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A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON CUSTOMER PREFERENCE BASED ON THE QUALITY OF SERVICE OFFERED ONBOARD OMAN AIR (FSC) AND SALAM AIR (LCC)

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Abstract

Safety is the prime concern in the aviation sector. It deals with all air-related transportation services, utilising aircraft as the mode of transportation. Flying has become more and more expensive; one must switch to alternative forms of transportation when one need to travel. Low-cost carriers (LCCs) have an advantage over full-service carriers (FSCs) in many nations because of their cheaper prices and equivalent levels of service quality. The purpose of this study was to compare and contrast the services provided by Salam Air (LCC) and Oman Air (FSC). Passengers are prepared to pay a premium to participate in Oman Air's in-flight experience, but Salam Air charges consumers more on the move to provide the same premium service. Oman Air (WY) charges INR 13,447 for a flight from Muscat (MCT) to Cochin (COK), but Salam Air (OV) charges roughly INR 8,301, which is 47.324% less. To understand the Value for Money (VFM) received by passengers on each aircraft, primary data was evaluated and gathered. The study's findings aid in determining the type of services provided by these airlines. The findings of this study will aid in understanding the passenger's preference in choosing an airline for their travel purposes.

Keywords: Oman Air, Full-service, Salam Air, Low-cost airlines, Seat pricing, Passenger preference, In-flight experience, Oman.

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INTRODUCTION

Passenger preference refers to decisions made by passengers to increase their level of satisfaction. Although consumers may pick some of the products they purchase, they are not always able to get exactly what they desire. A theory that describes how customers make decisions is called the consumer preference theory. It is predicated on the notion that passengers are rational decision-makers who will select the item or service they feel will meet their requirements.

The entertainment offered to airplane passengers during a flight is referred to as in-flight entertainment or IFE. Inflight services refer to airline amenities such as meals, snacks, refreshments, duty-free shopping, and other products served on the flight to enhance the passengers' flying experience, either free or paid. These may also include In-flight entertainment such as pre-loaded movies, games, etc., to keep the passengers engaged during their long-haul flight journey.

The delivery of the full service is broken down into a number of procedures in the airline industry. At various points in the service process, passengers' expectations for the quality of the provided services may change. Given the nature of air travel, trips are divided into two phases: the ground and in-flight phases. Information Collection, ticket purchasing, airport check-in, and post-flight assistance are all examples of ground services.

In-flight entertainment is now available as an option on practically all wide-body aircraft, whereas certain narrow-body aircraft do not have any in-flight entertainment. This is mostly due to aircraft capacity and weight restrictions. Nowadays it is uncommon to find a Boeing 757 without an in-flight entertainment system because the Boeing 757 was the first narrow-body aircraft to commonly include both audio and visual in-flight entertainment. Although some modern Boeing 757s may have drop-down LCDs or audio-video-on-demand systems at the rear of each seat, the Majority of Boeing 757s have ceiling-mounted CRT screens. Drop-down LCD screens are also popular on Boeing 737 Next Generation and Airbus A320 Series jets. There are numerous choices of in-flight services offered to passengers. One of the most prominent and most utilized highlights is a moving-map system. A moving-map system is an advanced flight information audio-visual feed that is transmitted to personal monitors and displayed in the cabin for passengers (PTVs). The system provides the elevation, airspeed, external atmospheric temperature, range to the target, length from the origination site, and source time, along with a map that shows the coordinates and orientation of the plane. Information for the moving-map system is obtained in perfect sync with real-world time from the flight computer systems of the aircraft.

Many airlines provide complimentary meals and drinks on board, which can include breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, and non-alcoholic beverages. Some airlines may also offer alcoholic drinks, but these may be available for purchase. Music, news, information, and family drama shows are included in the category of audio entertainment. The majority of music networks utilize their own DJs to host conversation shows, introduce songs, and conduct artist interviews. In few aircrafts, the radio communications of the aircraft are occasionally broadcasted on a separate channel, allowing passengers to hear the pilot's in-flight communications with other aircraft and ground stations. This study's major goal is to thoroughly explore and contrast the differences between the passenger's choice of airlines based on the services offered by full-service carriers (FSC) and low-cost carriers (LCC).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In today's competitive corporate world, supplying outstanding service quality is a

precondition for success and survival. However, some may believe that price is a key factor in demand. According to Collis (1998), IATA conducted research in North America, Europe, and Asia in 1997 and discovered that passengers preferred timeliness (65%) and schedule (52%), overpricing (37%). This is not to argue that price is unimportant to airlines; cost structures and competitive pricing are always important, but the focus of this study is on enhancing service tactics (Collins, 1998). The studied paper focuses on the link between customer expectations and service quality and proves how an airline can utilize a measure of different passengers' expectations as a diagnostic tool in managing its service quality. The expectations taken are pre-consumption beliefs that consumers draw upon as the probabilities of the occurrence of positive and negative events. Therefore, they form an important part of the decision process for an airline (David Gilbert, Robin K.C. Wong; 2003).

In their gap framework from 1985, Parasuraman et al. defined service quality as the magnitude and direction of the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions. When evaluating the overall service quality, five gaps were found. The first gap among the gaps occurs when the management's assessment of the customer's service expectations and the consumers' expectations themselves diverge. The importance of frontline staff in delivery cannot be overstated because airline service is characterized by extensive contact between service providers and passengers. However, there has not been much research done to look into discrepancies between passengers' expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Customer contentment is predicted by the quality of service, in this case, the efficacy of air flight services, according to Brady and Robertson (2001), because the quality of service is a cognitive assessment, quality of service that may be favourable, can create satisfaction that can change into a lucrative capability. Quality of service and client satisfaction are two unmistakable concepts at the heart of the marketing idea. Exporting high-quality services is crucial in today's corporate market for increasing client satisfaction. (Michael K Brady, Christopher J Robertson, 2001).

Feng and Jeng (2005) used the importance-performance analysis matrix (IPA) to evaluate airline companies' service performance, using criteria such as seat reservation, ground service, cabin facilities, in-flight food, in-flight service, baggage delivery, complaint response, flight safety, and punctuality. Based on the IPA results, they recommended methods to enhance service (Feng and Jeng, 2005).

Low-cost carriers (LCCs) have changed passenger air travel by offering low fares and basic, no-frills services. LCCs are distinguished from typical full-service airlines in three ways: Service savings (no free meals, economy seating), operational savings (standardizing airline fleet and cabins, flying point-to-point), and overhead savings (Internet sales, tight luggage laws) are all examples of cost savings (Chang & Hung, 2013; Huse & Evangelho, 2007). A study conducted by Thapanat Buaphiban of Thailand found that LCC passengers are not motivated by price alone, as economic studies in LCC selection have suggested. Instead, subjective criteria like quality of service, airline brand image, and popularity play a key role in the preference for LCCs over Full-Service Carriers (Thapanat Buaphiban, 2015).

Saeid Joshan and Sven Maertens carried out a study in the year 2020 that explores the growth of low-cost carriers (LCCs) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area from a wider approach. Despite recent rapid expansion, the total market share of Low-cost carriers in MENA is still below the global average. LCC footprint varies greatly between MENA nations and route segments (Journal of Transport Geography, 2020). LCCs handled 16% of the MENA

market in terms of visiting tourists in 2018, up from 10% in 2010. The region's primary markets for LCCs include the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco.

The **Research Gap** identified after an extensive study of the above articles revealed that a group of ten variables were identified for the study to understand the relationship of passengers and the factors influencing their decision in the choice of airline, one being an LCC and the other being an FSC. Availability Factor, Comfort Factor, Service Quality Factor, Price Factor, Passenger Friendly Factor, Need for In-Flight Entertainment Factor, Handheld Factor, Personalised Factor, Dropdown Factor, and Other Engagements Factor are the ten factors considered for the study.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To identify and understand the difference in the quality of services offered on an LCC and an FSC.
- To learn how the quality of service offered affects passenger's decision of choosing the airline.
- To understand how passenger preference affects their choice between Salam Air and Oman Air.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Primary data for the research was collected using a questionnaire circulated online. The sampling technique applied was both convenience sampling and snowball sampling technique. A sample of 255 passengers who travelled on both Oman Air and Salam Air was included in the study.

The samples were asked questions that would help to understand the level of significance between frequency of flying and preferred choice of the airline. Based on the response, a set of 10 variables (Availability Factor, Comfort Factor, Service Quality Factor, Price Factor, Passenger Friendly Factor, Need for In-Flight Entertainment Factor, Handheld Factor, Personalised Factor, Dropdown Factor, and Other Engagements Factor) were derived to help carry out analysis. With the response from the samples, a paired T- Test was done and tabulated below.

Table 1: Paired Samples test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Frequency Of Flying – Preferred Choice of Airline	.70588	1.53052	.13124	.44633	.96544	5.379	135	.000

This table shows the results of a paired sample t-test between frequency of flying and their preferred choice of airline. The t-value is 5.379 and the degrees of freedom (df) are 135, resulting in a p-value of .000. This indicates that the difference between frequency of flying and their preferred choice of airline is statistically significant, suggesting that the more frequently Salam flies, the more likely they are to choose a particular airline as their preferred choice.

Reliability analysis for all the items was done which resulted in Cronbach alpha values of 0.928 and 0.910 for Oman Air and Salam Air respectively which confirmed that all the items – total correlation is above the acceptable minimum and hence accepted.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis for Service Quality Oman Air and Salam Air

Reliability Statistics - Oman Air		**Reliability Statistics - Salam Air**	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.928	10	.910	10

Table 3: Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity for preference among Oman Air and Salam Air

KMO and Bartlett's Test		Oman Air	Salam Air
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.947	.886
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2410.440	2185.012
	Df	45	45
	Sig.	0.000	0.000

KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity for all the 10 variables that influence the preference of Oman Air and Salam Air were performed for the items. The following table shows the results of the analysis.

KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was performed and the measure was found to be 0.947 and 0.886 for Oman Air and Salam Air respectively which is above the obligatory minimum of 0.5, hence confirming the sampling adequacy. The test was found to be significant at ($P<0.01$) with the Chi-square value of 2410.440 and 2185.012 for Oman Air and Salam Air respectively confirming the stability of the data set for factor analysis. The principal component analysis with Varimax rotation resulted in the extraction of 1 factor for Oman Air and Salam Air and the factor loading of 0.5 or above was taken as significant loadings. The factor structure explains 70.982 and 74.612 variance for the 1 factor. Thus, the percentage of variance explained by the factor structure is accepted.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of 10 influencing variables and their Communalities

Oman Air	Extraction	Salam Air	Extraction
Availability Reason	.529	Availability Reason	.831
Comfort Reason	.745	Comfort Reason	.706
Service Quality Reason	.522	Service Quality Reason	.637
Price Reason	.734	Price Reason	.684
Passenger Friendly	.695	Passenger Friendly	.840
Need for Inflight Entertainment	.888	Need For Inflight Entertainment	.859
Handheld Form	.788	Handheld Form	.680
Personalized Form	.831	Personalized Form	.764
Drop Down Form	.708	Drop Down Form	.693
Other Engagements	.758	Other Engagements	.767

All the 10 variables had communalities greater than 0.5. Higher communalities indicate that larger amount of variance in the variables that has been extracted by the factor solution. This indicates that all the 10 influencing variables were considered for the study and no variable were eliminated.

Table 5: Factor Analysis of Influencing variables of Passenger preference of Oman Air and Salam Air

Oman Air Factors	Factor Loading	Initial Eigenvalues			Salam Air Factors	Factor Loading	Initial Eigenvalues		
		Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %			Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
Availability Reason	.655	7.098	70.982	70.982	Availability Reason	.912	1.097	10.974	74.612
Comfort Reason	.863				Comfort Reason	.810			
Service Quality Reason	.722				Service Quality Reason	.795			
Price Reason	.857				Price Reason	.758			
Passenger Friendly	.834				Passenger Friendly	.696			
Need for In-flight Entertainment	.943				Need For In-flight Entertainment	.707			
Handheld	.888				Handheld	.776			
Personalize	.911				Personalized	.822			
Drop Down	.841				Drop Down	.662			
Other Engagements	.871				Other Engagements	.692			

All 10 influencing variables of Oman Air have significant factor loading under one factor. The factor loading must be greater than 0.5 and here the factor loading of Oman Air ranges from 0.655 to 0.943 and 0.662 to 0.912 for Salam Air. The percentage of the total variance is explained by all the influencing factors.

Factor 1 explained 70.982 and 74.612 for Oman Air and Salam Air respectively the total variance. Principal component analysis of the extraction method was employed with the varimax rotation method converged in one iteration.

Table 6: Model summary for influencing variables of Oman Air and Salam Air on passenger preference

Category	Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
Oman Air	1	.990[a]	.980	.979	.07256	1.717
Salam Air	2	.883[a]	.779	.770	.23958	.345
a. Predictors: (Constant), Oman Air 10 INFLUENCING VARIABLES, Salam Air 10 INFLUENCING VARIABLES						
b. Dependent Variable: Preferred Choice of Airline						

In this study, the regression analysis was used to derive an appropriate mathematical expression for finding values of the dependent variable (Passenger Satisfaction) based on the independent 10 influencing variables (one factor). The modal summary for key metrics of Oman Air & Salam Air and passenger satisfaction on each passenger rail was studied. The model fit output consists of "Modal Summary" and "ANOVA".The modal summary includes multiple correlation coefficients R and R - Square and the adjusted version of this coefficient has summary measures of the model fit. As per the table the linear regression coefficient R = 0.990 and R = 0.883 for Oman Air and Salam Air, R Square = 0.980 and R Square = 0.779 for Oman Air and Salam Air indicating that 98% and 77.9% of variation respectively in the key metrics of Oman Air and Salam Air explained by 10 influencing variables.

Table 7: ANOVA for key attributes of influencing variables of Oman Air and Salam Air on Airline preference of passengers:

Category	Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Oman Air	1	Regression	62.182	10	6.218	1180.937	.000[b]
		Residual	1.285	244	.005		
		Total	63.467	254			
Salam Air	2	Regression	49.462	10	4.946	86.174	.000[b]
		Residual	14.005	244	.057		
		Total	63.467	254			
a. Dependent Variable: Preferred Choice of Airline							
b. Predictors: (Constant), Oman Air 10 INFLUENCING VARIABLES, Salam Air 10 INFLUENCING VARIABLES							

Setting the confidence intervals at 99% the results of the ANOVA test provide an F-test value where F = 1180.937 and F = 86.174 with P<0.001 for Oman Air and Salam Air reflected significant relation with passenger preference. This means that the prediction of passenger preference by the 10 influential variables under Oman Air and Salam Air was found to be linear.

Table 8: T- test for key attributes of influencing variables of Oman Air and Salam Air on passenger preference

Category	Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
			B	Std. Error	Beta		
Oman Air	1	(Constant)	1.991	.006		321.429	0.000
		Comfort Reason	-.082	.018	-.080	-4.637	.000
		Service Quality Reason	-.030	.015	-.028	-2.043	.042
		Passenger Friendly	-.031	.007	-.070	-4.421	.000
		Need for Inflight Entertainment	-.615	.024	-.644	-25.647	.000
		Handheld	-.079	.019	-.077	-4.162	.000
		Personalized	-.155	.021	-.153	-7.417	.000
Salam Air	2	(Constant)	1.988	.022		91.371	.000
		Comfort Reason	-.126	.052	-.121	-2.406	.017
		Price Reason	-.122	.052	-.120	-2.364	.019
		Need For Inflight Entertainment	-.351	.066	-.417	-5.345	.000
		Personalized	-.221	.062	-.220	-3.585	.000
		Drop Down	-.121	.057	-.119	-2.126	.035

Y = 1.991 – 0.082X2 – 0.030X3 – 0.031X5 – 0.615X6 – 0.79X7 – 0.155X8

The key metrics of 10 variables in Oman Air viz., Comfort Reason, Service Quality Reason, Passenger Friendly Reason, Need for Inflight Entertainment, Handheld, and Personalized were all found to be significant at P<0.001. Comfort Reason (X2), Service Quality Reason (X3), Passenger Friendly Reason (X5), Need for Inflight Entertainment (X6), Handheld (X7), and Personalized (X8) all had a negative relationship with passenger preference.

Y = 1.988 – 0.126X2 – 0.122X4 – 0.351X6 – 0.221X8 – 0.121X9

The key metrics of 10 variables in Oman Air viz., Comfort Reason, Price Reason, Need for Inflight Entertainment, Personalized and Drop Down were all found to be significant at P<0.001. Comfort Reason (X2), Price Reason (X4), Need for Inflight Entertainment (X6), Personalized (X8), and Drop Down (X9) all had a negative relationship with passenger preference.

Table 9: Influencing Factors in SEM Analysis

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Oman Other Engagements	<---	F1	1				
Oman Drop Down Form	<---	F1	0.378	0.026	14.825	***	P<0.001
Oman Personalized Form	<---	F1	0.466	0.024	19.542	***	P<0.001
Oman Handheld Form	<---	F1	0.449	0.024	18.431	***	P<0.001
Oman Need for Inflight Entertainment	<---	F1	0.541	0.023	23.521	***	P<0.001
Oman Passenger Friendly	<---	F1	0.968	0.058	16.574	***	P<0.001
Oman Price Reason	<---	F1	0.4	0.025	15.841	***	P<0.001
Oman Service Quality Reason	<---	F1	0.333	0.026	12.947	***	P<0.001
Oman Comfort Reason	<---	F1	0.435	0.025	17.63	***	P<0.001
Oman Availability Reason	<---	F1	0.265	0.025	10.576	***	P<0.001
Salam Availability Reason	<---	F2	1				
Salam Comfort Reason	<---	F2	1.559	0.187	8.343	***	P<0.001
Salam Service Quality Reason	<---	F2	1.285	0.167	7.7	***	P<0.001
Salam Price Reason	<---	F2	1.659	0.195	8.51	***	P<0.001
Salam Passenger Friendly	<---	F2	4.918	0.538	9.142	***	P<0.001
Salam Need For In-flight Entertainment	<---	F2	2.386	0.259	9.213	***	P<0.001
Salam Handheld Form	<---	F2	1.587	0.191	8.32	***	P<0.001
Salam Personalized Form	<---	F2	1.714	0.199	8.614	***	P<0.001
Salam Drop Down Form	<---	F2	1.709	0.197	8.661	***	P<0.001
Salam Other Engagements	<---	F2	4.255	0.481	8.844	***	P<0.001
Preferred Choice Of Airline	<---	F1	-0.523	0.025	-20.819	***	P<0.001
Preferred Choice Of Airline	<---	F2	-0.019	0.06	-0.328	0.74	P<0.001

Structural Equation Modelling on Influencing factors leading to passenger satisfaction:

SEM was carried out to find the fit of the developed conceptual model. The variables used for the analysis include:

The preferred choice of airlines among Oman Air and Salam Air were considered as the observed, endogenous variables, and the factors influencing passenger preference were considered as observed exogenous variables. The number of variables in the SEM for the model is 44, the number of observed variables is 21, the number of unobserved variables is 23, the number of exogenous variables is 23, and number of endogenous variables is 21. The factors that are used for the study are found to be significant. The C.R. represents construct reliability.

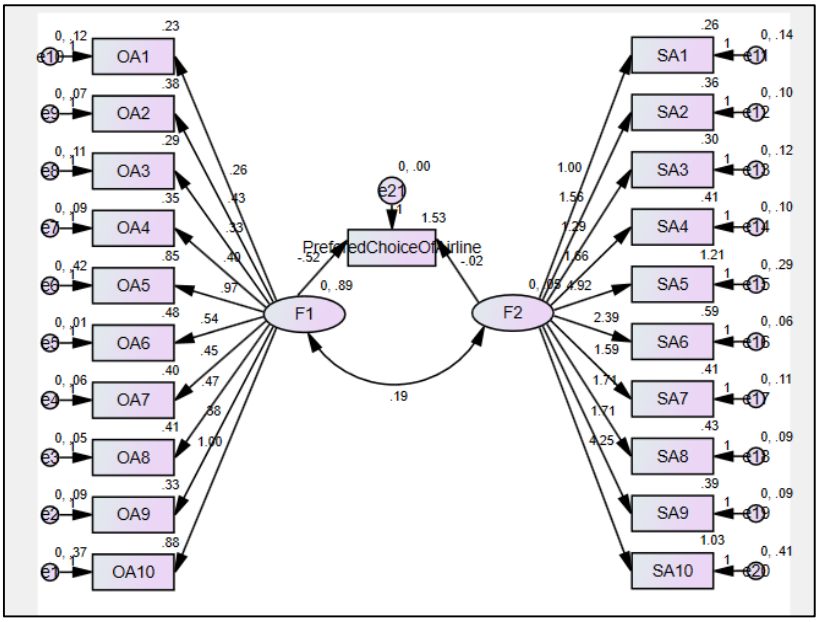

Figure 1: SEM on Influencing Factors on Passenger Preference

Table 10: Goodness of Fit Indices of Influencing Factors on Passenger Preference

Goodness of Fit Statistics Oman Air and Salam Air on Passenger Preference		Values	Desired range of values of a good fit
Chi-Square Test	CMIN	890.537	P < 0.001
Absolute Fit measure			
Degrees of Freedom	DF	187	> = 0
Chi-Square Test / DF Ratio	CMIN / DF	4.762	> 0.90
Goodness of Fit Index	GHI	0.745	> 0.90
Root mean square error of approximation	RMSEA	0.122	< 0.08
Incremental Fit measure			
Adjusted good of Fit Index	AGFI	0.753	> 0.90
Tucker - Lewis Index	TLI	0.855	> 0.90
Comparative Fit Index	CFI	0.883	> 0.95
Normed Fit Index	NFI	0.857	> 0.90

The SEM on Passenger Satisfaction is depicted in Fig 2. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis, reliability, and validity analysis were performed to assess the adequacy of the measurement model. More than one goodness of fit index was used to evaluate the model fit of the proposed model. The variables identified fit well with the influencing factors on passenger Satisfaction. Among the 10 factors, the most important factor that decides the passenger preference is what makes the difference in the choice made by the passengers.

FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

1. The paired T-test was done to understand whether there was a difference in passenger preference before and after the introduction of 10 influencing variables. The results indicated that there is a significant difference between Oman Air and Salam Air, respectively. The

introduction of the 10 variables has drastically changed the mindset of the 255 passengers, which is evident with the t values.

2. Reliability analysis with crown back's alpha value revealed that the entire item-total correlation for both Oman Air and Salam Air is above the acceptable minimum >0.7 and the KMO measure also being above the obligatory minimum of 0.5. Hence, the sampling adequacy is well confirmed.
3. Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant at a 1% level of significance ($P<0.01$). Therefore, the stability of the dataset of factor analysis is confirmed.
4. In correlation with the key metrics of the Oman Air and Salam Air variables, a negative relationship was found to be strongly prevalent with the passenger scores.
5. Principal component analysis of extraction method was employed with varimax rotation method converged in four iterations which are grouped to contribute the influencing factors leading to passenger satisfaction.
6. Multiple regression between the 10 influencing variables on passenger satisfaction established a linear relationship between with positive and negative effects between the overall passenger preference and key metrics of influencing factors for SEM a partial effect exists in both Oman Air and Salam Air factors on passenger preference with a good fit.
7. The above findings were observed to correlate with the objectives of the research and thereby address the research intent of the study. The key metrics of Oman Air and Salam Air responsible for passenger preference were identified and the study reveals that Salam Air had better satisfaction than Oman Air with 74.612% of the total variance for Salam Air as against 70.982% of the total variance for Oman Air. These confirm the preference of Salam Air over Oman Air.

It can be concluded from the results of this comparative analysis of the levels of service provided by Salam Air (LCC) and Oman Air (FSC) that each airline has both strengths and limitations in terms of service quality. Respondents favoured the availability, comfort, level of service, and in-flight entertainment of Oman Air, whereas Salam Air was selected for its cost. The study offers insightful information about the aspects of the airline sector that influence customer happiness and loyalty. Thus, it is crucial to remember that passenger priorities and preferences might change based on their travel itinerary, frequency of flights, and other unique circumstances. Airline service offers should be prioritized in accordance with the demands and preferences of their target market. In order to keep customers happy and loyal, both airlines should work to consistently enhance the quality of their service.

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