More Than Just a Meal: How In-flight Meal Service Shapes Passenger Satisfaction and Continuous Travel Intention

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ABSTRACT

As competition in the global airline industry intensifies, service quality has become a key factor in how passengers evaluate airlines and decide on future travel. Based on the SERVQUAL framework, this study examines how the quality of in-flight meal service relates to passengers' continuous travel intention. Passengers' perceptions of in-flight meal service were measured on five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility. An online questionnaire was distributed through convenience sampling, and 217 valid responses were obtained from respondents who had actually traveled by air. Multiple regression analysis was then used to test the effects of the five dimensions on continuous travel intention. The results show that empathy and tangibility have significant positive effects, while the effects of reliability, responsiveness, and assurance are not significant. This pattern suggests that attention to passengers' individual needs and the visible elements of meal service may play an important role when passengers decide whether to fly with the same airline again. The present study extends airline service quality research by applying SERVQUAL to the specific setting of in-flight meal service, and it offers practical suggestions for airlines seeking to improve the passenger experience.

Keywords: In flight meal service quality, SERVQUAL, Continuous travel intention, Airline service quality, Passenger experience

1. Introduction

Air travel has become a major mode of long-distance transportation as the global air transport industry continues to grow. Competition among airlines no longer depends mainly on routes, fares, and fleet size. Instead, it increasingly depends on the overall service experience and on how customers perceive that experience [1]. Passengers form their overall impression of an airline's service quality across the entire service process, from booking and check-in to boarding, the flight itself, and arrival [2]. Therefore, raising service quality, meeting customer needs, and creating a positive travel

experience have become central concerns for airlines that wish to retain customers and stay competitive. Among the many touchpoints in this process, in-flight meal service plays a particularly important role [3]. Airline meals are served in a limited cabin space, under specific flight conditions, and within a tight time frame. Their delivery depends on a chain of activities that includes meal preparation, storage, transportation, reheating, serving procedures, and the performance of the cabin crew [4]. As a result, passengers' evaluations of meal service may reflect not only the meal itself but also the way the whole service is delivered.

In-flight meal service also requires a high level of contact between passengers and the cabin crew. During meal service, the attitude, efficiency, responsiveness, and professionalism of flight attendants, as well as their ability to handle special dietary requests, may shape how passengers judge service quality [5]. This contact matters even more on long-haul flights, where passengers stay on board for many hours and interact with airline staff more often. Meal service can therefore serve as an important moment of contact between passengers and the airline. Even if an airline performs well in-flight safety, punctuality, and cabin amenities, a meal service that falls short of passengers' expectations may still influence their overall evaluation of the airline.

Consumers today also hold more varied and personal expectations of service. Passengers who differ in age, travel purpose, cabin class, flight length, and eating habits may expect different things from in-flight meals [3]. Some passengers care most about taste and food quality, whereas others pay more attention to health, nutrition, hygiene, or special dietary needs. Some value a wide choice of dishes and local specialties, while others care more about how quickly and politely the crew serve the meal. For this reason, judging in-flight meal service against a single standard may prevent airlines from understanding what different passenger groups actually need and perceive.

Prior research on service quality has mostly examined general services, the food and beverage sector, the hospitality sector, or the aviation industry as a whole [4, 6]. Studies that focus specifically on the quality of in-flight meal service remain limited. Airline meals combine product quality, service quality, and customer experience, and they are served in an environment very different from that of an ordinary restaurant. Their quality depends on the flight environment, cabin space, serving procedures, cabin crew, and the requirements of individual passengers. It is therefore necessary to take the passenger's point of view in examining how in-flight meal service is perceived and evaluated, and how its different quality factors relate to customer satisfaction and continuous travel intention. Such an approach can offer a fuller picture of how passengers evaluate meal service and whether they intend to keep flying with the same airline.

The present study focuses on airline passengers and examines how they perceive and evaluate the quality of in-flight meal service. Meal quality, service personnel, service processes, and the overall service experience are treated as the main aspects of this service. By collecting responses from passengers who have actually flown, this study seeks to understand how they evaluate in-flight meal service and which factors shape their overall judgment of its quality. This study also tests how the quality of in-flight meal service relates to continuous travel intention.

In-flight meal service differs from ordinary food service because it takes place in a particular setting defined by limited cabin space, flight conditions, fixed serving procedures, and direct contact with the cabin crew. These features may affect how passengers perceive service quality and how they make later travel decisions. Therefore, examining in-flight meal service from the passenger's perspective helps to explain how perceptions of service quality may shape passengers' willingness to choose the same airline again.

Based on the above background and motivation, the objectives of this study are as follows:

I. To examine how passengers perceive and evaluate the quality of in-flight meal service.

II. To examine the effect of in-flight meal service quality on passengers' continuous travel intention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 In-Flight Meal Service

Air transport services are highly intangible, cannot be stored, and require a great deal of customer participation. While receiving these services, passengers form an overall perception of service quality through their contact with the airline at different touchpoints [6]. Prior research on air service quality has covered several dimensions, including ground handling, in-flight services, service personnel, flight reliability, comfort, and other parts of the passenger experience [7]. Studies have also shown that air service quality is significantly associated with customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions [8]. A study of air travelers in Taiwan, for example, identified structural links among service quality, perceived value, customer satisfaction, and behavioral intentions, and showed that both perceived value and satisfaction can affect travelers' behavioral intentions [5]. Taken together, these studies suggest that airline service quality is not limited to core operations such as flight safety and punctuality but also covers the many touchpoints that passengers experience during their journey. Accordingly, a full understanding of the airline customer experience requires a closer look at how passengers perceive service quality at specific touchpoints.

In-flight meal service is one of the main cabin services that airlines offer to passengers [9]. It differs considerably from ordinary restaurant dining, because meals have to be served inside an aircraft, where cabin space is limited and serving must follow set procedures [10]. Passengers' perceptions of meal quality may therefore depend not only on ingredients, cooking methods, and taste but also on food preservation, transportation, reheating, serving time, and the performance of the cabin crew. Prior research has suggested that in-flight meals are an important part of the overall airline service experience and that the service environment of an airline may affect how passengers perceive meal quality [11]. Studies drawing on data from several airlines and their passengers have further indicated that the in-flight service environment is related to passengers' perceptions and evaluations of meal quality. These results indicate that both the attributes of the meal and the service environment should be considered when examining how passengers evaluate in-flight meal service.

2.2 Service Quality

Service quality refers to customers' overall judgment of a service, formed through their perceptions and experiences during the service process and, in particular, through a comparison between what they expected and what they actually received [12]. Because services are intangible, inseparable, heterogeneous, and perishable, their quality is hard to judge against a single objective standard. Service quality is instead assessed mainly through customers' subjective perceptions and actual experiences [13]. For this reason, its measurement usually considers the gap between customer expectations and perceived performance, as well as the different touchpoints that customers meet during service delivery.

Parasuraman, et al. [14] proposed the Service Quality Gap Model, which holds that service quality depends on the gaps among customer expectations, the provider's understanding of those expectations, and the service actually delivered. Building on this model, Parasuraman, et al. [14] later developed SERVQUAL to measure how customers perceive service quality. SERVQUAL contains five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Tangibles cover the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of service staff. Reliability is the provider's ability to perform the promised service accurately and consistently. Responsiveness is the willingness of staff to help customers and to respond to their needs without delay. Assurance concerns the knowledge, competence, courtesy, and professionalism of staff and their ability to gain customers' trust. Empathy is the degree to which the provider understands and attends to the individual needs and concerns of each customer.

SERVQUAL has been applied widely in service industries such as aviation, food and beverage, hospitality, healthcare, and finance, and it has become an important theoretical basis for assessing service quality [15]. Nevertheless, service characteristics vary from one industry to another, so the dimensions and measures of service quality may need to be adapted to each context [8]. In aviation, service quality is shaped by frequent customer contact, time-sensitive delivery, operational constraints, and the particular environment in which services are provided. Applying general service quality dimensions directly to aviation services may therefore fail to reflect what passengers actually experience.

In-flight meal service is a clear case of this problem, as it combines a physical product with service delivery and customer interaction. Passengers judge not only the meal itself but also how it is prepared, delivered, presented, and served in the aircraft. Meal quality, service personnel, cleanliness and hygiene, reliability, and service processes may therefore jointly shape their perceptions of in-flight meal service quality [7]. Using the general SERVQUAL dimensions without considering these features may not fully capture how passengers actually evaluate the service.

Accordingly, this study uses SERVQUAL as the theoretical basis for examining in-flight meal service quality and draws on prior findings on aviation services and in-flight meals. To reflect the features of the in-flight meal setting, the relevant service quality dimensions are adapted from the passenger's perspective. The dimensions considered include meal quality, service personnel,

cleanliness and hygiene, reliability, and service processes. This adapted framework is intended to measure passengers' perceptions of in-flight meal service quality in a way that fits the context. It also serves as the basis for the hypotheses, questionnaire items, and empirical analysis that follow.

3. Hypothetical Development

Reliability is the ability of a service provider to deliver the promised service consistently and accurately. Parasuraman, et al. [14] defined reliability as the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately and listed it as one of the five core dimensions of service quality. In the context of in-flight meal service, reliability appears in whether the airline serves meals at the scheduled time, delivers the meal each passenger has chosen, keeps service quality consistent, and properly handles meal-related requests. Reliability in this setting thus reflects whether passengers believe the airline can keep its meal service promises consistently and accurately. Such beliefs may affect their overall evaluation of the airline and their willingness to fly with it again.

Prior research has shown that airline service quality is positively related to passengers' repurchase intentions [16, 17]. When passengers find that an airline serves meals reliably and accurately as promised, they are more likely to form a positive view of its service quality. This positive view may in turn strengthen their willingness to stay with the airline and to choose it for future trips. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The reliability of in-flight meal service quality has a positive effect on passengers' continuous travel intention.

Responsiveness is the willingness of service providers to help customers and to serve them promptly when needs arise. During meal service, passengers may ask for particular meal options, special dietary arrangements, extra cutlery, drinks, or other meal-related assistance. How quickly and accurately the cabin crew understand and respond to these requests is therefore a key part of responsiveness in in-flight meal service.

Prior research has found a positive relationship between airline service quality and passengers' repurchase intentions [16]. Manurung and Alhakiim [18] also examined responsiveness as one dimension of service quality and found that service quality dimensions were significantly related to passengers' repurchase intentions. These results suggest that timely and appropriate responses to customer needs may lead to a more positive evaluation of the service experience. In the in-flight meal setting, passengers who see the cabin crew respond to their requests quickly and effectively may evaluate the airline's service more favorably and be more willing to choose the airline again. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The responsiveness of in-flight meal service quality has a positive effect on passengers' continuous travel intention.

Assurance concerns the knowledge, competence, courtesy, and professionalism of service staff and their ability to earn customers' trust and confidence. In-flight meal service involves questions

about meal content, food safety, special dietary needs, and serving procedures [15]. Passengers' views of the cabin crew's professional knowledge, skills, and attitude may therefore affect their confidence that the airline can provide suitable meal service.

When passengers believe that the cabin crew know enough to answer meal-related questions and can handle dietary requirements properly, their confidence in the airline's service capability may grow. Professional service performance can contribute to customer trust and a positive evaluation of the provider [19]. This evaluation may then carry over to passengers' overall judgment of the airline and their willingness to keep using its services. Prior research has also suggested that service quality and employee performance can influence customers' future behavioral intentions [20]. Thus, when the cabin crew show professional knowledge, a courteous attitude, and dependable skills during meal service, passengers may trust the airline more and be more willing to choose it for future travel. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The assurance of in-flight meal service quality has a positive effect on passengers' continuous travel intention.

Empathy is the ability of service providers to see customers' needs from the customers' own point of view and to offer individual and caring service (An & Noh, 2009). In the context of in-flight meal service, passengers may differ in dietary preferences, religious dietary rules, health conditions, and other special needs [8]. How well the airline recognizes and responds to these individual requirements may therefore shape passengers' perceptions of service quality.

When the cabin crew show that they understand passengers' individual needs and offer suitable help, passengers may feel that their preferences are noticed and respected. Such personal attention can make the service experience more positive and strengthen perceptions of service quality [21]. A positive service experience may then encourage passengers to maintain their relationship with the airline and to keep choosing it. Passengers who perceive a higher level of empathy during meal service may thus form a more positive evaluation of the airline and show a stronger continuous travel intention. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: The empathy of in-flight meal service quality has a positive effect on passengers' continuous travel intention.

Tangibles are the physical facilities, equipment, service environment, and staff appearance that customers can see and experience directly during the service process [22]. In the context of in-flight meal service, tangibles may include how the meal is presented, the quality of the tableware, the packaging, the cleanliness of the tray, the cabin dining environment, and the appearance of the cabin crew [23]. These elements give passengers visible cues for judging the quality of the service.

Since passengers may have few opportunities to judge the full quality of a service before they experience it, tangible attributes can act as important signals of service quality. Well-presented meals, suitable tableware, clean trays, and a pleasant service environment may contribute to passengers' overall perceptions of in-flight meal service. Prior research has shown that tangible service attributes

can affect customers' evaluations of service quality and their later behavioral intentions [22, 24]. Therefore, passengers who view the tangible aspects of meal service as high in quality may evaluate the airline more favorably and be more willing to keep choosing it for future travel. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: The tangibility of in-flight meal service quality has a positive effect on passengers' continuous travel intention.

4. Research result

4.1 Sampling Method

This study used convenience sampling to conduct a questionnaire survey. The target population was members of the general public who had actually traveled by air, and data were collected with an online questionnaire. During the survey period, the questionnaire link was shared through social media, messaging apps, and related online communities to reach more people and raise the response rate. To make sure that respondents met the eligibility criteria, the questionnaire opened with a statement of the research purpose and instructions, and it was directed specifically at people with air travel experience. A total of 217 valid responses were obtained, with no missing values in the demographic data. Respondents' demographic characteristics and travel behavior were recorded and later used for statistical analysis and hypothesis testing.

4.2 Sample Analysis

Of the 217 valid responses, none contained missing values. By gender, 143 respondents (65.90%) were male and 74 (34.10%) were female, so the sample was mainly male. By marital status, 119 respondents (54.84%) were unmarried and 98 (45.16%) were married, with unmarried respondents slightly outnumbering married ones.

By age, the largest group was 41 to 50 years old, with 77 respondents (35.48%). This group was followed by those aged 31 to 40 (51 respondents, 23.50%), 51 to 60 (47 respondents, 21.66%), and 20 to 30 (30 respondents, 13.82%). The smallest group was aged 61 and above, with 12 respondents (5.53%). Respondents aged 31 to 60 made up 80.64% of the sample, so the sample consisted mainly of people in this age range.

By annual travel frequency, the largest group traveled 11 to 15 times a year (76 respondents, 35.02%). Next came those traveling 6 to 10 times (58 respondents, 26.73%), 1 to 5 times (56 respondents, 25.81%), and 16 times or more (27 respondents, 12.44%). In total, 74.19% of respondents traveled six or more times a year, which suggests that a large proportion of the sample traveled fairly often.

4.2 Analysis of Results

Table 1 shows that the regression model has a multiple correlation coefficient (R) of 0.49, a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.24, and an adjusted R^2 of 0.22. Together, reliability,

responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility explain about 24% of the variance in continuous travel intention. After adjusting for the number of predictors and the sample size, the explained variance is about 22%.

The overall model yields an F value of 13.34 ($p = 2.64 \times 10^{-11}$), so the model is statistically significant. This result means that the five service quality dimensions, as a group, are significantly related to continuous travel intention. The model therefore has overall explanatory power and supports a closer look at the individual effects of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility.

Table 1. Model summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	RMSE	R^2 Change	F Change	df1	df2	p
M_0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.68	0.00		0	216	
M_1	0.49	0.24	0.22	0.60	0.24	13.34	5	211	2.64×10^{-11}

Table 2 shows that the five dimensions of in-flight meal service quality related to continuous travel intention in different ways. Reliability, responsiveness, and assurance were not significant, whereas empathy and tangibility had significant positive effects. The effect of reliability on continuous travel intention was not significant ($\beta = 0.006$, $p = 0.92$), so H1 is not supported. Responsiveness was also not significant ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.06$), and H2 is not supported. Likewise, assurance had no significant effect ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.12$), and H3 is not supported.

Within this study, therefore, the reliability of meal delivery and the responsiveness and assurance of the cabin crew were not significantly related to continuous travel intention. From the standpoint of the aviation industry, passengers may regard these features as basic or expected parts of in-flight meal service. When they are present or performed adequately, they may not make the overall experience distinctive enough to change passengers' intention to keep flying with the airline. This interpretation, however, is only a possible explanation and cannot be drawn directly from the statistical results.

Empathy had a significant positive effect on continuous travel intention ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.00181$), so H4 is supported. This result suggests that passengers who feel that their individual dining needs are understood and considered may report a stronger intention to choose the airline again. Personal attention and suitable help during meal service, in particular, may improve the overall service experience and, in turn, continuous travel intention.

Tangibility also had a significant positive effect on continuous travel intention ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.00403$), so H5 is supported. The tangible parts of in-flight meal service, such as meal presentation, packaging, clean tableware, and the cabin dining environment, are things that passengers see and experience directly. The results suggest that more positive perceptions of these elements go together with a stronger continuous travel intention. Improving the tangible side of meal service may therefore contribute to a better passenger experience and may be associated with a greater willingness to fly

with the airline again.

Table 2. Structural model analysis

Model	Unstandardized	SE	ST	t	p
M_0	5.06	0.05		109.69	2.21×10^{-191}
M_1	1.58	0.46		3.44	7.11×10^{-4}
Reliability	7.22×10^{-3}	0.07	6.63×10^{-3}	0.10	0.92
Responsiveness	0.13	0.07	0.14	1.90	0.06
Assurance	0.12	0.08	0.12	1.54	0.12
Empathy	0.22	0.07	0.21	3.16	1.81×10^{-3}
Tangibles	0.21	0.07	0.21	2.91	4.03×10^{-3}

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results

This study used the five SERVQUAL dimensions to examine how in-flight meal service quality relates to continuous travel intention. The five dimensions did not relate to continuous travel intention in the same way. Empathy and tangibility had significant positive effects, while reliability, responsiveness, and assurance did not.

Reliability was not significantly related to continuous travel intention. A possible reason is that passengers already treat accurate and consistent meal provision as a basic requirement of in-flight meal service. In the aviation industry, meal service usually follows standard procedures and operating practices, from loading and distribution to serving in the cabin. Reliable and consistent meal service may thus be seen as something passengers expect rather than as a feature that sets one airline apart from another. Improving reliability alone, therefore, may not necessarily be associated with a stronger intention to choose a particular airline.

Responsiveness and assurance also showed no significant effects on continuous travel intention. In-flight meal service operates under several constraints, including flight duration, cabin space, serving procedures, and standardized service practices. Under these conditions, passengers may hold fairly stable expectations about how fast and how professionally the cabin crew serve them. Once these expectations are met, faster responses or more professional performance may not greatly raise passengers' continuous travel intention. This reading offers one possible explanation for the nonsignificant results, and further research is needed to examine the mechanisms behind them.

By contrast, empathy had a significant positive effect on continuous travel intention. Because

passengers differ widely in dietary preferences and special requirements, attention to individual needs and personalized help may make the service experience more positive. Passengers who feel that their specific needs are understood and respected may evaluate the airline more favorably and be more inclined to choose it again.

Tangibility also had a significant positive effect on continuous travel intention. The concrete parts of in-flight meal service, including meal presentation, packaging, clean tableware, hygiene, and the cabin dining environment, are seen and experienced directly by passengers. These elements may therefore act as key cues for judging the quality of the meal service. Overall, the results suggest that airlines, besides keeping basic service standards, may gain from paying more attention to passengers' individual needs and to the visible presentation of the meal service.

5.2 Discussion

Drawing on SERVQUAL, this study applied its five dimensions to in-flight meal service and examined their relationships with continuous travel intention. In-flight meal service differs from many ordinary service settings because it brings together a physical product, service delivery, and customer interaction within the confined space of an aircraft. Its quality may therefore depend on the cabin environment, serving procedures, cabin crew, and the needs of individual passengers. By applying SERVQUAL to this specific airline service, the present study provides empirical evidence on how well the service quality dimensions apply to in-flight meal service.

The results also show that the five SERVQUAL dimensions were not uniformly related to continuous travel intention. Reliability, responsiveness, and assurance were not significant, whereas empathy and tangibility had significant positive effects. This pattern suggests that the weight of each service quality dimension may change with the features of the service setting and the type of customer interaction. In the context of in-flight meal service, standardized and professional service may be regarded as expected, while individual attention and tangible attributes may be more closely related to passengers' continuous travel intention.

In addition, by adding continuous travel intention to the research framework, this study moves the discussion of in-flight meal service quality beyond passengers' evaluations of service performance. Prior research on service quality has mostly examined customer perceptions, satisfaction, or general behavioral intentions. The present study goes a step further by testing whether specific dimensions of in-flight meal service quality relate to passengers' intention to keep choosing the same airline. This offers another angle for understanding how perceptions of service quality connect to later behavioral intentions in the airline context.

Finally, the significant effects of empathy and tangibility point to the possible importance of both personal attention and physical service attributes in in-flight meal service. In theoretical terms, these results fit the nature of airline meal service, which combines standardized operating procedures with room for individual interaction and with direct sensory judgment of tangible elements. They may serve as a reference for future studies of service quality in airlines and other specialized service

settings. Future research could add variables such as customer satisfaction, perceived value, perceived service experience, or customer trust to examine the mechanisms through which in-flight meal service quality relates to continuous travel intention.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest.

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