



SERVICE QUALITY AND PERFORMANCE OF AIRLINES IN ABUJA, NIGERIA

Garba Saidu Masoud (PhD)
(Garbamasoud1234@yahoo.com)
+2348065638025

Department of Marketing, ABU Business School, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

Abstract

Since the beginning of globalization and open sky policies, airlines experience intense competition, and their performance get affected by many external factors in addition to internal issues. Fuel price fluctuation, aircraft maintenance, labor and aircraft technical operations cost are primary factors that significantly drain the budget of an airline while exerting strong impact on its operational performance. Therefore, the main objective of the study is to investigate the effect of service quality on performance of airlines operators in Abuja Nigeria. Service quality (tangibility, responsiveness and reliability) is the independent variable while Employees performance is the dependent variable. The study adopted a survey approach using a questionnaire to collect the needed data. Data were collected from passengers at the arrival halls of international and domestic terminals in the Nnamdi Azikwe International Airport, in Abuja. SEM model was the instrument for the analysis. Regression result shows that tangibility, reliability and responsiveness have significant effect on employees' performance of airlines operators in Nigeria. Again, the result indicates strong relationships between tangibility, responsiveness, reliability and employees' performance of airlines in Nigeria. The research concludes that service quality has significant effect on performance airlines operators in the Nnamdi Azikwe International Airport, in Abuja-Nigeria. The study's findings support the idea that airline managers should create initiatives to raise service standards that is satisfying passengers' who are customers of the airlines operators in Nigeria.

Keywords: Airlines, Tangibility, Responsiveness, Reliability and Performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Air transport is key to global economic development. This wider economic benefit is underpinned by both the direct connections between cities, enabling the flow of goods, people, capital, technology and ideas and these contribute to the performance of the industry (Awara, Anyadighibe, & Ofum, 2022). For the last 70 years, Nigeria has been aiming to develop a healthy airline industry, originally as a one national airline, and now focusing on a primarily private airline industry.

The performance of air transport industry in Nigeria experienced a landmark since the airline sector air fares were formally deregulated as the narratives around the industry gradually changed from a national carrier focus to one focused on private carriers (Amaechi, Ibe, Ejem, & Okeudo, 2022). To improve the performance of the airline industry apart from deregulation of airline services, government, in recent years is gradually divesting from air transport infrastructure and encouraging provision of these by the private sector as well (Elgarhy, 2022). Some gains of private participation are readily observable in the airline sector, namely increased competition, more efficient electronic based booking systems, and discount fares in some cases (Adeniran, Njoku, & Stephens, 2022). Analysis of air transport in Nigeria easily bifurcates into pre-deregulation and



post-deregulation periods; however, after more than three decades of deregulation, patterns of air traffic in the post-deregulation period can be interrogated for meaningful explanations without much recourse to the pre-deregulation years. In this study, the performance of airlines is restricted employees' performance. This is because the performance of airlines is linked with quality of airlines and employees. Employee performance is scalable behavior, actions and outcomes that employees engage in or bring about that are linked with and contribute to organizational goals. (Viswesvaran & Ones, 2000).

Service quality is a process of conforming to requirements of an assignment and a key factor that contributes to satisfaction of clients in the service industry. Service providers are expected to improve service quality from time to time so as to remain competitive in the globalized world of business (Aluko, Omoniyi & Adedotun, 2022). The expectations of passengers regarding the quality service they receive, and expected value are increasing, and airlines are conscious of meeting these expectations (Pascual, & Cain, 2021). This implies that airline management must have an in-depth understanding of the dynamics in which passengers value service quality. Currently, with the increasing demand for air travel in Nigeria, airlines are confronted with the need to have a better understanding of passengers' travel behaviour (Adeola & Adebisi, 2019), which will enable them to offer exact services that are appealing to the passengers when consumed. Due to intense competition, airlines aimed at maintaining quality services so that they can retain passengers. For a customer to be retained and willing to repurchase, this implies that such a customer must have positive intentions about the services offered, value the services as quality, receive value for their money and be satisfied.

The theoretical understanding of the service quality process will be better explain with the theory of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1985) gap theory, which suggests that the difference between consumers' expectations about the performance of a general class of service providers and their assessment of the actual performance of a specific firm within that class drives the perception of service quality. However, little if any theoretical or empirical evidence supports the relevance of the expectations-performance gap as the basis for measuring service quality and performance of airline in Nigerian context. Therefore, the airline industry market is much more competitive than it was a few decades before. Over the past decade, there has been a rise in domestic airlines, budget airlines as well as new airline companies that offer flights at cheaper rates.

They state that in measuring perceived service quality the level of comparison is what a consumer should expect, whereas in measures of satisfaction the appropriate comparison is what a consumer would expect. However, such a differentiation appears to be inconsistent with Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins' (1983) suggestion that expectations should be based on experience norms-what consumers should expect from a given service provider given their experience with that specific type of service organization. This results in provision of service quality in Nigeria air business but with antecedent loss of market share for major players, with the possibility of new entrants making their way to become market leaders in the future. In March 2021, for instance, Ibom Air achieved 99.8 per cent schedule reliability and 96 per cent on-time performance, a remarkable feat in Nigeria's aviation history where passengers have become accustomed to several hours of delayed flights and flight cancellations (Premium Times 2022).



Nigeria's domestic airlines are therefore not strong players in the international and regional markets (Daramola & Fagbemi, 2019). Small size of carriers also constrains capacity to offer frequencies and compete on regional and international routes. Expectations from Philips Consulting (2022) survey revealed that passengers would value aircraft punctuality and timely departure, uncompromised safety standards, improved aircraft conditions, improved communications with staff, as well as a downward review of airfares. That's the reasons this study believes that service quality of tangibility, responsiveness and reliability are strongest to increase the performance of airline in Nigeria. This distinct dimensions of service quality are considered in this study because they can directly influence the performance of airlines. The study will be beneficial to airline operators, policy makers and potential academic researchers who shall use this research as their reference point.

Therefore, the main objective of the study is to investigate the effect of service quality (tangibility, responsiveness and reliability) on performance of airlines operators in Nigeria. The following null hypotheses are developed for testing.

H₀₁: There is no significant effect of tangibility on employees' performance of airlines in Nigeria

H₀₂: There is no significant effect of responsiveness on employees' performance of airlines in Nigeria.

H₀₃: There is no significant effect of reliability on employees' performance of airlines in Nigeria

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

This part reviews literature on some basic concepts and studies that are important to this study.

2.1 Concept of Employee Performance

Employee performance is generally described on a micro level as "actions and behaviors under the individual's control that contribute to the organization's goals" (Campbell, 1990; Murphy, 1989). Muchinsky (2003) defines employee performance as set of workers' behaviors that can be monitored, measured and assessed achievements at individual level. Despite Murphy (1989) argument that employee performance should be defined as actions and behaviors rather than results or outcomes, however, scholars like Viswesvaran and Ones (2000) have argued that making a distinction between behaviors and results might be very difficult, hence the need to include result in conceptualizing employee performance. Upon this, Viswesvaran and Ones (2000) define employee performance as "scalable behavior, actions and outcomes that employees engage in or bring about that are linked with and contribute to organizational goals. To support the above argument, Cardy and Leonard (2004) opine that at the end of the day, the results or output of the behavior are more important to employer or the management than the activities that lead to those results. Based on the foregoing definitions and arguments, the working definition of employee performance in this study is the one advanced by Viswesvaran and Ones (2000) because it is the result of the employees' performance that contribute directly to the achievement of the goals of airline companies.

2.2 Concept of Service Quality

Service quality concepts have a long history and right since its inception it is known as what the customer gets out of what he/she is willing to pay (Ducker, 1991). Service quality is also considered as the extent to which the needs or expectation of the customers are met with (Butt *et al.*, 2010; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2011; Amjad *et al.*, 2013). In terms of measurement, service quality



frequently has been conceptualized as the difference between the perceived and expected service (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996; Kara *et al.*, 2005). Service quality is a consumer's overall impression of relative inferiority/superiority of the organization and its services (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994). The importance of service quality has been widely discussed by researchers. For example, Parasuraman *et al.* (1991, 1993) argued that delivering high quality in the service industry has been recognized as the most effective means of ensuring that a company's offerings are uniquely positioned in market filled with "lookalike" competitive offerings. Goodman (1989) also asserted that businesses should be concerned with service quality issue because problems with service quality can make customer loyalty decline by 20%. Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) developed a 22- item instrument representing the five dimensions (tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, empathy and assurance) called SERVQUAL for assessing customer perception of service quality in service and there are a number of different definitions as to what is meant by service quality (Aluko, Omoniyi, & Adedotun, 2022). One that is commonly used defines service quality as the extent to which a service meets customers' needs or expectations (Dotchin & Oakland, 1994; Buttle, 1996; Wisniewski & Donnelly, 1996). Thus, service quality in this study is the difference between customer expectations of service and perceived service.

2.3 Review of Empirical Literature

Factor influencing performance of an organization are numerous. Aluko, Omoniyi, and Adedotun, (2022) found significant differences between the expected service quality and perceived service quality in structural engineering, mechanical/electrical engineering and quantity surveying services along all the dimensions of service quality. However, "tangibles" dimension of architectural services had no positive differences in the service quality, but had differences in "responsiveness", "empathy", and "reliability and assurance" dimensions. The results imply that professional service providers require fundamental improvement in their services to their clients. Adeniran, Njoku and Stephens (2022) found that the major service factor influencing willingness-to-repurchase economy tickets of passengers' is influenced majorly by service quality, but not necessarily influenced by satisfaction. The study found that the quality of 30-32 inches' seat pitch; accessibility to digital TV during flight; allowance of 30kg luggage permission; and availability of online check-in 24 hours before the departing flight are the major service factors influencing willingness-to-repurchase for an economy ticket. Elgarhy (2022) used a survey for data collection of 350 responses from travel agents' managers to test the associations between service quality, loyalty programs, pricing strategies and customer engagement, and customer retention and firms' performance. The finding revealed that the service quality, loyalty programs, pricing strategies and customer engagement have positively affected customer retention. In addition, customer retention has positively affected firms' performance.

Sammy (2013) analyzed the effects of customer service quality on the performance of the EPZA – Kenya. Utilizing descriptive survey research design and a modified SERVQUAL questionnaire to collect primary data from a sample of 57 Export Processing Zone enterprises, the study finds that service tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance are positively correlated with EPZA's performance. Thus, factors other than customer service quality affect the performance of the EPZA. The study recommended that policy makers should integrate and streamline the regulatory framework for investors to avoid counterproductive effects of the various agencies on investor environments. Parasuraman *et al.* (2015) suggested that when perceived service quality is high, then it will lead to increase in customer satisfaction. He supports that fact



that service quality leads to customer satisfaction and this is in line with Lee, Lee and Yoo (2000) who acknowledge that customer satisfaction is based upon the level of service quality provided by the service provider.

Lian, Army, and Susan (2015) found that both service quality and customer satisfaction have a positive effect on customer's re-patronage intentions showing that both service quality and customer satisfaction have a crucial role to play in the success and survival of any business in the competitive market. This study proved a close link between service quality and customer satisfaction. Joshy, Peterkumar and Sunil (2020). carried a study to find out the link between service quality and customer satisfaction. The study reveals that the employee service quality of public sector General Insurance companies in Cochin has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

2.4 Underpinning Theory

The theoretical understanding of the service quality process will be better explain with the theory of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1985) gap theory, which suggests that the difference between consumers' expectations about the performance of a general class of service providers and their assessment of the actual performance of a specific firm within that class drives the perception of service quality. However, little if any theoretical or empirical evidence supports the relevance of the expectations-performance gap as the basis for measuring service quality and performance of airline in Nigerian context. Therefore, the airline industry market is much more competitive than it was a few decades before. Over the past decade, there has been a rise in domestic airlines, budget airlines as well as new airline companies that offer flights at cheaper rates.

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3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a survey approach using a questionnaire to collect the needed data. The survey data were collected passengers at the arrival halls of international and domestic terminals in the Nnamdi Azikwe International Airport, in Abuja (April 2023). The respondents included in this study were those that have more than 1-year air travel experience and patronized the airline more than once. The population of the study in question comprised of all travelling passenger using the airline service and a total of two hundred respondents' opinion was sampled in order to avoid the cumbersome nature of trying to gather information from the entire population. In the selection of the sample, a convenient sampling technique was used to get the respondents.

Copies of questionnaire were administered to the customers /passengers ready to board and have the feel of services of the airline under study. The Abuja airport was selected as the study context because it is one of the most patronized airport operating in Nigeria on both local and international scheduled flights. This airport is considered a center of consolidation of customers that intend to embark on a journey using the air transport mode. To obtain the data, the SERVQUAL model was used to reflect airport activities and this further validated the research instrument. The questionnaire was developed to test the ratings of perception and expectations of passengers on the service attributes rendered to them by the airline under study. Having validated the questionnaire, the 18-items scale of the SERVQUAL (tangibility, responsiveness and reliability) and 6-items of performance was used capture attributes of airlines services in its totality. Respondents were required to rate on a five point Likert scale their perception of the attributes for the airline. Using the PLS-SEM the study tests the direct relationship between the service quality and the performance of airline industry.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study investigates the influence of service quality on performance of airline. As the data were collected primarily from Nigerian, the study focuses on tangibility, responsiveness and reliability that affect performance of airlines. This service quality is considered as an external factor. Therefore, it is evaluated as an independent variable.

4.1 Measurement Model

This sub section explains the measurement/outer loading of the model. It is part of the SEM model, which describes the relationships among the latent variables and their indicators (Becker et al. 2012). On the other hand, the outer model parameter estimates consist of the loadings (Ringle et al. 2012). Figure 1 represent the path model

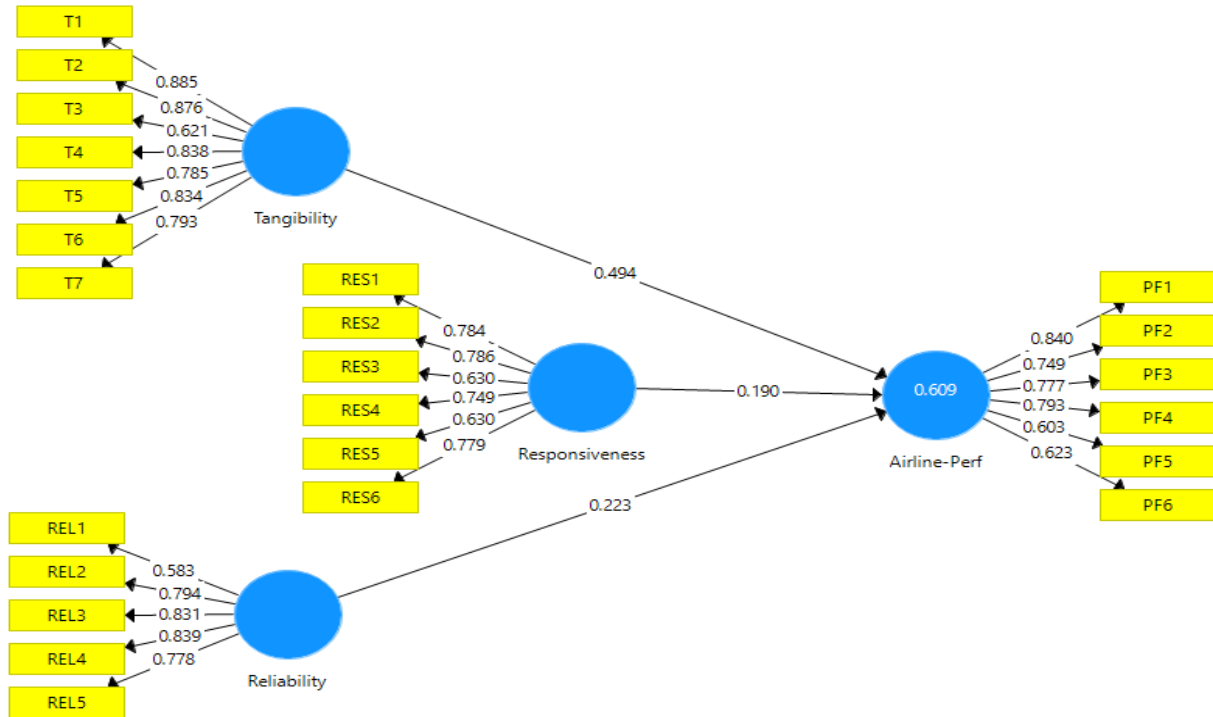


Figure 1 Path Model

Figure 1 shows the loadings of respective indicators/items for the constructs and hence, it's reported by the reliability and validity, and discriminates validity.

4.2 Reliability and Validity

This study performs internal consistency composite reliability (CR) to ensure the accuracy of the designed first-order reflective constructs and factor loading to evaluate the reliability of each item (Nunnally 1994). It also executes the average variance extended (AVE) to evaluate the construct's validity. As illustrated in Table 1, factor-loading values for all informative indicators were above 0.5. It achieves the desired value, which findings supported by several studies (Hair et al. 2011). The results of constructs achieved desired composite reliability (CR) > 0.7 and have gotten accepted AVE value > 0.5 as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Constructs Reliability and Validity

Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
PF1	0.84	0.826	0.875	0.542
PF2	0.749			
PF3	0.777			
PF4	0.793			
PF5	0.603			
PF6	0.623			
REL1	0.583	0.826	0.878	0.594
REL2	0.794			
REL3	0.831			



REL4	0.839			
REL5	0.778			
RES1	0.784	0.822	0.871	0.532
RES2	0.786			
RES3	0.63			
RES4	0.749			
RES5	0.63			
RES6	0.779			
T1	0.885	0.909	0.929	0.654
T2	0.876			
T3	0.621			
T4	0.838			
T5	0.785			
T6	0.834			
T7	0.793			

Source: Smart-Pls Output, 2023

Table 1 show the loadings of the respective items on their construct, and all the loadings are above 0.5. Also the tables show the Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) which is above the threshold of 0.7 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is above the recommended value of 0.5.

4.3 Discriminant Validity

The discriminants validity explain how each variable is distinct from each other in the study. The study report in table 2 using Fornell and Lacker Criterion.

Table 2 Discriminants Validity Fornell and Lacker Criterion

	Airline- Perf	Reliability	Responsiveness	Tangibility
Airline-Perf	0.736			
Reliability	0.580	0.771		
Responsiveness	0.635	0.576	0.730	
Tangibility	0.727	0.502	0.640	0.809

Source: Smart-Pls Output, 2023

Table 2 show the discriminants validity using Fornell and Lacker criterion for the variable of the study. It indicates that, the diagonal and bold figure show the square of the AVE and they are above all the correlation of their respective loadings. Thus, the study satisfies this discriminants validity criterion and hence the next criterion is checked.

4.4 R Square

The coefficient of determination (R^2) illustrates the amount of variance in the endogenous constructs. It indicates that the threshold value of 0.25 (as weak), 0.5 (as moderate) and 0.7 (as substantial respectively). Thus, below is the R square value for the study.

Table 3 Coefficient of Determination

R Square	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Airline Performance	0.609	0.599

Source: Smart-Pls Output, 2023

Table 3 shows the R Square value, however, it is acceptable when the R^2 value is less than 0.19 (Chin 1998). Table 3 shows that the R^2 value is 0.609. Therefore, it explains the 61% of the variation in independent variables of the model.

4.5. Assessment of Structural Model/Inner Loading

This sub section explains about the assessment of structural model. Also, it completes the SEM model, which describes the correlations among the latent variables that make up the SEM model (Chin, 2010).

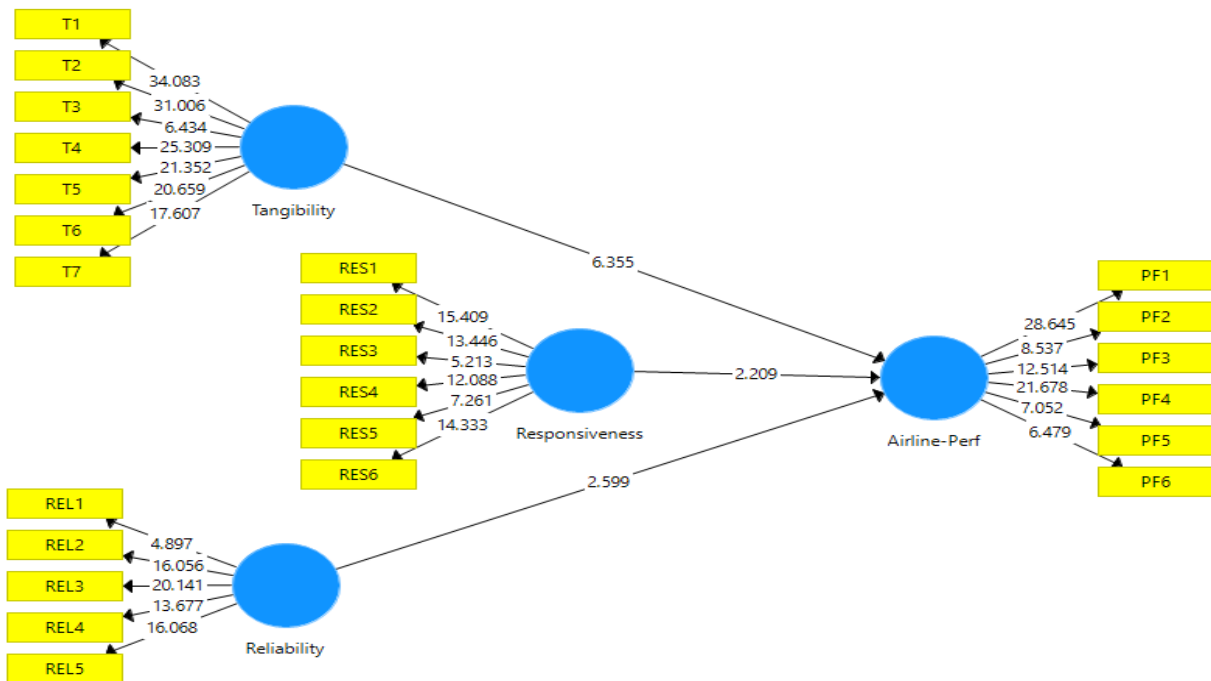


Figure 2 Bootstrapping Result of Direct Relationship

Figure 2 shows the result of bootstrapping of the direct relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable of the study and it show the test of hypotheses. Below is the result of the test of hypotheses in Table 4.

Table 4 Test of Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values	Decision
Tangibility -> Airline-Perf	0.494	0.492	0.078	6.355	0.000	Reject
Responsiveness -> Airline-Perf	0.19	0.193	0.086	2.209	0.028	Reject
Reliability -> Airline-Perf	0.223	0.231	0.086	2.599	0.010	Reject

Source: Smart-Pls Output, 2023

Table 4 show the bootstrapping procedure for testing the hypotheses and evaluate the significance between constructs (Henseler *et al.* 2015). The table further elucidates that all constructs in the model are with a critical value of 1.96 for the two-tailed test at significant level $p < 0.05$. Therefore, it supports the following hypotheses: Table 4 summarises the assessment of the relationship between the constructs (endogenous and exogenous). Results recapitulate that,

H₀₁: There is no significant effect of service quality of tangibility on employees' performance of airline in Nigeria ($\beta = 0.494$, t-value 6.355 and P value = 0.000).

H₀₂: There is no significant effect of service quality of responsiveness on employees' performance of airline in Nigeria ($\beta = 0.190$, t-value 2.209 and P value = 0.028).

H₀₃: There is no significant effect of service quality of reliability on employees' performance of airline in Nigeria ($\beta = 0.223$, t-value 2.599 and P value = 0.010).

In contrast, results show that service quality tangibility has a higher influence on airline performance ($\beta = 0.494$), while service quality reliability ($\beta = 0.223$) has the second influence to the airline performance. Also responsiveness was ($\beta = 0.190$) and positive significant to airline performance.

4.6 Discussion of Findings

This study examined the effect of service quality on the performance of Airline in Abuja. Based on the result of the tested hypotheses, service quality of tangibility has a great influence on performance of airlines in Nigeria. This reveals a wide response with the respondents affirming that the for the airline to exceed above operations their tangible service most affects the performance of an airline hence the null hypothesis is rejected. In same view the study confirms that responsiveness and reliability affect the performance of airline within the study context. This result is in line with the study of Sammy (2013) which show service quality of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance are positively correlated with performance.

5. CONCLUSION

From the summary of the result above, it can be inferred that passengers of airline advocates for quality of services rendered to them by the airlines. This can be accounted for by the high level of positive SERVQUAL gap scores obtained in the tangibles, reliability and responsiveness dimensions. The best service attribute was the tangibility then responsiveness and reliability respectively.

The study's findings support the idea that airline managers should create initiatives to raise service standards, including satisfying passengers' expectations for service levels, raising the caliber of in-flight meals, creating aesthetically pleasing facilities, ensuring smooth check-in and boarding, and more. These tactics will improve the reputation of the airline, retain current passengers, and attract travelers from other carriers. Knowing that dependability is one of the most crucial needs of airline operations, domestic airlines should work to maintain a strong safety record and an on-time performance in order to attract potential passengers.



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