) applied the Servqual model to identify critical performance measures in the airline industry, exploring differences between Eastern and Western cultural expectations and delivery. The findings showed that service quality dimensions in the airline industry did not vary across cultures and had a significant impact on customer satisfaction and service value. In addition Liou et al. (2011) applied a

modified VIKOR method to analyze four Taiwan airlines' overall service quality. The authors integrated the modified Servqual model into an importance and performance analysis and then, based on the modified VIKOR method, they prioritized the gaps for improvement. Chou et al. (2011) constructed a fuzzy weighted Servqual method to also evaluate and understand service quality of a Taiwanese airline. The findings showed that the most important service dimension was reliability and assurance.

As can be seen, most of the prior studies implicitly or explicitly assume a linear relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. So, given that paying more attention to a particular dimension of service quality may not always lead to higher customer satisfaction, there is a lack of research concerning the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the airline sector. This paper attempts to fill this void. In this context, among several models, the Kano model enables one to determine the most valued requirements for consumer satisfaction. Moreover, the Kano model can be considered as a basic tool to overcome the misconception of linearity between service quality attributes (or dimensions) and customer satisfaction.

2.2. Kano model

The Kano model enables one to explore the components of service quality of a commercial airline that affect customer satisfaction and furthermore, the role of these service characteristics on a customer's perception of quality. In this context, Kano et al. (1984) classified product features into three distinct categories, each of which affects customer satisfaction in a different way when met: "must be" (basic) attributes, "one-dimensional" (performance) attributes and "attractive" (excitement) attributes (Baki et al., 2009:109).

Must be attributes can be defined as the basic attributes of service quality in terms of customer satisfaction. In other words, basic features are essential for all customers. Consequently, if these requirements are not fulfilled, it will lead to a strong dissatisfaction of the customers. On the other hand, fulfilling must be requirements will not lead to high levels of satisfaction (see Fig. 1).

Customer satisfaction can be described as a linear function of the one-dimensional attributes. As can be seen in Fig. 1, one-dimensional attributes will lead to customer satisfaction when fulfilled, and will lead to customer dissatisfaction when not fulfilled. Customer satisfaction level increases linearly with the level of such attributes. So, they are both a necessary and sufficient condition for customer satisfaction (Busacca and Padula, 2005) and can be used in obtaining a competitive advantage.

Attractive attributes lead to high levels of customer satisfaction when fulfilled, but do not cause any dissatisfaction when not fulfilled because they are not expected by customers, who may be unaware of such product features (Shen et al., 2000:92). So, these attributes are a sufficient, but not a necessary condition for satisfaction (Busacca and Padula, 2005). Excitement attributes have a strategic significance in helping airlines to create a competitive advantage.

Although the Kano model was originally employed to enhance product quality development in manufacturing, it has been applied to various service industries (Kuo et al., 2010). In the services sector, the Kano model and Servqual are commonly used in a complementary way in order to achieve customer satisfaction [see Lim et al., 1999 (healthcare); Pawitra and Tan, 2003 (tourism); Chen and Kuo, 2011 (banking); Sahney, 2011 (education)]. Integrating the Kano model to Servqual may help to eliminate the main criticism of Servqual-the linearity assumption, and, therefore, could offer researchers an opportunity to identify specific customer

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