IMPACT OF AIRLINE SERVICE QUALITY ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY: A CASE OF SELECTED INDIAN DOMESTIC AIRLINES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of airline service quality on customer loyalty within the context of Indian domestic airlines. As competition intensifies in the aviation sector, understanding the factors that drive customer loyalty has become crucial for airlines aiming to enhance their market position. This research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing surveys to gather data from frequent flyers across various Indian domestic airlines. Key service quality dimensions—including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles—are analyzed to determine their influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Findings indicate that service quality significantly affects customer loyalty, with reliability and responsiveness emerging as the most critical dimensions. The study also highlights the role of customer satisfaction as a mediating factor in the relationship between service quality and loyalty. Furthermore, demographic variables reveal differing perceptions of service quality, suggesting that airlines should tailor their strategies to meet diverse customer needs. This research contributes to the existing literature by providing insights specific to the Indian market and offers practical recommendations for airline management to enhance service quality and foster customer loyalty.

Keywords: *service quality, perceptible, dependability, assurance, reactive, compassion*

INTRODUCTION

The Indian airline industry is one of the fastest-growing aviation markets in the world, characterized by its dynamic growth, increasing competition, and evolving regulatory landscape. With a population exceeding 1.4 billion and a burgeoning middle class, the demand for air travel in India has surged, leading to significant investments and innovations in the sector. Service quality in the Indian domestic airline industry is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty, especially in a rapidly growing market characterized by intense competition. With an increasing number of passengers opting for air travel, airlines are focusing on enhancing their service offerings to differentiate themselves and improve the overall travel experience.

Key Dimensions of Service Quality

1. **Dependability**: This encompasses the airline's ability to consistently deliver on its promises, including on-time departures, efficient baggage handling, and minimal flight cancellations. Reliability is particularly crucial in a market where punctuality can influence passenger choice.
2. **Perceptible**: The physical aspects of service, such as the condition of the aircraft, cleanliness, and the appearance of cabin crew, play a significant role in shaping passenger perceptions. Modern, well-maintained aircraft and clean facilities contribute to a positive travel experience.
3. **Reactive**: Airlines must demonstrate a willingness to assist customers promptly, whether it's addressing queries, managing complaints, or providing timely information about flights. Quick and effective communication can significantly enhance customer satisfaction.
4. **Assurance**: The confidence and comfort passengers feel when dealing with airline staff is vital. Well-trained and courteous employees who can provide accurate information instill a sense of trust and safety among travelers.
5. **Compassion**: Understanding and addressing the unique needs of individual passengers is essential. Personalized services, such as special assistance for elderly or disabled travelers, can greatly enhance the perceived quality of service.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior studies have indicated a connection between customer loyalty and service excellence. Many service quality researchers have found that when consumers perceive big inter-brand quality disparities within a product category, they are more likely to be loyal to a single brand (Jacoby et al. 1973, Olson and Jacoby 1972, Anderson 1974,).

The majority of service quality characteristics are "experience qualities" that can only be determined when a consumer buys or consumes (experiences) a service (Parasuraman et al. 1985). A number of recent researches have looked into the effect of service quality on customer behavior intentions (e. g., Cronin and Taylor 1992, zei et al. 1993). These studies, however, have a number of drawbacks, which are listed below:

- In these investigations, the operationalization of behavioral intents does not capture the complete range of potential behaviors that could be prompted by service quality. Cronin and Taylor (1992) utilized a single-item scale to assess purchase intentions, whereas Boulding et al. (1993) used a two-item scale to assess repurchase intentions and willingness to suggest in one of their research. They utilized a 6-item scale in the second trial to assess intentions to speak positively about the institution and donate money to it.
- The absence of other client behaviors that are frequently touted as advantages of good service. For example, a readiness to pay a higher price and to remain loyal even as prices rise is an examples of these behavioral intents (Zeithaml et al. 1990).
- Customers' complaint intents (Singh 1990) when they encounter problems with a company's service and shows the level of dissatisfaction among customers.

Boulding et al. (1993) investigated the association between disconfirmation of predictive expectations and forms of should-expectations and various types of behavioral intention in an experimental and field investigation. In the first study, the perceived service quality of a hypothetical airline visit had a positive impact on repurchase and recommendation intentions.. Overall, intentions were found to be highly and positively connected to perceived service quality. In his research of regular travellers, Knutson (1988) found a relationship between service quality expectations and repeat behavior. Knutson discovered that repeat airline visitors evaluated service quality in the same way they did when they first booked the

flight. The level of these quality expectations for the airlines' service and amenities varied by class (economy and business), but the criterion for evaluating quality and consequent repeat purchase remained consistent across all price segments. One would anticipate an individual who perceives a high degree of service quality associated with a recreation experience to demonstrate higher levels of loyalty and continue to patronize the recreation agency providing the service. Customer loyalty is a crucial component of business success and profitability since customers who are most loyal to a service are more likely to spend more money and repurchase the service more frequently (Dehghan and Shahin, 2011). Studies conducted elsewhere have found that customer loyalty is significantly influenced by service quality, either directly or through the mediating influence of other dimensions like satisfaction (Park, Robertson & Cheng-lung , 2005). Lai et .al (2007) According to a study, the benefits of good customer relations will influence a customer's loyalty.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is an empirical study. The primary data was collected to analyse the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty in India's domestic aviation industry. The primary data has been collected through self-designed questionnaires addressed to the flyers of the selected airline players. The most critical part of study design is sample selection. The researcher employed several sample techniques for data collecting at various phases of data collection. Purposive and convenience sampling strategies were utilized to choose organizations for the study in the outset. The aim of this research is to examine at the factors that influence service quality and how they affect customer satisfaction & loyalty. The researcher selected the four major airline companies i.e. IndiGo, AirIndia, GoAir and SpiceJet on the basis of market share (Source: Airport Authority of India Survey Report).

In terms of airline respondents, they were picked based on researcher's judgement and then at random. The sample for airline respondents were picked based on the researcher's judgment and then on a random basis. In all, 749 respondents of different airline companies constituted the sample. To arrive this figure, the data from 800 (200 from each airline company) flyer has been collected. 51 questionnaires filled were discarded because of insufficient response, biasness or ambiguity in responses. The reliability of the data has been tested through Cronbach alpha and discriminant validity has been tested average variance

explained which is found to be in the acceptable range.

The collected data has been analysed by employing the different statistical techniques like exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, structure equation modelling.

Analysis of the Data

Data Analysis

In order to identify prominent factors of service quality that lead to loyalty among the customers of the airline industry. An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to summarize various statement into few considerable factors and to derive different factors from them. EFA is a multivariate data analysis technique used to reduce a large number of statements into a smaller set of summarized variables and to identify unobserved factors that cannot be observed directly **(Hair et al., 2014)**.

Table 1 displays the KMO value of the data set used for factor analysis, which as per Kaiser indexing is 0.892 meritorious level and acceptable to proceed further for analysis.

KMO AND BARTLETT'S TEST

Table: 1
KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.892
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	14423.199
	Df	595
	Sig.	.000

Source: Primary Data

- **Bartlett's Test of Sphericity:** Table 1 also depicts the value of Barlett's test of Sphericity which looks significant, the p-value is less than 0.05 (i.e. p = 0.000) indicating that a significant correlation structure exists among statements of service quality.
- **Anti-image Correlation:** This indicator was used to examine the partial correlation among the statements. Anti-image correlation value less than 0.5 indicates that partial correlation exists among the variables which is not a good indicator. All the values of

anti-image correlation were found to be greater than 0.5 which showed that there is no partial correlation among the variables.

Based on above parameters, the primary data set was found suitable for the application of factor analysis.

PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS WITH VARIMAX ROTATION

Table: 2
Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation

Statements	Component					Communalities
	1	2	3	4	5	
The airline processes the luggage of passengers with care and attention.	.784	.060	.057	.048	-.044	.626
When you have an issue, the airline is sincere in its intention to assist you in resolving it.	.737	-.042	.129	.059	-.040	.567
The airline provides services that are at par with best in the industry.	.804	.028	.057	.045	-.021	.653
The airline can be relied on aspects such as seat booking, seat allotment and applicable charges.	.819	.023	-.011	.056	.026	.675
The airline's departure and arrival schedules have always been on time.	.809	.026	.029	.040	.016	.659
The airline has prompt information of status update through ICT facilities like websites, mobiles.	.788	-.058	.138	.077	-.009	.650
The personnel of the airline crew are cordial.	.731	-.005	.021	.056	.028	.538
The airline fulfills its promises.	.830	.028	.054	-.001	.020	.693
The airline keeps accurate records.	.774	.145	.054	.122	.023	.639
Passengers are transported on new modern and well-maintained aircraft by the airline.	.084	-.033	.824	.070	-.022	.693
During the trip, the airline features a convenient washroom.	.124	-.016	.841	-.002	-.035	.725
The food and beverages served in airline are fresh, hygienic and tasty.	.059	-.058	.824	.015	-.044	.689

There are daily newspaper and current magazines to read on board the aircraft.	.078	-.022	.806	.079	-.043	.665
Airline's physical infrastructure is acceptable in the type of service it delivers.	.056	-.012	.841	.071	-.056	.718
The airline provides services actively.	.040	.836	-.028	.006	.082	.708
Employees of the airline are consistently courteous with you.	.017	.816	-.053	.047	.110	.683
The airline personnel are experienced and well-trained.	.015	.836	-.022	.042	.077	.707
Employees of the airline have the knowledge to answer your questions.	.018	.846	-.007	.042	.073	.724
The airline has convenient flight schedule and enough frequencies.	.059	.844	-.034	-.033	.043	.720
Passengers are compensated sufficiently by the airline for any damages arising from services disruption in the shortest time possible.	-.002	.127	-.045	.042	.822	.696
The airline attaches importance to you.	.021	.073	-.060	.028	.842	.719
The airline is accessible at occasions when you need it.	.004	.055	-.034	.017	.817	.671
Employees are aware of the expectations of customer and readily fulfill those.	-.026	.106	-.047	.039	.852	.742
The airline's employees notify precise time when services will be delivered.	.107	.034	.059	.853	.014	.743
The airline provides inflight safety and security features practiced by the staff.	.067	.035	.033	.880	.041	.783
Personnel working for the airline put themselves in the place of passengers when providing services.	.119	.019	.063	.854	.037	.749
There is clarity and usefulness of announcements.	.077	.012	.070	.872	.040	.774
Eigen Value	5.651	3.568	3.501	3.056	2.830	
Percentage of Variance Explained	20.931	13.214	12.968	11.319	10.480	
Cumulative Percentage Variance Explained	20.931	34.144	47.112	58.430	68.911	

The principal component analysis method with latent root criteria has been adopted to extract the factors for analysis. Latent root criteria select only those variables whose eigen value is greater than one **(Slocum-Gori and Zumbo, 2011)**. The eigen values of all five given factors were 5.651, 3.568, 3.501, 3.056 and 2.830 respectively. Factor analysis reduced the 27 statements related to the service quality of airline companies into five key factors.

Table 2 presents the value for percentage variance explained, factor loading and communality. According to Heir et al., (2008), the value for the total variance explained should be less than 60 percent, above table depicts that the value of the total variance explained was 68.911%, which is found to be satisfactory for conducting factor analysis. Varimax rotation with the Kaiser Normalization method was adopted for loading the statements. This method is useful in avoiding dual-loading problems in analysis. The researcher also used criteria 0.5 for selecting the statement included in factors and suppressed all statements whose loading value is less than 0.5, ignoring the -/+ signs.

Communality is the sum of the squared component loading up to the number of factors extracted in the study. A good way to measure factor analysis is to have a communality of at least 0.40. Looking at the above table value of communality of all statements was found greater than threshold value.

Factors affecting Customer Satisfaction

Table: 3

Naming of the Factors affecting Customer Satisfaction

Sr.no	Factor Name	loading	Statement of variables
	Dependability (20.931%)	.830	The airline fulfills its promises.
		.819	The airline can be relied on aspects such as seat booking, seat allotment and applicable charges.
		.809	The airline's departure and arrival schedules have always been on time.
		.804	The airline provides services that are at par with best in the industry.
		.788	The airline had prompt information of status update through ICT facilities like websites, mobiles.
		.784	The airline processes the luggage of passengers with care and attention.
		.774	The airline keeps accurate records.

		.737	When you have an issue, the airline is sincere in its intention to assist you in resolving it.
		.731	The personnel of the airline crew are cordial.
	Assurance (13.214%)	.846	Employees of the airline have the knowledge to answer your questions.
		.844	The airline has convenient flight schedule and enough frequencies.
		.836	The airline personnel are experienced and well-trained.
		.836	The airline provides services actively.
		.816	Employees of the airline are consistently courteous with you.
	Perceptible (12.968%)	.841	During the trip, the airline features a convenient washroom.
		.841	Airline's physical infrastructure is acceptable in the type of service it delivers.
		.824	The food and beverages served in airline are fresh, hygienic and tasty.
		.824	Passengers are transported on new modern and well-maintained aircraft by the airline.
		.806	There are daily newspaper and current magazines to read on board the aircraft.
	Compassion (11.319%)	.880	The airline provides inflight safety and security features practiced by the staff.
		.872	There is clarity and usefulness of announcements.
		.854	Personnel working for the airline put themselves in the place of passengers when providing services.
		.853	The airline's employees notify precise time when services will be delivered.
	Reactive (10.480%)	.852	Employees are aware of the expectations of customer and readily fulfill those.
		.842	The airline attaches importance to you.
		.822	Passengers are compensated sufficiently by the airline for any damages arising from services disruption in the shortest time possible.
		.817	The airline is accessible at occasions when you need it.

Source: Primary Data

After conducting factor analysis on 27 statements of service quality five key factors have been derived and appropriate names were also given to all factors. The most appropriate names were given after considering the nature and hidden insight of the statements.

The EFA has identified five factors of service quality in the airline industry. The researcher has examined whether these factors lead to satisfaction among the customer towards airline companies. To examine the impact of service quality factors on customer satisfaction structural equation modeling was used in this section. Structure equation modeling is a multivariate data analysis technique that is used to confirm the hypothesized relationships among latent constructs by considering observed variables that are used as indicators of latent constructs and measurement errors. The relationship between constructs can be analysed by the path coefficient of each research hypothesis. The hypothesized relation of each estimated path coefficient can be tested with statistical significance **(Bollen, 1989; Byrne, 1998; Hair et al., 1998; Loehlin, 1992).**

Table: 4

Hypothesized Structural Model Constructs - Conceptual Model

Exogenous Construct	Endogenous Variable
Reactive (RE)	Customer Satisfaction(CS)
Compassion (CO)	Customer Loyalty (CL)
Dependability (DE)	
Perceptible (PE)	
Assurance (AEM)	

Table 4 depicts the all exogenous and endogenous variables included in the research model. The study used service quality variables (identified through exploratory factor analysis) as independent variables to explain the variance in consumer satisfaction. In the second step, consumer satisfaction is also used as a predictor to explain the variance of consumer loyalty towards airline company.

HYPOTHESIS FOR PROPOSED MODEL

Some hypotheses have been proposed to test the significance of the relationship between each variable. All the proposed hypotheses were null hypotheses as they appear to be unexcited. The null hypothesis is an opposite statement that assumes no relationship exists between the variables. The hypothesis has been developed for the proposed model are:

H_{1a}: There is no significant impact of dependability on customer satisfaction in airline service

quality.

H_{1b}: There is no significant impact of Perceptibility on customer satisfaction in airline service quality.

H_{1c}: There is no significant impact of Assurance on customer satisfaction in airline service quality.

H_{1d}: There is no significant impact of Compassion on customer satisfaction in airline service quality.

H_{1e}: There is no significant impact of Reactive on customer satisfaction in airline service quality.

H_{1f}: There is no significant impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty in airline service quality.

MODEL MEASUREMENT

Two steps are followed while applying structural equation model, one is the measurement model which is also known as confirmatory factor analysis and other is the path model **(Hair, et al., 2010).**The measurement model evaluates the validity and reliability of latent variables while the path model examines the statistical significance of hypothesized relationship between each variable. Table 5 depicts the values of factor loadings, Cronbach alpha (**α**), composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE).

Table: 5

Assessment of validity and reliability of proposed model

Instrument/Items and constructs	Loadings	(α)	CR	AVE
Assurance				
AEM1: The airline provides services actively.	0.823	0.896	0.922	0.703
AEM2: Employees of the airline are consistently courteous with you.	0.861			
AEM3: The airline personnel are experienced and well-trained.	0.834			
AEM4: Employees of the airline have the knowledge to answer your questions.	0.862			
AEM5: The airline had convenient flight schedule and	0.813			

enough frequencies.				
Compassion				
CO1: The airline provides inflight safety and security features practiced by the staff.	0.778	0.861	0.901	0.696
CO2: There is clarity and usefulness of announcements.	0.845			
CO3: Personnel working for the airline put themselves in the place of passengers when providing services.	0.876			
CO4: The airline's employees notify precise time when services will be delivered.	0.834			
Dependability				
DE1: The airline processes the luggage of passengers with care and attention.	0.797	0.925	0.937	0.625
DE2: When you have an issue, the airline is sincere in its intention to assist you in resolving it.	0.764			
DE3: The airline fulfills its promises.	0.800			
DE4: The airline can be relied on aspects such as seat booking, seat allotment and applicable charges	0.804			
DE5: The airline's departure and arrival schedules have always been on time.	0.804			
DE6: The airline had prompt information of status update through ICT facilities like websites, mobiles.	0.811			
DE7: The personnel of the airline crew are cordial.	0.721			
DE8: The airline delivers on its commitments when it says it will.	0.818			
DE9: The airline keeps accurate records.	0.792			
Perceptible				
PE1: Passengers are transported on new modern and well-maintained aircraft by the airline.	0.823	0.891	0.917	0.690
PE2: During the trip, the airline features a convenient washroom.	0.822			
PE3: The food and beverages served in airline are fresh, hygienic and tasty.	0.798			
PE4: There are daily newspaper and current magazines to	0.868			

read on board the aircraft.				
PE5: Airline's physical infrastructure is acceptable in the type of service it delivers.	0.840			
Reactive				
RE1: Employees are aware of the expectations of customer and readily fulfill those.	0.866	0.896	0.927	0.762
RE2: The airline attaches importance to you.	0.875			
RE3: Passengers are compensated sufficiently by the airline for any damages arising from services disruption in the shortest time possible.	0.869			
RE4: The airline is accessible at occasions when you need it.	0.881			
Customer Satisfaction				
CS1: Rate your satisfaction in resolving your issues.	0.829	0.875	0.909	0.666
CS2: The airline always fulfills my expectations.	0.822			
CS3: All the contracts made with the airline are satisfactory.	0.830			
CS4: How do you rate our customer communications?	0.798			
CS5: In general, I am satisfied with the airline.	0.801			
Customer Loyalty				
CL1: I will continue to travel with the airline.	0.862	0.823	0.894	0.737
CL2: I will continue to recommend this airline to my family and friends.	0.869			
CL3: I believe it is a good airline.	0.846			

Source: Primary Data

The factor loading is the correlation coefficient between a given item and the latent variables **(Gorsuch, 1997)**. A factor loading value greater than 0.6 is considered as a good indicator of an appropriate model, however, if a loading value is found to be less than 0.4 the item should be dropped **(Awang, 2014)**.All factor loading values in the above table were found to be greater than the threshold value. The internal consistency of the given model is measured through Cronbach alpha and composite reliability. As recommended by **Henseler et al., 2009,** the value of both measures should be greater than 0.7. looking into Table5 it is found that the

values of the Cronbach alpha and composite reliability is more than the suggested value. The value of the extracted mean-variance (AVE) was higher than the acceptable limit of 0.50 suggested by **Fournell and Larker (1981)**.

Table: 6

Assessing Discriminant Validity

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Assurance	0.839						
2. Compassion	0.194	0.834					
3. Customer Loyalty	0.102	0.067	0.859				
4. Customer Satisfaction	0.133	0.076	0.245	0.816			
5. Dependability	0.060	0.000	0.291	0.199	0.791		
6. Perceptible	-0.066	-0.102	0.222	0.133	0.176	0.830	
7. Reactive	0.063	0.070	0.176	0.164	0.183	0.134	0.873

Source: Primary Data

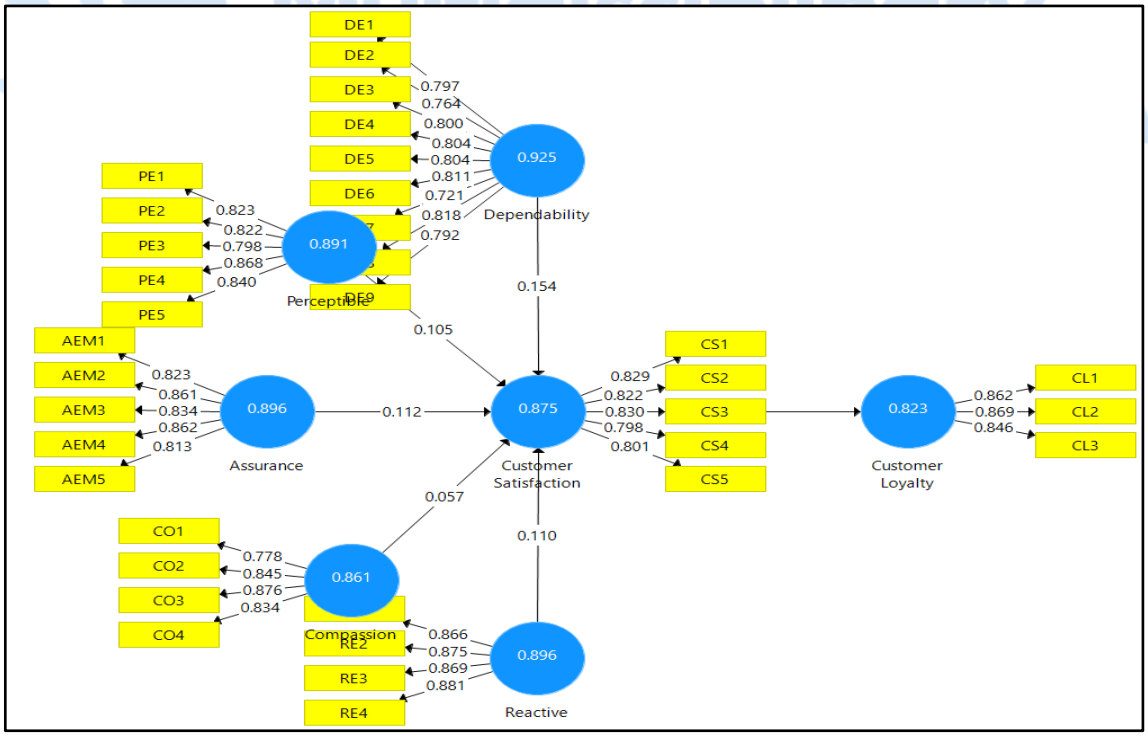

Figure 1: Description of CFA model

In order to access the discriminant validity of the latent variables Fornell and

Larcker'scriterion has been adopted in the study. Discriminant validity indicates the extent to which *"items differentiate among constructs and measure distinct concepts"***(Fornell and Larcker, 1981)**. Discriminant validity of a given model is considered to be acceptable when the value of the average variance explained is greater than its correlation coefficient with each pair of constructs.From Table6 it is evident that the square root of the average variance extracted is more than off-diagonal factors in the corresponding rows and columns. Therefore, the above table demonstrates that the measurement model of the study has acceptable reliability and validity to execute the path model.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigates the impact of service quality oncustomer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to analyze the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction & Customer Loyalty. The result of the SEM found that convergent validity, discriminant validity, construct validity and composite reliability were reported as per standard, which indicated that service quality dimensions, i.e. Dependability, Perceptible, Assurance, and Reactiveness influence Indian domestic airlines. But Compassion has an insignificant impact on customer satisfaction. Therefore, all the null hypotheses except the impact of compassion on customer satisfaction have been rejected, claiming that the dimensions have a significant influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty, but the extent to which they influence customer satisfaction in Indian domestic airlines is different.

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