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Research Article

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Brand Dilution's Implications for Purchase Intention Through Brand Equity¹²

Ali KÖROĞLU¹ | | * | Salih YILDIZ² |

¹ Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University | Tokat Vocational School | Tokat, Türkiye

² Gümüşhane University | Faculty of Economics and Administrative Science | Gümüşhane, Türkiye

* Corresponding Author: alikoroglu5461@hotmail.com

Keywords: Brand dilution, brand equity, purchase intention, trademark dilution, famous brand.

JEL Codes: M30, M31, M37, M39

Abstract: Brand dilution, which refers to new brand's damage to well-known brand's reputation and distinctive character by entering the market, is an understudied topic in marketing. Furthermore, there are very few studies comparing the effects of different levels of blurring and tarnishing. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the indirect impact of brand dilution on purchase intention through brand equity and by comparing the effects of blurring and tarnishing. For this purpose, a survey was conducted with 960 university students selected using a convenience sampling method. The conditional process model (Model 8) developed by Hayes (2018) was used in the research. The research results indicate a negative impact of brand dilution on brand equity dimensions and purchase intention. Additionally, brand awareness/association and brand loyalty play a mediating role in the relationship between brand dilution and purchase intention. Familiarity with the product category plays a moderating role in the relationship between brand dilution and brand awareness/association, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. As participants' familiarity with the product category increases, the influence of brand dilution on brand loyalty and purchase intention increases, while its influence on brand awareness/association decreases.

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¹ It is declared that this article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics principles.

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Araştırma Makalesi

Açık Erişim

Marka Sulandırmasının Marka Değeri Üzerinden Satın Alma Niyetine Yansımaları

Ali KÖROĞLU¹ | | * | Salih YILDIZ² |

¹ Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa Üniversitesi | Tokat Meslek Yüksekokulu | Tokat, Türkiye

² Gümüşhane Üniversitesi | İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi | Gümüşhane, Türkiye

* Sorumlu Yazar: alikoroglu5461@hotmail.com

Anahtar

Kelimeler:

Marka sulandırması, marka değeri, satın alma niyeti, ticari marka sulandırması, tanınmış marka.

JEL

Kodları:

M30, M31, M37, M39

Öz: Pazara yeni giren bir markanın tanınmış markanın itibarına ve ayırt edici karakterine zarar vermesi anlamına gelen marka sulandırması pazarlama alanında yeterince ele alınmamış bir konudur. Ayrıca bulanıklaştırma ve lekeleme boyutlarının etkilerini karşılaştıran çalışmaların sayısı da oldukça azdır. Bu çalışma marka sulandırmasının marka değeri aracılığıyla satın alma niyeti üzerindeki dolaylı etkisini inceleyerek ve bulanıklaştırma ve lekelemenin etkilerini karşılaştırarak bu boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla, kolayda örnekleme yöntemiyle belirlenen 960 üniversite öğrencisiyle bir anket çalışması yürütülmüştür. Araştırmada Hayes (2018) tarafından geliştirilen koşullu süreç modeli (Model 8) kullanılmıştır. Araştırma sonuçları, marka sulandırmasının marka değeri boyutları ve satın alma niyeti üzerinde olumsuz bir etkisi olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca, marka farkındalığı/çağrışımı ve marka sadakati, marka sulandırması ile satın alma niyeti arasındaki ilişkide aracı rol oynamaktadır. Ürün kategorisine aşinalık, marka sulandırması ile marka farkındalığı/çağrışımı, marka sadakati ve satın alma niyeti arasındaki ilişkide düzenleyici rol oynamaktadır. Katılımcıların ürün kategorisine aşinalığı arttıkça marka sulandırmasının marka sadakati ve satın alma niyeti üzerindeki etkisi artarken, marka farkındalığı/çağrışımı üzerindeki etkisi azalmaktadır.

1. Introduction

Brand dilution is a type of damage different from classic brand infringement, resulting from the weakening of the distinctive character and reputation of a well-known brand. Unlike traditional trademark infringements, dilution relies not on consumer confusion, but on the erosion of the brand's mental representation and the disruption of its network of associations. In this respect, dilution poses a strategic threat, especially for well-known brands with high awareness and strong associative structures (Keller, 1993; Morrin & Jacoby, 2000). In recent years, the brand management literature has increasingly emphasized that dilution is not only a legal issue but also a marketing problem with direct impacts on consumer perceptions and brand equity (Loken & John, 1993; Torelli et al., 2012).

In the literature, it is generally accepted that brand dilution occurs in two main dimensions: blurring and tarnishing. Blurring refers to a brand losing its distinctiveness over time due to its uniqueness weakening and being associated with different connotations; while tarnishing refers to damage to a brand's reputation as a result of being associated with negative or inappropriate connotations (Pullig et al., 2006). Current studies show that these two effects operate through different cognitive processes in the consumer mind, and that emotional responses and cognitive evaluations are particularly distinct (Besharat & Langan, 2014; Singh et al., 2020). This situation reveals that the effects of dilution are not one-dimensional, but have a multi-layered structure.

Protection against brand dilution applies only to well-known brands. This is because the dilution is rooted not in consumer misconceptions, but rather in an erosion of the brand's symbolic and economic value (Beebe, 2008). However, recent studies have shown that dilution not only harms a brand's distinctive character but also indirectly impacts brand performance by weakening consumer-based brand equity (Datta et al., 2017; Swaminathan et al., 2020). In this context, dilution is considered a strategic risk factor that threatens a brand's long-term competitive advantage.

However, the extent and magnitude of the impact of brand dilution remain largely unclear. Empirical findings are limited, particularly regarding the extent to which a newcomer's use of the distinctive elements of a well-known brand will create a dilution effect. Current studies mostly focus on specific scenarios in experimental contexts, and the effects reflected in real consumer behavior are not adequately explained (Pullig et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2020). Furthermore, the effects of dilution on concepts such as brand equity, brand image, and brand personality, and how these effects translate into purchase intention, have also been addressed in a fragmented manner in the literature.

The consumer-based brand value approach provides an important theoretical foundation for explaining these relationships. Brand equity arises as a result of consumers' perceptions, associations, and experiences with the brand, and directly influences consumer behavior (Keller, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001b). Current research indicates that changes in brand equity often influence purchase intention indirectly, through cognitive and emotional processes, rather than directly (Dwivedi et al., 2019). In this context, the effect of brand dilution on purchase intention is expected to occur through brand equity; however, studies directly testing this mediating relationship are quite limited.

On the other hand, consumers' level of knowledge and experience regarding the product category stands out as a critical variable shaping the impact of brand dilution. Category familiarity directly influences

consumers' information processing, brand comparisons, and decision-making mechanisms (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Current literature indicates that consumers with high category familiarity process brand information more effectively and evaluate differences between brands more accurately (Hutter et al., 2013; Pappu & Quester, 2016). This suggests that the dilution effect may vary depending on the consumer, and that consumers with a high level of familiarity may be less affected by the dilution.

This study offers three key contributions to the literature. Firstly, the effects of blurring and tarnishing are tested comparatively within the same model to reveal the relative impact of these two types of dilution on purchase intention. Secondly, the underlying mechanism of this process is explained by showing that the effect of brand dilution on purchase intention occurs through brand equity. Thirdly, the moderating role of category familiarity is incorporated into the model, revealing the contextual and consumer-dependent nature of dilution effects.

In conclusion, this study aims to fill a significant gap in the literature by explaining the impact of brand dilution on purchase intention not only through direct relationships but also through mediating and regulatory mechanisms. In this respect, the study addresses brand dilution not from a results-oriented approach, but within a process-oriented and multivariate framework, offering significant implications for both academic literature and practitioners.

2. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The Federal Trademark Dilution Act of 1995 defines dilution as the reduction of the ability of a well-known trademark to identify and distinguish goods and services, regardless of whether there is competition between them and regardless of likelihood of confusion or deception (Federal Trademark Dilution Act of 1995, 15 U.S.C. § 1127). Brand dilution is defined as the gradual diminution or dissipation of the identity and hold of a well-known brand or name in the minds of consumers through its use on non-competing goods (Schechter, 1927, p. 814). All brands are protected against the possibility of confusion. In other words, when a new brand entering the market uses the name or emblem of another brand in the market on the same product, these two brands will be confused with each other, and protection is provided to the old brand. However, dilution does not only occur when two brands compete in the same product category. A brand in a different product category may also damage the well-known brand by using its name or emblem. This harm occurs by weakening the connotations of the well-known brand in the minds of consumers. The new brand damages the well-known brand by blurring its distinctive character and tarnishing its reputation. Therefore, brand dilution occurs in two ways: blurring and tarnishing. Blurring is when a new brand causes the associations of the famous brand to weaken (Peterson et al., 1999, p. 256). Tarnishing is when a new brand negatively affects brand evaluation, attitudes, and consumers' desired behaviors by adding negative associations to the mental network of the well-known brand or changing the positive ones (Jacoby, 2001, p. 1060). A good example of dilution through blurring is the emergence of low-quality and inexpensive accessory brands using the phrase "Apple Style," while the Apple brand has a premium and innovative image. The newly launched brand trivializes Apple's unique and innovative connotation. The use of Prada, a world-famous fashion and clothing brand, in bathroom cleaning products can be cited as an example of tarnishing. Consumers can understand that the brand name used on cleaning products is not related to the world-famous Prada brand, and no misconception about the product's origin arises in their minds. Therefore, the distinctive character of the famous brand remains unharmed. However, if a well-known and prominent

brand in the fashion world is used in cleaning products, the brand will lose prestige in the eyes of consumers and its reputation will be damaged (Dilmaç, 2014, pp. 117-118).

The brand dilution issue has focused on well-known brands, but there is no clear definition of well-known. The World Intellectual Property Organization (1999) states that factors such as the degree of brand recognition within the relevant industry, the geographic region where the brand is widely used, the brand's value, and the geographic reach of advertising should be considered to determine brand recognition. The US Trademark Dilution Revision Act of 2006 also states that for a brand to be considered well-known, it must be widely known by US consumers (Trademark Dilution Revision Act of 2006, 15 U.S.C. § 1125(c)(2)(A)). Protection against brand dilution is only available for well-known brands. This is because well-known brands have a certain degree of recognition in return for their investment in the sector. Due to this recognition, these brands have a high perceived quality. Consumers are more familiar with these brands, and they can trust well-known brands more easily than unknown ones. (Peterson et al., 1999, p. 257).

When examining studies on the subject, it is seen that marketing researchers began examining brand dilution in the 1990s. From this period onwards, it was investigated whether a new brand entering the market could harm a well-known brand by using its distinctive features. Although the number of studies conducted is quite limited, important results have been obtained. These studies have mostly examined the relationships between brand dilution and purchase intention, brand equity and dimensions, brand personality, and brand image, and have found that brand dilution has a negative impact on these variables (Choy & Kim, 2013; Macias & Cervino, 2017a; Macias & Cervino, 2017b; Macias & Cervino, 2019). Studies show that even trivial, weak, and redundant brand attributes used in branding, as well as minor deviations in brand presentation, can contradict customers' expectations based on past experiences, confuse consumers, and weaken brand equity. Secondary features that are inconsistent with a brand's core positioning and identity elements, and that fail to generate strong and distinctive associations in the consumer's mind, can create inconsistencies in the brand schema, leading to perceptual confusion. Similarly, minor changes in logo, visual language, communication tone, or packaging design that don't fully align with the brand identity can also weaken brand equity by violating expectations in strong brands (Broniarczyk & Gershoff, 2003; Osselaer & Alba, 2000; Ponnampalil et al., 2015; Thorbjørnsen, 2005). Therefore, even if consumers can distinguish between a newly introduced brand and a well-known brand -meaning the new brand doesn't harm the brand's recognition- the new brand, with its trivial, weak, and redundant attributes, negatively impacts consumer loyalty and perceived quality of the well-known brand, thereby weakening its brand equity. For example, if a premium-positioned brand emphasizes "cheapness," or if a minimalist brand uses complex visuals, these brands can damage their perceived quality, even if they are well-known. Studies also support this idea. Macias and Cervino (2019) emphasize that while the awareness of well-known brands remains the same in a competitive environment, the dimensions of perceived quality and loyalty tend to weaken. In recent years, efforts to dilute luxury brands have come to the forefront. Studies show that luxury brands are diluted through social rejection, renting, weakening of brand image, and the use of inconsistent advertising, thereby diminishing their brand equity. Social rejection refers to a situation where a brand is not socially or ethically approved by society or consumer groups; for example, a luxury fashion brand being perceived as overly elitist may not be embraced by a broad consumer base. Leasing or licensing involves the use of a brand in incompatible product categories; for example, licensing a prestigious watch brand for lower-quality accessories or handbags could obscure the brand's distinctive character. Brand image weakening occurs as a result of negative developments related to perceived quality or prestige; for example, a well-known car brand experiencing safety or production scandals negatively affects consumers' brand

perception. Finally, inconsistent advertising use creates cognitive dissonance in consumers as a result of the mismatch between brand messaging and visual presentation and brand identity; for example, using mass and colorful advertising campaigns for a minimalist and sophisticated brand can blur brand perception. All of these mechanisms can weaken brand equity by diminishing brand value through consumer perception (Khalifa & Shukla, 2021; Qian & Park, 2021; Shin et al., 2017; Vogel et al., 2019). In a quasi-experimental study by Cho (2015), it was observed that diluting the information given to consumers about a well-known sports brand increased, rather than decreased, the brand equity. This suggests that the harm proposed under dilution theory is questionable and that more empirical evidence is needed. Another study on well-known sports brands found that diluting the information given to consumers about the sports brand decreased the brand equity of moderately well-known brands but increased the brand equity of highly well-known brands (Cho et al., 2019). This difference can be explained by the nature of the manipulation: the information provided in this studies was perceived by consumers as an element of novelty or curiosity that reinforced a brand that already had high brand awareness and strong loyalty. In our study, the manipulations applied to highly recognizable brands were designed to blurring brand attributes and negatively impact reputation. In this context, it is logical to hypothesize that brand dilution will reduce brand equity and purchase intention even in highly recognizable brands. Based on these studies, the following hypotheses have been formed;

H1: Perceived brand dilution negatively effects the level of brand awareness/associations in consumers' minds.

H2: Perceived brand dilution negatively effects the perceived quality by consumers.

H3: Perceived brand dilution negatively effects consumer brand loyalty.

Studies show that brand dilution not only diminishes the equity of a well-known brand but also negatively impacts the intention to purchase that brand. When consumers encounter a new brand that imitates a well-known brand, their positive attitudes towards the well-known brand may decrease (Zhang et al., 2018). Furthermore, dilution has a greater effect when the new brand and the well-known brand are similar. Brand dilution negatively impacts brand personality, reducing the intention to purchase the well-known brand (Choy & Kim, 2013). When consumers perceive a new brand as similar to a well-known brand, their trust in the well-known brand may decrease, and their purchase intentions may be negatively affected (Jung & Seock, 2016; Li & Nan, 2023). Furthermore, studies show that the inability to distinguish between a new brand and a familiar brand can lead to consumer confusion. Consumers who cannot differentiate between the two brands are less likely to purchase either the new or the familiar brand (Vale & Matos, 2015). Brand dilution reduces the perceived uniqueness of well-known brands. This, in turn, lowers the intention of consumers, who value authenticity and distinctiveness, to purchase the well-known brand (Loebnitz & Grunert, 2019). Based on these studies, the following hypotheses have been formed;

H4: Perceived brand dilution negatively effects consumers' purchasing intentions.

However, as previously mentioned, there are also studies claiming that brand dilution does not harm well-known brands. Indeed, some studies have found that brand dilution does not negatively affect brand awareness, brand personality, and other brand elements (Choy & Kim, 2013; Macias & Cervino, 2019). Research on the subject indicates that dilution does not always occur and that certain conditions must be met for dilution to happen. One of these conditions is the similarity between the new brand and the well-

known brand. Studies have found that as the similarity between the new brand and the well-known brand increases, the impact of dilution decreases (Choy & Kim, 2013; Macias & Cervino, 2017a; Macias & Cervino, 2017b; Macias & Cervino, 2019; Pullig et al., 2006). In fact, some studies suggest that as similarity increases, the well-known brand is strengthened (Choy & Kim, 2013; Pullig et al., 2004). Moreover, if consumers are familiar with a well-known brand, the well-known brand is strengthened regardless of the similarity between the new brand and the well-known brand (Choy & Kim, 2013). Factors such as co-exhibition of brands and the price of the new brand being the same or lower than that of the well-known brand can also lead to brand dilution (Buchanan et al., 1999). Especially when a new brand uses the same or similar name or logo as a well-known brand at a lower price, it can damage the reputation of the well-known brand.

Additionally, some researchers state that it is difficult to dilute very famous brands, while it is easier to dilute moderately famous brands (Peterson et al., 1999). This situation is related to the level of consumer familiarity with the well-known brand. When consumers are familiar with the well-known brand, the likelihood of dilution occurring decreases or disappears altogether (Morrin & Jacoby, 2000). Product category similarity is also a determining factor in brand dilution. That is, when the brand and the well-known brand are in the same or similar product category, dilution does not occur; however, when they are in different product categories, dilution occurs (Peterson et al., 1999). Morrin and Jacoby (2000) found in their studies that when the new brand and the well-known brand are in the same or similar product category, the recall rate of the well-known brand drops to 70% when exposed to diluted advertisements, and when both brands are in different product categories, the recall rate of the well-known brand drops to 58%. When the new brand and the well-known brand are in the same product category, consumers are less likely to confuse the two brands. However, when the brands are in different product categories, the likelihood of confusing the two brands increases, thinking that the well-known brand has started operating in a different product category. When consumers confuse the well-known brand with the new brand, the recall rate of the well-known brand decreases while the recall rate of the new brand increases (Morrin et al., 2006). Another result obtained from the research is that dilution negatively affects the preference for the well-known brand, and this effect emerges over time. Therefore, immediate reactions do not provide an idea of what the consumer ultimately prefers. For this reason, many factors need to be considered when evaluating the effects of brand dilution (Bradford, 2008).

Furthermore, brand dilution occurs in the form of blurring and tarnishment. Research results show that blurring and tarnishment affect different components of brand attitude (Kruger & Boshoff, 2015). In most studies, the results of blurring and tarnishment have not been examined separately. This may have led to different results in the research. The literature shows that the effect of brand dilution on well-known brands depends on many factors, such as the characteristics of the new brand and the product category. Accordingly, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H1a: Product category familiarity weakens the negative effect of brand dilution on brand awareness/associations.

H2a: Product category familiarity weakens the negative effect of brand dilution on perceived quality.

H3a: Product category familiarity amplifies the negative effect of brand dilution on brand loyalty.

H4a: Product category familiarity amplifies the negative effect of brand dilution on purchase intention.

Consumer-based brand equity is defined as the additional value created by the brand name and added to the product in the consumer's mind (Farquhar, 1989). Therefore, consumer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer is knowledgeable about the brand and strong associations with the brand are formed in their memory (Esch et al., 2009). Considering these characteristics of consumer-based brand equity, it can be said that it will also be a determinant of consumers' purchase intentions for the brand. A review of the literature reveals that many studies confirm this.

Yurdakul and Şener (2021) found in their study that brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand associations towards purpose-driven brands have a positive effect on purchase intention. Yılmazel and Göktaş (2021), Verma (2021), and Majeed et al. (2021) found in their studies that overall brand equity has a positive effect on purchase intention. Güner et al. (2021) concluded in their study that the dimensions of consumer-based brand equity have a positive effect on purchase intention. Azzari and Pelissari (2020) found in their study that brand loyalty, brand associations, and brand awareness have a positive effect on purchase intention. Halim et al. (2024), articulate that strong brand equity not only differentiates a company from its competitors but also significantly enhances the likelihood of making purchases. Similarly, Louvet (2023) explores the dynamics within the sports nutrition sector, noting that brand equity significantly influences purchase intentions among millennials in Ireland. Moreover, the work by Faisal and Ekawanto (2022) emphasizes the role of brand awareness as a precursor to brand equity, demonstrating its consequential impact on purchase intentions. Their analysis reveals that heightened brand awareness effectively translates to increased consumer desires to purchase, solidifying the connection between strong brand equity and higher purchase intentions. Based on these studies in the literature, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H5: The level of brand awareness/associations in consumers' minds positively effects purchase intention.

H6: The perceived quality by consumers positively effects purchase intention.

H7: Consumer brand loyalty positively effects purchase intention.

Numerous studies have shown that changes in brand equity also effect purchase intention. Especially for consumers with a high status consciousness, purchasing intentions are shaped by brand equity (Awan et al., 2020). Brand dilution, which causes a well-known brand to lose its distinctiveness, can reduce consumers' perceived brand equity, negatively impacting their intention to purchase the well-known brand. Furthermore, brand equity effects purchasing intention by creating a perception of quality and safety among consumers. Therefore, brand dilution can negatively effect perceived equity and purchase intention by misleading consumers about the quality and safety associated with a well-known brand (Legendre & Coderre, 2018). Furthermore, a decrease in brand equity jeopardizes perceived quality, brand associations, and brand image -important components of brand equity that directly influence purchase intention- thus reducing the purchase intention (Foroudi et al., 2018). Brand dilution negatively impacts brand equity, reducing these perceptions of the brand and thus potentially lowering purchase intention. Especially in cases of competitive counterfeiting, consumers perceive a weakening of established brand equity. This, in turn, amplifies the negative impact of decreased brand equity on consumer behavior (Maslikhan, 2019). Based on these studies in the literature, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H5a: Brand dilution has an indirect negative effect on purchase intention through its impact on brand awareness/brand associations.

H6a: Brand dilution has an indirect negative effect on purchase intention through its impact on perceived quality.

H7a: Brand dilution has an indirect negative effect on purchase intention through its impact on brand loyalty.

The research model is shown in Figure 1.

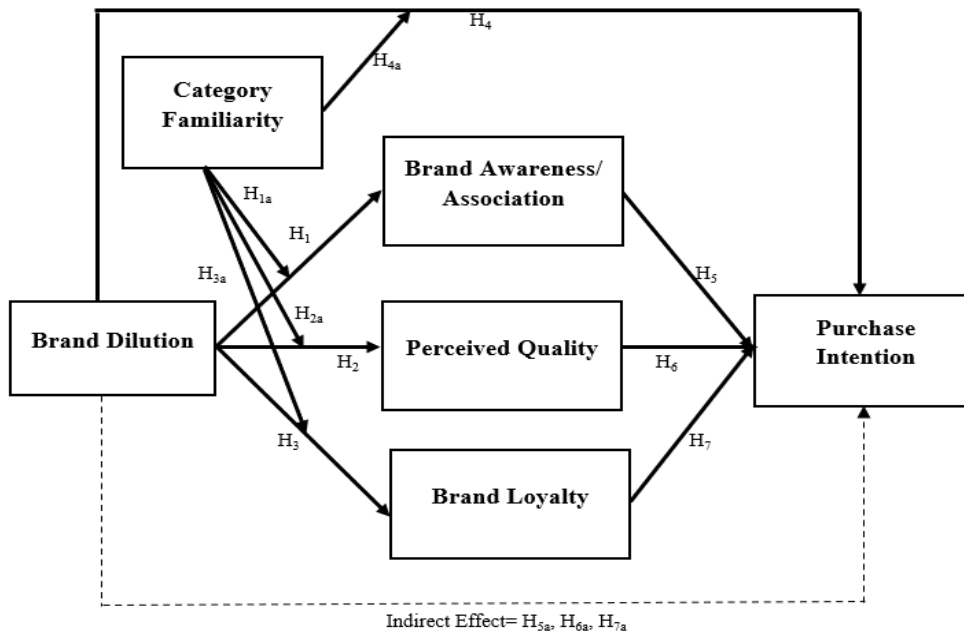


Figure 1. Research model

Source: Created by the authors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Preliminary Study

In a study aimed at determining the impact of young brands on famous brands, a survey was first conducted among female and male students to identify the top 3 product categories they shop for most (sports products, coffee, high-tech products). Following this stage, a graphic designer prepared logos for four well-known brands in these product categories and for new brands associated with them. The logos were designed based on the distinguishing features of the brands. Furthermore, logos were created for young brands with content that undermined the distinctive features and reputation of well-known brands. These logos aimed to identify the dilution of the brands through content that blurred and tarnished the distinctive character and reputation of the famous brands. To assess the likelihood that participants might determine the authenticity of these brands, a manipulation control question was added to the survey: “The image shown undermines the brand’s equity.” Then, the level of agreement with this statement was compared using ANOVA between those who were and were not exposed to the dilution. The analysis revealed significant differences ($p=0,00$) between

those exposed to the blurred brand ($m=2,27$) those exposed to the tarnished brand ($m=1,85$), and those not exposed to the diluted brand (3,58). These findings indicate that the manipulation was successful.

A pilot test was conducted with 50 university students to determine the clarity of the statements included in the survey form used in the research. The survey forms were administered face-to-face to the students, and the data obtained were subjected to factor and reliability analysis. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that the scales had sufficient validity and reliability.

3.2. Scale

The variables of the research consist of brand dilution, category familiarity, brand equity (brand awareness/association, perceived quality, brand loyalty), and purchase intention. Brand dilution is included in the research as a categorical variable with two categories: those exposed to dilution and those not exposed. Familiarity with the product category was also added to the questionnaire form as a categorical variable with three categories: those who have no knowledge about the product, those who have partial knowledge, and those who have a high level of knowledge about the product.

Before the survey form was created, the scales, which were originally in English, were translated into Turkish. The reverse translation method was used in the translation into Turkish. The translations were done by an expert translator in both Turkish and English, and by an academician specializing in the field. A survey form was created because the two translations were similar to each other. To determine the comprehensibility, validity, and reliability of the survey form, it was reviewed by four academics. Based on feedback from academics, a survey form was created, and a pre-test was conducted on 50 university students to determine the comprehensibility of the statements in the survey form. The survey forms were administered to students in person. Based on feedback from students, it was determined that the statements in the survey were highly understandable, and survey form was formed.

The brand equity scale consists of 24 statements taken from the studies of Aaker (1996), Yoo, Donthu and Lee (2000), Yoo and Donthu (2001b), Netemeyer et al. (2004) and Tong and Hawley (2009). The awareness/association dimension consists of 8 statements such as “I know what X looks like”, “Some characteristics of X quickly come to mind” etc. The perceived quality dimension consists of 9 statements such as “X has the highest quality”, “The potential quality of X is extremely high” etc. The brand loyalty dimension consists of 7 statements such as “I think I am loyal to X”, “X would be my first choice” etc.

The purchase intention scale consists of 4 statements taken from the study by Yoo and Donthu (2001a). The purchase intention scale consists of four statements such as “I would buy X instead of other existing brands”, “I would recommend others to buy X”, etc.

The study utilized scales that have been widely used and proven valid in various contexts in the literature. All items in the scales have been adapted to the context of the study and the necessary citations have been made. The tools used in research are generally protected by copyright and may require permission. However, some research tools are available for academic use without requiring permission (Hays et al., 2018). The scales used in this study were carefully examined in terms of their conditions of use, and no restrictions requiring permission were identified. Therefore, the scales have been used appropriately for academic purposes, with proper attribution. These scales were not reproduced; they were adapted to the survey design in accordance with their use in previous studies.

3.3. Sampling and Data Collection Process

The first part of the survey form includes questions to determine the gender of consumers and their level of familiarity with the product category. In the second section, there are statements about brand equity dimensions and purchasing intention. The statements in the scale are prepared in a 5-point Likert scale format. Additionally, since an experimental design will be used in the research, the questionnaire is divided into 12 separate groups. Each of these 12 groups contains statements related to 4 different brands (brands X, Y, Z, and W). There are 3 different questionnaires for each brand, one with the original statements, one with the statements blurred to dilute the brand, and one with the statements tarnished to dilute the brand. Therefore, the design of the study is structured as 3X4. For example, while some participants are presented with statements regarding brand X, others are shown the logo of a young brand that dilutes brand X, followed by statements about brand X. Similarly, some participants are shown the logo of a young brand that tarnishes brand X, followed by statements about brand X. The newly designed dilution logos manipulation method was also used in a study conducted by Morrin et al., (2006), and evidence related to dilution was obtained as a result of the research.

The universe of the study consists of university students. Since it was not possible to reach the entire universe, the convenience sampling method, a non-probability sampling method, was used. This method was preferred to collect data more quickly, easily, and at a lower cost. In order for the sample to represent the universe as well as possible, efforts were made to reach students with different socio-economic and demographic characteristics. The questionnaire was administered face-to-face with students from 01.04.2022 to 30.04.2022. During the data collection process, the questionnaire was filled out by 960 individuals. These 960 individuals were randomly assigned to 12 behavioral groups (4 well-known brand, 8 young brand). A total of 12 behavioral groups were created, with one group for each well-known brand and two groups for each brand associated with young brands. The reason for creating the behavioral groups as 4 control groups and 8 experimental groups is the possibility of different results emerging regarding different categories and brands. The reason for having a larger number of experimental groups is to distinguish between blurring and tarnishing, with those exposed to blurring and tarnishing advertisements being allocated to different groups. Subsequently, participants were asked to answer the questions in the survey after being shown images related to well-known brands for the control group and images blurring and tarnishing associated with new (young) brands for the experimental group.

To measure dilution, a two-level (dichotomous) variable was used. In this case, individuals in the control group are represented by 0, while those in the experimental group are represented by 1. Brand equity dimensions were included in the research because blurring and tarnishing, which are brand dilution dimensions, mean that the distinctive aspect of the brand and its reputation in the eyes of the consumer are damaged and affect the consumer's perceptions of the brand or product. Thus, changes in purchase intention due to the dilution of consumer awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and loyalty are examined. For this purpose, brand equity was included in the research as a multidimensional concept. Additionally, previous studies have suggested that consumers' familiarity with the product category of the well-known brand may also influence the dilution of the well-known brand's brand equity by the young brand. Therefore, consumers' familiarity with the product category of the well-known brand was included in the research as a moderating variable.

3.4. Ethical Permissions for the Research

This study adhered to all regulations outlined in the “Directive on Scientific Research and Publication Ethics of Higher Education Institutions.” No actions listed under the second section of the Directive, titled “Actions Contrary to Scientific Research and Publication Ethics” were undertaken.

Ethics committee approval information

Name of the committee that conducted the ethics review= Gümüşhane University Rectorate Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee

Date of the ethics review decision=23.02.2022

Ethics evaluation document number=2022/1

4. Findings

4.1. Factor Analysis

The analysis revealed that the Kaiser Meyer Olkin value of the brand equity scale was 0.942, and the Bartlett Sphericity test result was significant ($p < 0.05$). These results indicate that the sample was suitable and sufficient for factor analysis. The analysis revealed that the brand equity scale consisted of 24 items grouped into three dimensions. Of these dimensions, brand awareness/association comprised 8 items, perceived quality comprised 9 items, and brand loyalty comprised 7 items. All items in the scale had factor loadings above 0.40. The total variance explained in the scale was 67.48%.

The analysis revealed that the Kaiser Meyer Olkin value for the purchase intention scale was 0.857, and the Bartlett Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.05$). These results indicate that the sample was suitable and sufficient for factor analysis. The analysis revealed that the brand equity scale consisted of four items grouped under one dimension. All items in the scale had factor loadings above 0.40. The total variance explained in the scale was 80.47% (Appendix 1).

To assess the potential risk of common method bias, Harman’s single-factor test was conducted. All measurement items were entered into an unrotated exploratory factor analysis. The results revealed a three-factor structure, and the first factor accounted for less than 50% of the total variance. Although Harman’s single-factor test has certain limitations, the findings provide preliminary evidence that common method bias is unlikely to substantially influence the results.

4.2. Reliability Analysis

The Cronbach alpha values of the scales used in the study are above 0.70 (Brand Equity: 0.914; Purchase Intention: 0.919). This result shows that the reliability level of the scales is high.

4.3. Normality Test

In this study, after considering skewness and kurtosis values, a normal distribution test was conducted. The test results revealed that all scale, dimension, and item skewness and kurtosis values fell within the range of -2 and +2. These findings indicate that the data are normally distributed (George & Mallery, 2010).

4.4. One-Way ANOVA

One-Way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether there were differences in participants' perceptions of research variables based on the type of dilution they were exposed to. The analysis results are shown in

Table 1. Differences by dilution type

Variable	Category 1	Category 2	N	Mean	F	s.e.	p
Brand Awareness/ Association	No Dilution	Blurring *	320	3.81	72.787	0.07	0.00
		Tarnishing *				0.04	
	Blurring	No Dilution *	320	3.61		0.07	
		Tarnishing *				0.07	
	Tarnishing	No Dilution *	320	3.10		0.04	
		Blurring *				0.07	
Perceived Quality	No Dilution	Blurring *	320	3.86	118.222	0.08	0.00
		Tarnishing *				0.06	
	Blurring	No Dilution *	320	3.02		0.08	
		Tarnishing *				0.07	
	Tarnishing	No Dilution *	320	2.89		0.06	
		Blurring *				0.07	
Brand Loyalty	No Dilution	Blurring *	320	3.99	291.992	0.05	0.00
		Tarnishing *				0.07	
	Blurring	No Dilution *	320	2.68		0.05	
		Tarnishing *				0.06	
	Tarnishing	No Dilution *	320	2.74		0.07	
		Blurring *				0.06	
Purchase Intention	No Dilution	Blurring *	320	4.01	572.318	0.06	0.00
		Tarnishing *				0.05	
	Blurring	No Dilution *	320	2.63		0.06	
		Tarnishing *				0.05	
	Tarnishing	No Dilution *	320	2.30		0.05	
		Blurring *				0.05	

Source: Created by the authors.

Table 1 shows that there are significant differences in the awareness/association dimension between those who were not exposed to dilution and those who were exposed to blurring and tarnishing. Furthermore, there are significant differences between those exposed to blurring and those exposed to tarnishing. The perception of brand awareness/association of those not exposed to dilution is higher compared to those exposed to blurring and tarnishing. Similarly, the perception of brand awareness/association of those exposed to blurring is also higher compared to those exposed to tarnishing.

There are significant differences observed between those not exposed to dilution and those exposed to blurring and tarnishing in the perceived quality dimension. However, there is no significant difference between those exposed to blurring and tarnishing. The perceived quality by those not exposed to dilution is higher compared to those exposed to blurring and tarnishing.

There are significant differences observed between those not exposed to dilution and those exposed to blurring and tarnishing in the loyalty dimension. However, there is no significant difference between those exposed to blurring and tarnishing. Brand loyalty among those not exposed to dilution is higher compared to those exposed to blurring and tarnishing.

There are significant differences observed between those not exposed to dilution and those exposed to blurring and tarnishing in the purchase intention dimension. Additionally, significant differences are also observed between those exposed to blurring and those exposed to tarnishing. The purchase intention of those not exposed to dilution is higher compared to those exposed to blurring and tarnishing. Similarly, the purchase intention of those exposed to blurring is also higher compared to those exposed to tarnishing.

4.5. Hypothesis Tests

SPSS PROCESS Model 8 was used for mediation and moderation tests in the study. Hypotheses were tested with 5000 bootstraps at a 95% confidence interval (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, p. 725). The mediation analysis employed the approach advocated by Preacher and Hayes (2004). While the causal steps approach developed by Baron and Kenny (1986) is commonly used in mediation analysis, it has recently been criticized by researchers, and a new approach has been proposed. The new approach suggests that indirect effects can exist even when there is no direct or total effect and that mediation effects can be present even without a total effect (Gürbüz & Bayık, 2021, p. 6). Furthermore, the inclusion of both mediator and moderator effects in Hayes' (2018) models through the SPSS PROCESS plugin has contributed to the adoption of this new approach in this study. The analysis results for testing the main hypotheses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Hypothesis tests

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Coeff.	s.e.	t	p	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Brand Diletin	Brand Awareness/ Association	-0.93	0.19	-4.7425	0.00	-1.3108	-0.5435
	Perceived Quality	-0.53	0.21	-2.4788	0.01	-0.9588	-0.1115
	Brand Loyalty	-0.73	0.19	-3.7794	0.00	-1.1130	-0.3522
	Purchase Intention	-0.24	0.11	-2.2076	0.03	-0.4553	-0.0268
Brand Awareness/ Association	Purchase Intention	0.24	0.02	11.4900	0.00	0.1970	0.2781
Perceived Quality		0.35	0.02	19.0665	0.00	0.3193	0.3926
Brand Loyalty		0.48	0.02	26.7637	0.00	0.4459	0.5165

Source: Created by the authors.

The analysis results indicate that brand dilution has a negative effect on brand awareness/association, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and purchase intention. This supports hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H4. Additionally, it is found that brand awareness/association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality, have a positive effect on purchase intention. This supports hypotheses H5, H6, and H7. After testing the main hypotheses, the mediating roles of brand awareness/association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality in the relationship between brand dilution and purchase intention were examined. The results regarding the mediation effects are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mediation analysis results

Independent Variable	Moderating Variable	Dependent Variable	F	p
Brand Dilution	Brand Awareness/ Association	Purchase Intention	27.3009	0.00
	Perceived Quality		0.4351	0.51
	Brand Loyalty		25.7112	0.00

Source: Created by the authors.

The analysis results indicate that there is a mediating effect of brand awareness/association and brand loyalty in the relationship between brand dilution and purchase intention. This supports hypotheses H5a and H7a. However, it is found that perceived quality does not mediate this relationship. Therefore, hypothesis H6a is not supported. After examining the mediating roles of brand equity dimensions, the moderating role of category familiarity in the relationship between brand dilution and brand awareness/association, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and purchase intention was investigated. The results of the analysis regarding the moderating role of category familiarity are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Moderation analysis results

Independent Variable	Moderating Variable	Dependent Variable	R ²	F	p
Brand Dilution	Category Familiarity	Brand Awareness/ Association	0.0081	8.7368	0.00
		Perceived Quality	0.0017	2.0311	0.15
		Brand Loyalty	0.0047	7.3460	0.01
		Purchase Intention	0.0013	6.8170	0.01

Source: Created by the authors.

When Table 4 is examined, it is observed that category familiarity has a moderating role in the relationship between brand dilution and brand awareness/associations, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. These results support hypotheses H1a, H3a, and H4a. However, there is no moderating role of category familiarity in the relationship between brand dilution and perceived quality. Therefore, hypothesis H2a is not supported. Table 4 shows that the reported R² values are relatively low. However, low R² values are commonly encountered in experimental research conducted in behavioral sciences, and especially in regression models involving moderating variables. In this study, brand dilution manipulation, used as an independent variable, and product category familiarity, used as a moderating variable, were included in the model to explain their effects on participants' brand awareness/associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. However, the impact of these variables on consumer perceptions and behaviors represents only a fraction of numerous factors, rather than explaining the entire variance. Consumers' brand perceptions and purchase intentions are influenced by many different variables, including price perception, personal preferences, past brand experiences, individual values, and situational factors. Therefore, experimental manipulation is not expected to explain a large portion of the variance in the dependent variable.

Furthermore, the primary goal in moderating variable analysis is not to explain the total variance of the model to a high degree, but rather to reveal whether the relationship between the independent and dependent variables changes depending on specific conditions. Therefore, in moderation analyses, the evaluation of the model focuses not only on the total R² value but also on whether the interaction term is statistically significant (Hayes, 2018). Similarly, research in marketing and social sciences indicates that low to moderate R² values are quite common in models explaining consumer behavior (Hair et al., 2019). In behavioral research, relatively low R² values are considered methodologically normal because variance is explained by numerous factors (Cohen, 1988). In this context, the relatively low R² values in Table 4 are

due to the experimental manipulation-involved design of the study and the fact that consumer behavior is influenced by numerous variables.

After determining the moderating role of category familiarity, the analysis results were examined to determine the magnitude and direction of the moderating effect. The analysis results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Direction of the moderating effect of product category familiarity

Brand Dilution - Product Category Familiarity – Purchase Intention					
Familiarity	Effect	s.e.	p	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	-0.36	0.03	0.00	-0.2278	-0.1041
2	-0.48	0.02	0.00	-0.1384	-0.0721
3	-0.60	0.02	0.00	-0.0828	-0.0128
Brand Dilution - Product Category Familiarity – Brand Awareness/Association					
Familiarity	Effect	s.e.	p	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	-0.68	0.12	0.00	-0.9160	-0.4507
2	-0.44	0.06	0.00	-0.5556	-0.3237
3	-0.19	0.08	0.01	-0.3545	-0.0373
Brand Dilution - Product Category Familiarity – Brand Loyalty					
Familiarity	Effect	s.e.	p	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	-0.46	0.06	0.00	-0.5846	-0.3375
2	-0.56	0.04	0.00	-0.6468	-0.4889
3	-0.67	0.05	0.00	-0.7759	-0.5771

Source: Created by the authors.

As seen in Table 5, as participants' familiarity with the product category increases, the negative effect of brand dilution on purchase intention and brand loyalty increases, and its negative effect on brand awareness/association decreases. Here, familiarity with the product category is coded as a continuous variable. Participants were asked to indicate their level of familiarity with the product category on a scale of 1 to 3, with 1=low and 3=high. Since the SPSS PROCESS macro considers the moderating variable at a level of 3 in moderation analysis, the upper limit for the level of familiarity with the product category was set as 3. The moderating role of product category familiarity in the relationship between brand dilution and purchase intention, brand awareness/association, and brand loyalty is shown in Figure 2.

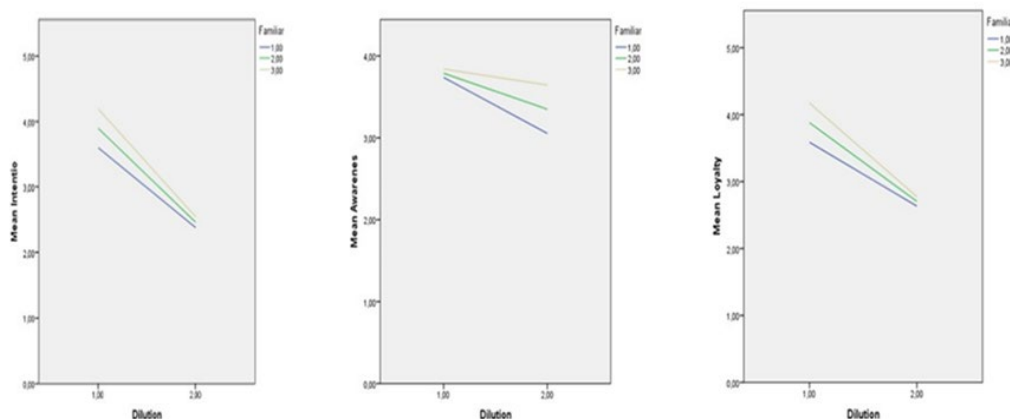


Figure 2. Moderating effect of product category familiarity

Source: Created by the authors.

5. Results And Discussion

The study first examined the differences between those who were exposed to dilution and those who were not. The significant difference between those not exposed to dilution and those exposed to dilution in all dimensions shows that brand dilution is an important factor in terms of both brand equity and purchase intention. However, there is no difference between blurring and tarnishing in the brand loyalty and perceived quality dimensions. This situation can be interpreted as the effects of dilution cases on these two dimensions being similar. In other words, both dilution methods are effective at these dimensions, but their levels of effect are not significantly different.

The analysis conducted using SPSS PROCESS Model 8 examined firstly the impact of brand dilution on brand equity dimensions and purchase intention. The analysis revealed that brand dilution has a negative effect on brand awareness/associations, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and purchase intention. Upon examining the results of the model, it was found that dilution most significantly affects brand awareness/associations, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and purchase intention, in that order. The findings indicate that as perceptions of brand dilution increase, participants' brand awareness/association, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and purchase intentions decrease. These findings are supported by studies in the literature. Studies have concluded that brand dilution negatively impacts brand equity and its dimensions, as well as consumer purchase decisions (Chen & Chen, 2000; Macias & Cervino, 2017b; Macias & Cervino, 2019).

Another finding is that brand awareness/association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality positively influence purchase intention. While brand loyalty is the most influential dimension on purchase intention, brand awareness/association has the least impact. Numerous studies support these findings in the literature (Azzari & Pelissari, 2020; Yurdakul & Şener, 2021).

Another finding suggests that brand awareness/association and brand loyalty mediate the relationship between brand dilution and purchase intention. Perceived quality, however, does not mediate the relationship between brand dilution and purchase intention. These findings suggest that part of the effect of brand dilution on purchase intention is mediated by brand awareness/association and brand loyalty. In the literature, perceived quality has been found to play a mediating role in the effect of brand dilution on purchase intention. However, in this study, perceived quality did not act as a mediator. This situation may stem from the fact that the brands used in the study have high brand recognition; students had already formed quality perceptions about the brands, and a short-term perception of brand dilution did not affect these perceptions. Instead, brand dilution indirectly influenced purchase intention through brand awareness/associations and brand loyalty. Therefore, in highly recognizable brands, the mediating role of perceived quality may be limited, and its effect may vary depending on the context.

Another finding is that product category familiarity moderates the effect of brand dilution on brand awareness/associations, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. However, product category familiarity does not moderate the effect of brand dilution on perceived quality. As participants' familiarity with the product category increases, the negative effect of brand dilution on brand loyalty and purchase intention increases, while its negative effect on brand awareness/associations decreases.

A review of the literature reveals that there are studies examining the relationship between product category importance and product category similarity and brand dilution (Morrin & Jacoby, 2000; Peterson et al., 1999; Pullig et al., 2004). Studies show that as the level of similarity between a well-known brand and a new brand increases, the new brand's dilution of the well-known brand decreases (Macías & Cerviño, 2017a; Morrin & Jacoby, 2000; Pullig et al., 2006). Studies have also found that as consumers' level of importance towards the product category increases, the negative impact of brand dilution decreases (Kruger & Boshoff, 2015). However, the moderating role of product category familiarity in the effect of brand dilution on brand equity and purchase intention has not been investigated. However, findings from studies investigating the moderating effects of similar variables, such as category similarity and product category importance, suggest that product category familiarity may also mitigate the negative impact of brand dilution on brand equity dimensions and purchase intention. The finding that the negative impact of brand dilution on brand awareness/association decreases as product category familiarity increases aligns with this notion. However, the fact that the negative impact of brand dilution on brand loyalty and purchase intention increases as familiarity with the product category increases does not align with the findings in the literature suggesting that familiarity is protective. Studies show that for some consumers, hedonic value and symbolic prestige, rather than functional utility, are more influential in their attitudes towards well-known and luxury brands (Debby et al., 2024). These prestige-seeking consumers place more importance on the symbolic attributes of a brand than on its quality (Anic et al., 2024). Therefore, it can be said that consumers with a high level of knowledge about the product category lose their loyalty not because they believe "the quality of the brand has decreased," but because they think the brand's "reputation" or "social value" has been damaged.

Brand awareness/associations are perceptual constructs that form in consumers' minds and express cognitive representations of a brand. Therefore, as consumers' familiarity with a product category increases, the impact of a potential decrease in brand awareness/associations may remain limited. This is because consumers are familiar with well-known brands, and their mental associations with these brands are less affected by short-term manipulation. In contrast, brand loyalty and purchase intention are concepts that more directly reflect consumer behavior. Therefore, explaining these variables solely through the level of familiarity with the product category may not be sufficient. Status perception or status awareness was not directly measured in the study; however, the literature indicates that consumers perceive some brands as status symbols, and this perception can influence their purchasing behavior. In this context, the current findings suggest that status-related motivations may also play a role in changes in consumers' brand loyalty and purchase intention. For example, some studies show that consumers perceive certain brands as symbols expressing their social status and therefore prefer those brands (Awan et al., 2020). Similarly, the literature has shown that consumers' status perceptions can influence their preferences for counterfeit brands (Chung et al., 2012). Furthermore, the desire to belong to a social group can, in some cases, have a stronger influence on intentions to purchase luxury goods than on the tendency to purchase counterfeit goods (Inkon, 2013). These findings suggest that consumers' brand preferences may be influenced not only by functional evaluations but also by social and symbolic motivations (Krom, 2024). In this context, consumers who are highly familiar with a product category may be more aware of alternative brands that are perceived as status symbols within that category. This situation may lead consumers to gravitate towards brands they perceive as having a stronger status. However, this interpretation is an inference based on the literature regarding status perception, a variable not directly measured in the study. Therefore, future studies examining the impact of brand dilution on consumer behavior, attitudes, and intentions could contribute to the literature by including status perception as a moderating variable in the research. The research results also show that

perceived quality does not mediate the effect of brand dilution on purchase intention. This finding suggests that in cases of brand dilution, the decrease in purchase intention may not be explained solely by a decline in the perceived quality of the familiar brand. Therefore, this change can be interpreted as potentially related to other factors highlighted in the literature, such as status, symbolic value, or social identity.

Based on the findings, some recommendations have been developed. To counter the dilution risk created by new brands, it is recommended that well-known brands broaden their trademark registration scope, intervene early against similar brands, and proactively utilize dilution-based legal protection mechanisms (especially established trademark protection). Since perceived quality doesn't play a mediating role, brand communication should focus on messages that highlight brand prestige and authenticity among consumer segments familiar with the category, rather than simply emphasizing quality. Because consumers with a high level of familiarity with a product category are more susceptible to dilution, brands should prioritize offering loyalty and engagement-boosting practices such as loyalty programs, exclusive memberships, or prestigious experiences to this segment.

However, this study has several limitations. Firstly, the experimental design used in this study is artificial and created by the researcher. Although real brands used in the study were determined through a pre-test, the brands used for blurring and tarnishing were designed by a designer. These brands are not real, and there is a possibility that participants are aware that these brands are not real. Finding and using real cases from the internet or other sources to conduct studies based on these cases is difficult (Macias & Cervino, 2017a) and may also be legally problematic. Another limitation of the study is that it was conducted on university students. Although selecting students as a sample is criticized, Calder et al., (1981) argue that using students as a sample is correct because it also provides the possibility of rejecting hypotheses. Another limitation related to the sample is that the easy sampling method, one of the non-random sampling methods, was used when determining the sample. Due to its cost advantage and ease in data collection, this method, which is preferred, cannot be generalized to the entire population. Therefore, future research will contribute to the literature by using one of the random sampling methods when determining the sample. Another limitation of the study is that only a questionnaire was used as a data collection tool. Brand dilution is a concept that damages brands by influencing the associations in consumers' minds. Therefore, collecting data through interviews or neuromarketing techniques will contribute to the literature. PROCESS models were not run separately for the blurring and tarnishing groups; instead, these two groups were combined under a single framework in the main hypothesis test. This situation may hinder the observation of the differing indirect effects of these two distinct dimensions on purchase intention. To address this problem, perceptions of brand equity dimensions and purchase intentions of those not exposed to dilution, those exposed to blurred brands, and those exposed to tarnished brands were compared using ANOVA. Future studies could contribute to the literature by testing the effects of these two dimensions separately.

Future studies could contribute to the literature by examining factors that may mitigate the effects of brand dilution and its impact on factors such as brand image, brand positioning, and brand personality. This study was conducted on university students and did not categorize participants in any other way. Future studies could only investigate those who choose brands out of status concerns. Furthermore, this study examined perceptions of brands across three different product categories. Future studies could contribute to the literature by focusing on just one product category.

In this study, surveys were used as the data collection tool. Future studies could explore brand dilution using interview and neuromarketing techniques, comparing their findings with the results of this study.

Existing studies have typically examined brand dilution as the impairment of a distinguished character or reputation of a well-known brand through imitation by a new entrant in the market. There have been limited studies on a well-known brand diluting itself through expansion. However, brand dilution is not solely initiated by a new entrant or the brand itself. Consumers can also dilute a well-known brand through false comments or criticisms. Furthermore, self-dilution of a brand has been primarily studied through brand extension. Yet, a brand can dilute itself through changes in its country of origin or by using elements in its advertising or promotions that may provoke consumer backlash. Therefore, future studies can approach brand dilution from a marketing perspective rather than just a legal standpoint, examining it in a multidimensional manner.

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9. Ethics Committee Statement and Intellectual Property Copyrights: The study adhered to the ethics committee's principles, and necessary permissions were obtained in accordance with intellectual property and copyright regulations. This study has been prepared in accordance with the rules of scientific research and publication ethics.

10. Data Availability: Data is available from the authors upon request.

11. Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools: Artificial intelligence tools were used for grammar and language checking purposes.

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