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## Assessing the Antecedents and Dimensions of Air Passenger Experience (Case study: Iranian Airlines, Isfahan Airport)

Narges Rostamian<sup>1\*</sup> | Bahram Ranjbarian<sup>2</sup> | Arash Shahin<sup>3</sup> | Azarnoosh Ansari<sup>4</sup>

1. Corresponding Author, Department of Management, Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Economics, Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran. Email: [nargesrostamian@yahoo.com](mailto:nargesrostamian@yahoo.com)
2. Department of Management, Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Economics, Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran. Email: [b.ranjbarian@ase.ui.ac.ir](mailto:b.ranjbarian@ase.ui.ac.ir)
3. Department of Management, Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Economics, Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran. Email: [arashshahin@hotmail.com](mailto:arashshahin@hotmail.com)
4. Department of Management, Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Economics, Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran. Email: [noosh.azar@gmail.com](mailto:noosh.azar@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Customer experience has become a focus of study in the scientific community. Though the customer experience and its components are measured to define, the antecedents and dimensions of customer experience require a comprehensive assessment in developing countries such as Iran. For this purpose, 23 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the passengers of different Iranian airlines. In this attempt, seven dimensions of customer experience were identified – including sensory, emotional, cognitive, recognition, security, novelty, and relationship dimensions – through thematic analysis method. To identify the factors affecting the passenger experience, a list of factors was initially extracted from previous studies. The impact of the ambiance inside the airplane, marketing programs, staff, scheduling, planning and management actions, the scope of passenger choice, and physical facilities were extracted through the fuzzy Delphi method according to 10 experts' views. The proposed method and the findings therein would contribute to the efforts of researchers and marketing practitioners, airline managers, and travel agencies in identifying the existing challenges in the airline industry besides planning to develop modern airline infrastructure and competitive differentiation.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary marketing is interested in discussing the customer experience. Customer experience is a pervasive issue in scientific and practical environments. According to Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2021), because empirical economics is the last stage of economic development classification, customers' focus is on the product and the experiences gained. Providing good customer experiences is a fundamental business challenge (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). The first discussions in this context were made in the mid-'90s by Schmitt (1999), continuing the study by Pine II and Gilmore (1998). Customer experience is an emotional and cognitive state originating from a shared cultural meaning, referring to the interactions between the customer and the goods/services (Waqas et al., 2021). Customer experience is the brainchild of their thoughts, feelings, and evaluations. A positive experience influences customer commitments, guides purchasing decisions, and alerts companies concerning customer satisfaction and loyalty (Rudkowski et al., 2020).

The experience is a multidimensional concept (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2021). To most researchers, customer experience is a state of mind in the form of a set of emotions described as dimensions of the customer experience (Nysveen et al., 2013). Among many, Maklan and Klaus (2011) and Verleye (2015) has acknowledged the multidimensionality of the experience. The customer experience consists of the consumer's emotional, physical, and cognitive states, and if considered seriously as a package by the organization, its performance would improve. The count and the content of the customer experience dimensions vary. Though the dimensions have specific features, they have overlapping similarities (Waqas et al., 2021). The count and the content of the dimensions are diverse. Pekovic and Rolland (2020) introduced the dimensions of experience as: emotional, cognitive, sensory, social, behavioral, and technological, while Molinillo et al. (2020) introduced emotional and cognitive dimensions as the basis for measuring customer experience. The only explanation for a varying count of dimensions is the setting where customer experience is experienced (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The concept of customer experience in the related literature prevails. Contrary to recognizing the importance of the customer experience, the scientific literature examining this concept is limited (Havir, 2017). In this field of study, the focus is more on the outputs than on the influential factors (Liu, 2013). Marketers seek to find factors capable of promising customer experience (Zhang et al., 2015). The attempt is made in many studies to devise conceptual and empirical models regarding correlations between customer experience and other concepts; consequently, many antecedents and consequences are assessed. Different classifications have been made. Classifications vary as to antecedents in different industries (Waqas et al., 2021). Laming and Mason (2014) applied the customer experience concept in the airline industry, where the airline passenger travel elements (including reservation services, website services, check-in, lounge, flight delay, boarding and departure, cabin features, seat features, crew and pilots, IFE, inflight food and drink, and arrival) are assessed according to the variables of overall satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy. Wang and Seo (2016) differentiated the basics of customer experience in general businesses as (1) the internal factors, like social-demographic, past experiences, familiarity, and customer participation, and (2) external factors, like quality product/service, physical characteristics, social/online environment, employee characteristics, economic factors, and self-service technologies.

In general, the transportation industry of any country reflects its economic situation and industrial development status. The airline industry is considered one of the most influential aspects of growth and development in developed and developing countries. Airlines often view the issue of passenger needs in their context and focus on reducing costs to achieve effective performance, while this may distract them from providing quality services (Ali et al., 2015). In this competitive market, providing high-quality service to passengers by the airlines to be both profitable and promote steady growth is a competitive advantage. The in-flight experiences are essential to the customers, who, if not satisfied with the quality of provided service, will no longer fly the given airlines (Namukasa, 2013). Customers evaluate the services provided subject to the influence of travel experience. There is a high level of satisfaction when passengers value the experiences of the services they have received.

This article seeks to identify the dimensions and antecedents of the customer experience for domestic flight passengers. It is assumed that consumers in different markets apply a different criterion, formed based on their needs and expectations for evaluating their needs and experiences subject to their knowledge of the product or how sophisticated they are. The unique characteristics of

Iranians as travelers distinguish them from travelers of other countries in various ways. Political, economic, and uncontrollable parameters and constraints have created a situation in which Iranian travelers' feelings, expectations, and decisions are affected. An example of these parameters is the sanctions that the Iranian people have been struggling with for years. Consequently, the emotional expectation of Iranian air travelers varies from the same in other developing countries.

The impact of Covid-19 on the global economy – in this case, air travel – made consumers more cautious in their purchasing behavior. Considering this factor and the fact that the count of studies run on this subject is low in developing countries (Waqas et al., 2021), realized the necessity of addressing this issue to fill the gap in this context regarding the experience of Iranian air travelers.

By reviewing the available related literature, it is revealed that (1) some of the mentioned factors as variables affecting the passenger experience are airport related, something beyond airline control, and (2) some factors like the dimensions and antecedents, which can be magnified as a complete category, are assessed separately.

To improve these drawbacks, it is sought to propose a complete model of passenger experience than what exists by identifying and categorizing the dimensions and antecedents of airline passengers' experience and classifying the separate but homogeneous dimensions and antecedents subject to general heading.

The article is organized as follows. The literature is reviewed in Section 2, the research methodology is presented in Section 3, the findings are presented in Section 4, the discussion is made in Section 5, and the article is concluded in Section 6. The research implications are presented separately.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Background**

One of the success factors in the empirical economics phase is the development of marketing strategies with a focus on introducing valuable experiences (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Customer experience is a relatively new concept in the marketing world (Tajeddini et al., 2021). Actual and predicted purchases, consumption experience, encounter outcome, living with objects, and new consumer perceptions constitute some of the definitions of customer experience in the literature (Cajetan & Patrick, 2018).

This study focuses on Schmitt's (1999) definitions of customer experience. According to him, customer experience consists of experiences obtained when encountering or living with things that provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational values. Experience is gained by factors controlled by the seller, like the service interface, retail environment, price, and equipment, in addition to the factors not subject to seller control, like the other's influence, the purpose of the purchase, etc., (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014).

### **2.1 Customer Experience Dimensions**

Different dimensions of experience have been identified in the literature (Hoyer et al., 2020). Maklan and Klaus (2011) suggested that researchers assess the customer experience dimensions, which are essential in the organizational performance. The research literature acknowledges the multidimensionality of experience (Hosany & Witham, 2009). Customer experience dimensions and definitions from different perspectives regarding different industries are tabulated in Table 1.

### **2.2 Customer Experience Antecedents**

Marketers seek to determine factors that promote positive customer experiences (Liu, 2013). The available literature reflects the different classifications on customer experience antecedents based on different contexts.

**Table 1.** Customer Experience Dimensions and Definitions

Researcher		Definitions
Otto & Ritchie (1996)	Hedonic	Performing friendly and memorable activities during which one's imagination is aroused and excited.
	Novelty	Doing new and different things and being challenged in some way.
	Comfort	Physical and mental comfort.
	Safety	Security of life and personal property.
	Recognition(stimulation) Interactive	Being important and taken seriously by service staff. Meeting different people, having the right to choose, being part of the process, and being aware and educated.
Pine II & Gilmore (1998)	Entertainment	Provide attractive and fun services.
	Educational	Stimulate curiosity to learn new things.
	Escapist	The feeling of living in another time and place and getting out of the normal routine of life.
Schmitt (1999)	Esthetic	A pleasant and desirable experience arising from paying full attention to the details of the design and the perfect coordination of the components and the pleasant environment.
	Sense	Experience arising from the five senses and sensory perceptions associated with the shopping environment.
	Feeling	Experience arising from the customer's inner feelings and emotions during the consumption process.
	Thinking	Intellectual and mental processes performed in the customer's mind that can affect problem-solving skills and change assumptions about goods and services.
	Relating	A person's connection to a larger social system and other persons.
Gentile et al. (2007)	Acting	Combine different behavioral options including physical activity, lifestyle patterns, and interactions.
	Lifestyle	
	Relating	Experiences that are the result of confirming the values and beliefs of the person provided by the product and consuming it.
	Pragmatic	Dependence arising from social context and communication that leads to identity.
Verhoef et al. (2009)	Emotional	Experiences that are the result of consuming or doing practical work.
	Thinking	Emotions, feelings, and emotional experiences that lead to dependence on the company, products, and brand.
	Sensory	
Rose et al. (2012)	Social	
	Affective(Emotional)	Any interaction and communication with people.
	Cognitive(Thinking)	
Physical (Lifestyle)		
Rageh et al. (2013)	Cognitive	
	Affective	
	Comfort	
	Educational	
	Recognition	
	Relational	
Hamzah et al. (2014)	Beauty	
	Hedonic	
	Novelty	
	Safety	
Homburg et al. (2015)	Sense	
	Behavioral(Acting)	
	Emotional	
	Thinking	
Zhang et al. (2015)	Relating	Experiences related to activities such as automatic tuning devices, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality in the online and store environment.
	Technological	
	Emotional	
	Cognitive	
	Social	
Molinillo et al. (2020)	Sensorial	
	Behavioral	
	Sensory	
	Thinking	

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.

Garg et al. (2014) identified customer experience antecedents in banks as a service environment, customization, added value, convenience, core service, marketing mix, staff, response speed, service process, customer interaction, the presence of other customers, the beauty of the website, and the enjoyable and operational elements of the website. Physical environment (Jeloudarlou et al., 2021), skills (Rose et al., 2012), physical facilities and service staff (Arnold et al., 2005), price (Bolton et al., 2000), beauty (Martin et al., 2015), marketing mix (Khan & Rahman, 2015), perceived ease of use, speed, and clear goals (Bilgihan et al., 2014), travel-related factors, consumer personality traits (Walls et al., 2011) and traveler's past experiences (Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014) are other factors mentioned in the studies. The details of studies done on customer experience antecedents in the aviation industry are tabulated in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Antecedents of Customer Experience in the Aviation Industry

Researchers	Antecedents of passengers' experience	In
Richardson (2012)	Customer service, meet the customer's needs, customer's feels about using service, price, ease of use of product or service	Airline
Harrison et al. (2012)	Artifact: check in kiosk; service: staffed check in; environment: hallway between security and gate	Airport
Misopoulos et al. (2014)	Online and mobile check-in, prices, on board entertainments, iPad access in lounges	Airline
Losekoot (2015)	Physical environment, meeting customer needs, efficiency, expectations against impressions, airport environment and processes, personal travel philosophy, purpose of travel, facilities, culture and authenticity, business or tourism travel, sense of ownership, other people, airport role, brand, and offer of improvement, unforeseen travel, privacy, services, security, control, assistance, hospitality, meetings, identity, special needs of passengers, acceptance of customer complaints, pride or friendship, problem-solving, social occasion, technology, Internet, consecutive flights, time-lapse, pre-flight behavior, executive features	Airport
Jiang & Zhang (2016)	Airport parking, check-in, immigration, internet/Wi-Fi, and baggage delivery	Airport
Lolini (2018)	Human touch points: ground and in-flight service crew, word-of-mouth, customer service, call center, digital touch points: e-mail, website, other touch points: advertisement, merchandising, marketing	Airline

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.

### 2.3 Passenger Experience in the Aviation Industry

The aviation system is one of the significant components of tourism. This industry is in constant change (Hvass, 2014). The passenger aviation system is constantly growing for business or other purposes (Zabkar et al., 2010). In the marketing context, one of the significant issues of an airliner is how to absorb more passengers for a specific destination and identify the influencing factors through the passenger's behavioral responses that ultimately would lead them to become fixed customers through good word-of-mouth advertising and attracting new passengers (Jankingthong & Gonejanart, 2012; Zabkar et al., 2010). The rapid advances are made in technology; thus, airline services, the convenience, and the comfort of travel have promoted passenger expectations (Bogicevic et al., 2013). Not long ago, most airlines perceived the passenger needs according to their internal factors, which were merely profit-oriented with no concern for providing quality service to their customers (Ali et al., 2015). Now, airlines seek to gain more market share and absorb more passengers to use their services by offering new services and applying different promotional tools (Laming & Mason, 2014). People receive information via their personal experience, information received from company personnel, other consumers, mass media, or interactions with other people (Namukasa, 2013). Evaluation of air travel services is influenced by travelers' psychological, demographic, passenger experience, and cultural backgrounds (Boetsch et al., 2011). Due to high competition in the aviation industry, airlines must focus on the customer experience (Ban & Kim, 2019). Being fully aware of the customer experience concept is considered the primary success factor for an airline's future profitability and growth. Managing the factors that constitute the customer experience in airlines is a specific and obvious challenge because many factors like the airport, immigration, security, and customs are not subject to direct airline control (Laming & Mason, 2014). Therefore, given the importance of discussing customer experience in the aviation industry and related challenges; research in this area and providing solutions to the problems facing this industry seems important.

In general, after a comprehensive review of the available research background in this field, it is found that only the concept of customer experience and its dimensions are assessed in different aspects, including the brand marketing (online or offline), banking (online or offline), touristic facilities (hotel or airport), health, shopping centers, sporting events, mobile store, and retailing (online or offline). Accordingly, due to the different contexts of the customer experience, the count of dimensions in different studies is different. Nonetheless, the dimensions of the customer experience in the aviation industry, especially in airlines, have not been assessed.

Iran is a developing country, and the different contexts of developing countries make them different in terms of issues. It can lead to differences in the factors affecting customer experience in the aviation industry. The economic sanctions imposed on Iran have left effects on this industry. The aging aircraft fleet, lack of access to facilities, poor training, poor international communication, and lack of improvement of specialized workforce in airlines constitute only a part of the sanctions' effect on Iranian aviation industry. A careful assessment of the fact reveals that Iran's domestic flight service criterion is far behind that of conventional standards of this industry. Therefore, many of the factors in international settings that could lead to unpleasant experiences may seem unimportant for Iranian passengers. The expectation of Iranian passengers is formed based on current market possibilities and conditions; consequently, assessing Iranian passengers' experiences would undoubtedly introduce different dimensions when compared with these similar assessments elsewhere. The examination of the available resources, the dimensions, and the factors affecting the customer experience in the aviation industry in a developing country like Iran with its special conditions has not been undertaken so far. This gap in customer experience research is the driving force of this study.

### **3. Research Methodology**

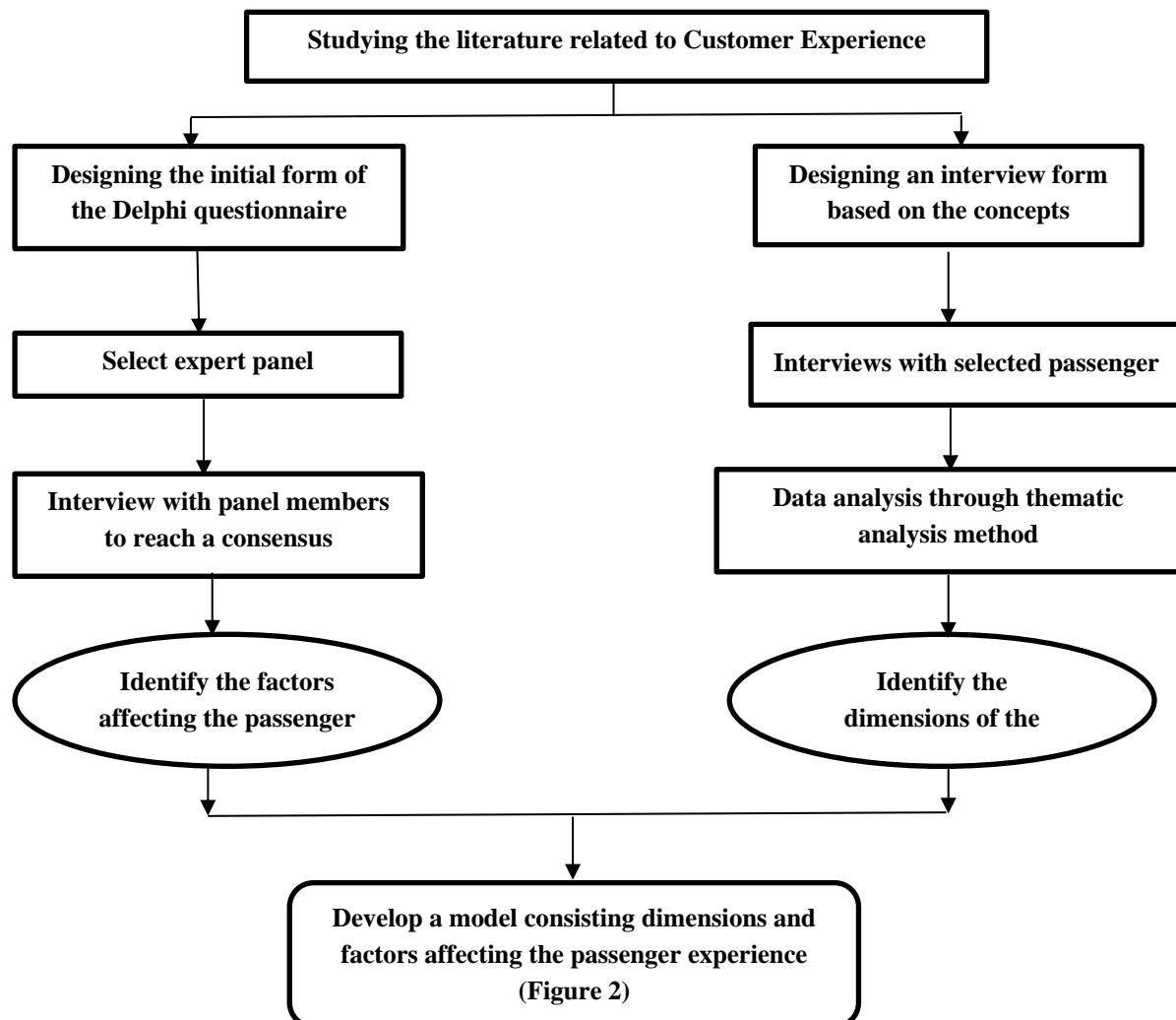
This study aimed to identify and categorize customer experience dimensions and antecedents within Iranian airlines passengers' perspectives in the city of Isfahan. Because customer experience has different meanings in different countries, its details should be identified for different segments of the target market according to its nature and general. To identify these dimensions, customers were directly asked to explain different aspects of their experience in air travel through the thematic analysis method. Although previous studies have pointed to the factors affecting experience among individuals and different fields, the fuzzy Delphi method and group consensus of experts were applied in this study to identify and categorize the antecedents of Iranian passengers' experience in Isfahan. The research procedure in reaching the final model is flowcharted in Figure (1).

#### **3.1 Sampling and Data collection**

Sampling was made through the purposive method. There was no specific rule for determining the qualitative research sample count, and sampling continued to the extent that the theoretical saturation was achieved (Ranjbarian et al., 2018). Voss et al. (2002), by considering the sample count in a qualitative case study, suggest that the less the count of cases studied, the greater the study depth. In this study, 23 passengers of different Iranian airlines at Isfahan airport constituted the study sample. A non-probability judgmental method was adopted to select the specialists and experts who answered the Delphi questionnaire. The validity of the Delphi method was not subject to the expert count but rather to their competence. Required competencies are a sufficient level of knowledge, experience, and expertise in the field of study (Abdollahi et al., 2020). The panel members were university professors of tourism and marketing, geography and urban planning disciplines, and executive directors of airline agencies, totaling 10.

In order to collect data to assess the expert opinion, the literature related to customer experience in air services and tourism was assessed and a list of potential factors affecting the passenger experience of airlines was prepared. Then, the initial Delphi method questionnaire was developed. To gain access to the target community members, by referring to the office of the Association of Employers, Companies and Travel Services Offices of Isfahan Province, a list of characteristics and work experiences of tourism institutions was prepared and used for face-to-face interviews. In marketing, geography, and urban planning, the panel members were identified by assessing valid scientific databases and the questionnaire was sent to them through e-mail or personally. This was followed by identifying the dimensions of the customer experience and running in-depth semi-structured

interviews with the target group of people who had recently traveled with one of the Iranian airlines. The interviews were of two parts: 1) demographic factors like gender, marital status, age, education, and purpose of travel, and 2) the feelings or experiences towards Iranian airlines like the different stages of passenger reception, ticket preparation, and in-flight services. The researchers continued to conduct semi-structured interviews until they reached theoretical saturation at the 23<sup>rd</sup> interview.



**Figure 1.** The Sequential Procedure  
Figure: designed and devised by the researchers.

### 3.2 Thematic Analysis

A six-step method containing data familiarity, raw code generation, content search, content review, content definition and naming, and report preparation proposed by Broun and Clark (2006) was adopted to obtain the data from the 23 passengers and record them using the MAXQDA 2020 software.

### 3.3 Fuzzy Delphi Method

The Delphi method proposed by Rand in the 1960s is one of the structured methods for arriving at consensus (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963). The Delphi method is a series of consecutive courses with controlled feedback-seeking consensus among a group of experts on the subject (Mahmoudi et al., 2017). Due to the high cost of implementation and low convergence, Kaufmann and Gupta (1988) developed the fuzzy Delphi method. The critical point in implementing the fuzzy Delphi method is the count of the panel experts. The typical panel count is between 8-12 (Cavalli-Sforza & Ortolano, 1984), which, in this study was 10.

### 3.4 Data Trustworthiness

To assess the reliability and validity of the qualitative studies, the four criteria of credibility, transformability, conformability, and reliability proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) were examined. The credibility of the data in this study was determined through triangulation based on three data sources obtained from airline managers, university professors, and tourism and marketing practitioners who assessed different perspectives and provided more comprehensive data on the dimensions of the passenger experience and its effective factors. The transformability of research results was determined through targeted sampling and obtaining rich data. The conformability was determined by collecting data from in-depth interviews and long-term involvement with the data and classification and conceptualization. To achieve reliability, some interviews were entrusted to two experts to check their agreement with the coding. The fuzzy Delphi's reliability was confirmed as the results of each source were returned to the experts, followed by re-asking the members' opinions.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Thematic analysis

Passengers of different Iranian airlines in Isfahan were interviewed first to reveal their feelings about the different stages of their air travel. These views were recorded entirely. Different aspects of their experiences were analyzed and identified through the thematic analysis and the mentioned software. In this process, 208 primary codes were identified first, and next, the primary codes were classified into 21 basic codes with all-encompassing themes. The output of these 21 basic codes was categorized into 7 central codes or concepts, and finally, the global theme, the *passenger experience*, was extracted from the composition of the organizing themes. The demographic characteristics of the interviewed passengers are tabulated in Table 3, and the details of the thematic analyses are given in Table 4.

**Table 3.** Demographic Characteristics of the Passengers Interviewed

Parameter	Count	Percentage	
Gender	Female	12	52.18
	Male	11	47.82
Marital status	Married	20	89.96
	Single	3	13.04
Age range	<25	0	0
	25-35	9	39.13
	35-45	11	47.82
	45-55	2	8.7
	>55	1	4.35
Educational status	High school	2	8.71
	Bachelors	7	30.43
	Masters	7	30.43
	PhD	7	30.43
The purpose of the trip	Visit friends and family	3	13.04
	Work appointments	6	26.1
	Recreation	11	47.82
	Business	0	0
	Other	3	13.04
Total	23	100	

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.



**Table 4.** Thematic Analysis Output

Global theme	Organizing themes	Count	Basic themes	Count
Passenger experience	Emotional	41	Experiencing disorder	7
			Sense of wasting time	14
			A sense of despair and compulsion	1
			Feelings of anxiety and stress caused by lack of awareness	4
			A sense of discrimination and inequality	2
			Anxiety experience	1
			Fun and entertaining experience	5
	Recognition	43	A sense of calm	7
			Respect the passenger	43
	Safety	22	A sense of security and safety in flight	18
			Concerns about the equipment being intact	2
			Fear	2
	Sensory	58	Suffocation	4
			Enjoying catering and food	13
Sense of aesthetics			22	
Sense of comfort			18	
Cognitive	31	A sense of confidence and belief in the efficiency of the subject company	26	
		A sense of the value of the choice for the money paid	3	
		Learning and teaching	2	
Relational	10	Experiencing interaction and communication	10	
Novelty	3	Experiencing freshness and newness	3	

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.

The thematic network was developed based on the output of previous steps, providing an illustrative graphical map by arranging basic, organizing, and global themes.

## 4.2 Fuzzy Delphi Method

### 4.2.1 The First Stage

By reviewing and assessing the literature on customer experience in the aviation industry and the opinions of two active professors in this field, a list of potential factors affecting the passenger experience of airlines was made to serve as the initial basis for the implementation of the fuzzy Delphi method (Table 5).

### 4.2.2 The Second Stage

A questionnaire consisting of 3 sections was handed to the experts. The first section included the demographic questions, the second section included 11 5-point Likert-scale closed questions according to Table 5, scaled from very low to very high, and the third was a question addressed to the experts to state the factors they thought had an impact on the passenger experience but were not expressed in the initial classification. To facilitate the evaluation process for all experts and the possible limitations of presenting evaluations with numerical values, the questions were formulated in verbal form (Abdollahi et al., 2020). Questionnaires were provided to 10 experts by email and in person.

**Table 5.** Passenger Experience Antecedents Based on the Existing Literature and Experts' Opinions

Passenger experience antecedents and description
1. The airline company office: office design, colors, music, lighting, air conditioning, and fragrance
2. The ambiance inside the airplane: signs and indicators, the facilities quality, and services (like catering)
3. Electronic apparatus: quality of equipment and facilities inside the airline, Internet facilities, and self-service technology
4. Marketing programs: price, discounts, corporate marketing mix, new and innovative services, security and safety, personalized of services, and advertisement
5. Staff: value-culture compatibility, tone of voice, expertise, how to interact with the passenger, honesty, dialect, and appearance
6. Other passengers: behavior and impact
7. Planning and management actions: proper leadership, airline performance, organizational procedures and policies, systematic group, efficiency, flight planning, having a schedule for multiple flights, having a customer response office, managing the fleet life cycle, and fun and enjoyable airline programs
8. Travel objectives and passenger information: the person's past experiences, other people's statements, reason, and type of journey
9. Passenger: cultural compatibility between traveler and others, motivation, knowledge, personality, views and attitudes, job, income, personal limitations, and passenger language and dialect
10. Scheduling: prompt service process, delays, waiting time, allocating the right time to each customer, and proper scheduling on two or more destinations
11. Situational factors: time urgency and unforeseen problems as well as passenger stress

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.

### 4.2.3 The Third Stage

The analysis of data collected from a group of experts was carried out. The variables were converted into trapezoidal fuzzy numbers according to Table 6 and Eq. (1):

**Table 6.** The Fuzzy Numbers Associated with Verbal Values (adopted from Wu et al., 2009, 10135)

Value	Fuzzy trapezoidal numbers
Very High	(7,8,9,9)
High	(5,6,7,8)
Medium	(3,4,5,6)
Low	(2,3,3,4)
Very low	(0,0,1,2)

$$A_j^i = (a_1^i, a_2^i, a_3^i, a_4^i) \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, n; j = 1, 2, \dots, m \quad (1)$$

Where  $A_j^i$  is the  $i^{th}$  expert's opinion about the  $j^{th}$  criterion.

For example:

$$A_1^3 = 4$$

According to the 5-point Likert scale, 4=high;

According to Table 6,  $A_1^3 = (5, 6, 7, 8)$ .

At this stage, the mean of the answers received in the first stage was calculated through Eq. (2) (Cheng & Lin, 2002):

$$A_{j\text{ave}} = (a_{j\text{ave}1}, a_{j\text{ave}2}, a_{j\text{ave}3}, a_{j\text{ave}4}) = \left( \frac{1}{n} \sum a_1^i, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_2^i, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_3^i, \frac{1}{n} \sum a_4^i \right) \quad (2)$$

For example:  $j=1$  and  $i= (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10)$

$$a_{1\text{ave}1} = \frac{1}{10} (3+3+5+7+3+3+5+5+5+7) = 4.6$$

$$a_{1\text{ave}2} = \frac{1}{10} (4+4+6+8+4+4+6+6+6+8) = 5.6$$

$$a_{1\text{ave}3} = \frac{1}{10} (5+5+7+9+5+5+7+7+7+9) = 6.6$$

$$a_{1\text{ave}4} = \frac{1}{10} (6+6+8+9+6+6+8+8+8+9) = 7.4$$

$$A_{1\text{ave}} = (4.6, 5.6, 6.6, 7.4)$$

Because in the final section of the questionnaires, experts' opinions were asked regarding the factors affecting the experiences other than the initial list, at the end of the first stage, their opinions were collected and categorized, as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Antecedents of Passenger Experience Proposed by Panel Experts

The additional suggested factors
12. Passenger demand importance
13. Fleet and equipment compatibility
14. Public transportation facilities
15. Access to Internet facilities and GPS network
16. Food diversity and cultural compatibility
17. Rate of development of different geographical areas
18. Fleets (number and variety of airplane models)
19. Charter and non-charter
20. Airplane locations on the runway
21. Airline office and ticket sales at the airport
22. The company hotel and resort facilities
23. Flights with different flight routes

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.

To reach consensus in the group, the defuzzified mean values based on the opinions of the experts were calculated through Eq. (3). The disagreements among the experts' mean opinions for each index was determined through Eq. (4) (Cheng & Lin, 2002):

$$K_j = \frac{(a_{j\text{ avg }1} + a_{j\text{ avg }2} + a_{j\text{ avg }3} + a_{j\text{ avg }4})}{4} \quad (3)$$

where  $K_j$  is the defuzzification of  $A_{j\text{ ave}}$

(e.g.,  $j = a_{1\text{ avg }1} = 4.6, a_{1\text{ avg }3} = 6.4, a_{1\text{ avg }2} = 5.6, a_{1\text{ avg }4} = 7.4$

$$K_1 = \frac{1}{4}(4.6 + 5.6 + 6.6 + 7.4) = 6.05$$

The results and the newly proposed factors were provided to the experts in the form of a second-stage questionnaire.

Similar to the first stage, Eq. (1) and (2) were applied to convert the variables to trapezoidal fuzzy and calculate each factor mean (i.e.,  $B_{j\text{ ave}}$ ). The difference between the mean opinions of experts was calculated based on Eq. (4) (Farhadian & Shahgholian, 2015) to decide on the necessity or unnecessary of repeating the survey based on the obtained volumes in Table 8. After applying the fuzzy Delphi method, if the difference between the mean opinions of experts in two consecutive stages was less than 0.2 ( $d \leq 0.2$ ) (Mahmoudi et al., 2017), the necessary consensus was reached, and there was no need to continue. As observed in Table 8, the only difference between the means of the company employees, scheduling and planning, and management actions was less than 0.2. Because the factors 12 to 23 in Table 8 were introduced by the experts at the end of the first stage, the mean difference for these factors could not be calculated; therefore, the third-stage questionnaire was devised to reach a consensus. In the third stage, the process was repeated as previous steps to obtain the mean volumes in terms  $C_{j\text{ ave}}$ . The mean difference with the second stage (i.e.,  $d(C_{j\text{ ave}}, B_{j\text{ ave}})$ ) was calculated through Eq. (4):

$$d(B_{j\text{ ave}}, A_{j\text{ ave}}) = \left| \frac{1}{4} [(b_{j\text{ ave }1} + b_{j\text{ ave }2} + b_{j\text{ ave }3} + b_{j\text{ ave }4}) - (a_{j\text{ ave }1} + a_{j\text{ ave }2} + a_{j\text{ ave }3} + a_{j\text{ ave }4})] \right| \quad (4)$$

(e.g.,  $B_{1\text{ ave}} = (3.5, 4.5, 5.4, 6.4), A_{1\text{ ave}} = (4.6, 5.6, 6.6, 7.4)$ )

$$d(B_{j\text{ ave}}, A_{j\text{ ave}}) = 1.1.$$

As observed in Table 8, the mean difference of all factors in the third stage in the acceptable range was less than 0.2 ( $d \leq 0.2$ ); therefore, the experts had reached a consensus, and the polling process was stopped. Finally, to identify antecedents of passenger experience, factors whose diffuse average value (equation 3) is greater than 5 (Abdullahi et al., 2020), have been identified as effective factors from the perspective of experts.

The features identified as antecedents of passenger experience of Iranian Airlines came in 14 categories and were prioritized based their importance. They are given in Table 9.

At the end of the fuzzy Delphi method, as in the classification of primary factors (Table 5), the item packaging technique was applied (Abdollahi et al., 2020), that is, factors with commonalities and content overlap were combined into a more general concept to be categorized into a more comprehensive format. The title *physical facilities* was selected for public-transport facilities, fleet and apparatus compatibility, airplane location on the runway, access to the Internet facilities and GPS network; and the term *passenger choice scope* for the fleets (count and variety of airplane models), charter and non-charter, passenger demand importance, food diversity and cultural compatibility, and flights with different flight routes. The final model of this study, consisting of the dimensions and the antecedents of passenger experience in domestic airlines in Iran, is shown in Figure 2.

**Table 8.** The Difference between Mean and the Defuzzification Mean of Stage 3

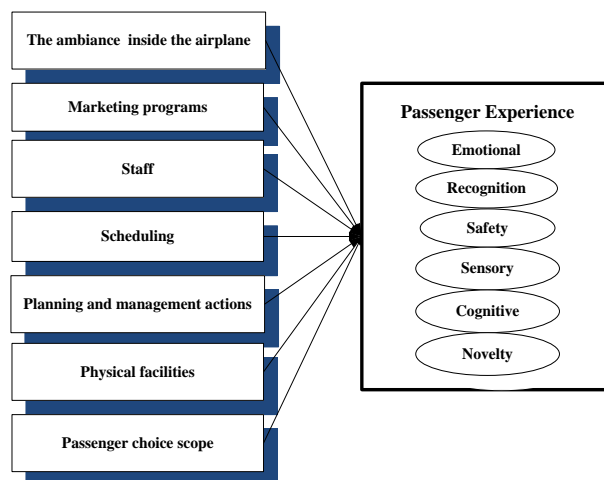
Proposed factors	The difference between the mean of stages 1 and 2	The mean difference between stages 2 and 3	The defuzzification mean in stage 3
The airline company office	1.1	0.15	4.8
The ambiance inside the airplane	0.35	0	7.2
Electronic apparatus	1.875	0.2	4.9
Marketing programs	0.7	0.175	7.025
Staff	0.05	0	6.85
Other passengers	1.2	0	3.575
Planning and management actions	0.2	0.15	6.45
Travel objectives and passenger information	0.95	0.2	4.75
Passenger	1.15	0	4.8
Scheduling	0.175	0.175	6.65
Situational factors	0.925	0	4.925
Passenger demand importance	-	0.2	6.075
Fleet and equipment compatibility	-	0.15	5.1
Public transportation facilities	-	0.2	5.35
Access to the Internet facilities and GPS network	-	0	5
Food diversity and cultural compatibility	-	0.2	5.875
Rate of development of different geographical areas	-	0.15	4.95
Fleets (count and variety of airplane models)	-	0.175	6.85
Charter and non-charter	-	0.2	6.8
Airplane locations on the runway	-	0.15	5.1
Airline office and ticket sales at the airport	-	0	4.6
The company hotel and resort facilities	-	0.15	3.95
Flights with different flight routes	-	0.175	5.75

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.

**Table 9.** Passenger Experience Antecedents

1. The ambiance inside the airplane
2. Marketing programs
3. Staff
3. Fleets (number and variety of airplane models)
4. Charter and non-charter
5. Scheduling
6. Planning and management actions
7. Passenger demand importance
8. Food diversity and cultural compatibility
9. Flights with different flight routes
10. Public transport facilities
11. Fleet and equipment compatibility
11. Airplane locations on the runway
12. Access to the Internet facilities and GPS network

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.



**Figure 2.** Antecedents and Dimensions of Passenger Experience.

Table: designed and devised by the researchers.

## 5. Discussion

Thematic analysis indicated that passengers' experience from different airlines in Iran consists of the 7 factors, namely emotional, recognition, safety, sensory, cognitive, relational, and novelty dimensions. Based on the content of the interviews and the classification of the dimensions of experience, the findings here correspond to Schmitt (1999) and Rageh et al. (2013).

Qualitative data reveal that in this study, the sensory experience is one of the essential components of travelers' experience: enjoying or not enjoying food, feeling good or bad, comfort and discomfort, fatigue, and ventilation. The sensory experiences and the like can have a significant impact on airline passenger choice. The repetition of this dimension in the interviews reveals that good and memorable experiences influence the five senses properly. This finding corresponds with that of Schmitt (1999), Gentile et al. (2007), Hamzeh et al. (2014), Homburg et al. (2015), and Pekovic and Rolland (2020).

Another important dimension is recognition, which refers to the customer's sense of importance and emphasizes customers' desire to feel comfortable with the staff and be welcomed warmly and responded to with openness and respect. The ability of the staff to deal with passengers correctly is effective in improving their mood and reducing travel anxiety. This factor corresponds with the findings of Otto and Ritchie (1996) and Rageh et al. (2013).

Another primary dimension of the passenger experience is their cognitive experience, where the findings indicate that they choose the airline, the factors of which are a planned-for safe and sound trip, without hassle, in complete peace, on time, and without delay. When the customer compares the costs incurred with the services provided by the airline of choice with the same of other lines, the sense of satisfaction prevails in making the right choice. The focus on this dimension in the data indicates the importance of attention, identification, and understanding of customers' need for comfort and confidence as well as creatively gaining new meaningful experiences by the service providers. The findings regarding this dimension correspond with that of Verhoef et al. (2009), Rose et al. (2012), and Homburg et al. (2015).

The emotional dimension is another dimension of concern in passenger experience. The focus on this dimension in interviews reveals the fact that airline agents should be aware that passengers are sensitive to pleasure, joy, excitement, anxiety, etc., and the positive or negative emotions experienced during the flight would influence their future decisions in selecting an airline. This dimension is one of the primary dimensions of the customer experience. The findings in this context correspond with that of Schmitt (1999), Gentile et al. (2007), Verhoef et al. (2009), Rose et al. (2012), Hamzah et al. (2014) and Zhang et al. (2015).

Safety, the most vital dimension, is judged by the existing record of the airline, without which other dimensions lose their status. The findings of this study regarding this primary dimension correspond with those of Otto and Ritchie (1996) and Rageh et al. (2013).

Another dimension of concern that confirms that individuals are inherently social and tend to experience happy times in flight through socializing with people is interaction, an integral part of the experience. Researchers such as Otto and Ritchie (1996), Schmitt (1999), Gentile et al. (2007), Rageh et al. (2013), Hamzah et al. (2014), and Zhang et al. (2015) revealed the importance of this dimension to which the findings here match.

The interviews revealed that some passengers are looking for new and different experiences in addition to what is provided, thus posing a new challenge in this industry. The findings here in this respect correspond with that of Otto and Ritchie (1996) and Rageh et al. (2013).

One of the objectives of this study was to provide a more complete model of the dimensions and antecedents of the passenger experience. To actualize this objective, Otto and Ritchie (1996) and Rageh et al. (2013) introduced the comfort and pleasing features as dimensions of the tourist experience. In this study, the factor of comfort is identified in Table 4; accordingly, the sense of comfort is instrumental and is transmitted to humans through the available facilities and the five senses, placed in a more general sensory category. Similarly, the pleasing dimension is identified in this study but placed in a more general emotional category. Rageh et al. (2013) refer to beauty as a separate factor, though it is placed in the sensory category in our study.

The results of the fuzzy Delphi technique reveal the most critical factors affecting the experience of airline passengers consist of the ambiance inside the airplane, marketing programs, staff, scheduling, planning and management actions, passenger choice scope, and physical facilities. The results

obtained from the Delphi method correspond with that of Laming and Mason (2014), Losekoot (2015), and Hwang and Seo (2016). In the study done by Misopoulos et al. (2014), some of the factors affecting the experience (e.g., iPad access in lounges) are not entirely subject to airline control and are more airport factors, while in this study, an attempt is made to examine the factors that are within the authority of the airline. This forms one of the differences between this research and previous studies.

Among the factors mentioned, staff behavior is outstanding in many studies, such as Garg et al. (2014), Losekoot (2015), Arnold et al. (2005), and Laming and Mason (2014). The findings confirm that staff are highly contributive in forming a positive or negative experience for customers, and providing a good experience depends on their knowledge and skills.

One of the factors suggested by the experts is the emphasis on cultural compatibility, a multifaceted factor where food, among other aspects, prevails. Passengers from different cultures perceive and evaluate the same experience differently, an issue not addressed in the previous studies. Suppose the cultural differences of their customers was a concern among airline managers and planners. In that case, they would be able to visualize a realistic picture of what is happening to the customer, leading to planning carefully in providing a first-hand and lasting experience.

Another influential factor is scheduling, with the sub-factor of prompt service process, addressed by Garg et al. (2014), Losekoot (2015), and Bilgihan et al. (2014), to which the findings of this study correspond. The focus on this factor indicates that customers want to shorten or eliminate waiting time in each service encounter and have prompt response.

It is found that the adopted marketing program factor of the subject airlines corresponds with that of Garg et al. (2014) and Khan and Rahman (2015). Company marketing programs can increase company satisfaction, loyalty, and ultimately profitability by focusing on the factors that introduce a positive customer experience. One of the subsets of this factor is the marketing mix, where realizing consumers' requirements and the correct arrangement of the components of the marketing mix influence the formation of a positive experience in passengers. The right combination of marketing mix components is one of the success factors in all industries, especially in the aviation industry, because it leads to an appropriate and efficient marketing strategy and meets the consumer requirements at the level of the target market.

One of the subsets of passenger choice scope is the possibility of chartering or not chartering flights, which has not been mentioned in the previously made studies. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of each of these facilities, in terms of prices, discounts, routes, time intervals, refund ability, online shopping; airlines must increase passenger choice scope and meet the needs of different market segments aiming to have proper planning to have both options. In this study, a new antecedent of the passenger experience (i.e., chartering or not chartering flights) is added to the antecedents of customer experience.

The next influential factors are the count and variety of airplane models, the importance of passenger demands, flights with different flight routes, public transportation facilities, fleet and equipment compatibility, the location of the airplane on the runway, and the Internet facilities. Some of these factors, like variety in airplane models, the importance of passenger demand, and airplane's location on the runway, do not seem to have been directly addressed in the previous studies.

In this study, an attempt was made to place the effective factors with similar applications and content in a category with a general title by applying the packing items technique. Laming and Mason (2014) assessed factors like cabin and seat feature as well as the inflight food and drink quality as the factors affecting the passenger's experience of airlines. In this study, these factors were also identified (table 5), but they were included in a larger category, i.e., the environment inside the airplane, in order to include more factors in categories, and thus to achieve a more complete classification.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study was based on the emphasis of the previous research and was carried out to examine the customer experience concept, its dimensions, and antecedents in the aviation industry and for a specific group of Iranian passengers. The study was done in two stages, where the thematic analysis method and fuzzy Delphi method were applied. In this process, a semi-structured interview was made with 23 passengers of different Iranian airlines in the city of Isfahan. The questions were about the passengers' evaluation of their last trip with one of these airlines. By applying the thematic analysis

method, the dimensions of passenger experience were identified and categorized. The fuzzy Delphi method was applied to identify the antecedents of passenger experience. After reviewing the available related sources and considering the opinion of experts in this field, an initial list of 11 categories of factors affecting the passenger experience was prepared and handed to experts as a closed questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale. Some general categories of factors affecting the experience of Iranian airline passengers were identified in the formerly discussed 3 stages.

The results indicated that different dimensions constitute the feelings and experiences of passengers traveling by airline. In this study, the sensory experience was found to be the most crucial dimension; that is, the 5 senses individually or in interaction with each other can lay the foundation for a positive or negative experience. Another critical dimension was the cognitive aspect, which reflects the importance of the correlations between staff, services, and the passengers. This result advises service managers who invest in staff training to predict considerable return in profits. Emphasis on the cognitive dimension would absorb more customers, next to prices and discounts, as creative measures in providing services. The different emotions attributed to the service process determine customers' future decisions. Emphasis on safety is one of the primary concerns of aviation industry, a vital factor for airline sustenance. The importance of the newly introduced dimension and the experiences of their application for airlines is required for fulfilling passenger requirements.

In this study, the factors of ambiance inside the airplane, marketing programs, staff, scheduling, planning and management actions, passenger choice scope, and physical facilities were proposed to be sought if developing a lasting experience is pursued.

Passenger choice scope, a new antecedent in passenger experience, is added to the available factors affecting the passenger experience.

The 7 dimensions of experience identified in this study do not always evolve in passenger experience; they change over time and are categorized differently among people with different experiences. Because the duration of this study was short with a small statistical population, it should be realized that the factors affecting the passenger experience here may change with changing the conditions and statistics. These results cannot be generalized for long-term decisions making. Future similar studies carried out in the context of different countries are necessary to allow comparisons with the results of this study for better applications. The focus of this study was on the customer experience concept, an emerging field of research that, due to technological changes, requires more profound studies in this realm.

### **The Research Implication**

The results of this study are applicable to service companies in general and airlines and tourism companies in particular. The results of this study contribute to researchers in the field of marketing, airlines, and travel agencies to identify challenges in the aviation industry and plan to develop airline infrastructure and competitive differentiation. The findings here include both theoretical and practical implications.

As to the theoretical implications, in the previous studies, some of the factors affecting the passenger experience, their specific representations in the airlines, and a country with special conditions like Iran are not assessed simultaneously. The findings of this study are presented at the theoretical level as a model to identify and fully categorize the structure of passenger experience

As to the applied implications, the findings here would assist airlines managers in recognizing (1) the different factors of the customer experience, (2) finding solutions to improve and enhance each factors, and (3) gaining a competitive edge over others by providing memorable customer experiences. Moreover, they would better understand the difference between the factors affecting the passenger experience (antecedent) and its constituent foundation (dimension) and adopt this insight to provide passengers with a positive and lasting experience. Identifying challenges in the aviation industry, planning to develop airline infrastructure, and establishing competitive differentiations give managers a broader view of the customer experience. The researchers and marketing practitioners familiar with the dimensions of experience from the perspective of passengers and the variables involved in supporting this situation, presenting new perspectives of the concept of experience with regard to examining this concept in the cultural context of Iran and providing new clues for further research in the field of experience. Service business managers, especially airline and tourism managers, can plan their activities based on the results obtained in this study to assure passengers' satisfaction while receiving appropriate services and promote customer loyalty through company-passenger interactions.

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