

# **When Laughter Takes Flight: Analyzing Ryanair's Humorous Strategy on Instagram**

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Ryanair's Memes

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### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis delves into the strategic deployment of humor by Ryanair in its Instagram memes to cultivate and solidify its brand identity. To understand this phenomenon, the research explores the question: How does Ryanair use humor through memes on its Instagram account to shape its brand identity? Through a multimodal critical discourse analysis of 100 Instagram posts from the airline's official account, the research identifies prevalent humor styles and types employed within these memes. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism serves as the theoretical framework to assess how these humorous elements contribute to the construction of Ryanair's brand identity.

The analysis reveals a diverse range of humor themes utilized by Ryanair. The airline predominantly leverages affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles, fostering a sense of community and positivity among viewers. Affiliative humor engenders a spirit of camaraderie amongst travelers, cultivating a welcoming and inclusive brand identity. Self-enhancing humor aids customers in maintaining a positive outlook on travel, even amidst challenging circumstances, by prompting them to find humor in common travel frustrations. Additionally, humor types such as comparison, exaggeration, and sarcasm are strategically deployed to engage the audience and highlight relatable travel experiences.

The findings underscore that Ryanair's humor-driven content helps in establishing a relatable and down-to-earth brand persona. The visual and textual components of the memes, incorporating recognizable travel settings and playful language, enhance brand distinctiveness and strengthen its association with these positive attributes. The use of travel-related imagery and themes, alongside Ryanair's logo, colors, and typography, reinforces the brand's identity as a fun and approachable low-cost company. This visual consistency serves to keep these elements at the forefront of the audience's mind, bolstering brand recall and recognition. Furthermore, the study highlights how Ryanair's humorous approach aligns with contemporary digital marketing trends, capitalizing on the potential of memes to foster consumer engagement and brand loyalty.

By offering insights into the effective use of humor within digital brand communication, this thesis contributes to the scholarly discourse on social media marketing and presents practical implications for marketing professionals. The findings suggest that integrating humor into social media strategies can significantly enhance brand identity,

offering valuable lessons for brands navigating the ever-evolving landscape of digital marketing.

**KEYWORDS:** *Humorous Brand Communication, Ryanair's Brand Identity, Meme Marketing Strategy, Instagram, Multimodal Critical Discourse*

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With great satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment, I am happy to present my master's thesis titled "When Laughter Takes Flight: Analyzing Ryanair's Humorous Strategy on Instagram – A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Ryanair's Instagram Memes".

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## 1. Introduction

“Humor is mankind's greatest blessing.”-Mark Twain.

Laughter is not just contagious; it is also surprisingly powerful. Research demonstrates its effectiveness in fostering positive workplace dynamics (Cooper, 2008, pp. 1097-1099) and enhancing learning outcomes (Mahardika & Prasetyo, 2021, p. 61). It also plays a crucial role in psychological well-being (Kim & Plester, 2021, p. 2; Galloway & Cropley, 1999, pp. 303-306). This pervasive power of humor translates to the marketing sector, which has become a potent tool for brand communication and advertising strategies. This focus on humor stems from the fundamental objective of capturing consumer attention and forging strong cognitive associations with the advertised brand (Palikhe, 2019, pp. 60-61). Studies have consistently demonstrated the persuasive power of humor in traditional advertising, highlighting its ability to engage consumers and enhance brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Eisend, 2021, p. 963; Primanto & Dharmmesta, 2019, p. 114; Chang & Chang, 2014, p. 9209; Zhang & Zinkhan, 2006, p. 113). It has also been argued that beyond persuasion, humorous advertisements can capture attention, boost likability, establish emotional connections, and raise brand awareness (Primanto & Dharmmesta, 2019, p. 119). Additionally, these advertisements can transfer positive perceptions of the humor to the brand, enhancing brand communication (Lee, 2014, p. 1402). This effectiveness of humor extends beyond traditional advertising and flourishes in the dynamic and versatile environment of social media marketing (Borden & Suggs, 2019, p. 194).

Social media platforms have become key advertising arenas, with global digital advertising expenditure projected to reach a staggering \$835.82 billion by 2026 (Statista Research Department, 2023, Table 1). These platforms have not only revitalized traditional forms of humor but also introduced innovative methods, such as GIFs and memes (Marone, 2017, p. 51). This digital landscape has further fostered the development of new visual humor forms, including animations (Marone, 2017, p. 51) and even AI-generated humor (Avetisyan et al., 2023, p. 60).

Recognizing the power of humor in the digital space, many brands leverage humorous communication strategies to stand out and engage consumers. A notable example is Wendy's, an American fast-food restaurant chain known for its witty and often "roasting" promotional campaigns on Twitter, resulting in a significant follower increase (Dynel, 2020, p. 1). Dynel (2020, p. 2) reports that Wendy's Twitter account experienced a follower growth of over 125% in one year. Although customer service contributes to its success, Wendy's clever Twitter promotions have significantly boosted the brand's visibility across various

social media platforms (Dyner, 2020, p. 2). These humorous interactions contribute to a brand's perceived coolness and sincerity, especially among younger demographics (Torres et al., 2023, p. 232).

Paralleling this trend, the proliferation of social media marketing has witnessed the rise of meme marketing, a popular strategy brands leverage to achieve humorous communication and advertising (Lin, 2023, p. 241). Their rapid spread and cultural prominence have made them a powerful tool for brands seeking to connect with audiences (Bury, 2016, p. 36). Integrating memes into advertising strategies can effectively capture consumer attention and spark conversations on social media (Bury, 2016, p. 35). Compelling memes act as conversation starters, fostering engagement and potentially leading to brand advocacy amongst users (Bury, 2016, p. 35). This approach is embraced by a diverse array of brands, from luxury giants like Gucci and Prada to dating apps such as Tinder, and even food delivery services like Swiggy and Zomato (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1776; Bhardwaj et al., 2024, p. 12127). By utilizing memes in their marketing strategies, brands can effectively engage customers and expand the reach of their campaigns.

Ryanair, a European low-cost airline, is another prime example of a company that has harnessed social media for effective brand communication (Forslund & Friman, 2022, p. 20). A key element of this strategy is the implementation of a meme marketing strategy, as evidenced by Bilecen and Nur's (2023, p. 1326) analysis on their Instagram page. They found that meme-based content dominated their posting strategy (Bilecen & Nur, 2023, p. 1332). Generally, social media offers airlines valuable platforms to achieve several objectives, such as understanding customer preferences and behavior, facilitating targeted communication of services and promotions, fostering customer relationships, and ultimately, strengthening the brand image and loyalty (Zelenka & Hruška, 2018, p. 228). Notably, Ryanair holds the top spot among European low-cost airlines in terms of social media presence, boasting 1.4 million followers on its Instagram page (Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.). This surpasses its competitors, such as Wizzair with 761 thousand followers (Wizz Air, n.d.), and EasyJet with 470 thousand followers (easyJet, n.d.). Furthermore, Ryanair experienced its most successful commercial year in 2022, a success likely correlated with its meme marketing strategy on Instagram (Bilecen & Nur, 2023, p. 1330). The same study also revealed that Ryanair's follower base is growing rapidly, with an increase of 1,111 followers weekly, translating to a monthly gain of 33,330 followers (Bilecen & Nur, 2023, p. 1330).

Despite the numerous benefits of incorporating memes into a social media marketing strategy for humorous brand communication, existing literature highlights several drawbacks



associated with meme marketing. As per Malodia et al., (2022, p. 1781) a significant concern is the potential misalignment of memes with a brand's message or values, which can result in a disconnect with the target audience. To ensure a meme's effectiveness, social media marketing experts must possess a deep understanding of their audience's preferences (Rathi & Jain, 2023, p. 54). Moreover, the rapid evolution of memes, often fueled by viral trends, can lead to a lack of originality and depth in the marketing message. An illustrative example is Dogecoin, a cryptocurrency that rose to prominence largely due to its association with internet memes. This meme-driven origin resulted in an absence of a well-thought-out infrastructure for Dogecoin, hindering its ability to establish itself as a serious contender in the cryptocurrency market (Nani, 2022, p. 1721). This lack of substance, prioritizing short-term virality over long-term functionality, can compromise the credibility and longevity of marketing campaigns built on trends alone.

Additionally, using outdated or unpopular memes poses another challenge, potentially leading to campaign failure and damaging the brand's reputation. Even if customers overlook the outdated content and the immediate impact on the brand's image is minimal (Rathi & Jain, 2023, p. 54), there is still a significant risk that such memes could be perceived as out of touch. This perception may alienate the audience and reflect poorly on the brand (Dimitrov et al., 2021, pp. 6606-6607).

The growing academic and industry interest in humor and memes underscores the need to understand how companies strategically leverage these tools within social media for brand communication. While research delves into the use of humor in memes that arise from user creativity and spread organically on platforms like Facebook as part of the communication process (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, pp. 290-293), it overlooks the strategic implementation of memes within brands' social media marketing campaigns. This gap also extends to the deliberate implementation of humor in shaping brand identity. Ryanair's well-documented success on Instagram, as evidenced by Bilecen and Nur's (2023, pp. 1326-1330) research on the airline's broader meme marketing strategy, presents an exemplary case study to examine this underexplored area. By examining Ryanair's strategic use of humor in their Instagram memes, this research aims to provide insights into how humor can be leveraged to build and develop brand identity within social media marketing, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of digital marketing strategies.

To address this gap, the following research question is investigated:  
“How does Ryanair use humor through memes on its Instagram account to shape its brand identity?”

## **1.1. Academic and Societal Relevance**

The strategic use of humor in shaping brand identity through social media marketing has received limited scholarly attention. This research explores this gap by investigating the specific humor styles and types employed in Ryanair's Instagram memes and how these elements shape the airline's brand identity.

The academic significance of this study lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of how humor functions within social media brand communication. By critically analyzing Ryanair's Instagram memes through established humor frameworks (e.g., Martin et al., 2003, pp. 70-71; Catanescu & Tom, 2001, pp. 92-93), this research extends the application of these theories to the specific context of strategic meme use for brand identity development.

This focused approach offers novel insights into the deliberate selection and application of humor styles to cultivate a brand identity within the dynamic environment of social media. Investigating a specific brand's (Ryanair) strategic use of humor in a particular platform (Instagram) allows for a nuanced understanding of this approach and its potential benefits for brand communication in the digital age.

From a societal perspective, it is highly relevant to contemporary society as it explores the intersection of humor, social media, and brand communication—three pervasive elements in modern digital culture. By examining how Ryanair uses humor through memes on Instagram to shape its brand identity, this research provides valuable insights into effective digital marketing strategies.

The airline industry is a fiercely competitive market, necessitating each company to develop a lasting and distinct brand identity in the minds of consumers (Lin & Ryan, 2016, p. 151). Thus, establishing a robust brand identity that significantly differentiates an airline from its competitors has become a strategic imperative for success (So et al., 2017, p. 727). In recent years, social media has emerged as one of the most potent strategies for this industry to communicate and reinforce its distinctive brand identities, fostering stronger consumer connections (So et al., 2017, p. 727). This shift highlights the growing importance of social media in the airline industry's communication landscape.

By examining how Ryanair utilizes humor to differentiate itself within this competitive landscape, this research offers valuable insights for other organizations seeking to stand out in saturated markets. Understanding how humor can create a distinct and memorable brand identity, can provide a strategic advantage for companies across various industries. This research can inform broader marketing practices by highlighting the

potential of humor to establish a unique brand identity and resonate with target audiences.

Gaining knowledge of these strategies is crucial not only for marketers but also for consumers, who increasingly interact with brands online and form perceptions based on digital content. As social media platforms become primary arenas for advertising, the ability to capture attention and foster engagement through humor can significantly influence consumer behavior and attitude towards the brand. This study sheds light on how brands can effectively communicate and connect with their audience in a way that is both entertaining and impactful, thereby contributing to more meaningful and enjoyable online experiences.

In conclusion, by examining the specific case of Ryanair's humor-driven Instagram memes, this research offers valuable insights with broader societal relevance. It contributes to a deeper understanding of humor's role in social media communication, brand identity development, and consumer engagement within the digital age. The findings from this research can inform best practices for humor use in marketing and offer valuable insights for companies aspiring to distinguish themselves in competitive industries. Ultimately, this research contributes to a wider conversation about the role of humor in shaping communication within the ever-evolving social media landscape.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

To investigate the research question, it is imperative to incorporate several key concepts systematically. Firstly, the function and dynamics of the humorous communication process will be delineated. Subsequently, various humor styles, types, and the specific nature of memes will be explored in-depth. This inquiry will then extend to an analysis of Instagram as the selected platform for this study. The culmination of this exploration will involve a comprehensive discussion on the concept of brand identity.

### **2.1. The Humorous Communication Process through Memes**

A thorough analysis of the humor integrated into Ryanair's memes necessitates understanding the communication process underlying their creation. This process can be explained through Berlo's (1960, p. 41) traditional communication model, which encompasses four fundamental components: source, message, channel, and receiver. Hall's encoding/decoding model provides further insight into how audiences interpret messages (as cited in Fornäs, 2024, pp. 152-154). Berlo's Model (Berlo, 1960, p. 41) posits that the communication process involves the source encoding a message, transmitting it through a channel, and decoding it by the receiver. This model highlights the importance of each component in ensuring effective communication.

However, Hall's Model (as cited in Fornäs, 2024, pp. 152-154) adds a layer of complexity by emphasizing that the sender does not fix the meaning of a message but is subject to interpretation by the receiver. This model introduces the concepts of encoding (the sender's construction of the message) and decoding (the receiver's interpretation of the message), acknowledging that there can be variations between the intended and perceived meanings. While Berlo's model provides a strong foundation for understanding communication's core elements, Hall's model provides a more detailed picture by acknowledging the active role of the audience in interpreting messages, highlighting the potential for misunderstandings due to this interpretive process.

The communication models have been effectively applied in various contexts, including humor, as demonstrated by Taecharunroj and Nueangjamnong (2015, pp. 290-292). In the specific context of humor, this model can be deconstructed as follows: the sender (the individual responsible for disseminating the humorous content, often referred to as the "joker"), the message (the core content of the humor itself), the channel (the medium through which the humorous message is transmitted encompassing social media or other communication platforms), the receiver (the individual interpreting the humorous message, often referred to as the "audience"), and the feedback (the receiver's response to the

humorous message) (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 290).

The model also demonstrates adaptability in the context of social media. Here, the traditional notion of "response" is transformed. Social media users engage with humor primarily through likes, comments, and shares, which constitute the dominant modes of interaction on platforms like Facebook (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 290), and similarly on Instagram.

Communication models provide a valuable analytical lens for understanding humor. Deconstructing these models and applying them to humor across various communication channels offers insights into the processes of joke creation, delivery, reception, and audience response (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 290). However, it is equally important to recognize and understand the potential pitfalls of humorous communication.

Numerous real-world instances exist where prominent global companies have severely harmed their business due to poor communication with their target market. This often stems from a lack of understanding of the culture of the audience they aim to reach (Baltezarević & Baltezarević, 2023, p. 102). Using serious violations for humor can lead to negative emotional responses in instances where humor is perceived (Holbrook & Batra, 1987, pp. 412-146). Such adverse reactions can negatively affect the advertised brand, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity and audience understanding.

This study is focused on Ryanair's humor in their Instagram posts. Therefore, the emphasis of the research lies on the sender (Ryanair), the message (the memes), and the channel (Instagram as the medium of communication). This narrowed focus will enable the researcher to delve deeper into how Ryanair employs humor in its social media strategy to formulate its brand identity. The sender demonstrates a specific type of humorous meme and disseminates it via a channel, such as a social media platform. The meme then reaches the receiver's device, where the recipient interprets the message (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 290). Recognizing this communication process is essential for evaluating how Ryanair crafts and delivers its humorous content.

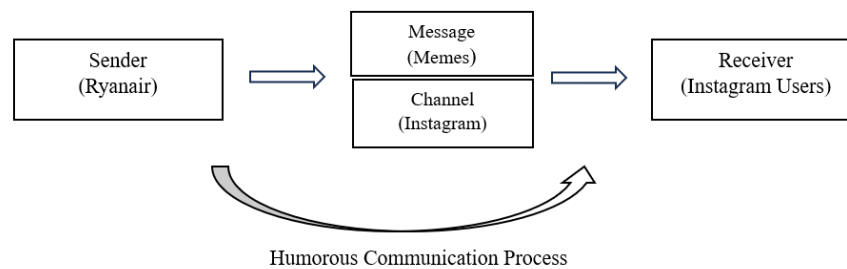


Figure 1: Framework for Ryanair’s humorous communication process

Source: Prepared by the author, based on the model of Communication of Humorous Memes on Facebook from Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015, p. 290).

### 2.1.1. Humor Styles -Sender’s Perspective

The communication procedure goes beyond merely transmitting a message. It involves understanding the sender's unique characteristics and how they shape the message itself. The sender employs a distinct style of humor motivated by his psychological condition and specific intent (Martin et al., 2003, p. 70). Research has proved that the notion of humor style assumes significant importance in understanding how humor is conveyed from the sender's standpoint (Gignac et al., 2014, pp. 35-39; Martin et al., 2003, pp. 70-71; Stieger et al., 2011; pp. 747-749). Different humor styles can significantly impact how the audience interprets the message (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 290).

This conceptual framework will stem from Martin et al.’s (2003, pp. 53-54) classification of humor. According to their research, humor is categorized into four distinct forms, depending on whether it is directed towards oneself or others and has a positive or negative nature (Martin et al., 2003, p. 52). These humor styles are identified as affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor (Martin et al., 2003, pp. 70-71).

*Affiliative humor* is characterized by an individual's propensity to make amusing comments, tell jokes, and engage in spontaneous witty conversations. The primary aims are to entertain others, strengthen social bonds, and mitigate interpersonal tensions. In addition, research suggests that affiliative humor can lead to greater relationship satisfaction and a more positive emotional outlook (Martin et al., 2003, p. 70).

*Self-enhancing* humor is distinguished by a humorous outlook on life, characterized by the ability to identify amusement in life's inconsistencies and maintain a humorous perception during stressful or challenging situations. Similar to affiliative humor, it is associated with positive personality traits like cheerfulness and optimism. However, self-

enhancing humor focuses more on the individual's internal perspective, rather than social interaction (Martin et al., 2003, p. 70).

*Aggressive* humor encompasses the employment of sarcasm, teasing, ridicule, or other forms of disparaging humor. This dimension also involves compulsive humor expressions, where there's a challenging impulse to resist saying humorous things that may distress or alienate others. Unlike the previous styles, aggressive humor correlates with aggression and hostility (Martin et al., 2003, p. 71).

*Self-defeating* humor involves the use of excessive self-deprecating humor, where individuals seek to entertain others by making themselves the subject of jokes, often to win favor or approval. This includes allowing oneself to become the target of others' humor and joining in the laughter when ridiculed or belittled. Furthermore, this dimension is believed to involve humor as a defensive denial. In this context, humor serves as a coping mechanism to conceal deeper negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, or aggression. (Martin et al., 2003, p. 71).

Despite the effectiveness of these humor styles in various contexts, their application is not without risks. Humorous advertisements are well-documented for their potential benefits but also carry the risk of damaging the brand, even if they are amusing (Warren & McGraw, 2016 p. 57). For instance, Ameriquest's 2006 Super Bowl advertisement, where unexpected turbulence places two airline passengers in a compromising position, was listed among Forbes's "Worst Super Bowl Commercials Ever" despite its comedic intent (Smith, 2014, para. 30). This example illustrates that humor alone does not guarantee that advertisements will not backfire and generate negative emotions alongside amusement. Therefore, marketers must assess not only the comedic value of an advertisement but also the execution of humor to minimize adverse consumer reactions (Warren & McGraw, 2016, p. 57).

A thorough grasp of these humor styles enables a deeper examination of Ryanair's approach to crafting and delivering its humorous content on Instagram. Each style offers different ways to present the brand's message and influence audience perception, which can significantly impact the nature of the communication and the shaping of the brand's identity. By strategically leveraging these humor styles, Ryanair uses humor to formulate its brand identity and connect with its audience on a deeper level.

### 2.1.2. Humor Types -The Message of the Process

Successful humorous communication is largely dependent on the compatibility of the humor and the underlying message (Speck, 1991, p. 16). Managers ought to weigh the type of humor carefully before deciding whether to incorporate it into their advertisements (Catanescu & Tom, 2001, p. 93). Properly utilizing various types of humor to design messages is essential for achieving effectiveness in humorous communication (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 291). Many scholars have attempted to categorize humor into different types. Specifically, Speck (1991, pp. 12-16) categorizes humor in advertising into five types: comic wit, sentimental humor, satire, sentimental comedy, and full comedy, while Barry and Graça (2018, p. 163) define each one.

*Comic wit* often emerges from resolving incongruities, highlighted by surprising developments, odd actions, unique circumstances, or extreme overstatements.

*Sentimental humor or Resonant humor* (Beard & Tarpenning, 2004, p. 18) often stems from the arousal-safety mechanism, typically illustrated by childlike fantasies, playful mischief, or hidden desires.

*Satire* is recognized by its employment of sarcasm, irony, parody, exaggeration, and similar methods to critique human flaws and deficiencies, aiming to provoke contempt or ridicule. Its primary purpose is often to stimulate self-reflection and encourage improvement in individuals or society.

*Sentimental comedies* frequently manifest through extreme emotional outbursts, aggression, and various expressions of pent-up emotions. They showcase the release of improprieties and the tension arising from observing someone's explosive reactions, set against a backdrop of peculiar actions.

*Full Comedy* often emerges from deviations in social norms, incorporating taboos, disparagement, and unpredictable actions. Another facet of full comedy materializes in situations filled with awkwardness, where the transfer of embarrassment to others coincides with misfortune and unusual dilemmas.

Although these humor types are usually identified in traditional media, they have undergone adaptation and recontextualization within the context of social media. In this digital domain, seven distinct humor categories have been identified. According to Catanescu and Tom (2001, p. 93), these types are comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness, and surprise.

*Comparison humor* juxtaposes two or more elements in a manner that highlights their contrasts or similarities, leading to the creation of a humorous scenario. The effectiveness of



it lies in the unexpected connections made between disparate elements. *Personification humor* assigns human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities, such as animals, plants, or inanimate objects. By imbuing these entities with human characteristics, personification generates humor through the absurdity and creativity of such attributions. *Exaggeration* is the type of humor that is characterized by the deliberate overstating or magnification of aspects of reality. Precisely, it distorts elements to a degree that they become ludicrous or absurdly funny. Hence, this distortion emphasizes the humorous potential of everyday situations by presenting them in a hyperbolic manner. *Pun humor* plays on the multiple meanings of words or exploits similarities in sound between different words to produce a humorous effect. The humor in that case arises from the linguistic creativity involved in reshaping language to reveal unexpected meanings. Differently, *sarcasm* represents a distinct category of humor that relies on sharp, cutting remarks or situations. Often manifesting through ironic or obvious contradictory statements, sarcasm aims to convey humor through the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. *Silliness* encompasses a wide range of behaviors from making funny faces to engaging in ridiculous situations, silliness is characterized by its deliberate departure from conventional behavior. The humor here derives from its unpredictability and the joy found in nonsensical or childish acts. Ultimately, *surprise* humor emerges from situations that deviate from expected outcomes, delivering a shock or twist that triggers laughter. The essence of surprise humor lies in its ability to contradict expectations, creating a juxtaposition between what is anticipated and what actually occurs (Catanescu & Tom, 2001, p. 93).

This research examines the choice of these humor types in Ryanair's memes and how they contribute to shaping the company's brand identity. All the aforementioned humor types will be analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of Ryanair's humor strategy on Instagram. By exploring the utilization of different humor types, this study seeks to reveal how each type contributes to the overall brand identity that Ryanair projects through its social media presence.

### **2.1.3. Memes: A Medium for Strategic Brand Humor**

Ryanair's strategic use of humor to craft its brand identity is rooted in memes as a specific communication element. It is therefore essential to incorporate this concept as the message of the communication process.

Memes are dynamic entities that spread rapidly in response to cultural, social, and technological shifts (Shifman, 2011, p. 189). They encapsulate “units of popular culture that

are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process.” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). This mode of multimodal communication is distinguished by its structure and swift spread, often driven by events that have captured significant media attention (Pulos, 2020, pp. 1-2). As Zahoor (2020, p. 12) highlights, memes might contain personal elements unique to the creator's experiences or perspectives, yet they also possess universal components that are recognized and appreciated by a wider community. This blend of individuality and commonality enables memes to resonate on a broader scale, ensuring they are enjoyed and understood within shared cultural or social knowledge (Zahoor, 2020, p. 11). These characteristics make internet memes distinct from other forms of online communication.

Most memes typically consist of images paired with captions, both of which can be altered as they are shared (Zanette et al., 2019, p. 3). They repurpose the format of already existing memes to highlight new events, employing humor and irony to convey various messages (Francisco et al., 2023, p. 2). These adaptations are used for a range of objectives, such as critiquing social, political, and cultural phenomena (Chagas et al., 2019, para. 5; Zahoor, 2020, p. 14; Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021, pp. 2367-2369). This reuse of structure allows memes to maintain a recognizable form while adapting content to address contemporary issues, making them powerful tools for commentary and reflection (Francisco et al., 2023, p. 2). Even though they are characterized by their ease of creation, distribution, and consumption, they are also prone to being quickly forgotten (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021, p. 2367).

As reported by Enberg (2021, para. 1), internet memes have become the third most frequently shared type of content on social media platforms, highlighting their growing significance in the realm of brand advertising. This surge in popularity can be attributed to memes' proven capacity to effectively communicate brand messages, enrich brand experiences, and extend brand visibility (Vasile et al., 2021, p. 31). Far from being just a fleeting trend, internet memes have recently evolved into a key strategic asset for interactive marketing since they are widely acknowledged as one of the most effective methods of brand engagement (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1776).

According to the extensive research conducted by Malodia et al. (2022, pp. 1784-1786), achieving brand engagement, along with brand recall and awareness, through memes requires marketers to adhere to specific content-related criteria, including relevance, language, structure, humor, and shareability. To ensure a meme's relevance, the content should be timely and widely recognizable among the target audience, familiar to the

consumers, relatable to their personal experiences, current, and not controversial. In terms of language, memes should be clear and understandable, avoid abbreviations, and ensure that the writing style is contextually appropriate and descriptive. This combination of sentence structure, vocabulary, and writing style establishes the meme's overall recognizability and effectiveness (Malodia et al., 2022, pp. 1784-1786).

The study also underlines the critical role of humor in memes. Selecting the appropriate humor style and type is essential for crafting viral and engaging content (Malodia et al., 2022, pp. 1784-1786). Lastly, the research sheds light on the factors influencing meme shareability. Memes with trending, topical, and informative topics are more likely to be disseminated, particularly when the templates are easily shareable. This integral motivation encourages recipients to further spread the memes (Malodia et al., 2022, pp. 1784-1786).

This development has opened avenues for brand marketers to harness internet memes as a pivotal component of their marketing strategies, a practice known as meme marketing (Shen, et al., 2023, p. 2). This phenomenon can be firstly attributed to the cost-effectiveness of meme-based advertising in comparison to traditional and digital marketing methods.

Secondly, meme marketing campaigns capitalize on existing popular memes, thus facilitating a more immediate and relatable connection with the target audience (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1776). Indeed, according to Paquette's (2019, para. 4) report, incorporating memes into advertising efforts has been shown to significantly enhance engagement rates on social media, achieving a 30% engagement rate. This stands in stark contrast to the 1% click-through rate (CTR) typically seen with Google AdWords campaigns (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1776). By leveraging the intrinsic appeal and viral potential of memes, this approach aims to engage audiences, heighten brand awareness, and foster an interactive dialogue with consumers (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1776).

Beyond the potential benefits explored previously, the academic literature also identifies drawbacks associated with utilizing memes for business purposes (Casey, 2018, p. 166; Sharma, 2018, p. 305). Casaey (2018, p. 166) emphasizes the lack of control inherent in memes, arguing that user-generated content can deviate significantly from intended messaging. This lack of control manifests in memes spreading with unforeseen content, potentially leading to unintended and long-lasting negative consequences (Zappavigna 2012, Chapter 6; Van Dijck, 2013, p. 7). In a similar vein, Sharma (2018, p. 305) underscores the user-driven nature of memes, highlighting the absence of control offered by traditional, regulated marketing communications. An exemplary case is the McDonald's "#McDStories"

campaign on Twitter, which invited users to share positive brand narratives about Happy Meals. However, this user-driven approach resulted in the spread of unforeseen content, ultimately generating negative publicity for the brand (Sharma, 2018, p. 305).

As highlighted earlier, the selection of humor styles and types is crucial for the engagement that memes can produce (Malodia et al., 2022, pp. 1784-1786). While the general typology of humor types was covered in section 2.1.2, it is necessary to examine how these established categories adapt to the specific format of memes (Fauziah et al., 2018, pp. 165-166).

Building on the foundation of Catanescu and Tom's (2001, p. 93) humor types, Fauziah et al. (2018, pp. 165-166) identify various meme categories that exploit humor in distinct ways. For example, *comparison memes* juxtapose multiple elements to create humor, with the humor arising from the contrast between them. *Personification memes* involve assigning human traits to non-human entities, such as animals, plants, or objects and often feature fictional characters in human-like scenarios. *Exaggeration memes*, amplify certain aspects beyond realistic boundaries to create humor through absurdity. Regarding *pun memes*, the wordplay takes center stage. These memes cleverly exploit the multiple meanings of words for comedic effect. *Sarcasm memes* employ irony to produce humor, often using statements that contradict the literal meaning to mock or express contempt. Meanwhile, *silliness memes* showcase humorous facial expressions or behaviors, encompassing a broad range of funny and absurd content. Finally, *surprise memes* rely on unexpected situations to trigger comedic effects, utilizing the element of surprise as a core component.

Therefore, comprehending the various meme categories that exploit humor in distinct ways can provide valuable insights into Ryanair's approach to humor on Instagram. Analyzing and categorizing the specific types of memes employed by Ryanair will reveal how the airline strategically leverages these formats to shape its brand identity. This focused examination, through the lens of meme categories, offers a foundation for a detailed exploration of Ryanair's digital branding strategy.

#### **2.1.4. Instagram - The Channel**

Social media is defined as a collection of Internet-based applications that are built upon the ideological and technological underpinnings of Web 2.0. These platforms facilitate the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC), enabling users to share

information, ideas, personal messages, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 255).

With their advent, the landscape of customer communication has undergone a substantial transformation (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 357). Their primary purpose is to inform peers about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues, marking a shift towards a more participatory and consumer-driven approach to information dissemination and brand interaction (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004, p. 2). In this dynamic environment, the role of content consumers is radically redefined, particularly in the context of meme dissemination. On social media, individuals who receive a meme are not merely passive recipients; they become active participants in the communication process, effectively transforming into the senders in the next cycle of meme diffusion (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 292).

Approximately half of the world's population is active on social media since the estimated number of users in 2023 was 4.89 billion (Statista Research Department, 2024, para. 2). According to Walsh (2024, Table 2), the four most prominent social media platforms for marketers, ranked by the number of active users, are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

Instagram, with over 2 billion users (Anand & Kumar, 2023, p. 768), stands out for its focus on visual content, allowing only image or video-based posts (Lee et al., 2015, p. 552). Brands utilize Instagram for posting Firm-Generated Images (FGI) to market their products (Anand & Kumar, 2023, p. 769). This strategy aligns with consumer preferences for visual content, rooted in the fact that 90% of the information processed by the brain is visual (Kane & Pear, 2016, para. 5). Instagram's impact on engagement surpasses that of Twitter and Facebook (Arora et al., 2019, p. 89). Thus, platforms like Instagram serve as pivotal spaces for memes to emerge as they represent the virtual environments inhabited by people (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 292).

Lastly, Instagram offers digital features that facilitate meme creation and dissemination, fostering a dynamic environment where both consumers and brands can engage with memetic content (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021, p. 2). Razzaq et al. (2023, p. 673) emphasize the role of platform-specific affordances in strengthening brand-audience connections. Instagram's functionalities, particularly those designed for content creation and sharing, facilitate meme marketing among brands. This is likely achieved by encouraging imitative actions and user engagement with brand-generated memes (Razzaq et al., 2023, p. 673). This platform, along with other similar ones, inherently motivates user participation in

meme marketing, by making them interact with the content through features such as liking and sharing. This promotes a communal digital experience around memetic content (Razzaq et al., 2023, p. 673).

## **2.2. Brand Identity- Crafting the Brand's Persona**

Since the 1990s, marketing research has increasingly delved into brand identity, as highlighted by Aaker (1995, pp. 67-94) and Keller (1993, p. 2). Aaker (1995) defines brand identity as “a set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain.” (p. 68). Through its brand identity, a company aims to communicate its uniqueness and distinct characteristics to all its pertinent audiences (Nandan, 2005, p. 265). This effort is directed toward fostering a connection between the brand and the consumer by creating a value proposition that encompasses functional, emotional, or self-expressive advantages (Aaker, 1995, p. 68). Keller (1993), views it as a set of elements such as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design" (p. 2) or a mixture of them, that distinguish a brand from its competitors.

### **2.2.1. Brand Image**

Within the realm of branding, the communication between a company and its customers can be analyzed through the lenses of brand identity and brand image (Nandan, 2005, p. 265). While these two terms are often misconceived, they have distinct definitions (Nandan, 2005, p. 265). As previously mentioned, brand identity stems from the company itself, or alternatively from the sender’s perspective (Nandan, 2005, p. 265; Kapferer, 2008, p. 174). Conversely, brand image pertains to the perspective of the receiver (Kapferer, 2008, p. 174). It reflects the actual perception of the brand by consumers, shaped by the associations and impressions they recall in relation to that brand and its offerings (Puey & Jiménez, 2022, p. 180).

According to Nandan (2005, p. 266), brand image is also characterized by the brand's positioning in the market, that is, how consumers perceive the product. Brand identity constitutes the groundwork for both brand image and reputation, acting as a precursor in the sequence of brand development (Farzin et al., 2021, p. 331).

### **2.2.2. The Brand Identity Prism: Facets of Identity**

To understand an organization’s brand identity, Kapferer (2008, pp. 182-187) introduced a set of attributes known as the brand identity prism. Considering that brands articulate the essence of products and are perceived as sources of products, services, and

satisfaction, it is inferred that brand identity encompasses six distinct facets (Kapferer, 2008 p. 182).

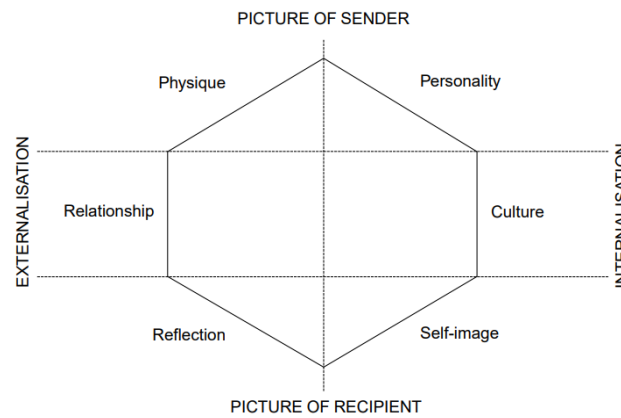


Figure 2: Kapferer's brand identity prism  
(Kapferer's, 2008, p. 183)

The European Institute of Brand Management (2009, p. 1) summarizes Kapferer's concept by identifying six key aspects that constitute a brand's identity: *physique*, *personality*, *culture*, *relationship*, *reflection*, and *self-image*. These six facets of brand identity are organized into two dimensions: The Constructed Source versus The Constructed Receiver and Externalization versus Internalization. (European Institute of Brand Management, 2009, pp. 1-3).

In the first dimension, a brand must be perceived both as a persona and as embodying the archetypal user. The Constructed Source encompasses the brand's physique and personality. Firstly, *physique* refers to the physical attributes associated with a brand upon mentioning its name and constitutes the cornerstone of a brand's identity. Critical questions concerning this facet include the brand's appearance, its functional utility for the consumer, and its recognizability. The emphasis on a brand's material advantages is imperative for its successful differentiation and positioning in the market (European Institute of Brand Management, 2009, p. 2).

On the other hand, *personality* encapsulates the character of a brand, which is shaped through its mode of communication with consumers, giving the impression that the brand embodies a persona with distinct character traits. This perception can be achieved through the utilization of a particular writing style, specific design elements, and color schemes, among other strategies. Endorsements by individuals who personify the brand can imbue its character with a tangible form, further reinforcing its personality in the memory of consumers (European Institute of Brand Management, 2009, p. 2).

Meanwhile, the Constructed Receiver includes reflection (of the consumer) and self-image. *Reflection* pertains to the portrayal of the brand's archetypal user, serving as a mirror for consumer identification. Importantly, this depiction may not always align with the actual characteristics of the target demographic. Brand managers are not required to provide an accurate representation of the true target audience in their campaigns. Instead, the strategy involves presenting a group or individual that resonates with and appeals to the target audience's aspirations or ideals, facilitating a stronger connection and identification with the brand (European Institute of Brand Management, 2009, p. 3). In addition, *self-image* reflects the perception the target group has of itself, acting as a self-held mirror. In demonstrating a brand identity, it is appropriate for brand managers to regard this dimension. Gaining insights into the inherent motivations of consumers can significantly enhance a brand's appeal. When such insights are identified, they can be effectively applied in advertising campaigns to resonate deeply with the target audience, thereby strengthening the brand's connection and relevance to its consumers (European Institute of Brand Management, 2009, p. 3).

The second dimension, Externalization versus Internalization, addresses the outward expression and core essence of a brand. Specifically, externalization covers the social attributes that determine a brand's external expression, which includes physique, relationship, and reflection. *Relationship* refers to the symbolic representation of a specific type of interaction or connection between individuals that a brand can embody. It necessitates brand managers to articulate and embody the nature of the relationship that their brand represents. This facet is arguably more critical for service brands compared to product ones, given that services inherently constitute a form of relationship. The emphasis on this dimension underscores the importance of fostering meaningful connections and interactions through the brand, enhancing its relevance and value to the consumer (European Institute of Brand Management, 2009, p. 3).

In contrast, internalization focuses on characteristics intrinsic to the brand's essence, encompassing personality, culture, and self-image. Finally, *culture* represents the set of values and foundational principles that underpin a brand's actions, including its product offerings and communication strategies, serving as the essential channel between the brand and the organization. Occasionally, a brand's strength is augmented by its association with the consumer's national identity. Hence, it is crucial for brand managers to ensure that the brand's culture is reflected across all points of interaction with customers, thereby reinforcing the brand's core values and enhancing its connection with the audience



(European Institute of Brand Management, 2009, p. 2).

By integrating these dimensions, Kapferer's (2008, p. 187) model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and developing a cohesive brand identity. This model emphasizes that these facets are actualized only through the brand's communication with the consumer. Strong brands can seamlessly integrate all these aspects, establishing a concise, clear, and appealing identity that resonates with both the company and its consumers.

### **3. Methodology**

The subsequent chapter delves into the methodology employed in this study, outlining the systematic approach undertaken to address the research question. Initially, it describes the research approach, emphasizing the chosen method and its relevance to the objectives of this study. Following this, the chapter explores the case study of Ryanair, detailing the brand's significance and its relevance to the research purpose. Subsequently, the sampling strategy and data collection processes are presented, highlighting the characteristics of the sample and the methods used to ensure representativeness and appropriateness for the research aims. The chapter then transitions to the multimodal analysis approach, explicating how a specific theoretical framework is applied to the study. This is followed by an in-depth explanation of the operationalization and procedure of the data analysis, illustrating how the concepts of humor types and styles, as well as the components of brand identity outlined by the Brand Identity Prism, are translated into measurable variables. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the reflexivity, and credibility of the research, and a thorough discussion of the ethical considerations inherent to this study's approach.

#### **3.1. Qualitative research**

This thesis investigates the nuanced ways humor shapes Ryanair's brand identity on Instagram. To achieve this in-depth exploration, a qualitative research approach is particularly well-suited. Several factors make qualitative methods particularly appropriate for this study.

Firstly, given the study's objective of uncovering how various humor styles and types contribute to Ryanair's brand identity, an exploratory approach is essential. Humor in advertising can be a powerful tool, often containing layers of subtle messages and brand associations that create deeper connections with viewers beyond the surface-level content (Eisend, 2021, pp. 963-965). One key advantage of qualitative research lies in its exploratory nature. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted layers of meaning within the data (Boeije, 2009, p. 5). Quantitative methods, which typically focus on measuring and analyzing isolated variables (Creswell, 2014, p. 42), would be ill-equipped to capture the richness and complexity of the visual and textual elements within these Instagram memes.

Furthermore, the data of the study are Ryanair's posts, specifically those depicting memes, which are inherently multimodal, as they employ a combination of visual elements like images or videos alongside textual content (Moussa et al., 2020, p. 5923). This necessitates an interpretative approach to understand the deeper meanings they convey.

Qualitative research methods are adept at analyzing multimodal elements, enabling researchers to interpret underlying dynamics and relationships within the data (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 151).

Additionally, this study particularly benefits from the strength of qualitative research in generating new insights and exploring uncharted territories (Doz, 2011, p. 583). The analysis of humor in social media marketing, especially its role in shaping brand identity, is a contemporary topic that remains relatively underexplored. The qualitative approach aligns perfectly with the research objective of uncovering novel insights into how Ryanair leverages humor on Instagram to construct its brand identity. This analysis aims to reveal previously unidentified aspects of how humor functions within the memes, how the visual elements enhance or subvert the textual message, and how they collectively contribute to the overall brand identity.

Lastly, this study aims to develop new theoretical insights specifically grounded in the context of Ryanair's Instagram presence, thereby achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. According to Doz (2011, p. 583), qualitative research is particularly conducive to inspiring new ideas and exploring novel research fields. To achieve this, the researcher will analyze the memes and identify emerging themes and patterns within the data. This approach leverages the inherently inductive nature of qualitative research, where theories emerge organically from empirical observations rather than being imposed on the data (McDowell, 2004, p. 219).

In contrast, quantitative research assesses objective theories and investigates relationships between variables through tools such as surveys and hypothesis testing (Creswell, 2014, p. 42). While existing theoretical frameworks on humor and brand identity will guide the analysis, focusing solely on pre-determined hypotheses could potentially overlook the unique aspects of Ryanair's use of humor on Instagram. Quantitative methods might fail to capture the nuanced and interpretative nature of the humor used in Ryanair's social media content.

### **3.2. Deductive Approach**

Another essential consideration in research design is the choice between an inductive or deductive approach (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 61). To further align with the research goal of understanding how humor creates Ryanair's brand identity on Instagram, a deductive approach was chosen. This approach is characterized by applying established theories to guide the collection and interpretation of data, ensuring that the findings are grounded in established theoretical frameworks (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 61; Hyde, 2000, p. 83). These

pre-established theories will guide the data collection process, inform the interpretation of the memes, and ultimately demonstrate how the findings connect back to the existing theoretical framework. However, the research remains open to new findings that may arise, allowing for the discovery of novel insights and the potential development of new theoretical contributions.

Also, deductive research in qualitative studies involves concluding specific phenomena based on pre-existing theories and general principles (Fife & Gossner, 2024, p. 1). With this approach, the study systematically investigates how humor is used in Ryanair's social media content, ensuring that the analysis remains consistent with theoretical constructs of humor and brand identity.

Conversely, the inductive approach which prioritizes data-driven exploration, formulating theories and generalizations based on observed patterns (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 61; Hyde, 2000, p. 83), is deemed less suitable for this study. While this approach might be beneficial for entirely new phenomena, this study seeks to understand a specific case within an existing theoretical framework - humor and its impact on brand identity.

### **3.3. Multimodal Critical Discourse Approach**

The research will employ multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) as a method to answer the main research question, aiming to detect and examine the humorous elements in both textual and visual aspects of memes and how they demonstrate Ryanair's brand identity. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis is considered the most suitable approach due to its alignment with the research goal for several reasons. Firstly, the inappropriateness of quantitative methodologies for effectively processing the complex connotative meanings inherent in visual and textual data is noted (Brennen, 2017, p. 4). Secondly, MCDA was chosen over other qualitative methodologies because, although interviews or focus groups could provide insights into consumers' perceptions (Brennen, 2017, pp. 28-61), this study prioritizes analyzing how Ryanair's Instagram account itself employs humor and constructs its brand identity through memes.

Thirdly, as previously mentioned, memes are inherently multimodal artifacts, often relying heavily on visuals alongside textual elements (Moussa et al., 2020, p. 5923). MCDA, in contrast to other qualitative content analyses, offers a comprehensive framework for investigating how visual semiotic selections, alongside textual discourse in memes, illustrate the power dynamics and ideologies of the airline industry. Thus, the approach that is particularly suited to exploring their multimodal and diverse nature, while also addressing the social critique they often embody, is critical discourse analysis and more specifically,

multimodal critical discourse analysis (Moussa et al., 2020, p. 5923).

Multimodal Discourse Analysis builds upon the foundation of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA posits that power dynamics are enacted through discourse, examining how power is conveyed and perpetuated within discursive practices (Machín & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). However, scholars have called for a paradigm shift towards multimodal discourse analyses, contending that meaning is crafted through the coexistence of multiple semiotic modes within texts. This perspective challenges the traditional emphasis CDA has placed on language as the primary medium of communication, suggesting a more inclusive approach that recognizes the significance of various forms of semiotics in constructing meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006 p. 14; Machín & Mayr, 2012, pp. 6-10).

Therefore, MCDA is concerned with the composition of both visual and linguistic texts, aiming to reveal the underlying structures and intentions (Machín & Mayr, 2012, pp. 9-10). By studying how the visual and verbal aspects collaborate within memes to create discourse and humor, this approach allows us to gain deeper insights into how humor shapes Ryanair's brand identity on its Instagram account.

### **3.4. Ryanair's Case Study**

Hyde (2000, p. 83) argues that qualitative research frequently adopts the form of a case study. More than a singular qualitative method, a case study is a research approach, characterized by the in-depth examination of a specific instance, or a small selection of instances, of a phenomenon. A case study is the optional research approach when addressing "how" or "why" questions, which are inquiries into processes. (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 146). It serves as a logic of design that is particularly suited to certain circumstances and specific research problems (Hyde, 2000, p. 83).

This thesis's research is centered on the case of Ryanair. The selection is based on its assumed relevance to the research objectives. As previously mentioned, Ryanair serves as a noteworthy example of a brand that maintains a strong presence across various social media platforms (Forsslund & Friman, 2022, p. 20). Ryanair, founded in 1984 by a group of Irish businessmen including Tony Ryan, the founder of Guinness Peat Aviation, initially operated flights between Waterford and Gatwick Airport to compete with British Airways and Aer Lingus (Tungate, 2017, para. 8).

The key figure behind Ryanair's minimalist service model was CEO Michael O'Leary, who drew inspiration from US low-cost carriers like Southwest Airlines. In 1990, Ryanair rebranded itself as 'Europe's first low fares airline', as stated in the history section of its website. The airline introduced several innovations, such as high-frequency flights, a

single aircraft fleet, and the elimination of free drinks and expensive meals on board (Tungate, 2017, para. 9).

While Ryanair's ultra-low-cost model occasionally faced criticism, the airline leveraged controversy to generate publicity, often making bold statements. Its no-frills approach extended to advertising, with internally produced black-and-white print campaigns that frequently sparked debate. One notable 2012 ad featuring flight attendants dressed in lingerie with the slogan 'Red hot fares & crew', drew complaints from the Advertising Standards Authority (Tungate, 2017, para. 12-13). Nevertheless, Ryanair's strategy proved successful, making it one of the top three European airlines by passenger numbers in 2020, alongside easyJet and Lufthansa Group. The airline exemplifies how low-cost carriers can achieve explosive growth with an effective business model. Over the past decade, Ryanair has seen its annual revenue more than double, reaching approximately 8.5 billion euros in its most recent financial year (Statista, 2024, para. 2).

Additionally, as discussed in the introduction (section 1.), Ryanair has successfully adopted a marketing strategy focused on meme marketing (Bilecen & Nur, 2023, p. 1330). More precisely, the company's assertive pricing strategy and humorous marketing tactics, combined with the widespread appeal of internet memes, have resulted in significant business growth (Bilecen & Nur, 2023, pp. 1331-1332). For instance, the airline's 2022 financial report revealed that it experienced its most prosperous commercial period compared to previous years, which is likely attributed to its meme marketing strategy on its Instagram account (Bilecen & Nur, 2023, p. 1330).

### **3.5. Sample & Sampling Strategy**

This research is focused on analyzing Instagram posts shared by Ryanair on its official Instagram account (Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.). Adhering to the guidelines outlined in the master thesis framework (Janssen & Verboord, 2023-2024, p. 7), a selection of 100 Instagram posts is retrieved and subjected to analysis. Given the extensive volume of over 5,000 posts available on Ryanair's Instagram page (Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.), the research strategically employs a purposive sampling method.

Purposive sampling is a deliberate method used to select the most relevant posts for the study (Flick, 2007, pp. 3-7). In this case, the selection is based on the most recent posts from the day the researcher collected the data, which was April 10, 2024. The range of posts spans from the most recent post on April 10, 2024, to the oldest post in the sample on October 14, 2023. This approach ensures that the analysis is grounded in the most temporally relevant content, offering a detailed look at how Ryanair leverages humor,

particularly through memes, to craft and communicate its brand identity on this social media platform.

This analysis concentrated solely on the visual components of the Instagram posts, as exemplified in Figure 3: the images themselves and any captions embedded within them. Text captions accompanying the posts were excluded from the scope of the investigation. Additionally, a subset of the analyzed posts were carousels, containing multiple images within a single post. These carousels were evaluated in two ways. For carousels where humor arose from the sequential nature of the images, the entire sequence was analyzed as a whole. Conversely, carousels where each image held inherent humor and provided deeper insights were analyzed on an image-by-image basis. Lastly, some of the analyzed memes originated as posts from Ryanair's Twitter account, subsequently reposted on Instagram. These reposted memes were nonetheless included in the analysis. Other types of posts, such as purely informational or promotional ones, videos, and reels, were excluded from this analysis due to their limited relevance to the core focus of this research, which is to dissect the role of humor in shaping brand identity through Instagram images. User comments were also not included in the study, as the research aims to examine the content shared by Ryanair rather than the perception of consumers.



Figure 3: Post from Ryanair's official account (Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.) as an example of the elements analyzed in the memes for this study.

### 3.6. Data collection

To address the research question, this study relies primarily on primary data. Primary data refers to original data collected directly by the researcher for the specific purpose of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, Chapter 7). In this case, the primary data source will be the collection of Instagram posts shared by Ryanair on its official account. These posts

will be the focus of the MCDA analysis to explore how humor is used and how it contributes to the construction of brand identity.

### 3.7. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

As previously highlighted the study employs a multimodal discourse analysis approach to examine the integration of text and visual elements in memes, focusing on how these elements collectively contribute to humor and brand identity communication. The analysis of the data will draw on Machín and Mayr's (2012) approach, which examines both linguistic and visual elements along with their underlying meanings. This method focuses on the semiotic resources within the language and visual communication (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 17).

In the context of analyzing the text within the memes, five aspects of lexical choices in language are examined. These are word connotations, overlexicalization, suppression or lexical absence, structural oppositions, lexical choices, and genre of communication (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 32-47). For the analysis of non-linguistic elements, the researcher will delve into visual choices and their meanings, as outlined by Machin and May (2012, p. 49-56). The creation of visual meaning involves several aspects such as iconography, attributes, settings, and salience. To illustrate these concepts, Figure 4 presents a specific Instagram post extracted from the data set, and Table 1 explains how various lexical and visual choices were applied:

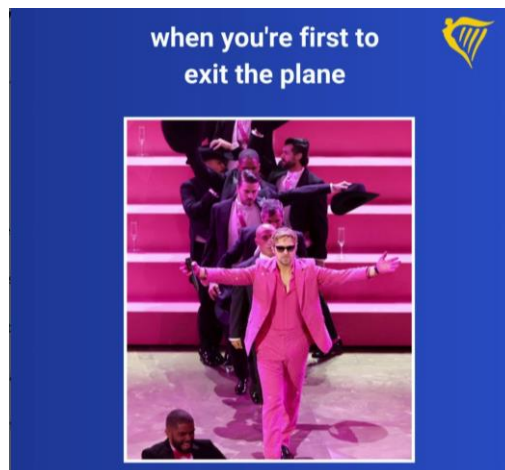


Figure 4: Post from Ryanair's official account (Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.) drawn from the data set. This post showcases the visual and lexical aspects examined using Machin and May's (2012, pp. 32-56) toolkit.



<b>Lexical &amp; Visual Choices</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example from Data Set</b>
Word connotations	Investigating the choice of words within the text and the concepts or emotions they evoke (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 32-37).	"First to exit" conveys a win or advantage in the context of the often-competitive rush to leave the plane once it is landed. The whole phrase "when you're first to exit the plane" evokes a sense of accomplishment and exclusivity.
Overlexicalization	Repeating, overemphasizing, or employing synonyms for words to influence or persuade the reader repetition, and overemphasis, or use of synonyms with words to impact or persuade the recipient (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 37-38).	There is no overlexicalization; the caption remains precise without unnecessary repetition.
Suppression or lexical absence	Identifying which words are absent in the text (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 38-39).	Absence of words related to waiting or delay, focusing only on the positive outcome of being first.
Structural oppositions	Proposing differences by introducing opposites or contrasting elements (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 39-42).	Man's grand stance is set against what is typically a less remarkable moment, creating a humorous contrast. Also, implicit contrast between being first to exit and others who must wait.
Lexical choices and genre of communication	Using linguistic elements to assert authority or control over the reader (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 42-47).	Casual, relatable language coupled with the celebrity image engages the audience and creates a humorous and relatable scenario.
Iconography	Examines how images convey specific connotations and denotations (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 49-51).	The person's confident pose and glamorous suit connote a celebratory event, which in this case is humorously applied to the act of exiting a plane. His triumphant and confident walking in front of others conveys success and leadership.
Attributes	Considering how objects within an image can embody and communicate broader discourses (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 51-52).	The confident posture and attire of Gosling in the foreground embody the feeling of victory and exclusivity.
Settings	Analyzing how settings contribute to conveying discourses and reflecting values, identities, and actions (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 52-54).	The setting of a glamorous event stage reinforces the context of celebration and recognition.

Saliency	<p>Focusing on the elements that are emphasized within an image and their symbolic significance. Techniques to achieve saliency include the use of potent cultural symbols, size, color, tone, focus, foregrounding, and overlapping (Machin &amp; Mayr, 2012, pp. 54-56).</p>	<p>The bright pink attire and central position of the person emphasize their importance and draw attention.</p>
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Table 1: Lexical and Visual Aspects of Machin and Mayr’s (2012, pp. 32-47) toolkit for Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis.

### 3.8. Operationalization and Procedure

In the operationalization phase of this thesis, a systematic methodology was applied to analyze the humor styles and types employed by Ryanair through its Instagram memes. This analysis also examined how these elements contribute to the creation of Ryanair's brand identity. The process is thoroughly described and proceeds in several well-defined steps to ensure a rigorous examination.

Each Instagram post was analyzed following a consistent approach. First, the memes were examined in terms of denotation and connotation. According to Chandler (2022, pp. 210-211) denotation refers to what is literally shown, while connotation involves the underlying meanings conveyed by the image that are related to the interpreter's personal and social associations. The analysis began with describing any prominent features in the memes and noting the initial associations they evoked. It is crucial to note that the image and caption within the memes are interrelated and were not analyzed separately. For instance, while focusing on the image, the caption within the image was also considered to understand the connections between the visual and textual elements. In some examples, the caption was the primary source of humor in the meme, underscoring the importance of analyzing these two elements in conjunction.

Following this, a lexical analysis was conducted on the caption of the meme. This included applying specific tools provided by Machin and Mayr (2013, pp. 32-49), such as word connotations, overlexicalization, suppression or lexical absence, structural oppositions, and the genre of communication.

Subsequently, the visual aspects of the meme were analyzed in detail using the toolkit for visual analysis as outlined by Machin and Mayr (2013). This phase aimed to understand how highlighted elements are depicted and how they contribute to the overall humor and message of the meme. This phase focused on elements such as iconography, attributes, settings, and saliency, as outlined by Machin and Mayr (2013, pp. 49-56).

The next step involved closely reviewing the humorous content within these posts to

identify the prevailing humor styles, drawing upon Martin et al.'s (2003, pp. 70-71) humor classification scheme, and the specific types of humor as defined by Catanescu and Tom (2001, p. 93). This thorough examination aimed to unravel the nuanced ways in which different styles and types of humor are harnessed within the memes to articulate and enhance Ryanair's brand identity. This analytic process focused not only on categorizing humor but also on understanding the strategic use of humorous elements in demonstrating and projecting the airline's brand identity.

The operationalization extended to the analysis of how Ryanair's brand identity is reflected through these humorous Instagram posts, employing Kapferer's (2009) brand identity prism as outlined by European Institute of Brand Management (2009, pp. 1-3) as a guiding framework. This involved a thorough examination of six brand identity dimensions: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image. The analysis delved into both visual and textual elements of Ryanair's memes. Specifically, it identified the following aspects:

Physique	Physical attributes associated with the brand, such as logos, and colors.
Personality	The tone and character of the memes, revealing the personality traits Ryanair wishes to project.
Culture	The cultural values espoused by the memes, which ideally resonate with Ryanair's corporate culture.
Relationship	The nature of the relationship Ryanair aims to cultivate with its audience.
Reflection	How the target audience is depicted within the memes, and how the audience is encouraged to perceive themselves in relation to the brand

Table 2: Operationalization of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism for Analysis of Ryanair's Instagram Memes. Source: Prepared by the author.

This process entailed a systematic, in-depth examination of each selected meme to discern the use of humor styles and types, and how these humor elements serve to articulate and reinforce various facets of Ryanair's brand identity on Instagram. By analyzing the strategic deployment of humor in Ryanair's branding on this social media platform, this study aims to offer profound insights into the intricate ways in which humor content and brand identity construction are interlinked.

### **3.9. Reflexivity and Credibility**

Reflexivity refers to the process through which a researcher becomes aware of and acknowledges its role as a significant element within the research process (Haynes, 2012, p. 72). This thesis adopts an exploratory approach, delving into a narrowly defined aspect of a broader phenomenon from a distinct perspective.

The researcher wishes to acknowledge its active engagement with the social media platform under study. Consequently, it is crucial to recognize that the researcher's pre-existing perceptions could potentially influence the conclusions drawn from this research. However, these prior convictions might also contribute positively by providing a deep contextual understanding of the subject matter, especially since the research question was inspired by an initial interest in the Instagram platform. To mitigate the potential for bias, this study employs a systematic and well-defined methodological approach.

The findings are expected to be shaped by the author's prior subjective experiences (Given, 2008, p. 6). Furthermore, the outcomes are anticipated to represent a portion of the reality under investigation, as opposed to a mirror reflection of it (Maxwell, 2022, Chapter 9). This reflective stance is supported by Alvesson et al. (2022, Chapter 2), who argue that interpretation is an unavoidable aspect of research. Therefore, the study is influenced by the author's preconceived notions and theoretical frameworks. Despite these influences, it does not detract from the research's credibility (Alvesson et al., 2022, Chapter 2).

In addition to clarifying the researcher's positionality, the transparency of this study is further ensured by providing the dataset. This allows readers to access the sampled Instagram posts directly. By enabling readers to examine the analyzed sample material, they can better understand how the researcher derived certain interpretations and critically evaluate the analysis process and results. Furthermore, transparency is enhanced by presenting the analysis process in Appendix A, which also provides the opportunity for this study or its analysis procedure to be replicated in future research.

Finally, the credibility of this study is enhanced since the researcher adhered to established criteria. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301), supported that there are several techniques that increase the likelihood of producing credible findings. The first technique is prolonged engagement, which requires the researcher to dedicate sufficient time to fully immerse in the data, repeatedly reviewing it to understand all possible meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). In this study, the researcher dedicated sufficient time to analyze the dataset and obtained feedback from her supervisor to ensure the process was on track. Particularly after conducting an initial analysis of a meme as a trial, the researcher received

feedback, made necessary adjustments, and then proceeded with the analysis of the remaining data. This iterative process continued during the coding of posts, where feedback was again incorporated to align with the supervisor's guidelines, ensuring the entire dataset was coded accurately.

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 302) also emphasized that credibility is achieved when the researcher comprehends the social context in which the data is embedded. The researcher employed Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), a method that necessitates embedding data within its societal context. This approach was consistently applied throughout the study, further enhancing the credibility of the findings.

### **3.10. Ethical Considerations**

This research is firmly grounded in ethical principles and adheres to guidelines appropriate for the nature of the data and the chosen methodologies. The study focuses on analyzing publicly available content from Ryanair's Instagram account, thus deliberately avoiding the direct involvement of human subjects. This approach significantly reduces ethical concerns typically associated with privacy and informed consent. Moreover, the data consists exclusively of content that is intended for public viewing and interaction. It is crucial to acknowledge that while these Instagram posts were not initially created for academic purposes, their availability in the public domain justifies and legitimizes their use in scholarly research. The primary ethical obligation, therefore, is to represent this content respectfully and accurately, ensuring that the analysis remains transparent.

Additionally, proper attribution is given to all source material to allow for the traceability of the data used in the research. This practice aligns with scholarly standards and provides a clear path for readers and reviewers to verify the source material, thereby enhancing the credibility of the research (Given, 2008, p. 10).

Finally, this research carefully considers the potential impact that the interpretation and presentation of the analyzed content might have on the public perception of Ryanair and its stakeholders. Conducted with an objective, respectful, and unbiased approach, the study specifically acknowledges the influence of the researcher's perspectives, a topic thoroughly discussed in the reflexivity section. This mindful approach ensures that the findings are not only credible but also responsibly reflective of the broader social implications.

## 4. Results

To comprehensively present the results of this analysis and address the research question, this section is divided into two main subsections. Firstly, attention is given to the various humor categories and the corresponding types and styles identified across Ryanair's Instagram memes. Secondly, the study connects these humorous representations to Ryanair's brand identity through the lens of the brand identity prism to demonstrate how Ryanair's memes demonstrate its overall brand identity.

### 4.1. Humor Categories and Dominant Humor Styles

The analysis, as described in section 3.8, revealed recurring themes in Ryanair's Instagram memes, categorized in Table 3 (see below) to highlight the airline's diverse strategies for communicating with audiences through humor. These categories, ranging from "Social Etiquette in Public Spaces" to "Practical Challenges," encompass various aspects of travel and cultural interaction that resonate with viewers.

Themes	Descriptions
Social Etiquette in Public Spaces	Humor surrounding expected behaviors in shared travel environments
Personification and Anthropomorphism	Attributing human traits to non-human entities (e.g., airplanes)
Expectation vs. Reality in Air Travel	Contrasting travelers' expectations with their actual experiences
Everyday Life Relatability	Depicting ordinary situations and personal experiences
Travel and Cuisine	Humorous takes on food experiences associated with travel
Cultural Differences	Exploring humorous contrasts between different cultural practices
Celebrity and Pop Culture	Using well-known public figures and cultural icons
Practical Challenges	Highlighting common travel struggles

Table 3: Categorization of Humor in Ryanair's Instagram Memes.

Source: Prepared by the author.

This categorization underscores Ryanair's multifaceted approach and reveals how humor styles and types vary within categories. For example, memes under "Social Etiquette" and "Everyday Life Relatability" often use exaggeration. In contrast, those under "Personification and Anthropomorphism" predominantly employ personification humor to humanize airplanes, whimsically illustrating travel experiences. This distinction in humor types is crucial as it reflects Ryanair's strategic use of humor to present a light-hearted brand persona that is approachable and has a versatile appeal. Importantly, the diverse themes broaden Ryanair's appeal, targeting a wide demographic across different regions and travel scenarios.

#### **4.1.1. Social Etiquette in Public Spaces**

Ryanair's Instagram memes leverage humor to explore the theme of "Social Etiquette in Public Spaces," particularly within the confined environment of airplanes where passenger behavior can significantly impact the experiences of others. These memes offer humorous insights into the unspoken rules and social dynamics that govern air travel.

A key visual characteristic in this category involves contrasting expected behavior with actual conduct. Exaggerated facial expressions and body language highlight these disparities. The memes often showcase familiar airplane interiors, especially seating areas, to immediately contextualize the scenario for viewers. This use of relatable imagery and settings produces an immediate connection with the audience.

This category reflects a multifaceted approach to humor. Some memes utilize affiliative humor, aiming to entertain viewers and create a sense of shared experience by highlighting relatable social etiquette violations, while others prominently feature aggressive humor. This style, often delivered through sarcasm and ridicule, highlights and discourages behaviors deemed socially unacceptable.

In terms of lexical aspects, the primary focus is on the conversational and sarcastic tone used in the memes. Direct captions further emphasize these points, directly addressing or questioning the behavior depicted. For instance, a meme features a caption that reads "when everyone claps for the pilots when they land the plane" (posted on December 4, 2023). The language used is typically straightforward and colloquial, reflecting the spontaneous and often irreverent tone of social media discourse (Bashlovkina et al., 2023, p. 3737). Finally, the captions utilize comparison humor by contrasting expected social behaviors with actual, often exaggerated, actions.

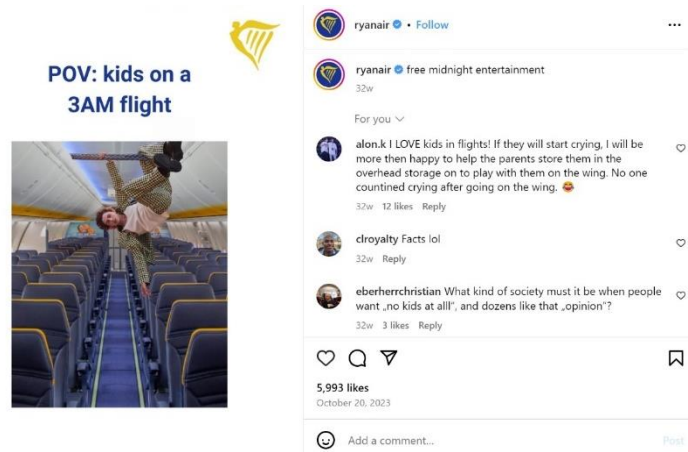


Figure 5: Ryanair's official Instagram account, posted on October 20, 2023.  
(Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.).

In particular, Figure 5 features a child playfully hanging from an airplane's overhead compartment. The caption, "POV: kids on a 3 AM flight" employs point-of-view (POV) language, inviting viewers to imagine themselves in this scenario. The humor hinges on the playful yet disruptive behavior of the child. Its exaggerated position hanging from the compartment contrasts sharply with the expected calmness of passengers, particularly during early morning hours. This unexpected action creates a sense of amusement, drawing attention through the visual absurdity. The familiar airplane setting further grounds the humor in a relatable scenario for frequent flyers.

The meme's humor is further enhanced with exaggeration, a common tactic in Ryanair's memes. The child's unlikely behavior amplifies the reality of children's unpredictable actions on flights, making the situation more entertaining. The concise caption, "POV: kids on a 3 AM flight," avoids overlexicalization, allowing the visual exaggeration to take center stage and maintain the humor's clarity.

This meme exemplifies Ryanair's use of affiliative humor. The lighthearted portrayal of the child's silly action aims to build a connection among viewers who can relate to the frustrations and unexpected moments of air travel. By subtly acknowledging these common annoyances, Ryanair encourages viewers to find humor in such situations, nourishing a sense of shared understanding.

In this way, Ryanair humorously critiques children's unpredictable and often challenging behavior during flights, resonating with viewers who have experienced similar situations. Through relatable scenarios and visual exaggeration, Ryanair uses this meme to connect with its audience on a shared understanding of the minor irritations and unexpected moments of air travel. This strategy slightly reinforces the idea that such disruptions are part



of the travel experience, encouraging viewers to find amusement in these common yet frustrating scenarios.

#### **4.1.2. Personification and Anthropomorphism**

This category involves attributing human traits and characteristics to non-human entities, such as animals or airplanes, to convey emotions or humor related to travel scenarios and experiences. These memes often utilize settings and elements that are familiar and instantly recognizable. This relatable humorous content assists Ryanair to resonate with its audience on a personal level. For instance, an airplane might be depicted with a mischievous grin or a lovesick expression, injecting a playful or romantic mood into the typically mundane travel experience.

The humor style in this category predominantly falls under affiliative humor. Lighthearted and inclusive jokes aim to create a sense of community among viewers, engendering a shared understanding through the common ground of travel experiences travel experiences, and relatable emotions.

Lexically, the tone of the language in the captions is playful, featuring numerous puns that stretch the boundaries of reality to heighten humor and engagement. The captions are concise, avoiding overlexicalization. This simplicity ensures that the humorous message is clear and easily understood by the audience, using language that accentuates the human-like characteristics of non-human subjects. Phrases such as "that one couple before takeoff" accompanying a meme depicting two dogs posing for a selfie inside an airplane (posted on January 14, 2024), exemplify this technique. Here, the dogs are personified, imbued with human emotions and behaviors that viewers can readily relate to.

Regarding humor types, the analysis corresponds with the categories of personification, exaggeration, and puns. Personification reigns supreme, as non-human entities are endowed with human characteristics. Humor arises from the absurdity and creativity of these attributions. Exaggeration also plays a significant role, amplifying specific aspects of reality to create amusement. This manifests in the humorous portrayal of non-human entities performing human-like actions, further enhancing the content's relatability and engagement. Lastly, puns are also employed, harnessing wordplay and the multiple meanings of words to produce a comedic effect.



Figure 6: Ryanair's official Instagram account, posted on March 21, 2024.

(Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.)

As depicted in Figure 6, the meme features a black cat with wide, intense eyes, anthropomorphized to represent the common experience of being stared at by a child during a flight. Visually, the exaggerated expression of the cat is utilized to create humor, as its wide eyes and direct gaze convey an intense, almost unsettling focus that mirrors a child's stare during a flight. This familiar travel scenario amplifies the humor, as many travelers can recall similar experiences. The salience is primarily achieved through the cat's striking, wide-eyed expression, capturing the viewer's attention and immediately conveying the humorous personification of the staring child.

The simple and direct phrase "that one kid that stares at you on your flight" sets up the humorous comparison between the cat's intense gaze and the imagined scenario of a staring child. The caption avoids overlexicalization, maintaining a concise and clear message. This simplicity ensures that the focus remains on the humorous personification and the exaggerated reaction of the cat. The informal and relatable language used in the caption is typical of social media meme culture, making the humor accessible and engaging to a wide audience.

By utilizing the cat's expressive reaction as a stand-in for the staring child, the meme humorously highlights a common and slightly uncomfortable travel experience. This combination of visual exaggeration and simple, direct language allows the meme to connect with its audience on a personal level. Travelers can easily relate to the scenario, and the humorous personification fosters a sense of empathy and relatability, enhancing the meme's connection.

This image utilizes affiliative humor. By highlighting a common and slightly awkward travel experience, the meme fosters a lighthearted connection with viewers who can likely relate to the scenario. The humor stems from finding shared amusement in the

familiar, yet peculiar, moments of travel.

Furthermore, the meme falls into personification and comparison. Personification is evident as the cat's expression embodies human-like behavior, creating a humorous parallel to a child's curious stare. Additionally, the meme can be classified as a comparison meme. It juxtaposes the cat's behavior with that of a child, finding humor in the relatable experience of being stared at by a child on a flight.

#### **4.1.3. Expectation vs. Reality in Air Travel**

Another prevalent theme that emerged in Ryanair's memes is the humorous representation of what travelers typically expect with what they experience during their journeys. These memes highlight the often disappointing or ironic differences between what passengers hope for and what they encounter during their travels. By showcasing these discrepancies, Ryanair connects with its audience's common frustrations and shared experiences, making the brand more relatable. Furthermore, by acknowledging potential shortcomings in the travel experience, Ryanair avoids projecting an image of an unapproachable, flawless airline. Instead, the memes demonstrate an understanding of the realities of travel, which can be messy and unpredictable. This humanizes the brand and develops a perception of Ryanair as being more down-to-earth.

Visually, these memes often juxtapose idealized images of air travel with more humorous, exaggerated, or disappointing realities. This contrast is typically depicted through comparisons, clearly illustrating the gap between expectation and reality. Common elements include luxurious seating versus cramped economy-class conditions.

This category employs a multifaceted humor approach including elements of affiliative, self-enhancing, and self-defeating humor styles. The affiliative aspect is evident in the way these memes build a sense of community among travelers by referencing shared experiences and frustrations. Self-enhancing humor is also present, as the memes encourage viewers to laugh at the inevitable inconveniences of travel, promoting a positive outlook. Finally, self-defeating humor allows Ryanair to poke fun at itself in a lighthearted manner, subtly acknowledging potential flaws.

In terms of lexical analysis, the captions in these memes often adopt a playful and sarcastic tone, which enhances the humor by subtly mocking unrealistic expectations and highlighting the stark realities of air travel. This use of sarcasm adds a layer of wit to the humor, appealing to the audience's sense of irony. The captions avoid overlexicalization, maintaining a concise and clear message that ensures the humorous contrast is immediately understood.

In this category the most dominant humor type is comparison. Memes commonly juxtapose two contrasting images or scenarios to emphasize the gap between what travelers expect and what they experience. Exaggeration is also prevalent, where the differences between expectation and reality are amplified to create a humorous effect. Sarcasm is another key humor type, as the captions often use sarcastic tones to mock unrealistic expectations and highlight the irony in the actual situations.

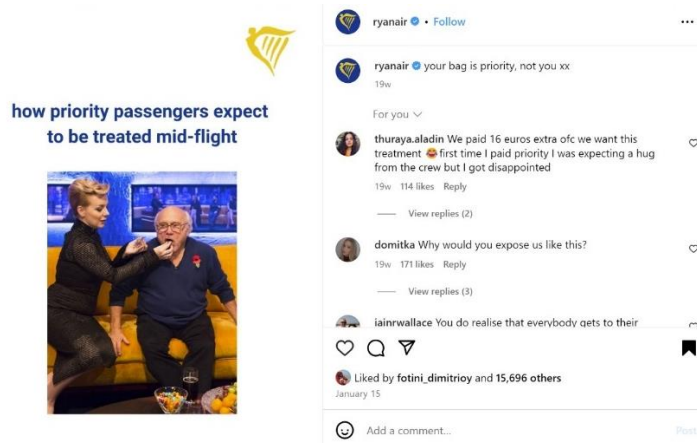


Figure 7: Ryanair's official Instagram account, posted on January 15, 2024.

(Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.)

Figure 7 features an elegantly attired woman spoon-feeding an elderly man seated on a couch. This exaggerated display of service serves as the foundation for the humor. The act of feeding someone a treat symbolizes lavish care and luxury, a stark contrast to the cramped quarters and practical service typically associated with economy class. The woman's posture exudes sophistication and top-notch service, adding to the humor by emphasizing the exaggerated expectations. The focal point is primarily the woman's actions, underscoring the hyperbolic level of service being parodied.

Furthermore, the humor in this meme is amplified by the caption, which implies an excessively indulgent experience in contrast to the standard airline service. The text overlay amusingly suggests that this is "how priority passengers expect to be treated mid-flight" humorously exaggerating the expectations of luxury and pampering that some passengers might have during a flight. The straightforward language resonates with the cultural narrative of first-class passengers anticipating exceptional treatment, making the humor accessible and captivating for a broad audience.

This meme employs affiliative humor to create a lighthearted connection with viewers. The humor arises from the image's ironic portrayal of an excessively attentive service experience on an airplane. This exaggerated scenario stands in stark contrast to the

more practical and confined environment commonly encountered in coach class.

The audience is also likely to find amusement in the relatable situation, with a potential layer of self-enhancing humor. By laughing at the absurdity of expecting such extravagant service, viewers might feel a subtle sense of superiority to those who hold such expectations. This potential for self-enhancement adds another dimension to the humor, but it is important to note that it is a more nuanced element compared to the core focus on shared amusement.

Finally, the meme falls under the category of an exaggeration meme. The image takes a standard element of air travel (in-flight service) and portrays it in an outlandish manner, specifically the act of feeding a passenger. This exaggeration creates humor by highlighting the absurdity of expecting such an extravagant level of service on a plane.

#### **4.1.4. Everyday Life Relatability**

This category encompasses memes that draw humor from everyday situations and personal experiences familiar to most people. These memes resonate with viewers by depicting common experiences and small frustrations that everyone can relate to, particularly in the context of travel. By highlighting these relatable moments, Ryanair's memes foster a connection with their audience, making the brand appear more approachable and in tune with the daily lives of its customers.

Visually these memes often depict typical travel-related scenarios that many people encounter, such as the anxiety travelers feel when passing through security checks emphasizing normality and everyday occurrences. Humor is often derived from exaggerating the passengers' expressions or actions, highlighting the absurdity of the situation and making it relatable to a wide audience. This strategy is consistent with Malodia et al.'s (2022, p. 1797) assertion that memes depicting relatable situations are highly effective in digital culture, as they are more likely to achieve higher levels of virality.

The humor styles in the memes of this category are affiliative and self-enhancing. Affiliative humor manifests through playful and inclusive jokes that build a sense of solidarity among viewers who recognize and relate to similar everyday situations. Meanwhile, self-enhancing humor appears by encouraging viewers to find amusement in the typical annoyances of travel, helping them to maintain a positive outlook despite these minor setbacks.

The dominant humor types include exaggeration, comparison, and sarcasm. Exaggeration is prominently used to blow minor travel annoyances out of proportion,

thereby amplifying their comedic effect. Comparison and sarcasm are also employed, though not as consistently. Comparison humor juxtaposes idealized travel expectations against the often-disappointing realities, creating a humorous contrast. Sarcasm uses a sharp and witty tone to mock unrealistic expectations and highlight the irony in actual situations.

The language employed within the captions is relatable, reflecting everyday speech patterns. Captions incorporate common phrases or thoughts that one might experience in certain situations, such as "me on the plane listening to music while creating fake scenarios in my head" (posted on February 5, 2024). Last but not least, the captions are typically concise and direct, avoiding overlexicalization.

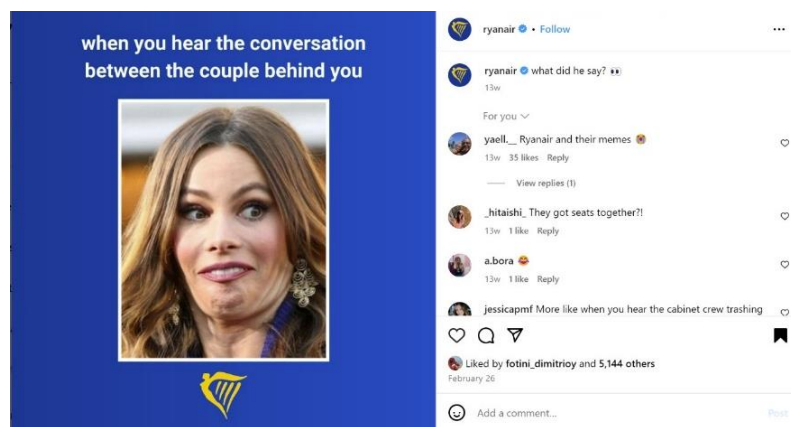


Figure 8: Ryanair's official Instagram account, posted on February 26, 2024.

(Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.)

An illustrative example within this category can be found in Figure 8, depicting a woman with a comically exaggerated awkward facial expression, captured amid a grimace. The woman's expression, caught at an unflattering moment, resonates with the internal reaction that many individuals experience when overhearing a private or uncomfortable conversation in public spaces. The meme's impact is largely attributed to the woman's facial expression, which captivates the viewers' attention and communicates the humorous discomfort of the situation. Thus, this places the humor within a familiar travel context for frequent flyers.

The phrase "when you overhear the conversation between the couple behind you" is straightforward. It adeptly establishes the comical situation of unintentionally listening in on an awkward dialogue. By avoiding overlexicalization, the caption maintains a precise and unambiguous message that complements the visual humor of the meme. This simplicity guarantees that the attention is directed towards the humorous reaction conveyed by the woman's expression.

This meme leverages affiliative humor to create a connection with viewers through a shared experience. The humor stems from the relatable scenario of accidentally overhearing an awkward conversation in public, a situation many travelers likely encounter. The image captures this internal struggle through the woman's exaggerated facial expression, which serves as the focal point and draws the viewer's attention.

The meme aligns with two meme-specific humor categories. First, it can be classified as a silliness meme. The humor is derived from the woman's overly dramatic expression, an exaggerated response to a common situation. Second, it functions as an exaggeration meme. The meme takes a relatable internal feeling (discomfort at overhearing a conversation) and amplifies it through the woman's extreme facial expression.

#### **4.1.5. Travel and Cuisine**

The "Travel and Cuisine" category focuses on the humorous portrayal of food-related experiences while traveling. These memes highlight the unique, often quirky, and sometimes frustrating culinary adventures that travelers encounter. By targeting food, which is a universal aspect of travel, these memes tap into shared experiences and common emotions associated with dining in transit, whether at airports, on airplanes, or in foreign destinations.

Visually, these memes often depict exaggerated images of airplane meals, crowded food courts, or bizarre culinary offerings that travelers might find in different countries. For instance, a meme showing a plate with an unusual combination of food ingredients (spaghetti, shrimp, pizza, and gelatin cubes) with the caption "this is why we don't fly to America" (posted on April 5, 2024). The visual exaggeration and expressive imagery immediately capture attention and convey the intended joke. With hyperbole and cultural references, there is a humorous comparison between expected and actual food experiences during travel.

In this category, the dominant type of humor is affiliative, which is demonstrated through memes that entertain and create a sense of unity among travelers who share common experiences of disappointing meals. Additionally, there's self-enhancing humor present, encouraging viewers to find humor in the often-disappointing dining scenarios they encounter, promoting a positive outlook despite these less desirable aspects of travel.

The primary humor types identified are comparison and exaggeration. Comparison humor juxtaposes the idealized versus the actual food experiences, while exaggeration humor amplifies the disparity to absurd levels, creating a comedic effect.

The language used in these memes is descriptive and playful. Additionally, the captions employ a sarcastic and witty tone to mock the high expectations versus the disappointing

reality. They are direct and concise ensuring that the humorous intent is immediately clear.



Figure 9: Ryanair's official Instagram account, posted on March 24, 2024.

(Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.)

In Figure 9, the meme portrays a young child peering over the edge of a table at a massive pizza. The caption exaggerates the anticipation and excitement of enjoying authentic Italian cuisine upon arriving in Italy, stating "me the minute I arrive in Italy". The contrast between the enormous pizza and the small child, along with the child's wide-eyed expression, humorously captures the excitement many people feel about Italian food. The sizable pizza emphasizes the childlike wonder and eagerness associated with indulging in a highly anticipated culinary experience. The implied dining area setting grounds the humor in a familiar context for those who have eagerly awaited local cuisine while traveling. The meme's salience primarily stems from the juxtaposition of the small child and the oversized pizza, drawing immediate attention and highlighting the humor of the exaggerated anticipation. The phrase "me the minute I arrive in Italy" evokes a sense of eagerness and delight associated with travel and culinary exploration. By using the first-person perspective "me," the caption becomes personal and relatable, inviting viewers to envision themselves in the scenario.

This meme falls into the affiliative humor category. It aims to amuse and connect with an audience that shares an appreciation and enjoyment for Italian food and the experience of travel. The humor stems from the relatable scenario of eagerly anticipating a culinary experience while traveling. The meme also employs exaggeration and surprise as humor types. Firstly, it functions as an exaggeration meme. The exaggeration highlights the child's excitement and creates a humorous contrast between the child's size and the abundance of food. Secondly, the unexpected size of the pizza, especially when juxtaposed with the small child, creates a moment of surprise that contributes to the humor.



#### 4.1.6. Cultural Differences

This category features memes that showcase the variations in cultural practices and expectations associated with travel, including customs, etiquette, and contrasting lifestyles. Ryanair employs humor to address the diverse experiences and perspectives of travelers by exploring these cultural differences.

Visually, these memes often depict side-by-side comparisons of different cultural scenarios or use culturally iconic imagery to emphasize the differences. They often employ contrast, symbolic imagery, and expressive characters.

This category incorporates both affiliative and self-enhancing humor. The first type is evident in memes creating a feeling of community and shared understanding among viewers who recognize the cultural references and stereotypes. The humor aims to include everyone and generate a shared laugh among those who see it. The second type is also present, as it encourages viewers to laugh at the exaggerated depictions of cultural differences, which helps to maintain a lighthearted and positive perspective on these contrasts.

When it comes to humor types, these memes employ comparisons to highlight cultural differences by juxtaposing them side by side. Exaggeration is also used to amplify these differences to absurd levels. Sarcasm plays a significant role, using a sharp and witty tone to mock cultural stereotypes and underscore the irony in these situations.

The language employed in the captions complements the visuals by utilizing directness, irony, and cultural references. This approach creates humorous comparisons that resonate with the audience's travel experiences. Plus, the captions are brief and straightforward, avoiding overlexicalization.

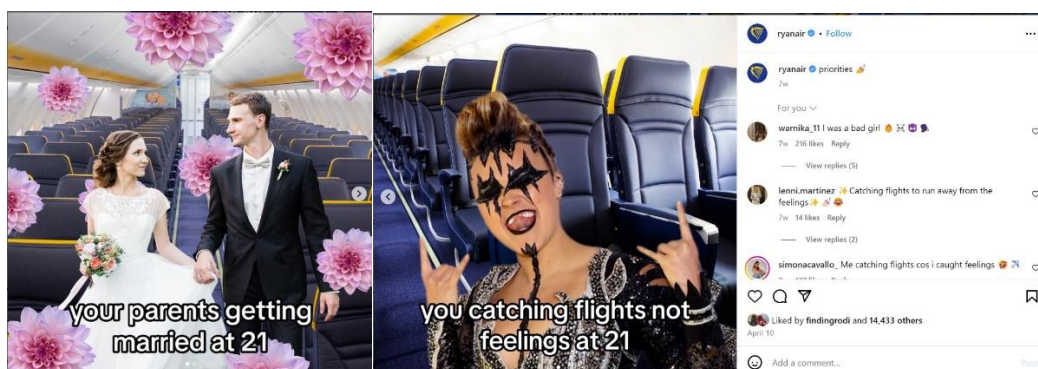


Figure 10: Ryanair's official Instagram account, posted on April 10, 2024.

(Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.)

An illustrative example within this category is a carousel post (Figure 10) that showcases two contrasting memes. One features a couple getting married at 21, while the other depicts a young individual catching a flight at the same age. The captions humorously highlight the shift in generational priorities, with one reading "your parents getting married at 21" and the other "you catching flights not feelings at 21".

The first meme portrays a traditional wedding scene, symbolizing the early life commitments prevalent in past generations. In contrast, the second meme illustrates a young person embracing a modern, carefree lifestyle, emphasizing travel and personal freedom over early marriage. The juxtaposition of these two images creates a distinct visual contrast that emphasizes the humor of generational disparities. The salience is achieved through the clear and immediate comparison of the two life scenarios, drawing attention to the evolving priorities over time.

The humor in this meme is also enhanced by the direct and contrasting captions. The phrases "your parents getting married at 21" and "you catching flights not feelings at 21" succinctly capture the shift in generational values. The informal and conversational language makes the captions relatable and engaging, inviting viewers to reflect on their experiences and societal changes.

Here, affiliative humor is a prominent humor style, as it creates a lighthearted connection by poking fun at generational differences in priorities (freedom vs. commitment). It aims to amuse and connect with viewers across age groups. The humor is inclusive and avoids offending, potentially evoking amusement in both younger and older audiences. It can also be self-enhancing helping viewers find humor in their lifestyle choices and reinforcing their sense of identity.

Considering humor types, it is a comparison meme, drawing humor from contrasting past expectations (early marriage) with the unexpected modern setting of a plane. In addition, it could be considered an exaggeration meme due to the hyperbolic elements that amplify the theme of youthful rebellion and the carefree lifestyle.

#### **4.1.7. Celebrity and Pop Culture**

Ryanair's meme strategy extends to incorporating well-known public figures and cultural icons to convey humor about travel scenarios. By including celebrity images or references, the humor is grounded in a familiar context. Ryanair ensures that the content resonates with a broad audience by tapping into the collective knowledge and shared interests of its followers.

As per Murray et al. (2014), celebrities in popular culture act as "meme fountains"

(p. 336) owing to their large followings and considerable influence. These individuals act as key nodes in the cultural transmission network, propelling memes featuring them or endorsed by them into wider circulation.

Moreover, these memes can exploit the satirical potential of contrasting the lavish lifestyles of celebrities with the common experiences of ordinary travelers, particularly in travel contexts. For example, a meme might feature a famous actor's exaggerated expression from a movie scene, paired with a caption that humorously relates the expression to a common travel frustration. This juxtaposition creates humor by highlighting the disparity between these two contrasting realities.

The humor styles showcased in these memes primarily consist of affiliative and self-enhancing elements. Affiliative humor fosters connection by celebrating the shared enjoyment of featured celebrities and cultural references. Self-enhancing humor encourages viewers to find amusement in the travel absurdities depicted through familiar pop culture icons, ultimately promoting a positive outlook on travel mishaps. This sense of humor is primarily expressed through comparison, exaggeration, and sarcasm. Comparison juxtaposes well-known celebrity images or pop culture scenes with travel-related situations, creating a humorous contrast. Exaggeration takes aspects of travel scenarios or celebrity portrayals to extreme levels, highlighting the humor in these everyday situations. Additionally, sarcasm is commonly used to mock unrealistic expectations and underscore the irony of the actual situation through sharp, cutting remarks.

Another key aspect is the use of informal language, a casual tone, and a second-person perspective in the captions. The memes also maintain conciseness through short, direct phrases that complement the visual elements, while the tone is mostly sarcastic and witty.



Figure 11: Ryanair's official Instagram account, posted on November 17, 2023.

(Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.)

Figure 11 exemplifies Ryanair's use of celebrity culture and meme-specific humor types to connect with its audience. The meme features a celebrity that can be identified as Kim Kardashian, depicted in a state of tearful joy. This image choice serves a multifaceted purpose. Kim Kardashian's widely recognized face instantly captures the viewer's attention. Her expressive features add an emotional depth, conveying an exaggerated sense of relief and happiness. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the everyday experience of planning a group trip, typically a less dramatic endeavor. This juxtaposition between celebrity and ordinary experience injects humor into the situation.

The meme's setting is implicitly associated with the glamorous world of celebrities, further emphasizing the contrast with the ordinary task of group trip planning. The informal and conversational language of the caption, "when your holiday finally makes it out of the groupchat," reinforces the lighthearted tone. Using the second-person perspective ("your") creates a sense of direct engagement, inviting viewers to imagine themselves in the scenario.

Viewers can readily identify with the satisfaction of successfully planning a group trip. The unexpected emotional response (Kim Kardashian's tears) adds an element of surprise, creating affiliative humor by connecting viewers through a shared experience. Additionally, the meme can be classified as a surprise meme due to the humor arising from the unexpected emotional response to a commonplace event.

#### **4.1.8. Practical Challenges**

This final category of memes tackles the common struggles and minor crises travelers usually encounter, transforming them into humorous content. From managing passports to navigating airport security and the disembarkation scramble, these memes focus on universally relatable travel challenges. By employing humor, Ryanair creates content that resonates deeply with its audience.

Visually capturing these challenges, the memes often depict scenarios involving airport security, boarding processes, or in-flight inconveniences. The settings are typically populated with recognizable travel elements like luggage, security gates, and airplane interiors. Exaggerated facial expressions further amplify the humor, emphasizing the urgency and stress associated with these practical travel challenges. The chaotic and dynamic nature of the visuals mirrors the often-hectic experiences of traveling, fostering a sense of realism and relatability.

The humor styles primarily rely on affiliative and self-enhancing elements. Affiliative humor cultivates a sense of shared understanding and community among viewers who have likely faced similar travel hurdles. Additionally, self-enhancing humor plays a significant

role. By encouraging viewers to laugh at the common inconveniences of travel, the memes promote a positive outlook, enabling viewers to maintain a sense of humor despite the challenges.

The humor types in these memes often include exaggeration, comparison, and sarcasm. Exaggeration amplifies the minor annoyances of travel to absurd levels, making them comical. Comparison contrasts idealized travel expectations with the often-disappointing realities, creating a humorous juxtaposition. Sarcasm is also commonly used, employing sharp and witty tones to mock unrealistic expectations and highlight the irony in actual situations. This combination of humor types underscores the common frustrations and small victories experienced by travelers, making the content engaging and relatable.

The language used is both descriptive and straightforward. The captions often highlight the disparity between the anticipated smooth travel experience and the actual challenges encountered. For instance, a caption like "me trying to appear innocent going through airport security" (posted on January 3, 2024) establishes a funny scenario using simple language. The primary linguistic feature is the use of the first-person perspective. This choice personalizes the captions, making them more relatable and fostering a sense of shared experience with the viewers.



Figure 12: Ryanair's official Instagram account, posted on March 19, 2024.

(Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.)

Figure 12 exemplifies the "Practical Challenges" category's use of humor to connect with viewers through a relatable travel experience. The meme features a distorted face, framed within a bowl of spaghetti, conveying a sense of panic and urgency. This exaggerated image humorously captures the frantic last-minute search for a passport, a common travel struggle.

Visually capturing the chaos, the image features a dynamic and cluttered setting. The spaghetti bowl not only frames the face but also adds to the sense of disarray, mirroring the frantic nature of searching through a cluttered bag for a misplaced passport. The exaggerated facial expression acts as the focal point, immediately drawing attention and highlighting the humor of the stressed-out situation.

The caption, "me looking for my passport 5 minutes before my flight" employs informal and conversational language to convey the last-minute scramble. The use of the first-person perspective ("me") personalizes the caption and encourages viewers to imagine themselves in the scenario. This fosters a sense of shared experience and empathy.

The exaggerated expression and chaotic image create affiliative humor by connecting with viewers through a relatable experience. Also, this functions as an exaggeration meme as the spaghetti humorously amplifies the frustration of searching through a cluttered bag.

#### 4.2. Ryanair's Humor and Brand Identity Prism

In examining how Ryanair utilizes humor in memes to establish its brand identity, the researcher employed Kapferer's (2008, pp. 182-187) Brand Identity Prism as a guiding framework. Each facet of the prism assists in explaining how Ryanair's deliberate use of humor in memes contributes to its overall brand identity.

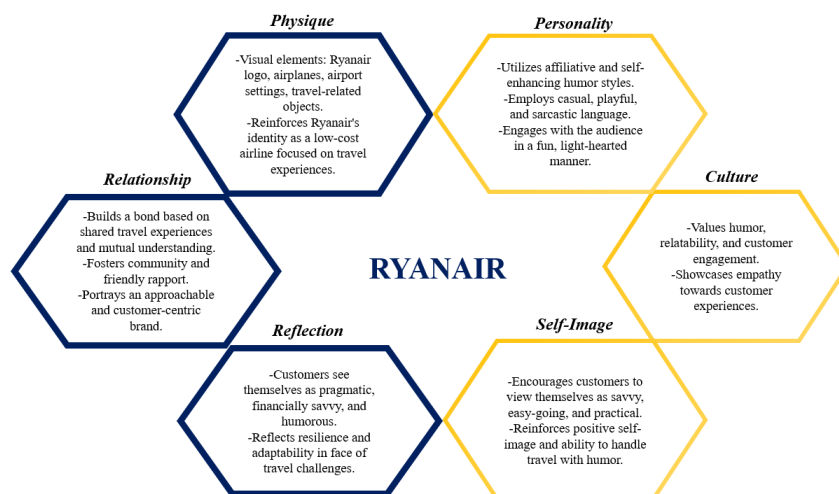


Figure 13: Ryanair's Brand Identity Prism: Insights from Instagram Content

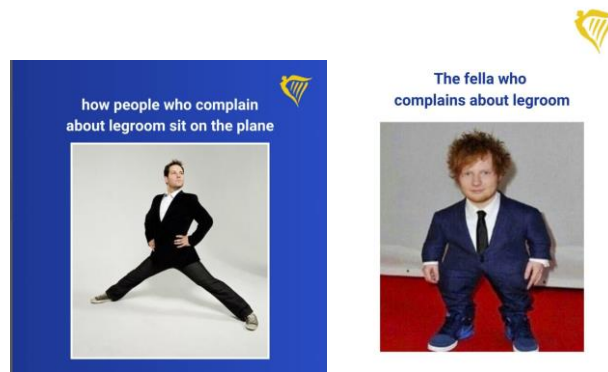
Source: Prepared by the author

Ryanair's visual identity is reinforced through the incorporation of recognizable elements such as the Ryanair logo, colors, typography, airplanes, and travel-related objects. The exaggerated visuals and familiar imagery in the memes help solidify the brand's identity as a fun and approachable low-cost airline. This visual consistency assists in keeping these elements at the forefront of the audience's mind, enhancing brand recall and recognition (Kaur & Kaur, 2021, p. 238).

Moreover, the personality of Ryanair as portrayed through its memes aims to cultivate a humorous, irreverent, and playful brand persona with casual, playful, and sometimes sarcastic language. This is in line with Fubara's (2020, p.78) observation that the conversational style makes the content easily relatable and enhances its impact by creating a sense of familiarity with the audience. The humor styles that foster a sense of community (affiliative) and encourage a positive outlook on common travel frustrations (self-enhancing) (Martin et al., 2003, p. 70), along with the use of sarcasm and wit, could contribute to the creation of an approachable and friendly brand image. This distinct humorous and conversational brand voice differentiates Ryanair from its competitors and is consistent with literature that emphasizes the effectiveness of having a human tone in enhancing customer engagement and brand evaluation (Barcelos et al., 2018, p.61).

In addition, the cultural facet of Ryanair's brand identity is shaped by its emphasis on humor, relatability, and customer engagement. The memes often reflect common travel experiences and frustrations, particularly those related to budget airlines. While this approach intends to promote empathy and connection toward customers, it can also serve a critical function by addressing or even mocking potential criticisms. For instance, by making jokes about issues such as limited leg space (Figure 14 & Figure 15, see below), Ryanair preemptively acknowledges these complaints and diminishes their impact. This strategy turns the complaint into a shared joke, positioning those who criticize as overly sensitive.

In this context, Ryanair employs self-defeating humor (Martin et al., 2003, p. 71), allowing the brand to become the target of humor and join in the laughter when ridiculed. This use of humor not only humanizes the brand but also mitigates negative perceptions by framing flaws in a humorous light.



Figures 14 & 15: Ryanair's use of humor to address and mock complaints (Ryanair\_European\_Airline, n.d.). Posts drawn from Data Set.

This cultural aspect is further emphasized using personification and anthropomorphism, which humanizes the brand and connects it with the everyday experiences of travelers. This approach helps build a brand that seems to value customer experiences and strives to connect with them personally. The alignment with meme culture, as suggested by Dutta et al. (2024, p. 135), and the use of relatable humor contribute to the brand's cultural resonance.

Furthermore, Ryanair's memes aim to build relationships based on shared travel experiences and mutual understanding. By addressing common challenges with humor (comparison and exaggeration), Ryanair might encourage a sense of community and friendly rapport among its audience. This humorous content could portray Ryanair as a customer-centric brand, striving to make the travel experience more enjoyable and less stressful. This facet highlights the brand's focus on maintaining strong, positive relationships with its customers through engaging and relatable content (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1784).

Consequently, it is anticipated that customers who engage with Ryanair's humorous content can potentially perceive themselves as pragmatic, financially savvy, and possessing a good sense of humor. The memes often spotlight common travel challenges and the practical solutions or humorous outlooks that travelers might adopt, possibly reflecting the resilience and adaptability of Ryanair's customers. This sense of self-reflection might lead viewers to identify with the brand's persona, perceiving it as congruent with their own travel experiences and attitudes.

Finally, Ryanair's humor also targets the self-image of its audience. By highlighting the lighthearted ways travelers cope with common challenges (memes that portray them as savvy, easy-going, and practical), the brand intends to reinforce a positive self-image through humor. This approach could help customers feel more confident and capable of handling travel challenges with a sense of humor. Ultimately, this aligns with Ryanair's



potential goal of making travel an enjoyable experience, even in the face of difficulties.

In summary, the analysis of Ryanair's use of humor through the Brand Identity Prism framework reveals how the airline attempts to integrate various facets of brand identity to create a cohesive and humorous brand persona. By embedding humor into relatable and culturally resonant memes, Ryanair endeavors to create a sense of community among its audience, thereby building strong customer relationships. This approach is designed to enhance customers' self-image and encourage them to view themselves as savvy and adaptable travelers. Ultimately, Ryanair's humor-infused branding strategy exemplifies the potential of social media content in shaping and reinforcing a distinctive brand identity.

## 5. Conclusion

The current research investigated how Ryanair employs humor through memes on its Instagram account to shape its brand identity. Specifically, by analyzing 100 Instagram posts using multimodal critical discourse analysis, the study identified prevalent humor styles and types based on dominant visual and textual elements. These humorous elements were further interpreted through the lens of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2008) to assess their contribution to constructing and reinforcing Ryanair's brand identity. The objectives of this final section are twofold. Firstly, the study's results are presented to address the research question in light of the theoretical framework of humor styles and types, as well as the academic discourse around brand identity presented in the literature review. Secondly, some limitations of the study are outlined along with suggestions for future research on the intersection between social media and brand identity.

The analysis revealed that Ryanair leverages a diverse range of humor themes in its Instagram memes. This broad thematic approach reflects the airline's appeal across various regions and travel scenarios. The memes often touch upon universal travel-related topics, enabling Ryanair to connect with different customer segments by reflecting on their unique travel experiences and cultural contexts. Such a strategy ensures that Ryanair's content resonates with a broad audience, enhancing its relatability and global reach.

Ultimately, the study found that memes, deeply embedded in contemporary cultural trends and references, bridge the gap between the brand and a diverse audience. This fosters a stronger consumer-brand association, aligning with research by Dutta et al. (2024, p. 135) who highlight the effectiveness of cultural references in social media marketing.

### 5.1. Humor and Communicative Strategies

The analysis revealed that Ryanair predominantly utilizes *affiliative* and *self-enhancing* humor. Affiliative humor seeks to foster a sense of camaraderie among travelers, creating a friendly and inclusive community around the brand. This aligns with the core tenet of affiliative humor, which aims to entertain and strengthen social bonds (Martin et al., 2003, p. 70). Self-enhancing humor is employed to help customers maintain a positive attitude toward travel, even in challenging situations. By encouraging viewers to laugh at common travel frustrations, Ryanair promotes a sense of humor and resilience. This aligns with the function of self-enhancing humor, which helps individuals maintain a positive outlook in difficult circumstances (Martin et al., 2003, p. 70). This combination is effective in maintaining a fun and optimistic brand identity, aligning with theories by Martin et al.

(2003 pp. 70-71) on humor's social and psychological benefits such as extraversion, cheerfulness, relationship satisfaction, and the predominant experience of positive emotions. Additionally, Ryanair occasionally employs *self-defeating* humor to potentially address shortcomings lightheartedly and mitigate negative perceptions (Martin et al., 2003, p. 71). This humor facilitates the intention of the brand to turn criticisms into shared jokes and further humanize itself by acknowledging its flaws. Regarding *aggressive humor*, even though less prevalent, it adds a sharp edge to the brand's commentary on social norms, allowing Ryanair's intention to address improper etiquette with a humorous but critical tone (Martin et al., 2003, p. 71).

This study further identified three primary types of humor prevalent in Ryanair's memes: *exaggeration*, *comparison*, and *sarcasm*. According to Catanescu and Tom (2001, p. 93), each type serves a unique purpose within the overall humor strategy. Exaggeration humor magnifies everyday travel scenarios to ridiculous extents, making them amusing and unforgettable. Comparison humor juxtaposes idealized travel expectations with the often-disappointing realities, creating a humorous contrast. Sarcasm, meanwhile, delivers sharp, cutting remarks that mock unrealistic expectations and highlight the irony in actual situations. This comical interplay, as evidenced by existing literature, makes the memes particularly memorable and widely shared among consumers, thereby bolstering Ryanair's strategy as a potent tool for engagement (Bury, 2016, pp. 34-36). The analysis also revealed that Ryanair occasionally employs *personification* in its memes. This humor type humanizes the company, fostering a closer connection with the everyday experiences and emotions of travelers. It is a technique that enhances the relatability of the content, embedding the brand more deeply into the cultural and experiential context of its audience. The incorporation of these diverse humor types supports Ryanair's objectives to craft a lighthearted and distinct brand persona.

Regarding the lexical analysis of Ryanair's memes, another important finding lies in the genre of communication used in the captions. This aspect refers to the specific language style the brand adopts. Ryanair consistently employs a direct and informal tone, often incorporating multiple pop-culture references. This aligns with the characteristic features of meme language, as documented by Fubara (2020, p. 78). This informality fosters relatability with the audience, enhancing the overall impact and engagement of the memes (Fubara, 2020, p. 78; Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1776). This conversational and playful language featured in the meme captions complements the brand's humor strategy.

Shifting to the visual analysis, salience emerged as a critical element of the airline's

strategy. This feature refers to the aspects within the meme that stand out most prominently, capturing the viewer's attention. In Ryanair's memes, salience is often achieved through the use of exaggerated facial expressions or highlighted actions within the image. These focal points serve to draw attention to the humorous elements of the meme and emphasize the specific messages or values that Ryanair intends to communicate.

## **5.2. Brand Identity Insights Through Ryanair's Brand Identity Prism**

Using the Brand Identity Prism framework in analyzing Ryanair's Instagram memes provides valuable insights into how the airline strategically employs humor to shape and strengthen its brand identity. One of the primary outcomes of this research lies in Ryanair's consistent application of travel-related imagery, themes, logos, color schemes, and typography. This cohesive approach strengthens brand recognition by ensuring these travel-centric elements remain at the forefront of the audience's mind, enhancing memorability and recognizability (Kaur & Kaur, 2021, p. 238). As Kaur and Kaur (2021) suggest, fostering a connection with consumers and developing a distinct brand identity necessitates a consistent "look and feel" across all communication channels (p. 238). This uniformity in visual elements serves to reassure customers and solidify the company's identity. In contrast, inconsistency might create consumer unease and potentially undermine brand loyalty and perception on a subconscious level.

Another significant finding is the distinct personality Ryanair projects through its Instagram account. The airline's brand personality is characterized by a blend of humor, irreverence, and playfulness, which are primarily achieved through the employment of affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles combined with sarcasm and wit. Also, Ryanair's strategic use of self-defeating humor to acknowledge shortcomings serves the additional purpose of the brand to disarm potential criticism and further humanize itself. These humor styles aim to cultivate a humorous, approachable, and relatable brand persona, differentiating Ryanair from its competitors and fostering a unique brand voice that resonates with its audience.

Furthermore, the analysis of Ryanair's brand identity through Prism's cultural facet reveals an additional finding. The brand leverages humor to cultivate relatability, empathy, and even a degree of self-awareness. According to Malodia et al. (2022, p. 1784), for a meme to be perceived as relevant, its content must align with current trends, and be topical and familiar to the target audience. This is evident since most of Ryanair's memes reflect common travel experiences and frustrations, demonstrating a brand that seeks to

comprehend and relate to travelers' everyday realities. This relatable humor contributes to building a community among travelers and aligns with research suggesting its importance for consumer engagement and meme shareability (Malodia et al., 2022, p. 1784). By employing relatable humor and presenting its flaws in a lighthearted manner, Ryanair creates a distinct brand identity that is both approachable and engaging.

Additionally, a key finding regarding the relationship facet is Ryanair's focus on creating a positive rapport with its audience. By addressing travel hassles with humor, it aims to make the travel experience more enjoyable. This approach builds strong, positive relationships with its customers. The humorous content portrays Ryanair as a customer-centric brand, seeking to alleviate travel stress through relatable and engaging content. This aligns with research suggesting that humor can enhance customer relationships (Lunardo et al., 2018, pp. 18-19) and brand loyalty (Torres et al., 2023, p. 232).

Finally, it is revealed that the humor used in Ryanair's memes encourages a positive self-image among customers. By depicting travelers as savvy, easy-going, and practical individuals, the memes reinforce a positive self-image and resilience. This self-reflection helps customers to identify with the brand's persona and see it as aligned with their own travel experiences and attitudes.

In conclusion, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how humor is strategically employed to shape and reinforce the airline's brand identity. The findings demonstrate Ryanair's consistent use of travel-related imagery, humor, and a carefully crafted persona that resonates with global travelers. These efforts not only enhance brand recognition and loyalty but also foster a strong community around shared experiences and a sense of humor. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of maintaining consistent messaging for fortifying customer relationships and enhancing brand perception.

As Ryanair continues to navigate the complexities of social media branding, this research suggests that integrating humor and relatable content remains a potent strategy for maintaining relevance and engagement in a competitive market. The insights gained from this study could serve as a valuable framework for other brands aiming to deepen consumer connections and enhance brand identity through social media.

### **5.3. Theoretical Implications**

This research offers significant theoretical contributions to social media branding, particularly regarding the use of humor and memes in constructing brand identity. Existing literature explores prevalent humor styles and types in memes as part of the communication process (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). It also examines what content-related

factors in memes can foster virality, brand recall, and consumer engagement as a social media marketing strategy (Malodia et al., 2022). However, a gap remains in understanding how humor and memes collaborate to shape a brand's core identity. This study addresses this gap by analyzing various humor application strategies within Ryanair's Instagram memes, demonstrating how these strategies integrate with the six facets of Kapferer's (2008) Brand Identity Prism.

The findings contribute to Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong's (2015) research on humor styles and types within memes in the context of social media, suggesting how these humor techniques can be leveraged to reinforce brand identity. Also, the research extends Martin et al.'s (2003) theory on individual humor style motivations to a marketing context. This study further extends the Brand Identity Prism Framework (Kapferer, 2008) by showcasing the role of humor in the construction of brand identity. Specifically, the analysis revealed that four distinct humor styles and various humor types, such as exaggeration, comparison, and sarcasm, are employed across all six facets of the Prism." By incorporating recognizable brand-related travel elements and creating humorous content that resonates with a wide audience, Ryanair successfully builds a cohesive, distinct, and approachable brand persona. This application of humor produces a sense of community, and approachability thereby strengthening the overall brand identity.

Finally, this study complements Malodia et al.'s (2022) focus on virality and engagement by examining brand identity as an additional outcome of meme marketing strategies. The integration of humorous memes into the Brand Identity Prism framework illustrates how it can achieve the dual purpose of creating engaging content, as shown by Malodia et al. (2022), and developing a brand identity. This dual function of humor is critical for understanding how brands can strategically leverage humor to differentiate themselves in the competitive digital landscape.

#### **5.4. Managerial implications**

The current study offers valuable insights for marketing professionals seeking to elevate their digital strategies by harnessing the power of memes. Memes, with their capacity for engagement, represent a potent tool for brand communication. Although meme marketing has emerged as a powerful strategy (Malodia et al., 2022), many mainstream brands have yet to fully harness its potential. This study serves as a guide, providing a structured approach to creating memes that blend relevance with humor.

More precisely it emphasizes the importance of using humor strategically to achieve brand objectives. Specific humor techniques can enhance approachability and foster a

positive brand perception. By actively incorporating humorous meme content, brand managers can develop more engaging marketing campaigns that resonate with target audiences and strengthen brand identity.

Lastly, the study highlights the need for humor to align with the overall brand objectives. By understanding the brand's marketing goals, professionals can strategically select humor styles and content that appeal to consumers and drive the desired marketing outcomes.

### **5.5. Limitations and Future Research**

This study, while offering a detailed exploration of Ryanair's use of humor in Instagram memes, identifies several limitations that suggest areas for future research. Primarily, the analysis was applied to 100 Instagram posts, which may not fully encapsulate Ryanair's comprehensive social media strategy. The focus solely on Instagram also means that the use of humor on other platforms like TikTok, Facebook, or Twitter was not considered. Future studies should broaden the scope by including a larger sample size and incorporating multiple social media platforms to validate the qualitative findings and gain a more holistic understanding of Ryanair's humor strategy across the digital landscape.

Moreover, this research employed a qualitative approach to analyze Ryanair's use of humor, which provides rich, detailed insights but lacks the empirical rigor that quantitative methods might offer. Future studies could benefit from incorporating quantitative methods to validate the findings and explore various moderating variables, such as audience demographics. A more nuanced understanding of how different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and travel frequencies (frequent flyers versus occasional travelers) perceive humor could enable brands to tailor their strategies more effectively and resonate with diverse consumer segments.

In addition, this study's focus on Ryanair during a specific timeframe limits the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies are recommended to track how Ryanair's use of humor evolves and to assess its long-term impact on brand identity and customer engagement.

Finally, while this research provides insightful guidelines for marketers aiming to design and launch effective meme marketing campaigns, it is crucial for practitioners to critically assess the suitability of their content for meme creation. Ensuring that humor aligns with brand values and audience expectations remains essential for the success of such campaigns.

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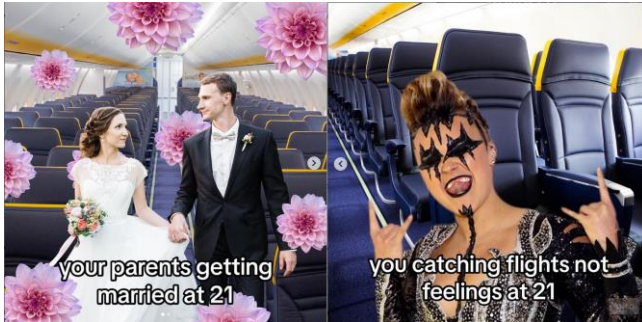


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## Appendix A: MCDA Analysis of a Single Post

The following analysis depicts the Multimodal Critical Discourse Approach applied by the researcher to all the data (100 posts). Here is the procedure for one post, and the remaining analyses will be uploaded to a separate file along with the dataset:

### 1<sup>st</sup> post:



**Denotation:** This post consists of a carousel post with two images placed side by side. The left image shows a bride and groom at the front of a Ryanair plane, holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes, with passenger seats behind them. The couple is portrayed in wedding attire suggesting they are in the midst of the ceremony. They are standing where one would typically expect to see a priest during a wedding ceremony, but in this context, it would be the pilot's cabin directly ahead of them. The right image features Jojo Siwa, an American singer and dancer, making a rock and roll hand gesture and sticking out her tongue, with exaggerated party makeup including black star shapes around their eyes. She is dressed in a way that is associated with glamor or nightlife. She appears to be superimposed onto the aisle of a Ryanair plane. Both images are captioned: "your parents getting married at 21" and "you catching flights not feelings at 21"

**Connotation:** The memes contrast the traditional life milestones of previous generations with the modern lifestyle choices of today's youth. The left image connotes commitment, responsibility, and societal expectations of getting married at a young age. The right image connotes independence, freedom, and a preference for experiences over traditional commitments. It humorously highlights the shift in priorities and values between generations.

### Lexical Analysis

-Word Connotations: "Parents" suggests traditional family values and generational expectations. "Getting married" connotes commitment, stability, and conventional life milestones. "Catching flights" implies travel, freedom, and prioritizing personal experiences. "Not feelings" indicates a rejection of emotional commitments in favor of independence.

-Overlexicalization: The phrases "getting married" and "catching flights" are emphasized to highlight the stark contrast between the two priorities.

-Suppression or Lexical Absence: The meme does not mention the reasons for the generational shift in values, leaving it to the viewer's interpretation.

-Structural Oppositions: Traditional vs. Modern: The contrast between marriage (a traditional commitment) and travel (a modern pursuit of personal freedom). Commitment vs. Independence: Highlighting the difference between settling down and exploring the world.

-Lexical Choices and Genre of Communication: The informal, relatable language fits within the genre of social media memes, targeting a young audience familiar with these cultural references.

### **Visual Analysis**

-Iconography: The wedding attire and airplane aisle symbolize traditional life milestones and the setting of an unusual wedding location, adding humor. The rockstar attire and exaggerated makeup symbolize a modern, carefree lifestyle, focusing on self-expression and non-conformity.

-Attributes: The formal wedding attire and serious expressions of the couple denote commitment and societal expectations. The flamboyant outfit, makeup, and playful expression of the individual denote a rebellious, free-spirited attitude.

-Settings: The airplane aisle setting in the wedding photo humorously juxtaposes a traditional event with an unconventional location. The empty airplane seats in the right image suggest solitude and independence, reinforcing the theme of personal freedom.

-Salience: The central positioning of the characters and their distinct attire make them the focal points, drawing attention to the contrast between their lifestyles.

**Humor Style:** affiliative, relying on shared generational experiences and the relatability of prioritizing personal freedom over traditional commitments. It uses a light-hearted approach to poke fun at generational differences without causing offense or distress. The humor is inclusive and aims to evoke a shared chuckle among those who come across it, likely resonating with both younger audiences—who may find the concept of early marriage outdated—and older generations—who might reminisce about the norms of their youth. It can also be self-enhancing as it helps individuals cope with the stress or expectations of societal norms by finding humor in their lifestyle choices and reinforcing their sense of identity and independence.

**Humor Type:** a) comparison meme. It draws humor from comparing the traditional expectations of getting married early, as was more common in previous generations, with the contemporary setting of a Ryanair plane, which is unexpected and anachronistic for a wedding. This contrast creates humor by comparing the past with the present.

b) exaggeration meme, because of the hyperbolic makeup and gesture that amplify the theme of youthful rebellion and the celebration of a carefree lifestyle. Also, there's an element of exaggeration due to the surreal size of the flowers and the concept of getting married in an airplane aisle, both of which amplify the meme's humor by creating a scene that is outside the bounds of reality.

## Appendix B: Coding Scheme

The following table showcases how the researcher ended up in the thematic categories that are presented in the results section (4.1.1.- 4.1.8.), through a coding process.

Category	Axial Code	Open Codes
Social Etiquette in Public Spaces	Social Etiquette	Keeping shoes on during flights - Talking quietly - Sharing armrests - Respecting personal space - Boarding and exiting behavior - Managing children's behavior
Personification and Anthropomorphism	Humanizing Non-Human Elements	Airplanes expressing emotions - Animals displaying human-like behavior - Inanimate objects with facial expressions - Anthropomorphized planes - Animated characters representing travelers' emotions
Expectation vs. Reality in Air Travel	Expectations vs. Realities	Flight comfort levels - Timeliness of flights - Behavior of flight attendants - In-flight meals - Luggage handling - Seating arrangements - Flight attendants' treatment
Everyday Life Relatability	Relatability in Daily Life	Rushing to the gate - Forgetting seat numbers - In-flight sleeping positions - Checking for flight delays - Boarding pass issues - Security check experiences- Overpacking luggage
Travel and Cuisine	Travel and Food Experiences	Airplane food humor - Cultural food differences - In-flight snacks- Dining experiences at airports - Local cuisine explorations - food mishaps during travel
Cultural Differences	Cultural Contrasts	Wedding customs in different cultures - Social norms in public spaces - Differences in travel habits - Language barriers - Clothing styles during travel
Celebrity and Pop Culture	Celebrities and Pop Culture in Travel	Celebrity reactions in travel contexts - Pop culture references to travel scenarios - Memes featuring famous personalities- Iconic movie or TV scenes adapted to travel
Practical Challenges	Travel Difficulties	Handling luggage - Navigating airports - Lost passports - Overcoming jet lag - Dealing with flight delays - Managing travel expenses

## Appendix C: AI Declaration

### Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

#### Student Information

Name: Eleftheria Bakomitrou

Student ID: 675544

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. (Izabela) IM Derda

Date: 26/6/2024

Declaration:

#### Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Chat GPT 3.0- Basic Version, Grammarly-Basic Version], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

#### Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

#### Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these

#### Used AI prompts:

##### Chat GPT 3.0:

-For further understanding and comprehension of complex concepts and theories from scientific articles, such as: the Brand Identity Prism framework from Kapferer and European Institute of Brand Management and the difference between Berlo's Communication Model and Hall's Communication Model.

-For providing me with some initial ideas regarding the wording of my thesis title. However, the final title was undertaken by me, and I have not copy-paste any content from Chat GPT

-For initial assistance with naming a few thematic categories (e.g. "Social Etiquette in Public Spaces" to describe Ryanair's approach to mocking inappropriate social behaviors) Please note that I have not copy-pasted any theme names. AI only supported me in generating some ideas.

tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

-For basic grammar and vocabulary spell check  
-For synonyms to avoid repetition of the constant use of the same words such as: foster, present, illustrate, use, humorous, different, stand out, fun, social behavior. This procedure was applied in addition to Google search. From the options given, the final words were selected by me and according to my critical thinking.

**Grammarly-Basic version:**

-For punctuation check  
- For grammar, syntax, and lexical mistakes

**Note: I never copied any content out of ChatGPT or Grammarly**

Signature: Eleftheria Bakomitrou

Date of Signature: 26/6/2024