

SERVICE QUALITY PROVIDED BY THE TRAVEL AGENTS: AN ASSESSMENT REPORT ON PUNJAB STATE

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ABSTRACT: Land of five rivers, Punjab is situated in the northwestern corner of the India. There are 25,000 travel agents in Punjab doing business of \$ 600 million/year. Research study was aimed to gain an empirical understanding for service quality gap between expectation and perception level of customers in the service provided by travel agents. This study employed a descriptive single cross sectional design and questionnaire was considered an appropriate approach to collect the data. The sample size of 1000 was selected by convenience sampling procedure. The data were collected in the state of Punjab only. This may limit the generalizations of the research findings to the travel agents of other states of India. In totality, this study contributes for the establishment of new theories, and concepts with reasonable degree of certainty.

Keywords: Punjab, GAP, RATER dimensions, SERVQUAL, travel agents, satisfaction, perceptions, behaviour intentions,

INTRODUCTION

Services are everywhere (Hoffman & Bateson, 2011). Many researchers and scholars have shown an interest in an assessment of service quality in travel agents service sector (Foster, 1997; Hossan, 2012; Mohamed, 2007; Olorunniwo & Hsu, 2006; Stickdorn & Zehrer, 2009; Yu, Morais, & Chick, 2005). The state of Punjab literally means Punj (five) ab (waters). There were 25,000 travel agents, 300 travel agents were International Air Transport Association approved, 96 agents were approved by Travel Agents Association of India, 18 were registered by Immigration agents accredited by Ministry of Tourism and 25 agents were accredited by Ministry of Labour. Lack of governing body performance appraisal norms in the state is a big constrained for providing efficient services by travel agents. The interactions with the customers of the travel agents revealed that the tourists face problems due to the lack of quality services provided by travel agents. Before the commencement of the research study, none of the study related to travel agents in the state of Punjab was presented in review of literature. Due to this fact, comprehensive study is required for the assessment of travel agents service quality.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

(Shahin & Janatyan, 2011) emphasised the need to analyze the correlation of service quality gaps. (Hossan, 2012) used SERVQUAL to estimate satisfaction in tourism service quality and affirmed that tourism satisfaction is depend upon goodness of fit between the expectations and perceptions of the consumer. (Jordan, 2012) was comprised to evaluate the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction and revealed that there was significant relationship between reliability service quality dimension, responsiveness service quality dimension, tangibility service quality dimension, empathy service quality dimension and customer satisfaction. (Khan & Tabassum, 2010) measured the customer service quality level to measure the customer satisfaction. (Stickdorn & Zehrer, 2009) reported that customer satisfaction is determined by customer assessment of expectations and perceptions towards the service quality provider. (Mohamed, 2007) purposed to measure the gap between expectations and perceptions of the respondents and found that service quality gap was highest in tangibility dimension of the service quality. (Clemes, Wu, Hu, & Gan, 2009) revealed that behaviour intentions were directly influenced by customer satisfactions and intention to revisit the service provider leads to customer satisfaction among customers. (Kuruuzum & Deniz, 2010) used SERVQUAL scale to determine the impact of service quality on behaviour intentions. Service quality dimensions such as empathy, responsiveness, tangibility, reliability and assurance had more impact on 'loyalty' and 'pays more' dimensions of behaviour intentions. (Pont, 2002) tested five factor behavioural intentions battery as given by (a Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) in service sector and emphasise to replication of this study in different areas and settings of service sector. (V. A. Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996) studied that dimensions of behaviour intentions were influenced by service quality. (A Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) constructed the disconfirmation paradigm for measuring quality in services. Expectations – perceptions = Quality. (V. Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2006) recognized Gap model (SERVQUAL) as an important tool for the assessment of service quality. (A. Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1993) stressed that formation of perceptions depends upon the interlinking what customer experiences from the services (A Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) divided the customer perceptions into the perceptions of five RATER service quality dimensions. (Grönroos, 2007) empirically tested the components of customer satisfaction and conceptualize satisfaction as the comparison between customer expectations and customer perceptions. (Hossan, 2012; Kouthouris, Alexandris, & Kouthouris, 2005) focused on the concept of customer satisfaction and perceived service quality. (Buttle, 1996; Foster, 1997; Kouthouris et al., 2005; Wu, 2009) argued that degree of customer satisfaction was directly proportional to level of service quality provided to the customer. (Prentice, 2013; Swaroop Debasish & Dey, 2015; Weiermair, 2000; William, Appiah, & Botchway, 2016) investigated the relationship between service quality, perceptions, expectations, behaviour intentions and customer satisfactions by using SERVQUAL model in service construct provided by travel agents sector.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

1. To conduct an empirical study for determining the service quality gap between expectations and perceptions of customers.
2. To study the relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction.

HYPOTHESES

H1a₀: There is no significant difference between overall expectations and overall perception of the customers in the service provided by travel agents in Punjab.

H2a₀: Correlation coefficient between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction is not significantly different from 0.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive single cross sectional design. The first step was taken to select the travel agents from three different regions of Punjab i.e. Majha, Malwa and Doaba. Secondly, pre-testing of the questionnaire (SAQ) was conducted in Khanna city before the questionnaire was finally distributed to the required sample of respondents. Sample size of 1000 was considered adequate to provide statistical inferences at 95% confidence level interval (Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, & Oppenheim, 2007).

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS PERTAINING TO RESEARCH OBJECTIVE ONE

This section presents the results for Hypothesis H1a₀ in order to achieve Research Objective One. The differences between consumer expectations versus perceptions of actual service delivered by travel agents in Punjab were examined by analyzing the 21 questions regarding expectations of the respondents with the 21 questions measuring perceptions of the respondents. The Gap score was calculated by using the formula (Gap = combined mean of expectations – combined mean of perceptions).

Table 1. Ranking of gap

Dimensions	Gap	Rank
Responsiveness	0.3980	1
Tangibles	0.3850	2
Empathy	0.3646	3
Reliability	0.3553	4
Assurance	0.2993	5

Gap score of all the 21 questions related to RATER dimensions were positive and sig. value for all the dimensions were less than 0.05 indicated that the perceptions fails to meet expectations in travel agents case. The overall mean gap of all the 21 items of consumer perceptions and consumer expectations was 0.3604 and clearly indicated that the customers' perceptions of service quality did not match with their expectation. Table 1, revealed that, the highest gap was found in 'responsiveness' dimension (0.3980) of service quality. This huge gap clearly indicated that consumer perceived the lowest from this quality dimension. The poor perception in this dimension was due to the fact that travel agents did not give prompt service to customers (0.5460) and travel agents were not always willing to help customers (0.5330). The second highest gap was found in 'tangibles' dimension (0.3850). In Punjab service providers were not certain about their employees' appearance and uniform (0.3850), equipment (0.3918), and work areas on-site (0.3782). Services can be performed completely as per specifications. Yet customers may not feel provider employees care about them during delivery as shown in empathy gap (0.3646) at rank 3. And this hurts customer's assessments of providers' service quality. They overall average value the reliability dimension (0.3553) was at number 4 in terms of gap because the travel agents do not insist on error free records. Lowest gap was in the 'assurance' dimension. This poor perception was due to the fact that less qualified and low skilled people were offered job in most of the travel agents office.

Paired sample t – test showing the overall gap between overall expectation and overall perception of service quality provided by travel agents in Punjab.

Table 2. Paired Samples t - test

Pair	Paired Differences		t - test for Equality of Means		
	Mean Gap	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
overall expectation of travel agents service quality – overall perception of travel agents service quality	.36110	.13682	10.319	20	.000***

Note. *** $p < 0.05$

It was observed from the table 2, paired sample t – test that the gap between overall expectation and overall perception with respect to the service provided by travel agents was statistically significant ($t = 12.095$, $p < 0.05$). Thus null hypothesis H_{1a_0} was rejected. Therefore, it can be concluded with strong evidence that there is significant difference (0.36110) between overall expectations (4.9594) and overall perception (4.5984) of the customers in the service provided by travel agents.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS PERTAINING TO RESEARCH OBJECTIVE TWO

This section presents the results for hypothesis H_{2a_0} in order to achieve research objective four. To investigate the relationship between the perceived service quality and customer satisfaction, multiple correlation models was run as shown in the table 3.

Table 3. Correlation matrix (perceived quality and customer satisfaction).

		Perceived.Quality	Satisfaction
Perceived.Quality	Pearson Correlation	1	.257**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1000	1000
Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	.257	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1000	1000

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 – tailed)

The correlation table shows a low positive relationship ($r = .257$) between the predictor variables i.e. perceived service quality and the single dependent variable i.e. the satisfaction. It can be confirmed that overall satisfaction of perceived service quality has low positive relationship with overall satisfaction. Thus correlation coefficient between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction is significantly different from 0. We reject our null hypothesis H_{2a_0} . Thus correlation coefficient between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction is significantly different from 0 and exist low positive relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

Research study made contributions to improving the theoretical understating of the expectations, perceptions and satisfactions of the customers of travel agents. Research study provides more detailed analysis of service gaps between expectations and perceptions of the customers and adds additional information to the existing literature for travel agents, Literature review suggested that the relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction was neglected by the researchers in the case of travel agents. No study was found that was related to the state of Punjab. This research provided more inclusive understandings of the relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction in the state of Punjab.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The area for the research study was very much restricted according to sample size of Majha, Malwa and Doaba. Cost constraint and time constraint did not allow for more extensive collection of the required data. Larger sample may give clearer picture of an assessment of service quality provided by the travel agents in the state of Punjab. Only five RATER service quality dimensions were used in the research, there may be other service quality dimensions that could also be considered in further empirical research studies because role of significant influence of other factors cannot be ruled out. Many other constructs such as individual attitude or other subjective norms also influenced individual behaviour intentions might be included in the future research studies. IBM SPSS AMOS could be used to fit structural equation models (SEM) for more reflective measurements and path analysis. Due to availability of limited literature on travel agents, may be some aspects and dimensions related to service quality of travel agents have not been identified in the conceptual model as described in the research methodology.

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