

## Level of Satisfaction of Passengers About the Quality Level of In-Flight Services Provided by Saudi Arabian Airline: Case Study Domestic Airways Between Hail-Jeddah- Riyadh

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The purpose of this study is to measure the level of satisfaction of passengers about the quality of in-flight services of Saudi Arabian Airline, at its domestic airways, Hail, Riyadh, and Jeddah. An on-site intercept survey was conducted by the two researchers the survey was conducted by two field researchers between February 10 and February 25, 2014. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed only to those who agreed to respond to the survey. Out of 130 questionnaires distributed, 25 were incomplete and thus eliminated from the study. As a result, 105 questionnaires were accepted for the purpose of final analysis, representing a response rate of 77%. The results revealed that there are no statistically significant differences between respondents' gender, nationalities, social status, and qualifications according to assessment of the quality of in-flight services with a value of significance of (.05). There is a statistically significant difference between respondents' ages according to assessment of the quality of comfort during the flight(.033), food provided in the plane (.002) and beverages provided in the plane. There are no statistically significant differences between booking experience and the assessment of the quality of in-flight services of Saudi Arabian Airline. There is no statistically significant correlation between booking experience and responding to inquiries from reservation staff of Saudi Arabian Airline.

**Key Words:** Passengers, in-flight services, satisfaction, quality, Reservation


### Introduction

The topic of air transportation services satisfaction caught the attention of a large number of authors (Munusamy *et al.*, 1991, p.718; Fornell, 1992; Oliver, 1997; Mahmud *et al.*, Jusoff & Hadijah, 2013; Piyajitmetta, 2003; Oyewole *et al.*, 2007; Saha and Theingi, 2009; Ringle, Sarstedt, Zimmermann, 2011; Mohsan *et al.* 2011; Hassan, 2012; Chang and Chen, 2012; Chang, 2012; Namukasa, 2013; Sung *et al.*; Hing, 2014; Snyder, 2014; AL-Medabesh and Ali, 2014). There is no doubt that transportation with all its means plays a significant role in human's life (Charoensettasilp, Wu, 2013) in general and in the tourism industry in particular (Rodrigue *et al.*, 2009). In the recent time, the air transportation market has become even more challenging. Many airlines have turned to focus on quality of airline service to increase passengers' satisfaction (Devi, Smitha, 2014, p.143). Air transport plays a vital role in moving passengers and goods either domestically or internationally especially over long distance (Archana and Subha, 2012; Beliner, 1996; Oyewole *et al.*, 2007; Zahari *et al.*, 2011; Zangmo *et al.*, 2014; Rodrigue *et al.*, 2009;

Charoensettasilp, Wu, 2013). Globally, the aviation industry has become an important and reliable means of transportation. (Zangmo *et al.*, 2014). The air transportation is the fastest and efficient mode to carry passengers (Rodrigue *et al.*, 2009; in Hassan, 2012). Air transportation has been enhanced to fulfill passengers' higher demands. It accommodates business and private transactions in terms of convenience and timeliness (Charoensettasilp and Wu, 2012; Devi and Smitha, 2014). Aviation is one of the most fundamental aspects that affect the global development significantly in the new century (Perovic, 2013).

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The Aviation sector is important vital role in the economic development of any nation and of the world economy (Zangmo *et al.*, 2014; Devi and Smitha, 2014; Archana and Subha, 2012; Tiernan *et al.*, 2008).

Generally, an aviation industry is the center of globalization for other industries (Suhartanto and Noor, 2012). The airline industry is considered to be at the backbone of the travel and tourism industry (Tiernan *et al.*, 2008; Chan, 2000) as it contributes to many destinations economies through international tourist arrivals (Pincus, 2001).

Following relaxation of economic regulation in many aviation markets (Alamdari, 1999) besides, rapid change in the industry both in terms of changing customer needs and as well as what constitutes the transportation industry itself (de Jager and van Zyl, 2013) the level of competition amongst airlines has intensified in recent years (Alamdari, 1999). This has resulted in enhancements in airlines services, particularly, in-flight services and continuously seeking ways of differentiating them (Alamdari, 2000).

Thus, the main agenda for airline industry to remain competitive is to provide a superior service quality (Mustafa *et al.*, 2005). As airlines in particular are vulnerable to competitors' offerings, they should offer passengers high levels of service and ensure that passengers are satisfied with their service offering (De Meyer and Mostert, 2011, p.79).

It is also important as a strategic tool in all companies' efforts in gaining competitive advantage (Angelova and Zekiri, 2011). In today's competitive market scenario, organizations increasingly understand the importance of building long-term relationships with its passengers. (Devi, Smith, 2014; De Meyer and Mostert, 2011; Oyewole *et al.*, 2007) owing to the number of service encounters passengers involved in during their flight (Anderson *et al.*, 2008 and Cheng *et al.*, 2008) and because of the large growth over the past few years in the total number of passengers that an airline industry has to deal with (Oyewole *et al.*, 2007). So, international airlines need to understand and meet the expectations of its passenger (Devi and Smitha, 2014).

As customers are increasingly becoming aware of alternative offerings in the market place, and are thus more demanding in terms of their expectations pertaining to service delivery (De Meyer and Mostert, 2011). The international airlines today should seek not only to delivery of the service to the passengers, but should also focus on satisfying them (Devi and Smitha, 2014). Likewise, the travelers demand especially for air transportations which cater long distance journey has increased and leading to greater competition among airline operators (Hassan, 2012).

Air passengers may experience many service encounters with in-flight attendants, this is called "moment of truth". Passengers may judge airline service quality by comparing between their perception airlines performance and expectations, with regard to a number of service quality dimensions (Gro'nroos, 2000). Namukasa (2013) revealed that in-flight services such as (safety percussions, seat comfort, quality of food, in-flight entertainment services, language skills and courtesy of in-flight crew) affect passenger satisfaction.

In recent years, one of the areas for product differentiation has been the development of in-flight entertainment, in which airlines are investing a huge sum of money. The increase in the IFE expenditure has been due to airlines moving away from the old overhead distributed services to video and audio systems which are installed in the back or the armrest of individual seats (Alamdari, 1999). Doyle and Wong (1998) argue that successful companies have a competitive advantage in overall company reputation and communicate it as quality to their customers.

The importance of this study is that it sheds light on the quality of in-flight services provided to air passengers that play an important role to realize the competitive advantage. It helps airlines managers to better understand the air passengers' expectations about in-flight services in order to fill the gap between the perceived performance and the anticipations fulfill them. It gives the guidelines them to implement effective strategies of quality depending on a deep analysis of in-flight services attributes. The study is held at Hail regional airport, Saudi Arabia. It aims to measure the level of satisfaction of passengers about the quality of in-flight services of Saudi Arabian Airlines, at its domestic airways between Hail, Riyadh, and Jeddah. The present study is more comprehensive as it integrates all in-flight services attributes. This study consists of an introduction, literature review, methodology, discussion and conclusion.

## Literature review

### Air Passenger satisfaction

The notion of purchaser satisfaction has been the issue of empirical research for a long period (Oliver, 1993). A number of authors defined customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1993; Seyanont, 2011; Wetzels *et al.*, 1998; Zeithaml *et al.*, 2009; Reisinger and Turner, 2003; Oliver, 1996; Khatib, 1998; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Wang *et al.*, 2009; Woodruff, 1997; Hansemark and Albinson, 2004; Levesque & McDougall, 1996; Patterson, 1993; Ellinger *et al.*, 1999; Fornell, 1992;

Zangmo *et al.*, 2014; Perreault, *et al.*, 2000). In fact, satisfaction is an outcome of purchase and results from the consumer's comparison of the benefits or value added and costs of the process of purchase in relation to his expectations (Seyanont, 2011; Wetzels *et al.*, 1998). Customer satisfaction is a function perceived performance compared with the customer's anticipations (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2009). Satisfaction is referred to as a function of pre-travel expectations and after travel experience (Reisinger and Turner, 2003). When the perceived performance is lower than expectations, the customer is dissatisfied. When service supplier is able to fulfill or exceeds the expectations, the customer will be satisfied (Patterson, 1993; Zangmo *et al.*, 2014). Hence, dissatisfaction happens in case of a failure to fulfill customer's anticipations (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2009). In this context, Kotler (1997) explained that satisfaction of consumer is formed according to past experiences of consumer himself, word of mouth communication and statements made by the suppliers. Satisfaction is a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance in relation to his or her expectations (Kotler, 2000).

Oliver (1980) defined customer satisfaction as "overall affective response to a perceived discrepancy between prior expectation and perceived performance after consumption". Oliver (1996) defined satisfaction as "an emotional post-consumption response for comparing expected and actual performance". Oliver (1993) further argues that satisfaction involves states that are not limited to mere situation and thus can be described as a process. According to Khatib (1998, p.61) consumer satisfaction is the consumer's fulfillment response.

Rust and Oliver (1994) defined satisfaction as the customer's fulfillment response which is an evaluation as well as an emotion based response to a service. They view that satisfaction is a result of cognitive and affective reaction to the service provided. Wang *et al.*, (2009) defined tourist satisfaction as a feeling created both by cognitive and emotional aspects of tourism activities as well as an accumulated evaluation of various components the destination.

Woodruff (1997) defined Customer satisfaction as an overall positive or negative feeling about the net value of services received from a supplier. Swan (1983) also confirmed that meaning as they argued that satisfaction is a specific affective/cognitive post-purchase orientation in terms of its performance in use. Zineldin (2000) focused on the affective component of the attitude to describe the satisfaction as they depicted it as an emotional reaction to the difference between what customers expect and what they get. On the other hand, Hansemark and Albinson (2004); Levesque &

McDougall (1996) view satisfaction as a general customer attitude towards a service supplier. Hence, it is similar to attitude. Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons (2001) explain that the formation of customer satisfaction for a service can be determined through a comparison between service performances with service expectation. Customer satisfaction has been defined as the state of mind that customers have about a company and its products or services when their expectations have been met or exceeded.

This state reflects the lifetime of the product or service experience (Patterson, 1993). Satisfaction can be defined at the level of individual service attributes or at an aggregate level of experience across a series of encounters with brands or services over time (Ellinger *et al.*, 1999). Fornell (1992) defined satisfaction as "an overall evaluation dependent on the total purchase and consumption experience of the target product or service performance compared with repurchase expectations over time". Customer satisfaction is defined as a customer's overall evaluation of the performance of an offering to date (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2005).

Satisfaction has been defined as "an overall evaluation of performance based on all prior experiences with a firm" (Seyanont, 2011, p.29). Chen (2008) affirmed that customer satisfaction pertains a holistic evaluation of the experience of purchase. And acts as a result of satisfaction with consumer characteristics. Zangmo *et al.*, (2014) defined passenger satisfaction as being all about fulfilling the expectations of the customers.

According to Perreault *et al.*, (2000) customer satisfaction is 'the extent to which a firm fulfills customers' needs. It could be defined also as (a judgment made on the basis of a specific service encounter) (Archana and Subha, 2012). Customer satisfaction is determined by defining customer perceptions of quality, expectations and preferences (Barsky, 19952). Satisfaction can be associated with feelings of acceptance, happiness, relief, excitement, and delight (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2001). Providing excellent service quality and high customer satisfaction is the important issue and challenge facing the contemporary service industry (Hung *et al.*, 2003). Apparently, the main goal of any organization is to satisfy each customer. However, it is not an easy thing as every single person has his own idea of what is perfect customer service (Chumakova, 2014). In achieving customer satisfaction, many companies today are adopting Total Quality Management (TQM) to improve the quality of their products / services (Ahmed and Kangari, 1995). Nejati *et al.*, (2009) emphasize that a positioning strategy should wove together promises of distinct experiences, benefits, and personal values with the actual production of the

service experience. The passenger should experience the feeling of power when they, for example, experiences a bigger seat compared to the normal economic class seat. Air companies must provide satisfactory services to the passengers. They must also know the service quality metrics for passenger's satisfaction (Shah et al., 2014).

Satisfaction has been linked to firm profitability and repurchases probability (e.g., Anderson et al., 1994). When some degree of satisfaction exists after purchase and evaluation, the intention to repurchase will be positive. Conversely, if there is dissatisfaction the intention to repurchase will be negative, and a consumer would be unlikely to repurchase the product again. However, in both cases the existence of switching barriers raises the likelihood of repurchase. Every available alternative within a consumer's consideration set creates its own level of intentions to repurchase; but, if neither satisfaction nor switching barriers exist then repurchase is unlikely (Smarrug, 2006). Atalik (2009); Li and Petrick (2006) and Boland, Morrison and O'Neill (2002) explain that CRM has become vital to the airline industry for airlines to gain a competitive advantage as it provides airlines with a basis of how to achieve long-term relationships and growth, while still achieving operational efficiency. Due to the competitive nature of the airline industry, the only way in which airlines can remain competitive is by ensuring that customers are satisfied with the service encounter by exceeding customer expectations and by developing long-term relationships with them (De Meyer and Mostert, 2011; Chang and Yeh, 2002).

Namukasa (2013) stressed that there was a necessity for airlines to always fulfill the needs of their customers in order to survive and compete successfully in today's dynamic business atmosphere. Fornell (1992) found that high customer satisfaction would result in a high level of loyalty for the company. So, they are probably not affected by offers presented by other competitors. Oliver (1997) showed that extremely satisfied travelers are much more likely loyal to the airline than those who are just satisfied. Mahmud *et al.*, (2013) identified that customer satisfaction has a significant positive impact on customer loyalty. Mohsan *et al.* (2011) found out that there is a positive correlation between satisfaction and loyalty of passengers to the company. Namukasa (2013) confirmed that, in order to continue to exist and compete effectively, airlines have to fulfill passengers' needs. He proved that the pre-services quality of flight had an effect on air passenger satisfaction and loyalty. Park *et al.* (2004) found that service quality level, satisfaction and airline image have an effect on the decision-making process of air passengers. Park (2007) examined air passengers' perceptions of 11

factors that may influence their decision of purchase. The results revealed that there are significant differences between passengers across airlines, seat classes, and usage frequencies. Ching (2014) conducted a study to examine passengers' expected and perceived service and quality satisfaction of the Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA). It is shown that there was a significant variance in ranking importance by different demographic features. Ringle *et al.*, (2011) reveal that perceived safety affects considerably the overall satisfaction of pleasure passengers than on that of business ones. A study conducted by Munusamy *et al.*, (1991) revealed that there is no relationship between the price presented by Air Asia and the satisfaction of the passengers. But they revealed that there is a correlation between the pre-flight services, customer relationship management, cabin environment, in-flight services from one part and satisfaction level from the another one.

Oyewole *et al.*, (2007) show that use of ICT, reservation procedures, in-flight services, airline image, and method of registering complaints are likely to influence customer satisfaction in Malaysian setting. Zahari, *et al.* (2011) revealed that food service contributes to the prediction of both the airline passengers' levels of satisfaction and their re- flying intention. Hassan (2012) conducted a study to find out the factors that considerably influence the satisfaction level of passengers of MASwings airline and to discover the features in the service quality model that satisfies or dissatisfies the passenger most. Manani *et al.* (2013) indicate that passengers were satisfied in luggage security, safety and communication with customers, provision of food and beverage variety. It was also noted that kindness of airline crew toward disabled travelers contribute to a significant increase of the level of passenger satisfaction.

Piyajitmetta (2003) explained that there are three factors that had the major effect on the total satisfaction of passengers on the services quality level of Thai Airways International in Bangkok Metropolitan area. Pearo and Widener (2008) find out that overall satisfaction is a function of passengers' partial satisfaction with core service elements and peripheral service elements. They also point out that overall satisfaction is not formed homogeneously as it depends on the passenger characteristics. Chang and Chen (2012) examined the satisfaction with airlines of aged passengers at Taiwan Taiyuan international Airport and found that they are not satisfied with the performance of service attributes such as meals, information announcements and on-board rest rooms. Sung *et al.*, (not found, p.71) point out that the most important factors affecting passenger satisfactions are

cabin facility, cabin service personnel's efficiencies and booking service.

Snyder (2014) measured the satisfaction levels of services provided by JPA in Vietnam. The result revealed that the behavior–performance is the most important factor that influences passenger satisfaction, followed by the price - convenience. On the other hand, it was found that the tangibility – commitment factor has little effect on satisfaction.

AL-Medabesh and Ali (2014) conducted a study to explore the level of passengers' satisfaction with Saudi airline's services. The results revealed that they are satisfied with the reservation, boarding, cabin crew, food & beverages, and in-flight entertainment services. Mostert *et al.*, (2009) indicate that passenger satisfaction with an airline's service improvement efforts significantly affects their relationship with the airline. Saha and Theingi (2009) indicate that the appearance of low cost airlines has boosted concerns about the passenger's satisfaction with their services.

Mostert *et al.*, (2009) indicate that passenger satisfaction with an airline's service enhancement efforts significantly influences their relationship with the airline as well as their behavioral repurchase decision of the airline. Chang (2012) find out that passengers have a positive attitude towards cabin safety behavior, reduced mobility passengers may be in a high risk factor for cabin safety compared to normal passengers. He suggested that "passengers with reduced mobility may be in a high risk factor for cabin safety.

### Service quality of airlines

During the past two decades, service quality has caught the attention of a large number of researchers (e.g. Leonard and Sasser, 1982; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Gammie, 1992; Hallowell, 1996; Chang and Chen, 1998; Gummesson, 1998; Lasser *et al.*, 2000; Newman, 2001; Sureshchander *et al.*, 2002; Seth and Deshmukh, 2005). Quality is an increasingly important element that means differences among the competing services (Shah *et al.*, 2014). Service quality is like beauty in the eyes of the beholder and thus a matter of perception (Rhoades and Waguespack, 2004). Its measurement plays an important role in assessing a service organization's performance (DeMoranville and Bienstock, 2003).

Therefore, airlines which would like to enter successfully in international markets should significantly deliver a high level of services (Sultan and Simpson, 2000). Delivering superior service quality is crucial for airline survival in today's competitive environment (Namukasa, 2013). The delivery of high quality service is considered as a marketing tool among air carriers as a result of

competitive pressure (Zangmo *et al.*, 2014). Rhoades and Waguespack (2008) explained that an important element of a successful strategy is gaining a better understanding of customers' perception of service quality.

Hassan (2012, p.2) indicated that the passengers on a particular airline did not only choose their means of transportation based on a variation of airline's attributes. It is also linked with the quality of services provided by the airlines. The identification of airline service quality is much harder than that of other service whose work processes comprise separate tasks (An & Noh, 2009). In order for a business's offer to reach the customers, there is a need for services which depend on the type of product or service rendered (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Service definitions are diverse and depend on which area the term is being employed (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

By reviewing definitions of service quality, it was noted that most of them focus on fulfilling the clients' needs and expectations. Indeed, recognizing precisely what customers anticipate is the most difficult step in defining and delivering high-quality service (Archana and Subha, 2012). Service is defined as "any intangible act or performance that one party offers to another that does not result in the ownership of anything" (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Gronroos (1984, p. 27) stated that a service is "an activity or series of activities that take place in interactions between the customer and employees as offered to deal with customer inquiries. Hynes and Dredge (1998) defined customer services as (the way in which an organization handles the interaction between itself and its customers).

Gronroos (1982) and Parasuraman *et al.*, (1988) were the leaders in the conceptualization of the service quality construct. They consider that the overall perception of quality is a disconfirmation of a customer's expectation and his assessment of a service (in: Baker, 2013, p.69 ;). So, the customer's own evaluation influences his/her future behavior (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990; Grönroos, 1984; Brown *et al.*, 1991). It is necessarily, that service companies do not only deliver service according to internal standards which might not match the customers' expectations (Jensen, 2009). Based on SERVQUAL conceptual model, service quality is considered as the difference between customers' anticipated and perceived quality of services (Subha & Archana, 2013, p.26). Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) defined customer perceived service quality as a global judgment or attitude related to the superiority of a service relative to competing offerings.

According to Parasuraman and Berry (1985, 19), "service quality, as perceived by customers, can be defined as "the extent of discrepancy between

customers' expectations or desires and their perceptions". Service quality depicted as a type of attitude results from the comparison of expectations with performance (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). If perception of the actual performance exceeds customer anticipations, the service will be considered outstanding (Seilier, 2004; Zahari *et al.*, 2008). Likewise, if the service is not up to the anticipation then it will be judged as bad (Kabir and Carlsson, 2010). Service quality is the excellent service that meets or exceeds customers' needs, thus creating customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Chaisompon, 2006).

Perreault (2000) shows perceived service quality is evaluated thoroughly by the actual performance of one service rather than the expected performance in a specific context. The perceived quality of a service will be the outcome of an evaluation process where consumers compare expectations with the service they perceive they have got" (Grönroos, 1983). Passenger perceived service quality can be defined as a customer's belief or opinion about the services provided to them. It is the comparison between their prior expectations and the real performance of the services, based on their experiences (Zangmo, *et al.*, 2014). Also, Bolton and Drew (1991) stated that the perception of the actual performance directly have an effect on a customer's assessment of the service quality. This means that service quality is evaluated by the customers (passengers) who compare the expectations of the service with the perceived service performance experienced in a given service process.

Jou *et al.* (2008) defined service quality with 17 indices regarding comfort, service attitude, convenience, and service comprehensiveness and analyzed passengers' choice of airlines in Taiwan. Service quality in the airline industry is related to the ability of the airline providers to transport passengers to their required destinations while providing excellent standards of service (Rhoades & Waguespack, 2008) during the various interactions between passengers and airline employees, as well as anything that is likely to influence passengers' perceptions, such as the airline's image (Gursoy *et al.*, 2005) towards attaining the highest level of passengers' satisfaction. (in, Suki, 2011, p.26). Service quality can be defined as a chain of services in which the entire service delivery is divided into a series of processes (Chen and Chang, 2005).

Service quality can thus be considered an attitude by a long-term overall evaluation of a service provider's performance and consequently an overall perception made up by several transactions (Jensen, 2009; Srinivasan, 2004; AL-Medabesh and Ali, 2014). Service quality is the consumers overall impression of

the relative inferiority/superiority of the organization and its services (Park, Robertson, 2004; Bitner & Hubbert, 1994; Park *et al.*, 2005; Zangmo *et al.*, 2014, Archana and Subha, 2012). Service improvements are simply defined as changes in features of service that already exists in the market. It tightly correlates with service quality. Enhancing a quality allows to improve service itself. (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). Therefore, it is necessary for organizations to assess service quality from the customer's viewpoint so as to be familiar with their feedback and thus develop themselves (Shah, *et al.*, 2014).

The importance of service quality has been widely argued by researchers. Service quality is an essential topic in all businesses, particularly in airlines (Zahari *et al.*, 2008; Baker, 2013; Smarnrug, 2006) due to the world transition to a service economy and the fierce global competition (Khatib, 1998). Ensuring high-quality service to passengers is the key for the success and survival in airline industry (Ozment and Morash 1994; Park, 2005; Namukasa, 2013; Al-Refaie and Fouad, 2013). So, airlines need to understand what passengers expect from their services (Archana and Subha, 2012). In a highly competitive environment, delivering superior -quality service to airline passengers is the core competitive advantage for the airline's competitiveness, profitability (Aksoy *et al.*, 2003; Park *et al.*, 2004; Robertson, Wu, 2004; Kandampully, 1998; Shah *et al.*, 2014). It is a key differentiator between the competing airlines (Shanka, 2012).

The delivery of high-quality service turns into a marketing necessity owing to increasingly competitive pressures in airlines industry (Ostrowski *et al.*, 1993). This airlines' competitive advantage lies in their service quality as perceived by customers (Chang and Yeh, 2002). To deliver better service to passengers, airlines should understand and consistently meet the needs of passengers and anticipations to do better than the competitors (Aksoy *et al.*, 2003; Bui and Nguyen, 2004; Hussain *et al.*, 2015; Alamdari, 1999). Airlines can achieve competitive advantage by retaining customer through a high level of quality (Morash and Ozment, 1994). Quality of service is very significant to guarantee customer satisfaction, as bad experiences will impact negatively on the future of the company (Munusamy *et al.*, 2011).

Today, a large number of airlines give a significant importance to enhancing their service quality to boost passenger's satisfaction and loyalty (Al-Refaie *et al.*, 2013). In fact, adequate service quality leads to increase level of satisfaction of customers and to create a positive word of mouth communication (Hu *et al.*, 2009; Nadiri & Hussain, 2005; Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Most companies are implementing quality management programs aiming

to enhance the quality of their products owing to its direct impact on product performance, and therefore on customer satisfaction and loyalty” (Kotler *et al.*, 2005; Bui and Nguyen, 2004).

Indeed, Airlines necessitate recognizing what passengers anticipate from their services to better fulfill their requirements and wants by continuously working on the in-flight services improvement (Hu *et al.*, 2009). If the passenger feels satisfied in airlines services, their expectations will be heightened and lead to intention of re-flying (Zahari *et al.*, 2011) and a good relationship between the airline and its passengers would be established, resulting in increasing profits (Park *et al.*, 2005; Rizan, 2010). Indeed, passengers have increased their concern about the quality of service they receive (Brewda *et al.*, 1989). So, airlines have to exert their efforts to meet their expectations (Coppet, 1988) through providing satisfactory services (De Meyer, Mostert, 2011).

Service quality has become a centerpiece for airline companies to maintain their image (Zahari *et al.*, 2011) and to keep satisfied passengers and to attract new ones (Zahari *et al.*, 2011). Quality of service significantly drives the airline image and what passengers believe about the service and how they it has the strongest impact on the image of the airline (park *et al.*, 2005). Providing poor service will lead to negative influence on the image and survival of a service company (Boshoff & Staude, 2003, Snyder, 2014). Recognizing airline service quality has augmented rapidly due to its impact on passenger satisfaction and profitability (Namukasa, 2013; Bukhari *et al.*, 2013; Saha, 2009).

According to Noh and An (2009) there are few numbers of researches on the service quality of the airline industry in spite of the high level of competition between air carriers. Young *et al.* (2002) argued that there is a lack of researches conducted regarding investigating passenger satisfaction towards service quality in the airline industry. According to Archana and Subha (2012) the interest of researchers into service quality in the airline industry has been growing, as providing quality of service is fundamental for airlines to survive. McKechnie *et al.*, (2011) indicated that several researches revealed that airline service quality is one of the most significant factors that are possibly to influence passengers’ airline choice decision. Empirical studies of demand for airlines show that service quality is essential to the preference of airlines for both business and leisure travelers (de Jager and van Zyl, 2013).

Nejati *et al.*, (2009) argue that only a few airlines are capable of establish a reputation of high service quality over the years. Research into airline service quality has increased rapidly since its relationship with passenger satisfaction and profitability has been

established (Heskett *et al.*, 1994). Bolton *et al.* (1989) indicated the most important complaints of air passengers with airlines are delaying flights, problems with reimburses and long queues at airport ticket counters. Khatib (1998) indicated that passenger satisfaction and loyalty affect extremely on the perception of overall service quality of airlines.

Shanka, 2012 investigated the relationship between airline service quality, passengers’ satisfaction and loyalty towards Ethiopian Airlines. The most dissatisfied dimension was reliability. Besides, tangibles, assurance and reliability dimensions positively influenced the passengers’ level of satisfaction. It was revealed that satisfaction level has an impact on the passenger loyalty to airline. Alamdari (1999) indicate that while IFE contributes greatly to passengers’ satisfaction with airline services. Clemes *et al.*, (2008) examined factors that had the most and least important impact on service quality in international air travel. Zangmo *et al.*, (2014) indicated that level of service quality has a significant effect on both satisfaction and loyalty of passengers to Drukair Royal Bhutan Airlines.

Hussain *et al.*, (2015) revealed that service quality, perceived value, and brand image have a positive significant impact on customer satisfaction, which in sequence lead to brand loyalty in a Dubai-based airline. Suki (2014) revealed that there was a significant relationship between passenger satisfaction with airline service quality and word-of-mouth communications. Khuong and Uyen, (2014) indicated that staff performance, facilities, image, timeliness, ground handling services, safety procedures, baggage handling service, and perceived service quality were positively related to passenger satisfaction. Namukasa (2013, p.520) indicated that the quality of pre-flight, in-flight and post-flight services had a significant impact on passenger satisfaction and consequently on his loyalty. Baker, (2013) examine the service quality and customer satisfaction of the top 14 U.S. airlines between 2007 -2011.

Hassan (2012) examined the underlying dimensions of service quality for MASwings airline and measured the relationships between five dimensions of service quality towards passengers’ satisfaction with the airline services in order to determine the most important that perceived more satisfactory. Al-Refaie *et al.*, (2013) concluded that service quality and perceived values are found the key factors which affect passenger satisfaction and thus passengers’ fidelity. Clemes *et al.*, (2008) studied variables that influence on service quality in international air travel. Huang (2010) showed that the service value is the most important factor that can influence the behavioral intention in the future, and responsiveness is evaluated as the core airline service

quality element for passengers. Yang *et al.* (2012) found that service quality has significant positive effect on customer value, airline image and behavioral intentions of passengers on low cost airlines. Ritchie *et al.* (1980) investigate passengers' perceptions of attributes that differentiate airlines services by examining 30 key measures that influence the option of air services. From their parts Jones and Cocks (1981) assessed the perception of passengers on seven commuter airlines.

Gronroos (1990) revealed identified four attributes that affects the perception of passengers about level quality of services provided by British Airways: careful employee selection, training program, recovery and spontaneity. Shah *et al.*, (2014) showed that there are no significant differences between international passengers' perception about the service value of the Airline on domestic routes but they discovered a difference in level of satisfaction between them on international routes.

In addition, perceptions of responsiveness, assurance and empathy dimensions remain same, but were found to significantly different with regard to both tangibles and reliability dimensions. Ott (1993) revealed that passengers did not perceive any difference between airlines regarding their services attributes. Ling *et al.*, (2005) indicated that there were significant differences between the perceptions of Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese passengers related to cross-strait airlines in all service features. Abdullah *et al.* (2007) indicate that the most important dimensions affecting Malaysian air passengers' perception are empathy, tangibility and assurance. Park (2007) found significant differences between air passengers relating to their perceptions about airlines and seat classes. Somwang (2008) found a gap between expectations and perceived performance of Thai low cost airlines' passengers as their perception of their performance was lower than anticipations. Suzuki (2004) concluded that the value added plays a significant role in selecting airlines. De Jager and Zyl, (2013) attempted to identify the various service and value factors that matter most to domestic airline passengers in South Africa and to benchmark it with the domestic airline industry in Malaysia that has similar airline services. Gao and Koo (2014, p.23) argues that in order to recognize flight choice, it is better to consider the conventional itinerary choice factors in the context of the socio-cultural and historical influences. Jou (2008) found that safety, convenience and service quality factors affect significantly in selecting international airlines.

Suzuki (2000) revealed that airline choice is affected by precedent experience of flight postponement. Pakdil and Aydin (2007) proved that responsiveness is the most important dimension,

whilst availability, found to be the least important element of service quality of Turkish airline. Wen and Lai (2010) evaluated airline service quality according to airfare, schedule time difference, flight frequency, punctual performance, airport check in service, in-flight seat space, and in-flight food and beverage service.

Chou *et al.* (2011) found that reliability and assurance are the first important dimensions, responsiveness is the second and empathy is the third followed by tangibles and flight pattern of Taiwanese airline. Wang *et al.* (2011) found that passengers are more concerned with comfort, internal decoration and services quality of airlines. Archana and Subha (2012) reveal that in-flight service, in-flight digital service and back-office operations are positively correlated with perceived service quality in international air flights. Jager *et al.* (2012) found that the most important dimensions of service features are on-time performance of flight, cabin crew, and ease of booking.

Gilbert and Wong (2002) conducted a passenger survey in Hong Kong and found that safety is ranked in the first position, followed by punctuality of flights, promptness/responsiveness, willing to help and having a courteous attitude. Tiernan *et al.* (2008) found that there is a significant difference between the economy class passengers and business ones concerning requirement for airline services. Chu (2001) conducted a study to identify Internet users' wants and anticipations towards airline/ travel websites in Hong Kong. It is revealed that e-users declared that the content of airline websites should be informative, interactive and attractive. Aksoy *et al.*, (2003) showed that there are differences between passengers on the Turkish domestic airline and a number of four foreign airlines on the same flight destinations regarding demographic characteristics, behavioral characteristics, and satisfaction levels. Park *et al.* (2004) found that passengers' post decision making process of air passengers is positively affected by service quality level value, satisfaction, and airline image.

Chan (2000) assumed that keeping and continuously improving service quality has long been essential for airline companies in retaining old passengers attracting new ones. Marshall (1991) argues that meals services provided in flight, represents for many the only means for the competitive advantage of airlines.

Park (2006) indicated that there were significant relationships between in-flight service, employee service, passenger satisfaction, airline image, value, and behavioral intentions. In addition, they positively affected passengers' repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth communications. Ng, *et al.*, (2011) found



that the in-flight services provided by high morale flight attendants affect passenger satisfaction. Vlachos, Lin (2014) reveals that reputation, in-flight services, frequent flyer program, and aircraft type have the greatest influence on business passenger's loyalty to airlines. Jensen (2009) also revealed that reliability and assurance are judged important to the overall in-flight experience, while the tangible dimension is declared rather unimportant. Archana and Subha (2012) found that personal entertainment is the most important dimension as perceived by airline passengers in In-flight digital service quality. Online ticket booking is another dimension in back-office operations. In addition, the findings indicate that passengers' satisfaction on different airline companies on basis of the services delivered.

Munusamy *et al.*, (1991, p.720) argued that the cabin environment in the airplane is a key factor affecting the level of satisfaction of passengers. Namukasa (2013, p.524) argues that in order to develop a good customer service, the in-flight crew should put emphasis on tangible cues in order to create a strong organizational image. An and Noh (2009) declared that enhancing the in-flight service quality such as their in-flight meal service is vital in ensuring successfulness of airline companies. King (2001) revealed that passengers would change airlines, adjust travel patterns and even pay more money for high quality in-flight services. Thus, airlines are competing for optimizing their services provided. Chang and Yeh (2002) regard that only, price, as the primary competition weapon for competing companies. but this tool is not feasible on the long term if it not accompanied with high quality level of services provided to their passengers.

## Methodology

This study aims to measure the level of satisfaction of air passengers about the quality of in-flight services of Saudi Arabian Airline, at its domestic airway between (Hail, Riyadh and Jeddah). This section describes the methodology employed to test the hypothesis of the study, the sample of the study.

## Hypothesis

**Hypothesis 1:** There were statistically significant differences between respondents' demographic characteristics according to assessment of the quality of in-flight services.

**Hypothesis 2:** There are no statistically significant differences between booking experience and the assessment of the quality of in-flight services of Saudi Arabian Airlines.

**Hypothesis 3:** There is no statistically significant correlation between booking experience and responding to inquiries from reservation staff of Saudi Arabian Airline.

## Questionnaire

A questionnaire for the current study was designed with four sections as follows:

-The demographic characteristics of respondents.

- Travel data.

-The respondents' perception of quality of in-flight services provided by the Saudi Arabian airline on its domestic airways.

## Sampling and data collection

An on-site intercept survey was conducted among a random sample of passengers at the regional airport of Hail, Saudi Arabia. The survey was conducted by two field researchers between February 10 and February 25, 2014. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed only to those who agreed to respond to the survey. Out of 130 questionnaires distributed, 25 were incomplete and thus eliminated from the study. As a result, 105 questionnaires were accepted for the purpose of final analysis, representing a response rate of 77%.

## Data analysis

In order to test research hypotheses in the proposed model, a structural equation modeling (SEM) was run using (SPSS) statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18.0. Statistical techniques such as descriptive statistics, chi-2, and Pearson correlation coefficient were used to achieve the objectives of this study.

## Results and discussion

### Assessing scale reliability with coefficient Alpha

In order to assess the reliability of survey questions, the researchers obtained a coefficient Cronbach's Alpha score. Table 2 shows that the coefficient of consistency for survey is .777. It declares that this survey is reliable.

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.777	11

Case Processing Summary

	N	%
Cases Valid	105	100.0
Excluded <sup>a</sup>	0	.0
Total	105	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

**Respondents’ demographic characteristics**

As Table 1 shows, the size of this research sample was 105 passengers. Saudi passengers represented the vast majority of respondents (89.5%) whereas. Most of

respondents were males (80.0%). Less than third of respondents were married and about one third were bachelors. About one third were between 20 to less than 30 years. The majority had secondary school and the minority had PHD.

Table 1: Respondents’ demographic characteristics (N=105)

Attribute	Frequency	Percent
<b>Nationality</b>		
Saudi	94	89.5%
Other	11	10.5%
Total	105	100%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	84	80.0%
Female	21	20.0%
Total	105	100%
<b>Age</b>		
Less than 20 years	33	31.4%
From 20 to less than 30 years	35	33.3%
From 30 to less than 40 years	12	11.4%
From 40 to less than 50 years	13	12.4%
From 50 to less than 60 years	10	9.5%
More than 60 years	2	1.9%
Total	105	100%
<b>Social status</b>		
Married	67	63.8%
Bachelor	35	33.3%
Other	3	2.9%
Total	105	100%
<b>Qualifications</b>		
PHD	6	5.7%
Master	9	8.6%
Bachelor	20	19.0%
Secondary school	62	59.0%
Less than secondary school	8	7.6%
Total	105	100%

**Respondents’ travel behavior**

Table 2 shows domestic itineraries, purpose of travel, mode of reservation, impression of respondents about the level of co-operation of reservation staff. As the survey distributed at the regional airport of Hail, the

itineraries include just two cities (Riyadh- Jeddah) as they are the only available on Saudi Arabian Airline for domestic flights at Hail regional airport. As is shown below, travel for business is on the top of purposes of travel followed by tourism and visiting friends’ one. Travel for study came at the end of the

list. More than two thirds reserve their flights through internet from which used Saudi Arabian airline`s websites. The Vast minority refugee to other sites and travel agencies to proceed their reservations. The vast

majority declared that reservation staff is co-operative with them. Just 15% complained and were not satisfied in that service.

Table 2: travel behavior

Attribute	Freq.	%	Attribute	Freq.	%	%
Respondents according to (origins, destinations)			Internet reservation			18.0
Jeddah	48	45.7%	Yes	73	69.5%	27.3
Riyadh	57	54.3%	No	32	30.5%	19.8
Total	105	100%	Total	105	100%	34.9
<b>Purpose of travel</b>			Ticket reservation through Saudi Arabian Airline			100
Business	27	25.7%	Yes	95	90.5%	
Free works	14	13.3%	No	10	9.5%	
Omra	14	13.3%	Total	105	100%	
Tourism	21	20.0%	Co-operation of reservation staff			
Visiting relatives	21	20.0%	Yes	90	85.7%	
Study	8	7.6%	No	15	14.3	
Total	105	100%	Total	105	100%	

Table 3 presents the mean scores and the standard deviations for each item of the scale. The means scores of the items that were used to measure the level of satisfaction of passengers about the quality of in-flight services provided by Saudi Arabian airline. It indicates that the general mean of the scale is 1.967. This means

that the respondents tend to be satisfied in in-flight services quality in general. On the other hand, it is revealed that the level of reception and guidance of onboard staff represent the least mean of (1.4857). Finally, the comfort of seats represents the highest one (2.4857).

Table 3: Mean scores and standard deviations of scale items

Items	Number	Mean	STD
The level of reception and guidance of the cabin crew	105	1.4857	.78586.
Cabin crew`s helping to fasten seat belts	105	1.8095	.78563
Quality of food service	105	2.0857	1.03881
Quality beverage service	105	1.9238	.93742
The speed of delivery of services provided by cabin crew	105	2.0190	1.09176
The level of cleaning	105	1.7905	.91667
Means of in-flight entertainment	105	2.1524	1.11615
Responsiveness of cabin crew while inquiring or requesting any service	105	1.8190	.95857
Cleaning of seats, aisles and toilettes	105	2.1238	.90612
Comfort of seats	105	2.4857	1.24123
General mean	105	1.967	0.971

## Hypothesis testing

**Hypothesis 1:** *There were statistically significant differences between respondents` demographic*

*characteristics according to assessment of the quality of in-flight services.*

Table 4 shows that there are no statistically significant differences between respondents` gender according to

assessment of the quality of in-flight services with a value of significance of (.05). There are no statistically significant differences between respondents` nationalities according to assessment of the quality of in-flight services with a value of significance of (.05). There is a statistically significant difference between respondents `ages according to food provided in the plane (.002) and beverages provided in the plane.002 with a value of significance of (.05).There are no

statistically significant differences between respondents` social status according to assessment of the quality of in-flight services with a value of significance of (.05 ).There are no statistically significant differences between respondents` qualifications according to assessment of the quality of in-flight services with a value of significance of (.05).

Table 4: The difference between respondents according to demographic variables

Items	Chi-Square (gender)	p value (gender)	Chi-Square (nationality)	p value (nationality)	Chi-Square (age)	p value (age)	Chi-Square (social)	p value (social)	Chi-Square (qual)	p value (qual)
The level of reception and guidance of the cabin crew	1.943 <sup>a</sup>	.584	.832 <sup>a</sup>	.842	12.675 <sup>a</sup>	.627	2.160 <sup>a</sup>	.904	6.442 <sup>a</sup>	.892
Cabin crew`s helping to fasten seat belts	1.172 <sup>a</sup>	.883	.685 <sup>a</sup>	.953	16.890 <sup>a</sup>	.660	3.529 <sup>a</sup>	.897	11.117 <sup>a</sup>	.802
Quality of food service	3.385 <sup>a</sup>	.496	1.425 <sup>a</sup>	.840	43.714 <sup>a</sup>	.002	5.125 <sup>a</sup>	.744	8.940 <sup>a</sup>	.916
Quality beverage service	1.948 <sup>a</sup>	.745	2.744 <sup>a</sup>	.602	42.829 <sup>a</sup>	.002	5.199 <sup>a</sup>	.736	9.594 <sup>a</sup>	.887
The speed of delivery of services provided by cabin crew	1.845 <sup>a</sup>	.764	6.245 <sup>a</sup>	.182	21.690 <sup>a</sup>	.358	5.469 <sup>a</sup>	.706	12.992 <sup>a</sup>	.673
The level of cleaning of Squabs and covers	7.126 <sup>a</sup>	.129	3.384 <sup>a</sup>	.496	19.681 <sup>a</sup>	.478	13.693 <sup>a</sup>	.090	25.102 <sup>a</sup>	.068
Means of in-flight entertainment	4.107 <sup>a</sup>	.392	2.682 <sup>a</sup>	.612	17.194 <sup>a</sup>	.640	8.787 <sup>a</sup>	.361	13.199 <sup>a</sup>	.658
Responding to inquiries	2.945 <sup>a</sup>	.400	1.097 <sup>a</sup>	.778	14.452 <sup>a</sup>	.492	11.070 <sup>a</sup>	.086	13.643 <sup>a</sup>	.324
Cleaning of seats, aisles and toilelles	5.667 <sup>a</sup>	.225	1.568 <sup>a</sup>	.815	28.932 <sup>a</sup>	.089	13.576 <sup>a</sup>	.094	16.548 <sup>a</sup>	.415
The comfort of seats	4.748 <sup>a</sup>	.314	2.194 <sup>a</sup>	.700	15.211 <sup>a</sup>	.764	6.206 <sup>a</sup>	.624	19.417 <sup>a</sup>	.248

**Hypothesis 2:**

There are no statistically significant differences between booking experience and the assessment of the quality of in-flight services of Saudi Arabian Airlines.

Table 5 shows that there are no statistically significant differences between booking experience and the assessment of the quality of in-flight services of Saudi Arabian Airline.

Table 5: The difference between respondents according to qualifications

Items	Pearson Correlation	Sig (2-tailed)
The level of reception and guidance on board	-.036-	.719
Cabin crew`s helping to fasten seat belts	-.045-	.645
The level of comfort during the flight	-.015-	.876
Quality of food provided in the plane	-.121-	.219
Quality of beverages provided in the plane	-.078-	.430
The speed of delivery of services of the cabin crew	-.036-	.719
The level of clean of Squabs and covers	-.032-	.745
Means of Entertainment during the flight	-.015-	.877
Responding to inquiries	.062	.533
Cleaning of seats, aisles and toiletles	-.152-	.120
The comfort of seats	-.180-	.066

### Hypothesis 3:

There is no statistically significant correlation between booking experience and responding to inquiries from reservation staff of Saudi Arabian Airline. Table 6

shows that there is no statistically significant correlation between booking experience and responding to inquiries from reservation staff of Saudi Arabian Airline.

Table 6: The relationship between booking experience and responding to inquiries

Correlations			
		Booking experience	Responding to inquiries
Booking experience	Pearson Correlation	1	.053
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.591
	N	105	105
Responding to inquiries	Pearson Correlation	.053	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.591	
	N	105	105

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The study is held at Hail regional airport, Saudi Arabia. The aim of this paper was to measure the level of satisfaction of passengers about the quality of in-flight services of Saudi Arabian Airlines, at its domestic airways between Hail, Riyadh, and Jeddah. The results from the survey suggest that in-flight services quality levels in general are satisfactory. The level of reception and guidance of onboard staff registered lower scores. Whilst, the comfort of seats represents the highest one. Here, clearly, Saudi airline needs to do more to satisfy their passengers. All gender, nationalities, social status, qualifications, and booking experience registered no significant differences with regard to the assessment of the quality of in-flight services. On the other hand, age contributed to predict the assessment of the quality of comfort during the flight, food provided in the plane and beverages provided in the plane. There is no

statistically significant correlation between booking experience and responding to inquiries from reservation staff of Saudi Arabian Airline. There is no statistically significant difference between respondents` purpose of travel according to the perception of service quality at all attributes. The findings of this study have a significant importance to Saudi airline management to improve its domestic in-flight service quality and customer satisfaction efficiently. Airline marketing managers should develop various strategies to guarantee quality services to passengers. This study measured all items of in-flight services that affect the satisfaction of passengers. Which in turn provides practical insights for airline managers into how to improve airline service quality. Thus, this research adds to the literature review regarding airline service quality, and customer satisfaction.

The findings of this study have important implications for airline managers to adopt strategies to improve in-flight service, which in turn, will make passengers more likely to become loyal to the airline. This study has limitations. These results of the study are based on the examination of in-flight services provided by a single airline (Saudi Arabian airline). It is feasible that the assessment of different airlines would have yielded different empirical results. The survey was conducted at only Hail regional airport, before the time of flights in a short period of time. So a number of passengers had no enough time to fill in the questionnaire. Besides the vast majority of them are Hail residents. Perceptions of airline in-flight service quality may vary between different passengers' place of residence. Additionally, this study did not take into account the assessment of in-flight services of international flights.

Passengers have to be actively involved in the service process to ensure their satisfaction. The management of the different airline in-flight service components, as well as their integration in an integrated strategy supports the formation of a good image in passengers' minds. This could result into the development of customer fidelity. Airline companies should bridge the gap between consumers' anticipations and perceived performance. We suggest that Saudi Arabia airline increase investment and management efforts to improve their in-flight services.

The application of the study to more than one airline will probably present more comprehensive results. An investigation of the airline employees' perceptions of in-flight service quality, comparing them with passengers' perceptions will help to the real assessment of in-flight services. An empirical investigation is required to assess how domestic passengers' perceptions are different from that of international passengers. This study provides a foundation for more research studies to further explore travelers' needs and expectations about in-flight services. Further research needs to be conducted to identify satisfaction with airline quality for different groups of passengers.

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