International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Examining How Customer Service Quality Affects Passenger Contentment and Loyalty in the Indian Aviation Sector

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Abstract:
The aviation industry has recently placed strong emphasis on the ongoing need to improve service quality to ensure maximum passenger satisfaction. With its dynamic and customer-centric nature, there is always room for innovation in airline operations. The effectiveness of airlines largely relies on service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. In response to intense competition in both developed and developing nations, it has become vital for airlines to consistently assess their service quality. Brand managers within the industry have identified several characteristics aimed at continuously delighting customers with efforts focused on monitoring customer satisfaction and fostering brand loyalty. This paper presents a conceptual framework to investigate how passengers' perception of service quality impacts their satisfaction and loyalty using Structural Equation Modeling based on data collected from 154 domestic airline passengers at Indira Gandhi International Airport Delhi.The findings reveal that perceived service quality significantly influences passenger satisfaction which, in turn, plays a crucial role as a mediator between perceived service quality and passenger loyalty

Keywords: Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Loyalty, Airlines, India

1. INTRODUCTION

The aviation sector is highly competitive and constantly evolving, experiencing significant growth over the last twenty years with further expansion expected on both domestic and international fronts. The government's open sky policy has attracted private airlines, intensifying competition within the market. In today's service industry, particularly in aviation, providing exceptional service to passengers is essential for survival in this fiercely competitive landscape (Zeithaml et al., 1996). According to (Park et al., 2004) An enhanced market presence through the provision of exclusive, high-quality services is essential for retaining passengers and ultimately achieving profitability. Improved service quality and increased passenger satisfaction are key factors in driving business performance and gaining a competitive edge in this industry (Li et al., 2017). Intense rivalry among different airlines to expand their market share has sparked increased emphasis on the quality of services offered to passengers. Earlier research mainly aimed to validate that high service quality can drive customer satisfaction and loyalty, (Atilgan et al., 2003); (Park et al., 2004)(Ostrowski et al., 2023). According to (Haruna & Osa-Afiana, 2022) the happy customer's expectations aligned with the actual outcome, surpassing their expectations, while dissatisfied customers felt that their expectations were not met.

Aviation companies should prioritize in-flight comfort, baggage handling, employee excellence, internet accessibility, airport proximity, additional services, available destinations and safety measures(Dostaler & Flouris, 2006) The frequency of measuring customer satisfaction in the airline industry has increased, reflecting its growing relevance. This is attributed to the critical importance of delivering high-quality service for airlines' survival and their competitiveness within the industry. Service quality encompasses a range of interactions between customers and airlines, with employees aiming to shape customers' perceptions and the carriers' image (Gürsoy et al., 2005). Airlines have been adopting fresh tactics in recent decades to enhance their company's profitability. (Chen & Chang, 2005) Service quality can be conceptualized as a chain, with its delivery involving a sequence of processes. International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) (2017) Airlines are categorized as either full-service or low-cost based on the services they offer. Several research studies have explored the factors influencing passengers' choice of airline, including travel purpose, personal characteristics, and socioeconomic status ((Mason, 2001); (O'Connell & Williams, 2005)),value as perceived by customers, the image of the airline (Park et al., 2004), value for their money and passenger satisfaction (Rajaguru, 2016). The present circumstances present a chance for aviation firms and academics to develop and gain knowledge.

In the recent study about airline service quality and customer loyalty, a comprehensive theoretical framework is developed to explore the connections between passengers' perception of service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty. The research methodology employed to test this theoretical model through empirical investigation is explained, with findings interpreted to provide practical implications and recommendations for future research.

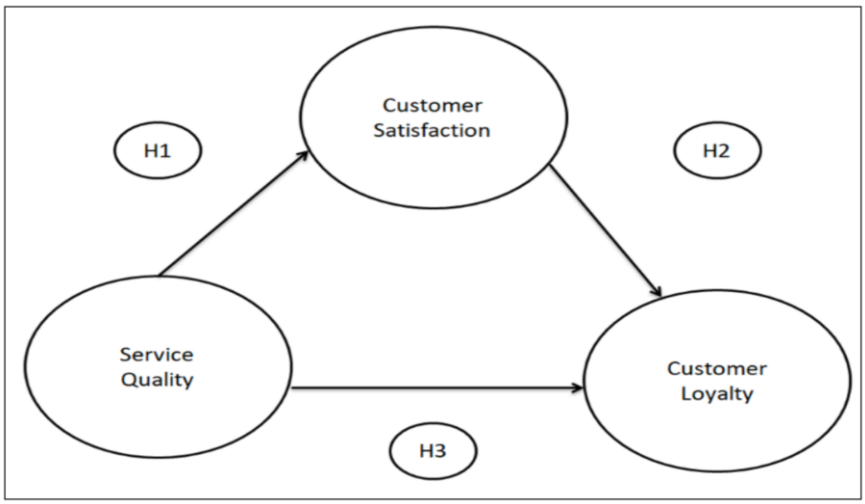
2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty are highly critical areas that have been extensively studied for the effective functioning of any airline. Academics, researchers, and industry professionals are equally eager to understand the different facets of this topic due to its significance and direct impact on the economic aspects of airline companies as well as their objectives and profitability. According to (Ringle et al., 2011) The satisfaction of customers sets the standard for quality and excellence in any organization (Heymann, 2019) believes in the principle "The customer is constantly correct". According to (Hutahayan & Wahyono, 2019) Service quality plays a significant role in meeting or strengthening customer needs. According to research on service management, the Service Quality Scale is widely recognized and commonly utilized as a benchmark ((Saleh & Ryan, 1991); (Aksoy et al., 2003); (Martínez & García, 2008); (Chand, 2010);) Service quality has a significant influence on customer satisfaction, which ultimately contributes to customer loyalty (Martínez & García, 2008).

Since the 1990s, there has been intense competition among airlines, leading service providers to prioritize passenger needs in order to cultivate a loyal customer base. According to Power, there has been a growing emphasis on customer satisfaction in the aviation industry over the last five years. This competitive environment has also impacted air carrier manufacturers, as they are under significant pressure to assist companies in acquiring and retaining customer loyalty (Chen et al., 2010). (Law, 2017) Satisfaction is the immediate response to consuming a service; however, customers perceive service quality as the overall impression of a company in their minds, especially within the airline industry (Prentice & Loureiro, 2017)believes that in the era of digital media, feedback from both happy and unhappy passengers can quickly circulate. Happy customers contribute to increased profits, while dissatisfied ones can harm a company's image and reputation, affecting its economic aspects. Previous studies have also shown that

contented customers tend to be loyal and often recommend good services to others through word-of-mouth (Kim et al., 2006). The aviation industry, which is highly focused on providing service, requires a thorough examination and definition of the relevant factors in order to enhance customer satisfaction. This necessitates specific insight into these factors from the customers' perspective (Hair et al., 2011). Loyalty can be defined as the expression of dedication and support from a person to consistently purchase a specific service or product. Customer satisfaction and loyalty are often used interchangeably in top-notch service companies, with customer satisfaction leading to loyalty through positive recommendations in the airline industry (Chow & Tsui, 2017), The research in this area primarily centers on a fundamental set of theories concerning the link between service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty

Fig. 1: Conceptual Model



The theoretical and empirical discussion and to test the proposed research model led to the development of the following hypotheses:

H1: Service quality is positively related to passenger satisfaction in airlines.

H2: There exists a positive relationship between passenger satisfaction and loyalty.

H3: There exists a correlation between service quality, passenger satisfaction and loyalty.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The participants were individuals who were present at Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi between January and February 2023, and who agreed to take part in this academic study. The research sample consisted of 154 respondents. To account for the diverse demographics within the population, including gender, education levels, age groups, occupation types, and income brackets a stratified random sampling method was employed to distribute the survey questionnaire among the research subjects.

To determine the required sample size for the ultimate study, G*power software will be utilized to compute the minimum sample size according to statistical power (Faul et al., 2009). To achieve a statistical power of 0.8, we require at least 85 samples, so our sample size is sufficient for conducting statistical analysis.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data screening serves as a crucial initial stage in structural equation modeling. The upcoming section describes the data utilized for analysis, beginning with an examination of sample size and variable type.

It then delves into the significance of addressing missing data, outliers, non-normality, and nonlinearity along with the associated methods.

A complete dataset is crucial for SEM, but most research options encounter the issue of missing data. Since statistical analysis is significantly impacted by missing data, it's important to carefully examine data entry and handle any missing values. There are various approaches to address this issue including deleting subjects with missing values, replacing the missing data, or using robust statistical procedures that can accommodate for the presence of missing data. Additionally, SEM software programs offer several options for managing missing data such as listwise deletion which removes all subjects with any variable being empty. It has also been noted that reducing sample size may lead to inefficient parameter estimates and potential bias if deleted respondents differ significantly from those with complete data (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

Moreover, in multivariate analysis, the key assumption is normality. Previous research has shown that most structural equation modeling estimation techniques assume that the data are from a continuous and multivariate normal distribution (Zeithaml et al., 1996); (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000). Multivariate normality pertains to the form of the data distribution for a single metric variable and its alignment with the Gaussian distribution (Hair et al., 2011). A widely used and straightforward way to test for normality is by visually comparing the observed data values with a distribution that approximates the normal distribution using a histogram (Hair et al., 2011). A histogram of standard residuals should closely resemble a normal curve. Aside from this, examining the data's normality statistically and visually is also recommended. SPSS computes Skewness and Kurtosis for each variable. Skewness indicates the symmetry of a univariate distribution, while Kurtosis relates to the peakedness of the distribution's shape. Extreme values for either measure suggest that the data is not normally distributed; extreme values for skewness and kurtosis are greater than +3 or less than -3. In a normal distribution, univariate skewness and kurtosis coefficients should be zero (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000). Invalid statistical hypothesis testing, using the normal theory test statistic, may not provide a sufficient evaluation of the model under study when the assumptions stated above are violated (Mason, 2001).

The chi-square test can be significantly affected even by a slight deviation from multivariate normality, leading to inflated chi-square values and lower model fit. This bias towards Type I error may result in the rejection of a model that should not be rejected. Anderson and Gerbing found that maximum likelihood estimation is less affected by non-normality than previously believed. Additionally, tests for skewness and kurtosis suggested that the data analyzed in this study can be considered to follow a normal distribution (Wu & Cheng, 2013) The study provided a measurement for evaluating service quality in the airline industry, consisting of 4 second-order constructs and 11 first-order constructs. These include Interaction Quality; Physical Environment Quality; Outcome Quality (Waiting Time, Valence) Access Quality (Information, Convenience)The data for this study was segmented based on the participants' education, age, gender, and work experience. The detailed explanation of the demographic characteristics is provided below in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristic of Research Population

Demographic Characterics of Passengers			
Sr. No:	**Demographic Factors**		**Response**
1	Gender		
	a)	Male	65
	b)	Female	89
2	Age		
	a)	20-35 Years	85
	b)	From 35- Less than 45 years	30
	c)	From 45 and above	39
3	Status		
	a)	Married	47
	b)	Single	107
4	Education level		
	a)	Lower than bachelor degree	29
	b)	Bachelor degree	87
	c)	Higher than bachelor degree	38
5	Monthly income		
	a)	30,000 Rupees or lower	28
	b)	30,001 – 40,000 Rupees	56
	c)	40,001 – 50,000Rupees	32
	d)	50,001 – 60,000 Rupees	22
	e)	Higher than 60,000 Rupees	16
6	Nationality		
	a)	Indian	154
	b)	Not Indian	0
7	Profession		
	a)	Business	27
	b)	Corporates officials	44
	c)	Government Officials	18
	d)	Retired	6
	e)	Students	61

5. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

5.1. Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha and Test For Skewness and Kurtosis

Cronbach's alpha measures the internal consistency of an instrument by assessing whether all items within it are measuring the same construct (Dostaler & Flouris, 2006). Cronbach's coefficient alpha is a widely used measure of internal consistency reliability, which assesses how closely related a set of items are as a group. The coefficient ranges from 0.0 to +1.0, with higher values indicating a greater level of internal consistency among the items. In the context of survey research, Cronbach's alpha helps researchers determine the reliability of the survey instrument by assessing the consistency of responses across different items or sections.

In this study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each section of the survey, and the results were recorded in Table 3. The purpose of computing Cronbach's alpha for each section is to assess the internal

consistency within that particular segment of the questionnaire. This allows researchers to identify whether the items within each section are measuring the same underlying construct consistently.

Additionally, Skewness and Kurtosis tests, detailed in Table 4, are essential statistical measures used to assess the distributional properties of data. Skewness measures the degree of asymmetry in the distribution, while Kurtosis measures the degree to which the distribution is peaked or flat compared to a normal distribution. These tests help researchers understand the shape and characteristics of the data distribution, which is important for making valid statistical inferences.

Furthermore, Item Total Correlation tests and Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted are displayed in Table 5. These tests provide additional insights into the reliability of the survey items by examining how each individual item correlates with the total score of its respective section. Cronbach's alpha if item deleted helps identify whether removing any particular item would significantly improve or decrease the internal consistency reliability of the section.

Table 2 presents the Cronbach's Alpha values for each section of the questionnaire, as well as for the entire questionnaire. The high Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.746 to 0.932 indicate a high level of reliability for each part of the questionnaire. This suggests that the items within each section and the questionnaire as a whole consistently measure the intended constructs, demonstrating strong internal consistency reliability.

The detailed analysis of Cronbach's alpha, Skewness and Kurtosis tests, Item Total Correlation tests, and Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted provides comprehensive insights into the reliability and validity of the survey instrument used in the study. These findings enhance the credibility of the research outcomes and ensure that the data collected accurately reflects the constructs under investigation.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Tangibles (4)	TAN1	3.42	.941	-.462	.195	-.432	.389
	TAN2	3.72	.771	-.598	.195	.654	.389
	TAN3	3.32	.989	-.240	.195	-.625	.389
	TAN4	3.40	.932	-.398	.195	-.623	.389
Safety & Security (3)	SS1	3.77	.763	-.663	.195	.885	.389
	SS2	3.88	.699	-.176	.195	-.157	.389
	SS3	3.85	.721	-.085	.195	-.411	.389

Cleanliness (3)	CLE1	3.77	.771	-.535	.195	.177	.389
	CLE2	3.66	.820	-.152	.195	-.461	.389
	CLE3	3.75	.770	-.677	.195	.822	.389
Comfort (3)	COM1	3.50	.909	-.476	.195	-.061	.389
	COM2	3.64	.876	-.890	.195	.958	.389
	COM3	3.64	.898	-.437	.195	-.281	.389

Construct	**Items**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Skewness**		**Kurtosis**	
		Statistic	**Statistic**	**Statistic**	**Std. Error**	**Statistic**	**Std. Error**
Expertise (3)	EXP1	3.99	.566	-.659	.195	2.543	.389
	EXP2	3.86	.657	-.409	.195	.578	.389
	EXP3	4.11	.632	-.563	.195	1.369	.389
Conduct (5)	CON1	3.23	1.002	-.248	.195	-.453	.389
	CON2	3.30	.998	-.511	.195	-.296	.389
	CON3	3.25	1.005	-.318	.195	-.350	.389
	CON4	3.30	1.030	-.446	.195	-.330	.389
	CON5	3.34	1.049	-.404	.195	-.457	.389
Problem Solving (3)	PSO1	3.68	.862	-.495	.195	.261	.389
	PSO2	3.73	.834	-.407	.195	.061	.389
	PSO3	3.74	.831	.035	.195	-.782	.389
Information (3)	INF1	4.12	.714	-.502	.195	.152	.389

	INF2	4.17	.624	-.298	.195	.212	.389
	INF3	4.18	.715	-.814	.195	1.719	.389
Convenience (3)	CONV 1	3.45	.957	-.371	.195	-.431	.389
	CONV 2	3.45	.950	-.516	.195	-.212	.389
	CONV 3	3.40	.999	-.426	.195	-.451	.389
Customer Loyalty (4)	CL1	4.45	.658	-1.087	.195	1.238	.389
	CL2	4.50	.597	-.748	.195	-.401	.389
	CL3	4.46	.648	-.948	.195	.483	.389
	CL4	4.40	.771	-1.339	.195	1.651	.389
Customer Satisfaction (3)	CS1	4.35	.621	-.573	.195	.280	.389
	CS2	4.35	.589	-.274	.195	-.664	.389
	CS3	4.23	.780	-.841	.195	.368	.389
	Valid N (list wise)						

Table 3: Assessing Measurement Model Validity

Tangibles (4)	.769
Safety & Security (3)	.711
Cleanliness (3)	.708
Comfort (3)	.831
Expertise (3)	.698
Conduct (5)	.899
Problem Solving (3)	.804
Information (3)	.711
Convenience (3)	.811
Customer Loyalty (4)	.732
Customer Satisfaction (3)	.711

Table 4: Total Statistics

Constructs		Scale Mean	Scale Variance	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha
Tangibles	TAN1	10.45	4.471	0.63	0.423	0.68
	TAN2	10.15	5.409	0.519	0.296	0.742
	TAN3	10.55	4.132	0.685	0.476	0.647
	TAN4	10.47	5.048	0.465	0.235	0.769
Safety & Security	SS1	7.73	1.559	0.463	0.215	0.707
	SS2	7.62	1.57	0.551	0.329	0.596
	SS3	7.65	1.484	0.58	0.352	0.558
Cleanliness	CLE1	7.41	1.838	0.521	0.276	0.625
	CLE2	7.53	1.663	0.562	0.317	0.572
	CLE3	7.43	1.88	0.497	0.249	0.653
Comfort	COM1	7.29	2.624	0.675	0.468	0.801
	COM2	7.14	2.568	0.749	0.561	0.728
	COM3	7.14	2.646	0.68	0.477	0.795
Expertise	EXP1	7.97	1.097	0.507	0.258	0.484
	EXP2	8.1	1.022	0.425	0.189	0.591
	EXP3	7.86	1.051	0.438	0.205	0.569
Conduct	CON1	13.18	12.921	0.623	0.435	0.903
	CON2	13.12	12.039	0.777	0.638	0.871
	CON3	13.17	11.88	0.797	0.667	0.866

	CON4	13.12	11.764	0.791	0.67	0.867
	CON5	13.08	11.811	0.763	0.652	0.874
Problem Solving	PSO1	7.47	2.198	0.646	0.424	0.738
	PSO2	7.42	2.205	0.683	0.467	0.7
	PSO3	7.4	2.321	0.625	0.395	0.759
Information	INF1	8.34	1.338	0.505	0.262	0.653
	INF2	8.29	1.515	0.505	0.267	0.653
	INF3	8.29	1.238	0.585	0.344	0.548
Convenience	CONV 1	6.85	3.174	0.703	0.504	0.801
	CONV 2	6.84	3.074	0.753	0.567	0.754
	CONV 3	6.9	3.056	0.696	0.49	0.81
Customer Satisfaction	CS1	8.58	1.461	0.381	0.2	0.693
	CS2	8.58	1.239	0.636	0.405	0.395
	CS3	8.7	1.061	0.468	0.304	0.618
Customer Loyalty	CL1	13.36	2.584	0.464	0.233	0.705
	CL2	13.31	2.608	0.536	0.308	0.668
	CL3	13.35	2.321	0.636	0.409	0.606
	CL4	13.42	2.284	0.481	0.256	0.706

Model fit measures such as the comparative Fit Index, goodness of fit index, Normed fit index, Tucker Lewis Index and root mean square of error approximation were chosen to assess the suitability of the model (Hair et al., 2011). The statistics indicate that the model meets the necessary criteria for a satisfactory fit.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has provided valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of service quality, passenger satisfaction, and loyalty within the Indian aviation sector. Through an extensive analysis of empirical data and theoretical frameworks, we have elucidated the significant influence that service quality exerts on passenger perceptions and behaviors.

Our findings underscore the critical role of empathy and responsiveness as key determinants of service quality, highlighting their profound impact on passenger satisfaction and subsequent loyalty. By emphasizing the importance of prioritizing customer-centric approaches in flight operations, we have offered practical recommendations for airline managers to enhance problem-solving strategies and ensure passenger contentment at every stage of the journey.

Moreover, our study has empirically validated the hypothesized model, affirming the positive relationships between service quality, passenger satisfaction, and loyalty. This reaffirms the interconnected nature of these constructs, underscoring the need for integrated strategies that address all facets of the passenger experience.

Importantly, our research contributes to both academic scholarship and industry practice by shedding light on crucial operational drivers and their implications for customer relationship management. By highlighting the significance of interpersonal skills and service efficiency improvements, we have provided a roadmap for enhancing passenger loyalty through service excellence.

Looking ahead, our study paves the way for future research endeavors to delve deeper into emerging trends and developments in service quality and passenger satisfaction within the Indian aviation sector. By continuing to explore these dynamics, scholars and industry practitioners can further refine strategies aimed at elevating the overall customer experience and fostering enduring loyalty in an increasingly competitive market landscape.

In essence, this research serves as a catalyst for ongoing dialogue and innovation within the aviation industry, driving towards a future where passenger satisfaction remains at the forefront of airline operations and customer relationships flourish in an environment of excellence and continuous improvement.

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