

Online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement in the South African domestic airline industry – a gender perspective

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Abstract

The airline industry experienced rapid growth and airlines are competing for new customers. The industry is experiencing a change in customer behaviour as customers are becoming less loyal and harder to satisfy. The online environment is also changing the way airline tickets are bought and it is vital for airlines to manage their online environment in order to create positive online experiences and atmospherics to satisfy and retain these customers.

The aim of this study is to determine if gender differences exist with regard to online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement when purchasing airline tickets on the airlines' website. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents who have bought an airline ticket on a domestic airline website in South African within a six months period prior to the study being conducted. Respondents were selected by means of convenience sampling.

A total of 250 questionnaires were analysed and the results indicate that significant differences exist based on gender, with females rating each construct significantly more positive than males.

Findings from this research may guide airlines in improving their online service and environment and improving online airline purchases for both males and females by embracing these differences.

Key phrases

airline industry; gender; online; service attitudes; site attitudes; site involvement; South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

Nearly 15% of the overall travel sales worldwide are accounted for by travel businesses on the Internet, while half of it is for airline ticket sales (Cunningham, Gerlach, Harper & Young 2005:375). This is because of the ease of purchasing airline tickets online, however, customers can just as easily switch to another airline website to compare prices. (Cunningham *et al.* 2005:358).

From the first exposure the customer has with an airline website, emotions that influence the customers' perception of the site are evoked (Mazaheri, Richard & Laroche 2012:538). In early research on atmospherics, Kotler (1974:50) defined it as the attempt to create an environment which induces certain emotional effects to increase the purchase possibility in customers. Keeping this in mind, it can be suggested that airlines need to focus on the atmospherics of their websites which can influence their services, site attitude and site involvement.

The study focuses on uncovering and comparing online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement of male and female customers in the South African domestic airline industry. The subsequent section provides background on the South African domestic airline industry as well as e-commerce, online consumer behaviour, online service and site attitudes, site involvement and gender differences in consumer behaviour. The research methodology and findings will be discussed as well as the implications, limitations and future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The South African domestic airline industry

Domestic flights provide easy and effective ways to reach major visitor destinations and attractions all over South Africa and offer access to nearly every part of the country (South Africa.info 2014). Domestic flights are generally hassle-free and can be booked online directly over the airline's website, from travel agencies or new flight search and travel websites that provide the cheapest fares. Nevertheless, the South African domestic airline industry is growing at a rapid rate as demonstrated by a 70% increase in air travel from 2003 to 2007 (Campbell & Vigar-Ellis 2012:99). This is further supported by research done by D'Angelo (2011) and Martin (2011) who foretold that South Africa will be one of the countries with the fastest-growing domestic airline markets, from 2011 to 2013.

The industry is also being dominated by a government-controlled airline, namely South African Airways, (including its subsidiary Mango, and its alliance partners, SA Express and SA Airlink), but other domestic airlines include Kulula and British Airlines (Petzer & Mostert 2012:6).

The South African domestic airline industry is experiencing growth in addition to increased competition, especially rivalry for customers (Campbell & Vigar-Ellis 2012:98). Mayr and Zins (2012:356) further explicate that airlines worldwide aren't only competing to get new customers, but also to retain customers.

Furthermore, the South African airline industry is experiencing a change in customer behaviour as their customers are becoming less loyal due the availability of lower ticket prices, which is making it harder for airlines to retain customers (Petzer, De Meyer, Svavi & Svensson 2012:486). In addition to lower ticket prices, the airline industry is also more frequently becoming recognised for its negative service encounters and this is also making it more challenging to retain customers (Petzer *et al.* 2012:486).

In the quest to retain and satisfy customers, domestic airlines are also providing additional services on their websites to create user friendly and comprehensive websites for customers, by including car hire, hotel bookings and travel packages (Kulula.com 2014).

Sreenivasan, Lee & Goh (2012:26) also explain that the internet is playing an increasingly significant role which suggests that airlines should keep in mind that customers are more frequently making use of the online environment to purchase airline tickets, check flight statuses and compare prices in order to retain customers. Therefore, it is important for airlines to manage their website strategically in order to create positive online experiences and atmospherics as this has the ability to change a customer's attitude as well as their goal or reason for visiting the website (Hunter & Mukerji 2011:120).

2.2 E-commerce

The advancement of the Internet in recent years has undeniably transformed the way individuals carry out business and commerce in an online environment (Muhammad & Muhammad 2013:2). This is especially true in South Africa where e-commerce significantly increased over the last couple of years (Goldstruck 2012:1; Mayo, Helms & Inks 2006:271).

According to Muhammad and Muhammad (2013:2), e-commerce can be described as the process of buying and selling over the internet and can be categorised into four categories, specifically business-to-business, business-to-customer, customer-to-business and

customer-to-customer. During an e-commerce transaction, it is expected of customers to offer extensive personal information such including contact details or credit card information before the transaction can be processed, and this as a result can influence the customer's willingness to make a purchase (Beldad, De Jong & Steehouder 2010:860; Kim, Ferrin & Rao 2008:546). This adds to the importance of developing an effective website (Mazaheri *et al.* 2012:535).

For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on business-to customer e-commerce which involves the selling of airline tickets to customers over the Internet where customers can easily make a purchase without any human involvement needed from the airline.

2.3 Online consumer behaviour

The Internet transformed customer behaviour as it offers customers, greater information availability like never before on choice alternatives, prices, details and features (Mazaheri, Richard & Laroche 2011:958).

As a result of the increased e-commerce opportunity, online retailers are experiencing increased competition and online retailers are aiming to differentiate themselves from rivals by creating online environments that can evoke positive behaviour in customers such as the willingness to spend time and money on the website (Mazaheri, Richard, Laroche & Ueltschy 2014:253).

Mazaheri *et al.* (2012:545) pronounces that it takes mere seconds for customers to switch from one website to another and that it can be a great competitive advantage to create websites that involve and attract customers. Effective website atmospherics can influence a high level of interaction between online retailers and customers (Hausman & Siekpe 2009:6). As a result, online retailers including domestic airlines, should consciously design their websites and website environment to facilitate interaction and improve the customers' shopping experience (Dailey 2004:795).

A successful website will allow customers to make quality assumptions about the services provided by the online retailer based on the website atmosphere. It is also important for these online retailers to create positive customer attitudes with the help of an effective website; as this will influence the manner in which the customer evaluates the business offerings (Mazaheri *et al.* 2012:539).

2.4 Online service attitudes and site attitudes

Attitudes play a significant part in consumer behaviour as attitudes motivate customers to behave in consistently favourable or unfavourable ways, and can be described as learned and enduring evaluations of objects such as products and services (Babin & Harris 2014:121; Schiffman & Kanuk 2014:194). In traditional services marketing, one of the most important elements in developing customer attitudes and impacting customer behaviour was the interpersonal relationship between a customer and a service business (Mazaheri *et al.* 2012:535). However, in online services marketing, technology and electronic interaction have replaced the interpersonal interactions, and website characteristics are now influencing the customers' behaviour and attitudes (Holloway & Beatty 2008:349).

According to Mazaheri *et al.* (2012:535), customers surf and navigate service business's online sites so as to assess the service, as a replacement for interacting directly with service employees during traditional transactions. Customers' attitudes during traditional marketing are positively influenced by the product, but in an online setting, the customer develops an attitude toward the service and service business before consumption, based on the website cues and atmosphere (Mazaheri *et al.* 2012:358). It is vital for online retailers to develop positive customer attitudes towards their products and services as customer attitude impacts the way the customer evaluates the products and services, the purchase stages, as well as the post-purchase stages of the decision-making process (Mazaheri *et al.* 2012:539).

2.5 Site involvement

Consumer behaviour literature and research are not new to the involvement construct which has been widely explored (Dahlèn 2002; Jiang, Chan, Tan & Chua 2010; Liu & Shrum 2002; O'Cass 2000). In marketing research, customer involvement represents the degree of personal relevance a customer finds in a given category of consumption (Babin & Harris 2014:88). Furthermore, involvement can be explained as the internal state of arousal that includes three properties, namely intensity, direction and persistence with a product or service, advertisement, situation, website, or even a person (Andrews, Duravasula & Akhter 1990:28). Website involvement is correspondingly defined as the perceived relevance of the website based on the innate needs, values as well as interests of the customer (Jiang *et al.* 2010:38).

From an online perspective, site involvement is considered as a situational involvement where customers can interact with the website and become familiar with the site, which can contribute to making their site attitudes more positive. Mazaheri *et al.* (2012:542) found that

site involvement impacts site attitudes and purchase intentions. Online retailers can facilitate customer involvement by improving their online interface to become vivid and interactive (Demangeot & Broderick 2007:882). This is also supported by findings from research conducted by Jiang *et al.* (2010:51), postulating that it is imperative for online retailers to recognise that interactive features have to be implemented to enhance the customer's website involvement, as this can elicit positive behavioural outcomes.

2.6 Gender differences in consumer behaviour

In various marketing research, the importance of gender-related differences are emphasised as businesses can address men and women as separate market segments with different marketing strategies (Frank, Enkawa & Schvaneveldt 2014:171). This is also confirmed by Schiffman and Kanuk (2014:346) who explicate that gender plays an increasingly important role in shopping motives. In an online context, gender differences exist in web navigation behaviour as men engage in less exploratory activities and are less involved in the website than most women, according to research conducted by Richard, Chebat, Yang & Putrevu (2010:926). Similarly, Kim, Lehto and Morrison (2007:423) determined that considerable gender differences in terms of attitudes, information channels and website functionality preferences exist. This is reinforced by various prior research conducted with the focus on gender differences in consumer behaviour, as illustrated in Table 1.

Gender differences can, according to Richard *et al.* (2010:926), influence how men and women obtain as well as process online information. For instance, women are more likely to use websites for enjoyment and information gathering and can be regarded as comprehensive processors who assimilate all obtainable information. Men on the other hand, tend to limit their information gathering to cues that are immediately relevant to the current context and switch websites till they find the information they are searching for (Richard *et al.* 2010:926). In a similar study conducted by Kim *et al.* (2007:431) results demonstrated that significant differences exist between males and females in terms of their attitudes towards website functionality and online search behaviour.

Findings from research conducted by Venkatesh *et al.* (2000:53) reveal that men and women embrace very different decision processes when evaluating new technology developments, including online shopping. Gender is also a significant predictor of a customer's intention to make a purchase by means of the Internet (Van Slyke *et al.* 2002:84).

TABLE 1: Selected studies focussing on gender differences in consumer behaviour

Authors	Focus area	Findings
Hasan (2010: 597-601)	Gender differences in online shopping attitude	Gender differences in cognitive attitude
Richard <i>et al.</i> (2010: 926-934)	Assessing the role of gender in online consumer behaviour	Gender differences in web navigation behaviour
Kim <i>et al.</i> (2007:423-433)	Gender differences in online travel information search	Gender differences in terms of attitudes to information channels and travel website functionality preferences exist
Dittmar, Long and Meek (2004: 423-444)	Gender differences in online and conventional buying motivations	Gender differences in attitudes and involvement in online buying
Van Slyke, Comunale and Belanger. (2002:82-86)	Gender difference in perceptions of web-based shopping.	Gender differences in perceptions of online shopping were verified.
Venkatesh, Morris & Ackerman (2000:33-60)	Gender differences in individual adoption and usage of individual technology adoption decision-making processes	Gender differences exist in attitude toward using new technology and perceived behavioural control

Source: Researchers' construct compiled from literature review

Regardless of the availability of research on psychological differences amongst men and women, it is still unknown how these gender differences contribute to the development of repurchase intent, according to Frank *et al.* (2014:174). Therefore it is particularly important for retailers to remember that men and women do not make purchase decisions in a similar way (Babin & Harris 2014:195). A lack of research on gender-based differences exists within the South African online domestic airline industry, and would strongly contribute to theory building as well as the possibility of improving customer satisfaction and retention, along with the improvement of marketing strategies for gender-based segments in the domestic airline industry.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT, PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

3.1 Problem statement

According to Ha, Kwon and Lennon (2007:478), the atmosphere of a website affects customers' emotions and their behaviour, attitudes as well as involvement. The entire design of a website evokes emotional responses that affect the customer's buying intentions (Ha & I 2012:90). Ha *et al.* (2007:477) state that one of the issues when using the Internet is that it is easy to move between different websites before making a purchase, which emphasises that

the website's atmospherics is important to keep the customers on the site and involved. The site atmospherics, which influences a person's attitudes and, perception, consists of entertainment, informativeness and effectiveness which are influenced by pleasure, arousal and dominance (Mazaheri *et al.* 2012:536).

Based on the abovementioned literature review provided, it is evident that:

- The South African domestic airline industry is growing at a rapid rate.
- Airlines are experiencing competition for new customers as well as difficulty to retain customers.
- Customers are more frequently making use of the online environment with greater information availability to purchase airline tickets, check flight statuses and compare prices.
- As a result of the increased e-commerce opportunity, online retailers are experiencing increased competition and are aiming to differentiate themselves by providing additional services on their websites in order to create user-friendly and comprehensive websites for customers.
- It takes mere seconds for customers to switch from one website to another and it can be a great competitive advantage for service businesses to create websites that involve and attract customers, allowing them to make quality assumptions about the services based on the website atmosphere.
- It is also important for these online retailers to attempt to create positive customer attitudes with the help of an effective website, as this will influence the manner in which the customer evaluates the business offerings.
- However, electronic interaction has replaced the interpersonal interactions and website characteristics are now influencing the customers' behaviour and attitudes which impact the way the customer evaluates the products and services, the purchase stages, as well as post-purchase stages of the decision making process.
- In various marketing research the importance of gender-related differences is emphasised as businesses can address men and women as separate market segments with different marketing strategies.
- Gender differences can influence how men and women obtain as well as process online information, and the two genders embrace very different decision processes when evaluating new technology developments including online shopping.
- A lack of research on gender-based differences exists within the South African online domestic airline industry.

Therefore, the following problem statement can be formulated:

The South African domestic airline industry is expanding quickly and is characterised by rivalry between airlines for new as well as loyal customers. Furthermore, the industry is experiencing a change in customer behaviour as customers are becoming less loyal and harder to retain. The Internet has created opportunities and transformed the way customers make purchase decisions, as it offers a great variety of available information and customers are in a position to easily purchase airline tickets, check flight statuses and compare prices. These new developments are further increasing competition for domestic airlines as they have to differentiate themselves by means of effective, easy to use, all-inclusive and interactive websites, as it takes seconds for customers to switch to another website if they are not completely satisfied.

Conversely, in online services marketing, electronic interaction has replaced the interpersonal interactions and websites are now influencing the customers' behaviour and attitudes. It is therefore essential for domestic airlines to develop positive customer attitudes towards their products and services. Incidentally, improving a website is not enough as gender also plays an increasingly important role in purchasing motives. It is important for domestic airlines to determine gender-related differences in order to address men and women as separate market segments with tailored marketing strategies.

A lack of research on gender-based differences exists within the South African online domestic airline industry and this study will contribute to theory building, as well as the possibility of improving customer satisfaction and retention along with the improvement of marketing strategies for gender-based segments in the domestic airline industry.

3.2 Purpose and objectives

The purpose of the study is to uncover and compare the online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement of male and female customers in the South African domestic airline industry. Several objectives have been formulated to achieve the purpose of the study:

- Determine the demographic profile of respondents taking part in the study.
- Uncover the domestic airline website patronage habits of respondents.
- Measure respondents' online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement towards domestic airline websites.

- Report on the validity and reliability of scales used to measure online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement towards domestic airline websites.
- Compare the online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement towards domestic airline websites of male and female customers who buy airline tickets online.

3.3 Hypotheses formulated for the study

Based upon the literature review presented, the following alternative hypotheses are formulated for the study:

H₁: There is a significant difference in the online service attitudes towards domestic airline websites of male and female customers who buy domestic airline tickets online.

H₂: There is a significant difference in the site attitudes towards domestic airline websites of male and female customers who buy domestic airline tickets online.

H₃: There is a significant difference in the level of site involvement with domestic airline websites of male and female customers who buy domestic airline tickets online.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study followed a descriptive design that is quantitative in nature. A descriptive design is most appropriate in this instance, since the study aimed at describing a particular marketing phenomenon. The problem is also clearly defined and the research design suits the nature of the research objectives and hypotheses formulated for the study.

The target population of the study included all those customers who have bought an airline ticket on a domestic airline's website in South Africa within a six-months period prior to the study being conducted within the North-West Province.

A non-probability convenience sample was drawn from the target population since a sampling frame that accurately reflects the target population, does not exist. Five trained fieldworkers, who were all graduate students in the field of marketing management, were required to approach prospective respondents in major cities and towns in the North-West Province of South Africa to take part in the study. A fieldworker first had to ensure that the prospective respondent meets the criteria of being included in the research.

Furthermore, the fieldworker was required to communicate the rights of the respondent and completion instructions to the prospective respondent. The fieldworker then had to hand the

questionnaire to the qualifying and willing respondent to complete. Upon completion, the questionnaire was collected from the respondents. The fieldworkers collected 250 questionnaires that could be included in the analysis.

As alluded, a self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents. The questionnaire commences with a preamble, explaining the rights of the respondent as well as the completion instructions of the questionnaire. This was followed by a screening question to ensure the prospective respondent's eligibility to take part in the research. The questionnaire furthermore comprises of a section determining the demographic profile of respondents and a section measuring the domestic airline website patronage habits of respondents.

The subsequent section measures the key constructs of the study, namely online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement on a seven-point semantic differential scale adopted from the work of Mazaheri *et al.* (2012). They in turn adapted the service and attitude scales from the work of Eighmy (1997) and adopted the site involvement scale from Muehling, Stoltman and Grossbar (1990). The scales measure attitude towards and involvement with the domestic airline website from which the respondent had most recently bought an airline ticket.

The researchers utilised SPSS version 22 to enter the data and to ensure that the data is complete and without errors. This software package was furthermore used to analyse the data. In line with the research objectives of the study, the data analysis strategy involved the calculation of frequencies (counts and percentages) to portray the demographic profile of respondents taking part in the study, as well as to portray their domestic airline website patronage habits. The descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for items measuring the key constructs of the study were furthermore calculated. Validity as well as reliability of the scales measuring the key constructs of the study were furthermore assessed before overall mean scores were calculated for each of the key constructs of the study.

Subsequently, the hypotheses formulated for the study were tested using an independent samples t-test, a parametric test used to compare the means of two groups, in this instance males and females.

The researchers considered a parametric test suitable since the sample size is sufficiently large ($n=250$), the two groups who are being compared (males and females) are fairly equal in size, and assumptions inherent to using this test have been met. The researchers relied

on a confidence level of 95% and a subsequent significance level of 5% ($p\text{-value} \leq 0.05$) to interpret the results.

5. FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

This section of the paper provides insight into the demographic profile of respondents taking part in the study. It uncovers the domestic airline website patronage habits of respondents, and provides an assessment of respondents' online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement towards domestic airline websites. It also reports on the validity and reliability of scales used to measure online service attitudes, site attitudes towards, and site involvement with domestic airline websites. The section finally presents the results of the hypothesis testing.

5.1 Demographic profile

Table 2 presents the demographic profile of respondents, overall and based upon gender.

TABLE 2: Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Male		Female		Overall	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Gender						
Male					107	42.8
Female					143	57.2
Age						
27 years and younger	56	42.4	76	56.7	132	52.8
28 to 36 years	9	36.0	16	64.0	25	10.0
37 to 48 years	19	44.2	24	55.8	43	17.2
49 to 67 years	23	46.0	27	54.0	50	20.0
Highest level of education						
Primary school completed	0	0.0	1	100.0	1	0.4
Some high school	2	40.0	3	60.0	5	2.0
Matric / Grade 12	24	30.4	55	69.6	79	31.6
Tech diploma / degree	19	46.3	22	53.7	41	16.4
University degree	38	50.7	37	49.3	75	30.0
Postgraduate degree	24	49.0	25	51.0	49	19.6
Primary employment status						

Full-time employed	50	46.3	58	53.7	108	97.2
Part-time employed	4	20	16	80	20	8.0
Self-employed	18	64.3	10	35.7	28	11.2
Student	31	41.3	44	58.7	75	30.0
Housewife or househusband	0	0.0	10	100.0	10	4.0
Retired	2	50.0	2	50.0	4	1.6
Unemployed	2	100.0	0	0.0	2	0.8
Other	0	0.0	3	100.0	3	1.2

Source: Calculated from survey results

It can be seen from Table 2 that the majority of respondents are female (57.2%) with 42.8% of the respondents being male. The respondents are also fairly young with just over half of the respondents (52.8%) being 27 years or younger. Those taking part in this study are also well educated with two thirds (66%) being in possession of a post matric qualification.

When comparing the demographic profiles of male and female respondents as presented in Table 2, it is evident that the demographic profiles of males and females were very similar with respect to age, highest level of education and primary employment status.

5.2 Domestic airline website patronage habits

Table 3 depicts the domestic airline website patronage habits of respondents, overall and based upon gender.

It is evident from Table 3 that the majority of respondents most recently purchased an airline ticket from Kulula.com's website (49.2%), followed by those purchasing on the South African Airways website (17.6%) and Mango's website (14.8%) respectively. The majority of respondents have been buying domestic airline tickets online for 3 years or longer but less than 5 years (27.6%), followed by those who have been buying domestic airline tickets online for 1 year or longer, but less than 3 years (22.4%).

The majority of respondents (30.8%) only buy a domestic airline ticket online once a year, followed by those who buy a domestic airline ticket online once every three months (21.6%). It is also evident that the domestic airline patronage habits of male and female respondents are very similar with respect to the domestic airline from which an airline ticket was most recently bought, the length of time respondents have been buying domestic airline tickets online, and how often they buy domestic airline tickets online.

TABLE 3: Domestic airline website patronage

Variable	Male		Female		Overall	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
From which domestic airline's website did you purchase the airline ticket you most recently bought?						
Kulula.com	46	37.4	77	62.6	123	49.2
Mango	17	45.9	20	54.1	37	14.8
British Airways	13	46.4	15	53.6	28	11.2
South African Airways	20	45.5	24	54.5	44	17.6
SA Express	5	62.5	3	37.5	8	3.2
SA Airlink	6	60.0	4	40.0	10	4.0
For how long have you been buying domestic airline tickets online?						
Less than 6 months	12	50.0	12	50.0	24	9.6
6 months or longer but less than 1 year	15	37.5	25	62.5	40	16.0
1 year or longer but less than 3 years	23	41.1	33	58.9	56	22.4
3 years or longer but less than 5 years	31	44.9	38	55.1	69	27.6
5 years or longer but less than 10 years	20	40.0	30	60.0	50	20.0
10 years or longer	6	54.5	5	45.5	11	4.4
How often do you buy domestic airline tickets online?						
Every day	0	0.0	3	100.0	3	1.2
Every second day	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0
Twice a week	1	25.0	3	75.0	4	1.6
Once a week	1	50.0	1	50.0	2	0.8
Once every two weeks	3	50.0	3	50.0	6	2.4
Once a month	8	50.0	8	50.0	16	6.4
Once every second month	4	80.0	1	20.0	5	2.0
Once every three months	25	46.3	29	53.7	54	21.6
Once every six months	17	40.5	25	59.5	42	16.8
Once a year	37	48.1	40	51.9	77	30.8
It was a once-off purchase	11	26.8	30	73.2	41	16.4

Source: Calculated from survey results

5.3 Validity

As noted before, the scales used to measure the key constructs of the study, namely online service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement (on a seven-point semantic differential scale) were adopted from the work of Mazaheri *et al.* (2012). He in turn adapted the service and attitude scales from the work of Eighmy (1997) and adopted the site involvement scale from Meuhling *et al.* (1990). In the study conducted by Mazaheri *et al.* (2012), convergent and discriminant validity were tested with respect to all three these scales. Subsequent results uncovered both convergent and discriminant validity (Mazaheri *et al.* 2012:541).

5.4 Reliability

Table 4 provides the Cronbach's alpha values that were calculated in order to determine the internal consistency reliability of scales measuring the key constructs of the study. A scale can be considered reliable if a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7 and more is realised (Pallant 2010:6). The closer the value is to 1.00, the more reliable the scale is deemed to be (Pallant 2010:6).

TABLE 4: Cronbach's alpha values

Construct	No of items	Cronbach's alpha coefficient
Service attitude	5	0.946
Site attitude	5	0.924
Site involvement	6	0.920

Source: Calculated from survey results

It is evident from Table 4 that the Cronbach's alpha values for all three scales measuring the key constructs of the study exceed 0.7. The scales measuring these constructs can therefore be considered reliable.

5.5 Descriptive results

Table 5 depicts the standard deviation a (SD) and mean for each of the items measuring the key constructs of the study. The Table also presents the overall mean scores for the key constructs of the study calculated once validity and reliability of the scales measuring the constructs were confirmed. Mean scores of male and female respondents are included as this study focused on gender differences. The mean scores based on gender were determined by means of an independent sample t-test.

It is evident from Table 5 that service attitude realised the highest overall mean score of 5.46. All items measuring this construct realised means that range between 5.22 and 5.55. Site attitude obtained the second highest overall mean score of 5.33 with scores for items ranging between 4.83 and 5.52. Site involvement obtained the lowest overall mean score of 5.21. The means for the items range between 4.97 and 5.39.

TABLE 5: Descriptive results

Construct or item	SD	Mean		
		Male	Female	Overall
Service attitude	1.082	5.23	5.63	5.46
This service is bad/good	1.162	5.31	5.73	5.55
I dislike/like this service	1.156	5.31	5.66	5.51
I react unfavourably/favourably toward this service	1.183	5.26	5.73	5.53
I have negative/positive feelings toward this service	1.207	5.27	5.69	5.51
This service is unattractive/attractive	1.258	5.02	5.36	5.22
Site attitude	1.074	5.10	5.49	5.33
This site is bad/good	1.196	5.33	5.66	5.52
I dislike/like this site	1.282	5.17	5.62	5.42
I react unfavourably/favourably toward this site	1.162	5.17	5.59	5.41
I have negative/positive feelings toward this site	1.172	5.21	5.63	5.45
This site is unattractive/attractive	1.307	4.65	4.96	4.83
Site involvement	1.044	5.00	5.37	5.21
This website is unimportant/important to me	1.331	4.79	5.11	4.97
This website is irrelevant/relevant to my needs	1.198	5.18	5.55	5.39
This website is not worth/worth remembering	1.208	5.21	5.52	5.39
This website is not worth/worth paying attention to	1.229	5.12	5.43	5.30
This website does not/does matter to me	1.213	4.91	5.34	5.15
This website is insignificant/significant to me	1.222	4.80	5.25	5.06

Source: Calculated from survey results

5.6 Hypothesis testing

Three alternative hypotheses have been formulated for the study and based upon the results of the independent samples t-tests that were performed to test the hypotheses, the following findings can be observed:

Hypothesis 1

With respect to H_1 stating that there is a statistically significant difference in the online service attitudes towards domestic airline websites of male and female customers who buy domestic airline tickets online, it can be said that females (mean = 5.63) hold a more positive service attitudes than males (mean = 5.23, p-value = 0.006). H_1 can therefore not be rejected.

Hypothesis 2

With respect to H_2 stating that there is a statistically significant difference in the site attitudes towards domestic airline websites of male and female customers who buy domestic airline tickets online, it can be said that females (mean = 5.49) hold a more positive service attitude than males (mean = 5.10, p-value = 0.006). H_2 can therefore not be rejected.

Hypothesis 3

With respect to H_3 stating that there is a statistically significant difference in the level of site involvement with domestic airline websites of male and female customers who buy domestic airline tickets online, it can be said that females (mean = 5.37) are more involved with the domestic airline's site than males (mean = 5.00, p-value = 0.009). H_3 can therefore not be rejected.

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From the empirical results, it is evident that the majority of the respondents who participated in the study and indicated that they purchase domestic airline tickets online, are 27 years and younger and are well educated. Domestic airlines can therefore use this information to ensure that it relates with their younger consumer base.

Results indicated that service attitude realised the highest overall means score followed by site attitudes, which indicate that domestic airlines should aim to maintain the attitudes customers have with their service and their website. The lowest mean scores were obtained for site involvement which indicates that domestic airlines should focus on improving the instructiveness of the website in order to increase the customers' involvement.

The following implications can be made based on the result of the hypotheses testing.

- A significant difference exists in the online service attitudes toward domestic airline websites between men and women. Female respondents hold significantly more positive service attitudes than males.

- Domestic airlines should aim to improve the service attitudes of male customers by targeting them with marketing strategies aimed at creating a pleasant perception of the services that are provided by the airline.
- Domestic airlines should also determine why male customers might have lower service attitudes than their female customers.
- Furthermore, domestic airlines can aim to maintain the positive service attitudes that female customers currently have by reminding these customers of the pleasant services the airline provides.
- A significant difference was also found in the site attitudes towards domestic airline websites between male and female customers. Results indicate that women hold significantly more positive site attitudes than men.

This indicates that domestic airlines should aim to improve the site attitudes of men, by targeting male customers with marketing strategies aimed at creating a pleasant perception of the website.

Domestic airlines should also evaluate their website with the intention to identify features that can have a negative influence on the attitudes men have towards the website.

This also shows that domestic airlines can aim to retain the positive website attitudes that female customers currently have.

A significant difference exists in the level of site involvement with a domestic airline website between male and female customers. Results indicate that females are significantly more involved with the domestic airline's website than males.

It is important for domestic airlines as they should aim to keep their female customers who make online flight bookings involved and interactive in the website.

Domestic airlines should explore why male customers are not as involved on their website, and fix issues that might be responsible for this occurrence.

Domestic airlines should also attempt to improve the site involvement of male customers who purchase airline tickets online, by making the website vibrant, colourful and interactive.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The most important limitation of this study was that it was only conducted in the North-West Province of South Africa. Non-probability sampling was used and this means that the

findings are only relevant to these respondents. Although these can be seen as limitations, it must be remembered that the findings correlate with other research and the theory. This means that the implications of the findings are relevant and the domestic airlines must take note of it.

For future research, it is recommended that this study must be done in more provinces to establish if the same results will be achieved. Future research can also be done on why male customers are more negative in terms of their website evaluation, than females, in order to develop websites that will be more attractive to male customers. It would also be interesting for future research to identify the type of bookings made by domestic airline customers including for instance, if they only acquired airline tickets, or also made car hire or hotel booking from these websites.

8. CONCLUSION

This research was done to uncover and compare the service attitudes, site attitudes and site involvement of male and female customers in the South African domestic airline industry.

Three hypotheses were formulated and tested in the North-West Province of South Africa by using non-probability sampling. Data from 250 respondents was analysed by using several statistical techniques. Findings from the empirical research correlate with the theory and previous research. Significant differences were found between male and female customers regarding site service, site attitudes and site involvement.

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