



## Antecedents of Brand Loyalty of the Airline Business in Thailand

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### Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the structure and relationship and to study the path of effects between customer behavior, customer relationship management, airline service quality, digital marketing, and brand loyalty. The study population comprised individuals aged 20 years and above who utilized airline services. The sample was selected using a simple random sampling method. A questionnaire was used for data collection. The sample consisted of 400 participants. Then analysis the measurement model and structural equation modeling before hypotheses testing by Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software. The results found that the causal relationship structure was consistent with the empirical data. Customer behavior, customer relationship management, and airline service quality had a positive influence on digital marketing, and digital marketing had a positive influence on brand loyalty, but airline service quality did not have an influence on brand loyalty. The study results revealed that digital marketing was a mechanism driving customer behavior, customer relationship management, and airline service quality, leading to how to build brand loyalty in the airline business in Thailand.

### Keywords

Brand loyalty, Airline Business, Customer relationship management, Service quality, Digital marketing

## Introduction

Since the very dawn of the industrial evolution in Europe, but especially from the 1980s, marketers have focused on establishing and keeping intact brand loyalty, and through more recent systematic studies, have sought to determine whether either of these factors influences customer satisfaction. Brand loyalty studies suggests a significant, perhaps deep, relationship between customer and the brand. Happy users satisfied with a product do not wish to leave the company for another anymore (Coelho et al., 2018). A faithful customer spends a lot of money on the same brand, remains a customer for a longer period of time, and recommends their preferred company to other consumers, than does a casual customer (Zeithaml, 2015). To preserve consumer brand loyalty in various ways, different campaigns are adopted, such as brand elements, conventional marketing mixes, as well as modern methods like sponsorship, digital marketing, and social media (Keller, 2008). Brand loyalty is of great significance to businesses large and small. An increase in brand loyalty can bring many benefits: word of mouth about things positive, greater bargaining power relative to other organizations, and increased returns on investment (ROI). The top 20 percent of customers will generate 80 percent of a company's profit (Kotler & Keller, 2005), so it is more economical and advantageous for a company to invest in building a good relationship with its customers.

Among the many businesses that comprise the continuous growth of the digital economy in Southeast Asia, aviation and airline businesses have been in the forefront of adapting themselves into businesses that can cover both travel *and* lifestyle in conjunction with operating using information technology and advanced technologies (Asian Development Bank, 2023). In addition, entering the so-called New Normal era has caused both structural changes and changes in customer behavior, changing rapidly to a digital system and accelerating a change in the digital economy (Heiets et al., 2022). Such changes affect airline business considerably as airlines face significant challenges, especially changes in customer demands; for example, passengers need convenience and speed of online transactions, passengers need updated and accurate flight status information, flight time, and other related information, passengers need good post-flight services or assistance in case of emergency. The most important need is security in that passengers give the utmost importance to safety and their private information security (Hongsakul, 2022). Consequently, understanding and responding to changes in customer needs in the digital era is essential for airlines to maximize customer service efficiency and to adapt themselves to the rapidly changing trends in a digital environment (Mayer, 2019; Heiets et al., 2022). Operating an airline business in the digital era is considered an opportunity for improving efficiency in marketing, with the power to change the organizational role of the airline business, starting from how to acquire customers, and business engagement to brand promotion and building brand loyalty (Chaffey

& Smith, 2022). Airlines are able to add more value to products and services to create competitive advantages. In a business environment full of intense competition, the adoption of a digital platform can lead to better response to customer demands and acts as a connecting point for customers to communicate with the airlines, search for airline information, flight information, and share suggestions from their personal experiences (Molchanova, 2020). Additionally, a well-planned digital marketing strategy, consistent with in-depth information related to customer behavior, is able to increase brand visibility and build customer engagement effectively (Dabbous & Barakat, 2020).

The aviation industry in Thailand faced challenging conditions in 2020. Airlines struggled due to increased competition and operational complexities. Despite expanding their fleets and adding regional routes, airlines were burdened by higher operational costs and frequent flights on the same routes, often three to four times a week. Passenger expectations also rose, demanding better services, comfort, safety, and attentive flight attendants. The need for enhanced service quality became imperative. Financial pressures intensified for some airlines, with over 50% facing liquidity issues. This led to reduced flights on less popular routes, negatively impacting the airlines' reputation and intensifying competition in the market. To address these challenges, airlines needed to urgently improve service quality and rebuild passenger confidence. Adapting to the competitive landscape, which includes both existing and new market entrants, was crucial for survival and success in the increasingly tough aviation industry (Tayanuwat, 2020).

The airline business in Thailand has been developing speedily in terms of aircraft operation, business operation, services, the entry of low-cost airlines into the market, and the growing demand for passengers (Kankaew, 2022). Understanding the direct influence of digital marketing on brand loyalty is a tool for airlines committed to achieving outstanding marketing positioning by collecting updated information that can keep up with changing global situations and include advanced statistical analysis. For this reason, the researcher was interested in developing a model to study causal factors influencing brand loyalty in the airline business in Thailand. The study aimed to view the scope of digital mail marketing effects on brand loyalty and to identify an exclusive digital marketing strategy that offers the highest return regarding promoting brand loyalty among airline passengers. The study also aimed to examine the effects of other variables in this relationship that promote brand loyalty among airline passengers, namely passenger behavior (customer behavior), customer relationship management, and airline service quality. In-depth information was obtained from the study and can be used as a guideline for airlines to adjust their digital marketing strategies, increase the quality of services, strengthen the relationship between customers and airlines, and enhance brand loyalty in the context of the airline business in Thailand.

The study has also penetrated various dimensions of the relationship between customer behavior, customer relationship management (CRM), airline service quality, digital marketing, and brand loyalty in the context of airline business in Thailand. Customer behavior is the key to a customer-centric strategy (Portal, 2018). In the airline business, understanding of likeness, decision-making process, and consumption behavior of passengers is considered a strategic advantage for airlines committed to changing services and marketing effectively. Changes in passenger behavior in the airline context are influenced by several factors including the quality of services, the implementation of digital marketing activities, and the relationship that strengthens customer loyalty to the airline brand. The implementation of digital marketing activities introduces a variety of guidelines for customer engagement and customer retention in the digital era, consisting of many strategies ranging from marketing on social media, content creation to maximize efficiency, and search engine marketing to a personalized email campaign. These strategies are designed not only to increase the brand visibility of airlines but also to make meaningful connections with customers, enhancing trust and eventually building brand loyalty (Hajarian et al., 2021; Chaffey & Smith, 2022).

With regard to this research, the research objectives were determined as follows: 1. To study causal factors influencing brand loyalty of airline business in Thailand and 2. To develop and verify the consistency of the causal relationship model of brand loyalty of airline business in Thailand.

## **Literature Review and Hypothesis Development**

### **Customer Behavior – CB**

CB is behavior expressed by passengers when choosing an airline business. It is the method through which passengers directly behave towards an airline, such as picking a seat on a plane, planning to book a ticket, giving an opinion, or reviewing an airline flight after a trip. Passengers' experience with an airline shall affect the stability of an airline as well as airline marketing and business strategies. In addition, Shah et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021 argued that *passenger behavior* is essentially a customer's action and response related to buying and using airline services or products. Such behavior encourages airlines to wish to learn more about personal characteristics, demands, and behavior of customers in order to adjust a pattern of services or products to meet market demand appropriately, promoting brand loyalty among airline passengers (Ferrell et al., 2021).

*Hypothesis H1a: Customer behavior has a direct positive effect on brand loyalty.*

*Hypothesis H1b: Customer behavior has a direct positive effect on digital marketing.*

Research hypothesis development (H1a) - *Customer behavior* has a significant effect on brand loyalty towards an airline business. It could be argued that good in-flight

services, such as attentive and generous services provided to passengers, serving snacks, desserts, or drinks, responding to passengers' problems or complaints quickly and efficiently, taking care of passengers and recommending activities for passengers to do at their destination, effective and clear communication, and describing related rules and conditions. Such behavior can help build customer confidence and trust, satisfaction, and brand loyalty (Kurhayadi et al., 2022). As for customer behavior having a direct positive influence on digital marketing (H1b), there are many significant factors that lead to effects on product or service development of airline businesses. (Karaağaoğlu & Çiçek, 2019; Abu-Dalbouh, 2020; Barykin et al., 2022; BAŞARAN & GÖZEN, 2022; Wu & Ma, 2022; Basal & Suzen, 2023; Keke, 2023). These can be described as the following: 1) Searching for information online: – generally passengers are more likely to search for ticket prices, airline specific information, and finding information about flight paths from a platform, 2) Price comparison: – passengers use a platform to compare ticket prices offered by each airline for convenience and other services if it is worth paying the premium, 3) Online booking: – passengers are able to book a ticket or other additional services offered by an airline and make a payment via an online platform directly, 4) Giving scores and writing reviews: – passengers shall give scores and write a review about their travel experience via an online platform, 5) Follow up and receiving updated information: – passengers are more likely to receive information about ticket prices, flight paths, and promotion from an airline and 6) The use of mobile application: – passengers are more likely to use an airline application or related applications to check flight information, perform check-in, and receive travel notifications.

### **Customer Relationship Management – CRM**

CRM is a strategy or method a company uses to manage and build good relationships with its customers. Importance is given to understanding and responding to customer demands systematically, which stays in every procedure of business operations. Customer relationship management is the integration of various activities; for example, customer identification, customer analysis, building relationships, customer service, effective marketing, technology utilization, et cetera, to build a relationship between service providers and service receivers to understand and feel good about a certain products and services (Xu et al., 2002; Payne & Frow, 2016; Subongkod, 2016; Kumar & Reinartz, 2018; Buttle & Maklan, 2019).

*Hypothesis H2a: Customer relationship management has a direct positive effect on digital marketing.*

*Hypothesis H2b: Customer relationship management has a direct effect on brand loyalty.*

Research hypothesis development (H2a): - Customer relationship management influences the digital marketing of an airline business. There are many significant factors that lead to airline customer relationship management (Law, 2017; Guerguis, 2018; Dastane, 2020; Khanh et al., 2022; Al Balawi et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2023). It could be said that customer relationship management helps airlines be able to collect travel behavior information, customers' purchase history of products and additional services, monitoring customer activities and sending important notifications, such as birthday, special promotion, or responding to an email for making modern communication via an online platform and advertisements that target specific audiences. Meanwhile, strategies can be designed to boost customer retention, which is more cost-effective than customer acquisition, leading to customer brand loyalty of the airline business. Customer relationship management helps customer segmentation, making airlines able to adapt themselves and launch a marketing campaign that can respond to a specific group. It is also able to help airlines monitor customer participation in airline brand loyalty programs, and collect reviews given by customers. The information obtained can be used to launch a digital marketing campaign to build customer confidence and trust. With reference to the study on customer relationship management affecting brand loyalty (H2b), most study results indicate that (Quaye et al., 2018; Salah & Abou-Shouk, 2019; Khan et al., 2022; Kumar & Mokha, 2022) efficient customer relationship management contributes to customer brand loyalty, enabling them to have good experiences and satisfaction with services and products. Building customer trust and close relationships with customers enable customers to select and support products of a certain business continuously. Additionally, brand loyal customers will have a chance to become the most influential persons who promote and recommend products to others, affecting the expansion and growth of product brands in the market. Therefore, customer relationship management is important to build and maintain product brands of every kind of business.

#### **Airline Service Quality – ASQ**

ASQ is the level of excellence and satisfaction given by an airline to its passengers throughout the trip including other services, such as ticket services, passenger lounges, facilities and conveniences provided in a passenger cabin, punctual services, post-flight assistance, and assistance in case of emergency. Airline service quality plays a crucial role in developing customer perception, satisfaction, impression, and trust in an airline. Airlines that offer high quality of services retain more customers continuously (Perçin, 2018; Shah et al., 2020; Agarwal & Gowda, 2021; Hongsakul, 2022).

*Hypothesis H3a: Airline service quality has a direct positive effect on digital marketing.*

*Hypothesis H3b: Airline service quality has a direct positive effect on brand loyalty.*

Research hypothesis development (H3a): - Airline service quality influences digital marketing. The findings revealed that there were many important factors affecting airline marketing strategies and service quality (Badrillah et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022; Violin et al., 2022) in other words, airline service quality has a direct positive effect on digital marketing. It is a significant factor that attracts and satisfies customers. Good service quality, high standard services, response to customer demands in an appropriate manner, and satisfying services shall give good experiences to customers and build customer trust and confidence in a certain airline brand. Customers are more likely to select that airline again next time. In addition, the quality of services contributes to experience sharing and customer satisfaction in online channels. Reviews and experience sharing from customers enable airline service quality to be higher. Positive reviews and opinions given by customers affect customer trust and confidence. People who have received a recommendation for a good airline from their friends or families are more likely to select that airline next time to receive a good experience as well. Reviews and experience sharing are important tools for building customer confidence and strengthening the reputation of airlines with intense competition at present. It helps promote brands in the digital world, giving rise to an increase in following and recommendations from customers and making that airline obtain customer trust as well. With reference to airline service quality affecting brand loyalty ( H3b) , excellent and impressive services help create a great customer experience, making them satisfied and feel it worth the cost to select services from the selected airline again next time. Good services create customer confidence in the airline brand, encouraging customers to select this airline regularly. Excellent services can also promote good experience sharing with others. This is consistent with research studies on airline service quality affecting brand loyalty in various dimensions (Wilson, 2018; Khudhair et al., 2019; Shen & Yahya, 2021; Law et al., 2022; Prentice et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). Most study results indicated that good and efficient airline service quality influences enhancing brand loyalty in airline business significantly.

### **Digital Marketing – DMK**

DMK is the use of a digital platform or tools to create, deliver, and implement marketing activities to connect to target audiences on the internet, enabling organizations to access customers efficiently (Chaffey & Smith, 2022). Moreover, it helps connect and build relationships with customers. There are various channels for branding and increasing sales of products or services in digital marketing that can be used to communicate with customers, such as websites, social media, email, mobile applications, SEO ( Search Engine

Optimization), SEM (Search Engine Marketing), advertisements on social media, online customers and mass media, and other types of marketing technology (Bala & Verma, 2018; Ayush et al., 2020). Digital marketing is employed widely in airline businesses. Digital marketing is a strategy that uses digital platforms and tools to create connection and attraction to airline customers, an important part of airline business marketing in the era in which technologies and internet play a vital role in providing connection and communication between airlines and passengers via digital means. (Santos & Silva, 2019). Airline businesses are able to use customer information to modify its marketing and services to meet each customer's demand. Improving sales and enhancing loyal feelings towards airline brands are significant results that airline businesses can expect from digital marketing.

*Hypothesis H4: Digital marketing has a direct positive effect on brand loyalty.*

Research hypothesis development (H4) – Digital marketing affects brand loyalty. There are several findings that affect brand loyalty of airline businesses (Bilgin, 2018; Özdemir, 2020; Samosir, 2021; Sumerta & Kiswara, 2022; Aljuhmani et al., 2023). In other words, the use of digital platforms and tools is able to create understanding and an impression of airline products or services. Digital marketing enables the business to connect with customers in an online space, building good customer connections and impressions with those products or services. Digital marketing offers multiple methods that generate brand loyalty in the airline business. It helps airlines to offer good customer experiences through designing an online platform to be easily and efficiently accessible including the use of marketing through media influencers so as to transmit important airline information, promote airline products or services among target audiences, and create participation in the customer decision-making process. Information related to customer behavior helps airlines be able to undertake marketing that meets customer demands and improve various activities to build brand loyalty towards airline products and services among customers via good experiences and efficient communication.

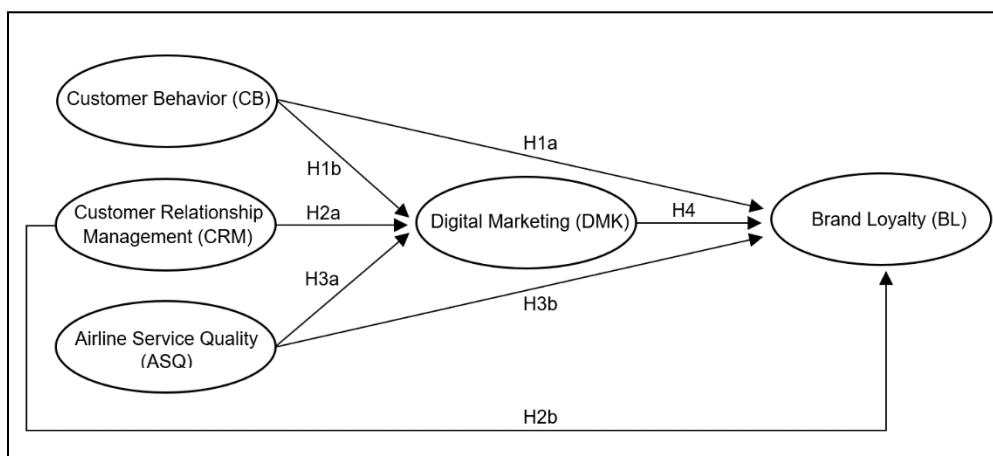
### **Brand Loyalty – BL**

The BL concept essentially describes the principle of customer confidence in and engagement with a certain brand. It means that customers have confidence in, and are more likely to use, the products or services of this brand. BL also includes securing the consent and privacy of the customer to that brand without getting interested in other brands. Many theorists and researchers have provided different descriptions of the concept of brand loyalty, its causes and its impact (Schultz & Bailey, 2000; Durmaz et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Nurlaini et al., 2021; Sawmong, 2021; Dwidienawati et al., 2022; Jai et al., 2022). The researcher concluded that the most important factors affecting customer brand loyalty can be described as follows: Customers satisfied with products or services are more likely to select

this brand again without thinking too much or considering choices from other brands. Customers are loyal to brands that offers value-for-money and desirable benefits, namely, a product or service that is priced to value. Customers are loyal to a trustworthy and reliable brand, based on their experiences they have with services or products. Loyal customers are more likely to show their preference for products or services of a certain brand and tend to select it before other brands. Loyal customers have participated in and performed activities related to that brand, an important attitude in building customer engagement and stability including offering better experiences beyond what customers expect.

It can be concluded that any airline brand or product that enables customers to have confidence, preference, and is easily accessible, will secure a loyal customer base. Customers do not need to spend much time researching or trying to find out airline information when they would like to use such services if they are familiar with the airline platform's methods of access. Customers will select an airline that offers good perception and attitude, contributing to brand loyalty. Other than being one member of a strong customer base, the customer may recommend other consumers to join this base via word of mouth.

**Research Conceptual Framework:** - In studying the causal factors influencing brand loyalty towards airline businesses in Thailand, the researcher conducted an analysis and synthesis from relevant theories, concepts, and research studies, and concluded that there were five principle causal factors, consisting of 1) customer behavior, 2) customer relationship management, 3) airline service quality, 4) digital marketing and 5) brand loyalty as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework showing proposed hypotheses.

## Research Methodology

### Population

The study was conducted on the basis of a quantitative research design. A questionnaire was used to collect data from the sample. The population in the study consisted of Thai nationals aged 20 years old and above who travelled with any airline certified in the list of Air Operator Certificate Holders of Thailand (Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand, 2023). With reference to the annual report of Airports of Thailand Public Company Limited, it was found that there were 32,779,863 passengers travelling in 2022 (Airport of Thailand PLC., 2022). However, since the researcher would like to specifically study passengers aged 20 years and above, there was no explicit statistical data identified from any authority. Therefore, a formula was used to calculate a sample size when the population size was unknown.

### Sample

$$n = \frac{z^2}{4e^2}$$

$$384.16 = \frac{(1.96)^2}{4(0.45)^2}$$

The population size of the research is unknown, we use the Cochran Formula (Cochran, 1977) when the population proportion is unknown. The sample size determined comprised 400 participants. According to causal structural-modes with a latent variable. Wiratchai (1999), a suitable sample size is a sample size of approximately 10 – 20 times the number of one observed variable or the smallest possible sample size based on Hoelter's N statistics which is a sample of 200 numbers (Hoelter, 1983), which can be considered a causal relationship model consistent with the empirical data. There were 20 variables in this study, requiring at least a sample of 200-400 numbers. To prevent data errors, the researcher increased the number of samples to 400 numbers, using the probability theory which is a simple random sampling method.

### Research Instrument

The research instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire developed from revised theoretical concepts and related literature. It consisted of two parts: 1. General information of the respondents and information about the airline business, and 2. The level of opinion on passenger behavioral factors. There was a total of four questions in each of the following categories: customer relationship management factors (Kurhayadi et al., 2022; Basal & Suzen, 2023; Keke, 2023), airline service quality factors (Subongkod, 2016; Siregar et al., 2023), digital marketing factors (Hongsakul, 2022; Wang, 2023), and brand loyalty factors

(Ayush et al., 2020; Aljuhmani et al., 2023; Sawmong, 2021; Dwidienawati et al., 2022). For the assessment in part 2, the sample group was asked to rate on a Seven-Point Scale, where 1 represented strong disagreement and 7 represented strong agreement. The researcher then interpreted the levels of opinion, dividing them into 5 ranges, each 1.2 points wide. The ranges were as follows: a mean score of 1.00–2.20 indicated a very low level of opinion, 2.21–3.40 indicated a low level, 3.41–4.60 indicated a moderate level, 4.61–5.80 indicated a good level, and 5.81–7.00 indicated a very good level of opinion.

The content validity test was performed by three experts to check the accuracy of content and language for communication. The index of item objective congruence (IOC) is greater than 0.67. The reliability test of the questionnaire was performed with respondents having similar characteristics to the sample, 30 samples. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.972. The alpha coefficient's close proximity to 1 means the measurement model is reliable at an acceptable level.

**Table 1** Reliability and validity of constructs for model building

Measurement Items		Mean	Standard Loading
<b>CB</b>	<b>Customer Behavior</b> (Kurhayadi et al., 2022; Basal & Suzen, 2023; Keke, 2023)		
<b>CB1</b>	You will share your experience from using the airline service with others through word-of-mouth or reviews on various social media platforms.	5.36	0.87
<b>CB2</b>	You choose to receive news and information about airfare and various details through online platforms.	5.31	0.90
<b>CB3</b>	You expect and place importance on the presentation of information about personal interests to passengers.	5.39	0.89
<b>CB4</b>	You use online platforms to compare airfares from various airlines before deciding to purchase products and services.	5.40	0.88
<b>CRM</b>	<b>Customer Relationship Management</b> (Subongkod, 2016; Siregar et al., 2023)		
<b>CRM1</b>	You receive important notifications such as birthdays, special promotions, or responses to letters through online platform channels.	5.46	0.90
<b>CRM2</b>	You use mobile applications to quickly access information and services of the airline.	5.53	0.90
<b>CRM3</b>	You receive service from employees knowledgeable in products and services.	5.32	0.90
<b>CRM4</b>	You can quickly communicate with the airline.	5.44	0.89
<b>ASQ</b>	<b>Airline Service Quality</b> (Hongsakul, 2022; Wang, 2023)		
<b>ASQ1</b>	You receive comprehensive information about the terms of service.	5.40	0.87

**Table 1** Reliability and validity of constructs for model building (continued)

Measurement Items		Mean	Standard Loading
<b>ASQ2</b>	You experience speed in the service process, from check-in and document verification before travel, to boarding and disembarking the aircraft.	5.44	0.80
<b>ASQ3</b>	You enjoy convenience in seat reservation and travel alterations through various channels of the airline.	5.41	0.85
<b>ASQ4</b>	You receive responses to passenger needs according to the 4R's principle.	5.40	0.87
<b>DMK</b>	<b>Digital Marketing</b> (Ayush et al., 2020; Aljuhmani et al., 2023)		
<b>DMK1</b>	You believe the airline has a modern online platform as a channel for selling products or services.	5.34	0.95
<b>DMK2</b>	You think the airline markets through a frequent flyer program, offering reward redemptions, to help boost passenger trust.	5.39	0.80
<b>DMK3</b>	You believe the airline markets through influencers, celebrities, and popular artists to enhance and stimulate passenger trust.	5.43	0.96
<b>DMK4</b>	You think that content publicized through online platforms is interesting, increases engagement, and assists in the decision-making process for using services.	5.32	0.90
<b>BL</b>	<b>Brand Loyalty</b> (Sawmong, 2021; Dwidienawati et al., 2022)		
<b>BL1</b>	You are satisfied with the products or services of the airline	5.40	0.87
<b>BL2</b>	You recommend or refer the airline to friends or close relatives	5.41	0.85
<b>BL3</b>	You have confidence in the airline you use.	5.44	0.80
<b>BL4</b>	You will continue to choose the services of that airline.	5.40	0.87

### Data Analysis

The statistical partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is an analysis technique for detecting or constructing predictive models. Especially for the causal model analysis between latent variables, it is better than the general linear structural relationship model, which is very suitable for exploratory research. Compared with covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), which is evaluated by covariance matrix, the PLS SEM is suitable for small sample analysis (Ringle, 2012). PLS-SEM is mainly designed to detect whether the causal relationship has a statistically significant mutual linear relationship. It is rather suitable for the construction of theoretical models. This study uses PLS-SEM as a method to explore the relationship between the research variables. It mainly

uses PLS Algorithm and Bootstrapping to perform the repetitive sampling 5000 times in order to derive path coefficients and significance (Henseler, 2010). It can describe the correlation and influence between the dimensions.

## Research Findings

### General information of respondents

400 participants responded to the research questionnaire. Most of them were women (56%), aged 20-29 years (46.50%) and 30-39 years (41.80%), and had graduated with a bachelor's degree (75%). Most were private company employees (65.50%), with a monthly income between 15,000-30,000 baht (61.80%). The number of times they flew with airlines per year on average was six to ten times (50%). The purpose of these flights was mostly for travelling and relaxation (62.30%) and most of them flew with a low-cost airline (68.80%).

According to Table 1 below, it was found that the mean customer behavior (CB) was 5.37, meaning that service receivers selected airline services based on their behavior at a *good* level. The mean customer relationship management (CRM) was 5.44, meaning that service receivers focused on airline customer relationship management at a *good* level. The mean airline service quality (ASQ) was 5.41, meaning that service receivers focused on airline service quality at a *good* level. The mean digital marketing (DMK) was 5.37, meaning that service receivers focused on digital marketing at a *good* level. The mean brand loyalty (BL) was 5.41, meaning that service receivers were loyal to brands at a *good* level.

**Table 2** Mean, standard deviation and meaning of the variables.

Variables	Mean	Interpret
Customer behavior (CB)	5.37	Good
Customer relationship management (CRM)	5.44	Good
Airline service quality (ASQ)	5.41	Good
Digital marketing (DMK)	5.37	Good
Brand loyalty (BL)	5.41	Good

As shown in Table 2, the test results of the relationship between observed variables studied in the model indicated that the pair of variables with the strongest correlation had Pearson's correlation coefficient equal to 0.710, showing that none of the pairs of variables studied had correlation higher than 0.80 (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). Thus, multicollinearity did not occur, and structural equation modeling was performed accordingly.

**Table 3** Correlation coefficient of observed variables in the model.

	<b>CB</b>	<b>CRM</b>	<b>ASQ</b>	<b>DMK</b>	<b>BL</b>
<b>CB</b>					
<b>CRM</b>	.405**				
<b>ASQ</b>	.475**	.710**			
<b>DMK</b>	.476**	.538**	.588**		
<b>BL</b>	.492**	.477**	.487**	.631**	

\*\* with statistical significance level of 0.01

**Note:** CB = Customer behavior, CRM = Customer relationship management, ASQ = Airline service quality, DMK = Digital marketing, BL = Brand loyalty.

### **Structural Model**

The hypotheses regarding the structural models were investigated using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Path coefficient and structural model correlation analysis were tested by the Bootstrapping technique using SmartPLS 4.0 analysis software.

The findings as the details in Figure 2, Table 3, and Table 4 below indicate that the structural equation of the causal factor model influenced brand loyalty of airline businesses in Thailand. The estimation of the structural equation model indicated the following: Customer behavior (CB) had a direct positive effect on brand loyalty (BL); the coefficient of the effect was 0.166 with the statistical significance level of 0.001 (hypothesis H1a was accepted). Customer behavior (CB) had a direct positive influence on digital marketing (DMK); the coefficient of the effect was 0.184 with the statistical significance level of 0.000 (hypothesis H1b was accepted). Customer relationship management (CRM) had a direct effect on digital marketing (DMK); the coefficient of the effect was 0.224 with the statistical significance level of 0.001 (hypothesis H2a was accepted). Customer relationship management (CRM) had a direct positive effect on brand loyalty (BL) was 0.146 with the statistical significance level of 0.013 (hypothesis H2b was accepted). Airline service quality (ASQ) had a direct effect on digital marketing (DMK); the coefficient of the effect was 0.377 with the statistical significance level of 0.000 (hypothesis H3a was accepted). Airline service quality (ASQ) did not have a direct positive effect on brand loyalty (BL); the coefficient of the effect was 0.032 with no statistical significance (hypothesis H3b was not accepted), and digital marketing (DMK) had a direct positive effect on brand loyalty (BL); the coefficient of the effect was 0.468 with the statistical significance level of 0.000 (hypothesis H4 was accepted).

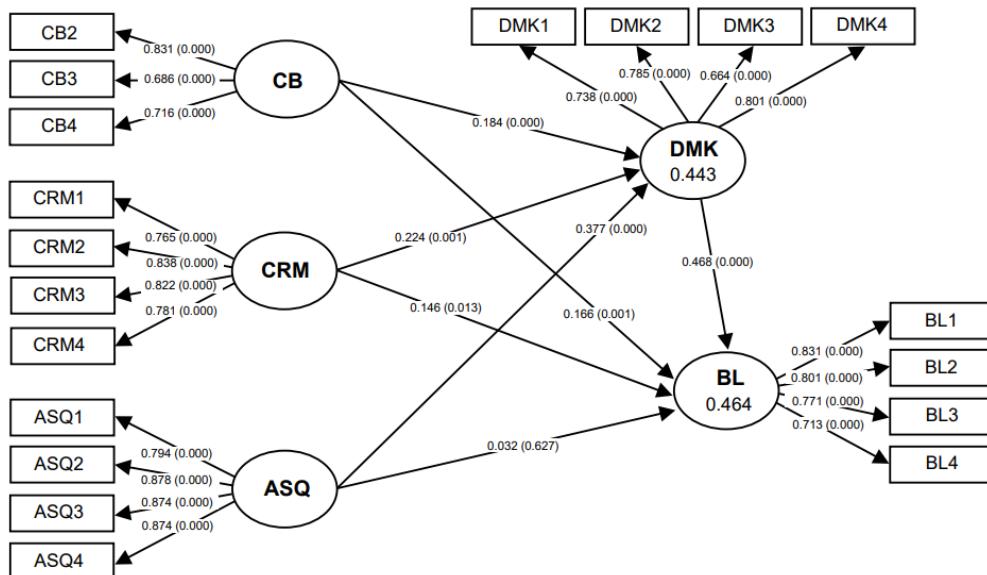


Figure 2 Proposed model of PLS-SEM path analysis diagram.

Table 4 Path Analysis (Coefficients of direct effect, indirect effect, and total effect).

Dependent variable		DMK			BL		
Independent variable		DE	IE	TE	DE	IE	TE
CRM		0.224	-	0.224	0.146	0.105	0.251
CB		0.184	-	0.184	0.166	0.086	0.252
ASQ		0.377	-	0.377	0.032	0.176	0.208
DMK		-	-	-	0.468	-	0.468

Note: CB = Customer behavior, CRM = Customer relationship management, ASQ = Airline service quality, DMK = Digital marketing, BL = Brand loyalty.

According to inferential statistics analysis to test the hypotheses about customer behavior, customer relationship management, airline service quality, digital marketing, and brand loyalty of airline businesses in Thailand, the hypothesis test results are as follow:

**Table 5** Analysis results of the causal factor model influencing brand loyalty of airline business in Thailand.

Hypotheses	Relationships	Path Coefficients	S.E.	t-values	p-values	Results
<b>H1a</b>	CB → BL	0.166	0.052	3.210	0.001**	Accepted
<b>H1b</b>	CB → DMK	0.184	0.048	3.833	0.000**	Accepted
<b>H2a</b>	CRM → DMK	0.224	0.069	3.267	0.001**	Accepted
<b>H2b</b>	CRM → BL	0.146	0.059	2.485	0.013*	Accepted
<b>H3a</b>	ASQ → DMK	0.377	0.074	5.099	0.000**	Accepted
<b>H3b</b>	ASQ → BL	0.032	0.068	0.472	0.637	Not Accepted
<b>H4</b>	DMK → BL	0.468	0.054	8.735	0.000**	Accepted

**Note:** This table reports the path coefficient between the variables and the results of the hypothesis. \*, and \*\*, denote significance at the 5% , and 1% levels, respectively. CB = Customer behavior, CRM = Customer relationship management, ASQ = Airline service quality, DMK = Digital marketing, BL = Brand loyalty.

## Discussion

The study of causal factors between customer behavior (CB), customer relationship management (CRM), airline service quality (ASQ), digital marketing (DMK), and brand loyalty (BL) revealed that the relationship structure was consistent with the empirical data as follows:

Hypothesis – H1a: Customer behavior has a direct positive effect on brand loyalty. According to the study results, the hypothesis was accepted, consistent with research studies conducted by Shah et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021 viewing that customer behavior is an action and response to customer demand about buying and using products or services related to an airline business. Such behavior encourages airlines to learn more about personal characteristics, demand, and behavior of customers to adjust their services to meet the market and customer demand. Meanwhile, when products or services are improved to meet customer demand, satisfaction and impression are created among customers as well as pleasant experiences, leading to word of mouth recommendations, making customers repeatedly engage with the products or services. This is consistent with a research study conducted by Ferrell et al., 2021 stating that when service patterns are improved and developed to meet customer demand, it will help promote the brand loyalty towards an airline business continuously.

Hypothesis – H1b: Customer behavior has a direct positive effect on digital marketing. The hypothesis was accepted, consistent with a study conducted by Wu & Ma, 2022 stating that nowadays digital marketing plays an important part in promoting products and services to become more widely known. In the meantime, it is a convenient and quick

method and pattern of marketing that is able to respond to new generation service users who focus on easy accessibility to search for information efficiently. It is also consistent with a study conducted by Basal & Suzen, 2023 and Keke, 2023 that concluded that searching for information online to find desirable airlines, searching for ticket prices and price comparison, and searching for flight paths led to the booking and buying of tickets online. Convenience is provided in the form of check-in, notifications, and online tickets.

Hypothesis – H2a: Customer relationship management has a direct positive effect on digital marketing The hypothesis was accepted, consistent with a study conducted by Law, 2017 and Guerguis, 2018 stating that customer relationship management is a strategy that helps promote airline operations by using technologies and personnel rationally to increase levels of services, build understanding of service receiver demand, and respond to demand for products and services. This is consistent with a study conducted by Dastane, 2020, who argued that customer relationship management can be performed using automated digital marketing by adopting technologies to help analyze individual data, customer history, types of products purchased, the value of a purchase, and purchase frequency. Automated customer relationship management constitutes a simple, convenient, and fast pattern of marketing, leading to sustained customer base expansion. Meanwhile, customer relationship management breaks market demand down into customer segmentation and categorizes customer preferences, enabling airlines to employ such information to launch a marketing campaign consistent with their target audiences continuously.

Hypothesis – H2b: Customer relationship management has a direct positive effect on brand loyalty. According to the study results, the hypothesis was accepted. This is consistent with a study conducted by Yawala et al., 2020, which found that customer relationship management influences brand loyalty since most airlines have a convenient contact channel or provide an online contact channel or chatbot, making service receivers satisfied. Because airlines can solve customer problems quickly, for example, flight delays or cancellations, they can make service receivers feel good and want to use their services again. Meanwhile, passengers can make contact via any communication channel, contributing to brand loyalty. However, most research results indicate that (Quaye et al., 2018; Salah & Abou-Shouk, 2019; Khan et al., 2022; Kumar & Mokha, 2022) efficient customer relationship management contributes to customer brand loyalty as it fosters pleasant experiences and satisfaction with services and products, customer confidence and customer relationships that enable customers to repeat purchases and support products of that business repeatedly. Loyal customers also have a chance to become promoters and supporters with the highest influence in recommending products to other people, leading to the expansion and growth of those brands in the market. Therefore, customer relationship

management is an important element in building and retaining customer brand loyalty in every type of business.

Hypothesis – H3a: Airline service quality has a direct positive effect on digital marketing. The study results accepted the hypothesis, consistent with a study conducted by Badrillah et al., 2021 and Kumar et al., 2022 stating that the quality of airline services is important to attract customers and build customer satisfaction. Good service quality includes high standard services that can respond to customer demand appropriately. Satisfying services will generate pleasant experiences for customers and trust in a certain airline. Therefore, customers are more likely to use the services of that airline again next time. It is also consistent with a study conducted by Violin et al., 2022 mentioning that good service quality contributes to experience sharing and customer satisfaction on online channels. Customer reviews and experience sharing affect a higher level of airline services. Positive customer reviews and opinions bring about customer trust and confidence in airlines. People who are recommended a good airline by their friends or family members are more likely to use services from that airline and to have pleasant experiences with them as well. Thus, customer reviews and experience sharing are an important tool for building customer trust and confidence, enhancing reputation of airlines, especially when the competition today is so intense, and strengthening branding in the digital world, contributing to greater numbers of social media followers and recommendations from customers.

Hypothesis – H3b: The quality of airline service has a direct positive impact on brand loyalty. The study's results did not support this hypothesis. This finding aligns with Ashari et al., 2023, which indicated that service quality alone does not necessarily lead to brand loyalty. Good service quality initially satisfies customers, but if they are not satisfied with the product or its price, they may not return and could even spread negative feedback. Similarly, Lina and Try., 2019 study found that service quality alone does not guarantee brand loyalty. If the product lacks quality or the price doesn't align with the service quality, it can lead to customer dissatisfaction, preventing them from returning for future purchases or services. Most research studies found that the quality of services is most likely to influence brand loyalty since excellent services will deliver pleasant experiences for passengers, making them satisfied and feel it worth-their-while to select services from the selected airline again next time. According to a research study conducted by Wilson, 2018 and Khudhair et al., 2019, good services can build customer confidence in airline products, enabling passengers to use services from a certain airline regularly. It can also promote pleasant experiences that are likely to be shared with other people. However, the results from this study indicated that the quality of services was not a main factor in service selection since the domestic airlines used by most participants were low-cost airlines. They mainly considered prices that had to be cheap to serve their short trips while in-flight services or other services

were not taken into consideration, and differed from full-service airlines. Therefore, service users selected the airlines based on prices, which did not affect brand loyalty or the intention to use the service again. According to the study on Oliver's concept (1999), brand loyalty is essentially customer satisfaction with products and services. Customers feel deeply engaged with a certain brand, giving rise to repeat purchase but if they are not satisfied with products and services, repeat purchase will not occur and they will not be loyal to products and services.

Hypothesis – H4: Digital marketing has a direct positive effect on brand loyalty. According to the study results, the hypothesis was accepted, consistent with a study conducted by Bilgin, 2018; Özdemir, 2020, which found that the use of a platform and digital tools can build understanding and good impressions of the airline products or services. Digital marketing encourages businesses to connect with customers online, offering continuity and make a good impression on customers towards a certain product or service. This is also consistent with a study conducted by Samosir, 2021; Sumerta & Kiswara, 2022; Aljuhmani et al., 2023, which found that digital marketing offers many methods that lead to brand loyalty towards airline businesses; for example, digital marketing helps airlines to deliver pleasant experiences via an attractive design of online platform that provides easily accessible and efficient services, to do marketing via influencers so as to transmit important information of airlines, promote products or services to target audiences, and build participation in customers' decision-making process, including information related to customer behavior that helps airlines undertake marketing to meet customer demand and improve various activities to build customer loyalty towards the product and service brand of a certain airline.

## **Conclusions**

The study results are highly beneficial for the formulation and adoption of guidelines for building brand loyalty in the airline business in Thailand, especially for low-cost airlines. Such guidelines can start from determining operational strategies with customer behavior, customer relationship management, airline service quality, and digital marketing, leading to brand loyalty; for example, the use of information technology systems to analyze customer behavior, customer segmentation to determine strategies for providing services and building a relationship with customers. Digital marketing strategies focus on convenience, speed, easily accessible information, and various platforms to expand customer base, public relations, and sales promotion. These things will enable the business operations to be more effective in accordance with the policies determined and have a positive effect on the operational performance of the airline business, leading to business expansion and competitive advantages.

### **Managerial and Business Implications**

This research highlights four key strategies for airline businesses in Thailand. Firstly, it is crucial to prioritize the setting of high standards for service quality. Secondly, leveraging digital marketing and social media can effectively promote airlines. An integrated information system should be implemented for improved work efficiency. Thirdly, airlines should focus on attracting new customer segments, such as those with high purchasing power or foreign customers, by offering new products and services at suitable prices. Fourthly, it is essential to build strong customer relationships through effective and empathetic communication, along with a quick response to customer needs. This approach fosters satisfaction and leaves a lasting positive impression. Lastly, leadership is key. Executives should display the ability to plan, set clear goals, make bold decisions, and differentiate their brand from competitors.

### **Academics Implications**

The development of the relationship structure in this research emphasizes the connections between customer behavior, customer relationship management, airline service quality, and digital marketing in building brand loyalty in an airline business in Thailand, especially in domestic and low-cost airlines. According to the path analysis results, the coefficient of the total effect of customer behavior, customer relationship management, and airline service quality, indicates that these factors affect brand loyalty more effectively via digital marketing. The study results indicate the importance of digital marketing as a mechanism driving customer behavior, customer relationship management, and airline service quality to achieve brand loyalty, satisfaction, impression, generation of word-of-mouth recommendation, repeat use of services, and successful business operations. Academics and researchers can study other factors further including the use of digital marketing for developing other businesses to achieve quality and brand loyalty.

### **Future Research**

Future research should expand its focus to include additional variables that may influence brand loyalty within Thailand's airline industry. These include exploring the impact of social media, the effectiveness of management systems, and behavioral factors. A comprehensive study is recommended to analyze and categorize the unique characteristics of airlines in Thailand in greater detail and at greater depth. This could entail examining key success factors, evaluating service management across airlines of various sizes, or segmenting airlines based on their target customer groups. Furthermore, conducting qualitative research through executive interviews can validate these findings and provide valuable insights. Such an approach will not only confirm the gathered qualitative data but also guide the development of airline service strategies in Thailand.

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