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THE INFLUENCE OF CHARTER AIRLINES' SERVICE PERFORMANCE ON RUSSIAN TOURISTS' SATISFACTION WITH TOUR OPERATORS' TRAVEL PACKAGE

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ABSTRACT

Transport is an important element of the total tour package. In mass tourism, charter airlines are the main and often the only travel option. This study therefore focuses on the effect that package tourists' perceptions of the level of service delivered by those airlines has on their satisfaction with the tour operator and their future choice intentions. Research data were collected by questionnaire from 24,641 tourists whose journeys with ten charter airlines originated in 16 cities of the Russian Federation. The findings demonstrate that the charter airlines' service (comfort, cleanliness, catering and cabin staff) has a significant effect on tourists' overall satisfaction with the operator's package and their behavioral intentions.

Keywords: Charter airlines, package tours, value, satisfaction, behavioral intention

1. INTRODUCTION

Package tours are the most popular mode of vacation travel among Russians. The notion of the package tour is widely understood, but Kandampully (2000) defines it very specifically as "… the sum total of the goods, services and interactions which a tourist receives at different points in time, and maintains as perceived memories of his/her tourism experience" (p.14). The core services provided in a package tour can be categorized as transportation, accommodation, and such tour operator services as provision of guides, excursions, transfers, and the like. Customers evaluate their service experience on the basis of the tour package as a whole. Thus, every actor in a tour operator's service chain makes an important contribution to the totality of the customer's experience. The tourism literature is not clear, however, about the extent of the effect of each individual contribution on overall customer satisfaction.

Airlines are important actors in this service chain. Low-cost operators have been the major driving force for the development of tourism destinations (Bieger and Wittmer, 2006). Charter airlines in particular are the main mode of travel to many tourism destinations and one of the major transport-service providers to tour operators. Mass-tourism flows are the main 'product' of charter airlines, and often the only one (Bieger and Wittmer, 2006). Many mass-market tour operators are vertically-integrated owners of a charter airline (Williams, 2001).

One of the most important elements in a tour package is the cost of the air transport within the total price. Yet research studies of tour operators have generally neglected the effect of this factor on overall customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions, despite the clear evidence in the literature that those outcomes are important predictors of the profitability of service providers (Saha and Theingi, 2009) and that customer satisfaction influences behavioral intentions (Zeithaml et al.,1996). There is moreover no doubt that customer satisfaction plays a critical role in the success of the airline industry as a whole (Bamford and Xystouri, 2005; Chau and Kao, 2009).

Bieger and Wittmer (2006) have summarized the business models of airlines and their impact on tourism flows, identifying charter airlines' success factors as the integration of tour operations, cost effectiveness and integrated capacity management. They also identified the key factor driving charter airlines' business models as their "interest in markets and integration of the value chain" (p. 45). The relationship of the former to the latter is a key success factor in the sustainability of their operations, yet it is not clear exactly what determines it, specifically with regard to tour operators' knowledge of customers' perceptions of the service quality delivered by the charter airlines they use, which in turn affects overall satisfaction with the tour operator's own performance. To date, no research study has addressed the question of how the perceived service performance of charter airlines affects tourists' overall evaluation of tour operators.

The research study described in this paper revolves around two key questions:

- ✓ How does the demographic profile of charter airline passengers influence their perceptions of in-flight services?
- ✓ How do customers' perceptions of the charter airline's service affect their overall satisfaction with the tour operator's package, and in turn influence their behavioral intentions?

2. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive cross-sectional customer survey was undertaken to quantify the extent to which the in-flight service performance of charter airlines influence consumer perceptions of tour operator's service chains, and to assess the ways in which they do so.

The data for analysis had been collected in a Tour Operator Customer Satisfaction Survey carried out by a Turkish-Russian tour operator partnership, which is transporting from eight Eastern Europe countries to the city of Antalya in Turkey during 2009. The data used in this study was obtained from a part of the original questionnaire, which: classified respondents demographically, by gender, age, education, income, and departure point; measured their perceptions of the airline's services by responses to four statements on five-point Likert scales anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree; evaluated customers' satisfaction, value perceptions, loyalty and behavioral intentions by responses to other specific statements on the same five-point scale.

The original questionnaire had been drafted in Turkish and translated into Russian by bilingual senior executives employed by the tour operator. It was back-translated to Turkish and checked against the original for any errors in idiomatic or colloquial wording (Netemeyer et al., 1991). The questionnaire was finally checked for the existence of confusing or misunderstood terminology by a native speaker of Russian (Netemeyer et al., 1991).

Data gathering took place daily over five months from May to September. Given the resources made available by tour operator, quota sampling method was chosen. The company's personnel responsible for itinerary transfers delivered structured questionnaires to passengers in every hotel-to-airport return shuttle bus during the survey period who were willing to participate in the survey. At the end of the data collection period, 35,939 usable questionnaires had been collected. For the analysis reported in this paper, the major national sub-group within the sample, tourists from Russian Federation, was extracted in order to have a homogeneous sample and top reduce possible 'noise' from responses, rather than to calculate a population estimate from the sample statistics or control for external validity (Calder et al., 1981).

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The final data set collected from shuttle-bus passengers comprised the answers to 24,641 questionnaires. The month-by-month distribution of returns was May = 1,991, June = 8,583, July = 7,202, August = 4,838, and September = 2,027.

The demographic profile of the sample is presented in Table 1, which shows that more than two thirds of respondents were female, somewhat under half were aged between 28 and 37, and more than half had a monthly income below $2,000 (USD). They had been transported by ten airlines from 16 cities in the Russian Federation (Moscow, Murmansk, St. Petersburg, Surgut, Magnitogorsk, Ufa, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, Chelyabinsk, Nizhnevartovsk, Perm, Samara, Volgograd, Samara, Rostov and Novgorod), almost three quarters departing from Moscow.

Respondents evaluated the in-flight services of the charter airlines were evaluated by responding to statements of satisfaction with four dimensions of in-flight service on five-point scales anchored at

"strongly agree" and "strongly disagree". Table 2 shows that the most favorably rated dimension ($\bar{X}$=4.31) was the cabin staff, followed by cabin cleanliness ($\bar{X}$=4.16), comfort and physical aspects ($\bar{X}$=3.88), and the quality of in-flight catering ($\bar{X}$=3.77).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Demographic	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	16,957	70.9
Male	6,965	29.1
Not recorded	719	
Total	24,641	100.0
Age		
18-27	5,771	23.4
28-37	9,902	40.2
38-47	5,303	21.5
48-57	2,775	11.3
58-67	770	3.1
Over 68	120	.5
Total	24,641	100.0
Income in US dollars per month		
0-1000	5,645	33.3
1001-2000	4,756	28.0
2001-3000	2,143	12.6
3001-4000	2,609	15.4
4001-5000	1,803	10.6
Not recorded	7,685	
Total	24,641	100.0
Departure city		
Moscow	17,573	71.3
Yekaterinburg	2,420	9.8
St. Petersburg	1,638	6.6
Ufa	624	2.5
Volgograd	490	2.0
Surgut	361	1.5
Nizhnevartovsk	334	1.4
Omsk	332	1.3
Samara	281	1.1
Chelyabinsk	261	1.1
Perm	156	.6
Rostov	89	.4
Krasnoyarsk	48	.2
Murmansk	17	.1
Magnitogorsk	9	.0
Novgorod	8	.0
Total	24,641	100.0

Chi-square tests were performed to determine whether or not there was a systematic association between the passengers' demographic profiles and their satisfaction with the staff, cleanliness, comfort, and catering aspects of in-flight service.

Table 2 Respondents' evaluation of in-flight service

	n	Mean	SD	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
I am satisfied with the cabin staff.	24,251	4.31	.927	.860	-1.674	2.896
I am satisfied with the physical facilities and comfort of the plane.	24,446	3.88	1.043	1.088	-.833	.194
I am satisfied with the quality of in-flight catering.	24,426	3.77	1.074	1.153	-.706	-.107
I am satisfied with the general cleanliness of the plane.	24,068	4.16	.889	.790	-1.150	1.383

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Valid n (listwise)	23,688					

Though no significant association was observed between respondents' gender and each of those dimensions of service, significant associations were found between respondents' age and their evaluations of staff (χ^2= 21,924, *df*=10, p=.015), cleanliness (χ^2= 40,626, *df*=10, p=.000), comfort (χ^2= 289,854, *df*=10, p=.015), and in-flight catering (χ^2= 59,129, *df*=10, p=.015). The strength and direction of this association was further analyzed by Kendall's Tau-c and Gamma tests. Results indicated a generally slightly weak positive association between age and, in descending order of magnitude, the comfort dimension (Tau-c = .082; Gamma = .163), in-flight catering (Tau-c = .034; Gamma = .061), cleanliness (Tau-c = .015; Gamma = .047) and cabin staff (Tau-c = .007; Gamma = .028). In other words, evaluations of service quality improve as age increases.

A significant association was also found between respondents' income and their satisfaction with the airlines' cabin staff (χ^2= 33,364, *df*=8, p=.000), with cleanliness (χ^2= 127,368, *df*=8, p=.000), with comfort (χ^2= 93,822, *df*=8, p=.000), and with in-flight catering (χ^2= 178,910, *df*=8, p=.000). Tests of the strength and direction of this association revealed a slightly weak negative association between income and, in descending order, cleanliness (Tau-c = -.048, Gamma = -.139), in-flight catering (Tau-c = -.077, Gamma = -.131), comfort (Tau-c = -.051, Gamma = -.096) and cabin staff (Tau-c = -.017, Gamma = -.061). Thus, evaluations of service quality become less favorable as the income level rises.

The tourists' evaluation of the charter airlines' in-flight service was analyzed for each airline, with the results set out in Table 3. With respect to satisfaction with their cabin staff, Airline1 and Airline3 scored highest, with a mean value on the five-point scale of 4.43, while Airline6 was rated lowest, at 3.93. In terms of the comfort and physical dimensions, Airline8 was highest-rated. Where in-flight catering is concerned, no airline had a mean value for satisfaction above four except for Airline10, very marginally higher at 4.09, which also enjoyed the best rating for cabin cleanliness, at 4.38.

Table 3 Mean values of service-quality ratings by airline

Airline	Cabin staff		Comfort and physical aspects		In-flight catering		Cabin cleanliness	
	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n
Airline1	4.43	530	3.95	527	3.81	531	4.16	527
Airline2	4.27	1218	3.80	1219	3.70	1222	4.09	1,197
Airline3	4.43	8130	3.78	8163	3.86	8154	4.05	8,004
Airline4	4.32	1478	4.08	1488	3.77	1486	4.32	1,486
Airline5	4.17	366	3.54	368	3.31	367	4.10	355
Airline6	3.93	1237	3.80	1350	3.77	1346	4.10	1,345
Airline7	4.10	860	3.84	861	3.31	867	4.21	863
Airline8	4.42	2332	4.09	2341	3.65	2334	4.28	2,287
Airline9	4.23	6929	3.91	6950	3.76	6938	4.20	6,838
Airline10	4.39	1171	4.07	1179	4.09	1181	4.38	1,166

Passengers' behavioral intentions were evaluated by their responses on the same five-point scale to a new set of statements, shown in Table 4. Their mean scores ranged between 4.31 and 4.54. These variables were further used as dependent variables in regression analyses.

Table 4 Respondents' behavioral intentions

	n	Mean	SD	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
The overall image of the tour operator is excellent.	23,447	4.54	.663	.440	-1.639	3.711
I am satisfied with the overall holiday experience of this tour operator.	23,943	4.49	.741	.550	-1.750	4.013
I recommend this tour operator to others.	23,890	4.45	.788	.620	-1.832	4.303
I will prefer this tour operator for my next holiday.	23,761	4.35	.845	.715	-1.403	2.093
My holiday experience with the tour operator has been value for money.	23,985	4.31	.834	.696	-1.325	1.984
Valid n (listwise)	22,789					

Five regression analyses were carried out with the same independent variables for each dependent variable. Table 5 presents the beta values, adjusted R2 values and p values (in brackets) as summary results.

Table 5 Summary results of linear stepwise regression analysis

Dependent Variable	**Value for money**	**Intention to recommend**	**Loyalty**	**Satisfaction**	**Image**
Independent Variables					
Cabin staff	.158 (.000)	.180 (.000)	.172 (.000)	.203 (.000)	.182 (.000)
Comfort and physical aspects	.018 (.043)	.022 (.013)	.042 (.000)	.007 (.000)	.011 (.188)
In-flight catering	.091 (.000)	.067 (.000)	.072 (.000)	.065 (.000)	.068 (.000)
Cabin cleanliness	.079 (.000)	.083 (.000)	.068 (.000)	.109 (.000)	.113 (.000)
Adjusted R^2 Value	.076	.081	.081	0.98	.091

It can be concluded from the regression analysis that the charter airlines make only a limited contribution to travelers' perceptions of a tour operator's value for money, to their intention to recommend it, to customer loyalty, to satisfaction, or to the operator's image. Overall, the most important effect derives from satisfaction, which nevertheless accounts for only 9.8% of the explained variance. Customers' perceptions of value for money explained only 7.6% of the variance with respect to cabin services (comfort, cleanliness, catering, and cabin staff). The most effective independent variable for all the models was found to be the cabin staff. With the highest beta coefficients, between 2.03 and 1.58, its relative importance was almost twice that of the nearest independent service attribute variable.

To analyze the effect of the independent variables in Table 5 more thoroughly, we grouped the satisfied and dissatisfied customers for each service attribute by designating those at points 1 and 2 on the satisfaction response scales as "dissatisfied" groups, and labeling those at pints 4 and 5 "satisfied". These newly created variables were used for mean comparisons of scores for value for money, intention to recommend, loyalty, satisfaction, and image, for the tour operator's overall service. Table 6 shows the results of this analysis, which exhibit significant differences between satisfied and dissatisfied respondents for all satisfaction and behavioral intention variables in terms of each service attribute. The mean values for all variables are higher within the "satisfied" group. The conclusion is that high mean scores for charter airlines' services lead to significantly higher mean values for satisfaction with the tour operator and intention to recommend it.

Table 6 Mean differences in behavioral intention of "satisfied" versus. "dissatisfied" respondents.

Cabin staff	**Group**	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Std. Error Mean**	**t**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
Value for money	1.00	1,310	3.90	1.078	.030	-15.208	.000
	2.00	20,552	4.36	.792	.006		
Intention to recommend	1.00	1,289	4.01	1.122	.031	-15.490	.000
	2.00	20,489	4.50	.731	.005		
Loyalty	1.00	1,291	3.87	1.146	.032	-16.664	.000
	2.00	20,384	4.41	.796	.006		
Image	1.00	1,285	4.20	.921	.026	-14.816	.000
	2.00	20,097	4.59	.619	.004		
Satisfaction	1.00	1,301	4.05	1.038	.029	-16.976	.000
	2.00	20,535	4.54	.687	.005		

Comfort and physical aspects							
Value for money	1.00	2,461	4.01	1.008	.020	-17.979	.000
	2.00	16,590	4.39	.785	.006		
Intention to recommend	1.00	2,435	4.15	1.007	.020	-17.770	.000
	2.00	16,535	4.53	.725	.006		
Loyalty	1.00	2,423	4.03	1.036	.021	-18.756	.000
	2.00	16,456	4.44	.785	.006		
Image	1.00	2,364	4.30	.840	.017	-17.144	.000
	2.00	16,237	4.61	.611	.005		
Satisfaction	1.00	2,439	4.20	.921	.019	-18.515	.000
	2.00	16,576	4.56	.691	.005		
Quality of in-flight catering							
Value for money	1.00	3,002	4.00	.988	.018	-21.199	.000
	2.00	15,529	4.40	.781	.006		
Intention to recommend	1.00	2,978	4.17	.987	.018	-18.951	.000
	2.00	15,477	4.53	.719	.006		
Loyalty	1.00	2,964	4.06	1.007	.019	-19.735	.000
	2.00	15,398	4.45	.791	.006		
Image	1.00	2,928	4.31	.820	.015	-19.393	.000
	2.00	15,148	4.62	.604	.005		
Satisfaction	1.00	2,990	4.21	.910	.017	-20.456	.000
	2.00	15,513	4.57	.684	.005		
Cabin cleanliness							
Value for money	1.00	1,214	3.95	1.033	.030	-13.523	.000
	2.00	19,289	4.36	.800	.006		
Intention to recommend	1.00	1,203	4.10	1.040	.030	-13.182	.000
	2.00	19,219	4.50	.739	.005		
Loyalty	1.00	1,194	3.98	1.071	.031	-13.467	.000
	2.00	19,121	4.41	.805	.006		
Image	1.00	1,193	4.23	.883	.026	-13.906	.000
	2.00	19,134	4.59	.622	.004		
Satisfaction	1.00	1,202	4.13	.965	.028	-14.587	.000
	2.00	19,269	4.54	.698	.005		

4. CONCLUSION

The tourism industry comprises a complementary and combined network of actors, most obviously airlines, tour operators, and hotels (Kandampully, 2000). The research study reported in this paper has focused on one key mode of transport in the industry, charter airlines. The effect of their service quality on tour operators' performance is a neglected area of consumer research. More specifically, the study investigates the relationship between customers' evaluation of the in-flight experience (in terms of comfort, cleanliness, catering and cabin staff) on their satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioral intentions, which are in turn directly linked to the success of the tour operators' businesses. Answers were sought to two research questions: how does the demographic profile of charter airline passengers influence their perceptions of in-flight services, and how do customers' perceptions of the charter airline's service affect their overall satisfaction with the tour operator's package, in turn influencing their behavioral intentions? To that end, comprehensive statistical analysis was applied to a larger data set than is normal in conventional consumer research. Significant results were obtained.

First, a significant relationship was found between the tourists' demographic characteristics and their perceptions of the charter airlines' services. Specifically, significant associations were observed between age and income and all four dimensions of in-flight service; only gender was not significantly related. The findings further indicate that perceptions of service are more favorable among older passengers and less favorable among the higher earners.

Second, analysis of questionnaire data showed that the service performance of a charter airline has a significant effect on customers' overall satisfaction with the tour operator and on their behavioral intentions, as expressed in their responses to two statements in particular in the research questionnaire: "I recommend this tour operator to others" and "I will prefer this tour operator for my next holiday". The

most influential element of the service was found to be the cabin staff, which had an effect almost twice that of any other dimension. This finding has important managerial implications. In the short term, price-based agreements between charter airlines and tour operators might seem to be a productive strategy but, in the longer term, it could be a destructive mistake not to taken into account the parallel effect of the charter airlines' services on perceptions of the tour operator's total package. It is thus important for tour operators to monitor the service performance levels of the charter airlines they use. In particular, it will be a sound strategy to sub-contract to airlines with high standards of service when high-income passengers dominate the customers for a specific package. Strategic planning should also take into account in some way the relationship of satisfaction ("I am satisfied with the overall holiday experience of this tour operator"; "My holiday experience with the tour operator has been value for money") to age.

An informed understanding of the fundamentals of tour operators' value chains and of the relative importance of charter airlines' services in determining the levels of satisfaction among tour operators' customers is an essential input to efficient and effective strategic decision-making. It can moreover shape the management decisions of Russian charter airlines, in an intensely competitive industry.

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