
EFFECT OF EMPLOYEE SERVICE ON INTERNATIONAL AIRLINE PASSENGERS' BEHAVIOURAL INTENTIONS IN FOREIGN AIRLINES: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT:

The study investigated the direct effect of employee service on customers' behavioural intentions in foreign airlines operating in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The descriptive survey research design generated data from 150 international airline passengers who were found in their respective offices using a well structured questionnaire with 9 scale items, in addition to four demographic items. The statistical result from the inferential analysis with the aid of SPSS revealed that repurchase intention and word of mouth communications (customers' behavioural intentions) towards the foreign airlines is driven by employee service. Thus, the results showed that employee service had positive significant effect on repurchase intentions and positive word of mouth communications of international passengers. Entrepreneurs/managers operating foreign airlines in the tourism industry are expected to build capabilities in human capital selection, training and development based on the needs and expectations of their target market.

Keywords: Employee Service. Airlines. Repurchase Intention. Word of Mouth Communications.

INTRODUCTION:

Crafting and implementing customer service strategy especially in the service organisation is considered very important and a critical area of interest by both practitioners and academics. While the organisational managers emphasise on the need to provide quality service, academics are concerned with issues bothering on how to measure and understand how customers form service evaluations. This implies that the critical role of service quality in any service environment cannot be over emphasised. Also, recent environmental changes occurring in the transportation industry makes service quality a major management concern for both airline managers and passengers (Ostrowski, O'Brien, & Gordon, 1993).

The foregoing suggests that in the ensuing competitive battle in the aviation industry, a major element is the quality of service, and how to retain passengers (Khatib, 1998). The characteristics of services: intangibility, perishability and production and consumption occurring simultaneously requires close involvement of the service

providers and the customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). This explains why Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, and Evans, (2006), noted that the close interaction between service providers and customers make relationship building more critical for services marketing.

Many scholars have conducted studies (Ostrowski et al. 1993; Sultan & Simpson, 2000; Park, Robertson, & Wu, 2004; Adekunle, 2019) to highlight the effect or relationships between airline service quality, passenger satisfaction, and passengers' behavioural intentions. Other studies were also carried out in the hospitality industry (Simbine, & Tukamushaba, 2020)), retail banking (Choudhury, 2014), public transportation (Randheer, AL-Motawa& Vijay (2011), health care service delivery. (Kitapci, Akdogan, & Dortyol, 2014). However, to the best of our knowledge, no research seems to have investigated employee service as a main predictor of passengers' behavioural intentions in the Nigerian tourism industry. This current study is expected to fill this gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Conceptual Review:

Employee Service:

Many scholars have emphasised the specific role of employees in building the service brand and making the brand 'come alive' (Kimpakorn&Tocquer 2007). Even though the service organization may have developed positioning for their brand and devised a good communication programme, the brand can still flounder because of insufficient attention to the role employees play in producing and delivering the service.

Employees (Staff) embody the service brand in the consumer's eyes. In many cases the service staff are the only point of contact for the consumer and by thoroughly training staff and earning their commitment to the brand, its chance of succeeding is greater. The success of

the Disney brand results from the firm's insistence that the employees recognize they are always 'on stage' whenever in public, encouraging them to think of themselves as actors who have learnt their roles and are contributing to the performance and enjoyment of visitors (McDonald, De Charnatony & Harris 2001, p.350).

Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2007) found employees' brand commitment as strongly linked to employee's perception regarding the way in which customers perceive their brand. The staff of service organization can positively enhance the perception consumers have of the service quality through their:

- i. **Reliability:** For example, Lufthansa pilots strive to ensure that their brand has an outstanding track record of punctuality.
- ii. **Responsiveness:** a member of cabin staff may be sympathetic to the family who has been split up on their flight and take the initiative to enable them to sit together.
- iii. **Assurance:** While the plane is kept waiting before taking off, the pilot informs travellers of the reason, the expected length of delay and that all is being done to minimize the delay.
- iv. **Empathy:** Cabin staff may show empathy by comforting a crying child who is flying for the first time.
- v. **Appearance:** The uniform worn by the Alitalia crew is perceived as particularly elegant and fashionable as some travellers recognize that it is designed by Armani.

Failing to take heed of these factors can have a negative impact on the quality of the delivered service. Empirical study has shown that not only are the actions of employees fundamental to a high quality delivery of the service, but also that the morale of staff influence customer satisfaction with a service brand. A study about a British bank revealed that the branches with the lowest staff turnover and absenteeism were

also those with the highest level of profitability and customer retention. A good example of the link between satisfied and satisfied consumers is shown by Southwest Airlines. In 1995, the employee of this airline paid \$60,000 for an advertisement in *USA Today* to thank Herb Keller, their CEO, for the success of their company (McDonald, et al, 2001).

By addressing the issues of recruitment, training and support services a company can establish a more customer focused service culture, which is a prerequisite for delivering consistently high quality service for building successful service brands. A customer centred focus should pervade the whole organization so that the commitment to customers becomes second nature for all employees. The development of a genuine service culture is neither easy nor quick, but companies that have overcome this challenge will continue to harvest customer loyalty. The development of a service culture at Guinness Nigeria, for example, must have earned the firm “the best firm to work with” award.

Passengers’ Behavioural Intentions:

Jhamb, Mittal and Sharma, (2020, p.363), are of the view that customers’ behavioural intentions could be described as their “behavioural activities to promote the brand, purchase service/product, price point’s comparisons, and complaints”. This implies that the behavioural activities in response to brands could either be positively through promoting the brand, purchase consideration/intention, repurchase intention, brand loyalty, and positive word of mouth (WOM) communication or negative and therefore manifest through customers engaging in negative WOM communications, display of higher probability of brand switching behaviours, unwillingness to pay premium prices and reduction in the volume of business transactions, with the

company (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996). Cronin and Taylor (1992) and Zeithaml et al, (1996) posited that customers repurchase intentions consist of four principal dimensions: purchase intention, price sensitivity, word-of-mouth communications, and complaining behaviour. However, the behavioural intentions considered in this current study are repurchase intention, and positive word of mouth communication.

Repurchase Intention:

Ibzan, Balarabe, and Jakada (2016), posited that repurchase intention is seen as a genuine activity of customers purchasing or utilizing a particular product/service once more. This act could be repeatedly and it is considered as a sign of satisfaction from the consumption of products/services from a particular supplier. Customers’ repurchasing goals has been conceptualized in two perspectives: the actual re-purchase of items from the same source and the quest to engage in positive word of mouth evangelism (Fitzgibbon & White, 2005). In this study, the repurchase intention focuses on international airline passengers patronising foreign airlines.

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Communication:

Soderlund (as cited in Wong & Musa (2010, p.3413) defined word-of-mouth “as the extent to which customer that obtained a certain level of satisfaction would inform other people about that particular event”. This implies that WOM communication emanates from satisfied customers. Word of Mouth (WOM) communication has become very important to marketing practitioners and academic researchers. Its study is usually inserted in a context of communication, in which this behaviour becomes important and increasingly prevalent, mainly by the saturation of stimuli of the traditional communication channels

received by customers. Communication by WOM is a source of information free of commercial value to the customer and does not generate cost for the company.

Part of the communication characteristics of WOM includes.

- Favourability: A character described as positive or negative comments made by behavioural WOM,
- Focus: The focus is on the subjects involved in the process,
- Application: It starts from the assumption that when information is requested, the receiver chooses to seek opinion from an opinion leader or influencer,
- Intervention: WOM person suffers the intervention of the organization to increase their individual or organizational level.

In service settings WOM is believed to play an even more important role than in the exchange process of goods due to the specific characteristics of services such as intangibility and non – standardization, customer integration, all of which add to higher risk perception of consumers prior to using the service.

Positive word-of-mouth activity on a particular organisation will give rise to a good reputation and eventually increases an organisation's sales, attracts more customers, and reduces customer departures. Saha and Theingi (2009, p.354) stated that "word-of-mouth represents trusted information that obtained externally; enabling customers to evaluate a product or service that has been associated with profitability and market standing of an organisation".

Empirical Review and Hypotheses

Development:

Employee Service and Passengers're purchase Intentions:

Prior empirical research has identified service quality as a determinant of repurchase

intentions in various market situations. In the service sector in Pakistan customer perceived value was found to acts as a partial mediating variable in the overall relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction (Malik 2011). Sheu (2010) found that quality of product impacts value and satisfaction in an educational environment. The author discovered that, students who perceive superior education quality, value the learning from the university, and feel satisfied with the institution and hence demonstrates favourable behavioural intentions.

In South Africa, Cambel and Yiar-Ellis (2012) found in a study that the attributes that passengers considered important in their choice of airline and that differentiated amongst competitors within the domestic passenger airline industry were safety (considered most important attribute), punctual reliable flights and low price. Further results indicated that passengers were prepared to sacrifice Voyager Miles, legroom and onboard space for lower prices.

Chen (2008) investigated the relationship between service quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions for air passengers in Taiwan. The result showed that perceived performance had a significantly positive effect on perceived value, but not on satisfaction; perceived value had a significant positive effect on satisfaction while perceived value revealed larger effect than overall satisfaction on behavioural intentions.

In the same vein, Aydrin and Yildirim (2012) conducted a study in Turkey and found that different service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy were considered important for different airline passengers, while safety was considered more important as well. For customers of THY airline, 'price' was considered

the most important factor of preference to other domestic airline.

In a comparative study carried out in Turkey, Gwes, Arslan & Yilmaz (2011) found that for domestic flight passengers 'assurance' was ranked as the most important service quality dimension while 'reliability' was ranked by international flight passengers as the most important dimension. Somwang (2008) in Thailand discovered that the expectations of Thai low cost carrier passengers on service quality were higher than their expectations.

An examination of the consumption of the services of a social enterprise in Korea, Choi and Kim (2013) showed positive relationship and how perceived quality influenced perceived functional, emotional, and social values positively and in turn positively influenced customer satisfaction.

Ishaq (2012) conducted a study in the telecommunication sector of Pakistan, to determine the effect of perceived value, service quality and corporate image on customer loyalty. The survey which adopted convenience sampling to gather opinion of five cellular companies' customers who were employees of different multinational firms in Pakistan. The result from stepwise regression analysis showed that service quality and customer perceived value had positive and significant relationship with customer loyalty while corporate image had no significant relationship with customer loyalty. The study revealed that service quality had stronger influence on customer loyalty than customer perceived value.

In Europe, Korda and Snaj (2010) sought to validate the perceived retail banking service scale and also examined the role of customer perceived value in the service quality–customer relationship in retail banking. They found that customer perceived value variable has the potential to be a mediating variable between

perceived quality and customer satisfaction relationship in retail banking setting.

Raza, Siddiquei, Awan and Bukhari (2012) investigated the relationship between service quality, perceived value, satisfaction and revisit intention in the hotel industry in Pakistan. The descriptive study collected data from 250 customers of luxury hotels in Pakistan through a well structured questionnaire. The result showed that all the dimensions of perceived value were significantly dependent with service quality dimensions. Perceived value was also found to be a significant determinant of customer satisfaction.

Randheer, et al (2011) investigated commuters' perception of service quality in public transportation in India. A sample of 534 commuters were the source of data collection in the descriptive study. The result showed that responsiveness, assurance, reliability, culture and empathy were confirmed to meet the expectations of the commuters as dimensions of service quality.

Park, et al (2004) investigated the factors affecting air passengers' decision-making processes by testing a model that examined service perception, service value, service expectation, passenger satisfaction, airline image, and behavioural intentions at the same time. Data were collected from Korean international air passengers. The statistical results showed that service value, passenger satisfaction, and airline image had direct effect on air passengers' decision-making processes. Adekunle, (2019) carried out a comparative study on the effect of service quality on passenger satisfaction in Nigeria among three airlines (Virgin Atlantic, British airways and Med-view airline). The route considered in the survey was the Lagos to London route/flights. The statistical analysis revealed that passengers ranked Virgin Atlantic services first, while British airways services were ranked second

with Med-view airline services occupying the third position. Overall, the passengers considered the following service attributes as being more important: safety and security, flight attendant's courteousness, appealing appearance, attitude and uniform of employees, staff behaviour and communication skills.

Simbine, and Tukamushaba, (2020) investigated the effect of employee behaviour on organisational competitiveness in the context of Qatar hospitality industry with a sample of 51 employees. The results showed that the attitude of employee's attitude and perceptions towards various aspects of hotel operation are key antecedents that shape employee behaviour. It was established that employee behaviour has a direct effect on organisational competitiveness. For future improvements, it is recommended that managers within the hospitality establishments make conscious efforts to involve employees in operational decision-making, communicate ideas in a way that is easy to understand, and lastly the salaries of employees should be adjusted periodically following key inflation factors such as the prices of essential commodities.

From the foregoing, we can hypothesise that,

H1: Employee service positively significantly affects international passengers repurchase intentions to foreign airlines in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Employee Service and Passengers' Word of Mouth (WOM) Communication:

Susilowati, and Yasri (2019) carried out a study to determine the effect of service quality and customer satisfaction toward word of mouth intention. The result showed that quality of service had a significant effect towards word of mouth communication. Also, customer satisfaction had a significant effect on word of

mouth communication. Jiewanto et al (2012) showed that SERVQUAL has a positive impact on organizational satisfaction and image, and then has a positive impact on WOM's intention. WOM's intention is negatively influenced by SERVQUAL and student satisfaction. Liu and Lee (2016) found that service quality is related to increased perceptions of service prices as a result of increased passenger WOM, which also influences their return intentions. In the same study, service quality had positive relationship with WOM with perceived value of monetary prices mediating the relationship.

Choudhury (2014) investigated the effect of four dimensions of service quality (attitude, competence, evidence and comfort) on WOM in retail banking. The result revealed that attitude proved to be the most important service quality dimension influencing WOM. In another study, Ren and Lam (2014) found that assurance and reliability encouraged WOM's more positive intentions, while tangibles, responsiveness, and empathy did not have a significant effect on WOM's intentions. De Matos and Rossi (2008), conducted antecedents and moderator meta-analyzes on word-of-mouth, and found a positive effect by service quality on word-of-mouth activities. Alexandris, Dimitriadis, and Markata, (2002) examined the relationship between SERVQUAL dimensions and WOM behaviour in the Greek hotel industry. All SERVQUAL dimensions except tangibles were significantly and positively influential on WOM.

Kitapci, et al (2014) investigated the effect of service quality (SQ) on satisfaction, effect of satisfaction on word of mouth (WOM) communication and repurchase intention (RI) in the context of health care service delivery. From a data set 369 patients, the study that adopted the work of Parasuraman et al.'s SERVQUAL variables found through a structural equation model (SEM) that empathy and

assurance dimensions are positively related to customer satisfaction. However, customer satisfaction has a significant effect on WOM and repurchase intention which are found highly related. Based on the foregoing we hypothesize that,

H2: Employee service positively significantly affects international passengers' word of mouth communications to foreign airlines in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Research Design:

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design due to the fact that data bothering on the perception and preferences of international airline passengers were involved. The statistical tool for testing of hypotheses was the simple regression analysis.

Sample and Data Collection:

The target population for the current study were international airline passengers who patronize foreign airlines and resident in or visiting Port Harcourt. The population was considered to be large and unknown population, and as a result, Freund and William's formula for determination of sample size from unknown population was utilized to determine the sample size. The resulting figure of 150 was gotten. A convenience sampling method was used to generate primary data from the international airline passengers. Only the international airline passengers who were found in their offices (universities, corporate organisations and government offices, etc) during the period of questionnaire administration were included in the survey. The respondents were approached and urged to be part of the survey. Those who agreed were given a well-structured questionnaire to complete. Out of the 150 questionnaires distributed, only 105 were

retrieved and proved useable and therefore subjected to data analysis.

Demographic Profile of Respondents:

The information on gender revealed that (59) respondents (56.2%) were male while (46) respondents (43.8%) female. This implies that male respondents were of the majority. The information on age brackets of the respondents showed that 11 respondents (10.5%), were less than 20 years, 27 respondents (25.7%) were within 20–29 years, 39 respondents (37.1%) were within 30 – 39 years while 28 respondents (26.7%) were greater than 40 years. This information shows that majority of the respondents were within the ages of 30 – 39 years. Information on the respondents' level of education: No formal education (NIL), FSLC (NIL), SSCE/GCE (18) (17.1%), ND (NIL), while HND/B.SC (41) (39%), MA/MSC/MBA (21) (20%) and Ph.D (25) (23.9%). From the information it shows that respondents with HND/B.SC are of the majority. On the number of years, the respondents had patronised their respective brands of foreign airlines: 15 respondents (14.3%) had patronised for less than two years, 76 respondents (73.4) had patronised for two to four years (2-4), 11 respondents (10.5) had patronised for five to eight years (5-8), 3 respondents (1.8%) had patronised for nine years and above This information implies that majority of the respondents have worked two to four years (2-4).

Measurement Instrument and Questionnaire Design:

Extant literature provided the sources of items used in the study. Items for employee service were adapted from Khatib (1998). The items used for repeat patronage and word of mouth communication intention were adapted from, Lim (2010) and Namkung and Jung

(2007). All measurement items used in expressing the degree of agreement were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale anchored by: Strongly Disagree [SD] (1), Disagree [D](2), Agree [A](3), Agree fairly strongly (4) and Strongly Agree [SA] (5).

Research Results:

Reliability Analysis:

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.975	.979	9

The 9-item research instrument was subjected to a reliability test using Cronbach Alpha, with a resulting value of .98 as shown in Table 1. The result is suggestive of a very good internal consistency. A threshold of .7 was suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) with the implication that the measuring instrument was considered helpful and applicable in measuring opinions of international airline passengers concerning the effect of employee service on their intention to repeat their patronage as well as generating positive word of mouth.

Discriminant Validity:

Table 2 Correlation Matrix

	Employee Service	Repurchase Intention	Word of Mouth Communication
Employee Service	1.000	.843	.848
Repurchase Intention	.843	1.000	.949
Word of Mouth Communication	.848	.949	1.000

Correlation matrix was utilised to determine the discriminant validity of the research instrument. From the result obtained and demonstrated in Table 2 the discriminant validity is confirmed based on the suggested by Fornell and Larker (1981) that discriminate

validity is proven if all the diagonal elements are higher than all the off-diagonal elements in their columns and rows.

Sampling Adequacy:

Table 3 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.743
Approx. Chi-Square		370.696
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	3
	Sig.	.000

The nine exploratory items of employee service, repurchase intention and word of mouth communication were subjected to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). The result as shown in Table 3, indicates that Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant at $p < .000$ and KMO measure of sampling adequacy is .743. The value of MKO is greater than 0.5 which was suggested as a minimum level by Kasser (as cited in Wong & Musa 2010, p. 3417).

Data Analyses:

To ascertain the effect of employee service on international passengers' behavioural intentions the two hypothesized relationships were subjected to statistical analysis using simple regression analysis.

Hypothesis One:

Table 4 Simple Regression analysis showing the effect of employee service on repurchase intentions of international airline passengers.

Dependent variable	Independent Variable	Beta(β)	t-value	p-value
Repurchase Intention	Employee Service	.843	15.900	0.00**

Notes: $P \leq 0.05$; $R = .843$; $R^2 = .711$; Adjusted $R^2 = .708$; $F = 252.818$; $P = 0.000$

From the Table, the following results are shown; standardized beta (β) of employee service ($\beta = 0.843$), adjusted R square = 0.708, $F = 252.818$ and $p = 0.000 < 0.05$. This specifies that employee service explains 70.8% variation in international airline passengers' repurchase intentions in foreign airline in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

The statistical analysis show that employee service had positive significant effect on international airline passengers repurchase intentions to the foreign airlines ($\beta = 0.843$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis one is supported.

Hypothesis Two:

Table 4 Simple Regression analysis showing the effect of employee service on word of mouth communications of international airline passengers.

Dependent variable	Independent Variable	Beta(β)	t-value	p-value
Word of Mouth Communications	Employee Service	.848	16.272	0.00**

Notes: $P \leq 0.05$; $R = .848$; $R^2 = .720$;

Adjusted $R^2 = .717$; $F = 264.780$; $P = 0.000$

From the Table, the following results are shown; standardized beta (β) of employee service ($\beta = 0.843$), adjusted R square = 0.717, $F = 264.780$ and $p = 0.000 < 0.05$. This specifies that employee service explains 70.8% variation in international airline passengers' word of mouth communications in foreign airline in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

The statistical analysis show that employee service had positive significant effect on international airline passengers' word of mouth communications to the foreign airlines ($\beta = 0.848$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis two is supported.

Discussion of Results:

Hypothesis 1 showed a positive significant effect of employee service on repurchase intentions to the foreign airlines ($\beta = 0.843$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). This implies that H1 is supported. Thus, a higher level of employee service in terms of quality service delivery by foreign airlines the higher the propensity by international passengers to return to the airlines for future patronage. This finding is consistent with the findings of Park et al (2004).

Hypothesis 2 posited a significant effect of employee service on the international passengers' word of mouth communication to the foreign airlines. With $\beta = 0.848$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, the effect is significant. This result is consistent with the prediction of H2 and is therefore supported. Thus, a higher level of employee service in terms of quality of service delivered by the employees of foreign airline is associated with a high propensity by customers to recommend the foreign airlines to family and friends. This finding is consistent with the findings of Khatib (1998).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

This study examined the effect of employee service on international passengers' behavioural intentions in selected foreign airlines in Port Harcourt. This research effort has fulfilled its objectives by empirically determining the effect of employee service on two measures of passengers' behavioural intentions (repurchase intention and word of mouth communications). The findings showed that employee service of foreign airlines had significant positive effect the two measures of passengers' behavioural intentions respectively in the context of airlines operating in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. As a conclusion, the outcome of the research indicates that the employee service quality of foreign airlines

constitutes an important factor that influenced international airline passengers' behavioural intentions in terms of repurchase intention and word of mouth communication in the aviation industry in Port Harcourt.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are being made for airline entrepreneurs and their managers in the industry. These recommendations that follow are meant to enhance the delivery of good customer experience to international passengers in Nigeria based on employee service. They are as follows;

- i. The foreign airlines should maintain their high standard of employee service to continue to meet international passengers' expectations.
- ii. Qualified employees should be recruited to enhance the service quality level.
- iii. Employees should be giving adequate training on how to deliver high quality service.

SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:

In the future, further research effort should be directed towards investigating the effect of other dimensions of service branding on passenger's behavioural intentions in the aviation industry. Also, brand satisfaction could be introduced as a mediating or moderating variable in the relationship between service branding and passengers' behavioural intentions.

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