



Midocean University

College of Master Business Administration MBA

Department/Major: Service Management & Customer Experience

**The Role of Customer Service in Handling Complaints and Its Impact on
Customer Satisfaction in the Airline Industry in Saudi Arabia**

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Introduction

Research ethics refers to the principles, standards, and procedures that guide responsible research from the development of a study idea to the reporting and publication of its results. It requires researchers to produce knowledge honestly while protecting the dignity, rights, privacy, and welfare of participants. Research ethics is therefore broader than avoiding misconduct. It also includes designing a scientifically valid study, recruiting participants fairly, obtaining voluntary informed consent, managing data securely, analyzing evidence objectively, and communicating findings accurately. The Belmont Report identifies respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as foundational principles for research involving human participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). These principles are reinforced by professional standards concerning integrity, confidentiality, competent research practice, and transparent reporting (American Psychological Association, 2017; Shamoo & Resnik, 2015).

Ethical conduct is especially important in business and service research because information that appears routine may still be sensitive. Customers who describe airline complaints may reveal travel patterns, booking details, negative experiences, interactions with employees, or opinions about particular companies. Even when the study does not involve medical procedures, careless collection or disclosure of such information may cause embarrassment, reputational harm, unwanted contact, or concern that future services could be affected. The researcher must therefore create conditions in which participants can answer freely without pressure and without exposing identifiable personal or organizational information.

This report applies research ethics to the proposed study titled “The Role of Customer Service in Handling Complaints and Its Impact on Customer Satisfaction in the Airline Industry in Saudi Arabia.” The project uses a quantitative questionnaire to examine response speed, complaint-resolution quality, communication style, customer service performance, and customer satisfaction among approximately 150–200 airline customers in Saudi Arabia. The purpose of this report is to explain the importance of research ethics, discuss major ethical principles and common ethical problems, review the role of ethics committees and relevant standards, and develop a practical ethical plan for collecting, storing, analyzing, and reporting the study data.

2. Importance of Research Ethics

Research ethics is essential because the credibility of academic knowledge depends on the trustworthiness of the process used to produce it. A conclusion may appear statistically convincing, but it cannot be considered reliable if the data were fabricated, participants were misled, inconvenient responses were removed without justification, or the analysis was changed only to obtain a significant result. Ethical standards connect methodological quality with moral responsibility. They require researchers to use suitable questions, accurate measures, transparent procedures, and honest interpretations. In this way, ethics improves the validity, reproducibility, and usefulness of research rather than functioning as a separate administrative requirement.

Ethics also protects participants and society. Individuals must understand what participation involves, what information will be collected, whether any risks exist, and how their data will be used. They must be able to decline or withdraw without punishment. These protections are particularly important where a power imbalance may exist, such as when a researcher is also an employee or supervisor in the industry being studied. Participants could otherwise believe that cooperation is expected or that negative comments may affect them. Respectful recruitment and anonymous data collection reduce this risk.

At the social level, ethical research prevents the waste of participants' time and avoids conclusions that could mislead airlines, regulators, or customers. Accurate findings can support better complaint-management practices, while biased findings may encourage ineffective policies. Ethical reporting also requires the researcher to acknowledge limitations and report non-significant or unfavorable results. This responsibility protects the public value of research and maintains confidence in universities and researchers. In Saudi Arabia, institutional oversight and the National Committee of Bioethics framework emphasize protecting participants' rights, dignity, safety, confidentiality, and voluntary consent where relevant to human-participant research (National Committee of Bioethics, 2025).

3. Basic Principles of Research Ethics

3.1 Scientific Honesty

Scientific honesty means presenting the research process and its results truthfully. The researcher must not invent responses, change values, hide unfavorable results, copy another author's work, or claim that procedures were completed when they were not. Sources must be cited accurately, and the final report must distinguish between evidence, interpretation, and personal opinion. For example, if the survey produces a weak relationship between response speed and customer satisfaction, the researcher must report that result rather than modifying the dataset or selectively presenting only stronger relationships.

3.2 Integrity

Integrity means maintaining consistency between the approved research plan and the actual conduct of the study. It includes keeping promises made to participants, documenting methodological decisions, correcting errors, and accepting responsibility for the accuracy of the work. Integrity also requires transparency about any use of employer resources, access to customer data, funding, or professional interests. For example, if the questionnaire is revised after ethics approval, the researcher should obtain approval for the amendment before using the revised version rather than quietly changing the instrument during data collection.

3.3 Objectivity

Objectivity requires the researcher to minimize personal, professional, and organizational bias when selecting participants, analyzing data, and interpreting findings. Complete neutrality may be difficult, particularly when the researcher has experience in airline customer service, but bias can be managed through predefined hypotheses, standardized questions, documented inclusion criteria, consistent data cleaning, and

supervisor review. For example, the researcher must not exclude dissatisfied passengers because their responses create a negative image of airline customer service. Their experiences are part of the phenomenon being studied and must be analyzed fairly.

3.4 Confidentiality and Privacy

Privacy concerns a participant's control over access to personal information, while confidentiality concerns the researcher's obligation to prevent unauthorized disclosure of information that has been collected. The study should collect only the minimum data required to answer the research questions. Names, national identification numbers, booking references, ticket numbers, phone numbers, email addresses, exact flight details, and complaint case numbers are not necessary for the proposed analysis and should not be requested. For example, the report may state that 42% of respondents were dissatisfied with resolution quality, but it must not publish a combination of details that could identify a particular passenger, employee, flight, or complaint.

3.5 Informed Consent

Informed consent is a voluntary decision to participate after receiving understandable information about the purpose of the study, procedures, expected time, foreseeable risks, possible benefits, confidentiality, data use, researcher contact details, and the right to refuse or withdraw. Consent must be free from coercion or excessive influence. The Saudi implementing regulations define informed consent as agreement given freely, without exploitation or coercion, and with understanding of the research objectives, potential risks, rights, and obligations (National Committee of Bioethics, 2025). In the proposed online questionnaire, the first screen should contain a participant-information statement and a consent question. Only respondents who select "I agree to participate" should proceed to the survey.

4. Ethical Issues in Scientific Research

4.1 Plagiarism

Plagiarism occurs when a researcher presents another person's words, ideas, structure, data, or analysis as original work without appropriate acknowledgment. It may involve direct copying, close paraphrasing, reuse of a previous assignment without disclosure, or citation of a source that was not actually consulted. Plagiarism damages academic credibility and violates the intellectual rights of authors. A relevant example would be copying a published questionnaire or literature-review paragraph about airline service recovery and presenting it without citation or permission. The ethical approach is to paraphrase accurately, provide APA citations, use quotation marks for limited direct quotations, and obtain permission when a protected research instrument requires it (American Psychological Association, 2020).

4.2 Fabrication and Falsification of Data

Fabrication means creating data or cases that never existed, while falsification means manipulating research materials, procedures, or data so that the research record no longer reflects what actually occurred. A hypothetical example would be adding 30 invented

questionnaires to reach the target sample or changing low satisfaction scores to make complaint handling appear more effective. Another form of falsification is deleting valid outliers solely because they weaken a hypothesis. Ethical data cleaning must follow pre-established rules, retain an audit trail, and explain exclusions in the methodology. Original survey exports and analysis files should be preserved securely so that the results can be checked if necessary.

4.3 Bias

Bias may enter the study through recruitment, question wording, measurement, analysis, or reporting. For example, recruiting only frequent business travelers from one airline may not represent the wider population of airline customers in Saudi Arabia. Leading questions such as “How satisfied were you with the airline’s helpful customer service?” also encourage a positive response. Bias can be reduced by neutral wording, pilot testing, balanced response options, transparent sampling procedures, and reporting the characteristics of the final sample. The researcher should also describe the sampling method accurately. If respondents are recruited through open social-media links, the method should not be called random sampling unless each eligible person had a known and equal probability of selection.

4.4 Violation of Privacy and Confidentiality

A privacy violation occurs when personal data are collected or accessed without proper justification or consent. A confidentiality breach occurs when collected information is disclosed to unauthorized persons. In this project, an ethical violation would occur if customer records obtained through an airline’s internal system were used to contact passengers without organizational authorization and ethics approval. It would also be inappropriate to share raw comments with managers if those comments contained identifiable details about passengers or employees. Anonymization, restricted access, encryption, careful quotation practices, and aggregate reporting are required to minimize these risks.

4.5 Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest exists when personal, professional, financial, or organizational interests could influence, or reasonably appear to influence, research judgment. Because the researcher has professional experience in airline customer service, there is a potential conflict between academic objectivity and the desire to protect an employer or industry reputation. This does not prevent the study, but it must be managed. The researcher should disclose the professional connection to the university, avoid using privileged customer information, refrain from recruiting direct subordinates, use standardized analysis procedures, and ensure that supervisors review the interpretation. A conflict becomes unethical when it is hidden or allowed to shape the data and conclusions.

5. Rules and Regulations Governing Research Ethics

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), research ethics committees, or equivalent university committees independently evaluate proposed studies before data collection begins. Their purpose is not merely to approve paperwork; they assess whether the research

question is meaningful, participant selection is fair, risks are proportionate to benefits, consent materials are understandable, privacy protections are adequate, and the research team is qualified. The committee may approve a study, require revisions, use an expedited review for minimal-risk research, or reject a proposal that exposes participants to unjustified risk. Any significant change to recruitment, consent, questionnaire content, data access, or storage should be submitted as an amendment before implementation.

International ethical guidance provides a broader foundation. The Belmont Report's principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice support voluntary consent, risk minimization, and fair participant selection (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki, although developed for medical research, reinforces independent review, informed consent, privacy, scientific validity, and responsible publication of results (World Medical Association, 2024). Professional standards such as the APA Ethics Code and the APA Publication Manual guide integrity, avoidance of harm, confidentiality, accurate authorship, citation, and transparent scholarly reporting (American Psychological Association, 2017, 2020).

Within Saudi Arabia, the Law of Ethics of Research on Living Creatures and its implementing regulations establish a national system of oversight for covered research involving living creatures and human participants. The 2025 implementing regulations describe the responsibilities of local ethics committees, requirements for informed consent, confidentiality, risk assessment, participant protection, and ongoing monitoring (National Committee of Bioethics, 2025). The exact regulatory classification of a non-medical customer survey should be confirmed with MidOcean University's ethics committee. Regardless of whether a specific law legally requires formal review, university approval and recognized ethical principles should be followed before recruitment begins.

6. Practical Application to the Proposed Research

6.1 Ethical Review Before Data Collection

Before distributing the questionnaire, the researcher should submit an ethics application containing the research proposal, questionnaire, recruitment message, participant-information statement, consent form, data-management plan, and any organizational permission required. Data collection should begin only after written university approval. The submission should clearly state that the study is a minimal-risk quantitative survey of adult airline customers in Saudi Arabia and that it does not request medical information, financial account information, booking references, or other direct identifiers. If the researcher later adds interviews, accesses company records, changes the population, or begins collecting identifying information, the amendment must be reviewed before implementation.

6.2 Participant Eligibility and Fair Recruitment

Participants should be adults aged 18 years or older who have used airline services in Saudi Arabia and have sufficient experience to answer questions about complaint handling. Because the research specifically concerns complaints, eligibility should include having

submitted or attempted to submit an airline complaint within a defined period, such as the previous two years. The final protocol must state this period consistently. Recruitment should use neutral public invitations or an ethically approved sampling frame. No person should be pressured to participate because of an employment, supervisory, customer-service, or academic relationship with the researcher.

If access to an airline customer list is proposed, the airline must authorize the access, the ethics committee must approve the method, and the airline—not the researcher using operational systems informally—should normally distribute the invitation. The researcher should not download customer contact details from a workplace system or use complaint records for academic recruitment without explicit approval. Direct subordinates and members of the researcher’s own team should preferably not be recruited because they may feel unable to refuse. Participation should not affect employment, complaint outcomes, refunds, compensation, loyalty benefits, or future airline services.

6.3 Informed Consent Procedure

The first page of the online survey should present a clear consent statement in the language selected by the participant. Because the study is conducted in Saudi Arabia, an Arabic version should be available in addition to English, with translation checked for equivalent meaning. The statement should explain the study purpose, eligibility requirements, approximate completion time, voluntary nature of participation, topics covered, minimal risks, absence of guaranteed direct benefit, confidentiality measures, data retention, use of aggregated results, contact details, and the right to stop before submission. Participants should confirm that they are at least 18 years old and select an agreement option before accessing the questionnaire.

The consent statement should also explain the limits of withdrawal. A respondent may close the survey at any time before submitting it. If the survey is fully anonymous and does not collect a withdrawal code, it may be impossible to identify and remove a response after submission. This limitation must be stated honestly. No preselected consent box should be used, and continuing to the questionnaire should not be treated as valid consent unless the information has been displayed clearly and agreement has been actively recorded.

6.4 Privacy, Confidentiality, and Data Minimization

The questionnaire should follow the principle of data minimization by collecting only information that is necessary for the research questions. Demographic variables should use broad categories, such as age ranges and travel-frequency bands, rather than exact dates or detailed personal histories. Open-text questions should be limited or accompanied by a warning not to include names, booking references, phone numbers, employee names, exact flight numbers, or complaint case numbers. If the survey platform automatically collects email addresses, IP addresses, or sign-in information, those settings should be disabled unless the ethics committee has approved a specific reason for collection.

Raw data should be stored in a password-protected and encrypted university-approved location. Access should be restricted to the researcher and academic supervisors. Files shared for supervision should use participant codes and should not contain direct identifiers. A separate document describing coding and cleaning decisions may be retained,

but it should not enable re-identification. Data should be retained for the period required by MidOcean University—for example, five years if this is the approved institutional requirement—and then securely deleted. The final ethics application should state the exact retention period rather than leaving it unspecified.

6.5 Assessment of Risks and Benefits

The proposed survey is likely to involve minimal risk, but minimal risk does not mean no risk. Recalling an unresolved complaint may cause frustration or mild emotional discomfort. Participants may fear that criticism of an airline could affect an ongoing complaint. There is also a confidentiality risk if detailed comments identify a passenger, employee, or event. These risks can be reduced by allowing participants to skip non-essential questions, using neutral wording, avoiding requests for identifiable details, providing a “prefer not to answer” option for sensitive demographics, and emphasizing that the survey is independent from complaint processing and has no effect on airline services.

The study does not promise a direct personal benefit. Possible indirect benefits include contributing to knowledge about complaint handling and helping airlines improve response speed, communication, and resolution quality. The consent form must not exaggerate these benefits or imply that participation will resolve an individual complaint. The survey should also be reasonably short so that the time burden is proportionate to the study value.

Table 1
Ethical Risks and Proposed Safeguards

Ethical risk	How it may arise	Safeguard
Undue influence	Customers or employees may believe participation is expected.	Use public, neutral recruitment; do not recruit direct subordinates; state that refusal has no consequences.
Re-identification	Detailed complaint or flight information may reveal a participant.	Do not collect names, booking references, case numbers, exact flights, or employee names; report only aggregates.
Emotional discomfort	Participants may recall frustrating or unresolved complaints.	Allow skipping and withdrawal before submission; use respectful wording; provide researcher and ethics contacts.
Organizational bias	The researcher’s airline experience may influence interpretation.	Disclose the professional connection; predefine analysis; retain an audit trail; use supervisor review.

Ethical risk	How it may arise	Safeguard
Data breach	Survey files may be accessed or shared without authorization.	Use encrypted, password-protected storage; restrict access; remove platform metadata and identifiers.
Misleading conclusions	Non-random online recruitment may be described as random sampling.	Describe the actual sampling method accurately and report its limitations.

6.6 Ethical Questionnaire Design

Questionnaire items should be relevant to the study variables and written in clear, neutral language. Participants should not be asked to identify a specific employee or provide accusations that the study is not designed to investigate. Questions should distinguish between response speed, quality of resolution, communication style, and overall satisfaction so that the instrument does not manipulate respondents toward a predetermined conclusion. The questionnaire should be reviewed by academic experts and pilot tested with a small group to identify confusing, leading, culturally inappropriate, or unnecessarily intrusive items. Pilot participants should also receive information and consent, and pilot data should not be merged with the final sample unless this was approved and the instrument remained unchanged.

6.7 Ethical Data Analysis and Reporting

The researcher should prepare an analysis plan before examining the final results. The planned procedures in the project—descriptive statistics, reliability testing using Cronbach’s alpha, correlation, and regression—should be applied consistently and reported accurately. Data exclusions, missing-value treatment, reverse coding, scale construction, and assumption checks should be documented. Statistical significance should not be presented as proof of practical importance, and causation should not be claimed from a cross-sectional survey that measures associations. Non-significant findings must be included because selective reporting would distort the evidence.

Results should be presented at group level. Small categories should be combined or suppressed when they could identify respondents. Any participant quotations from optional open-text responses should be carefully anonymized and used only if consent covered quotation. Airlines or employees should not be named unless identification is necessary, ethically approved, and supported by appropriate evidence. The discussion should acknowledge limitations such as self-selection, recall bias, reliance on self-reported experiences, and limits to generalization. All sources, instruments, and adapted ideas must be cited in APA style, and authorship should reflect genuine academic contribution.

6.8 Conflict-of-Interest Management and Dissemination

The researcher should include a conflict-of-interest statement explaining any current or previous employment in airline customer service and confirming that the academic study is independent of complaint decisions. No employer should be permitted to edit, suppress, or

selectively release findings. If an organization provides access or support, that role should be disclosed. Supervisors should review the analysis and interpretation, especially where findings may reflect positively or negatively on airline practices.

After completion, the results may be shared through the master's project, academic presentation, or a summarized report for industry stakeholders. Dissemination should protect confidentiality, present both strengths and weaknesses in the evidence, and avoid claims beyond the data. Participants should be told in the consent information whether an overall summary will be available. Ethical responsibility continues after data collection: the researcher remains accountable for secure storage, correction of errors, accurate citation, and responsible communication of the findings.

7. Conclusion

Research ethics is fundamental to the quality and legitimacy of academic research. It protects participants from coercion, privacy violations, and unjustified harm while also protecting scholarship from plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, bias, and misleading reporting. Scientific honesty, integrity, objectivity, confidentiality, and informed consent are practical obligations that must guide every stage of the research process rather than statements added only to the final report.

For the study on customer service complaint handling and customer satisfaction in the Saudi airline industry, the main ethical priorities are prior ethics approval, fair recruitment, voluntary and understandable consent, avoidance of employer-related pressure, collection of minimal non-identifiable data, secure storage, objective statistical analysis, transparent disclosure of professional interests, and aggregate reporting. Applying these safeguards will strengthen participant trust and improve the credibility of the findings. Ethical compliance should therefore be treated as part of good research design and as a continuing responsibility throughout future studies.

8. References

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