

# INVESTIGATION OF FACTORS IMPACTING PASSENGERS' AIRLINE SELECTION: A REVIEW APPROACH

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper aims to study the factors influencing passengers' preferences for air transport modes and airline selection, providing insights for the aviation industry to enhance future planning, policy and decision-making. As several factors influence the passengers' preferences for air transport mode and the selection of airlines, it is important to evaluate the extent and impact of these factors.

**Research Approach:** The factors impacting passengers' preferences for the air transportation mode and the airline selection, available in the literature were studied and discussed.

**Findings and Originality:** Several factors were studied, and key factors such as passenger's demographic characteristics, airline service quality etc. were identified. The research work also considered factors that could indirectly impact the passengers' decisions.

**Research Impact:** The factors studied in this paper are not only significantly important to the airlines/air industry but also relevant to the associated facilities.

**Practical Impact:** The results could help the air transport industry and airlines in recognising factors affecting the passengers' perception in the selection of airlines and air transport modes. Identifying these key areas could help in policymaking, future planning of airlines, as well as associated services that could help boost passengers' experience to opt for certain airlines while making their future bookings.

**Keywords:** Aviation industry, Airline Service Quality (ASQ), Airline selection, Passenger behaviour, Flight booking

## **1. Introduction**

As per the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the global airline industry reported profits in 2023/24. The IATA predicts that passengers opting for air travel will reach 4.7 billion in 2024. Hence, airlines are trying to attract more and more passengers to increase the overall revenue. Due to the ever-increasing competitive environment, it is essential for airlines to deliver a high-quality service to their passengers for the airline's sustained growth, profitability, competitiveness and survival (Suki, 2014). Also, passenger satisfaction is important to increase passenger demands for different transportation businesses, including airlines. However, when it comes to selecting an airline for travel requirements, in addition to a high-quality service from an airline and passenger satisfaction, there are several other factors that influence passengers' preferences.

Additionally, it is important for the transportation industry to know the customer preference for transportation mode and the factors affecting it. In the literature, several factors such as comfort, time, safety, cost, personal preference and environmental impacts, have been reported to influence passengers' choice of transportation mode (Üzülmez & Sarılgan, 2024). Knowing or determining these factors is important to achieve success in a field like transportation and it can be seen in the future planning and decision-making of business and industry stakeholders (Chen et al., 2020; Findlay et al., 1997). Furthermore, understanding these factors and identifying their impact on changes in demand can also be seen as a more focused area of research. In the past, several research articles have investigated the different factors affecting passengers' preferences in terms of air transport and airline selection, however, a detailed study using a statistical tool could help in estimating the extent of these factors. Currently, several measurable variables are being used in different countries or

regions to study the changes in the demand for air transportation. The selection of these variables, such as forecast variables, depends on various methodologies such as data availability, previous studies and relevance (Üzülmez & Sarılgan, 2024).

For the above-mentioned reason, this work aims to study different factors influencing passengers' preferences in terms of air transport and airline selection. This paper would help the air transport industries and airlines in recognising factors affecting the passengers' perception in selecting airlines and air transport modes. This will also motivate airlines to focus on key areas that could help attract passengers and provide better or appropriate levels of services in comparison to their competitors.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reports the methods used to study the factors and Section 3 presents results and discussion. The Limitations and future works are included in Section 4 and concluding remarks are made in Section 5.

## **2. Method**

The study was conducted in two parts. In the first part, the factors impacting passengers' choice of air transport mode available in the literature from previous research articles were studied and discussed. The subsequent part reviewed factors impacting passengers' preference for airline selection.

### **2.1 Air Transport Mode**

Several research articles were reviewed to examine factors attributing passenger experience. These articles reported factors such as passengers' demographic characteristics, travel time, transportation cost, comfort and services, frequency of operation, airport location, user-friendly and safe operation process, flight schedule (arrival/departure time) and connectivity (such as high-speed rail service). These factors are summaries in Table 1. The most notable factor affecting passengers' choice of transportation mode is the passengers' demographic features (Budd & Ison, 2017; Üzülmez & Sarılgan, 2024; Wensveen, 2023). For instance, passengers' age, income status, gender etc. influences people's desires and needs. In addition, young passengers are mostly price-sensitive but would like to fly more often whereas older passengers may give preference to comfort (Demirsoy, 2012; Üzülmez & Sarılgan, 2024).

Table 1. A summary of factors affecting passenger's choice of transportation mode

SI No.	Factor affecting passengers' choice of transportation mode	References
1.	Passengers' demographic features such as age, income status, gender etc.	(Budd & Ison, 2017; Üzülmez & Sarılgan, 2024; Wensveen, 2023)
2.	Travel time and transportation cost	(Li et al., 2016; Park & Ha, 2006; Shi et al., 2022; Xia & Zhang, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019)
3.	Comfort and frequency	(Pagliara et al., 2012; Yang & Zhang, 2012)
4.	Airport location	(Behrens & Pels, 2012; Liu, 2017; Loo, 2008; Zhang et al., 2019)
5.	User-friendly and safe operation process	(Y.-C. Chang, 2013)
6.	Departure time	(Li et al., 2016)
7.	High-speed railroad service	(Park & Ha, 2006)

This article further assessed passenger perception of service quality provided by the transport industries. Various factors attributing to service quality perceived by the passenger were also found such as customer interaction and loyalty, in-flight product development and innovation, customer satisfaction, recommendations etc. An overview of service quality assessment is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. An overview of service quality assessment

SI No.	Assessment of service quality	References
1.	Customer interactions	(Y. H. Chang & Yeh, 2002)
2.	Customer loyalty	(Ostrowski et al., 1993)
3.	In-flight product development and innovation	(Suki, 2014)
4.	Customer satisfaction, recommendation	(Hu et al., 2009; Nadiri & Hussain, 2005)
5.	Empathy and tangibles facilities	(Ananthanarayanan et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1990)
6.	Airline choice	(Etherington & Var, 1984; Ritchie et al., 1980; Wells & Franklin D. Richey, 1996)
7.	Customer satisfaction	(Alotaibi, 1992)
8.	Passenger type	(Alotaibi, 1992; White, 1994)
9.	Airline type	(Jones & Cocke, 1981)
10.	Airline class	(Alotaibi, 1992; Etherington & Var, 1984)
11.	Aircraft type	(Truitt & Haynes, 1994)
12.	Productivity	(Ozment & Morash, 1998)
13.	Changes in the level of quality over time	(Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics, 1992)

## **2.2 Airline Selection**

This study also reviewed factors impacting passengers' preferences in terms of airline selection. Worldwide, the deregulated commercial airline market is experiencing rapid growth in passenger traffic (Y. H. Chang & Yeh, 2002). Hence, airlines are trying to retain and acquire passengers due to ever-increasing competition and the study of these factors could help in focusing the key areas for further growth and policy making. These factors are discussed in this section.

### **2.2.1 Service Quality and Brand Reputation**

Empirical study's findings related to the airline services demand suggest that service quality is central to the choice of airlines for both leisure and business travellers (Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics (BTCE), 1994; Y. H. Chang & Yeh, 2002). Furthermore, an empirical study shows that airlines could acquire and retain passenger loyalty if they continuously provide high-quality services perceived by the passengers (Ostrowski et al., 1993). In addition, the study suggests that an airline offering quality services superior to its competitors would eventually lead the industry market (Y. H. Chang & Yeh, 2002). Hence, it is significantly important for airlines to recognise the advantage of service quality (carrier image) in relation to other competitive advantages.

In order to serve passengers' demands and needs, it is important for airlines to know their service expectations. For example, continuous work on in-flight product development and innovation could help airlines achieve a significant level of satisfied passengers (Suki, 2014).

Furthermore, the highest quality of service could help increase passenger satisfaction levels, consequently resulting in passenger retention and enhancement in recommendations (Hu et al., 2009; Nadiri & Hussain, 2005).

Ananthanarayanan et al. (1988) and Zeithaml et al. (1990) stated that empathy and tangibles are service quality constructs and can influence passenger perception of service delivered by the company and passenger satisfaction. In the context of airlines, the tangibles are related to terminal and airline tangibles. Empathy is attributed to individual attention and care to customers provided by the company to make passengers feel special or valued (Suki, 2013). Tangibles are attributed to the physical assets, company facilities and surrounding appearance (Suki, 2014). The services provided by the company are intangible, therefore, the customer assesses the company's service quality depending on tangible factors such as physical layout, building and atmosphere.

The selection of an airline by the passengers for a flight trip depends on a complex interaction of affecting and cognitive factors such as service quality, flight schedule, ticket price, safety record and travel time (Sun et al., 2024). Additionally, Airline Service Quality (ASQ) highlights airport service quality assessment to help improve different services and enhance the passenger experience and services offered. Furthermore, social influences and emotional responses such as recommendations (word of mouth), brand reputation and frequent flyer program benefits impact airline selection (Sun et al., 2024). The brand reputation and image are key driving factors. This largely depends on past feedback and reviews available on different social media platforms. The brand reputation and image are also linked to the reliability of the airline's operation.

### **2.2.2 Price (Overall Cost)**

Initially, price used to be the primary competitive reason, whereas nowadays airlines have realised that the competition in the price will not represent the situation in the long run. Also, to avoid any decline in service quality or flight safety due to price competition, airline system regulators might interfere. Hence, airlines think that the competition over price is not sustainable for them. In such a competitive environment, where all airlines have almost matching frequent flyer programmes and comparable fares, airlines can focus on service quality perceived by passengers (Y. H. Chang & Yeh, 2002).

### **2.2.3 Travel time, Transportation Cost and Flight Schedule**

Travel time (or flight time) and transportation cost are quite important factors when selecting the mode of transport for the passengers, therefore, more weightage is given to these criteria in comparison to other factors (Li et al., 2016; Park & Ha, 2006; Shi et al., 2022; Xia & Zhang, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). Other factors such as comfort and frequency are also vital factors for the passenger's preference for transport mode (Pagliara et al., 2012; Yang & Zhang, 2012). These factors include convenient flight schedules (arrival/departure times) and connectivity/transportation. For instance, it would be convenient to reach the airport during normal working hours, however, flights scheduled during the night may create issues with the availability of relevant public transport.

### **2.2.4 Airport Location/Transportation/and Convenience**

Another important factor that affects passenger choice is the airport location, furthermore, with an increase in the number of flights at the central airport, secondary airports are seeing a reduction in the number of flights (Behrens & Pels, 2012; Liu, 2017; Loo, 2008; Zhang et al., 2019). User-friendly and safe operational processes are other important factors for passengers when selecting a transportation mode as problems or accidents during the flight have a significant impact on passengers (Y.-C. Chang, 2013). It can be added that a

passenger's preference for a particular mode of transport during the decision process depends on various factors such as economic, psychological, demographic, technological and environmental (Üzülmez & Sarılgan, 2024).

### **2.2.5 Additional Services and In-Flight Facilities**

It was also found that the passengers are now looking for extra services offered by the airlines. These include Wi-Fi on board, the facility to carry large baggage, extra baggage allowances and other in-flight facilities such as an entertainment system, medicines, blankets, meals, seats and lavatories (Sun et al., 2024). Furthermore, some of the airlines now offer fast check-in services to boost the customers' experience. Additionally, services that could help enhance the safety and security of the passengers (as well as luggage) were also considered in the literature.

### **2.2.6 Rewards, Loyalty Programs/Membership**

Passengers were also found to be inclined to different rewards and loyalty programs offered by the airlines. For instance, British Airways offers reward points called as 'Avios' that could be used to book flights, hotels, car hire and other travel rewards. Similarly, there are airlines' loyalty programs such as Frequent Flyer Programs, that offer discounts or rewards on travel and services from affiliated airlines/partners. Furthermore, it has been found that a well-structured loyalty program including exclusive offers and personalized rewards can significantly influence passenger behaviour while booking flight tickets (MoghadasNian & Javideh, 2024).

### **2.2.7 Environmental Sustainability**

In more recent years, there has been a growing interest in services/airlines that are prioritising environmental sustainability. This includes different initiatives by air industries such as waste reduction, efficient aircraft, and carbon awareness programmes. For instance, the development of Electric Vertical Take-off and Landing (eVTOL) aircraft is a potential eco-friendly solution for short-distance travel such as regional air mobility (range several 100 kms) and urban air mobility (range < 100 km) (Sun et al., 2024). Moreover, an evident shift in urban youth towards environmental sustainability impacts the choice of airlines engaged with sustainable practices (MoghadasNian & Javideh, 2024).

## **3. Results and Discussion**

This paper studied factors impacting passenger choice of transportation mode, specifically air transport and the selection of airlines. The airline service quality is difficult to measure due to its intangible nature. However, some studies have investigated service quality in the context of the airline industry (Y. H. Chang & Yeh, 2002). Various methodologies defining service qualities from the passengers' perspective have been suggested. These methodologies mostly use the relationship between service quality and connective factors such as airline choice, customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, airline type, airline class, passenger type, aircraft type, the changes in levels of quality over time and productivity (Y. H. Chang & Yeh, 2002).

Importantly, we acknowledge that nowadays technologies or innovations are affecting the passenger experience. The authors, in (Verhoef et al., 2009), have listed an overview of customer experience aspects where they mentioned how social environment or atmosphere and how channels drive the customer experience. One of the important factors is travelling time impacting passengers' choices, for instance, passengers need to spend a specific amount of time during check-in and the security process (Boonekamp et al., 2018). Although time spent during these processes varies based on certain factors such as airport size and day/time in a week, a reduction in this time can enhance the passenger experience of service

quality. Furthermore, another factor that airline passengers consider when choosing an airline is the flight's on-time performance. It has been found that passengers are sensitive to waiting time or flight delays, especially business travellers (Proussaloglou & Koppelman, 1999). Transportation cost and time (to the airport) and ticket fare are other important factors that passengers consider when selecting an airline (Phang, 2003). Another important factor is safe and secure operation, since safety is an important issue for passengers, any accidents that occurred previously impact passengers' preferences (Marzuoli et al., 2014; Su et al., 2019).

Various tools or frameworks discussed in the literature illustrate how passengers choose their preferred flight. For example, Proussaloglou & Koppelman (1999) have introduced a Travel choice framework based on an individual traveller approach. It is difficult for passengers to accurately assess the quality of the services provided by the airlines based on their experiences in comparison to expectations. Therefore, a concept of fuzzy sets representing survey results was used due to the intangible nature of services provided (Y. H. Chang & Yeh, 2002). The fuzzy multicriteria analysis was developed to help with airline ranking based on passengers' assessment, this allowed passengers' preferences or decision makers' attitudes to be included in the evaluation process. Although a lot of research has been done in this direction, a more detailed investigation of factors influencing passengers' preferences in recent years, such as emerging technologies, and social media, could help airlines and the air transport industry understand passenger's views on these aspects.

#### **4. Limitations and Future Works**

Several articles were studied to investigate factors impacting the passengers' preference for air transport and airline selection. A more detailed study of factors could also consider factors such as first-time travellers, or referrals. Also, there could be some indirect factors that could impact passengers' preferences. The limitations of the current study also include potential biases in the literature review, regional limitations or the lack of empirical data.

The findings of this paper will help readers in preparing a detailed questionnaire based on the factors highlighted and help collect responses from a wide range of audiences. A survey/collection of responses from a large number of passengers, from different groups covering background/regions/age groups and so on, will help in estimating the extent different factors contribute to impacting the passengers' preference towards air transport and airlines.

In future work, a survey will be created to record passengers' responses that can potentially influence their decision to opt for a particular flight and air transport. The questionnaire will also collect responses considering the two categories, pre-flight experience/factors and post-flight experience which were responsible for making a decision for a future flight. The data will be analysed using SPSS software and weights for the different factors/parameters will be evaluated to identify the extent to which these factors influence the passengers' preferences. The data will be used in conducting empirical studies and exploring the impact of emerging technologies with a focus on air transport and airlines.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This paper investigates factors that influence passenger perceptions and play a significant role in the selection of air transport modes and airlines. This is vital considering passenger experience or passenger satisfaction continues to be an important issue for the airline industry. With respect to practical application, a list of significant factors discussed in this study could be used to study the extent to which they contribute towards decision-making and help airlines and the air industry in future planning and policy-making. Knowledge of factors assessing service qualities perceived by the passenger could help management consider strategies that can improve service qualities provided by the airline and passenger satisfaction. Furthermore,

this study found that service quality is one of the key factors airlines can use as an advantage in today's competitive world. The airline decision-makers can focus on excellent service quality for their passengers as this will lead to an improved airline's image and, consequently, can help boost the number of passengers, such as using recommendations/referrals or feedback posted on social media channels such as X (formerly Twitter) and Meta (formerly Facebook). In addition, the study discussed tangible aspects of airlines which are important for their operations. This study reviews articles related to transport choice, airline and passenger experience and adds to the literature related to factors attributing service quality and passenger satisfaction. In future, the study will work on collecting data and statistically validate factors impacting passenger behaviour. It is recommended that studies in the future focus on or investigate passenger behaviour towards the airline service quality. For example, people from different demographic characteristics such as age have different attitudes towards airline service quality. Other dimensions exist to expand the number of factors and examine other areas for better analysis in future.

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