Airline Service Quality Dimensions and Customer Loyalty: Empirical Evidence from Air Passengers' in Lagos State

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ARTICLES

Abstract

Air travellers are increasingly becoming more demanding in terms of their expectations of the quality of service offered by airline carriers. Hence, operators must improve service delivery to retain their loyalty. This study investigates the relationship between airline service quality dimensions and customer loyalty among air passengers in Lagos state. Causal research design was adopted to examine the aforementioned relationship. Convenience sampling technique was used to survey 600 air travellers. Data collected from the respondents were analysed by using Pearson correlation analysis and Anova. The findings reveal that the service quality and its dimensions are positive and significantly related to each other, overall service quality and customer loyalty. The results of the study indicate no significant difference between customers' travelling for different motives in their perception of the quality of services. It was also discovered that flight frequency was insignificantly connected to customer loyalty. In line with the above findings, the study concludes that the airline service quality improvement initiatives should begin with recognition of customers' needs. Correspondingly, airline operators should cultivate strategies to fulfil their service promise along the service quality dimensions, most important to air travellers to enhance customer loyalty.

Keywords

Service quality, customer loyalty, cabin class, flight frequency, air traveller.

JEL classification: M31, Z13

Introduction

Air transportation is a progressively developing sector and one of the most important service industries across the globe. Statistics released by the International Air Transport Association [IATA] in 2012, revealed that by 2030, airline industry would provide 82 million employments and generate $6.9 trillion revenues in economic activity (IATA, 2012). The airline business across the globe is projected to experience traffic growth of about 4.8% per annum, and by 2031, air traffic is projected to reach 13,256 billion revenue passengers-kilometres (RPK), which is 2.6 times the volumes recorded in 2011 (Japan Aircraft Development Corporation [JADC], 2012). In line with the global trend in airline industry, the Nigeria airline industry has recorded tremendous change over the last three decades. In particular, between the year of 2000 and 2011, airline operations in Nigeria expanded considerably and air traffic is projected to grow at an annual rate of 9–10% reaching the level of 15 to 20 million passengers by 2020 (Oxford Economics, 2010).

In contemporary business world, measuring and maintaining service quality offered to air travellers are very pivotal to the growth and competiveness of airline business. Jain and Gupta (2004) maintain that competitive pressure to deliver high-quality service has propelled service organisations to understand customer' assessments of service quality and then develop service standard that will meet and exceed customers' expectations. This implies that service-based industries, such as airline businesses are obliged to deliver outstanding services to their customers in order to have a sustainable competitive advantage. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), service quality is a measure of inconsistency between consumers' perceptions of services received and their expectations about the organisation offering the services. Hence, if what customer perceives falls below expectation, consumer evaluates quality to be low and if what is perceived meets or exceeds his/her expectation, then consumer views quality to be high. Zahari, Yusoff, and Ismail (2008) describe the service quality as the degree to which a service offered to customer meets or exceed his/her expectations.

Academic interest in customer loyalty dates back to the earliest days of marketing discipline and resonates to date (Copeland 1923; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Oliver, 1997). In the opinion of Van-Pham and Simpson (2006) enhancing customer loyalty remains cardinal to airline success and profitability. Hallowell (1996) views loyalty as a form of behaviours, including relationship maintenance, improved level and scale of relationship, and commendation emanating from customer's belief that quality of value from one service provider is superior to what is obtainable from another. Explicitly, a firm with loyal consumers is likely to benefit from; relatively low costs of customer acquisition costs and servicing overheads (Palmer & Beggs, 1997); high customer resistance to competitive-offers (Ahmad, 2007); positive word-of-mouth communication (Bone, 1995) among other numerous benefits. While meanings and dimensions abound in elucidating loyalty, the construct manifest itself in two distinct approaches: attitudinal and behavioural loyalty (Ahmad, 2007). According to Soderlund (2006), attitudinal loyalty is examined in relations to attitudes, preferences, obligation and intents, while the behavioural

loyalty encompasses features such as: the frequency of purchases, degree of cross buying and the extent/duration of the relationship.

Due to the rising competition, business strategies in service industries have shifted from predominant attention on attracting new customers to focusing on cultivating and enhancing customer loyalty (Bruhn & Grund, 2000). Hence, the issue of customer loyalty cannot be neglected in airline industry if the operators are to maintain repeat-patronage and business sustainability. Essentially, customer loyalty is a potent strategy to lower the rate of customer defection to competitors, and helps the airline operators to generate profits. Although the significance of the service quality in Nigeria airline industry has been recognized (Sulaiman, 2012; Chikwendu, Ejem, & Ezenwa, 2012; Geraldine & Chikwendu, 2013; Ojo, 2014), limited research has addressed the criticism labelled against SERVQUAL five-dimensional structure with a view of modifying its underlying structure to suit airline context. In addition, a number of scholars have voiced a divergent degree of influence of service quality and customer loyalty (Faheed, 1998; Werner & Kumar, 2002; Egan, 2004; Nor & Wan, 2013; Rahim, 2016).

The present study attempts to investigate the relationship between the service quality and customer loyalty among domestic air passengers' in Lagos state. In the pursuit of accomplishing the aforementioned objective, the study addresses the following specific objectives: (1) to examine the relationship between the service quality (comprising of seven sub-dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, customization, employees, facilities, and flight pattern) and customer loyalty among air travellers in Lagos state, (2) to investigate the relationship between purposes of flights and perception of airline service quality among domestic air travellers in Lagos state, and (3) to investigate whether the flight frequency is significantly related to customer loyalty among air travellers in Lagos state.

Theoretical Review

SERVQUAL Model

Researchers have suggested numerous models to measure service quality. To date, SERVQUAL gap model suggested by Parasuraman et al. (1985) is the most notable service quality model. The foundation of service quality measurement is the SERVQUAL Gap model, which measures the difference (gap) between expectations and actual performance that determines perception of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry 1988; Cronin & Taylor 1992). Although scholars disagree about the approach in which the service quality should be evaluated, however, in service marketing literature, several researchers suggested that service quality was a multi-dimensional or multi-attribute concept and therefore, no single model can be considered generic in measuring it (Shonk, 2006; Clemes, Gan, & Kan, 2008). Consequently, some scholars pointed to the shortfalls of the expectations and perceptions (gap model) that underlies the SERVQUAL model (Jin-Woo, Rodger, & Cheng-Lung, 2005; Pakdil & Aydin 2007; Ladhari, 2008). In particular, some of the aforementioned scholars pointed to the nature of

SERVQUAL's ostensible five-dimensional structure, the shortfalls of the expectations and perceptions gap model that underlies the SERVQUAL and the complications in the explanation and operationalization of expectations among others. One of the notable researchers to respond to the debate over the modification of the SERVQUAL model was Gilbert and Wong (2003). These scholars proposed a seven-dimensional structure of the service quality consisting of (reliability, assurance, responsive, employees, customization, facilities, and flight patterns) which is considered to be comprehensive and fit into the service quality measurement in airline industry (Rahim, 2015).

Gilbert and Wong (2003) claim that the SERVQUAL model does not capture other vital aspects of the service quality attributes in a number of industries. Jin-Woo et al. (2005) and Mishal (2015) maintain that the SERVQUAL model was not a universal tool to measure the service quality because some of the items underlying the dimensions corresponded and regrouped under different dimensions. Jin-Woo et al. (2005) further state that amendments and adaptations should be made to the selected dimensions to make them more relevant and applicable to diverse industry. Following the shortcomings of the SERVQUAL model, a number of substitute models to measure customer evaluation of the service quality have been developed (Caro & Garcia, 2007).

The Concept of the Service Quality

The conceptualization of quality is more challenging for services industry than manufacturing business due to the intangible nature of services (Palmer, 2011). According to Ghylin (2008), by defining and evaluating the service quality, businesses will be able to offer a service that is of high quality level ostensibly leading to customer satisfaction. Parasuraman et al. (1988) view the service quality as a form of attitude, connected to but not equal to satisfaction, and emanates from comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance. Landrum, Prybutok, Kappelman, and Zhang (2008) maintain that the service quality is evaluated by computing the difference between two scores where the superior service quality results in a lesser gap. Douglas and Connor (2003) observe that the service quality is not only evaluated as an outcome of service experience but also on the manner provided during the service process and its eventual consequence on customer's perceptions. Holbrook and Corfman (1985) disclose that the service quality is a very much subjective and relativistic construct. Parasuraman et al. (1985) concurred with the above position and allude that most of the dimensions of the service quality are "experience elements" that can be recognized only when the customer is buying or consuming (experiencing) the service.

Defining the Customer Loyalty

The customer loyalty is a significant issue to academicians and business practitioners because it is a vital construct in marketing and represents an important outcome to business organisations. A loyal customer, according Dimitriades (2006), is one who holds

a favourable attitude toward a particular service organisation recommends the service provider to other users and displays repeated patronage. Selnes and Hansen (2001) define loyalty as an evaluation of predictable future customer behaviour and enthusiasm to maintain a relationship, to engage in favourable discussion about the company, and to enlarge existing business relationship. Zineldin (2006) opines that the loyalty is a commitment to maintain a business relationship with a firm on a long term basis. To a large number of scholars, the loyalty relates to intention or disposition (Ahmad, 2007), which is related to customer retention (Griffin, 1997) However, some academicians deliberate that the two are synonyms (Samaha, Palmatier, & Dant, 2011; Inamullah, 2012). In the opinion of Seth and Sobel (2001; cited in Silvia, Pedro, Vitor, & Jael, 2013), the customer loyalty can be demonstrated through loyalty behaviour and attitudes. According to these scholars, there is the loyalty behaviour when the consumer re-purchases, which shows that the customer is pleased with the product. On the other hand, the loyalty attitude occurs when the consumer's motivation to buy a firm's product is accessibility, or force of habit; and such a consumer is interested in the relationship sustenance that can stand the competitive enticement.

Perspectives on the Customer Loyalty Measurement

One of the provoking thought in academic circles is loyalty measurement or dimensionality. Generally, most of the research measures the loyalty as behavioural or attitudinal tendencies alone (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2003). The behavioural perspective discusses customer's behaviour as an expression by repeated patronage and willingness to recommends (Wong & Sohal, 2003). Thus, the behavioural approach to loyalty is founded on customers' real or stated buying behaviour and has been characteristically operationalized as series of purchase, ratio of purchase, and likelihood of purchase (Ahmad, 2007). Although behavioural measures offer satisfactory prediction of loyal purchase behaviour, they do not reflect on the process that leads to that behaviour (Ehrenberg, Uncles, & Gerald, 1990). According to Dick and Basu (1994), the behavioural approach has been condemned as deficient in conceptual rigour, and generating only the static consequence of a dynamic process. Chiou and Droge (2006) posits that focusing on the behavioural element of loyalty alone does not highlight the motives behind buying behaviour, because the buying decision may be propelled by subjective reasons such as price, timing of purchase and absence of alternative or other factors not relevant to loyalty or allegiance.

   The attitudinal perspective on the loyalty measurement clarifies an added aspect of apparent discrepancy that behavioural methodologies do not address (Backman & Crompton, 1991). The attitudinal viewpoint relate to consumer's aspiration to maintain relationship with a particular firm in spite of competiveness pressure or reasons to try out competing products or services (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). On this note, Filip and Costantinescu (2007; cited in Bobâlcă, 2013) maintain that the importance of the attitudinal variables must not be underrated, because the behavioural element of loyalty

echoes the present situation or the established past actions; while attitudes suggest indications about the customers' future behaviour. Ehrenberg, Uncles, and Gerald (2004) uphold that the attitude itself cannot determine the competitive effects (i.e., multi-brand or shared loyalty), familiarity, and situational factors.

Uncles, Dowling, and Hammond (2003) also made two important observations regarding the attitudinal loyalty. Firstly, consumers' in repeat-purchase markets do not display strong loyalty towards brands, or accompanying loyalty programs. Secondly, concentrating on the attitudinal commitment without a framework that accommodates habit and context will be ambiguous for most customers. Dowling (2002) notes that the psychological significance of approaching consumer behaviour as antecedents of attitude is well documented, however, there are sentiments concerning the sustenance of the deficiency of the attitudes in clarifying the consumer tendency to engage in repeated patronage.

From the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that the construct "loyalty" has developed through numerous conceptual and operational explanations, rather than theoretical ground; and this has a propel controversy in developing the universal measures of behavioural and attitudinal loyalty in literature (Muncy, 1983). Correspondingly, numerous scholars contend that uni-dimensional measure of brand loyalty is undoubtedly inadequate in measuring such a complex construct (Ahmad, 2007). Lately, the composite approach which integrates the behavioural and attitudinal measures has been promoted to operationalize loyalty (Ahmad, 2007). According to Dick and Basu (1994), the adoption of composite measure enhances the extrapolative power of the concept, as each approach cross-validates the nature of truly loyal relationship. Nonetheless, this approach has limitations because not all the computed scores may apply to both the behavioural and attitudinal components due to the variation in their measurements (Chi, 2005).

Is Loyalty Profitable?

Loyalty is very vital and its impending benefits are well established in the literature. Researchers have documented that the customer loyalty enhances business performance in a number of industries (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994). According to Bob (2005), loyalty leaders enjoy a considerable advantage in earning and profitability. Timothy, Bruce, Lerzan, Tor, and Jay (2007) and Tim, Lerzan, Alexander, and Luke (2009) concur with the above claim, but maintain that loyalty does not always equal profits, because not every customer has the potential to be a profitably loyal. Reichheld (2006) offers a critical insight into the conundrum assessment of loyalty. He highlights some probing questions about the customer loyalty: are customers sticking around out of loyalty, or just out of the restricted preference and inertia? Or are they stuck in the relationship that is costly to terminate? The above questions basically raise concern over the real worth of a loyal customer in terms of his/her profitability.

A study conducted by Werner and Kumar (2002) supported the above claim. Their study examined three claims commonly raised by loyalty advocates, i.e., that loyal cus-

tomers cost less to serve, they are less price-sensitive, and they serve as marketers for company's products through word-of-mouth. The outcome of their study in all the four companies surveyed (grocery retailer, corporate service provider, direct brokerage firm and mail order company) discovered a weak to moderate association between the loyalty and the profitability. Specifically, the study revealed little or no evidence to suggest that regular customers are necessarily cheaper to serve, less-price sensitive and bring in new customers. Correspondingly, a large body of research conducted in business-to-business reported poor profitability of long-standing customers. This is basically because the high net-worth-customers know their worth and will often exploit their worth to negotiate price discounts and concessions that often erode the company's bottom line (Werner & Kumar, 2002).

The relationship between the Service Quality and the Customer Loyalty

The relationship between the service quality and the customer loyalty has been one of the most recurrent issues in service marketing literature. According to Falk, Hammer-schmidt, and Schepers (2010), the effect of the service quality on the customer loyalty is in two forms: a direct influence and an indirect influence through customer satisfaction, or a moderating effect through satisfaction. As far as the direct effect is concerned, Boshoff and Gray (2004) have demonstrated that the service quality is an antecedent to the customer loyalty. Likewise, many studies in different industries have also revealed a positive relationship between the service quality and the customer satisfaction, as well as the tendency of repeated purchase (Chen, Chen, & Hsieh, 2007; He & Song, 2009). A study conducted by Ostrowski, O'Brien, and Gordon (1993) reported consistent and significant relationships between the service quality and the retained preference as a measure of the customer loyalty. Zineldin (2006) contends that businesses should view the quality as a product and service bundle. Hence, when business organizations provide a high level of product or service, the level of customers' satisfaction increases, as well as the loyalty status, while some studies reported that the service quality accounted for significant variation in the customer loyalty (Oliver, 1997; Rahim, 2015). Some scholars maintain that uncertainty surrounds the service quality and the loyalty relationship since some studies have failed to discover a significant link between the two constructs (Roberts, Varki, & Brodie, 2003; Egan, 2004).

Methodology

Research Hypotheses

This study is grounded on the existing literature. Hence, the hypotheses were formulated on the basis of theories and literature related to the phenomena under investigation. This implies that this study leans towards a deductive research approach. Accordingly, the following research hypotheses were addressed:

1. There is no significant relationship between the service quality (consisting of seven sub-dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, customization, employees, facilities, and flight pattern) and the customer loyalty among air travellers in Lagos state.
2. There is no significant relationship between the purposes of flights and the perception of the airline service quality among air travellers in Lagos state.
3. The flight frequency is not significantly related to the customer loyalty among air travellers in Lagos state.

Research Method

This study used a causal research design by performing a cross-sectional sample survey. The causal research design was adopted because the researcher is interested in the cause and effect relationship between the variables under investigation. The target population of this study is the air passengers who travelled from Lagos with any of the selected domestic airline operators, specifically: Arik Air, Aero Contractors, First Nations Airways, Overland Airways, Dana Air, and Med-view Airline to any destination in Nigeria. In particular, two airlines (Discovery Airline and Azman Airline Services Limited) were excluded from this study because they commenced operations in Nigeria at the time of this survey. The sample size of this study consisted of 600 air passengers departing from the two domestic airports in Lagos state with the selected airlines to any destination in Nigeria. This study adopted a convenience sampling technique to select respondents.

This study used data obtained from a self-administered questionnaire. With the exception of the sections that seek information on demographic characteristics and travel behaviour of the respondents, all items in the questionnaire are based on reflective multi-item scales, measured on a 7-point Likert scale with end points of 1 to 7 with "1" denoting "strongly disagree" and "7" indicating "strongly agree" (7). Prior to the main survey, the pilot study was conducted to assess ambiguities in the questionnaire. In this study, the content validity was done by seeking the opinion of three marketing specialists and individuals with vast experience in airline industry to appraise the suitability of the questionnaire items. Modifications were made to the final questionnaire as advised by them. Subsequently, the amended questionnaire was piloted among the respondents to test its reliability. The Cronbach's alpha for the two variables (service quality and customer loyalty) and service quality dimensions falls within the acceptable region = 0.7, which indicates that the instrument is reliable (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The data collected were analysed by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS-21). Descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean, and standard deviation were computed to provide a snap view of the data collected from the respondents, and the hypotheses were tested by using the correlation analysis and one way analysis of variance –Anova.

Results

There is no significant relationship between the service quality (consisting of seven sub-dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, customization, employees, facilities, and flight pattern) and the customer loyalty among air travellers in Lagos state. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the service quality and its dimensions, and the customer loyalty. The mean scores for all the service quality dimensions ranged from 3.19 to 3.31 and the standard deviations ranged from .358 to .429. The mean values of the overall service quality and the customer loyalty are 3.25, 3.18 and the standard deviations are .369 and .328 respectively. As presented in Table 1 (using mean values), domestic airline carriers in Nigeria performed below average across all the seven dimensions of the service quality as perceived by air passengers.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations analysis of the service quality dimensions, the service quality and the customer loyalty

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Reliability	3.22	.398	1								
Responsiveness	3.25	.398	.784**	1							
Assurance	3.24	.383	.716**	.977**	1						
Customization	3.31	.429	.812**	.781**	.728**	1					
Employee	3.30	.417	.853**	.802**	.746**	.976**	1				
Facilities	3.23	.405	.986**	.820**	.751**	.865**	.887**	1			
Flight pattern	3.19	.358	.951**	.758**	.716**	.821**	.836**	.950**	1		
Service quality	3.25	.369	.940**	.913**	.867**	.926**	.944**	.965**	.928**	1	
Customer loyalty	3.18	.328	.513**	.758**	.714**	.668**	.654**	.589**	.487**	.678**	1

Note: 7-point scale was used

Source: Field Survey (2014)

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the service quality and its dimensions with the customer loyalty. As shown in Table 1, all the seven dimensions of the service quality exhibit positive statistically significant correlations among each other (the correlation ranged from .487 to .986 and $p < 0.01$). Likewise, there exists a statistically significant positive correlation between the service quality and its dimensions: the service quality and the reliability (r=.940, $p<0.01$), the service quality and the responsiveness (r=.913, $p<0.01$), the service quality and the assurance (r=.867, $p<0.01$), the service quality and the customization (r=.926, $p<0.01$), the service quality and the employee (r=.944, $p<0.01$), the service quality and the facilities (r=.965, $p<0.01$), and the service quality and the flight pattern (r=.928, $p<0.01$). The patterns of these correlations between the service quality and its dimensions reveal that the seven dimensional structure of the service quality proposed by Gilbert and Wong (2003)

is valid. Likewise, it provides support that the dimensionality and the influence of the service quality varies and depends on the service context, which reinforces the position promoted by Clemes et al. (2008).

Furthermore, the association of the service quality and its seven dimensions with the customer loyalty is equally positive and statistically significant. As shown in Table 1, there exists a statistically significant positive correlation between the reliability and the customer loyalty (r=.513, p<0.01), between the responsiveness and the customer loyalty (r=.758, p<0.01), between the assurance and the customer loyalty (r=.714, p<0.01), between the customization and the customer loyalty (r=.668, p<0.01), between the employee and the customer loyalty (r=.654, p<0.01), between the facility and the customer loyalty (r=.589, p<0.01), and between the flight pattern and the customer loyalty (r=.487, p<0.01). Similarly, a statistically significant and strong positive correlation exists between the service quality and the customer loyalty (r=.678, p<0.01). In line with the above results, hypothesis one is not supported by the findings of this study.

Research hypothesis two: There is no significant relationship between the purposes of flights and the perception of the airline service quality among air travellers in Lagos state. As displayed in Table 2, the main motives for travel were business (17.75%), study (3.92%), visits (22.72%), conference/seminar (20.89%), and meetings (30.55%). Furthermore, the content analysis of 16 respondents, who indicated their responses as "other", reveals that they travelled for wedding, church programmes, burial and social engagements. The mean and the standard deviation scores for the intended purposes of travel ranged from 3.20 to 3.40 and .328 to .436; with those that travelled for study having the highest and those whose intended purpose of travel was for conference/seminar recording the lowest mean score.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and Anova – Purpose of flights and the perception of the service quality

Purposes of flights	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Business	68	3.27	.328	.864	.505
Study	15	3.40	.436		
Visits	87	3.26	.379		
Conference/Seminar	80	3.20	.375		
Meetings	117	3.25	.373		
Others	16	3.21	.357		

Source: Field Survey, 2014

The ANOVA analysis (Table 2) was performed to test how customers travelling for different motives assess the quality of services offered by airline. As shown in Table 2, F= .864, P-value = .505, which is not significant at 5% level (p>0.05). Since P-value is greater than 0.05, the findings of this study indicate that there is no significant differences be-

tween customers' travelling for different purposes and their perception of the quality of services provided by airline. Although the mean score across the intended purposes of travelling varies slightly, the post-hoc comparisons using Turkey honestly significant difference (HSD) test revealed that the mean score for all the categories was not significantly different. Furthermore, the low Eta squared value of 0.01 (computed manually) was too small, which reveals that the results are independent of sample size effects and offer a further proof for the conclusion drawn. From the above analysis, the findings of this study support hypothesis two.

Research hypothesis three: The flight frequency is not significantly related to the customer loyalty among air travellers in Lagos state. The travel behaviour (in term of number of flights taken) is shown in Table 3. As depicted in Table 3, the total sample of passengers (383 air passengers) was divided into three sub-samples (groups) according to the number of flights they had taken with the selected airlines from October 2013 to October 2014 when the survey was carried out. The first group (109 passengers) consisted of those who travelled with the selected airlines between (3–4 times), the second group (167 passengers) of those who flew (5–6 times), and the third group (107 passengers) of the passengers who flew more than 7 times. For the purpose of this analysis, the first two groups are referred to as "non-frequent travellers" and the last group as frequent travellers. Table 3 also presents an analysis of air passengers' loyalty by flight frequency. In general, passengers who flew between 3–4 times and 5–6 times (non-frequent travellers) exhibited slightly a lower loyalty level to the airlines as indicated by mean scores, while those who flew more than 7 times have displayed a slightly higher loyalty level to the airlines.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics and Anova – The frequency of flight and loyalty level of air travellers

No of Flights	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
3 - 4 times	109	3.14	.303	3.589	.029
5 -6 times	167	3.16	.322		
More than 7 times	107	3.25	.353		

Source: Field Survey (2014)

The Anova test (Table 3) was conducted to determine whether the flight frequency is not significantly related to the customer loyalty among air travellers in Lagos state. As shown in Table 3, the loyalty tendency of frequent air travellers is significantly different compared to non-frequent travellers F= 3.589, p<0.05. Although the mean score across the three categories of air travellers varies slightly, the Post-hoc comparisons using Turkey HSD test revealed that the mean score of those that flew between 3–4 times and more than 7 times differed, while those that flew 5–6 times did not differ significantly from either those that flew 3–4 times and more than 7 times. Furthermore, the low Eta squared value of 0.02 was too small, which reveals that the outcomes are independent of

sample size effects and provide further indication that supports the conclusion drawn. On the basis of these results, hypothesis three is not supported by the findings of this study.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a statistically positive correlation between the service quality/dimensions and the customer loyalty (all correlation r ≥ .487), which indicates that the effect of the service quality dimensions on the customer loyalty differs across the service quality attributes. The results also indicate that the customer loyalty may increase if service quality and its dimensions are high. Studies conducted by Boshoff and Gray (2004), Kuo, Wu, and Deng (2009), and Nor and Wan (2013) reported similar findings that the service quality accounted for a significant variation in the customer loyalty. On the contrary, Roberts et al. (2003) study reported that uncertainty surrounds the service quality and the loyalty relationship. Thus, all the service quality dimensions might prompt the loyalty tendency towards the airline operators with attendant benefits on customer behavioural disposition such as repeated patronage and frequency of purchase and attitudinal effects such as propensity to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication and willingness to recommend the service provider.

Therefore, the poor capability of airline operators to sustain the customer loyalty portends a serious danger for the overall profitability and competitiveness of the Nigerian airline business. This is because the airline industry across the globe is capital intensive and as such, by incurring high fixed costs relative to variable costs, implies that the operators should leverage on passengers' growth to enhance their success and profitability. These findings confirm the sentiments expressed by some aviation practitioners in the Nigeria's airline industry that one of the major reasons for the poor performance of the airline operators is the deteriorating service quality (Bayo, 2012; Nkem, 2013).

This study also showed that there was no significant difference among the customers travelling for different motives in their perception of the quality of services provided by airline. Similarly, the flight frequency (as measured by the number of flights taken by passenger within a given period) was equally found to be insignificantly related to the customer loyalty. This finding portends that the frequency of patronage is not an indication that the passenger in question is loyal to the service provider. Perhaps, this may be attributed to a lack of choice (Hobson's choice), convenience in term of duration and timing, flight pattern, or subjective affinity (such as brand affinity).

Conclusion and Implications

This study examines the relationship between the airline service quality dimensions and the customer loyalty among domestic air passengers' in Lagos state. The study documents a significant positive relationship among all the service quality dimensions consisting of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, customization, employees, facilities, and

flight pattern. Likewise, all the dimensions exhibit a positive significant correlation with the service quality. Correspondingly, the relationship between the service quality and its dimensions is significant and positively related to the customer loyalty. On this note, customers' perceptions and the evaluation of the service quality offered by airline hinge on the service quality dimensions. This study highlights the significance of understanding air passengers' needs and expectations as a basis for developing capabilities to maintain loyal customers. The findings of this study further suggest that the airline service quality improvement initiatives should begin with recognizing the customers' needs and preferences and adjust their service quality process and delivery accordingly. In other words, airlines should develop proactive strategies to fulfil their service promise in line with air travellers' changing preferences.

No doubt, it is challenging to build differentiation in the airline industry due what might be termed mono-strategies, nonetheless, the airline operators should leverage on the service improvement and extension strategies to differentiate its service process and delivery system. An attractive frequent flier program may equally contribute to the improved loyalty from the repeated business of an enlarged customer base. Therefore the airline operators should comprehend what dimensions are most important to customer's evaluation of the service quality; and develop strategies to correct lapses in their service standards with a view of enhancing services offered along those dimensions. Consequently, the inability of airline operators to offer quality services to customers may not only damage their reputation, but may result into adverse effect on passengers' behavioural intentions (such as negative word-of-mouth communication, and customer switching).

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