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## SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIA AIRLINES IN MALAYSIA

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### Abstract:

This study examines the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction in the airline industry, with specific focus on Malaysia Airlines. Grounded in SERVQUAL and Customer Satisfaction Theory, the study evaluates reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, and empathy among Generation Z passengers. A quantitative cross-sectional design was adopted, and 385 valid responses were analysed using SPSS. The findings indicate that reliability, tangibility, and empathy are the most influential predictors of customer satisfaction, while responsiveness shows comparatively weaker influence. The study contributes theoretically by extending SERVQUAL with cognitive and affective components and provides managerial implications for enhancing service delivery strategies.

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Airline Industry, Hospitality Industry, Malaysia Airlines, Service Quality, SERVQUAL Dimensions, Tourism Industry.



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## Introduction

The airline industry has evolved into one of the most competitive service sectors worldwide, where success is no longer determined solely by ticket pricing but by the ability to deliver superior service experiences. In an era of globalization and digital transformation, passengers expect not only safe and efficient travel but also personalized, seamless, and memorable service encounters. Service quality has therefore become a critical differentiator, directly influencing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term profitability (Tussyadiah, 2020; Usman et al., 2023). Airlines that fail to meet these expectations risk losing market share to competitors who prioritize customer-centric strategies.

The SERVQUAL framework, encompassing reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, and empathy, has been widely applied to evaluate service quality in the airline industry (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Each dimension captures a distinct aspect of passenger experience, ranging from operational consistency and staff professionalism to physical facilities and personalized care. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that higher service quality leads to greater satisfaction, which in turn fosters loyalty and strengthens brand image (Mohamad, 2022; Koçali et al., 2025). However, the relative importance of these dimensions may vary across passenger demographics, airline types, and evolving travel contexts, highlighting the need for continuous reassessment.

Malaysia Airlines, as one of Southeast Asia's premier full-service carriers, has long positioned itself as a brand synonymous with hospitality and service excellence. Yet, the airline faces persistent challenges, including intense competition from low-cost carriers, fluctuating economic conditions, and rapidly changing passenger expectations. Generation Z travelers, represent a growing customer segment with distinct preferences for speed, digital engagement, and personalized experiences (Ali et al., 2025). Understanding how this demographic perceives service quality is crucial for Malaysia Airlines to refine its strategies and sustain competitiveness.

Despite extensive application of the SERVQUAL model, several critical gaps remain. First, prior studies report inconsistent findings regarding the influence of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction, as results vary across contexts and measurement approaches. Traditional service quality models such as SERVQUAL have been criticized for their limited

ability to capture evolving and industry-specific customer expectations, particularly in the airline sector (Yas et al., 2025).

Second, although global airline satisfaction has reached relatively high levels, with approximately 86% of passengers reporting satisfaction with their travel experience, data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA, 2026) indicate that passenger expectations continue to rise, particularly in relation to seamless, digital, and personalized service delivery. This highlights a persistent gap between expected and perceived service quality, especially across key service touchpoints such as delays, responsiveness, and service recovery.

Furthermore, according to WifiTalents Research (2026) around 80% of travelers expect consistent service across all service touchpoints, indicating that customer satisfaction is no longer determined solely by functional performance but also by holistic service experience. However, existing SERVQUAL-based studies predominantly emphasize functional attributes while neglecting experiential and emotional aspects.

In addition, limited studies focus on Generation Z, despite their growing influence in the airline market. Moreover, survey conducted by Official Aviation Guide (OAG) in 2024, airline industry projections suggest that Generation Z and Millennials will account for more than 80% of global airline travel expenditure by 2035. Moreover, Generation Z travelers are increasingly experienced oriented and willing to pay more for enhanced service quality, challenging traditional assumptions of price sensitivity (OAG, 2024).

Finally, within the Malaysian context, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on full-service airlines such as Malaysia Airlines, particularly in understanding how service quality influences satisfaction within a multicultural and competitive environment (Badrillah et al., 2025).

By integrating functional and experiential perspectives, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of customer satisfaction formation, offering both theoretical contributions and practical implications for airline service improvement strategies.

## Literature Review

Previous studies consistently highlight the critical role of service quality in shaping customer satisfaction, loyalty, and airline competitiveness. The SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) remains the most widely adopted framework, capturing both tangible and intangible aspects of service delivery. Reliability, encompassing punctuality and operational consistency, is often cited as the strongest predictor of satisfaction (Xue & Ylagan, 2024). Tangibility, including aircraft cleanliness and staff appearance, also plays a decisive role in shaping perceptions (Koçali et al., 2025). Assurance, reflecting professionalism and safety, is particularly valued in full-service airlines (Idris & Mohamad, 2023). Empathy, through personalized attention, has been shown to foster loyalty among younger passengers (Günel & Gümüş, 2025). While responsiveness is important, some studies suggest its impact is comparatively weaker, especially when passengers prioritize efficiency over interpersonal interaction (Ramli et al., 2024).

Beyond SERVQUAL, emerging perspectives highlight the influence of digitalization, generational differences, and post-pandemic safety concerns. Digital service innovations, such as mobile apps and AI-driven support, are increasingly integrated into tangibility and responsiveness dimensions (Simón-Moya, 2019). Generation Z passengers, in particular, demand speed, personalization, and digital engagement, requiring airlines to adapt service strategies (Ali et al., 2025). Furthermore, health and safety protocols have become central to assurance, with passengers evaluating airlines based on their crisis management and hygiene standards (Usman et al., 2023). These insights underscore that service quality is not static but evolves with technological, social, and environmental changes, making continuous improvement essential for sustaining customer satisfaction and loyalty.

### ***Reliability***

Reliability refers to the airline's ability to provide the services accurately and consistently, including punctuality and dependable operations. Studies show reliability is one of the strongest predictors of customer satisfaction (İnan, 2025; Xue et al., 2024), as delays and cancellations often lead to dissatisfaction.

### ***Responsiveness***

Responsiveness reflects the airline staff's willingness to assist passengers promptly and address their needs. Research suggests that responsiveness influences customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ali et al., 2025; Ramli et al., 2024) by improving overall service experiences.

### ***Assurance***

Assurance relates to staff professionalism, competence, and the ability to inspire trust and confidence among passengers. It plays a key role in customer satisfaction, particularly in full-service airlines where high standards are expected (Bakır et al., 2025; Idris et al. 2023).

### ***Tangibility***

Tangibility includes physical elements such as aircraft cleanliness, seating comfort, facilities, and staff appearance. Tangible aspects significantly influence passenger's perceptions of service quality and satisfaction (Koçali et al., 2025; Ramli et al., 2024).

### ***Empathy***

Empathy involves providing personalized attention and understanding the passenger's needs. Empathetic service delivery positively influences customer satisfaction (Günel et al., 2025; Wang, 2023) and overall service perception.

### ***Customer Satisfaction***

Customer Satisfaction is a key outcome of service quality and is closely linked to customer loyalty and airline image. Research consistently shows that higher service quality leads to higher satisfaction, which in turn increases customer retention (Mohamad, 2022). Previous findings also suggest that a positive destination image leads to greater visitor satisfaction,

which in turn leads to greater destination loyalty (Jamaludin et al., 2018; Mohamad, 2022; Mohamad et al., 2022).

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction in the airline industry. A quantitative approach is suitable as it enables the collection of standardized data and facilitates statistical analysis to identify relationships between variables. The study applies the SERVQUAL framework to measure service quality dimensions.

### ***Target Population and Respondent Criteria***

The target population of this study consists of Generation Z passengers (aged 18–32) who have previously flown with Malaysia Airlines. To ensure the accuracy and relevance of responses, only individuals who had travelled with Malaysia Airlines within the last six months were included. This criterion ensures that respondents have recent service experience, improving the reliability of their evaluations of airline service quality.

### ***Sampling Techniques***

A non-probability purposive sampling method was employed in this study. This technique allows the researcher to select respondents who meet specific criteria, namely Generation Z passengers with prior experience flying with Malaysia Airlines.

This approach is appropriate because it ensures that only relevant respondents are included, particularly those who can provide meaningful insights related to service quality and customer satisfaction. Additionally, purposive sampling is widely used in service-related research where specific respondent characteristics are required.

### ***Sample Size and Data Collection***

Data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire, distributed via social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram to reach digitally active Generation Z respondents.

A total of 385 valid responses were obtained and used for data analysis. This sample size is considered adequate and meets the recommended threshold for statistical analysis in quantitative studies, ensuring sufficient power for reliability and inferential testing.

### ***Research Instrument***

The questionnaire was adapted from the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). It consists of six main constructs consisting of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, empathy and customer satisfaction. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. This scale allows for consistent measurement of respondents' perceptions of service quality and satisfaction.

### *Data Analysis Technique*

The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis consisted of Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Analysis and Pearson Correlation. These analytical methods enable both summarization and interpretation of relationships between variables, ensuring the robustness of findings.

### **Findings**

The findings reveal that while all SERVQUAL dimensions are significantly associated with customer satisfaction, the strength of influence varies across dimensions, indicating differing levels of importance in shaping passenger perceptions. Notably, empathy ( $r = 0.854$ ), tangibility ( $r = 0.843$ ), and reliability ( $r = 0.841$ ) emerged as the strongest predictors of customer satisfaction.

This indicates that personalised service, physical service environment, and operational consistency are the most influential determinants of satisfaction among Generation Z passengers. In particular, the strong impact of empathy suggests that emotional engagement and understanding of customer needs are critical in enhancing customer experiences.

Furthermore, the high significance of tangibility demonstrates that aircraft condition, cleanliness, and service environment are key factors influencing passenger evaluation. Similarly, reliability reinforces the importance of consistent service delivery, punctuality, and fulfilment of service promises.

In contrast, responsiveness ( $r = 0.812$ ) and assurance ( $r = 0.801$ ), although positively related, exhibit relatively weaker influence. This suggests that while prompt service and professional conduct remain important, they are not the primary drivers of satisfaction for Generation Z passengers. Table 1 summary the hypothesis testing for this study.

**Table 1: Summary of Hypothesis Testing**

Hypothesis	Findings	Strength	Result
H1: There is a significant relationship between reliability and customer service satisfaction within Malaysia Airlines.	0.841	Positive	H1 is accepted
H2: There is a significant relationship between responsiveness and customer service satisfaction within Malaysia Airlines.	0.812	Negative	H2 is rejected
H3: There is a significant relationship between assurance and customer service satisfaction within Malaysia Airlines.	0.801	Negative	H3 is rejected
H4: There is a significant relationship between tangibility and customer service satisfaction within Malaysia Airlines.	0.843	Positive	H4 is accepted

H5: There is a significant relationship between empathy and customer service satisfaction within Malaysia Airlines.

Positive

H5 is accepted

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These findings indicate a shift from traditional service expectations toward experience-driven service evaluation, where emotional engagement and service environment play a more dominant role than reactive service delivery.

## **Implication**

### ***Academic Implication***

This study provides several important contributions to the academic literature on service quality and customer satisfaction in the airline industry.

First, the findings extend the applicability of the SERVQUAL model by demonstrating that service quality dimensions do not contribute equally to customer satisfaction. The results highlight that empathy, tangibility, and reliability have stronger explanatory power, suggesting that traditional service quality frameworks should be re-evaluated in terms of the relative importance of each dimension. This supports the argument that service quality is context-dependent and influenced by evolving customer expectations, particularly in the airline industry.

Second, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on generation-based service evaluation, particularly focusing on Generation Z. The findings confirm that Generation Z passengers place greater emphasis on emotional engagement and experience quality, rather than purely functional service delivery. This indicates a shift from traditional service quality paradigms toward experience driven customer evaluation, thereby enriching theoretical discussions on customer behaviour in service industries.

Third, the study advances the theoretical understanding of service quality by integrating both cognitive (functional performance) and affective (emotional experience) dimensions. While SERVQUAL traditionally emphasizes functional attributes, this study demonstrates that affective elements such as empathy significantly influence customer satisfaction, suggesting the need for a more holistic service quality framework.

Overall, the study supports the development of more comprehensive and context specific service quality models, contributing to future research in airline service management and customer experience studies.

### ***Practical Implication***

The findings of this study offer practical recommendations for airline managers, particularly for Malaysia Airlines, in improving service quality and customer satisfaction among Generation Z passengers.

First, given the strong impact of reliability, airlines should prioritise operational improvements such as enhancing flight punctuality, reducing delays, and ensuring consistency in service delivery. This can be achieved through improved scheduling systems, real time operational monitoring, and proactive handling of service disruptions.

Second, the significance of tangibility suggests that airlines should invest in improving physical service elements, including aircraft cleanliness, cabin comfort, and onboard facilities. Regular maintenance, modern cabin design, and attention to in-flight environment can directly enhance customer perceptions.

Third, the importance of empathy indicates that airlines should focus on enhancing staff interpersonal skills through targeted training programmes. Employees should be trained to deliver personalised service, actively respond to customer needs, and demonstrate emotional intelligence in service interactions.

Fourth, airlines should leverage digital technologies to align with the expectations of Generation Z passengers. This includes providing mobile based services, real time updates, personalised communication, and digital customer support platforms, which enhance overall service experience and accessibility.

Finally, airlines should implement continuous customer feedback systems, such as post-flight surveys and real time service evaluations, to monitor service quality performance and identify areas for improvement. This allows for data driven decision making and supports evidence-based service management practices.

Collectively, these recommendations can assist airlines in strengthening customer satisfaction, improving service consistency, and enhancing competitive advantage in the increasingly dynamic airline industry.

## **Conclusion**

This study confirms that service quality dimensions significantly influence customer satisfaction in the context of Malaysia Airlines, with reliability and tangibility emerging as the most influential factors, followed by empathy. These findings highlight the critical role of operational consistency, physical service environment, and personalised service delivery in shaping satisfaction among Generation Z passengers.

The results further suggest a shift in customer expectations, where passengers place greater emphasis on experience quality and service consistency rather than solely on functional service responsiveness. This reinforces the importance of adopting a more holistic approach to service quality that integrates both operational performance and customer experience dimensions.

From a strategic perspective, continuous service improvement remains essential for sustaining competitiveness and strengthening customer retention in the airline industry (Tussyadiah, 2020; Usman et al., 2023). Airlines must prioritise key service dimensions that directly influence customer satisfaction while adapting to the evolving expectations of younger passenger segments.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on Generation Z passengers within a single airline context. Future research should consider comparative studies across different airline types (full service versus low-cost carriers) or explore other demographic segments to enhance the generalisability of findings. Additionally, further research could incorporate advanced analytical techniques, such as regression or structural equation modelling, to provide deeper insights into the causal relationships between service quality and customer satisfaction.

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