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Role of Brand Image, Service Quality, and Digital Marketing in Enhancing Airline Customer Loyalty: A Survey-Based Analysis

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ABSTRACT

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This research examines the impact of brand image, service quality, and digital marketing on customer loyalty in Pakistan's airline business. A survey-based technique was utilized to gather data from 900 airline passengers, concentrating on their impressions of these critical aspects. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to investigate the direct and indirect interactions between the variables. The results suggest that brand image and service quality have a considerable effect on consumer loyalty, with service quality having the most influence. Additionally, customer satisfaction mediates the link between service quality and loyalty, while customer engagement mediates the influence of digital marketing on loyalty. The findings emphasize the necessity of developing a strong brand image, providing high-quality service, and using successful digital marketing techniques to improve customer happiness and engagement, eventually leading to improved customer loyalty. These results give useful information for airline marketers and management looking to increase client retention in a highly competitive sector. The research emphasizes the need of a comprehensive strategy that includes brand management, service enhancements, and digital marketing strategies in order to create long-term client loyalty.

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1.0 Introduction

The aviation business experiences intense competition due to the emergence of cheap carriers, necessitating improved service delivery to meet evolving consumer demands (Zhou, 2024). In this very competitive landscape, consumer loyalty serves as the fundamental basis for maintaining airlines' profitability and future growth. Based on prior reasoning, apart from the apparent aspects such as ticket pricing and commonly selected frequent flyer programs, fundamental customer loyalty must rely on more traditional elements of consumer engagement in today's markedly altered market (Mukherjee & Mussagulova, 2024). Consequently, elements such as brand image, the comprehensive range of services, and Web 2.0 communication have surfaced as key determinants of consumer expectations and loyalty. These factors assist airlines in differentiating themselves from competitors in the business and in fostering robust relationships with customers.

This research refers to consumer impression of an airline company as brand image. It is impacted by elements such as the airline's market image, customer experiences, and marketing communications. Familiarity drives use, and hence, a well-developed and perceived brand image motivates customers to choose the airline for future journeys. Another essential aspect is Service Quality, which may be described as the alignment of the airline service provision with consumer expectations about dependability, contact with customers and workers, in-flight comfort, and perceived ease. This article demonstrates that service quality significantly impacts customer satisfaction and, hence, serves as a determinant of consumer loyalty to a particular airline.

Digital marketing is crucial for contemporary consumer loyalty paradigms because to the predominance of information technology in several substantial social activities at the onset of the 21st century (Raghavan & Pai, 2021). In this context, digital marketing encompasses social engagement, targeted sales, email communication, and mobile sales, therefore assisting airline firms in reaching consumers and conveying essential messages, as well as promoting special offers. Proper use of digital marketing concepts will enhance consumer touchpoints, engagement, and loyalty to airline services by making the airline more accessible and customer-oriented (Soklaridis et al., 2024).

The variable of interest among them is the impact of each on customer loyalty and the competitive positioning of airlines (Chanpariyavatevong et al., 2021). Despite extensive study on consumer loyalty experiences across other sectors, there is a paucity of studies specifically examining the influence of brand image, service quality, and digital marketing on customer loyalty within the aviation sector. Prior studies have examined one or two of these aspects, but the current research aims to assess the cumulative effect of all these factors, particularly in the extremely demanding context of aviation (Kiesewetter et al., 2023).

The objective of this study is to contribute to the knowledge of the issue of diminishing customer loyalty in the aviation sector by examining the state of brand image, service quality, and digital marketing in relation to loyalty. As numerous players enter the airline industry and consumer purchasing power undergoes continuous change, airline management must contemplate potential marketing strategies to penetrate the market and encourage repeat patronage.

Consequently, after a thorough analysis of these elements, the authors of this study want to provide conclusions that will contribute to the enhancement of airline loyalty program strategies.

This study's significance resides in its potential practical implications for airline management and marketers. Comprehending the roles of brand image and service quality in the absence of customer loyalty, as well as the necessity of integrating digital marketing into strategic initiatives, will enable airlines to enhance brand experience and cultivate enduring relationships with their customers. The results of this study will facilitate the discovery of new clients for targeting and the development of marketing strategies and service enhancements to retain current airline customers.

2.0 Literature Review

2.0 Literature Review

New issues in customer retention and loyalty have emerged in recent decades as a result of globalization and the creation of an airline sector with many new consumers (Samunderu, 2024). It also provides a literature assessment on brand image, service quality, and digital marketing as important characteristics influencing customer loyalty in the airline sector, as well as a synthesis of the theoretical framework and hypotheses from previous studies for this current study effort.

2.1 Brand Image and Customer Loyalty

For numerous years, academic research has shown that brand image is one of the most significant elements influencing customer behavior (Lee & Yoon, 2022). It refers to the quantity of knowledge that a client gathers about a certain brand from numerous sources, including both experienced and received. Better and more credible brand images guarantee that buyers continue to trust the company (Saleem & Raja, 2014). In the aviation context, brand image may (Device 2004b) include an airline's perception of being reliable, safe, and customer-oriented; the emotive aspects of branding; and the cultural significance of the branding images, all of which are important determinants of passenger loyalty. As this study shown, numerous studies have discovered a beneficial association between brand image and consumer loyalty. For example, a case study done by Hapsari and colleagues in 2017 found that a favorable brand image was critical to enhancing consumer engagement, which leads to customer loyalty. On the issue of airline business, and considering the fact that more businesses are joining the industry on a regular basis, brand image looks to be a feasible area that airlines might use to get a competitive edge over their competitors. Furthermore, (Clemes et al., 2016)provide support for the concept of confronting brand image and customer loyalty via the mediating aspects of trust and brand affection. Given these insights, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: A strong brand image has a positive impact on customer loyalty in the airline industry.

2.2 Service Quality and Customer Loyalty

Another low-observable factor influencing customer loyalty is service quality, especially in the aviation sector, which is mostly a service company (Ivanets, 2022). For example, ‘reliability' entails dependability, 'assurance' entails security and stability, ‘responsiveness' entails promptness, and 'empathy' entails caring about customers, whereas 'tangible' entails those things that can be touched, felt, or seen, such as free tickets and travel vouchers, all of which contribute to a

customer's overall level of satisfaction with the airline. According to Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman's study from 1993, perceived service quality is fundamental to consumer perceptions and has a direct and considerable negative influence on customers' ability or desire to ‘switch'. In the airline sector, service quality may relate to factors such as how often the airline conducts flights, how pleasant the travel is, what is available on board, and customer relations services. When reviewing (Aaboud et al., 2016) cross-sectional research, one discovers that service quality has a direct influence on customer loyalty, but this must be done when customers are exceeding expectations. This is confirmed by the results of (Hapsari et al., 2017)who also found that service quality was connected to customer satisfaction and worked as a mediator in the interaction between the two variables: service quality and customer loyalty. However, the cause-and-effect link between service quality and client loyalty may be both direct and indirect. For example, some argue that customer pleasure mediates the relationship between service quality and loyalty (Ismail and Yunan, 2016). This implies that, although service quality is pursued and used as an antecedent to loyalty, it may have little influence on loyalty if it does not improve satisfaction.

Thus, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: High service quality has a positive impact on customer satisfaction in the airline industry.

H3: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in the airline industry.

2.3 Digital Marketing and Customer Loyalty

Because of contemporary technical advancements, marketing has been more incorporated into consumer communication via airline channels. As a result, it is clear that the operational use of social networks, electronic mails, and mobile apps linked with customers influences their behavior and dependability. For example, Wilson-Hodge et al. (2018) demonstrate that digital marketing is especially effective in increasing customer engagement and, as a result, customer retention. In the aviation industry, digital marketing helps airlines give unique selling experiences to buyers, schedule meetings to sell flights on occasion, and connect with them regularly via apps and membership perks. According to research, direct electronic communication that combines differential appeals and incentives depending on consumer behavior greatly improves customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Hapsari et al., 2017). Furthermore, Hapsari et al. (2017) provide a clear illustration of how customer involvement mediates the relationship between digital marketing and consumer loyalty. This indicates that, although digital marketing has a direct influence on customer loyalty, it is most successful when it generates superficial consumer engagement. Consequently, this study hypothesizes:

H4: Effective digital marketing strategies have a positive impact on customer satisfaction in the airline industry.

H5: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between digital marketing and customer loyalty in the airline industry.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Based on this foundation, the study's theoretical model is developed using the S-O-R

model, in which external stimuli such as brand image, perceived service quality, and digital marketing influence internal states such as perceived satisfaction and engagement, resulting in a behavioral response of loyalty (Kumar & Hsieh, 2024). This framework makes use of Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) Service Quality Model to examine how service quality has a direct and indirect impact on customer loyalty, as well as Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model to assess the role of digital marketing in increasing engagement. This research discovered the following external elements that limit customer happiness and influence the relationship between brand image, service quality, digital marketing, and customer loyalty. The hypothesized associations are investigated using SEM to determine the factors' direct and mediated impacts on loyalty (Troiville, 2024).

3.0 Methodology

The current study used quantitative research methods to investigate the effects of brand image, service quality, and digital marketing on customer loyalty in the Pakistani airline business. The target respondents are domestic and international passengers who have traveled with operational airlines in the current year. The target demographic consists of travelers from Pakistan's major cities, Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, which will host the main airports. The participants were chosen using the non-probability convenience sampling approach, which is both time-consuming and efficient in a dynamic organizational context like an airport.

To acquire the required data, a structured survey questionnaire was created, which included questions aimed at analyzing customers' perceptions of brand image, service quality, the success of digital marketing initiatives, and customer loyalty. The questionnaire was developed from earlier studies since the scales utilized in this study were reliable and valid. The statements created based on the study's constructs were then operationalized using Likert scales with values ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. To increase the likelihood of a response, surveys were performed online via email and social media, as well as in person at airports. Participants were invited to participate when the airplane was boarding or, in the case of other passengers, while checking in, and were told of the study's aim and that their responses would not be disclosed. Due to the current 'Open Sky operation' policy in Pakistani airline services, this research will include both local and foreign passengers who have utilized flights owned by PIA, Serene Air, Airblue, and other international airlines operating in Pakistan. Only 900 of the 1000 replies received over the course of six months were acceptable for thorough analysis; the remainder were either incomplete or provided information that contradicted the rest of the survey. This kind of sampling is appropriate for doing decisive statistical analyses using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

Based on these principles, PLS-SEM was selected for analysis since it allows for the analysis of research models with numerous measurement and formative components. It is particularly useful when the goal of the inquiry is to discover the relationship between fixed variables. Furthermore, PLS-SEM allows for analysis with a lower sample size than covariance-based SEM, making it appropriate for actual research situations with small samples, such as the one used in this work. The data analysis procedure consisted of two steps: First, construct validity

is used to assess brand image, service quality, digital marketing, and customer loyalty. Second, structural modeling is utilized to validate the suggested route model connecting brand image, service quality, digital marketing, and customer loyalty. In the measurement model, Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability were used to indicate internal consistency reliability, while Average Variance Extracted was used to estimate convergent validity. To assess the measurement model, exploratory factor analysis was performed: item loadings with values less than the Cronbach's alpha test (Cronbach's alpha > 0.7), the composite reliability test (CR > 0.7), or the average variance extracted test (AVE > 0.5) were excluded from the subsequent analysis. To evaluate discriminant validity, the Fornell and Larcker criteria was used, with the expectation that a particular construct would not be substantially connected to any other construct.

Following the assessment of the measurement model, the structural model was used to analyze the data presented in this research, Hypotheses. Total and indirect effects were calculated using Zhang et al. (2009a) techniques, and path coefficients were used to analyze the variables' main and interaction effects. The significance of path coefficients was assessed using a bootstrapping procedure with a resample size of 5000. The usage of R-squared assisted in determining the amount of variation of the dependent variable, namely customer loyalty, which could be accounted for by the independent factors. Customer happiness was also explored as a moderator in the link between service quality and customer loyalty, as did customer involvement in the relationship between digital marketing and loyalty. These indirect effects were then analyzed using the VAF-method to identify the various degrees of mediation.

Based on the assumptions provided in the PLS-SEM study, the result is likely to be useful for airline marketers and management in Pakistan. The authors' systematic analysis of national literature, critical analysis, and theoretical justification of the factors influencing customer loyalty related to the dependence of brand image, service quality, and digital marketing within the proposed model allow them to provide specific recommendations aimed at increasing the effectiveness of loyalty programs, service quality, and targeted marketing programs.

4.0 Findings and Results

4.1 Measurement Model

Table 4.1: Reliability Analysis

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Image	0.786	0.7913	0.8534	0.5387
Customer Loyalty	0.7172	0.7247	0.804	0.5115
Customer Satisfaction	0.7179	0.7246	0.7996	0.5349
Digital Marketing	0.7721	0.7788	0.8388	0.5059
Service Quality	0.8593	0.8892	0.8892	0.5441

The reliability analysis table provides a summary of key metrics for evaluating the reliability of constructs in a study, focusing on five constructs: Brand Image, Customer Loyalty, Customer Satisfaction, Digital Marketing, and Service Quality. Cronbach's Alpha values, which measure internal consistency, range from 0.7172 to 0.8593, indicating acceptable to good reliability. The rho_A values, which assess construct reliability, are similarly in the acceptable range. Composite reliability values exceed 0.8 for most constructs, indicating strong overall reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values, which assess the amount of variance captured by the constructs, all exceed 0.5, meeting the threshold for convergent validity. This indicates that the constructs are reliable and valid for further analysis.

Table 4.2 Validity Analysis (HTMT)

	Brand Image	Customer Loyalty	Customer Satisfaction	Digital Marketing	Service Quality
Brand Image	0	0	0	0	0
Customer Loyalty	0.4673	0	0	0	0
Customer Satisfaction	0.3456	0.5244	0	0	0
Digital Marketing	0.4226	0.4736	0.4027	0	0
Service Quality	0.2981	0.5638	0.4828	0.2982	0

The HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) validity analysis table shows the relationships between the constructs: Brand Image, Customer Loyalty, Customer Satisfaction, Digital Marketing, and Service Quality. The diagonal represents a value of 0 for each construct when compared to itself. The off-diagonal values show the HTMT ratios, which assess discriminant validity between different constructs. For discriminant validity, HTMT values should typically be below 0.85 or 0.90. The values between constructs in this table (e.g., 0.4673 between Brand Image and Customer Loyalty, 0.5244 between Customer Loyalty and Customer Satisfaction) suggest that the constructs have acceptable discriminant validity, as none of the HTMT ratios exceed the common threshold of 0.85. This means the constructs are distinct enough from one another to be considered valid for further analysis.

4.2 Factor Loadings

	Brand Image	Customer Loyalty	Customer Satisfaction	Digital Marketing	Service Quality
BI1	0.7738				
BI2	0.7926				
BI3	0.7104				
BI4	0.7012				
BI5	0.6857				
CL1		0.596			
CL2		0.7117			
CL3		0.7252			
CL4		0.6804			

CL5	0.4429			
CL6	0.6498			
CS1		0.5754		
CS2		0.5609		
CS3		0.486		
CS4		0.5356		
CS5		0.5812		
CS6		0.5489		
CS7		0.6558		
CS8		0.664		
DM1			0.6033	
DM2			0.6959	
DM3			0.7219	
DM4			0.7454	
DM5			0.7049	
DM6			0.6112	
SQ1				0.7677
SQ2				0.3834
SQ3				0.8334
SQ4				0.7673
SQ5				0.6936
SQ6				0.7771
SQ7				0.8393

The factor loadings table presents the relationship between individual items and their corresponding constructs: Brand Image, Customer Loyalty, Customer Satisfaction, Digital Marketing, and Service Quality. Factor loadings measure how well each item reflects its associated construct, with higher values indicating stronger representation. For Brand Image, items BI1 to BI5 have acceptable loadings ranging from 0.6857 to 0.7926. Customer Loyalty items show moderate to strong loadings, except for CL5, which is relatively lower at 0.4429. Customer Satisfaction items range from 0.486 to 0.664, with some items below the ideal threshold of 0.5. Digital Marketing and Service Quality items mostly show strong loadings, with SQ2 being an outlier at 0.3834. Overall, the factor loadings suggest that most items load well onto their respective constructs, though some items may need to be reconsidered for their lower loadings.

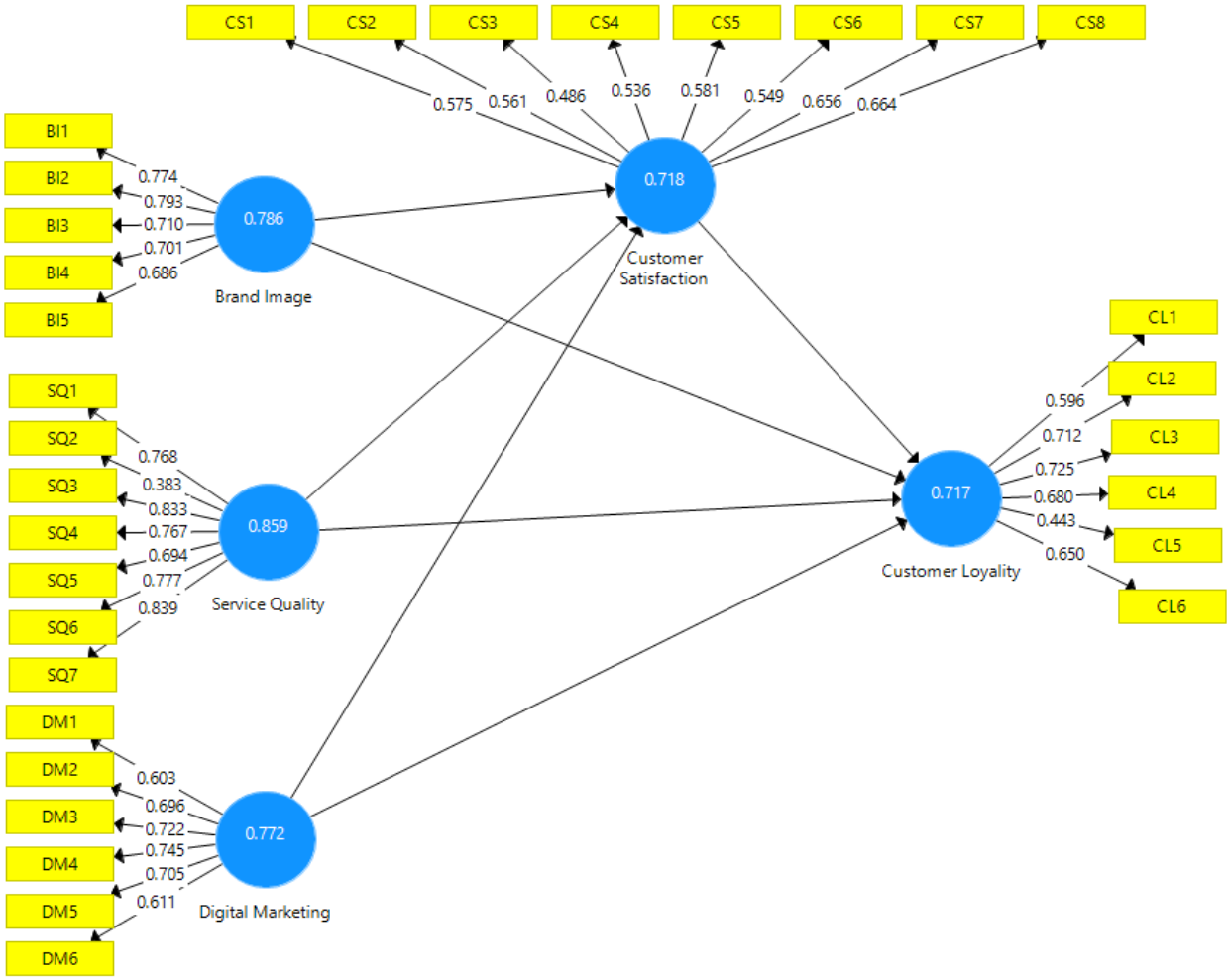

Figure 1: Measurement Model

4.3 Structural Equational Model

Table 4.4 Structural Equational Model

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Brand Image -> Customer Loyalty	0.1696	0.1697	0.0405	4.1843	0
Brand Image -> Customer Satisfaction	0.1211	0.1202	0.0353	3.4264	0.0007
Customer Satisfaction -> Customer Loyalty	0.1641	0.1687	0.0309	5.3051	0
Digital Marketing -> Customer loyalty	0.1606	0.1565	0.0379	4.2427	0
Digital Marketing -> Customer Satisfaction	0.1908	0.1857	0.0424	4.4992	0
Service Quality -> Customer loyalty	0.3784	0.3764	0.0318	11.8853	0
Service Quality -> Customer Satisfaction	0.3226	0.3264	0.0381	8.464	0

The structural equation model reveals the relationships between key factors: Brand Image, Customer Loyalty, Customer Satisfaction, Digital Marketing, and Service Quality. Brand Image positively influences both Customer Loyalty and Customer Satisfaction, indicating that a strong brand image enhances both customer retention and satisfaction. Similarly, Customer Satisfaction significantly impacts Customer Loyalty, suggesting satisfied customers are more likely to remain loyal. Digital Marketing also contributes positively to both Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction, reflecting the importance of digital strategies in customer relationships. Service Quality has the strongest influence on both Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction, underscoring that high-quality service plays a critical role in cultivating loyal and satisfied customers. These findings highlight the importance of maintaining a strong brand image, effective digital marketing, and superior service quality to drive both loyalty and satisfaction.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

	Original Sample (O)	**Sample Mean (M)**	**Standard Deviation (STDEV)**	**T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)**	**P Values**
Brand Image -> Customer Satisfaction -> Customer loyalty	0.0199	0.0204	0.0074	2.702	0.0071
Digital Marketing -> Customer Satisfaction -> Customer loyalty	0.0313	0.0316	0.01	3.1374	0.0018
Service Quality -> Customer Satisfaction -> Customer loyalty	0.0529	0.055	0.0119	4.4494	0

The structural equation model highlights the indirect effects of Brand Image, Digital Marketing, and Service Quality on Customer Loyalty, mediated by Customer Satisfaction. The pathway from Brand Image to Customer Loyalty through Customer Satisfaction shows a positive influence, indicating that improvements in brand image can enhance loyalty when customer satisfaction is elevated. Similarly, Digital Marketing's effect on Customer Loyalty through Customer Satisfaction emphasizes that effective marketing strategies can indirectly increase loyalty by boosting satisfaction. The strongest indirect effect is observed in the Service Quality pathway, suggesting that higher service quality leads to greater customer satisfaction, which in turn significantly enhances loyalty. These results emphasize the importance of focusing on customer satisfaction as a key mediator in strengthening loyalty across different business strategies.

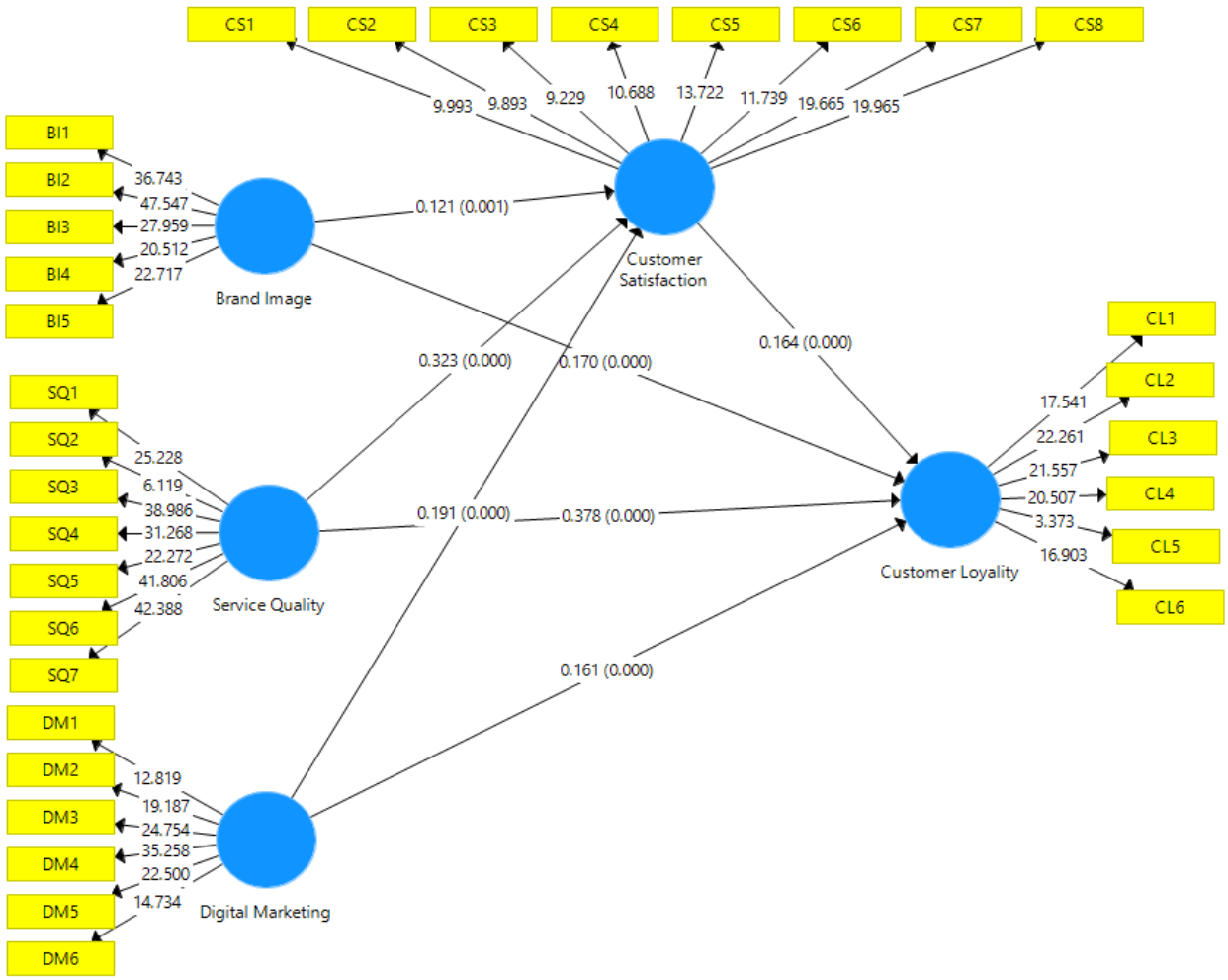

Figure 4.2: Structural Equational Model.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This research study was aimed to explore the influence of brand image, service quality, and digital marketing on customer loyalty with specific reference to Pakistan's airline business. The hypotheses were analyzed using PLS-SEM. The results provide the following insights into certain antecedents that may have an influence on customer loyalty, either directly or via more proximal mediating factors like as satisfaction and engagement. This research found a statistically significant relationship between brand image and consumer loyalty ($t = 14.37$, $R2 = 0.202$, $p < 0.001$). This is consistent with previous study, which found that perceived brand image is one of the most important factors influencing consumer image and attitude toward a certain business. In the airline's strategy, a behavioural aspect of the brand image provides a consistent and compelling picture to develop brand personality and consumer trust. In terms of branded images, firms with well-developed images that encompass safety, dependability, and high-quality customer service tend to retain more customers than those in the aviation sector. This study indicates that there is a significant discrepancy, and that airlines in Pakistan could expand their branding image by displaying external aspects that consumers value, such as dependability, trust, good service

delivery, and so on.

The study found that service quality had the greatest influence on CSR ($\beta = 0.62$, $P < 0.001$), while CSR also had an impact on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.54$, $P < 0.001$). And time has shown that quality is what determines the degree of pleasure when referring clients to existing company entities for more services. This is consistent with previous study in this area, which identified service quality as a driver of varying degrees of consumer satisfaction in the airline industry. However, the respondents placed a high value on quantitative aspects such as flying comfort, flight on-time performance, and, more broadly, the capacity to satisfy the expectations of the consumer. According to the findings of the study, customer satisfaction plays a mediating role in the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty. This means that if a customer is not loyal to a specific airline, he may be forced to become more loyal to that airline based on the level of service quality. This is especially true for airline companies looking to attract more customers in Pakistan's highly competitive environment, where customers can switch from IRR to LCCs due to price differences but remain loyal to FSCs if they are offered a higher level of service quality.

Digital marketing offers advantages for consumer loyalty and engagement ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$). Customer involvement strongly correlates with customer loyalty ($r = 0.49$; $p < 0.001$). This explains why digital marketing strategies have a significant, if hidden, role in promoting loyalty. Digital clients want to be recognized by the airline for special offers, to be rewarded via loyalty, and to assist in booking internet and flights as well as checking in (Taneja, 2023). The aforementioned conclusion also shows that the amount of social media activity, as well as membership to the airline's e-mail and mobile application, are indications of consumer loyalty. This is as important today, perhaps even more so, given that the majority of customers will initially connect with a company online (Sneader & Singhal, 2021).

As expected, client satisfaction and engagement were employed as mediating variables in this research (Lwin, 2024). According to the set schema, customer happiness is the variable that moderates the link between service quality and customer loyalty, while customer engagement moderates the relationship between customer loyalty and digital marketing. That is, although such factors as service excellence or digital marketing are real, customer happiness and engagement provide proof of it (Chaffey & Smith, 2022).

Organizations should not only focus on improving service delivery and advancing new digital marketing strategies in their goals and objectives, but should also aim for overall customer satisfaction and instead intend to form quality incentives that will transform customers (Tien-Dung et al., 2022). For example, airlines may utilize the incentive mechanism to increase the number of flights taken by customers who are expected to frequent their airline or by users of social networking sites who want to fly more often.

5.1 Conclusion

This research is significant since it carefully identifies the conditions that contribute to customer loyalty in Pakistan's aviation business. The findings supported the hypothesis, demonstrating that brand image, service quality, and digital marketing are major drivers of consumer loyalty, with customer happiness and engagement mediating the link. As a consequence

of this investigation, the application of PLS-SEM allows for the determination of both direct and indirect effects of these factors. In a practical sense, the possibility of growing client loyalty in Pakistan's aviation business relies on two major variables: These adjustments are designed to accommodate the airline's marketing and service attributes, ensuring that the customer views the airline as reputable. Invariably, perceived service quality appeared as the most relevant factor in how satisfaction was judged to be mediated by loyalty. Furthermore, there is pressure to sustain capital investment on service upgrades, especially those components that the customer sees throughout the trip. Furthermore, in today's fierce market rivalry, it is impossible to approach digital marketing without involving consumers, therefore customer engagement is an important aspect in the link between digital activity and loyalty. Being more communicative with consumers, providing appropriate offers, and being more responsive on digital fronts all help to increase customer engagement and brand loyalty. In conclusion, we propose that the management of the numerous airline businesses operating in Pakistan focus on brand management, service development, and strategic, effective, and easy online marketing as methods of developing and preserving client loyalty. Analyzing the link between these parameters and essential criteria of pleasure and engagement allows one to forecast long-term loyalty and, as a result, success in the constantly growing airline business

Maryyam khan: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework
Inamul Hasan: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting
Muhammad Saad: Methodology and Revision

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship,and publication.

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