Impact of choice attributes perceived by Korean airline passengers on relationship quality during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates the relationship between the choice attributes of the passengers of a Korean airline and relationship quality during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study used a quantitative approach and conducted an online survey using Google Forms through the convenience sampling method on users with experience in domestic and international airlines within the past month. It received 300 valid responses. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 21.

Findings: This study hypothesized that a significant relationship exists between airline selection attributes and the quality of relationships. The results demonstrate that satisfaction significantly influences trust.

Conclusion: This study demonstrated that choice attributes as perceived by passengers exert a significant influence on determining the quality of relationships between airlines and customers.

Research Limitations and Implications: The data were collected using an online questionnaire due to the COVID-19 situation. This aspect is a limitation of the study because it is highly dependent on the honesty and willingness of the respondents.

Practical Implications: This study found that airlines can improve the quality of relationships with customers by overcoming crises if they can increase satisfaction by grasping the selection attributes pursued by customers. This study suggests appropriate marketing strategies for airline managers in Korea.

Keywords: *Choice attributes, COVID-19, In-flight service, Operation service, Relationship quality, Reservation and ticketing service, Social reputation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid and extended spread of COVID-19 which began in December 2019 has led to an unexpected crisis including unprecedented worldwide issues for airlines. International routes worldwide, including those to Korea have been reduced. Travelers have been few due to quarantine periods (ICAO, 2020) and concerns over infectious diseases among aircraft passengers have increased (Perić, Dramićanin, & Conić, 2021). In the meantime, the aviation industry has faced unexpected situations such as terrorism, diseases and worsening international conditions. This is the first time that infectious diseases have caused such a long-term and widespread impact on a business despite the research that has been conducted concerning them. Therefore, the need has emerged for airlines to recheck their response to the unsafe situation given the COVID-19 pandemic (Machida et al., 2020). When choosing an airline, travelers evaluate and compare various airline attributes. These optional attributes have the potential to change depending on the situation (Thepchalerm, Ho, & Kongtaveesawas, 2021). According to this perspective, identifying the attributes of the choice of airline users and analyzing their influence on relationship quality can be an essential research topic. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the influence of airline choice

attributes on relationship quality during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also intend to make an empirical contribution by examining the impact of customer satisfaction on trust.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Choice Attributes

Attributes are the tangible and intangible characteristics of a product and products are bound to these tangible and intangible attributes. Meanwhile, choice attributes refer to factors that consumers consider essential when choosing a product from among the attributes of a product or trademark. These multiple selection attributes significantly impact consumer satisfaction (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2020; Thepchalerm et al., 2021). The selection attribute is the characteristic of consumers ability to compare various competitive products. It is a significant factor in consumer purchase decision-making because it combines multiple social and psychological elements. Therefore, it identifies consumer behavior and is the source of consumer choice. Thus, one may say that selection behavior is inseparable from selection factors (Meng & Uysal, 2008; Pike, 2003; Zhou, 2005).

In terms of airline selection attributes, passengers select the final airline after evaluating the numerous attributes of airlines such as convenience in baggage handling, rapid reservation changes, spare seats, employee kindness, and convenient flight schedules. These attributes comprise the passenger's choice. In other words, the majority of passengers compare and evaluate in-flight and ground services and opt for the airline they want to use (Kim & Jo, 2004).

The typical attributes of airline selection preferred by passengers include in-flight services including catering, entertainment and cleaning as well as well-selected or routed flight services (O'Connell & Williams, 2005; Wafik, Abou-Shouk, & Hewedi, 2017). In addition, punctuality, convenience and diverse reservation or ticketing systems are essential attributes. The attributes of meeting safety standards and pursuing safe operation also play a positive role in customer satisfaction or intention to use these airlines (Forgas, Moliner, Sánchez, & Palau, 2010; Medina-Muñoz, Medina-Muñoz, & Suárez-Cabrera, 2018).

Mason (2001) presents the flexibility of reservation and ticketing, in-flight service, punctuality, flight, fare, mileage system, business lounge, etc. Fourie and Lubbe (2006) discuss flight schedules, food, payment methods, seat convenience, pre-seating, commercial customer preferential programs, airport lounge facilities, business class, in-flight meals and entertainment. Chen and Wu (2009) consider in-flight meal services, in-flight entertainment, reservation channels, flexibility in reservation changes and fares while Han, Ha, and Kim (2009) highlight marketing, stability and airport services based on airline selection. It was composed of seven dimensions, namely, reservation service, in-flight service, auxiliary service and air freight and differences in essential selection attributes were presented according to age and income level.

In the face of the global spread of COVID-19 in 2019, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) provided operating guidelines for airlines in terms of passenger transport, including in-flight physical distancing and sanitary equipment. The contents included anti-smear shields, gloves, masks, personal protective equipment for crew members, hand sanitizers for passengers and crew members and recommendations to increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfection (IATA, 2020). In the case of Korean Air in Korea, the COVID-19 update center presents the current status of flight operations, ticket regulation, immigration restrictions by country, mileage expiration date and guided countermeasures through the "Care First" program (Korean Airlines, 2020). Factors influencing travelers' destination choice, behavior and intention have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Caber, González-Rodríguez, Albayrak, & Simonetti, 2020; Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002). In a study on airline selection during the COVID-19 pandemic, Thepchalerm et al. (2021) discussed infectious disease prevention measures, additional charges, safety and reliability, flight schedules and connections, in-flight catering and entertainment, ticket prices, in-flight space and ground services, airline affiliations and loyalty programs and reputation.

2.2. Relationship Quality

Odekerken-Schröder, De Wulf, and Schumacher (2003) found that the successful performance of relationship marketing influences relationship performance and consumer relationship orientation. The relationships were identified as satisfaction, trust, relationship commitment and purchase behavior. The components of relationship quality are satisfaction and trust. Airline users who have built trust in service providers through satisfaction with their products or services are likely to repurchase in the future and they are likely to create new customers by

engaging in positive oral activities based on experience (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000; Trabelsi, 2020). Trust is considered a subjective sense that will not produce harmful consequences with the expectation that the one who receives trust can adequately fulfill the words and actions of a person or thing, fulfill promises and play a role. At this time, the level of emotion that the provider believes will fulfill its contract with the buyer contributes to the corporate image or reputation (Kolsaker & Payne, 2002; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Trabelsi, 2020).

The higher the relationship quality, the more trust there is in the organization and the more responsible the customer feels for a mutually beneficial and satisfying relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Reichheld & Schefter, 2000). In addition, the construction of a high-quality relationship positively influences customer loyalty towards organizations (Leanne, Souchon, & Thirkell, 2001) and leads to various positive corporate effects such as customer satisfaction, favorable word-of-mouth and increased purchase volume (Wong & Sohal, 2006).

A few empirical studies revealed that choice attributes mediate trust and customer satisfaction and statistically influence long-term relationship orientation (Lee & Kim, 2013). Other scholars emphasized that relationship quality may have a high negative aspect during COVID-19 (Pieh, O´ Rourke, Budimir, & Probst, 2020).

2.3. Choice Attributes and Relationship Quality

Trust is a sub-factor that constitutes relationship quality and satisfaction and is an indispensable factor in successful relationship marketing. It plays a vital role in forming long-term relationships. It is portrayed as an attitude that expects positive intentions or actions from others (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002).

Many studies used the prior theory which addresses the relationship between choice attributes and relationship quality. For example, Lee, Aeeun Jeon, and Kim (2016) analyzed the effect of choice attributes of full-service airlines on customer satisfaction. The price service factors did not significantly impact. The authors found that satisfaction exerted an essential influence in terms of in-flight, airport and flight service factors. According to Lee and Kim (2013) study on low-cost airlines, customer satisfaction is correlated with flight, in-flight and price services all of which are choice attributes but not with additional services. Choi (2019) analyzed satisfaction and impact relationships by categorizing airline choice attributes into core, facilitating and value-added services and explained that the satisfaction of consumers with choice attributes was important.

2.4. Satisfaction and Trust

Various previous studies suggest that satisfaction positively influences trust in seller–buyer relationships from the perspective that customer satisfaction with a service company is a source of trust in the company (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Julander & Söderlund, 2003; Kassim & Abdullah, 2008; Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2003; Pavlou, 2003; Román, 2003).

The positive relationship between satisfaction and trust is a result of previously satisfying consumer experiences which naturally form over time. Thus, the study infers that a positive complementary relationship exists with each other as an essential variable at the service contact point (Julander & Söderlund, 2003). In other words, if the company is satisfied with its commitment to fulfilling, then consumers believe that the behavior of airlines is continuous and want to maintain a constant relationship accordingly. At the same time, it helps long-term customer relationships by making consumers pay less attention to alternatives in the market.

Omar et al. (2009) found that parental satisfaction was the most important aspect influencing trust in their empirical study of daycare centres. The authors found that customer satisfaction exerted the most significant impact on trust. Therefore, efforts should be exerted to satisfy customers and gain their trust. In addition, Altanzul and Park (2016) explained that satisfaction is associated with trust in a study on Mongolian banks. The relationship between satisfaction and trust is an integrated evaluation at a level that is higher than that of satisfaction which is an essential source of trust.

For the purpose of building the conceptual framework of this study, we constructed a research model as shown in Figure 1.
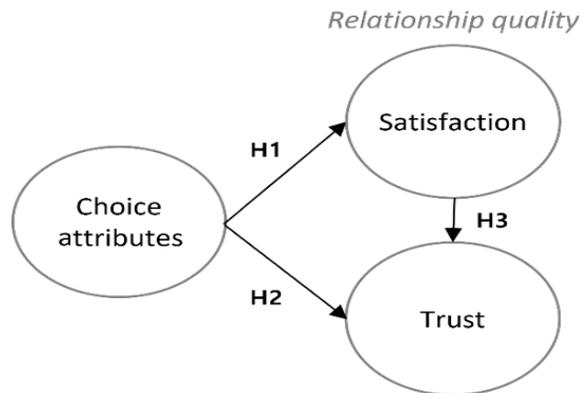
Relationship quality

Figure 1. The proposed research model.

2.5. Hypotheses of the Study

H_1: Airline choice attributes will exert a positive impact on satisfaction.

H_{1-1}: Reservation and ticketing service attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on satisfaction.

H_{1-2}: In-flight service attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on satisfaction.

H_{1-3}: Operation service attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on satisfaction.

H_{1-4}: Economic attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on satisfaction.

H_{1-5}: Social reputation attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on satisfaction.

H_{1-6}: COVID-19-related attributes will exert a positive impact on satisfaction.

H_2: Airline choice attributes will exert a significant and   positive impact on trust.

H_{2-1}: Reservation and ticketing service attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on trust.

H_{2-2}: In-flight service attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on trust.

H_{2-3}: Operation service attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on trust.

H_{2-4}: Economic attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on trust.

H_{2-5}: Social reputation attributes will exert a significant and positive impact on trust.

H_{2-6}: COVID-19-related attributes will exert a positive impact on trust.

H_3: Satisfaction will exert a significant and positive impact on trust.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study aims to analyze the relationship between quality and trust satisfaction of airline choice attributes as perceived by air passengers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were collected through online surveys and analyzed using frequency, exploratory factor, correlation and linear regression analyses.

3.2. Data Collection and Sampling

This study focuses on airline passengers in Korea specifically those who have used domestic and international airlines within the past month. The survey was conducted using the convenience sampling method and covered approximately six weeks from September 14 to October 27, 2020. An online questionnaire using Google Form was distributed. A total of 415 questionnaires were collected out of which 115 were excluded because they were difficult to use as data during the data processing process. The number of questionnaires finally used in the study was 300 which accounts for 72.28% of the total number of questionnaires. In terms of demographic characteristics, the sample is composed of 133 men (44.3%) and 167 women (55.7%). The age range was 20s (n = 57; 19.0%), 30s (n = 168; 56.0%), 40s (n = 42; 14.0%), 50s (n = 19; 6.3%) and 60s or older (n = 14 4.7%). In terms of educational background, 20 were high school graduates (6.7%), 221 were college graduates (73.7%) and 59 were graduates or higher (19.7%).

3.3. Measurement of Constructs

Table 1 presents the composition of the measurement items.

Table 1. Survey items and their sources.

Choice attributes (CA)	
CA1	Various airline ticket reservation methods are important.
CA2	It is important to change or cancel convenient flight reservations.
CA3	It is important to have an unmanned check-in system.
CA4	A comfortable cabin seat and a relaxed space are important.
CA5	The taste and quality of the in-flight meal are important.
CA6	Various in-flight entertainments (Movies , books, music, games, etc.) are important.
CA7	There is no extra charge for the service.
CA8	High mileage and usability are important.
CA9	Relatively low rates are important.
CA10	The airline's reputation and social image are important.
CA11	It is important to use a world-famous airline.
CA12	It is important to use airlines with high service levels.
CA13	It is important to broadcast an announcement on the distance between passengers when boarding and departing an airplane.
CA14	It is important to strengthen the hygiene of in-flight meals (Prohibition of reusing objects).
CA15	It is important to allocate seats at a distance.
Relationship quality (RQ)	
RQ1	Overall, I am satisfied with the use of this airline.
RQ2	I am satisfied with the various services provided by this airline.
RQ3	I am satisfied with the response of this airline staff.
RQ4	The staff of this airline is trustworthy.
RQ5	This airline's service is reliable compared to other airlines.
RQ6	This airline strives to fulfill its commitments with customers.

3.4. Data Analysis
The study conducted factor analysis to test the validity of the content' process. It conducted principal component analysis which is a commonly used technique to ensure discriminant validity among the validity of the constituent concept. Varimax rotation was performed to simplify the factor loading and factors with eigenvalues of 1 or more were recognized.
In addition, the study analyzed the degree of internal consistency by evaluating the degree of homogeneity between measurement items using a reliability analysis method using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to verify the reliability of the measurement items.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS
4.1. Reliability and Validity Analyses
Table 2 presents the results of exploratory factor analysis for components. All KMO (Kaiser Meyer Olkin) values are .8 or more.
Thus, the study deemed that the variable selection was appropriate. The total cumulative variance was also acceptable at 75.51%.
The factor loading value of the exploratory factor analysis for the variable items is ±. Factors extracted above 50 are believed to have secured construct validity. In addition, Cronbach's alpha for each extracted factor was .60 or more which indicated the reliability and internal consistency of the data.

Table 2. Results of factor and reliability analyses.

Factor	Variable	Loading	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Cronbach's alpha
Reservations and ticketing	RT1	0.763	1.960	7.838	0.668
	RT2	0.756			
	RT3	0.686			
In-flight service	IF1	0.748	2.307	9.228	0.715
	IF2	0.641			
	IF3OS1	0.634			
Operation service	OS1	0.757	1.983	8.675	0.701
	OS2	0.697			
	OS3	0.704			
Economic	EC1	0.757	1.848	7.394	0.609
	EC2	0.685			
	EC3	0.650			
Social reputation	SR1	0.869	2.459	9.835	0.849
	SR2	0.857			
	SR3	0.674			
COVID-19 related	CV1	0.770	4.790	19.162	0.880
	CV2	0.740			
	CV3	0.737			
KMO = 0.878, Bartlett's test χ² = 3099.540 (df = 300, *p* = 0.000)					
Satisfaction	SF1	0.869	2.616	32.698	0.883
	SF2	0.852			
	SF3	0.827			
Trust	TR1	0.862	3.770	47.119	0.932
	TR2	0.856			
	TR3	0.836			
KMO = 0.894, Bartlett's test χ² = 1915.048 (df = 28, *p* = 0.000)					

Next, the study analyzed the relationship between the variables. Table 3 shows that all coefficients except for the relationship between satisfaction and reservation issuance, satisfaction and flight service displayed significant correlations at the 99% level of confidence. When the correlation coefficients ranged from ±.81 to ±1.0, multicollinearity may exist but all are below this level. The results demonstrate that the direction and significance derived from the theory-based model met the validity criteria.

Table 3. Results of the correlation analysis.

Variables	Reservation	In-flight	Operation	Economic	Reputation	COVID-19	Satisfaction	Trust
Reservation	1							
In-flight	0.348***	1						
Operation	0.396***	0.449***	1					
Economic	0.246***	0.360***	0.339***	1				
Reputation	0.205***	0.364***	0.357***	0.290***	1			
COVID-19	0.345***	0.290***	0.487***	0.248***	0.365***	1		
Satisfaction	0.174**	0.290***	0.172**	0.210***	0.266***	0.258***	1	
Trust	0.317***	0.432***	0.260***	0.261***	0.320***	0.312***	0.632***	1

Note: ***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.
              **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

Table 4 depicts the results of the multiple regression analysis to test H1. The result of the study, R^2 and the explanatory power of the regression equation were 14.2%. The F-test statistics for the regression equation were significant at 8.061 ($p < .001$). In-flight service for each sub-factor of the analysis result choice attribute ($\beta = .187$, $p < .01$) related to COVID-19 ($\beta = .160$, $p < .05$) and social reputation ($\beta = .137$, $p < .05$) were found to exert a statistically significant positive impact on satisfaction. In other words, H1b, 1e, and 1f were supported.

For H2, R^2 and the explanatory power of the regression equation was 26.2% and the statistics of the F-test for the regression equation were 17.358 ($p < .001$) which were significant. In-flight service for each sub-factor of the choice attribute ($\beta = .298$, $p < .001$), reservation service ($\beta = .148$, $p < .05$), related to COVID-19 ($\beta = .145$, $p < .05$), and social reputation ($\beta = .135$, $p < .05$) were found to exert a statistically significant positive effect on trust. In other words, H2a, 2b, 2e and 2f were supported.

In terms of H3, R^2 and the explanatory power of the regression equation was 40.0% and the resulting statistic of the F-test for the regression equation, it was 198.504 ($p < .001$) which was significant. Satisfaction ($\beta = .632$, $p < .001$) was found to exert a statistically significant and positive impact on trust. Therefore, H3 was supported.

Table 4. Regression results.

Model	Non-standardization factor		Standardization factor	t	p
	B	S.E.	Beta		
Choice attributes → Satisfaction					
Constant	2.350	0.302	-	7.779	0.000
Reservation & ticketing	0.034	0.056	0.038	0.613	0.540
In-flight service	0.162	0.056	0.187	2.880**	0.004
Operation service	−0.088	0.074	−0.082	−1.179	0.239
Economic	0.070	0.051	0.082	1.365	0.173
Social reputation	0.096	0.043	0.137	2.223*	0.027
COVID-19 related	0.165.067		0.160	2.466*	0.014
R^2 = 0.142, Adj. R^2 = 0.124, F = 8.061***, p = 0.000, Durbin–Watson = 1.865					
Choice attributes → Trust					
(Constant)	1.521	0.291	-	5.234	0.000
Reservation And ticketing	0.140	0.054	0.148	2.597*	0.010
In-flight service	0.268	0.054	0.298	4.954***	0.000
Operation service	−0.083	0.072	−0.074	−1.153	0.250
Economic	0.060	0.050	0.067	1.209	0.228
Social reputation	0.098	0.042	0.135	2.350*	0.019
COVID-19 related	0.156	0.064	0.145	2.414*	0.016
R^2 = 0.262, Adj. R^2 = .247, F = 17.358***, p = 0.000, Durbin–Watson = 1.979					
Satisfaction → Trust					
(Constant)	1.338	0.190	-	7.043	0.000
Satisfaction	0.656	0.047	0.632	14.089***	0.000
R^2 = 0.400, Adj. R^2 = 0.398, F = 198.504***, p = 0.000, Durbin–Watson = 1.876					

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed test).

5. CONCLUSION AND MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

This study analyzed the relationship between choice attributes of an airline as perceived by air passengers using Korean airlines during the COVID-19 pandemic and relationship quality. The study found that in-flight, operation, and COVID-19-related services which are sub-factors of choice attributes were satisfied, reservation and ticketing, in-flight and COVID-19-related services exerted a significant impact on trust. In addition, satisfaction exerted a

significant impact on trust. In other words, an important causal relationship existed between the choice attributes of airlines as perceived by passengers using Korean airlines and the quality of the relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Countermeasures against need to be prepared in advance because no guarantee exists to ensure that devastating infectious diseases such as COVID-19 will not happen again in the future. We notice that airlines can enhance the quality of their relationships with passengers by providing them with numerous spaces, high-quality in-flight meals and a variety of entertainment options. Since in-flight services and COVID-19-related services exerted the most influence on satisfaction and trust.

In this context, if used in marketing strategies and focusing on factors that can increase passenger satisfaction, then the study believes that an excellent opportunity exists for improving the quality of long-term relationships of airlines with passengers by overcoming crises.

6. LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted when the number of confirmed cases and deaths of COVID-19 was increasing worldwide. Thus, the study may be unable to reflect the opinions of international passengers. In addition, the age range of the respondents was from 20 to 30 due to the decrease in the travel population of children and older people with relatively low immunity during the period of study.

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684

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