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## **Customer Service Strategies to Minimize Negative Customer Incidents in the Airline Industry**

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Monica Muzinda

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Walden University  
2021

Abstract

Customer Service Strategies to Minimize Negative Customer Incidents  
in the Airline Industry

by

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MBA, Keller Graduate School of Management, 2007

BA, Zimbabwe Open University, 2003

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

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## Abstract

There has been a continuous increase in customer complaints against airlines in the United States. The airlines' customer service complaints were up 90% in April 2017 compared to April 2016. Airline customer service managers who do not address customer complaints may experience reduced customer satisfaction, customer retention, and profitability. Grounded in the service quality model, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore customer service strategies airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents. Participants were three airline customer service managers from two airlines who developed strategies to minimize negative customer incidents. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, company documents, and social media platforms. Yin's five-step data analysis approach was used to analyze the data. Five themes emerged: recruit competent employees, enhance training, strengthen communication, elicit customer feedback, and improve service policies and standards. A key recommendation is for customer service managers to develop and implement robust training to empower frontline personnel with education and skills to improve service quality and mitigate customer complaints. The implications for positive social change include potentially mitigating unpleasant customer experiences, cultivating trust and loyalty between the airlines and the travel community, and increasing customer satisfaction.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to God Almighty, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit for faith, perseverance, and dedication throughout this journey. My late grandmother, Margaret Musemburi Muza, and my parents' loving memory for believing and encouraging me to do the best. They made me be who I am today. My grandmother's art of storytelling had a profound impact on my life from a tender age. Her vivid stories sharpened my imagination to dream my life and educational ambitions into reality.

Forever in my heart.

To God, be the Glory!

Jeremiah 29:11

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Customer service is crucial for survival in the competitive airline industry. Effective customer service strategies can increase passenger confidence and customer retention for airline companies (Deepa & Jayaraman, 2017). The problem is that some airline managers lack strategies to meet customer expectations and retain customers. Airline customer service managers could use findings from this qualitative multiple case study to implement strategies to avoid or minimize adverse customer experiences and increase customer satisfaction and retention to stay competitive.

### **Background of the Problem**

Airline customer service managers must render quality service to stay competitive (Šebjan et al., 2017). There is increased competition in the airline industry because of rapid expansion and the introduction of low-cost carriers (LCCs), forcing airlines to consider various factors beyond price for survival (Deepa & Jayaraman, 2017; Xie et al., 2020). One of the crucial factors is the delivery of high-quality service. Osarenkhoe et al. (2017) defined service quality in terms of a comparison of the customer's expected service with the perceived service. The problem is that some airline managers lack strategies to deliver high-quality service, resulting in increased customer complaints, low customer retention, and revenue loss (Mehta & Rice, 2016; U.S. Department of Transportation [DOT], 2017a).

The airlines in the United States are experiencing a continuous increase in customer complaints. The U.S. DOT (2017b) reported a 90% increase in U.S. airlines' customer incidents in April 2017 compared to April 2016, noting an increase of 63%

compared to March 2017. My focus in this qualitative multiple case study was conducting document analysis and interviews to explore customer service strategies that airline managers use to meet customer expectations and minimize complaints. Customer service managers could use the study findings to improve customer service and reduce reputational damage and revenue loss caused by losing customers.

### **Problem Statement**

A continuous increase in negative customer incidents is threatening the survival of some of the airlines in today's competitive aviation industry (Deepa & Jayaraman, 2017). The U.S. DOT (2017b) reported a 90% increase in U.S. airlines' customer incidents in April 2017 compared to April 2016, noting an increase of 63% compared to March 2017. The general business problem is that if customer service managers in the airline industry do not mitigate negative customer incidents, airlines may incur reputational damages that can directly impact their financial bottom lines when customers take their business elsewhere. The specific business problem is that some customer service managers in the airline industry lack customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore customer service strategies that airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents. The target population consisted of three managers from two airline companies located in the United States with successful experience implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents. The implications for social change include airline leaders' potential to develop customer-focused airline

policies to improve customer service quality and satisfaction for the travel community, benefiting airline employees and their families.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used the qualitative method to explore effective customer service strategies that airline managers use to mitigate adverse customer incidents. The qualitative method is essential because researchers use it to explore social or human problems through behavior observations, document review, and interviews with participants (Yin, 2018). I used document review and semistructured interviews to explore customer service managers' experiences and knowledge.

Other research methods that I considered were quantitative and mixed methods. Quantitative researchers use statistics and relationships of variables or differences to test a theory (Leppink, 2017). Mixed-methods research contains qualitative and quantitative attributes in one study (Schooneboom & Johnson, 2017). Both quantitative and mixed methods were inappropriate for this study because the goal was not to test a theory by examining relationships of variables or differences.

I considered four research designs for this qualitative study of airline customer service strategies: ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and case study. Ethnography involves exploring culture-sharing groups' beliefs and behaviors through observation and active interaction with participants (Hammersley, 2017). I did not choose the ethnographic design because I was not studying culture-sharing groups' customs and values. My focus for this study also made grounded theory and narrative design inappropriate. A grounded theory researcher generates a theory to explain an underlying

process, action, or interaction through exploring phenomena (Tie et al., 2019). The proposition generation in grounded theory disqualified this design because my goal in this study was not to generate a new theory. A narrative design involves the study of events through participants' storytelling (Yin, 2018). I did not choose the narrative design because my objective was not to narrate the histories of participants' experiences. The case study design was appropriate because researchers using case study explore complex social phenomena through content analysis, observations, and interviews to learn about situations (Yin, 2018). Thus, I chose the case study design to explore strategies that customer service managers use to mitigate adverse customer incidents.

### **Research Question**

What customer service strategies do airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What customer service strategies do you use to mitigate negative customer incidents?
2. What customer service strategies have you found most effective in mitigating negative customer incidents?
3. What customer service strategies have you found least effective in mitigating negative customer incidents?
4. What barriers have you encountered in implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents?



5. How do you address the barriers to implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents?
6. What information would you like to add regarding customer service strategies that customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used the service quality (SQ) model as the conceptual framework to study the increase in customer service complaints and poor service in the airline industry.

Parasuraman et al. (1985) developed the SQ model to understand service quality challenges (Osarenkhoe et al., 2017). Osarenkhoe et al. (2017) pointed out that service quality, popularly defined as a comparison between customer service expectations and perceptions, implies that service firms must consistently meet customer expectations to achieve high service quality. Parasuraman et al. attributed problems associated with providing high service quality to five gaps related to knowledge, policy, delivery, communication, and customer discrepancies. In 1988, Parasuraman et al. improved the model. The SQ model was an appropriate conceptual framework and lens to understand the study findings because service quality is a significant mediator in the relationship between customer complaint behavior (CCB) and customer loyalty (Osarenkhoe et al., 2017). Airline customer service managers, businesses, and scholars could use the SQ model and study findings to understand service failures and develop effective customer service strategies, policies, and recovery plans.

## Operational Definitions

*Air Travel Consumer Report*: is a product of the DOT's Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings (OAEP) that is designed to assist consumers with information on the quality of services provided by the airlines (U.S. DOT, 2017a).

*Customer churn*: refers to customer defection due to unsatisfactory service quality (Ahmad et al., 2019; DeCaigny et al., 2018).

*Customer complaint behavior (CCB)*: is a behavioral expression after dissatisfaction resulting from disconfirmation of expectations (Osarenkhoe et al., 2017).

*Customer experience (CX)*: is a holistic end-to-end journey that comprises a customer's interactions and activities across multiple touchpoints (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2018).

*Customer loyalty*: is the customer's commitment to repeatedly purchase an organization's products and services (Shankar & Jebarajakirthy, 2019).

*Customer satisfaction*: is the positive feeling that customers experience after a company's performance meets their expectations (Rita et al., 2019).

*Customer switching*: refers to customers changing from one service provider to another (Amin et al., 2019).

*Service quality*: Osarenkhoe et al. (2017) described service quality as a comparison between the customer's expected service and the perceived service.

## **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are assessments of critical aspects of a plan that are not verified (Berner & Flage, 2017). A researcher clearly states assumptions to avoid ambiguity and misinterpretation (Wolgemuth et al., 2017). I made three assumptions in this study. The first assumption was that a direct relationship between customer complaints, customer satisfaction, service quality, and customer service exists. I used previous studies' findings to verify the relationship (Alabboodi, 2019; Asirifi & Senya, 2020; Shah et al., 2020; Sharma & Shoaib, 2020). The second assumption was that the participants were airline customer service managers who had successfully implemented effective strategies to improve customer service and minimize customer complaints. I used LinkedIn and DOT Air Travel Consumer Reports to validate experience and customer satisfaction. The third assumption was that the participating managers would truthfully respond to the interview questions and share their knowledge and experience without bias or prejudice. Contractual obligations ensure that participants and researchers uphold ethical commitments, concerns, and moral standards and obligations (Farmer & Lundy, 2017). Therefore, I mitigated bias and prejudice by assuring confidentiality and transparently sharing and adhering to the study's contractual and ethical obligations.

### **Limitations**

Limitations refer to potential weaknesses out of a researcher's control (Dimitrios & Antigon, 2018). The small sample sizes used by qualitative researchers do not allow researchers to generalize study findings across sectors, organizations, and contexts

(Twining et al., 2017). According to Twining et al. (2017), there are only two ways that research results apply across contexts: (a) when research settings are similar and (b) when a qualitative study can extend its relevance beyond the research through the development of a theory. I used a multiple qualitative case study for potential transferability to other environments. I followed qualitative research theories, data collection, and organization.

Researchers' or participants' personal bias may interfere with and compromise data and study findings (Twining et al., 2017). I may have a personal bias because of my airline experience and previous involvement in delivering customer service products and services. McGrath et al. (2018) suggested that a researcher avoids contaminating or biasing data by being a co-creator of data together with the interviewees. I remained neutral, objective, and impartial throughout my interaction with participants. I also used interview protocols, member checking, and triangulation to ensure trustworthiness and present neutral and unbiased study events.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to scope boundaries that researchers stipulate so that a study's aims and objectives do not become impossible to achieve (Dimitrios & Antigoni, 2018). In this qualitative multiple case study, all participants were from the United States. Participants were customer service managers from the airline industry who had successfully implemented strategies to mitigate customer complaints. The small sample size included three participants with the willingness and ability to provide in-depth knowledge on customer service strategies.

## **Significance of the Study**

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore customer service strategies that airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents. The U.S. DOT (2017b) reported a 90% increase in U.S. airlines' customer incidents in April 2017 compared to April 2016, noting an increase of 63% compared to March 2017. Customer service managers in the airline industry could use the study findings to reduce the increased rate of negative customer experiences in the United States. When business leaders employ effective customer service strategies, they may increase customer service quality, satisfaction, and retention, reducing reputational damage and revenue loss through customer churn. According to Deepa and Jayaraman (2017), effective customer service strategies can increase passenger confidence and customer retention for airline companies.

### **Implications for Social Change**

This study's implications for effecting positive social change may encompass airline leaders' potential to develop customer-focused policies for the travel community. Business leaders may inform and protect customers from airline companies' unscrupulous principles by developing and enforcing policies. Effective customer service strategies may help in avoiding or mitigating unpleasant customer experiences, thereby cultivating trust and loyalty between airlines and the travel community. A satisfied and loyal travel community maintains business with reputable airlines, thereby providing job security for employees, families, and the community.

## **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore customer service strategies that airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents. In the United States, 67% of airline customer complaints in August 2019 were against U.S. airlines, and 33% were against non-U.S. airlines (U. S. DOT, 2019). In this literature review section, I explore service quality theories and strategies to understand the phenomenon under study.

Researchers have extensively used Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) SQ model as a conceptual framework to study service quality (Gandhi et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2017). Researchers have employed the SQ model to study gaps between customer expectations and perceptions across the following industries and sectors—airlines (Adeniran & Fadare, 2018; Alotaibi, 2015; Alsini, 2017; Chilembwe, 2014; Olaniyi & Stephens, 2019); education (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016); banking (Anjalika & Priyanath, 2018; Murugeswari et al., 2018); and hotels (Stefano et al., 2015)—hence the popularity and influence of the SQ model in service quality and airline literature (Alotaibi, 2015; Suresh et al., 2017).

Although the literature shows that traditional SQ models are not comprehensive, scholars have made attempts to broaden SQ models for a wider audience and many different applications (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020). The impact of service gaps on creating and implementing strategies makes SQ models important to managers, scholars, and practitioners (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020). Researchers (Ashraf et al., 2018; Dsilva et al., 2021; Ingaldi & Ulewicz, 2018; Przybytniowski & Michalski,

2020; Yang et al., 2020) have successfully applied the SQ model as a framework to measure and understand service quality and to implement strategies. Other researchers (Alsini, 2017; Ingaldi & Ulewicz, 2018; Parasuraman et al., 1988) have applied the SQ model as a basis for their studies and developed industry-specific service quality models and strategies to meet companies' specific customer service needs.

Therefore, airline customer service managers can employ the SQ model to develop effective strategies and service recovery plans to prevent service failures and mitigate customer complaints (Osarenkhoe et al., 2017). When organizations fail to meet customer expectations, service failure occurs (Harrison-Walker, 2019). SQ model application helps researchers identify weak quality features and dimensions, thereby providing a basis for customer service improvement efforts (Knop, 2019). The service quality study results help practitioners prioritize service quality improvements and develop tailor-made marketing and branding strategies to survive the intense airline industry competition (Dsilva et al., 2021; Nwaogbe et al., 2017).

Evaluating literature enriches researchers' skills and ability to synthesize data and deduce meaning through analysis and interpretation (Wolgemuth et al., 2017). The literature reviewed for this study included scholarly articles related to the SQ model, service quality, customer service concepts, insights, and strategies. The literature review section addresses the following: the model of service quality, studies that aligned with the model of service quality, logical models related to the SQ model, critiques of the model of service quality, and theory application to the business problem.

I compiled the literature by searching in various databases, accessing websites, and setting up Google Scholar Alerts. I used the following keywords to search for material for the literature review: *service quality*, *service quality model*, *gap analysis*, *SERVQUAL*, *customer service*, *customer service strategies*, *customer complaints*, *customer loyalty*, *customer retention*, and *AIRQUAL*. I conducted a literature review using Walden Library databases: ABI/Inform Collection, Academic Search Complete, Business Market Research Collection, Business Source Complete, Dissertation, and Theses @ Walden University. I also searched Emerald Insight, Expanded Academic Search ASAP, Export.gov, F1000 Research, Federal Agency Participation, IBISWorld, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Dissertation & Theses Global, ProQuest Science Journals, SAGE Journals, SAGE Research Methods Online, SAGE Stats, Taylor and Francis, Scholar Works, and ScienceDirect.com.

There are 204 total references, which include 195 (96%) peer-reviewed journal articles. Of the 204 total references, 157 (77%) are from the 2017-2021 period. Of the 204 total references, three (1%) are reports from government websites, four (2%) are books, and two (1%) are dissertations. For the literature review section, there are 105 total references, of which 102 (97%) are peer-reviewed journal articles. Of the total number of references in the literature review, 71 (68%) are from the 2017-2021 period, two (2%) are reports from a government website, and one (1%) is a dissertation.

### **The Model of Service Quality**

Parasuraman et al. (1985) conducted a systematic research program from 1983 to 1988 that led to the SQ model's development. The SQ model is multi dimensional,



comprising the gaps between expectations and perceptions, the SERVQUAL instrument, and the five dimensions of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). Parasuraman et al. (1985) suggested that service quality challenges relate to five gaps. Gaps are between consumer expectation and management perception (Gap 1), management perception and service quality specification (Gap 2), service quality specifications and service delivery (Gap 3), service delivery and external communications (Gap 4), and expected and perceived service (Gap 5). Parasuraman et al. (1988) introduced the SERVQUAL instrument to measure gaps between customer expectations and organizational performance related to five dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Hence, researchers refer to the SQ model as the gap model. In this study, the SQ model and gap (SERVQUAL) model are the same.

### ***Expectancy Disconfirmation Paradigm***

The SQ model has its foundation on the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Previous literature indicates that researchers more frequently apply expectancy-disconfirmation theory in customer satisfaction research than dissonance theory, contrast theory, attribution theory, and equity theory (M. Li et al., 2020). The expectancy-disconfirmation concept refers to post purchase satisfaction as a function of expectations, perceived performance, and disconfirmation of expectations (M. Li et al., 2020). The fundamental tenets that constitute the expectancy-disconfirmation theory are expectations, perceptions, disconfirmation, dissatisfaction, and intangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Customers have performance expectations before purchasing

a product or service, which they then compare with the actual perception after purchase (M. Li et al., 2020).

**Expectations.** Customers perceive service quality in terms of how well a service delivery meets their expectations. Customer expectations are any set of behaviors or actions that individuals anticipate when interacting with a company (Ingaldi & Ulewicz, 2018). Organizations must understand customer expectations, plan, and execute delivery per expectations (Bozkurt & Gligor, 2021). According to Stefano et al. (2015), understanding customers' expectations is a prerequisite for delivering high-quality service and staying competitive. Customer expectations directly influence satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988). An individual's specific cognitive patterns and evaluations affect expectations through situational variables such as intelligence, personality, and behavioral norms.

Most importantly, expectations provide a benchmark for consumers to evaluate performance, facilitate judgment, and determine satisfaction (Oliver, 1981). Researchers of service quality study these customer judgments based on customer perceptions or beliefs. Oliver (1981) identified critical factors driving customer expectations as price, prior experiences, a similar product or service consumer experiences, advertising, and word-of-mouth communications. Modern customers have much higher expectations, such as proactive service, personalized interactions, and connected experiences across channels (Ingaldi & Ulewicz, 2018). When a service organization meets customer expectations, the quality of service is satisfactory, and when the services exceed expectations, customers are delighted and perceive service quality as excellent (Stefano et

al., 2015). Therefore, the interpretation of customer expectations and meeting these expectations is critical to service-providing organizations. If organizational leaders disconfirm customer expectations, they need to know immediately before any substantive damage to customer satisfaction and the financial bottom line occurs.

**Perceptions.** Perception refers to the service received or experienced (Parasuraman et al., 1985). According to Stefano et al. (2015), perception is how the customer perceives and assesses service delivery's appropriateness. How a customer perceives the utility, benefits, and value of goods and services leads to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention (Bogicevic et al., 2017; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Perceptions, unlike expectations, are easy to measure.

**Disconfirmation.** Disconfirmation refers to the variance between prior expectations and actual performance (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Consumers use the cognitive process of disconfirmation to formulate a satisfaction response (Parasuraman et al., 1985). When consumers evaluate performance, disconfirmed expectations lead to either customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The disconfirmation of views applies to the judgments that a customer makes concerning a product, service, or technology artifact. Consumers use the cognitive process of disconfirmation to formulate a satisfaction response (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Disconfirmation affects satisfaction when customers positively compare their beliefs, attitudes, and expectations with performance (Liu et al., 2020). According to M. Li et al. (2020), positive disconfirmation occurs when the actual organizational performance is better than the customer's expectation. When the actual performance is equal to the expectation, no disconfirmation occurs, but negative

disconfirmation occurs when the actual performance is lower than expectations (M. Li et al., 2020). The disconfirmation process initiates responses that consumers use to evaluate performance.

**Dissatisfaction.** Negative disconfirmation leads to customer dissatisfaction (M. Li et al., 2020). Customers are dissatisfied when organizations do not meet their needs or expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Customers' dissatisfaction leads to low performance, negative experiences, customer complaints, or negative word-of-mouth communication (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Factors that affect customers' expectations are environment, situation, consumer reaction, severity, experience, and performance standards (Bolting, 1989). These factors are critical because researchers use them to establish whether a product or service satisfies or dissatisfies (Bolting, 1989). Hence, measuring dissatisfaction requires a multi attribute model like the SQ to assess all factors related to customers' expectations, including intangibles.

**Intangibles.** In the early 1980s, research on service quality progressed from tangible goods to include intangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The quality of service was and is still a challenge to researchers because many intangibles determine satisfaction compared to products whose physical characteristics can be objectively measured (Stefano et al., 2015). This challenge led to the SQ model's systematic development to measure intangibles (Osarenkhoe et al., 2017; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Parasuraman et al. (1985) applied unidimensional self-report measures to illustrate and measure service quality and used customer expectations to measure predicted performance level (Oliver, 1981; Parasuraman et al., 1988). When company performance

exceeds customer expectations, positive disconfirmation leads to satisfaction and vice versa (Liu et al., 2020). The level of customer satisfaction influences customers' behavioral intentions. Customer behaviors range from speaking favorably about a company, to recommending the firm to others, to remaining loyal to the firm, to spending more money on the firm's goods and services (Bozkurt & Gligor, 2021). The more that a customer expects from a service organization, the higher the service quality must be to satisfy the customer. Therefore, when researchers apply the expectancy-disconfirmation theory to measure customer satisfaction, they should inquire about the extent to which a customer's service experience exceeded, met, or fell short of expectation.

### **Studies That Aligned With the Model of Service Quality**

After its introduction in the 1980s, the SQ model became the most popular and influential framework used to study service quality for more than three decades (Jiang et al., 2017). The literature review confirms the theoretical and empirical usability of the insights and propositions that Parasuraman et al. (1985) posited as a framework for service quality research. Previous study findings depict significant and robust affirmation of the relationship between service quality, service gaps, and service failures related to service quality dimensions, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and retention (Kipchilat & Omodi, 2021).

Mehrotra and Bhartiya (2020) agreed with Parasuraman et al. (1985) that understanding customer expectations concerning service quality is of fundamental importance. Research on service quality helps service providers understand gaps and service provision requirements (Luke & Heyns, 2020). Researchers apply the SQ model

and use study results to prioritize and allocate resources for customer satisfaction (Namin, 2017; Shokouhyar et al., 2020). According to Dinçer et al. (2019), applying the SERVQUAL criteria of the SQ model helps in decision making. The different dimensions of service quality that researchers identify can be used by managers to set guidelines and strategies in providing better customer service (Namin, 2017). Researchers have applied the SQ model to study service quality, understand service failure through gap analysis, identify influential dimensions, make recommendations to meet customers' expectations, and improve satisfaction through continuous improvements to service quality policies and standards.

Study findings from previous research aligned with Parasuraman et al.'s (1985, 1988) insights and propositions on service quality, gaps, and dimensions. Stefano et al. (2015) agreed that service quality should be measured using customer's expectations and perception. This approach is consistent with those of Parasuraman et al. and other researchers who expressed the importance of interpreting customer satisfaction from a customer's perspective because of the abstract and elusive nature of service quality. Researchers define service quality based on customer expectation and perception because of the intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability of the production and consumption of services (Stefano et al., 2015). When company employees misunderstand service recipients' expectations, the possibility of a negative impact on customer satisfaction arises (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020).

Przybytniowski and Michalski (2020) confirmed that the SQ model presented by Parasuraman et al. (1985) is a practical model for managers to use in studying service

quality and understanding customer service challenges related to customer expectations and perception levels. Przybytniowski and Michalski's confirmation was consistent with Ingaldi and Ulewicz's (2018) declaration that the SQ model offers tools and methods to evaluate service quality. Ingaldi and Ulewicz posited that the appearance of gaps emanates from service provision discrepancies between the recipients and the service provider. Hence, it is not surprising that researchers identified service gaps between customer expectations and perceptions aligning with the service quality dimensions of the SQ model.

### *Service Gaps*

The emergence of gaps causes a decrease in the quality of services offered to the customer (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020). Previous researchers revealed service gaps consistent with Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) insights during the SQ model's conceptualization. Researchers (Anjalika & Priyanath, 2018; Arundev et al., 2020; Chilembwe, 2014; Desai, 2018; Stefano et al., 2015; Yousapronpaiboon, 2014) identified service gaps that Parasuraman et al. proposed in 1985. Stefano et al. (2015) revealed that customer expectation was above perception in the hotel industry.

Anjalika and Priyanath (2018) discovered discrepancies between customer expectations and service provision related to the banking industry's responsiveness. Management's lack of commitment to daily operations, resources, and market constraints causes discrepancies between expectation and perception (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Chilembwe (2014) revealed two gaps after evaluating Air Malawi's service quality level, value, and satisfaction. The service gaps were between consumer expectations and

management perceptions, and service delivery and external communication. According to Parasuraman et al. (1985), the gap between customer expectations and the management perception results in (a) a lack of knowledge of what features connote high quality to consumers in advance, (b) what features a service must have to meet consumer needs, and (c) what levels of performance are needed to deliver high service quality on those features. Lack of communication, miscommunication, and overpromising lead to a communication gap. Overpromising raises expectations but lower quality perceptions when service organizations do not fulfill promises (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Previous findings confirm Parasuraman et al.'s (1985, 1988) proposition that customers are dissatisfied when the expectation is above perception. When Yousapronpaiboon (2014) applied the SQ model, the researcher established discrepancies between students' expectations and perceptions in all Parasuraman et al.'s service quality dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. The students were dissatisfied with the institution's overall performance. Arundev et al. (2020) revealed a low level of customer satisfaction caused by service quality gaps for all five dimensions. According to Ingaldi (2018), the appearance of service gaps related to service quality dimensions results from deficiencies in the successive stages of preparation and service provision.

### ***Continuous Improvements***

The SQ model application drives continuous quality improvement efforts in different services and sectors (Mendes et al., 2018). Evaluation of airlines based on service quality criteria can help improve airline service processes (Ghorabae et al.,



2017). Managers and practitioners prescribe service quality improvements based on identified gaps and dimensions (Adeniran & Fadare, 2018). Decisions on what precautionary measures to adopt and what areas to improve on are dependent on identifying service quality gaps and influential dimensions for the services (Alsini, 2017; Namin, 2017). Chilembwe (2014) proposed improvements to Air Malawi's processes and procedures to mitigate the knowledge and communication gap. Stefano et al. recommended hotel improvements to mitigate the service gap between service quality expectations and service provision. Yousapronpaiboon (2014) proposed organizational leaders upgrade facilities and equipment to improve service delivery in the Thailand education sector.

Based on the study results, Anjalika and Priyanath (2018) prescribed safe, secure, and reliable banking services and prioritized improvements related to responsiveness based on the study findings. Sharma and Shoaib (2020) prioritized improvements to assurance and empathy dimensions to improve the overall service quality in fast-food restaurants in rural Kashmir. Anjalika and Priyanath advocated for security and customer training improvements to minimize security gaps. Olaniyi and Stephens (2019) recommended upgrades to airport facilities to ensure proper ambiance, seating, television, entertainment, and better business center facilities to the airport management.

### ***Customer Satisfaction***

Researchers adopt the SQ model to measure service quality and improve customer satisfaction (Murugeswari et al., 2018). Customer satisfaction is the experience a customer has with a service that it encounters against the customer's expectations for the

service (S. R. O. Ali et al., 2020). Olaniyi and Stephens (2019) applied the SQ model to study and improve the passenger satisfaction level at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos. Olaniyi and Stephens revealed that airline passengers were satisfied with the services at Murtala Muhammed International Airport. The airline passengers highly rated the availability of public transport options, getting to and from the airport with ease, the availability of luggage trolleys, baggage delivery times, and priority baggage delivery efficiency as the top five services. Passengers were satisfied with the overall service level of the airport service. There was a good relationship between the passengers' satisfaction and service quality.

Olaniyi and Stephens (2019) instructed airport management to train airport personnel to improve interaction and increase customer satisfaction. Chilembwe (2014) recommended Air Malawi prioritize reliability, assurance, and website usability to improve customer satisfaction. The National Courier Service prioritized processes and procedures for assurance to increase customer satisfaction (Siali et al., 2018). Namin (2017) provided a set of guidelines for improving each of the five dimensions of service quality based on their ranking to enhance customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants. Therefore, researchers and organizations implement service recovery plans based on identified gaps and influential dimensions.

### ***Influential Dimensions***

The managers' decisions on what precautionary measures to adopt and what areas to improve on are dependent on identifying influential dimensions (Alsini, 2017). Identifying the most relevant dimensions and ranking them provides a clear picture of

what actions to take to be closer to customers (Dinçer et al., 2019). Belwal and Amireh (2018) revealed the significance of reliability and assurance in affecting telecom customers' attitudinal loyalty for long-term profitability. Other researchers (Alsini, 2017; Anjalika & Priyanath, 2018; Dsilva et al., 2021; Kumar & Hundal, 2018; Namin, 2017; Nwaogbe et al., 2017; Orte et al., 2020; Rezaei et al., 2018; Siali et al., 2018) applied the SQ model and identified influential dimensions in different industries. Namin's (2017) study findings show that all five dimensions significantly impact service quality. Alsini (2017) and Kumar and Hundal (2018) confirmed the importance of tangibility in two different sectors. Alsini identified tangibility as the most significant after analyzing perceptions of service quality and satisfaction levels among customers of the national airline of Saudi Arabia. Kumar and Hundal identified tangibility as important in solar energy. Tangibility refers to the physical surroundings in terms of objects and subjects, for example, interior design and appearance of employees, facilities, equipment, and communication (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Researchers (Dsilva et al., 2021; Nwaogbe et al., 2017; Ocampo et al., 2019; Rezaei et al., 2018; Sam et al., 2018; Suresh et al., 2017) identified reliability and responsiveness as influential in the airline industry, bus transport, and government agencies. Reliability is the capability to consistently perform or provide appropriate company services, and responsiveness is a company's preparedness to quickly help its customers and efficiently perform services (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Rezaei et al. (2018) revealed reliability as the most significant in baggage handling, consistent with Nwaogbe et al.'s (2017) and Dsilva et al.'s (2021) interpretations. Nwaogbe et al.

revealed the significance between passengers' perspectives and reliability, and Dsilva et al.'s study results depicted reliability as significant among international business travelers. Suresh et al.'s (2017) perceived responsiveness to be most significant in the airline industry, confirming Anjalika and Priyanath's (2018) interpretations in the banking sector and Sam et al.'s (2018) in public transport.

Other researchers (Anjalika & Priyanath, 2018; Nuryanto & Farida, 2020; Siali et al., 2018) revealed different influential dimensions in different sectors. When Siali et al. (2018) applied the SQ model towards the parcel delivery service of the National Courier Service, assurance was the most significant. Assurance depicts the employees' knowledge, courtesy, politeness, trustworthiness, and various features that give customers confidence (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Some of the dimensions' significance is dependent on the current situations or events. For example, Nuryanto and Farida (2020) revealed empathy as the highest variable affecting customer loyalty during COVID-19 in the fast-food restaurant in Semarang.

Based on the study results, researchers acknowledged the importance of Parasuraman's multi-dimensional SQ model in service quality research but argued that there are different dimensions and levels of influence for different services and sectors (Stefano et al., 2015). Researchers' arguments were consistent with Cronin and Taylor's (1994) assessment that different scales may be more relevant than the SQ model for measuring service quality in various industries. Stefano et al. (2015) asserted that Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) mistake was to define a generic set of service quality determinants for all types of service sectors.

Therefore, researchers and scholars proposed adopting the SQ model to different settings (Alsini, 2017). When researchers (Meleddu et al., 2020; Nuryanto & Farida, 2020) employed the SQ model across sectors, they discovered different service dimensions with varying significance levels. Some researchers used SERVQUAL as a basis to develop other measuring instruments of service quality, for instance, LODGSERV (Knutson et al., 1990), DINESERV (Knutson et al., 1996), HOLSERV (Mei et al., 1999), SITEQUAL (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), AIRQUAL (Alotaibi, 2015), LODGQUAL (Getty & Getty, 2003), WebQUAL (Loiacono et al., 2007), RENTQUAL (Ekiz et al., 2009), E-S-QUAL (Parasuraman et al., 2005), HiEduQual (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016), HOLSAT (Ceylan & Ozcelik, 2016), FAIRSERV (Carr, 2007), and GLSERV (W. H. Lee & Cheng, 2018).

### **Logical Models Related to the Model of Service Quality**

Researchers and scholars used the SQ model as a foundation to develop industry-specific models. Some industry-specific models align with or encompass some of the SQ model insights and propositions. Researchers developed the new models to study service quality, focusing on the discrepancies between customer expectation and perception, as Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) posited. Models like LODGSERV (Knutson et al., 1990), AIRQUAL (Alotaibi, 2015), GLSERV (W. H. Lee & Cheng, 2018), and E-Res-QUAL (Parasuraman et al., 2005) include all or some of Parasuraman et al.'s (1985, 1988) service quality dimensions. Other models like RENTQUAL (Ekiz et al., 2009), and E-S-QUAL (Parasuraman et al., 2005) have entirely different service quality dimensions. Researchers are using the industry-specific models to identify gaps and influential

dimensions critical to continuous improvements, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and retention (Gandhi et al., 2017; Latif et al., 2019). However, SITEQUAL (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), AIRQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 2005), and GELSERV (W. H. Lee & Cheng, 2018) have shortcomings and faced criticism like SERVQUAL (Stefano et al., 2015). Hence, some researchers combine the models with SERVQUAL to get comprehensive results (Gandhi et al., 2017; Parasuraman et al., 2005; Subha, 2020).

### ***LODGSERV***

Knutson et al. (1990) developed the 26-item LODGSERV model to measure service quality in the hotel industry after applying the SQ model. The LODGSERV model initially contained 36 items to tap into the five dimensions of service quality tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Knutson et al. removed ten of the 36 questions because they did not add meaning to the index (Minh et al., 2015). Researchers use the 26 items to measure consumers' expectations in the hotel experience (Minh et al., 2015). A. S. B. M. Ali et al. (2020) applied LODGSERV to measure consumer service experience in the boutique hotel. A. S. B. M. Ali, et al. revealed the significant relationship between guest satisfaction and revisit intention. The hotel managers and owners had to improve the hotel's physical facilities and services to compete with other hotels.

### ***DINESERV***

Knutson et al. (1996) developed DINESERV as an index to measure consumer expectations for service quality in restaurant experiences. According to Knutson et al., the DINESERV model helps differentiate customer expectations based on quick service,

casual or theme, and fine dining. Researchers use DINESERV to measure, assess, and manage service quality in restaurants (Knutson et al., 1996). The SQ and DINESERV model has been widely used to measure service quality in the hospitality industry (Hansen, 2014). Chun and Nyam-Ochir (2020) employed the DINESERV scale to evaluate the factors affecting customer satisfaction, revisit intention, and the likelihood of recommendation for Mongolian fast-food restaurants. Chun and Nyam-Ochir's results showed that food quality, service quality, price, and atmosphere of a restaurant positively influence customer satisfaction and positively influence a customer to revisit intention and likelihood of recommendation for Mongolian and global restaurants.

### ***HOLSERV***

Mei et al. (1999) developed the HOLSERV model based on the hotel industry's SQ model. The HOLSERV model had 27 measuring items and three dimensions: employees, tangibles, and reliability. Getty and Getty (2003) developed the LODGUAL model after studying service quality dimensions in the USA's hotel industry. Getty and Getty (2003) developed LODGQUAL with five dimensions: tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, communication, and confidence. Researchers are employing SERVQUAL, HOLSERV, and LODQUAL scale to extensively measure and understand service quality and customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Subha (2020) applied the three scales to evaluate the service quality in the hotel industry. The customers who were favorably treated in a friendly manner and understood had a high satisfaction level. Subha identified the crucial factors of housekeeping services quality, which helped the hotel improve the housekeeping services, minimizing its cost and time investment.

### ***SITEQUAL***

Yoo and Donthu (2001) developed a nine-item SITEQUAL model for measuring website quality using four dimensions: usability, aesthetic design, processing speed, and security. Yoo and Donthu developed SITEQUAL by asking students in two marketing classes to generate appropriate questions. However, SITEQUAL had its shortcomings. According to Yoo and Donthu, it did not capture all aspects of the purchasing process and, therefore, did not constitute a comprehensive assessment of a site's service quality. Based on previous studies, processing speed is the most crucial determinant for measuring service quality for food delivery apps (Pattnaik, 2019). When Pattnaik (2019) applied SITEQUAL to measure delivering quality services in food delivery applications, including Uber Eats, Zomato, and Swiggy, three variables, namely ease of use, aesthetic design, and processing speed, were significant. The most critical dimension was processing speed, and aesthetic designs had lower significance than the relevance of ease of use (Pattnaik, 2019).

### ***E-S-QUAL and E-RecS-QUAL***

Because of the increase in online shopping, Parasuraman et al. (2005) developed the E-S-QUAL and E-RecS-QUAL model to measure service quality on websites. Parasuraman et al. refined and validated the SERVQUAL instrument to develop the E-S-QUAL and E-RecS-QUAL model. Researchers use the two electronic quality scales to assess the full cycle of service quality for business to customer (B2C) e-commerce websites. E-S-QUAL is a multi-item model for measuring electronic service quality (Loiacono et al., 2007). E-S-QUAL is a multi-item model with a 22-item survey scale



and four dimensions: efficiency, fulfillment, system availability, and privacy (Parasuraman et al., 2005). E-RecS-QUAL is an 11-item survey scale with three dimensions: responsiveness, compensation, and contact (Loiacono et al., 2007). According to Loiacono et al. (2007), researchers apply E-S-QUAL and E-RecS-QUAL to measure trends in the dimensional and attribute level websites' ratings. The trends help identify websites' strengths and weaknesses (Loiacono et al., 2007). Researchers use E-S-QUAL and E-RecS-QUAL to demonstrate excellent psychometric properties based on findings from various reliability and validity tests (Parasuraman et al., 2005).

### ***WebQUAL***

Loiacono et al. (2007) developed the WebQUAL model. Researchers use WebQUAL to rate websites and generate information for web designers (Loiacono et al., 2007). According to Loiacono et al., researchers must rate websites on the following 12 dimensions: task, interaction, trust, response time, design, intuitiveness, visual appeal, innovativeness, flow-emotional appeal, integrated communication, business processes, and substitutability. The WebQual tool has different dimensions to that of the SQ model because of customer-site interaction. However, service quality dimensions like responsiveness and communication are still relevant in website evaluations. Researchers (Andry et al., 2019; Candiwan & Wibisono, 2021) used WebQUAL to rate e-business websites. The success of e-business highlights websites as a tool to interact with customers, so a website's quality becomes essential (Andry et al., 2019). If a company wants to build or improve customer loyalty, high service quality from the website is required to retain customers (Andry et al., 2019). Chi (2018) revealed the significant

impact of response time and brand trust on consumer satisfaction toward apparel mobile commerce websites. Candiwan and Wibisono (2021) revealed information quality as the only positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, companies must continuously use SERVQUAL and WebQual tools to evaluate and improve website quality, customer loyalty, and retain customers.

### ***RENTQUAL***

Ekiz et al. (2009) developed the RENTQUAL model after applying Parasuraman et al.'s (1985, 1988) SQ model. RENTQUAL is an instrument to measure the service quality of car rental services. It is an 18-item scale with six dimensions; comfort, delivery, safety, handing over, ergonomics, and accessibility (Ekiz et al., 2009). Ekiz et al. developed RENTQUAL because issues in the car rental industry received less attention from scholars and researchers, and there was no scale for measuring car rental service quality.

### ***HiEduQual***

Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2016) developed the HiEduQual model with 23 items and six-structured dimensions to measure service quality in higher education institutions. Annamdevula and Bellamkonda studied students' perceived service quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and motivation. The students perceived service quality as a critical prerequisite to student satisfaction, student motivation, and student loyalty. Justin et al. (2019) confirmed the theoretical and empirical usability of the HiEduQual structural model. Justin et al.'s data analysis confirmed a strong relationship between students' perceived service quality and student loyalty, student satisfaction, and image. Latif et al.

(2019) applied HiEduQual to validate the scale and measure the service quality level in higher education and found six determinants of service quality: teacher quality, administrative services, knowledge services, activities, continuous improvement, and leadership quality. Leadership was the most significant, and the final scale included 37 items. Based on the study findings, university leaders could employ HiEduQual to assess the service quality levels and importance placed on teaching, administrative services, academic facilities, campus infrastructure, support services, and internationalization (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016). Education leaders, service providers, and higher education shareholders would attempt to create strategies to safeguard high service quality and standards preferred by international students (Justin et al., 2019).

### ***FAIRSERV***

Carr (2007) developed the FAIRSERV model. The model is a four-dimensional service fairness scale. Researchers use the FAIRSERV as an alternative to SERVQUAL or additional to study consumer reactions to service (Carr, 2007). According to Carr, FAIRSERV involves assessing service through the lens of organizational fairness theory. Researchers combine FAIRSERV and SERVQUAL to predict service satisfaction and customer loyalty (Carr, 2007). Gandhi et al. (2017) used attributes of FAIRSERV and SERVQUAL in the preliminary questionnaire to study satisfaction and loyalty intentions in small to medium manufacturing enterprises. Gandhi et al. revealed five essential factors: credibility, compensation, competence, servicescape, and friendliness to measure organizational service quality and employee retention. Bhatt (2020) established the reliability and validity of the FAIRSERV model.

***GLSERV***

The rise of environmental awareness and carbon reduction trends has made green hotels a vital business for the hospitality industry (W. H. Lee & Cheng, 2018). Therefore, W. H. Lee and Cheng (2018) developed the Green Lodging Service Quality (GLSERV) scale to measure service quality in green hotels. The hotel service quality scale was not sufficient to evaluate green hotels' service quality (W. H. Lee & Cheng, 2018). GLSERV has six dimensions and 25-items. The six dimensions include reliability, empathy, environmental communication, green energy saving, assurance, and tangibles (W. H. Lee & Cheng, 2018).

***AIRQUAL***

AIRQUAL is an airline industry model (Alotaibi, 2015), hence my detailed discussion since I focused on customer service managers' strategies to mitigate negative customer complaints in the airline industry. Beri developed AIRQUAL in 2001 for measuring service quality in the airline industry (Alotaibi, 2015). Although Beri did not publish an academic press study, the study provided the basis for developing industry-specific models for measuring service quality in the airline sector. In 2001, Beri conceptualized AIRQUAL with 44 items based on Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) SERVQUAL instrument. Beri identified 44-items, like Parasuraman et al. (1988), but the dimensions were not similar. Beri identified seven service quality factors instead of five and revealed the following dimensions: Airline tangibles, terminal tangibles, personnel, empathy, image, perceived service quality, and customer satisfaction. Several researchers adopted the AIRQUAL model in their studies at various geographic locations: North

Cyprus, Pakistan (S. R. O. Ali et al., 2020), Saudi Arabia, and the USA (Alotaibi, 2015). Just like SERVQUAL, Berri's 2001 AIRQUAL model went through variations and had its limitations and inconsistencies.

Researchers criticized AIRQUAL after getting inconsistent results in the airline industry. Alotaibi (2015) posited that Berri's terminal tangibles and image should not be part of the AIRQUAL model because terminal tangibles and company image were not under the control of airline management's service delivery process. According to Alotaibi, the personnel dimension measured all Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) five dimensions. Alotaibi then deleted the three dimensions: terminal tangibles, image, and personnel, and excluded perceived quality and customer satisfaction from the AIRQUAL model. Alotaibi updated the model to include empathy, assurance, and responsiveness. However, when researchers applied Alotaibi's updated AIRQUAL model in the airline industry, researchers still identified varying dimensions.

Therefore, researchers continued to test and refine the AIRQUAL model. Alotaibi (2015) conducted further research and improved the scale from 44 items to 30 by creating a new hybrid scale comprising 18 items from the SQ model, nine from AIRQUAL, and added three new items on airline context. The updated AIRQUAL model included five factors reliability, empathy, assurance, tangibility, and responsiveness, just like the SQ model. Alotaibi applied the hybrid AIRQUAL model to measure airline service quality using Saudi Arabia samples and retested with examples from the USA in 2015. The results of Alotaibi's study using Saudi Arabia samples retained all the five dimensions

but did not confirm the Hybrid scale's validity. The lack of efficacy meant further research and development of the AIRQUAL model.

Alotaibi (2015) conducted further studies and still did not get consistent and valid results. Alotaibi conducted subsequent tests using USA samples and confirmed only three significant dimensions: reliability, tangibility, and empathy. Alotaibi's exploratory factor analysis on European and Indian passengers showed that respondents perceived the dimensions differently because of the different sectors, cultures, and data collection techniques. The research findings aligned with Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) five dimensions when Alotaibi reallocated a few items to other dimensions. With further research, Alotaibi observed that the new hybrid AIRQUAL's five dimensions were not stable with different populations.

The different study results prompted Kalemba and Campa-Planas (2018) to conduct a content analysis of airline service quality literature for two decades to identify factors specific to the airline industry. Kalemba and Campa-Planas identified 12 significant factors in airline literature from 1997 to 2014. The factors included airline employees, baggage handling, punctuality, convenient flight schedule, seat comfort, in-flight service, food quality service, in-flight entertainment service, airline safety, service reliability, handling of customer complaints in abnormal conditions, and frequent flier program. When Kalemba and Campa-Planas conducted further content analysis, they revealed the five dominant factors: airline employees, baggage handling, punctuality, convenient flight schedule, and seat comfort. However, the study findings were not consistent with other researchers' (Nedunchezian & Thirunavukkarasu, 2018) results,

who verified the AIRQUAL scale using five dimensions and 22 items SQ model. Researchers are still developing and testing the hybrid model of AIRQUAL and SERVQUAL in the airline industry and various sectors with no consensus (Nedunchezian & Thirunavukkarasu, 2018).

Despite the inconsistent results and challenges to confirm the AIRQUAL-SERVQUAL hybrid model's validity, researchers use the two scales to understand the trend in passenger perception of airline performance (Budimcevic et al., 2018). Researchers use AIRQUAL and SERVQUAL as input to develop effective marketing programs, increase customer satisfaction, and improve customer experience (Budimcevic et al., 2018). The criticism of AIRQUAL and the SQ model continues because of the different dimensions researchers identify within and across industries. That does not take away or minimize the importance of applying AIRQUAL and SERVQUAL to study service quality.

### **Critiques of the Model of Service Quality**

Besides the popularity and application of the SQ model, researchers (Babakus & Boller, 1992; Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Marcolin et al., 2021; Ranjbari et al., 2020) have subjected the model to several criticisms in different sectors, including the airline (Adeniran & Fadare, 2018). Cronin and Taylor (1994) posited the theoretical weaknesses related to comprehending customer expectations, the gap approach to service quality, and the SQ measurement tool's unsuitability in different industries. Babakus and Boller (1992) revealed the methodological shortcomings of the gap model related to service quality's dimensionality in various services. The use of mixed-item wording and the

operationalization of service quality based on gap scores appeared in the research process in Babakus and Boller's study. Hence, Babakus and Boller warned researchers to exercise caution when applying the SQ model.

Inconsistent study results across and within sectors heightened the SQ model's criticism (Murugeswari et al., 2018). Anjalika and Priyanath (2018) and Murugeswari et al. (2018) revealed all five dimensions as critical in the banking sector, with responsiveness as the most important contributor. In the airline sector, empathy, responsiveness, reliability, and assurance were significant, but tangibility insignificant (Nedunchezian & Thirunavukkarasu, 2018; Pakdil & Aydin, 2007; Suki, 2014). The results were contradictory to S. R. O. Ali et al.'s (2020), who identified tangibility as significant in the airline sector. Satpathy et al. (2017) revealed gaps related to ten dimensions of service quality instead of five in the aviation sector. The service quality factors included: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding, and service. However, the dimensions' values varied from one to ten (Nedunchezian & Thirunavukkarasu, 2018).

Ganiyu (2016) compiled a report of all concerns raised about the SQ model to prove that the scale was not a generic instrument to measure service quality. According to Ganiyu, researchers criticized the model for (a) dimensionality and use of different scores concerning the dependence or independence of the service quality dimensions, (b) focusing on the service delivery process and not taking cognizance of service delivery outcomes, (c) the researchers have based their SQ methodological stance on the disconfirmation theory rather than an attitudinal view, which ignores the scientific



principle of continuity and deduction, thereby portraying the SQ model as an inductive framework service quality, (d) its measurement of expectations and perceptions using the SQ model that makes the questionnaire relatively cumbersome and time-consuming, and (e) its failure to capture the dynamics of customer expectations, which by nature is not static.

Researchers provided counter propositions to Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) five service quality dimensions. Gilbert and Wong (2003) proposed seven dimensions, which are reliability, responsiveness, assurance, customization, employees, facilities, and flight pattern for the airline industry instead of five. On the other hand, Hussain et al. (2015) proposed six determinants security and safety, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, and communications for the airline industry. According to Cronin and Taylor (1994), the SQ model's shortcomings caused low reliability, poor convergent, and predictive validity. There was no consensus even within the same industry.

These challenges led to the proposition and adoption of other models such as SERVPERF (Cronin & Taylor, 1994), FAIRSERV (Carr, 2007), and RESCA (Olaniyi & Stephens, 2019). Cronin and Taylor (1994) argued that the gap approach was not comprehensive and proposed SERVPERF as an alternative to the SERVQUAL measurement tool. According to Cronin and Taylor, SERVPERF was the ideal scale because it evaluates service quality based on performance. However, other authors disagreed with Cronin and Taylor, and a debate between the effectiveness of SERVQUAL and SERVPERF ensued. Authors on both sides remained unconvinced that customer expectations should measure service quality but agreed that SERVQUAL was a

valuable tool for measuring overall service quality (Murugeswari et al., 2018).

SERVQUAL has the highest diagnostic power in pinpointing service quality shortcomings (Murugeswari et al., 2018).

Researchers like Gandhi et al. (2017) explained that the SQ model is commendable because of the ease of use, possession of a simple structure, and generalization capability. Gandhi et al. argued that since service quality mainly depends on human behavior, the service quality measuring instrument's quality dimensions vary in different service settings or sectors. For example, reliability is essential in transportation, and empathy and responsiveness more significant in the health sector. Therefore, researchers, scholars, and practitioners can adopt the SQ model and modify the dimensions to suit the service settings.

### **Theory Application to the Business Problem**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore customer service strategies that airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents. Airlines must render quality service to survive in today's competitive aviation industry (Deepa & Jayaraman, 2017). A continuous increase in customer complaints and decline in passenger confidence in the aviation industry's reliability and service offering is threatening some airlines' survival (Deepa & Jayaraman, 2017; U.S. DOT, 2017a). Therefore, effective customer service strategies are crucial for airline customer service managers to mitigate customer complaints and retain customers (Mehta & Rice, 2016).

The SQ model is the appropriate conceptual framework for this study. The model is vital to understand service quality business problems and explore customer service strategies. Researchers assess passenger perception of airline performance, develop effective marketing programs, increase customer satisfaction, and improve customer experience through the SQ lens (Budimcevic et al., 2018). Researchers (Aydin & Yildirim, 2012; Chilembwe, 2014; Ganiyu, 2016; Gilbert & Wong, 2003; Pakdil & Aydin, 2007) prescribed solutions to improve customer satisfaction after applying the SQ model. Therefore, airline service managers should employ the SQ model to understand customer service quality failures and mitigate the increase in customer complaints. Managers should adopt a holistic approach that includes regular surveys and effective service recovery plans for continuous improvements to service processes and procedures (Stefano et al., 2015). The service recovery plans must encompass customer recovery, process recovery, and employee recovery (Johnston & Michel, 2008). A company's continuous assessment and improvement to service quality policies and standards eventually change customer perception from negative to positive and retain customers.

### *Surveys*

Airlines must continuously evaluate and assess the quality of service they deliver to their customers through surveys (Anjalika & Priyanath, 2018). The surveys or questionnaires help organizations to assess customer expectations and perceptions. The airlines can achieve this by using the SQ model to develop questionnaires to measure customer satisfaction and service quality regularly. According to Stefano et al. (2015), the SQ instrument is an excellent basis for developing questionnaires. Other researchers

(Boakye et al., 2020; Ding et al., 2020; J. Kim, 2021; C. H. Lee et al., 2019; Nojavan et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2020) employed the SQ model to measure service quality in different industries. Constant research allows managers to gain insight into improvement areas and develop effective methods to enhance service policies, processes, and procedures (Anjalika & Priyanath, 2018). Managers also need to understand the nature of quality and essential values related to quality through surveys (Stefano et al., 2015). Customer service managers can identify customer needs, expectations, and values through surveys, implement changes and continue observing and evaluating the managerial processes, technological systems, and human relationships supporting continuous improvement. Therefore, continuous improvements to service delivery processes need continuous performance evaluations (Maghsoodi et al., 2019).

### ***Continuous Improvement***

One of the most effective solutions to sustain an organization in competitive markets is the continuous improvement strategy (Maghsoodi et al., 2019). Organizations achieve continuous improvement through the application of the SQ model (Stefano et al., 2015). Customer service managers can use the SQ model as a diagnostic tool for various applications and identify service quality trends. According to Stefano et al. (2015), marketing researchers use the SQ model to compare services between competitors, determine dimensions of quality superior to competitors, and the areas that need service recovery. Therefore, researchers use the SQ model to develop effective marketing programs, increase customer satisfaction, and improve customer experience (Budimcevic et al., 2018).

### *Service Recovery Plans*

Airline customer service managers can use the SQ model to adopt a holistic and systematic approach to improve service quality and develop effective service recovery plans. Companies implementing recovery techniques are not giving the customers what they want, leaving 60% of them dissatisfied (Harrison-Walker, 2019). Service recovery plans are the actions organizations take to mitigate service failures (Bozkurt & Gligor, 2021). The application of service recovery plans must include customer recovery, process recovery, and employee recovery (Johnston & Michel, 2008). Johnston and Michel (2008) investigated the impact of service recovery on these three aspects and their relative impact on an organization's financial performance. The two revealed that many organizations and academic researchers have focused most of their efforts on customer recovery and ignored the high impact outcomes of the process and employee recovery. Service recovery procedures had a more significant impact on employees and process improvement than customers (Johnston & Michel, 2008).

The concept of forgiveness must be part of the service recovery plan. Besides service recovery strategies such as apologizing, offering compensation, or allowing customers to voice their grievances, Harrison-Walker (2019) prescribed the rich concept of forgiveness about service recovery plans. Harrison-Walker demonstrated that forgiveness mediates the relationship between service recovery strategies and desirable outcomes. Therefore, airline managers can mitigate service failures if they incorporate the concept of forgiveness in their future service recovery models and customer service training strategies.

The SQ model has been an invaluable conceptual framework for this study. It provides a systematic and logical point of reference for scholars and practitioners seeking to monitor and evaluate service quality across sectors (Ganiyu, 2016). Researchers adopt the SQ model and modify the dimensions to suit the different service settings (Gandhi et al., 2017). The SQ model offers a proficient structure that service organizations can rely on to generate comprehensive service quality interpretations through historical development, extensions, and evolution. The SQ model has been an invaluable tool for researchers studying service quality in the airline industry. In this study, I successfully used the SQ model lens to research and understand the continuous increase in customer complaints and explore effective customer service strategies in the airline sector.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 1, I presented the study's background highlighting the business problem and the purpose statement. I conveyed the research question and interview questions I used to elicit participants' knowledge and experience. I then presented the nature of the study and the conceptual framework. Subsequent was the study's significance highlighting the study's contribution to the business practice and social change. A review of the academic and professional literature followed. The literature review contains a depth analysis of the SQ model's foundation, studies that aligned with the SQ model, logical models related to the SQ model, critiques of the SQ model, and the theory applied to the business problem. The literature review confirms the theoretical and empirical usability of the SQ model. Customer service leaders are employing the SQ model as a foundation to understand and measure customer service challenges and

implement effective strategies. Section 2 includes the purpose statement, the researcher's role, participants, the research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability and validity, and an overview of section 3. Section 3 contains the presentation of findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, and further research, followed by reflections and the conclusion.

## Section 2: The Project

Airlines must render quality service to survive in today's competitive aviation industry (Deepa & Jayaraman, 2017). A continuous increase in customer complaints and decline in passenger confidence in the aviation industry's reliability and service offerings are threatening some airlines' survival (Deepa & Jayaraman, 2017; U.S. DOT, 2017b). Therefore, to retain customers, airline customer service managers must know strategies to mitigate customer complaints and improve customer satisfaction (Mehta & Rice, 2016). Customers' confidence to choose the same airline company depends on customer satisfaction.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore customer service strategies that airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents. The target population was three managers from two airline companies located in the United States with successful experience in implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents. The study may contribute to positive social change by supporting airline leaders' potential to develop customer-focused airline policies to improve customer service quality and satisfaction for the travel community, benefiting airline employees and their families.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In a qualitative research study, the researcher is instrumental from the initial steps to the concluding phase (Henderson, 2017; Johansson & Wallo, 2019). Researchers are involved in data collection, management, and analysis (Cypress, 2018). They anticipate



ethical issues and develop means and methods for collecting, recording, and storing data securely (Cypress, 2018). The researcher collects and analyzes data after conceptualizing and formulating the research problem (Henderson, 2017). Data collection and analysis process includes gaining access to selected participants, developing a dialogue, organizing the research process, executing the research, collecting the data, and analyzing the results (Cypress, 2018). Another critical role of a researcher is to discuss ethical issues and consider them (Johansson & Wallo, 2019). The researcher's relationship with the topic and research area can cause moral and ethical conflicts in a study (True et al., 2017). As the researcher in this study, I had 16 years of experience in the airline industry and had developed preconceived notions related to customer service challenges. Therefore, I adhered to the guidelines and ethical principles outlined in *The Belmont Report* (Miracle, 2016) to maintain ethical standards throughout the study.

*The Belmont Report* serves as an ethical framework for research, and its primary purpose is to protect all research subjects or participants (Miracle, 2016). *The Belmont Report's* three ethical principles are (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (Miracle, 2016). The principle of respect for persons involves promoting and enabling participants' freedom to make choices about participation without constraints or undue influence (Kaye et al., 2019). The principle of beneficence requires efforts to secure the well-being of participants (Singh, 2016). The principle of justice requires that there must be an equitable distribution of both burdens and benefits related to research participation (Singh, 2016). The justice principle pertains to participants' right to fair treatment and privacy (Miracle, 2016).

As a researcher, I mitigated bias that could have affected the interpretation of study findings. According to Twining et al. (2017), the researcher's or participants' personal preference may interfere with and compromise data and study findings' accuracy. McGrath et al. (2018) posited that a researcher avoids bias in a study by being a reflexive and conscious co-creator with interviewees. Therefore, I mitigated bias by being objective and impartial throughout my interactions with participants in this study. I consciously resisted discussing my knowledge and expertise with participants to prevent influence and bias.

### **Participants**

A researcher uses a study's goal or purpose to select appropriate participants (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Based on this study's phenomenon and purpose, I selected three participants from two airline companies who had successfully employed customer service strategies to mitigate adverse customer incidents for at least 5 years in the United States. I used Air Travel Consumer Reports to select eligible airline companies. The Air Travel Consumer Report is a monthly product of the DOT's OAEP that contains the number of customer complaints raised against each U.S. airline (U.S. DOT, 2017a).

I used LinkedIn and Facebook to identify and verify participants with at least 5 years of customer service experience. Participants P2 and P3 were managers from Airline Company B in the western region, and Participant P1 was from Airline Company A in the eastern region. Researchers use in-person visits, emails, or phone calls to access eligible

participants (Amundsen et al., 2017). After receiving Walden's IRB approval, I sent invitation emails with the informed consent form to prospective candidates.

There are several ways of establishing a working relationship with participants. Interviewers can strengthen their working relationships with participants by being transparent, avoiding harm, communicating, and protecting confidentiality for study participants and organizations (Amundsen et al., 2017). I cultivated a working relationship through ethical investigation, following contractual obligations, and transparency. Social skills are vital to creating trusting relationships (Johansson & Wallo, 2019). Therefore, after sending the participation invitation emails communicating the study's intent and ethical obligations, I strengthened the relationship by consistently communicating and answering participants' questions in person and via emails, texts, and phone calls. I explained how I would avoid harm and protect the confidentiality of study participants and the airline companies. Three eligible participants from two airline companies agreed to participate, and I scheduled and conducted semistructured interviews in-person and through Zoom at the participants' convenience in terms of place and time.

A researcher poses questions to elicit participants' perceptions, experiences, thoughts, and feelings in interviews (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Hence, researchers use purposive sampling selection using characteristics of the population, research question, or research objective (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The participants' characteristics must align with the overarching research question to ensure rich data collection to fully understand the phenomenon under study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I recruited the

participants based on their experience in and knowledge of the phenomenon under study, thereby aligning participants' characteristics with the overarching research question. This study's overarching research question was the following: What customer service strategies do airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents? Therefore, the participants were customer service managers from the airline industry who had successfully employed customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

The research problem determines the research method (Johansson & Wallo, 2019). In this study, I used the qualitative method to conduct in-depth research on airline customer service strategies. The three commonly used research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Yin, 2018). The researcher's direct participation in collecting data, interviews, and other processes is a significant qualitative research function (Yin, 2018). Researchers use qualitative studies to conduct in-depth investigations and gain a broad understanding of social or human phenomena through behavior observations, document reviews, focus groups, and interviews (Queirós et al., 2017). Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring solutions to business problems related to quality improvement of business operations management (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Unlike data analysis with the quantitative method, data analysis in a qualitative study does not require measurements or empirical analysis (Yin, 2018).

In quantitative research and the quantitative portion of mixed methods research, researchers use statistical data to test a theory using computations and monitoring (Queirós et al., 2017). According to D. L. Morgan (2018), quantitative researchers use variables and statistics to examine relationships or differences when testing a theory or hypothesis. A mixed-methods approach combines qualitative and quantitative attributes to validate study findings (S. J. Morgan et al., 2017). Although combining both methods may complement and validate study findings, the quantitative and mixed methods were inappropriate for this study because the goal was not to test a theory or hypothesis using statistical data.

The rationale for selecting the qualitative method was the goal of this study. My goal was to conduct an in-depth investigation of practical strategies that airline customer service managers employ to mitigate customer complaints. The qualitative method provides a thorough and in-depth overview of a phenomenon and allows flexibility in data collection process, as researchers can adopt unstructured and semistructured questions to understand the who, what, how, and why of a problem (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Naderifar et al., 2017).

### **Research Design**

I used multiple case study to gain in-depth knowledge of customer service strategies that airline managers use to mitigate adverse customer incidents. In multiple case studies, researchers explore complex phenomena using multiple data sources (Yin, 2018). Researchers who apply the case study design using various sources such as semistructured interviews, document reviews, and observations collect extensive data

(Yin, 2018). Besides case study, I considered several qualitative research designs, such as ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative (Yin, 2018). These designs were not appropriate because they did not align with this study's intended goal. Ethnographic researchers focus on the extended cultural theory test (Jones & Smith, 2017). Such researchers spend long periods in the participants' setting to better understand the environment influencing participants' perceptions (Gherardi, 2018). Ethnographic researchers explore culture-sharing groups' beliefs and behaviors through observations and active interaction with participants (Godden, 2017). Grounded theory researchers develop propositions for underlying processes, actions, or interactions (Cao et al., 2019). These researchers generate new theories using the perceptions of participants (Bakker, 2019). Lastly, the narrative design involves studying events through participants' storytelling (Yin, 2018). The focus of these research designs did not align with the research goal. My goal was not to study culture-sharing groups' customs and beliefs, generate a new proposition, or narrate the histories of participants' experiences. The multiple case study was the most appropriate because I intended to study and collect extensive data for customer service strategies using semistructured interviews and document reviews.

An important aspect of qualitative research is reaching data saturation (Lowe et al., 2018). Sample size determination for surveys with open-ended questions relies on data saturation (Tran et al., 2017). The case study researcher incorporates data from various sources, which allows for data saturation (Yin, 2018). Researchers reach data saturation at the point at which no new information, themes, or codes emerge from the

data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To ensure data saturation, I collected extensive data from various sources and continued the semistructured interviews until no new information, themes, or codes emerged.

### **Population and Sampling**

My data collection process started with identifying the population and sample for this study. A population is a vital source of evidence in research (Asiamah et al., 2017). When conducting sampling in a qualitative study, a researcher focuses on a small number of interviewees and relies on in-depth, detailed responses from participants (Weller et al., 2018). Asiamah et al. (2017) stated that a research population comprises individuals with one or more characteristics of interest, who are identified based on the overarching research question, topic, or goal. This study's central research question was the following: What customer service strategies do airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents? Therefore, I selected participants for this study from two airline companies in the United States who had successfully employed strategies to mitigate customer complaints. I chose a small sample of three experienced participants from this population.

I used purposeful sampling to select the three participants. In qualitative research, a sample is synonymous with cases or participants and represents the entire population (Twining et al., 2017). According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), purposeful sampling allows the researcher to accumulate rich and thick data and ensure data saturation from a small number of eligible participants. Therefore, target participants were three customer service managers from two airline companies located in the United

States who had successfully implemented customer service strategies to mitigate adverse customer incidents.

Researchers must consider data collection tools' appropriateness to ensure data saturation (Noble & Heale, 2019). During the data collection process, the researcher focuses on addressing the research questions until data saturation (Twining et al., 2017). Researchers achieve data saturation when participants no longer reveal any new findings, patterns, and themes relevant to the research topic or when gathered data are sufficient to replicate the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Twining et al., 2017).

Researchers use open-ended questions alone or other interviewing techniques during interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and knowledge (Weller et al., 2018). I asked the same six open-ended questions during the semistructured interviews to elicit in-depth objective and structured responses from the participants until no new data emerged. To establish rapport with participants, a researcher needs to be genuine, treat participants as subject matter experts, and use ordinary conversation (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). To build an interview relationship, a researcher must explain the research purpose and importance to dispel any preconceived notions and mistrust held by participants (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Therefore, I incorporated the research objective and importance at the beginning of the interview and used the interview guide (see Appendix) to maintain formality in all interviews. I conducted interviews lasting 30-45 minutes in person and via Zoom. Participants picked their own convenient time and a safe and neutral location for the interview.



## Ethical Research

A researcher provides information about a study during the informed consent process to disseminate information, build trust, and obtain consent from potential participants (Nusbaum et al., 2017; True et al., 2017). The consent form included guidelines, ethical, and moral obligations of the researcher and participants (Farmer & Lundy, 2017). I emailed the consent form to potential participants stipulating the study's nature and purpose after obtaining approval from Walden University's IRB committee. The Walden University IRB approval number is 07-10-20-0638398. The consent form contained ethical and contractual obligations stipulated in the 1979 *Belmont Report* (Miracle, 2016) to ensure the participants' and organizations' protection (Miracle, 2016).

I took measures to ensure the protection of participants and organizations using *The Belmont Report* ethical principles. *The Belmont Report* is a critical document because it helps researchers address ethical concerns (Miracle, 2016). The primary purpose of *The Belmont Report* is to protect the rights of all research subjects or participants based on the three ethical principles: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (Miracle, 2016). Freedom of choice underlies the ethical principle of respect for persons. Within this guiding principle, researchers must protect participants' autonomy while ensuring full disclosure of the study's factors. An agreement to participate in research constitutes a valid consent only if voluntarily given (Miracle, 2016). Therefore, I fully disclosed information about the study and explained the voluntary nature of participation through the consent form to all participants. I ensured that participants understood that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any

time as stipulated in *The Belmont Report*. I allowed participants to ask questions and explained that they had the right to refrain from answering any questions. I informed the participants that they had the right to withdraw at any time via email after providing consent or even during interviews. I explained to participants that declining interviews or discontinuing participation would not negatively impact our relationship or access to any services.

Researchers must ensure that they do not coerce potential participants into agreeing to participate in studies (Miracle, 2016). According to Miracle (2016), giving participants extreme rewards for agreeing to participate can be coercion because the rewards may be too good for them to pass up. Some incentives may pressure potential participants into joining a study, thereby stripping participants of complete self-determination and autonomy (Miracle, 2016). Therefore, I did not provide any incentives to participants and did not recruit subordinates to avoid coercion. Participants only got a summary of the study findings.

Researchers adhere to the principle of beneficence when they ethically treat participants by respecting their decisions, protecting them from harm, and making efforts to secure participants' wellbeing (Miracle, 2016). Researchers must protect participants' voluntary agreements and confidentiality using stipulated principles and guidelines. The default is to mask the organization's identity and participants unless there is a good reason not to do so. A researcher can protect participants' names and the organization by using attribute codes at the individual level instead of actual names (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). I used codes to ensure participants' and organizations' confidentiality

during and after the research. I used codes P1 to P3 for participants' names and Airline Company A and B for the organizations in the transcripts, written notes, journals, and recorded interviews. P1 was from Airline Company A, and P2 and P3 were from Airline Company B. All documents and storage devices for this study were password protected.

The principle of justice stipulated in *The Belmont Report* pertains to participants' right to fair treatment and privacy. Researchers must ensure that data remain confidential to avoid causing any harm and to protect participants' rights (Surmiak, 2018). Therefore, I stored the data I collected in a locked safe and will remain there for 5 years beyond the approval of this study to protect participants' confidentiality, the organization, and future audits as required by Walden University. These contractual obligations ensure that participants and researchers uphold ethical commitments, concerns, and moral standards and obligations (Farmer & Lundy, 2017).

### **Data Collection Instruments**

I was the data collection instrument for this multiple case study. According to Vasquez-Tokos (2017), researchers are the instruments for data collection in a qualitative study. A case study design is a comprehensive approach employed by researchers to collect and study extensive data using several data collection techniques (S. J. Morgan et al., 2017). Researchers employ interviews, document reviews, observations, and focus groups to gather data (Twining et al., 2017). According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), semistructured interviews are in-depth and frequent qualitative data sources. Semistructured interviews combine structured and unstructured interviews and collect additional and comprehensive information during the data collection process (Brown &

Danaher, 2017). The interviews enable a researcher and participants to create a working relationship (Amundsen et al., 2017). Therefore, I conducted document reviews and semistructured interviews to gather data and create a working relationship with participants.

I used the interview protocol (see Appendix) with six open-ended questions for all interviews. Qualitative researchers use procedural guides, such as an interview protocol, to standardize, build quality, and consistency during the data collection process (Braaten et al., 2020). Open-ended questions help researchers explore a deeper understanding of processes, participants' experiences, and knowledge (Weller et al., 2018). However, an interview protocol can sometimes be time-consuming and expensive for a large sample size (Leung, 2015). Therefore, I used a small size of three experienced and knowledgeable participants to collect extensive data in a short period.

In a qualitative study, researchers use member checking to ensure the study findings' credibility, validity, and accuracy (Bear, 2018). Researchers use member checking to verify their interpretation of participants' answers to interview questions (Livari, 2018). I used member checking to verify my interpretations of participants' responses via Zoom and in person. Participants read, verified, asked questions, and made comments before approving the data interpretations. I updated the interpretations based on participants' feedback to increase the validity and credibility of the study. Researchers achieve data saturation when responses no longer reveal any new findings, patterns, and themes relevant to the research topic (Twining et al., 2017).

Researchers must confirm the credibility of the data. Besides member checking, researchers can use document analysis to ensure qualitative research credibility (Fusch & Ness, 2015). According to Fusch and Ness (2015), researchers use document analysis to validate the reliability of participants' experiences and knowledge. For participant eligibility, I used LinkedIn to verify work experience and knowledge. I reviewed company documents to ensure the credibility of participants' responses. Most of the external communication with customers was through their websites. The websites contained their services communication, contractual obligations, fees, frequently asked questions, and links to their social media accounts.

### **Data Collection Technique**

I primarily used semistructured interviews to collect data for this qualitative research. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), researchers effectively use semistructured interviews to collect in-depth data in qualitative research. Researchers use interviews to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and knowledge, thereby ensuring a deeper understanding of phenomena under study (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix) with six open-ended questions to elicit answers from participants in all interviews. According to Weller et al. (2018), researchers employ open-ended questions to understand the business problem under study. The six questions helped to elicit information on customer service strategies that airline customer service managers used to mitigate negative customer incidents.

Interviews have their disadvantages, which I mitigated by using an interview protocol and member checking. A researcher's or participants' personal bias may

interfere with and compromise data and study findings (Twining et al., 2017). Therefore, I used an interview protocol and member checking during the data collection process to remain objective and impartial in this study. An interview protocol consists of rules, guidelines, and questions based on the research purpose (Gani et al., 2020). Researchers use an interview protocol to control, ensure consistency, and objectivity throughout the data collection process (Gani et al., 2020). After interviews, researchers use member checking to ensure their interpretation of participants' answers (Varpio et al., 2017).

Researchers use different research methods to ensure the credibility of research data (Moon, 2019). I analyzed company documents containing policies, processes, and procedures as a secondary research technique to ensure that the data accurately reflects the business phenomena. Policy document analysis is a technique for investigating a policy document's nature to understand what lies behind and within it (Cardno, 2019). According to Cardno (2019), the analysis of policy documents is appealing in qualitative research because it offers insight into understanding the business problem. Researchers use document analysis as a supplementary way of collecting data to add rigor to a qualitative study through multiple data collection techniques referred to as triangulation (Cardno, 2019). Thus, it is common to find researchers employing qualitative techniques, such as interviews, participant observations, and documentary evidence as an additional data source when relevant and feasible (Bryman, 2012). The rationale for using document analysis is its appropriateness as a secondary research technique. Therefore, I used document analysis as an additional source of data to supplement and validate participants' responses.

Using organizational document analysis has benefits that I took advantage of. According to Cardno (2019), organizational documentation analysis is straightforward, efficient, cost-effective, and manageable. Its primary advantage is the availability of documents, usually at little or no cost to a researcher (Cardno, 2019). Another advantage is the documentary analysis's unobtrusive nature that makes it non-reactive (Bryman, 2012). A document as a data source does not draw attention to the researchers' presence as they can quietly work behind the scenes.

Researchers need to be aware of some of the shortfalls of relying on documents as sources of evidence. Cardno (2019) criticized document analysis for the (a) inability to access a document when it is protected and deliberately blocked; (b) difficulty in locating and accessing some documents because of geographical reasons; (c) inadequacy of detail for some documents, which are not for research purposes; and (d) difficulty to authenticate organizational policy documents on the Internet. Researchers will have to contact the organization to confirm that the documents are authentic and up to date. Researchers also need to know that public records may contain built-in biases that a researcher may not be aware of (Cardno, 2019). Therefore, I used semistructured interviews augmented with organizational document analysis to compile comprehensive data for this study.

Researchers conduct a small-scale pilot study to explore and prepare for the significant study (Majid et al., 2017). Researchers use pilot testing to practice the interviewing techniques, make necessary preparations, and modify the primary research (Majid et al., 2017). Researchers conduct pilot testing to ensure that the setting, choice of

participants, and interview methods are appropriate and close to those intended in the main study (Majid et al., 2017). However, a successful pilot study does not ensure the main study's success, and the small number of participants makes it challenging to reach data saturation (Majid et al., 2017). Therefore, I did not implement a pilot study for this research.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Digital analysis software such as NVivo provides excellent data management and retrieval facilities that support analysis and write-up (Maher et al., 2018). NVivo 12 computer software is a valuable framework for organizing comprehensive information for qualitative data analysis (Kassab et al., 2017). Researchers can use NVivo 12 computer software to present the subject, idea-formulation, and organize data for disassembly and reassembly (Yin, 2018). I used NVivo 12 to create and organize data using the prepared data analysis plan. I used the filing system in NVivo 12 to create a database with main and subfolders containing the research data. I used the categorizing and coding functionality to group, label, and color code the participants' responses line by line. Categorizing helps researchers keep interpretive and raw data separate (Yin, 2018). I used the logical and centralized database to search quickly, sort, integrate, and synthesize data.

Researchers need to have a strategy to store data and maintain participants' confidentiality (Kokina et al., 2017). I used a secure data storage system and anonymization to protect participants and the organizations. The anonymity strategy helps to protect the identity of participants and the organization (Surmiak, 2018). In this study, I referred to the organizations as Airline Company A and B and participants as P1



to P3 when scheduling interviews, writing interview transcripts, notes, and addressing participants during interviews to ensure confidentiality on the audio-recordings. I saved all data on password-protected storage devices and a safe for 5 years per Walden University's IRB protocol. After 5 years, I will shred the documents and erase the storage devices.

### **Data Analysis**

A researcher uses data analysis to process and share outcomes (Yin, 2018) effectively. Data analysis includes organizing, reading, coding, organizing themes, representing, and interpreting the data (Cypress, 2018). Researchers make judgments about coding, theming, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing the data (Nowell et al., 2017). In this qualitative multiple case study, I used methodological triangulation, Yin's five-steps data analysis, and NVivo 12 Pro software to collect, analyze, and support study findings. Methodological triangulation is one of the five recommended triangulations besides data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and environmental triangulation (Renz et al., 2018). According to Yin (2018), methodological triangulation involves applying multiple data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. Therefore, I collected data using semistructured interviews, company documents, and member-checked the data.

Yin's five steps give structure to the data to counter criticism in the literature that the case study design lacks a universally acceptable analytic structure (Durodola et al., 2017). The five steps are: compile data, disassemble data, reassemble data, interpret data, and conclude. NVivo 12 Pro computer software supports Yin's analytical structure

because researchers use it as a tool to identify recurrent codes and themes (Maher et al., 2018). I used NVivo to sort, integrate, and synthesize the data.

The first step is to compile the data (Yin, 2018). After audio-recording the interviews, I transcribed the interviews and reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. I listened to the audiotapes several times and reviewed the transcripts for errors, missing information, and unwanted data. I retrieved and reviewed the company's online documents on customer service processes and procedures. After data familiarization and interpretations of participant answers, I gave each participant a copy to verify the interpretations using member checking. Member checking ensures that a researcher's interpretations of participants' responses to the interview questions and data saturation is accurate (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

After member checking, I created a database in the NVivo 12 computer software. I created the main file for the database, labeled it Airline Customer Service Strategies, and then created separate files within the main project file for the three participants labeled P1 to P3. I reread to understand and digest the data and wrote down notes. According to Durodola et al. (2017), rereading the data helps a researcher to assimilate information more thoughtfully, connect the data to the original research questions, and identify new insights into the research questions (Durodola et al., 2017).

After compiling the database and establishing familiarity with the data, a researcher's second step is to disassemble it (Yin, 2018). The disassembling process involves breaking the textual data into small components and assigning labels to each fragment (Durodola et al., 2017). Researchers use NVivo 12 to avoid the time-consuming

work of making codebooks, sorting, arranging, and aligning the composed data with previous literature (Paulus et al., 2017). I used NVivo 12 to categorize, assign, and color code specific actions, opinions, and explanations line by line. After generating the initial codes, I identified and systematically labeled features across the entire data set.

Researchers use NVivo 12 to link documents easily and trace through different participants' replies (Paulus et al., 2017). Coding responses line by line minimizes repetitive coding and ignores statements unrelated to the interview questions (Durodola et al., 2017).

The third step after disassembling is the reassembling of data (Yin, 2018).

Researchers use NVivo 12 software to present the subject, form ideas, disassemble, and reassemble data (Yin, 2018). The reassembly step entails using themes to compile fragmented pieces into different categories (Yin, 2018). Researchers reassemble data to identify critical themes (Durodola et al., 2017). I used the sorting and color-coding functionality in NVivo 12 to search for potential themes and gather all data relevant to each potential theme. I continued with this process of mixing and matching the fragments under different arrangements and themes until credible and relevant patterns emerged. The point of reference for the credibility and relevance was the literature and the conceptual framework.

The fourth step after reassembling is the data interpretation stage (Yin, 2018).

Researchers look for a close alliance of the data with the research questions (Durodola et al., 2017). I reviewed the reassembled data from the broader perspective and narrowed it down in close alignment with the research objectives to bring out important points. At

this stage, I identified themes related to strategies being used to mitigate negative customer complaints in the airline industry. I refined the specifics for each theme and the overall story. I generated clear definitions and names for each theme.

The final stage of the data analysis process is the conclusion (Yin, 2018). I linked the themes to the research question, objective, conceptual framework, and current literature. The relationship between the results and the conceptual framework proved that the SQ Model was the appropriate lens to understand the phenomenon under study. I documented a focused and concise conclusion to wrap up Yin's (2018) five-step data analysis process.

## **Reliability and Validity**

### **Reliability**

Dependability, synonymous with reliability, refers to the consistency of study findings across time and research (Cypress, 2017). Maher et al. (2018) stated that dependability is the extent to which a researcher achieves data consistency through transparency when collecting, coding, and analyzing data. I employed the interview protocol (see Appendix) and member checking to ensure this study's dependability. Gani et al. (2020) posited that qualitative researchers must avoid bias and attain validity using interview protocols. An interview plan allows a researcher to map out a guide for the interview process from the beginning to the end, forcing the researcher and participants to be objective and focused on phenomena under study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Throughout the study, I was very transparent and used the interview protocol to avoid bias during the interviews, forcing the participants and me to be objective and focused on

airline customer service strategies. I used the interview protocol to ensure reliability and consistency during the data collection process.

Member checking refers to the ongoing consultation with participants after primary interviews to ensure the researcher's interpretations of participants' responses to the interview questions (C. B. Lee et al., 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In a qualitative study, researchers and the interviewees use member checking to validate the researcher's interpretation of participants' responses (Cypress, 2017). After the primary interviews, I documented the participants' responses word-for-word and then made a succinct synthesis of one-paragraph for each question. Participants validated the interpretations for accuracy in the member checking sessions via Zoom and in person. I added new information and revised the interpretations based on participants' feedback. Participants checked, questioned, commented, and confirmed the validity of my interpretations.

Researchers reach data saturation to ensure reliability and validity in a qualitative study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers reach data saturation when no new themes, concepts, and findings emerge during interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In this study, I knew I reached data saturation when there were no new ideas, findings, and themes from participants towards the end of each interview. This strategy's limitation was that a researcher might need to conduct several interviews before data saturation, as Fusch and Ness (2015) recommended. However, this was not the case in this study.

## **Validity**

Researchers ensure validity to establish a study's credibility (Cypress, 2017).

Validation refers to the accurate and relevant application of study findings in business and society, thereby making rigor and application intertwined (Hays et al., 2016). Hays et al. (2016) postulated that substantive Validation focuses on the extent to which study results are beneficial to a profession and society. Validity in qualitative research refers to the Confirmability, credibility, and transferability of study findings (Cypress, 2017). Confirmability is the accurate reflection of participants' perspectives without the researcher's opinions (Hays et al., 2016). Credibility relates to the extent to which researchers accurately portray outcomes based on the research process (Hays et al., 2016).

I used methodological triangulation to ensure validity in this study. Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing the research question from multiple perspectives (Noble & Heale, 2019). Methodological triangulation is when researchers use multiple data sources and compare the data to determine if data alignment has occurred (Yin, 2018). I used semistructured interviews, reviewed company processes, and procedures, and member checking to establish validity. I used an interview protocol (see Appendix) in the semistructured interviews to ensure the consistency and credibility of participants' responses. An interview protocol allows a researcher to map out an interview process from beginning to end, forcing the researcher and participants to be objective and focused on phenomena (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Member checking in a qualitative study allows researchers and

the interviewees to confirm the validity of the researcher's interpretation of participants' answers (Cypress, 2017). After the primary interviews, I employed member checking to validate the accuracy of my interpretations of the participants' responses to interview questions. I emailed copies to participants and invited them to check, comment, and confirm interpretations' accuracy.

Transferability refers to the degree to which a researcher can generalize or transfer the study results to other contexts or settings (Hays et al., 2016). In qualitative research, transferability is primarily the reader's responsibility for future researchers (Aravamudhan & Krishnaveni, 2015). A reader or researcher, who wishes to transfer the results to a different context, is responsible for making the judgment (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers use contextualized qualitative findings regarding research designs and sampling strategies to enable the transferability of qualitative research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I used a structured method of appraising qualitative research for potential transferability to other settings. I adhered to qualitative research concepts, data collection, organization, and analysis techniques for a qualitative multiple case study for reliability, validity, and transferability.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, after restating the study purpose statement, I clarified the researcher's role in selecting participants, population, and sampling based on the primary research question and purpose. Participants for this qualitative multiple case study were three airline customer service leaders who had successfully employed strategies to mitigate customer complaints in the United States. I also highlighted the importance of

Walden IRB's ethical research and used a coding system to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and the airline companies throughout the study. I expanded on the research method and design. In this qualitative multiple case study, I conducted semistructured interviews and document reviews to understand the business problem. Section 2 also contains information on the data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, and data analysis. I used member checking and the interview protocol to ensure study reliability and validity. Section 3 includes presenting the findings, applications to professional practice, implications for social change, and action recommendations. I also include recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusion.



### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore customer service strategies in the airline industry. An increase in competition and customer complaints forces airlines to consider service quality in addition to price for survival. An organization with satisfied customers is bound to increase its customer base and profitability (Honu & Addy, 2020). The study findings were the culmination of interviews, additional source data provided by participants, the conceptual framework's influence, and evidence from the literature. I conducted data analyses through the SQ model lens and revealed the following five customer service strategy themes: (a) recruit competent employees, (b) enhance training, (c) strengthen communication, (d) elicit customer feedback, and (e) improve service policies and standards. The findings align with the insights and propositions concerning consumers' perceptions of service quality that Parasuraman et al. (1985) conceptualized as a framework to study service quality issues. The airline customer service leaders cognizant of these five strategies could mitigate the increase in adverse customer incidents and deliver high service quality (Honu & Addy, 2020).

#### **Presentation of the Findings**

The overarching research question was the following: What customer service strategies do airline customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents? To answer the overarching research question, I conducted semistructured interviews complemented by a document analysis of customer service policies, processes,

and procedures. A semistructured interview guide includes a few predetermined questions, allowing the interviewer to explore issues brought forward by the interviewee (McGrath et al., 2018). During the interview process, I followed an interview protocol (see Appendix). Procedural guides, such as an interview protocol, help researchers to maintain quality and consistency in a study (Braaten et al., 2020). I used purposeful sampling to identify three airline customer service managers with at least 5 years of airline customer service experience in the United States. Purposeful sampling allows a researcher to accumulate rich and thick data and ensure data saturation from a small number of eligible participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers reach data saturation when participants no longer reveal any new findings, patterns, and themes relevant to the research topic (Twining et al., 2017).

A researcher can protect participants' and organizations' names by using attribute codes at the individual level instead of actual names (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Therefore, I used codes P1 to P3 for participants and Airline Company A and B for the organizations. I augmented the interviews with organizational document analyses for methodological triangulation. Researchers use methodological triangulation in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena using multiple data sources (Yin, 2018). I collected and analyzed data from semistructured interviews and company processes and procedures and member-checked the data.

I used Yin's (2018) five-step data analysis process: (a) compile, (b) disassemble, (c) reassemble, (d) interpret, and (e) conclude. I transcribed the audio results with Microsoft Word processing and reassembled them using Microsoft Excel and NVivo 12

Plus. I used member checking to verify the accuracy of my interpretations of the three participants' responses. Researchers use member checking to verify their interpretations of participants' answers to interview questions (Livari, 2018). During the data analysis process, five major customer service strategy themes emerged, as shown in Table 1: (a) recruit competent employees, (b) enhance training, (c) strengthen communication, (d) elicit customer feedback, and (e) improve service policies and standards. The study findings extend the knowledge of customer service strategies and customer complaint management in the airline industry. The insights that airline customer service managers revealed confirm and link back to the gaps and dimensions of the SQ model that Parasuraman et al. (1985) proposed as the foundation for future studies.

**Table 1**

*Customer Service Strategy Themes*

Themes	Gaps being mitigated	Participants	
		Number	%
Recruit competent employees	Service delivery gap	3	100
Enhance training	Service delivery & knowledge gap	3	100
Strengthen communication	Communication gap	3	100
Improve service policies & standards	Policy gap	3	100
Elicit customer feedback	Knowledge gap	2	67

**Theme 1: Recruit Competent Employees**

All three participant responses and supporting documentation from Airline Company A and B indicated the importance and characteristics of competent employees,

as summarized in Table 2. P3 from Airline Company B stated that the “human aspect is really key.” P3 explained that “engagement with the agent at the airport and having that relatable human interaction and not just treating them as a customer” is a good strategy. Participant P3 expressed that the first interaction from a “human base where someone may not speak the language” is essential. According to P3, the agent has “to explain uh in a more amicable friendly common matter that improves the customer service because the customer, the passenger is getting such a supportive dialogue.” P3 voiced that a strategy is least effective when it is missing the human aspect and the agent is “overly really process or company driven” and fails to relate. P3 stated that “sometimes being able to sympathize or empathize is key.”

**Table 2**

*Theme 1: Recruit Competent Employees*

Characteristics of competent employees	Gap being mitigated
Human aspect	Delivery gap—between service quality expectations and actual service delivery caused by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee lack of knowledge and skills</li> <li>• Incompetent human resource recruitment and retention policies</li> <li>• Lack of teamwork and motivation</li> </ul>
Good listeners	
Supportive	
Friendly	
Respectful	
Respond timely	
Apologetic	
Courteous	
Service with a smile	
Empathize	
Relate	
Sympathize	
Customer service experience	

P1 and P2 agreed that the saying that “the customer is always right” does not represent the correct response to customer issues. According to P1 from Airline Company

A, “customers are not always right. However, they do have something valuable to take that’s being shared, or the opportunity to fix” the issue. Participant P2 from Airline Company B echoed, “I guess for me my personal reference, or I know they say the customer is always right and uh I guess I kind of agree with that, but I slightly disagree.” P1 and P2 provided alternatives to just saying that the customer is always right. P1 mentioned that “it is always key and always the best to have a first response to resolution of the problem, so it doesn’t escalate.” According to P1, this response “does mitigate a lot of the situations.” P1 mentioned “respect” as “always beneficial” when “listening to what somebody has to say.” According to P2, “service with a smile goes a long way” when handling customers. Airline Company B gives room for “flexibility” to give first time “courtesy” to unhappy customers. P2 explained that when “managing customers . . . you can still talk about a customer who is not right.” P2 expressed that to provide excellent customer service is to “talk, and calm, and understand the customer.” According to P2, such an approach helps “the customer understand and acknowledge” a mistake. P2 added that this must be done “in a civil manner and not just saying, you know we apologize for the misunderstanding.” P2 voiced that “sticking to facts” in such a situation is better than an apology.

Airline Company A’s and B’s leaders aim to attract competent employees. The online documentation that I reviewed showed similar means that both companies employ to attract competent customer service employees. Airline Company A had verbiage and videos promising to fulfill potential candidates' dreams and develop their careers. Airline Company B appealed to potential candidates by mentioning that the airline is innovative,

is successful, and is one of the best places to work. Both airlines published attractive employee health, wellness, financial, vacation, training, career development, travel, and flight benefits to tempt potential candidates. Online job descriptions highlighted required qualifications consistent with the participants' responses. Airline Company A's documentation focused on the fact that hiring managers are looking for flight attendants who "welcome guests with a smile" and are "fun and friendly." One of the job descriptions for Airline Company A required the candidates to be "responsible, dependable" and possess "exceptional communication interpersonal skills." Airline Company A expected guest service agents to be "professionals" and deliver a "delightful customer experience" through "courteous, friendly, fast, and efficient service."

Airline Company B focused on recruiting flight attendants who "value teamwork in every way" and are prepared to meet all passengers "with a warm smile." Airline Company B's leaders looked for customer service agents with "flexibility" who dedicated time to provide "customers with the best possible experience" and who "love to have fun." The job description for a customer care sales representative position for Airline Company B included language requiring representatives to provide "efficient, professional customer service" and to "respond to telephone inquiries . . . in a prompt, courteous manner while creating a memorable experience by anticipating the customer needs." The duties and responsibilities of the customer care sales representative position for Airline Company B included language requiring representatives to resolve "customer problems and/or complaints that may occur in order to ensure customer satisfaction." Preferred requirements for prospective representatives were "basic computer skills,

excellent communication skills, and a minimum 1-year customer service experience.”

The aspect of the experience is consistent with P3’s response in that, when looking for capable candidates, “experience goes a long way as well.” Airline Company A’s and B’s job descriptions included keywords, such as *interpersonal skills, people oriented, cheerful, friendly attitude, bright personality, smile, courteous, friendly, professional, knowledge, empathy, fast, and efficient service*, which were consistent with all three airline managers’ responses. The search for competent candidates extends outside the two airline companies to other hiring agents and websites, such as Glassdoor, LinkedIn, Ladders, ZipRecruiter, and Flying Career.

The strategy to recruit competent employees extends the literature on customer service strategies, recruitment, and customer complaint handling in the airline industry. The plan to recruit skilled employees to address customer issues is consistent with the work of other researchers (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020) who identified employees and technology job fit as influential in mitigating the service delivery gap. Qualified employees mitigate the service delivery gap, which Parasuraman et al. (1985) posited to be part of the SQ model. Executives consistently mentioned the pivotal role and influence of the contact person’s performance on service quality problems (Parasuraman et al., 1985). All three airline managers’ responses in this study confirm executives’ perception in the Parasuraman et al. study, in that service employees exert a strong influence on customers’ perception of service quality. According to Parasuraman et al., the contact person, the operational support team, and the research team must possess the knowledge and skills to perform services.

In summary, all three airline managers revealed that competent frontline employees should be respectful, supportive, apologetic, responsive, sympathetic, and empathetic to handle disgruntled customers effectively. Airline Company A's and B's online documentation and job descriptions stipulated critical characteristics of competent employees. Therefore, airline managers facing service delivery failures because of incompetent employees can use this study's findings to set employee recovery guidelines and strategies.

### **Theme 2: Enhance Training**

All three participants highlighted the importance of training and education in service quality. Table 3 contains a summary of the training aspects all three participants highlighted during the interviews. P3 explained that Airline Company B had competent employees because the recruitment process was a "lengthy process and, even after recruitment, there is extensive training." P3 added that Airline Company B provided "constant training . . . refresher courses." P1 from Airline Company A pointed out that "education mitigates negative customer incidents." Therefore, Airline Company A invested a significant amount of money on the "philosophies and the training and skills." P1 expressed that Airline Company A provided "training for all frontline personnel and everybody within the company." According to P1, the training was on customer handling and delivering "values and promises . . . from a customer service perspective." P2 from Airline Company B echoed the importance of self-education and explained that customer service courses on "de-escalation . . . improve and provide excellent customer service." According to P2, self-training is "key and paramount to educate the customer." P2 voiced



that education helps “to realign disconnect” with customers who buy tickets through a third-party. P2 added that customer service employees should know “rules and regulations . . . to pacify and make your customer feel better because sometimes they are having a bad day.”

**Table 3**

*Theme 2: Enhance Training*

Training program	Gaps being mitigated	
Soft or people skills	Delivery gap—between service quality expectations and actual service delivery caused by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee lack of knowledge and skills</li> <li>• Incompetent human resource recruitment and retention policies</li> <li>• Lack of teamwork and motivation</li> </ul>	
Third-party training		
Handling customer issues		
Cost-saving measures		
Keeping promises		
Response techniques		
Valuable service		
Customer knowledge		
Deescalating situations		Knowledge gap—between consumer expectation and management perception caused by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of trained personnel</li> <li>• Market constraints</li> <li>• Lack of resources</li> <li>• Management indifference</li> </ul>
Managing customers		
Pacifying customers		
Company values		
Customer options		
Good customer experience		
Good recruitment & training		

Airline Company A’s and B’s online documentation and job descriptions stipulated the requirements and expectations for flight attendants and customer care agents. Airline Company A’s job descriptions included language related to Airline Company A’s providing “a comprehensive program, mentorship, and opportunities to grow with the company” for selected candidates. Airline Company A informed job seekers that they “will be asked to complete a required assessment to be considered.” Online documentation for Airline Company A and B stipulated compulsory training for

customer care agents and flight attendants. Airline Company B stipulated that its training program is “six weeks of paid training” and Airline Company A stipulated a “4.5-week training program.”

The strategy to enhance training extends the knowledge of customer service strategies and training in the airline industry. All three participants’ responses confirm the importance of training in customer complaint mitigation. Robust training can be applied to mitigate the service delivery and knowledge gap Parasuraman et al. (1985) posited to be part of the SQ model. The service delivery gap affects service quality from the customer’s standpoint (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Therefore, inadequate training can result in employees’ inability to meet organizational service delivery standards.

When a company provides insufficient training and evaluation, the employees cannot implement strategic objectives and know whether the service process meets customer requirements (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020). For example, P1 from Airline Company A mentioned that training employees to respond to or acknowledge customer issues within 48 hours is required. After 48 hours, any response is considered poor service and indicates inadequate training, incapability, or unwillingness to meet the set standard. P1’s statements support the contention that airline companies can develop robust training programs to resolve service delivery failures caused by a lack of knowledge and skills related to processes, products, and services. The importance of recruitment and training of employees to ensure service quality confirmed study findings of Olaniyi and Stephens (2019), Anjalika and Priyanath (2018), and Price (2017).

Therefore, robust training is important to empower frontline personnel with education and skills to improve service quality and mitigate customer complaints.

### **Theme 3: Strengthen Communication**

All three airline managers highlighted vital communication aspects, as shown in Table 4. P3's first response to what makes a good customer service agent was, "communication skills are a very good and strong one." P3 stated that communication skills are important because "sometimes you need somebody to explain the process or policies without coming across as too aggressive and not just saying that's the policy that's it." P3 expressed that "we are in constant communication with the customers. We also have uh the ability when you're on the site, either booking or modifying to talk to someone right there and there." P3 explained that "prior to take off, we send email communications out to the customer . . . informing them of the check-in process." P3 added that Airline Company B sends out "notification of a flight delay or cancellation . . . so that the customer is not annoyed by coming to the airport and not being able to get on the flight" according to the flight schedule.

**Table 4**

*Theme 3: Strengthen Communication*

Vital communication aspects	Gap being mitigated
Communicate, educate, and inform customers	Communication gap—between service delivery and external communication caused by
Customers voice issues/complaints	
Good communication skills	
Open line of communication	
Promote several communication channels	
Constant customer engagement	

P1 pointed out that “a lot of times you find that uh the majority of the issues could have been resolved with communication uh or education to some degree.” P1 emphasized the importance of “better education or more visibility or clearer explanation of the policy that is required” to fix customer complaints. P1 explained that communication helps to mitigate complaints related to “the business model that somebody does not agree with.” P1 clarified that if “there is an issue where somebody cannot resolve face to face . . . customers know where to go uh via our website or emails or however we promote it.” P1 explained that Airline Company A promoted interaction with customers via social media. P1 stated that customers “voice their situation or negative feedback” via social media to get a quick response. According to P1, “the most efficient way is communication via the website.”

P2 stated that Airline Company B used communication to mitigate challenges related to bag fees. P2 explained that “people hate paying for bags . . . especially when they’re asked to pay for bags at the boarding gate.” P2 expressed that “I do not think anybody would ever be happy with that experience.” Therefore, to mitigate the bag fee complaints, Airline Company B communicated the different bag fees in advance via “emails 24 and 72 hours” before departure, or “during the booking path if they are booking online, and when they are talking with customer service.” According to P2, “it’s about educating the customer when they are executing their purchase, looking to purchasing, and just making sure that these things are permanent on the website.”

Online documentation review revealed the different ways Airline Company A and B strengthen communication. Airline Company A promoted communication via links in

the *Talk With Us* section on their website at the bottom of the page. Airline Company B promoted communication via links in the *Contact Us* section at the bottom of the web pages. Airline Company A and B had web links directing customers to their social media accounts Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Airline Company A had the social media links in the *Connect With Us* section, and Airline Company B had them in the *Follow Us* section. These communication channels support continuous interaction with customers all the time. Airline Company A and B used their websites to provide information besides the reservation centers and airports. Websites are convenient because customers access information anytime from anywhere without the cost of time and money associated with call centers and airports.

Airline Company A and B leveraged their websites to communicate, inform, and advertise products and services, upcoming sales, system outages, and new changes to products and services. Airline Company B had information on new bag fees and policy changes. Airline Company A had new information on COVID-19 on its website enforcing COVID-19 rules and restrictions. The information on COVID-19 confirmed P1's response that Airline Company A focused on the current top customer issues to mitigate customer complaints. According to P1, "one of the top complaints is about people not wearing face masks onboard or social distancing."

The strategy to strengthen communication extends the existing literature of customer service strategies and communication in the airline industry. The communication strategy can be applied to understand the service delivery and external communication gap posited in the SQ model (Ingaldi, 2018; Parasuraman et al., 1985;

Zeithaml et al., 1996). All three participants' responses are consistent with the work of other researchers (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020; Yang et al., 2020; Zeithaml et al., 1996), who revealed the importance of communication in service quality.

Communication skills are essential to educate, inform, and set correct customer expectations. The importance of strengthening communication aligns with the dimension of communication which Parasuraman et al. (1985) posited to be part of the SQ model.

The importance of communication to achieve high service quality confirms findings from previous studies. Other researchers (Hussain et al., 2015; W. H. Lee & Cheng, 2018; Satpathy et al., 2017) confirmed the influence of communication in service quality and incorporated the communication dimension in the industry-specific service quality models. Communication is a vital tool to set customer expectations and mitigate the communication gap. Therefore, managers should strengthen communication to mitigate discrepancies in service quality.

#### **Theme 4: Elicit Customer Feedback**

P1 and P3 revealed the importance of eliciting customer feedback using surveys to mitigate adverse customer incidents. P1 and P3 highlighted the aspects of market research and customer feedback, as shown in Table 5. According to P1, when mitigating customer incidents, "the most efficient way is through feedback." P1 explained that "one of the big things for us is to provide timely feedback uh to customers. Uh, that's extremely important." P1 asserted that company managers have the "opportunity to fix something . . . when given that feedback." Thus, according to P1, managers "take time to get feedback on a negative situation." P1 elaborated that "we start off with a simple

survey after they completed their trip on each leg or journey, and then . . . drill down from there.” P3 echoed that when “flights land, an email is . . . send to the customer to ask for their feedback on their flight.” P3 from Airline Company B explained that before customer feedback was automated, the flight crew handed out “customer surveys in the aircraft asking customers to complete.” P3 expressed that Airline Company B was “able to compile the experience from the customers and make improvements” using this feedback.

Airline Company B and Airline Company A analyzed and ranked customer issues. P1 from Airline Company A had the opinion that “if you don’t have the data to understand the problems you are dealing with, you will not be able to figure it out.” Hence, the least effective strategy to P1 was “not analyzing the root cause of the issue and where it stems from.” P3 from Airline Company B voiced that company managers identified the “top ten feedback or like the most important items that customers say or feel like airlines should provide for them,” and then used the customer feedback to meet customer expectations “so that they at least become repeat customers.” P1 echoed that “we always look at . . . our top ten, and we take the top ten complaints or issues that are driving complaints of the customers and work our way backward.” P1 explained that issues are tracked, evaluated, and aggregated from the top down.

Customer feedback reveals customer expectations. P1 from Airline Company A stated that “one example of the feedback is that they would like to . . . see wi-fi as an option or offered on flights.” P1 explained that after company managers compile the customer feedback, the “information is taken back to corporate, and strategies are

assessed based on how much we could generate customer retention or acquisition based on these features.” Customers provided feedback on the company and employee performance. P3 from Airline Company B explained that “one experience I remember was the customer feedback . . . to thank the agent because the agent went above and beyond and rented a car and drove them to their destination that they needed to get to.” P3 gave another example of a grateful husband who explained that he “was able to book tickets for his wife to a show for a concert that his wife always wanted to go to” after getting information from Airline Company B to check out shows and excursions.

**Table 5**

*Theme 4: Elicit Customer Feedback*

Aspects of market research	Gap being mitigated
Constant customer feedback	Knowledge gap—between consumer expectation and management perception caused by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient market research</li> <li>• Failure to listen to customer complaints</li> <li>• Lack of management and customer interaction</li> <li>• Lack of interaction between service employees and management</li> </ul>
Use of surveys to elicit feedback	
Conduct data analysis	
Conduct root cause analysis	
Identify & rank issues	
Decision making	
Assess service delivery	
Assess customer experience	
Assess performance	
Assess customer satisfaction	
Provide timely feedback	

Customer expectations are dynamic. According to P1 from Airline Company A, “complaints change depending on the dynamics of what’s going on.” P1 expressed that “I believe one of the top complaints is about people not wearing face masks onboard or social distancing that will be for probably right now.” The top complaints were related to the health and safety issues of COVID-19. P1 and P3 revealed the importance of constant



communication and customer feedback using social media. P3 from Airline Company B explained that “with social media, just taking off we have uh employed uh different people to manage our Twitter accounts and all the social media feedback that we get so that we are in constant communication with the customers.” P1 expressed that when eliciting customer feedback, “social media . . . is a big piece of it . . . nowadays.” P1 explained that they use social media as “another way to try to uh resolve the issue” and “to direct them back . . . to the carrier to fix the concern or issue.” Therefore, Airline Company A had links on the social media platforms redirecting customers back to the airline.

Airline Company A and B invited customers to contact or provide feedback via the links at the top and bottom of the web pages. Airline Company A had a *Contact Us* link directing customers to the *Contact Us* page with an option to submit a compliment or complaint via email or chat. The *Contact Us* web page has SMS, WhatsApp, or email options. The *Complaint or Compliment?* Web page for Airline Company A had a form customers fill out to submit either a compliment or a complaint. Airline Company A had a survey online asking customers “how likely they are to recommend their airline to a friend or colleague with a scale of one to 10.” Airline Company B had a *Contact Us* link at the bottom of the page directing customers to the *Contact Us* page with the option to email, write, and chat with customer service agents. Airline Company B instructed customers to telephone “for immediate assistance because agents are available 24/7.” Customers can contact and provide feedback to Airline Company A and B via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube anytime.

Customers provide both positive and negative feedback on social media pages. A customer wrote on Airline Company B's Facebook page that "thank you . . . been very satisfied and feel very safe with all your safety with this virus stuff this past year." However, another customer felt differently about the way Airline Company B's flight crew was adhering to COVID-19 health and safety procedures. The customer wrote, "I wish . . . crew was compliant with mask-wearing. I feel unhappy and unsafe as I sit here." Interestingly another customer responded saying, "we have flown . . . and have been at the airport . . . and we did not see or have a problem with masks." Airline Company B invited the customer to submit the complaint so that managers can investigate.

The strategy to elicit customer feedback to mitigate adverse customer incidents found in this study extends the literature on customer service strategies and market research in the airline industry. Market research can be applied to mitigate the knowledge gap posited as part of the SQ model (Baffour-Awuah, 2018; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Researchers suggested that tools, such as AIRQUAL (Alotaibi, 2015) and SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985), should be used to measure passenger perception trends (Budimcevic et al., 2018). Eliciting customer feedback and conducting surveys is critical to measure service quality based on customer expectations (Guo et al., 2017). Hence, Guo et al. (2017) posited that researchers must measure customer satisfaction by the gaps between service quality perception and the pre-purchase quality expectation to improve service quality.

The responses of P1 from Airline Company A and P3 from Airline Company B confirm the importance of customer feedback and surveys from previous studies. Without customer feedback, there is a possibility of misunderstanding service recipients' expectations and impacting customer satisfaction (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020). Customer data collected using customer feedback and surveys by other researchers (Arundev et al., 2020; Hunt & Truong, 2019; Murugeswari et al., 2018; Sharma & Shoaib, 2020) proved that organizations could compile customer data and analyze it to drive customer service decisions. Therefore, airline managers facing service failures and a continuous increase in adverse customer incidents should conduct market research to identify the root cause, make decisions, and implement customer service strategies based on the research findings.

#### **Theme 5: Improve Service Policies and Standards**

All three participants highlighted improvements to customer service policies, processes, and standards Airline Company A and B implemented to mitigate negative customer complaints, as shown in Table 6. P1 from Airline Company A emphasized the importance of timely response to customer complaints. P1 stated that for any written process, "there is a turnaround time that's required to be met, and it's usually no more than 48 hours." P1 stated that Airline Company A implemented the "first response to resolution of the problem so it doesn't escalate, and it doesn't have to go off to another department." According to P1, "this approach does mitigate a lot of the situations." P1 explained that company managers revised the carry-on bag policy after getting many complaints because "the fee was very high." P1 explained that "we ended up adopting a

new policy or revising it to be more aligned and lower that amount.” According to P1, the new policy “dropped the number of complaints.” P1 expressed that the top 10 complaints approach, the first response to the resolution, and extensive training “definitely changed things around because you could see it in our data, and our metrics, and the DOT customer complaints that are out there.”

**Table 6**

*Theme 5: Improve Service Policies & Standards*

Customer service improvements	Gap being mitigated
Implemented and revised policies Implemented and revised processes Implemented and improved service quality standards Implemented tracking and monitoring tools Leverage technology	Policy gap—between management perception and service quality specifications caused by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of customer service standards</li> <li>• Poorly defined service levels</li> <li>• Service level standards not regularly updated</li> </ul>

P2 explained that Airline Company B reduced customer complaints by improving the information, emails, communication, and training. P2 explained that Airline Company B mitigated the bag issue by disseminating bag fee information to customers via “emails 24 and 72 hours.” P2 added that Airline Company B informed customers about the different bag fees via the “the booking path if they are booking online” and “when they are talking with customer service” over the phone. According to P2, Airline Company B trained the agents to communicate the bag fees upfront to minimize the “I hate paying for bags” feedback from customers. P2 explained that Airline Company B introduced a few strategies “to regain the customer and try to fix the experience so that they do come back

and know that we appreciate their business.” P2 stated that Airline Company B used courtesy, vouchers, and offered options to improve customer service experience. P2 explained that in most cases, “policies and procedures . . . do not change; however, there is some flexibility” allowed on an a customer basis.

P3 expressed that Airline Company B leveraged technology to improve processes and customer experience. P3 explained that “we have done a lot of self-service options on our website.” According to P3, one example Airline Company B did was to provide the customer with the ability “to go online and change their flight itinerary.” P3 stated that “prior maybe to a few years back, they would have to be on the phone in a queue waiting, so that kind of uh builds up frustration knowing that hey I didn't cancel the flight.” P3 explained that “if the cancellation is caused by us the airline, then they are able to change their itinerary without any change fees.” According to P3, doing this “shows that we empathize with the inconvenience we have caused” to our customers. P3 mentioned that they implemented “self-service options” on the kiosk to improve customer experience. P3 explained that Airline Company B implemented one source for customer information, TSA pre-check, and the kiosk check-in system at the airport and, as a result, customers received “a smoother or faster process through security” and reduced “wait time at the ticket counter and the boarding gate.”

P3 explained that Airline Company B implemented “email communications” to inform customers about the check-in process and flight delays or cancellations and elicit customer feedback. P3 stated that Airline Company B implemented “flight alerts” on the website. P3 explained that flight alerts provide “up-to-date information on the status of

the flight . . . prior to coming to the airport.” P3 voiced that the customer feedback was that flight alerts were “informative and useful . . . they didn't have to go to the airport because the flight was delayed.” P3 stated that the communication of flight changes to customers using flight alerts “obviously saves people’s time and maybe money if they are parked at the airport.” Another improvement P3 mentioned was the “bag tracking technology . . . to trace the bag and bring the bag to the customer the day they arrive” when their luggage is lost. P3 added that Airline Company B introduced the “loyalty” program to provide “VIP service” to loyal members. According to P3, customers voiced their appreciation for these improvements to processes and procedures.

I reviewed the changes Airline Company A and B implemented online. Airline Company B’s customers had the ability to make flight changes via the *Manage Travel* link and check-in via the *Check-in* link. Customers could sign up for flight alerts on Airline Company B’s website. The “loyalty” members for Airline Company B could log into their accounts to view and redeem points for flights, car rental, and hotels on the website. Airline Company B’s customers could view the new bag fees when booking, modifying, and checking in on the website. Airline Company A’s job description indicated that flight attendants were expected to “achieve and improve performance of daily operations by monitoring flight attendant delays and cancellations attributed to flight,” emphasizing the importance of continuous improvements to job seekers. On the other hand, Airline Company B required the flight attendants to have the ability “to maintain the highest level of customer service (85% QA) while demonstrating a friendly and genuine demeanor.” Airline Company A’s and B’s websites and social media

accounts displayed COVID-19 health and safety policies. The DOT Air Travel Consumer Reports showed a decline in Airline Company A's and B's customer complaints.

The strategy to improve service policies and standards extends the literature of customer service strategies in the airline industry. Continuous improvements to policies and standards, is one of the effective solutions to sustain an organization in competitive markets (Maghsoodi et al., 2019). Constant updates to policies and standards close the service quality specification gap (Ingaldi, 2019; Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020), which Parasuraman et al. (1985) posited as part of the SQ model. Constant research allows managers to gain insight into areas of improvement.

Airline Company B's strategy to offer compensation to disgruntled customers confirmed other researchers' (Gandhi et al., 2017; Latif et al., 2019; Olaniyi & Stephens, 2019) previous study findings and propositions. When customer experience is not desirable, organizations implement, or revise policies related to compensation to improve customer satisfaction. Positive compensation changes are fundamental to service recovery because consumers evaluate service recovery efforts in terms of outcome.

**Table 7***Service Quality Determinants*

Determinants & definition	Participants' responses
Empathy—The caring, individualized attention provided to the customer	<p>P1 – Agents handle customers respectfully and listen to what customers have to say</p> <p>P2 – Agents provide courtesy to customers on an individual basis</p> <p>P3 – Agents are good listeners who show empathy and support</p> <p>P3 – Human factor is good to handle customers</p>
Responsiveness—The willingness to help customers and provide service	<p>P1 – Provide timely response and feedback to customers</p> <p>P1 – Employ the first response resolution approach</p> <p>P1 – Use data to understand and resolve problems</p> <p>P2 – Deal with customers calmly, apologize for any misunderstanding, and stick to facts</p> <p>P3 – Negotiate, manage conflict, and deescalate situations</p>
Assurance—The knowledge and courtesy of employees	<p>P1 – Train front-line personnel and company on how to deliver values and service</p> <p>P1 – Airline invests on the philosophies of training of skill sets and cost-saving measures</p> <p>P1 – Agents do a good job of explaining policies</p> <p>P2 – Train and equip agents with skills and information on how to educate the customer; provide first time courtesy</p> <p>P2 – Equip agents with customer service skills.</p> <p>P2 – Train agents on the rules and regulations to pacify customers</p> <p>P3 – Constantly inform customers about flight changes</p>
Reliability—The ability to perform the promised service dependably	<p>P1 – Train agents how to understand, keep promises to, handle, and treat people</p> <p>P2 – Customer service courses are related to handling and deescalating situations.</p> <p>P3 – Agents use good communication skills to explain policies without being aggressive or defensive</p>
Tangibles—The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication	<p>P1 – Have an open line of communication with customers</p> <p>P1 – Use surveys, face to face, website, phone calls, letters, and social media to communicate and elicit customer feedback</p> <p>P1 – Provide clear communication of the mission to all stakeholders</p> <p>P2 – Use communication to inform customers about bag fees via the website, over the phone with reservation agents, and face to face at the stations</p> <p>P3 – Crew keeps customers informed of any flight changes</p> <p>P3 – Use surveys to elicit customer feedback via emails</p> <p>P3 – Airline created a centralized source of customer information for customers, customer agents, and TSA use</p>



### ***Service Quality Dimensions***

Further data analysis links the airline customer service strategies and efforts with Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) five service quality determinants: empathy, responsiveness, assurance, reliability, and tangibles, as shown in Table 7. Designing customer service strategies that align with these five dimensions ensures improved service delivery (W. Li et al., 2017). Therefore, based on this study's findings, the SQ model is a practical conceptual framework that researchers can use to study service quality. This study's findings related to service gaps and dimensions can drive managers' decisions, strategies, and customer service handling and management in the airline industry. The multidimensional SQ conceptual framework supports research on customer service challenges in different sectors, including the airline industry. Managers could apply the SQ model and then use the study results to implement effective strategies and appropriate countermeasures based on the discrepancies between customer's expectations and perception (Przybytniowski & Michalski, 2020). Therefore, airline customer service managers, researchers, and scholars could employ the study findings and leverage the SQ model to measure and understand customer service challenges.

### ***Barriers to Service Quality***

P2 and P3 face resource challenges when implementing customer service strategies. P1 voiced that "resources are always a constraint." P3 stated that the three constraints are "money, time, and resources." P1 expressed that company managers face "resistance to change" internally. According to P3, other stakeholders "do not want to go back to revisit policy." P3 voiced that "sometimes in our organization, different

departments uh may not understand the need to spend uh resources and finances when implementing customer service strategies.” P3 explained that “the push back we get sometimes is intra departments.” According to P3, when “talking to a marketing or revenue marketing guy, they won’t see necessarily the return but, when you’re speaking to someone from the stations, more customer-centric focused, they see value in it because you are retaining that customer.” These challenges are consistent with the barriers executives voiced in Parasuraman et al.’s (1985) study.

Company managers in Airline Company B employed communication and stakeholder management to address the barriers when implementing customer service strategies. P3 stated that “internally you know you have to uh get the stakeholders and sponsors together in a room and uh hear the concerns on both sides.” According to P3, “the internal departments not agreeing . . . are able to understand the reason or rationale behind something.” According to P3, having them in the same room “makes it easier for them to get on board.” P1 addresses challenges by being solution-driven or data driven and leveraging technology. P1 stated that “being solution-driven and trying to find ways to implement or be creative about the way we do it, uh I think that's number one.” P1 voiced that “technology can be a great friend to helping the cost in the long term.” However, social media have advantages and disadvantages. According to P1, people use social media “to get some five minutes of fame,” and for some, it is “a quicker way of response.” The use of technology to manage service quality challenges is consistent with Sarbabidya and Saha’s (2020) conclusions that technology enables companies to

penetrate the market on a larger scale and provide fast, secure, and ubiquitous services to create profit.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

In today's fiercely competitive environment, the cost to attract new customers is more than five times that of maintaining existing customers (Xie et al., 2020). The airline industry's business challenge is that a continuous increase in customer complaints related to customer service is threatening some of the airlines' survival because of customer churn. Therefore, the objective was to explore customer service strategies that airline managers successfully use to mitigate negative customer incidents and improve service. Five customer service strategy themes emerged: (a) recruit competent employees, (b) enhance training, (c) strengthen communication, (d) elicit customer feedback, and (e) improve service policies and standards. Airline customer service managers cognizant of the five strategies could mitigate negative customer incidents and deliver high service quality that will increase customer satisfaction, customer base, and company profitability.

Positive employee–customer interaction contributes to customer retention and company profitability. Wampande and Osunsan (2020) confirmed the significant relationship between employee attitude and customer satisfaction. Therefore, airline customer service managers should employ strategies to attract, select, and retain competent employees to mitigate negative customer incidents. Airline companies could retain their employees for an extended period through effective human resource practices.

Commitment from the right employees is paramount to positive work outcomes (Sondheim et al., 2017). Airline customer service managers should focus on enhancing

customer service training to produce competent customer service employees. According to Dean and East (2019), companies must develop and implement training programs to address employees' soft skills deficits. Soft skills training programs should focus on individual needs, group, and individual training to address emotional behaviors at work. Therefore, extensive training programs equip employees with the required education and skills to mitigate service failures.

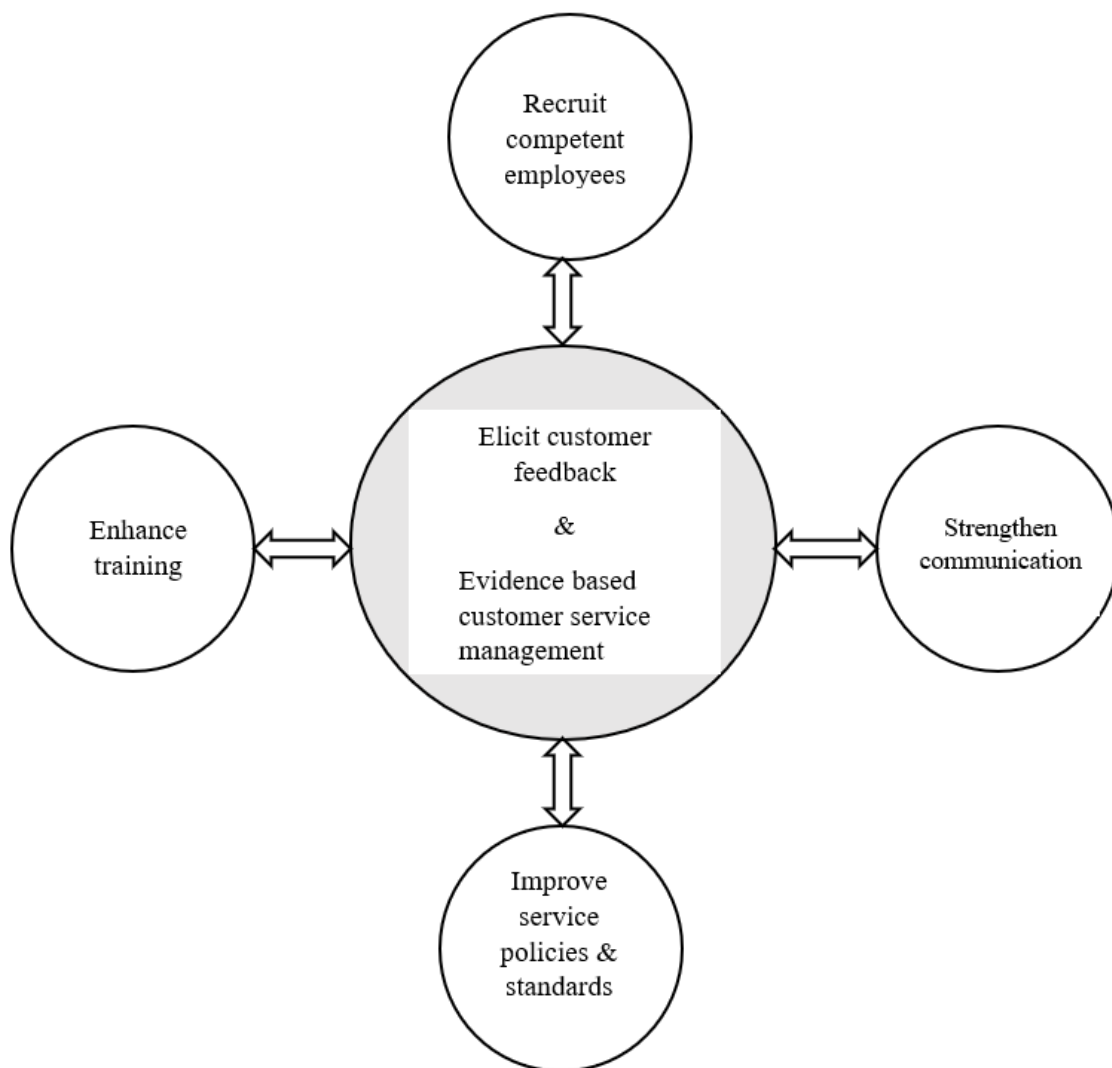
Employees' ability to adapt to their environment and communicate appropriately can affect business outcomes (Sony & Mekoth, 2016). Some researchers have stated that organizations can use numerous approaches, including communication, to rectify service failures. The approaches include communicating with customers to gain response, clarifying, and apologizing for their failures (S. R. O. Ali et al., 2020). Therefore, strengthening communication is important to set correct customer expectations and mitigate adverse customer incidents.

Airlines must continuously evaluate and assess the quality of service they deliver (Anjalika & Priyanath, 2018). Research on service quality helps service providers understand the gaps and service provision requirements (Luke & Heyns, 2020). Therefore, constant customer feedback and surveys must be at the center of knowing and understanding customers' needs and expectations. Airline managers should use surveys to elicit information from customers and use the data to assess and evaluate customer service strategies related to employee competence, training efforts, communication techniques, and improvements to service policies, processes, and procedures. Surveys and customer feedback should be at the center to drive decisions, changes, and improvements

to customer service strategies, creating an evidence-based customer service management system, shown in Figure 1. Evidence-based practice in management helps to make better organizational decisions (Rousseau, 2018). It also alleviates support challenges related to stakeholder buy-in.

**Figure 1**

*Evidence-Based Customer Service Management*



Airline managers should adopt a holistic approach that includes regular surveys and effective service recovery plans for continuous improvement. It is also vital that employees responsible for implementing customer services monitor and control all efforts to close service gaps (Przybytniowski, & Michalski, 2020). Service recovery plans should have Key Performance Indicators to monitor changes' effectiveness (Kucukaltan & Topcu, 2019). Airline managers must have tracking and monitoring tools to assess the progress and effectiveness of implemented strategies, policies, processes, and procedures.

Effective customer service strategies are critical for airline managers to mitigate the continuous increase in customer complaints and retain customers (Mehta & Rice, 2016). It is imperative to recruit and train the right personnel, strengthen communication, elicit customer feedback, and improve policies and standards to minimize customer service complaints. Managers cognizant of these strategies may apply them to improve customer satisfaction. Firms that alienate and dissatisfy their customers will have a lot to lose. Service failures have led many to boycott airlines such as British Airways; by contrast, airlines such as Southwest Airlines have reaped the fruits of effectively managing service failures (Borah et al., 2020).

### **Implications for Social Change**

Service recovery is the primary means to maintain relationships with existing customers (Xie et al., 2020). The participants indicated that effective customer service strategies mitigate negative customer incidents. The implications for a positive social change in reducing negative customer incidents could lead to improvements in trust and loyalty between passengers and airline companies. Customer recognition through loyalty

programs retains customers (Kipchilat & Omodi, 2021). When customers get the right treatment, they perceive quality and become loyal to any organization (Honu & Addy, 2020). When airlines provide high service quality, it improves travelers' experience leading to customer retention and job security for airline employees and their families. The airline leaders could use the study findings to develop customer-focused policies for the travel community. Business leaders may inform and protect customers from unscrupulous principles by developing and enforcing customer service policies. Airline customer service managers cognizant of the five strategies could mitigate negative customer incidents and deliver high service quality that will increase customer satisfaction, customer base, and company profitability (Honu & Addy, 2020). Kalemba and Campa-Planas (2018) demonstrated and confirmed the positive and significant influence of service quality on the return on investment for U.S. airline companies.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Effective customer service strategies are crucial for airline customer service managers to mitigate customer complaints and retain customers (Mehta & Rice, 2016). Data analysis revealed five customer service strategies that airline managers could employ to mitigate adverse customer incidents: (a) recruit competent employees, (b) enhance training, (c) strengthen communication, (d) elicit customer feedback, and (e) improve service policies and standards. I documented recommendations that airline customer service managers could use to mitigate negative customer incidents. Any organization with satisfied customers is bound to increase its customer base and profitability (Ahmed et al., 2020; Honu & Addy, 2020).

The theory of competence is the foundation for improving the organization's performance and survival (Alsini, 2017; Oh & Choi, 2020). Hence, employee behavior is fundamental to service recovery (Borah et al., 2020). The experienced and knowledgeable airline customer service managers revealed the importance of having competent employees to handle and mitigate customer complaints. Employees have the following expectations from their organizations: (a) appropriate compensation; (b) recognition for accomplishments, contributions, behavior, and capability; (c) opportunities for personal development, career, and job-related; (d) working with high capability organizations; (e) fairness of managers in hires, rewards, promotions, and dismissals; and (f) the opportunity to solve customer challenges internally and externally (Gandhi et al., 2017). Therefore, I recommend airline customer service managers consider the employees' expectations when implementing recruitment techniques to attract, select, and retain experienced and competent customer service employees. Airlines can partner with reputable hiring companies and offer competent remuneration packages to attract potential employees. According to Samanci et al. (2021), the biggest challenge is retaining experienced employees. Therefore, human resource functions such as training, development, benefits, compensation, performance appraisal, and job satisfaction could increase and retain competent employees. Airline companies must create a conducive working environment and culture to attract competent employees and build great teams.

However, providing high-quality service is not about recruiting the right person only. Customer service personnel must undergo extensive mandatory training to acquire



knowledge and skills to handle and manage adverse customer incidents. Companies reported that their employees lack soft skills (Hurrell, 2016). Therefore, I recommend airline customer service managers enhance their training efforts to be extensive enough to support and produce competent frontline personnel. Airline companies already experiencing customer service failures should enhance and provide training to new and current customer service employees to effectively handle customer complaints.

According to the participants' responses, the robust training programs must include customer handling and management, communication skills, response techniques, company values, policies, processes, and procedures. The training curriculum should include but not limited to customer service knowledge and skills, options available to customers, keeping promises, delivering valuable service, rules and regulations on pacifying and de-escalating situations, timely response, and first response to the resolution. The airline companies should support and encourage employee career development plans through annual education reimbursements for completing courses. The airline customer service managers should determine the level of training offered to employees that qualify for company education reimbursements (Dean & East, 2019). The airline companies should push for the same high-level training standards from other customer service companies they partner with for consistent high service quality for all customers.

Therefore, customer service managers should invest in extensive training of skill sets that support internal and third-party employee development. The airline companies should leverage computer-based training (CBT). CBT increases flight attendant

performance, service proficiency, and balance cabin service with safety-related duties, ultimately leading to passenger satisfaction (Gibbs et al., 2017). The robust training programs will educate and equip customer service personnel with required skills to handle customers. Competent frontline personnel with the right customer service training can effectively respond to and mitigate customer issues.

Without emotional intelligence and communication, negative workplace behaviors may occur (Hendon et al., 2017). Therefore, recommendations are that airline customer service managers strengthen communication. Based on the study findings, good communication means keeping customers informed, understanding, and listening. Understanding one's emotions and others' is crucial for effective communication (A. Kim et al., 2016). Airlines should have several communication channels accessible for customers and provide immediate responses to all communication issues via any channel. Airline customer service managers could develop communication processes and procedures around submission, handling, and response time. When it comes to handling sensitive customer issues, the customer service personnel should know who does what, where, when, and how. Airline managers should incorporate communication processes in customer service training. Competent, well-trained personnel should continuously engage with customers, adjust language for different customers, explain the service itself, service cost, and assure customers that their problems will promptly be solved. Therefore, airlines must develop employees with confidence and excellent communication skills to convey what they mean positively and strive to never end conversations in a way that leaves customers dissatisfied.

Airline customer service managers should focus on strengthening communication to set correct customer expectations. Airline companies must not promise more than they can deliver because discrepancies between service delivery, external communication, and customer expectations cause customer service issues. Airlines fail to meet customer expectations when they overpromise. Based on the study findings, airline companies must keep an open communication line to continually engage with customers on what they need, their grievances, and their perception of service delivery. Strengthening communication should involve transparent dissemination of accurate information related to promises, policies, processes, and procedures.

Managers must understand the nature of quality and essential values related to their service through surveys (Stefano et al., 2015). I recommend that airline customer service managers develop surveys and questionnaires to assess their service quality from a customer's perspective. Airline managers should leverage the popular SQ model to develop surveys to elicit constant customer feedback and drive customer service strategies, as shown in Figure 1. The airlines could use the data to develop key indicators to measure and assess the effectiveness of service recovery plans and customer service strategies. Airline customer service managers could use the results to support decision-making and customer service continuous improvements. Thus, Tsafarakis et al. (2018) recommended multicriteria satisfaction analysis method to identify and measure airline service quality and passenger satisfaction.

Therefore, the mantra is to act and not ignore customer issues. Customer service improves with rigorous responses to customer complaints. Because the more a customer

feels satisfied with the service provider's resolution performance, the better chance for the customer to forgive the company and continue the business relationship (Xie et al., 2020). The airline managers who participated in this study proved that service recovery plans effectively include employee recovery, process recovery, and customer recovery. Therefore, I recommend that airline leaders, academic scholars, and other practitioners utilize this study's findings and recommendations to increase their understanding of customer service strategies and develop customer-focused policies and service recovery plans. I will share the study findings with the participants, airline customer service managers, and leaders in meetings, conferences and publish the study results using aviation and air transport literature and scholarly publications.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A recommendation for further research is to perform a qualitative study using customers as study participants. Customers may have a different perspective on what successful customer service strategies are and what makes them happy. Researchers can conduct the same study in other airlines and industries. Future studies could focus on customer service strategies non-U.S. airline managers use to mitigate customer complaints. In the United States, 67% of the airline customer complaints in August 2019 were against U.S. airlines and only 33% against non-U.S. airlines (U.S. DOT, 2019). Future researchers could also conduct a quantitative study to administer surveys to airline managers and customers.

This study's limitations were that the researcher recruited three airline customer service managers with potential bias from the researcher and participants. Therefore,

future studies with a researcher and a large sample size with participants from more airlines and regions with no airline customer service knowledge and experience could avoid bias. After starting the research, one of the limitations was switching from a single case study to a multiple case study because of COVID-19 health and safety challenges. Future research using a single case study will further extend knowledge for customer service strategies.

### **Reflections**

I committed to completing the Walden University Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) Program to fulfill my educational aspirations to support my dreams of being a small business owner and supporting entrepreneurs in the community. I faced work, health, and educational challenges throughout the doctoral journey. I changed the research topic at the prospectus stage and changed the design at the prospectus and proposal stage. The unwavering support and resources from Walden, family, and friends helped to overcome and complete the challenging educational journey.

As an aviation professional, I have experienced customer service business challenges. I leveraged the experience to identify and start research on the continuous increase of customer complaints in the airline industry. Personal bias, experience, and knowledge were going to interfere with the research. Therefore, I mitigated the bias and preconceived notions by adhering to ethical and IRB requirements throughout the research process. I hope customer service managers and leaders will use the study

findings to mitigate negative customer incidents and improve customer satisfaction and retention and increase profitability for their organizations.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that airline customer service managers employ to mitigate negative customer incidents. A continuous increase in poor service quality is threatening some of the companies' survival in the competitive airline industry (Lucini et al., 2020). In the United States, we have a continuous increase in negative customer service complaints. The U.S. DOT (2017b) reported a 90% increase in U.S. airlines' customer incidents in April 2017, compared to April 2016, noting an increase of 63% compared to March 2017. The airlines' customer service complaints were up 90% in April 2017, compared to April 2016. Therefore, I purposefully selected and interviewed three airline managers from two airline companies who developed strategies to minimize negative customer incidents. Five themes emerged: recruit competent employees, enhance training, strengthen communication, elicit customer feedback, and improve service policies and standards.

All three participants provided insights into ways airline customer service managers could mitigate the adverse customer incidents to stay competitive. To be competitive, airline customer service managers should focus on implementing human resource policies to attract and retain competent employees. Culture, career development, and employee benefits should be attractive enough to entice competent candidates. Attracting competent employees is just the beginning. Airline customer service managers should not leave service quality to chance. The airline managers must proactively

develop and implement robust training programs to address employees' knowledge and skills deficits. Airline customer service managers must strengthen communication to minimize service failures. The consumer-firm communication that occurs before service failure impacts the service recovery expectations. Therefore, managers must use communication to educate, inform, and set correct expectations and not overpromise. Customer service managers need to understand the nature of service quality and the essential values they deliver through customer feedback and surveys. Therefore, airline companies must consider dedicated feedback and complaint management. All decisions, strategies, and improvements to policies and standards should revolve around evidence-based customer service management to mitigate negative customer incidents, retain customers, and improve company profitability.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

What I will do	What I will say—Script
I will introduce the interview and set the stage	Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Monica Muzinda, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. You signed agreeing to participate in this interview by replying with the words <i>I Consent</i> after emailing you the consent form. I want your permission to record the interview so that I have an accurate recording of the interview. If at any time you want me to stop the recording to take a break or withdraw from the interview, please let me know. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without any consequence. I am going to ask you six open-ended questions and follow-up questions. The length of this interview is going to be 30-45 minutes. Your participation will help formulate strategies airline customer service managers use to mitigate customer service complaints. Do you have any questions before we begin? If not, let us begin.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch for non-verbal queues</li> <li>• Paraphrase as needed</li> <li>• Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What customer service strategies do you use to mitigate negative customer incidents?</li> <li>2. What customer service strategies have you found most effective to mitigate negative customer incidents?</li> <li>3. What customer service strategies have you found least effective to mitigate negative customer incidents?</li> <li>4. What barriers have you encountered in implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents?</li> <li>5. How do you address the barriers to implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents?</li> </ol>

6. What additional information would you like to add regarding customer service strategies customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents?

I will wrap up the interview thanking the participant

Script: I have asked you all the six questions. Thank you very much for your participation. Your experience and knowledge you have shared will help formulate strategies airlines customer managers use to mitigate customer complaints. I will keep your name, and the name of your airline confidential. The audio recording, my notes, and my copy of the signed consent form will be kept in a secure password protected safe and will be destroyed after 5 years as required by Walden University.

I will schedule a follow-up member checking interview

Script: The next follow-up interview will be for member checking. In that interview I will ask you if my interpretation of your account of strategies to lower customer complaints are accurate. What is the best day and time to schedule the follow-up interview?

### **Follow-up Member Checking Interview**

I will introduce follow-up interview and set the stage

Thank you so much for taking time to meet with me once again. In this follow-up interview you are going to review my interpretation of your accounts of strategies to lower customer complaints for accuracy. You are going to ensure I have accurately interpreted your answers.

I will share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual question

Here is a copy of the synthesis for each individual question. Let us go over each summary and please let me know if I missed or need to add any information.

I will bring in probing questions related to other information that I may have found. I will ensure that my probing pertains to information on strategies to lower airline

1. What customer service strategies do you use to mitigate negative customer incidents?  
*Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.*

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<p>customer service complaints and will adhere to IRB approval.</p> <p>I will walk through each question, read the interpretation, and ask:</p> <p>Did I miss anything? Or what would you like to add?</p>	<p>2. What customer service strategies have you found most effective to mitigate negative customer incidents? <i>Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.</i></p> <p>3. What customer service strategies have you found least effective to mitigate negative customer incidents? <i>Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.</i></p> <p>4. What barriers have you encountered in implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents? <i>Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.</i></p> <p>5. How do you address the barriers to implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents? <i>Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.</i></p> <p>6. What additional information would you like to add regarding customer service strategies customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents? <i>Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.</i></p>
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**What I will do****What I will say - script**


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<p>I will Introduce the interview and set the stage</p>	<p>Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Monica Muzinda, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Here is your copy of the consent form you signed agreeing to participate in this interview. I would like your permission to record the interview so that I have an accurate recording of the</p>
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interview. If at any time you want me to stop the recording to take a break or withdraw from the interview, please let me know. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without any consequence. I am going to ask you six open-ended questions and follow-up questions. The length of this interview is going to be 30-45mins. Your participation will help formulate strategies airline customer service managers use to mitigate customer service complaints. Do you have any questions before we begin? If not, let us begin.

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- Watch for non-verbal queues
- Paraphrase as needed
- Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth

1. What customer service strategies do you use to mitigate negative customer incidents?
  2. What customer service strategies have you found most effective to mitigate negative customer incidents?
  3. What customer service strategies have you found least effective to mitigate negative customer incidents?
  4. What barriers have you encountered in implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents?
  5. How do you address the barriers to implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents?
  6. What additional information would you like to add regarding customer service strategies that customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents?
- 

I will wrap up the interview thanking the participant

Script: I have asked you all the six questions. Thank you very much for your participation. Your experience and knowledge you have shared will help formulate strategies airlines customer managers use to mitigate customer complaints. I will keep your name, and the

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	name of your airline confidential. The audio recording, my notes, and my copy of the signed consent form will be kept in a secure password protected safe and will be destroyed after 5 years as required by Walden University.
I will schedule a follow-up member checking interview	Script: The next follow-up interview will be for member checking. In that interview I will ask you if my interpretation of your account of strategies to lower customer complaints are accurate. What is the best day and time to schedule the follow-up interview?
<b>Follow-up Member Checking Interview</b>	
I will introduce follow-up interview and And set the stage	Thank you so much for taking time to meet with me once again. In this follow-up interview you are going to review my interpretation of your accounts of strategies to lower customer complaints for accuracy. You are going to ensure I have accurately interpreted your answers.
I will share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual question	Here is a copy of the synthesis for each individual question. Let us go over each summary and please let me know if I missed or need to add any information.
I will bring in probing questions related to other information that I may have found. I will ensure that my probing pertains to information on strategies to lower airline customer service complaints and will adhere to IRB approval.	7. What customer service strategies do you use to mitigate negative customer incidents? <i>Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.</i>
I will walk through each question, read the interpretation, and ask:	8. What customer service strategies have you found most effective to mitigate negative customer incidents? <i>Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based</i>
Did I miss anything? Or what would you like to add?	

*on answers provided by the study participant.*

9. What customer service strategies have you found least effective to mitigate negative customer incidents?

*Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.*

10. What barriers have you encountered in implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents?

*Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.*

11. How do you address the barriers to implementing customer service strategies to mitigate negative customer incidents?

*Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.*

12. What additional information would you like to add regarding customer service strategies customer service managers use to mitigate negative customer incidents?

*Succinct synthesis of the interpretation to be developed based on answers provided by the study participant.*

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