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BEYOND THE FLIGHT: DOES SERVICE EXCELLENCE PRECEDE SUSTAINABLE AIRLINE BRAND TRUST?

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the impact of the perceived service quality and value in airlines on building brand trust. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 236 customers from different airlines. The unique contribution of this study is the conceptualization of service excellence as a fundamental factor that precedes brand trust. The results highlight a strong relationship between these elements, suggesting that service delivery must go beyond functional excellence to create a lasting impact on passenger behavior. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of the role of airlines in improving quality standards, which leads to increased perceived value and sustainable brand trust. Ultimately, the research indicates that the enhancement of the experience and the perceived quality of passengers is a major driver of long-term credibility in airlines.

Key Words: perceived quality, perceived value, sustainable brand trust, airline, service excellence

JEL classification: M31, Z32, L21

Introduction

In the last ten years, aviation has faced a series of strong disturbances, from the devastating COVID-19 pandemic that grounded the global fleet, through security crises, to geopolitical conflicts and chronic personnel shortages (Pascual & Cain, 2021). In such an environment of permanent

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uncertainty, passengers have become extremely sensitive to security, reliability, and flexibility, which is why the classic service model is no longer sufficient for survival. Ensuring the survival of airlines at this crucial moment is a top priority for both governments and management. Thus, understanding how to retain consumers and meet their expectations is essential for guaranteeing airlines' sustainability (Shen & Yahya, 2021). Airlines can only establish enduring confidence through perceived service excellence, which denotes the shift from being a mere "carrier" to becoming a "travel partner." This is achieved through individualized support, transparent communication, and unwavering safety standards. Today's travelers choose companies that demonstrate the capacity to turn a stressful journey into a reliable and seamless experience, directly affecting sustainable brand trust.

This research paper is structured as follows. Following the introduction, the first section explores the concepts of perceived service quality, perceived value, and brand trust. The second section presents the research methodology and the data collected from 236 respondents. The third section highlights the findings, exploring how service excellence, conceptualized as a synergy of quality and value-precedes and shapes long-term brand trust. The paper concludes with practical implications and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review and Research Background

In this study, service excellence is conceptualized as a higher-order construct that integrates both perceived service quality and perceived value. According to contemporary service management literature, excellence is not merely the absence of defects but the consistent delivery of superior value that exceeds passenger expectations (Johnston, 2004). While perceived quality focuses on the performance and attributes of the service itself, "perceived value represents the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of the service based on perceptions of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). Therefore, the synergy between high-quality standards and a fair value-for-effort ratio forms the foundation of service excellence, which ultimately drives long-term brand trust.

Perceived service quality is often defined as the consumer's subjective judgment of an airline's overall excellence or superiority. In the aviation sector, this goes beyond the physical attributes of the aircraft; it

encompasses the reliability of the flight schedule, the responsiveness of the ground staff, and the assurance provided by the crew. As Shiwakoti et al. (2021) point out, while safety is a basic expectation, it is the consistent delivery of these functional service elements that builds a passenger's foundational faith in the brand.

Furthermore, during periods of global uncertainty, the impact of service quality on a brand's image becomes even more critical. Hassan and Salem (2022) emphasize that maintaining high quality standards serves as a strategic tool for airlines to mitigate stress and foster passenger loyalty. When passengers perceive that an airline is reliable and “better than others” in managing their travel needs, it reduces their perceived risk and directly strengthens brand trust. Consequently, perceived quality is not a static attribute but a dynamic driver that precedes the formation of a sustainable relationship between the traveler and the airline.

Perceived value is a customer's subjective assessment of service utility, based on the balance between benefits received and costs incurred, such as price, time, and effort. This value increases when the service quality exceeds passenger expectations, providing a vital competitive advantage. A passenger's overall assessment of a service, balanced by the advantages received and the sacrifices made during the experience, is the core definition of perceived value (Kim, Hyun, 2019). Empirical study by Heung and Ngai (2008) confirm that high perceived value directly drives behavioral intentions, including repeat purchases and positive recommendations. Furthermore, Praja et al. (2023) emphasize that aligning service delivery with value expectations is essential for fostering long-term credibility. Ultimately, when passengers feel that the quality justifies their investment, it becomes a critical driver of sustainable brand trust.

According to Chung et al. (2022), the anticipation of morally acceptable action is trust, a concept that has gained significant relevance despite the limited empirical research on passenger trust in the aviation sector. While general perceptions often equate trustworthiness with safety and reliability (Shiwakoti et al., 2021), the readiness of the average consumer to rely on the brand's ability to fulfil its declared purpose is a deeper aspect of trust (Praja et al., 2023). This perspective suggests that trust is not merely a reaction to functional attributes like convenience or responsiveness, but a reflection of the brand's perceived skill, effectiveness, and unwavering commitment to its promises, even when

doing so is not financially advantageous for the company. Consequently, building enduring trust in the airline industry transcends technical performance; it requires a value-based alignment where passengers perceive a shared culture and identity with the brand. As customers' loyalty is increasingly impacted by their sense of the service's worth and the company's ethical management, the level of sustained trust ultimately depends on the degree to which travelers identify with the airline's core values and consistent behaviors.

Based on the theoretical framework of service management and the current challenges in the aviation industry, this study proposes a model where service excellence, comprising both quality and value, acts as the primary antecedent of brand trust. To empirically test these relationships within the context of contemporary air travel, the following hypotheses have been developed:

H1: Perceived service excellence is positively and significantly related to sustainable airline brand trust.

H1a: Perceived service quality is positively and significantly related to airline brand trust.

H1b: Perceived service value is positively and significantly related to airline brand trust.

Methodology of Research

There are 236 respondents in the sample who have utilised various airline services within the last three years. As a research tool, the questionnaire was employed. A pre-made electronic questionnaire for the study was created using the Google Forms application. The survey was disseminated online through several Facebook public and private groups, a LinkedIn account, and private messages sent to friends and acquaintances. Using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), the respondents assessed the results.

Table 1: *Structure of respondents*

	Frequency (N = 236)			N	%
	N	%			
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Employment</i>		
F	121	51,3	Employed	208	88,1
M	115	48,7	Unemployed	11	4,7
<i>Education</i>			Student	17	7,2
High school	27	11,4	<i>Airline</i>		

College	31	13,1	Air Serbia	100	42.4
Bachelor's <i>degree</i>	89	37,7	Wizz Air	32	13.6
Master's degree	60	25,4	Turkish Airlines	30	12.7
PhD	29	12,3	Lufthansa	12	5.1
Age			Quatar Airways	8	3.4
18 – 25	31	13,1	Residual	54	22.9
26 – 35	80	33,9			
36 – 45	64	27,1			
46 – 55	46	19,5			
Over 55	15	6,4			

Source: *Authors' calculation*

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections: the first focused on the socio-demographic profile of the respondents (gender, age, education, employment status, airlines that provided the services), while the second section contained items measuring the latent variables of the model: perceived service quality, perceived value, and brand trust.

Women make up the majority of respondents (51,3%) in the observed sample, whereas males make up 48,7% of the sample. The majority of respondents had a bachelor's degree, followed by those with a master's degree, with a college and PhD, and the fewest with only a high school (37,7%, 25,4%, 13,1%, 12,3%, and 11,4%, respectively). Young respondents between the ages of 26 and 35 make up the majority of the sample (33,9%), followed by those between the ages of 36 and 45 (27,1%), those between the ages of 46 and 55 (19,5%), those between the ages of 18 and 25 (13,1%), and those over the age of 55 (6,4%). The majority of respondents (42.4%) used Air Serbia's services, followed by Turkish Airlines (12.7%) and Wizz Air (13.6%). The percentage of respondents who utilised other airlines was far lower.

Research Results and Discussion

IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 23, was used to process statistical data. First, the descriptive findings are shown. Absolute and relative frequency are used to show data in a descriptive manner for categorical variables. The average, median, and standard deviation of the observed variables are used to display numerical data. The data of 263 respondents were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques to determine the arithmetic mean, median, and standard deviation. The findings of the descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 2. Conclusions were made

using the arithmetic mean, median, and standard deviation values for every variable in the model.

Table 2: *Measures of descriptive statistics*

	N	Arithmetic mean	Median	Std. Dev.
Perceived quality	236	5.59	5.75	1.14
Perceived value	236	5.62	5.75	1.17
Brand trust	236	5.38	5.75	1.26

Source: *Author's' calculation*

Perceived value (5.62) and perceived quality (5.59) have the highest arithmetic average values of all the model's variables, which makes sense given that the airline brand was noted. According to the given values, the variable brand trust (5.38) has a lower score, suggesting that the threat of price competitors stealing passengers is minimal. The low values of the standard deviations for perceived quality (1.14), perceived value (1.17), and brand trust (1.26) show that respondents' opinions regarding the claims that fall under the relevant variables are uniform.

A seven-point numerical scale, which is frequently used in this kind of research, was used by respondents to indicate how much they agreed with the questionnaire's results. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient value was used to gauge the assertions' internal consistency. The dependability of a variable, or the internal consistency of the statements used to measure it, is shown by a coefficient called Cronbach's alpha. This coefficient has values between 0 and 1, with values above 0.7 being regarded as sufficient consistency and dependability (Nunnally, 1970). The statements used to measure the model's latent variables are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: *Results of reliability analysis*

Variables	Value of coefficient Cronbach's alpha
Perceived quality	0,914
Perceived value	0,963
Brand trust	0,959

Source: *Authors' calculation*

Perceived quality, perceived value, and brand trust had respective Cronbach's alpha coefficient values of 0.914, 0.963, and 0.959. The results show that the manifest variables have sufficient internal consistency and dependability. The overall model's Cronbach's alpha is 0.956.

The direction and intensity of the relationship between brand experience, satisfaction, brand trust, and loyalty are examined using correlation analysis. The Spearman's Correlation Coefficient value indicates the correlation's strength and direction. We begin with the premise that a correlation coefficient value between 0 and 0.29 indicates a weak correlation between variables, a value between 0.30 and 0.49 indicates a medium correlation, and a value greater than 0.50 indicates a strong correlation (Pallant, 2011). The correlation coefficient's value, whether positive or negative, also establishes the relationship's direction. The positive numbers show that one variable's growth influences another's growth and vice versa. On the other hand, when the correlation coefficient is negative, an increase in one variable causes another to decrease and vice versa. Table 4 displays the correlation analysis's findings.

Table 4: *Spearman's Correlation Coefficient*

	<i>Perceived quality</i>	<i>Perceived value</i>	<i>Brand trust</i>
Perceived quality	1		
Perceived value	0,802**	1	
Brand trust	0,761**	0,737**	1
* Correlation statistically significant at the level 0.050			
** Correlation statistically significant at the level 0.000			

Source: *Authors' calculation*

The intercorrelation matrix shows significant Spearman's Coefficient values, suggesting a strong linear correlation between the latent variables in the model. Perceived quality and brand trust ($\rho = 0.761$; $p = 0.000$), perceived quality and perceived value ($\rho = 0.802$; $p = 0.000$), and perceived value and brand trust ($\rho = 0.737$; $p = 0.000$) are all highly correlated. Only perceived quality and perceived value have a positive and statistically significant link with brand trust, according to the correlation between dependent and independent variables.

The empirical results of this study provide strong support for the proposed conceptual model. Specifically, the confirmation of both sub-hypotheses, H1a (perceived quality) and H1b (perceived value), demonstrates that passengers do not evaluate their experience through a single lens. Instead, trust is built on a dual foundation of functional reliability and the perceived worth of the investment. Because both dimensions show a significant positive correlation with brand trust, the overarching hypothesis H1 is also confirmed. These findings suggest that service excellence, viewed as the synergy between high quality standards and a

fair value-for-effort ratio, is the primary driver of sustainable brand trust. In the volatile context of the modern aviation industry, achieving excellence in both areas is what allows an airline to transition from a service provider to a credible long-term partner.

Conclusions

This research confirms that service excellence, as a synergy of perceived quality and value, is a fundamental prerequisite for building sustainable brand trust in the airline industry. The findings indicate that in an era of constant global disruptions, passengers prioritize reliability and perceived worth over simple transportation functions. A strong positive correlation between the observed variables suggests that high standards of service directly lead to long-term credibility and passenger loyalty. For airlines, this means that investing in the "travel partner" experience is not just an option, but a necessity for survival in a competitive market. Ultimately, achieving service excellence ensures that brand trust remains resilient even during times of crisis.

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