

Adapting social media strategies: a comparative analysis of Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates before, during, and after the COVID-19 Pandemic



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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the aviation industry has transformed significantly, driven by the increasing importance of digital technologies and social media for communication and marketing. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation, posing unprecedented challenges to airlines. The present study investigates how Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates adapted their social media strategies before, during, and after the pandemic. The research has a threefold focus: (i) assessing pre-pandemic social media strategies, (ii) examining strategy evolution during the pandemic, and (iii) comparing the effectiveness of these strategies before and after COVID-19. By exploring how these airlines leveraged social media to navigate pandemic-related disruptions and maintain vital connections with passengers, this study provides valuable insights. These findings hold significant implications for aviation stakeholders, marketing professionals, and researchers, shedding light on the evolving role of social media in crisis communication and marketing. The study uncovered interesting changes in how airlines use Twitter. After the pandemic, they started using more emojis, and their messages shifted from promoting services to expressing hope during the pandemic and back to promotions afterward. They played with visuals and hashtags. Pricing-wise, they offered discounts for students, different ticket options, and bundled services. In promotions, they focused on being environmentally and socially responsible, user convenience, and specific events. They mainly shared updates on flights, achievements, and travel advice. To engage people, they used quizzes, replied directly to customers, and targeted specific groups. For marketing managers, the study suggests being more customer-focused, emphasizing environmental and social responsibility, offering diverse pricing, celebrating milestones, and creating engaging content. Overall, the findings provide practical insights for adjusting marketing strategies in the ever-changing world of airlines, especially considering the challenges brought by COVID-19.

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Introduction

The aviation industry has witnessed a remarkable transformation in recent years, fueled by the growing importance of digital technologies and social media as potent tools for communication, engagement, and marketing. The catalyst for this transformation was the unprecedented global event - the COVID-19 pandemic. The aviation sector, known for its resilience and adaptability, confronted immense challenges as the pandemic triggered travel restrictions, reduced passenger numbers, and severe financial implications. In response, aviation companies turned to social media as a lifeline to connect with passengers, deliver vital updates, and navigate uncharted territory. This paper delves into the realm of social media within the aviation industry, with a specific focus on Turkish Airlines, Emirates, and Qatar Airways, both before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The digital era has revolutionized customer-company interactions, with social media platforms emerging as indispensable tools for marketing, brand promotion, customer engagement, and crisis communication. In the aviation industry, these platforms provide a

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unique channel to connect with passengers, share real-time information, and foster brand loyalty. The industry's adoption of social media intensified in response to the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an enduring impact on the aviation industry. Travel restrictions, lockdowns, and widespread health concerns brought air travel to a halt, prompting airlines and aviation companies to reevaluate their strategies. Many airlines faced financial crises, staff layoffs, and government bailouts to stay operational. The pandemic compelled the aviation sector to explore innovative approaches to customer engagement and crisis management.

In the midst of pandemic turbulence, social media strategies became pivotal for aviation companies. These platforms enabled direct communication with passengers, facilitated real-time updates on safety measures, and managed public perceptions during times of uncertainty. This study delves into the dynamic nature of the social media strategies, particularly on Twitter, employed by Turkish Airlines, Emirates, and Qatar Airways and how they adapted to the unique challenges posed by the pandemic.

This study addresses the primary research problem of analyzing the social media strategies of Turkish Airlines, Emirates, and Qatar Airways before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this overarching goal, the following research objectives have been defined:

- i. Assess the social media strategies employed by Turkish Airlines, Emirates, and Qatar Airways before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ii. Examine how these companies adapted their social media strategies in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic.
- iii. Compare the effectiveness of social media strategies before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research holds significant importance as it contributes to understanding how aviation companies, particularly Turkish Airlines, Emirates, and Qatar Airways, navigated the uncharted waters of the COVID-19 pandemic using social media. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for aviation industry stakeholders, marketing professionals, and researchers seeking to adapt to the evolving role of social media in crisis communication and marketing.

Literature Review

Use of social media by Airlines Before Covid-19 Pandemic

The use of social media in the pre-pandemic era has been shown by past studies to be dominantly used for crisis management and communication by airlines (Ngai & Jin, 2016; Pohl et al., 2015; Tian et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2016). The effectiveness of social media during crisis management is not unique to the aviation industry as social media has been used elsewhere to manage crisis communication, for example, during flooding to identify affected areas and channel emergency services to places of need (Akhgar et al., 2013; De Albuquerque et al., 2015). According to a past study, social media platforms were leveraged for stakeholder interactions to allow for effective communication as well as response to crisis situations (Ngai & Jin, 2016). Additionally, the social media platforms were critically beneficial to the airlines as they allowed for open and transparent communication during a crisis, with an example given during the Malaysia Airlines accident, during which customers and families or friends of the affected passengers could follow up on their concerns receiving frequent updates (Wang et al., 2017).

Social media was also helpful in restructuring and improving crisis management and communication strategies (Tian et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2016). The reactions from the public as a result of the crisis communication were publicly and readily availed through social media platforms, which helped the affected airlines to re-strategize their crisis communication and management to properly address the concerns of their customers (Tian et al., 2022). The diverse and lots of data that could be extracted from messages, responses, and engagements from the audience was reported to help fine-tune the crisis communication strategies used by the airlines (Pohl et al., 2015; Tian et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2016). Through multiple messages, the airlines could discern the prevalent concerns of their customers and address them promptly (Zhang et al., 2016). The availability and access to diverse data allowed by the social media platforms were also reported to be helpful to the decision-makers during airline crises, as they could analyze the messages through sentiment analysis and adequately respond to customers during crisis situations (Zhang et al., 2016). Pohl et al. (2015) reported that integrating advanced data analysis techniques like clustering and machine learning in analyzing the diverse messages from audiences in social media platforms helped the airlines to identify the different sub-event concerns within a given crisis, this they could achieve without the traditional labor and time-consuming method of going through each message manually to identify the concerns raised by the consumers.

Additionally, the use of social media for crisis communication accelerated the process as it altered the status quo in the traditional crisis management and communication practice, by allowing for fast reporting and updates throughout the crisis management process (Husain et al., 2014). This access to accelerated crisis communication and management is consistent with the view from Pohl et al. (2015) that clustering data extracted from social media messages gave faster insights compared to the traditional time-consuming ways of collecting and analyzing customer sentiments.

Besides the use of social media for crisis communication and management, the airlines also used social media to engage with their customers and also engage in promotions and advertisements (De Fátima Silva Piedade et al., 2022). Through engagements with their customers, the airlines could model and improve their relationships with their customers, through understanding their customers

better by analyzing the data from the responses provided by their social media audience (Chen et al., 2016). This way, the airlines are able to effectively address the complaints the passengers have during their flight experiences (Loo, 2020). For promotions and advertisement purposes, social media platforms served as crucial marketing tools, giving airlines with dominant social media engagements a competitive advantage over other airlines that had not embraced social media marketing as much (Avinash, 2017; Kavoura & Kefallonitis, 2018). Additionally, the airlines leveraged social media platforms for enhanced brand awareness and brand marketing (Chumwatana & Chuaychoo, 2017). The dominant social media platforms for engagement and promotions were Facebook and YouTube as they allowed for diverse engaging content types including promotional videos (Al Maazmi, 2020; Avinash, 2017; Loo, 2020).

In summary, the social media use pre-pandemic comprised of crisis management, customer engagements, brand image building and awareness, and promotions and advertisements. Crisis management and communication was highlighted as the main aspect of social media use, involving addressing concerns by customers and giving regular updates throughout the crisis management. In all these, past studies showed that social media allowed for effective communication and also accelerated the crisis management process. Additionally, the most used social media platform pre-pandemic was Facebook, followed by YouTube as the two platforms allowed for diverse, dynamic, and engaging content to keep the audience informed and enticed. However, it is important to note that there was only a little literature on the social media use of airline companies before the COVID-19 pandemic. The next sections present the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on the aviation industry, the use of social media through this impacted period, and the re-strategy of social media communication by airlines in the post-pandemic era.

Covid-19 Impact on Airline Operations

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the aviation industry ranges from profit loss, decline in staff numbers, price increases, and additional regulations, procedures, and guidelines to adhere to (Göv & Erbay, 2021). With the disruptions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the airlines adopted and embraced new technologies to ensure effective service to their customers as well as convenience for their customers (Shiwakoti et al., 2022; Waramontri, 2023). The increase in technology implementation with the airline customer service was seen in the e-services, cleaning robots, and UV light cabin cleaning, all to ensure the safety and convenience of their customers (Shiwakoti et al., 2022; Waramontri, 2023). The adoption of these technologies was positively received by their customers (Fadhilah et al., 2022; Shiwakoti et al., 2022).

These impacts, disruptions, and adjustments require adequate and effective communication, and that is where social media comes in. For instance, the airlines informed and directed their passengers and target customers on the required health guidelines mandated before taking a flight (Göv & Erbay, 2021). Additionally, the airlines reported the impacted financial performance through social media to their shareholders (Göv & Erbay, 2021). The next sub-section discusses the role of social media in addressing and communicating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from the airlines to their customers. The strategies used during this period will also be discussed.

Use of social media by Airlines during the Pandemic

Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a crisis to the aviation industry, be it halted flights, social distancing that affected the number of passengers onboard, and even reduced profits (Göv & Erbay, 2021). Managing these crises required effective crisis communication, for which the social media platforms were leveraged (Chevtaeva & Guillet, 2021; Chmielewska-Muciek et al., 2021; Scheiwiller & Zizka, 2021). For example, a number of airlines communicated to their shareholders through social media platforms briefing them on impacted financial performances, and their new strategies to overcome the negative impacts on the profits made (Chmielewska-Muciek et al., 2021). Among the adjustments to social media-based crisis communication was the dominant use of Twitter (now X) for primary communication to replace the Facebook app during the COVID-19 pandemic (Scheiwiller & Zizka, 2021).

Social media was also used to promote the brands of the different airlines during the COVID-19 pandemic as reported in the study by Dias et al. (2021). The airline companies were focused on improving and maintaining a positive brand image during the pandemic by focusing on CSR responsibilities, safety, as well as compliance with the health measures to ensure their customers are not exposed to covid-19 virus (Dias et al., 2021; Fadhilah et al., 2022).

The airlines also used social media to maintain relationships with their customers during the pandemic era (De Fátima Silva Piedade et al., 2022). The relationship was maintained through audience engagement and promotional content posted by the airline on its social media pages (De Fátima Silva Piedade et al., 2022).

In summary, the use of social media platforms by the airlines has been crucial to the relationship with their customers, having real-time insights to effectively address the concerns of their customers during the pandemic. Social media was also used by airline companies to build and maintain their brand image by communicating compliance and dedication to CSR and ESG responsibilities. The next sub-section looks into the adjustments in social media communication and marketing strategies after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Post-Pandemic Use of social media by Airlines

The experiences of the airlines during the COVID-19 pandemic era presented opportunities for the airlines to adjust their social media communication strategies in the post-pandemic era (Chevtavaeva & Guillet, 2021). Other uses of social media by airline companies like maintaining customer engagement and relationship was consistent even in the post-pandemic era (De Fátima Silva Piedade et al., 2022). Another consistency was the promotion of airline products, services, and affiliations through the different social media platforms (De Fátima Silva Piedade et al., 2022). Observably, there has been only a limited number of studies that have focused on the social media use by airlines in the post-pandemic era, with none (according to this literature review), doing a comparison in the use of social media before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic.

Social media has proved to be an important and crucial communication tool for airline companies to effectively manage their crisis communication before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It allowed the airline companies to quickly respond to the concerns presented by their customers, as well as offer information and updates on given guidelines and airline operations. One of the noticeable shifts in social media communication was the shift to Twitter (now X) as the primary communication platform for the airlines during the pandemic. However, there seemed to be a consistency in the purpose of using social media by the airline companies mainly to engage with their customers, respond to concerns, enhance their crisis communication management, brand imaging, and awareness, and for promotion and advertisements of the products, services, and offers by the different airlines. The literature review has identified a gap in the limited or no focus on the specific social media marketing strategies by the airlines consistently through the three different stages; pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic era. To fill this research gap, this study looks into the dynamics of social media marketing and communication strategies in the three time periods comparing the strategies implemented by the airlines through their social media communication and marketing before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is grounded in the Social Media Marketing Mix. The Social Media Marketing Mix, often referred to as the "4Ps for Twitter," is an adaptation of the traditional marketing mix (McCarthy, 1960). The traditional marketing mix consists of four elements known as the 4Ps: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. In the context of social media marketing, especially Twitter, the 4Ps are reinterpreted to suit the dynamics of online platforms. Here's a breakdown of the 4Ps for Twitter.

In the context of Twitter, the "Product" refers to the content and information that a company shares. This includes tweets, images, videos, and other media that contribute to the brand's image and messaging. It's about creating engaging and relevant content that resonates with the target audience.

On Twitter, the "Price" element doesn't necessarily involve monetary transactions but focuses on the perceived value of the content. It includes strategies related to pricing models, discounts, and promotions. For airlines, this could involve tweeting content related to ticket prices, promotions, and discounts.

The "Place" in the social media context refers to the platforms and channels where the brand establishes its online presence. Twitter serves as a primary "place" for engagement, communication, and interaction. It involves decisions about which social media platforms are most suitable for reaching and engaging the target audience.

"Promotion" on Twitter involves the strategies used to promote and market the brand. This includes tweet campaigns, advertising, and any other tactics employed to increase visibility and engagement. Promotion on Twitter also encompasses how the brand communicates its messages, engages with followers, and builds a community.

It's important to note that while the traditional marketing mix focuses on tangible products, the Social Media Marketing Mix for Twitter emphasizes the intangible aspects of online engagement, conversation, and content dissemination. This adaptation recognizes the unique features and opportunities presented by social media platforms for building brand presence and connecting with a digital audience.

This framework serves as the foundation for the empirical investigation of Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates to understand their Twitter utilization for various marketing aspects, including product promotion (e.g., tweets about services), pricing strategies (e.g., discounts or fare announcements), customer engagement (e.g., replies, retweets, likes), and information distribution (e.g., flight updates). By applying this framework, we aim to link our research hypotheses with contemporary empirical reviews and up-to-date top-class citations. These airlines were selected due to their global prominence in the airline industry, diverse market presence, and competitive nature. Their substantial global reach, along with their varied Twitter marketing strategies, provides valuable insights that can serve as industry benchmarks, and their robust online presence facilitates data collection for a comprehensive analysis. This approach enhances the research's impact on readers by aligning theoretical concepts with real-world practices and current academic discourse.

In this research, content analysis is applied to categorize and analyze tweets from the selected airlines across different time periods, focusing on product promotion, pricing strategies, customer engagement, and information distribution.

Content analysis, as defined by Krippendorff (2004), is a systematic research method employed in this study to categorize and analyze textual data from Twitter posts of Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates. This method allows for the identification of patterns, themes, and trends in the airlines' communication strategies. Krippendorff's work serves as a foundational reference for understanding the principles and rigor of content analysis, guiding the systematic coding and categorization process employed in this research.

By systematically coding and categorizing the content, researchers can uncover patterns in the airlines' communication strategies, discern changes over time, and evaluate the effectiveness of various marketing approaches. The goal is to link the empirical findings back to the theoretical framework, establishing connections between the airlines' Twitter activities and the adapted 4Ps for Twitter.

Content analysis involves the development of a coding scheme based on predefined categories aligned with research objectives. In this study, MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, is employed for managing and organizing the extensive textual data from tweets. Researchers manually review and code the tweets according to established categories, ensuring consistency and reliability in the analysis. MAXQDA facilitates efficient data management, allowing for a thorough examination of content, context, and tone in tweets.

This approach provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how these prominent airlines strategically use Twitter for marketing. Content analysis, particularly with MAXQDA, enhances the research's rigor by offering a systematic and technology-supported means of analyzing social media content. It ensures a thorough exploration of the data, contributing to the overall reliability and validity of the study's findings.

Research and Methodology

The study's scope includes the examination of how airlines use Twitter to promote their services, encompassing everything from in-flight amenities to booking procedures and customer experience. The research investigates their Twitter practices and strategies for service promotion, emphasizing their content approaches and audience engagement methods.

Pricing strategies within the airline industry, including fare announcements, discounts, and promotional offers, are scrutinized to assess the transparency and effectiveness of these strategies in attracting and retaining customers. This research specifically focuses on how airlines use Twitter as a platform to communicate pricing information to their audience.

Customer engagement, involving interactions such as replies, retweets, likes, and direct messaging between airlines and their Twitter audience, is a critical component of this study. The research delves into the practices that airlines employ for engaging with their online community.

The study also addresses the distribution of timely and accurate information on Twitter, especially during critical periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of using Twitter for information distribution in crisis management.

The study explores how these four components (product promotion, pricing strategies, customer engagement, and information distribution) are interrelated. It investigates the strategic integration of these elements in the development of comprehensive social media marketing strategies. The analysis considers the potential impact of changes in one aspect on the others, providing insights into the interdependencies among these components in social media marketing strategies. See Figure 1.

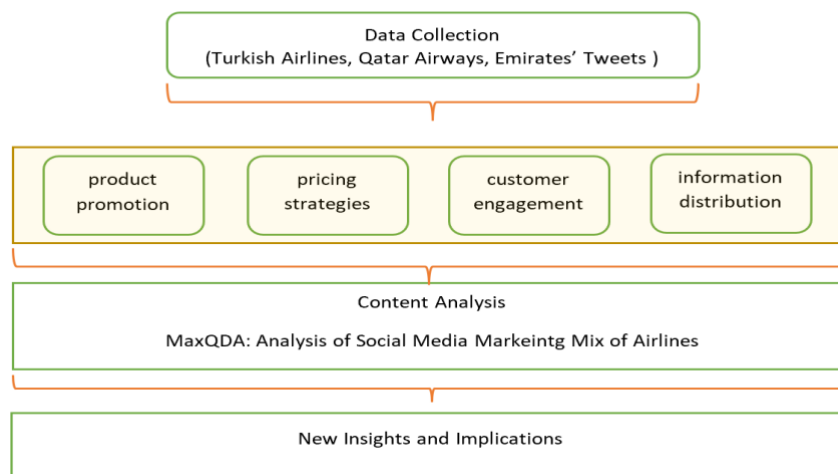


Figure 1: Methodology used in this research

Data Collection

The research methodology is designed to encompass primary and secondary data sources for a comprehensive examination of the social media marketing strategies employed by Turkish Airlines, Emirates, and Qatar Airways. These airlines' official Twitter accounts serve as the primary data source, while secondary sources encompass their official company websites and relevant industry reports.

Data Inclusion

The data collection process was designed to capture the evolving social media strategies of Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates across three key time periods: pre-pandemic (2019), during the pandemic (2020), and post-pandemic (2023). Each airline's official Twitter accounts contributed 500 tweets for each specified period, resulting in a substantial dataset of 1,500 tweets per airline. This meticulous approach, employing social media scraping tools and Twitter's API, ensured a diverse and representative sample. The collected tweets were systematically gathered, allowing for an in-depth analysis of various dimensions of social media marketing, including product promotion, pricing strategies, customer engagement, and information distribution. This comprehensive dataset forms the basis for uncovering insights into the dynamic responses and adaptations of these airlines to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shifting landscape of the airline industry.

Data Analysis

The data analysis utilized content analysis techniques to delve into the extensive dataset of tweets from Turkish Airlines (Figure 4), Qatar Airways (Figure 3), and Emirates (Figure 2). MAXQDA technology was employed to streamline the analysis process, providing a robust platform for systematic coding and categorization of the content. This involved a two-fold approach, addressing both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the social media strategies employed by the airlines.

Quantitatively, the analysis focused on metrics such as changes in post frequency and engagement levels. Post frequency variations were examined across the pre-pandemic, during-pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. Engagement metrics, including likes, retweets, and comments, were quantified to gauge the audience's response to different types of content.

Qualitatively, the content analysis involved the identification and categorization of recurring themes and communication strategies present in the tweets. This process entailed creating a coding scheme with specific codes representing different themes, tones, and strategies observed in the tweets. For example, codes could include "promotional," "aspirational," "ESG-related," or "pricing strategy." Each tweet was systematically coded based on these predefined categories, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the content.

The coding process involved iterative rounds of analysis, refining and expanding the codebook as new patterns and themes emerged. Inter-coder reliability measures were employed to ensure consistency in coding across different analysts involved in the process. This rigorous approach enhanced the reliability and validity of the analysis, providing a comprehensive overview of how the airlines navigated their social media communication across the specified time periods.

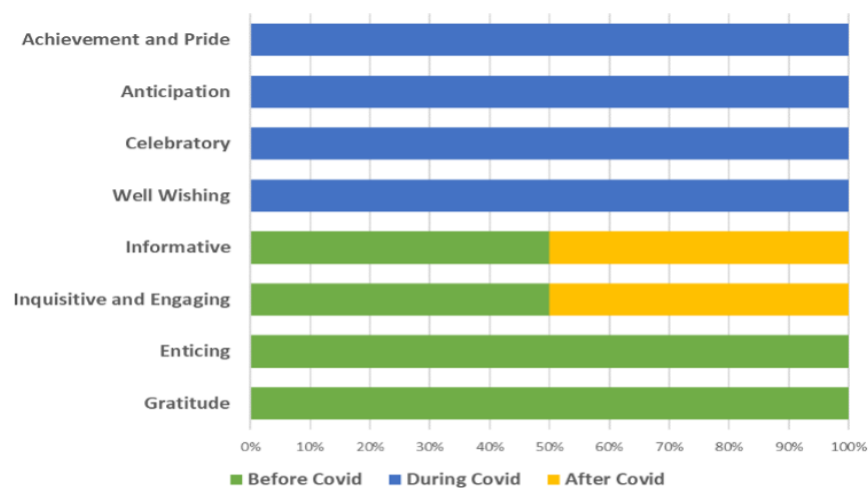


Figure 2: Messaging tone in the tweets by Emirates before, during, and after the pandemic

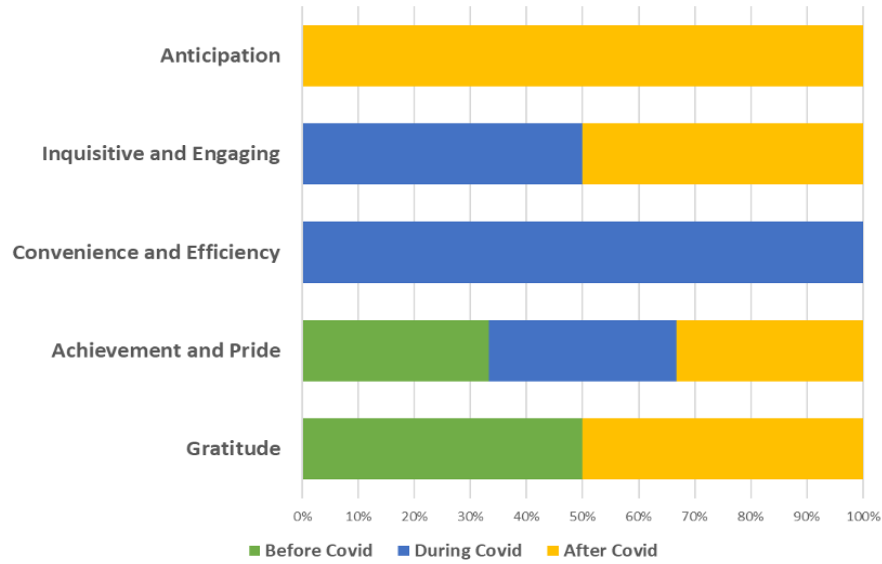


Figure 3: Messaging tone in the tweets by Qatar Airways before, during, and after the pandemic

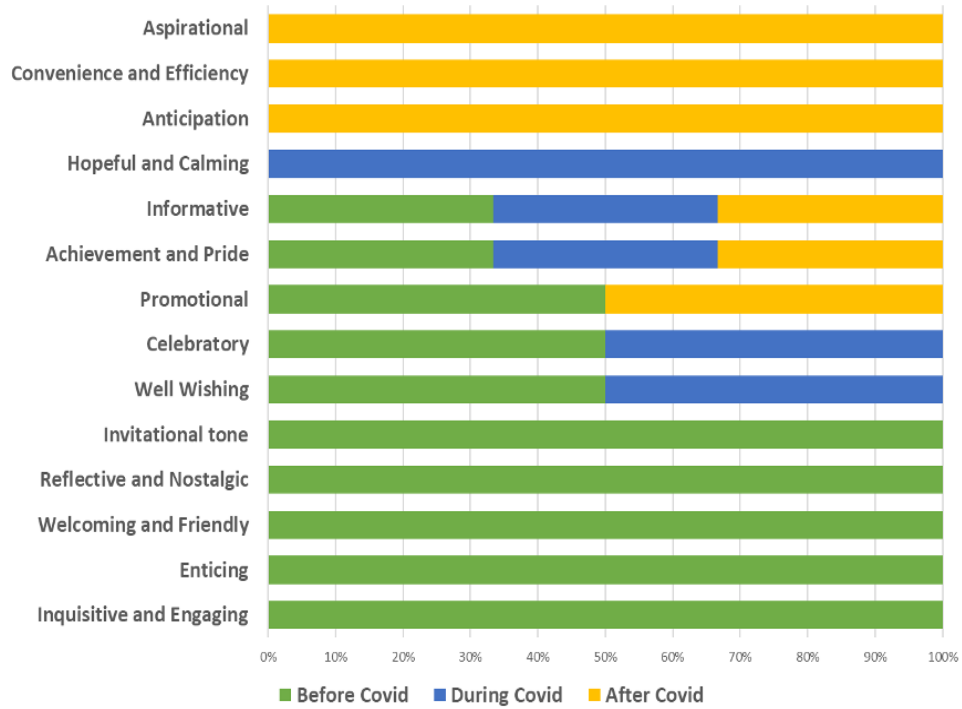





Figure 4: Messaging tone in the tweets by Turkish Airlines before, during, and after the pandemic

Table 1: Tweet extracts presented as evidence for the messaging tones identified in the analysis

Messaging Tone	Tweet Extract
Aspirational promotional	“Your future is in the sky!” (Turkish Airlines – After Covid) “Plan an unforgettable vacation now by booking your seat on our Istanbul-Shanghai flights starting as of January 13th, 2023.” (Turkish Airlines – After Covid)
Gratitude	“... Thank you for making us the airline of choice for your journey.” (Qatar Airways – Before Covid)
Enticing	“11 million pieces of fine chocolate are served in Emirates First and Business Class every year...for passengers with a cocoa craving.” (Emirates – Before Covid)
Welcoming and Friendly	“Welcome to the crossroads of history! See you on your next flight!” (Turkish Airlines – Before Covid)
Reflective and Nostalgic	“...   Here is the sunset, us and excitement. #TurkishAirlines #TBT” (Turkish Airlines – Before Covid)
Invitational tone	“The nature, architectural beauty and delicious cuisine of Podgorica is waiting for you to discover it all!” (Turkish Airlines – Before Covid)
Inquisitive and Engaging	“Where are you flying to next with us?” (Emirates – Before Covid)
Informative	“Our January flight plan has been updated so you can kick off 2023 with brand new and exciting routes.” (Turkish Airlines – After Covid)
Anticipation	“...Mark your calendars  ” (Qatar Airways – After Covid)
Achievement and Pride	“We are the first airline to achieve this milestone...” (Qatar Airways – After Covid)
Convenience and Efficiency	“Enjoy quickly changing your ticket or fare via our mobile app in case of operational changes regarding your flights.” (Turkish Airlines – After Covid)
Well Wishing	“We wish you the sweetest of journeys around the world with us!”(Turkish Airlines – Before Covid)
Celebratory	“Emirates celebrates the spirit of the 49th UAE National Day across six continents.”(Emirates – During Covid)
Hopeful and Calming	“We instil hope in our country for better days!” (Turkish Airlines – During Covid)

Source: Authors

Findings and Discussions

Twitter Engagement Trends: Examining tweets from Qatar Airways, Emirates, and Turkish Airlines across pre-pandemic (2019), during the pandemic (2020), and post-pandemic (2023) periods revealed evolving trends. Pre-pandemic, limited emoji use and invitational tones shifted to increased emoji and calming tones during the pandemic, returning to promotional tones post-pandemic.

Pricing Strategies: Insights into pricing strategies include discounting, tiered pricing, and bundled pricing models. Post-pandemic, airlines offered student discounts, introduced vouchers, and provided additional premium features.

Promotion and Advertising Strategies: Airlines employed diverse strategies, including ESG initiatives, user convenience, geographic focus, event promotions, and emotional elicitation. Post-pandemic, there was an increase in sports sponsorships and event promotions.

Distribution of Information: Information distribution focused on operational updates, travel advisories, and achievement/milestone announcements, with operational updates dominating.

Audience Engagement: Airlines engaged audiences through call-to-action, direct replies, and audience targeting, utilizing quizzes, contests, personalized interactions, and targeted messaging.

Thus, we conclude with the following company-specific implications. For Qatar Airways, a customer-centric approach, emphasis on ESG initiatives, and geographic focus are recommended. Emirates should diversify pricing models, enhance customer engagement

through interactive content, and celebrate achievements. Turkish Airlines should continue aspirational messaging, explore industry partnerships, and balance broader engagement with targeted messaging.

Discussion

The observed shifts in Twitter engagement and marketing strategies among airlines showcase their adaptability to dynamic circumstances, particularly evident during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic promotional content, characterized by invitational tones and limited emoji use, transformed during the pandemic to convey hope and calmness. This strategic shift aligns with existing crisis communication theories emphasizing the importance of empathy and reassurance during periods of uncertainty (Coombs, 2012). Airlines recognized the need to address heightened anxiety and uncertainty, emphasizing messages of hope and calmness to resonate with a worried audience.

The post-pandemic return to promotional tones indicates a strategic reorientation toward normalcy and recovery. This aligns with theories of crisis recovery, where organizations strive to restore and rebuild their image following a crisis event (Fink, 1986). Airlines strategically adjusted their messaging to reflect a sense of optimism and a return to routine, aligning with established crisis communication frameworks.

In terms of pricing strategies, the introduction of student discounts, vouchers, and premium features reflects a proactive response to evolving customer needs. This aligns with marketing theories emphasizing the importance of market segmentation and tailored offerings to meet diverse customer preferences (Kotler et al., 2017). The emphasis on tiered and bundled pricing models aligns with an industry-wide trend of offering flexibility, allowing passengers to personalize their travel experiences, reflecting principles of service customization (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

The increased focus on sports sponsorships and event promotions in the post-pandemic period suggests a strategic investment in activities that resonate with a broad audience. This diversification aligns with social media marketing theories emphasizing the importance of aligning brand messaging with shared interests and experiences to enhance audience engagement (Smith et al., 2009).

The dominant information distribution strategy centered around operational updates indicates a commitment to transparency and customer communication, aligning with crisis communication theories highlighting the importance of timely and accurate information during crises (Coombs, 2012). However, the limited emphasis on achievement/milestone announcements suggests an opportunity for airlines to further enhance their brand reputation by showcasing successes and milestones, aligning with reputation management theories (Grunig, 1993).

Audience engagement strategies, including call-to-action approaches, direct replies, and targeted messaging, showcase a nuanced understanding of customer interaction. The use of quizzes and contests not only fosters interaction but also cultivates a sense of community and participation, aligning with theories of engagement and relationship-building on social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The multifaceted approach underscores airlines' efforts to engage diverse audience segments and build lasting connections.

In summary, the observed shifts in Twitter engagement and marketing strategies among airlines not only highlight their adaptability but also align with established theories of crisis communication and social media marketing. By incorporating these theoretical perspectives, the findings gain deeper implications, providing valuable insights into the strategic responses of airlines to crises and evolving market dynamics.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this extensive analysis of tweets from Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates during three distinct time periods—pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic—has provided valuable insights into the dynamic nature of social media marketing in the airline industry. The study's findings offer a deeper understanding of how these airlines adapted and evolved their Twitter strategies to engage with their audience and navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis of Turkish Airlines' Twitter activity before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic uncovered valuable insights. The airline underwent a significant transformation in its use of emojis and messaging tone. Pre-pandemic, emoji usage was limited, but during and after the pandemic, it significantly increased, reflecting efforts to engage and reassure customers during uncertain times. Messaging tone evolved from promotional to conveying hope and well-wishing during the pandemic, then back to a promotional tone with elements of aspiration post-pandemic. Pricing strategies demonstrated flexibility with discounting, tiered pricing, and bundled packages. Promotion and advertising strategies, including ESG, user convenience, geographic focus, and emotional elicitation, were consistently applied, with a post-pandemic emphasis on sports sponsorships and ESG. Information distribution centered on operational updates, travel advisories, and achievements. Audience engagement was facilitated through calls to action, direct customer replies, and audience targeting.

In our analysis of Qatar Airways' Twitter activity over the three distinct time periods, we found a consistent commitment to customer engagement and trust-building. The airline's use of emojis and messaging tone transformed significantly, with increased emoji usage and evolving messaging tone. Pricing strategies showcased flexibility through discounts, tiered pricing, and bundled packages. Promotion and advertising strategies, including ESG, user convenience, geographic focus, and emotional elicitation, were

consistently applied, with a post-pandemic focus on sports sponsorships and ESG. Information distribution emphasized operational updates, travel advisories, and achievements. Audience engagement was a key focus, achieved through calls to action, direct customer replies, and audience targeting.

Our analysis of Emirates' Twitter activity before, during, and after the pandemic revealed an innovative and customer-centric approach. The airline's use of emojis and messaging tone transformed significantly. Pricing strategies displayed flexibility through discounts, tiered pricing, and bundled packages. Promotion and advertising strategies, including ESG, user convenience, geographic focus, and emotional elicitation, were consistently applied, with a post-pandemic emphasis on sports sponsorships and ESG. Information distribution centered on operational updates, travel advisories, and achievements. Audience engagement was facilitated through calls to action, direct customer replies, and audience targeting.

In summary, these findings underscore the adaptability and responsiveness of Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates in their social media marketing strategies. Understanding how these strategies evolved in response to changing circumstances, especially during the pandemic, provides essential insights for their ongoing efforts to engage customers, build loyalty, and navigate the complexities of the ever-evolving digital landscape. These insights offer actionable guidance for shaping future social media marketing practices, enabling these airlines to maintain meaningful connections with their audience in an ever-changing environment.

Turkish Airlines underwent a significant transformation, increasing the use of emojis and shifting messaging tone to emphasize safety and reassurance during the pandemic. They successfully communicated with their customers, enhancing loyalty and trust.

Qatar Airways consistently maintained customer engagement and trust-building strategies. Their adaptability was evident in the evolving messaging tone, reflecting hope and well-wishing during challenging times, fostering a sense of community and support among passengers.

Emirates, known for innovation, adjusted its messaging to maintain passenger engagement. They continued to focus on customer experience and embraced creative content, even during challenging times.

These insights provide valuable guidance for shaping future social media marketing practices, allowing these airlines to maintain meaningful connections with their audience in an ever-changing digital landscape. The ability to adapt and respond to shifting circumstances, as demonstrated by Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates, is a vital asset in the dynamic and ever-evolving aviation industry.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The analysis is based solely on publicly available Twitter data, and the study does not consider potential variations in strategies across other social media platforms. Future research could expand its scope to encompass a broader range of platforms to capture a more comprehensive view of airlines' cross-channel marketing strategies.

The study concentrates on the external-facing content of the airlines, excluding an examination of internal communication strategies. Internal dynamics play a crucial role in shaping external messages, and future research could explore the interplay between internal and external communication strategies within airline organizations.

Despite efforts to establish a robust coding scheme and ensure inter-coder reliability, the use of content analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation. Researchers' perspectives may influence the categorization of content, and acknowledging this subjectivity is crucial for a nuanced understanding of the study's findings.

Future Research Directions

Future research could delve into the integration of social media marketing strategies across multiple platforms. Investigating how airlines orchestrate cohesive campaigns and messaging across diverse digital channels would provide a more holistic understanding of their overall digital marketing strategies.

Exploring the internal communication dynamics and strategies of airlines represents a promising avenue for future research. Understanding how internal processes shape external communication can offer insights into the organizational factors influencing social media practices.

Conducting a longitudinal analysis beyond the post-pandemic period could reveal sustained trends and adaptations in response to ongoing challenges. Tracking the evolution of social media strategies over an extended timeframe would contribute to a nuanced understanding of the dynamic nature of airline marketing.

Investigating the impact of cultural and regional factors on social media engagement within the aviation industry could provide valuable context-specific insights. Recognizing the diversity of global markets and understanding how cultural nuances influence marketing effectiveness would enhance the applicability of findings across different regions.

By addressing these limitations and exploring these future research directions, scholars can further enrich the scholarly conversation on social media marketing strategies in the airline industry, advancing our understanding of the complexities and dynamics inherent in digital marketing practices.

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