More Than a Thousand Words!
Emoji Engagement on Turkish Airline Instagram Pages

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Consumer engagement (CE) has become one of the marketing problems that many airlines strive to solve. In this sense, emojis implemented to increase CE on social media have gained a stronger popularity as a form of communication among brands. This chapter will provide readers with a deeper understanding of how emoji usage and emoji types affect CE using the highly standardized Unicode classification based on emoji semiotics. Therefore, the author concludes with a case study that investigates the relationship between emoji usage and CE in the official Instagram pages of Turkish airline companies. Also, the author discusses the state of the art in semiotics and concludes by suggesting that the use of emojis by brands may change activism on social media through consumer behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Emoji, a different form of communication, has been sent over 2 billion so far as a part of the content created by internet users.[1] Therefore, emojis have replaced the natural language in personal and informal computer-mediated communication (Leung et al., 2017). As of September 2020, there are 3,521 different emoji types[2] according to Unicode standards. Emojis are classified by Unicode.org in 10 main categories (Smileys&Emotion, People&Body, Component, Animals&Nature, Food&Drink, Travel&Places, Activities, Objects, Symbols, and Flags).[3]

Emojis are frequently used by businesses as a marketing strategy (Mathews and Lee, 2018). In addition, colourful and highly visual emojis play a universal role in understanding the inner world of the consumer. Emojis also attract the attention of the consumer to products/services and bring brands and them closer (Sümer, 2017). Thus, the primary reason for using emojis by firms is to increase CE (Mathews and Lee, 2018). Additionally, businesses can reach wider audiences and develop better social

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media strategies through CE (Farook and Abeysekara, 2016). Today, many academic scholars focus on CE to find the motivations that push consumers to online interaction (e.g., de Vries et al., 2012; Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; Tsai and Men, 2017; Demmers et al., 2020). CE can be defined as "the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the consumer or the organization initiate" (Vivek et al., 2012). Therefore, investigating the underlying factors behind consumer brand engagement will shed light on marketing efforts. Previous studies suggest that the post content (i.e., informational, entertaining, or remunerative) characteristics (i.e., vividness, interactivity) or the date (i.e., weekday, workday, or events) shared by companies operating in various sectors are in relationship with engagement (de Vries et al., 2012; Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; Schultz, 2017; Devereux et al. 2019; Demmers et al., 2020). However, there are few studies investigating the factors effecting CE in airline industry (Leung et al., 2013; Thao et al., 2017; Öhman, 2017; Menon et al., 2019; Sigurdsson et al., 2020; Sigfúsdóttir, 2019; Koçak, 2021).

As an important part of visual communication on social media (Herring and Dainas, 2017), emojis impact the consumer's attitudes toward the brands operating in many sectors (Arya et al., 2018; İşler and Demir, 2019) and are among the tools implemented to effect (Pancer et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2019) and to increase CE (Mathews and Lee, 2018).

In the airline industry, where social media plays an important role, (Grančay, 2014) brands share messages containing different types of emojis from their pages (Sahin et al., 2018). However, no study was made so far to specifically evaluate the relationship between CE and emojis used on airline social media posts. Hence, the importance of determining the factors affecting social media engagement is obvious in terms of the strategies to be produced in the airline marketing. In this sense, developing strategies to encourage social media engagement in the airline sector might increase the consumers interests towards brands (Solem and Pedersen, 2016).

In this study, the effect of the use of emojis on CE is examined from a Turkish airline perspective. As a popular social media platform in Turkey (wearesocial.com, 2019), Instagram has been selected for the analysis. The other objectives of the study are statistically to reveal how often Turkish airline companies use emojis in their Instagram messages and which types of emojis that they focus on. For this purpose, all messages sent in 2019 from the official Instagram accounts of Turkish airline brands were collected.

Within the scope of the study, first, the literature review is presented along with theoretical framework, after which research questions are developed. Second, the methodology is introduced. Next, the results are reported and discussed. Finally, the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the study are mentioned, and suggestions are then made for future studies.

BACKGROUND

Semiotics

Semiotics, the first examples of which are based on the correspondence of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, is a discipline that offers a structure to analyse and examine how signs work in a particular environment. In the field of marketing, it is possible to find out which product or service will be offered, which audience will be targeted through signs. As such, semiotics can help develop a logic and system sequence that will answer questions with signs (Zakia and Nadin, 1987).

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