

Digital Brand Equity in the Global Context? Comparative Insights from U.S. and Indian Ride-Hailing Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Global expansion of ride-hailing brands is still in an early stage, and research on their digital branding strategies remains limited, creating a significant gap in the literature. The purpose of this study is to cross-analyze two major ride-hailing markets and provide insights into the digital branding practices of these companies. Through a series of exploratory research techniques, 62 service attributes of ride-hailing were identified. Leveraging these attributes across five analytical dimensions, the comparative findings reveal that the distinct characteristics of each service context directly influence the market evolution of ride-hailing brands. The results show that Indian consumers prioritize cost-effective, community-oriented, and highly accessible

services, whereas U.S. consumers tend to favor customizable options, eco-friendly transportation, algorithmic transparency, and stronger driver rights. The research further underscores the importance of decentralized management structures and highlights the counter-disruptive potential of cultural norms in emerging markets, offering adaptable branding and managerial strategies for the global ride-hailing sector. These insights provide practical guidance for brands seeking to navigate cultural diversity and sustain competitive momentum in an era of continuous technological disruption.

***Keywords:** Ride-hailing; digital brand equity; sharing economy; cross-cultural brand management; emerging markets*

1. Introduction

The current research addresses the limited understanding of ride-hailing service implementation outside Western markets (Pereira et al., 2002) by examining variations in service structures, and the operationalization of ride-hailing services in the U.S. and India. As the birthplace of the ride-hailing business model, the U.S. leads the way in the market evolution, whereas India offers significant potential for digital business growth (Belk, 2021; Goel & Halder, 2020a) as the world's most populous nation (United Nations, 2023). The study presents a comparative multidimensional perspective evaluating five key dimensions of the ride-hailing brand equity - platform functionality, service quality, service value, personal reputation mechanisms, and brand image - to capture both functional and experiential elements of service delivery and consumption. These criteria ensure a balanced assessment of localized customer experiences alongside universal service expectations.

Specifically, platform functionality serves as the primary touchpoint, shaping the first impression while influencing accessibility, engagement, and overall service perception (Lee et al., 2018).

Service quality encompasses the entire service lifecycle, from demand to consumption, and is directly tied to customer retention and word-of-mouth (Al-dweeri et al., 2017). Service value measures the cost-benefit ratio, a critical aspect in price-sensitive markets like India (Akhmedova et al., 2020). Personal reputation, primarily driven by electronic word of mouth (eWoM) through ratings and reviews, offers real-time insights into customer sentiments and service perceptions (Kumar et al., 2018). These factors underpin brand image, a key determinant of customer loyalty and market positioning (Kaur & Singh, 2021).

In the following sections, we provide an in-depth analysis of these dimensions pertaining to the U.S. and Indian ride-hailing markets, offering insights for stakeholders navigating these distinct yet evolving landscapes. This focus on service structure variations contributes to a deeper understanding of how ride-hailing brands can disrupt or be disrupted by local market conditions, ultimately informing more adaptive global branding strategies.

1.1 The emergence of ride-hailing services

In the early 2000s, car-hailing via text message was prevalent in several major American cities. UberCab emerged in San Francisco with only three drivers to address this need. However, texting-based car-hailing soon proved inefficient. As smartphone usage grew, the UberCab founders integrated their service into this technology, enabling riders to request rides at the tap of a screen, track drivers through GPS, and pay automatically (Freund & van Ryzin, 2021).

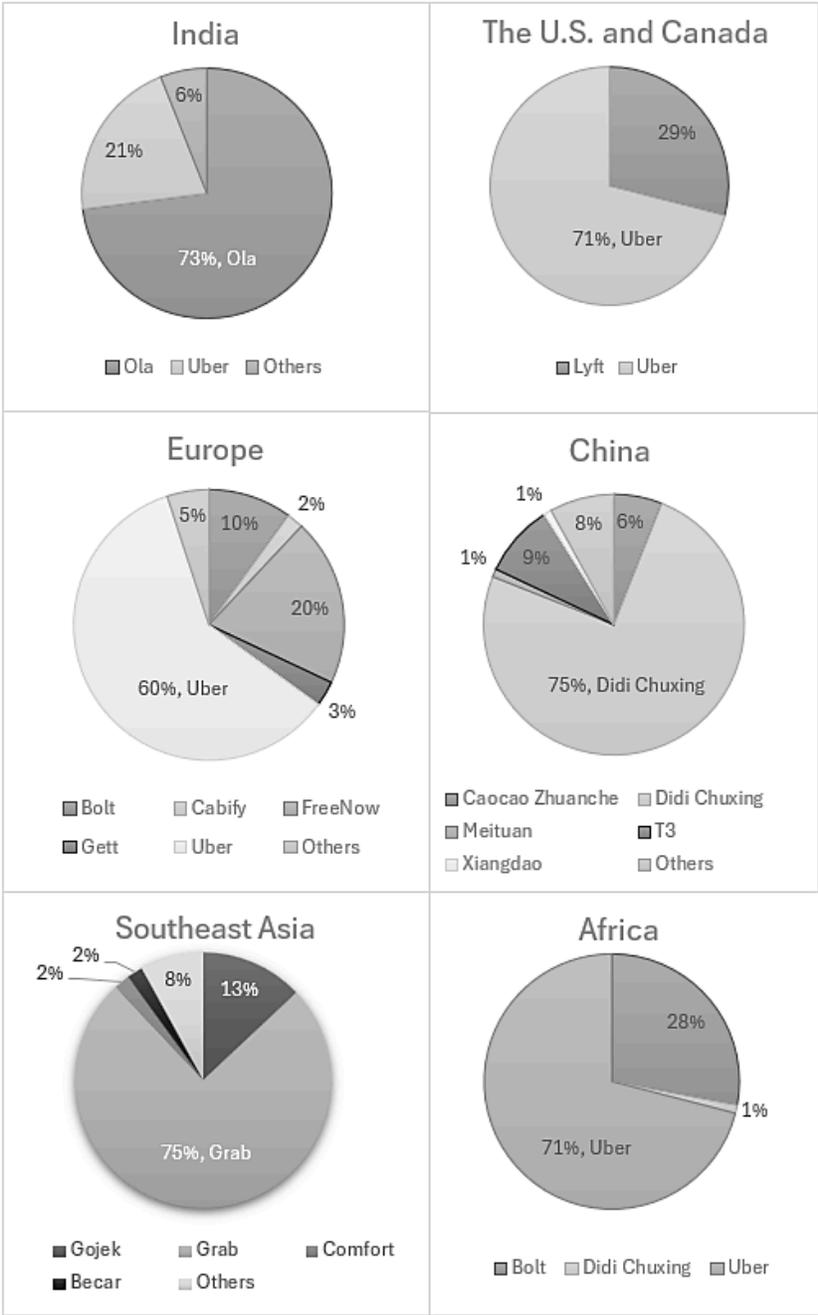
Subsequently, the first app-based ride-hailing service was rebranded as Uber, initially focusing on the luxury market. Shortly after, the founders began developing specialized offerings that set Uber apart and reached broader customer segments. Affordable rides became available to the

general public, and the service portfolio expanded to include standard ride-hailing, carpooling, and premium options. This rapid evolution was fueled by smartphones' ubiquity, which popularized the model globally and disrupted established taxi markets (da Silveira. et al., 2021). The global trend spurred the emergence of Ola in India in 2010, and soon after, Lyft in California, Didi in China, and Grab in Malaysia in 2012. Meanwhile, Uber solidified its market leadership and began international expansion, launching in France in 2011, Canada and the UK in 2012, and Mexico, Taiwan, and India in 2013.

Ola Cabs, India's pioneering ride-hailing platform, was founded to address the unreliability of the on-demand service sector. Ola leveraged the growing dissatisfaction with irregular taxis and auto-rickshaws, mirroring Uber's rapid-scaling strategies (Panigrahi et al., 2018). The agility of India's market, combined with digitalization opportunities, enabled Ola to become one of the country's largest companies and the fourth most downloaded ride-hailing app globally in a short period (Tiwary, 2019). Ola's localized market insights gave it an edge over Uber India (Bhardwaj et al., 2010). Today, ride-hailing is integral to on-demand transportation in India's major cities, offering superior value to traditional taxis (Thapa, 2020).

Ride-hailing services have revolutionized private car usage, shifting it from a luxury to an everyday commuting option. Despite pandemic-induced slowdowns, global ride-hailing industry continues to expand, valued at \$113 billion in 2020 and projected to reach \$322 billion by 2030 (Mordor Intelligence, 2025). Early market entrants have become major industry players, while new competitors continue to enter. Figure 1 overviews the leading ride-hailing services and their market shares.

Figure 1: Major ride-hailing brands and their market shares



References: Mordor Intelligence (2025), Curry (2025), Bolt (2024), FreeNow (2022), Onaleye (2021), Kow (2022), Bloomberg (2021)

Much of this growth is driven by a business model that benefits all stakeholders. As a tech-based peer-to-peer system, ride-hailing addresses numerous management challenges in traditional services (Brembeck et al., 2021), aligning the expectations and satisfaction levels of users, providers, and digital platform companies (Hagberg & Kjellberg, 2020; Chimenti, 2019). These services function through a two-sided model akin to a cause-and-effect mechanism, requiring real-time alignment of supply and demand (Ozbal et al., 2020). Both parties must trust the system and one another, rendering trust a critical requirement for smooth operations and a significant determinant of behavioral intentions (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018; Punyatoya, 2014).

1.2 Service context comparison of the U.S. and India

A preliminary examination of the U.S. and India's service context characteristics is crucial for understanding their respective market dynamics. Culturally, consumers in the U.S. tend to be individualistic, whereas Indian society is primarily collectivist (Paul et al., 2006; Kaur & Soch, 2017). This contrast is reflected in decision-making processes: U.S. decision-makers often rely on detailed individual-level analysis, while Indian decision-makers are more influenced by social and familial factors (Maxwell, 2001; Khare, 2016). However, in recent years, urban areas in India have shifted toward individualism, driven by the growing influence of social media and globalized communication (Association for Asian Studies, 2018; Fatehi et al., 2020).

Economically, the U.S. offers favorable conditions for business growth and individual entrepreneurship, especially in technology-oriented sectors. Meanwhile, India has been transitioning from a populous developing nation to an economy propelled by a burgeoning

middle class. Rapid digital transformation, increasing adoption of technology-driven services, and a flourishing startup ecosystem position India as a promising market (NASSCOM, 2021).

From an infrastructural perspective, the U.S. benefits from widespread high-speed internet access and relatively well-maintained transportation systems, providing a robust foundation for internet-based services. India's recent initiatives, such as the Digital India project (CSC, 2024), have accelerated mobile application usage and cultivated a growing middle class in urban centers (Victor et al., 2021). By contrast, rural India remains in a nascent stage for such developments due to limited internet connectivity, lower digital literacy, and economic constraints. Nevertheless, rural areas hold considerable potential for future growth as the broader economic landscape evolves (Vij, 2018).

2. Research Questions

The current research aims to uncover nuanced, localized perspectives while examining operational mechanisms from a comparative standpoint (Singh et al., 2005). These two countries exhibit unique market dynamics shaped by cultural roots, market agility, and service infrastructure (Weng et al., 2024).

In pursuing this goal, the study employs exploratory research techniques (Saunders et al., 2019; Robson, 2002) to address the following research questions:

- 1) How do leading ride-hailing brands in the U.S. and India differ on the five core drivers of digital brand equity - (a) platform functionality, (b) perceived service quality, (c) perceived value, (d) personal reputation mechanisms, and (e) brand imagery, and what do these differences imply for building, leveraging, and protecting brand equity across markets?

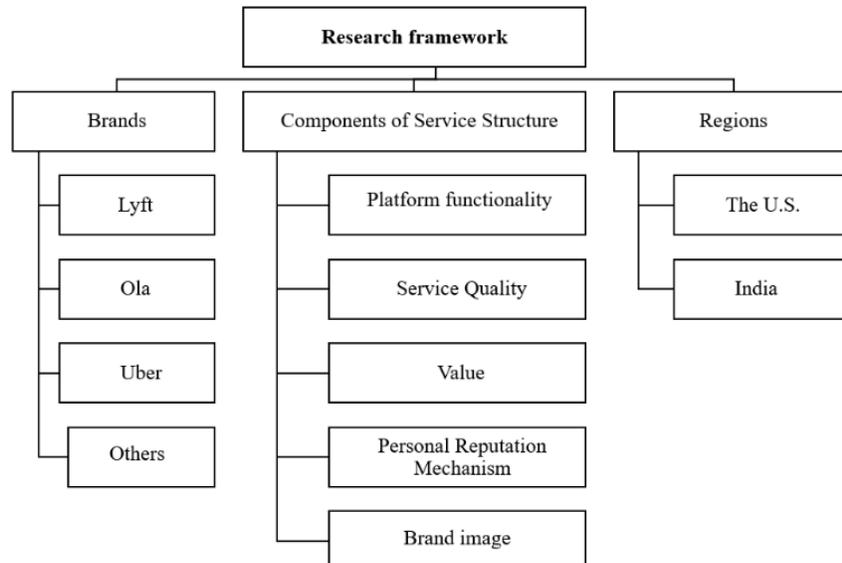
- 2) How do locally embedded customer preferences shape the formation of key brand equity components in the two ride-hailing markets, and how can managers convert these insights into market responsive brand building programs?
- 3) Which actionable insights on managing brand equity across distant service contexts, distilled from the U.S.–India comparison, can guide multinational ride-hailing platforms in designing and scaling globally consistent yet locally resonant brand strategies?

3. Research Methodology

The study leverages exploratory research techniques to shed new light and gain fresh insights into ride-hailing services in the U.S. and India (Saunders et al., 2019; Robson, 2002). These countries exhibit unique market structures influenced by their cultural roots, market agilities, and service infrastructures (Weng et al., 2024). Therefore, we aim to uncover nuanced, localized, and distinct insights (Singh et al., 2005) while examining the operational mechanisms of ride-hailing services from a comparative perspective. The flexible nature of exploratory research allowed us to discover the nature of the research problem and refine conclusions accordingly.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual framework of this study. The service model and the structure of the ride hailing markets in the US and India were cross analyzed using five major service components.

Figure 1. Research Framework



To begin, existing literature was systematically synthesized to define the scope of the research and to ensure clarity, completeness, and transparency regarding prior findings (Linnenluecke et al., 2020; Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). Major academic databases were screened using keywords such as ride-hailing, ride-sharing, sharing economy, peer-to-peer services, platform-based business, digital platforms, service value, service quality, brand image, online ratings and reviews, eWOM, Uber, Lyft, Ola, United States, and India. Following the search, the identified records were assessed for eligibility.

Next phase aimed to create a holistic collection of studies that captured a broad range of understanding of consumers' perceptions of ride-hailing services in the U.S. and India. The service structures were based on five established criteria, platform functionality, service quality, service value, personal reputation mechanism, and brand image. Totally 87 papers were selected and classified under seven categories: ride-hailing brands (Uber, Lyft, Ola), platform functionality, service quality, service value, personal reputation mechanisms (ratings/reviews), brand image, and regional analysis of ride-hailing markets. Publications published between 2021

and 2025, covering ride-hailing in general terms, the U.S. and Indian markets in particular, were recorded. Only reports and surveys from reputable market research firms were considered. The majority of the market reports focused on the direction of the sector, global and local revenue details, and regulation issues. Among these, reports whose focus was irrelevant were excluded. The reports that provided insights on ride-hailing dynamics, such as service offerings, platform capabilities, safety measures, and user experience touchpoints were included.

The research then transitioned into an examination of online resources — company websites, news portals, and blogs — aimed at identifying emerging issues. We aimed ride-hailing company websites to obtain official insights, news portals for multi-directional sector overviews and blogs to capture service user and provider sentiments. The procedure for selecting online resources was based on the market reports methodology withholding the articles of the last six years (2019-2025) to determine the transitional changes as well as the sector's state before, during, and after the pandemic (Morshed et al., 2021).

To enhance clarity, completeness, and transparency, we undertook a systematic review following established evidence-synthesis protocols (Linnenluecke et al., 2020; Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). Major databases were searched with Boolean strings that combined domain terms (ride-hailing*, ride-sharing*, sharing economy, digital brand equity, peer-to-peer, digital platform*) with focal constructs (service value, service quality, brand image, online ratings, eWOM) and brand/country filters (Uber, Lyft, Ola, U.S., India).

The screening process yielded 87 peer-reviewed articles addressing consumer perceptions of ride-hailing in the U.S. and India. Guided by Ozbal et al. (2020), we mapped the evidence to five analytically distinct dimensions: (1) digital platform functionality, (2) perceived service quality, (3) perceived service value, (4) personal reputation mechanisms, and (5) brand image.

Because digital platform dynamics evolve rapidly, we augmented the academic pool with market reports and industry surveys published between 2022 and 2025. The same inclusion rules were applied, and reports lacking direct relevance to our research questions were excluded. Acceptable sources detailed ride-hailing offerings, platform capabilities, safety provisions, and user-experience touchpoints.

To capture emergent issues, we next reviewed company websites, news portals, and specialist blogs. Using the earlier search logic but extending the window to the past seven years (Morshed et al., 2021) allowed us to trace longitudinal shifts in service design and market discourse.

Customer experience with the ride-hailing services were gathered with focus groups and personal interviews in India and in the US. By combining focus groups and interviews, the mixed method design elicited culturally contingent insights unlikely to surface through a single method (Krueger, 2014). In India, we convened five focus groups with postgraduate business students in Odisha. This cohort, digitally savvy, daily users of ride-hailing services, and trained to articulate branding concerns, generated reflexive, peer-validated insights into service experiences (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Parker & Tritter, 2006; Millward, 2012). In the US, we conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen Uber and Lyft drivers operating in Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. Participants, aged 24–56, diverse ethnicities, had two to eight years of full-time or part time experience, enabling us to capture supply-side nuances of service operations.

Item generation for the comparative evaluation of U.S. and Indian ride-hailing services followed Churchill's (1974) scale-development procedure. Redundant or marginally relevant items were removed through iterative categorization and coding, preserving content and face validity (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Nevo, 1985). Five items were discarded, leaving a pool of 62 attributes. Table 1 lists the refined item pool that define the service characteristics of ride hailing services in the US and India.

Table 1. Dimensions and Items that define the service characteristics of ride hailing services in the US and India

	Platform performance and feature characteristics		Service quality characteristics
1	User friendly apps	1	Local infrastructure and driver reliability impact on quality
2	Rider-driver evaluation feature	2	Diverse transportation options (e.g., cars, auto-rickshaws and motorbikes)
3	Different ride choice options for various user categories (e.g., pooling, luxury)	3	High service quality and strict regulations
4	Automatic payment setup with multiple options	4	Traditional prevalence of tipping
5	Fare splitting option for multiple riders	5	Courtesy of drivers
6	Point and cash reward system for riders	6	Mostly proper condition of vehicles
7	Critical response line support for drivers	7	Lack of standard features (i.e., air-conditioning)
8	Ride scheduling in advance	8	Mostly convenient and hassle-free rides
9	Integrated delivery services (e.g., food delivery)	9	Driver background check
10	Panic button or emergency alert functionality	10	Ride insurance

11	Voice recording feature for security concerns	11	Driver monitoring
12	Detailed safety, hygiene, and sanitation information for drivers and riders (COVID-19 prevention)	12	Data security standards
13	Multi-platform services (booking transportation tickets, making WhatsApp calls)	13	Quality improvement training for drivers
14	Location-sharing capability	14	Guidelines for good business conduct
15	Driver referral system in the app	15	Implementation of cleaning fees
	Service value characteristics	16	Fare adjustment, cancellation, and refund policies
1	Perception of good value for money	17	Requesting rides through landline numbers
2	Dynamic or surge pricing	18	Being more organized than the local taxis
3	Loyalty programs	19	Vehicle color preference by riders
4	Cross-promotion features	20	Integrated ride-booking through WhatsApp
5	Free complementary services (e.g., beverages, charging cable)	21	Entertainment features in the ride-hailing app
6	Referral programs		Personal reputation characteristics
7	GPS tracking	1	Star rating and review mechanism
8	Requesting rides for others	2	Account suspension due to low ratings
9	Multiple payment gateways (card, cash, wallet)	3	Driver/rider rejection feature
10	Hourly rental service	4	Availability of feedback to drivers about their low ratings
11	Shuttle services	5	Two-way rating (driver – rider)
	Brand image characteristics	6	Perception of biased ratings and reviews
1	High public awareness of ride-hailing brands	7	Low adaption rate for the rating/review system
2	Lower driver loyalty to ride-hailing brands	8	Drivers' negative perception of the rating/review system

3	The difficulty of differentiating the ride-hailing brands in practice	
4	The negative impact of harassment allegations on brand image	
5	Clear positioning of ride-hailing brands	
6	Positive effects of sustainable brand-building efforts (i.e., zero emission target and EV promotion) on brand image	
7	Data privacy concerns	

An expert panel of three researchers specializing in ride-hailing and sharing-economy services was convened to cross-analyze the two markets using the identified item pool (Gordon, 1994; Linstone & Turoff, 2011). All experts were experienced marketing scholars who have published extensively in services marketing and ride-hailing. The first expert has more than ten years of research and consulting experience in U.S. markets; the second has worked across Europe, the United States, and Pakistan; and the third is a marketing professor in India with substantial expertise in the Indian ride-hailing sector.

Following the procedures of the Delphi technique, a moderated session was organized to record and analyze the panel’s discussions. The Delphi technique is a structured method for synthesizing expert knowledge through multiple rounds of inquiry, with the goal of reaching an informed consensus (Davey, Sung, & Butcher, 2023). Guided by an interview protocol, the moderator posed three rounds of open-ended questions to evaluate the relevance of each item to the respective markets. The moderator also facilitated cross-examination and evaluation of each item throughout the discussion. The session recordings were subsequently transcribed and

analyzed by the research team to identify points that differentiate market conditions across the two sectors.

3. Discussion

Understanding digital brand equity requires close scrutiny of heterogeneous consumer ecosystems. Such analysis illuminates how expectations and choice heuristics vary across markets, informing global brand building strategy (Lee et al., 2021). Consumers' value systems shaped by personal, social, and wider environmental adaptation, surface clearly in their online and offline consumption behaviors (Clarke & Micken, 2002). The following sections therefore address our research questions by contrasting U.S. and Indian ride-hailing data across five brand equity drivers, showing how differences in service design and technology adoption shape each platform's brand-equity profile (Eckhardt et al., 2019).

3.1 Platform Functionality

Ride-hailing services primarily operate through internet-enabled mobile applications designed to match drivers with riders (Perren & Kozinets, 2018). Beyond essential matching functions, these platforms often feature user-friendly interfaces that guide users before and during their trip. Our analysis highlights a universal technological framework that underpins ride-hailing in both the U.S. and Indian markets. In both contexts, brands design applications to enhance user experience through seamless navigation, real-time ride requests, comprehensive driver and vehicle information, and convenient driver-rider communication (Rasheed & Nandukrishna, 2023). These platforms further bolster trust and convenience by offering automatic payment systems, fee-splitting for shared rides, and loyalty or reward programs. Their user-centric design extends

to value-added services such as trip planning, location sharing, in-app support, and integrated delivery features.

Despite many shared functionalities, ride-hailing platforms remain closely tied to their operational contexts. Geographic factors and local conditions significantly influence platform functions and service efficiency (Verma et al., 2020). Understanding how the digital environment intersects with the physical landscape is key to grasping the ride-hailing brand ecosystem. Cross-market differences in security features underscore how cultural norms and economic realities steer the development and usage of these platforms (JGM Editorial, 2018). For instance, Ola and Uber have introduced additional in-app safety features in India, including pin verification, panic buttons, and safety notifications (Uber, 2022a; OlaCabs, 2023). These enhancements reflect a deliberate response to local safety concerns, and feedback indicates that riders and drivers appreciate such measures.

Ride-hailing brands also respond to social and cultural expectations. In India, female drivers may be available for night shifts, catering to female riders' preferences and reflecting the country's gender dynamics (Nagda & Hanif, 2015). Moreover, Ola and Uber in India have integrated multi-platform services, allowing riders to make WhatsApp calls or book other transportation tickets directly in-app. This feature, designed for connected mobile devices, streamlines the user experience by eliminating the need to switch between multiple applications (Sun & Xu, 2019).

Our interviews with U.S. ride-hailing service providers indicate that these applications have evolved to satisfy both drivers and riders. However, some full-time drivers report instances where the algorithm appears to disadvantage them. For example, a driver might head to a location after noticing surge pricing, only to find that fares have dropped by the time they arrive.

This recurring issue underscores a long-standing challenge of algorithm-based management from the perspective of U.S. drivers. We elaborate on this issue in the Managerial Implications section.

3.2 Service Quality

The disruptive nature of the ride-hailing industry has encountered numerous obstacles, and the sector has been subject to various regulations and restrictions since its inception in the U.S. Over time, the underlying business model and operational practices have been tested, refined, and validated, enabling leading brands to establish global service quality standards. These standards include data security, customer satisfaction supported by ratings and reviews, multiple payment options, fare adjustments, and cancellation and refund policies (Arcand et al., 2017). Drivers must undergo background checks, and both drivers and riders are insured. Vehicles must be properly maintained, safe, and clean (Too & Earl, 2010). Additionally, drivers are expected to behave professionally and offer comfortable rides (Shaaban & Kim, 2016; Govender, 2016).

Perceived quality is influenced by factors, including customer expectations, prior experiences, and service provider interactions (Matos et al., 2011). Insights from driver interviews indicate that, although it is not required, many U.S. drivers voluntarily provide additional amenities - such as phone chargers, bottled water, or customized A/C settings - to enhance riders' experiences. In return, these drivers hope to receive a five-star rating, a tip, and a cheerful acknowledgment from the rider.

When asked to rank incentives, part-time drivers place greater value on tips, whereas full-time drivers prioritize maintaining a five-star rating. Professional drivers note that an average nearing the five-star threshold prompts the platform algorithm to assign them more attractive trips—rides

of reasonable distance, fares boosted by surge pricing, and passengers who are typically well-rated, courteous, and often airport-bound.

Quality standards require ride-hailing brands to mitigate economic, business, infrastructural, behavioral, and regulatory constraints (Mitropoulos et al., 2021). Although Uber operates in both the U.S. and India, the application of its service standards is shaped by differing service environments. Contextual and sociocultural factors also influence the quality norms in India (Shaaban & Kim, 2016; Bakti & Sumaedi, 2015).

Contrary to popular belief, most drivers in India do not own their vehicles. Despite diminishing, India's entrenched social class structure, rooted in the caste system remains visible (Bandyopadhyay et al., 1994). Many less-educated, low-income drivers cannot afford a car and work for 'taxidars,' who operate sub-businesses via ride-hailing apps. Taxidars are relatively wealthy persons who typically own multiple vehicles and hire full-time drivers to operate them (Kashyap & Bhatia, 2018). This arrangement results in more casual engagement from drivers, who often feel detached from platform regulations (Prabhat et al., 2019). Such drivers face stress, job insecurity, and economic challenges that prevent them from developing sustainable personal businesses, which in turn hampers overall ride-hailing service quality (Kane, 2016; Gautam, 2015).

Focus group discussions with business school students in India revealed that driver stress can compromise service quality—for instance, some drivers may choose not to use air conditioning during trips. In India, where summer temperatures often surpass 45°C (113°F), the impact on service quality can be considerable. Moreover, culturally, tipping and offering verbal thanks for good service are not standard practices in India. Consequently, drivers lack the motivation of

their U.S. counterparts to deliver a superior experience. Because many drivers in India earn significantly less than those in the U.S., they cannot offset this lack of motivation through higher earnings, further affecting service quality.

Nonetheless, ride-hailing companies in India offer certain benefits that are not found in the U.S. market. For example, Indian riders can make reservations using WhatsApp, mitigating issues associated with switching between multiple applications on touch-sensitive devices. Moreover, entertainment services are integrated into the core ride-hailing apps, allowing riders to watch popular shows or play games while monitoring their journey. Users can also select cars, motorcycles, or rickshaws based on budget and local conditions (Pels & Sheth, 2021).

Another culturally specific feature is that Indian customers prefer colors even when hailing a ride. This preference depends on regional subcultures and the cultural values and concepts associated with these colors; for example, Punjabi region favors vibrant colors like red, green, and yellow, whereas individuals from Tamil region may choose white or gold. These preferences can also shift with the day or mood, reflecting beliefs about color symbolism and its influence on happiness, luck, or success.

Finally, ongoing investments in India's digital infrastructure and technology are poised to strengthen the nation's economy and further benefit the ride-hailing sector.

3.3 Service Value

Service value emerges from a balance of benefits and costs (monetary and non-monetary) as perceived by the user (Zeithaml et al., 1988). This balance fosters community engagement within online platforms (Wirtz et al., 2013) and builds consumer trust when the brand integrates various

beneficial elements seamlessly. Ride-hailing services in the U.S. and India emphasize different value propositions to appeal to local markets. For example, Uber's slogan underscores reliable availability - 'Always get the ride you want' (Uber, 2021) - while Lyft promotes simplicity with 'Request-Ride-Pay' (Shewan, 2024). Ola highlights delivering an exceptional experience: 'Providing convenient, reliable, and affordable transportation options' (Pereira, 2024).

Pricing and service quality are crucial to perceived value (Young & Farber, 2019). However, the perception of surge pricing varies across regions. In India, algorithm-based pricing is welcomed as a sign of professionalism that distinguishes ride-hailing from traditional transportation (Guda & Subramanian, 2019; Young & Farber, 2019), while in the U.S., surge pricing at peak times can trigger user complaints. Interviews with U.S. drivers confirm that raising fares during high-demand periods (such as after late-night events) ensures an adequate supply of drivers but can sometimes result in exorbitant prices. Conversely, Indian focus groups appreciate surge pricing for clarifying the fare in advance, reducing the need for passenger–driver negotiation.

Using the perceived value framework (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007), assessing ride-hailing services in both countries involves more than just cost and quality. Beyond functional benefits - convenience, efficiency, and reliability - there are social and emotional dimensions. In India, choosing app-based services like Ola or Uber signifies modernity and aligns users with global trends, enhancing social prestige and security (Cucato et al., 2022). These factors can encourage user loyalty.

Ride-hailing brands also strengthen perceived value by introducing membership initiatives such as Lyft Pink, offering perks like cashback and joint promotions (e.g., Uber Eats). This strategy is common in the U.S. and India and integrates diverse payment options, including mobile wallets. However, India's reliance on cash sometimes impedes the adoption of advanced digital payment

systems, as seen with Ola. Meanwhile, U.S. ride-hailing services frequently include additional amenities - such as complimentary water and phone chargers - to enhance customer satisfaction and improve driver ratings.

3.4 Personal Reputation

Personal reputation refers to constructing a recognizable digital identity on online platforms through electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM). This process involves identity negotiation, experience-sharing, and broader social dynamics (Brown & Laurier, 2012). In ride-hailing services, high ratings and positive reviews constitute the primary indicators of a driver's personal reputation (Ozbal et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2018). The credibility of ratings and reviews is crucial for a platform's success (Ravanelle, 2019) because they help validate service quality and driver competence (Liu et al., 2021). Notably, ride-hailing platforms allow riders and drivers to avoid low-rated individuals (Sehrawat et al., 2021), making drivers' business success contingent upon maintaining strong ratings and favorable reviews (Botsman & Rogers, 2010).

Although rating and review systems operate similarly across U.S. and Indian ride-hailing services, perceptions of their usefulness and impact differ markedly (Jacobsen et al., 2019). In individualistic cultures like the U.S., there is a strong emphasis on abstract concepts, and comprehensive evaluations are standard. Conversely, conceptual thinking is less prevalent in collectivistic contexts such as India, and consumers primarily focus on tangible product features (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). While the personal reputation mechanisms are considered integral to assessing service quality in the U.S., they are often considered biased or less effective, partly due to contextual and socioeconomic factors in India. Many Indian riders show limited concern

for driver ratings and prioritize securing immediate transportation, particularly beyond major metropolitan areas.

Furthermore, the employer-employee relationship between ‘taxidars’ (vehicle owners) and their drivers amplifies pressure on drivers, prompting them to seek five-star ratings from riders. This patronage dynamic constrains the democratic potential of digital business models and compromises unbiased service evaluations. Personal interviews further indicate that the rating/review culture is more established in the U.S., although the Pollyanna effect - favoring positive over negative feedback (Matlin & Gawron, 1979) - may skew perceptions of personal reputation systems. Based on collectivist cultural roots in India, we also believe that the nature of mood-affecting mechanisms influences the effective implementation of the rating/review mechanisms (Luomala et al., 2004). Overall, compliance with such systems remains high in the U.S., whereas compliance levels in India are comparatively lower.

3.5 Brand Image

Brand image is a final element when comparing ride-hailing services in the U.S. and India. The brand image serves as the contract in which all associations about the brand are combined into an abstract perception of the brand (Keller, 1993). A brand's extrinsic attributes (i.e., features used in brand communication) serve as a reference point for its customers to build their brand image. Consumers' brand image reflects their understanding of how brand benefits meet their needs to use that brand (Padhi, 2013; Rauschnabel & Ro, 2016).

Overall, brand awareness of ride-hailing services is high in both countries. In the U.S., the market leaders Uber and Lyft distinguish themselves primarily through brand logos and symbols.

Uber features a black/white contrasting logo generally linked with a more masculine image, while Lyft employs a pink mustache motif to stand apart. Operating within an oligopolistic market structure, these two brands continually seek to maintain and adapt their brand images in a dynamic competitive environment. Insights from driver interviews suggest that Uber is perceived as offering higher-quality service at a slightly higher price, whereas Lyft is often chosen by riders looking for cost-effectiveness.

A comparable duopoly exists in India between Ola and Uber, both of which have been operating for over a decade. Unlike Uber, which is often perceived as a foreign brand, Ola benefits from its local origin and cultural alignment (Kashyap & Bhatia, 2018). Indian consumers' strong cultural identity and positive national self-perception may serve as a boundary condition that amplifies consumer ethnocentrism, potentially leading to more favorable attitudes toward Ola (Correa & Parente-Laverde, 2017; Maduku & Phadziri, 2021). The two companies also differ in their customer engagement strategies: Uber is frequently preferred by business travelers, while Ola is perceived as more accessible and appealing to the general public (Surie & Koduganti, 2016; Raman & Aashish, 2020). A positive attitude towards celebrity endorsers is more effective on brand identity and brand image, especially in developing countries where the power distance dimension has a very high score (Crespo et al., 2025). Likewise, storytelling based on cultural codes is seen as one of the most effective ways to mobilize Indian consumers (Dubhashi, 2024). Based on these facts, Uber hires popular Bollywood actors and cricket players as brand ambassadors to create a localized brand image and runs advertisements to establish cultural proximity (Uber, 2018; Afaqs, 2024; Campaign, 2024).

India's urban ride-hailing market continues to grow, with forecasts projecting an annual growth rate of 8.9%, from US\$8.29bn in 2025 to US\$11.64bn by 2029 (Statista, 2025). This expansion

is closely tied to strong branding strategies from companies like Ola and Uber. Despite operational challenges, brand-related initiatives remain pivotal for sustaining service quality dimensions and overall market growth.

As our interviews with U.S. drivers revealed, ride-hailing applications incorporate multiple features to safeguard both drivers and riders. For instance, if drivers perceive a threat, they can initiate audio and video recording with a single button. Another function alerts the nearest police station, prompting immediate support. On the other hand, despite being in the market for more than a decade, drivers' trust in ride-hailing companies remains uncertain. One driver shared:

'As someone who works with a ride-hailing brand, I can tell you that companies sometimes neglect us. The driver is found guilty when a dispute arises—even if the customer is at fault. For example, a passenger asked me to stop with her children in the city center, where stopping is forbidden. I explained that I couldn't stop there and drove to a safer location. She opened the car door while it was moving and insisted, 'I want you to stop right here!' I stopped, risking a fine. Later, she filed a complaint, and my license was suspended for four weeks. It took four emails before the company responded, but I still wasn't able to prove my innocence.'

Ongoing litigation over drivers' employment rights in several U.S. states underscores the fragility of ride-hailing firms' social legitimacy. Failure to redress these grievances could erode brand equity, invite sector-wide sanctions, and prompt more stringent regulatory oversight—developments that would complicate brand-management strategies across markets (Calo & Rosenblat, 2017; Bhattacharya & Bhaskar Lata, 2022).

4. Managerial Implications

Our findings support previous research on the impact of globalization on cross-cultural and cross-national consumer decision-making processes (Nair and Selvaraj, 2021; Manrai and Manrai, 2011), highlighting how contextual differences play a significant role in shaping product evaluations and service expectations (Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Nicholls et al., 1996). We illustrate this effect by highlighting how social factors influence the adoption and use of ride-hailing services (Maier & Wilken, 2017).

Ride-hailing users in the U.S. and India exhibit distinct behaviors associated with presumption (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). As the term ‘consumer’ becomes less relevant in the sharing economy where individuals can deliver and receive services under the same brand (Leminen et al., 2014), the responsibility for brand creation increasingly relies on collaboration between marketers and prosumers (Rajaretnam & Sheth, 2017). Technological and platform-related challenges also pose threats to successful branding. This study identifies India as a particularly complex market and suggests that these insights may guide similar emerging markets (Christofi et al., 2022). As a rapidly developing economy, India's ride-hailing sector warrants deeper integration into global research pipelines to comprehensively understand service and branding challenges. By comparing the U.S. and Indian ride-hailing frameworks, this study aims to inform multiple stakeholders who may benefit from cross-market insights.

U.S. society is generally characterized by an individualistic culture, where consumers seek information independently and formulate more direct, formal demands. Perceived usefulness, ease of use, and output quality guide their decision-making processes, with efficiency and

punctuality taking precedence. Accordingly, ride-hailing brands in the U.S. should enhance service offerings by providing customizable rides and offering users greater control over their journeys (e.g., preferred routes with minimal wait times). Moreover, the emergence of artificial intelligence raises privacy concerns, prompting ride-hailing providers to implement and continually update secure payment methods and robust data protection measures.

By contrast, India's collectivist culture informs a decision-making process that relies heavily on input from family, friends, and peers (Goel & Halдар, 2020a; Pandita et al., 2021). Focus group discussions revealed that social sharing, referrals, and customer reviews significantly sway user preferences. Consequently, Indian ride-hailing brands should embrace a more community-oriented approach. Developing features that facilitate group travel experiences and encourage social interaction could prove valuable in this setting. Additionally, India's vast population and rapid growth necessitate recognizing the variation within its consumer base. Urban 'global consumers' in major metropolitan regions may share traits with city-dwelling U.S. users (Paswan & Ganesh, 2005), whereas suburban and rural populations often differ considerably (Albinsson et al., 2019).

Because ride-hailing services require effective market segmentation (Goel & Halдар, 2020b), companies operating in India—notably Uber—should avoid assuming that the U.S. operational model transfers seamlessly in emerging markets (Rajaretnam & Sheth, 2017). This assumption can challenge service quality, value, and brand image dimensions. Dara Khosrowshahi, Uber's CEO, emphasized these difficulties during his visit to India in February 2024:

'Indian customers are extremely demanding but unwilling to pay for anything... India is one of the toughest markets out there. If we can succeed here, we can succeed anywhere. It is

also an extraordinary opportunity for us to expand our services to a wider population. We don't just want to be an upper-middle-class product. We want to be available to everyone.' (Times of India, 2024).

Khosrowshahi acknowledges that India disrupts Uber's operations, allowing for the possibility that the company may not succeed and could eventually withdraw from the market. This scenario mirrors Uber's experience in China, where intense cultural disruption and fierce competition from the local rival Didi Chuxing led to unsustainable financial losses for Uber. After two years, the company agreed to acquire an 18% stake in Didi and exited China to refocus on other regions (Harvard Business Review, 2016).

To better understand local market dynamics, ride-hailing executives should implement a bottom-up communication approach rather than a top-down strategy when expanding into new regions (Chevrier, 2009). Tailoring operational and managerial methods to local conditions can strengthen brand development (Yan & Hunt, 2005; Shergill & Nargundkar, 2005). For instance, Uber might learn valuable lessons from India's homegrown competitor, Ola. In 2014, Ola transformed a dissatisfied customer into a brand advocate (Chopra, 2019) and became India's most trusted online brand in 2018 (Olacabs, 2018). A greenfield investment strategy involving an in-depth understanding of market dynamics and designing services accordingly is advisable for successful global expansion (Cavusgil, 1985; Sethi et al., 1990).

5. Future Research Directions and Limitations

India's ride-hailing market remains in its early stages. Few studies examine the complexities of service-related branding, and even fewer investigate the local constraints and root causes

challenging the ride-hailing sector. Given the cultural diversity between the global East and West, comparative inquiries into business cultures and market orientation strategies could significantly enhance the existing literature. Technological adaptation and branding across different markets is another promising avenue for comparative analysis. In this respect, the present study addresses a significant gap by offering a comparative perspective that can be extended to various customer segments and expectations. Future research should also consider the positive and negative dimensions that simultaneously shape user experiences in ride-hailing services (Axsen & Sovacool, 2019).

Several contemporary issues, not deeply explored here, deserve further attention, including the environmental impacts of ride-hailing services and future technological developments. These areas warrant detailed investigation, especially given the sector's worldwide growth. Concerning environmental effects, many ride-hailing brands are working to incorporate electric vehicles (EVs) into their business models (Agrawal & Gupta, 2018). Emerging EV technologies, newly introduced environmental regulations, and the broader adoption of electric vehicles can serve as rich focal points for future inquiries. Researchers should also assess how artificial intelligence may bring opportunities and challenges for ride-hailing platforms.

In juxtaposing ride-hailing service frameworks in the U.S. and India, this study confronted several constraints, mainly due to the extensive nature of these markets. Notably, a lack of robust academic work on various dimensions of Indian ride-hailing services complicated the analysis. While substantial research exists in the U.S. context, the Indian scholarly environment remains relatively undeveloped, requiring reliance on secondary data for insights into market structure and service characteristics.

Data collection across both locations proved difficult. Despite considerable efforts to engage industry experts, drivers, and riders, the information gathered served primarily as an exploratory foundation rather than a definitive account. Nevertheless, this study contributes significantly to our understanding of multinational ride-hailing structures, shedding light on service frameworks in two critical global markets. The findings form an essential basis for future research, which can benefit from more descriptive and explanatory data collection. This work offers a robust steppingstone for deeper investigations into the relationships between service providers and users in the ride-hailing ecosystem.

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