

Master's Thesis

Tourism – Master's Degree Programme

Middle East Airlines Service Quality

FROM THE PASSENGERS' PERSPECTIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ONLINE REVIEWS

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Abstract

This master thesis deals with the Middle East Airlines' service quality perceptions of their passengers. Three Middle East Airlines were selected and these are Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad Airways. To analyze the online reviews the research method of qualitative content analysis is used to find out the perceptions of the service.

Nowadays, due to technological development, travelers became more educated than ever before hence, it has an impact on their expectations and perceptions. On the other hand, this allows the researcher to analyze interesting data that are accessible at any time on the internet and to discover what is the gap between the airlines' passengers' perceptions and expectations.

Hence, the following problem statement is developed:

How is the Middle East Airlines' service quality perceived based on their passengers' experience expressed through online reviews?

The main goal of this research is to provide new insight into how service quality is perceived by Middle East Airlines' passengers. Moreover, the usage of online review websites, tourism, and marketing research will be enriched with many new themes and possibilities for further research.

Keywords: service quality, service quality perceptions, content analysis, online reviews

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and challenge

Over the years aviation has become not only a means of fast transportation on long haul distances but also a source of experience for demanding travelers. The aviation industry belongs to the area with fierce competition, especially, since the low-cost airlines have come into the picture. Thus, many airlines have discovered that the key success factor how to keep themselves on the market is to achieve high-quality services provided and to frequently innovate (Kim, 2013; Følstad & Kvale, 2018).

Naturally, air travel is one of the most important elements of global tourism, therefore flying for leisure as well as business purposes grows the overall demand in the service sector. Societal trends are continuously transforming hence travelers seek a wider network of destinations, flexibility, and high-quality services. Moreover, with the proliferation of information communication technologies (ICT) passengers became more sophisticated, trusting on-line feedback and social media (Galvani, 2011). Yet, managing the standard of service delivery is a crucial aspect since customers are more demanding than they used to be ever before (Zehrer, 2009).

The accessibility of information and on-line reviews make customers create ongoingly higher service expectations. Likewise, international airlines must cope with cultural diversity influencing how the service is received and perceived by the passengers since expectations might differ depending on a particular person's background, patterns, and behaviors (Donthu & Yoo, 1998). Understanding, of any tourism-related company, how the level of service might be acknowledged, and how to be an outstanding host for any culture is a necessity in a globalized environment. Such knowledge then leads to overall greater customer satisfaction and the likelihood of the company's success (Guesalaga & Pitta, 2014).

As mentioned above, over the last 20 years the development and accessibility of information via the internet have forever changed the way customers evaluate and buy services (Kracht & Wang, 2010). Customers have the option to find alternatives, compare prices, and quality during their decision-making process (Toh, et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the internet does not serve only as a source of information but also a place where users can create their content (for example own experience story, pictures or videos, etc.) which is then shared with others within on-line communities (Leung, et al., 2013), that means the information presented became translucent. Therefore, electronic word of mouth is one of the most important factors, since the customers are looking for others' experience and advice on the web. Accordingly, on-line reviews are the most relied on and trustworthy to the

potential buyers, thus are affecting the end decision of making a purchase and of which product or service (Leung, et al., 2013).

The above paragraphs indicate that the internet is the most important medium nowadays. Particularly taking into consideration services, which due to their intangible nature cannot be tried, thus assessed in advance (before the service is provided). It follows that word of mouth (WOM), especially, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is the source of data that potential customers are searching for to make an informed decision about the purchase. EWOM is shared on platforms such as social media (Facebook, Twitter), on-line reviews websites (TripAdvisor, Skytrax), or is shared by influencers (Youtubers, vloggers, bloggers), etc.

Many studies are analyzing the customer experience based on online reviews however, the focus has never been given to the Middle East airlines. Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad Airlines have been chosen since they belong to the best 20 world's airlines (Peskett, 2019) and are direct competitors of one another.

1.2 Purpose/Research question

The following research question investigates how the service quality is perceived by Middle East Airlines' passengers who are representing versatile social and cultural groups. It has been already mentioned previously that airlines seek to understand what their customers' needs are to achieve their ultimate satisfaction and keep themselves competitive on the market. Thus, online reviews of *Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad Airways' passengers* are analyzed to generate an in-depth evaluation of service quality perceptions.

The online reviews of their passengers express the genuine review of the service quality provided. This way the most important indicators of service quality might be observed amongst the passengers' online reviews that can characterize their perceptions towards the airlines' service quality. Certainly, conflicting experiences and perceptions are taken into consideration and further investigated.

This study focuses on studying Middle East Airlines' passengers expressed online on online review websites. To limit such a broad topic, the following problem statement has been developed:

How is the Middle East Airlines' service quality perceived based on their passengers' experience expressed through online reviews?

1.3 Structure of project

In the following paragraphs, the structure of this study is going to be portrayed in depth. This study is divided into 6 parts (chapters): Introduction (1), Literature Review (2), Methodology (3), Theoretical Background (4), Analysis (5), Discussion (6). The single chapters follow on from one another, thus the reader can easily track the progression of the thesis.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the topic of online reviews regarding the standards of high-quality services provided by Middle East Airlines. Moreover, the problem statement is formulated and subsequently supported by a broad literature review following in chapter 2.

Chapter 2 focuses on the background of what does flying experience and service quality mean in aviation as well as, reviews empirical studies focusing on the same or similar topic. The set framework involves the literature review chapter which discusses several perspectives and current development of the concepts related to this thesis.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological aspects used throughout this paper and shows the reader the qualitative research methods applied.

Chapter 4 presents theories used to decode online reviews to analyze them and put in common categories, thus the content analysis approach can be utilized.

Chapter 5 analyses all the data collected throughout the data collection phase of the research. Furthermore, it provides the reader with the key findings of this project. It constitutes the answers to the problem statement and leads to a conclusion of this content analysis research paper.

Chapter 6 critically revises the process of developing this research and also the relevance of the findings resulting from the data collected. Also, it discusses the significance of the whole project and its conclusions.

1.4 Significance of project

The findings of this project may support all 3 airlines in a deeper understanding of their passengers in terms of their needs, preferences, and expectations. Specifically, passengers who willingly shared their feedback online, after they have had the experience with one of the airlines' services.

Valuable online feedback might reveal important drawbacks, as well as other unknown observations about their customers which may be beneficial for service quality management to improve their services and achieve the ultimate customers' experience.

1.5 The objective of project

This project seeks to investigate the gap between the Middle East Airlines' passengers' expectations before their trip and their experience evaluation after their trip expressed on online review websites Skytrax and TripAdvisor. For this purpose, is used *qualitative research* which utilizes methods of *content analysis*. In this case, the *population* of the research is international passengers of the chosen airlines. The reviewers might be seen as representatives of an online community that means they engage in electronic activities, for example, reviewing airlines, hotels or places on the particular review websites, posting pictures, videos or comments on social media as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, etc (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010).

This paper aims to analyze *online reviews* of the passengers regarding the quality of service they experienced and evaluated. Reviews are investigated based on the open coding process to find out the categories of the service quality expressed by the passengers. The reviews will be assessed qualitatively since service quality is a multifaceted aspect, thus this allows the researcher to determine other viewpoints passengers might consider while evaluating the airlines' service quality. By analyzing online reviews, service' quality perceptions are explored to create characteristics of what is perceived as the most important aspect of the service quality for the airlines' passengers. Certainly, contradicting perceptions will be evaluated.

Service quality evaluations after the trip are gathered in the form of online written feedback from online review websites – Skytrax and TripAdvisor. Both Skytrax and TripAdvisor reviews are customers' evaluations *post-purchase*.

The willingness of the customers to participate in eWOM has changed the buyers' decision-making process, hence we can say it is one of the most revolutionary novelties of recent years. Online

reviews websites comprise genuine information immediately accessible to potential customers which can be used as recommendations or advice for their purchase (Sotiriadis, 2017). There are numerous motives why managers should care about online feedback. Currently, customers do not make any decisions before researching the online reviews of the customers who have already tried the product/service in the past. Moreover, the online world is not the only domain of the younger generation but has also diffused throughout all age categories. Inseparable advantage of the internet is its anonymity, yet users are more open to express their thoughts, feelings, and comments genuinely (Pantelidis, 2010). These are valuable data needed for this research paper specifically.

To sum it up, this research paper will be assessing online reviews of Middle East Airlines' passengers with a focus on the quality of services provided. Only reviews of the passengers who registered on one of the online review websites (Skytrax, Tripadvisor) are relevant and their perception is gathered for this research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to literature review

This chapter provides an introduction to the airlines' service quality perceptions of Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad Airways passengers, since this thesis concentrates on this topic in particular. The whole chapter is organized into several sections. Primarily, it pays attention to the concept of airline passengers' service experience. Even though the focus is put on the airlines' service quality, the beginning of the literature review is devoted to the aviation industry in general, since on-ground, as well as in-flight services, play a major role in it. Many studies are researching and discussing customer experience perceptions in service industries overall, as well as, in aviation, however, none of them were interested in investigating the Middle East aviation market.

2.2 Aviation Industry

Aviation Industry creates a complex model of different experiences the passenger must go through before, during, and after the flight to be transported into the final destination.

The airline environment might be subdivided into three sections as commercial, general, and military. This study in particular looks into the commercial division of aviation. In general, flights are classified into scheduled or non-scheduled lines. Most commercial airlines run corresponding to the plan of scheduled flights, this also applies to the 3 airlines in question (Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad). The non-scheduled flights are usually operated as charter flights. Such flights are having the advantage of higher flexibility in terms of flying off-peak hours, flight time, or load restrictions (Vault.com, 2020).

Currently, the rivalry amongst most of the carriers on the market is intense. This is also given by the globalized nature of the nowadays world and most importantly by technological development. Thus, one of the main goals of the airlines is continuous innovation to be able to uphold the competitive advantage. However, innovation in the past two decades meant mostly the arrival of low-cost airlines as Ryanair or EasyJet. Many airlines went through a period when the most successful strategy was cost-cutting. Nevertheless, after the crisis has been over the customers' buying behavior has significantly changed, in terms of buying preferences. Passengers go for value and accessibility rather than route networks or flawless journey (Xinhui, 2008).

2.3 Passenger experience

In recent years companies have been the most concerned with the achievement of the ultimate *customers' satisfaction*. However, it is difficult to keep your employees motivated by vague and abstract concepts, thus definite measures of performance must be established. *Customer satisfaction* might be considered as the most precious reaction and the model of how to consider their experiences and preferences. Positive feedback may form a base for service standard excellence. Yet, often service-oriented companies choose *customer satisfaction* as one of the main key performance indicators (Grigoroudis & Siskos, 2010).

Therefore, it can be defined as a complex phenomenon of a single or group customer experience which evaluates the standards of *service quality* provided by a company. As well as, it might be described as the subjective experience of a given customer, so the perception of other customers might differ based on versatile conditions and their background (Walden, 2017). Similarly, Meyer and Schwager (2007) talk about customer experience as it is an inner, subjective answer of the company's customers in regards to any explicit or implicit interaction with the company (Walden, 2017). Famous Pine and Gilmore are characterizing the experience also as a subjective measure, however, they believe experience is formed by positive moments that touched the customer's personality bringing enduring value (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011).

2.4 Passengers' service quality expectations

Nowadays, the comprehension of the management towards the *customers' expectations* is crucial for their success. According to Parasuraman et. al (1988), expectations are set by the consumers' wants, thus it is the service that should be delivered rather than would be delivered by the company (Parasuraman & Berry, 1988). Therefore, it is essential for the business to understand what are the needs of its consumers to be able to meet their expectations, thus accomplish their satisfaction during the service experience (Parasuraman, et al., 1991). It is given by the fact that the *customers' experiences* are setting up the standard against which comparison can be made. This way the organizational performance can be measured (Walker & Baker, 2000). This goes hand in hand with *service quality* since this is one of the elements vital for a basic market survival in the fierce competition of air carriers. *Service quality* has also a significant influence on building *customers' loyalty* and positive WOM, consequently, it is related to market share and cost-effectiveness of the airline. Thus, we can define *service quality* as organizational proficiency within the industry and to

what extent this is perceived by their consumers (Park, et al., 2004). In this thesis, the definition is utilized as the *extent to which the service meets the passengers' expectations*. Hence, it is significant to comprehend what the passengers' needs are to deliver service that can fulfill them (Abdlla, et al., 2007).

2.5 Electronic word of mouth

Customers are setting up the standard they are comparing to by creating their product/service expectations. However, customers' feedback and actions might change if any discrepancies between the expectations and post-purchase experience occur (Fondevila-Gascón, et al., 2019). With the proliferation of online technologies, the consumer-generated content has become one of the ways how an organization may distinguish the main attributes of their products or services. Such content usually involves versatile media types and categories. Especially, online reviews are an important source of data for the organization, since it might disclose how the customers perceived their experience and the way they share their perceptions reveals what is their view of the company and its products or services. There are many online platforms and communities which allow the consumers to share valuable information, experience, perception, knowledge, etc. with potential new buyers (Kim & Noh, 2019). Online response provides potential buyers feedback or recommendations which might be optimistic or pessimistic to make knowledgeable and precise decisions about the purchase. This boosts consumer belief, thus diminishes the recognized risks when buying new or unknown products or services (Sotiriadis, 2017). Thus, this thesis puts focus on the online reviews that have been written by the airline passengers who have already flown with any of the airlines in question.

2.5.1 eWOM and its impacts on consumers' decision making process

ICT has become accessible for almost everyone across all different age groups. That means it is effortless for the consumer to distribute their experience online on social media or online websites. This applies especially to services since one does not have an opportunity to try them before they have been delivered (Browning, et al., 2013). The massive influence of online customers' feedback has been studied repeatedly. For instance, according to Lacznia et. al., 2001 the appraisal of a brand is attributed depending on the online reviews. If the negative review is attributed to the brand the evaluations are lower if the attribution is towards the communicator the evaluations are higher

(Browning, et al., 2013). Moreover, Minnema et al. (2016) validates that negative online feedback provably has a significant impact on the abundance of returns. She states that products are usually returned not due to its faults but because of discouraging online feedback (Minnema, et al., 2016). There is an increasing trend in reviewing products or services online what has had a major effect on a organizations' performance in terms of volume of products or services sold (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). It is obvious that online recommendations and advice significantly influence the decision-making process of consumers within the tourism sector. This has also confirmed Sotiriadis and van Zyl (2013) explaining how powerful tool WOM is since buying tourism services/products requires high involvement what makes the online feedback even more influential. Therefore, WOM has a considerable effect on how the airlines are perceived based on created subjective measures in the online environment and also consumers' eagerness to make a recommendation (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013).

That is why online reviews are a relevant source of data available for airlines to comprehend their culturally diverse clientele to implement new or better strategies since aviation might be considered as a multicultural industry by nature.

2.6 Skytrax

Skytrax is an online review platform that is going to be used throughout the research as a data source. Skytrax is the largest mediator for airlines' online reviews. It provides evaluation for each trip made on a scale 1 to 10, moreover, it discloses basic information about the passenger as the nationality, seat type or class, aircraft type, and other aspects of the flight as sleep comfort, cabin staff service, etc. These reviews are then published on each airline notice board (Xu & Li, 2016). The validity of the reviews is verified by Skytrax's reporting team by checking and confirming the author's boarding pass or e-ticket against the information provided in the written review (Xu, et al., 2019).

Skytrax works as a global partner that offers qualified inspection and service benchmarking for the airlines to understand how do they stand compared to their competitors. Moreover, they assess not only the performance aboard but also the airports' services. Skytrax has become a well-known standard-setter that guarantees the expectations will be met, thus, the Skytrax best airline awards are highly recognized and appraised by the airlines as well as the passengers. Online ranking platforms might work as a great marketing tool, since Skytrax always presents, for example, if the airline has scored higher in the ranking over a certain time on the most visible spots of the website. Moreover, all the assessments and star rankings are publicly accessible by any internet user (Ban & Kim, 2019).

The information Skytrax (SKYTRAX, 2020) is gathering have been used by researchers in several studies, for example, *“Relationship between passengers’ satisfaction and service quality in Murtala Muhammed international airport, Lagos, Nigeria”* (Adeniran & Fadare, 2018) or *“A Critical Evaluation of U.S. Airlines’ Service Quality Performance: Lower Costs vs. Satisfied Customers”* (Yayla-Kullu & Tansitpong, 2013).

2.7 TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor, similarly as Skytrax is a platform gathering user-generated content that means the online reviews. TripAdvisor (unlike Skytrax) does not only focus on airlines’ ratings but all attractions accessible to the public. Moreover, it collects various information that might be useful to travelers planning their trips for example city guides, places to visit in chosen cities, hotels, restaurants, flights, car rentals, cruises, museums, theme parks, insurance, and many others. However, the most essential part of TripAdvisor what supported its proliferation is the possibility to share experiences with the other users. TripAdvisor also offers versatile links where the traveler might book chosen services directly (Forbes, 2020; TripAdvisor, 2020). Also, TripAdvisor has been used often as a data source for several studies for example *“Exploring TripAdvisor Online Reviews: The Case of George Eastman Museum”* (Aljahdali, 2016) or *“Factors Influencing Poor Experience Quality in 2-to-5-Star Hotels: A Content Analysis of Guest Reviews on TripAdvisor”* (Choo & Tan, 2017).

2.8 Airlines’ Service Quality Dimensions

Many recent studies have shown that quality service is one of the ways how to attract and keep customers in the long run. As mentioned before, the perceptions of the service quality might differ depending on the profile of the customers assessing (de Barros Jeronimo & Medeiros, 2014).

The quality of the service can be evaluated and measured once the service has been delivered to the final customer. This means the quality appears during a direct interaction between the service provider and the customer, in this case, the airline, and the passenger (Park, et al., 2006). It is highly demanding to evaluate customers’ perceptions, that is why many versatile methods have been developed and are frequently used, for example, *service audits* (Takeuchi and Quelch, 1983), *gap analysis* (Zeithaml et al., 1988), *SERVQUAL* (Parasuraman et al., 1988), *SERVPERF* (Cronin and Taylor,

1992), etc (de Barros Jeronimo & Medeiros, 2014). This is certainly given by the highly perishable and intangible nature of the service generally.

Most of the studies assume a direct correlation concerning the service quality elements and customer satisfaction, but, putting an extensive focus on one dimension of the service quality does not have to be a guarantee of improvement in customer satisfaction (Basfirinci & Mitra, 2015). It has been explored that some of the attributes might have a more important role than others in a given sector (Subha & Archana, 2013). The air transportation is considered as a complex network of services that are provided to travelers, therefore, the expectations of service quality might vary depending on the stage within the customer journey (Li, et al., 2017). The theoretical framework is further explained in the chapter *Theoretical Background (Section 4)*.

2.9 Impact of social media on airlines' service quality

Several studies are investigating the impact of social media on the quality of the services, for example, Hlee et. al 2018 (Hlee, et al., 2018). Usually, the focus is mainly put on the tourism and hospitality industry. One of them is "*The Case of E-Complaints on TripAdvisor*" where the authors analyze the most used online review website for hotels TripAdvisor. This article reveals that the guests' demographics and the hotel's class are having a significant impact on guests' satisfaction and the number of complaints they write online (Fernandes & Fernandes, 2017).

Moreover, Law and Cheung are investigating what impacts bloggers have on a destination's perceptions by sharing experience on their blogs. Even though blogging as online feedback has been often overlooked (Law & Cheung, 2010).

Sotiriadis and van Zyl show that online feedback does not only engage the consumers but also organizations initiating prompt and sincere interaction with the end-user. Thus, the internet is a mediator which might help the organizations to improve their product/service according to the needs of their customers (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013).

Only a few studies are dealing with the Skytrax airlines' reviews. Adeniran and Fadara focused on the interrelations between the passengers' satisfaction and service quality at the airport in Nigeria. They found out that a high standard of service quality leads to passengers' satisfaction (Adeniran & Fadare, 2018).

2.10 Storytelling

Storytelling has been a topic of many previous studies, however, it is a complex phenomenon, thus it is difficult to find a general definition (Howison, et al., 2017). It could be simply explained as a narration of the daily basis situations (Fog, et al., 2001) when the words and actions are interactively used so the story receiver might create mind pictures of the story that supports his/her imagination. Nowadays, storytelling is included in our daily lives and it has always been present in this world (Howison, et al., 2017) (Kent, 2015). The proliferation of the internet made storytelling easier, thus, the story can reach a mass audience in a very short time. Moreover, storytelling has become an important tool for marketers since they perceive many benefits of this tool and the value that it brings to the customers. The stories have the power of transmitting a message that the company intends to deliver to the customer, at the same time this process engages the audience. Thus, many well-known organizations are exploiting this tool to create a relationship with the buyers. Digital media allow us to create stories in various forms and through modern channels as photos, videos, short movies, online reviews (eWOM), or WOM and content marketing (Korez-Vide, 2017). The storytelling could be also explained as a narrative that reveals significant evidence to the consumers regarding the brand, as what the brand symbolizes or what are its drives. Moreover, it is more than just a logo or name but it is also a means of communication between the company and the consumer according to which the consumer creates a link between the brand and features of the product/service (Aram, 2016). According to Moore (2003), the brand is not only something tangible or just a name or visualization but what creates the brand are the actions as experiences, events, or the ways of communication which are aimed to be promoted to the final consumer (Moore, 2003).

Storytelling as a marketing tool has become commonly used since it might be used across various businesses or industries. Furthermore, if the storytelling is used appropriately it might increase the value of the product/service (DigitalMarketingInstitute.com, 2020). Also, Gill (2015) has revealed that storytelling impacts employees' commitment, thus it impacts their loyalty to the brand which creates a positive inner and outside image and reputation of the brand (Gill, 2015).

As mentioned before, there are versatile ways how the company can tell a story, it might via traditional channels as newspapers, radio or television as well as modern technology as social media, YouTube videos, or websites. That suggests that any channel the company chooses might help to make an impact, interact, and involve their consumers (DigitalMarketingInstitute.com, 2020).

2.10.1 Types of storytelling

Storytelling has become one of the most significant techniques in the marketing efforts of companies all over the world. That is why it is essential to decide what type of story to tell since the company should know and follow what their audience attracts the most. Kent (2015), believes that each story adopts a master plot, which serves as a structure for the company to decide what aim the storyline will have and what message they want to transmit. Kent has divided the storytelling types into 20 master plots:

1. **Adventure** – the story concentrates on the journey when the main character is taken to dangerous, or exotic places - often used on the internet or social media.
2. **Discovery** – story about self-discovery which uses the characters to explain and answer life questions. Usually used by activists (connected to animal protection etc.)
3. **Escape** – speaks about faulty imprisonment against the character's will. The character acts as his hero, who fights for freedom without waiting for outside rescue.
4. **Forbidden love** – lovers face societal conformations. Usually, they must adhere to social conventions. Usually used by politicians.
5. **Love** – love is found at the beginning of the story, however, lovers are separated trying to find a way back for the remainder. Used by welfare organizations.
6. **Maturation** – deals with the character's moral and psychological development.
7. **Metamorphosis** – usually talks about physical and emotional transformation.
8. **Pursuit** – based on hide-and-seek game, when a person pursues another.
9. **Quest** – The protagonist believes that his life will change if he finds what is needed to satisfy his quest. Used for social media and blogs.
10. **Rescue** – character tries to beat the powerful enemy to save a business, etc. Often used by activist groups
11. **Revenge** – the protagonist takes the truth into his hands to be able to do what is right. Used to describe governmental rights etc.
12. **Riddle** – connected to the mystery plot
13. **Mystery** – the audience is challenged by giving them hints to solve the mystery. Used by science organizations.
14. **Rise/Fall** – this type of story is famous for politicians or celebrities.
15. **Rivalry** – two characters working on the same goal but rivaling against each other.

16. **Sacrifice** – The character must make a sacrifice that does not align with his/her personality, thus big price is going to be paid. Common for explorers and activists.
17. **Temptation/Greed** – speaks about what is the temptation and what is the price for giving in.
18. **Transformation** – appears when the life-changing event occurs.
19. **Underdog** – seemingly person with little power is fighting against a corporation.
20. **Wretched Excess** – employed by activists or religious groups

The above-explained master plots might be suitable to clarify almost every story. Nevertheless, there are many other ways how the stories might be assessed, for example, Denning's (2006) eight different narrative patterns, etc.

2.10.2 Digital storytelling

Nowadays, companies utilize more and more often digital media for storytelling to catch customers' interest and to identify themselves with the brand. Since social media gained vast popularity amongst its users, hence, the companies engage their promotional efforts in this direction. This way they have the opportunity to share their stories in social networks, moreover, the digital environment gives them flexibility, information share in real-time as well as information accessibility and visibility for a wide audience (Van Laer, et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the visual elements of marketing are usually used by the organizations to attract attention and to involve the consumers. The audience is more educated in digital marketing then ever before, thus they seek honesty and genuineness that reflects their needs, emotions, and expectations from the content that is shared online (Bowman, 2018).

In general, storytelling serves as a branding tool that helps the company to create an authentic brand, to differentiate itself from the other market players as well as to increase its competitive advantage. That means it is significant to have a "catchy" story which is going to influence the consumers' perception of the brand. Such a message should then provoke them to turn their wishes into needs as well as it should create trust. Thus, it is important to form unique messages presented in unique ways to increase brand awareness (Woodside, et al., 2008; News, 2008).

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The next section depicts the research methods used along with the philosophical approaches that are applied to investigate and answer the problem identified in the introduction chapter of this thesis (*Chapter 1*).

First of all the research structure is explained to make it effortless for the reader to follow up and visualize the process of this research paper (*Section 3.2*). Consequently, the research paradigm applied will clarify the philosophical approaches adopted and will provide the claims for the usage of content analysis (*Section 3.3*) and its development (*Section 3.4*). The last part of the methodology chapter deals with data acquisition (*Section 3.7.1.1*) and sampling (*Section 3.7.1.2*) to answer the problem statement.

This chapter recognizes all the data collected, moreover, it supports the ways and reasons why the content analysis method is used to analyze them as it is one of the most frequently used methods within the qualitative data analysis accepted by many authors (Glaser & Laudel, 2013; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

3.2 Research structure

The purpose of this section is to create a detailed vision of the research process starting at the stage of problem formulation progressing to the conclusion. The research structure is pictured as a model of actions having an exact order that should be followed. However, in the case of this study, the actions are used interchangeably depending on the development of the research. Changing the order or skipping certain steps within the process is typical for qualitative studies. Moreover, the researcher must anticipate at each stage what is going to be any subsequent move and its requirements. It is crucial to constantly go back and review the previous steps. This might allow creating other viewpoints and feedback for the later stages of the project (Kothari, 2004). This also shows the research process flow chart below (*Figure 1*). The first step usually defines the last step to be undertaken, that means if the actions in between the first and last step are not well planned it might lead the researcher to the study completion failure. Even though it is not given in what order the particular actions must be taken, the flowing nature of the chart might serve as a useful guide for the researcher as well as for the reader (Kothari, 2004).

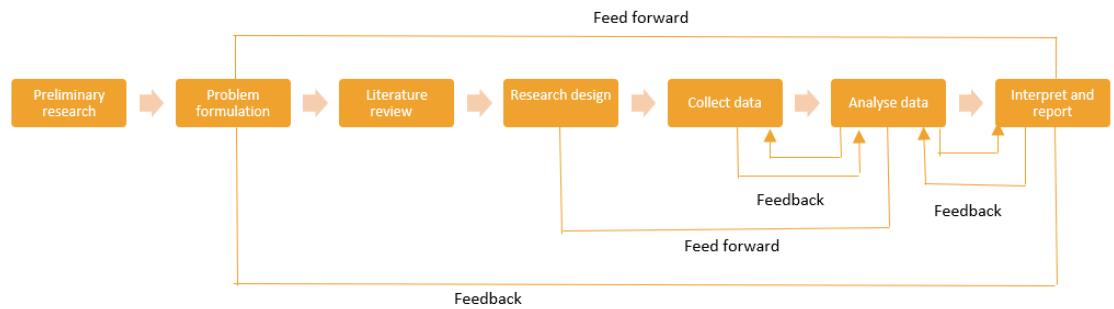


Figure 1 Research Process Flow Chart, Own interpretations, Based on C. R. Kothari 2004

The study begins with the *preliminary research* which creates a basis for selecting a topic of the study and *problem formulation*. The theme is based on the writer's presumptions (the researcher has traveled with the airlines in question and observed the discrepancies between the customers' expectations and service quality perception), and on *netnography* where online rating/feedback websites have been used to make a viewpoint on service quality and passengers' perceptions of Middle East Airlines which are considered as the ones most luxurious in the world.

The following stage of the research is *Literature review* which serves as an overview of other articles, dissertations, or books that other researchers have conducted within the area of the theme chosen. It provides a source of *secondary data* that is used to depict the current knowledge moreover, it supports the researcher to shift the topic from the personal level to the professional level that has relevance in the industry (Flamez, et al., 2017). Predominantly it investigates the aviation industry, passengers' experience, service quality, or eWOM targetting on how the online feedback influences consumer behavior and subjective measures of perceptions regarding service quality and renom   of the airlines.

One of the main constraints of the study might be seen the credibility of the online reviews. The authors of online feedback might be implementing their subjective viewpoint as feelings, perceptions, values, or cultural background. Reviews written by actual users of the product/service are considered as reliable, thus more credible since they do not have the same interests as the marketers, for example making a profit. However, enduring open discussion has increased awareness of fake reviews or organizations trying to alter their reviews to be able to change the consumers' buying behavior (Thomas, et al., 2019). Yet, this must be taken into consideration when progressing further with the research, moreover, the author's reasons for choosing this topic too.

All the previously mentioned criteria are used throughout the data collection and analysis part of this project. Then this leads to answering the *problem statement* and the *conclusion* of this thesis.

In the next section, the research paradigm is depicted to build a solid research design. Moreover, it offers ways how to comprehend the data gathered and what is the approach to the research overall.

3.3 Research paradigm

The research paradigm identifies the manner how the data that have been collected are interpreted to the reader. The main goal of this paper is to comprehend and find out the important aspects of the airlines' service quality from the perspective of their *passengers – international travelers with a versatile cultural background*. The *qualitative research* form has been chosen due to the interest of the author to analyze predominantly passengers' perceptions, emotions, and motives. This is the direction of how one can obtain individual in-depth understanding to generate profound information, expertise, and insights the organization might use for quality improvements (Romano Jr., et al., 2003). This type of organized analysis might recognize patterns, themes, biases, and meanings, thus through a given objective (for example customer service, staff behavior – that is discussed at a later stage of the thesis) of this research data can be categorized, summarized and compared (Camprubí & Coromina, 2016). As it has been mentioned before, each problem formulation is based on preliminary knowledge and research of the author (*Figure 1*).

Thus, the social world is going to be perceived through the *social constructivist* lens. We can justify the choice by the belief that things are constructed by *social interactions* (Detel, 2015). In this case, the author seeks to understand the passengers' intercommunication through analyzing online reviews (meaning written text) in two ways: firstly, the author's bias against the online reviews, secondly, the objective of the person who has written the online review (Mayring, 2014). This means that this thesis' author works as the reader of the online review, on the other hand, the airlines' passengers embody the text creators who are assessing the experience after they have flown with one of the airlines in question.

From the *epistemological* point of view, the author must be involved in the interactions between him/her and the observed realities since this is what creates the interest for the investigation of the problem statement and the research results (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Moreover, the writer is categorizing the online reviews to be able to comprehend them, thus, to find out what are service quality perceptions. In this manner, the researcher creates a notional passive relationship with the online reviews producers, thus this thesis might be pursued under the *constructivist paradigm*. The

author is deciphering the online reviews, thus is engaged in the creation of models regarding *service quality* from the passengers' perspective.

Social constructivism believes that all the world's realities might be conceived due to the existence of *social interactions*. The *reality* cannot be found unless it has been created by *human activity* (Kim, 2001). This reveals that the *social constructivist* rejects the presence of the *objective reality*, which means the reality that has been scientifically proven, for example, If the tree falls in the forest does it make noise even though no one has heard it nor seen it? The answer is: Yes, it does make noise (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). What stems from it is that every human being might create his/her reality, as well as, many realities might have similar traits, thus might be mutual (Mills, et al., 2006).

3.4 Netnography

Netnography is based on *internet communication* which creates *user-generated content*. This thesis investigates the passengers' perceptions what allows them to get increased knowledge and understanding regarding service quality. Usually, netnography is used in triangulation with other research techniques as interviews or surveys. However, it can be used as the sole methodology varying according to the problem statement and the objectives the project seeks to understand. Likewise, it is reliant on the judgment of the author if other methodologies are appropriate and needed for the research to arrive at valid conclusions (Mkono & Markwell, 2014).

There are few studies made based on Skytrax and TripAdvisor reviews as mentioned in the literature review section before. However, they do not deal with the Middle East market directly. Thus, it is useful to make research-based on Skytrax and TripAdvisor online reviews which we can relate to as *netnography*.

Nethograpy might be an effective option while performing research with a low-cost budget or as a source of preliminary data which might be used as a basis for more difficult, time, and money consuming tasks. Nowadays, the internet offers search engines that help to explore large amounts of data. Nevertheless, *netnography* might provide a way how organizations might assess online reviews to obtain deeper insights into their customers' minds (Deka, et al., 2016). In this paper, different sources of data are used, for example, books, articles or journals, as well as, airlines websites (or other documents published by airlines) to find out the standard of services promised by airlines to be delivered what helps to make the comparison with the passengers' perceptions.

When performing the data collection, the researcher should take into consideration the fast-changing nature of online data, especially, the user-based content. Moreover, only reviews/data

published by registered users (users having profile) will be deemed as relevant (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Additionally, all the data collected from online sources (Skytrax, TripAdvisor) are available in the appendix section of this thesis (*Appendix 1, 2, 3*).

3.5 Research design

3.5.1 Content analysis (qualitative research method)

3.5.1.1 Introduction to content analysis and data collection

This section outlines the choice of *qualitative content analysis* as the research method to assess the online reviews of Middle East Airlines' passengers in terms of their perceptions of the airlines' service quality.

Throughout the period between 1st February till 31st March 2020, 362 reviews of Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad airlines are gathered from 2 online feedback publishing websites Skytrax and TripAdvisor. Afterward, the data are used to perform the *qualitative content analysis* in this research paper.

To distinguish the passengers' service quality perceptions the *content analysis* has been chosen as a valid method to analyze the data obtained. As mentioned before, service quality might be perceived variously depending on the factors influencing the passengers' experience (theory). Firstly, the online reviews are collected to the Microsoft Excel file (*Appendix 1*), secondly, categorized into themes characterizing the aspects of service quality (*Appendix 2*).

3.5.1.2 Description of the content analysis method

Content analysis is a commonly used method to investigate communications, especially, the messages shared in the online environment (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Stepchenokova, et al., 2009). The proliferation of *qualitative content analysis* has been possible due to the expanding amounts of available online data as *articles*, *online communities* (due to the possibility for the reader to freely access the community's online conversations) or *websites* (representing versatile text, audio or pictures). Moreover, the development of ICT and software helped the researchers to collect the data

and subsequently analyze them. Thus, these are the elements encouraging the practice of qualitative methods in social science research (Stepchenokova, et al., 2009).

Furthermore, *content analysis* sees the way of accumulating the data as a thorough assessment of the text to discover common themes, biases, and meanings. It is a process throughout the data collected are analyzed and seen through a lens of the research's objective. Such analyses then allow the researcher to recapitulate and compare the data to make a conclusion and answer the problem statement (Camprubí & Coromina, 2016). This supports the suitability of online content analysis in this case since it is possible to see the perceptions and perspectives of chosen airlines' passengers, moreover, it allows to process a huge amount of quantitative data by breaking them into smaller parts based on explicit coding rules, thus express the phenomenon – that means it can be stated in numbers, percentages, etc., to achieve objectivity of the research (Prasad, 2008). Further discussion of this topic will follow in section 4 (*Theoretical Background*).

3.5.1.3 Suitability of content analyses compare to other methods

Since this thesis seeks to understand the passengers' perceptions of service quality, the method of *focus group research* would be appropriate. Nevertheless, it does not allow to process such an amount of data and directs on a limited number of stakeholders. At the same time, the objectivity of respondents' answers might be distorted under the influence of the interviewer (Ivey, 2011). Another method that is often applied by tourism or hospitality organizations is *comment cards* (Ogle & Fanning, 2013). *Comment cards* might help the airline to record passengers' concerns, feedback, and issues they encounter on their *customer journey*. Although, this method has many disadvantages as the poor design might discourage the customer to fill the card in or inadequate choice of wording might distort the results (Davies, 2006). Furthermore, not all the dimensions of the quality might be involved in this method (Ogle & Fanning, 2013). This also applies to the *content analysis*, because it is not possible to cover all the service quality dimensions. It is caused by the researcher's reliance on how much valid information the customer is willing to disclose to the online community audience.

3.5.1.4 Summary

To sum this section up, this research paper investigates what are the perceptions of the Middle East Airlines' passengers in terms of service quality. The study is rather qualitative than

quantitative nature, even though it gathers an extensive amount of data. It seeks to understand certain phenomena within the social interactions, unlike quantitative research which usually is based on statistics or numerical measures (Brochando, et al., 2019). Additionally, it considers versatile ontological and epistemological beliefs (Section 3.3).

Quantitative research is rather validated by the *positivist paradigm* which sees the world as a blend of measurable facts which might be divided into several groups sharing the same traits, thus this might be utilized to all of the issues or comparable circumstances (Golafshani, 2003). Thus, this approach is contrary to this research since it believes that each online review creator (someone who has tried the service of the airline) has his/her subjective truth/reality, which means the research is done qualitatively as has been mentioned before. Also, the author plays a significant role because the data source chosen is important or point of the author's interest, moreover, he/she influences the way how the implication of the data is formed and interpreted (Bryman, 2008).

Yet, several methods of quantitative research have been used since this is the only way how to effectively analyze many online reviews. One of the examples might be the analyses of how frequently the same expressions were used. If a certain word has been used many times it means that it calls for further investigation so the author can comprehend what are the significant traits of different groups of passengers.

It can be concluded, based on the statements made above, that the usage of a qualitative approach in fusion with quantitative methods is the best option for this research paper.

3.6 Limitations

As mentioned before, the previous studies are often pinpointing the concern of the prejudices and subjectivity of the sources which should be minimized to achieve reliable results. Thus, in this paper, the author creates categorization rules that must be followed to be able to measure the customer service perceptions, as well as, to accomplish objective outcomes. Firstly the criteria have been set up for the data collection process when only users who have contributed at least 3 times on TripAdvisor and who verified their reviews on Skytrax are taken into account (*Section 3.7.1.2.3.1 The credibility of online reviews*). Even though the researcher sets criteria for data collection, online reviews might be still deemed as a subjective source of data since the reviewer keeps his/her secrecy in the online environment.

Another disadvantage of *online content analysis* is the author's inability to personally connect with the respondents. Thus, there is no option to ask them additional questions or seek clarifications that mean the author can work only with the data available online.

The data are collected from TripAdvisor and Skytrax since both platforms offer service reviews in the English language. Despite TripAdvisor presents also reviews in other world's languages English has been chosen as the main language of this thesis since the author can speak English, moreover, it is an official language of the Tourism program at Aalborg University. Subsequently, it allows for efficient data gathering and analysis.

What might be seen as a constraint of this paper is the researcher's experience with the services of all 3 airlines in question. Therefore, own prejudice and service perceptions might have been formed in terms of the problem statement. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, this thesis follows the *constructivist paradigm* what allows the researcher to play the role of being a part of the research and not only act as an observer.

Even nowadays, there might be groups of the population who do not have a computer or are not familiar with the internet. Thus, certain passengers of the airlines in question might not be included in the sample due to this fact.

3.7 Structure of the content analysis

The content analysis of this research paper consists of six steps:

1. *Problem statement (Section 1.2)*
2. *Variables identification (Section 1.5)*
3. *Categories and unit definition (Section 1.5.)*
4. *Data collection (Section 3.7.1.1)*
5. *Code scheme creation (Section 3.7.1.3)*
6. *Data analysis/interpretations (Section 5 – Analysis Chapter)* (Kim & Kuljis, 2010; Romano Jr, et al., 2003).

This chapter is dealing with the stage of *data collection* and *code scheme creation* since the *problem statement*, *variables identification*, and *categories, and unit definition* have been already explained in the first chapter *Introduction*. Moreover, the last stage of data analysis is investigated in the fourth chapter *Analysis*. The whole structure in detail is depicted in *Figure 2* below.

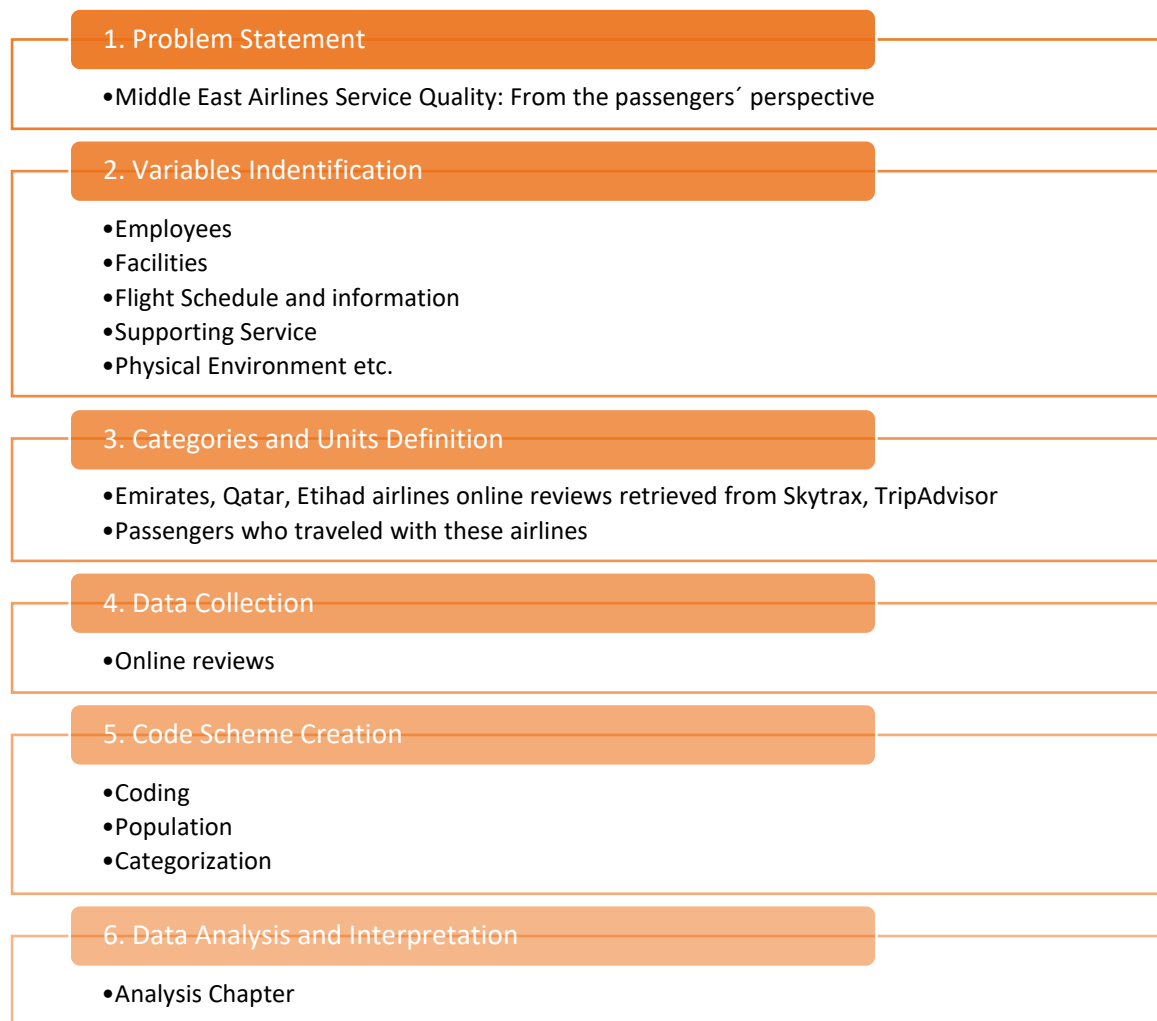


Figure 2 Flow chart for content analysis process, own interpretation, based on Kim and Kuljis 2010, Romano Jr et. al 2003

3.7.1.1 Data acquisition

The fourth step in the content analysis process is the data collection stage. The data are collected in the manner to reveal remarkable connections and experiences within the online reviews of airline passengers. Most importantly the population of this thesis must be identified, moreover, the choice of appropriate sources for data collection must be justified. Thus, the *Choice of the airlines* (section 3.7.1.2.2) is depicting why Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad airlines have been chosen and what review features are looked for throughout the analysis part of this research paper. Since online reviews are considered as subjective realities of each individual, as mentioned before, it is significant to show the validity of the data (Section 3.7.1.2.3.1 *The credibility of the online reviews*).

3.7.1.2 Sampling

The main objective of this thesis is to discover the service quality perceptions of the Middle East Airlines' passengers. Three leading airlines have been chosen: *Emirates* - Hub at Dubai International Airport (The Emirates Group, 2020), *Qatar Airways* - Hub at Hamad International Airport in Doha (Qatar Airways, 2020), and *Etihad Airways* - Hub at Abu Dhabi International Airport (Etihad Airways, 2020).

The *population* of this research forms all the passengers traveling on the routes' network of the 3 airlines in question. Moreover, the selected airlines are international carriers operating flights to 6 world's continents. Also, the Middle East with international airports in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha created an important stopover place from where travelers are reaching to Asia or Australia continents. That is why the passengers are coming from versatile parts of the world traveling for either leisure or business purposes (The Emirates Group, 2020; Etihad Airways, 2020; Qatar Airways, 2020). However, the country of origin might be found in each review or can be understood from the context of the written review (Skytrax, 2020; TripAdvisor, 2020).

Only reviews in the English language were collected and taken into consideration to comply with the conditions of Master Thesis writing within the Tourism program at Aalborg University, moreover, to bring value to the airlines in question. There might be observed a difference between Skytrax and TripAdvisor since Skytrax accumulates reviews in English unlike TripAdvisor where you can find the majority of the reviews in English but also in other worlds' languages (ibid).

It is important to mention that English is paramount especially in the international environment as airlines represent, likewise, the corporate language of all 3 airlines is English as well as it is the second most spoken language of the countries where they have their hubs (Wikipedia, 2020; Wikipedia, 2020). This is elaborated on more in-depth in the following section *Online feedback and rating websites*.

3.7.1.2.1 Airline's online feedback and rating websites

As mentioned before, the user-generated-content, especially the online reviews, is the most used data source within the ethnographic studies. Thus, online reviews and rating websites evaluating the airlines' service quality perceptions may be described as online communities which enable the researcher to comprehend all the elements of the individual consumer experience that the individual passengers considered as significant (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). This is also the main objective of this

research paper. The service quality as a component of the overall service experience is examined according to the open coding. That means the online reviews are interpreted according to the most common comments considered as the significant aspects of service quality perceived the airlines' passengers. This way the service quality is evaluated and produces the answer to the problem statement.

Qualitative research, as mentioned before, is often defined by a large amount of data the researcher has to process and analyze. That is why it is essential to set measures according to which the data sources are chosen and evaluated.

The primary data source, in the case of this research paper, is online reviews. These data are published on online reviews websites which are either focusing on the evaluation of only the world's airlines (Skytrax) or they evaluate many different hospitality and tourism services inclusive airlines (TripAdvisor). The reviews are written by the passengers who traveled with one of the chosen airlines.

To process the online reviews the content analysis research method is utilized. According to Liao and Tan, 2014 the aviation industry is socially intense, thus social media are utilized as a way of mutual interaction between the airline and its passengers (Brochando, et al., 2019). Thus, online reviews are perceived as *"accessible, reliable, credible and readily available information by both consumers and researchers"* (Lu and Stepchenkova in (Brochando, et al., 2019) p. 859). Moreover, online reviews are often referred to as eWOM, as mentioned before. Managers' main goal is usually to achieve as many positive reviews as possible, however, negative reviews are sometimes inevitable (Brochando, et al., 2019). This way it is possible for the author of this thesis to collect, analyze and understand the airline passengers' perception of the airlines' service quality.

Consumers usually do not review only on one of the many platforms available nowadays, thus 2 online reviews websites have been found as valid for this research to secure sufficient *representative sample*. Both, Skytrax and TripAdvisor, are focusing on world-wide airlines, furthermore, the researcher can see if the review has been verified, hence, can be found as genuine for this research. A more detailed description of Skytrax and TripAdvisor platforms might be found in the Literature Review Chapter (Section 2.6 and 2.7).

3.7.1.2.2 Choice of the airlines

As mentioned before, high-quality services/products are a key success factor of any airline. However, the quality might be seen from different perspectives, thus, it is necessary to also pay attention to the passengers' feedback. This way their needs might be distinguished in favor of

sustaining an organization's competitive advantage. Nowadays, customers have the sources of information to find out what are standards of service delivery which raises the urge of the airlines to differentiate from their competitors (Kurtulmusoglu, et al., 2016).

A common mistake within the aviation industry is the urge to measure service quality perceptions, however, without a previous understanding of the initial service expectation. That means it is meaningful to realize customer expectations to determine the preferred airline. If the airline fails to comprehend or misjudge the customer expectation it might have a compelling impact on the supply distribution choices (ibid).

That is why it must be identified which airlines are used for this thesis. The way the airline represents itself on its website or other social media creates a picture of expectations for the customers, which will then influence their perceptions.

The airlines have been chosen based on certain conditions to be included in this research paper. First of all, the airlines should not belong to the family of low-cost airlines, moreover, they must provide full meal and drinks service inflight and offer 3 classes of travel (first class, business class, and economy class). Second of all, they must be registered on Skytrax and TripAdvisor to be able to retrieve the data. And the last requirement they must be located in the Middle East. Thus, Emirates, Qatar Airways, and Etihad Airways have been chosen as representatives fulfilling the set requirements.

3.7.1.2.3 The online feedback created by airlines' passengers

Within this content analysis, online reviews (written by airlines' passengers) as *primary data* are utilized. The reviews were collected during February and March 2020, focusing on reviews no more than 3 years old to avoid non-recent information to be able to address the perceptions of the service quality of the existing service setting. What is also important to mention only reviews of economy class passengers will be collected, since, this class portrays the largest passenger group of all 3 airlines. Moreover, it has been proven that users of the business class have different perceptions of service quality as well as evaluate various service quality elements on distinct levels, unlike economy class passengers (Messner, 2016).

As mentioned before, the online customer review provides credible information regarding the customers' perceptions valuable for both potential customers and the organizations/researchers. Mainly it might be distinguished between positive and negative reviews which are perceived as eWOM (Section 3.5.2.2.1 - Airline's online feedback and rating websites). Therefore, to find out what are the passengers' service quality perceptions, the *Sentiment analysis* is applied.

For the reviewer to create a new online review it is enough to open the Skytrax website and leave a review without a need to create an account. Nevertheless, it is useful to register since you can track your reviewer history and earn membership tiers, thus gain the selected deals. To improve the reliability of the reviews Skytrax offers the option for the reviewers to submit documentation proving that the services of the given airline have been used (Skytrax, 2020). Unlike TripAdvisor where the users must be registered to write a review. However, the option of providing further documentation of the passenger journey is not offered, only photos taken may be submitted (TripAdvisor, 2020). Ultimately, it is dependent on the passenger if he/she will decide to write a review and what and how reliable information will share with the online audience.

To successfully perform the *content analysis* suitable *data sample* must be collected as mentioned earlier. The language may be a useful indicator, however, Skytrax provides only English reviews, unlike TripAdvisor. However, reviews in a different language than English cannot be taken into consideration due to the language barrier of the researcher.

The suitability of the reviews for this research is based on criteria that must be incorporated in the review. The reviews are then categorized according to aspects related to the service quality. Thus, the reviews which do not contain any service quality element can be neglected. Another criterium that has to be taken into consideration is the credibility of the reviews since there might be cases when the reviews are fake. This topic is discussed in the next section below.

3.7.1.2.3.1 The credibility of the online reviews

The credibility has been widely discussed related to the eWOM. Online review websites are often judged since it is easy to write an untruthful review that might negatively influence the result of this thesis. The main issue Skytrax and TripAdvisor might encounter is that even customers who have never traveled with the airline in question can write a review. On the other side also any organization may create its positive reviews to boost own sales and to hide any negative reviews since the occasional user would not scroll down that far to read through them thoroughly. Moreover, negative online reviews were misused in order to damage the reputation of the competitor organization. Nevertheless, there are several ways of how TripAdvisor fights fake reviews as regular system screenings, users warnings, or quality assurance teams (Minazzi, 2015).

There are numerous types of fake reviews the TripAdvisor's system can spot. Furthermore, if the users posting such reviews are discovered TripAdvisor either prevents them from having the possibility to make any reviews or starts a further investigation (TripAdvisor, 2018). To attract trusted

users to share their experiences, photos, feedback, etc., TripAdvisor has created a program called TripCollective which awards each contribution with points. According to how many points the user earned he/she can obtain badges expressing the user's expertise as Top Contributor or Attraction Expert and moves from level to level. However, the points cannot be converted to any monetary benefits or as such (TripAdvisor, 2020). Unlike Skytrax where the level of expertise is measured by Tier levels and registered users might receive selected deals as mentioned in the previous section. Thus, the TripAdvisor users' review is taken into account only if the user has contributed at least 3 times (Figure 3), as well as, only verified reviews on Skytrax are the focus of the interest (Figure 4).

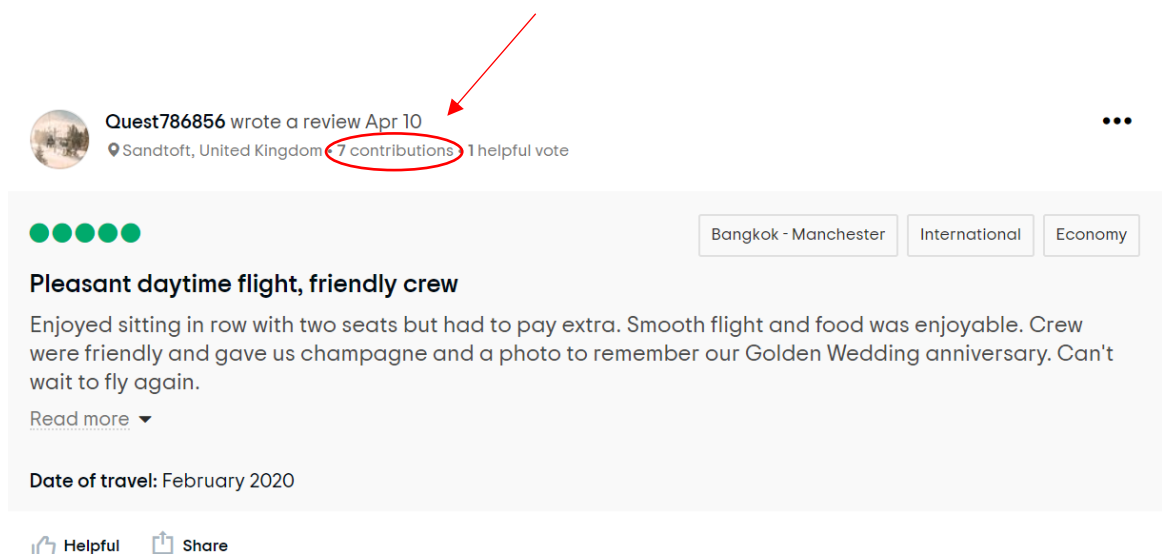


Figure 3 Emirates review, TripAdvisor, 10th April 2020

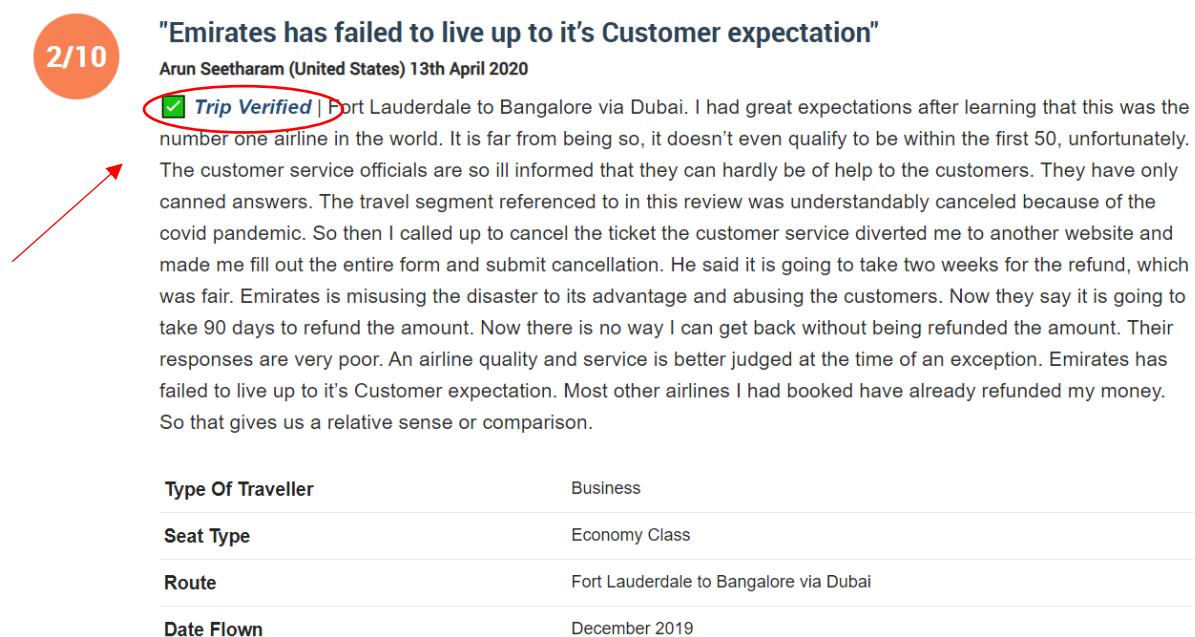


Figure 4 Emirates review, Skytrax, 13th April 2020

3.7.1.3 Acquiring of meaning

In order to answer the problem statement, the collected data must be analyzed *qualitatively*. In this manner, passengers' service quality perceptions are found out, moreover, the researcher can seek contrasting patterns and motifs. The techniques of *meaning acquiring* allow approaching the various groups of passengers traveling with the 3 chosen airlines.

The process of meaning acquiring is divided into 4 stages (Figure 5):

1. *Data preparation*
2. *Organization of the reviews*
3. *Examination of the reviews*
4. *Interpretation of the reviews*

The first stage is *data preparation* when the researcher has to collect and select valid data for this thesis. When the data are ready the common themes might be revealed what is a crucial moment in analyzing *qualitative data* (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The *inductive approach* of this content analysis then leads the researcher to categorize the reviews to comprehend what the reviewers' thoughts are that have been shared with the company and potential buyers online to find out what service categories are crucial for them (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). This also allows for contrasting diverse views.

Additionally, at the 4th stage, the *sentiment analysis* is conducted. *Sentiment analysis* allows the researcher to assess the reviews even into greater depth in terms of seeing them as positive, negative, or neutral passengers' service perceptions. In the end, it is feasible to determine what the airlines' passengers' service quality perceptions are, thus to answer the problem statement. The very last stage deals with presenting and interpreting the data to the reader.



Figure 5 Meaning acquisition scheme, own interpretation, based on Ryan and Bernard (2003), and Elo and Kyngas (2007)

3.7.1.3.1 Process of data preparation

Qualitative data are common for a significant amount of information the researcher must process. Thus, the text must be systematically arranged to decrease the complexity of the collected data, for example, many reviews are not mentioning any service quality aspects, thus these are not relevant for answering this paper's research question and are excluded from the analysis. Such data in this case passengers' reviews might be described as *irrelevant*. Exclusion of irrelevant data thus leads to sorting out only so-called *raw data* that are directly relevant to answer the problem statement (Glaser & Laudel, 2013).

3.7.1.3.2 Process of coding

According to Glaser and Laudel (2013) *coding* is a process of assigning labels of content to the text of versatile lengths as words, sentences, paragraphs, etc. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.56) described this process as a form of straightforward category label (Glaser & Laudel, 2013). The stage of coding is also dependable on the research method which is in case of this thesis *qualitative content analysis* (Section 3.5.1 *Content Analysis*). Due to the qualitative nature, the results of the research might be distinct due to the researcher's analytical skills, competencies, views, style, etc., equally, it is influenced by the type of inquiry, thus the comprehension and interpretation of the data could vary (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). To secure *reliability* of the results the researcher must describe the connection between the data and outcomes in detail, this also supports the *transferability* which is only possible when the process of the content analysis is thoroughly described including characteristics of the participants, data collection, contexts, etc (ibid).

This thesis applies a *qualitative research approach* (in terms of seeking patterns, perceptions, experiences) but derives its conclusions based on *qualitative data sources*. Yet, throughout the coding stage when the researcher sorts the reviews into service quality categories, the author has an essential position since as mentioned before, the categorization might vary depending on the way the researcher reads the reviews (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). This proves the qualitative nature of the research, as well as, the constructivist paradigm.

By applying the codes the data collected are structured and systematic that means the coding scheme has been created (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In the case of this study, the *theoretical framework* (Section 4) creates a basis for forming codes allowing further categorization, this way the problem statement might be answered (Kohlbacher, 2006).

According to Glaser and Laudel (2013), the categories are designed either based on the information retrieved from the data collected or theoretical considerations. As mentioned in *Section 3.2 Research Structure*, this thesis is structured corresponding to *Research process flow chart* (Figure 1) that means when the author is progressing in the research the previous steps are continuously revised, yet, it is possible to change theoretical statements if the data collected do not satisfy the preceding ones (Glaser & Laudel, 2013).

The coding scheme of the airlines' passengers' reviews is used throughout the analysis part of this thesis, moreover, it is shown in the Appendix to enhance the credibility of the results (Section 5 Analysis, Section 9, Appendix 1, 2, 3).

3.7.1.3.3 Word frequencies

When the researcher has created the codes for the online reviews and sorts them into categories the common themes might be discovered. One of the methods is the *word frequencies*. Even though this is a qualitative content analysis it must be taken into consideration that if the results must be generalized to a bigger sample of the population some quantitative steps must be applied. To secure the reliability and validity of the conclusions it is important to support them by representing repeating instances, in case of this study – perceptions, experiences, codes, themes, etc., which apply to the given service quality categories (Mayring, 2014). The frequent aspects might be examined in contrast with the other ones (ibid), hence, the author might deduct what is the most meaningful service quality category for the airlines' passengers when they assess the service post-purchase online.

Word frequency analysis together with the coding is used to find out the most frequent focal point within the online reviews, thus the paramount service quality categories can be displayed. Moreover, the word frequency analysis is employed for the *sentiment analysis* explained in the following section.

3.7.1.3.4 Sentiment analysis

The *sentiment analysis* is a predominantly contemporary method that has proliferated due to the increasing amount of online data including various thoughts of internet users (Htay & Lynn, 2013). Perez-Rosas and Mihalcea (2013) define *sentiment analysis* as a way to determine the population's

points of view, feelings, interpretations, and appraisals, as well as, polarity (Perez-Rosas & Mihalcea, 2013). The *polarity identification* is solely typical for the data sets including an opinion, which means the reviews might be categorized according to their *positive, negative, or neutral sentiment* (Montejo-Raez, et al., 2012). Due to technological development, there is much software that can detect subjectivity in the text, audio, or video, for example, CATPAC or WORDER. However, the computer-based analysis has not been used within the tourism industry frequently, since the researchers tend to rather utilize more qualitative methods of the content analysis allowing them to distinguish categories within the text and to extract customers' opinion, approach and preferences (Stepchenokova, et al., 2009; Liu, et al., 2018) and unlike computer program manual extraction may also recognize sarcasm (Guess, 2011).

According to Liu et al., 2018 *sentiment analysis* is a quite simple linguistic way how to investigate the text of the review (Liu, et al., 2018). As mentioned before, the *qualitative content analysis* is typical for large volumes of data, therefore, it is important to identify the features of the product or service first, followed by the opinion extraction to be able to create a summary (Htay & Lynn, 2013). Moreover, based on the *opinion words* the research may determine its *polarity*. The subjectivity and the opinion words might be obtained from the sentences or phrases comprising adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns, for example, specific verbs express an opinion: like, recommend, prefer, appreciate, dislike and love, as well as, adverbs: not, always, really, never, overall, absolutely, highly and well (ibid).

The language analysis then allows categorizing the reviews into three classes of *polarity*. Mostly, we could say there are three types of reviews. Firstly, *positive reviews* – when the customer had a good experience with a product/service and uses positive language, secondly, *negative reviews* – when the customer had a bad experience or did not like the product/service, and lastly *neutral reviews* – the customer is not dedicated to the product/service, thus have neither positive or negative perception (Kausar, et al., 2019). Hence, no/little evidence for positive or negative approach of the reviewer towards the service quality does not necessarily mean the review is neutral but it may be because of the researcher cannot determine the stance from the review (Mohammad, et al., 2016). The same way as the computer software is not able to recognize sarcasm within a context, also the manual based content analysis researcher should be careful and read the text properly to minimize any misunderstanding (Neuendorf, 2017).

Sentiment analysis has also its limitations since it deals with opinions it is directly considered as subjective, thus, the opinion may be different from human to human. According to A. R. Russel, several factors may impact directly or indirectly the sentiment of the review for example something

unpleasant happened during our day that caused our bad mood. This can lead to making a negative comment about a brand that we had a neutral perception about (Guess, 2011).

As described above the *process of coding* prepares the data for further analysis, thus the common *themes* can be determined within the airlines' passengers' reviews. Accordingly, the researcher might find out what are the perceptions of service quality taking into consideration the response to the problem statement. To organize various reviewers' comments the *sentiment analysis* is applied, thus the reviews might be sorted out corresponding to their sentiment. As the last step the *word frequency analysis* is done. After all the reviews are calculated in each sentiment class (that means positive, negative, and neutral), depending on the results the sentiment of the passengers' perceptions of each airline in question can be recognized.

4 Theoretical Background

The theoretical basis is an inseparable component of this research, together with the methodology (*Section 3*) and the data acquisition process (*Section 3.7.1.1*), since it deals with the *service quality categories*. The theoretical framework allows the performance of the data analysis and subsequent answer to the problem statement.

4.1 Airlines' service quality

Customer service is an integral part of the whole customer care and a way how to achieve passengers' ultimate satisfaction. Moreover, it might be a source of differentiation in order to beat the fierce competition in the current market. High-quality service has become a standard, especially, amongst the Middle East carriers, and is one of the most significant factors establishing the passengers' loyalty. This suggests a close relationship between the service quality and customer satisfaction since the satisfied customer is a key for success within the airline industry (Hussain, et al., 2015). As mentioned before, this is given by the intangible nature of the services which are customized, delivered to an individual passenger, and non-transferable. Therefore, customer service became a major aspect during the decision-making process, since the passengers do not perceive air transportation as only a way how to reach their chosen destination but as an experience, so high standard services are expected to achieve the value they paid for (Li, et al., 2017). This also supports a well-known motto "the customer is always right" since it is easier to maintain the current and loyal customers rather than to make the effort to obtain new ones (Hussain, et al., 2015).

4.2 Top Middle East Airlines

As mentioned before, the Middle East Airlines are recognized as brands providing an above-standard product/service (Emblem LLC 2020, 2018). Moreover, Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad Airways scored within the range of 30 best airlines' according to the Skytrax World Airline Awards (Skytrax, 2019). Genuinely, the service quality expectations from their passengers are always high, thus they are mindful of the brand and provided services and if the experience has achieved the value for the money paid.

4.3 Characteristics of the passengers

The airlines passengers consist of travelers from all over the world traveling for various purposes, additionally, they willingly shared their perceptions regarding their experience with the online audience. Thus, they create a population of this thesis to provide an answer to the problem statement. What must be taken into account is the fact, that every passenger is provided individual service, as mentioned before, hence, the success of airline services depends on the ground personnel and cabin crew who must evaluate their individual needs. This is also given by the cultural background which might influence the service expectations and perceptions of each passenger (Donthu & Yoo, 1998).

4.4 Service quality categories

Service quality categories are having a crucial function in this research paper, thus they must be further investigated and described. This section includes all the aspects an airline has to involve to serve all the passengers' needs. In place to recognize which service categories the passengers deem as substantial, they are used as a basis for the open coding scheme which is applied to analyze the online feedback. All the service quality categories might turn out positively, neutrally, or negatively depending on what is the quality of the service perceived by the passengers. Thus, *Sentiment analysis* is utilized to retrieve the polarity of online reviews (*Section 3.7.1.3.4 Sentiment analysis*).

4.5 Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is described as a reaction of the consumer towards the performance of the organization. The experience might either be with the particular product/service or it can be cumulated throughout the whole service encounter. In case the consumer had a positive experience there is a higher likelihood that the product/service is going to be recommended by him/her to other potential consumers (Rahim, 2016). As mentioned before, the competition fight is fierce, thus, to "just" satisfy the passengers' needs or requests stops being adequate. That contributes to increased demands put on the level of the service quality. Therefore to create a memorable experience for the passenger the service must achieve "extreme" satisfaction, according to Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004), this is the way how the airlines may attract the customers to stay loyal to the brand and willing

to spread positive WOM. This leads the carriers to improve the service quality since if the service has achieved the initial expectations then the need of the passenger has been full-filled satisfactorily, however, the airline should thrive for excellent service delivery which creates the *surprise moment* (Hussain, et al., 2015).

4.5.1 Expectancy disconfirmation model

The surprise moment has been also described by the *expectancy disconfirmation model*. The more experience the consumer has with the product/service the greater discrepancy happens between the expectation and experience, naturally, it might be of *negative* (disappointing – expectations were not met) or *positive* (surprising – experience achieved the expectation) nature. Additionally, it has been found that there is a close relationship between the surprise moment and customer loyalty (Dey, et al., 2015). However, it is important to mention that there are several service categories where the airlines got the chance to go beyond and above, thus, surprise and delight their passengers who are loyal in the long run (Brown, 2007).

4.6 Maslow's Hierarchy of needs

4.6.1 Passengers' needs and expectations

Excellent service delivery is one of the conditions to keep the market position and to be competitive (Abdlla, et al., 2007). What is an essential element of providing high-quality service is the comprehension of the customers' needs and expectations (Gilbert & Wong, 2003).

The managers have to know, produce, and convey value and satisfaction to the passenger and this is what creates a basis for con-current marketing activities. What is important to mention is the fact that the companies should not only comprehend their customers' needs and expectations but also keep what they promised (Aksoy, et al., 2003). Moreover, taking into consideration passengers' needs, expectations, and preferences is crucial in the customer-focused service industry (Abdlla, et al., 2007).

4.6.2 Service quality concerning passengers' needs

Service quality is a very complex concept that is challenging to define. The very first basic definition comes from the manufactures where the quality of the production is closely checked. Later on, several studies have defined service quality as *value* (Feigenbaum, 1951), *conformance to requirements* (Crosby, 1980), or *meeting customers' expectations* (Parasuraman, et al., 1985). Nowadays, the most commonly used definition is the *range to which the service meets the customers' expectations* (Reeves & Bednar, 1994). That is why, as mentioned before, the airlines must know what the passengers' needs and expectations are first and then to deliver a service that will full fill them (Abdlla, et al., 2007). Hence, this definition is also used throughout this research as an applied concept of service quality.

4.6.2.1 Passengers' needs and expectations in regards to airline service quality

The concept of human needs has been discussed in the literature for many years. However, the most commonly used theories of needs still belong to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, et al., 1987) and Murray's Theory of Motivation (1938) (Murray, 2012).

Murray's theory of motivation is based on the concept of human need. Thus, a person who has a need will be motivated to work (take an action) until the need is satisfied. Moreover, he has developed various schemes of how human behavior is motivated by human needs (ibid). Consequently, Maslow comes with the five categories of human needs that are hierarchically arranged from the most basic ones to the advanced ones.

As well as Murray, Maslow agrees that each person's situation will drive the focus on the basic needs and this is the condition for human motivation. These needs are: *physiological* (for example food, health, etc.), *safety needs* (for example security, stability, protection, etc.), *belongingness and love needs* (for example giving and receiving love, need for friendship and belongingness, etc.), *esteem needs* (for example feeling of confidence, achievement, prestige, etc.), *self-actualization needs* (for example feeling of self-fulfillment, growth, maturity, etc.).

Later on, Maslow has enriched the model about additional levels within the hierarchy: *knowledge/understanding needs* (for example satisfying curiosity, need to learn new things, etc.) and *aesthetic needs* (for example need for precision, symmetry, etc.). That means the first 5 needs are basic needs that every human being has, and the last 2 needs are basic needs to explore, learn, and be curious (Maslow, et al., 1987; Chiu & Lin, 2004; Robertson, 2009). Moreover, Chiu and Lin (2004)

confirm that *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs* remains the most used motivation theory due to its comprehensiveness, simplicity, and organization as opposed to Murray's Theory of needs (Chiu & Lin, 2004).

Since the various theories are using similar contents or are derived from Maslow's theory of Needs this thesis implements the 7 categories of needs as may be seen below. The table shows 7 categories of passengers' needs and airlines' service quality elements within their needs

Maslow's seven categories and their related service contents within the airline industry	
Categories of needs	Contents of service quality
Physiological needs	Comfort, convenience, responsiveness
Safety needs	Assurance, reliability, consistency, Secrecy
Belongingness needs and love needs	Relation, approval, empathy
Esteem needs	Self-esteem, superiority, politeness, acceptance
Self-actualization needs	Growth, show, care of the social fairs
Knowledge and understanding needs	Innovation, learning
Aesthetic needs	Appreciation of nature, arts, and literature

Table 1 Source: based on Chiu and Lin (2004)

4.6.2.2 The limitations of the theory

The theory considers all human beings perceiving the needs in the same way. That means all people have the urge to satisfy the needs in the same order as the theory has suggested. Unlike Alderfer's ERG theory which develops Maslow's theory combines its elements and suggests that a person must not necessarily follow the rigid order of the needs to be able to move on to the next level (Robbins, 1993). Furthermore, cultural and personal perspectives that might influence motivated behavior are not taken into account (Kukreja, 2020).

The motivation theories have been widely criticized in the literature of various industries (Kay, 2003). As mentioned before the motivation theories are deemed as useful for acknowledging a wide spectrum of human needs that might motivate human's specific behavior to fulfill them. However, only thorough comprehension of consumer needs cannot predict their behavior fully, thus one might not know what actions the consumer would take to fulfill the need or if the consumer would take any action at all (Witt, et al., 1992). Moreover, Schiffman and Kanuk (1997) argue that giving the theory a generic appeal to cover most of the human needs had a contrary effect, thus the theory tends to be too broad (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1997). They also questioned the way how the theory can be empirically

tested since there has not been developed any measurement of how the satisfied need looks like before the human may move on within the hierarchy on the next level (ibid).

This also goes hand in hand with service quality. The service quality has been defined as the extent to which the expectations meet the perceptions, however, the same way every individual has different needs, the service quality can be perceived in distinct ways depending on individual factors for example cultural background, social status, etc.

4.7 Concept of customer value

Value plays a significant role in the success of any business. Firstly, the value must be perceived and delivered to the consumer, secondly, it can create value for the company by earning profit. Value has also become one of the essential elements of marketing strategies since it must transmit the value in a manner that it generates consumers' satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016).

However, firstly it is crucial to understand the basic definition of human value and before any concept of value creation may be developed. The concept of "*value*" is a complex phenomenon, thus, there are various ways how may we define it. According to Marinova et. al. (2016), it might be obvious what "*value*" stands for, hence, applying the concept in different contexts may lead to various interpretations. She claims that every human being is unique yet the understandings and meaning may be different for every individual, for example, it can be based on our cultural background, or other backgrounds, ethics, religion, etc (Marinova, et al., 2017). Considering value from the perspective of an airline passenger, the value might be defined for example as a basis for the decision-making process hence, what might be even more important, is the result of the service experience (Hoolbrook, 1994).

4.7.1 Value creation via storytelling

As previously mentioned in the literature review stories are all around us, hence, they also became a substantial part of business marketing efforts (Ind, 2005). According to Ind (2005), storytelling is a way how a brand can be recreated in a financially efficient way to become competitive on the market. Hence, the company may develop an authentic brand, enhancing its diversity to have a larger competitive advantage within the industry (ibid).

According to Liu and Wu, it is important to develop stories based on facts, moreover, it must touch the customers' feelings. But only telling a story is not enough, customer should also extend his/her knowledge and comprehension about the products and services the company is providing (Liu & Wu, 2011). Batler and Butman (2005) confirm that the importance of storytelling within the marketing strategies, as they believe that products/services do not catch enough attention if there is no story behind, which means the customers do not have the urge to buy the products/services. To stay competitive on the market the promoters must include storytelling to create a unique brand image to be able to stimulate the customers amongst many other stories (Batler & Butman, 2005).

4.7.2 Theory of consumption values

Often the consumers evaluate the products/service depending on the range of values the purchase will bring them. Thus, Sheth et. al. (1991), introduced a theory about why do we buy certain products/services and why consumers choose a certain brand over another, etc (Sheth, et al., 1991).

The theory consists of five various values: *functional value*, *social value*, *emotional value*, *epistemic value*, and *conditional value*. Hence, the decision of the consumer to buy might be impacted by all of the value or none of them. Moreover, every consumption value has been supported by different models previously developed for example Maslow's motivation models, etc (ibid).

Functional value is assumed to be the primary element of the customers' decision making. *Social value* on the other hand can influence the choice of highly visible products (for example clothes, jewelry, cars, etc.). Thus, the products/service is bought to create a social image rather than for the functional attributes. *Emotional value* is often connected to products and services which evoke a feeling for example watching a horror movie. On the other hand, the *epistemic value* is connected to the usage of new products/services never tried before, or boredom of the current brand arises a curiosity to try a new one. *Conditional value* is related to products/services connect to a special occasion for example Christmas cards, wedding dress, etc (ibid).

The consumption values explained above may contribute to distinguishing various preference perspectives. Hence, it might be observed and identified what are the specific consumption values of the consumers in specific situations that can boost the marketing efforts of the company (ibid). That is also closely connected to Maslow's theory of needs.

5 Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis and the key findings within the data collected. The sources of data are online feedback websites, Skytrax, and TripAdvisor, where valid online reviews are gathered from to perform content analysis. Consequently, the data are critically examined against the formerly introduced theories. In the end, the problem statement is provided with an answer based on the conclusions made throughout the analysis process.

5.1 Service quality expectations

This section of the thesis deals with the passengers' *service quality expectations*. Firstly, the passengers' needs are defined based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (*Section 4.6, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*) and the online reviews of 3 leading Middle East Airlines: Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad Airways.

Furthermore, analysis of the marketing efforts is presented, with a focus on storytelling (narratives) captured on the airlines' corporate social media, for example, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or its website. The goal is to show how the chosen airlines represent themselves to the customers as well-known international brands and how did they implement storytelling into their marketing efforts.

Moreover, this section serves as a basis to understand how the customers' expectations of the service quality are formed, thus, to be able to compare if the passengers' expectations met their perceptions based on the online reviews.

5.1.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of needs

International airlines, as Middle East Airlines, are serving various customer segments. It is obvious that each target group has different needs and values which are favored by the passengers on their travels. Therefore, businessmen traveling for business purposes are having quite different needs than a family with children traveling on vacation. As mentioned several times before, also the international and cultural boundaries might play a significant role in service expectations creation (Strategist, 2020).

Especially, Middle East Airlines' customers expect rather customized service, with a person to person interaction unlike customers of European airlines who prefer fast and smooth automated services. Knowing customer needs might improve the business by creating offers targeted to certain groups of customers, or it might help to cut off services that are not frequently used. This way the profitability of the airlines might significantly increase (Strategist, 2020).

Since online reviews on TripAdvisor from where the majority of the online reviews have been collected do not mention what type of segment travelers are (for example couple going on vacation, family vacation, business trip, etc.), thus the needs of Middle East airlines passengers are put into perspective taking into consideration Maslow's Hierarchy of needs and most commonly mentioned features of the services in the online reviews to find out what are the needs every passenger has.

5.1.1.1 Passengers' personal needs

Firstly, it is important to mention that motivation is the most significant aspect of the traveler's consumer behavior. Thus, for the managers, it is important to discover what needs their passengers' have to be able to fulfill them (Hudson, 2000; Abdlla, et al., 2007). Once the traveler decided to book the flight ticket he/she is assessing all the promised aspects of the service to be able to secure all the needs he/she might have while traveling, that means on the ground (airport services) as well as in-flight (in the aircraft). Yet, Maslow's Hierarchy of needs is applied (Abdlla, et al., 2007; Chiu & Lin, 2004).

Since the Middle East Airlines are considered as airlines more expensive providing full services onboard of their aircraft (eDreams, 2020) also the passengers' needs might be of a higher level than just basic needs what a low-cost airline can satisfy. Moreover, online reviews already published on various internet platforms significantly contribute to the potential customers' expectations creation (Hinson, et al., 2020) and influence the standard of what the passenger's needs are during the flight.

There are 7 categories of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs which are going to be individually assessed and presented below:

5.1.1.2 Physiological needs (Comfort, convenience, responsiveness)

Since Middle East airlines operate long-haul flights the overall comfort is considered by the passengers as a paramount factor when traveling. As one of the passengers of Emirates Airlines said:

*“...Both **the A380 and the B777** I flew on were **very comfortable...**”* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.2, review 39). This signifies that the actual comfortability of the aircraft is a need of every passenger, moreover, consistency across the different types of aircrafts the airline is operating is an important aspect. Since many passengers are traveling to destinations where there is no direct connection, thus the connecting flights might be operated by different aircraft types.

Another Emirates passenger mentioned: *“...The Airplane (A380) is/was a very nice plane, **plenty of room** to stretch your legs...”* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.2, Review 81) this supports good interior configuration of the aircraft where passengers might enjoy a bit of space to stretch out or walk during a long flight that contributes to the overall comfortability.

What is essential is a comfortable seat as mentioned one of the Emirates passengers: *“...The **seats were not very wide, narrow in fact, and had a hard seat...**”* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.1, review 13). This passenger has been traveling on 6,5 hrs flight thus it is obvious that convenient seat is a basic comfort need of nowadays passengers. Qatar passenger deems as needed decent legroom so an even taller person might enjoy the pleasurable experience: *“...The planes are always impeccably clean and **comfortable, with plenty of legroom** (I'm just over 6ft)...”* (Appendix 2, Section 8.1.2.2, Review 15). This is connected also to good recline of the seat, especially talking about economy class, where the space and the cabin's comfortability of the flight might be limited: *“...The seats, although they look thin, are comfy with ample legroom **and decent recline...**”* (Appendix 2, Section 8.1.2.2, Review 14).

What is also substantial requirement are the aircraft's resources, for example, a sufficient number of lavatories, its cleanliness throughout the flight and regular refill of the amenities as a hand soap as Emirates Airlines passenger said: *“...the aircraft was pretty much full, which meant **long queues at the toilets** pretty much all the way, **hand soap running out...**”* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.1, Review 43) or *“The **toilets were not once cleaned** during the 6.5-hour flight...”* (Appendix 1, Section 9.1.1.1, Review 13).

Another need the passengers' have especially on long flights is a food and beverage. Good food and drinks also contribute to overall comfort and atmosphere in the cabin, since hungry passengers can never be happy as many reviews are putting a focus on this topic: *“The **food was also really good**, some of if not the best we've had on a plane... **The vegan option** for main was very good too...”* (Appendix 1, Section 9.1.2.1, Review 6) or *“The served food was delicious and the drinks on board were many and generous (all were offered free of charge)”* (Appendix 1, Section 9.1.2.2, Review 14). The reviews are supporting that a great experience is connected to delicious food, thus the basic needs are satisfied and passenger satisfaction may only increase with additional services provided.

Into physiological needs is included also cabin crew as their responsiveness is a need of every passenger on board. It is because passengers' are not familiar with all the emergency features of the

aircraft as well as they might not be trained on how to act in health-related emergencies in-flight. That is why the crew must react promptly to any request onboard. This might be deemed also as a safety need. This is supported by one of the Etihad Airways' passengers: *"...All they did was **close the curtains** and chit chat throughout the flight. I called the bell, no one came. They were not to be seen..."* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.3.2, Review 85). This need is significant since the crew does not know if the passenger needs "just" a glass of water or medical help. Thus, attentive crew monitoring the cabin frequently is a requirement.

5.1.1.2.1 Sub-conclusion

The paragraphs above suggest that the most basic needs of an airline passenger are the needs we are not able to live without nor travel without. As the analysis of the online reviews has shown these needs are cabin and seat comfort, cleanliness, food and beverage, and cabin crew. Thus, the expressed needs are encompassing the functional value that allows the passenger to supply basic comfort and maintenance for his/her body.

5.1.1.3 Safety needs (assurance, reliability, consistency, secrecy)

The passenger's need is not only the crew's attentiveness but also sufficient expertise to possibly solve all the issues the passengers might have during their trip. One of the passengers of Emirates Airlines mentioned a story about difficult passengers: *"A very **loud couple of gentlemen demanded drinks** throughout the flight...it was clear they had enough it seemed to us the cabin crew caved in to their demands even to the point of giving them a drink during landing approach. The language was unpleasant and **they should have been sorted out**"* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.2, Review 70). Thus, cabin crew should foresee what a "drunken" person might cause and be able to calm such passengers down. Moreover, this is an example of the various needs of each traveler. The passengers being described in the review might have been traveling on vacation, thus, they put themselves into a "good mood". On the other hand, the author of the review might have been a businessman who has a meeting after landing in the final destination and needs to be rested. That means cabin crew must be experienced and knowledgeable to take positive action during situations as such to fulfill everyone's needs.

Another significant need for the passenger might also be the crew's dependability, which means if a passenger has a request the action will be taken and done as promised. Very often many

requests are unintentionally or deliberately forgotten as highlights an Emirates Airlines passenger: *“Not only **did they forget the first meal** of the 14hr flight but I had to ask them again for the second meal”* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.1, Review 20). Also, the services should be provided as promised for example in case of a canceled flight: *“...they canceled my flight and when I requested for full refund they told me, it will be available within 15 days. After 20 days I called them back to ask what is going on and why my account is still not refunded. They told me that they recently changed their policy and refund will be done within 90 days”* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.1, Review 6). This reveals a need for truthful information given by the employees and an action taken consistently to what was agreed on. Consistency need has been also expressed by an Etihad Airways passenger criticizing varying services: *“Squashed like sardines in the 777. A380 was ok. Service wasn't consistent”* (Appendix 3, Section 8.1.3.2, Review 38). Middle East airlines are airlines well-known for their premium products, yet, also the price reflects this, also in economy class. Therefore, the passengers are putting even greater emphasis on how well their needs are satisfied.

As mentioned before, the passengers also express their need for personalized service as a passenger traveling on Qatar Airways revealed: *“...The service of the international staff on board was excellent (always friendly, speedy, smiley, caring, and **personal attention by the supervisor of cabin crew**)”* (Appendix 2, Section 8.1.2.2, Review 14).

One of the other needs that every passenger certainly have is secrecy. This is something that is mostly taken as for granted nowadays and failure to comply with it has fatal implications on the business, especially talking in terms of private information (as customer-related data for example date of birth, etc.) (Deltagon, 2020). This need will not be further investigated since this topic has not been mentioned by the reviewers.

5.1.1.3.1 Sub-conclusion

The safety needs are on the second level of Maslow's Hierarchy since if do not feel safe it will not evoke good feeling and our overall well-being is going to be impacted. The needs the airlines' passengers have expressed connected to the safety are attentiveness, problem-solving skills of personnel, dependability, consistency/personalized service, and secrecy. What more might be included in this section is the overall security of the airport and aircraft, as well as, personal protection (Alcivar, 2018). Hence, it means that safety is not only our immediate need to be and feel safe but also it refers to general well-being (Robertson, 2009).

5.1.1.4 Belongingness and love needs (Relation, approval, empathy)

Even when passengers are traveling they need to feel welcomed and to be treated politely as Etihad passenger said: “...got the general vibe that **Economy passengers are not welcomed**” (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.3.2 Review 5). It signifies that if the need for being welcomed is not satisfied at the beginning of the service delivery most probably it will be very hard or almost not possible to turn negative first impression into a positive experience (Hyken, 2020). On the other hand, the need of being related or empathy has been very nicely executed by the crew of Etihad Airways crew: “The crew was friendly and attentive. My partner had a birthday the day we were flying and **crew gave to my partner a nice gift and delicious fruit cake!**” (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.3.2, Review 16). This expresses a memorable experience for the passengers when they feel special and appreciated, thus this might create a basis for a long-term relationship in terms of customer loyalty.

Since all the airlines in question are international airlines nice touch are announcements in the language of the country the aircraft is flying to. Moreover, there is always present at least one speaker of that particular language. It is beneficial not only to create an empathetic atmosphere but also in emergency cases when someone does not speak English. This has not been mentioned in the reviews, thus, this is an author’s observation, since she has had the chance to travel with the airlines in question.

This section might also include the employees’ ability to provide customized service or individual attention, hence, this has been already discussed in the previous section. In the end, it is important to mention that customized service, as shown in the Etihad passenger review above, the crew are empathetic and have the knowledge of their customers’ needs.

5.1.1.4.1 Sub-conclusion

Naturally, every person needs belonging and love. This third level of the hierarchy refers to the relationships with our family, friends, and other relationships with colleagues, etc. It is closely connected to having a social life, which means being recognized within the community and being able to integrate (Robertson, 2009; Alcivar, 2018). There are several points where the passengers must meet and interact with other people/personnel for example check-in counter, boarding the aircraft, etc. The reviewers in the online reviews have voiced the following needs: to feel welcomed/appreciated, to be politely treated by the staff, empathy as to be crucial during the service encounter.

5.1.1.5 Esteem needs (Self-esteem, superiority, politeness, acceptance)

In this section, only the self-esteem and feedback valuation needs might be mentioned, since other aspects as superiority (as customized service with a personal touch), politeness, and acceptance have been already discussed in the paragraphs above.

Self-esteem means that the customer had a pleasurable experience and is confident about the services received. Furthermore, he/she is sure to use the airline repeatedly and is willing to spread positive WOM (Chiu & Lin, 2004), thus recommend the services to potential customers. This has been expressed by the Emirates Airlines passenger: *"...Excellent service throughout. I would definitely recommend"* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.1, Review 57).

Feedback valuation is an important need since if there was something extraordinary that has happened during the experience the customer wants to be heard, as the story of Qatar passenger supports: *"...Customer services at Doha were terrible, any questions that passengers had they would have to go and find out, sometimes not even returning! They couldn't even find a customer complaints procedure..."* (Appendix 1, Section 8.1.2.2, Review 24). Thus, it shows that the customer needs to be valued for the constructive feedback, moreover, the ground personnel has poor expertise in the field.

Another great example is Skytrax and TripAdvisor online reviews platforms, where it can be observed that only Etihad Airways are actively responding to their customers' comments. That means Emirates and Qatar Airways are not fulfilling the customer need of being heard or to suggest an improvement, moreover, the two-way communication with the customers cannot be achieved.

5.1.1.5.1 Sub-conclusion

The esteem level of the Hierarchy speaks about the importance, being valued and recognized by the airlines what creates the social value for the passengers. Thus, the needs the passengers have mentioned were the feeling of importance, the given feedback is valued and the need for being heard. As mentioned before, the key is to personalize the service to the need of the individual passenger, thus it can bring the experience to another level and fulfill the esteem needs.

5.1.1.6 Self-actualization needs (growth, show, care of social affairs)

Self-actualization needs are the needs through which every person expresses own desires for personal growth or possibilities for achievement (Robertson, 2009). Thus, it is considered as how much

the passengers appreciated the services provided by the airlines' employees, for example, one of the Emirates passengers appreciated the work of cabin crew highlighting one specific crew: *"I would like to particularly appreciate the service by the cabin crew Anthal. I know it is very difficult for the cabin crew to be smiling and go about their job with long hours of flying and adjusting to time differences. I would like to thank and appreciate the service provided by her on this flight"*(Appendix 1, Section 8.1.1.1, Review 21). The self-actualization need might not be seen only from the perspective to satisfy own interests but also seeing how difficult someone else's job might be, yet, being able to appreciate good quality of the service.

Moreover, self-actualization might bring us back to the basic question: Why do people travel? It is because they have got the need to experience, to achieve something new, unknown, and to personally grow. That is why the airport, as well as, in-flight the passengers should have the chance to experience something unique that will stay in their memory forever (Alcivar, 2018). This might be for example teaching them something new about the culture of the country the airline comes from or being able to create delightful moments as mentioned before crew making a birthday surprise for a passenger.

Social fairs and environmental protection need have not been mentioned in online reviews collected. Nowadays, charity activities, sponsorships, or celebrity endorsements are taking part in the promotional activities of each company to increase their general brand awareness. This topic is going to be investigated further in the following section *Expectations set via storytelling promotional activities* (Section 6.1.3).

In terms of aviation environmental sustainability, the passengers care more and more what is the carbon footprint each flight causes, thus the governments are forced by the public to implement additional measures so we can travel freely without harming our planet (Taylor, 2019). Even though, environmental sustainability is a real issue, according to the online reviews the airlines' passengers evaluate their service quality experience, as well as, the experience of the customers who have already flown with the airline before. Thus, it plays a major role in the decision-making process of potential customers. That shows factors as charity activities or sustainability are not the factors the customers are looking at primarily.

5.1.1.6.1 Sub-conclusion

The fifth level of self-actualization takes us back to the core question which is how can traveling helps us to self-actualize. Mainly people travel to fulfill their desires for personal development to reach their real potential (Alcivar, 2018; Robertson, 2009). The following needs

according to the analysis have shown to be important to the passengers: to appreciate the work of others and learning/exploring something new. It can be concluded that this need may create a link between the passenger identity and the principles of the airlines (ibid).

5.1.1.7 Knowledge/understanding needs (innovation, learning)

As has been mentioned before, the airlines are facing fierce competition on the market, hence they must innovate to keep a competitive advantage. Nevertheless, the innovation does not only serve the airlines as a tool for how to keep their market position but also the passengers due to the overall technological progress are having more and more demanding needs.

Thus, the airlines should always innovate in terms of developing new services or its contents, work on flight networks and its frequency, implementing new technological features in the aircraft cabin (as HD screen, electrical/USB outlet, etc.) (Chiu & Lin, 2004).

As has been outlined earlier, this way the airlines also exhibit that they know who their customers are, yet, they understand what are their needs are aiming to satisfy. Implementation of new services or other innovative technologies is then included in the company's promotional efforts to let the customers know what is new and what more they can enjoy while traveling

This topic has not been mentioned by the passengers in the online reviews, however, the overall understanding of the customers' needs and keeping up the progressive development is one of the ways how to offer products/services to the customers to satisfy them. The promotional promises are going to be further discussed in the following *section 5.1.3 Expectations set via storytelling promotional efforts*.

5.1.1.7.1 Sub-conclusion

Since the innovation/knowledge needs were not expressed in the passengers' reviews, however, we may assume that these needs are: innovation of cabin features (HD screens, electrical outlets, Wi-Fi, etc.), new service offerings onboard, new routes on the flights' network, frequency of the flights corresponding with demand.

5.1.1.8 *Aesthetic needs (appreciation of nature, arts, literature)*

What is iconic for Middle East Airlines are the uniforms that are famous all over the world. Passengers appreciate being served by well-groomed flight attendants wearing a beautiful uniform. However, the online reviews do not mention the uniform in particular, since they are evaluating the service quality experience in general. Thus, the uniforms as a part of a brand image will be further discussed in the following *section 5.1.3 Expectations set via storytelling promotional efforts*.

The same applies to the ambiance of the cabin, which has not been mentioned by the passengers in particular, but it is part of the overall evaluation of the cabin comfortability and functionality.

5.1.1.8.1 *Sub-conclusion*

Aesthetic needs are considered as higher-level needs, since, as mentioned before, a human being always puts major attention to satisfy the basic needs. Thus, Aesthetics is concerned with a need related to recognition and being able to take pleasure in beauty (Robertson, 2009). Even though, the needs of aesthetics were not found in the online reviews we can assume the following passengers' needs: beautiful uniforms, the well-groomed staff of cultured behavior, airport/aircraft cabin well designed, promotional materials express feel for beauty (Chiu & Lin, 2004).

5.1.1.9 *Conclusion*

The above section has expressed the passengers' needs mentioned within the online reviews put into the perspective of Maslow's seven categories related to the airline service quality, and these are as following:

1. *Physiological needs* – cabin/seat comfort, cleanliness, food and beverage, and cabin crew.
2. *Safety needs* - are attentiveness, problem-solving skills of personnel, dependability, consistency/personalized service, and secrecy.
3. *Belongingness and love need* - to feel welcomed/appreciated, to be politely treated by the staff, empathy.
4. *Esteem needs* - the feeling of importance, the given feedback is valued and the need for being heard.

5. *Self-actualization needs* - to appreciate the work of others and learning/exploring something new.
6. *Knowledge/understanding needs* - innovation of cabin features (HD screens, electrical outlets, Wi-Fi, etc.), new service offerings onboard, new routes on the flights' network, frequency of the flights corresponding with demand.
7. *Aesthetic needs* - beautiful uniforms, the well-groomed staff of cultured behavior, airport/aircraft cabin well designed, promotional materials express feel for beauty.

Knowing what are the customers' needs is one of the crucial aspects of the success of the airline and also leads to customer satisfaction. This section is going to be used as one of the elements to be able to understand the discrepancy between the passengers' service quality expectations and perceptions voiced in the online reviews later in this chapter.

5.1.2 Service quality expectations created via online reviews

According to Fan and Fuel (2016), at least 94% of the consumers are going to read reviews about the product/service before they decide to proceed with the purchase of a given product/service (Anderson, 2018). Thus, the online reviews also serve as a base that the potential consumers built their expectations on. As mentioned in the literature review, the consumers expect to receive a service they believe should be delivered rather than would be delivered. Yet, sentiment analysis is performed to find out how the consumers perceived the experience since this leads the potential consumers to make a particular buying decision and it influences the level of satisfaction.

5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis

As mentioned previously, sentiment analysis most importantly focuses on the analysis of the thoughts, feelings, appraisals, and conclusions expressed by the airlines' passengers, moreover, it considers their satisfaction with the services they received (Perez-Rosas & Mihalcea, 2013). Mostly, the sentiment analysis looks for the polarity of the reviews since this is one of the ways how the researcher might discover how the passengers perceived the service delivery and its quality.

There are versatile techniques on how the polarity of online reviews can be discovered. It is due to the fact there are various formats according to which the review is written. Thus, a suitable

technique must be chosen to effectively analyze customers' perceptions. This thesis is taking into consideration the *free format* of the reviews. This means the feature and opinion word must be extracted from the individual reviews. Moreover, it goes into detail as assessing what particular objects/products/parts of service the passengers did like or dislike (Htay & Lynn, 2013).

Firstly, the feature of the service/product is extracted then the opinion word is retrieved to find out the polarity of the passenger perception. Since this thesis is focusing on the *airline service quality* that means if the reviewer is using *positive language* overall but the airline service quality is evaluated negatively then the review is marked as *negative*. On the other hand, if the review is rather negative but the airline service quality is assessed as *positive* then the review is considered *positive*. Lastly, the neutral review takes into consideration a review of a passenger who has experienced an average service, which means he/she is not overly disappointed but also not delighted by the received service. This supports that the feature of the airline service is dependent on the opinion word which then reveals the polarity, thus evaluates the passengers' perception.




Online review	Sentiment analysis	Opinion word and its sentiment
<i>The flight attendants were very friendly...</i> (Source: Emirates reviews from TripAdvisor, review 89)		Opinion word = positive
<i>...it was very sad to see... rude behavior of the crew...</i> (Source: Etihad reviews from TripAdvisor, review 78)		Opinion word = negative
<i>Not my favorite airline I have to say, but the outward bound flight was quite good.</i> (Source: Etihad reviews from TripAdvisor, review 40)		Opinion word = neutral

Figure 6 Opinion mining, an instance of the positive, negative and neutral sentiment of airlines' online feedback (Appendix 1)

What should be highlighted is the perception of individual passengers. Since, the reviews are written by the airlines' passengers coming from various backgrounds, having different experiences

and the ways they perceive the airlines' service quality. That means no two individuals are having the same perceptions. The below section shows the sentiment analysis where are presented the total numbers of reviews analyzed all together as well as per individual airline. Furthermore, to showcase the coding process the reviews are split into sections of positive, negative, and neutral to demonstrate qualitative content analysis features. It is important to mention that this study is looking for the service quality perceptions of the Middle East airlines, thus the polarity of the reviews is considered from the passengers' point of view. The polarity has been allocated by the researcher according to how the reviewer has evaluated the overall service quality satisfaction.

Airline	Platform	Positive reviews	Negative reviews	Neutral reviews	Total	Reviews in total both from Skytrax and TripAdvisor
Emirates	Skytrax	2	23	3	28	128
	TripAdvisor	47	40	13	100	
Qatar	Skytrax	12	5	0	17	117
	TripAdvisor	73	25	2	100	
Etihad	Skytrax	2	15	0	17	117
	TripAdvisor	40	46	14	100	
	Total	176	154	32		
		48,6%	42,5%	8,8%		

Figure 7 Online Reviews Polarity Summary (Appendix 1)

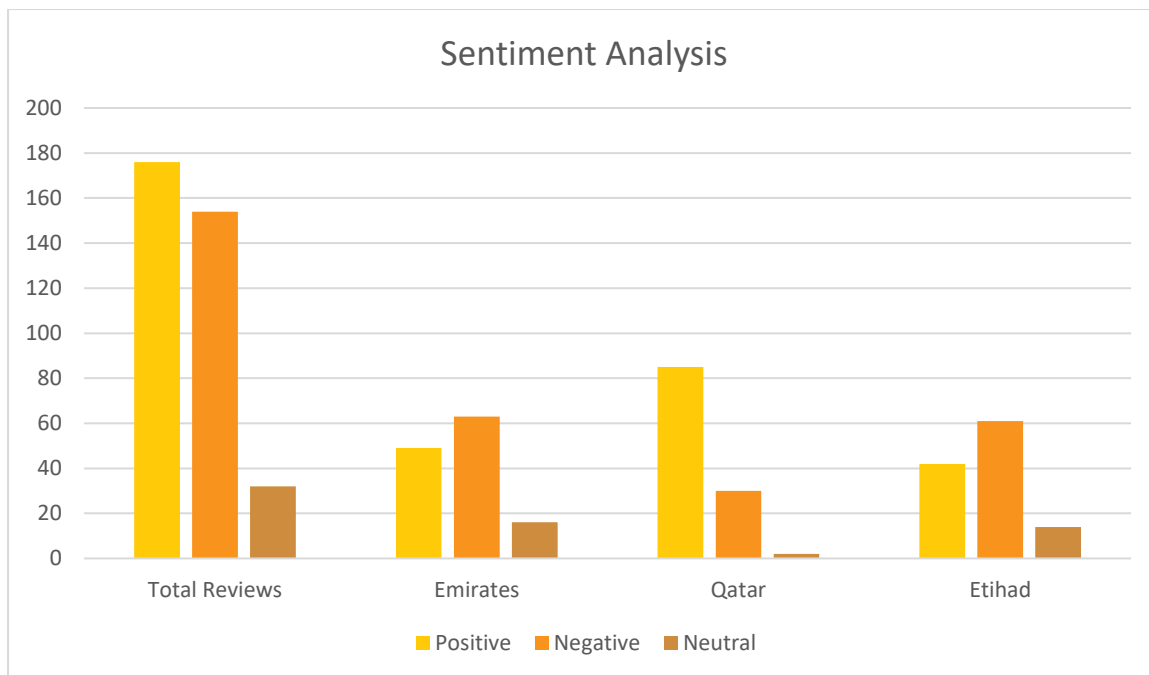


Figure 8 Sentiment Analysis, own interpretation, built on the online reviews of Emirates, Qatar, Etihad Airways collected between February and March 2020

The table presented in *figure 7* above reveals that the Middle East Airlines' service quality is perceived rather positively than negatively. Even though 362 reviews in total were gathered it must be highlighted that parts of some reviews were not mentioning airline service quality. That is why these reviews are not involved in this sentiment analysis since the reviewers speak about other features of the experience that they had the chance to encounter, thus it is important and applies to that particular passenger, but not to this research purpose.

Positive reviews are significantly influencing the potential passengers' buying behavior furthermore it might reinforce the airlines' trustworthiness. It has been proven that consumers tend to interact rather with companies having positive reviews than the negative ones. Moreover, the general reputation of the company is assessed based on online feedback. Nevertheless, the studies also reveal that consumers tend to write a review after a negative experience rather than a positive one (Anderson, 2018). From *figure 7* above it is clear that there is a higher number of positive reviews 48% (*figure 6*) however, the 42% (*figure 6*) of negative reviews is alarming. That is why the airlines need to take the negative reviews seriously since only one negative review might be harmful to the business and damage the brand name.

During the data collection and analysis, it has been discovered that only Etihad airways are actively replying to many reviews on Skytrax and TripAdvisor unlike their competitors Emirates and Qatar. Active interaction with the reviewers shows customer care, moreover, in case of the negative review or shortfall, a solution might be offered. This can create a great impression not only on the

affected consumer but also on the potential consumer who is about to make a purchase (Lee & Kim, 2020).

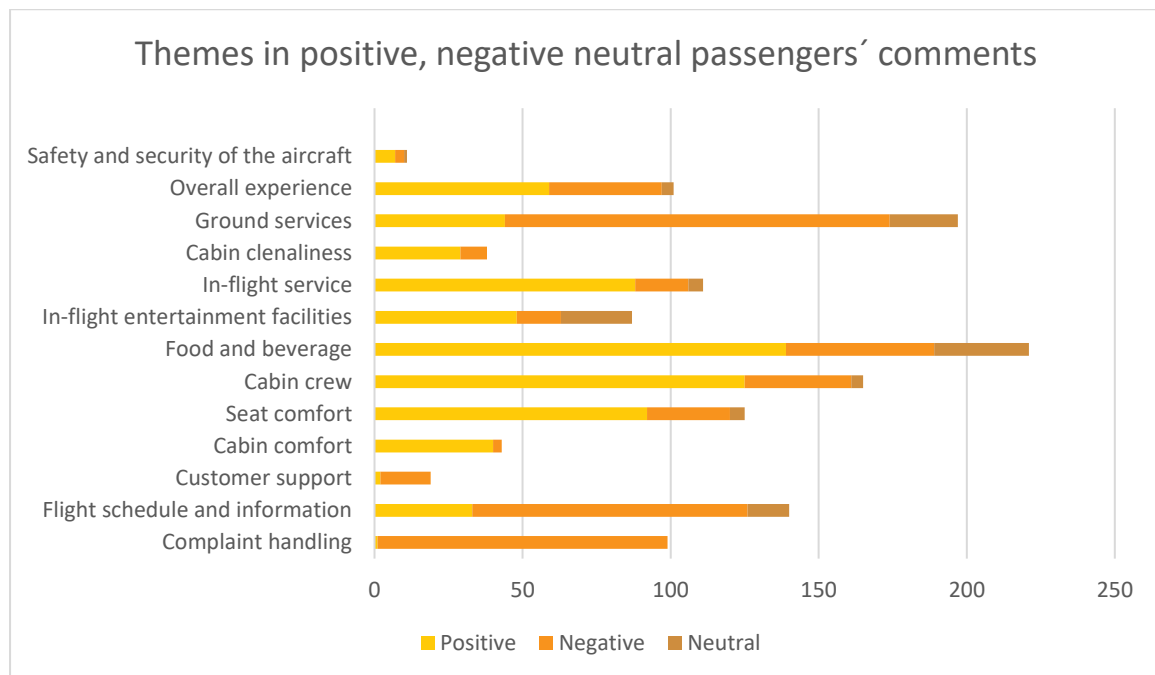


Figure 9 Themes in positive, negative neutral passengers' comments, based on Appendix 2

From the chart above (Figure 9) it is clear that the positive, negative, and neutral comments of the airlines' passengers are their perceived experience and satisfaction with the various features of the service via direct interaction with them. The interaction is an important stage since this is the moment when the experience is created. Experience then persists in the memory of the passenger, thus he/she can review its quality after the service has been delivered. Even though, every passenger was not able to express his/her perception regarding each theme the content analysis approach allowed to define most of the themes described by the airlines' passengers. That means the major themes were found in the overall online reviews analyzed. It is obvious that particular online reviews had either more positive, negative, or neutral comments, thus this is significant to conclude.

In the reviews analyzed there were positive, negative as well as neutral elements that the reviewers mentioned in their review. The chart above shows that the theme *"Food and beverage"* has received the most of the positive comments from the passengers. On the other hand, the themes of *"Safety and security of the aircraft"*, *"Cabin cleanliness"*, *"Cabin comfort"*, *"In-flight service"*, *"In-flight entertainment facilities"* generally have not received many and significantly negative comments which would have a substantial impact on the overall customer experience. Additionally, the *"Ground services"* had the highest number of negative comments by the passengers as they mostly connected their dissatisfaction with this theme, moreover, it was followed by *"Flight schedule and information"*

and “Complaint handling” themes within the online reviews. When looking at the overall comparison of all themes it is clear that most of the themes have been evaluated positively. That indicates that generally, the service quality perception is rather above average.

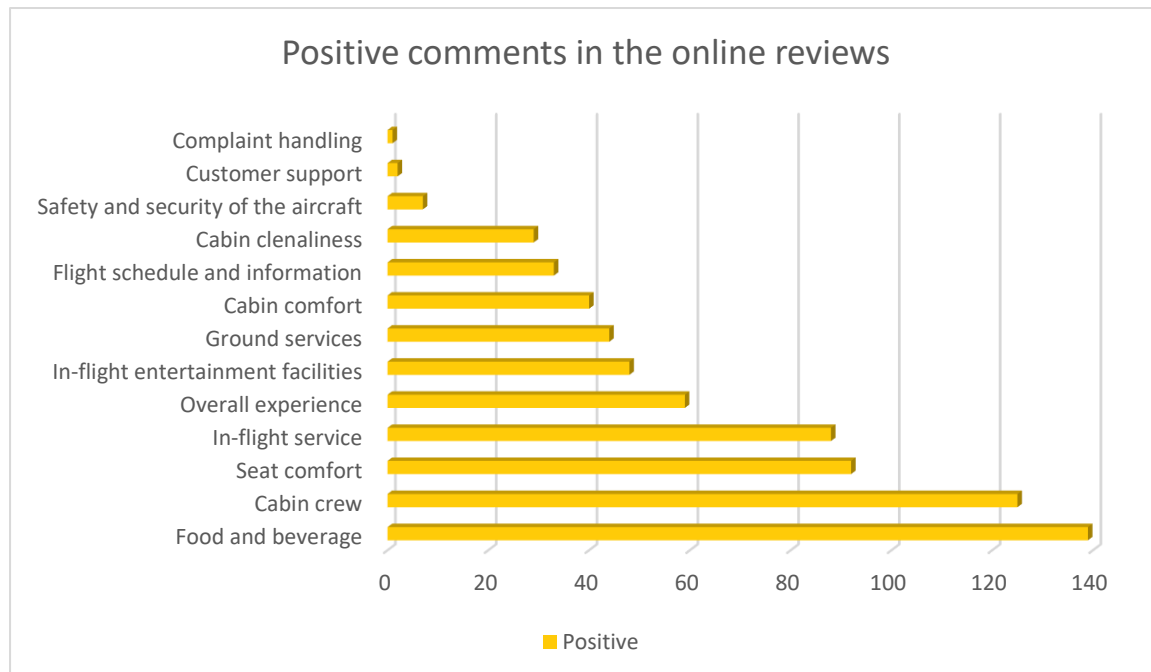


Figure 10 Positive comments in the online reviews, based on figure 9

Taking into consideration only the positive comments within the themes we may observe gradual development based on the review analyzed from the “Complaint handling” to “Food and beverage” as it is shown in the chart above. Thus, the themes of “Food and beverage” and “Cabin crew” are the main elements and themes that the passengers deemed that they are the most satisfied with and had the chance to interact with during the service delivery. Generally, it is clear that the passengers are the most satisfied with the onboard services and features.



Figure 11 Positive comments in the online reviews, based o figure 9

The chart above shows that negative comments are built on various elements that the passengers were not satisfied with, thus, they expressed negative comments within the online reviews. The “Ground services” and “Complaint handling” have received the highest number of negative comments. The reason for it might be the low expertise of the personnel in handling various aspects of the airlines’ ground services. Moreover, it might have also been by the poor design of the airport the passengers were departing from as well as the airport’s poor hospitality. On the other side, the “Safety and security of the aircraft” and “Cabin comfort” had the lowest number of negative comments. That signifies that the passengers generally felt comfortable, safe, and secure during the flight. This is might be assigned to the airlines’ excellent preparation since these elements are always perfectly obeyed, moreover, it is also one of the primary functions the aircraft must-have. Additionally, it seems the aircraft are well equipped and functional, thus majority of the reviewers were satisfied with these elements of their trip. The theme of “Safety and security of the aircraft” received the lowest number of comments from all the online reviews analyzed. This might have been caused by the fact that the passengers were not exposed to any safety and security failures, hence, there are only a few comments regarding this theme. Despite that there were negative comments, generally, there were more positive comments on what shows that service quality is perceived as rather above average.

5.1.2.1.1 Sub-conclusion

As the paragraphs above suggest the service quality of the Middle East airlines is perceived positively by their passengers based on online reviews. Nevertheless, there have been found 48% of positive and 42% of negative reviews. Despite a higher number of positive perceptions the airlines should consider the negative reviews, since online review websites are having significant impacts on the decision-making process of the passengers, additionally, negative reviews may destroy the brand name in the eyes of the passengers. As the analysis shown the most discussed theme by the passengers which has received the highest number of positive comments is *“Food and beverage”*. The *“Ground services”* and *“Complaint handling”* have received the highest number of negative comments. Generally, most of the themes were evaluated positively what indicates above-average service quality.

5.1.3 Expectations set via storytelling promotional efforts

5.1.3.1.1 Emirates profile

Emirates is one of the largest passenger airlines in the world. It has been established in the mid-1980s and has implemented aggressive strategies to become the fastest-growing airline (Centreforaviation.com, 2020). The airline has a fleet of 270 aircraft (Emirates.com, 2020) and is the largest operator of superjumbo Airbus 380 and Boeing 777 aircraft type (Centreforaviation.com, 2020). Emirates with its international hub at International Airport in Dubai operates flights to 159 destinations on 6 continents (Emirates.com, 2020).

5.1.3.1.2 Emirates Airline Story

The story has started in 1984 when Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum asked the director of dnata, to develop a business plan on starting a new airline. Later that year the plan was presented to the Sheik who asks the dnata director to establish an airline within 5 months with a fund of 10 million dollars. Moreover, he demands the airline to ***“look good, be good, and make money”*** (Emirates.com/about-us, 2020).

In October 1985 Emirates operated its first flights to Karachi and Mumbai on leased aircraft from Pakistani Airlines. In 1987 Emirates has started to operate its first owned aircraft (ibid).

At the beginning of the 1990s Emirates are introducing ***first inflight entertainment in the world*** by installing video systems in all seats. In 1992 Emirates built a new terminal at Dubai's International Airport (DXB) only for their use. Even though the industry was slowed down by the Gulf war Emirates place an order of 7 Boeing 777s. Furthermore, Emirates are the ***first ones to implement telecommunication onboard as well as fax equipment***. Other destinations are added to the portfolio of Emirates (ibid).

In the year 2000 Emirates signs a contract with Airbus for delivery of the Superjumbos, the ***largest passenger aircraft***. In 2004 Emirates sign ***GBP 100 million contracts with English Premiership club Arsenal***, inclusive naming rights for their stadium and shirt sponsorship. The contract has been renewed in 2012 what makes it the longest-running deal of this kind in the sports world. In 2005 the world's largest order of 42 Boeing 777 has been made. Emirates builds its catering facility in DXB. In 2008 new Terminal 3 which is Emirates-dedicated opens (ibid).

In 2012 commercial Emirates-Qantas partnership has been signed. In 2013, the world's first Airbus 380 dedicated concourse opens, where passengers may board the upper deck directly from the gate. In 2014 Emirates is named the world's "Most valuable airline brand" with an estimated value of 3.7 billion US dollars. In 2016, Emirates has won a Skytrax award "World's Best Airline". (ibid).

5.1.3.1.2.1 Sum up

Emirates airlines have been established in 1984 by the royal family of Dubai. They have started their business on leased aircraft flying on their first International route Dubai to Karachi (Pakistan). During 35 years of its operation, the airline grew exponentially also thanks to extensive sponsorships and investments and became one of the world's leading airlines.

Furthermore, Emirates is often taking a position of industry breaker by being the first one to implement new innovative solutions or features, thus to attract technology savvy customers who enjoy premium services and products. This is an inspiring example of an airline development connected to the development of Dubai city itself.

5.1.3.1.3 Airline storytelling and brand's promise

In 2018 Emirates airlines launches a whole new brand promise "Fly Better". The core of the new brand's promise is to innovate and be better in all that is offered to the customers. This promise is embedded in the Emirate's brand DNA. This allows the airline to be able to offer a comfortable and

enjoyable experience across all cabin classes at all times and repeatedly. This way Emirates wants to confirm their superior status in the airline industry (Staff, 2018).

For the promotion of the new brand promise, Emirates has created video spots, the first one promotes the great choice of entertainment on the award-winning in-flight entertainment. The various genres which the traveler might watch in-flight are represented by dancer transitioning between different dance styles to showcase the range the in-flight entertainment offers. The second ad is representing a wide network of Emirates destinations and a smooth transition in between the destinations as well as amazing cabin features (Emirates.com, 2018).

5.1.3.1.4 Sponsorship and advertising

Emirates mostly use their website and social media like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube for their promotion. It is important to mention that the pictures presented below are collected only from the Emirates Official Facebook page since the same posts are replicating on the previously mentioned other social media. Mostly the posts of Emirates Airlines are focusing on their new brand promise “Fly Better” and their sponsorships since it is where the airline invests the largest amounts to target the largest spectrum of the customers.

That Emirates are strong in their marketing efforts also supports the fact that only on Facebook they achieved 10.6 million followers (Facebook/Emirates Airlines, 2020) where all the most important news are shared. Twitter account with 81.8 thousand followers works as 24/7 customer support where customers may ask questions regarding flights, visas, etc (Twitter/Emirates Airlines, 2020). As well as, Instagram with 5.2 million followers sharing inspiring and significant moments of the airline (Instagram/Emirates Airlines, 2020). As it is obvious Facebook is the most followed account of Emirates where the brand promise is put into perspective of a globally recognized brand reaching to their customers by offering more.

Generally, the strong position on social media is important for all of the airlines in question since it gives the customers an idea of what markets the airline is serving, moreover, what are the features of their services and products. Moreover, sharing important events and moments from the “ordinary” life of an airline creates the stories that the travelers want to hear, thus it helps to build a stronger relationship with them.

In Emirates posts most commonly we can see featuring Emirates Crew dressed in the iconic uniform with the red hat and white scarf, together with the famous sportsmen or celebrities to raise awareness and to create synonymity between Emirates brand and sponsorship. Thus, the Airline

supports both culture and sports for example football, rugby, cricket, tennis, golf, horseriding, or Formula 1 as is shown in the pictures below. The sponsorships of this kind aim to connect the brand with potential customers all over the world and to be a part of the people's biggest passion. Moreover, to bring the starts of the sports world and other cultural symbols nearer to their fans (Group, 2018-19).

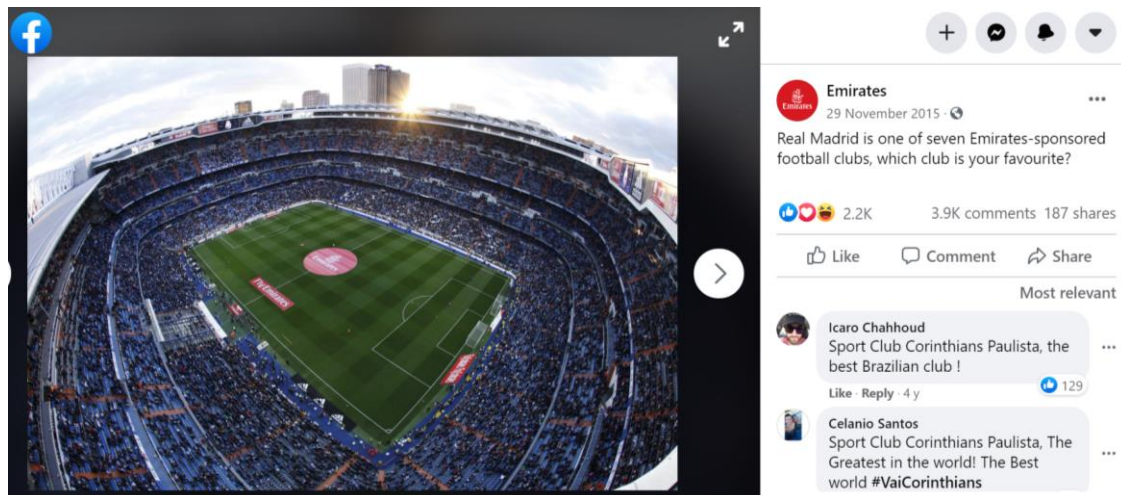


Figure 12 Picture of Real Madrid Sponsorship, Emirates Facebook Page

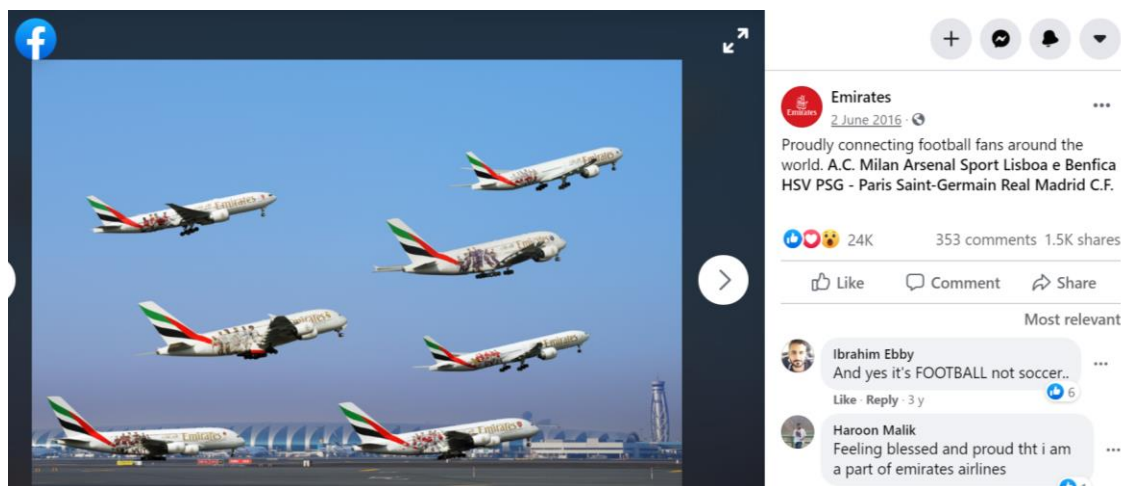


Figure 13 Picture of Emirates Aircrafts Connecting A. C. Milan Arsenal Fan all around the world, Emirates Facebook Page

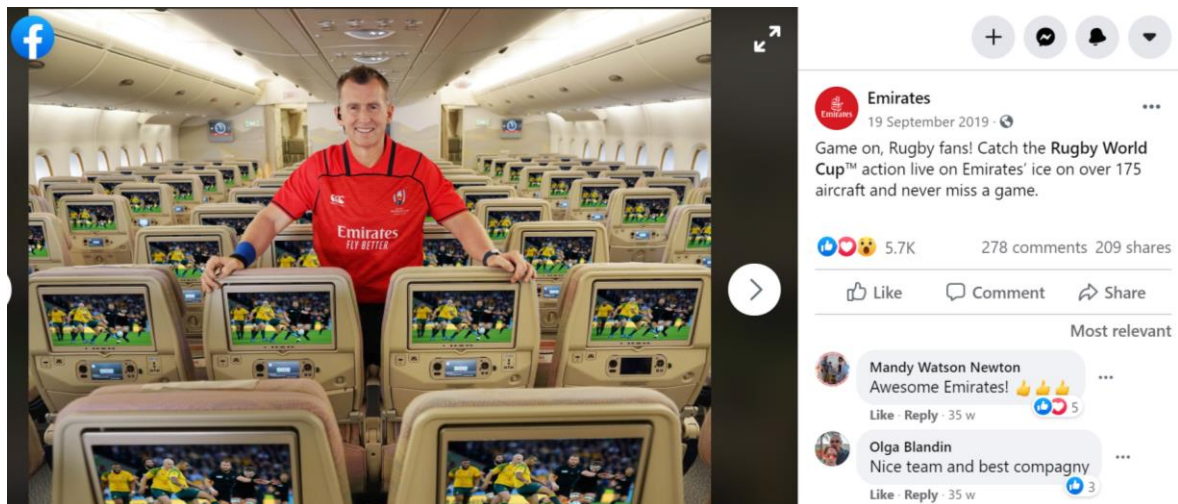


Figure 14 Picture of Rugby Sponsorship + opportunity to watch the game in-flight live on the IFE screen, Emirates Facebook page

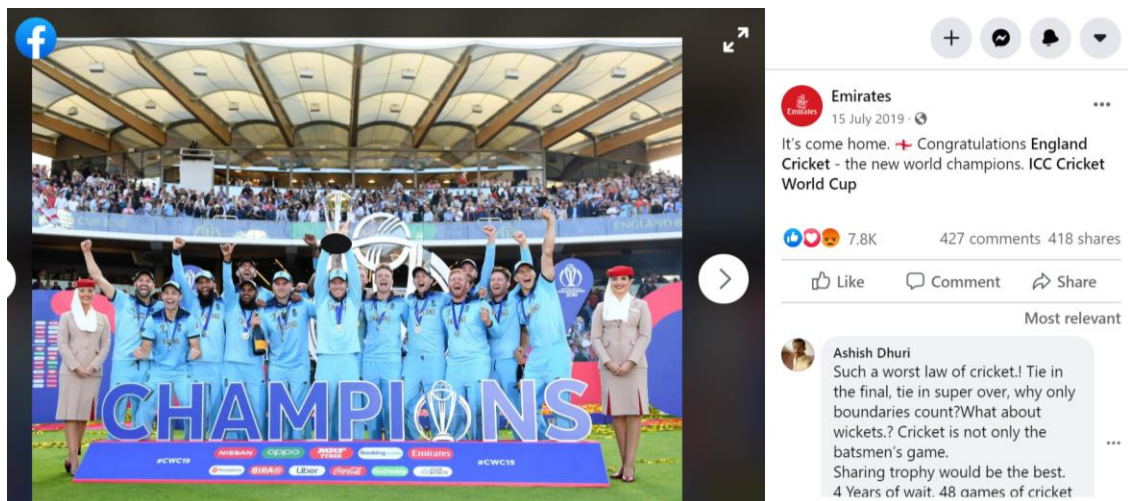


Figure 15 Picture of Cricket Sponsorship, Emirates Facebook Page

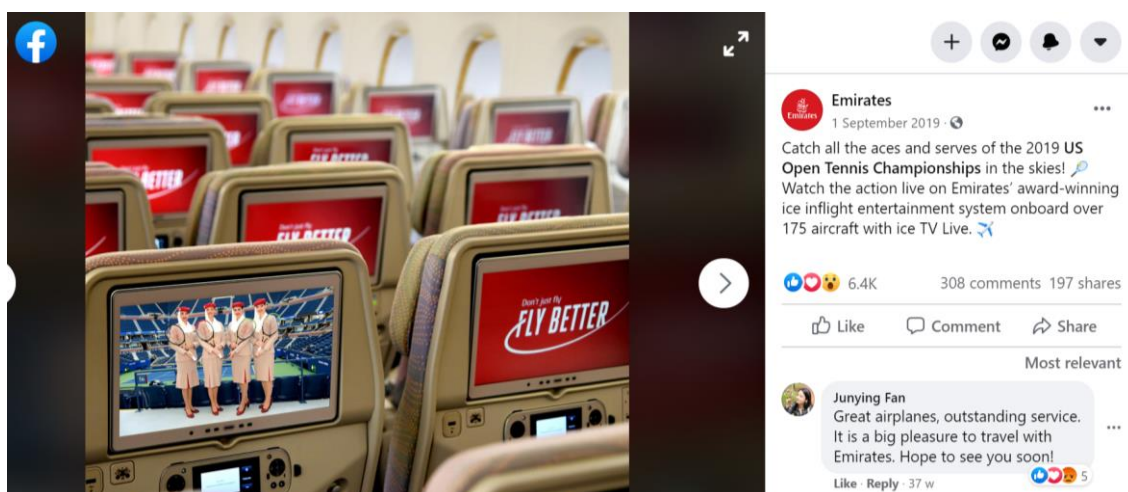


Figure 16 US Open Sponsorship, Emirates Facebook Page

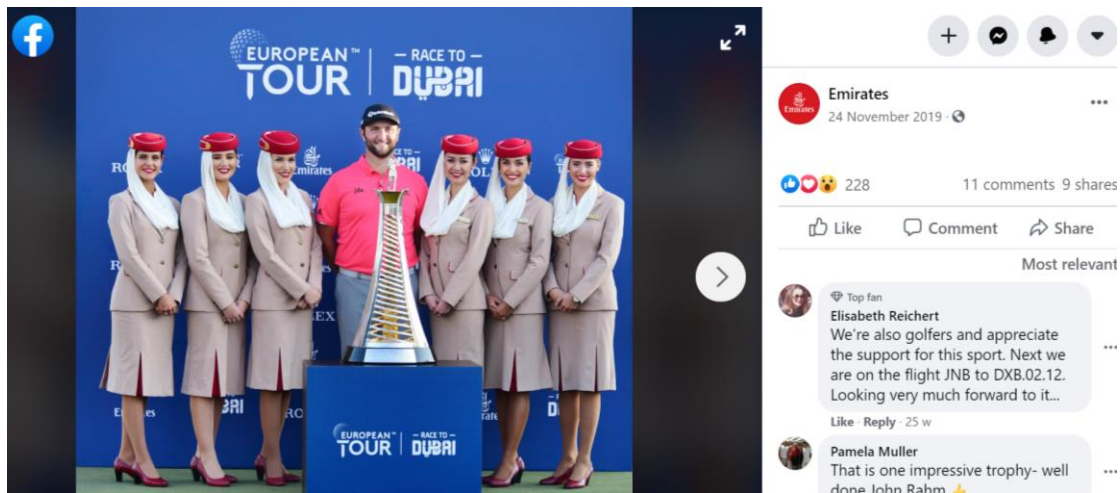


Figure 17 Picture of DP World Tour Championship, Emirates Facebook Page

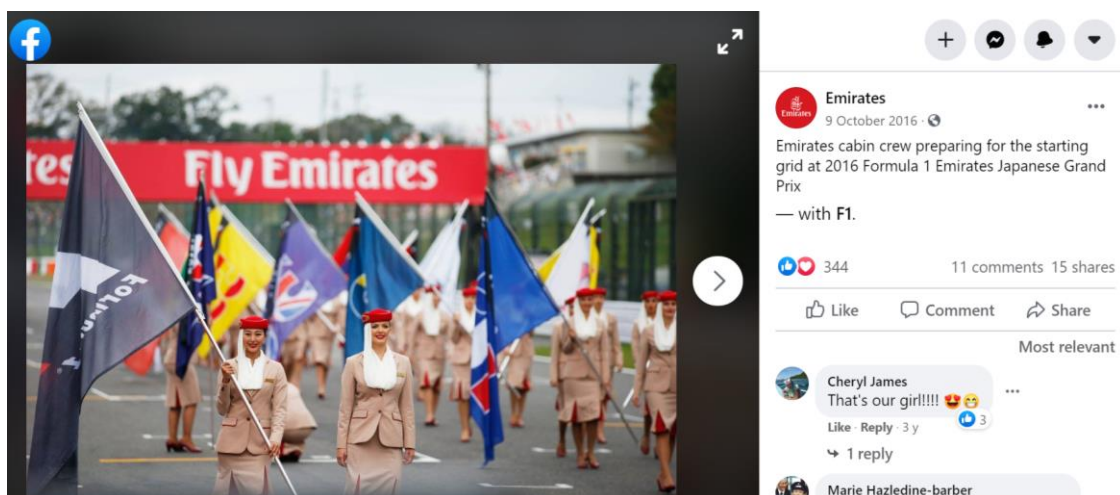


Figure 18 Picture of Grand Prix Formula 1 Sponsorship, Emirates Facebook Page

5.1.3.1.5 Celebrity Endorsement

In 2015 Emirates Airlines have created celebrity endorsement featuring popular American actor Jennifer Aniston to increase brand awareness as well as to reach other customer groups. This way also the relationship between the brand and the consumers might be established, it helps to build trust, and by featuring famous icons it might help to increase the mind associations with the brand.

The advertisement with Jennifer Aniston became a viral marketing effort that represents in humor way the luxury of the Airbus 380 flight and the whole airline. In the promotion, Aniston represents an ordinary passenger in a down to earth manner thus reaching wide clientele. Moreover, creating a feeling that luxury is reachable for everyone (Skyjourneys.com, 2015).

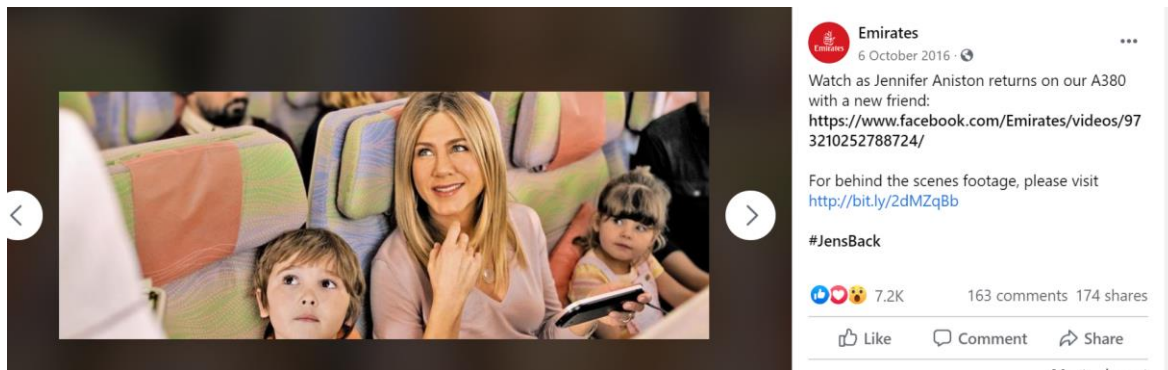


Figure 19 Celebrity Endorsement featuring Jennifer Aniston, Emirates Facebook Page

5.1.3.1.6 Logo

The Emirates logo features the company's name in Arabic Calligraphy with below English translation. The overall style of the logo represents elegance and luxury (1000logos.net, 2019).

5.1.3.1.7 Products and services in economy class

Emirates gives a promise of getting superior experience even in economy class. Thus, on the Emirates website, one might find a detailed video of how your seat looks and what are the cabin features. That means the customer gets an idea of the value for money and also starts building trust (Emirates.com/economy-class, 2020).

Surely, the Emirates represent all the modern features like Wi-Fi, HD touch screen, etc. simply everything nowadays customer might need. Moreover, as the picture below suggests, Emirates promises to deliver more than other airlines usually deliver in economy class what goes in line with the brand promise Fly Better. Emirates explains that even economy class feels like an upgrade on your trip (ibid).

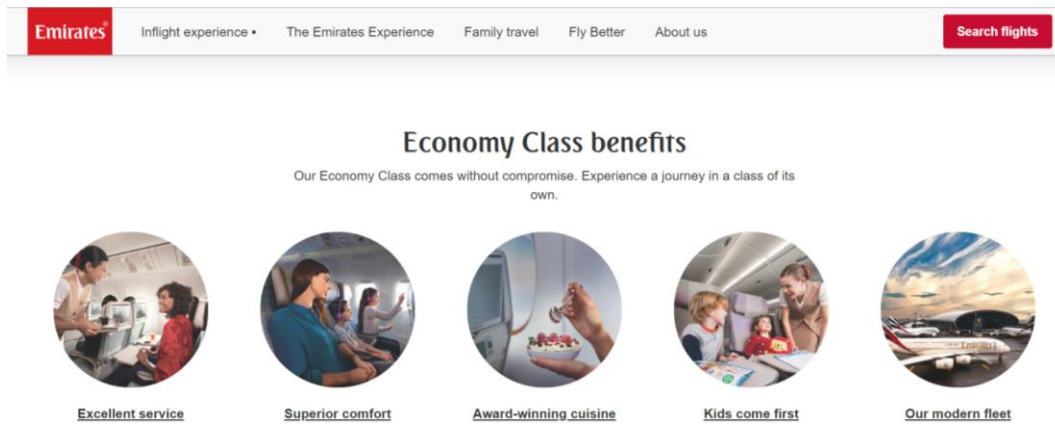


Figure 20 Picture of Emirates Economy Class Benefits, Emirates.com

The more luxurious vibe of Economy class is enhanced by various awards validating the standard level that must be achieved.

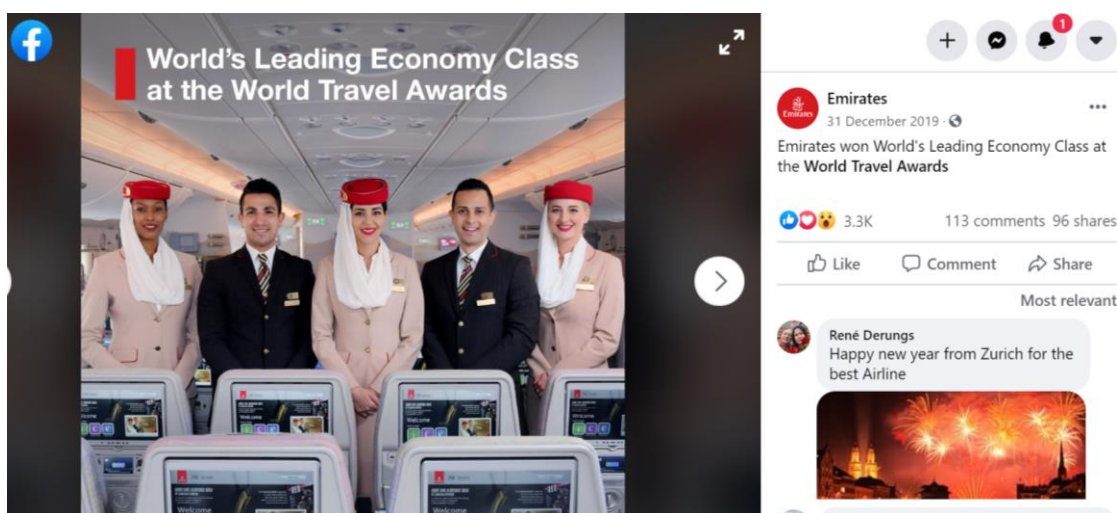


Figure 21 Picture of World's Leading Economy Class, Emirates Airlines Facebook Page

5.1.3.1.7.1 Sub-conclusion

Emirates Airlines' storytelling on social media gives the impression of an airline offering superior services and products, thus the customer has a feeling that by flying Emirates he/she gets something extra.

Several storylines and various content are representing new technology, new features on board of the aircraft, services but also sponsorships or other products customers may buy. What also creates the face of the brand since traveling unites the global community. Moreover, they create

stories from the daily routine of their employees. That means Emirates is not purely focusing on the selling but also by presenting stories they invite their customers to engage and be part of this community. Since, Emirates' social media accounts are full of customers' perceptions, conversations, and content it signifies that the storytelling is done in the right way.

5.1.3.2 Qatar airways profile

Qatar Airways is the national carrier of Qatar state, based in the capital city Doha (Qatar Airways Corporate Communications Group, 2017). From its base the airline links over 160 international destinations across the world using a fleet of 250 aircraft of both Airbus and Boeing family (Qatar Airways Group, 2019).

Together with its Gulf competitors Emirates and Etihad, Qatar is nowadays one of the world's top airlines. Thanks to its excellent customer service Qatar was named for the fifth time 'Airline of the Year 2019' at the Skytrax World Airline Awards (Skytrax, 2019; Qatar Airways, 2020).

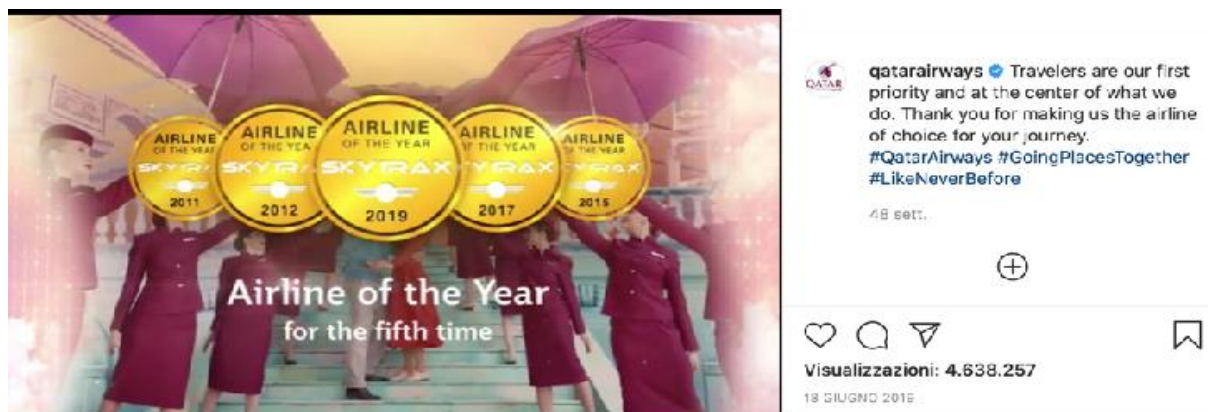


Figure 22 Picture of Skytrax Airline Awards, Qatar Airways Instagram Profile

5.1.3.2.1 Qatar Airways Story

Qatar Airways have started in 1994 as a small national carrier with only a few routes. The Airline was re-launched 3 years later under the command of His Highness The Father Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani who realized his vision of re-creating the airline into leading International Airline with the highest standard of service (Qatar Airways Corporate Communications Group, 2017).

Thus, Qatar Airways have become the fastest-growing carrier in the history of aviation under the leadership of His Excellency Mr. Akbar Al Baker (ibid).

In 2011, Qatar achieved 100 destinations on its route portfolio and is named for the very first time ***Airline of the Year 2011*** by Skytrax. This is when the journey of amazing success has started. Qatar is named Airline of the Year several times after. Moreover, Qatar expands its global network of destinations every year (ibid).

In 2015 Qatar unveils a new brand campaign – *Going Places Together* – that supports its passengers to go together on an amazing journey to reach their dreams and ambitions (ibid).

Qatar is also proud of one of the youngest fleet in the industry by having on average no more than 5 years old aircraft (ibid).

5.1.3.2.1.1 Sum up

Qatar Airways have started their operation 1994 operating few routes in the region. Since then Qatar Airways became the fastest-growing air-carrier in history. Moreover, the airline has won many awards for its outstanding services and excellence.

5.1.3.2.2 Mission and Vision

Qatar's mission is reached by emphasizing excellence in all activities the airline is offering to its customers, by prioritizing the safety with delivering the highest standards of customer service (Comparably.com, 2020).

According to His Excellency, Mr. Akbar Al Baker, the vision is about continuously expanding network of routes to destinations which are demanded or with fewer connections than needed, at the same time to provide the best inflight experience with a focus on supreme cuisine, entertainment and comfort, moreover, to satisfy the needs of technology-savvy customers with the newest developments and ongoing innovation (Forbes, 2017).

5.1.3.2.3 Airline Storytelling and the brand's promise

In 2015 its often mentioned slogan "*The world's five-star airline*" was changed and revitalized into "*Going places together*" creating an updated brand narrative enhancing the theme of interconnecting people physically and emotionally (Lucky, 2015). The narrative made the brand promise more realistic, thus all passengers might relate to the message. The core of the narrative is

why is traveling an important part of our life, how can Qatar enhance the passenger's experience and why is traveling an essential element of self-actualization. Hence, Qatar succeeded in creating a beautiful story everyone can engage with. Yet, Going Place Together is not only a slogan but it became a company's philosophy (Kersey, 2017).

In 2019, a new brand campaign is introduced "World Like Never Before" which builds upon the previous campaign. This campaign is inspired by Hollywood movies which take a traveler on an unexpected magical trip. Thus, Qatar shows how one experience can be brought to a completely new level. The goal of the campaign is to surprise and inspire the travelers and reveal all the options Qatar Airways offers, both in terms of the services and products on board, as well as, the wide network of the destinations Qatar Airways links to (Qatar Airways Group, 2019; Qatar Airways, 2019).

5.1.3.2.4 Sponsorship and advertising

It is important to mention that the airline's content is similar on all social media accounts like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Qatar has built a strong basis of followers across social media, which on Twitter is 1.5 million where the most important news and advice for passengers are posted (Twitter/Qatar Airways, 2020). With an Instagram account, Qatar has achieved 3 million followers sharing inspiring photos of possibilities where the traveler might go next (Instagram/Qatar Airways, 2020). But the main remains Facebook with 16.8 million followers (Facebook/Qatar Airways, 2020). This makes Qatar one of the most followed airlines that puts together the brand's values with the passenger's needs (Kersey, 2017).

On the social media platforms might be found examples of content created along with the most recent marketing strategy that means professionally made pictures and videos of journeys sending a message that the flight itself is not the way to the end but the journey can be an amazing experience (Kersey, 2017).

Furthermore, Qatar utilizes especially sports as one of the means on how to bring people and communities together on a global level. Qatar managed to link the airline and the everyday user by featuring the football club FC Barcelona as a team that unites the world (Kersey, 2017). "*The Land Of FC Barcelona*" (Qatar Airways, 2013) generated a huge amount of reactions both on Facebook and YouTube by also featuring megastars Messi and Neymar who have millions of social media followers, thus they showcase aspects of current applicability. Moreover, Qatar creatively developed an onboard safety video by starring popular football players (Kersey, 2017; Qatar Airways, 2019).

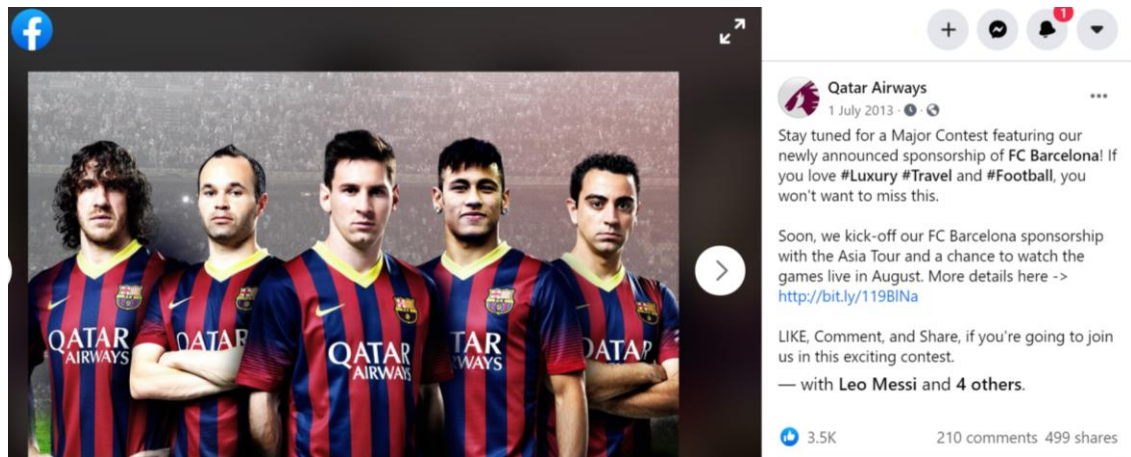


Figure 23 Picture of Qatar Airways Sponsorship with FC Barcelona, Qatar Airways Facebook Page

In 2019 Qatar became an official partner of FIFA and made a deal for one of the biggest sporting sponsorships in the world (Qatar Airways Group, 2019).

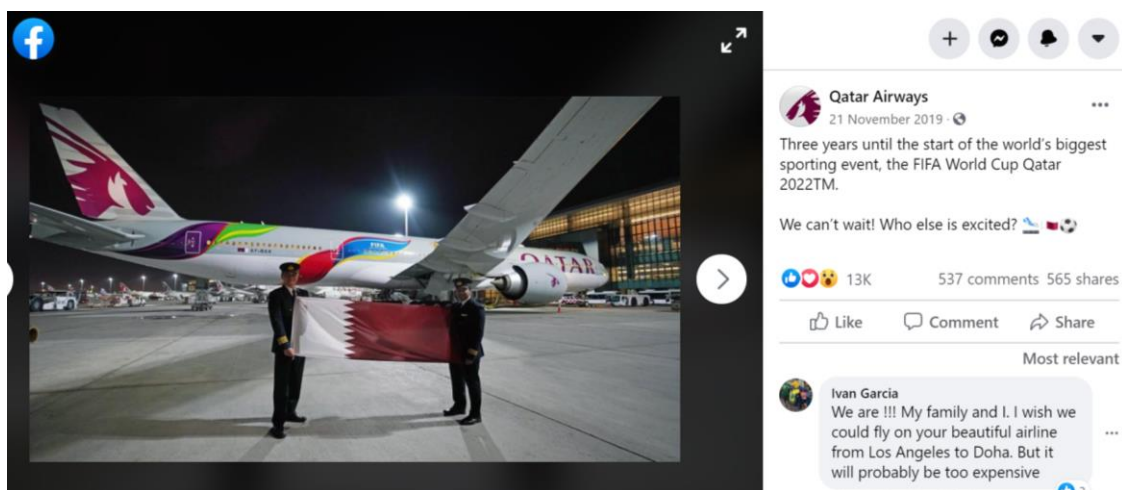


Figure 24 Picture of FIFA Sponsorship, Aircraft FIFA Livery, Qatar Airways Facebook Page

Moreover, Qatar is a sponsor of other initiatives as Qatar Cricket Tournament, Doha Jewellery, or Katara European Jazz Festival that are on a local level.

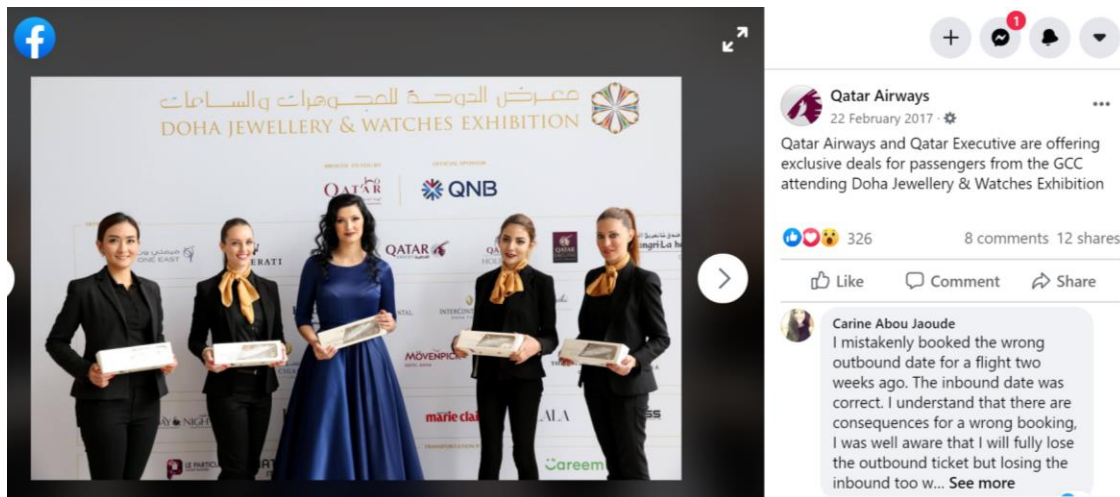


Figure 25 Picture of Doha Jewellery Sponsorship, Qatar Airways Facebook Page

5.1.3.2.5 Celebrity Endorsement

Qatar Airways often are sponsoring a partnership with famous social media influencers during various major events, as Australia's Masterchef judge George Calombaris, who was a face of series of promotional videos to make the airline more exposed to the public and touch also distant clientele (Kersey, 2017).

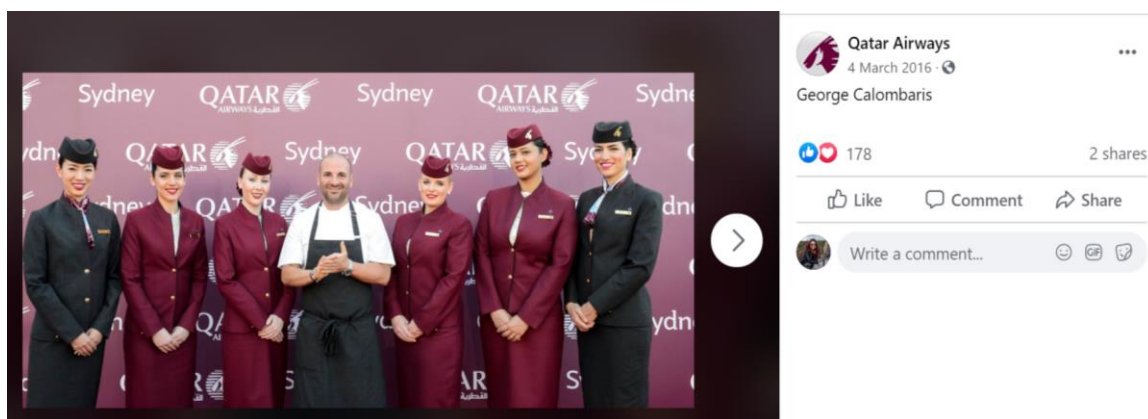


Figure 26 Picture of Celebrity Endorsement with George Calombaris, Qatar Airways Facebook Page

The promotion of the World Cup was done by incorporating singer and TV star Nicole Scherzinger. Thus, Qatar created a TV commercial full of music and fun to attract fans from all over the world, thus, the catchy song expresses sport as a common language to motivate and convince people to pursue their dreams (celebrity.co.uk, 2018).



Figure 27 Picture of Celebrity Endorsement with Nicole Scherzinger, Qatar Airways Facebook Page

5.1.3.2.6 Logo and uniform

The Qatar Airways logo shows the head of an oryx, which is the Qatar national animal, an antelope with long horns (dwglogo.com, 2020). The colors used are the burgundy/purple-colored letters and light Grey, which represent grace, nobility, and power (Wikipedia/QatarAirways, 2020).

The same is adopted for the uniform wore by cabin crew, which in 2010 was voted as the most charming suit by Skyscanner users (Independent.co.uk, 2010).



Figure 28 Qatar Airways Logo, Pinterest

5.1.3.2.7 Products and services in economy class

Qatar promises an amazing experience in economy class like never before. On Qatar's official website the customers might explore all the features the seat and cabin offers, thus the customer

knows what services and products are included in the price, so the trust may be established and expectations created (Qatarairways.com/economyclass, 2020).

The same way as Emirates are representing all the modern features of the aircraft In-flight Entertainment, Wi-Fi, etc. and promise ample space, comfort, and award-winning service provided by the cabin crew. The picture below suggests that the service is delivered accordingly with the brand promise “Experience Economy Class Like Never Before”.

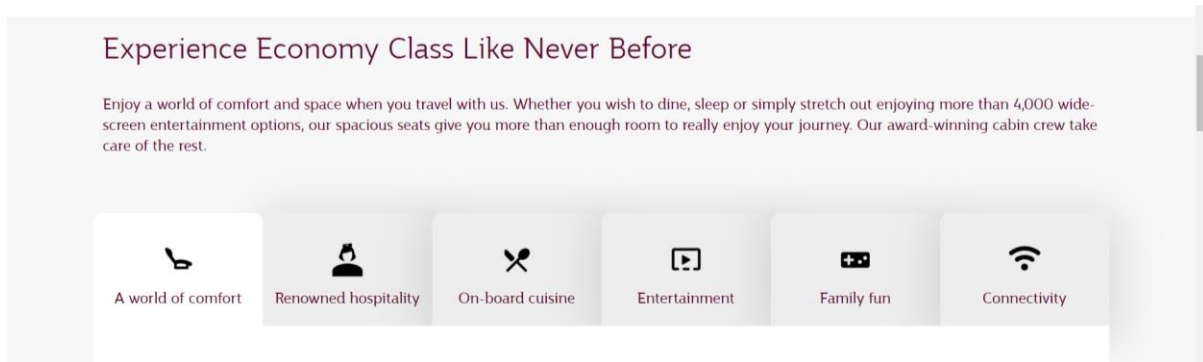


Figure 29 Picture of Economy Class Services and Features, Qatar Airways Website

5.1.3.2.7.1 Sub-conclusion

Qatar Airways are using storytelling throughout all of their marketing channels, thus it became part of their marketing efforts. The new campaign communicates by experiencing the “World Like Never Before”. It tells a story about a new level of experience on board to surprise travelers and inspire them to travel.

Hence, Qatar’s storytelling throughout its social media platforms creates an impression of being motivated to travel, explore, and experience and at the same to be spoiled by the award-winning service and gadgets on board.

Qatar as well as Emirates utilizes storytelling as sports sponsorships and celebrity endorsements since it brings the communities together. Nevertheless, the marketing efforts of Qatar are the most successful from the 3 airlines assessed since they have achieved the highest number of followers.

Similarly, like Emirates, Qatar focuses on achieving the customers’ ultimate satisfaction by providing excellent services, thus, stories of this type provoke the customers to actively interact.

5.1.3.3 Etihad Airways

5.1.3.3.1 Etihad airways profile

Etihad Airways is the flag carrier of the UAE and the second-largest airline in the country after Emirates Airline. Its head office is in Abu Dhabi and its name comes from the Arabic word 'الإتحاد' which means 'union'. Founded by a royal decree, the operations commenced in November 2003 (Spotting, 2014). The airline operates more than 1.000 flights per week (Wikipedia, 2020) to over 400 destinations in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia, and North America, with a fleet of 30 Airbus 320, 10 Airbus 380, 38 Boeing 787 and 19 Boeing 777 aircraft. In addition to its core activity of passenger transportation, Etihad also operates Etihad Holidays and Etihad Cargo (Etihad.com, 2020).

5.1.3.3.2 Mission and vision

From the Etihad official website, it is clear that they aim to achieve world-class expectations. In addition to that, the airline's motto and the narrative is going along with their cultural traits (Etihad.com, 2020).

Etihad's vision is thoughtfully connected to its Arabian heritage and hospitality which are the dominant factors reflecting the national identity where the cultured attitude to hospitality is embedded in Etihad's cultural mix. Moreover, Etihad aims to become a modern global airline that is breaking the conventions by challenging and changing airline hospitality (Essays, 2018).

This goes hand in hand with the *Etihad's mission* is to provide safety and security on the level of global standards to welcome guests with a refreshing spirit within a friendly environment (ibid).

5.1.3.3.3 Airline storytelling and re-branding

In 2014 Etihad Airways unveils a stunning new design allocated to a new word concept "remarkable" (Landor, 2014). Thus, the new livery must tell a remarkable story of its region and Abu Dhabi's past, present, and future, creating a narrative for a modern airline image and brand. The chosen motif recalls the shifting dunes and the ambient geometry present in the architecture and culture of the emirate. Everything's reinterpreted with a sense of Arabian modernism which has become synonymous with Etihad and Abu Dhabi itself (ibid).

Hence new scale of colors and patterns has appeared which become an icon for the airline. The pattern is called “Facets of Abu Dhabi” made of prismatic polygons in earth-toned colors of various shapes to signify the levels of the services the airline can offer its passengers (Yerman, 2017).



Figure 30 Picture of Facets of Abu Dhabi (Landor, 2020)

When the livery was released the CEO James Hogan confirmed that the new image breaks from the established conventions and commits to bringing something different. The new design shows its uniqueness and radical turn away from traditional airline image representations, thus the airline may stand out in the sky and attract the eyes of all at every airport (Yerman, 2017).

The story behind the new image is not just to act as a seller of the aircraft’s seats but to treat everyone with gratitude, thus to welcome guests onboard unlike the other airlines having “just” passengers. Etihad brand is depicted as hospitality provided with magical experience the airline is iconic for (Yerman, 2017). For Etihad “No detail is too small, no idea too big” (Landor, 2020). These rebranding efforts recreated from “only” Etihad airline into a destination that has got a place in the sky floating high above the city (ibid).

Therefore, Etihad has introduced itself in a new coat to be seen as a luxurious service brand that has thought about the whole service experience starting from the cabin interior to the class configuration, the lounge, the website, and the uniforms (Landor, 2020).



Figure 31 Picture of Etihad’s Aircraft in the new livery (Yerman, 2017)

5.1.3.3.4 Sponsorship and advertising

Thanks to its new livery, Etihad has extended its remarkable brand idea into unconventional territories, such as multichannel content, sportive events, and innovation festivals (Ward, 2018). The company is currently sponsoring football, cricket, and motor racing (Grand Prix) sporting events, among other campaigns (Etihad.com/our-sponsorships, 2020).

Moreover, the sponsorships and other activities are included in their efforts on social media. On Facebook they have achieved 4.5 million followers (Airways, 2020) hence Etihad can share the new features of their aircraft, important events, or moments. On Twitter (713.4 thousand followers) Etihad shares the new information or suggests advice for its customers (Twitter/Etihad Airways, 2020). That same content is then replicated also on Instagram with 1.5 million followers (Instagram/Etihad Airways, 2020). Thus, Facebook remains the most important medium for the promotional efforts of Etihad Airways, which goes along with their mission and vision of interconnecting the Arabian heritage and hospitality with the needs of the modern global airline.



Figure 33 Picture of Criquet Sponsorship, Etihad Airways Instagram Profile



Figure 32 Picture of Grand Prix Sponsorship, Etihad Airways Instagram Profile



Figure 34 Picture of Football Sponsorship, Etihad Airways Instagram Profile

5.1.3.3.5 Celebrity endorsement

In 2015 Etihad released a 360° virtual reality film featuring Nicole Kidman, then chosen as the brand ambassador of the Etihad Airways, as part of its global 'Flying Reimagined' campaign. The five-minute film shows the viewers a panoramic look at the airline's luxurious Airbus A380 (Bell, 2016). Numerous influencers were invited to experience the comfort of their aircraft and who positively rated their experience.

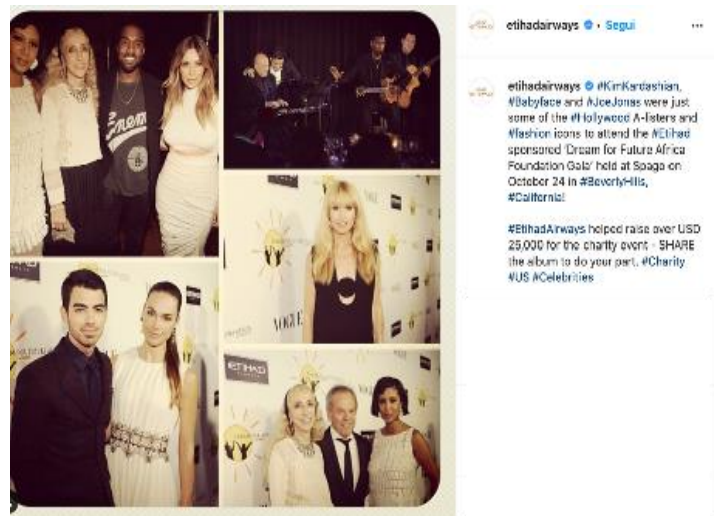


Figure 35 Picture of Celebrity endorsement, Etihad Airways Instagram Profile

From Etihad's social media profiles as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube, the vision and mission can be easily understandable. Simply Etihad is not just a means of transportation but offers complex experience on-air and on-earth since they directly cooperate with Abu Dhabi city (Etihad.com/abu-dhabi, 2020).

The palette colors itself used in their accounts reflect the re-branding operation put in place in 2014. All this to create storytelling able to communicate to their customers Etihad's promise: a luxurious safe experience, that brings a taste of globally and Arabic traditions at the same time.

5.1.3.3.6 Uniform

In 2014 even the crew uniforms were changed and updated. The uniform is made from 100% Italian wool intricating jacquard design representing Etihad's timeless sophistication, glamour, and elegance (traveljunkiediary.com, 2014).



Figure 36 Picture of Cabin Crew Uniform, Ettore Bilotta & Norman Jean Roy Unveil New Etihad Airways Uniforms 2014

5.1.3.3.7 Products and services in economy class

Etihad Airways offer comfortable cabins with complimentary food and drinks. A special feature is presented with a 3D preview of the cabin configuration so the customer might choose a seat that suits the need the best. Moreover, passengers might use a special service of “Neighbour-free” which means the whole row might be dedicated to one person.

The services on board include full service of complimentary drinks and meals, moreover, you get connected to the Wi-Fi. However, not all the aircraft are equipped with HD screens allowing the passenger to watch favorite programs, thus, on short-haul flight passengers have to download an e-box stream app to be able to stream the content offered on their device.



Figure 37 Picture of Economy Class Service, [Etihad.com/economy class](http://Etihad.com/economyclass)



Fresh food, good mood

We use fresh, healthy ingredients to create our main meals and snacks on board. You'll always have a choice of dishes, including one vegetarian, or you can request a special meal.



Children's meals

We know that children often prefer simpler food. From fishfingers to pasta, we've created special child friendly meals for you to pre-order. We'll even include a tasty treat to keep little tummies happy.

Figure 38 Picture of services offered onboard, [Etihad.com/economy class](http://Etihad.com/economyclass)

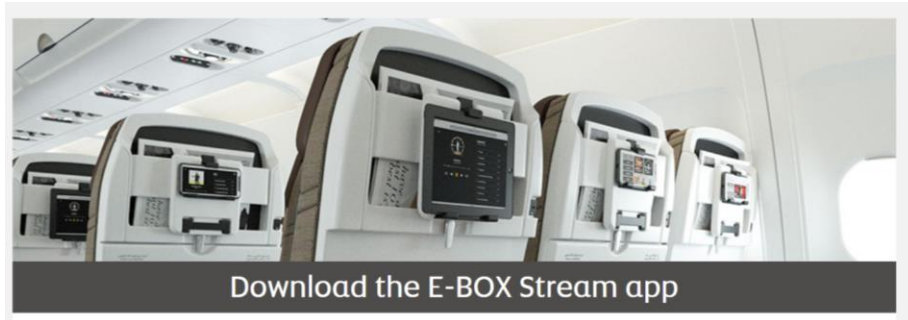


Figure 39 Picture of Streaming App, Etihad.com/economy class

5.1.3.3.7.1 Sub-conclusion

The Etihad 's storytelling on their social media creates an expectation of world-class services/products, moreover, the national identity and hospitality are felt on each step.

One may find various storylines as excitement connected to traveling, presenting the new features of the aircraft, stories of Arabian culture as well as sense of community created via sponsorships or celebrity endorsements.

Moreover, showing the stories of its employees on their journeys show the excitement of new adventures, sense for detail as well as passengers' treatment with gratitude. Thus, also Etihad does not only focus on selling but also on creating remarkable stories for their customers.

5.1.3.4 Summary

Overall it may be seen that all 3 Middle East Airlines are well-established global brands within the aviation industry. Moreover, stories about their development and design of the airline's name, logo, and uniform serves as a transmitter that creates feelings, knowledge, and memory in customers' perceptions (Yan, et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the brands put a large focus on their company heritage, hospitality, and customers' needs. It is clear they predominantly communicate what are the values of traveling with them and secondary they share stories. Hence, it represents the main interest of the airlines to focus on the values their services/products have for their travelers.

By the usage of the sponsorships and celebrity endorsements, the airlines motivate their customers to be involved on social media, moreover, to buy their services/products. The important part of the whole strategy is to tell the story of how a human being can self-actualize by traveling,

what are the benefits and how traveling unites the communities through the lens of Arabian luxury and hospitality offered.

From the various social media posts presented above, it might be observed that the traveling and story are shown visually which means in the form of photography/video but usually, the story is supported by a short textual caption. That means these two types of storytelling can be combined and enhanced by one another. This way the airlines usually highlight what are the values of the service/product.

According to Liu and Wu (2011), the story the company intends to transfer to the consumer must be able to create an emotion within the consumer's mind and must portray the needs as well as should bring additional knowledge and comprehension of the services and products (Liu & Wu, 2011). Thus, 3 various values within the storytelling have been found. First of all the airlines are communicating **functional values** - comfort, modern features as HD Screen, Wi-Fi and electrical outlet, safety, **emotional values** – adventures, freedom, uniting people, memories and **social values** – community feeling, being involved, honesty. Thus, these are the customer of the value may perceive and support by buying the airlines' services/products.

Additionally, the airlines are using similar plots in their storytelling and which are showcasing the theoretical understandings of the 20 master plots (*Literature Review, Section 2*). In case of the Middle East Airlines mainly the *Adventure* plot is used in their storytelling. Mainly, we can observe the plot in the story of their development when a visionary leader, later on, CEO, establishes a successful company with a globally recognized brand. Moreover, the adventures are also expressed via presenting the journeys the travelers might take for example to reunite with family, friends, or to explore new destinations. Another plot used by airlines is *Quest*. This is especially applicable for Qatar Airways since they want to support the travelers to experience something magical and to be inspired to follow their dreams, thus to find what may change their life.

What is important to mention that the common pattern of all 3 airline brands is to through their storytelling deliver and create emotional values as motivation, inspiration, and encouragement to travel the world. Thus, the airlines mostly tell a story into which the service/product value is incorporated.

5.1.4 Perceived Service Quality by Middle East Airlines' passengers

The following part of the thesis presents the themes discovered within the airlines' online reviews. This way it might be observed how the airlines' passengers have defined their experience with the services of Middle East Airlines. The content analysis has revealed that there are altogether 13 themes that the passengers mention the most when assessing their service perceptions (Appendix 2). The themes were based on the sample of online feedback shared on two online rating platforms Skytrax and TripAdvisor. Furthermore, the themes are divided into sub-themes that portray all the elements each theme includes.

Since this study is conducted qualitatively, the collected data have been organized at first, thus the analysis could be performed carefully and effectively. Yet, the open coding has been applied to produce common themes of the online reviews. The codes were categorized into 13 core codes which are going to be presented and discussed below (*Appendix 2*).

Thus, the following section draws upon *expectation-confirmation theory* (Lee & Kim, 2020) for the analysis of the themes. Firstly, the passengers' expectations were defined above by implementing Maslow's' Hierarchy of needs to find out the needs the customers have while traveling overall. Furthermore, the airlines themselves contribute to service quality expectations creation via their marketing activities and storytelling.

In the following section, the consumers' perceptions are put into perspective with their expectations. Thus, the gap between passengers' expectations before the trip and their experience evaluation may be assessed. Since all the definitions of the service quality are always considered from the customer point of view, thus, all the found passengers' perceptions are taken as significant categories of service quality (Mc. A Baker, 2013). The themes discussed below:

5.1.4.1 Food and Beverage (17%)

Even though the number of positive and neutral comments within the "Food and beverage" theme outweighs the negative ones, there might be found gaps between the passengers' perceptions and expectations (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*). According to Lee and Ko (2016a), the quality of food and beverage during the flight is the main aspect that influences the potential passenger throughout the decision-making process, moreover, it has been proven that the in-flight service quality also impacts the passenger loyalty (Sarioglan & Yabaci, 2018). Generally, we can say that the expectations met the perceptions. Nevertheless, airlines promising award-winning cuisine and

services onboard should be able to minimize the areas where the passengers disconfirm their expectations, thus, to improve the overall onboard services and products even to a higher level as they promise in their marketing efforts (*Section 5.1.3 Expectations set via storytelling promotional efforts*) since marketing is one of the aspects what impacts the passengers' expectations. It is also important to mention the "Food and beverage" theme was the most mentioned one by the airline passengers (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*), thus, it is deemed as the most important aspect of the service quality for them. Taking into consideration that this theme is satisfying the physiological needs of the passengers and the promotion of economy class and its services it may be assumed that the passenger expectation regarding the quality, tastefulness, and frequency of the serving especially on long haul flights is high even in economy class.

Nevertheless, within the passengers' reviews may be found many contradicting reviews, which means there are positive and negative comments regarding the same topic, for example, one passenger perceived the food and beverage as excellent, on the other hand, another customer might have perceived it as inedible (Appendix 3, 2, 1). Thus, it is assumed that the airlines are missing consistency within the food and beverage on board of their aircraft on different flights.

Hence these were the aspects of the service quality which have been perceived by the passengers as meeting their expectations: quality of the food, good selection of special meals, good selection and regular delivery of beverages, steel cutlery.

The following service quality perceptions did not meet the expectations: quality of the food, no nut-free meal option, confusion regarding special meal, insufficient quantity of food, not very wide selection of drinks, drinks not offered regularly, no water provide after boarding.

Since "Food and Beverage" have been the largest themes within the online reviews, we may consider it as the factor which directly leads to passengers' satisfaction, thus, may enhance customer loyalty (*Section 4.5 Satisfaction, 4.5.1 Expectancy disconfirmation model*).

5.1.4.2 Cabin Crew (13%)

According to sentiment analysis (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*), the majority of the comments regarding cabin crew were positive, hence, the perception of the cabin crew and the standard of service quality is positive. What is important to mention, many reviews speak about the cabin crew service quality that has overachieved their initial expectations. Moreover, the cabin crew is the second most mentioned concern of the airlines' passengers. That signifies that it is an important aspect of the overall service quality that has a significant impact on the final experience.

As has been mentioned earlier, cabin crew may help to fulfill the passengers' physiological needs in case of emergency, as well as, immaculate and excellent service on board. Middle East airlines are very proud of their onboard service and have won countless awards, for example, Qatar Airways won several times Skytrax Award of the Year, or Emirates won World's Leading Economy Class at the World Travel Awards, moreover, the airlines often use notions as excellent, better, enjoyable, magical experience, detail orientation, etc. in their promotional storytelling to showcase the standards of the service quality, thus the passengers' expectations are set on a high level (*Section 5.1.3 Expectations set via storytelling promotional efforts*).

As mentioned several times before, Middle East airlines are famous for their cabin crew wearing iconic uniforms, moreover, for their excellent service on board. Hence, these are also the expectations of the passengers.

Many airlines' passengers perceive cabin crew as helpful, friendly, kind, professional, moreover, in terms of the service, they perceive it as efficient with being able to fulfill the requests on time, with attention to detail or personalized needs (*Appendix 1, 2, 3*).

Nevertheless, there were distinguished several instances of the disconfirmation. That means the passengers' expectations did not meet their perceptions. Thus, they perceived the service quality in terms of cabin crew as negative. The passengers expressed their perceptions as the crew was impolite, rude, unhelpful, uninterested, unfriendly, arrogant, unsmiling, and having an attitude (*ibid*).

As well as, "*Food and beverage*" also "*Cabin crew*" is one of the crucial factors having an impact on passengers' satisfaction and their consequent loyalty. Moreover, this theme delivers the emotional and social value to the passengers (*Section 4.7 Concept of customer value*), and it is the time when the customer creates a positive relationship with the brand.

It may be observed also in this theme there are contradictions in customers' perceptions (*Appendix 3, 2, 1*). It may be assumed that there may be varying consistency of the service consistency. This may be also caused by varying lengths of the flights yet, the time for the crew to interact and provide outstanding services can be limited. However, in this case, the cultural background may play a significant role since what may be perceived as rude/impolite in one culture may be perceived as standard in another culture as mentioned before (*ibid*).

5.1.4.3 Ground services (12%)/Flight Schedule and Information handling (10%)

"*Ground services*" are the third most commented theme, hence, it a significant part of the service provided to the passengers. Despite the importance of ground services, this theme has received

most of the negative comments. *“Flight Schedule and Information Handling”* has also received a majority of negative comments (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*).

Ground services play an important part in the service quality of the perceptions since the ground personnel/services are the first encounter the passengers have with the airline. Thus, the passenger should feel appreciated and to be politely treated with empathy since delays or information acquisition may be stressful for the passengers. Furthermore, the ground personnel often provides information regarding flights, tickets, refunds, etc. thus, the consistency and reliability of the information is a significant aspect. This theme is also closely connected to the theme of *“Flight schedule and information handling”* since it is ground personnel who is going to be handling the passengers from delayed flights and is providing additional information regarding rebooking of the tickets and alternative flights. Based on this study, in terms of the promotion of the airlines themselves, there is not significant attention put on these two themes so the customers’ expectations may be based on their needs (*Section 5.1.1 Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs*).

The service quality has been voiced by the reviewers as following: good, fast, easy, efficient check-in, good customer service, helpful and professional ground staff, smooth boarding and disembarkation, excellent/good critical situation handling, excellent/good flight schedule handling, excellent/good information handling, on-time departure/arrival (Appendix 1, 2, 3).

However, there were several instances of customers’ perceptions of not up to standard service quality they mentioned following aspects: bad check-in experience, slow and bad customer service, no help when booking or rebooking tickets, chaotic boarding, poor critical situation handling, discrepancies in luggage policies, poor flight schedule handling, Poor information handling and delayed departure/arrival (ibid).

It may be seen that there are again contradictions in customer’s perceptions hence, this may be dependable on the airport the aircraft is departing from. Every airport may have different facilities and space for securing smooth passengers’ check-in and boarding. Moreover, the attitude of the personnel may vary depending on their cultural background, etc. Yet, the Middle East airlines are global brands as mentioned before, so the standards of the services and on-ground should not vary significantly depending on the country the service is provided in.

5.1.4.4 Seat comfort (10%)/Cabin comfort (3%)

Seat comfort received a majority of positive comments as the sentiment analysis revealed (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*). Hence, this theme is the fourth most important aspect of service

quality according to the passengers. This is significant for the passengers of Middle East airlines since they are mainly operators of long haul routes, as mentioned before. In this section also the “*Cabin comfort*” is included since it is closely connected to the overall aircraft comfortability. Also, cabin comfort received the vast majority of positive comments.

Based on this study, the comfortability of the aircraft may fulfill the basic physiological needs of the passengers, moreover, delivers the functional value. The airlines also promote themselves as providers of the best economy class which is characteristic for all modern cabin features like electrical outlets or HD screen as well as, comfortable seats with spacious legroom and good recline. Hence, these are also the expectations of the passengers (*Section 5.1.3 Expectations set via storytelling promotional efforts*).

The perceptions achieving passengers’ expectations have been voiced as good, average seat comfort, spacious seat, good recline, good configuration, good/decent legroom, two-seater row, “DO NOT DISTURB” sticker. Passengers’ generally expressed positive perceptions achieving even overachieving their expectations regarding the comfortability of economy class of Middle East Airlines.

There has been found also examples of not satisfied perceptions of the comfort service quality, thus, passengers voice these aspects: the uncomfortable, narrow, worn-out seat, poor configuration (cramped seats), no legroom.

The negative perceptions did not meet the expectations of the passengers since the airlines promote themselves as airlines with a young/modern fleet. Hence, passengers would not expect traveling on old aircraft full of scratches. Also, cramped spaces do not achieve the needs customers have in world-leading economy class especially on long haul flights (Appendix 3, Section Seat comfort/Cabin comfort).

5.1.4.5 *In-flight Services (9%)*

The theme of “*In-flight services*” has received the majority of positive or neutral reviews and this section creates 9% of all comments so it is considered as aspect contributing to overall comfortability and atmosphere of the flight.

As mentioned previously, the airlines have won several rewards for their in-flight services and are deemed as one the best economy class providers. Thus, passengers expect timely services and an unlimited amount of food and drinks since this is included in the price of their ticket. Moreover, the airlines present the in-flight service with words as excellent, amazing, or superior. Furthermore, the in-flight services deliver social and functional values in terms they contribute to the passengers’

comfort and feelings of being involved and appreciate. That means the expectations and demands of the travelers are high (*Section 5.1.3 Expectations set via storytelling promotional efforts*).

From the passengers' comments, it might be observed that there is the inconsistency of the in-flight services since some of the passengers perceived it as very good, thus meet their expectations, on the other hand, there are customers who perceive it poor experience, which is going downhill compare to their previous experience (Appendix 3, 2, 1). Hence, again we may see inconsistency regarding the services provided.

5.1.4.6 Overall Experience (8%)

The overall experience has received a majority of positive comments (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*). This theme might be an important indicator in terms of the passengers' perceptions since it puts into perspective all the aspects of the service quality that the passengers had the chance to experience during their flight, which means on ground and in-flight.

Since the Middle East Airlines promote themselves as the best airlines worldwide offering the best economy class and hospitality with the Arabian touch we may assume that the general expectations of the passengers are set much higher than what one could expect from low-cost airline, as mentioned earlier in this thesis (*Section 5.1.3 Expectations set via storytelling promotional efforts*).

The passengers' perceptions were expressed as an overall good/better than average experience, good/relatively good value for money, smooth flight (Appendix 3, 2, 1).

Hence, the reviews suggest that the passengers' expectations were met however, there was no moment of delight what could create a memorable experience for the passenger as the airlines promote themselves.

The perceptions not meeting passengers' expectations were described as following: not very good/average experience, overall disappointing experience, low value for money, disappointing flight, overall quality has decreased (ibid).

Hence this means, the whole experience did not go well from the start till the end. This is not what the passengers would expect from leading Middle East airlines experience.

5.1.4.7 Complaint handling (7,6%)/Customer support (1%)

The themes analysis has revealed that the “*Complaint handling*” has received only 1 positive and 98 negative comments (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*). Moreover, the theme of “*Customer support*” is included in this section since it is closely related. Customer support also received a majority of negative comments 17 negatives and 2 positive (*ibid*).

Complaint handling is also an important part of the service in the case there is a problem regarding service quality. As mentioned earlier, passengers want to be heard and valued for their feedback. Moreover, this is also a chance for the airlines to consider the feedback and to suggest solutions or alternative options to improve passenger service quality perceptions. This way the service may be recovered and passengers may still leave with a still positive perception. Customer support works in terms of call centers where the travelers may contact the airline in case of ticket change, information regarding flights, compensations, refunds, delayed luggage, etc. In some cases, the call center may be the first contact of the passenger with the airline or may play a critical role if the passenger is in a critical situation and needs further instructions (*Appendix 1*). Thus, this theme provides the functional value to the passengers. Based on this study, the airlines do not promote themselves in these terms, thus, the customer expectations are based on the online reviews of the passengers who have already had experience with these services before.

The passengers expressed themselves in terms of positive perception of the service quality as good complaint handling, good customer support (call center) (*Appendix 3, 2, 1*).

The negative perceptions were expressed as following: appalling complaint handling, poor refund handling, no refund offered, poor compensation handling/no compensation offered, unreachable call center, incompetent phone operator (call center) (*ibid*).

Hence, the negative perceptions signify that the passengers' expectations were not met. This might have been caused due to overwhelmed call centers. Nevertheless, world-leading airlines should make sure to not leave the passengers without a solution and get back to them with further information. Moreover, in case the flight was canceled by the airline sufficient refund must be offered.

5.1.4.8 In-flight Entertainment Facilities (7%)

The theme “*In-flight Entertainment Facilities*” has received a majority of positive and neutral comments (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*). Since 7% of the passengers’ have mentioned these

themes in their comments, especially talking about the HD screen offering a wide range of movies and other entertainment, it is a significant aspect of the journey (Appendix 1, 2).

As has been mentioned earlier, especially Emirates are pioneers in the area of in-flight entertainment. Yet, the airlines are challenging each other who can provide the best in-flight entertainment technologies. Moreover, nowadays technology is all around us, thus, even the passengers cannot imagine flying without being able to watch their favorite movie or charge their cellphone. Yet, this theme secures the functional value is delivered to their passengers. This also goes along with their expectations.

Many passengers perceived the in-flight entertainment as extensive, good IFE, appreciated 2hrs of free internet, outside cameras, or electrical power socket/USB power.

There have been found also preceptions not achieving the passengers' expectations as substandard IFE, non-existent IFE, IFE did not work, not working Wi-Fi.

Some of the passengers' did not perceive in-flight entertainment as achieving their expectations since there were many shortfalls in its function, which also does not achieve the standards of Middle East airlines. Moreover, the crew did not have any adequate solution nor there was not pronounced any apology (Appendix 3, 2, 1).

5.1.4.9 Cabin Cleanliness (3%)

The majority of the comments regarding the theme "*Cabin Cleanliness*" were positive – 29 comments and 9 negative comments (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*).

The cleanliness was an important factor for many of the passengers, especially the cleanliness of the cabin seats and bathrooms. This is a basic physiological need, as mentioned earlier, thus this must fully satisfied otherwise the passenger will not have a generally good experience.

The cabin cleanliness was expressed by the passengers as clean cabin/seats/blankets/pillows. The negative perception of not achieving the customers' expectations has been voiced as poor cleanliness of the aircraft, dirty/malfunction of the toilets.

Based on this study, for shortfalls in cleanliness, there is no excuse especially not in the case of Middle East airlines promoting themselves as the best in every step they do. Nevertheless, the major perception of the services is positive.

5.1.4.10 *Safety and Security of the Aircraft (1%)*

The theme “*Safety and Security of the Aircraft*” has received the least comments from the airline passengers even though this is a significantly important aspect. Based on this study, if the customer does not feel safe the whole experience cannot be positive. Yet, there were 7 positive comments, 3 negatives, and 1 neutral (*Section 5.1.2.1 Sentiment analysis*).

Safety and security of the aircraft belong to basic physiological and safety needs, as mentioned before (*Section 5.1.1.2 Physiological needs and 5.1.13 Safety needs*) hence the passengers expect the airlines' highest adherence. This also supports especially Etihad's mission where the priority is put on the safety and security first *Section 5.1.3.3.2 Mission and vision*.

The perceptions of the safety and security of the aircraft were expressed as good perceived safety and security. There has been found also instances when the safety and security of the aircraft were expressed as not satisfactory: aircraft's technical issue, poor intercom announcements.

The safety and security have to be always adhered to since this is crucial element of the positive passenger perceptions as well as overall success of the airline.

5.1.4.11 *Conclusion*

According to the passengers' perceptions the theme “*Food and beverage*” is the most important part of the service quality, thus, further improvements within this area may lead to increased passengers' satisfaction and loyalty.

Nevertheless, the theme of “*Complaint handling*” and “*Customer support*” had almost only negative comments expressed by the passengers. This signals that the airlines do not value the customers' feedback enough, thus, this does not present the airlines in a good light and it may influence the expectations the potential passengers make based on the published online reviews. Negative comments regarding the customer support show that the service quality during the service encounter (on-ground services and in-flight services) is perceived positively, hence, once the passengers need the additional support it is difficult to contact the airlines or achieve any compensations in case of a service quality failure.

What may be observed the Middle East Airlines are service providers delivering experience and not only transportation from destination to destination as other market counterparts as low-cost airlines may be perceived. This may be visible also from their promotional efforts and storytelling. ‘

Even though the general perception of the service quality from the perspective of the passengers is positive (that means the passengers' needs were mostly satisfied), however, very often there is no surprise moment or moment of delight created. Hence, this does not go along with the promotional efforts and storytelling and thus, it does not achieve the passengers' expectations created based on their representations towards their customers.

Since, the airlines' are global brands the quality standards are expected to be consistent throughout their fleet, services, airports and route network. Yet, themes analysis has discovered many contradicting comments which are denying each other and confirming service quality inconsistency.

6 Discussion

This thesis takes into account the perceptions of the service quality expressed by the Middle East airlines' passengers within the online reviews collected on Skytrax and Tripadvisor. In particular, a theme that describes the most significant category of the service quality according to the reviewers. Moreover, sentiment analysis is used to find out the polarity of the online reviews to discover how the service quality is perceived if positively, negatively, or neutrally.

The following paragraphs address the findings and the recommendations for further research:

6.1 Sentiment Analysis

In the analysis chapter, it has been assessed how the service quality of the Middle East Airlines is perceived if positively, negatively, or neutrally from the perspective of their passengers. Yet, the sentiment analysis has been selected to find out the polarity.

The airlines' passengers perceive the service quality positively rather than negatively. Looking at the Middle East Airlines' passengers as on one representative sample that means the passengers' expectations met their perceptions regarding service quality.

Even though, service quality is perceived positively the theme analysis is utilized to discover what are the main themes the passengers mentioned in online reviews to be able to categorize the service quality aspects. There are various service quality categories since each passenger is focusing on different attributes that are influenced by their motivations, expectations, cultural background, etc.

6.2 Theme Analysis

The other part of the analysis section deals with the analysis of the service quality categories that have been mentioned the most by the Middle East Airlines' passengers.

The content analysis has revealed 13 themes that the reviewers were mentioning in their online reviews the most, hence, they are considered as important aspects of the service quality perceptions according to them. The discovered themes were: *Food and Beverage, Cabin Crew, Ground services, Seat Comfort, Flight, Schedule and Information Handling, In-flight Services, Overall*

Experience, Complaint Handling, In-flight Entertainment Facilities, Cabin Comfort, Cabin Cleanliness, Safety and Security of the Aircraft, Customer Support (Appendix 2).

Yet, themes food and beverage and cabin crew were found out as the most important indicators of service quality for the airlines' passengers, moreover, the passengers expressed the most positive comments regarding these themes. On the other hand complaint handling and customer support have achieved the highest number of negative comments showing airlines lack of interest in customers' feedback, furthermore, negative perceptions of customer support signals that airlines are not interested to help their customers once the purchase has been already made.

Based on this study, Middle East Airlines are mainly providers of excellent experience, not just transportation. Hence, to achieve this the passengers' perceptions have to outshine their expectations to create a moment of surprise. Yet, a high number of reviews "just" achieving customers' expectations is not enough to achieve this.

The analysis has shown that the airlines are global brands, thus, it is expected that service quality is consistent throughout. However, a high number of contradicting perceptions are confirming its inconsistency.

6.3 Recommendations for future research

The content analysis of online reviews could be adopted for additional research within the field of the aviation industry. Future research could deal with a comparison of the airlines, or maybe extended of the other competitive airlines in the Middle East area. This way also the competitive advantages may be defined. Moreover, the research may be extended about the analysis of the first and business class features and their service quality perceptions. Furthermore, various social or cultural groups of airline passengers might be further investigated.

7 Conclusion

This thesis seeks to understand what are the service quality perceptions of the Middle East Airlines' passengers while adopting content analysis of online reviews. The thesis has focused on Emirates, Qatar, and Etihad Airways. Online reviews were collected from online review websites Skytrax and TripAdvisor. The objective of this research has been supported by the problem statement.

After the data sources choice, the data were collected and analyzed to provide an answer to the following problem statement:

“How is the Middle East Airlines' service quality perceived based on their passengers' experience expressed through online reviews?”

The response can be formulated as *the service quality is perceived positively* by the passengers hence at the same time each passenger has different preferences in terms of the service quality categories, their perceptions, and importance.

Furthermore, the content analysis of the online reviews uncovered crucial aspects of service quality according to Middle East Airlines' passengers and thus, the service quality is perceived according to the following categories: *Food and Beverage, Cabin Crew, Ground services, Seat Comfort, Flight, Schedule and Information Handling, In-flight Services, Overall Experience, Complaint Handling, In-flight Entertainment Facilities, Cabin Comfort, Cabin Cleanliness, Safety and Security of the Aircraft, Customer Support.*

Furthermore, the thesis revealed Middle East Airlines are mainly providers of experience, not just transportation. A high number of reviews “just” achieving customers' expectations is not enough to achieve it. Thus, in this area the expectations did not meet the perceptions and the service quality is perceived as low.

The analysis has shown that the airlines are global brands, thus, it is expected that service quality is consistent throughout. However, a high number of contradicting perceptions are confirming this reality. That signals that approximately almost half of the passengers who have written the reviews collected for this thesis perceive the service quality as low which means not meeting their expectations.

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