

Application of The Stimulus-Organism-Response Model in the Airline Industry: Examining Mediating Role of Airline Image in Repurchase Intention

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Abstract - The prime objective of the present study is to examine the impact of visual and touch stimuli on repurchase intention. Furthermore, the mediating role of airline image is assessed in the present research as well. The data was collected in the form of questionnaires from the international airline customers of Pakistan airlines travelling from Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad airports. Multi-stage sampling technique was employed for the collection of data. The usable response rate of the questionnaire was 68%. PLS-SEM was used for statistical analysis and hypothesis testing. The findings of the study revealed that touch and visual stimuli have a significant (positive or negative) impact on airline image and repurchase intention. Additionally, airline image also mediates significantly between touch stimuli, visual stimuli and repurchase intention. The findings of the study are essential for the practitioners and policymakers of the airline sector as they can use the study to derive policies regarding customer retention. The study also fills the gap of limited studies regarding the impact of sensory stimuli in the airline sector. Moreover, the study also helps the policy-makers of the airline industry and marketing experts to derive the strategies in order to retain the customers.

Keywords: Repurchase Intention, Visual Stimuli, Touch Stimuli, Airline Image, SOR Model

1. Introduction

Retention of airline customers in the aviation market is considered very important in marketing literature because it is very critical to increasing the profit of the airlines. Therefore, in the past few years, researchers and practitioners of the aviation industry are more concerned to develop strategies by which they can retain the customers [1]. Notably, in the aviation industry, competitions for international routes becoming fierce because of the entry of many airlines in the industry. Customers are demanding more quality of the services with competitive pricing [2].

Therefore, most airline service industry focuses on improvement of customer service quality to sustain and create competitive advantage.

The 80/20 rule stated that 80 percent profit of an organisation is created by 20 percent of customers who create repurchase. The customers who are satisfied with the services of an organisation will be willing to repurchase the products, and they tend to be less price sensitive as well. A past study also stressed that repurchasing of the product or service highly depends upon the first encounter of the consumer with that service or product [3]. Thus, in order to perform better, service providers have to offer superior value to the customers.

Today, due to competitive and customer-oriented, strategies of traditional marketing are not relevant to the business anymore. There is a need to change the strategies of traditional marketing, where marketers should discover creative ways to attract and retain their customers. There is a need to give more individualized and personal attention to the customers, along with experience, which is long-lasting. Customer experiences and their engagement with service providers and brands will help in enhancing a long-term relationship [4]. The current era customers are looking for more experience during the purchase process, and they want to make it memorable as well.

For this reason, it is important for marketers to understand the key role of perception senses during the purchasing process. It is pointed out that addressing the proper senses is a way to communicate with customers and could become a better way to reach them [5]. The sense organs receive various marketing stimulants produced through product or service provider. In turn, it leads to perception, where the customer interprets these sensory sensations. So, the firms or service providers need to offer a competitive sensory experience so they can create a point of difference.

In the context of marketing, sight is the most compelling sense and the dominant sensory system as well. The sense of sight is used for more than eighty percent of the communication [6]. Moreover, figures and colours of the product play a significant role in identifying and describing the product [5]. Even some services and products are associated with some colours. Colours also help the consumers in the process of reminding even the product is not in front of them.

Furthermore, another vital sensory organ of the human body is touch. Touch is the sign of physical contact via the skin. Twenty-five percent of the brand-building process is associated with the sense of touch [7]. It is not easy for the customers to move around in any service providing organisation if the temperature of the area is not pleasant. It is because temperature plays a significant role in developing emotions and perceptions. Air quality holds a key concern for the service sector because it shows a direct impact on the customers.

Among the service industry, the airline sector considered having vital importance in an international context. It plays a significant role in economic growth, world trade, tourism and social development. International customers of the airline industry are growing rapidly at a rate of 3.8%. But, in the last five years, the market share of international customers travelling through Pakistan based airlines have shown a decline in international routes. This highlights the problem of repurchase intention among the customers of Pakistani airlines. Thus, to address the problem of repurchase intention, the present study examined the impact of visual stimuli and touch stimuli on repurchase intention. Furthermore, the mediating role of airline image also investigated based on the SOR model [8].

2. Literature Review

2.1 SOR Model

Environmental stimuli (S) plays an essential role in evoking the organism (O) among the customers [9]. Under the SOR model, the organism (O) is the mediator between stimuli and response. A cognitive response is an outcome of the stimuli [9]. Same results supported by [10] who found the cognitive response as the construct of the organism. Additionally, researchers reported that cognition generated by the stimuli included perception, knowledge, and thoughts of the customer [11]. On the other hand, the image is the memory stored in the mind of the customer [12], which develop the perception. Moreover, the airline image is the perception created in the mind of the customer of the airline [13]. Thus, in the present research, airline image is the organism (O) created

from the environmental stimuli (S) including sight and touch. Furthermore, the response (R) is the consequence of the organism (O) under SOR model. In the present study, repurchase intention is the response (R) [14].

2.2 Repurchase Intention

Customers are the asset for the organisations, especially in the service sector. It is critical for organisations to meet as well as exceed the needs of the customers in order to retain them [15]. The revenue, as well as the profitability of the organisation, is directly affected by the retention of the customer. Researchers revealed that organisations enjoy a competitive advantage, high profit and business growth whose customers repurchase their products or services [16, 17]. In addition, repurchase intention also highly associated with service quality which highly promises satisfaction or dissatisfaction among customers.

In the past literature, many definitions were explained by researchers for repurchase intention. [3] defined repurchase intention as the intention of the consumer to purchase a product from the same firm for a more extended period. Moreover, [18] defined repurchase intention as the aim of the customer to sustain the relationship with a specific service provider and also the next purchase of the customer is made by the same service provider as well. So, in the present study, repurchase intention is studied in the context of airline customers travelling abroad from Pakistan.

2.3 Airline Image

The meanings held in the mind of the customers can be related to the tangible features of the identity of the product. It may also consist of ephemeral perceptions and fleeting that held in customer memory. An image has been defined as perception about product or organisation held in the memory of a consumer. Corporate image is related to behavioural and physical attributes of the organisation [19]. There is a vital role of image in the airline industry. The favourable image distinguishes and separates it from the other competitors. Customers of the airline will assume that the services of the airline are better if the image of the airline is favourable. The favourable airline image also shows that the service quality are worth more than the actual price, and they are of high quality [20].

The primary purpose of a particular image in the airline is to show the competence that is distinctive as competitors. It allows the identity, logo/symbol and name of the airline to mean something unique along with a corresponding appeal to retained in the memory of the customers of the airlines. When the customers are involved in airline travel, it can lead to a favourable image. This favourable image of that particular airline

may lead to the preference among the alternative available for the consumer. Thus, the airline image considered as a significant impact on the choice of the airline consumer [21].

2.4 Visual stimuli

In the past, different definitions presented by the researchers for visual stimuli, visual variables or sight cues. According to [22], visual dimensions include shapes, colour, brightness and size. On the other hand, [23] defined visual stimuli include package design, shelf location, number of facings, and price displays. Additionally, [24] revealed that menu, signage, brochure, cleanliness, upholstery, dressing of staff and logos are comprised of sight cues.

In the context of marketing, sight is the most robust sense and the dominant sensory system as well. The sense of sight is used for more than eighty percent of the communication [6]. Additionally, [25] mentioned that products that are beautiful influence the choice of the customers as it becomes easy for them to differentiate the products. Further, these products have a symbolic meaning that helps in developing a relationship with the customer.

2.5 Touch Stimuli

Touch stimuli are known as tactile, and it described in terms of sensory qualities of temperature, smoothness and softness [22]. One of the most significant sensory organs of the human body is touch. It is the sign of physical contact via the skin. 25% of the brand-building process is associated with a sense of touch [7].

When a child is born, touch is the first sense which was developed whereas, when a person gets old, it is the final sense which is lost [26]. Most of the commercial settings emphasise the importance of touching can be observed. The quality and condition of the product are checked by the buyer while buying the product. Firms regulate the atmospheric conditions of the environment in terms of temperature to show that they care about their customers and to get their attention [27, 28]. The location temperature and air quality are the critical factors of touch stimuli. Less marketing consideration is given to the sense of touch, though it engages a more significant area compared to any other senses. The tactile sense improves the customer experience by providing information about the products or service sensory value [29].

2.6 Hypothesis Development

2.6.1. Relationship of Visual Stimuli, Image and Repurchase Intention

Researchers conducted empirical research to analyse the impact of signs, layout and decor of a hotel on its image. They found that decor, layout and signs within

the hotel positively impact the image [30]. Same results were found in another empirical study which analysed the impact of ambience and layout on corporate image and found a positive relationship [31].

[32] also found that the visual cues had a significant impact on the intentions of the buyers and the total sales of the retailers as well. [33] empirically found that in the presence of plants, flowers, attractive layout, lightening had a significant impact on the consumer intention to revisit.

Thus, it is hypothesised that: -

H1: Visual Stimuli significantly impacts the Airline Image

H2: Visual Stimuli Significantly impacts repurchase Intention

2.6.2. Relationship of Touch Stimuli, Airline Image and Repurchase Intention

In an empirical study, researchers found that the image of the airline is significantly influenced by the temperature and quality of air [34]. Moreover, the touch experience is positively enhanced by shape, weight, temperature and material of the product and encourage the customers to use the product/ service again [35].

Past study also revealed that temperature is a touch element due to which customer may intent to revisit the resort [36]. The research findings of [37] mentioned that touch stimuli in terms of interaction among the tourists and the staff is significant for the intention to revisit. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is developed.

H3: Touch Stimuli will have a significant impact on the airline image

H4: Touch Stimuli will have a significant impact on the Repurchase Intention

2.6.3. Airline Image as the Mediator

According to the past literature, sensory marketing including stimuli like sight and touch, create the positive perception in the mind of the customer regarding a specific product or service [38] and airline image is the perception created in the mind of the customers [13]. Moreover, they are also linked with the memory of the customers as well [26]. Furthermore, researchers also found that visual cues also play a significant role in improving the brand image of restaurants.

There is a relationship between airline image and repurchase intention. [39] found a positive relationship between image and repurchase intention. Moreover, [21] found a positive relationship between image and repurchase intention. It signified that temperature is a

touch element due to which customer may intent to revisit the resort. Therefore, we can hypothesise that

H5: Airline Image have a significant impact on repurchase intention

H6: Airline image will mediate the relationship among visual stimuli and repurchase intention

H7: Airline image will mediate the relationship between touch stimuli and repurchase intention

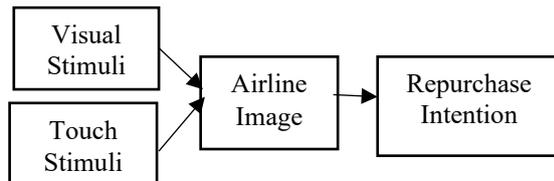


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Research Methodology

For this study, the population is the passengers travelling internationally from the Pakistani air carriers, namely Pakistan International airlines and Airblue. The data was collected from the passengers who are travelling abroad from Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad international airports. For the data collection, the multi-stage sampling technique was employed. Total of 576 questionnaires were distributed and received 397 questionnaires. The usable response rate of the study was 68.98%. For analysis, PLS-SEM employed for data analysis requirements. The items for variables in this study were adapted from past studies. Repurchase intention was measured using five items adapted from [40], airline image was measured using four items adapted from [41], visual stimuli was measured using six items, and touch stimuli was measured using five items adapted from [42].

4.0. Analysis

Demographic profile of respondents showed that more than 73% were male whereas remaining were females. On the other hand, more than 81% of the respondents were married. Remaining were either single or belong to another category. Among the age category, most of the respondents were young, under the category of 18 to 30 years. Moreover, 14% of the respondents were above the age of 50 years as well. On the other hand, most of the respondents were Pakistani national. Among the respondents, only around 4.8% of the *continued* were Foreigners, whereas remaining 95.2% were Pakistani. The detailed demographic results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic statistics of respondents

Demographic variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	291	73.29%
	Female	106	26.71%
Marital Status	Married	323	81.36%
	Single	69	17.38%
	Other	5	1.26%
Age	18-30	143	36.02%
	31-40	115	28.96%
	41-50	72	18.13%
	Above 50	67	16.87%
Nationality	Pakistani	378	95.21%
	Foreigners	19	4.79%

In order to evaluate the research model, structural equation model (SEM) is employed in the present study. The convergent validity is determined by simultaneously testing factor loading, average variance extracted, and composite reliability [43]. Thus, in the present study, for all the items 0.70 and above item loading was obtain, which shows adequate convergent validity. The loading of all the factors was in established range criteria. The existence of convergent validity is also confirmed by composite reliability. The test of composite reliability mentions the extent that a set of items constantly represent the latent construct [43]. The average variance extracted (AVE) was assessed as well, along with composite reliability so that the outer model can be further validated. Therefore, values of AVE show the set of items relative to the measurement errors with shared variance. Researcher asserted that enough convergence of the group items which are measuring a construct is indicated if the AVE is more than 0.5 [44]. In the present study, the range of AVE is from 0.648-0.724. All the Factor loading, Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and AVE of the latent constructs shown in Table 2 below

Table 2: Factor loading, Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and AVE of the latent constructs

Construct	Items	Loading	C-Alpha	CR	AVE
<i>continued</i>	I1	0.856	0.872	0.913	0.724
	AI2	0.857			
	AI3	0.877			
	AI4	0.810			
	AI4	0.810			
Repurchase Intention	RPI1	0.834	0.887	0.917	0.689
	RPI2	0.861			
	RPI3	0.859			
	RPI4	0.831			
	RPI5	0.760			
Touch	TCH1	0.844	0.864	0.902	0.648
	TCH2	0.821			
	TCH3	0.819			
	TCH4	0.781			
	TCH5	0.755			
Visual	VIS1	0.860	0.914	0.933	0.701
	VIS2	0.856			
	VIS3	0.866			
	VIS4	0.872			
	VIS5	0.838			
	VIS6	0.721			

In order to validate the measurement model further, it is essential to determine the construct validity and discriminant of the outer model. Before testing the hypothesis of the research, it is essential to confirm the discriminant validity. The difference of items of the construct is reflected in discriminant validity showing there exist no overlapping between the items of different constructs. Moreover, [45] mentioned that variance between all constructs is shared through measurement of discriminant validity. Moreover, measuring discriminant validity should be more as compared to shared variance among constructs. The criteria of discriminant validity was established [46] who replaced the AVE square roots of constructs on the diagonal of the correlation matrix. Construct validity, and content validity is defined as the amount that proposed items of the construct measure the construct appropriately [43].

Table 3: Discriminant validity Fornell and Larcker (1981)

	AI	RPI	TCH	Visual
AI	0.851			
RPI	0.565	0.830		
TCH	0.423	0.373	0.805	
Visual	0.251	0.309	0.173	0.837

5.0. Results

Evaluation of the structural model is the next step after the assessment of the measurement model. In the inner model, the relationship between predictive abilities and constructs of the outer model is determined [47]. The bootstrapping method was used for this purpose in which the statistical significance of path coefficient was assessed. It's been revealed from the results of bootstrapping that all five direct hypotheses were accepted.

Table 4: Direct Relationship

H	Path	Beta	STD EV	T value	P Value	Decision
H1	VIS -> AI	0.184	0.056	3.296	0.001	Accepted
H2	VIS -> RPI	0.252	0.063	3.998	0.000	Accepted
H3	TC H-> AI	0.392	0.066	5.916	0.000	Accepted
H4	TC AI -> RPI	0.330	0.056	5.057	0.000	Accepted
H5	AI-> RPI	0.459	0.063	9.723	0.000	Accepted

H=Hypotheses

The findings of bootstrapping of the present study shows that there is significant relationship among the proposed relationships as mentioned in Table 4 such as H1 (beta=0.184,t-value=3.296,p-value=0.001), H2(beta=0.252, t-value=3.998,p-value=0.000), H3 (beta=0.92, t-value=5.916, p-value=0.000), H4(beta=0.330,t-value=5.057, p-value=0.000), H5 (beta=0.459, t-value=9.723, p-value=0.000).

Furthermore, in the present study, mediation results found that visual stimuli and repurchase intention are significantly mediated by airline image as (B=0.084, t-value=3.001, and p-value=0.003). In the same vein, the relationship among touch stimuli and repurchase intention have proved to be significantly mediated by airline image as well (B=0.180, t-value=5.119, and p-value=0.000). These results showing the mediated hypothesis are accepted.

The brief results of H6 and H7 are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Mediation Results

H	Path	Beta	STDE V	T-value	P-Value	Decision
H6	VIS-> AI-> RPI	0.084	0.028	3.001	0.003	Accepted
H7	TCH-> AI-> RPI	0.180	0.035	5.119	0.000	Accepted

H=Hypotheses

In order to estimate the structural model, R-square is one of the important criteria which helps to determine the structural model of PLS-SEM [48]. R-square explains how well the model explains the outcome of the future and predicts the future. The values of R-square shows the variation of the dependent variable as a result of the independent variable [49]. Whereas, the context of research determines the acceptability of R square. [50] pointed out that the minimum acceptable value of is 0.10.

Table 6: R-Square of the latent constructs

Latent constructs	R Square
AI	0.212
RPI	0.367

On other hand, if the value is 0.33, 0.67 as substantial and 0.19 as weak. Thus, on the basis of the above criteria, the R square of the present study is moderate 0.212 and 0.367, as shown in Table 6.

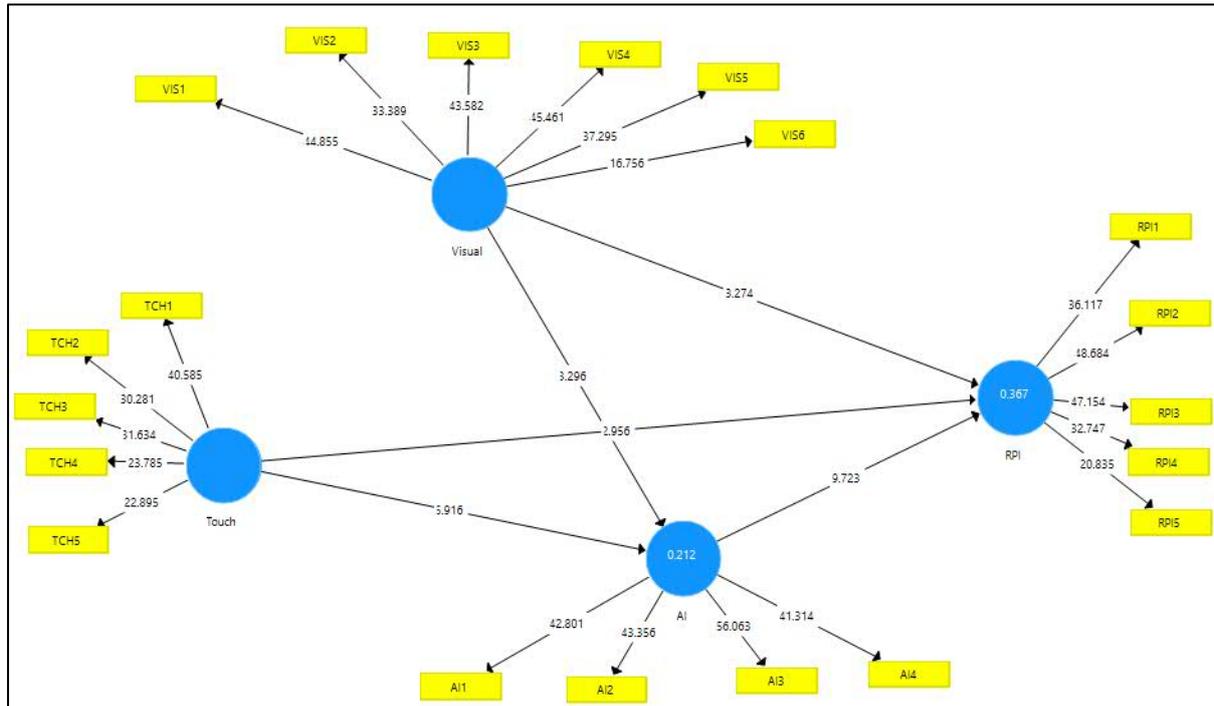


Figure 2: Structural Model

6.0 Discussion

In the present study, the mediating role of airline image between visual stimuli, touch stimuli and repurchase intention is examined. According to the results obtained by using PLS, Visual cues and touch cues of the airlines have impacted the airline image. Hence, the H1 of the present study was supported. In terms of the visual cues and airline image, findings of the present study are consistent with the previous findings [19], [30]. Moreover, results of the present study also revealed that touch stimuli in terms of comfort and temperature play a significant role as well to create positive airline image which is consistent with the findings of [34] supporting H3. The results revealed that repurchase intention among airline customers is impacted by visual cues and touch cues as well as supporting the H2 and H4. These findings are consistent with [35], [33]. Additionally, there exist significant relationship among airline image and repurchase intention as proposed by [21], [39] supporting H5.

In terms of indirect relationships proposed, the results of the present study reveal that airline image mediates between visual stimuli, touch stimuli and repurchase intention. These findings support H6 and H7 of the study. Theoretically, the results of the study are consistent with SOR model proposed by [14]. According to the findings, Visual and touch stimuli as sensory stimuli (S) impacts the airline image, which is an organism (O). later, the airline image has a significant impact on repurchase intention (R) of the SOR model.

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In the present era of globalisation and intense competition among the airlines, retention of the customers is the basic necessity in order to survive, maximise the profit and save the cost. For this reason, the purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of visual stimuli and touch stimuli on airline image and repurchase intention. Additionally, the mediating role of airline image was examined as well. The data was collected in the form of questionnaires from the international travellers of air blue and PIA from Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad airports.

The findings of the study reveal that visual stimuli have a significant impact on airline image and repurchase intention. The results of the present study show that customers of the airlines prefer the cleanliness, interior design, shape, décor and lighting in the airlines. If the airlines pay attention to the cleanliness and keep the sitting area of the airline clean, it will create a positive perception in the mind of the customers. The airlines should also pay attention to the interior design and décor as well, so the positive perception regarding the airline is developed. Moreover, customers will again show a willingness to travel from the same airlines in future.

On the other hand, the results of the study show that touch stimuli also have a significant impact on airline image and repurchase intention. If the temperature within the airline is according to the choice of travellers, it will create a positive perception. The seating area and leg space is also the major factor in creating positive perception

regarding airline. Furnishing and comfort level of the seats is important to develop a positive image. All these factors contribute to developing intention among customers to travel through with the same airlines. Finally, the airline image also mediates significantly between touch stimuli and visual stimuli. If the furnishing, comfort level, temperature, air quality, lighting, and cleanliness of the airlines is good, it will create a positive image which will develop intention among customers to re-travel from the same airlines.

This study has enriched the marketing literature in terms of the application of sensory marketing stimuli in the airline industry. Furthermore, the findings of the present study are helpful for the marketing experts and practitioners of the airline industry to make the strategies to retain the customers. There are a few limitations in the present study as well. The present study focused on two sensory stimuli only. For future studies, other sensory stimuli like olfactory, gustatory and sound should be incorporated for airline image and repurchase intention. The model in this study may also be tested with different moderators like WOM and price factors which can impact the choice of the customers.

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