

## Assessing Customer Perception of Service Quality: Comparative Study of Airlines in UAE

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*Customer satisfactions get highly influenced by perceptions of service quality. In particular, higher service quality leads to positive customer response, cross selling and word of mouth communication which make the customer decision making process a complex area of study. An analysis of literature revealed that service quality is an important attribute for retaining customer satisfaction in UAE especially towards aviation industry. Aviation industry sector in UAE economy has grown rapidly in the past and is fast catching up the attention of customers. However, customer satisfaction plays an important role between service quality attributes and customer behaviors in relation to retention and loyalty of customers but it is never been evaluated in UAE aviation industry context. The purpose of this study is to evaluate customer's perception towards five dimensions of SERVQUAL which influence the customer's decision making with respect to Etihad and Air Arabia of UAE. The research also explored the role of customer's demographic information and its impact on various scales of service quality perception. Necessary propositions were drawn to assess the customer's perception towards various service quality parameters of two airlines of UAE. 125 structured questionnaires primary survey based on reliability, assurance, responsiveness empathy and various tangibles of service quality were conducted with Emirati and non-Emiratis nationals, both men and women, and a Perceptual mapping was carried out to analyze the perceptual difference between the two airlines of UAE. Findings indicated that Air Arabia is perceived high on all service dimensions in comparison to Etihad airlines. This research will be helpful for managerial implication in aviation industry to enhance the market share in UAE economy.*

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### 1. Introduction

Perceived service quality is always been refereed as a component of customer satisfaction. Although customer satisfaction is a broader concept which depends on many things, but this is certain that satisfaction get influenced by perceptions of service quality (Berry and Zeithaml ,2001). There has been considerable discussion about the impact of customer behaviour and perception on business performance. However, there has been little empirical work that relates the elements of customer satisfaction with perception of service quality attributes.(Gronroos, 2001). The concept of service profit chain (SPC) which links service quality, customer behaviours and profitability .Even previous researchers found that, there is a strong and positive relationship between service quality attributes perception and customer satisfaction (Rust and Oliver, 2000 ).

Finding the critical service attributes that determine customer satisfaction and customer dissatisfaction can lead firms to seek comprehensive strategies for achieving lasting competitive advantage (M.J .Bitner, 1993 ). Moreover, customer satisfaction plays an

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important role between service quality attributes and customer behaviors in relation to retention and loyalty of customers . (L.L .Berry, and V.A. Zeithaml, 2001).

Customer satisfaction may increase the retention of customers through repeated and increased purchase (Rust and Oliver, 1994).Customer satisfaction may also positively affect customer loyalty. (Cochran and Craig, 2003). The combination of improved customer retention and loyalty may in turn increase profitability. (L.L. Berry, A. Parasuraman and V.A Zeithaml, 2001)

Service quality attributes influences Customer satisfaction & the positive or negative satisfaction leads to customer retention which finally influences the customer Loyalty.

The marketing literature on customer relationship or behavior outlines potential benefits available to customers and suppliers for their strategic management and business performance. (Bruhn, 2003). The literature calls for establishing relationships in order to build trust and loyalty, develop long-term strategies, and to be pro-active to customer needs.

Service quality has come to be recognized as a strategic tool for surviving and thriving in the present day fiercely competitive markets. Higher quality leads to higher repeat purchases, cross selling and positive word of mouth communication all of which help the business firms achieving higher sales revenues, profit and market share (Aaker and Jacobson ,1994; Anderson and Sullivan ,1993; Bolton,1998 ; Boulding, W., Kalra, A., Staelin, R. & Zeithaml, V. 1993; Danaher ,1997 ; Headly and Miller ; 1993; Jones and sasser ,1995 ; Magi and Julander , 1996 ; Mc Coll Kennedy and Schneider ,2000; Rucci, Kirn & Quinn 1998 ; Zeithmal, Berry & Parasuraman 1996 ). In the higher competitive market service firms can use superior quality even as a position in plank for differentiating their service products from other look alike competitive offers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1991). In view of its strategic importance, service quality has drawn considerable attention of the researcher in the past. Although several researches are conducted to develop and validate the scales to measure service quality and establish its linkage with customer satisfaction and purchase or repurchase intentions.

Such studies, however conspicuously lack in UAE, especially in context of Aviation industry which have undergone significant metamorphosis during the last decade. Aviation industry sector in this economy has grown rapidly in the past and is fast catching up the attention of customers. Competition in the market has considerably up in the recent years and customers today have variety of no frill airlines to choose from. With lot of players in the market there has been a substantial rise in customer expectation. In such a market place it is a concern for management to do something to increase their market share. Management of Airline industry know the importance of service quality but it is never been evaluated that which core component of customer service quality constitute is more important for better service quality perception. The present study aims at filling this void in literature. The study primarily aims at measuring service quality perception of two no frill airlines of UAE the correlation of any demographic factor with service quality perception.

## 1.1 Research Objective

The basic objective of the study is to focus on the importance of the five service quality parameter i.e. reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and tangibility and the impact of perceived service quality on customer satisfaction across the different cities of UAE namely, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharja.

1. To draw out the perceptual mapping of customer regarding Etihad airways and Air Arabia airways using SERVQUAL Model.
2. To find out which factor of service quality is most important in formulating the customer perception towards airlines in general.
3. Evaluate customer's perception towards various service quality parameters with respect to Etihad and Air Arabia.
4. To find the role of customer's demographic information and its influence on various scales of service quality perception.
5. To explore the role of customer satisfaction for retention and loyalty among airline customers in UAE.

The paper is organized into five sections with an introduction to the study provided in this section. The next section delves into service quality concept and its measurement in airline industry. Research methodology and the results are discussed next. The final section sums up the discussion and provides managerial implications and directions for future research. The findings of the present study are consistent with the previous studies in concluding that in the wake of intensifying competition towards perceived service quality plays a crucial role.

## 2. Literature Review

Passenger satisfaction in airline operations has become critically important. Dennett, Ineson, Stone, and Colgate (2000) suggest that as competition created by deregulation has become more intense, service quality in the airline industry has also received more attention. Airline companies also attempted to differentiate their services through the use of computerized reservation systems which were also designed to create customer loyalty in the distribution channels (Lee and Cunningham, 2001). However, despite the airlines' efforts to differentiate their services, an extensive survey of frequent fliers conducted by Ott (1993) revealed that consumers did not perceive any difference from one carrier to another. Cronin and Taylor (1992) originate empirical provision for the idea that perceived service quality led to satisfaction and argued that service quality was actually an antecedent of consumer satisfaction. Bitner and Hubbert (1994) determined that service encounter satisfaction was quite distinct from overall satisfaction and perceived quality. Service quality will vary; the definitions are all formulated from the customer perspective: that is, what customers perceive are important dimensions of quality. Gronroos (1984) and Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988) were the pioneers in the conceptualization of the service quality construct, these authors maintained that the overall perception of quality was a disconfirmation of a customer's expectation and evaluation of a services delivered. Saha and Theingi (2009) pointed out that the emergence of low cost airlines has raised concerns on how satisfied are the customers with the services provided. Doyle and Wong (1998) originate that successful companies have a differential advantage in overall company reputation and communicate it as quality to their customers (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel & Gutman,

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1985). Often, they are able to command premium prices (Tepeci, 1999). It is found that the most important criterion for customers selecting a bank is reputation (Darby, 1999) while Rogerson (1983) stated that good reputation could increase an organization's sales, attract more customers, and reduce customer departures.

Maintaining quality are the main concerns of business today. Providing quality is not a concern of manufacturing companies alone. The delivery of high-quality service becomes a marketing requirement among air carriers as a result of competitive pressure (Ostrowski, 1993). Chang and Keller (2002) argue that quality in airline service is difficult to describe and measure due to its heterogeneity, intangibility, and inseparability, and only the customer can truly define service quality in the airline industry (Butler and Keller, 1992).

The highly competitive market conditions in the airline industry pressurize airlines to deliver high-quality services. Since service is a performance, we have to measure and monitor performance to know where we stand in relation to customers' expectations and perceptions. Management may think that the company's service is fine, but if customers disagree, then the company has a problem. Hence, understanding the nature and determinants of customer expectations is essential to ensure that service performance meets or exceeds expectations. To provide this, airline firms must first understand customers' needs and expectations. Next, they should focus on how to deliver the most convenient service to meet customers' needs. The delivery of high-quality service became a marketing requirement among air carriers as a result of competitive pressure (Ostrowski et al., 1993).

In service industries such as airlines, a major requirement for success is to understand and satisfy customer needs and expectations; creating, communicating and delivering customer value, and keeping promise (Aksoy, Atilgan & Akinci 2003). Understanding what consumers expect from a service organization is important because expectations provide a standard of comparison against which consumers judge an organization's performance (Jin and Julie, 2000). The importance of delivering optimum service quality for success in today's business is an recognized fact in marketing theory and practice. Service quality has been argued to play a central role in understanding customer satisfaction and retention (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). Service quality has been conceptualized as the discrepancy between perceived service performance and expected service level. Expectations have generally viewed as reference standards- i.e. customer's benchmark about what a customer feel service provider should offer. As per the gaps model of service quality (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990), service quality will be high when service performance is perceived to be higher than expectations of service. Service quality is one of the critical success factors that influence the competitiveness of an organization. An airline can differentiate itself from competitors by providing high quality service. Service quality is one of the most attractive areas for researchers over the last decade in the aviation sector (Avkiran, 1994; Stafford, 1996;; Angur, 1999; Bahia and Nantel, 2000; Sureshchandar, Rajendran & Anantharaman 2002; Spiros, Gounaris, Stathakopoulos & Athanassopoulos Gounaris, 2003). However, this study will again investigate the factors that enable aviation to attract and maintain their customer have to improve the service level continuously. There is no guarantee that what is excellent service today is also applicable for tomorrow. To survive in the competitive industry, aviation industry has to develop new strategies which will satisfy their customer. That is why service marketing and aviation marketing are important areas in the marketing literature. Customer satisfaction is one

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of the important outcomes of marketing activity (Oliver, 1980; Surprenant and Churchill, 1982; Spreng & Mackoy, 1996; Mick and Fournier, 1998). In the competitive aviation industry, customer satisfaction is considered as the essence of success. File, Judd & Prince (1992) argued that the customers who are satisfied tell others about their experiences and this increases WOM advertising. In this way, aviation industry increase customer. Hwang & Prabhakaran (2003) mentioned that the customer is the king. High customer satisfaction is important in maintaining a loyal customer base. To link the service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is important. Kumar (2009) stated that high quality of service will result in high customer satisfaction and increases customer loyalty. Heskett, Earl & Leonard (1997) argued that profit and growth are stimulated primarily by customer loyalty and loyalty is a direct result of customer satisfaction. Parasuraman et al (1988) and Naeem, Akram & Saif (2009) found that customer satisfaction is the outcome of service quality the results appear to prove the links between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The study will draw up on a range of theoretical frameworks. Service quality is discussed in relation to the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Links between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty are examined in relation to the Mediation model by Caruana (2000) and Chang & Chen (1998) designated the airlines' work as a service store based on the model proposed by Davis & Heineke, (1999), which identified four types of service firms by two task dimensions as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Four types of Service Business by Davis (1999)**

Service Work Service Provider	Routinized	Knowledge
Integrated	Service Factory	Service Shop
Decoupled	Service Store	Service Complex

The services provided by airline companies have both fixed and flexible characteristics (Chang & Chen. et al. 1998). The fixed characteristics are subject to seat size, cargo storage, type of airplane, and airplane maintenance. The flexible characteristics of airline service include the in-flight meal service which has both tangible traits and intangible services from departure to arrival such as the service by flight attendants. Airline customers tend to be loyal to particular airline companies due to the traits of airline service such as mileage programs. Even customers who are not satisfied with service quality can keep on using a particular airliner rather than switching to other airliner (Jones, Mothersbaugh & Beatty 2002). In addition to service quality perceptions, transaction and switching cost factors also have a significant impact on service loyalty (Lee and Cunningham et. al. 2001). The recognition of airline service quality is much harder than that of other service companies such as financial institutions whose work processes consist of separate but interrelated tasks of one organization. However, airline services are performed simultaneously by a variety of processes by many entities such as TSA, airport authority, catering companies, etc (Chang et al. 2003). Therefore, a seamless coordination of a variety of activities by many organizations is needed for the improvement of the airline service quality.

### 2.1 Research Hypothesis

As deregulation and liberalization spread throughout the international airline industry, the issue of service quality has taken on a new focus as has the concept of measuring quality. Several travel-related organizations have historically conducted international surveys of quality measurement. Rhoades & Waguespack, (2008) review the conceptual background for service quality as applied to the airline industry and use data from the Air Travel Consumer Report to examine airline quality performance on such key indicators as on-time arrival, customer complaints, denied boarding, and mishandled baggage to determine the trend in airline service performance over the past two decades. The study high light the critical component about data that during periods of retrenchment when airlines are reducing flight schedules due to economic downturns the level of on- time arrival tends to improve while customer complaints, denied boardings, and mishandled baggage decline. Part of the explanation for the changes is the lack of airport and air traffic capacity to handle periods of higher traffic volume.

Further, Frequent Flyer and Conde Nast in 2005, conducted a cross-section survey of frequent flyers to develop a ranking of airlines based on selected, and differing, areas of customer satisfaction which indicates that airline service quality is driven by ten key factors: on-time performance, airport check-in, schedule/flight accommodations, seating comfort, gate location, aircraft interior, flight attendants, post-flight service, food service, and frequent flyer programs. However, Glab, 1998 argues that these surveys are a source of valuable information to consumers, they have several weaknesses from a research perspective. First, it is difficult to compare different surveys because of the variation in factors considered within each survey. Second, the cross-sectional nature and changing factors limits the ability to evaluate trends in the data. Finally, these surveys do not generally provide an overall ranking of all the airlines included but a category-by-category ranking of the top performers. Rhoades, Waguespack & Eric (1998) study another method of analyzing airline service quality in the US relies on publicly available secondary data, primarily, the US Department of Transportation publication the ATCR. The ATCR is published monthly and contains data on areas of service quality of interest to consumers.

Further, Rhoades & Waguespack (1999) describes service and safety quality were separated from inception to construct two different rankings of airline performance. Rhoades and Waguespack (2000) examine the service and safety quality of US national and regional carriers while Rhoades and Waguespack et. al (2008) compared traditional legacy (major carriers) with low-cost carriers (LCC).

In essence, the researcher has found that there is low relationship between service quality and safety quality for major US carriers, but high relationship between rankings of these two factors for national and regional carriers. While, the customer's perception of quality is a construct quite similar to satisfaction and has been discussed extensively, particularly in the context of service relationships (Persuraman, Zeithaml and Berry et.al 1988; Cronin and Taylor et. Al 1992; Tees 2012 & Oliver 1993). For the most part, the aforementioned authors stress that service quality leads to customer satisfaction, trust, commitment, relationship longevity, and to customer relationship profitability.

Another Study conducted by Vahednamariam (2010) observed that Air Arabia managed to grow organically over the past years. The company's fleet has grown tremendously which enabled the airline to offer the region's best network connectivity. In just five

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years time, Air Arabia revolutionized the way aviation was perceived in the Middle East by customizing a successful low cost business model to accommodate local preferences of the region. Hence, based on the developed conceptual framework in SERVQUAL Model in Figure 1 and above literarily arguments and insights from Airline customers, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H-0:** Air Arabia perceived higher on all service quality parameter than Etihad airways.

### 3. The Methodology

The research methodology adopted for the study is through structured questionnaire based on five point likert scale which was prepared and administered in English and Arabic in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharja based on five service quality parameter i.e. reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and various tangibles of service quality. (J.J.Cronin Jr, 2001). The questionnaire is formulated on SERVQUAL pattern where the perception of the customer was evaluated on both the airlines .The customers perceptions are also been evaluated on the basis of “Critical incidents studies “and market oriented ethnography. To undertake this study researcher has collected data from two major airline industries in UAE i.e. Etihad & Air Arabia.

#### 3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

Earlier studies focused on the relationship between service quality attribute and customer satisfaction in airline industry (Chang & Keller et. al 1998; Davis & Heineke et. al 1998; Jones, Mothersbaugh & Beatty et. al 2002), however such studies lacks in UAE especially in perspective of Aviation industry.

The present study makes use of the data that were collected in connection with a survey of airline industry in UAE. The reason for selection of these two airlines is basically on the popularity and market share of both the brands in UAE. Using convenience sampling, respondents from these two sub sets of population were approached and requested to fill in a non disguised questionnaire prepared for this purpose.

In total, 51 Asians, 59 Arabs, 12 Europeans and 2 others were conducted for participation in the survey. A total of 125 duly filled questionnaires were received as sample. After elimination of questionnaires from which excessive amount of data were missing, the final sample consisted 115 responses. A majority of the respondents were in the age group of 19- 25 (55.26 percentage). A brief description of sample profiles is shown in Table-1.

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics**

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
19-25	63	55.26315789
26 -32	24	21.05263158
33 - 39	20	17.54385965
40- above	8	7.01754386

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Note: Figures in parentheses show the percentages to the total number of respondents.

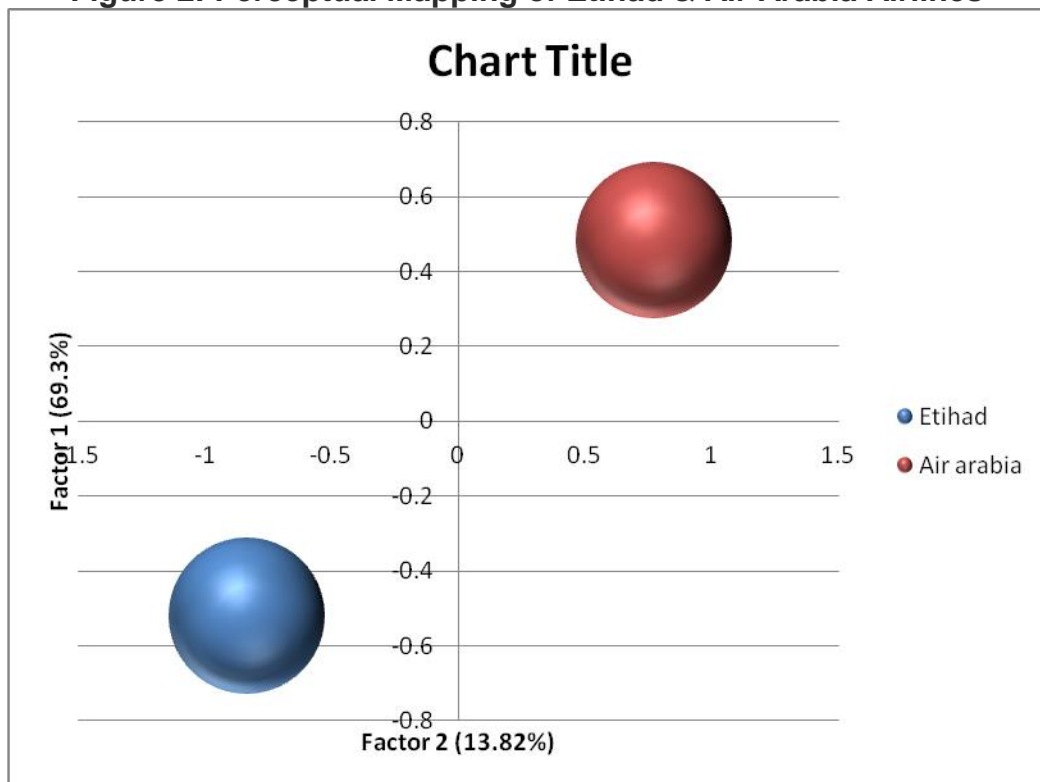
### 4. The Findings

Perceptual mapping is done to know the perceptual difference between the two airlines of UAE. The positioning of both airlines is plotted with respect to SERVQUAL pattern where the perception of the customer is evaluated for both the airlines shown in Figure 2. Five variables of the SERVQUAL Model are Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, and Tangibility is having unique positioning in figure 2.

**Table 2**

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Etihad	-0.83287	-0.52038
Air Arabia	0.771173	0.481832

**Figure 2: Perceptual Mapping of Etihad & Air Arabia Airlines**



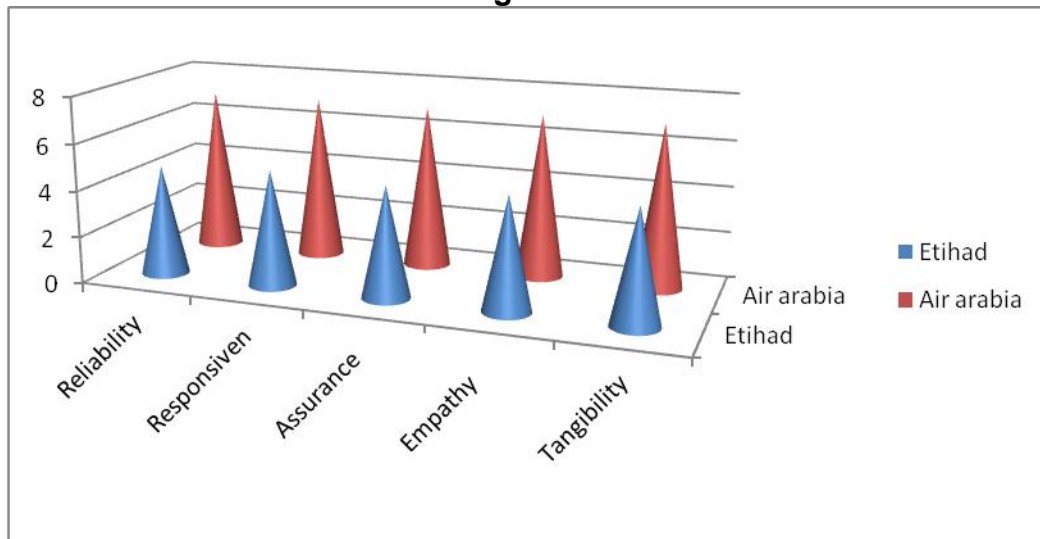
The analysis of Table 2 and Figure 2 emphasizes that Air Arabia is perceived high on all service quality parameter than Etihad airways i.e. Factor 1 for Etihad (-0.83287) v/s Air Arabia (0.771173) similarly Factor 2 for Etihad (-0.52038) v/s Air Arabia (0.481832). The table 2 and Figure 2 shows significant relationship of Air Arabia with the five variable of SERVQUAL Model.



Table 3: The Average score of two airlines on different service quality parameter

Service Quality	Etihad	Air Arabia
Reliability	4.7333	7.061728
Responsive	4.9733	7.067901
Assurance	4.7666	7.024691
Empathy	4.8244	7.05144
Tangibility	4.8548	7.048011

Figure 3



However, table 3 & figure 3 are also showing that airarabia airways score higher on different service quality parameter i.e. Reliability, (4.7333 vrs 7.061728), Responsive (4.9733 vrs 7.067901), Assurance (4.7666 vrs 7.024691), Empathy (4.8244 vrs 7.05144), and Tangibility (4.8548 vrs 7.048011). Therefore, the research hypothesis (H0) was strongly supported.

## 5. Summary & Conclusion

### 5.1 Conclusions with Managerial Implication

The findings of the present study are consistent with the previous studies in concluding that in the wake of intensifying competition towards perceived service quality plays a crucial role .In this study, passengers perception towards the various service quality parameters are evaluated which also influences the customer satisfaction level. Actually when airarabia has scored high on all service parameter the onus on the company increases with the responsibility to maintain the perception level in the mind of customers and provide the expected service for full satisfaction. The study entails that marketing manager has to develop various policies to guarantee quality service to passengers.

This research will be helpful for managerial implication in aviation industry service of UAE as it will know that how the specific factors of service qualities are perceived by the customers of two airlines. These perceptual values will be helpful in analyzing business success on service recovery, relationship maintenance, consumer behaviors

analysis and will also be helpful in knowing the zone of tolerance factor for various customers. On these parameters managers can develop a complete service blueprint which will finally enhance the business profit margin as well as long term growth and success of business.

### 5.2 Limitations and Future Research

Although the present study took a positive approach in reviewing previous literature of perceived service quality among two airlines and a comparative analysis of the relationship among them using advanced statistical tools, there are some limitations worth acknowledging. These include considering taking the factors on aggregate that means not looking into the details of each service quality. Future, research may also take up each factor identity will as well as studying the gap between perception and expectation.

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