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## AN INVESTIGATION OF IMPACT OF SERVICE STRATEGY ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN THE BUDGET AIRLINE INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY OF AIR ASIA

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### ABSTRACT

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*This paper investigates the level of customer satisfaction among the passengers who fly with Air Asia, a budget airline in Malaysia. The factors which investigated are the on-line services, third-party services, fare charging practices, advertisement and customer services. The independent variable which measured is customer satisfaction. A quantitative approach with a multiple regression analysis was deployed to study the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The findings suggest that there is strong correlation found between the independent variables and the dependent variable as the correlation coefficient for all variables is found to be significant at 0.01 and 0.05 levels. The multiple regression analysis reveals that there is a significant positive relationship exist between on-line services and customer satisfaction; third-party services and customer satisfaction; advertisement and customer satisfaction. The factors such as the fare charging practices and customer services though show a positive relationship with customer satisfaction, but the relationship is not significant. It looks like that the customers are not motivated any further with the fare being charged by Air Asia as passengers are already enjoying. The passengers also are not concerned with the customer services provided by Air Asia as the fares paid are relatively very low. However, the passengers are very concern about the on-line services, third-party services and the advertisement used to communicate with them. Therefore, this study highlights the managerial implications for Air Asia Berhad to improve the on-line services, third-party services and misleading advertisements in order to deliver customer satisfaction continuously.*

**Keywords:** On-line services, Third-party services, Fare charging practices, Advertisement, Customer services and Customer satisfaction.

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### INTRODUCTION

The study of customer satisfaction has become a paramount factor in the area of marketing as more organizations are trying to retain the customers for their business survival. As more than one airline is

operating in the domestic and regional markets, the competition is getting stiffer among the airline companies. This research is focused on the investigation of customer satisfaction in the airline industry particularly in Air Asia. Another study was conducted on the effect of the pre-flight

services, customer relationship management, cabin environment, and in-flight services on customer satisfaction among Air Asia passengers (Jayaraman et.al, 2008). But, this current research focuses on different parameters such as on-line services, third-party services, fee charging practices, advertisement and customer services which also impacts customer satisfaction among Air Asia customers. Air Asia was established in 1993 as a budget airline in the Far East Region which based at the Low Cost Carrier Terminal (LCCT) in Sepang. Air Asia Bhd. which is expected to handle 10 million passengers a year according to its CEO Tony Fernandes, unveiled a five-year plan to further enhance its presence in Asia. In the plan, AirAsia will strengthen and enhance its route network by connecting all the existing cities in the region and expanding further into Indochina, Indonesia, Southern China and India. Air Asia provides a totally different type of service in line with the Malaysia's aspirations to benefit all citizens and worldwide travelers. Such service takes the form of a no frills - low airfares flight offering, 40%-60% lower than what is currently offered in this part of Asia. Their vision is "Now Everyone Can Fly" and their mission is to provide 'Affordable Airfares' without any compromise to Flight Safety Standards..

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The budget airline industry is not new to Asia but it has seen failure in the past and Air Asia has made Malaysian proud with their achievement as the first Low Cost Carrier in South East Asia and they have literally taken to the skies. Recently, there have been many complaints and concerns about the service quality provided by Air Asia highlighted by the media and the personal experience faced by the passengers. Out of concern and after reading an interesting article on service integrity researched by

Eberhard E. Scheuing who is a Professor of Marketing at St John's University, Jamaica, and Bo Edvardsson, an Associate Professor of Business Administration at the University of Karlstad, we began to research and found very few research has been done specifically area of customer satisfaction in the budget airline. It can be observed from Air Asia's advertisements and promotional activities that Air Asia is working to position itself as the leader of low budget airlines by lowest price of tickets and even giving free tickets to customers. However, low priced or free tickets alone will not keep customers coming back to Air Asia. There are many other factors that affect customer satisfaction which are important to create customer loyalty. Therefore, we found the importance of a research required to provide a clear view into the factors that influence customer satisfaction among Air Asia passengers.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research is intended to measure the level of customer satisfaction among Air Asia passengers by investigating the relationship of the service integrity dimensions on customer satisfaction. Therefore, the study will investigate the relationship between on-line services and customer satisfaction; between third-party services and customer satisfaction; between fare charging practices and customer satisfaction; between advertisement and customer satisfaction; and lastly, between customer services & customer satisfaction.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Service Integrity

Service is about how your organization interacts with the outside world. Quite often, the service is the strategy. Integrity exists when you r organization does what it sets out to do. Integrity is

execution (SERVICE INTEGRITY MYSTERY SHOPPING, 2008). Service Integrity helps organizations to measure whether organizational strategies are being implemented at the point of customer contact. The service integrity programs by many organizations evaluate their stores, branches, call centers, or even website in delivering customer satisfaction. From the beginning of the “customer service revolution” almost 20 years ago, a body of business research has focused on customer satisfaction and customer-focused organizations. Business consultants, corporations and others have worked to identify the characteristics of organizations that consistently please their customers, to develop tools for monitoring customer satisfaction, and to build continuous, quality improvement systems that respond to consumer feedback. Although much of the research has been conducted by and for the corporate world, customer service and satisfaction is not limited to the private sector. Publicly funded organizations that are incorporating practices developed in the business world provide a growing body of experience and study. Increasingly, federal, state and local government agencies are attempting to gauge their performance and the effect on those they directly serve. Throughout the public sector, initiatives to “reinvent” government—including education reform, privatization, and managed care—have elevated customer service and satisfaction to new priorities. Within the European Union, a shift is underway to re-think and reform social services with social inclusion and “user involvement” as driving forces in quality improvement.

### Customer Satisfaction

The definition of customer satisfaction has been widely debated as organizations increasingly attempt to measure it. Customer satisfaction can be

experienced in a variety of situations and connected to both goods and services. It is a highly personal assessment that is greatly affected by customer expectations. Satisfaction also is based on the customer’s experience of both contact with the organization. Satisfaction construct has gained an important role in the marketing literature (Lin, 2003). To be competitive & survive, firms need to produce products & services of very good quality that yield highly satisfied customers (Fecikova, 2004). Satisfaction is used as a common marketing benchmark of an organization’s performance (Bennet & Rundle-thiele, 2004). Many studies on impact of customer satisfaction in many organizations (Glaveli & Kufidu, 2005; Allred, 2001). Maintaining customer satisfaction is the key to retaining customers & profitability (Hansemark & Albinsson, 2004; Mittal et al., 2001). UK banks have been reported that they deliver high customer satisfaction to their clients (Gilbert & Veloutson, 2006).

Customer satisfaction has become a paramount factor (Olorunniwo & Hsu, 2006; Rahman & Siddique, 2006). Important tool to create & maintain loyal customers (Schoenbachler et al., 2004). Satisfied customers contribute towards high repeated purchases (Law & Hui, 2003). Many studies on customer satisfaction measurement (Rossomme, 2003; Kandumpully, 2002; Swadding & Miller, 2002). Therefore, we can conclude that customer satisfaction is vital factor in achieving organizational goals.

### On-Line Services

With the arrival of the internet technology, this opens a new opportunity for companies such as Air Asia to strategies with the online model. We would like to examine how the consumer feel about the ease of you and the possibility of the programming

is designed to trap unwitting customers to subscribe to services that they are not interested. One glaring example is the Go Insure travel insurance premium is automatically included in the price of the ticket and you have to cancel the insurance by clicking on the website. 'Due to the move to high speed internet communication and tremendous increases in computing power, network latency has begun to play a more important role in determining service response time. This will significantly impact on customer satisfaction (Aboolian, & Yi Sun & Koehler 2007). On-line services being as a technology that manages an organization's relationship with its customers (Green, D., & Ridings, C.M., 2002 ; Zikmund, W.G., McLeod, R., & Gibert, F.W., 2003). On-line services being the data storage & analysis that yields greater insight into customer satisfying behaviors (Hamilton, D.P., 2001). It is a culture change in an organization where technology deployed at every customer touch point (Anton, J., & Petouhoff, N.L., 2002). It is a management practice that turns casual consumers onto loyal customers by satisfying their requirements (Swift, R.S., 2001). It is a practice that manages demand via customer-company relationship (Bergeron, B., 2002). It is a business process of an organization that identifies, selects, acquires, develops, retains & better serves customers (Bodenberg, T.M., 2001). It is a strategy which optimizes revenue, profits, & customer satisfaction by fostering customer satisfying behaviors (Gartner Group, 2002). It enhances customer relationships that deliver value beyond provided by the core product (Terziovski, 2006). It focuses on the achievement of 'operational excellence': excellent, efficient processes that results in satisfied customers (Peelen, Ed, 2005). Therefore, it may be concluded that on-line services has positive relationship with customer satisfaction.

### Third-Party Services

Bhatnagar et al. (1999) examined the extent of usage of third-party logistics services in Singapore. A similar study was undertaken in the Malaysian context (Sohail and Sohal, 2003). Other studies have outlined the linkage between manufacturing organizations and third-party logistics service providers in Hong Kong, Southern China, Japan, and South Korea (Millen and Sohal, 1996). A number of studies on the extent and usage of contract logistics and longitudinal measures undertaken in Australia have been reported (Dapiran et al., 1996; Sohal et al., 2002). Another study by Lieb and Randall (1996) reported on the third-party services in American Logistics Industry. Many companies are outsourcing their services to keep their focus on their core competencies and to avoid having a bloated organization. Companies such as Air Asia has to realize that their contractors or agents are seen as part of Air Asia and it is naïve to assume that when a service has been outsourced, the burden to serve has been transferred to another party and they can absolve themselves from this responsibility towards their customers. The Sky Bus service gets promoted through the website and you can pay through the web and in fact, you would enjoy a discount when you do so, hence, it will be difficult to claim ignorance when service gap takes place. The market cum thug style of client solicitation at Sentral, delay in the departure of coaches to maximize the seating take up rate, rude staff and the lack of recourse when problems arise and all these are issues which impact customer satisfaction. Therefore, third-party services have impact on customer satisfaction.

## Fare Charging Practices

Price charging decisions in products or services affect customer satisfaction (Kotler et al. 2006). Value-conscious consumers may buy products more on price than other attributes (Peter & Donnelly, 2007). When customer see all competing products as offering the same features and benefits, their buying decisions are primarily driven by price (Ferrell, O.C., & Hartline, D., 2008). Price has been identified as one of important reasons for purchase private-label products (Jin, 2005). Prices offered to customers for products or services have an effect on customer satisfaction (Cronin et al, 2000). The quality received by consumers must be perceived to be reliable, responsive and empathetic (Brady & Cronin Jr 2001). In the airline industry, the issue of the increase in petrol has aroused the feelings of consumers all over the world. How did the airline derive the surcharge for the fuel? Why should we pay for check in baggage when the baggage weight allowance is already so low? Why is the cost for excess baggage higher than the conventional airline? Is there justification to impose additional fees for express boarding? We intend to measure the satisfaction level of customers in the section for fare charging practices. Therefore, fare charging practices have impact on customer satisfaction.

## Advertisement

Malaysian Airline took the initiative to advertise their tickets at the actual price that the customers have to pay. The advertisements attract the consumer with so much goodies when it is only limited to a few and important information is in small print only. Consumers have to pay for one way though they have advertise that they are giving away free tickets and many consumers thought that

it is meant for the entire return trip. Advertisements most of the times overpromised and the company then under deliver its offers. Research has shown that the resource preference model enhances theoretical undertaking of cross-cultural consumer behavior and provides culture- specific guidelines for measuring the inevitable service failures. It is important that company delivers service consistently and the staff must be observant and diligent so that no ambiguous service is rendered to the consumer. The staff must be passionate (Dennis Whaitley, In Search Of Excellence) to serve everyone without any fear or favor. Service recovery is definitely an important aspect of service and employees must be trained to understand the importance of integrity and to serve everyone fairly and be given an equal attention. Borrowing from their tagline of 'Now Everyone Can Fly', Air Asia should adopt this tagline for their service commitment 'Now Everyone Gets Served' Air Asia must not use the excuse of being a low budget airline, hence, they need to cut corners when it comes to service. It is disturbing to find that there is no Air Asia service counter in the LCCT. Air Asia needs to take a closer look in this aspect of customer service leading to satisfaction.

## Customer Services

Services provided by a particular airline become customer concern during pre-flight stage (Herstein, R., & Mitki, Y., 2008). Stimulates improvement on customer's air travel experience (Graham, 2001). Delivering best experience right from checking in to baggage handling (Le Bel, J.L., 2000). Singapore Airlines voted as the best airline in the world, the Malaysian Airlines has been voted as the best in-flight services airline category for the year 2007 (IATA, 2008). In-flight services has impact on customer satisfaction

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(Wirtz, J., & Johnston, R. 2003). Service is not a uniform concept and there are great differences among different industries. However, services and the conditions under which they are delivered have certain generic characteristics in common. Firstly, the customer often participates in a direct and

difficult for the customer to assess before purchase and thus special emphasis is placed on the marketing of the services and it should be ethical and delivers what that has been advertised or communicated to the consumer. Third, employees play a pivotal role in the delivery of service and employee satisfaction has often been tied to service quality and the company should conduct ethics training and ensure employee satisfaction so that the service integrity is not compromised (Character First Institute, Arizona, USA). Fourth, service are often broken into core service and support service but the customers has always viewed service in totality. We see integrity as a key factor affecting the customer's perception of the value of the

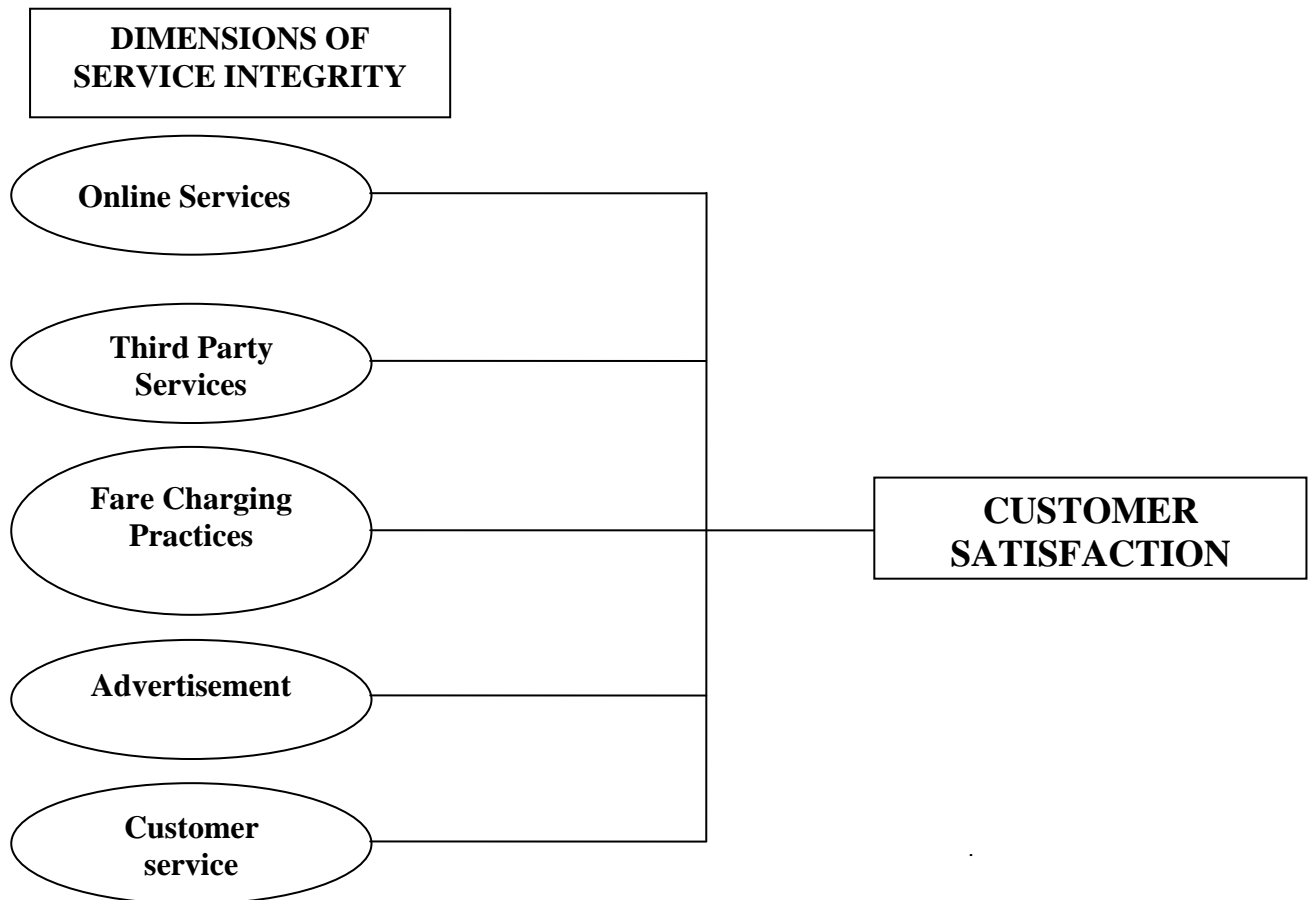
active way in the production process as co-producers by carrying out parts of the service himself. The customer is privy to the service delivery experience but he also contributes to quality and integrity. Second, services are largely intangible and therefore difficult to explain and

service, where value is defined as quality defined as quality in relation to cost (Scheuing & Edvardsson, *Managing Service Quality*, MCB UP Ltd). The International Standards Organization (ISO) defines quality as "The totality of Features and characteristics of products and services that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs". In creating quality, we argue that the quality constellation is formed by the competencies within, and relationships between, three constituencies: customers, employees, and suppliers/partners. In as much as service quality is experiential in nature, service integrity is a vital dimension of this experience (Scheuing & Edvardsson).



## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Figure 1: Research Framework



Source: Modified from Service Quality Model of Parasuraman et al, 1985.

## HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

**H1:** Online Services provided by Air Asia have positive impact on customer satisfaction.

**H2:** Third Party Services contracted by Air Asia have positive impact on customer satisfaction.

**H3:** Fare Charging Practices provided by Air Asia have positive impact on customer satisfaction.

**H4:** Advertisement placed by Air Asia has positive impact on customer satisfaction.

**H5:** Customer Service provided by Air Asia has positive impact on customer satisfaction.

## Data Collection

We selected the passengers randomly and we used the 5 point Likert scale measurement to measure the satisfaction level and broke the questions into 5 parts. We will conduct the Cronbach-Alpha Value Test to test for validity and reliability in our questionnaire. There were three of us and we took on the task to solicit 300 full respondents each and the survey takes an average of 10 minutes to complete. The ages of our respondents ranges from 22 till 60 years of age and consist of different races

and nationalities. The male and female ratio is equal and it has been designed as such to avoid gender bias and to have a broad spectrum of responses. The questions are in English but the interviews are conducted in Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin too.

### Response Rate

We circulated questionnaires to about 300 respondents at the LCCT. We had a few qualifying questions to ascertain impartiality and reliability by

our respondents and we manage to collect a total of 120 respondents that answered the questions fully. Therefore, the response rate is 40 %.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Pearson Correlation Analysis

To justify strength of the correlation between the dependent and independent variable parts, Pearson correlation coefficient was used in this analysis.

**Table 1.0: Correlations**

		Onlineserv1	Thrparty1	Farecharge1	Advert1	Custserv1	Custsatis1
<b>Onlineserv1</b>	Pearson Correlation	1					
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
	N	120					
<b>Thrparty1</b>	Pearson Correlation	.212(*)	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.020					
	N	120	120				
<b>Farecharge1</b>	Pearson Correlation	.161	.489(**)	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.079	.000				
	N	120	120	120			
<b>Advert1</b>	Pearson Correlation	.097	.293(**)	.322(**)	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.292	.001	.000			
	N	120	120	120	120		
<b>Custserv1</b>	Pearson Correlation	.323(**)	.330(**)	.300(**)	.247(**)	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.007		



<b>Custsatis1</b>	N	120	120	120	120	120	
	Pearson Correlation	.480(**)	.462(**)	.274(**)	.192(*)	.407(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.002	.036	.000	
	N	120	120	120	120	120	120

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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

Third Party Service and Customer Satisfaction is 0.462 it is significant at 0.01 level.

▪ **Online Services:**

The correlation coefficient between online Service and Third party Service is 0.212 and it is significant at 0.05 level or 95% confident interval. The correlation coefficient between online Service and Unfair Charging is not significant but has relationship. The correlation coefficient between Online Service and Misleading Advertisement is not significant but has relationship. The correlation coefficient between Online Service and Customer Service is 0.323 it is significant at 0.01 level or 99% confident interval. And the correlation coefficient between Online Service and Customer Satisfaction is 0.480 it is significant at 0.01 level.

▪ *Third Party Service:*

The correlation coefficient between Third Party Service and Unfair Charging is 0.489 it is significant at 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient between Third Party Service and Misleading Advertisement is 0.293 it is significant at 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient between Third Party Service and Customer Service is 0.330 it is significant at 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient between

▪ *Fare Charging Practices:*

The correlation coefficient between Unfair Charging and Misleading Advertisement is 0.322 it is significant at 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient between Unfair Charging and Customer Service is 0.300 it is significant at 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient between Unfair Charging and Customer Satisfaction is 0.274 it is significant at 0.01 level.

▪ **Advertisement:**

The correlation coefficient between Misleading Advertisement and Customer Service is 0.274 it is significant at 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient between Misleading Advertisement and Customer Satisfaction is 0.192 it is significant at 0.05 level.

▪ **Customer Service:**

The correlation coefficient between Customer Service and Customer Satisfaction is 0.407 it is significant at 0.01 level.

## Factor Analysis

The reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using factor analysis. The questions were analyzed using a principle component extraction with variance (orthogonal) rotation and using Eigen value greater than 1. The screen plot was used as a

guide to decide on the number of factors to be extracted, latent roots criterion and the method used (eigen value greater than 1) were Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin. The following table shows that the KMO measure sampling adequacy for five independent variables :

**Table 2.0: Rotated Component Matrix for Independent Variables**

	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Thrpary3	.850					
Thrpary4	.806					
Thrpary2	.775					
Thrpary1	.741					
Thrpary5	.676					
Unfcharge1	.537					
Custserv3	.509					
Onlineserv1		.885				
Onlineserv4		.862				
Onlineserv2		.729				
Onlineserv5		.613				
Unfcharge4			.767			
Misadvert1			.764			
Misadvert3			.615			
Misadvert2			.534			
Unfcharge5						
Custserv4				.769		
Custserv1				.692		
Cstserv5				.670		
Olineserv3					.670	
Msadvert4					.654	
Msadvert5					.593	
Ufcharge3						.720
Cstserv2						-.613
Ufcharge2						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 8 iterations.

## Multiple Regression Analysis

**Table 3.0: Multiple Regression Analysis Results**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.715(a)	.511	.490	3.14150	.511	23.835	5	114	.000

a Predictors: (Constant), custserv\_1, unfcahrge\_1, onlineserv\_1, thrparty\_1, misadvert\_1

b Dependent Variable: satis\_1

From the table above we can conclude that combination of independent variables contribute to 72% effect on Customer Satisfaction. The  $R^2$  is for the overall independent variable.

### ANOVA(b)

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	<b>Regression</b>	1176.133	5	235.227	23.835	.000(a)
	<b>Residual</b>	1125.067	114	9.869		
	<b>Total</b>	2301.200	119			

a Predictors: (Constant), custserv\_1, unfcahrge\_1, onlineserv\_1, thrparty\_1, misadvert\_1

b Dependent Variable: satis\_1

The F value changes are significant which implies that the model fit is robust. ANOVA test conducted to confirm whether the model used is correct and whether the dependent and independent variable chosen are in order.

### Coefficients(a)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	10.798	2.389		4.520	.000
	Onlineserv_1	.504	.126	.301	3.988	.000
	Thrparty_1	.468	.135	.296	3.472	.001
	Fare charge_1	-.225	.143	-.134	-1.574	.118
	Advert_1	.683	.157	.380	4.362	.000
	Custserv_1	.064	.141	.036	.453	.651

a Dependent Variable: satis\_1

From the above table we can conclude that though Unfair Charging and Customer Service has no effect on Customer Satisfaction, Online Service, Third Party Service and Misleading Advertisement have most significant effect on Customer Satisfaction at ( $p < 0.01$ ).

The higher beta value, the greater the possibility of influence of customer satisfaction. From above table Misleading Advertisement has the highest Beta value (0.380) and has the greatest effect on Customer Satisfaction.

It can be conclude that out of five independent variable, only three variables have significant effect on Customer Satisfaction namely (Online Service, Third Party Service and Misleading Advertisement), the other two have no effect on Customer Satisfaction namely (Unfair Charging Practices and Customer Service).

## DISCUSSIONS

The findings suggest that on-line services, third-party services and effective advertisement affect the choice of the customers to fly with Air Asia. Air Asia is positioned as the market leader for low budget carrier. As such, in order to live up to the positioning, Air Asia should ensure that their ticket prices are maintain at the average prices of tickets sold by other airlines. The result suggests that fare charging practices did not affect customer satisfaction. Everybody complains about the delay in departure time. They should take care on this issue. Though, services like online ticketing, information about destination, communication about the ticket price, etc. are satisfactory. Thus, it can be stated that as the image of Air Asia becomes positive and strong in the market then its on-line services should be stronger to keep the customers happy and loyal towards the company. As passengers who preferred to fly with Air Asia, they

will look more interaction through on-line services. In this case, Air Asia should keep the customer database properly, should be more responsive to customers' needs of information and queries, should measure client satisfaction through feedback & suggestions and of course they should treat every customer equally.

## LIMITATIONS

As researchers, we are constraint by the time frame as we took to complete in three months. As the number of respondents is relatively small, this may pose a challenge to provide a generalization of the findings. We are further restrained by the fact that the interview was conducted in oneday and the respondents might be influenced by the events experienced on that day. Our limitations are further influenced by passengers based in the KL LCCT only and not at other airports. Further research can be conducted with more respondents and the interviews to be conducted at all other airports that Air Asia provides services. We would also suggest that more empirical studies to be done because there has been studies that have shown that cultures do influence perceptions and the ethnicity of the respondents do have significant impact on how they perceive service quality.

## CONCLUSION

Air Asia should continue to be the low cost short-haul airline in every market and achieve strong organic growths through profit objectives. Air Asia needs to be efficient and simple at point to point operations, attracting and retaining hardworking and smart people. It must have the passions for continuous cost reduction, comply with the highest International Aviation Safety; standards and practices, keep operations simple and transparent. It has to ensure that the security of passengers in every flights. Winning customers over from

competition is important, but retaining existing customers is even more important. According to research, it is more cost effective to retain customers than to win new customers. Since it is well known that customers' loyalty results from customer satisfaction, it is important that Air Asia manages the factors that influence its customer satisfaction more efficiently.

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