

# DOES BRAND ATTITUDE MEDIATE THE EFFECTS OF PERCEIVED SERVICE QUALITY ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY? AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF LOW-COST CARRIERS IN THAILAND

Nuchjarin Intalar<sup>1</sup> and Somcane Yodpram<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Aviation Industry Innovation and Services,  
International Academy of Aviation Industry,  
King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang

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## Abstract

As the growth of the low-cost airline market has been rapidly increased, low-cost carriers (LCCs) have to compete with each other to gain a higher share in the market. LCCs need to build customer loyalty by offering excellent service quality and creating a good attitude toward its brand. This study explores the factors affecting customer loyalty in LCCs in Thailand by focusing on brand attitude and perceived service quality. It also explores whether the effect of perceived service quality is mediated by brand attitude on customer loyalty. Valid data was collected from 246 passengers who used service from low-cost carriers. This study employed a structural equation modelling to test hypotheses. The findings show the statistically significant direct relationships among perceived service quality, brand attitude, and customer loyalty. Moreover, the findings show that the effects of perceived service quality are partially mediated on customer loyalty through brand attitude. The implications of the findings noted that LCCs can identify a pin-point in the customer journey and collect related data to create data-generated profiles to gain insight about passengers' behaviour and preferences to design customized experiences for each customer.

**Keywords:** Airline Business, Brand Attitude, Customer Behaviour, Service Quality

## Introduction

With high competition in the low-cost airline market, customers have several options and alternatives to choose from. These lead to a high price and services sensitivity of customers (Hwang & Choi, 2018). Many LCCs offer promotions to retain customers and gain more shares in the market. However, with the increasing customer demand and preferences, the LCCs can no longer focus only on pricing strategy (Han, 2013). They need to focus on building sustainable customer loyalty by offering better customer experience and value-of-money to customers. A high level of customer loyalty with a high retention rate can constantly increase revenue growth, cost reduction in marketing, and sustain the relationship with customers (Hwang & Choi, 2018; Prentice & Loureiro, 2017).

It is important to explore factors influencing customer loyalty toward low-cost airline brands. There are many factors affecting customer loyalty (Chen & Liu, 2017; Rahim, 2016). It is very challenging for LCCs to create and sustain customer loyalty. LCCs can create a good attitude toward their brands by offering better service quality. Passengers compare what they actually perceive from what they pay to what the LCC should offer in pre-flight, in-flight, and post-flight stages (Alkhatib & Migdadi, 2018). A slightly better service quality offered by one LCC can make a big difference in the passenger selection process. Service failure can decrease a customer's level of brand attitude (Wu & Wang, 2011). Therefore, brand attitude toward

product and service can increase customer loyalty. Furthermore, attitude toward a brand may increase the level of customer loyalty as well. However, there is inconclusive evidence to support the relationships in the context of LCCs. To fulfil research gaps, the following research questions were raised for this study: Does perceived service quality affect brand attitude and customer loyalty among low-cost airline passengers? Furthermore, does a brand attitude indirectly affect customer loyalty through perceived service quality?

## Research Objective

This study aims to explore the relationships among perceived service quality, brand attitude, and customer loyalty in the context of LCCs in Thailand. Thai people may have distinct attitudes and behaviour that stimulate perceptions of service quality in LCCs. Investigating these relationships allows us to understand how their attitude toward brands and perceived service quality affect customer loyalty.

## Literature Review

### Perceived service quality

Many studies have been examined the effect of service quality by using SERVQUAL, which initiated by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1998), with 22 items measuring service quality in many industries (Zhao, Bai, & Hui, 2002). However, many scholars suggested that different industries have different characteristics of service quality measurement. Service

quality as what customers receive from what they are willing to pay for (Drucker, 2014). In the context of the low-cost carriers, passengers will be willing to pay more if they perceive or feel that the actual service quality, they received meet or exceed their expectations. Since service quality is intangible, LCCs can assess customer satisfaction from airline service by measuring customer's perception of quality (Findlay, 2002). Perceived service quality refers to the degree and direction of a discrepancy between expectation and the actual customer perception of the quality of service (Findlay, 2002; Song, Ruan, & Park, 2019).

A few studies have explored the effects of perceived service quality in the low-cost airline business. When passengers perceive a better experience that worth their money, they will repurchase a service continuously and become loyal to a brand. Therefore, perceived service quality is deemed as a crucial factor of a firm's competitive advantages (Song, Ruan, & Park, 2019; O'Connell & Williams, 2005; Chang & Yeh, 2002).

Alkhatib & Migdadi (2018) investigated operational factors affecting airline service quality. Song, Ruan, & Park (2019) empirically examined the interrelationships between the perceived service quality, corporate image, customer trust, and corporate reputation of Asiana Airline in South Korea. Their results showed the significant positive effects of only some aspects of service quality, namely responsiveness and reliability, on corporate image and customer trust. However, tangibles,

empathy, and assurance of service quality had no significant positive effect on corporate image and customer trust.

### **Brand Attitude**

Low & Lamb (2000) defined a brand attitude as how a customer evaluates whether a brand is good or bad. A positive brand attitude increases the customer's purchase intent (Kotler & Keller, 2008). Therefore, LCCs should build and maintain positive brand attitudes to increase customer retention and create customer loyalty by providing better performance and service (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002).

Brand attitude is an essential construct as customer loyalty is aligned with their attitude towards the brand (Beneke et al., 2015). A good attitude toward brands creates brand attachment, and consequently affects their purchase intention (Low & Lamb, 2000). In this study, we consider brand expectation, brand trust, affection as components of brand attitude. Brand attitude measures an overall feeling toward LCCs service.

### **Customer Loyalty**

Day (1969) mentioned that the concept of customer loyalty included behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. When customers repeatedly purchase product or service, willing to suggest such product and service to others, and commit to a brand, these behaviours are referred as "customer loyalty" (Dick & Basu, 1994). Customer loyalty reflects customer satisfaction and guarantees that companies can generate more sales.

Normally, a company needs a lot of

investment in marketing and operations to attract and gain new customers. In contrast, the cost of maintaining existing customers is relatively lower (McConnell, 1968). Therefore, LCCs can save costs and gain more profits by sustaining the loyal customers (McConnell, 1968). Therefore, it is crucial to study factors influencing customer loyalty toward LCCs to gain market share and sustain long term competitiveness.

### **Effects of Perceived Service Quality on Brand Attitude**

In the LCCs context, passengers concern about “value-for-money” offered by airlines. Passengers measure service quality by comparing what they perceive from the actual service with what they expect from the LCCs. Their attitude toward an airline is formed from the first customer touchpoint that they perceive service experience from the airline. This can shape the attitude of customers toward airlines. Negative impressions and experience from the service quality of an LCC decrease brand attitude toward the airline (Beneke et al., 2015).

It is essential to recognize how perceived service quality influences brand attitude. Previous studies have shown the effects of perceived service quality on brand image, customer engagement, repurchase intention (Chen & Liu, 2017; Hapsari, Clemes, & Dean, 2017). However, research of the effects of perceived service quality on brand attitude is limited. Chen & Liu (2017) showed that perceived service quality positively associated with brand image. The more customers perceived

service quality, the higher brand attitude (Johnson, Herrmann, & Huber, 2006). Hapsari, Clemes, & Dean (2017) demonstrated empirical results of the causal relationships among customer loyalty, engagement, satisfaction, brand image, perceived value, and service quality of passengers in the Indonesian airline industry. The findings revealed some conflicting results with prior research. Their results showed insignificant direct effects from service quality, perceived value, and brand image on customer loyalty (Hapsari, Clemes, & Dean, 2017). Thus, we hypothesised that: H1: Perceived service quality has a significant direct effect on brand attitude.

### **Effects of Perceived Service Quality on Customer Loyalty**

Perceived service quality is recognized as a key factor in determining customer loyalty and satisfaction (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Saha, 2009; Muturi, Sagwe, & Namukasa, 2013). Seo & Park (2017) showed that perceived service quality and brand preference significantly affected customer loyalty of Korean airline passengers. Keller (2001) found that there was a significant direct relationship between perceived service quality and behavioural loyalty. Ahn, Park, & Kang (2011) confirmed that perceived service quality affected behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. Muturi, Sagwe, & Namukasa (2013) showed that the pre-flight, in-flight, and post-flight service quality significantly affected passenger satisfaction at the Entebbe International Airport. Moreover, the effect of service quality on passenger loyalty was significantly

mediated by passenger satisfaction (Juliet, 2013).

Customers can perceive quality of service without previous consumption experience. Passengers' confidence is developed when they constantly perceive better service quality regularly. This can increase the level of customer loyalty (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). Thus, employees of LCCs should pay more attention to offering better service quality and maintaining high service quality on a regular basis. Sirdeshmukh, Singh & Sabol (2002) demonstrated that frontline employees of the airlines generated a significant impact on converting customer trust into value and loyalty.

Since the results of the association between perceived service quality and loyalty can be distinct from other industries and countries, we intend to explore how does perceived service quality affects loyalty in the context of LCCs in Thailand. Therefore, we proposed that:

H2: Perceived service quality has a significant direct effect on customer loyalty.

#### **Effects of Brand Attitude on Customer Loyalty**

Attitude of customers toward brand creates a foundation for customer behavior in the future and loyalty (Innis & La Londe, 1994). The customer experience from the actual service shapes their attitude towards airline brands. If customers have a positive attitude towards airlines, they will become more loyal to the brand. Positive attitudes can determine whether customers want to

continue using services from companies. When passengers have high satisfaction from airline service, they are expected to have a strong attitude toward the airline brand as well. Then they will develop behavioural loyalty such as purchasing tickets from their favourite brand even though the price is relatively higher than the competitors. Keller (2001) also found that brand preference had a positive impact on brand loyalty. Negative brand attitudes affect customer's purchase intentions because they may switch to use service from other LCCs. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that:

H3: Brand attitude has a significant direct effect on customer loyalty.

#### **Mediating Role of Brand Attitude between Perceived Service Quality and Customer Loyalty**

Research on the mediating role of brand attitude in the context of low-cost airline business is limited. Extant research has explored the mediating effect of perceived value, passenger satisfaction, brand equity, promotion, trust, brand reputation, or brand image (e.g., Chen & Liu, 2017; Hapsari, Clemes, & Dean, 2017). Previous studies have highlighted that customers' attitudes toward brand and satisfaction indirectly affected the relationship between perceived quality and purchase intention in different industries (Li & Green, 2011).

Chen & Liu (2017) found that service quality indirectly affected loyalty through perceived value and brand image. In contrast, Li & Green (2011) argued that the perceived value of service quality did not fully mediate

the effects of marketing strategy on customer loyalty. Ahn, Park, & Kang (2011) provided insights of how service quality influences customers' attitudinal and behavioural loyalty in different types of restaurants. The findings showed that perceived service quality significantly affected customer satisfaction and future expectations. Consequently, customer satisfaction affected future satisfaction and customer loyalty. Although Hapsari, Clemes, & Dean (2017) showed insignificant direct effects from service quality, perceived value, and brand image on customer loyalty, the effect of service quality on customer loyalty

was fully mediated through perceived value, not a brand image. Positive perceived service quality will cause service quality influences customers' attitudes and behaviour in terms of loyalty a positive brand attitude, it can further create customer loyalty. Together with a review of the literature, we proposed the following hypothesis.

H4: The effect of perceived service quality on customer loyalty is mediated by brand attitude.

### Conceptual Framework

The research model is illustrated as shown in Figure 1.

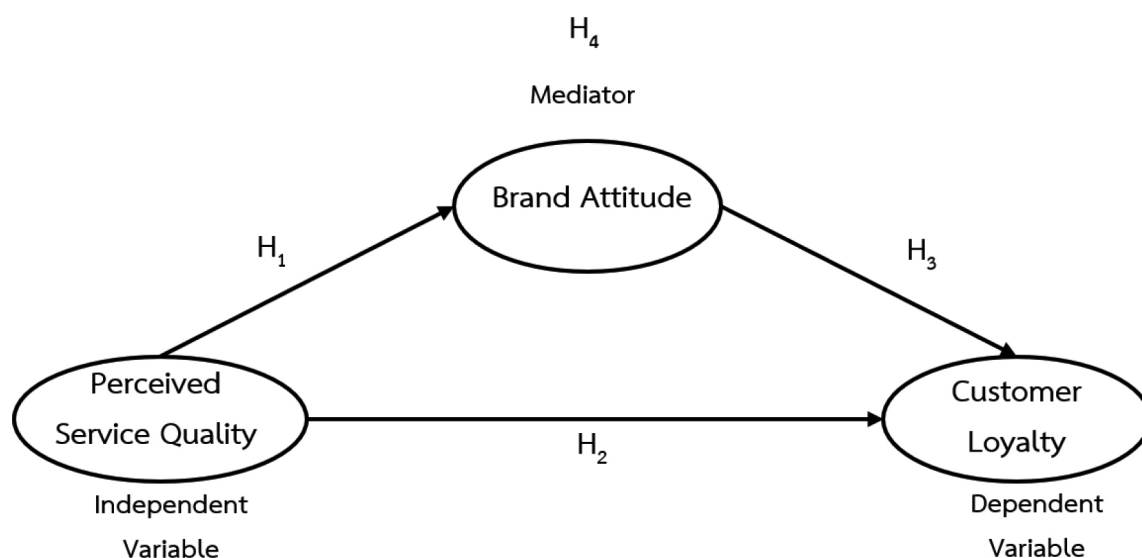


Figure 1 The Research Model

### Methodology

#### Sample and Data Collection

The survey was conducted to evaluate the customers' loyalty in a low-cost carrier in Thailand. The target group of respondents was passengers who used a low-cost service airline in Thailand. The low-cost airlines are Air Asia, Nok Air, Thai Lion Air, Scoot, Vietjet

Airline, and others.

We used non-probability sampling methods including snowball sampling, convenience sampling, and a voluntary response sampling technique for ease and convenience of data collection. The purposive sampling was also used to choose respondents who were accessible and could provide

accurate information relevant to the study.

We distributed a survey via an online channel such as social media. There were the respondents who voluntarily participated in an online survey, respondents who were selected based on convenience, and respondents who were shared by an acquaintance.

The questionnaires were distributed from June to October 2019 via online channels. Of the 500 questionnaires distributed, the number of collected survey is 293. However, there were 246 valid questionnaires because 47 of them contained invalid data. Wolf et al. (2013) applied the Monte Carlo data simulation techniques to determine sample size requirements for structural equation modeling. The results showed that the sample size recommendations ranging from 40 to 240. Tabachnick & Fidell (2001) suggested that the sample size of 100-150 is considered the minimum sample size for conducting SEM. Kline (2005) and Boomsma & Hoogland (2001) also suggested a larger sample size for SEM, such as  $N = 200$ .

A self-administered structured questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument to ensure a high level of anonymity and uniformity of response (Cooper & Schindler, 2011).

The survey questionnaire was developed to collect information about respondents'

demographics, customer's behaviour of using low-cost service airline, brand attitude, perceived service quality, and customer loyalty. The questionnaires used a 5-point Likert scale ranged from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The questionnaire items were adopted from previous related studies.

## Results

Table 1 shows a descriptive summary of the demographic characteristics of the respondents by gender, age, education background, average income, occupation, frequency of using low-cost service airline, the average cost per trip (1-way), and frequently used low-cost airlines.

### Measurement Model

We use SEM to simultaneously estimate the measurement model and the structural model (Hair et al., 2018). We used exploratory factor analysis with principal component analysis as the extraction method and varimax as rotation with Kaiser normalization to assess the underlying structure. The results of CFA (Table 2) suggested that the model was factorable with a KMO test value of 0.840 and Bartlett test of sphericity  $p < 0.001$ . The measurement model included three latent constructs measuring 6 items of customer loyalty (CL), 5 items of brand attitude (BA), and 3 items of perceived service quality (PSQ).



**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 246)

Characteristics	n (%)	Characteristics	n (%)
Gender		Education	
Male	111 (45.12%)	Below bachelor degree	13 (5.28%)
Female	135 (54.88%)	Bachelor degree	166 (67.48%)
		Master degree	53 (21.54%)
		Higher than master degree	14 (5.69%)
Age		Occupation	
< 20	5 (2.03%)	Student	45 (18.29%)
20-30	100 (40.65%)	Government	59 (23.98%)
31-40	92 (37.40%)	Private company	96 (39.02%)
41-50	31 (12.60%)	Self-employed	41 (16.67%)
> 51	18 (7.32%)	Retired	5 (2.03%)
Average income		Low-cost airline frequently used	
< 15,000 THB	44 (17.89%)	Air Asia	118 (47.97%)
15,000-30,000 THB	107 (43.50%)	Nok Air	27 (10.98%)
30,001-45,000 THB	34 (13.82%)	Thai Lion Air	51 (20.73%)
45,001-60,000 THB	30 (12.20%)	Scoot	12 (4.88%)
60,001-75,000 THB	10 (4.07%)	Vietjet Airline	10 (4.07%)
> 75,000 THB	21 (8.54%)	Other	28 (11.38%)
Average cost per trip (1-way)		Frequency of using low-cost service airline	
Less than 1,000 THB	44 (17.89%)	Less than 2 times/year	61 (24.80%)
1,000-1,500 THB	109 (44.31%)	2-3 times/year	104 (42.28%)
1,501-2,000 THB	45 (18.29%)	4-5 times/year	42 (17.07%)
2,001-2,500 THB	26 (10.57%)	More than 5 times/year	39 (15.85%)
More than 2,500 THB	22 (8.94%)		

The values of factor loading of items in each latent were greater than 0.500, where the lowest loading was 0.662 and the highest was 0.859. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to measure internal consistency

and reliability of each item that constitutes a scale correlate within a factor (Cronbach, 1951; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The rules of thumb used to evaluate the values of Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE are 0.7, 0.6, and 0.5, respectively.



Table 2 Results of CFA

Variables			Factor loading	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR
<b>Customer Loyalty (CL)</b>				0.838	0.546	0.857
CL1: I have a brand attachment with the LCC that I used			0.769			
CL2: I am willing to pay the extra price to this LCC			0.741			
CL3: Even if the airfare is higher than the others, I will use this LCC			0.778			
CL4: I have brand loyalty to the LCC that I used			0.776			
CL5: I would choose this LCC preferentially			0.662			
CL6: If this LCC has my preferred ticket, I will not buy a ticket from others			0.740			
<b>Brand Attitude (BA)</b>				0.799	0.555	0.862
BA1: Customers can anticipate a good service from the LCC that I used			0.754			
BA2: LCC that I used gains more trust compared with other LCCs			0.712			
BA3: When I think of the LCC that I used, it has a good image			0.789			
BA4: I am satisfied with the LCC that I used			0.705			
BA5: LCC that I used is the most popular			0.762			
<b>Perceived Service Quality (PSQ)</b>				0.692	0.627	0.833
PSQ1: LCC that I used is generally perceived for maintaining a good service on a regular basis compared with other LCCs			0.823			
PSQ2: LCC that I used is generally perceived as an airline that takes good care of customers			0.859			
PSQ3: LCC that I used has a long good history			0.682			
<b>Measurement model</b>	<b>CMIN/DF</b>	<b>GFI</b>	<b>IFI</b>	<b>NFI</b>	<b>CFI</b>	<b>RMSEA</b>
Fit indices	1.648	0.952	0.974	0.937	0.974	0.051
Suggested value*	≤ 3	≥ 0.9	≥ 0.9	≥ 0.9	≥ 0.9	≤ 0.08

**Note:** All standardized factor loadings are significant at  $p < 0.001$ . \*Suggested values were based on Hair et al. (2018).

From the results, the estimated value of Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.692 to 0.838. CR ranged from 0.833 to 0.857. The Cronbach's alpha of PSQ is 0.692 which is slightly lower than 0.700 due to the limited number of items in the construct. However, 0.6 is considered high reliability and acceptable index, and less

than 0.6 considered low (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Pallant, 2001).

The AVE ranged from 0.546 to 0.627. These results indicated that the internal consistency of the measurement model was acceptable.

### Hypotheses Testing

This study employed SEM to examine the path analysis. The model was tested goodness of fit with chi-square tests, GFI, AGFI, NFI, IFI, CFI, and RMSEA. The results (Figure 2) showed that the full model had acceptable goodness of fit index (CMIN/DF = 2.812,  $p = 0.000$ ; GFI = 0.914; AGFI = 0.856; NFI = 0.877; IFI = 0.917; CFI = 0.915; RMSEA = 0.080) (Hair et al., 2018).

From the results, the estimated value of Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.692 to 0.838, which exceeded 0.7. CR ranged from 0.833 to 0.857 which exceeded 0.6 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The AVE ranged from 0.546 to 0.627 which exceeded 0.5. These results indicated that the internal consistency of the measurement model was acceptable.

H1 examines the effect of PSQ on BA. The results show that PSQ significantly affects BA ( $\beta = 0.668$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ), which consistent with Johnson, Herrmann, & Huber (2006). H2 tests the relationship between PSQ and CL. It also shows that PSQ has direct positive effect on CL as well ( $\beta = 0.607$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ). The results confirm the findings of Seo & Park (2017) and Keller (2001). H3 examines the effect of BA on CL. There is a positive direct relationship between BA and CL ( $\beta = 0.543$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

Next, we tested the mediating effect of PSQ on CL through BA, which consists of the product of the  $a$  and  $b$  path. The  $a$  path is

the regression weight in the model estimating BA from PSQ. The  $b$  path is the partial regression weight for BA in the model estimating CL from both PSQ and BA. From the results, BA partially mediates the impact of PSQ on CL. The standardized mediated effect of PSQ on CL is 0.244 with  $p$  value less than 0.05. Thus. H4 is supported.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores a conceptual framework for antecedents of customer loyalty considering brand attitude and perceived service quality. We formulated four hypotheses to test the relationships among perceived service quality, brand attitude, and customer loyalty of LCCs in Thailand. Furthermore, we tested the mediation effect of brand attitude in this relationship.

Perceived service quality highly influences brand attitude, followed by customer loyalty. The findings were consistent with Song, Ruan, & Park (2019) such that service quality significantly influenced customer trust and a good attitude toward brands. Brand attitude also strongly affect customer loyalty and partially mediated effects of perceived service quality on customer loyalty. The results were in line with Seo & Park (2017) showing that perceived service quality and brand preference significantly affected customer loyalty.

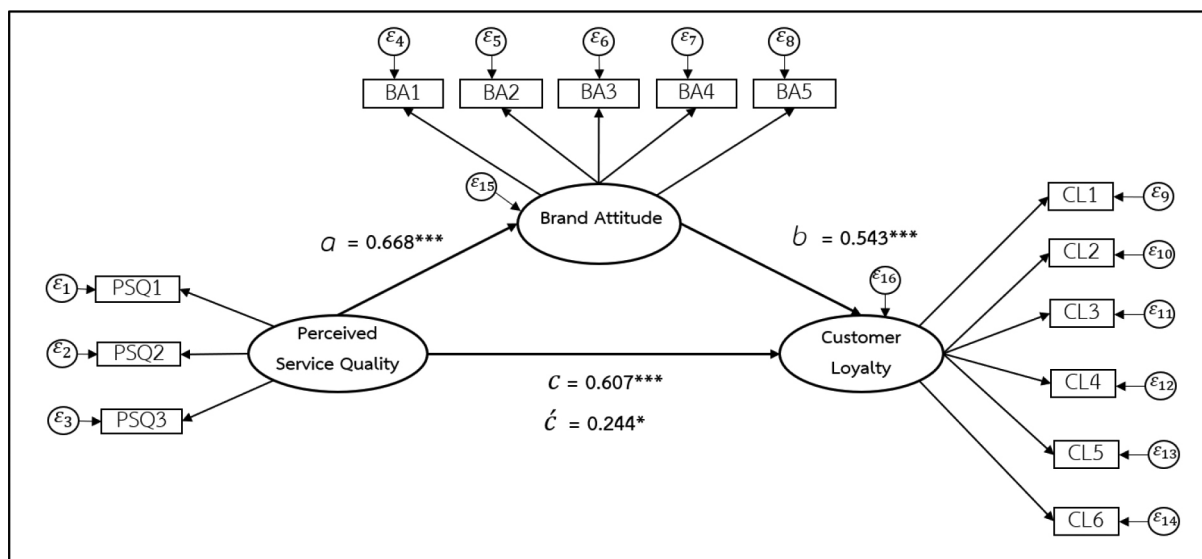


Figure 2 Results of hypothesis testing

The findings indicate that the passengers' perception of service quality offered by LCCs significantly shapes their attitudes toward brands and builds customer loyalty. When they perceive that the LCC that they used offer a good service and maintain a good service quality regularly compared with other LCCs, their satisfaction is increased. They will further anticipate experiencing the same or better service quality when they repurchase services. If LCCs maintain their service quality and offer a better experience to passengers, they will gain more trust from passengers. This can create a strong positive attitude toward the LCC brand. Passengers will become attached to the LCC brand and choose that brand preferentially. Even if the airfare is higher than other LCCs, they would still purchase a ticket from their favourite brand. These behaviours suggest that customers are loyal to the LCC that they used. Purchasing and re-purchasing tickets from an LCC without the need to compare prices with

other LCCs indicated that customers are loyal to LCC. They will not switch unless they have an uncomfortable experience or perceive a lousy service.

For the implications, LCCs should understand and redesign how to establish the service quality perceived by passengers. LCCs should put passengers' needs before their own. Employees of an LCC should understand passengers' needs, physical and emotional expectations. Special attention from airline employees also delivers a good customer experience. According to Pakdil & Aydin (2007), among overall service quality dimensions, responsiveness held the highest score in the expectation and perception. When employees proactively and quickly respond to a passenger's requests, even it is a simple request to make them comfortable, they already create impression and satisfaction in the passenger's mind.

To deliver service that exceeds customer's expectations, airline employees should be

thoughtful and observant because various passenger segments have different needs and expectations. LCCs should take feedbacks and recommendations from passengers to improve service quality. LCCs can identify a pain-point in the customer journey and collect data of what passengers expect and actually perceive during pre-flight, in-flight, and post-flight to create a positive experience for the entire journey. LCCs can use passenger data to create data-generated profiles to gain insight about passengers' behaviour and preferences in order to design customized experiences for each customer. Different quality of in-flight meals can make a significant difference in passengers' perception of service quality. Some passengers choose to use service from their favourable low-cost airlines because they love the in-flight meal. Management should regularly provide employee training programs to improve service quality and responsiveness. Employees should keep improving service quality and performance because when

customers perceive that service quality of one LCC is similar to another LCC, the lowest airfare wins. Therefore, engaging with customers to create a positive experience is valuable and makes a significant difference in passenger's perception. In summary, LCCs need to build and provide better service quality to enhance customers' perception by offering quality service that meets or exceeds customer expectations on a regular basis. These will consequently create sustain customer loyalty to the brand.

The limitation of this study is that we tested only on Thai passengers, the results may not be different across countries. Moreover, the variables in each factor only demonstrate some specific dimension of brand attitude, perceived service quality, and customer loyalty. Future research should explore this conceptual framework in another country and extend the dimensions of variables.

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**Name and Surname:** Nuchjarin Intalar

**Highest Education:** Doctor of Philosophy (Engineering and Technology), Sirindhorn International Institute of Technology, Thammasat University

**Affiliation:** International Academy of Aviation Industry, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang

**Field of Expertise:** Logistics and Supply Chain



**Name and Surname:** Somcane Yodpram

**Highest Education:** Doctor of Philosophy (International Business), Silpakorn University International College

**Affiliation:** International Academy of Aviation Industry, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang

**Field of Expertise:** International Trade, Marketing, and Economic