

Severity and Controllability of Service Failures as Perceived by Passengers in Airline Industry

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Abstract. Service delivery is inherently failure prone. Providing “zero defects” services should be the desired objective of all service providers, but problems are unavoidable in the service industry mainly due to the unique characteristics of services (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The characteristics and the typology of the complaints have been studied in fragmented manner (McCollough, 2009). Hence, this research has the following objectives: To find the severity and controllability of the complaint situations as perceived by airline passengers. To classify the complaint situations based on severity and controllability. To find the association between the typology of complaints, namely, process related and outcome related to the characteristics of severity and controllability. In the first stage, the research methodology was in-depth exploratory interviews with officials of eight airlines. Situations of common complaints were collected and integrated with those in the literature to develop inventory of complaints. An instrument was developed to classify the complaint situation based on perceived severity and controllability. The findings have managerial implications of guiding the officials in assessment of the severity and controllability of the process and outcome related situations.

Keywords. Complaints in airlines, Controllability of complaints, Outcome related complaints.

Jel. C12, C83, C93, M31.

1. Introduction

Service delivery is inherently failure prone. However providing “zero defects” services should be the desired objective of all service providers, but problems are unavoidable in the service industry mainly due to the unique characteristics of services (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Zeithaml & Bitner, (2000), defined services as “the deeds, processes, and performances. Services are intangible, they are activities rather than things and services being a process, the production and consumption of a service are inseparable and therefore, human involvement in the process is inevitable (Gronroos, 1984). The airline industry plays a vital role in the world economy by facilitating movement of trade and people across nations, driven by liberalization and globalization. It is increasingly recognized that aviation, far from being a mere mode of transportation for an elite group, is crucial for sustainable development of trade and tourism. However, there is also reduction in the average quality of service provided to the customers (Khan, Rajdutt & Bansal, 2009). All Air Carriers recognize that customer satisfaction and the perception of quality is important to the consumer who has a choice of Air

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Turkish Economic Review

Carriers, with multiple carriers providing the same basic service of transportation (Headley & Bowen, 1997).

In order to maintain a high level of services it would seem necessary to develop more customer oriented complaint management. Interviews with business passengers and the airlines complaints department indicate that complaints procedures are often felt to be complicated and time consuming by passengers (Edvardsson, 1992). Most of the research with respect to consumer complaining behaviour has been conducted in the European countries and the United States. The conditions prevailing in developed countries may be different from the prevailing conditions in Asian countries, more particularly in India and specifically in Goa.

2. Literature Review

The fact that services happen in the interaction between individuals and that the customer often participates in the production process, leads to special quality management problems (Edvardsson, 1992). Consequently in the delivery of services, mistakes and failures are inevitable. Although many firms may aspire to offer zero defect service, the possibility of service failures cannot be wholly eliminated because of variety of factors that may impact on the delivery process. The first law of quality is to do it right for the first time but despite efforts, things do go wrong (Lovell et al. 2001). A service failure is defined as service performance that falls below the customers' expectations (Lai, 2007). Services fail, and fail often due to the unique nature of services; failure is both more common than goods failure and inevitable (McCollough, 2009). Service failures are unavoidable and appear in both the process and the consequences of service delivery. They comprise conditions when the service fails to live up to the customer expectation (Michel, 2001).

According to Johnston, (1995), 'recovery is a developed term in the service literature which is concerned with managing an organizations' response to service failure when they occur and he further defines recovery (complaint handling) as to 'seek out and deal with service failures'. Service recovery involves those actions designed to resolve problems after negative activities of dissatisfied customers and to ultimately retain those customers. However, there seems to be an emerging realization both by practitioners and in the academic literature, that service recovery is not just about recovering dissatisfied customers to regain their satisfaction and loyalty but it should be viewed as opportunity for improvement. The failure should lead to urgent and adequate service recovery which can restore business relationship with customers (Leal & Pereira, 2002). When considering the impact of service failure harm, service providers should recognize that the same service failure impacts customers differently.

A complaint from a consumer is an overt manifestation of dissatisfaction (Resnik & Hermon, 1983). Different authors have defined the concepts like the complaint and the complaint handling. A complaint has been defined as an action taken by an individual, which involves communicating something negative regarding a product or service to either the firm manufacturing or marketing the product or service or to some third party entity (Jacoby & Jaccard 1981).

Complaint handling refers to the strategies firms use to resolve and learn from service failures in order to (re) establish the organization's reliability in the eyes of the customer (Tax, et al. 1998). Customer complaints provide organization with an opportunity to rectify their mistakes, retain dissatisfied consumers and influence consumers future attitudes and behaviours (Estelami, 1999). Indeed the beneficial effects of effective Service Recovery (complaint handling) have led many

Turkish Economic Review

commentators to argue that there are significant potential benefits from encouraging complaints.

As stressed by (Lewis & Spyropoulos, 2001), service recovery is much more than complaint handling. The failure should lead to urgent and adequate service recovery, which is a component of quality management that can maintain the business relations with customers (Boshoff, 1997). Tax & Brown (1998) – suggested that managing complaints well and recovering customers i.e. dealing with them after service failure and the complaint should be the corner stone of an organizations' customer satisfaction strategy.

Service failure severity refers to a customers' perceived intensity of a service failure. The more severe the service failure, the greater the customers loss (Lai, 2007). Severity of service failure can be determined by the magnitude of loss, damage or inconvenience caused by service failure (Blodgett et al. 1993). According to McCollough, (2009), a limited number of studies have investigated what researchers variously refer to as severity, magnitude or the harm of the service failure. However (Lai, 2007) states that previous research in this area suggests that the severity of the service failure will be influential in the evaluation of service provider after a service failure, and that service failure severity can enhance service recovery expectations in customers mind and therefore the service provider should adopt different service recovery strategies depending on the severity of the problem. According to (Anderson et al. 2005), the initial service failure severity exerts significant influence on post recovery satisfaction.

According to Anderson et al. (2005), Controllability refers to the customers' perception of which party has control over the cause and/or the outcome. The customer considers whether the effect of the incident is within the control of the service provider and whether the service provider could have taken actions to mitigate the effect of the initial incident. A service failure may be attributed internally, to the service provider or firm or externally to some uncontrollable situational factors. Customers are more dissatisfied if they attribute more responsibility to the service provider/firm (Chan & Wan, 2008). Controllability also refers to whether the consumer perceives that the seller could have prevented the problem or whether it was accidental (Blodgett, 1994). Researchers have indicated that customers' attributions have both behavioural and affective outcome. If customers attribute primary responsibility or control for the incident to the service provider or believe that service provider should have anticipated the incident due to its regularity, the customer will blame service provider for failure (Anderson et al. 2005).

Perceived reasons for a product or service failure influences how a consumer responds, based on attributional approach, and customers who make external attributions of blame, are more likely to ask for a refund, or an exchange or an apology (Folkes, 1984). Consumers who perceive the problem to be controllable are more likely to be angry and indulge in negative word of mouth behaviour (Blodgett, 1994).

The service marketing literature also recognizes two types of service encounter failures, outcome and process (Keaveney, 1995). According to (Smith, et al. 1999), in an outcome failure, the organization does not fulfil the basic service need or perform the core service (e.g.; a reserved hotel room is unavailable because of overbooking), whereas in process failures, the delivery of the core service is flawed or deficient in some way (e.g.; a hotel desk clerk treats the customer rudely).

The above literature review showed the following observations: 1- The research in the area of complaints and complaint handling is generic in nature and has not considered any classifications of complaints pertinent to particular industries. 2- The typology of complaints and its association with the characteristics of complaint

Turkish Economic Review

situation has not been studied. 3-Some authors have studied controllability and some attempted to study severity in isolation of each other. No study is found in extant literature where both the characteristics are studied simultaneously.

As observed in the literature, perceived severity and controllability are the characteristics of the complaint situations that could be relevant to the expectations of justice which would be the future research agenda.

3. Objectives of the Research and Framework

This research has the following objectives: 1- To find the severity and controllability of the complaint situations as perceived by airline passengers. 2- To classify the complaint situations as severe controllable; severe not controllable; not severe not controllable; and not severe controllable. 3- To find the association between the typology of complaints as specified in the literature, namely, process related and outcome related to the characteristics of severity and controllability.

This research attempts to enlist the different types of situations in the first stage of research. Further it proposes to link typology of complaints based on the categorization of complaints made in (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999) into outcome and process failures.

The researcher then proposed to associate the types of complaints based on outcome failures and process failures to the characteristics of complaints.

Proposed Model:

Severity	
Outcome Failure	Process Failure
>	>
Process Failure	Outcome Failure
Controllability	

Hence it is specifically posited that:

H1. Outcome failures are perceived as more severe but not controllable than process failures.

H2. Process failures are perceived as more controllable and less severe than outcome failures.

4. Methodology

In the first level of research, the methodology used was in-depth qualitative exploratory interviews with officials of all the airlines operating in the state of Goa in India. An open ended questionnaire was administered (Appendix 1). All the Airlines operating in the state of Goa were covered. This resulted in interviews of managers of eight airlines. Out of the eight airlines, two were operating only internationally, three operated in both domestic and international sectors and three operated only in the domestic sector.

An instrument was developed to classify the complaint situation based on perceived severity and controllability. Thus, complaint situations were classified independently based on severity and controllability and also in combined manner as severe controllable; severe not controllable; not severe not controllable; and not severe controllable, with a sample size of 313, airline passengers. Two researchers then classified the inventory of complaints into the typology suggested by (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999), namely process related and outcome related complaints.

An attempt was made to unearth the association between typology as suggested in literature with the characteristics as classified by the airline passengers.

Sample Selected: In the first stage, all the Airlines (eight) operating in the state of Goa in India were covered. In the second stage Questionnaire was administered

Turkish Economic Review

to 313 respondents to classify the common complaints based on severity and controllability. (Appendix II). The respondents were intercepted at the Dabolim airport at arrival and departures. Total questionnaires distributed were 330 total collected were 321 out of which usable Questionnaires were 313.

The situations of complaints were classified on the basis of controllability and severity based on passenger responses.

5. Findings and Conclusion

A) *Common Complaints*: Findings indicate that the predominantly common complaints pertain to delays in flights and baggage related issues.

The common complaints were classified under thirteen major heads as follows: 1- Delayed Flights- Leading to missing of an event; 2- Delayed Flights- Not leading to missing of an event; 3- Cancelled Flights- Leading to missing of an even; 4- Cancelled Flights- Not leading to missing of an even; 5- Baggage related problems; 6- Communication with flight crew/Staff – behavior; 7- Meals on Board; 8- Entertainment on Board; 9- Flight-fare; 10- Airport Lounges; 11- Check in Process; 12- Denied Boarding; 13- In-flight Seats.

B) *Typology of Complaints*: The failure situations were categorized into outcome failures and process failures by the researcher. To affirm the categorization the failure situations were presented to fellow researcher who independently categorized the complaints into process and outcome failures. In case of difference in categorization, the opinion of the fellow researcher prevailed. The % of agreement was 98%.

Outcome Failures: 1-Delayed flight due to non-availability of flight crew that caused you to miss an important meeting/ event. 2- Cancelled flight due to weather conditions that caused you to miss an important meeting/ event. 3-You reach late at the check-in counter and hence denied boarding. 4- Delayed Flight due to technical/ mechanical fault that did not cause you to miss an important meeting/ event. 5- Delayed flight due to technical / mechanical fault that caused you to miss an important meeting/ event. 6- Cancelled flight due to technical / mechanical fault that caused you to miss an important meeting/event. 7- Delayed flight due to weather conditions that did not cause you to miss an important meeting / event. 8- Cancelled flight due to non-availability of flight crew that did not cause you to miss an important meeting/ event. 9- Cancelled flight due to technical /mechanical fault that did not cause you to miss an important meeting/ event. 10- Cancelled flight due to weather conditions that did not cause you to miss an important meeting/ event. 11- You are involuntarily bumped from your flight due to over booking. 12- Non-refund of your fare- money on unused/lost tickets. 13- Due to incorrect reservation and ticketing of the airline you are denied boarding. 14- Delayed flight due to non-availability of flight crew that did not cause you to miss an important meeting/event. 15- On arrival at the destination, you find your baggage lost or missing. 16- You find no attendant at the check- in counter. 17- Delayed flight due to weather conditions that caused you to miss an important meeting/ event. 18- Cancelled flight due to unavailability of flight crew that caused you to miss an important meeting/ event.

Process Failures: 1- Your carryon bags were not given stamped security tags and hence you are denied boarding. 2- On arrival at the destination, you find your baggage delayed, that did not cause you to miss an important meeting/ event. 3- You find the airport lounges and washrooms busy and crowded. 4- No in-flight entertainment system. 5- Inadequate meals / beverages provided at a very high cost. 6- You lost time in long waits due to big queues at immigration/ passport control counter. 7- You experience discomfort due to Improper and uncomfortable seating

Turkish Economic Review

arrangement in the lounge. 8- You are baffled by unclear and loud announcement by flight attendants. 9- Delay in refund of your fare money on cancellation of ticket. 10- Reading material, games, and music of your choice not provided on board. 11- You find the behaviour of airline staff unpleasant. 12- You are charged high cancellation and reschedule charges. 13- You lost time in long waits due to big queues at check-in / security counter. 14- Scheduled meal and beverage not provided to you. 15- Failure of in-flight entertainment system. 16- You are provided with a tiny seat with a divider between seats on board. 17- Overcharged you for extra checked-in bag. 18- On arrival at the destination, you find your baggage damaged. 19- You find the airport lounges filthy and dirty. 20- You find that seat recline back facility is not functional on board. 21- You are abused by an airline staff. 22- Flight crew being rude and unhelpful to you. 23- Meals / beverages provided to you at extra cost. 24- You find that lounges lack facilities like shops, cafeterias and food outlets causing inconvenience to you. 25- Requested in-flight entertainment programme not played for you. 26- On arrival at the destination, you find your baggage delayed, that caused you to miss an important meeting/event. 27- You find your seat straight with very little legroom on board. 28- You find unreasonable increase in fare rate due to high demand. 29- Substandard meal/beverage provided to you.

C) Severity and Controllability of Service Failure:

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

Criteria	Details	Numbers	Percentage
Age	1 21 -29	124	40%
	2 30-49	131	42%
	3 50 Plus	58	19%
		313	100%
Gender	1 Male	186	59%
	2 Female	127	41%
		313	100%
Qualification	1 Graduation or Below	106	34%
	2 Post-Graduation	138	44%
	3 Professional	69	22%
		313	100%
Type of Airline Passengers	1 International	127	29%
	2 NRI	27	6%
	3 Domestic	179	41%
	4 Business	39	9%
	5 Leisure	68	15%
		440	100%
Flying Frequency	1 Frequent Flyer	57	18%
	2 Less Frequent Flyer	256	82%
		313	100%
Annual Income	1 5 Lakhs & less	122	39%
	2 5-10 lakhs	89	28%
	3 10-20 lakhs	62	20%
	4 above 20 lakhs	40	13%
		313	100%
Flight length (no of flying hrs):	1 Short haul less than 3 hrs.	154	46%
	2 Mid haul more than 3 hrs. less than 7 hrs.	101	30%
	3 Long haul more than 7 hrs.	77	23%
		332	100%
Travelled	1 Travelled in Group	95	30%
	2 Travelled Individually	176	56%
	3 Both	42	13%

Analysis of complaints based on severity and controllability:

Table 1. *Classification of complaints based on severity of service failures*

	Severe	Not severe	Total
Severity	29	18	47
%	62%	38%	100%

Table1 Shows that (62%) of failure situations are severe and (38%) are not severe out of 47 failure situations as perceived by the passengers, which implies that more service failures are perceived as severe by the passengers.

Table 2. *Classification of complaints based on controllability of service failures*

	Controllable	Not Controllable	Total
Controllability	43	4	47
%	91%	9%	100%

Table2 Shows (91%) of failure situations are controllable and (09%) are not controllable out of 47 failure situations as perceived by the passengers, which indicates that more service failures are considered as controllable as compared to not controllable, by the airline passengers.

Table 3. *Quadrantwise Classification of Complaints on the basis of Severity and Controllability of service Failures*

	Severe Controllable	Severe Not Controllable	Not Severe Not Controllable	Not Severe Controllable	Total
Total	27	2	2	16	47
%	57%	4%	4%	34%	100%

Table 3 Indicates that (57%) failure situations are severe controllable, and (4%) severe not controllable, (04%) are not severe not controllable and (34%) are not severe controllable out of 47 failure situations as perceived by the passengers.

Table 4. *Severity of service failure based on outcome failure and process failures*

	Severe	Not Severe	Total
Outcome Failures	12	6	18
	67%	33%	100%
Process Failures	17	12	29
	59%	41%	100%

Table-4: Indicates that (67%) of outcome failure situations are severe and (33%) are not severe out of total 18 outcome failure situations as perceived by the passengers. Whereas (59%) failure situations are severe and (41%) are not severe out of total 29 process failure situations as perceived by the passengers.

Table 5. *Controllability of service failure based on outcome failure and process failures*

	Controllable	Not controllable	Total
Outcome Failures	14	4	18
	77%	23%	100%
Process Failures	29	-	29
	100%	0%	100%

Table 5 Indicates that (77%) failure situations are controllable and (23%) are not controllable out of total 18 outcome failure situations as perceived by the

Turkish Economic Review

passengers. Whereas all (100%) failure situations are controllable out of total 29 process failure situations as perceived by the passengers.

Hence under the characteristics of severity and controllability, outcome failures are considered as more severe as well as controllable. In case of process failures naturally all the failure situations were considered as controllable. The difference between severe and not severe was less than that of outcome failures

Table 6. *Quadrant wise Classification of Complaints on the basis of Outcome Failures*

	Severe & Controllable	Severe & Not Controllable	Not Severe & Not Controllable	Not Severe & Controllable	Total
Outcome Failures	10	2	2	4	18
%	56%	11%	11%	22%	100%

Table 6. Indicates that (56%) failure situations are severe controllable, and (11%) severe not controllable, (11%) are not severe not controllable and (22%) are not severe controllable out of total 18 outcome failure situations as perceived by the passengers.

Table 7. *Quadrant wise Classification of Complaints on the basis of Process Failures*

	Severe & Controllable	Severe & Not Controllable	Not Severe & Not Controllable	Not Severe & Controllable	Total
Process Failures	17	-	-	12	29
%	59%			41%	100%

Table-7: Indicates that (59%) failure situations are severe controllable, and (41%) are not severe controllable out of total 29 process failure situations as perceived by the passengers.

6. Conclusion

Hypothesis 1: Findings indicates that 67% of the outcome failures are severe, and 23% of the outcome failures, are not controllable. In the case of process failures 59% are severe and not controllable being nil. This indicates that the outcome failures are more severe but not controllable by the service firm than the process failures. Thus hypothesis 1 is *supported*.

Hypothesis 2: Similarly findings, indicates that 100% of the process failures are controllable, and 59% are severe. Whereas only 77% of the outcome failures are controllable and 67% are severe. This indicates that the process failures are more controllable less severe than the outcome failures. Thus hypothesis 2 is *also supported*.

Since the severity and controllability of different complaints is determined, the second Instrument would use scenario techniques based on the model/style used by Verma & Kaur (2001). This would be administered to samples of different classes of airline passengers.

Verma & Kaur, (2001), conducted an empirical two dimensional study titled what the complainant expects- A study of car users. The objective of the study was to match the customer's expectation of the response to the complaints. Thus, this research endeavours to correlate the type of justice sought (Distributive justice, Procedural justice, and Interactional justice), with Severity and Controllability of complaint situation by using scenarios of complaints.

The results would be validated by statistical analysis

Appendix

I - INFORMAL INTERVIEW

Q.1.What is the name of the airline? Q.2. Whether it operates in Domestic, International or Both sectors? Q.3. When was it started? Q.4. From Goa what are the various destinations? Q.5. What are the different types of passengers who travel by your airline? Q.6. Do the passengers complain? Q.7 What are the different types of complaints? Q.8.According to you what is the expectation of the complainant? Q.9 What is the redressal you provide for various problems?

II – QUESTIONNAIRE: 1

Dear Sir/Madam,

This questionnaire has the objective of investigating the magnitude of service failure in the context of airline industry. The failure is researched in terms of severity and controllability. Severity is measured as severe and not severe. Controllability (whether the problem could have been averted by the airline) is measured as controllable by the airline and not controllable.Data will be used for academic purpose only and strict confidentiality about identity will be maintained.

Instructions to participants:

1. Please read the following airline complaints in column no.2. 2 Tick (√) any one characteristic of the complaint from column no. 3. Similarly please tick (√) any one characteristic of the complaint from column no. 4 that represents your opinion.

Sr. No.	Type of Complaint	Severity		Controllability	
		Severe	Not Severe	Controllable	Not Controllable
1	2	3	4		
	Includes 47 Complaints serially numbered from 1 to 47, as mentioned above, (classified as Outcome Failures and Process Failures)				

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