

# **Airline brand management: a practical perspective to brand management in the airline industry.**

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Measuring and managing airline services cannot be easily achieved using the tools developed to measure brands in goods and most other services industries due to some unique characteristics of the airline industry. This paper seeks to explain airline branding, brand management, and brand measurement from the perspective of airline marketing professionals. The aim is to identify customer-based brand equity (CBBE) measures appropriate to the unique nature of the airline industry. Furthermore, we explore the dimensions that drive brand equity in the airline industry. The paper uses semi-structured expert interviews to collect data from senior marketing executives working for both full-service and low-cost carriers, in addition to airline branding/marketing consultants. The findings reveal the factors that drive airline customer-based brand equity (CBBE) as awareness, functional and technical service performance, credibility, differentiation, value, satisfaction, and loyalty. The research encapsulates the basic dimensions of brand equity advocated in the branding literature but also some measures which are new to the airline branding literature (functional and technical service performance, and credibility). These measures are critical for airline managers as they attempt to build equity in their respective brands. Therefore, this research offers researchers and practitioners a better understanding of brand equity measurement and of brand equity formation for airlines.

**Key words:** Airline, Brand, Customer, Brand Equity

## **1. Introduction**

### **Differentiating the airline industry from other service sectors**

The competitive environment in the airline industry has been reshaped, particularly as markets have liberalised and new-entrant low price competitors direct their customers' focus principally towards pricing (O'Connell and Williams, 2005), which in turn can lead to commoditisation in the market. To counter commoditisation and pure price competition, airlines that cannot achieve the seat-cost base of the lowest cost competitors in their markets (especially LCC new-entrants) need to build strong brands to compete and survive.

1 The services marketing literature indicates the importance of branding as customers require  
2 a high level of trust in their preferred supplier of an intangible purchase. Berry (2000) argues  
3 that strong service brands enable customers to visualise and to discover intangible products  
4 more easily and thereby minimise perceived monetary, social, and safety risks prevalent in  
5 service purchases. For companies, a strong brand secures future demand with loyal  
6 consumers and is able to augment revenue since the brands may be the indicator of a  
7 substantial level of quality (Keller, 2013).  
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15 However, creating strong brands in the airline industry is especially challenging. Indeed, Keller  
16 (2001) and Shaw (2011) identify the airline sector as an industry where most companies  
17 struggle to create strong brands. Brands in the airline industry struggle to generate positive  
18 customer responses, and deep and active loyalty. Keller (2001) sees the underlying reason for  
19 this in the airlines' inadequate creation of strong, favourable, and unique brand associations,  
20 whilst Shaw (2011) sees the commoditised nature of the airline product as a major issue.  
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28 There are several reasons which make the creation of a strong brand more challenging in the  
29 airline industry. These reasons lie both in industry-specific factors (e.g. customer focus on  
30 schedule and network delivery, common aircraft types between competitors, small localised  
31 regional markets, etc) and in service sector challenges that are common to many other service  
32 industries (Riwo-Abudho, Njanja, and Ochieng, 2013).  
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38 With regards to industry-specific factors, brand differentiation is rather challenging for  
39 airlines, particularly in competitive markets, with virtually identical aircraft and similar  
40 airports (Driver, 1999). Herein lies one of the major differences to other service sectors. For  
41 example, in the hotel industry, extensive hotel brand segmentation can be witnessed over  
42 the last few decades. Hotel chains offer a range of hotel brands that target different market  
43 segments using significantly visually and structurally customised hotel buildings and grounds  
44 (O'Neill and Mattila, 2010). Hotels can differentiate themselves based on design, size, services  
45 provided or location (Jones, Day, and Quadri-Felitti, 2013; Lee, 2015). For airlines, the choice  
46 of aircraft type is highly limited, with perhaps only two principal choices in most mission  
47 ranges with interior products choice further limited by safety regulations that determine  
48 much of the layout of the aircraft, and a limited number of suppliers.  
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1 As a result, a commodity situation can be seen in the industry, where competing products  
2 show a high degree of uniformity (Laming and Mason, 2014; Shaw, 2011). To compete with  
3 low-cost entrants, network airlines have found new revenue sources by unbundling the flight  
4 experience, which in turn has hindered the delivery of a passenger experience unique to a  
5 specific product type, which in turn has undermined the ability of customers to attach  
6 perceived value to that brand (Aaker, 2014).  
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12 Furthermore, the complexity of the airline business creates significant product delivery  
13 consistency problems. The multi-locational nature of the industry often requires airlines to  
14 outsource their services (i.e., ground handling) which in turn makes the consistent delivery of  
15 promises made about services very hard.  
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21 A customer's experience with an airline could be anywhere from two to 24 hours and  
22 passengers potentially may face disruptions related to external factors where airlines have  
23 little control. During a passenger's journey, they will encounter many touchpoints where their  
24 airline has many opportunities either to satisfy or disappoint them (Ambrose and  
25 Waguespack, 2021; Nigam, 2016). Clearly, the air transport industry has dynamics that are  
26 different from other service sectors such as hotels, tourism, and banking.  
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### 33 **Introducing brand equity concept**

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36 Measuring business performance takes a central role for any company. Although financial  
37 indicators are predominantly used to measure a firm's well-being and evaluating firm's  
38 health, they are generally insufficient to explain cause or effect and they may be deceptive if  
39 they are used alone (Ambler, 2003).  
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45 Marketing metrics, in particular, are very helpful for managers in terms of assessing a firm's  
46 worth and competitive strengths in innovation and branding and whether the company  
47 achieves sustainable growth through its customer-oriented strategies (Ambler, 2003).  
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51 Amongst various marketing metrics, brand equity is one of the most popular and potentially  
52 significant marketing concepts (Keller, 2013). The concept of brand equity may play a  
53 marshalling role in the development of an airline's brand since it enables researchers and  
54 marketers to evaluate and interpret brand failures (Keller, 2001). Based on a fundamental  
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1 management perspective, it is necessary to measure something to manage it (Rust et al.,  
2 2004; Aaker, 1996). However, brand managers have strived to find the correct approach to  
3 measure brand equity (Rust et al., 2004). Although the concept of brand equity has been  
4 examined substantially, the literature is generally fragmented and inconclusive (de  
5 Chernatony, Harris, and Christodoulides, 2004). The reason for this may originate from the  
6 divergence of academic views regarding the measurement of brand equity since there is little  
7 agreement on the concept of brand equity and its establishing dimensions (Christodoulides &  
8 de Chernatony, 2010; Veloutsou, Christodoulides, & de Chernatony, 2013).

16 Most of the effort in the development of brand equity and its establishing dimensions focused  
17 on physical goods, and consequently some literature questions the applicability of brand  
18 equity to services industries (e.g. Berry, 2000; Grace and O’Cass, 2005). However, due to the  
19 unique and diverging characteristics of different industries, industry-specific brand equity  
20 measures have been developed, even within the service sectors, such as for tourist  
21 destinations (e.g. Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Tasci, 2018) and the hospitality and restaurant  
22 industries (Nam et al., 2011; Hsu, Oh, & Assaf, 2012). This gives a strong indication, that more  
23 industry-specific brand equity scales are appropriate and necessary, and that general scales  
24 or even service-sector-specific measures may not be sufficient to cope with the unique  
25 characteristics of the air transport industry.

36 Although there are a few attempts to measure airline brand equity (e.g. Chen and Tseng,  
37 2010), they are not really focused on the identification of airline-specific measures as they  
38 mostly follow a deductive approach to test the overall concept of Aaker’s (1991) framework  
39 or uses measures developed for different industries. Given the unique nature of the airline  
40 industry, it would seem that there is a lack of research that identifies airline-specific customer-  
41 based brand equity dimensions and specifies driving factors of airline brands.

48 To address this research gap, this study aims to identify the underlying factors driving airline  
49 brands and to establish effective airline-specific customer-based brand equity measures.

53 Based on the aim, two research objectives were identified, namely:

- 54 • To identify the sources of industry-specific equity of strong airline brands, and

- To develop a framework of components of industry-specific customer-based brand equity that can be used to assess airline brand performance.

This research uses a qualitative approach, using semi-structured expert interviews with airline marketing and branding executives. It contributes to airline brand equity research and customer behaviour research in several ways. It is the first attempt from, a practical point of view, to understand the generation and measurement of airline brand equity. It can lead to a better understanding of airline customer behaviour and enables accurate diagnostic information for marketing managers to monitor and audit the performance and health of their brand by incorporating relevant measures.

This paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and provides the theoretical background of the study. Section 3 details the research methodology. In sections 4 and 5 interview results will be analysed, and the findings will be discussed. Section 6 provides the conclusions and academic and practical implications as well as identifies limitations and future research suggestions.

## **2. Literature review and theoretical background**

Although brand equity is a long-debated concept, no consensus has been reached on its meaning and context, nor its measurement in the literature (Christodoulides & Chernatony, 2009; Keller, 2013; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005). Various definitions of brand equity have been suggested. For example, Aaker (1991, p.27) defines brand equity as *“a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers.”* Simon and Sullivan (1993, p.29) define brand equity as *“the incremental cash flows which accrue to branded products over and above the cash flow which would result from the sale of unbranded products.”* Keller (1993, p.69) defines brand equity *“as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand.”* Definitions of brand equity vary among authors while some of them focus on brand equity from the company or financial-aspect, others emphasize customer-aspect or both. However, it is clear that brands add value both to the customer and to the firm. Therefore, Farquhar (1989 p. 24) defines brand equity as – *“added value endowed to a product by a brand”* and argues that a brand can deliver

1 added value to the company, to the trade, and to the consumer when considered from  
2 different perspectives.  
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5 According to Keller & Lehman (2006), there are three distinct approaches to measure brand  
6 equity: at the customer level, at the product-market level; and at the financial market level.  
7 Marketing research regarding brand equity has mainly focused on the customer-oriented  
8 aspect and the customer-based paradigm propounds an understanding of customer  
9 behaviours (Keller, 1993) and tries to quantify current thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of  
10 actual and potential customers. Therefore, these thoughts, feelings, and behaviours will  
11 affect what customers will think and feel and therefore buy in the future (Ambler, 2003).  
12 Understanding customer behaviour is of practical relevance because the information gained  
13 offers a vision of customer behaviour that can be used for the development and instigation  
14 of branding strategies (Keller, 1993; Kim, Jin-Sun, & Kim, 2008).  
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25 Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) conceptualisations of customer-based brand equity (CBBE)  
26 have dominated the literature. Although they did not operationalise a valid scale  
27 (Christodoulides and Chernatony, 2009), both authors provided a set of measures that could  
28 apply to various contexts. However, most of the scale development studies have focused on  
29 the overall conceptualisation of Aaker's (1991) framework (awareness, perceived quality,  
30 brand image/associations, and loyalty) (e.g. Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Washburn and Plank,  
31 2002; Chen and Tseng, 2010) without considering other potential measures suggested in the  
32 Aaker's (1996) "Brand Equity Ten" or Keller's (2001) "Brand Equity Pyramid" both of which  
33 provide various measures. There are also other conceptualisations available in the literature  
34 suggesting different measures (e.g. Hsu, Oh, and Assaf, 2012; Lassar et al., 1995; Nam et al.,  
35 2011; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Tasci, 2018; Vázquez, del Río and Iglesias, 2002). Market  
36 research companies, e.g., Young & Rubicam's "Brand Asset Valuator" (BAV), Millward Brown's  
37 "Brand Dynamics", and Interbrand offer various dimensions to measure brand equity.  
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51 The increasing importance of services industries has led to research focused on the branding  
52 of services, in part, due to the lack of applicability of product brand equity models to services.  
53 The universal models that have been attempted to be applied to various products (Yoo and  
54 Donthu, 2001) are found less practical in terms of providing a deep understanding of a  
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1 particular industry or category (Anselmsson, Johansson, and Persson, 2007). It is also argued  
2 that although the concept of the brand is universally accepted, it is necessary to make  
3 adjustments based on the specific context applied (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Aaker,  
4 1996). In this sense, various attempts have been put forth to develop industry-specific scales  
5 to measure brand equity in sectors such as financial services (de Chernatony, Harris, and  
6 Christodoulides, 2004), online brands (Christodoulides et al., 2006), tourism destinations  
7 (Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Dedeoğlu et al., 2018), business-to-business (B2B) (Jensen and  
8 Klasttrup, 2008), hotels and restaurants (Nam et al., 2011; Hsu, Oh, & Assaf, 2012; Tasci, 2018),  
9 and grocery products (Anselmsson et al., 2007).

### 18 **Empirical and conceptual studies in the airline industry**

21 Research on airline brand equity is limited despite the increasing importance of branding in  
22 the airline industry. One of the first attempts to measure airline customer-based brand equity  
23 (CBBE) was conducted by Chen & Tseng (2010). The study used Aaker's (1991)  
24 conceptualisation consisting of brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand  
25 image/associations. The authors examined the causal relationship among the dimensions in  
26 the Cognitive-Affective-Conative approach in line with Konecnik & Gartner's (2007) work. In  
27 addition to the four dimensions of the conceptualisation, the authors used the overall brand  
28 equity concept which was proposed by Yoo & Donthu (2001). Although this research is a  
29 significant attempt to measure airline brand equity, the dimensions of scale were only derived  
30 from Aaker's initial conceptualisation and did not consider any other potential measures that  
31 may be relevant to airlines, such as Aaker's (1996) "Brand Equity Ten" and Keller's (2001)  
32 "Brand Pyramid."

33 Another study that also builds on a previously developed scale is by Uslu, Durmuş, & Kolivar,  
34 (2013) who conducted empirical research to identify whether there was a difference in the  
35 brand equity assessments of Turkish and Japanese customers by taking Turkish Airlines as a  
36 case study. In this research, CBBE included three dimensions in line with Yoo & Donthu,  
37 (2001): brand loyalty, brand awareness/ associations, and perceived quality. However, the  
38 three-factor brand equity scale introduced by Yoo & Donthu, (2001) has been criticised since  
39 it combines brand awareness and associations into one dimension although they are  
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1 theoretically two different constructs of brand equity (Christodoulides and Chernatony,  
2 2009).  
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5 Both, Chen & Tseng's (2010) and Uslu et al.'s, (2013) studies looked at applying and adapting  
6 previously developed CBBE scales to the airline industry. However, by using these  
7 predetermined scales, they are not able to fully incorporate and develop an industry-specific  
8 scale for the airline industry but are restricted by more generic approaches.  
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11 From an information economics perspective to customer-based brand equity, two studies  
12 examined airline brand credibility. Jeng (2016) investigated the relationship between brand  
13 credibility and its influence on decision convenience, affective commitment, and purchase  
14 intention. Wang, Kao, & Ngamsiriudom (2017) examined how celebrity endorsement affects  
15 brand credibility, brand attitude, and purchase intention. However, their approach only  
16 considers brand credibility as a fundamental source of CBBE.  
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19 The limitations of existing models used for the airline industry have also been identified by  
20 Sarker, Mohd-any, & Kamarulzaman (2019) and Thakshak (2018). Thakshak (2018)  
21 investigated the relationship between airline brand equity (suggested an airline brand equity  
22 model under five-dimension: flight service quality, brand affect, self-congruence, brand  
23 awareness, and brand association) and brand reputation and brand trust. They found that  
24 flight service quality, brand affect, awareness, and associations have a positive impact on  
25 reputation, and awareness and reputation have a positive impact on brand trust. Sarker et al.  
26 (2019) suggest a conceptual customer-based brand equity scale for airlines. They argue that  
27 the extant brand equity models are not quite adaptable to the airline industry. They  
28 conducted a systematic review of the literature and suggested a conceptual model called  
29 "Consumer-based Service Brand Equity". In this model, both the company perspective and  
30 consumer perspective are included. The authors argue that direct service experience and  
31 brand consistency create brand equity and that they directly affect brand equity components  
32 (brand awareness, brand meaning, and perceived value). Therefore, brand equity  
33 components directly influence service brand equity which is an overall behavioural outcome.  
34 Their conceptual model is mostly derived from Berry's (2000) service branding model which  
35 includes both company and consumer perspectives. In a follow-up study, Sarker et al., (2021)  
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1 also empirically tested their conceptual model. It is unclear why some of the components of  
2 Berry's model were excluded in the study and new dimensions included and why not other  
3 dimensions suggested by Aaker (1991, 1996) and Keller (1993, 2001) were not considered for  
4 the model.  
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9 All these studies are important and contribute to airline brand equity literature. However, the  
10 conceptualisations of these studies are partially based on generic frameworks of brand equity  
11 (e.g., Aaker (1991); Keller (1993)). In all these previous applications in the airline sector, the  
12 proposed models were either adopted or modified. It is also arguable the suggested  
13 conceptualisation efforts of airline CBBE were taken place effectively and having a concrete  
14 rationale and also considers all relevant factors related to airline CBBE.  
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21 Besides empirical and conceptual studies, the antecedents and consequences of CBBE were  
22 investigated. These studies examined the relationship between CBBE and some of the  
23 antecedent factors such as social media activities, marketing strategies, and crisis  
24 management or consequences of CBBE such as brand trust, brand satisfaction, and customer  
25 response. Table 1 shows how external factors affect the generation of CBBE of airlines.  
26 However, these studies are again based on current CBBE models to measure the brand equity  
27 of airlines. They have been adopted from the measures developed for other sectors or generic  
28 measurement scales. Furthermore, their purpose often was not to develop a CBBE scale but  
29 rather to identify relationships between CBBE and external factors. The empirical examination  
30 of brand equity and external factors is important in terms of understanding what has an  
31 impact on brand equity, and as a result what brand equity affect. However, despite the  
32 importance, to examine these relationships effectively, the CBBE of airlines needs to be  
33 measured using a framework appropriate to their practical need. While the available generic  
34 or industry-specific models from related industries (e.g., hospitality-specific measures) may  
35 provide a certain level of understanding of airline brand equity, they are not able to take into  
36 account the aforementioned industry-specific characteristics of airlines.  
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53 As a result of the lack of airline-specific CBBE models, previous research into airline brand  
54 equity has used divergent and inconsistent CBBE models and frameworks, as shown in Table  
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3 **Table 1: A summary of studies related measuring to airline brand equity**

Authors	Dimensions used to measure CBBE	Base conceptualisation
Chen & Tseng (2010)	brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand image/associations.	Aaker (1991)
Uslu, Durmuş, & Kolivar (2013)	brand loyalty, brand awareness/ associations, and perceived quality	Aaker (1991) and Yoo & Donthu, (2001)
Jeng (2016)	credibility, brand credibility, brand attitude, and purchase intention	Erdem & Swait, (1998)
Wang, Kao, & Ngamsiriudom (2017)	brand credibility, brand attitude, and purchase intention	Erdem & Swait, (1998)
Thakshak (2018)	Flight service quality, brand affect, self-congruence, brand awareness, and brand association	N/A
Sarker et al., (2019)	direct service experience, brand consistency brand awareness, brand meaning, and perceived value	Berry (2000)
Sarker et al., (2021)	airline service direct experience, brand consistency, brand awareness, brand meaning, and perceived value	Berry (2000)
<b>Antecedents and consequences of CBBE</b>		
Chen & Chang (2008)	brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations	Aaker (1991)
Grundy & Moxon (2013)	perceived quality, value, satisfaction, corporate reputation, recommendation, and general impression of the brand	YouGov "BrandIndex"
Lin (2015)	physical service quality, staff behaviour service quality, ideal self-congruence, brand identification, and lifestyle congruence	Nam, Ekinci, & Whyatt's (2011)
Lin & Ryan (2016)	physical service quality, staff behaviour service quality, ideal self-congruence, brand identification, and lifestyle congruence	Nam, Ekinci, & Whyatt's (2011)
Seo & Park (2018)	brand awareness and brand image	Keller (1993)
Santos de Oliveira & Caetano (2019)	brand awareness with associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty	Aaker (1991) and Yoo & Donthu, (2001)
Huang and Liu (2020)	awareness, perceived quality, image, and loyalty	Chen & Tseng (2010)

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42 Fourteen relevant airline-related CBBE studies have been identified (Table 1), however, the  
43 approaches to measure airline brand equity both with regards to the dimension level and the  
44 item level were heterogenous and show little commonality. Therefore, these divergent  
45 approaches make it difficult to build and develop airline brand equity theory. The  
46 conceptualisations and dimensions of CBBE differ among the researchers and no consensus  
47 has been reached in the literature.

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49 This is similar to the generic brand equity literature. CBBE is a well-examined topic. According  
50 to Tasci (2018), over 25 different measures related to CBBE are suggested and these  
51 dimensions are measured on between one to 22 scale items. Combining all these dimensions  
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1 into one study is not feasible. Therefore, establishing relevant measures or dimensions of  
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3 CBBE for airlines requires further studies as there are various (over 25) generic measures  
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5 suggested. Including all these measures into an airline context is not feasible, practical, and  
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7 given the characteristics of the airline industry, likely to be not necessary.  
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10 To develop better measures of marketing constructs, conducting exploratory research is  
11 suggested by Churchill (1979). Shaw (2007, 2011) also criticises the usage of branding  
12 concepts developed for other sectors that were expected to add value to airlines. This is in  
13 line with Aaker's (1996) recommendation on the necessity of adjustment of the CBBE  
14 measures to a specific industry — the airline industry has distinctive characteristics and,  
15 therefore, requires bespoke relevant measures for the sector. Despite recent research into  
16 airline brand equity, which highlights the relevance, importance, and indeed timeliness of this  
17 topic and the need for developing airline-specific CBBE measures, so far robust, and  
18 empirically and theoretically well-founded CBBE measures for the airline industry have not  
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30 Previously, prominent studies have used expert interviews (e.g. de Chernatony et al., 2004;  
31 de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998, 1999; Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2004;  
32 Bailey and Ball, 2006; Veloutsou et al., 2013), or consumer focus groups (e.g. Hsu et al., 2012)  
33 to identify industry-specific measures to assess brand performance. Consequently, this study  
34 also utilises expert interviews and the literature to identify fundamental driving measures of  
35 airline CBBE.  
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### 42 **3. Methodology**

#### 43 **Data collection and sampling**

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45 Considering Churchill's (1979) recommendation for conducting exploratory research (e.g.  
46 literature review, insights from experienced people, focus groups) for developing better  
47 measures of marketing constructs, this research uses semi-structured expert interviews with  
48 airline brand and marketing executives as well as airline marketing consultants. Non-  
49 probability purposive sampling was adopted, and data analyses were made concurrently  
50 while data collecting was in process. This process was finalised when no new information was  
51 received, and thus data saturation was reached (Saunders et al., 2009). During the process, a  
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saturation point was established after 11 interviews. To ensure saturation had been reached, two further interviews were conducted, however, no additional concepts, themes or codes emerged. A total of 24 airline marketing executives and consultants from different airlines and regions were approached to reach 13 interviews. The sample size of 13 interviewees is in line with research in branding, e.g. Veloutsou et al., (2013): 15 respondents; Bailey and Ball (2006): 11 respondents; Zavattaro, Daspit, and Adams (2015): 12 respondents and air transport management (e.g. Lamb et al. (2021): 15 respondents; Schmalz, Paul, and Gissibl (2021): 11 respondents; Efthymiou et al. (2021) 9 respondents, as well as theoretically underpinned. For example, Baker et al. (2012) and Bazeley (2013) discuss that for homogenous groups (as in this particular research of marketing and branding experts in the airline industry), a sample of 12 interviewees will be sufficient.

**Table 2: Sample profile for expert interviews**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Employer</b>	<b>Airline Experience</b>	<b>Region</b>
<b>R1</b>	Marketing Consultant	Consultant	30 Years	North America
<b>R2</b>	Marketing Manager	Airline	5 Years	South America
<b>R3</b>	Marketing Director	Airline	5 Years	Europe
<b>R4</b>	Academic & Consultant	Consultant	18 Years	North America
<b>R5</b>	Marketing SVP	Airline	6 Years	North America
<b>R6</b>	Head of Marketing	Airline	10 Years	Asia
<b>R7</b>	Consultant/CEO	Consultant	10 Years	North America
<b>R8</b>	Marketing Director	Airline	2 Years	Europe
<b>R9</b>	Chief Customer Officer	Airline	20 Years	Europe
<b>R10</b>	Customer Experience Manager	Airline	4 Years	Asia
<b>R11</b>	Marketing SVP	Airline	10 Years	Asia
<b>R12</b>	Customer Experience Manager	Airline	3 Years	Europe
<b>R13</b>	Customer Research Manager	Airline	8 Years	Asia

Airlines having an international brand presence, and consultants dealing with various airlines all around the world as part of their job were approached for an interview. The sample (Table 2) was selected to cover a highly experienced group of airline industry experts from major air transport markets in Asia, Europe, and North America to explore the phenomenon of airline CBBE in depth. Airline industry experts from both low-cost airlines (4) and full-service network carriers (6) as well as, airline marketing consultants with an academic background were

1 interviewed (3) to ensure that a wide range of perspectives would be incorporated into the  
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3 research.

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5 Interviewees were approached by e-mail and face-to-face and telephone interviews were  
6  
7 conducted due to geographic dispersion, time-cost constraints, and to facilitate interviewees'  
8  
9 participation since interviews were conducted with executive-level respondents. The average  
10  
11 and median industry experience of the interviewees is ten years.  
12

### 13 14 15 **Study design**

16  
17 Interview questions and probes were either adopted from previous research (e.g. de  
18  
19 Chernatony et al., 1998; Veloutsou et al., 2013) or were shaped during the initial interviews  
20  
21 as is seen in Table 3. In addition to the main interview questions, various probes were directed  
22  
23 at the respondents. The interviews were carried out over five months. All interviews were  
24  
25 recorded along with supplementary notes and lasted between 30 to 80 minutes.  
26

27  
28 **Table 3: Specific research objectives (headings) and key interview questions**

29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38	<b>To identify the sources of industry-specific equity of strong airline brands.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What do brand and brand equity mean to you and your airline?</li><li>• Can you tell me which airline you see as successful in terms of branding and why do you think they are successful?</li><li>• What are the characteristics of strong airline brands, and why?</li><li>• What are the challenges encountered in brand management and building? How have you managed these challenges?</li></ul>
39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46	<b>To develop a framework of components of industry-specific customer-based brand equity that can be used to assess airline brand performance.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do you evaluate the performance of your brand?</li><li>• What are the specific KPIs you use?</li><li>• What unique measures do you use for different cultures, locations, and segments?</li><li>• How do you consider the performance of competing brands?</li></ul>

### 47 48 49 **Data analysis**

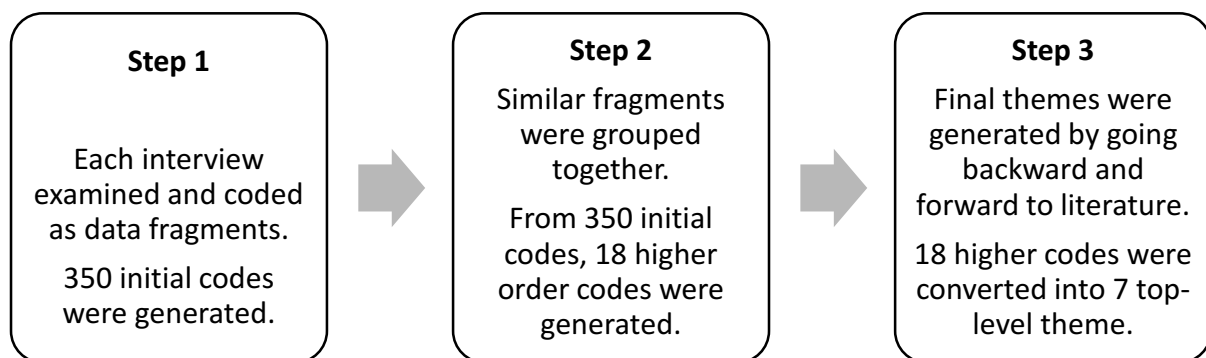
50  
51 Twelve interviews were conducted in English and one interview in Turkish. All interviews were  
52  
53 first transcribed and translated from audio recordings immediately after the interviews were  
54  
55 carried out. The data was pre-processed for further analysis with Nvivo 12, a qualitative data  
56  
57 analysis software.  
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1 The template analysis technique was adopted for data analysis which is a method of thematic  
2 analysis. It provides some degree of structure as well as flexibility in the process of analysing  
3 textual data to adapt it to a specific study (King, 2012). Template analysis is essentially a list  
4 of codes or categories representing the themes that emerge from the data. Deductive and  
5 inductive approaches are combined in the template analysis in which the codes can be pre-  
6 identified and then edited or can be included while data are collected or analysed (Saunders  
7 et al., 2009).

15 The hierarchical organisation of codes is the key aspect of template analysis in which groups  
16 of similar codes are clustered to create coherent higher-order codes. One of the advantages  
17 of hierarchical coding is that it allows analysing a text at different levels.

21 This research employed both an inductive approach to explore emerging themes from the  
22 data and theory-driven (top-down) approaches to identify the themes, categories, and  
23 concepts in the data. The data analysis was performed in three coding levels which in turn  
24 created a hierarchical organisation of the codes. Over 38,000 words were transcribed from  
25 13 interviews. In the initial step, over 350 initial data fragments (e.g., words, lines, and  
26 segments) were generated from transcripts.

34 **Figure 1: Data coding process**



53 In the second step, codes generated in the initial phase are integrated and synthesised, and  
54 associated under a core category (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg et al.,  
55 2013). Conceptually similar fragments are grouped to generate categories and underlying and  
56

1 related sub-categories (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) and were analysed through constant  
2 comparison of one interview with another (Charmaz, 2006) which resulted in 18 codes.  
3

4  
5 The top-level theme was used to identify possible relationships between categories that  
6 developed in the second step. The aim of these codes is both to conceptualise the relationship  
7 between second-level codes (Step 2) and to move the analytical story forward to a theoretical  
8 conceptualisation (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg et al., 2013; Bryman, 2016). Top-level codes  
9 were generated by reviewing the literature and the data until they met a common ground or  
10 shared understanding between the data and the theory.  
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### 18 **Reliability**

19 The reliability of codes can be established through inter-rater reliability which is a measure of  
20 to what extent different evaluators allocate a similar score to similar variables and it seeks to  
21 understand if the data collected in research really represents the variables. Although there  
22 are different variants of testing inter-rater reliability, the most conventional one is percentage  
23 agreement (McHugh, 2012).  
24  
25  
26  
27  
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30

31 In this research, two interview transcripts were given to two independent evaluators for  
32 coding. Both evaluators independently examined the transcripts and allocated codes. The  
33 initial codes revealing from two transcripts were compared and initially, 76% of the  
34 agreement was established. Any discrepancies were discussed, and the final themes were  
35 decided.  
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## 42 **4. Analysis**

43 The interviews were examined to identify the dimensions of airline customer-based brand  
44 equity (ACBBE). The interview transcripts were analysed in three steps as explained in the  
45 methodology. The final categorisation of the themes was reached through continual  
46 comparison of the data with the existing models and theories.  
47  
48  
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53 As a result of this systematic analysis, seven different dimensions related to ACBBE were  
54 found namely (Table 4): awareness, functional and technical service performance, credibility,  
55 differentiation, value, satisfaction, and loyalty measures. For most of these dimensions, two  
56 or more sub-categories were identified in the analysis. These sub-categories provide greater  
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insight into the construct of each dimension and show elements within the conceptualisation of the dimension. Table 4 highlights the frequency of how often these dimensions were addressed by the interviewees in the interviews.

**Table 4: Dimensions of airline CBBE**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Awareness</b>	Top-of-Mind Awareness (TOMA)	3
	Brand awareness	29
<b>Functional and Technical Service Performance</b>	Service delivery by employees	45
	Physical service attributes	52
	Overall service experience	27
<b>Credibility</b>	Consistency (image and service)	38
	Clear brand proposition	24
	Keeping brand promise and expectations	15
	Credibility	2
<b>Differentiation</b>	Trust	5
	Brand differentiation	35
	Brand personality and employee differentiation (friendly, innovative, fun)	13
	Place and product differentiation	13
<b>Value</b>	Value	11
<b>Satisfaction</b>	Satisfaction	18
<b>Loyalty</b>	Willingness to recommend	39
	Willingness to purchase	9
	Willingness to pay a price premium	12

The dimensions found in this study may enable executives and researchers to understand brand equity more comprehensively in turn enables airline executives to set strategic branding decisions.

### **Awareness**

Awareness is one of the main dimensions of brand equity used in the literature (Veloutsou et al., 2013) and is also revealed from the interview results. The concept was mentioned 32 times in the interviews and two sub-categories were identified. Most respondents used the term awareness to mainly mean “brand awareness” (29 mentions), whilst there were three mentions of “top-of-mind awareness”.

Brand awareness is taken to mean customers are aware of the brand in the market. This might be evaluated by asking customers if they can name a brand that has a certain tagline (e.g.,

1 “Fly the friendly skies”, or “To fly, to serve”) or identify the airline from its logo with any  
2 identifying mark removed (e.g., the Qantas tailfin which is red with a white kangaroo,  
3 Ryanair’s tailfin is a yellow harp on a blue background).

4  
5  
6  
7 Airline brand awareness is seen as an important dimension of brand equity and is monitored  
8 closely by executives as stated;

9  
10  
11  
12 *“these awareness scores are also closely monitored at the region level to understand where the problem*  
13 *is” (R12).*

14  
15  
16 Airlines particularly use brand awareness in emerging markets or the markets they intend to  
17 penetrate as stated below;

18  
19  
20 *“We do from time to time research, particularly in some of the emerging markets [of] our brand. That is*  
21 *how I understood to look at how we are tracking towards building brand equity. Those are [...]*  
22 *awareness, consideration, and willingness to try the product kind of survey questions.” (R5)*

23  
24  
25  
26 The competition is high in the airline industry and consumers have many choices thus it is  
27 seen as one of the biggest challenges for airlines to build awareness as quoted by respondent  
28 9;

29  
30  
31  
32 *“One of the challenges is the international nature of airlines [which] means you have built awareness in*  
33 *many places at the same time with a very tangible but very short-lived product. (short-lived refers to the*  
34 *amount of time that the customer spent with the airline during his/her flight). You have huge amounts*  
35 *of competition and consumer choice, you have the changing consumer behaviour, [and these] threaten*  
36 *the airline’s brand for both today’s management and for the long-term strategic development of the*  
37 *brand” (R9)*

38  
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40  
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42  
43 Creating airline brand awareness is useful for airlines to enable customers to include the  
44 airline into their consideration set especially in the markets where customers do not perceive  
45 significant differences among competitive offerings as stated by respondent 10;

46  
47  
48  
49 *“I think branding for me, in general, is really about identification [i.e. recognition of the brand] to start*  
50 *with. But I think in terms of the airline, it is more important because we have seen that the airline*  
51 *industry and the products that airline offered has become somewhat commoditised.” (R10)*

52  
53  
54  
55 Top-of-mind awareness (TOMA) is an unprompted measure of awareness. For example, a  
56 survey may be conducted in a market and respondents are asked to name as many airlines  
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1 serving the market as they can remember. If an airline is named, it has “top-of-mind”  
2 awareness.  
3

4  
5 *"We have TOMA, top-of-mind (awareness) and brand awareness. ... The most important one is top-of-*  
6 *mind." (R2)*  
7

8  
9 TOMA, as it is unprompted, indicates the strength of the brand in the market.  
10

## 11 **Functional and Technical Performance**

12  
13 Another significant measure revealed from the results is service performance including  
14 functional and technical performance. 128 mentions of the functional and technical  
15 performance of the airline service were expressed in three sub-categories: physical service  
16 attributes (52), service delivery by employees (45), and overall customer experience (27).  
17  
18

19  
20 There are a large number of discussion points about the physical and technical elements of  
21 the service such as seats, cabin décor, inflight entertainment systems, on-time performance,  
22 and the like, but with most quotes, as seen below, these are often discussed simultaneously  
23 with the cabin and on-ground service delivered by employees.  
24  
25

26  
27 *"Of course, the most important thing is the service the carrier provides. I don't mean just service in*  
28 *flight, the cabin crew service but also on the ground (...) so the overall experience for service, everything*  
29 *else in terms of the product, the quality of materials. Everything goes into how people perceive the brand*  
30 *and the product." (R13)*  
31

32  
33 The role of employees is important in driving brand equity as discussed by Respondents 1, 2,  
34 and 5;  
35

36  
37 *"I think it is a certain degree of collaboration with frontline employees to make sure that's delivered. It*  
38 *is also frontline employees' excellent initial training and periodically recurrent training service delivery.*  
39 *Of course, beyond that aspect, there is a hard product aspect prominently on board, you know,*  
40 *comfortable seats and these kinds of things. I have really been defining brand really close to the human*  
41 *aspect or people aspect." (R1)*  
42

43  
44 *"I think branding starts from customer service, excellence in customer service is the factor building*  
45 *brand. All that I mention except for Spirit, they are really focused on experience and customer service.*  
46 *And that what the brand is all about." (R2)*  
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1                    *"[it is] very difficult to find airlines that build strong brand equity without engaged employees, who*  
2                    *deliver brand promise, even if they have beautiful branding and great hard product. I think the most*  
3                    *important thing is having frontline staff who are engaged and believed in the brand."* **(R5)**  
4

5  
6 Overall customer experience is the aggregation of what customers think and feel about the  
7 brand and how this leads to behavioural responses such as re-purchase intention. Airlines'  
8 approach to the measurement of service performance is generally the measurement of  
9 service attributes related to functional and technical performance attributes rather than  
10 measuring overall perceived quality as elaborated by Respondent 8;  
11

12                    *"We use those scores (passenger ratings) absolutely to determine how we are actually performing in*  
13                    *terms of punctuality, (...) friendliness, in-flight service you know all those customer experience from*  
14                    *the time you booked your tickets, checked in to the arrival experience. Anything we claim to do well,*  
15                    *we would actually check all of those in the follow-up scores."* **(R8)**  
16

## 17 **Credibility**

18 The credibility dimension is an important part of airlines' approach in creating brand equity.  
19 Five sub-categories were identified in this respect: consistency (38 mentions); clear brand  
20 positioning (24); keeping the brand promise and expectations (15), credibility (2); and trust  
21 (5).  
22

23 Different from other types of the service industry, the dynamic nature of the airline industry  
24 imposes irregular operations due to internal (maintenance, staffing, etc.) and external factors  
25 (meteorology, air navigation, regulations, etc.) which in turn complicate both consistent  
26 service delivery and unclear brand promises or inconsistencies. It is critical for airlines to  
27 manage credibility perceptions to build a strong brand. The importance of consistency and  
28 difficulties of delivering brand promise for airlines and having a clear brand proposition is  
29 further highlighted by Respondents 10 and 5:  
30

31                    *"I think good examples would be...British Airways, Singapore Airlines; because of the consistency of their*  
32                    *brand so the guest knows that what they receive from time to time again and it is something consistent*  
33                    *and they have earned that trust over time. I think in essence; brand equity means to me a credible brand*  
34                    *one that has a good reputation and one that is powerful within the space that it operates."* **(R10)**  
35

36                    *"I think it is a hard industry just because operationally [a] complex service business in which delivering*  
37                    *that brand promise consistently is very very difficult. It is delivered by people; those people are largely*  
38  
39  
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1 distant probably to the network, so your employees aren't at one place [...]. Actually, quite hard to get  
2 consistent, I mean you can have a core brand image, proposition, and design, it is very hard to fulfil it  
3 consistently in the complex and regulated operating environment in which we operate and with  
4 employees that are generally pretty defused out of the workplace." (R5)  
5  
6  
7

8 Furthermore, most of the respondents emphasise the importance of clear brand positioning  
9 combined with consistent service delivery to achieve strong brand equity;  
10

11  
12 *"(...) Look at the easyJet, they are very clear what they are trying to do, and it is very clear how they  
13 position their product, it is brand positioning, their communications meet the expectation of what the  
14 product delivers and therefore it is a little bit it is what it says. I think, makes it clear for people to make  
15 decisions and to build affinity to it. There is also another thing; consistency. For me, a brand is about  
16 consistency. It has to say, do it, do it, do it again."* (R11)  
17  
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19  
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21

22 To build a brand over time, not only does the airline need to be consistent in delivering its  
23 proposition it needs to keep its brand promise and the expectations their customers have of  
24 it.  
25  
26

27  
28 *"Ryanair has complete consistency of product service and image. It is like Coca-Cola; it is one of the few  
29 brands. There might be a slight difference between Coke in Turkey, Coke in Abu Dhabi but it is Coke,  
30 Ryanair seems to manage to achieve a level of consistency in the product, service, and experience, and  
31 image across its entire network. In terms of the brand, [...] if you ask one person who knows Ryanair and  
32 the next person, they would have the same impression of the brand."* (R9)  
33  
34  
35  
36

37 The final identified element of credibility is the trust that the customer has in the airline, as  
38 summarised by respondents 3 and 9.  
39

40  
41 *"I mentioned trust. I think, increasingly, in our society that is really important. This is a softer element  
42 of (brand) meaning; the extent of which your brand resonates, your brand sticks out."* (R3)  
43  
44  
45

46 *Characteristics of strong airline brands are "Consistency, awareness and customer belief-trust"* (R9)  
47  
48  
49

## 50 Differentiation

51 Differentiation is one of the challenges for airlines due to the increasing competition in the  
52 industry. Three sub-categories were identified here: brand differentiation (35 mentions);  
53 Brand personality and employee differentiation (13), and place and product differentiation  
54 (13).  
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1 The brand itself is seen as a differentiator as quoted below;  
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3

4 *“The branding is the very central [significant] for whole airline [the company] in terms of differentiating*  
5 *from competitors and gives us a distinct personality. We would rely on all our brand essence to*  
6 *communicate very clear messages to our guests. About why they should choose [the airline] over other*  
7 *airlines, so it is very important. (...) That’s what brand means to us, what we use as a business to*  
8 *differentiate ourselves.” (R8)*  
9

10  
11  
12 *“Brand is how we differentiate ourselves; brand actually is an experience that we offer our customers*  
13 *and consumers.” (R12)*  
14  
15

16 Achieving a level of differentiation by creating a unique culture or personality for the brand is  
17 highlighted as one of the most important factors by the interviewees to achieve a strong  
18 brand;  
19  
20  
21

22  
23 *“I think you’ve got to be able to differentiate yourself and it needs to be not necessarily a vastly*  
24 *differentiated product but has a personality that is consistently delivered so that you fall into affinity*  
25 *with that brand.” (R11)*  
26  
27

28 More specifically, differentiation can be achieved through how employees behave. Not only  
29 are employees important when it comes to service delivery (see above), but they also can  
30 contribute to differentiate the brand from other airlines. Respondent 1 gives WestJet as an  
31 example and explains how they created a strong brand through their employee service.  
32  
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36

37 *“WestJet created from the beginning a business model that has always been focused on empowering*  
38 *their frontline [employees]. They have always spent a lot of time talking [about] what tools their*  
39 *frontline employees need to deliver great service. That’s point one. And they always have a very*  
40 *consultative and a non-hierarchical model of managing employees. That’s point two. And historically*  
41 *they have required all employees to receive a small part of their compensation in the stock market which*  
42 *means that every employee in WestJet, is also the owner of the company. Those things taken all together*  
43 *created success. Let’s take JetBlue; they have similarly done very innovative work on empowering*  
44 *frontline employees and developing a participative and collaborative culture.” (R1)*  
45  
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50  
51 *“I think of a good UK example, Virgin Atlantic Airways. They kind of set themselves apart from the others*  
52 *[airlines] by creating a very fun brand. Really creating a personality on their brand so I think if you have*  
53 *a brand that is very likeable just like [...] friendships or personalities you come across in your life, I think*  
54 *that becomes memorable and I think that creates the strong brand.” (R10)*  
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1                   *"The branding is the very central [significant] for whole airline [the company] in terms of differentiating*  
2                   *from competitors and gives us a distinct personality. We would rely on all our brand essence to*  
3                   *communicate very clear messages to our guests. About why they should choose [the airline] over other*  
4                   *airlines, so it is very important. (...) That's what brand means to us, what we use as a business to*  
5                   *differentiate ourselves." (R8)*  
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10                   The final element of differentiation is using a sense of place (such as nationality), or product  
11                   to differentiate the brand.  
12

13                   *"There are airlines who have been successful in terms of building brands anchored themselves in the*  
14                   *sense of place and embody that in their service" (R5)*  
15  
16  
17

18                   *"Southwest in the US is a great example of an airline who have very distinctive product offerings. It is*  
19                   *not really about place-specific brand identity; it is much more about sort of functional (service) attributes*  
20                   *the product that is different from the rest of the industry and that used to differentiate themselves."*  
21                   *(R5)*  
22  
23  
24

## 25                   **Value**

26                   Creating an attractive value proposition for an airline is important to gain a competitive  
27                   advantage. Respondent 13, highlights the link between value and brand equity in this respect:  
28  
29  
30

31                   *"Value, in terms of the price I am paying, what I am getting in return. That could be everything from the*  
32                   *hard elements of the product to the softer elements of the service. Brand equity comprises all these*  
33                   *elements in the mind of the customer. But the price I am paying that's the value I am getting. I think this*  
34                   *is a brand." (R13)*  
35  
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39                   This is further reiterated by respondent 3 who addresses the importance and the relevance  
40                   of value as a measure of airline CBBE;  
41  
42

43                   *"(...) value for money, so the extent to which customers think that the price that they paid was repaid*  
44                   *or they got better value than the amount. That is very important to [the airline]. (...) So, value is a very*  
45                   *important measure." (R3)*  
46  
47  
48

## 49                   **Satisfaction**

50                   While airlines frequently link various loyalty measures with satisfaction and sometimes use it  
51                   interchangeably (see statement below from respondent 9), satisfaction in itself is an  
52                   important dimension of airline brand equity. To measure satisfaction, airlines often use the  
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1 Net Promoter Score (NPS) approach, as highlighted by the two comments from respondents  
2  
3 9 and 13.

4  
5 *"NPS (Net Promoter Score) is the overall metric. I also look at the satisfaction, likelihood to use again,  
6 perception of value for money, then what I do is I look at the elements of the journey we measure it."  
7  
8 (R9)*

9  
10  
11 *"We use customer satisfaction, or we use NPS as well and also the brand health, brand personality  
12 attributes that I mentioned innovation, leadership. All those are benchmarked against our competitors  
13 as well."(R13)*

14  
15  
16 The correlation between brand perceptions and customer satisfaction has also emerged  
17 during the interviews:

18  
19  
20  
21 *"... we measure customer satisfaction which links into brands' perceptions." (R3)*

22  
23 Respondents 1 and 12 stressed that satisfaction levels for airlines should be measured across  
24 the journey and satisfaction scores for different cabin classes:

25  
26  
27  
28 *"... [to] understand their satisfaction at all the touch points from booking to check-in to inflight to  
29 baggage delivery to post trip aspects." (R1)*

30  
31  
32 *"We measure customer satisfaction separately (...) We are differentiating our measures, particularly in  
33 customer satisfaction measures, both in terms of measuring expectation and satisfaction because the  
34 product that we offer is different for business and economy passengers." (R12)*

35  
36  
37 As previously mentioned, there is an inherent link in the airline sector when it comes to brand  
38 equity and employees. This is also the case when examining the role of satisfaction and brand  
39 equity. Respondent 6 considers the customer satisfaction performance of staff:

40  
41  
42  
43  
44 *"I would also look together with how the people in the team good at customer satisfaction and how  
45 customer satisfaction goes over time." (R6)*

46  
47  
48 Similarly, respondents also referred to the correlation between the behaviour of loyal  
49 customers and satisfaction scores:

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51  
52  
53 *"We do look at our most loyal customers and what their behaviour is and how this behaviour correlates  
54 customer satisfaction scores." (R5)*

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1 **Loyalty**

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3 The interview results also demonstrate that airlines use various attitudinal brand loyalty  
4 measures. Three types of attitudinal measures are revealed from the interviews to  
5 understand passenger loyalty: willingness to recommend (39 mentions), willingness to  
6 purchase (9), and willingness to pay a price premium (12). These measures are advocated as  
7 discussed by Respondents 9 and 5;  
8  
9

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11  
12  
13 *“I think there are specific things that we tend to measure and care about with relation to the brand.  
14 Whether consumers are willing to pay more (price premium) or to choose us over competitors  
15 (willingness to purchase).” (R5)*  
16  
17

18  
19 “Willingness to recommend” has traditionally been measured based on the customer  
20 behaviour literature. As with satisfaction, the interviews show that airline executives often  
21 are in favour of Net Promoter Score and stated by respondent 9;  
22  
23

24  
25 *“The other benefit NPS (...) is (...) it is easy to understand. Likelihood to recommend is the advocacy  
26 measure. It is easy to explain to frontline staff.” (R9).*  
27  
28

29 Attitudinal loyalty measures are found to be more suitable for airlines. For instance, NPS or  
30 willingness to recommend are referred to as a manifestation of a brand as follows:  
31  
32

33  
34 *“We do look at that Net Promoter Score; that is an important measure not of the brand but of the  
35 manifestation of the brand which is people's willingness to recommend. (...)” (R5)*  
36  
37

38 *“We have something in the airlines [...] It is the Net Promoter Score. The NPS is like the measure of your  
39 customer service, overall, everything. For airlines, I think it should be the most important metric.” (R2)*  
40  
41

42 *“They all are linking with Net Promoter Scores; all individual elements will make up the net promoter  
43 score.” (R8)*  
44  
45

46 Here it is clear that although NPS is measured using a question about “willingness to  
47 purchase” it is used by airlines as a summary metric to assess loyalty, satisfaction, and other  
48 items that have been discussed separately in this section.  
49  
50

51  
52 The measure of “intention to use an airline” is advocated by airlines as a loyalty measure. The  
53 final loyalty measure is price premium. Respondent 5 also identifies the importance of price  
54 premiums:  
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1                   *"I think there are specific things that we tend to measure and care about with relation to the brand are*  
2                   *whether consumers are willing to pay more or to choose us over competitors." (R5)*  
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5 The importance of premium pricing is further stated by Respondent 10:

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7                   *"I think there is also a point to be made. An airline with high brand equity that cannot actually command*  
8                   *a price premium. They just have a very strong brand! I think that's an issue as well. The point I am trying*  
9                   *to make is that the airline brand should be built so that they can actually command its premium so that*  
10                  *it turns into a financial benefit as well." (R10)*  
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## 14 **5. Discussion**

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16 In airline branding research, measures of brand equity have mainly focused on traditional  
17 components of CBBE: brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand  
18 image/associations (e.g., Chen & Tseng, 2010; Uslu et al., 2013; Chen & Chang, 2008; Santos  
19 de Oliveira & Caetano, 2019) or brand credibility only (e.g., Jeng, 2016; Wang et al., 2017). In  
20 the literature over 25 different measures have been suggested (Tasci, 2018) that are either  
21 industry-specific or generic measures. The main question we have addressed was which  
22 measures are suitable for airlines. In the literature, no consensus has been reached on the  
23 dimensions of CBBE which in turn precludes the possibility of applying these measures in the  
24 airline context.  
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28 By conducting semi-structured interviews with airline marketing executives from LCCs and  
29 FSCs and airline branding consultants, this study has revealed seven different dimensions  
30 relevant to the airline industry by building on existing constructs and theories related to CBBE  
31 and expanding the existing literature through insights from interviews with airline marketing  
32 experts.  
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36 Across all the interviews, there was considerable consensus on what the driving factors and  
37 measures for airline brands are. These are namely, awareness, functional and technical  
38 performance, credibility, differentiation, value, satisfaction, and loyalty.  
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42 Unlike the airline executives, the consultants that were interviewed tended to focus their  
43 answers on internal corporate aspects such as organisational and managerial aspects and  
44 issues of building strong airline brands. For example, some commented on internal  
45 communication, where poor or inadequate communication of branding strategies from top  
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1 management to second-tier employees and non-hierarchical management models could lead  
2 to consistency issues. This may be contrasted with airline executive interviewees that focused  
3 their comments on the operational aspects of brand management such as brand  
4 measurement, budgets, challenges faced in brand building, day-to-day customer satisfaction,  
5 and the aspects of building strong airline brands.  
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10 Awareness has been highlighted as having an impact on customer decision-making by  
11 influencing brand association formation. An increase in awareness leads to the brand being  
12 considered or likely to take place as an alternative in the consideration set. Sometimes  
13 consumers may have no information about a brand rather than being aware of its existence  
14 (Keller, 1993). Airline executives generally suggested awareness as an overall measure of  
15 brand equity. Therefore, the results confirm awareness as a dimension of airline CBBE.  
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23 The interviews revealed two aspects of overall service experience: employee service delivery  
24 and hard service attributes. This type of conceptualisation of service performance is in line  
25 Grönroos (1984) who suggests that perceived service quality is a result of consumers' view on  
26 the two aspects of service: functional and technical quality. Two-factor service performance  
27 also used measurement of airline CBBE by Lin's (2015) including physical and staff behaviour  
28 service quality which is developed for measuring hotel and restaurant brand equity by Nam  
29 et al.'s (2011).  
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38 The information economics approach to customer-based brand equity discusses the  
39 antecedents of credibility as being a brand's ability to deliver their promises consistently,  
40 including clarity of brand message and consistent execution of marketing mix elements (i.e.,  
41 Erdem & Swait, 1998). Similarly, Keller (2001) and Aaker (1996) both argue that the  
42 organisation behind the brand needs to be perceived as being credible, having perceived  
43 expertise, is trustworthy, and is likeable. The interviewed experts also focused on these  
44 aspects (consistency, clarity of brand message, creating customer trust, etc.) which are the  
45 source of strong airline brand equity. Therefore, credibility emerges as a higher-order concept  
46 explaining subordinate elements such as a clear brand proposition, image consistency,  
47 keeping brand promises, customer trust, and as a component of airline customer-based brand  
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1 equity. The results from the expert interviews, therefore, support Keller (2013)'s approach  
2 including credibility as one of the significant dimensions and driving factors of airline CBBE.  
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5 Differentiation theory suggests that a brand needs to be perceived as different, both to win  
6 and then sustain market share. Kotler & Keller (2012) argue that four aspects of  
7 differentiation are attractive to consumers: employee, channel, image, and service  
8 differentiation. Similarly, the airline marketing experts that were interviewed for this research  
9 emphasised the importance of differentiation for the success of airline brands either creating  
10 a personality and image differentiation by building on employees or by offering products or  
11 services different than the other airlines. Differentiation is, therefore, a critical strategic  
12 position that a lot of airlines seek. Understanding this proposition from a customer  
13 perspective may enable airlines to reconsider, adjust or maybe strengthen their competitive  
14 positioning.  
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16  
17 The ability of a brand to create a value proposition is important since the absence of this  
18 proposition is likely to make a company vulnerable to competitors (Aaker, 1996). The results  
19 from the interviews also confirm Aaker's (1996) approach incorporating value as a key  
20 component of CBBE.  
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23 The expert interviews revealed varying views about customer satisfaction as an element of  
24 CBBE. Some experts suggested a link between overall customer satisfaction and repurchase  
25 intention and behaviour, between loyal, willingness to recommend, and brand perception.  
26 Other interviewees focused more on the measurement of satisfaction as a combination of  
27 journey touchpoints.  
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30 Loyalty management is one of the key aspects of marketing. Particularly understanding the  
31 main reasons behind loyalty may help practitioners to improve the customer retention rate.  
32 Reichheld (2003) argues that NPS is a measure of loyalty since customers put their reputations  
33 on the line when they indicate their willingness to recommend and will only do so if they are  
34 strongly loyal. However, we have also found that NPS is often used by airlines to measure  
35 customer satisfaction. The implication here is that, in practice, there is some relationship  
36 between loyalty and satisfaction.  
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## 6. Conclusion

Building on the different foundational approaches to CBBE, and expert views, this research identifies the most relevant measures for airlines and driving factors of airline CBBE based on theory and airline executives view and offer a shared understanding between the practice and the theory. This research re-examined airline CBBE to determine measures uniquely relevant to the airline industry and establish which dimensions drive airline brand equity. The interviews have revealed new measures for airline CBBE that are likely to be driving factors of airline brands. These include differentiation, credibility, and loyalty (including willingness to recommend, willingness to purchase, and willingness to pay a price premium). Differentiation has not been used in previous studies to measure airline CBBE. However, differentiation is revealed as one of the most important concepts and driving factors to achieve strong brand equity for airlines. Measuring perceptions of differentiation from the eyes of the customer may enable airlines to relocate or audit their positioning strategies. Credibility was previously not considered as a component of CBBE. However, achieving a certain level of credibility is highlighted by executives as critical to enhance airline brand equity.

This study contributes to airline brand equity research and customer behaviour research in several ways. It is the first attempt, from a managerial as well as practical perspective, to understand the generation and measurement of airline brand equity. This in turn may lead to the development of more sophisticated scales to measure airline brand equity and airline customer behaviour. This research also offers new dimensions (e.g. differentiation, credibility) to better understand airline passenger decision-making that can be used by researchers to examine the customer value creation process or to incorporate these dimensions to test theoretical models to understand passenger behaviour (Sezgen, Mason, and Mayer, 2019).

While some of these concepts are available in the marketing literature, very few researchers have incorporated them into airline brand equity research and airline consumer behaviour research. Using these concepts in theoretical models and empirical studies may enable researchers to have a better understanding of airline passenger behaviour. In a broader

1 perspective, the methodology used in this research can be applied to other industries to  
2 identify unique brand equity measures for different sectors.  
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5 In practical terms, this study suggests a set of concepts relevant to airlines which may enable  
6 diagnostic information for marketing managers to monitor and audit the equity of their brand.  
7 Managers may understand clearly in which area of the brand succeeds or what drives their  
8 brand and to what extent by assessing the relevant dimensions of airline brand equity. Thus,  
9 airline managers can make an efficient allocation of resources to maintain a balance among  
10 the brand equity dimensions.  
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13 Although this research provides a step towards the identification of relevant dimensions of  
14 ACBBE, some limitations can be recognised. This study is limited to the number of interviews  
15 and may not be generalised over the global airline industry. However, the sample is kept as  
16 wide as possible and executives from different locations were approached and airlines having  
17 strong brand presence and different business models were considered for an interview.  
18 Considering the paucity of airlines having a strong brand presence (e.g., Brand Finance the  
19 annual report on the most valuable and strongest 50 airline brands) and the difficulty of  
20 interviewing executive-level participants, this limitation may be acceptable. This study is  
21 exploratory in nature and requires further validation. The next step of this study is the  
22 development and validation of the relevant constructs by following well-established scale  
23 development procedures. Therefore, it is highly recommended for future studies to  
24 empirically test these dimensions and assess the relationships among the dimensions.  
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## AUTHOR STATEMENT

Eren Sezgen performed writing - original draft and conceptualisation and methodology. Keith J. Mason performed writing -review and editing; conceptualisation and methodology. Robert Mayer performed writing -review and editing; conceptualisation and methodology.

**Declaration of interest**

'Declarations of interest: none'.

# Airline brand management: a practical perspective to brand management in the airline industry

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