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# Investigating brand image and brand trust in airline service: Evidence of Korean Air

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## Abstract:

**Purpose:** Branding is a predominant part of a marketing strategy. When the brand building is implemented effectively, it delivers customer satisfaction, nurtures customer loyalty to a higher level, and ensures greater airline success. This study explores the relationships of price, safety, and in-flight service quality with airline customers' perceptions of the brand image and trust and clarifies their impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

**Methods:** A sample of 367 valid responses adopting a convenience sampling method was collected from customers of Korean Air. Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares SEM method.

**Results:** The findings connote that price, safety, and in-flight services are the core factors determining the creation of a strong impression in customers' minds about airline brands and have different impacts on customer satisfaction and loyalty. The mediating effects of brand trust and customer satisfaction on the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty were also highlighted.

**Implications:** This study underlines that airlines should focus on controlling and maintaining the brand stance in consumer perception. Therefore, there is a need to provide a flight experience that meets consumer expectations in terms of providing a positive brand image and building brand trust in order to generate customer satisfaction and loyalty.

**Keywords:** brand trust; brand image; customer satisfaction; customer loyalty; airline service.

**JEL Classification:** L8, M3, L93

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Given the transient nature of customer loyalty, creating loyal users in the hospitality industry has never been easy (Hao, 2020). The aviation industry is no exception to that phenomenon. Therefore, creating and nurturing customer loyalty is an important key for airlines to dominate the market share (Shen & Yahya, 2021). Due to the increasingly fierce competition in the aviation business context, branding is a solid foundation for an airline to convey its distinct and consistent identity to customers (Lin and Ryan, 2016). In addition, the importance of branding has been pointed out in service marketing literature relating to intangible purchases since customers need a high level of trust in their preferred suppliers (Fu, 2023). In other words, strong service brands imply customer confidence in service quality, thereby

reducing customer's other related-purchasing risks. However, the literature has shown that due to the unique characteristics of the airline services, the brand of an airline cannot be easily measured and managed using tools developed to measure brands in most other service industries (Sezgen et al., 2023).

In deed, airlines need to build strong brands to counter competitors in their markets (Fu, 2023). In this regard, the brand image and trust are principal factors that an airline needs to invest in and strategically orient (Sezgen, 2023). These factors obviously cannot be formed in the short term and are subjectively imposed, but are built along the history of the airline, having a great impact on customers' perception when making purchasing decisions (Mohd-Any et al., 2019). In other words, once an airline has built a distinct image that represents its service quality and reputation, customers will trust that airline (Siqueira et al., 2023). This goes beyond the

unfavorable parts that affect loyalty, such as the related costs of air travel (e.g. baggage fees, fee change tickets, seat selection fee) or a change of mind by immediate benefits from competitor's frequent flyer programs (Han et al., 2021). It is clear that branding is an important part of a marketing strategy, and when implemented effectively, it delivers customer satisfaction, improves customer loyalty to a higher level, and ensures greater airline success (Fu, 2023). In an effort to build the airline brand, airlines have sent various signals to customers to help them evaluate service and reduce discomfort in the purchasing process (Sezgen et al., 2023). Nonetheless, creating, maintaining, and adopting a successful brand is challenging and time-consuming (Huang and Liu, 2020). The researchers emphasize the importance of further study on the antecedents and consequences of branding which can better understand airline passengers who seek airline services that bring trust in their decision-making purchasing process (Han et al., 2019; Siqueira et al., 2023; Fu, 2023; Sezgen et al., 2023).

There is a variety of behavioural responses that demonstrate whether passengers are becoming tied to an airline they are choosing, or "bonding" with its brand image, which is still looking for more explorations (Park et al., 2020). For low-cost airlines, prior research indicated that service quality has a significant positive effect on customer value, airline image and behavioral intention, but that low-cost airline image itself does not significantly affect behavioral intention (Yang et al., 2012). For traditional airlines, Huang and Liu (2020) argued that raising awareness about airline image has a positive transmission effect from perceived quality to brand loyalty; however, in case of China Airlines, its traditional image reduces the perceived quality impact on brand loyalty. However, when considering the mediating and moderating processes of the nexus between brand image and passenger loyalty through perceived value, there are no different results between these two types of airline services (Fu, 2023).

In addition, the existing literature shows the need for further exploration of distinctively moderating modelling of key attributes of airline brands that strengthens the discussion of the brand formation processes from the passenger's point of view (Huang and Liu, 2020). Prior research on airline branding has highlighted that successful brands are those that convey a clear and consistent message, differentiate the airline's offerings, and instil trust in customers (Sezgen et al., 2023). Hence, there are needs for more clarification on ways of how an airline's brand image and trust are formed through customers' perceptions and whether brand image and trust play an important role in enhancing passenger satisfaction and maintaining passenger loyalty towards particular airline brands (Fu, 2023; Siqueira et al., 2023). With this in mind, the current research has indicated that price, safety and the customer's experience of in-flight services are salient factors affecting customers' perception of brand image and trust, and these elements make an important impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Airline services encompass unique characteristics compared to others (Sezgen et al., 2023). Consequently, scholars in aviation services have mainly focused on service quality as a source of attractive attributes to facilitate dealing with customer satisfaction and loyalty (Chen et al., 2021). However, while previous studies have seemed to focus only on general service quality factor, this study digs into the

influence of in-flight services on customer perception since in-flight services are indicated having more influence on customer behaviour than ground services in some prior research (e.g., Etemad-Sajadi et al., 2016; Loureiro and Fialho, 2017). Hence, the present study makes a theoretical exploration regarding a lack of full understanding on the independent effects of safety, price, and in-flight service factors on the linkage of airline brand-satisfaction-passenger behaviour. This study also enriches the literature by providing further empirical evidence on the mediating roles of brand trust and customer satisfaction in the linkage between brand image and customer loyalty. Besides, the research findings provide airline managers with important implications on passenger retention strategies in the increasingly competitive aviation market.

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## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

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### 2.1 Brand image

Brand image is indispensable for an airline to be heard (Park et al., 2005). Keller (2013, p. 3) clarifies that brand image is a "perception about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in a consumer's memory". Thus, a successful brand image sets itself apart from competitors and boosts consumers' likelihood of buying that brand (Yang et al., 2012). Kapferer (2012) pointed out that the brand image is next to the person who receives it (the customer). This image mentions how consumers decipher all the brand signals that originate from the product, service and communication program (Sezgen et al., 2023). Therefore, brand image is the consumer's perception reflecting the relation of a brand to personality in the customer's mind (AMA, 2013). In addition, the brand image also includes aspects of customers' thoughts, feelings and expectations about the brand (Shafiee et al., 2014; Rahman and Moin 2022).

In order to broaden the notion of brand image, scholars defined brand image as associations of a particular brand with consumers in the form of a set of beliefs in customers' minds about that brand (Naseem and Yaprak, 2022). Furthermore, brand image is incorporated in brand-related activities pushed forward by companies (Shafiee et al., 2014). Consequently, brand image is a set of meanings and associations used to distinguish products and services from competitors (Sezgen et al., 2023). With these distinctive features, brand image is the basis for customers to make purchasing decisions (Keller, 2013).

Although many different models and theories have been proposed to investigate the factors affecting purchasing behaviour, all factors influencing purchasing behaviour in the aviation context were not fully investigated (Han et al., 2019). The effects of the brand image and its indicators on customers' future behavioural intention in the airline industry are explained in several investigations (Park et al., 2005; Shafiee et al., 2014; Sari et al., 2021). Shafiee et al. (2014) address the powerful differentiating effect of brand image that can make a significant part of the variance of purchase intention. Additionally, several studies have shown that customer's desired brand image strongly escorts customer loyalty (van Doorn et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2012; Han et al.,

2021). Therefore, a positive brand image brings a high reputation to an airline and makes customers more attached to that airline brand (Fu, 2023). However, the brand image contains a large variation of influence on customer behaviour across the level of services in the airline industry (Han et al., 2019). Since brand image is an important source ensuring an airline the competitive advantage in the marketplace, more research is required on the role and impact of brand image in specific airline service contexts (Shafiee et al., 2014).

## 2.2 Brand trust

Trust is argued that connotes a perceived expectation of what to believe; therefore, fulfilling expectations signifies acquiring emotional support (Milan et al., 2015). Hence, trust is a long-term response which develops over time after the customer evaluates the purchase, increasing customer's confidence that service suppliers will not involve in opportunistic behaviours (Keller, 2013). It means that if customers perceive the service provider as trustworthy, they feel confident and safe to continue their relationship with the service provider (Siqueira et al., 2023). Researchers have suggested that trust in the consuming process before and after service consumption affects the customers' intention to repurchase (Mohd-Any et al., 2019). In other words, repurchase intention is based on customer experience, including emotional and cognitive facets that are embarked on a particular service supplier for future purchases after judging possible buying or experience scenarios (Keller, 2013; Naseem and Yaprak, 2022).

Operationalizing trust in business studies are diversified in disciplines of specific research contexts (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). In the service context of aviation sector, Clegg et al. (2002) implied trust in two aspects including "trust that is recognized" and "trust that is paid off". In the first aspect, "trust that is recognized" explains that, from the customer perspective, the airline will value its passengers seriously, put the customer's interests first, and has immediate reactions to the occurrence of any notable stimulus (Clegg et al., 2002). In particular, if customers trust their feedback to be noticed by airlines, they are more likely to repurchase the service (Sari et al., 2021). On the other aspect, Saleem (2017) considers that "trust that is paid off" pertains to the service delivery respecting fulfilment of promises and sharing rewards with customers. Airlines are expected to fulfill their commitments, thereby gaining their trustworthiness (Ahn et al., 2015). Furthermore, some airline passengers often overestimate the risks associated with air travel, if an airline reduces this emotional dissonance through motivating passengers a positive perception of safety and security procedures and utilising personal communication mode, they would be more loyal to that airline (Huang and Liu, 2020; Sari et al., 2021). This emotional stimulus is significant to develop customers' repurchase intention (Han et al., 2019). Further, scholars confirmed the role of consumer experience values in airline customers' trust and concluded that brand trust is closely tied to customer experience and has a positive relationship with customer loyalty and advocacy (e.g., Hao, 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Siqueira et al., 2023).

## 2.3 Passenger satisfaction and loyalty

According to the expectancy disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980), customer satisfaction is an assessment that deals with how well a product or service meet customer expectations. Customer loyalty can be defined as a deep commitment to repurchase or re-patronize a preferred service or product consistently in the future (Oliver, 1999). The more customer is satisfied, the more customer is loyal towards a brand (Shen and Yahya, 2021). These factors are the most salient indicators affecting customers' purchasing decisions (Hao, 2020). To a larger extent, they help predict sales and business growth (Chen et al., 2021). Although above-mentioned definitions seems pretty straightforward, it is difficult to fully and accurately define what "satisfied customer" means for each product or service offered (Milan et al., 2015). To better understand customer satisfaction and accurately predict customer loyalty, it is necessary to trigger them in each different consumption context, where customers experience unique attributes for each type of consumption (Mohd-Any et al., 2019).

Many previous studies have confirmed that customer satisfaction is strongly predicted by the airline service quality (e.g., Hao, 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Shiwakoti et al., 2022). When customers use the airline service, they will experience different levels of airline service quality and thereby determine their level of satisfaction with that airline (Han et al., 2021). More specifically, once superior service quality is perceived by airline customers, it will lead to an increase in airline brand awareness and a higher level satisfaction and loyalty (Anh et al., 2015). As a result, airline customers consider continuing to use that airline service and recommending it to others (Rajaguru, 2016).

## 2.4 Price

Price has a strong relationship with customer loyalty to leisure travellers, so it can be seen that the impact of airfare needs to be taken into account when conducting research exploring customer loyalty, especially in the aviation industry (Truong et al., 2020). Scholars have argued that the way customers perceive the price is as important as the price itself (Rajaguru, 2016). Price wars have raged in the airline industry around the world (Truong et al., 2020). Low-cost carriers have used price to increase profit margins, and posit themselves against traditional competitors in the aviation market (Shen and Yahya, 2021). In the management battle over price perception, not just about building a price structure and determining actual price points, companies often focus on building the concept of "pricing credit" from consumer perspective (Varki and Colgate, 2001). As a result, a fierce price competition in the airline industry is more important than ever. Customers can easily split their spending between different airlines, depending on which airline offers the best value-price equation (Rajaguru, 2016; Shen and Yahya, 2021).

With the emergence of the low-cost carriers market, airfares have fallen to zero, which could lead to customers' price perception that differs from that of full-service carriers (Truong et al., 2020). Passengers travelling on full-service flights are very sensitive to their airline selection as they not only demand rational airfares, but also expect the appropriate quality of products and services offered by the airline (Park et al., 2020). In that case, price is the most important

contributing factor relating to satisfaction and loyalty (Varki and Colgate, 2001). Therefore, the current study propose following hypotheses:

*H1. Price has a positive effect on brand image (H1a), brand trust (H1b), passenger satisfaction (H1c).*

## 2.5 Safety

As air transport is a special service type, safety and reliability are both paramount to the lives of hundreds of passengers on each flight (Stolzer et al., 2023). For this reason, airlines always emphasize safety and considers it as the leading factor in providing service (Ringle et al., 2011). Safety is not only an airline service attribute but also an output performance (Schopf et al., 2021). However, the actual gap about aviation safety awareness between the reality of the industry, the perception of experts, the media and the perception of passengers continues to grow (Shiwakoti et al., 2022). Therefore, scholars have tried to study aviation safety from different stakeholder perspectives. From technical perspective, aviation safety comes from technological improvements in aircraft, avionics and engines (Oster et al., 2013). From operational side, safety management systems are handled at both the organizational and individual levels which are supervised and assessed by civil aviation authorities (Ringle et al., 2011). Among them, safety behaviour is the most crucial part of aviation operations (Coetzee and Henning, 2019). The safety behaviours consist of safety compliance with regulations on safety practices and voluntary safety participation to develop a safety-supporting environment (Schopf et al., 2021). In the aviation system, the most recognised experts are aircrew and air traffic controllers who contribute to the improved aviation safety record (Stolzer et al., 2023). This type of professionals have the ability to understand and evaluate the safety of the aviation system (Schopf et al., 2021). On media perspective, the media seems to be more interested in trying to find the culprit of the accident than in the question of how a similar accident could have happened with the reason is seemly that the journalists normally do not have enough knowledge and experience to cover the complex nature of the accidents on the news (Ringle et al., 2011). Airline passengers are directly affected by aviation safety factors, however, in a completely different aspect, they do not seem to have the knowledge to fully understand the constituent elements of aviation safety (Shiwakoti et al., 2022). Customers appreciate the role of aviation safety and consider it the most decisive criterion in choosing an airline (Gilbert and Wong, 2003). When the importance of safety is emphasized, the more customers perceive themselves that “the higher the price, the higher the perceived safety” (Ching Biu Tse, 1999; p.912).

In addition, the brand reputation of airlines is always closely linked to the safety factor (Stolzer et al., 2023). Airlines have put safety as a top criterion to give customers confidence in their brand. As a result, airlines focus on ensuring their services' safety through using new technology, improving aircraft maintenance, and training pilots and flight attendants on how to respond professionally to safety, while following standard operating and safety inspection procedures (Oster et al., 2013). Consequently, airlines can offer passengers a safe and enjoyable flight experience. In the same vein, scholars have pointed out that airline passengers consistently link the

experience of a safe journey with a specific airline brand (Shiwakoti et al., 2022; Rahman and Moin, 2022; Stolzer et al., 2023). Not much research has been done on how passenger perceive safety affects airline's brand and how far of an impact it has on satisfaction of airline passengers (Mohd-Any et al., 2019; Shen and Yahya, 2021). Therefore, the current study proposes the following hypotheses:

*H2. Safety has a positive effect on brand image (H2a), brand trust (H2b), passenger satisfaction (H2c).*

## 2.6 In-flight services

Airline service quality can be described as the overall impression of the relative performance of the airline's organization and service from the customer's perspective (Park et al., 2005). Researchers have emphasized the prominence of service quality to figure out and understand passengers' satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Shen and Yahya, 2021). The results show that providing high service quality is a salient and important factor in determining airlines' success (Fu, 2023).

An increasing number of studies have proposed various models to measure the service quality of airlines and its influence on passengers (Shen and Yahya, 2021). The traditional service quality dimension approach by Parasuraman et al. (1988) uses five dimensions in the airline service context: turbulence, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy. These aspects emphasize the factors that measure competitive services (Rajaguru, 2016). In another aspect, because customer's perception about airline service quality is influenced by the interactions between airline passenger and airline staff, and therefore, passenger's perception of service quality before and during flight have independent effects on airline passenger satisfaction and significantly different impacts on airline passenger loyalty (Etemad-Sajadi et al., 2016). Therefore, the airline service is divided into three stages: pre-flight, during-flight, and after-flight for evaluating the service quality (Park et al., 2005). Among them, the quality of in-flight service is considered to be the most important factor affecting airline customers' satisfaction and loyalty (Loureiro and Fialho, 2017).

Grönroos (2000) explains the linkage between service quality and other factors such as brand image is most strongly influenced by the service quality. In the aviation sector, the positive impact of airline service quality on brand image is also revealed in the prior research (Loureiro and Fialho, 2017). Accordingly, the on-board environment and facilities including cabin cleanliness and orderliness, air circulation, cabin interior/environment, and seat comfort, are important factors to improve passenger satisfaction (Han et al., 2019). Consequently, full-service airlines have focused on supplementing high-end facilities such as high-speed internet access and widescreen television with various entertainment programs to enhance customers' in-flight experiences (Walia et al., 2021). These added-services improve in-flight service quality and bring airline passengers the positive airline brand image, which positively affects passenger satisfaction (Ahn et al., 2015). The satisfied passengers are then more probable to recommend the airline to others (Han et al., 2021). Besides, scholars have confirmed the existence of a relationship between in-flight service quality and passenger satisfaction

and loyalty (Huang and Liu, 2020; Han et al., 2021). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

*H3. In-flight services have a positive effect on brand image (H3a), brand trust (H3b), passenger satisfaction (H3c).*

## 2.7 The effect of brand image and brand trust on customer behaviour

This study uses commitment-trust theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) to conceptualize the relationships among research constructs, brand image, brand trust, customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Morgan and Hunt's theory states that two basic elements, trust and commitment, must exist to ensure the success of a relationship. Based on this theory, scholars argue that meeting customers' needs and honoring commitments could lead to positive relationships between a brand and customers' behavioural outcomes (Shafiee et al., 2014).

In the service industry, brand names are associated with company names (Berry et al., 1988). Consequently, in the aviation sector, brand image is undertaken as a facsimile of the brand of an airline (Mun and Ghazali, 2011). Brand reflects the needs of customers and therefore, it is necessary to study the nexus between brand and customer buying behavior. Previous studies have clearly explained the relationship between brand image and purchase intention (e.g., Shafiee et al., 2014; Huang and Liu, 2020; Sari et al., 2021). Brand image is related to a person's preference structure (Morgan, 1990). Accordingly, customers often buy products that are more acquainted to them and have an impressive image of them in mind because customers trust them more and make purchasing decisions easier (Hao, 2020). The differentiation that an airline's brand image can make has a powerful and positive effect on the purchasing behavior of airline passengers (Huang and Liu, 2020).

In addition, previous studies have shown that the desired brand image of an airline leads to passenger's satisfaction and loyalty (Rafael and Isabel, 2015; Huang and Liu, 2020). Furthermore, trust in an airline's brand plays a significant part in getting passengers to contemplate a positive attitude and purchase towards that airline brand (Mohd-Any et al., 2019). Accordingly, airlines make a great effort to develop brand trust through various methods (Siqueira et al., 2023). Mohd-Any et al. (2019) indicated that the brand trust of airline service customers positively affects service repurchase intention. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

*H4. Brand image has a positive effect on brand trust (H4a), passenger satisfaction (H4b), passenger loyalty (H4c).*

*H5. Brand trust has a positive effect on passenger satisfaction (H5a), passenger loyalty (H5b).*

Customers manifest the strong link between satisfaction and loyalty, which has been confirmed in previous customer behaviour studies (van Doorn et al., 2010). Scholars have also shown that satisfied customers are inclined to be loyal, as demonstrated by favorable behavioral intentions (Yang et al., 2012; Shen and Yahya, 2021; Shiwakoti et al., 2022). Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H6. Passenger satisfaction positively affects passenger loyalty.*

## 2.8 Mediating effect of brand trust and passenger satisfaction

Examining brand image and brand trust in the airline sector is becoming more routine as brand values are crucial to the survival of airlines and crucial to maintaining their ability to operate the competitiveness of airlines (Lin and Ryan, 2016). In recent times, the marketing literature has paid more attention to research focused on conceptualizing, measuring, and examining the structures of brand perception in relation to various mediating factors such as brand reputation and customer values (Sezgen et al., 2023).

Scholars stated that brand image is an important factor affecting customer satisfaction, particularly when customers have a positive experience of using a certain brand, they can also trust this brand and thereby making them more loyal (Mohd-Any et al., 2019). In other words, brand trust and customer satisfaction can act as mediators in enhancing the influence of brand image on customer loyalty. Furthermore, prior research results suggest on studying the mediating process that links brand image and passenger loyalty through various mediators (Han et al., 2021; Sari et al., 2021; Fu, 2023). According to scholars, brand trust mediates the influence of brand image on passengers' behavioural intention, while satisfaction exposes the mediating role between service quality and customer loyalty (Sari et al., 2021; Shen and Yahya, 2021). Similarly, Han et al. (2019) has identified the important mediating role of brand trust on the association between brand equity and passenger perception. Therefore, the current study investigates the mediating role of brand trust and satisfaction leading to passenger loyalty with respect to brand image as an independent variables. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

*H7a. Passenger satisfaction mediates the effect of brand image on customer loyalty.*

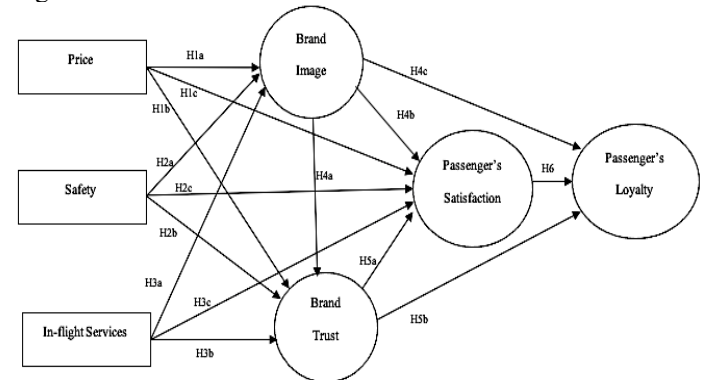
*H7b. Passenger satisfaction mediates the effect of brand trust on customer loyalty.*

*H8a. Brand trust mediates the effect of brand image on customer loyalty.*

*H8b. Brand trust and passenger satisfaction sequentially and positively mediates the effect of brand image on customer loyalty.*

Based on the above hypotheses, Figure 1 shows the proposed conceptual framework in the airline context of the present study.

Figure 1. The research model





### 3 METHOD

#### 3.1 Measurement and sampling method

To measure responses, this study used a Likert-type scale that ranges from one to five points corresponding to strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5), which was adjusted from previous studies. Specifically, the in-flight service quality scale was adjusted from the 4-item scale of Park (2007) and added two items from Gilbert and Wong (2003). Brand trust was measured by four items from the scale of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), whereas brand image followed five measurement items by the measures of Yoo and Donthu (2001). Regarding passenger satisfaction, the measure utilized the 6-item scale of Cronin (2000). Passengers' loyalty was measured by six items adapted from Zeithaml et al. (1996); perceived safety followed Ringle et al. (2011) with six items; price perception along with 4-item measurement scale adapted from Mikulić and Prebežac (2011) and Zeithaml (1988). To collect data, this study uses convenience sampling method from Korean Air's customers through a face-to-face survey conducted at Tan Son Nhat International Airport, Ho Chi Minh City. Since this study examines the theory of the interrelationships between seven marketing structures associated with a large number of observations and resource constraints, convenience sampling method is viewed as the most reasonable one (Zikmund and Babin, 2010).

#### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

Korean Air is the national full-service airline of Korea. The airline operates up to twenty flights per day from Vietnam to major cities in the world (Korean Air, 2023). Among these, there are eleven routes departing from Tan Son Nhat international airport, Ho Chi Minh city.

The researchers collected data from the departure terminal near the boarding area and at the tax-free area on different dates and times at Tan Son Nhat international airport. Respondents were firstly selected through screening question: "Have you used the airline service of Korean Air in six previous months?", if the answer is "Yes", the respondents then would be given a gift accompanying a survey questionnaire to perform. The researcher explained to the respondents that their participation in the survey was voluntary and also assured them of the anonymity and confidentiality of the survey. In about 4 weeks from the end of July to the end of August 2022, of the 430 questionnaires were sent out, a total of 402 responses were returned. After screening the questionnaires with missing data, there were 367 valid and eligible responses to participate in the study, corresponding to the valid response rate of 85.34%.

To analyse data, SmartPLS 3 software was used. The current study follows the suggestion of Hair et al. (2019) on using the PLS-SEM method, which should be used for the analysis involving the complex structural model that contains many structures and model relationships. According to Hair et al. (2019), the process of evaluating the PLS-SEM results involves examining the measurement model with the required criteria such as indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, the convergent value and discriminant validity of each construct. Then, evaluating the structural model by assessment criteria including coefficient of

determination (R square), a cross-validated measure of redundancy based on the Q square blindfold technique, and the statistical significance of the path coefficients. Collinearity is also checked before evaluating structural relationships to ensure that it does not bias the results of the regression.

### 4 FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Respondent Profile

The respondents' characteristics were exposed in Table 1. As observed, 155 respondents (42.2 per cent) were male, and 212 respondents (57.8 per cent) were female. Of these respondents, 89.1 per cent (327 respondents) had from one to five flights per year travelled with Korean Air. The majority of respondents were between 18 and 25 years old (30.2%) and 26 to 35 years old (42%). In addition, 168 out of the total number of 367 respondents were married accounting for 45.8%. Respondents with university degrees accounted for the majority (70%) with a fairly distribution of income levels, in which, monthly income ranged from 11 to 20 million VND (46%) and over 20 million VND (29.7%).

Table 1. Participants

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	155	42.2	42.2
Female	212	57.8	100.0
Total	367	100.0	
<i>Marital status</i>			
Single	199	54.2	54.2
Married	168	45.8	100.0
Total	367	100.0	
<i>Age</i>			
18-25 years old	111	30.2	30.2
26-35 years old	154	42.0	72.2
36-45 years old	81	22.1	94.3
46-55 years old	19	5.2	99.5
>55 years old	2	0.5	100.0
Total	367	100.0	
<i>Education background</i>			
High school	4	1.1	1.1
College	26	7.1	8.2
Graduate Education	257	70.0	78.2
Post Graduate Education	80	21.8	100.0
Total	367	100.0	
<i>Monthly income</i>			
Under 10 million VND	89	24.3	37.7
From 11 to 20 million VND	169	46.0	83.7
Over 20 million VND	109	29.7	100
Total	367	100.0	
<i>Flight frequency (No. of flights per year)</i>			
1 to 5 times	327	89.1	89.1
6 to 10 times	34	9.3	98.4
11 to 15 times	4	1.1	99.5
Over 15 times	2	0.5	100.0
Total	367	100.0	

#### 4.2 Measurement model results

All constructs were examined the reliability and validity in the current study. Specifically, the basic statistics of the outer loadings index showing the correlation between the observed items and the latent constructs of all items meet the threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). Average variance extracted (AVE) was used to test convergent validity, and Cronbach's alpha values and CR (composite reliability) were examined internal consistency for each construct. The results showed that Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.767 to 0.927, which are larger than the suggested values of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). The CR values ranged from 0.849 to 0.943, which are greater than 0.7, and values of AVE ranged from 0.517 to 0.733, which are greater than 0.50, indicating that the constructs are valid and reliable (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Table 2 presents outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha values, AVE and CR for each construct.

To test for discriminant validity, the next step is examining the square root of the AVE for each construct. As is shown in Table 2, the results show that the square root of its AVE is higher than each correlation values with other constructs; thus, discriminant validity is confirmed (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In addition, the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) has high power in detecting validity issues due to a dispute over the structure of cognitive capacity and outcome-oriented capacity.

Table 2. Measurement model evaluation

code	Construct Items	Outer loadings ≥ 0.6 (Hair et al., 2019)	Cronbach's Alpha ≥ 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019)	rho_A	CR ≥ 0.7 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988)	AVE ≥ 0.5 (Hick et al., 2010)
<b>Brand Image</b>			<b>0.882</b>	<b>0.884</b>	<b>0.914</b>	<b>0.681</b>
BI1	This brand is very reliable	0.802				
BI2	This brand is trustworthy	0.858				
BI3	This brand is highly valued and respected	0.853				
BI4	This brand is unique and stands out from the rest	0.849				
BI5	The perceived overall quality of this particular brand is extremely high	0.759				
<b>In-flight Services</b>			<b>0.927</b>	<b>0.927</b>	<b>0.943</b>	<b>0.733</b>
FS1	In-flight meals	0.85				
FS2	In-flight entertainment	0.89				
FS3	Seating comfort	0.9				
FS4	Cabin cleanliness and sanitation	0.853				
FS5	Service attitude of flight attendants	0.862				
FS6	Efficiency in problem solving of passengers	0.776				
<b>Passenger's Loyalty</b>			<b>0.814</b>	<b>0.824</b>	<b>0.865</b>	<b>0.517</b>
PL1	I would say positive things about this airline to other people	0.669				
PL2	I would recommend this airline to other people	0.675				
PL3	I would encourage friends and relatives to do business with this airline	0.662				
PL4	I would consider this airline as my first choice to use next	0.772				
PL5	Even if the price would be <u>higher</u> I would consider using this airline	0.746				
PL6	Even if the itinerary would be less efficient I would consider using this airline	0.78				
<b>Passenger's Satisfaction</b>			<b>0.846</b>	<b>0.851</b>	<b>0.891</b>	<b>0.62</b>
PS1	This is the best airline service I could have used	0.783				
PS2	This airline service is exactly what I need	0.84				
PS3	I normally have a pleasant flight with this airline	0.836				
PS4	I am satisfied with my decision to use the service of this airline	0.743				
PS6	Overall, I am satisfied with this airline service	0.728				
<b>Price</b>						
PR1	The airline charges reasonable fares	0.828				
PR2	The air fare cost is competitive with other airlines	0.867				
PR3	Extra baggage charge is reasonable	0.866				
PR4	Inflight food and giveaways price are reasonable	0.823				
<b>Safety</b>			<b>0.907</b>	<b>0.911</b>	<b>0.931</b>	<b>0.73</b>
SS1	Perception of security checks at the airport	0.855				
SS2	Perceived safety during flight	0.865				
SS3	I feel very safe using this airline	0.878				
SS4	The airline has a good safety record	0.814				
SS5	The airline has a good safety reputation	0.858				
<b>Brand Trust</b>			<b>0.767</b>	<b>0.783</b>	<b>0.849</b>	<b>0.585</b>
BT1	I trust this airline brand.	0.738				
BT2	I rely on this airline brand.	0.673				
BT3	This is an honest airline brand.	0.81				
BT4	This airline brand is safe.	0.829				

The results in Table 3 show the HTMT index of the construct is under the threshold of 0.85, indicating good discriminant validity (Kline, 2015) and a well-fitting model (Garson, 2016).

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	Brand Image	In-flight Services	Passenger's Loyalty	Passenger's Satisfaction	Price	Safety	Trust
Brand Image							
In-flight Services	0.515						
Passenger's Loyalty	0.625	0.461					
Passenger's Satisfaction	0.628	0.511	0.568				
Price	0.341	0.299	0.446	0.248			
Safety	0.557	0.570	0.506	0.496	0.298		
Brand Trust	0.566	0.442	0.704	0.498	0.511	0.578	

#### 4.3 Assessment of structural model

The evaluation of the structural model aims to analyze the predictability of the proposed relationships between the constructs. The collinearity of the model was first tested. The

internal VIF values, which are presented in Table 4, ranged from 1.112 to 1.720, below the threshold of 3.0 (Hair et al., 2019), showing that there is no concern of multicollinearity. The model was examined by utilizing the bootstrapping procedure with 2,000 resamples. As such, the coefficient of determination (R square) measures how well the independent variables can explain a dependent variable (Hair et al., 2019). The results show that four dependent variables including brand image, trust, passenger satisfaction, and passenger loyalty have R square values are 0.329, 0.387, 0.376, and 0.425, respectively. It indicates that these independent variables can be explained by the three antecedents (i.e. price, safety, and in-flight service) with 32.9, 38.7, 37.6, and 42.5 per cent of the variances, respectively. To indicate a moderate predictive accuracy of the model in terms of predicted relevance, the Q square values of brand image, trust, passenger satisfaction, and passenger loyalty were 0.218, 0.212, 0.224, and 0.215, respectively. This demonstrates a reasonable construction of values and implies that the exogenous variables of the model are predicted to be related to the endogenous variables (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4. Structural model assessment

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path coefficient	T-value	P values	Supported/rejected
H1a	Price → Brand Image	0.145	2.851	0.004	Supported
H1b	Price → Trust	0.240	4.882	0.000	Supported
H1c	Price → Passenger's Satisfaction	-0.024	0.526	0.599	Rejected
H2a	Safety → Brand Image	0.329	6.010	0.000	Supported
H2b	Safety → Trust	0.286	5.575	0.000	Supported
H2c	Safety → Passenger's Satisfaction	0.096	1.472	0.141	Rejected
H3a	In-flight Services → Brand Image	0.253	4.627	0.000	Supported
H3b	In-flight Services → Trust	0.063	1.227	0.220	Rejected
H3c	In-flight Services → Passenger's Satisfaction	0.191	3.400	0.001	Supported
H4a	Brand Image → Trust	0.239	5.360	0.000	Supported
H4b	Brand Image → Passenger's Satisfaction	0.343	5.560	0.000	Supported
H4c	Brand Image → Passenger's Loyalty	0.268	4.805	0.000	Supported
H5a	Trust → Passenger's Satisfaction	0.151	2.620	0.009	Supported
H5b	Trust → Passenger's Loyalty	0.345	6.944	0.000	Supported
H6	Passenger's Satisfaction → Passenger's Loyalty	0.187	3.357	0.001	Supported

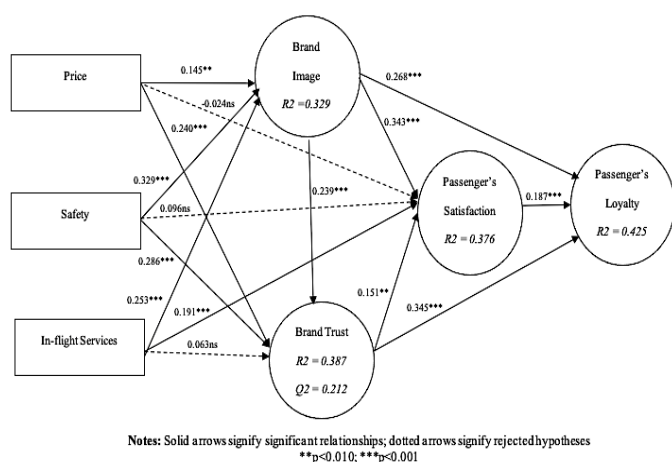
Note(s): \*\*p < 0.01. \*\*\*p < 0.001

Table 4 demonstrates the results of hypothesis testing. In specific, Hypothesis 1 was tested and the results showed that price positively affected brand image ( $\beta = 0.145$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and brand trust ( $\beta = 0.240$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) while having no impact on passenger satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.024$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Consequently, H1a and H1c were supported, but not H1b. Hypothesis 2 investigated the relationship between safety and brand image, trust, and passenger satisfaction. Results showed that safety has positive influences on brand image ( $\beta = 0.329$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), brand trust ( $\beta = 0.286$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), and insignificant effect on passenger satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.096$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, H2a and H2c were supported, and H2b was rejected. Hypothesis 3 analyzed the relationship between in-flight service and brand image, trust, and passenger satisfaction. There was a difference in the impact of in-flight service compared to the previous two hypotheses. Results showed that in-flight service has no effect on brand trust ( $\beta = 0.063$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) but positive influences on brand image ( $\beta = 0.253$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and passenger satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.191$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, H3c was rejected, and H3a and H3b were supported. The effects of brand image on brand trust, passenger satisfaction, and passenger loyalty were tested in Hypothesis 4. As a result, there was a positive impact of brand image on those variables including brand trust ( $\beta = 0.239$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), passenger satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.343$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), and passenger loyalty ( $\beta = 0.268$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Consequently, hypothesis 4 was fully supported by H4a,



H4b, and H4c. In addition, the relationship of brand trust with customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, represented by hypothesis 5, was also fully confirmed by the research results. Moreover, brand trust exerted the highest impact on passenger loyalty ( $\beta = 0.345$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), come after by passenger satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.151$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Hence, H5a and H5b were supported. Finally, hypothesis 6 describing the relationship between passenger satisfaction and passenger loyalty was also confirmed with a positive effect ( $\beta = 0.187$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Figure 2 exhibits the structural model.

Figure 2. The structural model assessment



#### 4.4 Assessment of mediating effects

Regarding mediating effects, the current study followed the multiple mediation analysis approaches of Nitzl et al. (2016). Specifically, mediation effects of passenger satisfaction with two mediating hypotheses, i.e. brand image  $\rightarrow$  passenger satisfaction  $\rightarrow$  passenger loyalty (H7a), and brand trust  $\rightarrow$  passenger satisfaction  $\rightarrow$  passenger loyalty (H7b) were analyzed. In addition, mediation effects of brand trust with two mediating hypotheses, i.e. brand image  $\rightarrow$  brand trust  $\rightarrow$  passenger loyalty (H8a); brand image  $\rightarrow$  brand trust  $\rightarrow$  passenger satisfaction  $\rightarrow$  passenger loyalty (H8b) were examined. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Mediating effects results

Hypothesis	Relationships	Total effect (Std. $\beta$ )	Direct effect (Std. $\beta$ )	Indirect effect (Std. $\beta$ )	t-values	Decisions
-	BI $\rightarrow$ PL	0.422***	0.268***	-	-	-
-	BR $\rightarrow$ PL	0.373***	0.345***	-	-	-
H7a	BI $\rightarrow$ PS $\rightarrow$ PL	-	-	0.064**	2.924	Supported
H7b	BT $\rightarrow$ PS $\rightarrow$ PL	-	-	0.028**	2.099	Supported
H8a	BI $\rightarrow$ BT $\rightarrow$ PL	-	-	0.083***	4.333	Supported
H8b	BI $\rightarrow$ BT $\rightarrow$ PS $\rightarrow$ PL	-	-	0.007ns	1.802	Rejected

Notes: BI, brand image; PL, passenger's loyalty; BT, brand trust; PS, passenger satisfaction; ns, non-significant; \*\* $p < 0.010$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

The results indicate that hypotheses H7a, H7b, and H8a were significant, but hypothesis H8b was insignificant. The total effect was 0.422, which comprises the effect of both mediators, while a significant direct effect between brand image and passenger loyalty was confirmed ( $\beta = 0.268$  at  $p = 0.000$ ). Also, the significant mediating effects were found including passenger satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.064$  at  $p = 0.003$ ) and brand trust ( $\beta = 0.083$  at  $p = 0.000$ ) since there was no zero value being found between the lower and upper bound of the confidence interval for the 95 per cent bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval. Consequently, H7a, H7b,

and H8a were accepted. Furthermore, both direct and indirect path coefficients were positive; thus, direct and indirect paths were significantly established inclined with same directions, implicating that passenger satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between brand image, brand trust and customer loyalty. Also, the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty is partially mediated by brand trust.

## 5 DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Discussions and theoretical implications

Taking the proposed model into considering the effectiveness, some interesting results were exposed. The findings of this study indicate the core factors of airline service including price, safety, and in-flight service are among the most important factors determining the creation of a strong impression in the customer's mind about an airline brand, and that notion has a strong impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty to that airline.

First, research results demonstrate that the price factor affects the brand image and trust of an airline while it has no impact on customer satisfaction. This result is different from the suggestion on the positive impact of price on customer satisfaction in some previous studies in the research context of low-cost airline services (e.g. Truong et al., 2020; Shen and Yahya, 2021). This finding underlines the context of this study as the traditional airline services of Korean Air. In other words, low-cost airline customers are more satisfied with a lower price; whereas, full-service airline customers accept a higher price that will not increase their satisfaction. Furthermore, it expose that the airline branding is strongly linked to the customers' assessment about the commensurate of service quality with its price.

Second, the findings demonstrate that both airline brand image and brand trust are positively associated with safety. It provides ample evidence to broaden the research context that underpins the implications of previous studies such as Lin and Ryan (2016) and Han and Huyn (2018). Accordingly, the safety factor has the strongest influence on the brand image and brand trust of an airline, therefore, the safety factor should be considered as an independent prefix and should be placed in further exploration of its impact on other components of an airline's brand equity. In addition, the positive brand image and a feeling of trust in that brand will make customers more satisfied and loyal to the airline, which effects customers' purchasing decisions in the future. Apart from that, the linkage between safety and passenger satisfaction is found to be insignificant in the current study. It can be explained that aviation is often considered a safe industry. Further, customers today have easy access to airline safety ratings before purchasing. In the service consumption process, customers are generally impossible to assess the actual level of flight safety; thus, they evaluate flight safety conforming to their perception of the external features of the aircraft or the rigorous security check procedures at airport. As a result, passengers' perceptions of safety seem to have a strong connection with airline brand rather than consideration of satisfaction. Consequently, from the customers' perspective, the safety factor is implicit in the brand image and trust of the selected airline.

Third, unlike the effects of price and safety, in-flight service quality expresses a positive impact on brand image and satisfaction, but not in relation to brand trust. This result emphasizes the importance of service quality for brand image protection and passenger satisfaction formation. Obviously, service quality is the key factor that sets an airline apart from their competitors. Consequently, full service airlines focus on continuously improving service quality to make a very clear distinction between low-cost airline services and traditional airline services. On the other side, inflight service quality have no effect on brand trust. This result implies that the airline's brand worthiness needs to be formed by years of consistent service quality and should be examined through long-term relationships with customers, which has not been explicitly mentioned in previous studies.

Finally, the relationship between brand image, brand trust and passenger loyalty was tested for mediation from passenger satisfaction. Previously, scholars have performed the mediating role of passenger satisfaction towards service quality and customer loyalty relationships in the context of low-cost airline services such as Shen and Yahya (2021); Fu (2023). This study strengthens and expands this exertion in the context of the full-service carrier. The results highlight the significance and notability of passenger satisfaction in driving passenger loyalty. The research findings not only empirically verify the direct relationships between brand image, trust and loyalty but also confirm the partial mediating effects of passenger satisfaction on those relationships. These results stress the mediating nature of brand trust and customer satisfaction in aviation settings, which indicates that improving brand psychology (i.e., brand image, brand trust) in mind of passengers is a key to maintaining the passenger loyalty.

## 5.2 Managerial implications

Consumers increase their expectations day by day. Given the fact that the consumer group incorporates different customer segments, especially within airlines, that manifests a need to locate the airline brand corresponding to each consumption pattern. The research findings clarify that while one group of consumers is focused on pricing, another group of consumers is interested in flight experiences that is independent of the price. Although different groups of consumers have different expectations, the basic expectations are a requirement for every passenger. Those of such demands may be catalogued as warranting a safe flight, furnishing with modern and clean equipment, and providing comfortable service atmosphere accompanied by experienced staff. Another requirement is that the airline service should be performed as it has been defined and committed by the service supplier in advance. Consequently, airlines should focus on providing flight experiences that meets consumer expectations to enhance positive brand image, which will help them to build their brand trust and generate the enduring loyalty of passengers. Accordingly, full service airlines should provide customers with diverse dining and enjoyment such as entertainment (e.g. movies and music); ensure to be faster and more accurately in solving service problems relating to customer requests. At this point, the customer perception of good service quality will bring a positive brand image and please customers which directs to extensive customer retention and loyalty. It is more important for airlines to design the right

strategies to maintain their competitive position, as building airline brands needs to go hand in hand with passenger retention through better quality service and customer satisfaction.

Finally, our research results help airline practitioners in Korea to find more effective passenger retention strategies in an increasingly competitive environment of the aviation market context. Based on the research results, it can be affirmed that brand image and trust play a prominent role in ensuring customer satisfaction and increasing the loyalty of travellers. Compared with other research variables, the impact of brand trust on customer loyalty is larger in the airline industry. The results also imply that marketing practitioners should strive to build a traditional airline's brand image in the direction of conveying clearer signals to customers about aviation safety and high-quality service. It is clear that the difference in the brand image is very important to increase the competitive strength of airlines. In fact, "low fares" is always attached to the brand image of low-cost airlines by default in the customers' mind. Meanwhile, in another segment, full-service airline customers often attach the airline image with high quality service and level of safety. This allows traditional airlines to issue flexible and effective pricing policies without sacrificing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Specifically, providing high-quality core service experience products (e.g. airline foods, electronic amenities, empathetic and efficient services, friendly interactions of cabin staff with customers) during the flight is effective in creating a cognitive and emotional positive flight experience for passengers. Ultimately, these positive factors will bring trust and reputation to the airline brand itself.

## 5.3 Limitations and further research

The current research is not fully exempted from limitations, consequently, offering opportunities for future research paths. First, the current research was taken part among passengers who have travel experiences with Korean Air. There is therefore concern about the generalizability of the current results because the sample of this study is not perfectly representative of all global airline passengers. Hence, further research should comprise a broad range of samples. Second, this study only anchored on passengers using the type of traditional airline services. Since passengers may have different perceptions of price and aviation safety and dissimilar expectations for service quality between full-service airlines and low-cost carriers. Thus, further research is needed for comparing passengers' perceptions of price, safety, and inflight service on different flight carriers. Especially, a comparative study between low-cost carriers and full-service carriers; or, traditional carriers and emerging airlines would expose a more all-inclusive understanding of airline passengers' perceptions of airline brands and consequent behaviours.

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