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DIFFERENTIATED SERVICES QUALITY AND SERVICE CULTURE: CUSTOMERS' PREFERENCE IN AIR TRAVEL

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Abstract

The study aims to assist existing Pakistani airlines in improving their service quality by focusing on customers as a crucial success factor that has yet to be thoroughly evaluated in the airline industry. The paper creates an understanding for specific independent variables (services quality, reliability, pricing, information, communication, and technology) upon dependent variable (customer's preference for air travel) through mediating variable of service culture. The study used the SERVQUAL Model on the theoretical part. Statistical analyses were done to analyze the relationship of independent variables with dependent variables through a mediating variable with a sample of 200 customers who traveled through domestic carriers in Pakistan. According to the findings, independent variables were positively associated to serviceculture and customers' preference for domestic air travel.

A key limitation was approaching the respondents on daily basis to get the responses on time. The positive relation between the variables indicates that a good service culture plays an important role in changing customers' preferences. It will not only help in promoting healthy competition among the operators, but from a broader perspective, it will also help the new entrants in the aviation industry to make optimistic growth in the future through greater focus on customers through better service culture. The study provides a unique perspective on Pakistan's developing country context. This is a unique study that looked at the impact of customer preference in air travel when independent variables changed.

Keywords: Service quality, reliability, pricing, information communication technology, service culture, customers' preference.

1. Introduction

Air travel is the most preferred means of travel in terms of time and comfort. It is the swiftest mode of travel these days. Most people enjoy traveling by air. The first thing

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on the preference list of a customer while choosing between air, land, and sea travel is time. People want to undertake multiple tasks at one time including travel. Like an emotional attachment of a customer with a brand, similar nature of attachment exists between a customer and an airline. The choices and preferences of customers are varied and significantly based upon past experiences and perceived expectations. Four carriers are competing in the domestic market of the Pakistan aviation industry namely, PIA, Air Blue, Serene Air, and Shaheen Air (closed). Air Sial has lately entered the domestic market. As per the current statistics collected from the Statistics Branch website of Civil Aviation Pakistan, a total of 6,019,953 (0.6 million) people traveled on domestic air routes during 2018-19. Keeping in view as an expensive mode of travel in Pakistan, the figure is acceptable however, the service standards lack customers' expectations due to the inconsistencies in the service standards of the air operatorsAccording to a study conducted by Bieger et al., (2007), for the early client, there wasno concept of preferences in air travel. Presently, when so much has changed in the airline business in terms of differentiated services; no such idea existed in those days. The only prime factor of importance was to transport the passengers from Point A to Point B. To be more precise, there was no concept of services for air travel due to which customers had no preferences. Like, seats were only meant to carry the passengers; without any consideration for the comfort. Similarly, there was no consideration for protection of external noises as well as uncontrolled onboard temperatures for the passengers. Safety was not on the priority list at that time, and the number of fatal crashes occurred during that timeline. Gradually, the concept of services started to evolve with the concept of long-haul flights after World War II. The passengers were given importance as an entity. Some of the major airports were made as the hub for the next point of travel, and so do the concept of passenger transfers that started with the hub. With the expansion of air travel, the concept of on-board services through air hostesses/stewards and food services also started. All the air operators at that time were government-operated and there was no concept of private airlines since resources were limited(in terms of good quality aircraft), and also there was not much understanding of expanding commercial business. The airfares/pricing of air tickets were controlled by a regulated system under government policies, however, most importantly, focus on customers improved in the areas of on-board services. So and so first-class cooks were also hired for their services during the flight. Later on, the concept of differentiated quality services was introduced in commercial travel where quality and comfort of seats improved, different classes of travel were also brought in to the point where beds were placed in the first class as an important area of productdifferentiation.

The beginning of 1970 brought a radical change in the airline industry with the introduction of wide-body aircraft for commercial travelers. On-board entertainment was yet another service extended to the customers that included audio and video systems where passengers enjoyed spending their travel time while listening to music and watching videos. These extended services had effects on cost and pricing. The average operational cost reduced as air travel picked astronomical growth with rising numbers of passengers per aircraft but withmore price differentiation as a result

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of differentiated services for economy and business class passengers. This was the first level of differentiation achieved by the airline industry. Safety and security of customers is a top priority agenda of the air operators. Customer preferences are also psychologically affected by the safety records of the airlines. A good safety record entails more customers and vice versa. In countries with more focus on safety, the safety of lives and equipment has finally gained maturity over a period however, many countries still lag in this area. Although much has changed in the concept of the air travel business, customer preference is still primarily focused more on service quality.

Consumers' demands and expectations have evolved as a result of a dynamic business environment, yet many service providers, particularly airlines, have failed to keep up with customers' genuine requirements and wants (Gustafsson et al., 1999). The bulk of airlines perceive passengers' requirements through their own lenses and usually remained focus on reducing operational costs to increase their revenues. Unfortunately, this approach overlooks the true quality of services, customers deserve (Boland et al., 2002). There is a unanimity in the marketing literature that quality of service is a dire factor of success to compete in an intense business environment (Tsoukatos and Mastrojianni, 2010). Customers, of course, are the reason for these services. Their preferences are driven by the quality of services extended by the service providers. The airline industry is no exception. The concept of service quality and its empirical relationship with client satisfaction has elevated it to a core marketing tool (Ahmed et al., 2010). Over some time, researchers have consumed a great deal of time onresearch of quality services (Abdullah et al., 2007). However, the quality of airline service hasyet to be adequately evaluated (Park et al., 2004).

According to (Deen & Arshad, 2007), the aviation industry in Pakistan had no other air operator except Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) which was established in 1955. It is the only official air carrier of Pakistan. Due to the unavailability of a formal regulatory body, most of the operational, maintenance, and services including on-board services were candidly managed by PIA. The service standards were at par excellent to the point where it even helped other airlines in the establishment phase. In the meantime, a formal regulatory body in the name of the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA) was formed to maintain an oversight of all types of aviation activities in the country. However, there were issues between the regulatory body and PIA management. As a result of repeated management conflicts between CAA and PIA, a gradual decline in standards occurred in all areas of airline operations including the services domain. Service culture is an important part of air travel that influences customer’s preferences. There is more focus on customer services in developed countries but developing countries somehow lack in this area. Domestic air travelers in Pakistan have limited preferences since every air operator is offering more or less similar levels of service. To promote the growth of the Pakistan aviation industry on a broader scope, customers must have more preferences through differentiated air services quality extended in a better service culture environment.

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Some theories propose that sales promotion motivates customers and it leads to increased customer preferences. According to Aaker and Keller (1990); Yesin, 2012 & Schultz, 2013), sales promotion impacts the end user's preference in selecting a service. According to (Chong & Rundus, 2004), managing quality standards in service contributes to increased revenue and profit as a result of customers' preferences; based upon past experiences. Another study supports the idea that customer service quality is a crucial facet in attracting and keeping customers loyal to a brand (Gursoy et al., 2005). The entry of private air operators in the country with better services in terms of better facilitation makes them differentiated from others and that leads to increased customer preferences or loyalty towards a product**.** Some organizations emphasize the role of management in improving the quality of services as they are the policy and decision-making people. Customers' perceptions of value and trust improve as a result of better service offerings, which leads to enhanced consumer preferences (Rasheed& Abadi, 2014).

The study will be conducted to identify the existing gaps in air services quality and service culture in the Pakistan aviation industry that has restricted customer preferences in air travel due to deteriorating service standards from the early eighties (Deen & Arshad, 2007). On a broader scope, this limitation is impacting the futuristic growth of the aviation industry in Pakistan. Improving the service culture with better quality services will help the customers to opt for more air travel with better choices among the air operators.

The study's goals are to determine the relationship between service quality, reliability, pricing, and information communication technology (ICT) as independent variables, and preferences of the customer in air travel as a dependent variable. Between the independent and dependent variables, service culture will operate as a mediating variable. While keeping in view the fact that very little has been researched in the area of customer service quality in the airline (Park et al., 2004), and the present low-grade service standards (Deen & Arshad, 2007), the effort would be aimed to take feedback from the customers through a questionnaire. The research would be focused on understanding customers' perceptions and expectations from the service providers on the defined independent variables; correlating their significance with the problem area, and then finally converging to a research outcome with the best possible solutions for improvements in the service culture of Pakistan aviation industry.The research will be targeting the segment of domestic air travelers in Pakistan. Their past experiences will be the main focus of the study. The frequency of travel is not the question at hand but it is the availability of choices or preferences, a customer has while opting for air travel. There could be a long list of variables associated with the service domain however, it is not possible to cater for every possible variable in the research, and the scope will, therefore, remain confined to the specific variables covered in the research objectives.

The study's goal is to help improve the service quality of Pakistan's existing airline companies to primarily focus on customers as their success factor which has not been thoroughly evaluated earlier for the airline industry (Park et al., 2004). It will not

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only help in promoting healthy competition among the operators, but from a broader perspective, it will also help the new entrants in the aviation industry to make optimistic growth in the future through greater focus on customers through better service culture.

The remaining research paper is presented as follows: Section 2 delineates the prior literature and hypothesis tested in this paper. Section 3 explains the research methodology and Section 4 deals with the survey results. The paper's last section finishes with a discussion of the findings and conclusions, along with implications, study limitations, and future research.

2. Literature Review

At present time, services have become an essential element of B2C as well as B2B relationships. In management literature, service quality has been a topic of discussion. It is for that matter, a lot of emphases is being laid to quantify performances through valid and reliable instruments. The aim of using these instruments to evaluate the performance of organizations systematically. The prime focus of this evaluation is to look at things from the customers' perspective as to how they perceive service quality and related organizational outcomes (Badri, Abdullah & Al-Madani, 2005). According to Schneider & White (2004), there is a strong correlation between the quality of service provided, customer satisfaction, and customer preferences. Earlier researches have explored these areas of interest and relate them to the customers' behaviors. The researchers believe that customer behavior plays a vital role in the relationship of service quality, satisfaction, and preferences. The performance of an organization to succeed or lose depends upon the preference of customers that largely depends on the service culture of that organization. A good service culture promotes growth whereas, the contrary proves damaging for the organization's repute. Similarly, the financial outcomes of service-oriented organizations are purely dependent upon the service quality and service culture of the organization. The preference of customers has a strong link with past experiences. These experiences are based upon the interaction of the customer with the service culture of an organization. Similarly, customers also perceive the quality of service with cost-benefit (Bitner, & Hubbert, 1994). Positioning of an organization among competitors has a significant influence from the high-quality services (Parasuraman & Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994).

In the service industry, the SERVQUAL model is regarded as the most significant service quality dimension, whereas reliability is the second most essential component (Chowdhary & Prakash, 2007). The SERVQUAL theory defines service quality as the difference between what a customer expects from a service offering and what the customer perceives of the service received, and respondents are asked to provide feedback on both their expectations and their perceptions of the service rendered (Parasuraman et. al., 1988). For practical purposes, SERVQUAL is a tool that assesses customers' perceptions based on service quality into five constructs. They

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include,

a) Tangibles - physical facilities, equipment, and the appearance of the staff, etc.

b) Reliability - the capacity to provide consistent and accurate service.

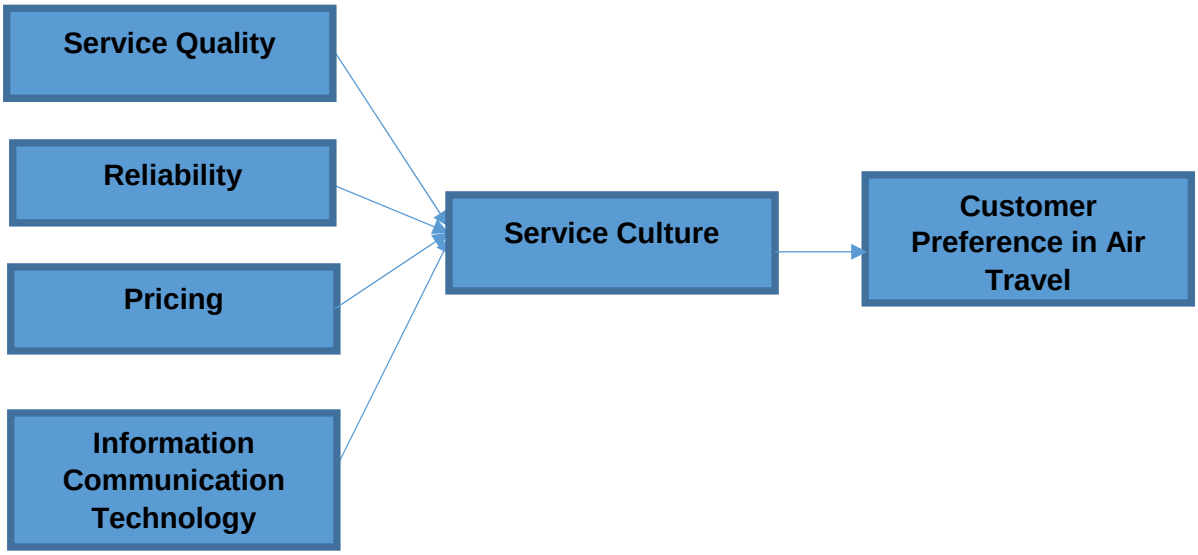
c) Responsiveness - willingness to assist and reply to a customer's needs.

d) Assurance - a person's ability to inspire confidence and trust in others.

e) Empathy - the ability to understand another person's needs and respond with personalized care and service.

Out of the five constructs, tangibility is considered to be the least prioritized dimension of customer preference. Generally, the customers are influenced more by the intangibles. The SERVQUAL model has been the prime reference for researchers in determining service qualityin air travel.

Conceptual Framework



Hypotheses Development

Service Quality and Service Culture

Definitions of service quality vary as per the perception of the customers (Lewis, 1989). The concept of service quality construct was presented by Grönroos (1982) and Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988). To measure service quality and its dimensions, Parasuraman et al. (1988) devised the SERVQUAL instrument. According to Cronin & Taylor (1992), Customers'opinions of service quality are slightly

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higher and better when performance-based measures are used. Customers are affected differently by varying levels of service excellence. Superior or high level of services favor the customer behaviors and increase the probability of their buying intentions. However, an organization cannot target every audience at the same time due to resource constraints. Therefore, the organizations must identify the segments, target specific audiences and position themselves to improve customer's preferences (Sebastianelli & Tamimi, 2002).

H1: Service Quality has a positive impact on the service culture of an airline.

Reliability and Service Culture

The majority of researchers have identified reliability as the most critical and crucial component in the service quality dimension. Reliability is a proxy for 'Timeliness' as they both cover the same domains. It is indeed a very significant variable in gauging customers' satisfaction in terms of their retention and loyalty to an airline (Sultan & Simpson, 2000;Natalisa & Subroto, 2003; Kozak, Karatepe, & Avci, 2003). According to Wilson et al., (2012), in terms of customer views of service quality, reliability is always regarded as the most essential element. According to Cronin and Tylor (1992), reliability is defined as an organization's commitment to delivering on time and in a systematic manner. Similarly, loss of customer confidence due to repeated reliability issues impacts passenger preferences in air travel (O'Connell & Williams, 2011). In light of this, the following hypothesis is put forward:-

H2: Reliability has a positive impact on the service culture of an airline.

Pricing and Service Culture

Price is one of the attractive instruments in the sales promotion category that targeted customers It has become one of the most driving forces of client satisfaction (Park et al., 2013). The concept of sales and promotion comes from underpricing. The customer's preference to buy an air ticket is dependent upon pricing. Sales promotions and discounts play a very crucial role (Han & Hyun 2015). Some theories propose that sales promotion motivates customers and it leads to increased customer preferences. According to Aaker and Keller (1990); Yesin, (2012)& Schultz (2013), sales promotion impacts the end user's preference in selecting a service. According to Chong & Rundus (2004), managing quality standards in service contributes to increased revenue and profit as a result of customers' preferences; based upon past experiences. Because of this, the following hypothesis is formulated:-

H3: Pricing has a positive impact on the service culture.

Information, Communication, Technology and Service Culture

The modern-day industry of aviation has a strong influence from information communication technology. Likewise, travelers also want to save time and need

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speedy check-in procedures and better flexibility in terms of change of flight plan. Almost every operation of the airports and airlines is linked with this variable. According to Rhoades and Waguespack, (2004), there was a time when an independent reservation system came into operations, unlike the older days when airlines used to call the passengers for arrival and departure services. Similarly, advancement in technology made it possible to have independent communication systems for Air Traffic Control Tower, gates agents, boarding agents, and ticketing agents. Effective use of information technology always augments service quality and ultimately creates value for the organization and its customers (Cheng, Chen & Chang, 2008).

H4: ICT has a positive impact on the service culture of an airline.

Service Culture and Customer Preference

A service culture is crucial for the development of passenger confidence (Grönroos, 2007; Ooncharoen & Ussahawanitchakit, 2008; Gebauer, Edvardsson & Bjurko, 2010). The quality of service and service cultures are different in different regions across the world (Eshghi, Roy & Ganguli, 2008). To improve customers' perceptions of services, several research findings have shown that managers of service provider firms should make attempts to meet their demands beyond their expectations. The same idea follows for the airline industry. When a client is pleased with an airline's services, the likelihood that he would choose it again is high, which will have a direct impact on the airline's sales volume (Zeithaml, 1996). Repurchase intent is the result of great satisfaction from the experience, according to previous research findings. According to (Martin, 1992), all service-oriented organizations have to maintain a good service culture to sustain in the market. Marketing improvement groups have concluded that a structured approach is necessary to build a service culture. Airline employees are the best influencers for the passengers' perceptions. It is important to understand that customers make a perception of employees' services and behaviors. This perception in their mind leads to the overall level of satisfaction and loyalty (Lee, Back, and Kim, 2009). Service culture, according to earlier theories, is a highly valued commodity that competitors cannot readily imitate. A good service culture leads to positive behavior or preference of the customer (Hoang, Hill & Lu 2010). Airlines, as a purely service-oriented industry, have a great significance in the domain of service culture. According to Reynolds (2011), the pure concept of a service culture is referred to as a customer-centric culture to generate superior value through extraordinary services and performance competencies. It is proposed that the following hypothesis be tested:-

H5: Service culture has a positive influence on the customer's preference in air travel.

Service Culture has a mediating effect on the relationship between Service Quality and Customer Preference.

Customers' overall views of service weakness or excellence, according to Zeithaml et al. (1996), are characterized as service quality. SERVQUAL instruments are often used to assess the quality of services delivered to clients. According to (Goodman,

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1989), organizations need to focus on service quality as customers tend to become disloyal and unhappy due to low service quality. It is an important variable that influences customers in deciding the selection of an airline (Park et al., 2004). Service quality also affects customers' perception of the benefit relative to the cost (Fen & Meillian, 2005). Sometimes companies tend to keep customers' expectations not too high. Sometimes this approach becomes risky because some organizations think that increased customers' expectations may put them in a condition where they may be subjected to some form of failure if, for whatever reason, they fail to achieve the same level of service quality that the consumers have experienced or that the organization has promised previously. Good service quality nurtures a healthy service culture. In view of this, the following hypothesis is proposed:-

H6: Service culture will mediate the relationship between service quality and customer's preference in air travel.

Service Culture has a mediating effect on the relationship between Reliability and Customer Preference.

According to Ooncharoen & Ussahawanitchakit (2008), service culture is a precondition for an organization to attain excellence and high-value business performance. It involves an active interaction between a customer and the personnel of an organization (Han & Hwang 2015). The core concepts of reliability are crucial in the study of high quality of service. The concept of reliability has a great emotional relevance in every industry. The airline industry is one of them. According to the service quality model of (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990), reliability is a very important dimension to measure customers' preferences. It all comes down to doing the right thing the first time and every time after that. Reliability is one of the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model that include tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Babakus & Boller, 1992; Ekinci, 2002). For a service culture adaptable to the customers' preferences, reliability is the key dimension in measuring the perception of customers about the service quality performance of a service-oriented organization (e.g., Getty & Thompson, 1994; Knutson & Bitz, 1991). According to Getty & Getty (2003), reliability, it's all about providing the appropriate service the first time. Employees must provide services in a consistent and accurate manner. In the real world, 100% reliability is not possible due to various practical reasons therefore, the systems should work in such a way that they do not hurt the customers' perceptions and preferences. In light of this, the following hypothesis is formulated:-

H7: Service culture will mediate the relationship between reliability and customer's preference in air travel.

Service Culture has a mediating effect on the relationship between Pricing and Customer' preference for air travel.

Services are critically important in festive seasons like Eid or religious occasions like Hajj or Umrah. Airlines tend to revise their prices to attract more customers. Now, if the price reduction on such special occasions, as well as the time period, is taken

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into account, it can bring in more consumers, as price discount has a big beneficial impact on the customers' buypreference (Rehman et al., 2013).

According to (Park et al. 2004), the service culture related to the airline industry involves manyvariables. They include ticketing (related to pricing), luggage allowance, and onboard facilities. Many researchers studying the airline suggest that the customer's intention and preference are highly influenced by his interaction with the service culture of an airline. It starts from the reservations department of the airline, sales and promotion, ticketing, baggage handling, flight schedules, cabin crew, cabin services, and many other variables (Archana & Subha, 2012; Saha & Theingi, 2009; Nadiri et al., 2008; Prayag, 2007). The following hypothesis is formulated in this context:-

H8: Service culture will mediate the effect on the relationship between pricing and the Customer's preference in air travel.

Service Culture has a mediating effect on the relationship between Information, Communication, Technology, and Customer Preference.

According to Oyewole, Sankaran & Choudhury (2007), the various aspects of advanced technology in terms of the use of information communication technology (ICT), online reservation, in-flight services, and many other utilities have a direct impact on customer preference in selecting an airline for air travel. According to Santonen (2007), in this digital age, competition is too tough and slackness in services can always create a chance for the customer to switch with the competitors as they are available just a click away. Technology has become extremely convenient and efficient for air travelers (Tronvoll, 2007). According to Oyewole, Sankaran & Choudhury (2007), airlines nowadays are in the efforts of bringing something innovative in the shape of technology for the air travelers. A good service culture will improve the customers' preferences in this unique domain. The performance of an airline is generally measured in terms of the safe and secure journey in the comfort zone. Customer trust is developed based on valuable criteria set in the service culture of the airline. In view ofthis, the following hypothesis is formulated:-

H9: Service culture will mediate the relationship between Information, Communication,Technology, and customer's preference in air travel.

3. Methodology

The methodology section is an important part of any conducting research. It helps in making a structural framework of research and also gives shape to its body. According to Groves et al., (2011), the methodology is responsible to give direction to the study as to how it will be conducted to obtain the correct facts accurately and efficiently. Moreover, it also describes how researchers formulate their priorities, and the outcome of the data, obtainedduring the analysis tenure (Sileyew, 2019).

Research methodology is a quantitative approach, used for pursuing research based on a theory. It explores the relation between numerically calculated and assessed

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variables using various statistical tools and techniques. Our study is chiefly focused on the dimensions of service quality (SERVQUAL), under the inspiration of the previously conducted studies, especially for the service sector.

3.1 Participants and Procedure

According to Saunders et al., (2009), sampling can be done through two types. One is Probability Sampling where every element has an equal chance of selecting from the population. The second type is Non-probability sampling where every element from the population does not have the same chances. The research was conducted through Non- Proportionate Quota Sampling Method. Due to the practical limitations, the data was only collected from Karachi. Data extracted from the Statistics Bureau of Civil Aviation Authority, Pakistan revealed that 6,000,000 (6 Million) passengers traveled on the domestic route from Karachi in 2018-19. Considering the same figure as an average approximation, the target population was taken as 6,000,000. The sample size calculated through Rao software gave the minimum number of respondents as 385, with a 95% certainty level and a 5% margin of error

In total, 385 Google forms were used to distribute self-completion questionnaires. Customers from several private and governmental sectors in Karachi participated in the survey, including those from Corporate, Business, Government, and Routine Travel.

The participants were given a self-completion questionnaire pack that had two sections for measuring the variables. The first section would be related to the demographics, whereas, the second section will include questions; based upon the correlation between independent and dependent variables while including the mediating effects. All the measurements will be done by using a five-point Likert Scale. Demographic data will be collected for age, gender, maritalstatus, and monthly income in Section 1 whereas, data for the variables of Services Quality, Reliability, Pricing, ICT, Service Culture, and Customer Preference will be covered in Section

2. The participants were told about the study's confidentiality and anonymity policies, as wellas their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time or stage. The data for the statistical analysis will be measured through SPSS Software. The results of the statistical data will be analyzed through descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, Hypothesis testing for direct and indirect relationships between the variables, and reliability (Cronbach alpha).

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Services Quality

The quality of the service was assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree-1 to strongly agree-5. A sample item embodied the ease with which a customer finds the reservation and ticketing process, the expertise of the airline employee to solve a query, seriousness of the airline employee in resolving an issue, complaint handling system, and evidence of management’s practices with regards to

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passengers' safety and security.

3.2.2 Reliability

Reliability was determined using a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. A sample item embodied was Promised services, such as offers and incentives, are delivered on time, and airline employees are friendly and pleasant; the employees' behavior instils confidence in passengers while travelling. Continuous improvement in better service creates a strong bonding and increases reliability, punctuality, and reliable in their flight schedules.

3.2.3 Pricing

Pricing was evaluated using a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. A sample item included Flexi pricing on different dates, preference for packages that are competitive with other airlines, enough time for the journey period when tickets are purchased through promotions, and flexible terms andconditions for tickets purchased through promotions.

3.2.4 Information, Communication, Technology

ICT was judged using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree-1 to strongly agree-5. A sample item was Prefer a user-friendly online air ticketing procedure, an airline/booking site with fewer technical issues, an airline with ICT facilities available even when counters are closed, and the ability to get timely status updates via ICT facilities such as websites, mobile phones, and the ability to use the internet, e-mail, fax, and telecom services.

3.2.5 Service Culture

A five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was used to examine the customer service culture. The scale runs from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. A sample item included facilitation, support, guidance, and quick response as part of the service culture of an airline, accurate Flight scheduling, equal treatment of passengers irrespective of gender and age, baggage handling convenience at both arrival and departure airports, and preference for airlinesthat offer customized frequent flyer program with additional services.

3.2.6 Customer's Preference

A five-point Likert scale, spanning from strongly disagree to strongly agree, was used to evaluate customer preferences. From 1 to 5, the scale is used. A sample item include aircraft cleaning and upkeep, flexible terms and conditions for tickets purchased through promotions, timely and safe journey, and behavior of front end facilitators like airlines' Boarding Pass issuance staff, Air hostesses, etc., and its influence.

4. Results and Discussion

The goal of this study was to uncover what gaps there were in the quality of air

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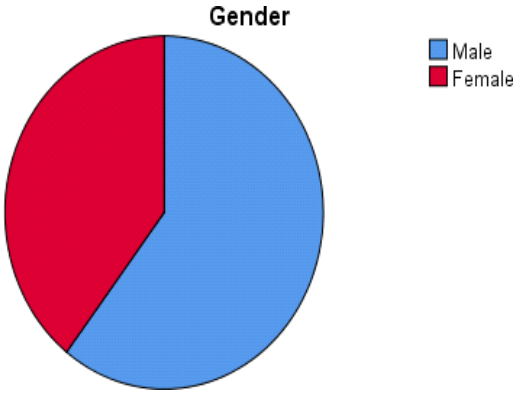
services and service culture in Pakistan aviation industry that has restricted customer preferences in air travel due to deteriorating service standards from the early eighties (Deen and Arshad, 2007). The research intends to examine the impact of the domestic air travel experience of Pakistani passengers. Similarly, nothing much has been done in this area of interest to improve the market growth from the perspective of the customer. For the study, the hypothesized factors (service quality, reliability, pricing, and information communication technology) were picked and tested to ascertain their impact on the preference of domestic air travelers in Pakistan through the mediating effect of service culture.The research data gave insight into two types of databases. First, the demographics data about the respondents, and the second data was based on the answers to the questions asked from the respondents. Some very interesting information was gathered from the demographics data about the genders viz-a-viz their preferences in domestic air travel in Pakistan. Interestingly, while analyzing the data, it was found that the majority of the passengers had a preference for private airlines to government-owned airlines. It was not the pricing that created the differentiation but the services in terms of tangible and intangible entities.

4.1 Demographics Data

4.1.1 Gender Data

It's worth mentioning that, according to the data gathered, 60.5 percent of respondents were male and 39.5 percent were female. These were not pre- decided percentages but came out of the collected data purely.



4.1.1 Reason for Travelling

The collected data showed that 54% of the passengers prefer domestic air travel due to both time saving, and comfort and convenience. The majority of them (36.5%) want to save time whereas, 9.5% showed their preference only for comfort and convenience. Both male and female air travelers preferred both time saving and comfort and convenience for domestic air travel.

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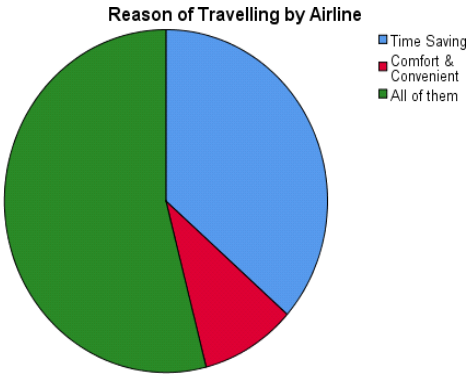
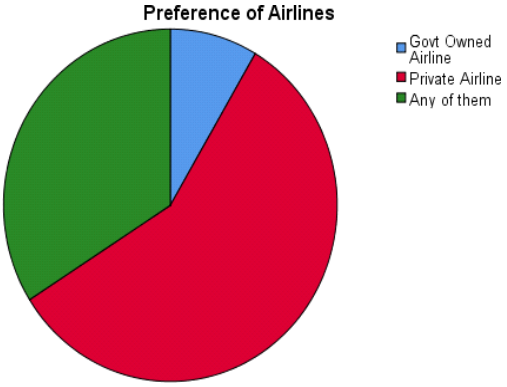
4.1.2 Preference for Airlines

As for the preference of airlines, 56.1% of the passengers prefer private airlines whereas only 8.3% prefer government-owned airlines. The remaining 33.2% of passengers pick any of them randomly. The higher preference percentage for commercial airlines has been witnessed due to the better quality of services and



reliability variables of the study. Both male and female air travelers preferred private airlines for their domestic travel. Due to better services in private airlines, 57% of the passengers preferred to travel by private airlines.



4.1.3 Frequency of Travel

The data also showed that 37.6% of travelers travel once a month on domestic flights. Only 8.3% of the people travel once a week whereas, 5.9% travel once in six months and 45.9% travel once in a year. Pricing is one of the major reasons for altering customers' preferences in air travel. Even considering the frequency of travel and preference of airlines, more than 90% of the passengers preferred to undertake travel by private airlines.

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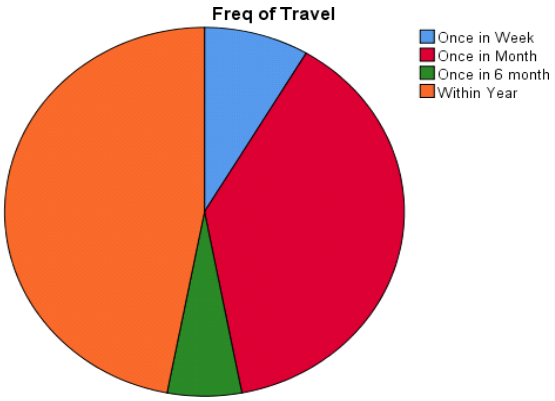

4.2 Statistical Results of the Research

The research's main focus is its findings. The variables used for the SPSS analysis are**:**

- Service Quality = SQ [Independent Variable]
- Reliability = RE [Independent Variable]
- Pricing = PR [Independent Variable]
- Information Communication Technology = ICT [Independent Variable]
- Service Culture = SC [Mediating Variable]
- Customer Preference = CP [Dependent Variable]

4.3 Results Analysis

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	StdError	Statistic	StdError
SQ	200	1.00	5.00	3.8200	0.72874	0.531	-0.721	0.172	0.727	0.342
RE	200	1.00	5.00	3.8720	0.71538	0.512	-1.124	0.172	2.127	0.342
PR	200	1.00	5.00	3.8325	0.75543	0.571	-0.757	0.172	0.688	0.342
ICT	200	1.00	5.00	3.8740	0.74761	0.559	-1.044	0.172	1.654	0.342
SC	200	1.00	5.00	3.8760	0.65970	0.435	-0.642	0.172	0.895	0.342
CP	200	1.00	5.00	3.8475	0.79839	0.637	-0.985	0.172	0.553	0.342

4.3.1 Descriptive Analysis

Based on the Likert Scale, the minimum and maximum values have been achieved as 1 and 5 respectively. A low standard deviation value indicates that the majority of the numbers are close to the mean, whereas a high standard deviation value indicates that the data are dispersed and far from the mean. For an approximation,

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the coefficient of variation is a handy mathematical tool to ascertain the proximity or spread of the data points from the mean value. A value of CV can be calculated by dividing the Standard Deviation by the mean value. If CV>1, then variation is high, and if CV<1 then the variation is low. A high variation shows points lying farther from the mean whereas, a low variation suggests points lying closer or clustered around the mean. It also shows better accuracy of data. To confirm the accuracy of the results, each variable was independently checked for its proximity to the mean value. The values came out to be as follows:-

SQ=0.19 < 1, RE=0.18 <1, ICT=0.20<1, SC=0.17<1, CP= 0.21<1

All the values of the Coefficient of variation came less than 1 which shows that the data pointsare fairly close to the mean.

The skewness values for all the variables came as negative. This showed that the distribution was skewed more towards the left side of the distribution curve as most values are clustered around the right tail of the distribution. It also indicated that the left tail is longer and fatter relative to the right tail. Moreover, while using the rule of thumb for determining the intensity of skewness, the research data is moderately skewed. According to this rule, if the skewness is between -1 and -0.5 (negatively skewed) then it is considered to be a moderatelyskewed distribution but the tilt is more towards the left side of the distribution. From the statistical point of view, this is an acceptable distribution. Similarly, for the kurtosis analysis, it was found out that all values are positive. Moreover, the standard normal distribution has a Kurtosis value from -3 to +3. The data extracted from the SPSS test showed that all values arelesser than 3 which shows that the data falls under the acceptable range. In statistics, K<3 means, the distribution is shorter and tails are thinner than the normal distribution. It is referred to as Playkurtic where the peak of the curve is lower and broader than the normal distribution(Mesokurtic).

4.3.2 Correlations

		SQ	RE	PR	ICT	SC	CP
SQ	Pearson Correlation	1	.718**	.942**	.810**	.874**	.191**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0	0	0	0	0.007
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200
RE	Pearson Correlation	.718**	1	.688**	.892**	.679**	.224**
	Sig. (2-	0		0	0	0	0.001

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	tailed)						
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200
PR	**Pearson Correlation**	.942**	.688**	1	.695**	.863**	.199**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0		0	0	0.005
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200
ICT	**Pearson Correlation**	.810**	.892**	.695**	1	.709**	.257**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0		0	0
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200
SC	**Pearson Correlation**	.874**	.679**	.863**	.709**	1	.339**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0	0		0
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200
CP	**Pearson Correlation**	.191**	.224**	.199**	.257**	.339**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.007	0.001	0.005	0	0	
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The acceptable range for correlation is from 0.3 - 0.9. The values of the correlation coefficient showed a strong correlation between the variables. For the analysis of the results, it was found that the Pearson Correlation Coefficient for all independent variables (SQ, RE, PR, ICT), mediating variable (SC), and dependent variable (CP), came within the specified range of ‘r’. This showed that a relationship exists between all variables. Secondly, while creating a linear relationship between the two variables, positive values of ‘r' suggested a positive association between the variables. It indicates a positive uphill slope for all the relationshipsbetween the two variables. Moreover, it also indicated that by increasing one variable, the second variable would also increase. At the 0.01 level, the correlation is significant (2-tailed). This means that if the value is between a certain ranges, it will be regarded significant (0.001 to 0.010). The same level of significance has been used for the research. The research results showed that each variable had a significant value under the accepted level of

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significance. These findings also show that the variables have a significant correlation.

4.3.3 Hypothesis Testing for Direct and Indirect Relationships

With the help of SPSS Software, hypothesis testing is carried out using structural equation modelling as shown in table-1. First, the discussion is based upon the 'direct relationship between the independent variables. In the first (simple) regression, **Service Quality** having goals is a significant (positive) predictor of Service culture that is used as mediating factor (b=.874, s.e= .031, p<.001). This coefficient indicates the direct effect of Service Quality on Service Culture in the path model. The correlation coefficient (r) having a value of .874 shows a strong positive relationship between them. Another constant determination (r-sq) also has a positive value of 0.763 that represents some expected variability in outcome Service Culture. Secondly, **ICT** has a positive impact on Service culture that is used as mediating factor (b=.625,s.e= .044, p<.001). This coefficient reflects the direct effect of ICT on Service Culture within the path model. The correlation coefficient (r) having a value of 0.709 shows a strong positive relationship between them. Another constant determination (r-sq) also has a positive value of0.503 that represents some expected variability in outcome Service Culture in the moderate range. **Pricing** is one of the predictors which relates to the Service culture and has direct effects (b=.754, s.e= .031, p<.001). The r and r-sq, having values 0.863 and 0.745 respectively, develop a statement that strongly correlates with the expectation in variability in the result. Last, one independent variable **Reliability**, also has impact on Service Culture with effects (b=.626, s.e= .048, p<.001). The linear relationship by correlation coefficient and constant determination is concluded by having values 0.679 and 0.461 respectively. These values strongly support co-bounding and have low variability in the result of outcome for service culture. The overall regression model is significant at alpha=0.05, where F(4,56)=.278, p

<0.05, Adj R(Square)=0.45

Moreover, another relationship or regression finds between independent and dependent variables in table-1 by using 'indirect effects'. The mediating variable **Service Quality** is a significant (positive) predictor of Customer preferences. The results for the mediating factor are found as (b=.636, s.e= .1167, p<.001). This coefficient reflects the indirect effect of Service Quality on Customer preferences within the path model. The correlation coefficient (r) having a value of 0.402 shows a positive relationship between them. Another constant determination (r-sq) also has a positive value of 0.162 that represents almost zero variability in outcome Customer preferences. Secondly, **ICT** has a positive impact on customer preferences. The results for the mediating factor are found as (b=.223, s.e= .0686, p<.001). This coefficient reflects the indirect effect of ICT on Customer preferences within the path model. The correlation coefficient (r) having a value of 0.3397 shows a positive relationship between them. Another constant determination (r-sq) also has a positive

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value of 0.115 and represents some expected variability in the outcome, Customer preferences. **Pricing** is another predictor that relates to Customer preference and has moderate indirect effects (b=.567, s.e= .1673, p<.001). Now, r and r-sq have values 0.387 and 0.1495 respectively, which develop a statement that correlates with expected variability in the result. The last independent variable **Reliability** alsohas an impact on Customer preferences with effects (b=.235, s.e= .0674, p<.001). The linear relationship by correlation coefficient and constant determination is concluded by having values 0.339 and 0.114 respectively which support minimum co-bounding and shows low variability in results for the outcome of customer preference. The p-value was compared withthe significant value (alpha) of 0.01. The results show that all the independent and dependentvariables had values lesser than the alpha which confirms the rejection of all null hypotheses. On the other hand, it also confirmed that all the selected alternative hypotheses are correct therefore, they all are accepted.

Direct Relationships	R	R-square	Coefficient	SE	T Stat.	P values	Result
SQ - > SC (H1)	0.874	0.763	0.874	0.031	25.26	***	H1 ACCEPTED
ICT -> SC (H2)	0.709	0.503	0.625	0.044	14.15	***	H2 ACCEPTED
PR - > SC (H3)	0.863	0.745	0.754	0.031	24.07	***	H3 ACCEPTED
RE - > SC (H4)	0.679	0.461	0.626	0.048	13.006	***	H4 ACCEPTED
SC - > CP (H5)	-	-	0.619	0.136	4.397	**	H5 ACCEPTED
Indirect Relationships	**R**	**R-square**	**Coefficient**	**se**	**T Stat.**	**P values**	**Result**
SQ - > SC - > CP (H6)	0.4023	0.1618	0.636	0.1167	-	***	H6 ACCEPTED
ICT - > SC -> CP (H7)	0.3397	0.1154	0.223	0.0686	-	*	H7 ACCEPTED
PR -> SC -> CP(H8)	0.3866	0.1495	0.567	0.1673	-	***	H8 ACCEPTED
RE -> SC -> CP(H9)	0.339	0.1149	0.235	0.0674	-	*	H9 ACCEPTED

Table 1: Hypothesis testing for a direct and indirect relationship between the variables

IV- 1: SQ-Service Quality IV - 4: RE – Reliability

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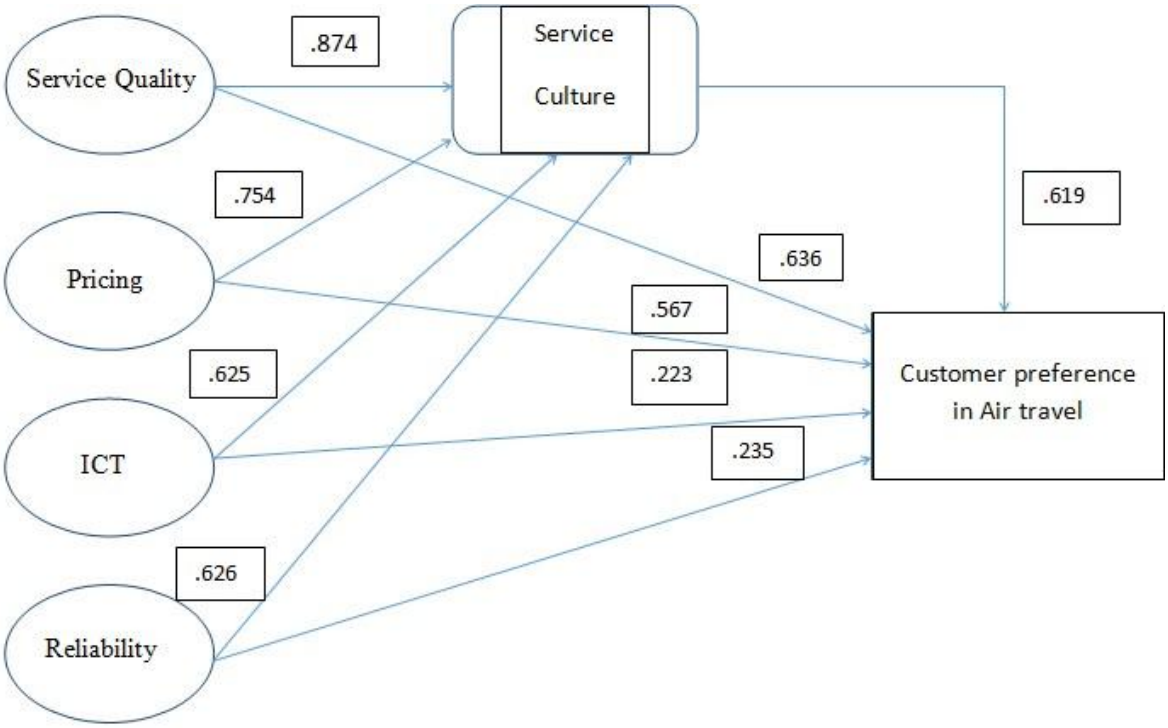
IV- 2: ICT–Information Communication Technology

MV: SC – Service Culture

IV- 3: PR – Pricing DV: CP – Customer Preference



Fig

*** = 0.001, ** = 0.01, * = 0.1 (Levels of significance)

4.3.3 Reliability

The aim of finding Cronbach's alpha is to determine if the scale is reliable. A comparable effort was made to ensure the scale's reliability in the research questionnaire. The values of Cronbach alpha, attained during the SPSS test were compared with the defined value ranges which showed how good, better, or excellent values were achieved. Every variable (independent, mediating, and dependent) were individually assessed for the reliability analysis. The details of the Cronbach alpha are covered in table-3 for better understanding and analysis.

Case Processing Summary

	N	**%**
Valid	200	100.0

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Excluded	0	0.0
Total	200	100.0

Table 2: Summary of research respondentsCronbach Alpha

Variable	Cronbach Alpha	No of Items
Service Quality	0.711	5
Reliability	0.765	5
Pricing	0.702	4
ICT	0.790	5
Service Culture	0.606	5
Customer Preference	0.805	4

Table 3: Cronbach Alpha results for all the variables

4.3.3.1 Service Quality

The Cronbach alpha for Service quality came as 0.711 which is a good scale value in comparison to the available value ranges. The variable has also shown a strong and positive correlation with the other variables in the conceptual framework. This value of reliability also supports one of the elements (Services Quality) of the selected SERVQUAL Theory for the research paper.

4.3.3.2 Reliability

The Cronbach alpha for Reliability came as 0.765 which is also a good scale value in comparison to the available value ranges. The variable has also shown a strong and positive correlation with the other variables in the conceptual framework. This value of reliability alsosupports one of the elements (Reliability) of the selected SERVQUAL Theory for the researchpaper.

4.3.3.3 Pricing

The Cronbach alpha for Pricing came as 0.702 which is again a good scale value in comparisonto the available value ranges. The variable has also shown a strong and positive correlation with the other variables in the conceptual framework.

4.3.3.4 Information Communication Technology

The Cronbach alpha for ICT came as 0.790 which is towards the better side of a good scale value in comparison to the available value ranges. The variable has also shown a strong and positive correlation with the other variables in the conceptual framework.

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4.3.3.5 Service Culture

The Cronbach alpha for Service culture came as 0.606 which is an acceptable value of a scale in comparison to the available value ranges. The variable has shown a strong and positive correlation with the other variables in the conceptual framework.

4.3.3.6 Customer Preference

The Cronbach alpha for Pricing came as 0.805 which is a very good value of a scale in comparison to the available value ranges. The variable has shown a strong and positive correlation with the other variables in the conceptual framework.

5. Conclusion

The study's goal was to establish a correlation between service quality, reliability, pricing, ICT as independent variables, and preferences of the customer in air travel as adependent variable. The service culture acted as a mediating factor between the independent and dependent variables. The research was focused on understanding customers' perceptions and expectations from the service providers on the defined independent variables; correlating their significance with the problem area, and then finally converging to a research outcome with the best possible solutions for improvements in the service culture of Pakistan aviation industry.

The research has helped in actually correlating the assumed hypotheses with the practical results. The analysis of the responses has shown that customers do have special considerations while opting for air travel. The positive relationships found among the variables also show that the selected independent and dependent variables have a link between the variables. The mediating variable (Service Culture) is critically important in a service-oriented industry like Airlines. The outcomes have shown that all the independent variables constitute a service culture which in turn influences customer's behavior in changing their preferences. Although, an interesting finding, not related to the research, showed customers' preference of private airlines to government-owned airlines. The most suitable reason to attribute this factor is the quality and reliability of services offered by the private airlines, despite their pricing a bit higher than the government-owned airlines. Moreover, the ICT services of these airlines are also better than the government-owned airlines which is one of the prime reasons for changes in customers' preferences. Similarly, the results also showed that customers look for time- saving, comfort, and convenience when deciding on their preference for air travel. As the SERVQUAL Theory also support the influence of services on human behavior; similar nature of results have been proven during the research.

The research targeted the segment of domestic air travelers in Pakistan. Corporate, Business, Government, and Routine travelers in various private and public sectors based in Karachi participated in the study. Their past experiences were a crucial element that remained the focus of the study. The frequency of travel was not the question at hand but it was the availability of choices or preferences, a customer has

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while opting for an air journey. There could be a long list of variables associated with the service domain however, it was not possible to cater for every possible variable in the research, and the scope of the research, therefore, remains confined to the specific variables covered in the research objectives.

Services are the pivotal area of the airline industry across the globe. The same thing applies to Pakistan Aviation Industry. The tested results have also shown that customers change their preferences with the variation in the quality of services and other associated factors. The study was done to create awareness among existing air operators in Pakistan to primarily focus on customers as their success factor which has not been thoroughly evaluated earlier for the airline industry.

The study's purpose is to assist existing air operators in Pakistan in improving the quality of their services. The research will help guide the air operators to improve the areas specifically covered in the paper. It will have multiple effects. First, it will help in promoting healthy competition among the operators. Secondly, sustainability and growth come with healthy competition. It will be a guiding reference especially for the new entrants in Pakistan Aviation Industry to make optimistic growth in the future through greater focus on customers through differentiated services and better service culture.

There were some limitations faced during the collection of the data sample. The first limitation was accessibility. The data for the study has to be acquired from people from various organizations in Karachi. Although the data required to be acquired within Karachi, contacting people from other organizations and gathering reliable data for the research's precise results proven challenging. The second limitation was the limitations of responses. It was challenging to acquire responses in a timely manner. It was often difficult to contact individuals and remind them of their responses. Due to a variety of factors, many people did not answer in a timely manner. For future researches in Pakistan, the research paper can be a leverage point to improve the areas in services to attract more customers towards air travel as a flourished aviation industry has a major contribution to the GDP growth of a country.

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