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Revival of the Aviation Industry in the Post-COVID Era - With Special Reference to Passengers' Satisfaction in Domestic Airlines of India

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Abstract *India is the ninth-largest global aviation market, handling 121 million domestic passengers[1] and its contribution to national GDP is 5%[2]. The aviation sector has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic but since mid-2022, it started reviving as the severity of the pandemic gradually slowed down. Investors, Airlines, Government, and Regulators are extra cautious about the safety protocols, regulations and passengers' satisfaction in the post-COVID era. So far, no research has studied the passengers' satisfaction level with all the new initiatives taken by Indian domestic airlines. Our empirical study addresses this gap by adopting a mixed method based on a survey of 224 passengers and a content analysis of 300 online reviews on domestic airlines. Important crucial inflight measures impacting passenger satisfaction are assessed through the qualitative study based on passengers' feedback using Importance-performance analysis. The study has also validated the impact of most crucial inflight experiences on satisfaction through an SEM model. The findings have shown that airline passengers are largely satisfied with the "Relationship quality with crew members" and "Safety and in-flight services" but are not comfortable and secure with the "in-flight ambient factors."*

Keywords: *Domestics Airlines, Aviation, COVID-19, Passengers' Satisfaction, Safety and Inflight Services, Relationship Quality*

INTRODUCTION

Aviation is one of the world's most competitive and market-driven industries. It plays a very significant role in the growth and development of the world's economy and the contribution to Global GDP is estimated as $2.7 trillion (ICAO)[3]. The aviation sector is a strategic sector heavily influencing economic growth, social development and trade between nations. It has evolved as an indispensable means of transport between countries and continents[4] (ATAG, 2004). In the post-liberalization period Indian aviation sector has witnessed steady growth and rapid transformation (Singh 2016). Liberalisation of the domestic civil aviation industry in India started in 1991 and gained pace when the Air Corporations Act (1953) was repealed on January 29, 1994. Presently, Air India and Vistara are full-service domestic carriers, whereas Indigo, Spice Jet, Air Asia, Paramount, and Go Air fall into the category of low-cost airlines[5] (Travelguru). Currently, the Indian aviation sector is the ninth-largest global aviation market[2], handling up to 69% of the total volume of air traffic in South Asia with 21 million domestic and 41 million international passengers (Tripathi, 2022). It is expected to handle a capacity of 1 billion trips annually by 2023[6] (IBEF, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a sheer devastating game changer for the tourism and aviation sector around the

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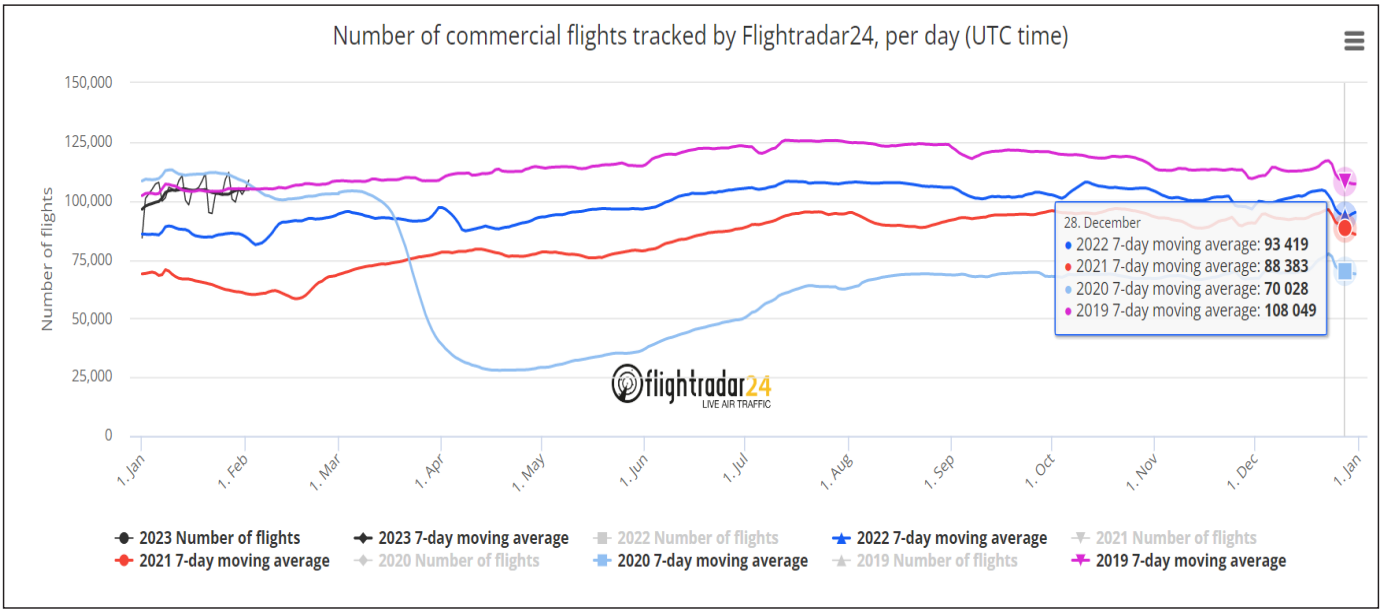
globe (Dube, 2022) and disrupted Indian aviation from 2020 till mid-2022. The travel bans, restrictive tourism activities, low income, phobia of getting infected and low commercial activities reduced the commercial viability of global aviation operations and India was no exception (Agrawal, 2021). In FY 2020-21, many foreign and international carriers have cancelled over 500 flights to and from India. Air travel restrictions to India from other nations impacted the global airline industry severely (Kumari et al., 2023). The estimated losses incurred by airlines and airports in India in the 2020-21 financial year was approximately Rs 20,400 crore (Economic Times)[7]. The average loss per day due to the lockdown was estimated at Rs 2.67 to 3 billion (Agrawal, 2021). However, since early 2022, the aviation sector has started reviving as the severity of the pandemic began to slow down gradually (IATA)[8]. Fig. 1 indicates that the 7-day moving average of commercial flights was lowest in 2020 and again in 2023 it has gradually reached to 2019 figure.



Source: shttps://www.flightradar24.com/data/statistics

Fig. 1: Impact of COVID on Aviation and the Revival in Post-COVID Time (Number of Commercial Flights in 2019-23)

The damaging impact of the pandemic on the aviation sector has drawn the attention of scholars and businesses (Maroof et al., 2021). Works of literature are available on the initiatives taken by the government to revive the industry and on the various prospects of recovery of the global aviation sector (Abate et al., 2020). Fortunately, Indian airlines returned flyers, and the domestic airline market has steadily grown in post-COVID era[9] (ET Prime, May 01, 2023). Post-COVID growth of airline passengers is impressive with a monthly growth rate of 15.24%. The passenger count has improved to 132.41 lakhs in May 2023 from 114.67 lakhs in May 2022[10]. Careful planning and proactive actions taken by the Indian aviation industry and by all other stakeholders to improve operational effectiveness resulted in smooth and hassle-free travel experiences to passengers[10] (PIB, June 2023). Although there are signs of recovery in the aviation market, investors, airlines, the government, and regulators are extra cautious about the safety protocols, regulations, and passengers' satisfaction (Dube, 2021). The government's role is very crucial to tackle the pandemic crisis and for the future development of the aviation industry (Abate et al., 2020). As the situation improved, all domestic airlines like Indigo, Vistara, Air India, SpiceJet, and Go Air resumed operations. Passengers insisted on strict implementation of hygiene protocols, adequate safety-related measurements and sanitisation by the airlines and the airport staff (Khan, 2022). All airlines have adopted improved safety measures like frequent cleaning and sanitization of aircraft, mandatory facemasks for flight passengers, contactless checking-in facilities, and advanced inflight air filtration to reduce the risk of virus transmission. PNPI (Personal non-pharmaceutical intervention) was imposed on the travellers to control the spread of the virus (Das & Tiwari, 2020). Despite academicians and practitioners showing interest in the new safety measures imposed in the aviation sector, there is a gap in understanding how customers reacted to the new flying experience in the post-pandemic period. The current paper is an attempt to identify the most influential inflight experiences valued by passengers in post-COVID era and therefore the study formulated the following research question:

RQ1: What are the most impactful inflight experiences and their associations with flyers' overall satisfaction in post-COVID time?

The inflight experiential elements that contribute to the flyers' satisfaction are investigated using three existing theories: 1) Servqual theory (Parasuraman et al., 1988), and Airqual dimensions (Bari et al., 1992), 2) Service Clues and Customer assessment of service experience (Berry et al., 2006), and 3) Importance Performance analysis (Martilla & James, 1977). Servqual measures the service quality in a quantifiable manner in five dimensions namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Since services are distinct from tangible goods, it is difficult to quantify service quality. Airqual is derived from Servqual by Bari et al. (1992) and it has been recognized as a better measurement of an airline's quality with its dimensions airlines tangibles (ATANG), terminal tangibles (TTANG), personnel (PER), empathy (EMP) and image (IMG). Customers assess the service experience and form perceptions from three clues, functional clues assessed through technical performance, mechanic clues measured by tangible components of services and human clues perceived by the appearance of service providers (Berry et al., 2006). Combining the above theories, our study has concentrated only on the most crucial inflight measures impacting passenger satisfaction. We assessed the variables related to inflight experiences based on passengers' feedback and used qualitative study and Importance-performance analysis to identify the most important attributes. The important attributes are reduced to a few constructs through Exploratory Factor analysis and they are named "Safety and inflight services," "Relationship quality with crew members," and "Inflight ambient factors" based on the nature of the items associated with the constructs (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Bari et al., 1992; Berry et al., 2006; Martilla & James, 1977). This study then measured the impact of three constructs on overall passenger satisfaction in domestic airlines and delivered a distinct contribution towards servqual measurement. It has examined the current state of domestic flyers' satisfaction with the new safety measures and new flying experience in the COVID era. Secondly, the study contributed to the most crucial inflight experiences valued by air passengers leading to satisfaction and validating their impact through an SEM model. The most important contribution of our study is that it throws light on the devastating impact of the pandemic on Airlines and the current level of adoption of higher safety and improved efficiency measures by domestic airlines. It presents a theoretical contribution to the literature on consumer behaviour and service quality and a practical contribution to developing a more sustainable and smart aviation system in the COVID era.

COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

Impact of the Pandemic on the Aviation

The COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted health and mortality and damaged the world economy severely (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). COVID-19 impacted the Indian GDP substantially and GDP contracted by -24.4% year on year in 2020-Q2 due to unprecedented lockdowns. Fortunately, the Indian GDP returned to a positive rate of 1.6% growth in 2021-Q1 (Policy response to COVID-19, IMF, July 2021)[11].

The number of air travellers reduced dramatically due to a series of lockdowns and travel restrictions (Solanki & Oberoi, 2021). During mid-2020, aviation was severely hit with a 50% decline in the total number of flights globally (European Commission, 2020)[12]. As per the speculation of Economists, in the first quarter of 2020, there was a negative impact of 0.02-0.12% on world GDP due to aviation losses and the job losses accounted for approximately 25 to 30 million dollars (Fabrizio Natale, 2020). The industry experienced a "double-hit" due to the pandemic as operation costs and longer processing times increased, whereas leisure and business travel diminished (Hensher, 2021). The International Air Transport Association (IATA) reported that the airline industry's overall loss was over $250 billion in 2020, an increase from -44% to -80% (Salman et al., 2020). In 2020, 97 countries (45%) closed their borders to international carriers to stop the spread of the virus (Lee, 2020)[13]. Due to the increased risk of spreading the Coronavirus, all international flights from India were ceased from March 23, 2020, to April 15, 2020, and all domestic flights from March 25, 2020, to April 15, 2020, by the Government of India (Solanki & Oberoi, 2021).

As per the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), 53,000+ travel agents (including non-IATA agents), more than 1.3 lakhs tour operators (domestic, inbound, adventure, cruise and outbound), more than 2,700 MICE organizers and 19 lakhs tourist transporters were dependent on the aviation sector (Solanki & Oberoi, 2021). The pandemic had a catastrophic impact on the livelihood of all those dependents, directly or indirectly. The present study is framed to analyse the domestic airline market after

COVID, the prominent players and the level of passenger satisfaction.

Post Pandemic Revival of the Aviation Industry

Earlier researchers (Das & Tiwari, 2020; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2020; Meena, 2020; Sun et al., 2021) suggested that aviation should revive with higher safety and improved efficiency and consider COVID-19 an opportunity to develop a more sustainable and smart aviation system. Aviation's sustainability and environmental impact have gained much prominence in post-pandemic times (Sun et al., 2022). Big data has a big role to play and route planning, crew management, aircraft operation and management, air logistics management, and service management should be automized and coordinated using big data (Aarthy C. et al., 2021). Some researchers felt the need to revise the curriculum of aviation schools to include non-technical skills to equip aviation graduates better to handle post-pandemic challenges (Miani et al., 2021).

Prolonged travel restrictions due to COVID resulted in huge losses, bankruptcy, and downgrading of services in many airlines, putting the aviation industry in a precarious position. A simulation study at Erkilet Airport showed that check-in queue length and waiting time have increased in the post-pandemic period, and consequently, customer satisfaction decreased (Bolat & Ates, 2020).

There are ample opportunities for airlines to be more efficient and sustainable by improving customer experience quality and providing safer, more secure, and more efficient journey options at a reduced cost (Dube, 2021). The pandemic has raised the expectations of consumers because of the newly emerged safety protocols, and the responsibilities of the airports and the air carriers have been expanded to ensure safer and better journeys. Most travellers become extra cautious about safety protocols and precautionary measures after the pandemic (Matiza & Kruger, 2021). In fact, during the COVID pandemic, flight attendants' job satisfaction was largely dependent on how they perceived the airline's initiative to ensure non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) such as washing hands and wearing masks being followed and how effectively the airlines could control infections. Job satisfaction of the attendants showed a significant impact on customer orientation and satisfaction (Lee et al., 2022). A major concern regarding the sanitisation and disinfection of aircraft after each trip was found in passengers' tweet (Afaq et al., 2021).

The discussion leads to the following research question.

RQ2: Is there an association between the "Inflight ambient factor" (AF) with the flyers' overall satisfaction with the airline?

Passengers' Satisfaction and Preferences

In the very competitive aviation market, for any airline, excellent passenger satisfaction is one of the most important factors to sustain and survive. Investigation of passengers' emotions and their intention to recommend should be enhanced to formulate specific retention strategies in the post-pandemic period (Wang et al., 2022).

Several studies have discussed air passengers' expectations of service quality measurements and major influencing factors like safety, security, timeliness, inflight experiences, tangible aspects like food, ambience, and functional relationship between front-line and back-end employees (Frost & Kumar, 2000; Hapsari et al., 2017)). As low-cost airlines have expanded their services, passengers have raised concerns about the services provided, and there is a need to measure customer satisfaction for all those airlines (Saha, 2018). Travellers' satisfaction varied from person to person, with some being more interested in off-board offices, others preferring inflight dining, and some requiring more remarkable baggage space (Namukasa, 2013). Making a distinction between leisure and business travellers is crucial and researchers discovered that ticket prices had a positive and significant impact on passengers' overall satisfaction, which increased customer loyalty among leisure travellers but had no effect on business passengers' satisfaction or loyalty (Jiang, 2016). Inflight service provided by inflight attendants is the most crucial factor leading to customer satisfaction and acts as a success factor for airline companies (Ali, 2015).

A prime shift toward health and safety is being observed now in passengers' expectations (Huang et al., 2011). Though the importance of "Inflight services" has been discussed several times, in post-COVID time how in-flight safety measures played an important role and added with inflight services is not studied. Thus our study formulated the following research question:

RQ3: How important is the "inflight safety and services" to any flyer in the post-COVID era?

Airlines come under the service sector, and passengers' satisfaction largely depends on five service quality dimensions, as proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). Earlier studies (Ramachandran, 2021; Susilo, 2019) confirmed that customers will be more satisfied and loyal to any airline if they get a more relationship-oriented service and empathy and responsiveness play a significant role in service quality. Increasing the level of relationship-oriented promotion will result in increased customer satisfaction and trust in airlines (Huang, 2011). Since the employees and crew members are the main point of contact and involved in service delivery, they play a major role in leveraging empathy and responsiveness, the two significant dimensions of Servqual (Ramachandran, 2021). Passengers' expectations from airline service providers have changed during the post-pandemic period (Monmousseau et al., 2020). Passengers appreciate the courteous behaviour of the airline staff and recognise the services of the crew who handled their queries effectively and timely (Afaq et al., 2021). In post-COVID era personalized travel experience is a preferred choice by passengers (Pandey et al., 2021) and service providers play an important role in that. In this context, we have framed our next research question as:

RQ4: What is the impact of "Relationship quality with crew members" on overall passenger satisfaction in post-pandemic scenarios?

RESEARCH METHOD AND MODEL DEVELOPMENT

This study adopted a mixed method comprising quantitative and qualitative research techniques.

Qualitative Analysis and Hypotheses Development

For a deeper understanding of the whole range of consumer experiences and feedback on the above-mentioned three factors namely Relationship quality, Inflight Ambient Factors, Safety and Inflight Services, the authors have examined reviews, satisfaction surveys, and opinions from social media platforms[18,19,20] and did a qualitative content analysis. Webpages of all prominent Indian domestic airlines were examined and feedback was collected (Table 1). Content analysis can arrange data from unstructured materials, and insights generated from the amorphous data help in qualitative and quantitative research (Hsieh, 2016).

A total of 300 online reviews are chosen randomly and extracted from the websites of the airlines shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Online Reviews[18,19,20]

Airlines	Air India	Vistara	Air Asia	Indigo	SpiceJet
Number of Reviews	106	48	40	56	50

Online testimonials were subjected to sequential coding using an inductive approach. It involves a coding process to map the comments, and feedback to a first level of constructs. Initially, we started with a rigour keyword search analysis of the collected testimonials and we focussed mainly on the inflight-related issues and comments. The keyword search was stopped at a level when there were no further insights generated. Through intensive inductive and deductive reasoning approaches, the authors have analysed the keywords and found many variables in three broad areas - Relationship quality with crew members, Inflight Ambient Factors, Safety and Inflight and they were fine-tuned from the scales developed by earlier researchers (Parasuraman et al. 1988; Bari et al., 1992; Berry et al., 2006; Martilla & James, 1977). Our study focused only on inflight services by referring to three theories (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Bari et al., 1992; Berry et al., 2006; Martilla & James, 1977).

A snapshot of the approach to derive important constructs that led to Flyers' overall satisfaction related to inflight services.

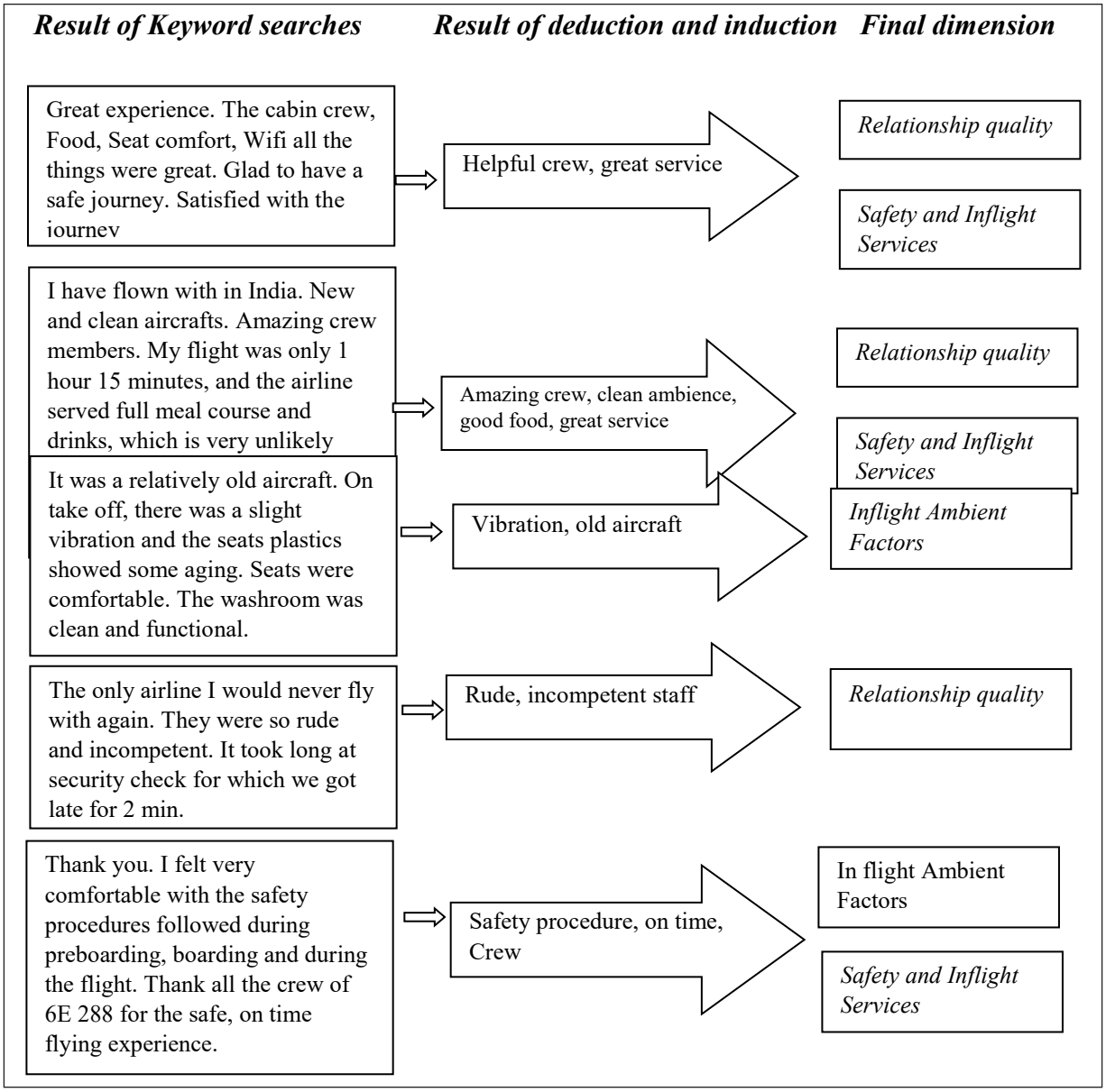


Fig. 2: Theoretical Dimensions on Inflight Attributes Derived from Online Testimonials on the Inductive and Deductive Approach [18,19,20]

A few bullet words in each category are identified to understand passengers' feedback and the importance of the parameters identified by them. The most common words extracted in our study are given below in Table 2:

Table 2: Comparison of Responses on All Inflight Attributes between Satisfied vs Dissatisfied Customers

Category	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Relationship Quality	Friendly Crew	No Customer Support
	Quick Response to Customer	Rude Staff
	Cabin crew looks courteous	
	Good onboarding experience	No Response
Inflight Ambient factor	Good Cleanliness	No social distancing
	Seats	Bad Leg Room
	Compulsory facemask	

Category	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
	Sanitized aircraft	No hand sanitisers
	Spray and fragrance	Uncomfortable Ambience
Safety and inflight services	Good food and drinks	Bad Luggage
	Cabin Baggage Handling	Flight Delay
	Swift check-in	Long queues on security check
	Best customer care	Bad Food

Importance and Performance Analysis

We have used Importance and Performance analysis (Martilla & James, 1977; Oh, 2000) to get a snapshot of the selected inflight attributes leading to passengers' satisfaction. 13 attributes (variables) are identified whose importance was rated more than the mean value 2.5 (on a 5 point Liker Scale) based on passengers' rating. Based on the nature of the variable, they were categorized into three broad areas and all variables related to "Relationship quality" are named R1, R2, R3, R4, and R5, variables related to "Inflight Ambient Factor" are named A1, A2, A3, A4, and variables related to "Safety and inflight services" are named as S1, S2, S3, S4. The mean, median value and standard deviation of the rating of all 13 variables are as follows (Table 3):

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Variables (Checked All the Values Again)

Statistics														
		R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	A1	A2	A3	A4	S1	S2	S3	S4
N	Valid	224	224	224	224	224	224	224	224	224	224	224	224	224
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		4.38	4.18	4.13	4.15	4.18	3.52	3.61	3.49	3.20	3.17	3.49	3.58	3.57
Median		4.50	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.50	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Std. Deviation		.712	.797	.913	.914	.891	1.067	1.044	1.054	1.143	.977	1.059	1.069	1.057

Result of Factor Analysis

All 13 variables have communality values higher than 0.5 communalities in EFA and they are reduced to above the three constructs using EFA. The total variance explained was 74.49% and the EFA output (Table 4) shows that all R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, loaded with Construct 1; A1, A2, A3, A4 loaded with Construct 2, and S1, S2, S3, S4 are loaded with Construct 3. Construct 1 is named "Relationship quality," Construct 2 is "Safety and inflight services," and Construct 3 is "Inflight ambient factors".

Table 4: Exploratory Factor Analysis to Identify Constructs Based on Variables

Rotated Component Matrix[a]			
	Component		
	1	2	3
R4	**.897**	.043	.042
R3	.859	.047	-.032
R5	**.841**	.100	-.017
R2	**.823**	.141	.024
R1	**.770**	.070	.145
S2	.032	**.845**	.298
S3	.128	**.839**	.269
S4	.119	**.794**	.324
S1	.112	**.767**	.288
A4	-.078	.196	**.823**
A2	.052	.438	**.799**
A3	.102	.471	**.726**
A1	.145	.487	**.707**
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis, Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.			
a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.			

In the next level to analyse the impact of the above three constructs on passengers' satisfaction, we have proposed the following hypotheses:

- *H1: Relationship quality with Crew members will positively affect passengers' overall satisfaction in the post-COVID period.*
- *H2: Inflight ambient factors member will positively affect passengers' overall satisfaction in the post-COVID period.*
- *H3: Safety and inflight services will positively affect passengers' overall satisfaction in the post-COVID period.*

Once the three important inflight services were identified our study took a reverse approach to propose a model as shown in Fig 3.

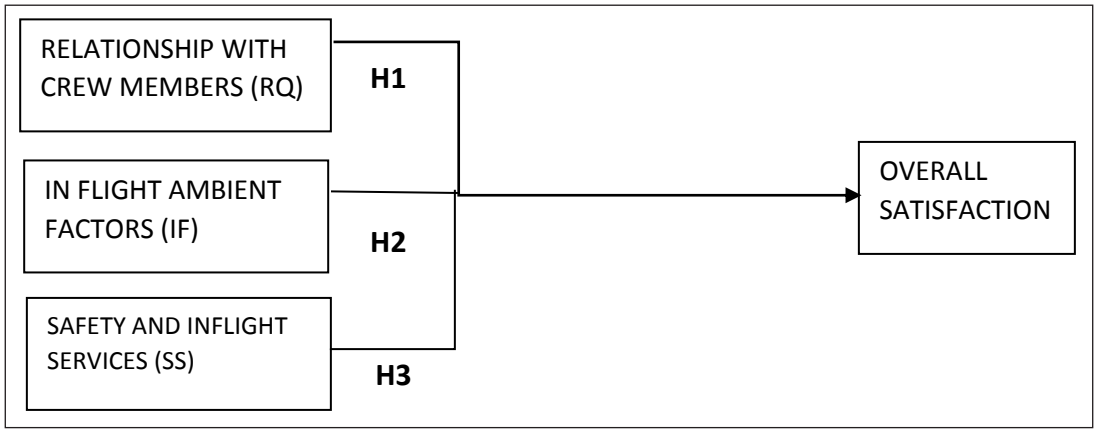


Fig. 3: Proposed Model to Check the Impact of Inflight Factors on the Overall Satisfaction of Flyers

Quantitative Analysis

Since the research adopted a mixed method, the quantitative research is done on the data collected through a survey based on a structured questionnaire. A total of 225 air travellers selected through a non-probability purposive sampling method from economy and business class travellers, completed the survey questionnaires (through Google Forms). Since one response fell as an outlier, it was discarded in the next level of analysis and a total of 224 data were considered for analysis. Structural equation modelling (SEM) using AMOS software establishes the relationship between three dimensions that led to passengers' satisfaction and their impact on overall satisfaction in post-pandemic time.

DATA ANALYSIS

Results of Qualitative Analysis

The researchers have used content analysis and compared customers' feedback from various airlines to determine passengers' satisfaction level on the three constructs and the result is as follows:

Table 5: Comparison of the Number of Responses on All the Factors from Satisfied vs Dissatisfied Customers

Airlines	Satisfied			Dissatisfied		
	Relationship Quality	Inflight Ambient Factor	Safety and Inflight Services	Relationship Quality	Inflight Ambient Factor	Safety and Inflight Services
Air India	31	16	33	35	12	11
Indigo	21	4	33	18	6	5
Vistara	30	24	33	16	3	2
SpiceJet	14	4	18	21	2	6
AirAsia	14	8	9	14	4	5

Interpretation

According to the above Table 5, passengers are reasonably satisfied with Air India and Vistara in all categories. Indigo and SpiceJet fall short of meeting customer satisfaction in the ambient factor category. Vistara has received one of the highest lovely comments in all three components and a comparatively lower number of dissatisfying remarks. Air India received a very high number of satisfying and dissatisfying feedback, which shows, that in terms of brand recognition and market share, Air India is leading. Compared to other airlines, Air Asia has a long way to go.

Demographic Details of the Respondents

Table 6: Demographic Profiles of Respondents

Group	Respondents' Characteristics	Number of Respondents
Gender	Male	132(59%)
	Female	92(41%)
Age Cohorts	15-25	100(45%)
	26-35	61(27%)
	26-45	34(15%)
	Above 45	29(13%)
Profession	Student	59(26%)
	Business	36(16%)
	Service/Professionals	78(35%)
	Govt Employee &Others	51(23%)
Educational Qualification	Plus, II	28(13%)
	Undergraduate	40(18%)
	Post Graduate	153(68%)
	PhD	3(01%)
Travel Type	Business	64(29%)
	Leisure	160(71%)
Travel Class	Economy Class	188(84%)
	Business Class	36(16%)

Data on the Popularity of Domestic Airlines and Ticket Booking Sites

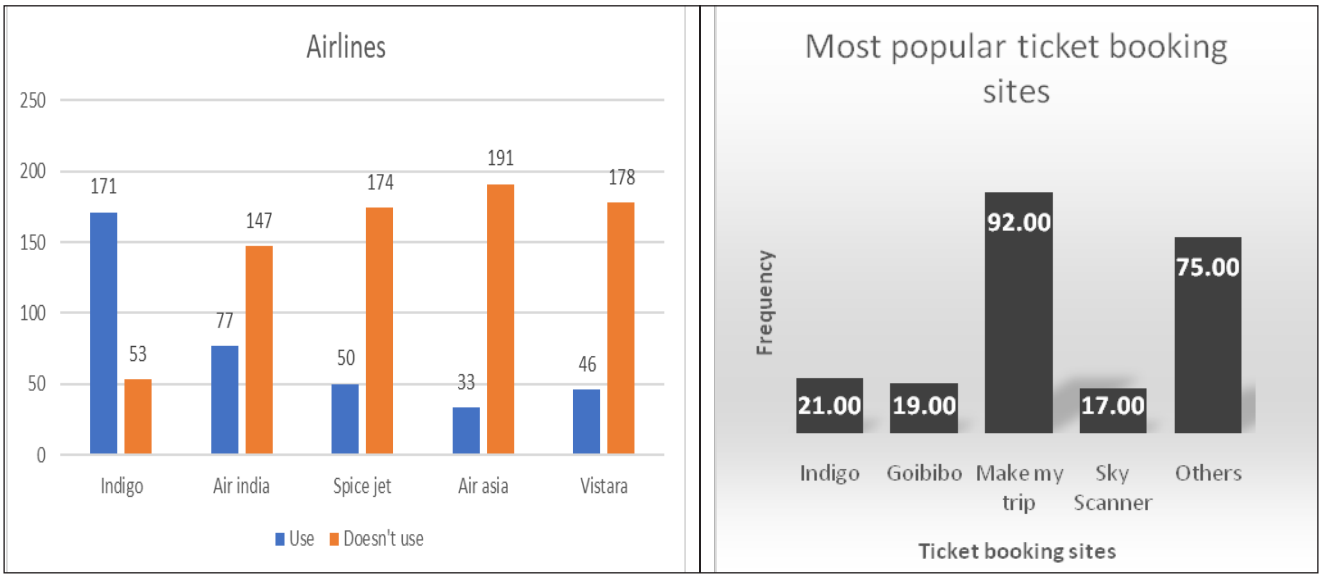


Fig. 4: Popular Domestic Airlines and Ticket Booking Sites Based on Air Passengers' Review

Interpretation

Table 6 reveals that our data is collected from passengers of both economy and business classes and across various age groups, professions, educational backgrounds, and genders. This ensures that the sample is unbiased. Fig. 4 shows that Indigo is the most popular domestic airline, and MakeMyTrip is the most preferred ticket-booking site. Indian domestic aviation sector has emerged as an affordable and credible alternative to rail or road transport, and Indigo is the market leader with a 55% market share among domestic carriers in 2022 (Sun S, Statista.com Sep18, 2023)[14]. In online ticket booking sites, MakeMyTrip is the market leader with around 60% market share (Hotelmize.com, 2022)[15]. Domestic airline choice is influenced heavily by the demographic, social-economic characteristics and travel destination choices of the air flyers (Yaylali et al., 2016). During the second phase of COVID, a study in the USA found that variables like age, gender, educational qualifications, marital status, work loss, difficulty in expenditures, income, work type and anxiousness with health status influenced the choice of travel plans and behaviour (Jiao & Azimian, 2021).

Quantitative Data Analysis: Rating of Passengers on Three Constructs for Different Airlines

Table 7: Comparison of Leading Domestic Airlines Based on the Various Constructs

Airlines	Number of Respondents	Relationship Quality	Inflight Ambient Factor	Safety and Inflight Services	Overall Satisfaction
Indigo	171	4.214	3.387	3.383	3.789
Air India	77	3.968	3.324	3.357	3.597
SpiceJet	50	3.972	3.470	3.605	3.56
AirAsia	33	4.006	3.287	3.295	3.484
Vistara	46	4.365	3.701	3.679	3.847

Interpretation

Based on above Table 7, it is found that Vistara is rated highest in "Relationship Quality," "Inflight Ambient Factor," "Safety and inflight services," and "Overall Satisfaction,", followed by Indigo. Though the number of flyers is highest in Indigo, all three other airlines got almost the same rating in all four constructs. AirAsia has received the lowest rating in "Inflight ambient Factor," "Safety and inflight services," and "Overall Satisfaction,". During the pandemic time, low-cost airlines have received lower ratings in terms of passenger satisfaction (Rita, Moro & Cavalcanti, 2022).

Measurement Model

The authors performed a preliminary data analysis examining data accuracy, normality, missing values, and outliers of all variables. They performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the measurement model with the three constructs- "Relationship quality", "Inflight ambient factors," and "Safety and inflight services" leading to Overall satisfaction of the air passengers by applying AMOS and maximum likelihood estimation. All items in each construct have high loading in the CFA, as shown in Table 8. The measurement model of the CFA achieved excellent fit; $\chi 2 = 59.564$, df = 40, $\chi 2/df = 1.844$, $p < .05$, CFI = 0.973, NFI = 0.930; TLI = 0.966; GFI = 0.943; RMSEA = 0.06) (Bentler, 1992; Bentler & Bonett, 1980).

Table 8: Measurement Model (Loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, Average Variance Explained)

Constructs	Item	Mean	SD	SL	SMC	CA (Cronbach's Alpha)	CR (Composite Reliability)	AVE (Average Variance Explained)
	R1	4.38	0.712	0.731***	0.50			
	R2	4.18	0.797	0.774***	0.638			
	R3	4.13	0.913	0.711***	0.651			
	R4	4.15	0.914	0.889***	0.790			
	R5	4.18	0.891	0.799***	0.638			

Constructs	Item	Mean	SD	SL	SMC	CA (Cronbach's Alpha)	CR (Composite Reliability)	AVE (Average Variance Explained)
Relationship Quality (RQ)		4.20				0.898	0.899	0.6427
	A1	3.52	1.067	0.854***	0.729			
	A2	3.61	1.044	0.902***	0.814			
	A3	3.49	1.054	0.859***	0.737			
	A4	3.20	1.143	0.659***	0.44			
Inflight ambient Factor (AF)		3.46				0.886	0.893	0.6787
	S1	3.17	0.977	0.771***	0.595			
	S2	3.49	1.059	0.849***	0.721			
	S3	3.58	1.069	0.847***	0.717			
	S4	3.57	1.057	0.833***	0.694			
Safety and inflight services (SS)		3.45				0.895	0.895	0.6916

Reliability and Validity

The authors confirmed convergent validity by analysing the conditions suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). All CFA factor loadings are statistically significant at $p < .05$ (see Table 8). The average variance extracted (AVE) for all the constructs is above the value of 0.50. It is observed that all the indicators of each construct are statistically significant. Thus, the convergent validity of each construct is established (Byrne, 2016).

Finally, the reliability of each construct, i.e., the CA values, is above the value of 0.70, fulfilling the general reliability condition for the research instruments (Table 8). In confirming the discriminant validity, the author evaluated the correlations of the constructs with the square root of the AVE values for each of the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Again, the model's fitness is measured by the squared multiple correlations (SMCs). SMC values of all items are over or nearly 0.5, i.e., over the threshold criterion of 0.5.

Table 9: Discriminant Validity of Three Constructs of CE

	RQ	AF	SS
RQ	0.8017		
AF	0.166**	**0.8238**	
SS	0.221**	0.812**	**0.8256**

As Table 9 indicates, the square root of the AVE for each construct of CE is higher than its correlations with other constructs; hence, the discriminant validity is fully confirmed. Next, three factors RQ, AF, and SS, are connected to see the impact on the overall satisfaction of the domestic flyers in a Structural Equation Model. The SEM model is given below in Fig. 5.

Path Analysis: Structural Equation Model (SEM)

The structural model was tested with maximum likelihood estimation using AMOS 16.0 (Table 10) to assess the model fitness and inter-relationship among the constructs of RQ, AF, SS and OS. The overall model fitness indices $\chi 2 = 123.486$, $df = 72$, $\chi 2/df = 1.715$, CFI = .974, TLI = .968, NFI = .941, GFI = .931, and RMSEA = 0.057 reflect good model fit.

Result of HypothesesTesting

The first hypothesis, H1 (mentioned in Fig. 3), investigates the contribution of the Relationship Quality component towards Overall Satisfaction. H1 produced standardized regression weight ($\beta = 0.38$, $CR = 5.61$, $p < 0.01$). Hence, H1 is supported. Similarly, the second hypothesis, H2 (mentioned in Fig. 2), examines the impact of the Inflight ambient Factor component on Overall Satisfaction. H2 produced standardized regression weight ($\beta = 0.08$, $CR = 1.34$, $p > 0.01$); therefore, H2 is not supported. The third hypothesis, H3 (mentioned in Fig. 2), checked the relationship between Safety and inflight services and Overall Satisfaction. H3 produced standardized regression weight ($\beta = 0.32$, CR =

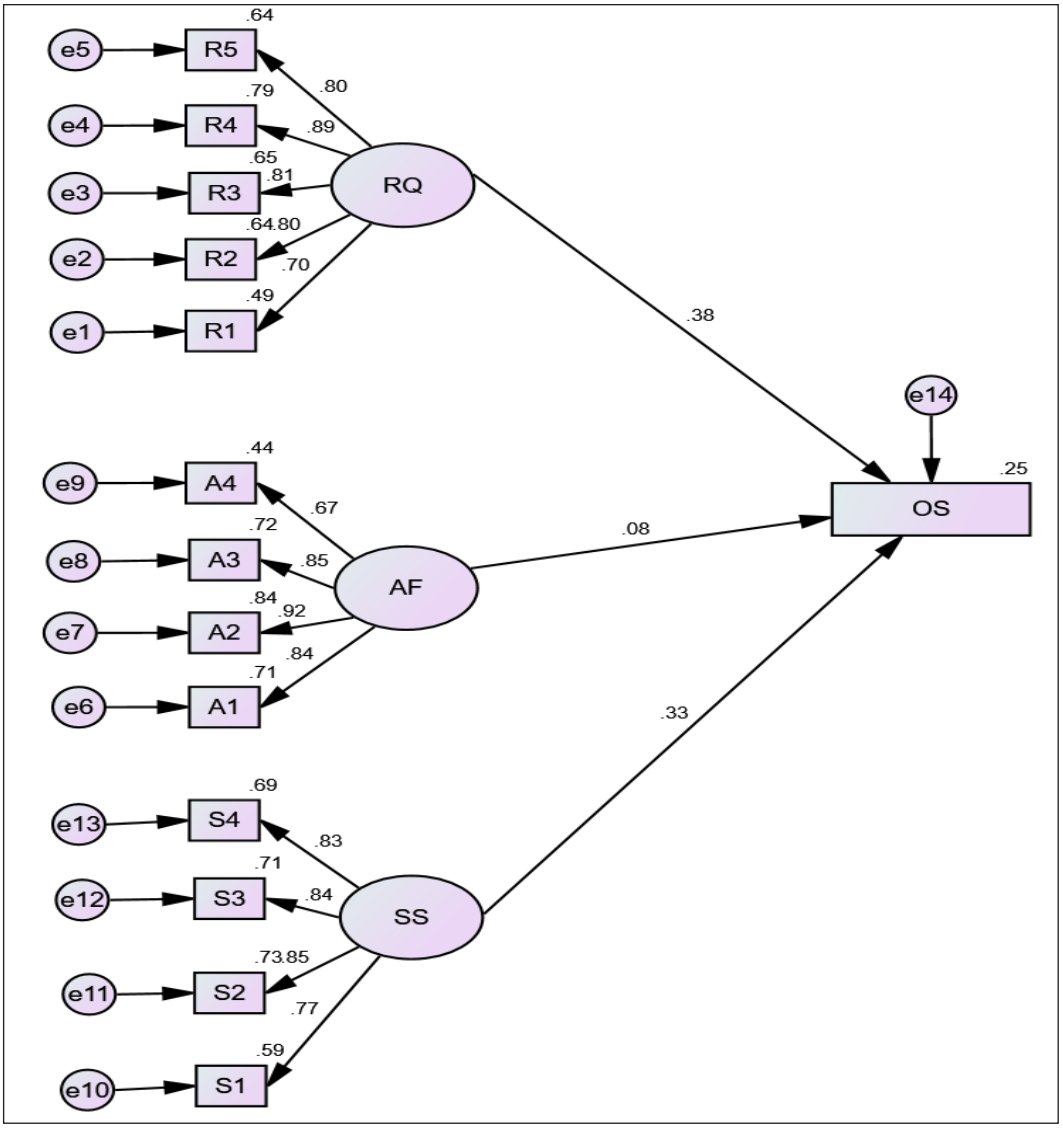


Fig. 5: SEM Model on the Influence of "RQ", "AF" and "SS" on "Overall Satisfaction"

5.033, $p < 0.01$). Thus, H3 is supported. All the results are tabulated in Table 10.

Table 10 indicates that the 25% variance in Overall Satisfaction can be explained by three components RQ, AF and SS taken as independent variables. The value is small as many other intervening and extraneous variables like price, baggage handling, complaints resolutions, beyond-flight services, and timeliness are not considered to check their influences on passengers' satisfaction.

Table 10: Result of Structural Equation Model

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standardised β	CR	P Value	Result
H1	Relationship Quality→Overall Satisfaction	0.38	5.61	0.000	Supported
H2	Ambient Factor→Overall Satisfaction	0.08	1.34	1.81	Not Supported
H3	Safety and Services→Overall Satisfaction	0.32	5.033	0.000	Supported

Earlier researchers have argued that the dimensions leading to passengers' satisfaction vary with the purpose of travel, i.e., passengers travelling for leisure might have different expectations than those who travel for work/business (Jiang, Hongwei & Zhang, Yahua, 2016). In our study, we have found mixed responses and the result is given in Table 11. Surprisingly the expectations of passengers in terms of independent variables leading to satisfaction do not vary across the purpose of travel but the rating on overall satisfaction shows significant differences.

Table 11: Comparison of Mean Ratings on All the Factors Based on Travel Purposes for Domestic Airlines

Factors	The Purpose for Travel (Leisure)	The Purpose for Travel (Business)	T-Value	Significance	Interpretation
Relationship quality	4.23	4.14	0.779	0.438	No significant difference
Ambient factor	3.47	3.39	0.598	0.551	No significant difference
Safety and services	3.48	3.35	0.997	0.331	No significant difference
Overall Satisfaction	3.92	3.64	2.108	0.036**	Significant difference

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the industry, and the effects could last longer than expected. Several airports, airlines and other aviation-related service providers have lost a significant proportion of their operations and income since the pandemic's inception.

As mentioned earlier, domestic passengers' overall satisfaction with new flying experiences has not been studied by existing literature. This study aimed to see the revival status of domestic airlines in India and to identify the most crucial inflight attributes causing satisfaction through qualitative and quantitative analysis. As per our study, Indigo is the most popular domestic airline, though Vistara got the highest rating in all three crucial constructs namely "Safety and inflight services (SS)", "Relationship quality (RQ)" and "Inflight ambient factors (AF)". Air India is another leading domestic airline whereas Air Asia is emerging strongly.

First, as our study shows, passengers rated "Relationship quality (RQ)" (Refer to Table 3 & Table 8) very high with a mean value of 4.21 on a scale of 1 to 5 and it has improved after COVID and led to a significant contribution to flyers' satisfaction with a Standardized β value of 0.38. RQ is comprised of latent variables on the behaviour of the inflight crew members, the average response time to any complaint, overall understanding of the passengers' requirements and requests and crew members' response quality in the post-pandemic period. Customers appreciated the assistance and the services that flight attendants put in to ensure their comfort (Refer Table 8). Relationship quality and relationship marketing are crucial in building trust and loyalty (Huang, 2011).

Second, the study revealed that Safety and inflight services (SS) have a significant impact (Standardized β value of 0.32) on the overall satisfaction of flyers in post-COVID time (Refer Table 3 & Table 8). Passengers have appreciated and rated all the components like inflight food quality, ways of handling cabin luggage, inflight safety measures and prompt services very high. The mean value of SS is 3.46, the second highest, slightly lower than the mean value of RQ. A large number of satisfied customers posted a message on "Safety and inflight services (SS) (Table 8). Inflight service, inflight digital service, and back-office operations significantly positively impacted perceived service quality (Archana & Subha, 2012).

Surprisingly, passengers did not show their satisfaction with the "Ambient factors" like- cleanliness of the flight, air quality, inflight temperature and inflight hygiene maintenance level (Refer to Table 3 & Table 8). The average value of AF is lowest for individual airlines (Table 7) and also received the lowest number of remarks from satisfied customers as seen in Table 5. Many airlines implemented strategies to deal with the new protocols and new inflight services like hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette which often resulted in fight delays and customer dissatisfaction (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020a). Noticeably the inflight cleanliness, sanitization and hygiene factors which were maintained at a very high level during COVID time in domestic airlines have returned to the pre-COVID time. AF did not show a significant impact on overall passenger satisfaction and the Standardized β value of 0.08, is very low (Table 10).

Our paper differs in terms of identifying the dimensions as it took a reverse approach and first identified attributes (variables) directly through word-of-mouth communication as available in passengers' feedback and comments on the websites. The variables are screened based on the rating of the customers using Importance Performance Analysis theory and important variables are reduced to three constructs. Our model validated the impact of the three constructs on the satisfaction of the flyers. Customer feedback on all Servqual dimensions is one of the best ways to investigate the impact on passengers' satisfaction (Butler & Keller, 1992).

THEORETICAL & MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The research adds a body of knowledge to the importance of the inflight dimensions leading to the satisfaction of passengers in the aviation sector. It addresses the existing gap in understanding satisfaction levels on the improved safety measures like contactless check-in, inflight air filtration, cleaning and sanitization of aircraft in the post-COVID era along with other attributes like relationship

quality with crew and inflight services. By contextualising and amalgamating three theories- Importance Performance analysis (Martilla & James, 1977), Servqual dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988), Airqual dimensions (Bari et al., 1992) and Service Clues and Customer assessment of service experience (Berry et al., 2006), we identified three inflight attributes valued by passengers that lead to satisfaction. It has a practical contribution to developing a more sustainable and smart aviation system in the post-COVID era.

Inflight ambient factor was rated lowest and most of the flyers do not feel comfortable and secure because of the relaxation of the new standards for health and safety being put in place during COVID time by the domestic airline. During Diwali and Christmas vacations, the huge crowds in most of the domestic airlines and the pictures of crowds in Indian airports indicated that no social distances were maintained (Economic Times, 2nd Jan 2023)[17]. The frequent spraying of sanitisers in airports and inflights was stopped and the distribution of masks and sanitisers to domestic passengers was discontinued. Previous research has proven that customer experience and satisfaction are significantly mediated by the perceived health risk of passengers travelling during COVID-19 (Sharma, 2022). Therefore the airlines should not ignore this Inflight ambient factors.

LIMITATIONS

Like any other study, this also has limitations. Due to the nature of the topic, this study is limited to only domestic passengers. Because of the chosen purposive sampling (non-probability sampling), the generalisation of research results poses some questions. Another aspect is that this study looked at the behavioural aspect through survey methods and online reviews. Since both are opinion-based with time changes, they also may vary.

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