

**Customer perception on services quality based on live chat for  
travel and tourism industry**

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## **Abstract**

The research aimed at examining consumer perceptions on the quality of service on the bases of live chats. Based on this, the research purposed to cover the influence live chats has on consumer perceptions, the level of engagement and interaction through live chats, individual satisfaction, and the correlation between satisfaction levels and live engagement. The research adopted the qualitative method where online questionnaires became a pertinent tool in collecting views, opinions, and suggestions from people. With the help of the BOS website, the research found it possible to engage 88 participants who were sourced from Facebook, twitter, Pinterest, Reddit and Whatsapp. The findings noted that consumers are likely to perceive service quality based on what friends shared to them over the past experience with the service. This also resonates with the impact of live chats on real-time responses and reactions to comments, questions, and opinions posted on most of the social media platforms.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background**

Across the travel and tourism industry, most of the customer searches and feedbacks take place through the online platform. The understanding of possible business consequences due to these online platforms is an area under research. Perhaps, the advent of word of mouth has increasingly grown to be more relevant in the era of internet and the internet of Things. Statistics has it that internet users have increased in number from 3.39 billion to 3.58 billion as from the year 2005 to 2017 (Statista, 2017). The drastic increase indicates possible chances of more people moving online and therefore, seeks services and products through online platforms. Melo et al. (2017) studied the extrinsic cues attached to the service industry claiming that services are essentially dominated by intangible attributes. The emergence of the information asymmetries has been realigned towards the pre-purchase details and the post-purchase information that drive customers towards clarity. The signalling theory, however, indicates that customers are likely to make use of cues in assessing quality. Tourists are likely to gather same signals from other people's behaviours as one way of understanding the decision framework.

Therefore, introduction of online platforms in the travel and tourism industry has been shaped as a basic need that channels positive behaviours to customers. It is worth noting that industries can tap into online customer reviews as a resourceful platform in determining the attitude, ownership, behaviours and usability of a service or good by the clients. Most of the reviews largely provide the customers' opinions, experiences, and emotions. Haghkhah et al. (2011) also adopted the same idea while studying the Malaysian travel and tourism industry.

While service quality appears to be an abstract concept, it amounts to one critical area that delves into the question of customer satisfaction as well as expectations.

Service quality in tourism attracts research in the area that covers the importance of online services. Haghkhah et al. (2011) further indicates that interactions in the travel and tourism industry where the hotel personnel has a direct influence on the visitors experience. This also implies that internet revolution came at the right time as it impacts significant changes in terms of the way most of the travel agencies are supposed to interact with their customers. Some of the travel websites take advantage of the post-transaction, pre-transaction and transaction services, which also helps most of the businesses to understand how customers are likely to interact in the online platforms. The move helps service providers in satisfying customers while creating loyalty. The thought of internet has enhanced competition across most of the travel agents and tourism across the world. In the basis of the information efficiency determined by WWW, it is evident that most of the travel and tourism agents are competing for similar services. This means that the scope of service quality provides a differential platform described through the mode of interaction the company has with its customers. Perhaps, most of the agencies are embracing social media platforms for real-time interactions as far as the internet business is put into consideration.

The argument of internet business is further captured by Bai et al. (2008) who focused on the customer quality perceptions across the travel websites and related social media platforms. Bai et al. (2008) delved more into how the consumers perceive most of the online and traditional services following different conceptualizations. First, Bai et al. (2008) looked at the scope of online travel business even before the authors worked on how the characteristics of tourists can resonate with such services.

Online travel services have been associated with both the auxiliary and peripheral services reasoned through provision of an additional value to customers. An online travel agency is more likely to pursue live chats through establishment of different platforms that are not limited to traveller storybooks, chat rooms and relevant websites that can help tourists to enjoy online services, or services that can allow them to interact with the rest of the travellers headed to a common destination. In a wider perspective, technology has been a frontier in terms of enabling exchange of information between the service providers and customers, among customers themselves, and between business customers. Besides, Live chats, in the context of the travel and tourism industry, paves way for the essence of creating significant user interfaces, which can bolster the efficiency of service quality.

The technical purposes of having the user interface is largely to describe how the services can be delivered to most of the customers, thereby having an impact on the quality perceptions that can affect service delivery. Whether customers are satisfied with the service or not, it all depends on the activities witnessed during purchase as well as consumption. The perception can easily be created among consumers themselves depending on what one customer tells the other. This means that live chats engaged among customers amount to signals that commonly indicate awareness as well as the customer attitude and the sense of trust they have towards a particular service (Kandampully et al. 2015). Customers tend to trust messages or attitudes of other customers said to be consuming a common service or product. The trust and the tendency of creating or developing an attitude towards a business or travel agency grow depending on the number of customers involved in the live chats. Online platforms, therefore, are emerging as significant predictors of the business performance or service quality depending on the reviews and comments posted by clients.

From the review of a few of the case studies, most of them focus on the websites and online platforms the businesses depend on for the purposes of assessing service quality. Some of the mentioned businesses focus on creating their own websites as one way of capturing the comments, reviews and reactions among potential customers. However, there is still a research gap that needs subsequent investigations or research. The gap revolves around how live chats provide real-time perceptions of customers towards service quality, and how this resonates with performance of the travel and tourism industry. Sometimes, most of the travel agencies end up depending on long-term plans and strategies, which can be expensive to change in case there is a change in the customer behaviour as a result of divided interests and a collection of different perceptions. This means that real-time perceptions and attitudes from customers call for a flexible business plan that can be adjusted to favour consumer behaviour.

## **1.2 Research problem and justification**

Several firms from a wide range of industry try to meet customers' expectations under a fierce competitive environment. In the other respect, increasing internet usage led companies to seek for new tools and adopt them to ensure customer satisfaction. Today, many customers do their shopping via internet. They also need to communicate with companies to find an answer for their questions about services or goods. Managing customer relationship is the one of the important indicator for service quality. Live chat is a new trend that provides instantaneous response to its online customers. It passes over traditional interaction tools such as telephones or mail. Live chat seems effective communication tools for online marketing. While researches seem to focus on service quality and the scope of customer satisfaction and

expectations, little or no studies have been directed towards understanding perceptions of customers based on specific online platforms for travel and travel industry like live chat.

Failure to cover the essence of live chats and the understanding of perceptions has also led to ignorance of the post-purchase perceptions and customer's pre-purchase perceptions as far as service quality is put into consideration. Perhaps, the thought of satisfaction is squarely grounded in the perception of service quality across the market segment or a potential market. Haghkhah et al. (2011) justifies the fact there is still confusion when it comes to relating service quality and customer satisfaction. Most of the case studies allude to the fact that customer satisfaction and service quality are interchangeable and companies fail to relate the two. As much as the two look more similar, they often have differences which call for attention in most cases. First, customer satisfaction and the scope of service quality differ in terms of the post-experience decision over the customer experience, satisfaction expectations as reflected in the anticipated performance, as well as the normative stand of what the future demands. As businesses work on their websites, it is never easy for customers to post a questionable comment or raise suspicion over the chances of poor quality said to have appeared in the history of the company.

Perhaps, some of the customers would choose to keep quiet over an issue and others choose to fake their satisfaction as one way of pleasing the business. Perhaps, freer platforms with no restrictions and permit live chats make most of the clients to feel the freedom of expressing their attitudes, complaints, suggestions, and general comments. Most of the managers understand the market and customer behaviour but fail to tap into genuine feelings and attitude of their clients in the service industry such as the travel and tourism industry. The question remains as to how companies can convert most of the live chats into real-time

perceptions especially in the travel and tourist industry. Rare studies focus on the real-time solutions as most of them would choose to pick on a history, which may not impact the situation in the context. This research, therefore, finds a research problem in the scope of converting the live chats into an understanding of the live chats that mean a lot in constructing real-time solutions as far as service quality in the travel and tourism industry is considered.

### **1.3 Purpose of the study**

This study aims to find customers' perception of service quality for live chat service in travel and tourism websites. The purpose of this study also revolves round fulfilment of the requirements of a master's degree at Anglia Ruskin University. This means that details gathered in the research process and the prompted analysis serves as compliance to the requirements of the course as stipulated by the university. In the course of the study, the prime aim fosters the organizational influence on the consumer-consumer relations, consumer-organization relations, retention rates and the customer satisfaction levels as detected through live chats. Besides, the study concentrates on the SERVQUAL model while assessing the perceptions and expectations of the consumers especially in the travel and tourism industry.

### **1.4 Aims and objectives**

The main aim of this research is to examine the customer's perception regarding service quality on the bases of using live chat. Key research questions include:

- What is the influence of the live chat platforms on customer's perception towards service quality?

- What is level of interaction and engagement among customers on live chats?
- How do online interactions influence individual's satisfaction based on the services offered?
- How does the correlation between live engagement and satisfaction levels relate to services?

### **1.5 Scope of the study**

The research is tailored towards perceptions held by clients on service quality across the travel and tourism on the basis of live chat. In the travel and tourism industry, customer expectations and competitiveness are as a result of globalization, emergence of new technologies and deregulations believed to have forced key players to focus on quality. In an organizational context, the research will stick to its main aim and the supporting objectives as far as customer satisfaction and service quality are put into consideration. An interview noted in the research methodology aims at collecting opinions while capturing the influence of integrating live chats that address perceptions towards service quality in the travel and tourism industry, the level of interactions of customers in live chats, the influence of the online interactions on the customer satisfaction, and finally, the correlation between live engagement and satisfaction levels as linked to the travel and tourism industry.

### **1.6 Research Methodology**

The research will improvise inductive approach in analysing considerable scenarios related to service quality and customer satisfaction in the travel and tourism industry. The research will also benefit from document analysis and thematic coding in interpreting the collected information. Besides, the qualitative research method is also thought to be the most appropriate method to be applied in the course of seeking descriptions or exploration of the

phenomena. In this context, the qualitative approach looks at the theories, arguments, suggestions, and opinions that best describe the significance of live chats in understanding perceptions on service quality across the travel and tourism industry.

### **1.7 The Structure of the thesis**

Chapter 1 provides the introduction where the background, the purpose, and the rationale of this research are captured. Besides, the research aims and research objectives are clearly established thereby facilitating a guide for the research process. Chapter 2 avails the literature review where significant and relevant case studies and researches are captured. Chapter 3 facilitates the research methodology where a collection of tools and techniques are established in implementing the research processes guided by the research aim and objective. Chapter 4 taps into the findings while Chapter 5 provides the discussion to the research findings.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provides an overview of what has been covered elsewhere but related to the research topic. In most cases, it covers the objectives of the study while connecting them to different case studies. The following topics can be explored to gain insights of the study.

### **2.1 The influence of live chat platforms on the customer's perception towards service quality in the travel and tourism industry**

Customers' expectations are increasing and getting harder to meet. Customers have more choice in the high-tech era: more goods to buy, more information to influence purchasing decisions, and more channels over which to seek customer service. Leggett (2018) found that customers do not wait for more response time. The study demonstrated 66% of US online adults think that valuing their time is the most significant thing a firm can do to supply them with pleasant online customer experience. The data has already showed that self-service interactions have overtaken all other channels. The study has showed a 13.6% increase for web self-service in 2018, compared with just a 1.6% rise for the phone channel. Kim and Kim (2017) relate the statistics to the travel and tourism industry that is currently embracing real time data as well as information accessed through the mobile devices. This means that mobile technology plays a significant role in terms of defining the behavioural entities connected to tourism.

According to the research done by Kim and Kim (2017) indicates that the theme of smart tourism is currently cutting across the travel and tourism industry in both the United States and China among other countries around the world. Almost 80% of the travel and tourism agencies in China and the United States are moving online where they tap most of the clients, as well as assess satisfaction in the most convenient way. The use of online systems in

tourism dates back in 2000s following the domination of the Airbnb, TripAdvisor and uber. However, the use of mobile internet has most of the clients into using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Whatsapp among others.

Many clients become reluctant to finalize a purchase if their questions are not answered. Live chat gives companies the opportunity to respond customers' questions instantaneously, which increases customer satisfaction. Live chat keeps customers confident because it allows companies to solve problems instantly rather than making customers wait to receive an answer (Elmorshidy 2013). According to Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2002) information availability is one of the most important indicator of service quality through websites. Online customers benefit from getting information through the websites. According to Bitner et al. (2002), even though technology is increasing and bringing additional benefits, companies should know that customers still want good service even when dealing with technology. They still want their questions answered, they still expect timeliness, they expect things to work, they want flexibility, they want help and assistance, and they expect readjustment when things go wrong. Dolen and Ruyter (2002) researched clients' satisfaction with moderated group chat service encounters by using an empirical research design. Respondents communicated with an advisor and other customers about financial investments through live chat. By using Likert-scales, Dolen and Ruyter (2002) attempted to evaluate the impact of ease of use, usefulness, and enjoyment on customers' perception based on live chat. They assessed the results at both an individual level and group level.

While the group level of analysis showed that usefulness, ease of use, and enjoyment perceived by users were important statistically, on the individual level, the perceived ease of

use and enjoyment were important and perceived usefulness was not. This research especially highlighted the importance of two dimensions that customers perceived through using live chat: ease of use and enjoyment. Different studies have delved into issues of identifying customers' perception towards service quality with regards to live chats. Turel, Connelly and Fisk (2013) conducted a research on 86 users of a library web-based live-chat service that is perceived to be authentic, leading to positive user assessment of information satisfaction, friendliness, and system usefulness evaluations, and ultimately to sustained use. On the other hand, Melo et al. (2017) indicates that online reviews as well as online comments are the critical indicators of perceived service quality.

The authors further explored both the negative and positive scenarios of service experience within the tourism setting. Melo et al. (2017) further indicates that online reviews can be substantiated as signals that can enhance the customers' trust and attitudes as well as the industry's market awareness. Jun et al. (2004) explored the impact that online platforms have on firms while developing survival strategies for interaction. Jun et al. (2004) focused on a case study of the US firms and how they have been performing as a result of the online platforms. June et al. (2004) found that accessibility, which refers to ease of contact of service quality, is one of the most important dimensions to evaluate online service quality. Customers evaluated accessibility as the second most important factor of service quality. The research also showed customers want to find more option to access a company such as telephone, mail, and live chat.

Elmorshidy et al. (2015) found usefulness, perceived ease of use and privacy are significant factors to use live chat. They conducted a research to investigate factors that affect live

customer chat service at e-commerce websites in Kuwait. Based on 324 respondents, the research showed that perceived usefulness and ease of use are the most important factors to use live chat. However, customers want to ensure that their information in live chat is not shared with others. Therefore, the authors suggested that firms should make livechat user friendly to make users feel confident. The thought of live chat platforms being a driving tool for consumer perception has also been captured by Rossmann et al. (2017). The authors focused on the efficacy of social media systems and whether live chats can handle complaints placed by customers. Rossmann et al. (2017) noted that customer complaints are recurrent, which means that the process of complaint handling should observe the overall service quality, as well as firm's customer centricity.

The researchers confirmed the fact that firms are increasingly adopting social media with utilization of key platforms like Facebook and Twitter. The adoption also applies to the service industries with travel and tourism industries finding the reviews more relevant in defining the scope of decision making. The move of the tourism in adopting the online platforms and live chats is influenced by the growth of the number of agencies within the same industry as noted by Terttunen (2017). Travel and tourism industry is growing at the fastest rate with international tourists mounting to 1.18 billion in the year 2015. Terttunen (2017) further indicates that China, the United States and France are the dominant tourism destinations, which means that better services are required for the growing market. Management of service quality in the tourism industry is largely nurtured by the perceptions of the travellers across the world. Such perceptions are essentially possible through some of the social media platforms and websites attached to the travel and tourism agencies.

Subsequent processes involved in handling social media activities include the internal process and social media monitoring. Studies on complaint management largely observe fairness where such dimensions like procedural, distributive and interactional justice always apply. A focus on interactional justice largely entails or encompasses service delivery. As Rossmann et al. (2017) indicates, interactional justice basically depends on perceptions and how customers perceive the employee effort, employee politeness as well as the employee empathy. Based on this argument, it can be justified that social media can possibly allow or give room for engagement and partnering between the customer and firm with customer retention basically depending on the company's actions. On the basis of the parasocial interaction theory, it is possible for social media to facilitate an illusionary experience behind the reciprocal relationships across the mediating personas. This means that live chats provides a democratic platform where consumers can still have their way without condemnation. Through illusion, social media can easily convince customers over an existing or non-existing service quality and assure them of utility even when the expected level of quality cannot be provided at the time.

## **2.2 Interaction and engagement among customers on live chats in the service industry**

Kietzmann et al. (2011) adopts different studies in response to engagement and interactions witnessed on live chats. The authors alluded to the fact that consumers make use of the internet to extend content, and that they read it as well as watch it when it concerns products and services. However, the greatest concern narrows down to how customers make use of such platforms, especially the ones attached to the service industry. Content sharing has been witnessed on wikis, social networking sites and blogs. Kietzmann et al. (2011) took note of the remarkable performance by social media as a result of the functional building blocks. The

blocks include relationships, reputation, conversations, identity, presence, and groups as well as sharing. On the other hand, Chandler and Lusch (2015) delved into realization of the service experience, and engagement as well as value proposition. In this case, Chandler and Lusch (2015) referred to the social and service systems that bind the perceptions of customers towards service quality.

Kwak (2001) found that customers have a tendency to engage in web chat as they become more familiar with the internet and when tools such as telephone or mail do not provide a reliable interactive transaction. Chat support service could be a magnificent communication tool when customers are engaged in a high-involvement-product or service purchase. Besides, Gonzalez (2015) analysed the correlation of 87 official destination websites according to two factors: interactivity and presence of social web components. According to their findings, user-message interaction is the most developed aspect, the authors suggested that advancing in offering a range of tools encourage customers to become familiar with the destination and arrange their journey. Trip planners, mobile applications and multimedia display elements for the destinations are just some priority elements all websites should include to improve this area of interaction. In terms of user-user interaction, many experts point to the importance of *word of mouth* (WOM) as a mechanism for conveying information users deem reliable, but this is scant in the case of most destinations.

New technology gives companies advanced interaction tools to focus on customers' needs. Dolen and Ruyter (2002) suggested that live chat can be a social engaging tool for firms, which enhances its interactive richness. Interaction, either direct or indirect, brings about different types of value creation for companies. On the other hand, interactions make the value creation process potentially reachable for the both customers and providers. Company

engagement with customer interactions may affect the customers' value creation both positively and negatively. This can be related to the constitution of the online landscape presented by Xiang et al. (2015) where they noted that European online travel agencies are enhancing the online leisure by a significant percentage. The positive change in the travel and tourism industry is accompanied by an increase on the use of the online share, which stood at 46% in the year 2010. Most of the UK travellers are more comfortable with the booking complex with strong momentums noted across the social media management. The perception of a growing tourism industry in UK has, however, been due to dynamics that have continuously been moving travellers into online platforms. The platforms are key determinants of the customers' attitude as noted in some of the meta-search sites like Swoodoo, Trivago and Skyscanner.

The basis of interaction is a physical, virtual, or mental contact, such when the provider generates opportunities to engage with its clients' experiences and practices and so affects flow and outcomes (Grönroos and Voima 2013). Customer engagement plays upon a significant role in governing service relationships in which other relational concepts such as involvement, loyalty. Customer engagement is a state that arises from virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal firm or band in focal service relationship (Brodie et al. 2011). Marbach et al. (2016) conducted research about customer-perceived value in online customer engagement by focusing on personality traits. Exploratory interviews suggested that customer value is showed up as a result of customer engagement. In addition, online customer engagement (cognitive, emotional and behavioural) is positively associated with social value, play, excellence, efficiency, aesthetic value, and altruistic value. Live chat could bring some advantages to companies to reach international clients who do not have access to toll-free. New internet technology and developing interactive market space

leads firms to concentrate on broadening new technology-based communications to overcome growing complexity in communicating with their stakeholders particularly customers (Ozuem et al. 2008). Arrazola et al. (2013) evaluated customers' awareness of live chat support and they found that if users/customers did not find the information they are looking for, they went to the FAQs section and after many futile searches, and they decided to use the live chat support. According the research, it is clear that live chat services on websites address a need for the customers to extend information.

In the context of reviewing customers on live chats, Gray et al. (2015) focused on the digital dynamics especially in most of the consumer-centric industries. Industries of this nature are known for providing services and products to millions of customers around the world. Live chats are currently known for enhancing the consumer experience, reducing the shopping cart as well as driving sales conversions. Gray et al. (2015) looks at the chats in the today's marketplace with consumer usage seen to have increased for the last three years. In the year 2009, over 30% of the online consumers were known for using the chats, while in 2012, the figure rose to almost 43%.

Apparently, the adoption of chats has greatly been influenced by two important forces, which include expansion of availability and customer satisfaction. Gray et al. (2015) further indicates that across all online channels, live chats score highly in terms of customer satisfaction, which is an incident that can be attributed to many factors. Some of the factors include high chances for customers to engage with real persons through a channel believed to be faster and better than the telephone, anonymity, retention of the transcript of the entire conversation and having options of co-browsing. In the modern era, customer engagement

programs are said to work more effectively as a result of the interactions and engagements witnessed among most of the online users. Today, over 35% of the travel and tourism companies around the world offer live chats while 19% are thought to have implemented it (Gray et al. 2015). In the course of interaction and engagement, chats can easily be bundled with other services or products. For instances, web self-service, social management, co-browsing, email and even click-to-call are extra features and services one can enjoy while using a variety of the platforms. For example, Twitter or Facebook has forced most of the firms to prioritize essential vendors such as Boldchat, Oracle RightNow and LivePerson as well as Moxie Software for the purposes of availing the required expertise across the virtual agent technology.

A study realized through the Martin Research noted that over 80% of the United Kingdom consumers are making use of internet (Melo et al. 2017). Most of them make use of the internet as the key channel of communication and a platform that allows them to carry out transactions in the travel and tourism industry. Most of the online platforms are changing the entire face linked to the financial services as noted in the tourism industry. Trust in the financial transactions is highly needed and largely redefines the relationship between the service providers and banks, as well as the service providers and customers. Statistics conducted in 2012 indicate that over 90% of the online consumers at least make use of one or two online banking services while making payments to the travel and tourism agencies.

While banking services involve the use of online apps, social media has never been left behind as customers feel better to interact on Facebook and twitter. Why do businesses or customers in the travel and tourism industry use social media when online banking apps are

available? Social media provides an environment where a business can talk directly to the customers as well as fans, or fans and customers can talk to one another. Social media forms part of the interactive component that enables consultants to identify, as well as address the complaints raised by most of the dissatisfied customers in the industry. Others would end making use of social media to share financial tips, trip packages as well as advice while exploring a new service or product in the market offered in the tourism industry. This means that live chats allow customers to experience the opinions, ideas and suggestions from other consumers believed to be making use of a service or consuming a common product. Some of the companies are miles away in terms of using live chats such as the travel agencies in the United Kingdom.

For example, American express is said to have come up with the “open forum” as one way of facilitating sharing of experiences and ideas across the business customers. This is the same case that applies to Morgan Stanley Smith Barney, which launched the Advisor insights meant to address issues within the service industries (Dobbin and Kalev 2016). Besides, Bank of America and Citibank are said to have pioneered the customer services through twitter and HSBC through Facebook. However, Smilansky (2017) clearly states that social media has its challenges and posits weaknesses if not handled carefully. While financial services appear to be more sensitive than any other retail services, it is difficult to keep most of the conversations in the public forums private and confidential at the same time. This indicates chances of mistrust among consumers themselves and lack of loyalty among consumers to their respective businesses and suppliers. Other challenges include losing personal touch where consumers expect familiar faces before they can share anything on the live chats. If such faces keep changing from time to time, most of the consumers would choose to pull out of the virtual communities or move to others where membership is consistent. A case where

membership keeps changing is likely to witness absence of intelligence as well as responsiveness towards the customer needs as it applies in the service industries such as travel and tourism.

### **2.3 The impact of online interactions on individual satisfaction based on services offered**

Hsu et al. (2012) posits that travel agencies play a significant role across the tourism industry. However, the development of e-commerce and internet is introducing more people to websites and other online platforms. This has introduced the idea of change in the travel and tourism industry based on transactions and interactions. Hsu et al. (2012) observed customers interactions on personal accounts while analysing the perceptions of customers. On the basis of the flow theory, the authors observed the enjoyable experience customers had when interacting via the online platforms. Flow, in this case, is described as the psychological experience as a result of work, hobbies, sports, events and even artistic performance. While observing the individual's satisfaction as a result of online interactions, Hsu et al. (2012) focused on enjoyment, curiosity and concentration of the customers towards an event and comments written by individuals. On the other hand, Jiang and Rosenbloom (2005) delved into service quality and perceptions behind online marketing. Different areas were observed in the course of the research including the price perception; customer satisfaction and the service attribute level. Jiang and Rosenbloom (2005) further pointed at the need of orienting strategies towards customer retention while observing superior customer values amid online interactions.

Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Malhotra (2002) found reassurance, courtesy and other facet of personal attention in offline context; these service qualifications do not imply significant issues in perceived online service quality. Only when customers need to interact with special

assistance to get help, the personal (e.g. empathetic, understanding and friendly) aspect of service quality's empathy can be required. However, Froehle (2006), found although customer service representatives characteristics such as courtesy, professionalism and attentiveness have an impact on face to face interaction, those characteristics does not have a significant role on online interaction. Ba and Johansson (2008) conducted research to evaluate customer satisfaction through e-service processes in the tourism industry. They showed that interactivity does not correlate with high customers' satisfaction. If customers' needs rise to the point that they require interaction with service providers, their satisfaction with the website falls off. Interactive communication allows customers to take control over the content, order and continuation of the subject-relevant information that leads customers to integrate, remember and understand inputs to their assessments (Ariely 2000). Mclean and Frimpog conducted an assessment of customers' satisfaction with the experience during a life chat service. Apparently, navigation support on the internet, providers should concentrate on responsiveness of the service representative, wait time, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are most significant factors. The service representative's assurance, reliability, empathy and information quality reflect important tools that influences customer satisfaction with the live chat experience. Customers want understanding, caring and personal attention from service representatives when they request decision support. According to the authors, while the ease of use plays a role on customer experience, information quality has an important effect on customer's satisfaction.

The field of linguistics also is an important factor. Lockwood (2017) showed the importance of linguistic in web-chat experience. Lockwood showed customers whose second language is English want to be understood by service providers when they made some nuances in their writing. While Solomon et al. (1985) highlighted the importance of the behaviours of both

customer and service providers, the authors suggested congruent role expectations and repeated experiences in service encounter make customer expecting the same behaviour from service provider. Kim et al. (2004), found that a group of travel and tourism website's members showed high satisfaction and the frequency of visitation while they receive useful and valuable travel information provided by the community. Hoxmeier and Dicesare (2000) showed that while service response time increase, customer satisfaction decreases. Nah (2004) further conducted a research and found that web users expect an answer from service provider in 2 second. According to Zhang and Lin (2015), customers who have opportunity to contact online with the company who makes an attempt to do, so might not get a punctual answer, thus demonstrating lower satisfaction level than someone who has no such chance at all. As Xiang et al. (2015) revealed, in social media, emergent channels lead to the development new customer behaviours. According to the authors, social media and developing online communications have a significant impact on customer travel planning. Lee and Cranage (2011) indicated the importance of privacy on tourism websites. Increasing the privacy assurance on websites leads to positive engagement with services.

Huang and Davison (2011) further extend the discourse on customer-to-customer platform loyalty where online satisfaction remains significant. Online satisfaction is regarded as one of the important constructs that explores the general satisfaction, transaction-specific, economic and social types of satisfaction. Huang and Davison (2011) still pointed at the fact that customer to customer e-commerce has led to new trends of conducting business. The context of Chinese online shoppers, for example, has increased at the remarkable rate of 76.9% on annual basis. However, part of this big success can be attributed to researchers who constantly argue through the marketing, technological and cognitive perspective. The researchers still indicate that customer loyalty and satisfaction largely differ when appearing

in either offline or online situations that are significantly witnessed in the travel and tourism industry. This has however been due to significant aspects negotiated through price sensitivity and brand impact. Under most circumstances, customer satisfaction is noted as an objective and critical factor in marketing as a justification of the impact of online interactions on satisfaction levels. While service and product quality stand as the positives of customer satisfaction, the advent of consumer-to-consumer online shopping meets the basic needs of acquiring information around the service or product. Apparently, sellers would want to sell the product and still handle the post-sell issues as part of the customer care services. However, some of the customers would choose to go silent and others would complain in low tones. Perhaps, social media platforms will be more convenient as customers find it more convenient to complain to each other. For the business to identify the satisfaction levels among customers, it has to do so through relevant platforms that tap into the market segment.

Huang and Davison (2011) noted that empathy and knowledge are always part of the significant features that need to be attached to the product or service. This means that the communication between customers and businesses is always important and can best be done through online conversations. The online interaction process expounds on sources of information that can be significant when it comes to increasing customer satisfaction. Empathy and knowledge helps buyers in terms of determining the seller's care, seller's knowledge and the seller's concern for the buyers. Perhaps, the latter refers to the courtesy and knowledge of employees and the ability they have towards inspiring confidence and trust among the travellers. Besides, the seller's knowledge regarding the product and confidence they have in the product or service underlines the essence of sharing professional details with the buyers. The vast look at customer satisfaction finds two divisions to be quite relevant in the course of reviewing the impact of online interactions. First, the economic satisfaction is

linked to significant rational factors like calculative commitment and cognitive trust. Secondly, social satisfaction is defined through the affective commitment and affective trust, which are mostly regarded as emotional factors. More so, personal relationships are highly valued in such markets like China and United Kingdom among others. This means that social connections are essentially based on the mutual benefit and interest, which can conveniently be expressed through online platforms. However, Huang and Davison (2011) confirmed that only fewer case studies and researches focus on the connection between the online sellers and the online buyers. It is only on rare occasions where businesses pursue a successful relationship that can promote information sharing. Despite lack of attention from the key industrial players, it is evident that online interactions work more conveniently towards customer loyalty, which in return leads to high levels of customer satisfaction. Both overall and transaction specific satisfactions are likely to invoke the repurchase intention and induce a typical behaviour among the loyal customers.

#### **2.4 Correlations between satisfaction levels and live engagement linked to services**

Fernandes and Esteves (2016) admit that in a competitive environment, the firm's performance depends purely on its ability to sustain, retain, and nurture a customer base. The scope of customer engagement largely fosters the study of psychological preconditions. In determining the integration of propensity to engage and customer engagement, the interactivity scale remains the key determinant parameter in relation to contextual conditions. Fernandes and Esteves (2016) further asserted that real-time interactions substantiate satisfaction levels while establishing a beneficial encounter across the travel and tourism industry. Some of the outreach programs have been recommended to impact live engagement. It is also of note that traditional marketing improvised the word of mouth as one way to boost trust among customers. In addition, Nguyen et al. (2018) focused on

determinants of customer satisfaction as well as loyalty across the Vietnamese life-insurance setting. While focusing on the synergies of live chat engagement and satisfaction levels, sustainable strategies still play a critical role in determining value and the image of social, as well as environmental performance. Three important areas have been noted by Nguyen et al. (2018) in relation to correlations between live engagement and satisfaction levels. These include service quality, perceived value, and customer satisfaction.

Fernandes and Esteves (2016) looked at the customer engagement and weighed it against the level of loyalty while observing the ability to sustain, retain as well as nurture the customer base. Customer engagement referred to the broader and transcending relational perspective described around customers and their service relationships. Fernandes and Esteves (2016) aimed at exploring the impact of context as a facilitating factor of customer engagement. A sample of 516 consumers enabled them to conduct a significant cross-sectional survey while examining the customer propensity in engaging the loyalty behaviours within the service settings as related to livechat. However, the behavioural dimension and the multidimensional construct of live engagement have consistently been covered in literature with customer engagement going beyond mere purchasing behaviour (Xiang et al., 2015). The loyalty-related outcomes are thought to be bettered through the well-thought conventional marketing constructs like satisfaction and quality. Besides, a number of factors can count in terms of determining the shape of customer propensity. On the basis of context, live or customer engagement has been studied around the online settings, commonly referred to as the virtual brand communities. Other settings are thought to be unexplored in the entire scope of academic research. Online brand give room for strengthening the consumer relationships as well as brand engagements while sharing interests that create bonds. Given that engagement is thought to the context-dependent nature of mind, the online settings have further been

substantiated into tools that tap into the customers' propensity as far as service relationship is put into consideration. Based on the research done by Fernandes and Esteves (2016), product complexity as well as high involvement purchases usually moderate the impact of online brand communities on live engagement.

On the other hand, Gummerus et al. (2012) focused on brand building, which has been thought to be more challenging especially for most of the service firms. The authors indicated that social media channels have been convenient in terms of engaging and encouraging other premises while availing the initiative that nurtures customer-driven behaviour as seen across the service and tourism industry in United Kingdom, and other tourist destinations across the world. Social media platforms have made most of the service firms to materialize their offers before realization of the service. Based on this, the popularity of social media, low cost and its vast reach has encouraged most of the practitioners to make use of the context. The service firms choose the self-hosted platforms such as the Facebook brand pages for the purposes of gaining a significant share of the customers' engagement. Gummerus et al. (2012) deeply delved into social media and defined it as contexts that involve two-way interactivity. Across the interactions, the involved platforms take into account the cultural, social and experiential aspects witnessed in the virtual interactive contexts. Social media largely depends on the web-based and mobile technologies in developing interactive platforms where people and communities discuss, co-create, share as well as modify the user-generated content. The content is apparently produced, shared as well as consumed by persons that generate it. Social media platforms are thought in line with social networking, photo sharing, wikis, forums, weblogs and text messaging among others (Guo, Barnes & Jia, 2017). In the framework of marketing, the internet based applications like Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and Wikipedia have a significant traffic that enables businesses to extend messages to

masses. In 2015, for example, Facebook alone had over 1.49 billion users on monthly basis as determined by Statista.com.

The platforms have significantly transformed most of the clients from being silent, invisible and isolated into being public, noisy and unmanageable at the same time. The traffic on social media platforms posits different advantages such as influencing the customer's behaviour and motivation, which motivates most of the marketing managers to undertake the social media initiatives (Organ et al. 2015). This is the reason as to why brand consultants and advisors present some of the channels for the purposes of establishing long-term relationships with the immediate customers. Brands consistently play a focal role in social media in terms of sharing the enthusiasm around the favourite brands through Facebook, You Tube and Twitter as well. Some of the consultants would end up solving customer-related problems for free, which is one way that reduces the costs to be met by the firm. In addition, most of service firms use social media in various ways such as communicating with the customers, measure communication as well as determine the purchase-related behaviours (Kim et al. 2015). The options are of importance in defining the customer-brand relationship management that deploys knowledge and marketing activities. Opportunities availed through social media demands the understanding of reasons as to why people are more attracted to different platforms, and how the platforms influence their feelings and behaviour. This is the reason as to why firms always develop new marketing approaches that favour or work in line with convenient characteristics of the social media.

Gummerus et al. (2012) has a feeling that marketers seem to be eager in establishing and facilitating brand communities across different social media platforms and brand communities. The author further resuscitates the scope of "social-media-based brand

community” which is conveniently drawn from two research streams. The first one constitutes the brand communities and the second one encompasses the social media platforms. The significance of the two perspectives underlines the customers involved in the brand and the brand employees involved in the design. People can voluntarily visit the Facebook brand pages and receive invitations and information through what is known as the newsfeed and the brand posts (Harrigan et al. 2017). This gives room for social media to concentrate on the brand attention as marketers focus on the customer engagement. Most of the airlines are working on the travelling experience by not only providing the comfort and convenience but also the freedom for the clients to share ideas. The dominance of Airbnb was as a result of the e-commerce that saw travellers contributing towards the entire experience. The company attributes its expansion to the growing online platform where one is assured of the perceptions and attitude on the travelling experience. Sometimes, people posting images on Facebook while travelling shows the right attitude or positive feedback from the travellers, while travellers keeping off the social media show they do not want to share the experience (Johnson and Neuhofer 2017). As much as social media came in later, most of the airlines and tourist centres applied traditional methods in sharing the experience. Perhaps, photos and even phone calls were primitive techniques of sharing the perceptions, which were rarely tapped by most of the tourism agencies in United Kingdom, China, the United States, France and Germany among others.

### **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Methodology can simply be described as systematic analysis and theoretical review of the methods that are applied in the field of study. This constitutes the use of the qualitative and quantitative research techniques, theoretical models and the research paradigm. On this basis,

this section presents a collection of methods that help in conducting the research process. Various areas need to be pointed as follows.

### **3.1 Research Approach and philosophy**

This takes note of the approach to be used in the study. In this case, an inductive approach, also known as inductive reasoning, can best suit the research process. The approach first paves way for observations as well as theories, which are proposed towards the research process. Notably, the latter incorporates a pattern that runs all the way from observation to development of different explanations (Marczyk et al. 2017). After the pattern, the approach invokes the research to develop a theory. The approach also attracts Interpretivism, which is more applicable in research. The use of inductive approach is purposefully meant to generate meanings from the data collected in the field with a reflection on the influence of live chats and their impact on customer perception in the travel and tourism industry (Babatunde and Low 2015). The approach is best applied in a qualitative research that deploys the descriptive and explorative approaches in constructing meaning from various contextual findings that resonate with the research topic.

The use of the inductive approach provides the research process with a number of findings. First, it leads to the understanding of the dynamics, emergence, resilience and robustness realized when focusing on behaviours in the scope of consumer perceptions through online or live chats (Marczyk et al. 2017). Secondly, the approach avails heterogeneous preferences when exploring phenomena within the social research. However, the approach can still posit a challenge where reliance on the premise is normally uncertain. As highlighted in the literature review section, customer perception and satisfaction vary based on service delivery (Lewis 2015). Interpretivism supports the idea of understanding differences between people and the social roles they play. This emphasises on the difference between running research

among people instead of objects such. Interpretivism requires adopting an empathetic stance and to enter the social world of our research subjects and understand their point of view (Saunders et al. 2012). According to interpretivism, nature of reality can be socially constructed and can be multiple. It integrates human interest into a study as required in the research on the consumer perceptions through live chats in the tourism industry. The philosophy supports qualitative analysis over quantitative analysis on the basis of the descriptive and explorative nature (Hughe and Sharrock 2016). This research aims to understand customer perception about service quality based on live chat. Customers' perception on service quality can be varied or be described through different forms. While some customers may be happy with service, others may not be (Marczyk et al. 2017).

### **3.2 Research Method**

Given that this is a social research, application of the qualitative method is more preferable. The method fosters collection of data through conversational and open-ended communication. The method paves way for subsequent probing and in-depth review of the response from the participants (Creswell and Creswell 2017). The choice of this method is based on the fact that qualitative research brings in the understanding of reasons, motivations, and opinions bonded to the research questions. The research uncovers possible trends aligned to customer satisfaction and experience as noted through live chats in the travel and tourism industry (Sekaran and Bougie 2016). In addition, qualitative method paves way for realization of deeper meaning while depending on opinions noted in the questionnaires. Lastly, qualitative research looks deeper into the behaviours, feelings and attitudes of the respondents in response to the research topic, and the research questions.

### **3.3 Research Design**

The research design describes procedures required in covering the problem at hand. Different types can be adopted including the case study design, the longitudinal design, historical design and cross-sectional design among others. A research on the consumer expectations and satisfaction essentially adopts the exploratory design (Taylor et al. 2015). The design depends on predictions while gaining insights as well as familiarity into the investigation. The design, therefore, calls for establishing a possible understanding of correlation and relationship between two or more phenomena. This is based on the nature of the problem where the design provides a better understanding before providing the insights over the research topic (Sullivan-Bolyai et al. 2014). The insights can bring out further details regarding the research topic, concerns and settings. The design provides the research with various advantages including the fact that it can accommodate a number of paradigms when handling a research problem. However, the design can still lead to assumptions and generation of new ideas.

### **3.4 Data Collection Methods**

Data collection is regarded as the process of gathering as well as measuring information on the basis of variables of interest. The process depends on an established systematic fashion believed to provide answers to the research questions stated in the introduction. This research depends on the primary data, which relies on sources that tap into raw or fresh data. The primary data will be collected through the significant use of online questionnaires (Guerra-Santin and Tweed 2015). The questionnaire is regarded as a research instrument that constitutes a series of questions meant for collection of opinions, suggestions and arguments from the respondents. The choice of online questionnaire was accompanied by various advantages. First, online questionnaires are inexpensive given that no geographical distance

is involved. Secondly, the technique paves way for real-time and automated access to information as the respondents can easily input their time. Besides, one is likely to spend less time and the design is flexible (Creswell and Creswell 2017). However, online questionnaires still face cooperation problems due to lack of a trained interviewer. The dissemination of questionnaires remains a significant process during data collection process. The questionnaires will be disseminated to 80-90 participants where a subsequent examination will focus on the validity and relevance of the applicable information.

### **3.5 Data collection process**

The first stage of the data collection process includes the recruitment of participants. The recruitment will be done through the online platforms where an advert will be put on the social media platforms like Whatsapp, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter and reddit. The platforms also double as the online survey sites that can host the research questionnaire. All the potential respondents will have a brief scope of the research including the requirements. The second stage of the process involves the sampling process to determine the participants (Sekaran and Bougie 2016). The research process will make use of stratified sampling for the purpose of achieving a smaller group. However, a criterion will be used to make sure that the small group is achievable. The criterion dictates that all the participants should be 16 years and above, and should have signed the consent form and the participation letter, which will be issued after registration. The participant should also have an email and should be in a position of accessing the BOS website, which will be used in hosting the research questionnaire.

The third stage involves extending the scope of the research to the selected participants including what is required of them (Creswell and Creswell 2017). The scope provides the

requisite preamble of the composition of the research while touching on the purpose of the study. The fourth stage involves the extension of the questionnaires to 80-90 participants who would have accessed the BOS website. The common website is to ensure uniformity of the channel used and to avoid data redundancy in the course of the research process. The fifth stage includes collecting feedback from the respondents while the sixth stage constitutes a check on the relevance and validity of the details collected from the field. At this stage, the research will also keep an eye on the integrity as well as inconsistency. Finally, the research will extend the findings to the thematic analysis process where themes will be established before reaching out to significant conclusions.

### **3.6 Sampling**

The research will make use of stratified sampling. Stratified sampling divides the population into relatively small groups for the purposes of initiating the sampling process. Given that the research makes use of different platforms, stratification is possible with each platform representing a group. Stratification, in this case, involves dividing the members into a homogenous group that bears same characteristics, or members that are privy to the same information or common mission. The established strata will be composed of the members aged above 16 years, have an email and can access the BOS website on the eve of the research (Sekaran and Bougie 2016). While the research expects to receive members from different websites and social media platforms, the BOS website is thought to be more convenient for the purposes of enjoying the advantages of a uniform channel. The choice of stratified sampling is accompanied by several advantages. First, stratified sampling provides convenient and precise estimates of the population parameters mentioned in the research. Secondly, the sampling technique is cheaper and can only lead to small estimation error in the course of the research. However, the method is likely to suffer from myriad errors when subgroups are forced to reflect the amount of data.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

The research will make use of thematic coding and content analysis. Thematic coding identifies the texts and establishes themes from them. It is more convenient for interviews and questionnaires where personal opinions play a significant role. The thematic ideas can be interpreted to produce meaning in the case of consumer perceptions and the impact of live chats in the context of service quality. Thematic analysis observes a process that constitutes stages of analysis. First, thematic analysis demands that one should be familiar with the data thereby calling for reading as well as rereading of the transcripts (Braun et al. 2014). Stage 2 demands that one should establish the initial codes, which are arranged in a more systematic and meaningful way. Coding is important because it reduces the bulkiness of data into small chunks that are more meaningful.

The third stage involves establishment of themes which are characterized by their significance. Codes are normally combined into themes depending on the perceptions and feedback from the respondents. Stage 4 includes reviewing the themes while identifying whether the themes make sense or not, data that can support the themes and whether the theme relates with others (Vaismoradi et al. 2016). The final stage includes definition of the themes where the essence is established. This is where meaning and theories can easily be generated from the theme while establishing the conclusion for the research. Apart from the thematic analysis, the research process also proposed to make use of the content analysis. Content analysis essentially makes use of document review as part of the data collection process (Guerra-Santin and Tweed 2015). Content analysis delves deep into meanings that can be established from different case studies considered in the research.

### **3.8 Reliability and validity**

This section will check on consistency of the results while establishing facts from the research process. The research will focus on different tests that can justify if the path and processes followed led to verifiable results. In the course of validity, the research process convenes the research findings into common conclusions that reflect the consumer perceptions on service quality in the travel and tourism industry under the influence of the live chats (Taylor et al. 2015). The research process further considers a series of methods that filter the data to reflect the research aim, thereby making the findings and inferences more valid. On the side of reliability, the research process is consistent and can be replicated under stable conditions. Given that customer perceptions do not only appear in the tourism industry, it is possible that the findings can still be referred to when handling a similar case.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS, ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION OF DATA**

### **4.1 Demographic profile**

The section responds to the following questions:

1. How old are you?
2. For how long have you been staying in London, or its outskirts?
3. Are you using any of the social media platforms?
4. Which of the following is/are your favourite social media platforms?
5. How often do you visit your favourite platform in a week?

Only 88 participants turned up for the research from a total of 502. This shows that the turnout met a threshold of 80 participants who came from different social media platforms.

All the participants were above 16 years and have a history of using Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Reddit and Pinterest. With at least one year of using either of the platforms, the findings established that participants visited their accounts more than four times in a week. With most of them staying in London and its outskirts, it is believed that online interactions in relations to ecommerce are a common phenomenon among young people. With all these in place, the table below shows the turnout from every platform considered in the study.

	Population	Sample	Turnout	Percentage turnout
Facebook	2000	120	32	26.67%
Twitter	800	82	17	20.73%
Whatsapp	1581	116	30	25.86%
Reddit	26	16	2	12.5%
Pinterest	45	21	7	33.33%

From the sample, it can be established that the turnout and is only a small portion of the sample. This is normally expected in any research that applies stratified sampling. Only a small group is achieved at the end of the sampling process. There are reasons as to why some of the individuals never turned up for the questionnaire or were expunged from the research. For instance, some of the reasons that made a large number of people to be removed from the research include lack of internet connectivity, dropouts from the interview process, violation of rules, voluntary declination of participation request and failure to respond to the questions in time. All these inconvenienced almost 60% of the population from participating in the response to the questionnaire that was forwarded to the participants through the BOS website.

However, a standard of 88 members was enough to substantiate the findings noted in the research process.

#### **4.2 Use of live chat platforms and customer perceptions**

The section determined findings in response to the following questions:

- Do you engage in live chat groups in any of the platform you are using? If yes, how many groups?
- Which topics do you commonly discuss regarding travelling and tourism in your respective groups?
- Do you find the groups more influential on your purchasing behaviour when it comes to travelling and tourism products?
- Why do you think live chats are necessary in determining whether to buy or pay for a good or service depending on service quality?
- Generally, do you agree with the fact that live chats influence consumer perception in the travel and tourism industry?

All the members had at least one group or more groups where one would participate in the live chats. 52 members participated in 3 groups, 28 members had 2 groups and the remaining 8 members delved into only 1 group. However, most of them still said that it was easier to engage groups on Whatsapp than it is on Facebook as much as Facebook records a higher number of participants. One of the member said “I find Whatsapp more tolerable when engaging the rest of the members because the platform is lighter and sometimes inexpensive compared to Facebook or twitter. However, I still keep Facebook because of the extensive network”. On the question of topics, at least 38 members admitted that they always talk about the travelling experience and even share photos as one way of showcasing nature and even

the inside of the plane. 21 members said that they discuss more about the quality of services or packages offered by the travel and tourism agencies. This played alongside the price placed on each package, which include individual, partners, family and friends. 20 admitted to have fun and only shared specific parts of the travel such as the food served or the kind of people they meet. The remaining 9 members had nothing to share and one admitted that, “in case am travelling, I just enjoy it and there is nothing I need to share”. On the question of the influence of groups, at least 81 members said that groups are likely to influence their purchasing behaviour especially when it comes to the travelling and tourism products and services. Most stated that friends can determine a change of attitude towards the quality of service at any given point and no one can avoid it. The remaining 8 said NO and that they can still make their own decisions regarding a product or service without their friends being around or even family members. “I can still do my things even without my friends being around so long as it is good”, one of them recorded. On the question of why live chats is a requisite component in assessing the service quality, 72 members stated that live chats give a real time experience of a service, which determines the kind of a service one has to choose next time. This meant that people stand a chance of having an instant evaluation of a service. At least 9 participants stated that live chats informs the rest of the group members on the availability of a service and the remaining 7 had no idea what live chats would do for them when buying or paying for a good or service on the basis of service quality. On the question on the agreement on live chats as an influential factor that determine consumer perception, at least 73 participants strongly agreed to this fact, 12 agreed and 3 remained neutral.

From this case, a review of case studies related to other industries can still be connected to travel and tourism industry. A positive relationship is expected but still the negative side should not be ignored. For example, it was found that live chats had a direct impact on the

purchasing behaviours among consumers while setting preferences on some of the services. Some of the services included online tickets, which attracted a positive attitude and right perceptions across the five live chat platforms. Furthermore, questions on the live chat groups, topics that are commonly discussed, purchasing behaviours and consumer perception resonate with findings established by Kim and Kim (2017) who said that an increase in the online systems means that there is increased demand for real-time chats on most of the social media platforms. The case study engaged by Kim and Kim 2017 shows that most of the travellers will delve in live chats because of the enjoyment purposes as well as the ease of use. However, Melo et al. (2017) further indicates that a move by the customers to use online platforms is beyond the enjoyment reasons. This means that more clients want to hear from other friends regarding a service experience realized within the tourism settings.

Through sharing, customers are likely to develop trust and attitude towards the industry as noted by Jun et al. (2004). A case study on the US online firms undertaken by June et al. (2004) also showed that social media systems are easier and reachable platforms where customers can air their complaints, laud a particular service provider and even post a question to the rest of the members. The utility of common platforms like Facebook and Twitter is becoming more pertinent in the course of decision making for both the industries and customers. As much as customers have a tendency of coming up with their own circles within social media, service providers are normally advised to undertake social media monitoring. Melo et al. (2017) agreed to the fact that China, France and the United States are emerging as the most dominant tourist destinations. Most of the firms in these countries, however, rely mostly or tap their customers from the online mainstream. China, US and France believe that the world has moved online, which is yet to determine the course or trend of consumption in the next 100 years and more. This agrees with the fact that live chats

mainly influence the kind of a perception consumers have towards a service or a service provider in the industry. Such findings are also confirmed by Melo et al. (2017) who said that social media is taking a command of what the millennial should do in the era where the generation is versed with technology. Therefore, live chats are becoming more important in providing the real-time experience in the travel and tourism industry, as well as to other industries in the economy.

#### **4.3 Interaction and engagement of customers on live chats in the service industry**

The section looks at the findings on the following questions:

11. How do you engage other members in response to a product or service commonly consumed by members?
12. Do travel and tourism agencies engage you in your favourite social media platform?
13. How do the agencies interact with you on the social media platform of your favourite?
14. Do travel and tourism agencies ask for feedbacks on the product or service that was previously offered?
15. How do you find it when agencies interact with your group members through live chats?

This section of the findings looked at the engagement of customers on the issue of service quality. On the question of how they engage the rest of the members, 63 participants said that they simply give a comment on a particular service during the trips and the rest of the members will share their side of the story as well. 18 members said that they would use questions such as “did you find those cakes tasty?”, “don’t you think it was too junky in that flight?”. The remaining 7 participants said that they rarely engage the rest of the group members. On the question of being engaged by the travel agencies during the flight through

social media platforms, 53 said YES while 35 said NO. On the question of how the agencies interact with people through social media platforms, at least 42 participants said that they normally post something about the flight or the tourism experience such as “hope you enjoyed our services”, “we wait to see you next time” and “feel free to have your side of the story”. This mostly attracts feedback from the travellers and the agency can easily get the mood or the kind of experience people went through. The remaining 11 said most agencies would ask questions about the flight and the entire experience such as “do you find value in us”, “do you mind telling a friend to join you next time” and “would you have us to serve you next time”. On the question of whether tourism agencies always ask for feedback, the 53 participants said YES, agencies would always ask for feedbacks either through the live chats, or direct questions during the trip and even through cards that have to be dropped after the trip. On the question of how they find it when agencies attempt to interact with them through live chats, 72 members said that it is never a good experience because it ruins the freedom of some of the members and impedes them from sharing the truth about a service. 11 members said they would not like the agencies to interfere with the live chats but their presence matters most. The remaining 5 members said that it is good to have the agents in some of the live chats.

Questions on live engagements among customers and agents points at the essence of feedbacks, and whether customers are ready to engage their travel and tourism agents through live chats resonate with studies engaged by Kietzmann et al. (2011). The studies pointed at the way consumers make use of the internet in extending and reading content. The remarkable area of the social media platforms include the functional blocks that bridge the reasons for relationships, identity, presence and even identity among others. This agrees to the argument raised by Kwak (2001) and Chandler and Lusch (2015) who expressed the

tendency of engaging live chats upon having the knowledge of internet and mobile technologies. Chandler and Lusch (2015) indicate that chats can support magnificent communication and makes it easier for customers to post their comments, questions or even remarks. For example, from the evaluation of different opinions in the case studies, Kwak (2001) and Chandler and Lusch (2015) it could note that online customer comments portrayed a global construct as well as global service quality attitudes. Most of the customer perceptions supported the idea of frequent interactions with loyal customers demanding for development of virtual communities. A study on the US firms also confirmed that customers can easily air their views and opinions when engaged through online platforms. This confirms the theory of constant interactions that build better relationships as noted through thematic analysis. Such relationships are realized through regular chatting and user-message, which are becoming more dominant in the era characterized by technology.

Due the networks and connectivity realized through live chats, more travel and tourism agencies are tapping into the live chat groups to identify customer needs. Ruyter (2002) recommended that social media, that hosts live chats, can bolster interactive richness both to the customers as well as service providers. This introduces the idea of company engagement with firms extending consultations to online platforms as pointed out by Xiang et al. (2015). The European travel agencies are now exploiting the online leisure where customers can freely engage the agencies through live chats where real-time feedbacks are provided by the firm. Apart from Facebook and Twitter, most of the travel and tourism agencies are now supporting websites of their own including Trivago and Swoodoo among others. While firms would attract different social media platforms, most of the customers do not appropriate the presence of the agents in most of the live chats as noted by Melo et al. (2017). Some would want the conversations to be kept close to their friends or family circles and would feel

insecure if a third party intrude into the platform. For instance, the American express introduced the “open forum” which never worked perfectly in terms of sharing the experiences. While some would feel an opportunity to air their grievances, others feel like their freedom is infringed and may not have a good chance to express or share the experiences. Melo et al. (2017) states that live chats are only effective when conducted among the peers and third parties are rarely allowed. As much as firms would want to know what customers talk about in their circles, their freedom remains pertinent to what they will talk about and the behaviours they are likely to adopt in the course of online interaction.

#### **4.4 Impact of online interactions on individual’s satisfaction**

The section seeks findings on the following questions:

16. Do live chats or online interactions have any influence on individual satisfaction and service quality?

17. How do you value comments from other friends regarding their satisfaction based on the services and products provided?

18. Why should you consider comments from friends on live chats than product messages from the service provider on service quality?

19. How do you treat a mixture of negative and positive messages posted in regard to service quality?

20. Do you personally know friends you normally with through live chats?

This section looked at the impact of online chats on the service quality on the basis of the individual's satisfaction levels. At least 86 participants said YES and the remaining 2 said NO. On the question of how the comments from friends alter the satisfaction based on the service quality, 72 participants shared a common reason of friends as the true ambassadors who can give a clear picture of the product or service. This means that the comments gives the true taste of the product or service and determines whether other friends can be satisfied with the quality. 13 participants said that comments determine satisfaction levels but can spread bias or prejudice regarding a product or service. 3 stated that comments cannot be valued to any scale and simply give personal opinions and suggestions. On the question of why comments from friends should be used in determining the service quality than the product or service messages, 69 participants stated that that comments from friends are genuine than what the service provider says. 11 members stated that friends are good in predetermining the course of a product or service just as their comments would state. The remaining 8 had no clue why such comments should be put in this context.

On the question of treatment of negative and positive responses from friends, 71 members stated that one should first look at what close friends have said regarding the service. Whether such comments are negative or positive, one should quickly weigh the sides and see the side that has more weight. 17 members stated that a mixture of negative and positive messages only presents confusion and it is healthy to avoid such scenarios. On the question of a personal knowhow of the friends on live chats, all participants said YES, they at least knew some of the friends on live chats. For instance, online interactions create either a negative or positive attitude towards a service as far as individual's satisfaction is put into

consideration. In this regard, services said to have attracted positive reviews are likely to lead to customer satisfaction even when they do not have the desirable quality. Therefore, it is evident that online interactions can be misleading especially when the issue of service is involved.

The subject of service quality further attracted a number of case studies and researches. The course of online interactions and their influence on satisfaction as regards satisfaction levels are well captured in the studies by Zeithaml et al. (2002). They indicated that customers are likely to get reassurance, personal attention and courtesy in both online and an offline context as far as service quality is put into consideration. The same meaning is well captured by Ba and Johansson (2008) who looked the e-services across the tourism industry. The researchers noted that customers want information quality, liability, empathy and assurance, which also amount to same qualities that will appear in the live chats when handling the subject of customer experience and service quality. This means that a web-chat experience that goes sour is likely to change the behaviours of the customers, who may do it through satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the service offered by the travel and tourism firms. However, according to Xiang et al. (2015), the exchange between customers themselves is more important than what the service provider communicates to the customers through live chats. This means that customers tend to trust their friends more what is communicated from the service providers through the social media platform. The trend, as determined by Xiang et al. (2015), customers find their friends' comments to be more genuine than those of the service provider, whose mission is generally to market the service. Therefore, a thought of service quality directly comes from the comments friends make than the product or service messages.

This resonates with the findings established by Huang and Davison (2011) that looked at the customer e-commerce as seen in the context of Chinese online consumers. The two looked at the online customer response that saw the numbers rising especially in the travel and tourism industry. The researchers indicate that interplay between loyalty and satisfaction is what generates voluminous numbers of people who go online to look for the service. As part of the big change in the customer dynamics, Huang and Davison (2011) looked at the sources of information and the nature of attitude is likely to produce in the mind of the customer. They argued that while looking service quality, the live chat comments should focus on two significant aspects of the service. First, economic satisfaction is important and can determine whether the message from friends is negative or positive. A cognitive trust developed by friends is a similar trust that can also be created in someone having same economic goals towards a product or service.

The second one is social satisfaction and largely looks at the commitment, as well as the affective trust, which are largely grounded on the emotional factors that determine the consumption behaviours. The most significant of service quality is the emotional response customers give towards the product. Live chats characterized by close friends and family relationships form a key determinant of the emotional response, given that customers would end up trusting the people close them than the service itself. However, the demographic profile normally attempts to classify the services depending on various factors that are likely to affect the consumption trends. Sometimes, the educated class is considered to be more rational and can make exclusive decisions that are different from what the rest of the group believes in. However, the subject is beyond the scope of customer engagement and is likely to have a trivial impact on the consumption trends.

#### **4.5 Correlations between satisfaction levels and live engagement**

This section looks at the findings on the following questions:

21. Do you agree that there is a correlation between satisfaction levels, on service quality, and live engagement in regards to products and services provided in the travel and tourism industry?
22. How does the correlation impact the nature of services provided in the industry with respect to service quality?
23. How does the correlation impact your loyalty to the travel and tourism agencies, or the nature of trips?
24. What are your recommendations regarding marketing through live chats in relation to service quality?
25. Do you think online interactions and live chat engagements can make the travel and tourism firms grow?

On the question of the agreement on the correlation between satisfaction level and live chat engagement in the travel and tourism industry, 68 members agreed that such a correlation prevails, 12 members agreed that such a correlation prevails, and the remaining 8 members chose to remain neutral on this question. On the question of how the correlation impacts the nature of services provided with respect to service quality, 71 participants showed that the correlation can fine-tune some of the qualities of the services provided in the industry, 9 said that the correlation may have no impact and the remaining 8 had no clue. On the question of the impact of the correlation on the loyalty of the customers towards the travel and tourism agencies, 82 participants stated that the correlation directly affects their loyalty towards a service or the service provider. The remaining 6 participants stated that they will still rely on the service even with or without the correlation between live engagement and satisfaction

levels. On the question of the recommendations on marketing through live chats, 83 members said that live chats should not be used as marketing tools and should absolutely serve as a tool that joins consumers of the same interest. 3 stated that marketing through live chats is applicable but not convenient and the remaining 3 had no clue. On the question of live chat engagements having a likelihood of making the tourism industry grow, 75 members noted that the online interactions and live chat engagements directly impact the growth of the relevant firms. One of them said that “online interactions and live chat engagements determine the consumption trends in the industry and therefore, they should not be ignored by all means possible”. 10 members stated that the online interactions and live chat engagements are likely to have a substantial impact on the growth of the firms, which may not be significant at the end of the day. The remaining 3 had no clue.

The findings established against question 21 to 25 indicate chances of satisfaction levels relying on the frequency of the live chats. The study of the correlation between satisfaction levels and live engagement is equally important and attracted case studies engaged by Fernandes and Esteves (2016). The researchers alluded to the fact that travel and tourism agencies should rely on their abilities to retain, sustain as well as nurture the customer base. The study of the psychological preconditions looks at the interactivity scale where live engagements are equally valued to satisfaction levels. The synergies realized through live engagements and satisfaction levels mostly yield the service quality, customer satisfaction as well as perceived value. Furthermore, customer loyalty can be weighed against the level of the customer loyalty and how services should be delivered in the travel and tourism industry. Xiang et al. (2015) noted that most of the loyalty-related outcomes, from a cross-sectional survey, can be bettered through the conventional constructs of quality and satisfaction. Most of the online brands normally make use of the customers’ propensity as far as live

engagement is put into consideration. This resonates well with the vast use of the social media channels in encouraging as well as engaging extra premises that impact consumer purchasing behaviour. The nature of the platforms is thought to have transformed the introverts into noisy loyalties who feel their voice is heard. Live chats, through social media, support both the motivation and behaviour of customers, which are also seen across Twitter, You Tube and Facebook. Gummerus et al. (2012) confirms that marketers have used the nature of some of the platforms in constructing the social-media-based brand community, which enhances the attachment between a brand and the consumers. The relationship is normally convenient where customers equally have their say on the product or service, and the form and quality in which it is delivered.

## **CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary of the chapters**

A research on the customer perception on service quality on live chat for travel and tourism industry attracted theories, concepts and a research process that led to significant findings. Chapter 1 of the research covered the background of the study where the travel and tourism industry is said to have made progress due to online platforms. The increase in the number of people moving online is a key indicator of more business transaction being conducted through online platforms that is heavily dominated by intangible attributes. The background further portrayed the fact that tourists are slowly adopting online consumer behaviours, which forms part of their decision making process. The integration of the online platforms in the tourism industry is largely shaped by consumption behaviours, which are thought to signal the experiences and emotions towards the quality of a service. The background further takes

note of the research gap identified along the real-time interactions through online platforms, and their impact on the customer perception on service quality. This amounts to a research problem that is justified by noticeable cases of companies in the travel and tourism industry. The chapter further indicates the purpose of the study, aims and objectives, the scope of the study, a brief on the research methodology and the structure of the paper.

Chapter 2 of the research is the literature review, which incorporates case studies and researches that have been covered before by scholars and researchers that pursued similar or relevant area. First, coverage on the impact of live chats on customers' perception towards the quality of service looked at the significance of information on the purchasing decision, and channels that can be used to seek the customer service across the travel and tourism industry. The section also indicated that online chats largely give customers the enjoyment and usefulness of pursuing interactions with the rest of the community. Live chats present a platform that makes the stakeholders in the travel and tourism industry to realize the essence of the online reviews as far as the trust and attitudes of the customer are put into consideration. The second section of the literature review looked at the interaction as well as live engagement among customers in the service industry. The section reviewed the tendency of engaging the clients on web chats and user-message interactions while outlining the consumption behaviours among customers. The literature review further focused on the impact of online transactions or interactions on the satisfaction among individuals on the basis of the service quality. This focused on the expression of personal qualities and emotions that can alter the attitude of customers.

The final section of the literature review looked at correlation between the live engagement and the satisfaction levels attached to services realized in the travel and tourism industry.

Chapter 3 of the research covered the research design and methodology where a collection of tools and methods to be used have been discussed. The inductive approach, alongside interpretivism, was thought to be applicable in a qualitative study such as the one covered in this context. The research also picked on qualitative method as the research method to be used while citing common advantages like the descriptive and explorative nature of the study. Besides, online questionnaires were selected as the key data collection method while extending the questionnaires to the participants through the BOS website. The website established a common channel where the respondents could give answers to the questions and send them back to the researcher. Thematic analysis was applied in data analysis, which led to realization of the findings.

Chapter 4 of the research constitutes results, analysis and interpretation of the collected data. This is where the research established the demographic profile that took note of age of the participants, the period of stay in London, the usage of social media platforms among the participants and the frequency of use. The second area of the findings focused on the usage of the web chat platforms, as well as customer perception where common topics covered on service quality in social media, purchasing behaviours and consumer perception towards the travel and tourism industry were covered. The third area of the findings looked at the interaction and live engagement of the customers through chats across the service industry, while the fourth section looked at the impact of the online chats on satisfaction levels. The final part checked on the correlation witnessed between live engagement and satisfaction levels. While these parts looked explorative, they made significant attempts of responding towards the research questions.

## **Conclusion on the research findings**

The first research question was what is the influence of the live chat platforms on customer's perception towards service quality? On this question, the research looked at the response and conclusion on questions regarding the frequency of users in participating in some of the live chat groups, topics discussed, the influence of live chat groups on the customer purchasing behaviour in the tourism industry and whether live chats are key in determining the service quality. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that most of the people or consumers in the travel and tourism industry do participate in the live chat groups. Most of them would talk about the travel experience and the quality of packages offered by some of the travel and tourism industry.

The findings also led to a conclusion of live chats playing a frontal role in controlling consumer behaviours by influencing the attitude of people towards service quality. Therefore, live chats are real-time enablers that establish a connection or a relationship between the service and consumer. The second question was what is the level of interaction and engagement among customers on live chats? The question looked for answers that could respond to the live chat engagement, the involvement of travel agencies in live chats, the need for feedbacks by agencies and the feeling among members when being engaged by the agents. The findings led to the conclusion that comments and questions posted on live chat platforms are the key ways customers would use to engage their friends. As much as travel agencies would have interest in some of the live chats, most of customers do not like having a constant contact with the agents because they feel that the presence of agents ruins their freedom. The same attitude is noted when agents ask for feedbacks where most of the customers end up lying about the service quality. The third research question is How do online interactions influence individual's satisfaction based on the services offered? On this

question, the research focused on individual satisfaction and online satisfaction, the value of comments, the essence of friend in determining the value and how to treat the mixed responses.

The findings led to a conclusion that justified the impact of online chats on service quality realized through the satisfaction levels. This can be aligned to the influence friends have when they comment on a given service, which puts the service offered under scrutiny by the customers. However, friends can still be biased and therefore mislead on the significant information regarding a service. As much as live chats are prone to mixed responses, most of the customers are likely to weigh the side that has the highest frequency before making any decision. The last research question is how do the correlations between live engagements and satisfaction levels relate to services?

On this question, the research looked at the prevalence of the correlation between satisfaction and live engagements, the impact of the correlation on service quality, the impact of the correlation on the customer loyalty and whether online interactions can influence the growth of the travel and tourism firms on the basis of the services offered. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the correlation between live chat engagement and satisfaction levels exists across the tourism industry and can impact service quality based on the attitude adopted by customers. This also has a similar impact on the loyalty of the customers, which can change depending on what is discussed on the live chats. Customer loyalty and individual satisfaction levels are key factors that dictate the consumption trends and therefore, influence the growth of firms in the tourism industry.

## **Limitations and Strengths**

The research process had its own limitations. The research could not confirm the exact person responding through the BOS website. This has raised a concern as to whether some of the responses directly came from the participants who had registered. Again, the time factor became a constraint in analysing each opinion given by the 88 respondents. While most of them showed a repeat, any research should factor the voice of every person who took part. Apart from the limitations, the research had its areas of strength including a rigorous process that led to substantial findings. The results on consumer perceptions on service quality through live chats are quite convincing.

## **Recommendations**

The research covers one of the most significant components in the world of marketing as far as live chats are put into consideration. However, the following areas are still recommendable.

- Regular quality and training on the side of employees can impact consumer perceptions in terms of building trust and the right attitude among young consumers through the social media mainstream.
- Travel and tourism companies should extend the freedom to customers who want to have their own chats instead of interfering with their process of interactions.

## **Future research**

The research provides a significant milestone in terms of the online transactions and real-time solutions provided to problems associated with consumer behaviours and consumer perceptions. However, future research is likely to look at whether the live chats can be used as a platform that can enhance the quality of services in the service industry, especially the travel and tourism industry.



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