MEASURING BRAND EQUITY IN THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY OF TÜRKİYE

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Abstract:
The aim of this study is to measure brand equity in Türkiye's airline industry by using Aaker's (1991) brand equity model, with the addition of Keller's (1993) brand image concept. The five key factors of brand equity which are brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, and brand image are investigated from the perspective of airline passengers in Türkiye. A quantitative and cross-sectional research was used, and data were collected via a structured survey. Also, Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted to test model's validity, followed by Pearson's Correlation Analysis to examine hypothesized relationships. Additionally, the results confirmed that there is significant relationship among all factors, although moderating effect of income level was not supported.

Keywords:
Brand Equity, Brand Image, Brand Loyalty, Perceived Quality, Brand Awareness, Brand Associations, Turkish Airline Industry, Aviation

1. Introduction

The aviation industry is a huge service sector which generates production and consumption activities. Airline service is a kind of transportation that has a significant worldwide influence because the profits made by the industry are not only based on the sector itself but also directly affect the economic development of the nations. According to Belobaba et al. (2015) aviation industry not only enables trade and travel but also plays a crucial role for economic growth across regions. The gross domestic product, which represents the sum of a nation's economic activity, is also correlated with aviation industry (Doganis, 2002). The airline industry plays a significant role in the global connectivity not only by promoting cross-border and seamless travel but also, by facilitating trade and cultural interaction. (Doganis, 2019).

Türkiye is a key playes in the global aviation industry due to its geographical position. It is located at the intersection of Europe and Asia. Thanks to the advantage of its location, Türkiye has become one of the major actors in the global aviation sector (International Air Transport Association [IATA], 2021). Turkish Airlines (THY), Pegasus, AnadoluJet (rebranded as Ajet in 2024), which are the main carriers of Turkish aviation, become competing figures with other airlines in the region through their service and network.

Turkish aviation industry has changed significantly because of increasing passenger demand, strategic partnership, and significant infrastructure expenditures especially over the past two decades since THY, the full service- flag carrier airline of Türkiye, is known as its global network diversity, Pegasus has also gained its reputation as LCC (low-cost carrier) leader in Türkiye (O'Connell & Williams, 2016).

While strong brand positioning becomes more important in the airline industry, the main components of brand equity has become significant for strategic decision-making. Moreover, data-driven approach to brand equity facilitates carriers to optimize market investments, increase customer loyalty and make them different from their competitor in the industry.

Brand equity is a central concept in marketing (Aaker, 1991) which refers to value that a product or service derives from its brand name as well as its functions. Brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations

(Aaker, 1991) and brand image are some of the elements which constitute this multifunctional structure (Keller, 1993). The interaction between the components of brand equity concept influences consumer behavior and perception which also establish a brand's success in the marketplace also effects how consumer think and act (Aaker, 1991).

In the aviation industry, strong brand equity is crucial for long-term profitability, customer retention and sustainable profitability (Kotler & Keller, 2016). For instance, brand loyalty which is generally affected by previous travel experiences and service satisfaction. This prior experience determines whether consumer stays loyal to a specific airline (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Similarly, a customer's brand choice is a strongly influenced by perceived quality which represents customer evaluation of an airline's services, and operations success (Grewal et al., 2018).

A strong brand underpins customers trust and preference, which is very important in the airline industry. As mentioned above, aviation is a service industry which commoditized and similar across other carriers. In the highly competitive market environment, brand equity plays an essential role as key differentiator in the consumers' perception, thereby effecting their preference of one airline over its competitors. Also, a study conducted by López-Rodríguez and Mora (2024) highlights that brand equity enhancement makes the market orientation strong and increase relationship with consumers and emphasizing its strategic value in highly competitive market.

In the case of Turkish aviation industry, brand equity has become particularly important lately because of its rapid growth and intense competition. Especially THY strengthened its brand and competes with major European and Gulf carriers in terms of both service and reputation. Studies have demonstrated that success of the Turkish aviation industry's branding efforts. For example, Sezgin and Kozak (2012) report that Turkish Airline has been intensive branding initiatives via expanding its brand strength and customer goodwill. The study conducted by Aktepe and Şahbaz (2010) is crucial because it examined the five biggest airlines in Türkiye (based on the number of domestic passenger) and conclusively demonstrated that high brand equity elements translated into real competitive advantage. The study results showed that passengers who are more familiar with a specific airline's brand are more likely to be loyal to that airline. This deduction from their study showed that brand equity has a significant positive impact on market performance and customer retention in the Turkish airline market, as well as other markets.

Evaluating the brand equity becomes highly crucial considering Türkiye's strategic and economic reliance on aviation industry as well as intense competition. By measuring brand equity airlines in Türkiye could determine where they need to improve, how well they are connecting through passengers and how brand value measure up versus competitor's (Aydın, 2024). Especially position of İstanbul, as a global hub, makes Türkiye important for the global airline industry. Mega-hubs like İstanbul Airport increase global connectivity by underpinning their geographical position, maintaining both operational and economic growth in their regions.

Airlines are not just competing for passengers based on routes and prices but also vying to build strong brand reputation to attract international transit traffic. According to IATA Economics (2024), global air travel has almost reached pre-pandemic levels which has increased airline competitiveness, particularly in key transit hubs. In summary Türkiye's aviation industry is economically and highly competitive so enhancing a strong brand and measuring its equity is important for any airline which seeks to thrive in this market (Aydın, 2024). It is imperative that airlines of Turkish aviation industry understand their brand equity so that they can make strategic decisions to underpin their brand value and capitalize İstanbul's hub potential to sustain their success in the global aviation sector (Genc, Capar, and Ahmed, 2024).

Based on the above, the main objective of this is study to measure the elements of brand equity in the Turkish airline industry from the passengers' perception by using Aaker's brand equity model (1991) and adding Keller's (1993) brand image to the model.

This study aims to analyze the brand equity structure within Tükiye's airline industry from passengers' perspective using brand equity framework. The research proceeds with literature review, followed by the methodology, findings, and discussion.

2. Literature Review

According to Kotler (2009), a brand represents a name, term, sign, or design, or a combination of these concepts, that aims to specify the seller's goods and services and differentiate them from those of competitors. Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol that adds or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or its customers. The model composes five

fundamental dimensions: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand relationships (Aaker, 1996) and Keller's (1993) brand image these dimensions will be detailed below. Each of these elements has a significant impact on consumer preferences and purchasing behaviors in the aviation industry.

Similarly, Yoo et al. (2000) argue that marketing efforts such as advertising directly strength the components of brand equity through service quality and provide a platform for competitive differentiation in service-oriented industries like aviation. Customer trust is another important aspect of brand equity in airlines, as aviation includes a significant perception of risk (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

In the airline industry, brand loyalty fosters customers to be loyal to the airline and long-term profitability (Hapsari et al., 2017). Addition to that brand awareness increases market share by positioning an airline as a recognizable entity (Macdonald and Sharp, 2000). Also, perceived quality affects customer satisfaction, influencing an airline's reputation (Namukasa, 2013).

Keller (1993) also introduced the customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model, which emphasizes the consumer's perspective in brand value creation. The model consists of brand knowledge, awareness, and associations, which influence consumer decision-making (Keller, 2016). Keller's model also applies directly to airlines, as passengers rely on brand cues when choosing an airline (Kim and Sullivan, 2019). Additionally, Chen and Tseng (2010) found that elements of brand equity have major influence on passenger preferences in the Taiwanese airline market, supporting Keller's model. For example, Turkish Airlines strengthen its "Globally Yours" slogan to build strong brand associations with connectivity and premium service (Turkish Airlines, 2025).

Moreover, brand loyalty is critical in airline industry due to frequent travel and loyalty programs (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Research shows that brand loyalty also significantly affects an airline's profitability by increasing customer lifetime value and reducing customer turnover rates (Grewal et al., 2018).

Brand awareness determines whether consumers recognize and recall an airline's name when making travel decisions (Macdonald and Sharp, 2000). Buil et al. (2013) demonstrates that strong advertising efforts improve brand awareness and associations, as seen in global campaigns of THY. Turkish carriers have made significant investment in brand-building efforts, including marketing strategic partnership, to strengthen global recognition and compete effectively in the international market (IATA Economics, 2024). High brand awareness ensures an airline remains a preferred choice in competitive markets (Keller, 2016).

What is more, airlines that consistently meet or exceed customer expectations build strong reputations, leading to higher brand equity (Hapsari et al., 2017). Airlines use brand messaging, service differentiation, and cultural elements to shape brand perceptions (Keller, 1993). For example, Turkish Airlines emphasizes its role as a bridge between Europe and Asia, enhancing its global brand attraction (Turkish Airlines, 2025).

Brand image is also one of the critical and widely studied components for brand equity. Keller (1993) defined brand image as the way that people perceive a brand based on the associations, they have with it. These associations are assessed according to their strength, distinctiveness, and favorability and may be connected to product qualities, user images, usage scenarios, brand personality, or symbolic meanings.

Türkiye's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East has positioned it as a major global aviation hub Istanbul Airport has been playing a key role in this positioning, with Eurocontrol (2024) reporting it as the busiest airport in Europe 2024, operating average 1,401 daily flights. This shows the country's growing importance in global aviation. It also highlights the value branding in such competitive market.

Turkish Airlines, flag carrier of Türkiye, has capitalized on this growth by building a global brand with extensive international routes (Turkish Airlines, 2025). Its brand equity is strengthened by its reputation for premium service, safety, and network coverage (Hapsari et al., 2017). Similarly, Pegasus Airlines has positioned itself as a leading low-cost carrier, leveraging affordability and digital innovation to build brand equity (Kim and Sullivan, 2019).

As competition intensifies, brand equity will continue to be a critical success factor for Turkish aviation industry. The ability to differentiate based on service quality, network coverage, and brand trust will determine long-term market success (Kotler and Keller, 2016).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to evaluate Aaker's brand equity (1991) dimensions which are brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty and Keller's (1993) brand image among airline passengers in Türkiye. The selected population consists of airline passengers from Türkiye who buy

their own tickets, which is an infinite population. The study was carried out with 315 passengers, with a confidence level of 95% and an approximate margin of error of 5.5. Also, an instrumental, analytical, and cross-sectional study was conducted. Firstly, primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire and distributed via google forms. The questionnaire measures airline brand equity using a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932) where 1 represents 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 represents 'Strongly Agree'.

This approach provided a strong statistical basis for validating the research model and evaluating the research model and validating theoretical construct employed.

The data analysis is divided into two stages. Firstly, a confirmatory factor Analysis (CFA) was applied to confirm the theoretical model of brand equity dimensions. CFA was particularly suitable tool because it reduces data complexity and verifies latent constructs statistically confirming predefined theoretical models (Byrne, 2016). Secondly, Pearson's Correlation Analysis was conducted to empirically test the relationships among the variables correspond ding the proposed nine hypotheses. This statistical technique allows researchers to study the relationships between variables and constructs, offering a thorough evaluation of the proposed structural model (Hair et al., 2019).

The primary data for this study was conducted digitally via Google Forms digitally in January of 2024 to provide easy access for participants. To be able to test the reliability of consistency of the applied instruments, the brand equity components were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha (Nunnally & Bernstein (1994), yielding reliable results for each of them. The results showed that there is a strong internal consistency, with an overall value of 0,966 for all theoretical constructs. Table 1. shows the reliability of measures for every element of Brand equity. Also, the data were analyzed via SPSS-27. To verify the model's fit indices, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using AMOS-22.

Table.1 Reliability of Measures

Brand Equity Components	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Loyalty	,847
Perceived Quality	,930
Brand Awareness	,810
Associations	,918
Brand Image	,918
Brand Equity	,966

Source: http://www.jital.org/article

3.1. Research Model and Hypothesis

The conceptual model which follows explains the way five key brand equity dimensions, illustrating their collective influence on consumer perception within the airline industry.

Brand associations and brand loyalty are both effected by perceived quality while brand associations and brand image are thought to be important loyalty mediators. Also, it is expected that passengers' intention to choose the airline in the future would be influenced by brand awareness. Moreover, the moderator effect of income level is studied in the associations between perceived quality and associations in addition to between perceived quality and brand loyalty.

For this research nine hypotheses have been established and listed below:

H1: Passengers with higher brand loyalty are more likely to have a more favorable brand image of the airline.

H2: Passengers who perceive the airline to be of higher quality compared to alternatives are more likely to remain loyal.

H3: Passengers who perceive the airline's services as innovative are more likely to associate the airline with strong and positive brand associations.

H4: Passengers with higher brand awareness are more likely to consider the airline for future flights.

H5: Passengers who perceive the airline as having a distinctive brand personality are more likely to report a favorable brand image.

H6: Passengers who perceive the airline as offering good value for money are more likely to exhibit brand loyalty.

H7: Passengers with a positive brand image of the airline are more likely to remain loyal to it.

H8: Income level has a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived quality and brand loyalty.

H9: Income level has a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived quality and brand differentiation.
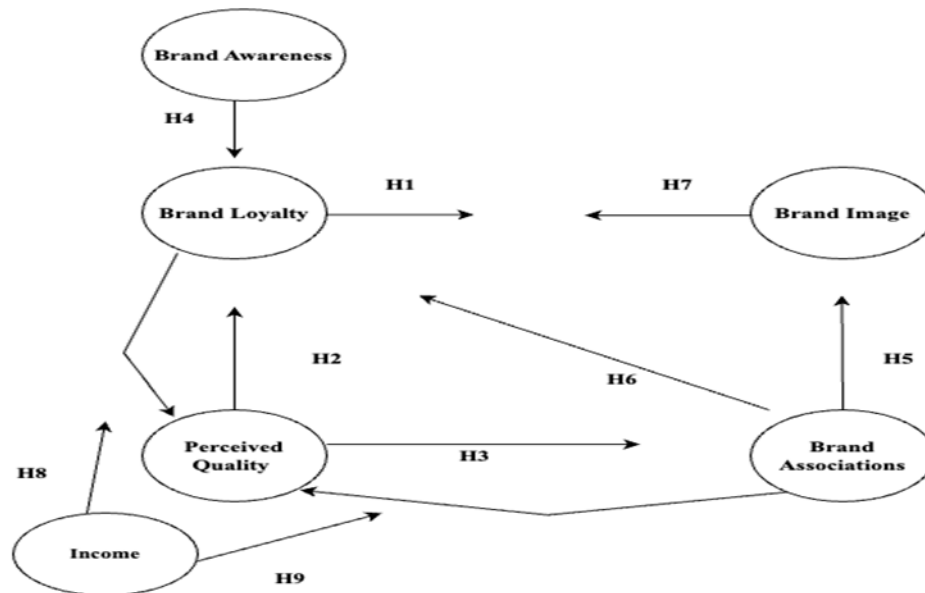

Figure.1. Research Model

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The number of overall participants for this study is 315 who have airline experience from Türkiye's airlines. A total of 192 women (61.0%) and 123 men (39.0%) participated in the study. There were 315 people in the study sample. Of these, 123 were men (39.0%) and 192 were women (61.0%). In addition to the participants, the largest age group was 26–34 years old (n=125, 39.7%), followed by 76 (24.1%) in the 34–44 age group, 58 (18.4%) in the 18–25 age group, 40 (12.7%) in the 45–54 age group, and 16 (5.1%) in the 55+ age group. Regarding education, the majority (n = 175, 55.6%) had a bachelor's degree, whereas 92 (29.2%) had postgraduate degrees, 29 (9.2%) had finished high school, and 19 (6.0%) had only completed primary school. In terms of monthly, personal income, 79 respondents (25.1%) reported earning more than 47,001 TL or more, followed by 67 (21.3%) earning 17,000 TL or less, 62 (19.7%) earning between 17,001–27,000 TL, 55 (17.5%) earning 27,001–37,000 TL, and 52 (16.5%) earning 37,001–47,000 TL. Regarding flight frequency, 107 participants (34.0%) reported flying once a year, 85 (27.0%) flew once every three months, 95 (30.2%) chose "other," and 28 (8.9%) reported flying once-a-month.

4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1. Structural Model Fit

The structural model fit scores indices indicates that the five-dimensional brand equity structure properly corresponds the data, as shown in Table2. At the p =.000 level, the model of structural equations is statistically significant based on the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results. The five latent constructs—brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, and brand image—are meaningfully connected to the 27 observed variables that comprise up the model.

Table.2 Reliability of Measures

Fit Index	Observed Value	Recommended Threshold
χ^2/df	3,003	≤ 5

RMSEA	,080	≤0,1
CFI	,914	≥0,80
IFI	,915	≥0,80
TLI	,902	≥0,80
NFI	,877	≥0,80
GFI	,813	≥0,80
SRMR	,066	≤0,10
χ2: 924,885; df:308; p:0,000		

Source: http://www.jital.org/article

4.2.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In this study, exploratory factor analysis was not conducted because the primary objective of this study is not to examine existing structure of constructs. The main objective is to validate an existing theoretical model of brand equity. On the other hand, Confirmatory Factor Analysis was performed using AMOS 22 to evaluate relationships among the latent constructs. Moreover, CFA was applied to evaluate the construct validity and the overall model fit. When the measurement model has a theoretical conceptual basis and potential variables and the metrics that relate to them have been identified, CFA is especially applicable (Hair et al., 2019).

The brand equity model which is presented in this study is strongly supported by the findings of the CFA. Hair et al. (2019) state that standardized factor loadings should preferably be above 0.70 to achieve convergent validity, while values above 0.50 are still acceptable if they are supported by strong construct reliability in the current investigation.

The reliability and significance of each observed variable in measuring its respective construct is confirmed by the standardized factor loadings for the 27 observed variables, which ranged from 0.473 to 0.948 and were all statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, with corresponding t-values exceeding the critical threshold of 1.96, as shown in Table.3

Table.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Factors	Items	Factor Loadings	Standart Error	t-value	p-value
Brand Loyalty Factor 1	M1	,790			
	M2	,850	,063	16,834	***
	M3	,720	,094	13,620	***
	M4	,584	,063	10,624	***
	M5	,700	,064	13,158	***
Perceived Quality Factor 2	M6	,939			
	M7	,925	,034	30,792	***
	M8	,764	,034	18,799	***
	M9	,903	,037	28,450	***
	M10	,772	,045	17,090	***
Brand Awareness Factor 3	M11	,687			
	M12	,798	,116	12,161	***
	M13	,761	,139	11,722	***
	M14	,657	,124	10,315	***
Associations Factor 4	M15	,779			
	M16	,681	,068	12,752	***
	M17	,843	,069	16,682	***
	M18	,810	,078	15,834	***
	M19	,473	,081	8,500	***
	M20	,676	,067	12,641	***

	M21	,796	,089	15,456	***
	M22	,698	,069	13,165	***
	M23	,727	,073	13,853	***
	M24	,757	,072	14,557	***
Brand Image	M25	,887			
	M26	,948	,042	26,799	***
Factor 5	M27	,842	,043	20,717	***

***p<0.05

4.2.3. Correlation Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

In this study, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test proposed relationships between the five dimensions of brand equity. Pearson correlation is a widely accepted statistical technique for assessing the strength and direction of linear relationships between continuous variables, especially when testing hypotheses involving direct effects (Pallant, 2016).

All hypothesized relationships among brand equity are found to be positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The results showed particularly strong relations between perceived quality and brand loyalty (r = .781), brand associations and brand loyalty (r = .795), and brand image and brand loyalty (r = .774), which confirms the theoretical model (Table.4.).

However, moderation analysis revealed that income level did not have a statistically significant effect on the relationship between perceived quality and either brand loyalty (β = −.176, p = .495) or brand differentiation (β = −.005, p = .983). Thus, while the direct effects in the model are empirically supported, the proposed moderating role of income level was not confirmed, indicating that no significant interaction effect was present in the tested relationships (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2018).

Table.4 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Correlation (r) / β	Significance (p)	Interpretation	Support Status
H1	761	< 0.01	Strong and significant correlation	Supported
H2	781	< 0.01	Strong and significant correlation	Supported
H3	784	< 0.01	Strong and significant correlation	Supported
H4	661	< 0.01	Moderate and significant correlation	Supported
H5	800	< 0.01	Strong correlation	Supported
H6	795	< 0.01	Strong correlation	Supported
H7	774	< 0.01	Strong correlation	Supported
H8	β = −.176	p = .495	No significant moderation effect	Not Supported
H9	β = −.005	p = .983	No significant moderation effect	Not Supported

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the components of brand equity model in the context of Türkiye's airline industry, applying Aaker's (1991) multidimensional framework and addition to Keller's (1993) brand image factor. The results, which are based on Correlation Analysis showed empirical support for the theoretical model and, confirm the important contributions which perceived quality, brand associations, brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty make to the formation of overall brand equity.

Out of the nine proposed hypotheses, seven were statistically supported through correlation analysis, while the two moderation hypotheses were not confirmed, indicating no significant interaction effect of income level.

The results yield that perceived quality has important influence on both brand loyalty and brand associations. This highlights that passengers' assessment of airline service plays a fundamental role in building loyalty and associations. Furthermore, the strong and significant relationship between brand associations and brand image demonstrates the

importance that symbolic, emotional, functional brand features are in generating mental images of the airlines. In the study of Keller (1993), he suggests that positive, strong, and unique associations provide a mental foundation of brand image. The findings correspond with earlier studies that show that behavioral intention and brand commitment deeply influenced by perceived quality (Zeithaml, 1988; Buil et al., 2013).

Additionally, a strong and statistically significant correlation between brand associations and brand image was identified, confirming Keller's (1993) claim that relationships that are powerful, positive, and distinct form mental images that enhance perceptions of the brand as whole. The consumer's internal perception of the airline seems to be influenced by both functional symbolic brand features such as safety or creative service.

Brand image shows two effects: it is directly affected brand equity also, to impact beneficial effect on brand loyalty. This proposes that emotional identification, along with consumers' positive perceptions of the airline's values, service design, and positioning, plays a vital role in increasing overall brand strength. These results underline that handling brand image is not only critical for nurturing loyalty but also for reinforcing the long-term equity of the brand.

Moreover, brand loyalty is strongly influenced by both brand awareness and brand image pointing out that customer retention is positively impacted by both brand image and brand loyalty. Also, the structural model also confirmed that brand loyalty acts as a direct antecedent of brand equity, demonstrating the strategic value of building long-term, trust-based relationships with consumers.

All seven of the nine hypotheses proposed in the model were statistically supported except moderation effects. This research not only supports Aaker's brand equity structure in a service-intensive and culturally specific context such as Türkiye but also provides practical insights into how each brand equity component interacts with others.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that brand equity is a multidimensional construct, composed of several interrelated perceptual dimensions—brand loyalty, brand image, perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand associations. This finding reinforces the theoretical frameworks proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), which argue that brand equity is not a unidimensional outcome but a complex configuration of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral brand-related responses.

Among the brand equity dimensions, brand loyalty emerged as the most influential factor of brand equity. This aligns with prior research suggesting that loyalty is a critical performance indicator in service industries (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), where customer retention, advocacy, and emotional attachment serve as key pillars of long-term value. Brand image and perceived quality followed closely, indicating that both emotional resonance and perceptions of service excellence are central to shaping the overall brand equity structure.

From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest that airline companies seeking to enhance their market position and consumer value perceptions should focus on delivering consistent, high-quality service encounters that foster trust, satisfaction, and emotional engagement. Additionally, cultivating a strong and favorable brand image through symbolic attributes—such as reputation, innovation, and social responsibility—can further amplify the impact of loyalty on equity.

This study also provides valuable practical insights for brand managers by illuminating the psychological and perceptual mechanisms that underlie customer-brand relationships. Understanding how dimensions such as brand awareness and associations contribute to loyalty and image enables firms to strategically allocate marketing resources and design campaigns that target not only cognitive awareness but also emotional differentiation.

On a theoretical level, the findings support the conceptualization of brand equity as a structured and interdependent framework, where each sub-dimension acts as both an antecedent and a mediator. This layered configuration invites future researchers to examine mediating and moderating variables—such as customer satisfaction, price sensitivity, or cultural influences—that may alter the strength or direction of these relationships.

In conclusion, this study contributes to both theory and practice by validating a comprehensive brand equity framework in the context of Türkiye's airline sector. The results affirm that a strategically managed, multi-dimensional approach to brand development is essential for cultivating enduring brand value in increasingly competitive and experience-driven markets.

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