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How Customer Experience Promotes Customer Loyalty through Passenger Satisfaction: Does Brand Reputation Matter?

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the factors of customer experience that influence passenger loyalty through the lens of passenger satisfaction. In addition, the moderating role of brand reputation on passenger loyalty was also considered. Data was collected from a survey of 997 Vietnamese passengers who used flight services on low-cost airlines in Vietnam. The research results from the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), showed that six customer experience factors have positive impact on passenger satisfaction. In descending order, these are Flight attendant quality, Check-in/luggage service, Online Booking Service, Convenient Flight Schedule, Lounge and Service Reliability. These relationships were also shown to be fully mediated by customer satisfaction. Moreover, brand reputation strengthens the positive association between passenger satisfaction and loyalty. The study has also suggested some implications for building a better service experience for low-cost airlines in Vietnam to increase customer loyalty.

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Keywords: Customer experience; Customer satisfaction; Customer loyalty; Brand reputation; Low-cost airlines.

1. Introduction

Vietnam's aviation industry has been developing strongly in the past ten years, and has evidenced a steady double-digit growth rate. It is widely considered to be in the group of countries with the fastest growing aviation market in

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the world (Vietnamairlines, 2021). There has been a parallel increase in the number of airlines in recent times, including Vietnam Airlines, Vietjet Air, Jetstar Pacific, VASCO and Viet Bamboo Airways, and in 2018, these companies dominated the country's air passenger transport sector (Vietstock, 2021). It has been reported that the sector is split into two classes of transportation, these being traditional and low-cost airlines, and these are partitioned between state-owned and private management models. Vietnam Airlines and Vietjet Air currently hold the majority of the market share, but the entry of Bamboo Airways into the market has partially filled the "gap" between the two models. This has caused rivalry within the industry to rise, and has sparked an increase in the general market share. Although Bamboo Airways has only been in business for three years, in the current epidemic conditions its competitive power has been stimulated. This strong increase in competition within the local airlines has made Vietnam's aviation market expand rapidly. This increase in competition has also forced companies into improving their service quality, as well as adjusting their prices to strengthen their brand power and increase their market share.

In fact, the fierce competition in the civil aviation industry is forcing airlines, whether Full-Service Carriers (FSC) or Low-Cost Carriers (LCC), to restructure traditional services and to create innovative products. New, seamless processes have been implemented in an effort to find ways to cut costs and keep fares competitive. However, low-cost airlines are now realizing that it is not only the offering of cheap fares that determine market share, but it is also what passengers look at when choosing their flights (Forbes, 2022). A recent study has been developed in order to understand the balance between costs and service quality, ensuring that hybrid aviation generates a competitive advantage in the market whilst also addressing the challenges of the hybrid aviation model. It is anticipated that future generations will have to face decisions when the line between Full-Service Carriers and Low-Cost Carriers begins to blur. In this respect, there will be a review in terms of costs and the creating of quality products for customers, which will be felt in the building of positive customer experience.

Researchers around the globe have observed that positive customer experience is the new means of creating options in the marketplace, rather than the more traditional difference in prices, products and services (Méndez-Aparicio, Jiménez-Zarco, Izquierdo-Yusta, & Blazquez-Resino, 2020). Determining customer experience is a very recent trend in the service industry, but is becoming an essential innovation for businesses. In this regard, the new term "experience economy" refers to the use of customer experience to produce value, which has now become a key business component. Investing in creating positive experiences has been shown to enable a company to attract and retain loyal consumers who will promote the business and generate recurring income. In this way, customer experience has been identified as an integral part of improving business performance, and the essence of positive customer experience is to improve the business's relationship with the consumer. In the service industry, where the service's strength dictates the service's quality, the necessity for customer experience research has become more prominent.

Like other businesses, the needs and requirements of customers in the aviation industry are often influenced by a range of factors, of which the customers' experience of the service remains the most critical element (Forbes, 2022). In addition, the complexity of human behaviour and perception has made customer satisfaction research in the aviation business a challenging field, since unsatisfied passengers may not continue to patronize some airline companies. According to previous studies, airline customer satisfaction will affect passenger loyalty (Ahmed, Choudhury, Ahmed, Chowdhury, & Asheq, 2021; Giao & Vuong, 2021), which clearly indicates that customers will be more willing to repurchase the airline's services after they gain substantial benefits. However, there is a crucial gap here since, in Vietnam's aviation business, there has been no empirical research on the effect of customer experience on customer loyalty. This study will therefore explore the relationship between customer experience and passenger loyalty through passenger satisfaction as well as the moderating role of brand reputation.

2. Background theory

2.1 Related concepts

Buttle and Maklan (2019) have defined customer experience as the way a customer thinks and feels after interacting with a company's staff, processes, technology, products, services and other outputs. In this context, customer satisfaction was defined as an effective response to the difference between what the customer expected and how well the product performed (Srivastava, 2015). Customer loyalty also refers to the number of times customers buy the same brand, product or service over time (Makudza, 2021).

2.2 Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT)

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the theory of expectation confirmation. Oliver (1980) asserts that Expectation Confirmation Theory is a cognitive theory that tries to explain how expectations, perceived performance and belief validation affect satisfaction after a purchase. ECT shows that post-purchase satisfaction will be high if a product or service does better than the individual expected, indicating that post-purchase satisfaction will go up and vice versa. According to the ECT theory, consumers' past interactions with a product or service significantly impact their intention to repurchase that product or service (loyalty). A satisfying experience is essential in building and maintaining long-term relationships with consumers. ECT is widely used in the field of customer behaviour to study consumer satisfaction, post-purchase behaviour (such as repurchase), customer complaints and service marketing in general.

3. Research model and hypothesis

On the basis of theories, related studies, and the customer experience model in the aviation industry of Ban and Kim (2019), the customer experience model consists of five elements: (1) seat comfort, (2) flight attendants, (3) entertainment, (4) ground service, and (5) value for money. In addition, based on the results of qualitative research, two-thirds of the discussion group members also said that some factors in the model of Ban and Kim (2019) are unsuitable for the research context on low-cost airlines, such as seat comfort, in-flight entertainment, and value for money. These three factors are only relevant to the full-service airline and applicable to long-haul flights. In addition, the variable “ground service” is separated into two variables which are check-in/luggage service and airport lounge service. The airport lounge is defined as the area of the airport terminal where the explicit combination of both waiting and processing of departing passengers takes place (Janic, 2003). Moreover, the discussion group also proposed some factors to the customer experience model, such as service reliability, convenient flight schedules, and online booking service in the study on the low-cost airlines in Vietnam. Therefore, through the aforementioned theoretical basis and qualitative research results, the customer experience model proposed by the author includes six components: (1) Flight attendant quality, (2) Check-in/luggage service, (3) Lounge, (4) Service reliability, (5) Convenient flight schedules, and (6) Online booking service. The research model includes six independent variables, one mediating variable (passenger satisfaction), one moderating variable (brand reputation), and one dependent variable (Passenger loyalty) (Figure 1).

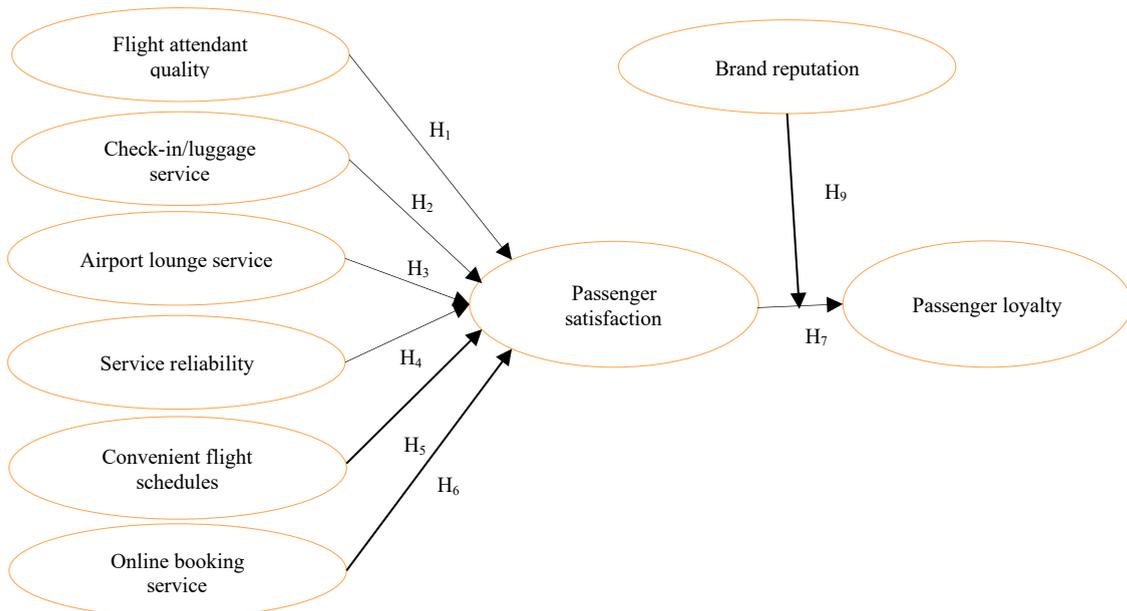


Fig. 1. Proposed research model.

- H₁: Flight attendants have a positive influence on passenger satisfaction.*
- H₂: Check-in/luggage service positively affects passenger satisfaction.*
- H₃: Passengers' experience of airport lounge service has a positive influence on satisfaction.*
- H₄: Service reliability will have a positive effect on passenger satisfaction*
- H₅: A convenient flight schedule will have a positive effect on passenger satisfaction.*
- H₆: Online booking service will have a positive effect on passenger satisfaction.*
- H₇: Satisfaction has a positive relationship with passenger loyalty.*
- H_{8a}: Satisfaction mediates the relationship between flight attendant quality and customer loyalty.*
- H_{8b}: Satisfaction mediates the relationship between check-in/luggage service and customer loyalty.*
- H_{8c}: Satisfaction plays a mediating role in the relationship between lounge and customer loyalty.*
- H_{8d}: Satisfaction plays a mediating role in the relationship between service reliability and customer loyalty.*
- H_{8e}: Satisfaction mediates the relationship between convenient flight schedules and customer loyalty.*
- H_{8f}: Satisfaction acts as a mediator in the relationship between online booking service and customer loyalty.*
- H₉: Brand reputation will moderate the positive relationship between passenger satisfaction and passenger loyalty.*

4. Research method

The Customer Experience Scale contains the following variables: Flight Attendant Quality, Check-in/Baggage Service, Lounge, Service Reliability, Convenient Flight Schedule, and Online Booking Service. Together with estimates of Passenger satisfaction and Loyalty, variables are built on the scales used by previous studies (Ahn, Kim, & Hyun, 2015; Giao & Vuong, 2021; Han, Hyun, & Kim, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2011; Kos Koklic, Kukar-Kinney, & Vegelj, 2017; Lin, 2021; Pan & Truong, 2018; Vuong, Tung, & Huan, 2022). To ensure accuracy, the scale is translated from English to Vietnamese and then decompiled to ensure the exactness of the scale (Giao & Vuong, 2019). It was then adjusted to suit the research context at low-cost airlines in Vietnam through qualitative research using the group discussion method. The questionnaire for the survey was developed in light of the comments.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics.

	N=997	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	431	43.2
	Female	566	56.8
Age	18-25 years old	218	21.9
	From 26 to 35 years old	405	40.6
	From 36 - 45 years old	246	24.7
	Over 45 years old	128	12.8
Education	Intermediate and below	24	2.4
	College	228	22.9
	Bachelor	717	71.9
Income	Master/Doctor	28	2.8
	Under 10 million	143	14.3
	From 10 to under 15 million VND	286	28.7
	From 15 to under 20 million VND	423	42.4
Airlines	From 20 million or more	145	14.5
	VietJet Air	859	86.2
	Pacific Airlines	138	13.8
	Total	997	100.0

Formal quantitative research was implemented by a survey method which was initiated by the conduct of an online survey using the *Google Docs* form. The questionnaires were sent to customers over 18 years old who have used the services of Vietjet Air and Pacific Airlines and are living in Vietnam. Data were collected using the convenience sampling method from March 2023 to July 2023. In addition, the study used filter questions to check whether each customer was the subject of the survey. “Have you ever used the services of Vietjet Air/Pacific Airlines?”. If the respondent answered 'Vietjet Air or Pacific Airlines', the survey continued, otherwise, the survey was stopped. A total of 1078 questionnaires were collected; 81 unsatisfactory questionnaires were excluded (respondents only selected one answer for all questions), and the remaining 997 survey questionnaires were used, reaching 92.49%. The questionnaire was coded and put into SPSS 20.0 software for data processing and analysis. When processing the 997 responses, they were grouped based on their gender, marital status, age, income, level of education, and airline travel (Table 1).

5. Research results

Before performing the PLS-SEM estimation to test the hypothesis, it was necessary to evaluate the scale's convergent and discriminant reliability values. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient measures reliability, and the scale achieves reliability when this coefficient reaches 0.6 or more (Giao & Vuong, 2019). The analysis showed that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the structures was from 0.902 to 0.955 (Table 2). Therefore, the scales for the variables have good reliability.

The convergent value is calculated using the external load factor. Vuong and Giao (2020) suggested that the convergent value will be achieved when the external load factor is greater than 0.5. The statistical results showed that all the external load factor loads of the structures are greater than the threshold of 0.5. Additionally, if the average extracted variance (AVE) for each latent variable is larger than 0.5, the convergent value will be confirmed (Giao & Vuong, 2019). As shown in Table 2, the reported AVE values for each variable ranged from 0.728 to 0.917. Therefore, all the structures showed good convergent value.

Table 2. Results of measuring the reliability and convergent value of the scale.

Variables	Encode	CA	AVE	R ²
Check-in/luggage service	CBS	0.907	0.728	
A convenient flight schedule	CFS	0.909	0.847	
Airport lounge service	LO	0.933	0.790	
Online booking service	OTS	0.917	0.858	
Passenger loyalty	PL	0.955	0.917	0.723
Passenger satisfaction	PS	0.940	0.848	0.684
Flight attendants	QFA	0.938	0.801	
Service reliability	RS	0.902	0.836	
Brand reputation	BR	0.902	0.835	

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker criteria for discriminant validity.

	LO	BR	CBS	CFS	FAQ	OTS	PL	PS	RS
LO	(0.889)								
BR	0.319	(0.914)							
CBS	0.779	0.393	(0.854)						
CFS	0.749	0.326	0.652	(0.920)					
FAQ	0.813	0.271	0.746	0.841	(0.895)				
OTS	0.795	0.361	0.732	0.833	0.852	(0.926)			
PL	0.716	0.405	0.629	0.710	0.703	0.623	(0.958)		
PS	0.754	0.356	0.738	0.712	0.764	0.682	0.817	(0.921)	
RS	0.319	0.349	0.390	0.325	0.267	0.359	0.401	0.356	(0.914)

On the other hand, the scale reaches discriminant validity when the square root of AVE is larger than the variance of any other latent variable. In the Fornell-Larcker standard table, the square root of the AVE is in the diagonal cells, and the correlations between the variables appear below it. Table 3 shows that the absolute value of the square root of AVE is greater than any of the correlation coefficients in the column and row containing it.

The evaluation of multicollinearity was completed for each structure. Multicollinearity issues are proposed to be measured using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The VIF value must be less than 5 (Giao & Vuong, 2019). The constructs' maximum VIF value is 3.975. Latent variable multicollinearity is, therefore, not a problem.

Table 4 displays the outcomes of the PLS-SEM analyses. The p-values and normalized path coefficients are presented. The following are the main findings: Research results have shown that the elements of customer experience: flight attendants, check-in/luggage service, Lounge, service reliability, convenient flight schedule, and service online booking service had a positive impact on customer satisfaction ($\beta_{1,2,3,4,5,6} > 0.000$; $p < 0.001$) (Table 4). Therefore,

H₁, H₂, H₃, H₄, H₅, and H₆ were accepted. This outcome is consistent with earlier research by Lin (2021), and Wong and Ho (2019).

Table 4. Table of results of the relationship between structures in the model.

Hypothesis	Relationship			Regression coefficient	P-value	Result
H ₁	QFA	→	PS	0.333	0.000	Accepted
H ₂	CBS	→	PS	0.280	0.000	Accepted
H ₃	LO	→	PS	0.244	0.000	Accepted
H ₄	RS	→	PS	0.086	0.000	Accepted
H ₅	CFS	→	PS	0.213	0.000	Accepted
H ₆	OTS	→	PS	0.209	0.000	Accepted
H ₇	PS	→	PL	0.695	0.000	Accepted
H ₉	PS*BR	→	PL	0.158	0.000	Accepted

Hypothesis H₇: passenger satisfaction strongly impacts passenger loyalty with a regression coefficient of 0.695 and p-value of 0.000, less than 0.05 (Table 4). Therefore, hypothesis H₇ is accepted at the 5% significance level. This result is consistent with the previous study by Shen and Yahya (2021).

Table 5. Result table of mediating role of passenger satisfaction.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Direct	Indirect	Type of mediation	Result	Total influence	Rating
H _{8a}	QFA → PS → PL	-	0.231***	Full mediation	Accepted	0.231***	1
H _{8b}	CBS → PS → PL	-	0.194***	Full mediation	Accepted	0.194***	2
H _{8c}	LO → PS → PL	-	0.170***	Full mediation	Accepted	0.170***	3
H _{8d}	RS → PS → PL	-	0.060**	Full mediation	Accepted	0.060**	6
H _{8e}	CFS → PS → PL	-	0.148***	Full mediation	Accepted	0.148***	4
H _{8f}	OTS → PS → PL	-	0.145***	Full mediation	Accepted	0.145***	5

Note: ***=p < 0.001; **=p < 0.01; *=p < 0.05.

Regarding hypotheses H_{8a,b,c,d,e,f}, passenger satisfaction plays a mediating role in the relationship between customer experience factors (flight attendants, check-in/ baggage services, lounges, service reliability, convenient flight schedules, and online booking services) and passenger loyalty with a P-value of 0.000 (Table 4). So, this mediating role is statistically supported. Therefore, hypotheses H_{8a,b,c,d,e,f} are accepted. This result shows that the customer experience factors (flight attendant, check-in/baggage service, Lounge, service reliability, convenient flight schedule, and online booking) affected customer loyalty through an indirect mechanism. Table 5 shows the total influence of customer experience factors on loyalty in order from high to low: flight attendant quality, check-in/luggage service, online ticketing service, convenient flight schedules, lounges, and service reliability.

Hypothesis H₉: Brand reputation moderated the positive relationship between passenger satisfaction and passenger loyalty with a regression coefficient of 0.158 and p-value of 0.014, less than 0.05 (Table 4). Therefore, hypothesis H₉ is accepted at the 5% significance level.

The R² value of customer loyalty is 0.684, suggesting that 68.4% of the total variation in loyalty can be explained by passenger satisfaction. In addition, the 72.3% variation in passenger satisfaction was explained by flight attendant quality, check-in/luggage service, airport lounge service, service reliability, convenient flight schedule, and online booking service (Figure 2). Furthermore, Gao and Vuong (2019) proposed a series of threshold values to assess the fit of the model, where an R² value of 0.26 represents 'strong influence', 0.13 represents 'medium influence' and 0.02 represents a 'weak effect'. This study's model demonstrated the model-data fit because the R² values for passenger satisfaction and loyalty are both higher than 0.26.

6. Conclusion

The current study examined the effects of customer experience on customer loyalty in the setting of low-cost flights, building on earlier studies into the airline business. The results of this study for customer experience are considered as an antecedent of passenger satisfaction, influencing and leading to passenger loyalty. In other words, when passengers have a good service experience, it makes them more satisfied, which subsequently makes them more loyal. This study's findings align with other research on the elements of the customer experience that significantly

impact customer satisfaction. Additionally, these results support the findings of other studies that revealed a positive relationship between loyalty and satisfaction. In the context of the study, passenger loyalty is influenced by six main factors, which are recorded here in order from strongest to weakest: (1) Quality of flight attendants, (2) Check-in service baggage/check-in, (3) Airport lounge service, (4) Convenient flight schedules, (5) Online booking service, and (6) Service reliability.

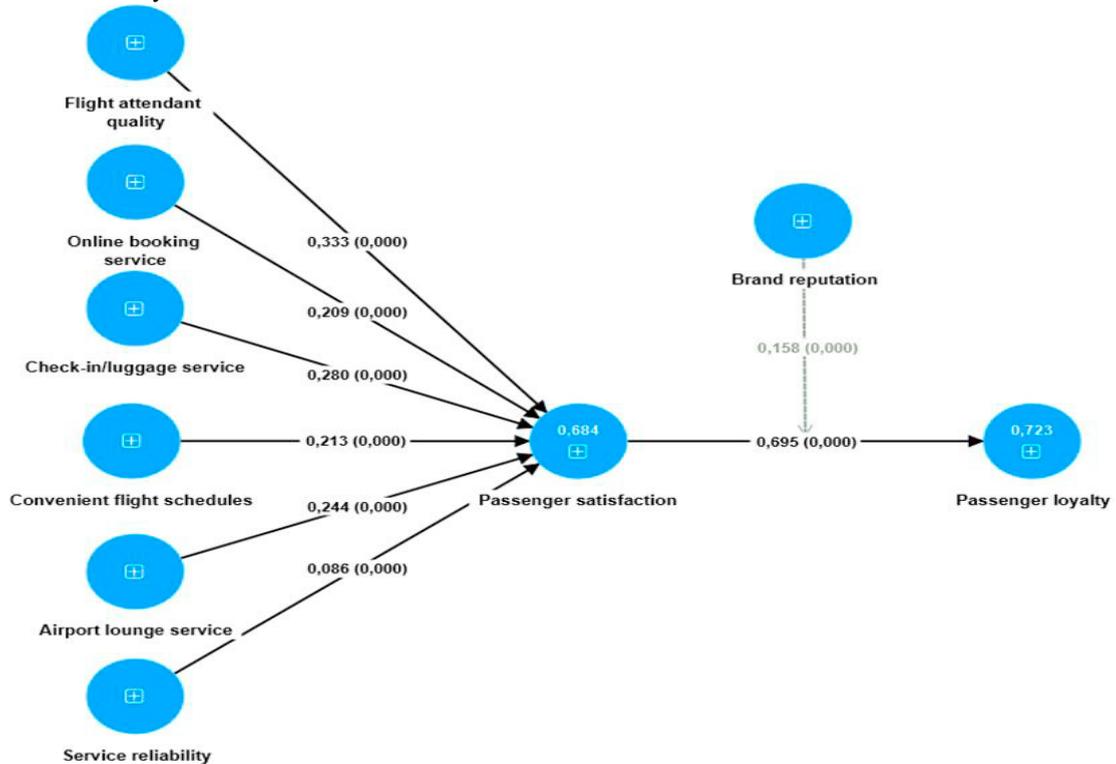


Fig. 2. The PLS-SEM model.

The results also show that positive impact of these factors on customer experience leads to customer loyalty through the mediation of customer satisfaction. This implies that customer satisfaction is a key part of competing with other companies in the aviation sector. These results are in line with earlier studies. For instance, Hussain (2016) demonstrates the significant influence that customer satisfaction has in mediating the relationship between service experience for customers and loyalty. Instead of waiting for complaints before acting, low-cost airline managers should take a more proactive approach to ensure customer satisfaction. This suggests that managers and policymakers at LCCs should strengthen the connection between experience and loyalty to more positively satisfy customers.

Overall, the study's findings advance our understanding of customer satisfaction, the critical components of customer experience and loyalty, and the connections between them. Whilst LCCs have been given particular attention, given that all of the discussed constructs apply to all branches of aeronautics, these findings actually have much wider significance. Managers can use the findings better to understand consumer wants and expectations from a management standpoint, and can use metrics to set standards for enhancing the customer experience and fostering customer happiness and loyalty. Clear organizational planning and operation plans, such as marketing, pricing, and pricing strategies, as well as cost and budget strategies, can be developed with the help of successfully industrialized customer experience guidelines. Finally, according to expectation validation theory, expectations serve as comparative anchors in ECT, suggesting that if a product or service lives up to or exceeds expectations, customers will be satisfied with their purchase, and vice versa. In the research context of Vietnam's low-cost airlines, the study has contributed to the important of the notion of customer experience, satisfaction, and the loyalty scale. The findings demonstrate that the study's full scale is trustworthy (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.6) and can be applied to other research projects. Finally, this study has demonstrated that brand reputation moderates the positive relationship between passenger satisfaction and passenger loyalty.

7. Limitations and further research

Although the research objectives have been met, there are a few issues which remain to be addressed. First, the study used convenience sampling, which implies that the results cannot be claimed to be highly representative. To avoid this difficulty, future research should employ probability sampling technique with an expanded sampling frame. Second, because this research only looks at six distinct aspects of customer experience, it leaves room for future investigations to examine additional considerations such as brand image and perceived value, safety concerns, and technological adoption. Among other things, gender, age, education level, and income have not been considered in this study.

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