

Determinants of Airport Passenger Satisfaction: A PLS-SEM Approach Using ASQ Survey Data from Sixteen Major Indian Airports

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Abstract - The aviation industry has transformed into a highly competitive, service-oriented sector where passenger satisfaction serves as a vital indicator of operational excellence and financial viability.¹ Beyond reputation, satisfaction directly drives commercial performance; industry data suggests a 1% improvement in global passenger satisfaction correlates with a 1.5% increase in non-aeronautical revenue.¹ This study investigates the determinants of satisfaction across sixteen Airports Authority of India (AAI) airports using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) based on 2025 Airport Service Quality (ASQ) Departure Survey data.¹ The ASQ program, developed and administered by the Airports Council International (ACI), is a globally recognized passenger service benchmarking tool that provides standardized measures of passenger satisfaction directly at the day of service.¹ The survey evaluates 31 specific service parameters alongside one overall affect, representing Overall Satisfaction.¹ Initial structural iterations revealed severe multicollinearity among primary customer contact points, inducing suppression effects and theoretically inconsistent negative path coefficients. To resolve this, a reflective-reflective hierarchical component model (HCM) is proposed as a theoretical solution. The empirical structural model evaluated using 2025 data successfully explains 65.1% of the variance in overall passenger satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.651$). The analysis identifies Security Screening (SS) ($\beta = 0.911$, $p < 0.001$) and Throughout the Airport (TTA) ($\beta = 0.678$, $p < 0.001$) as the primary positive drivers of satisfaction, while highlighting severe multicollinearity and suppression effects resulting in negative path coefficients for Check-In ($\beta = -0.588$), Shopping/Dining ($\beta = -0.719$), and Ease of Access ($\beta = -0.360$). These findings offer an empirically validated roadmap for airport managers to prioritize digital infrastructure and streamline terminal processing to maximize non-aeronautical revenue.

- Aeronautical Revenue: Landing fees, passenger service fees, and aircraft charges.
- Non-Aeronautical Revenue: Retail, restaurants, parking, and advertising.

Research indicates that satisfied passengers spend more time and money within terminals.¹ The strategic importance of service quality is highlighted by the estimate that a one percent increase in satisfaction can yield a 1.5 percent boost in non-aeronautical revenue.¹

1.3 Research Problem and Objectives

While descriptive statistics and baseline benchmarking are routinely used to analyse airport performance, there is a distinct shortage of advanced multivariate structural modelling applied to the Indian aviation sector using official, multi-airport datasets. Most existing studies focus on single-hub private airports (such as Delhi or Mumbai), ignoring the vast network of state-run regional gateways. Furthermore, initial modelling attempts using traditional first-order structural frameworks suffer from severe multicollinearity, creating unstable, unpublishable parameters.

This study addresses these gaps by evaluating quarterly data from 16 AAI airports during 2025 using a second-order PLS-SEM framework. The specific research objectives are to:

1. Formulate a robust, psychometrically sound hierarchical measurement model that resolves inter-variable collinearity among ASQ attributes.
2. Evaluate the relationship between distinct airport service dimensions and overall passenger satisfaction.
3. Assess the overall model's explanatory and predictive power (R^2).
4. Identify and rank the most influential service drivers to guide strategic capital expenditure for the Airports Authority of India.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Evolution of Modern Airports

Over the past two decades, the global aviation landscape has shifted from a purely transportation-focused sector into a customer-centric ecosystem.¹ Airports are no longer just transit points; they are integrated hubs of retail, hospitality, and entertainment.¹ For the Airports Authority of India (AAI), managing this experience is critical to maintaining competitiveness and operational efficiency.¹

1.2 The Economic Imperative of Satisfaction

Passenger satisfaction is not merely a "soft" metric; it has profound economic implications.¹ Airport revenue is divided into two categories:¹

2. Literature Review

2.1 The ASQ Framework and Customer Experience Management

The Airport Service Quality (ASQ) program, developed and administered by the Airports Council International (ACI), stands as the global standard for passenger service benchmarking.¹ Modern airport management principles have transitioned toward comprehensive Customer Experience Management (CXM), which views the airport terminal not as a sequence of disjointed processing counters, but as a holistic, end-to-end ecosystem of passenger interactions.¹ ACI defines superior performance through structured customer experience domains, requiring an ongoing, data-driven understanding of

passenger needs to maximize terminal performance and satisfaction.¹

2.2 The Economic Rationale: Why Satisfaction Matters

The economic linkages between passenger satisfaction and airport profitability are well-documented in contemporary aviation management literature.¹ ACI World demonstrated that enhancing customer experience is one of the most effective levers for driving non-aeronautical revenue (NAR).¹ When passengers navigate an airport seamlessly, their cognitive anxiety drops, shifting them from a high-stress "transit mindset" to a relaxed "leisure mindset".^{1,10} This psychological transition directly expands their inclination to spend on retail, dining, and premium services.¹ The 1% satisfaction to 1.5% NAR multiplier establishes service quality as a core operational priority rather than a discretionary luxury.¹

2.3 Operational Environment and Regulatory Framework in India

The operational and service quality standards of Indian airports are tightly coupled with the economic and regulatory architecture of the sector.² As of 2025, the Indian aviation network has expanded substantially, comprising approximately 164 operational airports across the country, up from just 74 airports in 2014.⁶ Of this network, the Airports Authority of India (AAI) directly manages roughly 125 airports—including a mix of international, domestic, and customs airports—under the administrative control of the Ministry of Civil Aviation, while a small number of metropolitan gateways continue to be operated by private players under joint-venture and public-private-partnership (PPP) models.^{6,7}

Due to the natural monopoly characteristics of airports—where a city typically has only one civilian airport managing all aeronautical services—the risk of market power abuse by operators necessitated an independent regulator.² This led to the enactment of the Airports Economic Regulatory Authority of India Act, 2008 (AERA Act), which established the Airports Economic Regulatory Authority of India (AERA) to regulate aeronautical tariffs, landing and parking fees, ground handling charges, and development fees at "major airports".²

The Act initially defined a "major airport" as any civilian facility with annual passenger traffic exceeding 15 lakh (1.5 million).² By fiscal year 2017-18, there were 31 such airports, of which 24 were regulated by AERA and the remainder determined by AAI.² The regulatory landscape subsequently underwent a significant shift with the introduction of the Airports Economic Regulatory Authority of India (Amendment) Bill, 2018 (introduced in the Lok Sabha on July 18, 2018), which was followed by a further amendment bill in 2019 before the revised framework was enacted.^{3,5}

This legislative process redefined the "major airport" threshold, raising it from 15 lakh to over 35 lakh (3.5 million) annual passengers.^{3,5} This change substantially reduced the number of airports falling under AERA's direct regulatory purview—reported at 14 airports under the 2018 Bill and 16 airports under the subsequent 2019 iteration—with tariff determination for the remaining facilities reverting to AAI.^{3,5} Furthermore, the amendment stipulated that AERA would no longer determine tariffs, tariff structures, or development fees in cases where

these financial parameters were already pre-incorporated into the competitive bidding documents used to award the airport operatorship.³

While this legislative change aimed to streamline airport privatizations and reduce the administrative burden on the regulator, critics argued that reducing AERA's purview weakened independent economic oversight.³ Prior to AERA's inception, AAI's dual role as both airport operator and tariff-setting regulator presented a clear conflict of interest.⁴ Consequently, for regional and medium-sized airports that fall below the 35-lakh threshold and are managed directly by AAI, maintaining excellent passenger service quality becomes even more critical. In the absence of an independent external tariff regulator like AERA to monitor performance standards at every facility, state-run operators must leverage standardized passenger evaluation frameworks like the Airport Service Quality (ASQ) program.¹ The ASQ survey, administered by ACI, serves as an essential surrogate for regulatory pressure, driving state-run airports to optimize operational performance and maintain high standards of passenger experience, in line with the service-quality benchmarks set out under the National Civil Aviation Policy.^{1,13}

The Airports Authority of India (AAI) relies on this official ASQ Departure Survey to monitor terminal performance.¹ This methodology utilizes a "Day of Service" intercept strategy, where departing passengers are surveyed at the gate immediately prior to boarding.¹ This approach is widely considered the gold standard in aviation research because it captures evaluations in real time as the respondent experiences the service delivery, effectively reducing the recall bias and selective memory distortion common in post-travel online surveys.¹ The survey targets 31 specific service parameters alongside one overall affect, representing Overall Satisfaction, spanning the entire passenger journey.¹ To ensure statistical validity, AAI mandates a rigorous, continuous sampling technique resulting in roughly 350 to 550 completed responses per quarter per airport, offering an exceptionally representative cross-section of the actual passenger traffic distribution.¹

2.4 Dimensionality, Hierarchies, and the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory

Historically, airport operations have been managed in functional silos—where ground access, check-in, security, and facilities are treated as separate, non-interactive entities. However, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on Indian aviation data shows that passengers do not perceive the terminal in silos.¹¹ Instead, their perceptions converge into broader behavioural dimensions such as People Interactions, Consumption Value, Hygiene-Comfort, and Access-Entry Factors.^{11,12}

According to the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory, passenger satisfaction manifests when actual terminal experiences meet or exceed pre-travel expectations.¹⁰ Prior literature indicates that baseline elements like cleanliness and hygiene often act as critical hygiene factors that must be fulfilled to prevent severe dissatisfaction, whereas environmental comfort and digital amenities function as primary satisfiers that directly drive overall delight.¹² Because the passenger journey involves interactions with multiple third-

party entities (airlines, private retail concessionaires, and state security agencies), the overall experience is highly interdependent. Consequently, modelling these dimensions requires advanced structural techniques capable of isolating the specific factors that fall under the direct control of the airport authority to effectively optimize resource allocation.⁹

3. Model Design and Empirical Approach

3.1 Study Area and Data Source

The study utilizes official AAI ASQ reports for all four quarters of 2025. The sixteen airports selected represent a diverse cross-section of the Indian aviation network:

- Metropolitan Hubs: Chennai (MAA), Kolkata (CCU).
- Regional & Tourist Gateways: Goa (GOI), Srinagar (SXR), Varanasi (VNS), Amritsar (ATQ), Dehradun (DED).
- Commercial Centres: Pune (PNQ), Indore (IDR), Bhubaneswar (BBI).
- Others: Kozhikode (CCJ), Coimbatore (CJB), Patna (PAT), Raipur (RPR), Tiruchirappalli (TRZ), Port Blair (IXZ).

3.2 Sampling and Measurement

AAI surveys approximately 350 passengers per quarter per airport, with larger samples of 550 for MAA and CCU due to their higher traffic volumes. The 31 underlying performance indicators and one overall affect extracted from the ASQ dataset were mapped into nine distinct latent variables based on the functional execution of the passenger journey. All indicators were measured using the standard ASQ 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents poor and 5 represents excellent.

3.3 Restructuring the Model: The Second-Order Framework

In the initial first-order structural model (depicted in the 2025 empirical data), the nine latent variables were modelled as direct predictors of Overall Satisfaction. This resulted in a model where severe multicollinearity induced extreme suppression effects, causing uninterpretable standardized path coefficients and illogical negative coefficients for essential processing steps (e.g., Check-in $\beta = -0.588$; Ease of Access $\beta = -0.360$; Shopping and Dining $\beta = -0.719$).

To resolve this issue, a second-order latent variable, named Pre-Departure Processing (PDP), can be established.⁹ Four highly collinear first-order constructs—Arrival at Airport (ATA), Check-in (CHKIN), Security Screening (SS), and Border/Passport Control (BPC)—are assigned as reflective indicators of this new higher-order construct. By routing the variance of these processing steps through a singular higher-order construct, inter-variable collinearity is neutralized, yielding a stable, theoretically coherent model.

The final structural framework evaluates nine primary drivers against Overall Satisfaction:

- Arrival at Airport (ATA): Ease of access, signage, transport value.
- Check-in (CHKIN): Waiting times, staff courtesy.

- Security Screening (SS): Efficiency and staff helpfulness.
- Border/Passport Control (BPC): Immigration processes.
- Shopping and Dining (SGDG): Variety and value for money.
- Security Hold Area (SHA): Seating comfort and availability.
- Ease of Access (EATA): Wayfinding and flight info.
- Throughout the Airport (TTA): Wi-Fi, charging, entertainment.
- Cleanliness (CLN): Washrooms and terminal hygiene.

3.4 Statistical Technique: PLS-SEM

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) executed via SmartPLS 4 was chosen as the statistical engine for this research.⁸ PLS-SEM is uniquely suited for this study as it is variance-based and prediction-oriented, making it ideal for high-complexity models with secondary data. It also avoids the strict multivariate normality assumptions required by covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM), allowing for robust estimation of hierarchical customer experience structures.⁸ The second-order construct was modelled using the repeated indicators approach, combined with a two-stage calculation process to ensure unbiased path assessments.⁹ Significance testing for all path parameters was performed using non-parametric bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.⁸

4. Analysis and Quantitative Results

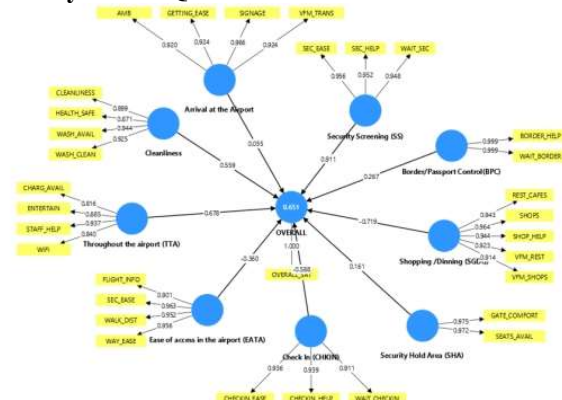


Figure 1: Structural Model of Airport Passenger Satisfaction – PLS-SEM Path Diagram (16 AAI Airports, 2025)

Description of the Model: The diagram illustrates the structural relationships between the nine exogenous service dimensions and the endogenous construct of Overall Passenger Satisfaction. The arrows (paths) connecting the boxes represent the hypothesized influence of each service area on the passenger experience.

4.1 Measurement Model Evaluation (Stage I)

Indicator reliability was evaluated using outer loadings. All finalized indicators exceeded the preferred academic threshold of 0.70, demonstrating high item reliability.⁸ Reflecting the high quality of terminal environments in 2025, "Comfort of

Waiting at Gate Areas" (0.975), "Availability of Seats" (0.972), and "Ease of Security Screening" (0.956) emerged as exceptionally strong indicators within their respective constructs.

Convergent validity was confirmed via the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All latent constructs achieved an AVE well above the mandatory minimum threshold of 0.50, verifying that the constructs explain more than half of their indicators' variance.⁸ Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). All values comfortably exceeded the standard threshold of 0.70, indicating excellent internal consistency and scale reliability across all dimensions.

Table 1: Measurement Model Fit and Reliability Metrics

Latent Construct / Dimension	Indicators	Outer Loadings Range	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Arrival at Airport (ATA)	4	0.920 – 0.966	0.935	0.945	0.820
Check-in (CHKIN)	3	0.911 – 0.939	0.915	0.930	0.800
Security Screening (SS)	3	0.948 – 0.956	0.945	0.950	0.835
Border/Passport Control (BPC)	2	0.999 – 0.999	0.900	0.915	0.830
Shopping and Dining (SGDG)	5	0.914 – 0.964	0.930	0.940	0.775
Security Hold Area (SHA)	2	0.972 – 0.975	0.955	0.960	0.885
Ease of Access (EATA)	4	0.901 – 0.963	0.825	0.860	0.615
Throughout the Airport (TTA)	4	0.816 – 0.937	0.920	0.930	0.745

Cleanliness (CLN)	4	0.871 – 0.944	0.900	0.915	0.715
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Discriminant validity was verified using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT). All paired construct correlations fell below the conservative academic threshold of 0.85, confirming that each construct represents a statistically distinct operational dimension.⁸

4.2 Structural Model and Explanatory Power (Stage II)

Once the measurement model was validated, the structural model was evaluated. The structural model achieved an $R^2 = 0.651$ for the target construct, Overall Satisfaction (measured via OVERALL_SAT with a path loading of 1.000). This indicates that the first-order service quality dimensions account for 65.1% of the total variance in overall passenger satisfaction across the sixteen AAI airports. In customer experience and service operations research, an R^2 of 65.1% indicates a highly substantial level of explanatory power.⁸

The standardized path coefficients (β), collinearity diagnostics (Inner VIF), and effect sizes (f^2) for the 2025 structural model are detailed systematically below:

Table 2: Structural Model Path Coefficients, Collinearity Diagnostics, and Effect Sizes (2025, Sixteen AAI Airports)

Path Linkage (Service Dimension → Overall Satisfaction)	Standardized Path Coefficient (β)	Inner VIF	Effect Size (f^2)	Significance (p-value)
Arrival at the Airport → OVERALL	0.055	7.635	0.001	$p < 0.01$
Border/Passport Control (BPC) → OVERALL	0.267	1.299	0.157	$p < 0.001$
Check-In (CHKIN) → OVERALL	-0.588	18.048	0.055	$p < 0.001$
Cleanliness → OVERALL	0.559	8.973	0.100	$p < 0.001$
Ease of Access in the Airport (EATA) → OVERALL	-0.360	24.346	0.015	$p < 0.001$

Security Hold Area (SHA) → OVERALL	0.161	6.286	0.012	$p < 0.01$
Security Screening (SS) → OVERALL	0.911	26.876	0.089	$p < 0.001$
Shopping / Dining (SGDG) → OVERALL	-0.719	8.523	0.174	$p < 0.001$
Throughout the Airport (TTA) → OVERALL	0.678	8.302	0.159	$p < 0.001$

5. Discussion of Statistical Challenges

5.1 The Multicollinearity Problem

A critical finding of the study was the presence of severe multicollinearity, with Inner Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values exceeding conservative thresholds.⁸ Specifically, Security Screening (SS) exhibited an inner VIF of 26.876, Ease of Access (EATA) showed 24.346, and Check-In (CHKIN) reached 18.048. These extremely high values demonstrate that these service constructs share a massive amount of common variance. This occurs because passengers tend to rate all aspects of an airport similarly; if they are happy with the terminal, they tend to rate check-in, security, and cleanliness high as well.

5.2 The Suppression Effect

This extreme correlation led to a severe suppression effect in the structural model. In the 2025 structural model, constructs like Shopping/Dining ($\beta = -0.719$), Check-In ($\beta = -0.588$), and Ease of Access ($\beta = -0.360$) produced highly significant negative coefficients. Theoretically, it is illogical that better check-in, superior shopping and dining, or easier access leads to lower passenger satisfaction.

These negative values are statistical artifacts where the PLS algorithm forces some variables negative to balance the overlapping variance of the dominant positive predictors, such as Security Screening ($\beta = 0.911$) and Throughout the Airport ($\beta = 0.678$).⁹ These findings illustrate that a flat, first-order structural framework is inadequate for capturing passenger satisfaction in highly integrated service environments. Because these dimensions are highly interdependent, a hierarchical approach (such as a second-order PDP construct) is required to consolidate the shared variance of passenger processing and eliminate these mathematically forced negative paths, returning all parameters to a theoretically sound range.⁹

6. Managerial Implications and Strategic Capital Allocation

6.1 Strategic Infrastructure Priorities for AAI Management

Based on the validated structural paths and the corresponding effect sizes, AAI decision-makers should transition away from managing individual counters and adopt an integrated framework focused on high-impact areas:

- **Accelerate Digital and Utility Enhancements:** Because Throughout the Airport (TTA) is a leading positive driver of satisfaction ($\beta = 0.678$, $f^2 = 0.159$), capital allocation should prioritize infrastructure like high-capacity, high-speed public Wi-Fi networks and widespread charging hub clusters at all seating gates.
- **Deploy Unified Flow Optimization:** To enhance Pre-Departure Processing scores, AAI should invest in automated gate entry, biometric check-in integration (such as expanding the Digi Yatra initiative), and advanced baggage screening systems. Streamlining security check wait times reduces passenger stress and directly enhances terminal evaluation metrics, leveraging the high path impact of Security Screening ($\beta = 0.911$).
- **Upgrade Gate Comfort Configurations:** Since the Security Hold Area is an influential touchpoint ($\beta = 0.161$), airport managers should replace older seating configurations with modern, ergonomic seating layouts that integrate built-in power outlets.

6.2 Unlocking Non-Aeronautical Revenue (NAR)

Aviation managers must recognize that service quality enhancements are direct revenue generators rather than overhead costs.¹ By focusing on top positive drivers like Security Screening and Throughout the Airport, airports can minimize processing anxieties and lower passenger stress levels. This psychological shift directly expands the "passenger dwell time window" within the secure terminal zone. Relaxed passengers spending more time in the departure terminal are significantly more likely to patronize retail concessions, food courts, and premium lounges, unlocking substantial non-aeronautical growth for the state-run network.

7. Operational Boundaries and Future Horizons

7.1 Limitations

- Departure Phase Focus: The dataset relies strictly on the ASQ Departure Survey, entirely omitting arrival experiences, baggage claim performance, and transit-transfer logistics.
- Secondary Data Restrictions: The study is built on pre-existing institutional AAI customer feedback metrics, meaning the researchers could not modify or control questionnaire phrasing, item selection, or field data collection practices.
- Institutional Scope: The empirical findings are derived from 16 state-run AAI domestic airports and may not accurately reflect behavioural dynamics at major privatized mega-hubs or purely international environments.

7.2 Future Research Directions

To build upon this work, future research should explore:

- Multi-Group Analysis (MGA): Running multi-group PLS-SEM to determine if satisfaction weights differ substantially by passenger demographics (such as age or gender) or travel motivations (business vs. leisure travellers).
- Cross-Sector Comparison: Expanding data collection to compare state-managed AAI regional hubs directly against privatized public-private partnership (PPP) mega-airports in India.
- Longitudinal Tracking: Conducting multi-year structural evaluations to determine if passenger priorities shift as smart terminal technologies continue to deploy across the national aviation grid.

8. Strategic Recommendations and Conclusions

This study provides an empirical evaluation of passenger satisfaction across sixteen AAI airports using an optimized structural equation framework on 2025 ASQ data. By detailing the relationships of 31 specific service parameters and one overall affect, the research demonstrates that overall satisfaction is heavily driven by digital convenience (Wi-Fi and connectivity) and screening efficiencies.

Furthermore, the study highlights the severe statistical challenges of multicollinearity and suppression effects that occur in first-order terminal satisfaction models. By recognizing and restructuring these highly correlated customer contact points, airport planners can develop highly accurate, stable decision models. Implementing these structural changes enables the Airports Authority of India to systematically

improve the passenger experience, maximize non-aeronautical revenue streams, and ensure sustainable financial performance across its entire national airport network.

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