VIDA NEJABATI

Impact of Passengers' Flight Experience on Satisfaction, and Loyalty. The case of Full-Service Airline companies

UNIVERSITY OF ALGARVE

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PhD Thesis in Tourism

Work carried out under the guidance of:

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Statement of Authorship of the work

I declare to be the author of this work, which is unique and unprecedented. Authors and works consulted are properly cited in the text and are included in the listing of references included.

Vida Nejabati

Dedication

To my parents, Ali and Simin, and my sister, Aida, and My brothers Aidin and Ramin.

Acknowledgements

A doctoral course is a journey that needs a lot of inspiration and support from different people. I am deeply grateful to the people that inspired and encouraged me in this journey.

My first acknowledgement is to the supervisors, Professors Eugenia Ferreira and Nelson Matos, which encouragement, guidance, and wisdom were fundamental to follow the right course of action, with strength and enthusiasm.

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My grateful thanks to my friends, they are my biggest motivation, and the reason to move forward with responsibility and confidence.

Finally, my parents, since their incentive was decisive, both to start this journey, and to complete it. In addition, I would like to say thank you to my sister, Aida, my biggest inspiration.

Resumo

Na última década, muitos estudos têm-se focado no setor aéreo. O motivo deve-se à inovação tecnológica, à crescente concorrência entre as companhias aéreas e às mudanças na oferta e procura. As inovações tecnológicas transformaram a maneira como os consumidores interagem com o transporte aéreo, e influenciaram diretamente, os terminais aeroportuários, as regulamentações do setor, as operações diárias, tornando-as mais seguras e pontuais. O desenvolvimento de novas aeronaves, impulsionado pela redução de custos e necessidade de maior sustentabilidade, tem contribuído também para melhorar a experiência do passageiro aéreo.

Simultaneamente, a tecnologia tem proporcionado uma experiência mais personalizada e acessível, permitindo que os passageiros escolham a companhia aérea, adquiram bilhetes, realizem check-ins online e desfrutem de serviços personalizados a bordo. Por seu lado, a globalização e a desregulamentação do espaço aéreo foram cruciais na criação de novas rotas e na abertura de destinos nacionais e internacionais anteriormente inacessíveis ao turismo. Além disso, o surgimento de companhias aéreas de baixo custo levou à democratização do transporte aéreo, com tarifas mais acessíveis e operações simplificadas.

Neste contexto, as companhias aéreas de serviço completo (Full-Service Carriers - FSCs) enfrentam desafios crescentes para se manterem competitivas. Estas empresas precisam equilibrar a oferta de tarifas competitivas e serviços simplificados sem comprometer a qualidade. A crescente personalização dos serviços e a conscientização ambiental dos consumidores tem pressionado as FSCs a adotarem práticas mais sustentáveis, e a personalizar os seus serviços, durante toda a jornada do cliente (antes, durante e após o voo).

Este contexto, representa um desafio para as FSCs, no sentido de criarem valor adicional para atrair e reter passageiros. A solução está na oferta de experiências envolventes, personalizadas, agradáveis e memoráveis, que não só agregam valor, mas também incentivam os passageiros a pagar mais por um serviço diferenciado. Assim, o foco em

experiências ricas e sensoriais representa uma oportunidade única para as FSCs se destacarem em relação às companhias de baixo custo e manterem a sua competitividade.

Neste sentido, esta tese investiga como a experiência de voo (usando como dimensões, os tangíveis da companhia, empatia, segurança e avaliação sensorial) de companhias aéreas de serviço completo (FSC) afetam as perceções dos passageiros sobre a imagem da companhia e a sua experiência hedónica, bem como como estes fatores influenciam a satisfação e a lealdade dos passageiros. Embora exista um extenso quadro teórico sobre as companhias aéreas e os serviços, a maioria dos estudos concentra-se em atributos tangíveis e na qualidade do serviço *per se*, negligenciando a subjetividade do consumidor e a intangibilidade da experiência. A revisão de literatura inicial (Capítulo 2), utilizando a metodologia de revisão sistemática da literatura, confirmou a dependência dos estudos anteriores na qualidade do serviço e em fatores tangíveis. Também revelou que o *intangível* da experiência ainda não foi suficientemente explorado. Entre as oportunidades para investigação futura, identificaram-se fatores anteriormente estudados que permanecem relevantes e cruciais no contexto atual da experiência de voo, tais como, elementos tangíveis, empatia e segurança. Identificaram-se também outros fatores ainda por explorar, como a avaliação sensorial e o hedonismo. Estes fatores, juntamente com a imagem, foram investigados para aferir o impacto da experiência de voo na satisfação e lealdade dos passageiros no contexto das FSCs.

Para o efeito, foi realizada uma nova revisão de literatura (Capítulo 3) com o objetivo de desenvolver o modelo conceptual e as hipóteses de investigação. No total, foram propostas 6 hipóteses. A metodologia escolhida (Capítulo 4) para a pesquisa empírica, foi baseada na metodologia quantitativa. Para o efeito, um questionário semiestruturado utilizando a Escala de Likert de 5 pontos (nível de concordância), foi aplicado online, em sites (e.g., LinkedIn) e apps (e.g., WhatsApp) ligadas ao turismo. O estudo de caso, centrou-se no aeroporto internacional de IKA –Tehran Imam Khomeini, escolhido pela sua dimensão (tráfego superior a 7 milhões de passageiros por ano), natureza (serviço a FSCs de grande e pequena dimensão) e importância (principal aeroporto do Irão para tráfego internacional). Utilizando escalas anteriormente validadas e adaptadas, foi obtida uma amostra de conveniência de 402 respondentes. A análise descritiva foi realizada com o SPSS v29 e a modelagem de equações

estruturais com o SmartPLS v4. Os resultados (Capítulo 5) encontrados na análise descritiva revelaram que a maioria dos entrevistados são homens casados, com idades entre 35 e 44 anos, com mestrado, empregados (engenheiros, empresários e gestores) que utilizaram a Iran Air como companhia aérea em 2022, em voos de classe económica entre Istambul (IST) e Teerão (IKA).

Na modelagem de equações estruturais, as relações entre os construtos foram examinadas com modelagem de equações estruturais utilizando a abordagem de mínimos quadrados parciais (PLS). O modelo PLS foi analisado e interpretado em duas etapas. Na primeira etapa, o modelo de medição deve ser examinado realizando análises de validade e confiabilidade em cada uma das medidas do modelo. Para o efeito, foi necessário retirar itens, para cumprir os critérios de validade e confiabilidade. Na segunda etapa, o modelo estrutural foi verificado através da estimação das relações entre os construtos do modelo, determinando sua significância e a capacidade preditiva do modelo. Os resultados mostraram que as seis hipóteses (H1a. TANG -> IMGE, H1b. TANG -> HDNC; H2a. EMPT -> IMGE, H2b. EMPT -> HDNC; H3a. SAFE -> IMGE, H3b. SAFE -> HDNC; H4a. SENSE -> IMGE, H4b. SENSE -> HDNC; H5a. HDNC -> IMGE, H5b. HDNC -> SATS, H5c. HDNC -> LOYT; H6a. IMGE -> SATS, H6b. IMGE -> LOYT) foram aceites.

As conclusões da investigação (Capítulo 6), demonstram que os elementos tangíveis das companhias aéreas (conforto, espaço para as pernas, entretenimento de voo) a empatia (atenção pessoal dada ao passageiro), a segurança (riscos percecionados durante o voo) e a avaliação sensorial (perceção sensorial do ambiente envolvente) contribuem para uma experiência hedónica (diversão vivida durante o voo) e para o reforço positivo da imagem (crenças e impressões do passageiro) da companhia aérea, bem como para a satisfação (avaliação da experiência) e lealdade (compromisso) do passageiro. As implicações teóricas e práticas revelam que as mudanças no setor aéreo requerem uma abordagem mais intangível, explorando a relação humana, o sensorial e o hedónico, frequentemente negligenciados pela academia. Em termos práticos, recomenda-se aos gestores das companhias aéreas a utilização do marketing de experiências nas suas várias abordagens (por exemplo, marketing gustativo,

marketing olfativo) para criar uma atmosfera agradável e memorável, que distinga as FSCs das companhias de baixo custo.

Palavras-chave: Experiência de voo, avaliação sensorial, Experiência Hedónica, Imagem, Satisfação, Lealdade.

Abstract

In the last decade, the aviation sector has been the focus of numerous studies. The reason lies in the technological innovations, increased competition and changes in supply and demand of the airline industry. The technological innovations have transformed the way consumers interact with the industry (i.e., air travel) and have directly impacted airport terminals, regulations, and daily operations, making them safer and more punctual. The development of new aircraft, driven by the need to reduce costs and increase sustainability, has also contributed for an improved passenger experience.

Technology has help companies to provide their customers a more personalized and accessible experience, allowing passengers to choose airlines, purchase tickets, do check-in online, and enjoy customized services on board. Globalization and deregulation of airspace have been crucial in creating new routes and opening previously inaccessible destinations to tourism. The emergence of low-cost carriers has democratized air travel, with more affordable fares and more simplified operations.

In this context, full-service carriers (FSCs) face the challenge of balancing competitive fares and simplified services without compromising quality. Growing service personalization and consumer environmental awareness press FSCs to adopt more sustainable practices and personalize services throughout the customer journey. FSCs need to create additional value to attract and retain their passengers by offering engaging and rich experiences that encourage passengers to pay more for differentiated airline services.

This thesis investigates how key aspects of the full-service carrier (FSC) flight experience—such as airline tangibles, empathy, safety, sensory evaluation—influence passengers' perceptions of the airline's image and their hedonic experience, and how these factors affect overall passenger satisfaction and loyalty. While many studies address tangible attributes and service quality, the subjectivity and intangibility of experience have not been thoroughly explored.

To this end, a new literature review (Chapter 3) was conducted to develop the conceptual model and subsequent research hypotheses. A total of 6 hypotheses were proposed. The chosen methodology (Chapter 4) for the empirical research was based on a quantitative approach. A semi-structured questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale (level of agreement) was administered online via tourism-related websites (e.g., LinkedIn) and apps (e.g., WhatsApp). The case study focused on IKA – Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport, selected for its size (over 7 million passengers annually), nature (serving both large and small FSCs carriers), and significance (the main international airport in Iran). Using previously validated and adapted scales, a convenience sample of 402 respondents was obtained. Descriptive analysis was performed using SPSS v29, and structural equation modeling was conducted with SmartPLS v4.

The results (Chapter 5) from the descriptive analysis revealed that most respondents were married men aged 35 to 44, with a master's degree, employed (engineers, entrepreneurs, and managers) who used Iran Air in 2022 for economy class flights between Istanbul (IST) and Tehran (IKA). In the structural equation modeling, relationships between constructs were examined using partial least squares (PLS) approach. The PLS model was analyzed and interpreted in two stages. In the first stage, the measurement model was assessed through validity and reliability analyses of each measure. The removal of items was made to meet validity and reliability criteria. In the second stage, the structural model was evaluated by estimating the relationships between the model's constructs, determining their significance and predictive capability. The results showed that the six hypotheses (H1a. TANG -> IMGE, H1b. TANG -> HDNC; H2a. EMPT -> IMGE, H2b. EMPT -> HDNC; H3a. SAFE -> IMGE, H3b. SAFE -> HDNC; H4a. SENSE -> IMGE, H4b. SENSE -> HDNC; H5a. HDNC -> IMGE, H5b. HDNC -> SATS, H5c. HDNC -> LOYT; H6a. IMGE -> SATS, H6b. IMGE -> LOYT) were accepted.

The research findings (Chapter 6) demonstrate that tangible elements of airlines (comfort, legroom, in-flight entertainment), empathy (personal attention to passengers), safety (perceived risks during the flight), and sensory evaluation (sensory perception of the

environment) contribute to a hedonic experience (enjoyment during the flight) and the positive reinforcement of the airline's image (passenger beliefs and impressions), as well as to passenger satisfaction (experience evaluation) and loyalty (commitment). The theoretical and practical implications reveal that changes in the aviation sector require a more intangible approach, exploring the human, sensory, and hedonic aspects, which are often overlooked. The recommendation for managers is to adopt experience marketing to create distinctive atmospheres that set FSCs apart from low-cost carriers.

Keywords: Flight Experience, Sensory evaluation, Hedonic Experience, Image, Satisfaction, Loyalty.

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Abbreviations List

TE: Tourist Experience

PFE: Passenger Flight Experience

FP: Flight Passenger

IAC: Iran Airports Company

IATA: International Air Transport Association

ICAO: International Civil Aviation Organization

CAO: Civil Aviation Organization

RPK: Revenue Passenger Kilometer

FSCs: Full-Service Carriers

LCC: Low-Cost Carrier

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Theoretical background

The airline industry is undergoing rapid changes and facing increasing competition (Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017) partly due to the new generation of aircraft and passengers' evolving lifestyles and expectations in a technologically advanced century (Chen & Chao, 2015). In 2019, the world experienced the Coronavirus pandemic crisis, and the airline industry subsided and halted. Airports were closed, and no passengers could travel. Most countries imposed stringent travel restrictions. Safety concerns became the foremost priority for governments and the public (Hayadi et al., 2021; Noviantoro & Huang, 2021). After resuming operations, the industry is now recovering.

Nowadays, after Covid-19 airlines companies seek to offer passengers enhanced airline services and added-value experiences. The intense competition in the global airline industry has amplified the importance of customer experience and perception of service quality (Koklic et al., 2017). In the highly competitive environment of passenger airlines, identifying the factors that influence passengers' experience and satisfaction is crucial (Tsafarakis, et al., 2018). For instance, low-cost carriers (LCCs) are facing rapid growth from new airlines and a consequent increase in market competitiveness (Kim & Park, 2017). Full-service carriers (FSCs) similarly face competitive pressures, leading them to enhance their service quality and passenger's flight experience in order to retain customers and attain profitable margins (Rajaguru, 2016). These airlines (i.e., FSCs) excel at managing connecting flights by coordinating aircraft traffic across multiple network routes, and also, by offering premium services such as, ticket flexibility (e.g., allowing cancellations or date changes) that attract demand and provides them a competitive edge in the market (Kankaew, 2022).

Thus, in the past decade, many studies have addressed the airline industry, focusing on LCCs and FSCs (Rajaguru, 2016) and have extended their research to identify important elements that could impact the flight experience, such as passengers' airline selection attributes (Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017; Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016; Rajaguru, 2016). Others have addressed the

customer experience by focusing on brands (Ringle, et al., 2011, Jeng, 2016; Laming & Mason, 2014), perceived value for money, and customers' behavioral intentions (Rajaguru, 2016), loyalty (Calisir et al., 2016), and customer satisfaction (Calisir et al., 2016; Farooq, et al., 2018; Koklic et al., 2017; Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Medina-Muñoz et al. 2018; Tsafarakis et al., 2018). However, despite all the previous studies, there is still a lack of research on flight passenger experience (Shiwakoti et al., 2022). The reason lies in previous research focusing mostly on tangible attributes (such as price) or service, neglecting the intangible attributes, especially the passengers' experience. For example, Koklic et al. (2017) used terminal tangibles, referring to tangible factors in the airport terminal, and personnel service, referring to service delivery by staff for passengers as dimensions. In the same way, Farooq et al. (2018) studied the quality of airline service using an AIRQUAL scale, with results showing that customer satisfaction was influenced by all dimensions of AIRQUAL. These examples, among other, show that comprehensive studies about intangible elements (e.g., sensory evaluation) integrated into the customer experience are found to be lacking (Koklic et al., 2017; Shiwakoti et al., 2022).

1.2 Objectives of the investigation

Therefore, this study aims to assess how key aspects of the full-service carrier (FSC) flight experience—such as airline tangibles, empathy, safety, and sensory evaluation—impact passengers' perceptions of the airline's image and their hedonic experience, and how these factors, in turn, affect overall passenger satisfaction and loyalty (Figure 1.1).

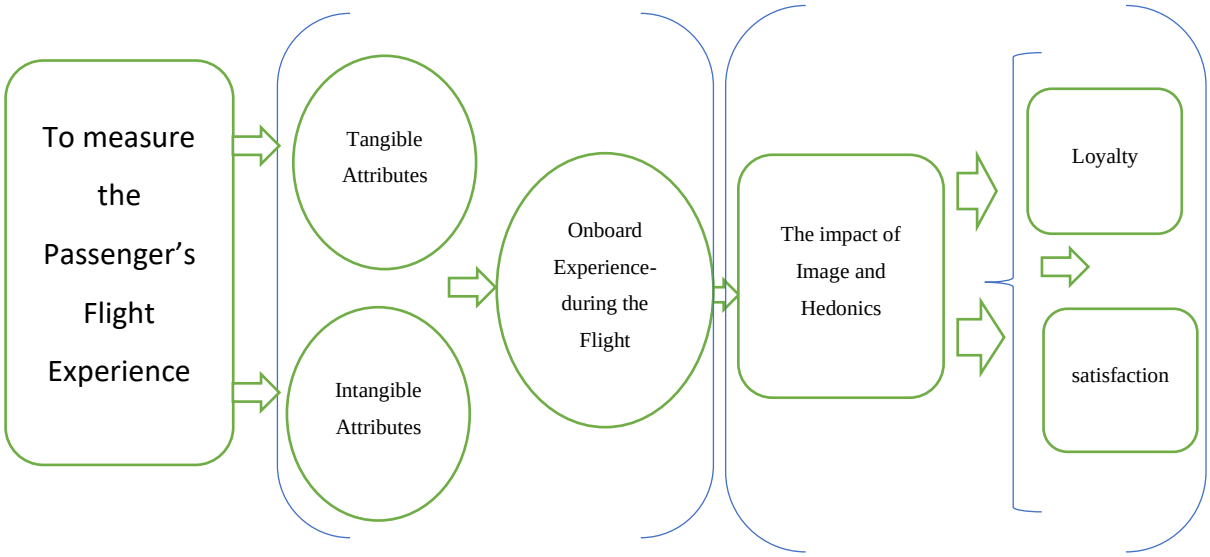
The specific goals of the study are:

- To identify the tangible and intangible dimensions of passengers' flight experience.
- To evaluate the impact of these dimensions on hedonic experiences and the airline's image.
- To explore how hedonic experiences and the airline's image influence passenger satisfaction and loyalty.

Given the importance of the airline industry in the economic development of a country and the increasing competitiveness of the air transport market, many companies are shifting their focus

from service to experience to enhance passenger satisfaction and loyalty (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Shah et al., 2020). For FSCs, which rely heavily on delivering high-quality service and experiences, this shift is particularly crucial (Farooq et al., 2018; Han et al., 2019).

Figure 1.1 Aim of the study



Source: Own Elaboration

In addition, customer loyalty is crucial to a company's success and survival, as it directly impacts its value (Halliburton & Poenaru, 2010). While some research shows that loyalty programs can positively influence customer behavior (Kim et al., 2020), the understanding of how customer experience, satisfaction, and loyalty in the airline industry affect these outcomes remains limited and underexplored (Taylor et al., 2016).

1.3 Relevance of the investigation

This research is significant because the competitive nature of the airline industry forces Full-Service Carriers (FSCs) to provide high-quality service and exceptional experiences (Farooq et al., 2018; Han et al., 2019). The 2008 global economic downturn and Covid-19 pandemic forced many airlines to reduce costs and services to survive (Liou et al., 2011). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic brought additional challenges, including travel restrictions, an economic downturn,

market liberalization, increased technology use, and structural reorganizations that led to the bankruptcy of some airlines and reduced services by others (Noviantoro & Huang, 2021).

This study has several theoretical and practical implications. It will assist airline managers in better understanding their passengers' experiences, enabling them to create more enjoyable experiences, that may differentiate them from their Low-cost carriers. By highlighting important sensations, and experiences valued by passengers, managers can achieve higher satisfaction, loyalty and potentially attract future customers by influencing their decision-making process. Offering rich and hedonic experiences will enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, as airlines need to understand which services meet their customers' needs and preferences (Noviantoro & Huang, 2021). For scholars, understanding service quality is crucial in the competitive global market, since excellent service in the form of experiences can provide a competitive advantage in the aviation industry, where passengers have high expectations compared to other service sectors (Shah et al., 2020; Noviantoro & Huang, 2021).

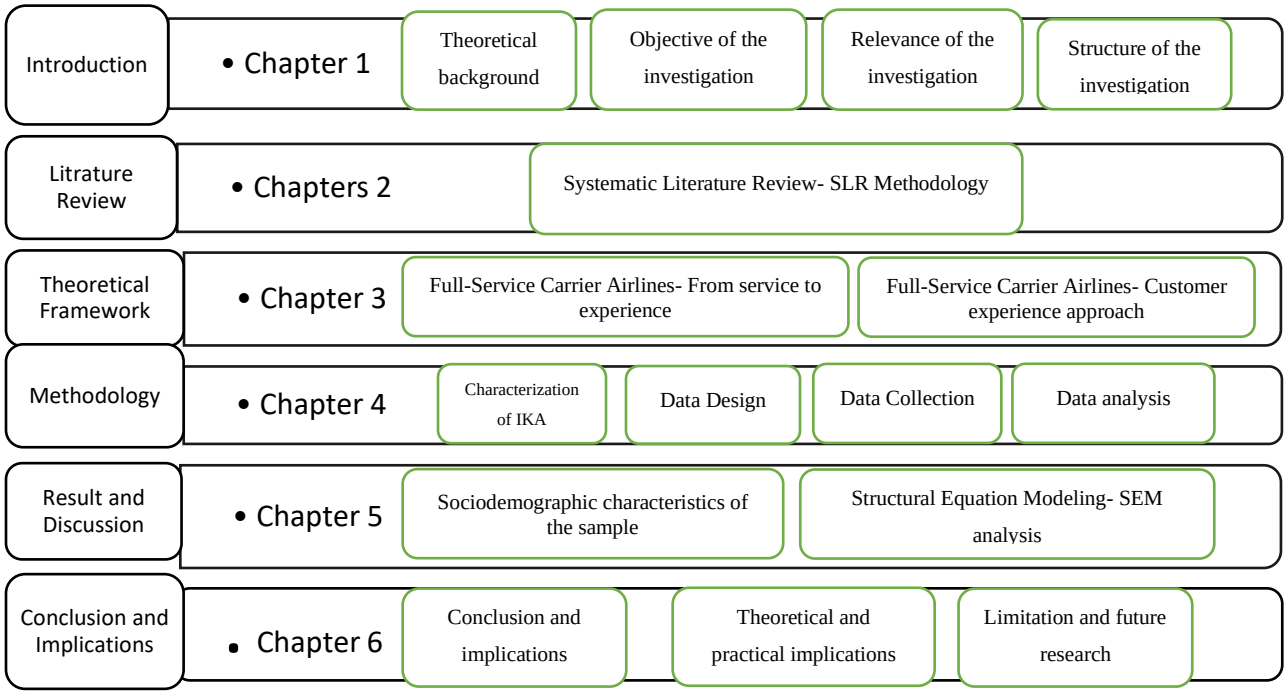
1.4 Structure of the investigation

This thesis is structured into six chapters (Figure 1.2). Chapter 1 introduces the research, providing an overview of the background, problem statement, objectives, and the relevance of the study, along with a summary of the thesis structure. Chapter 2 focuses on the Systematic Literature Review, identifying key theories, concepts, and gaps in the existing research that form the foundation of the investigation. Chapter 3 outlines the conceptual model and research hypotheses, explaining the relationships between the key variables and constructs to be explored, drawing from insights gained in the literature review.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology, including the research design, data collection methods, sampling techniques, and analytical procedures. Chapter 5 presents the results and discussion, where the empirical findings, statistical analyses, and interpretations are showcased, followed by a discussion that compares the results with the hypotheses and existing literature. Finally, Chapter 6 provides the conclusions and implications, summarizing the main findings, discussing practical

and theoretical contributions, offering recommendations for future research, and highlighting the overall contribution of the thesis to the field.

Figure 1. 2 Structure of the thesis



Source: Own Elaboration

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON FLIGHT EXPERIENCE

This chapter's aim is to understand what can be learned from the past research studies by identifying research trends and research opportunities. Moreover, this study seeks to find a common ground that may help academics and practitioners to have a better and more comprehensive understanding of this topic by identifying the gaps in the literature and directions for future research. Therefore, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach was taken since it is a reliable and reproducible methods, commonly employed within the tourism framework (deMatos, Sá & Duarte, 2021; Wattanacharoensil & La-ornual, 2019). In this regard, several authors highlight that SLR provides an organized procedure for finding, gathering, organizing, choosing, and evaluating pertinent data (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

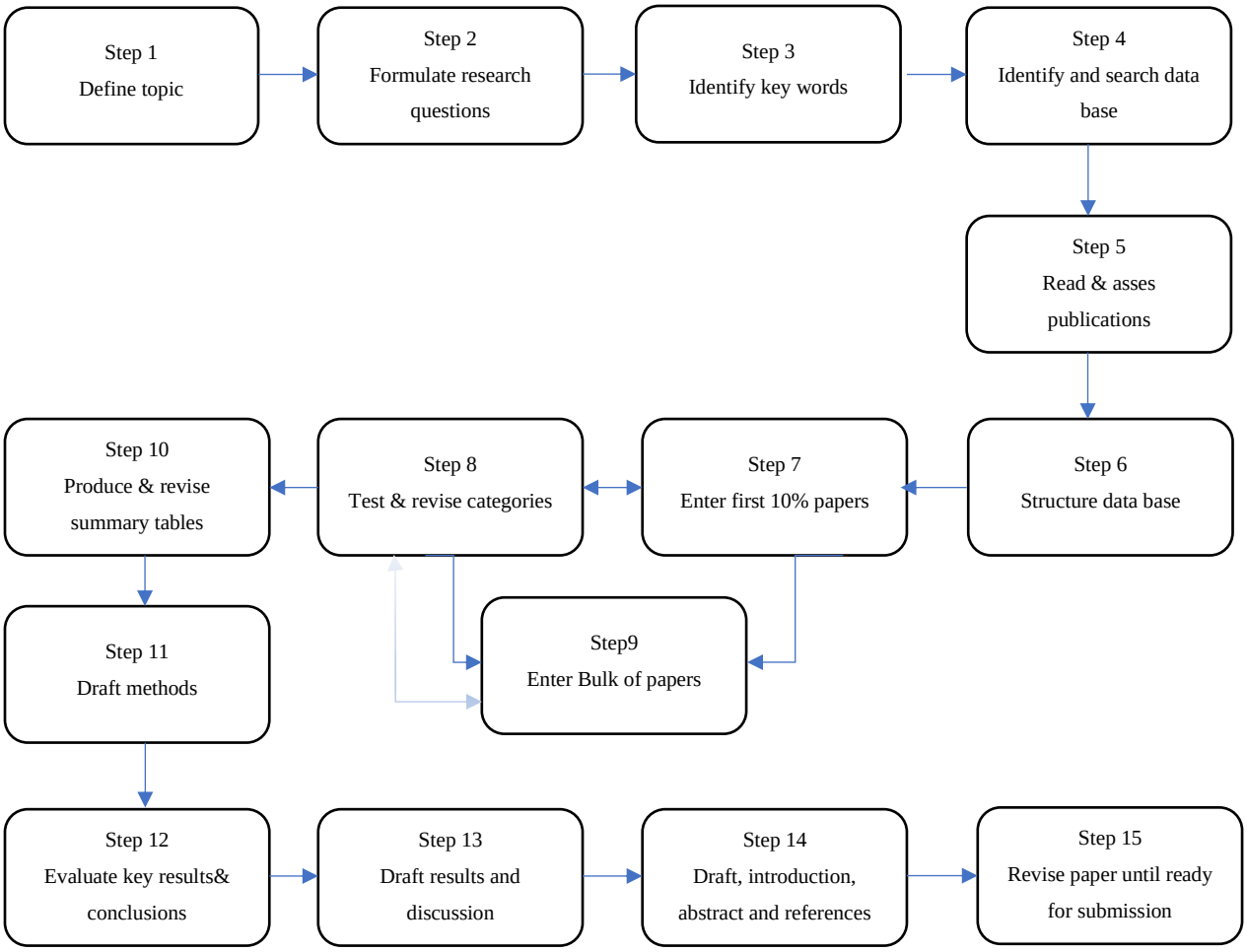
2.1 SLR Methodology

This literature review used the quantitative systematic literature review (SLR) approach. As Pickering et al. (2015: 1761) argues "The major difference between this method [SLR] and narrative reviews is that it produces knowledge about 'what we know' as well as 'what we don't know' by identifying research trends and gaps". SLR provides objective, replicable, systematic, and comprehensive coverage of a defined topic. This is intended to create a reliable knowledge base (Ginieis & Campa-planas, 2012; Spasojevic et al., 2018). Thus, the SLR involves documenting all the procedures undertaken (Ginieis & Campa-planas, 2012).

The SLR method originated in the 1990s and was initially used in the field of medicine, although more recently, it has been adopted in physical sciences (such as systems engineering) and social sciences (such as marketing, strategic innovation, and especially tourism). It differs from statistical methods such as meta-analysis, which seek to find common parameter values across studies or moderator variables that can explain differences in the values found (Ginieis & Campa-planas, 2012). There are some studies that employed SLR in this field regarding air transport (Ginieis & Campa-planas, 2012). Such literature reviews studied the intersections between air transport and tourism research (Spasojevic et al., 2018), extending into health hazards, e.g., tuberculosis and air

travel (Abubakar, 2010). However, despite these advancements in the area, there are no systematic literature reviews on passengers' flight experience and its consequences. In this context, literature reviews in social sciences have been found to generally have three functions: (i) identifying, summarizing, and critiquing current theory and methods; (ii) identifying methodological problems and gaps; and (iii) providing much-needed evidence for decision-makers when identifying and supporting priority issues – especially through funding for policy development (Pickering et al., 2014). As such, the following 15 stages were adopted in this review (Pickering & Byrne, 2013).

Figure 2.1 Systematic Literature Review steps



Source: Adapted from Pickering et al. (2014)

In step 1 of the process, the topic was defined as *passengers' flight experience*. In step 2, the research question was formulated: What are the main gaps and trends in the tourism literature

regarding airline flight experience. In Step 3, the following keywords were used for the database search based on a previous literature review: “passenger flight experience”, “airline passenger”, “air travel”, “customer experience”, “air service”. In Step 4, the recognized and comprehensive electronic scientific databases Google Scholar and Science Direct were searched. In Step 5, the papers from the databases were read and assessed. This involved an initial screening of publications based on the article titles, abstracts, and keywords to exclude duplicate papers, grey literature, and review papers (deMatos, Sá & Duarte, 2021). Papers were only included if they fitted the following criteria: original research papers published in peer-reviewed English language science journals that assessed airline selection attributes, passengers’ experience, airline passenger satisfaction, and future intentions (Han et al., 2019; Koklic et al., 2017). Review articles, books, book chapters, and grey literature (reports, conference proceedings, etc.) were excluded as we only wanted to include those which were subject to double-blind review (e.g., Wang, et al., 2017; Rajaguru, 2016). Steps 6 to 9 were iterative, involving developing and refining a series of categories used to include information about the papers and enter data for each paper. The search generated 569 potential articles for the systematic literature review. After downloading all these articles, a database was made in an Excel sheet with information about all the retrieved papers. The relevant data from the entire 569 journal articles was inputted into an Excel spreadsheet showing the author, year of publication, title of paper, abstract, keyword, category of the paper, methods, the place of study, title of journal, and page numbers. Finally, after reading the full text of the retrieved articles and double-checking the database for duplicate papers and potentially irrelevant articles to be removed (n=491), a final sample of 78 articles was selected for inductive thematic analysis, to identify, analyse and report patterns (e.g. see Table 2.5). Steps 10 to 13 consisted of producing and reviewing the summary tables, evaluating the key methods and results, and drawing the subsequent conclusion.

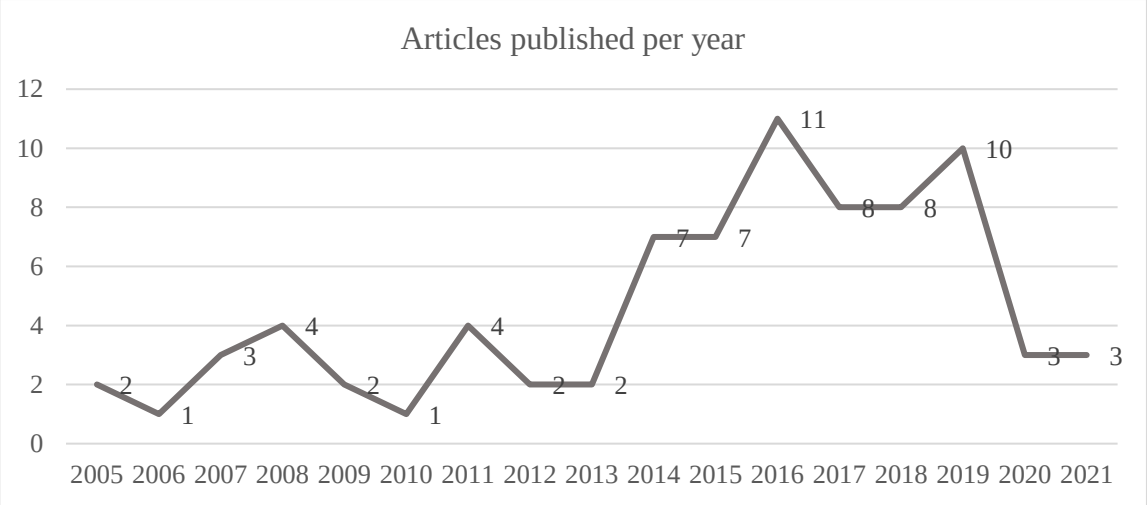
2.2 Results and discussion

2.2.1 Results

According to the database consisting of 78 papers, Figure 2.2 shows the number of articles that were published on the topic from 2005 to 2021. In the year 2005, two papers (2.56%) were published, and the number decreased to one article (1.28%) in 2006. There was a slow increase to

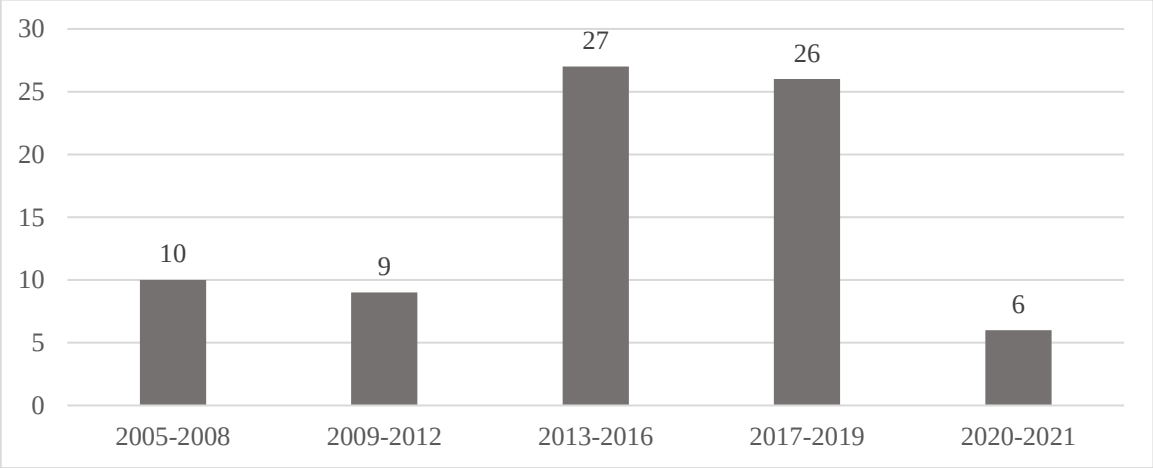
four articles (5.12%) in 2008, and then a significant decline in 2010 (one article). The number of published articles began increasing slowly from 2013 and reached a maximum in 2016, when there were 11 published articles (14%). In 2019, the number of published articles reached 10 (12.82%), during 2020 and 2021 the number of published articles decreased to 6 (7.69%). This shows (Figure 2.3) that the number of published articles increased over time during the last 15 years and declined during 2020-2021.

Figure 2.2 Passenger Flight Experience - Articles published from 2005 to 2021



Source: Own Elaboration

Figure 2. 3 Cumulative frequency of Articles Distribution



Source: Own elaboration

Next, the distribution of articles in journals shows that four journals published most of the articles on the topic. These journals were the *Journal of Air Transport Management* with 31 articles (39.74%), *Tourism Management* with five articles (6.41%), *Transportation Research Part A* with four articles (5.12%), and the *Journal of Business Research* with three articles (3.84%). This clearly illustrates that most of the articles were published in the *Journal of Air Transport Management*. Also, according to Table 2.1, 31 articles (39.74%) were published in the *Journal of Air Transportation Management*.

Table 2.1 Articles distribution from 2005 to 2021

Journal name	**Number of Articles**	**In %**
Applied Ergonomics	2	2.56
Ergonomics	2	2.56
Expert Systems with Applications	2	2.56
Future Business Journal	1	1.28
Int. J. Production Economics	1	1.28
Int.journal of aviation,aeronatics,aerospace	2	2.56
International Journal of Hospitality Management	1	1.28
International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management	1	1.28
Journal of Air Transport Management	31	39.74
Journal of Business Research	3	3.84
Journal of Destination Marketing & Management	1	1.28
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	1	1.28
Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice	1	1.28
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	1	1.28
Journal of the Eastern Asia Society for Transportation Studies	2	2.56
Journal of travel research	2	2.56
Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	2	2.56
Procedia Economics and Finance	1	1.28
Research in Transportation Business & Management	2	2.56
The Asian Journal of Shipping and Logistics	1	1.28
The TQM Journal	1	1.28
Tourism Management	5	6.41
Tourism Management Perspectives	2	2.56
Transport Review	1	1.28
Transportation Research Part A	4	5.12
Transportation Research Part E	2	2.56
Transportation Research Procedia	1	1.28

Applied Science	1	1.28
International journal of informatics classification algorithms	1	1.28
Total	78	100

Source: Own Elaboration

In Table 2.2. we can see the distribution of articles according to the year of publication. It becomes clear that Journal of Air Transportation Management is an important journal within this topic. In particular, 2016 was the most prolific year, with 8 articles (10.25%) published.

Table 2.2 Main journals article distribution

Year	Journal of Air Transportation Management	Tourism Management	Transportation Review-A	Journal of Business Research	Int Journal of Aviation	Ergonomics	Others	Total
2005	1						1	2
2006		1						1
2007	2			1				3
2008	1	1	1				1	4
2009	1						1	2
2010							1	1
2011		2					2	4
2012	1						1	2
2013				1			1	2
2014	1		1			1	4	7
2015	5						2	7
2016	8						3	11
2017	2		1	1		1	3	8
2018	2						6	8
2019	3	1	1		2		3	10
2020	3							3
2021	1						2	3
Total	**31**	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**2**	**31**	**78**

Source: Own Elaboration

Regarding the geographic location of passenger flight experience studies across the world, eight articles were devoted to studies investigating passenger experience in two or three different

destinations; for example, Freund-feinstein and Bekhor (2017) investigated two destinations, North America and Europe (Table 2.3). The results also show that 41.02% (32 articles) about passenger flight experience investigated Asia-Pacific and the East, while Europe was in second place with 18 studies (23.07%). No specific region was assigned to the studies which used websites such as Trip Advisor to collect the surveys (e.g., Korfiatis, Stamolampros, Kourouthanassis, & Sagiadinos, 2019).

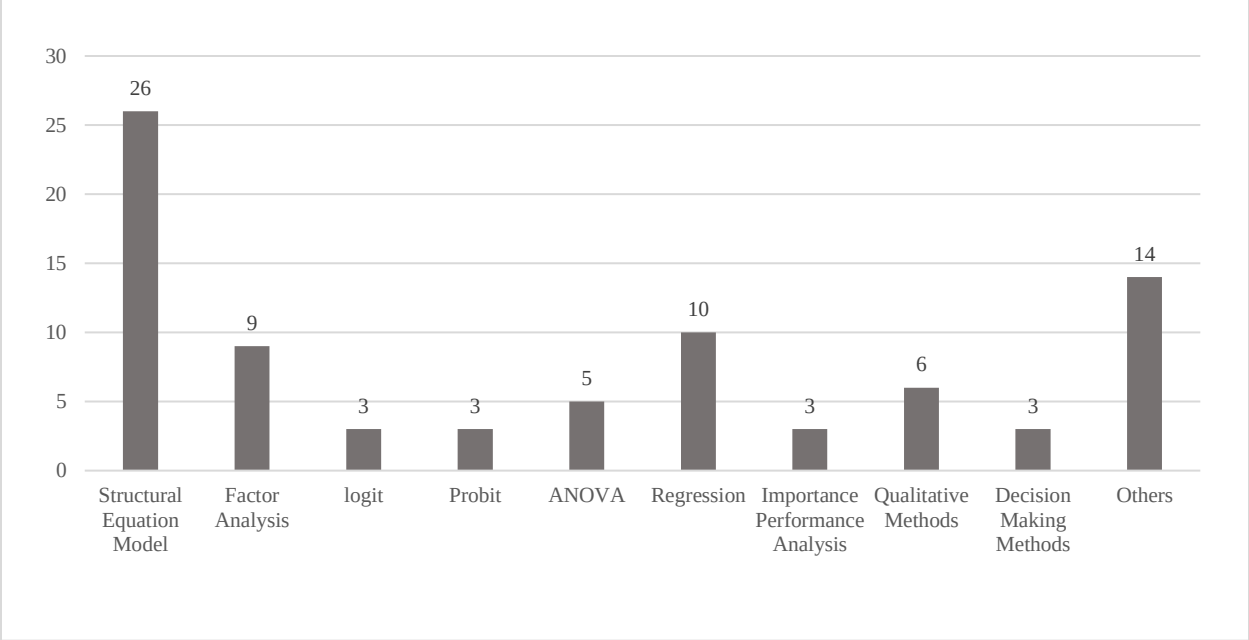
Table 2. 3 Articles with more than one region

No	Region	Article
1	Europe-North America	(Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017)
2	Singapore-Malesia-India- AUS	(Rajaguru, 2016a)
3	Frankfurt-Istanbul	(Calisir et al., 2016)
4	USA-China-AUS	(Wang et al., 2017)
5	USA-Turkey	(Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015a)
6	AUS-USA	(Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2013)
7	Europe- Middle East-Asia	(Laming & Mason, 2014)
8	Europe- North America- Middle East	(Dolnicar et al., 2011)
Articles with no region identified (websites)		
No	**Virtual place**	**Article**
1	Sky Trax Pax	(Punel et al., 2019)
2	Trip Advisor	(Sezgen et al., 2019)
3	Trip Advisor	(Korfiatis et al., 2019)
4	Online Customer Reviews (OCRs)	(Lucini et al., 2020)

Source: own elaboration

According to Figure 2.4, the most frequently used method among the 78 articles (2005–2021) was Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with 26 papers (33.33%), followed by Factor Analysis (FA) with nine papers (11.53%). Other methods (17.9%) included regression, qualitative methods (e.g., text mining and Delphi), decision making, cause-effect, and Important Performance Analysis (IPA) for example.

Figure 2.4 The number of methods used



Source: Own elaboration

Different approaches to research were investigated in our study. According to Table 2.4, there were 69 articles with quantitative approaches and just five with qualitative approaches. Two articles used mixed-method approaches (Delphi and quantitative methods).

Table 2.4 Methods

Method approach	**Method used**	**Number**
Theoretical		1
Empirical	Qualitative	5
	Quantitative	69
	Mixed-Method	2
	Experimental	1
Total		78

Source: Own Elaboration

2.2.1.1 Passenger Flight Experience - Thematic analysis

The inductive thematic analysis allowed to identify four main categories: Service Quality attributes-SQA, Passenger Flight Experience – PFE, Conceptual Model-CM, Airline selection attributes-ASA (Table 2.5).

Table 2.5 Passenger Flight Experience - Number of articles published per category

Categories	**Number of studies**	**%**
Service Quality attributes-SQA	28	35.90
Passenger Flight Experience - PFE	24	30.77
Conceptual Model-CM	17	21.79
Airline selection attributes-ASA	9	11.54
Total	78	100

Source: Own Elaboration

Category 1 – ASA (Airline selection attributes)

Regarding ASA, numerous studies (e.g., Alcántara-pilar et al., 2018; Kim & Park, 2017) were found (Table 2.6). Nevertheless, a more detailed view (Table 2.7) shows that *price* (or *fare*) was the most repeated attribute which was important for air passengers (Henderson et al., 2019; Kurtulmuşoğlu et al., 2016; Freund-Feinstein & Bekhor, 2017; Chen & Chao, 2015; Milioti et al., 2015; Chen & Wu, 2009). For example, Chen and Wu (2009) examined air passengers` choices and showed that air *fare* was the most important item for air passengers, and they preferred lower air fares to better meal services, onboard entertainment, a booking channel, and flight change; they also indicated that non-business travelers were more likely to trade off service attributes with air fare than business travelers. Other important selection items for passengers were *safety and reliability* (Kim & Park, 2017). *Scheduling* refers to items like travel availability, connection time, and flight timetable.

Table 2.6 Example of studies addressing Airline Selection Attributes (ASA)

Selection Attributes	**Region**	**Method**	**Author, year and Title of article**	**Findings**
Fare	Taiwan-China	Logit	(Chen & Wu, 2009) Exploring passenger preferences in airline service attributes: A note	Empirical results reveal both the implicit values of service attributes and the differing preferences between business and non-business travelers.
Safety and reliability; Punctuality of flight; Efficiency of problem solving of passengers; Speed of baggage transport; Direct or connecting flight; Efficiency of ground service staff; Speed of flight service info; Cabin cleanness; Convenience in making reservation; Price; Seating comfort.	China-Taiwan	Factor Analysis	(Chen & Chao, 2015) Airline choice by passengers from Taiwan and China: A case study of outgoing passengers from Kaohsiung International Airport	This study identified five key factors influencing airline selection: ground services, convenience, in-flight services, price, and travel availability. It finds that passengers from different nationalities prioritize different factors. These findings enhance existing research and offer airlines valuable insights for developing targeted marketing strategies for diverse customer groups.
Fare; Safety & reliability; Image;	Athene	Probit	(Milioti et al., 2015) Traveler perceptions and airline choice: A multivariate probit approach.	Fare, safety and reliability, and friendly and helpful staff are the most crucial factors in airline choice, while in-flight entertainment and frequent flyer programs are less important. The study highlights significant differences in the importance of these factors based on passengers' socio-demographic and trip characteristics.
Ticket price; Punctuality. Book convenience.	Turkey	Stochastic Multicriteria Acceptability Analysis-2 (SMAA2)	(Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016) A voice in the skies: Listening to airline passenger preferences.	The study's results, based on probabilities and impacts, provide airlines with insights into passenger preference criteria. Preferences vary by airline, with Airline 3 (AF3), a low-cost carrier offering optional services for additional charges, being the most preferred. Key factors influencing airline choice are ticket prices, punctuality, and booking convenience. The findings characterize passengers as rational, price-sensitive decision-makers.
Flight cost; Cancellation fee; Connection times; Punctuality percentages.	Europe-North America	CNL	(Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017) An airline itinerary choice model that includes the option to delay the decision.	The paper presents model estimation and application results for two market sectors (tourists and business travelers) and two flight types (medium-haul and long-haul). It includes expected results for various service variables such as flight cost, cancellation fees, connection times, and punctuality, as well as estimates the expected value of delaying a flight purchase.

Selection Attributes	Region	Method	Author, year and Title of article	Findings
Safety; Flight schedule; Cabin interior; Fast check-in process.	Korea	Delphi	(Kim & Park, 2017) A study on the importance of airline selection attributes by airline type: An emphasis on the difference of opinion in between Korean and overseas aviation experts	For Full-Service Carriers (FSCs), important selection attributes include safety, flight schedule, cabin interior, and fast check-in processes. For Low-Cost Carriers (LCCs), key factors are air fare, flight safety, ease of ticket purchasing, and additional charges. Additionally, the importance of airline selection attributes varies between the Korean and overseas aviation markets.
User`s emotional response; Destination marketing and branding; Online satisfaction; Perceived risk online; Perceived website usability.	Europe	Unbiased recursive partitioning	(Alcántara-pilar et al., 2018) The antecedent role of online satisfaction, perceived risk online, and perceived website usability on the affect towards travel destinations.	The results indicate that higher consumer satisfaction with online browsing and better perceived website usability lead to more positive feelings toward a travel destination. The conclusions address the practical implications for destination marketing and branding based on these findings.
Safety & punctuality; Ticket price; Attention and service during the customer journey; Other price related attributes; Flight schedule and connections; In-flight space; Airline reputation and previous experience; In-flight catering and entertainment.	Spain	One-way analysis	(Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018) Determining important attributes for assessing the attractiveness of airlines.	The results identified eight key attribute categories important to airline passengers, with safety and punctuality, ticket price, and service quality being the most significant. Additionally, factors such as air travel frequency and socio-demographic characteristics influence the perceived importance of these attributes.
Price; Reliability; Time.	New Zealand	Probit	(Henderson, et al., 2019) Airline brand choice in a duopolistic market: The case of New Zealand.	The study identifies 11 major post-consumption reasons and 10 key pre-consumption factors, related to variables such as gender, age, occupation, citizenship, travel characteristics, and international transit. Findings suggest that airline managers should prioritize fundamental attributes like price, time, and reliability to enhance market penetration and grow their market share.

Source: Own Elaboration

In this regard, Milioti (2015) found that for business travelers, the flight schedule was more important than price, while it was not an important attribute for other type of travelers. *Punctuality* is another attribute which air passengers take into account when they are making the decision to select an airline (Chen & Chao, 2015; Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017; Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018).

Table 2.7 Passenger Flight Experience -Airline Selection Attributes (ASA)

ASA	Author	Number of articles
Price/ Fare	(Kurtulmuşoğlu et al., 2016; Chen & Chao, 2015; Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017; Milioti et al., 2015; Henderson et al., 2019; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Chen & Wu, 2009)	7
Scheduling	(Chen & Chao, 2015; Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017; Henderson et al., 2019; Kim & Park, 2017; Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018)	5
Safety & Reliability	(Henderson et al., 2019; Kim & Park, 2017; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015)	4
Punctuality	(Chen & Chao, 2015; Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017; Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018)	4
In-flight services	(Chen & Chao, 2015; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015; Kim & Park, 2017)	3
Tangibles	(Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018)	3
Marketing/Branding /Reputation image	(Alcántara-pilar et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018)	3
Friendly & Helpful staff	(Alcántara-pilar et al., 2018; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018)	2

Source: Own Elaboration

Henderson et al. (2019) grouped *punctuality* with other factors like cancellation, avoiding delay, and reliability, naming this group of attributes "reliability", and found that it was a crucial factor when selecting an airline. On the other hand, Medina (2018) grouped *punctuality* with safety and found that this factor was a more important ASA. *In-flight services* consist of entertainment services, electronic media, newspapers, and magazines, and sometimes refer to related items such as in-flight entertainment, food, and beverages (Henderson et al., 2019; Kim & Park, 2017; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015; Chen & Chao, 2015; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015; Kim & Park, 2017). Factors like in-flight space, in-flight catering, and cabin

interior and named them "*airline tangibles*" (Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018). It was also found that friendly and helpful staff, along with branding, airline image, and reputation of an airline are important ASAs (Alcántara-pilar et al., 2018; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018).

Category 2 – SQA (Service Quality attributes)

In the literature, the SERVQUAL scale was used for measuring service quality (Table 2.8). Five AIRQUAL dimensions, including Assurance, were considered by seven articles (25%), Reliability with seven articles (25%), Responsiveness with six articles (21.4%), Empathy with six articles (21.4%), and Tangibles with 11 articles (39.28%). Tangibles, (39.28% of articles), was the most repeated item among all 16 factors collected from all 28 papers; it involves factors like leg room, seat comfort, food, modern aircraft, clean cabin, newspapers, and visual appearance (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Wang & Hong, 2011). Also, staff behavior with 8 articles (28.57%) and in-flight services with 6 articles (21.4%). In Table 2.9, several studies addressing Service Quality Attributes (SQA) can be found.

According to Leong et al. (2015), there are specified items to define the *assurance* (giving confidence, i.e., employees' service knowledge), *reliability* (providing trustworthy service, i.e., getting the service right first time), *responsiveness* (readiness to help passengers and efficient performance, i.e., always being willing to help), and *empathy* (willingness to offer each customer an individual service, i.e., to understand passengers' specific needs). There are other significant factors that need to be investigated, such as, *staff behaviour* with eight articles (28.57%), *price* with six articles (21.42%), and *safety* with five articles (17.85%). Ringle et al. (2011) defined *safety* as items like security checks at the airport, safety during the flight, the appearance of the airplane, and the competence of the cabin crew.

Table 2. 8 Passenger Flight Experience –-Service Quality Attributes (SQA)

Dimensions (Factors)	Author	Number of articles	%
Assurance	(Atalay et al., 2019; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Chen & Chang, 2005; Hussain et al., 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Wang & Hong, 2011; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007)	7	25
Reliability	(Atalay et al., 2019; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Hussain et al., 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Liou & Tzeng, 2007; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Wang, et al., 2011)	7	25
Responsiveness	(Chen & Chang, 2005; Hussain et al., 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Atalay et al., 2019)	6	21.4
Tangibles	(Ali et al., 2015; Atalay et al., 2019; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Feng & Jeng, 2005; Leong et al., 2015; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Vlachos & Lin, 2014, Gorzalczany et al, 2021)	11	39.28
Empathy	(Ali et al., 2015; Atalay et al., 2019; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007)	6	21.4
Price &Fare	(Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Korfiatis et al., 2019; Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Tsafarakis et al., 2018; Sezgen et al., 2019, Lucini et al, 2020)	6	21.4
Safety	(Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Liou & Tzeng, 2007; Ringle et al., 2011); (Hussain et al., 2015)	5	17.85
Staff behaviour	(Lu & Ling, 2008; Nadiriet al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Wang et al., 2011; Korfiatis et al., 2019; Osaki & Kubota, 2016; Sezgen et al., 2019, Lucini et al, 2020)	8	28.57
Punctuality	(Feng & Jeng, 2005; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Osaki & Kubota, 2016)	4	14.28
Scheduling	(Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Osaki & Kubota, 2016; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Lin & Vlachos, 2018)	4	14.28
Image	(Ali et al., 2015; Hussain et al., 2015; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007)	4	14.28
Ground Handling	(Feng & Jeng, 2005; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Lu & Ling, 2008; Osaki & Kubota, 2016, Noviantoro & Huang, 2021)	5	17.85
In-flight services	(Liou et al., 2011; Vlachos & Lin, 2014; Osaki & Kubota, 2016, Lucini et al, 2020, Gorzalczany et al, 2021, Noviantoro & Huang, 2021)	6	21.4
Ticketing& Reservation	(Elkhani et al., 2014; Feng & Jeng, 2005; Osaki & Kubota, 2016)	3	10.71
Airline reputation	(Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Vlachos & Lin, 2014)	2	7.14
In-flight Wi-Fi	(Hayadi et al., 2021; Noviantoro & Huang, 2021)	2	7.14

Source: Own Elaboration

Regarding *price*, it was found in several studies as ticket price (Jiang & Zhang, 2016), value for money (Tsafarakis et al., 2018), and product value (Sezgen et al., 2019). *Staff behaviour* covers a wide range of factors, from the skill of the flight attendants (Nadiriet al., 2008) to staff correspondence (Osaki & Kubota, 2016). Other factors, namely *punctuality*, *image*, *scheduling*, each of them is mentioned in four articles (14.2% of all articles), and *ground handling* is mentioned in 5 articles (17.85%). Lastly, as *service attributes*, ticketing and reservation, and airline reputation and inflight Wi-Fi were chosen.

Table 2.9 Passenger Flight Experience –Service Quality Attributes (SQA)- Examples of studies

Dimensions (factors)	Region	Method	Author, Year and Title of article	Findings
Responsiveness; Assurance.	Taiwan	IPA	(Chen & Chang, 2005) Examining airline service quality from a process perspective	Air travel service is split into ground and in-flight stages, with noticeable gaps between passengers' expectations and the actual service provided. Taiwanese airline passengers particularly value responsiveness and assurance from frontline staff, while the importance of tangible elements is greater for in-flight service compared to ground service.
Flight ontime; Seat reservation; Cabin facility and cabin food; Baggage delivery	Taiwan	IPA	(Feng & Jeng, 2005) Analysing Airline Service Improvement Strategy through importance and performance analysis	The results demonstrate that the proposed IPA method effectively identifies key areas for improvement in airline service. It proves to be a valuable tool for airline managers to develop targeted strategies for enhancing service quality.
Safety; Reliability.	Taiwan	Conventional Additive	(Liou & Tzeng, 2007) A non-additive model for evaluating airline service quality	This study introduces a non-additive model for assessing and improving airline service quality, comparing it with the traditional additive method. Using grey relation analysis and the simple additive weight method, it identifies safety and reliability as critical factors in service quality.
Employees; Tangibles; Responsiveness; Reliability and assurance; Flight pattern; Availability; Image; Empathy	Istanbul	Factor Analysis	(Pakdil & Aydın, 2007) Expectations and perceptions in airline services: An analysis using weighted SERVQUAL scores	This study evaluates airline service quality at a Turkish airline using SERVQUAL scores weighted by factor analysis loadings. It finds responsiveness to be the most crucial dimension, while availability is the least important. Additionally, passengers' educational level significantly influences their expectations and perceptions, with gap scores varying by educational level, flight frequency, and flight purposes.
Performance of pre-trip; operations; Dispatching performance of flights; Skills of flight attendants	China-Taiwan	ANOVA	(Lu & Ling, 2008) Cross-cultural perspectives regarding service quality and satisfaction in Chinese cross-strait airlines.	Air service quality is assessed based on passengers' backgrounds, revealing significant differences in service attribute preferences between Taiwan and Mainland China travelers on cross-strait airlines.
Airline tangible; Terminal tangible; Personnel; Empathy; Image	Cyprus	SEM	(Nadiri et al., 2008) An investigation on the factors influencing passengers' loyalty in the North Cyprus national airline.	The AIRQUAL model, which includes dimensions like airline and terminal tangibles, personnel, empathy, image, customer satisfaction, repurchase intention, and word-of-mouth communication, effectively diagnoses airline service quality perceptions. These dimensions reveal how passengers' views on various aspects of the airline influence their overall satisfaction and likelihood of repurchasing or recommending the airline.
Safety	Europe	SEM	(Ringle et al., 2011) Customer satisfaction with commercial airlines: The role of perceived safety and purpose of travel	Airline passengers view safety as a crucial factor in overall customer satisfaction. However, this perception is significantly influenced by the reasons for their travel, with varying levels of emphasis on safety depending on whether the trip is for business, leisure, or other purposes.
Assurance; Reaction; Reliability	China	Cause-effect	(Wang et al., 2011) Evaluation of customer perceptions on airline service quality in uncertainty.	Data from customers of two airlines were analysed using the DEMATEL method to examine cause-effect relationships among service quality criteria. This analysis covers the definitions of key evaluation criteria, the relationships between these criteria, and their overall impact on service quality.
Cabin services; Training flight attendants to offer heartful service	Taiwan	Grey Relation	(Liou et al., 2011) Using a modified grey relation method for improving airline service quality.	This study updates the evaluation model by using an aspired alternative instead of a referential sequence to better reflect today's competitive markets. It helps decision-makers identify gaps between actual performance and desired levels and introduces a new ranking index to assess airlines' competitiveness in service quality.

Dimensions (factors)	Region	Method	Author, Year and Title of article	Findings
Service quality: Tangibles; Reliability; Responsibility Assurance; Empathy	US-Turkey	CFA	(Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015) A cross-cultural investigation of airlines service quality through integration of Servqual and the Kano model.	The Servqual gap scores are negative in both the USA and Turkey across all service quality areas, showing that customer perceptions are significantly below their expectations. Differences in service quality attributes between the two countries highlight the need for standardization of certain elements, particularly for the international market.
Value for money Travel info	Greece	MUSA	(Tsafarakis et al., 2018) A multiple criteria approach for airline passenger satisfaction measurement and service quality improvement	The MUSA method's effectiveness in measuring and analyzing passenger satisfaction is demonstrated through its application to Aegean Airlines. The results show that passengers of a full-service airline prioritize certain aspects highly, with interesting patterns emerging across various segmentation schemes.
Value for money Staff Passenger experience Food Legroom	Trip Advisor	STM	(Korfiatis et al., 2019) Measuring service quality from unstructured data: A topic modelling application on airline passengers' online reviews	By capturing the dominant drivers of satisfaction and their dynamics and interdependencies, the results reveal the distinctiveness of the low-cost aspect of airline competition. This highlights how low-cost carriers succeed in the market despite differing service quality dimensions.
Friendliness and helpfulness Product value Service attributes (seat comfort, legroom, staff behaviour, luggage /flight disruption)	Trip advisor	Text Mining	(Sezgen et al., 2019) Voice of airline passenger: A text mining approach to understand customer satisfaction	Fundamental differences exist in the drivers of passenger satisfaction based on travel class and airline type. For Economy Class travelers, staff friendliness and helpfulness are crucial, while premium cabin passengers prioritize product value. Low-cost airline travelers focus on low price. Across all groups, service attributes are the primary cause of passenger dissatisfaction.
Seat Comfort; Onboard services; Type of travel.	-	Multi objective evolutionary optimization algorithms	(Gorzalczany et al, 2021) Business Intelligence in Airline Passenger Satisfaction Study A Fuzzy-Genetic Approach with Optimized Interpretability-Accuracy Trade-Off	The study presents a fuzzy-genetic business-intelligence solution with high interpretability and accuracy for assessing airline passenger satisfaction. It examines the impact of overlapping input attributes to identify their true influence hierarchy. The approach's effectiveness is validated through extensive cross-validation across different data splits.
In flight wi-fi; Online booking	-	Random forecast algorithm	(Hayadi et al, 2021) Predicting Airline Passenger Satisfaction with Classification Algorithms	The study shows that using the Random Forest Algorithm with a threshold of 0.7 achieves 99% accuracy. An important factor in customer satisfaction identified is Inflight Wi-Fi Service.

Source: Own Elaboration

Category 3 – CM (CONCEPTUAL MODELS)

A total of 17 theoretical papers were found, with conceptual models presented and explained about air passenger flight experience using five components (constructs): passenger flight experience attributes (or antecedents), perceived value, customer satisfaction, behavioral intentions, and loyalty. Table 2.10 shows the conceptual models' components.

Table 2.10 Passenger Flight Experience – conceptual models' components

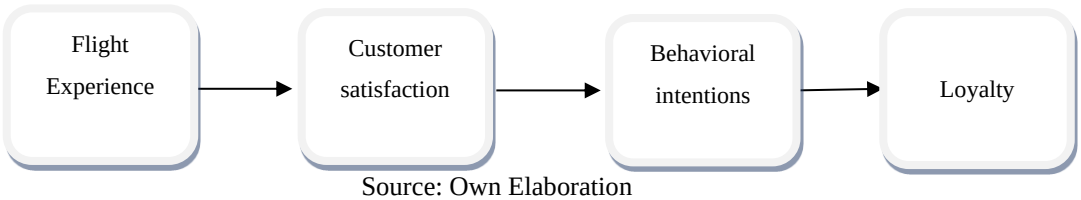
Year	Author	AIRQUAL	Flight Experience or antecedents	Perceived Value	Customer Satisfaction	Behavioral Intentions	Loyalty	Comprehensive Conceptual Model
2006	(Gallarza & Gil, 2006)	No	Efficiency, service quality	yes	yes	no	yes	no
2007	(Gouantas & Gouantas, 2007)	No	Feeling, thinking, emotion, tangible	no	yes	yes	no	no
2008	(Chen, 2008)	No	Expectation and performance	Yes	yes	yes	no	no
2010	(Huang, 2010)	Yes	Service quality	yes	yes	yes	no	no
2011	(Ringle et al., 2011)	No	safety	no	yes	no	yes	no
2014	(Suki, 2014)	No	Airline tangible, terminal tangible, empathy	no	yes	yes	no	no
	(Kuo & Jou, 2014)	No	Service quality gain, service quality loss	yes	yes	yes	no	no
2015	(Hussain et al., 2015)	Yes	expectations, image	yes	yes	no	yes	no
	(Leong et al., 2015)	Yes	no	no	yes	no	yes	no
2016	(Rajaguru, 2016)	No	Value for money, service quality	no	yes	yes	no	no
	(Calisir et al., 2016)	Yes	price	no	yes	no	yes	no
	(Hapsari et al., 2016)	No	Service quality	yes	yes	no	no	no

	Author	AIRQUAL	Flight Experience or antecedents	Perceived Value	Customer Satisfaction	Behavioral Intentions	Loyalty	Comprehensive Conceptual Model
2017	(Koklic et al., 2017)	No	Airline tangible and quality of personnel	no	yes	yes	no	no
	(Wang, So, & Sparks, 2017)	No	TES Quality	no	yes	yes	no	no
	(Wang, Kao, Ngamsiriudom, 2017)	No	no	no	no	yes	no	no
2018	(Hwang & Ok, 2018)	No	values	no	no	yes	no	no
2019	(Bezerra & Gomes, 2019)	No	Air service quality items	yes	yes	no	yes	no
	(Chen,et al., 2019)	Yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	no
	(Han et al., 2019)	No	Quality of food and beverage	no	yes	yes	no	no
	Shah et al, 2020	yes	Ticket price Advertisement Past experiences	no	yes	yes	no	no
Total		6		8	17	13	6	0

Source: Own Elaboration

Based on our database collected, in 85% of the conceptual papers, customer satisfaction (85%) was considered. The second most common variable was behavioral intentions (65%), followed by perceived value (40%), and loyalty (30%). Most conceptual models (50%) used three variables, such as: a) passenger flight experience attributes (or antecedents), b) customer satisfaction, and c) behavioral intentions. It was also found that AIRQUAL was cited in 30% of the articles. In addition, a common conceptual model found in the literature would have flight experience, customer satisfaction, behavioral intentions and loyalty, and would assess their relationship (see Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5 Example of a recurring conceptual model found in the literature



Source: Own Elaboration

Category 4 – PFE (Passenger Flight Experience)

Thirteen articles directly investigated Passenger Flight Experience. They assessed sensorial factors that are a priority for air traveler comfort, like space, noise, behavior of personnel (Hankovská, 2018). It was also found that peace of mind and pleasure (Ahmadpour et al., 2016), along with cultural influences (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2013) and brand perception (Alagöz & Ekici, 2014) impacts on passengers' loyalty (Laming & Mason, 2014).
Moreover, the ergonomics concerns of the airplane seem to be related with passengers' assessment of the flight experience (Ahmadpour et al., 2014; Patel & D'Cruz, 2018; Poria et al., 2010; Torkashvand et al., 2019; Vendel et al., 2019; Vink et al., 2012).

2.2.1.2 Tangible and intangible Factors

Table 2.11 sheds light on crucial factors for air passengers. We classified these factors as tangible or intangible. Passengers value highly the physical aspects of their experience, i.e., tangibles, such as food and drink. The intangibles related to non-physical factors, such as safety, staff behavior, convenience in booking or service attentiveness.

Table 2.11 Passenger Flight Experience – Tangible and Intangible factors

Tangible	Intangible
Inflight services (Chen & Chao, 2015; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015; Kim & Park, 2017; Liou et al., 2011; Vlachos & Lin, 2014; Osaki & Kubota, 2016) **Tangibles (Seating comfort, Cabin cleanness, Legroom, Food and drink, Aircraft)** (Ali et al., 2015; Atalay et al., 2019; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Feng & Jeng, 2005; Leong et al., 2015; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Vlachos & Lin, 2014; Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018)	**Reliability** (Atalay et al., 2019; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Hussain, et al., 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Liou & Tzeng, 2007; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Wang, et al., 2011) **Assurance** (Atalay et al., 2019; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Chen & Chang, 2005; Hussain, et al., 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Wang & Hong, 2011; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007) **Responsiveness** (Chen & Chang, 2005; Hussain et al., 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Atalay et al., 2019) **Empathy** (Ali et al., 2015; Atalay et al., 2019; Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007) **Price** (Kurtulmuşoğlu et al., 2018; Chen & Chao, 2015; Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017; Milioti et al., 2015; Henderson et al., 2019; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Chen & Wu, 2009; Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Korfiatis et al., 2019; Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Tsafarakis et al., 2018; Sezgen et al., 2019)

Tangible	Intangible
	Staff behavior (Alcántara-pilar et al., 2018; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Lu & Ling, 2008; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Wang et al., 2011 ; Korfiatis et al., 2019; Osaki & Kubota, 2016; Sezgen et al., 2019) **Safety** (Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Liou & Tzeng, 2007; Ringle et al., 2011; Hussain et al., 2015; Henderson et al., 2019; Kim & Park, 2017; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015) **Image** (Ali et al., 2015; Hussain et al., 2015; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Alcántara-pilar et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018) **Punctuality** (Feng & Jeng, 2005; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Osaki & Kubota, 2016; (Chen & Chao, 2015; Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017; Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018) **Ground Handling** (Feng & Jeng, 2005; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Lu & Ling, 2008; Osaki & Kubota, 2016) **Scheduling** (Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Osaki & Kubota, 2016; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Lin & Vlachos, 2018; Chen & Chao, 2015; Freund-feinstein & Bekhor, 2017; Henderson et al., 2019; Kim & Park, 2017; Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018)

Source: Own Elaboration

2.2.2 Discussion

The study's findings reveal a general increase in the number of studies on Passenger Flight Experience (PFE) over the past decade, with a brief decline during 2020 and 2021, likely due to the impact of COVID-19. The growing interest in PFE is evident from the publications in industry-specific journals, such as the Journal of Air Transport Management. While this highlights the field's strength within specialized domains, it also exposes a weakness: a lack of integration with more multidisciplinary and broader scientific areas. Additionally, the results show a concentration of studies in the Asia-Pacific region and the East. Although this aligns with the growth of the airline industry in these regions, it also underscores the need to investigate other parts of the world. Methodologically, there is a notable focus on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Factor Analysis.

The inductive thematic analysis identified four key research areas: Service Quality Attributes (SQA), Passenger Flight Experience (PFE), Conceptual Models (CM), and Airline Selection Attributes (ASA). This classification is a significant contribution of this study, as these areas offer insights into the PFE concept. The findings show that SQA still dominates, indicating a continued emphasis on tangible elements. However, the increasing number of studies on PFE suggests growing scholarly interest in exploring the passenger experience. The limited research on ASA presents an opportunity to better understand how passengers choose airlines and how they experience their flights. Despite the growth in air transportation studies, few have focused

specifically on PFE. Most research emphasizes service quality attributes and tangible factors, such as price and scheduling, while giving scant attention to intangible elements like emotions, sensory experiences, engagement, entertainment, enjoyment, and psychological states (e.g., Flow). This represents a critical oversight, as PFE encompasses both tangible and intangible aspects.

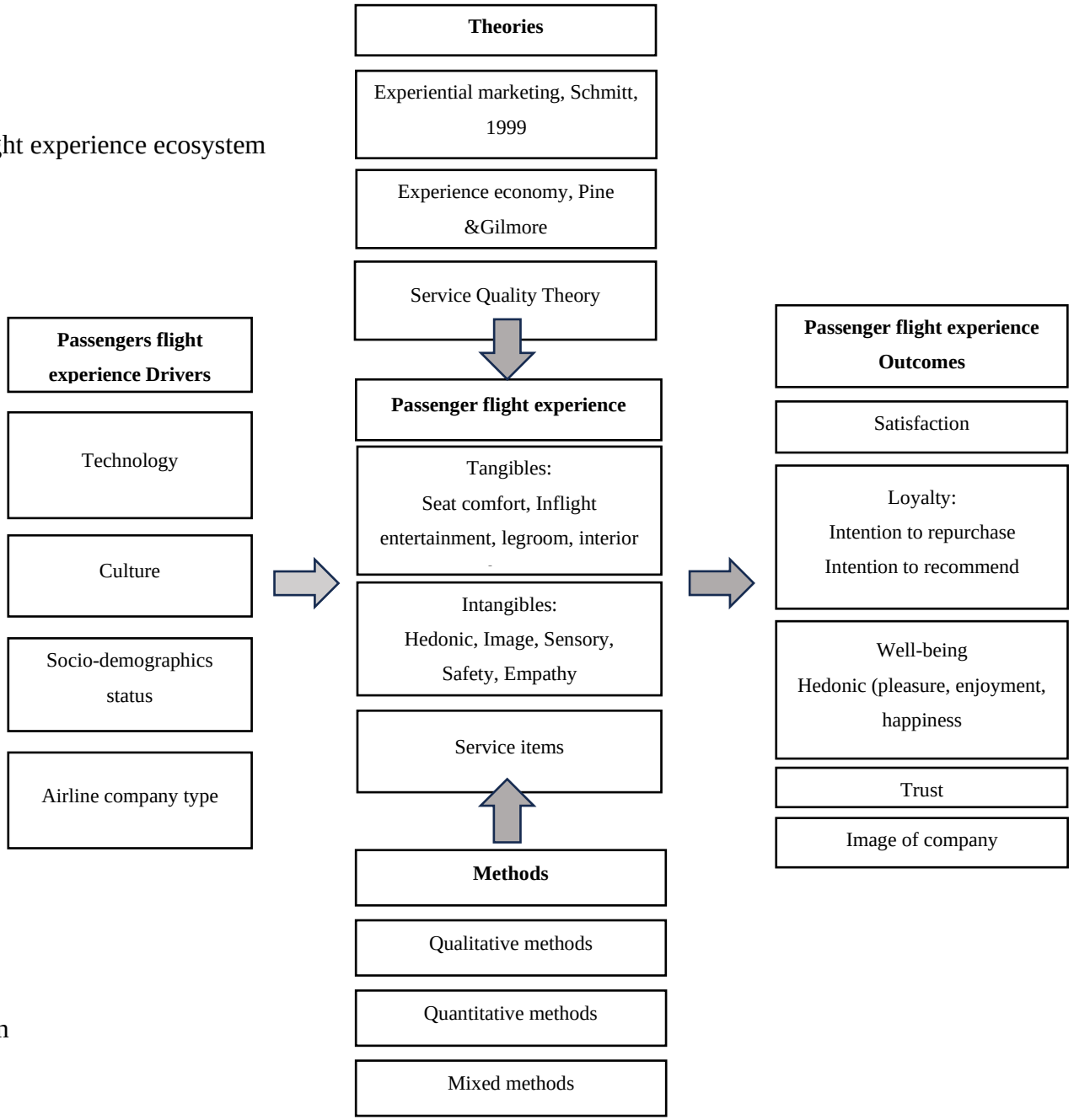
2.3 Conclusions and Implications

This study investigates the passenger flight experience, seeking to extend its understanding within the underexplored domains of tourism. Through a systematic literature review (SLR) of 78 articles published between 2005 and 2021, this research identifies key gaps and trends in passenger flight experience (PFE) studies.

Regarding the key trends existing literature relies mostly on air tangible factors, and there is a lack of studies focusing on passenger flight experience. Despite tangible factors being clearly important to passengers when selecting and flying with the airline, neglecting how passengers' sense, feel, think, act, and relate (Schmitt, 1999) during their airline journey is contrary to the market demand (Laming & Mason, 2014). Our findings also show a high dependency on quantitative methods, which cannot fully capture the complexity and dynamic nature of the passengers' experiences. A broader methodological approach and a focus on under-studied regions could help to develop and get a more complete picture of what truly matters to air passengers.

The findings of this review have several implications. For researchers, it highlights the need for expanding the study of PFE to include under-explored concepts (see Figure 2.6) like sensory marketing, hedonism, experience economy, and psychological well-being offers rich opportunities for theoretical advancement. For industry practitioners, understanding passenger experiences, before, during and after the flight, and its consequences (i.e., satisfaction and loyalty) helps to make more informed decisions, design better service strategies, and get more customer engagement and loyalty, In conclusion, while scholars are moving in understanding the passenger flight experience, there remain important gaps that must be addressed to fully grasp the complexity of this phenomenon. By broadening the scope of research and employing diverse methodologies, in particular qualitative, future studies can contribute to a more holistic understanding of PFE and its impact on satisfaction, loyalty, and airline performance.

Figure 2.6 Passenger flight experience ecosystem



Source: Own elaboration

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

In this chapter, the theoretical framework supporting the conceptual model and research hypotheses are examined. FSCs need to provide their passengers the best experience possible, led to a change in the modus operandi and approach. However, passengers flight experience involves more than service and tangible elements. It requires an integrative and holistic approach involving airline tangibles, sensory evaluation, empathy and safety perception as dimensions of flight experience, to assess their impact on airline image and hedonic experience, but also, on satisfaction and loyalty. As noted previously, passengers compare services, particularly in the airline industry, and their expectation of airline services (and experience) is higher than other service industries (Noviantoro & Huang, 2021). Despite the difficulty in understanding and comprehending such complex and subjective concept, managers of FSCs should continue to improve their airline flight experience, since it is important for creating and maintaining customer preference (i.e., satisfaction) and loyalty (Chauhan et al., 2017).

3.1 Full-Service Airline Carriers – From service to experience

In recent years, full-service airline passengers' decisions regarding the choice of the airline, considers not only reasonable airfares, but also the quality of products and services provided by the airlines (Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016). According to Oxford Dictionary (2009: 502) definition of service in business is" any activity or benefit that one party can offer to another that is intangible and does not result in the transfer of ownership of any physical object". The typical service business provides intangible products, such as accounting, banking, consulting, cleaning, landscaping, education, insurance, treatment, and transportation services (Law, 2009).During these services, the quality of the service provided is a key element for customer satisfaction. Service quality refers to the difference between the service expected and the customer's perceptions of the actual service delivered (Farooq et al., 2018). Recently, service quality has received an intense attention from researchers in the field of service marketing and business development (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Calisir et al., 2016; Ekiz et al., 2006; Han et al., 2019; Hussain, Nasser,

et al., 2015; Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Kuo, 2011). Also, quality in airline service is difficult to describe and measure due to its characteristics (i.e., heterogeneity, intangibility, perishability and inseparability) which means that only the customer can truly define service quality in the airline industry (Huang, 2009). Specifically, service quality has been explored in various industries, such as mobile banking, health management, telecommunication, online education, hoteling, tourism and airline (Farooq et al., 2018). Customers compare actual service delivery with their own expectations, which are shaped by their prior experience, memories and/or word of mouth (Farooq et al., 2018; Saha & Theingi, 2009). This comparison helps to determine customers' perceived service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Over the past years there has been many researchers (e.g., Parasuraman et al., 1985) investigating service quality. The method to do this has been using the SERVQUAL scale (Figure 3.1) to measure service quality by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988).

Figure 3.1. Service Quality Scale- SERVQUAL

Source: from Parasuraman et al. (1988)

This scale is among the most known, with initially ten dimensions: 1) tangibles, 2) reliability, 3) responsiveness, 4) understanding the customers, 5) access, 6) communication, 7) credibility, 8) security, 9) competence and 10) courtesy, it would later be reduced to 5 dimensions (Figure 3.1):

1) tangibles (physical facilities, equipment), 2) reliability (performing and delivering the service promised accurately), 3) responsiveness (prompt response and service in helping customers), 4) assurance (knowledge and courtesy of the staff to generate trust) and 5) empathy (caring and individual attention to each customer) (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

In this regard, Park et al., (2005) emphasized that only five dimensions of SERVQUAL scale are not suitable for measuring all dimensions of service quality in airline industry as they do not involve industry specific (i.e., Airlines industry) aspects of service quality. This concept was adapted for airline industry and named AIRQUAL. Bari et al., (2001) developed a scale with 5 dimensions, namely, airline tangibles, terminal tangibles, personnel, empathy and image. Several studies (Monoarfa, Usman, & Tausyanah, 2020; Rady, 2018) done since, have found AIRQUAL (along with other variables) can help measure service quality which impacts significantly on passengers satisfaction (e.g., Nadiri et al., 2008). Although some researchers have used this scale for assessing service quality in airline industry; yet there are number of critiques reporting its inability to capture all dimensions of airlines' service quality (Ali et al., 2015; Farooq et al., 2017; Ostrowski et al., 1993).

Moreover, services are typically defined as offerings that are intangible, but market offerings are a combination of tangible and intangible elements (Camilleri, 2024). While services are characterized by more intangible elements, goods are characterized by tangible elements(Camilleri, 2024). But an airline offers intangible services which include airplanes, in-flight meals, boarding gate facilities and so on, which produce some services with tangible perceptions for air passengers (Zhou et al., 2024). So, airlines deliver services with more tangible attributes than other industries (Miller & Foust, 2003).

Different concepts are used to define tangibility and intangibility. Bell (1981) defined the levels of tangibility by levels of customer involvement and found that airline shuttles, differentiated airline services, and charter air carrier services were more tangible in nature. Lovelock (1996) defined tangibility/intangibility according to the concept of people processing; these services require the consumer’s physical presence during the service delivery in order to receive the desired benefits. Bowen and Bowers (1986) created an alternative classification according to the overall

level of consumer uncertainty: higher levels of uncertainty were associated with higher levels of intangibility and customer contact. Miller and Foust (2003) found that high level imagery and psychological benefits of service attributes perceived tangibility. Moreover, Park et al. (2005) argues the existence of industry-specific operations of the airline industry (e.g. online ticketing, check-in, luggage allowance, boarding service and on-board facilities) that distinguish this industry from those of other (service-oriented) industries.

Other scholars (e.g., Chang & Yeh, 2002; Cunningham et al., 2004; Farooq et al., 2017; Namukasa, 2013; Radovic-Markovic et al., 2017; Wu & Cheng, 2013) have suggested that customers' expectations in the airline industry are formed at the moment-of-truth (i.e., key interactions between airline and customer that may shape or influence its perception of the service and experience being offered by the company), experiencing the service. The authors claim that by interacting with the distinct departments, e.g., reservation department (telephonic communication, ticketing experience, baggage handling system), these *moments of truth* occur. During these experience encounters customers perception of the experience influence their evaluation (Jayakumar, Dwivedi, 2023). As Table 3.1 shows, there are many attributes to consider when choosing, experiencing and assessing the airline experience (Calisir et al., 2016; Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017; Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Rajaguru, 2016).

Among these, Kim and park (2017) considered airline selection attributes as reservation, ticketing, check-in, baggage handling, cabin facilities, in-flight service and aircraft operation, in Korean and Overseas aviation markets. Others provided clues about differences between Full-Service Career and Low-cost career, and their impact in customer satisfaction (Koklic et al., 2017). The results show the difference of importance of airline selection attributes between FSCs and LCCs. Moreover, it showed that customer's airline selection attributes are different by aviation market. Table 3.1 shows the extensive elements customers consider before the flight experience and its outcomes. Chen and Chao (2015) on the other hand, went further regarding the number of choice factors for passengers' choices.

Table 3.1 Airline attributes used previously in empirical studies.

Categories-Dimensions	Example of Attributes used	Authors
Quality of Services	Reservation, Ticketing, Check in, Baggage Handling, Cabin facilities,	Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017; Kurtulmusoglu et al., 2016; Tsafarakis et al., 2018; Rajaguru, 2016; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Pan & Truong, 2018
Airline Operation	Safety and reliability, Punctuality	Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017
Marketing /Promotional strategies	Frequent Flyer, Specific rewards, Experience with an airline, Airline alliances, Airline image and reputation Airline scale, Airline promotion, Friends/ agents recommendation	Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017; Pan & Truong, 2018
In-flight service	In-flight services in general, In-flight food and beverage service, In-flight entertainment, Cabin crew service Other services	Chen & Chao, 2015; Kos Koklic et al., 2017; Tsafarakis et al., 2018; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018
Flight condition	Flight schedule, Flight frequency Direct or connecting flight, Connection until destination, Destination airport Flight quality	Chen & Chao, 2015; Tsafarakis et al., 2018; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018
Ticket Price and promotional prices	Ticket price, promotional prices	Chen & Chao, 2015; Tsafarakis et al., 2018; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018; Pan & Truong, 2018; Rajaguru, 2016;
Customer Services	User Friendliness of website, Efficiency of problem solving of passenger, Speed in providing flight information	Chen & Chao, 2015; Tsafarakis et al., 2018
Ground Services	Ground service in general, Check-in service, Seat assignment, Baggage handling, Waiting time, Efficiency of ground services staff	Chen & Chao, 2015; ; Kim & Park, 2017; Tsafarakis et al., 2018; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018
Airline reliability and safety	Reliability of the airline, Safety in baggage handling	Chen & Chao, 2015

Source: Own Elaboration

The results demonstrated that important factors for passengers are price, flight scheduling, safety and reliability of the airline, In-flight meal, In-flight entertainment, Seating comfort, service attitude of flight attendants, reliability and safety in baggage handling, speed of baggage transport, convenience in making reservations, image and reputation of airline. In this study, despite the flight experience not been evident, several intangible dimensions (e.g., image and reputation of airline) were presented. In effect, Chen and Chao (2015) found passengers of different nationalities to be concerned with safety and reliability, punctuality and efficiency in solving passengers' problems when selecting airlines. Medina et al. (2018) found in the same context, the most important categories for airline attractiveness to be safety and punctuality, ticket price, attention

and service during the customer journey. Chen and Wu (2009) illustrated that non-business travelers are more likely to trade-off service attributes with airfare than business traveler. The list of attributes consists of fare, meal service, entertainment service, booking channel, flight change. Airline attributes are crucial factors that influence passengers' airline experience, which in turn influence of passengers' satisfaction. Therefore, airline attributes are an important variable in an airline company's marketing strategy (Kim & Park, 2017).

3.2 Full-service Carriers - Customer experience approach

Nowadays, customer experience is an emerging opportunity in this fast-paced, highly competitive world, especially in the era of the experience economy (Chauhan et al., 2017). Due to the increasing growth of airline passengers, customer experience is emerging as a critical element in civil aviation sector, and it is a crucial element for airlines to offer better experiences to passengers to gain a competitive advantage (Chauhan et al., 2017). Experiential marketing conception contains the applications oriented for increasing marketing share within customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Alagöz & Ekici, 2014). However, customer experience is a multidimensional construct, that directly influences service quality, customer relationship and customer satisfaction (Chauhan et al., 2017). For instance, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) argued that experience is a multi-dimensional structure and so that it should be treated in holistic perspective. As Schmitt (1999) notes, consumer experience, as a concept and as an empirical phenomenon, is not as established as other consumer and marketing concepts such as choice, attitudes, consumer satisfaction, or brand equity. In this regard, Batat (2022: 4) argues that "…consumption as an experience implies a more holistic approach that incorporates, alongside tangible qualities, certain intangible dimensions (e.g., hedonic, social, symbolic, ideological), which have been ignored until now". Similarly, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) emphasize that experience encompasses two key aspects of consumer behavior, the hedonic and the emotional. For Becker (2018: 466), consumer experience is "*as emotional/affective, cognitive, sensorial, relational/social and physical/behavioral responses to stimuli during the consumer journey*".

However, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) pointed out that experiential components generate diverse and distinct dimensions, leading to an extensive number of perspectives since their seminal

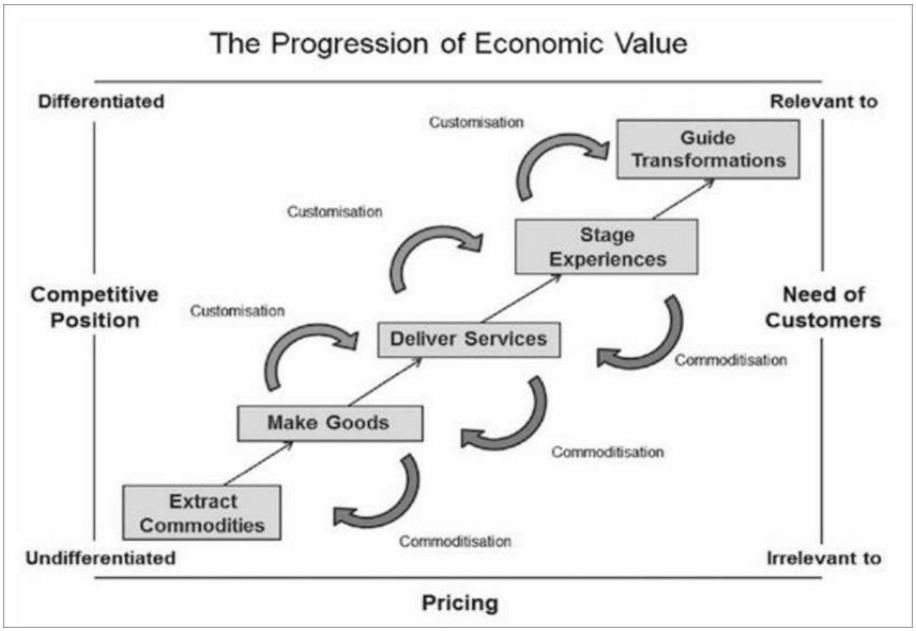
study in 1982. In their study, they addressed the hedonic consumption and argued the need for companies to offer experiences focusing on the symbolic, hedonic and subjective nature of consumption. Consumers desire and seek fantasies, feelings (positive) and fun during the consumption of products and services (e.g., going to a restaurant) (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). This contradicted traditional view of consumption, in which the focus was on the functional features and benefits of products (in their category) narrowing the competition, since customers were viewed as rational decision makers (Schmitt, 1999). On the contrary, the experiential marketing theory focusing on customer experience, sees consumers' consumption as a holistic experience in which the emotions are fundamental to engage consumers in creating richer experiences and long-lasting memories (deMatos, Duarte & Sá, 2024; Hosseini, Macias & Garcia, 2023; Kim et al., Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999). This new approach to the consumer behavior, focusing on the consumption and not the transaction, led to two important theories.

3.2.1 Main theories of customer experience

In the 1998 and 1999, the Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) and the Experiential Marketing (Schmitt, 1999) were presented. Regarding the former, experience economy, it has been a foundational paper to understand customers' experiences in hospitality and tourism (Kim & So, 2022). Pine and Gilmore (1998) argue that customers moved beyond commodities, goods, and services, and what unique, distinctive, engaging and personal experiences. For Pine (2020) "rather than focusing solely on goods or services, the Experience Economy emphasizes memorable customer experiences."

In addition, Pine and Gilmore (1998: 98) claim that "An experience is not an amorphous construct; it is as real as offering as any service, good, or commodity. In Today's service economy, many companies simply wrap experiences around their traditional offerings to sell them better." Thus, when a customer (or tourists) buys a service, they purchase a set of intangible activities carried out on his or her behalf, but when they buy an experience, they pay to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Such events are a stage for the companies to engage their customers in an inherently personal way, to increase their offering value and therefore its price and relevance to the consumer (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The progression of economic value they proposed considers five stages (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 Progression of the economic value

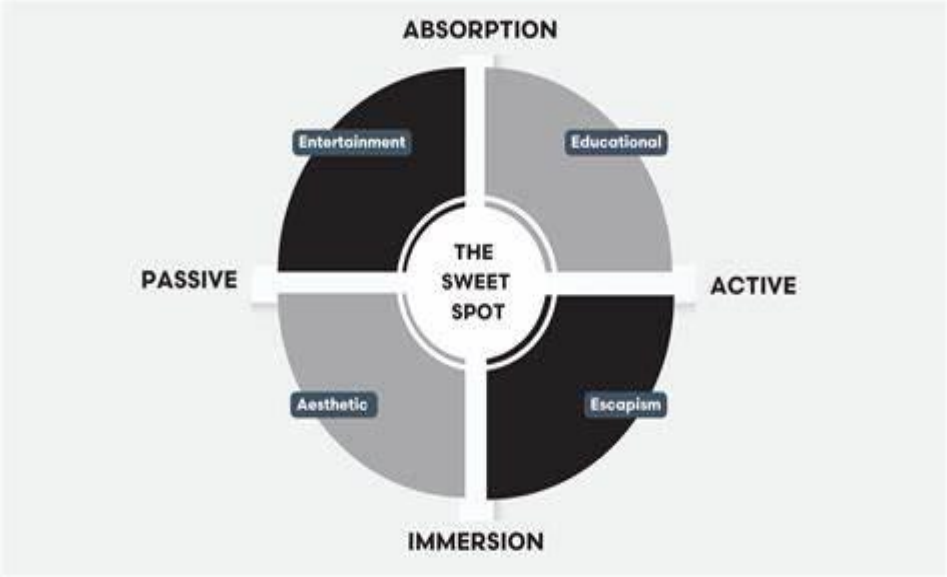


Source: Adapted from Pine & Gilmore (1998)

The first being Commodities (raw materials, extract and raised from the ground, i.e., soil), followed by Goods (manufactured products, like cars, clothing), Services (activities performed by others to customers, e.g., hotel services, education), Stage Experiences (memorable and immersive events to engage customers in an individual way., e.g., dining experience) and Guide Transformations (helping and guiding customers to experience events that have the capacity to make an impact and change on their lives) (Bettencourt, Pine, Gilmore & Norton, 2022).

The experience economy theory conceptualizes the customer experience(s) across two dimensions; a) customer participation – Active (doing something) vs passive (watching); and b) customer connection - Absorption (engrossed, captivated by something) vs immersion (Sense of being engulf, deep engagement), along with 4 realms (Entertainment, education, escapism and (a)esthetics).

Figure 3.3 – 4 Realms of the Experience



Source: Adapted from Pine and Gilmore (1998)

Entertainment involves customers participating more in fun, entertaining activities such as watching a movie, which are more passive, and the event is of absorption. *Education* involves learning and being active participants of highly absorptive events. *Escapist* involves active participation and immersion with either with the external environment and stimuli or with the self. *Esthetics* relate to customers participating in an event or experience in which they have minor effect on it. If a company or organization can offer each of the four realms, they will be offering a richer experience to their customers. Such richness is represented in the Figure 3.3, at the center, also called of the *sweet spot*, which can help to generate long lasting memories of the experiences lived (deMatos et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh, Seyfi, Hall & Hatamifar, 2021).

On the other hand, based on Schmitt's (1999) Experiential marketing theory, customer experiences can be categorized into five dimensions or SEM – Strategic Experiential Modules: Sense, Feel, Think, Act, and Relate. (Alagöz & Ekici, 2014) They argue that the SENSE module appeals to the senses to create sensory experiences through sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. (Schmitt, 1999; Holbrook and Hirschman,1982; Alkilani et al., 2013; Alagöz & Ekici, 2014).

SENSE marketing may differentiate companies and products, motivate customers, and add value to products (for example, through esthetics or excitement) (Schmitt,1999; Alkilani et al., 2013). One of the critical principles of SENSE is "cognitive consistency or sensory variety" (Schmitt, 1999); it means the ideal SENSE approach provides an underlying concept that is detectable but always appears original (Schmitt, 1999; Alkilani et al., 2013). In the context of the customer journey, the stimuli staged by the company (for example, cues, thematic content, and sensory stimuli) are important elements for the experience (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

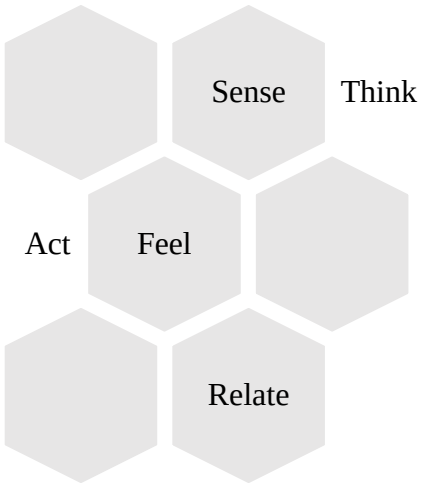
FEEL appeals to customer's "inner feelings and emotions" to create affective experiences (Schmitt, 1999) that range from mildly positive moods linked to a brand, like for a non-involving, specific airline or in-flight services or industrial product to intense emotions of joy and pride, for example for a consumer loyalty, brand new aircraft or gadgets, or social marketing campaign. (Schmitt, 1999) A close understanding of what stimuli can trigger certain emotions, as well as the willingness of the consumer to engage in corporate image and empathy, is needed for FEEL marketing to work (Schmitt, 1999; Alkilani et al., 2013).

Schmitt (1999) Addresses that, THINK marketing appeals to the intellect to create cognitive, problem-solving experiences that engage customers creatively. (Schmitt, 1999) THINK appeals to target customers' convergent and divergent thinking through surprise, intrigue, and provocation. (Schmitt, 1999) Think experience is a creative and theoretical practice that requires intelligence practices to create a cognitive experience and problem-solving through creative involvement with consumers. The Think experience aims to encourage consumers to think and be attracted innovatively so that it may produce re-evaluation feedback to the company and its brand (Alkilani et al., 2013).

ACT marketing enriches customers 'lives by targeting their physical experiences and showing them alternative ways of doing things (Schmitt, 1999; Alkilani et al., 2013). RELATE marketing contains aspects of SENSE, FEEL, THINK, and ACT marketing and expands beyond the individual's personal, private feelings; Then relates them to something outside their private state. (Schmitt, 1999). Relate experience happen by connecting the individual to something outside his/her private state (Schmitt, 1999). Relate uses the individual’s desire for self-improvement, the

need to be perceived positively by others, and relate the person to a social system (Alkilani et al., 2013).

Figure 3.4. Schmitt's Sensory TEs Dimensions



Source: Adapted from Schmitt (1999)

Companies that are using the strategic experiential modules proposed by Schmitt (1999) can have greater chances of making more effective and successful interactions, during contact with their customers, and companies can gain more distinctive identities like experiential brand, due to experiential marketing practice. On the other hand, Gentile et al. (2007) partially agreed with Schmitt's (1999) understanding of experiences, but considered dimensions such as: Sensorial component – is an offering with the purpose of affecting the senses or providing a pleasant sensorial experience; Emotional component – seeks to generate moods, emotions in order to establish an affective relation between customers and companies; Cognitive component – is a conscious mental process; Pragmatic component – as the practical act of doing something; Lifestyle component – arising from personal values, beliefs, customers assume throughout their lifestyle and behavior; Relational component – involving the context and the relationships social and non-social between customers and other people (Gentile et al., 2007).

In the end, these distinct views (among other) extend the traditional concept of the 'purchase process' introduced by Patterson in 1965, which discussed the steps and interactions between

company and individual before purchase. Instead, these ‘steps’ have been developed into interactions which deliver experiences and provide reactions. Nowadays, experiences that individuals go through may be defined as: the physical and emotional experiences occurring through the interactions with the product and/or service offering of a brand from point of first direct, conscious contact, through the total journey to the post consumption stage (Verhoef et al., 2009). This means that, customers experience is a separate construct from brand and an evolution from the traditional marketing/product and service functions within organizations. It comprises of a series of interactions between the company employees and the customer, also called customer “touchpoints”(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

It is more than just a one-time transactional experience or simple linear journey. Instead, the concept has been extended to envelop all interactions between customer and company, or consumer and brand, including pre- and post-consumption phases. It delivers both emotional and functional benefits to the consumer (Verhoef et al., 2009). Thus extending from the tangible to the intangible, from services to experiences. More recently, Weidig, Weippert & Kuehnl (2024) argued that managers need to more thoroughly understand customers' responses to touchpoints that were previously personalized by the offering side.

Thus, based on economics theories in consumer behavior, tourists purchase commodities to gain utility and value. In the tourism industry, tourists purchase goods and services in the form of Experiences mostly for leisure. Specially, in the airline industry, companies provide experiences in their aircrafts during travel from one point to other destination. It could be argued that when the airline companies provide a seat, they are providing a good, but when the airline is providing different seating places, for example, first class and economy class, we are talking about services.

In addition, when the airline company is trying to offer a pleasant flight to their passengers, we are talking about experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). As the Table 3.2 depicts, several distinctions can be found regarding the flight experience when comparing with other industry and market (e.g., Hospitality).

Table 3.2. Economic Distinction and Flight Passenger Experience

Economic offering	Commodities	Goods	Services	Experience	Flight Passenger Experience
Economic function	Extract	Make	Deliver	Stage	Onboard
Nature of offering	Fungible	Tangible	Intangible	Memorable	Memorable
Key attributes	Natural	Standardized	Customized	Personal	Standardized, Customized, Personal
Method of supply	Stored in bulk	Inventoried after production	Deliver on demand	Revealed during a flight	Inventoried after production, deliver on demand Revealed during a flight,
Seller	Trader	Manufacturer	Provider-Airline	Stager	Airline
Buyer	Market	User	Client	Guest	Flight Passenger
Factors of demand	characteristics	features	benefits	sensations	All of factors

Source: Adapted from Pine and Gilmore (1999)

The Table 3.2 shows the progression of economic offerings from commodities to experiences. It can also be seen the flight passenger experience differences in comparison with other industries. In this context, airlines strive to create a staged and personalized experience for travelers onboard. Thus, understanding such distinct characteristics and dimensions of flight experience and their impact on tourists' satisfaction and loyalty is critical due to highly competitive environment between airlines (Ghaderi, Rajabi, Butler & Beal, 2024; Koharudin & Simarmata, 2024). Among them is the airline tangibles.

3.2.2 Dimensions of the flight experience

3.2.2.1 Airline tangibles

Airline tangibles, cover a wide range of elements (e.g., comfort, leg space, seat size). For Nadiri et al. (2008) airline tangibles are the physical surroundings composed of objects (i.e., design of the

interior of the airplane) and subjects (i.e., employes uniform and appearance). For Suki (2014:27) airline tangible "include cleanliness of airplane interior toilets, quality of the catering and air-conditioning, comfort level of the plane seats and design of the aircraft". Among these elements, comfort and in-flight entertainment are two key dimensions in the airline industry (Koklic et al., 2017). Seat comfort is considered one of the most important factors of in-flight service group items (Chen & Chao, 2015; Kim & Park, 2017). Also, it is the more repeated tangible attributes in the studies in this field (Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018). Comfort and In-flight entertainment are a tangible factor that passengers consider when selecting an airline (Chen & Chao, 2015), it is one factor that influences passenger experience (Atalay et al., 2019; Tsafarakis et al., 2018) and satisfaction (Tsafarakis et al., 2018). According to Ahmadpour et al., (2014), comfort is depicted as a complex construct derived by passengers' perceptions beyond the psychological (i.e. peace of mind) and physical (i.e. physical wellbeing) aspects and includes perceptual (e.g. proxemics) and semantic (e.g. association) aspects. Seat comfort is one of cabin facilities on the flight and include seat pitch, legroom, arm/shoulder room, headrest, etc. (Kim & Park, 2017). However, comfort has been viewed as a new dimension towards subjective and personal experiences (Quehl, 2001). For instance, Helander (2003) described it in experiential terms such as relaxation (e.g. restful, calm), wellbeing (e.g. happy, pleasant), impression and aesthetics (e.g. softness, plush) and relief (e.g. refresh) rather than in terms of physical ergonomics features (related to proprioceptive feedback, i.e., sensory information the body receives from its environment).

Airline Tangibles impact on image and hedonics

Vink et al., (2005) state that comfort is a convenience experience that enhances product pleasure, or that provide enjoyment (i.e., hedonics). It is a critical element of cabin facilities (Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018). In addition, cabin interior design should facilitate 'social' interactions to improve comfort experience (Ahmadpour et al., 2014). In the same sense, Inflight entertainment refers to some facility and entertainment instruments that are available to air passengers during the flight, like newspaper, games, films, music that enable them to have a more pleasurable or hedonic experience (Koklic et al., 2017). The physical commodities can have a positive impact on the airline image, since they generate the perception among passengers of better service quality and experience, and consequently greater passenger purchase decisions and loyalty (Chonsalasin et al.,

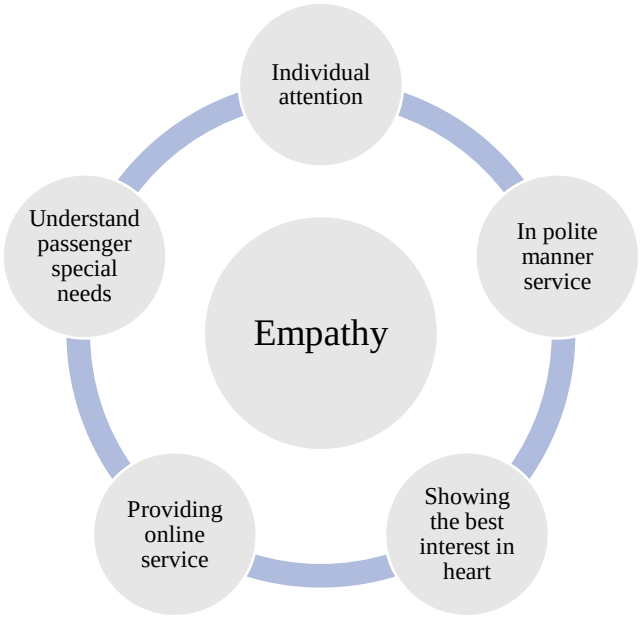
2020; Han et al., 2021). Also, during the experience, empathy is crucial to maintain good and positive interactions (Leong et al., 2015).

3.2.2.2 Empathy

Empathy means helping others (Prot et al., 2014). Empathy has been defined and measured by some indicators like individual attention, being polite during service, providing online service, showing the best interest in heart and understand passenger special needs (Leong et al., 2015).

For Ren and Li (2024:6) empathy can be seen as "connecting or comparing the distressed experiences being recounted with the comforter's own emotions or experiences". Empathy in this way related with positive social behaviors (Prot et al., 2014). To display empathy, means the ability to provide individualized attention to the customers (Parasumaran et al., 1988; Leong et al., 2015). In the airline industry, empathy is demonstrated through actions (Figure 3.5) like courteous ticketing, compensation plans, and greetings (Ekiz et al., 2006; Leong et al., 2015; Farooq et al., 2018).

Figure 3.5 Empathy Indicators



Source: Own Elaboration

According to Ren and Li (2024) empathy can be divided into concepts, firsthand empathy and secondhand empathy. They argue that “firsthand empathy as the act of connecting one's own experiences and emotions with those of the comfortee and secondhand empathy as the act of relating the emotions or experiences of the comfortee to stories of others that the comforter has heard of.”(Ren & Li, 2024: 6). The fact is that each journey involves some memorable emotions for every tourist or passenger, influenced by factors both under control and outside an airline’s control (Angrave, 2020). Nevertheless, as Angrave (2020) mentioned, there are six practical ways airlines can demonstrate empathy through effective communication:

1) Personalization requires more detail than one might think;
2) Consider timings;
3) Embrace empathetic language;
4) Do not make passengers go to the airport to stay informed;
5) Use the right channel for the moment;
6) Anticipate needs and help.

Using above techniques can help airlines improve passenger experience using empathy. Hochschild (1983) explained that service workers like flight attendants, sales agents, nurses, and others who work on the frontline deal with emotional labor in contact with customers. Emotional labor typically requires contact with other people external to or within the organizations, usually jobs with face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact (Hochschild, 1983; Steinberg & Figart, 1999). Since the cabin crew is responsible for smiling and showing empathy as they are the airline's representative, they need to have emotional contact with passengers (Nielsen, 2024; Whitelegg, 2002). In this regard, they are dealing with Emotional labor (including deep acting and surface acting) psychological problems arising among the Cabin Crew during service seeking to show empathy, while sustaining passengers’ own feelings (Adey, Lin & Harris, 2024; Hochschild, 1983; Nielsen, 2024). The important part of cabin crew duties and responsibilities is besides having good communication and empathy, since flight attendants are salaried to smile (Rithi & Jayasankara, 2018). They need to manage their feeling and emotions, to avoid stress, psychological diseases and fatigue. As found previously, fatigue can increase in depression and burnout among cabin crew and all aviation industry employees (Park & Hyun, 2020; Partridge & Goodman, 2016; Hochschild, 1983).

Various studies have explored empathy from different angles, underscoring the importance of empathy in enhancing service quality in air travel (Ali et al., 2015). However, services are only one component of passengers' flight experience (Etemad-Sajadi, Way, & Bohrer, 2016). Some studies (e.g., Ali et al., 2015) have used empathy as an important service dimension, and found it to influence passengers' behavior. For instance, Ali et al. (2015) evaluated how foreigners and overseas Pakistanis perceive the quality of services provided by Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and its impact on customer satisfaction. Their findings show that the empathy dimension plays a significant role in influencing passengers regarding, a) Punctuality of departures and arrivals; b) Compensation schemes in case of loss or mishaps; c) Care for passengers' luggage; d) Convenient locations of airline offices, e) Adequate number of flights to meet passengers' demands. Similarly, Atalay et al. (2019) examined airline passengers' priorities and found empathy to be a crucial factor linked to attributes like: a) Clear in-flight passenger announcements; b) Availability of direct or connecting flights; c) Knowledge and experience of the cabin crew; d) Politeness of the cabin crew. They also offered recommendations for airline managers to improve their customers' satisfaction.

In the same vein, Leong et al. (2015) examined the connection between empathy as a service quality factor, customer satisfaction, and loyalty across both low-cost and full-service airlines. They discovered a strong relationship between empathy, satisfaction, and loyalty. Their findings suggest that understanding this relationship can assist airline managers and policymakers in making better decisions during resource planning, ultimately improving customer satisfaction and loyalty. Leong et al. (2015) measured empathy as one of the SERVQUAL dimensions and an intangible construct. Another example is the study by Pakdil and Aydın (2007), which measured empathy using six indicators. These included how employees treat delayed passengers, personalized attention, the availability of air/accommodation packages, airline advertising, how fare problems are handled, and understanding passengers' specific needs (Pakdil & Aydin, 2007).

Empathy impact on image and hedonics

In this context, it can be seen in multiple studies (e.g., Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015; Leong et al., 2015; Nadiri et al., 2008) that empathy is widely regarded as an essential element of service quality in

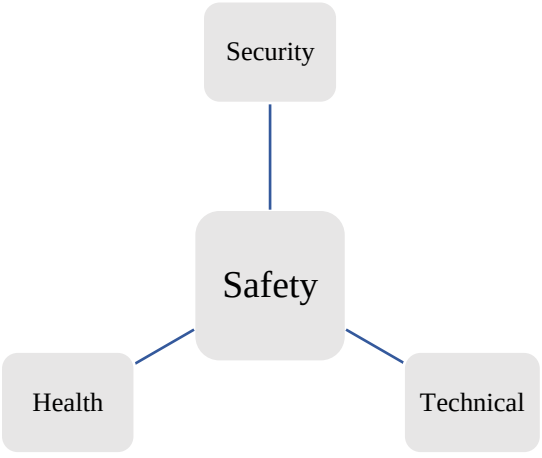
any business (Humphrey, 2013; Radovic-Markovic et al., 2017), and in particular, aviation, since it also impacts on passengers' satisfaction and loyalty. In addition, empathy has been found to affecting the airline's public image (Chen et al., 2019). Empathy can enhance a company's image, which in turn acts as a mediator between empathy and customer commitment (Yingfei et al., 2022). A cabin crew member with strong empathy can better understand passengers' feelings and needs, leading to a sense of appreciation and fostering positive interpersonal relationships and providing an enjoyable (i.e., hedonic) experience to passengers (Torkashvand, Stephane & Vink, 2021). This will lead to the formation of positive and distinct image about the airline in their minds of the passengers (Park & Ryu, 2019), but also, it will provide passengers with image of fun, pleasurable and joyful experience (Torkashvand, Stephane & Vink, 2019). Thus, with empathy, will be help airline cabin crew to create a more personal care and attention creating a relaxed, enjoyable environment (Leong et al., 2015). Consequently, improving the overall flight hedonic experience and enhancing the airline's image (Achmad, Simarmata, & Susanto, 2024; Lê & Mai Ngoc, 2023). In addition, during such care and attention environment, the perception of safety is needed (Ahmadpour et al., 2016).

3.2.2.3 Safety Perception

Aviation is generally considered one of the safest industries. However, airline safety performance can vary (IATA, 2024). For passengers, safety is one of the most important factors (Ahmadpour et al., 2016). For example, among middle-aged travelers, it was found that they regard safety as the most important aspect of their air travel experience (Ahmadpour et al., 2016). In a similar study, it was found among students that they prioritize safety over service quality during the decision-making process (i.e., of selecting flights) (Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017). It can be concluded that, safety is a critical factor influencing passengers' choice of airlines (Koklic et al., 2017; Levi et al., 2019). Safety, is a non-negotiable element for every flight, as reflected in numerous studies (e.g., Kim & Park, 2017). A safe flight is essential not only for ensuring passenger satisfaction but also for building and maintaining a positive corporate image. Incidents or accidents can severely damage an airline's reputation, often for extended periods.

According to ICAO (2016: IX) safety is defined as “the state in which risks associated with aviation activities related to or in direct support of the operation of aircraft are reduced and controlled to an acceptable level” (ICAO, 2016). Aviation safety encompasses the study and practice of managing these risks (Georgiev, 2021). This includes preventing accidents and incidents through research, training airline personnel and passengers, and focusing on the design of aircraft and aviation infrastructure (Evans, Glendon & Creed, 2007). The industry operates under strict regulations and guidelines (Wragg, 1973). Safety is a core value in aviation (Chan & Li, 2022). The collaboration between governments and industry groups through ICAO has made air travel one of the safest modes of transportation globally (ICAO, 2024). Currently, 193 member states of ICAO are working towards an ambitious global safety target of zero fatalities by 2030 (ICAO, 2024). To meet these high safety standards, ICAO published Annex 19 in 2013, which was later revised in 2016 (ICAO, 2016). This annex addresses safety requirements and establishes international safety standards for airlines. The document also mandates that safety management functions related to aircraft operations adhere to these standards, and it also requires member states to establish systems for collecting, storing, and analyzing safety data (ICAO, 2016). Thus, aviation safety can be examined from multiple perspectives and extensive number of factors. However, security, health, and technical elements are among them, and represent key aspects (Figure 3.6), since each of these aspects plays a vital role in maintaining the overall safety and integrity of air travel.

Figure 3.6 Aspects of Safety in literature



Source: Own Elaboration

The security aspect focuses on protecting passengers, aircraft, and aviation infrastructure from intentional harm or disruption (Derrickson & Tripathi, 2022). Another key aspect of aviation safety is the protection of passengers and crew from health-related risks (Bor & Hubbard, 2006; Melin & Lang, 2024). The pandemic underscored the critical importance of health and safety in air travel, highlighting the role passengers play in maintaining a safe and healthy environment onboard (Khatib, Carvalho, Primavesi, To, & Poirer, 2020; Sotomayor-Castillo, Radford, Li, Nahidi & Shaban, 2021). However, health concerns in aviation extend beyond pandemic-related issues (Melin & Lang, 2024). They cover a wide range of topics, such as duty time limitations for crew, the transmission of communicable diseases, and aircraft disinfection protocols (Melin & Lang, 2024; Zhao, Zhu, Zhang, Liu & Wang, 2024). These activities are proactive or reactive in nature, helping airlines continually assess and enhance safety (Li & Wang, 2024). However, this technical data is not accessible to passengers, making it difficult for them to evaluate the technical safety of their flight, but to address this, airlines use safety indicators that passengers can perceive and understand, such as security checks, in-flight safety measures, the appearance of airplanes, and the competence of cabin crew (Ringle, Sarstedt & Zimmermann, 2011). Improving safety remains a long-term goal for the aviation industry, and historical trends confirm (e.g., lower fatality rate – 17 people per billion passengers in 2023, or 1.87 accidents per million departures in 2023) that air travel is becoming safer (ICAO, 2023). However, passengers' perceptions of safety are shaped more by their own experiences than by technical evaluations. Technical elements refer to extensive number of services and technologies (e.g., air traffic control, GPS navigation systems, autopilot systems, fuel, etc.) that are crucial for flights to operate (e.g., Biedermann, Papatheodorou, Prowle, & Bulatovic, 2024; Sismanidou, Tarradellas, Suau-Sanchez & O'Connor, 2024; Wardle, 2003). Aircraft are only cleared for flight after meeting rigorous safety standards, as assessed by specialized staff of these High Reliable Organisations (Biedermann et al., 2024).

As seen, safety relates to many other factors, despite that in some studies, safety is grouped with other factors as a single attribute when evaluating airline performance. For example, Chen & Chao (2015) studied passengers' airline choices in Taiwan and China by pairing safety and reliability. Milioti et al. (2015) also examined traveler perceptions, using both safety and reliability as key factors influencing airline choices. On the different note, Medina-Muñoz et al. (2018) combined safety and punctuality to assess the attractiveness of airlines. However, the concept of safety can

also be refers to passengers' perceptions, which are measured (Figure 3.7) through four key indicators: security checks at airports, safety during flights, the appearance of airplanes, and the competence of cabin crew (Ringle, Sarstedt & Zimmermann, 2011).

Figure 3.7 Safety Indicators - Flight passenger perception of safety

Source: Adapted from Ringle, Sarstedt and Zimmermann (2011)

Safety's Impact on Image and Hedonics

Cheng et al. (2018) explored the relationship between safety and corporate image in the food industry, revealing a positive correlation between the two. Similarly, Marine-Roig & Huertas (2020) demonstrated that safety also influences the destination image in tourism. Although studies examining the relationship between safety and enjoyment (hedonics) are limited, there is evidence of a connection. For instance, Ernst & Reinelt (2017) identified a relationship between safety and enjoyment in personal driving, while Taylor & Toohey (2006) established a link between safety and enjoyment during the Rugby World Cup. On the other hand, the enjoyment is dependent on

the safety perception and sensory evaluation individuals make during their experience (Agapito et al., 2012; Krishna, Luangrath & Peck, 2024).

3.2.2.4 Sensory evaluation

Sensory evaluation is a key component of sensory marketing, and understanding its role in the literature can enhance our understanding of how sensory experiences affect customer behavior (Krishna, Cian & Sokolova, 2016). Sensory marketing, which involves creating sensory, emotional, behavioral, mental, and social experiences, plays a crucial role in customer satisfaction (Rabbani et al., 2021). It engages the five human senses to shape customer perceptions, behaviors, and decisions (Kim et al., 2016). The primary goal of sensory marketing is to stimulate consumer senses and establish an emotional connection between the customer and the product, ultimately influencing purchasing decisions and experiences (Hulten, 2020). While people act based on emotions and reason with logic, sensory marketing leverages unconscious stimuli to engage consumers and shape their behavior (Krishna, 2011). In the tourism industry (Table 3.3), the five human senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell) play a vital role in shaping tourist experiences from a marketing perspective (Agapito et al., 2012). Each sense has unique characteristics, involving specific organs and brain perception areas, making life without any one of them incomplete (Visha et al., 2023).

Table 3.3. The Senses

SIGHT	SOUND	SMELL	TOUCH	TASTE
Design and style	Jingle voice and	Product	Material Surface	Interplay
Color, light and	Music	Congruency	Temperature	Symbiosis
theme	Atmosphere	Intensity	Weight	Synergy
Graphic	Theme	Atmosphere	Form	Name
Exterior	Advertency	Theme and	Steadiness	Presentation, and
Interior	Sound Brand	Advertency		Setting
Logos		Scent Brand		Knowledge
Names		Signature Scent		Delight
Packages				
Product design				

Source: Own Elaboration

In the aviation industry, these five senses are equally important, helping air passengers recognize and interact with the cabin environment, ultimately shaping their overall flight experience (DeSalle, 2018). These senses are crucial for the flight passengers experience during a flight (Ghaderi et al., 2024). Passengers' sense of vision allows passengers to understand the visual environment around them, and to create images from the light that enters the cabin through their eyes (DeSalle, 2018; Visha et al., 2023). The retina contains photoreceptor cells called cones and rods (Ledford, 2024; DeSalle, 2018). Rods detect brightness levels, while cones distinguish between colors, working together to create a full field of vision (DeSalle, 2018; Visha et al., 2023). Visual marketing uses elements like design, color, light, logos, product packaging, and themes to create a perception of quality, ultimately encouraging purchases (Wedel & Pieters, 2007).

The sense of touch, or somatosensory sensation, helps air passengers feel pressure, temperature, and pain through receptors located in the skin (DeSalle, 2018). They perceive noises and vibrations that go from the earing to the brain, including announcements from the flight captain, but also, from engines which can affect their experience (DeSalle, 2018; Hankovská, 2018). Elements such as texture, temperature, weight, and form can all contribute to a customer's interaction with a product (Hussain, 2019). Taste buds are sensitive to flavors, while eating food and drinking beverages (Hussain, 2019), but because of cabin pressure, food frequently tastes different at altitude (DeSalle, 2018; Visha et al., 2023). Regarding the sense of smell, passengers detect the scents of food and surrounding air, which contributes to the overall flight experience (DeSalle, 2018; Visha et al., 2023).

Together, the five senses enable air passengers to form a complete perception of their surroundings, since the senses serve as physiological tools that allow the brain to process information from the environment, influencing the passenger's overall experience (Ghaderi et al., 2024; Qiao, Hou, Chen, Xiang & Prideaux, 2024). Whether through hearing sounds, recognizing languages, tasting food, or smelling the cabin air, the senses work together to shape the flight experience (DeSalle, 2018; Visha et al., 2023).

Empirical evidence from the restaurant industry supports the idea that businesses using sensory marketing techniques tend to have more satisfied customers (Satti et al., 2021). However, there is

a gap in the literature, as many researchers focus on only one or two senses, rather than involving all five senses in their studies (Satti et al., 2021). Sensory marketing goes beyond just visual or auditory elements to create immersive experiences that can be touched, heard, seen, tasted, and smelled (Hulten, 2020). Studies have shown that stimuli such as color, lighting, music, scents, and textures significantly impact customer behavior, including how much time they spend in a store and how much they are willing to spend (Hussain, 2019).

Simonson and Schmitt (1997) explained that the purpose of engaging the senses in marketing is to create positive purchasing experiences filled with excitement, satisfaction, and pleasure. When all five senses are incorporated into marketing strategies, it creates what is called a sensory experience, which helps marketers understand how consumers behave and make decisions (Hussain, 2019). Sensory marketing focuses on how a company interacts with its customers, aiming to leave lasting impressions by appealing to all senses (Krishna, 2011). This approach can directly influence sales, profits, and market share by shifting consumer behavior (Hussain, 2019).

For example, previous studies into luxury sport clubs and the food and beverage industries further confirm the significant relationship between sensory evaluation, satisfaction, and loyalty (Utama et al., 2022; Rabbani et al., 2021). In the food industry, the senses of vision, taste, and touch are essential in shaping sensory marketing elements (Kim & Perdue, 2013; Sidel & Stone, 1993). In the tourism and hospitality industries, sensory evaluation was measured through a set of items adapted from Kim and Perdue (2013), which assessed the quality of physical surroundings in hotel choices. The study confirmed that sensory evaluation positively impacted satisfaction.

Sensory evaluation impact on Image and Hedonics

Sensory evaluation can influence the image of an airline. Perumal et al. (2021) examined the moderating role of price fairness and the mediating effect of airline image, finding that airline image significantly mediated the relationship between sensory factors like touch and taste and repurchase intention. Sensory evaluation also can lead to a positive customer experience and service provider’s image, by stimulating all five senses, businesses can build positive customer perceptions and encourage repeat visits (Utama et al., 2022). Hussain (2018) suggested that sensory marketing strategies should utilize all five senses for effective consumer engagement.

Additionally, sensory evaluation based on the five senses is associated with happiness and has significant impacts on Hedonics, the pleasure derived from experiences (Hussain, 2019).

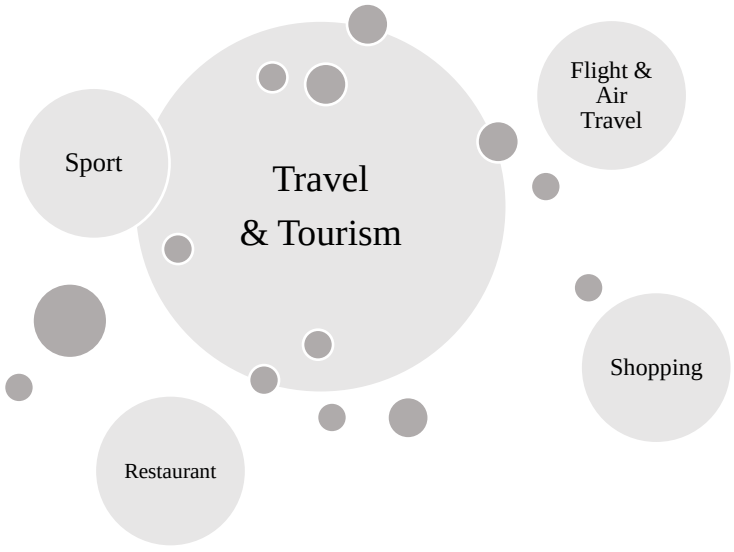
3.2.2.5 Hedonics Experience

Hedonic Experience, as has been identified as pleasure-oriented consumption, driven by the desire for sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun, such as vacationing in Las Vegas (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). While marketers increasingly focus on hedonic aspects to meet customers' rising desires for entertainment, academic research on the hedonic side of consumers' evaluations of their consumption experience lags behind (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Hedonics, as a term, has been defined repeatedly as joy (Albayrak et al., 2020) and has been explored in various contexts. Zuckerman (1971) used it to measure students that were sensation-seekers, while Carbone and Haeckel (1994) suggested that in the consumption process, customers generally prefer to experience a hedonistic feeling during their service encounters. Similarly, in the field of leisure, Mannell and Kleiber (1997) observed that leisure experiences often bring about benefits such as fun, pleasure, and relaxation. Not surprisingly, Hedonism, is often defined as pleasure, and is seen as the ultimate pursuit of humankind, plays a central role in shaping positive consumer experiences (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). For instance, Klaus and Maklan (2011) noted that hedonic enjoyment is primarily defined by fun, making it an essential experience factor in sports camps.

Thus, according to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), hedonics encompasses feelings of fun, amusement, fantasy, arousal, sensory stimulation, enjoyment, entertainment, and excitement, because individuals seek to satisfy their expectations for emotional and experiential events. They also argued that the level of hedonic response varies across product categories. For instance, leisure experiences might be defined by pleasure, enjoyment, or relaxation (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997), or shoppers value the stimulation from new products while browsing, as a process, among shops that offer a fun and interesting experience (Gehrt & Carter, 1992; Lin & Wang, 2012). Ryu et al. (2010) further elaborated on this concept by associating Hedonics with positive emotions such as good feelings, pleasure, joy, and excitement. Different types of product consumption, services, activities, and behaviors lead to varying forms of Hedonism in consumers. According to Hightower, Brady, and Baker (2002), hedonistic behavior is an integral part of leisure experiences.

Cohen et al. (2014), in their review of 192 papers on consumer behavior in tourism, found that only nine articles studied emotion as an influential factor, highlighting the relatively underexplored role of emotions in tourism. Hedonic experiences are more subjective and personal than utilitarian ones because they arise from the need for fun and playfulness rather than the need to complete a task (Babin et al., 1994). In tourism research, different types of travel should be associated with varying levels of hedonism. For example, island tourism offers a unique opportunity to explore how travel can provide tourists with hedonic experiences (Cheng & Lu, 2013). Previous tourism research, such as Duman and Mattila (2005), indicates that cruise vacations have become increasingly hedonically oriented (Lin & Wang, 2012).The existing view often assumes that emotions are inherent in-service attributes, overlooking the role of the consumer in eliciting emotions, this means, that this perspective ignores important theories from psychology and neuroscience, such as cognitive appraisal theory, which explains how emotions are generated (Adhikari et al., 2013; Hosany et al., 2015; Ali et al., 2015; Tasci and Ko, 2016; Ma et al., 2016). This shows that Hedonic experiences are examined in various contexts within existing literature, including wine tourism, restaurants, product and service trade, and retail sectors (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8. Hedonics Activities



Source: Own Elaboration

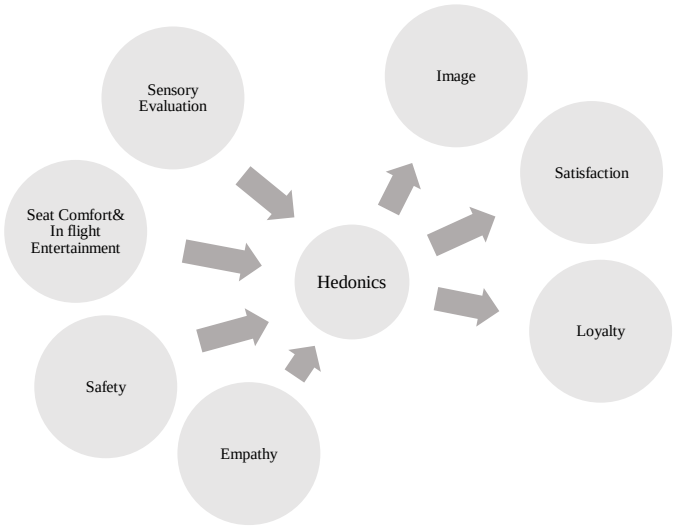
As a result, Hedonics has been a key subject of empirical research in consumer behavior, however, there is a noticeable gap in understanding this concept in specific areas of the globe, e.g., Asian

countries (Ma et al., 2016). Hedonics are non-instrumental, experiential, and affective, often associated with intangible attributes of retailers or products (Becker et al., 2019). Chitturi, Raghunathan and Mahajan (2007) found that consumers prioritize the hedonic dimension only after a *required* level of functionality is met. For example, in the car sector, utilitarian benefits such as fuel economy and safety differ from hedonic benefits like a sunroof and a luxurious interior (Chitturi et al., 2007). The goals consumers expect from the utilitarian dimension of a product differ from those sought from the hedonic dimension (Kim & Kim, 2016). Similarly, in the context of cell phones, utilitarian benefits may include for example battery life and sound volume, while aesthetic appeal may come from shape, while color can represent hedonic benefits (Kwateng, Yobanta & Amanor, 2021).

Hedonics impact on image, satisfaction and loyalty

Previous research (Figure 3.9) has demonstrated a significant relationship between Hedonics and Satisfaction. In this regard, Ponsignon et al. (2021) found that international visitors develop higher levels of satisfaction from tourism experiences with greater hedonic value.

Figure 3.9. Hedonics Relationship



Source: Own Elaboration

Similarly, shopping activities at airports reveal that hedonics significantly impact satisfaction (Han et al., 2018). Ahn et al. (2019) studied the effects of integrated resort experiences on customers' well-being. In their conceptual model for well-being, hedonic experiences were shown to influence satisfaction. Similarly, Chen and Huang (2021) proposed a conceptual model that defined tourist experiences through hedonics and explored their effects on satisfaction and loyalty. Their findings revealed that hedonic experiences positively relate to both satisfaction and loyalty. In the same vein, Cuesta-Valiño et al. (2023) argues that consumer's happiness or joy is crucial to create commitment to the corporate image, and that such commitment can impact future behavior, such as, increase purchase intention (Dinh et al., 2023).

In addition, if the flight experience was joyful (i.e., hedonics), it can have a positive impact on the way passengers view the airline as a whole, i.e., airline image (Geraldine & David, 2013; Boubker & Naoui, 2022). The same as found in other industries (e.g., Kim, Choe & Kwang, 2021) and tourism (e.g., Zhang, Xiong & Lee, 2020). Moreover, if the experience is not pleasurable, the airline image will be affected (Nadiri et al., 2008).

3.2.2.6 Airline Image

Airlines need to be highly aware of their image. It plays a crucial role in their success (Nadiri et al., 2008). According to Ekiz et al. (2006), an airline's image is shaped by several factors: how it is perceived overall, whether passengers feel they get value for their money, the promotional offers available, and the airline's goodwill. Essentially, an airline's image is the set of beliefs and impressions that passengers develop during their flight (Han et al., 2019). This image results from profound impact of customer experience (which includes service) during flight, and affects their satisfaction, and loyalty (Geraldine & David, 2013; Hassan & Salem, 2021; Park, Robertson & Wu, 2005).

The concept of corporate image has various aspects, and its meaning can differ depending on the field of study. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2024), "corporate image is how a company is viewed and understood by the general public." On the other hand, the Collins Dictionary (2024) provides two definitions—one for British English and one for American English. In the British

definition, corporate image refers to how an organization" is presented to or perceived by its members and the public". In the American definition, it" is the impression that a company's policies, staff, and operations leave on employees and the public". These different definitions reflect the range of meanings that have developed over time.

Corporate image is how the public perceives a company. Corporate personality, however, encompasses both qualitative and quantitative characteristics. For Johnson and Zinkhan (2014) corporate identity is closely related to corporate personality. In fact, corporate identity can be thought of as a company's ideal self-image (Johnson & Zinkhan, 2014). This identity is crafted by the company through careful selection of specific characteristics, which are meant to shape how customers and stakeholders see it (Johnson & Zinkhan, 2014). By promoting its identity—through things like branding, reports, and sponsorships—the company shapes its image. The relationship between corporate personality, identity, and image is complex but important (Johnson & Zinkhan, 2014; Marine-Roig & Huertas, 2020; Yingfei et al., 2022). As Shafiee, Sanayei, Shahin & Dolatabadi (2014) note the image of a company is associated regularly to its brand and has an important influence on passengers decision-making process when purchasing their airline travels. In effect, the image of a company relates to their corporate personality, corporate identity and image (see Table 3.4), and this image plays a key role when passengers choose which airline to fly with (Milioti et al., 2015).

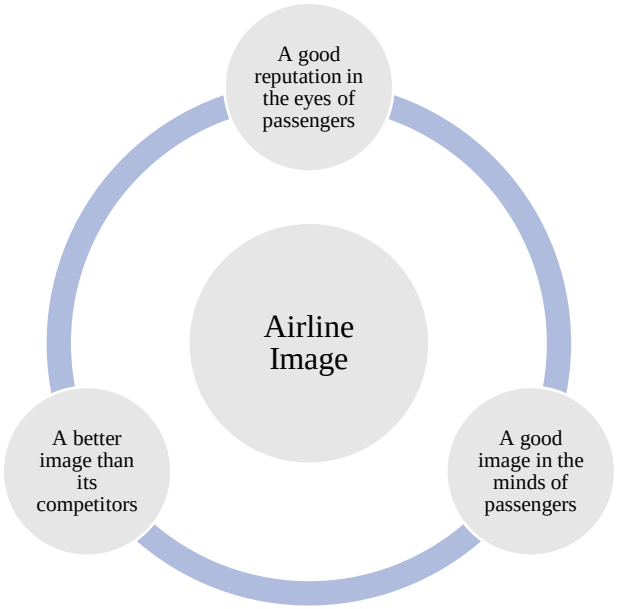
Table 3.4 Compare Corporate Personality, Corporate Identity and Company Image

Term	**Corporate Personality**		**Corporate Image**	**Corporate Identity**
Characteristics	Quantitative	Qualitative		
	Size of operation Number of outlets Number of employees Volume of sales	Company involvement in the community The quality of its services and products The friendliness of its personnel Its reputation for innovation	Public perceptions of the company	Analogous to ideal social self-image
	Captures an Objective reality		Captures subjective perceptions of reality	

Source: Own Elaboration

It's also a critical factor in how they evaluate the service quality of the airline (Ali et al., 2015; Hussain et al., 2015; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007). This image is assessed using three main indicators (Figure 3.10): the airline's reputation in the eyes of passengers, whether its image is better than that of its competitors, and the overall impression it leaves on passengers (Hassan & Salem, 2022).

Figure 3.10 Airlie Image Indicators



Source: Own Elaboration

Image impact on Loyalty and satisfaction

Numerous studies (e.g., Hassan & Salem, 2022; Han et al., 2019) have examined the relationship between corporate image and satisfaction. Some suggests that corporate image directly influences customer satisfaction (Hassan & Salem, 2022), while other studies, such as those by Ali et al. (2015), Han et al. (2019), Hussain et al. (2015), and Nadiri et al. (2008), also highlight the role of corporate image in shaping passenger satisfaction.

In addition to its impact on satisfaction, corporate image has been consistently linked to customer loyalty (Geraldine & David, 2013). This relationship is documented (e.g., Calisir et al., 2016; Chen, Zhang, Yu, Dong, He, & Ling, 2024) within the airline industry, where a strong corporate

image can lead to passenger loyalty. For instance, Calisir et al. (2016) showed how image impacts passenger's loyalty towards FSCs. For managers and marketing strategists, creating a positive image during the flight experience is crucial for maintaining satisfied and loyal passengers for future travel (Ali et al., 2015; Hussain et al., 2015; Nadiri et al., 2008; Pakdil & Aydın, 2007; Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2018; Milioti et al., 2015; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018).

3.2.3 Outcomes of the flight experience

3.2.3.1 Satisfaction and Loyalty

Satisfaction is often described as the pleasure or disappointment a customer feels when comparing a product's perceived performance with their prior expectations (Tsafarakis et al., 2018). For Yi (1990: 69), customer satisfaction is defined as "an emotional response to the experiences provided by, or associated with, particular products and services purchased, retail outlets...". Oliver (2010: 8) claims that "Satisfaction is the consumer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or over-fulfillment". However, Giese (2002) points out that despite multiple definitions of satisfaction, there is still no universally accepted interpretation. In a competitive industry like the airline industry, it is crucial for firms to not only understand their customers' needs and wants but also to manage their resources effectively to meet those expectations (Chen & Chao, 2015). Recognizing passengers' desires prompts airline managers to improve airline attractiveness and customer satisfaction by delivering better service experiences (Tsafarakis et al., 2018). For example, good service increases customer attractiveness, which in turn can lead to customer satisfaction and potentially loyalty (Medina-Muñoz et al., 2018).

Farooq et al. (2018) developed a model for customer satisfaction in Malaysian airlines, identifying five key antecedents: airline tangibles, terminal tangibles, personnel services, empathy, and airline image. Their model highlighted the importance of personnel services and airline image in enhancing customer satisfaction. They discovered that the positive effect of personnel quality on satisfaction is stronger for full-service airlines, while the positive impact of satisfaction on repurchase intent is more significant for low-cost airlines (Koklic et al., 2017). In another study, Tsafarakis et al. (2018) measured customer satisfaction in Aegean Airlines using the MUSA

(Multicriteria Satisfaction Analysis) method, focusing on customer satisfaction through importance-performance diagrams. They concluded that “satisfaction is a dynamic parameter of the business organization. Future changes in the airline market, (e.g. due to socioeconomic reasons) can affect passengers' preferences and expectations. For example, some satisfaction dimensions may become critical in the near future if passengers give more importance to them. Therefore, implementation of a permanent customer satisfaction system is considered necessary…” (Tsafarakis et al., 2018: 12).

It was also found that service quality influences satisfaction. Rajaguru (2016) evaluated passengers’ perceptions of value for money and service quality, confirming that low-cost airline passengers are highly sensitive to these factors, supporting price sensitivity theory. In this research, customer satisfaction refers to the overall level of contentment with the service experience provided by the airline (Koklic et al., 2017). Many studies have identified various attributes that influence airline customer satisfaction (Nadiri et al., 2008; Tsafarakis et al., 2018).
From a business perspective, customer satisfaction often leads to positive behavioral intentions (Koklic et al., 2017). Studies consistently show that the more satisfied customers are with a company, the more likely they are to repurchase (Calisir et al., 2016; Koklic et al., 2017) and recommend the company to others (Koklic et al., 2017). On the other hand, dissatisfied customers are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth (Saha & Theingi, 2009). In the context of airlines, most research supports the idea that customer satisfaction is a predictor of repeat purchases and recommendations (Nadiri et al., 2008; Rajaguru, 2016). Some attributes impact service quality, which then affects satisfaction, while others directly influence satisfaction. In turn, customer satisfaction affects the intention to repurchase and recommend the airline, leading to increased passenger loyalty (Calisir et al., 2016).

Loyalty is expressed by passengers through positive word-of-mouth, in which sincere and kind words are stated to show their preference for a specific brand, product or service (Durukan & Bozaci, 2011). For Singh (2021:34) customer loyalty is defined “as it is a strongly held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a chosen product or service continuously in the future despite situational factors and marketing efforts having the ability to induce switching behavior.”

Although several studies (e.g., Ostrowski, O'Brien & Gordon, 1993; Tran, 2024) have been conducted about Loyalty in the airline industry, loyalty and related concepts (e.g., brand loyalty, attitude loyalty) remain a topic or great interest among scholars. The problem with loyalty in the airline sector is identifying the distinct factors that contribute to it. For example, Calisir et al. (2015) addressed the airline industry and developed a model to measure passenger's loyalty on specific flights, such as between Frankfurt and Istanbul. The authors explored how image, satisfaction, price, and service quality affect passenger loyalty toward full-service carriers (FSCs) and low-cost carriers (LCCs). Their results revealed the importance of image for passenger loyalty. Similarly, Dolnicar, Grabler, Grün, and Kulnig (2011) also sought to find what leads to passengers' loyalty and found that not one, but many factors contributed to loyalty. They found that frequent flyer membership, price, nationality of airline and its status, along with its reputation among friends as best factors that contribute to loyalty.

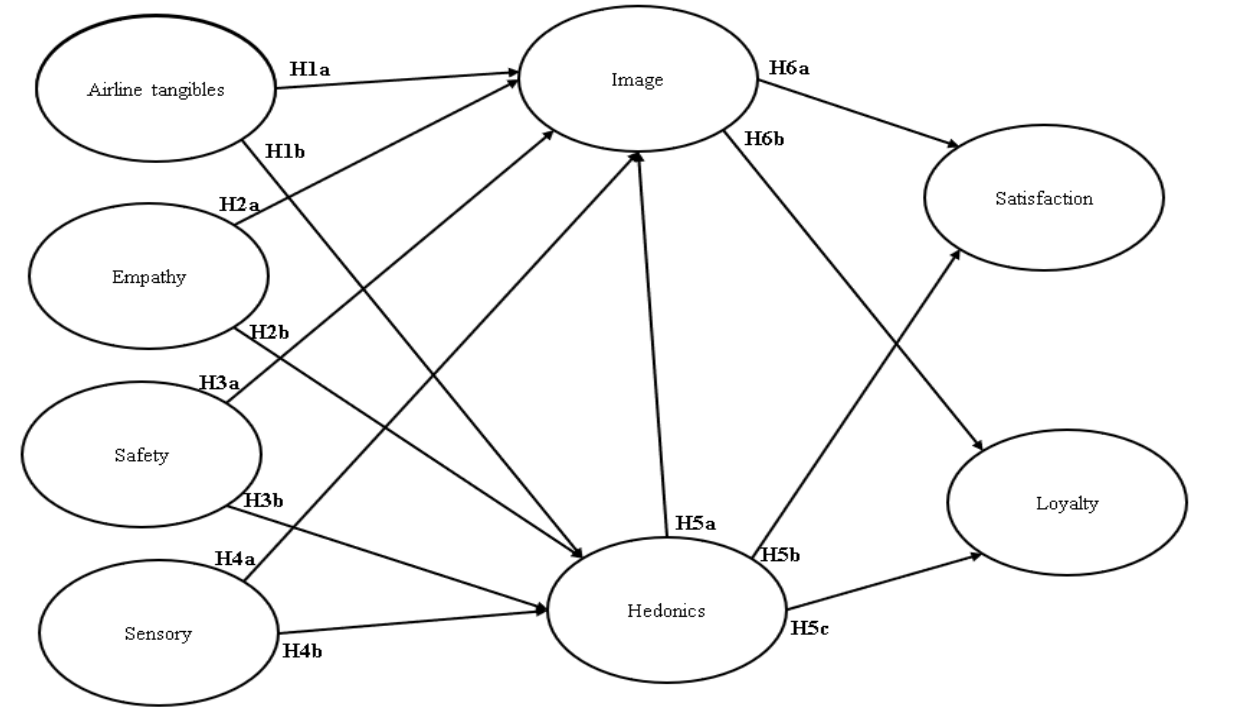
3.3 Conceptual model and research hypotheses

In effect, in the airline industry, the highly demanding consumer (Kim & Park, 2017; Rajaguru, 2016) seeks to have a good flight experience. However, the flight experience is influenced by the interactions and touchpoints passengers go throughout their journey (Siqueira, Bendixen, Reinoso-Carvalho & Campo, 2023). Consequently, a deeper understanding of these dynamic interactions and their impact on the experience of passengers', including their satisfaction and loyalty is needed (Koklic et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Siqueira et al., 2023; Verhoef et al., 2009). As found in the literature, customer satisfaction and loyalty in the airline industry is influenced by various factors (Figure 3.11).

These factors include tangible and intangible elements that define the passenger experience (Han et al., 2019). Regarding the tangible factors, such as airline tangibles (which include seating comfort and onboard facilities) directly impact how passengers perceive the service and consequently, the flight experience. Moreover, these tangibles play a significant role in creating a positive sensory experience, which in turn influences satisfaction. On the other hand, intangible factors, such as empathy and safety, are equally important. Empathy is demonstrated by attentive and caring staff, which ensures passengers feel valued and well-understood, enhancing the

emotional connection with passengers and improving this way the corporate image of the company.

Figure 3.11Conceptual Model



Source: Own Elaboration

Safety, the most crucial concern of passengers is another factor, because passengers' perception of safety contributes to a sense of trust, directly impacting on their satisfaction. Regarding, hedonic elements, such as the enjoyment and pleasure, they derived from in-flight entertainment or a stress-free travel experience. All together, these factors, contribute an overall perception of the airline's image —also plays a vital role in shaping both satisfaction and loyalty. A strong corporate image, reinforced by a positive and enjoyable experience (i.e., hedonics), enhances satisfaction. In turn, satisfied passengers are more likely to become loyal customers, leading to higher intentions to repurchase and recommend the airline to others (Koklic et al., 2017). Therefore, the following hypotheses were set:

H1a. Airline tangibles have positive and significant direct effect on Image.

H1b. Airline tangibles have positive and significant direct effect on Hedonics.

H2a. Empathy has positive and significant direct effect on the Airline Image.

H2b. Empathy has positive and significant direct effect on passengers' Hedonic experience.

H3a. Safety has positive and significant direct effect on the airline Image.

H3b. Safety has positive and significant direct effect on passengers' Hedonic experience.

H4a. Sensory evaluation of airline passengers has a positive and a significant direct effect on the airline Image.

H4b. Sensory evaluation of airline passengers has a positive and a significant direct effect on passengers' Hedonics experience.

H5a. Hedonics has positive and significant direct effect on passengers' Image.

H5b. Hedonics has positive and significant direct effect on passengers' Satisfaction.

H5c. Hedonics has positive and significant direct effect on passengers' Loyalty.

H6a. Image has positive and significant direct effect on passengers' satisfaction.

H6b. Image has positive and significant direct effect on passengers' loyalty.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 The Imam Khomeini International (IKA) Airport

Located in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini International Airport (IATA: IKA; ICAO: OIIE) serves as the main airport for Tehran, the capital of the country. It is situated approximately 30 kilometers (19 miles) south of the city (Moradi et al., 2024; Rajabi & Daneshvar, 2015). IKA handles all of Tehran's international flights, while domestic operations are managed by Mehrabad Airport. As of 2013, Iran has 54 commercial airports across the country, connecting travelers through a network that includes 16 Iranian airlines and 36 foreign carriers (Rajabi & Daneshvar, 2015). These airlines link Iran mostly with destinations in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The country's aviation history was established initially as the Iranian Airways Company (1944-1961), to be late renamed as Iran Air. Iran Air operated flights on many international routes (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Flight network from IKA

Source: Innovata (n.d.)

In terms of passenger traffic (Table 4.1), Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKA) is ranked third (in 2019) in Iran, handling approximately 7 million passengers (Taghizadeh et al., 2019; IAC, 2019). The airport is followed by Mehrabad and Mashhad International Airport which serves mostly domestic flights (Taghizadeh et al., 2019).

Table 4.1. Ranking of IKA

Rank	Airport	City	Passengers Domestic	Passengers International	Passengers Total	Change
1	Mehrabad International Airport	Tehran	14,931,796	2	14,931,798	▼ 2%
2	Mashhad International Airport	Mashhad	7,361,524	1,499,795	8,861,319	▼ 2%
3	**Imam Khomeini International Airport**	**Tehran**	**18,718**	**7,036,441**	**7,055,159**	▼ **7%**
4	Kish International Airport	Kish	3,158,141	48,355	3,206,496	▲ 9%
5	Shiraz International Airport	Shiraz	2,547,721	463,490	3,011,211	▼ 6%
6	Ahwaz International Airport	Ahwaz	2,337,242	37,175	2,374,417	▼ 4%
7	Isfahan International Airport	Isfahan	1,652,167	229,220	1,881,387	▼ 14%
8	Tabriz International Airport	Tabriz	1,411,870	222,713	1,634,583	▲ 3%
9	Bandar Abbas International Airport	Bandar Abbas	1,171,689	46,132	1,217,821	▼ 2%
10	Abadan International Airport	Abadan	898,889	0	898,889	▲ 28%
	Total (55 airports including 27 international airports)		41,999,087	9,847,650	51,846,737	▼ 3%

Source: IAC (2019)

The airport is operated by the Iran Airports Company (IAC) and serves as the main base for Iran Air and Mahan Air, besides being an international hub for various smaller Iranian airlines (Zeinalian et al., 2023). In 2019, IKA handled 7 million passengers, reflecting a 7% decline from the previous year (IAC, 2019). According to ICAO (2022), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant drop in passenger traffic by 87% in 2020. However, the airport had a rapid recovery, with traffic recovering by 99% in 2021 and rising by 205% in 2022, bringing the total to 6,211,927 passengers (ICAO, 2022). These figures and data highlight the strategic importance of

IKA as Iran's main international hub (Zeinalian et al., 2023), and reenforced the criteria for selecting it as case study: a) A diversified passengers' base, since it serves millions of passengers from distinct regions; b) Recovery trend from the Covid-19 lock-down; c) Hub for FSCs of major and small airline companies or carriers.

4.2 Data design

The constructs were measured using a semi-structured questionnaire, designed to gather comprehensive insights into participants' flight experiences. The questionnaire was split into two sections: the first focused on socio-demographic data to describe the sample characteristics, while the second section evaluated respondents' flight experiences, focusing on outcomes like satisfaction and loyalty. To capture these responses, a five-point Likert scale was employed, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), enabling participants to indicate their level of agreement with each statement.

The specific constructs, their respective items, and the sources adapted for measurement are detailed in Table 4.2. For example, Airline Tangibles (including factors like seating comfort and inflight entertainment) were operationalized using a three-item scale from Koklic et al. (2017). Empathy (referring to the politeness and personal attention provided to passengers), was measured using a five-item scale from Leong et al. (2015). The construct of Safety (which addresses risks associated with the airplane or flight, reduced or controlled to accepted levels), was assessed with four items from Ringle et al. (2011).

The sensory aspects of the flight, under Sensory Evaluation (such as the perception of the surroundings and overall atmosphere), were measured using an eight-item scale developed by Kim et al. (2016). The concept of Hedonics (the enjoyment experienced during the flight) was captured with seven items based on Triantafillidou and Petala (2016). Finally, Image (which refers to the passengers' beliefs and impressions about the airline), was measured using a three-item scale from Hassan and Salem (2021). For the key outcomes, Satisfaction (judgment of the overall experience) was measured using Nadiri, Hussain, Ekiz, and Erdoğan (2008), while Loyalty (commitment to the airline) was evaluated using a three-item scale from Leong et al. (2015).

Table 4.2 Measurement Items

Construct	Items	Source
Airline tangibles	▪ Comfort of the plane seat. ▪ It had enough space for legs. ▪ Extra offers - magazines, movies, games, newspapers were available	Used by: Koklic et al. (2017). Source: Leong, et al. (2015).
Empathy	▪ The airline that I choose gives me individual attention ▪ The airline that I choose has provided online service that was convenient to all its customers ▪ The airline that I choose has employees who serve me in polite manner ▪ The airline that I choose has shown me best interest at heart ▪ The employees of the airline that I chose understood my specific needs	Used by: Leong et al. (2015).
Safety	▪ Perception of security checks at airport ▪ Perceived safety during flight ▪ Appearance of airplane ▪ Competence of cabin crew	Source: Ringle et al. (2011). Other Sources: Pakdil and Aydın (2007); Leong et al. (2015).
Sensory Evaluation	▪ The interior design was visually appealing ▪ The cabin decoration was well-presented ▪ The airplane was equipped with good-quality products ▪ The lighting created a comfortable atmosphere ▪ The temperature was comfortable ▪ The colors used in this airline created a pleasant atmosphere ▪ The scent of cabin inside was pleasing ▪ The cabin inside was clean.	Used by: Kim et al. (2016). Source: Kim and Perdue (2013).
Hedonics	▪ I experienced joy during flight ▪ The flight experience was fun ▪ The experience during flight gave me a good feeling ▪ I felt cheerful during the flight experience ▪ I felt I was having the ideal flight experience ▪ It was pleasant just being there ▪ I enjoyed the flight experience for its own sake	Source: Triantafillidou and Petala (2016).
Image	▪ Has a good reputation in the eyes of passengers ▪ Has a better image than its competitors ▪ Has a good image in the minds of passengers	Used by: Hassan and Salem (2021).
Satisfaction	▪ My satisfaction with the airline has increased ▪ My impression of this airline has improved ▪ I now have a more positive attitude towards the airline company	Source: Nadiri, Hussain, Ekiz and Erdoğan (2008).
Loyalty	▪ In the future, I will be loyal to this airline ▪ This airline will be my first choice in the future ▪ I will not buy other airline ticket if this is available ▪ I will recommend this airline to others	Source: Leong et al. (2015).

Source: Own Elaboration

4.3 Data collection

The target population of this study were all the passengers (foreign and nationals) who travelled from IKA Airport in IRAN to one of the routes available. As such, an online survey was conducted

(Maulisa & Hati, 2019) on the apps Telegram and WhatsApp (in tourism groups or aviation groups) and via LinkedIn to collect the data through a convenience sampling method (Cho, Ali & Manhas, 2018). The purpose of the research was explained to all participants. They were also asked to share the survey with their acquaintances who also met this criterion, resulting in a snowball sample. The data collection took place from November 2022 and May 2023. A total of 402 valid responses were obtained. All respondents used FSCs.

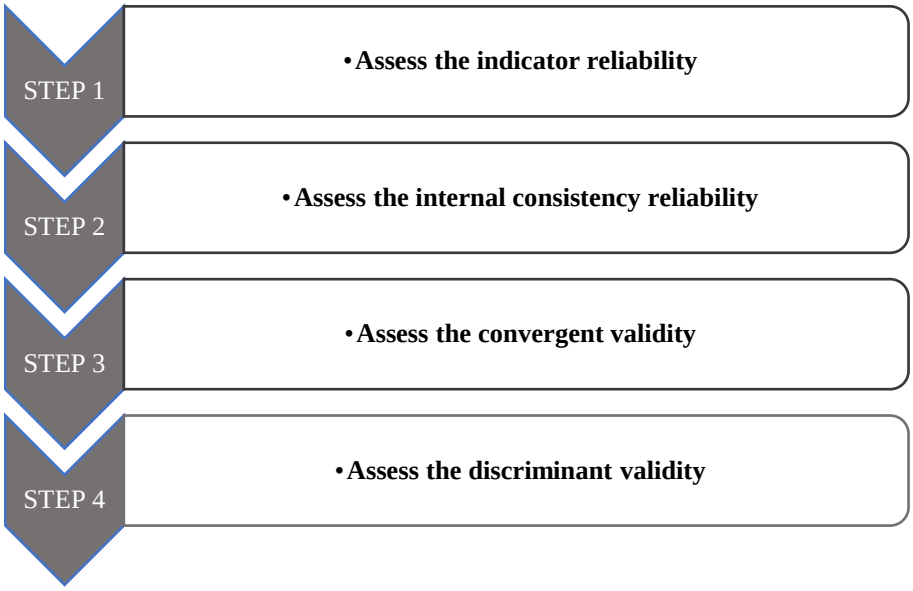
4.4 Data analysis

First, the descriptive statistics will focus on the description of the survey respondent's profile. Next, an analysis of conceptual fitness will be made, using a twostep approach (Figure 4.2 and 4.3). The structural equation modelling (SEM) technique (Chen & Fiore, 2017; Theodorakis et al., 2015) with latent variables will be computed using Smart PLSv4 to test the relationship(s) among the constructs. SEM is a considerably complex statistical technique for assessing relations between constructs, including latent variables (LVs) and observed variables (Andreev et al., 2009).

LVs represent conceptual terms used to express theoretical concepts, while observed variables refer to indicators that are measured directly. According to Hulland (1999) procedure, a PLS model is tested and interpreted in two steps. In the first step, the measurement model ought to be tested by performing indicator level and construct level validity (for example, the convergent validity test and discrimination validity test) and indicator level and construct level reliability (for example, the indicator reliability test and the internal consistency reliability test) analysis on each indicator (and construct) of the model (Hair et al., 2023).

This examination process aims to ensure reliable and validity of the construct indicators used (Hair et al., 2023; Sahibzada et al., 2022; Hulland, 1999). In the second step, after confirming that the measurement of constructs are reliable and valid, the structural model is examined by estimating the paths between the constructs in the model and determining their significance and the predictive ability of the model (Hair et al., 2023).

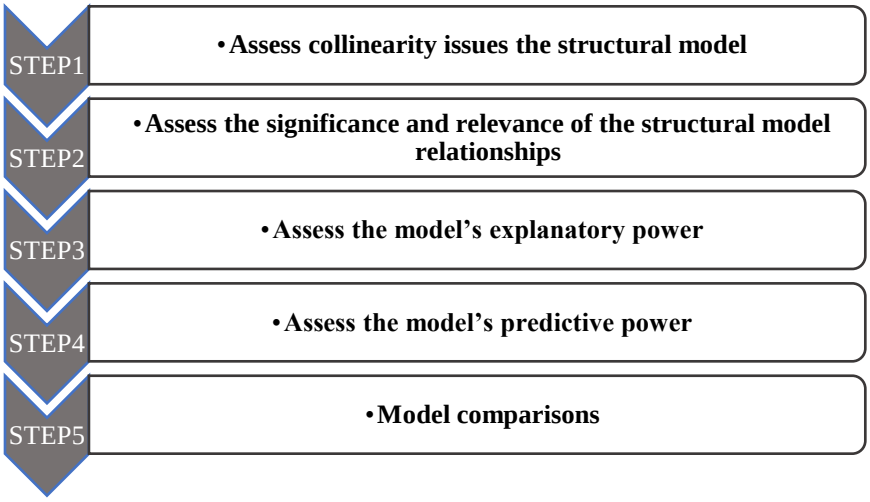
Figure. 4.2 Measurement model assessment procedure.



Source: Adapted from Hair et al. (2023)

Two types of SEM methods include covariance-based and component-based (CBSEM) or Partial Least Squares (PLS), the latter is frequently used in Management and Tourism empirical studies (Anderson et al., 2023; Andreev et al.,2009).

Figure. 4.3 Structural model assessment procedure.



Source: Adapted from Hair et al. (2022)

The covariance-based SEM (CovSEM) method uses software programs such as LISREL, AMOS, CALIS, EQS, and SEPATH (Anderson et al., 2023; Andreev et al.,2009; Arnett et al.,2003). The CBSEM method, known as the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method, is implied and examined in two steps (Tenenhaus, 2008; Hair et al., 2023). PLS is intended mainly for prediction purposes, while CovSEM is focused on parameter estimation (Andreev et al., 2009). PLS's advantages over CovSEM are too many as it exerts minimal demand on the measurement scale, the PLS needs a smaller sample size than CovSEM, PLS can handle a large number of variables, it employs simpler algorithms, estimates of latent constructs in PLS have a more practical meaning since its formation is precise, it allows building a complex framework of a multi-block analysis, and finally, it eases the task of estimating all-formative constructs (Anderson et al., 2023; Andreev et al., 2009; Tenenhaus, 2008). Partial Least Square is extensively used in variance-based reflective models (Anderson et al., 2023; Sahibzada et al., 2022).

CHAPTER 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Results

5.1.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

The socio-demographic profile (Table 5.1) of the respondents shows that the majority were male (65,4%), married (54.1%), with 35-44 years old (36%). Regarding the educational background, most had a master's degree (46.6%), and were employed (85%). Despite the diversity of jobs, most were engineers (10%), business owners (9%) or business managers (9%). Their last experience at IKA airport as passengers occurred in the 2022 (55,6%). Nevertheless, some had their experience two years before (8.4%), other three years (10.5%) and the remaining respondents had the experience more than three years ago (25,5%).

Table 5.1. Demographic variables

Characteristic	Item	%
Nationality	Iranian	100
Gender	Female	33.3
	Male	65.4
	Others	1.3
Age	18-24 years old	1.8
	25-34 years old	20.1
	35-44 years old	36.0
	45-54 years old	27.4
	55-64 years old	10.9
	65 and more years old	3.8
Marital status	single	41.1
	Married	54.1
	Divorced	3.6
	Others	1.3
Education	High school	3.6
	BA Degree	31.3
	Master's degree	46.6
	PhD and Doctorate	18.6
Occupation	Employed	85
	Retired	5
	Domestic Worker	5
	Student	2
	Other	4

Source: Own Elaboration

The name of the full-service airline company they used at the time was mostly, Iran Air, the national career of Iran (26.8%), followed by Mahan air (20.8%) and Turkish airline (17.3%). The route most respondents used for flying was Istanbul (IST)-Tehran (IKA) (41.3%), followed by Dubai (DXB)-Tehran (IKA) (13.1%) and Doha (DOH) – Tehran (IKA) (8.3%). Most of the respondents flew on Economy class (90,7%), and used a direct flight to IKA (67.3%), and very few had one (28.2%), two (3.6%), three (3%), or more (6%) on their travel.

5.1.2 Structural Equation Modelling analysis

5.1.2.1 Assessment of the measurement model

The proposed conceptual model is composed of four latent endogenous variables, four exogenous variable and thirty-seven reflective indicators. These indicators at this early stage, are all the questions of survey, before the path modeling procedure has been carried out and the output assessed. The standardized factor loadings (FL), average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach's (α) were were assess based on Hair (2006) guidelines, applied frequently (e.g., Sahibzada et al., 2022), to confirm the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

The item loadings are displayed in Figure 5.2. The reliability examination of the three Passenger Flight Experience constructs show that constructs did not yield exactly the expected results in accordance with the standardized scales (Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1993) and do need to be purified by eliminating some of the items with low loadings. The other five scales were showing satisfactory item reliabilities.

A) Convergent validity

According to the Table 5.2- after most of the indicators presented high factor loadings reaching 0,7 level or higher, except for SENS5 (0.514), SENS8 (0.674), HDNC7 (0.608), SAFE1(0.656), SAFE4 (0.699). Rather than automatically eliminating indicators when their loadings are below 0.70, researchers have to carefully examine the effects of removing those indicators on other reliability and validity measures. Generally, indicators with loadings between 0.40 and 0.708

should only be considered for removal if doing so leads to an increase in internal consistency reliability or convergent validity above the suggested threshold (Hair et al., 2021). Another important consideration when deciding whether to delete an indicator is the extent to which its removal affects content validity, which refers to how well a measure represents all factors of a given construct (Hair et al., 2021). As a result, indicators with weaker loadings are sometimes retained. However, indicators with very low loadings (below 0.40) should always be eliminated from the measurement model (Hair et al., 2022; de Matos et al., 2023). Taking all factors into consideration, and despite their loadings still being above the minimum acceptable level of 0.5, these four factors (SENS5, SENS8, HDNC7, SATS2) were deleted, as the overall model's outputs improved with their exclusion. In this way all remain indicators, except for SAFE1 (0.656), have acceptable loadings above 0.7, thus were considered in the next step of the path analysis.

Table 5.2 Item loadings, reliability and convergent validity

Constructs	**Items**	**Questions**	**FL >0.7**	***α*** **>0.7**	**CR >0.7**	**AVE >0.5**
Sensory	SENS1	The interior design was visually appealing	0.850	0.903	0.904	0.674
	SENS2	The cabin decoration was well-presented	0.876			
	SENS3	The airplane was equipped with good-quality products	0.800			
	SENS4	The lighting created a comfortable atmosphere	0.820			
	SENS5*	The temperature was comfortable	removed			
	SENS6	The colors used in this airline created a pleasant atmosphere	0.817			
	SENS7	The scent of cabin inside was pleasing	0.758			
	*SENS8**	*The cabin inside was clean.*	removed			
Hedonic Experience	HDNC1	I experienced joy during flight	0.816	0.921	0.925	0.717
	HDNC2	The flight experience was fun	0.850			
	HDNC3	The experience during flight gave me a good feeling	0.872			
	HDNC4	I felt cheerful during the flight experience	0.812			
	HDNC5	I felt I was having the ideal flight experience	0.857			
	HDNC6	It was pleasant just being there	0.872			
	*HDNC7**	*I enjoyed the flight experience for its own sake*	*removed*			
Airline tangibles	TANG1	The plane seat was comfort	0.889	0.819	0.820	0.736
	TANG2	It was enough space for legs	0.895			
	TANG3	Extra offers_ magazines, movies, games, newspapers were available	0.785			

Constructs	Items	Questions	FL >0.7	α >0.7	CR >0.7	AVE >0.5
Empathy	EMPT1	The airline that I choose gives me individual attention	0.807	0.842	0.841	0.613
	EMPT2	The airline that I choose has provided online service that was convenient to all its customer	0.746			
	EMPT3	The airline that I choose has employees who serve me in polite manner	0.759			
	EMPT4	The airline that I choose has shown me best interest at heart	0.823			
	EMPT5	The employees of the airline that I chose understood my specific needs	0.777			
Image	IMGE1	Has a good reputation in the eyes of passengers?	0.903	0.888	0.891	0.816
	IMGE2	Has a better image than its competitors?	0.891			
	IMGE3	Has a good image in the minds of passengers?	0.890			
Safety	SAFE1	Perception of security checks at airport	0.656	0.771	0.804	0.595
	SAFE2	Perceived safety during flight	0.873			
	SAFE3	Appearance of airplane	0.835			
	SAFE4	Competence of cabin crew	0.700			
Satisfaction	SATS1	My satisfaction with the airline has increased.	0.959	0.914	0.914	0.921
	*SATS2**	*My impression of this airline has improved.*	*removed*			
	SATS3	I now have a more positive attitude towards this airline	0.960			
Loyalty	LOYT1	In the future, I will be loyal to this airline	0.888	0.920	0.923	0.807
	LOYT2	This airline will be my first choice in the future	0.927			
	LOYT3	I will not buy other airline ticket if this is available	0.886			
	LOYT4	I will recommend this airline to others	0.890			

Note: FL: factor loadings; CR: composite reliability; α: Cronbach's alpha; AVE: average variance extracted.

Source: Own Elaboration

The outputs of the model also showed that all constructs Cronbach's Alpha (ranging from 0.771 to 0.920), CR (0.820 to 0.925), and the AVE (ranging from 0.595 to 0.921) are above the acceptable threshold of 0.7 and 0.5, confirming the convergent validity of the constructs (Hair et al., 2019), allowing to validate the adequacy of the measurement model (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; 2021; Müller et al., 2018; Hair et al., de Matos et al., 2023).

B) Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity was examined by employing the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations proposed by Henseler et al. (2015).

The square root of the AVE of each variable was calculated to verify if the result was larger than the correlation values in the respective row and column. As Table 5.3 shows in bold on the diagonal, the comparison of the latent variable's square root value of AVE, with the correlation values among the latent variables to find and establish discriminant validity (Wong, 2013). The values in bold show that the square root of AVE is higher than the correlations between the latent variables presented and so that all the results are acceptable (Hair et al., 2019). The HTMT ratio of correlations was also calculated and confirmed that the discriminant validity is well established since all values are below the threshold of 0.9 (Henseler et al., 2015; Franke and Sarstedt, 2019; de Matos et al., 2023).

Table 5.3 Discriminant validity - Fornell and Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations

Fornell-Larcker criterion	**Comfort**	**Empathy**	**Hedonics**	**Image**	**Loyalty**	**Safety**	**Satisfaction**	**Sensory**
AirlineTangibles	**0.858**							
Empathy	0.602	**0.783**						
Hedonics	0.677	0.585	**0.847**					
Image	0.591	0.581	0.596	**0.904**				
Loyalty	0.594	0.504	0.633	**0.660**	**0.898**			
Safety	0.641	0.624	0.624	0.633	0.516	**0.771**		
Satisfaction	0.655	0.588	0.692	0.712	0.759	0.629	**0.960**	
Sensory	0.708	0.599	0.748	0.617	0.552	0.668	0.644	**0.821**
Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)								
	Comfort	**Empathy**	**Hedonics**	**Image**	**Loyalty**	**Safety**	**Satisfaction**	**Sensory**
Airline Tangibles								
Empathy	0.723							
Hedonics	0.774	0.658						
Image	0.691	0.668	0.651					
Loyalty	0.681	0.566	0.679	0,725				
Safety	0.786	0.812	0.721	0.748	0.593			
Satisfaction	0.756	0.668	0.748	0.789	0.823	0.733		
Sensory	0.822	0.687	0.816	0.687	0.601	0.787	0.708	

Note: The data on the diagonal (in italic) of Fornell-Larcker criterion is the square root of AVE of the construct, while the other values are the correlations with the other variables.

According to Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics (2009:300), “Cross-loadings offer another check for discriminant validity. If an indicator has a higher correlation with another latent variable than with its respective latent variable, the appropriateness of the model should be reconsidered.” All the values of the indicators have been considered valid, since no indicator has a higher correlation value with another variable than with its own. Thus, the measurement model is considered internally consistent and reliable, with acceptable discriminant validity.

5.1.2.2 Assessment of the Structural model

Next, the structural model was assessed to verify the relationships among variables and test the proposed hypotheses (Hair et al., 2017). The bootstrapping technique using 5,000 subsamples was applied (Mahmud, Rahman, Lima, & Annie, 2021). Table 5.4 presents the path coefficient, t-values, p-values, and confidence intervals and also the *f2*. The results show that all hypotheses were confirmed, i.e., H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b, H3a, H3b, H4a, H4b, H5a, H5b, H5c, H6a, H6b. This means that there is significant positive relationship between the constructs as proposed in the conceptual model. In other words, the following hypotheses were accepted: Airline tangibles have positive and significant direct effect on the Airline Image (H1a. β=0.122, *t*= 2.155; *p*=0.016) and on passengers’ Hedonic experience (H1b. β=0.220, *t*= 3.823; *p*=0.000). The influence of Empathy on the Airline image (H2a. β=0.167, *t*= 2.684; *p*=0.004) and on passengers’ hedonic experience (H2b. β=0.111, *t*= 1.963; *p*=0.031) was also found to be significant. Furthermore, Safety had a positive and direct affect on the airline image (H3a. β=0.256, *t*= 3.991; *p*=0.000) and passengers’ hedonic experience (H3b. β=0.109, *t*= 1.840; *p*=0.033). In addition, the sensory evaluation of passengers had a positive and direct impact not only on the airline's image (H4a. β=0.156, *t*= 2.484; *p*=0.006), but also on passengers' hedonic experience (H4b. β=0.452, *t*=8.989; *p*=0.000) during the flight.

Regarding, Hedonics, it was found that it has a positive and significant direct effect on passengers’ Image (H5a. β=0.138, *t*=1.909; *p*=0.028), Satisfaction (H5b. β=0.415, *t*=9.955; *p*=0.000), and Loyalty (H5c. β=0.372, *t*=8.071; *p*=0.000). Lastly, Image has been found to have a positive and significant direct effect on passengers’ satisfaction (H6a. β=0.465, *t*=10.910; *p*=0.000) and loyalty (H6b. β=0.439, *t*=8.533; *p*=0.000). The effect size (f2) also showed differences among the

constructs relationships, ranging from 0.012 for Comfort and Image (H1a), to 0.364 between Image and Satisfaction (H6a).

The results also revealed R2 of 0.620, 0.510, 0.525, 0.618 for Hedonics, Image, Loyalty and Satisfaction respectively. This means that R2 outputs are high (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019) and support the model predictive capacity (Falk & Miller, 1992; Sarstedt et al., 2014). In addition, to verify the predictive relevance of the model (Chin, 2010) the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 value was employed. The results of the Stone-Geisser's Q^2, demonstrated acceptable predictive relevance (Ali et al., 2016a) with 0.607, 0.490, 0.524 and 0.388 respectively, for Hedonics, Image, Satisfaction and Loyalty. Hair et al. (2013) states that for Q-square (Q2) the values above 0 show that the model has predictive relevance. This predictive power can range from 0.02 (weak), 0.15 (moderate), and 0.35 (strong).

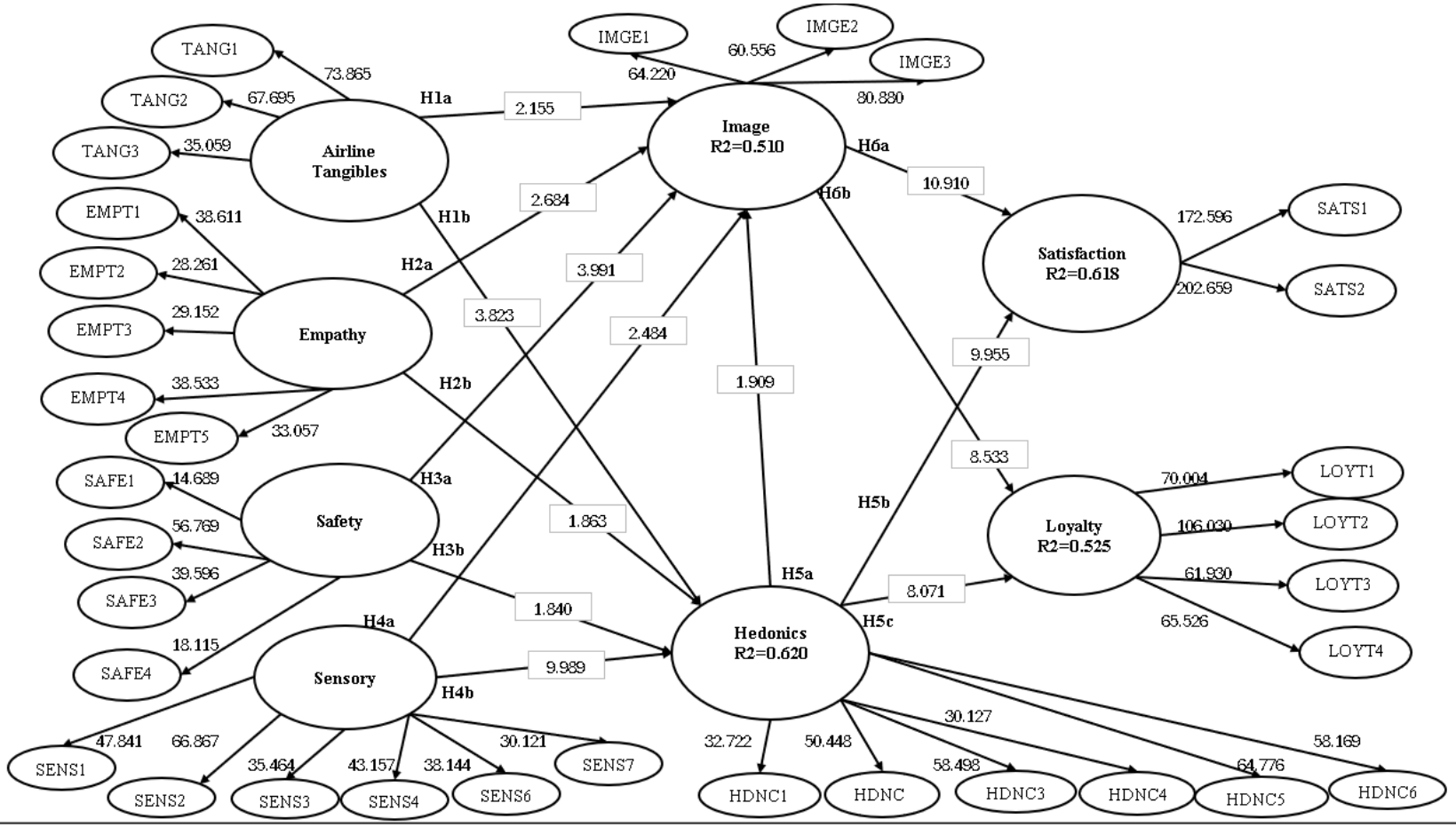
Table 5.4 - Results of structural model path coefficient (direct relationships)

Hypotheses and Relationship	**β**	**SD**	***t*-value**	***p*-value**	**Confidence intervals (bias corrected)**		***f*2**	**Decision**
H1a. TANG -> IMGE	0.122	0.057	2.155	0.016	0.028	0.216	0.012	Supported
H1b. TANG -> HDNC	0.220	0.057	3.823	0.000	0.127	0.314	0.054	Supported
H2a. EMPT -> IMGE	0.167	0.062	2.684	0.004	0.069	0.276	0.029	Supported
H2b. EMPT -> HDNC	0.111	0.060	1.863	0.031	0.014	0.211	0.017	Supported
H3a. SAFE -> IMGE	0.256	0.064	3.991	0.000	0.148	0.358	0.058	Supported
H3b. SAFE -> HDNC	0.109	0.059	1.840	0.033	0.012	0.207	0.014	Supported
H4a. SENSE -> IMGE	0.156	0.063	2.484	0.006	0.052	0.257	0.017	Supported
H4b. SENSE -> HDNC	0.452	0.050	8.989	0.000	0.368	0.534	0.221	Supported
H5a. HDNC -> IMGE	0.138	0.073	1.909	0.028	0.017	0.255	0.015	Supported
H5b. HDNC -> SATS	0.415	0.042	9.955	0.000	0.347	0.483	0.291	Supported
H5c. HDNC -> LOYT	0.372	0.046	8.071	0.000	0.296	0.446	0.188	Supported
H6a. IMGE -> SATS	0.465	0.043	10.910	0.000	0.391	0.532	0.364	Supported
H6b. IMGE -> LOYT	0.439	0.051	8.533	0.000	0.352	0.520	0.261	Supported

	R-square	**Q2**
HEDONICS	0.620	0.607
IMAGE	0.510	0.490
LOYALTY	0.525	0.388
SATISFACTION	0.618	0.524

Note: Critical t-value 1.96 ($p < 0.05$).

Figure 5.1 Outputs of Conceptual model



5.2 Discussion

As consumer expectations changed and technology drives continuous innovation, there has been a profound shift in the way customers use, buy and consume products and services, i.e., customer experience (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). For organizations is no longer just about offering services, it's about crafting meaningful and memorable experiences during the journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This shift in the market, underscores for the airline industry the need to study the airline experiences (Kim et al., 2016) more closely, as passengers are increasingly seeking not just transport, but enjoyable and sensory flight experiences that enhance overall satisfaction and loyalty (Koklic et al., 2017; Ringle et al., 2011). This is true for the airline industry where competition and customer demands are increasing. This study's findings have shown that airline passengers' flight experience is important to achieve satisfaction and loyalty.

In effect, this study has examined the influence of airline tangibles on the airline image (H1a) and passengers hedonic experience (H1b). This is in line with previous studies (e.g., Alamdari, 1999). For example, Alamdari (1999) found that passengers enjoy in-flight entertainment, since it enables them to relax and be more entertained. Thus, contribution to the airline image (Alamdari, 1999). The results support also the positive role of Empathy on airline Image (H2a) and Hedonics (H2b). This is congruent with Leong et al. (2015) and (Achmad, Simarmata, & Susanto, 2024; Lê & Mai Ngoc, 2023) studies. This finding stresses the need for airlines to continue having a relaxing and friendly atmosphere in helping their passengers to have a hedonic experience. At an era, technology is always present, our results highlight the need to maintain and improve the human touch and connection (Oktadiana & Pearce, 2020), between airline staff and passengers.

Safety has been shown to relate to airline Image (H3a) and passengers' Hedonic experience (H3b). This is congruent with the study of Jeeradist et al. (2016) that showed that Safety impacts airline image. It has been found similarly to Ernst and Reinelt (2017), and Taylor & Toohey (2006) studies that there is a relationship between safety and enjoyment, i.e., hedonic experience. In aviation, safety is always the top priority. On average, around 130,000 flights take off and land safely every day, with no incidents (IATA, 2024). Long-term trends show that the industry is becoming even safer. However, as aviation safety continues to improve, it becomes more challenging to achieve

higher levels of customer satisfaction, as expectations rise along with safety standards. Sensory evaluation of airline passengers has been found to be related with airline image (H4a) and passengers' hedonic experience (H4b). This is in line with Hussain (2018; 2019). As Kim et al. (2016) argue sensory evaluation can also help passengers to achieve a perception of well-being.

It was also confirmed that passengers' hedonic experience impact on the airline image (H5a) they hold, and on their satisfaction (H5b) and loyalty (H5c). This is congruent with Valiño et al. (2023), Ryu et al. (2010) or Park (2019). For example, Ryu et al. (2010) investigated the relationship between hedonic and utilitarian values, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. Their results showed that the hedonic value of dining experiences positively impacts customer satisfaction. Mehmood (2015) also noted that hedonic value plays a significant role in building loyalty and satisfaction. The last hypotheses, sought to find if airline image impacts on passengers' satisfaction (H6a) and passengers' loyalty (H6b). The study findings are like other studies showing a direct relationship between the variables (e.g., Geraldine & David, 2013; Han et al., 2019). For instance, Han et al. (2019) demonstrated in the airline context, that image moderate's passenger satisfaction.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study aimed to evaluate the influence of key aspects of the full-service carrier (FSC) flight experience—airline tangibles, empathy, safety, sensory evaluation—on passengers' perceptions of the airline's image and their hedonic experience. It also explored how these factors ultimately affect passenger satisfaction and loyalty. As consumer expectations shift from merely receiving a product or service to having an enjoyable, immersive experience, the study shows that FSC airlines should prioritize enhancing the flight journey at every stage—before, during, and after the flight.

The findings highlight that tangible elements such as seating, legroom, and in-flight entertainment, along with empathic service, are key to generating a pleasurable flight experience. These factors not only influence the airline's image but also contribute to passenger satisfaction and loyalty. This reflects current trends in experiential consumption, where passengers seek more engaging experiences rather than just functional services during their flights.

In terms of empathy, the study underscores the importance of maintaining human interaction and warmth, even in a technology-driven world. Friendly and attentive staff can significantly elevate the emotional quality of a flight, thereby enhancing the airline's image. Airlines must train their employees to communicate with warmth and assertiveness while also understanding and responding to passengers' behaviors and emotions effectively.

Sensory evaluation and safety were also found to play crucial roles in shaping the passenger experience. Sensory evaluation—assessing the plane, surroundings, and atmosphere—helps create a more relaxed, enjoyable flight while reinforcing passengers' sense of security. This points to the need for continuous innovation in the in-flight experience, as service quality is tied to perceived safety, satisfaction, and loyalty. For FSCs, this can be a key differentiator from low-cost carriers by offering a richer, more engaging travel experience.

Lastly, the study shows that an airline's image is not only shaped by branding but also by passengers' day-to-day interactions with the airline, particularly during the flight. FSCs should

seize these moments to positively influence passengers' perceptions, enhancing their reputation and fostering loyalty.

In conclusion, customer satisfaction and loyalty in the airline industry are multifaceted concepts, influenced by tangible factors like leg space, as well as intangible ones such as empathy and safety. These elements work together to shape the airline's image and passengers' enjoyment, which are key to building loyalty. FSCs need to adopt a more holistic approach to the overall flight experience, recognizing that creating memorable experiences is essential but must be integrated with other service-related factors. The study offers valuable insights into the interconnected nature of passenger experience, satisfaction, and loyalty, emphasizing the need for airlines to go beyond traditional service offerings.

6.2 Theoretical and practical implications

This study offers several theoretical contributions to the field of experience marketing in the airline and tourism industries. First, it presents a unique research model that evaluates the relationship between various factors influencing passengers' flight experience, satisfaction, and loyalty—factors that have previously been underexplored. Specifically, this research shifts the focus away from traditional notions of service quality and airline attributes and brings consumer experience to the forefront, a perspective often overlooked in air travel studies. This new approach is crucial for understanding how experience shapes consumer behavior in this sector.

Second, the study is the first to establish a direct connection between sensory evaluation and hedonics as core components of the flight experience. It highlights these constructs as influential variables that can significantly explain passenger satisfaction and loyalty. This is an important theoretical advancement, as previous research, such as Kim and Perdue (2013), rarely addressed the role of sensory and hedonic experiences in air travel. By integrating these dimensions into the discussion, the study expands the theoretical framework in ways that enrich our understanding of consumer behavior in aviation.

Third, the research contributes by addressing a gap in the experiential marketing literature. While much focus has been placed on service attributes and performance, this study underscores the importance of emotional and sensory experiences as key drivers of customer satisfaction and loyalty. The findings offer valuable insights for future studies, pushing the boundaries of how airlines and the tourism industry should think about customer experience beyond functional services.

In terms of practical implications, this research provides actionable insights for airline managers. Airlines could benefit from adopting experience marketing strategies that enhance the sensory dimensions of the flight. For instance, using auditory and gustatory marketing —such as carefully selected music and engaging atmospheric sounds—can create a more relaxing and memorable experience for passengers. Personalizing interactions, by training staff to be more empathetic and attentive, is another recommendation. Empathy offers a valuable way to connect with passengers and improve their in-flight experience.

Finally, airlines should continuously assess and refine their flight experiences to maintain competitive advantages and profitability. This involves using sensory elements strategically, training staff effectively, and consistently gathering feedback from passengers. By doing so, FSC airlines can better align with evolving customer expectations and needs, making passenger loyalty and satisfaction attainable in a highly competitive industry.

6.3 Limitations and future research

This study faced several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, due to the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a convenience sampling method was employed for health and safety reasons, utilizing an online questionnaire. This approach was necessary but led to the second limitation— limited generalizability of the findings, as convenience sampling lacks representativeness. Thirdly, the flight experience was not measured in real-time during the flight but was collected afterward, which might have introduced memory bias or altered responses based on post-flight reflections.

Given these limitations, future research should explore moderator or mediator variables such as the purpose of travel (e.g., leisure vs. business). These could reveal additional insights into how different passenger profiles shape the flight experience. Moreover, future studies should consider using scales specifically adapted to the leisure travel context, which could help uncover additional characteristics of the passenger flight experience, particularly for leisure travelers.

Additionally, more qualitative research methods from psychology, such as ethnographic research or focus groups, should be employed to better understand the emotional aspects of flight experiences. These methods could reveal the deeper hedonic impacts related to feelings of joy, happiness, or pleasure and how they might connect with other constructs like loyalty or satisfaction.

In summary, future studies on airline and air travel experiences should prioritize sensory evaluation and hedonics as key variables for explaining the flight passenger experience. This research demonstrated that four constructs —sensory evaluation, airline tangibles, empathy, and safety—influence hedonics. It also established that these same constructs influence passengers' airline image, which then affects satisfaction and loyalty, reinforcing the importance of both emotional and sensory elements in shaping flight experiences

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Appendixes

Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

Flight Experience in a Full-service airline carrier. The case of IKA Airport Tehran

The Ph.D. Tourism candidate Vida Nejabati from the University of Algarve (UAlg) is conducting an online questionnaire to assess "Passengers' Flight Experience in a full-service company in the Ika Airport Tehran" from the 3rd of April to the end of May 2023.
The primary purpose of this survey is to investigate Passengers' flight experience on a full-service carrier and its impact on satisfaction, future intentions, and loyalty. To participate in this questionnaire, fill in the following form in which all the mandatory fields and answers are identified. The questionnaire will take 5 minutes to complete. All data collected will be used only to register and manage the survey "Flight Experience" and will also be used as well as for communicating UAlg initiatives, being guaranteed the confidentiality of its treatment and exclusive use by UAlg; the data treatment will be carried out under the terms and conditions of the Data Protection Policy which is accessible at www.ualg.pt. If you need further clarifications regarding participation or filling out the form, please get in touch with us by email at a62410@ualg.pt.

* Required

1. I confirm that I have read and accept the general conditions of the terms described above. *

◯ Yes

2. I confirm that I accept the terms and conditions of the Microsoft Forms Privacy Policy available at "https://privacy.microsoft.com/en-US/privacystatement#mainnoticetoendusersmodule" . *

◯ Yes

Consent to the Processing of Personal Data

I expressly authorize the processing of personal data by UAlg, for the purposes of registering and managing the survey "Flight Experience", and also to communicate events or initiatives promoted by UAlg, under the terms of information on data processing and the Data Protection Policy that are available at www.ualg.pt. I am aware that I can withdraw consent or exercise data protection rights, namely the rights of complaint, access, rectification, opposition, limitation of treatment, or deletion, by contacting UAlg's Data Protection Officer by email rgpd@ualg.pt.

3. Response *

◯ Yes

Full-service carrier Flight Information

4. Have you flown at least once at IKA Airport (Tehran)?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

5. When was your last Flight?

- ◯ 1 year ago
- ◯ 2 years ago
- ◯ 3 years ago
- ◯ 4 or more years ago

6. What was the name of the Full-service airline company you flown and the route?

7. In which class have you flown on your last flight?

- ◯ Economy
- ◯ Business

8. How many stops did you have before coming to Tehran?

- ◯ 0
- ◯ 1
- ◯ 2
- ◯ 3
- ◯ 4 or more

9. Which airport (origin) did you depart for your flight to Tehran?

Flight Experience

10. When thinking about your last flight to IKA Airport, how much do you agree with the following statements regarding your sensory perception of the airplane you have flown? Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
The interior design was visually appealing	○	○	○	○	○
The cabin decoration was well-presented	○	○	○	○	○
The airplane was equipped with good-quality products	○	○	○	○	○
The lighting created a comfortable atmosphere	○	○	○	○	○
The temperature was comfortable	○	○	○	○	○
The colors used in this airline created a pleasant atmosphere	○	○	○	○	○
The scent of cabin inside was pleasing	○	○	○	○	○
The cabin inside was clean	○	○	○	○	○

11. We want to know how fun your flight was. So, to what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding the flight, Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
I experienced joy during flight	○	○	○	○	○
The flight experience was fun	○	○	○	○	○
The experience during flight gave me a good feeling	○	○	○	○	○
I felt cheerful during the flight experience	○	○	○	○	○
I felt I was having the ideal flight experience	○	○	○	○	○
It was pleasant just being there	○	○	○	○	○
I enjoyed the flight experience for its own sake	○	○	○	○	○

12. How was your last flight to IKA Airport regarding comfort and in-flight service? Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
The plane seat was comfortable	○	○	○	○	○
It had enough space for the legs	○	○	○	○	○
Extra offers, magazines, movies, games, and newspapers were available	○	○	○	○	○

13. Regarding the empathy you got from the airline staff during your flight, Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disgree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
The airline that I chose gave me individual attention	○	○	○	○	○
The airline that I chose has provided online service that was convenient to all its customers	○	○	○	○	○
The airline that I chose had employees who serve me in a polite manner	○	○	○	○	○
The airline that I chose has shown me the best interest at heart	○	○	○	○	○
The employees of the airline that I chose understood my specific needs	○	○	○	○	○

14. How good was the airline image of the company, you have flown to IKA Airport? Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
Has a good reputation in the eyes of passengers	○	○	○	○	○
Has a better image than its competitors	○	○	○	○	○
Has a good image in the minds of passengers	○	○	○	○	○

15. What influenced your **safety perception** during your last flight experience to IKA Airport? Please indicate that to what extent you agree with the following statements. Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
Perception of security checks at airport	○	○	○	○	○
Perceived safety during flight	○	○	○	○	○
Appearance of airplane	○	○	○	○	○
Competence of cabin crew	○	○	○	○	○

16. Regarding the **value for money** for your flight? To what extend do you agree with the following statements. Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
The service is good for the price paid	○	○	○	○	○
The fare is very reasonable	○	○	○	○	○
I received what I paid for	○	○	○	○	○
I see value for money I paid	○	○	○	○	○

Satisfaction & Loyalty

17. To what extend do you agree with the following statements regarding the **satisfaction** for your flight? Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1- Strongly disagree	2- Disagree	3- Neither agree nor disagree	4- Agree	5- Strongly agree
My satisfaction with the airline has increased	○	○	○	○	○
My impression of this airline has improved	○	○	○	○	○
I now have a more positive attitude towards the airline company	○	○	○	○	○

18. To what extend do you agree with the following statements regarding your **purchase intention** in the future?
Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1- Strongly disagree	2- Agree	3- Neither agree nor disagree	4- Agree	5- Strongly agree
I would like to use this airline in the future	○	○	○	○	○
I am willing to use this airline when I want to travel the next time	○	○	○	○	○

19. To what extend do you agree with the following statements regarding your **recommendation** to others about the airline?
Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
I would recommend this airline to others	○	○	○	○	○
I would say positive things about this airline to others	○	○	○	○	○
If someone is looking for good airline, I will suggest to him/her to patronize this airline	○	○	○	○	○

20. To what extend do you agree with the following statements regarding your **loyalty** to the airline?
Please select only one answer per line, ranging from 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree.

	1-Strongly disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither agree nor disagree	4-Agree	5-Strongly agree
In the future, I will be loyal to this airline	○	○	○	○	○
This airline will be my first choice in the future	○	○	○	○	○
I will not buy other airline ticket if this is available	○	○	○	○	○
I will recommend this airline to others	○	○	○	○	○

Demographic info

21. Gender

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Other

22. Age

- ◯ 18-24
- ◯ 25-34
- ◯ 35-44
- ◯ 45-54
- ◯ 55-64
- ◯ Above 65

23. Marital statues

- ◯ Single
- ◯ Married
- ◯ Divorced
- ◯ Other

24. Education

- ◯ Basic School
- ◯ High School
- ◯ BA Degree
- ◯ Master Degree
- ◯ PhD and Pos-Doctorate

25. Occupation

26. Nationality