

Tourists' perceptions of the quality of public transportation services in the Accra metropolis: a Servqual approach

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Abstract

All over the world, commuters (tourists) are entreating public transport service providers to ensure that they provide quality service to their clientele and not to be interested in only the financial gains. This study sought to examine tourists' perception of the quality of public transportation services within the Accra Metropolis, Ghana using a SERVQUAL approach. The SERVQUAL scale was modified to aid in evaluating how tourists perceive public transportation services within this jurisdiction. Accidental sampling procedure was used to collect samples from 200 tourists at selected transport terminals. The study concluded that the tourists had a negative perception of public transport services within the metropolis. The implication for this study is that it is intended to provide strong basis for more in-depth studies into this phenomenon.

Key words: Public transportation services, service quality, expectations, perceptions, Accra

Introduction

According to Olsen, Tse and West (1998) quality is doing the right thing right and consistently. Service quality can be perceived as an evaluation of how efficiently a delivered service measures up to the expectations of consumers. Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1998) opine that if tourists perceptions exceeds their expectations, then there is service quality delivery and also there is poor service quality delivery when the vice versa occurs. In evaluating service quality Voss, Parasuraman and Grewal (1998) noted that tourists compare the perceived service with the expected service. Once tourists perceive a service received as being worthy of their expenditure, they would maintain the service and if not, they would prefer to use other services.

White (2002) defined public transport as "all modes available to the public, irrespective of ownership" (p. 17). Tran and Kleiner (2005) simply defined it as the means of providing special or general transportation services to the public not taking into consideration chartered transport services but rather scheduled transport services. Public transportation in many countries is a share responsibility of government and private individuals. The main intention of governments and private individuals providing public transportation services for its citizenry is to fulfill the needs of the common public as regards to providing them with accessible and affordable transport opportunities.

Dridi, Mesghouni and Borne (2005) suggest that public transportation services should guarantee high service quality through following regular schedules and being safe and rapid. They should also be available

and accessible to all manner of persons, especially the vulnerable and the physically challenged. As public transportation facilities grow older, the quality of service dwindles and commuters are left with no option but to accept what is offered (Andreassen, 1994). Mazulla and Eboli (2006) were of the view that the dwindling nature of the services being provided is as a result of public transport operators given too much importance to financial gains at the expense of ensuring service quality delivery in their operations. Bertini and El-Generidy (2003) opined that this situation was not to be the case, but rather transport service operators should have an interest in providing good quality service to their passengers, taking into account passenger priorities and requirements.

Adarkwa (1991) asserts that public transportation in Ghanaian cities is characterized by over-crowdedness, excessive waiting times, long and inconsistent travel times coupled with poor and unreliable services. Abane (1993) also observed that an important aspect of commuting is the quality of services offered by transport facilities. He noted in his study that commuters expressed serious concerns about the reliability of public transports, length of waiting and access times and their comfort. Further studies by Jorgensen and Abane (1999) and Abane (2004) pointed out that public transports is faced with problems such as poor ventilation, dirty bus conditions (interior), and the high exposure to road traffic accidents (safety).

The consequence of poor transportation services is that it is likely to reduce repeat visitations of tourists to the country, thereby losing tourists to other competing destinations (Mensah, 2009). Though service quality is an important aspect in public transportation, which in the long run has an effect on the hospitality and tourism industry, there is very less research being done to explore this issue in the Ghanaian context since most studies have been

centered on hotel and restaurants. It is against this that the study seeks to examine tourists' perception of public transportation services within the Accra Metropolis, Ghana using SERVQUAL approach.

Literature review

Service quality as a concept has stimulated an extensive interest and deliberation in hospitality and tourism literature due to the difficulties in both defining, measuring and assessing it with generally no consensus emerging (Wisniewski, 2001). Service quality is of essence to the industry because it has an effect on customer purchase behaviour and retention (Oh & Mount, 1998) and the competitiveness of hospitality and tourism businesses (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2003). Proponents of this concept initially defined it "as the degree to which a customers' perception of the service encounter equates or exceeds their expectations for the service" (Parasuraman et al., 1985: 18). Alok (2013) defined service quality "as the extent to which the service, the service process and the service organization can satisfy the expectations of the user" (p. 189).

Kandampully (2002) views expectations in service quality as desires or wants expressed by the consumer or tourist before using the service, that is, what they feel a service provider should offer rather than would offer. Disney (1998) in his research identified the expectations of tourists using public transport as reliability and frequency of services, friendliness of service, clean bus interiors, comfort of vehicles and value for money. Others are clean bus exteriors, easy access, reasonable fares, easy to understand and remember time tables.

On the other hand, perception is about the reality after experiencing the service being provided, that is, what the service provider has offered. Generally before a customer evaluates service quality, he/she equate the service received with what he/she expected

(Voss, Parasuraman & Grewal, 1998). In situations where tourists' expectations are met or exceeded, they perceive the service to be of good quality but when their expectations are greater than their perceptions, there is a negative perception of the service. According to Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1998), there is quality service delivery when perceptions exceed expectations, satisfaction when expectations are met and unacceptable (negative) service quality when expectations are not met.

Theoretical framework

The most comprehensive and widely used model of measuring service quality is the Gap model by Parasuraman et al. (1985) which has enhanced the understanding of service quality issues and the operationalisation of this concept through SERVQUAL statements. This measurement scale has been established to be reliable and valid by researchers who have used it in their respective studies.

Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1994) refined the gap model by Parasuraman et al. (1985) into a perceived service quality model (SERVQUAL) based on the four gaps. They identified five generic dimensions in evaluating service quality. Tourists' perception of the quality of service is shaped by these five dimensions (service quality determinants), namely: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. These five dimensions were based on Parasuraman et al's. (1985) ten dimensions (access, communications, competence, courtesy, credibility, reliability, responsiveness, security, tangibles, understanding and knowing the customer). In an attempt to evaluate service quality, it is the tangibility of the service that can be evaluated in advance and the remaining four dimensions can also be evaluated during or after the service encounter (Zeithmal & Parasuraman, 1990).

These five dimensions basically describes various aspects of the service been: "*Tangibility* (involves appearance of physical facilities, including personnel); *Reliability* (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately); *Responsiveness* (the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service); *Assurance* (being the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence); *Empathy* (entails the provision of caring, individualized attention to customers. It includes access, communication and understanding/knowing the customer)". Etgar and Fuchs (2009: p. 475-476).

Study area

The study was conducted within the capital city of Ghana, which is the Accra Metropolitan Area (AMA). The city of Accra is the largest, most densely populated city (with a population of 2,291,352 [GSS, 2010]), and the commercial hub of Ghana. It has many manufacturing industries which include vehicle assembly plant, textile, metal and woodworks, plastics and pharmaceuticals and also hospitality and tourism facilities.

Accra is one of Ghana's cultural and tourist hubs, spotting a wide variety of hotels, monuments, museums and nightclubs. Accra serves as the first point for most tourists that travel to Ghana and public transportation is the most popular means of getting around Accra.

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive research design which aims at interpreting what exists (Payne & Payne, 2004). The descriptive design was well thought out to be appropriate for this study because the objective was to basically examine service quality delivery in public transportation services.

Questionnaire was used to collect data from the tourists. The questionnaire was categorized into two modules with the first module being on background characteristics and the second module emphasizing on service quality determinants (tangibles, reliability, assurance, empathy and responsiveness) was assessed by the tourists using a five point likert scale of *Strongly disagree* = 1, *Disagree* = 2, *Indifferent/Uncertain* = 3, *Agree* = 4 and *Strongly agree* = 5. Perez, Abad, Carrillo and Fernandez (2007) and Randheer et al. (2011) have successfully used the five point likert scale in measuring service quality. However, in order not to make the analysis cumbersome and to achieve better presentation of results, the five point likert scale was collapsed into a three-point likert scale of *Disagree* = 1-1.49, *Indifferent* = 1.50-2.49 and *Agree* = 2.50-3.0.

In all 200 questionnaires were administered through accidental sampling technique at designated points (tourist attraction sites and transport terminals) despite its inherent weakness of the findings not been able to be generalized. In all 165 were found to be useful for analysis. The data was coded using SPSS version 17 and analysed using descriptive statistics and paired-sample t-test.

Results

Background characteristics

Detailed description of the respondents profile was as follows: 64% were females and 36% were males. The percentage difference between females and males was high due to the use of non-probability sampling technique in the study. More than half (62%) of the tourists were between 21-30 years with an average age of 26 years. With regards to educational qualifications, 19% reported to have at least completed high school, 38% were first degree holders with the remaining being second degree holders. Majority of the respondents (84%) were unmarried. The high percentage of

unmarried respondents could be attributed to the fact that 79% of the tourists were less than 30 years.

Table 1 also indicated that, 21% of the respondents had average monthly income of less than 300 US dollars, whereas almost half (49%) had an average monthly income of more than US \$ 900.00. Also, less than half (40%) of the tourists were students, 32% were wage employees, 28% were self-employed. In terms of country of origin, 69% were from Europe, approximately a fifth (21%) of the respondents were from North America, 7% from the Oceania region and Africa and Asia recorded 2% each.

Perception of public transport service quality

The study employed the paired-sample t-test to ascertain whether their perceptions exceeded expectations or vice versa and which of these contributed significantly to either of the two scenarios.

Table 1 indicates that on the whole, tourists expectations with respect to tangibility (physical features of public transports) ($M=2.62$, $SD=0.22$) far exceeded their perceptions [$M=1.77$, $SD=0.51$, $t(164)=21.859$, $p< 0.05$]. Thus, tourists' expectations on tangibility far outweighed their perceptions on the same issue. The expectations of tourists relating to reliability of public transport had mean ratings of ($M=2.72$; $SD=0.23$) which was significantly higher than their perceptions [$M=1.98$; $SD=0.40$, $t(164)=21.909$, $p<0.05$].

There was also a statistically significant decrease in tourists' expectations of the assurance of public transport service providers from ($M=2.65$; $SD=0.29$) to [$M=2.20$; $SD=0.50$, $t(164)=11.394$, $p<0.05$]. From the analysis above, it could be deduced that there was a negative perception (unacceptable service quality)

since the tourists expectations were not met (ES>PS).

All five dimensions contributed somehow significantly to the negative perceptions of the service provided as none of them met their expectations.

Table 1: Comparisons between expectations and perceptions

Quality dimensions	Expectations		Perceptions	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
	Mean	Standard Deviation					
Tangibility	2.62	0.215	1.77	1.94	0.396	15.419	0.000
Reliability	2.72	0.230	1.98	1.94	0.396	15.419	0.000
Responsiveness	2.65	0.266	1.96	1.94	0.396	15.419	0.000
Assurance	2.65	0.288	2.20	1.94	0.396	15.419	0.000
Empathy	2.48	0.339	1.94	1.94	0.396	15.419	0.000

Scale: 1-1.49 = Disagree; 1.50-2.49 = Indifferent; 2.50-3.0 = Agree
 Source: Fieldwork, 2012

Discussion

The results of the paired-sample t-test revealed that the tourists had a negative perception about the kind of services that they were given. This was due to the fact that their expectations of the service were higher on the average than their perceptions (what they received). This result buttresses the notion held by researchers such as Parasuraman et al. (1988), Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1998) and Mensah (2009) that when expectations are higher than the perceived service received, consumers would generally be dissatisfied with the service they have received.

With regards to the dimensions contributing to the negative perception of the tourists, all the five dimensions contributed to this effect. Assurance of staff was one of the dimensions that contributed to the negative perceptions. Research has shown that tourists take into consideration the attitude and behaviour of drivers and other public transport staffs (Edvardsson. 1998; Friman et al., 2001) among many others in forming

their perceptions of service quality delivery. Budiono (2009) in his study in Indonesia observed that tourists or commuters take into consideration crew attitude in forming their perceptions. The result of the study indicates that the tourists were not happy about the general behaviour of the staff.

It can also be said that the tourists were also not satisfied with the tangibles of public transport services within the metropolis. This corroborates views held by Disney et al. (1998), Budiono (2009) and Stradling et al. (2009) that commuters pay critical attention to features such as clear signs, interior and exterior, comfort of seats as influencing their perceptions. Reliability, responsiveness and empathy also to some extent accounted for the negative perceptions.

The findings from this study is not much different from that of Abane (1993; 2004; 2011) who concluded that Accra's public transportation system has come under severe criticisms because of the deterioration in the quality of service offered to the public in terms of poor access, discourteous behaviour of the drivers and their mates, poor seating arrangements on board the vehicles and unreliability of their departure and arrival times.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the service quality delivery of public transportation services within the Accra Metropolis using SERVQUAL. The study was conducted using accidental sampling to select 200 tourists within the Accra Metropolis. The applied SERVQUAL model guided the study to ensure that all the needed variables were measured.

The results however revealed that the tourists had negative perceptions about the services received and were thus dissatisfied with the nature of services public transport service operators provided them with. The results also found out that there was a

statistically significant difference in the kind of service they expected and what they received from the service providers, hence their expectations far exceeding their perceptions.

It is increasingly becoming obvious from this study and earlier studies by Adarkwa (1991), Abane (1993; 2004; 2011) and Jorgensen and Abane (1999) that service quality analysis has to be introduced into Ghanaian public transport sector due to the dwindling nature of the services they are providing for commuters. It is therefore recommended that drivers should be given adequate training and advised to be friendlier, respectful and courteous in dealing with commuters and also transport authorities such as Ministry of Transport, Motor Traffic and Transport Unit of the Ghana Police Service, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority and driver associations should ensure that drivers abide by the rules and regulations governing the operation of transport facilities within the metropolis. When effective and efficient systems are put in place gradually to monitor the tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy of public transport facilities and staffs, the desired goal of providing quality of service can be achieved which might help increase the tourism potentials of the country.

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