

THE IMPACT OF THE ANTECEDENTS OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY TOWARDS CONSUMER-COMPANY RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN MALAYSIA'S LOW COST CARRIER, AIRASIA.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the significance of influence of antecedents of relationship quality (customer orientation, service provider attributes, promotion and corporate social responsibility) towards the consumer-company relationship quality (satisfaction, trust and commitment) of low cost carrier, AirAsia Malaysia. A total of 409 questionnaires were distributed, with 392 cases used in the final analysis. A series of statistical tests – descriptive analysis, normal Q-Q plots, reliability test, correlation analysis and regression analysis; were carried out based on the research objectives proposed. Results also indicated that all 4 of the antecedents of relationship quality does influence the consumer-company relationship quality and that CSR has the highest level of influence among the 4 antecedents of relationship quality tested, towards consumer-company relationship quality in AirAsia. Results provide important insights into the impact of customer orientation, service provider attribute, promotion and CSR towards consumer-company relationship quality in the low cost carrier industry compared to other previous researches. In addition, CSR is found to be the most influential antecedents of consumer-company relationship quality.

Keywords: *Relationship quality, consumer-company relationship quality, corporate social responsibility, promotion, service provider attributes, customer orientation, low cost carrier, AirAsia, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

A low-cost carrier is usually known as budget airline that caters its services at the relatively reasonable price compared to the traditional airlines. Low Cost Airline (or Low Fare Airline or Budget Airline) is a new business model in the airline industry. The business model first introduced by Southwest Airline (SWA) in the United States in 1971 prompted the spread of the model to Europe and after that to Asia, including AirAsia in Malaysia in 2002. LCAs contend by offering lower fares to passages than those of full-service carriers. To compensate for income lost in diminished ticket price, the aircraft may charge for additional items like on-flight meals, seat selection, and luggage and so forth.

AirAsia Berhad is a low-cost airline started in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. At present AirAsia works booked local and universal flights and is Asia's biggest low cost carrier. There is a stiff competition among airline service providers, which are always strategizing to expand their services and are constantly challenging their own limits. In their efforts to gain

and keep more customers than their competitors, airlines are known to employ a wide variety of business tactics (Chen and Hu, 2013). Despite being awarded “World’s Best Low-Cost Airlines” by Skytrax for the 8th consecutive year (Skytrax, 2016), average product and service review of AirAsia are still very inconsistent across multiple online review platforms. AirAsia will have to constantly improve all aspects of their product and services in order to attract and retain their customer (Sukati, Khiang and Isnurhadi, 2015).

Highlighting the importance of customer retention, Pi and Haung (2011) in citing Kotler et al. (1996) reported that the cost of getting new customers is five times the cost of retaining existing customers. To fully enjoy the benefits of high customer retention, AirAsia must firstly identify the key factors that lead to higher consumer-relationship quality level which will translate into higher customer loyalty and higher customer retention (Pi and Huang, 2011; Moghadem et al., 2014b).

Pi and Huang (2011) when investigating the frameworks and model of customer loyalty, many researchers ignored the important concept of relationship marketing – relationship quality. Past research conducted on AirAsia focuses on the factors influencing customer satisfaction however the researcher proposed that AirAsia should look at more than one aspect but instead focus on consumer-company relationship marketing which is a higher order construct that is inclusive of several related dimensions of customer relationship.

As such, this study will address the problem of inconsistent product and service review of AirAsia and potential low customer satisfaction rate by identifying the key factors that will lead to higher level of consumer-company relationship quality in AirAsia. The objectives for the research are to determine the antecedents of relationship quality that significantly influences the overall relationship quality of AirAsia airline passengers hence to identify the antecedents of relationship quality that has the highest influence among AirAsia airline passengers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Quality

The development of relationship quality has started from theories and studies in the area of relationship marketing (Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990). Berry (1995) in defining relationship marketing mentioned that relationship marketing is to draw in, keep up and enhance customer relationships in multi-service organisations. In the early 1980s and early 1990s, numerous new definitions for relationship marketing were created, due to the increase in interest in the area of relationship marketing (Kim and Cha, 2002). Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990) in their study on agent-policyholder relationship, developed a relationship quality model that test the nature, antecedents, and result of relationship quality from the consumer point of view.

Developing strong relationships with customers has long been considered as a positive factor leading towards purchase decision. Relationship quality was defined by Palmatier et al. (2006) as “the overall assessment of the strength of a relationship, conceptualised as a composite or multi-dimensional construct capturing the different but related facets of a relationship”. Giovanis (2015) defined relationship quality as the

customers' perceptions of how well a relationship fulfils customers' expectations, predictions, goals, and desires.

Dimensions of Relationship Quality

Past researches of relationship quality has argued and tested the concept of relationship quality in various contexts; however the definition and usage of relationship quality still differs from research to research. Despite discussion and differences in views regarding the conceptualization of relationship quality remains, the researchers agree that relationship quality is a higher order construct that is inclusive of several related dimensions. The dimensions of relationship quality are satisfaction (Crosby et al., 1990; Kim and Cha, 2002; Pi and Huang, 2011), trust (Cheng, Chen and Chang, 2008; Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2009; Pi and Huang, 2011; Moghadam et al., 2014a; Moghadam et al., 2014b) and commitment (Chung and Shin, 2009; Moghadam et al., 2014a; Moghadam et al., 2014b). Based on previous research, this study proposes that relationship quality comprised of satisfaction, trust and commitment.

Customer Orientation and Relationship Quality

Customer orientation is initially utilised in personal selling management and is frequently seen as an index of the calibre of customer–sales rep relationships (Cheng, Chen and Chang, 2008). As a representative of the organization, consumer-oriented employees in the service firm provide superior service which will lead to improve in customer satisfaction.

Baker (2013) in their research discussed that low cost carrier are gradually being more customer oriented as airline passengers are getting grumpier, less tolerant and complaining much more. It was added that the internet provided the customers an easier way of complaining and being heard.

Brown, Mowen, Donovan, and Licata (2002) describe customer orientation as a personality variable that reflects the service worker's ability to satisfy client demands. Hennig-Thurau (2004) in their studies concludes that service employees' level of customer orientation is a main influence for customers' satisfaction with the service organisation.

Castellanos-Verdugo et al. (2009) mentioned that there is a significant relationship between customer orientation and relationship quality in the service sector. Driver (2001) argues that true customer orientation airlines would be stress on the importance of compliance to aviation safety and protection measures, which would leads to increase in customer satisfaction with and trust in the airline. Cheng, Chen and Chang (2008) in their study of airlines in Taiwan also found that there is a relationship between customer orientation and relationship quality.

Service Provider Attributes and Relationship Quality

The service provider's attributes are the second antecedent of service quality. A service encounter occurs whenever a customer interacts with a service providing organisation by phone, e-mail, in-person, or via any form of technology (Kim and Cha, 2002). At each of these encounters also known as moments of truth, perceive quality of customers is formed and every encounters influences the overall customers satisfaction which will greatly

influence the purchase decision of the customer (Bitner, 1995). Physical appearance according to Kim and Cha (2002) is an important service provider attribute that influences guest satisfaction. Sundaram and Webster (2000) mentioned that Disney, and several other hospitality organisations have policies regarding physical appearance of their staff. The service providers' attributes and their performance are so important to build good relationship quality in the service encounter.

Among the most important service provider attributes in the service sector, employee appearance and experience are well-known (Tsang and Qu, 2000). Previous research deduced that the expertise of employee in contact is a great antecedent of relationship quality (Crosby et al., 1990). Macintosh (2007) mentioned that trust derives from the customer's confidence in the capability of the service provider to deliver. Bahathly (2010) in his study indicated that relationship quality was influenced by both service providers' attributes and promotional efforts.

In their research conducted based on Low Cost Carrier in Thailand, Saha and Theingi (2009) found that service provider attributes have positive influence towards customer satisfaction. Similarly, Sukati, Khiang and Isnurhadi (2015) in their research also found that there a weak influence between service provider attributes towards customer satisfaction.

Promotion and Relationship Quality

Promotion is a combination of sales promotion, advertising, personal selling, public relations and direct marketing (Borden, 1984). Sawyer and Dickson (1984) mentioned that a sales promotion can be differentiated into either a price-discounting sales promotion or a value adding sales promotion. Lovelock, Patterson and Walker (1998) mentioned promotion is the method of relating a product to a target market and the ways to persuade the market to purchase it.

Snyder and Tai (2014) described that promotion in airline industry are activities of advertising, sales promotion, publicity, and personal selling in addition to the use the internet, media to promote their services.

Campo and Yagüe (2008) in their study on tourist-tour operator relationship indicated that price promotion will influence perceive price and perceive quality of tourist. It is mention also that price promotions have a negative influence on overall satisfaction (Campo and Yagüe, 2008). This however differs from the finding of Huang, Chang, Yeh and Liao (2014) as the results of their research indicated that price promotion significantly influences customer satisfaction.

Qin (2012) in his study on the effects of promotion relationship quality and customer loyalty in the airline industry, found that among the 4 elements of marketing mix – product, place, price and promotion; only promotion shows positive influence towards customer satisfaction.

Anuwichanont (2011) in his study of perceived price in the airline industry found that there is no relationship between promotion and trust. However, Pi and Huang (2011) in a study conducted on airline services in Taiwan indicated that there is a positive relationship

between promotion and trust. In the same study, promotion is found to have a positive influence towards both trust and satisfaction.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Relationship Quality

The topic of CSR and its consequences towards an organisation is a topic that more and more researchers are interested in (Campbell, 2006; Kotler and Lee, 2008; Carroll and Shabana, 2010). Brown and Dacin (1997) mentioned that CSR activities are widely seen as the company’s status and activities in relationship with its perceived societal obligations. Companies which are positively associated with CSR will boost company and product evaluations (Biehal and Sheinin, 2007).

The impact of CSR on consumers’ purchase intentions according to Chung, Yu, Choi and Shin (2015) is more complicated than what was perceived to be and that CSR are perceived to positively lead to higher customer satisfaction and loyalty. Ou, Shih and Chen (2015) mentioned that ethical salesperson behaviour will lead to customer satisfaction and customer trust.

Many CSR initiatives address issues of broad social interest and are presented as fulfilling an obligation to society, which should evoke customer trust in the commercial enterprise (Swimberghe and Wooldridge, 2014). Furthermore, CSR initiatives stimulate trust established on personal values, particularly with consumers sensitive to ethical, social, and environmental issues (Pivato, Misani, and Tencati, 2008). Choi and La (2013) in their study on the effect of corporate social responsibility after service failure and service recovery in the airline industry indicated that CSR has a significant influence towards customer trust.

Theoretical Framework

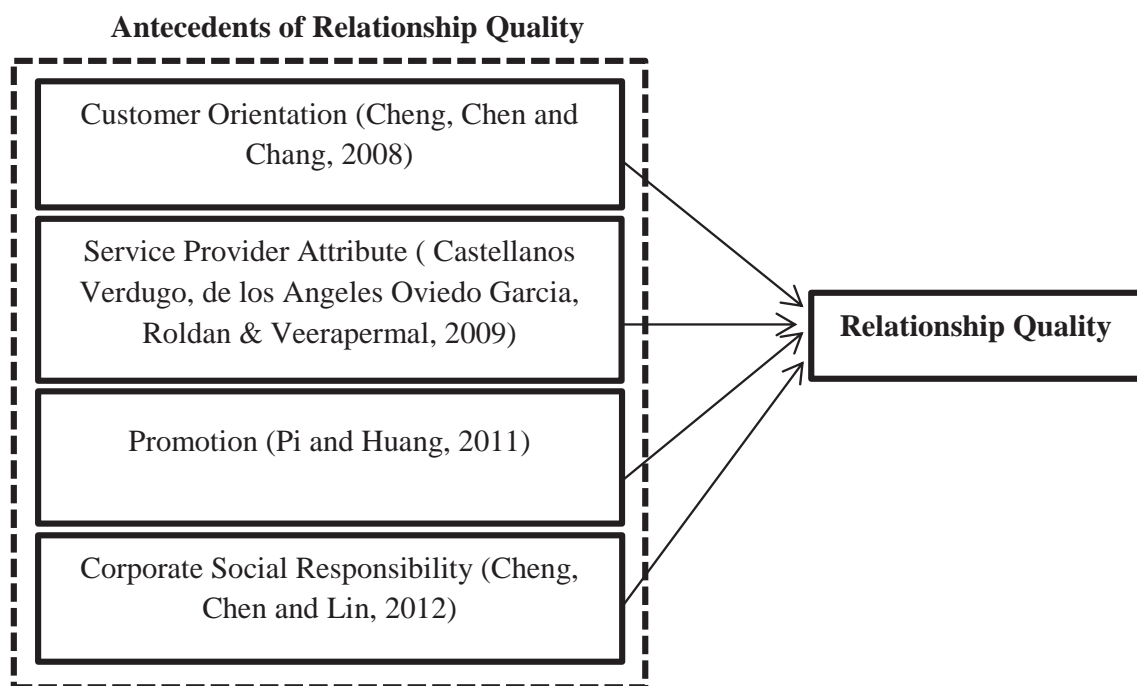


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Quantity research method was used for data collection to investigate the impact of the antecedents of relationship quality toward relationship quality in AirAsia Malaysia. It was a cross sectional study where the data was collected once at a particular time.

Sampling

The sampling method used in this study was convenience sampling which is a type of non-probability sampling. The population of this research are made out of passengers whom have flying experience with AirAsia in the past. Thus, Kuala Lumpur International Airport 2 (KLIA 2) was the target place to where the questionnaires were distributed. A total of 409 questionnaires were distributed, with 392 cases used in the final analysis. Participants involved in answering the questionnaire were at first asked for permission and guided by the researcher before and during the answering of the questionnaires to ensure that participation is truly voluntary.

Instrumentation

Data for the study were obtained by distributing the set of questionnaires to the target sample group. Self-administered questionnaire were used to conduct the study. It will consist of four sections. A 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree) were used to measure Section B, Section C and Section D of the questionnaire. Section A of the questionnaire will consist of 14 questions regarding to the 3 elements that were used to measure relationship quality. The 3 aspects of relationship quality are customer satisfaction, customer trust and customer commitment. The questions were adopted from Pi and Huang (2011). Section B of the questionnaire will consist of 4 antecedents of relationship quality – customer orientation, service provider attributes, promotion and corporate social responsibility awareness. The 25 questions were adopted from Cheng, Chen and Chang (2008), Castellanos-Verdugo et al. (2009), Pi and Huang (2011), Qin (2012) and Chen, Chang and Lin (2011) respectively. Section C of the questionnaire refers to the 6 questions used to obtain the demographic information and general information from the respondents. The result revealed that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for all the variables tested were relatively high: relationship quality (0.927), customer orientation (0.862), service provider attribute (0.833), promotion (0.868), and corporate social responsibility (0.902).

Assumptions of Parametric

Before choosing a statistical test to apply to the data collected, the researcher addressed the issue of whether the data are parametric or not. Statistical tests are used to analyse some aspect of a sample. The assumptions of parametric were met when: sample data are continuous and measurements met the minimum sample size requirement (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016), the ratio of cases/samples (N) to variables (IV) exceeded 5:1 (Osborne and Costello, 2002), more than 70 percent of the questionnaire can be measured using scale,

there was a linear relationship among the two variables and data collected were normally distributed based on the results obtained from the normality test conducted.

Statistical Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaires were analysed through a series of statistical test. The data collected were analysed using the SPSS statistical analysis software for Windows. The statistical procedures for quantitative research include reliability analysis, Q-Q plot, normality test, descriptive statistics, Pearson’s correlation and multiple regression analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Relationship between Antecedents of Relationship Quality and Consumer-Company Relationship Quality

Table 1: Correlations between the Five Variables

Variable	RQ	CO	SPA	PROMO	CSR
Relationship Quality (RQ)	-				
Customer Orientation (CO)	.686**	-			
Service Provider Attributes (SPA)	.630**	.709**	-		
Promotion (PROMO)	.582**	.501**	.416**	-	
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	.722**	.603**	.580**	.537**	-

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

A Pearson correlation was run to determine the relationship between each antecedents of relationship quality (customer orientation, service provider attributes, promotion, corporate social responsibility) and consumer-company relationship quality. The data in Table 1 showed no violation of normality and linearity. There are significant relationship between all 4 of the antecedents of relationship quality and consumer-company relationship quality.

Regression Analysis

Table 2: Regression Analysis: Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.809 ^a	.654	.650	.29665	1.902

a. Predictors: (Constant), Corporate Social Responsibility, Promotion, Service Provider Attributes, Customer Orientation

b. Dependent Variable: Relationship Quality

The R² value as shown in Table 2 is 0.654. With this it can be deduce that 65.4 percent of the variance in the dependent variable – relationship quality (RQ), can be explained by the variance of the independent variables which are customer orientation (CO), service provider

attributes (SPA), promotion (PROMO), corporate social responsibility (CSR). 34.5 percent of the data cannot be justified by the regression model. The Durbin-Watson statistics is recorded at 1.902 indicates a positive autocorrelation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016).

Table 3: Regression Analysis: ANOVA^a

	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	64.363	4	16.091	182.843	.000 ^b
	Residual	34.057	387	.088		
	Total	98.420	391			

a. Dependent Variable: Relationship Quality

b. Predictors: (Constant), Corporate Social Responsibility, Promotion, Service Provider Attributes, Customer Orientation

The F-ratio in Table 3 tests whether the overall regression model is a good fit for the data. The F-test result was 182.843 with significance ('Sig.') of .001. This meant that the probability of these results occurring by chance was less than 0.001. The table shows that the independent variables (corporate social responsibility, promotion, service provider attributes, customer orientation) statistically significantly predict the dependent variable (relationship quality), $F(4, 387) = 182.843$, $p < 0.001$. Thus it can be deduced that the regression model is a good fit of the data.

Table 4: Regression Analysis: Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	.035	.112		.314	.753
Customer Orientation	.217	.039	.257	5.574	.000
Service Provider Attributes	.145	.043	.150	3.401	.001
Promotion	.159	.031	.187	5.089	.000
Corporate Social Responsibility	.446	.048	.380	9.222	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Relationship Quality

To test the effect of each antecedent of relationship quality (customer orientation, service provider attributes, promotion, and corporate social responsibility) and consumer-company relationship quality, regression analysis is being used to test the direct effect between dependent and the independent variable. The dependent variable of this study is Relationship Quality (RQ) while the independent variables of this study which is Customer Orientation (CO), Service Provider Attributes (SPA), Promotion (PROMO) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Results shown in Table 4 shows that customer orientation has a statistically weak, positive influence towards relationship quality ($\beta=.217$, $n=392$, $P<0.01$). This shows that customer orientation has a significant influence towards relationship quality. The results are similar with the researches done in the past where customer orientation is found to influence one or more components of relationship quality in the aviation industry (Driver, 2001;

Cheng, Chen and Chang, 2008). Service provider attributes is shown to have a statistically weak, positive influence towards relationship quality ($\beta=.145$, $n=392$, $P<0.01$) as shown in Table 4. This shows that service provider attributes has a significant influence towards relationship quality. The results are similar with the findings of Sukati, Khiang and Isnurhadi (2015) where in their research found a weak influence of service provider attributes towards customer satisfaction. Saha and Theingi (2009) in their research found that service provider attributes have positive influence towards customer satisfaction as well. Next, it is found that promotion have a weak, positive influence towards relationship quality ($\beta=.159$, $n=392$, $P<0.01$). This shows that promotion has a significant relationship towards relationship quality. The findings of Huang, Chang, Yeh and Liao (2014) in their research indicated that price promotion significantly influences customer satisfaction. Qin (2012) in their study on the effects of promotion relationship quality and customer loyalty in the airline industry found that promotion has positive influence towards customer satisfaction. Pi and Huang (2011) in a study indicated that promotion is found to have a positive influence towards both trust and satisfaction.

Lastly, as illustrated in Table 4, corporate social responsibility is found to have a moderate, positive influence towards relationship quality ($\beta=.446$, $n=392$, $P<0.01$). This shows that corporate social responsibility has a significant influence towards relationship quality. The result is similar with the findings of Choi and La (2013) whereby corporate social responsibility (CSR) is found to positively influence relationship quality in the aviation industry.

By comparing the coefficient values (β) of each variable in Table 4, it is indicated that corporate social responsibility (CSR) has the highest level of influence towards relationship quality (RQ). At 0.446, the coefficient value (β) of CSR is the highest among the 4 variables studied, thus it is concluded that corporate social responsibility (CSR) has the highest impact towards relationship quality (RQ).

CONCLUSION

The research has two main objectives. The first objective was to determine whether the antecedents of relationship quality tested influence the consumer-company relationship of low cost carrier, AirAsia. It is found that customer orientation, service provider attributes and promotions have a weak and positive influence towards relationship quality. It is also found that corporate social responsibility has a moderate and positive influence towards relationship quality. The findings are in keeping with past research findings which suggested that customer orientation, service provider attribute, promotions and corporate social responsibility (CSR) does influence the consumer-company relationship quality.

The second objective of the research was to determine which antecedent of relationship quality has the highest influence among AirAsia passengers. Results obtained from the regression analysis suggested that Corporate Social Responsibility has the highest level of influence among the 4 antecedents of relationship quality tested, towards consumer-company relationship quality in AirAsia.

Recommendations

Result of the study suggested that customer orientation has a moderate relationship and weak influence towards consumer-company relationship quality. The weak influence of customer orientation towards relationship quality may simply reflect the current trend of the aviation industry that more airlines are moving towards customer centric product and services. This is evident as Baker (2013) mentioned that customers are getting less tolerant and complaining much more when service quality are below expectations, causing airlines to be more customer oriented in their service delivery and product offerings.

Next, recommendations are made to AirAsia to maintain and constantly uphold their good service provider attributes and it will influence the evaluation of the consumer-company relationship quality. As the airline industry is considered as one of the most people oriented and service-intensive businesses, companies such as AirAsia cannot detach themselves from the constant training of their employees to be more competent in service delivery as well as the attitude of keeping the customer's best interest in mind and help fulfil customers' needs and wants in a helpful and supportive manner. The findings of this study also highlights the importance for AirAsia employees to have a professional appearance with a nice and professional communication manner to make their guest feel more satisfied and confident in the company. AirAsia should make sure that their employees should undergo continuous quality training to identify and rectify potential shortcomings in the company's product and services.

Results of this research show that promotion has a weak influence towards consumer-company relationship quality. Past researches indicated that promotions do influence customer satisfaction but not customer trust, which in return may influence the overall relationship quality when paired against promotion. Promotions provided by AirAsia have always been their unique selling proposition and garner them the success both as a well-known low cost carrier and an affordable regional airline company. With their tagline "Now Everyone Can Fly" AirAsia's have since revolutionize the aviation industry in the region of South East Asia, providing new routes to various locations in the region at a very affordable price. Suggestions to AirAsia is that the company should always be aware that promotions and service delivery goes hand-in-hand and that good promotions without good service or product quality will have a negative effect on the relationship quality of the company. Tuttle (2012) mentioned that consumers will continuously associate "low price" with high value if the product or service quality of the purchased item meets their expectation. A below expectation product or service quality may risk the consumer to associate the "low price" brand with low quality or cheap quality instead. As suggested by the findings of this research, AirAsia's promotions should be attractive, available and most importantly truthful to increase their appeal to its customers.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is the only variable in this study that is found to have a strong relationship with relationship quality and a moderate influence toward the relationship quality. CSR is also the variable that has the strongest influence towards relationship quality among the 4 antecedents of relationship quality tested. The findings encourages AirAsia to continue actively engage themselves in CSR the implementing CSR can lead to the increase in consumer-company relationship quality. Past research indicates that higher levels of CSR can enhance customer trust and commitment and may later turn into customer commitment, repurchase intention and also customer loyalty. Park and Lee (2009) suggest that CSR engagement should be into a company's strategic mission and be

made part of a company's core concept. This will ensure CSR engagement can be consistent and purely altruistic. More importantly the company's engagement in CSR should be communicated to employees of all levels and other stakeholders of the company to clearly reflect the company's commitment into CSR engagement. Swimberghe and Wooldridge (2014) suggested that visible yet subtle displays of a firm's support of causes and issues can allow customers to be aware of these efforts and may trigger customer trust and association of the brand's name to CSR engagement.

Limitations and Further Research

Beyond the findings, there are some limitations associated with this study. Firstly, the study is based on a single low cost carrier and as such findings may not be generalizable to other context or other aviation companies. Future research based on the antecedents of relationship quality may include the comparison of other low cost carrier as well as full service airlines.

Secondly, convenient sampling of non-probability sample was used in this research for data collection. Despite fulfilling the minimum required sample size of the studies, collection of data are done mostly in the Kuala Lumpur International Airport 2 (KLIA2), the collection of data may be more solid if the sample can be collected from respondents from different airports that is included in AirAsia's flight route.

Besides that, the R² value obtained from the regression model is recorded at 0.645, indicating that only 65.4 percent of the dependent variable – relationship quality; can be explained using the individual variables tested. Suggestions for future studies is that additional variables such as mutual disclosure, service quality and cabin conditions can be included as antecedents of relationship quality to help explain the dependent variable better. The results of this research allow the researcher to identify which antecedents of relationship quality that has an influence towards consumer-company relationship quality. Future research may also consider to investigate each components of relationship quality - satisfaction, trust and commitment; individually and identify the influence of each antecedents of relationship quality towards satisfaction, trust and commitment separately. Nevertheless, the study still provides useful insights on the antecedents of relationship quality and their influence towards consumer-customer relationship quality in the low cost carrier industry.

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