

## **A Study of E-service Quality Dimensions for Umrah Travel Operators**

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### **Abstract**

This research was carried out with the objective of finding out customer perception regarding the marketing strategies and service quality of Umrah Services Operators in Kashmir. This is an empirical research. The data was collected using non probability judgemental data. The sample was the travellers who had performed Umrah pilgrimage in the last one year. The total sample of 198 was determined using Cochran's formula was collected was representative of the data. The data was analysed using various statistical models using SPSS. The findings of the study indicated that service quality of the Umrah service operators was low with the customers. This study helped us understand the problems and issues faced by pilgrim travellers from pan Kashmir. The Umrah industry being a large collector of revenue needs to setup self-regulatory authority in order to successfully redress the problems of the pilgrims. The government needs to setup regulations at the entrants of this industry. This industry being a highly competitive one has to limit the number of new entrants or create essential quality barriers to allow smooth functioning of the services. The pilgrim's needs to check with the authorities to make sure that only genuine promises are made and that they do not fall in the trap of false marketing.

**Keywords:** service quality, customer satisfaction, Umrah, pilgrimage tourism, Kashmir

### **Introduction**

Pilgrimage tourism is one of the highly effective forms of tourism generating high revenues for many destinations. For Muslims, one such destination is Saudi Arabia. It is the birthplace of Islam and holds two of the most sacred sites for Muslims all over the world. It is considered as the center of Islamic theology as well as the cradle of Islam. Islam prescribes pilgrimages among its followers, primary among them is the ritual pilgrimage of Hajj and Umrah. Muslims all over the world prefer to undertake Umrah more often as its timing is flexible and it is less tiring and can be performed any time of the year as compared to Hajj which can only be performed only at a specific time. Unlike Hajj, a Muslim is not obligated to

undertake Umrah. It has its genesis in Abrahamic faith and is considered to have its origins pre-Islam. As compared to the annual pilgrimage of Hajj, it costs considerably less and doesn't have government quotas. Any registered private operator can produce Umrah packages and the same is just like any travel agent providing packages to foreign country. The Umrah operators collect a group of individuals, help them in obtaining Visas, affordable air tickets, as well as in budget hotel accommodation in addition to transportation and other services. Most of the Umrah operators collaborate with international travel companies to provide various customized packages to customers.

It is one of the biggest event worldwide which happens all throughout the calendar year. Therefore the safety of Umrah pilgrims is a foremost priority. The number of pilgrims at any moment at Umrah is very huge and managing such a huge number is a big responsibility for both the host country as well as the Umrah Operators. It falls upon the Umrah tour package operators to provide a pleasant experience to pilgrims. Umrah is also a huge contributor to the Saudi economy as it is one of the largest and continuous source of foreign exchange. It has also led to general increase in overall tourism activity to the economy. The Umrah is a complete package which lets many other sectors to develop simultaneously. So it is a major source of employment to the millions of people in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere directly and indirectly. Saudi Arabia has registered many firms through its external affairs and hajj ministries which are given Hajj quotas every year. This leads to streamlining of this pilgrimage tourism which otherwise could be susceptible to frauds and cheating. The annual increase in the number of pilgrims will surely increase the expenditure of the infrastructure and other spending thus being a win win situation for both Saudi as well as the pilgrims visiting there. The Umrah revenue has a significant impact on the development of economy of Saudi as well as allied countries which also significantly benefit from the Umrah tourism. Various sectors are impacted due to Umrah which include but not limited to Transportation, logistics, hospitality, health services, etc.

Umrah services like any other services follow the same protocol of services. Customer satisfaction and service quality are the major denominators of any service. They are the yardstick by which we can measure the quality of services. Their improvements and modifications rest on this very critical factor. Travel and tourism in Kashmir has taken a strong hit in Kashmir due to various geo-political and medical reasons. The industry is in a very bad shape. The industry needs a peaceful environment to flourish. But one calamity after another has led the industry suffer very huge consequences. Inbound travel has suffered a lot. Outbound travel likewise has also taken a very strong hit. Therefore, the people involved in the

sector were looking for a way out for some respite. In the latter half of the initial decades on 21<sup>st</sup> century, travel operators began floating the idea of Umrah services, which was not very lucrative but the demand could be regular and growing. They flirted with the idea and it paid off. Initially, the travel operators were very few who dealt with Umrah services and it slowly grew, the revenues came down as did the profit margins. But more and more began to avail the services of Umrah service operators as the prices came down. In the subsequent years, the disposable income of people in Kashmir also increased owing to the introduction of 7<sup>th</sup> pay commission in government, coming on new industries as well as change in the outlook of people regarding the same.

The government was always not in the service of organising Umrah services but at the same time, there were very few private operators who used to provide such services. Growth in travel related business gave the exposure to tourism to a lot of newcomers who usually were young and wanted to try out different things. But they felt there was a scope in this sector. They wooed the customers, displayed advertisements and invested in other promotional activities.

## **Literature Review**

Umrah traveling is known as a trade and industry all over the world. There is much versatility in Umrah traveling and its importance is undeniable (Rashid et al., 2019). A thorough knowledge on effects of marketing mix elements for satisfying tourists may help the Umrah traveling operators for developing their tactics and strategies for maximizing the satisfaction of visitors and profitability” (Zhengwei et al., 2019). Companies in industries like Umrah service agents must study and identify their strengths and weaknesses and compare themselves with their competitors at present and suggest strategies for improvements and progress in future” (Khatab et al., 2019; Saghier & Nathan, 2013). Some other studies on Umrah travelers destination management revealed that two factors including innovative and well-coordinated travel products are considered to be very important for tourism areas” (Henderson, 2016; Hiransomboon, 2012). In order to encourage Umrah travelers services operators, the pricing strategy should be well supported by cost side (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010; Sadq, Khorsheed, & Mohammed, 2020). The marketers sell Umrah travel services by doing analysis and predicting Umrah traveler’s market, designing Umrah traveler’s products, packaging, and pricing, to enhance Umrah traveler’s products and some documents after value addition and expanding consumer products (Abdullah et al. 2016). Customer loyalty is defined as the link between

customer attitude, repeat purchasing, and financial performance” (Moura & Cunha, 2019). According to Yee et al., (2010), “the main antecedents of customer’s loyalty involve employee loyalty, Umrah service quality and Umrah customer satisfaction. Establishing loyalty requires the company to focus the value of its product and services as well as building long-term relationships with customers” (Gronholdt, Martensen, & Kristensen, 2000). Emphasizing the differences between Umrah traveling service could strengthen the Umrah travel agents competitive ability and raise satisfaction and customers’ willingness to repeat the service”(Hassan, Maghsoudi, & Nasir, 2016). Mucai, Mbaeh, and Noor (2013), “Umrah service quality is viewed as a multidimensional concept, perceived and evaluated by the customer based on five dimensions: Tangibility, reliability, assurance, responsiveness and empathy. Service quality is commonly defined as a discrepancy between the service expectation and perceived service that is delivered by the organization and the service performance by employees”(Syapsan, 2019). According to (Ashdaq, Maupa, Amar, & Nursyamsi, 2015), consideration is given for details and information by some of the providers resulted in a clear appearance of physical environmental conditions. Tangibles summarized as a physical affirmation of the service (Achyar and Oktora, 2014).

## **Research Methodology**

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To calculate the expectation and perception levels of customers towards service quality of Umrah Travel Operators in Kashmir.
2. To measure the gap between the expectation and perception of customers towards service quality among Umrah Travel Operators in Kashmir.
3. Provide suggestions to Umrah Travel Operators how to improve their services.

### **Hypothesis**

H0: Service Quality had no impact on Customer Satisfaction among Umrah Travel Operators in Kashmir.

H1: Service Quality had a significant impact on Customer Satisfaction among Umrah travel Operators in Kashmir.

## Sampling

To conduct the research a questionnaire was set and total of 198 people were questioned. Most of the data were collected from primary sources for this empirical research. Tourists from different guesthouses in Kashmir were asked a total of 198 survey questionnaire. Cochran formula was used to determine the number for large population assuming  $p=0.5$  (maximum variability), we desired 95% confidence level and  $\pm 5\%$  precision.

## Survey Questionnaire

After rejecting incomplete survey and post-adjusting different errors in sampling, 198 were selected for final data analysis. From final descriptive analysis, it is clear that sample represented people across various demographic factor. Non-probability convenience sampling technique was used for sampling purpose.

The questionnaire were divided into four sections. The first segment gathered respondents' demographic statistics. The next two sections contained questions that measured expectations levels and perception levels according to the original SERVQUAL scale developed by (Anathanarayanan Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Each section had 22 attributes. The last section asked for overall customer satisfaction rating of the hotel. The expectation and perception questionnaire asked customers to rate the service of the hotel on a 7 point Likert Scale vacillating from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The same scale was used for measuring overall satisfaction of tourists with the service quality of the hotel. The five proportions were the independent variables whereas customer satisfaction was the dependent variable.

## Results

Demographic frequencies

Table 1

		Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>	Male	96	48.5
	Female	102	51.5
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	169	85.4
	Single	29	14.6
<b>Age</b>	15-25	14	07.1
	26-35	34	17.2
	36-45	62	31.3
	46-55	48	24.2

	56 and Above	40	20.2
<b>Education</b>	Illiterate	57	28.8
	12th	60	30.3
	Above 12th	81	40.9
<b>Income Level</b>	Below 10000	42	21.2
	10000-20000	58	29.3
	20000 and Above	98	49.5

Table 2

EXPECTIONS		PERCEPTIONS	
Alpha	N of Items	Alpha	N of Items
.924	22	.891	22

**Factor Analysis**

Table 3

KMO and Bartlett's Test of Expectations		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.905
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	6219.542
	Df	231
	Sig.	.000

**PEARSON'S CO-EFFICIENT**

Table 4

Pearson's Co-efficient Correlations (Service Quality & Customer Satisfaction)					
				Service Quality	Customer Satisfaction*
Service Quality (Independent Variable) N	Pearson Sig.	Correlation (2-tailed)	1	198	.811** .000 198
Customer Satisfaction (Dependent Variable) N	Pearson Sig.	Correlation (2-tailed)	.811** .000	198	1 198

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## GAP ANALYSIS

Table 5

	<b>EXPECTED MEAN</b>	<b>PERCEPTION MEAN</b>	<b>GAP</b>
T1	6.3431	5.2201	1.123
T2	6.212	5.3123	0.89
T3	6.303	5.122	1.18
T4	6.234	5.3533	0.88
<b>TANGIBILITY</b>	<b>6.273025</b>	<b>5.251925</b>	<b>1.02</b>
RE1	6.2310	5.3211	0.91
RE2	6.3311	5.1231	1.21
RE3	6.021	5.351	0.67
RE4	6.3301	5.2345	1.09
RE5	6.081	5.321	0.76
<b>RELIABILITY</b>	<b>6.19884</b>	<b>5.27014</b>	<b>0.928</b>
RS1	5.234	6.354	-1.12
RS2	5.4561	6.4561	-1
RS3	5.4331	6.3411	-0.91
RS4	5.3471	6.1234	-0.77
<b>RESPONSIVENESS</b>	<b>5.367575</b>	<b>6.31975</b>	<b>-0.952</b>
EM1	6.112	5.3221	0.79
EM2	6.4327	5.234	1.2
EM3	6.4656	5.8312	0.63
EM4	6.245	5.6361	0.61
<b>EMPATHY</b>	<b>6.313825</b>	<b>5.50585</b>	<b>0.807</b>
AS1	6.8123	5.7345	1.07
AS2	6.7563	5.8123	0.94
AS3	6.3541	5.6934	0.66
AS4	6.4512	5.8751	0.57
AS5	6.8934	5.3456	1.55
<b>ASSURANCE</b>	<b>6.65346</b>	<b>5.69218</b>	<b>0.96</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6.16</b>	<b>5.61</b>	<b>0.55</b>

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research was conducted to find the relationship between service quality of Umrah travel operators in Kashmir and customer loyalty. We also tried to find out the gap between the post and pre-service delivery satisfaction of customers. It was found out that the customer satisfaction was significant and positive. In independent dimensions, there was a bit of dissatisfaction but overall the cumulative

satisfaction was significant. This relation existed as the services provided by Umrah operators in Kashmir was as expected as or better than what was anticipated by the customers. The four dimensions where the satisfaction of customers was positive were Tangibility, Reliability, Empathy and assurance. It meant that the overall ambience and physical appearance and comfort level of service provider was appreciative all throughout the journey. The Umrah operators were found to be genuine and their services also found to be as expected and as promised. The Umrah operators took proper care of the needs of the pilgrims keeping in view the sensitivities around the trip. And the pilgrims were assured of the services and no service was delayed or under-performed. Only thing where the pilgrims felt a bit of unease as in case of almost every service was responsiveness. The service agents, in our case, Umrah operators, being commission agents or a third party service didn't had exact control over the problems or issues arising in real time. From customer's point of view, it amounted to lack of service but in reality it is inherently a part of service business. Therefore, the customers were overall satisfied with the service provided to them. Among the independent variables, Tangibility possess the highest effect on customer's loyalty. Based on these results, we recommend that the Umrah service operators focus more on the responsiveness factor which is their weakest dimension. Customer loyalty is also important because it helps retain new customers and helps in word of mouth marketing which helps saving marketing costs. There is a strong co-relation between the customer satisfaction and loyalty. The inference drawn is testimony to the fact that the ones already existing in the marketing are getting a bulk of sales despite not getting into the price war. Need of the hour is to understanding the needs of the customers which evolve over time and also provide value addition to the services which are otherwise same everywhere in the market. This study has helped contribute to the already existing review of literature. It will help Umrah travel operators, government, regulators, and researchers in devising new policies and strategies and improve and upgrade on existing ones.

### **Limitations**

The sample size is the first and foremost limitation of this study like any empirical research where getting an actual representation of population is a big challenge. The research was conducted with travel operators based in Kashmir, whereas due to digitisation, many pilgrims are booking their tour packages online through agencies based outside Kashmir. This draws a unnecessary parallel between the service quality, price determination and other facilities where the local tour operators have very less information and control. Thirdly, those travel operators who operate solely online have been skipped due to lack of

information. Also some of the non-registered travel operators too were skipped during the course of this investigation.

### **Recommendations**

1. Umrah travel agents must focus more on value additions in their packages.
2. They must make more use of social media and internet to inform the customers about the services and the superiority over others. This will help them in reducing to the price actor which ultimately affects service.
3. They must focus and understand the e-service quality leading to e-customer satisfaction and ultimately e-loyalty.
4. More surveys should be conducted within the industry to understand the pre-service requirements and post service feedback from the pilgrims to check the reliability of their services.
5. More niche and customized packages can be developed to cater to diverse population.

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