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Customer Satisfaction and Commuter Transport Services a Quandary: A Case Study of Zimbabwe Commuter Omnibus Transport Services

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Customer Satisfaction and Commuter Transport Services a Quandary: A Case Study of Zimbabwe Commuter Omnibus Transport Services

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ABSTRACT

The need to meet customer service satisfaction in the transport service industry has always been the key aim for most transport service providers the world over, however sometimes with very little success. This observation is well confirmed if one is to pluck a leaf from the commuter omnibus transport service providers in Zimbabwe. This research study was based on investigating reasons behind the perceptible absence of customer service satisfaction within the commuter omnibuses which ply the Bindura-Harare route in order to come up with customer care strategies for this transport service industry. This is a qualitative research in which random sampling technique was used to select the commuters who then became the respondents for this research. Using the selected respondents, a customer satisfaction survey was then carried out in order to determine the level of customer perceptions on the level of customer satisfaction from the commuters who use the commuter omnibuses which ply the Bindura-Harare route. This research study discovered that there is apparent lack of customer satisfaction within the commuter omnibus transporters. Such discernible lack of customer satisfaction was attributed broadly to lack of employee training on customer care issues, unresponsiveness to customer needs and complaints, poor customer transport service experience as well as poor transport service delivery processes. This research is to be significant in coming up with customer care strategies for the commuter transport service industry. In addition, the findings of this research are to inform the concerned ministry on customer care policy formulation for the commuter omnibus transport service industry.

Key words: customer care, customer satisfaction, commuter, commuter omnibus.

1. INTRODUCTION

The business of ferrying people using commuter omnibuses, especially inter-urban transportation has experienced a phenomenal growth in Zimbabwe. May be these present exceptional increases of commuter omnibuses in Zimbabwean roads has got a historical bearing which is well explained by Agere H. in The Sunday Mail of 12 April 2015 when he submits that "the kombis (commuter omnibus) were introduced in the early 1990s to complement Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO) which was running urban transport then but facing operational problems." However of recent such unparalleled increases are being necessitated by the demand for such means of transport which has always been perceived to provide both handy and expediency travel to its customers. Simply explained, the commuter omnibuses have got the shuttle effect. This is in direct contrast to big buses as put forward by Agere H. in The Sunday Mail of 12 April 2015 when he posits "that the general concern is that while buses need to uphold schedules for their operations to be efficient, kombis (commuter omnibuses) on the other hand can respond to the demands of a time, conscious to urban population without adhering to schedule." The other noteworthy reason for such abrupt increase in this form of public transport could have been the shift in customer needs and wants relative to the large buses which would take a long time to fill up and in most cases has got many bus stations before they reach their final destination to the chagrin of many passengers who in such circumstances would need to get to their destinations in the shortest possible time. The ever changing livelihood of most people in Zimbabwe which is as a result of the transient nature of economy this country has also resulted for many commuters to require such form of well-situated transport in their endeavor to earn a living. Realizing the shifting trends in customer needs and preferences, an idea which is also under-pinned by Probhar R, M. (2010:37) who opines out that "customer needs and expectations are always changing," many business people are introducing commuter omnibuses into intra-urban and inter-urban road routes. The nature of this business which tends to have a short payback period is also another

enticement which is compelling new business entrants into this industry, thus increasing the number of such mode of public transport in Zimbabwean roads. Such unabated increases have also gained its equal share of customer grievances. Some of the complaints leveled against the commuter omnibus industry are complex, diverse and this is also to mean that this industry is disapproved off from several grounds. However, it also worth to note that, in most parts of the world, the public commuter transport industry in most cases is snowed under a number of unremitting problems.

Some of the reasons why many commuter omnibus customers are putting across complaints against the perceived poor customer care which has got a negative bearing on customer satisfaction from this service provider are due to their increase in customer service quality awareness and demands. No one articulated this better than Hirmukhe J. (2012:01) who contends that, "the expectations of the public are increasing day by day. Public demands are high and the nominal infrastructure and processes fall short in fulfilling these demands." Abullar A.A. and Talip R.M. (2013:333) is also in accord with these ideas when he explains that a "gamut of complaints for such public transport, range from late arrival, overcrowding, poor customer service, and bad general upkeep of the bus to frequent mechanical letdown." All such problems and customer complaints are a precursor to lack of customer service satisfaction within the commuter omnibus transport service. This finds apt support in Kuveya T. (2004 :) when he tenders that customer complaints are major indicators of lack of proper customer care in business.

However, most of these blatant customer complaints against the commuter omnibus transport service under normal business circumstance acumen should form the rationale for implementing a culture of customer care enhancement strategies but the barefaced truth is that this is not the case. It is from such a background that the researchers were motivated to research on the reasons behind the assortment of complaints pointed against this public transport service in order to come up with apposite customer care strategies.

1.2 The Harare-Bindura Route

The Harare-Bindura route is a stretch of about eighty kilometers between the capital city of Zimbabwe, Harare and Bindura Town. Bindura is to the north of Harare and is predominantly a mining town with some substantially shares of farming activities. Bindura being near to Harare means that this route is always busy as there are many commuters who travel to and from work between these two towns. In addition, there are also farmers who travel to Harare to sell their farm produce where there is a larger market. Furthermore, Bindura town is one of the smallest towns in Zimbabwe; however it is the only such town with two universities. This again means that there are many students who recurrently use this road. So being the case, it means that there are many commuter omnibuses which ply this route hence it becomes a suitable route choice for this research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Customer satisfaction

Many service providing organizations have always been discreet in making sure that they provide services which meet customer satisfaction, hence they come up with a myriad of strategies to achieve this noble business goal. The customer satisfaction construct is given a lot of worth discussion especially in the transport service providing industries because of the envisaged benefits it brings to business. This is well summarized by Bearden and Teel (1983: 21) in Yap, S. F. and Kew, M. L., (2007: 64) who argue that "customer satisfaction is key to the marketer because it is generally assumed to be a significant determinant of repeat sales, positive word of mouth, and customer loyalty." It is also regarded as a measure of how services meet or even exceed customer satisfaction. "Customer satisfaction is usually appraised by the customers in terms of technical quality and functional quality," Gronroos (1984) in Geetika S. et al (2010:97). In addition, "customers do not have much information about the technical aspects of a service, therefore, functional quality becomes the major factor from which to form perceptions of service quality" (Donabedian 1980, 1982) in Geetika S. et al (2010:97). Customer satisfaction can be further regarded by many researchers (Oliver, 1981, Brady and Robertson, 2001, Lovelock, Patterson and walker, 2001), who conceptualize customer satisfaction as "an individual's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance (or outcome) in relation to his or her expectations," in Yap, S.F. et al. (2000:61). Customer satisfaction is then aptly defined as "an experience of fulfillment of an expected outcome," Islam, R. (2014:34). Overall customer satisfaction then represents "a modern approach for quality in business life and serves the development of a truly customer-oriented culture management," Cengiz, E. (2010:77) and this is more decisive in the commuter business transport business industry than anywhere else.

2.2 Customer care and customer satisfaction rapport

Customer care is one of those marketing strategies which can be employed by businesses to attract and retain customers especially for the commuter transport sector. Customer care is defined as “the aim to close the gap between customer expectation and their experiences,” Kuveya T. (2004:159). In other words, customer care is all about the business organization and its relationship with its customers or passengers. For any given business entity, the customer is regarded as all the reasons for its existence and success. As it is appropriately explained by Zairi M. (2000:331-337) when he put forward that “it is becoming very clear that most business organizations have in their quest for progress and advancement, put the customer first.” In other words, many businesses are striving to meet customer satisfaction through customer care strategies. Firstly the reason for such all-out effort is to achieve customer loyalty. In addition “customer service is often seen as a valuable differentiator as many organizations have recognized the need not only to attract, but also to retain customers to ensure long term prosperity,” Steve Macaulay, Sara Cook, (1995: 7-11) . The other notable reason for being customer focused, which is an extension of customer care is that “it is a key factor in developing competitive advantages,” Holloway B., Mobbs D., (1994:13-17).

It is envisaged that the major business truism of customer care is to achieve sustainable customer satisfaction. This is alluded to by John Macdonald (1995:5-8) when he submits that “business success and survival depends on strategies and processes directed to delight customers.” However, dissatisfied customers will tell ten other people and a dissatisfied customer is twice as costly as one who had a good service experience. Customer care also aspires to ensure customer satisfaction with the service experience. All this can be easily realized through a company which “places its customers and their satisfaction at the fore-front of every activity, product or service, thereby ensuring profitability and success,” Kuveya T. (2004: 167). However a customer focused transport services is cognizance of the idea that “an improvement of the supplied service quality can attract further users,” Eboli, L. et al. (2007:21). Hence, this transport service provider has to provide adequate customer satisfaction which is regarded as a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product of service itself, provided(or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including –or over fulfillment, (Oliver, 1997) in Hom W. (2000:101).

2.3 Theoretical framework

This research is based on investigating the reasons behind the perceptible absence of customer satisfaction within the commuter omnibus transport services in order to come up with customer care strategies. As such, the Rater Model was employed so as to identify, and clarify the research problems found within the commuter omnibus transport services. In other words, the Rater Model was employed so as to have an informed study pertaining to the various problems bedeviling the commuter omnibus transport services. The Rater Model was again used since it is a useful tool for accessing service quality. This also means that it is a tool which helps business people to focus on service improvements so as to meet service quality for customer satisfaction. This model was propounded by Parasuraman and others in 1985. The model was originally the servqual gap framework which is a product from service marketing. Through factor analysis the servqual model authors identified ten factors that influence service quality, which were later on reduced to five. These are being popularized through the mnemonic aid as the Rater Model, Tanghe J. (2012:273).

The expanded model can be put in plain words as:

Responsiveness - willingness to help and to respond to customer needs

Assurance - ability of staff to inspire confidence and trust

Tangibles - physical facilities, equipment staff appearance.

Empathy - the extent to which caring individualized service is given.

Reliability - ability to perform services dependably and accurately, (Tanghe J. (2012:274).

The rater model is an evolution of the servqual model and it is a useful tool in identifying and discussing some of the problems related to lack of customer satisfaction in the commuter omnibus transport service. Needless to say literature is replete with the problems bedeviling the commuter omnibus transport service industry. Some of these perennial problems include high rates of fatal accidents, congesting the central districts of many urban areas as well as poor service experience. Nyathi J. in The Sunday Mail of 27 April 2014 is of the same persuasion when he points out “that Kombi drivers have turned Harare into a veritable warren where they hunt for passengers anyhow, and in any direction on the street, yet the schematic apportionment of blame solely on police corruption each time there is an accident suggests a nation at an ethical crossroads.” This is in concurrence with (Asiyanbola 2007, Adermo 2010, Ashiedu 2011) in Nwachukwu, A. A., 2014: 1 0 0) when they further point out that “commonly identified urban

transport problems in Nigerian cities are long waiting times for buses, traffic congestion, parking difficulties, air pollution and traffic accidents.”

However, one such continuing problem is the plain lack of customer care which culminates into poor service quality and low customer satisfaction in this industry. An idea which Khurshid R. *et al.* (2012: 24) also buy when they contend that, “it could never be denied that in Pakistan this service (the transport service) has always been at poor quality.” The other notable problem of this service industry which is a trajectory of poor customer care is the poor driving skills of many commuter omnibuses drivers which are regarded as lack of assurance according to the Rater Model. The driving of most drivers (may be they would be competing for customers) is sometimes questionable and this could be the main reason behind such unfortunate accidents. Khurshid, R. *et al.* (2012:29) are of the same persuasion (from the results of their research on service quality and customer satisfaction in public transport sector of Pakistan) when they put forward that “in desire to board more and more passengers, drivers drive recklessly, because of that reason, accidents occur and people do not feel secure while travelling.”

The other evidence of poor customer satisfaction which is better explained as tangibles by the Rater Model in this transport service sector is that, most of the vehicles do not have basic public bus passenger requirements, such as “comfortable seats and open windows for air flow, which measure up to the standards,” Nwachukwu, A. A., (2014: 114). In addition, some of them having poor interiors with torn upholstery and in some worse of situations, other buses have porous bodies which allow dust in. Again, comfort which is part of the service experience leaves a lot to be desired since some of the seats are hard to sit on and with very little room to stretch ones legs especially for tall people. Nwachukwu, A. A., (2014: 114), agrees no less when he clarifies that “a majority of public buses are minibuses, which do not provide adequate legroom or even adequate ceiling heights for standing.”

The other evident example of poor customer satisfaction associated with this service is the absence of reliability, another Rater Model dimension, evidenced by the heart rending delays, which force passengers to get to their destinations sometimes very late. The delays which are as a result of commuter omnibus drivers and their touts who would comb the whole urban area looking for passengers is carried out at the expense of those passengers who would be already in that vehicle. The service experience, which is part of the journey itself, is in most cases very poor. Over-loading in those small vehicles is a common feature. To make the matter worse, most if not all the commuter omnibuses have very small seats (a tangible dimension) which is a strategy to maximize profits, however this is what further aggravates the problem of over-loading.

Another notable lack of customer satisfaction which is part of the service delivery process is in most cases the absence of a trailer for ones luggage. In such a situation, one may be forced to carry his or her heavy luggage while seated on the commuter omnibus or the luggage may be stuffed under the seat, and this well summarized by the sentiments of Khurshid, R. *et al* (2012 : 29) who presents that “compared to other countries, public transport in Pakistan was really wretched.” Khurshid, R. *et al.* (2012: 29) further explains that tangibles (physical facilities) for this service business like bus stops are not clean, and “people litter, spit and it stinks that people cannot stay there and that public transport like commuter omnibuses do not stop at proper stops and sometimes when they do not have enough passengers they do not complete their route but transfer the passengers to some other busses.” In conclusion the major challenge this business sector is facing in light of the commuter omnibuses which ply the Bindura-Harare route is “how to move away from an introverted, profile oriented approach, to an external customer-focused and market-oriented approach” which is obtrusively absent in this transport business sector, (Zairi M., 2000:331-337)

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research in which random sampling technique was used to select the commuter omnibus passengers who then became the respondents for this research. The random sampling technique was used as a tool to select the respondents in order to allow an equal chance of the commuter omnibus passengers to be selected. Using the selected respondents, a customer satisfaction survey was then carried out in order to determine the level of customer perception on the level of customer satisfaction and service delivery from the commuter omnibus operators. A total number of 60 commuter omnibus passengers who use the Bindura- Harare route were selected as respondents for this study. Questionnaires with closed and open ended questions were used to collect data for this study. The questionnaire was based on the Rater Model. The questions were then derived from commuter omnibus passengers service experiences across the five Rater dimensions of service quality namely, responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, empathy as well as reliability. The administration of the questionnaires involved personal distribution of the questionnaires to the various respondents who filled in the questionnaires while the researchers were waiting in order to increase the chances of getting the filled in questionnaires. This also increased the validity of this research.

4. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

This part of the research presents and discusses the collected data. Data presentation in tables and analysis assists the researchers to come up with findings and conclusions of this research paper. The content analysis approach was used to analyse the data and this entails grouping the collected data into the five Rater Dimensions of service quality in order to have a discussion and a summary of the major findings.

4.1 Response Rate

Table 1 Number of respondents N= 60

Target group	Number of questionnaires	Number of Returned questionnaires	Response rate %
Bindura-Harare commuters	60	56	93

Source: Adapted from field data.

From Table 1, 93% of the commuters who use the commuter omnibuses which ply the Bindura –Harare route that is (56 out of 60) responded to the questionnaires. This high response rate was inside the acceptable range for the researcher to proceed on with the analysis of the collected data for this research paper. The high response rate also means that the conclusions and recommendations of this research would be valid and reliable. In addition, recommendations from this research would be free from bias due to this high response rate.

As afore mentioned, the analysis and discussion would employ the Rater Model as envisaged by Parasuraman *et al.* 1985 in Tanghe J. (2012) as well as in Wang, I.M. and Shieh, C.J., (2006:195)

4.2 Table 2. Responses across the five Rater Model N=56

Dimension	No Response	Response percentage	Yes response	Response Percentage	Total	%
Responsiveness	55	98	1	2	56	100
Assurance	52	93	4	7	56	100
Tangibles	50	89	6	11	56	100
Empathy	53	95	3	5	56	100
Reliability	54	96	2	4	56	100

Source: Adapted from field data.

4.3 Responsiveness

The large number of the respondents that was 98% as being depicted in Table 2 was of the opinion that commuter omnibuses' drivers, conductors and operators are not responsive to customers in terms of attending to their complaints. The compounding factor in handling customer complaints is mostly due to the absence of a proper procedure to do so, that is, there are no suggestion boxes and in most cases there no cell numbers of bus operators. Again there are no time tables for service delivery for the commuter omnibuses. The other worth mentioning out coming from this research is that there are no proper designated service access points (bus stations) for this service sector. Most of the respondents pointed out that the commuter omnibuses stop everywhere even in the middle of the road, and also in no stopping zones. The other remarkable idea pertaining to bus stops from the field is that these commuter omnibuses change the customer service access points very frequently to the inconvenience of their clients. The research findings also noted that these commuter omnibuses always shift their customer access points for a number of reasons which include, running away from the Zimbabwe Republic Police, and Municipality Police as well as competing to get commuters. It is also important to note that some of these commuter omnibuses are operating illegally hence they also offer a clandestine service.

4.4 Assurance

From Table 2, 93% of the commuters comparing to only 7% indicated that many of the commuter omnibus crew members do not enthuse assurance in their customers in several ways. The commuter omnibus crew members in most cases do not have the required skills to perform the required customer service and as such, it is no wonder why very often they are rude to their customers. The outstanding reason for this irregularity was that most of the conductors are not trained on customer care issues. Again some of the drivers do not have the right driver's license to operate the vehicles and as such they always flee at high speed from the police manning road-blocks. In this same light, the research exposes that faulty vehicles also push the drivers to use dangerous and illegal routes in order to elude the police. The other lack of assurance finding of this research is that the drivers pass through red robots as well as driving in the wrong lane and all these put into imperil the life of the passengers.

4.5 Tangibles

The largest number of the respondents that is 89% from Table 2 was of the view that the appearance and disposition of the vehicles, the conductors and drivers leaves a lot to be desired. This can be explained by worn out bus seats, which in most cases are very small to accommodate four people per-seat which is the norm with most commuter omnibuses. Another eye-catching idea is that most of the commuter omnibus crew members are not well groomed, in that they have uncombed long hair, do not bath regularly, and they put on greasy garments. The other conspicuous idea from the collected data is that, many of the conductors and drivers do not have uniforms, a tangible which is imperative for service provider identification. Such a flaw on the part of the service provider, in most cases makes the commuters predisposed to thieves. The absence of tangibles like bus stops with shelters is another major criticism against this public transport service.

4.6 Empathy

Another idea which came out of this research as indicated by the high percentage of 95% from Table 2 is that, the commuter omnibus crew members do not have empathy towards their customers. As a matter of fact they are courteous to passengers before they get into their buses but only to become vulgar to them when they are inside and have bought bus tickets. They also do not commiserate with their passengers, in that they do not compensate lost property. In fact on their ticket there is a disclaimer to that effect. Again the lack of empathy is also manifested when they do not give passengers their change, in the event that one has forgotten to collect it from them. Sometimes, the conductors of these commuter omnibuses use subliminal strategies to hood wink their customers in telling them a lower bus fare figure when one is not yet in the bus and only to be told a higher bus fare figure when the commuter omnibus is already in transit and when is now problematic for a passenger to then disembark.

4.7 Reliability

Another idea from this research indicated by the high response of 96% from Table 2 was that this form of transport is not reliable since the conductors do not tell the truth about their precise destinations. In some instances, passengers are forced to disembark at wrong destinations. In some cases they may change their route depending on the route which is lucrative to them. In some circumstances they off load their passengers to another commuter omnibus. The barefaced disregard of a fixed time table is the other major outcry for most respondents who contributed to this paper, which means that the first passengers to board a commuter omnibus have to uncomplainingly wait until it is filled up. The respondents also indicated that if the commuter omnibus crew discovers that there is a road-block ahead they may decide to wait until the police road-block has knocked off or worse still they may decide to go back. All this delays the passengers in getting to their intended destinations.

5. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

A succinct of the research findings gives the following illuminating ideas on the causes of poor customer satisfaction in the commuter omnibus service sector:

- Commuter bus operators employ drivers with no proper documents and experience whom they are likely to pay low salaries.

- The research results signify that there is entirely no customer care training within the commuter omnibus transport service for those commuter omnibuses which ply the Bindura-Harare route hence the perceptible lack customer care within this transport service sector.
- Engaging of touts in this service industry has removed all semblance of customer care from this service sector.
- The touts are rowdy and worse still they engage in hazardous drugs.
- The need to meet daily taking targets set by commuter bus operators are some of the factors which compels the drivers to drive at high perilous speeds.
- Meeting basic customer needs as well as running a viable and profitable business seems to be always at variance, hence the large number of customer complaints against this transport passenger service provider hence there is noticeable absence of service customer satisfaction in this business sector.
- Most of the available traffic regulations leave some glaring gaps on finer customer care key issues, and when they are there they are not being enforced.
- The alleged police bribing by the conductors is also another complicity to the issue of providing a customer transport centered service.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following customer care recommendations for this service sector can be construed from the research findings:

- The commuter omnibus crew should be trained on customer care issues and this should include communication and clientele reception.
- Commuter regulatory board with the major mandate to look into customer care issues should be formed albeit the fact that presently there are already existing transport regulatory authorities.
- There should be need to have the service access points (bus stations located at convenient places with the required amenities, like bus stop sheds and ablutions.
- Commuter omnibus operators and their workers should accept customer complaints as a tool for continuous customer care improvement strategy.
- The commuter omnibus transport service should continuously carry out customer satisfaction surveys so as to be proactive in meeting customer needs, wants and expectations.
- This service sector should constantly conduct customer needs assessments since customer needs and preferences always change in order to come up with solutions to their problems.
- There should be constant evaluation of the customer service delivery process in order to improve on its weaknesses as well as to exploit on its strength.
- The commuter omnibus operators should come up with service delivery process which caters for its customers before service encounter, during service encounter and as well as after the service encounter.
- The commuter omnibus crew should be determined to delight their customers further than what they expect through closing the gap between customer expectations as well as providing a finer service experience by being discerning to customer thinking, feelings and needs.
- Customer complaints should be regarded as a means to continuously improve the quality of the service as well as strategy for service recovery mechanism; hence they should be resolved without delay to the contentment of the passengers.
- There should be proper or centralized customer care complaining channels in order to assist passengers who may fall victim of poor customer care service from this service sector.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is apparent that there is wide spread poor customer care within the commuter omnibus transport service which culminates into low customer satisfaction, hence the avalanche of complaints being heaped against

this service provider. The absurdity of it all is the lack of effort either from the relevant government authorities or from the commuter omnibus operators themselves in addressing such customer complaints. However, such poor customer care has resulted into low customer service satisfaction hence the need to have proper customer care strategies as part of a concerted effort to come up with a service provider who is customer centered. Some of these customer care strategies should include the basic training of the commuter omnibus drivers as well as the conductors. All in all, there should be regulations or policies which enhance customer care efforts within this service sector.

COMPETING INTERESTS

There were no competing interests.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The two authors together came up with the major ideas for this paper. They also collected the data for this paper together; however, the corresponding author was then responsible for analyzing, interpreting, presenting and compiling the final paper.

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