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Passenger Perceptions on Airports and their Loyalty Programs

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Abstract

This paper aims to raise attention to the importance of airport service quality on passenger loyalty and satisfaction in the era of modern competition in the air transport sector. In light of existing international studies, passengers' perceptions of the determinants of airport service quality may be staff attitude and behavior, security checks, waiting time, cleanliness, comfort, accessibility and facilities. It describes how data analytics, smart technology and artificial intelligence are being applied to improve the passenger experience and operational efficiency of airports. The research confirms that satisfaction contributes to service quality and loyalty, and that brand image, internal value-for-money, and customer loyalty programs improve customer satisfaction. The research has investigated the role of airport lounges in terms of comfort and loyalty. Studies have also looked at the use of self-service kiosks and airport check-in automation to shorten waiting time and improve the travel experience, as well as individual characteristics such as age and culture, and the impact of COVID-19 on hygiene concerns related to waiting time. It is concluded that airports must achieve the right balance of service, technology and effective loyalty program to improve passenger satisfaction and loyalty. The research findings can be used by managers working for airports and airlines to provide a better travel experience, build bonds with passengers and improve operational efficiency and effectiveness in doing business in the dynamic, global marketplace.

Keywords: Airport Service Quality, Passenger Satisfaction, Passenger Loyalty, Airport Facilities, Passenger Experience.

Introduction

Airports today operate within a highly competitive global aviation landscape, where delivering strong service quality has become crucial for attracting travelers and encouraging them to return. With international air travel expanding each year, passengers now expect far more than basic processing they look for fast and efficient services, personalized interaction, user-friendly digital technology, and loyalty benefits that genuinely add value to their journey. Because of this shift, understanding how passengers perceive the services they receive is essential for airports that aim to enhance satisfaction and build long-term loyalty.

Airport service quality is multifaceted. It includes practical components such as the speed of security checks, waiting times at various touch points, and overall cleanliness, but it also involves emotional and experiential factors like staff friendliness, comfort levels, and how much value passengers feel they receive. While loyalty programs were once the domain of airlines alone, many airports are now integrating similar features through shared reward systems, priority lanes, lounge accessibility, mobile app engagement, and partnerships that create a broader loyalty ecosystem.

This study therefore looks to examine how various aspects of airport service quality contribute to passenger satisfaction and loyalty. It also investigates how emerging technologies and evolving loyalty programs are reshaping the passenger experience sometimes improving it, and at other times introducing new challenges that airports must address.

Literature Review

Airport Service Quality

Airport service quality is often evaluated through dimensions like reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and physical factors, as introduced by Parasuraman and colleagues (1988). When applied to airports, these ideas show up in areas such as how smoothly operations run, how approachable and supportive the staff are, how clearly information is communicated, and whether the environment like waiting areas and public spaces is comfortable and clean. Efficient security processes also play a major role (Bogicevic et al., 2016). Research repeatedly highlights that two factors how long passengers wait and how they feel about the security experience tend to shape their overall impression of the airport more than almost anything else (Fodness & Murray, 2007).

Staff Attitude and Behaviour

Even with the rise of advanced technologies in airports, human interaction still plays a crucial role. Passengers often judge their experience based on how courteous, professional, and helpful the staff are (Bezerra & Gomes, 2015). A single negative moment whether at check-in, during security screening, or while seeking

assistance can leave a strong impression and significantly lower a passenger's overall evaluation of the airport.

Technology, Automation and AI

Recent studies highlight how rapidly self-service tools and digital systems are reshaping the airport experience. Technologies such as biometric screening, AI-based queue monitoring, and automated check-in processes are becoming increasingly common (Li & Olorunniwo, 2018). These advancements help reduce crowding, speed up routine procedures, and give passengers a greater sense of control during their journey. Airports that invest in such smart innovations generally see noticeable improvements in their customer satisfaction scores.

Passenger Comfort and Facilities

Comfort-related features like the availability of seating, proper temperature control, reliable Wi-Fi, lounges, entertainment areas, and overall cleanliness have a major impact on how passengers perceive an airport (Chung & Kwon, 2015). Among these, airport lounges stand out as especially influential. They provide travellers with a more private, relaxed environment along with premium services and amenities. This elevated level of comfort not only improves the travel experience but also plays an important role in strengthening passenger loyalty.

Loyalty Programs

Airport loyalty programs often offer rewards such as points, priority processing, lounge access, retail discounts, and seamless partnerships with airlines. Research shows that these programs can significantly influence how emotionally connected passengers feel to an airport and how likely they are to return (Dorotic et al., 2012). Travelers respond especially well when the rewards feel meaningful, easy to use, and tailored to their personal needs, which increases their perception of value and strengthens loyalty.

Role of Value-for-Money and Brand Image

Passengers' sense of value how much they feel they are getting in return for the time and money they spend plays a major role in shaping their satisfaction and willingness to return. When airports deliver services that feel worth the effort and cost, travellers are more likely to stay loyal. A strong and consistent airport brand also helps build trust, signalling reliability and comfort, which further enhances passenger confidence and overall experience (Prentice & Loureiro, 2018).

Effects of COVID-19 on Service Expectations

Research conducted after the pandemic shows that passengers have become far more conscious about hygiene, cleanliness, and personal safety while travelling (IATA, 2021). Travellers now prefer contactless procedures and show greater discomfort with crowded spaces or long queues. Because of this shift, rigorous

cleaning routines, social-distancing measures, and digital, touch-free services have become essential components of what passengers consider good airport service today.

Statement of Research Gap

Although considerable research exists on airport service quality, several gaps remain:

- Limited integration of technology and loyalty programs in existing models.

- Many studies evaluate service quality and loyalty separately rather than examining how technology-enabled experiences influence loyalty programs.

- Underrepresentation of quantitative studies focusing on combined experiential, technological, and emotional factors.

- Few studies examine airports as independent service ecosystems, rather than extensions of airlines.

- Limited focus on how airport lounges, comfort, and value-for-money perceptions jointly influence loyalty.

This study attempts to bridge these gaps by investigating multiple determinants of satisfaction and loyalty simultaneously.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to examine how passengers perceive airport service quality across key dimensions such as staff behavior, security procedures, waiting time, and cleanliness; to analyze how technology, automation, and smart systems—including self-service kiosks, biometric verification, and digital information tools—enhance the passenger experience; and to evaluate how airport facilities such as lounges, accessibility features, seating comfort, and retail services influence overall passenger satisfaction. Together, these objectives provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape travelers' experiences in modern airports.

Research Design

A qualitative content-analysis approach was chosen for this study. This design is well-suited for examining existing literature in a structured way, allowing the researcher to review past studies, compare their findings, and interpret how different aspects of service quality influence passenger satisfaction and loyalty. Instead of gathering new numerical data, this method focuses on identifying key themes, recurring ideas, and patterns presented in academic papers, industry reports, and airport service quality studies.

Data Analysis Technique

The analysis followed a three-stage process to ensure a systematic and comprehensive review of the selected literature.

- Extraction of Quantitative Patterns

Even though this study uses a qualitative approach, many of the sources reviewed contained quantitative results. These numerical patterns were summarized to better understand the strength of relationships identified in earlier research. Examples include:

- The impact of service quality on satisfaction, with reported β-values typically between 0.45 and 0.82.
- Negative correlations between waiting time and satisfaction, generally ranging from –0.35 to –0.60.
- Positive correlations of around 0.50 between lounge access and loyalty intentions.
- Reductions of 20–35% in perceived waiting time linked to the use of self-service or smart technologies, as reported by bodies such as ACI.

These extracted statistics helped inform the interpretation of findings in the later sections, providing measurable context to the themes identified.

- **Thematic Analysis**

The reviewed literature was then organized into major themes. Grouping the studies in this way made it easier to understand how different aspects of airport service quality influence passenger perceptions. The main themes identified included:

- Staff attitude and customer service behavior
- Security procedures and safety measures
- Airport environment, including cleanliness, comfort, and ambience
- Technology use, automation, and digital services
- Perceived value-for-money
- Structure and influence of loyalty programs
- Differences based on passenger demographics
- Changing hygiene expectations in the post-COVID travel environment

This thematic organization brought clarity to the similarities and differences across various studies, helping to build a coherent understanding of the current research landscape.

- **Cross-Comparative Synthesis**

The final stage involved comparing research findings across different countries, regions, and types of airports. This helped identify which trends appear to

be universal such as the importance of waiting time and which are influenced by cultural expectations, economic conditions, or regional travel behaviors. This comparative step provided a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of global passenger experiences.

Limitations of the Methodology

Although the secondary research method offers valuable insights, it comes with certain limitations:

- The results depend entirely on the quality and accuracy of the existing literature.

- The researcher has no control over how original studies measured service quality or satisfaction.

- Differences in models, scales, or definitions across studies can make direct comparisons difficult.

- Because no primary data were collected, real-time emotional reactions or personal experiences of passengers are not captured.

- The research cannot generate new statistical evidence; it can only interpret what past studies have already found.

Findings

Core Service Quality Factors Strongly Shape Passenger Satisfaction

Across multiple studies, the same core elements cleanliness, helpful staff, efficient security processes, manageable waiting times, and overall comfort—consistently emerged as the strongest contributors to passenger satisfaction. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, hygiene has become especially critical, with passengers expecting visibly clean spaces and strict sanitation standards. For many travelers, cleanliness is no longer seen as an added benefit but a basic requirement.

Technology Plays a Key Role in Improving Efficiency and Experience

The literature highlights the growing importance of digital tools and automation in modern airports. Self-service kiosks, biometric identity checks, automated boarding gates, AI-based queue monitoring, and real-time mobile updates help reduce delays and uncertainty. Passengers appreciate the speed, accuracy, and sense of control these systems provide. Airports that integrate smart technologies generally achieve higher ratings in satisfaction surveys.

Airport Facilities Greatly Influence Comfort and Perceived Value

Physical amenities within the airport such as comfortable seating, charging points, strong Wi-Fi, diverse dining options, clear signage, and designated rest zones play a major role in determining how comfortable passengers feel. Facilities like lounges stand out as especially influential. Lounge users often report improved

comfort, reduced stress, and a greater sense of value, which in turn encourages positive feelings toward the airport.

A Strong Airport Brand Builds Trust and Encourages Loyalty Over Time

Research also suggests that brand image plays a meaningful role in shaping loyalty. Passengers who view an airport as reliable, safe, and well-managed tend to show greater loyalty even when minor delays or inconveniences occur. A strong brand creates a sense of trust, helping passengers feel confident and secure throughout their journey.

Discussions

The findings of this study highlight the growing complexity of passenger expectations in modern airports and demonstrate how multiple dimensions of service quality work together to influence satisfaction and loyalty. While earlier studies emphasize traditional factors such as staff behavior, cleanliness, and waiting time, the present research shows that the passenger experience is now shaped by a combination of technological efficiency, emotional comfort, perceived value, and loyalty-driven benefits**.**

One of the strongest observations is the consistent importance of core service quality elements such as cleanliness, efficient security processes, and courteous staff interactions. These align with past frameworks like SERVQUAL, which position reliability and assurance as pillars of positive service perception. The post-COVID travel environment has intensified these expectations, making hygiene and visible sanitation practices not only desirable but essential. Passengers now associate cleanliness with safety, trust, and overall comfort, revealing a significant shift in travel psychology.

A second major discussion point concerns the central role of technology and automation. The literature shows that passengers increasingly appreciate self-service kiosks, biometric screening, and automated check-in systems—primarily because they reduce uncertainty and perceived waiting time. The findings in this study reinforce the idea that airports investing in advanced digital tools tend to achieve higher satisfaction and smoother passenger flow. However, this rise in automation also introduces new challenges: not all passengers, especially older travelers or those unfamiliar with digital systems, adapt easily. This indicates the need for airports to balance automation with human support, ensuring inclusivity while maintaining speed and efficiency.

The role of airport facilities, particularly lounges, is another major dimension discussed in the research. Lounge access has been shown to significantly enhance comfort, reduce stress, and create a sense of exclusivity—all of which contribute to stronger loyalty. The findings suggest that passengers increasingly view lounges not merely as premium amenities but as essential components of a value-driven airport

experience. This highlights that comfort, privacy, and personalized space are becoming crucial differentiators for airports in competitive aviation markets.

The study also underscores the growing importance of airport loyalty programs, which have evolved far beyond traditional airline points systems. Modern airport loyalty programs incorporate retail benefits, priority lanes, digital engagement, and cross-partnership networks. When these programs are meaningful, easy to use, and tailored to individual needs, they enhance emotional connection and increase repeat patronage. However, the research also suggests that the success of loyalty programs depends heavily on perceived fairness, clarity, and the actual usefulness of rewards. A program that is complicated or offers low-value benefits may fail to influence loyalty despite strong branding.

Another critical insight relates to the concept of value-for-money. As airports expand commercial spaces and charge higher prices for food, retail, and services, passengers have become increasingly sensitive to whether the experience justifies the cost. This perception of value directly affects satisfaction and loyalty. For example, a passenger may accept high prices if the airport environment is clean, comfortable, and equipped with modern amenities, but the same pricing may be viewed negatively in a poorly managed terminal.

Finally, the cross-comparative perspective presented in this research shows that while many passenger expectations—such as quick service and cleanliness—are universal, cultural and regional differences can influence perceptions. For instance, passengers in technologically advanced countries may expect higher levels of digital integration, while travelers from developing regions may value human assistance more strongly. This demonstrates that airports must design service strategies that account for both global standards and regional passenger profiles.

Overall, this discussion reveals that airport service quality is no longer defined by isolated factors but by the integration of service efficiency, emotional comfort, technological innovation, and loyalty-oriented value creation. For airports seeking to remain competitive, the challenge is to craft a holistic experience that satisfies diverse passenger needs while maintaining operational excellence.

Conclusion

This study shows that the quality of airport services has a major influence on how satisfied passengers feel and how loyal they remain in the long run. Elements like cleanliness, the behavior of staff, waiting times, comfort, and smooth security processes strongly shape the way travelers judge their experience. The increasing use of smart technology and automated systems also helps make the journey faster and less stressful, boosting overall satisfaction.

Well-structured and easy-to-understand loyalty programs especially those integrated across multiple airport services play an important role in encouraging

passengers to return. The findings reaffirm that when travelers are satisfied, they are far more likely to stay loyal, supporting what many previous studies have already suggested. Because of this, airports need to balance traditional service quality with modern technological upgrades and meaningful loyalty benefits.

In essence, as international travel continues to grow, airports that focus on excellent service, efficient operations, and customer-focused strategies will be better positioned to stay competitive in the global aviation landscape.

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