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The Role of In-flight Magazines in Corporate Public Relations in the Aviation Sector

This study aims to investigate the use of in-flight magazines in the context of corporate public relations (PR) in the aviation sector since it is under-researched in the tourism and travel literature. A literature review on corporate PR strategies in the aviation sector shows that the strategies can be grouped under corporate image-generating and customer loyalty-generating themes. These themes were used in this study to identify the focus and strategy of the companies in PR in the case of four Turkish airline companies. In-flight magazines of the companies, published in 2018, were explored using content-coding analysis. Comparisons were conducted highlighting the differences among companies in their use of the PR themes. Implications were discussed both from the theoretical and managerial perspectives.

Keywords: Public relations, aviation sector, corporate image, customer loyalty, content analysis, in-flight magazines

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Introduction

The rapid development of the global travel and tourism industry, especially after the Second World War, was directly affected by the changes in the aviation sector. As the recent statistics indicate, the size of the world aviation sector reached 41.8 million flights and 4.1 billion passengers annually (IATA, 2017). In parallel to the developments experienced in this sector, competition among the airline companies increased significantly. In the tough competitive marketplace, public relations (PR), which also referred to as 'corporate communication' and 'corporate relations' (Hutton *et al.*, 2001), has turned into an indispensable part of the success in aviation business (Ray, 1999; Schimmel, 2013).

PR, which is defined as a “strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, 2012), therefore, directly plays the role of maintaining and developing good communications and relationships between airline companies and their stakeholders such as customers, partners, and society. Many companies publish media materials targeting the general public to develop a good corporate reputation and image (Scholes and Clutterbuck, 1998). For airline companies, monthly in-flight magazines can be considered one of the key elements of communication, especially with customers (Deuschl, 2006). Interestingly, in-flight magazines are rarely content analyzed by the researchers despite their importance in creating a good corporate image and customer loyalty that are among the main goals of PR policies.

Hence, the authors of this paper aimed to examine in-flight magazines to explore which PR themes were mostly used by airline companies. With this purpose, four Turkish airline companies' in-flight magazines published in the year of 2018, were content analyzed, and PR-related themes were compared with each other.

The relationships among PR, corporate image, and customer loyalty

PR is considered a vital element of the corporate reputation, which consists of the knowledge and the emotions held by individuals, based on "their direct experiences with the company and its processed communication messages" (Schwaiger, 2004). Previous studies show that a favorable corporate reputation positively influences sales and increases customer satisfaction and loyalty by generating competitiveness in service/product quality (Ji *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that an empirical study on *Fortune* 500 companies (Hutton *et al.*, 2001), shows that 'managing reputation' is the leading philosophy behind the corporate communication strategies, followed by 'managing image.' Bruning and Ledingham (2000) note that effective media strategies in the context of PR may also significantly enhance the corporate image that shapes the target group behaviors positively.

Similar to corporate reputation, corporate image is considered to derive from customer experiences and direct/indirect market communication of the companies (Zins, 2001). Corporate image is related to various attributes of a company, such as its name, variety of services, tradition, and quality of communication with its customers (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001). Therefore, it is seen as one of the domains of public relations (Liou and Chuang, 2010). Also, maintaining communication and relationship with the customers and generating a high corporate image may ensure customer loyalty (Fortunato, 2000). For example, in the aviation sector, customer loyalty has been identified to be impacted by the efficiency of customer loyalty programs and the reputation of the companies (Dolnicar *et al.*, 2011). In a study, perceived corporate image is more important in explaining customer loyalty than the customer quality evaluations about a flight (Ostrowski *et al.*, 1993). Newsom and Haynes (2014) also argue that corporate publications, in particular, targeting the public, are produced to establish both corporate image and customer loyalty.

The PESO model and the use of in-flight magazines in corporate PR

In the PR literature, media content is categorized under four quadrants: paid, earned, shared, and owned according to PESO Model (Xie et al., 2018). In this model, 'paid' media services are native advertising and paid influencers. 'Earned' media means the editorial publicity of the companies, distributed through media releases, interviews, or other media relations activities (Macnamara *et al.*, 2016). The 'owned' media contains company-owned publications and digital sites such as corporate magazines, blogs, websites, and newsletters. Unlike to paid and owned media, 'shared' (social) media are independently generated and developed by people, who are the users or subscribers of a social media platform such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Macnamara *et al.*, 2016).

In fact, "each media option has different relationships with any other options that are also used, generating interaction effects and thus enhancing communication effects collectively" (Keller, 2016). However, owned media can be considered as a less costly and more controllable platform in the context of PR. Monthly published in-flight magazines as a sample of owned media tools in the aviation sector are one of the key elements of communication with the customers (Deuschl, 2006). In-flight magazines, which are provided free of charge on planes, contain articles on various aspects of tourism and information about the destinations, offer products, introduce the company services, and provide travelers a sense of security (Maci, 2012).

Although publishing regular in-flight magazines requires financial and intellectual expenses for the companies, these are useful materials which have the potential of attracting "the interest of the wide range of customers and strengthen their aspiration to use the services of the company in the future" (Fedotova *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, in-flight magazines may

generate a significant amount of revenues rather than costs nowadays, and encourage the customers, shareholders, and others (i.e., journalists) to talk about the company brand. By producing their own publication, airline companies may also share their PR messages directly with the customers. For example, Lufthansa Magazin, published monthly by Lufthansa Airlines, has the potential of reaching 1.54 million readers. It has the basic rate of €36,000 for inner (205x260 mm bleed format) advertisements (Lufthansa Magazin Rate Card, 2020). Hence, this magazine's high popularity and circulation may be seen as an effective PR tool in enhancing corporate reputation and image, which is also maintaining a significant amount of revenue for Lufthansa Airlines.

Despite the important role that in-flight magazines play on PR strategies, the literature about this media and communication tool needs to be enlarged. Therefore, the authors of this paper aimed to examine in-flight magazines published by four Turkish airline companies for exploring which PR themes were mostly used in these publications.

Method

There are five airline companies in Turkey: Turkish Airlines, Sun Express, Atlas Global, Pegasus Airlines, and Corendon Airlines. Since Corendon Airlines publishes its in-flight magazines two times in a year (summer/winter) rather than monthly, this company is not included in the analyses of this study. Of the remaining four companies, one is legacy/full-service (Turkish Airlines), and the others are low-cost/charter airlines. The names of the in-flight magazines are Skylife (Turkish Airlines), Sun Times (Sun Express), Globber (Atlas Global), and Flypgs (Pegasus Airlines), respectively.

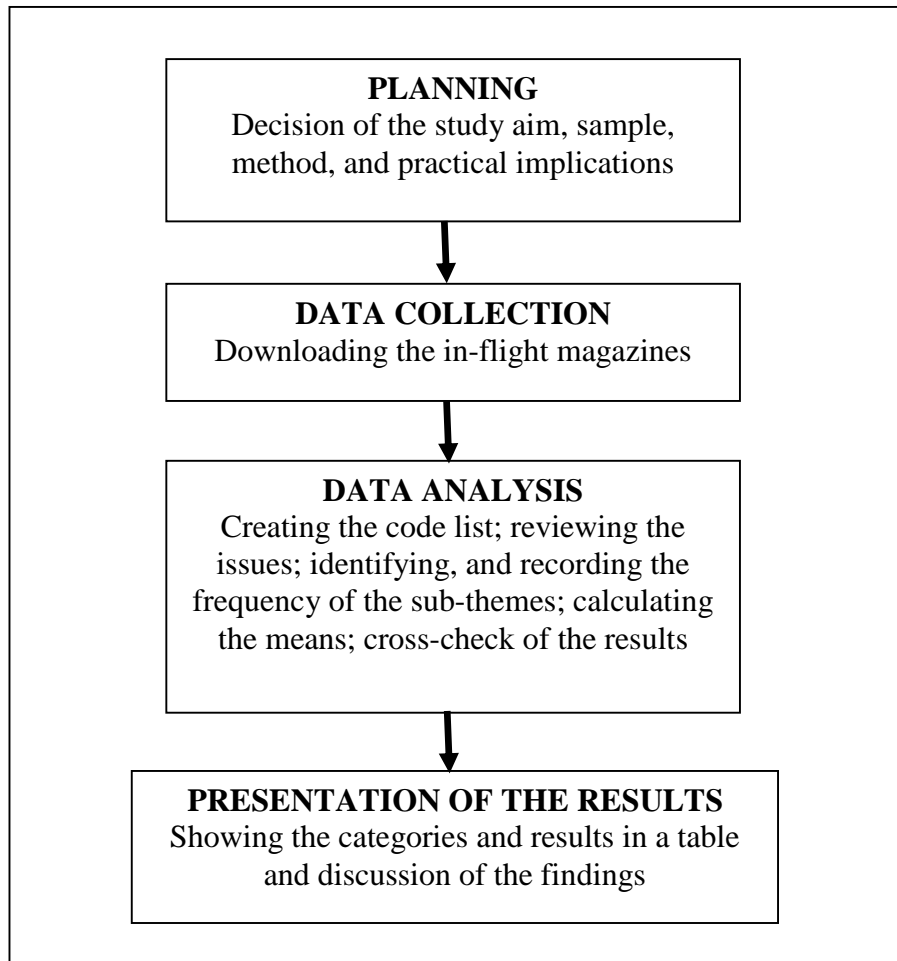
The authors prefer content analysis to achieve the objectives of this study. Content analysis, systematic coding, and categorization of textual information is a widely used method for exploring the trends and patterns of words or contents, their frequencies, and their

structures and discourses of communication (Vaismoradi, 2013). In the tourism literature, a literature review (Camprubí and Coromina, 2016) showed that content analysis was used in 23.8% of the articles for analyzing interviews, focus groups, or open-ended questions, while in 18.9% of the articles for analyzing reports and past documents. Therefore, content analysis of corporate publications is an ideal method for examining and exploring PR messages or strategies. As noted by Newsom and Haynes (2014), corporate publications, like in-flight magazines, are published either for the generation of corporate image and customer loyalty. Therefore, these two subjects were directly related to PR strategies of the airline companies.

In this study, PR-related themes were derived from the literature, as the corporate image-generating and customer loyalty-generating (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001; Liou and Chuang, 2010; Geraldine and Chikwendu, 2013). Corporate image-related PR sub-themes include CEO/board member preface, news about the company, company achievements & awards, charity campaigns, sponsorships, and partnerships with other companies (Melewar, 2003). Customer loyalty-related PR sub-themes consist of: services info, specialized services (for disabled, pregnant, elderly, pet owner passengers), new routes, loyalty card, safety & security info, and customer contact points (such as telephone numbers and email addresses) (Zins, 2001).

The research process was designed in analyzing a broad surface structure (manifest analysis) by following Bengtsson's (2016) recommendations, as visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Research Process



The data collection stage started with downloading monthly issues of the in-flight magazines from companies' official websites. That lasted in the period of January-December, 2018. Following to creation of an excel document where corporate image- and customer loyalty-generating PR sub-themes were listed, each issue was examined by the researchers in accordance with the frequency of these sub-themes. For example, the frequency of the company-related news was reviewed, counted, and recorded for each issue and magazine, and then the totals have been divided into 12 so that the sub-theme means in a year could be obtained for each airline company. This process was completed individually by each of the authors. The inter-coder reliability, indicating the correlation between the results belong to each author, was calculated by using Miles and Huberman's formula (1994). The obtained

ratio of 0.84 showed high reliability since it was above the recommended cut-off value of 0.70 (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Data analysis and results

Table 1 reflects the means related to the corporate image- and customer loyalty-generating PR themes and their sub-theme means. Skylife in-flight magazine has the highest means (11.99) for corporate image-generating PR theme. 'News about the company' seems to be considered as one of the most important sub-theme in corporate image generation efforts (means: 6.83). Among the low-cost/charter companies, Flypgs in-flight magazine (means: 5.75) and Glober magazine (means: 4.83) have the highest means for 'news about company' in PR communications. Also, in 'partnerships with other companies' sub-theme, Glober has a higher mean value than others.

In the context of customer loyalty-generation, Glober in-flight magazine leads with the highest means (22.50). At Glober, the sub-themes of 'services info' (means: 6.75), 'specialized services' (means: 4.92), and 'new routes' (means: 4.50) are frequently used for creating customer loyalty towards the company. Flypgs in-flight magazine is at the second position (means: 16.49) followed by Sun Times (means: 5.75) in the loyalty-generating theme. Surprisingly, Skylife has the lowest means (1.91) in this category.

Table 1: The Use of PR by Airlines

	Skylife (Turkish Airlines)	Sun Times (Sun Express)	Glober (Atlas Global)	Flypgs (Pegasus Airlines)
	Means*			
<i>Corporate Image-Generating PR Themes</i>	11.99	5.67	8.74	8.90
CEO/Board member preface	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
News about the company	6.83	3.50	4.83	5.75
Company achievements & awards	0.50	0.42	0.25	0.58
Charity campaigns	0.83	0.17	0.00	0.41
Sponsorships	1.83	0.50	0.58	0.41
Partnerships with other companies	1.00	0.08	2.08	0.75
<i>Customer Loyalty-Generating PR Themes</i>	1.91	5.75	22.50	16.49
Services info	0.75	2.33	6.75	5.83
Specialized services	0.33	1.17	4.92	1.25
New routes	0.75	0.25	4.50	1.08
Loyalty card	0.08	0.00	1.83	6.33
Safety & security info	0.00	1.00	3.42	1.00
Customer contact points	0.00	1.00	1.08	1.00

*calculated by dividing the total frequency of a sub-theme into 12 (total issues in a year)

Conclusion and future research recommendations

In this study, airline companies in Turkey were shown to use corporate image-generating and customer loyalty-generating PR themes in varying frequencies at in-flight magazines. While a legacy company (Turkish Airlines) heavily focuses on corporate image-generation, two low-cost companies (Atlas Global and Pegasus Airlines) tend to use customer loyalty-generation (i.e., services info and loyalty card). These findings show that in-flight magazines serve to customer loyalty and corporate image policies of the companies and are used as a part of corporate PR strategies.

The efforts of airline companies nowadays for attracting more passengers and for turning these passengers into loyal customers have become increasingly important (Namukasa, 2013; Vlachos and Li, 2014). In this regard, the management of corporate image and customer loyalty generation via PR may create market competitiveness and maintain loyal customers (Rahi and Ghani, 2016). Interestingly, the role of in-flight magazines in PR is

an essential area for ongoing exploration. In-flight magazines are very useful PR tools since recent statistics (IMM International, 2018) show that 26 million monthly in-flight magazines are issued, published by 180 international airlines, and read by 60% of the travelers. Because of their growing popularity, airline companies continue to offer complimentary in-flight magazines mainly for establishing communication with the customers (Maci, 2012) and for recognizing the stakeholder expectations (Alkibay and Ayar, 2013). However, there is a gap in the literature investigating and understanding the contents of the in-flight magazines related to corporate PR.

In the Turkish aviation sector, this research has become one of the early attempts in examining and categorizing PR-related themes (generating corporate image and customer loyalty) that are mostly used in in-flight magazines. In future studies, researchers are recommended to further expand the sample by comparing the contents of national and international in-flight magazines. Researchers should also continue to explore and expand the number of criteria for identifying the most frequently used PR-related themes. Furthering this work will expand our understanding of the role of in-flight magazines play on PR success of the airline companies.

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