

Airline passengers' rights to information and the strange case of the right to be informed about destinations

Jose D. PEREZGONZALEZ* and Andrew GILBEY
School of Aviation, Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract: This research explored whether airline passengers wanted more rights to know about the safety and economic conditions of their flights, as well as the right to be reimbursed if they decided not to flight because of perceived risks. Overall, passengers agreed somehow on having more safety rights, but not so regarding financial rights. Surprisingly, they also wanted to have the right to be informed about their destinations (hotels, attractions, etc), something that is foreign to the purpose and duties of air transport.

Introduction

Airlines have been hitting the news for all the bad reasons lately: passengers in the north hemisphere being stranded for days because of a volcanic ash cloud, many of whom have not been cared for by the airlines with a duty to do so; pilots on their way to work in the south hemisphere being stopped by police for drink-driving, a drinking behaviour apparently condoned by their airline's culture; a European airline declaring bankruptcy from one day to the next, and completely abandoning the passengers from whom they had no problem about taking their airfares the day before; a South-Pacific airline keeping a pilot flying, even after the pilot has reiterated that he was mentally unfit for flying; aircraft departing with several technical deficiencies, their pilots pressurised to disregard the potential for a catastrophe in favour of economics; and even an airline lobbying body which appears more inclined to look at the financial rights of airlines than at the safety of passengers.

And the issue is that, all-in-all, passengers are the stockholders that systematically appear to be holding the losing end of the rope. Yet we wondered whether a number of passengers would have opted to change flights had they learnt of the several technical deficiencies their aircraft had before departing to its fatal crash. We also wondered whether a number of passengers would have opted to change flights had they learnt that their airline was heading for bankruptcy before starting their trip.

This pilot study thus explores new rights for airline passengers. More specifically, it explores what prospective passengers think about holding a set of rights to information about particular conditions for an imminent flight, as opposed to conditions at the time of booking the flight proper. It further explores whether passengers also believe they should have the right to get their airfares reimbursed if they opt not to fly because of perceived safety or financial risks arising from those conditions. That is, the study explores whether prospective passengers think they should have more saying about whether to fly or not, and whether such decision should not be impaired by the money they have already invested with the airline.

Methods

We constructed a questionnaire with six scenarios, each of which asked two questions to prospective passengers: the right to be informed about a particular condition of an imminent flight, and the right to get the airfare reimbursed if they wished to cancel the flight because of a perceived safety or economic risk arising from

* Correspondence author: Dr. Jose D. PÉREZGONZÁLEZ, School of Aviation, Massey University, Turitea Campus, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand. <http://aviation.massey.ac.nz/>

such condition. Of the six scenarios, three dealt with potential safety risks: the technical condition of the aircraft, the physical and mental condition of the pilots, and the safety culture of the organisation. Another two scenarios dealt with potential economic risks: the financial risk of the airline, and the disruption of service for reasons such as weather, terrorism, etc. And one scenario dealt with information about the passenger's destination (i.e. information about main attractions, hotels, bus and train connections, etc). The latter scenario is foreign to the service, integrity or duty of care of an airline and, thus, was proposed as a control scenario. As such, it was placed midway in the questionnaire, as the fourth scenario respondents will come across. We expected respondents to mostly agree or totally agree with all rights except with the control ones, unless the respondent was not paying due attention. Thus, the control scenario would inform whether some questionnaires should be rejected because they might not have been filled out with care. The questionnaire also asked for two demographic variables: whether the respondent was a student or staff/worker, and whether the respondent was a pilot/ATP student or not.

We used a convenient sample of students and staff from a university in New Zealand. Sixty-six respondents constituted the final sample, of which 82% (n=54) were students and 18% (n=12) were staff. Regarding their flight experience, 39% (n=26) were pilots or ATP students and the remaining 61% (n=40) were not pilots.

During and after the collation of data into the database, we noticed that neither the research variables nor the control variables behaved as anticipated. Respondents did not systematically agree or highly agree with most rights, but their responses covered the entire possible range of options. Also, when respondents valued highly the control variables, they did not show a pattern of valuing equally highly all other variables, this indicating that they were paying due attention to the questionnaire. Thus, observing that responses to the control situation might not help identify unreliable questionnaires, and sensing that they might actually uncover rights that passengers want to have, we decided to use all returned questionnaires.

A statistical screening of the research variables prior to the main analyses showed that most variables had a negative, significantly non-normal skewness, as expected, and three had a significantly non-normal kurtosis. Furthermore, curvefit analyses between several pairs of variables showed that the linear model significantly fitted the variables being compared. Therefore, non-parametric tests were used for most analyses, but parametric tests were used for correlation-based analyses (e.g. correlations, and principal component analysis).

Results

We performed a principal components analysis on the ten main research variables (therefore excluding the two variables of the control situation). After observing that Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sample adequacy was good (KMO=0.8) and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2_{(df\ 45)}=354.56$, $p=.000$), we proceed with the principal component analysis with varimax rotation. We obtained the following two factors:

- "Safety rights", comprising the rights to information and reimbursement in situations regarding the technical condition of the aircraft, the physical and mental condition of pilots, the safety culture of the organization, and disruption of service.
- "Financial rights", comprising the rights to information and reimbursement in situations regarding the financial risk of the airline.

We calculated the value of each component as the average of the variables that loaded higher than 0.50 in the component. In so doing, the values in each component fitted the standard 5-anchor Likert-scale used with the research variables, thus simplifying description and interpretation of results.

The main results are summarised in the adjunct table, including descriptive statistics for the components, their constituent variables, and the control variables. As we can observe, most respondents agreed with the rights to receive safety-related information and to get reimbursed if they felt their personal safety was at risk (including the risk to lose financially because of disruptions due to “force majeure”). In contrast, they neither agreed nor disagreed with a right to know about the financial risk of the airline and a right to get their airfare reimbursed if they felt their journey was economically at risk.

Most respondents also agreed that they should have the right to be informed about their destination (e.g. about main attractions, accommodation, transport, etc). However, they neither agreed nor disagreed about a right to get their airfare reimbursed if they felt this information was incomplete.

We also carried out a factorial analysis of variance, testing for a possible interaction between the demographic variables and each factor. Although there was an interaction between both demographic variables for the ‘Financial rights’ factor, this interaction was not significant. We preferred to test further for mean differences between groups using non-parametric t-tests (Mann-Whitney U) instead of reporting the results of the ANOVA, given the non-normality of the variables.

Table 2 shows a breakdown of the results according to the two demographic variables. Overall, staff wished for safety (mean=4.3) and financial rights (mean=4.1) more than students did (mean=3.9, and mean=2.9, respectively). Mann-Whitney U test returned a significant difference between staff and students for the ‘Financial rights’ factor ($U=154.5$, $p=.005$), a significant difference which was also reflected at the level of its constituent variables. However, there was no significant difference between those groups for the ‘Safety rights’ factor, although staff differed significantly in their wish for a right to be informed about the safety culture of the airline ($U=192$, $p=.02$).

Regarding differences between pilot and non-pilots, pilots tended to wish less for safety (mean=3.8) and financial rights (mean=2.8) than non pilots (mean=4.1, and mean=3.3, respectively). Yet, differences were not significant at factor level, and only there were significant differences for two variables: the right to be informed about technical conditions ($U=368.5$, $p=.034$), and the right to be reimbursed for disruption of travel due to “force majeure” ($U=369.5$, $p=.037$).

Conclusions

Prospective airline passengers tend to agree somehow that they wish for more information about conditions that may affect the safety of their flight on the day they are flying. Safety conditions may include disruptions to service due to uncontrollable events (such as weather or terrorism threats), the technical condition of the aircraft, the overall safety culture of the organisation, and the physical and mental condition of the pilots. The sample, on average, agreed more on their rights to information than on their rights to get their airfares reimbursed if they wished not to fly because of safety concerns, although the differences between both rights were anecdotic rather than significant. It is also interesting to observe that participants were somehow more reticent to question the safety culture of the organisation or the fitness-to-flight of the pilots than other safety risks.

These prospective passengers were overall dubious about rights to information and reimbursement in regards to the financial condition of the airline. Yet, staff actually agreed on wanting those rights, thus differing significantly from students, who neither agreed nor disagreed with having them.

Furthermore, it was surprising that most respondents also agreed that they should have the right to be informed about their destinations (e.g. about main attractions, accommodation, transport, etc), although they neither agreed nor disagreed with a right to be reimbursed if they felt the information was incomplete. This is surprising because providing information about a passenger's destination is not among an airline's duties and has nothing to do with an airline's service. It is possible that respondents understood the question not in regards to an airline but on regards to a travel agency, for example, yet such misunderstanding seems unlikely in the context of the questionnaire.

These results may highlight that these prospective passengers have more concerns about their destination than about the potential risk to their personal safety and finance. Perhaps they have experienced the former (even if vicariously), more often than the latter two. Yet it is interesting that they think it is one of the airlines' duties to go the extra mile and offer them such information. It is also interesting that they neither agreed nor disagreed about getting a reimbursement if that information was incomplete. That is, although the right to reimbursement is not as high as their right to information, on average, these prospective passengers still considered that they might have a right to get reimbursed for a duty or service that is foreign to the purpose or duties of air transport.

Pilots tended to wish lesser for rights than non-pilots, which was something we were expecting, nonetheless. That is, pilots would see themselves as responsible for ensuring the safety of the aircraft and that of the flight, and, thus, less prone to have to answer to passengers about those, especially about their personal physical or mental condition. Yet, the differences between pilots and non-pilots were not significant, and we should wait for further evidence in this regards.

On the other hand, students tended to wish lesser for rights than non-students, which may be a reflection of two variables: their younger age and a higher proportion of pilots among the students' population. Although interaction was only evident but not significant for the financial factor, we can expect that the higher proportion of pilots in the group would have biased above results. Equally, a younger group of people may also have proportionally lesser experience with or concerns about safety conditions, and would be more trusting of airlines and pilots, while they would also have lesser concerns about the financial condition of airlines.

In conclusion, we couldn't be sure that prospective passengers wanted more information about safety and financial conditions in order to ascertain a potential safety or economic risk in order to avert it. The results seem indicative that they would like more information on safety related conditions. Yet, the responses were not only less extreme than expected, but also covered all possible ranges of response. This seems to indicate that there is enough leeway in personal perception. Even some people may believe that passengers should not have the right to information important to them, nor the right to reimbursement once their fares have been paid. Of course, this may reflect an artefact created by people who did not care to provide an honest answer (despite the survey being voluntary). It may as well reflect a minority opinion that airlines and pilots know best and care dutifully, and passengers should simply remain all-trusting "self-loading cargo".

	Mean	Std.dev	Skew	Kurt
Factor Safety rights	3.96	0.84	-1.06	1.35
Disruption information	4.47	0.90	-2.27	5.81
Disruption reimbursement	3.98	1.07	-0.89	0.19
Technical information	4.02	1.07	-1.11	0.61
Technical reimbursement	4.02	1.12	-0.85	-0.39
Culture information	3.89	1.22	-1.01	0.04
Culture reimbursement	3.73	1.26	-0.80	-0.24
Pilot information	3.82	1.19	-0.77	-0.37
Pilot reimbursement	3.74	1.18	-0.63	-0.52
Factor Financial rights	3.12	1.31	-0.17	-1.18
Finance information	3.12	1.35	-0.15	-1.21
Finance reimbursement	3.12	1.40	-0.15	-1.19
Destination information	4.00	1.12	-1.04	0.50
Destination reimbursement	2.80	1.34	0.18	-0.94

(Results reflect responses to a 5-anchor Likert-scale running as follows: "1, Fully disagree", "2, Disagree somehow", "3, Neither agree nor disagree", "4, Agree somehow", and "5, Fully agree")

Financial rights	Student	Staff
Pilot	2.67	4.50
Non-pilot	3.10	4.00
Safety rights	Student	Staff
Pilot	3.76	4.00
Non-pilot	4.00	4.30
Destination information	Student	Staff
Pilot	4.12	3.50
Non-pilot	3.97	3.89
Destination reimbursement	Student	Staff
Pilot	2.58	2.50
Non-pilot	2.87	3.22

(Results reflect responses to a 5-anchor Likert-scale running as follows: "1, Fully disagree", "2, Disagree somehow", "3, Neither agree nor disagree", "4, Agree somehow", and "5, Fully agree")