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Cultural Orientation and Customer Satisfaction. A study of African Airlines

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Abstract

The extent to which members of different cultures vary in their reactions to uncertainty can have a major impact on how perceived service quality affects customer satisfaction. This is so particularly to service industries in an era of rapid internationalization. Thus, the objective of this paper was to investigate the effect of cultural orientation on customer satisfaction in the context of an airline. The sample consisted of 750 customers drawn from 9 selected African Airlines, selected through stratified and simple random sampling techniques. Before testing the hypotheses testing, data collection instruments were purified by utilizing a structure model equation and confirmatory factor analysis. The findings of this study show that cultural orientation had a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction among African airlines. Insight on using culture for directing resources where quality investments are needed most is provided to managers. Given the novelty of the findings, the study recommends that African airlines must invest heavily in cultural orientation to foster identity, commitment, attitudinal and behavioral, which fosters long-term customer satisfaction.

Keywords: *Cultural Orientation, Customer Satisfaction, Service Quality, Customer Loyalty*

1. Introduction

Researchers on consumer psychology have argued that cultural background has a significant influence on how customers describe their service experiences (Gergen, Gulerce, Lock & Misra, 1996). This is so particularly to service organizations operating across national frontiers

(Reimann, Lünemann & Chase, 2008). Studies have pointed out the need for a better understanding of cultural orientation as it affects behaviors, perceptions and attributional style and pattern of emotions (Tsai & Lau, 2013; Santiago & Tarantino, 2002). Thus, cultural influences usually result in varied expectations causing discrepancies in customers' experiences (Lee, Joshi, & McIvor, 2007; Zhang, Beatty & Walsh, 2008). With intensified globalization, people can now travel abroad to and from different countries, airlines face numerous challenges in accommodating these different cultural influences. Moreover, airlines not only provide their services to domestic passengers but also those coming from abroad, inferring they operate at global scope. Therefore, diversity in customers presents different perceptions and expectations of what constitutes good air service (Laroche, Ueltschy, Abe, Cleveland, & Yannopoulos, 2004). For this reason, airlines need to understand the underlying differences among cultures. Therefore, a better understanding of differences can help airlines integrate the different needs more effectively in their products and service offerings to achieve customer satisfaction (Bellou, 2007; Tsoukatos & Rand, 2007). As a result, it is possible to grant more globalized, custom services that would cater to their unique cultural orientation. Unfortunately, airlines have often ignored the importance of cultural background in their continual attempts to provide the best quality service based on their understanding of service quality. Furthermore, understanding a culture may seem irrelevant as the complexity of culture adds to the difficulty of measuring the critical elements within providing quality service (Jin Hoare & Butcher, 2008). These critical elements, identified through research done in the past, are already difficult to utilize effectively to accommodate guests from abroad.

The current understanding of service quality and service encounters in an international setting is mainly derived from a standardized definition of high-quality services. However, this quality standard is no longer sufficient in satisfying the ever-growing population of sophisticated travelers from abroad. Despite the growing research on consumer psychology, little is known on the cultural orientation and customer satisfaction in developing countries, since the existing theoretical frameworks are based on western cultures. Thus, the objective of this paper is to examine the effect of cultural orientation on customer satisfaction among African airlines.

2. Literature Review

2.1.1 Cultural orientation

Cultural orientation is a multidimensional, multidirectional process through which identification to the traditional and dominant culture occurs independently yet simultaneously (Roosa, Dumka, Gonzales, & Knight, 2002). Researchers have weighed the cultural diversity against the impacts on the preferences, demand, values and purchasing patterns of customers. Kim, Forsythe, and Gu (2002) affirmed that the cultural norms, buying behavior and needs of customers in different areas are likely to vary, impact and establish where the loyalty lies. Airlines operate worldwide, passengers from various countries are being incorporated into global travel, as such, it is important to recognize culture to be a multifaceted concept that surpasses one country (Srnrka, 2004). To add, studies have noted the need to investigate the intersection between culture on

customer satisfaction models, which could open up a better comprehension of customer needs (Haryanto, Moutinho, & Coelho, 2016; Abu-Alhaija, Yusof, Haslinda, & Jaharuddin, (2018). Besides, Agag and El-Masry (2016) contend that it is crucial to investigate the impacts of cultural affiliation on customers' loyalty models, an example of social demonstration and risk aversion had a huge fluctuation among customers of mixed demographics and gender in various cultural affiliations in Europe, Africa including Asia.

2.1.2 Customer Satisfaction

According to Oliver (1997), customer satisfaction is the consumer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment. While Hansemark and Albinsson (2004) opine that customer satisfaction is "an overall customer attitude towards a service provider, or an emotional reaction to the difference between what customers expect and what they receive, regarding the fulfillment of some need, goal or desire." Thus, customer satisfaction is a construct that represents consumers' favorable or unfavorable feelings resulting from their appraisal of the correspondence or the discrepancy between the overall performance of the producer of the goods or services and their expectations. Customer satisfaction is a key performance indicator for both service providers and regulators; the highly satisfied customers remain loyal, are less sensitive to prices and have fewer complaints to make on the services delivered (Olatokun & Ojo, 2016).

The concept of satisfaction implies the fulfillment of the expectations from the purchase, as well as a positive emotional state based on the results of the purchase or the maintenance of the relationship with the mobile seller (Agrebi & Jallais, 2015).

Disconfirmation is generally defined as the discrepancy between two concepts; a pre-purchasing standard (such as expectations or desires) and actual performance (Spreng, 2003). The first research work in the field of consumer satisfaction and the later studies in the field of perceived service quality (Jiang, Klein & Crampton, 2000) have observed disconfirmation as the difference between a standard (expectations or wishes) and the perceived level of any attribute. According to Oliver (1980), disconfirmation was evaluated as a distinct cognitive state, subjectively perceived by the consumer, which therefore can be measured irrespective of its antecedents.

2.2 Theoretical Underpinning

This study is guided by Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 1980). The theory is a framework for cross-cultural communication, and it describes the effects of a society's culture on the values of its members, and how these values relate to behavior, using a structure derived from factor analysis. The theory has six different dimensions; (1) power distance, which is connected to the different explanations to the basic problem of human inequality; (2) uncertainty avoidance, which is connected to the level of stress in a society amid an unknown future; (3) individualism versus collectivism, associated with the integration of individuals into primary groups; (4) masculinity versus femininity, a dimension which explains the division of emotional roles between women and men; (5) long term versus short term orientation, which focuses on

the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present and past, and (6) indulgence versus restraint, related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). These six cultural value dimensions can be used to make important predictions on how different cultural orientations affect customer satisfaction through perceived service quality (Donthu & Yoo, 1998). Hofstede's is the widely cited theory in explaining the impact of cultural orientation due to its pragmatic nature and the concrete cross-cultural empirical evidence, which lacks in the majority of the other cultural theories. This theory has been used in previous studies to demonstrate how perceived service quality influences customer satisfaction thus the need to focus on cultural values. As a driver of people's thoughts, wishes, perceptions and behavior, culture influences service quality perceptions through service expectations. This study, therefore, conjectures that cultural orientation influences customer satisfaction. Though the theory has been criticized as having been validated with old data that is three decades old, sampling bias owing to his IBM employees sample, and his assumption of culture being a national mean value; all these constitute some valid face value, but no supporting empirical evidence exists to date (Samuel Craig & Douglas, 2006).

2.3 Review of Previous studies

Recent studies have identified cultural orientation as a key determinant of service quality and customer satisfaction. Winsted (1997) studied service assessment by consumers in the United States and Japan and identified significant differences. The dimensions identified in the United States were civility, personalization, remembering, Cultural influences on service quality conversation, congeniality, delivery, and authenticity. Those identified in Japan were civility, personalization, conversation, concern, and formality. Winsted (1997) showed that service quality dimensions explain a significant portion of customers' overall satisfaction.

A study by Furrer, Liu and Sudharshan (2000), that used a sample of 302 students (local and international) established that the significance of SERVQUAL dimensions differed across people from different cultural backgrounds. The authors further noted that the notion that culture was not essentially associated with nations rather at the individual level. Straughan and Albers-Miller (2001) used the Hofstede framework as the foundation to investigate the loyalty of domestic retailers. The findings of this study indicated that individualism had a negative effect on loyalty while uncertainty avoidance was positively related to customer loyalty, inferring cultural orientation had an impact on customer satisfaction. Malai and Speece (2005) investigated how culture can be integrated into the relationship between customer value and customer loyalty. The study was anchored Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension and a sample of 611 airline passengers across three Asian and three Western nationalities. The findings of this study revealed that that culture influenced customer perceptions on service quality and brand name; thus likely to influence customer satisfaction. In the same line, Eng and Kim (2006) studied the impact of Confucian culture on e-customer loyalty in South Korea. The findings of this study showed that high power distance in Confucian culture was positively

related to the affiliation. Additionally, the study noted that high power distance in Confucian culture was moderated by marketing activities that lead to lock-in. Tsoukatos & Rand (2007) examined the effect of culture on service quality and customer satisfaction in the Greek retail insurance, the study used a sample of 252 businesses. The study found that the 25 hypothesized relationships between the dimensions of culture and service quality, 23 are confirmed and the remaining two are directionally supported. The hypothesized importance of service quality dimensions is also confirmed. However, the expected association between the importance of quality dimensions and the strength of their relationships with customer satisfaction is only directionally supported. Brown and Buys (2005) assessed the impact of cross-cultural values on customer satisfaction in the South African banking sector, with special attention on internet banking security. The study used a sample of 77 MBA students, representing the different races, and found that the groups with higher uncertainty avoidance were less satisfied with security than those groups with lower uncertainty avoidance.

Generally, the aforementioned studies provide empirical evidence that cultural orientation influences customer satisfaction. However, the investigation is far from being conclusive and significant gaps still exist in the literature. For instance, the effect of culture on the importance of service quality dimensions to customers has not been exhaustively studied in developing and emerging markets since the studies are inclined toward Western cultures. Thus, the study closes the gap by investigating this relationship in the African airline industry.

3. Methodology and Sample

The study adopted an explanatory research design. The study used structured and self-administered questionnaires that were filled by 750 customers, selected randomly, and representing 9 African airlines; Kenya Airways, Ethiopia Airlines, Egypt Air, Rwanda Air, South African Airways, Mozambique Airlines, Air Zimbabwe, Air Tanzania, and Air Namibia; with a total population of 256, 254 customers.

3.1 Measurement of variables

In this study, the measurement scales and indicators were adopted from previous studies (Brady & Cronin, 2002; Colgate & Lang, 2001). Modifications and translations were made to transform the measurement scale to be readable for the average reader. In general, the respondents were asked to state their agreement or disagreement with the statements stated. Respondents gave their opinion for each statement using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 to indicate "strongly disagree", 2 to indicate "disagree", 3 to indicate "a neutral position", 4 to indicate "agree" and 5 to indicate "strongly agree".

3.2 Models Specification

The effect of cultural orientation on customer satisfaction was tested through regression analysis as shown in the model below.

$$CS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Age} + \beta_2 \text{Gen} + \beta_3 \text{CN} + \beta_4 \text{YAC} + \beta_5 \text{CO} + \varepsilon$$

Where

CS= Customer satisfaction

Age= Age of the customer

Gen= Gender of the customer

CN= Customer nationality

YAC= Year as customer

CO= Cultural orientation

$\beta_0 \dots \beta_5$ = regression coefficient to be estimated

ε = stochastic term.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics for Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the degree to which a customer perceives that an organization has effectively provided a product or service that meets the customer's needs in the context in which the customer is aware of and / or using the product or service. The descriptive statistics of customer satisfaction are presented in table 4.1, which illustrates that the passengers willing to revisit the organization had a mean of 4.02 and SD = 0.741. The implication is that the passengers were satisfied with how services were delivered by the airlines and that their grievances were settled in the shortest time possible.

Also, they were generally happy with the airlines' services offered (mean = 3.97, SD = 0.737). Precisely, their requests were responded to promptly and the airline operated according to business hours that were convenient to them. Besides, the complains process was convenient to use. Such factors appealed emotionally to customers hence they were happy with the services on offer. Consequently, passengers were generally contended by the services offered by the airline (mean = 3.96, SD = 0.753). Similarly, passengers were satisfied with the overall service they got from the organization (mean = 3.94, SD = 0.852).

Passengers preferred the airline because of the services offered (mean = 3.93, SD = 0.854). The airline had convenient operating hours, employees that were knowledgeable and always willing to assist the passengers. Also, high-quality food and drinks were served on board hence appealing even more to passengers. The resulting outcome is that passengers preferred the airline since it satisfied their needs (mean = 3.86, SD = 0.825) and they were generally delighted by the services offered by the airline (mean = 3.82, SD = 0.776).

Besides, the passengers were satisfied with the quality of services offered by the airline (mean = 3.81, SD = 0.835). They had never been disappointed so far (mean = 3.59, SD = 1.195) and had no complains on this airline (mean = 3.58, SD = 1.127). On the whole, results on customer

satisfaction summed up to a mean of 3.8475, standard deviation 0.66352, skewness -0.329 and Kurtosis -0.166. The Cronbach's Alpha value (0.914) was more than 0.7, and an indication of high internal consistency hence the results on customer satisfaction could be generalized to reflect the opinions of all respondents about the study problem.

Table 1: Customer Satisfaction

Items	N	Mean	Std.	Skewness	Kurtosis
			Deviation		
I am willing to revisit this organization	634	4.02	0.741	-0.305	-0.392
I am generally happy with airlines services offered	634	3.97	0.737	-0.403	0.005
I am generally contented by airlines services offered	634	3.96	0.753	-0.422	0.089
In general, am satisfied with the overall service I got from this organization.	634	3.94	0.852	-0.679	0.401
I prefer the airline because of services offered	634	3.93	0.854	-0.617	0.476
I prefer this airline because they always satisfy my needs	634	3.86	0.825	-0.357	-0.39
I am generally delighted by airlines services offered	634	3.82	0.776	-0.417	0.163
I am satisfied with the quality of services offered by airlines	634	3.81	0.835	-0.711	0.932
The airline has never disappointed me so far.	634	3.59	1.195	-0.601	-0.474
I have no complaints on this airline	634	3.58	1.127	-0.431	-0.68
<i>Composite Mean</i>	<i>634</i>	<i>3.8475</i>	<i>0.66352</i>	<i>-0.329</i>	<i>-0.166</i>

4.2 Descriptive Statistics for Cultural Orientation

Cultural orientation was sought by the study. Table 2 illustrates the results. As evidenced in the findings, the passengers noted that the well-being of their co-passengers is important to them (mean = 4.03, SD = 0.912). Also, when choosing an airline, they considered their history (mean = 3.98, SD = 0.857). It was therefore important for an airline to have a track record of meeting customer needs and offering quality service in the airline industry. As customers, the passengers expected long term services (mean = 3.82, SD = 0.856). Also, the airline could be rated as visionary (mean = 3.81, SD = 0.876). Further, according to the passengers, premier airlines were used by the higher class in the society with extra money to spend, it was expensive for those with low incomes (mean = 3.72, SD = 0.92). Moreover, the customers felt that they were a part of the airline culture (mean = 3.7, SD = 0.855). As such, all their relatives and friends flew with the airline (mean = 3.68, SD = 1.229). In most cases, the customers preferred flying as a group of friends, family, and colleagues as opposed to alone (mean = 3.58, SD = 1.082). Also, they would rather fly an international airline than a low cost (mean = 3.66, SD = 1.094). The implication is that quality service delivery was of utmost importance to the customers. Generally, the results on cultural orientation summed up to a mean of 3.7222, standard deviation 0.55849, skewness 0.56

and Kurtosis 2.526. The Cronbach's Alpha value (0.728) was more than 0.7 which is an indication of high internal consistency hence the results on cultural orientation could be generalized to reflect the opinions of all respondents about the study problem.

Table 2: Cultural Orientation

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
The well-being of my co-passengers is important to me	634	4.03	0.912	-0.968	1.159
When I am choosing an airline, I consider their history	634	3.98	0.857	-0.964	1.333
As a customer, I expect long term services	634	3.82	0.856	-0.476	-0.084
This airline can be rated as visionary	634	3.81	0.876	-0.359	-0.41
For me, premier airlines are used by the higher class in the Society with extra money to spend. It is expensive for those with low incomes.	634	3.72	0.92	-0.562	0.122
I feel to be a part of this airline culture	634	3.7	0.855	-0.797	1.481
All my relatives, friends, fly with this airline	634	3.68	1.229	0.618	10.635
I would rather fly an international airline than low cost	634	3.66	1.094	-0.83	0.339
I prefer flying as a group of friends, family, colleagues and not alone	634	3.58	1.082	-0.599	-0.111
Composite Mean	634	3.7222	0.55849	0.56	2.526

4.3 Discussion of regression results

Before the regression analysis, multicollinearity was also tested, and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values were generated and interpreted. The tests (VIF & Tolerance) indicated that multicollinearity problem among predictor variables did not exist because all the values were below the cut-off value, as per the rule of thumb of 10 which advocates for threshold VIF of 10 or tolerance ratio of 0.1 The VIF values in Table 4.3 were less than four while tolerance was more than 0.05 meaning that there was no multicollinearity. It is a sign that predictor variables were not highly related and that each accounted for variance in customer satisfaction.

To avoid the possibility of an unexplained effect on the dependent variable, the study controlled for customers' age, gender, nationality and the number of years the customer had been a customer of the airline alone. From the findings in Table 4.3, indicates that all the control variables had a positive effect on customer satisfaction, although effect was insignificant since the p-values were greater than 0.05. The main objective of the study was to establish the effect of cultural orientation on customer satisfaction, and based on the results of the Z score (customer satisfaction), $\beta = 0.692$, $t = 23.415$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$, the effect was positive and significant; which implied that a unit change in cultural orientation resulted in 0.692 units change in customer satisfaction. These findings are supported by previous studies (Laroche *et al.*, 2004; Furrer *et al.*, 2000; Malai & Speece, 2005; Tsoukatos & Rand, 2007).

Table 3: Results for multiple regression analysis

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Multicollinearity Statistics	
	β	Std. Error	β	$\rho>t$	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-4.27E-6	0.029		0.000	1.000		
Zscore: age	0.048	0.030	0.048	1.567	0.118	0.916	1.092
Zscore: gender	0.016	0.029	0.016	0.551	0.582	0.987	1.013
Zscore: nationality	0.045	0.030	0.045	1.520	0.129	0.966	1.035
Zscore: years as customer of the airline	0.036	0.031	0.036	1.178	0.239	0.900	1.111
Zscore: cultural orientation	0.692	0.030	0.692	23.415	0.000	0.969	1.032
Dependent Variable: Zscore(customer satisfaction)							

5.1 Conclusion

With increased pace in internationalization of businesses, researcher have pointed out the need focus on cultural values on customer perceptions and behaviours. From this background this study sought to examine the effect of cultural orientation on customer satisfaction in the African airline industry. The findings of this study demonstrates that cultural orientation is a key dimension/ predictor of customer satisfaction, as it explain how consumers differ or converge in their behavior in different countries. Therefore, the study argues that culture can serve the purpose of defining consumer behavior and enable managers to develop strategies for specific markets. This research contributes to the viability of current and potential African airlines' expansion strategies by analyzing the salient aspects of culture relevant to airline passenger handling. Further, the study brings out relevant elements for the development of branding strategies to influence consumer perception and purchasing behavior. The research provides a practical, proactive, and results-oriented analysis, that enables managers to understand the intricacies involved in building strong brands in the airline industry. This will alleviate the "trial and error" entries into unfamiliar markets. Culture is increasingly becoming the focal point for the development of winning customer satisfaction, particularly in the international business environment.

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