Determinants of Customer Trust in Legacy Airlines and Low-Cost Airlines: A Multi-Group Analysis

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Abstract

This study is an empirical attempt to understand the formation of customer trust among airline passengers and to determine whether the factors influencing customer trust differ between legacy and low-cost airlines. Examining the determinants of trust in airlines, the study separately tests the effects of brand image and price fairness on trust, emphasizing the mediating role of price fairness in the relationship between brand image and customer trust. Data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling. A multi-group analysis was conducted to determine whether these differences were statistically significant. The findings supported the hypotheses regarding the direct and indirect effects on trust. Furthermore, while differences in customer trust levels were observed based on the airline business model, no significant variation was found in customers' perceived brand image.

Keywords: Airlines, Consumer Behavior, Customer Trust, Brand Image, Price Fairness

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Geleneksel ve Düşük Maliyetli Havayollarında Müşteri Güveninin Belirleyicileri: Çoklu Grup Analizi

Öz

Bu çalışma, havayolu yolcuları arasında müşteri güveninin oluşumunu anlamak ve müşteri güvenini etkileyen faktörlerin geleneksel ve düşük maliyetli havayolları arasında farklılık gösterip göstermediğini belirlemek için yapılmıştır. Havayollarına olan güvenin belirleyicilerini inceleyen çalışma, imaj ve fiyat adaletinin müşteri güveni üzerindeki etkilerini ayrı ayrı test ederek, imaj ve müşteri güveni arasındaki ilişkide fiyat adaletinin aracılık rolünü ele almıştır. Veriler kısmi en küçük kareler yapısal denklem modellemesi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bu farklılıkların istatistiksel olarak anlamlı olup olmadığını belirlemek için çoklu grup analiz yürütülmüştür. Bulgular, müşteri güveni üzerindeki doğrudan ve dolaylı etkilere ilişkin hipotezleri desteklemiştir. Ayrıca, havayolu iş modeline dayalı olarak müşteri güveni düzeylerinde farklılıklar gözlemlenirken, müşterilerin algıladıkları marka imajında anlamlı bir değişiklik saptanmamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Havayolları, Tüketici Davranışı, Müşteri Güveni, Marka İmajı, Fiyat Adaleti

Introduction

Airline business models emerged as a result of deregulation (late 1970s and early 1980s), leading to an increasing number of competitors in the industry, each adopting different strategies. The deregulation process and the subsequent rise in the number of airlines have contributed to an increase in passenger demand, thereby intensifying competition within the sector (Banda, Lambulira, & Bello, 2024). In Turkey, the privatization that took place in 2003 resulted in significant growth in airline transportation since that year (İnan, 2019). In 2024, compared to the previous year, aircraft traffic increased by 3.7% in domestic flights and by 7.3% in international flights, serving a total of 15,562,646 passengers (Minister of Transport and Infrastructure, 2025). In this high-demand transportation sector, fostering a strong relationship between customers

and businesses to ensure long-term loyalty is crucial for the sustainable success of airlines operating in an oligopolistic market. Factors such as brand image, perceived price fairness, and trust play a significant role in the formation of this bond (Ashraf & Niazi, 2018).

Brand image can be perceived as an intangible asset of businesses that ensures their long-term prosperity. Elements such as the value offered to customers, visibility, quality, price, associations, brand identity, loyalty, and relationships contribute to shaping this image (Išoraitė, 2018). It is known that airline customers prioritize reliability and high-quality service. Moreover, enhancing flight comfort, providing complimentary in-flight services, maintaining optimal service quality, and ensuring punctual departures contribute to the development of a positive brand image for airlines (Dirsehan & Kurtuluş, 2018). Perceptions of price fairness emerge from customers' price comparisons, a process that can occur both spontaneously and in a consciously structured manner. Price comparisons are facilitated by customers' use of online information-gathering mechanisms (Malc, Selinšek, Dlačić, & Milfelner, 2021). When customers perceive price fairness positively in airlines, behaviors such as word-of-mouth promotion, recommendations, and trust development are observed. In contrast, when price fairness is perceived negatively, customers tend to exhibit behaviors such as filing complaints, experiencing negative emotions (e.g., anger, disappointment), and switching to competing airlines (Chung & Petrick, 2012). Trust is generally associated with businesses fulfilling their obligations and meeting customer expectations regarding their commitment to promises (Nguyen, Leclerc, & LeBlanc, 2013). Customer trust can be established through three dimensions: competence trust, which stems from an economic foundation; predictability trust, which arises from familiarity; and goodwill trust, which originates from empathy (Siau & Shen, 2003). From a customer's perspective, competence trust in airlines is based on the company's expertise, skills, and operational capabilities in the sector. Predictability trust is built upon the airline's consistent performance, while goodwill trust reflects the perceived honesty and helpfulness of airline personnel.

Airline image and customer trust directly influence customer loyalty (Chanpariyavatevong et al., 2021). Additionally, price fairness impacts customer loyalty and facilitates the development of long-term relationships (Wu, Liao, Chen, & Hsu, 2011). Given its significance, studies examining brand image, price fairness, and customer trust in the airline industry are necessary. Existing research in the airline context has explored the influence of price fairness on image (Setiawan, Kartini, Afiff, & Rufaidah, 2016; Widiastiti, Yasa, & Rahanata, 2020; Thrane, Balslev, & Friis, 2024). However, while studies in the service sector have examined the reverse relationship (Jin, Line, & Merkebu, 2016; Chae & Park, 2017; Hwang & Shin, 2024), only one thesis has been identified in the airline industry that investigates the moderating effect of brand image on the relationship between dynamic pricing and price fairness (Omarli, 2023). The lack of research in this area represents a significant gap in the literature and constitutes the primary motivation for this study.

The airline industry is in constant pursuit of sustainable competitive advantage due to intense competition and price-oriented consumer behavior. In this context, consumers' evaluations of abstract concepts such as perceived price fairness, brand image, and trust determine not only their choice behavior but also their long-term loyalty. The relationship between brand image, price fairness, and trust may differ across airline types, making such comparisons critical for understanding trust formation and informing managerial strategies. However, existing literature addressing these three constructs simultaneously remains limited. In particular, although the effect of brand image on price fairness and its indirect implications through customer trust have been theoretically suggested, they have not been sufficiently substantiated by empirical evidence.

Moreover, considering the differences between airline types, how consumers perceive price fairness and how this perception mediates the relationship between brand image and trust emerge as significant research questions. This gap not only provides a conceptual contribution to the marketing literature but also generates actionable strategic implica-

tions for airlines operating with different business models. The theoretical contribution of this study is that, by testing the relationship of brand image, price fairness and trust in the airline context, the study will enrich the literature with a three-way interaction model that has been largely overlooked and thereby contribute to consumer behavior theory. Additionally, empirical contribution is the findings derived from the Turkish context will reveal comparative insights into the perceptual differences between LCC and FSC customers in emerging markets, thereby diversifying the literature. Lastly, practical contribution is airline managers will recognize that pricing strategies should not be limited to creating cost advantages but need to be integrated with brand image and customer trust dimensions in order to develop a more balanced and sustainable competitive strategy. Therefore, this study is designed to measure the perceptions of airline customers operating in Turkey regarding brand image, price fairness, and trust, as well as their interrelationships and the impact of airline type.

The study addresses the following objectives:

- To assess the effect of brand image on price fairness.
- To assess the effect of price fairness on customer trust.
- To assess the effect of brand image on customer trust.
- To investigate the mediating effect of price fairness on the influence of brand image on trust.
- To explore the effects of the above-mentioned across different airline business models.

The structure of this study is as follows: First, the theoretical framework underlying the development of the research model is explained. Subsequently, the methodology, including data collection through surveys and hypothesis testing procedures, is presented. In the final section, results, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Hypothesis Development

Brand Image and Price Fairness

Image is judgments about how a business or brand is known and perceived (Clow & Baack, 2022) and price fairness refers to customers' subjective perceptions of whether a price is accurate, fair, or legitimate. Accordingly, a company's positive image in the eyes of customers influences their perception of price fairness (Koşar, 2020). In other words, customers form their price perceptions based on the company's image, and their image-related perceptions are directly linked to the value perceptions that determine fairness (Oh, 2003; Libent & Magasi , 2024). In their study examining the relationship between image and price fairness, Jin, Line, and Merkebu (2016) concluded that price fairness is shaped by the company's image. Similarly, Singh et al. (2022), in their research on the service sector, found that brand image positively influences price fairness. Additionally, Perumala, Alia, and Shaaria (2021), in their study on Pakistan's airline industry, demonstrated that customers' perceptions of an airline's image lead to repeated purchases, which is only possible through the mediating effect of perceived price fairness. Based on the findings of previous studies, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_1: *Brand image has a positive effect on price fairness.*

Price Fairness and Customer Trust

Trust can be defined as a consumer's belief in the reliability and integrity of a business (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001). Trust in airline businesses is crucial as it can reduce perceived uncertainty and risk while enhancing customers' perceptions of the company's performance (Song, Ruan, & Park, 2019). However, paying higher prices for shorter flights and realizing that other customers have purchased tickets at a lower price may lead to doubts regarding price fairness (Aslani, Modarres, & Sibdari, 2014). In such cases, customers may perceive the price as higher than expected, increasing the likelihood

of uncertainty about the service provider and a loss of trust in the airline (Han & Ryu, 2009). The existing literature also includes studies examining the effect of price fairness on customer trust. The findings of Garbarino and Lee (2003) indicate that price fairness has a positive impact on trust. Similarly, Soelasih, Sumani, and Wetik (2024), in their study within the context of Legacy Airlines (LA), demonstrated that price fairness influences customer trust. Moreover, Setiawan et al. (2020), in their research on the airline industry in Indonesia, also found that price fairness affects customer trust. Based on these previous findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_2: Price fairness has a positive effect on customer trust.

Brand Image and Customer Trust

Brand image is considered one of the most influential factors in the development of customer trust (Flavian, Guinalıu, & Torres, 2005). Hutama and Ekawati (2020) found in their study that image has a positive and significant impact on trust. This suggests that when a company has a strong image, it is likely to attract more customers. Similarly, the research conducted by Sari and Yasa (2019) demonstrated that image plays a crucial role in shaping customer trust. Seo and Park (2018), in their study measuring the impact of airlines' social media image on customer trust, concluded that image contributes to building trust. Han et al. (2019), in their comparative study on LA and Low-Cost Carriers (LCC), also found that image significantly influences trust. A strong brand image is also effective in ticket purchasing decisions, as airlines with a positive brand image are more likely to gain customer trust (Syahailatua, Fahrudin, Arubusman, & Suhendra, 2022). In summary, airlines should focus on delivering flight experiences that meet customer expectations to enhance their positive brand image. Achieving success in this area will assist airlines in building brand trust among their customers (Le & Khuong , 2023). Thus, this study also hypothesizes that:

H_3: Brand image has a positive effect on customer trust.

Mediating Role of Price Fairness

It is noteworthy that studies investigating price fairness as a mediator of the relationship between image and trust are scarce. However, there are studies demonstrating the positive impact of price fairness and image on trust (Hutama & Ekawati, 2020; Sari & Yasa , 2019). The study, motivated by the need to fill this gap, took as an example the few studies in the literature that support this hypothesis. Accordingly, Kazlauskas (2018) emphasizes that customers tend to perceive airline pricing policies as necessarily expensive and believe the fares are fair, even if they cannot change their travel plans and the ticket prices are high (Kazlauskas , 2018). In their study within the telecommunications sector, Ashraf and Niazi (2018) emphasized that the antecedents of satisfaction and loyalty include brand image, trust, and service quality, and that price fairness also influences image within this relational network. Consequently, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H_4: Price fairness has a mediating effect in the relationship between brand image and customer trust.

Business Model Differences in Brand Image, Price Fairness, and Customer Trust

In the literature, while LAs pursue strategies to enhance their brand image and service quality, LCCs, by contrast, prioritize operational efficiency to keep ticket prices as low as possible (Atalık, 2016). Airlines' focus on different areas, shaped by their distinct business models, also directly influences perceptions such as brand image, price fairness, and customer trust (Han et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2024). Therefore, it is assumed that the interaction between image and price fairness—and their impact on customer trust—varies depending on the business model. The four hypotheses mentioned above were reconstructed for two different business models in airlines and comparisons were made. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were developed:

H_{5a}: The influence of brand image on price fairness differs by airline business model.

H$_{5b}$: The influence of price fairness on customer trust differs airline business model.

H$_{5c}$: The influence of brand image on customer trust differs by airline business model.

H$_{5d}$: The mediating effect of price fairness between brand image and customer trust differs by airline business model.
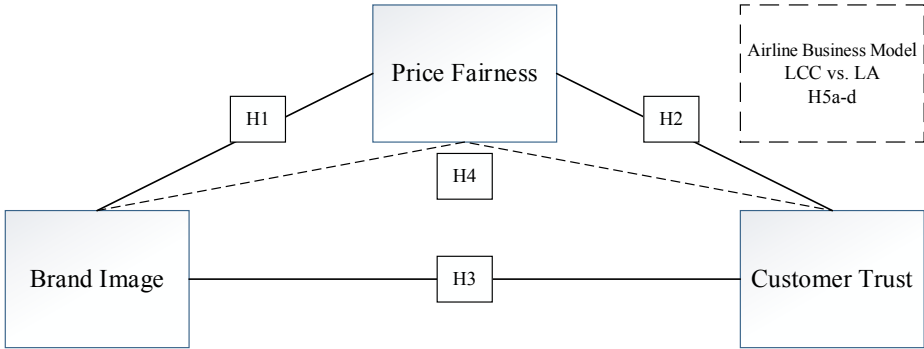
Research Model

Figure 1: Research Model

Methodology

Measurement Items

In this study, the survey questions were adapted from various previous studies and the measurements were conducted accordingly. As the validity and reliability of these scales had already been confirmed in previous research, no additional verification was required. The scales were translated into Turkish and adapted for this study, forming the basis for data collection. Specifically, the brand image scale was adapted from Hassan and Salem (2022), the price fairness scale was adapted from Konuk (2019), and the customer trust scale was adapted from Setiawan et al. (2020). The measurement items are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Measurement Items

Items	Sources
Brand Image	(Hassan & Salem, 2022)
BI1: LA/LCC airlines has a good reputation in the eyes of passengers	
BI2: LA/LCC Airlines is better image than its competitors	
BI3: LA/LCC Airlines has a good image in the minds of passenger	
Price Fairness	(Konuk, 2019)
PF1: The ticket price of LA/LCC Airlines is reasonable	
PF2: LA/LCC Airlines ticket prices are fair.	
PF3: LA/LCC Airlines ticket prices are acceptable.	
Customer Trust	(Setiawan et al., 2020)
CT1: LA/LCC Airlines works properly	
CT2: LA/LCC Airlines is trustworthy	
CT3: LA/LCC Airlines keeps its promises	

In this study, the scales were translated into Turkish with specific linguistic adaptations to enhance clarity. Three language experts reviewed the translations and made the necessary adjustments to adapt them to local terminology. The authors then conducted a final review to ensure the accuracy. The scales retained their original structure and were formatted using a five-point Likert scale (1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neutral, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree). The survey questions were uploaded to Google Forms and the link was distributed to the participants to enable them to complete the questionnaire online.

Sample and Data Collection

In this study, the sample was designed to include passengers travelling on both LCC and LA operating in Turkey. All participants were treated as a homogeneous group without applying customer segmentation, ensuring that the analyses reflect the overall dataset. The study was mainly conducted in Turkey due to easier access to the participants and the country's rapidly expanding airline market, which strengthens the relevance of sectoral analysis. The Turkish market is highly concentrated, with one LA and two LCC in operation. Another carrier follows a

hybrid model and is therefore not considered a pure representative of either business type. Since one of the LCCs and the hybrid carrier are subsidiaries of the LA, they cannot be regarded as fully independent actors. Accordingly, focusing on the remaining LA and one independent LCC provides a solid foundation for representing the two distinct and independent business models in Turkey. Moreover, Turkey serves as a major aviation hub in the region and is home to two of Europe's largest airlines, offering considerable diversity in both low-cost and full-service carrier models (Polat et al., 2024). This diversity allows for a more comprehensive examination of consumer perceptions across different airline business models, addressing a critical gap in the literature. In addition, Turkey's dynamic research environment further enhances the theoretical and practical contributions of the study.

In this study, before sharing the questionnaire, participants were asked which airline business model (LA or LCC) they had most recently flown with. Based on this response, they were directed to the corresponding survey form that was specifically prepared for either LA or LCC. The sample consisted of two independent groups, with each group only evaluating their assigned airline. This ensured that there was no overlap between participants in the LA and LCC groups. The data from both groups were analyzed separately, and the responses were later merged to create a full dataset. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants based on their experience with the airline. This approach allowed for a more objective assessment of independent perceptions of the two airline business models. The survey, which was managed via Google Forms, included demographic questions as well as nine measurement items. Data collection took place between March 7 and March 15, 2025. A total of 415 valid responses were obtained for the LCC group, while 422 valid responses were collected for the LA group. Sample size adequacy was assessed using G*Power 3.1 software (Faul et al., 2007). Based on a calculated effect size of 0.15 and a statistical power of 0.95, the minimum required sample size was determined to be 74 participants. As the data collected met this requirement, the sample size was considered adequate for analysis.

Data Analysis

In this study, a quantitative research method was adopted to test the proposed hypotheses and either confirm or reject them (Araújo et al., 2023). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used, with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) partially selected for the analysis. PLS-SEM is a statistical technique designed to test complex relationships between multiple variables and was preferred for its ability to estimate complex models involving both indicator variables and structural relationships (Pancic et al., 2023; Qayyum et al., 2023). For data analysis, SmartPLS 4.1.0.9 software was used. The measurement model was assessed using reliability and validity tests, including loading factors, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) for reliability and convergent validity. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The structural model was tested using the Bootstrapping analysis with 5000 resamples, and path coefficients and R^2 values were calculated. In addition, blindfolding based Q^2 values were calculated to assess the predictive accuracy of the model. Multi-group analysis (MGA) was also performed using SmartPLS to compare structural path coefficients across groups and to determine whether differences were statistically significant.

Findings

Demographic Profile of Participants

The results of the demographic variables, including gender, age, education and income, are presented in Table 2. Firstly, the full sample consisted of 50.54% (423) female and 49.46% (414) male participants. When examined separately, the gender distribution was 53.01% male and 46.99% female for the LA group, and 45.97% male and 54.03% female for the LCC group. In terms of age distribution, 42.53% (356) of the respondents were in the 18-25 age group, 29.87% (250) were in the 26-33 age group, 19.83% (166) were in the 34-44 age group and 7.77% (65) were 45 years or older. The subgroup breakdowns for LA and LCC are also provided in Table 2. Second, the majority of the participants

had a higher level of education in terms of educational background. In particular, 9.56% (80) had completed primary or secondary school, 26.16% (219) had completed high school, 57.47% (481) had undergraduate degrees and 6.81% (57) had postgraduate degrees. Thirdly, in terms of income distribution, the participants were relatively balanced across the different income brackets. Specifically, 22.58% (189) reported an income of 10,000 TL or less, 14.70% (123) earned between 10,001 TL and 22,200 TL, 17.32% (145) had an income between 22,201 TL and 30,000 TL, 19.00% (159) fell within the range of 30,001 TL-50,000 TL, and 26.40% (221) had an income above 50,001 TL. Overall, the demographic distribution reflects a diverse participant profile that includes different demographic groups. This diversity enhances the generalizability of the findings and provides a broader understanding of how different consumer segments perceive airline business models.

Table 2: Demographic Variables

Categories	Subgroup	LA		LCC		Full Dataset	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Gender	Female	195	46.99	228	54.03	423	50.54
	Male	220	53.01	194	45.97	414	49.46
Age	18-25	175	42.17	181	42.89	356	42.53
	26-33	121	29.16	129	30.57	250	29.87
	34-44	86	20.72	80	18.96	166	19.83
	>=45	33	7.95	32	7.58	65	7.77
Education	Primary and Secondary School	37	8.92	43	10.19	80	9.56
	High School	115	27.71	104	24.64	219	26.16
	Undergraduate Degree	228	54.94	253	59.95	481	57.47
	Postgraduate Degree	35	8.43	22	5.21	57	6.81
Income	10000 TL and below	92	22.17	97	22.99	189	22.58
	10001 TL-22200 TL	54	13.01	69	16.35	123	14.70
	22201 TL-30000 TL	77	18.55	68	16.11	145	17.32
	30001 TL-50000 TL	82	19.76	77	18.25	159	19.00
	50001 TL and above	110	26.51	111	26.30	221	26.40

Note: Freq.= Frequency

Measurement Model Results

The robustness of a measurement model is based on reliability and validity criteria. Therefore, it is essential to conduct reliability and validity analyses to determine the strength of the model. In this study, the measurement model was evaluated in three stages. First, the internal consistency was tested. The reliability of the model was assessed using loading factors and CR values (Table 3). The results showed that all CR values were above 0.70, consistent with Hair's (2019) recommendation that a CR value above 0.70 is sufficient to determine internal consistency. Furthermore, the factor loadings were above 0.70, confirming that each indicator strongly represented its respective latent variable (McNeish et al., 2018). Secondly, the convergent validity was assessed using AVE values. All AVE values exceeded 0.50, indicating that at least 50% of the total variance of each construct was explained by its indicators (Hair, Black, et al., 2019). This result confirms that the scales accurately measure their intended theoretical constructs, thus supporting convergent validity.

Table 3: Measurement Model Reliability and Convergent Validity

Constructs	LA			LCC			Full Dataset		
	Loading	CR	AVE	Loading	CR	AVE	Loading	CR	AVE
Brand Image		0.796	0.702		0.791	0.699		0.811	0.709
I1	0.894			0.860			0.883		
I2	0.761			0.707			0.763		
I3	0.853			0.875			0.876		
Price Fairness		0.922	0.778		0.865	0.764		0.896	0.778
PF1	0.874			0.870			0.877		
PF2	0.868			0.856			0.865		
PF3	0.905			0.895			0.903		
Customer Trust		0.830	0.740		0.791	0.699		0.813	0.726
CT1	0.855			0.860			0.865		
CT2	0.870			0.841			0.859		
CT3	0.856			0.806			0.830		

Third, discriminant validity was evaluated using the HTMT ratio and the Fornell-Larcker criterion. These analyses assess whether a construct measures a distinct concept that is separate from other constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). According to Henseler et.al. (2015) the acceptable threshold for HTMT should be either 0.85 or 0.90. As shown in Table 4, the HTMT ratios below the threshold of 0.90, indicating strong discriminant validity. Additionally, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to further validate discriminant validity. According to this criterion, the square root of the AVE for each construct should exceed its correlation with any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Meeting this condition confirms that each construct is distinct and represents a unique conceptual structure. As shown in Table 4, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was met, further supporting the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity Assessment (HTMT and Fornell-Larcker Criteria)

	Constructs	HTMT			Fornell Lacker		
		CT	I	PF	CT	I	PF
LA	CT				0.860		
	I	0.650			0.527	0.838	
	PF	0.239	0.207		0.209	0.179	0.882
LCC	CT				0.836		
	I	0.821			0.639	0.818	
	PF	0.582	0.453		0.483	0.372	0.874
Full Dataset	CT				0.852		
	I	0.763			0.615	0.842	
	PF	0.348	0.216		0.298	0.188	0.882

Structural Model Result and Multi-Group Analysis

After confirming the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the next step was to evaluate the structural model. This analysis aimed to identify relationships between variables and to determine whether the proposed hypotheses were supported. SmartPLS was used to

perform a bootstrapping analysis with 5000 resamples to calculate path coefficients (β), T-values, confidence intervals and P-values. The results of the hypothesis tests were evaluated separately for each dataset (LA, LCC, full dataset). The analysis showed that all relationships were statistically significant, indicating a robust model. As shown in Table 5, brand image had a significant effect on price fairness (β = 0.179, p < 0.01, LA; β = 0.372, p < 0.01, LCC; β = 0.188, p < 0.01, Full Dataset), supporting H1. Similarly, price fairness had a significant positive effect on customer trust (β = 0.119, p = 0.021, LA; β = 0.285, p < 0.01, LCC; β = 0.189, p < 0.01, Full Dataset), confirming H2. In addition, brand image had a direct positive effect on customer trust (β = 0.506, p < 0.01, LA; β = 0.533, p < 0.01, LCC; β = 0.580, p < 0.01, Full Dataset), supporting H3. Finally, the indirect effect of brand image on customer trust through price fairness was also statistically significant (β = 0.021, p = 0.028, LA; β = 0.106, p < 0.01, LCC; β = 0.036, p < 0.01, Full Dataset), supporting H4. Since both the direct effect of brand image on customer trust and the indirect effect of brand image on customer trust through price fairness were significant, this indicates partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Table 5: Structural Model Results

	Hypothesized Path	Std. Beta	t-value	%95 BCa CI	p-value	Decision
LA	H1: I -> PF	0.179	3.631	[0.101, 0.262]	0.000	Accept
	H2: PF-> CT	0.119	2.036	[0.023, 0.214]	0.021	Accept
	H3: I-> CT	0.506	8.326	[0.403, 0.605]	0.000	Accept
	H4: I -> PF-> CT	0.021	1.912	[0.004, 0.040]	0.028	Accept
LCC	H1: I -> PF	0.372	8.717	[0.303, 0.444]	0.000	Accept
	H2: PF-> CT	0.285	7.601	[0.223, 0.346]	0.000	Accept
	H3: I-> CT	0.533	14.549	[0.473, 0.593]	0.000	Accept
	H4: I -> PF-> CT	0.106	5.563	[0.077, 0.139]	0.000	Accept
Full Dataset	H1: I -> PF	0.188	5.624	[0.132, 0.242]	0.000	Accept
	H2: PF-> CT	0.189	5.700	[0.133, 0.243]	0.000	Accept
	H3: I-> CT	0.580	18.428	[0.525, 0.628]	0.000	Accept
	H4: I -> PF-> CT	0.036	4.358	[0.023, 0.050]	0.000	Accept

In this study, R² and Q² values were calculated to assess the explan-

atory power of the model and the relationships between variables (Table. 6). These metrics indicate the extent to which the dependent variables are explained and predicted (Cohen, 1988; Hair, Risher, et al., 2019). The R^2 value represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that is accounted for by the independent variables (Cohen, 1988). Ranging from 0 to 1, an R^2 value closer to 1 indicates a stronger explanatory power (Drape & Smith, 1998). Conversely, Q^2 evaluates the predictive validity of the model, and a Q^2 value greater than 0 indicates an acceptable predictive validity (Hair et al., 2019). In this context, the R^2 and Q^2 values for customer trust were $R^2 = 0.292$, $Q^2 = 0.270$ LA, $R^2 = 0.478$, $Q^2 = 0.403$ for LCC, and $R^2 = 0.413$, $Q^2 = 0.375$ for the full dataset. Meanwhile, the values for price fairness were $R^2 = 0.032$, $Q^2 = 0.026$ for LA, $R^2 = 0.138$, $Q^2 = 0.132$ for LCC, and $R^2 = 0.036$, $Q^2 = 0.032$ for the full dataset. These results suggest that the model adequately explains and predicts customer trust, while its explanatory power for price fairness remains relatively moderate. However, the positive Q^2 values for all dependent variables confirm the predictive validity of the model.

Table 6: R2 and Q2 Results

Constructs	Legacy Airlines		Low Cost Airlines		Full Dataset	
	R^2	Q^2	R^2	Q^2	R^2	Q^2
Customer Trust	0.292	0.270	0.478	0.403	0.413	0.375
Price Fairness	0.032	0.026	0.138	0.132	0.036	0.032

As part of the PLS-SEM analysis, a MGA was conducted to compare the path coefficients between LA and LCC. This analysis aimed to identify structural differences between the two airline business models (Table 7). Examining the impact of brand image on price fairness, the path coefficient for LA was $\beta = 0.179$, while for LCC it was $\beta = 0.372$. The difference between these coefficients was 0.193 ($p = 0.001$), indicating a statistically significant difference. Thus, H5a was supported, suggesting that brand image has a stronger effect on price fairness in LCC. Similarly, the effect of price fairness on customer trust was $\beta = 0.119$ for LA and

β = 0.285 for LCC, with a difference of 0.166 (p = 0.008), confirming a statistically significant difference. As a result, H5b was supported, indicating that price fairness plays a more significant role in shaping customer trust for LCC. However, for the direct impact of brand image on customer trust, the path coefficient was β = 0.506 for LA and β = 0.533 for LCC, with a difference of 0.027, which was not statistically significant. Thus, H5c is rejected, meaning that the effect of brand image on customer trust is similar for both airline models. Finally, for the indirect effect of brand image on customer trust through price fairness, the path coefficient was β = 0.021 for LA and β = 0.106 for LCC, with a difference of 0.085 (p < 0.001). Therefore, H5d was supported, indicating that price fairness plays a stronger mediating role in the relationship between brand image and customer trust for LCC.

Table 7: MGA Results

Constructs	Path Coefficient (β)		(β) Difference	*p*-value	Result
	LA	LCC Airlines			
H5a: I -> PF	0.179	0.372	0.193	0.001	Accept
H5b: PF-> CT	0.119	0.285	0.166	0.008	Accept
H5c: I-> CT	0.506	0.533	0.027	0.354	Rejected
H5d: I -> PF-> CT	0.021	0.106	0.085	0.000	Accept

The following figures illustrate the PLS-SEM results. Figure 2 presents the results for LA, Figure 3 summarizes the results for LCC and Figure 4 provides an overview of the full dataset. These figures depict the path coefficients and the overall structure of the hypothesis testing results, offering a clearer understanding of the relationships examined in the study.
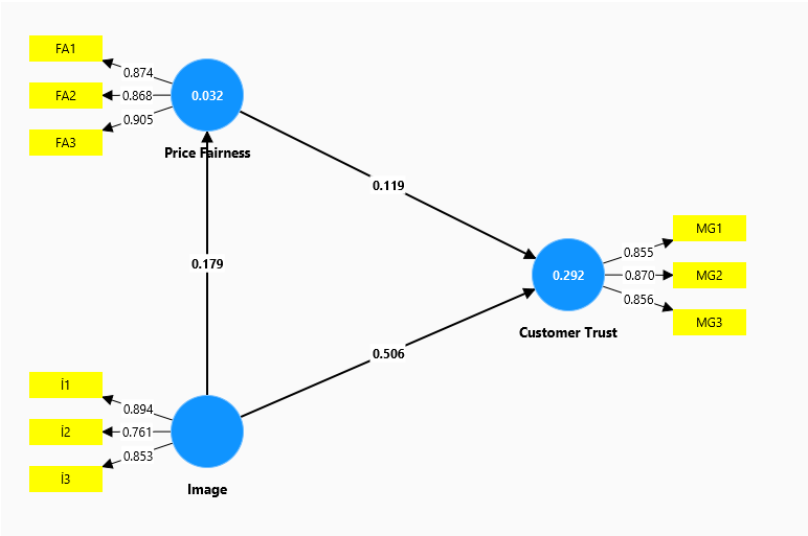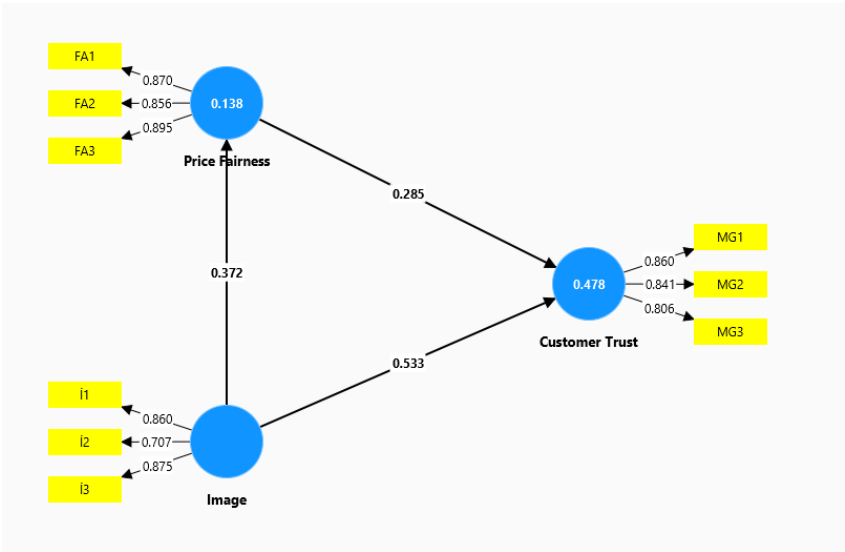
Figure 2: PLS-SEM results for LA

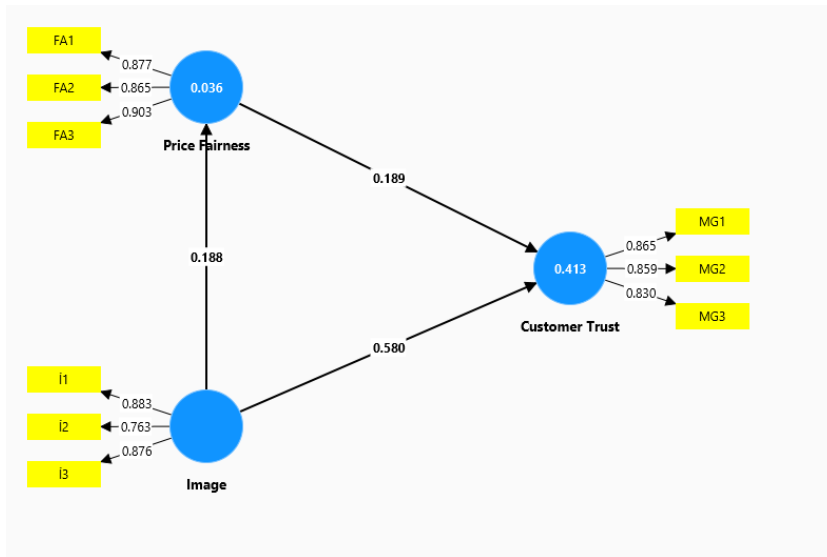**Figure 3: PLS-SEM results for LCC**

Figure 4: PLS-SEM results for full dataset

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, the effects of variables on airline customers' perceptions of trust were examined in the context of price fairness and brand image. Accordingly, it was determined that brand image has a positive effect on price fairness (H1) and customer trust (H3). Additionally, price fairness was found to have both a direct effect on customer trust (H2) and an indirect effect as a mediator in the relationship between brand image and customer trust (H4). Furthermore, in the context of airline business models, these variables were re-evaluated using a sample of two airlines operating in Turkey—one adopting the LA strategy and the other following the LCC strategy (H5a, H5b, H5c, and H5d). The hypothesized relationships were generally supported; however, no significant difference was found in the impact of brand image on trust (H5c) across different business models.

Examining the findings in this context, brand image has a significant and positive effect on customer trust. This finding aligns with previous studies in the literature (Sari & Yasa, 2019; Hutama & Ekawati,

2020; Syahailatua, Fahrudin, Arubusman, & Suhendra, 2022). This suggests that when an airline has a strong brand image, customers' perceived trust in the airline increases. Additionally, when analyzed based on business models, brand image was found to have a strong impact on customer trust for both LCC and LA. While this result was expected for LA, it also highlights that brand image contributes to trust even for LCC. In the past, it might have been assumed that "while low-cost carrier (LCC) customers regard low pricing as the most dominant criterion in their airline choice, factors such as brand image and service quality are comparatively less influential" (Kim & Lee, 2011; Sihite, Harun, & Nugroho, 2015; Rajaguru, 2016) but this study demonstrates that this assumption is not fully valid, along with recent literature, by revealing that LCC customers' expectations may have changed in recent years (Pratisthita, Yudhistira, & Agustina, 2022; Hassan & Salem, 2022; Fu, 2023).

Moreover, it was concluded that airline customers' perceptions of price fairness have a significant and positive impact on customer trust. This finding is consistent with previous research (Setiawan, Wati, Wardana, & Ikhsan, 2020; Soelasih, Sumani, & Wetik, 2024). Additionally, Hutama & Ekawati (2020) identified that both price fairness and brand image influence customer trust, which aligns with the findings of this study. This result indicates that an increase in perceived price fairness is associated with an increase in customers' trust in airlines. Furthermore, the effect of price fairness on customer trust varies depending on the airline business model. Price fairness has a significantly stronger impact on trust in LCC ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.01$) than in LA ($\beta = 0.119$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, for LCC customers, whether the price is perceived as fair has a direct effect on trust, whereas for LA customers, this effect is relatively weaker. This outcome is closely linked to and consistent with the underlying strategies of airline business models. Ultimately, in LAs, customer trust is primarily shaped by brand perception, while price perception does not play a decisive role in determining trust.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study offer significant contributions by enhancing existing theories. First, the study contributes to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989) by evaluating the impact of brand image and price fairness on trust from the customer's perspective. While prior literature has separately addressed the influence of image and price fairness on trust, this research provides detailed empirical evidence on how these variables shape customer perceptions in the airline industry, thus enriching the theoretical framework. Additionally, the study identifies the indirect effect of brand image on customer trust through price fairness. Notably, this indirect effect is more pronounced among airlines adopting the LCC business model.

Second, by supporting hypotheses H1, H3, and H4, which examine the impact of brand image on trust and price fairness, the study reinforces the significance of perceived image in the marketing literature. In the context of the airline industry, a customer's perception of a provider's image has external effects throughout the consumption experience. While previous literature suggested that image was more important than pricing for legacy airlines (LAs) and that pricing was more critical than image for LCC (Chiou & Chen, 2010; Önen, 2016), recent findings indicate that image has become a crucial factor for both business models (Hassan & Salem, 2022; Pratisthita, Yudhistira, & Agustina, 2022). This shift is likely influenced by changing customer attitudes. Furthermore, the study establishes that image has an indirect effect on customer trust via price fairness, with this effect being stronger in LCC. It is suggested that the increasing preference for LCC among business travelers, due to their affordability, has amplified this impact (Harris & Daniels, 2022).

Third, by examining the effects of price fairness within the airline context, this study contributes to equity theory (Adams, 1965). The findings confirm that price fairness directly influences airline customer trust (H2). Additionally, the study emphasizes the varying role of price fairness depending on the airline's business model. While price perception directly impacts trust in LCCs, this effect is less significant in LAs.

This difference may be explained by two possible reasons. First, since LCCs follow a simplified pricing policy, their fares may be perceived as fairer and easier to understand, which in turn can indirectly strengthen customer trust. Second, passengers traveling with LCCs are likely to be relatively more price-conscious, and therefore their perceptions of price fairness may play a more decisive role in the formation of trust (Atalık, 2016). Previous airline management studies have often approached price fairness from a singular perspective; however, the results of this study highlight the need for differentiated strategies based on business models. The findings illustrate how business model variations shape customer perceptions. Accordingly, while LCC customers are price-sensitive, LA customers are more brand-oriented. This distinction provides an important insight for trust-related research in the airline industry.

Fourth, by investigating the determinants of airline customers' trust perceptions, the study contributes to commitment-trust theory. Given that trust in a business fosters customer commitment, it can be argued that trust serves as the foundation for establishing long-term customer-business relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). From this perspective, the study finds that customer trust in airlines is influenced by different factors depending on the business model (H5). While price fairness plays a more significant role in shaping trust in LCC, brand image emerges as the primary determinant of trust in LAs. This finding suggests that there is no universal model for customer trust in the airline industry; rather, trust perceptions are shaped by the specific business model of the airline.

In conclusion, this research deepens the theoretical understanding of how brand image and price fairness influence trust. By providing empirical evidence and nuanced insights into the relationships between pricing fairness, customer perceptions of brand image, and trust in airlines with different business models, this study aims to enrich and advance theoretical knowledge in the field.

Managerial Implications

This study presents several managerial implications, which are dis-

cussed separately for LA, LCC, and the Turkish civil aviation sector. First, price fairness was identified as a critical factor in building customer trust for LCC ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that LCC should not only focus on offering low fares, but also adopt a transparent and fair pricing strategy to build customer trust. Clear communication channels are essential to manage price perceptions (Cho, 2014; Chu et al., 2020). In order to achieve this, all price components should be presented transparently throughout the booking process, with detailed explanations of ticket promotions and discounts to avoid perceptions of unfair pricing. Beyond transparency, LCCs should also manage customer perceptions of fairness in dynamic pricing. In addition to transparency, they should develop a dynamic price fairness strategy to improve perceptions of fairness. One way to achieve this is to implement real-time price evaluation indicators for instant price transparency. For example, in addition to the current ticket price for a particular route, the airlines could display the average price in the last 30 days, the lowest and highest prices during that period, and a dynamic price fairness score (e.g. 90/100). Introducing such measures can reassure customers about price fairness, reduce uncertainty and strengthen trust. By implementing these strategies, LCCs can maintain a competitive pricing model while fostering stronger customer relationships through fairness and transparency in pricing.

Second, the results indicate that the brand image is the most significant factor that influences customer trust in LA ($\beta = 0.506$, $p < 0.01$), while the price fairness has a weaker impact compared to LCC. This indicates that LA rely more on their brand image to build trust. However, despite having a stronger brand image than LCC, it does not fully capitalize on this advantage. One possible explanation is that LA prioritizes maintaining their reputation rather than enhancing customer trust through direct experience improvements. To build customer trust through image, it is essential to standardize service quality across all flights. Regardless of flight duration, ensuring consistency in core services such as in-flight catering and baggage policies can help manage customer expectations more effectively. In addition, LA should implement real-time feedback mechanisms to assess how different aspects of

the in-flight experience affect customer trust. Encouraging passengers to provide immediate feedback via mobile apps, SMS or email would allow airlines to monitor and address concerns dynamically. Finally, LA should focus more on personalized services to increase customer trust. Expanding loyalty programs to include features that build trust could be particularly effective. For example, offering loyalty members more flexible ticket rebooking options, priority support during disruptions, or exclusive service enhancements could improve customer perceptions and long-term loyalty.

Given that the full dataset was collected from passengers of the two largest airlines in Turkey, it provides meaningful insights into consumer perceptions within the Turkish civil aviation sector. First, a one-size-fits-all strategy to ensure customer trust is insufficient; airlines need to develop tailored approaches based on their business models. The results indicate that brand image has a strong effect on customer trust, while price fairness has a moderate effect, showing that passengers primarily rely on these two factors when forming trust perceptions. Therefore, airlines operating in Turkey should prioritize strengthening their brand image to maintain customer trust. Given the increasing competition and evolving market conditions, Turkish airline companies need to actively manage customer trust perceptions. Accordingly, airlines should focus on enhancing brand image, improving service quality and ensuring transparency. In addition, the moderate impact of price fairness on customer trust is somewhat surprising for a developing country. In emerging markets, price perceptions typically play a dominant role in shaping trust, but this study finds it to be less significant (Opata et al., 2021). Consequently, Turkish airline companies should focus less on price management and instead emphasize the value-added aspects of their services, highlighting overall service quality to build long-term customer trust.

Limitations and Future Studies

As with any academic study, this research has certain limitations and offers several suggestions for future studies. First, this study only

focuses on LA and LCC, excluding other airline business models such as ultra-LCC and hybrid carriers. Future studies could extend the scope by including a wider range of airline business models, enabling a comparative assessment of customer perceptions across different operational structures. Second, the price perception has been treated as a static variable. However, airlines implementing dynamic pricing strategies adjust their fares according to the season, week, time of day, and even crisis periods (Atalık, 2016). This variability makes it difficult to capture how consumers' perceptions of price fairness evolve over time. Future research could apply longitudinal data analyses to better understand how perceptions of price fairness fluctuate over different periods. Thirdly, this study considered all participants as a homogeneous group without customer segmentation. However, factors such as flight frequency, loyalty program membership and ticket purchasing habits may directly influence passengers' perceptions of brand image and customer trust. Future studies could explore different customer segments to examine how different consumer profiles perceive price fairness and trust. Finally, this research model only includes two independent variables that affect customer trust: price fairness and brand image. However, other factors may also play an important role in shaping customer trust. Future studies could include additional variables to develop more comprehensive models that provide deeper insights into the key drivers of customer trust in the airline industry.

Statement of Research and Publication Ethics

This research was approved by the Giresun University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee. The ethical approval was granted with the decision dated 05.03.2025 and numbered 03/85 (Document No: E-50288587-050.01.04-74296, dated 06.03.2025).

Authors' Contribution Rates

All authors contributed equally to this research.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Geleneksel ve Düşük Maliyetli Havayollarında Müşteri Güveninin Belirleyicileri: Çok Gruplu Analizi

Bu çalışmada havayollarında müşteri güveninin belirleyicilerini inceleyerek, imaj ve fiyat adaletinin müşteri güveni üzerindeki etkilerini ayrı ayrı test ederek, imaj ile müşteri güveni arasındaki ilişkide fiyat adaletinin aracılık rolü ele alınmıştır**.** Havayolu endüstrisindeki iki rakip iş modelinin (Geleneksel Havayolu-GH, diğeri Düşük Maliyetli Taşıyıcı-DMT) karşılaştırmalı analiz bulgularını tartışarak, çalışma farklı iş modellerini tercih eden müşterilerin anlayışını geliştirmeyi ve buna göre uygun stratejiler geliştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın örneklemi, Türkiye'de faaliyet gösteren DMT'ler ve GH'ler ile seyahat eden yolcuları kapsayacak şekilde planlanmıştır. Çalışmanın Türkiye'de yürütülmesinin temel nedenleri arasında, katılımcılara ulaşımın daha kolay olması ve Türkiye'nin son yıllarda hızlı büyüyen bir havacılık pazarı olarak sektörel analizleri daha anlamlı hale getirmesi yer almaktadır.

Bu çalışmada örneklem iki bağımsız gruptan oluşmuştur. İlgili gruplar, sadece kendilerine sunulan havayolunu değerlendirmişlerdir. GH ve DMT katılımcıları arasında herhangi bir kesişim bulunmamaktadır. Her iki gruptan gelen veriler kendi aralarında değerlendirilmiştir. Tam veri seti ise her iki farklı gruptan elde edilen verilerin birleştirilmesiyle oluşturulmuştur. Örnekleme yöntemi olarak amaçlı örnekleme yöntemi tercih edilmiştir. Her gruptaki katılımcılar, ilgili havayolu ile seyahat edip etmedikleri kriterine göre seçilmiştir. Bu yöntem, her iki iş modeli için bağımsız algıların değerlendirilmesini daha nesnel hale getirmiştir. Katılımcılardan elde edilen veriler, 7-15 Mart 2025 tarihleri arasında toplanmıştır. Araştırmada nicel araştırma yöntemi benimsenmiştir. Çalışmada belirlenen hipotezlerden yola çıkarak nihai amaç bu hipotezlerin doğrulanması ya da reddedilmesidir (Araújo et al., 2023). Bu amaç doğrultusunda, önerilen modelin test edilmesi amacıyla Yapısal Eşitlik Modellemesi (SEM) uygulanmıştır**.** Modelin analizinde Kısmi En Küçük Kareler Yapısal Eşitlik Modellemesi (PLS-SEM) yaklaşımı benimsenmiştir. Bu doğrultuda çalışmada verilerin analizi için SmartPLS 4.1.0.9 programı tercih edilmiştir. Bu program aracılığıyla, ölçüm modeli güvenilirlik ve geçerlilik testlerine tabi tutulmuştur**.** Güvenilirlik için yükleme faktörleri (loading factors), bileşik güvenilirlik (CR), yakınsak geçerlilik için Ortalama Açıklanan Varyans

(AVE), ayrışım geçerliliği için ise Fornell-Larcker kriteri ve Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) oranı hesaplanmıştır. Ölçüm modelinin güvenilirlik ve geçerliliği doğrulandıktan sonra yapısal modelin değerlendirilmesine geçilmiştir. Bu analiz ile değişkenler arasındaki ilişki belirlenerek hipotezlerin desteklenip desteklenmedikleri ortaya çıkarılmıştır. 5000 tekrar ile Bootstrapping analizi gerçekleştirilerek yol katsayıları ve R^2 değerleri hesaplanmıştır. Ayrıca, modelin tahmin gücü için Blindfolding temelli Q^2 değerleri hesaplanmıştır. Bu doğrultuda oluştutulan hipotezlerin tümü kabul edilmiştir. Daha sonra Smart-PLS yazılımı ile çoklu grup analizi (MGA) gerçekleştirilmiş ve gruplar arasındaki yapısal yol katsayılarının istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir farklılık gösterip göstermediği test edilmiştir. İmajın müşteri güveni üzerindeki etkisinde her iki iş modelinde de β kat sayısındaki farklılığın istatiksel olarak anlamlı olmadığı ortaya çıkmıştır.

Bu çalışma, imaj ve fiyat adaletinin müşteri güveni üzerindeki etkisini müşterinin bakış açısından değerlendirerek Sosyal Bilişsel Teori'ye (Bandura, 1989) katkıda bulunmaktadır. İkinci olarak, imajın hem müşteri güveni hem de fiyat adaleti üzerindeki etkisini destekleyerek pazarlama alan yazında algılanan imajın önemini pekiştirmektedir. Üçüncü olarak, havayolu bağlamında fiyat adaletinin etkilerini inceleyerek Eşitlik Teorisi'ne katkıda bulunmaktadır. Dördüncü olarak, havayolu müşterilerinin güven algılarının belirleyicilerini inceleyerek Bağlılık-Güven Teorisi'ne katkı sunmaktadır. Yönetsel olarak ise DMT'lerin yalnızca düşük ücretler sunmaya odaklanmaması gerektiğini, aynı zamanda müşteri güvenini oluşturmak için şeffaf ve adil bir fiyatlandırma stratejisi benimsemesi gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır. GH'lerin ise güven oluşturmak için marka imajlarına daha fazla güvendikleri gözlemlenmiştir. GH'lerin doğrudan deneyim iyileştirmeleri yoluyla müşteri güvenini artırmak yerine itibarlarını korumaya öncelik vermesi önerilmiştir.