



AN INVESTIGATION ON AIRLINE CUSTOMERS' LEVEL OF LOYALTY AND TRUST IN RELATION TO DEMOGRAPHICS, USE OF AIRLINES AND TICKET-PURCHASING HABITS

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Tanyeri Uslu¹, Bulent Sezen², Ibrahim Sarper Karakadilar³

¹Istanbul Gedik University, Kartal, 34876 Istanbul, Turkey.

tanyeriuslu@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-6006-65792

²Gebze Technical University Kocaeli, 41400, Turkey.

bsezen@gtu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-7485-3194

³Sutcu Imam University, Kahramanmaraş, 46800, Turkey.

iskarakadilar@ksu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-1785-5756

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- Loyalty and trust have been analyzed in relation to customers' behaviors and attitudes in various service sectors in previous studies in the literature. This study aims at evaluating how Turkish customers' characteristics affect their perception of loyalty and trust considering both low cost and network airlines.

Methodology- A survey was conducted and 967 airline passengers responded. Exploratory statistical methodology was conducted in order to analyze the data. These statistical techniques were used and hypotheses are tested with t-test and ANOVA.

Findings- According to the results of the analyses; (1) high level of education leads customers to having less level of loyalty and trust, (2) low cost carrier customers' level of loyalty and trust is lower than network customers', (3) where price research and online ticket purchase is less or none, the customers' level of loyalty and trust is high, (4) business travelers have higher level of loyalty and trust to their preferred company than the travelers' with touristic/entertainment or visiting family/friends purposes.

Conclusion- Airline companies should better evaluate their customers' demographics and habits in relation to their loyalty and level of trust.

Keywords: Loyalty, trust, demographics, habits, ANOVA

JEL Codes: M10, M31, L89

1. INTRODUCTION

Airline transportation industry is one of the most important economic sectors in the world which transports people and cargoes from one point to another. Not only it provides people faster international and intercity traveling, compared to other transportation types, but also plays an important global role for countries to have better relations economically, commercially, and politically. Passenger airline companies can be classified as low cost and network carriers. Demir and Ozturk (2011) mentioned, if organizations and employees become integrated, in other words, if companies make employees' purposes harmonize with their own purposes, companies will be able to reduce the risk of losing their employees. Similarly, airline companies can also minimize the risks of losing their customers as long as they understand their needs, wishes, and purposes.

Every service provider under uncertain market conditions should be a good decision-maker to deal with the issues related to pricing and selling. A service provider must know the best price for the product or service and when to decrease or increase. It is also hard to find the customers who have high level of loyalty and trust to their most preferred airline company in the competitive market.

Airline companies divide their customers into the segments considering their buying behavior, demand for product/service and characteristics. Customer loyalty is a very desirable quality for any company. The majority of loyalty-related behaviors are largely related to each other. In order to achieve a good performance, customers' demographics, purchasing habits, and perceptions of loyalty and trust should be well examined. Trust is important where there is risk, uncertainty, or interdependence occur (Mayer et al., 1995). The high level of mutual trust for the company-customer relationship allow the parties to take more risks and communicate more clearly with each other (Kwon and Suh, 2004).

In this study, it is planned to investigate airline company passengers' behavior and characteristics in relation to their level of loyalty and trust. Thus, this study tries to find answer for the question: How loyalty and trust levels of airline customers' for their most preferred airlines differ according to their demographics, airline usage, and ticket purchasing habits. For that purpose, a large sampling survey was conducted with airline passengers in Turkey.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Loyalty

One of the objectives of customer relationship management is to improve and maintain the relationships with customers (Winer, 2001). There are many definitions in the literature for customer loyalty. Customer loyalty is the tendency to repurchase a product/service which was experienced or recommended (Altintas, 2000). According to another definition, customer loyalty is to establish strong and profound relationships between customers and the company (Duffy, 1998). If a customer repurchases and recommends a product or service from a company he/she purchases, and develops positive opinions and maintains, that customer is a loyal customer for that company (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000).

Customers' perceived values have an impact on loyalty, customer engagement has also proved to be an antecedent of loyalty and the passenger loyalty is a result of positive engagement. Furthermore, customer engagement is a new structure that plays an important role in enhancing passenger loyalty (Hapsari and Dean, 2015). Both customers' experience of love and trust are important indicators for customer loyalty (Chen and Quester, 2015). Prentice and Loureiro (2017) studied on demographic and psychological variables of customers for modeling customer loyalty. They emphasized the importance of deep understanding of antecedent conditions for customer loyalty. Binsar (2014) stated that customer relationship management has an important impact on customer loyalty.

Two sides of customer loyalty come into prominence when these definitions are considered: behavioral side and attitudinal side. Tending to purchase a product or service consistently is related to the behavioral side of customer loyalty. Attitudinal side of customer loyalty is related to a customer commenting on a product or service positively to encourage others even though he or she does not repetitively purchase that product or service (Cati and Kocoglu, 2008).

In the recent years, with the development of technology and globalization, businesses are in competition to be able to obtain more customers. In such an environment, obtaining new customers, and then making them loyal customers is highly essential. Additionally, obtaining a new customer is more costly than keeping an existing customer (Lin and Wang, 2006). Considering all these cases, the term of customer loyalty becomes more of an issue for companies.

2.2. Trust

Trust is usually considered as an important point when it comes to positive relationships (Moorman et al., 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). It is especially significant for mutual relationships (Gronroos, 1990). Development of trust increases the loyalty of customers (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999), loyalty (Dwyer et al., 1987), and profitability (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Organizational researches show that trust has a positive effect on loyalty and it is also more important than satisfaction for loyalty (Colquitt et al., 2001; Kim and Mauborgne, 1997; Wetsch, 2005). Chung and Herrera points that trust should be considered as a basic psychological need in various service industries according to their focus group studies (Chung and Herrera, 2007).

Lee et al., (2015) stated that if consumers expect positive results confidently trust occurs. Customers' behavioral intention was importantly and positively affected by the price value and trust (Alalwan and Rana, 2017). Emotional experiences of customers have a positive influence on trust (Molinillo et al., 2017).

Revenue management practice in airlines is one of the most important problems for customers to lose their trust in the company. Price differentiation, which is one of the revenue management practices, may occur depending on flight capacity and traveling habits of customers. These pricing techniques may decrease the trust of a customer due to the lower pricing practices offered to another customer who bought the same service at a different time. Long-term relationships between customers and airline companies can provide mutual benefits. Trust is a prerequisite for buyer-seller relationship (McMahon-Beattie et al., 2002).

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Methodology

A survey was used in order to test the loyalty and trust of airline customers depending on their demographics, airline usage, and ticket purchasing habits. The scales in the literature, which include customer loyalty and trust variables, were revised and added to the questionnaire form to conduct a comprehensive study. To execute this study, a questionnaire form was developed and applied on 967 customers who used the airlines in Turkey. Additionally, detailed information was given about developing the survey, sample selection, sample space, structure of the questionnaire, data collection process, pilot tests, and results.

3.2. Survey Design

The survey prepared for this research consists of two parts. Before these parts, there is a cover text which informs participants that this research will be conducted for academic purposes, the responses given will be kept private, and they will only be subject to scientific usage.

After the literature review, the aim and content of this research, the variables which are considered, and the scales which are used to measure the variables were specified and the unique value of this research was explained. Accordingly, the survey involves, in the first section; the categorical questions which were designed in relation to demographics, use of airlines, and ticket purchasing habits. In the second section; questions which contain variables used in the research model were developed depending on the literature. For evaluating the responses; five-point Likert Scale was used. The survey consists of close-ended questions.

3.3. Scale Development

The surveys applied in this research were taken and adapted from the other researches which were proved to be reliable. The data obtained in this research was analyzed using exploratory statistical techniques. Exploratory statistical techniques, such as T-test and ANOVA, were applied and the results were evaluated for the Turkish customers.

The scales used in the second section of this survey were adapted from the valid scales which are loyalty (Too et al., 2001; Walsh and Beatty, 2007) and trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

3.4. Pre-Test and Pilot Study

After specifying the scales that will be used in the research, the survey was prepared both in Turkish and English. Firstly, the scales from the literature were translated into Turkish. To make the survey simple and clear, reverse questions were avoided. Then, the Turkish version of the survey was translated back into English by a language expert. Pilot tests were conducted after completing the pre-tests.

The first pilot surveys were distributed to the participants and 98 surveys were collected to analyze the results. Then, the second pilot test was conducted with minor changes on the scales. 108 surveys were gathered and analyzed considering the first pilot test, too.

Reliability and validity of the scales were proved by the Pilot test. The actual survey was published online and was responded by 967 participants. As a result, the survey results were statistically analyzed.

Cronbach's Alpha values of each variable were calculated. The values which are over 70% are considered viable values (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). According to the specified criteria, Cronbach's Alpha test results were calculated for the scales as for loyalty $\alpha=0.882$ and for trust $\alpha=0.948$, and it is found that the results are reliable.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analyses were achieved by using the SPSS. According to the data collected; demographics, use of airlines, and ticket purchasing habits of the participants are as follows:

Of 967 respondents, 412 were females (42.6%) and 555 were males (57.4%). 231 (42.6%) of them were aged between 18 and 24, 274 (28.3%) of them were 25 to 34, 196 (20.3%) of them were 35 to 44, 86 (8.9%) of them were 55 to 64, 45 (4.7%) of them are in the age group of 65 years and over. Also, participants have education levels as follows: 15 (1.6%) of them had primary school education, 22 (2.3%) had secondary school education, 75 (7.8%) were high school graduates, 89 (9.2%) had associate degree, 529 (54.7%) had bachelor's degree and 237 (24.5%) had graduate degrees (Master's Degree/PhD). Most of the participants prefer the low cost airlines rather than the network airlines; 438 (45.3%) and 521 (53.9%), respectively. 298 (30.8%) of them mostly fly for business purposes, while 411 (42.5%) fly for visiting family and friends, and 258 (26.7%)

fly for touristic and entertainment purposes. 140 (14.5%) of them answered "no" to the question "Do you generally buy your ticket via the internet?", while 827 (85.5%) of them said "yes". 32 (3.3%) of them said never, 504 (52.1%) of them said rarely, 431 (44.6%) of them usually make price research prior to buying a ticket, while nobody does it all the time.

While executing the statistical tests of group differences, questions were asked for variables with five-point Likert scale. With these hypotheses we analyzed how demographics, use of airline, and ticket purchasing habits differ for the level of customer loyalty and trust. Therefore, null hypothesis H_0 and alternative hypothesis H_A were formed. These hypotheses are as follows:

H_1 : There are statistically significant differences between gender and customers' level of loyalty.

H_2 : There are statistically significant differences between gender and customers' level of trust.

H_3 : There are statistically significant differences between age and customers' level of loyalty.

H_4 : There are statistically significant differences between age and customers' level of trust.

H_5 : There are statistically significant differences between education and customers' level of loyalty.

H_6 : There are statistically significant differences between education and customers' level of trust.

H_7 : There are statistically significant differences between carrier preferences and customers' level of loyalty.

H_8 : There are statistically significant differences between carrier preferences and customers' level of trust.

H_9 : There are statistically significant differences between travel purpose and customers' level of loyalty.

H_{10} : There are statistically significant differences between travel purpose and customers' level of trust.

H_{11} : There are statistically significant differences between internet buying and customers' level of loyalty.

H_{12} : There are statistically significant differences between internet buying and customers' level of trust.

H_{13} : There are statistically significant differences between price search and customers' level of loyalty.

H_{14} : There are statistically significant differences between price search and customers' level of trust.

In order to test the analyses of hypotheses; for the independent groups (when there are two groups), t-test; if there are more than two groups, one-way ANOVA test was used. Findings are shown in Table 1, 2, 3, and 4. Post-hoc test was applied when there are differences between the groups to determine which group causes the difference. Analyzed results are in 95% confidence interval (p (sig.) <0.05). When H_0 hypothesis is not supported, post-hoc tests results show which customer group has a significant difference. Post-hoc test results are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

It is shown in Table 1 that there is a significant difference between loyalty level and airline carrier preference ($p=0.00<0.05$). H_0 is rejected and alternative hypothesis H_7 is accepted. The mean value for loyalty level of low cost carrier customers ($x=2.939$), is lower than network carriers' ($x=3.553$). This refers to the fact that the loyalty of customers who prefer low cost carriers is lower than the loyalty of customers who prefer network carriers.

There is a statistically significant difference between loyalty level and customers' online ticket purchasing habits ($p=0.02<0.05$). H_{11} is accepted. Therefore, it can be said that customers who refuse buying tickets from internet have higher loyalty to the company ($x=3.450>x=3.242$). There is no statistically significant difference between gender and loyalty ($p=0.833>0.05$).

Table 1: The Results of T-Test Analysis for Airline Customers' Loyalty Levels by Gender, Carrier Preference, Internet Purchasing Habits

Loyalty	Category	N	Mean	Sd	F	Sig.	T	P (sig two-tailed)	Result
Gender	Female	412	3.278	0.915	5.677	0.017	0.211	0,833/2	H_1 Rejected
	Male	555	3.265	1.019					
Carrier preference	Low cost	438	2.939	0.957	3.430	0.064	10,189	0,000/2	H_7 Supported
	Network	521	3.553	0.896					
Internet	Yes	827	3.242	0.968	0.483	0.487	-2.331	0.020/2	H_{11}

purchasing	No	140	3.450	1.00	Supported
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*N=967; *p<0.05*

When Table 2 is considered, there is a significant difference between trust level and airline carrier preference ($p=0.00<0.05$). H_0 is rejected and alternative hypothesis H_8 is accepted. Mean value for trust level of low cost carrier customers ($x=3.532$), is lower than network carriers' ($x=4.00$). This is interpreted as trust level of low cost customers is lower than trust level of network customers.

There is no statistically significant difference between trust level and customers' online ticket purchasing habits ($p=0.174>0.05$). H_{12} is rejected.

There is no statistically significant difference between gender and trust ($p=0.906>0.05$). H_2 is rejected.

Table 2: The Results of T-Test Analysis for Airline Customers' Trust Levels by Gender, Carrier Preference, Internet Purchasing Habits

Trust	Category	N	Mean	Sd	F	Sig.	t	P (sig two-tailed)	Result
Gender	Female	412	3.781	0.823	1.911	0.167	-0.118	0.906/2	H_2
	Male	555	3.778	0.895					Rejected
Carrier preference	Low cost	438	3.532	0.889	14.374	0.000	8.882	0,000/2	H_8
	Network	521	4.00	0.771					Supported
Internet purchasing	Yes	827	3.771	0.859	0.000	0.995	-1.361	0.174/2	H_{12}
	No	140	3.878	0.895					Rejected

*N=967; *p<0.05*

The ANOVA results are given in Table 3. According to the ANOVA test results, there is no statistically significant difference between loyalty and either age or price research. H_3 and H_{13} are rejected because $p=0.065>0.05$ and $p=0.498>0.05$, respectively.

There is a statistically significant difference between loyalty and education level ($p=0.00<0.05$). H_0 is rejected and H_5 alternative hypothesis is accepted. Similarly, there is a statistically significant difference between travel purpose and customer loyalty level ($p=0.001<0.05$). H_0 is rejected and H_9 alternative hypothesis is accepted.

It is found that there are differences between sub-groups (education level and travel purpose) represented by supported hypotheses H_5 and H_9 . Post-hoc test results in Table 5 show which groups have the differences.

Table 3: The Results of ANOVA Analysis for Airline Customers' Loyalty Levels by Age, Education, Travel Purpose and Price Search

Loyalty	Category	N	Mean	Sd	F	P (sig.)	Result
Age	18-24	231	3.70	1.436	2.084	0.065	H_3
	25-34	274					Rejected
	35-44	196					
	45-54	135					
	55-64	86					
	Above65	45					
Education	Primary School	15	4.87	1.041	5.22	0.000	H_5
	Secondary School	22					Supported
	High School	75					
	Associate Degree	89					
	(Vocational School Graduates)						
	Undergraduate Degree	529					
	(Bachelor's Degree)						
	Graduate Degree	237					
(Master/PhD Graduates)							

Travel Purpose	Business	298	2.12	0.849	6.904	0.001	H ₉
	Visiting family and friends	258					Supported
	Entertainment and Touristic	411					
Price Search	Never	32	2.41	0.556	0.698	0.498	H ₁₃
	Rarely	504					Rejected
	Usually	431					
	Always	0					

*N=967; *p<0.05*

ANOVA results were given in Table 4. According to the ANOVA test results, there is no statistically significant difference between age and trust ($p=0.136>0.05$). H₄ is rejected.

There is a statistically significant difference between education level, travel purpose, price research and trust ($p=0.015<0.05$; $p=0.008<0.05$; $p=0.004<0.05$, respectively). Therefore, H₆, H₁₀, H₁₄ are accepted.

It is found that there are differences between sub-groups (education level, travel purpose, and price research) represented by supported hypotheses H₆, H₁₀, H₁₄. Post-hoc test results in Table 6 shows which groups have the differences.

Table 4: The Results of ANOVA Analysis for Airline Customers' Trust Levels by Age, Education, Travel Purpose and Price Search

Trust	Category	N	Mean	Sd	F	P (sig.)	Result
Age	18-24	231	3.70	1.436	1.683	0.136	H ₄ Rejected
	25-34	274					
	35-44	196					
	45-54	135					
	55-64	86					
	Above65	45					
Education	Primary School	15	4.87	1.041	5.22	0.015	H ₆ Supported
	Secondary School	22					
	High School	75					
	Associate Degree (Vocational School Graduates)	89					
	Undergraduate Degree (Bachelor's Degree)	529					
	Graduate Degree (Master/PhD Graduates)	237					
Travel Purpose	Business	298	2.12	0.849	6.904	0.008	H ₁₀
	Visiting family and friends	258					Supported
	Entertainment and Touristic	411					
Price Search	Never	32	2.41	0.556	5.437	0.004	H ₁₄
	Rarely	504					Supported
	Usually	431					
	Always	0					

*N=967; *p<0.05*

ANOVA tests results in Table 5 and 6 show if there are significant differences between groups. If the significance value is less than 0.05 at 95% confidence interval, Null hypothesis (H₀) is rejected. In this study H₅, H₆, H₉, H₁₀, H₁₁, H₁₄ are supported. There are differences between sub-groups for these hypotheses. Table 5 and Table 6 show which groups have the differences.

Table 5: Post-Hoc Test Results for Loyalty

		Mean Difference	Post hoc (Sig.)
Education			
Secondary School	Undergraduate Degree (Bachelor's Degree)	0.566*	0.007
	Graduate Degree (Master/PhD Graduates)	0.580*	0.007
High School	Undergraduate Degree (Bachelor's Degree)	0.322*	0.007
	Graduate Degree (Master/PhD Graduates)	0.336*	0.009
Associate Degree (Vocational School Graduates)	Undergraduate Degree (Bachelor's Degree)	0.389*	0.006
	Graduate Degree (Master/PhD Graduates)	0.403*	0.011
Travel purpose			
Business	Visiting family and friends	0.289*	0.000
	Entertainment and Touristic	0.211*	0.004

Table 6: Post-Hoc Test Results for Trust

		Mean Difference	Post hoc (Sig.)
Education			
High School	Graduate Degree (Master/PhD Graduates)	0.259*	0.023
	Undergraduate Degree (Bachelor's Degree)	0.237*	0.016*
Associate Degree (Vocational School Graduates)	Graduate Degree (Master/PhD Graduates)	0.295*	0.006*
	Undergraduate Degree (Bachelor's Degree)	0.207*	0.016*
Travel purpose			
Business	Visiting family and friends	0.222*	0.002
	Entertainment and Touristic	0.141*	0.031
Price Search			
Never	Usually	0.340*	0.031
Rarely	Usually	0.161*	0.004

H₅: The customers with secondary school, high school, and associate degrees are more loyal to their preferred airline company than the customers with undergraduate and graduate degrees. Mean differences for these sub-groups are 0.566* - 0.580*, 0.322* - 0.336*, and 0.389* - 0.403*, respectively, and confidence level is less than 0.05.

H₆: The customers with high school degrees have higher level of trust than the customers with graduate. The customers with associate degrees have higher level of trust than the customers with undergraduate and graduate. Mean differences for these sub-groups are 0.259*, 0.207* - 0.295*, respectively, and confidence level is less than 0.05.

The findings show that the customers with higher education level have less loyalty and trust to the company.

H₉: The passengers who travel for business purpose are more loyal to their preferred airline company compared to the passengers who travel for visiting family and friends or entertainment and touristic purposes. Mean differences for these sub-groups are 0.289* - 0.211*, and confidence level is less than 0.05.

H₁₀: The passengers who travel for business purpose trust their preferred airline company more, as compared to the passengers who travel for visiting family and friends or entertainment and touristic purposes. Mean differences for these sub-groups are 0.222* - 0.141*, and confidence level is less than 0.05.

H₁₄: Customers who never or rarely do research for ticket prices trust their preferred airline company more than the customers who usually do research for ticket prices. Mean differences for these sub-groups are 0.340* - 0.161*, and confidence level is less than 0.05.

5. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study provides significant contributions in terms of airline customers' level of loyalty and trust in relation to demographics, use of airlines, and purchasing ticket habits. According to the findings; if the customers' education level is higher, their level of loyalty and trust for their preferred airline company are lower. Customers who prefer to use low cost carriers have low level of trust and loyalty to the company than the customers who prefer to use network carrier. The reasons lying behind the customers' having low level of "loyalty and trust" may be explained by Turkish customers' with previous experiences with this company or practices and recognition of the company. It would be beneficial to add service quality as a variable to examine in the future researches.

In case of considering the travel purpose, passengers who travel for business purposes are more loyal and they trust the airline company more than the passengers who are traveling to visit family or friends or for touristic and entertainment reasons. This situation can be explained as the business travel is recognized as a routine part of their business by those passengers and they make it a habit to fly with the airlines they are satisfied with and this leads to higher loyalty and trust.

Customers who prefer buying printed (paper) tickets are more loyal to the company. The reason for this may be that loyal people do not consider the alternatives such as buying online tickets from the internet. Turkish people usually do not opt for online shopping because they feel safer if the purchasing is verified physically.

Airline customers, who never or rarely do price researching prior to buying a ticket, trust their preferred company more than the customers who always research for the prices beforehand. This shows that the trust feeling leads customers to questioning the company much less than the people who have lower level of trust. Additionally, they may be choosing to trust the company just because they do not find it necessary to spend time for researching for the prices.

The results of this research provide valuable information about customers for the airlines already operating or planning to operate in Turkey. Both low cost and network airline companies should consider these findings to develop approaches to increase the demand for and profits of the company.

This study will lead future researches. Even though analyzed data were gathered from a large sample, there are certain limitations: Respondents are generally the passengers who use the airlines operating in Turkey. There is only one network carrier operating in Turkey. Because the respondents generally did not experience various low cost and network carriers, they may have answered the survey questions considering the airlines they have had experience with. Even though 967 airline passengers participated in the survey, a wide range of passenger experience could not take into consideration due to Turkey's limited number of airlines. Due to the financial limitations, this study was conducted only in Turkey, where experiences, cultures, and habits of people are similar. For further studies, including international and more experienced airline passengers from diverse cultures would be advantageous.

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