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A Tale 3 Airlines: Customer Service in Summer 2022

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Ryanair, Southwest Airlines, and Spirit Airlines have served their customers as low-cost carriers and at different times, employed different customer service and marketing approaches. Ryanair has gone through a transition from a low customer service expectation model to a customer service orientation in 2014 (Ryanair, 2018; Thompson, 2012). Southwest Airlines has always emphasized customer service throughout its history using the LUV stock ticker symbol, friendly media campaigns, and low fares to develop loyal customers (Webb-Morgan, 2017). Spirit airlines was more similar to Ryanair setting customer expectations for low customer service in exchange for low fares. In 2019 the world was confronted with the Corona Virus which limited air traffic all over the world. As a result, many airlines, including Southwest, could not turn a profit (Hoopfer, 2020). Actions taken by airlines to survive reduced demand for air travel took steps to remain in business. In 2022, international travel began to resume at what the airlines hoped were pre-pandemic levels. Airlines and airports alike struggled to meet the increased passenger demand. As a result, travel over the summer months, loosely defined as May through September 2022, was difficult for many passengers.

Research Question

The focus of this study was formulated from two previous research efforts: 1) *A tale of two airlines: A comparative case study of high-road versus low-road strategies in customer service and reputation management* (2019) and *Customer service 2.0: The effect of Ryanair's policy change* (2021) both written by the authors of this research. Recommendations from the latter project were:

The Coronavirus has had a devastating impact on airlines. Future research should be conducted to determine how effectively air carriers adjusted to the disruption to the airline industry. Specifically, quality customer service has been a core concept for Southwest Airlines ever since its inception. Ryanair has recently adopted a customer service model. A future study along similar lines to this research should be conducted to determine how well these two airlines adjust to new requirements and difficulties presented by the pandemic. Possible data periods to compare are 2016-17 with 2021-22. (Griffith & Roberts, 2021)

Additionally, a recommendation from a University Aviation Association conference attendee to include Spirit Airlines as a low-cost U.S. carrier to contrast to Southwest (specifically) and Ryanair guided the formulation of this research. The key questions this study attempted to answer were: (1) did Ryanair and Southwest experience decreased customer service scores during the first summer after the pandemic then before the pandemic, and (2) was there any difference in customer perception between the three airlines regarding customer service.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in customer perceptions before and directly after the pandemic. Additionally, we wanted to

expand the comparison of low-cost/low service expectation vs a low-cost high service expectation airline by including Spirit Airlines (low-cost/low service expectation) in the comparison that also includes Ryanair and Southwest. This work builds off of Expectation Confirmation Theory which in this case, might suggest that Southwest will be viewed more harshly than Ryanair or Spirit because Southwest customers expected higher level of customer service than Ryanair or Spirit (Oliver, 1980; Spreng et al. 1996).

Literature Review

The Covid Virus Pandemic was an immediate and negative factor on air travel. Airline flights were reduced by 43% between 2019 and 2020. Reduced flights and increased safety requirements such as masking and overall fear of travel informed corporate and personal decisions regarding travel. Further clouding the issue was the national debate on if masking measures made any positive difference in disease transmission (Bielecki et al., 2020). In April of 2020, nearly 2/3rds of the world's airline fleet were not flying (Lange, 2020, as cited in Garrow & Lurkin) putting many airlines into financial jeopardy. Most global mask restrictions were lifted in March and April (US) of 2022 resulting in a sudden increase in air travel (Hirzic et al., 2022).

Historical Trends

Customer service is heralded as one of the most important factors that influence customer satisfaction and loyalty in the airline industry. However, different airlines vary widely in their approaches to customer service, especially among low-cost carriers (LCCs) that compete mainly on price and efficiency.

Ryanair Customer Service

Ryanair operates as the largest low-cost carrier in Europe and as one of the most profitable airlines in the world. It began as a low-cost low service airline. They operate according to a similar ultra-low-cost model as Spirit Airlines, offering very low fares and charging extra fees for optional services such as baggage, seat selection, priority boarding, and inflight amenities. Likewise, they also operate with a high-density seating configuration, minimal legroom, and no inflight entertainment or Wi-Fi. Ryanair has been notorious for its poor customer service, frequent delays and cancellations, and aggressive marketing and advertising tactics. Historically they have faced numerous complaints, lawsuits, and regulatory actions for their unfair and deceptive practices (Guardian News and Media., 2019; Martin, 2019). Operationally, CEO Michael O'Leary patterned the company after Southwest with regard to efficiency and low-costs. However, O'Leary's approach differed, at least initially, in the area of customer service. O'Leary believed that customers should be willing to accept lower levels of customer service for low fares and efficient operations (Michaels, 2000). However, in 2014, after a financial downturn, Ryanair began to emphasize customer service leading to higher ratings

from passengers when comparing 2016-17 data to 2014-14 (Griffith & Roberts, 2021).

Southwest Airlines Customer Service

Southwest Airlines is the largest LCC in the United States and one of the most successful airlines in the world with a reputation for providing high levels of customer service, which has historically been reflected in its high customer satisfaction ratings. The airline has historically been lauded for (and intentionally marketed) its friendly staff, hassle-free boarding process, and willingness to work with customers to resolve issues. Southwest Airlines also offers a range of customer-friendly policies, such as free checked bags and no change fees, which can make air travel more convenient and affordable for passengers. Its mission, as advertised on its website, is “dedication to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit” (Southwest Airlines, n.d.). Accordingly, Southwest has historically ranked high in customer satisfaction surveys. They received the J.D. Power award for highest customer satisfaction among low-cost carriers in North America for three consecutive years (Boon, 2020; J. D. Power, 2020).

Although no longer the CEO, the main ideas of Herb Kelleher focused on low-costs, efficiency, and customer service. Kelleher’s leadership allowed Southwest to grow from a small regional airline in Texas to an international airline which competed with the larger U.S. airlines such as Delta and American. His quote “Hire for attitude and train for skills” and “A company is stronger if it is bound by love rather than by fear” typified Southwest’s approach to customer service (Brown, 2016, p. 1).

Spirit Airlines is considered a low-cost/low customer service airline. In their drive to be a low-cost airline, Spirit charges low fares, but they also charge for everything else including a glass of water or overhead bin space. These ancillary fees beyond the basic ticket account for 40% of their revenues (Elian & Cook, 2013). They call this approach “Bare Fare” and claim that it gives customers more choice and control over their travel expenses (Aviation Marketing Monthly, 2014).

Spirit Airlines also operates with a high-density seating configuration, minimal legroom, and no inflight entertainment or Wi-Fi. Historically, they have been criticized for poor customer service, frequent delays and cancellations, and lack of transparency in its pricing and policies, and have consistently ranked low in customer satisfaction surveys, receiving the lowest score among low-cost carriers in North America for six consecutive years (Boon, 2020; Power, 2020).

Traditionally, Southwest Airlines, Spirit Airlines, and Ryanair have operated according to fundamentally different customer service strategies that reflect their different business models and operational priorities. In general, Southwest Airlines has focused on employee engagement and customer loyalty by offering high-quality service with no hidden fees. In contrast, Spirit Airlines and

Ryanair have focused on cost reduction and price competition by offering a bare-bones service with many optional fees. While these strategies may appeal to different segments of customers, they also have different implications for customer satisfaction and retention. Based on the available data and evidence, Southwest Airlines historically seems to have implemented a more effective customer service strategy than Spirit Airlines and Ryanair. However, given market fluctuations, unexpected crises such as the COVID pandemic, and the general volatility of the industry, these established precedents have been challenged, and the fickle element of customer satisfaction and sentiment has altered.

Previous Research

A Tale of Two Airlines

In 2019 Roberts and Griffith compared customer satisfaction ratings between Ryanair (prior to customer service initiative implementation) and Southwest. The idea that increased expectations of Southwest. Survey results from 164 Ryanair and 149 Southwest customers were examined to measure an overall rating, seat comfort, cabin/staff service, food, and value. In all cases the median rank of Southwest customers was significantly higher than Ryanair ($p < .001$). Additionally, significantly more Southwest customers (62.4%) would recommend Southwest Airlines than Ryanair customers (42.7%) regarding Ryanair ($p < .001$).

The 2019 study also examined open area comments from customers from 2012-13 survey results. Comments were sometimes broken down to multiple areas from many customers. This resulted in many instances of multiple comments from a single customer. Ryanair ($n=367$) and Southwest ($n=328$) customer comments were classified and examined to identify response trends. As one might expect, a higher percentage of Southwest customers cited good customer service (26%) than Ryanair (13%). It is interesting to note that 53% of Ryanair customers cited poor customer service compared to 29% for Southwest. Most comments from Ryanair customers cited ancillary fees such as printing a board pass (forgotten by the passenger), high food and drink prices and discourteous customer service (Roberts & Griffith, 2019).

The Effect of Ryanair's Policy Change

A follow-on 2021 study examined survey results from the 2016-17 timeframe to determine if Ryanair's customer service initiatives had improved their ratings relative to Southwest. Additionally, researchers wanted to determine any change in customer service ratings between the two time periods. Table 1 shows overall airline rankings between Ryanair and Southwest during the 2012-2013 and 2016-17 time frames.

Table 1
Overall Airline Rankings

<i>2012-2013 Ratings</i>				
	Median Rank 1-10	Mean Rank	Value	p-value
Ryanair (n=164)	8	6.15		
Southwest (n=149)	9	7.19	14985	.0228*
<i>2016-17 Ratings</i>				
	Median Rank 1-10	Mean Rank	Value	p-value
Ryanair (n=177)	6	5.4		
Southwest (n=104)	3	5.1	25235	.9418

Note. Adapted from Customer Service 2.0: The Effect of Ryanair's policy change. (Griffith & Roberts, 2021). Statistically significant results followed by an asterisk*. Data taken from Skytrax survey on Ryanair, (2020a; 2017b) and Southwest (2020b; 2017c) survey for inclusive dates of Jan 2012-Dec 2013 and Aug 2016-Aug 2017. Evaluated with Mann-Whitney U $\alpha=.05$ using Pearson StatCrunch software (2020).

Results indicated that Ryanair had indeed improved in perceived customer service based on the two surveys conducted. Ryanair also had a slightly higher mean rank than Southwest, but not to a statistically significant degree ($\alpha=.05$). Additionally, Ryanair rated higher in overall value than Southwest, but that difference was also not statistically significant. Southwest scored significantly higher than Ryanair in seat comfort ($p=.042$) and food ($p=.019$). A non-statistically significantly higher Southwest rating was noted for cabin/staff service. Ryanair customers (57.6%) stated they would recommend Ryanair compared to only 43.3% of Southwest customers who would recommend Southwest. This difference was statistically significant ($p=.02$) supporting the idea that Ryanair's customer service initiatives were perceived as effective by survey takers. The study also noted that three of six survey areas increased for Ryanair while five survey areas decreased for Southwest (Griffith & Roberts, 2021).

Open area comments showed a similar change in open area comments. Ryanair survey respondents cited good customer service (29%), slightly higher than Southwest (26%). Conclusions were that passengers were perceiving positive changes in the customer service provided by Ryanair (Griffith & Roberts, 2021).

Recent Challenges

The Unraveling of Southwest's Customer Service

Once regarded as a paragon of exceptional customer service in the airline industry, Southwest has experienced a steady decline in customer satisfaction in recent years. For decades, Southwest was synonymous with a focus on customer service and a positive flying experience for passengers. In recent years, however, Southwest's once-stellar customer service ratings have been in steady decline.

Operational Issues

Southwest has faced numerous operational challenges in recent years, including flight delays, cancellations, and baggage handling problems possibly due to the point-to-point model of travel used by Southwest Airlines (Zahn, 2022). These issues have contributed to increased customer dissatisfaction and have tarnished the airline's reputation for reliability and efficiency.

Labor Relations

Southwest has also faced significant labor disputes, including a long-standing conflict with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) (Wichter, 2019). These disputes have led to increased employee dissatisfaction and, consequently, a decline in the quality of customer service provided.

Rapid Expansion

Southwest's rapid expansion into international markets and the acquisition of AirTran Airways in 2011 have added complexity to the airline's operations and diluted the unique corporate culture that previously set it apart from competitors (Schlangenstein, 2017).

Increased Competition

The emergence of ultra-low-cost carriers such as Spirit Airlines and Frontier Airlines has intensified competition in the low-cost segment, forcing Southwest to cut costs to remain competitive. This has led to cost-saving measures that have negatively impacted customer service (Mitchell, 2023; Schaal, 2018).

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has strained the entire airline industry, including Southwest. The increased safety measures, financial pressures, and reduced staffing have further strained the airline's ability to maintain its high customer service standards (Murphy, 2021).

The decline in customer service ratings could have significant long-term consequences for Southwest. As customers grow increasingly dissatisfied, the airline may lose market share to competitors with better customer service (Mitchell, 2023; Murphy, 2021). Additionally, Southwest's declining reputation could deter potential investors, negatively impacting the company's stock price and financial performance.

Southwest Airlines' decline in customer service ratings is a concerning trend for the once-renowned carrier. To regain its position as a leader in customer satisfaction, the airline must address the underlying factors contributing to the decline, including operational issues, labor relations, and the challenges posed by rapid expansion and increased competition. By addressing these issues and refocusing on its original customer-centric mission, Southwest has the potential to regain its former status as a beloved airline.

Spirit Airlines' Struggle for Customer Satisfaction

In recent years, Spirit Airlines has faced notable challenges in maintaining customer satisfaction, with persistent issues contributing to the airline's low customer service ratings. Spirit Airlines was founded in 1983 as a charter airline before transitioning to scheduled services in 1993 (Schupak, 2023). The airline evolved into an ultra-low-cost carrier (ULCC) in the early 2000s, with an aggressive focus on cost-cutting measures to offer the lowest possible fares to passengers (Schupak, 2023). While this strategy has allowed Spirit to capture a significant market share, it has also resulted in a reputation for poor customer service.

According to the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) Travel Report 2023, Spirit Airlines consistently ranks at the bottom among major U.S. airlines for customer satisfaction (ACSI, 2023). Similarly, the J.D. Power 2022 North America Airline Satisfaction Study placed Spirit 8th lowest out of 11 among traditional carriers, with a significant gap in satisfaction scores compared to the next-lowest airline (Rains, 2022).

No-Frills Business Model

At the core of Spirit's customer service issues is its no-frills business model, which prioritizes low fares above all else. The airline's unbundled fare structure, which requires passengers to pay extra for virtually every service and amenity, has led to widespread customer dissatisfaction and a perception of nickel-and-diming (Duffy, 2022).

Operational Challenges

Spirit has faced significant operational challenges in recent years, including frequent flight delays and cancellations. The airline's aggressive cost-cutting measures have, in some cases, resulted in insufficient staffing and inadequate resources for managing operational disruptions (Duffy, 2022; Picoult, 2021).

Inflexible Policies

Spirit's strict adherence to its no-frills business model has also resulted in inflexible policies, such as strict baggage allowances and nonrefundable tickets. These policies can exacerbate customer frustration when issues arise, further tarnishing the airline's reputation (Duffy, 2022).

Customer Service Training

A lack of investment in customer service training has also contributed to Spirit's struggles. While the airline has made some efforts to improve its customer service to include turning to Disney and launching a customer service training program in 2017 (Josephs, 2021), further investment is needed to ensure consistent, high-quality service across all customer touchpoints.

The ongoing customer service issues pose a significant challenge to Spirit's long-term success. As competition intensifies in the ULCC market, with the entry of new players such as Avelo Airlines and Breeze Airways, Spirit's reputation for

poor customer service may lead passengers to choose competitors with better customer satisfaction ratings (Budjar, 2023). Additionally, the increasing focus on customer satisfaction within the airline industry may prompt regulatory action, such as the introduction of minimum service standards or penalties for poor performance, which could adversely affect Spirit's bottom line.

Ryanair's Customer Service Conundrum

In recent years, Ryanair has faced a myriad of customer service challenges as the airline has struggled to reverse their negative reputation and provide greater customer satisfaction. Founded in 1984, Ryanair initially operated as a traditional full-service airline before transitioning to a low-cost carrier model in the 1990s (Barrett, 2004). Since then, the airline has pursued a relentless cost-cutting strategy, offering rock-bottom fares and minimal onboard amenities to passengers. While this approach has helped Ryanair become one of the largest airlines in Europe, it has also been accompanied by a reputation for poor customer service (Gorgan, 2019).

According to the 2022 AirHelp Score, which ranks airlines based on their quality of service, on-time performance, and claim processing, Ryanair consistently ranks near the bottom among European carriers (AirHelp, 2022). Furthermore, the airline has frequently been criticized in the media and by passengers for its subpar customer service and controversial business practices (Gorgan, 2019).

Low-Cost Business Model

At the heart of Ryanair's customer service problems is its low-cost business model, which prioritizes low fares at the expense of passenger comfort and service. The airline's unbundled fare structure, which charges passengers for various services and amenities, has contributed to its negative reputation (Wells, 2022).

Operational Challenges

Ryanair has faced numerous operational challenges, including flight delays and cancellations, often attributed to the airline's aggressive scheduling and cost-cutting measures. These disruptions have led to increased passenger frustration and dissatisfaction (Gorgan, 2019)

Inflexible Policies

Ryanair's strict adherence to its low-cost model also resulted in inflexible policies, such as nonrefundable tickets, stringent baggage allowances, and a heavy reliance on ancillary fees. These policies can compound customer dissatisfaction when issues arise (Wells, 2021).

"Always Getting Better" Program - Customer Service Training

A lack of investment in customer service training further contributed to Ryanair's customer service challenges. In 2014, Ryanair launched its "Always Getting Better" (AGB) program, a strategic initiative aimed at improving customer service and enhancing the overall passenger experience. The AGB program was developed in response to widespread criticism of Ryanair's customer service and

the realization that the airline's growth could be hindered by its poor reputation (Griffith & Roberts, 2021). The initiative included a series of customer-focused changes.

Since the launch of the AGB program, Ryanair has seen a marked improvement in its reputation and customer satisfaction ratings. The AGB program has also contributed to Ryanair's financial success. Since the initiative's launch, the airline has consistently reported strong financial results, including record profits and passenger growth (Whyte, 2020). This indicates that Ryanair's focus on customer service has not only enhanced its reputation but also contributed to its bottom line.

Despite the improvements resulting from the AGB program, Ryanair still faces challenges in maintaining and enhancing its customer service levels. The airline must continue to invest in customer service training and employee development to ensure that its newfound focus on customer satisfaction is maintained. Moreover, as competition within the European low-cost market intensifies, Ryanair will need to continue refining and expanding its customer service initiatives to remain competitive and attract passengers who prioritize service quality alongside low fares.

The Changing Landscape of Airline Customer Service

The airline industry has experienced significant shifts in recent years, largely due to the increasing role of technology, changing consumer expectations, and global events like the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to these changes, airlines have experienced challenges in areas of customer service delivery accompanied by shifts in customer satisfaction.

In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the global aviation industry, as the sharp reduction in passenger demand, coupled with strict government regulations, forced airlines to rapidly adapt their operations (GAO, 2021). In addition, the pandemic placed immense pressure on airlines' customer service departments, as they have been forced to manage an unprecedented volume of cancellations, rebookings, and refunds.

Inconsistent Travel Restrictions and Quarantine Policies

A lack of global coordination in the implementation of travel restrictions and quarantine measures has led to confusion and difficulties for airlines and passengers alike (Bielecki et al., 2021). Airlines have struggled to adapt to the constantly changing regulations and to communicate these changes effectively to their customers (IATA, 2020). The inconsistent application of travel restrictions has hampered the recovery of the aviation industry and undermined passenger confidence.

Overwhelmed Customer Service Departments

Airlines were inundated with customer inquiries at the onset of the pandemic, as lockdowns and travel restrictions led to widespread flight cancellations and rescheduling (Schaper, 2020). Customer service departments

struggled to handle the sheer volume of inquiries, resulting in long wait times and delayed responses. The lack of timely and efficient communication has led to increased customer frustration and dissatisfaction.

Inconsistent Refund and Rebooking Policies

The pandemic has exposed inconsistencies in airlines' refund and rebooking policies, as some carriers were more lenient and accommodating than others (Puckett, 2020). In some cases, airlines were criticized for offering vouchers or credits instead of cash refunds, or for imposing strict conditions on rebooking options (Schaper, 2020). These inconsistencies have led to customer confusion and dissatisfaction, particularly when compared to more flexible policies offered by other airlines.

Reduced in-flight Services and Amenities

In an effort to minimize contact between passengers and staff, airlines have reduced or eliminated various in-flight services and amenities, such as meal services, entertainment options, and blanket distribution (IATA, 2020). While these measures were necessary to prioritize safety, they have inevitably led to a decline in the overall passenger experience and customer satisfaction.

Financial Challenges and Workforce Reduction

The sharp decline in passenger demand caused significant financial challenges for airlines, leading to massive layoffs and furloughs. While some airlines received government aid, many have been forced to make difficult decisions to reduce operating costs, including retiring older aircraft, reducing routes, and suspending services (Wong, 2022). The loss of experienced staff and reduced capacity may have long-term implications for the industry's ability to recover and meet future demand.

Furthermore, the financial challenges faced by airlines led to workforce reductions and limited resources for staff training and development (Wong, 2022). This put additional strain on the remaining customer service staff, who may be inadequately trained to handle complex inquiries or lack the necessary resources to provide satisfactory solutions. As a result, customer service quality suffered, leading to further declines in customer satisfaction.

The challenges faced by airlines' customer service departments during the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to a decline in customer satisfaction. To address these challenges, airlines must prioritize improving their customer service operations, streamlining policies, and investing in staff training and development to enhance the overall passenger experience and regain customer trust.

Hypotheses

H₁. Ryanair, Southwest and Spirit customer survey responses will show a significant difference when comparing 2022 survey data.

H₂. Ryanair and Southwest customer survey responses will show a significant decline in perceived customer service when comparing results from 2012-13, 2016,17 and 2022.

Design

This effort is the third study building on previous work published in 2019 (Robert & Griffith) and 2021 (Griffith & Roberts) replicating the methodology of those studies as much as possible. The Skytrax survey (2022a) has collected the same data over time allowing for comparison between the groups: (1) 2012-13, (2) 2016-17, and (3) 2022) of data. Open area comments were also examined to identify trends (Gay et al. 2009).

Limitations

1. Any survey data has the inherent limitations of self-selection. In this case, researchers could only collect the data willingly provided by airline passengers. We do not know the perceptions of customers who did not participate in the research. Accordingly, results from this research can be seen as a trend but cannot be generalized to perceptions of all airline passengers. This work attempts to characterize perceptions of those who responded to the surveys. Broader generalizations must be taken with caution.
2. One of the airlines in the comparison is not U.S. based. The perceptions of Ryanair passengers may reflect European mores and may not lend to accurate comparisons with U.S. airlines. To correct for this limitation, Spirit airlines was added to the 2022 comparison with Southwest (and Ryanair) in an attempt to mitigate this limitation.

Method

This study replicates two previous studies using a descriptive research model. The Skytrax survey instrument has stayed constant since at least 2012 when the first research results referenced in this study were collected assuring a consistent method of data collection (Gay et al., 2009). New data from the summer months of 2022 was collected from Skytrax who state they are: “Dedicated to improving quality of the customer experience for airlines and airports across the world” (Skytrax, 2017a, para. 1).

Participants

Survey respondents are customers of either Ryanair, Southwest, or Spirit Airlines. Ryanair is a European airline. Southwest and Spirit Airlines operate out of the United States. Survey respondents do not receive any rewards for participating in the survey and do so at their own free will. In particular, new survey data collected in this study was gathered during the first summer (May-September 2022) after Covid mask mandates were lifted (Hirzic et al., 2022).

Survey Instrument

The Skytrax survey used included seven questions: (1) overall rating, (2) seat, (3) cabin/customer service, (4) food, and (5) value. The overall rating score was based on a scale ranging from one (not very good) to 10 (excellent). Questions two through five used a five-star rating system (more stars meaning better customer service). The sixth question asked if customers would recommend the airline which called for yes or no responses. Finally, an open comment area was available to survey respondents (Skytrax, 2022a).

Data Examined

Data were pulled from Skytrax for Ryanair (Skytrax, 2022b), Southwest (Skytrax, 2022c) and Spirit Airlines (Skytrax, 2022d). Responses submitted from 1 May 2022 through 30 September 2022 comprised the data collected for analysis. The time period was purposely chosen to cover the summer travel season which begins in late May and ends in September. Additionally, data collected from previous research on Ryanair and Southwest were used for comparison as appropriate for the research questions examined.

Treatment of the Data

Replicating the 2021 study methodology, data were examined by comparing Ryanair and Southwest data for the collection period of this study as well as two previous studies by the researchers to determine if there was a change over time in customer perceptions. In the instances where three time periods were compared, (1) 2012-13, (2) 2016-17, and (3) 2022) a Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to analyze possible difference in ranks of the three independent groups of ordinal data ($\alpha = .05$). Upon a significant finding, a post-hoc Dunn's test was used to determine to specifically identify which data groups were significantly different. To avoid possible Type 1 errors with the Dunn post-hoc test, the alpha level was reduced using a Bonferroni correction resulting in a testing level of $\alpha = .017$. (Gay et al., 2009). The same statistical procedures were applied when comparing the three airlines based on 2022 data.

The 8th survey question required yes or no answers on if the customer would recommend the airline. In this case, the nominal data was evaluated using Chi Square tests of independence to determine if the variables were associated. A Cramer's V test for Association was also applied to the data to determine the strength of association and in this study showed similar results to the Chi Square findings. Pairwise Chi Square tests were performed when the initial Chi Square test between all three groups identified significant findings. (Gay et al., 2009).

Open area comments on the 2022 surveys were reviewed to identify significant trends. This review allowed researchers to discover the most common perceptions regarding customer service (Gay et al., 2009).

Statistical Results

Statistical testing examined (1) overall rankings, (2) seat comfort, cabin/staff service, food and value, and (3) if customers would recommend flying on the airline. Data for Ryanair and Southwest are shown in three data groups (2012-13, 2016-17 and 2022). Data for Ryanair, Southwest and Spirit Airlines encompassed 2022 survey data. Table 2 shows customers' overall airline rankings.

Table 2

Overall Airline Rankings (1 =Lowest, 10=Highest)

2012-2013 Ratings				
	Median Rank 1-10	Mean Rank	Value	p-value
Ryanair (n=164)	8	6.2		
Southwest (n=149)	9	7.2	14985	0.0228*
2016-17 Ratings				
	Median Rank 1-10	Mean Rank	Value	p-value
Ryanair (n=177)	6	5.4		
Southwest (n=104)	3	5.1	25235	0.9418
2022 Airline Ratings				
	Median Rank 1-10	Mean Rank	Value	p-value
Ryanair (71)	1	249.8		
Southwest (102)	1	242.5		
Spirit Airlines (263)	1	200.8	21.37	<0.001*

Note. 2012-13 and 2016-17 data and results adapted from A Tale of Two Airlines (Roberts & Griffith, 2019) and Customer Service 2.0 (Griffith & Roberts, 2021). Statistically significant results followed by an asterisk*. Data taken from Skytrax survey on Ryanair, (2020a; 2017b) and Southwest (2020b; 2017c) survey for inclusive dates of Jan 2012-Dec 2013 and Aug 2016-Aug 2017. Evaluated with Mann-Whitney U $\alpha=.05$ using Pearson StatCrunch software (2020). 2022 Data taken from Skytrax survey on Ryanair (2022b), Southwest (2022c) and Spirit Airlines (2022d) survey for inclusive dates of 1 May 2022 to 30 Sept 2022. Results were evaluated using Kruskal Wallis H $\alpha=.05$.

The most notable trend over the past 10 years can be identified by viewing the change between Ryanair and Southwest. In the 2012-2013 data, Southwest customers perceived the overall value of the airline significantly higher than Ryanair customers. In the 2016-17 survey, customer ratings were similar between the two airlines yielding a non-statistically significant difference. The trend continued between Ryanair and Southwest in the 2022 data.

The 2022 data showed a significant difference when comparing the dependent variable between the three different airlines using a Kruskal-Wallis H test, $H(2) = 21.37$, $p < 0.001$, with a mean rank score of 242.5 for Southwest, 200.8

for Spirit, 249.8 for Ryanair. The Post-Hoc Dunn's test using a Bonferroni corrected alpha of 0.017 indicated that the mean rank of Spirit airlines was significantly lower when compared to Ryanair ($p < 0.001$) and Southwest ($p < 0.001$). Ryanair and Southwest did not show a significant difference in ratings from their customers. Table 3 shows ratings on seat comfort, cabin/staff service, food and value.

Table 3*Seat Comfort, Cabin/Staff Service, Food and Value (1-5 stars)*

<i>2012-13 Ratings</i>					
	Airline	Median Rank	Mean Rank	Value	p-value
Seat Comfort	Ryanair (n=160)	3	2.919		
	Southwest (n=143)	4	3.559	21072	<0.0001*
Cabin/Staff Service	Ryanair (n=160)	3	2.9		
	Southwest (n=145)	4	3.834	20660	<0.0001*
Food	Ryanair (n=108)	3	2.556		
	Southwest (n=124)	4	3.395	10228.5	<0.0001*
Value	Ryanair (n=160)	3	3.175		
	Southwest (n=146)	4.5	3.808	21924	0.0004*
<i>2016-17 Ratings</i>					
	Airline	Median Rank	Mean Rank	Value	p-value
Seat Comfort	Ryanair (n=176)	3	2.551		
	Southwest (n=102)	3	2.873	23272.5	0.0418*
Cabin/Staff Service	Ryanair (n=176)	3	3.159		
	Southwest (n=102)	4	3.471	23427	0.0733
Food	Ryanair (n=94)	2.5	2.468		
	Southwest (n=85)	3	2.976	7667	0.0189*
Value	Ryanair (n=177)	4	3.320		
	Southwest (n=104)	3	3.038	26002	0.2024
<i>2022 Ratings</i>					
	Airline	Median Rank	Mean Rank	Value	p-value
Seat Comfort	Ryanair (n=70)	1	213.4		
	Southwest (n=95)	2	245.1		
	Spirit (n=232)	1	175.9	34.81	<0.001*
Cabin/Staff Service	Ryanair (n=69)	2	217.4		
	Southwest (n=94)	2.5	232.2		
	Spirit (n=228)	1	174.6	24.24	<0.001*

Food	Ryanair (n=37)	1	124.9		
	Southwest (n=80)	1	142.2		
	Spirit (n=122)	1	104	23.19	<0.001*
Value	Ryanair (n=71)	1	252.4		
	Southwest (n=102)	1	245.1		
	Spirit (n=263)	1	199.1	27.09	<0.001*

Note. 2012-13 and 2016-17 data and results adapted from A Tale of Two Airlines (Roberts & Griffith, 2019) and Customer Service 2.0 (Griffith & Roberts, 2021). Statistically significant results followed by an asterisk*. Data taken from Skytrax survey on Ryanair, (2020a; 2017b) and Southwest (2020b; 2017c) survey for inclusive dates of Jan 2012-Dec 2013 and Aug 2016-Aug 2017. Evaluated with Mann-Whitney U $\alpha=.05$ using Pearson StatCrunch software (2020). 2022 Data taken from Skytrax survey on Ryanair (2022b), Southwest (2022c) and Spirit Airlines (2022d) survey for inclusive dates of 1 May 2022 to 30 Sept 2022. Results were evaluated using Kruskal Wallis H $\alpha=.05$.

In the 2012-13 survey results, Southwest was rated significantly higher ($p<0.001$) for seat comfort, cabin/staff service, food, and value than Ryanair ratings from their customers. The survey data from 2015-16 continued this trend with Southwest earning significantly higher values in the areas of seat comfort ($p<0.042$ and food ($p=0.019$) than Ryanair except for the areas of cabin/staff service and value where differences were not statistically significant.

The 2022 survey data included Spirit Airlines along with Ryanair and Southwest. Significant differences were noted between the three airlines with regard to customer service in all four areas examined in Table 3. Post-Hoc Dunn's tests using a Bonferroni corrected alpha of 0.017 were used to examine which groups were different from each other.

Ryanair received significantly higher ratings than Spirit Airlines for seats ($p=0.005$), cabin/staff service, ($p<0.003$) and value ($p<0.001$). Southwest received significantly higher ratings than Spirit Airlines in all four areas: seats ($p<0.001$), food, ($p<0.001$), cabin/staff service ($p<0.001$), and value ($p<0.001$). No statistically significant differences were noted between Ryanair and Southwest in any of the four categories addressed in Table 3. Results for the question on if customers would recommend the airline are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Results for "Would you recommend this airline?"

<i>2012-2013 Ratings</i>					
	Yes	No	Total	Chi Sq	<i>p</i> Value
Ryanair	70 (42.7%)	94 (57.3%)	164 (100%)		
Southwest	93 (62.4%)	56 (37.6%)	149 (100%)		
Totals	163 (52.1%)	150 (47.9%)	313 (100%)	12.181	0.0005*

<i>2016-2017 Ratings</i>					
	Yes	No	Total	Chi Sq	<i>p</i> Value
Ryanair	102 (57.6%)	75 (43.4%)	177 (100%)		
Southwest	45 (43.3%)	59 (56.7%)	104 (100%)		
Totals	147 (52.3%)	134 (47.7%)	281 (100%)	5.413	0.02*

<i>2022 Ratings</i>					
	Yes	No	Total	Chi Sq	<i>p</i> Value
Ryanair	15 (21.1%)	56 (78.9%)	71 (100%)		
Southwest	16 (15.7%)	86 (84.3%)	102 (100%)		
Spirit	21 (8%)	242 (92%)	263 (100%)		
Totals	52 (11.9%)	384 (88.1%)	436 (100%)	10.99	<0.004*

Note. 2012-13 and 2016-17 data and results adapted from A Tale of Two Airlines (Roberts & Griffith, 2019) and Customer Service 2.0 (Griffith & Roberts, 2021). Data taken from Skytrax survey on Ryanair, (2020a; 2017b) and Southwest (2020b; 2017c) survey for inclusive dates of Jan 2012-Dec 2013 and Aug 2016-Aug 2017. Analyzed with Chi Square contingency table, $\alpha=.05$ at 1 degree of freedom using Pearson StatCrunch software (2020). 2022 Data taken from Skytrax survey on Ryanair (2022b), Southwest (2022c) and Spirit Airlines (2022d) survey for inclusive dates of 1 May 2022 to 30 Sept 2022. Results were evaluated using Chi Square $\alpha=.05$ at 2 degrees of freedom.

As seen in Table 4, Ryanair was rated significantly lower than Southwest in the 2012-13 survey ($p<0.001$) on if its customers would recommend the airline. However, Ryanair reversed that trend rating significantly higher than Southwest Airlines in the 2016-17 survey ($p=0.02$). The 2022 survey results showed a statistically significant difference overall between the three airlines ($p=0.004$). Post hoc stepwise Chi Square testing indicated that Spirit Airlines scored significantly lower on if its customers would recommend the airline than Ryanair ($p=0.002$) or Southwest ($p=0.003$). There was not a statistical association between airlines and ratings between Ryanair and Southwest.

These data shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4 supported the hypothesis that Ryanair, Southwest and Spirit customer survey responses would show a significant difference when comparing 2022 survey data.

Ryanair and Southwest Historical Comparisons

An important aspect of this study was to determine if the ratings for Ryanair and Southwest decreased over time. The impact of the pandemic resulted in many difficulties all airlines. In order to evaluate changes over time, we compared results from all three survey periods to determine if there was a change in how each airline's customers perceived their customer service. Data were evaluated using a Kruskal-Wallis H test ($\alpha=.05$) to determine differences in the dependent variables of the three groups of data. The Dunn's test using a Bonferroni corrected alpha of

0.017 was used as a post hoc test when needed. On the question regarding if customers would recommend the airline again, Chi Square tests were used to assess if responses and survey period were associated. Stepwise Chi Square tests were used as a post-hoc test to determine associations between paired groups in the event of significant findings.

Ryanair Historical Comparisons

Ryanair customers' overall rating which used a scale from 1 to 10 (10 being highest) changed significantly over the past 10 years ($H(2) = 32.51, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 214.23 for 2012-13, 224.54 for 2016-17, and 135.21 for 2022. Significant differences were found using a post-hoc Dunn's test between the 2012-13 data versus (vs) 2022 survey results ($p < 0.001$) as well as the 2016-17 vs 2022 results ($p = 0.001$). The difference in ratings between 2012-2013 vs 2016-17 were not statistically significant.

Ryanair's overall ratings for seats (1-5 scale – five being highest) also changed significantly over time ($\chi^2(2) = 36.66, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 234.34 for 2012-13, 202.52 for 2016-17, and 135.47 for 2022. Dunn's H post hoc testing yielded significant differences between all three time periods: between 2012-13 and 2016-17 ($p < 0.01$) as well as 2016-17 versus (vs) 2022 ($p < 0.001$) and 2012-13 vs 2022 ($p < 0.001$). The overall trend is a steady decline during the 10 year time period.

Cabin/staff results reported on a similar 1-5 scale also yielded a significant difference between the three data collection periods: ($H(2) = 14.21, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 201.65 for 2012-13, 221.09 for 2016-17, and 159.99 for 2022. Although the rank score increased between the 2012-13 and 2016-17 time periods, that difference was not statistically significant. Dunn's post-hoc testing revealed differences (declining ratings) between 2012-13 vs 2022 ($p = 0.011$) and 2016-17 vs 2022 survey data ($p < 0.001$).

Customer ratings (on a 1 to 5 scale) of Ryanair's food showed similar results (The Kruskal-Wallis H test indicated that there is a significant difference in the dependent variable between the different groups, ($H(2) = 11.27, p = 0.004$), with a mean rank score of 128.11 for 2012-13, 123.78 for 2016-17, and 86.73 for 2022. Although survey data on this question did not differ significantly between the 2012-13 vs 2016-17 time periods, significant findings (declining ratings) were found using Dunn's post-hoc test when comparing 2012-13 results to 2022 ($p = 0.001$) and 2012-13 vs 2022 ($p = 0.004$).

Ryanair survey respondents showed a similar trend when assessing value (1-5 scale). A significant difference was found when comparing the three data periods ($H(2) = 32.51, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 214.23 for 2012-13, 224.54 for 2016-17, and 135.21 for 2022. The slight increase between the surveys conducted in 2012-13 and 2016-17 was not statistically significant. However,

Dunn's post-hoc testing again noted differences (declining ratings) between 2012-13 vs 2022 ($p < 0.001$) and 2016-17 vs 2022 data ($p < 0.001$).

The percentage of Ryanair customers who would recommend the airline increased significantly between the 2012-13 (42.7%) and 2016-17 (57.6%) surveys ($\chi^2(2, 412) = 28.04, p < 0.001$). However, the percentage decreased significantly to 21% in the 2022 survey. Stepwise Chi Square testing showed significant differences between all three survey periods ($p < 0.001$). Overall, Ryanair's ratings declined significantly in each area surveyed between the 2016-17 and 2022 survey data.

Southwest Historical Comparisons

Southwest customers' overall rating which used a scale from 1 to 10 (10 being highest) changed significantly over the past 10 years ($H(2) = 84.23, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 219.56 for 2012-13, 170.17 for 2016-17, and 104.02 for 2022. Significant differences were found using a post-hoc Dunn's test between the 2012-13 data vs 2022 survey results ($p < 0.001$), the 2012-2013 vs 2016-17 ($p < 0.001$), as well as the 2016-17 vs 2022 results ($p = 0.001$). The Southwest data showed a steady decline for overall value over the past three surveys.

Southwest's overall ratings for seats (1-5 scale – five being highest) also changed significantly over time ($H(2) = 53.81, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 210.83 for 2012-13, 162.1 for 2016-17, and 118.82 for 2022. Dunn's post hoc testing yielded significant differences between all three time periods: 2012-13 vs 2016-17 ($p < 0.01$) as well as 2016-17 vs 2022 ($p < 0.002$) and 2012-13 vs 2022 ($p < 0.001$). The overall trend showed a steady decline based on data from the three surveys over the 10-year time period.

Cabin/staff results reported on a similar 1-5 scale also yielded a significant difference between the three data collection periods: ($H(2) = 31.79, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 196.21 for 2012-13, 176.83 for 2016-17, and 125.78 for 2022. Although the rank score decreased between the 2012-13 and 2016-17 time periods, that difference was not statistically significant. However, Dunn's post-hoc testing revealed differences between 2012-13 vs 2022 ($p = 0.011$) and 2016-17 vs 2022 survey data ($p < 0.001$) showing a steady decline in ratings.

Customer ratings (on a 1 to 5 scale) of Southwest's food showed similar results (The Kruskal-Wallis H test indicated that there is a significant difference in the dependent variable between the different groups, ($H(2) = 44.56, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 173.32 for 2012-13, 150.09 for 2016-17, and 95.7 for 2022. Although survey data on this question did not differ significantly between the 2012-13 vs 2016-17 time periods, significant findings (declining ratings) were found using Dunn's post-hoc test when comparing 2012-13 results to 2022 ($p < 0.001$) and 2016-17 vs 2022 ($p < 0.001$).

Southwest survey respondents showed a negative trend when assessing value (1-5 scale). A significant difference was found when comparing the three data periods ($H(2) = 75.02, p < 0.001$), with a mean rank score of 220.85 for 2012-13,

178 for 2016-17, and 111.49 for the 2022 survey. Dunn's post-hoc testing again noted differences between 2012-13 vs 2016-17 ($p < 0.001$), 2012-13 vs 2022 ($p < 0.001$) and 2016-17 vs 2022 ratings ($p < 0.001$).

The percentage of Southwest customers who would recommend the airline decreased significantly between the 2012-13 (62.4%), 2016-17 (43.3%), and 2022 (15.7%) surveys ($\chi^2(2, 355) = 53.83, p < 0.001$). Stepwise Chi Square testing showed significant differences between all three survey periods: 2012-13 vs 2016-17 ($p < 0.003$) as well as 2016-17 vs 2022 ($p < 0.001$) and 2012-13 vs 2022 ($p < 0.001$). Overall, Southwest's ratings declined significantly in each area surveyed between 2016-17 vs 2022.

Summary of Open Area Comments

Survey respondents had the option of making additional comments after rating the airlines. All 71 Ryanair, 102 Southwest and 263 Spirit airline customers who responded from May- September 2022 shared their thoughts in the additional comments section of the survey.

Ryanair Themes

2022 survey respondent most common themes included issues with flight delays and cancellations, poor customer service and uncomfortable seating. Ryanair passenger open area comments are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Summary of Ryanair Open Area Comments

Theme	Evidence
Ryanair	
Negative Customer Experience Several aspects of the experience are criticized, from flight delays and poor customer service to unexpected fees and a lack of professionalism	The phrases "most horrific airline to fly with", "Awful from start to finish", "a stressful experience flying Ryanair", "Absolutely horrendous service", "feels like fraudulent sale" and "worst I have ever ever (sic) experienced" highlight this theme.
Hidden Fees and Pricing Comments frequently reference hidden fees and the cost of services, suggesting that customers believe the airline misleads customers about the real cost of flying with them.	Examples include "Hidden fees everywhere", "charged £55 to print a boarding pass", "their way of taking our money", and "\$110 to print our two boarding passes". However, some customers also acknowledge that Ryanair offers "Cheapest tickets on the market", indicating an understanding of the trade-off between price and service quality.

<p>Lack of Professionalism Customers frequently criticize the airline for its perceived lack of professionalism.</p>	<p>This is seen in the phrases "It is a very unprofessional company", "Rude and disrespectful staff", "So unprofessional", and "Horrible staff". Customers suggest that the airline's employees do not behave professionally, which contributes to the overall negative customer experience.</p>
<p>Baggage Handling and Check-in Issues Many comments discuss issues related to baggage handling and check-in, including lost luggage and expensive check-in fees.</p>	<p>This is evidenced by the phrases "bag I checked in had been left in Helsinki", "had to pay \$128 for check in at airport", and "my suitcase has not been found". These experiences contribute to the overall negative impression of the airline.</p>
<p>Resolution to Avoid Ryanair A consistent theme is the resolution to avoid using Ryanair in the future due to the negative experiences they've had.</p>	<p>This is expressed in phrases like "Will never choose Ryanair again", "I would avoid flying with them", "I will not fly with Ryanair anymore!", and "look for other airlines next time".</p>
<p>Positive Remarks Despite the mostly negative review, some customers mention a few positive experiences. This suggests that not all experiences with the airline were negative, but the negative experiences significantly outweighed the positive ones (at least with respect to those reported).</p>	<p>"Overall a decent experience", "service provided on a rather short flight was a great credit to the company", "excellent service", "Actually a pleasant flight", "I feel very grateful to Ryanair", "the flight was pleasant and quick", and "All Ryanair staff we dealt with were polite and helpful".</p>
<p>Value for Money Customers frequently touch on the theme of value for money. Despite acknowledging the low prices, they believe that the level of service does not justify the cost.</p>	<p>This is reflected in phrases like "Don't be fooled by the affordable prices" and "this airline is not value for money at all".</p>
<p>Customer Service Overall customers indicate a severe dissatisfaction with the customer service provided by Ryanair. This theme is pervasive throughout the comments, highlighting the importance of</p>	<p>This is exemplified with phrases such as "worst customer service ever", "has to be the worst customer service", "customer service is a foreign idea to them" and "Shocking, unacceptable and dangerous disregard for customer".</p>

good customer service in the overall customer experience.	
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Note. Ryanair open area comments adapted from Skytrax (2022b) survey results for May-September 2022.

Southwest Themes

A review of 102 Southwest passengers' comments included the top three issues of: 1) Flight delays and cancellations, 2) Customer service issues and, 3) baggage handling and lost items. Comments from Southwest customers is summarized in Table 6 below.

Table 6

Summary of Southwest Open Area Comments

Theme	Evidence
Southwest	
<p>Negative Customer Experience Customers express strong dissatisfaction with the airline. This dissatisfaction extends to many aspects of the airline's operations, including customer service, management, and scheduling. Comments mention experiencing issues ranging from flight cancellations to poor treatment from the staff to the inability to board a flight on time.</p>	<p>This theme is pervasive throughout the comments, with phrases such as "Southwest is very unprofessional", "left us stranded in Amarillo for 2 days", "deceptive customer service", "Horrible customer service", "you just lost a life long traveler", and "this has been a horrible experience".</p>
<p>Lack of Professionalism and Competence Customers criticize the professionalism and competence of the airline's staff and management.</p>	<p>The unprofessional behavior is mentioned in phrases like "Southwest is very unprofessional", "unprofessional business practices", and "crew did not clean plane". Comments also highlight perceived incompetence in managing the airline, with phrases such as "poor management" and "Southwest offered no real explanation</p>
<p>Reliability Issues: Customers express a lack of trust in the airline's ability to maintain its flight schedules and handle baggage properly.</p>	<p>Customers describe experiences of flight cancellations and rescheduling, lost baggage, and delays, as seen in phrases such as "Constantly reschedules your flights", "his flight had been cancelled",</p>

	"they never loaded my bag", and "Southwest cancelled last minute".
<p>Post-COVID Impact Customers suggest that the quality of service offered by the airline has declined after the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme suggests that the pandemic may have had a significant negative impact on the airline's operations.</p>	This is expressed in the phrase "post COVID is a complete disappointment".
<p>Pricing and Value for Money Comments touch on the theme of pricing and perceived value for money. Despite acknowledging the low fares, customers feel that the level of service is not worth the cost.</p>	This is evidenced by comments such as "you get what you pay for", "am spending hundreds of extra dollars to never fly with Southwest again", and "Price gouging due to a hurricane".
<p>Resolution to Not Use the Airline Again A recurring theme is customers' resolution to not use this airline again.</p>	This is seen in phrases like "Never again will I book this airline", "I will never give them my business again", and "Never ever again will I fly Southwest".
<p>Positive Remarks Despite the overwhelmingly negative review, some comments mention a few positive experiences. This implies that not all experiences with the airline were negative, but the negative experiences significantly outweighed the positive ones with respect to reported comments.</p>	This is reflected in phrases like such as "attendants were nice and relaxed" and "such a remarkable attendant".

Note. Ryanair open area comments adapted from Skytrax (2022c) survey results for May-September 2022.

Spirit Themes

Open area comments from 263 Spirit Airlines customers yielded issues including: 1) flight delays and cancellations, 2) (poor) customer service and staff interaction and, 2) (unwanted) fees and extra charges. Spirit Airline responses are summarized in Table 7 below.

Table 7
Summary of Southwest Open Area Comments

Theme	Evidence
Spirit	
<p>Negative Customer Experience Customers consistently criticize the airline for providing a poor customer experience.</p>	<p>Phrases such as "have been so inconvenienced", "airline is a complete disappointment", "Absolutely frustrating", and "stress and frustration I have experienced" underscore this theme.</p>
<p>High and Unexpected Fees Customers regularly mention high and unexpected charges, particularly regarding luggage fees. This suggests dissatisfaction with the airline's pricing structure and transparency.</p>	<p>This is seen in phrases like "\$100 to carry a bag on the plane", "\$99 dollars each for carry-on luggage", "charged me 80\$ for my carry on", "paid \$74 to check in my luggage", and "charged me \$130 for a carry on".</p>
<p>Poor Customer Service Customers repeatedly criticize the airline's customer service. This theme indicates a significant pain point for the author in their interactions with the airline.</p>	<p>This is reflected in phrases such as "the customer service is terrible", "Terrible customer service", "its inhumane customer service", "worst customer service I have ever experience", and "Horrible customer service".</p>
<p>Resolution to Avoid the Airline Customers consistently express a resolution to avoid flying with the airline in the future. This theme suggests a strong dissatisfaction that has led to a decision to completely avoid the airline in the future.</p>	<p>This is indicated by phrases like "Will never fly this airline again", "Will never choose this airline again", "I will never fly with them again", "I will never book with Spirit again", and "Never flying Spirit again".</p>
<p>Flight Delays and Cancellations Issues related to flight delays and cancellations contribute to the overall negative impression of the airline.</p>	<p>This is expressed as dissatisfaction with being rebooked for a flight two days later or receiving a flight cancellation via email.</p>
<p>Positive Remarks Despite the largely negative reviews, some customers mention a few positive experiences. This suggests that not all experiences</p>	<p>This is evidenced by comments such as "staff were amazing", "My experience was excellent", "responding with urgency and with so much care", and "an amazing experience".</p>

with the airline were negative, but these positive experiences are vastly overshadowed by the negative ones (at least with respect to those reported).	
Value for Money Customer comments suggest that the low prices offered by the airline are not worth the overall negative experience.	This is seen in phrases like "any money you "save" on ticket price they bleed back out of you", "cheap prices are not worth the headaches", "Not worth the money you save", and "Spirit is more expensive to fly than its competitors".
Unprofessionalism and Disrespect Customers frequently criticize the airline for unprofessional and disrespectful behavior. This theme highlights customer dissatisfaction with the behavior and attitudes of the airline's employees	This is reflected in phrases like "Extremely unprofessional company", "rude and unprofessional", "No professionalism whatsoever", and "The supervisor was very rude and discriminating".

Note. Ryanair open area comments adapted from Skytrax (2022d) survey results for May-September 2022.

Summary of Major Themes

Flight delays and cancellations and customer service issues were the top two themes commented on by passengers for all three airlines. Baggage handling or policies also rated high for all airlines. A summary of the open area comments is shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Summary of Open area Comments for Ryanair, Southwest, and Spirit Airlines

Main Themes from Open Comments		
Ryanair	Southwest	Spirit
1. Flight delays and cancellations	1. Flight delays and cancellations	1. Flight Delays/Cancellations
2. Poor customer service	2. Customer service issues	2. Customer Service/Staff Interaction
3. Uncomfortable seating and lack of legroom	3. Baggage handling and lost items	3. Fees/Extra Charges
4. Inconsistent baggage policies		4. Luggage/Baggage Issues
5. Lack of communication from staff		5. Comfort/Seat Quality
6. Positive experiences with helpful staff and efficient		6. Refunds/Compensation

<p>check-in and boarding processes</p> <p>7. Issues with online check-in and fees for services</p> <p>8. Passengers feeling abandoned or mistreated in difficult situations.</p> <p>9. Mixed experiences with crew professionalism and service quality</p> <p>10. Positive experiences with staff going above and beyond to assist passengers in need</p>	<p>4. Seating and boarding procedures</p> <p>5. Mechanical issues with planes</p> <p>6. Overall dissatisfaction with Southwest Airlines</p>	<p>7. Booking/Reservation Issues</p> <p>8. Inadequate Information/Communication</p> <p>9. Inconvenience/Stress</p> <p>10. Safety/Reliability Concerns</p>
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Note. 2022 Data adapted from Skytrax survey on Ryanair (2022b), Southwest (2022c) and Spirit Airlines (2022d) survey for inclusive dates of 1 May 2022 to 30 Sept 2022.

Discussion

A major goal of this study was to assess out the three airlines (Ryanair, Southwest and Spirit) adjusted to airline operations after Covid restrictions were lifted in April 2022. Many decisions made during the Covid time period impacted how quickly the airlines could return to fully functioning operational tempos. Data collected in this study from the summer months of 2022 indicate lower levels of customer satisfaction for Ryanair and Southwest than had been observed in previous studies (Griffith & Roberts, 2021; Roberts & Griffith, 2019). Additionally, all three airlines exhibited low ratings in the 2022 study indicating that they had not fully recovered from an operational and customer relationship standpoint.

Open area comments reflected flight delays, cancellations, and customer service issues as the top three complaints raised by customers of all three airlines. Many comments stressed the lack of customer service from airline staff which appeared to be overwhelmed at times after airlines resumed operations after removal of Covid restrictions.

Conclusions

Notable trends when viewing the 2022 survey results indicated that Ryanair and Southwest received significantly higher ratings from their customers than Spirit Airlines in all areas examined by the Skytrax survey. However, ranks for all airlines tended to be low and in the case of Ryanair and Southwest, the ratings were dramatically lower in the summer of 2022 survey data than was reported by customers in either the 2012-2013 or 2016-2017 surveys. The impacts of Covid and difficulty in resuming full operations after April 2022 were evident in the data. One mitigating factor for Ryanair was the implementation of their customer service strategy beginning in 2014 which allowed Ryanair to equal and sometimes surpass Southwest as noted in the 2016-17 survey (Griffith & Roberts, 2021).

As a replication of two studies also conducted by the authors of this work, it was noted that despite the gains made by Ryanair (and customer service levels maintained by Southwest), both airlines earned dramatically lower ratings on customer service satisfaction from their passengers. These ratings reflect the impacts of attempting to move to full operations after April 2022 after the Covid Pandemic. However, as noted earlier, the data found in this study supports the argument that customer services efforts are important with regard to customer ratings of overall value and if they would recommend flying on the airline again. Even under difficult conditions such as rebounding operations after Covid, at least in this study, those airlines that prioritized customer service were more highly valued by their passengers (in this case - Ryanair and Southwest) than those who did not (Spirit).

Recommendations

This study should be replicated using a similar approach, collecting summer data (May through September 2023) to determine if or how well Ryanair, Southwest, and Spirit airlines rebound with regard to perceived customer service.

Airlines should see customer service as a competitive advantage. Customers will generally accept less service for a cheaper price, but that dynamic has its limits. Airlines that do not emphasize customer service will enjoy less loyalty from their customers.

As the airline customer service landscape continues to change, airlines must stay agile and adaptable to maintain a competitive edge. To ensure long-term success, several recommendations are offered:

1. **Invest in advanced technologies:** Airlines should continue to invest in emerging technologies such as AI, machine learning, and big data analytics to enhance their customer service offerings, streamline operations, and personalize the customer experience.
2. **Emphasize sustainability:** As environmental concerns become increasingly important to consumers, airlines must prioritize sustainability efforts and communicate their commitments to reducing their environmental impact.
3. **Focus on employee training:** Investing in employee training and development can help airlines maintain high-quality customer service as technology and consumer expectations evolve. Well-trained and knowledgeable employees can help enhance customer satisfaction and foster brand loyalty.
4. **Maintain flexibility:** Flexibility in booking policies and responsiveness to customer needs will remain essential in the post-pandemic world. Airlines should continue to offer flexible booking options and adapt to changing travel restrictions and regulations.

5. **Leverage social media:** Airlines must continue to utilize and update social media platforms to engage with customers, address their concerns, and share relevant information. This can help foster a sense of community, promote brand loyalty, and improve customer satisfaction.

By implementing these recommendations and embracing a customer-centric approach, airlines can navigate the changing landscape of airline customer service and continue to thrive in an increasingly competitive industry.

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