# Journal of Hospitality and Management Tourism

Full Length Research Paper

# Effects of airline service quality on airline image and passengers' loyalty: Findings from Arik Air Nigeria passengers

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Accepted 1st May, 2013

This paper investigates how individual service quality attributes under specified dimension rendered by Arik Airline determine the image of the airline and passengers' loyalty to the airline. To achieve this, a well-structured questionnaire was designed in line with SERVQUAL dimension scale to capture the airline opinion of the passengers about the service rendered to them, their opinion on whether the quality of service has any effect on the image of the airline and finally if the nature of the airline image has any effect on repeat patronage. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed to a randomly selected sample out of the average weekly passenger volume of 2465 passengers that utilize the Arik air carrier. Data collected were analyzed first using Factor analysis in order to factor out the three major service quality dimensions and Pearson correlation coefficient was determined to ascertain the significant relationship between the factored service quality dimensions and the airline image. Finally, a relationship was further determined between the airline image and the passengers' loyalty to the airline. Result from the analysis proved that there existed a strong statistically significant relationship between the service quality variables and the airline image, indicating that the quality of the service the airline offers has a positive relationship with the airline image and the airline image also has a positive relationship with the passengers repeat patronage. The study thus recommended that airline managers should improve on the quality of service rendered to passengers since it is one of the determinants of the airline image and the airline image also determines the passengers' choice of repeat patronage.

Key words: Loyalty, SERVQUAL, modelling, image dimension, patronage.

#### INTRODUCTION

Managers in the service sector are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their services are customer-focused and that continuous performance improvement is delivered. Given the financial and resource constraints under which service organizations must manage it is essential that customer expectations are properly understood and measured and that, from the customers' perspective, any gaps in service quality are identified. This information then assists a manager in identifying cost-effective ways of closing service quality gaps and of

prioritizing which gaps to focus on – a critical decision given scarce resources. The study on service quality and customer satisfaction has attracted keen attention over time especially in the airline industry. This interest has developed because the delivery of high service quality is essential for airlines' survival and competitiveness in the dynamic air transport industry where there exists so many key players and any form of laxity on the part of any airline will give its competitor an edge.

This study sets out to disclose how airline passengers'

loyalty can be achieved as a result of the corporate image the airline has posed to its customers, using Arik Airline in Nigeria as a case. This is done by deriving airline service dimensions and determining the effects of individual dimensions of airline service quality on airline corporate image and passengers' loyalty, using a structural equation model to study related effects simultaneously. The study further hypothesizes that there exists a significant positive relationship between airline service quality attributes and airline corporate image as well as a corresponding positive relationship between airline image and the passengers of Arik Air Nigeria future patronage/intention.

#### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Several researchers have worked so much on the issue of service quality, especially because of the necessity for an organization to provide quality services to its clients in order to gain competitive advantage over its rivals in their respective industry. Service quality related theories have also been used particularly in the airline industry but most of them have rather relied mainly on customer satisfaction and the service quality level to describe customer evaluations of service and have focused on the effect at an aggregate construct level. There is much need for one to focus on the effect of the individual attribute it is very important to the airline managers especially in planning how to improve the value of services rendered to passengers/customers.

In recent years, research related to corporate image and consumer behavior in the field of service marketing has progressed. There is some evidence that corporate image is an important factor in the overall evaluation of the service of a company (Gronroos, 1984).

Corporate image can influence customers' perception of services offered and customers' choice of company (Andreessen and Lindestad, 1998). Therefore it is very important to understand the role of corporate image in the customer retention decision. This is a key issue that has received little attention in the service marketing area (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 1998). It is worth noting that the role and effect of corporate image in airline service setting in Nigeria has often been ignored in previous airline service studies.

### **Conceptual framework**

A conceptual framework that investigates the effects of individual attributes of airline service quality and the corresponding effect of airline image on passengers' behavioral intentions was proposed. Hence, the review thus presents an overview of relevant literature leading to the establishment of the proposed conceptual framework. The components of the proposed conceptual framework

include the following.

# Service quality

Service quality is a concept that has aroused considerable interest and debate in the research literature because of the difficulties in both defining it and measuring it with no overall consensus emerging on either. There are a number of different "definitions" as to what is meant by service quality. One that is commonly used defines service quality as the extent to which a service meets customers' needs or expectations (Lewis, 2010). Service quality can thus be defined as the difference between customers' expectations of service and perceived service. If expectations are greater than performance, then perceived quality is less than satisfactory and hence customer dissatisfaction occurs (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Lewis, 2010).

Always, there exists an important question: why should service quality be measured? Measurement allows for comparison before and after changes, for the location of quality related problems and for the establishment of clear standards for service delivery. The starting point in developing quality in services is analysis and measurement. The SERVQUAL approach, which is used in this paper, is the most common method for measuring service quality.

#### Model of service quality gaps

There are seven major gaps in the service quality concept, which are shown in Figure 1. The model is an extension of Parasuraman et al. (1985). According to the following explanation (Curry, 1999) the three important gaps, which are more associated with the external customers are Gap 1, Gap 5 and Gap 6 because they have a direct relationship with customers.

Gap 1: Customers' expectations versus management perception: this is as a result of lack of marketing research orientation, inadequate upward communication and too many layers of management.

Gap 2: Management perceptions versus service specification: this is as a result of inadequate commitment to service quality, a perception of unfeasibility, inadequate task standardization and an absence of goal setting.

Gap 3: Service specifications versus service delivery: this is as a result of role ambiguity and conflict, poor employee-job fit and poor technology-job fit, inappropriate supervisory control systems, lack of perceived control and lack of teamwork.

Gap 4: Service delivery versus external communication: this is as a result of inadequate horizontal communications and propensity to over-promise.

Gap 5: The discrepancy between customers' expectations

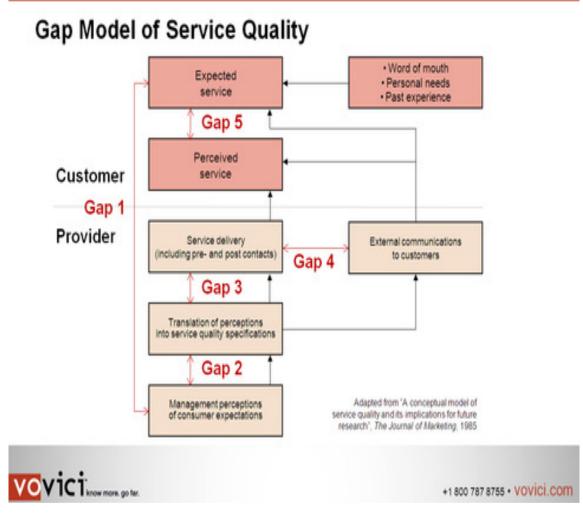


Figure 1. Service quality gap model. Source: SERVQUAL study.

and their perceptions of the service delivered: this is as a result of the influences exerted from the customers' side and the shortfalls (gaps) on the part of the service provider. In this case, customers' expectations are influenced by the extent of personal needs, word of mouth recommendation and past service experiences. Gap 6: The discrepancy between customers' expectations and past service experiences.

tions and employees' perceptions: this is as a result of the differences in the understanding of customers' expectations by front-line service providers.

Gap 7: The discrepancy between employee's perceptions and management perceptions: this is as a result of the differences in the understanding of customers' expectations between managers and service providers.

# Corporate image

Corporate image refers to how a business is perceived. It

is a generally accepted image of what a company stands for. In creating corporate image, marketing, experts use public relations and other forms of promotion to suggest a mental picture to the public. Typically, a corporate image is designed to be appealing to the public, so that the company can spark an interest among consumers, create share of mind, generate brand equity, and thus facilitate product sales.

A corporation's image is not solely created by the company. Other contributors to a company's image could include news media, journalists, labor unions, environmental organizations and other NGOs.

Corporations are not the only form of organizations that create these types of images. Governments, charitable organizations, criminal organizations, religious organizations, political organizations, and educational organizations all tend to have a unique image, an image that is partially deliberate, accidental, self-created and exogenous (Wikipedia, 2005).

According to the Business Dictionary, it is the mental picture that springs up at the mention of a firm's name. It is a composite psychological impression that continually changes with the firm's circumstances, media coverage, performance, pronouncements, etc. Similar to a firm's reputation or goodwill, it is the public perception of the firm rather than a reflection of its actual state or position. Unlike corporate identity, it is fluid and can change overnight from positive to negative to neutral. Large firms use various corporate advertising techniques to enhance their image in order to improve their desirability as a supplier, employer, customer, borrower, etc. The image of Apple computer, for example, as a successful business has dimmed and brightened several times in the last 30 years. But its identity (conveyed by its name and multicolored bitten-off-apple logo) as an innovative and path breaking firm has survived almost intact during the same period.

According to Fombrun and Shanley (1996), a planned and well - managed corporate image is the most promising marketing strategy for attracting current consumers. A company with a good image is more likely to stand out in the mark et place because it draws repeat customers and trial users (Connor and Davidson, 1997). The more favorable a company's image, the more likely consumers will assume that the services rendered by that company are better, of higher quality and worth more in actual price (Dowling, 1994). Similarly, in the airline industry, the more favourable image passengers have, the more likely negative elements about the airline will be filtered out of passengers' consciousness. Passengers who have a favorable image of the airline consider a particularly bad flight to be an exception to their impression of the airline (Ostrowski et al., 1993). Thus, a favorable image separates and distinguishes the company from its competitors.

Previous research has identified corporate image as an important factor in the overall evaluation of the service and the company (Gronroos, 1984). The relationship between corporate image, service quality and loyalty has been investigated in previous studies. Andreessen and Lindestad (1998) noted that corporate image has an impact on customers' choice of company when service attributes are difficult to evaluate. Zeithaml and Bitner (1996) also asserted that image can influence customers' perception of the goods and services offered. Even though previous studies have presented the role and the effect of corporate image, it is still unclear whether there is a direct relationship between image and consumers' behaviour (Bloeme et al., 1998). Understanding the role and the effect of corporate image in the customer retention decision is a key issue that has received little attention in the service marketing area. Neither the role nor the effect of corporate image in the airline industry has been fully investigated yet (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 1998). Hence, airline image is considered as a significant variable that influences passenger's choice of airline in this paper.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted the SERVQUAL scale in the research instrument, and amendments were made to capture more of the service quality attributes measured in the aviation industry. This study adjusted the measurement items and their corresponding dimension to develop a more appropriate scale for measuring airline service quality. To develop airline service quality attributes, in - depth interviews and focus groups were held with airline and passengers. The interview session was focused on the airline services with special attention to the nature of the services provided by airlines to passengers. Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted in order to ensure the reliability and face validity of the instrument. A total of 50 Nigerian air travel passengers who have recent experience of International travel were used in the pilot survey. Passengers were asked to complete the questionnaire and give their overall comments about the questionnaire. The airline service quality items were drawn from these interviews and pilot study was examined by academics familiar with the airline industry and questionnaire design. These led to the development of service quality measurement items suitable for the airline industry. Service quality was measured by 22 measurement items and airline image was measured by asking passengers three measurement items as shown in Table 1. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed to passengers, 554 completed questionnaires were returned and 53 questionnaires were incomplete. Hence, 501 questionnaires were used for data analysis.

#### Sample

The survey was conducted using the simple random sampling method at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport Lagos Departure Wing in October 2012. Sampling was done by randomly selecting the passengers about to embark on a journey within the country at the Arik Air terminal. Arik air was selected for the study as a result of Arik Air's level of operation. It is actually considered as one of the major operators in Nigeria and could be considered the major carrier in Nigeria. The simple random sampling technique was utilized to avoid misrepresentation of the passengers. Randomizing the passengers created room for a total representation of the entire passenger and no passenger was given special preference over another. The survey was done for a period of two weeks. To promote a successful research and reduce the problem associated with cooperation on the part of the passengers, the research assistants had to administer the questionnaire politely and explain the significance of the research to the respondents/ passengers as they arrived and departed to and fro their destination and origin, respectively. Data were gathered from passengers who had admitted to having been on flight at least in the past twelve months.

# Analysis of data

The passengers' demographic characteristics are represented in Table 2 and the distribution with respect to age, occupation and income factors (Figures 2 and 3). Behavioral intentions were measured using passengers' intention to repurchase and willingness to recommend the airline to other people. All the items were measured using a 7- point Likert-type scale.

#### Reliability measurement

The reliability of the model and its internal consistency require statistical verification. In order to ascertain the reliability and the internal consistency of the model, Cronbach's alpha was used to

Table 1. Service quality attributes.

Variable	Quality attribute	Measurement scale	
Attribute	Up-to-date aircraft and in-flight facility  Meal service (items, tastes, freshness, quantity, appearance, etc)	7-point Likert scale	
	Seating comfort (Seat space and Legroom)		
	In-flight entertainment services (books, newspapers, movies, magazines, etc.)		
	Convenience of reservation and ticketing		
	Promptness and accuracy of reservation and ticketing		
	Frequent flyer program		
	On-time performance Sincere interest in solving problems (flight cancellation, baggage loss, etc.).		
Service quality	Safety record	7-point	
	Chcek-in service (waiting time, efficiency, etc)	Likert scale	
	Promptness and accuracy of baggage delivery		
	The amount imposed for overweight baggage		
	Providing seat that passengers prefer		
	Neat appearance of employee		
	Employees who are willing to help passengers  Courtesy of employees		
	Employees who have the knowledge to answer passengers' questions		
	Give passengers personal attention		
	Convenient flight schedule and non-stop flight		
Airline image	I have always had a good impression of this airline(I1)	7-point	
	I believe that this airline has a better image than its competitors.	Likert scale	
	In my opinion, this airline has a good image in the minds of passengers		
Behavioural	Would you consider flying on this airline again in the future?(F1)	7-point	
intention	Would you recommend this airline to other people?(F2)	Likert scale	

Source: SERVQUAL model instrument.

Table 2. Demographic character of the respondents.

Variable	Number
Male respondents	275
Female respondents	224
Missing respondents	2
Total respondents	501

Source: field survey.

Table 3. Reliability of measures.

Measure	Cronbach
Reliability and customer service	.9006
Convenience and accessibility	.8595
In-flight service	.8559
Airline image	.9077
Behavioral intention	.9452

assess internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha is the average of all possible split- half coefficient s resulting from different ways of splitting the scale items and a value of 0.6 or less generally indicates unsatisfactory consistency reliability (Malhotra et al., 1996). The Cronbach's alpha of each measure is presented in Table 3. Obviously, the internal consistency reliability of each measure was higher than 0.8, which implies the reliability of the measure is very high.

Exploratory factor analysis was used for the analysis of the airline service quality attributes to determine the factored dimensions. Factor analysis is a generalized name that denotes a class of

certain procedures primarily used for data reduction and summarization (Malhotra et al., 1996). Table 4 shows the results of the factor analysis carried out.

From the result of the analysis only the factors with eighen values that are greater than one (1) will be retained and an overall pattern of rotated factor loadings suggested a three-dimensional solution and factors. The factors that formed the airline service dimensions are labelled thus:

<sup>1.</sup>Dimension 1- "Reliability and customer service" (R1-R8)

<sup>2.</sup>Dimension 2- "convenience and accessibility" (C1-C9) 3Dimension 3- " in-flight service" (S1-S5).

# gender distribution

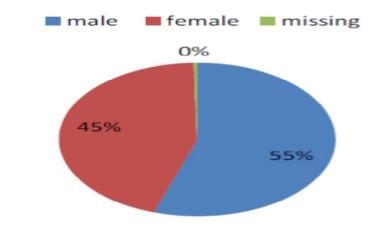


Figure 2. Gender representation.

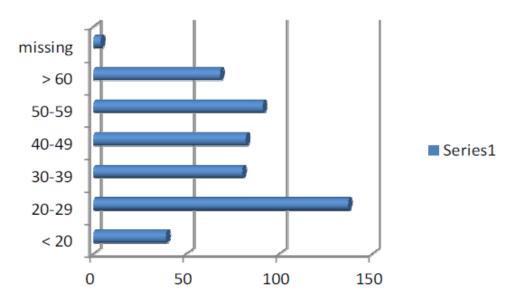


Figure 3. Age distribution.

These dimensions represent the latent variables that will be utilized in the structural equation model developed.

# The structural equation model

Studies carried out by researchers in the business and service related industry have shown that perceived service quality has a direct impact on forming the image of a company (Jin-Woo et al., 2005). Nguyen and Leblanc (1998) asserted that bank customers who receive higher levels of service quality, form a corresponding favorable image, in the banking services industry. It is generally recognized that many aspects of corporate image are derived from past experience, and word-of-mouth communications. Therefore, a higher service quality on the part of the airline can in turn create a

positive corporate image of the organization. On this ground, this paper will ascertain a positive relationship between the individual airline service quality dimension already stated above, its corporate image and finally the passengers future behavior (Figure 4) otherwise called "loyalty to the airline".

#### Interpretation of structural model

R1-R8 entails 8 attributes under the reliability dimension, C1-C9 entails 9 convenience and accessibility attributes and S1-S5 entails5 in flight service attributes. The quality of the services rendered by the airline under the aforementioned dimensions determines the image of the airline. I1-I3 entails the attributes that determine the airline image while the F1-F2 attributes determines the passengers

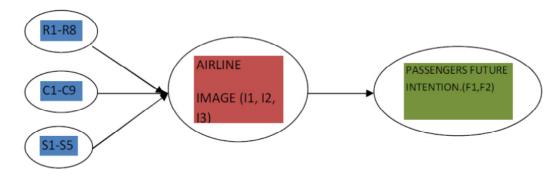


Figure 4. Structured equation model for effect of service quality on airline and corresponding effect of airline image on passengers' future behavior.

Table 4. Result of factor analysis.

Factor	Variables	Factor loadings	Eigen value	Cumulative % of variance
Factor 1(R1-R8)	Courtesy of employees (R1)	.872		
	Employees who are willing to help passengers (R2)	.856		
	Employee knowledge to answer customers question R3	.814		
	Give passengers undivided attention R4	722	10.476	48.082
	Neat appearance of employees (.R5)	.716		
	Safety of flying (R6)	.636		
	Sincere interest in resolving passenger complaint(R7)	.623		
	On time performance (R8)	.543		
Facto2(C1-C9)	Convenience of reservation and ticketing(C1)	.791		
	Promptness and accuracy of reservation and ticketing(C2)	.783		
	Check in Services(C3)	.669		
	Frequent flyer programe (C4)	.602	1.584	55.045
	Accuracy in baggage delivery(C5)	.586		
	Non stop lights(C6)	.505		
	Convenient flight schedule (C7)	.500		
	Providing seat passengers prefer(C8)	.497		
	Amount imposed for overweight baggage (C9)	.350		
Factor 3(S1-S5)	Seat comfort(S1)	.833		
	Seat space and legroom(S2)	.824		
	Meal service(S3)	.709	1.284	60.944
	In flight entertainment(S4)	.556		
	Modern in flight technology facility(S5)	.523		

Source: Spss factor analysis (Dec 27, 2012, 12.45pm). Note: Factor R---reliability and customer service; factor C----convenience and accessibility; factor S---In flight services.

repeat patronage. The interdepence of these attributes makes up the model (Appendix).

The model hypothesizes a three way structure among a set of latent variables and observed variables, which are used as indicators of these latent variables. Result of the factor analysis

shows that airline service quality is best described by three dimensions, namely, reliability, quality and customer service (Dimension 1), convenience and accessibility (Dimension 2), and in-flight service (Dimension 3). Each service dimension is modelled as a latent variable, which is further described by a number of

**Table 5.** Correlation analysis result.

Variable	RC	CA	IS	Al	ВІ
Reliability and customer service (RC)	.876				
Convenience and accessibility (CA)	.788*	1.000			
In-flight service (IS)	.548*	.660*	1.000		
Airline image (AI)	.477*	.495*	.516*	1.000	
Behavioral intention (BI)	.577*	.498*	.573*	.827*	1.000

Note: \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. Result of hypothesis testing.

Relationships	Standard regression weight	P values	Results
Reliability and customer service dimension - Airline image	0.0142	0.0112	Accept
Convenience and accessibility dimension - Airline image	0.2175	0.0121	Accept
In-flight service dimension – airline image	0.3531	0.0001	Accept
Airline image- behavioral Intention	0.7831	0.0001	Accept

(p>srw: reject);( p<srw: accept).

observed variables as shown in Figure 4 (R1 through R8, C1 through C9 and S1 through S5). Observed variables are based on passengers' actual responses to corresponding measurement items on the survey form. Airline image and behavioural intentions are also represented by observed variables, that is,  $II \sim I3$  and  $II \sim I3$  are calculated from passengers' survey responses.

#### Correlation analysis

In trying to determine the relationship between the variables under consideration, correlation analysis was therefore conducted between three airline service dimensions, airline image and passengers' behavioral intentions. The result obtained using Pearson correlation coefficients is shown in Table 5. The three dimensions of airline service quality and airline image had posit iv e correlations with behavioral intentions at the 0.01 level of statistical significance.

#### **Testing hypotheses**

As earlier stated that a positive statistical significant relationship was hypothesized between the variables; all the hypothesized relationships proved to be statistically significant (p<0.05). In this model, significant relationships were found between the dimension of reliability and customer service, convenience and accessibility, in- flight service, airline image, and behavioural intentions. The result of hypotheses testing is presented in Table 6.

#### **RESULTS**

The dimension of reliability and customer service, convenience and accessibility and in-flight services had a positive effect on the airline image which also shows that the passengers of Arik Air were quite satisfied with quality of the service under these dimensions. They are most likely also to form a strong image of that airline. Notably, the airline image formed from the service quality dimensions also had a significant positive influence on behavioral intentions. This implies that passengers who form a positive overall impression of the image of the airline are more likely to fly the airline again and recommend the airline to other passengers.

# **CONCLUSION/BUSINESS IMPLICATION**

This paper therefore provides practical insight to airline managers to earnestly try to improve on the quality of the services rendered to the customers/ passengers since the study has proved beyond reasonable doubt that there exists a positive significant relation between the quality of the service rendered in all the dimension s and the image of the airline. If the quality of the service is good

invariable a strong image of the airline is formed and this can further also bring about a positive behavior of the passengers in terms of repeat patronage and even talking to other passengers of other airlines about the positive image of the airline which we understand constitute what forms the passengers' view or perception of the airline. Appropriate allocation of resources must be channelled towards maintaining and sustaining the service quality level and in turn boasts the airline image for customer loyalty.

Finally, this paper has important implications regarding airline image. Analysis showed that with a very good quality of service delivered by the airline, its passengers get satisfied and pleased with their services. Hence a positive image is formed about the airline and when a good image is formed, passengers' behavioral intention will be portrayed by way of repeat patronage and further marketing of the airlines brand to other passengers intending to travel using air. This indicates that Arik Air passengers would respond to strategies that pose a favourable image in their choice of airlines. Therefore, airline marketers are to emphasize on building a favorable image as a means of improving passengers' repurchase rate and their recommendation to other passengers.

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# Appendix.

	<ul> <li>- Up-to-date aircraft and in-flight facility.</li> <li>- Meal service (items, tastes, freshness, quantity, appearance, etc)</li> <li>- Seating comfort (Seat space and Legroom)</li> <li>- In-flight entertainment services (books, newspapers, movies, magazines, etc.)</li> <li>- Convenience of reservation and ticketing</li> <li>- Promptness and accuracy of reservation and ticketing</li> <li>- Frequent flyer program</li> <li>- On-time performance</li> <li>- Sincere interest in solving problems (flight cancellation, baggage loss, etc.).</li> </ul>	7-point	
Service Quality	-Safety record - Check-in service (waiting time, efficiency, etc) - Promptness and accuracy of baggage delivery - The amount imposed for overweight baggage - Providing seat that passengers prefer - Neat appearance of employee - Employees who are willing to help passengers - Courtesy of employees - Employees who have the knowledge to answer passengers' questions - Give passengers personal attention - Convenient flight schedule - Non-stop flight	Lik ert Scale	22 items
Airline Image	<ul> <li>I have always had a good impression of this airline(I1)</li> <li>I believe that this airline has a better image than its competitors/.(I2)</li> <li>In my opinion, this airline has a good image in the minds of passengers(I3)</li> </ul>	7-point Likert scale	3 items
Behaviou Intention	The same year continue in the continue again in the continue (i.e.,	7-point Likert scale	2 items