
THE ROLE OF 'AFROSIYOB' HIGH SPEED RAIL SERVICES IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF TOURIST SATISFACTION IN SAMARKAND

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Transportation plays a key role in the development of tourism as it serves the main purpose in the process of travelling (Rufat Mammadov, 2012). Thus, the transportation system creates a profound impact on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. In other words, the more developed and organised the transportation system is, the more tourists feel fulfilled and loyal. In fact, there are a wide divergence of means of transportation, including air, train and road used while making local trips within Uzbekistan, however, train is recommended most (Sylvester, n.d.) and preferred widely. High-speed electric train 'Afrosiyob' was developed in Spain (Trains Schedule in Uzbekistan: On Afrosiyob or Sharq; Fast Train in Uzbekistan Between Cities, n.d.) and launched in Uzbekistan to travel between Samarkand and Tashkent and the reverse. This breakthrough has significantly contributed to the number of trips between cities in Uzbekistan and tourism overall.

INTRODUCTION. The thesis on **the role of train services in the improvement of tourist loyalty and satisfaction in Samarkand** aims to investigate the connection between the train services and their quality and a sense of fulfilment tourists feel about their journey in Samarkand, a historic and culturally rich city in Uzbekistan.

This paper explores how train services, particularly 'Afrosiyob' - high-speed train covering the cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Tashkent affect tourism level and quality in Samarkand and how the government and tourism industry can leverage this potential to enhance tourist satisfaction levels.

Tourism is one of the emerging realms, substantially contributing to the economy and financial well-being of the country, therefore, advances and significant developments in

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transportation will in turn increase the number of both national and international visitors. Thus, this paper proves valuable and reliable for the pursuit of accomplishments in tourism, particularly in Samarkand, a historic city with a number of monuments worth visiting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transportation systems can be given the definition as the network that must be connected to travel routes (Dissanayake, Salith Harsha, 2019). Transport facilities are inferred to be important to a tourism system (Hall, 1999). Based on the research he conducted, transportation and its proper facilities are one of the major elements to influence tourist satisfaction. Thus, if government wants to develop tourism in the country, transportation system should be developed accordingly (Hall, 1999).

Transportation plays a significant role in the tourism experience, as it not only facilitates movement but also contributes to overall satisfaction. Researchers (Cohen et al., 2004; Wang, 2005) emphasize the importance of reliable, convenient, and comfortable transportation services in shaping tourist perceptions and experiences.

Train services are an essential component of the transportation infrastructure in Samarkand. Several studies have investigated the impact of train services on tourist satisfaction. For example, Wang et al. (2014) examined the influence of train services on tourist satisfaction in China and found that factors such as cleanliness, ticket availability, and customer service significantly affect tourist satisfaction levels. Similarly, Gursoy and Chi (2015) investigated the relationship between train services and tourist satisfaction in a different cultural context and identified factors such as comfort, punctuality, and information provision as crucial determinants.

METHODS

Samarkand has seen a substantial rise in the number of both local and international tourists in recent years following the introduction of high speed rail, Afrosiyob. This research aims to study the factors affecting tourist experience, tourist satisfaction and loyalty in Samarkand.

The author collects the following data relevant to the study objectives having studied and analysed previous data to address the research questions (Mat, Bahry, Kori, Munir, Daud, 2019). I looked for the information about how transportation services, particularly rail and high speed rail services affect tourist satisfaction and loyalty in different countries in order to attain the objectives of the research. The research questions of this thesis are quantitative, aimed at understanding the factors contributing to commuters' satisfaction levels with train system in Samarkand. The research provides thorough descriptions, in-depth understanding, and details of the survey and study. The aim of this research is to reach as many tourists and commuters as possible and analyse their experience with high speed rail in Samarkand and implement the survey and study results and analysis in order to improve the tourist

satisfaction and loyalty in Samarkand. Therefore, quantitative research is the most suitable approach for conducting this research.

It is essential to determine which relevant factors in train services, particularly high speed rail affect tourist satisfaction and loyalty by reviewing key textual documents such as reports, articles, press releases, websites, public interviews and other research materials. As a result of continuous research and study, I was able to determine a number of factors and their effects on the experience tourists have, in turn, influencing their tourist satisfaction and loyalty. After collecting these sources, there is sufficient amount of information to address the research questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There were 236 respondents who took part in the survey. The female respondents comprised 97 (41.1%) and male respondents accounted for 58.9% (139). In terms of age categories (Diagram 1), most of the respondents were aged over 45, comprising a total of 91 (38.5%). This figure was followed by the participants aged between 35 and 44, with 27.3% (64). 22.2% (52) respondents reported that they were aged between 25 and 30. However, the least proportion of survey participants were aged between 31 and 34 or under 24, accounting for 5.3% (13) and 6.7% (16) respectively. Thus, it can be concluded that there were a wide disparity of age variations - teenagers, adults, and senior citizens, using Afrosiyob high speed rail services.

Figure 1. Age range of respondents who took part in the survey (Table 2)

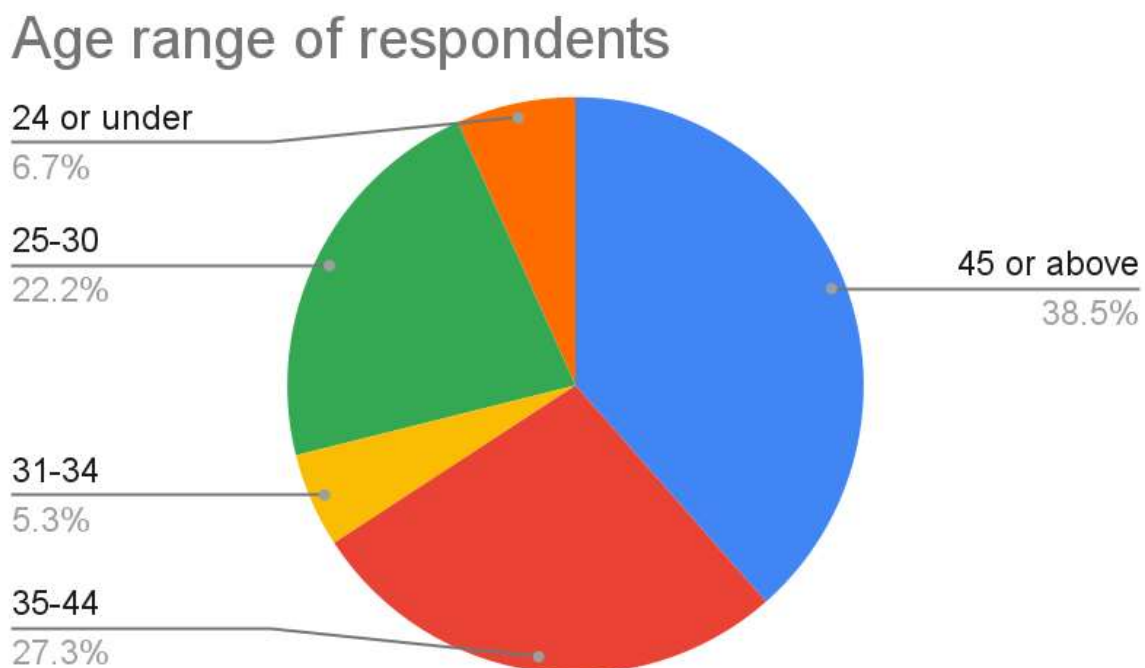


Table 2. Survey measuring satisfaction levels of foreign passengers using Afrosiyob high speed rail from Samarkand Train Station Tashkent Northern Station and the reverse

Table 3. The proportion of passengers who never involved in any form of accident
(Source: Author’s own research)

I have no experience involving any accident when using Afrosiyob

		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	9,1	9,1	9,1
	Agree	50,0	50,0	59,1
	Strongly agree	40,9	40,9	100,0
	Total	100,0	100,0	

Tangibility is the next factor playing a substantial role in passengers’ satisfaction levels with the service provided in Afrosiyob high speed train. 18.1% of survey participants shared their satisfaction with tangibility and cleanliness train service provides, with over 77.3% mentioning tidiness and neatness of the carriage as something they were happy with (Table 4).

Table 4. The proportion of passengers satisfied with tidiness and neatness of the carriage.
(Source: Author’s own research)

Afrosiyob train is well maintained and neat

		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	22,7	22,7	22,7
	Agree	59,1	59,1	81,8
	Strongly agree	18,2	18,2	100,0
	Total	100,0	100,0	

Over 13.6% respondents are satisfied with the reliability of Afrosiyob high speed rail. While most of the passengers (72%) are most satisfied with the friendliness of the staff, most of the passengers consider Afrosiyob unreliable because of the difficulties with booking (58%).

In addition, responsiveness of staff affects passengers’ satisfaction levels. The research I conducted inferred that over 11.8% of passengers were strongly agreed that staff members were responsive.

The survey conducted among 280 ETS passengers from KL Sentral to Padang Besar Station (Mat, Bahry, Kori, Munir, Daud, 2019) concludes that reliability is the most important factor for passenger satisfaction. Similarly, the survey I conducted among 236 Afrosiyob high speed train passengers from Samarkand to Tashkent and the reverse infers reliability to be significant as most of the passengers choose this mode of transportation for its punctuality, accessibility and reliability during the journey. However, the most important factor affecting satisfaction levels in the survey I conducted was safety, with over 30%

passengers strongly agreeing that their journey was safe. Moreover, just above 90% passengers were never involved in any form of accident.

Result

From the research and analysis conducted, the result concluded that all four factors contribute to satisfaction levels and hypotheses are validated (Table 5). The findings of the study are aligned with the previous studies conducted by Murambi and Bwisa (2014); Kurshid, et al. (2012); Azmi Mat, Norliza Saiful Bahry, Nur Liana Kori, Zarina Abdul Munir, Norzaidi Mohd Daud, 2019 found that service quality dimensions are significantly related to the passenger satisfaction.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing

(Source: Author’s own research)

Path Coefficient	Hypothesis Statement	Result
Reliability = Satisfaction	H1: There is a strong relationship between reliability and passenger satisfaction.	Supported
Responsiveness = Satisfaction	H2: There is a strong relationship between responsiveness and passenger satisfaction.	Supported
Safety = Satisfaction	H3: There is a strong relationship between safety and passenger satisfaction.	Supported
Tangibility = Satisfaction	H4: There is a strong relationship between tangibility and passenger satisfaction.	Supported

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study conducted on the significance of Afrosiyob high speed rail in tourist satisfaction concluded that service quality dimensions, namely reliability, responsiveness, safety and tangibility significantly affected tourist satisfaction.

The following recommendations are made in accordance with the study’s results about how service quality dimensions of Afrosiyob high speed rail affect tourist satisfaction in Samarkand:

- Improve booking possibility: To improve tourist satisfaction, booking process of the train should be facilitated.
- Increase rail capacity: Carriage capacity or the frequency of train should be increased.
- Train rail conductors: Rail conductors should be trained and qualified more to serve customers more politely and meet their needs immediately.

These suggestions can significantly improve tourist and passenger satisfaction with Afrosiyob high speed rail.

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