

Air Travel: when the flight doesn't go as planned

Whether travelling by airplane for work or leisure, flying can be an exciting time. But from time to time, air travel can be a source of annoyance. When passengers experience a service failure while travelling, they respond in various, and sometimes unpredictable, ways. So how do passengers respond if they experience a service failure during their flight experience?

A research study was conducted by Reece Mowatt, a [Master's](#) student in the [Department of Marketing Management](#), to investigate whether customers react with either dissatisfaction and/or brand avoidance, after experiencing a service failure. In addition, the study investigated whether these behaviours further lead to negative word-of-mouth (nWOM), participation in anti-brand activism movements (such as writing blogs which oppose the airline or boycotting the airline) and/or passengers having the intention to switch to a different airline.

It is important for airline managers to understand these behaviours as the airline industry is extremely competitive with several alternative airlines readily available to passengers. The data were collected using a scenario-based online survey, from which 130 responses were obtained from airline passengers via social media platforms.

This study contributed towards service failure literature in the airline industry by not only identifying how passengers respond when they are dissatisfied, but also by identifying which post service failure actions most strongly correlated with dissatisfaction and brand avoidance. Findings revealed that both dissatisfaction and brand avoidance are statistically significant predictors of nWOM, anti-brand activism and switching intention. It was found that dissatisfaction and brand avoidance had the strongest relationship with switching intention, followed by anti-brand activism and then nWOM.

Since the outcomes of a service failure could be detrimental for airlines, managers should focus their attention on ensuring that passengers aren't left with the desire to avoid the

airline in future. Total quality management (TQM) practices could be adopted to make the service fail-safe. Ergo, managers could set a variety of 'poka-yokes', a Japanese term which means 'fail safe'. For example, ensuring that enough food parcels are on-board the flight. In the event that a service failure does occur, airline managers should encourage and track complaints and thereafter respond timeously, in an effort to minimise consumer dissatisfaction and possible future brand avoidance.

This research was conducted as part of the fulfilment of the [Master's degree](#) in Marketing Management in 2020 with the [Department of Marketing Management](#) by Reece Mowatt under the supervision of [Dr MC van der Merwe](#).