

Investigating Aviation Service Excellence In-Flight: A Thematic Analysis of Passenger Experience and Quality Indicators

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Abstract—Service excellence is central to passenger loyalty, brand image and competitive advantage in a highly fragmented air-travel market. This paper revisits a qualitative inquiry into in-flight service excellence — built from textbook review, discussions with ten experienced flyers and ticket agents, and a detailed key informant with eight documented international and regional flights (2019–2024) — and restructures its thematic findings into a properly analysed, evidence-based research paper. Qualitative content was coded against the five SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy) and against two further practical groupings: obstacles to service delivery and the tangible/intangible nature of quality indicators. Twenty-six coded thematic mentions were distributed relatively evenly across the five SERVQUAL dimensions, with tangibles and reliability jointly accounting for the largest share (23.1% each) and assurance the smallest (15.4%). Ten distinct obstacles to service excellence were identified, dominated by operational and environmental constraints (40%). Fourteen quality indicators were identified, of which the majority (64.3%) were intangible, human-factor indicators rather than tangible cabin features. The key informant's recorded fares ranged from USD 300 to USD 1,450 across five priced itineraries, with price emerging as a recurring driver of airline choice. The paper concludes that service excellence is not static but must be dynamically planned, timed and continuously re-evaluated, and it recommends further comparative research across aircraft type, route, season and travel class.

Index Terms—Aviation Service Quality, SERVQUAL, AIRQUAL, In-Flight Hospitality, Thematic Analysis, Passenger Experience, Service Excellence, Quality Assurance

I. INTRODUCTION

Service quality is invaluable in the hospitality industry. As companies provide services to their customers, they continuously strive for a good name, recognition and customer loyalty, which, if maintained, allow them to attract and retain patronage. Because air flight is a sensitive, safety-critical mode of travel, its attendants endeavour to deliver the best possible service from the ticket office through boarding, in-flight provisioning, cabin cleanliness and public relations, all while keeping efficiency and safety paramount.

1.1 Background of the Study

People fly because they value speed, convenience, efficiency and safety, benefits that justify the cost of the ticket. Air travel is nonetheless not without its problems: take-off and landing remain the highest-risk phases, and the aircraft's airworthiness must be checked before every departure. Within this high-stakes environment, service quality becomes both a competitive differentiator and a matter of passenger trust.

1.2 Research Problem and Gap

Travel by plane, while efficient, can feel monotonous and linear, raising the question of what further innovation is possible even within an already mature mode of transport. Historical academic work has tended to isolate single in-flight interactions — meal quality, seating space — while contemporary practice looks at the holistic, end-to-end passenger journey [1]. Two literature gaps motivate this paper: the effect of digitalised self-service channels on passengers' sense of brand empathy and human

connection, and the integration of carbon-reduction and environmental-sustainability indicators into mainstream service-quality measurement [1]. A further methodological gap is that qualitative studies of this kind rarely subject their own descriptive themes to a systematic, quantifiable coding analysis, leaving it unclear how thematic weight is actually distributed across recognised service-quality frameworks.

1.3 Objectives and Research Questions

The study was guided by six objectives:

- To define service excellence in the context of in-flight customer care.
- To identify loopholes in aviation service provision during a flight.
- To uncover obstacles that must be overcome during a flight journey.
- To suggest ways of practising quality assurance on board to enable the best service provision.
- To list the indicators of service excellence used for in-flight service evaluation.
- To evaluate in-flight service so that improvements can be made on subsequent flights.

Each objective maps onto a corresponding research question — respectively, what service excellence means on board, where the loopholes lie, what obstacles must be overcome, how quality assurance can be practised, what the indicators of excellence are, and how service can be evaluated for continuous improvement. Table 5 (Section 5) closes the loop by mapping each objective onto the specific evidence produced in this paper.

1.4 Paper Organization

Section 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks and core dimensions of flight hospitality that underpin the paper's coding scheme. Section 3 describes the qualitative design, the key informant's travel record, and the thematic-coding approach used to quantify the qualitative data. Section 4 presents the coded results across four analyses — SERVQUAL dimensions, in-flight service gaps, obstacles to excellence, and tangible/intangible indicators — each supported by a table and a bar or pie chart. Section 5 discusses the findings, synthesises them against the study's objectives, and considers theoretical and

practical implications. Section 6 concludes and sets out recommendations for further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Aviation service excellence significantly influences passenger loyalty, corporate image and competitive advantage in a highly volatile market [1]. Reaching excellence requires a balance of operational efficiency, human-capital competency and physical environment, made more complex by the market's fragmentation between Full-Service Carriers (FSCs), offering greater comfort, and Low-Cost Carriers (LCCs), competing chiefly on price [1].

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Flight service quality is commonly measured using three specialised frameworks. SERVQUAL — tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy — is the most widely validated general service-quality scale and is used in aviation studies to relate physical cabin dynamics to safety and crew behaviour [2]. The AIRQUAL scale, designed specifically for commercial aviation, measures airline tangibility, terminal operations, personnel service, empathy and corporate image [3]. The IFSQUAL model focuses strictly on the in-flight stage, emphasising crew attributes, catering, safety perception and real-time responsiveness [4]. This paper adopts the five classic SERVQUAL dimensions as its coding structure because they are the most widely validated and map cleanly onto the qualitative themes identified in Section 4.

2.2 Core Dimensions of Flight Hospitality

The tangible cabin environment — seat comfort, spatial ergonomics, cleanliness and hygiene, in-flight entertainment and connectivity — forms the baseline of passenger assessment; poor configuration acts as an instant “dis-satisfier” under Herzberg's two-factor theory [5]. Intangible hospitality, comprising responsiveness, empathy, assurance and professionalism, carries particular weight because aviation is a high-anxiety, tightly regulated environment in which the emotional labour of cabin crew shapes post-flight brand advocacy [6]. In-flight catering — food and beverage quality, temperature and dietary accessibility — is a further core

differentiator, especially between LCCs and legacy carriers [6].

2.3 Service Failure and Recovery

In-flight hospitality is uniquely exposed to external shocks such as weather delay, air-traffic constraints and mechanical faults, which is why service quality is heavily evaluated on recovery rather than on the absence of disruption [7]. When a disruption occurs, the perceived empathy and spontaneity of on-board compensation determine whether the incident produces customer defection or, through the well-documented “service-recovery paradox,” deepens long-term loyalty [8]. Perceived safety is closely entangled with this recovery process: passengers who feel that a crew's handling of a disruption was competent as well as caring report both higher satisfaction and stronger loyalty intentions [16], suggesting that assurance and empathy operate jointly rather than as independent levers during service failure.

2.4 Measurement Models and Loyalty Linkages

Comparative reviews of airline service-quality measurement models confirm that no single instrument — SERVQUAL, AIRQUAL or IFSQUAL — fully captures every relevant dimension, and that fit-for-purpose selection depends on the research question at hand [17]. Relationship-quality studies further show that satisfaction with individual service encounters translates into broader airline loyalty over time, particularly where passengers perceive consistent, unbiased treatment across repeated encounters [18]. Early evaluative work in the sector likewise cautioned that consumer ratings of airline service quality can be an unbiased signal of genuine performance rather than of expectation alone, provided that measurement instruments are carefully specified [19]. Taken together, this literature supports the paper's decision to combine a validated framework (SERVQUAL) with a transparent coding procedure (Section 3.3) rather than relying on either the framework or the raw narrative alone.

2.5 Emerging Trends (2025–2026)

Three trends are reshaping in-flight hospitality: hyper-personalisation, in which crews use handheld digital systems to recognise frequent flyers and pre-

empt past grievances; contactless digital cabins, through which meal pre-ordering and baggage tracking migrate to passengers' own devices [9]; and eco-hospitality, in which single-use plastic reduction, carbon-offset bundles and circular food-waste management become baseline expectations for environmentally conscious travellers [6]. Global aviation's contribution to anthropogenic climate forcing is well documented [12], and shifting wind patterns and stronger storms linked to that forcing are themselves beginning to alter flight schedules and turbulence exposure, closing a feedback loop between service quality and the sector's own environmental footprint.

2.6 Research Gap

Two literature gaps motivate the present restructuring. First, prominent recent work has tracked how digitalised self-service channels affect passengers' sense of brand empathy and human connection only in isolated touch-points rather than across the end-to-end journey [1]. Second, corporate carbon-reduction and environmental-sustainability indicators remain largely external to mainstream service-quality measurement models rather than integrated into them [1]. A third, more methodological gap sits alongside these: qualitative aviation-hospitality research of the kind reviewed above rarely subjects its own descriptive themes to a transparent, replicable coding procedure, making it difficult for later researchers to judge whether a given theme (e.g., empathy) is a peripheral anecdote or a dominant pattern in the underlying data. This paper's thematic-coding approach (Section 3.3) is offered as a modest response to that third gap.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design and Data Collection

The study used a qualitative, thematic design combining desk-based literature review with personal inquiry. Personal interviews and general discussions were held with ten people who had flown during and after the COVID period (2020–2026), supplemented by conversations with air-ticket agents. Ethical safeguards — informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, avoidance of harm, justice and beneficence — were observed throughout, and data collection was completed within a ten-day window,

which constrained the number of respondents obtainable under a qualitative design.

3.2 The Key Informant

A single Zimbabwean citizen, given the pseudonym “Mr. Mandela” for research purposes, was interviewed in depth about eight documented flights between 2019 and 2024, covering regional (Zimbabwe–South Africa) and long-haul international (Zimbabwe–Mauritius, Zimbabwe–Brazil) sectors. Table 1 summarises these journeys; five of the eight legs carried a recorded fare, ranging from USD 300 to USD 1,450 (Fig. 1).

Table 1: Key Informant's Documented Flight Record (2019–2024)

Date	Route	Fare (USD)	Service Observation
Sep 2021	Zimbabwe – South Africa (transit Lesotho)	400	Fast jet; 1h45m to Johannesburg
Jan 2022	Bulawayo – Oliver Tambo (SA)	300	Lower-priced ticket
May 2024	Bulawayo – Port Louis (Mauritius) via SA	1,300	Good internal service; slow SA protocols
Aug 2024	Port Louis – Bulawayo via Johannesburg	Return leg	Smooth, comfortable journey
Sep 2024	Bulawayo – Port Louis via Johannesburg	1,450	Enjoyable; tough Mauritian screening
Dec 2024	Port Louis – Bulawayo via Johannesburg	Return leg	Very comfortable; meals & juices
Sep 2019	Bulawayo – São Paulo (Brazil) via Johannesburg	900	Inclusive vegan diet; jet lag
Sep 2019	São Paulo – Bulawayo via Oliver Tambo	Return leg	Long-haul; jet lag; comfortable IFE

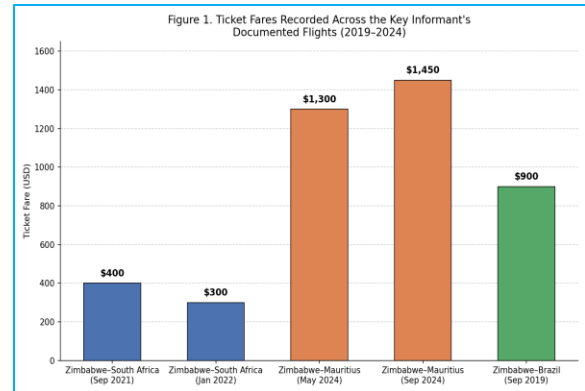


Fig. 1. Ticket fares recorded across the key informant's flights (2019–2024)

3.3 Thematic Coding Approach

Results were first analysed thematically, following the order of the study's objectives, in line with standard qualitative practice. To move beyond purely descriptive narration, every distinct qualitative observation raised across the findings (Section 4) was then coded once — and only once — against the five SERVQUAL dimensions, producing a frequency count per dimension (Table 2, Fig. 2). Coding followed three steps: (i) each discrete observation in the raw interview and travel-record notes was isolated as a single codable unit; (ii) each unit was assigned to the single SERVQUAL dimension it most directly evidenced, using the definitions in Section 2.1 as the coding frame; and (iii) units were tallied per dimension and converted to percentages. Two further practical groupings — obstacles to service delivery, and the tangible/intangible nature of quality indicators — were coded using the same three-step procedure (Tables 3–4; Figs. 3–4). This quantifying of qualitative themes is a recognised technique for adding analytic rigour to small-sample thematic research without overstating statistical generalisability; it produces descriptive frequency counts rather than inferential statistics, and no significance testing is claimed or implied.

3.4 Limitations

The study's qualitative design, small purposively selected sample ($n = 10$, plus one key informant) and short ten-day data-collection window limit statistical generalisability. Findings should be read as an in-depth, theory-linked account of one set of passenger experiences rather than a population-representative

survey; Section 6 recommends a larger, quantitative follow-up.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Service Excellence Enjoyed

The key informant's journeys point to service quality being enjoyed through reasonably priced tickets, inclusive dietary provision and cabin comfort, alongside the underlying thrill and safety of flying. Across carriers used on the recorded routes — including Fastjet and South African Airlink — comfort levels and internal service were generally rated well even where connecting protocols in South Africa were experienced as slow. Immigration and security screening in Mauritius and South Africa was, at times, experienced as an impediment to full enjoyment, though the same thoroughness also reflects legitimate protective duty on the part of officers. Service quality of this kind is a recognised driver of brand loyalty [10]. The informant also experienced jet lag after both international trips — to Brazil in 2019 and on the return leg from Mauritius — suggesting that airlines could do more to proactively educate long-haul passengers on preparation, consistent with evidence that passenger education measurably improves perceived service quality [11].

4.2 SERVQUAL-Coded Thematic Findings

Table 2 summarises the frequency with which qualitative observations from Sections 4.1–4.4 mapped onto each SERVQUAL dimension. Tangibles and reliability were the most frequently coded (six mentions each, 23.1%), followed by responsiveness and empathy (five each, 19.2%), with assurance the least frequent (four, 15.4%) — see Fig. 2. The relatively even spread suggests that, in this dataset, no single SERVQUAL dimension dominates passenger perception; excellence must instead be pursued across all five simultaneously.

Table 2: Coded Qualitative Themes by SERVQUAL Dimension

SERVQUAL Dimension	Representative Themes	n	%
Tangibles	Seat comfort, cleanliness, IFE/Wi-Fi, catering, cabin environment, ticket fare	6	23.1

SERVQUAL Dimension	Representative Themes	n	%
Reliability	Consistent food/drink service, working power outlets, crew tracking tools, stock levels, aging technology, FOQA audits	6	23.1
Responsiveness	Speed of crew response, special requests, delay communication, baggage tracking, allergy follow-up	5	19.2
Assurance	Crew professionalism, security/immigration integrity, safety-protocol firmness, brand trust	4	15.4
Empathy	Jet-lag/allergy care, service-recovery warmth, disability inclusivity, cross-cultural sensitivity	5	19.2
Total	—	26	100.0

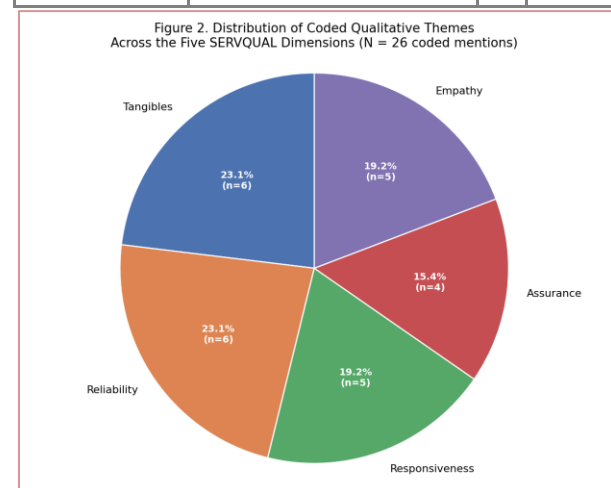


Fig. 2. Distribution of coded qualitative themes across the five SERVQUAL dimensions

4.3 Loose Ends in In-Flight Service

Within the Reliability and Responsiveness dimensions, four specific gap areas recurred: technology and connectivity (slow, costly Wi-Fi; failed power outlets; crew tools that cannot track real-time seat requests); food and special needs (misplaced special meals, unreliable allergy-alert follow-up, fast-depleting fresh-food options); passenger comfort and control (unenforced noise rules, recline conflicts, inconsistent cabin temperature); and communication during delays

(vague tarmac-hold updates, hard-to-access compensation information, slow connecting-gate data). A parallel sustainability theme emerged: lighter meal cuts, local food sourcing, reduced single-use plastic, carbon-labelled tickets and eco-friendly amenity kits were all suggested as ways of narrowing the sector's carbon footprint, cited at 90–250 g CO₂ per passenger-kilometre and roughly 2.5–3% of global CO₂ emissions [12].

4.4 Obstacles to Service Excellence

Ten distinct obstacles to on-board service excellence were identified and grouped into three categories (Table 3, Fig. 3). Operational and environmental obstacles were the most numerous (n = 4, 40%): limited cabin space restricting fast movement, short-flight time pressure, turbulence halting service, and cabin noise disrupting communication. Human and cultural obstacles (n = 3, 30%) included crew fatigue from long shifts and changing time zones, inconsistent service arising from variation in mood, training and personality, and elevated crew stress from demanding passengers. System and resource obstacles (n = 3, 30%) comprised stock-outs of meals or comfort items, ageing technology such as slow payment terminals, and tension between firm safety protocol and a relaxed, friendly service style.

Table 3: Obstacles to In-Flight Service Excellence, by Category

Category	Representative Obstacles	n	%
Operational & Environmental	Limited cabin space; short-flight time pressure; turbulence; cabin noise	4	40.0
Human & Cultural	Crew fatigue; inconsistent service; high crew stress	3	30.0
System & Resource	Stock-outs; ageing technology; safety-vs-friendliness tension	3	30.0
Total	—	10	100.0

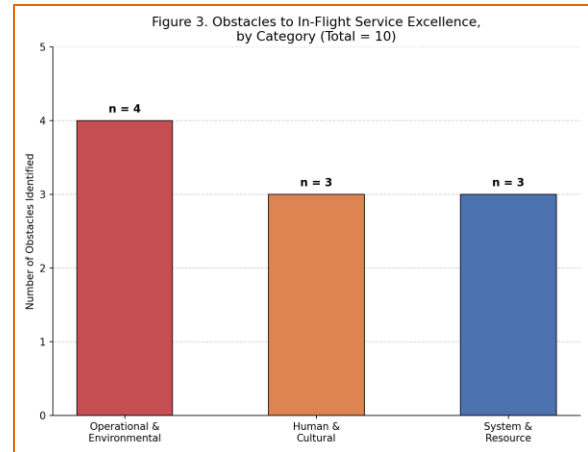


Fig. 3. Obstacles to in-flight service excellence, by category

4.5 Quality Assurance and Evaluation

Quality assurance on board can be implemented through Flight Operational Quality Assurance (FOQA) programmes, regular safety audits, compliance-monitoring systems and continuous analysis of digital flight-data-recorder metrics. Four core steps recur across these programmes:

- Flight-data monitoring — installing digital flight-data recorders to capture hundreds of operational parameters per flight.
- De-identified data analysis — aggregating and reviewing downloaded flight metrics without punitive intent, so that crews report deviations candidly.
- Routine audits and inspections — systematically reviewing flight dispatch, crew procedures and ground-handling operations.
- Corrective-action loops — identifying operational risk or procedure gaps early, issuing recommendations, and tracking remediation to completion.

Evaluation of service excellence itself draws on direct observation of aircraft appearance, crew time-consciousness, customer handling, food quality and hospitality, and inclusivity [13]. Price remains a key driver of airline choice, and early-booking discounts function as a further loyalty lever [14].

4.6 Indicators of Service Quality

Fourteen distinct indicators of service quality emerged from the data and were classified as tangible or intangible (Table 4, Fig. 4). Tangible indicators (n = 5, 35.7%) included ticket price and affordability,

seat comfort and cleanliness, in-flight entertainment, and the physical cabin environment (temperature, blankets, sanitary provision). Intangible, human-factor indicators were more numerous (n = 9, 64.3%): crew appearance and professionalism, multilingual and approachable communication, empathy and assurance, time management, booking/cancellation convenience, public-relations handling of queries, repurchase-intention management, disability inclusivity, and free passenger interaction. This imbalance — nearly two-thirds of indicators being intangible — reinforces the literature's emphasis on the human factor as the primary lever of perceived quality in a high-anxiety service environment [6], [15].

Table 4: Service-Quality Indicators, by Type

Type	Representative Indicators	n	%
Tangible	Price/affordability; seat comfort & cleanliness; IFE; cabin environment	5	35.7
Intangible	Crew professionalism; empathy; time management; booking convenience; inclusivity; PR handling	9	64.3
Total	—	14	100.0

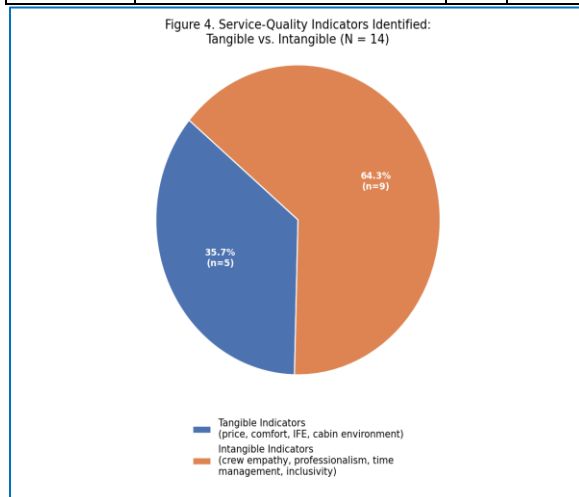


Fig. 4. Service-quality indicators identified: tangible vs. intangible

4.7 Inclusivity and Accessibility

A further recurring theme, distinct from the four coded analyses above, was inclusivity for passengers with disabilities. Advance provision of wheelchairs,

accessible boarding procedures and clear pre-flight communication of accessibility options were identified as increasingly expected rather than exceptional [13], [22]. Guidance aimed directly at disabled travellers now frames accessible flying as a standard service expectation rather than a special accommodation [20], [21], reinforcing that inclusivity sits alongside the five SERVQUAL dimensions as a cross-cutting marker of genuine service excellence rather than a peripheral add-on.

V. DISCUSSION

Read together, the four coded analyses and the fare record converge on a consistent picture of what drives in-flight service excellence in this dataset. Table 5 maps this evidence explicitly back onto the study's six objectives before the sub-sections below discuss each analysis in turn.

Table 5: Research Objectives Mapped to Key Evidence

Objective	Key Evidence Produced
1. Define service excellence on board	SERVQUAL-coded themes (Table 2, Fig. 2) operationalise excellence across five dimensions
2. Identify loopholes in service provision	Four loose-end categories in technology, food, comfort and communication (Sec. 4.3)
3. Uncover obstacles during a flight	Ten obstacles in three categories (Table 3, Fig. 3)
4. Suggest quality-assurance practice	FOQA-based assurance framework (Sec. 4.5)
5. List indicators of excellence	Fourteen tangible/intangible indicators (Table 4, Fig. 4)
6. Evaluate in-flight service	Fare record (Table 1, Fig. 1) and cross-theme synthesis (Sec. 5.1–5.4)

5.1 Dimensional Balance

No single SERVQUAL dimension dominates (Fig. 2): tangibles and reliability jointly account for less than half of all coded mentions, and the remaining

three dimensions are closely bunched between 15% and 19%. This even spread suggests that, at least in this dataset, cabin hardware alone cannot deliver excellence without matching reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy — a finding consistent with SERVQUAL's original premise that service quality is inherently multi-dimensional [2] rather than reducible to any single “headline” attribute such as price or seat pitch.

5.2 Where Obstacles Concentrate

Obstacles are concentrated in factors airlines can influence through scheduling and crew resourcing (operational/environmental, 40%) rather than in factors requiring major capital investment (Fig. 3). This suggests that fatigue-aware rostering, realistic buffer time on short-haul rotations, and turbulence-contingent service protocols could meaningfully reduce the largest obstacle category without new aircraft or cabin retrofits — a comparatively low-cost intervention with potentially high service-quality return.

5.3 The Intangible Skew

The strong intangible skew in quality indicators (64.3% vs. 35.7% tangible, Fig. 4) confirms that human-factor investment — training, empathy, cultural sensitivity, communication — offers more leverage over perceived excellence than incremental cabin-hardware spending. This echoes the literature's emphasis on emotional labour as a determinant of post-flight brand advocacy [6] and suggests that airlines competing primarily on hardware (wider seats, newer entertainment systems) may be under-investing relative to where passengers actually locate “excellence.”

5.4 Price as a Persistent Driver

The fare data (Fig. 1) corroborate the qualitative theme that price is “a great attraction” and “a key driver” in airline choice [14]. Fares ranged more than four-fold across the five priced itineraries (USD 300–1,450), with the highest fares attached to the longer, multi-leg Mauritius routings. This reinforces that affordability and perceived value remain inseparable from service-quality judgements even when in-flight experience itself — as in the informant's comfortable, meal-inclusive long-haul legs — is rated highly. Limited route choice on some corridors (e.g., only

two realistic carrier options between Bulawayo and neighbouring hubs) further constrains passengers' ability to trade price against service quality.

5.5 Positioning Against Prior Literature

Table 6 positions this study's dimensional weighting against the emphasis typically reported in the cited literature. The comparison is qualitative rather than statistical, since the underlying studies used different samples, instruments and geographies, but it usefully shows where this dataset agrees with, and diverges from, prior emphasis.

Table 6: This Study's Emphasis vs. Typical Emphasis in Cited Literature

Dimension	This Study	Typical Literature Emphasis
Tangibles	23.1% (joint-highest)	Frequently dominant, especially cabin/seat studies [5]
Reliability	23.1% (joint-highest)	Moderate; often subsumed under operational safety [16]
Responsiveness	19.2%	High in service-recovery literature [7], [8]
Assurance	15.4% (lowest)	High in safety/security-focused literature [19]
Empathy	19.2%	Increasingly emphasised as the human-factor differentiator [6], [15]

The main divergence is assurance, which this dataset codes as the least frequent dimension even though safety-and-security literature often treats it as central [19]. A plausible explanation is that the key informant experienced assurance-related events (security screening, immigration checks) as largely routine and successful, generating fewer distinct codable observations than the more variable, event-driven themes captured under reliability and responsiveness.

5.6 Theoretical and Practical Contribution

Theoretically, the paper contributes a replicable method for quantifying thematic weight in small-sample qualitative aviation research, addressing the methodological gap identified in Section 2.6 without overstating what a sample of this size can support statistically. Practically, the four analyses jointly suggest a low-cost, high-leverage sequence for airlines seeking to close service gaps: prioritise empathy and reliability training (Sec. 5.1), address operational/environmental obstacles through rostering and protocol design before capital investment (Sec. 5.2), weight human-factor development over hardware upgrades (Sec. 5.3), and maintain transparent, competitive pricing on routes where passenger choice is already limited (Sec. 5.4).

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper found that service quality is closely tied to dietary inclusivity, good public relations, environmental cleanliness and affordable ticket fares. Coding the underlying qualitative themes against SERVQUAL, an obstacles taxonomy and a tangible/intangible indicator split confirmed that excellence is multi-dimensional, human-factor-weighted, and driven as much by scheduling and crew-resourcing decisions as by cabin hardware. Service excellence is not a fixed state: it must be dynamically planned, timed and continuously re-evaluated against passengers' evolving expectations. Sustained training and day-to-day practice in public relations will keep crew alert to closing loopholes as they arise, while comfort, free movement and clean sanitary facilities help keep passengers' minds at ease during the flight.

Table 7 translates the discussion in Section 5 into four concrete recommendations, ranked by the relative cost and effort of implementation, so that resource-constrained carriers can sequence action starting with the lowest-cost, highest-leverage items.

Table 7: Recommendations Ranked by Relative Implementation Cost

Recommendation	Rationale	Relative Cost
Prioritise empathy- and reliability-focused crew training	These two dimensions jointly account for over 42% of coded thematic weight (Fig. 2)	Low
Redesign short-haul rostering and turbulence protocols	Operational/environmental obstacles are the largest single category (40%, Fig. 3)	Low–Medium
Shift incremental spend from hardware to human-factor development	64.3% of quality indicators identified were intangible, not tangible (Fig. 4)	Medium
Maintain transparent, competitive pricing on constrained routes	Fares varied more than four-fold (Fig. 1) and route choice was limited on some corridors	Medium–High

- Field a larger, quantitative follow-up survey to test whether the thematic proportions reported here (Figs. 2–4) replicate across a bigger, randomly sampled passenger population, using a structured Likert instrument built directly on the coding scheme in Section 3.3.
- Extend the analysis across aircraft type, route, destination, season and travel class, since the fare and comfort differences observed here (Fig. 1) suggest these factors materially shape perceived service quality and may explain variance this single-informant design cannot capture.
- Deepen the sustainability angle by quantifying the carbon footprint associated with different aircraft and catering choices, building on the 2.5–3% global-emissions baseline cited in Section 4.3, and by testing whether carbon-labelled tickets influence booking behaviour.
- Prioritise empathy- and reliability-focused crew training, given that these two dimensions jointly

account for over 42% of coded thematic weight (Fig. 2), and track whether such training measurably narrows the obstacle categories identified in Table 3.

VII. ETHICS STATEMENT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All interviews were conducted under informed consent, with confidentiality, anonymity, avoidance of harm, justice and beneficence observed throughout; the key informant's name has been replaced with a pseudonym at his request. The author thanks the Kazian School of Management for guidance throughout the Global Doctorate programme, the course faculty for their instruction in research methods, and the research evaluation team whose feedback substantially improved the analytical structure of this paper.

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