



# Branding and Advertising Strategies in Global Airline Communication: A Mixed-Method Analysis

Selen Bilginer Halefoğlu\*

Maltepe University, Turkey

## Abstract

This study explores branding and advertising strategies in the global airline industry, focusing on how message appeal and digital platform selection influence audience engagement. Drawing on Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and emotional branding theories, the research employs a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative content analysis and qualitative sentiment analysis. A total of 160 social media posts and 480 user comments were collected from Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Ryanair, and Lufthansa between 2020 and 2024 across YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X. The quantitative analysis revealed significant differences in engagement rates across airlines and platforms, with Turkish Airlines achieving the highest average engagement (5.6%), followed by Ryanair, Emirates, and Lufthansa. Humorous and storytelling appeals generated some of the strongest audience responses, particularly on TikTok. The qualitative findings indicated that emotional resonance and cultural relevance were key drivers of positive sentiment, while sustainability messages fostered brand trust rather than viral popularity. The study contributes to the literature by extending IMC and brand equity models to the aviation context, illustrating how emotional, ethical, and experiential dimensions interact in digital airline communication. Managerially, it highlights the importance of data-driven personalization, a consistent brand voice, and responsible storytelling to sustain engagement and trust in the post-pandemic period.

**Keywords:** Airline Branding; Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC); Emotional Branding; Digital Engagement; Social Media Marketing

## Introduction

The aviation industry operates within one of the most competitive service environments of the global economy, where differentiation is structurally difficult and services are largely intangible. While operational efficiency and route networks remain important, they are no longer sufficient to sustain competitive advantage on their own. Increasingly, airlines rely on branding and advertising to shape how they are perceived, remembered, and chosen by passengers.

In this context, airline branding cannot be reduced to visual symbols or promotional slogans. It involves constructing identity, articulating values, and creating emotional meaning around travel experiences that are often associated with anticipation, uncertainty, and personal significance. Advertising thus functions not merely as a persuasive tool but as a narrative space in which airlines frame who they are and what they stand for. This dual role - both functional and symbolic - makes branding particularly consequential in aviation.

Rather than treating marketing communication as a collection of isolated promotional activities, airlines increasingly adopt Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) approaches to maintain coherence across multiple platforms and customer touchpoints. For airlines, IMC serves as a strategic logic through which advertising, sponsorships, digital content, loyalty programs, and service encounters are aligned. Consistency across these elements is especially critical given the fragmented nature of contemporary media environments and the extended passenger journey that unfolds before, during, and after the flight.

Airline advertising strategies, however, are far from homogeneous. Legacy and flag carriers often emphasize global connectivity, national identity, and aspirational lifestyles, whereas low-cost carriers frequently deploy humor, disruption, and self-referential messaging to highlight price transparency and accessibility. These contrasting approaches suggest that airline branding is closely tied to market positioning and audience expectations, rather than following a single dominant model. Importantly, such strategies have become increasingly visible and measurable through



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### \*Correspondence:

Selen Bilginer Halefoğlu, Maltepe University, Turkey,

E-mail: [selenhalefoглу@maltepe.edu.tr](mailto:selenhalefoглу@maltepe.edu.tr)

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digital platforms, where audience engagement and sentiment can be observed directly.

Building on established frameworks of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993) and emotional branding (Gobé, 2001), this study examines how airlines deploy branding and advertising strategies within digital communication environments. Rather than assuming emotional impact as an abstract construct, the analysis connects message appeals to observable engagement patterns and audience sentiment. Using a mixed-method design, the study investigates social media communication by Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Ryanair, and Lufthansa between 2020 and 2024, a period marked by both disruption and transformation in the aviation sector. In doing so, the research aims to clarify how message design and platform selection jointly shape audience responses in post-pandemic airline communication.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### Branding in the Aviation Industry

Branding occupies a central position in the aviation industry, where competitive differentiation is limited by regulatory constraints, standardized service structures, and high price transparency. Unlike physical goods, airline offerings are largely experiential and shaped by service encounters, safety perceptions, cultural symbolism, and emotional expectations associated with travel. As a result, branding functions not only as a marketing instrument but also as a mechanism for reducing perceived risk and establishing trust between airlines and passengers.

In this sector, branding extends well beyond visual elements such as logos, liveries, or slogans. It reflects how an airline positions itself within the global marketplace and how that positioning is interpreted over time. Brand meaning is formed through repeated interactions across multiple touchpoints, including advertising, digital platforms, in-flight experiences, and customer service encounters. These cumulative impressions shape how passengers evaluate airlines, particularly in contexts where objective differences in service are minimal.

Three interrelated concepts frame branding practices in the aviation context: brand identity and brand image, brand equity, and emotional branding. Brand identity refers to how airlines seek to define and communicate themselves, while brand image reflects how these identity claims are ultimately perceived by consumers (Keller, 1993). Alignment between identity and image is especially critical in aviation, as passengers often rely on brand cues when making decisions under conditions of uncertainty and perceived risk.

Brand equity further underscores the strategic importance of branding in this industry. Drawing on Aaker's (1996) conceptualization, brand equity represents the added value generated through brand awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty. Strong airline brands operate as cognitive shortcuts in consumer decision-making, influencing preferences beyond price-based comparisons and enhancing tolerance toward service failures. This is particularly relevant in aviation, where travel choices frequently involve emotional, financial, and safety-related considerations simultaneously (Halpern & Graham, 2013).

Taken together, these dimensions indicate that branding in aviation cannot be approached as a purely promotional activity.

Instead, it constitutes an ongoing strategic process through which airlines articulate identity, manage expectations, and cultivate enduring relationships with passengers. Recent airline-specific branding research emphasizes the need for sector-tailored brand equity frameworks that reflect the experiential, safety-critical, and highly competitive nature of aviation services (Sezgen et al., 2023). This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for examining how branding and advertising strategies operate within contemporary airline communication and across increasingly digitalized market environments.

### Advertising Strategies of Airlines

Airline advertising strategies are shaped by the sector's structural characteristics, including high competition, limited product differentiation, and the intangible nature of service offerings. Within this context, advertising does not merely aim to promote routes or prices but plays a key role in constructing brand meaning and reinforcing strategic positioning. Airlines, therefore, employ advertising as a long-term communication tool that aligns with broader branding objectives rather than as a series of isolated promotional efforts. Previous empirical research in the airline industry demonstrates that social media marketing activities significantly influence brand equity formation through enhanced brand image and customer engagement (Seo & Park, 2018).

Functional appeals emphasize reliability, safety, network connectivity, service quality, and technological competence, addressing passengers' rational concerns and risk perceptions. Emotional appeals, by contrast, draw on themes such as freedom, aspiration, comfort, belonging, or national identity, seeking to create affective bonds between airlines and audiences. The relative emphasis placed on these appeals varies according to airline type, target market, and competitive positioning.

Legacy and flag carriers typically foreground experiential narratives that highlight premium service, global reach, and cultural symbolism. Through high-production-value campaigns and storytelling techniques, these airlines aim to position air travel as an extension of lifestyle and personal aspiration rather than a purely logistical activity. Low-cost carriers, in contrast, often adopt more direct, humorous, or disruptive advertising strategies that prioritize price transparency and accessibility. In doing so, they may intentionally challenge conventional advertising norms to signal efficiency, authenticity, and brand distinctiveness.

Recent developments in digital media have further reshaped airline advertising strategies by expanding the range of platforms and formats available for communication. Social media, in particular, has enabled airlines to move beyond one-way messaging toward more interactive and adaptive forms of advertising. Engagement metrics, user-generated content, and real-time feedback now play an influential role in shaping how advertising messages are designed, distributed, and evaluated. This shift has increased the visibility of audience reactions and intensified the reputational consequences of advertising choices.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that advertising strategies in the aviation industry cannot be understood independently of branding objectives or media environments. Instead, effective airline advertising emerges from the alignment of message content, platform selection, and audience expectations. Examining advertising strategies through this integrated lens is therefore essential for understanding

how airlines communicate value, differentiate themselves, and sustain brand meaning in increasingly competitive and digitalized markets.

### **Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) in Aviation**

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) has become an increasingly relevant framework in the aviation industry, where brand messages are dispersed across multiple platforms and passenger touchpoints. Rather than approaching communication activities as isolated efforts, IMC emphasizes the strategic coordination of advertising, digital content, customer experience, and relational communication to maintain coherence in brand meaning. For airlines operating in complex and highly visible environments, such coherence is particularly important.

In practice, IMC in aviation reflects the need to align diverse communication elements across the passenger journey, from pre-flight awareness and booking processes to in-flight experiences and post-flight engagement. Advertising campaigns, social media communication, loyalty programs, and service encounters contribute collectively to how brand messages are constructed and interpreted. Consistency across these elements helps reduce ambiguity and reinforces passengers' perceptions of reliability, professionalism, and trustworthiness.

The growing centrality of digital platforms has further heightened the relevance of IMC for airline communication strategies. Fragmented media consumption patterns and interactive channels require airlines to manage not only message consistency but also tone, timing, and responsiveness. Social media environments, in particular, amplify the visibility of communication misalignments, as discrepancies between brand promises and passenger experiences are readily exposed through public feedback and user-generated content.

From an analytical perspective, IMC can therefore be understood not merely as a managerial coordination tool but as a lens through which the effectiveness of airline communication strategies can be evaluated. Examining how messages are integrated across platforms offers insight into how airlines construct coherent brand narratives and how audiences receive them. This approach is especially valuable in digital contexts, where engagement and sentiment offer observable indicators of communicative alignment.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a mixed-method research design to examine branding and advertising strategies in global airline communication within digital environments. Combining quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative sentiment analysis allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how airline advertising messages are constructed and how they are received by audiences. This approach is particularly suitable for aviation marketing research, where symbolic meaning and emotional responses play a significant role alongside measurable interaction outcomes.

The empirical focus of the study is on social media communication published by four major international airlines - Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Ryanair, and Lufthansa - between 2020 and 2024. This period was selected to capture both the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent transformation of airline communication practices in the post-pandemic context. Rather than treating advertising campaigns as monolithic units, the analysis concentrates on selected advertising executions that are representative of each airline's broader branding and communication strategies.

Data were collected from official airline accounts on Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), platforms that play a central role in contemporary airline advertising and audience engagement. For each airline, a set of representative digital advertising executions was identified based on visibility, engagement levels, and relevance to branding themes such as emotional appeal, sustainability, innovation, and brand identity. This selection strategy prioritizes analytical depth over exhaustive coverage, allowing for meaningful comparison across airlines and platforms.

### **Research Design**

This study employs a mixed-method research design to examine branding and advertising strategies in global airline communication. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches allows for a comprehensive analysis of both observable engagement patterns and the interpretive dimensions of audience responses. Such a design is particularly appropriate for aviation branding research, where symbolic meaning, emotional resonance, and measurable interaction outcomes intersect.

Quantitative content analysis was utilized to identify patterns in message appeals, platform use, and engagement metrics across airlines. Complementing this, qualitative sentiment analysis was conducted to explore how audiences evaluated and emotionally responded to airline advertising messages. Rather than treating these methods as separate analytical tracks, the study integrates them to provide a multi-layered understanding of airline communication strategies within digital environments.

By combining numerical indicators with interpretive insights, the mixed-method design strengthens analytical depth and supports comparative evaluation across airlines and platforms. This approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive observation toward a more nuanced interpretation of how branding messages function within contemporary digital airline communication.

### **Sample and Data Collection**

The dataset consisted of social media posts and video advertisements published by Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Ryanair, and Lufthansa between January 2020 and December 2024. This period was selected to capture variations in airline communication before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected from the airlines' official accounts on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, which represent central platforms for contemporary airline advertising and audience engagement.

A total of 160 advertising executions were selected for analysis, comprising 40 posts from each airline. Selection was guided by three criteria: the presence of a clear branding or advertising message (e.g., storytelling, sustainability, or promotional communication), a minimum visibility threshold of 10,000 views or interactions, and balanced representation across the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. This approach ensured both analytical relevance and temporal comparability across airlines.

To complement the content analysis, qualitative data were collected in the form of user-generated comments associated with the selected advertising executions. In total, 480 comments were analyzed, with 30 comments collected for each of four representative advertising executions per airline. These executions were selected to reflect different message appeals, including storytelling, humor, sustainability, and celebrity endorsement. Comments were randomly sampled from the same platforms to support sentiment and thematic

**Table 1:** Intercoeder Reliability (Cohen's  $\kappa$ ).

Variable	$\kappa$	95% CI	Agreement (%)
Message Type (storytelling, humor, etc.)	0.86	[.80, .91]	93
Platform Category	0.90	[.85, .95]	95
Brand Identity Dimension	0.84	[.78, .90]	92
Sentiment Classification (positive/neutral/negative)	0.87	[.81, .93]	94

analyses, resulting in 120 comments per airline.

### Quantitative Coding Scheme

Each post was coded using a structured codebook adapted from Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996). Intercoeder reliability coefficients for all variables are reported in Table 1. The coding scheme was designed to capture both message characteristics and engagement-related indicators across platforms. The following variables were recorded:

- Message Type: storytelling, humor, celebrity endorsement, sustainability, or corporate reputation.
- Platform: YouTube, Instagram, TikTok.
- Visual Appeal Score (1-5): clarity, aesthetics, and creative execution.
- Engagement Metrics: number of likes, comments, shares, and total views.
- Brand Identity Dimension: luxury, accessibility, responsibility, innovation.

Intercoeder reliability was assessed on a random subsample comprising 15% of the dataset ( $n=24$  posts) using Cohen's *Kappa* coefficient. The resulting value ( $\kappa=0.87$ ) indicates a high level of consistency in coding decisions across variables.

### Qualitative Sentiment and Thematic Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted to examine how audiences interpreted and emotionally responded to airline advertising messages. User-generated comments associated with the selected advertising executions were imported into NVivo 14 and analyzed using an inductive thematic approach. As an initial step, comments were classified according to sentiment valence as positive, neutral, or negative in order to capture overall affective orientation.

Following this classification, thematic coding was applied to identify recurring patterns in audience responses. Rather than relying on predefined categories, themes were allowed to emerge from the data through iterative reading and comparison. Prominent themes included brand trust, emotional connection, service satisfaction, perceptions of sustainability, and responses to humor. These themes provided insight into how different advertising appeals resonated with audiences beyond surface-level engagement metrics.

All comments analyzed in this study were retrieved from publicly accessible social media platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X. To protect user privacy, usernames and any identifiable information were removed prior to analysis. As the study relied exclusively on publicly available data and did not involve direct interaction with human participants, additional ethical approval was not required.

## Findings

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the

quantitative content analysis and qualitative sentiment analysis. The results are organized to reflect observed engagement patterns, message appeal performance, and audience sentiment across airlines and platforms. Interpretive implications are addressed in the discussion section, while the focus here remains on the systematic presentation of empirical outcomes.

### Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis examined 160 social media posts published by Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Ryanair, and Lufthansa between January 2020 and December 2024. The dataset included content from YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, which represent official brand communication channels for each airline. Table 2 summarizes the number of posts, total engagement levels, and average engagement rates by airline and platform.

A one-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences in average engagement rates across airlines ( $F(3,156)=5.42$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Additional one-way ANOVA tests were conducted for each message appeal across platforms to examine engagement variation, enabling comparison of content performance on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

These findings align with recent empirical evidence suggesting that airline advertising plays an important role in shaping brand equity through effects on engagement, trust, and perceived service value (Mahadin et al., 2023).

Turkish Airlines recorded the highest average engagement rate (5.6%), followed by Ryanair (4.8%), Emirates (4.1%), and Lufthansa (3.9%). Across airlines, storytelling-based advertising executions - such as Turkish Airlines' Pangea campaign - generated more than twice the number of comments compared to purely informational posts. Humorous content, predominantly associated with Ryanair, exhibited the highest share-to-view ratio (6.2%), indicating greater potential for content diffusion.

Sustainability-themed advertising executions, primarily observed in Lufthansa and Turkish Airlines campaigns, generated comparatively lower levels of interaction but were associated with a higher proportion of positive user responses. Platform-level analysis further indicated that TikTok yielded the highest average engagement rate (6.8%), followed by Instagram (4.2%) and YouTube (3.7%). Detailed engagement patterns by appeal type and platform are reported in Table 3.

To complement these quantitative patterns, qualitative sentiment analysis was conducted to examine audience perceptions and emotional responses to airline advertising campaigns.

### Qualitative Sentiment Findings

The qualitative sentiment and thematic analysis provided insight into how audiences interpreted and emotionally responded to airline advertising messages. Analysis of user-generated comments revealed three primary sentiment categories - positive, neutral, and negative - within which recurring themes emerged across airlines and platforms. These patterns provide contextual depth to the quantitative engagement findings by illustrating the evaluative and affective dimensions of audience responses.

Positive sentiment was most frequently associated with expressions of brand trust, emotional connection, and perceived service quality. Storytelling-based campaigns elicited comments emphasizing national pride, aspiration, and personal identification

**Table 2:** Dataset Overview (2020–2024).

Airline	Platform	Posts (n)	Total Engagement (likes+comments+shares)	Avg. Engagement Rate (%)	Top Campaign Example
Turkish	YouTube/Instagram	40	4,200,000	5.6	<i>Pangea (2022)</i>
Emirates	YouTube/Instagram	40	3,100,000	4.1	<i>Fly Better (2018–2023)</i>
Ryanair	TikTok/X	40	3,400,000	4.8	<i>TikTok Humor Series (2021–2024)</i>
Lufthansa	YouTube/Instagram	40	2,800,000	3.9	<i>Say Yes to the World (2018–2024)</i>

**Table 3:** Engagement by Appeal and Platform (ANOVA Summary).

Appeal Type	TikTok M(SD)	Instagram M(SD)	YouTube M(SD)	F(2,156)	p	$\eta^2$
Storytelling	7.1 (2.3)	5.2 (1.9)	4.8 (1.5)	4.23	0.016	0.07
Humor	8.5 (3.1)	5.8 (2.2)	3.9 (1.8)	6.02	0.004	0.10
Sustainability	4.6 (1.7)	4.2 (1.6)	4.0 (1.5)	0.82	0.44	0.01
Celebrity Endorsement	5.5 (2.0)	5.1 (1.8)	4.5 (1.7)	1.07	0.34	0.02

**Table 4:** Sentiment by Airline and Dominant Themes.

Airline	Dominant Sentiment	Key Themes	Representative Comment (translated)
Turkish	Positive (74%)	Pride, global unity, emotional storytelling	"THY ads make me feel proud every time - it's not just an airline; it's our flag in the sky."
Emirates	Positive (68%)	Luxury, comfort, aspiration	"Flying Emirates is like being in a movie - the service feels unreal."
Ryanair	Mixed (55% positive)	Humor, affordability, sarcasm	"Ryanair's posts are hilarious - at least they admit they're cheap!"
Lufthansa	Positive (71%)	Trust, professionalism, sustainability	"Finally, an airline that talks about the planet, not just profit."

with the airline brand, particularly in the case of Turkish Airlines. Similarly, emotionally driven narratives were often linked to comments highlighting comfort, reliability, and long-term brand attachment.

Humor-oriented advertising executions, predominantly associated with Ryanair, generated high volumes of playful and affiliative comments. Users frequently referenced entertainment value, brand personality, and perceived authenticity, indicating that humor functioned as a mechanism for enhancing brand distinctiveness and memorability. While some humorous content also attracted critical or ironic responses, these comments were largely neutral in tone rather than overtly negative.

Sustainability-focused advertising elicited a distinct pattern of response. Although such campaigns tended to receive lower overall interaction volumes, user comments were more likely to express evaluative judgments related to environmental responsibility, corporate sincerity, and ethical commitment. This theme was especially visible in Lufthansa and Turkish Airlines campaigns, where discussions frequently extended beyond the advertisement itself to broader perceptions of corporate responsibility.

Negative sentiment across all airlines was relatively limited and was primarily related to service-related dissatisfaction, skepticism toward advertising claims, or perceived inconsistencies between brand messages and personal travel experiences. These comments appeared sporadically across campaigns rather than clustering around specific message appeals. Overall, the qualitative findings highlight how different advertising strategies evoke distinct emotional and interpretive responses, offering depth to the engagement patterns identified in the quantitative analysis. The distribution of sentiment categories and dominant themes across airlines is summarized in Table 4.

### Case Study Insights

This section presents case-based insights into airline branding

and advertising strategies by examining selected practices of Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Ryanair, and Lufthansa. The cases are discussed to illustrate how different strategic emphases - such as storytelling, humor, sustainability, and celebrity endorsement - are operationalized across platforms and markets. Rather than providing an exhaustive campaign history, the focus is on identifying distinctive strategic patterns that complement the quantitative and qualitative findings reported earlier.

**Turkish Airlines:** Turkish Airlines has undergone a significant brand transformation from a nationally oriented flag carrier to a globally positioned airline emphasizing connectivity, cultural diversity, and experiential travel. This shift became particularly visible from the early 2000s onward, as the airline expanded its international network and adopted a brand narrative centered on global reach and destination richness. Branding efforts during this period increasingly framed air travel not merely as transportation, but as a gateway to cultural exploration and emotional experience.

Storytelling has been a defining feature of Turkish Airlines' advertising strategy. Long-term campaigns such as *Widen Your World* and *Pangea* exemplify the airline's use of cinematic narratives, symbolic imagery, and emotional appeal to communicate brand values related to inclusivity, curiosity, and global connection. These campaigns often foreground destinations, human encounters, and shared experiences rather than product features, aligning with the airline's broader experiential branding approach.

The airline has also strategically employed celebrity endorsements and sports sponsorships to enhance global brand visibility and memorability. High-profile collaborations with internationally recognized figures and partnerships with major sports organizations have functioned as amplifiers of brand prestige and global relevance. In digital environments, particularly on Instagram and YouTube, these associations are integrated into storytelling-driven content rather than presented as isolated promotional messages.

**Table 5:** Key Branding Milestones in Turkish Airlines Branding Timeline.

Year	Campaign/Event	Key Message	Impact
2013	<i>Widen Your World</i>	Travel expands horizons	Repositioned THY as global connector
2013	<i>Kobe vs. Messi Selfie Shootout</i>	Playful global reach	140M+ YouTube views, Ad of the Decade
2016	<i>Batman v Superman Super Bowl</i>	Innovative partnerships	First Turkish brand at Super Bowl
2017	<i>Wonder (Morgan Freeman)</i>	Discovery and curiosity	U.S. exposure, omnichannel campaign
2022	<i>Pangea</i>	Global unity post-COVID	Positive PR, Freeman endorsement
2024	<i>Tomorrow On-Board</i>	Sustainability and eco-travel	Repositioned as responsible airline

More recently, Turkish Airlines has incorporated sustainability and social responsibility themes into its branding architecture, reflecting broader industry trends and shifting audience expectations. While such messages are less prominent than storytelling-based campaigns, they contribute to the airline's corporate reputation by emphasizing environmental awareness and long-term responsibility. Together, these elements illustrate how Turkish Airlines combines narrative-driven branding, strategic partnerships, and evolving corporate values within a cohesive communication strategy (Table 5).

**Emirates:** Emirates was founded in 1985 with only two leased aircraft and has since developed into one of the world's most prominent luxury airlines (Airways Magazine, 2024). Unlike many legacy carriers with long national histories, Emirates established a premium and globally oriented brand identity from its inception, leveraging Dubai's strategic position as an international hub. The airline's branding has consistently emphasized prestige, innovation, and global connectivity, supported by investments in wide-body aircraft such as the Boeing 777 and Airbus A380, advanced in-flight entertainment systems, and elevated service standards (Shaw, 2016; Emirates, 2024).

A central pillar of Emirates' branding strategy has been its long-term commitment to experiential and aspirational advertising. The global Fly Better campaign, launched in 2018 to replace the earlier Hello Tomorrow slogan, exemplifies this approach. The campaign positioned Emirates as a provider of superior service, advanced aircraft, and premium comfort, implemented through high-production-value television commercials, digital storytelling, and experiential marketing initiatives. Messaging consistency across airports, lounges, print media, and social platforms reinforced the airline's luxury positioning and contributed to a cohesive global brand narrative (Emirates, 2024; O'Connell & Williams, 2016).

Sports sponsorships constitute another defining element of Emirates' branding architecture. The airline has achieved sustained global visibility through long-term partnerships, including its title sponsorship of the Emirates FA Cup and its shirt sponsorship of Arsenal FC since 2004. Beyond football, Emirates has invested heavily in cricket and rugby sponsorships in markets such as India, Australia, and South Africa, as well as in major international tennis events, including the US Open. These sponsorships align the Emirates brand with elite performance, global reach, and cultural prestige, reinforcing its premium image across diverse markets.

Celebrity endorsements have further strengthened Emirates' luxury positioning by humanizing its brand appeal. Notably, the Jennifer Aniston campaigns in 2015 and 2016 employed humor to contrast Emirates' onboard experience with fictionalized depictions of inferior airline service. These campaigns highlighted signature features such as onboard showers and spacious cabins while

presenting the brand in a playful yet aspirational manner. Widespread online circulation and media coverage contributed to high visibility and reinforced Emirates' reputation for premium comfort and service excellence (Adweek, 2016).

Innovation has also played a central role in Emirates' digital storytelling strategy. The airline has consistently promoted its ICE (Information, Communication, Entertainment) system as a distinguishing feature of the onboard experience and has been an early adopter of immersive technologies in marketing communication. Virtual reality and augmented reality campaigns enabling virtual exploration of A380 cabins prior to booking have supported Emirates' image as a technologically forward-looking brand and enhanced experiential engagement in digital environments.

While luxury remains the core focus of Emirates' branding, sustainability has emerged as a supplementary narrative in recent years. Campaigns increasingly reference fuel-efficient aircraft, fleet modernization initiatives, and environmental responsibility, particularly in relation to the gradual retirement of the A380 and the adoption of next-generation aircraft. Although sustainability messaging is less prominent than in the branding of some European carriers, it represents a developing area within Emirates' communication strategy and signals potential for future brand differentiation.

Collectively, these branding practices have contributed to strong strategic outcomes for Emirates. The airline consistently ranks among the top global carriers in brand recognition and service quality assessments (Skytrax, 2023), and market research indicates that passengers commonly associate the brand with prestige, superior comfort, and aspirational travel experiences (Shaw, 2016). Key stages in Emirates' branding and communication history are summarized in Table 6.

**Ryanair:** Ryanair began operations in 1984 as a small regional airline and has since grown into Europe's largest low-cost carrier in terms of passenger numbers. The airline's brand identity is firmly grounded in the low-cost carrier (LCC) model, characterized by high aircraft utilization, point-to-point routes, limited onboard services, and aggressive price competition (CAPA, 2024; Shaw, 2016). Unlike full-service airlines that emphasize luxury, comfort, or prestige, Ryanair has consistently positioned itself around affordability, accessibility, and operational efficiency.

From the 1990s onward, Ryanair distinguished itself not only through low fares but also through a communication style that deliberately challenged industry norms. Provocative advertising became a defining feature of the brand, with campaigns frequently employing confrontational comparisons, controversial humor, and direct references to competitors. Although such messages were often criticized as misleading or offensive, they succeeded in maintaining

**Table 6:** Key Branding Milestones in Emirates Branding Timeline.

Year	Campaign/Event	Key Message	Impact
1985	Launch of Emirates	Premium airline from Dubai	Established global ambition
2004	Arsenal FC partnership	Sport + prestige	Constant visibility in football
2015	Jennifer Aniston Campaign 1	Humor + luxury	Viral ad, millions of views
2016	Jennifer Aniston Campaign 2	Luxury humanized	Strengthened premium image
2018	<i>Fly Better</i>	Superior travel experience	Replaced "Hello Tomorrow", global rollout
2020+	VR/AR cabin tours	Innovation focus	Early adoption of immersive tech
2022–23	Sustainability initiatives	Efficiency + eco-awareness	Emerging CSR branding

**Table 7:** Key Branding Milestones in Ryanair Branding Timeline.

Year	Campaign/Event	Key Message	Impact
1984	Founding as LCC	Low-cost air travel	Entry into European market
1990s	Provocative print ads	"Cheaper than rivals"	Gained attention, controversy
2000s	Bold comparisons	Mocking competitors	Reinforced disruptive identity
2010s	"Always Getting Better"	Improving services	Attempt to soften image
2020+	TikTok & Twitter humor	Sarcasm, memes, self-parody	Millions of engagements, viral brand personality

media attention and reinforcing Ryanair's identity as a disruptive and unapologetically low-cost airline (Simple Flying, 2023).

During the 2020s, Ryanair further evolved its advertising approach by embracing digital and social media platforms as primary communication channels. The airline achieved notable visibility on TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) through humorous, meme-based content that personified aircraft with animated facial features and employed sarcasm, self-parody, and rapid audience interaction. Slogans such as "We're cheap, but we're honest" exemplify this strategy, which contrasts sharply with the polished and aspirational tone of legacy carriers. Prior research supports the effectiveness of this approach, demonstrating that humor-driven airline communication can generate significantly higher engagement levels than conventional advertising formats (Seo & Park, 2018).

A key strength of Ryanair's branding strategy lies in its consistency. Across campaigns and platforms, the airline repeatedly reinforces a single, transparent promise: low fares. Rather than attempting to mask service limitations, Ryanair frequently incorporates potential weaknesses into its humorous messaging, framing them as indicators of honesty and cost efficiency. This approach has contributed to a distinctive brand personality that resonates particularly with younger, digitally native audiences who prioritize authenticity over prestige.

At the same time, Ryanair's communication strategy entails reputational risks. The airline has faced legal challenges and public criticism related to controversial advertising content and confrontational messaging. However, such incidents have rarely translated into sustained declines in demand or market share. Instead, they often reinforce the airline's rebellious brand image, strengthening loyalty among core customer segments while presenting an ongoing challenge in appealing to more mainstream audiences.

These branding and communication practices have produced measurable strategic outcomes. Ryanair consistently leads the European aviation market in passenger numbers, carrying over 160 million passengers annually in the pre-pandemic period. Its social media presence, particularly on TikTok, ranks among the most successful in the airline industry, generating millions of interactions

and reinforcing brand visibility. Consumer research indicates a mixed perception, with frequent criticism of service quality coexisting alongside strong customer loyalty driven by transparent pricing and a distinctive, humorous brand identity. Key stages in Ryanair's branding and communication history are summarized in Table 7.

**Lufthansa:** Lufthansa was founded in 1953 and has since developed into Europe's largest airline group and one of the world's most respected legacy carriers. The airline's brand identity has long been associated with German engineering heritage, reliability, and professionalism, with a strong emphasis on safety, operational excellence, and service quality (Doganis, 2019; Lufthansa Group, 2024). Over time, Lufthansa transitioned from a primarily national carrier to a globally oriented airline while maintaining its reputation for trustworthiness and institutional stability.

Unlike Ryanair's price-centric positioning or Emirates' focus on luxury and spectacle, Lufthansa has pursued a branding strategy centered on balance - combining premium service quality with responsibility and credibility. This positioning reflects a deliberate effort to appeal to both business and leisure travelers who value consistency, safety, and long-term brand reliability. Lufthansa's communication strategy reinforces this identity by highlighting expertise, heritage, and dependable performance rather than overt emotional or provocative appeals.

A key milestone in Lufthansa's global branding was the launch of the Say Yes to the World campaign in 2018. As one of the airline's most ambitious communication initiatives, the campaign promoted themes of curiosity, openness, and cultural engagement through an integrated mix of television advertising, print media, digital platforms, and immersive brand experiences. By positioning Lufthansa as a facilitator of global connection rather than merely a transport provider, the campaign strengthened the airline's cosmopolitan image and aligned the brand with broader humanistic values.

Premium service has remained a consistent pillar of Lufthansa's brand narrative. Advertising messages frequently emphasize high-end cabin classes, personalized onboard service, exclusive lounges, and seamless digital travel solutions such as the Lufthansa app and mobile

**Table 8:** Key Branding Milestones in Lufthansa Branding Timeline.

Year	Campaign/Event	Key Message	Impact
1953	Reestablishment	German reliability	Established national identity
1990s	Global expansion	Trust + premium	Positioned as European leader
2018	<i>Say Yes to the World</i>	Curiosity + openness	Strengthened cosmopolitan values
2019	Compensaid launch	Passenger carbon offsetting	Pioneered digital sustainability tools
2022	Green Fares	Built-in CO <sub>2</sub> offset	Differentiated with eco-conscious branding
2023+	SAF campaigns	Eco-aviation leadership	Positioned as sustainability pioneer

check-in services. These elements collectively reinforce perceptions of professionalism, efficiency, and customer care, allowing Lufthansa to differentiate itself from low-cost competitors through quality and institutional competence rather than price competition.

In recent years, sustainability has emerged as a central component of Lufthansa's branding architecture. The airline has been among the first European carriers to make substantial investments in Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) and to integrate environmental responsibility into customer-facing communication. Initiatives such as the Compensaid platform, which enables passengers to offset carbon emissions during booking, and the introduction of Green Fares in 2022 reflect a strategic effort to embed sustainability into the travel experience. Campaigns highlighting these initiatives position Lufthansa as a forward-looking and environmentally responsible airline, resonating particularly with European audiences for whom ecological concerns are increasingly salient (CAPA, 2024).

Lufthansa has also demonstrated brand resilience through its crisis communication strategies, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communication efforts during this period emphasized safety, solidarity, and collective responsibility, while post-pandemic messaging focused on recovery, reliability, and long-term commitment to passengers. These narratives contributed to preserving brand trust at a time of heightened uncertainty within the aviation industry.

Collectively, these branding practices have produced strong strategic outcomes. Lufthansa consistently ranks among Europe's most trusted premium carriers, with brand equity rooted in reliability, professionalism, and sustainability leadership. By integrating its German heritage with cosmopolitan and environmentally oriented campaigns, Lufthansa maintains a balanced global positioning that differentiates it from both low-cost and luxury-focused competitors. Major developments in Lufthansa's branding and sustainability communication are summarized in Table 8.

### Cross-Case Synthesis and Future-Oriented Discussion

Across the four cases examined in this study, airline branding strategies reveal a set of shared challenges and emerging trends that are likely to shape the future of aviation communication. Increasing globalization, rapid technological change, environmental pressures, and shifting passenger expectations require airlines to continuously adapt how they communicate brand value in order to remain competitive and credible in global markets.

One of the most prominent challenges identified across cases concerns sustainability and environmental responsibility. Heightened public awareness of aviation-related carbon emissions and the growing influence of movements such as flygskam in Europe have intensified scrutiny of airline branding practices. Airlines including Lufthansa, Turkish Airlines, and KLM have begun integrating sustainability narratives into advertising, emphasizing investments

in Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF), carbon offsetting mechanisms, and environmentally oriented initiatives. At the same time, these developments raise the risk of perceived greenwashing if sustainability claims are not supported by transparent and verifiable actions. As Doganis (2019) suggests, future airline branding will increasingly depend on the ability to balance aspirational travel narratives with credible environmental responsibility.

Digital transformation also emerged as a central theme shaping the evolution of airline branding. Advances in artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and machine learning have enabled airlines to deliver personalized marketing communication through mobile applications, dynamic pricing systems, and AI-driven customer interaction tools. While personalization enhances relevance and customer engagement, it also raises ethical concerns regarding data privacy and algorithmic transparency. As noted by Kotler and Keller (2016), sustaining passenger trust in this context will depend on airlines' capacity to employ technological personalization responsibly and transparently.

Experiential marketing represents another area of growing importance in aviation branding. Technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and emerging metaverse environments have opened new possibilities for immersive communication, allowing passengers to preview cabin interiors, explore destinations, and engage with airline brands prior to travel. These approaches align with the experiential nature of air travel and are likely to play an expanding role in future advertising strategies, particularly as digital-native audiences seek interactive and participatory brand encounters (O'Connell & Williams, 2016).

Crisis communication and reputation management further emerged as critical determinants of brand resilience across the aviation industry. Airlines operate within a high-risk environment characterized by operational disruptions, safety incidents, labor disputes, and global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In such contexts, ineffective communication can rapidly escalate reputational damage, particularly within social media environments. Proactive, transparent, and empathetic crisis communication strategies are therefore likely to remain central to sustaining brand trust and long-term equity.

Finally, the cross-case analysis underscores the growing importance of cultural sensitivity in global airline branding. As airlines expand into diverse markets across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, they must navigate complex cultural landscapes while maintaining coherent global brand identities. Glocalization strategies—combining consistent core brand values with sensitivity to local norms, symbols, and expectations—appear increasingly essential for effective global communication. These dynamics also highlight opportunities for future research, particularly comparative

studies examining how airlines adapt branding strategies across cultural and regional contexts.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study examined how message appeal and platform choice interact to shape audience engagement in the context of airline branding and advertising. By adopting a comparative design focusing on Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Ryanair, and Lufthansa, the research highlights the coexistence of distinct branding archetypes - aspire, luxury, humorous, and sustainability - within the same competitive global environment. The findings demonstrate that airline branding effectiveness cannot be attributed to a single dominant strategy but rather to the alignment between emotional tone, ethical positioning, and platform-specific communication practices.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to branding and Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) literature by illustrating how emotional and symbolic appeals operate across both traditional and digital touchpoints in the aviation sector. Consistent with the foundational frameworks proposed by Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993), the findings suggest that strong brand equity emerges when airlines construct coherent and emotionally resonant narratives rather than relying on fragmented promotional messages. In digitally mediated environments, emotional branding plays a critical role in transforming short-term interactions into trust-based, long-term relationships by linking functional service attributes with symbolic meaning.

The results also offer several practical insights for airline marketers and communication practitioners. Effective airline branding extends beyond visibility and reach, requiring the strategic integration of emotional, ethical, and experiential dimensions. Airlines that maintain a consistent brand identity while adapting message formats to platform affordances are better positioned to generate sustained engagement and positive audience sentiment. In particular, the analysis indicates that short-form, storytelling-driven, and humorous content is especially effective on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where engagement dynamics favor authenticity and shareability.

In addition, the growing prominence of sustainability narratives underscores the need for airlines to communicate environmental responsibility in a transparent and credible manner. While sustainability messaging has the potential to enhance long-term brand equity and trust, it also exposes airlines to reputational risks if claims are perceived as symbolic rather than substantive. Integrating sustainability into a broader IMC framework - encompassing advertising, customer experience, loyalty programs, and in-flight communication - emerges as a critical strategic consideration. Furthermore, data-driven personalization tools offer opportunities to tailor communication based on passenger preferences and behavioral feedback, provided that such practices are implemented with due attention to privacy and ethical concerns.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The dataset is limited to four major, globally recognized airlines and focuses on a finite number of social media posts and user comments. As such, the findings may not fully capture branding practices among regional, niche, or emerging carriers. Future research could extend the scope to include low-cost or regionally focused airlines in order to examine how communication tone, humor, and cultural framing vary across market segments.

Moreover, while engagement metrics and sentiment analysis provide valuable insights into audience reactions, they do not directly capture longer-term behavioral outcomes such as purchase intention, brand loyalty, or advocacy. Longitudinal and experimental research designs could further illuminate how emotional and ethical appeals influence passenger decision-making over time. Finally, comparative cross-cultural studies would be particularly valuable in exploring how cultural values shape the interpretation and effectiveness of airline branding messages across different geographic contexts. Addressing these avenues would deepen theoretical understanding and support the continued evolution of airline branding research in an increasingly digitalized communication landscape.

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