WHAT DO WE CHOOSE TO FLY WITH LOW-COST AIRLINES: THAIS' PASSENGER PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: Generally, the price mechanism is the primary factor attracting customers to choose to fly. However, the other service components, especially punctuality and service quality, could not be neglected. This study aims to investigate the service components that enhance passenger return intention using three low-cost airlines operating in Don Mueang International Airport (DMK), Thailand. The quantitative approach was employed by f-test to compare three airlines' service components. The structural equation modelling was tested for the causal relation of the factors affecting passengers' choices. The questionnaires were distributed to 1200 Thai passengers who had experienced flying with low-cost airlines. The results disclosed differences among airlines: reliability, assurance, and the quality of products and services. In comparison, the most significant passengers' choices were reliability, assurance, and empathy.

Keywords: Low-Cost Airlines; Passengers' Choice; Service Components; Service Quality; Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

Today, all kinds of organizations are not competing for only the products; instead, they excel in the services during interaction and after-sales services since the advancement of technology allows organizations to acquire and produce almost the same quality of products. Specifically, the low-cost airlines' products and services are the same such as seats, scheduled flights, and in-flight services. Therefore, the price mechanism is the primary element in attracting customers (Kankaew, 2022). The study of Chanpayom and Witthawassamrankul (2017) recommended that low-cost airlines in Thailand shed light on cost leadership and price promotion. This results in intense competition, which makes Nok Air reposition to premium airlines by providing a lounge at Don Mueang International Airport (Wingtips, 2022). Intalar and Yodpram (2020) explored the customers' loyalty to low-cost airlines in Thailand that was inspired by service quality and brand attitude. The service quality was assessed quite often, such as in the study of (Junjit and Monpanthong, 2020; Akkapin et al., 2021; Akkapin, 2021). Still, there is no comparative study of the service quality among low-cost airlines in Thailand.

Additionally, service and safety were significant issues for low-cost airlines in Thailand. It obviously can be seen from social media and news, i.e. the error check-in, boarding and onboard headcount causing the number of passengers over the aircraft seats capacity. This incident resulted in the flight being diverted back to the airport and delayed (Thansettakij, 2022). Not only the error case that occurred but also the five hours delay due to aircraft rotation and operational issues (Sirarom, 2021) and the flight cancellation without prior notice and responsibility for the stranded passengers (Dailynews, 2017) were reported. Another sample of safety was the aircraft slipped off the runway where 164 passengers left on board an hour before evacuation (Mgronline, 2022).

Though, every single paid customer is always expected to the quality of goods and services. And inevitably, the paid customers always evaluate money's worth in every interaction, especially after purchasing. In concord with this fact, the airlines' passengers have the same expectation and assess the service they receive in every exchange. Thence, low-cost airlines should consider the service quality, particularly on-time performance and safety, as advertised. For this reason, this study sheds light on the comparative service components of three low-cost airlines in Thailand based on the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1985). It investigates the service quality affecting passengers' return intention using structural equation modelling. Presumably, this study would benefit low-cost airlines to adopt and implement to serve their passengers' needs better and compare their strengths and weaknesses.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Airline service process

According to the International Air Transport Association- IATA (2010), the airlines' services compose of five stages including; pre-journey, at the origin

airport, en-route, arriving at a destination, and post-journey. The pre-journey can be explained so that customers recognize the need to travel and make selections and reservations. While at the origin airport is the passenger processing, for instance, check-in baggage, security check, and embark the aircraft. The third stage includes onboard services, safety demonstrations, and in-flight entertainment. At the same time, the arrival at destination refers to passenger processing to leave the aircraft and airport, for instance, baggage collecting, connecting flights or ground transportation.

Lastly, the post-journey deals with passenger information update such as frequent flyer miles and looking for other promotional offerings. Remarkably, the first stage is vital for serving the needs of passengers. In contrast, the passengers' handling and interactions are represented in the other four stages. That is highly important for the airlines since, during the exchange, airlines' employees could make or break the impression. Henceforward, IATA (2015) identified the five needs of airlines passenger: friendliness, authority, understanding, fairness, and information. Concisely, friendliness is a basic need where the air carrier could add value-added to customers' experiences through friendly service delivery. Addedly, the authority is to give some amount of control to the passengers for decision-making. The administration would allow air carriers to provide and facilitate serving its passengers' needs. The understanding is to express the comprehension of passengers' feelings and treat everyone fairly and respectfully. In the meantime, if any situation arises, the airlines should promptly act to the solution. A clear explanation of the conditions and solutions is essential to customers' needs. Keeping customers with blank information is perilous to the organization since they can share and complain immediately through 'word of mouth' or social media (Timm, 2011). Social media is instantly spread worldwide, and it is challenging to regain the firms' image and trust.

Service quality

Customer satisfaction with airline services mainly concerns punctuality, safety, comfort, and friendliness. To date, the airline's customers are more demanding over the ticket fee they paid with the high level of service, quality of products, and immediate action on problem issues. Successful airlines can exceed customer expectations (Colin, 2018). In addition, airlines that could deliver service beyond passengers' expectations would benefit from customer loyalty. The service quality, then, is highlighted for service delivery distinction. The service quality is the customer's perception of the service received compared to the expectation set (Chang & Sokol, 2020; Chen, 2013; Vo & Chovancová, 2019). It includes the overall impressive customer experiences obtained from the company (Yunus, Bojei, & Rashid, 2013; Kim & Lee, 2011). Wirtz and Lovelock (2016) added that service quality is a constant attitude and belief toward a service firm which results in the return intention. The standard service quality model was recognized as SERVQUAL—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2018). The tangibles are the presence of service facilities, personnel and communication, and the

environment. Reliability refers to the firm's performance as promised (Harun et al., 2018). The responsiveness serves as the prompt service and willingness to assist the customer. For assurance, it is the service organization's competence, security, credibility, and courtesy. Lastly, empathy is the ease of accessibility to getting in touch with service providers, understanding service receivers' needs, attentive listening and communicating.

The SERVQUAL model was applied in airline services (Huang, 2010; Yunus, Bojei, & Rashid, 2013; Kim & Lee, 2011) and segregated the airline's products and services in concordance with five dimensions as the aircraft, seat pitch and comfort, in-flight entertainment, employees' grooming, and meal and beverage services were tangibles. The reliability is composed of punctuality, ease of reservation, and efficiency of passenger processing at the check-in counter (Harun et al., 2018). Whilst responsiveness constituted employee performance in delivering services, for instance, the willingness to help passengers and prompt action to solve problems and discrepancies arise. The assurance is concerned with the trust in the airlines' employee knowledge and skills. The airline's workforces know the products, service process, and company policies well. The last dimension, empathy, is based on passenger comprehension, and the airline could deliver tailored service regarding the passenger's needs. The study by Yunus, Bojei, & Rashid (2013) found that service quality is significant in passenger loyalty in Malaysia's low-cost airlines. At the same time, Kim & Lee (2011) cited that tangibles and responsiveness improve passenger satisfaction toward low-cost airlines in Korea. In Taiwan, Huang, 2010 found that responsiveness has the highest impact on passenger return intention.

Vuthisopon and Srinuan (2017) revealed that service quality positively influences Thai customers using low-cost airlines. This is consistent with Khuong and Uyen (2014) disclosed that Vietnam passengers perceive the airline's service quality and satisfaction through the image of the airline, the airline's workforce, prompt services, and punctuality. Worasuwannarak and Kankaew (2022) mentioned that the idea of airlines had created value attracting the passengers' choice. Empathy is also crucial in airline services, as referred to Munoz, Laniado, and Cordoba (2019) highlighted that empathy is the most significant impact on passenger satisfaction. However, the airlines and airports shall consider three primary elements in managing service: safety, customer service, and benchmarking to ensure better performance (Davahran and Yazdanifard, 2014).

Despite the SERVQUAL model, AIRQUAL was further adopted for assessing the airline's service quality. The AIRQUAL consisted of five notable dimensions; airline tangibles, terminal tangibles, personnel, empathy, and image (Suki, 2014; Demirbag and Demirbag, 2017; Farooq et al., 2018). More precisely, Bowen, Headley, and Lutte (1993) proposed the airline service quality rating tool 'Airline Quality Rating (AQR). The AQR examined fifteen airlines' service components in four categories of airline operations. The device was administered to the average weight of the airline operation data, i.e. on-time, denied boarding, mishandling bags, and the twelve series of customer complaints, such as flight problems, over sales, reservations, and customer service. However, in this study, the author found the service quality model (SERVQUAL) appropriate for

assessing the passenger's choice of flying low-cost airlines since the SERVQUAL did include the empathy of personnel, airline tangibles, image, and reliability in terms of airline operation from AQR model. In contrast, the terminal tangibles are unavoidable for the low-cost operation to operate at the same airport that is DMK.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative method was employed by using descriptive statistics and an f-test to compare the service attributes from passengers' perspective of three low-cost airlines operating to/from DMK, namely; Thai Air Asia (TAA), Nok Air (NKA), and Thai Lion Air (TLA). Later, structural equation modelling (SEM) was administered to evaluate the causal relation of service components affecting passengers' choice of flying. The data was collected using questionnaires distributed to 1200 Thai passengers, separated with 400 copies for each airline. The purposive sampling was identified by those who experienced flying with the three mentioned low-cost airlines. The SERQUAL was employed in this study instead of AIRQUAL because one element in AIRQUAL, namely 'terminal tangible', has no differences. Since the sample airlines operate in the same terminal facilities, the five dimensions of SERVQUAL were specified as tangibles composed of aircraft, seating pitch and comfort, employee grooming; reliability consisting of punctuality, the efficiency of passenger processing at the check-in counter, ease of reservation; responsiveness includes employee well-performed in delivering services, willingness to assist passenger, prompt problem-solving, and effective discrepancies handling; assurance composes of the airline's employees can be trust, the employee knowing airline policies, and skills in passenger processing; and last the empathy concerns with the understanding of passenger's needs, provide tailored service as passenger's request.

H1: There is no difference in passengers perceive service components toward three low-cost

H2: SERVQUAL dimensions affect the passenger's choice of flying each airline equally

RESULTS

Respondent's demographic

The majority of respondents from TAA, NKA, and TLA were female 51% and male 49%. The highest number of average age around 24-29 years old accounted for 44%, followed by middle age, 18-23 years old, and 30-35 years old at 25% and 20%. Most of them hold a bachelor's degree 57%, master degree 37%. Regarding their occupations, they work in private organizations at 44%, public organizations at 21%, and state enterprises at 15%. They fly for business reasons 20%, seminar and education 19%, leisure 17%, and visiting friends and relatives 14%.

The descriptive analysis was first employed to examine the passenger selection flying with specific low-cost airlines based on five dimensions of

SERVQUAL, as illustrated in table 1 below. It demonstrated that all three airlines' sizes of SERVQUAL strongly influence passenger choice.

Table 1. The Passenger's Choice of Flying Based on SERVQUAL

SERVQUAL	TAA			NKA			TLA		
	Mean	SD	Interpret	Mean	SD	Interpret	Mean	SD	Interpret
Tangibles	3.85	.740	High	3.60	.701	High	3.80	.740	High
Assurance	3.88	.661	High	3.86	.669	High	3.73	.685	High
Reliability	3.80	.739	High	3.77	.781	High	3.58	.773	High
Responsiveness	3.72	.730	High	3.72	.712	High	3.65	.728	High
Empathy	3.83	.725	High	3.82	.747	High	3.81	.731	High

The f-test was administered to investigate the differences in SERVQUAL dimensions affecting passengers' choice of flying with low-cost airlines. The results shown in table 2 reveal that the SERVQUAL perception of passengers flying with three anonymous low-cost airlines differed. It can be noticed that assurance, reliability, and tangibles were significantly different among the three airlines. Passengers prioritize reliability, followed by assurance and tangibles, respectively. Therefore, the author has continued testing the post hoc to analyze comparing the differences, as shown in Table 3.

Table 2. The f-Test of SERVQUAL Dimensions of Three Low-Cost Airlines

SERVQUAL	Source of Variance	SS.	Df.	MS.	F.	Sig.
Assurance	Between-group	5.58	2	2.79	6.17	.002*
	Within group	540.84	1197	.452		
	Total	546.31	1199			
Reliability	Between-group	10.86	2	5.43	9.28	.000***
	Within group	700.32	1197	.585		
	Total	711.18	1199			
Responsiveness	Between-group	1.34	2	.671	1.28	.278
	Within group	626.96	1197	.524		
	Total	628.31	1199			
Empathy	Between-group	.095	2	.047	.086	.918
	Within group	662.47	1197	.553		
	Total	662.56	1199			
Tangibles	Between-group	4.57	2	2.286	4.93	.007*
	Within group	554.52	1197	.463		
	Total	559.10	1199			
Total	Between-group	3.42	2	1.71	4.67	.010
	Within group	439.10	1197	.367		
	Total	442.52	1199			

Note: ***significant level =0.000, ** =0.001, * =0.05

Table 3. The Post-Hoc Analysis

Airlines	$\bar{x}$	TAA	TLA	NKA
		3.81	3.79	3.76
TAA	3.81			.12046*
TLA	3.79			.10458*

NKA	3.76

The data from table 3 points that the least significant difference (LSD) comparative method was adopted. It can be seen that the passenger-perceived NKA airline service components differed from TAA and TLA airlines. Further, the author used SEM to investigate the causal relationship between passengers' flying choices and the three airlines' service quality attributes. The goodness of fit indices was tested, as shown in Table 4. Then, the confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test the relationship of five SERVQUAL dimensions affecting passengers' choice to fly with each airline. The results are demonstrated in table 5.

Table 4. The Goodness of Fit Analysis

Criterion	Cut-off value	Result	Criterion	Cut-off value	Result
X^2 (CMIN)		59.790	GFI	>0.8-0.9	.993
d.f.		51	RFI	>0.9	.996
P	>0.05	.205	CFI	>0.9	1.00
CMIN/d.f.	<2	1.585	RMSEA	<0.05-0.08	.022
AGFI	>0.8-0.9	.999			

Table 5. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

SERVQUAL	Standardized estimate	S.E.	C.R.	SMC	Constant reliability	AVE
TAA						
Assurance	.816	.018	9.90***	.666		
Reliability	.794	.015	10.50***	.631		
Responsiveness	.730	.021	11.73***	.533	.864	.666
Empathy	.754	.021	11.35***	.568		
Tangibles	.660	.029	12.52***	.435		
TLA						
Assurance	.824	.021	9.42***	.680		
Reliability	.801	.015	10.54***	.641		
Responsiveness	.765	.020	10.65***	.586	.831	.615
Empathy	.771	.020	11.23***	.594		
Tangibles	.758	.020	11.47***	.574		
NKA						
Assurance	.830	.018	10.14***	.688		
Reliability	.799	.015	10.95***	.487		
Responsiveness	.808	.017	10.74***	.569	.824	.607
Empathy	.754	.020	11.76***	.653		
Tangibles	.698	.028	12.44***	.638		

Note: ***significant level =0.000, ** =0.001, * =0.05

From table 5, the results of SEM revealed that the measurement model was acceptable with the construct reliability greater than 0.7 and the average variance extracted (AVE) above 0.5. Take into account that the factor loading on SERVQUAL components of three airlines TAA, TLA and NKA, primarily excel on the assurance at 0.816, 0.824, and 0.830 accordingly. The multiple square correlations (SMC) that could explain the relation of assurance are also high at 66

and 68%. The second factor-loading of the SERVQUAL dimension is reliability, which accounted for 0.79 and 0.80 for TAA and TLA. The explanation power is also related to the loading factor for TAA and TLA airlines. There are 63 and 64%, respectively. This contrasts NKA, which found that responsiveness ranks second in factor loading. Thirdly, the empathy dimension was rated at 0.75 and 0.77 for TAA and TLA. While the NKA found reliability rank in the third place with a loading factor of 0.79, the explanation power of NKA in the empathy dimension seems to be higher reliability and responsiveness.

DISCUSSION

To this end, the descriptive analysis disclosed that the five service dimensions of SERVQUAL—assurance, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and tangibles- highly impact Thais passenger choice to fly with low-cost airlines. The passengers selecting to fly with TAA and TLA accentuate assurance, empathy, and reliability. On the one hand, those prefer to fly with NKA because of empathy, tangibles, and assurance dimensions. In conformity with the first hypothesis, it is discovered that there are differences in passengers' perspectives on service dimensions toward the three airlines. The passengers highlighted that NKA's assurance, reliability, and tangibles differed from TAA and TLA. At this point, the second hypothesis can be inferred that each airline's service dimensions affect the passenger's choice differently. It is highlighted by the confirmatory factor analysis that the passengers flying with TAA and TLA were influenced by assurance (airline's employees can be trusted, the employee knows airline policies, and skills in passenger processing), reliability (punctuality, efficiency of passenger processing at check-in counter, ease of reservation), and empathy (Junjit and Monpanthong, 2020) alike the understanding of passenger's needs (Kang et al., 2014; Lam & Law, 2019), provide tailored service as passenger's request. In contrast, the passengers select to fly with NKA because of assurance (Junjit and Monpanthong, 2020), reliability, and responsiveness (employees well-performed in delivering services, willing to assist passengers, prompt problem-solving, and effective discrepancies handling).

Finally, it can be assumed that Thai passengers choose to fly at a low cost of the airline employees' competencies, similar to knowledge of policies and passenger handling processes. Another critical issue is the airline's on-time operation and the user-friendly technology that allows customers to make reservations quickly (Buhalis et al., 2019; Hartmann et al., 2015; Ray et al., 2004). The authors would like to stress the findings that low-cost airlines in Thailand could adopt the service dimensions which it lacks. For example, TAA and TLA airlines should shine a light on responsiveness. It can be done by practising human resource training and development on customer service experience and problem-solving skills. In the meantime, the tangibles of TAA and TLA should consider similar seat pitches. More importantly, safety and security are the priority in the air transport industry, and the airline should always be kept to a high standard (Al-Kwifi et al., 2020; Seo et al., 2020). Furthermore, the management team should consider the integration of the marketing mix 7Ps with

the service quality. The study of Phonsiri et al (2022) revealed that the marketing mix is significantly related to service quality and repurchase intention.

FURTHER STUDY

This study was done only on low-cost airlines operating at Don Mueang International Airport (DMK), and Thais passengers were only the sample group. There were more gaps in studying full-service and low-cost airlines working at Bangkok Suvarnabhumi International Airport (BKK) and DMK. On the other hand, the sample group should exist as international travellers to gain profound data. Or else, the other tools, such as AIRQUAL or AQR should be applied in Thailand. The NKA or Nok Air has changed its positioning to premium airlines. The NKA provide lounges for its passengers at DMK. These changes necessitate discussing the strategic changes in airline industries and the following causal effects.

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