



An exploration of international bus service quality: A study of Thai-Laos routes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the service quality of international Thai-Laos bus routes. The focus is on how passengers on the Thai-Laos international bus routes experience the service quality gap between expectations as measured in each of the five dimensions and the perceptions of service quality offered by the bus companies. In addition, this study aims to investigate how nationality influences perceptions of service quality. A survey research with judgmental sampling was conducted with 82 passengers. The results reveal that there are significant gaps in perception between Thai and Laos international buses service levels. Service expectations exceed perceptions in all five dimensions, especially regarding the quality of reliability which is the biggest gap. Moreover, the perception of service quality is different as related to service providers, specifically the perception that the Thai international bus service quality is rated higher than the Laos one. For the expectation and perception of Thai international buses service, quality is not influenced by nationality. However, the perception of Laos international bus service quality is influenced by nationality, especially in the third dimension which consists of the two variables reliability and assurance. The limitation of this study is explored with small data and only one route.

Keywords : Service Quality, SERVQUAL, International Bus

Introduction

Over the last four decades, the ASEAN economic has increased cooperation and is moving towards the ASEAN Economic Community. The goal is to provide the citizens of member countries free trade amongst themselves and to simplify travel between member countries to compete in the global market (Bureau of Academic affairs, The Federation of Thai Industries 2554). The master plan on ASEAN connectivity has been enhanced physical connectivity, institutional connectivity, people-to-people connectivity (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2011). One of the ASEAN goals for Thai and Laos ministries of transportation is to open an international bus route between the two countries in order to facilitate discourse and movement between the citizens of both countries as well as promote tourism and thus contribute to the economic growth of both countries. This project is conducted under the framework of the Economic and Social Development Plan No.9 that encourages cooperation between Thailand and its neighboring countries in the region, and focuses on the development of Thailand becoming the center of a transportation network of the region (Department of land transport 2011). This is consistent with the ASEAN Economic Community, which aims to increase trade between member states. The statistics of Nong Khai immigration show that in 2011 2.75 million people entered and exited Nongkhai



(Nongkhai immigration records for the year 2554), with the volume of international travel increasing each year. Therefore, there is a contract between Transportation Co.,Ltd. and Laos bus privatization in many sub-routes.

This study examined the Khonkaen – Vientiane routes only because Khonkaen province has the largest bus center in northeastern region and is also the hub for bus transfers to other provinces. The passenger volume of the international bus companies that service the Khonkaen – Vientiane sub-routes is about 20,000 passengers annually, with the majority of the passengers belonging to the categories of traders, businessmen and tourists.

Literature review indicated lack of studies concerning the service quality in the international bus companies in Thailand. Therefore, the present research attempts to contribute to the literature in international transportation service by examining the perception of service quality of the international bus routes for Thai-Laos and the Khonkaen-Vientiane sub-routes. In particular, it aims to investigate the gap between customer expectation and perception of the international buses provider. In addition, the present study also investigates how certain differences between service providers and nationality of passengers are variables which may influence the service gaps. The research results will provide some useful information on which dimension of service quality the international bus companies should attend to because each dimension may be differently expected and perceived by consumers. (Polyorat 2012)

Literature Review

Service Marketing

Because of their diversity, services have traditionally been difficult to define. The way in which services are created and delivered to customers is often hard to grasp since many inputs and outputs are intangible. (Lovelock and Wright 2002) The characteristics of services are intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability must be acknowledged for a full understanding of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985). First most services are intangible (Bateson 1977; Berry 1980; Lovelock 1981; Shostak 1977). Service can't be counted, measured, inventoried, tested, and verified in advance of sale to assurance quality. (Parasuraman *et al.* 1985) In addition, the firm may find it difficult to understand how consumers perceive their service and evaluate service quality (Zeithaml 1981) some researchers suggest that price becomes a pivotal quality indicator in situations where other information is not available (McConnell 1986; Olander 1970; Zeithaml 1981) Furthermore, service is heterogeneous: its performance often varies from producer to producer, from customer to customer, and from day to day. Service personnel are difficult to assess (Booms and Bitner 1981) because what the firm intends to deliver may be entirely different from what the consumer receives. (Parasuraman *et al.* 1985) Third, service is inseparable from the service provider. (Carmen and Langeard 1980; Regan 1963; Upah 1980) The service firm may also have less managerial control over quality in services where consumer participation is intense because the client affects the process. In these situations the consumer's input becomes critical to the quality of service performance. (Parasuraman *et al.* 1985)

Service Quality and SERVQUAL model

After purchase, customers compare the service they expected to get with what they actually receive. They decide how satisfied they are with service delivery and outcomes, and they also make judgments about quality. Although service quality and customer satisfaction are related concepts (Lovelock 2002; Mohsin and Ernest 2010) they are not exactly the same thing. Many researchers believe that customers' perceptions about quality are based on long-term, cognitive evaluations of a firm's service delivery, whereas customer satisfaction is a short-term emotional reaction to a specific service experience. (Lovelock 2002) while Churchill



and Suprenaut (1982) suggest that satisfaction is related to the size and direction of the disconfirmation experience where disconfirmation is related to a person's initial expectation. Expectations may vary within different demographic groups (e.g., gender, age, occupation) to make things more complicated, expectations also differ from country to country (Lovell 2002). Thus this research tested expectations and perceptions vary across different nationality.

The SERVQUAL instrument has been the predominant method used to measure consumers' perceptions of service quality. Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) concluded that consumers evaluated service quality by comparing expectations with perceptions on five dimensions to measure service level, as follows (1) Tangibles : the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, and personnel; (2) Reliability : the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; (3) Responsiveness : the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; (4) Assurance : the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence; (5) Empathy : the level of caring and individualized attention the firm provides to its customers.

The gap score (G) is calculated on an item-by-item basis as the difference between the raw perception-of-performance score (P) and the raw expectation score (E) for matching items; therefore, $G = P - E$. Following this calculation, the greater the perception-minus-expectation score, the greater is the perceived service quality. (Riadh 2009; Parasuraman *et al.* 1985) developed a service quality model which for the purpose of this study seeks to address the following five types of gaps:

- . Gap 1. The difference between what passengers expected and what management perceived about the expectations of the passengers.
- . Gap 2. The difference between management's perceptions of passengers expectations and the translation of those perceptions into service quality specifications and designs.
- . Gap 3. The difference between specifications or standards of service quality and the actual service delivered to passengers.
- . Gap 4. The difference between the services delivered to passengers and the promise of the service provider about its service quality.
- . Gap 5. The difference between passengers' expectation and perceived service.

The present study attempts to investigate the gap between service quality expectation and perception for international buses : Thai-Laos routes, Khonkaen-Vientiane sub-routes. Moreover, this research also examine how certain the difference service provider and nationality of passenger variables may influence the service gaps. Formally, the hypotheses of this study are:

H1 : There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception.

H1a: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception in Thai international buses.

H1b: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception in Laos international buses.

H2: The perception of service quality are different in different service provider.

H3: International buses passengers of different nationalities have different levels of service gap.

H3a: Thai and Lao passenger are different expectation in service quality.

H3b: Thai and Lao passenger are different perception in Thai international buses service quality.

H3c: Thai and Lao passenger are different perception in Laos international buses service quality.



Materials and Methods

The instrument used in the study is an adaptation of the SERVQUAL survey to measure service quality, customer expectation compare to perceived service quality levels should be evaluated (Shekarchizadeh, Rasli and Hon-Tat 2011) A modified SERVQUAL questionnaire comprising 22 items was used as the survey instrument to collect data. The items we applied from studied by Fareena and Merlin (2000), Aghomolaei and Zare (2008) and Khodayar *et al.* (2011). Furthermore, developed items from the information of Khonkaen bus operation manager of transportation co.,Ltd. interview to conducted validity. This instrument comprised 4 sections: (1) demographic data; (2) Travelling data; (3) statement of passenger expectation and (4) statement of passenger perceptions.(See Appendix A) Subsequently, instrument was pre-test by 15 Thai-Laos passengers (Cronbach's alphas = .962). The score for expectation and perception items were ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on a five point Likert's scales. Therefore, if perception exceeds expectation ($P > E$), service quality level is very satisfactory, if perception equals expectation ($P = E$), is satisfactory. If expectation exceeds perception ($P < E$), service quality level is poor. (Ilhaamie 2010; reported by Khodayar *et al.* 2011)

This study designed an instrument as 2 dimensions of 2 service providers such as Transportation Co.,Ltd. (Thai buses) and Laos private buses (Laos buses), also was conducted at the Thai-Laos passengers have experienced on the international buses Khonkaen-Vientiane sub-routes at least once time in which a total of 82 passenger were surveyed. The bus station and join travel on the bus are survey areas.

Descriptive statistic, paired *t*-test, independent sample test were utilized to measure. The mean were used to compare the perception and expectation of service quality and the gap between them.

Result

A total of 100 passenger participated in the survey of the participants surveyed. About 18 per cent were deemed unusable due to the failure of the respondents to complete major portions of the survey questionnaire. 82 usable questionnaires comprised the following demographic data: female = 49 (60 percent) and nationality Thai = 43 (52.4 percent) and Laos = 39 (47.6 percent). Travelling purpose is travel as tourist (61 percent). Most passengers travel on weekend (73 percent), receive information of international bus companies from personal recommendations (59.8 percent). 49 percent of passengers unknown the bus company provided the temporary border pass document at the bus terminal. Based on the survey findings passenger needs are the following: service provider should improve punctuality, more convenient access to busses at the immigration entrance, upgraded facilities in the bus and an increased number of busses for holidays.

The means of service quality expectation of Thai international buses range from 3.90 for empathy to 4.29 for assurance. For perception, the mean range from 3.35 for empathy to 3.74 for assurance and the gap mean range from -0.552 for assurance to -0.80 for reliabilities. For Laos international bus companies the range is from 3.92 for empathy to 4.36 for assurance. For perception, the mean range from 2.90 for tangibles to 3.29 for assurance and the gap mean range from -0.94 for responsiveness to -1.33 for reliabilities. To test the set of hypotheses H1: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception, paired-sample *t*-test were conducted for the expectation score and perception score of each service quality dimension. The results reveal that for every dimension there is a significant gap and the expectation are higher than the perception. For Thai international buses with every dimension the expectation ($M=4.14$) is significantly higher than the perception ($M=3.53$, $t=8.17$, $p < .001$). Similarly, for the Laos international buses with every dimension the



expectation ($M=4.17$) is significantly higher than the perception ($M=3.05$, $t=10.938$, $p<.001$) There for H1a and H1b are all supported. (See table I)

Table I Mean standard deviation and gap score of Thai and Laos international buses service quality

Dimension of service quality	Expectation service		Perception service		Gap Score		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Thai international buses service quality ($n = 72$, passenger who used Thai international buses)								
Tangibles	4.11	0.598	3.55	0.563	-0.56	-0.035	6.837	.000
Reliabilities	4.27	0.675	3.47	0.599	-0.80	-0.076	8.922	.000
Assurance	4.29	0.655	3.74	0.616	-0.552	-0.039	6.672	.000
Responsiveness	4.04	0.713	3.45	0.663	-0.59	-0.050	5.741	.000
Empathy	3.90	0.767	3.35	0.701	-0.557	-0.066	5.262	.000
Overall	4.14	0.579	3.53	0.517	-0.610	-0.062	8.170	.000
Laos international buses service quality ($n = 64$, passenger who used Thai international buses)								
Tangibles	4.13	0.591	2.90	0.723	-1.23	0.132	11.093	.000
Reliabilities	4.32	0.674	2.99	0.898	-1.33	0.224	10.090	.000
Assurance	4.36	0.646	3.29	0.830	-1.07	0.184	9.607	.000
Responsiveness	4.05	0.672	3.11	0.837	-0.94	0.165	7.819	.000
Empathy	3.92	0.753	2.97	0.885	-0.95	0.132	7.249	.000
Overall	4.177	0.561	3.05	0.730	-1.121	0.169	10.938	.000

Notes : Items' gap scores can range between 4 and - 4; positive scores indicate performance exceeds expectation; negative scores show that performance is less than expectation; a score of 0 indicates is equal to expectation.

Table II Mean standard deviation and gap score of perception difference in Laos and Thai international buses service quality

Dimension of service quality ($n = 58$)	Perception of Thai International buses service		Perception of Laos International buses service		Gap Score		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Tangibles	3.60	0.555	2.84	0.719	-0.76	0.164	9.429	.000
Reliabilities	3.41	0.624	2.92	0.864	-0.49	0.240	5.825	.000
Assurance	3.75	0.667	3.25	0.811	-0.50	0.144	7.318	.000
Responsiveness	3.49	0.693	3.04	0.810	-0.45	0.117	6.331	.000
Empathy	3.34	0.777	2.91	0.839	-0.40	0.062	5.296	.000
Overall	3.54	0.554	2.99	0.700	-0.55	0.146		

Notes : sample is passenger who ever used Thai and Laos international buses, $n = 58$

The means of perception in service quality for different service provider: For Thai international busses the range is from 3.34 for empathy to 3.75 for assurance. For Laos the mean range is from 2.84 for tangibles to 3.25 for assurance and the gap mean range from - 0.43 for empathy to -0.76 for tangibles. To test the hypotheses H2: The perception of service quality are different in different service providers. Paired-sample *t*-test were conducted for the perception score of service quality each service provider. The results reveal that for every dimension of Thai international buses service quality perception there is a significant gap and the perception is higher than Laos international buses. Thai international busses perception ($M=3.54$) is higher than the Laos international buses perception ($M=2.99$, $t=9.319$, $p<.001$). There for H2 is supported. (See table II)

To test the hypotheses, independent sample *t*-test were conducted where different nationality is the independent variable and the expectation-perception service gap is the dependent variable. The result reveal that, for expectation of service quality (H3a) the gap is not significantly different between Thai passenger ($M=4.18$) and Laos passenger ($M=4.09$, $t=.713$, $p>.05$). For Thai international buses perception of service quality (H3b) the gap is not significantly different between Thai passenger ($M=3.46$) and Laos passenger ($M=3.61$,



$t=-1.299$, $p>.05$) For Laos international buses perception of service quality (H3c) the gap is significantly different between Thai passenger ($M=2.84$) and Laos passenger ($M=3.23$, $t=-2.074$, $p<.05$). Therefore, H3a and H3b are not supported while H3c is supported. (See table III)

Table III Independent sample test of nationality of passenger in level of service gap

Dimension of service quality		Expectation service			Perception of Thai international buses service			Perception of Thai international buses service		
		Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Tangibles	Thai	4.07	-.357	.722	3.44	-1.730	.088	2.66	-2.519	.014*
	Laos	4.12			3.66			3.10		
Reliabilities	Thai	4.32	.820	.415	3.41	-.937	.352	2.69	-2.477	.016*
	Laos	4.20			3.54			3.23		
Assurance	Thai	4.31	.203	.840	3.66	-1.191	.237	3.06	-2.115	.038*
	Laos	4.28			3.83			3.49		
Responsiveness	Thai	4.18	1.647	.103	3.40	-.613	.542	2.99	-1.062	.292
	Laos	3.92			3.50			3.21		
Empathy	Thai	4.02	1.229	.223	3.30	-.664	.509	2.85	-1.015	.314
	Laos	3.82			3.40			3.07		
Overall	Thai	4.18	.713	.478	3.46	-1.298	.198	2.84	-2.168	.034*
	Laos	4.09			3.61			3.23		

Discussion

Application of SERQUAL instrument enables demonstration of five empirical components of service quality, namely: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, which are variously described as dimensions (Parasuraman *et al.* 1985,1988 ; Riadh 2009) The 22 statements, modified SERVQUAL used in this study were distributed among the five dimensions. The study results reveal that, for Thai and Laos international buses, the perception of service quality in all five dimensions are lower than the expectation especially the quality of reliability is biggest gap. Moreover the perception of service quality are different by service providers, while perception of Thai international bus service quality higher than Laos international busses in every dimension especially tangibles dimension is biggest gap. Thus service quality level of both service provider are poor since passengers' expectations were not met. International buses passengers were dissatisfied with the service quality on all the five aforementioned quality dimensions. (Ahamadreza, Amran and Huam 2011). The Gap Theory suggests that the difference between consumers' expectations about the performance of a specific provider drives the perception of service quality. Thus, improvements are needed across the aforementioned dimensions (Khodayar 2011) .

Furthermore, the expectation and perception of Thai international buses service quality are not influenced by nationality, in contrast with Fareena (2000) that shows that expectation of service quality vary over group nationality. However, the perception of Laos international bus service quality is influenced by nationality in three dimensions (tangibles, reliability, assurance).

To improve the service quality dimension of tangibles, the international bus provider should provide the modern facility on bus such as TV VDO and toilet and ~~involve~~ maintain that the physical standard of bus is always at a high level. In terms of reliability, the service providers should uphold the promise to provide services such as punctuality (Abu and Khalidah 2004; Polyorat 2012) and the staff should be honest and reliable. For assurance dimension, the service provider should try to make customer feel safe while travelling and



trust the staff to provide good service such as courteous and polite to customer in service. However, to achieve this, the manager should support the employees so that they can fulfill the mission and promise of the bus company. (Lee *et.al* 2005; Polyorat 2012). Further, to increase the perception of responsiveness, the service provider must, for example, provide the details regarding immigration process carefully every time, and if possible, should manage the special immigration gate for the international bus passengers and develop the ticket online system to provide convenience for the customer. Finally, to improve empathy dimension to increase service quality by training staff to understand the differences and limitations of each customer, such as the elderly, children, and disabled people who want special services and also to build the service mind to staff.

Overall, the present study demonstrated a negative gap of service quality with international bus providers. This service supports the master plan for ASEAN connectivity as physical connectivity, institution connectivity and people connectivity (Association of Southeast Asian Nation 2011). In particular this service supports the ASEAN tourism strategy plan for 2011-2015 that aims for the development of the regulation between ASEAN countries to facilitate transport of passengers of the network states and to eliminate factors hindering the free movement of vehicles, goods and people across the member countries. Transportation Co.,Ltd. under concession from the government as part of the privatization is preparing to develop staff with knowledge especially in the English language that is suitable for communication with foreign passengers and raise service quality to international standards. However, we also found that there are barriers in the regulations and liberalization is not complete. There are additional problems in terms of availability and sovereignty of both countries. Problems such as the fares also need to be addressed. For example, differing rates for different customers-even when travelling same route- emphasize the need for online ticket booking and the differences in quality of service.

Limitation/ Future research

Though the present research provides contributions to the areas of international service marketing, some study limitations should be acknowledged. First, the results for this study are drawn from survey data with a small data. Future research should employ a larger data to increase reliability. Secondly, the study only examined the perceived service quality on international buses on the Khonkaen – Vientiane sub-routes only. It can be argued that the perception of service quality may vary across different routes.

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Appendix A. SERVQUAL model statement

Service quality	Statement for expectation and perception
Tangibles	1) The physical condition of bus is maintained in “like new” condition. 2) Comfortable passenger seats. 3) The cabin is clean and pleasant smell maintained. 4) The modern facility such as TV VDO, toilet. 5) Uniform and personality of staff are satisfactory. 6) The bus station location is convenient access.
Reliability	7) Service provider upholds its promises to the customer-punctuality, route destination, etc. 8) The staff are honest and reliable. 9) The staff willing to help when customer has a problem. 10) Standard service is delivered every time per use.
Assurance	11) Service providers maintain assurance for safety and property while traveling. 12) Staff maintain courteous, polite, humble relationship to customer in service all the time. 13) The staff is knowledgeable and can answer customer questions. 14) Service is worthwhile for the money. 15) Round trip seats are provided.
Responsiveness	16) Quick service at time of ticket booking. 17) The staff pleased and enthusiastic in service. 18) The staff never too busy to respond to customer requests. 19) Provide the details for immigration process.
Empathy	20) Staff interested and educated in differences and limitations of each customer, such as the elderly, children, disabled people who require special services. 21) Providers understand the needs of the passenger and customer Recognition as necessary. 22) Service provider maintain operating hours convenient to all their customer and consider the benefit of customer is the most important.
