

# Southern China Airlines Service Quality Supply Chain and Customers' Satisfaction: A Practical Case Study

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Received: September 24, 2023 / Revised: November 4, 2023 / Accepted: March 26, 2024

## Abstract

The purposes of this research are: 1) To measure the service quality of China Southern Airlines. 2) To measure customers' satisfaction on flights with China Southern Airlines. 3) To explore the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction for China Southern Airlines. The quantitative analysis method is applied in this research, based on the SERVQUAL model of perceived service quality theory, combined with the actual service quality of China Southern Airlines customers, according to five sub-dimensions (reliability, tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy). A sample size of 400 units of China Southern Airlines' customers was collected. The research instrument was a questionnaire with an overall reliability of 0.911 was found. The statistics used in data analysis included percentage, mean, standard deviation, and hypothesis testing Pearson's correlations.

The research results found that: 1) overall, the service quality of China Southern Airlines is valued at a good service (3.63 out of 5.00). In addition, the highest-rated aspect of service quality is reliability, followed by empathy. 2) This research indicates customers are generally satisfied with the service quality of Southern China Airlines (3.63 out of 5.00). 3) Finally, it is found that there is a significant relationship between SERVQUAL and customers' satisfaction with China Southern Airlines.

**keywords:** Service Quality, Satisfaction, Relationships, China Southern Airlines

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## Introduction

Considering the aviation industry, it becomes evident that its fundamental nature is inherently service-oriented. One of the core missions of airlines is to provide services to passengers. Given that air travel is generally priced higher than other modes of transportation, people's expectations for service quality within the aviation industry are higher compared to other forms of travel. Therefore, in this sector, service can be regarded as a key factor contributing to the success of airlines. Some airlines might enjoy a stronger reputation in the market due to their service quality and passenger experience.

Measuring customer satisfaction in the airline industry is becoming ever more frequent and relevant due to the fact that the delivery of high-quality service is essential for airlines' survival and crucial to the competitiveness of the airline industry (Park et al., 2004).

Due to the quality of their services and the satisfaction of their customers, some airlines may have a better reputation in the market. Passengers' expectations for the caliber of public aviation services have increased as a result of the rapid development of public air transportation. The number of complaints regarding public aviation services is consistently on the rise as passenger awareness of their rights grows. As a result, there is constant pressure on the quality of these services. For domestic aviation enterprises, improving their core competitiveness in this new competitive climate becomes a critical challenge. Service quality has emerged as a crucial element in this competition due to its inclusion in the service industry (Li, 2019).

In the context of globalization, China Southern Airlines not only needs to maintain its leading position in the domestic market competition but also faces pressure from international aviation markets. This necessitates an even greater emphasis on improving its service quality to meet the demands of passengers from different regions. There are still some shortcomings in the passenger service operations of Chinese aviation companies when compared to internationally renowned airlines, despite the fact that domestic aviation companies in China are actively adjusting and optimizing their service systems based on passenger needs, leading to an evident improvement in service quality and passenger satisfaction compared to the past. There is a clear standardization of the customer experience, and different airlines find it difficult to distinguish their service brands. The system for evaluating service quality lacks scientific rigor and is unable to develop individualized service strategies that are differentiated based on the actual travel demands of passengers. The human touch is also lacking in service details, and service satisfaction is only slowly improving (Qin, 2021). Providing high-quality service is a crucial aspect for airlines to enhance passenger satisfaction and market competitiveness, necessitating the full attention of airline management.

## Objectives

The purposes of this study are:

- 1) To measure the level of service quality of China Southern Airlines.
- 2) To measure the level of customer satisfaction on flights with China Southern Airlines.
- 3) To explore the relationship between service quality and customers' satisfaction with China Southern Airlines.

## Contributions

Researching and enhancing the quality of airline services has a positive impact on the company's operations, management, and employee teams. Particularly in the service-centric aviation industry, the quality of service is closely tied to the company's success. Improving the company's service quality management system can assist in better detection and management of potential issues, enhancing management efficiency and decision accuracy.

For the aviation industry, excellent service quality also signifies meeting consumer expectations and satisfaction, thereby enhancing the overall reputation of the industry and driving sales growth and market share expansion. Optimizing service quality contributes to market expansion. By providing exceptional service experiences, it not only increases passenger satisfaction but also stimulates sales growth and boosts market share.

The consumer satisfaction index can contribute to building a positive brand image, aiding the company in establishing trust and a favorable reputation. Positive brand image and high-quality service experience directly influence passengers' decisions in selecting an airline. Such decisions have a direct impact on enhancing market competitiveness and business growth.

## Definitions

SERVQUAL is a widely recognized model for assessing service quality. It was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry in 1985 and is often used in both the academic field and industry to measure and manage the quality of services (Parasuraman et al., 1985). This will address passenger service issues and enhance service quality.

In analyzing the passenger service issues of China Southern Airlines in this paper, research will also be developed based on the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL scale model:

“Tangibles” refers to the equipment and specific facilities used by airlines in carrying out their service activities. This dimension of service quality can be seen, touched, and felt by the customers.

“Reliability” primarily denotes the consistency of services provided by airlines, fulfilling service commitments accurately and on time. This dimension emphasizes very much on how the service system flows smoothly without interruption.

“Responsiveness” refers to the airline's ability to swiftly enhance service quality and level based on customer needs, providing timely service or accurate time estimates for service availability to ensure service efficiency, and how airline personnel respond to the needs of the passengers.

“Assurance” indicates that the services offered by the airline are trustworthy and come with a guarantee. The customers feel secure with the service of Airlines in terms of security, safety, comfort, and tertiary services.

“Empathy” indicates that the airline is capable of understanding customer needs and providing personalized services beyond customers' satisfaction. Personalized services mean extra care, personally designed care and services customers receive with the flights.

Customer satisfaction can be viewed as an evaluation of the gap between actual experiences and expectations, encompassing both explicit, implied, or desired satisfaction or expectations. The concept of customer satisfaction first appeared in the field of marketing in the 1960s, introduced by Cardozo in 1965 (Cardozo, 1965). Howard and Sheth (1969) defined customer satisfaction as a "cognitive state of whether customers feel adequately compensated for the costs they have incurred."

### Literature Review

The following literature will be investigated to ensure the research is adherent to theoretical models and constructs:

#### Service Quality

Evaluating service quality requires not only assessing consumers' judgments of the outcomes but also encompassing a comprehensive evaluation from the consumer's perspective throughout the service process. Gronroos (1982) proposed that service quality is determined by the alignment between customers' expected service and their actual service experience. Chen (2020) conducted a study on customer satisfaction with domestic airlines, emphasizing the impact of service quality on airlines. They argued that service quality directly affects consumer satisfaction and marketing quality. Airlines should focus on improving their service levels. Gronroos (1982) found in his research that marketing communication, word-of-mouth, image, and needs play a crucial role in shaping customers' service expectations, while the technical competence of service personnel and the functionality of service facilities are key factors influencing customers' service experiences.

#### Satisfaction

The concept of customer satisfaction first appeared in the field of marketing in the 1960s, introduced by Cardozo in 1965 (Howard & Sheth, 1969). Howard and Sheth (1969) defined customer satisfaction as a "cognitive state of whether customers feel adequately compensated for the costs they have incurred." Westbrook and Reilly (1983) viewed customer satisfaction as an "affective response generated by the psychological impact of the product presentation and shopping environment during the purchase process." Kotler (1991) described customer satisfaction as a "feeling that arises when an individual compares the perceived effects of a product with their expectations." Hunt (1977) defined customer satisfaction as the "evaluation made when consumption experiences match or exceed expectations." Tse and Wilton (1988) considered customer satisfaction as the "evaluation of the difference between the expected quality formed before purchasing a product and the perceived quality after consumption."

#### SERVQUAL

The SERVQUAL (Service Quality) assessment framework is frequently used in evaluating service quality. The SERVQUAL model is currently the most widely applied theoretical model in the field of service quality research, providing a significant and insightful tool for studying service quality, and laying an important foundation for subsequent research, making it undoubtedly the preferred choice in our field of study on service quality. In 1985, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (Parasuraman et al., 1985) built upon Gronroos' customer-perceived service quality model to redefine service quality. They proposed that the level of service quality is

essentially the gap between customers' expectations of service and their actual service experience. A smaller gap indicates higher service quality, while a larger gap suggests lower service quality.

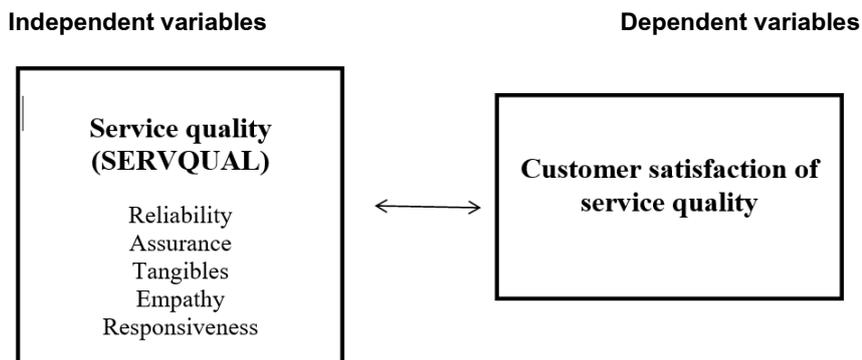
**Related Research**

With the emergence of a service-oriented economic society, the aviation sector, which is a part of the service economy, would bring intense rivalry. Following the price war, the majority of domestic aviation companies have come to the realization that, in addition to enhancing service quality and understanding customer needs, they must also be dedicated to enhancing customer satisfaction. This is because, in the competitive landscape of the entire service industry, achieving these goals is essential for ensuring the long-term growth of their clientele (Wang, 2018).

Customer happiness is significantly impacted by the quality of airline services, according to research (Xiong, 2017). Additionally, she thinks that customer pleasure primarily hinges on the caliber of the airline's services and that passenger contentment with an airline directly influences the airline's ability to grow in a long-term, stable, and healthy manner. Enhancing the quality of service provided to customers can turn them into the company's most devoted patrons, which is a prerequisite for airlines' long-term growth.

According to Yu and Li (2010), consumer satisfaction is positively impacted by perceived value and the quality of aviation services, but negatively impacted by negative emotions. Simultaneously, good emotions influence perceived value, which in turn influences consumer satisfaction. The aforementioned findings demonstrate that customer happiness is significantly impacted by both consumer sentiment and the caliber of airline services.

Mao and Zhu (2010) conducted a quantitative analysis using satisfaction indicators to determine the effects of different variables on customer satisfaction. They found that the greatest influence on customer satisfaction is "perceived service quality" from the customer, followed by corporate image, which suggests new directions for strategic adjustments by airlines. guideline.



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework

### Research Methodology

The overall participants of this study were passengers who had flown with China Southern Airlines. A sample of 400 passengers who had flown with the airline at least once or multiple times within the past year was selected using a simple random sampling method.

Slovin's (1960) formula calculates the number of samples required when the population is too large to directly sample every member. As the following chart shows, once your population is large enough, boosting your sample size does little (or nothing) to increase accuracy

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

- N= Population Size
- e = Margin of Error
- n = Sample size

Set up Margin of Error, 95% confidence interval 5% margin of error; plug data into the formula, when the population size (N) is larger, the number of sample size (n) tends to be but does not exceed 400.

This study collected data through a questionnaire survey. The survey will be conducted by using the online survey platform "Questionnaire Star" and questionnaires will be randomly distributed to consumers who have traveled with China Southern Airlines during the past one year (June 2022 – June 2023).

Part 1: A questionnaire containing basic information about customers who had flown with China Southern Airlines at least once or multiple times within the past year. This section included questions about the respondent's gender, age, income, and other personal details.

Part 2: A questionnaire survey evaluating the service quality on the five dimensions (reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness) using a 5-point rating scale.

Part 3: A questionnaire survey assessing the extent to which customers are satisfied with the service quality of Southern China Airlines using a 5-point scale.

- Scoring Satisfaction Level
- Means Strongly Satisfied
- Means Satisfied
- Means Neutral
- Means Less Satisfied
- Means Least Satisfied

The author employed a computer package to analyze the data as follows:

- Part 1 : personal information factors of the passenger.

Part 2: customer satisfaction in 5 dimensions including 1) Tangibles 2) Reliability 3) Responsiveness 4) Assurance and 5) Empathy analyzed by using Arithmetic mean value ( ) and Standard Deviation (S) value whose criteria are:

Average Satisfaction Level		
1.00 - 1.80	Means	Least Satisfied
1.81 - 2.40	Means	Less Satisfied
2.41 - 3.40	Means	Neutral
3.41 - 4.20	Means	Satisfied
4.21 - 5.00	Means	Strongly Satisfied

Part 3 : recommendations analyzed by using content analysis.

### Data Analysis

**Table 1** Reliability analysis of Service Quality

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Tangible	.836	5
Reliability	.842	5
Responsibility	.843	5
Assurance	.824	5
Empathy	.842	5

**Table 2** Reliability analysis of Satisfaction

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Satisfaction	.911	10

Generally, a Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.7 is considered acceptable for research purposes, so all your variables seem to have good internal consistency. The reliability value is greater than 0.7, so this questionnaire has high reliability.

**Table 3** Descriptive statistics

	$\bar{x}$	S.D.
SERVQUAL	3.63	.804
Satisfaction	3.62	.821

The Arithmetic mean value of SERVQUAL is 3.63 and the Standard Deviation is 0.804. For satisfaction, the Arithmetic mean ( $\bar{x}$  =3.62, SD=0.821) indicates that their actual service experiences were satisfied.

**Table 4** Mean and Standard Deviation of Service Quality

Service Quality of China Southern Airline	N=400		Satisfaction Level
	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	
Tangible	3.61	.861	Satisfied
Reliability	3.67	.884	Satisfied
Responsiveness	3.62	.862	Satisfied
Assurance	3.61	.831	Satisfied
Empathy	3.62	.862	Satisfied
<b>Total average</b>	<b>3.63</b>	<b>.860</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>

The highest satisfaction is observed in the dimension of Reliability ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.67, SD=0.884), followed by Empathy ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.62, SD=0.862), Responsiveness ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.62, SD=0.862), Assurance ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.61, SD=0.831), and Tangibles ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.61, SD=0.861).

**Table 5** Correlations of the service quality and satisfaction of China Southern Airlines

		SERVQUAL	Satisfaction
SERVQUAL	Pearson correlation	1	.939**
	Sig. (two-tailed)		.000
	Sum of Squares and Cross Product	259.975	247.206
	Covariance	.647	.620
	Number of cases	400	400
Satisfaction	Pearson correlation	.939**	1
	Sig. (two-tailed)	.000	
	Sum of Squares and Cross Product	247.206	268.630
	Covariance	.620	.673
	Number of cases	400	400

\*\* significant level = 0.05

The Pearson correlation coefficient between SERVQUAL and Satisfaction, the Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.939. This indicates a strong positive linear relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. The p-value is very close to zero (0.000). This means that the observed correlations are statistically significant, indicating that the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is not likely to have occurred by chance.

In summary, the table suggests a statistically significant positive relationship between service quality (SERVQUAL) and customer satisfaction for China Southern Airlines. The correlation coefficient of 0.939 indicates that as service quality improves, customer satisfaction also tends to increase.

**Table 6** Correlation matrix between service quality and consumer satisfaction

	Tangible	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy	Satisfaction
Tangible	1					
Reliability	.853**	1				
Responsiveness	.857**	.835**	1			
Assurance	.856**	.830**	.849**	1		
Empathy	.833**	.837**	.837**	.845**	1	
Satisfaction	.871**	.875**	.881**	.886**	.878**	1

\*\* significant level = 0.05

This correlation matrix shows the degree and direction of linear relationships between the variables, and it appears that consumer satisfaction has a significant correlation with Tangible (0.871), Reliability (0.875), Responsiveness (0.881), Assurance (0.886), and Empathy (0.878).

### Discussion and Conclusion

Relationship of Service Quality with Customer Satisfaction in order to observe the individual linear correlation between customer satisfaction and each variable under the service quality, Pearson's product-moment correlation test was done. according to the correlation analysis, there are positive correlations between each dimension of service quality and customer satisfaction.

Overall, based on the provided data, the Pearson correlation coefficient ( $p=.939^{**}$ ) between SERVQUAL and Satisfaction indicates that there is a significant correlation between service quality and satisfaction. This suggests that in this study, there is a significant relationship between service quality and consumer satisfaction, as indicated by the research results.

Tangibles: Research results show that passengers are satisfied with the appearance and grooming of the cabin crew. Most passengers are satisfied with the comfort of the cabin interior and the variety of food and beverage services. Tangibles encompass aspects that consumers can see, touch, and feel. In this regard, passengers typically have certain expectations regarding the appearance and grooming of cabin crew and desire a comfortable cabin environment with high-quality food. Gummesson (1991) presented numerous dimensions on which customers might evaluate the tangible element of their service experience. The dimensions derived from three perspectives of the tangibles elements: the manufacturing/goods perspective (Garvin,1988), a psychological perspective concerned with aspects of tangibility that affect consumers' ability to interact with products in everyday life (Norman, 1988), and an environmental perspective that addresses the impact of the larger physical environment of the service experience on the evaluation of it (Baker, 1986).The

tangibles dimension was considered more important when evaluating in-flight service quality than when evaluating ground service quality.

**Reliability:** Research results reveal that consumers' satisfaction with the quality of service from China Southern Airlines is consistently at a high level. Most passengers believe that the airline provides clear solutions when addressing issues. Flights are punctual and dependable. When flight changes occur, China Southern Airlines provides detailed explanations and arrangements. Reliability involves aspects such as the punctuality of flights and the ability to resolve issues. Passengers' satisfaction with cabin crew providing accurate and reliable emergency and medical assistance indicates the airline's success in training and preparing cabin crew to handle potential emergencies effectively. Chou et al. (2011) assess carrier administration quality in a Taiwanese aircraft and found that dependability and affirmation are the principal significant measurements. In terms of the findings, reliability, understand ability, and security criteria were the most important criteria. Therefore, airlines should consider these in their web-based marketing strategies and strengthen the perception of reliability in the minds of the consumers (Bakir & Atalik, 2021).

**Responsiveness:** Research results show that consumers find customer service to be responsive and flexible in addressing questions and needs. They also exhibit a positive attitude when handling complaints and issues, offering timely flight information and updates. Responsiveness pertains to the airline's prompt response to passenger needs and issues. It shows that the airline demonstrates a high level of service in meeting customer needs and expectations across various aspects. The substantial part of the overall responsibility for the improvement of service quality rests upon the employees detailed to contact and deliver to the passengers. Stum and Church (1990) call such customer service employees "corporate ambassadors" Which is most important to make travelers' loyalty and organizational image. Nambisan et al. (2016) explained that responsiveness is crucial to improving customer perceptions of service quality.

**Assurance:** Research results indicate that most passengers perceive a high level of professionalism in the airline's passenger service. The cabin crew efficiently handles in-flight emergencies and calm passenger emotions. They maintain composure and professionalism when dealing with emergencies. Staff effectively address consumer issues, ensuring timely resolution of passenger problems.

The research results indicate that the airline's employees exhibit a high level of professionalism, can respond to emergencies calmly and professionally, and effectively address passenger concerns and doubts. Passengers have become increasingly concerned about aviation companies' safety and emergency response capabilities. It's important to recognize that no flight can entirely avoid crisis events, and an airline's ability to respond to emergency situations directly reflects its competence. Safety should always be the top priority in providing services. Enhancing emergency preparedness requires cabin crews to possess the necessary skills to handle various emergency situations (Qin , 2021).

**Empathy:** Research results show that most passengers believe that employees genuinely care about and respect them during communication. They exhibit a high degree of empathy when dealing with passengers. Ground service personnel cater to the individual needs of different special passengers (elderly, disabled,

pregnant, etc.). China Southern Airlines actively collects passenger opinions and suggestions and responds positively to building constructive customer relationships.

Researchers also suggest that empathy, care and attentiveness shown by frontline service employee to customer lead to customer service (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). Particularly in the literature concerning service, empathy is regarded as an essential element for fruitful employee and customer communications that commonly lead to altruistic motivation and pro-social and altruistic behavior (Aksoy, 2013; Itani & Inyang, 2015).

### Recommendation

China Southern Airlines can take several strategic steps to enhance its service quality and improve overall customer satisfaction.

In terms of tangibles, the airline should focus on upgrading cabin interiors, including seat design and comfort, as well as the quality and availability of facilities. Providing more spacious and comfortable seating, ensuring cleanliness, and enhancing aesthetics will contribute to a more pleasant passenger experience.

The airline should prioritize on-time arrivals and departures while promptly communicating any flight changes or disruptions to passengers. Transparent and detailed explanations for changes, along with alternative arrangements, will help passengers feel valued and confident in the airline's commitment to their comfort and convenience.

Responsiveness can be improved by continuous staff training to enhance their ability to address passenger needs swiftly and proactively. Establishing a dedicated emergency response team and offering multiple communication channels will ensure passengers have access to timely information and support, ultimately enhancing their overall experience.

Assurance involves training employees to handle emergencies and remain professional in challenging situations. Implementing an effective complaint-handling mechanism will demonstrate the airline's commitment to resolving passenger issues promptly and efficiently, fostering trust in service quality.

China Southern Airlines should encourage employees to show empathy, especially when dealing with special passengers. Providing specific training on how to assist elderly, disabled, and pregnant passengers is essential. Actively seeking and acting on passenger feedback and suggestions will further enhance mutual trust and satisfaction.

Future research can further study the relationship between service quality and consumer satisfaction by conducting more in-depth quantitative and qualitative analyses, as well as by comprehensively considering multiple potential influencing factors.

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