

Passenger Expectations Of Full-Service Airlines' Service Quality After COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

In this research, passengers' service quality expectations of full-service airlines after the outbreak of COVID-19 were studied and compared with reference to travel behaviors and purposes. The results from 400 questionnaires indicated that the majority of full-service passengers travelled for leisure purposes and valued in-flight services and experiences as an important measure of the airline's service quality. Further analysis also revealed that the dimension of employees was observed to have the highest expectation level ($\bar{x} = 6.09 / S.D. = .596$) in terms of professional appearance, personal hygiene, product knowledge, rhetoric, and excellent communication skills, respectively. Based on the hypothesis test results, it can be overall concluded that 1) service activities were positively correlated with gender and education. and 2) the recognition of tangibles expected towards the service quality after the pandemic was reported different ($\text{sig.}=.008$) among passengers with different travel purposes, at a statistically significant level of 0.05.

Keywords: Full-service Airlines, Service Quality, Airline Business, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

The situation of coronavirus (COVID-19) spread had noticeably worsened and subsequently escalated the complete closure of airspace across many countries by March 2020. The lockdown measures including air travel restrictions were implemented and, as a result, significantly reduced the number of passengers for international flights around the world. According to the International Civil Aviation Organization (2020), the decline in air transportation rates worldwide was mainly due to the drop in demand for passenger air transport despite the 9% increase in air freight volumes. These led

to a halt of many airlines with an attempt to save operating costs. Given the more relaxed COVID policies, airlines have however had to adapt drastically to attend to the change in passengers' travel behaviors (Lorène, 2020).

At present, the aviation business models are being transformed with a shifting of emphasis from passenger transports to freight services and delivery of medical supplies and assistance. Driven by the need to adapt to the crisis brought on by the pandemic, many airlines have temporarily converted their passenger carriers into freighters until the circumstances improve (Vorakamnueng, 2020). Fortunately, Thailand's air travel later started to recover after the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand (CAAT) had allowed airports to resume normal operations while mandatorily adopting heightened safety measures. Given the shifting travel behaviors, unnecessary routes were cut down with hygiene and safety becoming more of utmost concern. Accordingly, the pre-during-post flight measures including body temperature screening, mask wearing, and hand sanitizing throughout the terminals as well as on board flights are strictly monitored.

The SERVQUAL theory by Zeithaml et al. (1990) has considerably been applied in research studies to assess the quality of service in the airline industry. It was found that responsiveness (the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service) and empathy (the caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers) were determined to be most salient among the other key dimensions of airline service quality (Pakdil & Aydin, 2007). This indicated that passenger experience through service channels should be enhanced to give good accessibility and convenience. As supported by Lambert & Luiz (2011), the consideration of cross-cultural differences that may be present across individuals of different needs should also need to be treated carefully in order to manage service quality and ensure that passenger expectations are met.

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand's airlines have undertaken the tasks of reshaping their business strategies and preparing a safe return to normal operations for domestic and international flights to address passenger needs and restore their confidence in air travel. The findings of this study can therefore be served as useful guidance for how service can be qualified in response to passenger expectations of full-service airlines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Quality

As described by Parasuraman et al. (1988), service quality is an overall judgement towards a product or service based on reasons, assessment characteristics, beliefs, and assessors' attitudes. Moreover, Zeithaml et al. (1990) pointed out that the assessment of service quality also marks the excellence and superiority of the service as perceived by the customer. This perceived service quality is the global assessment through comparisons of customers' expectations of service quality with their perceptions of actual service delivered by the service providers. The

concept is in line with Zineldin's (1996) study, suggesting that the service quality expectation is in relation to the preference of the service after receiving information about that particular service. According to Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Agmapisarn (2020), the measurement of service quality was developed into the SERVQUAL model as an approach to identifying the 5 dimensions of service quality experienced by customers, that is, tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Taken together, it can be said that the awareness of excellent service that matches customer expectations can be seen as contributing to customer satisfaction, impression and a sense of worthiness which can in turn instill credibility and loyalty into the customers.

SERVQUAL

In this research, the indicators of full-service airlines' service quality in the post-COVID-19 era were determined by using the SERVQUAL devised by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The model comprises a rundown of 5 measurements - Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy - which served to gauge the quality of airline service in substantial lines of research (Pakdil & Aydin, 2007; Ariffin et al., 2010; Lambert & Luiz, 2011; Jiang, 2013). After a series of investigations into relevant previous research studies, 3 additional dimensions along with certain adjustments were taken into account as follows to ensure the new normal service quality of full-service airlines can be captured. 1) Tangibles 2) Reliability, Assurance and Hygiene 3) Responsiveness 4) Empathy 5) Employees 6) Affordability 7) Flight availability.

METHODOLOGY

This survey research was conducted using a quantitative method and also approved by the Institutional Human Research Ethics Board of Rangsit University, Thailand.

1) Population and sample: 400 air passengers who were living in Thailand and travelled with full-service airlines. This sample size was calculated using the Yamane's (1973) formula, with a 95% confidence level.

2) Measurement and questionnaire design:

The data were collected through a questionnaire of close-ended questions to investigate the real expectations of passengers towards the quality of airline service and to elevate the quality standards of full-service airlines. The questionnaires consisted of 3 sections: respondent general profiles, individual characteristics associated with travel behaviors, and passenger expectation levels of full-service airlines' service quality. The dimensions of service quality in the last section were measured on a 7-rating Likert's (1932) scale - from 7 (most expected) to 1 (least expected) - as it is considered the most accurate and offers a range of options where a true midpoint can be selected.

The questionnaire items were reviewed by 3 experts and tested for content validity (IOC: 0.67-1.00). Plus, the reliability of the questionnaire was examined with Cornbach's alpha coefficient, indicating an acceptable value of .972.

3) Data analysis: This research employed both descriptive and inferential statistics. Data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, chi-square test, and one-way ANOVA with a statistical significance of 0.05.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the largest group of passengers who participated in this study was female (50.80%) whose age was between 40-49 years old (47.80%) and education level was bachelor's degree (67.50%).

Table 2 presents the analysis results of travel behaviors of passengers who chose to fly with full-service airlines. The majority of respondents travelled around 11-15 times

(34.50%) for leisure purposes (59.30%). Besides, the operational process during flight (27%) was deemed to be the most important in all respects. Where the quality of service is concerned, passengers attended more to check-in receptions during the pre-flight process, in-flight food and beverage quantity and services as well as the post-flight baggage delivery system.

Table 1 Demographic profile of respondents (n = 400)

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	197	49.3
	Female	203	50.8
Age	Less than 20	4	1.0
	20 – 29	64	16.0
	30 – 39	122	30.5
	40 – 49	191	47.8
	50 – 59	15	3.8
	Older than 60	4	1.0
Education	Under bachelor's degree	12	3.0
	Bachelor's degree	207	67.5
	Master's degree	98	24.5
	Doctoral degree	20	5.0

Table 2 Frequency and percentage of travel behaviors of respondents (n = 400)

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Frequency and number of trips	1 – 5 times	42	10.5
	6 – 10 times	94	23.5
	11 – 15 times	138	34.5
	16 – 20 times	106	26.5
	Over 20 times	20	5.0
Purpose of trips	Leisure	237	59.3
	Business / Seminar	129	32.3
	Family or relative visit	34	8.5
Process orientation	Pre - flight	108	27.0
	During flight	290	72.5
	Post flight	2	0.5

Table 3 Analytical summary of expectation levels of respondents towards the service quality of full-service airlines after the outbreak of COVID-19

Mean and standard deviations of passenger expectation levels (n=400)

Dimension	\bar{X}	S.D.	Expectation level
Tangibles	5.06	.778	relatively high
Reliability, Assurance and Hygiene	5.60	.734	high
Responsiveness	6.05	.707	high
Empathy	5.89	.505	high
Employees	6.09	.596	high
Affordability	6.00	.739	high
Flight availability	5.87	.611	high

TOTAL	5.79	.459	high
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From Table 3, the analysis of passenger expectations towards the service quality of full-service airlines demonstrated that, compared with other dimensions, passengers had the highest expectations on service quality regarding employees ($\bar{x} = 6.09 / S.D.=.596$). This was followed by responsiveness ($\bar{x} = 6.05 / S.D.=.707$), affordability ($\bar{x} = 6.00 / S.D.=.739$), empathy ($\bar{x} = 5.89 / S.D.=.505$), flight availability ($\bar{x} = 5.87 / S.D.=.611$), reliability, assurance and hygiene ($\bar{x} = 5.60 / S.D.=.734$), and tangibles ($\bar{x} = 5.06 / S.D.=.778$), respectively.

Certain aspects of each dimension which obtained the highest scores are addressed as follows. As for tangibles, service items are expected to be wrapped for individual use in a separate package with a certification mark for hygiene and sanitation ($\bar{x} = 6.69 / S.D.=.771$). The second dimension - reliability, assurance and hygiene - entails the cleanliness of the interior and cabin and the

comfort level of seats and on board facilities ($\bar{x} = 6.57 / S.D.=.850$). As for responsiveness, fast access to check-in processes which allow seat self-selection were viewed as vital for the full-service airlines' service quality ($\bar{x} = 6.46 / S.D.=.843$). To ascertain the empathy dimension is met, with caring attention air staff are expected to be able to provide the personalized and individualized services to passengers ($\bar{x} = 6.29 / S.D.=.770$). In terms of employees, crew members are demanded to appear well-groomed and maintain good personal hygiene for skin, hair, fingernails and body odor, to name a few ($\bar{x} = 6.37 / S.D.=.980$). The other aspect of service quality called affordability involves the ticket conditions and policies that would allow greater flexibility to satisfy the needs of the passengers ($\bar{x} = 6.22 / S.D.=.981$). Last, the flight availability is reflected by the adequacy and vast selection of flight schedules ($\bar{x} = 6.19 / S.D.=.937$).

Table 4 Correlation between demographic profiles and service activities (n = 400)

Variables		χ^2	df	Sig.	Result
Pre Flight	Gender	10.885	4	.028*	related
	Age	18.903	20	.528	unrelated
	Education	12.818	12	.032*	related
During Flight	Gender	16.909	4	.002*	related
	Age	28.647	20	.095	unrelated
	Education	23.743	12	.022*	related
Post Flight	Gender	8.283	3	.041*	related
	Age	35.878	15	.002*	related
	Education	8.965	9	.440*	related

*Significant difference at 0.05 level

Table 5 Comparative Difference between the average expectation of service quality and purpose of travel (n=400)

Dimension	Purpose of travel ($\bar{x} / S.D.$)	Difference
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	leisure	business / seminar	family or relative visit	F	sig.
Tangibles	5.09 / .725	5.10 / .746	4.66 / 1.113	4.927	.008*
Reliability, Assurance and Hygiene	5.63 / .650	5.60 / .705	5.34 / .1223	2.433	.089
Responsiveness	6.07 / .705	6.07 / .668	5.81 / .837	2.107	.123
Empathy	5.90 / .470	5.89 / .564	5.79 / .513	.650	.523
Employees	6.09 / .553	6.12 / .613	5.94 / .790	1.209	.300
Affordability	5.97 / .708	6.06 / .686	5.88 / 1.085	1.067	.345
Flight availability	5.84 / .561	5.90 / .620	5.69 / .885	1.534	.204

*Significant difference at 0.05 level

As illustrated in Table 4, the pre-flight and during-flight service activities were correlated to all demographic factors except age whereas the post-flight service activities were correlated to all variables.

Altogether, it was found that passengers gave most importance to check-in receptions. Furthermore, the quality and quantity of in-flight food and beverages were most valued and the timeliness of baggage transport were regarded as the most important post-flight factor.

It can be seen from Table 5 that tangibles was the only one aspect of service quality where passengers showed differences in travel purposes and expectation levels. When compared by the LSD (Least Significant Difference) test, passengers who mainly travelled for leisure reported different average expectation score from those whose travel purpose was family/relative visit at statistically significant level of 0.05 (Sig. = .003). Correspondingly, the average expectation score of business travelers was perceived to be distinct from that of passengers who mostly travelled to visit their family/relatives at statistically significant level of 0.05 (Sig. = .003).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

1) The majority of full-service flyers was leisure and business travelers. This result substantiated such previous findings as those reported by Law et al. (2022) in which leisure and business were the main travel purposes among the Laotians flying with full-service carriers. Also as reported by Saleem et al. (2017), the most frequent travelers of Pakistan Airlines were those who regularly flew domestically and internationally for leisure and business purposes. The findings further revealed that service activities together with experiences with regard to the hygiene of in-flight food and beverage services and pre-flight check-in receptions were found most valued, respectively. This was in line with the study of Ngammak (2020), in which the provision of quick response for check-in via website/application was highlighted by passengers who travelled with commercial airlines.

2) In this study, the researcher used SERVQUAL to measure service quality. To achieve quality service of full-service airlines after the COVID-19 pandemic, recommendations are proposed as follows:

2.1 Tangibles - Passengers who regularly travelled with full-service airlines preferred service items wrapped for individual use in a separate package with a certification mark for hygiene and sanitation. Their expectations also included lounges with fully-equipped facilities and seating arrangement for social

distancing. These results were consistent with Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand's (2021) guidelines and preventive measures against COVID-19. To comply with the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand's (2021) new normal flight operations regarding in-flight service measures, passengers are not allowed to touch in-flight catering equipment. Plus, cabin crew are required to provide each passenger with separate equipment and utensils used for food and drink and clean lavatories more frequently. It is possible that airline businesses will focus more on service quality issues after COVID-19. That is, the full-service airlines - particularly those located in the airport hubs - will need to draw up alternative plans to facilitate passengers since the check-in processes will take longer time. This can however be seen as an opportunity to renovate areas and expand lounge space to accommodate business-class as well as first-class flyers.

2.2 Reliability, Assurance and Hygiene - Similar to Lorène (2022), the result from the sample group demonstrated particular expectations for the hygiene of the passenger cabin, seating and on board facilities in addition to the provision of personal protective equipment such as surgical masks and hand sanitizers, suggesting airline sectors poised to change for new normal air travel services. Such importance which would be stressed more on hygiene was in accordance with Thai Airway International's (2021) preventive guidance aiming to rebuild confidence in air services and boost passenger safety.

2.3 Responsiveness - The participants considered fast access to check-in processes which allow seat self-selection the most crucial factor for full-service airlines' service quality. As delineated by Wahyuni et al. (2021) whose research involved the service quality of Garuda Indonesia Airlines, passengers showed good perceptions when the staff were more responsive and acted promptly with help of travel document verification and checked baggage. More importantly, it was expected that there be

enough check-in counters and that queuing to check-in services be efficiently managed. Besides, the ground staff are required to assure their luggage are carefully handled.

2.4 Empathy - Data obtained from the participants illustrated caring attention to understand specific needs of passengers as the most essential indicator for the dimension of empathy. This corroborates the earlier investigation by Baker (2013) who also found that when services offered meet or exceed customer expectations, the customers are likely to repurchase and become loyal to the service.

2.5 Employees - Cabin crew are expected to appear neat and well-groomed on duty. To raise the quality of service, not only should they maintain personal hygiene for skin, hair, fingernails and body odor at all times, but it's vitally important they also be able to serve passengers with extensive product knowledge. This study further confirms that highly performing professionals are associated with great service quality and thus higher customer satisfaction. As observed by Lolilaha (2015), passengers reported higher expectation levels of Thai Airway International's service quality than other leading airline companies'. In Chotpanich's (2018) study, it was concluded that the high quality of service of full-service airlines was considerably influenced and characterized by employees' professionalism; that is, employees were competent and knowledgeable to respond quickly to passengers. This outcome is however contrary to that of Afaq et al. (2021) who examined air passengers' engagement with the airline service providers (ASP) on Twitter. Their findings exhibited that a certain group of employees lacked attentive listening skills and patience in dealing with customers. They avoided handling problems or had them ignored possibly due to the lack of adequate product knowledge as well as comprehension of what is being asked. Based on this perceived feedback, it is interesting for airline service providers to discover how

service quality can be enhanced in order to derive customer satisfaction.

2.6 Affordability - In concordance with the study of Ansari et al. (2014), the ticket flexibility policy emerged as a key factor in regard to affordability. Most passengers showed the highest expectation of availability of tickets, prices of the tickets, cancellation fees, rerouting charges and services of travel agencies. Besides, it was demanded free change and cancellation be considered during and after the period of COVID-19. The analysis of Twitter activity by Afaq et al. (2021) revealed that passengers were upset and dissatisfied with the airlines which did not allow them to cancel and reschedule their flights free of charge. This inflexibility along with the strict non-refundable policy being enforced during the pandemic was as such criticized fiercely on several social media comments.

2.7 Flight availability - The adequacy and vast selection of flight schedule was ranked as the most important aspect of this dimension. The results bear a close resemblance to Alderighi et al.'s (2019) study of flight availability and international tourism flows, suggesting flight supply-demand equilibrium. Regardless of the choice of available airlines, the expansion of flight frequencies by full-service carriers in Italy contributed to a higher level of passenger enplanement and hence the worldwide growth trend of the tourism industry. This accords with the prediction launched by Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand (2022) that the recovery of air travel was close to the 'best case scenario' owing to the higher number of passengers in succession with the increased volumes in the global air transports.

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