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DIGITAL VOICES IN THE SKIES: A NETNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION OF SERVICE QUALITY IN TÜRKIYE'S FULL-SERVICE AND LOW-COST AIRLINES

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ABSTRACT

Competition among airlines is intensifying as more carriers enter the market, making long-term survival increasingly challenging. Customer satisfaction is a key driver of success, directly influencing passenger loyalty and repurchase intentions. While service failures are inevitable, turning them into opportunities for improvement can be a strategic advantage. Understanding complaint patterns and proactively addressing service failures is crucial for airlines. This study analyzes online consumer feedback from full-service and low-cost airlines in Türkiye to determine which service quality dimensions receive the most criticism and whether dissatisfaction differs by airline type. Using web scraping with Python 3.12, 482 reviews containing 1,029 complaints were analyzed. The findings revealed reliability as the most criticized dimension, regardless of competitive strategy. However, differences in other dimensions suggest varied consumer expectations based on airline type. These insights offer valuable guidance for airlines to enhance service quality and improve passenger experience.

KEY WORDS

Consumer complaints, consumer behavior, service quality, airline services, aviation management.

In a highly competitive industry, businesses must prioritize maintaining and enhancing service quality to achieve long-term success. The growing number of service providers intensifies competition, underscoring the significance of service quality for airlines. As a result, understanding consumer expectations has become even more critical in delivering exceptional service quality (Robledo, 2011). Airlines adopt different competitive strategies to gain an advantage. While some follow a full-service strategy, offering unique, high-quality services to stand out, others—specifically low-cost airlines—focus on balancing price and performance to enhance customer satisfaction, competing primarily on cost while providing standardized services (Koklic et al., 2017).

The aviation industry has reached 4.497 billion passengers (Statista, 2024) and is projected to grow at an annual rate of 3.8%, resulting in over 4 billion additional passenger journeys by 2043 compared to 2023 (IATA, 2024). Airlines aiming to expand their market share must thoroughly understand consumer expectations and address weaknesses in their service offerings to enhance satisfaction, which plays a vital impact in market share and gaining long-term competitive advantage (Thongkruer & Wanarat, 2021; Tahanisaz & Shokuhyar, 2020). However, service quality is a multifaceted concept, and improving one aspect alone does not necessarily guarantee an overall enhancement in service quality. For airlines, customer satisfaction extends beyond the flight experience to encompass marketing and customer service strategies, including ticketing, departure, arrival, and post-purchase loyalty programs (Khudhair et al., 2021).

This study aims to provide insights for airlines based in Türkiye by examining consumer feedback shared on www.airlinequality.com to identify areas requiring improvement. Consumer complaints are valuable for enhancing satisfaction and transforming dissatisfied passengers into loyal customers. The findings of this analysis may contribute to improving



service quality by addressing the root causes of negative experiences. This can lead to strengthened customer satisfaction, an expanded market share, and a greater competitive advantage in the increasingly dynamic airline industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Quality in Airline Transportation. When purchasing goods, consumers rely on tangible attributes such as style, color, packaging, and texture to assess quality. However, in the case of services, tangible indicators are limited to aspects like physical facilities, equipment, and personnel. Due to this intangibility, consumers often depend on alternative cues to evaluate service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Zeithaml (1988) characterizes service quality as how customers perceive the overall excellence and superiority of a service based on their experiences and expectations. Various concepts have been proposed to define service quality; however, the most widely recognized framework in the literature is SERVQUAL, introduced by Parasuraman et al. (1985). Service quality can be defined by the extent and nature of the comparison between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the service provided (Leong et al., 2015). SERVQUAL evaluates service quality across five key dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Its primary objective is to assess customer expectations and perceptions, providing a structured approach to measuring customer satisfaction.

The original SERVQUAL model initially comprised ten dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer, and tangibles. However, three years later, Parasuraman et al. (1988) refined the model, consolidating it into five core dimensions:

- Tangibles: The physical aspects of the service, encompassing infrastructure, equipment, and the presentation of the personnel;
- Reliability: The capability to fulfill commitments with accuracy and consistency, ensuring dependable service delivery;
- Responsiveness: The readiness to assist passengers and deliver prompt and efficient service when needed;
- Assurance: The expertise, professionalism, and courtesy of employees, along with their ability to foster trust and confidence among customers;
- Empathy: The extent to which personalized attention and care are provided to meet individual customer needs and expectations.

In the airline industry, extensive research has explored the influence of service quality perceptions on consumer behavior along with the key dimensions that matter most to passengers. Studies suggest that an airline's service quality has a pivotal role in driving customer loyalty through satisfaction (Hussain et al., 2015). Thongkruer and Wanarat (2021) further established that service quality is closely linked to passenger loyalty, trust, airline performance, and perceived value. Additionally, it significantly influences repurchase intentions (Law et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2019).

Among the five SERVQUAL dimensions, reliability has been identified as the most crucial, followed by responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Sultan & Simpson, 2000). Similarly, Tsaur et al. (2002) highlighted attendant courtesy, safety, seat comfort and cleanliness, and attendants' responsiveness as the most critical service attributes. Research by Chen and Chang (2015) emphasized that tangible aspects are particularly significant for in-flight services, whereas responsiveness and assurance play a more crucial role in shaping passengers' experiences with ground services. This distinction highlights the varying importance of service quality dimensions at different stages of the travel experience, reinforcing the need for airlines to tailor their strategies accordingly. Moreover, Gupta (2018) found that tangibility and reliability are the most critical factors in determining service quality. In their study examining whether the importance of service quality dimensions differs between full-service airlines and low-cost airlines, Jim and Lee (2020) found that for full-service carriers, tangibles are the most critical dimension, while for low-cost carriers, reliability holds the highest significance. Conversely, assurance and empathy were identified



as the least significant dimensions for full-service airlines and low-cost airlines, respectively. These findings highlight how service quality priorities vary between airline business models, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches to effectively meet passenger expectations.

Service Failure and Consumer Complaints. The field of services marketing widely emphasizes the importance of both retaining existing customers and establishing connections with new consumers as a core business approach (Piercy, 1995). The success of this approach depends on maintaining profitable relationships, which are closely linked to customer satisfaction with service quality. A key indicator of satisfaction levels is the customer complaints (Metwallay, 2013).

Passengers' dissatisfaction with service quality is a major factor contributing to market share loss in the airline industry. However, a well-handled response can significantly increase the likelihood of transforming a dissatisfied customer into a loyal one. Businesses should see consumer complaints as a crucial opportunity and a final chance for them to address issues and retain customers (L, et al, 2021).

Encouraging genuine customer complaints can be highly beneficial, as they provide valuable opportunities to address service failures. Since dissatisfied customers may leave without voicing their concerns—resulting in revenue loss—creating an environment that encourages complaints can enhance service recovery and foster customer loyalty (Schoefer & Ennew, 2004).

Building long-term customer relationships requires a deliberate effort and a strong foundation in a company's service approach and value proposition, both of which are reinforced by an effective service recovery strategy. This is particularly important since customers who have positive experiences are more likely to return and recommend the brand to others. Moreover, they often exhibit greater tolerance for price variations, placing higher value on the overall service experience (Atalik, 2007). Since service failures are inevitable due to variability in operations and the high level of human involvement in service delivery (Migacz et al., 2018), they pose a constant challenge for service providers. Therefore, it is crucial for businesses to develop the capability to understand the sequence of actions and strategic measures needed to address service failures (Van Breda, 2016). Service quality is positively affected by service recovery performance and affects repurchase intention (Amako et al., 2018). When companies manage service failures, customers perceive it as a reflection of their reliability and responsiveness—fundamental components of service quality—which, in turn, fosters customer satisfaction and encourages repeat purchases (Alzoubi et al., 2020),

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Netnography, often referred to as online ethnography, is a contemporary qualitative research method that modifies traditional ethnographic techniques to examine cultures and communities formed through digital interactions. In the context of marketing research, netnography leverages publicly accessible data from online forums to analyze the needs and factors influencing the decisions of relevant consumer groups (Kozinets, 2002). This approach remains natural and non-intrusive, as it relies on organically shared consumer information within an environment that is not artificially created by the researcher. Consequently, it is widely employed to gain insights into consumer behavior (Guyt et al., 2024; Singh, 2019).

In this study, consumer feedback was collected from www.airlinequality.com. The webpage is operated by Skytrax, a global rating organization for airlines and airports founded in 1989.

The website is operated by Skytrax, a global organization specializing in air transport ratings, established in 1989. The platform has been commonly selected for previous studies (Song et al., 2020; Brochado et al., 2024; Gidener and Morcote Santos, 2024; Pérezgonzález and Andrew, 2011; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2017), does not have any financial ties to airlines or airports, ensuring its impartiality. Skytrax is also known for its



prestigious awards—often referred to as the "Oscars" of the airline industry—that recognize excellence in air travel.

To ensure that factors beyond the control of service providers during the COVID-19 period do not influence the analysis, only customer feedback from 2023 onwards—when the World Health Organization declared the end of the pandemic (United Nations, 2023)—has been considered. This analysis examines two budget airlines and one full-service carrier to compare the frequency of complaints. The selection of two budget airlines is due to the limited number of consumer feedback entries available for these carriers.

Consumer feedback data spanning 2023 to 2025 was collected using web scraping, employing a Python 3.12-based web scraper. Once the data was retrieved, the initial phase focused on categorizing and coding each feedback entry according to the relevant service quality dimension. This classification process was systematically applied to all consumer reviews recorded between January 2023 and January 2025 for Turkish Airlines (THY), Pegasus Airlines (PGS), and SunExpress (SUNX).

Reviews that contained positive feedback or lacked clear issues were excluded from the analysis. When the process of coding was completed, the outputs from both coders were compared to ensure inter-rater reliability. Additionally, three independent field experts evaluated the final version of the coded and categorized dataset, leading to a shared agreement on classification accuracy. After establishing alignment on the coding, each complaint category was assigned to its corresponding service quality dimension, as outlined below:

Table 1 – Service Quality Dimensions and Related Complaints

Service Quality Dimension	Reasons of Complaint
Tangibles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seating • In-flight entertainment • Webpage /mobile app problems • Food / Drink • Aircraft conditions • Lounge
Reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delay • Cancellation • Compensation process • Refund process • Baggage Problems • Reservation • Paid services problem • Not taking responsibility for service failure
Responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of explanation • Unhelpful staff • Ignored consumer requests • Inaccessible call center • Lack of timely update • Failure to timely provide a solution
Assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rude staff • Incompetent staff • Staff's English proficiency • Negligent staff • Unfriendly staff
Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No apology • Lack of individualized care • Lack of understanding

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All airlines were analyzed based on complaint frequency across service quality dimensions, average rating, and journey verification. The total amount of consumer feedback available during the selected period was 448 for THY, 75 for PGS, and 31 for SUNX.



However, as mentioned earlier, positive and non-specific complaints were excluded from the analysis. After filtering, the final dataset consisted of:

- 392 consumer feedback entries for THY (after excluding 47 positive reviews and nine non-specific comments);
- 68 consumer feedback entries for PGS (after removing six positive and one non-specific feedback);
- 22 consumer feedback entries for SUNX (excluding six positive and three non-specific feedbacks).

In total, 482 passenger feedbacks were analyzed for service quality dimensions across all carriers. However, the actual number of complaints was more than twice this amount, as dissatisfied customers often reported multiple service quality issues within a single review and provided detailed elaborations. The majority of the reviews focused on THY, as it is a Star Alliance member and the most recognized and reputable Turkish aviation brand. Additionally, as the flag carrier airline, it offers a greater number of flights and serves a broader range of destinations compared to other airlines in Türkiye.

Table 2 – Consumer feedback and complaints

n/n	THY	PGS	SUNX	Total
Number of feedbacks	392	68	22	482
Number of complaints	823	159	47	1029

Passenger ratings were generally low, likely because dissatisfied customers are more inclined to leave reviews on this platform than those with positive experiences. When analyzing positive feedback, 21% of reviews for SUNX and 10% for THY were favorable, while this percentage dropped to 8% for PGS. Although this comparison is not entirely fair due to differences in competitive strategies among the airlines and the unequal number of consumer reviews, it still provides a snapshot of consumer satisfaction at the time. In other words, these ratings may reflect differences between budget and full-service airlines, as passenger expectations vary based on the level of service provided. Since THY is the only full-service carrier in this analysis, offering business class services, its passengers may have had different expectations compared to those flying with budget airlines like PGS and SUNX.

The verification of trips was also analyzed, revealing that 147 out of 392 reviews were verified, meaning that at least 62% of the reviews reflected actual travel experiences from real passengers. However, the remaining 147 unverified reviews should not be automatically dismissed since verification requires extra effort from passengers, and some may have lacked the time or misplaced their tickets.

The final step of the analysis focused on classifying consumer dissatisfactions, where we applied the SERVQUAL dimensions originally developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). This model was adapted to the field of airline service quality in a study conducted by Sultan and Simpson (2000) and was used as a reference for this research.

Table 3 – Complaint analysis

SERVQUAL Dimensions	Number of Complaints			TOTAL
	THY	PGS	SUNX	
Tangibles	118	8	7	133
Reliability	363	74	22	459
Responsiveness	150	30	7	187
Assurance	136	37	9	182
Empathy	56	10	2	68
TOTAL	823	159	47	1029

The reliability dimension emerged as the primary source of consumer dissatisfaction, regardless of the airline's competitive strategy. Both low-cost carriers and full-service airlines struggled to meet passenger expectations in this area. According to Sultan and Simpson (2000), reliability in the airline industry refers to an airline's ability to deliver promised



services consistently and accurately. A detailed analysis revealed that flight delays were the most significant cause of dissatisfaction, followed by baggage issues (including lost or damaged luggage), canceled flights, compensation disputes, and problems with paid services. The latter includes pre-paid extras such as seat selection, meals, and baby bassinets, where passengers encountered issues despite prior payment. Below are some examples that illustrate the previously mentioned sub-categories:

"...Our original flight was canceled, and a replacement was provided only after a few hours of delay. The aircraft was later changed, and we lost our pre-assigned seats that we had paid for..."

"... Upon arrival to my final destination, I discovered that a few items were stolen..."

"...Upon arriving in Hanoi, I was shocked to find that both of my checked-in luggage were missing..."

The second most frequently reported service quality complaint varied across different airlines. For the full-service airline (THY), passengers were primarily dissatisfied with the responsiveness dimension, whereas for low-cost carriers (PGS and SUNX), consumer dissatisfaction aligned more closely with the assurance dimension, following reliability. Sultan and Simpson (2000) define responsiveness as an airline staff's willingness to assist customers and provide prompt service. Within this dimension, consumers primarily expressed dissatisfaction with unhelpful staff, followed by a lack of explanation and inaccessible call centers. Below are examples of consumer feedback related to these sub-categories:

"...the lack of assistance and clarity from Turkish Airlines' customer service representatives has been disappointing..."

"...Despite multiple attempts to call them regarding urgent travel issues, there has been no response. This experience has shattered my trust in the airline's commitment to customer care..."

"...The staff ..., wanted to start their coffee break and simply refused to check us in and just ignored that the flight was re-opened..."

The assurance dimension ranked as the second most common category of negative experiences among low-cost airline passengers. It pertains to the expertise, professionalism, and level of courtesy of airline employees, as well as their power to build trust and confidence (Sultan & Simpson, 2000). Under this dimension, the most frequently cited issues were staff rudeness, incompetence, and inadequate English proficiency, all of which contributed to passenger dissatisfaction. Below are some examples that illustrate these problems:

"...None of the cabin staff spoke to us or greeted us on boarding..."

"...The supervisor then arrived and screamed at us at the top of her voice. We have never been spoken to like this at a check-in counter at any airport in the world..."

"...Talking to staff was a nightmare; they barely spoke any language other than Turkish..."

Tangibles ranked as the third most frequently dissatisfied dimension for THY and SUNX, whereas PGS passengers expressed slightly higher dissatisfaction with the empathy dimension compared to tangibles. According to Sultan and Simpson (2000), tangibles refer to



the appearance of an airline's ground facilities, aircraft, personnel, and communication materials. Given that airlines today primarily rely on digital service distribution rather than physical stores, issues related to their websites and mobile applications were also categorized under this dimension. It is important to note that THY is the only airline in this analysis that features aircraft featuring specially designed sections for business-class passengers. This distinction may have contributed to a higher volume of criticisms related to seating comfort, in-flight entertainment, food and beverage quality, and overall aircraft condition. Within this dimension, consumers primarily reported negative experiences related to seating issues, specifically seat comfort, and legroom. This was followed by dissatisfaction with food and beverage selection and quality, as well as concerns about aircraft condition, including the age of the aircraft, cabin cleanliness, and lavatory hygiene. Below are examples of consumer feedback related to these sub-categories:

"...Absolutely shameful business class, which in fact is exactly the same as the economy class, but in the middle, they made something like a table instead of a seat..."

"...The food was minimum quality..."

"...The flight from Dubai was operated by a totally worn-out 330 with no leg recline..."

"...I tried to change the flight on the Turkish Airlines (TA) website, but I got an error: "Unable to process your request, please try again later..."

Finally, the last SERVQUAL dimension, empathy, refers to the caring and personalized attention an airline provides to its passengers (Sultan & Simpson, 2000). The analysis revealed that within this category, consumers primarily complained about the lack of apologies, inadequate individualized care, and a general absence of understanding from airline staff. Below are some examples of consumer feedback related to the empathy dimension:

"...My wife had a broken foot and was treated poorly by ground and cabin staff..."

"...We put away from each other father and mother and 2-year-old baby..."

"...A trip that should have taken half a day was transformed into two full days of Travel, waiting at the airport during a transfer in Turkey, queuing during hours to get a new flight, no information at all, nobody from the company apologizing for the situation..."

CONCLUSION

This study aims to offer current insights into consumer perceptions of airlines based in Türkiye and to identify dimensions of service quality that reveal areas needing improvement. To accomplish this, we extracted 1,029 consumer complaints from 482 online feedback entries shared after the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected through web scraping from www.airlinequality.com was analyzed, and the specific issues leading to negative consumer experiences were categorized according to their relevance to each service quality dimension.

The results revealed that regardless of the competitive strategy adopted by airlines, issues related to the reliability dimension are the primary drivers of negative consumer feedback online. Reliability reflects an airline's ability to successfully carry out all aspects of flight operations in a timely and efficient manner. More specifically, consumers complained about flight delays, baggage issues, canceled flights, compensation processes, problems with paid services, refund difficulties, reservation problems, and airlines' failure to take responsibility for service failures.

The second most criticized service quality dimension varied among airlines based on their competitive strategy. While the full-service airline (THY) faced more negative consumer



experiences related to responsiveness, passengers of budget airlines reported assurance as the second most problematic area. Within responsiveness, consumers primarily expressed dissatisfaction with unhelpful staff, followed by lack of explanation, inaccessible call centers, ignored consumer requests, and delayed updates or resolutions. Meanwhile, under assurance, airlines were criticized for issues such as staff rudeness, incompetence, inadequate English proficiency, negligence, and unfriendly behavior.

Another service quality dimension examined was tangibles, which refer to passenger satisfaction with an airline's ground facilities, aircraft, personnel, and communication materials. This category encompasses service quality aspects such as seating comfort, food and beverage selection and quality, age of the aircraft, in-flight entertainment, cabin cleanliness, lavatory hygiene, website and mobile app functionality, and lounge services.

The empathy dimension, which reflects the caring and personalized attention an airline provides to its passengers, is another aspect consumers highlighted in their feedback about their experiences with airlines. Although it did not receive complaints as frequently as other dimensions, consumers in this category reported issues such as a lack of apologies, inadequate individualized care, and a general absence of understanding from airline staff.

These findings align with previous research. Liou and Tzeng (2007) identified reliability as the most influential factor in shaping service quality perceptions, alongside airline personnel attitudes, such as customer complaint handling and service efficiency, which are linked to responsiveness. Similarly, a study examining airline service quality during COVID-19 found that reliability remained the primary factor driving consumer dissatisfaction (Gidener & Morcote Santos, 2024). Conversely, studies focusing on low-cost carriers suggest that tangibles are the primary driver of service quality perception for these airlines (Shiwakoti et al., 2022; Shen & Yahya, 2021).

The findings of this study aim to provide practical insights for airline managers, highlighting key areas where service improvements could make a significant impact. Addressing these issues effectively can lead to higher customer satisfaction, stronger brand identification, repurchase intention, and improved passenger loyalty over time (Gürler, 2025). Additionally, literature shows that successful handling of consumer complaints can create a greater benefit compared to the cost that occurs due to consumer loss. (Ozumen et al., 2021).

One of the biggest concerns among passengers was reliability. To improve in this area, airlines should focus on better scheduling, more efficient baggage handling, and clearer compensation policies. Additionally, proactive communication during disruptions could help manage expectations and prevent frustration.

Full-service carriers (THY) received more complaints about responsiveness, indicating that passengers expect a higher level of customer support when they choose a premium airline. To address these concerns, airlines should invest in better customer service training, expanded digital support options, and faster response systems. For budget airlines, assurance was the second biggest issue reported by passengers. Since many travelers choose budget airlines expecting a no-frills experience, poor service can leave an even stronger negative impression. Airlines in this segment would benefit from enhancing staff training, ensuring service consistency, and improving language support for international travelers.

Passenger dissatisfaction with tangibles also played a role, particularly regarding seating comfort, food quality, aircraft condition, and digital services. Airlines that overlook these aspects may struggle to retain customers, especially in an increasingly competitive market. Improvements such as enhanced seat design that aligns with their price range and a more intuitive booking system could significantly boost passenger satisfaction.

Although empathy was not as frequently mentioned as other service quality dimensions, it remains a key factor in shaping customer perceptions. Small yet meaningful improvements—such as enhanced assistance for families, elderly passengers, and individuals with disabilities, personalized service recovery efforts, and well-trained frontline staff who actively engage with passengers—could significantly enhance how airlines are perceived.



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