

LEVEL 7 ASSESSMENT SPECIFICATION

Student name:	Angela Calista LAU	Student ID number:	1812881
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The impact of airport service quality on passenger satisfaction:

A case study of Hong Kong International Airport

1. Introduction

Over the years, airports have dramatically transformed from mere aerodromes to complex infrastructures where travellers can indulge themselves in a wide range of activities. As passengers' expectations continue to grow, airports must strive to gain a deeper understanding of the passengers' perspectives in order to attract and retain passengers in a modern, competitive landscape. However, as the scope of airport services develops and becomes more extensive, the service environment also grows into one that is increasingly complex. The challenges encountered by airports are also amplified by the global surge in passenger volume. Therefore, amidst the increasing standards and expectations as well as proliferating passenger throughput, the way that airport services are evaluated also needs to be critically reviewed. In this regard, this research aims to examine the impact of airport service quality on passenger satisfaction by conducting a case study on Hong Kong International Airport.

2. Literature review

2.1 Current research gap

In a comprehensive literature review that comprises 380 documents regarding airport performance, Bezerra and Gomes (2016b) highlights the persistent emphasis of objective 'benchmarking' in the majority of previous studies. Due to the weak competition amongst airports in the earlier days, research had been scarce and interest in airport performance had been largely limited to the measurement of operational efficiency. It is not until the millennial era that researchers begin to recognise that benchmarking based solely on efficiency yields limited value as it undermines the multidisciplinary nature of airport business (e.g. Bazargan and Vasigh, 2003, cited in Bezerra and Gomes, 2016b). In particular, Fodness and Murray (2007) addresses to the lack of attention given to passengers' perspectives in evaluating airport services, as objective indicators per se are insufficient to conceptualise the qualities of a *service* industry.

Despite the gain in momentum in a passenger-centric approach and the introduction of various under-explored dimensions, the traditional benchmarking approach remains deep-rooted in the industry. Even when the service quality is examined under a broader perspective that encompasses diverse service qualities, the concept remains superficial seeing as the service attributes are mostly developed

through discussions with experts and professionals rather than with passengers. For example, the research of Rhoades, Waguespack and Young (2000) identifies four key quality factors including (1) passenger services such as dining, toilets, and shopping, (2) access and transportation, (3) flight related services such as baggage claim, boarding areas and information displays and (4) inter-terminal transportation. Nevertheless, these attributes are developed by a questionnaire filled out by airport operators and consultants, who first rate the importance of the pre-identified factors in their own capacities as industry professionals, and then answered the same set of questions again from the perspective of passengers. This limitation is in fact acknowledged by the authors who point out that experts were targeted for the ease of accessibility, but that they might fail to recognise or understand the service attributes that matter to the passengers. In other words, the fact that passengers are not involved at all in the data collection hampers the objective of this research, which is to design an index of quality factors “from the perspectives of all airport service customers”. Notwithstanding the apparent limitations, the research remains an authoritative and frequently cited piece of work in the realm of airport service quality.

In a more recent study by Fernandes and Pacheco (2010) conducted on six international airports in Brazil, passengers are again not included in the data collection process, as both the generation of primary indicators and the subsequent weighting of the same are developed through discussion with experts in the airport industry only. Similarly, Yeh and Kuo (2002), another frequently cited research in defining airport service quality, does not include any passengers in forming the key service categories, although the research is one of the few studies that has moved away from simple benchmarking and opens up to qualitative measures of airport services.

Bearing in mind the abovementioned phenomenon, the service quality attributes used in this study are based on selected research that has taken into account passengers’ perspectives, so as to ensure that the indicators present passenger-centric qualities. The preliminary conceptual model of the present study is mainly built upon the final model postulated by Fodness and Murray (2007), which is developed by qualitative research with passengers and then refined after exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Since this research is based on a US airport, other research is also used to supplement the item pool to offer a more holistic, global view in the contemporary landscape.

2.2 Conceptualisation and hypotheses

2.2.1 Airport service quality dimensions

Dimension 1: Function

Airport passengers are often time-pressed. Thus, the capacity of an airport to facilitate effective and efficient movement of the passengers within the terminal is fundamental. The importance of “servicescape” to service business where customers are physically present to experience the service within a “factory”, namely the physical facility provided by the firm, is theorised by Bitner (1992). Servicescape is comprised of a wide array of environmental features which covers three main constructs, including spatial layout, signs and symbols, ambient conditions. In this study, the first dimension focuses on the first two functional aspects in servicescape. In an airport setting, these include wayfinding signage that directs passengers’ movement, flight information, physical layout of the airport terminal in relation to the ease of access to relevant facilities, location of various facilities such as baggage carts and toilets, etc. (Bezerra and Gomes, 2016a; Widarsyah, 2013). Furthermore, the timeliness of the provision of service such as baggage delivery and check-in processes is a recurrent theme in almost all literature that attempts to conceptualise airport service quality (e.g. Bezerra and Gomes, 2016a; Fodness and Murray, 2007; Humphrey, Francis and Fry, 2002; Mirghafoori, Izadi and Daei, 2018).

In regard to efficiency, this research has included a new aspect to the ‘function’ dimension, which is the use of self-service facilities in delivering timely terminal services. Self-service facilities commonly include check-in kiosks, bag-drop, immigration gates and boarding gates. Research finds that passengers use self-service facilities to save time and avoid long queues (Gelderman, Ghijsen and van Diemen, 2011; Meuter et al. 2000), and that those who have shorter dwell time in the airport are more likely to use self-service facilities (Castillo-Manzano and López-Valpuesta, 2013). These research suggest that such facilities are perceived by passengers to have a positive impact on increasing their efficient movement at the airport, and Bogicevic et al. (2017) suggest that the use of airport self-service technologies have a positive impact on passengers’ overall satisfaction. Thus, as passengers perceive such technologies to be a prevalent and integral part of airport service, self-service facilities ought to be included as an important function delivered by an airport. In this regard, it is hypothesised that:

H1: Airport service quality is positively influenced by the basic functions delivered by the airport.

Dimension 2: Interaction

In the service sector, the impact of the quality of interaction between customers and the service provider is well-established. Although it is contended that the airport setting is more complex than ordinary service businesses, the SERVQUAL scale introduced by Parasuraman et al. (1988) which is widely adopted in service industries nevertheless sheds light on airport services qualities, particularly regarding the interaction with customers. The model proposed by Fodness and Murray (2007)

supports a number of SERVQUAL dimensions, for example the appearance of the airport staff are tangibles, while the attitude of employees relate to empathy and assurance. These items are duly included in the present study. In addition, knowledge and expertise of the staff are also important factors that customers take into account when evaluating the interaction with the service provider (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Overall, it is postulated that passengers' perceptions of the airport's service quality are influenced by interaction with the personnel who deliver the service.

H2: Airport service quality is positively influenced by the interaction between airport personnel and passengers.

Dimension 3: Diversion

Recall that the first dimension deals with that effectiveness and efficiency in delivery various airport functions. However, apart from in-terminal movement and processing activities, the in-between time and discretionary time are of equal importance to passengers, especially to business travellers (Darko, 1999, cited in Fodness and Murray, 2007) and transit passengers who comparatively spend more time waiting in the terminal. Furthermore, since passengers are often stressed during processing activities, it is important that the service provider manage passengers' discretionary time in a way that alleviates anxiety and brings positive experiences to the travellers (Livingstone et al. 2012). Popovic, Kraal and Kirk (2009) identify two main types of activities on which travellers spend their discretionary time, namely necessary activities that are travel-related and informal activities such as shopping and dining. Thus, airports must be able to divert their attention from processing activities to an environment that offers "aesthetic, cognitive and sensory satisfaction" (Fodness and Murray, 2007, p.501). All in all, the extent to which an airport can facilitate passengers in spending their dwell time could have a significant impact on its service quality.

H3: Airport service quality is positively influenced by diversion activities and facilities offered by the airport during passengers' discretionary time.

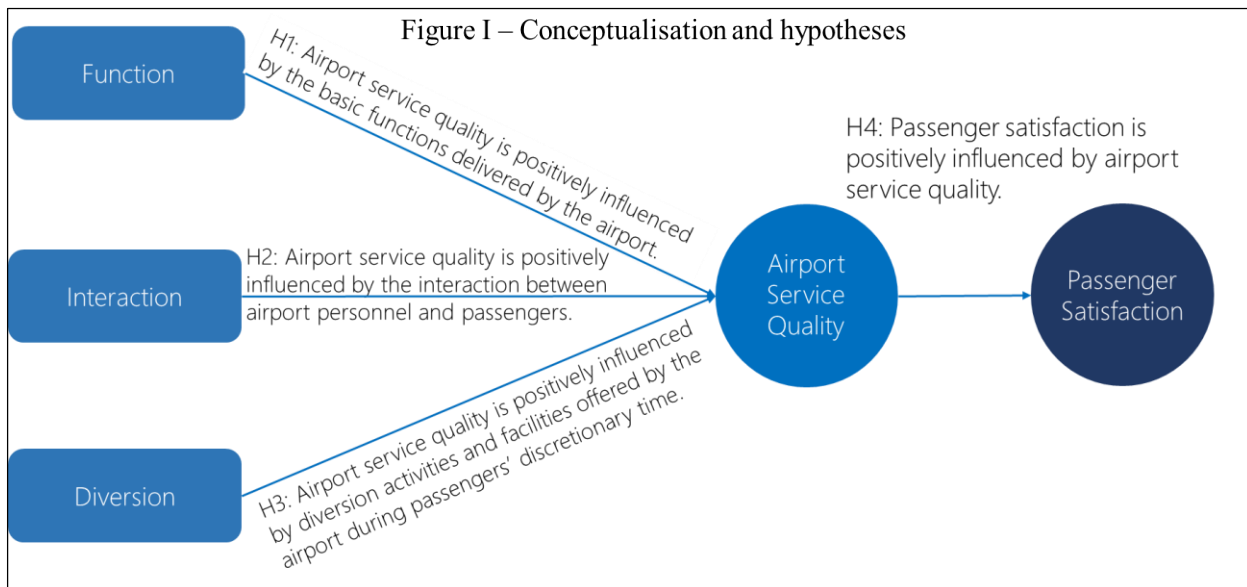
2.2.2 Airport service quality and passenger satisfaction

Although customer satisfaction and service quality are often discussed concurrently, literature consistently characterises them as two distinct constructs despite their close relationship (Taylor and Baker, 1994). Customer satisfaction is postulated as a process and could be affected by a number of 'non-quality' issues (Oliver, 1993), whereas service quality's underlying dimensions are more specific and are based on perceptions of excellence (Taylor and Baker, 1994). As regard the way that these two constructs are specifically related, various seminal works suggest that perceived service

quality is positively related to customer satisfaction (e.g. Monroe and Chapman, 1987 cited in Oh, 1999). Woodside et al. (1989, cited in Oh, 1999), in investigating customers' purchase intentions, also recognises that satisfaction is a mediating variable between service quality and purchase intention. In this light, the present research proposes that:

H4: Passenger satisfaction is positively influenced by airport service quality.

The overall proposed model is illustrated in Figure I as follows:



3. Methodology

This is an explanatory study aimed at studying how the quality of airport services affects passenger satisfaction. Based largely on the airport service quality model developed by Fodness and Murray (2007), quantitative research is carried out by way of questionnaire. Although the questionnaire is not reviewed by industry experts due to the short time span of the pilot test research, two members of the DBA class were asked to review the questionnaire to ensure the clarity of wordings and presentation. The entire research is conducted in two phases. A pilot test is first conducted to assess the adequacy of the instrument; after the item pool has been refined as appropriate and reviewed by experts, a full-scale survey will be carried out.

3.1 Survey instrument

The questionnaire in the pilot study is divided into three main parts, and the respondents are also reminded at the beginning of the survey to fill out the questionnaire based on their personal experience at Hong Kong International Airport within the past 12 months. The first part contains screening questions using nominal scales to ensure that respondents are in the target population. Apart from

being 18 or above, respondents are required to have departed and arrived at Hong Kong International Airport at least once within the past 12 months, so that they could draw on their experiences to evaluate the holistic quality of the airport's services which include both departures and arrivals services.

The second part of the survey has 3 subsections, all of which employ a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree). Part 2a is the principle section that aims to measure the different dimensions of the airport's service quality, containing statements pertaining to function, interaction and diversion as previously explicated. Part 2b is a question that measures the overall airport service quality, while Part 2c is another separate question asking respondents to rate the overall satisfaction of their airport experience. Lastly, the third part of the survey collects data on the respondents' demographics and travel purposes using nominal scales.

3.2 Sample size

The total size of the target population is hard to ascertain, however a ballpark figure could be used as indication as the total passenger throughput at Hong Kong International Airport, departures and arrivals inclusive, was over 74.7 million in 2018. According to Sudman (1976), the typical sample size for a study of a regional group of people or household is 200 to 500. The current study falls within the definition of a regional case study, but given the large target population, the higher end of the spectrum will be targeted so as to reduce sample variance, namely a sample size of 500. For the pilot study, the target sample size is set at 30 based on the recommendation made by Johanson and Brooks (2010).

3.3 Sampling method

To allow assessment of sampling error, systematic sampling will be adopted for the full-scale survey. Every third passenger queuing up for check-in at the airport's departures hall will be asked to fill out the questionnaire. This will be repeated for every aisle in both Terminals 1 and 2 to cover passengers taking different airlines, conducted at different times of the day and will cover every day of the week. For the pilot study, snowball sampling was adopted due to a tight timeframe. Members of the DBA class who qualify as the target population were asked to fill out the pre-test questionnaire and to refer others as appropriate.

A total of 28 respondents completed the pilot test, 27 of whom qualify as the target population. The high percentage of usable questionnaire is likely attributed to the snowball sampling method, since qualifying respondents had been identified before being asked to participate. As there were no incomplete responses, all 27 questionnaires were used for the following analysis.

Table I – Summary of methodology		
	Survey	Pilot Test
Target population	Passengers aged 18 or above who have arrived at and departed from Hong Kong International Airport in the past 12 months.	
Total size of target population	Unknown Ballpark figure: 2018 passenger volume at Hong Kong International Airport was 74.7 million	
Sampling method	Systematic sampling – every 3 rd passenger queuing up for check-in at the departures hall, repeated for every aisle in both Terminals 1 and 2 to cover passengers taking different airlines.	Snowball sampling – DBA classmates
Sampling size	500	30

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1 Analysis methods

To present the results of pilot test, a frequency table with descriptive statistics is used summarised and simplify the demographics and travel purposes of the respondents. A separate table is then used to present the mean and standard deviation for each item in all the constructs and for the overall airport service quality and overall passenger experience (Parts 2a-2c of the questionnaire); as well as the Cronbach's alpha for each construct to determine the internal consistency.

In the subsequent analysis for the full-scale survey, multiple regression analysis will first be used to find out the relationship between the three independent variables (function, interaction and diversion) with the dependent variable (airport service quality). The R^2 value will be evaluated to determine the amount of variance explained by the constructs; after which the F-test and T-test will be run to determine the usefulness of the overall regression model and the individual relationship between each of the three constructs and airport service quality. Finally, correlation analysis will be run to ascertain the relationship between the airport service quality and passenger satisfaction.

4.2 Summary of pilot test results

The demographics and travel characteristics of the 27 respondents in the pilot test are summarised and presented in Table II. Table III provides the mean score and standard for each item as well as the Cronbach's alpha for each factor.

Table II
Pilot Test respondents' demographics and travel characteristics

(n=27)

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Gender		
Male	16	59%
Female	11	41%
Age group		
17 or under	0	0%
18-24	0	0%
25-34	13	48%
35-44	8	30%
45-54	5	19%
55-64	1	4%
65 or above	0	0%
Education		
High school or below	0	0%
Bachelor	5	19%
Master	22	81%
Doctor	0	0%
Are you a Hong Kong resident?		
Yes	26	96%
No	1	4%
Travel purpose (please choose the most frequent if you travelled more than once in the past 12 months)		
Business	10	37%
Leisure	14	52%
Visiting family	2	7%
Study	0	0%
Others	1	4%
No. of times you departed by air from Hong Kong International Airport in the past 12 months		
0	0	0%
1-3	12	44%
4-6	8	30%
7-9	3	11%
10 or above	4	15%
No. of times you arrived by air at Hong Kong International Airport in the past 12 months		
0	0	0%
1-3	12	44%
4-6	8	30%
7-9	3	11%
10 or above	4	15%

Table III
Pilot Test Questionnaire Items

Item		Mean [†]	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Construct 1: Function				
1*	A variety of ground transportation options to the city is available.	4.26	0.89	
2*	The signs are visible throughout the airport directing me to airport facilities (baggage, ticket counter, security, rest rooms, rental cars, transportation services, etc.)	4.56	0.63	
3*	The flight information displays are clear and sufficient.	4.44	0.68	
4*	Baggage carts are conveniently located.	4.11	0.68	
5*	Processing and queuing time at check-in is short.	3.81	0.98	
6*	Waiting time for my arrivals baggage is short.	3.15	1.08	
7#	Self-service facilities (e.g. check-in kiosks, info kiosks, self bag-drop) are helpful to me.	3.56	0.79	0.81
Construct 2: Interaction				
8*	Employees at the airport are courteous.	3.96	0.79	
9*	Employees at the airport are neatly dressed.	4.19	0.61	
10*	The way the airport employees are dressed makes it easy to identify their function.	3.96	0.79	
11*	Employees at the airport are able to direct me to any airport service.	3.81	0.72	
12*	Employees at the airport are knowledgeable about local areas of interest.	3.81	0.72	
13*	Employees at the airport are available to offer me individualised attention.	3.48	0.83	0.82
Construct 3: Diversion				
14*	Business facilities such as computers, wifi and conference spaces are available.	4.00	0.67	
15*	The airport facilities are clean.	4.30	0.66	
16*	The waiting areas provide comfortable seating.	3.89	0.57	
17*	A good variety of food and beverages are available at the airport.	3.78	0.83	
18*	A good variety of retail outlets are available at the airport.	3.74	0.64	
19*	The airport's décor matches the local culture of the city.	3.70	0.66	0.66
Overall service quality				
20	The overall service quality at Hong Kong International Airport is good.	4.15	0.52	
Overall passenger satisfaction				
21#	I am happy with the experiences I have had at Hong Kong International Airport.	4.22	0.50	

* Item adopted from instrument in Fodness and Murray (2007). Wordings modified from expectation of service quality to actual service quality, e.g. "A variety of ground transportation options to the city should be available" is rephrased to "...is available".

Item adopted from instrument in Bogicevic et al. (2017).

† All items are answered using a 5-point Likert scale.

4.3 Mean and standard deviation

Item 6 regarding waiting time for arrivals baggage, which scored a mean of 3.15 which is close to the middle of the 5-point scale. Although the score is the lowest among all items, it nevertheless has the highest standard deviation. The large variance could be caused by the different behaviours of different types of passengers, for example leisure passengers might carry and check-in more luggage leading to a longer waiting time, while business passengers often have less or no check-in luggage. In the pilot study, leisure and business passengers constitute 52% and 37% of the sample respectively, which could be an important contributing factor to the split in opinion.

On the other hand, the scores for Items 2 and 3 pertaining to terminal directional signage and flight information displays scored a mean of 4.56 and 4.44 respectively, which are noticeably higher than the rest of the items in the questionnaire. The reason that they have higher mean scores could be

attributed to the demographics of the respondents. In the pilot study, 54% of the respondents travelled four times or above at the Airport in the past year, and 15% even travelled 10 times or above. This suggests that the respondents are more familiar with the layout and facilities locations at the Airport, thus the terminal signage and displays might appear clearer to them than to non-frequent travellers, who might be more demanding in the availability and clarity in these aspects. In a full-scale survey, the travel frequency of respondents is likely to be more spread out, thus a lower mean score and also larger variance are expected.

4.4 Internal consistency

Internal consistency amongst the items within each factor are found to be acceptable. Factors 1 and 2 have a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 and 0.82 which indicate good consistency. However, attention should be drawn to Factor 3 which yields a Cronbach's alpha of 0.66, slightly lower than the acceptable level of 0.70. The exclusion of Item 16 regarding the provision of comfortable seating in waiting areas leads to the highest increase in the alpha compared with exclusion of other items in the same construct, as the alpha would leap from 0.66 to 0.73, thereby flagging an issue as to the appropriateness of Item 16. Nevertheless, given the small sample size in the pilot study, it would be premature to decide on the removal of this item. Instead, the problem will be addressed by a change in wordings in the statement to shift the focus from 'comfortable seating' to the actual activities that divert passengers' attention in the enclosed airport setting, which is the underlying concept of the factor 'diversion'. Therefore, the statement will be adjusted as follows:

Before: The waiting areas provide comfortable seating.

After: The waiting areas provide quiet areas to nap, read, or do business.

4.5 Subscale correlation

Table IV – Subscale correlation		
Factor	Correlation with overall airport service quality	Correlation with overall passenger satisfaction
1 – Function	0.47	0.30
2 – Interaction	0.54	0.38
3 – Diversion	0.64	0.41
Overall airport service quality	/	0.73

All three factors are positively correlated with the overall airport service quality. According to Warmbrod's description of the correlation coefficients (1992), Factor 1 is moderately correlated, while Factors 2 and 3 are substantially correlated with the overall airport service quality, ranging from 0.47, 0.54 to 0.64 respectively. Furthermore, the overall airport service quality is also very strongly and positively correlated with the overall passenger satisfaction as the correlation stands at

0.73. This supports Hypothesis 4 which suggests that passenger satisfaction is directly influenced by the airport service quality.

4.6 Limitations

The pilot study is subject to two major limitations. Firstly, the survey was conducted within a short period of time, therefore the number of participants was also limited. Given the vast number of travellers who qualify as the target population, the results of this pilot study has to be interpreted with caution as an indicative reference only. Secondly, the tight timeframe led to another limitation as snowball sampling was used to collect the results as quickly as possible. Since the majority of the respondents were DBA classmates, their demographics such as education level, nationality, travel purposes and travel frequency appeared more similar and concentrated compared with the expected target population, which are factors that could affect their perceptions towards the service quality and their overall airport experience. Therefore, by using systematic sampling in the full-scale survey coupled with a larger sample size, it is anticipated that the results will reflect a more genuine picture of the issues at hand.

5. Conclusion

No doubt, passenger satisfaction is not the only indicator of a good airport, but customer orientation is indisputably an important factor that could set an airport apart from its competitors in this day and age. However, even though there is abundant literature on the topics of service quality and customer satisfaction, research that is specifically directed at airport services nevertheless remains an under-explored discipline. Additionally, literature review also reveals the issue that despite its close relationship with passenger satisfaction, service quality has often been studied without adequate participation from the end users of airports, namely the passengers. Hence, the present study is conducted with a view to filling these research gaps by addressing the multi-faceted airport setting through a passenger-oriented approach. Through grasping the factors of airport service quality and their relationship with passenger satisfaction, it is envisioned that airport managers could better map the route towards their ultimate corporate goals.

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