Flying High: How Brand Image and Customer Engagement Shape Service Excellence in the Indian Airline Industry

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Abstract

This research examines the impact of brand image and customer engagement on service excellence within the Indian airline industry. As highlighted in service marketing theory, service excellence is a vital yet challenging component of organisational success. Using the purposive sampling technique, data was collected from the faculty members of higher educational institutions in Jammu City, North India, using both online and offline approaches. The data was analysed using the Smart PLS 3 software. The results identified both brand image and customer engagement as crucial drivers of service excellence, with a significant impact on customer delight as an ensuing effect. This study contributes novel insights into customer experiences, particularly within the airline industry. It stands out for examining the mediating role of service excellence in the relationship between brand image, customer engagement, and the achievement of customer delight in the service quality of Indian airlines.

Keywords: *Service Excellence, Customer Delight, Customer Engagement, Brand Image, Indian Airlines Sector*

1. Introduction

The burgeoning forces of globalization and intensified competition have increasingly led organizations to prioritize service excellence as a strategic imperative, as observed by Gouthier et al. (2012). Defined as the art of exceeding customer expectations to induce delight (Asif, 2014), service excellence has evolved from a mere operational goal to a strategic organizational commitment aimed at generating high levels of customer satisfaction, as articulated by Wirtz and Zeithaml (2018, p. 61). This shift from initial efforts to please customers towards striving for customer delight has been underscored by evidence suggesting that delighted customers exhibit greater loyalty than merely satisfied ones (Schneider & Bowen, 1999). The competitive landscape of today places a premium on customer delight as a critical outcome of service excellence, deemed essential for organizational survival (Torres and Kline, 2006; Asif, 2015). Despite its acknowledged importance, organizations often fall short in achieving service excellence, primarily due to a lack of deep understanding of its determinants (Abdul et al., 2010; Gouthier et al., 2012). The academic discourse around service excellence is notably sparse, with a distinct absence of clarity regarding its consequences and the empirical evidence needed to substantiate its role as a competitive lever for enhancing both customer and employee experiences. The existing body of literature on service excellence primarily adopts a conceptual stance, with empirical investigations into its antecedents and consequences being notably rare. Studies by Abdul Aziz and Wahiddin (2010), Sekhon et al. (2015), and Padma and Wagenseil

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(2018) represent some of the few attempts to conceptualize the drivers and outcomes of service excellence empirically. Abdul Aziz and Wahiddin (2010) have made strides in identifying customer participation as a key driver of service excellence in the hotel industry, with customer satisfaction highlighted as a significant outcome. However, they neglect the more critical measure of customer delight. Sekhon et al. (2015) identified crucial antecedents of service excellence in retail banking but did not explore their impacts on subsequent outcomes. Similarly, while Padma and Wagenseil (2018) recognized brand image and customer engagement as essential drivers of retail service excellence, pinpointing customer delight as a key outcome, the empirical validation of these findings remains outstanding. Moreover, Ziyad et al. (2020) provided empirical evidence of customer satisfaction due to service excellence. Still, they did not address its influence on customer delight, a key element for attaining a sustainable competitive advantage. Furthermore, discussions on service excellence have mainly been confined to a select few sectors, leaving areas like the airline industry, which is characterized by intense competition and significant buyer power due to low service differentiation and high availability of alternatives, relatively unexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the influence of brand image and customer engagement as pivotal antecedents to service excellence in the airline sector, focusing on customer delight as a primary outcome. Thus, our study on service excellence within the airline industry aims to enhance the current understanding and provide empirical support for the significance of service excellence as a competitive strategy, thereby offering organizations a more straightforward path towards achieving and sustaining service excellence. It contributes significantly to the extant literature by offering a deeper understanding of its dynamics and validating theoretical propositions with empirical evidence, thereby facilitating strategic advantages for organizations striving to achieve service excellence.

Our approach involves a comprehensive review of the literature on service excellence, its influencers—brand image and customer engagement—and its impact on customer delight. We will then outline a theoretical framework to assess how customer engagement and brand image influence service excellence and, in turn, how service excellence affects customer delight. Following this, the methodology employed will be discussed, culminating in examining the results, managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Brand Image and Service Excellence

Research indicates that a robust brand image is instrumental in crafting a compelling brand narrative, as Hsieh and Li (2008) noted. Furthermore, the perceived quality of a product, and consequently customer behaviour, is significantly influenced by the brand's image, suggesting that products associated with a higher brand image are considered superior quality (Richardson et al., 1994; Burmann et al., 2008). This perspective is reinforced by Hariandja et al. (2014), who argue that a formidable brand image, as a valuable asset for an organisation, is key to providing outstanding services. Additionally, Park et al. (1986) and Kim & Chao (2019) posit that brand image, as an initial phase in brand development, endows an organisation with a competitive edge by shaping consumer purchasing behaviours. Nevertheless, achieving service excellence extends beyond merely influencing consumer purchases; it encompasses fostering enduring customer relationships through continuous engagement in various business operations, as advocated by Vivek et al. (2012) and Padma and Wagenseil (2018). Engagement of customers in service delivery as co-producers mitigates costs and enhances service provision quality, as delineated by Heskett et al. (1997). This principle is especially pertinent in the service sector, including the airline industry, which is highly dependent on understanding and fulfilling the needs of its clientele to deliver exceptional service. Attaining service excellence,

in turn, equips an organisation with a sustainable competitive advantage by ensuring customer satisfaction and delight (Oliver et al., 1997; Johnston, 2004).

A brand is characterised as a design, symbol, name, or a blend of these elements (Kun, 2012), representing an intangible asset that is challenging to replicate and crucial for gaining a competitive advantage (Chao, 2011). Brand building is a long-term commitment that, when carefully cultivated, secures a lasting competitive edge (Syahfudin & Ruswanti, 2015). Brand image, as perceived by customers, is formulated through associations stored in memory (Keller, 1993), playing a vital role in service evaluation and marketing strategy formulation based on customer perceptions (Wijaya et al., 2020). Brand image is pivotal in assessing service quality, where a positive organizational image correlates with higher service quality (Darden & Schwinghammer, 1985; Andreassen & Lindestad, 1999; Bloemer et al., 1998), thus establishing a brand image as a crucial determinant of service quality (Wu, 2011). Empirical evidence from Mattila (1999) suggests that visible indicators of service excellence, rather than pricing information, significantly enhance a company's brand reputation. Similarly, Hariandja et al. (2014) emphasise that a strong brand image, as an organisational asset, is fundamental in delivering superior services. Thus,

H1: Brand Image has a significant impact on Service Excellence.

2.2 Customer Engagement and Service Excellence

Customer engagement represents how customers interact with a brand or company, extending well beyond mere purchasing actions (Van Doorn et al., 2010). It is crucial to cement a robust bond between customers and companies by promoting customer involvement in company initiatives (Braun et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2010; Liao et al. 2024). In the contemporary competitive landscape, comprehending and addressing customer needs and preferences is vital for any firm's survival and growth, underpinning the delivery of superior service quality (Diamantopoulos & Hart, 1993; Brady et al., 2006). Furthermore, given the active participation of customers in the service delivery process, engaging them becomes imperative to ensure the provision of high-quality services (Hau et al., 2017; Chang et al., 2019). Vargo & Lusch (2006) highlight that service delivery is a continuous interaction of social and economic activities that benefit from learning and collaborating with customers, who are now seen as partners in value creation. Therefore, fostering customer engagement is key to shaping their service experience and perceptions of service quality (Chang et al., 2019). Moreover, customer engagement aids firms in maintaining a customer-centric approach, providing ongoing insights into their evolving preferences (Padma & Wagenesil, 2018). A company highly attuned to its customers encourages feedback, which is instrumental in refining service excellence (Nwokah & Maclayton, 2006). This argument supports the work of Lytle et al. (1998) and Padma and Wagenesil (2018), who assert that customer engagement is a critical component in achieving service excellence. Therefore, it is hypothesized that

*H2: Customer Engagement has a positive impact on service excellence.*

2.3 Service Excellence and Customer Delight

Asif (2014) characterised service excellence as providing services that go beyond customer expectations, leading to customer delight. This concept of customer delight emerges when the service provided surpasses what customers anticipate, leaving them with a gratifying experience (Oliver et al., 1997). In the current competitive landscape, companies can secure a sustainable competitive edge by focusing on creating customer delight (Aziz & Wahiddin, 2010). This notion of delight is distinct from mere satisfaction, as it involves surpassing rather than merely meeting customer expectations (Asif, 2015). Barnes et al. (2016) noted that the extent customers are delighted is contingent upon a service organisation's capability to fulfil

these expectations. The greater the level of service excellence an organisation achieves, the higher the level of customer delight. Oliver et al. (1997), Gauthier et al. (2012), and Padma Wagenesil (2018) have all recognised that customer delight is a direct result of service excellence, describing it as an emotional response triggered by services that exceed expectations and leave customers with a joyful experience. Therefore, it is proposed that:

H3: Service excellence significantly impacts customer delight.

Figure 1: Research Framework
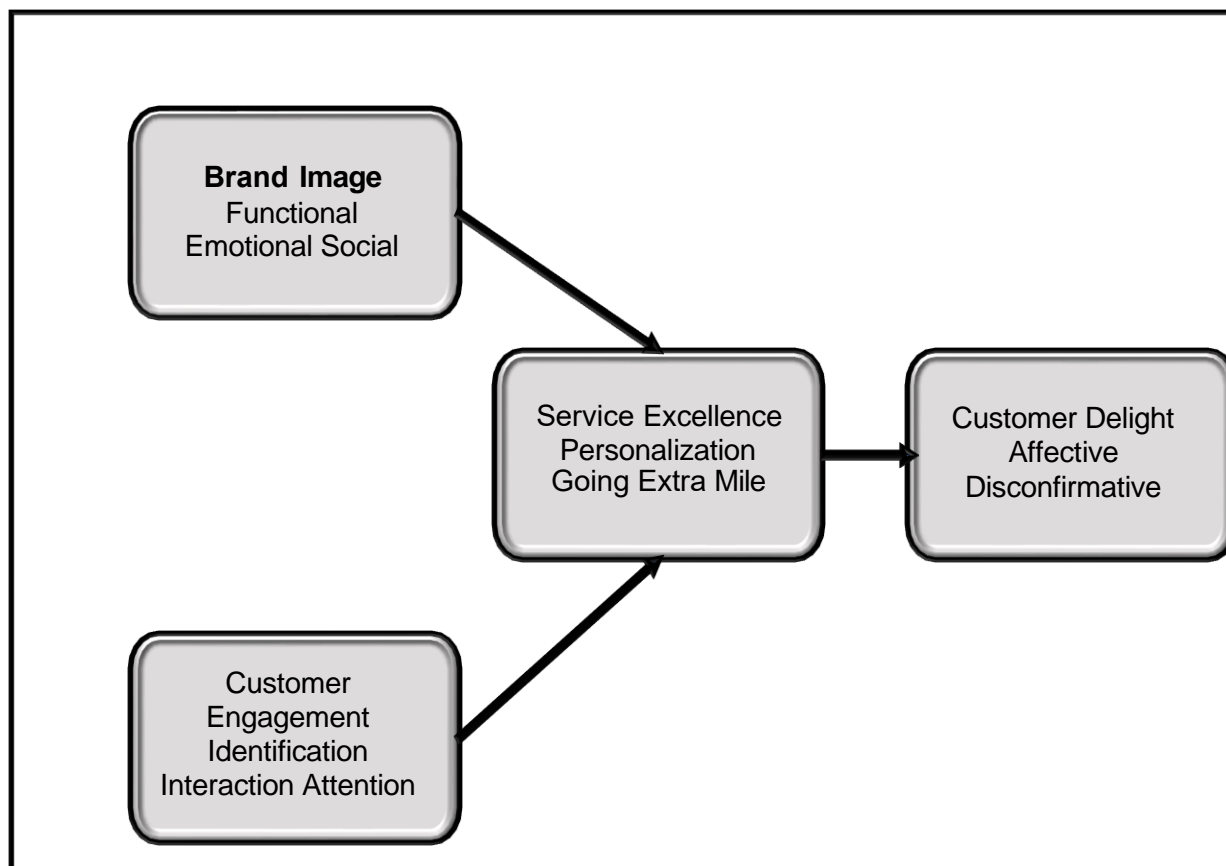
3. Research Method

An exploratory research design was used to test the research model. The scales employed in the study were taken from the existing studies. The constructs of customer engagement, brand image, service excellence, and customer delight were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). This study conceptualised service excellence as having two key dimensions: personalisation and going above and beyond. The personalisation dimension was evaluated using a scale devised by Parasuraman et al. (1988), while the aspect of going above and beyond was assessed through a scale developed by Johnston (2007). The brand image was measured employing a scale by Shafiee et al. (2014), capturing three facets: functional, experiential, and social image. To gauge customer engagement, scale items from Hapsari et al. (2017) were modified, viewing customer engagement as encompassing three dimensions: interaction, absorption, and attention. Lastly, customer delight was assessed with a 12-item scale derived from the works of Finn (2005), Liu and Keh (2015), and Coetzee & Coetzee (2019).

The instrument's pre-testing was done in two stages. Five marketing experts' responses were sought regarding the content, readability, and suitability of the items for measuring the

constructs. Their suggestions were considered and incorporated. In the next stage, the revised instrument was tested on twenty regular flyers with respect to readability and suggestions were also incorporated for better clarity.

As we could not identify the dedicated database of domestic flyers, snowball sampling was used to collect data from the regular and frequent flyers. Further, Indian airline customers who have travelled at least 3-5 times in the last year were contacted. Thus, based on the purposive sampling technique, we distributed questionnaires to 150 faculty members of higher educational institutions operating in Jammu City, North India, using both online and offline approaches. After 3-4 reminders to each, 123 questionnaires were found to be fully filled. However effective response rate was 66.7% (100 completed questionnaires), as 23 questionnaires were excluded because of incomplete responses. The sample size was adequate for the exploratory research design and the PLS-SEM data analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis and Results

The present study has used Smart PLS 3 to develop the structural equation model and to evaluate the paths of the latent variables and their associations. PLS-SEM is the best alternative to covariance-based-structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) when predictive accuracy is paramount and the sample size of a population is small (Hair et al. 2019: Shmueli et al. 2019). PLS-SEM is the preferred approach in exploratory research, as it can handle measurement errors associated with small samples (Ringle,2011) and exhibit optimal predictive power (Zhang, 2007). Since the present study is exploratory and had a sample size of 100, the data is analysed on Smart PLS 3 (Hair et al., 2017, 2019). The partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) results were assessed in two stages. The first stage involves the assessment of the measurement model, whereas the second involves structural model assessment. The detailed analysis related to the measurement model and structural model is discussed as under:

3.3.1 Measurement Model

The measurement model evaluates the relationship between observed items (latent variable) and exogenous/endogenous latent variable by examining the factor loading on each construct (Hulland,1999). The assessment of the measurement models for reflective constructs in PLS-SEM

3.0 is based on reflective indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). The detailed analysis related to the measurement model is discussed as under:

A. Reflective Indicator Reliability

Reflective indicator reliability is concerned with examining the factor loadings. According to Hair et al. 2019, reflective indicator reliability is considered adequate when the indicator has a loading equal to or greater than 0.708 on its construct. All the indicators have factor loadings above 0.708, establishing reliability.

B. Internal Consistency Reliability

Internal consistency reliability is assessed by checking the composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha. According to Hair et al. (2019), composite reliability values between 0.60-.70 in exploratory research and 0.70-.0.90 in more advanced research are considered satisfactory. In contrast, Cronbach's value above 0.70 is acceptable for demonstrating internal consistency reliability. The study's reliability results are mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability and Validity of the Data

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Brand Image	Functional Image	0.852	0.842	0.905	0.761
	Experiential Image	0.918			
	Social Image	0.844			
Customer Engagement	Interaction	0.812	0.772	0.866	0.685
	Absorption	0.932			
	Attention	0.727			
Service Excellence	Personalization	0.913	0.785	0.903	0.835
	Going the extra mile	0.901			
Customer Delight	Affective	0.934	0.804	0.910	0.823
	Disconformative	0.893			

C. Convergent Validity

Convergent validity, the third step, is the correlation among the items used to measure the same construct. AVE (Average Variance Extracted), the mean of squared loadings of each item on its construct, is used to measure convergent validity (Malhotra& Dash, 2010; Hair et al., 2019). Convergent validity is established when AVE values exceed 0.50.

D. Discriminant Validity

The fourth and last step of the reflective measurement model is assessing the discriminant validity. Discriminant validity measures the extent to which each latent variable is empirically different from others (Hair et al., 2019). The Fornell-Larker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) are the methods used to assess discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017). The Fornell- Larcker method involves that the AVE of each latent construct should be higher than the construct's highest squared correlation from any other latent construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hamid et al., 2017; Henseler &Ringle, 2015). In contrast, the HTMT criterion involves comparing the correlations of the latent constructs to a predefined threshold of 0.85 (Kline et al., 2011) and 0.90 (Gold et al., 2001). The present study has used both methods to assess discriminant validity. Table 2 exhibits values greater than correlations among the variables, thus satisfying the Fronell-Larker criterion. Table 2 depicts that the HTMT ratio results of the study are lower than the threshold limit of 0.90, hence showing that the model has excellent discriminant validity.

Table 2: Fronell-Larker and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Values

	Brand Image	Customer Delight	Customer Engagement	Service Excellence
Brand Image	(.872)			
Customer Delight	0.870 (.715)	(.914)		
Customer Engagement	0.626(.511)	0.761(.612)	(.828)	
Service Excellence	0.806 (.660)	0.825(.663)	(.593)	(.907)

(Note: Values within brackets are HTMT values)

3.3.2   Structural Model

After fulfilling the measurement model assessment criteria, the next step in PLS-SEM is assessing the structural model. The structural model examines the relationship between exogenous and endogenous latent variables by analysing their path coefficients (Goswami & Dsilva, 2019). According to Hair et al. 2019, the central criteria used in assessing the structural model are R2 (coefficient of determination), Q2 (cross-validated redundancy measure), relevance and the statistical significance of the path coefficients. The detailed analysis related to the structural model is discussed as under:

(i)   R Square

Before measuring R^2, the initial step in the structural model is the collinearity assessment. Collinearity is checked to ensure that structural model coefficients do not influence regression results, as the latter are derived from regression equations. For this purpose, the VIF values should be less than 3 (Hair et al., 2019). If the VIF values are less than 3, then the next step in the analysis would be the determination of R^2. The coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates the cumulative influence of the exogenous variable over the endogenous variable (Al-Maroof et al., 2021). The R2 values range from 0 to 1, so values of 0.25, 0.50, and 0.75 are considered weak, moderate and substantial (Henseler et al., 2009; Hair et al., 2019). This study found that 52.4% of the variance in service excellence is explained by brand image and customer engagement 42.4% of the variance in customer delight was explained by brand image, customer engagement, and service excellence, thus providing conclusive evidence of model predictive ability.

(ii) Q^2

Q^2, measured through blindfolding, is another method to examine the PLS path model's predictive accuracy (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974). Q^2 value is the difference predicted and the original values; the smaller the difference, the higher the value. According to Chin (2010), Q^2 values higher than 0, 0.25 and 0.50 represent the PLS-path model's small, medium and large predictive relevance, respectively. Table 6 shows that Q^2 values for service excellence (0.410) and customer delight (0.352) have medium predictive relevance. Thus, the present study model's predictive relevance is confirmed as all endogenous constructs have Q^2 values more than zero.

(iii) Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing in the Smart PLS 3 involves a significance test for direct and indirect effects and a measurement of the magnitude of the influence of the exogenous variable on the endogenous variable (Hair et al., 2012). An analysis of the direct test is required to determine the effect of brand image and customer engagement on service excellence and service excellence customer delight. The effect test in the present study was performed using the t-statistic test in the PLS software 3.0 using the bootstrapping technique (Hair et al., 2019). With 100 cases, 500 subsamples, and no sign change option, the p-value and t-value are shown in Table 4. The values show that brand image positively impacts service excellence with a p-value (0.000) and t-value (5.612). Hence, supporting hypothesis 1. Similarly, the hypothesis that customer engagement positively impacts service excellence (H2) is also supported with a p-value (0.000) and a t-value (3.791).

The service excellence positively impacts service excellence with p-value (0.000) and t-value (12.733) indicate acceptance of H3.
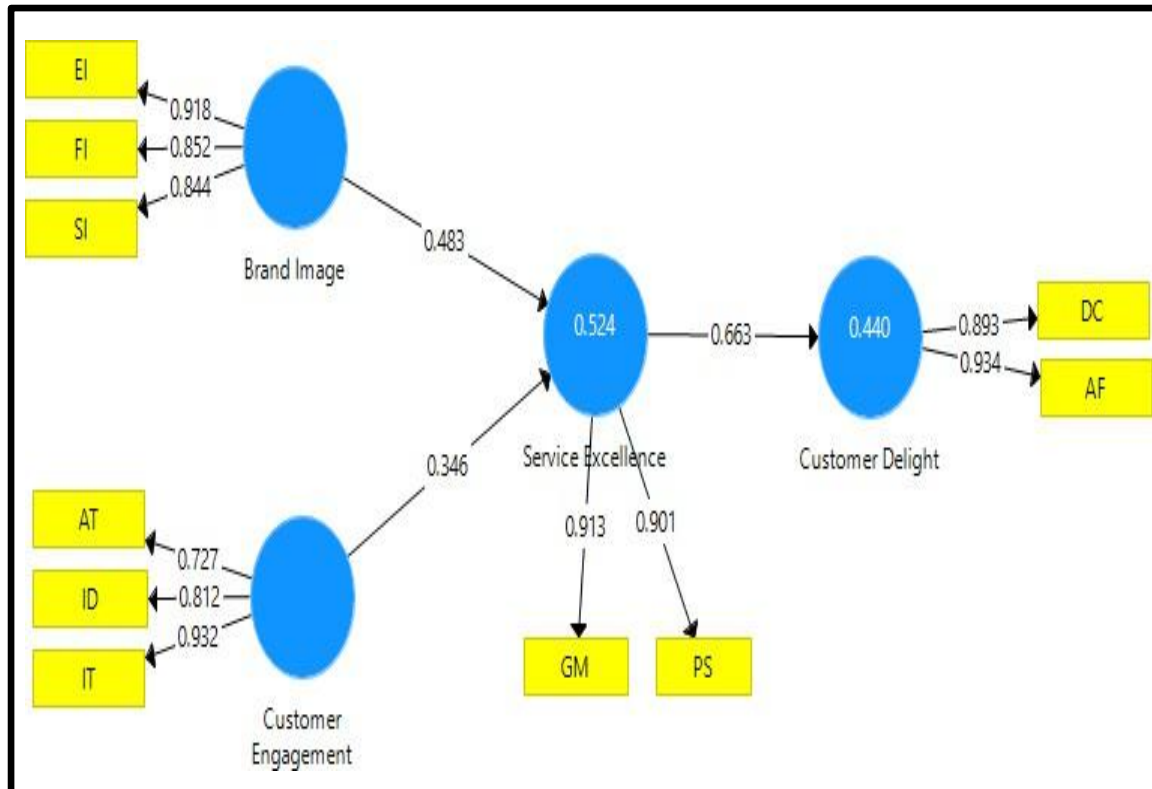
EI-Emotional Image, FI-Functional Image, SI-Social Image, AT-Attention, ID-Identification, IT-Interaction, GM- Going the extra mile, PS-Personalisation, DC-Disconformative, AF-Affective

Table 3: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path	T-value	P-value	Results
H1	**Brand Image – Service Excellence (BI- SE)**	**0.483**	**5.612**	**0.000**	**Accepted**
H2	**Customer Engagement - Service Excellence (CE-SE)**	**0.346**	**3.791**	**0.000**	**Accepted**
H3	**Service Excellence- Customer Delight (SE- CD)**	**0.663**	**12.733**	**0.000**	**Accepted**

4. Discussion

The primary aim of this investigation is to delve into the influence of brand image and customer engagement on fostering service excellence and how service excellence, in turn, enhances customer delight within the Indian airline sector. This research underscores brand image and customer engagement as pivotal elements that drive service excellence, with customer delight emerging as a significant outcome of such excellence. The findings offer profound insights with substantial implications for the industry. Customer loyalty is paramount in the highly competitive service sector, including the airline industry. Modern consumers are discerning, seeking not just satisfaction but experiences that resonate on a personal level. To cultivate such loyalty, airlines must extend their efforts beyond achieving mere customer satisfaction to delivering memorable and personalised experiences. Excelling in service delivery becomes a

crucial strategy in this context. The study brings to light the critical role of an organisation's brand image in attaining service excellence. Constructing a robust brand image is a long-term endeavour, requiring consistent excellence across all operational facets. For Indian airlines, this means excelling in customer service, punctuality, in-flight services, and more to solidify a positive image in the consumer's psyche. Moreover, the research highlights the significance of customer engagement in realising service excellence. Airlines can enhance the service delivery process by involving customers in the service process or treating them as co-contributors. Such engagement elevates the customer's experience and fosters a sense of belonging and loyalty towards the airline. For instance, introducing interactive platforms for feedback or involving frequent flyers in service improvement discussions can be instrumental. Airlines like IndiGo and Vistara have leveraged social media and customer feedback mechanisms to refine their services, reflecting an understanding of the critical role customer engagement plays in service excellence. Furthermore, personalised services, such as custom meal plans based on customer preferences or offering tailored travel solutions, exemplify how airlines can exceed customer expectations, transitioning from satisfaction to delight. These practices reinforce the brand image and significantly enhance customer engagement and loyalty. This investigation is particularly relevant for stakeholders including airline managers, employees and policymakers, especially in a burgeoning aviation market like India. With India poised to become the world's third-largest aviation market by 2024, understanding and implementing strategies that hinge on brand image and customer engagement to achieve service excellence could be pivotal in navigating the competitive landscape and ensuring sustainable growth.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Exploring brand image and customer engagement's impact on achieving service excellence within the Indian airline industry opens avenues for further scholarly inquiry. While shedding light on pivotal factors contributing to service excellence, this study also delineates areas that require a more nuanced understanding. Firstly, the research context is confined to the airline sector, suggesting that the applicability of the findings might be limited across different industries. The unique dynamics of the airline industry, such as the critical importance of safety, timeliness, and customer service, might not directly translate to sectors with different operational pressures and customer expectations. For example, the retail industry's emphasis on product variety and shopping ambiance presents a contrast to the airline industry's focus areas. Secondly, the investigation centers predominantly on the customer's viewpoint concerning the determinants of airline service excellence. However, achieving a comprehensive understanding of service excellence necessitates examining it from multiple perspectives, including those of employees and the organization itself. Employees, for instance, play a crucial role in delivering service excellence, and their insights could reveal internal processes and challenges that influence service outcomes. Likewise, organizational strategies and policies could significantly impact how service excellence is pursued and achieved. Thirdly, this study posits service excellence as a construct with two main dimensions: personalisation and going the extra mile. However, the literature identifies other essential facets, such as reliability, responsiveness, and servicescapes, as crucial to service excellence. The concept of reliability in the airline context could relate to on-time performance and baggage handling efficiency, while responsiveness might pertain to the speed and quality of service recovery efforts. Servicescapes, referring to the physical and virtual environments where services are delivered, could encompass everything from the design and comfort of the aircraft to the user-friendliness of the airline's website. Hence, future research endeavours could explore service excellence as a more comprehensive multi-dimensional construct that includes these additional dimensions within the airline industry. For example, a study could examine how the physical layout and ambience

of an airline's lounges or the efficiency of its online booking system contribute to overall service excellence, alongside personalisation and efforts to exceed customer expectations. By addressing these gaps, future research can significantly enrich our understanding of service excellence, providing a more holistic view that encompasses diverse industry contexts, stakeholder perspectives, and the multifaceted nature of service excellence itself. Such endeavours would contribute to the academic discourse and offer practical insights for the airline industry to enhance its service delivery and competitive positioning.

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Appendix: Scale Items.

Constructs	Dimensions	Scale Items	Factor loading	Items Retained / Deleted	Alpha	CR	AVE
Brand Image	**Functional Image**	This airline is regarded as a good choice for air trips. I have positive perceptions and beliefs about the features of this airline. This airline is exciting and attractive	**0.449**				
	Emotional Image	I have positive feelings towards this airline. This airline is luxurious and smooth. This airline has a personality that distinguishes itself from others.	**0.549**		**0.842**	**0.905**	**0.761**
	Social Image	This airline creates a positive image of me in the sight of others. This airline fits my personality and self-image. This airline makes me leave a good impression on other people. This airline is suitable to my class and social status**.**	**0.341**				
Customer Engagement	**Identification**	I am proud of this airline's success. When someone criticises this airline, it feels like a personal insult. I often participate in the activities of this airline	**0.730**		**0.772**	**0.866**	**0.685**
	Interaction	I enjoy interacting with like-minded people that fly with this airline. In general, I thoroughly enjoy exchanging ideas with other people that fly with this airline	**0.320**				

	Attention	I pay a lot of attention to any information about this airline	0.540			
Service Excellence	**Personalisation**	Airline's operating hours are convenient to their customers.	0.700			
		Airline has customers' best interest at heart.		0.785	0.903	0.823
		Airline's employees give customers individual attention				
	Going the extra mile	Airline's employees do things beyond what might be expected from them to do.	0.730			
		Airline's anticipate the needs of their customers.				
		Airline's employees are always eager to serve their customers				
Customer Delight	**Affective**	I felt delighted by the service of this airline.	0.586			
		I felt gleeful by the service of this airline		0.804	0.910	0.835
		I felt elated by the service of this airline				
		I was pleased with the services of this airline.				
	Disconformative	The service I received was much more than generally necessary.	0.648			
		Services of this airline exceed my expectations.				