ASSESSING CUSTOMER VIEWPOINTS IN THE AIRLINE SERVICES

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Abstract

This research aims to measure the relationship between service quality, brand image, confidence, and price to satisfy customers. This study was based on consumer expectations in Malaysia's airline industry. Customer satisfaction has become a fundamental problem, especially when the competition is stiff, and consumers have more bargaining power. This research used data-gathering questionnaires. Two hundred respondents attended data collection activities. Survey types consisted of several sections separated by variables. The questionnaire was distributed at Malaysia's three primary airports and completed for a month. Participants volunteered for analysis. Results indicate that the price was not crucial to customer satisfaction. The remaining factors remain optimistic and critical to customer satisfaction. Not only the airline industry, but all logistics service providers can use the findings.

Keywords Brand image, trust, price, service quality, satisfaction

1.0   Introduction

In the industrial world today, transport plays an extensive role and helps to eliminate the distance barrier. After all, an effective transport network is crucial for a country's sustainable economic development and plays an essential role in promoting national and global integrations (Farooq et al., 2018). The airline industry is a significant contributor to its economic growth (Kanje et al., 2019). air transport facilitates foreign trade and indirectly benefits the tourism industry. Apart from increasing world trade activities by allowing quicker and easier movement of passengers and visitors, the airline industry also enhances

life quality by extending leisure and tourism uses, which have substantially expanded worldwide. Moreover, airline transport services have become the necessary means for both daily activities and travel needs. Most customers choose air transport when it comes to a long-distance journey due to its flexibility and efficacy of time (Farooq et al., 2018).

An airline company provides travel and freight air transport services. The business leases or owns aircraft to provide these services and may also create mutual benefits ties or partnerships with other airlines. Moreover, airline companies vary from a single aircraft carrying cargo and passengers to hundreds of aircraft engaged by full-service international airline companies. Airline services can be categorized as intercontinental, domestic, regional, or international and are engaged as scheduled or charter services (Pabedinskaitė & Akstinaitė, 2014). The airline industry consists of a dynamic market since it focuses on customer experience (Farooq et al., 2018). Different understandings and standards can be modified and updated in different ways. Thus, market researchers have moved away from the literal meaning of happiness and choose to explore and define the term "customer experience" instead (Pabedinskaitė & Akstinaitė, 2014). It is a decision that a product or service itself provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related performance, including the level of under-or over-performance (Homsombat et al., 2014). In this case, this study viewed airline customer experience as a mechanism in line with the company offering that involves only a few variables, such as on-time performance and check-in customers.

In the last decade, the global airline industry has experienced a roller-coaster operation due to various factors, such as higher fuel prices (Farooq et al., 2018), increased protection premiums ("Branding Satisfaction in the Airline Industry: A Comparative Study of Malaysia Airlines and Air Asia," 2011), rapid industry deregulation (Homsombat et al., 2014), and natural disasters (ranging from disease outbreaks to volcano eruptions). These factors impede the growth of air travel. With the rapid advances in the competitive business climate, customers' growing demands and expectations lead to a situation where many companies in the airline industry encounter issues of retaining their customers (Shamsudin, Azmi, et al., 2020). Today's challenging market environment has compelled airline companies to concentrate on cost savings to achieve efficient business operations with the possible need to sacrifice service quality and customer satisfaction (Shamsudin, Johari, et al., 2020).

Customer reviews can help airline companies to strengthen their services and make the right choices to satisfy customers. However, customer reviews may also have adverse effects.

Customers can make use of their family and friends through word of mouth. Individual customers would condemn the services provided because they want the organizations to be negatively known. In addition, service quality can directly affect behavioral intention and leads to customer satisfaction. Hence, airline companies need to take established standards seriously.

This study aimed to understand service quality, brand image, trust, and price on customer satisfaction in airline services from the customer perspective. Malaysia Airlines Berhad or previously known as the Malaysian Airline System was selected for this study. Malaysia Airlines is recognized as the only national flag carrier in Malaysia. Its international and domestic flight routes cover 100 destinations globally. Furthermore, Skytrax awarded Malaysia Airlines as one of the six five-star rated airlines. Malaysia Airlines aims to tackle its shortcomings through behavioral expectations, service quality, and customer satisfaction. This study also explored the values of service efficiency, price policy, and airline service escapes and how these factors influence customer satisfaction.

2.1   Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction towards goods and services can be achieved in various circumstances. It is a highly individual decision that is deeply affected by assumptions about customer satisfaction. Customers' satisfaction depends on familiarity with business dealings and personal events (Shamsudin, Ramle, et al., 2020). It reflects the degree to which a customer agrees that a person, business, or organization sufficiently delivers a product or service that meets the customer's standards in the context where the customer is familiar with the product or service (Shamsudin, Nayan, et al., 2020b). Customer satisfaction is not deeply rooted in the customer or the product or service, but a socially generated reaction to the customer's relationship, product or service, and the business or organization (Özkan et al., 2019). In this case, customer satisfaction can be more comprehensively defined by the perception of the quality of product, service, and price and the factors of circumstances and personal factors (Chicu et al., 2019).

In addition, customer satisfaction reflects customers' general preference for the product or service of a business or an emotional reaction. (Mannan et al., 2019) to the difference between what customers lack and what they get (Slack & Singh, 2020), which affects consumer behavior in terms of the intent and expectation of the proposed product or service (Moorthy et al ., 2018). Customer satisfaction can also be characterized as experience based

on a specific service encounter (Özkan et al., 2019), which contributes to customer loyalty (Chicu et al., 2019), repeat purchase, encouraging word of mouth (WOM) (Ruzanna et al., 2020), and ultimately, more significant achievements and profitability (Moorthy et al., 2018). It is a dynamic experience in the service industry and can be described as a customer experience assessment (Özkan et al., 2019). Customers set the requirements of products or services, and these standards become the norm before the purchase (Mannan et al., 2019). Knowing what customers expect from the service industry is essential as a reference standard in evaluating an organization (Shamsudin et al., 2021).

As the features of services are intangible, reviews are critical in the service industry. The results or experiences may be correlated with the pre-purchase expectations when buying a product or service, and as the product or service is used (Chicu et al., 2019). The content produced by customers can be in various forms and types of media. Customer reviews reflect how customers describe and share their experiences differently, helping organizations understand what customers think (Zamry & Nayan, 2020). Through online platforms, customers can easily express their experience, information, opinions, and knowledge about the products, services, and brands they use. In this case, online reviews help airline companies implement effective strategies to improve their services, considering their customers' diverse backgrounds (Özkan et al., 2019).

The interactions between customers and employees strongly influence customer satisfaction. Hence, it is critical to examine employees' behavior that can be heavily influenced by the business operation (Shamsudin, Nayan, et al., 2020a). The value of customer satisfaction comes from the generally accepted concept that consumers must be pleased in order for an organization to be successful and profitable. Customers are more likely to return when satisfied, while disappointed customers are more likely to go elsewhere (Chicu et al., 2019). Customer satisfaction often results in good WOM that provides valuable indirect advertising for an organization. Satisfied customers often ensure the collection of fewer customer complaints; thereby, reducing the costs of managing service failure (Mannan et al., 2019). Moreover, the value of service is one of the main factors in attracting and retaining loyal customers. As a result, airline companies tend to critically innovate their system and technology to retain competitive performance and meet customers' needs and desires (Shamsudin, Rasol, et al., 2020).

2.2   Service Quality

The term "service" can be defined differently, depending on the region where the term is used. The service provided depends on the product type, which differs for different organizations (Moghavvemi et al., 2018). Meanwhile, quality is one of the aspects that customers look for in a product or service. Quality can also be defined as the overall features and characteristics of a product or service, depending on its ability to satisfy customers' specified or implied needs (Shamsudin, Nayan, et al., 2020c). Service quality can be described as an overall perception of the organization's relative output by consumers. In management and marketing literature, service quality is customers' perception of the service that achieves or surpasses their standards (Khamis & AbRashid, 2018). These service standards may refer to the way customers are handled, which can be either good or bad.

2.3   Brand Image

The brand image is more than a label representing an entity, product, or service. Today, the brand picture is a blend of customer relationships focused on an organization's experience. Being more than a logo or slogan (M. Ahmed et al., 2019), brand image involves visual elements and brand connexions that include speed, reliability, and continuity. The best brand images can be easily identified and immediately deliver the right message from these brands' organizations (Shamsudin, Hassan, et al., 2020). When customers start to recognize and purchase a product or service, customers return for a good brand and stay loyal to that brand (Sasmita & Mohd Suki, 2015). If a great product comes with an engaging message that hits all the right notes with the customers, customer satisfaction will grow.

2.4   Trust

Brand trust as an "insurance policy'" is not a new idea. Most organizations know that customer trust would build or break an organization and ensure the organization (Chen, 2017). However, only a few organizations achieve sufficient brand trust; others choose to pay lip service rather than delving into what it means to honestly care for customers and their needs (Mohd Yusof et al., 2020). Brand trust has been more critical than ever, as customers today have many choices to select from. Trust has a significant impact on loyalty and influence. Building trust lies in authenticity—a mere claim of a product or service without proper steps to support the claim is likely to result in business failure. To build trust, organizations have to control what they do; identify customers' expectations, and assess how

they perform in meeting the customers' trust and expectations (Hasim et al., 2020). Before a purchase, customers would first consider the brand; loyal customers would support and even protect the integrity of the brand they trust. Therefore, as a brand gains trust from customers, the benefits are massive. High-quality products and services are the leading factors for customer trust. Besides that, excellent ratings and feedback and efficiency in addressing customer-related issues contribute to a positive customer experience if these aspects are properly handled (Shamsudin, Nayan, et al., 2020d). The values of creating better customer interactions, getting to know the demographic information, desires, and expectations of customers, and offering better flexibility are critical in building brand trust.

2.5   Price

Research has shown that the perceived quality of an advertised product or service increases with price. Price gives customers a vital message. The low price of the provided product or service may mean that at a higher price, the product or service may not be especially desirable or of lower quality than that of a similar product or service. A low price for a product or service may raise the consumer perception of its overall quality in the likelihood of finding any flaws or perceived shortcomings.

Under-priced products or services can be harmful to the profit margins, particularly when the under-priced products or services fail to attract customers and eventually fail to cover other costs, such as ordering costs (Mohd Yusof et al., 2020). However, setting a low price and unexpectedly increase the price comes with the risk of losing customers who now believe that the product or service offered is no longer the best value in the market (Chen, 2017). There are a few aspects to consider before enforcing a high price for the product or service. Although a higher price may seem intuitively discourage purchase, this may not be the case, as a higher price may imply an extremely high-quality or well-made product or service. However, fixing a high price can also backfire and leads to a lack of customer retention. Therefore, the management needs to apply a pricing strategy that balances the two extremes of price to send a positive message on the quality and value of products and services offered to the customers (Sasmita & Mohd Suki, 2015).

3.0   Methodology

For this study, an online survey in Google forms was conducted through WhatsApp. The questionnaires were distributed using the simple random sampling technique. Two hundred

respondents, age 17 and above, who experienced using airline services were selected to provide their views on the performance of airline services and customer satisfaction. In this research, the self-administered questionnaire focused solely on customer attitudes towards the airline services offered. It is all about customer opinion on airline service quality, including the physical facilities given, airline staff, brand image, trust, and price.

4.0 Findings

Analysis of the Research Model with the Method *Partial Least Square* (PLS)

This study uses the PLS analysis technique with the SmartPLS Program. From the results of data processing, PLS analysis can be done by evaluating the structural equation model. In this evaluation, there are two essential evaluations. *First*, evaluating the measurement model *(outer model)* to determine the validity and reliability of indicators that measure latent variables, the instrument validity and reliability test criteria in this study refer to *discriminant validity, convergent validity,* and *composite reliability. Second,* assess the *inner and structural models to see the relationship between constructs, the significance value,* and the *research model's R-square*. Testing the *Inner model* in PLS analysis is done through *bootstrap resampling.*

Discriminant validity

This study finds it essential further to assess its discriminant validity complementary to the prior assessments. D*iscriminant validity* in research was tested using the score *square root of average* (AVE) to check (testing) whether the research instrument is valid in explaining or reflecting latent variables. *Discriminant validity* used is the *square root of the average variance extracted* ($\sqrt{}$AVE)*.* Suppose the square root of the average variance extracted ($\sqrt{}$AVE) value of each variable is greater than the correlation value between the latent variable and other latent variables. In that case, the instrument variable is said to be a valid discriminant.

Table 4.1 Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

No	Construct	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
1	Brand Image	0.790

2	Customer Satisfaction	0.749
3	Price	0.828
4	Service Quality	0.779
5	Trust	0.817

Test results in Table 4.1 show that the value of the *average variance extracted* (AVE) is more than 0.5. According to Hair, Sarstedt, & Ringle (2017), the *average variance extracted* (AVE) of each latent construct should 0.5 or higher. All constructs showed a satisfactory explanation of more than 50% of variances of its items ranging from 0.749 to 0.828.

Table 4. 2 Fornell Larker's Criterion in Establishing Discriminant Validity (√AVE)

	Brand Image	Customer Satisfaction	Price	Service Quality	Trust
Brand Image	0.824				
Customer Satisfaction	0.818	0.813			
Price	0.803	0.845	0.809		
Service Quality	0.727	0.815	0.727	0.722	
Trust	0.718	0.734	0.803	0.856	0.901

The table shows that the square root of the average variance extracted (√AVE) values of all variables are more significant than the correlation between latent variables and other latent variables. Each variable's instruments are valid discriminant. In compliance with Fornell-Larker's criterion, this study is keen to report that this study's constructs and items had confirmed its discriminant validity.

Convergent validity

Convergent validity measures an indicator's validity as a constructed measure, which can be seen from *outer loading*. The value outer loading can also be interpreted as the contribution of each indicator to the latent variable. *Outer loading of* an indicator with the highest value means that the indicator is the most robust measure of the latent variable in question. More

clearly follows the results of the analysis and evaluation of measurement models for each research variable.

Table 4.3 Outer Loading Each Indicator

	Brand Image	Customer Satisfaction	Price	Service Quality	Trust
BI1	0.817				
BI2	0.833				
BI3	0.929				
BI4	0.914				
CS1		0.858			
CS2		0.866			
CS3		0.865			
CS4		0.818			
CS5		0.859			
PR1			0.916		
PR2			0.924		
PR3			0.900		
PR4			0.855		
SQ1				0.828	
SQ2				0.860	
SQ3				0.772	
SQ4				0.758	
SQ5				0.836	
TR1					0.903
TR2					0.904
TR3					0.865
TR4					0.888

All indicators in each variable have a value *outer loading* above 0.70, which means that the indicators are valid and able to measure latent variables.

Composite Reliability

Composite reliability tests the value *reliability* between the indicators of the construct that constitutes it. Results are *composite reliability* said to be good if the value is above 0.70. Test results of *composite reliability of* the measurement model are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4 Composite Reliability of Constructs

No.	Construct	Composite Reliability
1	Brand Image	0.921
2	Customer Satisfaction	0.916
3	Price	0.930
4	Service Quality	0.892
5	Trust	0.915

The test results in Table 4.4 obtained the value of composite *reliability of* all variables above 0.70. These results mean that the six latent variables analyzed have good composite reliability, and it is concluded that all instruments used in this study have met the criteria or are suitable for use in the measurement of the five latent variables: brand image, customer satisfaction, price, service quality, and trust.

Table 4.5 Path coefficient on the direct relationship between variables

Relationship	Original sample (β)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation STDV	T - Statistics	P-Values
Brand Image -> Customer Satisfaction	0.249	0.245	0.119	2.098	0.036
Price -> Customer Satisfaction	0.170	0.172	0.116	1.464	0.144
Service Quality -> Customer Satisfaction	0.302	0.294	0.112	2.712	0.007
Trust -> Customer Satisfaction	0.213	0.224	0.085	2.512	0.012

The result for path coefficients on the relationship between BI (brand image) and CS (customer satisfaction) was β 0.249. The result of the *t*-value and *p*-value explicated that BI has a strong positive relationship with customer satisfaction, where *t*-value = 2.098 and *p*-value = 0.036. This confirmed that the relationship of BI (brand image) toward CS (customer

satisfaction) is significant because of the *t*-value of more than 1.96 and a *p*-value of less than 0.05. Considering the assessment result of the structural model's path relationship had delineated that BI positively impacts customer satisfaction.

The result for path coefficients on the relationship between PR (price) and CS (customer satisfaction) was β 0.170. The following test on significant result through bootstrapping procedure showed *t*-value = 1.464, which less than the cut-off of 1.96 and *p*-value = 0.144 that is more than 0.05. Hence, this confirmed that the relationship of PR (price) toward CS (customer satisfaction) is not significant. Considering the assessment result of the structural model's path relationship had delineated that PR has a negative impact on customer satisfaction. The result for path coefficients on the relationship between SQ (service quality) and CS (customer satisfaction) was β 0.302. The result on t-value and p-value clarified that SQ has a robust positive relationship with customer satisfaction where t-value = 2,712 and p-value = 0,007/ This confirmed that the relationship between SQ (service quality) and CS (customer satisfaction) is important due to the t-value above 1,96 and p-value below 0,055.. Considering the assessment result of the structural model's path relationship had delineated that SQ positively impacted customer satisfaction.

The result for path coefficients on the relationship between TR (trust) and CS (customer satisfaction) was β 0.213. The t-value and p-value explained that TR has a clear positive relationship to customer satisfaction where t-value = 2.512 and p-value = 0.012. This confirmed that the relationship between TR (trust) and CS (customer satisfaction) is vital since the t-value exceeds 1.96, and the p-value exceeds 0.05. Considering the assessment result of the structural model's path relationship had delineated that TR positively impacted customer satisfaction.

5.0   Discussions

The findings highlighted that only one variable was not positively influenced by customer satisfaction. Price was not significant towards customer satisfaction, and as such, there could be a strong reason why respondents react in such a way. The rest of the variables indicated positive roles in customer satisfaction. Brand image, service quality, and trust remain essential in leading to customer satisfaction. The results are similar to the previous research conducted in other parts of the world except for the price.

A possible reason for the price elements is the continuous promotions and campaigns made by local airline providers. In Malaysia, at least three major service providers and customers have ample choices based on preferences (Ahmad et al., 2020). The online purchases and booking services provided customers more time to compare and find the best travel rates. There are also online applications that can help customers compare the prices and recommend the best offer based on the date of traveling posted. Based on that, the price could no longer be an issue as customers may choose what type of services they wanted to satisfy their needs.

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