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National Images and Aviation Communication: A Qualitative Study on the Communicated Representation of Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

Official corporate communications cannot by themselves reveal how foreign audiences perceive a country, but they do reveal how nation-related meanings are projected by corporate actors. This study therefore analyses the communicated representation of Türkiye in the official materials of four aviation brands—İGA Istanbul Airport, TAV Airports, Pegasus Airlines and Turkish Airlines. The study is based on 13 official items published between 2016 and 2025, including 6 press releases or announcements, 5 official web or service pages, and 2 corporate reports. Using qualitative content analysis, the article maps five recurring themes: country-related representation, brand positioning, service quality and experience, infrastructure and capacity, and global connectivity. The findings show that direct nation-linked references are concentrated especially in İGA and Turkish Airlines materials, whereas Pegasus and TAV more often represent Türkiye indirectly through innovation, accessibility, operational competence and international reach. Rather than claiming that these materials prove audience-level country image effects, the study demonstrates how corporate actors build a complementary repertoire of communicated identity around hospitality, connectivity, scale and modernisation. In this respect, the article contributes to nation-branding and sectoral communication literature by clarifying the distinction between projected identity and received image while offering a transparent document-based coding framework.

Keywords: Nation Branding, Brand Narrative, Communication Discourse, Positioning, Qualitative Content Analysis.

JEL Classification Codes: M16, M30, M37

Ulusal İmgeler ve Havacılık İletişimi: Türkiye'nin İletişimsel Temsilinin Nitel Bir İncelemesi

ÖZ

Kurumsal resmi iletişim materyalleri yabancı hedef kitlelerin bir ülkeyi nasıl algıladığını doğrudan göstermez; ancak kurumsal aktörlerin ülkeye ilişkin anlamları nasıl yansıtıldığını ortaya koyar. Bu çalışma bu nedenle Türkiye'nin iletişimsel temsilini dört havacılık markasının (İGA İstanbul Havalimanı, TAV Havalimanları, Pegasus Havayolları ve Türk Hava Yolları) resmi kurumsal materyalleri üzerinden incelemektedir. Bu çalışma kapsamında oluşturulan veri seti, 2016-2025 yılları arasında yayımlanmış 13 resmi metinden oluşmaktadır: 6 basın bülteni veya duyuru, 5 resmi web ya da hizmet sayfası ve 2 kurumsal rapor. Nitel içerik analizi ile çalışmada beş tekrar eden tema haritalanmıştır: ülke ile ilişkili temsil, marka konumlandırması, hizmet kalitesi ve deneyim, altyapı ve kapasite ile küresel bağlantı. Bulgular, doğrudan ülke bağlantılı göndermelerin özellikle İGA ve Türk Hava Yolları materyallerinde yoğunlaştığını; Pegasus ve TAV'ın ise Türkiye'yi daha çok yenilikçilik, erişilebilirlik, operasyonel yetkinlik ve uluslararası erişim üzerinden dolaylı olarak temsil ettiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, bu materyallerin hedef kitle düzeyinde ülke imajını kanıtladığını ileri sürmemekte; bunun yerine kurumsal aktörlerin misafirperverlik, bağlantısallık, ölçek ve modernleşme ekseninde birbirini tamamlayan bir iletişimsel kimlik repertuvarı kurduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu yönüyle makale, iletilen kimlik ile algılanan imaj arasındaki ayrımı netleştirerek ve belge temelli şeffaf bir kodlama çerçevesi sunarak ülke markalama ve sektörel iletişim literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ülke Markası, Marka Anlatısı, İletişim Söylemi, Konumlandırma, Nitel İçerik Analizi.

JEL Sınıflandırma Kodları: M16, M30, M37

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Amaç ve Kapsam:

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin iletişimsel temsilini dört havacılık markasının (İGA İstanbul Havalimanı, TAV Havalimanları, Pegasus Havayolları ve Türk Hava Yolları (THY)) resmi kurumsal materyalleri üzerinden incelemektedir. Çalışma, "ülke imajı nasıl algılanıyor?" sorusundan ziyade, "markalar Türkiye'yi nasıl yansıtıyor?" sorusuna odaklanmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda; ülke imajı ve ulusal kimlik, marka konumlandırma stratejileri, hizmet kalitesi ve deneyim, altyapı yatırımları ve kapasite oluşturma ile küresel bağlantı ve ittifak stratejileri gibi temaların kurumsal söylemde nasıl bir araya getirildiği incelenmektedir.

Bu araştırma, analitik odağı varsayılan ülke-marka "etkilerinden" kurumsal materyallere yerleştirilmiş iletişimsel kimlik iddialarına kaydırarak bu boşluğu ele almaktadır. Bu çerçevede çalışma üç temel katkı sunmaktadır. İlk olarak, teorik bakımdan havacılıkla ilgili ulus-marka tartışmalarında iletilen kimlik ile algılanan ülke imajı arasındaki ayrımı açıklığa kavuşturmaktadır. İkinci olarak, metodolojik açıdan doküman dağılımı ve tema birlikte-görülme örüntülerinin raporlanması ile şeffaf bir belge tabanlı kodlama çerçevesi sağlamaktadır. Üçüncü olarak, uygulama yönünden havacılık aktörlerinin Türkiye ile ilgili tamamlayıcı ancak özdeş olmayan anlatıları nasıl yansıttığını göstermektedir.

Yöntem:

Bu çalışma, resmi kurumsal materyaller üzerinde belge temelli nitel içerik analizi yaklaşımına dayanmaktadır. Araştırmanın veri seti 2016-2025 dönemini kapsamaktadır. İlk aşamada 57 materyal incelenmiştir. Ancak teknik/finansal içerikli olanlar veya üçüncü taraf haberleri elenmiştir. Böylece veri seti, 2016-2025 yılları arasında yayımlanmış 6 basın bülteni veya duyuru, 5 resmi web ya da hizmet sayfası ve 2 kurumsal rapor olmak üzere 13 resmi metinden oluşmaktadır. Bu metinler, nitel içerik analizi ile beş tema üzerinden haritalanmıştır. Bu temalar; ülke imajı ve ulusal kimlik, marka konumlandırma stratejileri, hizmet kalitesi ve deneyim, altyapı yatırımları ve kapasite oluşturma ile küresel bağlantı ve ittifak stratejilerinden oluşmaktadır. Pilot kodlama aşamasında araştırmacılar arasındaki görüş birliği %85'in üzerinde gerçekleşmiştir. Araştırmada güvenilirlik; açık sınırların belirlenmesi, denetim izi oluşturulması ve doküman bazlı matris kullanımıyla sağlanmıştır. Çalışmada kamuya açık kurumsal materyaller kullanıldığı için insan katılımcılara ilişkin etik bir risk bulunmamaktadır. Bulgular, üçüncü taraf yorumları dışarıda bırakılarak, yalnızca resmi marka söylemlerine dayandırılmıştır.

Bulgular:

Ülke imajına yapılan doğrudan vurgu, tüm markalara eşit dağılmamış olup daha çok İGA ve Türk Hava Yolları (THY) materyallerinde yoğunlaşmaktadır. İGA ve THY, Türkiye anlatısını operasyonel başarıyla birleştirerek markayı ulusal bir sembol olarak sunmaktadır. Diğer taraftan Pegasus ve TAV ise Türkiye vurgusunu daha dolaylı yapmaktadır. Pegasus "Türkiye'nin en dijital ulaştırma şirketi" ifadesiyle dinamizme odaklanmaktadır. TAV ise ulusal bir sembolden ziyade küresel bir havalimanı işletmecisi diliyle hareket etmektedir.

Marka konumlandırma stratejileri açısından her marka kendine özgü bir alan seçmiştir. İGA kendisini "Dünyanın en iyisi" gibi iddialı sıfatlar ve küresel bir aktarma merkezi olma vizyonuyla konumlandırmaktadır. TAV, deneyimli, uluslararası bir havalimanı hizmetleri ve operasyon aktörü olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Pegasus, erişilebilirlik, dijitalleşme ve Silikon Vadisi yatırımları gibi yenilikçi vurgularla "çevik" bir marka imajı çizmektedir. THY ise yüksek prestijli, geniş uçuş ağlı ve küresel ölçekte bir "bayrak taşıyıcı" kimliğini benimsemektedir.

Hizmet kalitesi söylemi deneyimsel prestij ve fonksiyonel kolaylık olmak üzere iki farklı yaklaşımla ele alınmaktadır. Deneyimsel prestij açısından THY ve İGA; ödüller, konfor ve özel yolcu salonları üzerinden lüks ve prestije vurgu yapmaktadır. Fonksiyonel kolaylık bakımından Pegasus ve TAV ise hıza, dijital kolaylığa ve operasyonel uzmanlığa odaklanmaktadır.

Ele alınan dört markanın gelecek vizyonu ve yetkinlik iddiaları altyapı üzerinden şekillenmektedir. İGA ve TAV; fiziksel ölçek, genişleme projeleri ve uzun vadeli kapasite artırımına odaklanmaktadır. Pegasus, fiziksel altyapı yerine teknolojik ve dijital altyapıya (inovasyon merkezleri gibi) öncelik vermektedir. THY ise büyümeyi vurgulamakta, bu açıdan filo genişliği ve kargo kapasitesini içeren entegre bir "havacılık ekosistemi" öne sürmektedir.

Küresel bağlantı ve ittifak stratejileri bakımından THY, Star Alliance üyeliği ve dünyanın en çok noktasına uçan ağ yapısıyla küresel erişilebilirliğin merkezinde konumlanmaktadır. İGA, İstanbul'u dünyanın stratejik transfer merkezi olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Pegasus ve TAV ise bağlantısallığı daha çok iş birlikleri, kod paylaşımı ve turizm kapısı olma işlevi üzerinden tanımlamaktadır.

Sonuç ve Tartışma:

Bu çalışma, havacılık markalarının kurumsal söylemleri aracılığıyla Türkiye'ye dair nasıl bir kimlik kurguladığını analiz etmektedir. Araştırmanın temel vurgusu, "iletilen kimlik" (markanın iddiası) ile "algılanan imaj" (kamuoyu algısı) arasındaki ayrımdır. Çalışma, dış algıyı ölçmek yerine markaların kendilerini nasıl sunduğuna

odaklanmaktadır. THY ve İGA doğrudan ulusal vurgular yaparken, Pegasus ve TAV yenilikçilik ve operasyonel beceri üzerinden dolaylı bir anlatı sunmaktadır. Böylelikle her bir marka tek tip bir mesaj yerine, farklı rollerin paylaşıldığı "dağıtık bir mesaj mimarisi" sergilediği ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Hizmet kalitesi, altyapı ve küresel bağlantısallık gibi temalar belgelerde iç içe geçerek güçlü bir "yetkinlik anlatısı" oluşturmaktadır. Havacılık sektörü, Türkiye'nin modernleşme, misafirperverlik ve küresel erişim iddialarını taşıyan görünür bir arayüz işlevi görmektedir.

Çalışma, ele alınan materyaller üzerinden hedef kitle düzeyinde ülke imajını kanıtladığını ileri sürmemekte; bunun yerine kurumsal aktörlerin misafirperverlik, bağlantısallık, ölçek ve modernleşme ekseninde birbirini tamamlayan bir iletişimsel kimlik repertuvarı kurduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu yönüyle makale, iletilen kimlik ile algılanan imaj arasındaki ayrımı netleştirerek ve belge temelli şeffaf bir kodlama çerçevesi sunarak ülke markalama ve sektörel iletişim literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır. Çalışmanın kısıtı, yalnızca markaların kendi yayınladığı materyallere dayanmasıdır. Gelecekteki araştırmaların, bu söylemlerin gerçek itibar üzerindeki etkisini ölçmek için hedef kitle odaklı (anket, mülakat) çalışmalara yoğunlaşması önerilmektedir.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aviation industry is a highly visible interface through which countries encounter global audiences, yet official corporate communications do not directly reveal how those audiences actually perceive a country. They instead show how commercial actors project nation-related meanings, identities and competencies in their own discourse. From this perspective, the present study examines how selected aviation brands officially represent Türkiye rather than claiming to measure audience-level country image.

Türkiye's aviation ecosystem offers a useful setting for such an inquiry because airlines and airport operators frequently combine commercial claims with narratives of scale, location, hospitality, service and connectivity. In other words, aviation communication operates simultaneously as sectoral branding and as a communicative arena in which nation-related meanings are articulated.

Accordingly, the study focuses on four brands with high international visibility—İGA Istanbul Airport, TAV Airports, Pegasus Airlines and Turkish Airlines—and analyses only self-published official materials. The dataset consists of 13 official communication items published between 2016 and 2025, including press releases and announcements, official web or service pages, and corporate reports. The purpose is not to infer diplomatic or reputational effects, but to map the recurring themes through which Türkiye is communicatively represented in these materials.

Existing aviation research has extensively examined service quality, sustainability, brand equity and passenger satisfaction, yet fewer studies compare how multiple aviation actors jointly project nation-related meanings through official discourse in the Turkish context. This article addresses that gap by shifting the analytical focus from presumed country-brand "effects" to the communicated identity claims embedded in corporate materials.

The study asks the following questions: (RQ1) How are Türkiye-related meanings represented in the official corporate communications of the selected aviation brands? (RQ2) Which positioning and service quality narratives are prioritised by İGA Istanbul Airport, TAV Airports, Pegasus Airlines and Turkish Airlines? (RQ3) How are infrastructure, capacity and global connectivity framed in these materials? and (RQ4) To what extent do these themes form a complementary communicative repertoire across brands?

The study offers three contributions: theoretically, it clarifies the distinction between communicated identity and received country image in aviation-related nation-brand discussions; methodologically, it provides a transparent document-based coding framework by reporting dataset composition, theme distribution and co-occurrence patterns; and practically, it shows how different aviation actors project complementary but not identical Türkiye-related narratives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on service quality and sustainability practices in the aviation industry highlights the significance of brand equity. Lee et al. (2024) argue that airlines can increase their brand equity by integrating sustainability into their operations and meeting or exceeding passenger expectations, which reveals a multifaceted understanding of service quality. Similarly, Haksevenler and Topal (2023) discuss the necessity of sustainable aviation policies within Türkiye's civil aviation framework, identifying key motivating factors and performance outcomes that align with global sustainability standards. These studies align with the growing body of literature indicating that sustainability efforts improve operational efficiency and enhance customer perceptions and loyalty in the airline industry (Shang et al., 2023).

In addition to sustainability, customer engagement and service quality are recognized as important variables affecting airline brand perception. Fu's (2023) research on airline brand image reveals that positive brand perceptions significantly impact customer loyalty and perceived value. Mushtaq et al. (2024) elaborate on the negative impact of brand aversion on customer behavior and emphasize the importance of maintaining high service standards to mitigate customer dissatisfaction. Collectively, these factors contribute to a psychological perspective where consumers' experiences can directly influence their loyalty to brands in the aviation industry (Xia & Arif, 2023).

Türkiye's advancements in aviation logistics and technology strengthen its brand position on the global stage. To optimize the passenger experience, Turkish airports have adopted new technologies, representing a proactive approach to increasing customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Humza & Hacıoğlu, 2023). Çiftçi and Şevkli (2015) propose a new hub-and-spoke system that could further enhance Türkiye's strategic advantage in aviation by improving connectivity and operational efficiency. This technological advancement is crucial for fostering a sustainable aviation ecosystem, which is in high demand among consumers who prioritize sustainability alongside service quality (Yusaf et al., 2022).

It is important to build a strong corporate brand image through practical strategies that can provide competitive advantages in the dynamic aviation market (Foroudi et al., 2021). The realization of corporate branding initiatives can serve as a robust mechanism to overcome the challenges of fluctuating consumer preferences and expectations. This suggests that a sound brand strategy can effectively increase brand equity amidst turbulent market conditions.

As Türkiye continues to grow as an aviation hub, the key analytical question is not whether official materials by themselves demonstrate country image outcomes, but how these materials organise communicated identity claims at the intersection of sectoral branding and nation-related representation. Thus, the present study contributes to the literature by qualitatively mapping the discourse through which selected aviation brands position themselves and, at the same time, symbolically situate Türkiye within global aviation narratives.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For nation-branding literature, identity refers to the set of meanings a nation or institution seeks to project, whereas image refers to how those meanings are received and interpreted by external stakeholders (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2016). This distinction is critical for the present study. Official airline and airport communications can be used to analyse communicated identity claims, but they cannot on their own demonstrate audience-level country image or public diplomacy outcomes. Accordingly, the analytical object here is projected representation, not perceived image.

Aviation nevertheless remains a particularly visible channel of representation because flag carriers and hub airports operate at the intersection of mobility, symbolism and international encounter. Airlines may function as "flying ambassadors," and airports may operate as gateways through which claims of scale, hospitality and modernity are communicated (Anaz & Akman, 2017; Kobierecki, 2021). However, such visibility should be treated as representational potential rather than as direct proof of image effects.

Brand positioning concerns the distinctive place that a brand seeks to occupy in relation to competitors and target audiences (Ries & Trout, 1981). In aviation, this positioning may take premium, accessible, innovative, global or service-oriented forms. What matters for the present study is how these positions are stated in official discourse and how they become attached to broader Türkiye-related meanings without being equated with audience reception.

Service quality is another recurring source of symbolic value in aviation communication. Awards, passenger comfort, lounge services, punctuality, catering and convenience are not only operational claims; they are also self-descriptions through which firms communicate competence and credibility (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Ostrowski et al., 1993). In official materials, such claims may indirectly support nation-related representation even when the country itself is not named explicitly.

Infrastructure and capacity claims similarly function as communicative resources. Fleet growth, terminal expansion, technological systems and cargo capacity are presented not merely as technical facts but as evidence of scale, preparedness and future orientation. In this sense, infrastructure discourse allows brands to translate investment decisions into symbolic claims about competence and continuity.

Global connectivity completes this framework. Destination breadth, hub logic, alliance memberships and codeshare partnerships position aviation brands as network actors. In communicative terms, connectivity links corporate growth to narratives of reach, openness and international embeddedness.

Yet here too, the analytical claim must remain modest: connectivity discourse reveals what brands project, not how external audiences ultimately interpret those projections.

Taken together, these concepts justify analysing aviation materials through five interrelated themes—country-related representation, brand positioning, service quality and experience, infrastructure and capacity, and global connectivity. The purpose of the study is therefore to map the structure of communicated identity claims across brands rather than to infer verified country-image outcomes.

4. METHOD AND DATA

This study uses qualitative content analysis to examine how selected aviation brands communicate Türkiye-related meanings in their official corporate materials. The analytical focus is limited to communicated identity claims contained in self-published texts and pages; the study does not analyse audience reception, media reinterpretation or causal effects.

4.1. Research Design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative content analysis with a document-based design. The goal is not to determine causal effects or public diplomacy outcomes, but to map representations and narratives across multiple aviation brands by analysing their official self-published communication materials.

4.2. Data Sources and Document Selection

At the preliminary screening stage, 57 items were identified from the official digital communication channels of İGA Istanbul Airport, TAV Airports, Pegasus Airlines and Turkish Airlines, including press releases and announcements, official website pages and accessible corporate reports. The screening process applied four inclusion criteria: the material had to be self-published by the focal brand, publicly accessible, thematically relevant to the research focus, and sufficiently substantive for qualitative coding. Documents were retained if they explicitly referred to at least one of the following dimensions: brand positioning, service quality and experience, infrastructure and capacity, global connectivity, or Türkiye-related representation. Materials were excluded when they were duplicate versions of the same content, limited to technical or financial disclosure, lacking in discursive depth, or produced by third-party news, interview or commentary sources. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 13 documents were retained in the final dataset.

Following the preliminary screening process, 13 official communication items were retained in the final dataset published between 2016 and 2025 by four brands—İGA Istanbul Airport, TAV Airports, Pegasus Airlines and Turkish Airlines. Only self-published materials were retained in the final analysis. Third-party news articles, interviews, opinion pieces, unauthorised user-generated content and interpretive media coverage were excluded from the findings section. Inclusion required that a document explicitly present the brand's positioning, service, infrastructure, connectivity or Türkiye-related narrative. Table 1 summarises the composition of the final dataset, and Appendix A lists the retained documents.

Table 1. Composition of the Final Dataset by Brand and Material Type

Brand	Press release / announcement	Official web or service page	Corporate report	Total
İGA Istanbul Airport	1	1	1	3
TAV Airports	1	1	0	2
Pegasus Airlines	4	0	0	4
Turkish Airlines	0	3	1	4
Total	6	5	2	13

Note. The dataset includes only self-published official materials retained for the findings section. Third-party news and commentary were excluded from the evidentiary dataset.

4.3. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the individual document or page. Each item could receive multiple theme assignments because positioning, quality, infrastructure and connectivity frequently appeared together within the same text. The analysis therefore records document-level theme presence rather than treating each document as belonging to only one category.

Table 2. Condensed Codebook Used in the Analysis

Theme	Operational focus	Typical indicators in the documents
Country-related representation	Explicit or implicit references linking the brand to Türkiye, national symbolism or a broader Türkiye narrative	Türkiye, national pride, showcase, gateway, centrality
Brand positioning	Statements defining the brand's distinctive place, promise or strategic identity	world's best, digital, accessible, premium, global operator
Service quality and experience	Claims about comfort, awards, convenience, passenger care or service expertise	awards, lounge, convenience, passenger services, experience
Infrastructure and capacity	Claims about fleet, terminals, investment, technology or scale-building	capacity, renewal, expansion, digital systems, innovation centre
Global connectivity	Claims about routes, hub status, alliances, partnerships or network reach	destinations, hub, Star Alliance, codeshare, gateway

4.4. Code Scheme

The code scheme included five main themes: (i) country-related representation, (ii) brand positioning, (iii) service quality and experience, (iv) infrastructure and capacity, and (v) global connectivity. Each theme was defined operationally in advance and linked to recurrent lexical indicators such as hospitality, world-class service, accessibility, innovation, capacity, hub, destination network, alliance and partnership. Table 2 presents the final codebook in condensed form.

4.5. Coding Process and Reliability

An initial pilot coding round was conducted independently by two researchers on a brand-balanced subset of the documents. Overall agreement exceeded 85%, after which disagreements were discussed and the code definitions were tightened. The remaining documents were then coded comparatively using the final codebook and a document-by-theme matrix that allowed multiple themes to be assigned to the same item where appropriate.

4.6. Validity and Rigour

Rigour was enhanced by clearly defining the scope of the dataset, keeping an audit trail of inclusion and exclusion decisions, retaining only self-published official materials, and reporting document-level frequencies and co-occurrences in tabular form. Instead of claiming theoretical saturation, the study relies on analytic completeness within the predefined dataset.

4.7. Ethics

All materials were publicly available and produced by corporate actors for public circulation; no personal data were included. The study therefore raises no human-subject risk. Ethical care was instead directed at source integrity: only official, attributable and retrievable brand materials were treated as evidentiary data in the findings.

The findings are presented theme by theme, but the interpretation remains anchored in official materials only. Third-party news articles and external commentary may still appear elsewhere in the article as contextual references, yet they are not used as primary evidence for the findings.

5. RESULTS

Table 3. Document-level Distribution of Themes by Brand

Brand	Country-related representation	Brand positioning	Service quality / experience	Infrastructure / capacity	Global connectivity	Documents
İGA Istanbul Airport	2	2	3	2	1	3
TAV Airports	0	2	1	1	1	2
Pegasus Airlines	1	3	2	2	1	4
Turkish Airlines	1	2	2	2	3	4
Theme presence total	4	9	8	7	6	13

Note. Counts indicate the number of retained documents in which a theme was present. Because multiple themes could occur in the same document, row and column totals are not additive in a one-theme-only sense.

Table 4. Most Visible Theme Co-occurrences at the Document Level

Co-occurring themes	Number of documents
Brand positioning + Service quality / experience	6
Brand positioning + Infrastructure / capacity	5
Service quality / experience + Infrastructure / capacity	5
Country-related representation + Brand positioning	4
Infrastructure / capacity + Global connectivity	3
Brand positioning + Global connectivity	3

Note. Co-occurrence counts show how often two themes appeared together in the same retained document.

Before turning to the theme-by-theme discussion, Tables 3 and 4 provide a transparent overview of document-level theme distribution and the most visible co-occurrences in the final dataset.

5.1. Emphasis on Country Image and National Identity

Table 3 summarises document-level theme distribution across the four brands. Direct country-related representation is present but comparatively limited; it is concentrated mainly in İGA and Turkish Airlines materials rather than being evenly distributed across the whole corpus.

The clearest country-linked discourse appears in İGA and Turkish Airlines texts. İGA's announcement “iGA Istanbul Airport is the World's Best” and its sustainability report frame the airport as a showcase of scale, quality and global centrality, thereby connecting operational claims to a broader Türkiye narrative (İGA Istanbul Airport, 2022, 2023). Turkish Airlines' annual report similarly connects company performance, national scale and international reach, although the emphasis remains company-centred rather than audience-centred (Turkish Airlines, 2025b).

By contrast, Pegasus and TAV mention Türkiye more indirectly. Pegasus mainly represents dynamism, digitalisation and accessibility through self-descriptions such as “Türkiye'nin en dijital ulaştırma şirketi,” while TAV more often speaks as a global airport operator than as an explicit national symbol (Pegasus Airlines, 2016a; TAV Operation Services, 2025).

5.2. Brand Positioning Strategies

Brand positioning is the most widely distributed theme across the dataset (Table 3). The four brands occupy differentiated yet complementary communicative positions rather than reproducing a single uniform message.

İGA is positioned through superlative and hub-oriented language such as “world's best” and the promise of a globally significant aviation centre, while TAV defines itself as an experienced international airport services and operations actor (İGA Istanbul Airport, 2022; TAV Operation Services, 2025).

Pegasus constructs a positioning centred on accessibility, digitalisation and innovation. Titles such as “Türkiye'nin en dijital ulaştırma şirketi” and the announcement of a technology and innovation centre in Silicon Valley present the brand as agile and future-oriented (Pegasus Airlines, 2016a, 2024).

Turkish Airlines combines premium service, scale and global reach. The awards page, destination network page and annual report together portray the company as a high-prestige flag carrier with broad international reach (Turkish Airlines, n.d., 2025a, 2025b).

Therefore, positioning in the corpus is distributed across premium, accessible, infrastructural and operational-competence narratives rather than one single meaning cluster.

5.3. Emphasis on Service Quality and Experience

Service quality and passenger experience appear in eight of the 13 retained documents (Table 3), making this the second most visible cross-brand theme.

The strongest and most explicit quality discourse is found in Turkish Airlines and İGA materials. Turkish Airlines' awards page transforms external recognition into a stable part of brand self-description, while İGA's award announcement and İGA Pass service content foreground passenger comfort, lounge access and travel convenience (Turkish Airlines, n.d.; İGA Istanbul Airport, 2022; İGA Pass, n.d.).

TAV and Pegasus also mobilise service language, but usually in a more operational or functional register. TAV emphasises airport services expertise and passenger-facing operations, whereas Pegasus links service to ease, speed and digital convenience rather than to luxury or prestige (TAV Operation Services, 2025; Pegasus Airlines, 2017).

This pattern shows that service quality in the dataset is communicated through two registers: experiential prestige on the one hand, and functional convenience on the other.

Both registers matter for the study because they illustrate how nation-related representation may be carried indirectly through quality claims even when the country itself is not named in every document.

5.4. Emphasis on Infrastructure Investments and Capacity Building

Infrastructure and capacity claims appear in seven documents and are one of the main ways in which future orientation is communicated (Table 3).

İGA and TAV use infrastructure discourse to underline scale and long-term capability. İGA's sustainability reporting links airport development, operational scale and long-term planning, while TAV's Antalya announcement foregrounds renewal, expansion and increased passenger capacity (İGA Istanbul Airport, 2023; TAV Airports, 2025).

Pegasus emphasises digital and technological infrastructure rather than monumental physical infrastructure. Its 2017 operational digitalisation announcement and 2024 Silicon Valley innovation centre announcement frame growth as technology-enabled capability building (Pegasus Airlines, 2017, 2024).

In Turkish Airlines materials, fleet scale, cargo capacity, technical capability and system-wide operational expansion are brought together in the annual report, which presents growth as an integrated aviation ecosystem rather than as isolated investment decisions (Turkish Airlines, 2025b).

Thus, infrastructure discourse in the dataset should be viewed as a claim of competence; brands utilize capacity, technology, and renewal discourse to demonstrate preparedness, scale, and continuity. This again emphasizes projected identity rather than verified external perception.

5.5. Global Connectivity and Alliance Strategies

Global connectivity appears in six documents and is especially concentrated in Turkish Airlines materials, followed by selected İGA, Pegasus and TAV documents (Table 3).

Turkish Airlines constructs the clearest connectivity discourse. The destinations page foregrounds breadth of reach, while the Star Alliance page frames connectivity through alliance-based network extension. Together with the annual report, these materials position the airline as a network brand whose value is built around access and worldwide reach (Turkish Airlines, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

İGA connects this discourse to hub logic by presenting Istanbul as a transfer centre of global significance, whereas Pegasus represents connectivity more selectively through cooperation, codeshare and point-to-point accessibility. TAV, by contrast, links connectivity to the airport-operator role and to the capacity of airports to serve as gateways for tourism and mobility (İGA Istanbul Airport, 2023; Pegasus Airlines, 2016b; TAV Airports, 2025).

As Table 4 shows, connectivity most often appears alongside positioning and infrastructure. In other words, network reach is rarely communicated as an isolated fact; it is usually embedded in broader claims about capability, scale and strategic importance.

Overall, the results show a complementary structure of official discourse across brands, but they should be interpreted strictly as communicated identity claims derived from self-published materials.

6. DISCUSSION

The official materials examined in this study do not demonstrate how foreign publics perceive Türkiye; rather, they show how aviation brands project a complementary set of nation-related meanings through corporate discourse.

This distinction between communicated identity and received image is central In the dataset, İGA and Turkish Airlines make the most direct nation-linked claims, whereas Pegasus and TAV more often contribute indirectly through narratives of accessibility, innovation, operational skill and international reach. The sector therefore appears not as a single unified message, but as a distributed message architecture in which different actors emphasise different symbolic roles.

These findings remain relevant to nation-branding literature because they show how sectoral brands can articulate meanings adjacent to national narratives without allowing the researcher to infer audience effects. In that sense, the study supports the usefulness of analysing airports and airlines as visible interfaces of national representation, while also respecting the methodological boundary between projected discourse and actual image formation (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2016; Kobierecki, 2021).

A second implication concerns the content of the discourse. Positioning, service quality, infrastructure and connectivity do not operate independently; they frequently co-occur and reinforce one another at the document level. The communication of quality often appears together with positioning, and connectivity is commonly embedded in broader claims about scale, capacity and modernisation. This pattern suggests that aviation brands rarely present isolated functional facts; instead, they build compound narratives of competence.

From a managerial perspective, the analysis suggests that coordination across brands may increase narrative clarity, but practitioners should avoid assuming that projected identity automatically becomes country image. Any stronger claim about public diplomacy, tourism image or reputation transfer would require audience-based research.

Therefore, the principal value of the present study lies in documenting the structure of official discourse rather than in proving reputational outcomes. This more bounded interpretation makes the study more consistent with its sample, method and evidentiary base.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined how official corporate communications from İGA Istanbul Airport, TAV Airports, Pegasus Airlines, and Turkish Airlines convey Türkiye-related meanings within aviation discourse. Using a dataset of 13 official documents and a transparent document-based coding framework, the article identified five recurring themes: country-related representation, brand positioning, service quality and experience, infrastructure and capacity, and global connectivity.

The analysis showed that direct country-linked claims are concentrated mainly in İGA and Turkish Airlines materials. In contrast, Pegasus and TAV more often represent Türkiye indirectly through claims of innovation, accessibility, operational competence, and internationalisation. As a result, the dataset reveals a complementary communicative repertoire rather than a single homogeneous national script.

The main contribution of the study is conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, it clarifies the distinction between communicated identity and received image. Methodologically, it demonstrates how official document analysis can be made more transparent by specifying dataset boundaries, reporting document-level theme distribution and showing co-occurring themes.

The study does not claim that these materials prove Türkiye's country image, public diplomacy success or stakeholder perceptions. Those outcomes belong to the realm of audience research. What the present analysis demonstrates is that official aviation communications recurrently project meanings associated with hospitality, scale, modernisation, competence and connectivity.

APPENDIX A. RETAINED OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS

Appendix A lists the official materials retained in the evidentiary dataset.

Appendix Table A1. Retained Documents Included in the Findings

Brand	Document title	Year	Type	Primary theme emphasis
İGA Istanbul Airport	iGA Istanbul Airport is the World's Best	2022	Announcement	Country-related representation; positioning; service quality
İGA Istanbul Airport	2021-2022 Sustainability Report	2023	Corporate report	Country-related representation; infrastructure; connectivity
İGA Pass	General passenger services	n.d.	Service page	Service quality and experience
Pegasus Airlines	Türkiye'nin en dijital ulaştırma şirketi	2016	Press release	Positioning; country-related representation
Pegasus Airlines	Pegasus ve flynas ortak uçuş anlaşması imzaladı	2016	Press release	Global connectivity
Pegasus Airlines	Pegasus'un İstanbul Sabiha Gökçen ile operasyonel süreçleri dijitalleşiyor	2017	Press release	Service quality; infrastructure
Pegasus Airlines	Pegasus, Silikon Vadisi'nde Teknoloji İnovasyon Merkezi kuruyor	2024	Press release	Positioning; infrastructure

TAV Airports	Yenilenen Antalya Havalimanı ilk yolcularını karşıladı	2025	Press release	Infrastructure; connectivity
TAV Operation Services	About	2025	Official web page	Positioning; service quality
Turkish Airlines	Flight destinations	2025	Official web page	Global connectivity
Turkish Airlines	2024 Annual Report	2025	Corporate report	Country-related representation; infrastructure; connectivity
Turkish Airlines	Star Alliance	2025	Official web page	Global connectivity
Turkish Airlines	Awards | Press Room	n.d.	Official web page	Service quality; positioning

Note. The appendix reflects the final document set retained after excluding third-party news coverage and commentary from the evidentiary sample.

In practical terms, aviation and transportation institutions may use this kind of mapping to assess whether their communication portfolios are internally coherent, where narratives overlap, and which claims remain brand-specific.

The study has clear limitations. It is based only on self-published official materials and a bounded dataset covering four brands. It does not analyse foreign audience reception, media reinterpretation or behavioural outcomes. Future research should therefore combine document analysis with surveys, experiments, interviews or social-media reception data.

DECLARATION OF THE AUTHORS

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