

CUSTOMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIOR: A STUDY OF AIRLINE CUSTOMERS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Unfavorable service experience causing dissatisfaction is believed to be the prerequisite of complaint behavior. It is, therefore, vital for any service provider to understand the aspects of an unfavorable service experience to prevent damaging complaint behavior. Therefore, an attempt has been made in this study to find the pre-board and on-board service attributes that the customers complain about when they are dissatisfied. Second, the author tried to find the major problems that lead to complaints, and finally, find the actions taken by customers when they feel dissatisfied with the airline service.

Methods: The study included a sample of 112 passengers who were randomly selected from the ones present at Indira Gandhi International Airport. Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23 was used for the purpose of analysis and finding descriptive statistics.

Results: It was found that the majority of respondents were likely to complain regarding the various service attributes mentioned in the questionnaire. The most important problem that influences the customer's decision to complain was cancellation of flight and the most common actions taken by customers when they feel dissatisfied with the airline service included seeking a replacement for the service and spreading negative word of mouth.

Conclusion: The paper focuses on the service attributes causing dissatisfaction among the customers and the mode of the complaint being followed by them to deal with the problem. During service encounters, consumers expect zero-defects in service delivery. Despite the service provider's attempts to offer consistent, high-quality service to consumers, service failures may still occur because of the critical service characteristics.

Keywords: Customer complaint behavior, Dissatisfaction, Airline service, Attributes.

INTRODUCTION

The customer complaint behavior (CCB) is an area of research which deals with the spotting and analysis of all the aspects involved in the consumer reaction to a product or a service failure and the resultant perceived dissatisfaction. Consumer dissatisfaction, satisfaction, and CCB are three distinct, but highly correlated subjects investigated by marketing and customer research studies. The growing competition in the market, the importance given to quality, performance, and satisfaction, the developing consumerism, the emphasis given to customers; considered as the center of a product or service, brings researchers to inquire about the complex mechanisms which determine customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction and the consequent consumer behaviors [1]. When the service encounter overcomes the expectations, the customer is satisfied; on the contrary, when the expectations are not fulfilled by the experience, the customer is dissatisfied. For these reasons, dissatisfaction should be considered as a precursor of complaining [2]. According to Lovelock *et al.* [3], when customers experience dissatisfaction, four basic courses of action can be taken by them, which include:

1. Doing nothing
2. Complaining in some form to the service organization
3. Taking some overt action with a third party
4. Defecting and simply not patronizing the organization in the future.

CCB is a distinct process, which begins when the consumer has assessed a consumption experience (resulting in dissatisfaction) and ends when the consumer has completed all behavioral and non-behavioral responses [4]. However, a few companies recognize the importance of customer complaints which can be estimated through the fact that fewer than 50% of complainants receive a reply from the company and those that do often view the organization's response as unsatisfactory [5]. It seems that the issue of service failure is still not adequately addressed by businesses, especially when the seriousness

of customer dissatisfaction for companies in the short- and long-term is considered [6]. In this competitive era, customer dissatisfaction can lead to long-term losses for any service industry. The growing airline industry faces many challenges in this regard due to the rising customer demand for better service at a lower price. Although airlines have customer satisfaction as a major goal, not all airline experiences are satisfactory from the consumer's perspective – service failures do occur in this industry.

Rationale of the study

The present study was conducted keeping in mind the need to study the CCB. As no previous study on CCB has been conducted on airline customers at Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport, India, the study will provide useful insights regarding airline customers and their complaint behavior.

Literature review

To understand the impact of customer dissatisfaction and service failure, many previous studies have been reviewed which provide a better insight. Bejou and Palmer [7] examined the effects of service failure on the relationship between buyers and sellers in the airlines industry. They administered a questionnaire using face-to-face interview of passengers waiting for their flights. Overall 257 completed questionnaires were collected, 214 of which were found usable. An analysis of customers' post-failure assessment of trust and commitment indicated that for any given level of service failure, their inclination to recommend the airline, which had experienced a service failure, was dependent on the length of time that they had been dealing with that airline. The effect of service failure on trust and commitment to a relationship was partially confirmed, in that relationship, duration was seen to be an important mediating influence on the outcome level of trust and commitment following the service failure. Tax and Brown [8] found that the greatest barrier to effective

service recovery and organizational learning was that only 5-10% of dissatisfied customers choose to complain following a service failure. To see the financial impact of complaints [9] conducted a study, in which they found that the complaints of airline passengers were negatively correlated with future revenues and profit margins. They suggested that as the financial information on listed carriers are reported quarterly and customer complaint information is available monthly, one can use monthly customer complaint information to help predict the financial performance of the carriers before their financial results are announced in the next quarter. Wirtz and Johnston [10] highlighted the positive correlation between the profits and the service excellence of Singapore Airlines (SIA). The authors conducted in-depth interviews with SIA's senior management and found that the senior management considers valuing staff and customers as the key driver of service excellence. The management's responses made it clear that the airlines make it a point to listen to the customer's feedback and take remedial action. The findings suggested that SIA's holistic process perspective – A culture where all staff looks at all processes, all the time to search for incremental improvement; SIA strives to maintain consistency in service excellence that meets the needs of every customer; a simultaneous focus on service excellence and costs/profits, pushed right out to the front line staff. In another study, Bamford and Xystouri [11] examined the effectiveness of internal processes of service quality recovery for an international airline. An action research methodology was adopted. It was found that, for service recovery to be effective, it must be external (to the customer) as well as internal (to the organization). The need to incorporate employees and not overlook their significance, power, and influence on the delivery of quality service is highlighted. Atalik [12] identified common complaints made by Turkish frequent flyers related to their program membership. He administered a questionnaire via the Internet to 2000 members who were randomly selected from the Elite members of the Frequent Flyer Program of Turkish Airlines (THY). Following the survey, 608 usable questionnaires were included in the analysis stage. It was found from the Elite members of the Miles & Miles program of THY and that the common complaints of members fell into five categories. The main concerns were related to the availability of free tickets and upgrades of the flight class, the behavior of personnel, card ownership issues, level and type of priority services offered within the program and the lack of alliances with other airlines. Ndubisi and Adeline [13] investigated whether male and female Malaysian consumers differ in their dissatisfaction complaint behavior and its aftermath. The study examined the moderation effect of gender in the relationship between public complaint behavior, private complaint behavior, and customer defection. The results showed that public and private complaints are significantly associated with defection. Liu and Zhang [14] focused on factors related to the CCB tendency in Internet. The research indicated that the factors, which consist of online consumer characteristics, product characteristics, consumer attitude to the complaint, customer satisfaction, and shopping experience, have a positive impact on web CCB tendency. Malhotra *et al.* [15] examined the relationship between public complaint (i.e., complaining to the organization) and private complaint (complaining to family members and friends without a word to the organization) on customer defection. The research also investigated the moderating effect of ethnicity, income, and switching cost in this relationship. The results showed that both public and private complaints are significantly associated with defection, albeit private complaint had a stronger impact. Ethnicity and switching cost do not moderate the observed relationships. Income has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between private complaint and defection. Tronvoll [16] investigated pre-complaint situations which had a threefold purpose: To identify a set of negative emotions experienced in unfavorable service experiences, to examine the patterns of these negative emotions, and to link these negative emotions to complaint behavior. The study found that the negative emotion of frustration is the best predictor of complaint behavior toward the service provider. Emir [17] investigated the level of relationship between the complaints and complaint behaviors of the customers who benefit from the services offered by hotel restaurants and to determine if the complaint behaviors show a difference according to the nationalities. As the result of analysis, a relationship between

the customer complaints and complaint behaviors was found, and it is determined that CCBs show basic differences between the customers coming from different countries such as Turkey, Russia, Holland, and Germany. A study from another service industry was conducted by Nimako and Mensah [18] explored the relationship between customer dissatisfaction/satisfaction and complaining responses among bank customers in the Ghana banking industry. The most likely to be used to complain responses are complaining in person and refraining from using the bank's services, whereas the least likely to be used complaining responses are complaining to the mass media and consumer associations. There was a significant correlation between complaining responses and frequency of complaining and between complaining responses and overall satisfaction. Komunda *et al.* [19] focused on the concept of customers' complaining behavior in the mobile telephone company sector. Primary data were collected using questionnaires from Makerere University mobile telephone subscribers who were students, academic staff, administrative staff, and support staff. The results revealed that service quality directly influences customer loyalty and also has a positive significant relationship with CCB.

METHODS

Objectives of the study

1. To find the pre-board and on-board service attributes that the customers complain about when they are dissatisfied
2. To find the problems which influence the customers' decision to complain
3. To find the complaint actions taken by customers when they feel dissatisfied with the airline service.

Sampling design

A total of 150 passengers were randomly selected from those waiting for their flights at the IGI, New Delhi Airport. Of the responses received, 112 were complete (response rate of 74.66%) and used for the analysis.

Methods of data collection

Both primary and secondary data were used in the study. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to the passengers. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections with questions related to pre-board and on-board service attributes, problems influencing customer's decision to complain which were rated as "no," "little," "somewhat," "very much" influential and complaint actions taken by customers which were rated on 5-point scale representing 1 with "never," 2 "unlikely," 3 "likely," 4 "most likely," and 5 "extremely likely." Secondary data were collected from online journals, magazines, and websites.

Research tools

The analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23 to find the descriptive statistics. Cronbach's alpha (0.92) was found to be good enough showing the reliability of the research instrument.

Limitations

The study was limited to a single airport and covered a small sample. The study was conducted on passengers in waiting only, and in-flight passengers were not surveyed who may have different views.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Table 1, it can be seen that the majority of the passengers are "likely" to complain about services attributes such as boarding information, jetway waiting longer, pre-boarding assistance, ticket reservation, and security check as the value of the mean is above 2 for all these statements with the likelihood of complaints regarding boarding information being the highest (mean=2.96±1.122) and security check being the least (mean=2.57±0.984).

In the case of on-board service attributes, passengers are likely to complain about crew service efficiency, crew attentiveness, crew courtesy, crew friendliness, and complaint handling as all the statements

have values of more than 2 for mean scores. The highest value among all being that of crew service efficiency (mean=3.14±1.130) and the least being crew friendliness (mean=2.61±1.240) and complaint handling (mean=2.54±1.154).

According to Table 2, problems influencing the decision to complain included delay in flight, cancellation of flight, rudeness of crew, and lost luggage with the highest majority of people being somewhat influenced by cancellation in flight (mean=3.00±1.004) and the lowest number of people being less influenced by lost luggage (mean= 2.64±1.047).

From Table 3, it can be seen that the actions to be taken by people when dissatisfied with the airline included taking no action, urging family/friends not to patronize the airline, not personally flying on the same airline again, negative word of mouth (WOM), seeking a replacement

Table 1: Pre-board and on-board service attributes that the customers complain about when they are dissatisfied

Statements	Mean±Standard deviation
Pre-board service attributes that the customers complain about when they are dissatisfied	
Ticket reservation/purchase	2.68±1.042
Security check	2.57±0.984
Jetway waiting length	2.79±1.086
Boarding information	2.96±1.122
Pre-boarding assistance	2.75±0.915
On-board service attributes that the customers complain about when they are dissatisfied	
Crew courtesy	2.68±1.042
Crew service efficiency	3.14±1.130
Crew attentiveness	2.86±1.030
Crew friendliness	2.61±1.240
Complaint handling	2.54±1.154

Source: Survey by author

Table 2: Problems which influence the customers' decision to complain

The degree to which the following problems influence the customer's decision to complain	
Problem	Mean±Standard deviation
Delay in flight	2.86±1.064
Cancellation in flight	3.00±1.004
Rudeness of crew	2.64±1.047
Lost luggage	2.82±1.232

Source: Survey by author

Table 3: Complaint actions taken by customers when they feel dissatisfied with the airline service

Complaint actions taken by customers when they feel dissatisfied with the airline service	
Action	Mean±Standard deviation
Take no action	2.25±0.954
Urge family/friends not to patronize airline	2.79±0.944
Would not personally fly on this airline again	2.89±1.211
Negative WOM about the airline	3.07±1.393
Seek replacement for the service you are dissatisfied with	3.14±1.161
Complain to the airline management	2.68±1.317
Divert complaint to the media	2.32±1.317
Complaints to Consumer Council	2.61±1.085
Seek legal advice	2.21±1.052

Source: Survey by author. WOM: Word of mouth

for the service, complaining to the airline management, diverting complaint to media, complaining to consumer council, and seeking legal advice. The highest majority are most likely to seek replacement for service (mean=3.14±1.161) and negative WOM (mean=3.07±1.393). The lowest number either take no action (mean=2.25±0.954) or seek legal advice (mean=2.21±1.052) both of which lie at the extreme ends of the action being taken.

The results related to pre-board and on-board service attributes that lead to the complaint on dissatisfaction showed that majority of the complaints were related to boarding information and crew service efficiency. The cancellation of flights was found to be a major problem among airline passengers. Finally, the most common complaint action taken by airline customers included seeking replacement for the service which shows that if the airlines do not deal with the complaints of the customers with due care then there is a risk of the customers shifting to some other airline service leading to losses as seen from previous studies by Behn and Riley [9] and Bamford and Xystouri [11].

CONCLUSION

CCB is a part of understanding the customer response to services in case they are dissatisfied. A large amount of existing findings focuses on answering questions such as: How consumers tend to act when dissatisfied; what factors trigger the complaint behavior; what type of consumers tend to choose a certain type of action; what are the purposes of the complaint; why it is necessary to manage consumer complaint [20]. In this study too, an attempt has been made to highlight the service attributes that the customers complain about when dissatisfied and the action taken by them in response to dissatisfaction. The findings revealed that the among the pre-boarding service attributes the boarding information was the most likely attribute which led to complaining, whereas among the on-board service attributes crew service efficiency was the most likely attribute. The most common complaint actions taken by customers include seek replacement for service and negative WOM. Negative WOM is very dangerous, especially with the use of the social media; where one word can be spread to millions of people through Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc., a problem that the companies should avoid.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

As it was seen through the study that among airline passengers the problem of cancellation of flight was prominent, so steps could be taken by the airline industry to avoid these failures and have contingency plans for situations where such problems occur.

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