

## Influence of Branding on Customers Purchasing Behavior in the Nigerian Airline Industry: A Comparative Study between Qatar Airways and Virgin Airline amongst Gen Z Customers.

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**ABSTRACT:** This study embarked on presenting the influence branding has on the Gen-Z consumer cohort purchasing behaviour in the Nigerian airline industry taking into comparison the Qatar airways and Virgin airline. The quantitative methodological choice was employed as a form of collecting primary data whilst being supported with secondary data being reviewed to guide the remainder of the study to identify requisite themes and gaps to be utilized and closed respectively in this study. Using convenience sampling to collect primary data, findings verify the theoretical assertions germane to branding in its equity model that brand loyalty, awareness, perceived quality and brand association are positively significant on the purchasing decision of the Gen-Z towards both Qatar airways and Virgin Airline which was more significant in the case of Qatar airline at (Sig. is <0.05). which implies that, airline practitioner in the Nigerian airline industry must hone their branding strategies if they are to become more competitive for long-term sustainability in attracting the Gen-Z cohort of customers.

**KEYWORDS INCLUDES:** Gen-Z, branding, brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association, brand equity, purchasing behaviour.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Branding has long been identified as a cornerstone of marketing, essential to differentiating a firm's offerings from competitors and building lasting relationships with consumers (Knox, 2004; Belch & Belch, 2012; Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). Without robust branding strategies, organizations struggle to meaningfully engage their target audiences, reduce substitution threats, or build strong brand equity. As Sammut-Bonnici (2015) affirms, achieving high brand equity through differentiation reduces price elasticity, enabling premium pricing and improved profitability. These branding frameworks often revolve around brand positioning, value chain development, and brand equity management.

In the context of the airline industry—especially the Nigerian sector—branding functions somewhat differently. Research (Sylva & Florence, 2021; Dimitriou, 2019; McKeever et al., 2021; Agustina & Astari, 2022) suggests that the Gen-Z cohort, also known as Zoomers, places significant emphasis on brand prestige, innovation, and reputation when making purchasing decisions. This group has overtaken Millennials in size and influence, and they actively shape market dynamics across sectors. In the airline industry, their digitally savvy and brand-conscious nature has made them a critical consumer segment.

Although prominent global brands like Qatar Airways have established strong resonance with Gen-Z travellers in Nigeria, many other airline services remain under-recognized or unappealing. Brands such as Virgin Atlantic, Nigeria Airways, Olympic Air, and others have struggled to sustain visibility and influence within this demographic (Onwumere, 2018). This underscores the relevance of branding as a strategic tool for consumer engagement, especially with a generation that values perception, quality, and association.

Qatar Airways, in particular, exemplifies the power of strategic branding. Since its relaunch in 1997, it has transformed into one of the fastest-growing global carriers, boasting a brand that emphasizes luxury, innovation, and consistency (Qatar Airways, 2018). Its achievements—including being the launch customer for the Airbus A350 and receiving numerous accolades from Skytrax—reflect not just operational success, but also strong

brand positioning. On the other hand, Virgin Atlantic, despite a charismatic brand identity and early success under Richard Branson's leadership, has faced challenges in recent years due to rising competition and financial constraints (Virgin Atlantic, 2023; Windsor, 2023).

The central problem this study addresses is the underexplored relationship between branding and consumer behaviour among Gen-Z travellers in the Nigerian airline market. While the importance of branding is well recognized in developed economies, research is limited when it comes to emerging markets like Nigeria—particularly regarding how brand equity, loyalty, awareness, and association influence Gen-Z purchasing patterns. Furthermore, marketing practices in Nigeria often treat branding as a narrow advertising tool rather than a holistic strategic function (Chernatony, 1991; Vijande et al., 2013; Mazurek, 2014).

This gap is visible in how some legacy airline brands have lost traction in the face of new market entrants with stronger brand equity. Qatar Airways, for example, has made significant inroads among Nigerian Gen-Z consumers, unlike Virgin Atlantic and other once-prominent competitors. This raises important questions: Do Gen-Z consumers shift brand preferences based on branding strategies? Are factors like brand loyalty or perceived quality decisive in shaping their choices? Does brand association truly confer a sense of identity or social value?

To explore these questions, this study aims to assess the effect of branding on the purchasing behaviour of Gen-Z consumers within Nigeria's airline sector, using Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic as comparative case studies. Specifically, the study seeks to evaluate how brand loyalty, awareness, perceived quality, and association influence Gen-Z purchasing confidence.

The following research questions guide the study:

- What is the relationship between brand loyalty and the confidence in purchase decision of Gen-Z towards airline brand equity (Qatar and Virgin Atlantic)?
- How does brand awareness affect the confidence in purchase decision of Gen-Z?
- What is the impact of perceived quality on Gen-Z purchase decisions?
- How does brand association shape Gen-Z confidence in airline brand selection?

The objectives are aligned accordingly to examine each of these factors in the context of Qatar and Virgin Airlines. This study is significant in multiple dimensions. It contributes to the academic literature by filling a geographic and demographic gap in branding research. Practically, it aids airline marketers and brand managers in Nigeria in understanding how to more effectively position themselves to engage the Gen-Z segment. By doing so, it provides a blueprint for strategic brand development aimed at long-term competitiveness and consumer resonance in an increasingly crowded market.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Understanding the Concept of Brand and Branding Strategy**

Branding has evolved into a fundamental pillar of business strategy, yet the distinction between the concepts of brand and branding remains widely misconstrued within marketing literature. As Holt (2003) emphasizes, branding is often simplistically relegated to advertising activities alone. This section aims to elucidate this confusion by clearly defining the concepts and grounding them within the context of this research.

#### **Brand**

According to Sammut-Bonnici (2015), a brand constitutes a carefully curated amalgamation of tangible and intangible elements crafted to generate awareness, create a unique identity, and establish a strong reputation for a product, service, or organization. Importantly, branding transcends mere marketing communication and encompasses a broad spectrum of strategic initiatives aimed at innovation and long-term value creation. This holistic view is critical for understanding how brands influence consumer perception.

Kotler and Keller (2016) further assert that brands are among the most valuable intangible assets an organization can possess. Effective brand management is essential because a robust brand can foster strong consumer preference and loyalty, serving as a strategic asset that delivers measurable financial returns. Sammut-Bonnici (2015) notes that a brand is characterized by a unique, consistent, and recognizable set of symbols, images, and narratives that distinguish a company from its competitors (see Figure 2, Appendix 2). The comprehensive nature of this definition serves as the foundation for the analytical framework of this study.

Holt (2003) deepens this understanding by explaining that consumers derive symbolic value from brands through experiential and social identification processes. Drawing on anthropological perspectives, he describes this as ritualistic behavior wherein brand symbols function as markers of social status, foster identification with group values, and promote social solidarity. Brand cultures typically integrate four core value components (refer to Figure 2, Appendix 2) that primarily determine a brand's competitive success.

### **Branding Strategy**

Sammuto-Bonnici (2015) highlights that the primary objective of branding strategy is to cultivate brands that are distinctly differentiated from competitors, thereby reducing the availability of close substitutes in the marketplace. When strong brand equity is achieved through effective differentiation, the price elasticity of demand diminishes. This allows firms to command premium pricing and improve profitability over time. This phenomenon has been observed extensively in airline industries in developed economies such as the UK and USA (Riwo-Abudho, Njanja, and Ochieng, 2013), yet remains insufficiently explored in the Nigerian context.

Branding strategies operate on interdependent frameworks consisting of a robust value chain, competitive brand positioning, and strategic brand equity management, as illustrated in Figure 3 (Appendix 2). Holt (2003) describes branding strategy as a purposeful transition from the current brand culture to an aspirational one. This process involves identifying opportunities to refine brand culture by assessing competitive benchmarks and adapting to environmental shifts to maintain relevance and competitiveness.

### **Antecedents of Brand Loyalty and Equity in the Airline Industry**

Brand loyalty holds a pivotal role within marketing scholarship, particularly in airline marketing (Al-Gharaibah, 2020). Over the last four decades, brand loyalty has emerged as a critical determinant of customer retention and competitive advantage, validated by numerous scholars such as Brashear-Alejandro, Kang, and Groza (2016), and Rambocas, Kirpalani, and Simms (2018). Airlines, especially traditional carriers, face mounting competition from low-cost operators across both developed and developing markets, including Nigeria (Kim, Kim, and Hyun, 2015; Jan, Abdullah, and Smail, 2013; Oghojafor and Alaneme, 2014; Ahmad, 2017). While price competition has historically been the primary tactic, it has proven unsustainable. This has driven airlines to adopt more innovative, sustainable marketing strategies to secure long-term competitive advantage (Kim, Kim, and Hyun, 2015).

### **Historical Overview of Branding in the Nigerian Airline Industry**

Air transportation represents a vital infrastructure for national economic growth and international integration (Oliseh, 2021; Shafiee et al., 2014; Bastola, 2017; Omoleke and Taleat, 2018; Kira, Omoleke, and Taleat, 2018; Saade and Rezai, 2019). Airlines operate scheduled commercial flights that facilitate movement of goods and passengers under specific brand identities competing at varying levels of intensity (Oliseh, 2021). This research situates itself within the Nigerian airline sector to explore the specific dynamics of branding in this emerging market.

### **Brand Awareness**

Brand awareness is defined as the extent to which consumers recognize a brand and associate it with a particular product or service category (Bornmark, Goransson, and Svensson, 2005). Keller and Swaminatha (2019) stress that brand visibility is essential in cultivating consumer awareness, which typically arises when consumers can recall previous encounters with a brand—often through advertising and promotional activities. This recognition is foundational for building stronger brand associations.

### **Consumer Purchasing Behavior**

Consumer buying behavior encompasses the entire process through which individuals select, purchase, use, and dispose of products or services, evaluating their experiences to fulfill personal needs (Roy and Datta, 2022). Kotler and Keller (2019) elaborate that consumer purchasing behavior involves decision-making about expenditure of time, effort, and financial resources, considering factors such as product choice, purchase location, frequency, and post-purchase evaluation, all of which influence future buying decisions.

### **Branding and Purchasing Behavior**

Haeruddin (2020) posits that consumer preference for brands is influenced by perceptions of relative quality compared to competitors. Cobb-Walgren et al. (2013) and Stankevich (2017) argue that brands serve as a critical bridge between consumer expectations and corporate promises, fostering emotional bonds that shape purchase intentions. Gambetti et al. (2016) and Mudambi (2002) underscore the importance of competitive branding strategies for cultivating loyal customer bases. Al-Gharaibah's (2020) study of Jordanian airlines supports this,

showing that effective branding influences consumer purchase behavior, though it does not specify which consumer segments are most affected.

Musa (2017) confirms that stronger brand equity enhances consumer attraction towards purchasing services. Haeruddin (2021) reiterates that consumer perceptions of brand quality significantly impact purchasing decisions. Prasad et al. (2019) define brand equity as the value consumers assign beyond basic awareness, encompassing perceived quality, brand associations, and functional attributes. This concept remains underexplored within the Nigerian airline industry, forming a critical research gap.

Conversely, Mohammed and Murova (2019), Gurleen and Bhandari (2014), and Akdogan (2021) argue that pricing is often the dominant factor influencing purchase decisions. High prices may deter consumers regardless of perceived quality, indicating an area needing further empirical investigation.

### **Branding and Generation Z Purchasing Behavior**

Generation Z, roughly those born between 1993 and 2005 (Spenny, 2014; Turner, 2015; Zorn, 2017; Kahawandala, Peter, and Niwunhella, 2020), represents a digitally native, tech-savvy consumer group heavily influenced by brand equity perceptions. Accounting for approximately 40% of consumer shopping by 2020, their purchasing behaviors are shaped by social media engagement and access to information (Kahawandala et al., 2020). Airline companies must therefore optimize brand equity positioning to engage this critical demographic.

Spenny (2014) categorizes generations by birth years and highlights variations in consumer behavior. While numerous studies address Gen Z's brand influence in developed markets, there is a paucity of research within developing contexts such as Nigeria—an important gap this study aims to fill.

### **Research Methodology**

The study employs a quantitative research design targeting Generation Z airline consumers in Nigeria, specifically focusing on university and secondary school students in Lagos, where a dense concentration of this demographic exists. A sample size of 100 respondents was selected, split evenly to capture perceptions regarding Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic, two prominent international carriers.

A convenience sampling method was utilized due to practical constraints such as accessibility, participant willingness, and time limitations. This non-probability approach enables efficient data collection from readily available respondents, though it limits generalizability.

Data collection was conducted using structured questionnaires disseminated via Google Forms. The questionnaire was designed to capture respondents' views on brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and their confidence in purchase decisions regarding the two airlines.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 22. Descriptive statistics characterized the sample, while inferential statistics—including regression analysis—were applied to test the hypotheses examining relationships between brand equity dimensions (independent variables) and consumer purchase confidence (dependent variable). A significance level of  $p < 0.05$  was adopted to determine statistical relevance.

To ensure reliability and validity, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for internal consistency of the measurement scales. This rigorous approach strengthens the accuracy and dependability of the research findings.

## **3. DATA ANALYSIS**

This section presents the findings derived from responses gathered from Generation Z participants concerning their perception of branding in relation to Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic. The total sample size consisted of 100 respondents, equally split between the two airlines, which meets the intended sample target for the study. A quantitative research design was adopted, and hypotheses were tested using SPSS regression analysis. Initial reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha for the first nine items on the questionnaire. The internal consistency values of 0.900 for both airlines confirm high reliability, surpassing the acceptable threshold of 0.7, as outlined by EZ SPSS Tutorial (2023).

The demographic analysis reveals a female majority in both surveys—62% for Qatar Airways and 60% for Virgin Atlantic—with the dominant age range being between 1995–1998 for both brands. Qatar Airways, however, enjoys greater brand familiarity among Gen-Z respondents (98%) compared to Virgin Atlantic (80%). Additionally, educational attainment is high across both groups, with a larger percentage of respondents holding bachelor's degrees—52% for Qatar Airways and 58% for Virgin Atlantic.



To examine the relationship between brand loyalty and Gen-Z's confidence in purchase decision, regression analysis was carried out. For both airlines, the R-values exceeded the acceptable threshold, standing at .736 for Qatar Airways and .710 for Virgin Atlantic, indicating a strong correlation. The  $R^2$  values were .546 and .504 respectively, suggesting that over half the variance in purchase decision could be explained by brand loyalty. ANOVA results for both models showed significance at  $p = .000$  for Qatar Airways and  $p = .012$  for Virgin Atlantic, with F-ratios of 14.6 and 6.9 respectively, confirming the models' adequacy. Coefficient tables revealed significant impact ( $p < 0.05$ ), thereby rejecting the null hypothesis and affirming that brand loyalty positively influences Gen-Z's purchase confidence, with Qatar Airways showing a slightly stronger effect.

Next, the influence of brand awareness was assessed. R-values were .750 and .851 for Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic respectively, and  $R^2$  values stood at .522 and .725. These figures indicate a strong explanatory power for the models. ANOVA confirmed statistical significance with  $p = .000$  for Qatar Airways and  $p = .01$  for Virgin Atlantic, and F-values of 35.1 and 11.8 respectively. The coefficients again indicated significant positive influence, leading to rejection of the null hypothesis. While both airlines demonstrated substantial brand awareness effects, Qatar Airways again showed a marginally stronger impact.

Lastly, the perceived quality of airline service was analyzed in relation to purchase decision. The R-values (.827 for Qatar Airways and .895 for Virgin Atlantic) and  $R^2$  values (.684 and .801) suggested a highly predictive model. The significance levels ( $p = .000$  for Qatar Airways,  $p = .03$  for Virgin Atlantic) and F-ratios (101.8 and 9.6) confirmed robustness. Coefficient analysis indicated strong influence ( $p < 0.05$ ), reinforcing the rejection of the null hypothesis and validating that perceived quality significantly affects purchase decisions among Gen-Z, with Qatar Airways again exhibiting a higher magnitude of influence.

These findings collectively affirm the theoretical relevance of Aaker's (1991) brand equity model and provide robust empirical support for the role of brand loyalty, awareness, and perceived quality in shaping Gen-Z consumer behavior in the Nigerian airline industry. The study sought to test the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between perceived quality and the confidence in purchase decision of Gen-Z towards airline brand equity for Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic. Additionally, it aimed to assess the relationship between brand association and Gen-Z's purchase confidence. Utilizing statistical models and linear regression analysis, the results yielded R-values of 0.859 and 0.871 respectively for Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic in relation to brand association. These indicate a strong correlation between brand association and confidence in purchase decision for both brands. R-square values of 0.738 for Qatar Airways and 0.760 for Virgin Atlantic confirm that over 73% of the variation in purchase decision confidence can be explained by brand association, making the model statistically reliable and adequate for further analysis.

The ANOVA results, with significance levels of 0.000 for both brands, reinforce the strength of the regression models. The F-statistic values—132.5 for Qatar Airways and 15.3 for Virgin Atlantic—reflect a statistically significant model fit, suggesting strong predictability of the dependent variable by the independent variable. Furthermore, coefficients from the regression analysis indicate that brand association, interpreted as the perceived link to social status and high self-esteem, significantly influences Gen-Z's purchasing behavior, with p-values also recorded at 0.000 for both airlines. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected, affirming that brand association positively affects Gen-Z's confidence in their airline purchase decision.

In examining brand loyalty, results align with the works of Farjam and Hongyi (2015), Tanford et al. (2016), and Rambocas et al. (2018), confirming that brand loyalty significantly influences Gen-Z's purchasing decisions. The results revealed stronger loyalty effects for Qatar Airways than Virgin Atlantic, aligning with claims from Qatar Airways (2018) that greater investments in brand positioning have led to a more loyal consumer base. This highlights the necessity for Nigerian airline brands to establish and nurture loyalty among the Gen-Z cohort for sustained profitability.

Regarding brand awareness, the study validates assertions from Al-Gharaibah (2020) and Aaker (1991) that consumer knowledge and recall directly affect purchasing decisions. Findings indicated a stronger brand awareness impact for Qatar Airways, which supports its leading position in the Nigerian market as affirmed by Skytrax (2022). This confirms that heightened visibility and top-of-mind awareness increase Gen-Z's confidence when selecting an airline brand, though additional research is required to identify the most effective awareness-building strategies.

In the context of perceived quality, this study supports the claims of Cobb-Walgren et al. (2013) and Stankevich (2017), indicating that high perceived quality, especially through innovation and premium services, is a major determinant of Gen-Z's airline choice. Despite the presence of less expensive alternatives, Gen-Z consumers showed stronger confidence in brands offering high-quality experiences, particularly Qatar Airways. This finding refutes earlier claims by Gurleen and Bhandari (2014) and Akdogan (2021) that perceived quality alone does not sufficiently drive purchase behavior.

Finally, brand association was confirmed to significantly shape Gen-Z's confidence in airline selection. As theorized by Aaker (1991) and demonstrated in this study, association with high social class and prestige plays a key role in Gen-Z consumer decisions. The results suggest that cultivating brand identities that align with Gen-Z's social aspirations can fortify market positioning, echoing recent findings from Keever et al. (2021) and Agustina and Astari (2022). These outcomes provide critical strategic direction for airline marketers aiming to resonate with this unique and influential consumer segment.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study offer significant insights into the relationship between brand equity components and the purchase decision confidence of Generation Z consumers toward airline brands in Nigeria, specifically Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic. Using Aaker's (1991) brand equity model as the theoretical framework, the study examined four key dimensions—brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association—and their influence on Gen-Z's confidence in choosing an airline. The statistical analysis demonstrates that all four dimensions exhibit a significant positive relationship with purchase confidence among the Gen-Z cohort, affirming the model's applicability in this context.

The results confirm prior assertions by Spenny (2014), Turner (2015), Zorn (2017), and Kahawandala, Peter, and Niwunhella (2020) that Generation Z represents a uniquely complex and influential consumer segment. This study reveals that Gen-Z's purchase decisions in the Nigerian airline industry are strongly shaped by their perceptions of airline brand positioning. Notably, brand loyalty emerged as a powerful driver, reflecting Gen-Z's tendency to commit to brands that resonate with their identity and values. Similarly, brand awareness was found to enhance consumer confidence, indicating that visibility and recognition play critical roles in fostering trust and preference.

Perceived quality also showed a robust association with purchase decision confidence, underscoring the importance of service excellence and tangible performance factors in influencing Gen-Z's airline choices. Brand association further contributed significantly, highlighting how emotional connections and symbolic meanings attached to the brand affect consumer behavior. The comparative analysis between Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic underscores these dynamics, providing nuanced insights into how branding strategies can be tailored to capture this segment effectively.

These findings substantiate Aaker's (1991) theory within the Nigerian airline sector, validating the importance of integrated brand equity management in influencing emerging consumer cohorts. They offer practical guidance for marketers seeking to engage Generation Z, emphasizing that a multifaceted approach addressing loyalty, awareness, quality perceptions, and brand symbolism is essential for cultivating strong consumer-brand relationships.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers clear implications for airline service providers struggling to attract and retain Gen-Z customers. It advocates for enhanced branding strategies that prioritize loyalty programs and awareness campaigns, alongside continuous innovation in service quality to meet the expectations of this digitally connected generation. Such strategies not only strengthen perceived quality but also elevate the brand's social status appeal, which is critical in shaping Gen-Z's purchase intentions and self-esteem as consumers. This aligns with the findings of Turner (2015), Zorn (2017), and Kahawandala et al. (2020), who emphasize the psychological and social dimensions of Gen-Z consumer behavior.

Theoretically, this study extends Aaker's brand equity model by contextualizing it within the Nigerian airline industry, bridging existing gaps in the literature regarding emerging markets and younger demographics. It confirms that the core components of brand equity remain fundamental in developing profitable customer bases and sustaining competitive advantage. This contribution reinforces the relevance of brand equity as a strategic tool in airline marketing, especially as Nigerian airlines prepare to target Generation Z as a key future customer segment.

Policy-wise, the findings encourage airline companies and educational institutions involved in aviation marketing to incorporate these insights into training curricula and organizational strategies. There is a compelling case for integrating brand equity principles into airline service policies, fostering greater awareness of how loyalty, quality, awareness, and association impact consumer decisions. Such policy adaptations can guide airline stakeholders in designing marketing frameworks that are responsive to evolving consumer profiles, particularly the technologically adept and brand-conscious Gen-Z. This study thus serves as both a roadmap for policy transformation and a foundation for further academic inquiry in marketing within the Nigerian aviation sector.

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