

## EVALUATION OF SERVICE QUALITY, VALUE AND SATISFACTION OF AIR TRANSPORTATION IN MALAWI: CASE STUDY OF AIR MALAWI

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the level of service quality, value, and satisfaction of Malawi air transportation focusing Air Malawi. There was no previous research conducted to identify the successfulness or shortfalls of their service performance since its introduction in 1968. The main literature review includes the characteristics of the service industry, satisfaction and quality, service quality in airline industry and measurement of service quality. The field research was conducted by both quantitative and qualitative methods. The in- depth interviews were conducted with managers and travel industry experts based on SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy). The idea was to obtain an overall customer satisfaction level in figures and confirm the results with managers and find out the perception gaps. The findings revealed that the customer satisfaction level in general was remarkably moderate almost all dimensions. The results of customers and managers relatively matched in reliability but also differed in a few aspects. The lowest value was found in reliability such as punctuality and lateness which were very crucial. There was no significant difference in the rest of the variables; however, the best scored variable was assurance except website usage as attribute. Furthermore, the research revealed two gaps. The first was customer expectation and management perceptions gap and second one was service delivery and external communication gap.

**Key Words:** *Service Quality, Satisfaction, Perception, Expectation, RADER Model and GAP Model*

### Introduction

The provision of high quality services to passengers is the core competitive advantage for airlines profitability and sustained growth (Chen, 2008). In recent years, the air transportation market has become more challenging and airlines have turned to focus on service quality to increase service satisfaction. Service quality conditions influence an organisation's competitive advantage by retaining customer patronage and market share (Park et al., 2004). Delivering high quality service to passengers is quite essential for airline survival, so carrier operators should

understand what passengers expect from their services. In other sectors, studies suggest that customer satisfaction and service quality judgements involve consumers comparing their prior expectations to actual service performances.

Paying attention to service quality should be the practice of today if airlines aspire to improve market share and further enhance financial performance in both domestic and international markets. A necessary procedure should be followed by airlines in order to have valid and reliable measures to better understand the variables likely to have a bearing on the service quality offered by their organisation such as perceptions and expectations of airline passengers.

Air travel is driven by globalisation and liberalization and remains the fastest-growing market in the world. According to IATA, (2007) over 2.1 billion passengers departed on scheduled trips in 2006. Strong economies saw international passenger demand grow by 5.9%. These developments are being driven by further market liberalisation and availability of more fuel efficient and longer-range aircraft that are better able to serve weaker routes. Air Malawi routes are good examples in Southern Africa. They feed to major airports in Africa such as Addis Ababa, Johannesburg and Nairobi.

The airlines code shares and alliances have rapidly increased in number not only in Malawi but also worldwide. One of the reasons why airlines join alliances and share codes is to gain competitive marketing edge through commercial promotions and another is to cover many destinations due to insufficient flights. Air Malawi, the national airline, is no exception even though it has been recognized as a provider of better service and more convenient to passengers for so many years in the region. Still, the airline has to compete against other airlines in alliances and code share which fly to similar destinations.

Airlines operating domestic and international service in Malawi have to overcome its competitors by avoiding reducing airfares but through increasing their service quality to enhance passengers' satisfaction. In order to achieve this, airline operators in Malawi need to understand the importance of how to make the passengers satisfied with a high quality service. To be successful in business depends on a high level of customer satisfaction and this is regardless of size of business and whether it is product-based or service-based (Rueangthanakiet, 2008). Customer satisfaction strategies are proven to enhance service quality of the business. Knowing how to provide passengers with satisfaction is very useful to in air transportation business to increase its competitive advantages.

Customer satisfaction service arises when an airline can provide customers with benefits that exceed customers' expectation and this is considered value-added. Griffin, (1995) stressed that customers who are satisfied with the product or service will buy more, and so more often. All businesses always try to find ways to make customers happy by all means to meet and even exceed their expectations in order to win their loyalty.

In case of Air Malawi, the company has focused on service quality to increase passengers' satisfaction and the firm's market share for years. The airline's current motto 'Africa's Friendly Airline' clearly indicates that the company has placed paramount importance to service. Ostrowski, O'Brien and Gordon, (1993) in a study on customer retention revealed that airlines could acquire and retain customer loyalty by offering high quality service. Providing a superior service quality should, therefore, be the main agenda for all airlines in order to remain competitive in the market.

Conversely, there are many factors affecting customer's satisfaction with a company's service. Service provided can be tangible or intangible. The service-related equipment, brochures, magazines or even service operators' uniforms are considered tangible factors which can enhance customer's satisfaction with an organization service. The quality of tangibles is easier to improve since the tangibles are concrete. However, it is difficult to evaluate the quality service when taking the intangible factors into account (Heesawat, 2005). The intangibles such as personal needs and expectations are abstract. Expectations of a person differ from one to another. Consumers' expectations can be influenced by word of mouth, past expectation. The best way is to provide the excellent service. Research and development projects should be more frequently carried out in a service organization to keep pace with how customers feel towards the service (Anichkul, 2010). The SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman, Zeithamal, & Berry, 1985) has been considered one of the effective tools used to assess a company's service quality as to see if the company needs to better serve the customers and what service areas need to be improved. It is against this background that this research seeks to evaluate the service quality, value and satisfaction of Malawi air transportation focusing on Air Malawi as a national and regional airline.

Malawi has two international airports namely; Kamuzu International Airport (KIA) and Chileka International Airport. In addition, there are four domestic airports with scheduled services. These are Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Karonga. According to Bofinger (2008) the country has 23 airports in total including landing strips. Air Malawi, the national carrier, flies to most major destinations in Southern Africa.

The number of airlines operating internationally into and out of Malawi has not been constant over recent years. Tourism Intelligence and Commonwealth Development Corporation (2008) and World Bank Report (2010) reported that British Airways which was operating between Malawi and United Kingdom route withdrew due to limited demand, a favoured incumbent state-owned Air Malawi, and high operating costs for example landing fees and aviation fuel. However, the report indicates that 80% (World Bank Report, 2010) of government officials did not use Air Malawi citing among other reasons minimum services offered and unpredictable time schedules.

## Problem Statement

Air transportation in Malawi faces multiple challenges including service delivery which resulted to financial constraints many customers ignoring airline for international trips. The carrier fleet looks to be a drop as compared to other airlines in Africa, for example South Africa Airways, Kenya Airways and Ethiopian Airlines. While it is common with small countries in Africa, Malawi has relatively small air transport market. According to Foster and Shkaratan (2010) the domestic market for Air Malawi amounts to no more than 167,000 seats, while the international market comes to 435,000 seats and the intercontinental market is negligible. It is argued that Malawi has experienced decline air transport connectivity in recent years. It is well connected to Zambia and the regional hub in South Africa. In 2004, there were 28 city pairs reachable out of Malawi but this number dropped by almost one-half to 15 pairs by 2007 (Foster & Shkaratan, 2010:10). With this trend, though not only experienced by Air Malawi but also other smaller Airlines in Africa, the national airline needs also to turn into its service as area of focus to pull more customers and remain competitive in the market. In addition, what appears critical also is to ensure that the airline has regular service to the relevant hubs and create more code shares and join one of the alliances although participation fees could be another challenge for small airline like Air Malawi.

## Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to evaluate the service quality, value and satisfaction of Malawi air transportation focusing Air Malawi as a national and regional airline.

## Specific Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the level of passengers' satisfaction with the service quality on Air Malawi's international and domestic flights.
2. To identify the service gap between the perception and expectation of Air Malawi customers.
3. To explain the linkages among constructs of services quality, satisfaction and passengers' behaviour towards Air Malawi.

## Literature Review

### Service Quality Defined

Service quality is defined as a post-consumption assessment of services by customers (Holdford & Reinders, 2001: 126). Alternatively, service quality may be the difference between what customers expect and what they certainly perceive as outcome. According to Mostafa (2005: 518) observes that service quality has become a famous research topic because of its important relationship to costs, profitability, customer satisfaction, customer retention, service guarantees,

and financial performance. Furthermore, Swarbrooke, (2003: 314) defines service quality as customer's overall impression of the relative efficiency of the organisation and its service. Service quality according to (Park et al., (2004) is 'a consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of the organisation and its services'.

On other hand, Swarbrooke and Horner (2007: 211) argue that 'quality can be technology driven and product-orientated in terms of conformance to requirements based on company specification'. However, fitness-for- purpose definitions, those are market driven and customer oriented, and which focus upon customer utility and satisfaction. Service quality is a product-led concept and it focuses on the features and attributes of the product (Swarbrooke, 2003: 315).

In addition, Czepiel et al, (1985) defines service as an encounter and a service organisation. This is the moment of truth when employee training and expertise is truly tested in an effort to meet or exceed the customer's expectations of the tangible and intangible components of the service encounter.

### **The Importance of Service Quality**

The importance of service quality has been widely discussed by a number of researchers. Parasuraman, et al., (1991) argues that delivering high quality in the service industry has been recognised as the most effective means of ensuring that a company's offerings are uniquely positioned in a market field with "look alike" competitive offerings. Therefore, businesses should be concerned with service quality which can make customer loyalty decline or increase depending on how customer perceives it. Perceived service quality is also seen in the customer's global point of view or judgement of the overall excellence or superiority of the service (Ugboma, et al., 2004:488).

Moreover, providing service, understanding customer expectations and the customer's perception of the service encounter is a vital component to delivering superior service. Delivering superior service, especially in the travel industry creates a myriad of opportunities for the service organisation to surpass the competitive and become a recognized leader in the service industry. It only stands to rationalise that the concept of the service encounter directly affects satisfaction, loyalty and future behavioural intentions; which in turn, has a direct affect on the organisation's success and financial stability (Zeithaml et al., (2008).

Researchers have explored and clarified the definition and concept of service since the early 1960s. Although a large body of service research exists acknowledging the countless definitions and theories that surrounding service, some of the most widely accepted and cited definitions in past literature is that; service encounter is an interpersonal relationship between the organisation and the customer (Berenguer et al., 2008; Price et al., 1995). It is also a critical moment of the truth that involves either satisfying or dissatisfying the customer (Albrecht & Zemke, 1995).

The presentation in the next section will discuss and analyse the surrounding of the service industry's distinguishing characteristics. In addition, the section demonstrate that whilst customer expectations and demands on the service provider are steadily increasing, service providers continuously fall short in meeting and exceeding customer expectations.

### **Unique Characteristics of the Service Industry**

The service industry is increasingly competitive in nature of services, especially the travel industry. Service professionals must be concerned themselves with a minimal increase in the market share in addition to maintaining their existing customer base (O'Neill, 2001). As the service industry continues to expand, customers are constantly presented with new opportunities to find a service provider that is capable of fulfilling their demands and meeting their expectations. Lovelock (2001) believes that the pressure placed on service organisations to achieve service excellence is truly justified. In the research, Lovelock (2001) points out three issues as firstly: today, customers are more demanding of the products and services they buy. Secondly, the development of sophisticated technology has made it convenient for all service organisations, large and small, to offer personalised services that are highly valued by the customer. Thirdly, in an increasingly competitive and international marketplace, providing a quality service encounter is seen as having the advantage over the competition.

In addition to the characteristics stated above, service has also been characterised in four dimensions, namely intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability. Although intangibility has already been discussed to some extent, intangibility will be the object of further discussion. Intangibility is a fundamental characteristic of service. Zeithaml et al (1990) claims that intangibility is the fundamental factor that differentiates service and goods. In consideration of tangible objects, for example; products and goods, involved in a service encounter, a service can use physical attributes such as sight, touch, sound and taste, to evaluate the quality and to determine their degree of satisfaction with the products or goods. However, a customer is unable to utilize their physical attributes to judge the quality and their satisfaction with the intangible aspect to the service encounter. Consequently, intangible aspect to the service is dependent upon the employee's ability to interact with the customer and satisfy the customer with the personalisation and emotional element that makes the service encounter exceptional.

In reference to the inseparability characteristics, in most service encounters, the provider is present when the service is being delivered and consumed. Therefore, consumers are often physically involved and become a vital part of the service delivery process. Thus, the quality of the service depends on the provider's performance as well as the customer's participation (Kelly et al., 1990). The delivery of the service becomes a human performance and the customer is inseparable from participation.

In service, the evaluation of past service encounter tends to influence the customer's attitude and intentions when preparing for an upcoming service encounter. Zeithaml et al., (1985) refers to

heterogeneity as a remarkable phenomenon. The customer's overall evaluation of a service encounter does not rest solely on the processing of tangible attributes or the intangible elements from the service provider but instead on a combination of the above, paired with the customer's mood, emotions and attitudes (Sichtmann, et al., 2007). The challenge to heterogeneity is the fact that many service providers strive to engender loyalty from their existing customer base; therefore, service organisations tend to confuse customer satisfaction with customer loyalty. However, in order to engender loyalty, a customer must be satisfied with the service organisation in good times and challenging times. Hesket et al., (1994) contends that relying on the customer's satisfaction with a specific service transaction does not necessarily mean that customer will be satisfied enough to return or recommend the service. In fact, Silvestro and Cross (2000) reveals that the weakest link in the service profit chain is between satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, suggesting that a satisfied customer does not necessarily develop into a loyal customer.

The final characteristic of the service industry is perishability. This means that the services are time sensitive and service providers have a small, distinct window of opportunity to delivery of service excellence and meet the customer's expectations. Zeithaml et al., (1985) definition of perishability states that, unlike products that can be stored or reinvented for future orders, services can not be returned, recaptured; only repeated.

Industry projections suggest that the service industry will continue to dominate in the world as well as in Malawi workforce and the economy (Tourism Intelligence and Commonwealth Development Corporation, 2008). In consideration of the above, service providers must continuously strive to create a balance in their approach to service excellence. A balance of the characteristics of the service industry seems to be the most reliable approach to delivering quality service, creating satisfied customer and maintaining a competitive advantage.

### **Satisfaction and Quality**

Satisfaction plays a key role in the service industry and especially in the travel and hospitality industry (Choi et al., 2004; Chang & Chang, 2010). As the service has evolved, researchers have made great strides to define and understand satisfaction from the customer's perspective. The emphasis to comprehend what truly creates satisfied customers has lead to an ever increasing body of literature surrounding satisfaction, how service providers create satisfied customers and the value as well as effects that satisfaction has on businesses today (Anderson & Fornell, 2000)

The performance of any firm leads to customer satisfaction with a product or service. Customer satisfaction is fundamental to the practice of consumer sovereignty. Customer satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) has become an important issue for marketing practitioners because of the rapid business environment (Zeithaml et al., 2008). Customer satisfaction is the judgement made on the basis of a specific service encounter. Satisfaction and loyalty are not surrogates for each other. It is possible for customers to be loyal without being highly satisfied (for example; when

they are few other choices) and to be highly satisfied and yet not loyal (for example; when many alternatives are available). Companies are needed to get better understanding of the relationship between satisfaction and behavioural intention in the online environment and to allocate the online marketing efforts between satisfaction initiatives and passengers behaviour intentions program. In order to improve the understanding of air passengers' decision-making process, a model that considers airline service quality and satisfaction is established. According to Swarbrooke and Horner (2007: 113) satisfying the consumer in tourism is important for three main reasons as:

1. It leads to positive word-of-mouth recommendation of the product to friends and relatives, which in turn brings in new customers.
2. It also creates a repeat customer by satisfying them with their first use of the product which brings steady source of income with no need for extra marketing expenditure. In addition, dealing with complaints is quite expensive, time-consuming and bad for the organisation's reputation.
3. It can bring direct costs through compensation payments.

Bei and Shang, (2006) suggests that in order to achieve satisfied customers, organisations must forget about market surveys, advertisements, and promotions and focus on developing the right infrastructure that offers the right products and services that meet the customer's expectations. To a certain degree, relationships may keep the customer loyalty but the customer must be fulfilled on other levels too; thus the customer must be truly satisfied with the quality and value of the services and products. For example, if a customer chooses to pay for first class or business class of service in an aircraft, it means that the service in that class to be received must correspond with facilities and find value in the fare paid to truly be satisfied.

A number of scholars have contributed volumes of research to support the importance of satisfaction in the service industry. Blodgett et al., (1993) reveals that satisfied customers are far more valuable to a service organisation when compared to dissatisfied customers; thus, the organisation's primary objectives should be to satisfy the customer. Academicians, professionals and trade publications have justified the importance of satisfaction. In response to the vast amounts of studies and research, service providers have slowly come to realize that satisfied customers are truly assets to the organisation. However, Luchars and Hinkin (1996) states that managers typically choose to ignore satisfaction and service quality research and suggest techniques since direct operating costs could not be accurately measured or associated with specific instances of good or bad service. This in turn, leads to justification for a manager to rely on data collected from the tangible or quantifiable measurements in order to make managerial decisions. However, in consideration of the ramifications, when customers are satisfied, they are likely to participate in favourable behavior towards the provider. For example, positive word of mouth advertising, willingness to recommend, repeat intentions, decreased price sensitivity over time and their willingness to participate in study to help the organisation revolutionise.

It is no surprise that satisfied customers are truly invaluable to an organisation. However, at the opposite end of the spectrum, service providers are still faced with the negative consequences from dissatisfied customer. One of the most significant problems with dissatisfied customers is that some customers choose not to complain in order to avoid confrontation or to save the employee from being reprimanded. Nevertheless, with each dissatisfied customer who chooses not to complain, the service provider loses the opportunity to rectify the situation and return the customer to a satisfied state. In addition to possibly losing the customer, the service provider also misses the opportunity to fulfill a commitment to continuous quality improvement. Therefore, it is important to recognize that dissatisfied customers can be far more damaging to an organisation than satisfied customers can be beneficial.

Service providers have a direct influence and control over the customer's degree of satisfaction through the quality of the products and services provided. As global competition and market saturation changes the expanding service sector, quality plays an increasing pivotal role in both attracting and retaining service customers (Jenson & Markland, 1996) and online loyalty and application (Chou & Kim, 2009; Caruana & Ewing, 2010). Service quality research has addressed a variety of fundamentals to assist organisations in creating satisfied customers.

### **Service Quality in the Airline Industry**

Airline industry is being faced by liberalisation and open skies and as such the impact of global alliances, no-frills carriers, new low-cost, state-owned airlines privatisation and on-line ticket selling are some of the crucial developments that are impacting on airline business at a time of continually falling average fares and yields. One of the challenges facing the world traditional full service carriers is increasing competition due to low cost, low fare carriers, and alliances as marketing and survival strategy ( O'Connell, 2005; Pant, 2006) and it has contributed to the reduction in average quality of service provided to the customers (Manuela, 2007).

According to Doganis (2006) the air transport business has become highly unstable and competitive. Almost all airlines have comparable fares and similar frequent flyer programs if any. This has made service quality to be a significant driver of passenger satisfaction, loyalty and choice of airline (Rust et al., 2006). There is a need for airlines to have proper and reliable measures for a better understanding of the variables likely to impact the perception and expectation of service quality being offered to passengers. If there is significant variations of the perceptions of airline passengers' service quality on the different flights, changes in the marketing mix need to be implemented to improve the perception of quality. Gkritza et al., (2006) noted that in general, passenger hardships increased after 11 Sept, 2001 New York attacks.

Many papers have been written in the past years scrutinising the service quality of airline industry. These papers focus primarily on measuring the performance of airlines using SERVQUAL instrument (Bel, 2005; Ling et al., 2005; Rhoades & Waguespack, 2005; Park et

al., 2005, 2006; Hunter, 2006; Pham & Simpson, 2006; Pakdil & Aydin, 2007; Lioua & Tzeng, 2007). Other countries do publish Airline Quality Ratings (AQR) and USA is an example where such developments of accounting 12 customer complaint categories are being published every year since 1991 according to Bowen & Headley, (2007).

Other countries do publish Airline Quality Ratings (AQR) and USA is an example where such developments of accounting 12 customer complaint categories are being published every year since 1991 according to Bowen & Headley, (2007). Apart from counting customer complaints, Gardner, (2004) also carried out a dimensional analysis of airline quality based on denied boardings, on-time arrivals, mishandled baggage and customer complaints, which produced results in conflict to AQR 2004 findings.

The travel industry did not remain behind in the innovative use of information technology ( Ghobrial & Trusilov, 2005; Yang et al., 2009). Technology has become a cutting edge to gain competitive edge in the airline industry (Baker, 2007). According to O'Toole, (2004) air travel industry could become the world's first web-enabled industry as online sales, e-tickets and several new technologies gain ground with increased speed. McIvor et al., (2003) observes that the increasing growth of web and self-service technologies allow customers and airlines to by pass the intermediaries thereby reducing costs.

Researchers have investigated the effects of individual dimensions of airline service quality using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), (Park et al., 2005, 2006; Lin et al., 2005;). Chang and Yeh (2001) suggests a multi-attribute decision making model to measure and compare overall competitiveness of airlines on five dimensions and their associated objective performance measures. However, a method based on conjoint analysis to determine the relative importance of service attributes measured in airline customer satisfaction surveys was also employed (Danaher, 1997).

The Lack of Quality Service or Meeting Customers' expectations will result in a lack of customer satisfaction (Angelos, 2006). When customers are satisfied with the organisation's tangible goods and service efforts, customers are more inclined to be loyal to the organisation and continuously show their support through repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth advertising. When service quality and customer satisfaction are analysed, research tends to aim toward the disconfirmation theory. As outlined in a previous section, the difference between the customer's expectations and perception is defined as positive or negative disconfirmation. There appears to be an on-going in quality research today. Some researchers suggest that service quality is a vital antecedent to customer satisfaction (Berry et al., 1985; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; O'Neill, 1992). However, on the contrary to debate, many researchers suggest that customer satisfaction is a vital antecedent of service quality (O'Neill, 1992). Either way, it appears that both customer satisfaction and service quality are vital to the overall success of today's airline and travel professionals (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2007).

Service quality and customer satisfaction in the travel industry today are two critical elements to most organisations. Professionals are constantly searching for new and exciting ways to promise more than the competition and delivery on their promise. O'Neill and Palmer (2004) explained that service quality and the degree of satisfaction derived from service quality is becoming the single most important differentiating factors in almost every travel environment. For the travel industry, the increasing competition and expansion of unique services and amenities has forced travelers to continuously search for the competitive advantage. Today, customers have an abundance of options when travelling. Customers are educated, well travelled and notorious for conducting extensive research before selecting that perfect airline, resort, tours or cruise line experience. Individual travel organisations face a significant challenge when they attempt to deliver quality service to create satisfied customers; customers who will hopefully demonstrate their loyalty to one exclusive brand.

In an effort to obtain service quality standards and strive for customer satisfaction, many travel organisations have implemented continuous quality improvement strategies to deliver on their promises. The measurement and testing quality signifies the organisation's commitment of quality to the customer. Customers often view service quality as the organisation's demonstration of respect and appreciation. In cultivating a continuous quality improvement effort, one of the most important forms of analysis is to focus on the customer's opinions and feedback. An integral part of any organisation's attempt to install a "quality culture" is a commitment to a process of "continuous improvement" (Witt & Muhlemann, 1995). In order to remain competitive in the marketplace and to be recognised as a leader in service quality, an organisation must continue to utilise different forms of formal and informal measurements.

### **Measuring Service Quality and Satisfaction**

Parasuraman et al, (1988) has developed a 22- item instrument representing the five dimensions, called SERVQUAL for assessing customer perception of service quality and service organisation. It is based on the premise that customers can evaluate service quality by comparing their perceptions with their expectations of its service. To develop the SERVQUAL scale, data were gathered for five different service categories: appliance, retail, and maintenance, retailing banking, long-distance telephone, securities, brokerage, and credit cards. Since the development of the SERVQUAL scale, a number of studies have been conducted on the service quality using this scale. The SERVQUAL has been used widely to evaluate service quality in various industries. However, several researchers have noted limitations of the SERVQUAL and presented modified and alternative methods. For example, Carman (1990) asserts that it is difficult to use the 22 proposed items and some modifications in items or wording were always required. Cronin and Taylor (1992) argue that the limitations in the SERVQUAL due to the fact that disconfirmation paradigm does not perform well statistically and the author presented a performance based alternative method called the SERVPERF.

Since service quality is an important factor for airlines, several researchers have applied service quality related theories and methods in the airline industry (Jain & Gupta, 2004; Somwang, 2008; Huang, 2009; Hongxiu et al., 2009; Atalik, 2009; Chiou & Chen, 2009 and Lee et al., 2011). Most of the previous airline service quality studies have used the SERVQUAL method to evaluate service quality. However, the 22-item scale of SERVQUAL representing five dimensions is not appropriate for measuring all aspects of airline service quality due to characteristics of airline service quality. Airline service quality is different from services in other industries. An airline service comprises tangible and intangible attributes. Airlines carry passengers to the destination using aircraft, and passengers experience diverse intangible services from airlines such as; on time performance, in-flight service, and service frequency and so on. Airline travel is intangible-dominant. It does not yield physical ownership of a tangible good. Therefore, apart from SERVQUAL, other models, theory and concepts used to evaluate service quality and satisfaction are Simultaneous multi-attribute level trade off (SIMALTO), Conversional model, Service Profit Chain, American Customer Satisfaction Index model, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Psychological model (Chinunda, 2014: 187-189). But for the purpose of this study, the researcher used SERVQUAL theory mainly in order to measure and identify gaps between what customers expect from airline products and services and what customers perceive the service to be from their carriers.

Cunningham et al., (2002) indicates that there are differences in the expectations of airline passengers in different parts of the world and among different nationalities. As the need for service quality escalates, the need for continuous quality improvement measurement becomes prominent. Gronroos (2001) provides the groundwork for service quality models utilised in research today. The Service Quality Model consists of two main parts, technical and functional quality. Technical is what the customer actually receives from the interactions with the service organisation. Functional quality is the way in which the technical quality is delivered to the customer. The two combined create image or the service organisation's reputation. In the end, the three elements together create experienced quality. The combination of technical quality, which is tangible in nature, paired with functional quality, which is intangible in nature, leads to the overall satisfaction level. Therefore, the overall level of satisfaction depends on the customer's expectations when entering into the service experience and how the experienced quality measures up in the end. Service Quality Model shows that technical quality and functional quality are interrelated and directly affect the image portrayed to the customer. This in turn leads to experienced quality. Within experienced quality there are two areas; experienced service as it relates to technical quality and experienced service as it relates to functional quality.

Most often referred to as SERVQUAL, the model revealed five dimensions of satisfaction leading to the development of the RADER Model. The five dimensions outlined in their search represent the dimensions that are important in the eyes of the customer (O'Neill, 1992). Martin (2007) described SERVQUAL as one of the most commonly used construct when measuring the relationship between service quality and satisfaction. The five elements of RATER include:

1. Reliability: The ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
2. Assurance: Knowledge and courtesy; their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
3. Tangibles: The condition of the facility, equipment and appearance of the facility.
4. Empathy: Caring, individuated attention; appearance of the personnel.
5. Responsiveness: Willingness to help, provide prompt and attentive service.

The model is believed to be a concise representation of the core criteria that customers employ in evaluating service quality and is a representation of the relationship between the dimensions of the service quality, customer expectations and the customer's overall perception of service quality. In addition, Berry et al., (1985) also signified the correlation between a customer's expected service and attributes that directly effect a customer's expectations. The attributes are word of mouth advertising, personal needs, past experiences, and external communications.

There are several ways to measure service quality (Yang, 2003:311; Douglas & Connor, 2003:167). Some consider quality from the customer's point of view while others have settled for management perspective. There are two approaches highlighted by Johnson and Mathews (1997:291-292) to the assessment of service quality from the customer's perspective, one based on expectancy and the other on performance. The expectancy-based approach has been developed during a quarter of a century of research. One of the outcomes of this approach has been the GAP model. The Gap model states that service quality is the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of performance, with focus on strategies and processes for companies to use in search of service quality (Ueno, 2010:74). The second approach is the performance-based assessment, which seeks to understand service quality as customer's perceptions of service delivery only. The later was developed through testing of the expectancy based approach by Cronin and Taylor in 1992 (Cronin & Taylor, 1994:125). After explaining each of these approaches a discussion of their relevance to the airline context will be held.

Even though many researchers have seen the expectations of customers as more important in evaluating service quality, it has been argued that measuring expectations of service quality as an experience would be difficult. This difficulty rises from the lack of physical attributes since people cannot describe their expectations of a service as good as they can with products. According to Yang (2003:311) the characteristics of services such as intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability make the evaluation of service quality difficult. Moreover, unknown factors have played an immense role in the process of consumers' evaluation of services.

### **Model of Service Quality Gaps**

There are seven major gaps in the service quality concept, which are shown in Figure 3. The model is an extension of Parasuraman et al., (1985). The three important gaps, which are more associated with external customers are Gap 1, Gap 5 and Gap 6; since have a direct relationship with customers.

1. **Gap 1:** Consumers expectations versus management perceptions: as a results of the lack of a marketing research orientation, inadequate upward communication and too many layers of management.
2. **Gap 2:** Management perceptions versus service quality specifications: as a result of inadequate commitment to service quality, a perception of unfeasibility, inadequate task standardization and an absence of goal setting.
3. **Gap 3:** Service quality specification versus service delivery: as a result of role ambiguity and conflict, poor employee-job fit and poor technology-job fit, inappropriate supervisory control systems, lack of perceived control and lack of teamwork.
4. **Gap 4:** Service delivery versus external communication: as a result of inadequate horizontal communications and propensity to over-promise
5. **Gap 5:** The discrepancy between customer expectations and their perceptions of the service delivered: as a result of the influences exerted from the customer side and the shortfall (gaps) on the part of the service provider. In this case, customer expectations are influenced by the extent of personal needs, word of mouth recommendation and past service experience.
6. **Gap 6:** The discrepancy between customer expectations and employees' perceptions: as a result of differences in the understanding of customer expectations by front-line service providers.
7. **Gap 7:** The discrepancy between employee's perceptions and management perceptions: as a result of the differences in the understanding of customer expectations between managers and service providers.

## Research Methodology

### Questionnaire Design and Measurements

The questionnaire was primarily based on 21 items of SERVQUAL model. In depth interviews were held with Travel Agency Managers, and Airline Managers to develop the questionnaire. In addition, the service quality measures were checked against other independent sources of literature related to service quality. This development made the researcher to maintain the five service dimensions and 21 measurement items suitable for the airline industry. Service quality dimensions in the questionnaire design contained 4 items each except responsiveness and empathy which were modified and contain 3 and 5 items each respectively. Tangibility dimension was also modified to reflect unique characteristics of airline service industry. All the items were measured on rating scale type such as very low, low, moderate high and very high. The questions were placed in the middle of perception and expectation rating for each item. In addition, the research instrument had also questions pertaining to overall service quality and demographics. The questionnaire was confirmed by airline industry experts. Saunders et al., (2007:356) suggest that the questionnaire should be confirmed by experts. The tool used to measure the service quality in this research was SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988, 1991).

Survey instrument used by SERVQUAL supports to measure the quality of service provided by organisations including that of airlines along five dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness (RATER). Sultan and Simpson (2000); Gilbert and Wong (2003) and Park et al., (2006) states that the instrument is viewed as a basic skeleton that requires modification to fit airline industry. The gap analysis using SERVQUAL instrument has been conducted for the first time on Air Malawi targeting both domestic and regional passengers for Air Malawi only. SERVPERF analysis has also been partly applied. Therefore minimum application of SERVPERF provided further insight. Moreover, the combination of SERVQUAL and SERVPERF instruments makes this study not only unique but also reliable and valid. So, the whole study was carried out on a full service carrier Air Malawi focusing on Chileka Airport passengers only.

### **Data and Sampling**

Data was specifically collected from passengers in waiting lounges at Chileka International Airport, Malawi. It should be noted that the airport covered is not the busiest as compared to Kamuzu International Airport in the Capital City of Malawi, Lilongwe. However, some days of service within the week are busy and thus expected to provide an unbiased sample as the focus is only for Air Malawi passengers. Air Malawi flights depart Chileka Airport, Blantyre for destinations within the country or via Lilongwe International Airport for other destinations in Africa. Out of 156 passengers that were randomly approached only 107 agreed to participate in the study. During the same period in-depth interviews were conducted. Out of 107 questionnaires distributed 4 were destroyed and declared null and void. This means only 104 questionnaires from passengers were used for the purposes of analysis in SPSS (Appendix 1).

### **Research Results**

The main purpose of this study was to evaluate the service quality, value and satisfaction of Malawi air transportation focusing Air Malawi as a national and regional airline. The researcher used SERVQUAL measurement instrument which comprised of five dimensions: responsiveness, tangibility, reliability, assurance and empathy. This first part analysed the demographic facts of the respondents group which is important to recognise for the further analysis later on. In terms of gender the majority were males. Out of 104 respondents 66 were males and 38 were females which weighted 63% and 37% respectively (Appendix 1). Among given option to choose age groups, approximately 50% of respondents belonged to the age group of 31 – 45 years old. The age group of 18 – 30 years old represented 23% and 46 – 60 years old indicted 20%. There were 7 respondents over 60 years old. Respondents were asked to indicate their travelling status and the results showed that the majority of Air Malawi customers travel alone representing 70% while those travel with work colleague followed with 30%. However, there was nobody travelling with other issues to be specified (Appendix 1). In terms of country of residence, the findings have shown that 60 out of 104 customers lived in Malawi followed by

South Africa 15, United Kingdom 7, Kenya 6, Australia and Zambia 4, India and Zimbabwe 3, Tanzania 2 while Netherlands 1. According to purpose of visit, the researcher found out that 78 customers out of 104 were business travellers representing 75% followed by 25 respondents travelling for the purpose of visiting friends and family representing 24%. The lowest were leisure travellers represented by 1%. Frequency use of airline services and products revealed that those who travelled five times were 42, followed by two times 26, three times 18, fourth times 15 and once 3.

### **Responsiveness**

Responsiveness is associated with how personnel to passengers are related. In this case it is according to how quickly the service was conveyed, how busy or long the staff takes to respond to requests and how special requests such as wheel chair and meals were dealt with and the level of responsiveness was determined. The overall passengers' expectations of airline's responsiveness were high 166 and very high 104 while perception was moderate 162 (Appendix 2; Table 2.1).

### **Tangibles**

This variable was approached by assessing physical factors such as airline uniforms and appearance of personnel (attribute 1), food and beverage (attribute 2), materials associated with services such as in-flight pillows and magazines (attribute 3) and equipment such as air conditioners, furniture and communication devices (attribute 4). The results have shown that passengers overall perception over airline tangibles was moderate representing a total of 187 whereas passengers expectations was high and very high representing a total of 177 and 148 passengers respectively (Appendix 2; Table 3.2).

### **Reliability**

Reliability factor can measure how much passengers can trust the Air Malawi flights. This was addressed by ensuring that airline utilities and equipment were assessed. Also included are how airline resolves complaints and deal with compensations, provision of services in time as promised and advertised and provision of safe and secure airplane and waiting lounge. Overall passengers perceived airlines reliability as low and moderate representing totals of 109 and 187 respectively. On the other hand, expectations for passengers were high and very high representing the totals of 175 and 228 respectively (Appendix 2; Table 4.1).

### **Assurance**

The assurance variable was measured to see if the personnel were well trained, competent and experienced in their job, if customers felt comfortable and confident in dealing with airline by keeping error-free records and if personnel were able, willing and knowledgeable to give information for hotels and other outside services. Finally the factor was to measure if the website

was easy to access and use. The results have revealed that passengers perceptions was moderate representing a total of 170 against passengers expectations which were high and very high representing totals of 197 and 168 respectively (Appendix 2; Table 5.1).

### **Empathy**

The concept of empathy was that airline cares for their passengers. This factor reveals if customers were individually cared and understood right. However, the findings have demonstrated that passengers' perceptions were moderate and low representing totals of 170 and 113 respectively. On contrary, it has also revealed that passengers' expectations were high and very high representing 248 and 172 respectively (Appendix 2; Table 6.1). Findings demonstrated that the overall service quality of Air Malawi was moderate according to 57 passengers out of 104. It is also noted from figure above that even though the majority responded moderate, some passengers responded as low represented by 34 respondents.

### **Discussions**

The results of the research revealed that overall service level of Air Malawi was moderate (Figure 4 and Tables 4- 6.1) except one attribute form tangibility about the appearance of personnel uniform and grooming which was high. In assurance the attribute that perceived high was about staff knowledge and provision of hotel information and other outside services such as shopping venues and places of tourist interest. The common reasons given were that the airline has a lot to do to improve business in all aspects of airline business. They cited examples of other regional airlines which are doing well nowadays were in the same situation when owned by government. Moreover, they discovered that government is never good in doing business and instead they privatised airlines hence they have become competitive in the market. Other reasons were lack of punctuality and lots of breakdowns. 78 out of 104 airline customers were business travellers. Therefore, respondents valued time and money as some of important factors why they wanted to depart and get to destinations in time. Furthermore, six tourism industry managers interviewed, all agreed to the opinion of passengers as regard to overall service quality. They pointed out that this could be due to the aircrafts which were too old and as such require frequent maintenance but also the facilities needed to be improved to modern equipment. They suggested that maintenance of aircrafts at the current state would be proved to be costly and as such the acquisition of new aircrafts would easy the current problems. However, two out four airline managers interviewed disagreed with passengers on the opinion of privatising the airline as one way of improving service quality and indicated that the airline was profitable but just need reliable aircrafts.

The researcher also identified two gaps in the study. First being consumer expectations and management perception (Appendix 2; Tables 1.1 – 6.1). This gap has occurred due to management negligence and failure to properly perceive the customer's service expectations. It clearly showed that managers assume they understood the customer's needs without conducting

the necessary market research. The results clearly showed that managers failed to decide the needed time to talk with the customers and understand needs or expectations. The outcome of the study also showed that there were numerous layers of management that often caused a communication breakdown: thus, managers or employees were not truly aware of the customer's needs or expectations. The second gap was service delivery and external communication gap. There was a breakdown in external communications between Air Malawi and customers. This was a service situation where the customer's needs and expectations were not truly understood and did not match the service delivery. The results clearly showed that the airline had a tendency to over promise on their service quality ideals through mission statement, formal goals and objectives; however the airline fell short in delivering on the promises. Moreover, this communication breakdown was also contributed between the marketing and public relations departments and front line management. Either interruption in communication or service delivery caused customer dissatisfaction.

The outcome of the study has confirmed that the conceptual linkages among constructs of satisfaction, service quality gap model and behavioural intention of carrier passengers. Although, the airline attracts many passengers, the majority were Malawians who utilised the services due to lack of choice especially when travelling on government official duties. When on personal trips, the passenger behaviour could change by switching to other airlines hence bringing in financial problems to the airline due to competition and lack of profitability for the airline. Therefore, the research has proved that there are linkages among constructs of services quality, satisfaction as well as passengers' behaviour towards airline. Passengers' behaviour includes feelings and thoughts experienced by them and the behaviour during their buying process. At the same time, it also includes environment which affects consumers' emotion, cognition and behaviour, like other consumers comment, advertisement marketing, product price information, package, product appearance. As compared with service quality or passenger satisfaction variables, intended behaviours are more closely related to actual behaviours and reflect richer diagnostic value. In this regard, the airline needs to improve in all aspects of airline business as suggested by respondents if it is to remain competitive and attract many customers both local and international.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the specific objectives of the study were to explore the level of passengers' satisfaction with the service quality on Air Malawi's international and domestic flights; to identify the service gap between the perception and expectation of Air Malawi customers and to explain the linkages among constructs of services quality, satisfaction and passengers' behaviour towards Air Malawi. It has therefore been revealed that the customers satisfaction level in general was remarkably moderate almost all dimensions. Although the airline provided services to its passengers, the consumers were faced with so many challenges because the airline did not meet their expectations. Passengers' expectations were very high almost in all dimensions. The

results of customers and managers relatively matched in reliability but also differed in a few aspects. The lowest value was found in reliability such as punctuality and lateness which were very crucial. There was no significant difference in the rest of the variables; however, the best scored variable was assurance except website usage as attribute. Furthermore, the research revealed two gaps. The first was customer expectation and management perceptions gap and second one was service delivery and external communication gap. The research has also proved that there are linkages among constructs of services quality, satisfaction as well as passengers' behaviour towards airline customers.

In light of the research findings, it is therefore recommended that the airlines should strive at making improvements in reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness all the time if to withstand and remain competitive in airline business. Airlines should improve in all aspects of air transportation business not only on customer service and care but also in areas such as equipment, funding, business creativity, restoring trust and confidence and general management of airline business to remain competitive in the world of competition. The airline management should improve on service delivery and external communication to avoid over promising to passengers.

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## APPENDIX A: BIOGRAPHIC PROFILE – PASSENGERS

Dimension	Primary	Chileka Airport	Total
	Respondents		
Gender	Male	66	104
	Female	38	
Age Group	18 - 30	24	104
	31 - 45	52	
	46 - 60	21	
	60 Above	7	
Travelling	Alone	73	104
	Work colleague	31	
Country of Residence	Australia	4	104
	India	3	
	Kenya	6	
	Malawi	60	
	Netherlands	1	
	South Africa	15	
	Tanzania	2	
	United Kingdom	7	
	Zambia	4	
	Zimbabwe	3	
Purpose of Visit	Leisure	1	104
	Business	78	
	Visiting friends and family	25	104
Frequent use of Air Malawi	Once a year	3	
	Twice a year	26	
	Three times a year	18	
	Four times a year	15	
	Five times a year	42	

Table 1.1: Evaluation of Biographical Information

APPENDIX B: EVALUATION OF TANGIBLES, RESPONSIVENESS, RELIABILITY, ASSURANCE AND EMPATHY

Table 2.1: Evaluation of Responsiveness

ITEM	RESPONSIVENESS	Expectations					Perceptions				
		very Low	Low	Moderate	High	very High	very Low	Low	Moderate	High	very High
1	The airline provides prompt and quick service at booking stage and during flight	0	0	8	57	39	19	15	53	7	0
2	The airline has staff who are never too busy to respond to requests	0	0	16	61	27	9	12	54	27	2
3	Staff give extra effort to handle passenger special requests (wheel chair/meals)	0	0	18	48	38	9	12	55	30	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 3.1: Evaluation of Tangibles

ITEM	TANGIBLES	Expectations					Perceptions				
		very Low	Low	Moderate	High	very High	very Low	Low	Moderate	High	very High
1	Appearance of uniforms and personal grooming	0	0	21	50	31	0	6	41	50	7
2	The airline serves food and beverages that are hygienic adequate and consistently in high quality	0	1	19	34	50	6	16	65	17	0
3	Materials associated with service (in-flight pillows and in-flight magazines)	0	7	28	47	22	24	32	45	2	1
4	The airline has modern looking equipment (air conditioners, furniture and communication devices)	0	2	11	46	45	33	32	38	1	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>8</b>

Table 4.1: Evaluation of Reliability

ITEM	RELIABILITY	Expectations					Perceptions				
		Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
1	The airline has utilities and equipment that work efficiently without causing breakdowns	0	1	5	46	52	7	29	52	1	1
2	The airline resolves passengers' complaints quickly and compensate for inconveniences	0	0	5	56	43	21	19	52	9	3
3	The airline provides services on time and as they were promised and advertised	0	0	1	36	67	21	32	33	4	0
4	The airline provides its passengers with a safe and secure airplane and waiting lounge	0	0	1	37	66	35	29	50	1	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6</b>

Table 5.1: Evaluation of Assurance

ITEM	ASSURANCE	Expectations					Perceptions				
		Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
1	Staff are well trained , competent and experienced (in-depth occupation knowledge, and communication skills)	0	0	4	58	42	22	11	54	29	3
2	The airline makes passengers feel comfortable and confidence in dealings by keeping error-free records	0	1	17	51	35	7	15	20	60	0

ITEM	ASSURANCE	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
		3	The airline staff are able, willing, knowledgeable to give hotel and outside services information	0	2	24	46	32	10	18	48
4	The airline website is easy to access and use	0	0	3	42	59	22	30	48	3	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>11</b>

Table 6.1: Evaluation of Empathy

ITEM	EMPATHAY	Expectations					Perceptions				
		Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
1	The airline make passengers feel like a special and valued guest	0	0	28	43	33	11	21	50	16	6
2	The airline ha staff who are sympathetic and assuring if something is wrong	0	0	8	51	45	9	25	43	23	4
3	The airline eliminates unnecessary bureaucracy to contact a manager/ supervisor	0	0	24	45	35	9	23	39	25	8
4	The airline provides terminal and in-flight services (snacks, tea/coffee, newspapers and courtesy shuttles)	0	2	33	51	28	23	27	38	10	6
5	The airline provides healthful snacks, tea/coffee services and special diet options	1	2	12	58	31	16	23	49	14	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>26</b>