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Passengers' Insights toward Low-Frills Airlines: Mapping Perceptions and Decision-Making Factors

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Abstract

There is strong competition among low-cost airlines in the domestic Indian aviation sector. Since the competition is fierce in the airline industry, understanding travellers' perceptions will help develop marketing plans and enhance services. Although previous research has covered independent metrics such as timeliness, quality of service and pricing but not much has been explored about how travellers perceive and compare different airlines across service areas. This research explores how major low-cost airlines in India, such as IndiGo, SpiceJet, Akasa Air, Vistara, and Air India Express, are perceived by travellers. Primary data was obtained by administering surveys to domestic travellers. The study employed Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to identify five primary categories: brand reputation, in-flight services, punctuality, customer support, and connectivity. Using these factors, the study develops a two-dimensional perceptual map that represents where the selected airlines stand in the market. The analysis identifies four distinct competitive groups, each with its unique strengths. This kind of visual and tactical information benefits airline marketers, strategic planners, and policymakers by aiding them in improving their markets.

Keywords Positioning; airlines; passengers; perceptual map; aviation

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Introduction

The Indian domestic aviation sector has experienced rapid growth over the past few years. Moreover, Indian airlines provide domestic air travel that connects all Indian territories, facilitating connections between various regions. In this study, domestic airlines are considered as companies with established structures, rules, and management designed to offer passengers scheduled, low-cost, or full-service flights (Buhalis, 2000; Jayathilakan et al., 2024). Recently, the airline industry has adopted digital technology, prioritised customer needs, and expanded its routes to enhance service for its clients. These companies now enable travellers to select their own prices, book trips online, join rewards programmes, and tailor their journeys. Furthermore, it can be argued that domestic airlines empower passengers with affordable and convenient travel options, contributing to national mobility and growth.(Jayathilakan et al., 2024) argue that domestic airlines enable passengers to use cheap and convenient travel, which helps with national mobility and growth. Unlike international or legacy airlines, Indian low-cost carriers work to meet the growing need for low-cost travel by providing basic services, low fares and flights to many domestic locations (Jayathilakan et al., 2024). As the airline industry becomes more crowded, businesses must use competitive strategies to distinguish themselves from others. In this situation, positioning helps an airline try to make its brand unique for travellers. It includes two main components: the efforts airlines make to strengthen their brand and services, and how passengers perceive them compared to rival airlines in terms of service reliability, quality and worth (Dike et al., 2024; Shihab, Vashisht, et al., 2024). Currently, India is served by more than a dozen domestic airlines, which help make air travel accessible throughout the country and its regions (Dike et al., 2024; Tran, 2024). However, this study is centred on five major low-cost carriers that have consistently excelled in market share, covering a wide range of services, keeping passengers happy and running operations smoothly. Among these, IndiGo is the market leader due to its punctuality and wide range of routes; SpiceJet stands out thanks to its competitive pricing and regional reach; Akasa Air is new and focuses on both customers and the environment; Air India Express provides budget-friendly short flights and Vistara operates using digital tools. These Airlines were chosen due to their size of operation, brand recognition and positive attitude of passengers. Researchers judge air-traveller opinions by examining factors which are brand reputation, punctuality, in-flight facilities, customer assistance and domestic connectivity (Jayathilakan et al., 2024). As noted by (Valentini et al., 2020; Yadav et al., 2025), the rise of low-cost airlines in India has made the market more competitive, which makes it difficult for airlines to stand out with their brand. According to Jayathilakan et al. (2024), the rise of new airlines has changed the domestic aviation market from mainly being ruled by a few legacy carriers to having greater diversity in choices for passengers. Selecting an airline has become a priority for Indian passengers, considering the airline's on-time performance, how comfortable the flights are, how helpful the staff is and how many routes it covers (Barbot et al., 2008). As a result, domestic airlines should make sure they are understood positively by passengers and use strategies that highlight their unique qualities and market importance.

Literature review

Positioning describes the way consumers view one product compared to others in the industry (Sengupta, 2016). It helps customers decide which companies are better by reviewing their service and the quality of their travel experiences (Harison & Lahav, 2025; Valentini et al., 2020). In aviation, the positioning of an airline refers to how passengers judge the airline and the steps carriers take to change or improve their branding (Barbot et al., 2008). A strong positioning strategy enhances an airline's reputation, influences passenger preference, its market share, and its future success. To remain relevant in today's aviation industry, airlines must regularly assess their reputation with customers. The approach to positioning can vary depending on the target customers, the level of competition, and what distinguishes a business. A widely used approach for analyzing where airlines stand in the market is called perceptual mapping which places airlines on different service-related axes according to passenger opinions (Hasan et al., 2025a). Here, passengers judge an airline based on how well it offers value, is reliable and provides comfort. Proper positioning enables airlines to establish a favorable image and gain an advantage over rivals (Hasan et al., 2025b). It plays a vital role in airline branding by influencing how people judge the airline and decide which one to choose. Furthermore, positioning plays a role in shaping an airline's reputation with customers in various markets. When carriers use a strong positioning strategy, they can keep customers satisfied, provide fair service and ensure their operations remain stable. During this stage, using competitor benchmarking and differentiation analysis is very helpful. With the help of perceptual maps, it becomes easier to see what gaps exist and where the strongest competitors are in the airline industry (Harison & Lahav, 2025; Hasan et al., 2025b). These maps categorise airlines based on their strengths and highlight areas of overlap or performance differences (Barbot et al., 2008; Derudder & Witlox, 2008). Perceptual mapping is used in consumer research but is rarely applied to studying India's domestic airline market Fuyane (2021).. Using attribute-based perceptual mapping helps analyse what passengers think of airlines and how their views differ from one another. It helps carriers detect when their strategy and services are not on track and figure out how to make improvements (Harison & Lahav, 2025; Satsangi et al., 2025). As the competition and demands of travellers increase, Indian domestic airlines are now focusing on digital upgrades, building their brands, buying new airplanes and interacting with passengers on social media. The aviation sector has been transformed by technology, which has simplified booking, improved time in the air and made giving feedback easy (Demir et al., 2024). Because travellers are looking for aeroplanes that are reliable, flexible and offer good value, airlines are under pressure to improve their services and stay relevant to passengers. Although many airline companies have reliable operating systems, some find it difficult to win market acceptance due to uncertain branding or irregular service. Therefore, this study explores how passengers assess and evaluate five major Indian domestic airlines: IndiGo, SpiceJet, Akasa Air, Air India Express and Vistara, using five key service dimensions: brand image, in-flight services, timely arrivals, customer support and connectivity. Brand reputation involves the airline's image, how reliable it is and how consistent it is which is affected by marketing, customer reviews and past experiences. In-flight services mean that how clean the plane is, what amenities are available and the behaviour of the crew all influence how satisfied passengers are (Hovora, 2001). Punctuality indicates an airline's success in keeping to flight schedules and avoiding delays, both of which are important for maintaining customer loyalty (Badrillah et al., 2025). Customer support involves being responsive, resolving issues and offering help during booking, boarding or when unexpected disruptions occur (Hovora, 2001). Connectivity is about the variety of flights, how easily passengers can access different parts of the region and the general level of coverage (Demir et al., 2024; Fuyane, 2021). These five aspects help compare and evaluate the rankings of domestic airlines. When airlines tailor their services and messaging to meet passenger needs, they gain a stronger position, enhanced brand value, and stay current with the latest trends in the aviation industry.

Research gap

Despite the significant growth of domestic aviation in India over the past few years, not many research studies have examined how passengers perceive airlines (Hasan & Gupta, 2020; Badrillah et al., 2025). Most research centres on how airlines work, remain safe or promote their brand, but not much focuses on how passengers view and compare them (Barbot et al., 2008; Hovora, 2001; Sun et al., 2024) . Moreover, research in the field has not yet provided a detailed structure to explain how people choose airlines and make decisions to fly. A combination of theoretical models is used in the study to make the analysis organized and grounded in theory (Dwivedi et al., 2024; Sun & Medaglia,2019). TAM reveals the relationship between passengers' views on ease of use and usefulness of digital technology and their behaviour. DIT shows how new services, such as tracking or touchless check-in, are adopted by the public. UGT examines how people decide on an airline by considering the services they need and expect. UTAUT brings together several important concepts to describe why passengers are likely to use airline technologies and services in a competitive situation (Sun et al., 2024). Previous studies on airline positioning have usually been incomplete and have failed to recognise the many facets of what passengers want (Barbot et al., 2008; Hasan et al., 2025b.; Hovora, 2001; Jayathilakan et al., 2024). By integrating these theories, the study seeks to: (1) To assess how travellers perceive the positioning of select Indian domestic airlines; (2) To find out the factors influencing travellers decision to fly with Airlines; (3) To map the relative positioning of major domestic airlines based on travellers' view; (4) To provide strategies to enhance their reputation and distinguish their airlines.

Research methodology

An applied and exploratory approach was used to examine how passengers feel about Indian domestic airlines. Since the aviation market is extremely competitive hence, this study looks into IndiGo, Air India Express, Vistara, SpiceJet, and Akasa Air five domestic airlines for the survey. The snowball sampling method was used to gather information from passengers of all kinds, including those who may be hard to contact. The participants were asked to take part during conversations at airports, in public areas, and after referrals from their social networks. The researchers used a questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale to gather primary data from the participants. In addition, secondary data such as reports from DGCA, airline rankings, and brand evaluation documents were studied. After checking the data, 435 valid responses were used for analysis, which provided enough information for a perceptual map. The questionnaire was reviewed and evaluated with traditional methods of validity before final use. The scale items were reviewed by 15 aviation marketing professionals and 10 academic experts on how travelers behave. A S-CVI score of 0.934 was achieved, which is more than the recommended minimum (≥ 0.90). The overall scale validity index measured at 0.79, which is higher than the standard requirement of 0.60. The items that did not meet the I-CVI standard of 0.83 (F1 Item 2, F1 Item 6, F2 Item 4, and F4 Item 4) were removed after experts and validation criteria suggested it (Hasan, 2017; Hasan & Gupta, 2020). The final tool was reliable and valid for understanding passenger views and the position of domestic airlines.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and CFA

The Principal Component Method with an orthogonal Varimax rotation was used to select important components. Initial testing revealed that the data was suitable. The KMO measure was 0.829, which shows that the data is suitable for factor analysis. The result of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p = 0.000$), which confirms factorability. According to the eigenvalue >1 rule, five perceptual dimensions were found. Item 4 from the 5th factor was removed because its factor loadings were low. There were 23 items in the final factor structure, which together explained 73.27% of the variation in passenger perception. The name of each factor was set by grouping them and using what was already known from airline service quality research (O'Connell & Williams, 2006). Factor analysis revealed five primary dimensions of passenger perception. Brand Reputation (F1), as gauged by five items (BR1–BR5), had factor loadings between 0.701 and 0.898, communalities ranging from 0.622 to 0.762, eigenvalue 8.263, and accounted for 35.39% variance. In-flight Services (F2), with four items (IFS1–IFS4), had loadings of 0.725–0.921, communalities 0.445–0.649, eigenvalue 2.976, and explained 13.19% variance. Punctuality (F3) consisted of four items (PT1–PT4) having loadings 0.795–0.922, communalities 0.502–0.795, eigenvalue 1.876, explaining 9.19% variance. Passenger Support (F4), three items (PS1–PS3), had loadings 0.829–0.908, communalities 0.726–0.892, eigenvalue 1.802, 7.47% variance. Connectivity (F5), three items (CN1–CN3), displayed loadings 0.761–0.813, communalities 0.667–0.871, eigenvalue 1.531, explaining 5.74% variance. Cumulative variance over all factors was 70.98%. EFA and CFA were used to verify the structure of the factors found. The five-factor model was confirmed by the CFA, as every retained item had a factor loading above 0.50, which means the model has strong convergent validity. Model fit was evaluated using the Confirmatory Fit Index (CFI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), and Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI). All the index values were above the usual standards (CFI > 0.90, GFI > 0.90, AGFI > 0.80), which means the model fits the data well and is statistically sound. The findings confirm that brand reputation, in-flight services, punctuality, customer support, and connectivity are all important factors in how passengers view the positioning of domestic airlines in India. Common method variance (CMV) was assessed using Harman's single-factor test, which involved conducting unrotated principal component analysis. Since the first factor only explained 43.316% of the variance, which is below 50%, it means CMV is not a concern in this study (Barros & Peypoch, 2009; Vashisht et al., 2024).

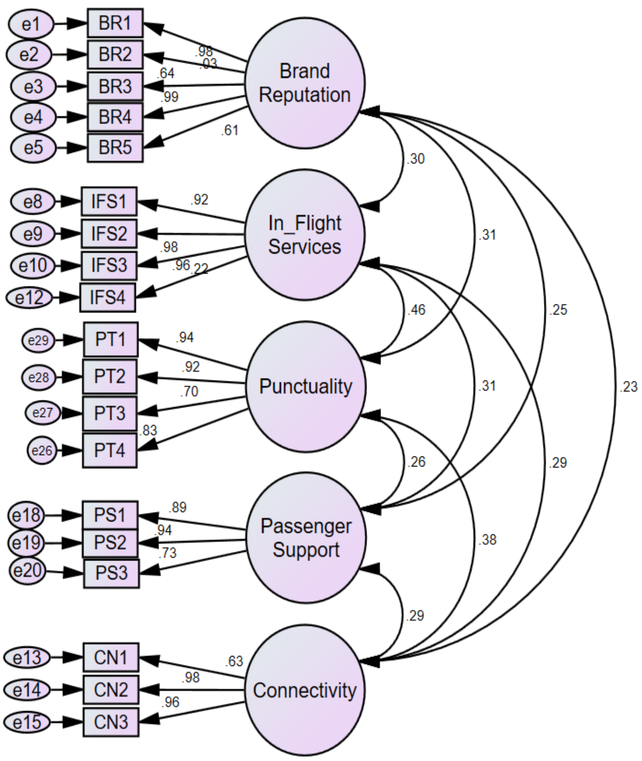

Figure 1: Measurement model

Measurement model: CFA

Yet, the initial results of the measurement model showed that the fit indices were not optimal, mainly in GFI, AGFI, and NFI. This suggests that the model should be adjusted(Devon et al., 2007). After excluding items that had poor loadings, the new model showed much better results. All the revised fit indices were acceptable, confirming that the measurement model was suitable. These findings confirm that the model fits the passengers' opinions about the top domestic airlines in India and can be depended on for further analysis. The measurement model results show significant improvement after modification. CMIN/DF decreased from 4.52 to 2.832 (<3.0), GFI improved from 0.72 to 0.97, and AGFI rose from 0.75 to 0.96 (>0.90). NFI increased from 0.73 to 0.92 and CFI from 0.82 to 0.95, both exceeding 0.90. RMSEA decreased from 0.07 to 0.04 (<0.07). Overall, the modified model demonstrates a good fit with the data (Schulz, R. N., et al., 2024).

Construct reliability

Reliability and validity assessment of airline service constructs

Three methods were used to check if the constructs are reliable, including (i) Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency, (ii) composite reliability (CR), and (iii) average variance extracted (AVE). (Devon et al., 2007)state that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or greater shows that the measure has good internal consistency. As evident from Table 1, every service-related construct exceeded the required threshold, indicating that the scale is reliable. Brand reputation had the highest rate of reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91), while in-flight services, punctuality, customer support, and connectivity came next with lower values. These findings match what previous studies have found about what passengers think about airline services (Giordano et al., 2024). The composite reliability scores confirmed that the measurement model was reliable. CR levels were between 0.83 and 0.94, and brand reputation (0.94) had the highest reliability, followed by in-flight services (0.90), customer support (0.91), punctuality (0.88), and connectivity (0.83). All of the scores were above 0.70, which demonstrates that the constructs are well related and consistent. All constructs' AVE scores were higher than 0.50, which is the minimum suggested by Hair et al. (2012), proving that convergent validity was achieved. Customer support had the highest AVE of 0.78, brand reputation came in second with 0.67, and connectivity had the lowest acceptable AVE of 0.59 (refer to Table 1). According to these findings, most of the variation in each construct comes from its indicators, not from measurement errors (Hair et al., 2012; Kyeu, 2025).

Convergent and discriminant validity

All standardised regression weights were larger than 0.50, which proves that each factor loading in each construct was statistically significant. These attributes are considered important in the field of consumer behaviour and service quality, as they strongly impact passengers' satisfaction, loyalty to the airline, and their intention to book again (Hair et al., 2012). To check discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE for every construct was compared with the correlations between the constructs. From Table 1, it can be seen that the square root of every correlation was higher than the inter-construct correlation, which means the Fornell-Larcker criterion was met (Frank et al., 2019). Correlation estimates in AMOS were below the important level of 0.85. (Derudder & Witlox, 2008; Frank et al., 2019), which again confirmed that the measures are not strongly linked.

Table 1: Reliability and validity measurement

Variables/ Constructs	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Square Root of AVE
Brand Reputation	BR1	0.98	0.912	0.93	0.64	0.80
	BR2	0.83				
	BR3	0.64				
	BR4	0.99				
	BR5	0.61				
In-flight services	IFS1	0.92	0.846	0.90	0.65	0.82
	IFS2	0.98				
	IFS3	0.96				
	IFS4	0.82				
Punctuality	PT1	0.94	0.821	0.87	0.64	0.80
	PT2	0.92				
	PT3	0.70				
	PT4	0.83				
Passenger Support	PS1	0.89	0.860	0.89	0.75	0.87
	PS2	0.94				
	PS3	0.73				
Connectivity	PN1	0.63	0.793	0.81	0.61	0.74
	PN2	0.98				
	PN3	0.96				

Results

Respondents' profile

In this research, 432 domestic airline passengers were surveyed, including 58.5% men and 41.5% women. Most were single (66.4%) versus 33.6% who were married, indicating that unmarried people might take more trips within India. The sample was dominated by young adults, with 52.8% in the 18–25 age bracket and 20.1% between 26–35, indicating that airlines must target early-working professionals and younger travelers as their main customer segments. Airline choice was also affected by education: 32% of the respondents had an undergraduate qualification, with 28% having a higher educational level, suggesting that educated travellers are a key market and possibly one to demand greater service quality and brand interaction. The distribution of income disclosed that 42% of the travelers belonged to upper-income segments, which demonstrates that

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domestic air travel is a medium- to upper-income mode of transport. Also, passengers who are living with two to three people or who travel alone reported greater usage, providing targeted marketing potential for these markets.

Descriptive analysis

The passenger preferences were spread over the five airlines, and IndiGo (79), Air India Express (97), SpiceJet (86), Vistara (92), and Akasa Air (78) were chosen, indicating there was no one airline that dominated. This reflects the competitive environment of the domestic market and the need to research related brand positions.

Positioning Analysis of Domestic Airlines

Passenger attitudes were analyzed five dimensions of service: brand image, in-flight services, timeliness, customer support, and route availability. Perceptual mapping based on attributes enabled a visualized representation of airline positioning and helped carriers match changing customer aspirations (Barros & Peypoch, 2009). Ratings were gathered using structured surveys, categorized by similar response patterns, and summed up in Microsoft Excel for analysis and visualization (Table 2). The study contrasted IndiGo, Air India Express, SpiceJet, Vistara, and Akasa Air on these metrics, noting variations in passenger sentiment and providing airlines with areas to improve their services and strategically differentiate.

Table 2: Dimensions and constructs for passengers' airlines

	Dimension 1		Service Quality		Reliability		On-board Support		Network Coverage
	BR1		IFS1		PT1		PS1		CN1
	BR3		IFS3		PT2				
	BR4								
	BR5		IFS4		PT4		PS3		CN4
	BR8								
Brand Reputation	Customer Value	In-flight Services	Functionality	Emotional Comfort	Responsiveness	Passenger Support	Crew Competence	Connectivity	Multimodal Connectivity
	BR2		IFS2						
	BR6				PT3		PS4		CN3
	BR7		IFS5						
	BR9								

Certain methodological steps were taken to assess passenger opinions of selected Indian airlines based on key service features.

Step 1: Structuring the data

Positioning analysis is a study method employed to determine the attitude of passengers regarding the brand image of domestic airlines concerning customer perception based on set standards. Perceptual mapping will combine the significant service attributes with the five chosen airlines and thus will enable to compare the market positions of the airlines. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) have revealed that there are five major constructs that were then confirmed by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), therefore, forming a strong framework that could be used to explain the way passengers distinguish and perceive airline brands. The results allow airlines to understand their levels of competition and identify the possible improvements.

Step 2: Data compilation

The scores of passengers to any airline on the five constructs were recorded in Microsoft Excel on a five-point Likert scale. The subsequent mean scores were put into perceptual matrices (see Table 3), therefore, becoming the base of the further mapping and analyzing processes.

Table 3: Perceptual matrices of select domestic airlines

Attributes	Vistara	Indigo	Akasa Air	Air India Express	SpiceJet
Dimension 1- Service Quality	5	4.4	2.8	3.4	1.8
Dimension 2- Customer Value	4.8	4.3	3.4	2.5	1.6
Dimension 1- Emotional Comfort	5	4.4	4.1	3.2	2.8
Dimension 2- Functionality	4.8	4.6	4.7	3.4	2.6
Dimension 1- Reliability	4.6	5	2.8	3.9	3.0
Dimension 2- Responsiveness	4.5	4.8	3.0	3.9	2.6
Dimension 1- On-board Support Quality	4.8	4.8	3.7	4.0	3.0
Dimension 2- Crew Competence	4.8	4.6	4.1	3.6	3.1
Dimension 1- Domestic Network	4.7	4.6	2.6	5	3.1
Dimension 2- Multimodal Connectivity	4.2	4.4	2.8	4.8	3.4

Step 3: Perceptual map

The two major dimensions of the factor analysis of each attribute were used to construct perceptual maps. This positioning of each airline indicates passenger perceived variation in brand reputation (Figure 2), in-flight services (Figure 3), punctuality (Figure 4), customer service (Figure 5) and route connectivity (Figure 6). Two dimensions have been used since they explained a significant percentage of the variance across constructs, including brand reputation (74 %), in-flight services (78%) punctuality (81%), customer support (82%) and route connectivity (90%). The addition of a third dimension did not add much explanatory value; this is why two dimensional maps were considered to be effective, understandable, and suitable to compare airlines.

Positioning maps of select airlines with respect to identified service attributes

The following figures (2 to 6) depict how the five leading domestic airlines are positioned in customers' minds using the five core constructs. They not only show how the airlines line up but also represents what passengers think about them. All maps are supported by in-depth descriptions of the items that passengers rated.

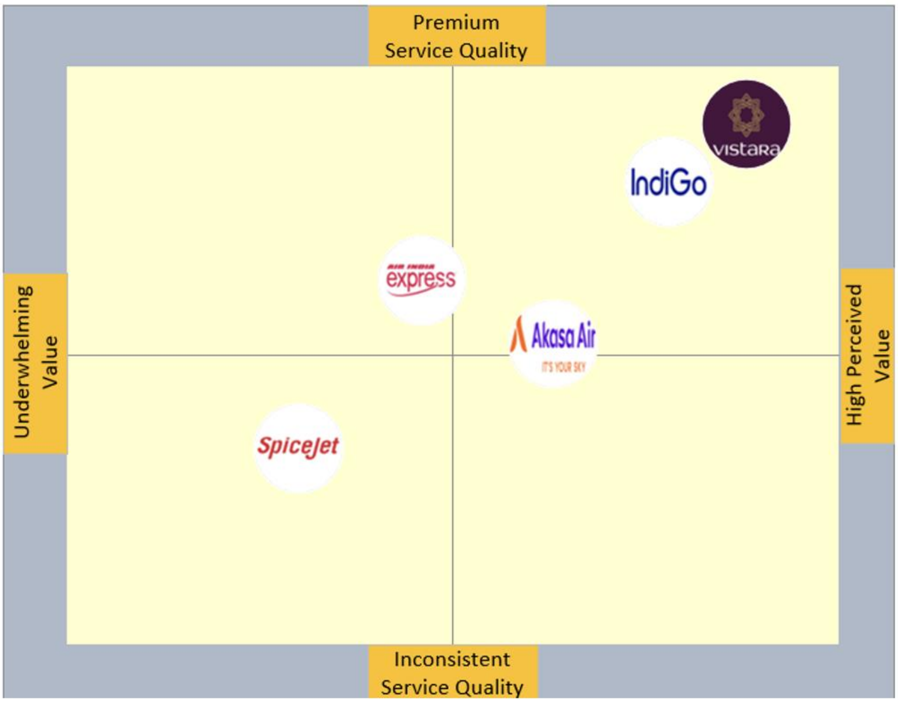

Figure 2: Two-dimensional positioning map viz-a-viz brand reputation

Figure 2 demonstrates how the Indian passengers rank the leading domestic airlines in relation to two major service dimensions. The core attributes indicated by the first dimension, which forms 65.3620.00 percent of the total variance, are brand image, reliability, in-flight service quality, and operational efficiency. The second dimension that explains 9.43 immensities of the variance is perceptions of ticket pricing, reservation convenience, loyalty programmes and general contentment. Altogether, these dimensions account for about 75 percent of the difference in passenger perceptions. IndiGo and Vistara are the market leaders and they have earned strong reputations of punctuality, premium service, and consistent customer experiences. On the other hand, Akasa Air is seen as not as established, and with medium service value and poorer brand recognition. SpiceJet is a unique group with a focus on low costs and regional connectivity coupled with increased reliability. Air India Express is in a privileged status, its image being formed by the heritage, international connectivity, and the transformation in progression. Generally, customers prefer carriers that incorporate safety, efficiency in operations and smooth travelling experiences. To maintain competitiveness, carriers will have to enhance the quality of their services, increase their routes, use technology-based solutions and enhance loyalty programmes to meet the changing customer expectations in the fast-growing aviation industry in India.

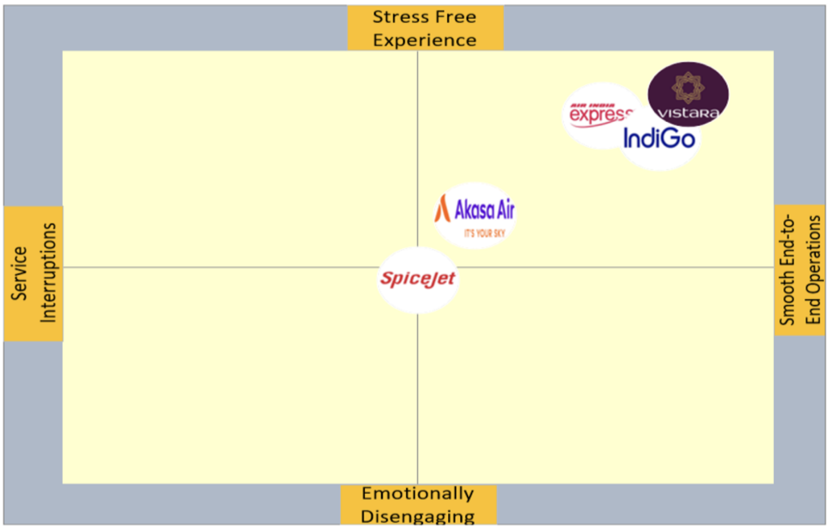

Figure 3: Two-dimensional positioning map viz-a-viz in-flight services

Figure 3 indicates a perceptual map showing the assessments of facilities and in-flight infrastructure by passengers in airlines which was developed using two major dimensions generated through factor analysis. Dimension 1 explains 62.38 per cent of the total variance and explains emotional interest and comfort, including cabin aesthetics, seat comfort and the overall atmosphere. The dimension 2, which has an explanation of 15.66 percent variance, has functional elements of booking flexibility, technological integration, and operational efficiency. Taken together, these dimensions contribute to 78.04 percent of the total variance, which is why their effects on passenger perceptions are significant. Vistara, IndiGo and Air India Express are the greatest ranked in both dimensions thus providing a multi faceted travel experience that combines emotional satisfaction with business excellence. Combination of their excellent cabin design, smooth check-in processes and a combination of technology all contribute to passenger satisfaction. In comparison, SpiceJet and Akasa Air have the moderate compliance with the expectations of the passengers; they are doing a good job in the areas of affordability and convenience, but they are doing poor in terms of sophistication and responsiveness. Customers are increasingly demanding airlines that will provide them with a technology-enabled and similar experience at each touchpoint of travel. As a way to stay competitive, domestic carriers need to invest in smart cabin design, digital innovation and responsive service models. Carriers can create long-term customer loyalty and cement their position in the ever-changing Indian aviation sector by creating comfort, simplifying in-flight services, and designing personalized digital experiences.

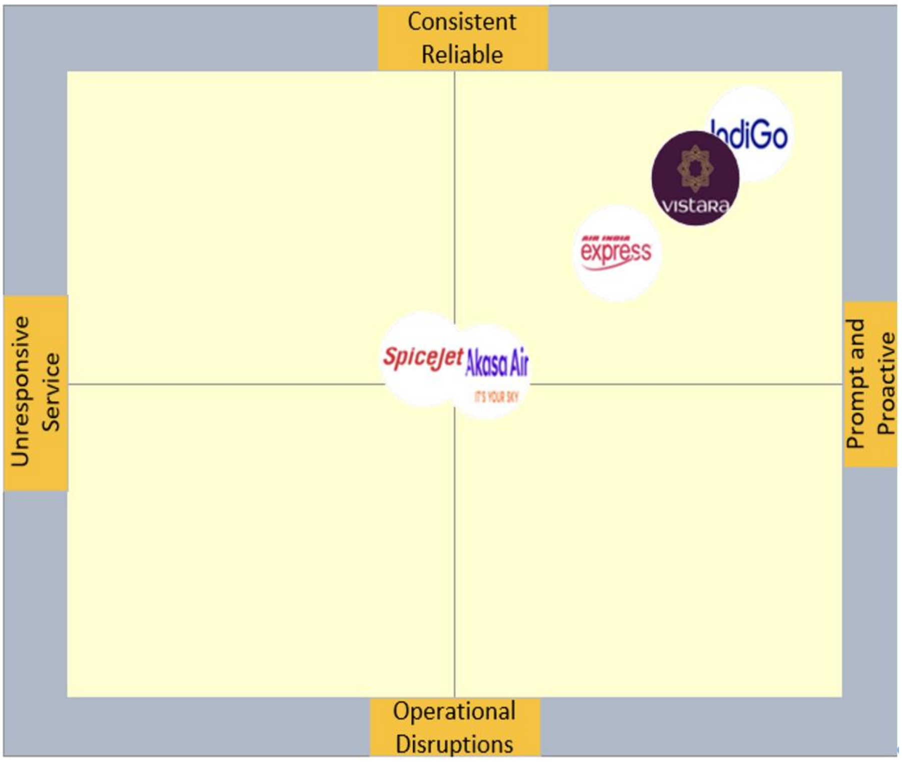

Figure 4: Two-dimensional positioning map viz-a-viz punctuality

The findings of perceptual mapping of airline punctuality and operational reliability are shown in figure 4; this result is achieved through an exploratory factor analysis. Most of the perceptions of passengers can be explained by two main dimensions: Dimension 1 (explaining 66.86[1]) is operational efficiency and includes on-time performance, frequency of delay, cancellations, and procedural transparency. Dimension 2 (explains 15.03% of the variance) is passenger engagement, and it has real-time communication during disruptions, staff responsiveness, and pre-boarding procedures. Collectively, these dimensions account for 81.89 0.000 percent of the total variance, which indicates how valuable they are in assessing the reliability of airlines. IndiGo is placed in the best position in the perceptual map, followed by Vistara and Air India Express, which means that it is closely associated with the expectations of passengers of the company to keep the timetables and proactively communicate scheduled flights. Meanwhile, SpiceJet and Akasa Air are in the neutral position; they are doing fine, but they are not very consistent in such areas as punctuality and contingency management. Modern passengers are less concerned about low fares and prefer to have reliability and smooth operations. Time keeping, openness and responsiveness have become key elements of trust and loyalty. Airlines need to improve their capacity to compete with each other by improving scheduling systems, communication in event of disruptions, and use data-driven operational planning. The commitment to efficiency and real-time responsiveness will help the carriers to address the changing demands and build the reputational capital as well as win the loyalty of customers in a busy and dynamic aviation industry in India.

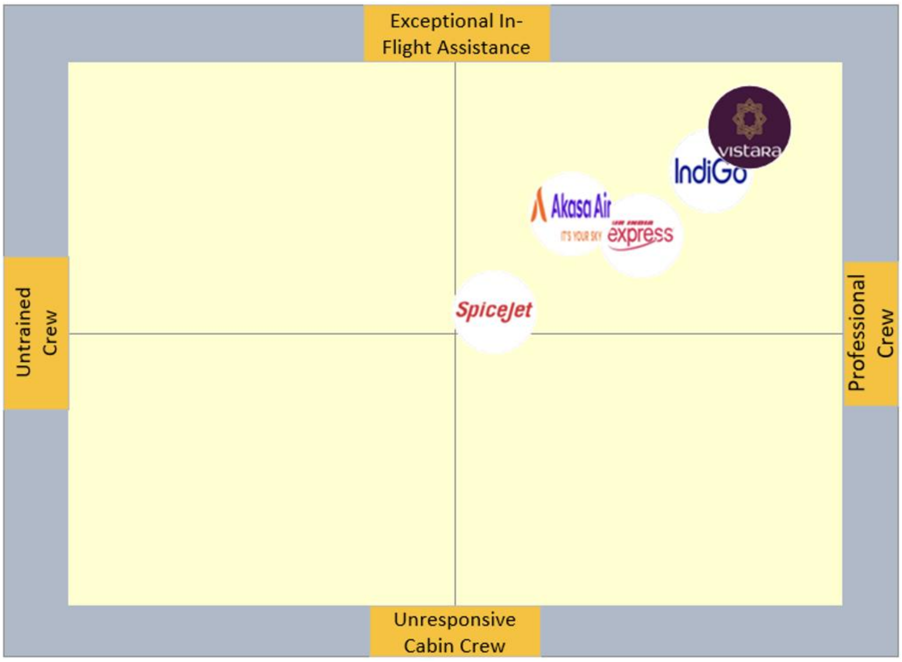

Figure 5: Two-Dimensional Positioning Map viz-a-viz Passenger Support

The analysis of the perceptions of the passengers concerning the quality of the services and the competence of the crew revealed two significant dimensions that were used to explain 81.51 percent of the total variance. These dimensions shed light on how travellers rate staff professionalism, responsiveness and helpfulness in-flight and at the airports. Vistara and IndiGo have the top positions in quality of service and behaviour of staff which later builds a good reputation in the market of providing service in a polite and efficient manner. There are also positive reviews concerning Air India Express and Akasa Air in terms of involvement of the passengers and increasing the performance of the workforce. On the other hand, SpiceJet appears at the bottom of the perceptual map, which implies that it must gain a prerequisite of restoring trust through more sensitive and consistent service provision. The way people are treated in the airplane greatly affects passenger choice. The attitudes are developed based on the personal experience, recommendations of the peers, online reviews, and brand reputation. The flight conditions are also good and conducive, the crew attentive and ready to serve the customers and also additional in-flight services are given all contribute to the level of customer loyalty. Being a competitive airline, Indian airlines should not limit themselves to delivering simple services but should focus on the development of delightful travelling experiences. This implies setting of well set standards of service, investing in the continuous training of the crew, incorporating innovative models of service and embracing the use of advanced technologies. The airlines focusing on employee growth and guiding genuine relationships with passengers have higher chances of fulfilling the dynamic expectations and enhancing brand image and loyalty in the dynamic aviation industry in India.

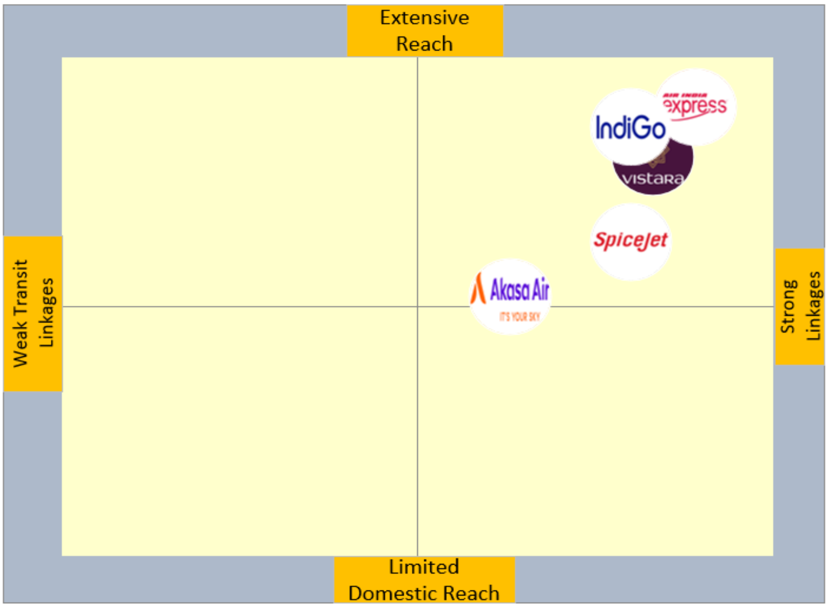

Figure 6: Two-Dimensional Positioning Map viz-a-viz Connectivity

Figure 6 is used to understand the connectivity and integration of the major domestic airlines of India as perceived by the passengers. The first dimension, which accounts 72.22 survey of the total variation includes the intensity of domestic activity in Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities. The second dimension, which explained 17.73 percentage of the variance, shows the extent to which airlines integrate with other modes of transport and enable other modes of transport to travel seamlessly between metropolitan and regional hubs. All these compose a major factor that determines what passengers think of airline connectivity in India. IndiGo is the strongest competitor with its network, a high frequency of flights, and well-covered underserved routes. Air India Express is also a successful carrier of air transit linkage of metropolitan and regional airports which provide uninterrupted movement of domestic to international flights. As a company with a good reputation in terms of reliability and high-quality service, Vistara has the opportunity to become more competitive by increasing its coverage to smaller cities. SpiceJet is still operational in the regional markets, but has challenges of uneven operations. Akasa Air is a new company that is already developing, but it is small and has little recognition. Airlines are required to expand their coverage to the region, combine transport services and make use of real-time data to plan their route efficiently to become stronger rivals. It could be enhanced by partnerships with airports, digital systems, and local transport networks to provide accessibility that can guarantee a reliable and well-connected travelling experience of diverse air passengers of India.

Conclusion and implications

With the increasing domestic aviation industry in India, the airlines are dealing with increased competition, changed passenger demand and fast changing technical innovation. This paper compares the performance of the IndiGo, Air India, Vistara, SpiceJet, and Akasa Air on the main dimensions such as brand reputation, in-flight service, punctuality, customer support, and connectivity. By using perceptual mapping and factor analysis, the analysis highlights differences in the perceptions of the travellers and the determinants of the airline preferences that show that the modern travellers care more about the image of the brands, the reliability, responsiveness, and the network connectedness instead of the low fares. Vistara and Air India have strong market shares due to their reputed image, good time management, high quality of services, and their personalized services and treatment to customers. Their competitive advantage in the industry is supported by the fact that their strategic global partnerships together with emphasis on high quality travelling experiences make them especially appealing to frequent flyers. The affordability and wide geographical coverage are some of the factors behind the competitive edge of SpiceJet, but poor service quality and reliability challenges reduce its attractiveness. Akasa Air is a new competitor, which has some growth prospects but has a neutral view of the populace. Improving the service reliability, improving the customer experience, and new unique in-flight services would help it compete better with the established carriers. Comfort, quality of services and digital connectivity have become a preference of the passengers compared to the ticket prices. As a result, maintaining punctuality, investing in personnel training, and customer-oriented technologies are inevitable. Operational excellence combined with high service innovation; airlines will be in a better position to build better reputations and competitive positioning. The study has implications to the academic and industry practice by establishing the determinants of passenger choice in service quality, reliability, technology, pricing, and reputation, therefore, adding to the discussion on airline consumer behavior. The results also create strategic basis on how to build the brand image, customer loyalty, and keep pace with the dynamic aviation environment in India.

In terms of limitations, the research used primarily quantitative designs to assess passenger behaviour in major domestic airlines and provided useful statistical pattern but made little contribution to emotional reactions, loyalty concepts and reactions to services. Further research efforts should assume mixed-method or purely qualitative approaches to further explain the factors of decision-making that affect the passengers. The narrow-minded approach of domestic travellers did not consider the other classes of users like international tourists and non-air travellers whose views might enlighten the reasons behind the reluctance to use domestic carriers. Besides, the study failed to include the opinions of airline CEOs, management personnel, flight attendants, and government agencies- which are key stakeholders in understanding the challenges within the industry which include safety, cost management as well as the use of technology. Future research should also incorporate other variables.

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