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A Constant Comparative Analysis to Identify Onboard Service Needs and Expectations of Air Travelers with Mobility Impairments: Perceptions of Flight Attendants

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to investigate flight attendants' perceptions of the onboard flight service needs and expectations of passengers with mobility impairments; and second, to examine the flight attendants' perceptions of what aspects influence the various types of needs and provide insights for airlines to improve service provided to passengers with mobility impairments. The study was conducted by three focus group interviews among thirteen flight attendants who worked in a European airline. Two major themes were found based on the result of the study: 1) participants agree that most passengers with mobility impairments are independent; and 2) participants' perceived service needs notably vary by passengers' demographics, their at-home behavior, severity of disability, and how recent they have become disabled. Implications and future directions were discussed.

Keywords: air travel needs; flight attendant; people with mobility impairments; onboard service; accessibility

INTRODUCTION

Studies for travelers with disabilities have become more common in the tourism literature. Typically, disabled travelers travel with family or an assistant and create a potential market for tourism businesses (McKercher, Packer, Yau, & Lam, 2003).

Previous research has focused on the barriers that people with disabilities face while traveling (Bi, Card, & Cole, 2007; Darcy, 2002; Murray & Sproats, 1990; Smith, 1987). Researchers found that constraints may be due to internal barriers (poor health or financial limitations), interactive barriers (attitudinal barriers or communication barriers), or environmental barriers (transportation barriers or rules and regulations barriers). As a result, travelers with disabilities may not only need easy access to tourist facilities, but also have special needs and expectations in order to overcome these barriers.

People with disabilities are increasingly traveling in long haul flights which require airline front-line employees to provide positive tourist experiences through world-class customer service. The question then becomes, do we know the needs of passengers with disabilities during their travel? Do all travelers with mobility impairments have the same expectations regarding airline services or do their needs and expectations vary? To answer these questions, the study investigates onboard flight service needs and expectations of passengers with mobility

impairments. It also aims to examine the flight attendants' perceptions of what aspects influence the various types of needs and provide insights for airlines to improve service provided to passengers with mobility impairments.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2008, 41.3 million of people were disabled in some degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Among those, 10.7 million of people with a disability aged six and older needed personal assistance in their daily living, and 2.7 million aged fifteen and older used a wheelchair.

Consequently, there is a large tourist market for the tourism and hospitality industry to target. According to a Harris Poll conducted with the Open Doors Organization (ODO) and the Travel Industry Association (TIA) of America in 2002, people with disabilities traveled 32 million trips and spent over \$13.6 billion on travel in the United States (Disabled World, 2011). This study also suggests that spending could double if more personalized and accessible services were available in hotel rooms, at airports, or on airplanes.

In addition, air travel has become one of the primary means of transportation for long distance travel, especially for people with a disability who do not own a car or cannot drive (Skjenna, Evans, Moore, Thibeault, & Tucker, 1991). In the 2005 study by ODO, 31% (9.6 million) of travelers fly long haul flights each year, accounting for 4% (\$4 billion) of airline revenue each year (Open Doors Organization, 2005). As a future projection, by 2030, nearly 24% of the total U.S. population will be facing different degrees of disability (Lipp & Van Horn, 2011). The study claims that air travel market for people with a disability is likely to expand in the next few decades.

With better understanding of this potential market, the travel and tourism industry is expected to address the needs of people with disabilities and provide barrier-free service to these customers (Germ & Schleien, 1997; McKercher, et al., 2003; Yau, McKercher, & Packer, 2004). However, disabled travelers have expressed various types of constraints when traveling by public transportation. In their studies regarding experiences and expectations of travelers with a disability, Williams, Copestake, Eversley, and Stafford (2008) reported that about three in ten participants found it difficult or very difficult to travel, especially among the elderly adults aged 75 or older. The main barrier of transportation, according to the study, was their physical limitations.

Moreover, air transport as the primary mode for long-distance travel does not always provide a satisfactory experience for people with disabilities. According to the European Conference of Ministers of Transport (1995), major complaints with air travel included the condition of onboard facilities (wheelchairs or aircraft seats), transfers between airport terminals, and lack of assistance on the ground and in flight. Chang and Chen's (2011) study of airline employees found that availability of help from the employees was a major barrier to disabled passengers. They further identified that *compensation and improvement schemes* and *not suitable for taking a flight* had significant effects on airline staff's willingness to help. Staff was more willing to help when the airline was prepared to compensate passengers for service failure, or when the airline had a barrier-free environment. However, if a passenger appeared severely

impaired physically but did not carry medical certificates it became challenging for airline staff to determine whether the person was fit to take a flight. In this case, they might not know how to help.

Limited research on service needs and expectations of passengers with mobility impairments suggests that further investigation of this topic is necessary because service providers' perceptions may or may not be consistent with the service needs and expectations expressed by this group of passengers.

METHODOLOGY

Two data collection methods were utilized: a brief survey on participants' demographic information, and focus group interviews. Demographic information was solicited using a bilingual (Chinese and English) questionnaire. Three focus group interviews were conducted in Beijing, China in the summer of 2011. Participants were conveniently selected based on the primary researcher's social network. Participants were all flight attendants in the same European airline. Participants were asked: 1) to describe who they consider as passengers with mobility impairments; 2) to explain any rules or regulations which may cause onboard complaints from passengers with mobility impairments; 3) to use examples they had encountered or heard about to describe the needs and expectations of passengers with mobility impairments; and 4) to provide recommendations and suggestions regarding how to improve services for passengers with mobility impairments.

Each of the three focus groups lasted about an hour and was audio-recorded. The focus groups were conducted in Chinese, and the transcripts were translated to English by a graduate student who was not part of the research team. The transcripts were coded in Nvivo 9 qualitative software program. Major themes emerged by using constant comparative analysis.

RESULTS

All thirteen participants were female ranging in age from 29 to 37. The majority of them (10, 77%) had a college or higher level of education. They had worked in the airline industry for an average of 9.5 years and had worked in the current company for at least five years. Almost all participants (12, 92.3%) had worked in other airlines prior to employment with the current company. They reported that they had worked in major international airlines, including the Northwest Airlines, Singapore Airlines, Emirates, Vietnam Airlines, etc.

Participants define passengers with mobility impairments broadly to include those with any mobility limitations, whether they do or do not need assistive device or assistants. Participants commonly mentioned three groups of passengers with mobility impairments: those who cannot walk at all, those who can walk but cannot climb stairs and those who are able to walk but may need assistance. Flight attendants' description of passengers with mobility impairments by and large is consistent with the Fox, White, Rooney, & Rowland's (2007) definition of people with mobility impairments, which refers to: "someone who has moderate to complete difficulty walking or moderate to complete difficulty moving around using equipment." (p. 198)

Participants suggest that most passengers with mobility impairments are satisfied with onboard service. Passengers who usually complain are those who have trouble moving their legs. Often times, they want to sit in an emergency exit row because those seats are more spacious. Due to the policy and rules in regards to flight safety they are not allowed to sit in these areas. However, passengers usually understand the situation if flight attendants offer a careful explanation.

Two major themes have emerged regarding service needs and expectations of passengers with mobility impairments. First, participants agree that most passengers with disabilities are independent. They only ask for basic things such as help with going to the lavatory or getting their belongings. They do not tend to request special assistance. One participant said: “The majority of people, such as Special Olympics’ athletes from foreign countries, or art groups—they are all independent and can take care of themselves. They do not like to be considered ‘special’ passengers and do not want others to care for them.”

Second, participants believe that service needs notably vary by passengers’ demographics (age and cultural background), their at-home behavior, severity of disability, and how recent they have become disabled. As one participant put it, “. . .if the passenger is elderly and Chinese then he or she might require more service or need extra care. If the passenger is younger and Western. . .perhaps he or she has a prosthetic limb, etc. then extra help will seem disrespectful.” For many people who are self-reliant at home, they tend to have a stronger sense of self-strength and generally do not need help. In addition, if the passenger is recently disabled, he or she may need more assistance, such as going to the lavatory, or even having a meal.

DISCUSSION

The study has shown that air passengers with mobility impairments rarely express service-specific complaints, and their service expectations usually vary according to the individual’s demographics, at-home behavior, and severity of their disability. Effective communication with passengers should be ensured when they are on board. Participants recommend that airline managers may consider upgrading onboard equipment (wheelchairs or lavatories) to incorporate more user-friendly features and functions. For airlines to be inclusive, healthcare and medical treatment should be available for people with mobility impairments to ensure their basic needs are met, which in turn will enhance the quality of their flight experience. More public announcements from the airlines are needed to increase public’s awareness of the service needs of people with mobility impairments.

Caution should be exercised when interpreting results of the study. Convenience sampling was adapted for the ease of the study. It should be advised that the use of Chinese flight attendants could lead to culture specific results. Future studies should examine perceptions of service providers from other cultural backgrounds. Our research did not examine the perceptions of passengers with mobility impairments. Therefore, additional research could compare the gap between customers and service providers to deliver more appropriate services to this niche market.

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