

IMPACT OF PRICE SENSITIVITY ON CONSUMERS' DECISION-MAKING IN AIRLINE TICKET PURCHASES

Eka, Umoren

Department of Marketing,
University of Calabar, Nigeria.
ekajenny2005@gmail.com

Mbaze-Ebock, Vivian

Department of Marketing,
University of Calabar, Nigeria.
mbazea@yahoo.co.uk

Bassey, Frederick Offiong

Department of Hospitality and Tourism,
University of Calabar, Nigeria.
fredhakins@unical.edu.ng

Abstract

This research examines how price sensitivity shapes consumers' decisions when purchasing airline tickets in Calabar, Cross River State. Its specific focus is on the role of alternative evaluation and sensitivity to booking time. Two null hypotheses were tested: that neither alternative evaluation nor booking-time sensitivity significantly influences ticket-purchase decisions. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, covering passengers travelling to different destinations through Margaret Ekpo International Airport. Stratified sampling was used to allocate the 400 respondents among Ibom Air, Cally Air and Air Peace. Primary data were obtained with a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) and multiple linear regression. The findings show that respondents placed the greatest emphasis on promotional deals and discounts when comparing fares (mean = 4.58), while booking early to obtain cheaper tickets was the highest-rated booking-time behaviour (mean = 3.74). Regression results indicate statistically significant effects for alternative evaluation ($p = 0.004$) and booking-time sensitivity ($p = 0.002$), both below the 0.05 threshold. The study concludes that comparing available options and choosing booking times carefully can influence ticket-purchase decisions. Airlines are therefore encouraged to review pricing arrangements and strengthen appropriate discount and promotional programmes to attract and retain customers.

Keywords: Airline Ticket Purchases, Alternative Evaluation, Booking Time Sensitivity, Price Sensitivity, Consumers' Decision-Making.

1.1 Introduction

The airline sector has experienced substantial technological development and structural change, helping make air travel a common option for long-distance journeys. Travellers may favour flying because it can offer speed, safety, comfort and competitive overall value (Dayı & Ulusoy, 2018). Nevertheless, airline consumer behaviour differs from that found in many other industries because demand, fare variation and purchase decisions are shaped by several interacting factors (Masiero & Nicolau, 2012). Yadav (2023) observes that developments in air transportation have also influenced how customers make choices, including an increasing concern with price.

Price is the monetary amount a buyer gives in exchange for a desired product or service. Price sensitivity describes the extent to which changes in price affect demand or an individual's willingness to buy (Razak et al., 2019). It therefore indicates how strongly price influences a customer's purchasing decision. Price is important to perceived value and purchase behaviour; pricing reference points and the selection of an appropriate price can shape how consumers assess an offer and whether they proceed with a transaction (Kagan, 2025).

Within aviation, price sensitivity can be observed in changes in the number of tickets purchased as fares rise or fall (Razak et al., 2019). As travellers become more deliberate in their choices, sensitivity to ticket prices has become a relevant concern for airline operators and can affect consumers' decisions (Huck & Wallace, 2015). Consumers seek to obtain value from purchases, although the relative importance they assign to affordability, brand and quality differs (Uslu et al., 2018). Such differences mean that price sensitivity varies among travellers and may be associated with their assessment of alternatives and the timing of a booking.

Airfares often change across booking channels and over time. Lazear (2016) explains that passengers with differing levels of price sensitivity may try to identify the most advantageous time to buy. Some delay purchasing when they expect a future reduction in fares. Similarly, Anderson and Wilson (2013) report that consumers who understand pricing practices and can access relevant information may wait if they anticipate that less expensive options will become available.

Alternative evaluation is the part of the consumer decision process in which available products or services are compared to identify the option that best satisfies a person's needs. Buyers may assess price, features, benefits and other relevant attributes before choosing. In air travel, this may involve comparing airlines, routes, service standards and fares, all of which can shape the eventual purchase decision. Johan et al. (2023) describe this process as comparing products or brands against criteria such as cost, quality and features. Consumers may also assess their post-purchase experience when deciding whether to buy the same service again.

Understanding price sensitivity requires airlines to consider competitors, the way customers make decisions and the distinctiveness of the service offered. Kagan (2025) suggests that customers may be less responsive to price when a service is unique or has few substitutes. Where the actual price exceeds a buyer's expected or acceptable amount, the customer may abandon the purchase, reduce consumption or choose another option (Kerebel, 2025). Travellers who are highly price-conscious may therefore consider road or rail transport when airfares are beyond their budgets.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Competition in aviation has intensified as online platforms allow travellers to compare fares and other ticket conditions more readily. Customers can now assess a wider range of offers, and their decisions may depend on affordability, perceived value and service quality rather than brand attachment alone. Even modest fare changes or promotional offers may influence their choices. Receiving satisfactory service at a reasonable price remains important when travellers select a mode of transport (Kerdpitak et al., 2020).

In developing economies such as Nigeria, financial pressures, exchange-rate movements and differences in disposable income can heighten attention to ticket prices. Some travellers consequently search for lower fares, change airlines or postpone purchasing while waiting for prices to decline. These responses create a challenge for airlines seeking to remain competitive while maintaining profitability and customer retention. Sangeetha and Khan (2020) emphasise that airline performance depends in part on understanding the changing needs of customer groups and how those needs shape decisions. Unstable fares can also create uncertainty for passengers planning a trip.

Although price sensitivity is important to airline purchasing, the literature indicates gaps in the available empirical evidence. Research on airline-ticket decisions has been undertaken in other international settings (Shen & Yahya, 2021; Diyah et al., 2019), whose economic circumstances may differ from Nigeria's. Other studies have concentrated on service quality, brand image, satisfaction or loyalty (Edim et al., 2023; Diyah et al., 2019; Rahim, 2016, 2017), giving less attention to the behavioural processes linking price perceptions with purchase decisions. Nigerian studies, including Aiyegbajeje (2023), Sunday et al. (2025) and Adamolugbe et al. (2023), have examined matters such as airline choice, route availability, passenger experience, patronage and airline pricing. However, the present study addresses the consumer perspective in Calabar, where the authors identified a local research gap.

To address this gap, the study investigates the relationship between price sensitivity and consumers' airline-ticket purchase decisions in Calabar, Cross River State, focusing on alternative evaluation and sensitivity to booking time. The findings are intended to inform airline operators, marketers and policymakers.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The main objective was to examine how price sensitivity relates to consumers' decisions to purchase airline tickets in Calabar, Cross River State.

The specific objectives were to:

- i. examine the effect of alternative evaluation on consumers' airline-ticket purchase decisions;
- ii. determine to what extent sensitivity to booking time affects consumers' airline-ticket purchase decisions.

1.4 Research questions

- i. To what extent does the evaluation of alternatives affect consumers' decisions to purchase airline tickets?
- ii. Does sensitivity to booking time significantly influence consumers' decisions when purchasing airline tickets?

1.5 Hypotheses

The study tested the following null hypotheses:

- i. Alternative evaluation has no statistically significant effect on consumers' airline-ticket purchase decisions.
- ii. Booking-time sensitivity has no statistically significant effect on consumers' airline-ticket purchase decisions.

1.6 Scope of the study

The research examines price sensitivity in relation to consumers' airline-ticket purchasing decisions, with particular attention to alternative evaluation and booking-time sensitivity. It is limited to domestic airline passengers using Margaret Ekpo International Airport in Calabar, Cross River State, for travel to different destinations. The sample consisted of 400 respondents: 198 from Ibom Air, 168 from Cally Air and 34 from Air Peace.

1.7 Significance of the study

Academically, the study adds to discussions of pricing and consumer decision-making in air travel and may provide a basis for further research into airline pricing strategies. For airline operators, it offers insight into how travellers assess ticket costs in relation to purchasing power, perceived value and competing options. These insights may support the design of pricing structures, packages and promotional programmes for different customer groups. Aviation regulators and policymakers may also use evidence about consumers' affordability concerns when considering accessibility, demand and industry development.

For travellers, the study may improve awareness of the factors involved in comparing airlines and planning purchases. More informed choices can support access to travel and may contribute to mobility and tourism in a developing economy such as Nigeria.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical framework

2.1.1 Theory of buyer behaviour

Howard and Sheth's buyer-behaviour theory, introduced in 1969, explains how consumer choices develop over time, particularly choices among competing brands. The framework identifies motives, alternative courses of action and decision mediators through which buyers match their motives to available options. It also considers how repeated purchasing and exposure to commercial and social information influence the decision process. As summarised by Stankevich (2017), the model distinguishes extensive problem-solving, limited problem-solving and habitual response behaviour.

2.2 Price sensitivity and airline ticket purchase

Price sensitivity is the degree to which changes in price influence consumer purchasing behaviour (Kintler et al., 2023), and it can be important in airline-ticket decisions (Shaik et al., 2020). In this study, two relevant dimensions are the comparison of alternatives and the timing of a booking.

Solomon (2004) notes that consumers can often choose among different products or among variations of the same brand that meet similar needs. Price is one criterion used in making these comparisons, and the fares offered may shape perceptions of airlines and their services. Alternative evaluation involves weighing the attributes of available options and considering their advantages and disadvantages before selecting an option that suits one's needs (Kumar, 2022). Consumers may also rely on assumptions about the relationship between price and quality (Mishra, 2018).

Price can be especially influential for people whose budgets are limited. Consumers with greater disposable income may instead give more weight to service quality, convenience or

brand reputation. According to Lazear (2016), travellers across different levels of price sensitivity may try to time their purchases strategically and may delay buying when they expect a fare reduction.

2.2.1 Price sensitivity and consumers purchase decision

Mamuaya (2024) examined purchase intentions in the fast-moving consumer goods market using a quantitative online survey of 500 respondents and regression analysis. The results indicated that greater price sensitivity was associated with lower purchase intentions.

To identify factors affecting airline preference, Yıldız (2018) surveyed 932 passengers and analysed the responses using multiple logistic regression and ordered logit techniques. The findings showed that travel purpose, cabin class and price sensitivity were statistically relevant to market segmentation. The segmentation patterns also differed across socio-demographic groups and preference criteria.

Savaş and Duran (2020) investigated airline choice among 386 respondents through a questionnaire, assessing the validity and reliability of the data. Their results linked airline preference to schedules, safety, service quality and ticket cost. Passengers were also prepared to pay more when an airline offered convenient departure times and a dependable service image.

Kayhan et al. (2023) analysed airline-level panel data covering 2013–2022 to explore the relationship between average ticket prices and passenger numbers. Their dataset contained 4,194 observations and grouped airlines according to business model: network, low-cost, charter and regional carriers. The analysis identified a significant negative relationship between average fares and passenger demand, although the size of the response varied among business models.

2.2.2 Evaluation of alternatives and consumers purchase decision

Dallenbach (2020) argues that alternatives such as buses, trains and ships may become more attractive when comfort, booking facilities and opportunities to use travel time productively improve. Lower fares, including those supported by subsidies or special offers, may further encourage travellers to choose these modes.

Hansmann and Binder (2021) used an online survey of 1,206 participants in Switzerland and an integrated environmental-behaviour model to examine intentions to reduce personal air travel. Flying habits were the strongest predictor, followed by social norms, environmental attitudes, personal norms relating to flying and acceptance of justifications for environmentally harmful behaviour. The model reported a multiple R of 0.75. Participants frequently identified alternative transport as a condition for reducing flights and suggested online meetings as a substitute for some business trips. Trains were commonly mentioned, although journey duration and cost remained concerns. Faster services, competitive prices and better ways to use travel time could make alternatives more appealing.

2.2.3 Booking Timing and consumers purchase decision

Law et al. (2021) compared factors associated with flight-ticket purchase intention and decisions among 635 respondents in Malaysia and Taiwan. Their analysis considered perceived value, service quality, price and satisfaction using structural equation modelling. For Malaysian

respondents, service quality, perceived value and price were important in budget-airline purchases, whereas perceived value was the key factor reported for Taiwanese respondents. The authors discussed how airlines, tourism organisations and ticket resellers could adapt marketing activities to different customer markets.

Law (2017) surveyed 600 passengers of a Thai airline about airline preferences. The findings indicated that fares and limited-period promotions could encourage prompt bookings and influence repurchase intentions. Flight schedules and promotional tactics also contributed to passengers' final airline choices.

Udjoa et al. (2015) explored how passengers search for tickets, where they prefer to search and whether they believe advance purchase provides a price benefit. Their web-based survey in South Africa found that airline websites were the preferred search channel and that passengers associated earlier bookings with better fares. However, respondents were not willing to spend excessive time searching for the lowest price. The findings suggest that travellers consider the booking channel, lead time and effort required when seeking savings.

Using a multiple-logit model based on responses from 506 passengers, Yayar and Tekin (2015) found that airline choice was associated with affordable fares, discounts for early booking, comfort, direct routes, company ownership, catering, income and individual risk attitudes.

2.3 Consumers decision making in airline ticket purchase

A purchase decision involves determining whether to buy and choosing an option after considering relevant information and prior experiences (Assauri, 2004). Kerdpitak and Boonrattanakittibhumi (2020) describe a five-stage consumer process: recognising a need or problem, searching for information, evaluating alternatives, making a purchase and responding after the purchase. Tu (2024) explains that consumers develop a set of preferred brands or options, but the option they initially favour does not always become the final choice because price and other considerations can intervene. Buyers often compare prices against reference points before completing a transaction (Simarmata et al., 2016). Mankiw (2006) frames consumer choice as an attempt to maximise utility within a limited budget. Leisure travellers seek satisfaction from the journey and associated holiday activities, while business travellers generally aim to control travel costs in support of business objectives. As Brons et al. (2011) note, leisure and business travel demand can respond differently to fare changes, with leisure travel generally more price-sensitive.

3.1 Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was used to examine the association between price sensitivity and airline-ticket purchase decisions. The study population comprised passengers using airlines at Margaret Ekpo International Airport between July 2024 and June 2025. The recorded population was 67,614 passengers: 33,565 for Ibom Air, 28,367 for Aero/Cally Air and 5,682 for Air Peace. Taro Yamane's (1967) formula was used to determine a sample of 400, allocated proportionately through stratified sampling: 198 Ibom Air passengers, 168 Cally Air passengers and 34 Air Peace passengers. Primary data were collected from passengers using a structured questionnaire. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were used to describe responses, while multiple linear regression tested the hypotheses. Data were processed using SPSS version 31.

4.1 Results

Respondents' demographic data

The respondents' demographic data indicates that men accounted for 58.0% of participants and women 42.0%. The largest age group was 31–40 years (35.3%), followed by those aged 41–50 (26.5%), 21–30 (17.8%), 51 years and above (12.8%), and below 20 years (7.8%). Married respondents represented 57.5%, single respondents 39.5% and divorced respondents 3.0%. By occupation, 35.0% were business people, 25.0% civil servants, 19.5% politicians, 13.3% students and 7.2% reported other occupations.

Table 2: Mean rating of effect of alternative evaluation on consumer's

Alternative evaluation	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
I usually compare different airline prices before deciding which one to fly.	3.65	1.27	5
I consider alternative travel options such as road and train if the price of ticket is expensive	4.51	0.78	2
I evaluate promotional offers and discounts when comparing airlines ticket purchases to reduce travel costs.	4.58	0.75	1
If I am to incur unexpected cost such as accommodation due to delay, I consider alternative travel option.	3.72	1.12	4
I consider other options for business meetings such as zoom if the price of ticket is high	4.23	0.99	3

Tables 2 and 3 present respondents' mean ratings for alternative evaluation and booking-time sensitivity. In Table 2, the highest mean (4.58) concerned checking promotional deals and discounts when comparing airline fares to reduce travel expenses. Considering road or rail transport when fares are expensive ranked second (4.51), while considering online business meetings such as Zoom ranked third (4.23). Considering other travel options when delays could create extra accommodation costs ranked fourth (3.72); comparing prices across airlines before choosing ranked fifth (3.65).

Tables 2 and 3 shows the mean rating of respondent responses on effect of alternative evaluation and booking timing sensitivity on consumer's decision making in airline ticket purchases. The results in Table 2 showed that in evaluating alternatives, consumers evaluate promotional offers and discounts when comparing airlines ticket purchases to reduce travel costs ($\bar{x}$ =4.58) ranked 1st, consumers consider alternative travel options such as road and train if the price of ticket is expensive ($\bar{x}$ =4.51) ranked 2nd, consumers consider other options for business meetings such as zoom if the price of ticket is high ($\bar{x}$ =4.23) ranked 3rd, If consumer is to incur unexpected cost such as accommodation due to delay they consider alternative travel option ($\bar{x}$ =3.72) ranked 4th, and consumers usually compare different airline prices before deciding which one to fly ($\bar{x}$ =3.65) ranked 5th.

Table 3 shows that booking early to secure a lower fare received the highest mean score (3.74). Taking advantage of promotional periods and discounts ranked second (3.67), followed

by adjusting booking decisions in response to fare changes (3.45). The urgency of the trip ranked fourth (3.36), while buying a ticket at the time of travel regardless of price ranked fifth (3.08).

The results in Table 3 showed that in booking timing sensitivity, consumers book flights earlier to get lower ticket prices ($\bar{x}$ =3.74) ranked 1st, consumers take advantages of discounts and promotions periods to book flight ($\bar{x}$ =3.67) ranked 2nd, the time consumers book depends on ticket price fluctuations ($\bar{x}$ =3.45) ranked 3rd, consumers usually book flights based on how urgent the travel need is ($\bar{x}$ =3.36) ranked 4th, and consumers book airline tickets at the point of travelling irrespective of the price ($\bar{x}$ =3.08) ranked 5th.

TABLE 3: Mean rating of the effect of booking timing on consumer's decision making in airline ticket purchases N=400

Booking timing	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
I book flights earlier to get lower ticket prices.	3.74	1.19	1
I book airline tickets at the point of travelling irrespective of the price	3.08	1.23	5
The timing of my booking depends on ticket price fluctuations.	3.45	1.24	3
I take advantages of discounts and promotions periods to book my flight	3.67	1.25	2
I usually book flights based on how urgent my travel need is.	3.36	1.35	4

Taken together, the descriptive results suggest that travellers consider promotions and discounts when comparing fares. When ticket prices are high or additional expenses may arise, some respondents may consider road or rail travel, or use online platforms for business meetings. Respondents also reported booking earlier and using promotional periods or fare changes to seek lower prices. Where travel is urgent, some may purchase close to departure even when prices are high. Table 4 summarises the multiple regression examining alternative evaluation and booking-time sensitivity in relation to airline-ticket purchase decisions. The R-squared value of 0.55 indicates that the model accounts for 55% of the observed variation in the dependent variable. The overall model was statistically significant ($p = 0.001$), below the 0.05 criterion.

TABLE 4: Summary result of multiple linear regression analysis of the effect of alternative evaluation and booking timing sensitivity on consumer's decision making in airline ticket purchases

Variables	R-Squared	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-statistics	p-value
Constant	0.55	13.416	1.382	9.705	0.001*
Alternative evaluation		0.142	.060	2.897	0.004*
Booking timing sensitivity		0.153	.038	3.107	0.002*

*Significant = $p < 0.05$

The first null hypothesis, which proposed no significant relationship between alternative price evaluation and airline-ticket purchase decisions, was rejected. The estimated effect was positive and statistically significant ($p = 0.004 < 0.05$).

The second null hypothesis, proposing no significant effect of booking-time sensitivity on airline-ticket purchase decisions, was also rejected. The relationship was positive and statistically significant ($p = 0.002 < 0.05$).

4.2 Discussion of findings

The regression results indicate that both alternative evaluation ($p = 0.004$) and booking-time sensitivity ($p = 0.002$) are significantly and positively associated with airline-ticket purchase decisions. As consumers compare fares and other travel possibilities more carefully, they may be more likely to choose a lower-cost flight or consider road and rail options. Greater attention to booking time may likewise help travellers obtain cheaper tickets.

These findings broadly correspond with Hansmann and Binder (2021), who identified buses and trains as possible substitutes for air travel but noted that cost and journey duration can limit their appeal. Travellers weighing alternatives may therefore consider travel time and other practical concerns before deciding whether to use a lower-cost flight or another mode. Some may also replace in-person business meetings with online alternatives.

Lazear (2016) suggests that passengers with different levels of price sensitivity may try to identify a favourable purchase time and postpone buying if they expect fares to fall. Anderson and Wilson (2013) similarly note that access to pricing information can encourage consumers to wait for a cheaper option. If the actual price exceeds the amount a consumer considers acceptable, the consumer may abandon the purchase, buy less or select an alternative (Kerebel, 2025).

Law's (2017) findings also indicate that ticket prices and short-term promotional offers can influence airline preferences and encourage immediate booking. The study further identifies flight schedules and promotional activity as relevant elements in the final choice of airline.

5.1 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study finds that alternative evaluation and booking-time sensitivity—two dimensions of price sensitivity—have positive and statistically significant effects on consumers' airline-ticket purchase decisions in Calabar. Comparing available options and booking in advance may help consumers identify lower fares or benefit from discounts, promotions and price changes. Depending on price and travel requirements, some passengers may instead use road or rail transport or conduct business meetings online.

Because passengers differ in their response to price, they should compare available travel options and consider booking time before purchasing tickets. Airlines should review their pricing structures and use clear, well-planned promotional and discount programmes to appeal to different customer groups, while monitoring the implications for customer retention and profitability.

Consumers behave differently in their sensitivity to price hence the need to consider alternative travel options and time of booking before making a final purchase. To attract and

keep customers, firms can establish efficient pricing plans, increase and improve on their promotion and discounts strategies at all time to increase purchase.

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