



Service Quality influence on Customer Satisfaction and Brand Loyalty: An Empirical Study on Pakistan Airline Industry

Shumaila Islam^{1*}, Muhammad Usman¹, Danish Junaid¹

i) Bahria Business School, Bahria University, Islamabad

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ABSTRACT

The airline industry's intensifying competition has encouraged companies to pursue a shared objective to attain customer satisfaction and establish brand loyalty. Companies recognize the crucial role that service quality and customer satisfaction play in retaining customers and gaining an edge over rivals in the market. As such, the significance of prioritizing service quality has amplified in this increasingly competitive environment. This paper aims to find out whether service quality (ServQual) results in customer satisfaction and does it mediate service quality towards brand loyalty through mediation in Pakistan's airline industry to provide new insights. Additionally, the objective is to identify the service quality dimensions that exerts the most significant influence on customer satisfaction. The research was carried out using a quantitative approach by administering survey from recent travelers of local air carriers. The study demonstrates that in Pakistan's airline industry, all dimensions of service quality, except for empathy, has a significant effect on customer satisfaction. The assurance being the most significant dimension contributing to the variation in customer satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the research reveals that customer satisfaction has a partial mediating role between ServQual and its impact on brand loyalty. This paper illustrates that service quality should be given more importance to increase repeat purchase intention of the customers.

1. Introduction

The economic recession in 2007-2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic, were two major recent setbacks for the world economy. The lockdowns implemented throughout the world due to Covid-19, had a huge impact on services sector specially, hospitality, tourism and transport (Javed, 2020). Pakistan also imposed lockdown and social distancing during 2019 and 2020 to mitigate Corona Virus, due to which the economic activities in the country were suspended. The Financial Report of Government of Pakistan, (2020) revealed that the country experienced negative growth rate of 0.59 percent for the first time, in services sector. Services sector is the major contributor of GDP for Pakistan (Javed, 2020) due to which the change in its growth rate has a significant effect on the overall economy.

The airline industry is a prominent player in the services sector. Between 2019-2021, the domestic and international flights were suspended several times which adversely affected the revenues of the airline

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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industry (Javed, 2020). To revive and stimulate growth in the airline industry amidst a post-Covid landscape, it is imperative that companies prioritize service quality to both retain their existing customer base and attract new clientele. Enhancing service quality represents a critical strategy for achieving customer satisfaction (Scheffler, 2018) and is a fundamental prerequisite for success in a fiercely competitive world (Gilbert & Wong, 2003). As an integral element of the tourism sector, the airline industry operates within a shared competitive landscape (Tiernan et al., 2008).

Pakistan has a huge domestic market due to which the airline industry of Pakistan is among the fastest growing industries of the country (Javed, 2020). The increased growth in industry is also giving rise to the competition in the market. The airlines are competing on the basis of quality of service and competitive pricing for economy class (Taneja, 2016).

It is crucial for local airlines to retain their customer base so that they can survive in the industry. To exhibit a competitive advantage, the airlines need to retain their customers, since the customers who have positive past experience with an airline are less price-sensitive (Gómez et al., 2006). Customer retention will occur when they are loyal to the brand which is a complex phenomenon, and calls for further research on the factors that drive loyalty and repurchase intentions (Saleem et al., 2017). Companies are interested in identifying and analyzing the factors of customer loyalty including quality of service and satisfaction (González, 2015). The brand loyalty is important because the cost of retention is less than acquiring new customers (Namukasa, 2013). That is why some scholars have investigated the antecedents of customer loyalty (Lin & Ching Yuh, 2010). However, the existing literature is mostly limited to the developed world (González, 2015). By knowing the factors leading to customer satisfaction, companies can act proactively for satisfying the customers and resolve problems before they can even occur. Gauging customer satisfaction is critical for highly competitive airline industry.

In service industry, quality of service that a company provides, is a vital strategy to achieve customer satisfaction. Researchers have demonstrated that enhancing customer satisfaction can foster customer loyalty, leading to positive impact on the market share. (Jiang & Zhang, 2016). Satisfied customers usually result in repurchasing and generating a positive words of mouth (WOM) (Nadiri et al., 2008). Given the emphasis on service quality in recent years, a critical challenge that researchers confront pertains to measuring service quality. To address this issue, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988) developed the SERVQUAL scale consisting of 22 items that assess service quality among five attributes, namely “Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy”. This scale includes customer expectations due to which it was criticized so later another SERVPERF method was created (Cronin & Taylor, 1994) which focused only on perceptions of customers (Nadiri et al., 2008). To suit the airline industry demands, the AIRQUAL scale was established (Bari et al., 2001) that included the five dimensions related to airline “tangibles, terminal tangibles, personnel, empathy and image”. To gauge quality of service of Pakistani airlines, the SERVQUAL scale will be used because it is more applicable to airline industry in Pakistan. Further discussion on this is a part of the Literature Review section.

There are few studies which have examined that service quality has a correlation with the customer satisfaction (Jiang & Zhang, 2016) and a few of these studies already focus on SERVQUAL scale dimensions for service quality (Baloch & Jamshed, 2017; Zhu, 2016). However, to date, no study has examined the effect of service quality through SERVQUAL scale on brand loyalty, that is mediated by customer satisfaction, in Pakistan. Baloch & Jamshed (2017) explored the linkage of service quality and consumer loyalty in Pakistan's context, but with solely focusing on PIA - the national flag carrier. This study, however, encompasses all Pakistani airlines.

This research seeks to analyze the impact of five dimensions of service quality, namely “Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, Tangibles, and Responsiveness”, on customer satisfaction and evaluate how it mediates the linkage of service quality and the brand loyalty. The contentment of travelers plays a significant role in sustaining airlines and promoting local economic growth. As demand for air travel

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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continues to rise, it is imperative for the airline industry to devise effective strategies to attract new customers while retaining existing ones. Achieving customer retention and brand loyalty is contingent on providing high-quality service and ensuring customer satisfaction.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between service quality (ServQual) and customer satisfaction in the airline industry of Pakistan. Moreover, this study aims to examine whether customer satisfaction mediates the impact of service quality on brand loyalty. Additionally, the research aims to identify the service quality dimensions that have the most significant impact on customer satisfaction. The findings of this research can help airline companies in Pakistan to enhance their service quality and customer loyalty by focusing on the key dimensions that have the greatest influence on customer satisfaction.

In the next sections, we first discuss the relevant literature review on the topics of service quality, customer satisfaction and brand loyalty in the perspective of airline industry. This helps in highlighting the research gap and to develop a research framework which comes in the following section 3. Afterwards, we discuss the methodology adopted to carry out this research. Section 5 discusses the results of the data collection and analysis, followed by the conclusion section. In the conclusion section we elaborate the theoretical and practical implications of our research and then conclude this paper describing our limitations and suggesting some areas for future research.

2. Literature Review

The significance of the airline industry can be derived from the fact that despite the setback in 2019-2021 due to COVID-19 pandemic, its market size is \$785.6 billion by revenue in 2022 (McGrath, 2022). Industry experts agree that emerging markets are at the heart of future air traffic and market share (Taneja, 2016). Pakistan, being an emerging economy generates a major portion of first-time flyers. The domestic and international travel is related to the growth in economy of a country (Kum et al., 2015). Pakistan has seen a significant growth in GDP per capita in past few years. According to World Bank, per capita GDP of Pakistan in 2021 has grown to USD 1,538. With this economic growth, the local airline industry might see a premium market appearing along with the budget market (Baloch & Jamshed, 2017). Pakistan International Airline (PIA) is the flag bearer of Pakistan and holds the highest market share in the country's airline industry (CAA Pakistan, 2019). However, recently with emergence of more airline companies in Pakistan, the competition has become tough. The airline industry is highly dependent on differentiation based on quality of service to attain sustainable competition in the industry (Chen, 2008). Tahanisaz & Shokuhyar (2020) recommended improvement in specific service quality attributes like amenities, services based on class, access to in-flight internet and seating comfort to enhance customer satisfaction. According to the research, customer behavioral intentions are significantly influenced by both the image of the airline and the quality of its services (Kurhayadi et al., 2022). Any deficiency in service quality can quickly result in negative feedback and through word-of-mouth (Raut et al., 2022). Service quality results in customer loyalty which in turn results in improved market share and increased profitability (Baloch & Jamshed, 2017). Dissatisfied passengers do not prefer to travel in the same airline (Wu & Lin, 2014). That is why; customer loyalty is a vital goal for any company.

The Pakistan's airline industry needs to engage with customers on multiple fronts to improve its strategic competitiveness (Baloch & Jamshed, 2017). The buyer and seller interaction are highly dependent upon the service quality and hence, Pakistan's aviation industry needs to understand the service-profit chain effect, to be successful in the growing market.

2.1. Service Quality Significance in the Airline Industry

Service quality plays an important role in achieving higher market share and profits (Chen, 2008).

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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Quality is defined by Gilmore (1974) as “(...) the degree to which a specific product satisfies the wants of consumer”, while Normann (1991) defined Service Quality as “(...) a social act that takes place in direct contact between the customer and representatives of the service company”. Based on these definitions, in context of aviation industry, the customers compare their perceptions with the services that they get to evaluate the service quality of the company. Therefore, perceiving the expectations of customers is crucial for the airline management to offer a relatively superior service. Recently, service industry providers have become more focused on providing quality service in this fast changing environment (Nadiri et al., 2008). Superior quality of service ensures customer approval and results in favorable word of mouth as well as repeat customers (Leong et al., 2015). A service oriented firm can increase their profits by charging eight percent more by delivering higher quality services (Gilbert & Wong, 2003). Such companies have a competitive advantage over their competitors and can attain a unique market position (Bawa, 2011). Due to this competitive advantage in the market, high-quality service providers can have much bigger market share and attain high profitability (Gilbert & Wong, 2003). The aviation industry became a highly competitive market after deregulations in 1978 (Tiernan et al., 2008) The rivals in this industry can differentiate through either price or service quality (Kim & Lee, 2011). However, price does not give sustainable advantage that the companies can achieve (Chou et al., 2011).

2.2. Scales to Measure Service Quality

The perception of customers plays a crucial role in determining service quality (Chou et al., 2011). Therefore, measuring customers' perception of service quality is deemed as a significant challenge for researchers. Two main approaches, the Nordic and American, can be used to conceptualize service quality (Suhartanto & Noor, 2012). The Nordic approach emphasize that the quality of a service is determined by its technical and functional aspects, which contribute to the general perception of service quality by customers. The interaction between a service and a customer results in what is being delivered and is called technical quality while the functional quality can be described by the manner in which service delivery is done (Grönroos, 1984). The service delivery is subjective to employee performance, the customer and influence of other customers due to which it becomes difficult to measure (Grönroos, 1984).

According to the American approach, service quality is determined by the "expectancy-disconfirmation model," which defines service quality as the “difference between customers' service expectations and their perceptions of the actual service delivered” (Suhartanto & Noor, 2012). The SERVQUAL scale was developed as an instrument to determine the gap between perception of customers and their expectations (Scheffler, 2018). Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988) came up with five dimensions that are considered as possible indicators for service quality. These dimensions include “tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance”.

The SERVQUAL model received some criticism though it is often used practically. One of the relevant criticisms of SERVQUAL is its inability to be universally applicable to all service-related industries since different industries may require industry-specific dimensions (Ali et al., 2015). SERVPERF scale was developed to overcome the other criticisms of the SERVQUAL scale (Nadiri et al., 2008) however; it is also criticized for its generalizability to measure service quality (Ali et al., 2015).

An AIRQUAL scale was developed to cater for the elements specific to aviation industry (Alotaibi, 2015). This scale encompasses five dimensions specific to the airline industry, including "airline tangibles, terminal tangibles, personnel, empathy and image" (Ekiz et al., 2006). Globally, AIRQUAL scale has a significant validity and reliability to measure quality of service in aviation industry (Alotaibi, 2015). However, there is one dimension called “terminal tangibles” in AIRQUAL scale, which is not compatible with Pakistan’s aviation industry. Communal airport terminals exist for both arrival and departure of passengers at Pakistan’s airports and are used by all airlines including local, international and budget

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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airlines, which hinders research on “terminal tangibles” specific to an airline.

To cater for this gap at Pakistan’s airports, the SERVQUAL scale is selected for this research as a measure for service quality. It does not specify “terminal tangibles” and has more appropriate dimensions to measure quality of service of Pakistan’s airlines. The SERVQUAL scale comprises five dimensions, namely “Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Empathy, and Assurance”. It is worth noting that the "Tangibles" dimension does not exclusively apply to airport terminals.

2.2.3. SERVQUAL Dimensions

The five dimensions of SERVQUAL scale are further divided into a 22-item questionnaire (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Out of the five dimensions, reliability refers to execute the expected service accurately every time. Assurance is related to behavior of the employees, their knowledge, values, courtesy, and ability to satisfy a customer. Tangibles are physical equipment used to provide a service. Empathy refers to the ability to understand a customer’s individual need and give them proper attention while responsiveness is about offering quick service and eagerness to help (Zhu, 2016).

2.3. Customer Satisfaction

In marketing literature, the customer satisfaction is a key concept (Suhartanto & Noor, 2012) which has been defined by multiple researchers as presented in Table 1:

Definition	Author
“the overall evaluation based on the total purchase and consumption experience with a good or service over time”	(Leong et al., 2015)
“the feeling of pleasure or disappointment when a customer compares a product’s perceived performance with his or her prior expectations”	(Jiang & Zhang, 2016)
“consumer’s response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectation and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption”	(Suhartanto & Noor, 2012)

Table 1: Customer Satisfaction Definitions in Literature

In a service company, satisfying customer is a greater challenge than making them happy on purchase of a good because services are multilayered and more complex in nature (Shoab et al., 2018). Also, for service industry, it is very important to retain customers through satisfaction (Kim & Lee, 2011) since new customer acquisition costs five times extra as compared to retaining old ones through customer satisfaction (Sandada & Matibiri, 2016). Customer service is highly dependent on perceived service quality (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996).

2.4. Brand Loyalty

The capacity of a business to attract customers to its brand is a critical determinant of its success (Mellens et al., 1996). In airline industry the customers are passengers, so the more passengers an airline company is able to attract to its brand, the more it is considered successful. Oliver (1999) defined loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior”. Brand loyalty is defined as “the

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biased behavioral response expressed over time by some decision-making unit with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands and is a function of psychological (decision making evaluative) processes” (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978).

Ensuring customer retention and brand loyalty is vital for the survival of a company (Mellens et al., 1996). The significance of brand loyalty can be inferred from the fact that previous Ford VP, Basil Coughlan revealed that every percentage of loyalty translates to \$100mn of profit to Ford (Seraphin & Horton, 1994). Organizations that have brands with high customer loyalty have a competitive edge over others as brand loyalty helps in reduction of marketing costs, provides trade leverage and buys the company time to respond to competitor moves (Mellens et al., 1996). Building on the relevant literature as discussed above, next we will develop our framework for analysis grounded in the literature.

3. Theoretical Framework Development

In order to investigate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the airline industry, (Alotaibi, 2015) has segmented the measurement of service quality into several dimensions. Hence, initially, it is crucial to evaluate the impact of ServQual dimensions on the customer satisfaction, followed by an examination of the mediating role of customer satisfaction.

3.1. Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

A company's ability to offer top-notch services to its customers can encourage them to establish a lasting association with the company (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Overall, quality is a complex concept encapsulating excellence, value, meeting expectations and fulfilling specifications (Saleem et al., 2017). Quality, in services marketing, is determined by customers' perceptions and expectations while the standard of quality is achieved when customers' perceptions meet expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Quality has also been studied as a antecedent of re-purchase intention (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996), satisfaction (Ali et al., 2015) and brand image (Saleem et al., 2017). Prior research in the airline industry indicates that service quality has a considerable impact on passenger satisfaction and their intention to repurchase (Namukasa, 2013). Hence, we will utilize the service quality constructs outlined in the SERVQUAL scale to examine whether they positively impact customer satisfaction in the airline industry of Pakistan.

3.1.1. Assurance:

Assurance is considered the most significant dimension of service in the airline industry as it encompasses the employees' expertise, courteous behavior, and ability to demonstrate confidence, certainty, and trust. (Gilbert & Wong, 2003). In past research, “reliability, assurance, facilities, employees, flight patterns, customization, and responsiveness” (Zhu, 2016) was used to determine the differences between customers' expectations. In this study, many differences were found depending upon various ethnicities and purpose of travel (Gilbert & Wong, 2003). The findings confirmed that assurance is the most important dimension to the customers of an airline industry hence it is inferred that customer satisfaction of airline will increase with increase in assurance.

H1: Quality of service with respect to assurance positively influences customer satisfaction.

3.1.2. Reliability

Reliability is related to fulfilling the agreed-upon service accurately every time an interaction between the customer and the service occurs (Zhu, 2016). Previous implementation of SERVQUAL scale in airline

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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industry suggested that reliability and empathy influence customer retention the most (Young et al., 1994).

Also, on-time performance is the most significant attribute contributing to satisfaction of customers traveling for business purpose, as time is of utmost importance to them (Zhu, 2016). Hence, reliability is another key dimension affecting the perceptions of passengers about an airline's service quality and hence, satisfying the customers.

H2: Quality of service with respect to reliability positively influences customer satisfaction.

3.1.3. Empathy

In the service industry, empathy is an essential component. Passengers assess the quality of service based on the employees' ability to comprehend their needs and their authentic concern for well-being of customers (Scheffler, 2018). Empathy can be measured by the concern of an airline to provide problem-free services and its ability to understand the need of the passengers (Alotaibi, 2015). Empathy in the services industry refers to "caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers" (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In airline industry, this translates to whether the airline caters for individual needs of the passengers. Baloch and Jamshed (2017) concluded in their research that there is a significant positive relationship between empathy and customer loyalty.

H3: Quality of service with respect to empathy positively influences customer satisfaction.

3.1.4. Tangibles

Tangibles defined as the "appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials" (Parasuraman et al., 1988), are a crucial dimension as they enhance the customer's perception of the service quality (Zhu, 2016). It encompasses the appearance of the airplane, airplane and ground facilities, employees, and communication (Parasuraman et al., 1988). It also includes the standard of equipment on the aircraft, cleanliness of the plane interior, and cabin comfort (Scheffler, 2018). It is reasonable to anticipate that providing customers with high-quality tangibles would enhance their level of satisfaction with the service.

H4: Quality of service with respect to tangibles positively influences customer satisfaction.

3.1.5. Responsiveness

Responsiveness in the airline industry pertains to the willingness of an airline to promptly serve and support its customers, offering them fast and efficient services (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Previous research included customer services, complaints handling, check-in services and baggage handling under responsiveness (Bruning et al., 2009). Studies indicated that passengers who fly frequently, have a higher expectation of responsiveness and quality service (Zhu, 2016). It signifies that with increase in responsiveness, the customer satisfaction can increase.

H5: Quality of service with respect to responsiveness positively influences customer satisfaction.

3.2. Service Quality and Brand Loyalty

Previous studies have indicated that service quality and brand loyalty are positively related through mediating factors such as customer satisfaction or brand trust (Chumpitaz & Swaen, 2003; Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Zehir et al., 2011). The previous literature includes satisfaction, loyalty programs, and trust

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*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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as the antecedents of brand loyalty. Baloch and Jamshed, 2017 found that the dimensions of service quality have

a positive and notable correlation with customer loyalty. This implies that customers who receive high-quality services from an airline are more inclined to remain loyal to that airline, reducing the likelihood of switching to another carrier. This suggests that service quality and brand loyalty have a direct and positive correlation.

H6: Service quality has a direct positive influence on brand loyalty.

3.3. Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Brand Loyalty

Arnould & Price (1993) suggested that customer satisfaction can be explained by taking the emotional context of services utilized. Customers can have negative, positive or both type of feelings during a service encounter. If company's give more attention to customers, it will result in positive feelings about the company which leads to customer satisfaction and building a positive image of the company (Kee & Ghazali, 2011). There is also a proven relationship between reputation of a company and its image which influences customer expectations (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1996). Research has proven over time, that superior service by an airline is an important survival feature for today's competitive airline industry (Gilbert & Wong, 2003). For aviation companies in Pakistan, quality of service and customer satisfaction has even more significance due to a lot of negative perception around seat reservation, inconsistent schedules, check-in complexities, mishandling of baggage, safety hazards and misinformation to the customers (Baloch & Jamshed, 2017). The passengers utilize these perceptions to gauge the airline quality (Tiernan et al., 2008).

Consistently delivering quality services gives way to customer loyalty (Parasumaran et al., 1991). Loyalty is important to airline companies because sustaining a loyal customer costs less than new customer acquisition (Namukasa, 2013). Also, loyal customers less price sensitive and they need less communication from the firm hence decreasing the marketing costs (Gómez et al., 2006). Hence, providing high quality service is a differentiating strategy for airlines to improve customer experience, the airline image which is further related to improvement in loyalty, earnings and market share (Baloch & Jamshed, 2017). Customer satisfaction relates to repurchase intention which and is a part of loyalty (Saleem et al., 2017). Kotler & Keller (2012) explained satisfaction as a phenomenon that occurs when perceived outcomes of customers meet their expectations and results in feeling of pleasure. It is expected that a satisfied customer will repurchase the service and become loyal to the brand (Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996). Thus in services sector, customer satisfaction has developed into a main concern and a priority to gain the competitive edge of brand loyalty (Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Parasuraman et al., 1988). According to previous research, assurance (Gilbert & Wong, 2003) and responsiveness (Pakdil & Aydın, 2007) are the most important predictors of loyalty to an airline brand. Both these predictors are contributors of customer satisfaction (Saleem et al., 2017). Hence, based on this literature, following hypothesis can be proposed:

H7: Customer Service plays a mediating role in the relationship between Service Quality and Brand Loyalty.

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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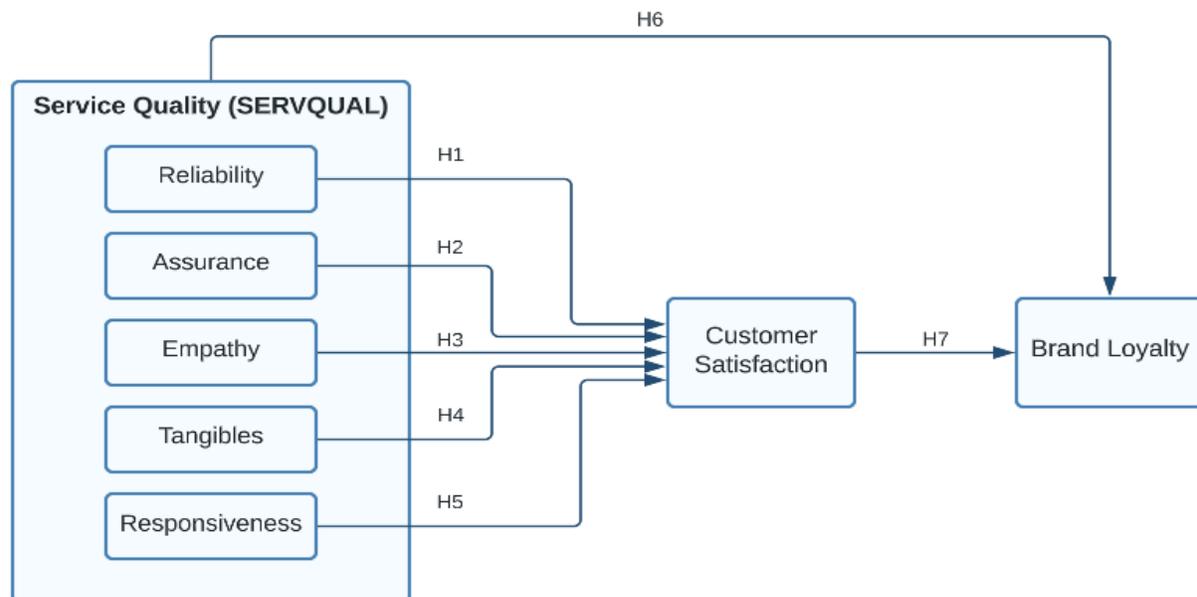
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3.4 Framework

From the above sections, following research framework can be developed.



4. Methodology

This study focuses on the influence of service quality dimensions on brand loyalty and the customer satisfaction as a mediator in the process. A quantitative study is undertaken in this research in which data collection is done through a large group of representative respondents. Data is collected through structured questions on the Likert scale, as it increases the result significance and makes the analysis more useful (Ballinger & Davey, 1998). This study is a cross-sectional study in which data was gathered in a single go, through a survey that was kept open for a month, from September 13, 2022 to October 13, 2022.

Data was conducted through survey, from the individuals who have recently travelled with a local air carrier. According to research, the customers remember negative experiences for a longer duration as compared to the positive experiences (Samson, 2006). For this reason, a timeframe of two years was selected so that the respondents are able to remember the negative as well as positive experiences of service quality while answering the questions. Scheffler (2018) used a twelve-month timeline for research in airline industry; however, the air travel had recently opened throughout the world after travel restrictions of COVID-19 were lifted, and due to this reason, this research is based on past two years to

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capture a good sample size. A total of 346 responses were received between September and October, 2022 out of which 103 respondents travelled by air before 2020 hence those 103 responses were considered invalid and the remaining 243 respondents who travelled within past two years were considered valid.

The measurement scales for various variables used in the research were adapted from previous literature. The survey was segregated into nine sections. First section was used to introduce the subject and to get consent of the respondent to fill the survey. Second section collected general information about demography of the respondent and about their air travel details like departure city, year when they travelled last and the airline that they used to travel. This helped in understanding the sample better. Several applicable options were given to answer these questions. Section three to seven each contained items related to each of the five independent variables of SERVQUAL scale (reliability, assurance, empathy, tangibility, and responsiveness). Section eight comprised of items related to the mediating variable – customer satisfaction while section nine contained items regarding brand loyalty. The items included in section three to nine are listed in Table 2 along with the variable that they represent.

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Section	Item	Variable
3	REL1: Departures and arrivals of the airplanes is on-time REL2: The check-in procedures are efficient REL3: Handling of baggage is effective and without loss REL4: The airline provides reliable schedules REL5: Reservations and ticketing transactions were easy and error-free.	Reliability (REL)
4	ASR1: The airline has a very good safety record ASR2: Airline is a trusted name in the industry ASR3: Food and drink served on the aircraft during the flight are of high quality and sufficiently varied. ASR4: The meals served on the plane are fresh ASR5: The airline offers a good frequent flyer program	Assurance (ASR)
5	EMP1: The airline offers appropriate services for children EMP2: The airline offers good services for people with special needs. EMP3: The airline staff is courteous and friendly EMP4: The cabin crew give passengers individual attention EMP5: Employees of the airline understand the passenger's specific needs and are able to solve the problems	Empathy (EMP)
6	TANG1: The airplane interior is clean TANG2: The on-board atmosphere is comfortable TANG3: In-flight amenities (like free wi-fi, wet napkins, amenity kits, etc.) provided during the flight are good. TANG4: The airline provides good in-flight entertainment TANG5: The airplane cabin is comfortable	Tangibility (TANG)
7	RESP1: The on-ground staff is available to resolve concerns RESP2: The flight information is accurately and readily available RESP3: The airline handles complaints efficiently and effectively RESP4: Information can be easily found on the official website of the airline	Responsiveness (RESP)
8	CS1: I am pleased with my decision to use this airline as a service provider CS2: I think the airline provides adequate service/value for the airfare. CS3: My choice of this airline as a service provider was a wise one CS4: I feel satisfied with my experience with the airline.	Customer Satisfaction (CS)
9	BL1: I consider the airline to be my first choice for air travel in Pakistani Airline Industry BL2: I would recommend this brand to friends and family BL3: I intend to continue traveling through this airline	Brand Loyalty (BL)

Table 1: Survey operationalization for Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Brand Loyalty

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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Previous research has enhanced Parasuraman's (1988) 22-item SERVQUAL scale to measure quality of service in airline industry and hence the operationalization of the SERVQUAL variables in this research are mainly based on Zhu (2016). The study by Scheffler (2018) in the airline industry was used to develop questions related to service quality, while the items for measuring customer satisfaction were taken from a study by Ong (2017) that focused on customer satisfaction and brand loyalty in the banking sector. One question regarding doing more transactions was removed from Brand Loyalty variables used by Ong (2017) because this question is not applicable in aviation industry. These scales showed statistical reliability (α) in the original studies. Apart from section two, all the questions used five-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (1-5).

The statistical data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.0. First, the demographic and flight related general descriptions of the sample were summarized by using frequencies. A descriptive statistics analysis was conducted to get an idea of the composition of sample and its travel detail frequencies. To check how well the developed instrument measures the required variable, a validity test was performed using Bivariate Spearman Correlation. For questionnaire reliability, the Cronbach's Alpha test was run to confirm the consistency and stability of the instrument to measure a concept (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Once the validity and reliability of the measures were confirmed, a Bivariate Spearman Correlation test was performed to examine relationships between each of the independent variable with mediating variable in the hypothesis. A Spearman correlation method was used in contrast to Pearson for two reasons. First, Pearson correlation is used in case of continuous variables while we have ordinal variables here for which Spearman correlation is more suitable and secondly, Pearson method is used in case there is a linear relationship between variables (Pallant, 2002), while in this case there is not a strict linear relationship being followed. Apart from this, if Spearman method is used for linear data, it does not have much impact, however if Pearson method is used for non-linear data, then it can result in significant differences. Spearman correlation is a better choice for questions that are based on Likert scale. That is why Spearman method was chosen for correlation. Next, a regression analysis was conducted to examine the association between multiple independent variables and a single dependent variable (Pallant, 2002). The regression technique is useful as it allows researcher to identify the most effective and important factor contributing towards the dependent variable along with predicting outcome of dependent variable using multiple independent variables (Pallant, 2002).

5. Results

The analysis included 243 valid responses, with 20.6% of the respondents being males and 79.4% being females. The majority of the respondents (55.1%) were aged between 31 to 40 years, while 28.9% fell into the 18 to 30 years range. The group aged between 41 to 50 years comprised 16.5% of the respondents. According to the analysis, 82.3% of the respondents travelled in last twelve months, 9.1% travelled prior to one year while 8.6% of the respondents travelled 2 years ago. This proves that most of the data was taken from those people who travelled by air recently. As discussed before, the questionnaire had a total of five options which helped in removing data of those people who travelled before 2 years of time. A very interesting observation was that 56.8 percent of the respondents travelled through the national carrier of Pakistan, PIA (Pakistan International Airline). Airblue stood at second with 18.1 percent of respondents travelling through it. 14.4 percent of the respondents travelled via Serene Air while Air Sial which is a relatively new airline is surprisingly the fourth most traveled

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airline of the research sample.

Before going forward with further analysis, the consistency and stability of the questionnaire was checked ensured by running a reliability analysis. Cronbach's Alpha is the most frequently used metric that examines internal consistency of items of a variable to gauge the reliability of a scale (Abdel & Rady, 2018). The value of Cronbach's Alpha ranges from 0 to 1 but acceptable value for a scale in social sciences is 0.7 (Abdel & Rady, 2018).

To undergo a reliability analysis, the value of Cronbach Alpha was calculated for each of the variable being represented by a number of items. The results of Cronbach's Alpha for each instrument are discussed below. The value of Cronbach's Alpha for each of the variable is listed in Table 9. All of these values are above 0.7 which shows that the items have high internal consistency and hence they are a reliable measure of their respective variables.

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
REL	3.8337	0.85106	0.821	5
ASR	3.2716	0.84304	0.778	5
EMP	3.2181	0.90014	0.878	5
TANG	2.9770	0.93868	0.870	5
RESP	3.4660	0.88819	0.857	4
CS	3.2963	1.15291	0.949	4
BL	3.1399	1.30253	0.954	3

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Correlation determines the strength and direction (positive or negative) of relationship between two variables (Pallant, 2002). SPSS v26 was used to perform the correlation analysis. The research uses Spearman Bivariate correlation to determine the strength and direction of relationship between two variables. The correlation matrix is shown in Table 4.

		REL	ASR	EMP	TANG	RESP	CS	BL
REL	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.628**	0.578**	0.532**	0.646**	0.707**	0.664**
	Significance	.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
ASR	Correlation Coefficient		1.000	0.622**	0.624**	0.663**	0.744**	0.689**
	Significance		.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
EMP	Correlation Coefficient			1.000	0.624**	0.670**	0.649**	0.571**
	Significance			.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
TANG	Correlation Coefficient				1.000	0.684**	0.705**	0.628**
	Significance				.	0.000	0.000	0.000
RESP	Correlation Coefficient					1.000	0.755**	0.691**
	Significance					.	0.000	0.000
CS	Correlation Coefficient						1.000	0.882**
	Significance						.	0.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: Correlations Table

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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As depicted from the table that all the correlations are highly significant since for all the variables $p < 0.01$. Beginning with the first five hypothesis based on relationship of service quality with that of customer satisfaction, it is seen that a significant and high positive correlation exist between reliability and customer satisfaction ($r=0.707, p < 0.01$), assurance and customer satisfaction ($r=0.744, p < 0.01$), tangibility and customer satisfaction ($r=0.705, p < 0.01$) and, responsiveness and customer satisfaction ($r=0.755, p < 0.01$). However; there is exists a significant and moderately positive correlation between empathy and customer satisfaction ($r=0.649, p < 0.01$). Also, it is seen that there is a highly positive and significant correlation between customer satisfaction and brand loyalty ($r=0.882, p < 0.01$). This data suggests that there is a positive relationship between the service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. Increase in these ServQual dimensions leads to increased customer satisfaction. Furthermore, customer satisfaction is directly proportional to increased brand loyalty.

The effect of service quality variables on customer satisfaction was observed using the multiple linear regression technique as there are multiple independent variables being studied. In first part of the regression analysis, the SERVQUAL's five variables were treated as independent variables while the mediator variable, customer satisfaction was the dependent variable. For linear regression, R-square is considered as a goodness-to-fit measure for a theoretical model. For small sample sizes, SPSS adjusts the value of R-square to cater for the inconsistency. Since we had an appropriate sample size of 243, there was not much difference between the value of R-square and adjusted R-square so the value of R-square is considered in this research. The R-square value shows how much change in customer satisfaction is occurring because of a specific independent variable. This regression model suggested that the R-square value is 0.720, which means that the service quality variables (SERVQUAL) cause 72.0 percent change in customer satisfaction. R-square caters for the amount of variance in dependent variable that is predicted by a set of independent variables when taken as a group. So R-square value of 0.720 shows that when taken as a group, our independent variables REL, ASR, EMP, TANG and RESP account for 72.0% of the variance in Customer Satisfaction.

The ANOVA table showed that the p-value of the model is 0.000 which is less than 0.01; hence there is a significant relationship between the independent variables of service quality and customer satisfaction. This means that the regression model is statistically significant and when the five independent variables are taken in a group, the predict the customer satisfaction significantly. The overall model is significant but a deeper analysis of the factors of service quality is needed to study significance of the individual independent variables. The regression model is summarized in Table 5.

R-square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Significance
0.720	0.61669	0.000

Independent Variables: RESP, ASR, REL, TANG, EMP

Dependent Variable: CS

Table 5: Regression Model

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*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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A detailed analysis of the regression of independent variables can be done using the regression coefficients in Table 6. First, all the independent variables except empathy have a significant relationship with customer satisfaction with a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$). Empathy has a p-value of 0.501 which is less than 0.05 which means that the relationship of empathy with customer satisfaction is not significant.

Model	Coefficient Beta (β)	t-value	Significance
REL	0.233	4.772	0.000
ASR	0.302	5.743	0.000
EMP	0.035	0.674	0.501
TANG	0.185	3.580	0.000
RESP	0.244	4.247	0.000

Independent Variables: RESP, ASR, REL, TANG, EMP

Dependent Variable: CS

Table 6: Regression Coefficients

For reliability (REL), a beta value of 0.233 indicates that the change in the reliability of airline by one unit will bring about a change in the dependent variable that is customer satisfaction (CS) by 0.233 units ($\beta=0.233$). Furthermore, the beta value is positive which shows that there is a positive relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction. In other words, it can be deduced that for every unit increase in the reliability of the airline results in a corresponding 0.233 unit increase in customer satisfaction. For assurance (ASR), the beta value is 0.302 which shows that a change in assurance of an airline by one unit will bring a change in customer satisfaction (CS) by 0.302 units ($\beta=0.302$). The positive beta value signifies that a positive relationship exists between assurance and customer satisfaction that one-unit increase in assurance, there is a corresponding increase of 0.302 units in customer satisfaction. Similarly, the beta values of tangibility ($\beta=0.185$) and responsiveness ($\beta=0.244$) also indicate a positive relationship with dependent variable that is customer satisfaction, which shows that a unit increase in tangibility will increase the customer satisfaction by 0.185 while a unit increase in responsiveness will increase the customer satisfaction by 0.244. The beta coefficient for empathy (EMP) is 0.035 which is positive but is very low (close to zero). This means that with every unit increase in empathy, it will result in only 0.035 units increase in the dependent variable that is customer satisfaction ($\beta=0.035$). This increase is almost negligible and hence supports the result of empathy being insignificant with relation to customer satisfaction.

The t-value indicates the level of confidence of a coefficient as a predictor of dependent variables. A higher t-value shows greater confidence of a coefficient as a predictor while a low t-value indicates the low reliability of a coefficient's predictive power. If t-value is 0, it implies that the sample results completely support null hypothesis. In regression analysis of the research, it was found that all t-values except that of empathy were high (REL t-value=4.772, ASR t-value=5.743, TANG t-value=3.580 and RESP t-value=4.247). For a coefficient to be a strong predictor, the t-value should be higher than +2 or lower than -2. The four variables of reliability, assurance, tangibility and responsiveness are above this

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range so these variables are strong predictors of customer satisfaction. On the other hand empathy has a t-value of 0.674 which is close to zero and falls in the range of +2 to -2. Hence, the confidence of empathy as a predictor of customer satisfaction is very low.

Also, the largest beta coefficient is of assurance dimension at 0.302. This shows that this dimension has the strongest impact to explain the level of customer satisfaction. With some recent airplane crashes in Pakistan, it is not surprising that the element of safety and trust is most important to the passengers while selecting an airline service. The second largest contributor to customer satisfaction is responsiveness with beta value 0.244 closely followed by reliability with a beta value of 0.233. Responsiveness dimension mostly deals with readily available information and customer services while reliability is related to the ease and timeliness of the services.

The mediating role of customer satisfaction between independent variables with that of the dependent variable is explored using the Hayes Process Macro (v4.2) in SPSS. This macro was developed by Andrew F. Hayes to study the mediating role of one or multiple mediating variables. The model 4 of process macro supports the theoretical framework of this study; hence, model 4 was selected to run the mediation analysis. Since Hayes Process Macro allows running mediation analysis on only one independent variable at a time, first a mean of all the independent variables (reliability, assurance, empathy, tangibility and responsiveness) was taken to determine a single value for service quality (SQ). Next the mediation of customer satisfaction was checked between service quality and brand loyalty. The model summary tables are summed up in Table 7.

Relationship	Variables	R-square	p-value
IV>MV	SQ>CS	0.7030	0.0000
IV,MV>DV	SQ,CS>BL	0.7814	.0000
	SQ>BL	0.2038	.0371
	CS>BL	0.8862	0.0000
IV>DV	SQ>BL	0.5987	0.0000

Table 2: Mediation Analysis

According to these results, the variance that occurs in mediator (customer satisfaction) due to the independent variable (service quality) is 70.3% (R-square=0.7030). It means that an increase in 1 unit of service quality will increase customer satisfaction by 0.703 units. Also, the relationship between service quality is significant as $p < 0.01$ ($p = 0.0000$) in this case. Apart from this, the overall R-square for affect of both independent variable (service quality) and mediator (customer satisfaction) on dependent variable (brand loyalty) is significant. Service quality and customer satisfaction accounts to 78.14% variance in brand loyalty. However, the details show that the p-value of relationship between service quality and brand loyalty is 0.0371 while the p-value of the relationship between customer satisfaction and brand loyalty is 0.0000. The p-value of relationship of service quality with brand loyalty is quite high as compared to the p-value of relationship between customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, but it is still significant ($p < 0.05$). The positive values of R-square show, that an increase in one unit of service quality will increase brand loyalty by 0.2038 units while an increase in one unit of customer service will increase brand loyalty by 0.8862 units. The relationship of service quality with that of brand loyalty is highly significant as p-value is equal to 0.0000 ($p < 0.01$). Also, the positive R-square value of

Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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0.5987 shows that an increase in one unit of service quality, will result in an increase of 0.59 units in the brand loyalty.

In mediation, the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable can be divided into direct and indirect effects. The direct effect refers to the effect of the independent variable (service quality) on the dependent variable (brand loyalty) without the involvement of a mediator (customer satisfaction). On the other hand, the indirect effect demonstrates the effect of the independent variable (service quality) on the dependent variable (brand loyalty) with the inclusion of a mediator (customer satisfaction). For significant mediation, in indirect effect there should be no zero crossing in bootstrap upper and lower bounds. The results of total, direct and indirect effect of mediation analysis are listed in Table 8.

Relationship	Mediation	Effect	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	p-value
SQ>CS>BL	Total effect	1.3584	1.2172	1.4995	0.0000
	Direct effect	0.2038	0.0122	0.3953	0.0371
	Indirect effect	1.1546	0.9650	1.3579	No zero crossing

Table 3: Total Effect, Direct Effect, and Indirect Effect

The p-values in Table 8 depict that there is a significant indirect effect of independent variables with that of the dependent variables in presence of a mediator as there is no zero-crossing between the upper and lower bounds. The direct effect of independent variables with dependent variable is also significant as p-value=0.0371, which is less than 0.05.

In the effects column, it is observed that the variance in brand loyalty in indirect effect (effect=1.1546) is more than the variance in brand loyalty in direct effect (effect=0.2038). This shows that the relationship of service quality and brand loyalty strengthens in presence of the mediator that is customer satisfaction. Both the indirect effects are positive and significant; hence, it is established that the mediator variable, customer satisfaction partially mediates between the independent variable that is service quality and the dependent variable that is brand loyalty. Since both direct and indirect effects are significant, hence partial mediation exists between service quality and brand loyalty with customer satisfaction being used as a mediator.

From Tables 6 and 8, it can be established that hypotheses H1, H2, H4, H5, H6 and H7 are confirmed and significant while hypothesis H3 is insignificant.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Discussion

This research explores the factors contributing to customer satisfaction of the air passengers in Pakistan and studies its effect on brand loyalty. The practical and academic contributions of the study are discussed below.

The study revealed there is a significant and favorable association between the various aspects of service quality and the contentment of customers. The selected dimensions of service quality were specifically relevant in the context of Pakistan. The findings of this research support the existing literature that highlights the influence of reliability, assurance, tangibility, and responsibility on customer

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*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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satisfaction. At the other hand, the relationship of empathy with customer satisfaction turned out to be insignificant. The items associated with empathy were mostly related to needs in special circumstances and individual attention of airline crew to the passengers. This can open avenue for further research whether empathy is low because less people encountered special circumstances in which empathy matters. The increasing competition among airline companies forces the marketers to focus more on the reduction of airfares (Saleem et al., 2017) instead of focusing on improving the quality of service to increase brand loyalty. The result of this research indicates that airlines companies of Pakistan need to focus on their service quality as the passengers give more weightage to quality of service as compared to price. Additionally, there is an interesting role of customer satisfaction acting as a mediator between customer service and brand loyalty. Our study affirms that customer satisfaction plays a positive and significant mediating role between service quality and brand loyalty. This result is consistent with previous research (Baloch & Jamshed, 2017; Forgas et al., 2010), that highlights the importance of customer satisfaction in shaping customer loyalty towards a brand. Customer satisfaction's role as a mediator for brand loyalty is also referred to by Cronin & Taylor (1994). Also, it is observed that the relationship of empathy with that of customer satisfaction is insignificant. However, its indirect relation with brand loyalty through the mediation of customer satisfaction is significant. This infers that in order to achieve brand loyalty, empathy is an important factor.

Another significant finding is that assurance, responsiveness, and reliability are the most important factors contributing to customer satisfaction and, subsequently, to brand loyalty. Our reliability statistics show that the mean of tangibles is the lowest in Pakistan's airlines. According to (Scheffler, 2018), tangibles refer to the aircraft equipment, cleanliness of the cabin interior, and overall comfort. To improve customer satisfaction levels, airlines should focus on enhancing their tangibles, as this is the area where most of the aircrafts are lacking. An airline can gain competitive advantage by working on tangibles as a differentiating factor.

6.2. Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, the research concludes that customer satisfaction and service quality are crucial determinants of brand loyalty in the aviation industry. Therefore, aviation companies should prioritize service quality, along with other factors such as pricing, to foster brand loyalty among customers. Airline companies should try to be more connected with the passengers to create a sense of assurance, reliability, and responsiveness. Airlines should try to satisfy their customers to gain more brand loyal customers in today's competitive world. Since customer service strongly mediates the factors of service quality and brand loyalty, hence, it can be inferred that enhancing the quality of service and ensuring customer satisfaction are essential factors in cultivating brand loyalty for airlines. Results stated that the first two and last three hypothesis were confirmed while the third hypothesis was not confirmed. The results of this research have significant theoretical implications for the literature. The findings demonstrate that "reliability, assurance, tangibles, and responsiveness" are critical determinants of customer satisfaction in Pakistan's aviation industry, while empathy does not have a significant impact on customer satisfaction. The study also reveals that quality of service has a positive effect on brand loyalty, and this relationship is mediated by customer satisfaction. The study's findings provide new insights into the factors that drive customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, which can guide airlines in developing effective strategies to retain customers and improve their market position. Overall, the study contributes to the theoretical understanding of the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty in the aviation industry of Pakistan.

Corresponding Author:

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The practical implications of this research for airline managers are discussed in this section. Previous literature shows that customers are important for success of a company and to make it profitable (Ekiz et al., 2006). However, what the customer values and which service elements will increase customer satisfaction, are often not clear to organizations. This research shows that assurance is the most prominent predictor of customer satisfaction which eventually mediates brand loyalty. The airline companies should invest more in inculcating the element of safety and trust in their brand. For this purpose, the maintenance of the aircrafts should be done more often, and the pilots and aircraft crew should be properly trained for all the special circumstances that can occur in air.

The second and third most important factors contributing to customer satisfaction were responsiveness and reliability, respectively. These mostly deal with the employees of an airline company and the processes involved in air travel like check-ins, flight schedules and baggage handling. The airline companies should make their processes seamless to make the air travel more convenient for their customers. In Pakistan, it is common for the flights to get delayed and change schedules without informing the customers. The results are in accordance with this observation as the airline customers would want the airlines to fix the uncertainties in reliability of flight schedules and responsiveness of the airlines to any changes in schedules. The airline crew must be trained to assess and resolve the problems of individuals that can occur before, during or after the flight. There is a room for improvement in internal marketing of the aviation companies which intends to motivate the employees who are the point of contact for passengers to improve the service encounter in airline industry (Scheffler, 2018). This can lead to better service quality which results in customer satisfaction and eventually brand loyalty.

Another aspect is the tangibles of the aircraft which although did not result in a high beta coefficient, however, it is still significant. The first impression of the service quality of an airline comes from the environment of the airplane which is the service landscape for aviation industry (Scheffler, 2018). This means that if the environment of an airplane is clean, comfortable and provides convenience, the passengers will take a positive first impression of the airline company. The airlines can develop guidelines for quality and process of internal maintenance which will eventually result in customer satisfaction. Practitioners and managers can apply the knowledge gained through this research in the airline industry. The study results indicate that maintaining a focus on improving service quality is crucial for enhancing customer experience and satisfaction. Once the customer is satisfied, they will eventually lead to brand loyalty and customer retention. This is also evident in the previous literature (Saleem et al., 2017). Including new service features that create value for the customers along with meeting the customer expectation by fulfilling promises, increases customer satisfaction. When customers are satisfied, they perform repeat purchases which increases brand loyalty to the airline.

There are three stages of encounter between air passengers and the airline – “pre-flight services, in-flight services and the post-flight services” (Saleem et al., 2017). Hence, based on the previous discussion, the airline marketers must focus on improving the customer experience on all these three stages of the customer encounter. Pre-flight encounter can be improved by improving the process of reservation and ticketing and making it convenient and error-free. Efficient check-in procedures are necessary to minimize the wait times for passengers prior to their flights. The flight schedules provided should be reliable and if there is a change in schedule, the customers should be informed in time. The maintenance of the aircrafts must be done on regular basis to ensure safety and improve trust and assurance among passengers. Pre-flight services can also include providing an online tool “to facilitate destination planning, flight booking and calculation of flight cost” (Scheffler, 2018). Such measures will ensure engagement of the customer with an airline for a longer duration, hence resulting in more

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*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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trust and positive first impression of the service.

The in-flight services can be improved in terms of taking care of special diet requirements of the passengers, serving fresh and a variety of food, stable internet connectivity and better entertainment options. The airplane staff should be courteous and should be able to understand individual needs. There is a lack of appropriate services for children and people with special needs that needs improvement. The cabins in the airplane and the service landscape i.e. the aircraft should be clean and comfortable so that the customers can have a positive impression of the airline, hence increasing the brand image and customer satisfaction. Finally, the post-flight experience can be improved by paying attention to the inconvenience experienced during the flight or before the flight. The airline personnel must possess the necessary skills to respond to service failures promptly and effectively to mitigate any inconvenience experienced by passengers. This includes aiding passengers in filing recovery claims for lost baggage, issuing refunds for canceled or delayed flights, and facilitating alternative travel arrangements for passengers who have missed their connecting flights. Along with this, the airlines should provide valuable frequent flyer programs to enhance loyalty to the brand. These steps can improve the post-flight experience for the customers of an airline. In addition to this, ensuring customer satisfaction plays a crucial role in cultivating brand loyalty among customers. The emergence of new competitors such as AirSial and Fly Jinnah, Pakistan's first low-cost carrier, has intensified the competition in the aviation industry of Pakistan, placing greater importance on customer satisfaction. In order to stand out, the airlines need to come up with strategies that can identify the customer needs and wants, so that the airlines can offer services that provide optimal value for airfare. This can be done by taking feedback from customers after a service encounter, to address customer issues.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

The research examines the role of customer satisfaction as a moderator between service quality and brand loyalty. There can be other factors impacting brand loyalty for example, brand image or word of mouth can be explored in further research on this topic. Furthermore, according to this research, the service quality variables incorporated into the model explain 72% of the variance in customer satisfaction (R-square=0.720). Nevertheless, there may be additional factors that impact customer satisfaction. For example, price can be of importance to customers as they compare the value provided by airlines to the airfare charged to the customer. In future studies, the influence of other variables such as price and customer relationship on customer satisfaction can be explored.

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Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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Corresponding Author:

*Email: shumaila.islam1@gmail.com (Shumaila Islam)

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