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Research article

Customer satisfaction analysis of selected African airlines post-COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted tourism business operations with far-reaching implications for service excellence in the aviation industry. This study explores the sentiments of passengers who have used the four major African airlines using the TripAdvisor platform as the source of online data reviews. The findings reflect 1284 online customer reviews posted between 01 May 2023 and July 20, 2024. These reviews were analysed using ATLAS.ti for content, thematic, and sentiment analyses. This study found that the airline industry in Africa faced several challenges post the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to largely negative sentiments against airlines, with most travellers unsatisfied with the standard of service. These challenges include baggage mishandling, poor quality of meals, unreliable schedules, and lack of onboard entertainment and WIFI facilities, among others. To address baggage mishandling, this study recommends deploying technology, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), robot technology, and Radio Frequency Identification (RFID). Improving employees' communication and customer service skills and adopting policies that foster a culture of service excellence among airline players are also recommended to improve customer experience.

KEYWORDS

service excellence; airport technology; airline food; onboard flight entertainment; COVID-19, customer satisfaction

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the tourism and aviation industries worldwide. The tourism and aviation industries are among the most adversely affected sectors of the economy (Abu-Rayash & Dincer, 2020; Dube et al., 2021; Nhamo et al., 2020; Suau-Sanchez et al., 2020). The pandemic challenged the core business models of most businesses, and the aviation industry was not spared. The pandemic disrupted businesses in many ways, forcing them to rethink their business models and strategies (Salem et al., 2025). According to (Seetharaman, 2020) such shifts apply to how businesses operate and offer services to ensure resilience and survival. The tourism and aviation industries also had to grapple with a raft of changes in their business protocols (Pongpirul et al., 2020). These include the adoption of appropriate health and safety measures aimed at ensuring the health and safety of passengers and airline staff during their journeys (Grout & Leggat, 2021). These changes have implications for service delivery in the aviation and tourism industries. While there were changes, some were beneficial to the tourism industry, ensuring improvement in service delivery. Undoubtedly, some of these changes can adversely affect the customer experience. Rita et al. (2022) argue that, among other things, the airline industry had to change its ticket booking and refund policy to accommodate the inconveniences posed by the pandemic. This development has resulted in changes in the level of tourist satisfaction. In the same study, it was found that low-cost airlines fared poorly in this regard compared with commercial airlines. In contrast, Kim et al. (2024) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the aviation industry, leading to flight cancellations, refunds, and entry restrictions which severely undermined service delivery in many respects. In some respects, the pandemic affected the punctuality of arrivals, which is a critical aspect of aviation as it affects passenger satisfaction levels (Koharudin & Simarmata, 2024; Singaravelu & Amuthanayaki, 2017). The recovery process from the

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pandemic was not without challenges, as it witnessed several challenges, including strikes in other parts of the world at airports and airlines. Employees battled to ensure their welfare was a top priority, demanding improved wages and a better workplace environment that upset air traffic movement and punctuality (Dube, 2023). As the aviation sector slowly moves out of the COVID-19 era, there is a need to understand how the sector has evolved to meet travellers' needs and demands. This is critical for understanding the evolving consumer needs. Consumer choice is an ever-evolving subject of concern that every airline and business must monitor to address, meet, and exceed their needs and wants. This study examines the key issues that affect the African aviation market to understand the key success drivers and concerns for improving product and service offerings. Such a study is key to ensuring that a business can effectively deal with its competitors in a cutthroat market.

Literature review

At the global level, the post-COVID-19 pandemic has intensified airline competition (Vermooten, 2023). Owing to the efforts to uphold e-word of mouth (reviews), platforms such as TripAdvisor create 24-hour real-time passenger subjective-experience-based sentiments (Lucini et al., 2020). Sentiments stem from socioeconomic backgrounds, past experiences, and e-social capital word-of-mouth (Setiawan et al. 2020). When governments lifted lockdown measures, passengers' expectations changed, intensifying pressure on the U.S. aviation industry to adjust service quality and pricing (Oluwole, 2022). In Asia, Indonesian airlines perceive service quality and price alterations differently in various geopolitical spaces (Setiawan et al., 2020). According to Setiawan et al. (2020), airline passengers perceive that service quality degeneration and price unfairness negatively affect their satisfaction and trust. Tahanisaz & Shokuhyar (2020) evaluated passenger satisfaction using service quality (service excellence) as a critical factor in airline markets. African airlines are no exception to the failure to address the challenges induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced traffic in and out of countries such as South Africa (Vermooten, 2023). Scholars such as Vermooten (2023) have used organizational reports (data) to reflect the reduction of passengers due to health pandemic measures. Organisation-based data from reports are good but may require more adequate insights from and about the market environment. Some experienced financial and operational challenges that made them change ownership, merge, and partner with other organisations (African Development Bank Group 2020). Tolcha (2023) forecasts the recovery of the aviation industry post-COVID-19; however, there is still limited research on airline users' sentiments in the post-health pandemic period on Africa's major airlines. Park et al. (2020) established that service attributes such as cleanliness, food and beverages, and in-flight entertainment affect passenger satisfaction ratings. In addition, airline service attributes include customer service, such as check-in and boarding influence ratings (Park et al., 2020). According to Agarwal and Gowda (2021), airline service quality influences customer satisfaction and loyalty. Unless airlines understand the relationship between the online environment, satisfaction, and behavioural intention, online marketing strategies to nurture satisfaction initiatives and behavioural intention may fail to yield sales (Chakamera & Pisa, 2021). Airlines can continue to examine service quality from the managers' perspective. In the academic debate, Africa's best-ranked airlines have yet to be discussed from passengers' opinions from a service performance perspective to establish customer-centric factors that influence the formulation of perceived quality in airline services (Carvalho & Medeiros, 2021).

Lucini et al. (2020) assert that there have been numerous measures of customer satisfaction in the airline industry since the nineties. Lucini et al. (2020) proposed the following reasons: Airline-centric customer satisfaction measurement programs seek to enhance communication with clientele. Airlines probe and examine whether they are fulfilling their customers' expectations; in the process, they analyse the impact of their service-related efforts and actions on their market. iii. Airlines identify and ascertain the key satisfaction dimensions that need improvement. Simultaneously, they evaluate service-related strengths and weaknesses against competition using customer perceptions and judgments. iv. Airlines seek customer opinions and assess service excellence. Airline-initiated feedback creates gaps in the market that influence airline service expectations. Hence, electronic word-of-mouth provides cues to address blank sides with shared authentic real-time evaluations among airline users without being probed by airlines. This study aimed to assess the perceived quality of service using the sentiments expressed by airline passengers who use Africa's major airlines. This is because of the need for a major African airline passenger-centric evaluation using online e-WOM in academic aviation debates. After extracting data from TripAdvisor, a scientific analysis was conducted on the online opinions shared by airline passengers on Ethiopian Airlines, South African Airways, Kenya Airways, and RwandAir.

Following Çallı & Çallı (2023), Africa's major airlines need to understand the sentiments of airline passengers to improve their perceived quality consciousness and satisfaction from their lens. This study contributes to informing marketing strategies and communication messaging that can address the expected

quality of service offerings among major African airlines. It contributes to showing the determinants of airline customer satisfaction, which has yet to be determined among major African airlines but has been addressed in non-African airlines (Park, 2019). This can raise service quality expectations and make service excellence a strategic tool for brand differentiation (Noviantoro & Huang, 2022). This study uses content sentiment analysis to evaluate customer satisfaction with the services provided by major African airlines. If they remain undisclosed, airlines may continue to lose clientele. Simultaneously, passenger feedback is separate from customer-centric service excellence. This results in continued service failures with a limited number of specific corrective strategies. Therefore, this study contributes to co-creating knowledge and theoretical insights that major African airlines can use to enhance service excellence (practice and operations) in the future. The overview of this article is as follows: First, a literature review positions the current study within the extant literature. Second, the research methodology provided the scientific procedures for this study. Third, the findings emerged from the data. Finally, the conclusions are presented.

Measuring service excellence in the airline industry

Johnson (2003; 2004) established four scales of service excellence measures: a). delivering promises, and (b). Provides a personal touch, c). going the extra mile; and d). Dealing correctly with problems and queries is important. Lin et al. (2016) developed a scale to measure service excellence in the airline industry by using SSTs through the SSTQUAL model. Safaeimanesh et al. (2021) assert that there are ‘blanks’ on the impact of service excellence on customer satisfaction from understanding the factors that bring about service excellence by adopting SSTs in airlines, let alone African airlines. Research still needs to be more explicit on how service excellence among major African airlines can inform innovation and technological, financial, and reputational dimensions within passengers’ interpretations of their quality-based satisfaction. Bakır et al. (2021) evaluated airlines’ e-service quality. They identified the top three e-service criteria as reliability, understandability and security. Quality of service (service quality model) is critical for measuring customer expectations and perceptions (Agarwal & Gowda, 2021). It is worth acknowledging that self-expressed passenger satisfaction is essential for customer sovereignty (Agarwal & Gowda, 2021). This implies that, on the one hand, customers may be loyal while experiencing low satisfaction levels; on the other hand, delighted customers can be disloyal (Agarwal & Gowda, 2021). Therefore, a better understanding of the relationship between satisfaction and behavioural intention in an online environment can enable managers to assign and implement online marketing strategies for satisfaction initiatives and behavioural intention programs (Agarwal & Gowda, 2021). The extant literature fosters a 'blind spot' in African airlines. Al Awadh (2023) implemented an analytic hierarchy process (AHP) approach to model the five SERVQUAL dimensions. Monoarfa et al. (2020) assert that airlines should focus more on reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy, and less on tangibles, which are critical aspects of the current study.

Major African airlines

Martini et al. (2023) indicate that African airlines participate in global alliances. The airlines included Ethiopia, South Africa, Kenya, Royal Air Maroc, Air Mauritius, EgyptAir, Air Seychelles, and RwandAir. Additionally, the 2019 Skytrax awards had the same airlines as those in Africa. Interestingly, before the pandemic, Sezgen et al. (2019) used TripAdvisor to determine the key drivers of customer satisfaction for full-service and low-cost carriers in the airline industry. However, Sezgen et al. (2019) provided inadequate insights into customer sentiments after the pandemic, especially when examining service excellence by targeting only the major African airlines' markets. In addition, it is essential to note that the impact of COVID-19 has led to the liquidation of African airlines, whereas others are under public administration (Dube, 2021). Post-COVID-19 research on airline customer satisfaction, loyalty, and quality attributes has focused on non-African airlines (Hassan & Salem, 2022; Park et al., 2020). Researchers must also consider major African airlines, especially in one study. Thus, it is essential to explore how customers who use major African airlines feel in the post-pandemic period (Rita et al., 2022; Sulu et al., 2021). Martini et al. (2023) indicate that African airlines participate in global alliances. The airlines included Ethiopia, South Africa, Kenya, Royal Air Maroc, Air Mauritius, EgyptAir, Air Seychelles, and RwandAir. Additionally, the 2019 Skytrax awards had the same airlines as those in Africa. Before the pandemic, Sezgen et al. (2019) used TripAdvisor to determine the key drivers of customer satisfaction for full-service and low-cost carriers. However, Sezgen et al. (2019) provided inadequate insights into customer sentiment after the pandemic, especially when examining service excellence by targeting only major African airlines' markets. In addition, it is essential to note that the impact of COVID-19 has led to the liquidation of African airlines, whereas others are under public administration (Dube, 2021). Post-COVID-19 research on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and quality attributes has focused on non-African airlines (Hasan & Salem, 2022; Park et al., 2020). Researchers must also consider major African airlines, especially in one study. Thus, it is essential to explore

how customers who use major African airlines feel during the post-pandemic period (Rita et al., 2022; Sulu et al., 2021).

Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research technique using a case study of four state-owned airlines operating in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ethiopian Airlines, Rwanda Air, and South African Airways. According to Flight Radar 24, Ethiopian Airlines has 128 aircraft, Kenyan Airways has 34, RwandaAir has 14, and South African Airways has 11 (flightradar24, 2024). This study adopted a multi-case analysis of the above airlines, which analysed the review comments of passengers who commented on trip advisors between May 2023 (the official date for the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the World Health Organization) and July 2024. The COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared in May 2023. To that end, 585 comments were posted on Kenyan Airways, 457 on Ethiopian Airlines, 136 on RwandAir, and 106 on South African Airways comments were analysed. This was the total number of comments posted during this period. This study focused on examining the quality of service during the COVID-19–19 pandemic, hence the selection of the period. The airlines were chosen based on their size and reputation in Africa. The researchers deliberately chose airlines that they knew and utilised their services in the past to ensure that they could relate to the comments being analysed. Trip Advisor is widely used across the tourism industry, with some entities having a review platform that is sent to tourists' post-tourism product utilisation, simultaneously allowing tourists to post reviews on the Trip Advisor platform. The platform's usage allows tourism businesses and tourists to gain invaluable insights into the tourism product in question, what to expect, and what is not expected at certain destinations. This platform has been used in previous aviation and tourism studies to better understand tourists' sentiments about specific tourism products and to address service failures within the aviation tourism sector (Arasli & Sulu, 2022; Bodnár et al., 2020; Brochado et al., 2019; Güngör et al., 2019; Sulu et al., 2021). Therefore, using such public platforms is acceptable in the scientific community. In this regard, review comments from Trip Advisor were copied from the Trip Advisor website into a Word Document for each of the four airlines analysed. To ensure anonymity, the names and pseudonyms of the people posted on the platforms were deleted for ethical purposes, in compliance with the best ethical standards. Anonymised comments were analysed using ATLAS.ti. This study utilised coding functionality to delve deeper into the comments and create meaning. Code and thematic analyses were the principal approaches used to analyse the comments from passengers. The codes, groups, and themes were thoroughly examined using various software functionalities to gain deeper insights into the data and generate meaning. ATLAS.ti has several functionalities and can generate figures and various visualisations that allow the researcher to summarise and make meaning of the inputted data. The quote functionality was used to detect critical messages from airline passengers. Key research questions guided the analysis process and meaning generation. This software is widely accepted for use in qualitative studies (Woods et al., 2016).

Results and discussions

The research examined four airlines, namely Kenyan Airways, Ethiopian Airlines, Rwandan Airlines, and South African Airways, and found that they were rated differently by customers on Trip Advisors. The four African airlines were ranked between 3.0 and 3.5, with three airlines, Kenyan Airways, Ethiopian Airlines, and Rwandan Airways, sharing the same three rankings, and South African Airways ranked highest at 3.5. This translates to an average performance for the three airlines and a slightly above-average service for the South African Airways. Kenyan Airways received the lowest ratings in inflight entertainment (WIFI, TV, films), seat comfort, onboard experience, customer service during check-in and boarding, and food and beverages, which were rated at three out of five. However, the airlines received slightly higher ratings for legroom on aircraft and cleanliness, rated slightly above the average. Ethiopian Airlines had the lowest reviews for onboard experience and in-flight entertainment, with customers seemingly happy with the legroom space, seat comfort, customer service, value for money, cleanliness, check-in, and boarding experience. South African Airways faces challenges in terms of onboard experiences and inflight entertainment, similar to Rwanda Air. Rwanda Air is ranked at the top in cleanliness, scoring 4/5, the highest ranking. Considering all time concerns, there is a need for airlines in Africa to tackle the issue of onboard experience, which is a universal challenge, and inflight entertainment, such as onboard WIFI and TV, which is a concern for customers. Onboard flight entertainment (IFE) is central to improving the airline customer experience by providing a broad range of onboard media content. Media content, such as full-colour magazines, radio programs, and video-on-demand, can assist in killing boredom (John, 2022). Recent technological developments have allowed WIFI and live television programming to roll out, allowing passengers to interface with the world while flying. Technology such as WIFI can offer opportunities for airlines to earn extra revenue and spruce revenue (Dinc et al., 2017). Yin (2019) stated that recent

developments in IFE allow airlines to personalise passenger entertainment based on past experiences. Such offerings can kill inflight boredom and fatigue and improve the flying experience (John, 2022). Generally, there is an equal need to improve the in-flight experience by revisiting the onboard experience among all investigated airlines. Simultaneously, IFE is one measure that considers other aspects that might be lacking to ensure passenger enjoyment. The COVID-19 pandemic was declared a pandemic in May 2023. As such, this study explored reviews of customer experiences between May 2023 and July 2024, which is slightly more than a year. The study found that if one is to go with the reviews, passengers are generally not happy with the service they receive from the airlines. Customers are largely dissatisfied with airlines' negative experiences (Figure 1), reigning supreme among them. The most negative reports pertain to Kenyan Airways, followed by Ethiopian Airlines and Rwanda Air, and the best experience seems to be that of residents of South African Airways. Most customers indicated that they had negative experiences with airlines and complained of poor customer service. Customers expressed frustration with their treatment by various airlines.

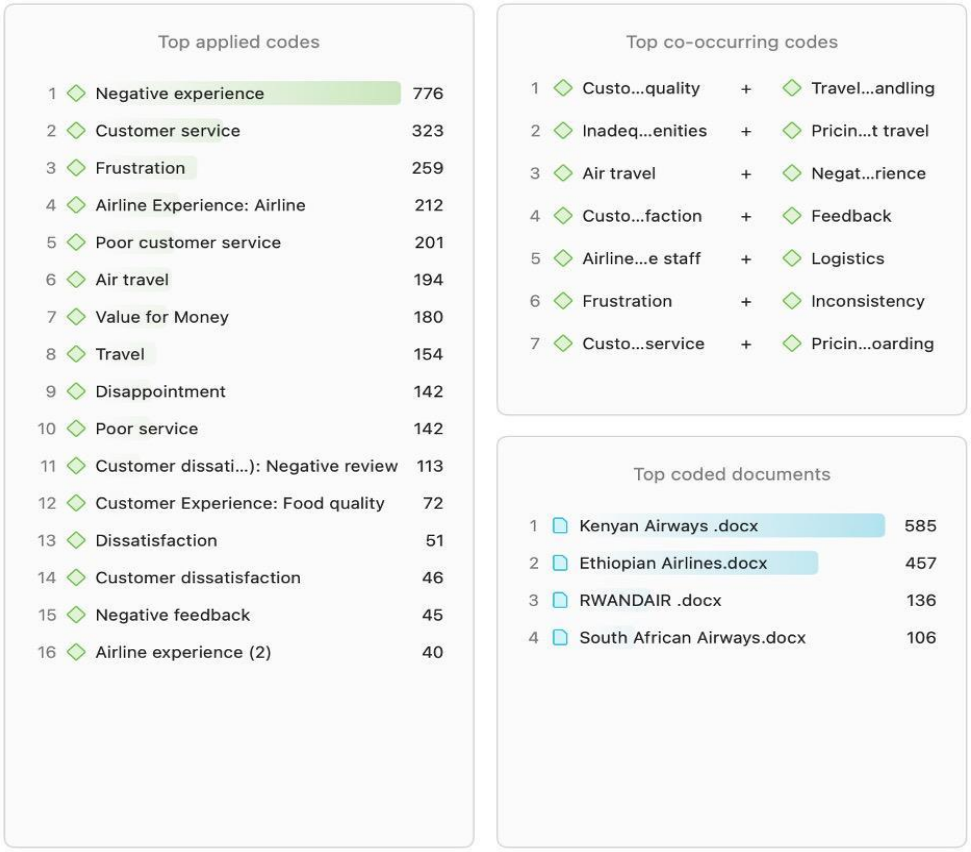

Figure 1: Codes generated from the analysis of the four African airlines to review customer satisfaction post-COVID-19

Each of the four airlines was flagged for transgressions by passengers who flew with them (Figure 2). For example, passenger reviews of Kenyan Airways point out several issues, including flight delays, lost luggage, poor customer service, flight cancellations, and discrimination against passengers with disabilities, as major challenges they experienced during their flight. Customers of this airline expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the airline's service and were advised to fly with Kenya Airways because of their negative experiences. On the other hand, passengers who used Rwanda Air reported negative experiences with Rwanda Air, such as lost luggage, flight delays, poor communication, and inadequate customer service. The main complaints of customers were cancelled and delayed flights, mishandled luggage, disorganised boarding processes, uncomfortable flight conditions, unhelpful staff, and a lack of compensation for inconveniences. Although some passengers have had positive experiences with punctual flights and good service with friendly staff, many recommend against flying with RwandAir because of consistent problems and unreliable services. South African Airways (SAA) has received mixed reviews. While some passengers appreciated friendly staff, clean planes, spacious seats, and good meals, others were not as impressed with the service offered by the airline. Those who posted negative reviews highlighted issues such as lost luggage, delays, unhelpful staff, disorganisation, and poor communication. There are also concerns about the age of some aircraft used by the SAA. Overall, sentiment analysis for the airline revealed mixed negative customer sentiments concerning the SAA, with reliability and customer service overshadowing positive interactions

with individual staff members. While some reviewers recommended SAA use, others strongly advised against it.

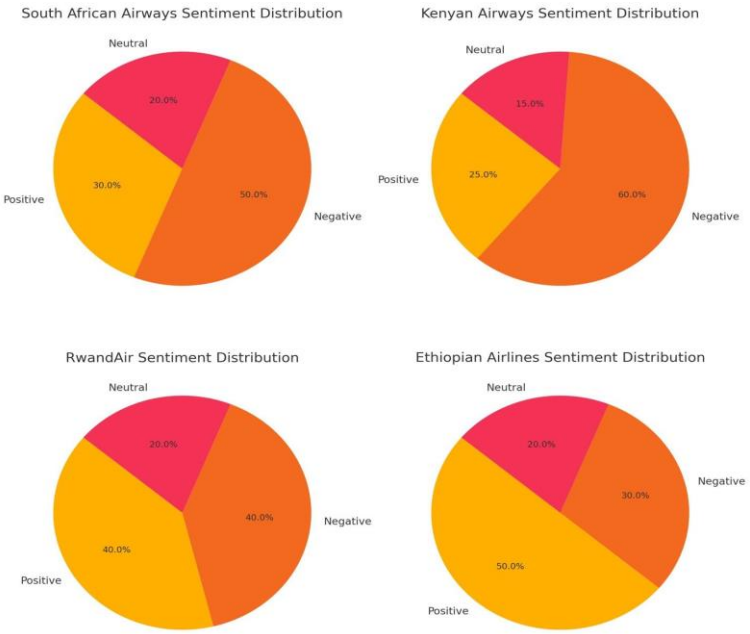

Figure 1: Codes generated from the analysis of the four African airlines to review customer satisfaction post-COVID-19

Regarding Ethiopian Airlines, customers who expressed positive sentiments pointed out the excellent service provided by the staff, good in-flight meals, and overall comfortable flights. These passengers also noted reasonable ticket prices and good value for their money. However, some customers were concerned about the loss of luggage and poor customer service, particularly regarding flight delays and cancellations. Concerns regarding in-flight entertainment systems and the condition of older aircraft also exist.

Discussion

In brief, this research highlights several crucial aspects that have a detrimental impact on the aviation sector across Africa and require immediate attention. Customers voice the difficulties they face when using the services provided by the aviation industry. Generally, the experience is negative, and the lack of value for money is evident owing to poor service delivery, which exasperates air transport system users. Many travellers reported that a bad airline experience tarnished their overall enjoyment of the trip and could potentially harm tourism products in general. The concerns raised by tourists (Figure 3) indicate poor airline management and the need for customer-focused service delivery in the aviation sector. This presents a significant challenge for major airlines in the continent. The need to re-evaluate service delivery in Africa is essential, as it undermines the efforts of the entire tourism industry to create a competitive product that can be offered to the market and drive its growth. Inadequate attention is given to customer service, which leads to airline staff not assisting during and outside of disruptions. Another pressing concern voiced by tourists is the delay in securing refunds, which results in dissatisfied customers being overlooked. Airlines must take proactive measures to ensure service recovery whenever a service failure occurs. One of the hallmarks of an effectively thriving airline is its capacity to ensure operational reliability. This involves mitigating recurrent flight delays, cancellations, and baggage handling problems. Achieving airline reliability ensures that airlines are economical and financially efficient (Aleksanyan et al., 2018); airlines need to recognise this aspect by improving customer satisfaction levels. Complaints about the condition of aircrafts used by some airlines can lead to service failures and, in some cases, flight delays and cancellations. It is essential to address the issue of relying on outdated aircraft, as these old planes can be just as expensive to maintain and emit high levels of carbon. Therefore, efforts are needed to renew fleets to tackle the dual challenge of unreliable and unwanted aircraft for customers while also addressing the environmental burden of carbon emissions associated with these aircraft. De Jong (2022) supported this assertion by pointing out that fleet renewal offers numerous benefits, amongst others, are benefits to the environment and assists airlines in meeting regulated environmental standards.

Figure 3: Summary of issues affecting customer experience in the African aviation market

The aviation sector is acutely aware of safety issues (Klenka, 2019; Price & Forrest, 2016; Ukwandu et al., 2022), particularly those resulting from aircraft malfunctions. Renewing the fleet and ensuring that aircraft are both visually appealing and fit for purpose are essential for fostering client confidence. It is vital to ensure that an aircraft's appearance conveys a sense of reliability, as passengers often judge the level of safety based on their initial impression. Maintaining a clean and well-maintained appearance is crucial for providing a comfortable flight experience to passengers. It is important to consider that passengers often form opinions based on what they see, and a dilapidated interior or dirty aircraft can create a negative perception that is challenging to overcome. Loss of luggage can have a detrimental and emotionally damaging impact on individuals travelling (Herjanto et al., 2022; Scherer & Ceschi, 2000; Xu et al., 2019) to the continent for leisure purposes, as the loss of personal belongings can be traumatic. Tourists without a substantial budget may find it difficult to adapt without personal clothing, which can adversely affect their overall destination experience. Therefore, the baggage-handling procedures employed by airlines and airports must be revised to ensure a positive experience for all visitors. Airlines can implement several approaches to address baggage mishandling, including the introduction of the Internet of Things (IoT). This technology offers a range of solutions, such as the Baggage Reconciliation System (BRS), which conforms to IATA Resolution 753 and uses barcode scanners to read printed tags in bags. The BRS has five critical stages that monitor baggage throughout the journey: baggage handling at check-in counters, tracking bags in the baggage handling system, baggage tag scanning, loading baggage onto an aircraft, and unloading baggage after the flight. Airports can utilise radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology, which uses electromagnetic fields to automatically identify and track tags attached to luggage. This technology is strategically located throughout the baggage-handling system, including mandatory entry and exit points, to ensure continuous tracking. The implementation of this system allows passengers to conduct real-time monitoring of their luggage, thereby reducing anxiety associated with baggage loss (Suwannakul, 2021). Furthermore, some airports have adopted Artificial Intelligence (AI), which uses image recognition technology and autonomous vehicles to improve baggage handling. Incorporating technology into baggage handling systems represents a significant step towards modernising airport operations, ensuring efficient and reliable luggage tracking, and enhancing passenger satisfaction, despite the lag of African airlines and airports. It was IATA (2024) reported that only

27% of airlines were compliant with Resolution 53 on baggage tracking, which made it mandatory for all airline members to track baggage at four mandatory points throughout the journey. This could be one of the major reasons for the high rates of baggage mishandling and loss. Given the emotional and financial cost of losing luggage by airlines, which cost approximately $2.2 billion in 2022 (OAG, 2023), there is a need for airlines and airports to be proactive in addressing this challenge. Evidence shows that baggage mishandling surpassed pre-pandemic levels in 2022 because of various disruptions experienced at airports due to strikes and climate-related disruptions.

Apart from complaints about baggage loss, passengers also complained about onboard hygiene and the poor quality of meal services. Meal services are an important part of the airline experience and require significant attention to ensure customer satisfaction (Ernits et al., 2022; Yusoff et al., 2022; Zhao, 2022). Therefore, airlines must adopt various measures to address these critical challenges. Airlines should consider partnering with renowned chefs and nutritionists to design nutritious and tasty meal options. There is also a need to enhance menu variety to offer a variety of meals that encompass meal options for different dietary needs, such as vegetarian, vegan, halal, kosher, and gluten-free options. Airlines must also regularly refresh their menu options to incorporate seasonal ingredients and new and traditional trends. In the same breath, airlines must invest in better food presentation, including attractive packaging and plating. There is a need to continuously collect and analyse passenger feedback on inflight meals to make informed decisions regarding meal improvements. Research that frequently emphasises customer service positively is centred on individual employees who willingly go the extra mile, indicating pockets of excellent service. This implies that there is potential for outstanding services, despite inconsistencies in this area. Therefore, airlines must invest in extensive customer service training programs and implement robust customer feedback mechanisms to better understand customer needs and expectations. This will enable African airlines to compete with other global airlines on an equal footing. Notably, there is no evidence that airlines monitor and engage with customers on TripAdvisor, which presents a missed opportunity to win customers. Considering the platform's popularity and role in informing travellers about which tourism services to use, airlines should dedicate more effort to this platform. The inadequate level of customer engagement demonstrated by airlines is a significant concern, as evidenced by the travellers' comments. Airlines must establish clear and effective communication channels that provide real-time updates to minimise passenger frustration, particularly during periods of disruption. Improvements in aircraft scheduling and general operational management are required to reduce the frequency of delays and cancellations. Such measures would enhance customer confidence and mitigate negative sentiments. Furthermore, it is crucial to implement, monitor, and review quality control systems in a timely manner. This study has several policy implications for the government. The absence of regulatory oversight to guarantee that airlines adhere to service quality warrants attention, as this could lead to a more responsive and responsible aviation sector in Africa. Such a policy must be accompanied by punitive measures and redress for customers, an area that appears to be rather lax. There is a need to enact and enforce passenger rights laws that include mandatory compensation for delays, cancellations, and lost luggage to promote accountability and improve services.

Conclusion

This study aimed to assess customer experience in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, this study scrutinised four African airlines to pinpoint crucial successes and obstacles in service delivery. The study revealed that while there are occasional exceptional services, the overall passenger experience on African airlines is predominantly unfavourable, as passengers do not believe they receive fair value for their money. This study highlights several concerns that jeopardise the airline industry's competitiveness, including poor treatment of passengers, baggage loss, inadequate refund processing times, meal service, and unsatisfactory onboard experiences. This study emphasises several practical and policy measures that can be taken to enhance passenger experience and ensure that the airline industry is on par with other parts of the world. Implementing high-tech technology in airports and quality management systems can play a vital role in addressing these challenges. Airline management needs to establish stability to improve the customer service experience. In some cases, addressing training gaps can help win the hearts of travellers. The absence of regulations regarding delays and cancellations does not bode well for the sector's growth, and policymakers must consider this if the industry is to remain competitive. Adherence to regulatory standards by other airlines is crucial for the sector to address service failures.

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