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# The effect of the uniforms and attitudes of the flight attendants on passenger repurchase intention, and the mediating role of brand imagery and brand perception

Mustafa Aslan<sup>a</sup> , Habibe Güngör<sup>a</sup>  and Büşra Önler<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Department of Aviation Management, Faculty of Applied Sciences, Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, Türkiye; <sup>b</sup>Department of Aviation Management, Faculty of Economics, Administrative, and Social Sciences, Istanbul Gelisim University, Istanbul, Türkiye

## ABSTRACT

In a competitive airline industry, even small details, like the cabin crew's uniforms and demeanor, can significantly influence passenger loyalty, and hence, this study aims to reveal how the cabin crews' attitudes, behaviors, and uniforms shape passengers' loyalty through brand imagery and brand perception. The data was collected from airline passengers by utilizing the convenient sampling method. A total of 488 surveys out of 520 participants were included in the analyses conducted using Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) software. The results show that the appearances and attitudes of uniformed cabin crews significantly affect the repurchase intention, and while the brand perception only mediates the effect of attitudes on repurchase intention, the brand imagery both appearances and attitudes of uniformed cabin crews. Results suggest that airlines need to pay attention to both the attitudes and the appearance of the cabin crew to make the passengers feel that the airline is their own extent and, in return, to increase passengers' repurchase intention. Unlike previous studies, this research focuses on the interplay between visual branding through uniforms and passengers' psychological mechanisms driving loyalty explained by Social Identity Theory and Aesthetic Labor Theory. This research demonstrates the strategic role of cabin crew in creating a brand experience that is different but reflective of their own identity.

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## SUBJECTS

Business, Management and Accounting; Marketing; Marketing Management; Services Marketing

## Introduction

Among today's transport systems, the air transport industry, with its cutting-edge technology, is subject to intense competition, significantly impacts the global economy, and garners the most incredible attention (Bakir et al., 2017; Hine, 2000; Schäfer & Waitz, 2014). The airline industry, which also has a considerable impact on national economies, fosters international trade, favors domestic and international tourism, and boosts productivity globally. (Chen & Chao, 2015). The degree of well-being for society and people is increased by fostering corporate collaboration and innovation, both directly and indirectly (ICAO, 2016).

In the aviation industry, there are only a few companies that are engaged in passenger and cargo-carrying activities, and this turns the sector into an oligopolistic nature, and only a few of those companies control a sizable portion of the market (Doganis, 2002; Wensveen, 2018).

The core service offered by all airlines – transporting passengers, cargo, or mail from one point to another – is fundamentally the same. However, airlines differentiate themselves through competition on routes (offering direct or connected flights), pricing strategies, and enhancing passenger experiences to make them feel special. This includes varied offerings such as low-cost versus full-range services, seating options, onboard catering, and in-cabin entertainment systems. In the fiercely competitive airline

**CONTACT** Mustafa Aslan ✉ [mustafa.aslan@bilgi.edu.tr](mailto:mustafa.aslan@bilgi.edu.tr)  Department of Aviation Management, Faculty of Applied Sciences, Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, Türkiye.

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industry, retaining existing customers and fostering brand loyalty are critical challenges. Airlines leverage customer loyalty programs as a strategic tool for competitive advantage (Arslan, 2020; Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Verona & Prandelli, 2002), recognizing that maintaining loyal customers is significantly less costly than acquiring new ones (Berman, 2006). Drawing from Social Identity Theory and Aesthetic Labor Theory, this study explores how uniforms and cabin crew demeanor shape brand perception and loyalty.

Customer loyalty is not just about repeated business; it also cultivates repurchase intentions, which are crucial for sustained revenue growth (Kotler, 2000). Oliver (1997) and Hayes (2008) note that customer loyalty significantly enhances repurchase intentions, which have a more favorable impact on business than mere purchase intentions. This is because repurchase intention indicates a readiness to continue engaging with the same service or product in the future (Salsabila et al., 2020; Zeithaml, Berry, et al., 1996). Consequently, airlines increasingly focus on existing customers, developing various strategies to deepen loyalty and encourage repeat purchases (Cronin et al., 2000; Upamannyu et al., 2015).

In service marketing, where the offerings are inherently intangible, creating a favorable and distinct brand image is especially crucial (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1989; Tu et al., 2011). The successful marketing of airline services, therefore, hinges not only on the physical aspects of the service but also on creating and maintaining a desirable image that resonates with consumers, ultimately influencing their perception and decision to repurchase.

In the competitive landscape of the airline industry, although airlines strive to standardize their core services, perceptions of these services vary significantly among passengers due to factors such as flight attendants' uniforms, their professional demeanor, and attitudes, contributing to a differentiated brand experience, hence, distinctive branding becomes crucial not only through service offerings but also through elements like flight attendant uniforms. This variance is influenced by subtle yet impactful factors such as the uniforms and attitudes of flight attendants. For example, a precisely crafted and unique uniform may have the potential to increase the perception of professionalism and reliability, and hence, increased sense of luxury, even in cases when the core service provided aligns with that of competitors. In the same way, the demeanor exhibited by cabin crew members has the potential to create a sense of appreciation and awareness of the airline within the market where almost all other tangible elements of service, such as seat comfort and in-flight amenities, are similar. Moreover, as per the Service Marketing Theory, the service encounter, the service environment, encompassing elements such as the physical surroundings, employees' demeanor, and behaviors, play a crucial role in influencing consumer perceptions of service quality while marketing intangible items (Zeithaml et al., 2017). The interaction between cabin staff and passengers, as well as their professional look, has a direct impact on the overall service experience for airlines. This, in turn, affects consumers' happiness and their chance of making repeat purchases.

In this study, the term 'uniform' refers specifically to the clothing attire worn by the flight attendants, which includes their formal outfits and accessories. This study does not consider other aspects of appearance, such as makeup or gestures, unless explicitly stated. To the best of our knowledge, limited research has been conducted on how uniforms specifically affect passengers' repurchase intentions, with a notable exception being the study by Baumann (2016). Baumann's findings indicate that airline uniforms significantly influence consumer behavior and repurchase decisions under several conditions, and his findings highlight how uniforms can enhance a brand's personality, making it more appealing to consumers who see a reflection of themselves in the brand image. Baumann (2016) found that "...airline uniform is more likely to positively impact on consumer behaviour when:

- *It aligns with how consumers view themselves;*
- *It fosters a sense of attachment to the airline;*
- *The respondent would fly with the airline based on the uniform;*
- *It appears to be the work of a famous designer;*
- *The uniform is viewed as a point of difference.*

*This result underscores the importance of building a strong, distinctive brand personality: Consumers will be more likely to respond positively to a brand they feel reflects how they see themselves."*

The findings of Baumann (2016) fall into the Social Identity Theory, which provides a robust framework for understanding how individuals' self-concepts are influenced by their memberships in various social groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that such identification can significantly influence consumer behavior, as customers are more likely to repurchase from brands that they perceive as an extension of their self-concept. When applied to the airline industry, this theory suggests that passengers may develop a sense of affinity or allegiance to an airline based on how well the brand and its representatives (i.e. the cabin crew) align with their own identity and values.

This insight complements existing strategies focused on deepening customer loyalty and suggests that the aesthetic and symbolic aspects of uniforms play a critical role in shaping customer perceptions and loyalty. Airlines that successfully integrate these elements into their brand identity can create a strong, distinctive brand personality that resonates with consumers, thereby enhancing their competitive advantage and fostering customer repurchase intentions. The strategic alignment of uniform design with customer culture not only differentiates an airline but also strengthens the emotional and psychological connections that drive customer loyalty and repurchase behavior.

Besides establishing a special bond between passengers (i.e. consumers) and the airlines, they should also have consumers develop a positive brand perception, which can be defined as *the sum of a consumer's feelings, experiences, and thoughts about a product or service* (Brakus et al., 2009). Brand perception is mainly created by user experience (Baty, 2006) and visual content (Dzyabura & Peres, 2021), such as advertising stimuli cues, and causes consumers to choose that specific brand among others (Rashid et al., 2019; Vorobyova, 2021). This special bond and brand perception are needed to have consumers find the brand suitable to their needs, sustain demand, earn their trust, and cause the consumers to perceive the airline as authentic as possible. Consumers tend to choose and use the brands they find authentic, close to themselves (or their extended self), and fit their lifestyle (Belk, 1988; Chernev et al., 2011; Mrad et al., 2020; Schroeder, 2008), creates a self-brand connection (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2003), and self-concept, i.e. the consumer's generalized view of the brand in relation to the self (Sprott et al., 2009), which is realized thru brand imagery. Brand imagery is different from brand image. Brand imagery is the product presentation through images or visual appearances associated with the brand, while the brand image is how consumers perceive the brand (Rossolatos, 2017; Schroeder, 2008) or the symbolic meaning that is associated with the brand by the consumer (Padgett & Allen, 1997).

The uniform is likely to influence brand perception and imagery as it plays a critical role in shaping the image of the individual, the company, and the state. In sectors where uniforms are used, businesses try to represent their characters and unique images with uniforms to enhance their image and increase their competitiveness. An airline's integrated image can be said to be embodied in the uniforms worn by flight attendants, which are the longest point of contact for passengers. The brand imagery is conveyed by the visual image of the uniforms and the way the flight attendants present them, such as the diction, make-up, walking style, and hairstyle (Nam & Kim, 2003; Ragab et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2010), which is the communication of the brand with its customers (Raza et al., 2023).

From a visual standpoint, the cabin crew and the uniforms they wear are the faces of an airline because cabin crews are directly in charge of projecting the company's image and making decisions. By nature, airlines sell intangible services. Passengers, on the other hand, perceive the brand imagery depending on the behavior of cabin attendants in their uniforms (Zeithaml, Bitner, et al., 1996). Uniforms should be functional for employees while reflecting the character and the business image. Uniforms reaffirm the employee's role, while customers recognize the image of a business through them (Nam & Kim, 2003; Ragab et al., 2024). Passengers' recognition of the uniform renders the uniform a non-verbal communication tool between the organization and the passenger (Kim et al., 2015; Raza et al., 2023). Therefore, uniforms provide an opportunity for airlines to apply a differentiation strategy and provide a competitive advantage.

According to Turley and Milliman (2000), the wearing of uniforms by business personnel accelerates the customer's adaptation to the institution's atmosphere. The uniform increases the perceived service quality level and positively affects the repurchase intention. In their study, Shao et al. (2004) concluded that the customers' perceived service quality is higher in businesses with appropriately dressed personnel, and the customers' purchase intention is higher in businesses with appropriately dressed personnel.

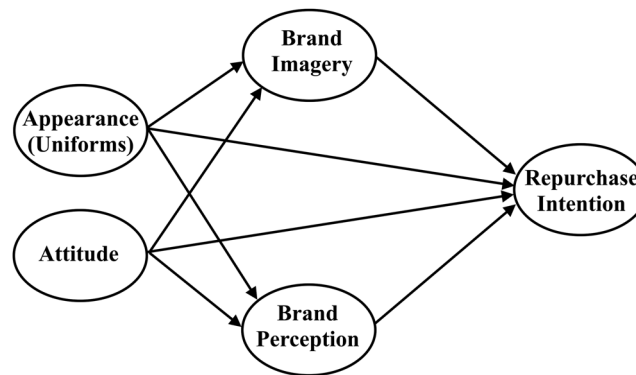
Fortune et al. (1995) revealed in their study that using more casual and comfortable clothes instead of uniforms has a lower perception of brand imagery by customers. Many researchers in the marketing domain have recognized the effects of brand imagery and brand reputation on customer purchasing behavior (Barich & Kotler, 1991; Zeithaml, 1981). Brand imagery and brand reputation are particularly important in developing and maintaining customer loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994). Therefore, the most critical issue for an airline is convincing customers to choose their service for their next trip, which is quite challenging since the industry is highly competitive and profit margins are very narrow. Therefore, it is crucial to determine factors affecting customers' repurchase intention.

Since the uniforms, i.e. their formal appearance, cause flight attendants to fulfill their predetermined roles and force them to watch their attitudes towards customers and all activities, it should affect the customers' perception of the airline and its brand imagery and brand perception. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of flight attendants' uniforms on customers' repurchase intentions and their perception of the airline's brand imagery and perception, which may provide valuable insights for airlines to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty. In this context, customer satisfaction is specifically attributed to the symbolic and professional aspects of uniforms, rather than general appearance. Additionally, understanding the role of uniforms in shaping customers' perceptions and, hence, their repurchase intention can contribute to the literature on service marketing and employee-customer interactions.

There are several studies may be found in the literature exploring the impact of service employees' appearance on customer perceptions and behaviors, yet there is a significant gap that our study aims to investigate. For example, previous research on the impact of cabin crew uniforms on customer perceptions has yielded mixed results. Seo (2018) found that customers perceive full-service carrier crew uniforms as clean and sophisticated, while low-cost carrier crew uniforms are seen as comfortable and familiar. Kim and Park (2013) identified aesthetics, functionality, and symbolization as key factors influencing uniform satisfaction and airline selection. Yang (2017) highlighted the importance of physical attractiveness and emotional awareness in full-service carrier crew uniforms, and a good cabin atmosphere and outgoing personality in low-cost carrier crew uniforms. Foster (1989) and Adomaitis and Johnson (2005) found that customers prefer young, female cabin crew members and that uniform type can influence crew behavior and self-perception. Opatha and Rathnayake (2018) emphasized the importance of crew attitude, agreeableness, and competencies in job performance and customer service. Baumann (2016), provides foundational insights into the influence of uniforms on consumer behavior.

As far as the service sector is concerned, the appearance of service employees was found to significantly influence customer perceptions, with factors such as age, gender, and mode of dress playing a role (Foster & Resnick, 2013; Karl et al., 2013; Tu et al., 2011). Frontline staff also play a crucial role in building service brands through their conduct and appearance (Mogaji, 2015). Visible diversity, including age, ethnicity, and gender, can impact customer attitudes and behavior (Quach et al., 2017). Cleanliness and neatness in employee appearance can enhance customer approach and business interest (Vilnai-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2011). Frontline employee behaviors, particularly those related to service quality, are key to enhancing customer perceptions (Farrell et al., 2001). Physical attractiveness stereotypes can also affect customer perceptions of service quality (Luoh & Tsaur, 2009).

However, almost all studies often overlook the deeper psychological mechanisms involved, particularly within the airline industry context. To address this, our study integrates Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Aesthetic Labor Theory (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001), offering a more detailed analytical framework to examine how uniforms and crew demeanor affect passenger loyalty. Furthermore, existing literature tends to focus primarily on immediate customer reactions to uniforms, with limited discussion on the long-term effects on repurchase intentions and brand loyalty. This research extends these findings by exploring not only the initial impacts of aesthetic factors but also their enduring influence on brand perception and customer loyalty, as discussed in studies by Zeithaml, Berry et al. (1996). Additionally, prior studies often treat the airline service experience as uniform, neglecting the nuanced ways in which different branding strategies – such as low-cost versus premium services – mediate the relationship between uniform perceptions and customer loyalty (Berry, 2000). By considering these variations, this



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.

study enriches the understanding of how cabin crew presentation strategically enhances competitive advantage and customer retention in a diverse market.

This study seeks to explore the impact of flight attendants' uniforms and professional demeanor on passengers' perceptions of airline brand quality and their subsequent repurchase intentions. Recent research suggests that service employee appearance plays a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions of service quality and brand credibility. The conceptual model is given in Figure 1.

Our first research question, *"How does the uniform and professional demeanor of cabin crew influence passengers' perceptions of airline brand quality and their repurchase intentions?"* is grounded in both social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and aesthetic labor theories (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007).

Social Identity Theory underscores how uniforms visually align passengers' self-concepts with the airline brand, fostering group identification. Aesthetic Labor Theory complements this by emphasizing the performative aspect, where visual and behavioral standards of cabin crew contribute to creating a premium service environment. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive lens to understand the symbolic and aesthetic impact of uniforms on passenger perceptions.

The second question, *"Through what psychological or perceptual mechanisms do uniforms and cabin crew attitudes impact passengers' loyalty and repurchase decisions?"* aims to uncover the underlying psychological processes, such as the halo effect, where positive impressions of one attribute (e.g. attractive uniforms) lead to favorable perceptions of c (e.g. service quality) (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

This study intends to contribute to a better understanding of the mechanism and strategic importance of employee uniforms within the airline industry and its effects on brand differentiation and consumers' repurchase intentions by addressing the research questions.

## Methods

This study was conducted with the approval of the Istanbul Gelisim University (Turkiye) Ethics Committee (approval number: 2021-37-03), and informed written consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

### Measures and data collection

The questionnaire had four parts. We collected the demographics of the participant, including their age, gender, the airline they prefer, and flight frequency in the first part.

In the second part, we used the Uniformed Flight Attendants Attitudes-Behavior Scale, developed and validated by Güngör and Önlér (2022), to gather participants' input regarding their perception of the attitudes and behaviors of the uniformed flight attendants. The scale has eleven items and two dimensions: 1) appearance (uniforms) (5 items) and 2) attitude-behavior (6 items). All items in the scale on uniform appearance and professional demeanor are directly aligned with the symbolic (Social Identity Theory) and aesthetic (Aesthetic Labor Theory) dimensions of the study. Furthermore, items

related to appearance and attitudes were designed to measure their impact on brand imagery and perception as well. For instance, 'The appearance/image of the flight crew in the airline uniforms makes me feel optimistic' aligns with 'I think the airline I choose to fly with prioritizes community interests' to show connections between visual cues and trust. Some of the items from the scale are as follows:

- i. Appearance (Uniforms)
  - The appearance/image of the flight crew in the airline uniforms makes me feel optimistic.
  - Images of airline uniformed flight attendants create an aesthetic perception.
- ii. Attitude-behavior
  - Airline uniformed flight attendants always have a helpful attitude.
  - Airline uniformed flight attendants are good at initiating and maintaining positive communication with passengers.

In the third part, we used the Brand Imagery Scale that was developed and validated by Canitez (2016), based on Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) and Gürses and Kılıç (2013). The scale has 10 items and 2 dimensions: 1) brand perception (6 items) and 2) brand imagery (4 items). Some of the items in the scale are as follows:

- i. Brand perception
  - The airline I choose to fly with prioritizes community interests and welfare over company interests and profitability.
  - I think the airline I choose to fly with is an expert in all areas of the aviation sector.
- ii. Brand imagery
  - I think other consumers also like the airline brand I choose to fly with.
  - This airline I choose to fly with is the first company that comes to mind among airline transportation companies.

In the fourth and last part, the scale that was developed by Shafiee et al. (2014) was adapted to this study to measure the repurchase intentions of the participants. The scale has one dimension and three items:

- If I travel by plane again, I prefer the airline I fly with to other airline companies.
- I have enough reasons to prefer the airline I fly with to other airline companies.
- In general, I think it is an excellent decision to use the services offered by the airline I fly with.

## **Sampling**

In this cross-sectional study, the convenience sampling method and an online survey were employed to gather data. The survey was conducted in Türkiye between March 4 and April 30, 2021. The criteria for inclusion were to be over 18 years old and use any airlines operated in Türkiye. Since the total population size of airline passengers in Türkiye is vast and difficult to define precisely, a non-probability convenience sampling method was used. Convenience sampling is commonly utilized in aviation and service research when a precise population framework is unavailable (Etikan et al., 2016). While this method carries potential bias, it allows researchers to access participants who have just experienced airline services, ensuring the relevance of responses.

To determine an appropriate sample size, we followed the general guidelines for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). According to Hair et al. (2014), the minimum sample size for PLS-SEM should be ten times the maximum number of inner or outer model paths leading to any construct. Given our model's complexity, a sample size exceeding 200 is considered sufficient for robust results. Additionally, we ensured a margin of safety by collecting data from 520 participants, exceeding typical recommendations for SEM analysis. To obtain real-time insights, the data was curated at the exit door of Istanbul Airport Arrival Terminal, only from passengers who had just landed. We used electronic forms and tablet computers to get the responses of the participants.

**Table 1.** The demographic of the respondent.

| Characteristic                | Category         | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender                        | Female           | 298       | 61.07%     |
|                               | Male             | 190       | 38.93%     |
| Age                           | 18–25            | 87        | 17.83%     |
|                               | 26–35            | 145       | 29.71%     |
|                               | 36–45            | 129       | 26.43%     |
|                               | 46–55            | 101       | 20.70%     |
|                               | >55              | 26        | 5.33%      |
| Education                     | Primary          | 2         | 0.41%      |
|                               | Secondary        | 38        | 7.79%      |
|                               | Associate Degree | 63        | 12.91%     |
|                               | Undergraduate    | 247       | 50.61%     |
|                               | Graduate Level   | 138       | 28.28%     |
| Frequency of flights per year | 1–3              | 198       | 40.57%     |
|                               | 4–6              | 157       | 32.17%     |
|                               | 7–12             | 47        | 9.63%      |
|                               | >12              | 86        | 17.62%     |
| Preferred flight class        | Economy          | 463       | 94.88%     |
|                               | Business         | 25        | 5.12%      |
| Preferred airline             | Turkish Airlines | 224       | 45.90%     |
|                               | Anadolu Jet      | 92        | 18.85%     |
|                               | Pegasus          | 147       | 30.12%     |
|                               | Onur Air         | 14        | 2.87%      |
|                               | Sun Express      | 9         | 1.84%      |
|                               | Other            | 2         | 0.41%      |
| Total                         |                  | 488       | 100.00%    |

A total of 520 individuals participated in this study, but only 488 (93.85% of total participants) responses were included in the analysis due to either contradictory (three similar items were randomly distributed in the questionnaire to assess the integrity of the responses) or empty responses.

We used the SPSS 24 statistical software package to analyze the participants' demographics (e.g. gender, age, education, frequency of flights per annum, preferred class, and airline) and results reported in Table 1.

### Data analysis

PLS-SEM (using SmartPLS version 3.2.9) is used to analyze collected data to test the hypothesis. Confirmatory Composite Analysis (CCA), Convergence Validity and Discriminant Validity, and Reliability Tests were performed alongside the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) and the prediction relevance ( $Q^2$ ) values that were used to assess the acceptability of the model. Figure 2 shows the path model.

PLS-SEM (using SmartPLS version 3.2.9) was used to analyze the collected data and test the hypotheses. The software automatically calculates key validity metrics, including Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio based on standard PLS-SEM validation procedures (Hair et al., 2014). These metrics ensure that the constructs meet the following reliability and validity thresholds.

- For Convergence Validity:
  - The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should be greater or equal to 0.50 (Hair et al., 2014, 2019).
  - Composite Reliability (CR) should be greater or equal to 0.70 and the square root of the AVE value (Hair et al., 2014, 2019).
  - Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) should be greater or equal to 0.70 (Hair et al., 2014, 2019).
- For Discriminant Validity:
  - Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) should be smaller or equal to 0.90 for the theoretical concepts close to each other and smaller or equal to 0.85 for those distinct (Henseler et al., 2015).
  - The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) should be smaller than 5 (Rahman et al., 2016).
- For model acceptability:
  - The coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ):  $R^2 \geq 0.10$  (Falk & Miller, 1992; Hair et al., 2019).
  - The  $Q^2$  value (the prediction relevance):  $Q^2 > 0$  (Ringle et al., 2015).

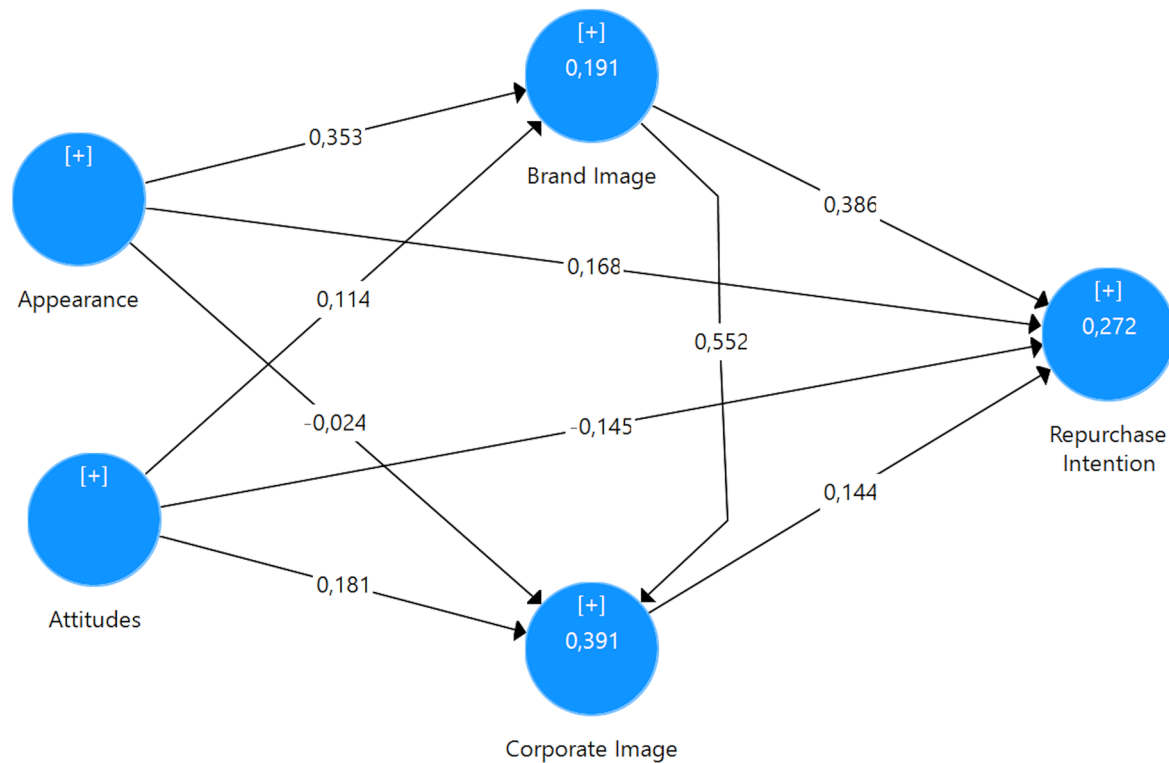


Figure 2. Path model.

### Findings and discussion

As per the results reported in Table 2, all the criteria set for Cronbach's Alpha, CR, AVE values, and Factor Loadings were met, and hence, we concluded that the internal consistency, reliability, and convergent validity conditions were satisfied.

The highest HTMT value was measured as 0.760 between Attitudes and Appearance. Hence, we concluded that the scales satisfy the criteria set for discriminant validity. Because of the VIF value (measured as 1.943 between Brand Perception and Appearance), we concluded that there is no collinearity between variables.

The  $R^2$  and  $Q^2$  values that are used to assess the model's acceptability, are given in Table 3, and as per those values, the measurement model has prediction power and is acceptable.

The PLS-SEM and path analysis were utilized to test the structural equation model after establishing the validity, scales' reliability, and the measurement model's acceptability. The analysis results of the complete bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 sub-samples are reported in Table 4.

As per the results in Table 4, the Attitudes and Appearances of the flight attendants significantly and positively affect the Repurchase Intention ( $\beta=0.144$ ;  $p<0.01$  and  $\beta=0.168$ ;  $p<0.01$ , respectively). Furthermore, the Attitudes of the flight attendants significantly and positively affect Brand Perception ( $\beta=0.181$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), while the Appearance of the flight attendants affects Brand Imagery ( $\beta=0.353$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) significantly and positively.

Although opposite results were reported (Widayat et al., 2021), we found that Brand Imagery and Brand Perception affect the Repurchase Intention ( $\beta=0.388$ ;  $p<0.001$  and  $\beta=0.142$ ;  $p<0.01$ , respectively) significantly and positively. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the effect of brand imagery on repurchase intention is higher than that of brand perception. This aligns with prior research suggesting that visual branding elements, such as uniforms, create an immediate and emotional connection with consumers (Haidar, 2024; Trehan & Kalro, 2024; Tripathy, 2025), reinforcing brand loyalty. From a theoretical perspective, this supports Social Identity Theory, which posits that passengers are more likely to repurchase when they perceive an airline's brand as a reflection of their own identity. This distinction suggests that while brand perception is important, the symbolic and visual cues associated with brand imagery play a more direct role in influencing passenger behavior.

**Table 2.** Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE values.

| Construct            | Item         | Factor Loadings | Cronbach's Alpha | CR    | AVE   |
|----------------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------|-------|-------|
|                      | REPURCHASE02 | 0.934           |                  |       |       |
|                      | REPURCHASE03 | 0.924           |                  |       |       |
| Appearance           | APPR01       | 0.733           | 0.821            | 0.870 | 0.528 |
|                      | APPR02       | 0.712           |                  |       |       |
|                      | APPR03       | 0.793           |                  |       |       |
|                      | APPR04       | 0.591           |                  |       |       |
|                      | APPR05       | 0.777           |                  |       |       |
|                      | APPR06       | 0.737           |                  |       |       |
| Attitudes            | ATT01        | 0.778           | 0.889            | 0.916 | 0.646 |
|                      | ATT02        | 0.719           |                  |       |       |
|                      | ATT03        | 0.848           |                  |       |       |
|                      | ATT04        | 0.777           |                  |       |       |
|                      | ATT05        | 0.825           |                  |       |       |
|                      | ATT06        | 0.865           |                  |       |       |
| Brand Imagery        | BRND_IMG01   | 0.858           | 0.790            | 0.865 | 0.617 |
|                      | BRND_IMG02   | 0.839           |                  |       |       |
|                      | BRND_IMG03   | 0.710           |                  |       |       |
|                      | BRND_IMG04   | 0.723           |                  |       |       |
| Brand Perception     | BRND_PERC01  | 0.536           | 0.812            | 0.865 | 0.520 |
|                      | BRND_PERC02  | 0.777           |                  |       |       |
|                      | BRND_PERC03  | 0.770           |                  |       |       |
|                      | BRND_PERC04  | 0.807           |                  |       |       |
|                      | BRND_PERC05  | 0.659           |                  |       |       |
|                      | BRND_PERC06  | 0.742           |                  |       |       |
| Repurchase Intention | REPURCHASE01 | 0.898           | 0.908            | 0.942 | 0.844 |

**Table 3.**  $R^2$  and  $Q^2$  values.

|                      | $R$ Square | $Q$ Square |
|----------------------|------------|------------|
| Brand Imagery        | 0.191      | 0.112      |
| Brand Perception     | 0.391      | 0.197      |
| Repurchase Intention | 0.272      | 0.223      |

**Table 4.** Direct effects.

| Path                                     | $\beta$   |
|------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Appearance -> Brand Imagery              | 0,353 *** |
| Appearance -> Brand Perception           | -0,024    |
| Appearance -> Repurchase Intention       | 0,168 **  |
| Attitudes -> Brand Imagery               | 0,114     |
| Attitudes -> Brand Perception            | 0,181 **  |
| Attitudes -> Repurchase Intention        | 0,144 **  |
| Brand Imagery -> Brand Perception        | 0,554 *** |
| Brand Imagery -> Repurchase Intention    | 0,388 *** |
| Brand Perception -> Repurchase Intention | 0,142 **  |

$\beta$ : Path coefficient; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

The results above suggest that the flight attendants' attractive uniforms (e.g. appearance) and attitudes toward the passengers affect their repurchase intentions.

By integrating these theoretical insights with our empirical findings, it becomes evident that the strategic management of cabin crew's appearance and demeanor is not merely about aesthetics but is a vital component of the airline's service marketing strategy. These elements work synergistically to create a differentiated brand experience that not only meets but exceeds passenger expectations, fostering loyalty and encouraging repeat business.

Interestingly enough, the attractive uniforms (e.g. appearance) of the flight attendants improve the brand image, but the attitudes of flight attendants do not. This result may be due to the uniformity of the flight attendants' attitudes across aviation companies. The attitudes of flight attendants of almost all airlines are similar to each other, and hence, the brand image is only affected by the appearance of the flight attendants (Kim et al., 2015). Therefore, the only difference, and hence the observed effect, across the companies in the aviation sector is in the appearance of the flight attendants, i.e. their uniforms. The positive effect of the attitudes of the flight attendants on brand perception suggests that, although the

attitudes of crew members are similar across airline companies, the positive interaction of the crew members with the passengers improves the brand perception of the passengers. The passengers most likely perceive this interaction as the communication of brand information and meaning perception, crucial for successful value creation and brand positioning (He & Zhang, 2022) and brand value (Mahadin et al., 2023).

Improved brand image (Shafiee et al., 2014), brand awareness, and service quality (Cole et al., 2002; Erogluer, 2013) affect customer trust and purchase intention (Fu, 2023; Shabankareh et al., 2024) not only in aviation but in all sectors (Ali et al., 2022; Febrian & Vinahapsari, 2020; Mambu, 2015; Pramudya & Sunaryo, 2018; Wu et al., 2011), customer loyalty (Marangoz & Biber, 2007; Mazanec, 1995; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001; Wilson, 2019;), and satisfaction (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000) which leads repurchase behavior (Çabuk et al., 2013; Fu, 2023; Nguyen & Leblanc, 1996; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Shabankareh et al., 2024; Sirgy et al., 2008; Suh & Youjae, 2006). Therefore, the results of this analysis show the importance of the appearance and attitudes of the crew members in creating an improved brand image and perception, two crucial concepts in the marketing domain.

Although uniforms cause the employee to act according to predefined standards or roles (Albert et al., 2008; Nelson & Bowen, 2000; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993), the appearance of the uniform affects the perceived competence of the employee (Mangum et al., 1997). In line with the findings mentioned above in the literature, most likely, the appearance of the crew members causes the passengers to perceive them as competent employees, which may affect the brand image. Further research needs to be conducted to reveal the effect of the aesthetic appearance of uniforms (Kim et al., 2015) or uniforms that are produced by luxury brands (Kim & Baker, 2022) on perceived brand imagery.

These findings are also supported by some of the key theories of psychology, consumer behavior, and service marketing. From the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) perspective, cabin crew uniforms serve as symbolic elements that visually connect the airline with passengers' self-identity, fostering a sense of belonging and group affiliation. This symbolic alignment creates an emotional attachment, causing passengers to perceive the airline as an extension of their own identity, which enhances brand loyalty and influences repurchase intentions, consistent with the findings of Baumann (2016). Principles of the Aesthetic Labor Theory (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007), which emphasizes the impact of aesthetic and behavioral elements on the service experience, are evident in our results. The polished appearance of cabin crew (e.g. uniforms) and their professional demeanor not only meet aesthetic expectations but also significantly enhance passenger satisfaction. A well-managed service environment, defined by visually appealing uniforms and professional interactions, reinforces the perception of quality and is crucial for fostering customer loyalty. Furthermore, Brand Equity Theory may provide additional insights into these findings. According to Aaker (1991), the positive perceptions created by the professional appearance and behavior of cabin crew significantly contribute to an airline's brand equity by enhancing brand awareness and perceived quality. This enhanced equity directly influences passengers' repurchase intentions and their likelihood to recommend the airline, as described by Keller (1993).

All the above-mentioned theoretical perspectives help explain our findings and the importance of the appearance and behavior of cabin crew members in increasing passengers' repurchase intentions. Our findings also prove that cabin crew uniforms should not be considered just an aesthetic component but an important detail or factor for airline service marketing and branding strategy.

As per the results given in Table 5, Brand Imagery mediates the effect of Appearance on Repurchase Intention ( $\beta=0.137$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) and Brand Perception ( $\beta=0.195$ ;  $p<0.01$ ). Brand Perception mediates the

**Table 5.** Indirect effects.

| Path                                                                    | $\beta$   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Appearance -> Brand Imagery -> Brand Perception -> Repurchase Intention | 0.028 *   |
| Attitudes -> Brand Imagery -> Brand Perception -> Repurchase Intention  | 0.009     |
| Attitudes -> Brand Imagery -> Brand Perception                          | 0.063     |
| Appearance -> Brand Perception -> Repurchase Intention                  | -0.003    |
| Appearance -> Brand Imagery -> Repurchase Intention                     | 0.137 *** |
| Attitudes -> Brand Imagery -> Repurchase Intention                      | 0.044     |
| Attitudes -> Brand Perception -> Repurchase Intention                   | 0.026 *   |
| Appearance -> Brand Imagery -> Brand Perception                         | 0.195 *** |
| Brand Imagery -> Brand Perception -> Repurchase Intention               | 0.079 **  |

$\beta$ : Path coefficient. \* $p<0.05$ ; \*\* $p<0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.001$ .

effect of Attitudes on Repurchase Intention ( $\beta=0.026$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). The results reported in [Tables 4 and 5](#) show that all the mediation effects are partial (Hair et al., 2014), not full mediation.

Although certain effects, such as the effect of Appearance on Brand Perception and its indirect effect on Repurchase Intention, yielded statistically non-significant results, this suggests that the appearance of flight attendants does not directly influence brand perception in a meaningful way. Therefore, these effects were not interpreted further as they do not contribute to the theoretical or managerial implications of the study.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effects of the appearance (i.e. uniforms) and attitudes of cabin crew on passengers' repurchase behavior and the mediating role of brand imagery and brand perception in this effect.

The findings of this study show that the cabin crew uniforms has a significant effect on brand perception, which suggests that uniforms act as a symbolic indicator connecting passengers' self-concept with the airline. Moreover, the findings also suggest that uniforms, along with the professional demeanor exhibited by the cabin crew members may have significant influences on creating a positive first impression on the brand, passengers' overall satisfaction and perception of service quality, and brand equity. Furthermore, from the findings of this study, it may be said that the integration of fashionable uniforms and the courteous professional demeanor of the cabin crew greatly improves the perceived service atmosphere, resulting in increased passengers' intention to repurchase.

These results show that Baumann (2016) reached the correct and verifiable conclusion. Furthermore, Baumann (2016) conducted his research in Australia, and we were able to verify the same result from a Turkish sample, which suggests that the perceptions of the passengers are more or less the same: creating a distinctive brand personality through the uniforms which may cause the passengers to feel like as their reflection, and cause them to create a feeling of attachment.

From a managerial standpoint, airlines should leverage uniform design as a strategic branding tool. Given that brand imagery significantly influences repurchase intention, airlines may benefit from investing in visually distinct uniforms that reflect the brand's values and target audience preferences. Additionally, training programs emphasizing aesthetic labor – where cabin crew members align their presentation and demeanor with brand identity – can enhance passenger perceptions. These insights offer practical guidelines for airline executives seeking to strengthen customer loyalty through uniform aesthetics and crew professionalism.

## Limitations and further research

This study has several limitations, and the findings should be interpreted by considering those limitations. The limitations of this study may be listed as follows:

- This study is cross-sectional, and we do not have information on whether the participants have flown with other airlines.
- Another limitation of this study is the potential bias arising from respondents' limited exposure to multiple airlines.
- Another limitation is the convenience sampling method itself. The method relies on only self-reported measurement instruments and carries out the measurement only once, which may raise concerns about the generalizability of the findings.
- Another limitation of the study is that the interpretations of the effects may not be as precise as intended since no comparable study has been found in the literature.
- Due to the pandemic, time, and money constraints, this research was only conducted online and at Istanbul Airport.
- Because of the uncontrollable variables related to international flights during the pandemic, only domestic flights were included in the study.

- This study focused only on the effect of flight attendants' uniforms and attitudes on customers' repurchase intentions, and sampling location, cultural influences, and airline-specific attributes have not been extensively elaborated. Future research should explore how these contextual factors might influence passenger perceptions and repurchase intentions.
- Future research could also design a study where real passengers are invited to interact with cabin crew members wearing different uniforms and exhibiting specific gestures. This approach would allow for a more dynamic assessment of how the combination of uniforms and non-verbal cues influences passenger perceptions and repurchase intentions in a realistic setting.
- Future studies also need to assess if the aesthetic appearance of uniforms (Kim et al., 2015) or uniforms produced by luxury brands (Kim & Baker, 2022) impact the airlines' brand image or brand perception.
- Cross-cultural studies or comparative studies across full-service and low-cost carriers or between domestic and international airlines could reveal differences in how uniforms influence passenger perceptions.
- Furthermore, the effect of the color, design, brand, and globalization of the uniforms on cabin crew and their behavior needs to be investigated in order to guide airlines during their design of the uniforms.

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Conceptualization HG, and BÖ; methodology, MA, and HG; software, MA; validation, MA, HG, and BÖ; formal analysis, MA and HG; data curation, HG, and BÖ; writing – original draft preparation, MA, HG, and BÖ; writing – review and editing, MA, HG, and BÖ. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Mustafa Aslan**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Habibe Güngör**: Data curation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Büşra Önlü**: Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Institutional review board statement

This study was conducted with the approval of the Istanbul Gelisim University (Türkiye) Ethics Committee (approval number: 2021-37-03).

## Informed consent statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Disclosure statement

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## About the authors

**Mustafa Aslan** is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Aviation Management at the Faculty of Applied Sciences, Istanbul Bilgi University. He holds a Ph.D. in Management and has extensive experience in both academic and administrative roles across the aviation industry and higher education. His primary research interests include organizational behaviour, strategic management, and leadership, with a particular focus on their applications

within the aviation and service industries. Dr. Aslan has contributed to numerous national and international conferences and journals and actively participates in initiatives aimed at improving management practices in the aviation sector.

**Habibe Güngör** is currently the Supervisor of Flight Documentation and Training Development at Turkish Airlines Flight Academy and holds a Ph.D. in Business from Istanbul Arel University, MSc degree in Air Transport Management. She is teaching various courses at Istanbul Bilgi University, Department of Aviation Management. Her academic interests center on management within the broader field of social sciences and humanities, and her research explores a range of topics, including strategic management, sustainability, service quality, and organizational dynamics within the aviation and transportation sectors. She has published extensively in national and international journals and maintains a strong interest in interdisciplinary approaches to aviation policy, innovation, and management practices.

**Büşra Öner** is currently working as a research assistant at Istanbul Gelisim University, Department of Aviation Management. She completed her undergraduate degree at Erciyes University, Department of Aviation Management, her thesis-based master's degree at Cumhuriyet University, Department of Business Administration, and her non-thesis master's degree at Istanbul Gelisim University, Department of Aviation Management. Res. Asst. Büşra Öner Çiğdem is currently pursuing her doctorate at Kocaeli University in the same field. Her areas of interest include sustainable aviation, airline marketing, and airline management.

## ORCID

Mustafa Aslan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8049-3615>

Habibe Güngör  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3148-8737>

Büşra Öner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9894-1639>

## Data availability statement

Data are available upon request from the corresponding author, Dr. Mustafa Aslan [mustafa.aslan@bilgi.edu.tr](mailto:mustafa.aslan@bilgi.edu.tr)

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