

E-REPUTATION REPORT: EMIRATES, ETIHAD AIRWAYS, QATAR AIRWAYS, AND SAUDIA

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Introduction

E-reputation (also called online reputation) is a component of corporate reputation that deals with aspects of an organization's digital activity and online brand presence. There is plentiful research revealing the impact of an airline's reputation on customer acquisition and retention. But research isn't necessary when customers themselves blatantly state the correlation between their purchase decision and a company's reputation.

During our research, [this](#) tweet was found:

Makharia, Sandeep. 13 Apr 2017.

"@EtihadAirways Was planning to book with Etihad but after reading reviews, looking for other airline. U guys should read online reviews"

Although the post was originally targeted at Etihad Airways, the content of it has unrestricted implications for every company. Presently, there is unanimity among marketers about the importance of diligent reputation management. However, vast differences exist between the ways companies understand and measure e-reputation.

This study academically demonstrates the use of modern techniques to measure the different components of e-reputation. The technique, accuracy, and scale of this research make it the first of its' kind in the Middle Eastern Airline industry. The focus is on the four major Middle Eastern airlines: Emirates, Etihad Airways, Qatar Airways and Saudia. However, the managerial implications asserted in this report for online reputation management are relevant to professionals and organizations of all industries.

Method

Framework

According to academic explanation, reputation must be measured in three dimensions: (1) *being known*, (2) *being known for something*, and (3) *generalized favorability*. Each dimension is represented by different measures.

Data Collection and Analysis

From March to May 2017, over half a million posts were tracked. Using an opinion mining analytics platform, Arabic and English content was captured from different digital channels. The final analysis was conducted by a team of three lead analysts. A total of 80 working hours was spent on the data analysis.

The main challenge with such research is collecting relevant posts. For example, words like “Emirates” and “Saudia” are also used to refer to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, respectively. “Emirates” and “Etihad” are also the names of two very prominent football stadiums. Additionally, the way the airlines are mentioned varies from full names (Saudi Arabian Airlines) and short names (Saudia) to airline ICAO codes (SVA). To further complicate matters, there is a much greater variety of ways in which the names are written in Arabic. Although the use of Boolean operators and detailed search syntax can enhance the data relevance, the margin for error remains very high with automation.

To solve this problem, the data collection and analysis was done in collaboration with **BrandsEye**, which leverages the integration of artificial intelligence software with the human factor. Once the data was collected automatically, it was processed through a global crowd, who manually identified, coded and labeled the relevance, sentiments, and topics (issues) of the content. To achieve a confidence level of 95% with an average margin of error of 2.15%, 22,028 mentions were analyzed for sentiment.

Findings

Unlike other reputation reports, this study does not issue a final verdict stating a winner and a loser. Rather, the attempt is to deliver key insights as observed, while the overall interpretation of the findings is left to the reader's judgment.

Dimension 1: Being Known

The *being known* dimension depicts the strength and popularity of an organization. Emirates emerged as the most talked about brand, followed by Qatar Airways, Etihad Airways, and Saudia.

Total Brand Mentions

Emirates received the most mentions across different social media networks—243,633. It was followed by Qatar Airways (165,276). Etihad Airways (78,705) performed slightly better than the worst performer, Saudia (59,447).

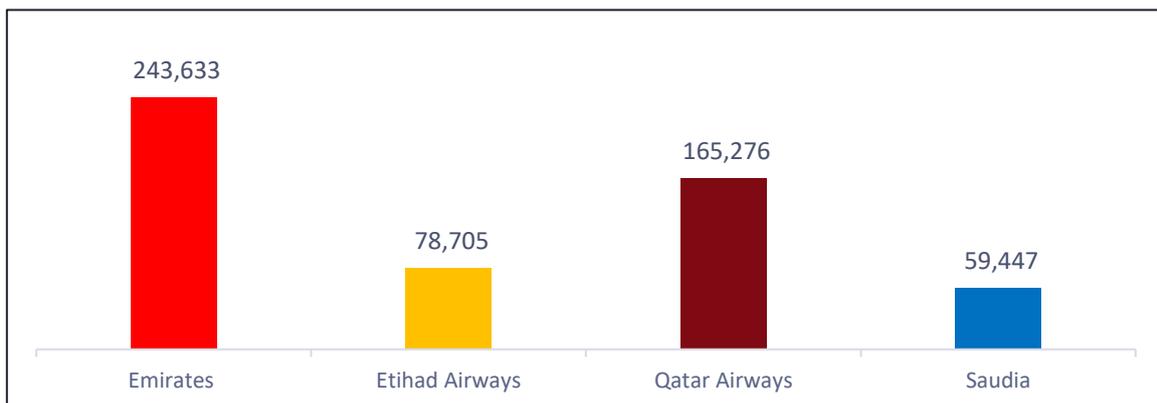


Figure 1: Total Brand Mentions

Weekly Mentions

The most engaging post between the four airlines was the April fool's post by Emirates. On Twitter, the **post** was retweeted over 11,000 times and got close to 9,000 likes. The same **post** on Facebook was shared nearly 95,000 times, received 22,000 comments, and 192,000 likes. The volume of Saudia's mentions, increased considerably from March to May.

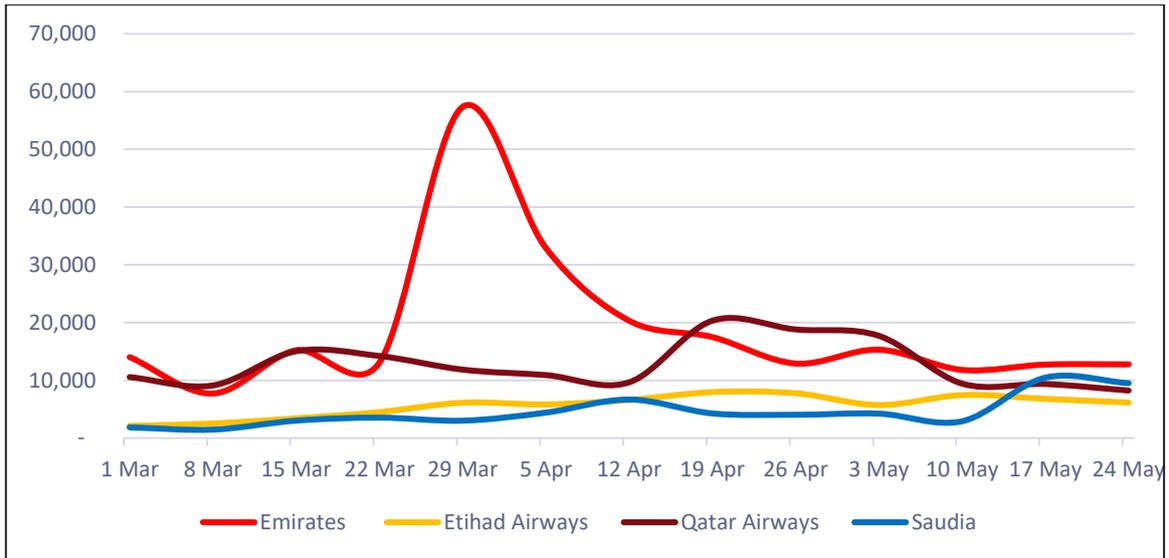


Figure 2: Weekly Mentions

Mentions / Social Networks

Consumers were most active on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Each airline received most of the mentions from Twitter. The second best source of mentions for Emirates and Qatar Airways was Facebook. Of all four airlines, Etihad Airways got the best engagement from Instagram. The airline had a good balance of mentions on all three social networks. Saudia got close to 92% of its mentions from Twitter. Also, Emirates was mentioned by a total of 157,014 unique authors, Qatar Airways by 94,924, Etihad Airways—41,661, and Saudia—32,480.

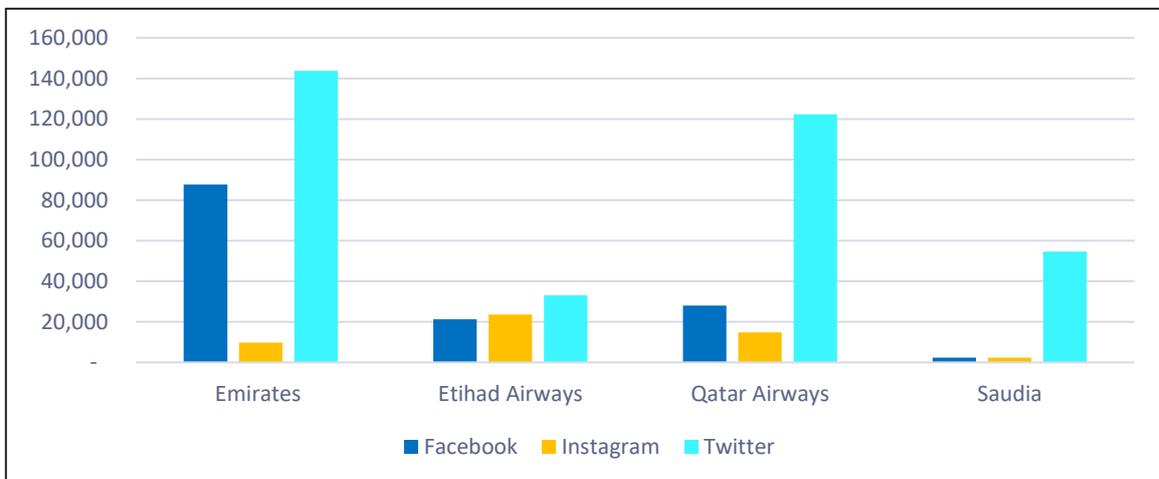


Figure 3: Mentions / Social Networks

Dimension 2: Being Known for Something

Being known for something dimension is explained by illustrating each brand's reputation for the 11 major issues (topics) of the airline industry. Posts related to **aesthetics** dealt with aspects of aircraft livery, interior decor and cabin beauty. **Airport experience** addressed the quality of an airline's hub airport. **Baggage handling** discussions mainly focused on issues related to lost luggage. The quality and variety of **in-flight amenities** and **in-flight services** were also key topics of discussion. A lot of discussions originating from the western countries were about the Middle Eastern airlines' **ethics**. **Response time** was a common theme, related to the amount of time taken by the customer support to respond to complaints and queries. The quality of the **brand**, **pricing**, **special offers/promotions**, and **staff** behavior were other key topics.

Issues Being Discussed

The most discussed issues were **aesthetics**, **ethics**, and **in-flight amenities**. Each issue contributed 10% to the total data. The **staff** related posts had a 9% share in the overall conversation, while **airport experience**, **brand**, and **response time** had 8% share each. **In-flight service** and **baggage handling** had a share of 7% and 6% respectively. The least discussed topics were **pricing** and **special offers/promotions**.

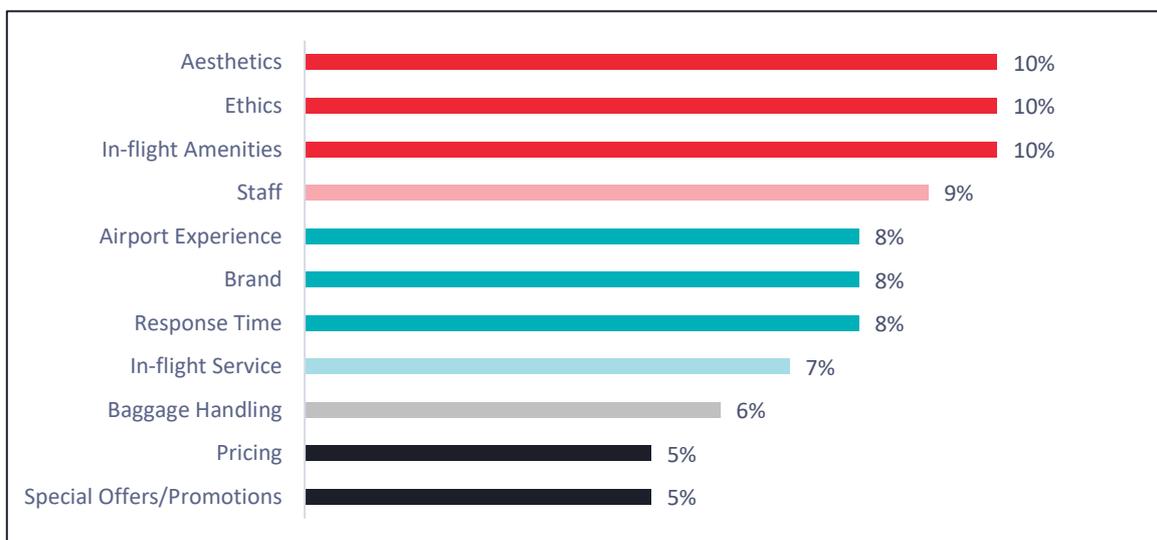


Figure 4: Issues Being Discussed

Issue-Specific Reputations

Emirates appeared to have the best reputation in posts discussing quality of the **brand**. Qatar Airways had the best reputation for **aesthetics**, **airport experience**, **baggage handling**, **in-flight amenities**, **in-flight service**, **pricing**, **response time**, **special offers/promotions**, and **staff**. Etihad Airways performed best for **ethics** while appearing the worst for **baggage handling** and **response time**. Saudia emerged as the worst for **aesthetics**, **airport experience**, **brand**, **ethics**, **in-flight amenities**, **in-flight service**, **pricing**, **special offers/promotions**, and **staff**.

Aesthetics

Qatar Airways performed the best in this category. There were a lot of positive conversations and feedback about the airline's business class, with passengers sharing pictures of aircraft interior and exterior. Etihad Airways came a close second, with passengers mainly sharing their positive experience onboard the A380. The pictures largely featured the luxurious cabin. There were also some negative posts for Etihad Airways, where passengers mentioned the lack of legroom in the economy class.

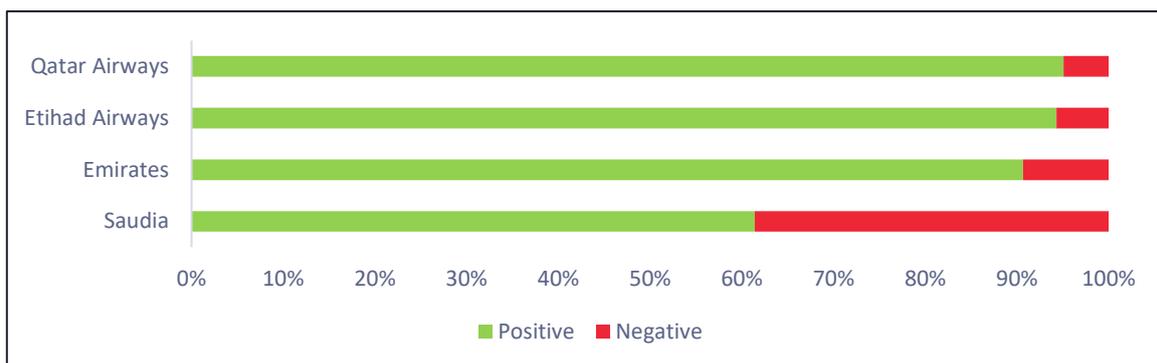


Figure 5: Aesthetics

Airport Experience

Qatar Airways received the least negative discussion for this issue. Many passengers complained about lengthy check-in times, long queues at transfer desks, poor management of flight delays and cancellations. However, there was an appreciation for the lounges and other excellent services available at the airport. Mostly Etihad Airways was positively linked

to smooth check-in procedures, and quality of the first-class lounge. The majority of conversation for the airline was however negative, highlighting the staff’s bad attitude and mismanagement. Also, some passengers complained about the Etihad lounges not being open at all times. Saudia performed the worst, with passengers reporting all sorts of problems—mainly at Jeddah airport, one of the world’s worst ranked international airports.

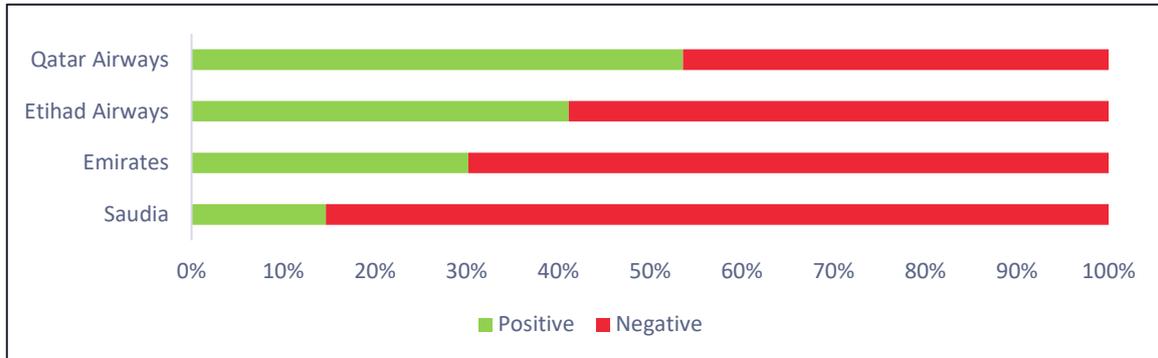


Figure 6: Airport Experience

Baggage Handling

This is a topic that is usually discussed only when someone faces a problem. Thus, almost all of the airlines received a lot of negatives comments. Etihad Airways performed the worst, followed by Saudia, Emirates, and Qatar Airways. Passengers not just expressed disappointment about misplaced bags and luggage damage, but also about the way the complaints were handled by the airlines. Also, Etihad Airways customers were critical of the new policy barring musical instruments in the cabin. Some Qatar Airways customers were very appreciative about the luggage tracking mobile application provided by the airline.

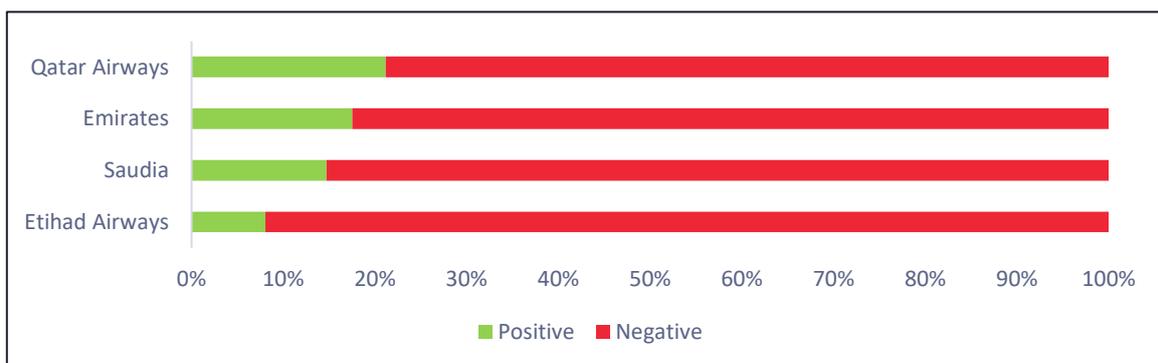


Figure 7: Baggage Handling

Brand

The discussions related to this topic touched on aspects of brand story, corporate visual identity, marketing campaigns, product/service portfolio, and sponsorship agreements. Emirates emerged as the most favorite airline brand of the region. Qatar Airways and Etihad Airways followed. The three airlines were mostly compared with British Airways and other U.S. carriers. Saudia ended up last in this category, by a big margin. The few who posted favorably for Saudia, compared it with small low-cost carriers like Nesma Airlines.

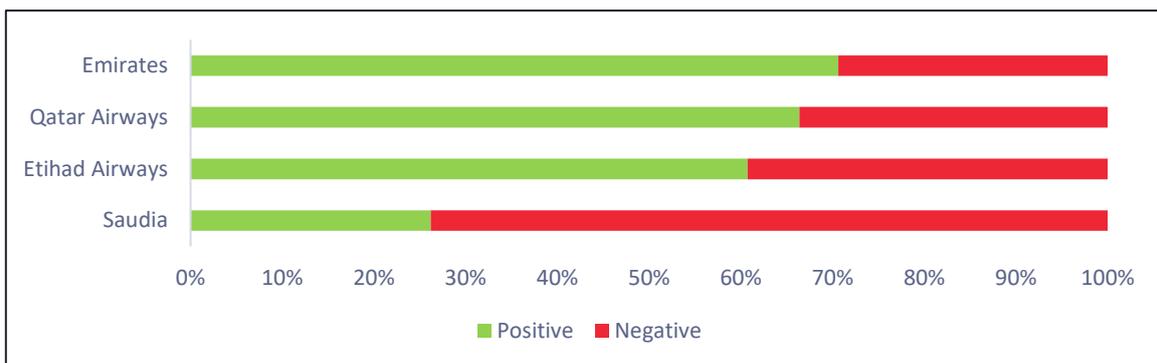


Figure 8: Brand

Ethics

Customers spoke about dishonesty, rude attitude, and racism. Some even criticized the airlines for receiving government subsidies. There was an uproar on Twitter with the hashtag [#BoycottSaudiAirlines](#), when Saudia forcefully flew a Saudi woman back from the Philippines and handed her over to the family. Etihad Airways received appreciation as their pilot returned to the gate so that a couple could visit their dying grandson.

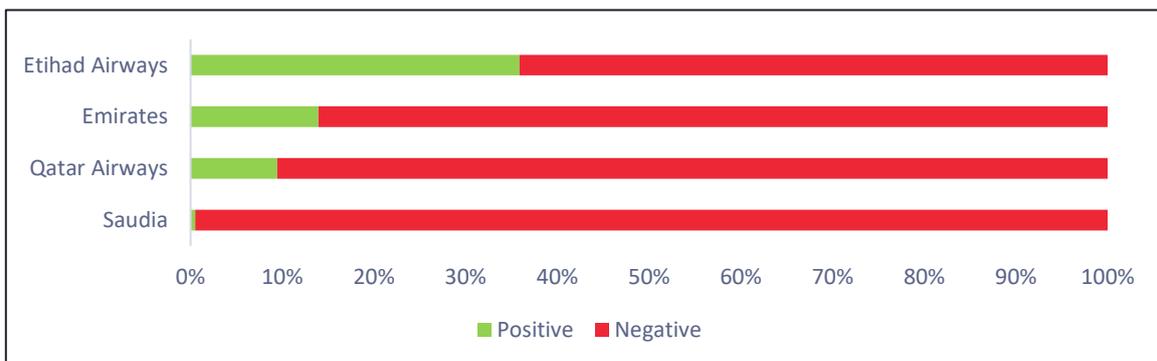


Figure 9: Ethics

In-flight Amenities

Qatar Airways customers were the happiest, although some disapproved content moderation on the entertainment systems. Etihad Airways ranked second, followed by Emirates. Airlines were generally praised for providing tablets, with passengers thanking Qatar Airways in particular for giving laptops. The negative conversation related to Saudia was about some aircraft not having screens.

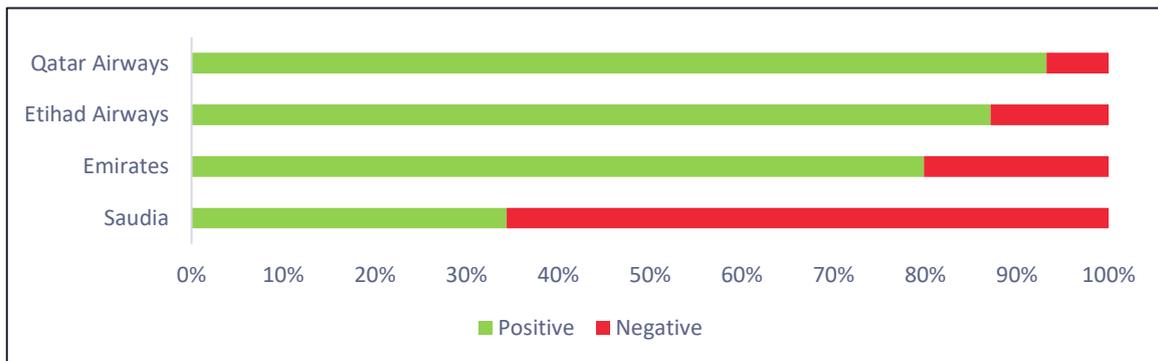


Figure 10: In-flight Amenities

In-flight Service

Again, Qatar Airways outperformed the other airlines. People expressed contentment about the pleasant in-flight experience, friendly crew, food quality, tinted windows, soft landings, and quiet aircraft. Emirates and Etihad Airways were appreciated in a similar tone, although Etihad was criticized at times, for food and insensitivity of flight crew towards passengers with special needs. Customers of Saudia experienced poor service in the air and on land, with particular complaints about non-functional entertainment systems, and dirty cabins.

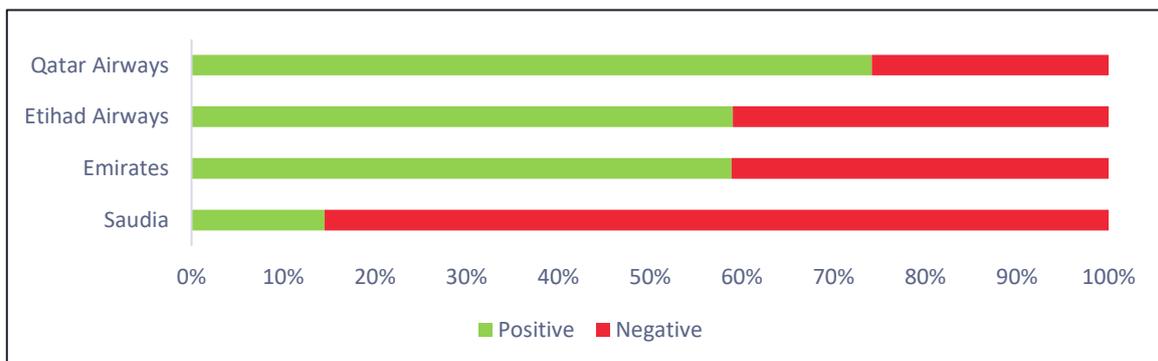


Figure 11: In-flight Service

Pricing

Qatar Airways was the leader on this issue also. There was a lot of positive sentiment towards the airline for their summer deals. Etihad Airways also received positive conversations for pricing, although some customers complained about being charged twice for the same flight, due to errors on the website. Additionally, customers were upset about having to pay highly for extra luggage. Emirates was criticized for making customers pay for flight changes, and for reserving preferential seats.

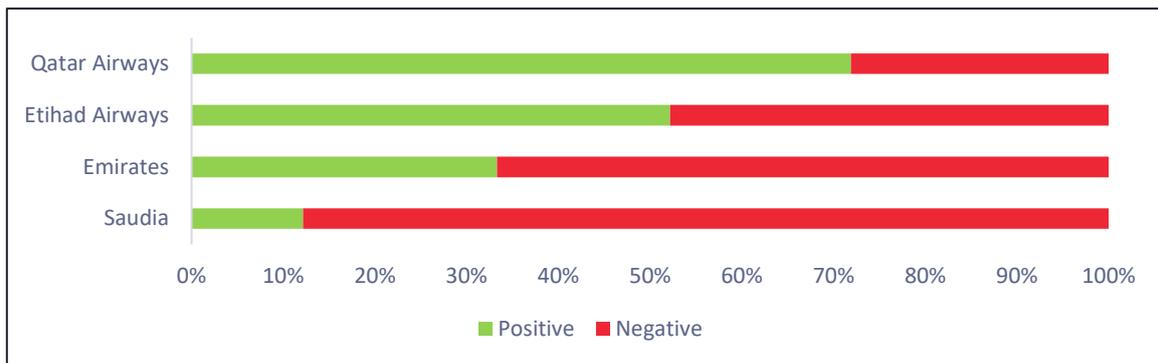


Figure 12: Pricing

Response Time

This is also a topic that is mostly discussed by customers when they are facing problems. The momentary bad mood was clearly reflected in the fact that almost all airlines received the bulk of conversation in a negative perspective. Etihad in particular received the biggest share of negative posts, closely followed by Emirates and Saudia. Customers were disgruntled about not receiving timely responses to complaints.

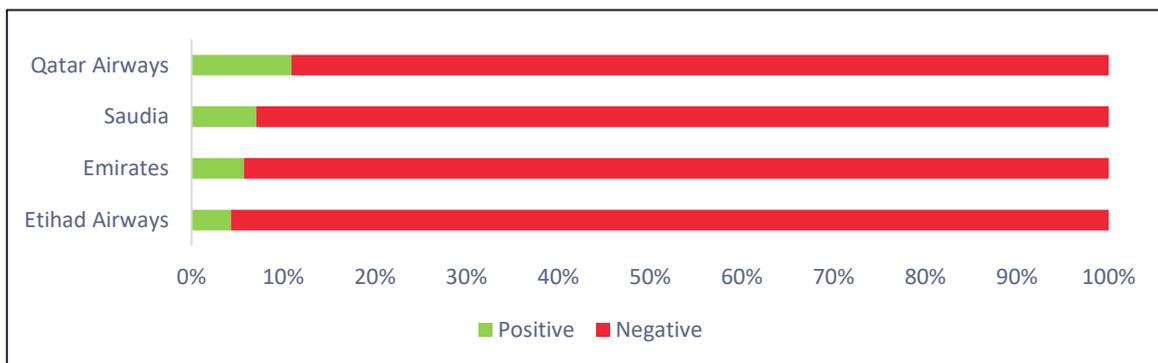


Figure 13: Response Time

Special Offers/Promotions

Qatar Airways got the most positive mentions for various coupon deals, student flight offers, and other discounted travel packages. Etihad Airways ranked second, with people appreciating the extra 20% luggage allowance and other discounts. Emirates was positively mentioned for the offers and deals offered via competitions, discounted vacation packages, and various other deals.

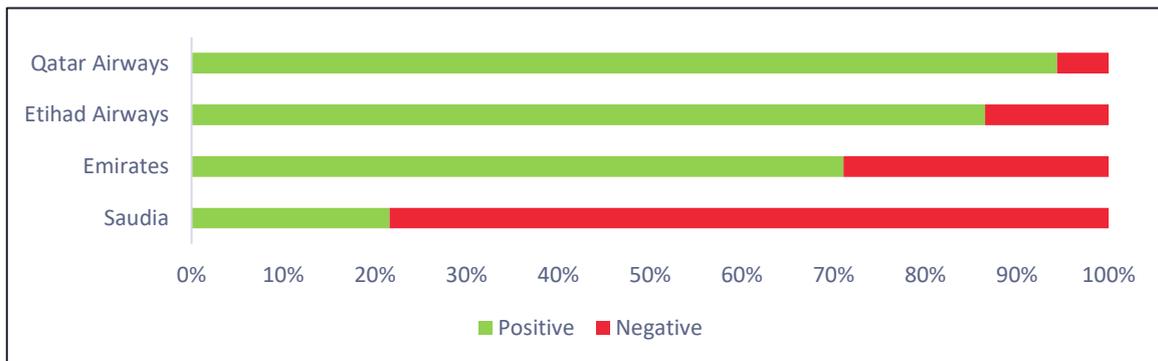


Figure 14: Special Offers/Promotions

Staff

Although Qatar Airways was appreciated the most, some passengers stated that the staff needed more training to handle certain situations better. Etihad Airways was criticized for the rude, unhelpful and insensitive behavior of their staff (towards older people and passengers with medical conditions). Emirates was criticized for being understaffed and for poor service through the call centers. Saudia performed the worst, and there was even a post about their staff getting involved in a fight with a passenger.

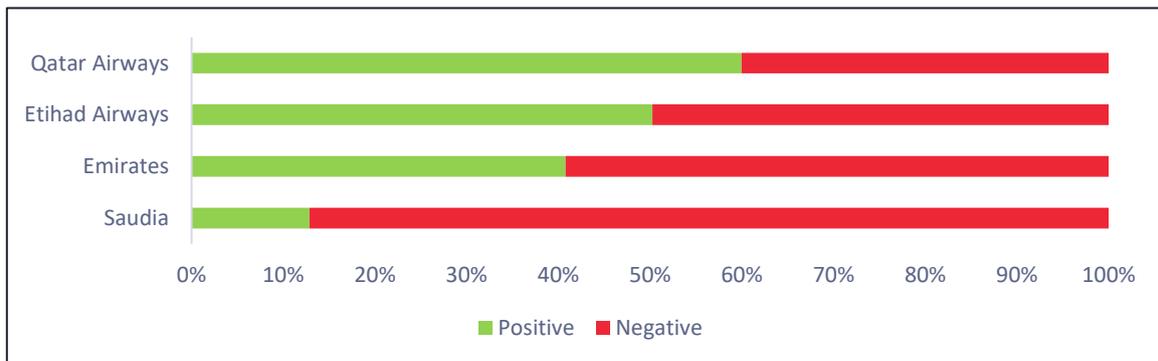


Figure 15: Staff

Dimension 3: Generalized Favorability

Overall sentiment share is used to describe the *generalized favorability* dimension. This section describes the overall likeability of an airline. Additionally, the performance of each airline over the three months of study is discussed in detail.

Overall Sentiment Share

During the research period, Qatar Airways came out as the top airline, both in term of maximum positive sentiment 44%, and the least negative sentiment—9%. The findings back up the recent study published by Skytrax which reported Qatar Airways as being voted the best airline for 2017. Emirates, although being the most talked about airline from March to May, ranked as the second most popular brand based on sentiment. They averaged 39% for positive sentiment against 16% negative. Etihad Airways received just 31% positive mentions, 9% behind Emirates. In terms of negative sentiment, the airline was tied with Emirates at 16%, the joint second lowest average negative sentiment for the period, 7% behind leaders Qatar. Saudia was the worst performing airline from the study, with the least positive sentiment (15%), and the highest share of negative sentiment (40%).

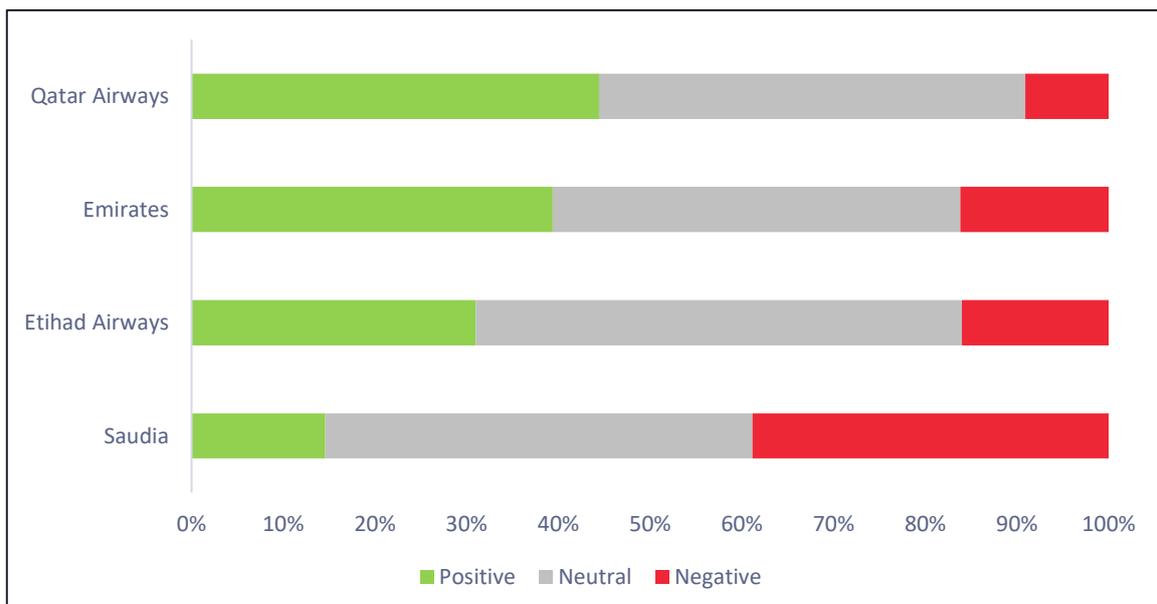


Figure 16: Overall Sentiment Share

Performance Details

Emirates

Over the three months, the positive sentiment remained consistent, as the negative sentiment dropped from 21% in March to 11% in May. In March, “A380” was mentioned 7,760 times as consumers expressed their appreciation for the new features and big screens in the economy class. The launch of the A380 to three new destinations also generated ample positive engagement. People reacted very favorably to Emirates celebrating the International Women's Day. In April, the tagline “Fly the friendly skies for real” was repeated 10,134 times. This was a campaign launched by Emirates in response to a United Airlines’ incident of dragging a passenger out of the aircraft. In May, Emirates was mentioned positively 705 times, in relation with the FA Cup final. Additionally, the post announcing Emirates sponsorship agreement with football club Atletico Boca Juniors generated 706 positive mentions.

Over the three months, much of the negative discussion was centered on **baggage handling**, **customer service**, **staff behavior** and corporate **ethics**. Complaints from celebrities like Kevin Pietersen, Shobu Yarlagadda, and Suhel Seth received a lot of attention. Also, the airline's decision to replace the Taiwanese flag from the crew’s service waistcoat, for the Chinese flag, was met with negative engagement.

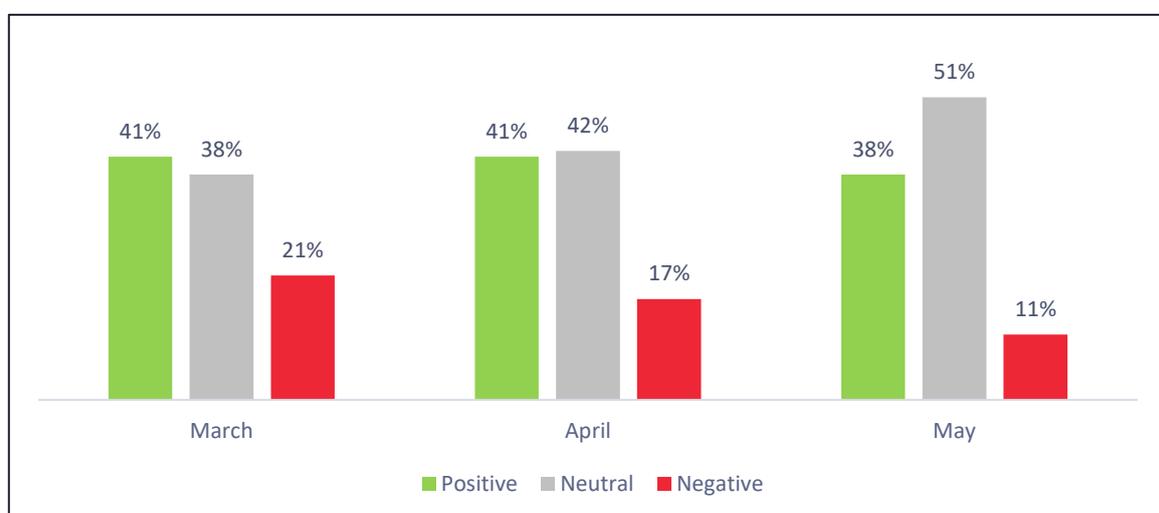


Figure 17: Emirates 3-Month Sentiment Analysis

Etihad Airways

Etihad Airways consistently received more positive mentions than negatives. From March, there was a rise in the positive sentiment and a gradual drop in the negative content related to the airline. Consumers praised the airline for the high-quality in-flight experience (comfort, food, and entertainment). The airline also received positive engagement in March for outstandingly handling the electronic ban. In April, modeling star Halima Aden tweeted to Etihad Airways, thanking the airline for a tour in Abu Dhabi. The post generated 585 positive engagements. In the same period, many passengers expressed their liking of the A380 experience. In May, a huge share of the positive discussions was related to the airline's sponsorship agreements with sports teams and events. Additionally, a post on Instagram about the initiative of inviting nine students from "The Future Rehabilitation Centre" to the training facility in Abu Dhabi, as part of the 'Year of Giving' campaign, was viewed 19,803. People engaged very positively with this post.

On the other hand, **baggage handling** was a constant issue throughout the three-month period, with complaints linked to tampering of bags, as well as accusations of theft from luggage. **Staff** behavior and **response time** were other main issues that generated negative engagement. There were also some isolated complaints around the inability of the staff to speak English effectively on international flights.

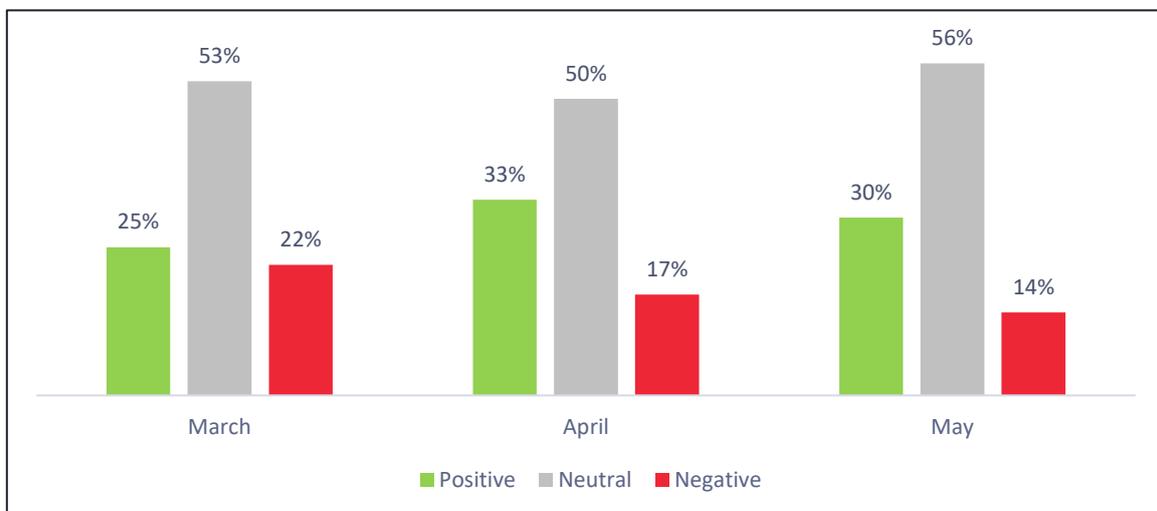


Figure 18: Etihad Airways 3-Month Sentiment Analysis

Qatar Airways

The net sentiment over three months, leaned consistently towards the positive side. In March, a post announcing the launch of a luxurious business class cabin generated 10,553 mentions. In April, a post by Dublin Airport about the chance to win two return tickets, in partnership with Qatar Airways, generated 8,123 positive mentions. In the same month, an article published by Al-Watan news website about Qatar Airways' intention to purchase shares in Lufthansa was well received and engaged with. Furthermore, the engagement was also driven by the announcements of flight network expansion to Abidjan, Accra, and Mombasa. In May, the airline announced the renewal of sponsorship for Al-Ahli Saudi football club, leading to 5,473 positive mentions. Furthermore, there were 1,296 positive mentions related to business class experience with consumers expressing their satisfaction.

On the negative side, the word "disappointed" appeared 125 times in March, in relation to customer service, flight delays, and long response times to lost baggage complaints. In April, a passenger tweeted, complaining about being homophobically treated by an airline staff member, which resulted in many negative posts around the incident. The reactions carried to the following month. In May, the hashtag [#BoycottQatarAirways](#) was posted by an LGBT group, leading to some negative sentiment towards the airline. The community demanded a boycott of the airline, in retaliation to harsh law against gay people in the State of Qatar.

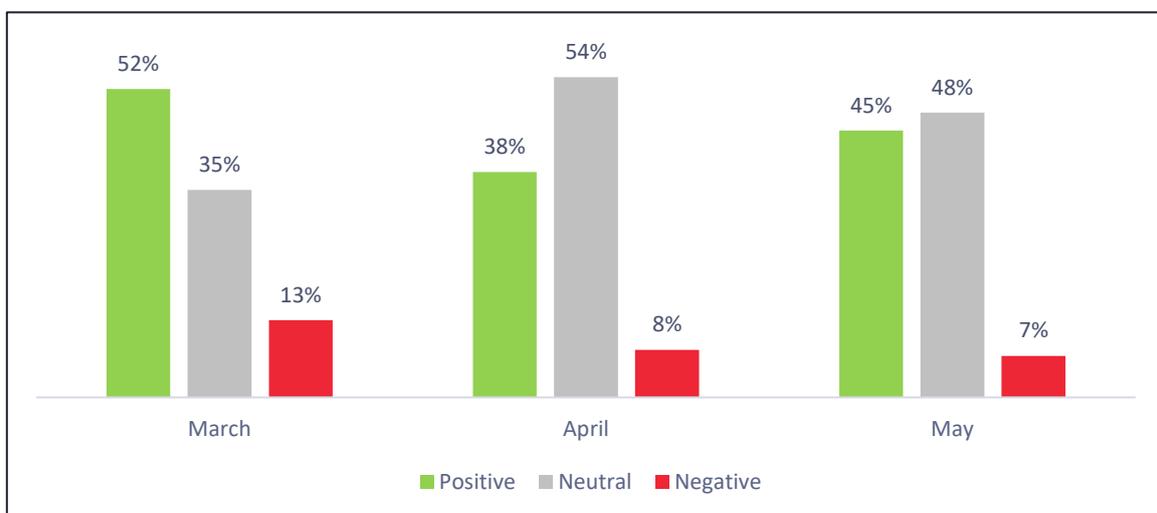


Figure 19: Qatar Airways 3-Month Sentiment Analysis

Saudia

In March, passengers appreciated the new service of bubble wrapping personal laptops. In April, the start of flights to new destinations in Sudan and Pakistan also generated some positive discussions, as did the opening of specific check-in desks for Saudi military personnel. The initiative of Princess Noura University with Saudia promoting the culture of traveling amongst young children also contributed to positive engagement. In May, the announcement about sending 30 women abroad for pilot training got positive attention.

Although the positive mentions remained around 15%, from March to May, the negative mentions went up from 29% to 47%. In the three months, Saudia performed very poorly across different topics. In April, much negativity was linked to an incident of a Saudi woman being kidnapped and enslaved by her family. Saudia allegedly cooperated with the family. [#BoycottSaudiAirlines](#) and [#SaveDinaAli](#) trended on Twitter, attracting over 2,000 negative mentions for the airline. The poor condition and lack of services at Jeddah Airport remained a central theme of negative discussions, among regular travelers and seasonal pilgrims. In May, a negative tweet from [@Fayez_malki](#) about flight delay and poor communication from the airline generated an engagement of 5,166. In the same month, a video posted from the Twitter account, [@G_alshael](#), showing how a handicapped girl was denied boarding, was engaged with, 3,464 times.

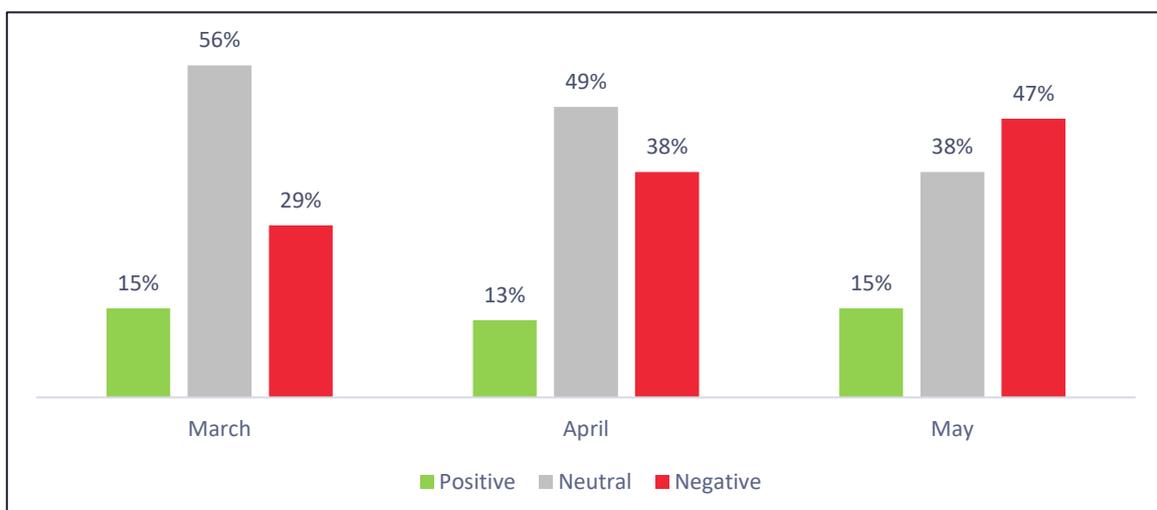


Figure 20: Saudia 3-Month Sentiment Analysis

Managerial Implications

Focus on the Right Things

Human Intelligence in Sentiment Analysis

For airlines, monitoring online brand mentions and analyzing sentiments, is especially imperative. Such big data sentiment analysis can be conducted using two different methods.

The first method relies on artificial intelligence (AI), automated natural language processing algorithms, computational linguistics, and machine learning capabilities—to systematically extract sentiments from a text, and to assign topics. It is a speedy approach to conducting analysis on huge data sets, with an accuracy ranging from 50-60%, at best. Machines fall significantly short of humans when handling conversations filled with sarcasm, slang, and metaphors. There is still quite a way to go before AI can match human judgment.

The second method (such as the one used for this study) combines AI with human intervention. The process of analysis involves running a sample set of data through individuals that specialize in the specific language and regional dialect. Although this technique is slightly relatively slower, it delivers very high accuracy (95%).

Operationalizing such a technique requires a huge investment of time and money. Nonetheless, solution providers like **BrandsEye** deliver a cost-effective alternative. These companies possess access to the right infrastructure and human capital—and by meeting the economies of scales, provide high-quality, cost-effective commercial solutions for governments and businesses.

Opinion Mining—A Deeper Level of Analysis

Humans express sentiments that are more than just ‘positive’ or ‘negative.’ A post may contain joy, disappointment, anger, fear, surprise, anxiety, among a range of different emotions. Also, people express these emotions ‘about something.’ It is not sufficient to know the overall sentiment associated with a brand. Businesses must analyze which issues

their consumers are content with, and which issues fall short of meeting the expectations of the customer.

While most contemporary sentiment analysis tools merely categorize text as positive or negative, a deeper level of analysis—**opinion mining**—attempts to uncover the exact emotions related to specific issues. For example, **BrandsEye** categorizes content based on the sentiments and topics (example - baggage handling, in-flight service, and pricing). Such insights facilitate micro-level inspection of sentiments based on topics. Thus, opinion mining turns big data into segmented smart data. The key implication for progressive practitioners is to shift focus from bipolar sentiment analysis to multi-dimensional **opinion mining**.

Quality vs. Quantity of Engagement

Few years back, the main KPI of a brand's social media activity was its **number of followers**. Then as most social media networks implemented the '**pay-to-play**' policy, brands could no longer reach the majority of their followers without paying. The size of social following eventually had little meaning, and the attention gradually shifted to the number of likes and comments received on brand posts. Thus, the **quantity of engagement** became the primary KPI. Nevertheless, this metric has also outlived its hype, as evident in this study.

For instance, Emirates won the numbers game, receiving the most engagement and mentions on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; but 16% of this interaction was negative. Similarly, Saudia was mentioned a lot on Twitter—for all the wrong reasons. Over 40% of the conversation surrounding Saudia was negative. The quality of engagement was best for Qatar Airways. The brand attracted the highest percentage of positive sentiments (44%), and the least percentage of negatives (9%).

In this evolving landscape, brands must concentrate on improving their **quality of engagement** by posting content that delivers educational value, emotional connection, or entertainment. Furthermore, the managerial focus must switch to KPIs and software that facilitate qualitative assessment of social engagement.

Impact of Sports Sponsorships on E-Reputation

In the *being known* dimension, the popularity of the brands was evaluated based on the quantity of online brand mentions. Most of these posts were related to the airlines' agreements and sponsorships of sports teams and events. Etihad Airways was mentioned for its' sponsorship of Manchester City Football Club (F.C.). Emirates received an enormous amount of mentions in relation with its sponsorship of International Cricket Council, Rugby World Cup, Tennis events, and various football teams and events. Qatar Airways was also discussed frequently in connection with Al Ahli F.C., FIFA, FIFA World Cup, and F.C. Barcelona. Thus, the size and quality of sports related partnerships appeared to have a strong correlation with the overall e-reputation of the airlines.