

# Country-of-Origin and Airline Brand Effects: A Study of Brand Associations

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**Abstract** This study examines linkages between country-of-origin brand (country brand) and operator brand using examples in the airline industry. A review of literature examines brand associations that may be (a) shared among the country brand and an airline or (b) are unique to an airline. The importance of both shared and unique association is highlighted. The level of engagement that these associations generate in the consumer audience is exemplified.

**Keywords** Airline brand experience · Brand associations · Consumer perception · Sensory characteristics

## Introduction

Airline marketing communications should compliment the airline product in highlighting the brand's differential advantages. Passenger perception and satisfaction depend on the accuracy and simplicity of the airline brand communications (Krystallis and Chrysochou 2014). Consumer memory associations change over the course of an airline rebranding exercise. Association changes may relate to events that alter the perception of the airline's country-of-origin brand (country brand) or the airline brand. An increase in the number of negative brand associations may result in airline brand dissatisfaction (Kefallonitis 2015). A number of methodologies exist to link product with brand and consumer perception (Kefallonitis and Sackett 2004), but there is limited research on linking consumer brand associations to rebranding. Brand evaluations are affected by local or global sensitivities (Winit et al. 2014; Aziz et al. 2012). Airline rebranding processes need to take into consideration any links to the airline's country-of-origin brand, particularly if the airline is considered a "flag-carrier." Such airline brands ought to gain strength from their consumer audiences toward their perception of the brand (Sackett and Kefallonitis 2003).

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## **Brand Equity**

Brand equity is the bundle of characteristics and values attached to a product or service, along with how these are perceived by the public (Yadin 2002; Lassar et al. 1995). Brand equity is the value that customers attach to a brand that keeps its promise (LePla and Parker 1999). Being truthful to customer promises creates positive brand characteristics, specially through brand use (Bennett 1995). Brand equity is consisted of: brand associations, brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and proprietary brand assets (Aaker 1991). Brand perception built on the consumer's brand associations and attitude has been considered an integral part of brand equity and has been widely employed in brand equity frameworks (e.g., Aaker 1996; Agarwal and Rao 1996; Feldwick 1996; Keller 1993; Park and Srinivasan 1994; Srivastava and Shocker 1991).

### ***Brand Associations***

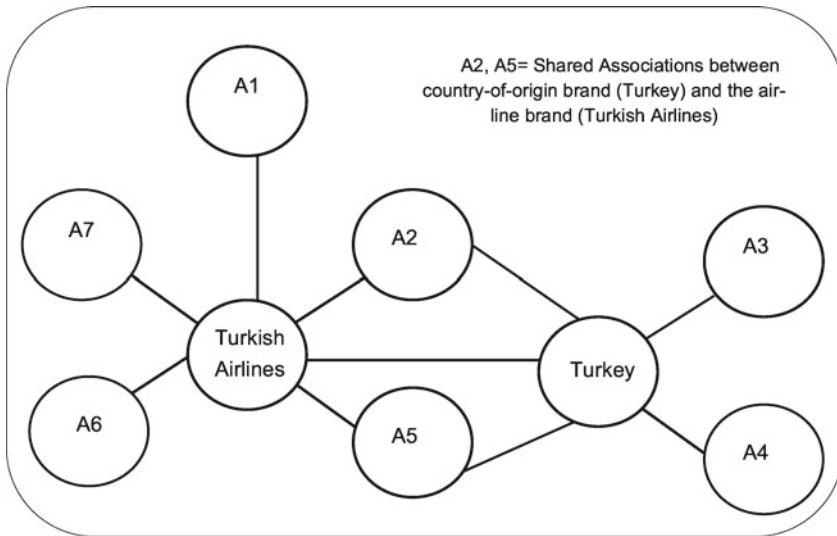
Brand associations refer to memory associations related to a brand and are part of its brand equity (Aaker 1991). These are distinguished between product and organizational associations and subcategorized to organic and created associations (Chen 2001). They are usually presented under a network representing links between elements of consumer memory and their connection. Such networks are referred to as Consumer Associative Networks (CAN).

## **Consumer Associative Networks (CAN)**

In consumers' minds brands have certain characteristics (Sakas et al. 2015). These characteristics may have both positive and negative associations. This becomes more complicated considering that not everybody shares the same viewpoint or values about brands; for some, a brand association may be positive; while for others this same association may be negative. In terms of desirability, an airline should build on, strengthen and sustain its positive associations.

A brand lives through the characteristics that we attach to it from memory. Previous research has focused on linking consumers' memory and knowledge to brand equity (Keller 1993; Dwivedi et al. 2015; Roy and Sarkar 2015). Krishnan (1996) following the model of Keller (1993), demonstrated that various characteristics of brand associations in consumers' memory might be used to indicate a brand's strength. Identifying and studying strong associations could prove beneficial for a firm (Anderson 1983).

Consumer association networks are based on memory theory, which is a means of linking various concepts, characterized by a network of connected nodes.



**Fig. 1** An example of an associative network map for Turkish Airlines

This process of linking a brand with associated memory perceptions is portrayed as a map of nodes (Nelson et al. 1993). Figure 1 presents such a network based on Turkish Airlines (Fig. 1).

Identifying key associations is an essential part of understanding the brand's "essence," the overall impression consumers have of a brand (Waters 1997). To meet expectation for a product or service one needs to understand the value consumer associations offer (Maio 1999). After all, what really exists in a consumer's memory is the brand and its associations in relation to the consumers needs (Kapferer 1997). Competitors can easily copy an offering, while brand experience cannot be easily replicated.

Understanding consumers' minds holds a vital role in formulating brand campaigns (Gobé 2001) and strong associations (Vomberg et al. 2014; Tavassoli et al. 2014). Brands need strong associations in order to compete successfully in a market category (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2012).

Consumer familiarity with well-known brands helps them develop feelings of comfort, trust, and encourages a positive behavioral interaction (Delgado-Ballester and Hernández-Espallardo 2008). Consumers prefer brands that are realistic (Johnson 2002). Similarly passengers show preference to airline brands that they feel close too (Chen and Chang 2008).

Consumers perceive the personal relevance and desirability of product attributes in terms of their association with personal consequences of product usage (Reynolds et al. 1995). Consumers review brands based on their relevance and benefits in comparison with their own personal values (Dimofte and Yalch 2011).

All these associations, expectations, and standards that consumers link with a brand are not remembered directly as a brand but experienced through senses.

Words alone, whether written or spoken, may lack the desired level of precision to describe a brand (Kefallonitis and Sackett 2003). Strong brand associations are those that encourage an emotional attachment to a specific brand (Aziz et al. 2014; Uslu et al. 2013; Cervera-Taulet et al. 2013). Engaging human senses in perceiving brands, creates memorable brand associations (Rupini and Nandagopal 2015; Chatterjee 2015; Lund 2015).

As an example, the use of visual characteristics and colors in expressing brands reduces imprecision and potential misunderstandings (Amsteus et al. 2015). In addition to sensory characteristics, the quality and overall service experience affects brand associations. Airline personnel are perceived as living examples of the airline brand that they work for. Consumer perceptions of employee age affects the brand and its associations (Davies and Chun 2012), as well as brand endorsements (Dwivedi et al. 2015).

Attention to customer-contact employees could help create better brand associations, such as unlike physical goods, people are not inanimate objects but have feelings and emotions (Bateson 1992).

## Limitations

The continuously evolving business environment of the airline industry presents some initial challenges. Specific factors that affect airline brand associations can be summarized into: the complexity of world socioeconomics, political instability, the fluctuation of oil prices that affect ticket prices, fierce competition among air carriers, job losses, dissatisfied passengers, airline customer service standards, and the aggressive marketing operations. Brands should be studied over a long period of time to make assumptions or determine if they are healthy (Mirzaei et al. 2015).

## Conclusion

Brand associations are an integral element of brand equity. The larger the number of associations a brand has the more likely it is that consumers will remember it. This has encouraged marketers to create strong and memorable brand associations that will set the brand apart in competition. Identifying and using unique brand characteristics helps strengthen brand associations. Engaging consumers using emotional and sensory elements help brand associations stay memorable.

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