CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY TOWARD LOW-COST AIRLINES IN THAILAND THROUGH SERVICE QUALITY AND AIRLINE IMAGE

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Abstract

This research studied customer loyalty and customer satisfaction through three variables, namely service quality, airline pricing, and airline image. The study aimed to 1) examine the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction leading to customer loyalty, 2) examine the influence of airline pricing on customer satisfaction leading to customer loyalty, and 3) examine the influence of airline image on customer satisfaction leading to customer loyalty toward low-cost airlines in Thailand. The sample group of this research consisted of 466 customers who had an experience of using low-cost airline services in Thailand at least once by responding the questionnaire. The route taken by these passengers included: international flights departing from Thailand, international flights arriving in Thailand, and domestic flights within the country. The results indicated that service quality and airline images had a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Customers will be satisfied and become loyal customers when they receive good service, and the airline has a good image in the customer's mind. However, airline pricing was found to have no significant effect on customer satisfaction or loyalty. This might be because low-cost airline customers understand that the low-cost airline ticket is cheaper than a normal full-service airline and therefore do not expect luxury service. Nevertheless, reasonable and efficient service must be performed and served the customer; otherwise, this could cause problems and may lead to customer dissatisfaction.

Keywords: customer satisfaction**,** customer loyalty, low-cost airline, service quality, airline image

Introduction

The airline business is a major business for many countries that helps to transfer people from one place to another destination; moreover, this tremendous business could generate a huge income and revenue for the company and country (Albers et al., 2020; Pandey, 2020). In the past, taking an airplane might have been for only the rich

people who could afford to use this service. However, nowadays other kinds of airlines could help many people who cannot afford to pay the expensive tickets to have a chance of taking an airplane; it is called a low-cost airline. Low-cost airlines (LCA) or low-cost carriers (LCC), often known as budget airlines, are a business model in the aviation sector that reduces the cost of flying by not offering complimentary food and beverages, not having passenger entertainment systems, and so on (Barua and Kaiser, 2024). Shen and Yahya (2021) stated that low-cost airlines are airlines that offer cheap fares in a straightforward manner and often do not offer the same amenities as traditional airlines. While flying with an LCC can be more economical, there are important considerations to keep in mind to ensure a smooth and hassle-free journey. This permits them to offer tickets at a reduced cost. Furthermore, tickets are offered in advance via the Internet, making it simple to plan and manage flights, lowering the danger of not having full flights. For these reasons, it allows the airline to sell tickets at low prices. In addition, tickets are sold in advance via the Internet, making it easy to plan and manage flights, reducing the risk of not having full flights.

In Thailand, there are several low-cost airlines that offer their services to customers, for example, Nok Air, Asia Asia, Thai Lion Air, etc. Nowadays, there are so many people traveling by using low-cost airlines. Srisook and Panjakajornsak (2018) studied about low-cost airline business in Thailand and found that low-cost airlines are very famous among Thai customers, and the number shows that more than 70% of Thailand's domestic seat capacity. Moreover, the existence of low-cost airlines helps to stimulate the tourism industry to be vigorous because the lower cost of the air ticket makes the general price of the tour package cheaper, which could attract more tourists to purchase the tour (Panduwinasari et al., 2020).

Research Objectives

This research aims to find the relationship between service quality, airline pricing, and airline image to customer satisfaction, which leads to customer loyalty in the low-cost airline business in Thailand. It consists of 3 main objectives:

1) To study the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction, which leads to customer loyalty to low-cost airlines in Thailand

2) To study the influence of airline pricing on customer satisfaction, which leads to customer loyalty of low-cost airlines in Thailand.

3) To study the influence of airline image on customer satisfaction, which leads to customer loyalty of low-cost airlines in Thailand.

This research focuses on the customer behavior of two main factors, which are customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, via three factors that influence these two main factors to be accomplished, namely service quality, airline pricing, and airline images. The area of study is the low-cost airline business in Thailand, by interviewing and giving questionnaires to test the low-cost airline customers.

Literature Review

Service Quality:

Service is an intangible factor that companies provide to their customers. The quality of service will be either good or bad depending on the level of customer expectation (Leninkumar, 2016). If the service that customers receive is higher or better than they expected, that result is a good or high-quality service. On the other hand, if the service they received could not reach their expectations, then that service will become a low-quality service. Service quality helps the company to increase its competitive advantage beyond its competitors (Khan & Fasih, 2014). In this research, the service quality is the service of low-cost airlines in Thailand that customers expect to perceive compared with the real service that they received after using the service.

Airline Pricing:

Price is one of the factors that customers use before making a decision as to whether or not to purchase any products or services. For low-cost airlines, pricing is a very important factor for their customer to focus on because it is the main purpose of this business to offer an airplane service at a lower price than normal airline service by cutting out some services and making the price as low as possible. Abdella et al. (2021) stated that the price of low-cost airlines is very complex intertemporal dynamics because sometimes the airline needs to adjust prices on a day-to-day basis to provide available seats at a good price for its customers. Sometimes the fare needs to be raised to avoid selling out flights in advance, or the ticket price must be lower after a sequence of low-demand realizations (Williams, 2022). This research defines airline pricing as the fare price that low-cost airline customers need to pay to purchase and use the service as they expect.

Airline Image:

The low-cost airline business focuses on a lower price of the ticket than normal airline fare to offer their customers to receive airline service. Most of the customers understand the condition of this service and do not expect a luxury service as a full-service airline. However, customers still expect to receive a good and reasonable service quality at this price. Many airlines could offer good service at a low cost and create a

good image and branding of the airline. The image of the airline is significant in terms of building trust with its customers (Kurhayadi et al., 2022). Ali et al. (2020) stated that the image is the memory stored in the mind of customers, and they will use this memory to make a decision to purchase products or services in the future. In this research, the airline image is the memory of the customer's mind of the low-cost airline that they trust to provide good service.

Conceptual Framework

According to the literature review, the hypothesis and conceptual framework were proposed following this model

Relationship between service quality, airline pricing, and airline image to customer satisfaction.

The low-cost airline business in Thailand has been studied by several authors and marketers. There are a number of studies and research that mentioned the importance of three variables, namely service quality, airline pricing, and airline image, which influence customer satisfaction. Saha and Theingi (2009) studied the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction with a large number of low-cost airline customers in Thailand. From the responses of more than 1,000 customers, the results found a positive impact of service quality on customer satisfaction. Ali et al. (2021) found service quality could be able to increase customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry (Malik et al., 2020). On the other hand, Tanomsin and Chen (2018) studied the low-cost airline business in Thailand and found that the price of the ticket and customer satisfaction have a significant influence on customer loyalty. Similar to Hasim et al. (2020), who studied customer satisfaction in Malaysia, found that pricing is one of the significant factors in increasing customer satisfaction (Prasilowati et al., 2021). Hasan et al. (2019) added the importance of airline image that could stimulate a higher level of customer satisfaction among low-cost airline customers. Rahi et al. (2020) studied Internet banking and found that the importance of a positive image of the brand could stimulate a higher level of customer satisfaction. Following these literature reviews, three hypotheses were presented

H1: Service quality has a direct positive effect on customer satisfaction

H2: Service quality has a direct positive effect on customer loyalty

H3: Airline pricing has a direct positive effect on customer satisfaction

H4: Airline image has a direct positive effect on customer satisfaction

Relationship between Customer Satisfaction to Customer Loyalty

Customer satisfaction is a positive feeling of the customer toward companies that provide good products and services to serve the customers. There are several researches and studies that express that a higher level of customer satisfaction could increase the level of customer loyalty. Kusumawati and Sri Rahayu, (2020) studied the customers of natural outdoor cafes in the hilly areas of Joyo Agung, Malang, Indonesia, and found that customer satisfaction is a very important factor that could help to increase customer loyalty. At the same time, Othman et al. (2021) found that customer satisfaction with the travel service in Malaysia could stimulate positive customer loyalty and help to increase the business performance of the companies. Following these literature reviews, the fourth hypothesis was proposed as:

H5: Airline image has a direct positive effect on customer loyalty

H6: Customer satisfaction has a direct positive effect on customer loyalty.

Mediating Effect

Customer loyalty is the level of very happy and satisfied customers who receive the services that they want or need. Low-cost airline customer loyalty could indicate a high level of customer satisfaction. There are a number of previous studies that found a positive relationship between each variable. Malik et al. (2012) studied the telecommunication sector of Pakistan and found a significantly positive impact of service quality, reasonable price, and brand images on customer satisfaction. Hasan et al. (2019) studied the low-cost airline business in India and found that the three factors of service quality, airline pricing, and airline image are very important and could influence positive customer satisfaction before leading to the level of customer loyalty. From this literature review, the fifth to seventh hypotheses were created:

H7: Service quality has a positive effect on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction.

H8: Airline pricing has a positive effect on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction.

H9: Airline image has a positive effect on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction.

Following the literature review, the conceptual framework of this research was created.

According to the literature review of all factors, namely service quality, airline pricing, airline image, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty, together with all hypotheses, the conceptual framework of this research has been created and presented:
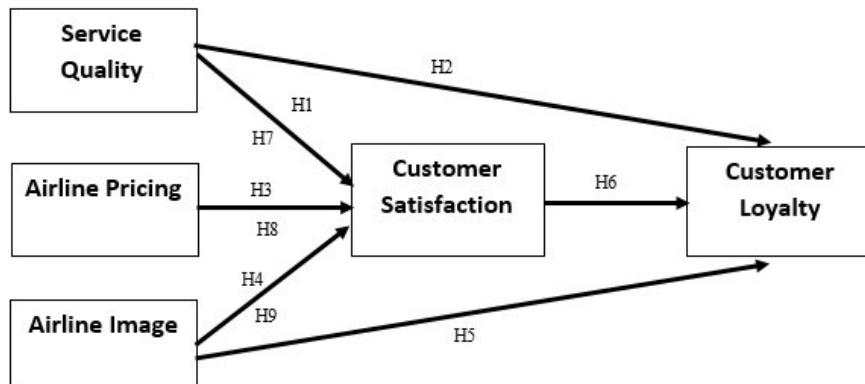
Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of the research

Research Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

The sample group in this research is the customers of low-cost airlines in Thailand. These customers must be customers who have experience using the low-cost airline service in Thailand at least once. There were many choices of low-cost airlines in Thailand that offered their service to the customers, such as Nok Air, Air Asia, Thai Lion Air, etc, but they must either start the route from Thailand or come back to Thailand. Both paper questionnaires and Google form online questionnaires were sent to customers, together with an explanation of the main objectives of the research, until permission from the customers to respond to the questionnaire. This research was presented as quantitative research, which proceeded by applying both paper and online research questionnaires to collect the data. After the data-collecting process is done, structural equation modeling (SEM) will be conducted to calculate and analyze the data. The conceptual framework of this research was proposed and presented with all factors, namely service quality, airline pricing, airline image, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The respondents who participated in this survey research are Thai customers who have experience using the low-cost airline service at least once. The total population is 466 low-cost airline customers who answered their choices in the questionnaire.

Data analysis

The data from the sample group was later statistically analyzed by applying SEM and the Jamovi software program. This quantitative research applied the purposive sampling method to collect the data and used structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the data received from the questionnaires. The Google Form questionnaire of a

7-point Likert scale was created and sent to the respondents. According to Hair et al. (2006) the recommended sample size for research should be in the range of 100 to 400 or more because it could make the goodness of fit measurement, and any difference could be easy to be detected. Therefore, this research has 466 sample dependencies, enough for SEM to analyze. The results of the data analysis are presented.

Results

The results of this research have been presented in Table 1: Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity Result, Table 2: Discriminant Validity, Table 3: Absolute Model Fit Indices, Table 4: Hypothesized Relationship Results, and Table 5: Total effect, direct effect, and indirect effect from the SEM

Construct Reliability, Convergent Validity, Discriminant Validity

In principle, the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) of all measurement scales should be higher than 0.50 and 0.70, respectively. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981) the discriminant validity is used to test the discriminant validity, and it should be lower than the square root of AVE. Hair et al. (2006) presented that standardized factor loading for all variables should not be lower than the recommended value of 0.50. The construct reliability and convergent validity of the content of service quality have shown in Table 1 (α = .935, AVE = .963, CR = .987), airline pricing (α = .904, AVE = .953, CR = .982), airline image (α = .912, AVE = .948, CR = .978), customer satisfaction (α = .903, AVE = .957, CR = .981) and customer loyalty (α = .915, AVE = .977, CR = .992). According to the result, all factor loadings were between .747 and .974. Eventually, the reliability of all variables and the convergent validity were accepted. Moreover, the discriminant validity result of this research was presented in Table 2

Table 1 Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity Result

Construct and Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR
SQ (Service Quality)		.935	.963	.987
SQ1	0.900			
SQ2	0.877			
SQ3	0.803			
AP (Airline Pricing)		.904	.953	.982
AP1	0.747			
AP2	0.855			
AP3	0.876			

Construct and Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR
AI (Airline Image)		.912	.948	.978
AI1	0.756			
AI2	0.838			
AI3	0.863			
CS (Customer Satisfaction)		.903	.957	.981
CS1	0.829			
CS2	0.850			
CS3	0.718			
CL (Customer Loyalty)		.915	.977	.992
CL1	0.974			
CL2	0.783			
CL3	0.922			

Table 2 Discriminant Validity

Constructs	Mean	SD	CR	AVE	SQ	AP	AI	CS	CL
SQ	6.26	0.52	0.987	0.963	**0.9813**				
AP	6.21	0.477	0.982	0.953	0.727	**0.9762**			
AI	6.13	0.449	0.978	0.948	0.597	0.796	**0.9737**		
CS	6.14	0.433	0.981	0.957	0.677	0.792	0.84	**0.9783**	
CL	6.19	0.473	0.977	0.915	0.634	0.746	0.734	0.799	**0.9566**

Structural Equation Model (SEM Report)

Structural equation modeling or SEM was applied to test the overall fit of the structural model, which examined the outcome of the hypothesis testing. According to Hair et al. (2006), the criteria of model fit should have $\chi^2/df \leq 3.00$, GFI ≥ 0.90, CFI ≥ 0.90, NFI ≥ 0.90, AGFI ≥ 0.90, RMSEA ≤ 0.07, and RMR ≤ 0.08. This is a criterion of good model fit value that can be statistically accepted. In Table 3, the model fit indices were demonstrated as follows: firstly, the initial model showed moderate fit (χ^2=558, χ^2/df=7.251, p=.000, GFI=.990, CFI=.912, NFI=.899, AGFI=.982, RMSEA=.122, RMR=.060). After modification the model showed good fit (χ^2=108, χ^2/df=1.636, p=.000, GFI=.998, CFI=.992, NFI=.980, AGFI=.995, RMSEA=.040, RMR=.021). The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Absolute Model Fit Indices

Model	χ^2	χ^2/df	GFI	CFI	NFI	AGFI	RMSEA	SRMR
				Absolute Model Fit Indices				
Criteria	-	> 3.00	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.07	> 0.05
Initial model	558	7.251	.990	.912	.899	.982	.122	.060
Final model	108	1.636	.998	.992	.980	.995	.040	.021

Table 4 Hypothesized Relationship Results

Hypothesized relationship	Results	P-value
H1: SQ to CS	supported	.001
H2: SQ to CL	supported	.05
H3: AP to CS	not supported	
H4: AI to CS	supported	.001
H5: AI to CL	supported	.001
H6: CS to CL	supported	.05
H7: SQ to CS to CL	supported	.05
H8: AP to CS to CL	not supported	
H9: AI to CS to CL	supported	.05

Table 5 Mediating Effect Results

Mediating effect	IV-M-DV		Mediation type
	direct	indirect	
SQ to CS to CL	0.238 (p=.05)	-0.116 (p=.034)	Partial mediation
AI to CS to CL	0.823 (p=.001)	-0.473 (p=.05)	Partial mediation

Table 6 Total effect, Direct effect and Indirect effect

Path	Path coefficient	SE	t-value	P-value
Total effect				
SQ to CL	0.122	0.0723	2.010	0.005
AP to CS	0.554	0.1929	3.103	0.002
AI to CL	0.350	0.2321	3.142	0.005
Direct effect				
SQ to CS	0.202	0.0394	3.369	<.001
SQ to CL	0.238	0.0817	2.488	0.013
AP to CS	0.554	0.1929	3.100	0.002
AI to CS	0.821	0.1029	7.440	<.001

Path	Path coefficient	SE	t-value	P-value
AI to CL	0.823	0.2398	4.161	<.001
CS to CL	-0.576	0.2717	-2.755	0.006
Indirect effect				
SQ to CS to CL	-0.116	0.047	-2.12	0.034
AP to CS to CL	-0.07	0.084	-0.905	0.365
AI to CS to CL	-0.473	0.206	-2.785	0.005

Discussion

The low-cost airline business is becoming more and more popular in Thailand because it gives a chance to people who cannot afford a full-service airline ticket. Even though there are not many services during the trip on a low-cost airline, it is not the main point for customers who decide to use the service of the low-cost airline. From this research, the majority of hypothesis were supported, namely the first hypothesis is service quality has a direct positive effect on customer satisfaction, the second hypothesis presented that service quality has a direct positive effect on customer loyalty, the fourth hypothesis suggested that airline image has a direct positive effect on customer satisfaction, the fifth hypothesis mentioned that airline image has a direct positive effect on customer loyalty. The next supported hypotheses are the sixth, seventh, and ninth hypotheses (H6: Customer satisfaction has a direct positive effect on customer loyalty, H7: Service quality has a positive effect on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction, H9: Airline image has a positive effect on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction). These results confirmed that all factors, including service quality, airline pricing, and airline image, have a positive effect on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Body of Knowledge

The result shows that there are only 2 hypotheses that were not theoretically supported, which are the third and eighth hypotheses. (H3: Airline pricing has a direct positive effect on customer satisfaction, H8: Airline pricing has a positive effect on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction). The conclusion of a new body of knowledge is presented in the Figure 2
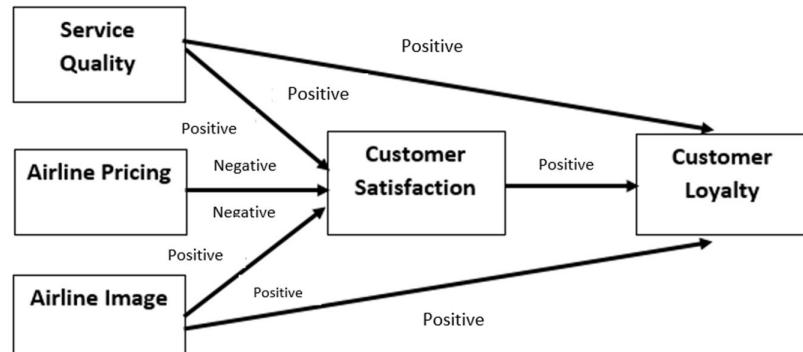
Figure2 Body of Knowledge of the research

Both unsupported hypotheses were about the airline pricing. This result indicated that the price of low-cost is not the main factor to satisfy their customers. As the price of low-cost airlines is already cheap compared with that of full-service airlines. Therefore, customers are already happy since they decided to purchase, but that satisfaction has already gone since they have paid the money. However, the period after purchasing the ticket and waiting to take a flight is sometimes quite long. Customers have an expectation to receive good service, and when they receive the real service on the flight, it will be able to measure their satisfaction and loyalty.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the low-cost airline business in Thailand is still promising and has a good chance to expand because there are more customers who still want to use airplanes but do not want to pay a lot of money to travel just a few hours. Service quality and airline image are the significant factors that increase the level of customer satisfaction, which leads to the level of customer loyalty. The low-cost airline companies must be concerned and focus on these two factors because there is very high competition between other airlines to attract customers, and most of them use a similar strategy for promotion. While airline pricing is not a significant issue for the customer to be satisfied. Airline pricing plays a lower role in stimulating customer satisfaction because customers understand that the full service of the flight must be more expensive than the price they paid. However, the airline must still be concerned and be careful about this topic because even if customers do not pay a lot of money for their flight but they still expect to receive good quality of service. Every airline must keep its good standard and try to increase its service quality, building a good and

trustworthy brand under a reasonable budget. That would be the key to the success of this business in the long run.

Suggestion

This research topic is very interesting and it is a significant foundation of the low-cost airline business. The result of this research could help to increase the positive performance of every industry. Therefore, this model should be tested and applied in other businesses, industries, or other countries to expand the area of knowledge.

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