Airline Brand Experience
Passengers’ Perceptions of the Big Three Carriers in the United States

by

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Abstract

TITLE: Airline Brand Experience: Passengers’ Perceptions of the Big Three Carriers in the United States

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The purpose of the study was to observe passengers’ perceptions about brand experience research in the airline industry by applying a transcendental or descriptive phenomenological methodology designed to evaluate interview transcriptions and organize derived knowledge into defined themes. The NVivo program was utilized to analyze data from textual transcriptions. The experiences of passengers of the Big Three United States legacy carriers, including American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and United Airlines, were described. The participants comprised three couples and seven individuals, all frequent-flyer members of the Big Three carriers and their partnering global airline alliances. The researcher-constructed instrument was used for in-depth interviews and data collection while the qualitative rigors ensured trustworthiness.

The findings are purposeful guides for airline managers to help identify customer preferences and maintain lasting relationships. In legacy carriers, long known as full-service airlines, customer expectations are higher than for those in newer business models like the low-cost and ultra-low-cost carriers. Three significant findings were related to airline brand experiences (ABEs), loyal
members, and customer retention behavior. First, ABE concepts play a decisive role in implementing excellent airline service based on customers’ perceptions. Positive attributes of brand images transfer into brand loyalty, and in turn, improve business performance; in contrast, poor communication negatively impacts passengers during adverse customer service matters. Successful problem-solving, vital for management in attaining trust and in helping customers overlook mishandlings, leads to satisfied customers. Second, member benefits of Frequent-Flyer Programs, which are commitments between providers and members, motivate repeated passengers; hence, in the passengers’ views, rewards must be worth the efforts to continue being loyal. Last, convenient locations or hubs, reward programs, airline reputations, customer expectations, and customer relations are critical concepts established to develop and retain buying behaviors, also known as customer retention in the current study.
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<tr>
<td>AAL</td>
<td>American Airlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAY</td>
<td>Allegiant Air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWE</td>
<td>US Airway that was merged with AAL in 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABE</td>
<td>Airline Brand Experience</td>
</tr>
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<td>ABL</td>
<td>Airline Brand Loyalty</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANA</td>
<td>All Nippon Airways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANZ</td>
<td>Air New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAW</td>
<td>British Airways</td>
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<tr>
<td>Big Three</td>
<td>The Big Three carriers are major legacy carriers in the United States also known as the US 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAL</td>
<td>Delta Air Lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLH</td>
<td>Lufthansa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCCs</td>
<td>Full-Cost Carriers also known as FSC: Full-service carriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFPs</td>
<td>Frequent-Flyer Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFT</td>
<td>Frontier Airlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAL</td>
<td>Hawaiian Airlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICAO</td>
<td>International Civil Aviation Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBU</td>
<td>JetBlue Airways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCCs</td>
<td>Low-Cost Carriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Company/Location Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>KATL</td>
<td>Atlanta Airport, officially known as Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta International Airport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMLB</td>
<td>Orlando Melbourne International Airport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NKS</td>
<td>Spirit Airlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWA</td>
<td>Northwest Airlines that was merged with DAL in 2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIA</td>
<td>Singapore Airlines</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWA</td>
<td>Southwest Airlines</td>
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<tr>
<td>THA</td>
<td>Thai International Airways</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>Emirates Airline</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAL</td>
<td>United Airlines</td>
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<tr>
<td>ULCCs</td>
<td>Ultra-Low-Cost Carrier</td>
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of my grandmother Khunyai Karn Thong for her blessings to the Udchachone family and to my parents. Capt. Taweechai and Dr. Soonthree Udchachone, for their unconditional love and endless support as I pursue my goals. My doctoral journey would have never been possible without their care, encouragement, and praise. My dedication would be unfinished without acknowledging my wingman and also my brother, Taweemanai Udchachone, and his incredible children Wine, WarnHorm, and Wheya for their empowerment.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background and Purpose

The concepts of branding are widely recognized as an important marketing strategy in the aviation industry. In the past 15 years, many published journal articles have focused on airline branding involving brand name and brand experience. Emirates Airline (UAE) is a strong example of a brand that generates positive outcomes in terms of consumers’ brand preferences and purchase intentions (Chen & Chang, 2008). UAE has been acknowledged as one of the most valuable airline brands in 2014, with a brand value of $6.6 billion, a 21% increase over 2013 (Brand Finance, 2015). Therefore, this study is particularly focused on air carriers that applied brand experience concepts to develop strong brands that meet customers’ satisfaction and maintain loyalty.

Singapore (SIA) and Emirates (UAE) Airlines emphasize enhancing the quality of service; both are well-known in terms of best service on an excellent. SIA and UAE operate Boeing 777 Dreamliner and Airbus 380, which are the latest technology aircraft fleets, providing in-flight entertainment with a broad choice of channels and offering a business lounge. The Singapore Girl icon represents an SIA flight attendant; the image of an Asian woman is one of the most successful advertising campaigns that catches customers’ attention and helps them to recognize the brand. Thus, brand sensory experience that passengers find the scent
permeates the cabin; even flight attendants wear the same perfume blending into hot towels served before takeoff (Lindstrom, 2006). SIA cabin crews must be under 26 and complete the longest and the most comprehensive program among other major airlines. However, SIA’s example may not be applicable in the U.S. market due to cultural concerns. In 1968, American Airlines launched the advertisement campaign, “Think of her as a mother,” which attempted to use women as a symbol of airline branding, so-called emotional labor (Lyths, 2009). Later, the campaign was banned and became illegal in the United States because of discrimination of gender.

UAE, the first airline to introduce spas for first-class passengers, gives advanced, quality service to customers. UAE was awarded the Airline of the Year. UAE operates one of the most modern fleets airplanes in the market with an average airplane age of 5.7 years (Emirates, 2018), compared with an industry average of 13 years. Many airlines promote young fleets as a part of their business strategy to represent safety and modern technology for passengers and reduce maintenance costs for airline operations (Endrizalova et al., 2018). Thus, SIA and UAE are examples of the airline brands that adopted brand experiences to implement their brand strategies that refer to products, services, and shopping to provide customers with a more lasting impression, so they remember the services that the airlines provided.
Current brand experience research in the aviation industry is found in various subjects regarding consumer behaviors, and services of airlines that are emerging to the brand. In this case, experiences refer to the responses of air travelers who are engaged in their brands: perceptions, thoughts, behavior, and cognition. Thus, airline managers find it essential to understand different sorts of experiences.

Consumption experience in airlines occurs when customers purchasing tickets are existing customers or new customers. For analyzing brand experiences, most studies were found in the literature measuring customer satisfaction arising during and after product consumption, such as ticket-counter, in-flight, and call-center service (Chen & Chang, 2008; Kim, Chua, Lee, Boo, & Han, 2016; Lishan, Wenxuan, & Yinmei, 2014; Yeoh & Chan, 2011). Consumption experience is the way passengers feel about the service offered by the airline compared to their expectations. To manage the consumption experience, airline managers have to employ sensory and affection experiences to stimulate sentiment and impression to make customers fall in love with the brand (Kim et al., 2016).

SIA and Thai International Airways (THA) selected sensory experience as a strategy for the entire servicescape. Hence, the scent of SIA’s planes becomes a distinctive trademark that reminds customers of the warm, welcome service. THA uses purple and orchid as the national flower of Thailand to represent the airline and Thai culture. The slogan of “Smooth as Silk” expresses a smile derived from a
flight attendant’s heart, a fresh orchid, and a *wai* gesture, the way of greeting in Thai culture to welcome passengers on board. Because of a unique cultural characteristic of Thai charm, THA is one of the most popular in the world, achieving a high ranking of passenger service (Skytrax, 2017). Tungtakanpoung and Wyatt (2013) concluded that adding emotional labor in line with company operations may enhance customer satisfaction.

Product experience in airlines is the process of the customers’ buying decisions, starting when customers consider their purchased air ticket and the service that they have perceived or experienced. If customer expectation is below what they expected, they may not return, but if the services have met or exceeded expectations, they have a greater possibility of repurchasing the services (Brakus et al., 2009; Park, 2015). In other words, product experience can be analyzed by customer purchase and repurchase intentions toward that airline.

Several academic studies of behaviors were highlighted on a survey regarding the influence of e-ticketing services on customer satisfaction and repeat service (Lau et al., 2011; Yeoh & Chan, 2011). The studies by Chiu, Liu, and Tu (2016) and Rajaguru (2016) focused on the customers’ expectations and perceptions of the value of Low-Cost Carriers (LCCs). However, Nikbin, Armesh, Heydari, and Jalalkamali (2011) studied the downside of the airline industry when LCCs lost their reputation to Full-Cost Carriers (FCCs) because passengers believed that the airlines had low-cost and, therefore, low-quality service.
Service and shopping experiences link to all types of a brand or so-called relational experiences, particularly in an aviation service industry. Air transportation offers transport from place to place; airlines provide seats to passengers. In other words, airlines sell an experience to customers similar to other service industries, such as hotels, spas, and banks, where companies contribute their best expertise for customers to recognize their services. Researchers found that affective experience is essential for generating customers’ perceptions of the brand and could influence customers in recognizing the brand (Chen & Chang, 2008; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). For example, Air New Zealand (ANZ) presents a distinctly “kiwi affective experience” to represent the country’s national air carrier and to attract customers’ attention. All Nippon Airlines (ANA) featured Pokémon, a cartoon character painted on the aircraft, and turned in-flight service into a Pokémon theme park, expressing that Japan is a fun country for travel and that flying with ANA is fun. ANZ and ANA have created several types of brand experiences in airlines.

Literature reviews show that airline loyalty programs are related to passenger behaviors. Dick and Basu (1994) explained a switching cost strategy for passengers, who purchase a ticket and automatically earn frequent-flyer rewards for continuing to fly with the same airline. Chen and Pearcy (2010) asserted that loyalty programs make customers less willing to change airlines. Customer loyalty is a basis of competitive advantage, allowing airlines that already had loyal base
customers to tempt their rivals’ consumers with lower marketing costs (Chen & Pearcy, 2010), thereby, increasing airline profits (Jiang & Zhang, 2016). Understanding passengers’ behaviors could motivate passengers to join loyalty programs, which are essential for airline company survival.

The three problems regarding brand loyalty research are as follows. First, marketeers consider brand concepts as a critical research topic to create long-term relationships. In maintaining consumer relationships, the brand experience becomes part of the brand engagement between passengers and airline brands. Lin, Quan, Lau, and Ma (2016) reported that airline brand experience has a positive influence on passenger satisfaction. In understanding the needs of airline passengers, brand experience concepts should be closely analyzed through academic journals and actual perceptions of airline passengers because airline marketing changes over time. To date, there is a lack of brand experience research related to airline passengers’ behaviors providing substantial information to examine the loyalty of airline passengers.

The second issue concerns service quality and brand loyalty. A significant shift in airline passengers’ behaviors occurred when LCCs were introduced to the industry as an alternative option for passengers to use air transportation by selecting more reasonable airfare with minimal service, also known as no-frills. Although LCCs impacted FCCs, as so-called regional air carriers, many passengers still fly with FCCs because of the services and benefits of frequent-flyer programs
(FFPs) (Dolnicar et al., 2011; Vlachos & Lin, 2014), which the airlines offer to loyal customers. The current study investigated the relationship between the legacy carriers’ passengers’ perceptions and levels of loyalty to the particular airline.

The third problem regards the different airline loyalty programs in the market. Membership programs such as FFPs like Mileage Plus by UAL and SkyMiles by DAL are designed to encourage passengers to enroll in a program to accumulate points. An FFP of a specific airline uses accumulated points to retain passengers; likewise, airline alliances (e.g., One World, Star Alliance, and Sky Team) also provide a process of point accumulation because most airlines are aggregated as an alliance. Sandada and Matibiri (2016) reported that the FFPs impacted airline brand loyalty; thus, they recommended that airline alliance studies could help to explain their commitment.

These three problems led to the question of this study: In customers’ perspectives, how could airline brand experiences and airline alliances retain customer loyalty when newcomers such as LCCs and Ultra Low-Cost Carriers (ULCCs) enter the airline market?
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to scrutinize the experiences of passengers, who are part of FFPs and global airline alliances, focusing on airline brand experiences that reinforce airline brand loyalty in the United States. In the context of the study, the consequences of airline brand experiences lead passengers to apply for memberships in airline alliances. However, a gap remains in the literature about the positive relationship of airline alliances with airlines and brand loyalty. The target population of this study was all airline passengers in the loyalty programs with U.S. legacy carriers or the Big Three, consisting of AAL member of One World; DAL, member of Sky Team; and UAL, member of Star Alliance. Throughout the study, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) codes are used: the three-letter codes indicate airlines, and the four-letter codes airports.

Airline brand experiences (ABEs) refer to any points of contact, such as ticket purchases, in-flight services, check-in service, and in-flight duty-free, which are physical and emotional bases. Examples of physical experiences are the tastes of the food and beverages during flight, enhanced entertainment units in the modernize aircraft, and extended legroom in the passenger cabin; these are one of the brand experience dimensions called “sensory brand experience” (Brakus et al., 2009). Examples of emotional brand experiences are passengers receiving a warm welcome by flight attendants and ground staff, which are called “affective brand experience,” another dimension of brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009). The
above examples occurred in every point of contact: prior (ticket purchase), during (in-flight, duty-free shopping), and after (luggage claim and customer service) the flight service.

Understanding concepts of brand loyalty, one of the critical strategies of the aviation business, helps airline managers to evaluate levels of satisfaction and purchase intentions. In other words, gratified passengers are likely to repurchase or repeat the same airline services. Moreover, Hapsari, Clemes, and Dean (2017) showed that passenger engagement has a positive impact on loyalty. The study focused on the passengers’ views, primarily when engaged with airline brands, also recognized as “airline brand experience.” An example of airline brand loyalty occurs when passengers receive positive experiences during flights (e.g., catering and in-flight entertainment units) and ground services (e.g., check-in and baggage claim); then, they are willing to fly with the airline again and recommend it to others. Therefore, satisfied passengers become re-patronized by showing loyalty to one airline over others. Hence, airline brand loyalty is evaluated by airline passengers’ experiences.

Airline alliance refers to a group of at least two airlines mutually cooperating under the same code-share agreement, contributing the same benefits for their passengers (see Table 1). This proposal focuses on the major U.S. airlines partnering with global alliances, as mentioned. Passengers can expect the same benefits through the alliances, such as priority check-in and boarding, mileage
earning, and redemptions. This study explored whether passengers understand the benefits that influence airline brand loyalty. The results of this study did not fully support Brueckner and Flores-Fillol’s (2018) assumption about how service quality impacts loyalty positively.

Table 1

*United States Carriers’ FFPs and Airline Alliances*

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<th>Carriers</th>
<th>3-Letter codes</th>
<th>FFPs</th>
<th>Alliances</th>
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<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>AAL</td>
<td>AAdvantage</td>
<td>One World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>DAL</td>
<td>SkyMiles</td>
<td>Sky Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United</td>
<td>UAL</td>
<td>MileagePlus</td>
<td>Star Alliance</td>
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In summary, this study focused on the Big Three in order to understand the quality of their service after a low-cost carrier model entered the market and made a vital movement in the aviation industry. As highlighted by Hazledine (2011), the U.S. legacy carriers, once named the Big Five, included AAL, DAL, Northwest Airlines (NWA), UAL, and US Airways (AWE), and survived price wars in terms of costs and service quality. An interesting phenomenon in the airline industry occurred when NWA merged with DAL, Continental with UAL, and AWE with AAL. Hence, airline companies must pay close attention to service quality to retain marketshare.
Definition of Terms

1. An airline alliance is a group of at least two airlines mutually cooperating as a network under a code-share agreement, providing benefits to passengers on a reciprocal basis. This study focused on the global airline alliances One World, Sky Team, and Star Alliance.

2. An airline brand experience (ABE) refers to the points of contact and associations that customers have with airline service providers. Examples include customers’ perceived experiences with ticket purchases, in-flight services, check-in services, and duty-free shopping. Airline personnel, such as ground staff and flight crews, provide ABE.

3. Airline brand loyalty (ABL) focuses on airline passengers, who repeat airline services or repurchase airline tickets; ABL helps airline managers to evaluate the level of passenger satisfaction and purchase intention. The goal is to create a strong airline brand and retain customer loyalty over competitors.

4. Brand experience, in this study, is defined in the same way as in Brakus et al. (2009), who concluded that the engagement of customers with brands is based on “consumption, products, services, and shopping experiences” (p. 1).
5. A *code-share agreement*, a contract between two airlines that can be used to sell flight tickets on behalf of each other, is signed for various purposes, such as geography route bases and marketing collaborations. In this study, a code-share agreement is associated with an airline’s partnership in global alliances that have cooperative service agreements, such as joining FFPs, sharing lounge access, and promoting the same marketing campaign. An example of a code-share agreement of Star Alliance is UAL partnered with SIA, THA, and Lufthansa (DLH).

6. A *frequent-flyer program (FFP)*, a membership program, also known as a loyalty program, is widely provided by many airlines, particularly to offer special treats and deals for passengers who often fly with the airline. Each airline offers a type of programs or rewards that apply different conditions and rules to encourage passengers to enroll; examples are Mileage Plus by UAL and SkyMiles by DAL. Moreover, each program has different levels or statuses to earn and accumulated points to redeem. For instance, Mileage Plus Premier status has four levels (Premier Silver, Premier Gold, Premier Platinum, and Premier 1K); thus, requirements to reach a certain level mostly depend on marketing strategies of the airlines to motivate passengers to continue earning points or maintaining their statuses.
7. A full-cost carrier (FCC) is an airline offering passenger services, such as in-flight entertainment, checked baggage, food and beverages, and blankets and pillows, all included in the ticket cost. Moreover, the seats recline more than in LCCs, and more legroom is available. In the U.S. airline industry, an FCC is also known as a legacy carrier (see below). Examples include DAL, UAL, and Hawaii Airlines (HAL).

8. A legacy carrier, which is similar to an FCC, was “categorized as a ‘major’ or ‘national’ carrier by the United States Department of Transportation in 1978, the year that airline deregulation was signed into law” (Greer, 2009, p. 784). To date, the U.S. legacy carriers are the Big Three with a long history of operation and expansive domestic and international routes. The Big Three, AAL, DAL, and UAL, were the main focus of the study.

9. A low-cost carrier (LCC) is an airline offering flights that have less expensive tickets compared to FSCs by cutting the costs of unnecessary services, such as in-flight meals, while maintaining flight safety standards. An LCC is also known as a no-frills carrier and a ULCC. Examples include SWA, JBU, and Allegiant Air (AAY). In this study, an LCC is defined as an airline in either the LCC or ULCC category (see definition of ULCC below).
10. A *switching cost* refers to an essential link between customer satisfaction and loyalty, taking place when there are repeated purchases. A switching cost to change airlines is substantial for customers. Furthermore, an FCC affects switching costs, which also influences customers’ loyalty and behaviors (Carlsson et al., 2006).

11. An *ultra-low-cost carrier (ULCC)*, an extended business model of an LCC that is lower cost by using a competitive price strategy to cut down on extra charges. Bachwich and Wittman (2017) explained the cost reduction: “[B]y keeping their labor costs low, unbundling their fare products, and focusing on strategies that increase return on invested capital, ULCCs have been able to offer low base fares in the markets they serve” (p. 155). Examples include Spirit Airlines (NKS), Frontier Airlines (FFT), and AAY. Practically, a ULCC has not yet been used as an airline business model in other regions besides the United States. The model remains unrecognized and unclearly defined in academic literature (Bachwich & Wittman, 2017).
Research Question

The two main objectives for the study were to bring a general understanding of airline passengers’ experiences to create brand loyalty and to investigate the influences of airline alliances on airline customers. Thus, the study employed qualitative approach to understand customers’ experiences and compared to existing aviation and marketing literature to answer the research question.

Responding to these research objectives, the research question is as follows: How do U.S. legacy airline alliances use airline brand experiences to retain passenger loyalty? This research question was a preliminary inquiry, which was changed after themes emerged during data analysis. The research process is emergent. Flexibility of the design distinguishes the qualitative characteristic. The initial plan is not fixed; all phases may change after interviewing and collecting data. The goal of the research analysis is to learn the problems from participants and engage in the best practices to obtain information.

Study Design

The research was conducted transcendental phenomenology approach focusing on people’s meanings of lived experiences and describes the essences or natures of phenomena (Husserl, 2012). Thus, phenomenology was suited for this study because the understanding of airline members concerning with airline alliance benefits comparing to FFPs benefits were remain unclear, according to
Sandada and Matibiri’s (2016) inquiry. Additionally, improving passengers’ perceptions benefits alliance members and supports further research to retain customer loyalty. This research was designed to describe the significance of passengers’ experiences and their perceptions about the services they received as airline members. Three sampling strategies were used for data collection: first, convenience was to recruit the candidates; second, purposive was to select the participants, who met the criteria; and last, snowball was the participants that refer to other participants. Personal contacts were made, and invitation emails were sent to seek qualified candidates (purposive), who were asked to identify others to participate in the study (snowball). The participants, airline passengers who currently are active members of at least one airline from the Big Three, were invited to participate in the study. The phenomenology approach allowed passengers to draw on memories from their previous experiences.

The study consisted of data derived from interviews of thirteen participants: three couples and seven individuals (see Chapter 3 for more details). Creswell (2014) recommended that the sample size should be at least five participants or continue until saturation takes place (Bowen, 2009). Moreover, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) surveyed 60 in-depth interviews that achieved a saturation point at 12 and most of the emerging themes at six. The interview method was deployed to collect data from participants. The interview questions were limited in scope to one or two broad, open-ended questions regarding their experiences with the
phenomena; for example, they were asked what their experiences were with Star Alliance. The following interview questions were probes for more insight into participant experiences: What are the benefits that you received from the airline? Please describe the situation that makes you feel impressed about how the airline solved problems for you.

Colaizzi’s (1978) seven steps of analysis, a method of phenomenology, were applied: (1) obtain general knowledge from the overall content, (2) extract the transcription for the significant statements, (3) prepare and develop clusters of meanings into themes from the participants’ experiences, (4) cluster the significant statements into themes and categories, (5) integrate the findings into the phenomena in the study, (6) describe the structure of the phenomena, and (7) ensure the validation of the findings. Therefore, the sole investigator employed a single source of data by interviewing the subjects. However, the researcher gave attention to issues related to creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2014) to address the issue of validation. The researcher used member checkers, my advisor and colleague, to check and develop the questionnaires, in order to establish validity by reviewing the research question from other perspectives. To mitigate the biased interpretation of the data, the researcher employed the bracketing concept to set aside views and biases about the research topic by discussing and taking notes to cross-check the topics with colleagues. Researcher brackets give a better view of the issue (Langdridge, 2007).
The study can be replicated for an extended research, applying to other samples such as airline passengers with different cultures, countries, or airline business models. The results can benefit for exposed misconceptions regarding their personal experiences that came from the voices of passengers.

**Significance of the Study**

The review of the literature was focused on the integration with existing research and sought the extent of superior knowledge of the brand experience that leads to branding mechanisms. This study contributes in three main objects: (a) to evaluate the current literature and organize the knowledge into defined themes and patterns, (b) to articulate a new general model of airline brand experience, and (c) to suggest a potentially productive avenue for future research, which researchers and managers can pursue to refine and extend aviation branding theory. On a more practical level, the results of the study can assist airline managers in employing a systematic approach to their future branding endeavors.

The social significances of the study are (a) brand experience concepts are beneficial for stakeholders in terms of economic returns and supportive of creating and reinforcing alliances, (b) the implementation of the findings is advantageous to different industries, contexts, regions, and cultures, and (c) both customers and service providers are in a win-win situation when customers receive the
experiences they want from providers as the providers maintain long-lasting relationships with customers.

**Study Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations refer to situations or events that are beyond the control of the researcher and can limit the generalizability of the study. The potential limitations of this study are discussed below:

1. **Researcher Bias.** The principal investigator found that eliminating bias was a very challenging step and a learning process from the beginning; hiding prior knowledge about airline experiences was not simple. Hence, the pilot study proved constructive in practicing the qualitative method through identifying positive and negative experiences expressed about particular airlines by collecting opinions which may have disagreed with the researcher’s experiences. To eliminate subjectivity, the researcher listed personal biases in the field notes and made sure not to mention or imply them to participants. If similar studies were conducted; different methods may lead to different results.

2. **Voluntary participation.** The study is limited to passengers who voluntarily agree to participate in interviews. The researcher used purposive sampling to select qualified participants and then used snowball sampling to seek more participants. Therefore, studies that use
diverse groups of participants or a set of different criteria might get different results.

3. **Regions and sample size.** The study was conducted in the United States. The results may have varied if the survey had been distributed in other countries or if a broader sample size had been used.

**Delimitations** refer to conditions the researcher imposes on the study that further limit the generalizability of the results. The delimitations are mentioned below:

1. **Standard of rigors for qualitative research.** The researcher gave close attention to the concept of rigor in qualitative research adopted from Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2010): creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

2. **Researcher-developed interview questions.** The researcher developed interview questions corresponding to the research question and objectives. A different questionnaire used in subsequent studies could yield different results.

3. **Experienced interviewer.** An interviewer requires proper interview training skills, for the data collected relies on the data collector as a human instrument. Thus, as the principal investigator, the researcher was trained in a qualitative research method course before conducting the study. Poorly trained interviewers, who collect and analyze data,
may create faulty and biased results. Subsequent studies that employ interviewers with different levels of training could yield other results.

Chapter 1 presents the rationale for the study and reports reasons for implementing brand experience concepts in the airline business, followed by identifying the research question and objectives. Finally, the structure of the study is as follows: Chapter 1 presents the introduction, Chapter 2 provides the review of related literature, and Chapter 3 presents the research methodology. Literature about brand experience concepts and branding in the airline business and links between them are reviewed in the following chapters.
Chapter 2

Reviews of Related Literature

Introduction

Chapter 2 contains three sections. The first section demonstrates the theoretical foundation of phenomenology, which is based on qualitative analysis, in both the marketing and aviation fields. The second section reviews past research related to brand experience in the aviation industry. The last section summarizes related literature and discusses implications.

The five elements of Merriam’s (2009) procedures for qualitative research, used to organize the framework theoretically and link logically to the research question of the study are (a) the main topic of the study, (b) what is known about the topic, (c) the gap in knowledge about the topic, (d) the purpose of the study, and (e) the research question informing the purpose of the study.

Overview of Underlying Theory

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study focuses on brand experience concepts that were defined by Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009). Brand experience involves brand and customer experience, which is an association between customers and companies, where companies are product or service providers. In this study, companies refer to commercial airlines or passenger carriers. To illustrate the brand experience concept begins with understanding the core concepts
of brand experience, which was first introduced in literature by Pine and Gilmore (1998), who focused on customer satisfaction.

**Pine and Gilmore (1998).** Pine and Gilmore suggested that companies provide excellent services to satisfy customer needs and expectations. Consumers become more focused on experience because they are willing to spend money on good value (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

**Schmitt (1999).** Brand experience was also called experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999). He illustrated the significant concepts of traditional marketing, which was focused on the product’s quality and competitive activities in the market; on the other hand, experiential marketing emphasized consumers’ experiences. Based on his observations, the emotion of the individual consumer can trigger intellectual recognition or consumer behavior that may lead to increased product value. Based on experiential marketing concepts, Schmitt proposed five types of customer experience: sense, feeling, thinking, action, and relating. Later, Brakus et al. (2009) expressed that the brand experience can be conceptualized as subjective in terms of customer responses and categorized brand experiences into four dimensions: sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behaviors.

**Brakus et al. (2009).** The first dimension was the brand sensory experience, and the purposes are to evoke consumers’ five senses to differentiate the brand or company from competitors and to add value to the product (Brakus et al., 2009; Simonson & Schmitt, 1997). The essential objective of the sensory experience was
to make customers recognize and remember the company in the long term (Brakus et al., 2009).

In the following section, the standard terms of sensory experiences and specific examples in aviation were described. Examples of sensory experiences that practically used visual images were found in the unique design of the transparent glass bottle of Absolut Vodka and the red plastic upside-down bottle of Heinz Tomato Ketchup. These designs appeal to create a conscious experience for customers and increase the recognition of the brands. Also, Hollister, a clothing brand for teenagers, uses audio by playing background music to create a youthful, Southern California lifestyle to draw attention from their target customers. Starbucks, a well-known coffee house that offers a coffee experience by using the sense of touch to comfort customers, provides a reading atmosphere with leather couches and long tables for group meetings. The senses of smell and taste involve serving food and beverages to engage customers in experiential marketing (Spangenberg et al., 1996).

In the airline industry, Air France is an example of the sensory experience, offering French foods and beverages (macaroons and champagne) to remember the country. Air France brought a gastronomic experience to in-flight services (Erguven, 2015) by introducing original menus by three Michelin-starred Chefs (Budd, 2016). Gobe (2010) claimed that multi-sensory experience is one of the keys to building customer-brand preference and brand loyalty. An example of
multi-sensory experience is a unique aroma, which was designed for SIA to trigger passenger memories about their experiences and has been used in the entire servicescape, such as the flight attendants’ perfume, the freshener spray inside the aircraft, and the warm towels given to passengers before takeoff. Hence, SIA’s scent became a distinctive trademark and reminded customers about the warm welcome that they experienced.

In previous literature, the sensory experience showed a positive impact on decision-making (Krishna, 2012; Lindstrom, 2006). In the context of this study, sensory motivation adopted by marketers to communicate to customers appropriately can influence decision-making to purchase products. For example, Kim, Chua, Lee, Boo, and Han (2016) reports that applied emotional and sensory experiences induce passengers’ perceptions to repurchase the airline service; the airline lounge has an influence on the passengers’ perceptions. Therefore, sensory brand experience, one of the key dimensions to build the airlines’ brand identities and personalities, reminds passengers about feelings experienced with the airlines’ services.

The second dimension is the brand affective experience that concerns customers’ emotions. The affective experience aims to create affective or positive feelings between the customers and products (Brakus et al., 2009). For example, Kinder Surprise Egg is a successful snack brand for children that creates a fun experience. Hallmark is a brand prototype of greeting cards for special occasions.
These two brands motivate a specific link with the brand. Airline marketers focus on passengers’ expectations; hence, the purposes of emotional experiences are to offer delightful feelings that are above expectations. Thereby, Thai International Airways (THA) elicits passengers’ emotions with politeness and the welcoming slogan of “Smooth as Silk,” and JetBlue Airways promotes their culture of “Safety, Caring, Integrity, Fun, and Passion.”

The color and visual designs of the airlines can trigger passengers’ emotions regarding the brand; thus, several airlines are associated with specific color schemes. For example, THA uses purple and orchid as the national flower of Thailand to represent the airline and Thai culture. Southwest Airlines uses the colorful, heart-shaped logo to support the company’s vision “To become the world’s most loved, most flown, and most profitable airline” (Southwest, 2018, para 2). Moreover, Virgin decided to change the name by choosing the color to represent its brand and also its re-brand from Virgin Airlines to Virgin Blue. The color blue was used to introduce the new style and low airfare to the market under the umbrella brand of Virgin Group Operations. The founder of Virgin Group, Richard Branson, stated that “it represents our goal to prove to Australia how true BLUE we are about delivering low fàres” (Virgin Australia, 2000, para 9). Virgin Blue created a personality by calling the airline service Blue to extend service lines, such as the Blue Zone (extended legroom), Blue Room (lounge service and core services), Blue Holidays (vacation packages), and Pacific Blue (flights to New
Zealand). In 2010, Virgin again transformed the organization into a quasi-full-service by rebranding the airline to Virgin Australia and using orange to represent a new, lively character of the airlines. The airlines still offer low fares but enhanced in-flight services and amenities, such as business class cabins and airport lounges, to compete with major airlines like Qantas.

A few studies showed that affective experience is essential for generating customers’ perceptions of the brand, which can influence customers’ buying decisions (C. F. Chen & Chang, 2008; Oh et al., 2007). Air New Zealand uses Kiwi characters, the friendly and outgoing people of New Zealand, to represent the national air carrier and to draw attention. All Nippon Airlines (ANA) painted Pokémon on their aircrafts and turned the in-flight service into a Pokémon theme park, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Sensory and affective experiences are post-experiences for passengers regarding how they feel about the services. Using affective experiences influences customers’ decisions to repurchase from the airlines.

The third dimension is the brand intellectual experience. Brakus et al. (2009) explain that an intellectual experience is based on the creativity of customers to think about and solve problems from experience by applying excitement and stimulation, such as LEGO toys and Sudoku games. Similarly, the think experience is aimed to encourage customers to think and be attracted to commodities (Schmitt, 1999). This dimension has been described in various ways,
including intelligence, cognitive style, and creativity (Lee et al., 2008). According to Nagasawa (2008), the intellectual experience relates to new technology offered by the company. Virgin Atlantic Airways is one of the examples using innovative amenities, such as Wi-Fi and the Red platform (an in-flight entertainment system), to inspire customers’ perceptions. Moreover, the think experience creates a brand identity, differentiates the airline from its competitors, and helps customers to recognize the brand (Boje & Smith, 2010). Intellectual experience is an additional method for air transportation to gain the passengers’ attention and intention to buy after they have experienced the services.

The fourth dimension, the brand behavioral experience, is about the lifestyle aspects of the consumption or the experience of action (Brakus et al., 2009), which is similar to the act experience by Schmitt (1999). The act experience creates a situation relating to consumers’ physical bodies, lifestyles, behaviors, and knowledge gained from the social interaction with other people or the reference group. The purpose of the behavioral experience is to convince customers to try an alternative lifestyle: for instance, Nike’s motto “Just Do It.”

In the airline business, in-flight, duty-free shopping is an example of the behavioral experience that relates to customers’ behaviors. During flights, shoppers receive samples and information from flight attendants about products in showcase spaces. In-flight shopping allows customers to test products and purchase them from trained flight attendants, who assist passengers in experiencing the products.
(Park, 2015). Besides, in-flight shoppers perceive more convenience because they spend less time shopping and less effort than visiting a store (Huang & Kuai, 2006).

Another type of behavioral experience, membership programs, such as frequent-flyer programs (FFPs) and loyalty programs, assist the airlines in maintaining the relationship with their customers in the long-run. FFPs are broadly offered by many airlines, such as Royal Orchid Plus by Thai International Airways (THA), Mileage Plus by United Airlines (UAL), and SkyMiles by Delta (DAL). Loyalty programs were designed to encourage airline passengers to enroll in the program and accumulate points. Thus, airlines can evaluate the consumption of passengers’ experiences; this is another option for passengers to interact with the brands, which leads to brand loyalty.

These four dimensions of the brand experience are methods to create the brand experience concepts. For instance, the iconic Singapore girls create a brand identity for SIA, the Blue service creates a brand personality for Virgin Airlines, and the Royal Orchid Plus membership creates brand loyalty for THA by applying sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences. Airline managers need to understand different types of brand experiences to build a strong brand. Therefore, multiple dimensions are often applied to create one brand.

Khan and Rahman (2015a). They compiled literature that describes the concepts of brand experience as “the integration of all consumption, product,
shopping and service experiences that a consumer encounters during a brand interaction” (p. 244). Khan and Rahman summarize the interaction of experiences between consumers and providers as follows: (a) consumption experience occurs when customers buy or consume a product, (b) product experience happens when customers interact with the product, which can be direct physical contact or indirect contact through the company website, and (c) shopping and service experiences usually occur when customers walk into a store and experience the atmosphere, layout, setting, and customer service.

The focus of the study is to perceive passenger-lived experiences comprehensively with the U.S. legacy airlines based on the concept of brand experiences. These areas of study have been found in various fields relating to travelers’ behaviors, facilities, and services of airlines and airports, including non-aviation services (e.g., duty-free shopping, car rental, and Citylink). Brand experience, an essential element for airline managers to understand, is to create a strong brand in the airline sector because it refers to travelers’ responses, such as perceptions, thoughts, behaviors, and cognitions when they engage with the brand.

In addition to brand experience, the first concept of Khan and Rahman’s (2015a) consumption experience is critical. The consumption experience in an airline can be explained when new or existing customers purchased an air ticket with that airline; in other words, this experience occurs during and after consuming the product (e.g., ticket-counter, in-flight, and call-center services). Therefore,
consumption is about the passengers’ feelings regarding the service after it is offered by airlines, compared to their expectations prior to experiencing the airlines’ services. Airline managers create brand identity and personality by immersed sensory and affective experiences to manage the consumption experience and to stimulate customers’ sensations and affections.

The second concept, the product experience, is the process of the customers’ buying-decisions (Khan & Rahman, 2015b) that affect consumers’ behaviors, lifestyles, and intentions to buy the products. In the service sector, the product experience is an interaction between customers and service providers, either before or after purchase; it can be direct or indirect physical transactions. The study of product experience focuses on how customers perceive services and how they form the purchase intention (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). To stimulate product experience, behavioral and intellectual experiences encourage buying behavior and repeated services (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010).

In the airline business, the product experience starts when customers consider purchasing an airline ticket. In general, the two factors that have the most influence on airline ticket purchasing behavior are price value and service quality. With this regard, ticket prices are based on levels of the services, such as full-fare carriers (full-service) and low-cost carriers (no-frills service). In the no-frills service, unnecessary services are eliminated, and fewer comforts are offered than in full-service airlines. Thus, the customers’ purchasing behavior could be based on
their expectations; if the experience is below expectations, they may not return to fly with the airline again. This example of the behavioral product experience can be analyzed by customer repurchase intention toward that airline.

In this era of advanced technology, customers quickly access a company through online technology, including mobile applications (mobile apps); they access the service with one tap. A high volume of airline passengers intends to purchase online tickets (e.g., e-commerce and m-commerce). Many studies focus on consumer behavior via online ticketing service (Chu, 2001; Kim, Qu, & Kim, 2009; Sam, Fazli, & Tahir, 2009). Currently, major airlines, such as Delta, American, Southwest, and United, adopted mobile apps as an option for their services (e.g., flight tracking, booking, and check-in). Customers need some time to gain trust in using mobile apps because the apps are new to the market platform. However, recent researchers are interested in the adoption of mobile apps in airline marketing to enhance airline service capability (Morosan, 2014; Samy, 2012) and to study airline consumer behavior toward the applications on a smartphone (Liu & Law, 2013).

According to the behavior product experience, many academic studies of airline passengers’ behaviors focus on customer intention toward e-ticketing service that may have an influence on customer satisfaction and repeated service (Lau et al., 2011; Yeoh & Chan, 2011). Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) suggest that behavioral intentions are associated with service providers acquiring
customers’ positive responses, recommendations to others, and loyalty, all of which result in repurchases. With this concept of product experience, airline managers need to understand the dynamics of consumer behavior. Possible factors leading to change in consumer behaviors are new technology applications, which are a faster way for passengers to access airline services and new business models (e.g., no-frills, ultra-low-cost) that offer more options to passengers for choosing air transportation.

The third concept, the service and shopping experiences, is the connection of all types of brand experience concepts (Khan & Rahman, 2015a) and the same idea as the relational dimension (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci (2007). The relational experience involves other people who are relevant to the social context or social identity, such as Disneyland and Ducati (Gentile et al., 2007). Likewise, Nysveen, Pedersen, and Skard (2013) reported that a relational dimension has the most significant impact among all dimensions (sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, and relational) of brand experience on brand personality, brand satisfaction, and brand loyalty in a service industry.

Likewise, air transportation provides service experiences for passengers to travel from place to place. For example, commercial airlines offer seats (tickets) to passengers, and airports provide facilities, such as customs and immigration for International flights, to host origin and destination (O&D) and connecting passengers. In the same way, airlines mainly sell the experience to the customers
similarly to other hospitality industries, such as hotels, spas, and banking, contributing the best practices for customers to remember their services.

Nonetheless, airlines may confront disadvantages when customers change their minds or try a new service that the competitors offer. The customers that decide to change from one company to another are also called brand switchers. Paternoster (2008) explains that the passengers changed their airport destinations because of the airport environment, such as long queues, unprompted staff, unsanitary toilets, and airport locations. Paternoster’s results imply that a service experience could influence customers’ decisions to select competitor airports that could provide better service. The quality of the service is a turning point for passengers to select destination airports; hence, airlines and airports should observe the reasons that could lead passengers’ minds to switch operators.

Summing up, brand experience concepts in the aviation industry are part of the marketing strategies for customers to choose air transportation, which is the engagement between passengers and providers. Brand experience concepts are about creating a positive relationship among passengers and providers before, during, and after service. The main goals of positive experiences are to retain the existing passengers (customer retention) through customer loyalty and to recruit new passengers by using consumption, product, service, and shopping experiences to create brand identity, personality, and loyalty. Hence, the main themes of brand experience concepts were derived from the actual passengers’ experiences.
The following statement represents the gaps and issues that were found in the current research. Studies of brand experience relating to airline passengers’ behaviors show that there is insubstantial information to examine loyalty programs to create long-term consumer relationships. Three main issues regarding behavior changes when new circumstances are introduced include: (a) airline business models, which are the LCCs follow by ULCCs, (b) global alliance strategies along with their airline membership programs, and (c) new, advanced technologies that applied to support new lifestyles. Thus, these matters were observed in the study to fill the gap by employed phenomenology to frame the research question.

The concept of brand experiences from previous literature reviews brings a general understanding of passengers’ experiences in order to create airline brand loyalty. This extensive study focuses on creating strong brand loyalty, which will deliver insightful lived experiences of passengers who traveled by U.S. legacy air carriers. Notably, examples that have been raised in the literature reviews presented in this study came from many regions that varied in socioeconomic status. The provided examples emphasize the U.S. airlines, which are the target population of this study, and other major airlines from many nations. This study also is focused on passengers’ perceptions of global alliances; thus, learning from various backgrounds would be worthwhile.

How do the U.S. legacy airline alliances use airline brand experiences to retain passenger loyalty? This research question, which informed the current study
and was a primary reason for choosing the brand experiences framework, was derived from gaps in the study by applying concepts of brand experiences (Brakus et al., 2009; Khan & Rahman, 2015a) to create a strong brand (Aaker, 2009; Keller, 1993) and by satisfying airlines to understand and predict customer behaviors that change periodically and competitively.

**Review of Past Research Studies**

**Overview.** Transcendental phenomenology was used to evaluate passengers’ experiences in order to develop the concepts of airline brand experience, which have been unclear in the airline industry. Three main subjects were considered: (1) the brand experience concepts as a critical research topic to create long-term relationships, (2) the service quality regarding brand loyalty, and (3) the global airline alliances compared to loyalty programs of an individual airline in the market.

Literature reviews related to the vital concept of brand experience are discussed.

**Study 1. “A Review and Future Directions of Brand Experience Research”**

*Khan and Rahman (2015a).* Khan and Rahman’s concepts and significant findings have been mentioned in Chapter 1. Khan and Rahman performed a content analysis to categorize the unit of analysis (selected articles) based on the relevance of the brand experience context; the relevant articles were qualified for the
study. Eventually, 73 articles were determined relevant to the context of brand experience; 47 out of 120 matched with the key terms but were not relevant.

Accordingly, Khan and Rahman examined the correlation between two raters, who were independently reviewing the same article, ensuring the inter-rater reliability. The result of the correlation was 87.3 percent; according to Holsti (1969) cited in Khan and Rahman (2015a), higher than 85 percent can be accepted as a high level of correlation. The results of the analysis by categories were presented accordingly, empirical versus conceptual studies, industry focus, country of research, research design, data analysis techniques, and nature of sampling method and respondents.

1. Comparing empirical and conceptual studies, Khan and Rahman (2015a) showed that 57 out of 73 studies (76%) were empirical in nature, and the rest of the studies (16) were non-empirical. Khan and Rahman showed that the quantitative approach was the most frequently used methodology for brand experience.

2. The industry focus was identified by-products and service sectors. Examples of the products were foods and beverages, automobiles, and electronics. The service sector included tourism, hospitality, finance service, and telecommunication.

3. The countries frequently involved in the area of brand experience were found in the United States (23), United Kingdom (7), and Australia (5), which were categorized in developed countries. China was found to have
the most published articles (5) among developing countries. The remaining of the sample articles (33 out of 73) were found to have one or two article(s) in each country. Khan and Rahman (2015a) noticed that economic status might have an impact on brand experience studies because most of the articles (85%) were done in developed countries; only 15 percent came from developing countries.

4. The survey research was the most prominent design (34 out of 73 studies). Ten other studies used experimental research designs, such as factorial designs, mixed design, online experiments, and quasi-experiments. The less frequently used study designs were in-depth interviews (6), single company cases (3), expert panels (2), archival study (1), and action research (1) (Khan & Rahman, 2015b).

5. Khan and Rahman (2015a) observed that multiple data analysis techniques were used in research based on brand experience. Fifty-seven studies were empirical; some of the studies applied more than one technique. The most popular techniques were factor analysis (32 studies), structural equation modeling (31 studies), correlation (26 studies), and descriptive analysis (18 studies). Also, techniques such as ANOVA, MANOVA, and MANCOVA were not frequently used. For qualitative analysis, only four content analyses and one structural equation model were found (Khan & Rahman, 2015a).
6. The sampling methods (random vs. non-random) and respondent, Khan and Rahman (2015a) reported that a non-random technique was highly employed among empirical studies (47 out of 57), seven of them were random samples, and three of them were case-based studies. Khan and Rahman categorized the respondents into three groups, which are students, non-students, and brand users.

Thus, Khan and Rahman’s study is essential guidance to the current study to employ qualitative analysis, to implement the concepts of brand experience in the airline industry, and to understand the airlines’ market situation, which is essential for a company to create a strong brand.

Khan and Rahman (2015a) reported their significant findings, as follows.

1. “An excess of empirical studies in brand experience is not desirable; future research should emphasize more on conceptual studies in order to establish the brand experience construct. Also, there is a lack of brand experience studies in the services.” (p. 9). Khan and Rahman (2015a) reviewed that the brand experience scale of Brakus et al. (2009) was continuously used from 2009 to 2013, which showed it was useful and mostly conducted by empirical studies. Thus, Khan and Rahman recommended using the scale of brand experience to study service industries such as hospitality, tourism, and airlines.
2. “Brand experience research [was] found mainly in two-three developed economies. More brand experience research should be done in emerging economies that have [a] big consumer market.” (Khan & Rahman, 2015a, p. 9). The results of the study showed that most of the brand experience studies were found in developed nations. Although, to see the differences of customer’s taste and preference through brand experience, anthropology and ethnology are used to study the pattern of individuals within a culture. The perception made on an individual by a culture of the people, nations, regions. Thus, Khan and Rahman asserted that to study brand experience should be studied from different regions.

3. “A lot of quantitative studies have been carried out in brand experience. A majority of researches are based on survey methods.” (Khan & Rahman, 2015a, p. 9). Experience is perceived as subjective, which is a built-in brand experience. Therefore, Khan and Rahman reported that because the majority of the brand experience studies were based on quantitative methodology, a qualitative approach could be a more appropriate method to get more insight into brand experience research.

4. “A majority of the studies are based on people’s perception of object reality (logical positivist/empiricist paradigm-based researches). Future researches should use more interpretive perspectives in order to gain deeper insight into consumer experience with brands” (Khan & Rahman, 2015a, p. 10).
For future study, researchers should consider using qualitative methods such as netnography (online Ethnography), helping them to explore the phenomena of the study and to provide insightful information also representing diverse research approaches. Hence, Khan and Rahman explained that the brand experience study was about understanding a customer’s feelings when engaging with the brand in different cultures (environments). Khan and Rahman recommended interpretative perspectives for measuring brand experience to gain a deeper understanding of customer experience with brands.

5. “Customer satisfaction and brand loyalty are highly discussed brand experience outcomes; only a few studies have focused on other outcomes like brand equity, brand attitude, brand credibility and purchase intention. There is a need to examine these brand and non-brand related outcomes in different settings, especially in services.” (Khan & Rahman, 2015a, p. 10). Khan and Rahman identified brand experience into a conceptual framework (see Khan & Rahman, 2015a, Fig. 3, p. 9) that has been provided to bring brand experience antecedents and consequences together. Khan and Rahman studied antecedents of brand experience in different environments and evaluated an alternate outcome. Moreover, controllable variables are suggested for future research.
Khan and Rahman (2015a) highlighted that brand experience would help marketers to improve marketing planning strategies, understand customer behavior, and keep track of the objectives of the brand. Khan and Rahman explained two limitations of their study. First, they only used published articles due to time constraints. Second, the searching term was only limited to the term of brand experience as its title, which later found that sensory experience can be used interchangeably with the same meaning. Khan and Rahman’s recommendations were to conduct brand experience research in different settings, especially in the service industry, and to conduct qualitative studies in order to gain greater insight into the customer experience with brands. Thus, the current study examined brand experience research relative to airlines and used Khan and Rahman’s review as a guide for thematic analysis. Khan and Rahman emphasized that the importance of qualitative studies was to get more insight into the brand experience construct, in a way that brand experiences are concerning with interactions between customers and brands, which depends upon the environment. Khan and Rahman also recommended using an interpretative perspective method for measuring brand experiences in order to gain more in-depth insight into customer experiences with brands such as netnography. Hence, the study assessed the extent to which the current state of the published literature relative to brand experience research in the airline business.
The conceptual framework of Khan and Rahman (2015a) was a product of the content analysis. The two main research questions were: What is the present state of brand experience research? What essential issues should future studies address in this area? Khan and Rahman (2015a) presented a conceptual framework that examined the antecedents and consequences of brand experience. The antecedents were categorized into two types of marketplaces: offline and online marketing. Offline marketing consisted of event marketing, brand contacts, brand-related stimuli, and storytelling. Online marketing included trust and perceived usefulness. The dependent variables of Khan and Rahman’s framework were the consequences of the brand experience: customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, brand attitude, brand credibility, brand equity, and purchase intention. The conceptual framework of Khan and Rahman demonstrated that the consequences of brand experience were stimulated by offline and online marketing. Khan and Rahman described each antecedent and references to support their theory. For example, event marketing plays a vital role in customer engagement and in creating a long-lasting brand experience (Fransen, Van Rompay, & Muntinga, 2013 as cited in Khan & Rahman, 2015a). Brand contacts are the points at which a brand comes in contact with consumers (Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Meyer & Schwager, 2007, as cited in Khan & Rahman, 2015a).
Literature reviews related to airline branding strategies are discussed.

**Study 2. “Determining the Antecedents and Consequences of the Airline Brand Personality.”**

*Lu and Siao (2019)*. Lu and Siao investigated passengers’ perceptions of the brand personalities (BP) and the consequences of their behaviors to the airlines. An empirical, correlational study was selected to explore the causal relationships between the brand personality and its antecedent factor, the countries-of-origin (COO) of the airlines, and the purchase intention. Face-to-face was used as a tool to conduct the data of 490 effective samples from Kaohsiung International Airport, Taiwan. The participants were categorized into three types of airline business models: an international airline with a global network, a regional airline, and a low-cost carrier. All of these different statistical techniques were applied to explore the differences in the perceptions of airline brand personalities.

Two purposes of *Lu and Siao (2019)* research were “to investigate the BPs of different types of airlines from the perspectives of air passengers” and “to test the relationship between BP and its antecedent factor, brand COO, and the relationship between BP and its consequent factor, passengers’ purchase intention” (p. 3). Thus, Lu and Siao developed a framework from several published studies according to antecedents of the study: COO was adopted by Axelsson and Vakhrameeva (2016) and Chung and Feng (2016); BP was adopted by Aaker
(1997), and Purchase Intention was adopted by Chung and Feng (2016) and Jeng (2016).

Lu and Siao (2019) set up the questionnaire in five sections. The first section was to gather information regarding airline flights, including travel purpose, airline company, length of travel, type of membership program, travel type. The second was used to ask about the images of COO from Taiwan, Macau, and Singapore. The third was to rate the BP from Aaker’s five dimensions, an applied scale that was translated from English to Chinese. English native speakers who know Mandarin were asked to review the tools to ensure the meanings of each item. The fourth was to question participants about purchase intentions. The fifth section was to inquire about passengers’ demographics and general details, like age, gender, education, monthly income, and the number of times they travel abroad per year (Lu & Siao, 2019).

Lu and Siao (2019) separated participants into three groups by COO. They used the analysis of variance (ANOVA), structural equation modeling (SEM), and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) techniques to analyze the data. For descriptive analysis, they used various forms to represent the data. Bar charts presented the score of the perceptions of the images of the three countries and the perceptions of purchase intentions to the corresponding airlines and a spider web form illustrated nine types of perceptions of airline brand personalities.
Lu and Siao (2019) investigated passengers’ perceptions of the brand personalities of three types of airlines that related to their COO: international alliance (EVA Airways, EVA from Taiwan), a full-regional airline (Air Macau, AMU from Macau), and a low-cost carrier (Tigerair Taiwan, TTW originally from Singapore). The location or flight route constantly held as a control variable, and the data was collected from passengers who traveled between Kaohsiung and Macau at Kaohsiung Airport only.

The results showed that passengers’ perceptions of the brand personalities of different types of airlines were significantly different. The country-of-origin of airlines impacted brand personality. The results showed that brand personality significantly influenced passengers’ loyalty to airlines. Demographic and trip characteristics such as income, frequent-flyer programs, and flying experiences impacted passengers’ loyalty (Lu & Siao, 2019).

The implications of Lu and Siao (2019) showed that studies of brand personality were rarely found in the aviation field. They researched low-cost and legacy carriers that implemented different marketing strategies to retain existing customers. Their results revealed that brand personality, an essential element for airline managers to develop, is a consequence of passengers’ perceptions and a recognition of global network, regional network, and low-cost airlines. The results helped implement the current study.
Furthermore, the researchers recommended tracing passengers’ opinions on social media like Facebook and asking if the passengers had ever joined or provided comments on online social platforms.

Literature reviews related to service quality and brand loyalty are discussed.


*Chiu, Liu, and Tu (2016).* The word of mouth method (WOM) was one of the powerful methods using in communication marketing strategy to promote airline brands, especially low-cost carriers (Chiu et al., 2016). Thus, Chiu et al. integrated a marketing framework and developed a new model to test the relationship between service quality through corporate reputation (CR) and WOM associated with purchase intention. The associational study research design was used to examine the correlation between service quality of WOM and corporate reputation based on the opinions of low-cost tourists. Chiu et al. hypothesized model that provides the relationship between service quality and purchase intention in low-cost airline contexts, which can be clarified in four hypotheses:

**H1:** Empathy for tourists’ needs increases the relation between service quality and WOM.

**H2:** Empathy for tourists’ needs increases the relation between WOM and purchase intention.

**H3:** The airline’s reputation impacts the relationship positively between
service quality and purchase intention.

H4: WOM affects the relationship between service quality and purchase intention.

Chiu et al. (2016) explained that the model was framed by comprehensive literature reviews in the area of tourism, marketing, and management; consequently, they carefully reviewed and revised the contents of the questionnaires to match the research questions of the study. Moreover, Chiu et al. paid close attention to the equivalency of meaning by asking two English speakers (Australians) for a back-translation method to revise the questionnaires and to ensure that the original meanings were unchanged. The data of 535 respondents came from low-cost airline operators in Taiwan: AirAsia, Jetstar, Tiger Airways, FlyScoot, Cebu Pacific Air, Air Busan, t’way Air, Eastar Jet, Peach Aviation, Vanilla Air, Hong Kong Express, Spring Airlines, and V Air. Chiu et al. utilized seven-point Likert scales and asked participants to rate their experiences and feelings about low-cost carriers. Six research assistants were hired and trained to collect the data from check-in counters. Moreover, Chiu et al. gave attention to instrument validity and reliability. The control variables used in their study were gender, age, and education level.

Chiu et al. (2016) used confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the four hypotheses, as mentioned. The statistical results showed that all hypotheses were significantly supported. The results of Chiu et al. showed that H1 and H2:
“[T]ourists who score high on empathy are more positively related to purchase intention” (p. 229). Moreover, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the results of H3 and H4 that the airline’s reputation and WOM mediate the relationships between service quality and purchase intention.

The empirical testing of Chiu et al. (2016) provided strong statistical evidence to support their unique framework focusing on airline passengers’ behavior; thus, the results of their study, which is aligned with the previous researches of Yang, Wu, and Wang (2010) and Bartikowski and Walsh (2011), would help foresee passenger behavior. The generalizability was limited because of the data collected within a single location, which was Taoyuan International Airport in Taiwan. Thus, Chiu et al. recommended collecting data from multiple airports in order to increase the generalizability of the study.

More critical to the study is the fact that Chiu et al.’s (2016) hypothesis model was derived from Western literature and applied to Taiwanese passengers’ investigations. Chiu et al.’s model, based on the relationships between purchase intention, WOM, corporate reputation, service quality, and empathy, has never been tested in Chinese culture. Chiu et al. recommended that other cultures use their model to verify the generalizability of the extended study. Hence, the study focused on the link between passengers’ perceptions and purchase intention in the airline business; the results of their study were useful to support and guidance.
However, instead of the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach was used to conduct the study to earn insightful details of passengers’ experiences with airlines.

**Study 4. “How Airline Service Quality Determines the Quantity of Repurchase Intention - Mediate and Moderate Effects of Brand Quality and Perceived Value”**

*Chen, Li, and Liu (2019).* Chen et al. conducted a study in China when airline businesses operated by the general public sector and high-speed rail project were an alternative for transportation. Developing service quality, a fundamental element in creating a competitive advantage requires airlines to confront rivals from domestic and international companies. The quantitative approach was used and developed a questionnaire survey to measure customers’ perceptions of Chinese airline service qualities and brand quality (Chen et al., 2019). The selected questionnaire derived from previous literature, which was translated from English to Chinese and was reviewed by two experts in airline service quality to evaluate the translated questionnaire and to ensure the original meanings. The data was collected from passengers of 12 Chinese airlines that operated in Xiamen Gaoqi International Airport: Air China, China Eastern Airlines, Hainan Airlines, China Southern Airlines, Shandong Airlines, Xiamen Air, Shanghai Airlines, Spring Airlines, Juneyao Airlines, Sichuan Airlines, and Shenzhen Airlines. The respondents were 451 passengers who traveled domestic and international flights,
which they were willing to express their experiences with Chinese airline services.

SEM technique was chosen to analyze the model.

The conceptual framework of service quality on China airlines’ brand equity and repurchase intention was framed as the hypotheses model of the Chen et al. (2019) study. The four hypotheses were:

H1: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between service quality and perceived value, such that service quality is positively and indirectly related to perceived value through brand awareness.

H2: Perceived value mediates the relationship between brand awareness and repurchase intention, such that brand awareness is positively and indirectly related to repurchase intention through perceived value.

H3: Brand attractiveness moderates the relationship between brand awareness and perceived value; such a relationship is strengthened when brand attractiveness is high.

H4: Memorable brand experience moderates the relationship between brand awareness and perceived value; such a relationship is strengthened when a memorable brand experience is high.

All data were collected at Xiamen Gaoqi International Airport because it is located in economic zones and touristic areas and also regional aviation hubs in southeast China. Chen et al. (2019) showed that service quality leads to the fulfillment of customers’ expectations and that employee training is one of the
factors to achieve high-quality customer services. Hence, managers should consider employee training programs for the company master plan, which can improve the customers’ perceptions of the service quality of the company.

Chen et al. (2019) found that customers’ positive perceptions create brand recognition and attractiveness, influencing repurchase intention. Airline managers may adopt brand experiences to encounter in order to create positive relations between passengers and brands. Moreover, So, King, Hudson, and Meng (2017) found that brand attractiveness helps consumers satisfy their self-definition requirements (as cited in Chen et al., 2019). Thus, airline managers need to understand customers’ preferences in order to customize the brand image; the attractiveness of the airline brand can be conveyed into expectations and increasing positive perceptions. The contributions of Chen et al.’ empirical study included (a) using cross-sectional design for mediation-moderation integrated model testing, (b) conducting pretest and posttest measurement to reduce the bias of the responses from the same source, (c) collecting data from multiple airports in China and other countries, which may increase the generalizability of the findings to other cultures, and (e) applying the extended study to other cultures to verify the generalizability of the study. Thus, the current study compared the model of Chen et al. (2019) to conduct the qualitative study of the U.S. culture and context to verify the assumptions of the study.


**Study 5. “Key Drivers of Airline Loyalty”**

_Dolnicar, Grabler, Grün, and Kulnig (2011)._ Dolnicar et al. study revealed that loyalty programs or frequent-flyer programs (FFPs) play an important role in air travelers’ behaviors, a key scheme of airline loyalty. Existing academic researchers are likely to explore the factors influencing on passenger purchasing intention, such as airfare, complimentary food, and flight times (Hess et al., 2007). The purposes of Dolnicar et al. were to investigate airline loyalty of passengers in their study, to determine behavioral airline loyalty in different segments of passengers, and to identify the fundamental of behavioral loyalty by using the model of Suzuki (2007). The study was based on 687 respondents from airlines that operated within Central and Eastern Europe. However, Dolnicar et al. did not mention the names of the airlines in their study. The questionnaires, distributed by flight attendants, were written in two languages to ensure clarity of the questions.

Dolnicar et al. used an associational design to describe the relationship between behavior loyalty of the airlines (DV) and explanatory variables by using recursive partitioning to analyze and interpret data. The variables were collected differently; satisfaction and image variables were measured by using a six-point scale, booking criteria, and behavioral loyalty were measured in percentage.

Dolnicar et al. investigated the impact of frequency of flying on behavioral loyalty by categorizing customers into different groups: (a) holders of only one FFP of the airline, (b) holders of at least one member, and (c) nonmembers. The study
showed several substantial findings. For instance, reputation can be spread by WOM or be “perceived by friend[s]” (Dolnicar et al., 2011, p. 1025). Also, the key drivers of airline loyalty vary for different market segments because of customer behavior; loyalty programs are associated with behavioral loyalty for business passengers but not for casual and leisure passengers. Price has more impact on leisure than business travelers. Therefore, two possible explanations that can be explained from the findings are retention measured by intention to repurchase and the influence of behavioral loyalty through deals and special offerings in the loyalty programs rather than customer emotions toward airline brands.

The results of Dolnicar et al. (2011) showed that airfare and FFP are the key elements of airline loyalty, differences of behavioral airline loyalty exist between market segments, and FFP or loyalty programs can drive customer behaviors regarding airline loyalty, especially of business air travelers. Given the importance of membership in frequent-flyer programs for airline brand loyalty, Dolnicar et al. recommended investigating how to recruit new passengers to participate in the FFPs and to extend the relationship with the existing loyal passengers. Regarding Dolnicar and colleagues’ recommendation, the phenomenological study may help to understand the benefit of airline alliances that may influence brand loyalty as well as FFPs.

Sandada and Matibiri (2016). The purpose of the research of Sandada and Matibiri was to discover what makes passengers loyal to airlines in Southern Africa by investigating the impact on customer loyalty of service quality, safety perception on customer satisfaction, and of passenger satisfaction and loyalty program. Previous studies suggested that the costs of acquiring new customers are five times higher than the costs of retaining customers; thus, increasing customer intention can increase organizational profit (Reichheld, 2001 cited in Sandada & Matibiri, 2016). Sandada and Matibiri’s literature review explained that the number of repurchases could measure the level of customer loyalty; the more service they repeat, the more they spend. The frequent-flyer programs have been selected in order to gain attention from and retention of customers (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Furthermore, Dolnicar et al. (2011) acclaimed that the factors that drive passenger behavior to create airline loyalty differ in market segments; thus, airline managers must understand and develop customized deals for each segment.

Service quality plays an essential role in a service provider to achieve customer satisfaction (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Sandada and Matibiri (2016) determined that a positive relationship occurs between service quality and the level of customer satisfaction influencing passenger loyalty.
H1: Positive effects of passenger satisfaction on airline loyalty.

In the airline industry, according to Maeng and Park (2015), service quality can be categorized into three dimensions: Reliability and customer service, convenience and accessibility, and in-flight service (as cited in Sandada & Matibiri, 2016).

H2: Positive effects of service quality measurements, customer service reliability, convenience and accessibility, and inflight services effects on passenger satisfaction.

Sandada and Matibiri (2016) revealed a number of previous literature reviews regarding FFPs related to customer loyalty that leads to switching brands, information that helped to form hypothesis 3.

H3: FFP’s positive influence on customer loyalty.

Safety concerns have been a top priority for air transportation, particularly after 9/11. A U.S. Security system was installed to ensure a higher level of passenger safety (IATA, 2014). Sandada and Matibiri reviewed that airlines gave more attention to safety. Thus, they concluded that perceived safety is one of the keys to customer satisfaction; information created the last hypothesis:

H4: Positive influence of safety perception on passenger satisfaction.

The finding indicated that service quality positively influenced customer satisfaction, which has an impact on customer loyalty. However, regarding switching behavior, Sandada and Matibiri realized that satisfied customers may still
change to other airlines, depending on bargains offered by other airlines. Sandada and Matibiri (2016) study contributed to the development of a customer loyalty model for the South African aviation industry. The results will help airline managers to develop marketing strategies in order to improve passenger satisfaction and to make profits.

Implications of the current study. Sandada and Matibiri (2016) recommended to use their model to explain customer loyalty in other contexts. They suggested to focus on airline alliances such as One World, Sky Team, and Star Alliance that extend the routes coverage for airlines. Moreover, alliances offer FFPS more opportunities to earn points and more choices for redeeming accumulated points.

**Study 7. “Malaysian Low-Cost Airlines: Key Influencing Factors on Customers’ Repeat Purchase Intention”**

*Yeoh and Chan (2011).* Yeoh and Chan employed a qualitative method to understand the customers’ perspectives and the vital factors that influence repurchase behavior. A semi-structured interview of 20 Malaysian travelers who flew on low-cost airlines within Malaysia was chosen for data collection gathered in 2009. Low-cost or no-frills air carriers were highly competitive since they turned a non-customer group into potential customers, increasing the growth rate of air travelers in Malaysia. The empirical study of low-cost airlines focusing on price, customer satisfaction, and repurchase intention were limited; thus, Yeoh and Chan
explored the service factors that lead to customer satisfaction and repurchase of airline services. Yeoh and Chan addressed two main research questions regarding the factors of low-cost carriers that impact customer satisfaction and the degree to which customer gratification and price affect the repurchase services from low-cost carriers.

The study of Yeoh and Chan (2011) concentrated on domestic passengers who flew with Malaysian low-cost airlines. Corresponding with the research questions, Yeoh and Chan exposed that three factors that lead to passengers’ satisfaction were the on-time performance of departure and arrival, hygiene of cabin areas including restrooms, and comfortable seats. Passengers’ emotion influenced their feedback on overall flight experiences when referring to the consumption experience of low-cost airlines. Airfare was considered as the most critical factor for customer repetition of services; however, it may lead to displeasure when low-cost airlines cut off unnecessary or complimentary products like beverages, snacks, and meals to minimize the cost.

The review of the literature indicated that there is limited empirical evidence that explores airfare, customer satisfaction, and repurchase intention of services of Malaysian low-cost airlines among their existing customers. Exclusively, the current study explored the brand experience concepts that lead to positive perceptions and evaluate how purchase intention can be stimulated by creating brand loyalty through memberships programs.
Summary and Study Implications.

Throughout this literature review, brand experience concepts were shown to be well-recognized in marketing and management journals. The most essential of the concepts is how to create and sustain the relationship between customers and brands. The notions of customer experience are acknowledged in the service industries. Currently, the growth of airline passengers is rapidly developing. At the same time, customer experience plays an essential role in making it possible to achieve higher levels of competitive advantages. In airline business practices, numbers of airline brands are known for offering remarkable experiences to their customers. For example, as highlighted by Skytrax (2018), Singapore Airlines (1st), Qatar Airways (2nd), and ANA All Nippon Airways (3rd) are always in the top rank winning awards for best airlines in the world because these airlines provide excellent in-flight and overall services that passengers are willing to repurchase tickets. The airlines must understand the concepts of brand experiences because airline businesses are based on providing excellent services, in which the providers meet customer satisfaction when they travel.

In conclusion, the current study focuses on the relationship between airline brand experience concepts and customer loyalty. This relationship would contribute to acquire a more insightful understanding of customer behaviors and to fill in the gaps comprising (a) the interaction between passengers and service providers, (b) global alliances strategies, and (c) advanced technologies.
The following chapter demonstrates the applied research methodology, including populations and sample, instrumentations, procedures, and threats to internal validity.
Chapter 3
Methodology

As explained in Chapter 1, a phenomenological study was conducted to assess the phenomena of the airline brand experience.

This chapter includes four sections. The population and sample section contains demographic data about the population and sample. The instrumentation explains detailed information about the selected data collection methods. The procedures explain the process of transcendental phenomenology, including the steps to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the instrument used in the study. The last section, data analysis, describes the qualitative method applied to the data utilized in this research.

Population and Sample

Population. The target population for this study is all airline passengers in the loyalty programs with U.S. legacy carriers or the Big Three, consisting of AAL member of One World; DAL, member of Sky Team; and UAL, member of Star Alliance. According to the criteria, the candidates had to be current members of one of the Big Three: Three candidates were members of AAL, four were members of UAL, and the rest were members of DAL (see Table 2).
Table 2

Number of Participants from Each Loyalty Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Membership</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Airline code</th>
<th>Membership Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAdvantage</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>AAL</td>
<td>2 Gold 1 Platinum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MileagePlus</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>UAL</td>
<td>4 Premier Silver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SkyMiles</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>DAL</td>
<td>3 Silver Medallions 3 Gold Medallions</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Sample. The selected sampling strategies were purposive and snowball. Purposive sampling, a judgmental method used for selecting travelers from the target population, is a decision by researchers to search for participants willing to give information about their experiences (Bernard, 2011). The samples in this study are purposive rather than convenient. The researcher used particular characteristics that provided rich knowledge and assisted with relevant researches. Similar to the criterion sampling strategy, Miles and Huberman (1994) mention that “all cases that meet some criterion . . . [are] useful for quality assurance” (p. 28). On the other hand, convenience sampling is easily accessible to researchers (Given, 2008) but may not apply to the research problems; for example, participants from universities are willing to participate because of incentives. Thus, participants are selected if they meet the criteria of the study for quality assurance. The criteria, as mentioned in the target population, are passenger members of at least one of the Big Three carriers in the United States. Although the exact sample size is unidentifiable at the
beginning stage of the study, it is almost impossible to specify in advance (Marshall et al., 2013).

In a qualitative study, there are no definitive rules for a sample size due to changes in identified themes or the characteristics of the participants (Archibald & Munce, 2015). The achievement of saturation determines the final number of participants. Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016) explained that saturation happens when the researcher no longer receives surplus information to add to theory. Saturation occurs when researchers are satisfied with the size of the data; researchers continue to obtain data only when new substantial information is acquired (Bowen, 2009; Guest et al., 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The number of subjects was suggested by various academic researchers, who interviewed three to five participants (Cohen et al., 2000; Creswell, 2014). Few studies recommended that the sample size should be less than 30 (Cohen et al., 2000; Colaizzi et al., 1978). The adequate number of participants depends on what researchers believe would provide more insightful data into the phenomenon, which may be involved in the snowball sampling strategy, where researchers recruit more participants until the needed data are compiled (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

The researcher anticipated collecting data from 12 to 15 candidates. There were 15 candidates interviewed; but, two candidates were not active members in one of the Big Three. The sample of the study was reached at 10 participants,
determined by data saturation instead of statistical power analysis; however, the interviews were continued until 13 participants (five females and eight males), then collected data were transcribed in the following steps. Moreover, the homogeneous sample in this study is the participants, loyal customers to the U.S. legacy carriers.

The steps for data collection include convenience, purposive, and then snowball sampling strategies. First, the researcher had personal contacts, such as classmates, friends, and colleagues with backgrounds related to the airline industry, who shared data. Then, the selected participants introduced their friends and families, meeting the research criteria to engage in interviews, a strategy known as snowball sampling. With these regards, two types of in-depth interviews were conducted: individual (IDI) and focus group (FGI).

As highlighted by Gordon (2012), investigators must pay close attention to choosing the sample of the study to represent a key aspect. During the invitation process, the researcher discovered that many participants traveled together as a couple or with family members. The participants were requested to participate together in a focus group interview (FGI), constituted to accomplish two main objectives: to facilitate interaction among respondents and to amplify the high quality of information within a limited time frame (Acocella, 2012).

In the current study, the researcher conducted IDIs and FGIs, which are complementary methods, by using a semi-structured interview guide based on literature reviews of passengers’ perceptions. IDIs provided details of personal
information, while FGIs helped to understand the social context of issues. Azzara (2010) explained that the combination of FGIs and IDIs benefits for the qualitative approach, especially the project that deals with budget and time constraints.

**Personal Biography**

After a career as a marketing lecturer, I pursued a Ph.D. in Aviation Sciences. I had worked in the aviation industry for over five years before continuing in higher education in business administration and aviation management fields. I took AVS 6100 Qualitative Research in Aviation and COM 5302 Qualitative Research for Communication. My master’s thesis was based on a mixed-method research design. I used the NVivo program as a tool to organize and analyze the transcripts and later took an online course for MAC users called Moving on with NVivo to boost my research performance. This program not only strengthen my dissertation capability but also enhanced my research skill in the interpretative approach. Researching without prior knowledge and personal viewpoints can be very challenging; however, I was aware of these concerns from the beginning of the study. Personal biography was written by using the researchers’ experiences to create the trustworthiness of the study. However, my past experiences and personal critique influenced my suggestions and recommendations to the study in Chapter 5. By implementing this study, I gained a better understanding of the needs of airline passengers in the U.S. context to help airlines to retain customer loyalty.
Instrumentation

The transcendental or descriptive phenomenology approach was selected for the study because of my interest in the lived experience of airline passengers, who are members of airline alliances. Previous studies in regarding airline branding strategies were conducted using empirical studies to explain the relationship between airlines and passenger satisfaction (Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Lin et al., 2016). This study was designed to describe passengers’ experiences from their perspectives, which are neglected in aviation academic research, rather than to interpret their perceptions based on the results of descriptive and inferential statistics.

This study was based on the perceptions of the passengers of each airline; thus, in-depth interviews were the most appropriate technique to collect data. The phenomenological process, semi-structured and face-to-face, which took approximately 45 minutes to an hour, was deployed in the interview guide. The interview questions were concerned with the participants’ perceptions of their service experiences with their loyalty airlines. The questions asked of participants were open-ended, allowing participants to express their feelings freely. Each item was as open as possible, and the responses were not preconceived or judged. The researcher did not attempt to steer the respondents toward an answer. Two essential questions were listed (Moustakas, 1994): (1) What have you experienced in terms
of the phenomenon?, and (2) What context or situations have typically influenced your experience of the phenomenon?

Moreover, phenomenology *epoche* (or bracketing) was used throughout the interview process, along with the contribution of collected data from the participants’ interviews. Bracketing, which is a vital tool to mitigate researchers’ biases as mentioned in Chapter 1, is a method to increase researchers’ awareness, to put aside assumptions, and to look at a phenomenon with an open mind (Chan et al., 2013; Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). Thus, to be aware of preconception, the investigator consciously avoided leading questions; the concepts of bracketing were not only restricted to the data collection and analysis phases but also kept in the researcher’s mind throughout the research process. Table 3 demonstrates the data collection and describes the four stages of the interviews, including pilot test, preparation for interview, field interview, and post interview; also, the brief descriptions are given.
Table 3

Data Collection Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pilot Interviews (proposal stage)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A research proposal was prepared and approval permitted before the researcher was allowed to conduct the field of study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The study was presented with justification and approved by Ph.D. committee.</td>
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<td>3. The required literature review justified and supported the investigation.</td>
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<td>4. Two experts in the areas of aviation and marketing reviewed the interview questions.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Preparation for Interviews (1-2 weeks in advance)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Participants who meet the research criteria were invited to participate in the study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. An invitation for an interview schedule was sent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Invitation to participate in the study was sent.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interview Process (45 to 60 mins)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The interview questions were reviewed before the beginning of the session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The topic and the researcher were introduced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The interview took approximately 45 minutes, no longer than 1 hour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The final report was sent upon request.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Post Interviews (after the results)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Gifts (souvenir) were presented.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Thank you letter was sent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The report was written.</td>
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</table>

Pilot study. A pilot study was conducted for a preliminary survey in order to construct and ensure validity. Zumitzavan and Michie (2015) suggested that a pilot study could increase levels of validity and reliability of the data collected; for example, the appropriate lengths of interviews, the same understanding of the survey. The additional and subtractive survey questions can be added or removed throughout a pilot study, so that the data collected are certified as a low level of bias (Zumitzavan & Michie, 2015). My preliminary survey was completed after selecting a methodology, phenomenological research, as the most appropriate design to answer the research question and was conducted before launching the
actual questionnaire. Three key persons who developed the questionnaires were a marketing expert, an investigator, and a selected participant. (1) marketing and management expert, Dr. VZ, my colleague has more than ten years of teaching in business school; (2) Carol Tillema, an English teacher and writing tutor who works in the Academic Student Center, read, reviewed, and ensured the questions were well written; and (3) I myself, am an investigator and aviation marketing expert with a strong education and career background. These three developers made sure that the readers or the interviewees understood the questions in the same way that the researcher represented the themes. (4) a selected participant who provided the feedback. The participant was invited to assess the preliminary or pretesting questionnaires. Thus, a pilot interview, focusing on the perceptions of airlines passengers, was improvised to fit the scope of this phenomenological research; the pilot study took place in September 2019.

Castillo-Montoya (2016) found that interview protocols could be strengthened by piloting the interviews. The participant was interviewed to improve the questions and to approximate the length of time per interview. To begin the recruitment process, I posted on personal social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and looked for prospective volunteers who would meet the criteria and were keen to participate in the interview; soon after, I received a few contacts from respondents. One volunteer for the pilot study was a Florida Tech colleague, who had numerous air travel experiences on both international and
domestic routes. The study was held at the broadcast room in the library, an atmosphere that was comfortable for a participant and suitable for voice recording. The pilot study provided the opportunity to refine, rephrase, and clarify some questions in a semi-structured format.

The semi-structured questions were a guideline for both interviewee and interviewer to stay on track; the questions were set in correspondence to the research questions, which were grouped in sections by domains of the study. The questionnaires consisted of 7 sets of questions concerning demographic interviews, travel experiences, membership programs, brand recognition, passenger satisfaction, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. Later, these sets were grouped into three themes for analysis purposes.

Before the interview, demographic questions were asked to ensure the participant was at least 18 years old and a member of the FFPs with one of the Big Three carriers. For example, the first set of questions related to the participant’s background (see Appendix A, Pilot Interviews Questions).

1. Describe yourself and your airline preferences.
   a. What is your occupation?
   b. What is your educational background?
   c. Why do you travel? (business/leisure/beisure)
   d. What types of tickets do you usually buy? (first/business/economic)
e. Are you a member of a loyalty program? (Probe to make sure that the participant meets the criteria.)

f. How often have you flown domestically and internationally?

The following questions, created according to themes, are about the participant’s feelings and his perceptions of what he had experienced.

2. Please describe your personal traveling experiences with airlines that you mentioned.
   a. Explain the positive experiences that you had that made you feel impressed about the airlines and the services provided. Please describe a situation that made you feel good about how the airlines solved problems like flight delays, cancelations, and loss or delay of luggage.
   b. Describe and give an example of the negative experiences that you had with the airlines.

The following interview questions probed the participant to gain insight about his or her experiences:

3. Please describe your impression about how the airlines solved problems for you, like flight delays and cancelations?

The pilot test helped the researcher to draw attention to topics that were later inserted into the actual field interview questions. Prior to this study, the researcher took a qualitative research method course (COM5145) to understand the
depth and range of experience in the human condition. In the course, I read comprehensively and analyzed qualitative methods to complete a course project. Hence, the revised interview questions were corroborated by an English writing editor and a marketing expert (see Appendix B, Field Interview Questionnaires). Moreover, the duration of each interview that takes longer than 1.5 hours could lose a participant’s attention (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012); thus, the average of the actual interview time was 50 mins.

The pilot study was conducted and raised essential concerns that had not been anticipated, and some of the questions were rephrased to obtain more in-depth information. It was considered during the pilot study that the time duration must be controlled; some of the questions were repetitive. Participants frequently replied inconsistently or irrelevantly, so the interviewer had to bring interviewee back to the topic. During the session, the interviewer should have talked less and nodded to agree instead of verbally replying; less interference would have meant less work when transcribing the data.

The survey questions were developed respective to the pilot study. Additionally, open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews were developed beforehand by using probing questions (Morse & Richards, 2002). The probing or follow-up questions used during the interview sessions to obtain more specific or in-depth information allowed interviewees to pause in order to recall their memories and allowed them to express feelings about their experiences.
Preparation for conducting interviews. The settings of the interviews were carefully chosen for safety and comfort, ensuring the participants’ attention. The purpose of the interviews and terms of confidentiality were explained, as also stated in the interview script that contained informed consent form information (Appendix C, Informed Consent). The participants were asked to sign their initials to grant permission for using an audio recording for the interview.

Interview process. The principal researcher was trained before conducting the actual field interviews; the pilot study was conducted to avoid ambiguity in the questionnaires. The researcher was aware of possible bias and attempted to prevent it; the researcher avoided leading questions, attempted to remain as neutral as possible, and used bracketing to avoid personal opinions that could influence the results of the study. If the researcher was unaware of control biases, participants may be biased relative to misleading questions; moreover, a lengthy interview would decrease attention and engagement. Reducing prejudices through transcendental reduction, also called epscpe, allowed the investigator to become aware of personal biases, remove involvement with the subject material, and eliminate presumption about the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

For the instrument’s reliability and validity, a voice recorder was used to record the conversations. The setting of the interview was carefully selected to ensure comfort, such as reserved conference rooms in the College of Aeronautics or
John H. Evan’s library on the FIT campus. Face-to-face or in-person interviews were allowed for observable nuances of the participants’ experiences. Before the interviews, the exemption form used in studies that involve human participants was submitted and reviewed by the IRB for permission to collect data (Appendix D). Participants were informed that they could leave during the interview process at any time. Furthermore, during the interview, the consistency of the answers was ensured by rephrasing and repeating the responses to confirm the most exceptional levels of reliability. Member checking or peer-reviewing was applied after the interviews to evaluate the information received from the respondents and to ensure that what was heard or written down was accurate and valid. Creswell (2015) suggested that using member checking or external audit could ensure the accuracy of the coding process.

**Trustworthiness and validity of data.** The concept of rigor in qualitative research adopted by Ary et al. (2010) was used as a guide to enhance creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To approach creditability, member checking and reflexivity strategies were used. The interview questions were reviewed by both an English editor and a management expert as member checkers to ensure the meanings of the survey questions were understandable. The researcher was trained in qualitative research design. To enhance transferability, detailed and complete descriptions of the context were provided to assist readers in determining thick or rich descriptions. Literary comparisons to correlate findings
with other published literature and also to identify and describe specific limitations
and delimitations of the current study were applied. To ensure dependability, the
NVivo software package, used to record and analyze data, presented an audit trail
as a document for outsiders to follow the progress of the study (Mcniff, 2016). To
enhance confirmability, documentation to keep the audit trail of the study context
and evaluations of the findings were presented. The self-reflection or the reflexivity
strategy to control bias was introduced.

The following section illustrates the procedures that were discussed the
selected research methodology, the importance of human subject research, the
details of the study implementation, and the threats that could have affected the
study.

**Procedures**

**Research methodology.** The research methodology was based on the
phenomenology study of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a founder of the
phenomenology philosophy. Husserl (2012) urged that experience should be
examined in the way that it occurs and in its own terms. Phenomenology is often
used in social and health sciences, which are based on human experiences.
According to Creswell (2014), a phenomenological approach was appropriate to
understand common or shared lived experiences, which apply to occurrences that
reveal the reflective human consciousness of those who were observed during the events and those who participated in the phenomenon.

Two types of phenomenology are hermeneutics (interpretative) and transcendental (descriptive). In descriptive phenomenology, which was applied in this study, the researcher attempted to use a description of data collected through a rigorous process of dissecting the stories to discover the essential meanings. Intended meanings of transcendental phenomenology are conceived in human consciousness, which is always directed toward something else and not isolated from each other (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, transcendental phenomenology helped to explain the situation of airline passengers and the phenomena of brand experience concepts, particularly in the aviation industry.

**Figure 1.** Summary of study procedure.
The overall study procedures are explained in Figure 1. The first step before conducting the study was to achieve IRB approval, which explained in the next section. Official invitation emails were sent to the prospective candidates (Appendix E); then, the following emails were posted to arrange the most suitable schedule for the interview sessions. Before conducting the actual field survey, the researcher had completed the semi-structured interview questions and tested the pilot study. Consequently, the interviews were transcribed from audio to a textual format for data analysis. The researcher composed thank you letters for the participants and attached the copy of transcribed interviews for participants, who wanted to receive them. The digital transcriptions were processed in the transcendental analysis to describe and report the findings of the study.

**Human subjects research.** This study involved human subjects; the research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) chairpersons. An exemption application was submitted to ensure that the potential risk in the study was considered to be *minimal*. According to federal regulations, minimal risk is no greater than a person’s everyday routines. The IRB approval (number 19-16) is in Appendix D. The interviewees’ names were not identified, the data were kept confidential, and the highest level of anonymity of the sources of data and respondents was declared. The participant’s actual names were systematically changed to a pseudonym when reporting data (see more details in Chapter 4). Changing the participant’s name to the alias ensured that their identities
are not published through their quotes or statements. The interviews were recorded and digitally stored as audio files on my personal computer. The audio files were transcribed to electronic text files. After the completion of the study, I removed all participants’ information from all transcript and kept the list of participants in an email folder. However, for the possible use of secondary analyses, an electronic copy of the text data was maintained on my personal computer drive without any identifying information.

**Study implementation.** The process of the descriptive methodological approach was as follows:

1. Transcriptions from interviews were analyzed. More importantly, descriptive researchers do not interpret the data or resolve the ambiguities, but they attempt to describe the uncertainties as they present themselves. At this step, the interviews were scheduled for the date, time, and venue that suitable for recording the conversations. Hence, the interviewees were informed about the research topic, the researcher’s background, approximate time of the interview, and confidentiality. Moreover, the recruitment of participants was one of the crucial matters in the study.

2. Bracketing is recommended by Husserl’s concept that participants transcend the idea of human consciousness (Husserl, 2012). When conducting this study, the bracket concepts were applied, setting aside all prior knowledge, judgment, and understanding, so that the raw data were opened from varied biased
and unbiased perspectives. Leading questions were controlled during the interviews.

3. The data analysis in transcendental phenomenology is a structured process in which researchers first create entire transcripts of the interviews, read them to get a sense of the ideas, break apart the transcript, and note themes that seem to shift the meaning of the transcript by coding and categorizing. Mackey and Gass (2015) suggested that, during the analysis stage, the transcripts should be read and reread, also, coded and re-coded after a specific time.

4. In the reporting stage, the researcher looked at all of the data again for invariant meanings within the texts. An invariant structure of implications is an essential feature of descriptive phenomenology that the study observed in a particular context. After the analysis process, the essentials were reported.

**Threats to internal validity** were implied as alternative explanations of the study results. The concept of internal validity is related to the following questions: Are there alternative explanations to the results other than the variables? Do the results of the study accurately reflect the truth? Ary et al., (2010) explained that eleven possible threats can result alternative outcomes of the study if researchers do not control. In the contexts of the study, the three main threats to internal validity are history, instrumentation, and location, and the mitigation of these threats are suggested below.
History. A history threat refers to unexpected situations other than treatment that may occur during the study impacted changes in the dependent variables. For example, Passengers may directly experience satisfactory service overall. However, unexpected news on media involving airline staff misbehaving and acting unprofessionally to passengers. The history threat issue could lead to a change of attitude from positive to negative. Thus, a history threat applied to descriptive studies, and of concern to the research when participants conduct the interview survey.

Instrumentation. An instrumentation threat refers to changes in how variables are measured from one assessment to another. Variations could occur to an instrument when researchers use the instrument. The instrumentation threat consists of three types of data collection:

Instrument decay refers to a different interpretation of results (e.g., coder fatigue as a part of coder rating). The researcher is an instrument; thus, this decay was a threat to the study.

Data collector characteristics refer to characteristics of the researcher conducting the assessment, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, which were not the threat of the study because of the sole investigator in the study.

Data collector bias refers to an inconsistent administration of assessments by the data collector. Thus, instrumentation could be a significant threat, which applied to the study.
**Location threat.** Location is another threat to internal validity where collected data could provide an alternative outcome of the study. A fixed location was to mitigate the effect of this threat by conducting in the same country, the United States.

**Data Analysis**

This study, analyzing phenomenological data, generated the data from interview transcripts, which attempt to describe not to interpret the data. The study involved a thematic analysis to define the themes of the study. I used an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry; research questions were not fixed and can be modified as a result of the data being collected. Hence, during the data collection, the emerging themes were directly related to answering the research question. The data collected was categorized into different themes based on the contents of the data. The analysis was inductively speculated and explained the phenomenon in more insightful details.

NVivo 12, a software for qualitative approach, was applied to incorporate a visual presentation module enabling the researcher to explore the relationships between categories more vividly (Mcniff, 2016). It helps a researcher to keep track of the transcriptions among different themes in different categories. This software helped to enhance and constrain the data through the ease of cutting and sorting it (Ritchie et al., 2013). NVivo software program is not only helpful to look for the
repetitive words and organize the categories, but it can also provide charts and other images (e.g., word cloud and word tree), representing the frequency of the items.

The word repetition technique was compiled, enabling the researcher to consider keywords in the contexts. Words that occur frequently are seen as being significant terms in the document (Wiltshier, 2011). The data were grouped in categories to allow comparing and contrasting the article descriptions, and to organize the themes and concepts of each article category related to the contexts of this study. Finally, all data was re-reviewed or repeated reviewing: first versus second time of reviewing, whether if they were similar to or different from the core content vis-à-vis the related categories.

This study applied the Moustakas’ four-stage process to analyze the collected data as follows (Figure 2): epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings. Stage one, epoche, involved my setting aside preconceptions in order to obtain general knowledge from the overall content. Stage two, phenomenological reduction, helped in the identification of significant statements from the interview transcripts to prepare for the next step of the analysis. Stage three, imaginative variation, was substantial in clustering themes from both prior types of research and interview data and in integrating the findings. Stage four, synthesis of meanings, demonstrated the structure of a phenomenon and verified the validity of the study.
The four stages of transcendental phenomenological analysis were applied in the current study and lead to the findings, which are fully described in Chapter 4.

**Stage 1: Epoche.**

According to Moustakas (1994), epoche is rooted in “a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain” (p. 84). He proposed that investigators must suspend their beliefs, biases, and preconceptions, whether they may be against their own beliefs or perceptions. The researcher must look at different perspectives and be more objective by not allowing preconceived ideas to inform the results of the study. The investigator, in this example, had negative experiences and issues with
AAL, if these experiences were not set aside, the possibility of the findings of the related issues with AAL would more likely to report negatively perspectives. Of utmost importance, a researcher should allow a free flow of ideas from the consciousness with minimum resistance; however, the ideas might be contrary to their beliefs and biases.

First, in epoche practical application, the principal investigator reflected on her background, beliefs, biases, and presumptions related to the phenomenon by listing all conjectures that may have affected the data analysis process, intentionally put them aside, and assumed a state of mind without presumptions, ready to accept and evaluate any idea that came to mind.

In this stage, all documentations were organized to help audiences and readers interested in the study to understand what was done quickly. More importantly, the researcher scanned and stored all field notes, interview transcripts, and other related documents in digital files, making an audit trail easier to follow. The qualitative data analysis was a subjective process in which the researcher sought to understand human behavior while avoiding the tendency to become personally immersed in the subject matter in the research method. I offered each participant if he or she wants to read his or her transcript, and also the final report. The possible way to increase credibility was to document what the researcher experienced in the field study and be able to report to readers. However, it appears that no one has asked for either transcript or report.
**Stage 2: Phenomenological reduction.**

The concept of this stage was to attain the core meanings of participants’ experiences. Information from participants was reduced when responses were duplicated or unrelated to the questions without losing any essential data. In order to represent the data in action, the researcher organized information into core meanings, grouped into themes and concepts, and described the core experiences based on the themes. Besides, thematic reviews were used in this data analysis process to make replicable and valid inferences by describing and coding textual material. Thematic analysis for a phenomenology approach involved revealing the structure of meaning of the lived-through experience through text (Van Manen, 2016).

After completing transcriptions, Van Manen (2016) advised researchers to follow a three-step approach, read through scripts, try to express the meanings or essence of participants, and lastly, read the transcript in more extensive detail. Therefore, analytical approaches were completed concurrently: holistic reading (overall theme of the lived-through experience), selective reading (finding the critical essence), and detailed reading (a line-by-line reading).

The three main steps in the practical reduction stage consisted of compiling significant statements, developing themes, and creating textual descriptions. The researcher reviewed all interview transcriptions, kept the research question in mind, and identified all relevant statements about the participants’ experiences. To
identify significant statements, NVivo was employed in this stage to organize the responses into themes or nodes and then to guide the coder to the systematic examination of the interview script. The data set was imported to NVivo, including audio files, transcriptions, survey questionnaires, and other related documents. The demographic information was sorted in a classification sheet; all transcriptions were stored as cases. Closed-ended questions were created as case attributions to compare the respondents by demographics. Opened-ended questions were created as nodes; all responses to a question were grouped in a single node. This stage included extracting the transcription for the significant statements, which were coded by a set of interview questions and classified by themes in this study. These statements were presented in separate files and coded based on their transcript number and participant ID. More than one hundred significant statements were extracted and coded from the ten transcripts.

After the coding process, according to Moustakas (1994), stage 2 was used to present the themes generated in terms of their characteristics and how they addressed the research question. Regarding the research question about how the U.S. legacy airline alliances use airline brand experiences to retain passenger loyalty, the results were generated in terms of how the research question was addressed. Each theme sought different stories relating to the set of questions. However, the label or title of these themes was revised for a more detailed explanation.
Theme 1 referred to the participants’ travel experience; thus, any related response and story were labeled and coded in this theme, which was composed of the past experiences of the participants with the airlines and how they felt about their services. The researcher revised theme 1 to ABE with the Big Three because the participants gave their stories about what they experienced with one of the Big Three and other airlines.

Theme 2 focused on the knowledge of the airline passengers about loyalty programs, such as frequent flyer programs and airline alliances of the specific airlines in this study. Later, the researcher changed the title of this second theme to loyalty program experiences.

Theme 3, labeled ABL, was the key domain of the study to understand passengers’ perceptions of airline brands, including brand engagement, brand dimension, passenger satisfaction, and purchasing intentions, leading to the retention of customers. With this regard, the researcher renamed the theme to customer retention factor emerged with the interview data.

**Stage 3: Imaginative variation.**

This stage examined all possible meanings of the themes that have been developed from interpretations of participants’ experiences. In this case, the researcher looked at the contexts and participants’ demographics information and sought a causal relationship between the themes. Subsequently, the researcher developed structural descriptions from textural descriptions to represent the
findings. Three major themes were labeled based on the semi-structured questionnaire survey. The descriptions of the research findings were demonstrated in Chapter 4 in the form of tabular and figures.

**Stage 4: Synthesis analysis.**

The researcher developed the essential meaning of participants’ experiences by combining textural descriptions with structural descriptions in order to represent the essence of the experience logically. A combination of the textual descriptions and structural descriptions led to the importance of the experience (Creswell, 2014). Thus, the findings of the study were synthesized and presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology, population and samples, instrumentations, procedures, and data analysis underlying this study. The advantages and disadvantages of the phenomenological study were highlighted to demonstrate awareness of the methods’ several threats to internal validity in this chapter. The findings of this phenomenology study were presented and described in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4
Research Findings

Introduction

**Qualitative methodology.** This study used transcendental phenomenology to interview airline passengers about their experiences of being members of an airline alliance. Langdridge (2007) explained the discipline of phenomenology that “aims to focus on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them: a focus on people’s lived experience” (p. 4). A phenomenological approach was best suited for this study because the concept of alliances in the airline business remains unclear. Edmund Husserl theorized how individuals give meanings to social phenomena in their everyday lives (Reeves et al., 2008). Additionally, improving passengers’ perceptions would benefit alliance members and support further research to retain customer loyalty.

**Overview.** The current study indicates different perspectives of passengers regarding their experiences together with their loyalty to particular airlines. It includes recommendations to fill an unclear relationship between the understanding of airline alliances and brand loyalty concepts. The research questions were based on literature reviews in aviation and marketing management. The objectives were created in response to the following research question, how do U.S. legacy airline alliances use airline brand experiences to retain passenger loyalty? Inquiries were changed when themes emerged during data analysis. The purpose of this chapter is
to share the findings, present the interviewees’ profiles, and explain the demographics
of the participants participating in the study.

Themes and categories within the data were grouped as an umbrella term
for a variety of different domains. Examples included brand experience dimensions
introduced by well-known scholars, including Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello
that came from data directly reflected on and answered the research question.
Hence, the findings were derived from the interviews of 13 participants and
established as follows: Theme 1 was related to airline experience with Big Three,
theme 2 was related to loyalty program experiences, and theme 3 was related to
customer retention factors. The data analysis provided evidence of the participants’
experiences; for example, alternative explanations for the data were considered and
dismissed. Thus, the results of the study showed that the airline rewards program
was one of the key success strategies of the Big Three. The implications of the
survey may help airline managers to understand customer retention factors to
maintain loyal customers.

The participants’ profiles. The samples were purposely selected from the
target population to meet the criteria of the study (see Chapter 3, Population and
Sample section for more details). After selecting or recruiting the samples, 13
participants were completed the interviews. Participants had various positions in
different fields, including nurses, soldiers, pilots, engineers, teachers, and students,
and all travelled by air for both leisure and business. In the study, the data saturation was reached after conducting interviews with 10 participants because the responses began to replicate, and no new information was found from the respondents. However, the data collection was continued until reaching 13 people, of which were five females and eight males. The data collection was terminated because the interviews contained sufficient information.

The participants were considered a homogeneous group because they represented the members of the Big Three positioned in the same market group, which were the U.S. legacy airlines. For example, passengers who joined ULCCs and LCCs because of price-sensitive factors were positioned in one group; in contrast, those who joined FCCs because of convenience factors were positioned in another. The homogenous grouping was used to keep the fundamental demands of passengers on the same platform. Therefore, Big Three or legacy carriers are considered as one group based on customers’ perceptions.

*Venues.* The interviews were conducted on the Florida Tech campus in either the podcast room in Evans Library, conference room in the College of Aeronautics. Before the interviews took place, the prospective candidates were informed about the in-depth, face-to-face interview; they were invited verbally and by email to confirm the date, time, and location.

*Scheduling.* The data collection process took approximately 4.5 months after the approval of the research proposal in October 2019; hence, the interviews’
schedules were begun after the IRB approval from October 28 until December 6, 2019. The candidates were informed before and after interviews that the transcriptions were kept in audio files and digitally stored in the researcher’s personal computer only. The interviewer contacted candidates for scheduling. The first email contact was an official invitation and notification concerning the research topic and the criteria of the study. Formerly, the candidates accepted to participate in the study. The second email was sent to determine the most suitable schedule for the interview. The third notification was a reminder of the appointment composed in different methods: emails, Facebook inbox, SMS, and phone calls. The processes of scheduling took from one to two weeks before the actual field interviews took place.

Participant identifier. Audio files were transcribed by the NVivo transcription online program into text files, which were reviewed for data validation by the principal investigator. Participants were assigned numbers, and their names were coded into three identifiers: sequence, airline code, and type of interview (Table 4). Each identifier was coded into two groups: the first represented the airlines while the second defined the interview types. For the first group of airline codes were: AA stands for American Airlines, DA stands for Delta Air Lines, and UA stands for United Airlines. For the second group, the abbreviation ID stands for an individual interview, and FG stands for a focus group interview with a number. An example of 1DA_FG1 was the assigned identifier of the first
participant who joined Delta Air Lines’ FFP, and the researcher conducted the study by using FGI. Using the codes of identification ensured the identities of participants remained confidential; thus, the investigator simply tracked the interview transcripts.

**Sampling.** The data collection included input derived from in-depth interviews with 13 participants that involved both individual interviews (IDIs) and focus group interviews (FGIs). As explained in Chapter 3, the sampling strategies began with purposive and then snowball sampling. During the interview sessions, participants shared information and discussed their responses. The couple interviews were considered as FGI, but individual interviews were one-on-one interviews or known as IDIs in the study. Moreover, using FGIs shortened the time of conversations more than IDIs. In this study, the FGIs consisted of three couples, and the IDIs included seven individuals, totaling ten transcripts or interviews.

The FGI allowed participants to discuss their responses and recall their memories. The following FGI conversation is an example of how the airline solved their problems:

“Do you remember when you got stuck in Atlanta? I think when I stayed in Seattle, and you could not come home.” (IDA_FG1)

“I do not remember exactly how long ago it was, but I missed a connection in Atlanta. DAL booked us for the next flight out. That was the last flight of
the day with no more flights out, but the airline did send us to a hotel and rebooked us for an early morning flight.” (11DA_FG1)

“I remember you got home without me.” (1DA_FG1)

“Overall, they did well enough.” (11DA_FG1)

This brief discussion was an essential story of the passengers’ experiences about whether they were satisfied or not with the airline’s treatment. The couple interviews were considered as FGI, but individual interviews were one-on-one interviews or known as IDIs in the study. Moreover, using FGIs shorten the time of conversations more than IDIs. In this study, the FGIs consisted of three couples, and the IDIs included seven individuals, totaling ten transcripts or interviews.

Data collection. Before conducting the field interviews, the researcher employed pilot study (Appendix B) to develop the semi-structured interview questions. The demographic questions were designed to gain interviewees’ background and to ensure they met the research criteria.

The data were stored in audio and text files after the interviews and analyzed by using NVivo 12. The results were sent to the marketing experts and the advisor for discussions. This study utilized a qualitative software program that helped the researcher to store the material quickly and easily in one place. To begin the coding and analyzing process, the researcher ensured that the phenomenology approach focused on identifying the inherent and unchanging answer in the meaning of the issue under study (Langdriddle, 2007) and reflecting and analyzing
lived experiences to identify a typical structure of the phenomenon under investigation (Vagle, 2018). The study was based on participants’ experiences to focus on attaining objectivity as follows: suspend all researchers’ biases that they may have before data collection, examine and describe the information, and determine the essences of the experiences (Kafle, 2011).

**Research Findings**

**Demographics data results.** The results demonstrated that eight participants engaged with the loyalty program membership for a long period, more than 10 years; five persons had fewer than five years of membership. The reason behind the years of membership was to endorse the relationship between participants and airlines (See Table 4).

Table 4 shows the demographic information about the 13 participants that includes gender, years of memberships, their primary and secondary member, and membership status. Noted that the identifier codes were given instead of participants’ real name. Each identifier was coded into two groups: the first represents the airlines while the second defines the interview types.
Table 4

Demographic Information about the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID*</th>
<th>Transcript Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year of Membership</th>
<th>Primary Member</th>
<th>Membership Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1UA_ID1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td>MileagePlus</td>
<td>Premier Silver</td>
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<tr>
<td>2DA_FG1</td>
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<td>More than 20</td>
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<td>Less than 5</td>
<td>MileagePlus</td>
<td>Premier Silver</td>
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<td>9UA_FG3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Less than 5</td>
<td>MileagePlus</td>
<td>Premier Silver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10AA_ID6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Less than 5</td>
<td>AAdvantage</td>
<td>Gold Medallion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11DA_FG1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>More than 30</td>
<td>SkyMiles</td>
<td>Silver Medallion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12DA_ID7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>SkyMiles</td>
<td>Silver Medallion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13DA_FG2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>SkyMiles</td>
<td>Silver Medallion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *ID means individual interview and FG means focus group or couple interviews.

Interview question results. The first theme focused on the passengers’ engagement with the airline brands in two sets of questions (2 and 5). Set 2 was related to the passengers’ travel experiences and Set 5 was related to airline branding and their perceptions. Table 5 demonstrates the sets of questions in response to theme 1 regarding airline brand experience (ABE).
Table 5

*Questions Corresponding to ABE with Big Three*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set 2: Personal experiences</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Explain the positive experiences that you had that made you feel impressed about particular airlines and the services provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Describe the negative experiences that you had and give examples of your unpleasant experiences with the airlines.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set 5: Passenger Satisfaction</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levels of satisfaction</td>
<td>How do you rate your satisfaction as a member of FFP? What additional services would you like the airline to add?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results indicated the participants’ examples and feelings related to their travel experiences with the airlines from positive and negative perspectives. More specifically, the passengers compared other airlines, of which they formerly had signed up for membership. Table 6 shows significant statements related to airline brand experiences.
Table 6

*Significant Statements Regarding ABE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID</th>
<th>Interview script</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1UA_ID1        | “Being a member, one of the nice things is you get to board relatively early, which is nice because of these days with luggage restrictions, a lot of people travel with carry-ons.”  
                    “With all the luggage restrictions and everybody doing carry-ons, you need an overhead space.”  
                    “I get to sit down before the chaos of everybody else coming in is really nice.”                                                                                                                   | Member benefits   |
| 12DA_ID7       | “It is the most convenient because being here in Melbourne.”  
                    “Many flights.”                                                                                                                                                                                          | Convenience       |
| 2DA_FG1        | “We would get an upgraded from time to time.”  
                    “Early boarding, where you should go and board early or without the upgrade.”  
                    “Bags are always two bags for free.”                                                                                                                                                                    | Member benefits,  |
| 4AA_ID3        | “In all the baggage delivery has been good. I have had one misplaced bag, and they found it eventually. In the terminal building that took about an hour of waiting until they found it off a conveyor belt in the baggage area.” | Member benefits,  |
| 6AA_ID4        | “I actually quite like AAL. In recent years, because their entertainment unit has been the best for me, which, as a frequent traveler, is actually quite important. AAL seems like they have pretty modern equipment. That is a kind of good thing. Kind of doing things.”  
                    “I have flown with DAL out of the Florida area and I would say that they probably have older equipment. Some of them do not even have entertainment which is annoying or maybe because I flew out of Melbourne.” | Member benefits,  |
| 10AA_ID6       | “I mean the good thing about American Airlines. It sometimes said if you have a bad experience during trouble, they give you like a reward or something to compensate for it.”  
                    “AAL service, I remember the one time. I think it was a volcano eruption. There were ashes in the air that you can land some places. It was a few years back, and the plane was delayed, so they postponed my travels with no expenses. They also booked a hotel room for me. The airline actually let me get the baggage like the ones that you already loaded. Sometimes some airlines do not, and you have no clothes.” | Problem-solving   |

The participants’ stories of their positive experiences showed that they appreciated their airline memberships because of complementary services, such as
free snacks, free baggage loading, early boarding, airport lounge access, and upgrades. Moreover, convenient airport locations and inflight services that included modern equipment and courtesy of flight attendants were essential factors in creating positive experiences. The substantiation responses that lead to unpleasant experiences with their airline memberships were expressed. Participant 12DA_ID7 mentioned that point redemption had “too many restrictions” and that airfare was higher than other airlines. Participants 2DA and 11DA_FG1 said that the airline often “overbooked” the flights. Participant 6AA_ID4 complained that the seat was too small, the plane was old, and no power outlet was available. Participant 8UA_ID5 was upset about the “poor communication” of customer service during her overseas trip, and she tried every possible way to contact the airline customer service regarding her emergency request. The researcher noticed that the airline had a bias attitude, an issue that could affect passengers’ perceptions. The attitude that the interview referred may be related to the levels of satisfactions that individual perceived once experiencing the services of the airlines. Emotion and attitude towards the airlines can be observed during the interview sessions. Participants 12DA_ID7 and 5DA_FG2 expressed that UAL would be their last option because of an incident in 2019 in which a UAL staff member dragged a passenger who refused to leave the airplane because the flight was overbooked.

The second domain focused on the passengers’ involvement in the airlines’ loyalty programs, including FFPs and airline alliances. Questions in sets 3 and 4
were structured to understand data from the second domain (see Table 7). Set 3 was related to the commitment between passengers and their membership programs, including member benefits and problem-solving by the airlines; this set also included probing questions concerning airline alliance experiences.

Table 7

*Questions Corresponding to Loyalty Program Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set 3: FFPs</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3. Membership duration</td>
<td>How long have you been with this airline and in which level or status are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. Benefits of FFPs</td>
<td>What are the benefits that you received from the airline as a member of the program (e.g., fast check-in, baggage loading, upgrading)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5. Problem-solving</td>
<td>Please describe the situation that makes you feel impressed about how the airline solved problems for you (e.g., flight delays, flight cancelations)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set 4: Airline Alliances</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q6. Benefits of alliance</td>
<td>Have you heard about the benefits of airline alliances? If yes, please describe and give examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7. Experience with Alliance</td>
<td>What is your experience with Star Alliance?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 shows the significant statements related to participants’ responses about their membership programs. The researcher searched for repetitive experiences instead of eliminating the repetition of data that represented the group of experiences. Using NVivo in the coding process helped the researcher to separate good from irrelevant information based on research objectives.
Table 8

**Significant Statements Related to the Membership Program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID</th>
<th>Interview script</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Key terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1UA_ID1        | “Lines go faster, and I have the opportunity to reach the overhead bins before they are full.”
                 | “My first checked bag is free.”
                 | “I got upgraded to business class for international flights.” | Priority | Free checked bags |
| 2DA_FG1        | “Maybe half the time, we get upgraded to Delta Plus with a little more space and complimentary snacks and drinks.”
                 | “We get an upgrade from time to time.”
                 | “Early boarding…Two bags are always free.
                 | “He probably earned Miles that can be transferred to another member.” | Special treatment | Complimentary upgraded, early boarding, transferred rewards, |
| 11DA_FG1       | “Sometimes I can get a free flight, and I use my Sky Miles Plus. I also receive a companion certificate every year.” | Rewards | Companion Certificate |
| 3DA_ID2        | “I used to be platinum. I receive free upgrades to first class, board the plane first, get my bags marked as a priority, and am one of the first passengers to exit. I feel better than a normal class because I fly so often.”
                 | “Comfort Plus has free drinks. Also, as a Gold Medallion Member, the Delta sent me a coupon for free drinks.” | Special treatment | Upgraded, Priority boarding, free beverages |
| 5DA_FG2        | “For a platinum member, DAL provided food and the lounge, where I could even take a shower.” | Special treatment, rewards | Lounge access |
| 13DA_FG2       | “If you have an international flight and you want to get clean, then you can take a shower at the airport, even if you have a short transit.” | Special treatment, rewards | Free food & beverages |
| 9UA_FG3        | “The airline gave us passes to the lounge in the Honolulu Airport.”
                 | “We each got two passes that we were able to get the two adults and two children, into a United lounge. UAL gave me new passes, the next time we fly United, we will have access to the lounge.”
                 | “I was supposed to pay a baggage fee of about $60 a bag, but because we each had a United Explorer card… the airline staff waived some of the baggage fees for me as a courtesy.
                 | “The free travel and miles that can convert into a free ticket.” | Special treatment, rewards | Lounge access, Free ticket, Free checked bags |
| 10AA_ID6       | “Being a Gold Medallion Member, I get to check my baggage as I check-in and board earlier, and that saves me the lines. I can get in the VIP lounge.”
                 | “One time I flew in first class and checked the baggage and boarded the plane in a special line. They had sofas to sit down, and they also let you skip the line. The security staff opened a gate for me to go first because I was an executive platinum member.” | Skip lines, priority |
Participants were asked about the benefits they received from the airlines as members of the programs. Most mentioned the special treatment they received as members of the loyalty programs. The word cloud figure (see Figure 3) shows that the most frequently used words to describe special loyalty program treatment are *free, lounge, upgraded, and boarding*. Analyzing these words, the researcher found that participants appreciated being treated better than a nonmember. In other words, passengers expected special attention, especially if they were gold or platinum members. The gold member class has firstly been distinguished by the airlines, so each interviewee is noted separately whether individual is fallen into which category or class. The status of participants was included in the participants’ background (see Table 4) and noted during the interview.
Figure 3. Word cloud of participants’ responses regarding member benefits.

Figure 4. Word tree diagram that preceded and followed the word *free* from transcripts.
Figure 4 shows the connotations of the word *free* that are most frequently mentioned in the responses regarding the member benefits concept. For example, participant 2DA_FG1 said that she liked companion certificate earned from the SkyMiles reward. Participant 9UA_FG3 was excited about receiving free passes to the airport lounge and free tickets for miles redemption. Participant 11DA_FG1 mentioned that he gained free upgraded seats when he was a Gold Medallion Member of SkyMiles. Participant 5DA_FG2 and 13DA_FG2 enjoyed the complimentary food and beverages onboard. The results demonstrated that the participants enjoyed free products, services, and special treatment, such as early boarding, skipping lines, and priority luggage.

Apart from member benefit experiences, interviewees were asked to describe situations that impressed them and to provide examples of how the airline solved problems for them. The stories of the interviewees indicated that they valued the provided services of their airline memberships. For example, DAL provided car rental and a hotel room for participant 3DA_ID2 when his flight was canceled because no other flights were available for him to travel to his conference. Noted, he was a platinum member. In another example, UAL offered participant 9UA_FG3 $125 coupons when the flight was delayed and delivered lost luggage to the hotel for participant 1UA_ID1. AAL lost the luggage of participant 6AA_ID4 for three days but eventually returned it on the fourth day. Issues and complaints were solved if the airlines handled problems acceptably. Problem-solving, the ways
that airlines deal with issues, was another reason for passengers for repeating the service; on the other hand, passengers would likely not repurchase if the airline did not solve the problem or deliver a satisfactory solution. Cases of poor reputation are discussed in further detail in the next theme.

The questions in Set 4 focused on participants’ recognition of the logos, colors, and slogans of airline brands. The images of airline logos (Figure 5) were presented for participants to choose if they could remember correctly.

![Figure 5. Airline logos.](image)

The different airlines’ logos were presented to participants for an indication of recognition. All participants were able to recognize the logos of airline memberships from Figure 5. Most of them were able to describe the shapes of the logos verbally and remember the dominant colors without the researcher showing the images. The experiences of being members of the loyalty program with the Big Three was impressive. The higher the level or membership status was, the better the
service was received; overall, the participants did not want to downgrade. Thus, FFPs motivated for frequent travelers to earn and redeem rewards, points, and mileage from loyalty airlines. The answers of the participants about brand recognition implied that the Big Three successfully caught passengers’ attention. Brand recognition led to brand awareness, which cultivated loyalty.

The third theme emphasized that passengers’ perceptions and intentional behaviors regarding FFPs. Set 6 was related to the commitment between passengers and their membership programs, including member benefits and treatment. Set 7 was concerned with passengers’ purchasing behaviors and the possibility of repurchasing the service. Table 9 shows the sets of questions corresponding to theme 3 related to Customer Retention Behavior toward FFPs.

Table 9

*Questions Corresponding to Customer Retention of Interviewees with FFPs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set 6: Brand Loyalty</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended</td>
<td>What are the factors that keep you loyal to the airline?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-ended</td>
<td>Would you recommend your friends and family to join the program? Do you consider yourself loyal to the airline? Will you switch brands if other airlines offer better deals or benefits?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set 7: Purchase Intention</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended</td>
<td>What are the determining factors of your purchase decision of airline tickets? What are the reasons that you chose to be a member of the airline?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-ended</td>
<td>Do you choose this airline as your first option when you buy tickets?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following statements were described in order to cluster the significant statements into themes and categories by summarizing each transcription.

*Transcript No. 1*

Participant 1UA_ID1, who joined UAL’s MileagePlus Rewards over 10 years ago, considered himself a loyal customer to the airline and would recommend the program to friends and family. He mentioned the reasons for switching brands were because UAL did not fly to his preferred destinations and UAL was one of the corporate airlines chosen by his working company:

When I switched to the program I am on now, I was traveling between Florida and Denver, and United was the main carrier. The destinations were all nonstop flights through United, so I realized I would be on this program and would be traveling. I just switched over; since then, I have stayed with them [UAL].

Another interesting point was the management software that enables travelers to manage travel expenses. Participant 1UA_ID1 explained that his company offered the Concur website to manage the travel on business trips:

Concur website offers airlines, hotels, cars; customers choose when they travel, where they go. Concur gives customer all these choices. Lockheed has the company preferred list of airline options. I believe most major airlines are on the list, but not DAL. AAL and UAL are definitely both on our preferred list. Concur
gives me a list of schedules, so I select a flight and buy a ticket through the website for my work trips.

Participant 1UA_ID1 provided the significant factors of the purchase intention for personal or leisure purposes and gave examples as follows:

I think the first is a direct flight, the second is time, and the third is cost. I really hate having to transfer because I lose time. The second is what time of day. I have seen the flight time from here to New York, about eight to nine hours, which usually should take only two to two and a half hours. Long flight wasted so much time. His implied purchase intention factors were destinations, flight schedules, and airfare. He also reasoned that he remains a member of UAL because of the deals and promotions offered by the airline; hence, he often chooses this airline as the first option.

**Transcript No. 2**

This transcript was conducted in an FGI; the participants were members of SkyMiles for over 25 years. Participant 2DA_FG1 had a silver medallion, usually bought economic class tickets, and hoped for upgrades. She liked that the miles can be transferred to earn companion certificates, which she could claim for free flight tickets. On the other hand, participant 11DA_FG1 held a Gold Medallion Membership and bought business class tickets when he traveled for work. However, both of them agreed that an expensive ticket was a downside of DAL.
Participants 2DA_FG1 and 11DA_FG1 used to join other loyalty programs: AAL, UAL, and Jet Blue. They joined the programs for traveling to particular destinations; for instance, they joined AAL because the airline operated a flight to the Caribbean.

Participant 2DA_FG1 discussed the reasons for joining many programs:

I joined American and Jet Blue at some point because we were traveling to the Caribbean, and we flew American Airlines. I joined AAdvantage because AAL flew there. However, I never received any benefits from AAdvantage, the same with TrueBlue. Basically, airlines always want passengers to join their reward programs and websites.

Participant 11DA_FG1 added detail about joining various programs:

Recently, we were preparing to take a trip to the Caribbean. I joined the TrueBlue program with JBU. In the past, when I worked, I used to fly often; the travels were not always with Delta. I also had a US Air affiliation and United. Flying with US Air and UAL was less frequent than with Delta. One aspect that kept us loyal to Delta is that Delta flies out of secondary airports such as Melbourne Airport, where it is not as crazy hectic as Orlando Airport. I like that airport a lot.
According to the interviews, the determining factors of buying decisions were flight schedules, convenience, cost, and business trips; moreover, family members influenced their buying decisions.

Being members of SkyMiles as a couple, they liked companion certificate rewards in which the miles can be transferred. SkyMiles rewards can be used for upgraded seats and food discounts. They explained that Delta flights had large networks and convenience for them to commute, especially at Melbourne Airport. They felt special to be in the early boarding group of passengers: “It is good to be sitting down and getting comfortable while everybody else is looking for space for their luggage.” They responded that they were loyal to the brand and would not switch to other brands because they do not want to start over with other programs:

I would probably not switch, for even if other airlines came up with a better benefit starting today, there are mileages that we have accrued over time. Somebody else would not be able to match what we already have. Other airlines are going to be able to compete with the benefits that we already have.

Regarding levels of satisfaction, participant 2DA_FG1 gave the score 9 out of 10, while participant 11DA_FG1 gave score of 8 with few events to support their high scores. Participant 2DA_FG1 mentioned, “A lot of times when there is a delay, it is not DAL’s fault. One time, we had a delayed flight because a flight attendant was missing, and all passengers were boarded until someone showed up
for work.” She pointed out that the disappointment can be solved if the airlines settled with customers. Participant 2DA_FG1 expressed that:

I think that most of the delays are out of their control. They [DAL flights] always overbook; I know it was not just Delta. What they did was ask for volunteer passengers to take the other flights and gave them gift vouchers for compensation. Anyway, usually, it does not affect me. I wish I were flexible enough to take their voucher.

Participant 11DA_FG1 added another incident that caused a delay he believed was not the airline’s faults:

We were going to Atlanta, and for whatever reason, before we arrived at Atlanta, the airline did not have a gate for the plane to pull into the terminal. We flew around until the gate was available. I do not know if the delay was because of weather or mechanical issues. Usually, the arriving and departing planes were very well orchestrated. We lost a lot of time.

The following interview question was to see what services passengers would like airlines to improve; clean lavatory and more seat room were the most common answers. Participant 2DA_FG1 mentioned, “The biggest issue I would
like to see improved: I would like the restrooms always to be dry.” Participant 11DA_FG1 suggested more space be made available:

We usually carry a backpack, and for most of our trips, if we have luggage other than a backpack, we check the luggage. There is not much room under the seat for backpacks. I do not think we pack ours overly large. I think the space available is insufficient, so a little more space would be helpful.

The above statement implied that airlines should pay attention to small details, such as hygienic of the restroom areas and legroom in the passenger cabin. However, these participants seemed to overlook the airline’s mistakes, as can be seen from their impressions. They also verified that they were loyal to DAL and that they would definitely recommend the SkyMiles program to others. This transcript showed that FGI provided answers to support and to recall each other’s memories.

Transcript No. 3

Participant 3DA_ID2, a civil engineer, flew for both business and pleasure purposes. For business trips, which were less than 11 hours, he flew in coach class, but if the trip was longer than 11 hours, he flew in business class. For pleasure trips, he usually flew in Comfort Plus and occasionally upgraded to business class because he was a platinum member of SkyMiles. As a platinum member, he had been treated very specially:
I, a platinum member, receive free upgrades to the first class, board the plane first, and get my bags marked as a priority, so I am one of the first passengers to come out when the bags are delivered. I feel better than the regular economy class because of the way I am treated, and because I fly so often.

Because he frequently flew both international and domestic flights, he often compared his flight experiences with Asian service providers and mentioned uncomfortable situations that occurred with other American carriers.

I am comparing Delta against my other airline experiences, and I know Delta will never be as good as Korean Air or Thai International Airways. Comparing them to Southwest, Jet Blue, American, United, and Allegiant, I find that Allegiant is an antique airline. The airplanes are always delayed due to maintenance because the airplanes are old. With Spirit, one time from New York JFK to Cancun, I did not like the service at all. I never even thought about Spirit again since that was a bad trip.

Participant 3DA_ID2 often looked for the partner of DAL, which is Sky Team Alliance. A convenient airport location was one of the reasons that he flew with DAL:

Ninety-five percent of the time, I chose Melbourne Airport because of the hassle. Occasionally, I depart from Orlando in order to get a
direct flight to Detroit or Washington, DC, but if I have the time, I prefer to fly out of Melbourne to Atlanta and then connect.

Participant 3DA_ID2 remained loyal to DAL because of the benefits of being a SkyMiles member, and he refused to fly with AAL because of his past experiences:

I like the treatment that I get from the Frequent-Flyer Program and the upgrades and convenience when I fly out of smaller airports. DAL has a flight here in Melbourne. AAL has, too, but I do not like AAL. I am not trying them. I will go out of my way to use Delta even if the decision means flights with extra stop versus nonstop flights because I like their service better than some other airlines.

Participant 3DA_ID2’s positive attitude toward DAL is an example of customer retention and loyalty: “I have many good experiences flying with DAL. If I dropped down to silver or lower, I would still try to fly DAL in order to get my status back to gold.” He gave a score of 8 for the level of satisfaction with DAL services and highly recommended other people to join the SkyMiles program.

Unwilling to change to other airlines unless they have equal services to EVA Airlines, he prioritized that “service is number one and airport location is number two.”
Transcript No. 4

Participant 4AA_ID3, mostly flew for leisure and some time for business purposes. He flew internationally more than domestic flights within the US. He joined several airline loyalty programs such as British Airways, Air Canada, Delta, and American Airlines. He noted that he used to fly often with DAL flights because they served in MEL, but since AAL started, he switched airlines, even though he had more than 20 years with AAL.

Participant 4AA_ID3 explained that overall AAL service requirements such as reasonable ticket prices, met service standards, and on-time performance, were sufficient for travelers; thus, he scored 7 in the levels of satisfaction. The only complaint was limited space in overhead compartments.

I want to board a plane and have a basic travel service. That is all I ever looked for. I have bags to check-in. I do not want to pay an extra fifty dollars for a bag, which is necessary for travel. I have to bring clothes with me. AAL does not stand out over any other airline. I have flown on Air Canada, UAL, British Airways, Norwegian Airlines, Air Jamaica, and British Airways. They do not stand out particularly other than reasonable on-time performance.

Factors for retaining service with AAL were the convenient locations and the accumulated points of FFPs, also reasons for being loyal to the airline brand:
AAL flights operate in Florida. The airlines were my travel routes to the Caribbean, England, and Canada. Mostly, the main reason to fly with AAL was convenient locations; the airlines served a large network to pretty much where I wanted to go. I have used my points to buy tickets as well.

Regarding participant 4AA_ID3’s responses, the reason that he might switch to other service providers would also be the flights available for his origin and destination airports: “The compatible airlines have to offer services to where I want to travel, be at my origin and destination airports, and be available at the airport near where I work.” Therefore, the factors of Participant 4AA_ID3’s purchase decisions were price, service locations, inflight services, choices of origin and destination, and flight schedules.

Transcript No. 5

FGI was used to conduct the study of participants 5DA_FG2 and 13DA_FG2. Participant 5DA_FG2, a retired army, had plenty of air travel experiences due to his work; thus, the company that he works for usually paid for all business trip expenses. Participant 13DA_FG2, participant 5DA_FG2’s wife, is in charge of family trip plans.

According to participant 13DA_FG2, the factors that keep participants 5DA_FG2 and 13DA_FG2 loyal to the program were the SkyMiles rewards that can be accumulated, transferred, and turned into free tickets; participant 5DA_FG2
added that more important to him were “the priority boarding, the frequent upgrades to a better class, and the ability to check in with a human and not a machine.” He remarked that being a Gold Medallion Member entitles him to use the fast track lane, which usually allows passengers to go directly through check-in counters without waiting in lines.

Both participants 5DA_FG2 and 13DA_FG2 confirmed that they would not hesitate to recommend their family and friends join the program, and they considered themselves as brand loyalists because they said that DAL was a priority in buying tickets. Even though they seemed to have strong brand loyalty to DAL, participant 5DA_FG2’s and participant 13DA_FG2’s responses to the question about switching brands were different. Participant 13DA_FG2 immediately replied that she would switch to other airlines for better deals or promotions: “Airline services are worth the price.” JetBlue was her second option. Participant 5DA_FG2 replied, “It depends. I would switch to UAL easily compared to all the other low-cost carriers. I would not reserve them even they have a cheaper price because I had bad experiences with them.”

The buying decision factor of participants 5DA_FG2 and 13DA_FG2, the flight schedule, was a priority that included durations, stops, and layovers. If layovers were required, the transit airports were the second factor. Participants 5DA_FG2 and 13DA_FG2 gave a score of 7 to 8 for their levels of satisfaction.
Since participant 5DA_FG2 had numerous international flights, he mentioned more details:

If I am rating Delta compared to all the other airlines that I am familiar with in the world, DAL receives a score of about 6, but if I compare it to only American carriers and maybe even American and European, the score is maybe 8 or even as high as 10 just for American carriers.

Thus, participants 5DA_FG2 and 13DA_FG2 recommended that airlines should serve better complimentary food onboard to improve airline service. However, in-flight services have improved so much in the last 10 years with DAL and the other American flag carriers when compared with Asian airlines in terms of catering.

**Transcript No. 6**

Participant 6AA_ID4, a former pilot for one of the commercial airlines in the US, is a full-time graduate student from the UK. Thus, as a passenger, he joined several airline club memberships: SkyMiles, AAdvantage, and Virgin Atlantic Flying Club. He explained, “I have held AAdvantage for about three years and the Delta SkyMiles for a little while, but I have mainly been using American Airlines. I also have a Virgin Atlantic reward that partnered with DAL.”

According to participant 6AA_ID4, his pleasant experiences with AAL were the provision of modern technologies onboard and its new aircraft fleets,
although his buying decision was driven by unpleasant circumstances with competitors like DAL who lost his luggage and caused him flight delays.

I lost luggage with Delta, taking about three days to locate the luggage, and I got it back on the fourth day. DAL was delayed by the ground staff more frequently than other airlines, especially in Chicago, where I have flown into a number of times.

One reason that he committed to an AAL membership was that AAL, a part of One World Alliance, partnered with British Airways. Participant 6AA_ID4 explained, “I bought American’s flights through British Airways. I believed that these two airlines were codeshare airlines.” Therefore, he gave a score of 8 for levels of satisfaction; cheaper airfare and more seat space were desirable factors for the airlines to implement customer gratification.

Participant 6AA_ID4 revealed that the factors for repeating AAL services were locations of the airline’s hubs and technology as a part of the modernization of the fleets. He would recommend AAL services to other people and buy their ticket as a first option; however, he might switch to other airlines if the tickets are cheaper. Thus, the conclusion of participant 6AA_ID4’s purchase decision factors were price, schedule, and stopovers.

Transcript No. 7

An FGI was used to collect data from participants 9UA_FG3 and 7UA_FG3. The two participants gave slightly different perspectives about their
travel experiences. Participant 7UA_FG3, an engineer, traveled for business and pleasure purposes and hardly flew internationally. His company bought the economic class seat for his business trips. On the other hand, participant 9UA_FG3, a housewife and mother of two children, mainly traveled for pleasure and, thus, would be the one who organized and decided trips for the family. They belonged to more than one loyalty program: UAL’s MileagePlus and JBU’s TrueBlue. Members of UAL for only a year, they started when they were looking for a flight to Hawaii. Participant 9UA_FG3 mentioned, “We got the United loyalty card, MileagePlus, because we were interested in getting the miles since we were taking a trip to Hawaii, and United had the best itinerary from Orlando to Hawaii.”

Participant 9UA_FG3 raised a remarkable point about an expectation of the airline. She explained, “Knowing UAL’s reputation, I was expecting something fancy, something extra than JetBlue, but I found it to be pretty standard and nothing particularly outstanding or out of the ordinary.” However, participant 9UA_FG3 was pleased about compensation for being an airline member; it was a great solution to return a favor to passengers when the airline caused a problem, such as a flight delay, actions that could turn a crisis into a satisfactory result.

Participant 9UA_FG3 and 7UA_FG3 rated satisfaction level of UAL services 7 out of 10. Participant 9UA_FG3 said, “UAL service was not anything spectacular for what is charged versus what passengers can get from JetBlue.” Participant 7UA_FG3 added, “To fly United is not worth the extra cost if
passengers can get the same itinerary and experience on JetBlue.” Regarding additional services that they would like to request from airlines, participant 9UA_FG3 wished that airlines would bring back free complimentary meals and make sure the entertainment units onboard are operative, and participant 7UA_FG3 wanted bigger seats and more legroom.

Participant 9UA_FG3’s and 7UA_FG3’s responses indicated that their purchase intention factors were cost and destination. Both of them were considered sensitive customers, not loyal to the UAL brand, and ready to switch over to other airlines for better deals. Participant 7UA_FG3 preferred JBU because of the “reasonable price.” Participant 9UA_FG3 agreed, “Price is really what drives our travel. We will go with any airline.” Because of the choice of destinations, they preferred JBU over UAL because JBU had direct flights to where they often visited. Participant 9UA_FG3 explained, “Because JetBlue flies where we go, and the airline has more routes, plus the airport is near my sister’s house, we can fly a direct flight from Orlando.”

Transcript No. 8

Participant 8UA_ID5, a former teacher who is continuing higher education, has mostly traveled for school and leisure purposes. She provided significant reasons for having more than one airline membership, MileagePlus by UAL and Rapid Rewards by SWA; she joined MileagePlus because UAL partnered with other airlines, offered an easy way to buy tickets, and established a good reputation:
I think the biggest reason was the convenience of their being partnered with some other international flights or some other international airlines, so it was very easy to book flights and to see connections. Also, I made sure that I booked different legs and bought the tickets separately; then, if something went wrong like a delay, I would not have to pay for the change. Overall, UAL has a pretty good reputation.

Interestingly, according to participant 8UA_ID5’s interview, as a member of MileagePlus, she preferred booking international flights with UAL but domestic flights with Southwest:

Within the US, SWA is my favorite because they are very flexible. SWA allows you to switch your flight without charging a switch or change fee, so the allowance has been very convenient, especially with work and issues that come up.

Obviously, she was loyal to UAL, as loyal as she ever was- for international flights; however, her level of satisfaction was 5 to 6 out of 10:

Overall, everything has been fine. It was only one experience, probably because it was a family emergency, not that I needed some help with something, but because I was very stressed and anxious. UAL communication made an even worse impression. I
would give 5 out of 10, but I guess I give it a six because I would fly them again.

Regarding customer service, she added that airlines should provide better communication and open more channels to contact customers, including by phone, email, or live chat online, and take immediate actions. In her case, she tried every possible way to reach UAL customer service; she ended up contacting them through messaging in the inbox on UAL’s Facebook page:

The communication was really difficult that I had been unable to get an answer prior to my flight, and I was calling the whole day. I had a flight at 10:00 at night, and starting in the morning, I tried for at least 12 hours to get a hold of someone to figure out my problem but was unable. I was so frustrated.

She further explained:

Facebook, I think it was the only way that I could finally get an answer because I actually could not find an email address. The airlines communicated through Facebook with me. However, the communication was very slow with long gaps of time in between with what seemed like a different person each time.

According to participant 8UA_ID5’s personal experiences, purchase intention factors were airfare and the number of stopovers; she would prefer to pay
more for nonstop flights. Since she was already a member of UAL, she repurchased
the UAL service because she was familiar with the airline: “I was more familiar
with UAL because some flights were like Air China’s. I do not know much about
that airline, which has longer flight times as well.”

Participant 8UA_ID5 urged that UAL should not add extra charges: “UAL
should be more flexible with fees. Flexibility is the biggest reason I really like
Southwest so much.” She was also concerned about excellent communication,
which is customer service, the key to customer loyalty: “I would choose Southwest
Airlines because their customer service is very good.”

Participant 8UA_ID5 concluded that UAL is reputable in terms of safety
concerns and convenience because of the extensive networking (routes); thus, she
recommended others join the MileagePlus program if they fly with UAL often.

Transcript No. 9

Participant 10AA_ID6 is an international student who regularly flies
internationally for school purposes; thus, her domestic flights are routes in
Argentina. AAdvantage was the most suitable program for her; joining the program
was a decision made by her parents. She reached a gold membership.

According to loyalty concerns, participant 10AA_ID6 considered herself
loyal to the program; she insisted that AAL would be her first option to buy tickets.
The factor that caused her to retain the service was accumulated mileage: “Because
I have already earned a lot of mileage. I am a student. I do not fly anytime,
depending on the school schedule, so the price was not much different from other airlines.”

Theme 3 emphasized customers’ loyalty and purchase intentions. According to participant 10AA_ID6’s interview, she is loyal to the program because AAL has been the best option for her to this point, and the Gold Medallion Member benefits made her feel special among other passengers.

**Transcript No. 10**

Participant 12DA_ID7, a retired engineer, had numerous flying experiences internationally and domestically. He flew with airlines that no longer exist or that merged with existing airlines such as US Air, which became AAL, and Northwest, which became DAL. Participant 12DA_ID7 had more than one membership program, which were AAdvantage, MileagePlus, and SkyMiles; the latter was the primary program that he used. He often traveled for business purposes in the past; because the company paid for expenses, he flew in business class. Currently, he only flies for leisure; tickets that he buys depend on the destinations. He mentioned, “If a flight is international, I may use business class, but if the flight is for personal purposes, I select mostly coach and occasionally business.”

With more than a 30-year engagement with the SkyMiles program, participant 12DA_ID7 explained his positive characteristics, like the fact that DAL provides convenient airport locations and more flight schedules than other competitive airlines:
The most convenient aspect about DAL flights is that they are located in Melbourne and North Orlando. However, AAL is also here [KMLB] but does not have as many flights as DAL, so I am satisfied with my flights. DAL flights are occasionally late and have mechanical problems, but every airline has issues.

On the other hand, he complained about the difficulty of redeeming the SkyMiles rewards:

The redemption is not simple anymore because I have not gotten points lately. Since I earned the Silver Medallion level, the reward points were very difficult to use. For example, when I try to use points, DAL does not have flights to Melbourne Airport for using the points. They offered a special time and raised a new condition that used to be one level for any domestic trip. If I were traveling to Atlanta or California, the points to be used were about twenty-five thousand, depending on what time of day. The redemption terms have many restrictions.

Additionally, participant 12DA_ID7 explained that the requirement of using points depended on the time of the day and the day of the week. The different times of the day affect the number of required points. For example, on a regular weekday, passengers are required to use 25,000 points to buy a domestic flight, but the required points can be 32,500 on Friday and up to 45,000 on Saturday.
Regarding levels of satisfaction, participant 12DA_ID7 gave 7 out of 10 when he compared the airline services with other international providers like Cathay Pacific and Qantas Airways. Additional service that he would like to have with DAL is more routes, not only to Atlanta but also direct to other cities. He explained that the Atlanta Airport (KATL) was huge and changing gates from one terminal to another was difficult. He did not consider himself loyal to the program but would recommend others to join SkyMiles; he had a high potential of switching to other airlines, but not Spirit and Frontier because his friends had bad experiences.

Participant 12DA_ID7 described three main factors that kept him with SkyMiles, including convenient locations, good reputation, and extensive flight schedules, compared to other airlines:

The first factor is the convenience that DAL offered at the airport located near my house; the second is reputation. I heard the news about many United incidents that I had not heard about Delta. Third, DAL has so many flights that if passengers fly to Atlanta and miss a flight, another flight would be departing in one to two hours. Once, I traveled with AAL on a flight that usually flies from KMLB to Charlotte, where the airline has few flights, and when the flight was canceled, I was stuck in the airport for a long time.
Participant 12DA_ID7’s response was that the only reason for his buying decision, especially for a long-haul flight, was the duration of the flight, including the number of stopovers and time between transits; hence, airfare did not seem to be his concern. He repeated several times about convenience as one of the purchase intentions and stressed that he seldomly flies UAL because of its unpleasant reputation. He also emphasized that he would not travel with ULCCs because of additional charges like carry-on baggage fees. Noticeably, his buying decisions were influenced by media and friends.

**Conclusion**

The responses showed the interviewees’ perceptions with Big Three or legacy carriers and described personal experiences based on airline memberships, such as pleasant memories that led them back to repurchase the services. The stories from the passengers with positive attitudes implied that service engagement created significant value and remembrance between passengers and providers, which also related to customer retention and loyalty.

The results of the interview survey of close-ended questions regarding the levels of satisfaction and customer loyalty concluded and described.
Figure 6. The bar chart represents the individual scores of satisfaction and loyalty.

The stacked chart shows the levels of satisfaction and loyalty of the interviewees (see Figure 6). Results of the interview survey of close-ended questions were derived from the following questions: Do you choose [AAL/DAL/UAL] airline as your first option when you buy tickets? As a member of AAL, DAL, or UAL, do you choose your airline as the first option when you buy tickets? First option, four people answered that their programs were not their first option. All DAL members responded that their first option was their airline. Will you switch brands if other airlines offer better deals or benefits? Brand switcher, six out of 13 responded that they may switch to other airlines if the competitor airlines offer better deals and conditions regarding rewards. All DAL members responded that they would not switch brands. Do you consider yourself
loyal to your airline? Loyalist, only two participants did not feel loyal to their programs, even though the scores of their levels of satisfaction were above seven.

The scores of loyalties conveyed from the interviewees, who scored levels of satisfaction more than seven seem to be loyalist customers; nine interviewees replied that they bought tickets from their FFPs as the first options. The motivation could be related to the purchase decision factors, such as cost, destination, and service, deriving from interviewees’ responses.

The totals of the satisfaction and loyalty scores indicated the levels of airline brand loyalty, which was scored by adding 1 or 2 points to each item, dependent on the participants’ answers. If the response was to buy a ticket from their FFPs as a first option, 2 points were given, and if the response was not to buy a ticket from their FFPs, 1 point was given. If they responded that they were willing to switch the brand, 1 point was given, and if they responded that they were unwilling to switch the brand, 2 points were given. If the participants considered themselves loyal to the programs, 2 points were given and 1 point if not.

The total scores infer that a low level of satisfaction may create less trust in the brand and potential for airlines to lose their customers; thus, understanding customers’ perceptions of the brand is essential for airline businesses. One of the strategic success factors to build a strong brand is to understand customer retention behaviors; theme 3 of the study demonstrated the factors of customer retention that
were derived from the interviews regarding buying behaviors and trust in airline brands.

Chapter 5 discusses the summary of the study and findings, and the overall conclusions; also, provided implications and recommendations of the study. Lastly, Chapter 5 stated the study limitations and delimitations that were found throughout the research.
Chapter 5
Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter presented a summary of the study, conclusions, limitations, and delimitations of the study and provide recommendations for airline practice. The final section presented the areas of future research and also addressed suitable recommendations for practitioners and future academic researchers. The research question was: How do U.S. legacy airline alliances use airline brand experiences to retain passenger loyalty? The following sub-questions were derived from the research question. First, how do brand experiences influence airline passengers’ perceptions, and what strategy should airlines implement to develop brand experience in the airline business?

Summary of Study

The study was designed to apply the qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the selected target group. In doing so, the researcher utilized the standard of rigors for qualitative research by Ary et al. (2010) to enhance creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Moreover, the researcher paid close attention to the transcendental phenomenology procedures approach to carefully facilitate bracketing concepts and to control researcher preconceptions throughout the research process. In-depth interviews were selected to collect data from 13 participants, which resulted in 10 transcriptions: three were
FGIs, and seven were IDIs. Participants’ names and identities were coded and kept confidential.

Therefore, applying the transcendental method was discovered and conceived the essential meanings of the selected groups of airline passengers in the current situation.

**Summary of Findings**

The study’s significant findings correspond to the research question that strives for a deeper understanding of airline passengers’ views about their selected airlines; the results of the study are presented in the research discipline useful for researchers, practitioners, and airline managers desiring to develop brand loyalty strategies. The summary of the findings as bounded to the interview transcriptions is as follows:

Theme 1 related to airline brand experience and described passengers’ perceptions when engaging with the airlines’ services. The results of theme 1 present the passengers’ positive and negative feelings of their previous general flight experiences, which came from membership and non-membership airlines. The contents of the evaluation were derived from the significant statements of each manuscript by analyzing and synthesizing the data collection; in other words, breaking down the data and finding the connection between the relevant concepts.
As the results in Table 6 in Chapter 4 show, the derived contents were member benefits, convenience, and problem-solving.

Theme 2 was concerned with loyalty program experiences and focused on the passengers’ involvement in the airlines’ loyalty programs, including FFPs and airline alliances. The results of theme 2 described the dissection and scrutiny of the participants’ past experiences with their FFPs. The results demonstrated that the experiences of being members of the Big Three loyalty programs were remarkable. The higher the level of membership status was, the better the service was received, leading to customer retention; overall, the participants did not want to be downgraded. Thus, FFPs have become a motivation for frequent travelers to earn and redeem rewards, points, or mileages from the chosen airlines. The responses of the participants related to brand recognition implied that the Big Three successfully caught passengers’ attention some of the time. Brand recognition led to the brand awareness of cultivating loyalty. The result of the interviews revealed that the understanding of the concepts of airline alliances remained unclear to most of the participants; only frequently flyers of international flights had ideas about the alliances. Other flyers were unfamiliar with benefits of airline alliances.

Theme 3 observed customer retention factors of FFPs and emphasized information regarding factors of customer loyalty and purchase decisions; thus, this theme was designed to improve the existing marketing concept of customer retention. The participants’ responses reflected and suggested the five possible
factors (see Table 10): convenience, reward, customer relationship, customer expectation, and reputation for airlines to retain customers.

Data collection methods and processes are discussed as follows. Transcendental phenomenology was the most suitable methodology for this study and was used to achieve a textual synthesis and essence of the experiences (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The focus of the research was to describe participants’ experiences with airline services but not to interpret their experiences; thus, the phenomenological study described the essence of phenomena of airline brand experience concepts based on the meanings of passengers’ experiences from selected criteria. The study was conducted in naturalistic settings comparing to quantitative setup, and the researcher carefully observed and recorded phenomena, avoiding any changes that could interfere with the research outcome.

Interview questionnaires were developed based on Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenology recommendations. As a principal investigator, the researcher had sole access to the audio files. The interviews were recorded and digitally stored; audio files were transcribed into electronic text files. After IRB approval, initial contacts were made with preselected candidates for scheduling meeting times and venues beforehand.
Conclusions

Global airline businesses have adopted branding concepts to develop marketing strategies, especially brand experience and loyalty. Both are highlighted in this research. Airlines that create positive experiences are associated with higher levels of customer loyalty; thus, brand experience concepts are one of the most effective channels to connect service providers to customers. Regarding the research question, this study takes brand experience into account and focuses on airline brand experiences, strengthening brand loyalty, and consequences leading passengers to retain their memberships with legacy carriers.

As recommended by Khan and Rahman (2015), memorable interactions between service providers and customers motivate deeper engagements, inspire customer retention, and recruit new patrons. These positive interactions can be accomplished by using consumption, product, service, and shopping experiences to create strong brand loyalty. Khan and Rahman’s recommendations were applied in the study that the brand experiences should have studied in a different region. Still, the current study chose only the United States to understand the selected sample thoroughly. Thus, the studied results can apply to a similar cultural context to that of the US. Qualitative analysis is preferred over the quantitative method to gain more insight; thus, the current study approached the descriptive perspective for data analysis.
Lu and Siao (2019) reported that brand personality influences loyalty development from passengers’ recognitions and perceptions after gaining experiences from the services. Based on the findings, positive experiences resulted from excellent services in the past. The participants seemed to prefer the Big Three over other new airline models in terms of excellent services. An example includes free food and beverages offered by the Big Three as compared to LCCs, some of which do not provide basic comforts. On the other hand, negative experiences caused passengers to complain about how hard the restrictions were to maintain their membership status, which was an issue for less frequent flyers; furthermore, the airfare of the Big Three appeared to be more expensive than other airlines. The online platform was one of the findings that responded to Lu and Siao’s (2009) suggestions. Several interviewees mentioned that they chose digital communication over the traditional way, such as a call center, to contact with airlines. Mobile applications are an alternate option for customers to acquire quick access to airline customer service. For example, passengers can check reward redemption, track flight status, and provide flight details and notification directly through their phones.

The findings supported that airline brand experiences enhance passenger satisfaction (Lin et al., 2016). Vital information, which derived from many interviewees, was found that the benefits of airline members led to pleasant experiences with preferred airlines because of feeling “specially” treated.
Therefore, the responses of airline passengers logically related to the advantages of FFPs, airline alliances, and so naturally impacted customer loyalty. The results of the interviews provided valuable information about passengers’ knowledge regarding the benefits of airline alliances. As demonstrated by the interviews, participants traveling on numerous international flights seemed to have understood more about airline alliance programs. They recognized the alliance program of their FFPs, remembered the partnered airlines, and were able to take advantage of the alliances, such as using airline lounges, redeeming rewards, and booking flights with partnered airlines. However, participants who rarely flew internationally neither knew about airline alliance programs nor received any benefits; they conceded that they had heard about the benefits of the alliances but did not pay attention because reimbursements were not applicable or did not serve them. Hence, this research could not clearly explain whether or not airline alliances help to create loyalty as successfully as FFPs as the result of Sandada and Matibiri (2016). Neither could the interviews could not definitively corroborate Brueckner and Flores-Fillol’s findings (2018) that the relationship between service-quality and airline alliances are connected.

Nevertheless, the results could assist airline practitioners in spotting the right target groups of passengers on whom airlines should focus. An essential factor regarding purchasing behavior found in this research was that the targeted participants, who were members of the U.S. legacy carriers, intended to fly with
their FFPs’ airlines rather than LCCs and ULCCS when airfare was not considered
due to service quality and benefits offered to loyal members. The result was
consistent with the study of Dolnicar et al. (2011) and Vlachos and Lin (2014).
Magatef and Tomalieh (2015) which found that companies that create a robust
loyalty program maintain customer retention. Several participants did emphasize
cost, and the one specifically called out flexibility (SWA). These are key scheme
airlines could use to promote the airline brand.

Insightful information from the interviews, besides the member benefits that
come into play, included reputation and expectation, results that were similar to the
studies of Nikbin et al. (2011), Chiu et al. (2016), and Chen et al. (2019). These
studies found that reputation has an impact on repurchase intention. Furthermore,
customer expectations that lead to unfavorable buying decision behavior were
conjectured from the interviews; passengers seemed to set their levels of
expectation of legacy airlines and FCCs higher than of LCCs. Therefore, if the
experience falls below expectations, travelers may not repeat the airline services. In
the current study, few interviewees were likely to become brand switchers; the
participants were expecting that legacy carriers would provide better services or
higher standards than newcomer airlines. Moreover, membership benefits are
reasons for passengers to maintain their status and to retain their relationship with
the airlines.
Table 10 illustrates the participant suggestions for activities and engagements that help airlines retain their loyalty initiative.

Table 10

*Suggestions for Airlines to Retain Customers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Factors that Affect Loyalty Initiatives</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer Retention</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience and comfort</td>
<td>▪ Location of origin, hubs, and routes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Flight schedules, layovers, and stops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward Programs</td>
<td>▪ Companion certificates and redemptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputations</td>
<td>▪ Public news and influencers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Expectations</td>
<td>▪ More seat space, bigger seat, free food onboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Relations</td>
<td>▪ Customer services, communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final theme results are advantageous for airline managers to enhance their marketing strategies while customer retention and brand loyalty creation can be established and maintained through understanding. Thus, more details about these five suggested factors are discussed in the recommendations section to create customer retention, which was the goal of the study. The responses from the interviews captured the voices of passengers who experienced airline services.
Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners and Academic Researchers

This research focused on airline passengers’ perspectives regarding airline brand experience concepts, airline loyalty, and passengers’ retention behaviors. Therefore, the findings of the research contributed an insightful understanding of customer perceptions, as follows:

1. Airline brand experiences create interaction between passengers and service providers. Airlines must develop unique experiences for passengers to realize that airline businesses are service-based. In this study, the Big Three was remarkable in providing standard services, especially for their members. These airlines were capable of dealing with problems, such as flight delays and lost or misdirected luggage. ABE concepts were well-adapted into the target study as expected from the interviews. The findings resemble three brand experience concepts: Airline consumptions, products, and service experiences. Airline consumption relates to passengers’ feelings after using the services, applying for the airlines to create brand recognition and identity. Thus, creating a unique brand by using brand sensory strategy could be considered, such as applying scents to entire servicescape containing SIA, serving macaroon on FRA, offering particular specialties that can be an airline’s signature. Airlines can assess comments and complaints that may provide feedback to the airlines. Airline product
involves customers’ buying-decisions compared to their expectations. 

Airline product aims to improve customer retention, such as rewards to retain the customer, modern aircraft fleets to enhance passenger comfort, and advance flight technologies to stimulate repurchase behavior. Thus, airlines may provide free Wi-Fi accessibility onboard where passengers are using the services. Lastly, airline service is related to all service encounters. Also called airline relational experience, this experience is more likely to attain airline reputation and customers’ affection toward the services. In turn, the relational experience would also increase levels of customer satisfaction when using airline services. The Big Three was a successful group of airlines for decades by emerging from the Big Seven carrier of the U.S. legacy history. This experience has been extensively applied in many national airlines to represent their nations and cultures. Maintaining a positive image and reputation through customers’ eyes, airlines need to pay close attention to establish an excellent value proposition to the company.

2. FFPs or loyalty programs were successful in bringing back repeat customers. These programs help passengers differentiate between airline competitors. Therefore, airline managers may consider developing partnership strategies not only with airline alliances but also with other tourist industries such as hotels, car rentals, tourist attractions, and financial providers such as MasterCard, Visa, and banking services. For example,
UAL partnered with Marriott Convoy, Hertz rental, and recently with transportation service Uber to establish a complete travel experience. The interviews also found that corporate partnerships influenced purchase decisions, especially with passengers who work for the company partnering with the airline company. Thus, partnership strategies can be one of the ideas for extended research, which are part of customer segmentation strategies or niche markets that satisfy specific market needs.

3. The consideration of advanced technologies, specifically, the acceptance in online technology, was advantageous for airlines and their passengers, improving passenger experiences. The interviews noted that passengers thoroughly accepted advanced technology. Technologies are user-friendly, easy to access and make their lives easier. They also mentioned Eco-friendliness in terms of avoiding using paper tickets and boarding passes. This study touched upon two technologies related to customer services, kiosk check-in, and an airline application gathering the necessary passenger and airline service data in one place. The new observations about the uses of a mobile browsing platform showed that passengers tend to use two groups: web browser and mobile application based. Furthermore, advanced technologies would help airline customer services to provide a better communication with customers and to accommodate future academic researches to discover the best practices.
Recommendations

The findings of this study were derived from field interviews of selected passengers who had direct experiences with airline services. Thus, the findings profoundly recommend that airline managers need to implement and develop their branding strategies to increase the levels of brand loyalty and create customer retention. The results revealed five possible factors for the airlines to build customer retention:

1. *Convenience and comfort.* Passengers prefer convenience in terms of airport destinations and locations. Big Three offers large networks and hubs, providing passengers more flight options. On top of that, Big Three offers more convenient scheduling, which would be able to minimize layovers and stops. The study shows that the fundamentals for creating brand recognition include standard travel services that meet customer requirements, large networks in terms of flight schedules and conveniently located airports, and FFPs that offer tremendous benefits for their customers to retain loyalty.

2. *Reward Programs.* The interview results recommended that the redemption of the reward programs should be easier to claim. Another finding observed that passengers were not familiar with airline alliances unless they frequently traveled abroad. The Star Alliances brand seems to be the most noticeable among the other three alliances. However, intangible rewards appeared more critical than tangible benefits. Reward programs are one of
the marketing strategies that is designed to encourage passengers to return to their preferred airlines. This study overlooked in detail vis-à-vis how each airline redeems their award points. However, several interviewed customers complained about difficulties caused by changes to the terms and restrictions. Thus, airlines should consider contributing and more convenient for passengers to claim rewards. For example, rewards may be automatically claimed when passengers check in to the airline website or app. In addition, the automatic system for claiming rewards may possibly be activated through the hotline service provided by the airlines. The results also explained that passengers who commit to taking part in a program were likely to expect more exceptional treatment from the airline when compared to service provided to nonmembers.

3. *Airline Reputations.* As highlighted by the current situation from 2018 to 2020, the fast-growing social media platform, airline reputations have been impacted by public news and influencers. Bad news travels fast; people are more likely to remember unfortunate rather than positive news. Hence, if a company make a mistake, they must react to the disreputable matters immediately to earn back their reputations. An example of this incident was a passenger being out of the plane because the flight was overbooked. The problem may not have been escalated if the case supervisor had better solutions or other ways to negotiate with the passenger. Thus, in this case,
staff training could be a recommended option for airlines to avoid future incidents; also, airline PR/social media management must quickly response in the online platform. Moreover, the participants mentioned that friends and families also have an impact on reputations; they are known as influencers. Several participants deny flying with ULCCs because they have been told that the services were not excellent or inconvenient. An example of this phenomenon is when one ULCC interviewee related an unpleasant experience to his friend, who in turn changed his buying decision. There were two examples of buying decisions influenced by family members. The first case was when a couple of interviewees disclosed. They joined the same FFPs because they changed one another. The second case was an overseas student, who did not make her own buying decision, but her father would arrange flight tickets for her. To this end, airlines need to create good reputations to retain existing and recruit new purchasers. In addition, the cost of an airfare was raised concerning airline brand or reputation in this regard; also, ticket prices were mentioned in several the interviews. However, cost will be discussed in a further discussion.

4. Customer Expectations. Expectations are created from an individual’s perceived experiences relating to levels of customer satisfaction. Therefore, airline customer expectations are based on prior experiences. In interviews, passengers frequently traveling on international flights mentioned that
national airlines have their outstanding characters. For example, Asian airlines, such as Singapore Airlines, Thai International Airways, and Cathay Pacific Airlines, are known as service excellence providers compared to American airlines; thus, passengers expect to receive similar standard services universally. Moreover, airlines need to be aware of the business models’ positioning in order to prevent customer disappointment. One of the potential brand switchers explained that she expected to receive better privileges from FCCs than LCCs, but the received experiences were found to be below her expectations. The expectations of the Big Three passengers derived from the interviews were that airlines should provide more comfortable and spacious seats and should return to giving complimentary food and beverages and provide free luggage. Airlines need to exceed rather than just meet customer expectations in order to raise satisfaction. At the moment, some airlines offer these specialized services to their passengers. For examples, UAL provided airport lounge passes for their loyal members and DAL offered free mobile messaging, such as iMessage, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp while onboard.

5. Customer Relations. Airline customer services have to interact with different ranges of passengers’ emotions to ensure their satisfaction, which can be developed by customer relationship management. The interviews concluded that good communication services yielded excellent customer
service encounters. According to the participants’ responses, airlines need to develop two-way communication with customers. They complained that too often, customer services or call centers were difficult to contact when needed. Thus, they recommended that expanding communication channels would help build a more excellent customer relationship. Automated customer services known as chatbots have both advantages and disadvantages. The apparent benefits for airline companies are a reduction in the number of employees and shorter waiting times. However, the study did not discuss this topic in detail. For the disadvantages, several interviewees mentioned that they were not happy to explain their problems to bots rather than humans, especially when they are faced with a crisis. However, customer service is very challenging not only to service-based but also to product-based companies; service experience experts have suggested different methods to deal with the problem.

6. The five factors, as mentioned above, would be more interesting to investigate with possible brand switchers. These may be applicable when considering operational costs, business models, and destinations types (domestic versus international). For instance, one of the UAL passengers declared that she would choose SWA when she flew domestic flights because SWA, an LCC more likely offers a lower airfare and more flexible
in terms of changing fees. However, she would fly with UAL for international flights as of her loyalty program that she committed to.

**Study Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations and delimitations of this study are presented in Chapter 1; however, additional limitations were identified. Therefore, the following limitations and delimitations were recommended as topics for future research.

**Limitations.** The limitations of the study, the characteristics of research designs that influence descriptions of the results, were the constrains or weaknesses on the generalizability of findings. The factors impacted the outcome were described as follows:

1. **Cultural convergence.** In the aviation industry, cultural convergence has taken place over time. Diversity should be acknowledged and managed in the best possible way to ensure public safety by following the same standards, rules, regulations, and language. English is the mandatory language of international communication. This research showed that customer service culture was embedded in passengers’ mindset and led to an impressive unique experience; for instance, participants mentioned that the standards of Asian and American customer services were different. Regarding culture, passengers who had many international airline experiences seemed to have different levels of expectation from domestic airlines. Another cultural concern was that technology had caused a generation gap.
Therefore, cultural issues were hard to control in the study. People flying with a variety of internationally based airlines may have different expectations of service standards; also, different levels of technology acceptance may lead to varying degrees of satisfaction.

2. Subjectivity. The study was interested in gaining insight into individual meanings and motivations when people received airline services. However, reducing subjectivity is not an option for this study; it is rather strengthening and supporting the purposes of this qualitative research engaging with people’s perceptions. Individuals can be inconstant; different people understand the same objective reality in different circumstances and have personal reasons for their decisions. Moreover, human errors were committed by both parties: interviewee and interviewer; thus, the use of different people may lead to different outcomes.

3. Interpretivism. Lower levels of validity and reliability were found when compared to positivism, difficulties with analysis, and interpretation. However, the interview questions were prepared to sacrifice reliability and representation for enriched trustworthiness by gaining the rich data and respondent led results.

4. Researcher Bias. The researcher intended to minimize bias that can influence the study in which prejudice was difficult to detect. Bracketing was employed to set aside the researcher’s preconception, such as field notes and diary, which were recorded during the data collection process.
To sum up, the limitations of the study that went beyond researcher control were cultural differences and research design characteristics, which were the issues that the researcher has been pre-cautioned about throughout the study. The researcher attempted to mitigate the listed limitations from the various possible conclusions.

**Delimitations.** The delimitations of this research were included objectives, research question, and phenomenological approach that the researcher has adopted, and members of the U.S. legacy carriers as the target population. Before the investigation began, the delimitations were clearly discussed and explained the boundaries to control the range of the study, such as scope, time, and avoid unrelated matters.

1. **Transcendental method.** The researcher chose the transcendental method, which was one of the phenomenological methodological approaches that analyzed and described the participants’ experiences. The researcher gave attention to the standard of qualitative rigor, which were the cornerstones for enhancing researcher trustworthiness. Thus, similar analyses that use different methods might not obtain the same results.

2. **Target population.** The Big Three was the target population of the study classifying as a homogeneous group. They were well-known as the major legacy airlines in the US. Therefore, the Big Three was selected because the study focused on passengers who preferred to join large and famous airlines in U.S. history. Thus,
similar studies that use a different target population might not acquire the same outcomes.

3. **Sampling strategies.** The researcher employed convenience, purposive and then snowball strategies to select candidates for the study. Convenience and purposive sampling were used to seek the participants who met the criterion of the sample. Next, snowball sampling was used to gather more candidates to participate in the interviews. Thus, a similar area of studies that use different sampling strategies might not perceive the same consequences.
Summary

Chapter 5 presented a summary of the study, findings, and conclusions. The section showed the implications and the discussion, one of the significant purposes of this research. Finally, the chapter explained the limitations and delimitations of the study; eventually, it provided a list of recommendations for practitioners and academic researchers. This phenomenological research observed passengers’ perceptions about airline brand experiences, in particular with the Big Three carriers. The study provided a clear description of ABE, consisting of airline consumption, product, and service, creating interaction between passengers and service providers. This qualitative study derived the findings from interviews of customers’ experiences concerning loyalty memberships, partnerships, and alliances programs. These programs were a key successful strategy in retaining existing customers to repurchase with the same airline services.

Moreover, digital technologies play powerful tools to improve airline experiences with respect to expanding communication channels and captivating entertainment options, such as mobile applications and Wi-Fi onboard. The five factors suggested to improve customer retention were convenience and comfort, reward programs, airline reputation, customer expectations, and customer relations. These factors also attract brand switchers, which can be both beneficial and disadvantageous for other airlines, not only legacy carriers but also for new entrants.
References


Virgin Australia. (2000). *VIRGIN BLUE AIRLINES TO TAKE FLIGHT ON 3 AUGUST 2000*. Virgin Australia Airlines Pty Ltd.


Appendices

Appendix A

Pilot Interview Questions

1. Describe yourself and your airline preferences.
   a. What is your occupation?
   b. What is your educational background?
   c. Why do you travel? (business/leisure/both)
   d. What types of tickets do you usually buy? (first/business/economic)
   e. Are you a member of a loyalty program?
   f. How often have you flown domestically and internationally?

2. Please describe your personal traveling experiences with airlines that you mentioned.
   a. Explain positive experiences that you had that made you feel impressed about the airlines and the services provided. Please describe a situation that made you feel good about how the airlines solved problems like flight delays, cancelations, and loss or delay of luggage.
   b. Describe and give examples of negative experiences that you had with the airlines.
   c. Please describe your impression about how the airlines solved problems for you, like flight delays and cancelations.
Appendix B

Field Interview Questionnaires

Demographic information:

1. Please tell me about yourself and your airline preferences.
   a. What is your occupation?
   b. What is your educational background? (No High School/Some High School/High School Diploma or Equivalent/Some College/Associate Degree/Bachelor’s Degree/Master’s Degree/Doctorate Degree)
   c. What is the purpose of traveling? (business/leisure/both business and leisure)
   d. What type of tickets do you usually buy? (first/business/economic)
   e. How many airline-loyalty programs do you currently have?
   f. How often have you traveled by flight? Domestic or International?

Travel experiences:

2. Please describe your personal traveling experiences with airlines.
   a. Explain positive experiences that you had that made you feel impressed about particular airlines and the services provided. Please describe a situation that made you feel good about how the airlines solved problems like flight delays, cancelations, and loss or delay of luggage.
b. Describe **negative experiences** that you had and give examples of your unpleasant experiences with the airlines.

**Frequent-flier programs (FFPs):**

3. How long have you been with [this airline] and which status you are in? (inserted information)

4. What are the benefits that you received from the airline as a member of the program (e.g., fast check-in, baggage loading, upgrading)?

5. Please describe the situations that make you feel impressed about how the airline solved problems for you (e.g., flight delays, flight cancelations)?

**Airline Alliances:**

6. Have you heard about the benefits of airline alliances? If yes, please describe and give examples.

7. What is your experience with Star Alliance? (If yes)

**Brand dimensions:**

8. What are your favorite international airlines or U.S air carriers? This question demonstrates the participants’ preference for their selected top three airlines from their experiences. (Brand credibility, brand equity)

a. Do you recognize or remember the logo or dominant colors of the airlines? (visual image will be presented for the choice of selection)

b. Please describe your most memorable experience on the airlines.

c. Please provide more information about the following concerns:
technology offered by airlines to improve customer service, such as self-check-in (kiosk), mobile applications, and in-flight entertainment (IFE) and wireless in-flight entertainment (wIFE) systems that can be used on personal devices;

- ground staff who assist departing and arriving passengers, such as check-in, baggage drop and claim; and
- in-flight services.

**Passenger satisfaction:**

9. How do you rate your satisfaction as a member of FFP? What do you consider the most remarkable experience you have had relative to in-flight service, ground service system, and airline performance?

10. What additional service would you like the airline to add?

**Brand loyalty:**

11. How long have you been a member with this airline?

   a. Have you ever joined other loyalty programs beside this airline’s? If yes, please identify and explain the reasons?

   b. Are there any other memberships that relate to your airline membership programs (e.g., credit card or hotel club members)?

12. What are the factors that keep you loyal to the airline?

13. Would you recommend your friends and family to join the program?
14. Do you consider yourself loyal to this airline?

15. Will you switch brands if other airlines offer better deals or benefits?

**Purchase intention:**

16. What are the determining factors of your purchase decision of airline tickets?

17. Do you choose this airline as your first option when you buy tickets?

18. What are the reasons that you chose to be a member with this airline (i.e., brand, excellent service, price, and promotions)?
Appendix C

Proposed Form and Informed Consent

This interview script will contribute to my Ph.D. dissertation at the College of Aeronautics at Florida Institute of Technology (F.I.T). Thank you for participating in this study.

As a reminder, the title of the study is “Airline Brand Experience: Passengers’ Experiences of the Big Three Air Carriers in the United States.” The purpose of this study is to understand the concept of brand experience in airline businesses by using interviews. Also, I would like to ensure that you meet the study criteria. You must be over 18 years and a current member of one of these three airlines: American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, or United Airlines. The face-to-face interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Your confidential answers will be used for educational purposes only. Your information will be assigned a code number, instead of any personally identifying information. When the study is completed and the data has been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Please sign your initials to indicate audio recording of the interview is permitted __________.
If you have any inquiry regarding this research information, please contact

**Principal Investigator:** Ms. Sarinthree Udchachone,

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Email: sudchachone2015@my.fit.edu

**Major Advisor:** Dr. John E. Deaton, Ph.D.,

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Email: jdeaton@fit.edu
Appendix D

IRB Approval

Notice of Exempt Review Status
Certificate of Clearance for Human Participants Research

Principal Investigator: Sarinthree UDechachone
Date: October 26, 2019
IRB Number: 19-169
Study Title: Airline Brand Experience: Passengers' Perceptions with the big three legacy carriers in the United States

Your research protocol was reviewed and approved by the IRB Chairperson. Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.101, your study has been determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and exempt from 45 CFR46 federal regulations. The Exempt determination is valid indefinitely. Substantive changes to the approved exempt research must be requested and approved prior to their initiation. Investigators may request proposed changes by submitting a Revision Request form found on the IRB website.

Acceptance of this study is based on your agreement to abide by the policies and procedures of Florida Institute of Technology’s Human Research Protection Program [http://www.fit.edu/irb] and does not replace any other approvals that may be required.

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a secure location for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

The category for which exempt status has been determined for this protocol is as follows:

3. Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under paragraph (b)(2) of this section, if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.
Appendix E

Invitation Email to Candidates

Dear [Insert Name of Participant],

I am a Ph.D. candidate at Florida Institute of Technology who is interested in Airline Brand Experience: Passengers’ Perceptions of the Big Three Air Carriers in the United States. I would like to understand the concept of brand experience in airline businesses by using interviews. Also, I would like to ensure that you meet the study criteria. You must be current members of one of these three airlines (Big Three): American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, or United Airlines. The face-to-face interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Your participation in the study will be greatly appreciated. Participation is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate. If you choose to participate, you may pause or end the interview at any time. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

I would like to schedule a meeting with you to discuss the study in more detail. Please contact me using the email address below and indicate whether you are available to meet or have no interest in participating in the study.

Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,

Sarinthree Udchachone (Sandy)

Ph.D. Candidate, College of Aeronautics

sudchachone2015@my.fit.edu