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THE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS ON SERVICE QUALITY, CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT, CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN MULTI-NATIONAL AIRLINE SECTORS

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Abstract

Current business landscape and dynamism of the business environment have increased competitiveness in service industry. Also, understanding cultural differences intervening in customer decision is crucial for this global era. Therefore, multi-national airline sectors must now pay greater attention to customer need by exploring ways to improve customer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty through their services quality. Toward this end, the purposes of this research were to study the effects of cultural dimensions consisting of power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation on service quality, customer engagement, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in multi-national airline sectors. The research methodology was quantitative research with survey method by using questionnaires for data collection. The respondents were 800 of Thai and foreign passengers who have been participated in multinational full-service airlines during the last three years. Due to hypothesis testing, inferential statistics used were Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicated that cultural dimensions had positive effects on service quality, and service quality mediated the effects of cultural dimensions on customer engagement, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty at a significance level of 0.001. Besides, customer engagement had effects on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, and customer satisfaction had a positive effect on customer loyalty at a significance level of 0.001.

Keywords: Cultural Dimensions, Service Quality, Customer Engagement, Satisfaction, Loyalty

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Introduction

Multinational corporations (MNCs) generate vast amounts of jobs, investments, income, and tax revenues, and they are important to the world's major economic drivers (Hill & Hult, 2020). Service sector is rapidly growing, especially service associated with logistics and tourism industries. To strengthen the essential of service sector for these two industries, the multinational airline business has grown exponentially derived from carrying international imports and exports to all over the world. According to statistics in 2015, global airline companies generated the highest revenue at \$783 billion which increased from \$751 billion in 2014 (PwC, 2015). The statistics of the Air Transport Statistics Report 2012-2014 by Airports of Thailand Public Company Limited (AOT) revealed that the number of international flights in Thailand had increased with 14,424 flights and 2,370,006 foreign tourists visiting Thailand or transiting to other counties in 2014 (Ministry of Tourism & Sports, 2014).

To provide best service to customer, service quality is one of the key determinants to create such customer satisfaction and customer loyalty to all multinational corporations. Also, with diverse customers from different cultural background using service, cultural values on various dimensions should be concerned to understand customers properly. Therefore, service quality might be used as a strategy to increase the ability to compete with competitors and maintain excellent service to meet customer expectations and needs. In addition, customer engagement with the brand consistent to the corporation is under attentions from many scholars recently. Even though there were previous studies on the effects of cultural dimensions on service quality, and many recent studies focused on relationships among service quality, customer engagement, customer satisfaction and loyalty, they were mostly separated those areas of study from each other. Consequently, the researcher was interested in combining various study areas to finally explore the effects of cultural dimensions in terms of power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation on service quality, customer engagement, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty to better understand customer insights varying from cultural perspectives. As a result, the purposes of this research were to study the effects of cultural dimensions (power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation) on service quality, customer engagement, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in multi-national airline sectors. Furthermore, the results from this research could be used as guidelines to improve service quality of multinational airline services or businesses in tourism industry to understand customer choices and to plan their marketing strategies to maximize customers engagement, satisfaction and eventually acquire customer loyalty.

Literature Reviews

Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's cultural dimensions has been famous among scholars in international business and cross-cultural studies. The cultural dimensions consisted of five dimensions measuring cultural values as power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1980; 1991; 2001). The identification of each dimension can be described as 1) Power distance identified "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally." 2) Individualism identified "pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family." 3) Masculinity identified "the extent to which the dominant values in society are 'masculine', that is, assertiveness, the acquisition of money and things, and not caring for others, the quality of life, or people." 4) Uncertainty avoidance identified "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations." Finally, 5) Long-term orientation referred "fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards, in

particular, perseverance and thrift" (Hofstede, 2001). There were various studies focused on the effect of cultural dimensions on service quality, and the results indicated the effects of cultural dimensions on service quality both positively and negatively depending on dimensions (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Djekic et al., 2016; Furrer et al., 2000; Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Guesalaga & Pitta, 2014; Guesalaga et al., 2016; Polsa et al., 2013; Kueh & Voon, 2007).

Service Quality

Service quality (SERVQUAL) was first adopted from the gap in consumers perception between expected service and perceived service composed of 10 key categories labeled as service quality determinants, including reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding/knowing the customer and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In 1988, SERVQUAL was categorized into five dimensions as reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The definition of each dimension of service quality was described as 1) reliability referred to "the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately," 2) Tangibles referred to "the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personal, and communication materials," 3) Responsiveness referred to "the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service," 4) Assurance referred to "the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence," and 5) Empathy referred to "the caring, individualized attention provided to the customer" (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Service quality has been concentrated among scholars in many studies to strengthen competitive advantage for companies and to establish customer loyalty through services (Hapsari et al., 2017; Clemes et al., 2014). Recently, several researchers applied service quality to airline industry and to investigate airline service quality (Shah et al., 2020; Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Namukasa, 2013).

H1: Cultural dimensions (power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation) significantly affect service quality.

H1.1: Power distance significantly affects service quality.

H1.2: Individualism significantly affects service quality.

H1.3: Masculinity significantly affects service quality.

H1.4: Uncertainty avoidance significantly affects service quality.

H1.5: Long-term orientation significantly affects service quality.

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement was associated with level of the customer's interactions and connections with the company's brand, offerings, or activities involving other individuals in the social network, and it is composed of three dimensions as conscious attention, enthused participation, and social connection (Vivek et al., 2014). Other customer engagement definitions varied from different fields of study. Bowden (2009) and O'Brien & Toms (2010) stated that customer engagement is the psychological process influencing customer loyalty while Hollebeek (2011) defined customer engagement as the level of customer's brand-related motivation characterized by a specific level of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity in brand interactions. Customer engagement has attracted many scholars to assess its effect on customer loyalty; however, there were few studies explaining the relationship between customer engagement and customer loyalty (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Doorn et al., 2010).

H2: Service quality significantly affect customer engagement.

Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

Customer satisfaction has become a key area in many social and behavioral studies. Kotler & Caslione (2009) defined satisfaction as an individual's feeling of pleasure or disappointment which results from comparing a product's performance with his or her expectations. Meanwhile, Oliver (1999) described customer satisfaction as a pleasurable fulfillment, which is a measure of how service provided by companies meet or surpass customer expectations, making the customer feels that consumption fulfills some desires, need, goal. Due to the

benefits of customer satisfaction, satisfied customers tend to be less price sensitive, more willing to buy additional products, and less influenced by competitors (Hansemark & Albinsson, 2004). Besides, the increase in customer satisfaction should lead to great customer retention and loyalty (Abdullah et al., 2011).

Loyalty is one of the crucial determinants that plays an important role in affecting competitive benefits, such as share-of-wallet and market share in the airline industry (Calisir et al., 2016). Oliver (1999) defined loyalty as a deeply held commitment to rebuy a prefer product or service consistently in the future. Customer loyalty has been defined by different researchers in various ways. However, it is generally categorized as behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty, and the combination of both behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Shen & Yahya, 2021). The behavioral loyalty concentrates on the repeating purchases, implying a tendency of customer regularly purchase goods or service from the same company whereas the attitudinal loyalty is an approach using attitudinal data to express the psychological or sentimental loyalty (Vlachos & Lin, 2014). Oliver (1997) suggests that consumers can become loyal at each attitudinal phase from cognitive, affective, conative, to behavioral ones.

Oliver (1999) explained that satisfaction would become loyalty once customers are satisfied. If not satisfied, customers may not reconsider their decision to travel with the same airline for future flights, and they are more likely to try the other airlines instead (Namukasa, 2013). Some previous studies also revealed that passenger's satisfaction positively and significantly influence passengers' loyalty (Allen et al., 2019; Akamavi et al., 2015; Forgas et al., 2010; Calisir et al., 2016). Moreover, the positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty has been identified (Leong et al., 2015; Song et al., 2019). Curry & Gao (2012) further revealed that customer satisfaction has a strong power in predicting passenger repurchase loyalty than service quality, and it is significantly and positively related to customer loyalty for leisure travelers (Jiang & Zhang, 2016).

H3: Service quality significantly affect customer satisfaction.

H4: Service quality significantly affect customer loyalty.

H5: Customer engagement significantly affect customer satisfaction.

H6: Customer engagement significantly affect customer loyalty.

H7: Customer satisfaction significantly affect customer loyalty.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework had been drawn as shown in figure 1 below:

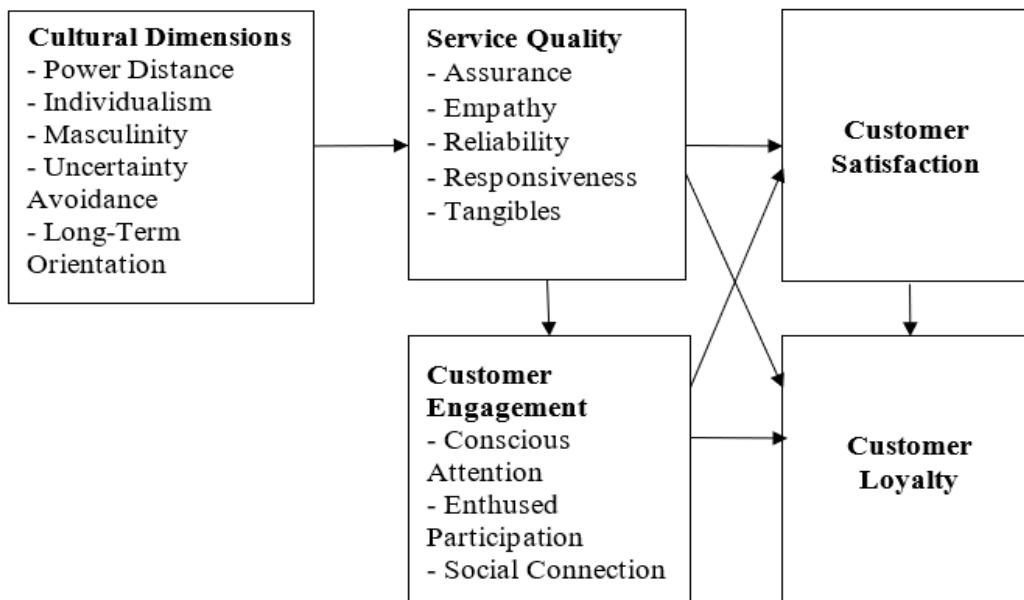


Figure 1 Conceptual Model

Research Methodology

Population and Samples: The total population for Thai and Western foreign passengers who had flights during their last three years of traveling with a multinational full-service airline including Thai Airways International, Emirates Airline, Qatar Airways, Cathay Pacific, and other full-service airlines were unknown. The samples were calculated based on SEM parameters suggested by Nevitt & Hancock (2001), Fritz et al. (2012), and Creedon & Hayes (2015) who suggested to use 500-1000 samples. Consequently, 400 Thai and 400 Western foreign passengers as of 800 in total were estimated as samples in this research. The samples were randomly selected by using non-probability sampling technique with purposive sampling.

Data Collection: The research methodology was the quantitative research conducted by using survey method. The questionnaires were used as the research instrument for data collection, and they were distributed at Suvarnabhumi Airport and locations for traveling in Bangkok areas. The questionnaires were divided into 6 sections as follows. Section 1-5 were five-point Likert scale questions regarding cultural dimensions, service quality, customer engagement, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Section 6 consisted of closed-ended questions regarding their personal background and travel experience, such as gender, age, purpose of traveling, and region and airlines.

Data Analysis: Descriptive statistics used in quantitative data analysis included frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. Due to hypothesis testing, inferential statistics used were Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

Research Results

Respondents' General Information, Cultural Dimensions, Service Quality, Customer Engagement, Customer Satisfaction, and Customer Loyalty

The results of the research showed that most of respondents were female (60.1%), had age range between 21-30 years old (49.9%), obtained more than a bachelor's degree (50.1%), had career as employees from private sectors (55.6%), and had experience in using airline for travel approximately 1-2 times per year (50.5%), mostly used Thai Airways International (37.9%) and geographical region was from Asia (50.1%). The research results further revealed that most of the respondents had agreements toward overall cultural dimensions at the neutral agreement level with the mean of 3.18, comprising average means of 2.11 on power distance, 3.39 on individualism, 2.38 on masculinity, 3.86 on uncertainty avoidance, and 4.16 on long-term orientation, respectively. Besides, most of the respondents had agreements toward customer engagement at the neutral agreement level with the mean of 3.20. The service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty were at the agree level and had the mean of 3.96, 3.73, and 3.85, respectively.

Validity and Reliability: The researcher had experts in related fields inspected the accurateness and consistency of contents and questions and recommended the improvement and edition. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were investigated to measure construct reliability as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Eigenvalues, % of Variance Explain, Factor Loading, Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (CA), Composite Reliability (CR) and Average variance extracted (AVE) for Measurement Model

Latent Variable		CA	CR	AVE	Indicators	Loads	Eigenvalues	% of Variance
Power (PDI)	Distance	0.801	0.854	0.542	PDI1	0.617	2.922	11.240
					PDI2	0.654		
					PDI3	0.828		
					PDI4	0.805		
					PDI1	0.755		
Individualism (IDV)		0.760	0.834	0.502	IDV6	0.719	2.873	11.049
					IDV8	0.655		
					IDV9	0.783		
					IDV10	0.727		
					IDV11	0.649		
Masculinity (MAS)		0.701	0.848	0.737	MAS14	0.787	2.622	10.084
					MAS15	0.924		
Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)		0.800	0.859	0.551	UAI16	0.749	3.050	11.730
					UAI17	0.789		
					UAI18	0.689		
					UAI19	0.740		
					UAI20	0.740		
Long-Term Orientation (LTO)		0.808	0.86	0.511	LTO21	0.795	3.074	11.823
					LTO22	0.816		
					LTO23	0.770		
					LTO24	0.750		
					LTO25	0.518		
					LTO26	0.590		
Service Quality (SQ)		0.901	0.927	0.717	SQA	0.832	3.001	15.004
					SQE	0.855	2.868	14.338
					SBRS	0.840	3.294	16.472
					SQRB	0.890	2.277	11.386
					SQT	0.813	2.994	14.970
Customer Engagement (CE)		0.841	0.904	0.759	CECA	0.857	3.213	29.209
					CEEP	0.918	3.115	28.316
					CESC	0.838	2.553	23.214
Customer Satisfaction (SAT)		0.915	0.946	0.854	SAT1	0.927	2.563	85.441
					SAT2	0.937		
					SAT3	0.909		
Customer Loyalty (LYT)		0.849	0.93	0.869	PI	0.930	2.568	42.808
					WM	0.934	2.442	40.703

Notes: Items MAS12, MAS13, and IDV7 were dropped from the scale after measurement purification.

In Table 1, in terms of composite reliability, all factor loading values ranged from 0.518 to 0.937, which is more than the recommended value of 0.50, but MAS12, MAS13, and IDV7 were dropped from the scale after measurement purification since the factor loading values were below 0.5; hence, the constructs in the research model are acceptable (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of each construct ranged from 0.701 to 0.915, meaning that all constructs are acceptable according to the recommended threshold value of 0.70

(Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The value of AVE was in the range of 0.502 to 0.869, which exceeded the minimum threshold value of 0.50, confirming convergent validity.

Table 2 Discriminant Validity

Variables	CE	IDV	LTO	LYT	MAS	PDI	SAT	SQ	UAI
CE	0.871								
IDV	0.219	0.708							
LTO	0.201	0.211	0.715						
LYT	0.491	0.133	0.146	0.932					
MAS	0.314	0.213	0.107	0.093	0.858				
PDI	0.135	0.128	-0.144	-0.028	0.288	0.736			
SAT	0.577	0.168	0.178	0.682	0.161	-0.056	0.924		
SQ	0.412	0.182	0.217	0.662	0.07	-0.145	0.639	0.847	
UAI	0.177	0.29	0.462	0.163	0.214	-0.025	0.201	0.197	0.742

Note: The value in main diagonal were square roots of AVE.

In Table 2, the discriminant validity was tested, and the square roots of AVEs were more than the 0.7 minimum threshold, and all values were more than the correlations among the latent constructs (0.71-0.90); thus, it is valid.

Analysis of Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

From the structural model in this research, the direct effects indicated that R^2 of the dependent variable, or customer loyalty was 0.561 indicating that 56.1% of customer loyalty variance was explained by independent variables. For the indirect effects, R^2 of the mediating variables service quality, customer engagement, customer satisfaction was 0.095, 0.170, and 0.527, respectively.

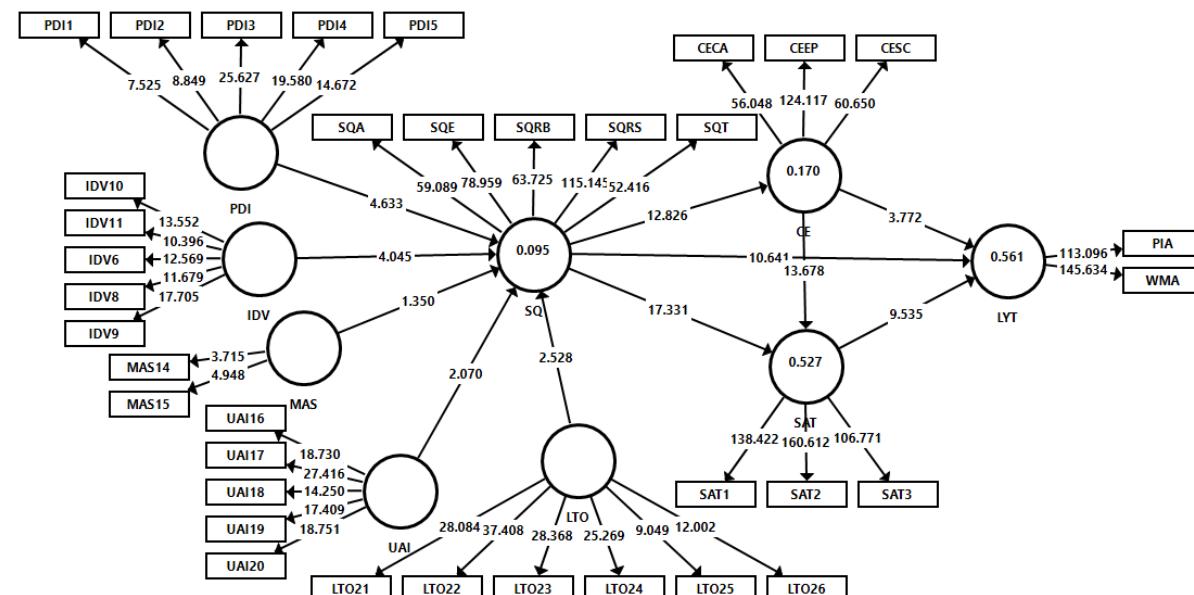


Figure 1 The results of testing the structural model of the theoretical framework

Table 3 Structural Model

Hypothesis	Standardized Estimate (β)	T Statistics	Results
H1.1: PDI → SQ	-0.16***	4.633	Supported
H1.2: IDV → SQ	0.141***	4.045	Supported
H1.3: MAS → SQ	0.055	1.35	Not Supported
H1.4: UAI → SQ	0.086*	2.07	Supported
H1.5: LTO → SQ	0.118**	2.528	Supported
H2: SQ → CE	0.412***	12.826	Supported
H3: SQ → SAT	0.484***	17.331	Supported
H4: SQ → LYT	0.374***	10.641	Supported
H5: CE → SAT	0.377***	13.678	Supported
H6: CE → LYT	0.122***	3.772	Supported
H7: SAT → LYT	0.372***	9.535	Supported

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test)

The results of structural model showed that cultural dimensions in terms of individualism ($\beta = 0.141$, $p < 0.001$) had the strongest positive effect on service quality, followed by long-term orientation ($\beta = 0.118$, $p < 0.01$) and uncertainty avoidance ($\beta = 0.086$, $p < 0.05$), respectively. Also, power distance ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.001$) had negative and significant effect on service quality while masculinity ($\beta = 0.055$, $p > 0.05$) did not show any significant effect on service quality, so Hypothesis 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, and 1.5 were supported whereas Hypothesis 1.3 was rejected. The results also revealed that service quality had positive and significant effects on customer engagement ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$), customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.484$, $p < 0.001$), and customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.374$, $p < 0.001$), so Hypothesis 2, 3, and 4 were supported. In addition, customer engagement had positive and significant effects on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.377$, $p < 0.001$) and customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.122$, $p < 0.001$), so Hypothesis 5 and 6 were supported. Finally, the results also revealed that customer satisfaction had positive and significant effects on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.001$), so Hypothesis 7 was supported. In summary, the strongest predictor in customer loyalty from this model was service quality, followed by customer satisfaction and customer engagement, respectively.

Conclusion & Discussion

Findings of this research revealed that cultural dimensions had direct influence on service quality which supported the study of Donthu & Yoo (1998) who indicated that cultural orientation in consumers vary in their overall service quality expectations and on each of the dimensions of service quality. For example, the result of this study confirmed that consumers with low on power distance have high overall service quality and expect all service quality performance to be delivered; hence, the result showed negative effect of power distance on service quality. Moreover, Furrer et al. (2000) showed there were relationships between cultural dimensions and the relative importance of the dimensions of service quality and the relative importance of the service quality dimensions varied from one culture to another, while Kueh & Voon (2007) found that cultural values influenced consumers' service quality expectations. Also, Polsa et al. (2013) found that cultural values influenced service quality perceptions. Consequently, cultural dimensions significantly influenced evaluation of service quality; therefore, using differences in cultural values as a tool for market segmentation could improve in understanding cultural differences among culture and formulating a better multi-domestic airline strategy to meet local needs and expectations.

Furthermore, the findings of this research also revealed that service quality was found to be the antecedent of customer engagement and customer satisfaction, which influenced customer loyalty, suggesting that good service encouraged consumers to be more engaged and satisfied

and finally could establish loyalty in customers' mind. These findings are similar to the finding from Shen & Yahya (2021) who indicated that service quality affected customer satisfaction which led to loyalty eventually, and was similar to the finding of Jiang & Zhang (2016) who proved that service quality had a positive influence on satisfaction. Moreover, these findings confirmed the result of previous studies that there was positive relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Allen et al., 2019; Akamavi et al., 2015; Forgas et al., 2010). Establishing overall service quality can enhance overall satisfaction and engagement from customers and will be able to increase their willingness to revisit the airline, to recommend this airline to others, and to become loyal to the airline eventually.

Limitation

The researcher's focus in this research was on cultural dimensions, service quality, customer engagement, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty toward using multinational full-service airlines ignoring those who used other low-cost airlines. Since the data were collected from 800 respondents using some specific full-service airlines for traveling and businesses, the generalization of the results could be limited. Other variables, such as lifestyle or brand trust in using full-service airlines did not include in this research. As this research was cross-sectional, data were collected at one specific time point. In addition, the hypotheses were tested utilizing quantitative research approach, while the qualitative approach techniques such as in-depth interview or focus group was excluded from the research.

Recommendations

The findings from this research indicated that cultural dimensions, service quality, customer engagement, and customer satisfaction had positive effects on customer loyalty. Therefore, in the process of customer loyalty building, service quality with excellent level, understanding the customer background to provide service that meet their expectation, and establishing customer engagement will consequently convey customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The agreements toward cultural dimensions and customer engagement from this research were at the neutral agreement level with the mean as of 3.18 and 3.20; therefore, focusing more on understanding customer background and building customer relationship management can be considered in the future research to enhance level of customer satisfaction and loyalty. For example, individualism is shown to be the strongest predictor in this research, so it seems that many passengers focused more on their personal life and need rather than the groups. Therefore, providing service to meet each individual shall be concentrated more to delight their experience through service. This could be an implication for the formulation of airline marketing strategies suggesting that adaptation strategy shall be considered.

The research was limited to the single industry, which is the airline service sectors. In order to generalize the result, the future research may consider extending the study to the other industries. This way can help the researchers to compare the results and conclude explicit phenomena. In addition, this research was purely on quantitative research, thus the other approaches such as mixed method or purely qualitative research can be possibly employed for future research. Lastly, this research was limited to variables covering cultural dimensions, service quality, customer engagement, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Further research could extend to other variables such as brand recognition, perceived value, or perceived benefits. Cross-cultural comparisons divided into low and high scores on cultural dimensions affecting service quality, customer engagement and intention perspectives shall be considered.

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