

The Effect of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction and Word-of-Mouth Communication: A Gender Based Research in the Airline Industry

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Extensive Summary

Introduction

Air transportation plays an important role in transporting people and / or goods from one place to another, whether local or international. The airline industry, which has significant impacts on the economies of countries; contributes to the development of international trade, affects local and international tourism positively, and contributes to global productivity (Chen, Batchuluun and Batnasan, 2015: 219). According to estimates by the International Air Transport Association (IATA), people who prefer air transport spend about \$ 650 billion in 2016. In addition, the value of commercial commodities transported by air is around 5.5 trillion dollars (IATA, 2017). At the same time, the airline industry is one of the fastest growing industries of the global economy. In the last two decades that we have left behind, this industry has grown at an annual average rate of 5%. This industry, which makes a significant contribution to the Gross Domestic Product of the countries, creates significant employment in all countries (Vespermann and Wald, 2011: 1066). The impact of the industry on the Gross Domestic Product is about \$ 665 billion, and this industry employs a total of 62.7 million people worldwide (ATAG, 2016). Despite the current stagnation in the market and the crises experienced in the sector, it is estimated that this industry will continue to remain a global industry with an annual average growth rate of 4.2% -5.1% (Vespermann and Wald, 2011: 1066).

In 2003, with the adoption of the regional air transport policy in Turkey, private airline companies were allowed to travel to any point in the country. With this development, there has been a significant increase in the number of airlines operating in the sector and the number of flight points (Işık, 2010: 11). From 2003 to 2016, the number of aircraft in our airline companies increased by 233%, seat capacity by 264%, cargo capacity by 502%. In addition, the number of flying points outside our country

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has been 341. However, it is foreseen that the growth in the sector will continue until the 2030s (DGCA, 2016). The Air Transport Action Group (ATAG) predicts that by 2034 the number of people who prefer air transport worldwide will be 6.9 billion per year, while the number of people employed in the sector will be 99.1 million (ATAG, 2016). This has made it mandatory for airline executives to analyze and measure the quality perceptions of customers about the services they offer (Bezerra and Gomes, 2015: 77).

Service quality has become an important determinant of both customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth communication (Kitapci, Akdogan and Dortyol, 2014: 162). It is of vital importance to develop different strategies and understand gender characteristics depending on how men and women communicate the perception of service quality to other people, especially when the influence of word-of-mouth communication is considered as a powerful tool of marketing channel (Sun and Qu, 2011: 210). Although the important relationship between service quality and word-of-mouth communication is acknowledged by the service industry, the characteristics of the customer, which is an important influence on word-of-mouth communication, are ignored (Sun and Qu, 2011: 211). Therefore, despite the fact that there are studies in the literature which examine the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth communication, few studies have investigated whether this effect varies according to gender. For example, Chaniotakis and Lymperopoulos (2009) and Kitapci and colleagues (2014) examined the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth communication with the help of structural equality model in the health sector. However, they did not conduct gender-based research in these studies. However, it is important for airline executives to understand the potential gender impact regarding the service quality and to develop effective marketing strategies. In this respect, in this study, it was aimed to determine the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth communication and contribute to the literature and make managerial inferences.

Method

An online questionnaire was conducted to investigate whether the service quality had an impact on customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth communication, and if so, whether this effect varied according to the gender. SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman et al. in 1988 was used to measure service quality. This scale consists of five sub-dimensions: Physical appearance (4 expressions), Reliability (5 expressions), Responsiveness (4 expressions), Assurance (4 expressions) and Empathy (5 expressions). There are total 22 expressions on the scale. The scale used by Calvo-Porrall and Levy-Mangin in 2015 was used to measure customer satisfaction. There are 4 expressions on this scale. The scale used by Marangoz in 2007 was used to measure word-of-mouth communication. There are 3 expressions on this scale. The scales are adapted on the basis of the airline industry. In fact, the reliability and validity of these scales have been tested by researchers. In addition, a 5-point Likert-type scale developed by Rensis Likert in 1932 was used to determine the participation levels of respondents regarding the expressions on scales.

People who prefer air transportation were selected as the target group in the study. Participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire if they had preferred airline transportation before. The questionnaire form has been prepared via Google Forms.

Convenience sampling method has been adopted in the study. In this direction, the questionnaire was carried out between 10 March - 03 April 2017. Within the scope of the study, 192 valid questionnaires were obtained. First, Frequency Analysis was performed to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants. Reliability Analysis and Principal Component Analysis were conducted to determine the reliability and validity of the scales used in the study. Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was performed to determine whether the data were normally distributed. Independent-Samples T-Test was conducted to determine whether there was a difference between male and female participants in terms of overall service quality and each sub-dimension of service quality. In addition, Multiple Regression Analysis was conducted to determine the effect of sub-dimensions of service quality on female and male participants' satisfaction levels and word-of-mouth communication behaviors.

Findings and Discussion

Reliability Analysis and Principal Component Analysis were performed to determine the reliability and validity of the scales. It was determined that Cronbach α value is over 0.70 for all expressions in the scales. Also, the factor loadings for all expressions are above the assumed value of 0.50 in practice. In addition, it has been determined that the Physical Appearance, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, Customer Satisfaction and Word-of-Mouth Communication dimensions are in one dimensional structure. Thus, convergence and construct validity are achieved with respect to one-dimensional factors. Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was performed to determine whether the data were normally distributed. According to Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test results, the factors were not distributed normally. However, since the skewness and kurtosis values of all factors are between -1.96 and +1.96, it is accepted that the data are normally distributed and parametric analyzes are more appropriate.

Independent-Samples T-Test was conducted to determine whether there was a difference between male and female participants in terms of overall service quality and each sub-dimension of service quality. According to Independent-Samples T-Test results, there was a statistically significant difference between the male and female participants regarding the overall quality of service. A statistically significant difference was found between the male and female participants regarding the Empathy dimension from the subscales of service quality; there was no statistically significant difference for the Physical Appearance, Reliability, Responsiveness and Assurance dimensions. Also, it has been determined that the mean of male participants is relatively higher than that of female participants in terms of both overall service quality and all dimensions of service quality.

Multiple Regression Analysis was conducted to determine the effect of sub-dimensions of service quality on female and male participants' satisfaction levels and word-of-mouth communication behaviors. According to the Multiple Regression Analysis results, the dimension of service quality, which has the greatest influence on the level of satisfaction of female participants, is "Reliability" dimension. Also, the dimension of service quality, which has the greatest influence on the level of satisfaction of male participants, is "Empathy" dimension. However, the "Empathy" dimension has a statistically significant and positive effect on the satisfaction levels of both male and female participants. The dimension of service quality, which has the greatest influence on the word-of-mouth communication of female participants, is

“Reliability” dimension. In addition, the dimension of service quality, which has the greatest influence on the word-of-mouth communication of male participants, is “Responsiveness” dimension. However, the “Physical Appearance” dimension has a statistically significant and positive effect on the word-of-mouth communication of both male and female participants. To sum up the results of the multiple regression analyzes performed, it was found that perceptions of the female participants regarding the “Reliability” dimension had a statistically significant and positive effect on both their satisfaction levels and word-of-mouth communication behaviors. At the same time, it was determined that the perceptions of the male participants regarding the “Physical Appearance” dimension had a statistically significant and positive effect on their level of satisfaction and word-of-mouth communication activities.