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Exploring the Implication of Service Quality and Satisfaction on Behavioral Intentions in the Indian Aviation Industry

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ABSTRACT

National Civil Aviation Policy in 2016 has propelled significant growth in the Indian civil aviation industry, driven by increasing passenger traffic. The study explores the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction and purchase intention, along with the mediating role of customer satisfaction in the Indian cultural context. Data from 783 passengers across 13 airports and 9 airlines was collected using a modified SERVPERF questionnaire, incorporating American Customer Satisfaction Index and the Theory of Planned Behavior dimensions. Exploratory factor analysis identified underlying constructs, which were further examined to validate hypothesized relationships. The results demonstrate that service quality significantly affects customer satisfaction and purchase intention, with customer satisfaction acting as a partial mediator. This study also analyzes growth trends using DGCA Civil Aviation Statistics (2016–2023), highlighting significant passenger growth. The findings validate all hypotheses, offering strategic insights to enhance service quality and customer loyalty in the Indian aviation industry.

Keywords: *Service Quality, Satisfaction, Behavioral Intention, India.*

1. INTRODUCTION

A central milestone in the industry's development was the introduction of the National Civil Aviation Policy (2016), which provided a organized regulatory framework to rationalize airline operations, advance airport infrastructure, and reduce bureaucratic hurdles that previously stalled growth. This policy played a key role in nurturing passenger traffic development and enhancing general industry efficacy. However, despite these developments, Indian airline passengers remain highly price-sensitive, often prioritizing cost over other factors such as convenience and service quality. This consumer behavior poses a challenge for airlines striving to uphold high service standards while contending on affordability.

In this dynamic environment, understanding the interaction between service quality, customer satisfaction, and behavioral outcomes such as loyalty and repurchase intention becomes essential. Service quality encompassing key dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, comfort, and overall customer experience suggestively influences passenger satisfaction. Satisfied customers are more likely to display positive behavioral responses, including repeat purchases and brand loyalty, which are critical for long-term airline sustainability. However, in a market where low-cost carriers dominate, achieving and maintaining high levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty remains a persistent challenge.

Given these complexities, this study seeks to evaluate the impact of the National Civil Aviation Policy (2016) on passenger traffic growth while also analyzing how service quality influences customer satisfaction and, in turn, drives purchase intention and behavioral outcomes. By leveraging empirical data, this research aims to provide actionable insights for airlines to enhance service delivery, improve customer retention, and ensure sustainable growth in India's highly competitive aviation sector.

1. Glimpses of the traits and trends in the Indian Civil Aviation Industry

The Indian civil aviation sector has evolved significantly since its inception, marked by the first Humber biplane flight in 1911 and the subsequent establishment of regulatory frameworks like the Indian Airships Act (1911). Over the years,

governing bodies such as the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), Airports Authority of India (AAI), Airport Economic Regulatory Authority (AERA), and Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) have played crucial roles in shaping the sector. The introduction of the National Civil Aviation Policy (NCAP - 2016) aimed to strengthen regional connectivity through the Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS), making remote locations more accessible. However, despite its categorization into Priority RCS and Tourism RCS, challenges such as lack of long-term sustainability, demand assessment gaps, and subsidy conflicts persist. The Indian aviation industry remains one of the most challenging markets globally, with airlines struggling against high fuel prices, overcapacity, intense competition, and an unfavorable regulatory framework, leading even full-service carriers to incur heavy losses. Consequently, ensuring operational efficiency and cost optimization while maintaining technical excellence is essential for sustaining profitability. Indian airports, particularly those in major cities and industrial hubs, maintain high efficiency levels, with southern and northeastern regions demonstrating superior productivity. Airports operating under public-private partnership models have shown significant efficiency gains. Additionally, sustainability has become a key focus, with increasing adoption of renewable technologies to enhance operational efficiency and mitigate environmental impacts. The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a severe blow to the industry, bringing passenger load factors (PLF) to a standstill and causing a drastic decline in GDP, with low-cost carriers suffering massive share price drops. Social distancing measures, liquidity crises, and reduced travel demand exacerbated financial pressures, while the psychological impact of the pandemic affected passenger behavior and airline profitability. Moving forward, airlines must adopt turnaround strategies that include network restructuring, pricing adjustments, and flight frequency modifications. Innovations such as zero-touch check-ins, AI-powered demand-driven operations, and automated disinfection systems are crucial for improving both security and long-term sustainability. To ensure resilience against future disruptions, airlines should retire fuel-inefficient aircraft and foster micro-alliances to enhance connectivity. By embracing these strategic adaptations, the Indian aviation sector can navigate uncertainties and achieve sustainable growth in an increasingly competitive landscape.

Passenger Traffic Data (2016-2023)

Passenger Traffic	**Unit**	**2016-17**	**2017-18**	**2018-19**	**2019-20**	**2020-21**	**2021-22**	**2022-23**
Domestic Passengers	Departing Passengers (Millions)	103.75	123.32	140.33	141.2	53.3	84.2	136
Domestic Airline Demand	Revenue Passenger Kilometres (RPK) (Billions)	98.64	117.04	134.88	136.7	52.9	81.8	132
Domestic Airline Capacity	Available Seat Kilometres (ASK) (Billions)	116.94	134.54	156.78	158.6	77.4	111.5	158.4
International Passengers	Departing and Arriving Passengers (Millions)	54.68	60.58	63.88	60.8	8.8	21.2	54.6
Total Passengers (Domestic & International)	Combined (Millions)	158.43	183.9	204.21	202	62.1	105.4	190.6

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of service quality has been a focal point in marketing and service management research, with two primary theoretical frameworks shaping its development: the American and Nordic perspectives. The Nordic Model, pioneered by Grönroos (1984) and later refined by Gummesson and Grönroos (2012), conceptualizes service quality as a combination of technical quality (what is delivered) and functional quality (how it is delivered). This approach underscores both the outcome and the process of service encounters. Conversely, the American Model, established by Berry et al. (1985) and Parasuraman et al. (1988), introduced the service gap model, which evaluates service quality as the disparity between customer expectations and actual service performance. This model led to the development of the SERVQUAL scale, a widely adopted 22-item instrument assessing five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. However, Cronin and Taylor (1992) challenged this methodology, arguing that service quality should be measured based on actual performance rather than the gap between expectations and perceptions. Their alternative model, SERVPERF, retained the same dimensions as SERVQUAL but focused solely on performance metrics, an approach later validated by Cronin and Taylor (1994) in response to critiques by Parasuraman et al. (1994).

Service quality is widely regarded as a key determinant of a firm's competitive advantage, financial sustainability, and customer loyalty (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Over time, its measurement has evolved into four distinct methodologies: (i) traditional service assessment models, (ii) hierarchical multi-dimensional frameworks, (iii) technology-driven service quality evaluation, and (iv) critical incident-based assessments (Roy et al., 2016). Additionally, the value-in-use concept has gained prominence as an alternative approach to evaluating service effectiveness, often intersecting with traditional service quality dimensions (Medberg & Grönroos, 2020). The increasing reliance on technology in service delivery has further complicated service quality assessment, necessitating new models that account for human-machine interactions (Cronin, 2021; Noble et al., 2022).

Purchase intention, a key behavioral outcome, has been extensively examined in consumer behavior research. However, its predictive reliability remains debated due to inconsistencies between stated intentions and actual purchase behaviors. Kalwani and Silk (1982) emphasized the difficulty in translating intention into action, while later studies by Lusk et al. (2006) and Barber et al. (2012) identified discrepancies in willingness-to-pay (WTP) metrics. The influence of cultural factors further complicates purchase intention, particularly in emerging markets where impulse buying is shaped by sociocultural norms (Peña-García et al., 2020). A widely accepted framework for understanding purchase intention is the Theory of Planned Behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2009), which considers attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as key drivers of consumer decision-making.

Customer satisfaction, a post-consumption evaluative judgment, serves as a critical intermediary between service quality and behavioral outcomes. Churchill and Surprenant (1982) and Oliver (2010) defined satisfaction through the disconfirmation theory, which posits that satisfaction arises when actual service performance exceeds expectations. However, Kondo (2001) argued that satisfaction and dissatisfaction function independently rather than as direct opposites, suggesting a more nuanced relationship. Beyond individual transactions, customer satisfaction has broader implications, influencing factors such as employee performance, brand advocacy, and overall marketing effectiveness (Luo & Homburg, 2007). To systematically measure satisfaction on a macroeconomic scale, national indices such as the Swedish Customer Satisfaction Barometer (SCSB) (Fornell, 1992) and the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) (Fornell et al., 1996; Morgeson et al., 2023) were developed. These indices reveal cross-cultural variations, with rationalist societies typically reporting lower satisfaction levels than traditionalist cultures (Keiningham et al., 2023). Furthermore, satisfaction is closely linked to customer retention, loyalty, and profitability, as illustrated in Rust and Zahorik's (1993) financial quantification model of satisfaction. While Bennett and Rundle-Thiele (2004) noted that satisfaction alone does not guarantee loyalty, it remains a critical precursor to sustained customer engagement.

The interplay between service quality, customer satisfaction, and purchase intention has been extensively analyzed in academic research. While some scholars treat service quality and satisfaction as distinct constructs, others argue that service quality serves as an antecedent to satisfaction, which subsequently influences purchase intention (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Lee et al., 2000; Brady & Robertson, 2001; Brady et al., 2002). Spreng et al. (2009) contended that service quality exerts both direct and indirect effects on purchase intention, while Taylor and Baker (1994) and Baker and Taylor (1998) posited that satisfaction mediates this relationship. Additional studies by Suh et al. (1997) and Cronin et al. (2000) reinforced the notion that service quality impacts purchase intention both directly and via customer satisfaction.

More recent research has explored how service quality and satisfaction jointly influence consumer behavior. Devaraj et al. (2001) and Choi et al. (2004) demonstrated that service quality and satisfaction simultaneously drive customer loyalty, with perceived value acting as a moderating variable. Similarly, Chongsanguan et al. (2017) found that service quality affects value perceptions, satisfaction, and purchase intention while also serving as a mediating construct. Moreover, effective service recovery mechanisms have been shown to strengthen customer satisfaction and retention, particularly in instances of service failures (Maxham III, 2001). However, the relationship between service quality, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions remains context-dependent, with variations observed across different service environments (Kouthouris et al., 2005).

In the realm of e-service quality, additional factors such as perceived risk, digital content, and website usability significantly influence online customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Udo et al., 2010; Wen, 2012). Research has demonstrated that high e-service quality enhances e-customer satisfaction, which subsequently drives repeat site visits, positive word-of-mouth, and online purchase intentions (Gounaris et al., 2010; Carlson & O'Cass, 2010). Over time, service quality models have expanded beyond the original five SERVQUAL dimensions proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), incorporating additional factors such as employee commitment, personalized service, and pricing strategies as determinants of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Saravanan & Rao, 2007; Carrillat et al., 2009).

In summary, the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, and purchase intention is complex and influenced by multiple contextual factors, including cultural norms, technological advancements, and service recovery strategies. While service quality remains a fundamental driver of satisfaction and behavioral outcomes, its effects are often mediated by satisfaction and shaped by evolving consumer expectations. A deeper understanding of these interconnections is essential for businesses seeking to enhance customer loyalty, optimize service performance, and sustain profitability in increasingly competitive and technology-driven markets.

Objectives:

Q_1: To analyze the impact of Service Quality (SQ) on Customer Satisfaction (CS) and Purchase Intention (PI) in the Indian Civil Aviation Sector.

Q_2: To examine the mediating role of Customer Satisfaction (CS) in the relationship between Service Quality (SQ) and Purchase Intention (PI) in the Indian Civil Aviation Sector.

Q_3: To explore the relative influence of different dimensions of Service Quality (SQ) on Customer Satisfaction (CS) and Purchase Intention (PI) in the Indian Civil Aviation Sector.

Hypotheses:

H_1: Service Quality (SQ) has no significant impact on Customer Satisfaction (CS) in the Indian Civil Aviation Sector.

H_2: Customer Satisfaction (CS) does not mediate the relationship between Service Quality (SQ) and Purchase Intention (PI) in the Indian Civil Aviation Sector.

H_3: Different dimensions of Service Quality (SQ) do not have a significant influence on Customer Satisfaction (CS) in the Indian Civil Aviation Sector.

Methodology

Data from nine domestic airlines across 13 airports were collected using the modified SERVPERF scale. Multiple regression analyzed SQ's impact on CS and PI, while mediation was tested via PROCESS Macro in SPSS (v23). Secondary data from DGCA's Handbook on Civil Aviation Statistics (2016–2023) tracked passenger growth.

Analysis

The distribution of airline samples collected, is presented in Table 1, categorized by airline and corresponding percentage of the total sample. A total of 783 samples were analyzed, with the highest proportion attributed to IndiGo (56.7%), followed by Vistara (21.8%) and Air India (10.7%). The remaining airlines accounted for smaller portions, with SpiceJet contributing 3.8%, Air India Express 2.4%, and Alliance Air 2.2%. The least represented airlines included Arunachal One Air and Air Asia India, each contributing only 0.1% of the total sample.

Table 1: List of Samples from Schedule Commercial Airline.

Schedule Airline	Samples	Percent
Alliance Air	17	2.2
SpiceJet	30	3.8
Arunachal One Air	1	0.1
Air India	84	10.7
Air India Express	19	2.4
Air Asia India	1	0.1
Akasa Air	8	1
Fly Big	8	1
IndiGo	444	56.7
Vistara	171	21.8
Grand Total	783	100

The demographic distribution of the sampled population (N = 783), categorized by gender, income level, age, marital status, education, and employment status is shown in Table 2 reveals that 71.9% of respondents are male, while 28.1% are female. In terms of income, the largest group belongs to the High-Income Group (HIG; 44.4%), followed by the Middle-Income Group (MIG; 25.8%), Low-Income Group (LIG; 19.3%), and Economically Weaker Section (EWS; 10.5%). The majority of respondents (55.2%) fall within the 18–35 age range, with 26.8% aged 36–49, 12.6% aged 50–60, 3.2% above 60, and 2.2% below 18 years. Marital status distribution shows that 52.9% are married, 39% are unmarried, and smaller proportions are divorced (1.3%), widowed (1.4%), separated (0.3%), or preferred not to disclose (5.2%). Regarding education, 47.8% hold a master's degree, 38.7% a bachelor's degree, and 7.5% have completed 12th grade, while the rest possess lower educational qualifications or technical diplomas. Employment-wise, the largest group consists of salaried employees (57.5%), followed by self-employed individuals (14.6%), students (13.2%), business owners (6.5%), unemployed individuals (4.3%), homemakers (2.3%), and retirees (1.7%). These statistics indicate a highly educated and economically diverse population, with a majority in stable employment and within the prime working-age range.

Table 2: Demographic Variable.

Gender	**Sample**	**%**	**Income**	**Sample**	**%**
Male	563	71.9	EWS	82	10.5
Female	220	28.1	LIG	151	19.3
Total	**783**	**100**	MIG	202	25.8
			HIG	348	44.4
			Total	**783**	**100**
Age			**Marital**		
Below 18 Years	17	2.2	Married	414	52.9
18 to 35 Years	432	55.2	Divorced	10	1.3
36 to 49 Years	210	26.8	Separated	2	0.3
50 to 60 Years	99	12.6	Widowed	11	1.4
Above 60	25	3.2	Unmarried	305	39
Total	**783**	**100**	Don't want to say	41	5.2
			Total	**783**	**100**
Education			**Employment**		
Below 10th	6	0.8	Salaried Employee	450	57.5
10th Pass	16	2	Unemployed	34	4.3
12th Pass	59	7.5	Self-Employed	114	14.6
Bachelors	303	38.7	Home Maker	18	2.3
Masters	374	47.8	Student	103	13.2
Technical Diploma	25	3.2	Business Owner	51	6.5
Total	**783**	**100**	Retired	13	1.7
			Total	**783**	**100**

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics.

Variables	Items	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Service Quality	Tangibility	1	7	5.50	1.23
	Reliability	1	7	5.70	1.15
	Responsiveness	1	7	3.48	1.68
	Assurance	1	7	5.55	1.18
	Empathy	1	7	3.70	1.51
Customer Satisfaction	Expectations	1	7	4.82	1.54
	Quality	1	7	5.21	1.34
	Value	1	7	4.97	1.61
	Complaints	1	7	4.91	1.52
	Loyalty	1	7	4.74	1.42
Purchase Intention	Intention	1	7	6.01	1.16
	Future behavior	1	7	6.20	1.08
	Attitude	1	7	6.11	1.10
	Norm	1	7	6.12	1.06
	Behavioral Control	1	7	4.74	1.42

The descriptive statistics for the study's key variables, including service quality, customer satisfaction, and purchase intention are presented in Table 3. Each item was measured on a seven-point scale, with a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 7. In the service quality dimension, reliability had the highest mean (M = 5.70, SD = 1.15), followed closely by assurance (M = 5.55, SD = 1.18) and tangibility (M = 5.50, SD = 1.23). However, responsiveness (M = 3.48, SD = 1.68) and empathy (M = 3.70, SD = 1.51) scored lower, indicating that these aspects of service quality may need improvement. For customer satisfaction, quality had the highest mean score (M = 5.21, SD = 1.34), followed by value (M = 4.97, SD = 1.61) and complaints (M = 4.91, SD = 1.52). Expectations (M = 4.82, SD = 1.54) and loyalty (M = 4.74, SD = 1.42) had relatively lower means, suggesting moderate satisfaction levels among customers. In the purchase intention category, future behavior had the highest mean (M = 6.20, SD = 1.08), followed closely by norm (M = 6.12, SD = 1.06), attitude (M = 6.11, SD = 1.10), and intention (M = 6.01, SD = 1.16), all indicating strong purchase intention among respondents. However, behavioral control had a lower mean (M = 4.74, SD = 1.42), suggesting some perceived constraints in purchase decisions.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis with varimax rotation was conducted, applying eigenvalues above 1 and a minimum factor loading of 0.50. Communality values exceeded 0.50, confirming acceptable variance levels. Responsiveness and Empathy failed to load within their construct and were removed before re-running EFA. The final model confirmed a three-factor structure consistent with the study framework. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, χ^2 (n = 783) = 6827.425, $p < 0.001$, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.868, indicating suitability for factor analysis. The final model explained 72.27% of the variance is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Exploratory Factor Analysis.

Items	Purchase Intention (PI)	Customer Satisfaction (CS)	Service Quality (SQ)
Tangibility			.863
Reliability			.853
Assurance			.758
Expectations		.777	
Quality		.802	

Value		.758
Complaints		.864
Loyalty		.801
Intention	.848	
Future Behavior	.917	
Attitude	.928	
Norm	.902	

Table 5: Construct Reliability & Validity.

Component	Construct Reliability	Convergent Validity		Discriminant validity					
				*FLC -Test			HTMT ratios		
	α	CR*	AVE*	SQ	CS	PI	SQ	CS	PI
SQ	.850	.865	0.682	.825*					
CS	.868	.899	0.642	.334	.801*		.332		
PI	.952	.944	0.809	.360	.470	.899*	.606	.279	
*Composite Reliability | *Average Variance Extracted | *Fornell & Lacker's criterion									

Construct reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability above 0.70. Convergent validity was established with AVE values over 0.50. Discriminant validity was supported by Fornell & Larcker's criterion and HTMT ratios below 0.85.

The study examines the impact of Service Quality (SQ) on Purchase Intention (PI) and Customer Satisfaction (CS). Regression analysis confirms that SQ significantly predicts PI with $F(2,780) = 142.061$, $p < 0.001$, $b = 0.259$) and CS with $F(2,780) = 142.061$, $p < 0.001$, $b = 0.304$). The model explains 26.7% of the variance in both PI and CS ($R^2 = 0.267$), highlighting the positive influence of SQ. The Table 6 shows the summary of the findings.

Table 6: Multiple Regression Values.

Hypotheses	Regression Weights	Beta Coefficients	t-Value	p-Value	Hypothesis Supported
H_1	SQ → PI	.259	7.030	< .001	Yes
H_2	SQ → CS	.304	12.087	< .001	Yes
R^2	.267				
F (2,780)	142.061				

Table 7: Mediation Analysis Values.

Relationship	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect effect	Confidence Interval		t-Value	Conclusion
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
SQ → CS → PI	.408 (.000)	.259 (.000)	.149	.111	.188	10.789	Partial Mediation

Customer satisfaction was examined as a mediator between service quality (SQ) and purchase intention (PI). Results showed a significant indirect effect (**b** = 0.149, **t** = 7.568), supporting H2, while the direct effect of SQ on PI remained

significant (**b** = 0.259, **p** < 0.001). This indicates partial mediation. The table 7 shows the summary of the findings.

3. DISCUSSION & IMPLICATION

The hypothesized relationships between service quality, customer satisfaction, and purchase intention (Taylor & Baker, 1994) were strongly supported, with service quality emerging as a key driver of both purchase intention and customer satisfaction. This reinforces its pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior within the airline industry. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on domestic commercial aviation in India by empirically re-validating the SERVPERF scale (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). The findings highlight the critical influence of service quality in enhancing customer satisfaction and fostering purchase intention among domestic flyers, ultimately strengthening brand loyalty and driving business profitability. To remain competitive, industry stakeholders including airline managers, fleet operators, and airport service providers must prioritize service excellence as a strategic imperative for customer retention and market leadership. Given the volatility of the aviation sector, a strong commitment to service quality is essential for ensuring long-term business sustainability. Future research should explore alternative sampling techniques beyond random convenience sampling and employ longitudinal studies to examine evolving consumer perceptions in response to continuous technological advancements in the airline industry. Additionally, researchers should investigate new variables influencing service quality and behavioral intentions that could further impact airline profitability. Lastly, while this study focused on consumer perceptions, future studies should incorporate the perspectives of service providers and employees as potential moderators within the service quality framework to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its impact.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence on the critical role of service quality in shaping customer satisfaction and purchase intention in the Indian civil aviation sector. By analyzing a diverse sample of 783 respondents across various airlines, the research highlights the significance of reliability, assurance, and tangibility in enhancing service perceptions. The findings reinforce the established theoretical framework, demonstrating that service quality positively influences both customer satisfaction and purchase intention, with customer satisfaction partially mediating this relationship. Given the competitive and dynamic nature of the aviation industry, service excellence emerges as a key strategic factor for airlines seeking to improve brand loyalty and business sustainability. Industry stakeholders must focus on enhancing weaker service dimensions such as responsiveness and empathy to optimize customer experiences. Future research should adopt longitudinal methodologies and explore additional variables influencing service perceptions, including the perspectives of service providers and employees, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in the airline industry.

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