

Antecedents and consequences of memorable experience in the airline industry: service robots versus human staff

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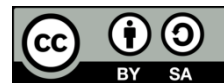
Service robot

SERVQUAL

ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine the type of service providers, such as service robots and human staff, as a potential moderator in the relationship between SERVQUAL and memorable experience in the airport industry. In order to verify 15 hypotheses, data were collected from 313 travelers who acquired information from service robots and 313 travelers who acquired information from human staff at the airport. The results of data analysis revealed that the five sub-dimensions of SERVQUAL, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, enhance memorable experience. In addition, a memorable experience has a positive effect on customer satisfaction, which subsequently influences attitude and intention to use. In addition, the type of service providers moderated the links between i) responsiveness and memorable experience and ii) empathy and memorable experience.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term of memorable experience describes an experience with a positive connotation that is fondly and emotionally remembered [1]. According to the script theory, the scripts saved in memory from experience affect individuals' future behavior [2]. Likewise, scholars commonly suggest that creating a customer experience which is memorable is highly effective to improve the competitiveness of the business [3]. It has also been one of the core performance metrics for service organizations since it determines important consequences that include customer satisfaction, attitude and revisit intentions [4].

The service environment of airports is intricate [5]. The airport involves a wide range of tasks that encompass ticketing, check-in, baggage handling, food services, and shopping. Plessis *et al.* [6] explained that the airport's core services are facilitating passengers from check-in to boarding, and its subsidiary services include restaurants, shopping, entertainment, and travel facilities such as airport lounges. Travelers generally use multiple services at the airport and therefore, customer experience at the airport is shaped over time through a chain of interactions with different parties [7]. With this respect, the current practice in evaluating service quality in the airport industry, which is the ACI/ASQ's Airport Service Quality encompasses a total of thirty-four attributes under the eight categories based on different process within the airport [5].

Studies provide evidence of how the service quality influence consumers' responses, such as memorable experience [3]. As such, a number of academic efforts have been made in developing airport service quality model [8]. However, it is hard to recognize which particular model is remarkable in predicting

the total customer experience within the airport. Instead, this study adopted the SERVQUAL, which is the most well-established framework to assess service quality based on its five dimensions [9]. The SERVQUAL model has been adopted across the different sectors and the existing literature indicates the superior power of its application to evaluate the service quality [10].

In the modern service domain, the widespread application of service robots is fairly predictable. Service robots at the airport multi-task to provide information, help travelers with luggage delivery, among other forms of aid [11]. The role congruity theory elucidates that service providers receive a positive assessment when they play their respective roles [12]. Then, it raises the question if the application of service robots is suitable model for the airport context, where requires much diverse roles in providing services as a multi-services business organization. Even though scholars have endeavored to evaluate service robots from various aspects in the hospitality and tourism industry [13], there is no sufficient evidence that advances our knowledge of how consumers evaluation differs by the type of service providers, such as service robot and human employee in the airport industry.

According to Sipe and Testa [14], the significant differences of the link between service quality and memorable experience exist across four types of offerings, which are attractions, dining, events, and lodging. This implies that the effect of service quality on memorable experience might differ within the airport environment. Also, as previously explained, studies for the quality of airport service robots in creating memorable experience have left much to be desired. In this regard, this study is motivated to investigate how service quality contributes to the creation of memorable experience in modern airports, which are equipped with different types of service providers (i.e., service robots and human employees), and how these experiences influence consumer behavior.

2. METHOD

This study tackles the identified research problem through the application of a hypothetico-deductive approach. A comprehensive literature review was undertaken for each construct, and all hypothesized relationships within the proposed model were derived from established theoretical frameworks. Following this, empirical data were collected and subjected to quantitative analysis. Detailed methodological procedures and analytical results are presented in the subsequent sections.

2.1. Literature review

2.1.1. Theoretical foundation

The SERVQUAL model is a multi-dimensional instrument, which is proposed to capture consumers' evaluation of service quality [9]. Specifically, the model suggests the five critical factors in assessing the service quality, namely, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Many academicians have adopted the SERVQUAL model in order to examine the service quality to this day [10]. Meanwhile, service encounters easily result in a mental schema of scripts [15]. The script is a knowledge structure of consumer experience which stays in the memory. The script theory was developed by Tomkins [2] and it elucidates that individuals' behaviors are facilitated as a script, which saved in memory from experience, and these patterns induce consumers' behavior. Likewise, the theory has been constantly employed to predict consumer behavior [16]. For example, Manthiou *et al.* [17] determined the close relationship among tourists' memorable experience, satisfaction, and loyalty on the basis of script theory. That is, the memorable experience is a solid clue that explains the courses of individuals' future actions in the service sector.

The role congruity theory indicates that an individual will be positively assessed when his or her performance is recognized as aligning with that individual's typical roles [12]. This means that people positively evaluate others when they play their respective roles and fulfill their duties, and the theory has been widely adopted to the hospitality industry as the background of a customer's assessment of the quality of service [18]. For instance, Bove and Johnson's [19] research was built based on the premise of the role congruity and they observed that when service employees faithfully conduct their given roles, there is a strong likelihood that customers perceive a high degree of customer orientation. The theory also endorses the consumers' different responses according to the service provider types, such as service robot and human staff [20].

2.1.2. The SERVQUAL and its effect

Airports were rather passive in customer services and they reflect the full impact of the service quality relatively late compared to other hospitality and tourism sectors [21]. An effective evaluation of service quality in the airport is not easy due to the high complexity of its service environment [8]. Considering that, this study adopted the SERVQUAL model, which has been long recognized as a tool to assess consumers' evaluation of service quality [10]. The SERVQUAL include five dimensions which are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy [9].

Experience that engages customers in a memorable way is a critical performance indicator of today's service establishments [22]. If the customers evaluate the offerings they received in a positive way, and their experience is built in the memory [17]. Whereas, when customers are provided with the low level of service quality, such as poor customer service, they are likely to look back with less-than-fond memories [23]. Likewise, service quality was constantly examined as a critical predictor of memorable experience in the service sector. For example, Plessis *et al.* [6] observed that visitors' experiences are more affected by the quality of the airport primary services, such as check-in and boarding, than other secondary services. Also, Lee *et al.* [24] discovered that employee's politeness and flawless service delivery contribute to customers' positive emotional responses. Drawing on the SERVQUAL model, Haverila *et al.* [10] asserted that empathy provided by the service employees aids customers in gaining a memorable experience. Consequently, it implies the SERVQUAL contributes to create memorable experience in the aviation industry, and this study formulated the following hypotheses.

- H1a: Tangibles exert positive influence on memorable experience.
- H1b: Reliability exerts positive influence on memorable experience.
- H1c: Responsiveness exerts positive influence on memorable experience.
- H1d: Assurance exerts positive influence on memorable experience.
- H1e: Empathy exerts positive influence on memorable experience.

2.1.3. The memorable experience and its effect

Customer satisfaction has been described in various ways, such as a viewpoint of the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm. The general consensus in defining customer satisfaction is that customer satisfaction reflects individuals' judgement about their experience concerning a product, service, or firm [25]. Meanwhile, attitude is conceptualized as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" [26]. In the service industry, positive customer experience results in customer satisfaction, which is central in determining attitude and customers' future behavior [3]. As such, the memorable experiences that occur during service encounters have consequential effects on customer satisfaction and attitude, and these relationships are supported by the script theory [16]. The significant effect of memorable experience on consumer responses have been validated in the extant literature. Hwang *et al.* [27] demonstrated how a memorable experience promotes the attitude toward the specific brand. Prentice *et al.* [3] determined the memorable experience significantly mediated the link between service quality and organizational outcomes, such as customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The foregoing discussion suggests the following hypotheses.

- H2: Memorable experience exerts positive influence on customer satisfaction.
- H3: Memorable experience exerts positive influence on attitude.

2.1.4. The customer satisfaction and its effect

Customer satisfaction has long been an essential concept in the services literature. Many earlier studies explain how satisfaction predicts customers' attitude and future behaviors [28]. Lee *et al.* [24] found that travelers' satisfaction is a significant indicator of their willingness to revisit the airport lounge. Specifically, they observed the essential role of service employees at the airport lounge and recommended training sessions for employees to improve the competency level, such as efficiency and responsibility in the provision of services. Bezerra and Gomes [29] focused on the passenger satisfaction with the airport, and their findings showed its significant influence on future behaviors that include behavioral attitudes towards the airport, preference using the airport, and recommending the airport to others. Similarly, Batouei *et al.* [30] found that passengers' satisfaction which is associated with airport experience has a decisive effect on their revisit intention and word-of-mouth intention. These discussions outline the following hypotheses.

- H4: Customer satisfaction exerts positive influence on attitude.
- H5: Customer satisfaction exerts positive influence on intention to use.

2.1.5. The attitude and its effect

Ghazi and Ammar [4] indicated the critical role of attitude in generating travelers' future intentions towards these concessions at the airport. The theory of planned behavior supports the close link between attitude and behavior [31]. The theory explicates that attitude is one of the key determinants of individuals' behavior and a number of previous studies validated the significant relationship between attitude and behavior based on this theory [32].

- H6: Attitude toward using an airport exerts positive influence on intention to use.

2.1.6. The type of service providers and its effect

Airports carry out a variety of tasks, so employees at the airport multi-task in every corner of the airport. In the research conducted by Halpern *et al.* [11], technological transformation in the airport context

was addressed, and they introduced service robotics, such as singing and dancing robots at Glasgow Airport, service robots in the check-in counter at Geneva Airport, and second-generation robots at Incheon International Airport. Precisely, Airstar robots at Incheon International Airport provide services that include escorting travelers, providing various information such as how busy immigration desks are, scanning boarding passes, emailing, carrying luggage throughout the airport [33]. It is also no longer a surprise to be provided with service by robot shopping assistants and interactive food service robots at an airport [34]. This environment opens up the questions how the travelers perceive the quality provided by the service robots and whether the travelers have a more pleasant experience by interacting with these service robots.

More consumers are technologically advanced, and they expect more innovative technology powered offerings, such as service robots [11]. Service robots assist customers to enjoy the improved customer experience [35]. Similarly, Naumov [36] contended that the embracing of service robots is increasingly important in order to gain a competitive edge in the hospitality and tourism context. These studies imply that service robots allow customers to enjoy better service quality and subsequently increase their memorable experience. Conversely, there are views based that the essence of hospitality remains as “all about the people” and human services are more powerful as they can offer more personalized services [27]. Likewise, there are studies that discuss overdependence on technologies and criticize the practical loss of personal touch [36]. In addition, the service quality is evaluated by the level of how the customers perceive the service providers and their roles, and customers’ different responses towards service robots and human staff can be explained by the role congruity theory [20].

H7a-e. The effect of SERVQUAL on memorable experience depends on the type of service providers.

2.3. Measurement developments

Measurement items of nine constructs in this study were adopted from prior studies. Fifteen items from Parasuraman *et al.* [9] were used to assess five sub-dimensions of the SERVQUAL, which are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Three measurement items borrowed from Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann [37] were used to estimate memorable experience. Three items from Hennig-Thurau *et al.* [38] were used to customer satisfaction. Three items regarding attitude were cited Pan and Truong [32]. Lastly, three measurements to estimate intention to use were cited from Hwang *et al.* [13]. Each item was measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale.

2.4. Data collection

This study collected data by the help of a market research company in Korea. The company conducted one survey with travelers who had acquired information from service robots (hereafter SR), and another survey with travelers who acquired information from human staff (hereafter HS). The sample population was travelers who have used Incheon International Airport in Korea. Regarding the survey subject to SR, an email invitation of online survey was sent to 2,225 panels of the research firm, and 330 surveys were returned. After removing 17 identified multivariate outliers, a total of 313 responses were remained for the final analysis. Similarly, an online survey invitation was sent to 1,728 panels in reference to the HS, and 330 responses were collected. After removing 17 multivariate outliers, the analysis was performed with 313 responses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

With respect to the 313 SR respondents, 50.2% were female travelers and 49.8% were male travelers. The majority were in their 30s (36.7%), followed by participants in their 20s (28.1%). Of them, 150 respondents reported being single (47.9%), and 159 respondents reported being married (50.8%). As for a monthly income, a total of 102 respondents indicated that they earned between \$2,001 and US \$3,000 (32.6%). For the responses from the survey subject to HS, 154 respondents were female travelers (49.2%) and 159 respondents were male travelers (50.8%). The largest age group, which is 38.3% were in their 30s, followed by respondent in their 20s (31.9%). Of them, 52.4% indicated being single, and 46.6% indicated being married. With regard to monthly income level, 110 participants made an income between 2,001\$ US-3,000\$ US.

3.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

All of two models confirmed the appropriate fit of the measurement model based on several fit indices [39]. Also, the results showed the adequate standardized factor loadings of the SR (> .759) and the HR (> .729). The average variance extracted (AVE) values for the constructs of the two models, namely the SR and the HR exceeded .50, which supported convergent validity of the measurements [40]. The values of

composite reliabilities of all the variables were greater than .70, confirming internal consistency [41]. Furthermore, we compared the AVE scores for each pair of variables with the squared correlations (R^2), and the AVE scores were found to be greater than R^2 . Thus, the discriminant validity was established [42].

3.3. Structural equation modeling

This study conducted structural equation modeling (SEM), and the results showed a satisfactory model fit. All of the hypotheses were found to be supported at $p < .05$ excluding the hypothesis of the link between empathy and memorable experience for SR, the hypotheses of the link between responsiveness and memorable experience and memorable experience and attitude for HS.

3.4. Multiple-group analysis

The moderating effect of the service provider type in the link between responsiveness and memorable experience was measured, and the results showed the significance at the .05 level. The coefficient for SR ($\beta=.141$ and $t=2.231$) was greater than the one for HS ($\beta=.074$ and $t=.885$) in the path between responsiveness and memorable experience. In addition, the moderating effect of the service provider type in the link between empathy and memorable experience was discovered at the .05 level. The coefficient for SR ($\beta=.064$ and $t=.937$) was smaller than the one for HS ($\beta=.328$ and $t=3.781^*$) in the path between empathy and memorable experience. However, in the link between tangibles and memorable experience, reliability and memorable experience, and assurance and memorable experience, a moderating effect was not observed. Therefore, Hypothesis 7c and 7e were supported whereas, Hypotheses 7a, 7b, and 7d were rejected.

3.5. Discussion

This study examined SERVQUAL as an antecedent of the memorable experience and explored customer satisfaction, attitude, and intention to use as outcomes within the airport setting. Furthermore, the moderating effect of the service provider type on the relationship between SERVQUAL and memorable experience was investigated. The analyses, including SEM and multiple-group analysis, were conducted using two different datasets: one from travelers who received services from service robots and another from those interacting with human staff. The results supported ten of the proposed hypotheses, while five were rejected.

Among the SERVQUAL dimensions, tangibles, reliability, assurance and empathy were found to be positively influential on memorable experience for the whole data set. This is in line with prior studies that emphasized the importance of service quality in the formation of memorable experience [10]. However, different from our expectations, responsiveness was not a significant service quality that leads to memorable experience in the current study. Previous studies (e.g., [43]) stated that responsiveness is important in generating positive service encounter experiences but the current study has a different result. This is because the effect of SERVQUAL on customers' responses can be different according to diverse service contexts [10]. Also, this result implies the existence of moderating effect of different types of service providers on the link between SERVQUAL and memorable experience.

The findings underlined the significant moderating effect of the type of service providers in the effect of SERVQUAL on memorable experience. Previous studies show that customers have different perceptions between robots and human staff in diverse tourism and hospitality settings. Our study aligns with these studies and further provides empirical evidence within the context of airport. Specifically, the impact of responsiveness on memorable experience was more effective when customers received services from service robots. Maybe this is because consumers perceived that contemporary service robots are not as responsive as human staff. For example, some early versions of the service robots did not provide prompt services as customers expected at restaurants. Despite the advanced technology, there are many rooms for the improvement of service robots in the hospitality and tourism industry. Therefore, when customers perceive that the services from robots are prompt and quick at an airport which is beyond their expectation, this may be very helpful for customers to create memorable experience. Meanwhile, the influence of empathy on memorable experience was more influential when customers received services from human staff at an airport. This result is understandable because consumers appreciate personalized interactions with human staff more than service robots. Hwang *et al.* [27] asserted that positive feelings or affective status were more effective to increase customer experience when they interacted with human barista than robot barista at a coffee shop.

4. CONCLUSION

First, despite its importance, few empirical studies have examined to what extent SERVQUAL influences customers' memorable experience at an airport. The present research provides vital information that the SERVQUAL model plays a critical role in the formation of memorable experience at an airport.

Second, a consumer's script includes information about the expected roles and behaviors of participants in a service encounter. Therefore, the importance of memorable experience has been emphasized in the tourism and hospitality industry. However, the effects of memorable experience on consumers' affective and behavioral responses at airports have not been fully investigated in academia. Therefore, our study offers considerable theoretical value in that it confirms the core concept of the script theory that consumers' affective experiences (e.g., memorable experience) fall into patterns that constitute scripts, influencing people's behaviors. Specifically, our findings showed that the memorable experience significantly influences customer satisfaction, but does not have a significant effect on their attitude.

Third, the service environment of airports is diverse and complicated. Accordingly, service robots at airport are required to provide complex and various services. However, there is very limited research that examined the role of service robots at an airport. Specifically, there exists a dearth of research on whether customers will evaluate differently between robots and human staff at an airport. Furthermore, studies that empirically compare the structural relationship from SERVQUAL on memorable experience are very limited. The research framework of current research is developed based on the role of congruity theory. Thus, this study is one of the first research that attempted to apply the role congruity theory in the context of an airport.

First, among the five SERVQUAL dimensions, assurance was found to be the most powerful service quality that leads to customers' memorable experience at an airport. Airport services are more complex than restaurants or hotels. Airport services are provided in diverse functional areas such as the accessibility interface (e.g., terminal curb and parking lot), the processing component (e.g., custom process and luggage check-in), and the flight interface (e.g., departure lounges and boarding). In these circumstances, the knowledge and the ability of employees to create trust and confidence between the service provider and customers is extremely critical. Therefore, the airport management should prioritize increasing the level of assurance above all to generate customers' memorable experience. For example, achieving a renowned certificate of an airport in the fields of risk management, safety, regularity, and efficiency will be important.

Second, it is worth noting that tangibles were demonstrated as the second strongest service quality dimension that affects memorable experience. Contemporary consumers' standard of tangibles in the hospitality and tourism industry has increased more than ever. For example, when consumers were asked about an ideal service robot in hotels, they responded that the design of the service robots should be very sleek and the color schema should reflect the brand of the hotel. This reflects that consumers have certain expectations and standards of the design of service robots in hospitality settings. Therefore, airports should strive to make the appearance of employees (both human staff and service robots) attractive to customers. Training human staff for better management of their grooming will be one of the basics.

Third, reliability was one of the significant service quality dimensions that affects memorable experience. In order to increase the reliability of services, employees at airports should offer accurate and error-free services to customers at an airport. Particularly, acquiring accurate information at airports is very important from traveler perspective during the crisis because immigration policies and flight schedules often change. The concept of AIoT has recently emerged in the hospitality and tourism industry to enhance reliable data management, providing better services to customers. Specialized training and in-depth understanding of the advancement of technology is necessary for the employees in the tourism industry. Through such a system, it is possible to provide the most updated real time information and accurate services to customers at various service encounters of an airport such as at ticket kiosks, departure and arrival halls, and luggage claim areas.

First, the survey in this study was limited to travelers via Incheon International Airport in Korea, and therefore the results are difficult to generalize to other regions. The present study proposes that future research should consider investigating differences according to countries/regions. Second, although this study postulated the type of employee as a potential moderator, customer demographics are also crucial moderators in consumer behavior in technology-based services. Thus, future studies should adopt key demographic factors such as moderating or control variables.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

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O : Writing - Original Draft

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The author(s) do not have permission to share the data.





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