

## LISTENING TO THE DIGITAL VOICE OF CUSTOMERS: AN ANALYSIS OF AIRLINE COMPANIES' SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### OUVINDO A VOZ DIGITAL DOS CLIENTES: UMA ANÁLISE DAS ESTRATÉGIAS DE GESTÃO DE MÍDIAS SOCIAIS DAS COMPANHIAS AÉREAS

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#### Abstract

##### Abstract

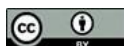
The purpose of this study is to investigate, from the standpoint of social customer relationship management (SCRM), the Instagram customer relationship management strategies of three significant international airline businesses. In this context, the customer interactions of the top three airlines, Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines, and Emirates, as assessed by the UK-based Skytrax organization in its 2024 evaluation of international air transport based on product quality and personnel standards, are examined with regard to the use of Instagram as a social media tool. Using qualitative content analysis, the study examines how customers' comments reflect their emotions and the businesses' responses. The analysis, conducted with MaxQDA software, reveals that customer comments predominantly convey negative emotions such as anger, dissatisfaction, and loss of trust. Company responses were categorized into four main types: redirection, apology, formal replies, and sincere feedback. Coding analysis indicates that specific types of complaints systematically correspond to particular response patterns. The findings demonstrate that emotionally intelligent, timely, and personalized responses are effective in increasing customer satisfaction. The study highlights that social media serves not only as a platform for voicing complaints but also as a strategic communication space for digital empathy and brand reputation.

**Keywords:** Social Customer Relationship Management (Scrm). Corporate Communication Strategies. Digital Reputation Management. Social Media. Instagram.

#### Resumo

*O objetivo deste estudo é investigar, sob a perspectiva da gestão social do relacionamento com o cliente (SCRM), as estratégias de gestão do relacionamento com o cliente no Instagram de três importantes companhias aéreas internacionais. Nesse contexto, as interações com os clientes das três principais companhias aéreas — Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines e Emirates, conforme classificação da organização britânica Skytrax em sua avaliação de 2024 do transporte aéreo internacional com base na qualidade do produto e nos padrões de atendimento — são examinadas no que diz respeito ao uso do Instagram como ferramenta de mídia social. Utilizando análise qualitativa de conteúdo, o estudo examina como os comentários dos clientes refletem suas emoções e as respostas das empresas. A análise, realizada com o software MaxQDA, revela que os comentários dos clientes transmitem predominantemente emoções negativas, como raiva, insatisfação e perda de confiança. As respostas das empresas foram categorizadas em quatro tipos principais: redirecionamento, pedido de desculpas, respostas formais e feedback sincero. A análise de codificação indica que tipos específicos de reclamações correspondem sistematicamente a padrões de resposta particulares. Os resultados demonstram que respostas emocionalmente inteligentes, oportunas e personalizadas são eficazes para aumentar a satisfação do cliente. O estudo destaca que as mídias sociais servem não apenas como uma plataforma para expressar reclamações, mas também como um espaço de comunicação estratégico para a empatia digital e a reputação da marca.*

**Palavras-chave:** Gestão de Relacionamento com o Cliente nas Mídias Sociais (Scrm).



*Estratégias de Comunicação Corporativa.  
Gestão de Reputação Digital. Mídias Sociais.  
Instagram.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The digital era has necessitated a fundamental transformation in businesses Customer Relationship Management (CRM) approaches. While traditional CRM strategies focused primarily on collecting and analyzing customer data, the emergence and widespread adoption of social media platforms have brought the concept of Social Customer Relationship Management (SCRM) to the forefront, enabling bidirectional communication with customers (Alt & Reinhold, 2020). SCRM represents an innovative approach that emphasizes customers not merely as service recipients, but as strategic partners who actively participate in the value creation process (Dewnarain et al., 2019). This paradigm shift allows businesses to explore new ways of enhancing customer satisfaction and strengthening brand loyalty (Chow & Shi, 2015).

Social media sites have transformed from being a simple platform for communication and interaction to a strategic tool that helps businesses achieve a competitive advantage in key areas like marketing, crisis management, and customer experience (Malthouse et al., 2013). In particular, visually oriented social media platforms such as Instagram facilitate the establishment of emotional connections with customers, thereby enabling brands to communicate more effectively with their target audiences (Zhao et al., 2020). The comments made by customers on social media platforms, as well as the responses given to these comments, help organizations understand customer needs and improve their service processes (He et al., 2013).

In service sectors where customer satisfaction is of utmost importance, such as the airline industry, the importance of social media management becomes even more pronounced. Customers in this sector influence the image of the brand by posting their experiences on social media platforms and can also influence the perceptions of other potential customers (Gavilanes et al., 2018). In this context, providing prompt and solution-oriented responses to customer comments not only enhances individual customer

satisfaction but also generates a positive impact on overall brand reputation (Wolter et al., 2023).

Within this context, this research aims to answer the research question: “How do companies’ responses to customer comments on social media and their digital engagement strategies influence customer satisfaction?” In this regard, this research concentrates on a qualitative study of the responses of customer comments on social media platforms by prominent airline companies such as Emirates, Singapore Airlines, and Qatar Airways. The thematic and emotional aspects of these companies’ social media strategies were studied by using MaxQDA software. The purpose of this research is to contribute to the existing literature from theoretical as well as practical aspects by providing strategic insights into customer satisfaction. In this regard, the significance of social media platforms in customer relationship management, the nature of the industry, and digital engagement strategies are discussed in depth.

Moreover, the purpose of this research is to make a contribution to the evolution of customer relationship strategies tailored to the aviation industry through an in-depth investigation of the sectoral effects of social media platforms. The examination of the opportunities and challenges posed by digital platforms will not only fill the existing gaps in the literature, but it will also help businesses to effectively design their customer satisfaction and brand loyalty strategies.

## **2 SOCIAL CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT**

Social Customer Relationship Management (SCRM) has emerged as a new and innovative approach that allows companies to build stronger and more effective relationships with their customers via online platforms (Kim & Wang, 2019). Even though its roots are based on the traditional CRM approach of collecting, analyzing, and reacting to customer feedback, it has become a much more dynamic system because of the new opportunities that have arisen with the advent of the digital era (Alt & Reinhold, 2020).

Theoretical basis for SCRM is rooted in the service-dominant logic theory (Chen & Vargo, 2014). According to this theory, customers are viewed not only as consumers but also as value co-creators who take an active part in business processes. Social media

sites create a two-way communication channel that helps in this value creation process, allowing businesses to build stronger ties with their customers (Chow & Shi, 2015; Dewnarain et al., 2021). According to Malthouse et al. (2013), SCRM is more flexible and interaction-focused than the conventional customer relationship management strategy. In this respect, the fact that SCRM allows direct communication with customers and the incorporation of their inputs into business processes in real time is one of the most important benefits of SCRM.

Social media sites are at the heart of SCRM practices. Specifically, visually driven and interaction-based sites (such as Instagram and Facebook) enable communication between businesses and customers. According to Gavilanes et al. (2018), these sites offer a competitive advantage in building one-to-one communication and offering personalized experiences. In this respect, handling customer comments and interactions in a timely manner directly affects customer satisfaction and business loyalty (Zhao et al., 2020). Dealing with negative comments through solution-providing responses not only improves customer satisfaction but also plays a crucial role in crisis management activities (He et al., 2013).

The key to the success of SCRM is the alignment of the strategic goals and organizational structures of businesses. According to Alt and Reinhold (2020), the successful implementation of SCRM is dependent on the organizational leadership, digital skills, and business process integration. In large corporations, the integration of social media strategies into the organizational decision-making process can produce long-term results in customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Moreover, improving the employees' skills in the use of social media platforms and their ability to process customer feedback can improve the competitive advantage of businesses (Drummond et al., 2020; Elena, 2016).

### 3 DIGITAL CONTENT MANAGEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Digital engagement strategies can be described as “the planned ways in which organizations can leverage social media sites to improve their relationships with consumers. boost customer satisfaction. and build brand loyalty” (Drummond et al., 2020). Digital platforms have a dynamic structure. and by adapting to this. digital engagement strategies optimize key processes such as content development. customer engagement. and managing feedback. Visually driven platforms are especially important in building an emotional link that helps to build customer engagement (Gavilanes et al., 2018).

Digital content management is one of the key tools that help in improving customer engagement on social media sites. Drummond et al. (2020) highlight that customers are attracted to content that is engaging. informative. and emotionally connected. which helps in improving customer satisfaction and brand building. Visual content. particularly on sites such as Instagram. acts as a key tool that helps in improving customer engagement and building a strong connection with customers (Zhao et al., 2020). Time is also an important element in content management. According to Arora et al. (2021). posting content during the time when the target customers are most active helps in improving customer engagement rates. This again proves the importance of digital content management in personalizing customer experiences and improving customer loyalty (He et al., 2013).

Feedback management is another critical element of online engagement strategies. Customer comments are a rich source of feedback for brands. and their management has a direct impact on customer satisfaction (Wolter et al., 2023). The strategy of responding to negative feedback with solutions is one that has a positive impact on customer perceptions (Zhao et al., 2020). In addition. feedback management should not be restricted to the management of negative feedback. When brands respond to positive customer comments with appreciation. it has a positive impact on customer loyalty. These practices help brands to have “one-to-one” communication with customers. which helps to build strong relationships with them (Gavilanes et al., 2018).

To assess the efficiency of online engagement strategies. engagement metrics like likes. comments. share rates. and views are of utmost significance. These metrics help in

understanding customer behavior and can be used to improve content strategies (Malthouse et al., 2013). In this regard, data analytics tools like word clouds and sentiment analysis help in understanding the themes and emotions associated with customer comments, which in turn helps brands create strategies based on customer needs. Content that builds stronger emotional bonds, in particular, has long-term positive impacts on customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Drummond et al., 2020).

Moreover, digital engagement strategies are of utmost importance in the context of crisis management (Al Balawi, 2023). Negative feedback or customer complaints spread across social media platforms can create a rapid impact on the reputation of a brand (Celestin & Sujatha, 2024; Restrepo-Morales et al., 2023). In this context, an active and solution-focused crisis management approach is an essential tool in maintaining customer satisfaction and influencing brand perception in a positive manner (He et al., 2013). According to Wolter et al. (2023), actively engaging with customers on social media platforms can increase the credibility of a brand in a crisis situation and have a positive impact on customer satisfaction.

#### **4 SCRM IN THE CONTEXT OF CORPORATE MANAGEMENT AND STRATEGIES**

SCRM has caused a paradigm shift not only in customer relationship management processes but also in the management strategies of companies as a whole (Chittaie, 2012; Matosas Lopez, 2024). The success of SCRM is contingent on companies' ability to integrate their organizational structures, management styles, and strategies with this new paradigm of customer relationship management (Alt & Reinhold, 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2019). In this regard, the use of social media platforms becomes a vital tool for companies to quickly react to customer demands and further improve their competitive advantage. Furthermore, SCRM also demands a degree of flexibility and innovativeness in organizational structures. Alt and Reinhold (2020) argue that by integrating organizational structures with social media management, the efficiency of SCRM practices can be increased.

According to Drummond et al. (2020), the transformation of companies through technology requires support from leadership. Leadership not only helps in the provision

of technological infrastructure but also ensures that the organizational culture is in line with social media strategies (Chatterjee et al., 2019). In this regard, it helps employees to interact effectively with customers using social media platforms, thereby improving customer satisfaction. For companies to function properly on social media platforms, it is also important to build the digital competencies of employees. (He et al., 2013) indicate that improving digital competencies improves the speed and accuracy of customer relationship management processes. Specifically, responding to customer comments in a timely and professional manner is directly linked to the competencies of employees in managing the processes.

A successful SCRM strategy must put the human element first in understanding and dealing with customer feedback. Thus, it is essential that firms improve the employees' understanding of social media strategies through training programs (Geciene & Sileviciute, 2024; Malthouse et al., 2013). Social media strategy alignment with organizational goals is a major success factor of SCRM. Alt and Reinhold (2020) argue that strategic goals must be reformulated from a customer-focused perspective. For example, customer responses on social media sites must not only address specific complaints but also serve as a strategic tool that enhances the overall reputation of the brand. Moreover, strategies developed by firms to improve customer satisfaction on online platforms must go beyond the boundaries of reactive strategies, such as crisis management, and focus on proactive strategies that go beyond customer expectations (Gavilanes et al., 2018).

The practices of SCRM differ from one industry to another, and these differences should be considered in a manner consistent with the strategic goals of companies. In industries where the expectations of customers are high, for example, in the airline industry, the strategies of social media should be more proactive and solution-focused (Wolter et al., 2023). In particular, the responses of airline companies to customer comments on social media platforms have a direct effect on the overall reputation of the brand (Helmold et al., 2022).

The impact of SCRM on organizational structures and its application in the corporate management processes is still a field that is open for further research. In particular, the absence of research studies on the integration of organizational leadership and social media strategies is a major gap in the literature (Arora et al., 2021; Malthouse

et al., 2013). In this context, the alignment of SCRM with organizational structures and strategic goals will not only improve customer satisfaction but also ensure the sustainability of the competitive advantage of companies.

In conclusion, customer feedback is a rich source of information for companies regarding their service quality and brand image. According to He et al. (2013), customer feedback analysis is an essential approach for companies to enhance their service quality and customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, the timing, tone, and quality of responses to customer feedback play an important role in determining customer satisfaction (Wolter et al., 2023). A timely and solution-providing response to negative feedback is an effective approach to positively impact customer perceptions (Zhao et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of empirical research on the differences in response strategies based on sectoral contexts (Malthouse et al., 2013).

## 5 METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach to analyze the engagement strategies on social media in the airline sector in the context of SCRM. The research will offer strategic implications for customer satisfaction by evaluating customer comments and company responses posted on the official Instagram pages of global airline companies, namely Emirates, Singapore Airlines, and Qatar Airways.

In the context of this research, the posts published over a period of three months on the official Instagram pages of these three airline companies were evaluated. A total of “141 posts, around 76.000 customer comments, and 449 company responses were analyzed”. The tags, emoticons, and meaningless word combinations in the comments were not included in the analysis. The data was considered a natural dataset, as customer comments and company responses on the airlines’ Instagram pages are publicly available.

In order to make the research reliable and valid, the coding procedure was carried out independently by two researchers, and the findings were compared afterwards. The rate of inter-coder agreement was measured at 90%. Additionally, the use of multiple sources (three different companies) helped to increase the generalizability of the findings. In order to increase the validity and reliability of the research, the controversial comments

and responses that were identified during the coding procedure were assessed by a third researcher.

## 5.1 Analysis and findings

This section will discuss customer comments posted on the official Instagram pages of Emirates, Qatar Airlines, and Singapore Airlines, as well as the responses of the companies to these comments. In the sample analysis, general information about the companies was provided, and coding and cross-tabulation analysis results from the MaxQDA software were used to identify the qualitative aspects of emotional expressions and company responses.

The main aim of the analysis is to identify the nature of the emotions expressed by customers in their comments on social media platforms and the quality of the responses of the companies to these comments.

**Table 1**

*Airlines Company Information*

| Company            | Account Name  | Account Creation Date | Number of Posts | Number of Followers | Following | Verified |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------|----------|
| Qatar Airways      | @qatarairways | May 2012              | 3.313           | 6.170.463           | 58        | Yes      |
| Singapore Airlines | @singaporeair | May 2014              | 2.335           | 1.564.522           | 22        | Yes      |
| Emirates Airlines  | @emirates     | October 2013          | 2.652           | 7.791.192           | 44        | Yes      |

General information about the airline companies participating in the study is presented in Table 1. In analyzing the Instagram data of the three airlines, Emirates emerges as the brand with the broadest reach on social media, with 7.7 million followers. While Qatar Airways is the most prolific brand in terms of posting content, it comes second in terms of the number of followers. Singapore Airlines, on the other hand, has a smaller online presence in terms of both the number of posts and the number of followers. The fact that the three airlines' Instagram accounts were launched at different times (Qatar in 2012, Emirates in 2013, and Singapore in 2014) helps to account for the differences. Moreover, the fact that all three accounts are verified is a positive indicator of the

authenticity of the brands and the trust that their followers place in them. The fact that the three brands follow few people indicates that their online activities are mainly centered on content creation and one-way communication.

As shown in Table 2. in terms of analyzing the posts on social media. Qatar Airways is the most content-producing brand with 82 posts. which recorded the highest engagement with 58.319 comments. 5.3 million likes. and 197 million views. Moreover. Qatar Airways interacted with customers the most. with a total of 277 company responses. Singapore Airlines. with only 24 posts. recorded 3.811 comments; however. the company responses were only 88. and the likes and views were much lower than Qatar Airways. Emirates posted a moderate amount of content with “35 posts. which recorded 14.080 comments and 1.4 million likes”. The company responses were only 84. which is a low rate of engagement with customer comments.

**Table 2**

*Three-Month Instagram Statistics of Airline Companies*

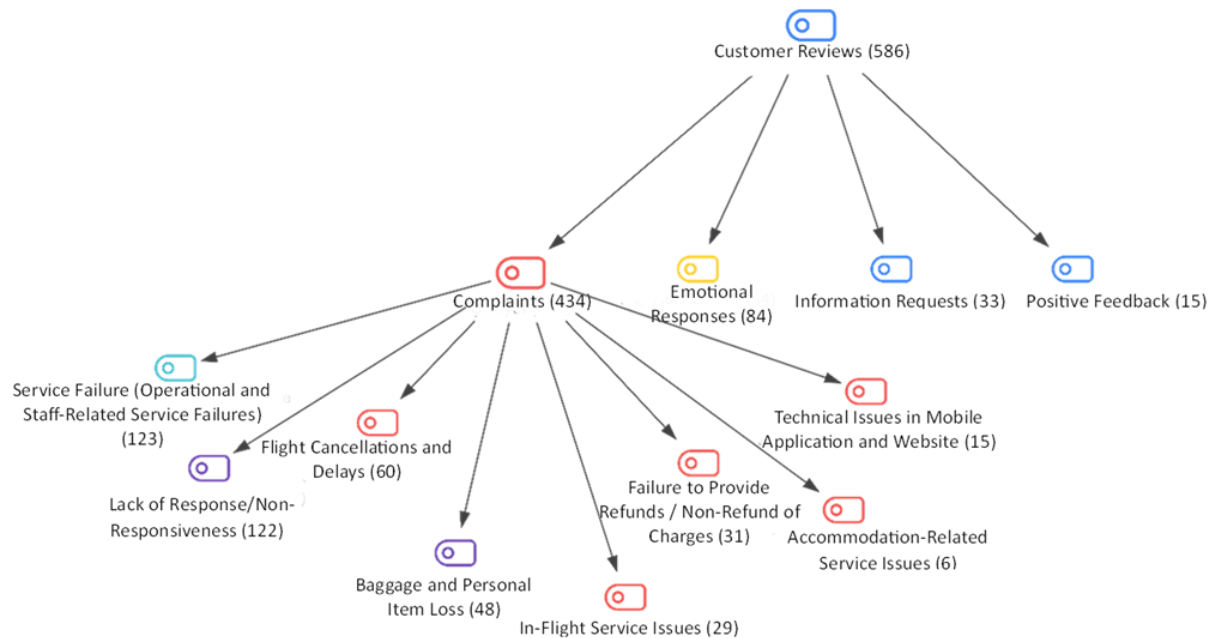
| Company            | Posts | Company Replies | Comments | Avg. Comments | Likes     | Avg. Likes | Views       |
|--------------------|-------|-----------------|----------|---------------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| Qatar Airways      | 82    | 277             | 58.319   | 703           | 5.331.800 | 64.239     | 197.945.000 |
| Singapore Airlines | 24    | 88              | 3.811    | 141           | 182.725   | 6.768      | 41.450.800  |
| Emirates Airlines  | 35    | 84              | 14.080   | 402           | 1.496.498 | 42.757     | 20.705.000  |

The coding system created through the MaxQDA software allowed for the qualitative coding of customer comments and company responses. The coding system was designed with two main axes. which included customer comments and company responses. Sub-themes were also created under the two main axes.

## 5.2 Customer comment codes

Customer feedback was examined on two major axes: (1) Emotional Responses and (2) Categories of Complaint/Request. This classification is founded on a customer-focused analysis method that acknowledges customers as information seekers but also as people expressing emotional responses and degrees of satisfaction.

- **Emotional Responses:** The most common emotional responses in customer feedback were identified and coded through concepts of anger, frustration, surprise, regret, and satisfaction. For instance, feedback such as “I was totally disappointed,” “I had the worst trip of my life with Qatar Airways,” and “I love you, Emirates team!” are very significant for identifying the emotional aspect of the feedback.
- **Information Request:** Customer inquiries about ticketing, offers, flight information, and so on.
- **Positive Feedback:** Feedback in which customers thank the company for the service they have received.
- **Complaint Types:** Content-based complaints were categorized into eight themes:
  1. **Operational Service Issues:** Flight cancellations, delays, staff behavior, seat problems, and similar operational concerns.
  2. **Baggage and Item Issues:** Lost luggage, baggage damage, misdirection, and other logistical problems.
  3. **Website / Technical Issues:** Difficulties with online transactions, mobile application errors, and check-in disruptions.
  4. **Expense / Refund Requests:** Refund requests, complaints about extra charges, and hidden costs.
  5. **Accommodation Service:** Negative reactions related to the provision of accommodation services due to flight cancellations or long delays.
  6. **In-Flight Service:** Inadequate in-flight services, poor service quality, staff behavior, uncomfortable seats, malfunctioning air conditioning, and other similar issues.
  7. **Flight Cancellations / Routes:** Cancellation or delay of scheduled flights, lack of notification to passengers, or indifferent treatment of affected customers.
  8. **Insufficient Response:** Comments expressing that customers did not receive a reply from the company.

**Figure 1***Hierarchical Coding Framework of Customer Comments***5.3 Company response codes**

Under company responses, the type and tone of messages that companies used to communicate with their customers were coded. This format allows for a straightforward examination of customer relationship management practices.

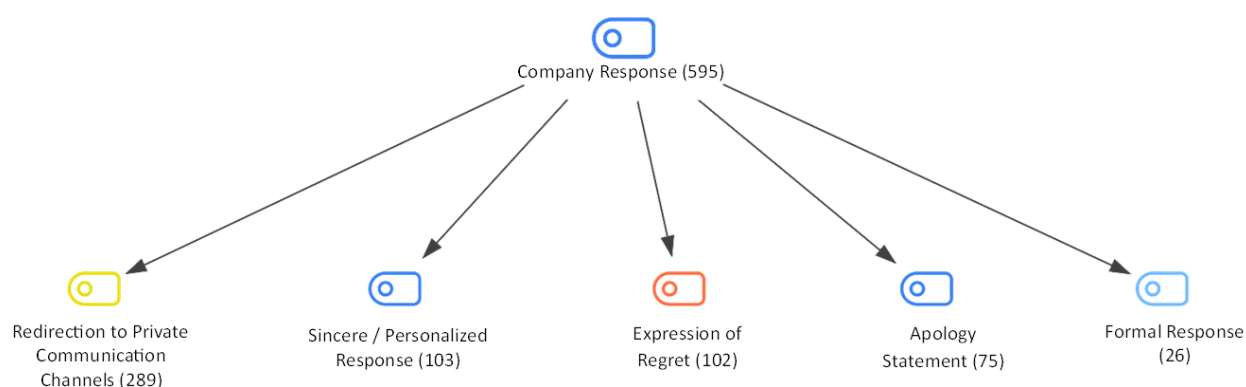
- **Apology:** Messages that use standard apology phrases like “We are sorry” were coded under this category.
- **Personalized Response:** Messages that attempt to build an emotional link, such as using positive language and direct address, were coded under this category.
- **Formal Response:** Corporate and neutral-toned messages that are often standardized or template-based were coded under this category.
- **Private Channel Referral:** Messages that refer the customer to private communication channels like direct messages (DM), call centers, or email were coded under this category.

- **Expression of Regret:** Messages that expressed the company's regret over the situation but did not have a solution-oriented approach were coded under this category.

The hierarchical structure facilitated the multidimensional study of interactions between customers and companies. Relationship analysis of the codes indicated that negative emotional responses coupled with apology or formal responses were prevalent, pointing to the need for improvement in communication as a factor in the low levels of customer satisfaction. However, personalized and empathetic responses improved the chances of customers reacting positively. The structure enabled the systematic coding of qualitative data, which facilitated the extraction of strategic information for customer relationship management.

**Figure 2**

*Hierarchical Coding Framework of Company Responses*



## 5.4 Customer comments

Detailed analysis of customer comments focused on the subtleties of customer response. The number and distribution of customer comments are shown in Table 1. It is worth noting that customers often complained about operational service issues, as well as their responses to the lack of answers to their questions or concerns. The lack of answers to customer inquiries or concerns through channels other than social media platforms, such as email, increased customer dissatisfaction.

**Table 3***Distribution of Customer Comments by Codes*

| <b>Customer Comments</b>                    | <b>Emirates</b> | <b>Qatar</b> | <b>Singapore</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|---|-----------------|--------------|------------------|--------------|
| Emotional Responses (Negative)              | 14              | 59           | 11               | 84           |
| Information Request                         | 0               | 20           | 13               | 33           |
| Pos. Comment                                | 1               | 9            | 5                | 15           |
| Complaints                                  |                 |              |                  |              |
| • Website / App Technical Issues            | 3               | 7            | 5                | 15           |
| • Accommodation Service                     | 1               | 5            | 0                | 6            |
| • Poor Service (Operational & Staff Issues) | 41              | 62           | 20               | 123          |
| • In-Flight Services                        | 11              | 15           | 3                | 29           |
| • Baggage and Item Loss                     | 15              | 25           | 8                | 48           |
| • Flight Cancellations / Delays (+)         | 10              | 37           | 13               | 60           |
| • No Response Provided                      | 27              | 85           | 10               | 122          |
| • Expenses / Refund Not Provided            | 12              | 16           | 3                | 31           |
| <b>Total</b>                                | <b>135</b>      | <b>340</b>   | <b>91</b>        | <b>566</b>   |

On the other hand, most of the customer comments are filled with negative emotions. The emotional intensity of customer feedback is quite striking. As evident from the tables, a total of 84 comments is filled with direct emotional expressions, with the dominant emotions being anger, frustration, disappointment, and distrust. The emotional expression among Qatar Airways customers ( $n = 59$ ) is the highest, which can be linked to the company's huge customer base and presence on social media platforms.

For instance, a customer of Qatar Airways wrote, "I had the worst experience of my life traveling with Qatar Airways," which highlights the customer's dissatisfaction with the company in strong words. Likewise, a comment on Singapore Airlines, "I am completely disappointed. I paid a fortune for the flight but received nothing in return," highlights both material and emotional discontent with the service quality.

For Emirates, a comment like "The flight was canceled, no information was provided, and customer service didn't even answer the phones. Truly disgraceful," highlights the customer's experience of feeling wronged and the loss of trust in the company.

## 5.5 Company responses

Analysis of the responses of the companies to their customers shows that the most common responses are those that contain expressions of regret, apologies, and referrals to private channels. The intensity levels of the responses are shown in Table 2.

**Table 4**

*Company Responses to Customer Comments*

| Response Type            | Emirates   | Qatar      | Singapore | Total      |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Formal Response          | 1          | 13         | 12        | 26         |
| Expression of Regret     | 40         | 35         | 27        | 102        |
| Personalized Response    | 17         | 57         | 29        | 103        |
| Apology                  | 3          | 66         | 6         | 75         |
| Private Channel Referral | 70         | 202        | 17        | 289        |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>131</b> | <b>373</b> | <b>91</b> | <b>595</b> |

The four main categories of responses that the companies used to respond to their customers include apologies, personalized responses, formal responses, and referrals to private channels. For instance, the companies used general apologies in responses such as, “We are sorry for your experience; please send us a direct message so we can resolve your issue.”

In some instances, the responses from the companies worsened the situation for the customers. For example, a formal response to a customer of Qatar Airways who said, “I am speaking with you here on Instagram; why are you asking me to use another third-party app?” further irritated the customer.

The reactions of the companies to the comments of the customers were categorized into four major groups. The groups were utilized to evaluate the variations in customer relationship approaches among the companies.

- **Qatar Airways** had the most sensitive reaction to customer satisfaction. The company that topped the list with a total of 66 apology reactions also used 57 personalized reactions, indicating an attempt to interact with the customers. For instance, in reaction to a comment by a customer that read, “The staff was very rude during check-in,” the company reacted: “We sincerely apologize for what you experienced. Please share the details with us so we can make it right.” The

reaction not only accepted responsibility but also facilitated the process of finding a solution.

- **Singapore Airlines** took a balanced but quite limited approach to interaction. Although there were only six apology messages, the personalized messages and referral messages indicated an attempt to build a relationship with the customers. For instance, in reaction to a comment by a customer that read, “They were incredibly helpful throughout our flight.” the company reacted: “Thank you very much for your kind words! We look forward to flying with you again.”
- **There was a relatively passive customer complaint handling strategy displayed by Emirates. Only three apology messages and seventeen personalized messages were sent, while the remaining seventy messages (n = 70) were referrals to the private messaging channel (e.g., “Please contact us via DM”). For instance, when a customer complained, “I was charged \$1.900 because my son’s ticket did not appear.” the company responded, “We are sorry for what happened. Please share your ticket number and email address with us via DM.” Such messages were impersonal and did not serve as a means of boosting customer loyalty.**

The coding system developed for customer comments and company responses was analyzed not only for individual frequencies but also for co-occurrence patterns between codes. **Figure 3** visualizes the relationships between customer complaint types and company response strategies.

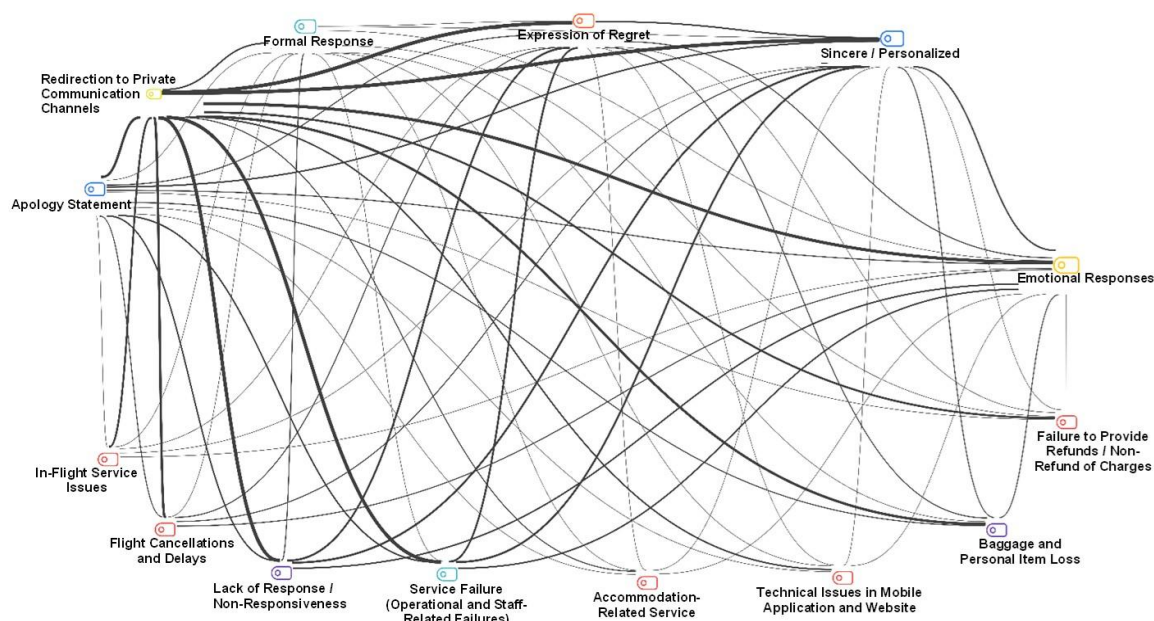
**Figure 3***Code Co-occurrence Model (Code Proximity)*

Figure 3th. points out one of the most interesting correlations: the “Emotional Responses” code tends to co-occur with both the “Private Referral” and the “Expression of Regret” codes. This shows that companies tend to react to emotionally charged comments with messages that are empathetic but lack a solution-oriented approach (“we are sorry”) or by referring the customer to private communication channels (e.g. DM. email). For instance, a customer comment such as “I am disappointed. nobody cared” was answered by the company as follows: “We are sorry about this experience. Please contact us via DM.” This approach can be criticized, as the customer is not provided with a satisfactory public answer but is instead subjected to personalized, other-directed communication.

Moreover, the “No Response Provided” code is often coded together with “Expression of Regret” and “Apology” codes. This result indicates that, in cases where responses are not provided or are delayed, companies resort to superficial and repetitive expressions of regret rather than accepting responsibility publicly. For example, a customer comment that read, “No response for five days. nobody cares!” was answered with, “We apologize for the delay.” Such responses seem inadequate, especially when the customer’s emotional needs are not met.

The combination of “Baggage and Lost Items” with “Private Referral” shows that companies are more interested in private communication regarding operational problems (lost items) than in providing solutions publicly. Although this is a reasonable practice from a data protection point of view, it may also create the impression that the company is not accepting full responsibility. For example, a customer comment that read, “My luggage is lost, three days have passed, no update!” was answered with: “Please contact us via DM so we can investigate the matter.”

The co-occurrence of “Flight Cancellations/Delays” with “Apology” and “Friendly Response” shows that companies try to console customers who are affected by flight delays and cancellations with apologetic and sometimes empathetic responses. Qatar Airways is the most active company in adopting this approach. For instance, a customer wrote, “Our flight was canceled, and we waited for hours at the airport.” and the customer service representative replied, “We sincerely apologize for this situation. We want to assist you.”

Figure 3 also shows that technical problems associated with digital technology, such as “Application/Web Site,” mostly co-occur with the “Formal Response” code. This shows that companies react to comments with technical and directive responses. For instance, a customer wrote, “I cannot check in; the system is giving an error.” and the customer service representative replied, “Please try again via our website or mobile application.” Although this is a reasonable response from a technical perspective, it is not personalized and does not try to build an emotional connection with the customer.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the customer relationship management (CRM) activities of three international airlines (Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines, and Emirates) on Instagram were explored from a qualitative perspective, with a focus on customer comments and responses. The results show that customers engaging with each other on social media are not only looking for information but also emotional expression, complaint visibility, and solution-seeking. The main assumption of this research is that social media sites have developed into “digital emotional interaction spaces” that go beyond the concept of customer service. In this respect, the type of digital feedback (empathetic, formal,

apologetic. or referral-based) has a direct effect on brand perception. confidence in complaint handling. and purchase intention.

Code and co-occurrence analyses reveal that the most common complaints are about “flight cancellations and delays.” “no response provided.” “lost luggage.” and “application/website issues.” Firms demonstrate great variability in their response approaches. Qatar Airways has a more empathetic communication approach with apologies and friendly responses. while Emirates focuses on private recommendations and short apologies. Singapore Airlines takes a balanced but non-engaging approach. These results are in line with the SCRM literature (Elena. 2016; Cahyani & Diniati. 2024). The importance of empathy. speed. personalization. and problem-solving in digital customer experiences is emphasized in previous studies (Trainor et al.. 2014; Charoensukmongkol & Sasatanun. 2017). Qatar Airways seems to have the best approach in incorporating these elements. showing a greater “emotional intelligence” in social media communication.

On the other hand. the social media CRM of Emirates. although having a large number of followers and posting a large number of messages. practices a low-key communication approach that does not involve human-level interaction. This could be the reason for the brand being perceived as “unreachable.” “anonymous.” or “bureaucratic.” The code co-occurrence approach illustrates the capabilities of companies to respond to the emotional intensity of messages in an appropriate manner. Replying to emotionally intense messages with directive or formal responses undermines the possibility of emotional bonding. Specifically. the solution-deficient “we are sorry” type of response to high-intensity complaints such as “no response provided” or “lost luggage” carries potential risks for customer loyalty.

In conclusion. social media interactions serve not only as technical support services but also as essential showcases of brands’ empathy and digital corporate responsibility (Dogan-Sudas. 2022; Kaplan. 2010). The quality of digital communication with customers can have a direct impact on future brand loyalty. reputation. and choice behavior (Harrigan et al.. 2020; Yasiukovich & Haddara. 2021).

This study provides a qualitative examination of how three major airlines respond to Instagram customer comments. analyzing the content. tone. and level of emotional intelligence in their replies. Findings demonstrate that airlines adopt markedly different

social media communication strategies, which directly impact the quality of customer relationships:

- **Qatar Airways:** Proactive, empathetic, and solution-oriented responses position it as a leading example of successful social media CRM.
- **Singapore Airlines:** Maintains a cautious approach with a balanced corporate and empathetic tone, though engagement levels remain low.
- **Emirates:** Despite a strong social media presence, shows low engagement with customers, relying mostly on referrals and brief expressions of regret.

The code co-occurrence model systematically illustrates how firms respond to different complaint types and underscores that customer satisfaction depends not only on content but also on response style, tone, and empathy. Accordingly, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Emotional Intelligence and Empathy Training:** Social media staff, especially those directly interacting with customers, should be trained in empathy-based communication, crisis management, and emotional literacy.
- **Personalized Responses:** Replace automated, template-based replies with personalized messages addressing the customer by name, referencing the complaint specifics, providing solutions, and ensuring direct communication.
- **Feedback Loop and Monitoring:** Particularly for situations resulting in private referrals, track the resolution process to ensure issues are addressed and maintain organizational transparency.
- **Balanced Response Tone:** Develop responses that maintain a professional tone while conveying human warmth, avoiding overly formal or excessively casual language.
- **Transform Digital Feedback into Insights:** Social media comments should be regularly analyzed to inform product and service improvements, not just complaint resolution.
- **Enhance Transparency and Visibility:** Whenever possible, share solutions publicly rather than solely via private channels, reinforcing trust among other users.

Conclusion. the research shows that social media-based CRM in the airline industry is still affected by traditional customer service models. but these models are not adequate for the digital age of expectations. With a SCRM strategic outlook. social media must be transformed into a platform for emotional engagement. reputation management. and maintaining customer loyalty. Every post visible on these platforms is more than just an individual complaint; it is also a collective representation of the company's overall customer approach.

However. there are some limitations to the generalizability of the results. The research only considers three major airlines' official Instagram accounts (Qatar Airways. Singapore Airlines. Emirates). This reduces the representativeness of the sample. Although these airlines are market leaders. other companies with smaller or different structures may have completely different approaches to social media. Moreover. the research only considers a period of three months. which may not reflect changes over time because of campaigns. crises. or seasonal events.

The study is limited to the Instagram platform. with other platforms such as X/Twitter. Facebook. and TikTok excluded. as they may have different demographics and modes of interaction with brands. Only public comments and responses were considered for analysis. as private communications and emails were not accessible. thus limiting a full analysis of issue resolution. While coding of qualitative data was systematic. there is a degree of subjectivity in interpreting emotional expressions. particularly when they may be out of context.

Future studies may include other industries (such as retail. hospitality. healthcare. and banking). use larger sample sizes. and use a combination of qualitative content analysis and quantitative techniques such as sentiment analysis. social network analysis. or structural equation modeling. Comparative analyses between platforms (such as Instagram vs. Twitter. etc.) and studies that use user feedback on responses may provide more insights into the multidimensional phenomenon of social media CRM. Surveys. experiments. or focus groups on the effects of responses on perceived brand loyalty would further advance the literature.

In conclusion. this study contributes to the SCRM literature while providing a basis for academic and practical discussions on digital empathy. transparency. and interaction quality in airline social media management.

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All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### **Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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