

Evangelia (Lia) Marinakou

Bournemouth University, Business School

Talbot campus, Dorset House, Poole, BH12 5BB, UK

Emarinakou2@bournemouth.ac.uk

Davide Lecca

Bournemouth University, Business School

Talbot campus, Dorset House, Poole, BH12 5BB, UK

S5326269@bournemouth.ac.uk

## **Personalised experience for airline passengers with flight-related anxiety**

Fear of Flying (FoF) has been a prevalent phobia mainly in adult population (Quero et al., 2015). The National Institute of Mental Health (2017) suggests that about 6.5% of the population in the US has aviophobia (FoF), and 25% of them experience flying-related anxiety causing many social, economic and health issues. The cost to airlines is significant causing incalculably reduced productivity and opportunity (Gottlieb et al., 2021). Interestingly, 10% of these people avoid flying, and 20% depend on alcohol or anxiolytics to fly (Campos et al., 2016, p.296). They also state that FoF is “a disabling disorder classified as a situational specific phobia”. Gould (2017) proposes different reasons of people’s fear to fly, such as “fear of crashing, a fear of being out of control, a fear of the unknown, a fear of heights, having lost a loved one in a plane crash and feeling claustrophobic”, she continues that some feel discomfort with the experience in terms of the procedures, crowds, long flights among others. Such fears fuel anxiety, which may activate people’s physical systems leading to shallow breathing, chest gets tight, sweaty palms, nausea or lightheads making diagnosis and treatment complex. Gottlieb et al. (2021) put fears in categories i.e. related to environmental conditions (e.g. severe weather), situational phobias (e.g. claustrophobia) or combined with panic attacks. Other studies categorize the flight anxiety as anticipatory flight anxiety, in-flight anxiety and generalize flight anxiety (Batouei et al., 2019, p.710). They also suggest that flight anxiety may take away the joy from the travel experience.

Research suggests there are many ways to overcome anxiety such as pharmacological treatments, but psychological interventions are found to be more efficient and start with deliberate mental shift. Various in-vivo methods have been used in the past, which have received limited participation due to the limited exposure to stimuli, hence new models have been introduced such as exposure therapy (ET) through virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET) (Gottlieb et al., 2021; Campos et al., 2016). Such methods can be delivered online, reaching more people in need. Such programmes provide a personalized flexible treatment with variations. Abramowitz et al. (2019) claim that ET is a form of cognitive-behavioural therapy rooted in respondent conditioning. It helps reduce stress and anxiety when exposed to a specific situation.

The *aim* of this study is to explore the ways airlines are using such programmes to deal with passengers’ fear of flying, the ways they use to personalize the service for such customers, and

investigate passengers' fears and expected services provided by airlines. There is paucity of studies on phobias, and more specifically on FoF (Gottlieb et al., 2021; Campos et al., 2016). Most studies on flight anxiety focus on travel medicine, psychiatry, and travel security (Batouei et al., 2019). Studies on overlooked areas such as air transport management, services management may provide an insight to understanding and managing passengers' flight anxiety. Research is required on air-travel anxiety in order to provide airlines with necessary tools to manage passenger's anxiety and provide personalized services (Bogaerde & Raedt, 2013). This study has the potential to promote positive social change by demonstrating how airlines are addressing passengers' fear of flying by creating personalized experiences.

A mixed methods approach will be used for this study, as data will be collected via semi-structured interviews with representatives at airlines with focus on data acquired on passengers' anxiety and fear of flying, as well as methods they use to address such issues and provide personalized service and experience. Moreover, a survey questionnaire with passengers who may exhibit flight anxiety with pre-selection criteria and convenience sampling. The questionnaire will include a section on demographic data and another with Van Gerwen et al.'s (1999) 29 items measuring passengers' situational anxiety and 18 items measuring somatic and cognitive modalities.

The results of this study may be significant for professionals and academics in air transport. Managers may use the findings to aggravate passengers' anxiety and adjust their services to accommodate this market. Moreover, it may provide a list of fears and ways to overcome this issue by bridging the knowledge gap in this field.

## REFERENCES

Abramowitz, J.S., Deacon, B.J., & Whiteside, S. P. (2019). *Exposure therapy for anxiety: Principles and practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Batouei, A., Iranmanesh, M., Nikbin, D., & Hyun, S.S. (2019) Flight anxiety: Investigating the role of airline service quality and flight crew's competence. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 24(7), 710-724.

Botella, C., Osma, J., Garcia-Palacios, A., Quero, S., & Barros, R. (2004) Treatment of flying

phobia using virtual reality: data from a 1-year follow-up using a multiple baseline design. *Clinical Psychology Psychother*, 11(5), 311–23.

Campos, D., Breton-Lopez, J., Botella, C., Mira, A., Castilla, D., Banos, R., Tortella-Feliu, M., & Quero, S. (2016) An internet-based treatment for flying phobia (NO-FEAR Airlines): A study protocol for a randomized controlled trial. *BMC Psychiatry*, 16, 296.

Gottlieb, A., Doniger, G.M., Hussein, Y., Noy, S., & Plotnik, M. (2021) The efficacy of a virtual reality exposure therapy treatment for fear of flying: A retrospective study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.641393

Gould, W.R. (2017) How to calm anxiety when you're on a flight. *NBC news*. Published 27<sup>th</sup> July, Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/your-4-step-guide-overcoming-your-fear-flying-ncna786746> [Accessed 7th March 2022].

Quero, S., Campos, D., Riera Del Amo, A., Breton-Lopez, J., Tortella-Feliu, M., Banos, R.M., & Botella, C. (2015) NO-FEAR Airlines: A computer-aided self-help treatment for flying phobia. *Annual Review of Cybertherapy and Telemedicine*, doi: 10.3233/978-1-61499-595-1-197

Van Gerwen, L.J., Spinhoven, P., Van Dyck, R., & Diekstra, R.F. (1999). Construction and psychometric characteristics of two self-report questionnaires for the assessment of fear of flying. *Psychological Assessment*, 11(2), 146–158.