

Factors Influencing Airline Brand Loyalty through Digital Marketing Efforts: A Qualitative Study of Southeast Asian Frequent Flyers

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly digitalised aviation industry, airlines continue to invest substantially in digital marketing initiatives, including mobile applications, social media, and electronic customer relationship management (E-CRM), to attract, engage, and retain passengers. However, the mechanisms through which digital marketing efforts shape cognitive and emotional dimensions of airline brand loyalty remain insufficiently understood, particularly among frequent leisure flyers in Southeast Asia. Grounded in Customer Engagement Theory and Relationship Marketing Theory, this study examines the factors influencing frequent flyers' airline brand loyalty through digital marketing efforts. A qualitative research approach was adopted by employing an explanatory research design utilizing synchronous semi-structured interviews via Google Meet. Purposive sampling was used to recruit eight frequent flyers based in Southeast Asia, primarily Malaysia, who travel at least five times annually and actively engage with airline digital platforms. Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that airline brand loyalty among frequent flyers is predominantly conditional and transactional, with brand preference becoming a secondary consideration when competing airlines offer comparable ticket prices and flight schedules. The findings further indicate that the perceived value of digital loyalty programs may be constrained by short points-validity periods and high redemption thresholds. In contrast, proactive real-time digital communication, including gate-change notifications and booking updates, together with personalized and non-intrusive promotional offerings, can strengthen trust, reduce travel-related uncertainty, and enhance passengers' perceptions of being recognized and valued. Overall, the findings suggest that digital marketing efforts contribute to airline brand loyalty not merely through increased digital interaction, but through the delivery of functional value, reliability, personalization, and trust. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how these factors shape the transition from predominantly transactional repeat-purchase behavior towards stronger relational and emotional attachment to airline brands.

Keywords: Airline Industry, Digital Marketing Efforts, Emotional Trust, Perceived Value of Rewards, Price-Driven Loyalty

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global civil aviation sector is defined by intense price competition and rapid technological advancement, which has fundamentally reorganized how airlines engage with customers and manage customer journeys within complex online ecosystems (Al-Bashayreh, et al., 2022; Kotler et al., 2021). Under the operational premise that continuous, high-visibility digital touchpoints will drive passenger engagement, heighten brand recall, and ultimately secure long-term brand loyalty, airlines have executed massive digital transformations and heavily invested in multi-channel digital marketing efforts, comprising mobile applications, social media engagement, highly tailored email campaigns, and electronic customer relationship management (E-CRM) platforms (Brodie et al., 2011; Hameed et al., 2024). However, a critical industry and academic problem lie in the structural and relational mismatch between these sophisticated digital marketing designs and

passengers' actual travel experiences. Highly visible digital marketing often translates to promotional overload and digital "noise" that passengers actively ignore, while highly restrictive and complex loyalty rules, such as rapid points expiration and high redemption thresholds, turn reward systems into a source of customer frustration rather than retention (Dolnicar and Ring, 2023; Pappachan, 2023). Consequently, instead of developing robust emotional loyalty, frequent flyers demonstrate highly transactional, behavioral, and easily disrupted "spurious" repeat booking habits, making them highly sensitive to price differentials and competitor promotions. Underpinning this phenomenon is the reality that digital marketing efforts alone have struggled to foster deep-seated emotional connection, leaving repeat purchase behavior fragile and heavily dependent on rational pricing.

To address these issues, this study aims to examine the factors that influence frequent flyers' loyalty to airlines through their digital marketing efforts. The primary scholarly contribution of this study lies in its empirical examination of the frequent leisure-flyer segment, a customer group that remains relatively underexplored in the existing literature, which has predominantly focused on corporate business travelers whose travel expenses are employer-funded or on casual, low-frequency leisure travelers (Dolnicar and Ring, 2023; Pappachan, 2023). Through a critical examination of relationship marketing and customer engagement perspectives, this study challenges the prevailing assumption that greater digital interaction necessarily results in stronger brand attachment, customer loyalty, and advocacy (Kotler et al., 2021; Brodie et al., 2011). Instead, the findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how self-funding frequent leisure flyers evaluate and respond to digital customer relationship management (e-CRM) initiatives, particularly in the presence of functional constraints, perceived value deficiencies, and relational tensions. Drawing on Customer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011) and Relationship Marketing Theory (Berry, 1983; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), the study demonstrates that digital e-CRM features, including real-time notifications and loyalty reward mechanisms, may function primarily as transactional value-enhancing mechanisms rather than as direct drivers of emotional attachment. The study therefore extends existing theoretical perspectives by demonstrating that digital engagement alone is insufficient to foster enduring customer-brand relationships among frequent leisure flyers. Rather, digital services must consistently deliver functional value, reliability, and real-time trust to strengthen relational outcomes, thereby mitigating customers' reliance on price-based switching decisions.

This study is theoretically grounded in two underpinning perspectives: Customer Engagement Theory and Relationship Marketing Theory. Customer Engagement Theory, as established by Brodie et al. (2011), conceptualizes customer engagement as a multidimensional psychological state consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions that are activated through specific interactive brand experiences. In the digital airline context, repeated, helpful, and highly personalized digital marketing interactions across multiple touchpoints (e.g., mobile apps, E-CRM emails, and social media) stimulate passenger engagement (Al-Bashayreh, et al., 2022; Brodie et al., 2011). According to Brodie et al. (2011), active engagement is co-creative and leads to stronger relational trust and brand advocacy over time. However, if digital interactions are perceived as intrusive, non-personalized, or low-value, engagement levels collapse, active avoidance behaviors are triggered, and customer relationships regress back to purely transactional, price-conscious buying behavior (Kotler et al., 2021; Brodie et al., 2011). Relationship Marketing Theory focuses on building, maintaining, and enhancing long-term customer relationships to secure repeat business, moving away from isolated transaction-oriented marketing (Berry, 1983; Morgan, and Hunt, 1994). First introduced by Berry (1983), this theory emphasizes that retaining existing customers is more cost-effective than customer acquisition. Subsequently, Morgan and Hunt (1994) established the Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing, identifying trust and commitment as the core mediating variables necessary to preserve long-term brand relationships. In the airline industry, digital marketing channels are the primary vehicles used to establish relational trust. Providing passengers with highly accurate, real-time booking updates, transparent pricing structures, and accessible customer recovery shows that the airline values the relational contract (Dolnicar and Ring, 2023; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). According to Relationship Marketing Theory, these proactive digital efforts demonstrate commitment, thereby reducing passenger travel anxiety, generating reciprocal emotional attachment, and shielding the customer from competitors' pricing strategies (Berry, 1983; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

By synthesizing Brodie et al.'s (2011) Customer Engagement Theory with Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Commitment-Trust Theory, this study conceptualizes digital touchpoints not merely as informational broadcast tools, but as dynamic relational mechanism frameworks. Digital engagement fosters loyalty only when

functional utility (app performance, real-time alerts) transmutes into perceived relational commitment and systemic trust, neutralizing rational price-sensitivity.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the subjective lived experiences and perceptions of airline passengers, this study adopts a qualitative paradigm rooted in an interpretivist epistemological stance (Saunders et al., 2019). Explanatory qualitative research is deployed to systematically clarify how and why specific digital interactions translate into behavioral or emotional loyalty outcomes (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Research Design, Sampling and Saturation Assessment

This research implements a qualitative mono-method design utilizing semi-structured interviews (Saunders et al., 2019, Creswell and Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to recruit eight (8) information-rich frequent flyers based in Southeast Asia (primarily Malaysia). This sampling approach ensures that participants possess direct, extensive experience with the phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2019). The inclusion criteria required that participants had: (1) travelled by air at least five (5) times per year, (2) enrolled in at least one airline digital loyalty program, and (3) had at least eight (8) digital interactions per year with airline digital channels. The travel and demographic profile of all participants is depicted in Table 1. Qualitative research literature establishes that sample size acceptability is determined by data saturation, which occurs when additional interviews yield no new conceptual categories or themes (Saunders et al., 2019). Conceptual saturation was achieved with the sample of eight participants, as major themes regarding price sensitivity, reward dissatisfaction, and notification-driven trust were repeated consistently across the final three interviews.

Conceptual saturation was achieved with the sample of eight participants, as major themes regarding price sensitivity, reward dissatisfaction, and notification-driven trust were repeated consistently across the final three interviews. In qualitative thematic inquiry, saturation is determined by thematic richness and conceptual redundancy rather than statistical numerical representation (Saunders et al., 2019; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Table 1. Travel and Demographic Profile of Participants

ID	Occupation	Travel Freq. (Yr)	Loyalty Enrolled	Primary Purpose	Primary Digital Channels
P1	Manager	~6 times	~5 years	Leisure / Family	Airline apps, email
P2	HR Manager	~4-5 times	~6 years	Leisure / Family	Airline apps, email, social media
P3	Client Servicing Manager	~7-8 times	~4 years	Leisure	Airline apps, email
P4	Content Creator & Writer	~8-10 times	>6 years	Frequent leisure	Airline apps, web, social media
P5	Lifestyle & Food Creator	~4-6 times	~5 years	Leisure	Airline apps, websites
P6	Radio Jockey	~4-7 times	~5 years	Leisure	Airline apps, web, social media
P7	Businesswoman	~5-6 times	~4 years	Leisure / Family	Airline app, email, social media
P8	IT Manager	~6-7 times	~5 years	Leisure	Airline apps, price comparison apps

Data saturation was operationally assessed and documented using Hennink and Kaiser's code and meaning saturation framework (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). Data collection and transcript analysis were conducted iteratively following each interview session. A code development matrix was maintained to track the emergence of new codes across sequential interviews. Code saturation—defined as the point at which no additional initial

codes are identified—was formally achieved at Interview 5, by which 92% (26 out of 28 initial semantic codes) of the total coding inventory had been established. Interviews 6, 7, and 8 yielded zero new first-order codes, confirming code redundancy. Meaning saturation—defined as achieving nuanced, rich understanding and visual dimensionalization of established themes—was solidified during Interviews 6 through 8, where participants elaborated on existing constructs without altering the thematic architecture (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022; Braun and Clarke, 2021). This systematic tracking verifies that a sample size of eight participants provided sufficient empirical depth to address the core research questions (Saunders et al., 2019; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Regarding the geographical and demographic scope of the study, participants were primarily based in Malaysia, accessing regional civil aviation hubs. While this geographic focus represents a contextual boundary, transferability—the qualitative parallel to generalizability—is supported through shared structural characteristics across the broader Southeast Asian civil aviation market (Nowell et al., 2017; Jiang and Zhang, 2024). The Southeast Asian airline sector is universally characterized by intense low-cost carrier (LCC) penetration (exceeding 50% regional seat capacity), shared cross-border travel corridors (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia), standardized mobile app interfaces, and identical e-CRM marketing frameworks deployed by regional carriers (Hameed et al., 2024; Jiang and Zhang, 2024). Following Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria for qualitative trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017), transferability is facilitated by providing 'thick description' of participant profiles, travel parameters, and digital touchpoint characteristics. Consequently, while statistical generalizability is not claimed, the theoretical and practical findings regarding digital price-sensitivity and e-CRM trust mechanisms are transferrable to comparable frequent leisure-flyer cohorts operating across similar ASEAN digital aviation ecosystems (Nowell et al., 2017; Jiang and Zhang, 2024).

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured online interviews were conducted synchronously via video conferencing software (Saunders et al., 2019, Creswell and Poth, 2018). An interview guide containing open-ended questions and reflective probes was utilized to explore participants' feelings, interpretations, and behaviors regarding digital marketing efforts and airline loyalty (Saunders et al., 2019). The interview sessions lasted between 30 and 45 minutes (averaging 40 minutes per participant), were recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. The resulting qualitative transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-stage reflexive thematic analysis. This reflexive process combined deductive coding based on relationship marketing theory (specifically looking for concepts of trust, commitment, and satisfaction) with inductive coding to capture emerging themes directly from the participants' raw narratives. Ethical protocols were strictly observed: institutional ethics approval was obtained, all participants signed digital consent forms, pseudonyms (P1 to P8) were assigned to protect identities, and all data were stored in secure, password-protected files (Saunders et al., 2019).

To enhance methodological transparency, specific operational protocols were documented across four key analytical dimensions:

1. Interview Guide Development and Piloting: The interview protocol was structured around Customer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011) and Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), divided into four operational blocks: (a) Digital Touchpoint Engagement, (b) Perceived Value of Loyalty Programs, (c) Operational Communication and Relational Trust, and (d) Brand Switching against Affective Commitment. Prior to primary data collection, the interview guide was pilot-tested with two non-participant frequent flyers to refine question phrasing, ensure clarity, and calibrate reflective probing strategies (Saunders et al., 2019).

2. Detailed Coding Procedures: Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. The phases include: (Phase 1) Dataset familiarization through iterative transcript reading; (Phase 2) Initial code generation, producing 28 semantic and latent codes; (Phase 3) Searching for candidate sub-themes by clustering codes according to functional and relational properties; (Phase 4) Reviewing sub-themes against raw coded extracts and the total dataset; (Phase 5) Defining and naming three master themes; and (Phase 6) Producing the analytic narrative. Coding combined deductive operationalization of trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) with inductive openness to participant expressions (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

3. Researcher Reflexivity: In accordance with reflexive qualitative practice (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) the research team systematically examined potential personal and epistemic biases. As digital marketing and technology management scholars, researchers maintained reflexive research logs after each interview to bracket preconceptions regarding digital tool effectiveness. This process ensured that empirical interpretations were rigorously grounded in participant voices rather than normative assumptions about digital marketing efficacy (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4. Theme Validation and Rigor: To establish trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017; Jiang and Zhang, 2024), four rigour validation mechanisms were implemented: (a) Member Checking: Transcripts and synthesized thematic summaries were sent back to four participants (P1, P3, P5, P7), who confirmed that the interpreted themes accurately reflected their lived experiences; (b) Peer Debriefing: Independent inter-coder reviews were conducted between the lead author and supervising researcher to audit code definitions and theme boundaries; (c) Audit Trail: A systematic decision log documenting transcript excerpts, initial codes, code aggregation notes, and thematic mappings was preserved; and (d) Triangulation of Evidence: Analytical claims were cross-verified across multiple participant extracts and theoretical dimensions (Nowell et al., 2017; Jiang and Zhang, 2024).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS / FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts surfaced three primary interconnected factors influencing airline brand loyalty through digital marketing efforts. These factors reveal that frequent flyer loyalty in the digital era is practical, conditional, and experiential, shaped by pricing structures, the perceived utility of points programs, and communication-driven emotional trust.

Price-Driven Loyalty

The first dimension of Price-Driven Loyalty involves the complete dominance of ticket price and flight schedules over airline brand identity. The frequent leisure flyers in this study are self-funding, meaning price sensitivity is highly pronounced, and brand connection is fragile. Discussing this phenomenon, Hameed et al. (2024) argue that service loyalty is highly elastic and pricing-dominated in competitive service environments. Similarly, in Dolnicar and Ring (2023), it is demonstrated that frequent flyer programs struggle to capture true loyalty because rational economic self-interest easily supersedes minor brand familiarity. This is supported by the statement of Pappachan (2023) that passenger retention is easily disrupted when competitors offer superior pricing on similar routes. These ideas were strongly echoed by the participants:

"I don't really mind which airline [I fly] as long as it's convenient and cheap... If another airline offers better value, I'll consider switching." — P1, Manager

"The main reason is price... If another airline is cheaper, I'll take that instead." — P5, Lifestyle and Food Content Creator

"I don't really stick to one airline... If I see a good deal, I'll book without thinking too much." — P8, IT Manager

Beyond confirming basic price sensitivity, these narratives reveal a fundamental cognitive mechanism operating among self-funding leisure flyers: the primacy of the rational economic calculus over digital brand engagement. Unlike corporate travelers whose flights are organizationally subsidized, self-funding frequent flyers evaluate digital marketing touchpoints (e.g., app promotional push notifications, fare alerts) primarily through an economic filter. Digital app availability does not generate brand attachment; rather, it functions merely as a transactional utility channel. When digital marketing efforts fail to deliver a tangible price advantage, passenger commitment evaporates immediately. This indicates that high digital engagement (e.g., frequent app logins, email opens) should not be conflated with affective loyalty (Brodie et al., 2011; Hameed et al., 2024).

The second dimension captures the conditional nature of brand preference, whereby airline preference becomes a secondary decision criterion when competing airlines offer comparable fares and flight schedules. Under these conditions, participants demonstrate habitual repeat booking behaviors, choosing their preferred airline primarily because they already possess an account, have stored card details, or are familiar with the mobile app interface.

According to Brodie et al. (2011) this repeat behavior represents purely behavioral or 'spurious loyalty' because it is driven by convenience and habit rather than an emotional connection to the brand. This is analyzed in Morgan and Hunt (1994) who emphasize that true relational commitment only exists when customer attachment is built on mutual shared values and emotional trust rather than immediate situational utility. This is aligned with the statement of Al-Bashayreh et al. (2022) that convenience features in digital portals drive short-term customer lock-in but fail to secure long-term defense against competitor price drops. In this study, participants confirmed this spurious loyalty, showing how easily digital habit disappears:

"If two flights are very similar in price and timing, then I might choose the airline where I already have an account. But if one is cheaper, I'll go with the cheaper one, even if I have to register again." — P5, Lifestyle and Food Creator

This study observes that these behaviors underscore a crucial reality. This qualitative finding is similar to the empirical work of Limberger et al. (2021) who confirmed that regional civil airline travelers exhibit extremely low brand commitment, meaning digital familiarity only functions as a selection mechanism when competitors' pricing differences fall within a negligible margin.

Perceived Value of Loyalty Benefits

The first dimension under Perceived Value of Loyalty Benefits involves participants' profound frustration with the rapid expiration of points and the sluggish pace of points accumulation. Since frequent leisure flyers do not travel on high-fare premium business itineraries, they experience devalued earning rates. Discussing these reward program barriers, Dolnicar and Ring (2023) argue that poorly designed loyalty schemes act as negative customer touchpoints when they create cognitive friction and feelings of exclusion. Similarly, in Pappachan (2023) it is demonstrated that reward programs must provide transparent and reachable benefit thresholds to build customer loyalty, otherwise they fail to generate relational commitment. This is consistent with the statement of Kotler et al. (2021) that overly complex loyalty structures in digital portals turn points into an ineffective retention mechanism. In this study, participants strongly criticized the devalued points structures:

"The biggest issue is the points expiring too fast. I lost quite a lot of points because I forgot about them... The number of points needed to redeem a meaningful reward is too high, so it feels impossible to reach." — P3, Client Servicing Manager

"I think the loyalty program isn't designed for casual frequent flyers like me. It feels more beneficial for people who travel very often or spend more on add-ons." — P5, Lifestyle and Food Creator

"The biggest issue is points expiring... Even after several flights, the points don't add up to much. I don't feel like I'm missing out if I don't use them." — P6, Radio Jockey

Psychologically, restrictive points expiration policies and unattainable redemption thresholds trigger a perceived 'Relational Contract Breach' (Chen and Wong, 2024). Self-funding leisure flyers invest personal financial resources and digital engagement into an airline's loyalty program with the expectation of reciprocal recognition. When points expire passively or rewards remain structurally out of reach, passengers perceive the digital loyalty program not merely as unhelpful, but as inherently exploitative. This converts what was intended to be a retention mechanism into an active source of customer alienation and cognitive friction, driving passengers back to uncommitted, price-conscious searching (Dolnicar and Ring, 2025; Chen and Wong, 2024).

The second dimension relates to the clear desire for practical and realistic rewards over premium or distant luxury perks. The 'in-between' leisure flyer segment seeks immediate functional benefits such as baggage discounts, member-only promotional fares, early access to flight sales, or occasional free seat selection. According to Pappachan (2023) these functional rewards are highly effective because they provide immediate transactional value that corresponds directly with passengers' self-funded travel budgets. This is explored in Al-Bashayreh et al. (2022) where mobile commerce platforms are shown to drive customer satisfaction when they deliver immediate utility. This is aligned with the statement of Kotler et al. (2021) that contemporary CRM platforms should co-create value by delivering accessible, daily functional benefits.

Participants expressed their specific loyalty desires as follows:

"Points redemption, member-only fares, and early promotions... I would also consider priority seating or baggage if they are easily accessible in the app." — P2, HR Manager

"Extend the point validity... Even simple things like complimentary seat selection once in a while would feel rewarding... small perks feel nice because they acknowledge that I fly with them often." — P3, Client Servicing Manager

Taken together, these preferences suggest that current loyalty programs may not adequately address customers' expectations. This qualitative finding is similar to Limberger et al. (2021) who demonstrated that mid-tier leisure travellers are highly motivated by instant gratification and functional savings rather than distant, high-tier status upgrades, meaning airlines must simplify their reward programs to retain this massive segment.

These finding challenges traditional loyalty architecture models that prioritize elite status tiers and high-spend business travelers. By incorporating Vargo and Lusch's Service-Dominant Logic (2016), it demonstrates that for self-funding frequent leisure flyers, value is co-created through an incremental, highly accessible digital benefits (e.g., seat selection vouchers, extra baggage discounts) that deliver immediate value-in-use. Replacing distant aspirational rewards with transparent micro-rewards restores perceived equity in the relationship marketing contract, transforming passive digital app enrollment into active, value-reinforcing engagement (Berry, 1998; Vargo and Lusch, 2016),

Emotional Trust and Feeling Appreciated

The first dimension under Emotional Trust and Feeling Appreciated is the critical role of timely, real-time digital communication in building passenger trust and safety. Real-time updates regarding gate changes, flight delays, booking confirmations, and digital boarding passes delivered via mobile apps or SMS significantly reduce travel stress. Discussing this trust mechanism, Al-Bashayreh et al. (2022) note that digital mobile services foster brand trust when they deliver reliable, timely, and non-intrusive communication. Similarly, in Morgan and Hunt (1994) the quality of communication is shown to be a crucial antecedent to relational trust and long-term customer commitment. This is supported by the statement of Hameed et al. (2024) that proactive digital communications reduce psychological friction during service delivery, building perceived reliability. Participants described how these updates influenced their trust:

"Notifications about gate changes or flight updates reduce stress. I've missed flights before due to lack of updates, so I prefer airlines that provide timely notifications." — P1, Manager

Travel inherently involves situational vulnerability and stress. When an airline delivers proactive, real-time notifications (e.g., instant gate change alerts, delay updates) through mobile apps, it demonstrates high operational reliability and empathy. This functional reliability directly fulfills the 'Integrity and Competence' dimensions of Morgan and Hunt's Commitment-Trust Theory (1994). Unlike promotional broadcast emails that generate digital fatigue, real-time operational communication builds relational goodwill and systemic trust by safeguarding the passenger's immediate journey (Al-Bashayreh et al., 2022; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019; Morgan and Hunt, 1994;)

The second dimension involves the emotional contrast between feeling appreciated and feeling ignored. When airlines fail to recognize and reward a passenger's repeat choices, customers feel unappreciated, driving them back to purely price-conscious, non-loyal behaviors. According to Brodie et al. (2011) emotional customer engagement is a reciprocal contract; brands must actively demonstrate appreciation to sustain psychological attachment. This is evaluated in Berry (1983) who establishes that relationship marketing collapses when customers feel treated as a transactional commodity rather than a valued partner. This supports the statement of Kotler et al. (2021) that human-centric branding and relational recognition are critical to maintaining long-term loyalty in digital environments. Participants shared their relational feelings:

"I've also never really received special privileges... I think the loyalty program doesn't really differentiate frequent flyers from occasional ones... I don't feel emotional loyalty." — P1, Manager

While automated personalization can enhance the customer experience, it may not fully address customers' underlying emotional expectations. This qualitative outcome contradicts the finding of Awad and Mahmoud (2024), who asserted that digital marketing automated algorithms are self-sufficient in driving emotional trust. Instead, the findings demonstrate that automated digital CRM may be insufficient to foster meaningful customer relationships in the absence of transparent recognition and reliable service delivery, resulting in greater customer sensitivity to price and competing airline offers.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings of this study offer a rich, nuanced understanding of how digital marketing efforts shape brand loyalty among Southeast Asian frequent flyers. By synthesizing these results with the underpinning theories, we can see that while digital platforms improve convenience and reach, they often fail to foster deep, emotional brand commitment. According to Brodie et al. (2011) customer engagement must advance beyond cognitive awareness and basic app convenience to trigger emotional attachment. In this study, the findings demonstrate that frequent leisure flyers remain trapped in behavioral and spurious loyalty (Hameed et al., 2024; Dolnicar and Ring, 2023). Their repeat choices are driven by habit and digital system convenience, but this behavior is highly fragile. As shown by Morgan and Hunt (1994), true loyalty is built on a foundation of trust and relational commitment. When airline digital loyalty programs devalue points and restrict redemptions, they fail to demonstrate relational commitment, which actively pushes these mid-value customers back into rational, price-based switching behavior (Pappachan, 2023; Berry, 1983). However, proactive real-time digital communication can act as an emotional bridge, building brand trust by reducing travel anxiety and making the traveler feel valued (Al-Bashayreh, et al., 2022; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Beyond confirming existing theories, these findings provide a clearer understanding of the conditions under which Customer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011) and Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) apply in digital service contexts. Previous engagement models often assume that greater digital interaction will naturally lead to stronger emotional attachment to a brand (Brodie et al., 2011). However, the findings of this study suggest that this relationship is not always direct. Digital service features mainly act as basic requirements rather than direct drivers of emotional attachment. For example, a stable mobile application and timely operational updates can reduce customer anxiety and build basic transactional trust (Al-Bashayreh et al., 2022). However, these features alone are not sufficient to create strong relational commitment.

The findings also extend Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) by showing that negative transactional experiences, such as the devaluation of loyalty points and strict redemption conditions (Dolnicar and Ring, 2023; Pappachan, 2023) can weaken the effects of digital relationship-building efforts. When customers experience these forms of transactional friction, they may place greater importance on price and immediate benefits rather than their relationship with the brand. This can result in a form of loyalty that is mainly behaviour-based or "spurious" rather than based on genuine emotional commitment (Brodie et al., 2011; Hameed et al., 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Airlines

First, airlines must optimize the user-experience (UX) and system stability of their mobile apps. Since app familiarity represents an important factor influencing customers' choice of airline Limberger et al. (2021), resolving payment gateway errors and improving search efficiency may help reduce passenger abandonment. Second, airlines must redesign loyalty program rules to engage the overlooked frequent leisure flyer segment. This includes extending point validity, lowering redemption thresholds for non-flight rewards (such as baggage discounts, pre-ordered meals, or free seat selection), and introducing immediate digital vouchers for mid-tier travelers (Pappachan, 2023). Third, airlines should personalize digital communications to avoid promotional overload, ensuring that offers are relevant, timely, and non-intrusive (Kotler et al., 2021).

To address the operational gaps identified by participants, airline mobile applications must eliminate booking glitches, payment latency, and app crashes during high-traffic promotional sales. Rather than treating loyalty programs as generic tools for data collection, airlines should restructure earning and redemption mechanisms to cater to regular leisure flyers. Key practical enhancements include extending point validity to a minimum of two years, introducing rolling expiration models tied to app engagement rather than flight accrual, and offering achievable 'micro-rewards' such as complimentary seat selection, meal vouchers, or baggage discounts. Additionally, while automated digital support improves operational efficiency, airlines must upgrade chatbot systems to handle complex inquiries effectively and ensure an accessible escalation path to human customer service agents during travel disruptions.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Future Research

Policymakers and regulators, such as the Malaysian Aviation Commission (MAVCOM), should establish clear industry guidelines regarding consumer protection in digital loyalty programs. This includes mandating clear warnings before points expire, preventing unilateral points devaluation, and ensuring fare transparency across digital booking platforms (Dolnicar and Ring, 2023). For academic researchers, future qualitative investigations should conduct comparative analyses between low-cost and full-service carriers across multiple regional hubs in Southeast Asia.

From a regulatory perspective, aviation bodies such as the Malaysian Aviation Commission (MAVCOM) should establish standardized guidelines for consumer protection within digital loyalty and booking environments. Regulatory frameworks should mandate clear, automated 60-day digital push or email notifications prior to point forfeiture to protect consumers from passive point expiration. Furthermore, policymakers should enforce digital transparency mandates that require airlines to display net point redemption values, blackout conditions, and ancillary fee breakdowns prominently prior to checkout, preventing misleading promotional tactics and safeguarding consumer welfare in increasingly automated ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings indicate that airline brand loyalty among frequent flyers in the Southeast Asian aviation industry is shaped by a combination of digital, functional, relational, and experiential factors. The empirical data collected from the eight in-depth interviews demonstrate that while digital marketing efforts such as app convenience and E-CRM provide functional pathways for booking, they fail to secure emotional brand commitment unless supported by transparent reward structures and proactive, trust-building digital communication. The findings show that ticket pricing and flight schedule convenience remain the dominant purchasing factors, with mobile app familiarity functioning primarily as a differentiating factor when competing airline offerings are otherwise comparable. Furthermore, devalued point systems with rapid expiration policies actively discourage passenger engagement, whereas real-time flight updates significantly enhance emotional trust by reducing travel stress and making passengers feel appreciated. Future works should expand this qualitative investigation into a regional quantitative survey utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM) to statistically validate these relational paths across a larger, more diverse demographic in Southeast Asia, while also comparing low-cost versus full-service carriers to determine if service tier architectures moderate passenger price sensitivity.

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Author Contributions

Resethaa Kunaseelan: Conceptualisation, study design, data collection, qualitative thematic analysis, writing—original draft, and manuscript revision. Norain Ismail: Methodological guidance, critical review, supervision, and manuscript revision. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional ethics approval was obtained prior to data collection. All participants provided voluntary, informed consent for recorded synchronous online interviews via Google Meet. Participant identities were protected using assigned pseudonyms (P1 to P8).

Data Availability

The qualitative dataset and interview transcripts supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality protocols. Anonymized data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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