

# An Empirical Analysis on Factors Affecting Passenger Satisfaction of Korean Air

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze and evaluate the factors affecting passengers' satisfaction in the airline industry. A survey was directly distributed to 367 individuals who had previously traveled with Korean Air, aiming to examine the connections among crucial elements of airline service, perceived service quality, and customer trust, with passengers' satisfaction serving as a mediating factor. By applying PLS-SEM, the results indicated the passengers' satisfaction was governed by brand image, trust, in-flight service, and perceived service quality, but unaffected by price and safety. During the mediation analysis, it was found that in-flight service does not have a mediating impact on the relationship between customer trust and passengers' satisfaction. Recommendations will be formulated to assist Korean Air in appropriately refining its service performance and meeting the needs of its passengers.

**KEYWORDS:** Korean Air, Customer satisfaction, Trust, In-flight service

## 1 Introduction

Faced with challenges that also bring potential opportunities, the primary aim of an airline is to cultivate satisfied customers. This objective holds various benefits, such as fostering positive relationships between the airline and its customers, building a strong foundation for repeat business, fostering customer loyalty, and encouraging positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Subaebasni, 2019). Conversely, dissatisfied customers are prone to elicit unfavorable reactions, as they may choose another option and spread negative information through word of mouth. (Sari, 2021). Customer satisfaction was defined by Hellier (2003) as the total pleasure or satisfaction of customers with the outcomes of service performance's capacity to fulfill customers' expectations and requirements. As a holistic concept, customer satisfaction describes the overall emotional reaction that occurs after consumption and can vary from "dissatisfied" to "satisfied" (Zeithaml, 1988). According to Siqueira (2023), customer satisfaction arises when the alternatives choose to deliver outcomes that at least meet or surpass customer expectations, whereas dissatisfaction is generated when the results achieved do not match customer expectations. Customer satisfaction can be considered a fascinating problem since customer retention in the service industry is more vital than obtaining new consumers (Sezgen, 2023).

Scholars indicated that service quality is viewed as customers' overall impression and their judgments about the relative inferiority or superiority of service performance delivered by service providers (Siqueira, 2023). In different sectors, there will be different measurement methods with a wide range of key factors used to identify service quality

(Griffin, 2002). Furthermore, service quality encompasses not only service attributes but also staff, processes, or environment (Goetsch, 1994). It can be said that conceptualization and assessment of service quality have emerged as one of the most disputed topics in the service marketing literature (Brady, 2001). Within the context of aviation, service quality plays a central role in the airline selection of passengers and can be regarded as the competitive advantage of airline companies (Chang, 2004). From the viewpoint of service providers, acquiring an understanding of customer expectations regarding various aspects of service quality aids in precisely delivering what the customers desire (Zeithaml, 1988). Therefore, this study aims to provide knowledge about the key factors of airline choice (i.e. price, brand image, in-flight service, and safety) that directly or indirectly affect passengers' satisfaction, then promulgate suggestions for service improvement to assist Korean Air in adjusting their service performance, enhance customer trust and increase passenger happiness with the airline company, especially for the recovery post-COVID-19.

Despite the historical competitiveness and intense rivalry in the aviation industry, leading airlines have diligently strived to gain a competitive edge by enhancing service efficiency. Subsequently, considerable research has been conducted on the perceived service quality of airlines. The elements of service quality and their evaluation have been well-researched in both management and economics literature, particularly among service providers (Subaebasni, 2019). However, the definition of service quality is context-dependent, and its measurement should match the operating environment being examined (Shen, 2021). Building upon this, in the present investigation, the airline service attributes including price, brand image, in-flight service, and safety and the customers' perceived service quality

are investigated. This article begins with a brief literature review, proposes, and tests the hypothesis on the relationships between airline service attributes, perceived service quality, trust, and passengers' satisfaction.

## 2 Literature review and hypothesis development

### 2.1 Influence of price on trust, perceived service quality, and passengers' satisfaction

Price is one of the drivers of a company's success since it determines how much profit the firm will make by selling its goods or services. If prices are set too high, the sales will fall, but if the price is too low, the profits gained by the organization will be reduced (Subaebasni, 2019). Although passengers are less sensitive to price in the field of FSCs, passengers' trust was investigated to be affected by price sensitivity compared to other attributes of airline service (Sihite, 2016). Consequently, price serves as an essential signal for the judgments about the service quality (Zeithaml, 1988). Specifically, customers' perception of price represents the real experience with services provided and the assessment between the overall transaction and their payment amount (Briliana, 2018). Regarding the influence of price on passengers' satisfaction, the price may be a means of improving the amount of profit for a company as well as the level of passengers' satisfaction, and raising the perception that the price is acceptable is also strongly related to the business success (Rajaguru, 2016). Furthermore, passengers' perceptions of price expose how much value customers can benefit from a product corresponding to this value (Briliana, 2018). Therefore, the following hypotheses were presented in this study:

**H1.1:** Price has a positive effect on Trust.

**H2.1:** Price has a positive effect on Perceived Service Quality.

**H3.1:** Price has a positive effect on Passengers' Satisfaction.

### 2.2. Influence of brand image on trust, perceived service quality, and passengers' satisfaction

Regarding aviation services, the more reputable and trustworthy the airline brand is, the greater trust it can develop with the passenger (Sezgen, 2023). Furthermore, previous studies propose that customers who possess robust and positive perceptions of a brand image are more likely to make a purchase from that brand. This is because a positive brand image enhances their trust in the brand (Siqueira, 2023). Scholars have previously concluded the association between corporate image and service quality (Andreassen, 1998). More specifically, the image of a company is seen as one of the six criteria to generate perceived service quality (Grönroos, 1988). Further, brand success could raise customer awareness about the reputation of the company, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction when purchasing with that brand and thus optimizing the company's profitability via passengers' purchases (Adhitama, 2017). Siqueira (2023) further supported the idea that the strength of brand image helps to retain a high level of customer satisfaction. The significant effect of an airline's image on passengers' satisfaction was also identified by prior research findings (Rahman, 2022). Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1.2:** Brand Image has a positive effect on Trust.

**H2.2:** Brand Image has a positive effect on Perceived Service Quality.

**H3.2:** Brand Image has a positive effect on Passengers' Satisfaction.

### 2.3. Influence of safety on trust, perceived service quality, and passengers' satisfaction

Due to the fatalities and physical harm caused by crashes, individuals may experience skepticism, uncertainty, and a diminished trust in airline services. Chen (2015) stated that focusing on aviation safety will improve passengers' trust. In reality, the actual levels of aviation safety are difficult to obtain (Shiwakoti, 2022), passengers thus more rely on proxy safety indicators such as the airline's service quality or their impressions of an aircraft's aesthetics (Raghavan, 2005). Hussain et al. (2015) included the concept of safety as the attribute to evaluate the service quality in the airline industry. Although previous studies showed that passengers prioritize safety when selecting an airline, few experiments have considered safety to be a determining feature of airline passengers' satisfaction (Begzjav, 2018). Moon (2017) used a three-item scale in the airport context to describe and measure the feeling of safety and discovered that passengers' satisfaction is directly influenced by their perceptions of safety. When passengers' perceptions of safety increase, it can ultimately maximize their likelihood of being satisfied and hence become loyal to the airline (Begzjav, 2018). Hence, safety is a significant determinant of passengers' satisfaction. Based on the validity of these considerations, the following hypotheses are established:

**H1.3:** Safety has a positive effect on Trust.

**H2.3:** Safety has a positive effect on Perceived Service Quality.

**H3.3:** Safety has a positive effect on Passengers' Satisfaction.

### 2.4. Influence of in-flight service on trust, perceived service quality, and passengers' satisfaction

Prior research findings claim that facilities as the dimension of airline service and indicated both direct and indirect relationships with customer trust (Setiawan, 2020). Moreover, the facilities onboard are tangible and passenger-oriented, which directly affects the perspective of passengers on the airline service quality. Particular items like in-flight magazines, books as well as in-flight entertainment programs are efficient ways for passengers to pass the time and relieve themselves from a long flight. Although passengers' perception of service quality is also affected by different service dimensions, such tangible features of in-flight service as facilities, personnel, or seat-related matters are examined to be pivotal for the evaluation of FSC passengers. Consequently, passengers' satisfaction is generated by the in-flight services provided by the flight attendants (Subaebasni, 2019). Further, the interactions between passengers and flight attendants are "the moment of truth" and specified that airlines should concentrate on the tangibles and let the staffs explain such features of airline service to passengers (Setiawan, 2020). Based on these findings, the following hypotheses were proposed:

**H1.3:** In-flight Service has a positive effect on Trust.

**H2.3:** In-flight Service has a positive effect on Perceived Service Quality.

**H3.3:** In-flight Service directly affects Passengers' Satisfaction.

## 2.5. Influence of trust and perceived service quality on passengers' satisfaction, and the effect of perceived service quality on trust

Trust is viewed as a critical driver in enhancing passengers' satisfaction, especially in the airline industry (Salah, 2019). A significant and positive association between perceived service quality and satisfaction has been supported by previous studies (Subaebasni, 2019). In particular, the quality of pre-flight, in-flight, and post-flight services all have favorable impacts on passengers' satisfaction (Park, 2019). Managing perceived service quality requires matching anticipated and perceived services to each customer to ensure customer satisfaction is generated (Song, 2019). To put it simply, better service experiences will result in a more favorable overall assessment or attitude, leading to increased satisfaction (Rajaguru, 2016). In the aviation context, many airlines strive to deliver high levels of service quality to improve customer satisfaction, retain passengers, and avoid expensive marketing expenses associated with acquiring new ones (Shen, 2021). Furthermore, trust in an airline would be deepened if passengers perceived high service quality (Han, 2015). In other words, customers are more likely to trust the service provider if they have a positive view of service quality (Song, 2019). As different service providers will achieve different levels of customer trust, delivering high service quality seems to be the most appropriate way to stay unique and competitive in a very dynamic industry like aviation (Salah, 2019). Based on theoretical evidence from previous studies, we thus propose the following hypotheses:

**H4.1:** Trust has a positive effect on Passengers' Satisfaction.

**H4.2:** Perceived Service Quality has a positive effect on Passengers' Satisfaction.

**H5:** Perceived Service Quality has a positive effect on Trust.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Measurement scale

In the operationalization of research, a set of questionnaires was formed based on previous studies including 4 independent variables (price, brand image, in-flight service, and safety) and 3 dependent variables (customer trust, perceived service quality, and passengers' satisfaction) being adapted from previous studies. A total of 37 items were initially drawn up for the questionnaire, divided as follows: PR (4 items), BI (5 items), SS (5 items), FU (6 items), TW (4 items), SQ (7 items) and SL (6 items). Questions under each item were designed under a 5-point Likert scale that was relevant with "Extremely disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Moderate" (3), "Agree" (4), and "Totally agree" (5). The five-point Likert scale was used by following Hayes (1992) suggestion since its results are less ambiguous and getting higher response rates.

### 3.2 Sampling and data collection procedures

As the research objective is to investigate the attributes that affect passengers' satisfaction, the target population will be Vietnamese passengers traveling by Korean Air in either long-haul or short-haul flights at least one time before. more specifically, participants were selected based on purposively

selected criteria (are not first-timers, are not air cargo service users, and children under 18 years of age who are financially dependent upon adults) that led to the use of a purposive sampling approach to select respondents representing the population of Korean Air passengers. The data was collected using the convenience sampling method in July and August 2022 at the Tan Son Nhat International Airport.

All survey questions were first written in English and then translated into Vietnamese. To verify the accuracy of the meanings, a process of translation and back-translation was employed and evaluated by a team of bilingual specialists (Brislin, 1970). Then, the pilot surveys with 30 Vietnamese frequent flyers of Korean Air were directly collected at the Korean Air representative office on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the Diamond Plaza Building to get feedback for further improvements such as the appropriate length of the questionnaire and to examine the feasibility of the approach before proceeding to the exact research. Pre-testing and piloting correspondingly devoted to the development of reliability, validity, and sensitivity of survey instruments. Finally, due to the limitations of time and workforce, among 430 surveys delivered to respondents, there were 367 passengers' responses reported to be valid, which accounts for 85.34% of the survey response rate. Although there are no "absolute" criteria for response rate evaluation, it is a common assertion that the higher the percentage, the more favorable the outcome. The authors then outline a research methodology employing SmartPLS for the purpose of hypothesis testing.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Respondents' demographic characteristics

Overall, the demographic characteristics of 367 passengers are appropriate and used as the input data to be analyzed by SmartPLS software. Regarding the frequency of travelling, people using Korean Air services 1-5 times a year account for a very large majority at 89% and only 11% were frequent flyers who annually purchase Korean Air tickets over 6 times. In terms of male and female, the latter outweighed the former.

Although it does not take gender concerns into account when identifying a target market, the proportion of females flying Korean Air is slightly larger than the proportion of males, at 57.8% and 42.2% respectively. A vast majority of 54.2% belong to the category of single passenger whereas 45.8% of respondents were already married. Passengers in the age group of 25 – 35 years contribute the largest percentage at 42%, while the proportion of 18 – 25-year-olds purchasing airline service is reported to be less than a third (30.2%). Regarding educational background, the majority, accounting for 70%, comprises passengers with graduate-level studies, while the remaining 30% consists of post-graduates, college graduates, and high school graduates. The survey also included an examination of the monthly income of passengers. Nearly 30% were individuals earning 15-20 million and the same proportion was observed for those making more than 20 million VND per month. The income level of 10-15 million VND also comes after with 16.3%.

### 4.2 Measurement model evaluation

Before evaluating the structural model, the study followed the guidance of Hair Jr (2016) to demonstrate the reliability and

validity of the construct. Firstly, looking at the factor-loading values. Although factor loadings must be at 0.7 or above to be considered acceptable, it is also possible to keep indicators ranging from 0.4 to 0.7. According to [Hulland \(1999\)](#), a score of 0.4 is appropriate for research with an exploratory purpose. Accordingly, all factor loadings satisfied this criterion, as shown in Table 1. Secondly, the reliability of latent variables was measured by the use of Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR). As a common rule of thumb, these coefficients must have CR values between 0.70 and 0.95 because such values exceeding 0.95 are considered problematic ([Sarstedt, 2017](#)). All CR values were displayed to be greater

than 0.70. Thirdly, the convergent validity was tested by examining whether the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each certain construct was greater than the threshold value of 0.5. The square root of AVE was then employed to determine the discriminant validity when it is higher than the values of correlation it shared with other latent variables ([Fornell, 1981](#)). Concerning the output, convergent validity and discriminant validity exist because of satisfying these criteria. In conclusion, measurement model evaluation revealed both reliability and validity evidence for all seven constructs including Price, Brand Image, In-flight Service, Safety, Trust, Perceived Service Quality, and Passengers' Satisfaction.

**Table 1.** Testing of Reliability and Validity

Constructs	Outer Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE	BI	FU	SL	SQ	PR	SS	TW
Brand Image (BI)	0.769-0.857	0.882	0.914	0.681	<b>0.825</b>						
In-flight Service (FU)	0.822-0.885	0.907	0.931	0.730	0.467	<b>0.856</b>					
Passengers' Satisfaction (SL)	0.744-0.821	0.867	0.900	0.601	0.546	0.454	<b>0.788</b>				
Perceived Service Quality (SQ)	0.744-0.821	0.867	0.900	0.601	0.456	0.471	0.503	<b>0.775</b>			
Price (PR)	0.836-0.858	0.869	0.911	0.718	0.305	0.277	0.222	0.392	<b>0.847</b>		
Safety (SS)	0.782-0.900	0.927	0.942	0.732	0.504	0.527	0.437	0.491	0.277	<b>0.854</b>	
Trust (TW)	0.698-0.835	0.767	0.850	0.588	0.495	0.402	0.444	0.472	0.405	0.516	<b>0.762</b>

### 4.3 PLS-SEM structural model evaluation

The structural model was evaluated based on the model fit assessment, the framework's predictive capability, and the interaction between constructs. First, the problem of multicollinearity was measured by the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which should be lower than 5.0 ([Hair Jr, 2016](#)) to ensure that no collinearity cases existed, with lower values being preferable. The findings indicated that the highest VIF value among variables was 1.784 and below the threshold of 3.33. The second stage would be the assessment of the structural model's predictive power by the use of two criteria including predictive accuracy determined by the coefficient of determination  $R^2$  value and predictive relevance determined by ([Geisser, 1974](#))'s  $Q^2$  value ([Hair Jr, 2016](#)). As a rough rule of thumb proposed by [Henseler \(2009\)](#) and [Hair Jr \(2016\)](#), the  $R^2$  values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 correspondingly represent the substantial, moderate, and weak levels of the model's predictive accuracy. However, an  $R^2$  value as low as 10% is typically

acceptable for research in the humanities or society, because it is impossible to properly predict human behavior ([Kebede & Chufamo, 2019](#)). Seeing Table 2, airline choice factors explained 41.3% of the total variance of passengers' satisfaction; 40.8% and 37.7% of the volatility of trust and perceived service quality, respectively. Despite being inferred as the weakness in the model's predictive accuracy, the judgment on  $R^2$  values of passengers' satisfaction, trust, and perceived service quality remained relevant to the given context. In addition to determining  $R^2$ , using the blindfolding procedure provides the ability to obtain information on the  $Q^2$  value. Values of  $Q^2$  must be above 0 to indicate that "the exogenous constructs have predictive relevance for the endogenous construct" ([Hair Jr, 2016](#)). With  $Q^2$  values of passengers' satisfaction, perceived service quality, and trust were 0.235, 0.207, and 0.212, respectively, the predictive accuracy of the path model was found to be satisfactory as all values are greater than 0. In short, the proposed model's predictive power was achieved in this study using both  $R^2$  and  $Q^2$  values.

**Table 2.** Testing of Structural Model

Relationships	$\beta$ values	Std. Dev.	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1.1 PR $\rightarrow$ TW	0.198	0.050	3.874	0.000	*** Supported
H1.2 BI $\rightarrow$ TW	0.219	0.044	4.987	0.000	*** Supported
H1.3 SS $\rightarrow$ TW	0.257	0.054	4.793	0.000	*** Supported
H1.4 FU $\rightarrow$ TW	0.039	0.050	0.810	0.418	NS Not Supported
H2.1 PR $\rightarrow$ SQ	0.216	0.054	3.966	0.000	*** Supported
H2.2 BI $\rightarrow$ SQ	0.176	0.055	3.189	0.001	*** Supported
H2.3 SS $\rightarrow$ SQ	0.234	0.064	3.649	0.000	*** Supported
H2.4 FU $\rightarrow$ SQ	0.206	0.055	3.711	0.000	*** Supported
H3.1 PR $\rightarrow$ SL	-0.070	0.045	1.549	0.122	NS Not Supported
H3.2 BI $\rightarrow$ SL	0.306	0.060	5.094	0.000	*** Supported
H3.3 SS $\rightarrow$ SL	0.042	0.061	0.666	0.505	NS Not Supported
H3.4 FU $\rightarrow$ SL	0.142	0.054	2.619	0.009	*** Supported
H4.1 TW $\rightarrow$ SL	0.127	0.057	2.273	0.023	** Supported
H4.2 SQ $\rightarrow$ SL	0.243	0.056	4.302	0.000	*** Supported
H5 SQ $\rightarrow$ TW	0.150	0.058	2.597	0.009	*** Supported
$R^2$ Value	$R^2$ (SL) = 0.413; $R^2$ (SQ) = 0.377; $R^2$ (TW) = 0.408				
$Q^2$ Value	$Q^2$ (SL) = 0.235; $Q^2$ (SQ) = 0.207; $Q^2$ (TW) = 0.212				

The procedure with 367 cases and 2000 samples, the option of no sign changes, bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap, and a two-tailed test at the significance level of 0.05 to determine a 95% confidence interval would be employed to run the task of bootstrapping. It is relevant to examine the numbers of t-values and ascertain the significance of the inner model's path coefficients. By way of assuming that path coefficients are sustainably different from 0, the empirical t-value should be greater than the theoretical value of 1.645 (at the significance level of 10%), 1.960 (at the significance level of 5%), and 2.576 (at the significance level at 1%) (Hair Jr, 2016). Table 2 indicated that all paths proposed in the conceptual model were significant, excluding the three hypotheses H1.4, H3.1, and H3.3. The findings of PLS path modelling also showed that passengers' perception of safety, with the  $\beta$  value of 0.25, had a greater impact on their trust compared to 0.219 and 0.198. It was discovered that in-flight service had no significant direct impact on passengers' trust. Similarly, the effect of safety on perceived service quality ( $\beta=0.234$ ) was stronger than that of price ( $\beta=0.216$ ), in-flight service ( $\beta=0.206$ ), and brand image ( $\beta=0.176$ ). Among the four predictors (i.e. brand image, in-flight service, perceived service quality, trust), the brand image had the greatest influence on passengers' satisfaction with the  $\beta$  value of 0.306. Perceived service quality, in-flight service, and trust came next with scores of 0.243, 0.142, and 0.127, respectively. The association between safety and passengers' satisfaction was shown to be

**Table 3.** Testing of Mediation Effects

Relationships	$\beta$ Values	t-value	p-value	95 % CI		Decision
				Lower Limit (LL)	Upper Limit (UL)	
PR $\rightarrow$ TW $\rightarrow$ SL	0.025	2.037	0.042	0.003	0.052	Full Mediation
BI $\rightarrow$ TW $\rightarrow$ SL	0.029	1.974	0.049	0.004	0.060	Partial Mediation
SS $\rightarrow$ TW $\rightarrow$ SL	0.034	2.023	0.043	0.005	0.069	Full Mediation
FU $\rightarrow$ TW $\rightarrow$ SL	0.005	0.738	0.461	-0.008	0.020	No Mediation
PR $\rightarrow$ SQ $\rightarrow$ SL	0.052	3.044	0.002	0.023	0.089	Full Mediation
BI $\rightarrow$ SQ $\rightarrow$ SL	0.043	2.392	0.017	0.013	0.083	Partial Mediation
SS $\rightarrow$ SQ $\rightarrow$ SL	0.057	2.726	0.002	0.021	0.100	Full Mediation
FU $\rightarrow$ SQ $\rightarrow$ SL	0.050	2.762	0.006	0.019	0.090	Partial Mediation

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of airline service factors on trust, perceived service quality, and satisfaction by concentrating on Vietnamese passengers who have previous flight experiences with Korean Air. Despite various shortcomings, the research is seen as accomplishing its goals. First, all components of passengers' airline choices are found to have positive effects on perceived service quality. Second, among the sub-factors of airline service, it has proven the favorable impacts of safety, price, and brand image on passengers' trust. However, the association between in-flight service and trust appears to be statistically insignificant which is in opposition to the finding of Setiawan (2020) using facilities as the dimension of airline service and indicating both direct and indirect relationships with customer trust. It could be most passengers believe that interiors inside the cabin solely reflect the outer surface of the service and, typically, those kinds of facilities have to be provided onboard by an international

insignificant while that of price and satisfaction was negative with no statistical significance. Lastly, H5 is supported since perceived service quality is concluded to have a positive effect on trust with  $\beta=0.150$ .

The current study further analyzed the indirect effects between components in the model. Accordingly, an indirect effect will be judged to exist if a 95% confidence interval does not contain a zero in between (Preacher, 2008). The results found no mediating effect of trust on the relationship between in-flight service and passengers' satisfaction because of no statistical significance ( $\beta=0.005$ ;  $p=0.461>0.05$ ) as well as the existence of zero in a 95% confidence interval. Therefore, the path was left out of the mediation analysis. Table 3 showed that trust significantly mediated the causal links from safety and price to passengers' satisfaction ( $\beta=0.034$ ;  $p<0.05$  and  $\beta=0.025$ ;  $p<0.05$  respectively), and the association between brand image and satisfaction was also partially mediated by the trust with  $\beta=0.029$  and  $p<0.05$ . Similarly, perceived service quality served as a full mediator on the links of safety and price upon passengers' satisfaction ( $\beta=0.057$ ;  $p<0.05$  and  $\beta=0.052$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), and partially mediated those of in-flight service and brand associated with satisfaction ( $\beta=0.050$ ;  $p<0.05$  and  $\beta=0.043$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). As such, with significant mediation effects of perceived service quality ( $\beta=0.057$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), safety was shown to have the strongest indirect effect on airline passengers' satisfaction.

premium airline. Further, the study discovered significant relationships between brand image and in-flight service to passengers' satisfaction in the FSC sector. Similar to the findings of Kim and Lee (2011) demonstrating that tangible features are one of the major drivers of passengers' satisfaction, this research concentrated on other main facets of in-flight service (i.e. seating comfort, cleanliness onboard, cabin interiors, and personal amenities). The influence of brand image on passengers' satisfaction is also in line with a prior study in the airline context by Adhitama et al. (2017).

Next, both trust and perceived service quality are proven to have significant influences on passengers' satisfaction. This study strongly confirmed the core fundamental relationship between perceived service quality and passengers' satisfaction that has been observed in previous studies across different airline markets. The significant and positive effect of trust on passengers' satisfaction was endorsed and compatible with the results of Salah (2019) who claimed that passengers feel satisfied with an airline if they are provided with trustworthy information and trust that the company will keep their information safe and secure. Additionally, the test also specifies

a significant relationship between perceived service quality and passengers' trust which is consistent with the earlier finding of Song (2019) indicating that two among five perceived service quality constructs have a substantial impact on customer trust. The outcome implies that customers are willing to trust a service provider whose service quality has been well perceived from their experiences. In other words, the better perceived service quality, the deeper trust in an airline company.

Finally, trust and perceived service quality are investigated to mediate the relationships between airline service factors and passengers' satisfaction, except the case of trust found no mediating effect from in-flight service to passengers' satisfaction. It is noteworthy that satisfaction is not driven by the perceptions of price and the feeling of safety when using airline services, even though both constructs have been proven to predict trust and perceived service quality. For that reason, the causal linkages from price and safety to satisfaction are entirely mediated by perceived service quality and trust. As a consequence, airline managers are anticipated to benefit from this study in a deeper understanding of how to improve the rate of passengers' satisfaction through passengers' perceptions of price and airline safety.

## 5.2 Practical implications

Primarily, the results aided in elucidating the viewpoints of Vietnamese passengers (and, on a broader scale, the Vietnamese community residing abroad) regarding the airline service provided by Korean Air. Additionally, the findings shed light on their preferences for international air travel, particularly when journeying to South Korea. While previous experiments attempted to discover how different passengers perceive the service quality of FSCs and LCCs or solely focused on the LCCs of aviation markets in Korea (Kim and Lee, 2011), Thailand (Tanomsin, 2018) or Indonesia (Riorini, 2018), this study concentrated on passengers' airline choice factors with FSC services and their satisfaction towards international premium airlines. Therefore, the current research findings provide a series of practical implications for domestic and international full-service airlines currently operating in Vietnam's aviation market, in particular, the perspectives of Vietnamese passengers (and more broadly Vietnamese community living abroad). The research results illustrated that the airline brand image has the biggest direct impact on passengers' satisfaction, followed by perceived service quality, in-flight service, and trust.

Secondly, concerning the airline's brand image, it is crucial for Korean Air to consistently uphold a positive brand image. This is particularly significant as the image plays a pivotal role in shaping passengers' perceptions of service quality, especially following the prestigious certification as a 5-star airline by Skytrax in 2020. Particularly, the most effective marketing approach for acquiring new consumers and maintaining existing ones is a well-planned corporate image. Such campaigns emphasizing a favorable image in passengers' airline choices can be successful. Concerning Korean Air, airline professionals should aim for a globally appealing image that effectively communicates the country-of-origin effects. This strategy is essential to promote the Korean image to Vietnamese passengers and capitalize on the extensive marketing platform provided by the SkyTeam alliances, enabling them to reach a broader market. Furthermore,

maintaining a consistently high level of premium service quality and structuring the public relations department within the business can contribute to the positive promotion of the airline's brand image. Additionally, it facilitates the efficient gathering of feedback for the company.

Thirdly, considering the crucial importance of perceived service quality, as a customer-centric enterprise, the airline should remain committed to providing high-quality flights and strengthen its capacity for quality control. The airline should also prioritize its passengers and staff, recognizing their regular interactions as opportunities to gather feedback, including both praise and complaints from passengers. This valuable information can be harnessed to enhance service quality. Acknowledging the significant impact of human connections between personnel and passengers, continuous education for the airline's staff is essential to efficiently identify and respond to passengers' needs. In the pursuit of consistently delivering top-tier service, Korean Air should continually engage in quality improvement initiatives aligned with the global standards and principles set forth by the SkyTeam alliance.

Fourthly, since tangible services are provided on board, results from this study demonstrate that Korean Air's passengers prefer cleanliness, comfortable seats, in-flight magazines, and modern facilities inside the cabin. Creating spacious spaces between seats and passageways, increasing carry-on baggage storage space as well as aggressively and continuously investing in the visual attractiveness of cabin interiors will generate a pleasant impression in the minds of passengers. Furthermore, creating unique designs for Korean Air uniforms can serve as a strategic tool for image marketing, enabling the airline to maintain competitiveness within the industry. In the dynamic global aviation sector, airline uniforms play a significant role as representatives of the country. Given that these uniforms are worn for extended periods for economic reasons, they become influential in conveying the company's ideology. This, in turn, directly impacts passengers' decision-making processes when choosing the airline (Park, 2019).

Finally, airline marketers need to foster trust between the airline and its passengers so that passengers' satisfaction is boosted. Since the feeling of safety has been identified as a critical factor in the formation of both trust and perceived service quality, the airline should regard it as an intangible advantage to be included in their marketing efforts. Due to the gravity of aviation operations involving people's lives, adhering to legal requirements concerning flight safety is imperative for the airline to establish itself as a dependable and trustworthy entity. Consequently, it is essential for Korean Air to uphold the utmost safety in its operational systems and ensure that this core value remains uncompromised in any circumstance.

## 5.3 Limitations and future research

Although the findings of this study generally contribute to the literature on passengers' satisfaction and the airline sector in particular, there are still certain limitations that necessitate more investigation. Firstly, only four dimensions are employed as the airline service factors, so the questionnaire cannot be claimed to encompass all the aspects of services of FSCs. Other elements, such as flight frequency, transit times, or frequent flyer programs can be included to provide a thorough knowledge of FSC passengers' airline choices. Next, the role of perceived value, the attractiveness of competitors, switching

costs, and others should be taken into account, along with passengers' satisfaction, to expand the conceptual model into the investigation of passengers' loyalty towards FSCs. Finally, this study does not account for the travel motivations of passengers (i.e. business, vacation, etc.) when selecting airlines. For example, there may be instances in which passengers travel with FSCs based on the support from the company expenses. In such circumstances, the monetary aspect would not be a factor. As a result, it is advised that future research should combine moderating variables (e.g. travel situation) to further enhance the model's accuracy in reflecting the airline's perceived service quality, trust, and passengers' satisfaction. The classification of service factors between prestige (business) and economy classes would be useful for establishing more diverse marketing strategies for passenger seat classes.

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