International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation, Vol. 24, Issue 10, 2020
ISSN: 1475-7192

IMPROVING QUALITY OF SERVICE AT PUBLIC TRANSPORT BY USING FOCUS GROUP METHOD

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Abstract: *The article deals with the results of marketing research by the method of focus groups on the observation of the quality of public land transport services. On the basis of analysis of research results preliminary groups of properties and characteristics of transport service are formed, "points of contact" of consumers of service with the supplier of service are specified, and the relation of consumers of service to made changes in system of transport service are exposed.*

Keywords: *Marketing, public land transport, customer satisfaction, focus group, service quality, marketing research.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, fundamental changes are observed in almost all spheres of life and activities of the city of Tashkent, which are connected with the formation of new management approaches. These changes have significantly affected public transport use in Tashkent and their basis was formed by the client-oriented approach to service provision. Customer orientation is now seen as a key factor in the successful development of the transport system. The growth of different types of services and the increase of their share in GDP in almost all countries, the importance of services for assessing the socio-economic level of development of the country and individual territories, increasing the share of spending on services in total spending led to increased attention to studies of service quality and customer satisfaction with services. As a result, several approaches and methodologies have emerged to address these important scientific and practical challenges, which are largely universal in nature, allowing for their use in research on different types of services. At the same time, when choosing the most effective methods of research (including for assessing the quality of services), it is necessary to take into account marketing features of the object of research of –public land transport (PLT).

II. METHODS AND APPROACHES

The specificity of transport services implies the mandatory consideration of consumers' opinion about the quality of the service provided (marketing approach to quality management) on the indicators available to passengers and assessment of service characteristics, compliance with which is regulated by laws and regulations [**Error!**

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Received: 27 Feb 2019 | Revised: 20 Mar 2019 | Accepted: 30 Apr 2020

Reference source not found.,**Error! Reference source not found.**]. In this regard, it is necessary to assess the level of quality of transport services:

1. to determine the quality indicators of multi-purpose transport service with the allocation of categories reflecting the properties of the service at all stages of its formation;
2. to take into account the legal, financial and technical limitations that apply when forming and providing the service;
3. to determine the existing quality level of the PLT service;
4. define the target level of quality and the degree of tolerance of the service provided from the target value;
5. to assess the degree to which the quality level expected by consumers corresponds to the perceived level of quality. The difference between the expected level of quality and the perceived level of quality can be considered as the level of customer satisfaction with the service.

The choice of quality indicators for evaluation of the characteristics of the service, provided directly by the carrier, and evaluation of activities associated with the formation of the service of the subjects are quite discussed and relevant topics of research of foreign and domestic authors. In the works the concepts and methods of quality assessment of transport services are studied [8,9,**Error! Reference source not found.**], groups and indicators of quality characteristics [1, 6,13], issues of assessing the significance of indicators in the formation of passenger satisfaction [**Error! Reference source not found.**,10,**Error! Reference source not found.**]. Given the complex nature of the service, the need to assess the quality of service from the point of view of its perception by the consumer (current or potential), as well as the need to control indicators that are not perceived by the consumer, but have an impact on the quality of service, there is no universal methodology for assessing the quality of transport services.

Researchers of Poland analyzing comprehensive methodology of marketing research, the general algorithm of which is shown in Figure 1.

Received: 27 Feb 2019 | Revised: 20 Mar 2019 | Accepted: 30 Apr 2020

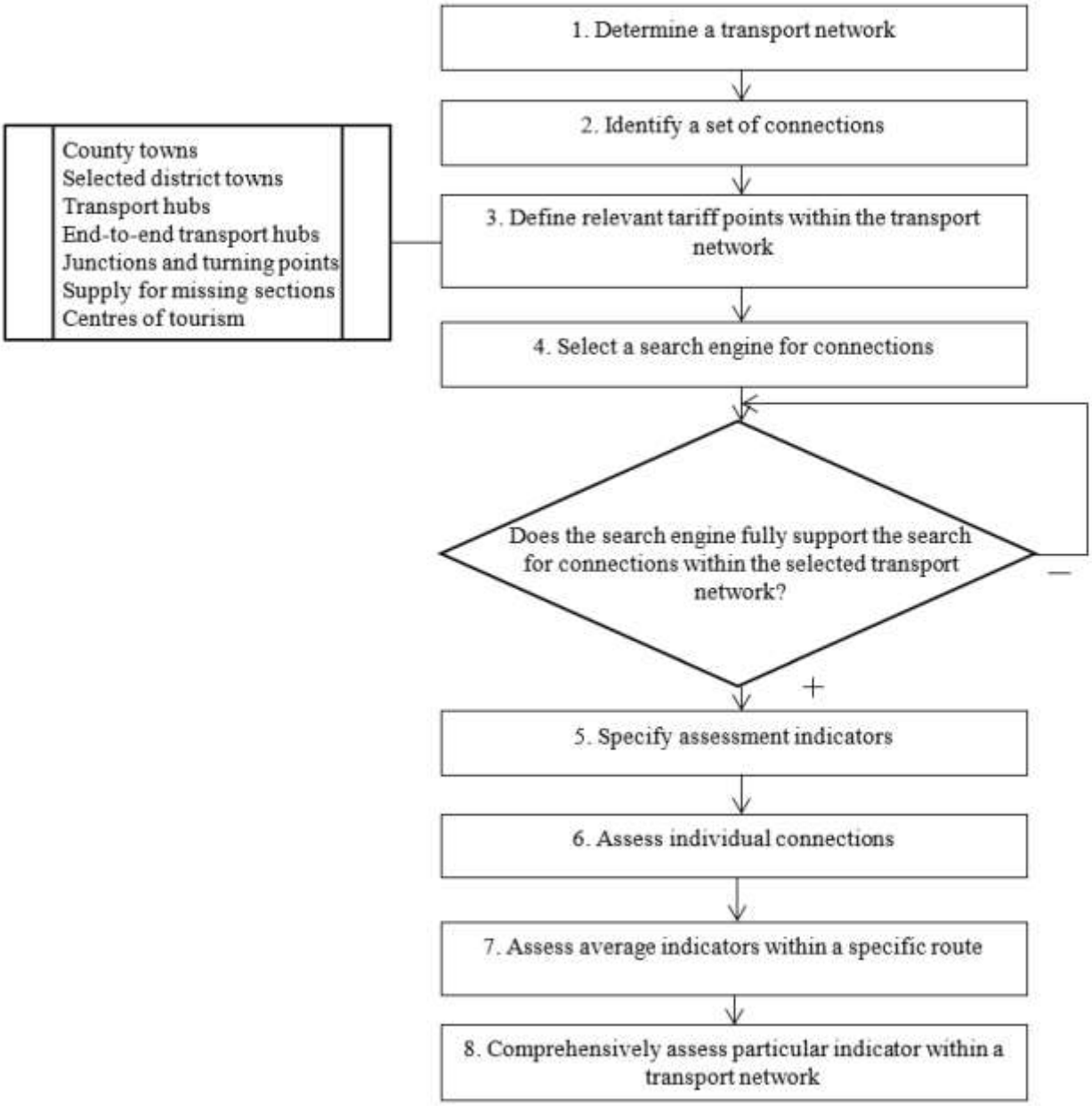

Fig 1. Algorithm of studies to assess the quality of transport services(source: www.mdpi.com)

This algorithm contains methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis to assess the quality of transport services, as well as mechanisms that provide for the control of compliance of indicators with consumer requirements to adjust the evaluation indicators and quality control based on existing indicators.

One of the important elements of the presented algorithm is qualitative research based on *focus groups*. Such studies allow to perform (1) determining of transport network, (2) to identify set of connections and etc.

The focus-group method involves conducting interviews according to the scenario (*topic-guide*), which includes four blocks (introductory part, warming up questions, questions on the research tasks, conclusion), in groups formed in accordance with the method of marketing research [11]. In this work, men and women of various ages (from 20 to 60 years old), degrees of employment, and social status were invited to participate in focus groups,

selected by recruiters using a specially designed questionnaire through telephone calls and invitations. Respondents were distributed into five groups, respecting the condition of heterogeneity of the participants. In the course of the focus groups, video and audio were recorded and transcribed.

Grouping and processing of the unstructured data has been supplemented by the constructive techniques which have arisen in a way of qualitative approaches [12] and was carried out by means of software products Taxi Master and TashBUS. Such approach allowed to get a visual picture of the research, as well as to structure the information and present it in a convenient for perception form. Based on the results of transcripts encoding, reports were formed in the Taxi Master and TashBUS applications, which allowed grouping the respondents' statements in accordance with the tasks of the marketing research into the following thematic blocks:

1. Mode of transport used by respondents and purpose of travel.
2. The Good Transport Association.
3. Attitude of respondents to transport.
4. Perception of change.
5. Possibility and convenience of transfer to public transport.
6. Foreign passengers' experience.
7. Passenger information: information when planning a trip.
8. Problems of passengers in the cabin and at the stop, at boarding and disembarking, travel planning,
9. Proposals to improve the stopping point and salon.
10. Requirements for PLT service: quality of service, qualification and appearance of the driver, salon, vehicle speed, turnstiles.

An array of unstructured responses collected in focus groups was coded and then analyzed by individual categories of respondents' statements or by category groups. Figure 2 shows an example of categorization of all statements on the topics "Quality Requirement" and "Passenger Vision for Good Transport". The results of the analysis were compared with the participants' characteristics in order to improve the validity of the researchers' conclusions.

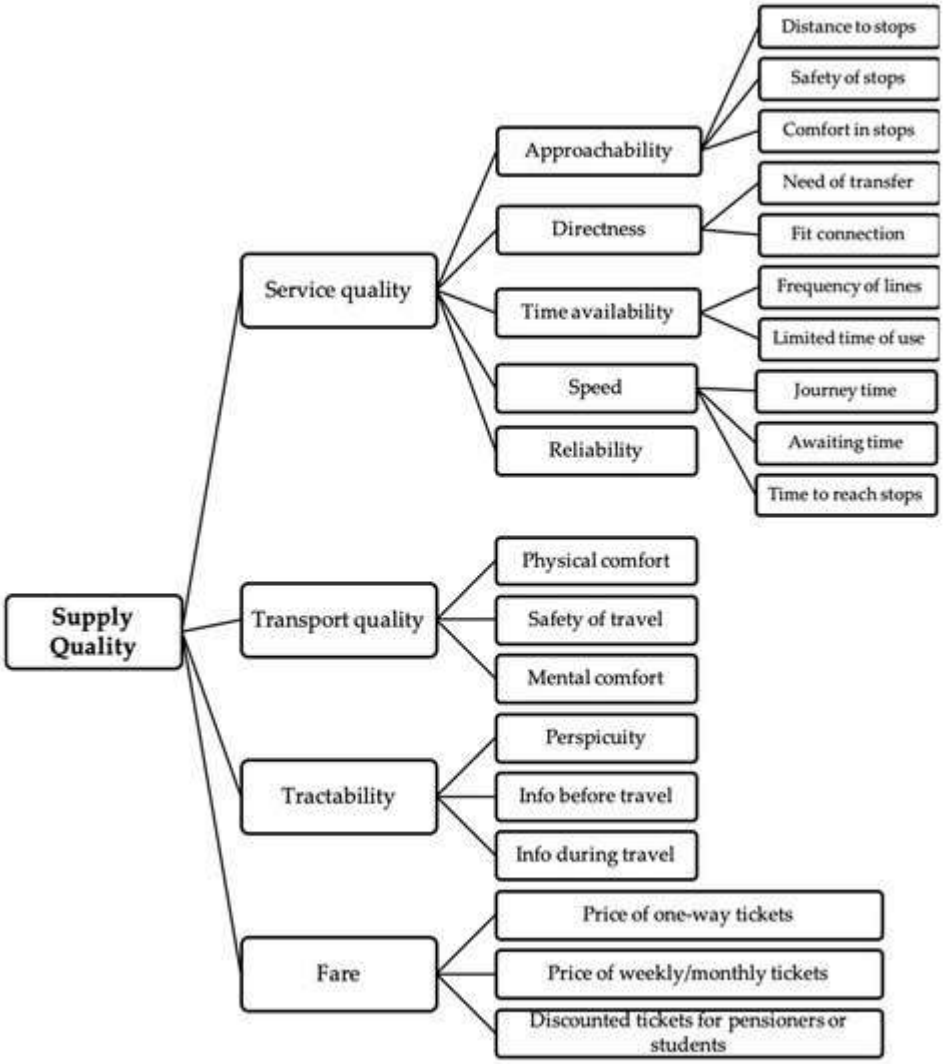

Fig. 6. Focus group analysis model(source: www.sciencedirect.com)

FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

The results of the analysis of the conducted focus groups are given for the individual thematic blocks that caused the highest activity of the respondents participating in the focus group.

- **Attitude of respondents to public land transport *of Tashkent city.***

The analysis of transcript reports showed that passengers who regularly use land transport are friendly and positive about changes in the quality of service of PLT. Respondents noted that many of the service elements specific to Central Asian countries are already being implemented in the area of PLT services. At the same time, focus group participants point to deficiencies and shortcomings that significantly reduce transport accessibility for people with disabilities.

The interest are the observations of the study participants, who have a greater preference for land transport than for the subway. These respondents note the large congestion of people in the subway and the depressing situation when moving underground. Some noted that it was impossible to enjoy the visual pleasure of travelling by underground transport.

Focus group participants perceive the transportation service as something complete, consisting of several parts, which are regularly built into a single process of providing transportation service. This observation is fully consistent with the research approach to service delivery at different "points of contact".

In general, almost all respondents indicated that they were willing to give a higher score to land transport because they noticed the changes introduced.

Passengers' perception of changes in PLT of Taskent city

As already mentioned, respondents point to significant changes in the development of the public transport system and view them positively. Among the participants were those who did not notice any new developments in transport services, usually the passengers who rarely use public transport. For passengers in this category, the main thing is to go "from point A to point B".

Passenger problems before and after the journey in the vehicle

In the process of analysis of transcripts the following problems of public land transport passengers were identified:

Frequency of movement of vehicles: violation of the schedule of public transport, large intervals between vehicles of one route and, as a consequence, a crowd of passengers, especially in sleeping areas.

Stopover points: poorly visible in some cases public transport stops; congestion of vehicles at small stops; lack of opportunity to buy a ticket at the stop in most cases; dirt from kiosks selling everything but tickets; small area of shelter at stopover points, which practically does not protect passengers in bad weather from rain and wind; poorly equipped approaches to the stop of public transport (which especially degrades the conditions of the passage).

Information accessibility: at many stops, numbers and routes are no longer displayed; the design of the timetable on a white background in small print is poorly readable and not sufficiently understood by older passengers; changes in vehicle timetables, of which a significant proportion of passengers can only find out about when they arrive at the stop; no signs allowing passengers to orientate themselves in a new area; information on the electronic boards does not correspond to the actual transport situation.

Passenger problems during the trip in the vehicle

The following were identified as the main problems:

Accessibility for all categories of passengers: difficulty for passengers with disabilities: high stairs for older passengers and passengers with children, few low platform buses. New buses with equipment for passengers with disabilities have very high climbing seats.

Behavior and qualification of the driver: in some cases, insufficient language, sharp manner of driving, in fixed-route taxis exceeding the admissible number of passengers, in some cases, insufficient polite behavior of drivers, sale of tickets while driving.

Safety: high wear and tear of the old transport fleet, reducing passenger safety; inoperability of internal equipment: malfunction of turnstiles, driver call buttons to stop "on demand".

Information: In some cases, the "ticker line" does not work or the information reflected is not true.

Travel planning: disruption to vehicle timetables that affects the accuracy of travel planning, including the need for drivers to sell tickets.

Communication with staff: low driver and control culture.

The majority of respondents highlighted the low quality of passenger transportation by minibuses (shuttle buses) in the discussion. The technical condition of route taxis, qualification of drivers allowing to break traffic rules, lack of information about the schedule, traffic, stops, inability to use this vehicle for passengers with disabilities and parents with small children (in wheelchairs) caused serious criticism.

Passengers identify the driver as a necessary and important element of the trip, and they note that not only safety but also comfort depends on him. Permanent residents of Tashkent do not positively recognize drivers - emigrants. In the course of focus groups the following negative moments in the work of drivers were noted: sharp style of driving, knocking down passengers in the cabin, ignorance of the route and stops in the course of the journey, not always include audio-notification of the names of stops, ignorance of the dialect language, rudeness and aggression towards passengers, phone conversations while driving, the inability to obtain clarification of information about the route from the driver due to his inaccessibility.

Some of the participants highlighted the following problems: not all passengers know that to stop "on demand" it is necessary to give a signal to the driver, travel documents are demagnetized and cannot be restored, it is inconvenient to pay the fare, non-compliance with the rules of the Uzbek language when declaring stops and when placing information on vehicles.

Passenger requirements for quality of service PLT

The analysis of passengers' perceptions of the quality of service is carried out in two directions: the direct formulation of quality requirements and mediated through the idea of passengers of good transport. As a result of the analysis of statements of respondents - participants of focus groups, a table of groups of characteristics and their components, the most important for passengers was formed (Table 1).

Table 1.**Service Quality Characteristics of PLT**

	Group properties	Characteristic of quality
	Security	Driver professionalism. Compliance of drivers with traffic rules. Service ability of the vehicle. Increase in the share of modern transport (complying with environmental and safety standards) in the vehicle fleet.
	Time	Regularity of transport movement. Observance of the time of departure of the vehicle, noting the delay of transport when selling tickets by drivers, delay of passengers at the entrance, traffic

		ams. Observance of time intervals between the vehicles of one route is 10-15 minutes. Free movement in selected lanes.
	Availability	• Entry/exit conditions of passengers, noting the importance of this parameter for passengers with disabilities, elderly passengers and passengers with children. In this case, the objects of compliance with the criterion are the doors of the vehicle, the level of the last step, the fixed place of stop of transport • Conditions of transport movement of passengers. The passenger notes that the design of the vehicle should be convenient for boarding/disembarking and travel. It is desirable to have available seats, convenience of moving on transport. • Convenience of purchasing tickets. For a comfortable trip at all its stages, passengers would like to be able to buy tickets at public transport stops, pay for travel with a more flexible system of cards (including credit cards), eliminate discrimination in the sale of tickets by the driver for only more than 1 trip. • Matching the cost of travel to the level of quality of service provided • Vehicle operating hours including night time
	Staff	• Friendliness and intelligence of the driver, his tidy appearance, knowledge of native language, knowledge of the route about the main places demanded by passengers on the route. • Friendliness and compliance with the law by regulatory authorities.
	Comfort	• Maintaining a comfortable temperature (availability of air conditioners and heating units), fresh air access. • No sudden shakes in motion. • Cleanliness in the cabin, the lighting of the cabin and bus stops. • Bus stops are clear.
	Informational support	• Availability and readability of the schedule at stops. • Availability of reliable information on the scoreboard with a ticker line. • Availability of signs at stops for orientation in the metropolis. • Clear audio accompaniment of the trip with the necessary equipment or driver. • Clear audio accompaniment of the trip with the necessary equipment or driver. • Opportunity to get additional information, for example, historical information when travelling on routes that pass through memorable places of city.

III. CONCLUSION

Focus groups allowed identifying groups of transport service properties and characteristics, as well as passengers' opinions on certain aspects of PLT service, namely:

1. Passengers identify the service of transportation as a service consisting of several stages (complicated). The general perception of the quality of the service is considered only in the aggregate of all stages: before the trip, after the trip (arrival, transfer, conditions of availability of the purpose of the trip).

2. Passengers of ground transport in the city do not consider it comfortable enough, although they are positive about the changes taking place. At the same time, there is some difference in the perception of individual changes depending on the age of the passenger.

3. According to a number of participants, the organization of a dedicated traffic lane does not allow to reach the speed advantage of PLT during peak traffic loads of highways due to a number of reasons, including violations of traffic rules by other participants, failure to comply with the schedule of the vehicle.

4. Replacement of the fleet of buses, trolleybuses, trams was noted by the majority of focus group participants, although there are certain claims to the design of the vehicle (accessibility for entry/exit of passengers with disabilities, insufficient space inside the cabin, high seats in the cabin on its rise).

5. For the most part, the study participants believe that PLT is not suitable for use by people with disabilities.

6. The possibility of transfer from personal transport to public transport exists, but will be realized by potential passengers under certain conditions of basic requirements for the quality of passenger service.

7. The conducted research can be considered as preliminary and can be used in the formation of a system of indicators to assess the quality of transport services and at the stage of quantitative evaluation of the quality of PLT.

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