

## Determining Repurchase Intentions of Airline Passengers: Role of Cabin Crew Competence and Passenger Satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

Through the lens of effect-as-information theory, this study develops and evaluates a mediation model aiming to understand the role of interpersonal and professional competence of airline cabin crew in determining repurchase intentions of passengers. The model associates the perceived competencies of cabin crew with passenger satisfaction which leads to the repeat patronage. After initial screening for the type of flight and cabin class, 303 valid responses were used for further analysis. Moreover, in coherence with Partial Least Square (PLS) method, goodness-of-fit for the proposed model, predictive relevance of endogenous variables, composite reliability and discriminant validity of the measurement scale was established before conducting mediation analysis. The results supported the premise that the positive direct-effect (26%) of crew competence on repurchase intentions is significant and with the inclusion of passenger satisfaction as a mediator, this association yields even a stronger impact i.e., 67%. These findings significantly contribute to the service-management literature by introducing a framework and testing a unique nexus among the study variables that is previously not explored in aviation industry. In the end, practical implications are discussed, few limitations of the study are acknowledged and some possible future research endeavors are also advised that can be pursued while using the proposed framework.

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## INTRODUCTION

In aviation industry where the competition is high, providing high quality service and the satisfy passengers are critical determinants of airline's profitability (Tsafarakis et al., 2018) because the competitive advantage of an airline lies in providing its passengers with quality services (Noviantoro & Huang, 2022). Airlines are facing pressure as the passengers today have many options to choose from while making decisions about travelling through air (Law et al., 2018). So these companies are increasingly focusing more on service delivery employees as, during the service encounter, these employees mainly determine the level of service quality that is delivered to the customers (Meesala & Paul, 2018). Obviously, a critical facet of the service experience by the customers is the quality of interactions between front line employees who are providing the service and these customers (Groth et al., 2019). As mentioned by Batouei et al. (2019), these service employees are expected to listen to customers, understand their requests and explain issues or ideas clearly. So, these service interactions significantly influence the customers' experience (Chahal & Dutta, 2015). Hence, the competencies of the service employees engaged in these encounters mainly drive customer satisfaction (Stock et al., 2017).

Social psychology studies initially brought the concept of competence which was later adopted by business and marketing scholars (Aaker et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2013). Competence has pivotal role in the success of an organization and can be broadly categorized into employee-level and organizational level competence (Wattanacharoensil & Yoopetch, 2012). Since the latter is embedded into the former (Cardy & Selvarajan, 2006) so the focus of this research is on employee-level competencies. Literature on organizational behavior identifies competencies as the worker's characteristics and abilities that distinguish him/her from an average employee (Potnuru & Sahoo, 2016). Employee competence is also understood as an "individually-situated" and "socially-situated" concept that incorporates the personal capabilities; and the ability of an employee to perform job roles according to the expected standards (Eraut, 1998). These may also be termed as "professional" and "interpersonal" competencies (Wu et al., 2015). The former is a human skill that is stated by Naim and Lenkla (2016) as visible while the latter is considered as invisible competency (Martínez-Clares & González-Lorente, 2019). The interpersonal competencies of service-employees, though invisible, yet perceived by the customers and has a significant positive impact on their satisfaction (Hui & Yee, 2015). In case of inflight service experience, these perceived competencies can be referred as the judgement of passengers about the capability of cabin crew which is meaningfully related to travelers' satisfaction (Nikbin et al., 2019).

Although the literature offers several conceptualizations of customer satisfaction yet the generally agreed upon definition is that "the satisfaction is an evaluation of customers about the overall experience of the consumption of a service" (Han & Hyun, 2015; Wong et al., 2017). It is a post-consumption assessment of customers that occurs if the perceived service performance meets their expectations or exceeds them (Eren, 2021). In the context of this study, passenger satisfaction can be defined as a feeling (based on the service experience) of a passenger with the company's product or service which may be measured by the repeat purchase (Bellizzi et al., 2018) and is considered as the competitive advantage for the business (Li et al., 2017). Because, increased passenger satisfaction will lead to their willingness to re-purchase the airline services (Law et al., 2022). In this context, studies related to "satisfaction of customers" and the "quality of service" provide overwhelming support to the notion that the repurchase intention is an outcome of customer satisfaction (Elbeltagi & Agag, 2016). As cited by Lestari and Ellyawati (2019), previous literature on aviation industry also established this positive relation between passenger satisfaction and their continuing intentions to use the service in future (Law et al., 2022). Evidently, retaining these passengers is one of the key success factors in airline business (Law et al., 2022).

Clearly, the satisfied passengers and their perception about the service interactions with front-line employees spills-over to other components that occur later (Dagger et al., 2013) like the future repurchase intentions. These can be defined as the behavioral intentions that measures the tendency of a passenger to continue buying the service from the current airline (Chen et al., 2019). As the airline businesses compete on a global scale and to gain competitive advantage in international marketplace, it is vital for them to understand the determinants of "re-purchase decision formation" of passengers (Han et al., 2019). Undeniably, achieving this repeat business is a key factor for the survival of airline

industry (Jiang & Zhang, 2016). Moreover, the quality of cabin service is pivotal for passengers while choosing an airline (Wattanacharoensil & Yoopetch, 2012) and the evidence suggests that the airline employees that interface with the passengers for the longest period of time are the flight attendants (Gibbs et al., 2017). There is a high degree of interaction between passengers and flight attendants who are responsible for successful on-board service delivery (Karatepe & Vatankhah, 2015). In this service delivery context, empirical evidence from the previous studies suggests a significant positive effect of flight-attendants' competence perceived by passengers on their overall satisfaction (Tahanisaz & shokuhyar, 2020). Despite this significance of inter-relation among crew competence, passenger satisfaction and their repeat patronage, the role of these front-line employees in providing service excellence is often underappreciated by the organizations (Netemeyer & Maxham, 2007) and is under-researched as well (Batouei et al., 2019). Moreover, in the context of Pakistan, although the nexus between the personal characteristics of service provider and the number of positive business outputs was studied in variety of settings including retail (Maqbool et al., 2020), medicine (Shahzad et al., 2022) and home-delivery-services (Akram et al., 2022) yet, the application of this concept in a unique inflight-service environment is needed to be explored which highlights the significance of current research effort.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Proposed by Schwarz and Clore (1983), "affect-as-information" rendered a valuable theoretical foundation to explain the role of cabin crew competence in predicting passenger satisfaction and their repurchase intentions. The theory conceptualizes that people use their affective and momentary state as information to make judgement about their over-all satisfaction (Pham, 2008). This has a significant consideration in service industry while studying the interaction between employee (who provides the service) and the customer (Delcourt et al., 2013). Because these interactions serve as a source of information for customers while making future buying decisions (Schwarz, 2004). Moreover, the competence of service provider creates a positive affirmation affect in customers' mind leading to their satisfaction (Ng & Bennett, 2015) and behavioral intentions such as repeat patronage (Barber et al., 2011) that underpins the research model proposed in current study.

Though limited yet, related to this subject, few multi-stage experimental studies, examined the simultaneous impact of helpfulness, physical attractiveness and emotions displayed by the retail employees on buyer's satisfaction (Keh et al., 2013). On similar grounds, service experienced by customers impacted by the friendliness and respectfulness of bank employees was investigated (Liu et al., 2016). Moreover, the subject literature also suggests the direct relation between authentic display of positive emotions by employees and satisfaction of customers (Ali et al., 2016). But the behavioral intentions triggered by the customer satisfaction or positive customer experience was not the part of any hypothesized paths in these studies.

Previous studies conducted in airline industry that analyzed passenger satisfaction and re-purchase intentions typically used overall service quality perceived by these passengers as predicting variable (Law et al., 2022; Lin, 2022; Saha & Theingi, 2009) and incorporated various service-quality dimensions in constructing their research models (Su et al., 2016). Others added additional input and outcome variables (Saha & Theingi, 2009; Şimşek & Demirbağ, 2017) and analyzed the moderating and mediating effect of different variables (Chen et al., 2019; Park et al., 2004, 2006) in similar research models. Evidently, much of the work in the marketing literature that is related to services focused on customers while the current study centered towards customer-facing-employees as the service delivery is affected by their personal characteristics and skills (Groth et al., 2019). One of the critical facets of the service quality happens in the “moment of truth” i.e., during the interaction between customer and the organization (Groth et al., 2019). And the quality of this interaction is often evaluated by the actions of front-line staff (Sarpong, 2016). Earlier studies also acknowledged the significance of this encounter in hospitality business and recommended the need to further research on this subject in various settings and cultural contexts (Lindsey-Hall et al., 2023; Pakurár et al., 2019) that served as a motive behind conducting this study.

During the service-encounters, the required employee competencies may vary with respect to the industry involved. For instance, understanding of the information management system is needed in IT industry (Devece, 2013) while Birdir and Pearson (2000) identified nineteen different competencies that are required by research-chefs working in food industry. Furthermore, Kay and Russette (2000) studied the five categories of job related competencies in hotel industry. They recommended to determine the employee competencies required by other industries and for the jobs in various organizational levels.

Based on the arguments presented above, it is vital to study the effect of front-line workers' competencies on customer satisfaction (Palacios et al., 2020) because it ultimately and positively influences repurchase-behavioral-intentions (Choi et al., 2020). In a complex study, Han et al. (2019) also established that the repurchase intentions of airline passengers, though indirectly yet, affected by the quality of service-interaction during flight. Similarly, literature also presents evidence that cabin crew competence is significantly related to passenger satisfaction (Batouei et al., 2019) and the inflight service-interaction of cabin crew with passengers acts as a driver for their intention to re-patronize (Han & Hwang, 2015) which led to the development of the research model shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: Proposed Model*

Despite the importance of the role of service employees' performance in perceived service quality (Dean & Rainnie, 2009; Hartline & Jones, 1996), the existing literature does not sufficiently address the association between front-line staff competencies and the satisfaction of customers which leads to their repurchase intentions (Wu et al., 2015). Moreover, although past studies have extended other theories to explain the re-purchase intentions (J. H. Kim & Lee, 2019) yet, the empirical evidence on this subject through the lens of effect-as-information theory is relatively under-explored. Additionally, following the recommendations of Wu et al. (2015), the current research is adding to the literature by evaluating the simultaneous effect of employee interpersonal and professional competencies on customer satisfaction. Considering these gaps, following hypotheses were proposed:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Taking passenger satisfaction as a mediator, cabin crew competency significantly and positively impact repurchase intentions of passengers.

**H<sub>1a</sub>:** Cabin crew competency has positive and significant effect on passenger satisfaction.

**H<sub>1b</sub>:** Passenger satisfaction has positive and significant impact on their repurchase intentions.

**H<sub>1c</sub>:** Cabin crew competency has positive and significant impact on repurchase intentions of passengers.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed quantitative research technique and benefitted from the deductive approach. Moreover, economy class passengers who have taken international flights by using the airlines that are registered in Pakistan was the target population. Random sampling was not feasible due to the reluctance of airlines in sharing their passenger manifest. So, convenient sampling was used for data collection as this non-probability sampling technique provides an opportunity to select the members of the population the access to whom is easy for the researcher (Taherdoost, 2016).

Data collection took place at Allama Iqbal International Airport (AIIAP) and the arriving passengers were targeted to fill the questionnaire. Only two airlines of Pakistan (i.e., Airblue and Pakistan International Airlines) were the major operators of international flights at the time of data collection. Hence the researcher only approached their passengers. Total 343 questionnaire were distributed and after screening the data for required characteristics mentioned in Table 1, 303 replies were used for the examination of data. Grounded on the assumption of J F Hair et al. (2014), this sample size is

appropriate for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) as the number of responses gathered were more than ten-times the quantity of inner and outer relations in the model (Kock & Hadaya, 2018).

**Table 1: Data Screening Criteria**

Airlines	Number of Respondents	Type of Flight			Respondents Used for Data Analysis
		Domestic	International (Economy)	International (Business/FC)	
Pakistan International Airlines (PIA)	190	25	158	7	158
Airblue	153	8	145	0	145
Total	343	108	303	7	303

For the purpose of measuring the variables used in the research model, suitable scales were taken from existing literature. To measure the interpersonal and professional competencies of cabin crew perceived by passengers, eight-item scale of Wu et al. (2015) was adopted. Example questions include “cabin crew possesses the ability to communicate effectively when dealing with passenger issues” and “cabin crew retains the technical-skills to solve passengers’ problems in an efficient way”. Whereas, passenger satisfaction was measured through the scale used by Batouei et al. (2019) which contained three indicators such as “overall, I was satisfied with my flight experience with this airline”. Repurchase intentions of passengers were measured via three-item scale adopted from Kim and Lee (2019). A sample question to measure repurchase intentions is “I am willing to use this airline again”. Respondents were required to specify their agreement level with each statement mentioned in the questionnaire by using the Likert scale from 1 to 7 where “1 equals strongly disagree” and “7 equals strongly agree”.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of evaluating the internal consistency of the individual constructs utilized in this study, the value of Cronbach’s alpha was calculated which is greater than 0.9 for all the scales showing high level of internal consistency (Bonett & Wright, 2015). In conjunction with structural equation modeling (Peterson & Kim, 2013) and considering the fact that the Cronbach’s alpha may provide over or underestimation (Spiliotopoulou, 2009), Composite Reliability (CR) was also calculated. Values of CR for all four scales were more than the acceptable standard of 0.7 (J F Hair, 2014) demonstrating that the measurement scales adopted for this study fit the purpose well (Taber, 2018).

Analysis also established that the variance seized by each of the four constructs was greater than the variance due to error as the values for Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all the constructs were more than 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Joe F Hair et al., 2011). Discriminant validity was tested as well by taking the square root of AVE (Ab Hamid et al., 2017) and comparing the resulted values with the values of correlations. To establish the discriminant validity, correlation values should be less than the square root of AVE (J F Hair et al., 2014). According to this criterion, the discriminant validity was established among all the constructs. The results of these tests are also summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2: Validity & Reliability**

	PCC	PST	PRI	Cronbach	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
PCC	(0.988)	0.946	0.931	0.997	0.997	0.997	0.977
PST	0.946	(0.993)	0.955	0.985	0.985	0.993	0.986
PRI	0.931	0.955	(0.991)	0.991	0.992	0.994	0.983

Note: AVE = Average Variance, PCC = Perceived Crew Competency, PST = Passenger Satisfaction, RPI = Passenger Repurchase Intentions, Extracted.

Further examination included the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and values for all factors except one were above 0.7 showing the strong external loading (J F Hair et al., 2014). Along with the standard loadings, Table 3 also presents the values of mean and standard deviation for all items in the construct used by this study.

**Table 3: Measurement Scale**

Factors and Items	SL	Mean	SD
Perceived Crew Competency (Wu et al., 2015)			
PIC1	0.985	6.059	1.658
PIC2	0.986	6.106	1.630
PIC3	0.985	6.020	1.721
PIC4	0.988	6.003	1.694
PPC1	0.996	5.990	1.758
PPC2	0.987	5.993	1.742
PPC3	0.992	6.010	1.775
PPC4	0.988	6.053	1.774
Passenger Satisfaction* (Batouei et al., 2019)			
PST2	0.993	5.515	1.750
PST3	0.993	5.809	1.885
Passenger Repurchase Intentions (J. H. Kim & Lee, 2019)			
RPI1	0.993	5.653	1.869
RPI2	0.993	5.690	1.871
RPI3	0.988	5.634	1.876

\*PST1 (Choosing this airline for flight is the right decision) was deleted before further analysis as it has factor loading 0.670 which was less than 0.7.

## Structural Model

Significance of the hypothesized paths were evaluated. For this purpose, test for the goodness of fit was used and the obtained R<sup>2</sup> for all the criterion variables were greater than 0.8 which established that the model presented in this research has good explanatory power (Ostertagová, 2012). Further to this analysis, the predictive relevance of these endogenous variables was also assessed through the values of Q<sup>2</sup> which were greater than the accepted standards (Gim et al., 2015). Moreover, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value was well below the required value of 0.10 (Aresi et al., 2018) hence suggesting a good model fit. The outcomes of these tests are also briefed in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Path Coefficients & Model Fit**

Paths	$\beta$	SD	t-Value	p-Values (At 95% Confidence)	Confidence Intervals Bias Corrected	
					5.0%	95.0%
H <sub>1a</sub> : PCC → PST	0.946	0.008	115.827	0.000	0.931	0.958
H <sub>1b</sub> : PST → RPI	0.709	0.059	11.924	0.000	0.614	0.809
H <sub>1c</sub> : PCC → RPI	0.260	0.060	4.358	0.000	0.158	0.353

SRMR = 0.011  
R<sup>2</sup> = 0.895 for PST, R<sup>2</sup> = 0.919 for RPI  
Q<sup>2</sup> = 0.895 for PST, Q<sup>2</sup> = 0.868 for RPI

Furthermore, as presented in Table 4, H<sub>1a</sub> tested the hypothesis whether there is a significant positive impact of competency of cabin crew perceived by passengers (PCC) on their overall satisfaction (PST) and the result ( $\beta = 0.946, t = 115.827, p < 0.05$ ) supported this premise. Similarly, result ( $\beta = 0.709, t = 11.924, p < 0.05$ ) strongly favored H<sub>1b</sub>. The third path in the model i.e., H<sub>1c</sub> hypothesized a significant positive impact of competency of cabin crew perceived by passengers (PCC) on repurchase intentions of these passengers (RPI) which was also supported by the results ( $\beta = 0.260, t = 4.358, p < 0.05$ ). Table 4 also incorporated the bias corrected lower and upper-level confidence intervals at 10,000 bootstrapping.

**Mediation Analysis**

By using Smart PLS 4.0, with regards to H<sub>1</sub>, the mediating role of passenger satisfaction (PST) between cabin crew’s competency perceived by passengers (PIC) and repurchase intentions of these passengers (RPI) was analyzed. The results presented in Table 5 showed a significant total effect of PIC on RPI ( $\beta = 0.931, t = 91.545, p < 0.05$ ). Direct effect between these two variables was also significant ( $\beta = 0.260, t = 4.358, p < 0.05$ ) and after including the mediator i.e., PST, the indirect effect remains significant ( $\beta = 0.671, t = 11.524, p < 0.05$ ) hence suggesting the complimentary-partial mediation (Zhao et al., 2010).

**Table 5: Hypothesis Testing**

Total Effect Size			Direct Effect			Indirect Effect				Decision			
Coeff.	t-value	Sig.	Coeff.	t-value	Sig.	Coeff.	SE	t-value	Sig.		Percentile Bootstrap 95% Confidence Interval		
											LCI	UCI	
H <sub>1</sub> : PCC→PST→RPI											0.580	0.771	Partial Mediation
0.931	91.545	0.000	0.260	4.358	0.000	0.671	0.058	11.524	0.000				

Note: “SE: Standard Error”, “Sig. Level: 95%”, “PCC: Perceived Crew Competency”, “PST: Passenger Satisfaction”, “RPI: Re-Purchase Intentions”



## CONCLUSION AND IMPLEMENTATION

This research was designed to evaluate the simultaneous impact of interpersonal and professional competencies of airline cabin crew on passenger's repurchase intent with the mediating role of passenger satisfaction. All proposed hypotheses were supported. Specifically, assessment of the path coefficients revealed that the impact of a flight-attendant's competence is stronger on passenger satisfaction in comparison to its impact on repurchase intention. The same was supported by the results of mediation analysis because the indirect impact of crew competence on passenger repurchase intentions is significantly increased after including passenger satisfaction as a mediator. These findings highlight the significance of the mediation model proposed in this study. Moreover, current study also adds to the existing literature by constructing a model through which a relatively under-researched relationship among the study variables is assessed.

Outcome of this study also has significant implications for airline companies as they often invest heavily in predicting the passengers' future buying intentions (Nadiri et al., 2008). Moreover, in service industry, behavioral intentions are considered as one of the least predictable outcome (Chow, 2015) and the current study provides the latest evidence on an additional predictor of future behavioral intentions. So, in concurrence with the study findings, airlines may choose to invest in developing professional and interpersonal competencies of cabin crew while planning their training programs to significantly improve the passenger satisfaction and to ensure the repeated business gains from such passengers. This competency-based training of cabin crew can lead to the airline's productivity (Kim & Park, 2014).

Certain limitations of the study are important to be highlighted as well. First of all, true random sampling was not obtained because the airlines were not willing to share the passenger manifest for obvious security and ethical concerns. So, future researchers may partner with the airlines to overcome this limitation. Moreover, although the standards were met regarding the adequacy of sample size yet, considering the large population size, a bigger sample may be obtained in future to replicate these results.

Furthermore, the mediation model used in current study, evaluated the impact of competence of service employees on passengers' re-purchase intentions. The service-interaction between employees and customers does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, it occurs within an "organization's ecosystem" i.e., physical environment (Han & Hwang, 2015), leadership role, organizational support and social interaction among colleagues which indirectly influence both the front-line employees and the passengers beyond the interpersonal interactions (Groth et al., 2019). Situational circumstances like crowding and the type of query may also play a moderating role in passenger satisfaction (Palacios et al., 2020). Hence the future researchers may include the moderation effect of these factors into the framework presented in this study. Moreover, theoretical contribution of management scholars in services industry is fairly under-researched (Pugh & Subramony, 2016). Incorporating variables like human resource flexibility, organizational culture, job satisfaction (Batouei et al., 2019), employee

training (Pramono & Prahiawan, 2022) and learning organization (Cik et al., 2021) as predictors of employe competence would be an interesting area for future research. Lastly, employees working in hospitality industry, constantly deal with cross-cultural service encounters (Grobelna, 2015). So, along with the interpersonal and professional competence, future research may also include the influence of cultural competence of front-line employees (Hsiao et al., 2023) on service satisfaction and future behavior of passengers.

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