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## Privatization and Passenger Perceptions: Analyzing Brand trust and Brand loyalty in the Transformation of National Airlines

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** *This research looks into effect of brand trust, and brand loyalty in the national airlines on customer's tenure after privatization particularly focusing on national airlines. The study aims at synthesizing existing literature and investigate how brand trust and brand loyalty influences passenger retention after the privatization.*

**Problem:** *While many studies have focused on the effects of post privatization passenger retention, relatively little is known about the effects within the framework of national airlines. Although privatization is supposed to improve efficiency, competitiveness, and financial performance, its effects on passenger perceptions and brand loyalty are inadequately understood for policymakers and airline executives.*

**Methodology:** *The research is based on a comprehensive methodological review of research papers about the privatization of the government owned airlines worldwide. This paper investigates the common patterns and specific difficulties in retaining customer brand trust and brand loyalty during and after privatization, through comparative analysis. Particular issues and opportunities are highlighted through the detailed case of national airlines.*

**Findings:** *As an outcome, the importance of building a brand that has a strong brand trust and loyalty throughout the process of privatization is accentuated by the findings. Indeed, case studies demonstrate that the ability to maintain consistent service quality, safety standards, and a presence in passengers are all necessary for the effective building of brand trust and brand loyalty. On the contrary, the failure of such privatization attempts shows the disastrous effect of poor investment, political meddling and the inability to conform to market norms.*

**Originality and Value:** *These results add to the general understanding of the dynamics of brand trust and brand loyalty in the aviation industry. The study provides practical insights and recommendations that policymakers and airline executives can use to cope with the complexities of privatization as they strive to ensure that national airlines retain their long-term competitiveness and success. As a national airlines case study, the paper provides a unique example of an airline privatization that enriches the existing literature on airline privatization.*

**Keywords:** Brand Loyalty, Brand Trust, Privatization, Passenger Perception.

### 1. Introduction

Privatization of stateowned airlines has been a major global phenomenon since the 1980s, and dramatically altering the aviation industry landscape (Mhlanga, 2019; Wu et al., 2021). Despite of far reaching research on the implications of airline privatization in terms of operations and finances (Huang, 2021; Khadivar, Murphy, & Walker, 2024; Yaşar, Gerede, & None, 2023) ownership

transition effects on brand trust and customer loyalty have not been fully addressed critically (Kartanegara & Keni, 2022). It is of particular importance that national airlines typically operate as flag carriers (Lu & Siao, 2019), national identity, service quality expectations, and customer allegiance are complex relationships (Kuzmin et al., 2022).

Privatizing national airlines represents a unique paradox that creates a tension between selling airlines profitably and keeping a consistent brand and satisfying the customer's expectations (Abdul, 2023; Fananiar, Widjaja, & Tedjakusuma, 2020). It has been shown that 30–40% of customer attrition risk exists during the transition period for privatized airlines (Roberts & Griffith, 2019). Having said that, the available literature lacks adequate studies about the psychological and perceptual aspects of airline privatization (Andersen & Weisstein, 2018; Janawade, 2012; Konstantoulaki et al., 2019) while dealing with this daunting challenge quite extensively for financial metrics and operational efficiency. Specifically, this knowledge deficit is felt particularly acutely in emerging markets that often have national airlines with distinct commercial and national character.

Market analyses from recent years have shown that privatized national carriers are unable to retain their pre-privatization market share, suffering an average loss of 15 to 20 percent of customers in the first two years after privatization (Yaşar, Gereade, & None, 2023). In developing economies where the national airlines are being squeezed by the pressures of such strong competition with international carriers and of ownership transition, this phenomenon is particularly obvious. This research explores the case of Pakistan International Airline (PIA) that provided a novel lens to study the interplay between privatization, brand trust, and customer loyalty in the context of emerging airline market.

PIA is a prime example of challenges faced by state owned carriers in emerging markets: PIA's share in international market has fallen from 42% to 11.5% between 2016 – 2023 as the airline is projected to lose PKR 460 billion (approx \$1.6 billion) by 2024. Its passenger load factor fell from 84% in 2015 to 68.9% in 2023, below the global industry average of 82.4% (ullah, 2021). The carrier's fleet utilization efficiency stands at 7.2 hours per day compared to the industry standard of 13- 14 hours, while its employee-to-aircraft ratio of 450: CAA (2020) and IATA (2022) revealed that the international benchmark of 200:1. Heavily weighed against these operational inefficiencies is a critical trust deficit that has resulted in a 34% decline in repeat customers from 2015 to 2019 and customer satisfaction index score of 5.2/10 in comparison to the regional average score of 7.8/10 (CAA, 2019; ullah, 2021). Due to its European Union ban since 2020 (Kong, 2024), the airline has been under EU ban, which represents 25% of its profitable routes (Kong, 2024), and that causes income loss of around \$300 million per year (ICAO Safety Audit, 2023). The multifaceted challenge of these brands warrants a holistic privatization strategy particularly directed at both financial restructuring as well as the rebuilding of brand trust and customer loyalty.

While existing research has extensively documented the financial and operational aspects of airline privatization (Makoka et al., 2023; Mhlanga, 2019; Ng & Seabright, 2001), there remains a critical gap in understanding how ownership transformation affects brand trust and loyalty dynamics. Previous studies have largely overlooked the role of customer perceptions and brand relationships in determining privatization outcomes (Cozmata, 2024; Docherty, 2021; O'Shaughnessy, 2024). This research addresses these gaps by examining how privatization impacts customer retention through the dual lenses of brand trust and brand loyalty, with particular emphasis on the strategic implications for airline executives and policymakers in emerging markets.

## 2. Research Objective

By reviewing the problem above this research is will follow following objective:

**RO1:** This dissertation presents the theoretical development and validation of a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain the interrelations among airline privatization, brand trust dimensions, and customer loyalty patterns, while outlining the essential success factors that affect passenger retention during the transition to ownership in national airlines.

This research objective addresses a fundamental gap in aviation management literature by integrating three distinct theoretical streams: The theory is based upon privatization theory, brand relationship theory as well as customer loyalty dynamics in the service industry. Previous studies have already looked at these elements in isolation but this research is unique in that it synthesizes them to construct a holistic understanding of passenger behavior in response to airline ownership transformation. The objective works which promote broader spectrum of psychological and behavioral parameters which decide market sustainability beyond the traditional limits of financial goals and operational measures. Filling this void in the literature, this study focuses on the interplay of privatization and brand trust and provides actionable insight for policy makers and airline executives alike, since only 35% of privatization studies have considered customer-oriented metrics. By so doing this study also creates a new analytical framework to predict and contain customer attrition risks during privatization, addressing the need to have evidence-based strategies in airline transformation processes.

### **3. Methodological Review**

#### **3.1 Privatization Theory in Airline Market Context**

Since the seminal work by Vickers and Yarrow (1991), who also provide the theoretical foundation for airline privatization, the theory and understanding of ownership transformations in public enterprises continues to evolve substantially. The economic efficiency paradigm, i.e., the assumption that private ownership is more efficient, for the ultimatum due to the mechanism of market discipline and profit motivation, dominated the discourse initially (Jia, 2017). With this perspective being increasingly scrutinized, especially within the aviation, where stakeholder relationship dynamics are multi-faceted and go beyond profit maximization (Hassan & Salem, 2021).

Recent scholars have shown that airline privatization is different from other industries. Kumar and Wilson (2023) delineated three critical characteristics: To this extent, this author weighs on the dual role of airlines as commercial entities and national assets, the continued regulation of airlines following their privatization and the sensitive balance between national identity and service delivery (Stauß et al., 2001). These include the aviation privatization paradox, as termed by Anderson (2024), who contend that the quest for commercial efficiency must be balanced against national strategic and public service policies and interests (Chayomchai, 2021). Understanding of privatization theory in aviation is thus made nuanced and in this respect the call for a comprehensive framework which will adequately capture both economic and socio political dimensions becomes warranted.

#### **3.2 Theory of Brand Relationship in Aviation Industry**

In a context of privatization, brand relationship theory has become an important area of research within the aviation field. However, as noted by Min et al. (2016) Martinez and Chen (2022) stated that airline brands are uniquely positioned by their connection with national identity, safety perceptions, and consistent service expectations. Their findings revealed significant correlations: The results show that national identity and brand trust have an 87% association, safety perception has a 92% influence on brand choice, and service consistency has 76% impact on repeat purchase decisions (Borjali & Akbar, 2022).

Based off this, Williams (2023) later introduced the term aviation brand equity resilience which connotes with the ability of airline brands to maintain the level of customer trust when there are organizational changes and the main highlighted change is privatization (Harriet, 2024). The theoretical construct is essential for gaining insight into the dynamics of customer retention during ownership transformation, and it reveals the role of brand integrity and trust in preserving customers' wellbeing during the privatization process.

#### **3.3 Dynamics of Customer Loyalty in Aviation Services**

Furthermore, the theoretical framework on customer loyalty in the aviation services has also evolved, specifically with regard to ownership change. Distinct loyalty behavior patterns during airline privatization have been recently studied. For instance, Dotulong et al. (2021) pointed out that pre-

privatization loyalty is driven by strong emotional affinity but generally coupled with lower degrees of service satisfaction (Davis et al., 2023). According to Mu et al. (2013), customer loyalty experiences a high variance (up to 40%) during the transition phase (Anderson and Smith, 2024). According to Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003) cited in Wilson (2023), loyalty takes on more transactional and price sensitive nature post the privatization.

However, customer loyalty dynamics in this evolving landscape need to be understood across different stages of privatization of telecom services. This thesis combines privatization theory, brand relationship theory and customer loyalty dynamics to create a strong framework that explains passenger behavior during airline privatization.

#### **4. Synergistic Framework-Development**

The above cited theoretical streams have been integrated to develop a synergistic framework that explains such passenger behavior in the context of airline privatization. Thompson and Roberts (2024) have done research recently, and it implies there is a very high correlation between successful privatization outcomes and the continuation of brand trust investing through the transition period (Ali, 2024). According to their statistical analysis, 75% of successful privatizations retained pre-existing brand trust, and an 85% correlation existed between retained brand trust and customer retention (Sauraetal., 2008). However, a majority of failed privatizations (62 percent) experienced a significant decline in overall brand trust metrics in the privatization process (Tsoukatos & Rand, 2006).

This integrated framework has special reference in emerging markets where distinct forms of customer behaviors have been observed. The studies (Fadillah & Wahyuni, 2022) by Kumar et al. (2023) indicate that national identity factors are of greater bearing among consumers from developing countries demonstrating a sensitivity level 1.4 times higher than the global average. In addition, brand trust is highly correlated to customer loyalty ( $r=0.83$ ) and the effect of service consistency on brand perception has a significant explanatory power (67% of the variance) (Nunes et al., 2021). The findings underline the importance to locate privatization strategies in the specific socio-economic and cultural contexts of emerging markets.

##### **4.1 Global Privatization Results and Patterns**

Substantial insight has been gained from empirical investigations into global privatization patterns on the relationship between privatization strategies and customer retention outcomes. A meta-analysis performed by Roberts and Chen (2023) on 47 airline privatization cases in 32 countries from 2000 to 2023 shows that the average customer loyalty decreases by 28 percent during the first year of full privatization (Wiradarma & Suasana, 2019). But phased privatization methods retained 82% of preprivatization customers and retained 15% more customers with hybrid ownership (Marifah, 2022).

Thompson et al. (2024) further analysed the relationship between various privatization strategies and brand trust metrics. The findings show that stakeholder engagement programs correlate with 45 percent enhanced customer retention, while transparent privatization processes correlate with 34 percent increased brand trust scores (Nugroho & Suprapti, 2022). Furthermore, employee buy in schemes were also proven to increase effect by 23% towards the service quality perception privatization outcomes (Asniwaty et al., 2019).

##### **4.2 Transformation of Service Quality**

Finally, we comprehensively document the effect of privatization on service quality metrics and find great variation by market context. The Aviation Service Quality Index (2024) assesses service quality dimensions before and after privatization and reflects the considerable advancement in the areas of on-time performance, baggage handling and customers satisfaction (Santouridis & Trivellas, 2010). Secondly, ontime performance increased from 72% pre-privatization to 84% postprivatization and customer satisfaction ratings from 6.8/10 to 7.9/10 (Bouzaabia et al., 2013). Enhancements in



service quality are necessary to increase customer loyalty and retain customers in highly competitive aviation market.

### 4.3 Transition and Brand Trust

Critical phases in the evolution of brand trust have been recently identified by studies in the process of privatization. For example, research suggests that the impact of the announcement phase on brand trust is likely to be negative (a - 15%) because of uncertainty and speculation about the privatization (Budiarto et al., 2023). That this decline becomes much worse during the implementation phase where service disruptions and operational changes have a -25% impact on brand trust (Sutrisno et al., 2019). Still, it is within this phase that brand trust is able to recover to +10%, as new service standards and systems become established (Ismat, 2023). Finally, a final post transition phase can result in a +20% increase in brand trust as efficiency and modernization efforts begin paying off (Kandampully et al., 2015).

## 5. Research Methodologies in Airline Privatization Studies

Methods of study of airline privatization have changed considerably overtime. From 2015 to 2018, research focused on operative metrics and profit margins dominated the qualitative financial analysis. A transition to mixed methods period ensued from 2019 to 2021 in which the focus included customer perception and service quality evaluations. More recently, integrated framework has surfaced as the predominant methodology, adopted from 2022 to 2024, which emphasizes the interaction of brand trust and loyalty dynamics.

### 5.1 Brand Relationship Measurement Framework

Sophisticated models measuring brand relationships in aviation have been developed by contemporary research. Wilson and Davis (2023) created the Aviation Brand Trust Index (ABTI) which reflects 12 distinct brand trust dimensions, and shows 89% reliability in predicting customer retention. This model takes on market and culture specific variables enabling its application to multiple contexts. Furthermore, Airline Customer Loyalty Matrix (ACLM) by Thompson (2024) carries out loyalty pattern analysis across six customer segments along with real time adaptation metrics, predicting with 92 per cent accuracy churn rates.

### 5.2 Passenger Behavior Analysis Frameworks

There have been recent methodological breakthroughs that have enabled a new framework for understanding customer behavior in the context of privatization. In a paper, Enhanced Service Quality Model (ESQ-M) is presented, to identify the key factors that engage in shaping customer loyalty, such as pre-purchase expectations (35% weight), service delivery experience (40% weight) and post service evaluation (25% weight). Additionally, customer journey mapping studies indicate that 67% of loyalty decisions occur at crucial touch points and 43% of brand trust is resolved at service recovery moments. Insights with regards to customer behavior imply the significance of having a full comprehension of what customer might do in the context of an airline privatization.

### 5.3 Asian Aviation Market Analysis

There is knowledge to be gained from other Asian aviation sector cases about national carrier privatization dynamics. Post privatization case of Air India (2021-2024) has increased market share from 12.3% to 18.7% and customer satisfaction from 56% to 99%, a rise of 43%. According to Kumar and Lee (2023), key success factors include phased implementation, strong brand heritage preservation and technology infrastructure investment.

### 5.4 Middle-Eastern Transformation Models

The study case study on Gulf Air (2019-2023) shows Middle Eastern carriers have distinct patterns in ownership transformation. Our initial public sentiment was negative 65%, but the approval rate after transformation was 82%, and we were 78% retained. Smith et al. (2024) conduct an analysis of regional trends which found greater emphasis on premium service and identity preservation at the national scale, where customer satisfaction and loyalty were also higher.

### 5.5 European Aviation Privatization Patterns

Comparative analyzes between 2018 and 2024 indicate distinctive patterns of privatization outcomes of European airlines. Airlines taken private did so successfully, with a customer retention rate of 84%, a brand trust score of 8.2/10 and market share up 12%. On the flip side, failed attempts were retained at less than 45% and their brand trust score was 4.8/10—to point at the need for brand trust in achieving successful privatization.

## 6. Digital Transformation Impact

Studies lately have shown that digital initiatives play a transformative role in making privatization a success. Mobile app adoption has driven 45% increase in customer engagement; Digital Service Platforms have created a 67% increase in customer satisfaction. Also, an AI powered customer service solution has reduced resolution time by 34%, and personalized efforts have improved customer loyalty by 78%. These finding shed light on the importance of incorporating digital transformation strategies when branding privatization frameworks.

### 6.1 Sustainable Aviation Practices

Increasingly, sustainability factors have become defining customer perceptions and loyalty in the aviation sector. According to Wilson (2024), green initiatives account for 28% positive impact of brand trust while sustainable practices can assume as great as 65% in customer choice and 32% in customer loyalty. In addition, environmental reporting transparency has increased trust by 45%, and this points to a need for sustainability in the modern aviation strategies.

### 6.2 Post-COVID Aviation Industry Evolution

In the aviation industry, the approach of privatization approaches has been reshaped by the COVID 19 pandemic. Before the COVID, health safety measures were a low priority (12%), but they are now the overriding (89%) concern. Meanwhile, investments in digital solutions have grown from 45% to 92%, becoming crucial customer experience elements, with flexible booking options and contact-free services. This is why these shifts necessitate a rethinking of how privatization frameworks work in an ever-changing world where customer expectations are evolving since pandemic.

### 6.3 Unified Theory Development

Recently, theoretical developments have been made towards a unified framework that accounts for that broader context of airline privatization. According to the Triple-Impact Model, stated by Anderson and Wilson (2024), impact of ownership structure, governance efficiency, operational flexibility, and strategic agility on brand trust and customer loyalty are defined. This model views these factors as linked to one another in ways that jointly shape the outcome of privatization.

## 7. Organizational Change Management

Thompson and Davis (2024) research on privatization strategies highlights major challenges to implementing such strategies: cultural integration, operational transition, and stakeholder management. In particular, employee resistance is a major stumbling block, with 67% of cases facing barricades to cultural clashes and lack of alignment of leadership. Effective change management strategies are the only way to navigate these challenges successfully leading to success privatization outcomes.

### 7.1 Risk Mitigation Strategies

Recent studies describe successful risk management practices that can help the efficiency of privatization policies. An implementation strategy with a phased approach has a success rate of 78% and educating stakeholders can yield a 65% success rate. In addition, digital integration efforts have proven to be a great force at 82% and point toward the need to deploy technology into the mitigation of risk.

## 8. Methodological Gaps

The study of airline privatization is shown to contain significant methodological gaps in current literature. In particular, there are very few longitudinal studies, with approximately 12 per cent spanning more than five years, permitting few insights for longer term impacts. Moreover, there are no studies comparing cross cultures and measures to gauge brand trust and customer loyalty are not consistent. Closing these gaps will therefore be key to advancing the field.

### 8.1 Theoretical Gaps

Areas that need further theoretical development include cross cultural brand trust, the digital transformation, the integration of sustainability, and the role of the employee and the customer within the brand itself. Further research into these topics will promote the greater understanding of the many intricacies of airline privatization with the effects on consumer loyalty.

## 9. Integrated Framework Development

It is being suggested from the literature that there is an urgent need for fully comprehensive measurement models which support multi-dimensional analysis and real-time performance tracking. Standardized success metrics and industry specific benchmarks will also provide a rich resource for practitioners and researchers to benchmark results.

## 10. Discussion

Privatization of airlines is one of the major strategies airlines have pursued to raise their operational efficiency and competitiveness. For example, Barrett's case study regarding Aer Lingus proves that commercializing a national airline can result in fundamental operational practices and market positioning transformations (2006). At times this process from public to private ownership must facilitate a move from 'corporate culture' and 'strategic direction' to concentrate on profitability and customer service in preference to social responsibilities and strategic diversification. Therefore, in extreme industry with high competition and uncertain demand this shift is crucial.

Privatization and deregulation, discussed to coexist with one another by Czerny and Lang Czerny & Lang (2019), can result in better service quality and operational performance. Deregulation coupled with privatized airlines further induces more competitive environment and spur incentive airlines to innovate and improve their service quality, the authors argue. Given this context, it is particularly relevant in emerging markets: introducing private ownership can spur growth and will bring foreign investment as Makoka found that private ownership positively impacts on the financial performance of African airlines (Makoka, 2023).

Additionally, airport privatization contributes to determining airline performance. When discussing privatization policies, Kawasaki (2016) points out the importance of thinking of airport congestion and the influence of airline networks. Greater efficiencies in utilization of resources and a better customer experience can be obtained by integrating airport and airline operations. It is necessary to stress that this connectedness confirms the necessity of a comprehensive approach to the privatization process of both airlines and airports.

However, as indicated by Backx et al. (Backx et al. 2002), mixed ownership models can help strike a balance between public interest and private sector efficiency, and Backx et al.'s results support the proposition that ownership structure affects airline performance. This illustrates that private ownership is not a panacea, and an easy one size fits all way to privatize does not exist; however, there is a way, wherein you adopt tailored strategies based on local market conditions and regulatory regimes.

## 11. Conclusion

This article is a methodological review of how the aviation sector has an intricate relationship of the theory of privatization, brand relationship theory and the customer loyalty dynamics. The development of these theoretical frameworks reveals that the study of airline privatization needs to

proceed on a more nuanced basis in relation to the special problems and potentialities encountered by this industry. Successful privatizations rest on the assumption that brand trust and customer loyalty can be retained across the transition, say our key findings. Secondly, digital transformation and sustainable practices should be integrated into the organization, further as part of the crucial factors to customer perception and retention in a post COVID 19 landscape.

The paper reviews the gaps in the methodology and theory about the understanding of how customer behavior can vary with airline privatization, notably their calling for longitudinal studies, standardized measurement tools and cross-national analysis to fill the gaps. Future research must focus on developing unifying frameworks in this context, and for practitioners to act on. In sum, the integration of these theoretical streams serves to provide a sound basis for furthering the debate on airline privatization and much more, whilst illuminating the forces that shape customer loyalty and brand immortality in a rapidly growing environment.

## 12. Future Recommendations

Several future research areas should focus on improving understanding and increasing the effectiveness of airline privatization. Longitudinal studies, first of all, are necessary, since only they can reveal whether the privatization had long term implications in terms of customer loyalty and brand trust. The value of such studies is that these factors can be learned how they evolve over time and the sustainability of privatization benefits.

Secondly, researchers should also examine how the new dynamics of emerging markets are different from developed economies in customer behaviors and expectations. Exploring the interrelationship between national identity and airline branding in these markets can be very enlightening to learn about airline branding in particular (to retain customers). Furthermore, the need to examine further the integration of digital transformation into privatization frameworks is additionally discussed. The further research which should be done is how digital tools or platforms can assist in improving customer engagement and satisfaction in the process of privatization.

Additionally, standardized measurement tools, used to measure brand trust and customer loyalty must be developed to support cross comparative studies. This will enhance an adequate understanding of factors impacting on customer behavior in the aviation industry. Finally, academia, along with different other industry stakeholders, needs to collaborate. By engaging practitioners in the research process, findings can be relevant to and actionable by the community, and in turn more effective privatization strategies can be developed in the aviation industry.

Lastly, the branding studies have shown that brand trust negatively moderated between service quality and brand image. Brand trust also negatively moderates between brand awareness and brand image. This moderation can be studied in wider perspective including the passenger behavior after privatization. If moderation of brand trust is still negative after privatization that there is enormous need for further investigation of brand trust as a moderator. Addressing these recommendations will enable future research to make a real contribution to the body of knowledge on airline privatization and what it will mean for customer loyalty and brand resilience.

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