

PASSENGER EXPERIENCE AND PATRONAGE OF DOMESTIC AIRLINES COMPANIES IN NIGERIA**SUNDAY Patience¹ ADIELE Kenneth C.² IKEGWURU Mac-Kingsley³**^{1,2} Department of Marketing, Faculty of Administration and Management

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between passenger experience and customer patronage of domestic airline in Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive research design. The population of the study comprised 21 domestic airlines. The study took a census. The marketing, sales and customer relation managers of the 21 domestic airlines provided data for the study through a structured questionnaire whose reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's Alpha test. The data collected was analysed at the primary level of analysis using descriptive statistical tools (frequency counts, mean and standard deviation); and at the secondary level of analysis using inferential statistical tool (Pearson Product Moment Correlation). The study found that a positive and statistically significant relationship exists between passenger experience and patronage of domestic airline in Nigeria. Therefore, the study concludes that passenger experience significantly relates to patronage of domestic airlines; and recommends that domestic airlines should implement strategies aimed at increasing passenger experience at all times, in order to improve their level of patronage.

Keywords: Customer patronage, customer retention, passenger experience, repeat purchase behaviour

Introduction

The aviation industry provide essential services that drive economic growth (Rodrigues et al., 2022). Nigeria's aviation industry has experienced explosive growth in recent years with older domestic operators competing with new ones (Orikpete et al., 2023). This expansion has given Nigerians a wider choice of airlines, many of them flying with new or recently refurbished aircrafts. The expansion has also led to high passenger, aircraft and freight traffic (Zhong & Han, 2019; Orikpete et al., 2023). Poor road condition and high level of insecurity in the country has added to the upsurge in demand for air transportation.

Adiele and Etuk (2017) argue that air transport is becoming the safest means of traveling in Nigeria, given the security condition of the country. However, airlines are also competing to attract more passengers by offering various levels of design, services, and prices (Nelloh et al., 2019; Adiele & Etuk, 2017). Also increased competition among airlines has made passengers more conscious of service experience and have raised their expectations for superior service experience.

Recent research emphasize subjective and experiential aspects of comfort (Vink et al., 2005). This suggest that careful attention to aircraft interior design and passengers' flight experience are key to improved patronage of airlines. Adiele and Etuk (2017) argued that when a customer has an exceptionally positive service experience with a firm, especially in the travel industry, the customer tend to patronize that firm instead of other competing firms.

The physical experience of many companies includes price, availability and accessibility, efficiency, ease of use, variety, and delivery. Meanwhile, the emotional experience is related to loyalty, embodiment of the brand, and trust (Shaw & Ivens, 2005). Popovic et al. (2010) posits that passenger experience is informed by interactions, processes, technology, services, personnel, and artefacts.

A major problem confronting Nigeria's domestic airlines is low patronage; and this may be the result of poor customer service and lack of courtesy, flight delays and cancellations without compensation to passengers (Mukarramah & Sulaimon, 2014). These and other factors have affected passenger experience, and led to low level of patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria.

This study examined the concept of passenger experience and its relationships with customer patronage. The study is a vital bridge as it provides clearer insights into the relationship between passenger experience and customer patronage in Nigeria's aviation sector.

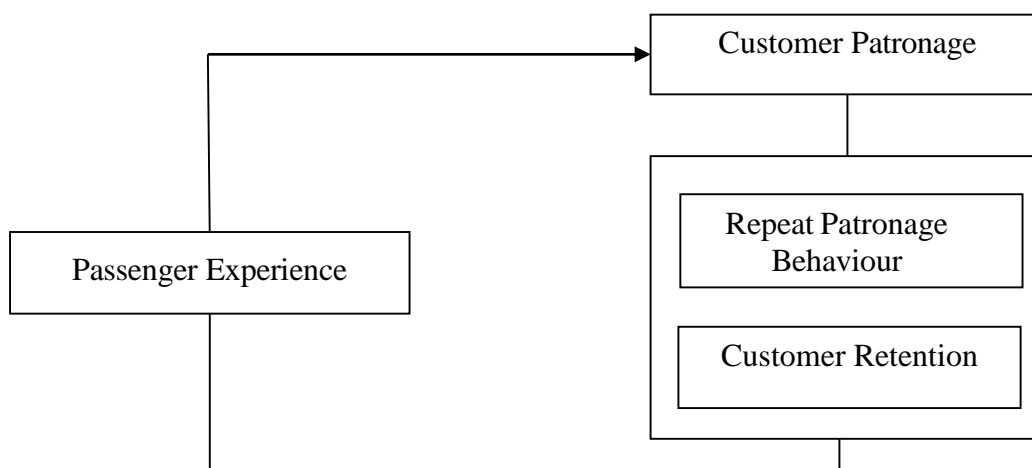


Fig 1: Conceptual framework of relationship between passenger experience and patronage of Domestic Airlines in Nigeria

Literature Review

Concept of Passengers Experience

Thanks to consumerism and the increasing realization that consumers are invaluable assets, marketers today are very mindful of the products they offer to customers and how they interact with them (Amangala & Ateke, 2018). Marketers have come to the conviction that beyond the product, customers' experience is the key to repeat business and continued relationships.

Passenger experience encompasses user comfort, passenger psychology, the balance of value and comfort, and service. It is a complex concept that reflects the overall satisfaction and emotional response of passengers during their journey in commercial aviation (Zhong & Han, 2019). Popovic et al. (2010) describe passenger experience as the series of events and interactions that take place before, during and after consumption of transport service.

Passenger experience also encompasses all of a traveler's interactions with a transport service provider, including processing activities like check-in, security screening, immigration, and boarding (Popovic et al., 2010). An exceptional customer experience can give a company a leg up in the market (Kramer et al., 2013).

Concept of Customer Patronage

According to Adiele and Etuk (2018), patronage occurs when a person makes a deliberate effort to select goods and services that will meet their need by examining circumstances that they believes would be rewarding and reasonably satisfying despite difficulties encountered in achieving their own goals. Customer patronage can also be defined as the commitment of a customer to frequently buy products from a particular vendor or brand. This commitment is often driven by the customer's preference for the quality or value offered (Kenny et al., 2015).

In the aviation sector, patronage refers to a passenger's conscious decision to regularly fly with a specific airline rather than using other airline service providers (Ikegwuru & Harcourt, 2019; Adiele & Etuk, 2018). Customer patronage is a complex concept influenced by factors such as a company's capability, product or service attributes, economic situation, political forces, social and psychological factors, situational, competition, and marketing mix programs (Ikegwuru & Harcourt, 2019). In line with Zahari et al. (2008), this study adopts repeat patronage behaviour and customer retention as the measures of customer patronage.

Repeat purchase behaviour

Repeat purchase behavior refers to the act of making multiple purchases from the same business or brand over time (Damit et al., 2019). Driving repeat purchases is one of the most important goals for marketing, sales, and customer service teams, as it is one of the ways to ensure retention and increased revenue securely (Ali et al., 2013). Repurchase is crucial for companies because it helps them gain or keep a competitive advantage, despite the difficulties and costs associated with it.

According to Tuan (2012), a customer's intention to buy from a particular service provider again depends on their present situation as well as their expectations for the future. Adiele et al. (2024) state that consumers are more likely to make repeat purchases when they are satisfied with the services they have received from a company. Being an inclined consumer's deliberate behaviour to buy convinced products, repeat patronage intention thus grows as a guarantee of re-purchase of a product at a subsequent expedition (Oluwalokun & Ikegwuru, 2023).

Customer retention

The success of a business depends on keeping customers happy with the products and services it offers (Jimoh, 2012). In order to keep customers coming back, businesses need to make an effort to engage with them on a personal level. Loyal customers not only spend more money, they also tend to spend more on upgrades for their business (Mazour, 2016). According to Gets and Thomas (2013), customer retention happens when a customer continues to buy a product or service from a company over a long period of time.

Jeng and Bailey (2012) define customer retention as "the verdict of a customer to uphold exchange relationship with a specific service provider for a long time and ensure customer's continuous patronage of a business. Adeyele et al. (2024) add to this definition by stating that customers are more likely to buy from a firm again and to recommend it to their friends and family.

Passenger Experience and Customer Patronage

Udoh et al. (2022) examined influence of service experience dimensions (brand name and past experience) on passenger patronage of transit companies in Nigeria. Findings showed that service experience have a positive significant influence on passenger patronage of transit companies. Eslami (2020) investigated effect of brand experience on brand equity and brand loyalty through the mediating role of brand awareness, brand image and perceived quality. The study established that that brand experience has significant effect on brand image, brand awareness and perceived quality.

Relatedly, Nelloh et al. (2019) showed that customer experience (individual space, staff skills, vehicle maintenance, waiting time and service) positively affect travel satisfaction and customer loyalty. This report suggests that maintenance of vehicle condition, service quality improvement, reduced waiting and staff skills are essential to travelers' satisfaction and loyalty.

Also, Clemes et al. (2008) investigated elements that impact passengers' pleasure and behavioural intentions in international air travel. The study identified timeliness, certainty, ease, helpfulness, comfort, food, and security and safety as key determinants of passengers pleasure and behavioural intentions.

The empirical studies reviewed asserts allude to a relationship between passenger experience and customer patronage. However, the following hypotheses were formulated based on the need to conduct statistical analyses:

H₀₁: Passenger experience significantly relate with repeat patronage behaviour of domestic airlines in Nigeria.

H₀₂: Passenger experience significantly relate with customer retention of domestic airlines in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design to determine the relationship between passenger experience and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria. The population of the study comprised 21 domestic airlines. The study surveyed the entire population. 3 managers (marketing, sales and customer relations) were drawn from each of the 21 domestic airlines to provide data for the study. 63 copies of structured questionnaire were administered to collect primary data. In other to determine the face, content and construct validity of the research instrument, the instrument was subjected to scrutiny. Also, a pilot survey was carried out to determine the reliability of the research instrument based on a threshold of 0.70 set by Nunally (1978). Table 1 provides a summary of results of test of reliability. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses formulated for the study, relying on the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0.

Table 1: Reliability Test - Cronbach's Alpha Analysis

S/N	Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients
1.	Passenger Experience	3	0.884
2.	Repeat Patronage Behaviour	3	0.856
3.	Customer Retention	3	0.872

Source: SPSS output (2024)

Data Analysis and Results

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for passenger experience

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
To what extent does your company focus on shared and social experience of passenger in the cabin?	53	1.00	5.00	3.4906	1.18683
To what extent does your company gain competitive advantage offering an outstanding passenger experience?	53	1.00	5.00	3.3774	1.27440
To what extent has your company's passengers experience influenced your airline patronage?	53	1.00	5.00	3.0755	1.41216
Valid N (listwise)	53				

Source: Research Survey Data (2024)

Table 2 shows that, with an x-value more than 2.50, there is a strong confirmation of features of travel experience. This construct attempted to study the factors that determine respondents' impression of travel pleasure by examining the context and manifestations of airline service quality inside the target organisations. It used indicators to do this. In

addition to the minimal response disparity ($SD < 2.00$), the results confirm all three parameters of airline service excellence within the target organisations. It appears from these comments that respondents strongly believe that airline service quality is something that happens at their company.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for repeat purchase behavior

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
To what extent does customer repeatedly patronize your airline?	53	1.00	5.00	3.4340	1.36592
To what extent has customer propensity to buy again influenced their positive experience with her company's service?	53	1.00	4.00	2.9245	1.14100
To what extent has your company identified her customer groups, learned her needs and devise strategies to meet those needs?	53	1.00	5.00	3.2264	1.42291
Valid N (listwise)	53				

Source: Research Survey Data (2024)

Indicators of repeat patronage behaviour, a measure of customer patronage, show a high level of affirmation (where $x > 2.50$) according to the data in Table 3. Using indicators designed to probe respondents' understanding of customer patronage, the concept investigated the setting and expressions of repetitive patronage behaviour inside the target organisations. With a minimal discrepancy in responses ($SD < 2.00$), the results corroborate all three indicators of recurring patronage behaviour among the target organisations.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Customer Retention

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
To what extent are your customers disposed to stick to or remain with your airline?	53	1.00	5.00	3.4906	1.18683
To what extent does your customer buy more and upgrade their patronage with your airline?	53	1.00	5.00	3.3774	1.27440
To what extent does keeping current customers more lucrative than trying to bring in new ones?	53	1.00	5.00	3.0755	1.41216
Valid N (listwise)	53				

Source: Research Survey Data (2024)

Indicators of repeat patronage behaviour, a measure of client patronage, show a high level of affirmation (where $x > 2.50$) according to the data (Table 4). Using indicators designed to probe respondents' understanding of customers' patronage, the concept investigated the setting and expressions of repetitive patronage behaviour inside the target organisations. With a minimal discrepancy in responses ($SD < 2.00$), the results corroborate all three indicators of recurring patronage behaviour among the target organisations.

Table 5: Correlations between Passenger Experience and Repeat Patronage

		Passenger Experience	Repeat Patronage
Passenger Experience	Pearson Correlation	1	.792**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	53	53
Repeat Patronage	Pearson Correlation	.792**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	53	53

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Research Data output (2024)

Table 5 shows a Pearson Correlation Coefficient (rho) of 0.792 on the relationship between passenger experience and repeat patronage behaviour. This value implies that a very strong relationship exists between the variables. The direction of the relationship indicates that the correlation is positive; implying that increase in repeat patronage behaviour result from passenger experience. Similarly displayed in Table 5 is the statistical test of significance (p-value) which makes possible the generalization of our findings to the study population. From the result, the sig- calculated is less than significant level ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. Thus, passenger experience significantly relates to repeat patronage behaviour of domestic airlines in Nigeria.

Table 6: Correlations between Passenger Experience and customer retention

		Passenger Experience	Customer Retention
Passenger Experience	Pearson Correlation	1	.888**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	53	53
Customer Retention	Pearson Correlation	.888**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	53	53

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output (2024)

Table 6 shows a Pearson Correlation Coefficient (rho) of 0.888 on the relationship between passenger experience and customer retention. This value implies that a very strong relationship exists between the variables. The direction of the relationship indicates that the correlation is positive; implying that increase in customer retention results from passenger experience. Similarly, Table 6 shows the statistical test of significance (p-value) which makes possible the generalization of our findings to the study population. From the result, the sig- calculated is less than significant level ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. Thus, passenger experience significantly influences customer retention of domestic airlines in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the relationship between passenger experience and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria. The results obtained from the empirical analyses showed that a positive and statistically significant correlation exists between passenger experience and patronage. These findings agree with findings of Udoh et al. (2022) that service experience has positive significant influence on patronage of transit companies and that of Eslami (2020) that brand experience has significant effect on perceived quality and brand

awareness.

The findings also support the report that travel experience has strong influence on travel satisfaction and loyalty (Nelloh et al., 2019). The findings further support the view that timeliness, certainty, ease, helpfulness, comfort, food, and security and safety as key determinants of passenger experience and behavioural intention (Adiele & Etuk, 2017; Clemes et al., 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the level of its consistency with similar studies, this study concludes passenger experience significantly relates with customer patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria. This implies that passenger experience play a crucial role in shaping customers' decisions to continue using a particular airline.

A positive passenger experience will bring about repeat purchase and foster customer retention. In accordance with the findings and conclusion of this study, we recommend that domestic airlines in Nigeria should implement strategies at increasing passenger experience at all times in order to improve their level of patronage.

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