

# **CONVERGING ON A NEW THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR MARKETING RESEARCH AND AIR TRANSPORT: RESEARCH EVOLUTION FROM 1977 TO 2022 AND AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE INQUIRY**

## **ABSTRACT**

MARKETING RESEARCH IN HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM HAS BEEN RISING CONTINUOUSLY. THIS STUDY PROVIDES A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW ON MARKETING RESEARCH AND AIR TRANSPORT. IT IDENTIFIES KEY THEMES AND TRACKS THE CHANGES IN SCHOLARLY RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES PRE AND POST PANDEMIC. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH BASED ON EMERGING RESEARCH TOPICS IS PROVIDED.

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the key characteristics of tourism research is the interdisciplinary nature of its subject matter, context and scope (Connell, 2012). Based on these realities, marketing research in hospitality and tourism has been rising continuously for more than three decades (Leung et al., 2015). This research trend aligns with today's turbulent and highly competitive environment, as the enhanced levels of complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability, demand that organizations apply a set of capabilities and strategies, such as marketing strategies, for efficient and effective organizational responses towards such difficult business environments (Brozovic, 2018). This is particularly important for the airline industry, as it has been impacted severely from the Covid-19 pandemic crisis due to the closures of airports for an extended period of time on a global scale (Kim et al., 2022).

Scholarly interest on marketing in the context of the aviation industry, has received increasing and vibrant attention from various academic disciplines, including tourism. This is because currently, people flying much more than at any time before in human history, as air travel has become an affordable, daily consumer product that provides personal aeromobility to a wide range of market segments (Young et al., 2014). And, to gain a competitive advantage in the airline industry, firms must engage in important marketing efforts in order to enhance passengers' loyalty in the interest of retention, enhance positive word-of-mouth behaviors, and attract new customers (Han, 2013). Therefore, what do we know about the role and impact of marketing within the aviation industry? The answer is that we now know far more than we once did. Remarkably, however, despite the stream of publications on the topic in tourism journals, the nature, breadth and depth of marketing research for the aviation industry within the tourism discipline is not known. Adding to this, due to the interdisciplinary nature of this research stream, the current state of extant literature on the topic is characterized as fragmented. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the aviation industry (Czerny, Fu, Lei & Oum, 2021), thus, creating the need to for existing marketing practices in the industry to adapt to this turbulent and volatile environment. In light of these, there is an urgent need to consolidate, structure, critically analyse and synthesize extant literature, due to the absence of a coherent and robust theoretical basis on the topic.

In response to these realities, a timely research on synthesis and critical review of the existing literature is necessary to assess the progress and evolution of marketing research on aviation within the tourism and marketing journals. This study has three objectives in order to fill this crucial gap: 1) to critically appraise and review the literature in order to comprehend the current status and provide a holistic understanding of marketing research for the aviation industry in the tourism discipline; 2) to identify what are the changes in scholarly researchers' perspectives during and post pandemic on the various themes, and; 3) to highlight knowledge gaps and limitations of existing literature that have limited its relevance and created points of disconnect between academia and practice post pandemic, and in light of this, to offer promising directions for further research. The patterns analyzed are (1) year and type of publication; (2) geographical information of authors and data; (3) content based on core marketing research categories; (4) theories, and; (5) methodologies applied and data sources used. Based on this information, we critically analyze, structure, and map extant literature pre (1977 – December 2019) and during-post (January 2020 – 2022) pandemic and provide promising directions for future research with regards to theory, context, and methodology.

To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first systematic review to specifically focus on marketing research in the broader research domain of air transport and tourism. The only systematic review on air transport and tourism was published by Spasojevic, Lohmann & Scott (2018), and differs from this systematic review in important ways. First, Spasojevic et al.'s (2018) provided a systematic review on air transport and tourism in general, but did not distinguished nor analysed the marketing research conducted within this broader research domain. Second, Spasojevic et al.'s (2018) review covers the period from 2000-2014. By contrast, this review has no time restrictions and dates back to 1977 up to and including December 2022, thus covering the most recent work on the topic as well. Third, compared to Spasojevic et al.'s (2018) review, this study provides an added value to the tourism, marketing and air transport fields by; first, identifying the changes before and after 2000, thus setting the pandemic as the starting point towards a new theoretical foundation in marketing research and air transport, and based on this; b) developing an agenda for future research and an integrative and multidisciplinary framework that triggers interdisciplinary curiosity, provides the basis for scholars to further build on and practitioners to be guided by. Lastly, by approaching this review not only from the tourism and air transport perspectives, but also from the marketing perspective, this allows the transfer of theories between disciplines, an added value that provides the basis for a field of research to expand and further evolve.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Since marketing research in general, and marketing for the aviation industry in particular is a widely researched domain, the systematic review methodology proposed by Tranfield, Denyer & Smart (2003) might better help us to identify and critically analyze the extant literature within the tourism discipline. The decision to employ the systematic review of this research topic was also based on the findings of a scoping search (248 potentially relevant studies published in the top tourism journals) in order to identify the current state of analysis and understanding of the research domain, to understand the nature and extent of extant literature, to 'access the size and relevance of literature and to delimit the subject area or topic, and to determine the value of applying the systematic literature review methodology.

## SELECTION OF ARTICLES – PHASE 1

As regards the scope of the review, this study will be conducted in two phases. In phase 1, the study focuses on articles that have been published in the leading journals in the tourism field, based on the following three reasons: first, publication in these journals raises the quality level to the highest standard, which ensures the identification of articles of rigorous design and appropriate standard (Baldacchino, Ucbasaran, Cabantous, & Lockett 2015); b) the selection of articles from top-tier journals is a frequently used method for capturing scholarly debates and research trends in a domain while conducting literature reviews (Oh & Kim, 2017), and; c) this journal search restriction is also a standard practice in various systematic literature reviews published in the top-ranked and high impact outlets in various disciplines, including marketing and tourism (e.g., Christofi et al., 2019; Vrontis & Christofi, 2019; Leonidou et al., 2018). Thus, this study included journals that are considered to be the premier publication outlets in tourism research (Mckercher, Law & Lam, 2006), and the selection was based on widely accepted lists of elite tourism journals used by state-of-the-art review studies that focused on topical issues in tourism (e.g. Sharpley, 2014). Accordingly, the selected journals were the following: *Annals of Tourism Research (ATR)*, *Tourism Management (TM)*, *Journal of Travel Research (JTR)*, and *Journal of Sustainable Tourism (JST)*. ScienceDirect and EBSCOhost's databases were used to search for potentially relevant articles from the selected journals.

Having selected the publication outlets, the next step was to define the nature and identify the final sample of articles. In line with the objectives of this study and based on standard practice from state-of-the-art reviews in leading tourism journals (e.g., Law Bai, Yoo & Lee, 2011), this research focused on full-length, peer-reviewed articles, but excluded editorials, conference proceedings, book reviews, comments, letters, and replies. Moreover, no time restrictions were used, because this is the first systematic review on the topic within the top tourism journals; hence, the review aimed to capture all possibly relevant studies from the first article published on the topic in these journals up to and including December 2019 (before the initiation of research on the Covid-19 pandemic).

As often done in systematic reviews (e.g. Zeng & Ryan, 2012), a keyword search formula was used on the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the potentially relevant studies. The application of standard Boolean operators allowed for the development of a single search algorithm. Following Sharpley's (2014) rationale, a combination of search terms that were considered generic enough to identify the most relevant articles were used, and specific enough not to generate an unmanageable sample. Based on this, the keyword search formula used was: (Marketing OR consumer OR customer) AND ("air transport" OR aviation OR airline OR airport OR \*plane\* OR aircraft OR airbus OR flight OR fly\*). This process resulted in an initial sample of 248 potentially relevant articles. Closer inspection of the manuscripts included in the initial sample revealed 87 articles that were relevant with the review topic. Moreover, because formal search techniques entering index terms or keywords in electronic databases may overlook significant studies (Nielsen, Asmussen & Weatherall, 2017), this review applied one more step in the search process, the backward and forward snowballing procedure which is used by the latest reviews (e.g., Christofi, Vrontis & Cadogan, 2019; Vrontis & Christofi, 2019), to search the reference lists of the selected studies for additional works of relevance. This step was repeated until no new articles were identified. After

this screening process, another three relevant studies were identified, thus 90 articles comprised the final sample of studies.

## **SELECTION OF ARTICLES – PHASE 2**

The tourism industry suffered huge losses worldwide due to the pandemic. This study aims to formulate and discuss future avenues on marketing research and air transport during this uncertain and ambiguous environment. Thus, in phase 2, the author will extend the findings by systematically reviewing papers published from January 2020 – December 2022, and, in this way, respond to objectives 2 and 3 that guide this review. In order to increase the thoroughness of the study, the author will include journals that are considered to be the premier publication outlets, not only in tourism research, but in marketing research as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study intends to make five key contributions to the marketing, aviation and tourism literature. First, compared to other reviews that partly capture an aspect of the reviewed topic, the sole focus here is on studies that clearly relate to marketing research and aviation within the tourism literature and concepts. Consequently, this review aims to identify and critically analyze the full set of studies that are published in top tourism and marketing journals and constitute the tourism literature on marketing research and the air transport industry. In light of this, this review, to date, is the first to identify, critically analyze, summarize, and integrate prior research focused on the reviewed topic. Second, in conducting this critical review, this study employs a theme-based logic that allows a systematic analysis of the final sample of articles and the identification of several themes that represent the main findings from extant research. Third, this review incorporates concepts and literature from three disciplines, namely, marketing, aviation and tourism. This multi-disciplinary dimension of the reviewed topic allows the transfer of theories and findings from one discipline to another, thus, further expanding the boundaries of all three disciplines and triggers interdisciplinary curiosity that enhances the collaboration among scholars from various disciplines for the advancement of science and related research. Fourth, to offer suggestions for best practices, as well as directions for further enquiry based on the changes pre and during-post pandemic research on the topic, in addition from those that were suggested by the authors of the selected studies, this study examined all articles from the final sample to provide a summary of best practice recommendations for researchers, as well as an overview of unexplored research streams and emerging research areas that have been largely overlooked by extant literature. The suggestions provided here aim towards theory advancement and offer guidelines on research approaches for scholars that focus on the topic of this review. Finally, this review provides an integrative conceptual framework for researchers from various disciplines to further build on and practitioners to be guided by.

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