

FROM FAIRNESS TO LOYALTY: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF COMPLAINT HANDLING SATISFACTION ON AIRLINE PASSENGERS REPURCHASE INTENTION

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Abstract: This study dives into how perceived fairness affects airline passengers' willingness to repurchase, especially looking at how satisfied they are with how their complaints are handled. It explores three key aspects of justice: procedural, distributive, and interactional, and how these factors influence satisfaction with complaint management in the Malaysian airline scene, focusing on Malaysia Airlines Berhad and AirAsia. This study used a quantitative method, sending a structured questionnaire to 500 passengers who filed complaints in 2020; 405 valid responses were received. The analysis, which included correlation and multiple regression, showed strong positive links between all dimensions of justice, satisfaction with complaint handling, and the intention to repurchase. Procedural justice was the strongest predictor of satisfaction, followed by distributive justice, while interactional justice fully mediated the effect through satisfaction. The results indicate that satisfaction with complaint handling partially mediates the relationship between procedural justice and repurchase intention and fully mediates the effect of interactional justice. Distributive justice had a minimal direct effect on repurchase intention. These findings emphasize that passengers perceive fairness in complaint resolution, primarily through fair procedures and just outcomes, and that this perception plays a crucial role in their satisfaction and loyalty. On a practical level, the study suggests that airlines can boost customer loyalty and encourage repeat business by adopting transparent, fair, and empathetic complaint handling practices. This research adds to the service management literature by shedding light on how perceptions of justice impact

loyalty in the airline industry and highlights the strategic importance of effective service recovery in competitive markets.

Keywords: *Procedural Justice, Distributive Justice, Interactional Justice, Complaint Handling Satisfaction, Repurchase Intention*

Introduction

The service sector is the backbone of Malaysia's economy, accounting for a significant share of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing a wealth of job opportunities. This sector includes a diverse array of activities, such as wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food services, transportation and storage, and financial and insurance services (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). It also covers professional and business services, education, healthcare, communication, and social services. When it comes to employment, the service sector is the primary source of jobs, especially in service and sales roles. This trend highlights Malaysia's ongoing transition from agriculture and manufacturing to a more service-oriented, knowledge-based economy, aligning with the nation's goal of reaching high-income status.

In today's highly competitive business environment, service organisations aim to provide customers with high-quality services (Cheng et al., 2021; Qalati et al., 2021; Solimun & Fernandes, 2018). Customer satisfaction has become crucial for organizations because it drives customer loyalty, profitability, and, most importantly, business survival. The global airline industry has seen remarkable growth over the last ten years, playing a bigger role in international travel and trade. This upward trend is highlighted by a 3.6% rise in passenger numbers, reaching 4.5 billion in 2019, indicating strong and ongoing demand for air travel (Bakır et al., 2024).

In the past, numerous studies have explored various aspects of service quality and customer satisfaction within the airline industry. These studies have consistently shown that the quality of airline services is positively linked to passenger satisfaction and their future intentions to fly. Beyond just keeping customers happy, providing top-notch service is crucial for airlines, as it leads to greater profitability and ongoing growth (Shiwakoti et al., 2022). The manner in which airlines address these failures through their complaint-handling mechanisms critically shapes customer perceptions, satisfaction, and future behavioral intentions, including the crucial decision to repurchase services (Ahmed et al., 2020). Effective service recovery, initiated by robust complaint handling, can not only mitigate negative impacts but also enhance customer relationships (El-Metwally, 2013; Juma & Munala, 2020). However, service delivery failures are sometimes inevitable due to internal and external factors, including human-related and non-human-related issues. Therefore, such failures cannot be eliminated in the service delivery process, resulting in customer disappointment, as evidenced by the growing number of customer complaints in the airline industry (Amoako et al., 2021).

Recovery from service failures is a significant obstacle for many service providers. However, it remains a successful strategy for addressing customers' concerns and achieving customer satisfaction (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Service recovery favours customer satisfaction, trust, positive word-of-mouth, and loyalty, resulting in customer repurchase intent or behaviour. Customers tend to purchase more of a company's product or service when their concerns are addressed and their demands are met. The efficacy of a service provider's response to service

failures enhances customer satisfaction. It discourages them from switching to a rival. Therefore, businesses that promptly and efficiently address service failures are more likely to have a greater repurchase intention (Shams et al., 2020).

In recent years, airline service failures and unsuccessful recovery attempts have received considerable media attention (Xu et al., 2018). In Malaysia, the top three complaints in MAVCOM consumer reports from 2018 to 2020 were consistently related to mishandled baggage, refund processing, and flight delays. More than 50% of the complaints are directed to Malaysia Airlines Berhad, followed by AirAsia and Malindo Air (a community airline carrier operated from Subang Airport), respectively (Malaysian Aviation Commission (MAVCOM), 2020). Past studies have shown that procedural, distributive, and interactional justice can influence the repurchase intention of complaining customers in the service industry (Min et al., 2015). According to Tolba et al. (2016), how customers perceive the fairness and quality of the complaint-handling process significantly influences customer loyalty.

Despite the recognized importance of efficient complaint resolution, the precise pathways through which it affects customer repurchase intention, particularly in the airline context, warrant further exploration (Sarılgan & Yücel, 2024). According to Agarwal and Gowda (2021), delivering top-notch services to customers in a fiercely competitive landscape is crucial for an airline's success and long-term growth. As the air transport market has become increasingly cutthroat over the past decade, many airlines have shifted their focus towards enhancing service quality to boost customer satisfaction. Similarly, Law et al. (2022) postulated that to thrive in an intensely competitive market, the airline company must truly understand what customers want and meet those needs by providing top-notch service.

Several other past studies have found that timeliness in complaint processing is a crucial determinant of customer satisfaction in the airline sector (Ali et al., 2021; Law et al., 2022; Shiawakoti et al., 2022). A proper justice process must be applied regarding the treatment of customer complaints. Being fair in resolving customer complaints may result in customer satisfaction with the airline service providers' attentive, prompt responses and the management of their complaints. Understanding the underlying reasons for customer complaints and implementing improvements based on them can provide a long-term competitive advantage for service providers (Johnston, 2001).

Although some of the studies were based in the setting of other service industries, a specific, standardized customer complaint-handling guideline needs to be implemented by the airline industry that is achievable, feasible, and practical for use by all airline employees and top management towards its customers. Therefore, this study proposes to investigate the influence of justice factors on complaint-handling satisfaction and the intention to repurchase, primarily focusing on moderating variables, such as airline type and the severity of customer complaints, using Malaysia Airlines Berhad and AirAsia.

Literature Review

This section will discuss five points: repurchase intention, procedural justice, distribution theories, interactional justice, and complaint-handling satisfaction.

Repurchase Intentions

Repurchase intention refers to customers' willingness to buy the same product or service from a brand again after their initial experience (Wen et al., 2023). This willingness is key to building strong future relationships between companies and their customers, influencing the long-term

profitability and success of the organization (Shabankareh et al., 2023). Essentially, the positive experiences customers have after trying a product or service are what primarily fuel their intention to repurchase (Sullivan & Kim, 2018; Bakır et al., 2024). Repurchase intention is a key behavioral outcome reflecting a customer's willingness to re-engage with a service provider Adeniran et al., 2023; Şimşek & Demirbağ, 2017. In the highly competitive airline industry, retaining existing customers is generally more cost-effective than acquiring new ones Ahmed et al., 2020.

According to existing studies, repurchase intention is shaped by various elements like service quality, customer satisfaction, perceived value, and trust (Law et al., 2022; Shabankareh et al., 2023; Sullivan & Kim, 2018). Additionally, the study by Aiyub et al. (2025) found that website quality, particularly in terms of service, system, and information, is positively associated with overall service quality (OSQ). In simple terms, when service quality is excellent and customers feel satisfied, they are more likely to come back. Satisfied customers are usually more likely to remain loyal to the same brand or service and may overlook other options (Law et al., 2022).

Procedural Justice

Cintamür (2023) defines procedural justice as customers' perceptions of the fairness, consistency, and transparency of the processes and procedures involved in service delivery. In service environments, fair procedures can lead to positive evaluations of the company, encouraging customers to act favorably and ultimately enhancing the corporate reputation. In the airline context, procedural justice encompasses the ease of filing a complaint, clear communication regarding service disruptions, and the speed of resolution Ahmed et al., 2020; Sousa & Desai, 2023. Previous research on airline service recovery highlighted the promptness of complaint processing (Karatepe & Vatankhah, 2014) and the flexibility and promptness of complaint resolution (Nikbin & Hyun, 2015).

Prior studies provided only anecdotal evidence of the possible impact of procedural justice on customer ratings of service recovery (Bitner et al., 1994; Blodgett et al., 1993). By contrast, a study by Yu et al. (2025) reveals an important insight about procedural justice: it was given less importance than informational justice in the context of airline service recovery. The airline seemed to prioritize providing explanations and information to resolve service failures, highlighting a preference for open communication over rigid procedural methods when dealing with customer complaints and recovery situations.

Distributive Justice

In service recovery, distributive justice refers to the extent to which customers feel they have been treated fairly, given the organization's service performance. Distributive justice is associated with one of the most effective service recovery strategies: financial compensation (Kwon, 2010). This is consistent with Smith et al.'s (1999) findings that compensation positively impacts customers' perceptions of distributive justice. This compensation is not limited to monetary losses alone but also compensates the customer for time, anxiety, and effort lost due to service failure (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2014). Compensating the customer after a service failure increases the customer's awareness of distributive justice and, over time, reduces their anger and discontent. Additionally, it also strengthens the relationship between customers and service providers (Tsao, 2018).

Bowen, Stephen et al. (1999) stated that there are four distributive justice principles: cost, number of services, correctness, and excellence. According to the study by de Souza et al.

(2023), customers' views on procedural justice vary depending on how serious and manageable they perceive service failures to be. It turns out that procedural justice is especially crucial in specific failure situations, highlighting that customers value fair and appropriate recovery methods differently based on the severity of the issue and their perception of the airline's control over it.

Interactional Justice

Interactional justice refers to the perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment received by the customer during the complaint resolution process (Sousa & Desai, 2023). Clemmer (1993) found that customers evaluate interactional justice during service recovery using the following six criteria: honesty, friendliness, politeness, bias, sensitivity, and interest. In contrast, Wen and Chi (2013) studied airline customers' service recovery by operationalising interactional justice order as the following criteria: courtesy, patience, effort, honesty, respect, and fair treatment. In their findings, interactional justice can help elicit positive emotions from customers and reduce negative ones.

Complaint Handling Satisfaction

The existing literature demonstrates substantial attention to customer satisfaction in diverse contexts, including the plastic industry (Suhail et al., 2025), banking services (Susanti, 2021), e-commerce platforms (Kumari et al., 2021), the fashion sector (Sari et al., 2025), and the electronics industry (Lal & Kashyap, 2024). A prior study by Cambra-Fierro et al (2016) revealed that proper complaint management can significantly improve customer satisfaction with the complaint process and foster greater customer engagement. Satisfaction also plays a crucial role in this relationship. Thus, when a service issue arises, addressing it effectively can result in more engaged customers.

Similarly, when a service failure occurs, customers typically seek redress, and their satisfaction with how their complaint is managed becomes a pivotal determinant of their future relationship with the company (Carrillo et al., 2019; Mainardes et al., 2020). Effective complaint handling extends beyond merely resolving the problem; it also involves demonstrating empathy, transparency, and fairness throughout the process. Contrarily, if a service provider does not respond to a customer's complaint or responds incorrectly, consumer unhappiness caused by product or service defects will escalate dramatically. The consequent "double" discontentment frequently results in quick customer migration to another competitor (Stauss et al., 2019)

Methodology

Quota sampling is unquestionably a means of reaching sample size objectives for specific subpopulations, as it is a less expensive and more appropriate method than simply generating a sample, as it is simple to administer and does not require a sample frame (Salkind, 2009). The statistical data on complaining customers were obtained from MAVCOM's annual and consumer reports. The reports have summarized the aviation consumers' complaints lodged with MAVCOM in writing, by telephone, by email, via a mobile application, or in person, received from 1st January to 31st December 2020. The respondents are customers who have made complaints about the airline providers' services in Malaysia and are divided into two (2) airline providers, namely Malaysia Airlines Berhad and AirAsia. The sample size was calculated using an online sample size calculator by Raosoft. The target population for this study was airline passengers who had experienced service failures and subsequently filed complaints. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed. From these, 456 responses were collected, yielding a 91.2% participation rate. This resulted in a final usable sample of 405

questionnaires, achieving an effective usable response rate of 81.0%. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire distributed to airline passengers of Malaysia Airlines Berhad and AirAsia at KLIA and KLIA2.

Data Analysis and Findings

Correlation Analysis

The results of the correlation analysis reveal strong, significant positive relationships among all key variables in the study. The mean scores for the variables range from 2.84 to 3.62, indicating generally moderate levels of agreement among respondents. Repurchase Intention recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.69$), suggesting that respondents tended to express a positive intention to repurchase. In contrast, Complaint Handling Satisfaction had the lowest mean ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.10$), indicating relatively lower satisfaction with the complaint-handling process. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alphas), shown along the diagonal, are all above 0.88, confirming excellent internal consistency for each construct.

The correlation coefficients indicate very high, statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.01$) among all variables. Procedural Justice shows a strong positive correlation with Distributive Justice ($r = .945$), Interactional Justice ($r = .967$), Complaint Handling Satisfaction ($r = .915$), and Repurchase Intention ($r = .905$). This suggests that when respondents perceive fair and transparent complaint-handling procedures, they also tend to perceive greater fairness in outcomes, better interpersonal treatment, greater satisfaction, and stronger intentions to repurchase. Similarly, Distributive Justice is strongly correlated with Interactional Justice ($r = 0.924$), Complaint Handling Satisfaction ($r = 0.879$), and Repurchase Intention ($r = 0.864$), indicating that fair outcomes contribute positively to satisfaction and loyalty behaviors.

Moreover, Interactional Justice exhibits robust correlations with both Complaint Handling Satisfaction ($r = 0.867$) and Repurchase Intention ($r = 0.884$), indicating that respectful, empathetic interactions during complaint handling are crucial to shaping customer satisfaction and future behavioral intentions. The correlation between Complaint Handling Satisfaction and Repurchase Intention ($r = .880$) is also notably high, suggesting that customers who are satisfied with how their complaints are handled are more likely to repurchase or remain loyal to the airline.

Overall, these findings suggest that all dimensions of justice, procedural, distributive, and interactional, are closely interrelated and have a positive influence on complaint handling satisfaction and repurchase intention. The robust correlations imply that perceptions of fairness at every stage of the service recovery process are key determinants of customer satisfaction and loyalty within the airline context.

Table 1: Results of Correlation and Reliability Analysis

No	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	Procedural Justice	2.94	.97	(.985)				
2	Distributive Justice	2.94	1.04	.945**	(.903)			
3	Interactional Justice	3.05	.94	.967**	.924**	(.955)		
4	Complaint Handling Satisfaction	2.84	1.10	.915**	.879**	.867**	(.888)	
5	Repurchase Intention	3.62	1.69	.905**	.864**	.884**	.880**	(.959)

Source: (Authors, 2025)

Notes: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed). N=405; Cronbach's alphas in the parentheses along the diagonal

Regression Analysis

The results of the multiple regression analysis in Table 2 indicated that procedural justice, distributive justice, and interactional justice were significant predictors of complaint-handling satisfaction. The model produced a very high R^2 of 0.919, indicating a strong overall relationship between the independent variables and complaint-handling satisfaction. The R^2 value of 0.845 further suggests that approximately 84.5% of the variance in complaint-handling satisfaction is explained by the combined effects of procedural, distributive, and interactional justice. The Adjusted R^2 of 0.844 confirms that the model maintains high explanatory power even after adjusting for the number of predictors. The F-value of 729.514 with a significance level of 0.000 indicates that the overall regression model is statistically significant and fits the data very well. Additionally, the Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.938 falls within the acceptable range (approximately 1.5–2.5), indicating no significant autocorrelation in the residuals, supporting the validity of the model.

Among the individual predictors, procedural justice exhibits the most substantial positive effect on complaint-handling satisfaction, with a beta coefficient of 1.044 ($t = 11.550, p < 0.001$). This implies that when customers perceive the procedures for handling complaints as fair, transparent, and consistent, their satisfaction levels increase significantly. Distributive justice also has a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.167, t = 2.757, p = 0.006$), indicating that fairness in the outcomes or compensation provided after a complaint positively contributes to satisfaction. However, its influence is negligible relative to procedural justice. Interestingly, interactional justice shows a negative but significant coefficient ($\beta = -0.296, t = -3.820, p < 0.001$), indicating an inverse relationship after controlling for other variables. This suggests that when the effects of procedural and distributive justice are accounted for, the influence of interpersonal treatment (interactional justice) on satisfaction may diminish or even appear negative—possibly due to overlapping variance or multicollinearity among the justice dimensions.

Overall, the findings indicate that procedural justice is the most significant determinant of satisfaction with complaint handling, followed by distributive justice. In contrast, interactional justice has a negative contribution once other forms of justice are considered. The model's high explanatory power and statistical significance underscore the crucial role of fair procedures and equitable outcomes in shaping customer satisfaction with complaint-handling processes.

Table 2: Regression Analysis (IV and Mediator - Complaint Handling Satisfaction)

	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta		
Procedural Justice	1.044	11.550	.000
Distributive Justice	.167	2.757	.006
Interactional Justice	-.296	-3.820	.000
R			.919
R^2			.845
Adjusted R^2			.844
F-Value			729.514
Sig. F-Value			.000
Durbin Watson			1.938

Source: (Authors, 2025)

The results of the multiple regression analysis in Table 3, with and without the mediator (Complaint Handling Satisfaction), demonstrate how the inclusion of the mediator affects the relationships between the three dimensions of justice (procedural, distributive, and interactional) and repurchase intention. In Model 1 (without the mediator), the three independent variables, procedural, distributive, and interactional justice, were entered directly as predictors of repurchase intention. The model yielded a robust correlation ($R = 0.906$) and an R^2 of 0.821, indicating that 82.1% of the variance in repurchase intention is explained by the justice dimensions alone. Among the predictors, procedural justice had the strongest and most significant effect ($\beta = 0.722$, $t = 7.432$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that fair and transparent complaint-handling procedures directly enhance customers' likelihood of repurchasing. However, distributive justice ($\beta = 0.064$, $t = 0.980$, $p = 0.328$) and interactional justice ($\beta = 0.128$, $t = 1.532$, $p = 0.126$) were not statistically significant predictors of repurchase intention in this model.

In Model 2 (with the mediator Complaint Handling Satisfaction), the mediator was added alongside the justice dimensions. The overall model remained strong, with $R = 0.916$ and $R^2 = 0.839$, indicating that the inclusion of complaint handling satisfaction slightly increased the explained variance by 1.8% (R^2 change = 0.018). The F-change of 45.003 ($p < 0.001$) confirms that the addition of the mediator significantly improved the model. The Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.873 indicates no serious autocorrelation in the residuals, thereby establishing the model's robustness.

When the mediator was introduced, complaint-handling satisfaction showed a significant positive effect on repurchase intention ($\beta = 0.342$, $t = 6.708$, $p < 0.001$), confirming its importance as a mediating variable. The standardized beta for procedural justice dropped substantially from 0.722 to 0.365. Still, it remained significant ($t = 3.430$, $p = 0.001$), indicating a quasi-mediation effect. This means that satisfaction with complaint handling partially mediates the relationship between procedural justice and repurchase intention. Distributive justice, which was insignificant in Model 1, remained insignificant even after the inclusion of the mediator ($\beta = 0.007$, $t = 0.107$, $p = 0.915$), also suggesting a quasi-mediation effect but with negligible influence. In contrast, interactional justice became significant in Model 2 ($\beta = 0.229$, $t = 2.843$, $p = 0.005$), indicating a complete mediation effect, in which its influence on repurchase intention operates entirely through complaint handling satisfaction.

Overall, these findings suggest that complaint handling satisfaction plays a significant mediating role between the dimensions of justice and repurchase intention. Procedural justice remains the strongest and most consistent predictor, though its direct impact diminishes once satisfaction is introduced, demonstrating partial mediation. Interactional justice influences repurchase intention only indirectly through satisfaction (complete mediation), whereas distributive justice has a minimal, non-significant effect. The results highlight that customers' satisfaction with how their complaints are managed is a crucial mechanism that translates perceptions of fairness into actual behavioral intentions, such as repurchasing.

Table 3: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis (IV, Mediator - Complaint Handling Satisfaction, and Repurchase Intention)

	Without Mediator (Model 1)			With Mediator (Model 2)			Remarks	
	Standardized Coefficients	Beta	t	Sig.	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
					Beta			
Procedural Justice	.722	7.432		.000	.365	3.430	.001	Quasi-mediation effect
Distributive Justice	.064	.980		.328	.007	.107	.915	Quasi-mediation effect
Interactional Justice	.128	1.532		.126	.229	2.843	.005	Complete Mediation effect
Mediator					.342	6.708	.000	Mediator is significant
R				.906		.916		
R ²				.821		.839		
Adjusted R ²				.820		.838		
R ² Change				.821		.018		
F-Change				613.593		45.003		
Sig. F-Change				.000		.000		
Durbin Watson						1.873		

Source: (Authors, 2025)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that all three dimensions of justice, procedural, distributive, and interactional, play significant roles in shaping customers' satisfaction with complaint handling and their repurchase intentions. Among these, procedural justice emerged as the strongest predictor, emphasizing the importance of fair and transparent processes in building customer trust and satisfaction. Complaint-handling satisfaction was found to mediate the relationship between justice perceptions and repurchase intention, highlighting its crucial role as the emotional link between fairness and customer loyalty. While distributive justice showed a limited effect, interactional justice influenced repurchase intention entirely through satisfaction, underscoring the importance of respectful and empathetic communication. Overall, the findings confirm that customers' perceptions of fairness during complaint resolution significantly influence their future purchasing behaviour, suggesting that airlines can strengthen loyalty by focusing on practical, fair, and customer-centered complaint handling practices that enhance satisfaction and long-term relationship retention.

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