

CASE ON CRUISE SHIP FAILURE SERVICES: ONBOARD

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ABSTRACT

The ocean has fascinated people since time immemorial. Currently, cruise lines, one of the most globalized, and legally complex industries, transported 28.7 million tourists around the seven seas, a \$40 billion industry, in 2019. However, among the people who step onto cruise ships each year, many are dissatisfied with the onboard services. This research investigated two cruises from Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC Crociere), navigating in Brazil (MSC Fantasia and MSC Seaview), as the unit of analysis. This article also combined N=205 qualitative interviews with direct participation (one of the authors has participated in the MSC Fantasia cruise). Key findings pointed out repetitive customer service failures in both cases, that should be avoided at all costs, such as not solving customers' problems, language barriers, disrespect, offenses, malpractice, among others. Combined, both ships transported near 10,000 people, in seven-day cruises, from February 22 to 29, 2020. This investigation is useful for managers, cruise line agents and decision-makers, tourists, students, academics, and overall practitioners. Analysis and discussion compile the present work.

KEYWORDS: Cruise industry, customer failure services

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examined the failure services to customers on two seven-day cruises from the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC Fantasia and MSC Seaview), as the unit of analysis (Yin, 1988). Concerns have been raised about the frequent customers' complaints regarding the service's onboard cruises. Thus, this research aims to call into question the failure services onboard, and what could be done at all costs to avoid them. The results were obtained through a multiple-methods approach, combining qualitative, in-depth interviews, with the direct participation of one of the authors, and qualitative analysis, through descriptive, multiple case study (Yin, 1988). This study was motivated by the personal experience of one of the authors, who took MSC Fantasia with his family from February 22 to 29, 2020. Thus, N= 205 customers from both ships were interviewed, during and after the cruises, until March 3, 2020. In most cases, the complaints were convergent, to be presented and further discussed in this research.

The interviewees' identities were omitted, to preserve the academic purposes of this research, and for compliance issues. Quotations were allowed in most cases. MSC Seaview departed from Santos port, São Paulo state, on February 22, 2020, to Salvador - Ilhéus (both in Bahia) - Ilha Grande (Rio de Janeiro), arriving at Santos (São Paulo) on February 29th, a seven-day cruise, in which course is illustrated in the following Fig. 1.



Fig. 1: MSC Seaview route. Source: MSC, 2020

On the other hand, MSC Fantasia departed on February 22nd, 2020, on a seven-day cruise, from Rio de Janeiro to Ilhéus - Salvador (both in Bahia) - Búzios, and finally Rio de Janeiro, on February 29th, as illustrated in the following Fig. 2. The two cruises crossed each other in Salvador (Bahia), on February 25th:



Fig. 2: MSC Fantasia route. Source: MSC, 2020

Observe in both Figures that Salvador "de Bahia," does not exist in Brazilian Portuguese. The correct name of the capital of the Bahia state is "Salvador da Bahia," which is a standard error from foreign companies when they operate in Brazil: do not pay attention to the correct spelling. Out of the 1,313 crew member from the MSC Fantasia, and 1,413 from MSC Seaview on board, less than ten percent were Brazilian natives, and less than ten percent has spoken Brazilian Portuguese properly, as follows:

The crew members did not speak Portuguese at all. Most only English. I do not speak English. Therefore, it was a nightmare trying to search and find one person to understand a simple order. Some of them seemed to take advantage of not taking in Portuguese to ignore my requests. It was a nightmare! In my ship, almost 90 percent were Brazilians, and how is it possible that crew members could not speak Portuguese? (Interviewee #205)

In 2019, approximately 27.8 million passengers were transported in 404 ships, representing two percent of the overall global travel industry, or \$ 41.6 billion revenues, with 601,777 berths worldwide (CLI, 2020). The average cruise is seven-day, as well as the average cruiser is 47 years old. The cruise passenger distributed per world region is depicted in Fig. 3, as follows:

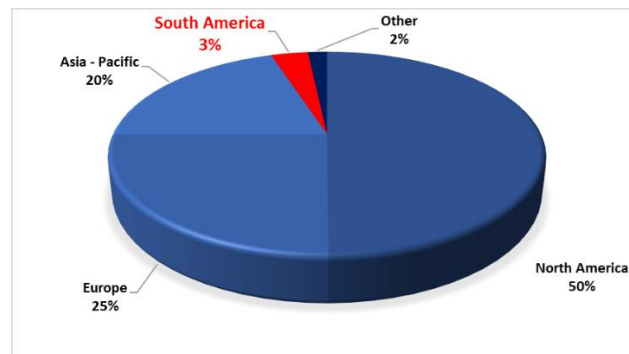


Fig. 3: Cruises per region (2018). Source: CLI, 2020

Observe in Fig. 3 that North America and Europe are responsible for 75 percent of all cruises in 2018. North America itself held 50 percent, while Latin America held three percent of all cruises in 2018. Finally, this article threw more light on how to prevent failure services onboard. In the next section, the method and limitations are presented.

2. METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

This research combined multiple qualitative methods approach, such as case study, with qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, in which unit of analysis are two cruises from Mediterranean Shipping Company: MSC Fantasia and MSC Seaview (Yin, 1988). This article also compiled inductive reasoning with the interpretive approach, supported by Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959, 1961). This research is limited to the two ships aforementioned, and from the period between February 22 to 29 (see Figures 1 and 2 for routes), and the n1= 155 interviews started on board of the MSC Fantasia and n2 = 50 from MSC Seaview. In total, N- 205 interviewees. All of the n1= 155 interviews were invited to participate face to face, while the n2 = 50 interviewees were contacted by phone or WhatsApp, with a 100 percent response rate. Other cruise line

ships and companies are not part of the present article. Primary data were In Vivo coded, to "honor the participant's voice (Saldaña, 2013). After coding, the data were analyzed through content analysis (Schreier, 2012).

3. MEDITERRANEAN SHIPPING COMPANY (MSC) CROCIERE: BACKGROUND

MSC Crociere¹ is a global, cruise line, based in Switzerland (Geneva). It was founded in 1989 in Naples, Italy (MSC, 2020). MSC Crociere is responsible for passenger transportation and part of the Mediterranean Shipping Company S.A. (MSC), one of the most significant container shipping operators worldwide (MSC, 2020). MSC Crociere is currently the fourth world's largest privately held cruise company. Near 23,500 people worldwide are employed in MSC, with offices in 45 countries (MSC, 2020). In 2019, Carnival Corporation & plc, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., and Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings, are the three biggest companies in the sector, as illustrated in the following Fig. 4:

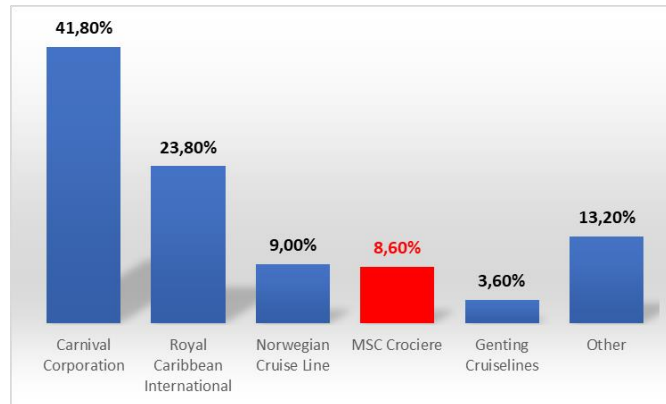


Fig. 4: Cruise lines global market share (2019). Source: Cruise Industry News, 2020

Observe in Fig. 4 that MSC is close to the third position, Norwegian Cruise Line, while Carnival Corporation performs 41.8 percent of the total market. Note that the five major companies are responsible for 86.8 percent of the total cruise lines market.

3.1 MSC Seaview

MSC Seaview was built in 2017, by the Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri², and it was launched on June 9th, 2018. The Seaview has a tonnage of 153,516 t and accommodates 5,179 passengers, 1,413 crew members, registered at Valetta, Malta (MSC, 2020). Figures 5 and 6 show MSC Seaview:

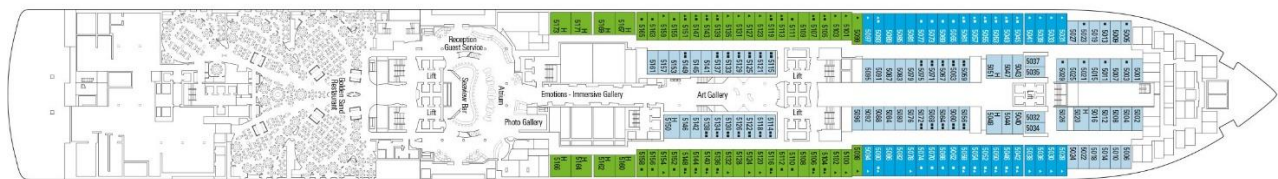


Fig. 5: Seaview plan. Source: MSC, 2020

¹ Crociere = Italian for Cruise, in English, therefore, MSC Cruise, in English

² Fincantieri S.p.A. is an Italian shipyard dedicated to the construction of large ships based in the city of Trieste.



Fig. 6: Seaview. Source: MSC, 2020

3.2 MSC Fantasia

MSC Fantasia was built in 2006 by the Italian shipbuilder STX Europe STX Europe is a shipbuilding company based in Oslo, Norway. It was launched on December 18th, 2008. The MSC Fantasia has a tonnage of 137,936 t and accommodates 3,274 passengers, 1,313 crew members, registered at Panama (MSC, 2020). Figures 7 and 8 show MSC Fantasia:

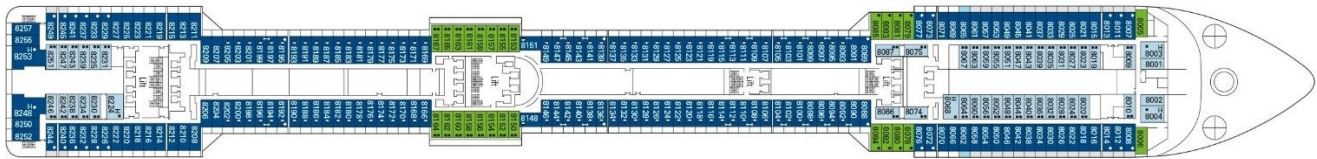


Fig. 7: Seaview plan. Source: MSC, 2020



Fig. 8: MSC Fantasia. Source: MSC, 2020

Fig. 9 illustrates both MSC Fantasia and MSC Seaview at Salvador port:



Fig. 3: MSC Seaview from MSC Fantasia cabin, at Salvador port. Source: author's picture

Observe in Fig. 9 the MSC Seaview (bottom left) at the Salvador port, from the cabin 10.041 of MSC Fantasia, on February 25th, 2020. On that occasion, MSC Fantasia transported 3,776 passengers and MSC Seaview near 5,000. Despite

the beautiful landscapes, the two cruises had one common characteristic, according to the interviewees: failure services, as discussed in the next section.

4. ONBOARD SERVICES: NIGHTMARE?

The embarkation finished at 4 PM, at the respective ports, Rio de Janeiro for MSC Fantasia and Santos for MSC Seaview. Both cruises departed at 6 PM sharp. The baggage was checked until 4 PM. In some cases, however, they were delivered at the cabins around 8 PM. According to interviewee #31, the lack of organization on the baggage delivery cause a first poor impression:

I entered the cabin by midday and received all my belongings by 8 PM. Imagine the frustration of being unable to change my clothes. I am also traveling with my wife and two kids. It was a mess, and no one from MSC anticipated in advance the delay in luggage delivery. (Interviewee #35)

Due to misinformation onboard, many passengers have lost their first dinner, at the restaurant. On MSC Fantasia, there were two schedules for dinner: at 7:30 and 10:00 PM. Interviewee #1 described the first impressions aboard, as well as the misinformation regarding the restaurant location for the first dinner:

When I entered the ship, I was astonished. It was my first time in a cruise and I had high expectations, sold by MSC agents. I had a dinner set to 7:30 PM at the Cerchio's restaurant (I don't know if this is the correct pronunciation, because it is in Italian, and I do not speak Italian at all). Well, I arrived at 7:55 PM because I got lost in this huge ship, asked for assistance to one crew member that did not speak Portuguese, and when I arrived, a steward told me that the restaurant was closed, and she was speaking in English, translated by another passenger, in the same situation. There were approximately a dozen passengers at there. The steward was rude, seemed upset, as if we were obliged to know by heart every corner of the ship as she did...nasty (Interviewee #1).

In MSC Fantasia, 14th deck, the buffet L'Africana served both for breakfasts, lunches, snacks. Virtually all the interviewees of the interviewees complained about the services offered at the buffet. The most frequent are summarized as follows:

"The Buffet was the worst I have ever seen. The waiters do not speak Portuguese. They do not understand what is asked and brought two wrong orders out of two" (Interviewee #2).

"The waiters (at the Buffet) pretend they do not understand what one talks and turned their back on me" (Interviewee #47).

"I have been traveling in other companies, and the waiters are far better trained than in MSC" (Interviewee # 112).

"This buffet service is the worst I have ever seen. Additionally, they do not speak Portuguese" (Interviewee #53)

This ship is registered in Panama, where the labor laws are less strict than in Brazil. Therefore, it is a much cheaper labor force from countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and so on. This is ridiculous. There is more than 99 percent Brazilian of passengers onboard, and the waiters can barely communicate in Portuguese. They need to learn how to speak Portuguese urgently (Interviewee #91)

"The cruise is very expensive to bear crew members that cannot communicate properly in Portuguese" (Interviewee #22).

Other complaints, regarding the services at the bars (spread over the ships) regard the number of attendees: in Fig. 10, interviewee #205 took a picture that evidenced the shortage of people working at the bar, unable to meet the bar's demand, as follows:



Fig. 10: MSC Seaview bar. Source: interviewee #205's picture

Observe in Fig. 10 that hundreds of passengers are being served by only two MSC employees, with huge lines (see the arrows in red). There was no other crew member outside the bar to attend the passengers. In Fig. 10, the two attendants seem concentrated in registering their orders, instead of serving people. Fig. 10 also evidenced the shortage of onboard services on peak activities promoted by the MSC Seaview, in this case, a Carnival gala, as described by the picture's author:

It is incredible how the employees at the ship (MSC Seaview) are poorly trained. They should, at least, move other employees to help meet the momentary high demand at that bar. I spent almost one hour to be served. It would help if the two barmen spoke Portuguese. The bartenders spent more time to decipher our orders than to process them (Interviewee #205)

However, not all services were criticized: cleaning and tidying the cabins received praise from passengers: "The cabins were very well organized and clean. Every day I came back from lunch, or after a full day sightseeing, I found the cabin and bathroom sanitized, with both towels changed" (Interviewee #37).

Other interviewees expressed similar opinions: "My cabin was constantly being sanitized" (Interviewee #94). "I thought my cabin would be clean for one day or two, like all the other services failed to provide quality services. To my surprise, they kept their good service on cleaning and organizing my cabin during my stay." (Interviewee #1).

Regarding the menu offered at the Buffet, the menu was not chosen to the Brazilian audience, observed as follows:

The buffet offered eggs, and bacon, like in the US, and pain au chocolat³, like in France. There are no Americans or Frenchmen here... How strange. I felt like to be in a rail station in France. The coffee was terrible, like tea, nothing like our

³ Type of croissant made with small pieces of chocolate, very common in France, but not in Brazil.

(Brazilian) coffee. This ship (MSC Fantasia) is sailing in Brazilian waters, with virtually all passengers Brazilians, and they serve that kind of coffee? Outrageous. I felt disrespected, almost offended (Interviewee #4).⁴

I did not like the menu served on the Buffet. Pizza for breakfast, lunch and dinner? Too much cholesterol. There was no one single diet beverage being served on board, and this coffee sucks. It is horrible. I should have gained weight very fast in this ship. My opinion is that the menu organizers did not pay attention to the Brazilian taste on purpose, or simply they don't care (Interviewee # 61)

Moreover, one of the services offered on board that was criticized was the Wi-fi paid connection, as the following piece of evidence shows:

I bought an internet bundle. Very expensive. The internet simply was not working. Something went wrong with their internet signal. I complained with one of the crew members, who told me to go to the front desk operator, at the deck five. She (the crew member) told me that the package would be cancelled, as per request. I went to the reception, at the front desk, and was literally offended by Mr. Luiz Delgado, a clerk who told me to complain about their lack of service in Justice. Absolutely yes, I will file a suit against this company. They humiliate people, this front desk operator was rude and offended me. Finally, one employee protected the error of the colleague, when confronted! Outrageous. Never in my life I will set a foot again in one of the MSC cruises (Interviewee # 1)

Finally, the worst failure service onboard case occurred when the crew of the MSC Seaview had to deal with an injury situation. The passenger slipped in a wet deck, at the Tropical party, on Saturday 22, with no visual signaling available at the moment, falling and breaking her ankle. She was assisted by other passengers, who took the initiative to provide the first aid to her, as observed:

After the accident, I was helped by my colleagues and other strangers. The crew members did not provide any kind of assistance. I went to my cabin to rest because I thought there was no big deal on my ankle. I was wrong because it did hurt. I called the reception (#99 channel), and asked for assistance. They offered assistance in my cabin for \$ 230. Outrageous! Later, they offered me a wheelchair for \$ 100. You know, in the middle of the ocean, I got stuck in my cabin. The cruise ended for me. At least, minimum I would say, the crew members should show, at least, an empathetic behavior through an accident caused by their malpractice. (Interviewee # 205)

5. IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The present investigation implicates in several fields of research, such as (i) services on air transportation industry (Cruz, B.S. & Dias, M.O., 2020; Dias, M.O., Teles, and Duzert, 2018; Dias, M.O. and Duzert, 2018), (ii) e-business negotiation (Dias, M.O. & Duzert, 2017); (iii) services on mining industry (Dias, M.O., & Davila, 2018); (iv) services on carmaker industry (Dias, M.O., Navarro and Valle, 2013, Dias, M.O., et al., 2014; Dias, M.O., et al., 2013); (v) non-market forces and services (Dias, M.O. & Navarro, 2018); services on the craft beer industry (Dias, M.O. & Falconi, 2018; Dias, M.O., 2018); (vi) public services (Dias, M.O., 2018); (vii) NGOs services (Paradela, Dias, M.O.; Assis, O., J.; Fonseca, R. (2019); (viii) services on governmental negotiations (Dias, M.O. & Navarro, 2017); (ix) copier services industry (Dias, M.O., 2012); (x) streaming services (Dias, M. O., & Navarro, 2018), among others.

Content analysis evidenced the failure of onboard services in both cases investigated. First and foremost, approximately 10,000 Brazilians were forced to deal, for seven days, within Brazil, with people serving onboard unable to speak Portuguese, in most cases. Evidence suggests the company's unpreparedness in dealing with a public in the country where they have permission from the Federal Government to operate. In this case, Brazil. Regarding the English spoken onboard, most Asiatic employees could not express themselves adequately. Thus, evidence also pointed out an imperfect communication process between customers and passengers within both cruises. The analysis also pointed out a poor experience onboard both ships. According to the opinions expressed here by the interviewees, the menus offered, were not adapted to the Brazilians. One of the most frequent complaints regarded the lack of training and preparation to deal with conflict management, unable to solve the customer's problems satisfactorily. When a receptionist tells a customer to seek Justice for reparation, there is something wrong with the service provider, and no matter arguments may exist for their defense. The behavior aforementioned (see interviewee #1 statement), is simply unacceptable and reprehensible behavior.

Customers should search primarily for the reputation of the company, before joining an expensive cruise package, on available customer protection services. They should also access the complaints service on the service provider primarily, and if necessary, ultimately to file a lawsuit, and to spread in social media their experiences. Certainly if the customers knew with due anticipation about the onboard services offered in both cases, they would have an opportunity to choose another service

⁴ Brazilian taste for coffee differs enormously from those in Europe or North America, for instance. Brazil is the largest arabica coffee producer worldwide, which varieties are quite stronger in taste than the coffee consumed in these locations. Therefore, Brazilians dislike what is usually called "weak" coffee.

provider. In such cases, communication and conflict management skills should be intensively practiced. The findings presented here cannot be generalized, and further studies on external validity should be performed. Nevertheless, all failure cases should be treated with due diligence by the service provider, to improve the quality of the services offered.

6. CASE RECOMMENDATIONS

The following seven courses of action are recommended to avoid such distress with passengers of all kinds of similar services, involving multi-cultures onboard:

1. Effective communication in the language of the client is mandatory: if the cruises were held in Brazil, the crew member should be fluent in Brazilian Portuguese. The reference for language should always be the client, not the opposite. The solution is to designate more Brazilian crew members on board and make sure that native Brazilian Portuguese speakers assess non-Brazilians.
2. Menus served should be customized to the local audience: the cruises were held in Brazil. Why did the menus not follow the fact that 99 percent of passengers onboard the two ships were Brazilian, traveling within Brazil?
3. Conflict management training is mandatory: the passengers are confined in a ship for several days. The ship moves continuously, and the seasick is expected. Crew members should be trained to understand these single facts, valid for any ship cruises, that may affect the passengers' mood. Therefore, conflicts may arise. Crew members should behave empathetically with the passengers, not the opposite. When a passenger starts feeling sorry for the crew members, something is going wrong with the whole employment system. If that happens, or the crew members complain about their situation or show signs of fatigue, perceived by the passenger. In both cases, the service provider image is damaged.
4. Crew members should be empathetic with the client, not only the opposite: simply because passengers bought a cruise to have a good time, not the opposite.
5. The service providers should always try their best efforts to solve the customer problems: situations do happen. However, it is the course of action taken by the service provider, the response time that counts when something goes wrong. Therefore, service providers should be responsive as far as possible. If the internet is not available, stop selling it. It is simple. If it is not working, return cash for the passenger. That is all. Trying to force the passenger to accept what is not working may cause unnecessary distress and future lawsuits.
6. Do not try to be the smartest guy in the room: hidden costs, once disclosed, backfire to the service provider reputation, much worse than suits filed. To collect \$ 231 for a medical assistance at the cabin may, or to collect \$ 100 for a wheelchair rent, might be considered an abuse for those who are incapable of locomotion, and should be avoided at all costs, simply because they might be seen as inhumane treatment by the passengers on board, and affect the service provider reputation dramatically, even destroying it.
7. The client is always right: try to avoid at all cost clients distressed on board. Try to satisfy the clients as far as possible. If not possible, try to compensate by all means. Bad word-to-mouth publicity in the long term may destroy a company, no matter its size.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is encouraged on other cruises from other companies. How do other companies worldwide treat their clients? Other cruise lines should be investigated, as well. Future studies are also recommended regarding the impact of failure services in the revenues of cruise lines companies. The assumption is that there is an inverse proportion between failure services and revenues. External validity studies are stimulated. Finally, further studies on the cruise lines performance in Brazil, regarding the other passenger transport modes' opportunities are strongly stimulated.

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