

IDENTIFICATION OF SERVICE QUALITY COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK FOR THE LOUNGE ATTENDANTS: A CASE OF A PRIVATELY-OWNED AIRLINE IN THAILAND

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Abstract

Service quality is a critical competitive differentiator, particularly for A airways, which cannot compete with low-cost carriers (LCCs) based on price; the airport lounge service has been identified as a critical aspect of overall airline service quality. However, an established competency framework for airline lounge staff, and clear understanding of the competencies that contribute to service quality in airline lounges are currently lacking. This research was conducted to determine whether staff competencies influence the service quality ratings for airport lounges, and to identify the most important staff competencies for providing exceptional service. A airway's customers (n = 419) were surveyed, and supplemental qualitative data was also collected via a series of interviews with airport lounge staff and passengers (n = 20), as well as focus groups with industry experts (n = 18). Multiple regression analysis of the survey data indicated that five competencies influence service quality ratings; these were efficiency, helpfulness, communication skills, the ability to maintain a neat and professional appearance, and knowledge (which was negatively related to service quality ratings). Content and thematic analysis from the interviews and focus group transcripts highlighted the importance of additional competencies, including problem solving and conflict resolution skills, attention to detail, situational awareness, service-mindedness, friendliness, the ability to maintain a positive attitude, a caring approach, and general customer service and hospitality skills.

Keywords— Airport lounge, Airport service, Service quality, SERVQUAL, Staff competencies

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1. INTRODUCTION

Airport lounges provide quiet spaces where passengers can relax and access a variety of services and entertainment whilst awaiting their flights (Fick, 2014). In recent years, as security procedures have intensified and waiting times have grown longer, airport lounges have become an increasingly important contributor to overall impressions of airline ground services (Correia & Wirasinghe, 2008; Farahani & Törmä, 2010; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007).

Airport lounges provide an opportunity for airlines to make good first impressions and encourage customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth through the provision of excellent services. According to Khuong and Uyen (2014), pre-flight services create the first impression passengers have of an airline and can therefore increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, Chang and Yang (2008) stated that airlines that differentiate themselves based on superior customer service enjoy greater customer loyalty than airlines that compete based on other factors, such as price.

Airport lounges have become an important competitive differentiator for full-service airlines that are facing rising competition from low-cost carriers (LCCs) (Pearson, Pitfield, & Ryley, 2015). Despite the popularity of LCCs, some passengers still prefer full-service airlines that have high service quality standards; these customers value quality service, and are more likely to choose airlines with good airport lounges.

Airport lounge reviews and recommendations can now be found on many travel websites, indicating their rising significance as part of the overall travel experience.

A Airways, the focus of this case study, serves Thailand's major airports, as well as its own private airports, with Samui, Sukhothai, and Trat, having a combined fleet of 35 aircraft, and both domestic and international routes (12 domestic and 14 international). Although many business-class airport lounges require an access fee, A Airways provides free lounges for all passengers, with computer and internet access, children's play areas, and snacks and beverages. However, the airline also has a series of premium Blue Ribbon Club lounges that can be accessed by purchasing a FlyerBonus Premier Membership. These lounges, characterized by a spacious, open design, extravagant décor, and luxury seating, provide personalized services, hot meals, shower rooms, and a quiet library space which can also be used as a private meeting room.

Service quality is a critical differentiator for boutique airlines such as A Airways that cannot compete with LCCs based on price. This is further supported by Han, Ham, Yang, and Baek (2012), who mentioned that customer relationships are particularly significant for higher priced services such as air travel; therefore, a clean, comfortable airport lounge with excellent food, beverages, facilities, and services, provided by polite, courteous, reassuring employees, can help airlines to differentiate themselves within an

increasingly competitive marketplace.

However, despite the contribution that airport staff make towards the perceptions of overall service quality, there is no guidance for hiring, training, assessing, rewarding, or promoting personnel in order to improve ground service quality. Therefore, the aims of this study were to determine which staff competencies influence airport lounge service quality ratings and to create an airport lounge staff competency development model.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Airline Service Quality Research

Various research studies have demonstrated that service quality is a critical competitive differentiator that can be used to increase customer satisfaction (Curry & Gao, 2012; Hu & Hsiao, 2016; Park, Robertson, & Wu, 2004; Saha & Theingi, 2009; Seth, Deshmukh, & Vrat, 2005), loyalty (Chang & Yang, 2008; Curry & Gao, 2012; Jeeradist, Thawesaengskulthai, & Sangsuwan, 2016; Nejati, Nejati & Shafaei, 2009; Osaki & Kubota, 2016), and willingness to pay higher prices (Wen & Lai, 2010), as well as encourage repeat business (Curry & Gao, 2012; Hu & Hsiao, 2016; Saha & Theingi, 2009), increase the likelihood that customers will recommend an airline to others (Saha & Theingi, 2009), and improve overall profitability (Curry & Gao, 2012; Seth, Deshmukh, & Vrat, 2005). Moreover, Ennis (2008) commented that

staff competencies consist of the characteristics, skills, knowledge, and behavior, required to provide particular services. The relationship between staff competencies and the perception of service quality is well established in the literature (Akbar, Azad, & Izadi, 2013; Bogicevic, Yang, Bilgihan, & Bujisic, 2013; Han et al., 2012; Wang, Chou, & Yeo, 2013; Yayla-Kullu & Tansitpong, 2013). However, ground services have been addressed by very few studies, and airport lounge services, while often reviewed on travel websites, have also been studied relatively little.

There are a few studies that have addressed the customer experience of airport lounges from a service quality perspective. Han, et al. (2012) found that dimensions of service quality including atmosphere, food and beverages, employee service, and facility dimensions influenced satisfaction and the intention to revisit an airport lounge. The strongest of these dimensions were food and beverage, and atmosphere. These authors confirmed the utility of the SERVQUAL model for airport lounges, but did not go further in attempting to identify aspects of the service experience that are unique to airport lounges. Recent studies have used experiential and brand identity perspectives to investigate airport lounge services. One survey of lounge passengers used brand personality and image congruity theories to investigate customer satisfaction and intentions to revisit (Lee, Chua, Kim, & Han, 2017). The authors found that functional congruity - described as the

similarity between customer expectations of the functional aspects of the lounge in an ideal experience, and their experience from the actual encounter - influenced positive emotions and was connected to self-congruity (or the self-expressive evaluation of the service). They also found that functional congruity had an indirect effect on satisfaction through its effect on positive emotions (Lee, et al., 2017). This study confirmed that the service experience of the lounge, and especially the notion of congruity between expectations and experience establishes satisfaction. However, the authors did not address the relative importance of various aspects of the lounge experience or attempt to identify new dimensions. Another study used a more complex model, incorporating functional congruity, delight, the perception of well-being, and brand identification, in the study of passenger satisfaction at American airport lounges (Chua, Lee, Kim, & Han, 2017). These authors went further than Lee, et al. (2017) by investigating customer delight, rather than simply customer satisfaction. Their results showed that the physical environment and facilities influenced customer delight, but that the service environment did not (Chua, et al., 2017). This finding raises the question of how service influences customer satisfaction, as it conflicts with previous studies, which have found such an effect. Once again, the authors did not investigate the specific dimensions of the service environment which lead to customer satisfaction. Another study has identified the importance of passenger perceptions

of well-being, which are influenced by the emotional and sensory experience of the lounge, in turn influencing customer satisfaction (Kim, Chua, Lee, Boo, & Han, 2016). Taken together, these studies support the importance of the customer experience as a factor in satisfaction and other outcomes such as repatronage. However, where these studies fail is in the development of a model of customer satisfaction that is actionable by airlines for improving customer service as they do not identify specific dimensions of the service experience which can be addressed.

A few researchers have examined supplementary airport services in Thailand, though their studies have focused primarily on in-flight services and ground service issues; such as, check-in and baggage handling (Buaphiban, 2015; Charoensettasilp & Wu, 2013; Kalaiarasan, Appannan, & Doraisamy, 2015; Kankaew, 2013; Ratanakomut & Kitcharoen, 2013; Saha & Theingi, 2009). Only two Thai studies have examined the competencies of ground staff as part of their research. Saha and Theingi (2009) assessed the characteristics of airport staff, such as appearance, helpfulness, responsiveness, friendliness, and knowledge, in relation to service quality, in which ground staff were attributed to have a significant influence on perceptions of service quality. Like most of the other research conducted in Thailand, this study focused on LCCs and made no mention of lounge services. Similarly, Ratanakomut and Kitcharoen (2013) examined the effects of ground staff

characteristics, such as personality, attitude, health, and language proficiency on service quality during a series of focus groups and assessed the degree to which issues, such as delays and baggage handling problems, contributed to poor service quality ratings. They found that all variables played a role in the perceptions of service quality. However, this research also focused on general airport services rather than lounge services.

Research conducted in other nations has found that assurance and responsiveness are important aspects of overall airport service quality (Chen & Chang, 2005) and that superior services are particularly important to high-revenue airline customers who choose full-service airlines over LCCs (Chen & Chao, 2015; Fourie & Lubbe, 2006). However, the findings of Prather and Steele's study (2015) demonstrated that enhancement of customer service quality is still a relatively new area of specialization for airports, so there have been few studies examining the degree to which the perceptions of airport services influence impressions of airlines or customer choice, and almost no research on the contribution that ground staff competencies make to airline service quality ratings.

2.2 Airport Lounge Service Competencies

A number of critical competencies for airline staff have been identified in prior research (see Table 1). The majority of these competencies are soft

skills rather than technical skills, in accordance with the findings of past research that has demonstrated the increasing importance of soft skills for tourism-based businesses (Nickson, Warhurst, Commander, Hurrell, & Cullen, 2011; Robles, 2012; Rok, 2013; Valachis, 2003; Wilks & Hemsworth, 2012). Such skills are challenging to measure, which increases the likelihood that their evaluation will be highly subjective (Ennis, 2008). Therefore, there is a necessity to develop objective ways to measure intangible service competencies, which could potentially be achieved by assessing the associated behavior. Furthermore, authors of prior research have not always tested the variables against service quality perceptions (or against any other outcome variable), leading to uncertainty in the exact relationship. However, using the research of previous authors does offer some guidance on what the expected relationships of competencies to perceived service quality are. While it is reasonable to assume that these factors would all have positive effects on perceived service quality, the evidence is sometimes weak for these relationships and this may not be fully supported. Therefore, no directionality is specified in the hypothesis framework.

Staff friendliness was also identified by Nejati, et al. (2009), although not by other authors, as a positive determinant of service quality in airline lounges. This research tests this relationship as follows:

H1: Staff friendliness significantly influences service quality.

A few authors have also identified listening and showing empathy as a significant factor in service quality perceptions (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Wilks & Hemsworth, 2012). Listening and showing empathy is related to several other factors, including communication skills and courteousness and respectfulness, and therefore it is not certain that it will stand as an independent variable. However, this research tests the relationship as follows:

H2: Listening and showing empathy significantly influences service quality.

Effective complaint handling is one of the most commonly identified characteristics or competencies associated with service quality (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Hu & Hsiao, 2016; Jeeradist et al., 2016; Tsaur & Tang, 2013). These studies all identified a positive relationship between effective complaint handling and the perceived level of service quality. Therefore, this research evaluates the following:

H3: Handling complaints effectively, significantly influences service quality.

Helpfulness, or the proactive offering of help and immediate response to requests, is also regularly identified as a competency that is associated with service quality (Basfirinci & Mitra; 2015; Jeeradist et al., 2016; Nejati et al., 2009). In some research, such as that of Nejati, et al. (2009), helpfulness was not a highly rated factor, but still influenced

perceptions of service quality. Therefore, this research tests the following:

H4: Helpfulness significantly influences service quality.

Sufficient knowledgeable to answer questions has also been proposed as one of the competency dimensions for airline lounge staff, that relates to service quality (Nejati, et al., 2009). This factor was only identified in one study, but it is tested in this study as follows:

H5: Being sufficiently knowledgeable significantly influences service quality.

A frequent competency identified by service quality and competency models is staff efficiency – that is, the speed and accuracy with which requests can be filled or needs can be met (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Hu & Hsiao, 2016; Tsaur & Tang, 2012). This characteristic was identified in all three of the prior research papers as a contributor to perceived airline quality. Therefore, this study tests the following:

H6: Efficiency significantly influences service quality.

Communication and language skills have also been identified as a potential service quality dimension (Alderson, 2009). This competency was identified in the context of ‘aviation English’, or the universal use of English as the airline communication language, rather than directly in relation to airline lounge service staff. This research evaluates the potential for this variable as follows:

H7: Communication significantly influences service quality.

Perhaps the most commonly included competency in service quality models is maintaining a neat and professional appearance including aspects such as tidiness and cleanliness of uniform, and overall presentation of personal appearance (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Jeeradist et al., 2016; Kozak & Rimmington, 1998; Nejati et al., 2009; Nickson et al., 2011; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Tsaour & Tang, 2013). Every peer reviewed study that has touched on airline service quality incorporated these dimensions into their evaluation of overall service quality, and it was routinely found to be a significant positive factor. Therefore, the hypothesis tested here is:

H8: Professional appearance significantly influences service quality.

Weber, et al. (2013) identified courteousness and respectfulness as main competencies of airline service staff, although they did not evaluate the effects on service quality. This research argues that courteousness will affect perceived service quality:

H9: Being courteous and respectful significantly influences service quality.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted as a mixed-methods descriptive case study of staff service competencies and service

quality in the airport lounges of A Airways. Both quantitative and qualitative research techniques were used to collect and analyze data. Quantitative data were collected using a modified SERVQUAL instrument. The original SERVQUAL scale, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), includes five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangible factors. In addition to the SERVQUAL items, a series of five-point Likert-scale questions were included to assess the competencies of the airport lounge staff. These were drawn from prior research on the competency of airline staff (see Table 1). The questionnaire also included questions for collection of demographic data and lounge usage statistics.

A pilot test was conducted with 50 participants to assess the instrument's reliability prior to launching the full-scale study, with the minimum threshold for acceptability set at the recommended level of Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.7$ (George & Mallery, 2003). Additionally, correlations were investigated to determine whether any of the variables were potentially non-independent. The results of these tests are summarized in Table 2. The thresholds $CR > .7$, $AVE > .5$, and $MSV < \text{square root of } AVE$, were used to determine reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, respectively (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2016). Alpha coefficients (α) were calculated for each of the multi-item Likert scales. The results ($\alpha = .79$ to $.94$) indicated that the internal

Table 1. Competencies.

Competency indicators	Competency definition	Sources
Being courteous and respectful	Courtesy and respectful treatment of passengers and co-workers in line with cultural expectations.	Weber et al. (2013)
Being sufficiently knowledgeable to answer questions and fulfil requests	All passenger questions and requests are met effectively.	Nejati et al. (2009)
Communication/language skills	Passenger understands the staff member and can communicate well.	Alderson (2009)
Efficiency	Requests are fulfilled as rapidly as possible.	Basfirinci & Mitra (2015), Hu & Hsiao (2016), Tsaor & Tang (2013)
Friendliness	Passenger-staff interactions are friendly and cordial.	Nejati et al. (2009)
Effective complaint handling	Complaints are resolved efficiently and effectively.	Basfirinci & Mitra (2015), Hu & Hsiao (2016), Jeeradist et al. (2016), Tsaor & Tang (2013)
Helpfulness	Staff members proactively offer help and respond to requests.	Basfirinci & Mitra (2015), Jeeradist et al. (2016), Nejati et al. (2009)
Listening and showing empathy	Staff members listen to passengers during passenger-staff interaction. Passengers feel their request was heard and responded to.	Raybould & Wilkins (2006), Wilks & Hemsworth (2012)
Maintaining a neat, professional appearance	Uniforms and personal appearance are neat and tidy. Grooming and personal hygiene is good.	Basfirinci & Mitra (2015), Jeeradist et al. (2016), Kozak & Rimmington (1998), Nejati et al. (2009), Nickson et al. (2011), Raybould & Wilkins (2006), Tsaor & Tang (2013)

consistency of the scales was adequate. Composite reliability scores (CR = .712 to .894) were all higher than the threshold of $CR > .7$ required to establish reliability (Hair, et al., 2016). Similarly, the values for the average variance extracted (AVE = .601 to .799) were above the minimum threshold of $AVE > .5$, indicating adequate convergent validity (Hair, et al., 2016). The condition for discriminant validity ($MSV < \sqrt{AVE}$) was met for all variables. Finally, the correlations r (columns 1 through 14) showed that in most cases, the correlations between variables were low to moderate ($r < .500$). The only exceptions were for Communication-Friendliness ($r = .512$), Reliability-Courteous ($r = .524$), Responsiveness-Friendliness ($r = .518$), Empathy-Courteous ($r = .511$) and Tangibles-Appearance ($r = .502$). While these variables have a slightly higher than moderate correlation, the relationships are understandable given the subject matter.

Therefore, the latent variables were assessed to be sufficiently reliable and valid to continue the analysis.

The passengers of A Airways who participated in the study ($n = 419$) were selected using a convenience sampling approach. The sample size was based on Cochran's formula for determining an appropriate sample for representing a large, unknown population, meaning that a minimum of 384 respondents were required (Godden, 2004). Additional participants were recruited to ensure that there were extra questionnaires, in the

case that some were returned incomplete or completed incorrectly. The self-administered survey was distributed in A Airways' lounges. A multiple regression analysis was conducted using SPSS software to identify the relationships between the various competencies of airport lounge staff and the overall service quality ratings. Outcomes of this analysis included measures of significance for each of the competencies (t-tests, measured using $p \leq 0.05$) and their contributions to perceptions of service quality (β values) (Hair, et al., 2016). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to investigate the proposed theoretical model. First, the reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of the scales were tested, using standard rules of thumb for acceptance (reliability: $CR > 0.7$; convergent validity; $AVE > 0.5$; discriminant validity: $MSV < \sqrt{AVE}$), (Hair, et al., 2016). All items passed the required thresholds, indicating appropriate levels of validity and reliability. Following this, the model's structure was examined using absolute and relative, goodness of fit characteristics (chi-square, chi-square/df, Hoelter index, RMSEA, CFI, NFI, GFI and AGFI) (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2016; MacCallum, Brown, & Sugawara, 1996). Factor loadings were used to determine which of the relationships were potentially important, using an expansive cut-off of 0.2 due to the model-building nature of this research (Gorsuch, 2015).

Table 2. Reliability and validity and correlations.

	α	CR	AVE	MSV	\sqrt{AVE}	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
1 Friendliness	.82	.781	.612	.426	.782															
2 Listening	.85	.746	.673	.505	.820	.481														
3 Complaints	.83	.788	.720	.604	.849	.215	.451													
4 Helpfulness	.79	.712	.601	.403	.775	.283	.302	.318												
5 Knowledgeable	.86	.738	.635	.475	.797	.287	.176	.289	.261											
6 Efficiency	.81	.772	.674	.551	.821	.202	.178	.196	.185	.170										
7 Communication	.86	.728	.771	.702	.878	.512	.385	.201	.140	.120	.178									
8 Appearance	.89	.799	.799	.607	.894	.219	.178	.202	.190	.195	.241	.148								
9 Courteous	.78	.800	.682	.525	.826	.496	.402	.202	.170	.196	.149	.302	.164							
10 Reliability	0.86	.821	.635	.528	.797	.187	.201	.351	.201	.168	.260	.201	.295	.524						
11 Responsiveness	0.92	.872	.684	.603	.827	.242	.162	.518	.454	.195	.309	.354	.219	.467	.302					
12 Assurance	0.94	.894	.689	.603	.830	.218	.289	.313	.328	.218	.376	.289	.415	.318	.204	.377				
13 Empathy	0.91	.880	.670	.599	.819	.291	.387	.177	.252	.262	.356	.201	.187	.511	.280	.284	.417			
14 Tangibles	0.87	.865	.659	.602	.812	.204	.315	.287	.207	.180	.140	.168	.502	.315	.291	.385	.351	.275		

Qualitative data were collected during a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they are efficient and allow for flexible data collection and emergent information (Galletta, 2013). Efficiency was a particular concern as employees were interviewed during working hours. Subjects were selected purposively to include airport ground staff, passengers, and industry experts. Interviews were conducted with airport lounge attendants (n = 5), airport lounge supervisors (n = 5), colleagues in other positions at the airport (n = 5), and passengers (n = 5). The sample size (n = 20) was in the mid-range of expert recommendations for interview-based research (Mason, 2010; Patton & Cochran, 2002). Three focus groups were also conducted, with six individuals in each group, based on Patton and Cochran's (2002) minimum recommended group size. These focus groups included airport service managers (n = 7), airport service consultants (n = 4), airport lounge managers (n = 3), airport service supervisors (n = 2), and other hospitality industry managers (n = 2). Criteria for selection included at least two years' experience with A Airways (either as a professional or as a passenger). Interviewees were selected so as to include a range of respondents in terms of experience level, to ensure a broad perspective of the operations of the airline.

Both the interviews and focus groups were conducted at the A Airways Head Office. Those who met the study criteria were sent written requests to participate; A Airways management assisted with the recruitment effort. Volunteers signed written consent forms describing the nature and purpose of the research, after which the interviews and focus groups were scheduled at times when staff could participate without disrupting regular services.

The validity of the semi-structured questionnaire that was developed for the interviews and focus groups was assessed by expert review, prior to conducting the study. Content and thematic analyses were conducted after the data had been collected and transcribed. The codes that were used for analysis were developed based on Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) SERVQUAL dimensions and the airline-specific SERVQUAL adaptations specified by other sources (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Jeeradist et al., 2016; Tsaur & Tang, 2013). In addition to recording the themes associated with the predetermined codes, the transcripts were analyzed to identify emergent themes. Triangulation between the qualitative and quantitative results was used to check for researcher bias and to validate the emergent qualitative model (Jens & Jonsen, 2009). Table 3 summarizes the codes that were used to evaluate the transcripts and themes.

Table 3. Analysis codes.

SERVQUAL themes	Codes
1 Reliability	1a Services delivered accurately, and as promised. 1b Services delivered promptly/efficiently. 1c Problems solved quickly. 1d Staff professionalism.
2 Responsiveness	2a Responsiveness to requests. 2b Effective complaint handling. 2c Satisfactory problem solving. 2d General helpfulness. 2e Courtesy and respectfulness.
3 Assurance	3a Reputation, and airline image. 3b Staff knowledge, and ability to answer questions. 3c Staff’s ability to make passengers feel safe and reassured. 3d Staff language skills, and clarity of communication. 3f English language skills.
4 Empathy	4a Individualized attention. 4b Special benefits. 4c Convenience. 4d Staff listen, show sympathy and a caring attitude. 4e Staff friendliness.
5 Tangibles	5a Clean environment. 5b Modern décor. 5c Attractive/appealing space. 5d Comfortable environment. 5e Entertainment. 5f Food and drink. 5g Staff general appearance (uniform, personal grooming, etc.)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4 provides an overview of the demographic and behavioral statistics for the survey respondents. The sample was skewed toward male, young adult and middle-aged airline customers, most of whom had visited the airport lounges more than once. The majority of respondents were male (64.9%), while fewer participants were female (35.1%). It was most common for respondents to be aged 26 to 35 years (37.5%), 36 to 45

years (28.6%) or 18 to 25 years (24.8%). Therefore, the group was relatively young. Most visitors visited the lounge two to five times a year (36.3%), although many were also first-timers (32.9%). The remainder were very frequent visitors, visiting at least six times (18.1%) and more than ten times (12.6%).

The majority of respondents considered the airport lounge an important factor in their choice of airlines.

Ratings were generally high for the perceived importance of all staff competencies, and for the quality of services provided in A Airways' lounges, with mean scores ranging from 4.46 to 4.68 out of 5 (see Appendix A).

CFA was used to establish a measurement model and evaluate model fit based on the proposed theoretical model of the research (Table 5). Chi-square and chi-square/df were used as absolute goodness of fit measures, while RMSEA, CFI, GFI and AGFI, NFI, and the Hoelter index were used as relative goodness of fit measures (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2016; MacCallum, Brown, & Sugawara, 1996). The goodness of fit

was acceptable based on the common thresholds for all variables. Therefore, the measurement model as it was established was accepted as reliable. The path loadings (figure 1) showed that the variables were all above 0.2, which is the minimal threshold for the importance of variable relationships within the model (Gorsuch, 2015).

Therefore, although some of these variables had surprisingly low factor loadings, including courteousness and respect, friendliness, and listening and empathy (.25 or lower), none of the relationships were eliminated at this stage. Instead, the regression results were evaluated to determine significance.

Table 4. Demographic and behavioral statistics.

Sample characteristics	Number (n=419)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	272	64.9
Female	147	35.1
Other	-	-
Age		
18-25 years old	104	24.8
26-35 years old	157	37.5
36-45 years old	120	28.6
46-55 years old	35	8.4
More than 55 years old	3	0.7
Annual visit frequency of A Airways' lounges		
First time	138	32.9
2-5 times	152	36.3
6-10 times	76	18.1
More than 10 times	53	12.6
The importance of the airline lounge		
How important is the airline lounge for your decision to purchase an airline ticket?	Mean 3.68 (Std. 0.86375)	Interpretation Very important

Table 5. Model fit statistics for the measurement model

Indicator	Observed	Acceptable Level
<i>Absolute fit measures</i>		
χ^2	.629	$p > .05$
χ^2/df	2.18	>3
Hoelter index	416	≥ 200
<i>Relative Fit Measures</i>		
RMSEA	.056	$\leq .05$ (excellent fit) $\leq .08$ (acceptable fit)
CFI	.912	$\geq .90$
NFI	.960	$\geq .95$
GFI	.961	$\geq .95$
AGFI	.915	$\geq .90$

Note: Acceptable levels were established based on Byrne (2016), Kline (2016) and MacCallum, et al.'s (1996) rules on acceptable levels.

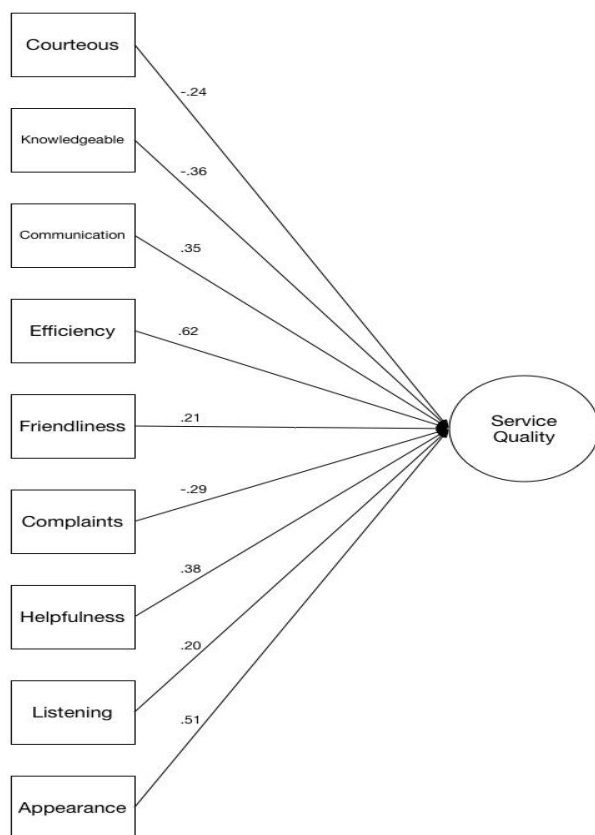


Figure 1. Factor loadings

The results of the multiple regression analysis indicated that although there was a statistically significant relationship between the staff competencies and the service quality ratings ($p = 0.000$), only five service competencies: efficiency ($p = 0.000$, $\beta = 0.407$), helpfulness ($p = 0.029$, $\beta = 0.216$), communication skills ($p = 0.009$,

$\beta = 0.194$), the ability to maintain a neat and professional appearance ($p = 0.028$, $\beta = 0.300$), and knowledge ($p = 0.018$, $\beta = -0.234$), actually made statistically significant contributions to service quality assessments. It should also be noted that, in the case of knowledge, there was a negative relationship.

Table 6. Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	VIF	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
	Friendliness	.018	.098	.021	.188	1.564
	Listening and showing empathy	-.013	.136	-.015	-.096	1.399
	Being courteous and respectful	-.055	.089	-.067	-.623	1.292
	Handling complaints effectively	-.094	.067	-.130	-1.417	1.368
1	Helpfulness	.177	.081	.216	2.197*	1.418
	Being sufficiently knowledgeable	-.161	.067	-.234	-2.384*	2.115
	Efficiency	.330	.086	.407	3.847***	1.569
	Communication	.155	.059	.194	2.625**	2.109
	Maintaining a neat, professional appearance	.259	.117	.300	2.206*	1.992

Dependent variable: Service Quality

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 7. Hypothesis Outcomes

Hypothesis	Accepted?
H1: Staff friendliness significantly influences service quality.	No
H2: Listening and showing empathy significantly influences service quality.	No
H3: Handling complaints effectively significantly influences service quality.	No
H4: Helpfulness significantly influences service quality.	Yes
H5: Being sufficiently knowledgeable significantly influences service quality.	Yes
H6: Efficiency significantly influences service quality.	Yes
H7: Communication significantly influences service quality.	Yes
H8: Professional appearance significantly influences service quality.	Yes
H9: Being courteous and respectful significantly influences service quality.	No

Qualitative analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts (n = 38) identified a number of recurring themes. Table 8 lists the competencies and service quality factors cited as important by interviewees and focus group participants. The most important staff competency themes, cited by 50% or more of the participants (n ≥ 19), included satisfactory problem solving and conflict resolution skills, courtesy and respectfulness, staff knowledge and ability to answer questions, general language skills and clarity of communication, English language skills, listening and demonstrating sympathy and a caring attitude, friendliness, the ability to maintain a positive attitude, good personal grooming, service-mindedness, attention to detail, hospitality skills, customer service skills, situational awareness, and maintaining a clean lounge environment. The most important tangible aspects of service

quality, that must be addressed by management, rather than staff, included providing an attractive and comfortable lounge space, good food and drink options, and helpful signage. Despite high ratings for the service quality of A Airways’ lounges, nearly all of the respondents recommended establishing some sort of training and/or evaluation program for improving lounge staff competencies to address areas of weakness identified during the interviews. These weaknesses included general hospitality skills, service-mindedness, communication skills, knowing how and when to approach customers, and anticipating customer needs. Thus, these interviews identified some of the most important aspects of service quality in the context of airline lounges. This information, along with the quantitative research, was used to provide guidance for the development of the draft service quality framework.

Table 8. Summary of interview and focus group themes.

SERVQUAL themes	Codes	Frequency
1 Reliability	1d Staff professionalism.	5
	1a Services delivered accurately, and as promised.	3
	1b Services delivered promptly/efficiently.	1
	1c Problems solved quickly.	0
2 Responsiveness	2c Satisfactory problem solving/conflict resolution.	20
	2b Effective complaint handling.	17
	2e Courtesy and respectfulness.	15
	2d General helpfulness.	14
	2a Responsiveness to requests.	4
3 Assurance	3d Staff language skills, and clarity of communication.	36
	3b Staff knowledge, and ability to answer questions.	30
	3f English language skills.	25
	3c Staff's ability to make passengers feel safe and reassured.	3
	3a Reputation, and airline image.	0
4 Empathy	4d Staff listen, show sympathy, and empathy, and have a caring attitude.	28
	4e Staff friendliness.	24
	4b Special benefits.*	9
	4a Individualized attention.	1
	4c Convenience.	1
5 Tangibles	5f Food and drink.	31
	5a Clean environment.	20
	5d Comfortable environment.	19
	5g Staff general appearance (uniform, personal grooming, etc.)	18
	5e Entertainment.	17
	5c Attractive/appealing space.**	14
6 Emergent service quality themes	5b Modern décor.	2
	6j Training program/evaluation.	37
	6a Service-mindedness.	30
	6g Situational awareness (passengers, objects, equipment, etc.)	28
	6d Hospitality skills.	27
	6e Customer service skills.	25

Table 8 (continued).

6f Positive attitude.	24
6h Better signage.	22
6c Showing attention to detail.	19
6b Patience.	11
6i Equipment checking.	3

*The focus of the comments was primarily on informing passengers of special benefits.

**The focus of the comments was primarily on quiet and other atmospheric factors.

A number of staff competencies contributed positively to service quality ratings, including efficiency, helpfulness, communication skills, and maintaining a neat, professional appearance. Service efficiency, a reliability indicator, made the strongest contribution to customer service ratings, which was consistent with the findings of Hu and Hsiao (2016) and Khuong and Uyen (2014). Service efficiency may also contribute to perceived responsiveness if it enables staff to provide prompt services; moreover, other researchers have identified responsiveness as the most important factor in airline service quality ratings (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Farahani & Törmä, 2010; Han, et al., 2012; Jeeradist et al., 2016; Nejati et al., 2009; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Patton & Cochran, 2002).

Helpfulness, another responsiveness indicator, also contributed to service quality ratings, consistent with the findings of past research (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Farahani & Törmä, 2010; Jeeradist et al., 2016; Mason, 2010; Nejati et al., 2009). However, in contrast to the results of prior research, the studies of Lerrthaitrakul and Panjakajornsak (2014) and Suki (2014) demonstrated competencies that could

potentially contribute to helpfulness, such as friendliness, listening to customers, and being sympathetic and kind, which did not influence customer service ratings in this study.

Tangibles are among the most significant predictors of customer satisfaction with full-service airlines (Suhartanto & Noor, 2012), and according to Tsaur and Tang (2013), personal grooming, an important tangible factor, has also become a major service quality differentiator for businesses serving the tourist market. Maintaining a neat, professional appearance was found to significantly influence service quality ratings in this study, in line with the findings of Han et al. (2012) and Farahani and Torma (2010). Personal grooming may be particularly important in the airport context, as it encompasses multiple service quality dimensions, acting not only as a tangible factor, but also an indicator of reliability and assurance. Han, et al. (2012) has also found that tangible dimensions including food and beverage service, atmosphere and facilities had some of the strongest effects on customer outcomes. Thus, this is consistent with previous studies in that respect.

Communication skills, another important assurance factor, made a positive contribution to customer service ratings, in line with past research, indicating that assurance factors influence customer service perceptions in the airline context (Gilbert & Wong, 2003) and that language skills are a particularly significant assurance variable (Tsaour, Chang, & Yen, 2002). A study conducted by Kiatkiri (2014) also found that intercultural communication skills are becoming increasingly critical for Thai businesses serving an international client base, an issue that was recognized by the interview and focus group respondents, who noted the importance of being able to communicate in multiple languages.

Staff knowledge had a relatively weak effect, and the influence of this variable on customer service ratings was negative. This diverges from the findings of Jeeradist et al. (2016) and Gilbert and Wong (2003), and the reason for this unexpected finding is unknown. One possibility is that passengers tended to only utilize staff members as a knowledge resource for complex questions, which may have been difficult for staff members to answer as well.

A number of additional insights into service quality factors were provided by the interview and focus group participants. Past research has identified comfortable conditions as a factor in airline service quality (Farahani & Törmä, 2010; Fourie & Lubbe, 2006; Han et al., 2012; Jeeradist et al., 2016; Nejati et al., 2009; Tsaour et al., 2002)

and many of the interview and focus group respondents also noted the importance of providing a comfortable lounge environment. Entertainment is another significant tangible aspect of airport service quality, and the respondents in this study identified free Wi-Fi as a critical entertainment variable. This was consistent with the findings of Han et al. (2012) that internet and computer access are among the most important factors for airport lounge customers, followed by food and beverage services, which were also identified as significant by the respondents in the current study. Many of the interview and focus group participants also cited cleanliness as a critical tangible factor that was consistent with the findings of other researchers (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Farahani & Törmä, 2010; Tsaour et al., 2002).

Emergent themes that provided insights into key staff competencies included the importance of maintaining a positive attitude, which likely contributes to perceived empathy. A number of the interview and focus group participants also noted the importance of attitudinal contributors, such as service-mindedness, a competency that spans multiple service quality indicators, including empathy and responsiveness. This finding is consistent with those of Hu and Hsiao (2016), who identified service attitudes as a critical factor in airline service quality ratings, and Suhartanto and Noor (2012), who found that employee attitudes were among the most significant predictors of customer satisfaction with full-service

airlines. Another empathy factor, convenience, was also addressed by the interviewees and focus group participants, who recommended increasing convenience with more helpful signage. This concern with convenience is in line with the findings of Tsaour et al. (2002) that convenience is particularly important in the context of airline services.

Reliability was also addressed by the interview and focus group participants, who emphasized the importance of detailed orientation to reduce errors and scan for potentially hazardous situations (situational awareness), competencies that also contribute to the assurance dimension of service quality. The participants talked about various aspects of situational awareness and equipment checking, which concurred with the findings of Nejati et al. (2009), that safety is among the most important service quality factors for airlines.

While past research suggests that friendliness, listening and showing empathy, being courteous and respectful, and effective complaint handling, should all contribute to service quality ratings, prior studies have typically focused on airline passenger services or general airport ground services, rather than airport lounge services. Very little research has been conducted to examine airport ground services, and few studies have included airport lounges. The factors most important to airport lounge customers may differ from those valued on flights due to differences in the two service environments, such as the greater

danger and fear associated with flights, and the wider range of activity options available in airport lounges.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the findings of this research indicated that airport lounges contribute to airline choice, and that enhancing certain staff competencies can improve airport lounge service quality, potentially contributing to customer preference. A framework for the competency development of airport lounge staff was created based on the findings of this study and the supplementary literature review (see Table 9).

This framework is a modified version of the general competency framework provided by Langdon and Marelli (2002), and has been adapted for the airport lounge service context. It specifies key competencies; performance behavior that can be used to assess them; inputs, conditions, and standards that influence competency development and overall service quality, and which should therefore be addressed by management; process steps for competency development and service quality improvement; and outputs and consequences, feedback and continuous improvement strategies. The purpose of the framework is to guide development of lounge service quality instruments for either assessment or customer evaluation, which is part of the expected future research of this project.

Table 9. Airport lounge attendant competency framework.

Competencies	Performance Behavior
Technical/ job-specific/problem-solving skills	Equipment checking. Situational awareness. Following procedures in potentially dangerous situations. Resolving complaints.
Language/ general communication skills	Communicating clearly in required languages. Demonstrating English language proficiency. Using both verbal and nonverbal communication effectively.
Job-specific knowledge	Information about flights, services, benefits, and promotions.
Customer service skills	Efficiency/promptness. Helpfulness/responsiveness. Hospitality.
Social skills	Addressing complaints effectively. Friendliness. Showing sympathy and empathy. Interacting in a courteous and respectful manner.
Personal characteristics	Listening. Displaying a positive attitude. Behaving in ways that indicate service-mindedness. Showing patience. Good personal grooming. Showing attention to detail.
Influential factors, activities, and outcomes	
Inputs	Airline market. Employer commitment to improving service quality. Employee competencies and needs. Supplementary services (food and beverage, free Wi-Fi, etc.) Customer preferences. Available technology.

Table 9 (continued)

Conditions/ standards	Budget. Regulations/standards. Lounge/airport environment, space, signage, furnishings, etc. Policies/procedures.
Process steps	Develop training program(s). Identify and remove barriers to efficient and convenient service. Address tangible factors under control of management (i.e., signage, décor, etc.)
Outputs	The service itself. Service quality. Service improvement.
Consequences	Customer satisfaction. Word-of-mouth promotion. Customer loyalty. Increased business. Image/brand enhancement.
Feedback and improvement	Evaluation by managers, staff, and customers. Assessments used to guide improvement of inputs, conditions, standards, and processes.

There were some limitations to the methodology of this study. One of the limitations is the reliance on convenience sampling, which was required due to the research context and lack of ability to conduct truly random sampling. The unbalanced gender makeup of the study is also a concern, although it is not certain whether this was due to oversampling of male respondents or an actual gender imbalance in the lounge visitors.

Based on the findings of this study, there are a number of possibilities for future research. Studies that could be undertaken for the purpose of airport lounge improvement include staff

surveys or interviews to identify barriers to efficiency and customer service skills that should be developed with new training programs. However, the findings also suggest several options for academic research to further explore the topics addressed in this study.

Given that the results of this research diverged, in many cases, from the findings of studies conducted in other nations, it would be interesting to conduct a cross-cultural study to determine whether the different perceptions and priorities of the Thai respondents in this study reflect cultural differences. Also, because the sample for this research was weighted toward

particular demographic categories, a larger study that includes a balance of demographic groups would indicate whether the findings were unique to the population of customers surveyed for this research or are generalizable to the broader population of airport lounge customers. Breaking out the findings based on demographic categories would also provide insights into particular market segments that could be used to customize areas of the lounge and associated services to particular groups and market these niche areas accordingly, thereby ensuring that the research has both academic and practical significance.

Another area worth exploring is the finding that staff knowledge actually had a negative effect on service quality ratings in this study. It would be useful to determine whether this finding indicates that Thai airport lounge customers actually have unusual reactions to staff knowledge, or the anomalous result is attributable to a flaw in the study methodology. If staff knowledge is found to negatively influence service quality ratings in subsequent studies, it would be worthwhile spending time to determine why this variable has an unexpectedly negative effect on service quality perceptions.

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