Determinants of Airline Patronage in Nigeria: A Path Analytical Approach

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ABSTRACT
This study was designed to examine the Determinants of Domestic Airline patronage in Nigeria. The population for the study consists of all users of the current and functional Domestic Airline operators in Nigeria which are estimated to be 75,000. Furthermore, the sample size for the study comprised 382 passengers/ customers of the Nigerian Domestic Airlines and our data collection instrument were 382 copies of structured questionnaire which were distributed to passengers in waiting lounges of designated airports in Nigeria; out of which, 377 copies was retrieved and used for the study. The postulated hypotheses were tested with the Multiple Regression Analysis; the Anova and it was found that most of the identified determinants of airline patronage used for the study significantly influenced domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. The authors concluded that the determinants of airline patronage affect domestic airline patronage; and therefore recommended that if a holistic and consistent blend of the determinants of airline patronage model used for the study is adopted by the management of airline service providers in Nigeria, it will immensely increase their level of patronage.

Key Words: *Perceived Service Quality, Perceived Airfare Fairness, Perceived Operational Effectiveness and Airline Patronage*

1. Introduction.

The Nigerian airline industry has a unique historical evolution. The history of aviation in Nigeria dates back to 1925 in Kano when the Royal Air Force (RAF), a British pilot made a breath-taking, but safe landing on the horse race course in Kano, thus going down in history as the first recorded aviation activity in Nigeria. In the early 1930s, an enterprising pilot also made a flight with a few fare paying passengers in a sea plane between Lagos and Warri.
This became an annual business for a few years thereby creating the need for more aero planes. On hearing this development, a representative of the Air Ministry in London visited Nigeria to inspect what could then be appropriately described as “landing grounds” .This however led to the selection of six points in Nigeria for planes landing namely Maiduguri, Oshogbo, Lagos, Minna, Kano and Kaduna. In August, 1958, the Federal Government of

Nigeria in partnership with the British Office of Aviation Control (BOAC) and Elder Dempster lines formed the West African Airways. This single historic move heralded the genesis of the airline industry in Nigeria (Bassey & Joseph, 2014).

Patronage arises when an individual displays conscious efforts to choose a solution towards his or her need (s) through the process of analyzing situations which one out of available offers would be rewarding and relatively satisfying amidst some challenges faced in the course of fulfilling his own desires. This explains why individuals can exhibit unconditional attachment and affection towards objects or persons (Adiele & Grend, 2016). Patronage in the aviation industry entails the deliberate act of a passenger to consistently fly with a particular airline instead of going to other airline service operators. Patronage could be defined as a passenger's selection of an airline from a set of alternatives. More so, Patronage can be viewed from the perspectives of being inductive in nature. This suggests that the level of patronage is induced by some external conditions that prevail at a given time. This dimension of patronage dominates the business and service industry or market and it accounts for the array of literature on customer patronage.

In Nigeria, patronage can be viewed or classified from two dimensions: conditional and unconditional patronage. Unconditional patronage is mostly associated with expectations which are not tied to reward for financial exchanges such as preference for issues that are affectively and psychologically oriented, particularly that gives them joy and satisfaction. The conditional patronage is common to goods and services that an individual purposefully or consciously maximizes to address his economic needs. When the expectations are less than the benefits received, quantitatively, the extent of patronage can fluctuate and will thus depend on the alternatives available (Adiele & Grend, 2016).

Previous research in the Nigerian aviation sector has shown that airline patronage is heavily dependent on some factors which include fare and flight frequency, convenience, non-stop flight, reliability, easy accessibility to airports by passengers , service quality, perceived airfare fairness, flight availability, passenger disposition towards airline image (Jim- woo park, Rodger and Cheng, 2006; Hart & Rosenberg will (2004) . Analysis of the above identified predictors of airline patronage suggests that they can exert direct or indirect influences. This further depicts interplay of complex variables that determines the airline choice decisions in a given economy.

The Nigerian aviation sector (Domestic / International) is influenced by various scenarios and gamut of factors. Some of these factors relates to how best the airline firms can satisfy their customers in order to increase patronage. Every business environment has its own socio-psychological dimensions that provide opportunity for interactions among the people. These people or users of Nigeria air services exhibit observable and peculiar attributes which are deducible by the pattern of factors that affect the level of patronage of services that they expect. A passenger behavioral pattern towards an airline can be influenced by his /her personality, belief, socio-economic, demographic, cultural factors to mention but a few. Different economies of the world have peculiar characteristics which shape the competitiveness and dynamics of each sub sector of the economy. Nigeria has the peculiarities, especially in the aviation sector.

A major problem confronting the Nigeria Aviation sector is that of low patronage which is evidenced in low commitment exhibited by customers of commercial airline operating firms in the country (Mukarramah & Sulaimon, 2014). The challenges that are quite noticeable within the aviation sector include overcrowded hall and traffic, obsolete and malfunctioning air navigation equipment, poor interaction and processes experienced in the purchase of air ticket (online & offline), persistent flight delays, regular flight cancellations without information to passengers and incessant plane crashes over the years are common scenarios in the industry (Connor & Davidson, 2010). Of course, the state of business climate and

infrastructure are crucial to sector performance but could it influence the passenger behavior within the context of airline service delivery? Despite the relative challenges facing the aviation sector in Nigeria, what is the level of patronage exhibited by passengers towards domestic airlines? And could the peculiarities of the aviation sector in Nigeria predict the level of patronage towards airlines in Nigeria?

A review of marketing literature reveals that there is dearth of empirical research on the determinants of Airline patronage in Nigeria. Most of the studies conducted outside Nigeria in the airline industry aimed at determining choice of Airline Alliance, the Impact of Airline Service Failures on Traveller's Carrier Choice (see, Sultan & Simpson 2002; Cheng & Tseng, 2010). None of these studies considered the determinants or contributory factors that influence Domestic Airline patronage in Nigeria.

Related studies in Nigeria were conducted by Wilfred *et al* 2012; Okeudo & Chikwendu, 2013, on the list of factors influencing airline choice making in Nigeria; and on the effects of airline service quality on airline image and passenger loyalty. Remarkably, both authors did not adopt a broader scope in investigating or examining the magnitude and directions of determinants of airline patronage in Nigeria .They conducted a case study on Arik Air Nigeria passengers without recourse to passengers of other domestic airlines in Nigeria. This makes difficult the generalization and applicability of their research findings to the entire Nigeria airline domestic market.

Based on the earlier discussion about the uncertainty towards domestic airlines operation and also the magnitude and direction of the challenges influencing the patronage of domestic airlines, therefore this study seeks to empirically evaluate the determinants of Domestic Airline patronage in Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW.

This section reviewed extant literature on the determinants of domestic airline patronage in Nigeria, the moderating variables of the study and how they influence domestic airline patronage in Nigeria: The dimensions or components of airline patronage used in this study include the following: Perceived Service Quality, Perceived Airfare Fairness, Perceived Operational Effectiveness while the moderating factors include: Passenger Attitudinal Disposition towards Airline Image and Passenger Socio – Economic Wellbeing.

I. Perceived Service Quality and Patronage of Domestic Airlines

Service quality is a concept that has aroused considerable interest and debate in the research literature because of the difficulties in both defining it and measuring it, with no overall consensus emerging on either. There are a number of definitions of service quality. One that is commonly used defines service quality as the extent to which a service meets customers' needs or expectations (Lewis, 2010). Service quality can thus be defined as the difference between customers' expectations of service and the perceived service. If expectations are greater than performance, then perceived quality is less than satisfactory and hence customer dissatisfaction occurs (Parasuraman *et al*, 1985; Lewis, 2010).

The importance of measuring service quality cannot be over emphasized. Measurement allows for comparison before and after changes, for the location of quality related problems and for the establishment of clear standards for service delivery. Similarly, service quality can be defined as a consumer's overall impression of the relative efficiency of the organization and its services. Understanding exactly what customers expect is the most crucial step in defining and delivering high-quality service (Pakdil & Aydim, 2007; Cheng, 2008).

Service quality is defined as a post consumption assessment of services by customers (Holdford & Reinders, 2001). More so, service quality may be the difference between what

customers expect and what they certainly perceive as outcome Wu (2011). Observes that service quality has become a famous research topic because of its important relationship to costs, profitability, customer satisfaction, customer patronage, customer retention, service guarantees, and financial performance. Service quality in the views of Park *et al* (2004) is a consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of the organization and its services. Swarbrooke and Harner (2007), argue that 'quality can be technology driven and product-oriented in terms of conformance to requirements based on company specification'. Service quality is a product-led concept and it focuses on the features and attributes of the product (Swarbrooke, 2003). Providing service, understanding customer expectations and the customer's perception of the service encounter is a vital component to delivering superior service.

However, delivering superior service, especially in the travel industry creates a myriad of opportunities for service organization to surpass their competitors and become a recognized leader in the service industry.

Service quality has become one of the key driving forces for business sustainability and is crucial for firm's accomplishment (Chae, *et al*, 2002) A service firm's ability to hang on to its customers depends on how consistently it delivers value to them (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). In addition, service quality has been described as a form of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction that results from the comparison of expectations with performance (Bolton & Drew, 2005) .In this study, we operationally define service quality as "the overall experience which a customer perceives through interacting with airline products/services. In this study, the dimensions of service quality used include: Flight Reliability, Perceived security consciousness, In-flight services and Seat Comfort. Each of these dimensions we believe will significantly influence domestic airline patronage. However, from the following empirical discussion and theoretical disclosures, it seems like a relationship exist between service quality and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria.

II Perceived Airfare Fairness and Patronage of Domestic Airlines.

Aksoy *et al* (2003) opined that one of the major determinants of airline patronage or choice is air fare or price paid to purchase air ticket (perceived airfare fairness).Airfare is defined as consumers' assessment of whether a seller's price can be reasonably justified (Xia, *et al*, 2004). Fairness has been defined as a judgment of whether an outcome is reasonable, acceptable or just (Bolton *et al*, 2003). When airline's airfare is perceived to be fair by passengers, it improves patronage and profit level of the airline service operators. The price sensitivity of the demand for airlines is directly related to the possibilities of substitution for airlines. Most air passengers are sensitive to airline ticket price and adopt price differentiation strategy using a discriminatory pricing policy to alter passenger's patronage behavior and to respond to a competitive environment so that their revenue is maximized.

In addition, airfare or ticket price is one of the most important determinant or factor influencing air passengers' patronage behavior. Airfare should be carefully ascertained or fixed bearing in mind the ticket price of other competing airlines in the industry. In fixing an airline's ticket price, an optimum amount should be charged which will be neither too high nor very low to recover operational expenses. Furthermore, passenger's price sensitivity analysis should be carried out with respect to business and non-business market segments in order to ascertain when and when not to increase air ticket price. To a business traveler/passenger, an increase in airfare may not be too significant so far he gets to his desired destination in time and safely, while a non-business traveler may decide not to fly with a particular airline due to an increase in airfare. The pricing of scheduled airline fares is a complex matter and most passengers have little or no idea on how it is done (Driver, 2001). The price charged by airlines per mile is not standard for all passengers in a particular flight

or when compared with miles flown on other routes. This multiplicity in fares enables the airlines to adopt discriminatory pricing by having different requirements or conditions for each type of fare. This is done by determining the amount of ticket flexibility. When the type of ticket purchased has flexibility it enables passengers on a scheduled flight to make changes to switch to another flight without notice or penalty. More so, ticket flexibility enables a passenger to book a flight almost on demand. The higher the ticket flexibility both for business travelers and leisure travelers, the higher the patronage.

From the consumer's perspective, the monetary cost of something is what is given up or sacrificed to obtain a product. Research has shown that price is one of the determinants of customer satisfaction and patronage (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). The price to be paid for a service determines, in passenger's mind, the level of quality to be demanded. Offering good service to passengers may not be good enough to attract and retain passengers. Airline passengers now seek better value for their money which is a combination of fares and quality. Lower air fares and improved road infrastructure are the major determinants of airports competitiveness and patronage (Fuellhart 2007). Cheng (2008) argued that previous studies have not included air fare and schedule convenience on a detailed level and these could ultimately influence passenger's choice of airline to fly. From the foregoing discussions, it appears that a relationship exist between perceived airfare fairness and patronage of domestic airlines.

III Operational Effectiveness and Patronage of Domestic Airlines

Another factor that can influence airline's customer patronage is Operational effectiveness. Operational effectiveness is the flight technician's capability and the on-board crew members' knowledge to fix or attend to aircraft problems efficiently and timely. Airline personnel can make service delivery and traveling by air more convenient and enjoyable by ensuring that pre-flight activities are adequately taken care of. There are two perspectives of operational effectiveness which include: maintenance effectiveness and information technology infrastructure

Maintenance Effectiveness: Personnel represent their organizations in exchange and interaction relationships with customers and other stakeholder. An airline's personnel can build long-term relationship that benefits both the air travelers and their airline by handling customer complaints and problems effectively. However for the airline personnel to be effective, they need to be competent. Competence of an employee is described in terms of workers knowledge, skills, and behavior (Schoonover, *et al*, 2000; McCain *et al* 2004; Avilar, 2005; Deflovor *et al*, 2006, Ley *et al*, 2007; Zeb-Obipi, 2007). An employee competence has been defined as those observable knowledge, skills, and behavior which differentiate between superior and other performers in a Job context (Asiegbu and Powei, 2012). Airline passengers expect airline personnel or staff such as pilots, engineers, ground personnel, and staff responsible for the refueling of an aircraft to be highly competent because travelling by air is a high risk movement. For instance, air passengers' expect the best of performance in terms of effective landing and take-off that exhibit a pilot's operational dexterity and competence. These can only be achieved with well trained and experienced pilots. Experienced personnel will always perform in line with company and passenger's expectations by ensuring that the engineers and other ground staff carry out routine check and maintenance when the need arises. Notably, this will however, translate to quality service delivery which will increase customer satisfaction, patronage and loyalty. An increase in patronage will ultimately influence the firms profit level and overall level of business activity.

The accuracy of the airline personnel in the use of aircraft facilities assures airline passengers

of excellent service and personnel competence which in turn can make the air passengers to be confident and committed to the airline. In addition, passenger confidence has been found to correlate positively with customer/ passenger patronage intention (Oduh, 2012).Thus, appearance, age, skills, knowledge, behavior, technical capability and operational dexterity of an airline's personnel are important to the air passengers in evaluating service quality of the airline. The result of such evaluations is most likely to affect an air passenger's intention to patronize a particular airline. From the discussions thus far, it appears like an airline's personnel competence and their operational effectiveness influences passenger's patronage intentions**.** Another factor that mediates the determinants of airline patronage in Nigeria is information technology infrastructure.

Information Technology Infrastructure: Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is the automation of processes, controls, and information production using computers, telecommunications, software's and other gadget that ensure smooth and efficient running of activities. It is a term that largely covers the coupling of electronic technology for the information needs of a business at all levels.

More recently, the pervasive use of internet in the airline business has created a digitalized market that improves the processes dealing with acquisition, management and maintenance of customers. The trend towards disintermediation helps airlines bypass travel agents or other intermediaries to get closer to their customers and the internet to facilitate too-way communication, online sales, e-tickets and a range of new technologies.

Many IT researchers and practitioners firmly believe that IT is an enabler of innovation. Studies (Farrel 2003, Well 2002, also suggest that the role of IT is to drive and lead business strategy formulation, and concern that IT is a means to achieve growth, create and sustain competitive advantage. In other words, the existence of IT capabilities and IT leadership within an industry are antecedents to industry leadership. Baradwaj (2000), Chircu Kauffman (2000) all opined that the adoption of information technology by a firm can moderate its level of patronage or performance.

In the views of Baradwaj, (2000) information technology adoption can be defined as a company's ability to mobilize and deploy IT based resources in combination or co-present with other resources and capabilities. Firms with superior IT capability enjoy superior financial performance by boosting their revenues, increasing productivity, and/or decreasing costs.

However, the phrase "IT capacity" describes different aspects of an organizations base of IT resources. These resources influence and determine the organization's ability to convert IT assets and services into strategic applications (Bharadwag 2000; Sambamurthy 1999), and to mobilize and deploy IT based resources with other resources and capabilities. Remarkably, the travel industry did not remain behind in the innovative use of information technology (Ghobrial and Trusilor, 2005; Yang, *et al,* 2009).Technology has become a major competitive tool that is used in the airline industry to outwit competitors (Baker, 2007). According to O' Toole (2004), ''air travel industry could become the world's first web- enabled industry as online sales, e- tickets, and several new technologies gain ground with increased speed''. Similarly, Mclvor*et al* (2003) argues that service technologies allow customers and airlines to bypass the intermediaries thereby reducing costs. From the foregoing discussions therefore, it appears that a relationship exist between operational effectiveness and patronage of domestic airlines.

IV. Passenger Attitudinal Disposition towards Airline Image and Patronage of Domestic Airlines

Corporate image is defined as perceptions of an organization reflected in the associations

held in consumer memory which distinguishes the organization from other competitors (Abbas, *et al* 2014). Due to the competitive nature of the airline industry, corporate image plays a vital role in attracting passengers and distinguishing a company from other competitors, because the more reputable an airline is, the more trust it can build among its passengers. An airline with a good image is more likely to standout in the market place because it draws both repeat customers and trial users (Connor & Davidson, 2010). Airline image serves as an important factor influencing brand loyalty, repeat patronage and customer retention(Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001).Various sources have indicated that airline image (corporate image) is an important determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty Wu ,(2011).

Brand image has been recognized as one of the central tenets of marketing research, not only because of its role as a function for tactical marketing-mix but also its role in building long-term brand equity (Keller, 1993).

Brand image is defined as the perception about a brand as reflected by the brand association held in customer memory. The purpose of image for airlines is to reveal a distinctive identity in order to allow the airline name, symbol and logo to differentiate the airline brand from those of competitors (Park *et al*, 2006). Thus, having a strong and positive brand image will strengthen perceived quality and assist in the development of brand loyalty (Cretu & Brodie, 2007).

Moreover, according to signaling theory, an airline's brand image becomes a signal by symbolizing a firm's past and present marketing strategies. This signal transmits information to customers mind depending on the clarity of the message and the credibility of the product and the provider. (Baker, 2007) suggested that if image is good then it shelters the delivery of services. A review of empirical service literatures demonstrates that airline brand image has a positive effect on customer satisfaction and patronage Faullant, *et al*, 2008; Hart & Rosenberger 2004).

More recently, Chen and Tseng (2010) maintained that airline image in comparison with passenger satisfaction, has more significant influence on passenger loyalty. To gain a competitive advantage, airlines should investigate the role and the effect of image perceived by passengers because it significantly influences choice and patronage of airlines to fly with.

According to the business dictionary, corporate image is the mental picture that springs up at the mention of a firm's name. It is a composite psychological impression that continually changes with the firm's circumstances, media courage performance, pronouncements etc. Similar to a firm's reputation or good will, it is the public perception of the firm rather than a reflection of its actual state or position. The image of an airline is important in reflecting a distinctive competence in comparison with the competitors, making the airline's name, symbol, or identity distinctive with a corresponding appeal. A favorable image separates and distinguishes the company from its competitors. Thus, a favorable image of a specific airline can improve and encourage customer patronage. Similarly, it has been established through previous studies that a good corporate image could be useful to an organization in various ways, including delaying rival entering the market, charging price premium on customers, etc. (Rindova *et al*, 2005)

Corporate image of an airline also affect customers choice of airline firm and influences customers perception of goods and services offered (Saha *et al*, 2009). A good corporate image is the most promising marketing strategy for attracting current customers. (Fombrun and Stanley, 2005). The more favorable a company's Image, the more likely customers will assume that the services rendered by the company are better, of higher quality and worth more in actual price (Dowling, 2003). Similarly, in the airline industry, the more favorable image passengers have, the more likely negative elements about the airline will be filtered out of passenger's consciousness. Passengers who have a favorable image of the airline consider

a particularly bad flight to be an exception to their impression of the airline (Saha *et al*, 2009). Thus, a favorable image separates and distinguishes the company from its competitors and ultimately impacts on its level of patronage.

V. Passenger Socio – Economic Wellbeing and Patronage of Domestic Airlines.

The importance of passenger socio- economic and demographic characteristics in influencing airline patronage cannot be over emphasized. Specifically, air passenger's age, income, sex, education level etc. influences their airline choice and frequency of air travel. Airline passenger's income level is a major determinant of patronage. The higher their salary, the more likely that people will fly when travelling than the use of road transportation. Exception to this argument is those individuals who exhibit phobia for height and flight. More so, airline passenger's age and the purpose of travel influence their patronage. The purpose of travelling for Passengers within 18-30 years may be anchored on education while passengers within 40 years and above may be motivated to travel on business purposes. In addition passenger's level of education and exposure can also influence patronage level of an airline. Passengers who are not educated may not be gainfully employed hence lacking the financial ability to pay for air tickets. Also, due to lack of proper education, they may develop strong phobia in travelling by air. Conversely, the more educated passengers will be favorably disposed to travel by air due to their level of exposure and experience. These are the categories of passengers who may be travelling for holidays, conferences, seminar, and workshop and to visit friends and relatives. From the forgoing discussions, it is evident that a passenger's socio- economic and demographic attributes can influence his or choice of airline to patronize. A conceptual framework on the determinants of airline patronage is depicted in figure 1 as follows:

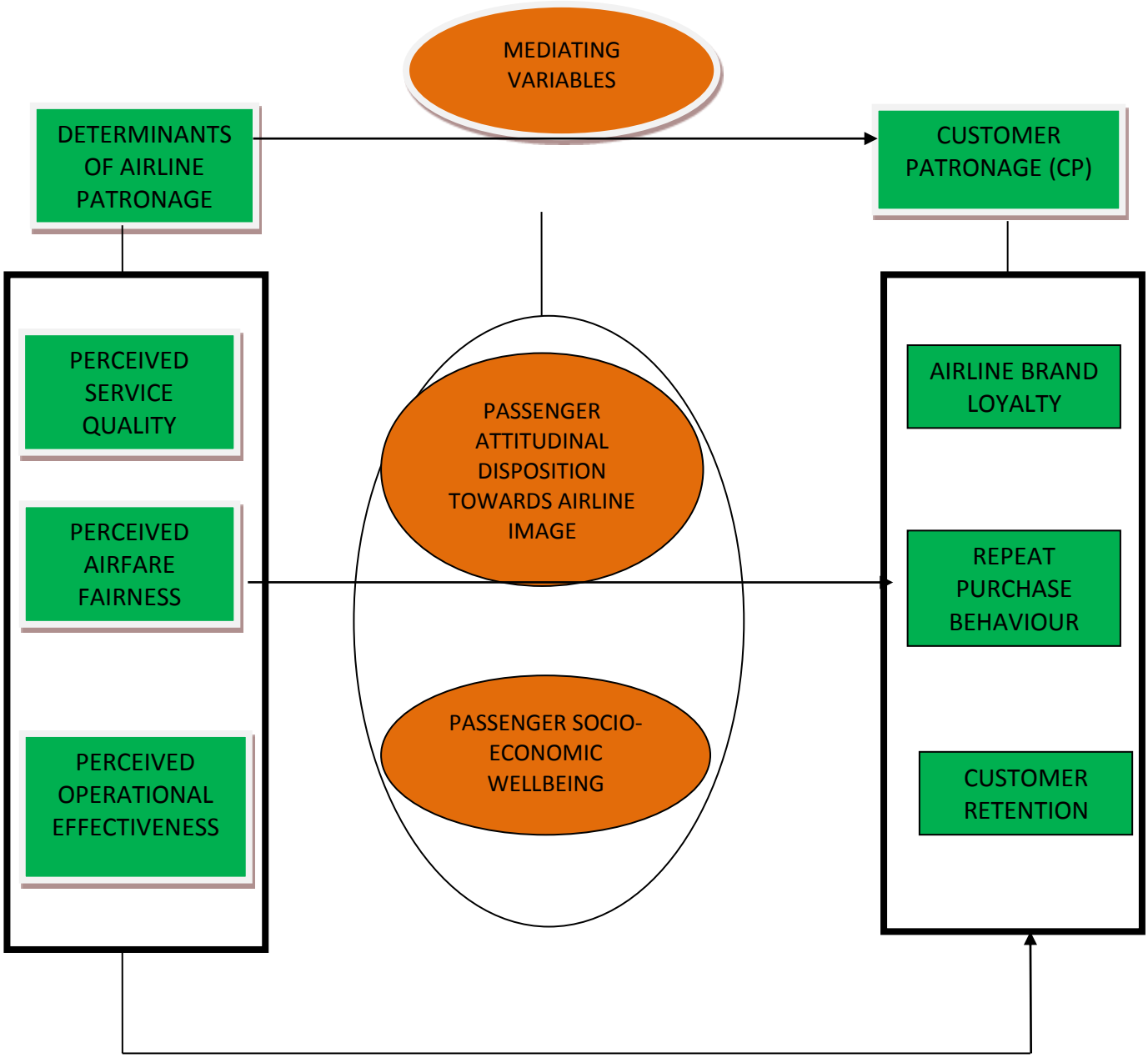

Figure .1: Conceptual Framework depicting the determinants of Airline Patronage and Customer Patronage Relationship

SOURCE: ***Researcher's Conceptualization from Review of Related Literature 2017***

VI. Customer Patronage

Patronage arises when an individual internally analyzes situations and such situations can be self-sustaining despite the challenges faced in the course of satisfying his own desires. This explains why individuals can exhibit unconditional attachment and affection towards objects or persons. Patronage in the aviation industry entails the deliberate act of a passenger to consistently fly with a particular airline instead of going to the competitors. In addition, patronage is defined as a passenger's selection of an airline from a set of alternatives.

People patronize organization products/services at one time or the other. Patronage is burn out of a desire to be committed to an organization either based on its service quality or perceived service qualities. Hence, the extent to which a passenger will patronize the services of an airline depends on how the customer perceives the airline's service quality and how the

customer thinks and feels that the conditions of the airline's customer service is consistent with his/her service expectations.

The selection or choice of patronage is determined by various factors including the comparative attributes of airlines in the consideration set (Wilfred, *et al* 2012). The passenger would be expected to patronize the airline that generates the highest level of utility. Other factors that can influence patronage include convenience, security, reliability, on-board crew behavior, fare and schedule of flight, socio-demographic characteristics, etc. (Wilfred *et al* 2012; Okeudo & Chikwendu, 2013).

Notably, Nigeria airlines in the 21st century often compete for customers in order to increase their market share. The possibility of any of these airline firms to achieve their aims is predicated on their ability to evolve services (products) that will satisfy the needs and wants of their chosen target customer better than their competitors. Also, their service quality delivery strategies should be improved while looking for new avenues to regularly attract and retain their customers. The importance or essence of repeat customer patronage is that an increase in volume of sales will significantly impact on an airline's profit level and improve their level of business viability.

Accordingly, and in line with previous studies, (Wilfred *et al*, 2012; Okeudo and Chikwendu, 2013; Mukarramah *et al* 2014; Johan and Dion 2013; and especially Ikeogu *et a*l 2013; this study views customer patronage as the means of a respondents rating for an airline's brand loyalty, customer retention and repeat purchase behavior.

Notably, the measures of customer patronage differ from one industry to another. In some firms, patronage may be used interchangeably with business performance. In a study carried out by Adiele *et al* (2011), on "the impact of corporate Citizenship on Business Performance: Marketing implications for Nigerian organization; profit margin was used as one of the measures of business performance which was predicated on consistent customer patronage. Asiegbu *et al* (2011), in measuring the "marketing performance of Nigeria Domestic and Industrial Product organizations adopted profitability, sales volume and market share. Johan and Dion (2013), in their study "Airline service quality in south Africa and Malaysia- An International customer expectations approach used brand loyalty and flight frequency and aircraft type as the measures of customer patronage. Similarly, Okeudo and Chikwendu in their study on "Effects of airline service quality on airline image and passengers' loyalty: Findings from Arik and Nigeria passengers '', used airline image and repeat purchase to proxy customer patronage. In addition, recently, Ikeogu *et a*l (2013), in their study "A comparative analysis of quality of customer service and the relationship with the level of patronage in the Nigerian Aviation Industry adopted customer retention and customer service as measures of customer patronage in the Nigeria aviation sector. Therefore, in this study, we adopted the following as measures of airline customer patronage: Brand loyalty, customer retention and repeat purchase behavior.

3. STUDY METHODOLOGY.

The research approach adopted in this study is the non- experimental research type and it was designed based on the cross-sectional survey method which offers a wide coverage and permits generalizability of research findings. The population for this study comprised all users of the existing functional domestic airline operators in Nigeria which are estimated to be seventy five thousand 75,000 (see Krejice & Morgan, 1970) .The airlines considered in this study are the current, registered, functional and operational domestic airlines which are holders of air operational certificate as at August (2016).

Furthermore, two- stage sampling technique was adopted in this study. At 1st stage, all the airports in Nigeria were stratified into four major airports based on 2015 FAAN zones and regions classification of airport to identify the major hub airports namely: Murtala

Mohammed International Airport (Lagos), Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport (Abuja), Port Harcourt International Airport (Port Harcourt) and Amino Kano International Airport (Kano). The researchers randomly selected two airports for the study. These Airports are the Murtala Mohammed International Airport Ikeja, Lagos and the Port Harcourt International Airport in Rivers State. These Airports are considered as trade hubs that have the largest human traffic due to the heavy presence of oil and gas industry, and high commercial activities which increased the migration level of Nigerians to these states. Furthermore, Murtala Mohammed International Airport Ikeja Lagos serve as a major takeoff and landing point for most of the Nigerian domestic airlines that operate and conveys air passengers to other states and airports in the country.

At the 2nd stage, all the passengers who were willing to participate in the study were given copies of the questionnaire up to the number assigned for each hub airport. In determining the sample size for this study, we adopted the Krejice and Morgan (1970) table.

TABLE 1: Table for Determining Sample Size for a Finite Population.

N	*S*	*N*	*S*	*N*	*S*
10	10	220	140	1200	291
15	14	230	144	1300	297
20	19	240	148	1400	302
25	24	250	152	1500	306
30	28	260	155	1600	310
35	32	270	159	1700	313
40	36	280	162	1800	317
45	40	290	165	1900	320
50	44	300	169	2000	322
55	48	320	175	2200	327
60	52	340	181	2400	331
65	56	360	186	2600	335
70	59	380	191	2800	338
75	63	400	196	3000	341
80	66	420	201	3500	346
85	70	440	205	4000	351
90	73	460	210	4500	354
95	76	480	214	5000	357
100	80	500	217	6000	361
110	86	550	226	7000	364
120	92	600	234	8000	367
130	97	650	242	9000	368
140	103	700	248	10000	370
150	108	750	254	15000	375
160	113	800	260	20000	377
170	118	850	265	30000	379
180	123	900	269	40000	380
190	127	950	274	50000	381
200	132	1000	278	75000	382
210	136	1100	285	1000000	384

Note.—*N* is population size. *S* is sample size.
Source: Krejcie & Morgan, 1970

The sample size for this study comprised three hundred and eighty two (382) passengers / customers of the Nigerian domestic airlines. We randomly distributed 222 copies of the questionnaire to passengers at the waiting lounge of Muritala Mohammed International Airport and 160 copies of the questionnaire to the passengers at the waiting lounge of Port-Harcourt international airport Rivers State respectively (See Table 2).

Table: 2: Questionnaire Distribution Rate

S/No	Airports	Quantity to be distributed	Expected Percentage of questionnaire distributed %
1	Murtala Muhammed International Airport Lagos.	222	58.1%
2	Port Harcourt International Airport Rivers State.	160	41.9%
	Total	**382**	**100%**

Source: Research Data, 2017

The reason for having distributed the highest number of (222) copies of the questionnaire to Lagos is because it has the major airport in Nigeria; the Murtala Muhammad Airport Domestic terminal 1. Most Nigerians travel through Lagos when travelling by air and Lagos has the highest population than other states which provided Lagos with the highest air

passengers in Nigeria. Similarly, the choice of these two airports is based on the nature of the cities where they operate. These cities selected are served by national airports and are considered favorable destinations for domestic travelers.

Regarding our source of data collection, 382 copies of structured questionnaire was distributed to passengers in waiting lounges at the two airports who intended to travel with any of the domestic airlines; that were also willing to participate in the study. From the 382 copies of questionnaire distributed, 377 were successfully completed and retrieved and were used for the study. More so, the validity of the scales used in this study was assessed for content, construct and face validity. The content validity was ensured based on review of similar constructs from previous studies. The questionnaire used by Pakdil *et al* (2007), Gourdin (1998), Haynes (1994), and especially Gilbert and Wong (2003), concerning passengers' expectation of airline services in Hong- Kong was adapted, modified and refined to suit our study in the Nigerian context.

However, reliability was ensured by protesting the questionnaire on at least 50 persons who have traveled by air in Nigeria within the past one year who were not part of the main study. The researcher used the Cronbach's Alpha analysis to ascertain the reliability and internal consistency of the measurement instrument .This was facilitated with the statistical packages for social science (SPSS) version 20.0. Table 3. Depicts our research instrument reliability rate.

Table 3: Research Instrument Reliability Distribution

S/N	VARIABLES	NO OF ITEMS	CRONBACH'S ALPHA VALUE
1	Flight Reliability	4	0.814
2	Perceived security consciousness of the airline	2	0.814
3	In-flight services	2	0.597
4	Seat comfort	2	0.880
5	Perceived Airfare fairness	8	0.904
6	Flight availability	2	0.807
7	Passenger attitudinal disposition towards airline image.	5	0.921
8	Socio-economic wellbeing	5	0.877
9	Operational effectiveness	4	0.541
10	Maintenance effectiveness	3	0.775
11	Information technology infrastructure	3	0.941
12	Airline Brand loyalty	6	0.957
13	Customer Retention	5	0.908
14	Repeat Purchase Behaviour	5	0.896

Source: Research Data, 2017

Table 3. Showed different Cronbach's Alpha value for the 14 constructs of the scaled questionnaire which were all considered sufficiently adequate for the study. Over all, this indicated that there was internal consistency of the variables scaled and that variables construct exhibited strong internal reliability. The results therefore confirmed that the instrument we used for this study had satisfactory construct validity.

Path Analysis

Path analysis is among the most senior of structural equation modeling (SEM) family used in the estimation of presumed causal relations among observed variables. The specification of the path model follows a recursive model which can be in forms of either (i) graphical form (using path diagram) or (ii) structural equation. In structural equation, the direct causal effects are represented by path coefficients or structural coefficients. These coefficients are analogous to standardized regression coefficients, resulting from a multiple regression analysis and their interpretations are Similar. The Zi is indicates the standardized raw score value on each variable. The symbol for a path coefficient is a p with two subscripts (Pj i), the first indicating the effect or the dependent variable and the second subscript indicating the cause or independent variables.

The variables that will be considered in the path analysis are as follows:

Independent Variables

Z 1 = Age
Z 2 = Sex
Z 3 = Educational Attainment
Z 4 = Perceived Service Quality
Z 5 = Perceived Airfare Fairness
Z 6 = Flight Availability
Z 7 = Perceived Operational Effectiveness
Z 8 = Passenger attitudinal disposition towards airline image
Z 9 Passenger socio- economic well being

Dependent Variable

Z 10 = Customer Patronage

Structural Equations:

If variables Age, Sex, Educational Attainment, Perceived Service quality, perceived airfare fairness, flight availability, Perceived Operational Effectiveness, passenger attitudinal disposition toward airline image and socio- economic wellbeing of passengers are defined using Z score Coefficient, that is, the standardized form, then the structural equation would be:

$Z_1 = e_1$ ……..eqn (1)

$Z_2 = e_2$ ……..eqn (2)

$Z_3 = P_{31} Z_1 + e_3$ ……..... eqn (3)

$Z_4 = P_{41} Z_1 + P_{43} Z_3 + e_4$ .....…...eqn (4)

$Z_5 = P_{53} Z_3 + P_{54} Z_4 + e_5$ ……..eqn (5)

$Z_6 = P_{63} Z_3 + P_{64} Z_4 + P_{65} Z_5 + e_6$ ……...eqn (6)

$Z_7 = P_{74} Z_4 + P_{75} Z_5 + P_{76} Z_6 + e_7$ ……...……eqn (7)

$Z_8 = P_{84} Z_4 + P_{85} Z_5 + P_{86} Z_6 + P_{87} Z_7 + e_8$ ……..…… eqn (8)

$Z_9 = P_{92} Z_2 + P_{93} Z_3 + P_{94} Z_4 + P_{95} Z_5 + P_{96} Z_6 + P_{97} Z_7 + P_{98} Z_8 + e_9$ ……eqn (9)

$Z_{10} = P_{10I} Z_1 + P_{102} Z_2 + P_{103} Z_3 + P_{104} Z_4 + P_{105} Z_5 + P_{106} Z_6 + P_{107} Z_7 + P_{108} Z_8 + P10_9Z9 + e_{10}$ ……eqn (10)

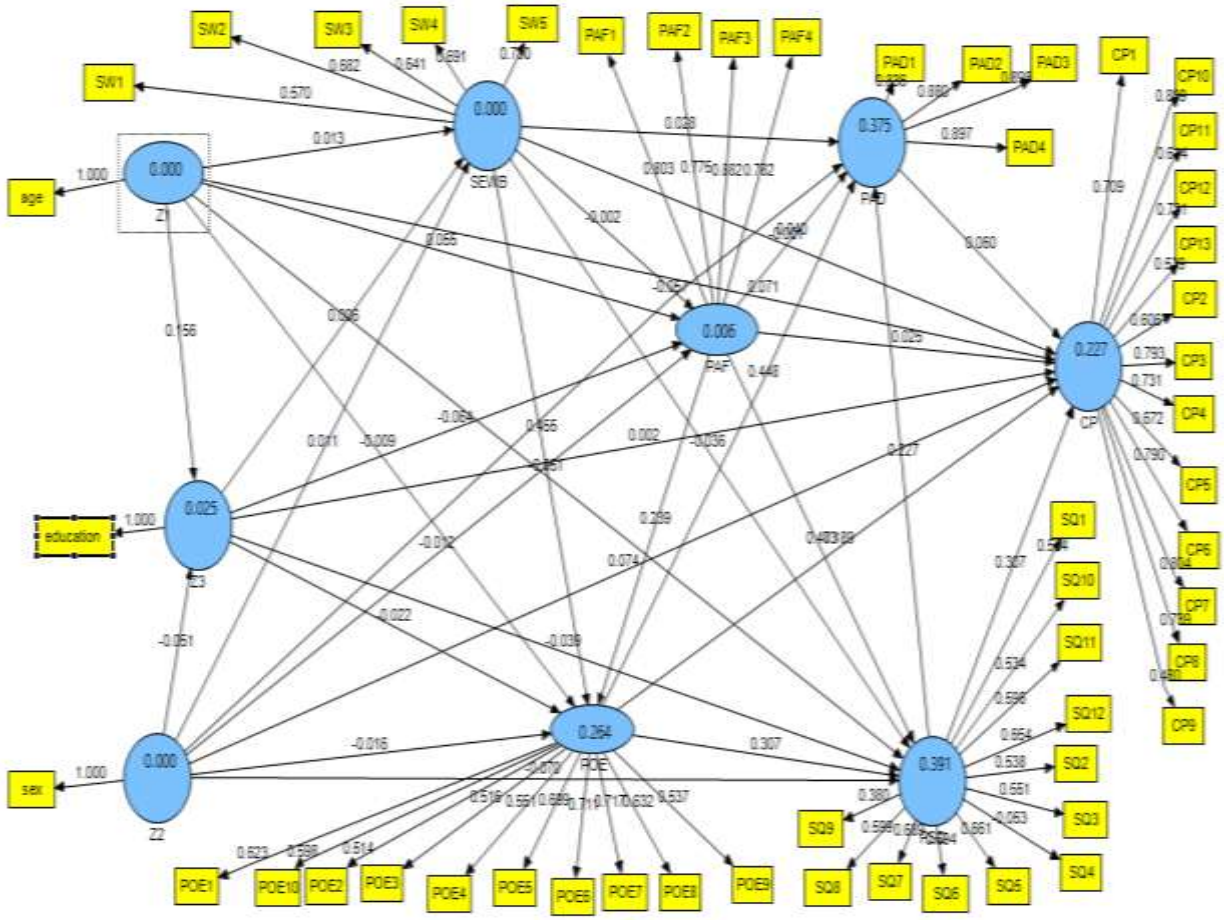

Figure 2: Generalized path model of determinants of domestic airline patronage in Nigeria

Figure 2, showed a path analysis model for all the perceived determinants of domestic airline patronage used for the study. After the trimming of some paths that were not significant, we developed a more parsimonious model for predicting domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. Out of the thirty two (32) hypothesized pathways (figure 2), twenty (20) significant path ways survived (figure 3, Table 4). These pathways are obtained or derived from nine (9) structural equations for producing the most meaningful causal model involving the determinants of domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

Hypothesized path models with path coefficients that are significant or meet the 0.05 Criterion

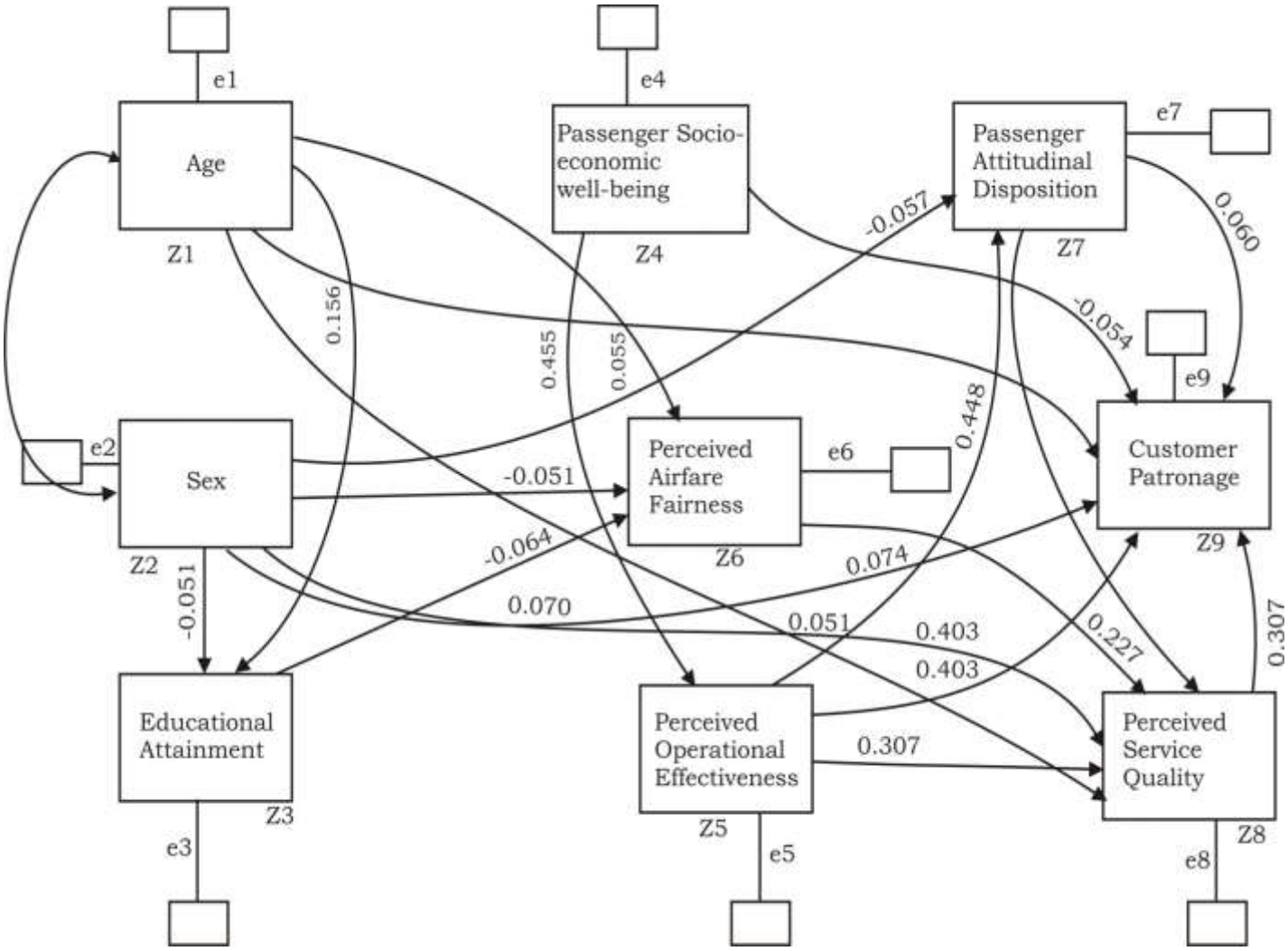

Table 4: Significant Pathways and Beta Values or Coefficients

S/No	Pathways	Path Coefficients (Beta Weight Values)
1	P31	0.156
2	P32	-0.051
3	P54	0.455
4	P61	0.055
5	P62	0-.051
6	P63	-0.064
7	P72	-0.057
8	P75	0.448
9	P76	0.071
10	P81	0.051
11	P82	0.070
12	P85	0.307
13	P86	0.403
14	P87	0.227

15	P91	-0.057
16	P92	0.074
17	P94	0.054
18	P95	0.403
19	P97	0.060
20	P98	0.307

4. TEST OF HYPOTHESES, RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS.

This section presented the hypotheses postulated for the study; the results obtained from our survey and ornately discussed the observed findings

H01: There is no significant difference in level of domestic airline patronage based on the determinants.

Table 5: Anova results in respect to the level of domestic airline patronage based on the determinants.

Item	Constructs/variables	N	Mean	F-value	Sig	P-value	Remarks
1.	**Service Quality**						
	Flight schedule consistency	8	0.49289[a]	21.965	0.000	0.05	
	Airline strict adherence to departure & arrival time	250	0.5743[a]				
	In-flight services	119	0.6744[b]				Ho Rejected
2.	**Perceived Airfare Fairness**						
	Considerate airline fare	40	0.5582[a]	4.420	0.13	0.05	
	Airline price attractiveness	194	0.5945[ab]				
	Airline reasonable ticket price	143	0.6302[b]				**Ho accepted**
3	**Passenger Attitudinal Disposition Towards Airline image.**						
		22	0.4974[a]	13.296	0.000	0.05	
	Passengers' perception / impression of domestic airlines in Nigeria.	140	0.5743[b]				
	Passengers' perception of domestic airline trustworthiness.	215	0.6345[c]				Ho Rejected
	Passengers impression of airline good service quality						
4.	**Operational Effectiveness**						
	Non-delay in flights due to airline engineer's proficiency.	61	0.5514[a]	13.613	0.000	0.05	
	Airline offers convenient online reservation and booking.	223	0.5918[a]				Ho Rejected
	Airline passenger's information access and website availability.	93	0.6683$_b$				
5	**Passenger's socio-economic well-being.**		0.5918[a]				Ho accepted
	Personal income influence on flying frequency.	223		0.321	0.726	0.05	
	Airline promo influence on personal flight.	61	0.5514[a]				
	Family challenges influence of flying frequency.	93	0.6683[b]				

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Variations in level of domestic airline patronage based on the determinants

The respondents exhibited different level of patronage based on the determinants. As shown

in Table 5, Item 1 above, the significant value revealed that there was a statistical significance as sig-value (0.000) was less than the p-value (0.05). This therefore implied that service quality with the following attributes: flight availability, perceived security consciousness of airline, seat comfort and in-flight services significantly influence domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

Also, considering the influence of perceived airfare fairness on domestic airline patronage in Table 5, Item 2, and the variations across the categories or sub-components showed differences in their mean index. Despite the variations in the mean index, the sig-value (0.13) was greater than the p-value (0.05), thus not statistically significant. This implies that the Ho is accepted meaning that there is no significance difference between perceived airfare fairness and domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

The respondents also exhibited different level of patronage based on their attitudinal disposition towards airline image as evidenced in Table 5, Item 3. Although, no regular pattern was observed in the three categories, passenger's impression of airline good service quality had the highest mean index. The significant value depicts that there was statistical significance as sig- value (0.000) was less than the p-value (0.05). This implied that there was a significant difference between passengers' attitudinal disposition towards airline image and domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. On the other hand, the result showed that passenger attitudinal disposition towards airline image significantly influence domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. In addition, the respondents exhibited different level of patronage based on airline operational effectiveness as evidenced in Table 5, Item 4 above. Considering the respective mean index values, even though the patterns were not regular, airline's ability to provide passengers quick information and create easy website access and availability had the highest mean index value.

The significant value revealed that there was statistical significance as sig-value (0.000) was less than the p-value (0.05). This entail therefore that there was a significant difference between operational effectiveness and domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. Conversely, operational effectiveness significantly influences domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. More so, Table 5, Item 5, depicts the respondent's level of airline patronage based on their socio-economic well-being. Again, no regular pattern was found amongst the three categories in regard to their mean index, though, the results revealed that family challenges influence passengers flying frequency and had the highest mean index value.

Moreover, the significant value revealed that there was no statistical significance as sig-value (0.726) was higher than the p-value (0.05). This entail that there was no significant difference between passenger socio-economic wellbeing and their domestic airline patronage. In other words, passenger socio-economic wellbeing does not significantly influence domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

5. Discussion of Findings

This section is concerned with the discussion of major findings obtained from the test of hypotheses postulated in chapter one of this study. For clarity purposes, the hypotheses are re- stated in this section for lucid discussion

Variations in level of domestic airline patronage based on the determinants

Service quality and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria

The Anova result as shown in Table 5, Item 1, revealed that there is a significant difference between airline service quality and domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. The sig- value (0.000) was less than the p-value (0.05). This implied that service quality significantly influenced domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

However, this finding supports the views of Swarbrooke (2003) that providing service,

understanding customer expectations and the customer's perception of the service encounter is a vital component to delivering superior service that will attract the required customer patronage. Service quality has become one of the key driving forces for business sustainability and is crucial for firm's accomplishment. Furthermore, a service firm's ability to hang on to its customers depends on how consistently it delivers value to them in the form of good service quality. Service quality is the overall experience which a customer or passenger experiences through interacting with airline products/services. It is expected that a good airline service quality will help the firms to improve their level of patronage. Therefore, from the observed results and the support obtained from relevant literature, we conclude that service quality significantly affect domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

Perceived Airfare Fairness and Patronage of Domestic Airlines in Nigeria

Again, the result shown in Table 5, item 2 revealed that there is no significant difference between perceived airfare fairness and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria. The sig-value (0.13) was greater than the p-value (0.05), thus not statistically significant. The result implied that perceived airfare fairness do not significantly influence or contribute to increase in domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

However, this finding contradicts the views of Zeithaml &Bitner (2000). They argued that price is one of the determinants of customer satisfaction and patronage. When airlines airfare is perceived to be fair by passenger it improves patronage and profit level of the airline service operators. A critical analysis of the result above depicts that price and airfare fairness may not be major determinants of domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. For instance, to a business traveler/passenger, an increase in airfare may not be too significant so far he gets to his desired destination in time and safely. Conversely a non-business traveler may decide not to fly with a particular airline due to an increase in airfare. Therefore, the price sensitivity of the demand for airline is directly related to the possibilities of substitution for airlines and the need to travel. It is important for the airline firms to carry out price sensitivity analysis with respect to business and non-business marketing segments in order to ascertain when and when not to increase air ticket price. In summary the result showed that there is no significant difference between perceived airfare fairness and domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. From the findings and foregoing discussions, we conclude that perceived airfare fairness does not affect domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

Passenger Attitudinal Disposition towards Airline Image and Patronage of Domestic Airlines in Nigeria

The respondents exhibited different level of patronage based on their attitudinal disposition towards airline image as evidenced in Table 5, Item 3. The sig-value (0.000) was less than the p-value (0.05), implying that there was a significant difference between passenger attitudinal disposition towards airline image and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria. This further suggested that PADTAI influence domestic airline patronage in Nigeria.

However, this finding corroborates the views of Rhee and Haunschild (2006), that corporate image of an airline also affect customer's choice of airline firm and influences their perception and patronage of goods and services offered by a firm. A good corporate image is the most promising marketing strategy for attracting current customers. In addition, the more favourable a company's image, the more likely that customers will assume that the services rendered by the company are better, of higher quality and worth more in actual price (Dowling, 2003). Conversely, in the airline industry, the more favourable image passengers have, the more likely negative elements about the airline will be filtered out of their consciousness. Driver (2000) further opined that if image is good, then it shelters the delivery of services.

In addition, the signaling theory posits that an airline brand image becomes a signal by symbolizing a firm's past and present marketing strategies. This signal transmits information to customers mind depending on the clarity of the message and the credibility of the product and the provider.

Thus, a favourable image separates and distinguishes the company from its competitors and ultimately impacts on its level of patronage. Therefore, based on the empirical evidence thus far, we conclude that passenger attitudinal disposition towards airline image (PADTAI) significantly affect the patronage of domestic airline in Nigeria.

Operational effectiveness and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria

Table 5, Item 4 showed the respondent's level of patronage based on their perception of airline operational effectiveness. The result showed that there was a statistical significance as sig-value (0.000) was less than the p-value (0.05). This entail that there was a significant difference between airline operational effectiveness and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria.

Operational effectiveness is the flight technician's capability and the on-board crew members' knowledge to fix or attend to aircraft problems efficiently and timely. The findings obtained from the result agrees with the views of (Oduh, 2012) that the accuracy of airline personnel in the use of aircraft facilities assures airline passengers of excellent service and personnel competence which in turn can inspire the air passengers to be confident and committed to the airline. In addition, passenger confidence has been found to correlate positively with customer/passenger patronage intention. Thus, appearance, age, skills, knowledge, behavior, technical capability and operational dexterity of an airline's personnel are important to the air passengers in evaluating service quality of the airline. The result of such evaluations is most likely to affect an air passenger's intention to patronize a particular airline. Another component of operational effectiveness that can influence airline patronage is information technology infrastructure (ITI). ITI is the company's ability to mobilize and deploy IT based resources in combination or co-present with other resources and capabilities (Baradwaji, 2000).

In the modern Nigerian aviation industry, technologies such as e-bookings, e-payments, sophisticated luggage scanning machine, ATM networks and transactional websites allow airlines to interact more efficiently with their customers regardless of geographic proximity. From the foregoing discussions and the empirical evidence shown in table5, item 4 above, we confidently conclude that operational effectiveness significantly affects patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria.

Passenger socio-economic well-being and patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria

Again, the respondents showed different level of patronage based on their socio-economic status and well-being. The result in Table 5, Item6showed that there was no statistical significance as sig-value (0.726) was higher than the p-value (0.05). This suggested that the null hypothesis be accepted meaning that there was no significant difference between respondents' socio-economic wellbeing and their patronage of domestic airlines in Nigeria. This finding do not agree with the views of Tombrun and Stanley (2005) which argued that air passenger's age, income, sex, education level etc. influences their airline choice and frequency of air travel. Airline passenger's income level is a major determinant of patronage. The higher the salary of air passengers, the more likely that they will fly when traveling than the use of road transportation. From our discussions so far, and from the results shown above, it is evident that a passenger's socio-economic and psychological attributes do not influence his patronage of a particular airline.

Conclusion

This article has elaborately explained and discussed the Determinants of domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. The findings from our analyses showed that most of the components of airline patronage determinants identified in this study significantly affect domestic airline patronage in Nigeria. The study further revealed that the most significant predictor of airline patronage was operational effectiveness (OE). Similarly, the result also showed that passenger socio- economic wellbeing (PSEWB) do not significantly influence domestic airline patronage rather the need and purpose of travel is the most important factor. From the empirical evidence observed thus far, we confidently concluded that operational effectiveness and all other determinants used for the study significantly affects domestic airline patronage in Nigeria; and that the Nigerian aviation industry (Airline service providers) should adopt a blend of the variables depicted in our model as service strategies in order to increase their level of patronage.

From our findings and discussions we developed a new heuristic model of the determinants of airline patronage in Nigeria as presented in figure 4

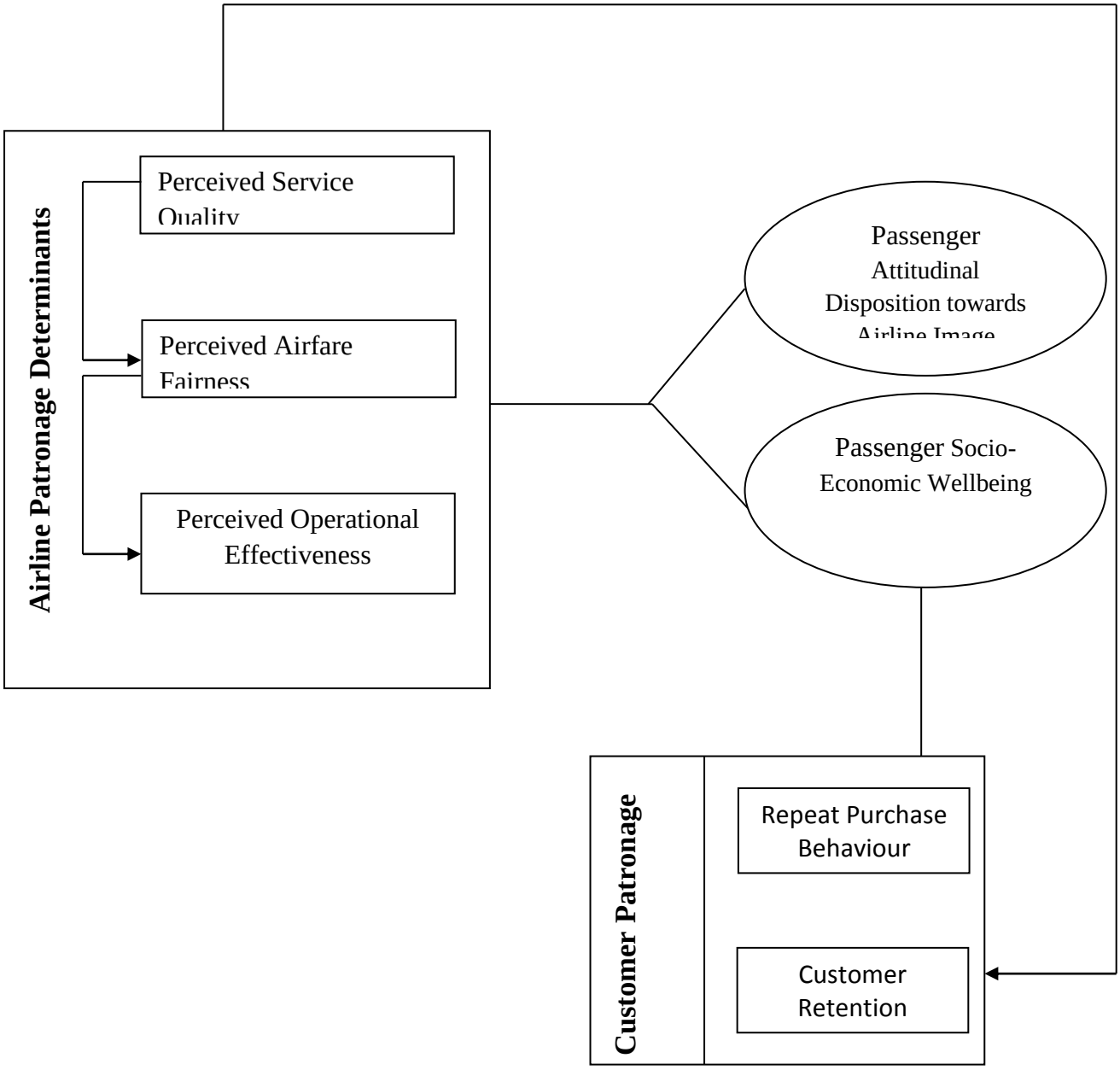

Figure 5: Determinants of Airline Patronage in Nigeria

Figure 5 Indicates that the predictors of airline patronage; perceived service quality, perceived airfare fairness and perceived operational effectiveness influences customer patronage in the context of moderating factors/variables passenger attitudinal disposition towards airline/image and passenger socio-economic wellbeing in the Nigerian aviation sector.

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