



# Analysis of Airline Marketing Optimization Strategies: Taking Middle Eastern Airlines as an Example

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**How to cite this paper:** Bendriouch, F.Z. (2025) Analysis of Airline Marketing Optimization Strategies: Taking Middle Eastern Airlines as an Example. *Open Access Library Journal*, 12: e14348. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1114348>

**Received:** September 25, 2025

**Accepted:** November 9, 2025

**Published:** November 12, 2025

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## Abstract

This article compares the marketing strategies and performance of Emirates Airlines and Qatar Airways. While Emirates has historically led with luxury branding and sponsorships, recent gaps in customer engagement and adaptive marketing have allowed Qatar Airways to excel. Qatar Airways' focus on customer-centric service, digital innovation, and agile marketing has earned it top accolades, including repeated Skytrax awards. On the other hand, we realize that Emirates' declining quality of customer service, and differentiation in terms of treating clients among different classes can impact customers' loyalty. Furthermore, rigidity in policy (one size fits all kind of laws) regarding flyer programs, not having to a certain degree some flexibility towards some customers' exceptional cases, and randomness in scheduling flights which can be seen in its WCR (Weighted Connectivity Ratio) has led the company to lose its "airline of the year" Skytrax award and then fail in customer retention and loyalty.

## Subject Areas

Marketing of Airline Companies

## Keywords

Middle Eastern Airlines, Marketing Strategies, Customer Retention, Customer Satisfaction

## 1. Introduction

The Middle Eastern aviation industry has experienced remarkable growth, transforming from a nascent sector into a global powerhouse due to strategic location,

state investment, and innovative marketing strategies. Airlines like Emirates, Qatar Airways, Etihad, and Turkish Airlines have capitalized on their geographic advantage to connect East and West, dominating long-haul travel. Emirates, despite its global success, has recently fallen behind Qatar Airways, which has consistently earned top customer satisfaction awards. This shift highlights the importance of marketing strategies in maintaining competitive advantage. Qatar Airways' customer-focused approach, premium services, and adaptive marketing have allowed it to outperform Emirates in recent years. The rapid development of aviation infrastructure, events like Expo 2020 and the FIFA World Cup, and initiatives such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 further fuel regional competition. Given this context, the study aims to analyze Emirates' marketing shortcomings and Qatar Airways' strengths, offering insights into how airlines can enhance their positioning by addressing both luxury and budget-conscious segments in an increasingly competitive market.

## 2. Literature Review

This section explores the marketing strategies that influence customer choice in the competitive airline industry, focusing on Emirates as a case study. Emirates' success is attributed to the strategic vision of Dubai's ruling family and the airline's commitment to innovative, detail-oriented, and unconventional management approaches [1]. However, the study lacks specifics on those strategies and acknowledges service inconsistencies without elaboration. Emirates' resilience and profitability despite global crises like 9/11, yet provide limited insight into its comparative weaknesses against Qatar Airways [2]. Furthermore, understanding customer perceptions is essential for effective positioning, as service quality shapes loyalty and competitiveness [3]. While pricing was once a key competitive tool, it is no longer sufficient alone; instead, perceived service quality is critical, especially in markets with similar fare structures [4]. Emirates, known for luxury in premium classes, balances this with competitive economy fares, thus appealing to a wide customer base [5]. Additionally, strategic operations management—including scheduling, fleet planning, and process efficiency—plays a vital role in enhancing reliability and punctuality, which are major customer priorities. Ultimately, service quality remains central to customer retention and brand differentiation across both business and leisure segments [4].

## 3. The Gap in the Literature Review

Qatar Airways, with eight Skytrax "Airline of the Year" wins including 2024, surpasses Emirates despite both being renowned. Limited research compares their strategies, highlighting an opportunity to examine Qatar Airways' success factors and how Emirates might adapt to achieve similar recognition.

## 4. Methodology

This qualitative research uses case studies, secondary data, and marketing frame-

works to compare Emirates and Qatar Airways. It involves:

- Case Study: Comparing both airlines' marketing strategies and competitive positions.
- Secondary Data: Using academic studies, Skytrax rankings, and customer reviews analysis
- SWOT Analysis: Applying and comparing SWOT frameworks for both airlines.

## 5. Emirates SWOT Analysis

Before we start this analysis, I'd like to emphasize that the two companies share some similar details in their SWOT analysis such as: both benefit from the geographic positioning since both of them are in the middle east, both are vulnerable to geopolitical conflicts that can show up in the region or in the rest of the world... so to avoid repetition, some of the shared traits in common will appear in Emirates but won't be repeated while talking about Qatar airways. Instead, for more innovation you'll realize diversification in each section of the SWOT for both companies as you proceed with the reading. As a matter of fact, what is mentioned in a section that is a point in common won't be repeated unless it's necessary and hard to overlook. Instead we'll look for more details that distinguish a company from another.

### 5.1. Strengths

#### 5.1.1. Branding

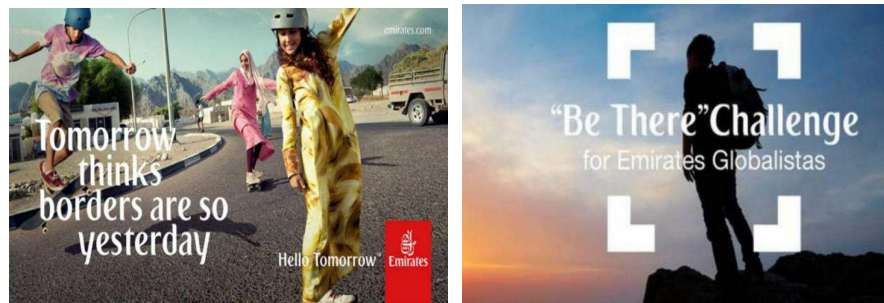
##### 1) Brand vision

Emirates Airlines has developed a strong internal branding strategy centered on positioning itself as a global lifestyle brand, not just an airline. This vision is reflected in a series of impactful marketing campaigns that combine celebrity endorsements, creative storytelling, and cultural messaging to build emotional connections with travelers. Notable campaigns include the "Fly Better" initiative, a high-profile partnership with Penélope Cruz, and symbolic efforts like showcasing gender empowerment atop the Burj Khalifa. The airline also introduced the concept of the "globalista" to target modern, cosmopolitan travelers who view travel as essential to their identity. By aligning its branding with lifestyle values and consistently promoting comfort, elegance, and inclusivity, Emirates has solidified its image as a luxury, customer-centric carrier in the competitive aviation market [5].

##### 2) Brand as a product

Emirates Airlines positions itself as a premium lifestyle brand by offering high-quality, experience-driven services that go beyond transportation. Its focus on luxury, innovation, and customer satisfaction is evident in its use of modern aircraft, exclusive amenities like lounges and chauffeur service, and significant investments in wine offerings, in-flight entertainment, and connectivity. Catering primarily to "Globalistas"—young, cosmopolitan travelers who view travel as part of their identity—Emirates emphasizes unforgettable experiences over basic util-

ity. The brand's strong link to the UAE further enhances its image of prestige and luxury, reinforcing its reputation as a symbol of national excellence and global sophistication as you'll see in **Figure 1** below.



**Figure 1.** Emirates' advertising campaigns.

### 3) The brand as an organization

Emirates' brand identity is deeply embedded in its organizational structure, emphasizing that its employees are key to delivering exceptional service. The airline invests heavily in staff training and development, fostering a skilled and open-minded workforce committed to excellence. Strategic partnerships with top universities like Carnegie Mellon and Oxford further enhance its talent base. Emirates also reinforces its customer-centric approach through consistent communication across digital and print platforms. These internal strengths, closely aligned with its premium service offerings, create a cohesive brand experience that competitors like Etihad struggle to replicate, giving Emirates a distinct competitive edge.

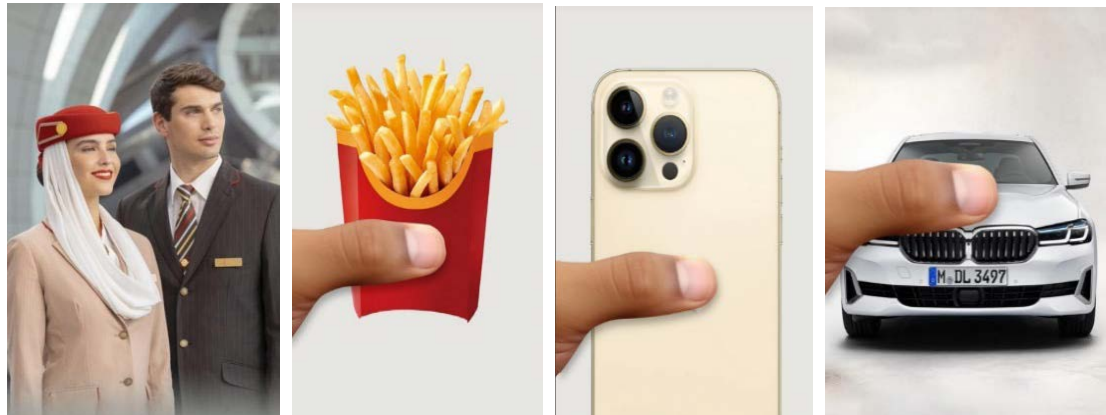
#### The brand as a person

In the case of Emirates, these attributes are clearly reflected in the user imagery portrayed in the airline's advertisements. Through the depiction of its customers, Emirates defines its brand personalities as sophisticated, prestigious, and glamorous.

#### The brand as a symbol

Emirates Airlines strategically uses visual branding—particularly its logo, colors, and uniforms—to create a strong, memorable brand identity closely tied to its cultural and national roots. The red and white logo, featuring Arabic calligraphy, reflects the airline's heritage while red, a dominant and psychologically powerful color, conveys passion, confidence, and luxury. This color is consistently used not only in the logo but also in the iconic cabin crew uniforms, reinforcing brand recognition in airports worldwide.

Beyond its visual appeal, red stimulates urgency and excitement, influencing consumer behavior and enhancing brand recall, much like major global brands such as Coca-Cola and Netflix. Emirates' branding extends beyond the logo into a comprehensive identity system, where visual cues, uniforms, and the "Fly Better" motto all contribute to a cohesive and instantly recognizable image that signifies excellence, elegance, and prestige—making the brand stand out even without the logo explicitly shown.



**Figure 2.** Iconic brands recognizable without their logos (Emirates, Apple, MacDonald's, BMW).

The images here (**Figure 2**) show brands that became obvious without even disclosing their logos. So I believe that it's the same thing with Emirates. In other words, it is totally obvious that we are talking about an iPhone, a BMW and French fries from McDonald's.

### 5.1.2. Fleet

Emirates' fleet expansion program remains on schedule, enabling the airline to consistently acquire new aircraft, invest in brand development and support, and extend its global network. Recently, Emirates introduced the Airbus A380, the world's largest passenger aircraft, into its operations, capturing the attention of air travelers worldwide. Since 1995, the airline has maintained an all-wide-body fleet and, over the past decade, has placed some of the largest aircraft orders in aviation history. With the world's largest Airbus A380 and Boeing 777 fleets, Emirates has emerged as a key customer for both Boeing and Airbus. Operating a diverse fleet of wide-body Airbus and Boeing aircraft, it is one of only nine airlines globally to maintain an exclusively wide-body fleet.

### 5.1.3. Geographic Position

Emirates Airlines' geographic advantage is a cornerstone of its global success, strategically leveraging Dubai's location as a central hub connecting major continents [1]. Emirates Airlines leverages Dubai's strategic location—at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa—to efficiently connect major global markets. With two-thirds of the world's population within an eight-hour flight, and a 24/7 operational airport, Emirates ensures quick turnarounds and seamless long-haul connectivity. This prime positioning allows Emirates to optimize long-haul connectivity, offering seamless transit between East and West while capitalizing on the increasing demand for intercontinental travel [6]. In fact, studies show that connectivity through European hubs has been challenged by the gulf hubs such as emirates airlines Etihad and Qatar [7]. Its modern wide-body fleet, hub-and-spoke model, and supportive infrastructure enable cost efficiency and global reach. Dubai's growth in tourism and commerce further amplifies this advantage, with cam-

paings like “Fly Emirates” and “Meet Dubai” strengthening the airline’s role as a premier transit carrier.

## 5.2. Weaknesses

### 5.2.1. Carbon Footprint

Emirates Airlines faces sustainability challenges due to its reliance on large, fuel-intensive aircraft like the A380 and Boeing 777, as well as its focus on long-haul routes and luxury services, which increase fuel consumption and carbon emissions. These factors contribute to a significant carbon footprint, placing the airline at a disadvantage amid rising global environmental regulations and shifting consumer preferences toward eco-friendly travel. Without significant investment in greener technologies and emission-reduction strategies, Emirates risks higher operational costs, reputational damage, and reduced competitiveness in a sustainability-driven market [8].

### 5.2.2. The Focus on Luxury

As a side note, Emirates is accused of giving more focus and care for customers on business and first class due to the high price it requires to benefit from its features which disparages the quality of service in Economy class. The investment done for first class is also enormous which gives the airline the general idea of luxury. Emirates is widely regarded as a luxury airline, leading travelers to anticipate a higher level of comfort compared to budget carriers. However, despite being priced at a premium, the business and economy class seating does not always reflect luxury standards. In contrast, the first-class cabin offers ample space and an exclusive experience tailored for leisure travel. By prioritizing first-class passengers, Emirates risks alienating those in business and economy class, who may feel undervalued in comparison. While some argue that premium treatment should be reserved for first-class ticket holders, others believe that Emirates could adopt a more egalitarian approach, similar to Southwest Airlines, which provides a uniform service level to all passengers

### 5.2.3. Random Connectivity

We’d like to mention O’Connell study (2016) in his journal titled “A study into the hub performance Emirates, Etihad Airways and Qatar Airways and their competitive position against the major European hubbing airlines.” (Table 1) In this study, the author utilized the Weighted Connectivity Ratio (WCR) and Average Routing Factors (ARF) to assess airline hub performance. The Weighted Connectivity Ratio (WCR) is a metric used to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of an airline’s hub operations by assessing the quality and quantity of connections facilitated. A higher WCR typically indicates better connectivity and more efficient hub performance [7]. According to Pino Rachmandika (2022), the WCR indicates that when the connectivity ratio is around 2, the airline demonstrates strong temporal connectivity and efficient hub operations, as observed in the case of Etihad Airways [9] (see Table 1). However, Gulf carriers generally exhibited good operational interconnectivity. A WCR close to 1 suggests that flight connec-

tivity may be more a result of randomness than strategic scheduling.

**Table 1.** WCR of different airlines: [9].

Airline	Main Hub	Additional hub	Hub Model	WCR (O'Connell, 2016)
Etihad airways	Abu Dhabi	-	Sole Hub	2.31
Emirates airlines	Dubai	-	Sole Hub	1.47
Qatar airways	Doha	-	Sole hub	2.17
KLM airlines	Amsterdam	-	Sole hub	1.31
Lufthansa	Frankfurt	Munich	Multi hub model	1.25
Air France	Charles De Gaulle	Paris Orly	Multi hub model	1.44
British Airways	London Heathrow	Gatwick	Multi hub model	1.13

For Emirates, it is important to note that, with the highest number of long-haul flights among Gulf carriers, the airline operates with the longest average sector length. This makes organizing connecting flights more challenging, leading to a lower WCR. However, the extended layover times for Emirates passengers contribute to increased time spent at Dubai Duty-Free, which is seen as a strategic advantage. Nonetheless, this could also be a drawback for some travelers which is exactly what will be witnessed in the review analysis in the future sections. In other words, this strategy has more profit to the airline and its hub but leads to more dissatisfaction to the clients.

#### 5.2.4. Opportunities

Emirates Airlines can strengthen its global leadership by leveraging the UAE's oil-rich position to secure favorable long-term fuel agreements—fuel being 20% - 30% of costs—through bulk purchasing and government ties [10]. Growth opportunities include expanding its 150+ destination network to emerging markets and secondary cities, capitalizing on Dubai's rise as a business hub to attract corporate and expatriate travelers, and using events like the Dubai Airshow to showcase innovations and forge partnerships, boosting profitability, market share, and competitive advantage.

### 5.3. Threats

#### 5.3.1. The Rise of Riyadh

Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, Riyadh is transforming into a cultural and economic hub through heritage restoration projects like Diriyah and Al-Ula, international events, and tourism-driven growth. The launch of Riyadh Air aims to fill gaps in direct global connectivity, positioning the city as a primary aviation hub and reducing reliance on traditional transit points like Dubai. This strategy challenges established Gulf carriers such as Emirates by attracting tourists and investors directly to Riyadh, signaling a shift in regional travel patterns and reinforcing Saudi Arabia's bid for global prominence through cul-

tural and infrastructural advancement.

### **5.3.2. The Geopolitical Issues in the Middle East**

Geopolitical instability in the Gulf, such as the 2017-2021 Qatar diplomatic crisis, has disrupted Emirates Airlines' operations by suspending Doha flights, reducing market access, and driving passengers to competitors like Qatar Airways and Turkish Airlines. Such disputes undermine intra-Gulf cooperation, aviation agreements, and investor confidence, while airspace restrictions or sanctions could further limit market reach. Reliance on Dubai as a transit hub heightens vulnerability, as prolonged unrest may deter travelers and benefit carriers in more stable regions. To mitigate risks, Emirates should diversify its network, secure alternative air corridors, and strengthen ties with neutral markets to maintain access and resilience.

### **5.3.3. The Competition between Low Cost Carriers and the Rest of the Major Airlines in the Middle East**

Emirates Airlines faces mounting competition from both low-cost carriers—such as Flydubai, Air Arabia, and Wizz Air Abu Dhabi—and full-service rivals like Qatar Airways, Etihad Airways, and Turkish Airlines. LCCs attract price-sensitive travelers with lower fares, challenging Emirates on short-haul and regional routes, while major full-service competitors match its premium services on long-haul routes and expand aggressively into markets where Emirates once dominated. This dual pressure risks eroding profitability, market share, and brand positioning. To stay competitive, Emirates must boost operational efficiency, strengthen loyalty programs, adapt pricing strategies, and expand partnerships to retain its global aviation leadership.

### **5.3.4. Calamities, Terrorism and Pandemics**

Emirates Airlines faces significant threats from Middle East instability and global health crises. Regional conflicts, terrorism, and political unrest can deter travelers, trigger airspace restrictions, raise fuel costs, and damage the UAE's image as a safe transit hub, potentially shifting traffic to alternative hubs like Singapore or Frankfurt. Similarly, pandemics such as COVID-19 severely disrupt operations, reduce demand, and force costly safety measures, while also accelerating long-term shifts like reduced corporate travel. Both risks threaten Emirates' hub-and-spoke model and profitability. To remain resilient, the airline must diversify routes and revenue streams, strengthen crisis management and health protocols, and leverage cargo operations and strategic partnerships to sustain its global leadership.

#### Conclusion

To conclude, Emirates Airlines benefits from a strong brand, modern fleet, and strategic Dubai hub, with growth potential in route expansion and partnerships. Yet, reliance on luxury branding, limited domestic reach, and rising competition, alongside threats like geopolitical instability, fuel volatility, emerging hubs, and pandemics, pose risks. Sustaining leadership will require diversifying offerings,

enhancing resilience, and leveraging Dubai's growth (See **Table 2**).

**Table 2.** Emirates SWOT analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strong branding</li> <li>● Fleet</li> <li>● Geographic position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Carbon footprint</li> <li>● Focus on luxury</li> <li>● Random connectivity between flights</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ability to negotiate favorable fuel supply agreement</li> <li>● Ability to expand to new destinations</li> <li>● Dubai's growing reputation as an international business hub</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The rise of Riyadh</li> <li>● The geopolitical issues in the Middle East</li> <li>● The competition between low cost carriers and the rest of the major airlines in the middle east</li> <li>● Calamities, terrorism</li> <li>● Pandemics</li> </ul>

## 6. Qatar Airways SWOT Analysis

### 6.1. Strengths

#### 6.1.1. Strategic Internationalization and Hub Development

Qatar Airways leverages its Doha hub at Hamad International Airport to connect key markets across Asia, Europe, and North America through an efficient hub-and-spoke model. Backed by the Qatari government and aligned with the nation's economic diversification goals, the airline has expanded to over 170 destinations, boosting market share, enhancing passenger convenience, and positioning Doha as a major global transit hub rivaling Dubai and Istanbul while strengthening Qatar's geopolitical influence [11].

#### 6.1.2. Commitment to Service Excellence

Qatar Airways has built a world-class reputation through its focus on premium service, supported by investments in advanced aircraft like the Airbus A350 and Boeing 787 Dreamliner for greater comfort, efficiency, and technology. Recognized with multiple "World's Best Airline" awards from Skytrax—dubbed the "Oscars of the aviation industry" the airline has set new luxury standards with offerings like the Qsuite, featuring fully enclosed suites, lie-flat beds, and direct aisle access [12]. These innovations position Qatar Airways as a leader in luxury air travel for high-end business and affluent passengers.

#### 6.1.3. Innovative Marketing and Branding Initiatives

Qatar Airways has strengthened its brand through innovative marketing, using digital campaigns, celebrity collaborations, and culturally tailored advertising to engage global audiences. A standout example is its humorous in-flight safety video with comedian Kevin Hart, which boosted engagement and showcased a creative twist on mandatory briefings [13]. By blending entertainment with culturally relevant messaging, the airline enhances brand recall, loyalty, and relevance across diverse markets.

#### **6.1.4. Strategic Partnerships and Sponsorships**

Qatar Airways boosts its global profile through major sports sponsorships like the FIFA World Cup and a £80 million Rugby Nations Championship deal, linking its brand to elite events and diverse audiences [14]. These partnerships enhance loyalty, visibility, and prestige, reinforcing its position as a leading global airline.

### **6.2. Weaknesses**

#### **6.2.1. High Operating Costs**

Qatar Airways' premium services, such as the award-winning Qsuite, gourmet dining, and cutting-edge entertainment, along with its extensive long-haul network, drive strong brand differentiation but also result in high operating costs. Long-haul flights require significant fuel, crew, and maintenance resources, compounded by the "fuel weight paradox," where carrying more fuel increases overall weight and fuel consumption [15]. Fuel price volatility, expensive fleet upkeep, and high staffing needs for service excellence further strain profitability, especially during demand downturns from events like recessions or pandemics. While investments in fuel-efficient aircraft like the Boeing 787 and Airbus A350 help mitigate costs, sustaining profitability will depend on efficient fuel use, cost-effective maintenance, and strategic pricing to balance luxury service with financial viability.

#### **6.2.2. Depending on Ultra Long Haul Flights**

Qatar Airways' success is built on its long-haul network, connecting Doha to major global cities with premium services, but this reliance also creates vulnerabilities. Global disruptions—such as geopolitical crises, recessions, or pandemics—can sharply reduce demand, as seen during COVID-19 when travel restrictions forced route cuts and financial losses. Long-haul operations are also highly sensitive to fuel price volatility, despite a modern fuel-efficient fleet, and face intense competition from carriers like Emirates, Etihad, and Singapore Airlines. Maintaining premium standards adds further cost pressure, while a limited short-haul presence reduces flexibility during downturns. To sustain profitability, Qatar Airways must balance service excellence with cost control and explore diversification beyond long-haul routes.

#### **6.2.3. Over Reliance on Hub and Spoke Model**

Qatar Airways' dependence on Hamad International Airport in Doha as its sole hub offers efficiency but also creates significant risks. Disruptions such as natural disasters, geopolitical tensions, or operational issues at the airport could cause widespread delays, cancellations, and passenger dissatisfaction. Capacity constraints, even with planned expansions, may also limit growth as global air travel demand rises. Political instability in the Gulf and diplomatic restrictions have previously underscored the vulnerability of a single-hub model. This reliance reduces flexibility compared to airlines with more decentralized operations, making it harder to adapt to shifting demand. Diversifying operations through regional or

alternative hubs could improve agility and resilience against future disruptions.

### **6.3. Opportunities**

#### **6.3.1. Expansion into Emerging Markets: Growing Air Travel Demand in Africa and Asia Provides New Market Opportunities**

Qatar Airways' expansion into emerging markets in Africa and Asia offers strong growth potential, driven by rising middle-class populations, higher disposable incomes, and growing demand for air travel. In Africa, routes to cities like Accra, Casablanca, and Nairobi position the airline to benefit from regional trade growth under AfCFTA (the African continental free trade area). In Asia, established and new routes to key markets such as China, India, and Southeast Asia leverage Doha's strategic hub to connect East and West efficiently. While opportunities are significant, challenges include underdeveloped infrastructure, political instability, and regulatory hurdles. Strategic partnerships, investment, and maintaining premium service standards will be essential for sustaining growth in these markets.

#### **6.3.2. Freight and Cargo Growth: Qatar Airways Cargo Is a Key Player in Air Freight and Can Further Expand in Logistics and E-Commerce Transportation**

Qatar Airways Cargo is a key revenue driver and global leader in air freight, benefiting from rising demand in e-commerce, logistics, and global trade. Leveraging a fleet of freighters and belly-hold capacity, it serves diverse sectors, from pharmaceuticals to perishables. Specialized services like "Qatar Airways Pharma" enabled vaccine transport during COVID-19, strengthening its niche expertise. Investments in sustainability, including fuel-efficient practices, align with industry trends and customer demand. With its strong network, infrastructure, and focus on innovation, Qatar Airways Cargo is set to grow further, providing resilience against passenger demand downturns and capitalizing on expanding global trade.

#### **6.3.3. Technology and AI**

Technological advancements in AI, automation, and digitalization have enhanced Qatar Airways' efficiency, customer experience, and competitiveness. AI-driven tools, including the digital human "Sama," personalize services, streamline booking, and improve in-flight experiences [16]. Predictive maintenance, biometric boarding, and automated baggage handling boost operational efficiency, while digital tracking and blockchain improve cargo transparency and security. Sustainability gains come from fuel optimization software, AI-based weather planning, and digital documentation. By integrating these innovations, Qatar Airways strengthens its operational resilience, customer satisfaction, and position as a global aviation leader.

### **6.4. Threats**

#### **6.4.1. Intense Competition**

Qatar Airways faces intense competition from Gulf rivals Emirates and Etihad, as well as major global carriers like Turkish Airlines, Lufthansa, and Singapore Air-

lines. Emirates' larger fleet and broader long-haul network, Turkish Airlines' vast connectivity and domestic base, and European legacy carriers' regulatory advantages challenge Qatar Airways' market expansion and pricing strategies. In Asia-Pacific, Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, and Chinese carriers compete for transit traffic, while low-cost carriers pressure price-sensitive markets. Rival alliances and joint ventures further heighten competition. To stay ahead, Qatar Airways invests in fleet upgrades, premium offerings like Qsuite, and expansion into underserved markets, though sustaining profitability remains difficult amid regulatory, fuel price, and demand shifts.

#### 6.4.2. Economic Turbulence

##### Economic Fluctuations and Their Impact on Qatar Airways

Qatar Airways operates in an industry highly sensitive to global economic conditions, where economic downturns, oil price volatility, and geopolitical events directly influence airline profitability and operational stability. As an airline with a strong reliance on international travel and premium passengers, economic fluctuations pose a significant challenge to Qatar Airways' revenue generation, passenger demand, and cost structure.

##### Oil Price Volatility and Operating Costs

As a Gulf carrier, Qatar Airways benefits from access to the region's abundant oil resources. However, fluctuating crude oil prices can significantly impact the airline's financial performance. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), fuel costs typically account for 20% - 30% of an airline's operating expenses, making them one of the largest cost components. While lower oil prices reduce operational costs and improve profit margins, they can also lead to reduced travel demand in oil-dependent economies, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In contrast, when oil prices surge, higher fuel costs increase Qatar Airways' ticket prices and put pressure on profitability.

For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, global oil prices collapsed to historic lows due to a sharp decline in demand. While this initially reduced costs for airlines, it coincided with an unprecedented drop in air travel demand, negating any financial benefits. Conversely, in 2022, when oil prices surged past \$100 per barrel due to the Russia-Ukraine war, airlines faced severe cost pressures, leading to increased ticket prices and operational challenges. Qatar Airways, despite having fuel-efficient aircraft such as the Boeing 787 Dreamliner and Airbus A350, had to adjust fares to accommodate rising costs, affecting price-sensitive passengers.

While lower oil prices do reduce airline operating costs (mainly because fuel is one of the largest cost components for airlines), they can also lead to reduced travel demand in oil-dependent economies like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

#### 6.4.3. Pandemics

Health crises like COVID-19 severely affect airlines by reducing global travel de-

mand through restrictions, quarantines, and border closures. For Qatar Airways, this led to suspended routes, reduced fleet operations, and layoffs, with business travel—an important revenue source—especially impacted. The pandemic-induced recession forced the airline to cut costs, restructure routes, and rebuild customer confidence. Long-term, pandemics can shift consumer behavior, making travelers more cautious and slowing recovery, as seen after H1N1 in 2009. Post-COVID-19, a gradual rebound is expected, with some passengers favoring short-haul over long-haul travel.

#### 6.4.4. Geopolitical Events and Travel Disruptions

Global crises like wars, sanctions, political instability, and terrorism disrupt air travel by causing airspace closures, flight cancellations, and route changes. For Qatar Airways, operating in a geopolitically sensitive region, such events are significant. The 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis, which banned the airline from neighboring airspace, and sanctions on certain nations have directly limited routes and reduced travel demand. The 2017 blockade by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt forced Qatar Airways to reroute flights, close 18 regional air routes, and absorb higher costs and longer travel times [17].

**Table 3.** Qatar airway's SWOT analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strategic internationalization and hub development</li> <li>● Commitment to service excellence</li> <li>● Innovative marketing and branding initiatives</li> <li>● Strategic partnerships and sponsorships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The blockade on Qatar and any possible geopolitical conflict</li> <li>● High operating costs</li> <li>● Dependence on ultra long flights</li> <li>● Over-reliance on Hub and spoke model</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Expansion into emerging markets: growing air travel demand in Africa and Asia provides new market opportunities</li> <li>● Freight and cargo growth</li> <li>● Technology and AI</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Intense competition</li> <li>● Economic turbulence</li> <li>● Pandemics</li> <li>● Geopolitical climate</li> </ul>

## 7. Comparison of the SWOT Analysis of Emirates and Qatar Airways

After further scrutiny, we realized that the two companies share some characteristics in common and differences as well. In terms of the common points:

- Same geographic zone
- Similar branding strategies
- Both are government financed which means more resources and ease in investments.
- Both face an intense competition from airlines in the middle east and the rest of the world
- Both are vulnerable to oil prices

- Both are vulnerable to calamities, pandemics, wars terrorism and economic recession
- Both can be influenced by any geopolitical issue weather in the GCC or in the rest of the world

So in order to find what distinguish one from the other and to dig deeper to understand Emirates failures an analysis of customers surveys is necessary (See **Table 3**).

## 8. Flaws Analysis from Online Customer Survey

According to customer surveys available online on <https://www.airlinequality.com/airline-reviews/emirates/> [18]. We realize that Emirates Airlines has witnessed a decline recently. The customer service quality is decreasing in comparison with Qatar Airways. Here are the findings of the survey:

- Poor crisis management: Mishandling flight cancellations, lack of passenger assistance, refusal to cover expenses, and mishandled baggage.
- Unresolved lost luggage claims: Inefficient complaint handling, lack of documentation
- Inadequate support during delays: Passengers left without guidance after missed connections despite hotel arrangements.
- Inconsistent Dubai Connect policy: Unfair and unclear application of layover benefits, leading to passenger frustration.
- Frequent flyer program failures: Technical issues blocking account access, expired miles without reinstatement, and rigid policies despite airline-caused problems.
- Delay and meal accommodation failures: Long delays, poor baggage handling, failure to provide pre-booked vegan meals, flawed loyalty program, and lack of communication.
- Neglect of medical and hydration needs: Ignoring a diabetic passenger's requests for water, refusing bottled water, and displaying poor courtesy from flight crew.
- A loyal Emirates customer was disappointed by poor Economy Class service: slow responses to basic requests, dismissive crew behavior, and a flight attendant spilling water on them without apology. The stark contrast with polished Business Class service suggests Emirates prioritizes premium passengers while neglecting Economy travelers, undermining its reputation for consistent professionalism and courtesy.

Customer complaints about Emirates Airlines reveal recurring issues harming satisfaction and loyalty: poor customer service, unresponsive complaint handling, and delayed refunds; frequent baggage mishandling and unresolved lost luggage; inadequate crisis management during delays and cancellations; stark service disparities between economy and premium cabins; inconsistencies in special services like Dubai Connect and meal requests; and technical failures in digital platforms

and loyalty programs. These problems highlight a gap between Emirates' premium image and actual service, risking long-term reputational and customer loyalty damage unless addressed.

To recap, even though premium services are the most profitable for both airlines, though Qatar Airways reviews don't show a certain discrimination nor difference in treatment of customers that don't chose business or first class and that is seen in its reviews and the quality of its customer service.

On the other hand, Emirates airlines gives more focus on the first class experience. Its appeal, services, features and options are certainly outstanding and give customers the best experience ever, yet the same courtesy isn't given to the budget travelers. That can be recognized in its reviews. As a supportive evidence, we recognize that the company won best first class Skytrax award but that doesn't represent the overall satisfaction of the majority of the customers since first class is only limited to a very few customers and not the majority. As a matter of fact, in the Airbus A380 Emirates has 14 suites while in the Boeing B77 the company has only 8. So, reviews from such a small mass of customers won't represent the overall dominating image of the company. Qatar airways has been able to offer more balanced experiences across all cabin classes, which could explain why Emirates' focus on premium services has not always led to the Skytrax awards. This shift in focus on delivering excellence for all types of passengers (not just premium passengers) could influence rankings in the eyes of the Skytrax voters.

The broader overall customer experience, including economy class service, in-flight entertainment, and overall value for money, plays a significant role in the Skytrax awards. Qatar Airways, for example, has gained recognition for its service quality across all classes, including economy, and this may contribute to its consistent top rankings.

The previously mentioned WCR also gives us an idea about the randomness of scheduling of the flights in Emirates airlines which leads to delays and sometimes cancellations which is not the case for Qatar Airways.

Additionally, it operates under global scrutiny regarding labor policies in Dubai, where labor conditions and worker rights have been criticized by international organizations. This negative perception may impact the airline's brand reputation, particularly in markets that prioritize corporate social responsibility. Another significant challenge is Emirates' exposure to fluctuating fuel costs. Since fuel accounts for a substantial portion of airline expenses, any sharp increase in oil prices directly affects profitability, especially given Emirates' extensive long-haul operations. Let's not also forget the carbon release which can lead environmentally conscious passengers to go for the competitors. Furthermore, the airline faces hostility from European and North American carriers, which often view it as a threat due to its government-backed growth model. As a result, Emirates encounters restrictive policies, slot limitations, and accusations of unfair competition in key Western markets. Lastly, the airline competes against major global airline alliances, such as Star Alliance and Oneworld, which offer customers exten-

sive connectivity, seamless transfer options, and loyalty benefits across multiple airlines. And since we've seen that Emirates faces complaints about the rigidity of its policies and frequent flyer program, this will increase the customers dissatisfaction. Since Emirates operates independently outside of these alliances, it may struggle to attract certain business travelers who prioritize network integration. Collectively, these weaknesses create strategic challenges that could impact Emirates' long-term sustainability and ability to compete in an evolving global aviation landscape.

## 9. Recommendations for Emirates Airlines

To improve satisfaction and loyalty, Emirates can do the following:

- enhance customer service responsiveness through dedicated refund/complaint channels and personalized support
- strengthen baggage handling with case managers and real-time tracking
- standardize service quality across cabin classes to reduce disparities
- ensure consistency in special services like Dubai Connect and meal requests
- fix technical and loyalty program issues by resolving access problems and offering flexibility with expiring miles as too much rigidity in policies can't be helpful for customer retention. It's not a "one size fits all" as there are exceptional situations that can occur to customers.
- Implementing these measures would restore trust and reinforce Emirates' reputation as a leading airline.

The Decline of Emirates Airlines and the Rise of Qatar Airways. What can other major airlines learn from this?

Emirates Airlines has faced a decline in reputation and global rankings, losing ground to Qatar Airways due to operational inefficiencies, inconsistent service, and weak customer care. Key issues include, rigidity in policies, unresponsive complaint handling, poor baggage tracking, inadequate support during delays, and service disparities between cabin classes, with Economy passengers feeling neglected. Special services like Dubai Connect and meal accommodations suffer from inconsistency, while technical failures and rigid policies in the Skywards loyalty program frustrate frequent flyers. In contrast, Qatar Airways excels through proactive customer service, reliable crisis management, uniform service quality, and flexible loyalty policies. Unless Emirates reforms its customer service, crisis management, and digital systems, it risks falling further behind its competitors.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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