

Harnessing Digital Disruption Toward Strategic Innovation: Customer Satisfaction and Online Reviews of Apex Car Rental

Yu Chen ^a, Maria Concepcion V. Umali ^b

^a*ICL Education Group, Auckland, New Zealand
yu912214@gmail.com*

^b*ICL Education Group, Auckland, New Zealand
maria@icl.ac.nz*

Abstract

It is important for organisations to embrace digital disruption to achieve competitive advantage. Understanding the disruption enables companies to keep their existing customers satisfied and create opportunities for new customers by employing customer data to new innovative ways. This research aims to study factors related to customer satisfaction in the New Zealand car rental industry. 300 online reviews of Apex car rental company customers on Google and product review sites were collected and qualitatively analysed. Based on the five dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) of the SERVQUAL model, these online reviews are divided into 10 factors. Then, through quantitative analysis, the factors related to Apex customer satisfaction are analysed. Most customers are satisfied with the service provided by Apex. Customer satisfaction has a strong positive correlation with Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. SERVQUAL was validated. Personalised service is most closely related to customer satisfaction in the car rental industry. Customer satisfaction is moderately negatively correlated with the response time to calls and emails and to provide and handle repair services. The service quality evaluation system (including five dimensions, 10 factors) suitable for the car rental industry was first constructed, which can provide reasonable guidance towards strategic innovation in the service quality of Apex car rental.

Keywords: car rental industry, customer satisfaction, innovation, online reviews, SERVQUAL

Introduction

Background

In the international market, car rental has developed into a relatively mature industry with a good development trend. The global car rental market reached \$68.463 billion in 2017 (Wood, 2019). The rapid development of the car rental industry in New Zealand is closely related to the tourism industry. Statistics New Zealand (2018) recorded 3.82 million New Zealand visitors in March 2018, a significant increase from the 2.61 million visitors in 2013. The growth of tourism is the main driver of growth in the car rental market. According to Welvaert (2017), new car rental sales increased by 24% in July 2017. In 2017, New Zealand's car rental industry had a turnover of US\$1.65 billion, accounting for approximately 35% of the New Zealand leasing industry's total turnover (Clark, 2019). Therefore, the car rental industry in New Zealand is worthy of an in-depth study by researchers.

Apex is New Zealand's largest local car rental company and was founded in 1992 in Christchurch. Apex was rated five stars by Canstar for booking process, cost and expense transparency, vehicle availability, value for money, customer service and overall satisfaction. Apex won the Canstar Blue Award for the most customer satisfaction five times (Apex car rentals, 2019). Although Apex has done a good job in customer satisfaction, there is still much room for improvement. The researchers in this study used online reviews to identify factors closely related to customer satisfaction in the car rental industry, in order to help companies, improve customer satisfaction and achieve corporate competitiveness.

Literature review

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM)

e-WOM has become a popular form of communication for people to exchange information on products or services. Online review is one of the most significant forms of e-WOM communication (Sen & Lerman, 2007). Online reviews are easier to be obtained and measured, and so it has become one of the most influential sources of information in online consumption (Park & Lee, 2009). Park and Lee (2008) believed that online reviews were previous users' experiences, evaluations, and opinions about products or services, and feedback on factors such as price and quality of goods or services. Ngo-Ye and Sinha (2014) mentioned that online reviews are not only a kind of information exchange between users but a more reliable source of information for products or services. Three out of five consumers will check the reviews of the companies they are visiting on Google (Review Trackers, 2018). Nearly 90% of consumers check reviews before buying a product or service, and Google is considered the most important buying decision review site (Andersen, 2019). Google

My Business ranked first among the top ten consumer and business review sites in the United States (Collectively digital, 2018).

Determining the validity, authenticity, and credibility of online reviews is a key research area. The research on an online review of Black and Kelley (2009) found that consumers will perceive comments that focus on detailed descriptions, comments with inflammatory content, or high level of writers' writing as highly effective. Mudambi and Schuff (2010) also found that the more words a comment has, the more detailed the reviewer's description of the product or service is, and the more effective it is. Park et al. (2007) found that customer purchase intentions are positively correlated with the quality of online reviews, and the number of online reviews has a positive impact on customer purchase intentions. However, the credibility of information is related to the channel of information dissemination. Kim, Chung and Lee's (2011) analysis shows that only consumers who perceive the website to be trustworthy will purchase products and services on the website. Cox et al. (2009) compared online reviews of blogs, virtual communities, and official travel websites, and the results showed that the information of official websites was more reliable than the online reviews of consumers. Chevalier (2014) pointed out that most of the reviews are true, and false reviews only account for about 10 %. Similarly, the Bright Local (2018) survey found that more than 90 % of consumers trust online reviews and personal recommendations. Therefore, most of the comments can be seen as authentic.

Customer Satisfaction

Oliver (1980) proposed that the well-known Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory is the consumer's evaluation of overall service performance based on their comparison between the expectation before purchase and the result after consumption. Spreng et al (1996) found that customer satisfaction is the result of the interaction between perceived quality and perceived inconsistency. This is consistent with the results of the Oliver study. Herrmann et al (2007) mention that price perception directly affects customer satisfaction, and similarly do Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000) and Malik et al (2012). Shankar et al (2003) proposed that customer satisfaction would be affected by service attributes in the process of service. Tam (2004) found out that perceived value and customer satisfaction are significantly positively correlated with customer post-purchase behavior. Mittal and Lassar (1996) asserted that "personalisation" is the most important determinant of perceived service quality and customer satisfaction among enterprises providing services in interactive contact with customers.

Service Quality

Parasuraman et al (1985) first proposed a service quality gap model, which shows that service quality is an overall evaluation of customer satisfaction that determines the level of service quality. In another research, a SERVQUAL evaluation model was established, which includes five dimensions of service quality, including Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy, which finalized into 22 specific indicators (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

The SERVQUAL model is widely used in the hotel industry, health care industry, and banking industry. Zhang et al (2013) conducted research on the car rental industry in China by detailing 33 projects from 5 dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy). They found that the level of service quality and all dimensions have a strong impact on customer satisfaction. Meanwhile, customer satisfaction also has a significant impact on customer loyalty. Amponsah (2016) measured customer satisfaction based on the SERVQUAL scale and found a significant positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Therefore, the SERVQUAL scale is a useful tool for service quality research (Ladhari, 2009).

Relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction

Service quality is the consumer's perception of the service results or comprehensive evaluation of the company's service process and may ultimately result in customer satisfaction. It is the performance of the consumer after a transaction, reflecting the consumer's purchase of the product or degree of like or dislike after service (Woodside et al, 1989). Parasuraman et al (1988) assert that the quality of service determines the level of customer satisfaction which is also reflected in the results of studies by Zeithaml et al (1996) and Lee et al (2000). The biggest difference between service quality and customer satisfaction is that service quality involves management in the service delivery process, while satisfaction reflects the customer's overall attitude toward a particular service. The delivery process of the car was emphasised as the most important factor in the car rental process. Yang and Fang (2004). based on 740 customer reviews in two search sites, Gomez and Epinions, found that customer satisfaction is affected by service quality and traditional services.

The quantitative research on customer satisfaction in the car rental industry is still blank and lacks the necessary theoretical guidance. This will seriously affect the sustainable development of car rentals in New Zealand. Therefore, it is especially important to strengthen the research on customer satisfaction in the car rental industry.

The research aims to determine the factors relating to customer satisfaction in the car rental industry in New Zealand focusing on the largest NZ car rental company, Apex.

Research design and methodology

Based on the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988), this study proposes the hypothesis that there is a correlation between customer satisfaction and five dimensions. Two specific factors are contained in each dimension for a total of 10 specific factors, listed in Table 1. The aim is to find out how closely each is related to customer satisfaction in the car rental industry through research and verification of the hypothesis, so as to improve the competitiveness of enterprises. These 10 specific factors are the best classifications obtained by screening, summarizing and evaluating online reviews of Apex. The ultimate goal is to discover the factors most closely related to customer satisfaction of Apex customers in order to better meet customer needs. Meanwhile, it is also able to provide a theoretical basis for new car rental companies as well as New Zealand's entire car rental industry to promote customer satisfaction.

Research design

Research hypotheses

Through the literature review, it is found that SERVQUAL is a reliable model for evaluating service quality, which can be applied to all walks of life, and service quality is positively correlated with customer satisfaction. In the measurement of the car rental industry, there is still a gap to specifically analyze which dimensions can affect customer satisfaction through SERVQUAL. Previous researchers used service quality as an antecedent variable of customer satisfaction. In this study, the research hypotheses of customer satisfaction in the car rental industry are tested.

H1a Tangibles is positively related to customer satisfaction.

H1b Tangibles is negatively related to customer satisfaction.

H10 Tangibles is not related to customer satisfaction.

H2a Reliability is positively related to customer satisfaction.

H2b Reliability is negatively related to customer satisfaction.

H20 Reliability is not related to customer satisfaction.

H3a Responsiveness is positively related to customer satisfaction.

H3b Responsiveness is negatively related to customer satisfaction.

H30 Responsiveness is not related to customer satisfaction.

H4a Assurance is positively related to customer satisfaction.

H4b Assurance is negatively related to customer satisfaction.

H40 Assurance is not related to customer satisfaction.

H5a Empathy is positively related to customer satisfaction.

H5b Empathy is negatively related to customer satisfaction.

H50 Empathy is not related to customer satisfaction.

Data sources, sampling and management

This research is a cross-sectional study of 500 Apex customers' online reviews posted on Google and Product Review sites collected from January 2017 to August 2019. A sample of 300 online reviews (each word longer than 50 words) that related to the research aim was selected.

A mixed method was employed. Qualitatively, the time of each sample review, the online review content, and the score on a 5-star rating were manually recorded. The 5-star rating represents the level of customer satisfaction. The levels were rated terrible, poor, average, good and excellent on a scale of 1 to 5. Then, each of the 10 factors (see Table 1) mentioned was regarded as one group. Each sample was assigned to the corresponding group, based on the content of the online review of the sample. Simultaneously, the level of customer satisfaction rating (1-5 stars) of each sample is specifically recorded. Qualitatively the collected data and content are re-examined to ensure the data is correct. Quantitatively, the hypotheses were tested at .05 level of confidence.

Data Analysis and Findings

Results



Figure 1: Customer Satisfaction Distribution

The 300 online reviews collected on Google and Product Review websites were analysed using Excel 2019. The results are shown in Figure 1. Apex customer satisfaction is excellent.

Table 1 Correlation coefficient between customer satisfaction and each dimension/factor

Dimension	Factors	Coefficient	
Tangibles	The car appearance and condition		0.79*
	The facilities and environment of the car rental company	0.78*	0.72*
Reliability	The price transparency of cars		0.81*
	The off-site return service	0.8*	0.76*
Responsiveness	The speed of response to calls and emails		-0.68**
	The ability of employees to provide services quickly and accurately	0.78*	0.87*
Assurance	The attitude of employees		0.81*
	Professionalism of employees	0.85*	0.84*
Empathy	The speed of the company to quickly provide and handle repair services		-0.64**
	The company's ability to provide personalized service	0.75*	0.88*

*a strong positive linear relationship. ** a moderate negative linear relationship.

Source: Author's own drawing

From Table 1, results showed that eight out of 10 specific factors have a strong positive correlation with customer satisfaction. The company's ability to provide personalised service and customer satisfaction has the strongest correlation. Among all positive correlations, the correlation between the facility and environment of car rental company and customer satisfaction has the weakest. There is a moderate negative correlation between two factors (including the response time to calls and emails and provide repair services) and customer satisfaction, with coefficients -0.68 and -0.64, respectively.

Table 2 below reflects the results of the qualitative analysis of the satisfaction level of customers based on star rating per factor as well as the typical comments on the Apex customers' online reviews.

Table 2 % distribution of customer satisfaction level per factor and customers' review

Dimension	Factors	Level of Customer Satisfaction per Factor in %					Customers Reviews	
		Terrible	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent	Positive	Negative
Tangibles	The car appearance and condition	13	4	8	23	52	Clean, new, low mileage, few scratches, and having the automatic navigation system	Old, depressions and scratches, windshield wipers made visibility worse, shuddering, noise, dirty, an odd smell
	The facilities and environment of the car rental company	11	8	11	11	59	Convenient, clean and tidy, enough seats for customers, and advanced car picking equipment.	Car parking was difficult, and it took a long walk to the store.
Reliability	The price transparency of cars	4	2	2	20	72	Value for money. Reasonable price. Competitive price and cheap.	Different price between website booking and actual price. To paid extra money to change the car
	The off-site return service	0	0	0	10	90	Saving time, and being more convenient	No one answered the call, especially on holidays and weekends, the customer did not receive a reply email from the company
Responsiveness	The speed of response to calls and emails	38	34	0	14	14		Waiting a long time and making mistakes
	The ability of employees to provide services quickly and accurately	10	9	14	22	45	Employees quickly processed and accurately explained car rental documents, paperwork and car inspection	Rude, chatting with colleagues
Assurance	The attitude of employees	14	11	8	25	42	Employees were friendly and helpful	Employees had no knowledge of explaining various car rental terms from a automotive expertise. When the professional perspective, and introducing booking was "lost" the manager did not New Zealand driving instructions in detail know how to deal with it.
	Professionalism of employees	8	6	8	35	43	Giving professional advice and explaining various car rental terms from a automotive expertise. When the professional perspective, and introducing booking was "lost" the manager did not New Zealand driving instructions in detail know how to deal with it.	
Empathy	The speed of the company to quickly provide and handle repair services	46	20	0	27	7	A car was broken down and quickly replaced.	Slowly, employees let the customers contact the trailer company themselves
	The company's ability to provide personalized service	5	5	4	38	48	Safety seats helping customers carry luggage. Providing free shuttle buses	Booking a safety seat, but the company did not provide it.

Source: Author's own drawing

Discussion

As can be seen from Figure 1, the overall service level of Apex is excellent. Most customers are satisfied with the services it provides. Apex won their well-deserved Canstar Blue Award for Most Satisfied Customers five times. Canstar Blue is the leading research and expert rating agency in Australia and New Zealand (Canstar Blue, 2019).

The hypotheses H1a, H2a, H3a, H4a, and H5a are supported.

There is a strong positive correlation between the tangibles and customer satisfaction. Zhang et al. (2013) found that tangibles have a positive impact on customer satisfaction in China's car rental industry, which is consistent with the results of this study. The tangible elements, such as the car condition, are an important factor directly related to passenger safety, so customers' evaluation of the tangible elements is as high as the intangible elements of service quality. When the facilities, equipment, and environment of Apex exceed the customer's expectations, the customer was satisfied, and conversely, dissatisfied. In addition, when the car's condition exceeds the customer's expectations, the customer's satisfaction was high, and vice versa. Spreng et al (1996) mentioned that the leading factor affecting customer satisfaction is the inconsistency between customer expectations and post-consumption results. Negative inconsistency leads to dissatisfaction, while positive inconsistency results in customer satisfaction. It was confirmed in this study.

Reliability has a strong positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Inconsistency between website pricing and actual rental prices and extra fees caused dissatisfaction. Malik et al. (2012) found that there was an obvious correlation between price and customer satisfaction, which is consistent with the results of Herrmann et al (2007) and Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000). All customers were satisfied with the off-site return services because Apex's strong branch network (17 points in New Zealand) is convenient for customers to return the car. Shankar et al (2003) found that the geographical location of an enterprise affects customer satisfaction and convenient transportation improves customer satisfaction.

Responsiveness has a strong positive relationship with customer satisfaction. If the company's employees can provide timely and accurate services to customers, the satisfaction of customers is high. These results emphasised that the delivery process of cars is the most important factor in the car rental process. Conversely, if the customers get slower service, wait for a long time, and there are errors in the car rental process, customers will be dissatisfied.

Assurance has a strong positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Customers are satisfied when their actual perception of service attitude and professionalism of employees is higher than their expectation. Customers are satisfied when employees are friendly and can give professional answers to their queries. However, the customers are dissatisfied when employees are rude and chat with each other while dealing with customers.

Empathy has a strong positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is high when customers can feel the concern of the company and the personalised service provided by the company is higher than their expectations. For example, when safety seats are provided for customers with children, employees actively help customers carry luggage, and free shuttle buses are provided between the airport and physical stores. Conversely, if customers do not feel the concern of the enterprise, customer satisfaction will be low.

Finally, in this study, the correlation coefficient between customer satisfaction and the 10 factors mentioned before was obtained (see Table 1 for details). Eight factors are positively correlated with customer satisfaction. The strongest correlation existed between the company's ability to provide personalised service and customer satisfaction. Mittal and Lassar (1996) found that "personalisation" is the most important determinant of perceived service quality and customer satisfaction among enterprises providing services in interactive contact with customers. Personalised service fully meets the individual needs of users. Customers' needs are met to the greatest extent and the gaps between customer expectations and post-consumer results are minimised. This is explained clearly using the famous Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980). The ability of employees to provide services quickly and accurately and the professionalism of employees, are intangible factors related to customer satisfaction. On the other hand, the tangible elements such as the car appearance and condition, and the facilities and environment of the car rental company are ranked lower. In other words, the main source of customer satisfaction is the prompt service provided by employees. The shorter the time the customer waits for the repair service, the higher the customer satisfaction.

Conclusion

Based on the development trend of the global car rental industry, this study concludes that car rental in New Zealand has a broad prospect but the competition among enterprises is extremely fierce. Service quality is an important determinant of

differentiation and competitive advantage among car rental companies and closely related to customer satisfaction.

Recommendations (harnessing online reviews results toward innovation)

Establish a customer-centric corporate culture

Corporate culture unites employees around the enterprise so that Apex should establish a customer-centric culture that provides quality service to maintain customer loyalty. A good corporate culture is inseparable from the improvement of customer experience as most important.

Build an employee training system

Personalised service is the most closely related factor to customer satisfaction. Giving the customers professional advice based on their preferences and expectations can improve customer satisfaction. Therefore, a course on professional knowledge, service theory, and communication skills should be provided to equip each employee with a professional knowledge reserve.

Set up an employee incentive system

An employee scoring system should be set up, and the performance of the employees evaluated. Employee service quality is linked to customer satisfaction. If the employee is complained about, a corresponding score will be deducted, and if the employee is praised, points will be added. The employee scoring system will ensure accuracy of each data entry, so that the responsibility is clear, the performance is considerable, and the personal service evaluation can be measured. Talent evaluations should be conducted annually to create a competitive atmosphere and outstanding individuals and groups (each physical store as a group) be given generous rewards, such as the opportunity to train and further their studies. In addition, employee innovation is encouraged, innovation channels are established, and innovative employees are rewarded as well.

Build an intelligent service system

Information management system plays an important role in delivering more efficient and quality services that enhance satisfaction. A complete customer file management system, such as a cloud database needs to be established, to enable unified management of customer information. Apex proprietary mobile software system can be designed to provide a variety of self-sufficient services, such as fast car rental, car return service, and query available vehicles. Human assistants can help customers reasonably plan their travel routes and answer questions. New Zealand traffic driving rules, local culture, tourist attractions, and major festivals and events in New Zealand

are updated and can be accessed by customers in real time. The company's care and empathy for customers can be realised through this database. to ensure delivery of more personalised targeted customer services, such as e-mail greetings sent on their birthdays and reward system based on the transactions made.

Set up a customer complaint channel

The establishment of a complaint channel where problems encountered by the customer in the rental process can be solved in time. Through a complaint box and a complaint hotline, the complaint information is promptly reported to the corresponding management department, and timely feedback from management is given to the customer. Phone calls and emails should be handled by an appointed person in charge and be automatically redirected to the person's mobile. This defines clear responsibility and is linked to the employee scoring system.

Build a communication system

Regular monthly meetings of employees and manager need to be carried out. Two employee representatives from each store (on a rotating basis) can participate and give feedback on the problems of each store and solve them in time.

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AUTHORS

Yu Chen earned her Master of Business Informatics from ICL Graduate Business School in New Zealand. Before her career shift, she has a master's degree in clinical medicine from Zunyi Medical College in China. For 13 years as associate chief physician, she published 14 multiple medical researches.

Maria Umali, a seasoned academic, successfully integrates research and practice in her teaching. Her researches inform her teaching and enhance her business and professional practice. Maria, as an entrepreneur, heads their family business in transportation, real estate and education. She is currently a lecturer/research supervisor at ICL Graduate Business School.