

## **CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS IN THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY: A CASE OF DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL AIR TRAVELLERS IN SOUTH AFRICA.**

**Abstract:** Service failures are inevitable in business. Understanding the nature of service failures that customers experience is critical to ensuring that proper measures are put in place to address them and avoid loss of customers. The study examined the types of customer complaints experienced by domestic and international travellers in South Africa. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire from 300 travellers at selected South African airports. The findings reveal that flight delays, baggage delays and poor food quality were some of the most complaints raised by travellers. Airlines were recommended to avoid those flight delays which are not naturally caused at all cost, and ensure that such delays are not repeated by securing pro-active strategies and that domestic airlines should consider the upgrading of their seats to better quality seats that can result in reduced customer complaints in this area.

**Key words:** customer complaints, airline industry, South Africa, domestic travellers, airline travellers

### **Introduction**

The global service industry realise the importance of quality service delivery so as to provide services which satisfies customers. Despite all the efforts that service providers put in place to ensure quality service delivery, at some point customers are failed (Souza and Desai, 2015) due to the nature of services. The fact that the interaction between individuals cannot be eliminated and that customer participation in the production process is inevitable, leads to challenges. As a result, in such situations, service failure becomes inevitable (Ellyawati, 2017) and the customer end up complaining, becoming frustrated and irritated with the service provider. Bitner (1993) also argues that the nature of services does not allow for a completely error-free service. While this is so service delivery complaints, if not addressed on time, can be costly to the organisation as customers can switch to competitors or spread negative word of mouth (Casado, Nicolau and Mas, 2011).

Customer complaints may be a very important source of information for organisations (Tse and Cho et.al. 2002; Gures, Arslan & Bakar, 2013). Customer complaints can also be used to develop the product or services (Haverila and Naumann, 2010) and solutions to these complaints may increase positive word of mouth (Pranic and Roehl, 2012).

The South African airline industry is faced with among others, high levels of competition, decreasing passenger volume and the effects of the depreciation of the Rand (Mhlanga & Steyn, 2017). Maqutu (2015) claims that the depreciation of the Rand has caused the airfares in South Africa to increase by roughly 40% between 2014 and 2016. This increase according to Vecchiatto and Cohen (2016) makes flying expensive. Consequently, this has intensified competition between carriers such as South African Airways (SAA) and low cost carriers such as FlySafair and Kulula (Maqutu, 2015), as more people in South Africa have more sensitive to higher fares, this resulted in an increase in the demand for low cost carriers (Mhlanga & Steyn, 2017). In southern Africa the performance of airlines is further impeded by restrictive Bilateral Air Service Agreements (BASAs) that hinders air transport service expansion between southern African countries (Abate, 2014). This shows that airlines in South Africa are faced with a number of challenges that are beyond their control. Apart from these challenges, customer complaints regarding the quality of the service being offered, particularly by domestic airlines, are also a challenge to airlines operating within the borders of South Africa (Maqutu, 2015). According to Writter (2015) South African Airways (SAA) has the highest customer complaints in the industry in 2015 (15%) and Comair has the lowest customer complaints (3%). This is an indication that airline customers are not happy with some of the services received from airline groups such as SAA and Comair.

Considering the information provided above, the aim of the study is to compare the common types of service failures experienced by passengers in both domestic and international travel. The findings of the study will assist both airlines, and other service industries on customer expectations after a service failure and to be aware of some of the major complaints from customers pertaining to their services. This will provide airlines with an opportunity to reflect and propose potential strategies to reduce service failure. This paper is structured such that the next section presents the objectives of the study, followed by a literature overview, the methodology followed, the results of the study and the managerial implications proposed.

### **Specific Objectives**

The specific objectives of this study are:

- To make a record of common complaints by both domestic and international travellers.
- Compare the complaints raised by domestic and international travellers according to their typology.

- To identify if there is an association between airline traveller type and complaint type.

## **Literature review**

### **The airline industry**

The airline industry is undoubtedly vital to the economic development of so many nations in the world. It facilitates world trade activities by enabling faster movement of goods, passengers and provides employment to millions of people (Cederholm, 2014). Its sustainability has some positive implications to the economic development of the world. However, despite its importance, the industry is faced with so many challenges which can hamper its sustainability. The Travel Technology Solutions 2016 report revealed that the global airline industry is faced with competition challenges, especially with the emergence of low cost carriers, fuel cost challenges which has led to many airlines imposing fuels surcharges on customers, low passenger volume, and increased fees from airport companies (Mncube, 2014) Being the case, the sustainability of the airline industry also hinges on its ability to manage customer expectations before and even after service failure. This can be achieved through documenting previous customer complaints so that effective service recovery can be implemented (Rejikumar, 2015).

A report by Travelstrat (2016), shows that there are so many challenges faced by the South African Airline industry. For example, South African Airways (SAA) is faced with financial challenges; on the other hand Skywise flights have been prevented from flying by Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) for failing to pay some airport fees. The safety of the flight is also a cause of concern after FlySafair in January 2016 experienced a technical. Being the case, many travellers are not really sure which airline to trust. Jarvis, head of communications at Travelstart also highlighted that the reputation of the South African airlines are being affected by the poor customer services or the poor press from the media (Travelstart, 2016). Thus, understanding the complaints of customers would assist airlines in South Africa to improve on their service delivery to customers.

### **Service failures and their classifications**

Service failure implies that the service or product failed to meet the expectations of customers due to some mistakes occurred in delivering the service (Mueller et al., 1991; Kruger, Mostert & der Bear, 2015). Service failures generally can be categorised as either an outcome failure or a process failure. Outcome failures are those failures relating to the core service offering,

meaning that the service provider is failing to provide the basic service required to perform the main service for example failing to provide comfortable seats (De Souza and Sousa, 2012). Process failures are related to the mistakes by the employees in delivery the service (Smith & Bolton, 2002), for instance cabin crew staff failing to be friendly. Despite the type of service failure that customers encounter, service provider should redress these failures by reinstating and keep their customer relationships (Chang et al., 2013). Furthermore, service failures have a long-term impact on profitability (Robinson et al., 2011). Typically, when customers are failed they will expect to be compensated for in any of the forms including refunds, credits, discounts, or apologies. When a service failure occurs the confidence of the customers towards that particular service provider is reduced (Rejikumar, 2015; Harrison-Walker, 2012). The most common complaint documented by global travellers (inclusive of South Africa) include the loss of baggage and mishandling due to ticketing error, delay due to airport restrictions, tagging errors and failure to load luggage on to an aircraft (SITA, 2015).

### **Managing customer complaints after a service failure**

In today's global business, how companies respond to customer complaints or customer complaint management is becoming central to the management of customer relationships and is considered as an important strategic tool for service providers across industries (Ofiri-Okeye & Kumadey, 2015). A complaint is an expression of unhappiness by a customer, directed to a service provider, third parties or consumer protection agencies when a service failure occurs (Ateke et al, 2015:). Thus, after complaints are raised by customers, there is a need for organisations to adopt effective and more efficient complaint handling procedures to assist with the handling or response to complaints made by aggrieved customers or clients who have experienced defective service in all forms (Ateke & Kalu 2016). Complaint handling is therefore the steps and process followed by service provider to address customer complaints and regaining unhappy customers (Taleghani et al, 2011). George et al (2007) identify the following practices as standards for effective complaint handling, namely visible procedures, easy and free access, responsiveness, objectivity, commitment, confidentiality, customer-focused approach, fairness and organisational ownership and continual improvement. Taking responsibility and offering solutions to customers after a service failure will reduce tension and increase satisfaction levels ((Hill & Baer, 1994). Efficient service recovery (customer handling) prevents customers from leaving to competitors and infuse loyalty behaviours (Filip, 2013).

## **Methodology**

The study used a quantitative approach using the cross-sectional method where data were collected from airline passengers once. The target population for the study consisted of airline passengers who have experienced service failure in both domestic and international South African airlines. Since there was no database on the number of passengers who travel using domestic and international airlines, a non-probability sampling technique was adopted (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Participants were selected through a convenience sampling technique at selected international airports in South Africa. Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect the data and a total of 300 usable questionnaires were returned. Eventually, 300 questionnaires were used.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts, the first part focused on the demographic information of the respondents, the second part focused on the types of complaints raised by respondents. A list of type of complaints was provided for customers to select the type of failure they experienced. The list was obtained after consulting previous literature (Sousa and Desai, 2015; Rejikumar, 2015; Harrison-Walker, 2012) on the common types of complaints raised by customers. The list of common complaints used in this study include flight delays, Flight cancellation, overbooking, baggage delay, baggage damage, baggage lost, uncomfortable seats, denied boarding due to incorrect reservation, poor food quality, poor inflight entertainment and other.

Data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 25 was used to analyse data. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse data especially the demographic information and was presented in the form of graphs and tables. To analyse the association between the types of complaints and the airline traveller type, the chi-square test of independence with Yates continuity correction was conducted. The results obtained starting with the demographic information of the respondents are presented below;

## **Results**

### **Demographic**

Based on the data collected from both domestic and international travellers, 58% of the respondents were males and 42% were females. The majority of the respondents were in the 36 to 40 age group (31.5%) followed by those respondents in the 41 to 45 age group (21.8%). 16.8% of the respondents were in the 46-50 age group, while 15.8% were in the 51 to 55 age group and 7.1% of the respondents were in the 31-35 age group. 3% of the respondents were over 55 years while 4% of the respondents were 30 years and below. In terms of educational qualifications, 35% of the respondents had a bachelor's degree, 26% had an honours degree, 16% had a masters degree, 10% had a doctoral degree and 13% had a diploma/matric certificate. In terms of race, 45 % were blacks, 26 % were whites, 15 were Indians, 14 mixed races for both domestic and international airlines.

The list of common service failures (complaints) experienced by both domestic and international airlines and a close observation of how each type of complaints is associated with the two airline traveller types is summarised in Table 1 and depicted in figure 1 below.

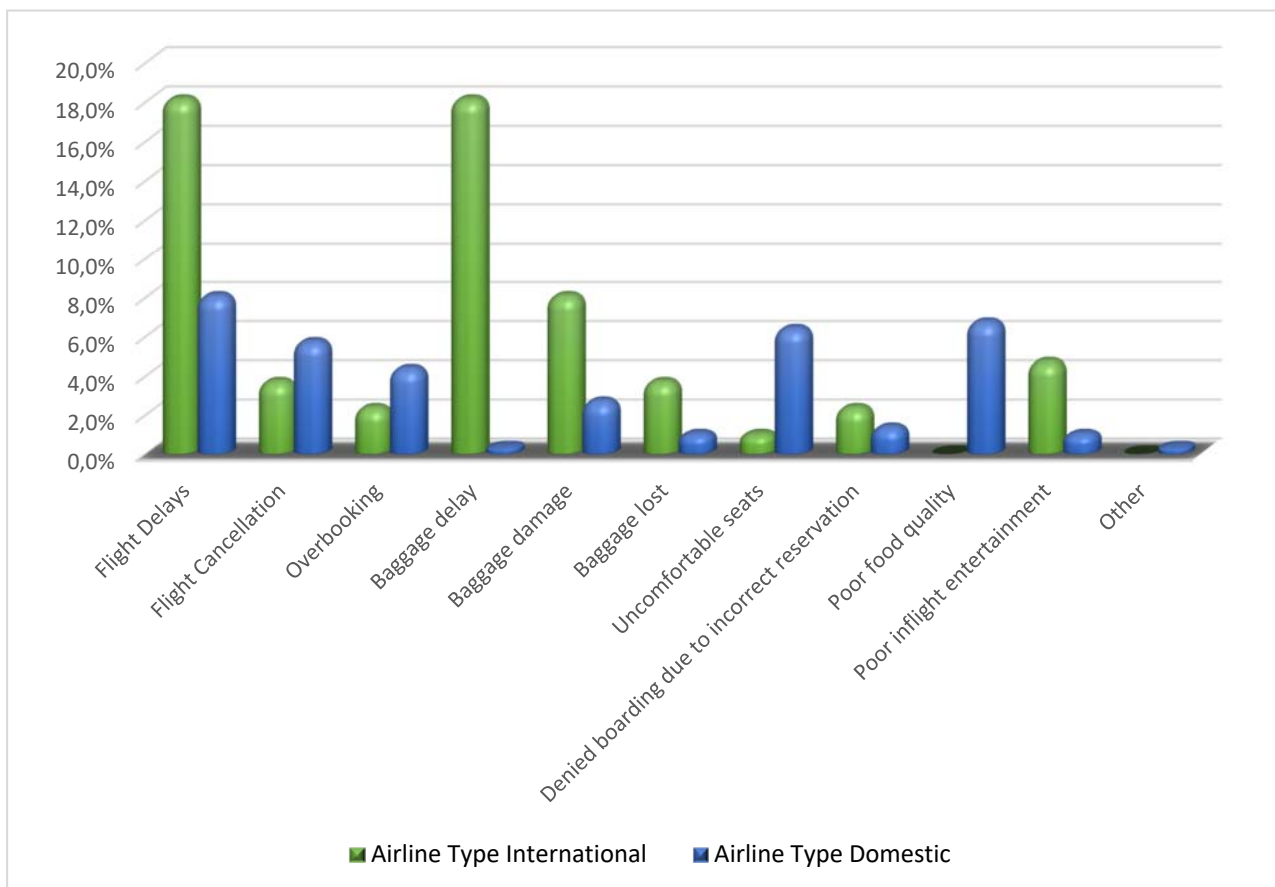
**Table 1: Cross-tabulation results between types of complaints and airline traveller type**

		Airline travellers	
		International	Domestic
Types of complaints	Flight Delays	18,1%	8,1%
	Flight Cancellation	3,7%	5,7%
	Overbooking	2,3%	4,4%
	Baggage delay	18,1%	0,3%
	Baggage damage	8,1%	2,7%
	Baggage lost	3,7%	1,0%
	Uncomfortable seats	1,0%	6,4%
	Denied boarding due to incorrect reservation	2,3%	1,3%
	Poor food quality	0,0%	6,7%
	Poor inflight entertainment	4,7%	1,0%
	Other	0,0%	0,3%
	Total	62,1%	37,9%

Respondents were requested to select the type of service failure they experienced whilst travelling with domestic and international airlines. Table 1 and Figure 1 suggests that overall,

the complaints were raised by the international travellers than the domestic travellers, except for uncomfortable seats with 6.4% respondents from domestic travellers and only 1.0% from international travellers and poor food quality 6.7% from domestic travellers no respondent complained about the poor food quality from international travellers. For Instance, 18.1 % of the international travellers complained about as opposed to the 8.1% domestic travellers who mentioned such occurrences. The table and graph also show that the baggage delay complaint is predominantly reported by international travellers (18.1%) than domestic ones (0.3%). More international travellers (8.1%) complained about baggage damage as compared to the 2.7% domestic travellers. Some of the complaints raised by few domestic and international travellers include baggage lost, poor inflight entertainment and denied boarding due to incorrect reservation. The few domestic travellers who selected the option “other” were further requested to indicate the type of complain and they highlighted issues such as such as delay in refund of money after ticket cancellation, unpleasant behaviour by crew members/ crew staff unfriendly, as well as no attendant at the check in counter.

**Figure 1: Graphic depiction of the association between the airline traveller type and complaints**



These results give a snapshot of some of the problems that travellers experience whilst travelling with airlines. Similarly, Sousa and Desai (2015) also established that, flight delays, flight cancellation, baggage related problems and inflight seats were some of the service failure complaints raised by travellers. The following section reports the classification of complaints according to their typology.

**Typology of complains**

Failures were further categorised into outcome failures and process failures (Souza & Desai, 2015). This was done in order to examine the most common types of failures experience by the different type of travellers. Table 3 shows the most complains highlighted by travellers.

**Table 3: Complains and their typology**

<b>Domestic travelle</b>	<b>Outcome failures</b>	<b>Process failures</b>
	1)Flight delays	Poor meals
	2)Flight cancellation	Uncomfortable seats
<b>International travallers</b>	<b>Outcome failures</b>	<b>Process failures</b>
	1)Flight delays	1)Baggage delay
	2) Baggage lost/ Flight cancellation	2)Baggage damage

**The Chi-Square Test**

The Chi-square test was further performed to test the association between the types of complaints and the airline traveller type. The Chi-square test results in Table 4 indicate that there is an association between the type of complaints and the airline traveller type ( $X^2=107.734$ ;  $df=10$ ;  $p<0.001$ ;  $\Phi=0.601$ ). Using the Cohen’s (1988) criteria of statistical power of relationship, it can be concluded that this positive association is strong ( $\Phi> 0.50$ ). Thus, it implies that the type of complaints raised is a true replica of what domestic and international travellers face in airlines.



**Table 4: Chi-Square Test results**

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	107.734 <sup>a</sup>	10	.000
Likelihood Ratio	127.514	10	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.748	1	.005
N of Valid Cases	298		
a. 3 cells (13.6%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .38.			

### **Discussion of results**

Table 2 above illustrate the most frequent process and outcome failures experienced by both domestic and international travellers. The failures in Table 2 are ranked in order starting from the most frequent failure. The main outcome failure which was highlighted by the majority of the both domestic and international travellers is flight delays. Following flight delays, travellers from domestic travellers also highlighted flight cancellation as another outcome failure they have experienced. However, in terms of international travellers, flight cancellations together with baggage lost was identified as the two most domestic and international pertinent outcome service failures experienced by air travellers. On process failures, the majority of domestic travellers indicated the overall poor quality of meals served on board as well as the limited variety of meals offered during a flight service, followed by uncomfortable seats and seating arrangements as the most common process failures.

On process failure, the most common failures highlighted by the majority of the international travellers are baggage delay followed by baggage damage. Supporting the findings of this result, a report by State Information Technology Agency (SITA) (2015) revealed that about 23 million bags globally were lost or mishandled in 2015. A video circulated in March 2017 indicated reckless baggage handlers kicking and hurling suitcases in London's Luton airport. This supports the finding of this study that international travellers complained about baggage damage. Therefore, the discussion above reports on the most critical outcome and process failures experienced by both domestic and international travellers in South Africa.

The results of this study also supports the SAA, customer reviews 2017 report which highlighted that the most common types of complaints raised by customers are poor food quality and uncomfortable seats, especially for travellers using South African Airways (SAA) as an airline. In conclusion, the results also revealed that there is a strong positive association between airline traveller type and type of complaint. Implying that the type of complaints raised by customers give a reflection of what is happening in the airline industry for both domestic and international travellers.

### **Recommendations to domestic airlines**

The findings of this study revealed some of the common complaints experienced by domestic airlines, inclusive of flight delays, flight cancellations and denied boarding. South African domestic airlines are therefore encouraged to establish the major causes of flight delays and flight cancellations and if these causes are natural and can be controlled, airlines should develop approaches to control them. Flight delays and flight cancellations have direct consequences to customers (e.g. arriving late at a destination, not being able to attend a meeting on time, missing a connecting flight) and must be avoided where possible. Denied boarding can be the result of an incorrect reservation made such as spelling the name or surname of the passenger incorrectly. To avoid such errors airlines must closely monitor the travel agents they work with and have control systems to ensure that errors are minimised or completely reduced to zero. An online booking system which can detect errors can also be used.

The results also revealed that the most common process failures include uncomfortable seats and uncomfortable seating arrangements. It is recommended that domestic airlines should consider the upgrading of their seats to better quality seats that can result in reduced customer complaints in this area. For example, increased leg space between seats can be secured, softer seating can be provided by using softer cushions on the sitting area, reducing the size of the arm rest of the seat or allowing the arm rest to be folded away to create more space for seating. Another process failure which was highlighted by a number of respondents in the study is the overall poor quality of the food served on the airplane as well as the limited variety offered. Customers evaluate service provision from the beginning of the journey to the end so even if the reservation and boarding was fine, one simple mistake or failure on board the flight can distort the whole customer experience. Therefore airlines should improve on the quality of the food that they serve on board. Airlines could, for example, collaborate with chefs and dieticians to provide mini meal servings that are more freshly preserved before serving to passengers,

that have a stronger nutritional appeal and that could include more South African cuisine (such as pap, samp, curry, fresh fruits, fish, pork, chicken and beef). In the case of all the low cost airlines in South Africa, food is sold and therefore the passenger expects a larger variety of options to choose from, as well as high food quality, which commensurate with the money paid (value for money).

When passengers are travelling inflight entertainment is also important. It plays a pivotal role in a passenger's journey experience from one point to the other. One of the complaints raised by a substantial number of domestic travellers is the issue of poor inflight entertainment. Airlines should become more innovative and enhance the in-flight experience of domestic travellers by offering in-flight entertainment such as short movies (e.g. series), documentaries, educational entertainment (that can range between thirty minutes to two hours), games and music. The option of pre-booking a movie, documentary or specific types of music, should also be made available to the individual prior to boarding. This option of a pre-booked entertainment experience can be made available when the online booking of a seat is made. This option can be made available to passengers as a free service offering or at a low cost charge (if provided as an additional offering).

### **Recommendations to International airlines**

Similar to domestic travellers, the majority of international travellers highlighted flight delays as the most pertinent challenge they face with South African international flights. Flight delays can have detrimental effects to travellers who want to use connecting flights since they will miss their flights. Some flight delays can be caused by natural events such as bad weather and cannot be controlled by airlines. However, for those flight delays which are not naturally caused, airlines should avoid them at all cost, and ensure that such delays are not repeated by securing pro-active strategies.

Baggage lost is another common complaint raised by international travellers. Most baggage is lost when luggage is being transferred from one flight to another or there is an error on the baggage tag or ticket. These are human errors which can be eliminated if airlines implement an online tracking system whereby a tracking number is allocated to the passenger so that he/she can be able to track his baggage. In the case of baggage damage, it should also be emphasised to the baggage handlers to properly handle passengers' baggage to avoid damage. This can be secured by airlines working closer with the airport services company in South Africa to track baggage damage complaints and find workable solutions, through a

collaborative approach, to reduce damage to baggage when handled. For example, more security cameras can be installed at the airport where baggage are handled to monitor how workers manage baggage on a daily basis, to identify employees and warn them or eventually retrench them), if caught on camera for the consistent improper handling of baggage. The could also be incentives offered (e.g. airline fare discounts, an income raise, a special bonus, etc.) by the airline and the airport services company for those workers who consistently deliver a professional and innovative baggage handling service.

### **Conclusion and areas of further research**

The main aim of this study was to establish the types of service failure or customer complaints in the South African airline industry both in the domestic and international airlines. Based on the empirical results of this study, it is concluded that flight delays, uncomfortable seats, and poor food quality were the most service failure complaints raised by domestic travellers. On the other hand, baggage delay, flight delay and baggage loss/damage were some of the most common complaints raised by international travellers. The findings of this study provide baseline information of what is actually happening in the South African airline industry. Airlines operating in South Africa, were recommended to avoid process failures where they have total control. Future studies can further elaborate on how domestic and international airlines respond to customer complained and evaluate their complaint mechanisms. Another study can also make a comparison of the complaints raised by travellers using domestic airlines and other international airlines flying to South Africa to establish if there are discrepancies. Airlines, both in South African and abroad, are therefore advised to take note of the complaints discussed in this paper, to improve on their overall service delivery, thereby strengthening their competitiveness in the domestic and international airline market.

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