

Mediation Effect of Cultural Features on Brand Equity Within Customer Brand Engagement: A Research on the Service Sector*

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Abstract: Today, the concept of customer brand engagement has become a very important element within the scope of creating brand value of businesses. In addition, strong brand equity understanding contributes to increasing the level of brand engagement of customers. The purpose of this study is to determine the mediating effect of cultural characteristics on brand equity within the scope of customer brand involvement. In this study, it is aimed to determine the effect of cultural characteristics on the brand equity of Generation Z Turkish and African participants living in Ankara. The data obtained in the study were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics 26 and IBM SPSS AMOS 23 programmes. It was determined that cultural characteristics have a mediating effect on brand equity formation within the scope of customer brand involvement. It has been concluded that the level of customer brand involvement is higher in African participants, cultural characteristics are effective in social identity and ethnocentrism dimensions in brand value formation, Turkish participants are less affected by cultural characteristics in brand value formation, service quality and price-performance perception are more effective in brand value formation. It is thought that the related research will make a significant contribution to the literature by examining cultural characteristics within the scope of customer brand involvement and measuring the mediating effect of cultural characteristics on brand value creation and the effect of cultural characteristics on brand value creation has not been examined before.

Keywords: Customer brand engagement, cultural characteristics, brand equity, generation Z, service sector

Jel Codes: M1, M3, M30

Müşteri Marka Katılımı Kapsamında Kültürel Özelliklerin Marka Değeri Üzerine Aracılık Etkisi: Hizmet Sektörü Üzerine Bir Araştırma

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Öz: Günümüzde işletmelerin marka değeri oluşturması kapsamında müşteri marka katılımı kavramı oldukça önemli bir unsur haline gelmiştir. Bunun yanında güçlü marka değeri anlayışı müşterilerin marka katılımı düzeylerinin artırılmasına katkı sağlamaktadır. Bu araştırmanın amacı ise; müşteri marka katılımı kapsamında kültürel özelliklerin marka değeri üzerine aracılık etkisinin belirlenmesidir. Bu çalışmada, Ankara’da yaşayan Z kuşağı Türk ve Afrikalı katılımcıların müşteri marka katılımı düzeylerinin marka değeri oluşturmasında kültürel özelliklerin etkisinin belirlenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Araştırmada elde edilen verilerin IBM SPSS Statistics 26 ve IBM SPSS AMOS 23 programları ile analizi gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmada elde edilen verilerin AMOS istatistik programı ile analizi gerçekleştirilmiştir. Kültürel özelliklerin; müşteri marka katılımı kapsamında marka değeri oluşumu üzerinde aracılık etkisi olduğu belirlenmiştir. Müşteri marka katılım düzeyinin Afrikalı katılımcılarda daha yüksek olduğu marka değeri oluşumunda kültürel özelliklerin sosyal kimlik ve etnosentrizm boyutunda etkili olduğu, Türk katılımcıların ise marka değeri oluşumunda kültürel özelliklerden daha az etkilendiği, hizmet kalitesi ve fiyat-performans algısının marka değeri oluşumunda daha etkili olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. İlgili araştırmanın müşteri marka katılımı kapsamında kültürel özellikleri inceleyerek

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marka değeri oluşturmadaki aracılık etkisini ölçmesi ve kültürel özelliklerin marka değeri oluşturmadaki etkisinin daha önce incelenmemiş olması nedeniyle literatüre önemli katkı sağlayacağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Müşteri marka katılımı, kültürel özellikler, marka değeri, z kuşağı, hizmet sektörü

Jel Kodları: M1, M3, M30

1. Introduction

Customers are the basic element of the survival of businesses, establishing a good relationship with customers is the basis for the long-term survival of a business. Therefore, understanding customers, providing individualised service, maintaining customer loyalty and interacting with customers to build a close relationship are the most important issues for businesses. In this context, the concept of customer brand engagement emerges. The concept of customer brand engagement, which is based on relationship marketing, has attracted the attention of businesses in recent years as it guides consumers and brands to communicate better.

The concept of customer brand engagement is defined as the intensity of an individual's engagement in an organisation's activities, customer- or business-initiated interaction, communication and connection with them (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019).

Customer brand engagement is a very important concept for businesses to create brand equity. It has been determined in the literature review that cultural factors are examined together with brand equity and country comparisons are carried out relatively less in the studies on the concept, and the subject of this study has been preferred in order to contribute to the field. Although the studies that address customer brand engagement within the scope of country comparison are quite limited, examples for the studies carried out are as follows; India and China (2018), Slovenia and Croatia (2016), Turkey and Spain (2016), America and China (2010). In this context, it can be stated that Turkey and Africa have not been analysed before. The concept of customer brand engagement emerges as a result of the relationship between the brand and the customer, and this communication, which has been created over time, strengthens and results in a strong value attributed to the brand.

Generation Z African and Turkish participants are included in the study. These two countries were chosen because the role of cross-cultural differences in customer brand engagement has not been addressed before. Determining the brand equity understanding of today's Z generation and their participation in the brand is very important for brands and businesses. Especially in an age where innovations are experienced very rapidly, this generation has been preferred in order to understand the attitude of Generation Z and to help businesses develop strategies in this direction. These two countries have been preferred in order to contribute to the field and to contribute to the field, as it has not been previously addressed on the basis of these two countries within the scope of determining cultural differences in the place of intercultural differences in customer brand engagement. The application part of the study was carried out on the fast-food sector, whose share in the service sector has increased over the years and is especially preferred by young people.

It can be stated that this issue addressed within the scope of the research will be necessary to understand the basic behaviours of young consumers that will shape the marketing strategies of both current and future businesses. Generation Z is a new population segment with different needs and enormous market potential. For today's brands, understanding the factors affecting the consumption behaviour of this generation is crucial when deciding on new goods and services and planning marketing communication strategies. The influence that this generation represents for marketing will have a significant value for businesses. Therefore, it is of great importance to understand

and analyse the behaviour of this young generation and the factors in their decision-making process.

Within the scope of the study, the customer brand engagement levels of Generation Z African and Turkish participants were determined and it was determined how effective their cultural characteristics were at the point of brand engagement and accordingly, it was revealed how the brand equity perceptions of the participants of the two countries differed in line with these different cultural characteristics. It is very important to examine how fast food brands operating in the service sector can interact with customers in different markets and cultures and how these interactions vary. This study is thought to make significant contributions to the field in terms of showing how the marketing strategies of businesses and brands can be adapted according to cultural and regional differences, examining the concept of customer brand engagement in terms of both cultural and brand equity with the aspect of Generation Z and making comparisons on the basis of two different countries and at the same time, it offers important results and suggestions to businesses and brands.

Within the scope of the study, firstly, a literature review was carried out, customer brand involvement and its dimensions were included, brand equity and the relationship between brand equity and customer brand involvement were mentioned. Then, the concept of culture is mentioned and its mediating effect on brand equity is mentioned. In the next section, the methodology of the study is given and the findings are analysed. Afterwards, the results of the analyses are interpreted and managerial implications are made and in the last section, suggestions for future studies are given.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Customer Brand Engagement

Customer brand engagement is a concept that is very important within the scope of managing brands and creating a customer base that is emotionally connected to the brand, and which should be handled carefully in order for businesses and brands to be successful in today's marketing understanding (Kandampully et al., 2015).

The concept of customer brand engagement is rooted in relationship marketing theory. Engagement in a customer-brand relationship is defined as "a set of behaviours that go beyond transactions and can be specifically defined as a customer's behavioural manifestations of a brand or business oriented behaviour resulting from motivational factors beyond the purchase". (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Customer brand engagement was first identified as a high research priority by the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) in 2010. The MSI states that customer brand engagement as a process does not only involve transactions and therefore includes behaviours that go beyond the purchase (Marketing Science Institute, 2010).

2.1.1. Customer Brand Engagement Dimensions

Although customer brand engagement is defined as a multidimensional concept; it consists of a three-dimensional structure consisting of cognitive, emotional and behavioural components. With these three dimensions, customer brand engagement captures the depth of customer-brand relationships. (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019).

Cognitive engagement is the degree of psychological behaviour or interest that occurs when interacting with a brand (Vivek et al., 2014). Affective engagement relates to the development of emotional connections and affection towards a brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Behavioral engagement represents the level of physical engagement of consumers and their positive contribution to the experience.

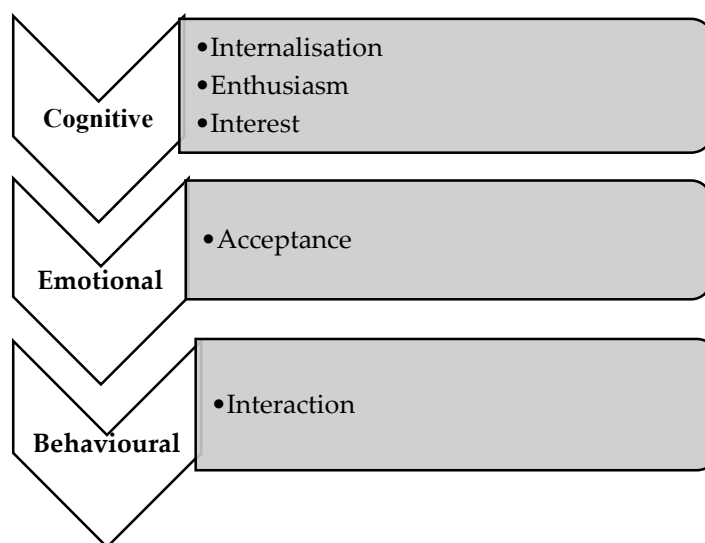


Figure 1. Customer Brand Engagement Dimensions

Source: So et al., 2014.

2.1.1.1. Cognitive Dimension

The cognitive dimension is defined as the information processing process that takes place during the customer-brand interaction. The cognitive dimension of customer brand engagement can be defined as the level of the customer's thinking, information processing and elaboration about the brand in a particular customer/brand interaction. (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

2.1.1.2. Emotional Dimension

The second component of customer brand engagement is the emotional dimension. The affective dimension can be defined as the degree of a customer's positive impression of the brand as a result of a particular customer-brand interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

2.1.1.3. Behavioural Dimension

The last component of customer brand engagement is the behavioural dimension, which is defined by Hollebeek et al. (2014) as the level of energy, effort and time spent by the customer for a brand in a particular customer-brand interaction.

3. Brand Equity

Brand equity is one of the most important structures within the scope of marketing. Since the mid-1980s, the concept of 'brand equity' has become an indispensable marketing term, especially when it is considered that the corporate image has decreased significantly and the competition between businesses has increased in the changing competitive environment and the marketing mix structure is no longer sufficient (Aaker, 1992).

Customers' minds are filled with past experiences and feelings about a brand. Therefore, how strong brands are is determined by the value that customers perceive about a particular brand. Customers play an active role in the creation of brand equity (Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2014). Value can be customers' thoughts, words or actions about the brand. Brand equity is one of the strongest, most fundamental aspects of all intangible assets a business can have. Brand equity consists of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and proprietary assets like trademarks and patents. These elements collectively enhance the brand's value and competitive strength in the market (Xi & Hamari, 2020).

a. Relationship Between Brand Equity and Customer Brand Engagement

Strong brand equity is very important for every business. Especially for businesses operating in the service sector, developing a positive attitude towards brand equity is much more important due to the characteristics of the service. The perception of strong brand equity is a cognitive representation of the brand that strongly influences the consumer's experiences with the brand (Grohs et al., 2016).

Customer engagement is an important driver of brand equity (Chahal et al., 2019). Strong communication with consumers influences brand equity as it improves brand equity by simplifying brand choice and mindset towards the brand (Bruhn et al., 2012). This positive relationship is further supported by the study conducted by Kumar (2021). The author shows that customer brand interaction has a direct and positive impact on brand equity.

In the study conducted by Hepola et al. (2017), it was concluded that customer brand engagement positively interacts with brand equity. This study has important implications for brand managers who aim to interact with consumers holistically and build brand equity. Brand equity is very important for businesses to build long-term success (Leone et al., 2006). Given the relationship between customer brand engagement and brand equity, managers should focus on tactics and strategies that engage customers.

Customer engagement in brand equity creation is a relatively new area of research and existing studies are scarce. A common and integrated assessment of customer brand engagement is still lacking and the process of customer brand equity creation has not been comprehensively analysed. The main objective of the literature review is to provide a conceptual contribution on customer engagement in brand equity creation, which allows to assess what types of customers should be involved and how to involve customers in value creation in the pursuit of higher brand equity.

H₃: Brand equity perception according to the level of customer brand engagement shows a significant effect.

4. The Concept of Culture

One of the first and most widely accepted definitions of culture is that culture is an umbrella term consisting of the shared values, social rituals, norms, habits and customs of a particular group or society. (Tylor, 1871).

Culture influences individual attitudes and behaviour through different mechanisms. People can internalise the core values in their culture and use them to guide their attitudes and behaviour. A link between self and brand is established when consumers use brand attributes to express their own identities and construct self-concepts (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

Cultural values are the main determinants of how people perceive themselves and others and how they behave towards each other. In marketing, cultural values greatly influence the consumer's perception of a product and brand, the consumer's decision-making process and consumption patterns.

In today's global society, one of the factors that attracts attention in marketing circles is the influence of cultural values. This is due to their ability to explain consumer behaviour within and between countries. Therefore, how brands influence people's cultural values within the global structure becomes a key issue (Park & Lee, 2019).

Various studies exist to examine the impact of national culture on consumer behaviour. The studies have mostly focused on the impact of culture on consumer-based brand equity. Although the effect of brand on culture is stronger than it is thought to be, it has been obtained as a result of the literature review that the studies examining the effect of cultural characteristics on brand equity within the scope of customer brand engagement are less compared to other fields of study.

H₁: Customer brand engagement level shows a significant effect according to cultural characteristics.

a. Mediating Effect of Cultural Characteristics on Brand Equity

In marketing, cultural dimensions play an important role in shaping brand equity, helping businesses and brands to communicate more effectively with consumers (Banerjee, 2008). Cultural values are commonly shared by consumers of a particular culture and influence brand attitude through brand equity.

Schroeder (2009) states that brand equity concept research has its roots in management and marketing disciplines and for a long time lacked a sociocultural perspective showing how brand building processes are influenced by cultural traditions. The process of creating and delivering brand equity is strongly influenced by cultural codes. Brands are carriers of cultural meanings (Shavitt, 1990). Brands embody cultural values and beliefs and are recognised as cultural symbols.

Culture is recognised as a factor affecting brand equity. Some research has documented cultural differences in product and brand evolutions (Holt, 2002). The impact of country of origin on brand (Lim & O'Cass, 2001) and brand culture of origin (Lee & Ganesh 1999; Lim & O'Cass 2001) has also been discussed in the literature. Kim et al., (2002) argue that customer value influences product attributes and consumption behaviour and that customer values are seen as an output of culture. A scale developed by Yoo & Donthu (2002) includes the effect of culture on brand equity. Yoo & Donthu (2002), in their research testing and comparing their scale on US and Korean samples, stated that cultural contexts significantly affect brand equity formation.

There are various studies on the dimensions of culture in the literature. Within the scope of the study, the scale developed by Rashmi Ranjan Parida & Sangeeta Sahney in 2017 to identify and measure cultural factors and brand loyalty among consumers was used. This scale consists of four dimensions: virtue, social identity, belief and ethnocentrism.

H₂: Cultural characteristics show a significant effect on brand equity perception.

H₄: Cultural characteristics have a mediating effect on brand equity perception of customer brand engagement level.

5. Methodology

Population and sample of the study

Determining the brand engagement understanding of today's Z generation and their participation in the brand is very important for brands and businesses. Generation Z was preferred in order to understand the attitude of Generation Z, especially in an age where innovations are experienced very rapidly, and to help businesses develop strategies in this direction. The sample of the research consists of Generation Z Turkish and African participants. These two countries have been preferred since the place of intercultural differences in customer brand engagement has not been addressed through brand equity.

In order to determine whether there is a difference between two independent groups determined in the study (Nationality: Africa and Turkey), Independent Sample T Test will be used under the assumption of normality. In this direction, the sample size was calculated with the determined effect size by examining the sample articles. Accordingly, it was predicted that the minimum sample number to be studied for 90% power at a significance level of 0.05 and an effect size of 0.30 would be 470 participants in total (235 samples for each group). The power of the study was calculated with the G*Power 3.1.9.2 package program. In this context, a sample survey application was conducted with a total of 500 people, 250 African and 250 Turkish participants, and it can be stated that more samples were reached than the specified number of participants.

Data collection tools

The research used survey technique as the data collection tool. The survey questions were generally grouped under four main groups. In the first part of the survey, questions were asked to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants; they were also asked about their consumption frequency and reasons for preferring fast food

products. The second part included questions to determine the customer brand participation levels of the participants. Within the scope of customer brand participation, the scale prepared by Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Dwivedi (2015) was used. In the third part, there were items to determine the perceptions of the participants towards brand equity. For the items asked within the scope of brand equity, the scale prepared by Aaker (1991) was used. In the fourth and last part, there were questions to determine the cultural characteristics of the participants. Within the scope of determining cultural characteristics, the scale developed by Rashmi Ranjan Parida & Sangeeta Sahney (2017) was used.

Analysis method

The study data was transferred to IBM SPSS Statistics 26 and IBM SPSS AMOS 23 programs and the analyses were completed. While evaluating the data, frequency distributions were given for categorical variables and descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were given for numerical variables. In the study, the customer brand engagement scale, brand equity scale and cultural characteristic scale were used together as measurement tools. In order to adapt the scales to the study data, the original validity and reliability studies of the scales were examined and a validity and reliability study was conducted on the scales again based on the responses given by the employees.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) applied to the scale for construct validity showed that the scales were confirmed. Item analysis results were also evaluated for the suitability of the scale structure to the data. Item analysis aims to determine the discrimination power of the items in the scale. For this purpose, the item total correlation coefficient of the scales was checked. For the measurement models of the scales, both single factor CFA and primary level CFA were applied. As a result of CFA, it was seen that the measurement models were confirmed. The convergent and discriminant validity of the scales whose construct validity was completed were also examined. The reliability of the scales was examined with Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient.

Customer brand engagement, brand equity and cultural characteristics scores were obtained by averaging the related items. In order to decide on the analyses to be applied, the Kolmogorow Smirnov Test ($n > 30$) was applied to the customer brand engagement, brand equity and cultural attribute scores of the individuals participating in the research for the assumption of normal distribution. As a result of the test, it was seen that the scores met the assumption of normal distribution and therefore parametric tests were used in the comparisons. Whether there is a difference between two independent groups according to the scores was analysed with the Independent Sample T Test. Whether there is a difference between more than two independent groups (e.g. educational status) according to the scores was analysed by One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the difference between which groups was examined by Tukey Test. The relationships between the scale scores were analysed by Pearson Correlation Analysis.

Construct validity

The method used to determine construct validity is factor analysis. Factor analysis is an analysis method mainly used to reduce and summarise data. The main purpose of factor analysis is to summarise the relationships between data in an easily interpretable and understandable way and to regroup variables.

The model fit indices reported in the confirmatory factor analysis results are explained in detail below.

Model fit indices and threshold values

Whether the model tested in the CFA application is supported by the data is decided by looking at the Goodness of fit indices values produced as a result of the analyses. Goodness of fit indices are discussed under two headings. These are absolute fit indices and comparative fit indices.

Absolute fit indices

Used to determine how well the predicted model fits the sample data. This class includes Chi-Square, GFI, AGFI, RMSEA, RMR and SRMR indices.

Chi-Square goodness of fit

Chi-Square Goodness of Fit (χ^2) is the oldest fit statistic value used to understand how well the model fits the data. The χ^2 value tests whether the theoretical model proposed by the researcher is compatible with the data obtained from the sample. It is accepted that the quotient of the χ^2 value to the degree of freedom (degree of freedom, df) (χ^2/df) will give more accurate results to evaluate the goodness of fit of the general model.

The goodness of fit index (gfi) and adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI)

Basically rescale the difference between the observed and model predicted covariances, producing a value of 0 for a poorly fit model and 1 for a perfectly fit model. Although GFI is a frequently reported goodness-of-fit measure in studies, it is affected by sample size and especially model complexity. AGFI is the adjusted goodness of fit value derived from GFI. In general, models with GFI values of 0.90 and above can be expressed as models with acceptable fit.

Root mean square of error approximation (RMSEA)

RMSEA tests whether the model fits the sample. The fact that it is one of the least sensitive goodness-of-fit measures to sample size makes this value one of the most reported values. A RMSEA value below 0.05 indicates a good fit of the model, and a value below 0.08 indicates an acceptable fit.

The root mean square residual (RMR)

RMR value expresses the absolute differences between the observed (i.e. obtained from the sample) and model predicted covariances. The value it presents is the square root of the mean of the absolute values of these differences. As the RMR value approaches zero, it shows a better fit as the disagreement decreases. Values below 0.1 indicate acceptable fit and values below 0.05 indicate good fit. However, the upper limit of the RMR value may exceed 1. Because this value depends on the measurements of the observations. In such cases, SRMR value is used to eliminate interpretation difficulties. SRMR (Standardised Root Mean Square Residual) value also expresses the difference between observed and estimated covariances. However, this difference is calculated over the standardised residuals for the SRMR value. For SRMR, values below 0.08 indicate acceptable fit and values below 0.05 indicate good fit.

Comparative fit indices

Comparative fit indices test the fit of the proposed model with other alternative nested models. Normed Fit Index (NFI), Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI (TLI)) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) are included under this class.

Table 1. Goodness of Fit Values of the Measurement Model

	Good Fit	Acceptable Fit
χ^2/df	≤ 3	3-5
GFI	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$
AGFI	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$
NFI	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$
NNFI (TLI)	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$
CFI	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$
RMSEA	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$
SRMR	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$

df: degree of freedom, GFI: Goodness of Fit Index, AGFI: Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index, NFI: Normed Fit Index, NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index- TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, RMSEA: Root Mean Square of Error Approximation, SRMR: Standardize Root Mean Square Residual.

Source: Bollen & Lennox, 1991.

Reliability analysis

Reliability constitutes a basis for the interpretations on the measurements obtained and the analyses that may arise later, and reliability analysis is a method developed to evaluate the properties and reliability of tests, questionnaires or scales used in measurement. With the Reliability Analysis procedure, coefficients that determine the reliability of scales such as Likert, etc., where total scores (points) are in question, are calculated and information about the relationships between the questions in the scale is obtained.

Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient

The alpha coefficient is a weighted standard mean of variation found by proportioning the sum of the variances of k questions in the scale to the overall variance. Cronbach alpha coefficient varies between 0 and 1. This method investigates whether the k questions in the scale express a whole showing a homogenous structure.

Table 2. The Reliability of the Scale Depending on the Alpha (α) Coefficient

Alpha Coefficient	Description
$0,00 \leq \alpha \leq 0,39$	The scale is not reliable
$0,40 \leq \alpha \leq 0,59$	The scale reliability is low
$0,60 \leq \alpha \leq 0,79$	The scale is quite reliable
$0,80 \leq \alpha \leq 1,00$	The scale is highly reliable

6. Findings

Distributions of demographic characteristics

Table 3. Distributions of Demographic Characteristics

	Number of Person (n=500)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Woman	283	56,6
Male	217	43,4
Nationality		
Africa	250	50,0
Turkey	250	50,0
Education Status		
High School	114	22,8
University	301	60,2
Master's Degree	85	17,0
Fastfood Consumption Status		
Yes	500	100,0
No	0	0,0
Local fast food / International fast food selection		
International fast food chain	280	56,0
Local fast food chain	220	44,0
Reason for Preferring the Brand		
Service quality (Product quality, flavour, variety, etc.)	220	44,0
Strong brand image	36	7,2
Price/quality performance	138	27,6
Internationalisation	50	10,0
Being domestic/national	24	4,8
Social environment effect (preference for family, friends)	30	6,0
Other	2	0,4
Brand Consumption Duration		
Less than 1 year	96	19,2
1-3 years	105	21,0
3-5 years	109	21,8
More than 5 years	190	38,0

When Table 3 is analysed; 56.6% (n=283) of the participants are female and 43.3% (n=217) are male. The nationality of 50% (n=250) of the participants was Africa, while 50% (n=250) was Turkey. When the educational status of the participants is analysed; 22.8% (n=114) are high school graduates, 60.2% (n=301) are university graduates, 17.0% (n=85) are postgraduate graduates. 100% of the participants (n=500) consume fast food. While 56,0% (n=280) of the participants prefer international fast food chains, 44,0% (n=220) prefer local fast food chains. The reason why 44.0% (n=220) of the participants prefer the brand is service quality (product quality, flavour, variety, etc.), while 7.2% (n=220) prefer local fast food chain), 7.2% (n=36) prefer the brand because of its strong brand image, 27.6% (n=138) prefer the brand because of its price/quality performance, 10.0% (n=50) prefer the brand because it is international, 4.8% (n=24) prefer the brand because it is local/national, 6.0% (n=30) prefer the brand because of its social environment (family, friends) and 0.4% (n=2) prefer the brand because of other reasons. While 19.2% (n=96) of the participants have preferred the brand for less than 1 year, 21.0% (n=105) have preferred the brand for 1-3 years, 21.8% (n=109) for 3-5 years and 38.0% (n=190) for more than 5 years.

Validity and reliability analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis

In confirmatory factor analysis, previously determined dimensions were examined. First, measurement models were created according to the dimensions. The measurement model established to confirm the structure consisting of a single dimension was analyzed with single-factor CFA, and the measurement models established to confirm the structure consisting of dimensions were analyzed with primary level CFA.

The factor loadings of 8 items in the customer brand engagement scale were analysed and no item that did not contribute to the model was identified. The modification shown by the highest 'M.I.' value was connected when it was conceptually appropriate (e4->e6) and the model was executed. The fit index values of the model were also examined and it was seen that the measurement model was validated. (Table 4).

Table 4. Fit Index Values of The Measurement Model of Customer Brand Engagement Scale

	Model Fit Index Values	Good Fit	Acceptable Fit	Fit
χ^2/df	3,773	≤ 3	3-5	Acceptable Fit
GFI	0,972	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$	Good Fit
AGFI	0,937	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$	Good Fit
NFI	0,950	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Good Fit
NNFI (TLI)	0,934	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Acceptable Fit
CFI	0,962	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Good Fit
RMSEA	0,065	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$	Acceptable Fit
SRMR	0,037	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$	Good Fit

df: degrees of freedom, GFI: Goodness of Fit Index, AGFI: Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index, NFI: Normed Fit Index, NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index- TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, RMSEA: Root Mean Square of Error Approximation, SRMR: Standardize Root Mean Square Residual.

The factor loadings of the 15 items in the brand equity scale were examined and the measurement model was confirmed by examining the fit index values of the model (Table 5).

Table 5. Fit Index Values of Brand Equity Measurement Model

	Model Fit Index Values	Good Fit	Acceptable Fit	Fit
χ^2/df	2,735	≤ 3	3-5	Acceptable Fit
GFI	0,945	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$	Good Fit
AGFI	0,923	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$	Good Fit
NFI	0,920	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Good Fit
NNFI (TLI)	0,936	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Acceptable Fit
CFI	0,947	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Good Fit
RMSEA	0,059	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$	Acceptable Fit
SRMR	0,040	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$	Good Fit

df: degrees of freedom, GFI: Goodness of Fit Index, AGFI: Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index, NFI: Normed Fit Index, NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index- TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, RMSEA: Root Mean Square of Error Approximation, SRMR: Standardize Root Mean Square Residual.

The factor loadings of the 15 items in the cultural trait scale were examined and the measurement model was validated by examining the fit index values of the model. (Table 6).

Table 6. Fit Index Values of Cultural Characteristics Measurement Model

	Model Fit Index Values	Good Fit	Acceptable Fit	Fit
χ^2/df	2,711	≤ 3	3-5	Good Fit
GFI	0,946	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$	Good Fit
AGFI	0,920	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$	Good Fit
NFI	0,900	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Acceptable Fit
NNFI (TLI)	0,914	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Acceptable Fit
CFI	0,933	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Acceptable Fit
RMSEA	0,059	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$	Acceptable Fit
SRMR	0,047	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$	Good Fit

df: degrees of freedom, GFI: Goodness of Fit Index, AGFI: Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index, NFI: Normed Fit Index, NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index- TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, RMSEA: Root Mean Square of Error Approximation, SRMR: Standardize Root Mean Square Residual.

Convergent-discriminant validity and reliability analysis

Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficients were analysed to determine the reliability of customer brand engagement, brand equity and cultural attribute scales. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Cronbach's Alpha Internal Consistency Coefficients of The Scales

	Item Number	Cronbach Alfa (α)	Reliability Level
Customer Brand Engagement Scale	8	0,830	Highly Reliable
Cognitive	3	0,778	Quite Reliable
Emotional	3	0,746	Highly Reliable
Behavioural	2	0,688	Highly Reliable
Brand Equity Scale	14	0,895	Highly Reliable
Cultural Characteristic Scale	15	0,843	Highly Reliable
Virtue	7	0,787	Quite Reliable
Belief	2	0,799	Quite Reliable
Social Identity	3	0,706	Quite Reliable
Ethnocentrism	3	0,662	Quite Reliable

0.00 < α < 0.40 Scale Not Reliable 0.40 < α < 0.60 Low Reliable 0.60 < α < 0.80 Quite Reliable 0.80 < α < 1.00 Highly Reliable

When Table 7 is examined, it is seen that the customer brand engagement scale consisting of 8 items is highly reliable ($\alpha=0.830$), while the cognitive ($\alpha=0.778$), emotional ($\alpha=0.746$) and behavioural ($\alpha=0.688$) sub-dimensions are highly reliable. The 14-item brand equity scale was found to be highly reliable ($\alpha=0.895$). The 15-item cultural trait

scale was found to be highly reliable ($\alpha=0.843$), while the sub-dimensions of virtue ($\alpha=0.787$), belief ($\alpha=0.799$), social identity ($\alpha=0.706$) and ethnocentrism ($\alpha=0.662$) were found to be highly reliable.

Table 8. Examination of AVE, CR and Inter-Scale Correlations

Scores	AVE	CR	1	2	3
1. Customer Brand Engagement	0,490	0,854	(0,700)		
2. Brand Equity	0,473	0,896	0,683	(0,688)	
3. Cultural characteristics	0,487	0,913	0,389	0,490	(0,697)

Note: The values in brackets on the diagonal are the square root of AVE values.

As can be seen, all CR values are above 0.70. AVE values were below 0.50, but CR values were above the acceptance limit (>0.70). In cases where the AVE is less than 0.5 but the composite reliability is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still sufficient (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In addition, $CR > AVE$ values for all dimensions, thus the existence of convergent validity of the dimensions can be mentioned. On the other hand, it can be said that the square roots of the AVE values are greater than 0.50 and greater than the correlation values between the factors and discriminant validity is also provided.

Descriptive statistics and comparison results of the scales

In this section, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, median) of customer brand engagement, brand equity and cultural characteristics scores are given and their compliance with the assumption of normal distribution is examined. The results are presented in detail in Table 8.

Table 9. Mean and Standard Deviation Values of Scale Scores and Examination of Normal Distribution Assumptions

Scores	Mean \pm SD	Median	Min-Max	Skewness	Kurtosis	Kolmogorov Smirnov (p)
Customer Brand Engagement	3,25 \pm 0,771	3,50	1-5	-2,6	2,9	0,000
Cognitive	3,19 \pm 0,850	3,33	1-5	-2,7	0,6	0,000
Emotional	3,45 \pm 0,953	3,67	1-5	-2,8	1,0	0,000
Behavioural	3,02 \pm 0,923	3,00	1-5	-1,6	-1,5	0,000
Brand Equity	3,42 \pm 0,729	3,57	1-5	-3,3	2,7	0,000
Cultural Characteristic	3,17 \pm 0,709	3,33	1-5	-2,4	2,6	0,000
Virtue	3,31 \pm 0,799	3,43	1-5	-2,4	2,5	0,000
Belief	3,17 \pm 1,297	3,25	1-5	-2,6	-2,4	0,000
Social Identity	3,45 \pm 0,979	3,67	1-5	-3,0	0,1	0,000
Ethnocentrism	2,53 \pm 1,035	2,33	1-5	2,9	-2,8	0,000

SD= Standard Deviation, Min=Minimum, Max= Maximum, p= Significance Level

Table 10. Investigation of Differences Between Demographic Characteristics According to Scale Scores

Demographic Characteristics		Customer Brand Engagement Scale				Brand Equity Scale	Cultural Characteristic Scale				
		Total Score	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral	Total Score	Total Score	Virtue	Belief	Social Identity	Ethnocentrism
		Mean±SD	Mean±SS	Mean±SS	Mean±SS	Mean±SS	Mean±SS	Mean±SS	Mean±SS	Mean±SS	Mean±SS
Reason for Preference											
1) Service quality	220	3,25±0,796	3,21±0,894	3,46±0,954	2,98±0,926	3,52±0,708	3,19±0,685	3,41±0,739	3,16±1,292	3,44±0,941	2,43±0,961
2) Other	142	3,28±0,779	3,17±0,846	3,50±0,934	3,11±0,971	3,33±0,723	3,12±0,739	3,11±0,847	3,29±1,293	3,33±1,021	2,80±1,101
(Strong brand image, Internationality, Domestic/nationality, Social environment impact, other)	138	3,22±0,725	3,19±0,784	3,40±0,976	3,00±0,868	3,37±0,753	3,18±0,718	3,36±0,809	3,08±1,308	3,58±0,986	2,43±1,035
F; p		0,211; 0,810	0,098; 0,907	0,398; 0,672	0,870; 0,419	3,398; 0,034*	0,467; 0,627	6,712; 0,001**	0,926; 0,397	2,202; 0,112	6,816; 0,001**
Difference		-	-	-	-	1-2	-	2-1,3	-	-	2-1,3
Consumption Duration											
1) Less than 1 year	96	3,28±0,739	3,23±0,817	3,48±0,894	3,05±0,874	3,39±0,744	3,32±0,632	3,40±0,762	3,56±1,119	3,44±1,003	2,84±0,950
2) 1-3 years	105	3,32±0,745	3,24±0,771	3,52±1,019	3,12±0,856	3,50±0,662	3,17±0,714	3,30±0,808	3,18±1,327	3,62±0,913	2,42±1,028
3) 3-5 years	109	3,35±0,758	3,21±0,909	3,61±0,891	3,18±0,995	3,43±0,759	3,11±0,635	3,21±0,740	3,18±1,296	3,37±0,927	2,59±1,008
4) More than 5 years	190	3,14±0,799	3,14±0,875	3,31±0,967	2,87±0,924	3,39±0,740	3,12±0,775	3,34±0,843	2,97±1,329	3,40±1,026	2,41±1,066
F; p		2,374; 0,069	0,445; 0,721	2,642; 0,049*	3,381; 0,018*	0,593; 0,620	1,965; 0,118	1,057; 0,367	4,440; 0,004**	1,469; 0,222	4,435; 0,004**
Difference		-	-	3-4	3-4	-	-	-	1-4	-	1-2,4

When Table 9 is examined, the mean score of customer brand engagement is 3.25 (±0.771), the mean score of cognitive sub-dimension is 3.19 (±0.850), the mean score of emotional sub-dimension is 3.45 (±0.953), and the mean score of behavioural sub-dimension is 3.02 (±0.923). The mean brand equity score is 3.42 (±0.729). The mean cultural trait score is 3.17 (±0.709), the mean virtue sub-dimension score is 3.31 (±0.799), the mean belief sub-dimension score is 3.17 (±1.297), the mean social identity sub-dimension score is 3.45 (±0.979) and the mean ethnocentrism sub-dimension score is 2.53 (±1.035). The fact that the skewness and kurtosis coefficient is between ±3 indicates that the distribution is normal. Finally, when the histogram graphs are examined, it can be said that the scores fit the normal distribution.

Table 10 shows the results of the analyses of whether there is a difference between the demographic characteristics of the participants according to the scale scores. The demographic characteristics with differences are explained in detail below.

It was observed that there was a statistically significant difference between the nationalities of the participants according to the mean scores of customer brand engagement, brand equity, cultural characteristics total scores and sub-dimension scores (p<0.05). Accordingly, it can be said that the mean scores of customer brand engagement, brand equity, cultural characteristics and sub-dimension scores of African participants are significantly higher than the mean scores of Turkish participants.

It was seen that there was a statistically significant difference between the educational status of the participants according to the total score of customer brand engagement, total score of brand equity and the mean scores of social identity and

ethnocentrism from the cultural feature sub-dimensions ($p < 0.05$). It is seen that as the level of education increases, the level of brand engagement increases, and as the level of education decreases, the level of social identity and ethnocentrism increases.

It was seen that there was a statistically significant difference between the reasons for the participants to prefer the brand according to the total score of brand equity and the mean scores of virtue and ethnocentrism from the cultural trait sub-dimensions ($p < 0.05$). According to this; it is seen that the brand equity total score averages of the participants whose reason for preferring the brand is service quality are higher than the other participants. Accordingly, it is seen that Turkish participants attach more importance to service quality and their perceptions of service quality affect the value they attribute to the brand.

It was observed that there was a statistically significant difference between the brand consumption periods of the participants according to the mean scores of emotional and cognitive sub-dimensions of customer brand engagement and belief and ethnocentrism sub-dimensions of cultural characteristics ($p < 0.05$). Accordingly, it can be said that the emotional and cognitive sub-dimension mean scores of the participants whose brand consumption period is between 3-5 years are significantly higher than the mean scores of the participants whose brand consumption period is more than 5 years.

Correlation analysis results

Correlation analysis is used to determine the degree of non-causal relationships between two numerical variables. In the study, the normal distribution assumptions of customer brand engagement, brand equity, cultural attribute total scores and sub-dimension scores were examined and it was seen that the scores were normally distributed. Therefore, Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to examine the relationship between the scores.

Table 11. Analysing The Relationships Between Scale Scores

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Customer Brand Engagement Total Score	r	1									
	p										
2. Cognitive	r	0,852	1								
	p	0,000***									
3. Emotional	r	0,888	0,604	1							
	p	0,000***	0,000***								
4. Behavioural	r	0,788	0,529	0,582	1						
	p	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***							
5. Brand Equity Total Score	r	0,683	0,578	0,628	0,511	1					
	p	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***						
6. Cultural Characteristic Total Score	r	0,389	0,312	0,384	0,273	0,490	1				
	p	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***					
7. Virtue	r	0,323	0,279	0,344	0,160	0,468	0,884	1			
	p	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***				
8. Belief	r	0,309	0,211	0,310	0,261	0,308	0,743	0,542	1		
	p	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***			
9. Social Identity	r	0,406	0,339	0,378	0,304	0,536	0,675	0,510	0,376	1	
	p	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***		
10. Ethnocentrism	r	0,107	0,067	0,081	0,140	0,072	0,575	0,293	0,381	0,132	1
	p	0,016*	0,135	0,070	0,002**	0,109	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,003**	

* $p < 0,05$, ** $p < 0,01$, *** $p < 0,001$

r= Pearson Correlation Coefficient, p= Significance Level

Table 11 shows the results of the correlation analysis between the scale scores. Accordingly, when the relationships between the total scores of the scales are analysed, it is seen that there is a significant positive linear relationship between the total score of customer brand engagement and the total score of brand equity ($r = 0,683$; $p < 0,001$), while there is a significant positive linear relationship between the total score of customer brand engagement and the total score of cultural attribute ($r = 0,389$; $p < 0,001$), and there is a

significant positive linear relationship between the total score of brand equity and the total score of cultural attribute ($r=0,490$; $p<0,001$).

Mediation effect

In structural equation modelling, the concept of mediation is used to define successive causal relationships between variables.

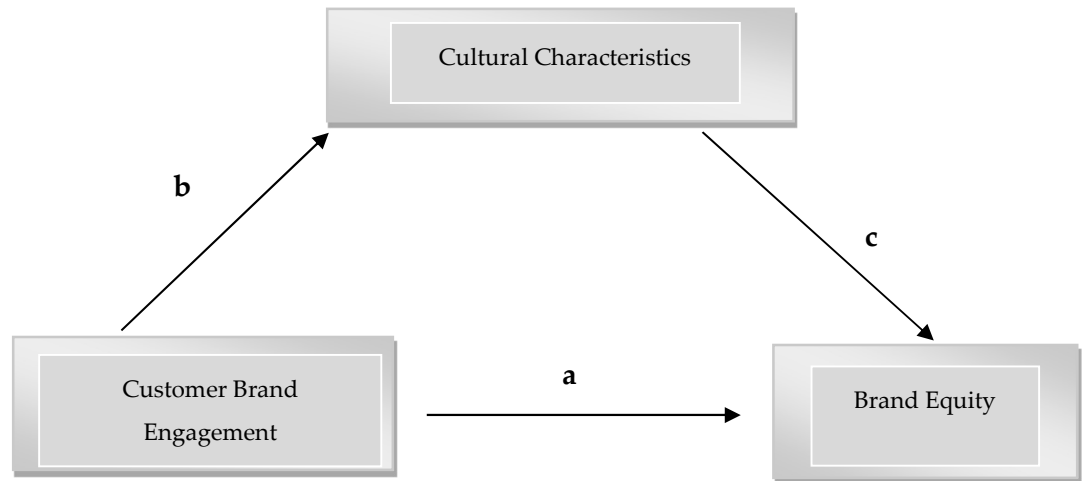


Figure 2. Model with Mediator Variable

The mediating role of cultural characteristics in the theoretical model was analysed and the results are presented below.

Table 12. Model Fit Index Values

	Model Fit Index Values	Good Fit	Acceptable Fit	Fit
χ^2/df	3,089	≤ 3	3-5	Acceptable Fit
GFI	0,895	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$	Acceptable Fit
AGFI	0,868	$\geq 0,90$	$>0,85$	Acceptable Fit
NFI	0,917	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Acceptable Fit
NNFI (TLI)	0,903	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Acceptable Fit
CFI	0,916	$\geq 0,95$	$>0,90$	Acceptable Fit
RMSEA	0,061	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$	Acceptable Fit
SRMR	0,060	$\leq 0,05$	$<0,08$	Acceptable Fit

df: degree of freedom, GFI: Goodness of Fit Index, AGFI: Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index, NFI: Normed Fit Index, NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index- TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, RMSEA: Root Mean Square of Error Approximation, SRMR: Standardize Root Mean Square Residual

Table 12 shows the fit index values of the mediation model. When the fit index values obtained for the mediation model are analysed, it can be said that χ^2/df , GFI, AGFI, NFI NNFI (TLI), CFI, RMSEA and SRMR values provide acceptable fit.

Table 13. Results of The Model Established with Cultural Characteristic Mediator Variable

Results Related to Mediation		Without Mediation Variable		With Mediation Variable	
		r	p	r	p
a	Customer Brand Engagement-> Brand Equity	0,788	***	0,631	***
b	Customer Brand Engagement-> Cultural Characteristic	-	-	0,521	***
c	Cultural Characteristic-> Brand Equity	-	-	0,303	***

*** $p<0,001$

When Table 13 is analysed, firstly, the significance of the direct effect when there is no intermediary variable in the model is examined. The results when there is no intermediary variable are shown in the first column. The 'r' value indicates the direct effect and the p value indicates the significance of the direct effect. Accordingly, it can be said that the effect of customer brand engagement-> brand equity is statistically significant ($r=0.788$; $p<0.001$).

In the second stage, the situation where the mediating variable is in the model was examined. Accordingly, it can be said that the effect of customer brand engagement-> brand equity is statistically significant in this model ($r=0,631$; $p<0,001$). When the mediating variable is analysed, the effect of customer brand engagement-> cultural attribute ($r=0,521$; $p<0,001$) is statistically significant, while the effect of cultural attribute-> brand equity is also statistically significant ($r=0,303$; $p<0,001$).

The direct effect of 'customer brand engagement-> brand equity', which was significant when there was no mediating variable in the mediation relationship of 'customer brand engagement-> cultural attribute-> brand equity', maintained its significance when the mediating variable was added to the model. The relationship between customer brand engagement and brand equity is also mediated through cultural characteristics. In this case, it can be said that cultural characteristic has a mediating effect.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

Today, it is possible for businesses to exist in a competitive environment by increasing customer participation. In this context, it is very important that customers participate in the brand as ambassadors of the brands. The values that customers perceive towards brands are affected by a wide variety of factors; at this point, it is not possible to ignore cultural dimensions. Individuals are shaped together with the social structure they live in and as a result, the concept of culture, which has been passed down for centuries and is one of the most basic structures of society, is formed. It is possible to see the effect of cultural characteristics on the consumption behaviours of individuals and the behaviours they exhibit in daily life.

This study, which examines the mediating effect of cultural characteristics on brand equity within the scope of customer brand engagement, reveals how much importance African and Turkish participants attach to cultural characteristics in their brand equity perceptions and how much this affects their level of brand engagement.

It was concluded that the customer brand engagement levels of African participants were higher than Turkish participants. When the results obtained are evaluated for each dimension, it can be stated that the knowledge levels of African participants towards the fast food brand they prefer are higher than Turkish participants within the scope of the cognitive dimension; within the scope of the emotional dimension, it can be stated that the degree of positive impact on the brand as a result of customer-brand interaction is higher, that is, they identify more with the brands; within the scope of the behavioural dimension, it can be stated that the energy, effort and time spent for the brand at the point of customer-brand interaction are higher in African participants. It has been concluded that the level of engagement of African participants at the point of interaction with brands is higher than Turkish participants for all three dimensions and as a result, customer brand engagement levels are much higher.

For each dimension of customer brand engagement, the relationship with cultural characteristics was analysed. Accordingly, it can be stated that as the level of engagement of African consumers increases, cultural characteristics also increase. It can be stated that the higher the virtue, belief, social identity and ethnocentrism values of African participants in the cultural characteristics sub-dimension, the higher their cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement levels. In this direction, it can be stated that African participants have a higher level of relationship between customer brand engagement levels and cultural characteristics than Turkish participants. Turkish

participants are less affected by cultural characteristics at the level of brand engagement, while African participants are more affected by cultural characteristics.

It was concluded that cultural characteristics are highly effective on brand equity. It is concluded that African participants are more affected by cultural characteristics in their attitudes towards brand equity. It can be stated that the effect of cultural characteristics on the value that Turkish participants show towards the fast food brands they prefer is lower. Accordingly, it can be stated that African participants have higher dimensions of virtue, belief, social identity, ethnocentrism and that they are more affected by these dimensions in the brand equity they show towards fast food brands compared to Turkish participants.

When the relationships between brand equity according to the dimensions of customer brand engagement are analysed, it is determined that the level of engagement of African participants for each customer brand engagement dimension is higher than that of Turkish participants; and as a result of brand equity perceptions, it is concluded that the perceptions of African participants are higher than those of Turkish participants. Accordingly, it is observed that the brand equity perception of the African participants for the brand they prefer in the fast food sector is in the same direction with the level of engagement; as the level of engagement increases, the value they perceive about the brand also increases. When this result is evaluated for each brand engagement dimension, it is concluded that African participants have higher levels of assimilation, enthusiasm and interest in the brand, and as this level of engagement increases, their feelings of value about the brand also increase; the emotional dimension of identification with the brand, feeling closer to themselves is higher, and as this level of engagement increases, their feelings of value about the brand also increase; behaviourally, the level of effort and energy exhibited towards the brand is higher, and as this level of engagement increases, their feelings of value about the brand also increase.

It has been concluded that the participants are affected by cultural characteristics in the formation of brand equity perception regarding the level of participation they show towards the brands they prefer. In this context, it is seen that African participants have a higher level of being affected by cultural characteristics. Considering the result that African individuals have a higher tendency to prefer local fast food brands, it can be said that the perception of ethnocentrism is higher in African participants. It can be stated as another result that Turkish participants have a higher tendency to prefer international fast food brands compared to African participants.

It is seen that the dimensions of brand equity perception and cultural characteristics are statistically higher in the customer brand engagement of African participants than Turkish participants, and as a result, the mediating effect of cultural characteristics on brand equity perception at the level of customer brand engagement is higher in African participants. In particular, it can be stated that ethnocentrism and social identity dimension are the two dimensions that the participants attach the most importance to and are influenced by at the point of brand equity perception formation.

It was concluded that African participants' level of engagement towards their preferred fast food brand was higher than Turkish participants in all three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behavioural. According to this result, it is seen that African participants have a higher tendency to exhibit a tendency as a brand ambassador towards the brands they prefer.

It is seen that African participants are more influenced by cultural characteristics in creating brand equity and they attach more importance to cultural characteristics sub-dimensions compared to Turkish participants. It can be stated that African participants see their cultural characteristics as an important factor in attributing value to the brands in the fast food sector and expect the brands to have ethical values and exhibit tendencies compatible with their belief structures and accordingly, the value given to the brand is shaped. In addition, it is seen that African participants are more influenced by their social environment, family and friends at the point of the value they will show regarding the

brand. Another result obtained is that African participants' tendencies towards local fast food brands are higher than Turkish participants and they are slightly more distant towards international brands.

Based on the fact that the brand equity perception of the participants who show service quality as a reason for preference is higher, it can be stated that the better the service quality is perceived, the higher the brand equity perception will be. It has been concluded that the participants who prioritise service quality and price-quality performance factors in their reasons for preference have a higher virtue dimension in the cultural characteristics sub-dimension, and in this direction, it can be stated that the participants attach more importance to ethical values in service provision. The higher the virtue value perception of the same participants, the lower the ethnocentrism dimension in brand preference. Accordingly, it can be stated that the participants ignore the origin characteristics of the fast food brand in brand preference more than other participants.

The most preferred fast food brands of Generation Z African and Turkish participants are among the research questions and according to the results obtained; while the most preferred international fast food brands of Turkish participants are Burger King and Mc Donald's, the most preferred local fast food brands are Tavuk Dünyası, Hmbrgr and Big Baker. It is seen that the most preferred international fast food brands of African participants are KFC and Mc Donald's, while the most preferred local fast food brands are Tuwo, Albaik and Haba Chicken.

Managerial implications

According to the results of the level of customer brand engagement of African and Turkish participants, it was determined that the level of engagement of African individuals in their preferred fast food brands was higher than that of Turkish individuals. In this context, it will be very important for national and international fast food brands operating in Turkey to follow strategies to increase brand engagement levels. It was concluded that the effect of cultural characteristics on the brand engagement level of Turkish participants was less. In this context, it will be beneficial for businesses to develop strategies that can attract the attention of Generation Z. Considering that they are less affected than African participants, especially in the dimensions of belief and ethnocentrism, the strategies recommended for brands to provide more experience in increasing the participation of Generation Z Turkish customers are given below:

- Using digital and social media marketing, sharing posts on social media accounts to attract the attention of Generation Z participants who actively use social media, and increasing interaction with events and competitions organised on social media. For example, organising competitions that encourage users to share content related to the brand will be effective.
- Providing personalised experiences will also increase the level of interaction of consumers with the brand and may have a positive impact especially in terms of emotional and behavioural dimensions. Since Generation Z consumers attach importance to personalised experiences, offering options that allow individuals to create their own menus will increase brand equity and brand engagement.
- Another suggestion that will increase the brand participation of Generation Z is to involve consumers in the processes through the campaigns and activities to be carried out by the businesses and thus, it will be supported to increase their communication with the business and the brand in a positive way. It can be stated as the results of the researches that Generation Z attaches more importance to the concepts of social justice and equality compared to other generations. In this context, it will be very important to develop campaigns and projects that show sensitivity to social justice and equality issues.
- Making use of technological innovations and increasing their use can be shown as examples of other practices that can be carried out by businesses in the fast food

sector. In order to attract the attention of Generation Z in restaurants and online platforms, producing creative and entertaining content and including interactive games can be expressed as strategies that can be effective within the scope of customer brand engagement.

- Another suggestion is for businesses to utilise content marketing. In this context, enabling Generation Z consumers to produce entertaining content for fast food brands will have a positive impact on brand engagement. In particular, encouraging customers to share their experiences with the brand and publishing these contents on the social media accounts of fast food brands will provide support in increasing brand-consumer interaction.

It is stated as another result obtained that African participants are more affected by cultural characteristics at the point of brand engagement and accordingly, increasing the use of items that reflect African culture at the point of increasing brand engagement is presented as a strategy that can be preferred by fast food brands. Due to the higher levels of participation in the dimensions of ethnocentrism and belief, especially in the dimension of cultural characteristics, it can be suggested that fast food brands that serve or plan to serve in Africa or that consider African Generation Z individuals living in Turkey as potential customers as a target audience should be more sensitive to the discourse or strategy to be developed for the beliefs of African individuals. In the dimension of ethnocentrism, since there is a more positive approach towards local brands, it can be suggested that fast food brands that want to be in the African market or want to obtain more customers should develop campaigns for special days and celebrations for Africans in order to turn this perception into a positive direction.

It is observed that Turkish Generation Z participants give more importance to the service quality, price-quality performance and strong brand image dimensions of the brand rather than cultural characteristics in terms of customer brand engagement. In this context, it can be recommended that fast food brands that provide services in Turkey, that are considering providing services, and that aim to enter the Turkish market should develop strategies by giving more importance to these dimensions. In this context, the suggestions offered for fast food brands operating in the service sector to increase their brand equity are given below:

- In order to increase service quality, it may be recommended to provide regular training to employees, provide fast and friendly service to customers, collect customer feedback regularly and make improvements based on this feedback.
- In terms of improving price-quality performance, other suggestions can be made to create value menus that offer affordable, satisfying and delicious products, offer regular discounts and promotions to customers, increase the taste and nutritional value of products by using high-quality and fresh ingredients, and provide transparent information to customers about the ingredients used and the preparation processes of the products.
- In terms of creating a strong brand image, more active use of social media can be recommended. Strategies can be developed such as reaching young consumers with active and creative social media campaigns, collaborating with individuals with strong brand images and thus creating a positive change in the brand image, and emphasizing the brand's social responsibility awareness with environmentally friendly practices and social projects.
- In terms of developing customer experience, offering personalized experiences can significantly strengthen brand-customer relationships. Offering personalized services using customer data, such as preparing birthday surprises, can be suggested as a strategy for this. In order to increase customer participation, including customers in brand-related decision-making processes and taking their opinions into account can be stated as another strategy.

- It is very important to offer healthy menu options and follow strategies within the scope of sustainability. In this context, it is recommended to appeal to a wide customer base by offering healthy and balanced nutrition options, use environmentally friendly packaging, initiate recycling programs and emphasize sustainability efforts.
- Improving communication and customer relations can also be expressed as another important element. Taking customer feedback into consideration and continuously improving service quality, making customer services accessible and solution-oriented can also be expressed as strategies that can be implemented.
- Within the scope of the fast food sector, recommendations have been made for both national and international fast food brands operating in Turkey or Africa, considering operating, or considering entering these markets from other countries or currently operating. In this context, as a result of the study, it is seen how much brand preferences, customer brand participation and brand equity levels differ according to cultural characteristics. Taking cultural characteristics into consideration will contribute to the progress of businesses and brands with more successful and effective strategies in entering the target market.

Future research directions

This study is aimed to guide future research. In the future, it can be investigated how to increase brand equity by considering the concept of customer brand participation together with digital marketing strategies. Another study proposal that will contribute to the field is to measure the effect of brand image on customer brand participation and to address this in the form of country comparisons. It is also possible to develop a more comprehensive study on how effective emotional and rational factors are in brand participation. In this subject addressed within the scope of the study, a comparison of Africa and Turkey is being made and it is recommended that the number of countries be increased in future studies and that countries that have not been addressed before be evaluated. Within the scope of the study, research was conducted on fast food brands in the service sector and it is recommended that sector-based comparisons be made by including different sectors in the studies for future studies. In this direction, it can be stated that especially the clothing sector, cosmetics sector and retail sectors can be the subject of similar studies. On the other hand, it is also recommended that a detailed study be conducted on coffee chains.

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