

# Corporate Image as a Differentiation Strategy in Healthcare: A Study in the Covid-19 Crisis Period

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# **Corporate Image as a Differentiation Strategy in Countries with Advertising Ban in Healthcare: A Study in the Covid-19 Crisis Period**

## **Corporate Image in Healthcare Institutions**

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

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## **HIGHLIGHTS**

- Studies examining corporate image and loyalty relations have been carried out outside of crisis periods.
- The effects of corporate image in a country with an advertising ban were investigated.
- The results of the research reveal the effects of corporate image both in an environment where there is an advertising ban and during the crisis.

## **Abstract**

The most important factor in the competitiveness of health institutions is the target consumer group. Countries with a ban on advertising in health have limited options to reach the target consumer group and create demand. In this context, the aim of this study is to investigate the effects of corporate image as an alternative competitive strategy in countries where advertising is prohibited. Conducting the study during the Covid 19 crisis period is also important in terms of evaluating the corporate image as a strategy that can be used in crisis periods. According to the results of the research, positive corporate image and patient satisfaction affect patient loyalty positively and significantly during the crisis period when the advertising ban is in place. In cases where advertising and promotion options are limited, corporate image can be used as an important differentiation strategy for health institutions in times of crisis.

**Keywords:** Corporate Image, Patient Satisfaction, Patient Loyalty, Hospitals, Health Institutions, Advertising Ban, Pandemic

## **1. Introduction**

Today, the increase in the number of health institutions and the developments in public hospitals increase the competition in health services <sup>1</sup>. With the health reforms made in Turkey, the provision of health services by the private sector has been supported, and city hospitals have started to become widespread within the scope of public-private partnership <sup>2</sup>. At the same time, agreements with reimbursement institutions have reduced patient participation rates and increased the opportunity for healthcare consumers to benefit from more healthcare providers <sup>3</sup>. The decrease in the patient participation share decreased the value of the price function in the demand for health services. In this period when electoral alternatives proliferate <sup>4</sup>, being able to compete with non-price factors has become even more important for the survival of health institutions <sup>5</sup>.

The most important factor in the competitiveness of health institutions and their survival in the sector is the target consumer group <sup>6</sup>. The increase in the level of education and the developments in communication and health technologies increase the expectations of health consumers <sup>1</sup>. The survival of health institutions requires both responding to changing consumer demands and standing out among their competitors. The competitiveness of healthcare institutions depends on the degree to which they retain their existing customer portfolio and acquire new customers <sup>7</sup>. Therefore, creating patient loyalty in healthcare institutions is vital for healthcare institutions to gain competitive advantage.

In countries where there is a ban on advertising and promotion in health, health institutions have limited competition options. Although there is a ban on advertising in health in Turkey, promotion in health services is limited by various laws and regulations. In this context, it is prohibited to make direct requests to create a request. It is related to the presence of restrictions on advertising and promotion in health services, the evaluation of health as a human right protected by law and the prevention of commercialization of health. However,

private health service providers, who can survive by making a profit rather than a budget basis, have limited competitive options in the sector other than advertising and promotion. For this reason, corporate image can be used as an important differentiation strategy for healthcare institutions in countries where advertising in healthcare is prohibited and there are limited competitive options. The corporate image, which is formed as a result of customer experience and perception and subsequently affects demand, becomes even more important for healthcare institutions when there are limited competitive options.

This study was carried out in the new normalization period, when the Covid 19 pandemic disease continues. In the relevant period, all public and private hospitals in Turkey were declared as pandemic hospitals, and treatments other than emergencies were postponed <sup>8,9</sup>. In the new normalization period <sup>10</sup>, private health institutions that have not welcomed patients for a long time, except for the pandemic, have tried to expand their service provision for the treatment of all diseases. However, health claims continued to be delayed due to the prevalence and risk of the disease. There is uncertainty and risk whether hospitals can recover their past patient portfolio in the relevant period.

The aim of this study is to evaluate whether corporate image can be used as a competitive strategy during the crisis in a country where there is a ban on advertising and promotion in health. In this context, in this study, it was aimed to measure the level of corporate image, patient satisfaction level and patient loyalty intention created by private hospitals that met the relevant conditions in the patients they previously served. The main purpose of this research is to measure the positive effect of perceived corporate image on patient satisfaction and patient loyalty.

When the studies measuring the relationships between corporate image and patient loyalty are examined, it is seen that the studies are mostly done outside of health institutions <sup>11-14</sup>. In the limited number of studies conducted in health institutions, no study has been found in

any country where there is a ban on advertising in health. At the same time, conducting the research during the Covid 19 period, which is one of the biggest crisis periods that all countries have experienced in terms of health, social and economic, and which affects the world, reveals the originality of the study. As a matter of fact, the probability of a crisis period of this magnitude to re-emerge is extremely low.

## **2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses**

### **2.1. *Corporate Image and Satisfaction***

How the service is provided and the perceived satisfaction level have an important place in the formation of the corporate image <sup>15</sup>. In today's competitive environment, institutions have to create a positive corporate image both to differentiate their services and to create trust and sympathy for the consumer group they serve. Positive corporate image allows to increase patient satisfaction in health institutions, to be distinguished from competitors and to be recognized more by the target consumer group <sup>16</sup>. Although there are few studies in the literature examining the relationship between corporate image and patient satisfaction in health institutions <sup>13,17,18</sup>, the results reveal the relationship between corporate image and patient satisfaction.

The hypothesis developed as a result of these relationships examined in the literature is as follows:

H1: Institutional image positively affects patient satisfaction

### **2.2. *Corporate Image and Loyalty***

Corporate image is about how institutions are perceived by other people and institutions, how they appear, what they think <sup>19; 20</sup>. Corporate image can be defined as the picture that the business creates in its target audience and the set of judgments imposed on the corporate

identity. According to another definition, corporate image is the company's efforts to provide a vision and hope to its stakeholders and the public <sup>21</sup>; <sup>22</sup>, is defined as the set of meanings attributed to the institution <sup>15</sup>. Corporate image is formed as a result of a process built with corporate communication activities <sup>22-27</sup>. Institutions operating in the service sector can provide a competitive advantage in the sector by creating a positive corporate image <sup>28</sup>. It is stated that corporate image increases sales and market share and is a way of gaining loyal customers <sup>13</sup>.

Customer loyalty is the customer's repetitive purchase of the same product or service, despite the increase in possible options and different marketing efforts, or his dedication to being the customer of an institution, organization or business <sup>29</sup>. According to another definition, it is explained as an individual's desire to continue his relationship with a business, of which he is a regular customer, or to recommend it to others <sup>30</sup>.

Patient loyalty is an important factor in healthcare institutions that allows patients to adapt to treatment and reduce complaints through their trust in hospitals and physicians <sup>31</sup>. At the same time, receiving health services from the same place reduces the costs of seeking new treatment for patients <sup>32</sup>. In terms of health institutions, it shows that loyalty is an important factor that increases sales and profitability, enables it to acquire new customers, and provides sustainable competitive advantage <sup>33,34</sup>.

Patients who apply to health institutions have an image perception about the institutions as a result of their experiences. A positive image for health institutions is built with recognition, information conveyed to patients, and patients' trust in treatment. This may increase the tendency of a consumer to choose that hospital in the future <sup>17</sup>. Corporate image in the health sector is critical for hospitals to maintain their presence in the sector and to create patient loyalty. Studies <sup>11-14</sup> explain that corporate image affects customer loyalty. The hypothesis developed due to these relations explained is as follows:

H2: Corporate image positively affects patient loyalty

### **2.3. *Satisfaction and Loyalty***

Oliver (1999), states that the formation of loyalty/devotion first starts with the service purchase, then the satisfaction from the service emerges and based on the satisfaction, loyalty/loyalty towards the institution from which the service is received will emerge<sup>29</sup>. The main purpose of organizations is to provide customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is also an important indicator of service quality. There is a strong relationship between customer satisfaction, profitability and quality<sup>35,36</sup>. Today, it is not possible to talk about a modern health service delivery of a health institution that does not aim at patient satisfaction, regardless of whether it is a public or private hospital<sup>37</sup>. Most studies<sup>38-44</sup> explains how it affects customer loyalty.

When the studies are examined, there are studies that examine the relationship between corporate image and satisfaction, and the relationship between corporate image and loyalty. There are limited studies examining the relationship between corporate image, satisfaction and loyalty<sup>13,40,41,45</sup>. It is seen that the studies are generally carried out in other sectors apart from the health sector. Relevant researchers suggest conducting studies in different countries and sectors in order to generalize the research results.

Studies on corporate image in health institutions are limited. In addition, this study is important because it reveals the perceptions and attitudes of health institutions consumers in a crisis period when new normalization decisions were made in the Covid 19 period. Examining the effect of corporate image on patient satisfaction and patient loyalty due to the relationships described in the literature forms the basis of this research. At the same time, it is aimed to examine the mediating effect of patient satisfaction on the effect of corporate image on patient loyalty. Demonstrating this mediation effect may provide support in the development of patient loyalty. In this context, the hypotheses developed in the research are as follows:

H3: Patient satisfaction positively affects patient loyalty

H4: Patient satisfaction has a mediating role in the effect of corporate image on patient loyalty.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. *Sample and data collection***

This study, which was conducted to examine the effect of corporate image and patient satisfaction on patient loyalty, was conducted in a quantitative data-based screening model and a relational screening model. The population of the research consists of individuals aged 18 and over who receive service from private hospitals in the province of xx... in xx... The research was carried out between November and February 2021, and the convenience sampling method was used in the research. There are 575 private hospitals in Turkey and 165 of them are in Istanbul <sup>46</sup>. The total population of people aged 18 and over in Istanbul is 11,520,854 <sup>47</sup>. The sample size to represent the population was found to be 384 at the 95% confidence interval<sup>48</sup>. The data obtained in the research were collected by face-to-face and online survey methods. A total of 609 participants were reached, and 446 (73%) survey data were considered valid due to exclusion criteria. The data obtained from the research were obtained from people who received service from a total of 119 hospitals, including 98 different hospitals and 21 branches.

#### **3.2. *Statistical analysis***

Data were analyzed with SPSS (25) and AMOS (24). In the analysis of the data, descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, correlation analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses were performed.

### 3.2.1. *Research model*

Within the scope of the research, it aimed to test the positive effect between the corporate image, satisfaction, and loyalty variables. The model of the research created in this context can be shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Model

The data obtained in the research were collected using a questionnaire consisting of four parts. In the first part of the questionnaire, expressions measuring demographic characteristics and two expressions containing exclusion criteria are included. In the continuation of the questionnaire, three different scales were used to measure a corporate image, patient satisfaction, and patient loyalty. All statements in the scales were evaluated with a 5-point Likert scale. -Absolutely Agree is requested.

### 3.2.2. *The Corporate image scale*

The corporate image scale developed (Karaosmanoğlu, 2006) was developed by (Bayın, 2013) by adapting it for health institutions<sup>49,50</sup>. Corporate image scale 26 consists of four dimensions: expression and physical factors, communication factors, quality factors, and social responsibility factors. The original Cronbach alpha value of the scale was 0.90. In the study, the Cronbach alpha value of the corporate image scale was found to be 0.88.

### 3.2.3. *The patient satisfaction scale*

(Chang, Chen, & Lan, 2013) and adapted by (Durmuş & Akbolat, 2020), validity and reliability analyzes were performed by the researchers for the patient satisfaction scale<sup>51,52</sup>. The scale, which consists of four statements, is gathered under one dimension. In the original scale, Cronbach's alpha values were 0.91 and 0.95, respectively. In the study, the Cronbach alpha value of the patient satisfaction scale was found to be 0.95.

#### 3.2.4. *The patient loyalty scale*

The validity and reliability analyses of the patient loyalty scale developed (Tosyalı, 2016) were performed by the researcher<sup>53</sup>. According to the factor analysis made by the researcher, the scale expressions consisting of 7 items are grouped under a single factor. According to the reliability analysis, the original Cronbach alpha value of the scale was 0.89. In the study, the Cronbach alpha value of the patient loyalty scale was found to be 0.95.

#### 3.2.5. *Analysis of Normality*

In the research, first of all, normality tests were examined to decide on the application of parametric or non-parametric tests. More than one method is used to test the normality of the distribution. In this context, skewness and kurtosis values, which are the most used in the field of social sciences, were examined to test normality.

If the data is normally distributed, parametric tests are required, if not normally distributed, non-parametric tests are required. It is stated that skewness and kurtosis values should be in the range of (-1 to +1) in some sources and (-2 to +2) in some sources to provide the assumption of normality. It is accepted that the data set is suitable for normal distribution in this range of values<sup>54-56</sup>.

Table 1. Skewness and Kurtosis Findings of the Scales

When Table 1 is analyzed according to the means of three dependent variables in the study, it is seen that the skewness and kurtosis coefficients are between (-1.5 and +1.5) and are in accordance with the normal distribution<sup>57</sup>. In this context, it was decided to apply parametric tests.

#### 3.2.6. *Confirmatory factor analysis (DFA)*

When the CFA analysis of the patient satisfaction scale is performed, it is seen that the variables in the measurement model are in the range of 0.89-0.94, and all the variables are of

ideal size, with a factor load of over 0.70. The goodness of fit values of the scale ( $\chi^2/df=1.757$ ; RMSEA=0.041; GFI=0.998; NFI=0.999, IFI=1.00; CFI=1.00).

When the CFA analysis of the patient loyalty scale is performed, it is seen that the factor load values are in the range of 0.73-0.91 and all variables are of ideal size. Acceptable goodness of fit values was obtained by making corrections in line with the modification suggestions ( $\chi^2/df=4.190$ ; RMSEA=0.85; NFI=0.985; IFI=0.988; CFI=0.988).

When the CFA analysis was performed for the Corporate Image Scale, the seventh statement regarding the quality factor was excluded from the analysis as it had a cross-correlation with the first statement on the communication factor. Acceptable goodness-of-fit values were obtained after adjustment ( $\chi^2/df=3.572$ ; RMSEA=0.76; CFI=0.909; NFI=0.879, IFI=0.910).

After providing acceptable goodness-of-fit values in the CFA Analysis, convergent validity, and reliability analyzes of the measurement model were performed (Table 2). In the model, it is seen that the CR and AVE values are within the acceptable values conveyed by (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2. CFA Report and composite reliability and validity

### **3.3. *Ethical Approval***

Written ethics approval (dated 13.10.2021, decision no.228) was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Mugla Sitki Kocman University Health Sciences Institute before the study.

## **4. Findings**

When the demographic characteristics of the 446 people who participated in the research survey were examined; 65% of the participants are women. About 60% are between the ages of 19-35. 57% of the participants have an associate degree and undergraduate education. Approximately 56% are private sector employees and approximately 49% have an income of 5001 TL or more.

#### **4.1. Correlation Analysis Findings**

Pearson Correlation Analysis was performed to measure the relationship between the variables of the study.

Table 3. Relationship between variables

When the correlation matrix in Table 3 is examined; It is seen that there are strongly positive ( $p < 0.005$ ) relationships between corporate image, patient satisfaction, and patient loyalty.

#### **4.2. SEM Analysis Findings**

When the model goodness of fit index values related to the research was examined, the goodness of fit index values obtained showed that the measurement model was confirmed (CMIN/DF=2.998; RMSEA=0.67; CFI=0.917; NFI=0.881, IFI=0.917).

The findings obtained as a result of the research are given in Figure 2. According to the created model, corporate image positively affects patient satisfaction and patient loyalty. H1 and H2 hypotheses were supported. Patient satisfaction also positively affects patient loyalty. The H3 hypothesis was supported.

Path analysis based on the bootstrap method was conducted to examine whether patient satisfaction has a mediating role in the relationship between corporate image and patient loyalty. 5000 resampling method was chosen in the analysis. In the mediation effect analyses made with this analysis, the values of the 95% confidence interval should not include zero (0) to support the research hypotheses.

According to the bootstrap test results, it has been determined that the indirect effect of corporate image on patient loyalty through patient satisfaction is significant. Bootstrap lower and upper confidence intervals do not include zero. The results show that patient satisfaction has a mediating role in the effect of corporate image on patient loyalty. The H4 hypothesis was supported.

*Figure 2: SEM Direct and indirect effects*

## **5. Discussion**

In this study, SEM was created to test the effect of corporate image and patient satisfaction on patient loyalty. According to the analysis results obtained from the research, it was concluded that corporate image positively affects patient satisfaction ( $\beta=0.909$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and patient loyalty ( $\beta=0.87$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Patient satisfaction has a partial mediator role ( $\beta=0.57$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) in the effect of corporate image on patient loyalty.

(Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998) reported that corporate image has a significant positive and indirect effect on customer loyalty<sup>11</sup>. (Liat et al., 2014) found a correlation ( $r= 0.650$ ) between corporate image and customer loyalty in their research involving foreign tourists in hotel businesses in Malaysia. In addition, as a result of the research, it is stated that a perceived one-unit increase in corporate image increases the loyalty level by 0.3 units ( $\beta =0.316$ ,  $p<0.05$ )<sup>13</sup>. (Wu, 2011) reports that brand image has a significant and positive effect on repurchase intention ( $\beta = 0.329$ ,  $p<0.05$ )<sup>45</sup>. Similarly, in their research (Prabowo et al., 2019) and (Ayutthaya, 2013), they report that corporate image positively affects patient loyalty<sup>12,14</sup>. Results from other studies support the findings of this study. Institutional image has a positive and significant effect on patient loyalty.

(Kösel, 2022) explains in his study that corporate image affects patient satisfaction ( $\beta=0.431$ )<sup>18</sup>. (Liat et al., 2014) reports that there is a correlation ( $r=0.597$ ) between corporate image and customer satisfaction<sup>13</sup>. The results of the research show that customer satisfaction directly and positively affects the level of customer loyalty significantly ( $\beta = 0.206$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). (Kim et al., 2008) reports that trust and patient satisfaction positively affect corporate image<sup>17</sup>. In the study conducted by (Wu, 2011) on private hospitals in Taiwan, it was concluded that hospital brand image did not have a significant effect on patient satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.065$ ,  $p> 0.05$ )

<sup>45</sup>. (Wai Lai, 2019) reveals that corporate image has a positive effect on perceived value and reputation. In the study, it is also reported that satisfaction has a partial mediator role in the relationship between corporate image and reputation<sup>58</sup>.

Another result obtained from the study is that patient satisfaction affects patient loyalty positively ( $\beta=0.626$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). (Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013) examining the effects of customer trust, customer identification with the company, and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty, it is revealed that customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer loyalty ( $\beta= 0.39^*$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) <sup>43</sup>. (Liu et al., 2021) in their study on public health institutions in China reported that patient satisfaction did not have a significant effect on patient loyalty, but it had a significant and positive effect on patient loyalty along with patient trust<sup>42</sup>. In the related study, a full mediator role was found in the effect of patient trust on patient loyalty (Abekah-Nkrumah et al., 2021) in their research on private and public hospitals in Ghana, and in the research conducted by (Hossain et al., 2019) in Bangladesh, it is reported that patient satisfaction has a positive and significant effect on patient loyalty <sup>38,39</sup>. (Ho & Huang, 2020) shows that brand image and patient loyalty have a positive effect on patient satisfaction and positive referrals<sup>5</sup>. (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000), (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2003); (Wilkins et al., 2009), similarly report that customer satisfaction has a significant effect on customer loyalty. Other research results seem to support these research findings<sup>40,41,44</sup>.

## **6. Implications of the Research**

This research shows that corporate image can be used as a competitive strategy in countries where there is a ban on advertising and promotion in health. At the same time, the combined effect of corporate image and patient satisfaction increases patient loyalty, even during periods of crisis when health institutions cannot advertise and promote. Institutional image and patient satisfaction are important prerequisites for ensuring patient loyalty. Institutional image is an important antecedent that affects patient satisfaction. Loyal customers

play an important role in overcoming crisis periods. In order to create patient loyalty, it is necessary to give importance to corporate image studies instead of focusing only on patient satisfaction. According to the findings obtained from the research, it can be said that health managers should give importance to both corporate image and patient satisfaction studies and focus on increasing efforts both under normal competition conditions and during crisis periods.

## **7. Practical Implications of Research**

In today's competitive conditions, hospitals have to both stand out among their competitors and respond to changing consumer needs in order to survive. In case of ban on advertising and promotion in health services, health institutions have limited competitive advantage. An important differentiation strategy that can be used by hospitals providing health services in the service sector is to create a positive corporate image perception. When the findings obtained according to the results of this research are evaluated, it is seen that corporate image has a positive and significant effect on patient satisfaction and patient loyalty. Health institutions that want to maintain their presence in the sector, to be preferred among their competitors <sup>28</sup>, to create patient satisfaction and to obtain loyal customers, should attach importance to multidimensional corporate image studies and continue their efforts to increase positive corporate image. Corporate image is an important competitive strategy that health institutions can use in competitive conditions with limited options and in times of crisis. Corporate image is the basic component of the corporate reputation that hospitals will create in the long term. In this sense, corporate image studies build the corporate reputation of the institution that will be perceived by all its stakeholders. Institutional image and patient satisfaction will affect patient loyalty and will contribute to improving market share, increasing profitability <sup>13</sup> and reducing the cost of acquiring new customers in hospitals.

## **8. Limitations**

This study is limited because it is a study conducted in a country where there is a ban on advertising in health and in private hospitals. At the same time, the study was carried out during a crisis period when the Covid 19 pandemic disease continued. It is recommended that future studies be carried out in a period when there is no crisis effect, examining by comparing public and private hospitals, and conducting studies in a wider universe, in different countries and sectors.

## **9. Conclusion**

According to the findings obtained from the research results, corporate image and patient satisfaction constitute important antecedents affecting patient demand and continuity in countries where there is a ban on advertising in health. Corporate image is an important competitive strategy that can be used both in normal competitive conditions and in times of crisis. Corporate image has a significant and positive effect on satisfaction<sup>13,17,18,59</sup>. The effect of corporate image on patient loyalty increases through patient satisfaction. According to the results of the research, both corporate image and patient satisfaction levels should be increased positively in order to ensure patient loyalty.

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## Tables

Table 1. Skewness and Kurtosis Findings of the Scales

Scales	Skewness	Kurtosis
Corporate Image Scale	-0.654	1.24
Patient Satisfaction Scale	-0.594	0.225
Patient Loyalty Scale	-0.518	0.046

Table 2. CFA Report and composite reliability and validity

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	CR ( $\geq 0.7$ )	AVE ( $\geq 0.5$ )
CI	C1	0.802	0.96	0.73
	C2	0.784		
	C3	0.839		
	C4	0.84		
	C5	0.764		
	C6	0.674		
	Q1	0.781		
	Q2	0.791		
	Q3	0.764		
	Q4	0.737		
	Q5	0.661		
	Q6	0.599		
	Q7	0.705		
	Q8	0.682		
	Q9	0.658		
	P1	0.608		
	P2	0.55		
	P3	0.687		
	P4	0.792		
	P5	0.724		
	P6	0.665		
	SR1	0.8		
	SR2	0.863		
	SR3	0.786		
	SR4	0.661		
PS	PS1	0.88	0.95	0.83
	PS2	0.94		
	PS3	0.941		
	PS4	0.884		
PL	PL1	0.734	0.95	0.72
	PL2	0.804		
	PL3	0.802		
	PL4	0.905		
	PL5	0.923		
	PL6	0.885		
	PL7	0.874		

Table 3. Relationship between variables

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Corporate image	446	3.768	0.673	1		
2. Patient satisfaction	446	3.686	0.944	0.860 0.000	1	
3. Patient loyalty	446	3.524	0.953	0.826 0.000	0.857 0.000	1

## Figures

Figure 1. Research Model

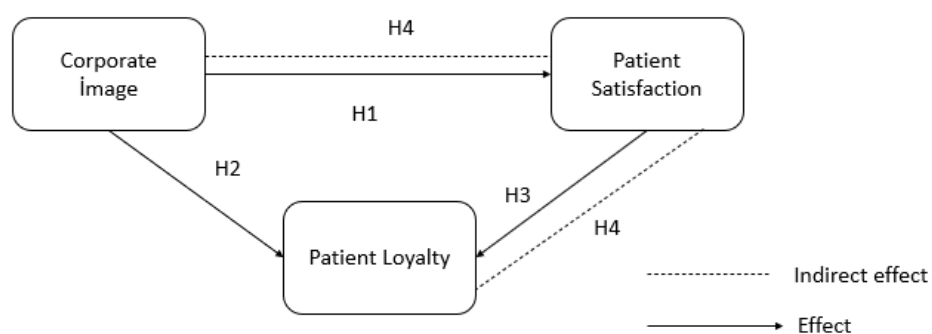


Figure 2: SEM Direct and indirect effects

