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Customer Journey Experience and Its Effect on PT KAI's Brand Equity

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Abstract: The digitalisation of railway services in Indonesia has significantly altered passengers' travel behaviour, although non-digital touchpoints remain essential for users with diverse levels of digital proficiency. This study investigates user interactions with PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) across the pre-trip, on-trip, and post-trip stages, and analyses how these interactions shape perceptions of service quality and contribute to the formation of brand equity. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in service design, the research utilises contextual inquiry to capture actual user behaviour at Bandung and Gambir Stations. Field observations were complemented by questionnaire data from respondents to identify patterns in information search, ticket purchasing, station navigation, and engagement with digital features such as face-recognition gates. The results indicate that digital touchpoints facilitate efficient access to schedules, ticketing, and payments, yet users continue to rely on physical guidance, staff support, and clear environmental cues to navigate the service ecosystem effectively. The degree of coherence between digital and physical touchpoints throughout the customer journey substantially influences user satisfaction and plays a critical role in strengthening KAI's brand equity.

Keywords: Service Design, User Experience, Brand Equity

INTRODUCTION

The digitalisation of transportation services has accelerated globally and is projected to generate up to USD 800 billion in economic value by 2025 through increased efficiency, reduced waiting times, and improved service integration (World Economic Forum, 2023). In Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, digital transformation in the mobility sector continues to expand rapidly. The Google-Temasek e-Conomy SEA Report (2023) identifies travel and transport-related digital services as among the fastest-growing categories, with an annual increase of more than 20% in active users. In Indonesia, this trend is reflected in the rising adoption of digital platforms for public transportation transactions. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2024), more than 68.2% of urban residents utilised digital systems in 2023 to reserve train and airline services, indicating a significant behavioural shift in mobility-related decision-making.

This surge in digital adoption fundamentally reshapes users' interactions across the entire mobility journey, comprising pre-trip, on-trip, and post-trip phases. Despite the growth of digital channels, non-digital touchpoints remain indispensable, particularly for older individuals, users with limited digital literacy, and communities with restricted internet access. A national survey conducted by Katadata Insight Center (2023) found that although 71% of respondents in major urban areas regularly use digital applications to plan their trips, 42% of users in suburban regions still prefer purchasing tickets directly at stations. These preferences are driven by trust in face-to-face interactions, the perceived reliability of staff assistance, and infrastructural limitations. This condition demonstrates that user experience in railway transportation remains hybrid, characterised by a combination of digital and physical touchpoints across different journey phases.

Within the field of service design and user experience studies, understanding this hybrid customer journey is essential not only for operational improvement but also for strengthening brand performance (Mahlke et al, 2021). Each interaction represents a "moment of truth" that contributes to users' overall perception of the service provider (Borsci et al, 2022). From a branding perspective, these interactions directly influence brand equity, which reflects the added value a brand contributes to a product or service. Aaker's (1991) brand equity model emphasises the role of perceived quality, brand associations, brand awareness, and customer loyalty (Gusfi et al., 2024), dimensions that are shaped by user experiences across the customer journey (Reitsamer, 2024). Likewise, Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (2001) highlights that strong brand equity emerges when users form favourable, strong, and unique brand associations based on consistent real-world encounters with the service.

Although existing studies have examined digital transportation services, much of the literature focuses primarily on isolated aspects such as mobile application usability, interface design, or online booking experience. These approaches overlook the interconnected and contextual nature of user interactions occurring across physical and digital environments (Santos, 2024). As a result, limited research has explored how the entire customer journey, encompassing pre-trip, on-trip, and post-trip touchpoints, collectively contributes to shaping brand equity in the public transportation sector, particularly in railway services (Bitner et al, 2022).

Given these gaps, this study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using the contextual inquiry method within a service design to examine user experiences across multiple journey phases in Indonesian railway travel. By observing front-stage interactions directly in their natural context, this research aims to capture the dynamic, situational, and emotional dimensions of user behaviour that quantitative methods often fail to reveal. The findings are expected to provide deeper insight into how users interpret service quality and form perceptions that ultimately strengthen or weaken brand equity.

This study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enriches discussions on customer journey mapping by integrating brand equity perspectives into a service design framework, an area that remains underexplored in Indonesian transportation research. Practically, the study offers strategic implications for PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) in improving service quality, enhancing user satisfaction, and reinforcing brand equity through more coherent and human-centred journey experiences. Strengthening these aspects is critical for ensuring competitive advantage in an increasingly digitalised transportation ecosystem.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research approach to obtain a deep and contextual understanding of user behaviour across the different phases of train travel, pre-trip, on-trip, and post-trip. As Creswell (2014) argues, qualitative research is suitable when the objective is to explore meanings, experiences, and interactions that cannot be quantified or reduced to numerical indicators. Such an approach enables researchers to examine user experiences within

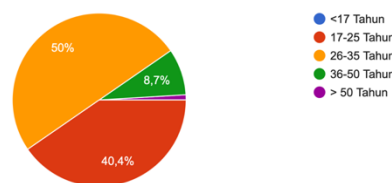
real-world contexts, allowing the emergence of nuanced needs, preferences, and behavioural patterns that may not surface through quantitative methods. Through this lens, the study captures detailed narratives of how passengers interact with both digital and non-digital touchpoints throughout their journey.

To operationalise this qualitative inquiry, the study adopts the Contextual Inquiry method, a user-centred technique designed to observe and understand user behaviour directly in the environment where it naturally occurs. According to Beyer and Holtzblatt (1998), contextual inquiry involves close observation and dialogue with users as they engage in their activities, providing insight into authentic practices and challenges. This method is particularly relevant for understanding how passengers navigate PT KAI’s service ecosystem in real time, especially as they interact with the newly implemented face-recognition system. It allows the researcher to capture adaptive behaviours and immediate responses to service features across both digital and non-digital touchpoints.

The researcher documented interactions with various touchpoints, including digital and non-digital ticket-purchasing systems, gate entry via face recognition, signage navigation, staff assistance, and other on-trip and post-trip services. In addition to direct observation, informal conversations were held to elicit users’ reasoning, expectations, and challenges as they engaged with the system. These field interactions provide insight into the effectiveness of PT KAI’s service design and highlight areas that require refinement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

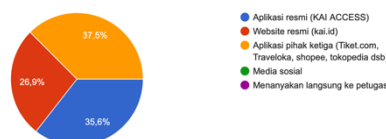
This study focuses on two major railway hubs in Java: Bandung Station and Gambir Station. Bandung Station serves as a key departure point to various cities in West and Central Java, with a user base dominated by regular commuters, students, and frequent travellers. Digital facilities, such as e-ticketing, face-recognition gates, and self-check-in kiosks, have been implemented, although challenges remain, including long queues during peak hours and limited waiting-room capacity



Source: Research Results
Figure 1. Questionnaire Responses

The majority of respondents fall within the 26–35 age group, representing 50% of the sample. This demographic typically comprises active users of public transportation, particularly rail services, for both work-related travel and personal mobility. The second-largest group is respondents aged 17–25, accounting for 40.4% of the total.

6. Jenis saluran yang digunakan untuk pencarian informasi mengenai jadwal/harga kereta api
 104 jawaban



Source: Research Results
Figure 2. Questionnaire Responses

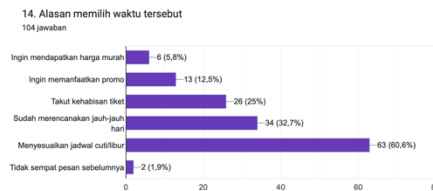
The questionnaire results from 104 respondents indicate that train users employ various channels to obtain information regarding schedules and ticket prices, as illustrated in Figure 3.

The majority of respondents (37.5%) reported that they most frequently rely on third-party platforms, such as Tiket.com and Traveloka to access travel information.



Source: Research Results
Figure 3. Questionnaire Responses

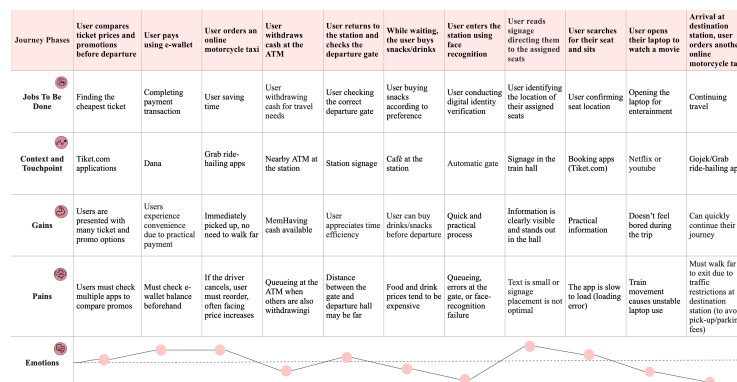
A total of 53.8% of users reported that they typically purchase their tickets approximately three days before departure. The second-largest group (28.8%) books tickets seven days in advance, or about one week before travel. The third group, representing 11.5% of respondents, purchases tickets one day before departure (H-1).



Source: Research Results
Figure 4. Questionnaire Responses

Users provided several reasons for their preferred ticket-purchasing timeframe. The most frequent response, given by 63 respondents (60.6%), was the need to align travel plans with leave days or holiday schedules, indicating that many passengers use rail services primarily for leisure or personal visits. The second most common response, reported by 34 users (32.7%), was early planning, which may relate to coordinating leave, anticipating free time, or adhering to work schedules set well in advance. The third reason, selected by 26 respondents (25%), was concern about ticket availability, particularly during peak travel periods or holidays when seats tend to sell out more quickly.

Customer Journey Map Scenario 1



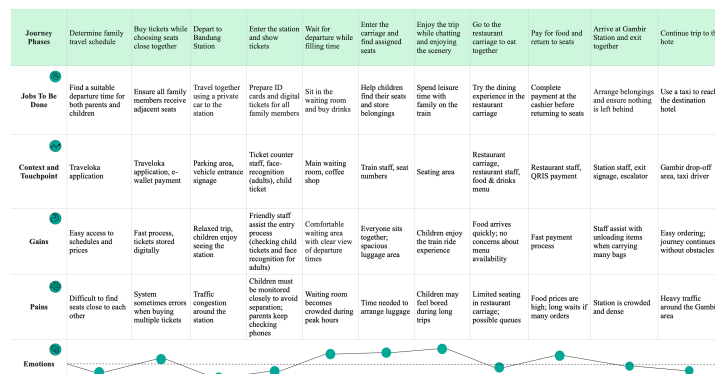
Source: Research Result
Figure 5. Customer Journey Map Scenario 1

The pre-trip phase begins with users searching for and comparing ticket prices and promotional offers across travel applications such as Traveloka, Tiket.com, and KAI Access. The primary objective at this stage is to secure the lowest fare and select a departure schedule that aligns with personal travel plans. While digital platforms facilitate efficient price comparison, users frequently experience minor friction due to the need to open multiple applications to verify available promotions.

Once a suitable ticket is selected, payment is completed through e-wallets such as GoPay, OVO, or Dana. Digital payment is preferred for its speed and convenience; however, limited balance and occasional technical issues may disrupt the transaction process. Users then typically rely on online motorcycle taxis (Gojek/Grab) to reach the departure station. This choice is driven by accessibility, predictable travel time, and the avoidance of parking difficulties associated with private vehicles. Collectively, the efficiency and ease of these touchpoints shape early perceptions of service quality and contribute to expectations of PT KAI’s reliability. Upon arriving at the station, users often engage in preparatory activities such as withdrawing cash from ATMs or purchasing food and beverages from station cafés. Before entering the departure area, ticket verification is conducted through the face-recognition system. Although perceived as modern and efficient, this system can generate temporary frustration when errors occur or queues form during peak hours.

During waiting periods, many passengers engage with digital entertainment platforms such as Netflix or YouTube. Once on board, users transition to personal activities—watching films, working on laptops, or resting. Emotional responses during this phase are generally stable and positive, supported by a comfortable travel environment and the predictability of the service. At the destination station, users typically resume their journey by ordering a Gojek or Grab ride. The exit process is generally perceived as smooth, though some passengers highlight the need for clearer organisation of pick-up zones to avoid confusion. The overall experience in this phase reinforces users’ final impressions of service effectiveness and contributes to broader evaluations of PT KAI’s brand equity.

Customer Journey Map Scenario 2



Source: Research Result
Figure 6. Customer Journey Map Scenario 2

The family’s journey begins with selecting a departure schedule that accommodates the availability of all members. This process is conducted through the Traveloka application, which enables users to compare departure times and ticket prices and to secure adjacent seats during the booking process. Digital payment through e-wallets further streamlines the transaction.

Once ticket arrangements are completed, the family travels to Bandung Station by private vehicle. At this stage, common challenges include traffic congestion around the station and the need to coordinate luggage and ensure all family members are prepared for departure.

Emotionally, the pre-trip phase is characterised by enthusiasm and anticipation associated with travelling together, accompanied by minor concerns about time management and punctual arrival at the station.

In the on-trip phase, the family arrives at the station and proceeds with ticket presentation and digital identity verification. Staff assistance at the entry gate facilitates the process, particularly for families with young children. While waiting for departure, they spend time in the waiting area by sitting, conversing, or purchasing beverages. Upon boarding, the family locates their designated seats, with staff providing support in arranging luggage in the overhead storage racks. During the journey, they spend time together in the restaurant carriage, enjoying meals while appreciating the travel atmosphere, an activity that contributes significantly to positive shared experiences.

Despite these positive aspects, several pain points emerge, including limited mobility when accompanying young children and occasional queues in the restaurant carriage. Nevertheless, the overall experience remains favourable due to attentive and responsive staff service. At Gambir Station, the post-trip phase begins with guiding the family through the exit area and escalators while managing luggage and ensuring all members disembark safely. Staff support continues to play an important role, particularly for families carrying multiple items or travelling with small children.

The journey is then continued using online taxis or other public transport available at the station's drop-off area. Challenges during this stage typically relate to crowding within the station and traffic congestion in the surrounding roads, which can slow the transition to the next destination. Overall, the post-trip phase concludes the journey with a sense of satisfaction and relief. The comfortable conditions inside the train and the responsiveness of staff contribute to a positive family travel experience across the entire customer journey.

CONCLUSION

Pre-Trip Phase: Efficiency Achieved, Integration Lacking

The majority of respondents rely on third-party digital platforms such as Traveloka and Tiket.com to search for schedules and compare ticket prices. This behaviour reflects a preference for platforms that offer ease of comparison and perceived reliability. However, the need to consult multiple applications suggests a persistent fragmentation of information, indicating that the convenience of digitalisation is not fully matched by seamless system integration.

Digital payments via e-wallets (GoPay, OVO, Dana) reinforce users' preference for speed and convenience, yet limitations such as insufficient balance and occasional transaction errors disrupt the booking flow. Additionally, the widespread use of online motorcycle taxis (Gojek/Grab) reveals that users navigate a multi-platform mobility ecosystem, meaning that their initial travel experience is shaped by external services beyond PT KAI's immediate control. This phase contributes to the formation of initial brand expectations. Smooth search, payment, and access processes generate early perceptions of reliability and modernity. Conversely, technical disruptions or inefficient digital integration may introduce uncertainty regarding the quality of subsequent service interactions.

On-Trip Phase: Balancing Automation and Human Support

The on-trip phase highlights the balance between advanced technology and human assistance. Verification through the face-recognition system is generally perceived as efficient and modern; however, system errors and queue build-up during peak hours diminish users' trust in technological readiness. These findings illustrate that successful digitalisation depends not solely on technological sophistication but also on operational preparedness, infrastructure capacity, and real-time responsiveness.

Navigation within the station, supported by signage and staff assistance, plays a central role in shaping user confidence. Families with young children, senior travellers, and those with large amounts of luggage demonstrate greater reliance on human assistance, underscoring that physical guidance remains indispensable for ensuring comfort and clarity.

During the train journey, users engage in various activities such as watching films, working, or resting. The restaurant carriage, in particular, emerges as a site of emotionally meaningful experience that enhances journey satisfaction. Nevertheless, issues such as limited mobility, especially for families, and long queues at the restaurant carriage constitute recurring pain points. This phase strongly influences users' *perceived quality*, a key dimension of Aaker's brand equity model. When technical systems and staff assistance operate cohesively, users perceive PT KAI as dependable, comfortable, and service-oriented.

Post-Trip Phase: Final Impressions and Transition to onward Mobility

In the post-trip phase, users' final impressions are shaped by their navigation of station exits, escalators, and pick-up zones. While the process generally proceeds smoothly, congested station environments, particularly at Gambir, create bottlenecks that affect convenience. The lack of clearly organised pick-up areas for online taxis heightens confusion and disrupts journey continuity.

These challenges are particularly evident for families or users with substantial luggage, who require greater spatial clarity and assistance. Delays caused by external traffic around the station also influence users' evaluation of the overall journey, even if such factors fall outside PT KAI's direct control. This phase shapes *post-experience evaluations*, which strongly influence users' likelihood of returning (brand loyalty) and recommending the service (brand advocacy).

This indicates that PT KAI's brand equity is not determined by isolated service components but by the consistency and coherence of user experience across all touchpoints. Several analytical insights emerge:

1. Seamless digital–physical integration enhances perceived quality.

Effective coordination between applications, payment systems, station technologies, and staff support strengthens perceptions of reliability and modernity.

2. Recurring pain points weaken brand associations.

Queue build-up, system errors, fragmented information, and poorly organised pick-up zones contribute to negative associations that reduce perceived service consistency.

3. Emotionally meaningful moments reinforce brand loyalty.

Positive shared experiences, such as family activities in the restaurant carriage, comfortable seating, and attentive staff, strengthen emotional connections to the brand.

4. Cross-phase coherence is essential for brand strength.

Brand equity increases when PT KAI provides predictable, clear, and user-centred experiences across pre-trip, on-trip, and post-trip phases.

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