

**PERCEPTION OF ASIAN PASSENGERS' SATISFACTION TOWARDS
QUALITY ASSURANCE OF LOW COST AIRLINES
IN THAI AVIATION BUSINESS**

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance is one of the important service quality dimensions affecting the use of the low cost airlines. It greatly influences the decision to use airline services, particularly when choosing the low cost airline in Thailand; since at the moment the airlines in Thailand were threatened to be banned by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to fly abroad. Therefore, the research aims to study the perception of Asian passengers towards airline quality assurance values of low cost airlines in Thailand in 2016. The research focused was conducted by distributing questionnaires regarding airline quality assurance values to 386 sampled Asian low cost airline passengers, segmented by genders, nationalities, ages, level of education and purpose of use. The research analyzed the descriptive statistics as percentage, mean and standard deviation and it processed statistical analysis as mean, S.D., t-test and Pearson Correlation. The result of the study was safety and procedures during flying were ranked highest for customers' satisfaction for the low cost airlines in Thai aviation business.

KEYWORDS: Quality Assurance, Low Cost Airlines, Aviation Business

INTRODUCTION

Low cost airlines have increased significant impacts in Thailand due to the growth of tourism and hospitality industry. (Qin, 2012) It becomes a major competitor to the traditional vehicles such as trains and buses for the developing country (Middleton, Fyall and Morgan, 2009). Furthermore, many low cost airlines developed new routes beyond the domestic and neighboring countries, such as Thai Air Asia to China, Japan. Therefore, the low cost airlines in Thailand become more and more popular nowadays. Not only have the low cost airlines majorly attracted the lower middle class Thais, they also increase more upper middle-class Thais by easiness and convenience of service provision. Consumers for the low-cost airlines today can be varying in terms of age, income and purposes (Buaphiban, 2015). Though the low cost carriers provide limited service and less than the premium ones; they still gain more and more numbers of passengers due to frequencies of flights and also the departure point in the city of Thailand, Don Muang.

Currently, there are well-known low cost airlines in Thailand as Air Asia, Nok Air and Orient Thai. These airlines play important roles in providing domestic routes and are opening news routes to the popular destination as Japan, China, and Korea. Though, these competitive advantages of the low cost airline are pricing at low and some exciting promotion in the low season, they still have some general services provided in the low cost airline based on the procedure such as ground service, in-flight service and also backup service. To compete by providing service is also non-cost explicitly, but influencing customers' satisfaction and finally customer loyalty. Therefore, service can be considered as factors attracting customers. It can increase the ticket sales volume and repeated rate of customers significantly (Mosahab, 2010). To service quality dimension (Paramesuan, 2010), quality assurance is prioritized for airline service and aviation business. Quality assurance ensures and creates passengers' trust to use airlines by its effective process and safety. To commit and follow the quality assurance regulations of aviation is a must to every airline.

In 2016, Thailand is encountering the problems of aviation quality assurance based on standards and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) audit. The issues of Significant Safety Concerns (SSC) impact Thai aviation business greatly. Thai aviation business was ranked very low in the aviation safety standards based on ICAO. According to the information, Thai aviation got only 35.6% while other ASEAN countries got higher percentage such as Cambodia's 40.2%, Indonesia's 45.1%, Brunei, Myanmar and Lao's 65%, Malaysia's 81% and Singapore's 98.9% (<http://shows.voicetv.co.th/voice-market/186282.html>, 2016). The major causes of problems from ICAO reported that management, process and system of The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand (CAAT) did not meet the standard and need huge improvement. To this, chartered airline and newly opened airlines in Thailand got impact largely from this issue in term of trust and confidence of passengers. In addition, the ICAO announcement impacts the airline business reputation.

This research aims to study the perception of Asian passenger' satisfaction towards quality assurance of low cost airlines in Thai aviation business since the passengers is the users. Though, Thai aviation department is a controller and problem-solver of this issue.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To identify the quality assurances that has high impacts on Asian passengers' satisfaction in the low cost airlines in Thai aviation business.

To know the demographic factors (gender, age and education) affecting perception of Asian passengers' satisfaction towards quality assurance of low cost airlines in Thai aviation business.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are quality assurances that have high impacts on Asian passengers' satisfaction in the low cost airlines in Thai aviation business?
2. What are demographic factors (gender, age and education) affecting perception of Asian passengers' satisfaction towards quality assurance of low cost airlines in Thai aviation business?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Quality assurance of Thai low cost airlines (i.e. process, system, management and people) affects Asian passengers' confidence and trust in travelling by the low cost airlines.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

1. To improve the customer satisfaction towards low cost airlines in Thai aviation business based on the identified perceived service quality assurance of customers' satisfaction.
2. To increase the sales and repeated purchases of the low cost airlines' tickets in Thai aviation business from Asian passengers.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The researcher defined the scope and limitation based on Bangkok, Thailand boundary and the timeframe on February, 2017.

CONCEPT, THEORY AND RELATE LITERATURE

1. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND SERVICE QUALITY IN THE AIRLINE

Quality assurance is one of the 5 service quality dimensions as reliability, assurance, tangible, empathy and responsiveness (Paramesuan, 1998). It focuses on building trust and confidence of product and service for customers. Numbers of product and service quality assurance are related with product and process control such as audit, process checking, quality management and IT (Zaim, Bayyurt and Zaim, 2010; Lau, and Suryani & Hendryadi, 2015; Lau, Cheung, Lam and Chu, 2013) since the methodologies are scientific and measurable. Quality assurance for airline is not exceptional. It is controlled by process and documentation and international aviation organization supervision such as ICAO, EASA.

Table 1: SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSION IN THE LOW COST AIRLINES

Source: Adapted from Service Quality Dimension (Bell and Smith, 2011)

Service Quality Dimension	Description	Example of Low Cost Airlines
Reliability	Ability to perform service dependently and accurately	To have low/no variation of service To render service to passenger accurately
Assurance	Ability of staff to inspire confidence and trust	To meet the airline standard and process To build trust and confidence of service
Tangible	Physical facilities, equipment, staff appearance, etc.	To clean and make ready-to-use facilities To provide essential equipment in aircraft
Empathy	Extent to which caring, individualized service is given	To look after special need passengers To care passengers in every process
Responsiveness	Willingness to help and respond to customer need	To help the passengers when needed To answer email immediately

2. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND PERCEPTION AND RELATED LITERATURES.

Quality assurance influences customer satisfaction and perception in term of trust and confidence of using service. Numbers of literature studied showed airline quality assurance influenced passengers or customers' satisfaction and perception. It also include loyalty as:

Research titled "Evaluation of Service Quality of Nigerian Airline Using Servqual Model" (Chikwendu, Ejem, and Ezenwa, 2012) showed that quality assurance, particularly safety performance of the airline (Perception Mean = 3.25/5) and knowledgeable employees to answer customers questions (Perception Mean = 3.25/5) affected perception and trust from the airline which was interpreted that 180 questionnaire respondents rated the good quality assurance service. The quantitative questionnaire was developed based on Servqual model.

In addition, quality assurance also affected customer satisfaction and loyalty. The research titled "The influence of airline service quality on passenger satisfaction and loyalty: The case of Uganda airline industry" (Namukasa, 2013) was done by using interview method using structured questionnaires to the randomly sampled 303 respondents. The research studied the relationship between variables. Regression analysis and hypothesis testing were used. The research concluded that quality of pre-flight, in-flight and post-flight services were different in each loyal passenger. Some were interested off-board rather than on-board. Some service provisions such as quality of foods, extra luggage allowance are also important.

Customer satisfaction was broad and varied from each individual. The satisfaction model also varies from one person based on individual factors or service provided and perceived values of the products or services.

Numbers of research studied the service quality and customer satisfaction in the airlines for the marketing reasons. Most of the research focused on the study of service quality gap model, which explained the comparison between expected and perceived service quality (Paramesuan, 2012). There are also many researches study the service quality in dimensions, the most common is the five service quality dimensions as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman, 2010). The literature reviews were:

The research titled “Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in the Airline Industry: A Comparison between Legacy Airlines and Low-Cost Airlines” (Baker, 2013) used perceived service quality model (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2001) and customer satisfaction model (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2001). The research studied customer service variables (percentage of flights on-time, passenger boarding, denied passengers’ complaints and mishandled baggage) by carriers for the period January to December 2007 to 2011 in 14 airlines in Department of Transportation (DOT), the U.S. by using mean and S.D. The study from the 5 year of 2007-2011 showed that the U.S. airline industry improved in two major categories as on-time performance and baggage handling, with a slight increase in involuntary denied boarding and customer complaints (Baker, 2013). The research implied that operating costs, market share, infrastructure and customer service and satisfaction were important to the low cost carrier.

Numbers of study use perception and expectation as a measurement of customer satisfaction and SERVQUAL model is used since in reality, satisfaction is affected from internal such as personal values, experience and external factors such as marketing advertisement and social group influences (Dhanalakshmi, Rajini, and Kanimozhi, 2010). To the study, perception is also important to satisfaction regarding quality assurance issues. Since satisfaction is based on perception, which is adopted from senses and shaped by learning, memory, and expectation and attention (Gregory, 1987 and Bernstein, 2010) and in reality passengers do not get full information of quality assurance as international aviation audit organization. Therefore, the research also uses perception to study Asian passengers’ satisfactions, who are experienced service users. In short, perception influences satisfaction.

3. SERVICE QUALITY MODEL (MODEL OF SERVICE QUALITY GAP)

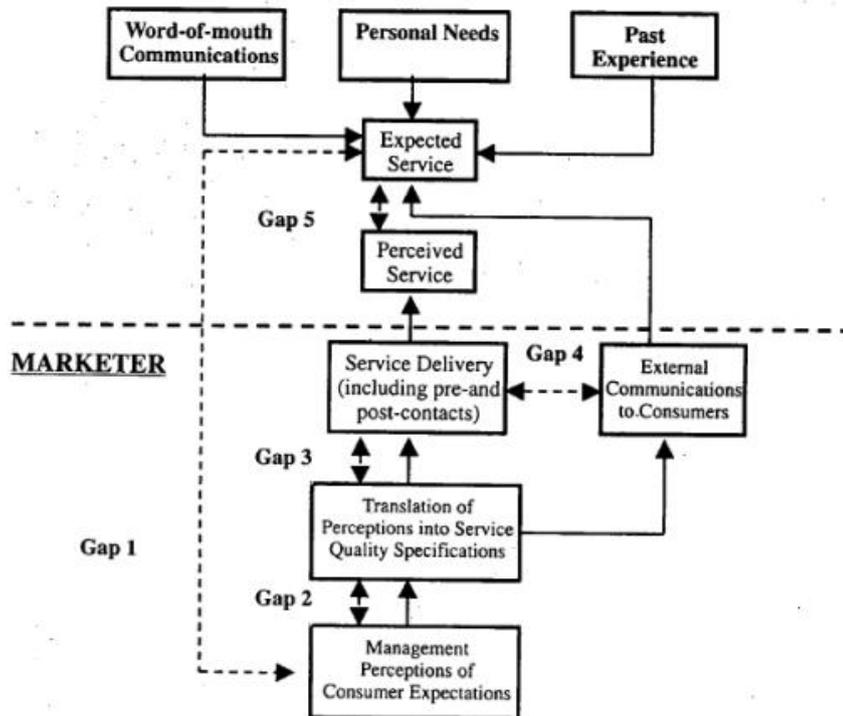
Model of service quality is a flow of the service quality process and delivery. It shows the step and gap in each service step. The person or consumer has his/her own expected service which are from word-of mouth communications, personal needs and past experience before later on he/she judges the perceived service. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) identified that SERVQUAL Model explains potential gaps that can occur in delivering expected service and will be useful for managing service quality gaps which arise because of difference between expectations and perceptions in order to meet customer satisfaction (Lewis and Chamber, 2000). Therefore, it needs to fulfill the gap in order to provide service quality excellence. Seven gaps in service management (Witthawassamrankul, 2015) are:

- Gap 1: Gap between services expected by customer and management perceptions of customers’ expectation
- Gap 2: Gap between management perceptions of consumer expectations and service quality specifications
- Gap 3: Gap between service quality specifications and service delivery
- Gap 4: Gap between service expected by the consumer and perceived service
- Gap 5: Gap between service expected by the customer and the service delivered when the customer really wanted something different
- Gap 6: Gap between service delivery and external communication
- Gap 7: Gap between expected service and external communication

FIGURE 1: MODEL OF SERVICE QUALITY GAP

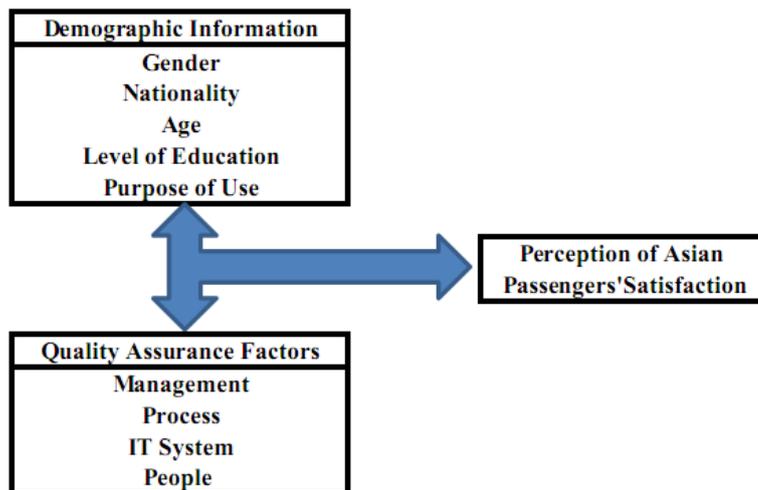
Source: Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985

CONSUMER



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

FIGURE 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK (Source: Researcher, 2016)



The conceptual framework was explained that both independent variables as demographic information (i.e. gender, nationality, age, level of education and purpose of use) and quality assurance factors (i.e. management, process, IT system and people) affect the dependent variables as perception of Asian passengers' satisfaction (towards the Thai airline).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

Population of the study is Asian passengers who experienced any low-cost airline in Thailand. Based on the last year, statistics, the population is more than 1,000,000 passengers and infinite unit. Therefore, sample should be more than 385 respondents based on Taro Yamane's formula at $\alpha = 0.05$. Hence, the researcher used 386 Asian males and females at Don Muang Airport as the sample. The purposive sampling was applied since the researcher used judgmental sampling to identify the nationalities of Asian passengers based on the facial and physical appearances before he distributed the questionnaire instrument. Though, the questionnaire asked the nationalities. The reason that researcher picked Asian passengers in the study because nowadays Asian passengers, particularly tourists have increased rapidly, particularly, Chinese and Indians (<http://aot-th.listedcompany.com/transport.html>, 2559).

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT, CONTENT VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Questionnaire instrument divided into 2 parts as demographic information and four quality assurance factors. The questionnaire has 7 boxes to tick with the range of 1-7 (Strongly Dissatisfied- Strongly Satisfied) and the 386 respondents chose only one answer in each questions regarding quality assurance of the low cost airlines based on four factors as management, process, IT system and people. The arbitrary level was $0.86 = [(7-1)/7]$ as:

TABLE 2: ARBITRARY AND DESCRIPTIVE RATING (Researcher, 2017)

Arbitrary Level	Descriptive Rating
1.00-1.86	Strongly Dissatisfied
1.87-2.73	Dissatisfied
2.74- 3.60	Quite Dissatisfied
3.61-4.47	Moderate
4.48-5.34	Quite Satisfied
5.35-6.21	Satisfied
6.22-7.00	Strongly Satisfied

The questions of questionnaire were developed based on ICAO Quality Assurance Manual (http://www.icao.int/Meetings/PBN-Symposium/Documents/9906_v1_cons_en.pdf, 2009). The questions were checked content validity by the 3 experts in the field of Aviation Management in the university and got the score of more than 0.75. The questionnaire reliability was accepted since Cronbach's Alpha (α) is 0.953, which is range from 0.70-0.95 showed that the questionnaire loaded enough questions and no redundant questions (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). After that, the researcher distributed the questionnaires to the samples.

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher collected questionnaires on February, 2017 which is the normal month of the year (comparing seasonal months, such as January, December) at Don Muang, Airport. The data of the questionnaire was processed by descriptive statistics as mean, S.D. The hypothesis was tested by t-test and Pearson Correlation was used to measure the relationship.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

TABLE 3: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE RESPONDENTS

Source: Researcher, 2017

Demographic Information	Total (386 respondents)	Total (100%)
Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	193	50
Female	193	50
Nationality	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Chinese	200	52
Indian	80	21
Others	106	27
Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 20	132	34
21-30	180	47
31-40	52	13
41-50	13	3
51-60	7	2
61 and above	2	1
Education	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than Secondary School	98	25
Secondary School and Equal	199	52
Higher Education and Equal	81	21
Others	8	2
Purpose of Use	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Leisure	48	12
Business	96	25
Visit	101	26
Study	129	33
Others	12	3

Demographic information of 386 sampled respondents based on questionnaires collected showed that there were 193 males and 193 females. Most of the respondents were at 21-30 years (47 percent) and then the respondents who were less than 20 years old (34 percent). Most of the respondents' education level were at secondary school and equal (52 percent) and then were at less than secondary school (25 percent). The purposes of use were study (33 percent), visit (26 percent) and leisure (12 percent), respectively.

Based on the result of quality assurance (Table 4), it found that almost every quality assurance issues were satisfied. The highest quality assurance (no.1) is professionalism and skills of flight attendants (Mean = 6.44). In addition, disciplines of flight attendant (Mean = 5.89) quality of in-flight service (Mean = 5.83) and were high respectively. The lowest score of quality assurance of the low cost airlines from the questionnaire was on-line and IT system readiness (Mean = 5.48). Also, transfer service at the departure airport (Mean = 5.5) and safety flight record (Mean = 5.55) got the low score of quality assurance, respectively. Even though, the scores of transfer service at the departure airport and safety flight record were low. Asian passengers were satisfied with the quality assurance in these two questions.

TABLE 4: RESULT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE (Source: Researcher, 2017)

Quality Assurance	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
1. Professionalism and Skills of Flight Attendants	6.44	0.744	Strongly Satisfied
2. Quality of In-flight Service	5.83	0.727	Satisfied
3. Disciplines of Flight Attendants	5.89	0.938	Satisfied
4. Information Provision of Ground Service	5.77	0.944	Satisfied
5. Standard Process of In-flight service	5.67	1.02	Satisfied
6. Efficient and Fast Baggage Handling Process	5.61	1.04	Satisfied
7. Good Management of Ground Service	5.58	1.042	Satisfied
8. Waiting Time Before Entering On-board	5.57	1.103	Satisfied
9. Safety Flight Record	5.55	1.018	Satisfied
10. Fast Check-in Process	5.57	1.099	Satisfied
11. Transfer Service at Departure Airport	5.5	1.082	Satisfied
12. On-line and IT system Readiness	5.48	1.119	Satisfied
13. Ability to Cope with Emergency	5.6	1.089	Satisfied
14. Flight Attendants Can Solve the Problems	5.63	1.072	Satisfied
15. Consistent standard of service provision	5.66	1.082	Satisfied
16. Airline has a good safety performance	5.59	1.093	Satisfied
17. Passengers Can Trust Flight Attendants	5.67	1.049	Satisfied
18. Knowledge of Flight Attendants	5.61	1.044	Satisfied
19. Provide Special Needs, such as Elderly, Disabled	5.63	1.093	Satisfied
20. Good Communication from Airlines	5.61	1.061	Satisfied
21. Quick and Update Information for Passengers	5.61	1.083	Satisfied
22. Good Management for Flight Delay	5.62	1.08	Satisfied
23. Airline is Strict to the Timetable	5.65	1.093	Satisfied
24. Enough Service After Landing	5.72	1.097	Satisfied
25. Airline has a Smooth Flight Operation	5.73	1.145	Satisfied
26. Professionalism and Skills of Pilots	5.78	1.143	Satisfied

Based on the research hypothesis about demographic factors (gender, age and education) affecting perception of Asian passengers' satisfaction towards quality assurance of low cost airlines in Thai aviation business, there is a relationship between demographic factors (gender, age and education) since significance level are less than 0.05. (Reject Ho)

Ha1: There is a relationship between 'Gender' and 'Quality Assurance' factor in the low cost airline, Thailand

Ha2: There is a relationship between 'Age' and 'Quality Assurance' factor in the low cost airline, Thailand

Ha3: There is a relationship between 'Education' and 'Quality Assurance' factor in the low cost airline, Thailand

In addition, Pearson Correlation also confirmed that the demographic information as gender, age, education has relationship with quality assurance factors since it has strong relationship in every demographic factor ($r = 0.50$ to 1.0) (Cohen, 1988).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Overall, perception of Asian passengers' satisfaction towards quality assurance of low cost airlines in Thai aviation business was satisfied. The high factors were from flight attendants or people factors such as professionalism, disciplines, and quality of in-flight service. The low factors were from on-line and IT system, transfer service at the departure airport and safety flight record. Therefore, Thai airlines should improve the supporting system such as on-line and IT system and transferring service. In addition, it should improve and create positive attitude regarding safety flight record to the passengers' perception. Moreover, since the gender, age and education has relationship with the quality assurance, therefore, airlines should communicate and give importance to these demographic factors.

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