

# SERVICE QUALITY AND ONBOARD EXPERIENCE AS DRIVER OF PASSENGER TRUST SATISFACTION AND BRAND LOVE EVIDENCE FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA'S FULL-SERVICE AIRLINES

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how service quality and onboard experience shape customer loyalty toward full-service airlines (FSCs) in Southeast Asia, emphasizing the emotional dimension of loyalty development, particularly the formation of brand love. Guided by an interpretivist-constructivist approach, data were collected from 16 semi-structured passenger interviews, supported by observation and document analysis. The analysis shows that five service quality dimensions, reliability, tangibles, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy, are key to building customer loyalty. This loyalty develops in stages, starting with trust, moving to satisfaction, and finally evolving into Brand Love. The findings show that reliability and assurance establish trust, tangibles and responsiveness drive satisfaction, and empathy fosters emotional attachment, emerging as the key determinant of long-term loyalty. These insights provide practical guidance for FSCs in enhancing crew empathy, service personalization, and passenger experience design to strengthen relational loyalty.

**Keywords:** Service Quality, Onboard Experience, Brand Love

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## INTRODUCTION

In the highly competitive airline industry, maintaining customer loyalty has become a strategic priority for Full-Service Carriers (FSCs) (Stewart & Tan, 2023). The rise of Low-Cost Carriers (LCCs) has intensified competitive pressure, requiring FSCs to differentiate beyond pricing and scheduling. However, existing research on airline loyalty has largely emphasized functional service quality, leaving a gap in understanding how onboard micro-interactions and emotional responses contribute to long-term loyalty beyond satisfaction alone (Saefudin et al., 2021). Although prior studies offer valuable insights, emotional dimensions, particularly emotional attachment and brand love, remain underexplored, especially within the Southeast Asian FSC context (Limberger et al., 2021). While rational factors such as tangible service quality have been extensively examined, deeper affective mechanisms linked to brand love (e-journal.uac.ac.id, 2024) have not yet been sufficiently analyzed. To address this gap, this study aims to identify the key drivers of customer loyalty, conceptualized as attitudinal and behavioral commitment, including emotional attachment, positive word-of-mouth, and willingness to pay a premium for full-service airlines.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

In the fiercely competitive landscape of the modern airline industry, securing customer loyalty is a critical strategic priority that relies heavily on the quality of the "Onboard Experience," comprising cabin crew performance, food and beverage, seat comfort, and perceived safety. While traditional views suggest that these factors drive loyalty primarily through satisfaction, Oliver (1999) warns of a "satisfaction trap," arguing that relying solely on satisfaction is insufficient, as even satisfied customers remain prone to switching competitors. Consequently, this study proposes a more robust framework in which onboard service quality drives loyalty not just through Satisfaction (via physical amenities) and Trust (via safety and reliability), but also, crucially, through Brand Love. As conceptualized by Batra et al. (2012), Brand Love represents a passionate emotional attachment linked to a customer's self-identity, often cultivated through the personalized attentiveness of cabin crew, and simultaneously fosters these three mediators. Satisfaction, Trust, and Brand Love of full-service airlines can move beyond basic service delivery to forge the deep, sustainable emotional bonds necessary for true customer loyalty.

**1) Service Quality as a Foundation:** Service quality is consistently identified as the cornerstone of customer satisfaction and loyalty, extending far beyond the flight itself to encompass the entire customer journey. It starts with efficiency in pre-flight and post-flight services, such as seamless booking, quick check-ins, and reliable baggage handling. This lays the essential groundwork for trust and professionalism (Hussain et al., 2015; Hapsari et al., 2017). When combined with a holistic in-flight experience driven by the cabin crew's attentiveness and professionalism (Chow, 2015), this consistent excellence across every touchpoint reinforces a positive overall impression, significantly increasing the likelihood that passengers will choose to fly with the airline again.

**2) The Onboard Experience as a Differentiator:** For full-service airlines, the in-flight experience is a primary selling point that distinguishes them from low-cost competitors. It directly impacts customer satisfaction and loyalty. Crew Professionalism, the cabin crew plays a vital role in shaping the onboard experience. Korea Science (2024) points out that the crew's friendliness, problem-solving skills, and attentiveness are crucial. A crew that effectively handles passenger needs and maintains a positive attitude can transform a routine flight into a memorable experience. Amenities and Comfort: The physical comfort of the cabin, including seat design, cleanliness, and the quality of in-flight entertainment, significantly contributes to passenger satisfaction. The availability of high-quality food and beverages is also a key

expectation for passengers choosing a full-service carrier, as these amenities are often perceived as a core part of the value proposition.

**3) Mediating Factors: The Path to Loyalty:** The relationship between service and loyalty is not direct; it is mediated by a series of psychological and perceptual factors that influence the passenger's decision-making process. Customer Satisfaction: Ganiyu (2016) identifies customer satisfaction as the most important mediating factor. A positive in-flight experience and high-quality service lead to satisfaction, which, in turn, drives repeat business. Satisfaction acts as a bridge, translating a positive experience into a long-term commitment. Brand Image and Trust: Wang and Tsai (2014) highlight the role of brand image in trust. An airline with a strong, reputable brand and a positive image is more likely to be chosen repeatedly. When passengers consistently have positive experiences, they build trust in the airline (Omaha Journal Sunan Giri, 2022), which serves as a fundamental foundation for long-term loyalty. This trust reduces the perceived risk of future flights and makes it easier to choose the same airline.

**4) The Emotional Dimension: A Modern Research Gap:** While traditional literature has prioritized rational service factors, contemporary research identifies the "emotional dimension" as the critical frontier for customer loyalty, specifically through the concept of "Brand Love." Distinct from "Satisfaction" (a short-term, cognitive response to service fulfillment) and "Trust" (an expectation of reliability), Brand Love represents a deeper, more enduring, and passionate emotional attachment (Batra et al., 2012). Empirical evidence suggests that Brand Love acts as a crucial mediator, transforming basic satisfaction and trust into long-term loyalty behaviors such as advocacy and forgiveness. Consequently, while consistent service excellence across all touchpoints forms the necessary foundation, the ultimate strategy for airlines to secure lasting loyalty lies in elevating these functional experiences into a powerful emotional bond.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION SCOPE

This study utilized a qualitative approach within the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. This approach is appropriate because the study aimed to explore how passengers perceive and emotionally respond to airline service, and how these perceptions shape their loyalty toward full-service carriers (FSCs). This study employed a purposive, maximum variation sampling design to focus on Full-Service Carriers (FSCs) operating in Southeast Asia, specifically on medium- to long-haul routes offering differentiated services such as complimentary meals, in-flight entertainment, multiple cabin classes, and lounge access. The target population consisted of adult passengers (aged 18 and above) who had flown with an FSC at least once in the past 12 months. Data collection involved 16 semi-structured interviews, a sample size determined by data saturation. Saturation was observed after the 12th interview, when no new themes or significant insights emerged. This sample size aligns with qualitative norms, which suggest that saturation typically occurs within 12-16 interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample comprised a diverse mix of 9 males and 7 females, aged 21 to 50 years. This range captures insights from younger travelers, represented by four university students (aged 21-22) who offer perspectives on price sensitivity and technology, to experienced professionals. The corporate sector was well-represented by business owners, investors, and executives (aged 36-50) who prioritize efficiency. Additionally, including individuals from specialized fields, such as writers, freelancers, and lecturers, ensured a multifaceted understanding of airline service expectations across diverse lifestyles and travel needs. The qualitative data in this study strictly adhered to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure methodological rigor and transparency. The researchers integrated reflexivity into the process by maintaining reflexive journals throughout the study, allowing them to acknowledge

potential biases and pre-understandings that could influence data interpretation. The analysis proceeded through six distinct phases, beginning with familiarization, which involved repeated, immersive reading of interview transcripts and field notes. This led to the generation of initial codes that capture the essence of raw data. Subsequently, related codes were collated to search for the theme, which were then critically reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure consistency. Once the themes were clear, the researchers proceeded to define and name themes, specifying their scope and delimitation. Finally, the process culminated in the production of the report, which synthesized empirical findings with relevant theory to comprehensively answer the research question. This study adheres to a strict ethical framework that prioritizes participants' rights and integrity. Informed consent will be obtained, ensuring participants understand the research objectives and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity are paramount; all data, particularly sensitive personal experiences, will be aggregated and anonymized to prevent identification. Furthermore, all data handling will strictly comply with relevant data protection regulations. Trustworthiness and Rigor to ensure reliability, the researcher follows Lincoln and Guba's guidelines. Findings are strengthened through triangulation (combining interviews, observations, and documents) and regular peer reviews by academic supervisors. The study incorporates diverse passenger perspectives to enhance validity, while the researcher maintains reflexive notes to minimize bias. Finally, the interpretation of results carries an ethical responsibility to balance airline profitability with the protection of passenger rights and well-being.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 16 passengers revealed a complex interrelationship among the service quality dimensions, Trust, Satisfaction, and the development of Brand love. The findings are categorized by the five SERVQUAL dimensions, demonstrating how each contributes to passenger progression through Oliver's loyalty phases. The key themes and representative evidence are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1** Data Structure Linking Service Quality Dimension to Loyalty Stages

SERVQUAL Dimension	Sub-Theme / key finding	Impact on loyalty	Representative Quotes
Reliability	<b>On-Time Performance and Flight Schedule:</b> Punctuality is non-negotiable for business travelers.	Reliability eliminates anxiety, fostering deep trust.	"FCS has various flight times, operates on time, and has seamless service during flight time," KI1
Tangibles	<b>Cabin Ambience &amp; Comfort:</b> Cleanliness, seat comfort, and modern in-flight entertainment are baseline expectations	Tangibles create the first impression of safety and professionalism.	"Seat is very comfortable and has free baggage allowance, can ask for a snack or a beverage for free during flight, price is worth paying" KI9.
Assurance	<b>Safety &amp; Expertise:</b> Crew knowledge and professional demeanor create a sense of security.	Passengers feel safe and respected, leading to repurchasing intentions.	"Safety equipment and aircraft performance are my priority when choosing to fly and become loyal," KI8
Responsiveness	<b>Problem Solving:</b> Speed and willingness to assist during disruptions	Positive emotional response to helpful service.	"I had a connecting flight, but the flight at the departure airport was

SERVQUAL Dimension	Sub-Theme / key finding	Impact on loyalty	Representative Quotes
			delayed. I told the staff that I would miss the connecting flight. When I arrived at the airport, the staff rushed me to the gate so I would not miss my flight” KI3.
Empathy	<b>Personalized Care:</b> Addressing passengers by name or remembering preferences.	Emotional bonding created by feeling "cared for" personally.	“Cabin crew greeted us by name and remembered our favorite dishes, which were very impressive,” KI7.

### **The foundation of Trust: Tangible and Reliability**

Participants consistently indicated that physical attributes and reliability are the prerequisites for trust. While these factors may not solely drive “love”, their absence destroys loyalty. For instance, cabin cleanliness and seat comfort were frequently mentioned as tangible indicators of an airline’s attention to detail. As KI6 explained, the physical environment set the tone for the experience “Seat is very comfortable and environment in cabin very quiet” Similarly, reliability in flight schedules was cited as crucial for building long-term trust. KI10 emphasized “If they delay twice in a row, I might change my mind to other airline”

### **Drivers of Satisfaction: Responsiveness and Assurance**

Moving beyond the basics, the behavioral aspects of the crew's Responsiveness and Assurance were found to drive passenger satisfaction. The analysis showed that passengers value crew members who are not only polite but proactive in solving problems. KI16 described a situation where assurance played a key role: "I appreciate how knowledgeable the staff are. Whether it's about the meal ingredients or flight information, they answer with confidence. It makes me feel like I am in good hands."

### **The Catalyst for Brand Love: Empathy**

The most significant finding of this study is the critical role of Empathy in transforming satisfied passengers into "Brand Lovers" (Action Loyalty). Unlike other dimensions, empathy involves emotional transactions. Participants described moments of personalized care as the "magic" that differentiates their preferred airline from competitors. This "micro-interaction" was vividly described by KI14, who noted: "It’s not just about serving food. It’s about the crew noticing my glass was empty before I even called them. That makes me feel truly valued, and other airlines do not treat me like this”

## **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that customer loyalty toward full-service carriers (FSCs) emerges following a clear path where trust leads to satisfaction, grows into Brand Love, and finally results in loyalty. While past research has highlighted the limitations of relying solely on satisfaction, this study uniquely identifies the mechanisms by which passengers progress beyond satisfaction toward a more profound emotional commitment. Specifically, it provides empirical clarity on how emotional and functional dimensions interact to resolve Oliver’s (1999) “satisfaction trap” in Southeast Asian cultural settings.

#### **1) Validating the Onboard Experience as the Core Driver**

This study confirms that the Onboard Experience remains the core differentiator for FSCs (Chow, 2015). Korea Science (2024). However, our findings extend existing knowledge by demonstrating that service quality continues to influence satisfaction. Instead, this research

introduces a novel understanding of how functional service elements initiate cognitive trust, which then activates emotional pathways toward Brand Love.

‘Reliability’ and ‘Assurance’ foster Trust, while ‘Tangibles’ and ‘Responsiveness’ stimulate Satisfaction, supporting prior studies (Agarwal & Gowda, 2020; Ganiyu, 2016). The unique contribution lies in showing that these functional qualities must be coupled with emotional empathy if airlines aim to achieve durable loyalty, thereby bridging the functional-emotional divide noted in the existing literature.

## **2) Solving the 'Satisfaction Trap': The Hierarchical Pathway to Loyalty**

While many studies acknowledge that satisfaction alone is insufficient to prevent customer switching, this study provides direct empirical evidence of how passengers transition from Satisfaction to deeper emotional loyalty. Our model extends Oliver’s (1999) theory by demonstrating that Trust builds Satisfaction, and Satisfaction drives Brand Love, confirming that emotional connection is the vital link for lasting loyalty. This research uniquely identifies Empathy as the relational mechanism that pushes passengers beyond rational evaluation into affective bonding (Batra et al., 2012). The hierarchical structure revealed thus offers a concrete pathway to break the satisfaction trap, validating and advancing past theoretical propositions.

## **3) Empathy as the Catalyst for Brand Love: Filling the 'Emotional Dimension' Gap**

A significant contribution to this study is its cultural contextualization. Unlike Western-centric studies, this research offers a novel explanation of how empathy operates within Southeast Asian, collectivist, high-context cultures. In this regional context, empathetic cabin crew behavior (warmth, relational attentiveness, respectful interaction) functions not just as a courtesy but to show respect and social harmony, which are core values in Thai and regional culture (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2011). Thus, this study uniquely identifies Empathy as the cultural-emotional mechanism that converts satisfaction into Brand Love, addressing the “emotional dimension” gap highlighted in existing literature and supporting Islam and Rahman (2023).

## **4) Theoretical Integration and Model Advancement**

This research advances theory by integrating SERVQUAL, Emotional Labor theory, and Brand Love literature into a unified framework. Our findings go beyond current models by showing that emotional labor, especially empathy, serves as the bridge connecting personal service quality to emotional loyalty. By empirically validating Empathy as the pivotal antecedent of Brand Love, the study proposes the “SERVQUAL-Emotional Loyalty Model (SELM)”, offering a newly expanded theoretical lens that incorporates both functional and emotional service dimensions as measurable predictors of loyalty. This represents a novel contribution, as prior studies rarely integrated emotional labor into airline loyalty modeling.

## **5) Implications for Emerging Service Economies**

Beyond theoretical advancement, this study offers practical contributions tailored to the Southeast Asian aviation context, which has been underrepresented in loyalty literature. The findings show that emotional quality and culturally attuned interpersonal warmth exert greater influence on long-term loyalty than operational performance alone. This research thus extends contemporary service management perspectives (Jeon & Dodd, 2014; Ahadi & Taghipour, 2024) by demonstrating that airline loyalty strategies in emerging markets must prioritize relational authenticity rather than service efficiency. Consequently, this study contributes to a context-specific understanding that encourages the development of culturally adaptive loyalty models, which are vital for airlines operating in diverse, relationship-driven markets like Southeast Asia.

## **6) Research Synthesis**

In sum, the discussion highlights that customer loyalty to full-service airlines is not a single-dimensional construct but an evolving emotional process. The study extends existing theories by positioning empathy as the emotional bridge between satisfaction and brand love, validating

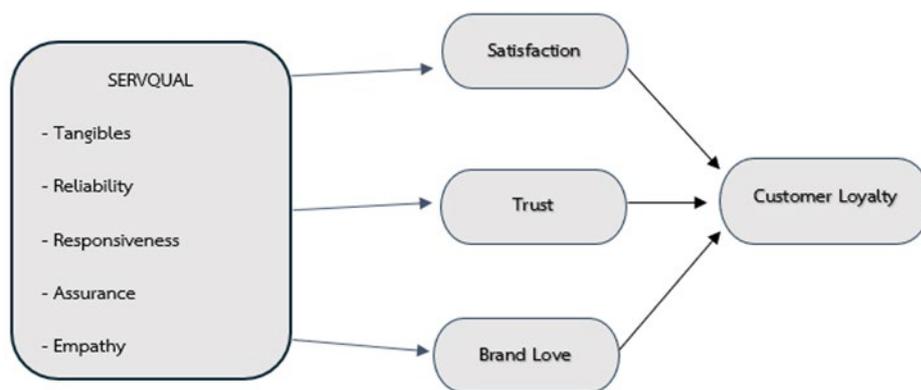
that affective attachment is both a theoretical outcome and a practical predictor of sustainable loyalty. These insights not only refine the academic understanding of airline service relationships but also reaffirm the strategic importance of emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity in global service design and delivery.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study shows that loyalty is built hierarchically. Reliability and Assurance are the foundational dimensions for building Trust, while Tangibles and Responsiveness act as the primary drivers of Customer Satisfaction. Meanwhile, Empathy plays the most critical role in fostering emotional attachment and Brand Love toward the airline. Passengers tend to develop affection and loyalty toward an airline when their experiences combine systematic service excellence with personalized care. Lastly, the conceptual model was proposed based on a qualitative study, and the researchers may collect empirical data to conduct further quantitative research to verify and highlight the significant roles of each theme and their effects on customer loyalty in full-service airlines. The current research has achieved its proposed objectives. However, the study has some limitations that need to be addressed. It was expected that this paper would provide an analysis of the role of service quality and onboard experience in building customer loyalty for full-service airlines.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study integrates SERVQUAL dimensions with Oliver's (1999) hierarchical loyalty model, empirically operationalizing the progression from cognitive Trust to affective Satisfaction, and finally to conative/action-based Brand Love. At the cognitive level, Reliability and Assurance build rational trust ("safe and dependable"), while Tangibles and Responsiveness foster affective satisfaction. Crucially, the findings identify Empathy as the pivotal mechanism bridging satisfaction and emotional attachment, transforming rational trust into Brand Love (repurchase intention and advocacy). This extends Batra et al. (2012) by refining Brand Love from a diffuse state into a measurable outcome explicitly driven by human interaction. Furthermore, the study provides regional contextualization within Southeast Asia's high-context, collectivist culture (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2011). In societies like Thailand, where relational harmony and "face" are paramount, empathy functions as a symbol of respect rather than a mere service trait. This cultural nuance explains why empathy emerged as the most powerful driver of Brand Love, elevating emotional connection above functional satisfaction. While this study offers valuable insights, three key limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. First, generalization is limited by the qualitative nature of the research, which relied on a small sample of interviews in Southeast Asia; thus, the findings reflect specific cultural experiences rather than universally applicable trends. Second, the study involves a degree of subjectivity, as thematic analysis inevitably draws on the researchers' interpretive frameworks, despite efforts to maintain analytical rigour. Finally, recall bias may have affected the data's accuracy, as participants relied on memories of past flights, potentially emphasizing emotionally intense moments over routine details. Acknowledging these limitations ensures transparency and provides clear directions for future research to enhance the scope and objectivity of findings in the airline service literature.



**Figure 1** The Purpose Model of Customer Loyalty of Full-Service Airlines Development

### Future Research Directions

Based on the findings, several future research directions are recommended. As shown in Figure 1, this study identifies the purpose model of customer loyalty in the development of full-service airlines. Future studies should pursue quantitative validation of the proposed hierarchical loyalty model (Trust, Satisfaction, Brand Love). Large-scale surveys could empirically test the influence of SERVQUAL dimensions on these stages, confirming causal relationships and enhancing generalizability. Cross-cultural comparative studies are needed to determine if the empathy-brand love mechanism is universal or context-dependent. Comparing Southeast Asian collectivist values with those of individualistic regions like North America or Europe could reveal cultural variations in how emotional interactions shape loyalty. Third, comparing full-service (FSCs) and low-cost carriers (LCCs) could identify differences in loyalty drivers. Analyzing how trust, satisfaction, and empathy operate in cost-sensitive versus premium environments would yield nuanced market segment insights. Finally, longitudinal designs tracking passengers across multiple flights could trace loyalty evolution, revealing how functional satisfaction transitions into affective brand love and how service recovery impacts loyalty stability over time.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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