
Crisis Response Strategies and Themes during the COVID-19 Pandemic in EU Aviation, Airlines' Executives Communication with Shareholders: A Content Analysis

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of the article is to analyse European Union airlines top-level executives COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with their shareholders in terms of both crisis response strategies used and the themes addressed.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Context analysis method was used to examine the top-level executives of five major European Union airlines (Lufthansa, Ryanair, SAS, Wizz Air and KLM) COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with their shareholders. Analyzed data consisted of C-level executives' letters to shareholders, collected from the available annual reports covering the period of COVID-19 aviation crisis. Data analysis of the available body of text was conducted in the dual procedure – to identify SCCT crisis response strategies.

Findings: Research shows that EU airlines mostly rely on diminish (mostly through justification – minimizing the perceived damage caused by the crisis) and bolstering (mostly through reminding the stakeholders about the past good works of the organization) crisis response strategies in their COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with shareholders. There is a difference in the themes present in the crisis communication between traditional and low-cost airlines, as low-cost airlines include themes of new and adjusted services and future of aviation more often than legacy airlines in their COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with shareholders.

Practical implications: Research results enable managers to better understand airlines crisis response strategies, and by providing examples of messages used it may help crisis response managers prepare their message. The study can be useful in future decision-making in the area of crisis communication.

Originality/Value: The originality of the research results primarily from the focus on crisis communication conducted by airlines top-level executives targeted towards shareholders understood as key stakeholders.

Keywords: Crisis communication, content analysis, COVID-19, airline industry.

JEL Classification: M14, M39, L93, L14.

Paper type: Original research article.

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1. Introduction

In the era of modern civilizational changes, accelerating globalization and the COVID-19 pandemic caused economic collapse, crisis is becoming a term inscribed in almost every sphere of our lives. It contributes to the disruption of the hitherto established economic, corporate and social order, and necessitates the development of rigorous procedures at a dynamic pace. Moreover, it becomes a factor that significantly limits the efficient and effective functioning of economic organizations, not only those operating on a regional and national scale, but especially those of an international and global nature.

Therefore, tools are being developed within each organization to enable efficient crisis management, focusing primarily on strategic issues. Crisis management is based on the streamlining of relations at the organisation-environment level, optimisation of resources (mainly employees' competences) and continuous monitoring of external threats. However, it should be remembered that every crisis involves a great deal of uncertainty, reorganisation of the hitherto binding rules and procedures, and a risk that must be taken when introducing measures to limit its negative effects on the enterprise. In such a case, crisis communication involving not only employees but also contractors is also of great importance, as it makes it possible to "bring order" to the ongoing chaos and widespread misinformation. The goal of enterprises is to constantly fight to maintain their existing reputation and take actions aimed at improving their image, which is possible thanks to appropriate communication with the external environment and putting the customer (his needs, expectations and fears) in the first place.

There is no doubt that the spread of the COVID-19 virus bears the hallmarks of a historic global socio-economic crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic caused by this virus had drastic effects on all sectors, but tourism was hit hardest (Kökény *et al.*, 2021). Frequent interpersonal contacts, large numbers of people staying in the same place and travel to countries with different mutations of the virus contributed to the worsening of the epidemiological situation worldwide. As a result, the authorities of individual countries implemented restrictions, travel limitations and even closed borders, causing the airlines to suffer the greatest losses. The procedures used to date did not respond to the widespread crisis, and passenger confusion seriously damaged the image of many companies. It was necessary to introduce crisis communication, taking into special consideration contractors' needs, expectations and predispositions.

Research conducted to date in this area has mainly focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the aviation industry (Suau-Sanchez *et al.*, 2020), crisis communication during aircraft crashes (Canny, 2016; Othman and Yusoff, 2020), and the relationship between crisis communication and epidemics that negatively impact corporate reputation (Yu *et al.*, 2020). Most researchers have analysed press releases or social media messages (Scheiwiller and Zizka, 2021), or news items

themselves (Albers and Rundshagen, 2020). In contrast, our study analysed letters to shareholders included in the EU airlines annual reports using the content analysis method. As a result, the aim of the article is to analyse European Union airlines top-level executives COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with their shareholders in terms of both crisis response strategies used and the themes addressed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Crisis

One of the characteristics of the functioning of contemporary organisations is the lack of stability. The complexity and dynamism of predictable and unpredictable changes in the environment is so great that they can be interpreted as crisis situations. That is why it is an important practice for organisations to carry out stabilising activities defined as crisis management. It reflects the organisation's reaction to a crisis and "encompasses applied knowledge concerning the principles of conduct in a generally understood crisis situation" (Grzegorzczuk and Kościańczuk, 2012). The object of theoretical and practical analysis of crisis management is the phenomenon of crisis and related activities.

A crisis is described as a major, sudden and adverse change. Bernstein (2013) defines a crisis as "any situation that is threatening or could threaten to harm people or property, seriously interrupt business, significantly damage reputation and/or negatively impact the bottom line". Similarly, crisis is defined by Fearn-Banks (2007) adding that "a crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organisation". For Venette (2003) crisis is a process of qualitative transformation and for t'Hart *et al.* (2001) a time-evolving, high-intensity process "in ongoing streams of social interaction". Among the characteristics of crisis, Bundy *et al.* (2016) list: uncertainty, disruption, and change, are harmful or threatening for organisations and their stakeholders, are behavioural phenomena and are parts of larger processes, rather than discrete events. Irimieş (2016) additionally emphasises that crisis affects the internal and external environment and introduces uncertainty, confusion and lack of control, while Heath and O'Hair (2009) "that it requires extraordinary personnel, technical, and messaging responses". And although according to Marsen (2020) "crises are generally unexpected and disruptive to the routine functioning of the organization, they are ubiquitous and unsurprising".

Crisis is a subjective phenomenon in terms of recognition. This is because crisis situations will not always be perceived by everyone in terms of a threat. Heath and O'Hair (2009) condition the understanding of crisis from the interpretation of the turn of events in the context of the organisation's ability to achieve its goals, mission and business plan. Writing about the perceptual nature of crisis, Coombs (2009) argues that "if stakeholders believe there is a crisis, the organisation is in a crisis unless it can successfully persuade stakeholders it is not. A crisis violates

expectations”. And in turn it is “how we define crisis determines whether we see its interconnection with issues, brand equity, and risk”. Therefore, according to Mikušová and Horváthová, organisations should develop “their own criteria to determine when a problem can develop into a crisis” (2019).

A crisis situation may develop into a crisis as a result of improper human activity or its omission (Reason, 1990). Irimieș (2016) sees the prerequisites for a possible crisis in all kind of factors that constantly affect any organization’s activity and decisions. Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) systematizing the types of crises listed such sources as disturbances in the functioning of the organization (performance crises), disasters (disaster crises), reputational decline as a result of the media or competitors (attack crises) and the failure to take into account social norms and values in the activities of the company (moral crises). To a large extent, crisis situations originate outside the organisation and result from economic and political change, or currently the Coronavirus pandemic. New generation threats can also be added - theft of personal data, computer viruses, loss of data (Grzegorzczuk and Kościańczuk, 2012). Additional escalation of crisis situations may be caused by the fact that their sources are not mutually exclusive and may occur at the same time. (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012; Hart *et al.*, 2001; Mikušová and Horváthová, 2019).

2.2 Crisis Management

The complete elimination of a crisis situation is not possible, but due to its negative effects organisations implement crisis management. Coomb (2010) defines crisis management as “a set of factors designed to combat crises”, Dayton (2009) as a “collection of social-psychological and bureaucratic/organizational variables that seem to come into play each time a decision maker deals with a crisis”, and Canyon (2020) as “the measures and methodologies used to recognize, control and limit the damage of a crisis, and its ripple effects”. Lesenciuc and Nag (2008) refer to crisis management as the “abilities of foreseeing crises, the anticipation of scenarios for the foreseen situation, the prompt answer in case of their appearance, the following of strictly designed steps in solving the crisis”. The cited definitions emphasise different aspects of crisis management, but what they have in common are crisis mitigation measures.

Crisis management is not a singular activity. It concerns crisis preparedness, training, planning, signal detection, prevention, systems activation, response, recovery, apologia, image restoration, post-crisis discourse and organisational learning (Jaques, 2009). It is “a comprehensive approach involving a cycle that starts with preparedness and prevention, and extends through response to recovery and learning” (Drennan and McConnell, 2007). The multiplicity of crisis activities has been mapped by Coomb and Hollady (2012) to a 3-stage process: the pre-crisis (prevention and preparation), the crisis (response) and the post-crisis (learning and revision). On the other hand, Williams *et al.* (2017), based on a literature review, listed 5 phases of crisis management: signal detection, preparation/prevention,

containment/damage control, business recovery, and learning. The specific phases differ in content, duration, and managerial opportunities (Pedersen *et al.*, 2020). And while each phase is important, some researchers emphasize the last one as a source of organizational learning from a crisis (Deverall, 2009). For Nittman (2021), knowledge accumulated through crisis management is an important factor shaping preparedness and speed of response.

Bundy *et al.* (2016) after an analysis of the literature concluded that crisis management is seen from internal and external perspectives. The first perspective focuses on the within-organization dynamics of managing risk, complexity, technology and involves the coordination of complex technical and relational systems and the design of organizational structures to prevent the occurrence, reduce the impact, and learn from a crisis. While the external perspective focuses on the interactions of organizations and external stakeholders and involves shaping perceptions and coordinating with stakeholders to prevent, solve, and grow from a crisis. Within both perspectives, emergency management policies and procedures that identify coordination, communication, and other activities that enable a more effective disaster response are developed (Williams *et al.*, 2017). And while strict application of these procedures is unlikely, it is important for organisations to take control of the course of a crisis (Lee, 2004).

The way an organisation reacts to a crisis situation influences the way it is perceived by stakeholders, employees, other actors in the environment. A negative perception of the organisation's actions results in a decline in reputation and consequently financial losses (Coombs, 2007; McDonald *et al.*, 2010; Chiciudean and David, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2009). Mitroff (2005) highlights the deterioration of relationships between managers and employees as the managers are blamed for the crisis, and the threat of losing employee jobs due to the potential for business collapse is written about by McDonald *et al.* (2010). And while crisis disrupts interpersonal relationships crisis management is a way to repair them (Kahn *et al.*, 2013). Many other studies describe crises as positive events, catalysts for change in dysfunctional areas of the organisation e.g. image, strategy, competitiveness, communication (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007; Holtzhausen and Roberts, 2009; Pollard and Hotho, 2006). According to Williams *et al.* (2017), crises build resilience in organisations that "points to the means of counteracting weakening or strategic misalignment as well as responding and adjusting to triggering events".

2.3 Crisis Communication

The analysis of crisis management is explicitly linked to the concept of crisis communication. For Hart (1993) "the most important instrument in crisis management is language. Those who are able to define what the crisis is all about also hold the key to defining the appropriate strategies for resolution". According to Telg (2010) an organisation that has developed a crisis communication strategy to communicate to decision makers and the public will deal with the crisis more

effectively. Crisis communication including the crisis cause is considered the main determinant of stakeholders' reactions to company crisis (McDonald *et al.*, 2010), and together with actions influence crisis perception and contribute to creating reality (Ravazzani, 2016).

Fearn-Banks (2017) defines crisis communication as “a dialogue between the organisation and its public(s)”, also emphasising that it addresses the different phases of a crisis. Its aim is to minimise damage to the image of the organisation by adopting specific strategies and tactics. Walaski (2011) emphasises the process and interactive nature of this dialogue, which aims to transfer information about the crisis. Whereby according to Irimieş (2016) it is about exchange and share with public, stakeholders and employees truly meaningful information in order to persuade and to reduce as much as possible the negative impact. Irimieş (2016) defines crisis communication as a concentrated effort undertaken by an organisation facing a crisis, and Coombs *et al.* (2010) as an integral part of stakeholder safety.

Crisis communication is a complex activity. Commb (2010) sees crisis communication as a process involving 2 interrelated activities. These are (1) crisis knowledge management and (2) stakeholder reaction management. Crisis knowledge management is primarily to equip managers with the knowledge to see the situation and make informed decisions. The decisions then must be communicated to the requisite stakeholders. Telg (2010), on the other hand, distinguished three crisis communication activities corresponding to the phases of crisis management. In the preparing for the crisis phase, crisis activities should focus on developing a plan in place for managing a crisis situation and select crisis management and crisis communication teams. In the crisis phase, intensive communication takes place, which should be characterised by factuality, activity and credibility. It is therefore important to be factual, to react quickly to conjecture and rumours, to speak frankly and to answer all questions. The post-crisis phase is the time to assess the course of the crisis and to improve the crisis communication plan.

A practical dimension of crisis communication research is guidance for managers in their selection and utilization of crisis communication strategies for reputation management (Coombs *et al.*, 2010). Depending on the extent to which the organisation is responsible for the consequences of the crisis, Benoit (1997) distinguished five crisis communication strategies. Denial strategies depict a situation where the organisation explicitly denies its involvement in the crisis or shifts the blame to others. In the case of Evasion of Responsibility strategies, organisations minimise their responsibility for the crisis by arguing the provocation, lacking knowledge to act properly, accidentality and claiming that the company had good intentions. Reducing Offensiveness of Event strategies include actions to draw attention away from the events of the crisis by improving Image, minimising the significance of the crisis, paying compensation to present the organisation in a positive light. Corrective Action strategies focus on procedures and measures to prevent event from reoccurring crisis. Organisations using Mortification strategies

take full responsibility for the impact of the crisis. Research by Arednt *et al.* (2017) indicates that response strategies with a high degree of crisis responsibility are the most effective in rebuilding a brand.

Among other practical recommendations for improving crisis management, Marsen (2020) listed: (1) Speed of response to crisis events. This is especially important in the era of social media, which facilitate immediate, two-way symmetric communication. This is one of the reasons why social media research is a growing field in crisis communication; (2) Selecting appropriate spokespersons to communicate with the public during and after a crisis. What they say can exonerate the organisation but can also lead to conflict and legal repercussions; (3) In a globalized world, paying attention to local cultures; (4) Spokespersons who cater for diverse audiences in their communication during a crisis tend to be more successful than those who make generic, "one size fits all" statements. Added to this is the development of the crisis communication, which according to Fearn-Banks (2017) is the primary tool of preparedness for crisis and its aftermath providing "a functioning collective brain for all persons involved in a crisis".

3. The Aviation Industry and COVID-19 Pandemic

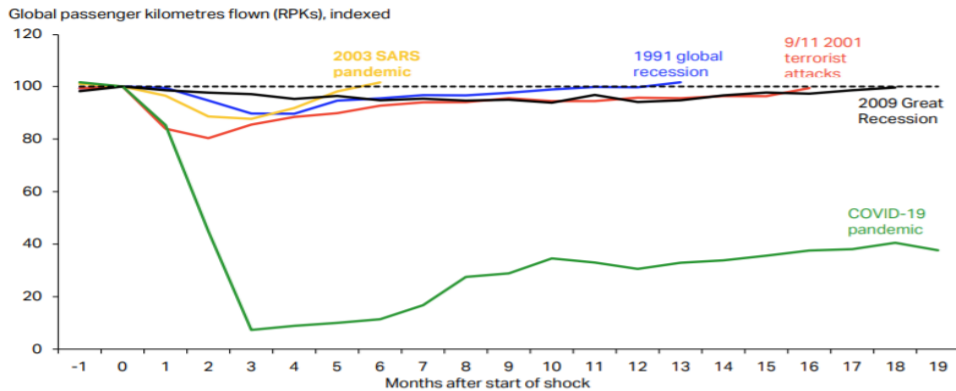
The spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and its dynamic transmission in public spaces, has contributed to the introduction of deepening restrictions on social distancing and protective measures, as well as growing problems in business (Suk and Kim, 2021). As a result, in late January 2020, World Health Organization underlined the significance of the situation by declaring an outbreak of a global pandemic (Scheiwiller and Zizka, 2021). COVID-19 has caused both social and economic damage. Ubiquitous paralysis affected one industry after another, and the resulting chaos and public confusion adversely affected interpersonal relations, so that functioning in public spaces gave rise to growing anxiety and fear. The global socio-economic crisis has hit the tourism industry hardest, especially aviation (Kökény *et al.*, 2021). COVID-19 is among the largest and deepest crises in aviation history, the effects of which are still visible today. With previous crises reducing global passenger kilometres flown (RPKs) by 5-20%, stabilisation occurred after only 6-18 months, as shown in Figure 1.

Researchers have shown that air transport greatly facilitates the spread of the virus, so that, given the health risks, travellers had a negative attitude towards travelling and the number of visitors to the countries most affected by COVID-19 decreased significantly (Wen *et al.*, 2005). Figure 2 shows the drastic decrease in monthly airline passenger numbers during the pandemic period compared to 2019.

In response to the pandemic, national governments and business entities introduced numerous bans, travel restrictions and strict quarantine regulations. In addition, borders were closed to international tourists, passenger flights were suspended, and passengers from the countries most affected by the pandemic were banned from

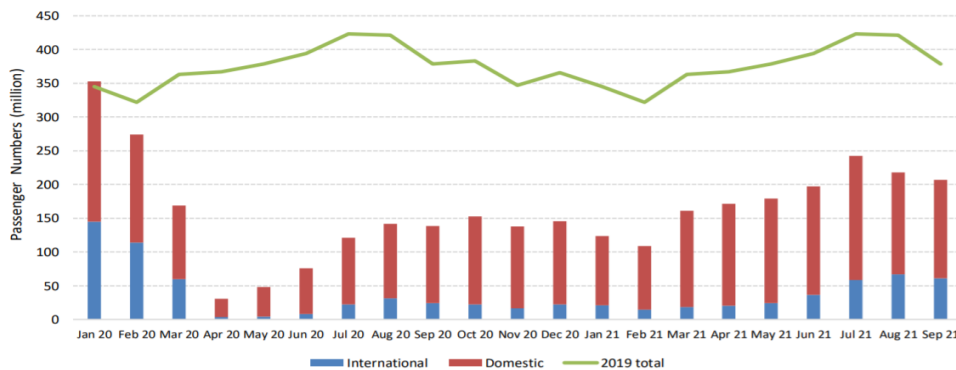
entering (UNWTO, 2020). As of 18 May 2020, all places in the world have introduced travel restrictions, 85% have fully or partially closed their borders and 5% have partially or fully suspended international flights, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 1. Duration and impact of COVID-19 on aviation industry compared to other crises



Source: Gulbas E. (2021). COVID-19 Airline industry outlook, IATA, 4 th October 2021, p. 2.

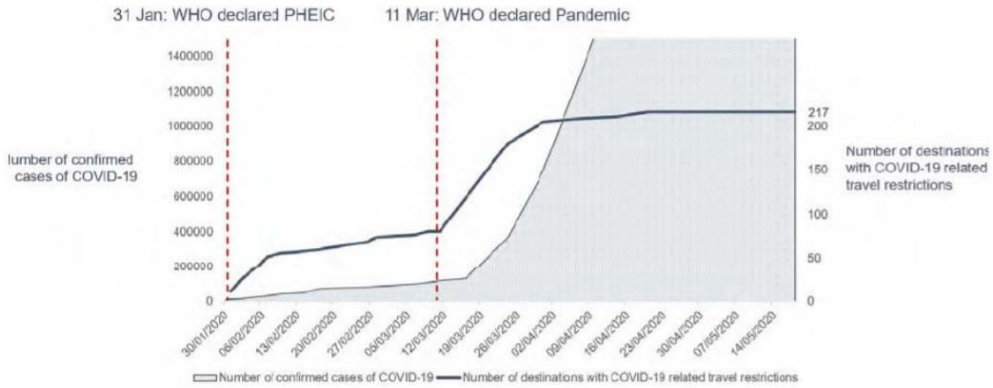
Figure 2. Monthly passenger numbers in 2020-21 vs. 2019



Source: ICAO. (2021). *Effects of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Civil Aviation: Economic Impact Analysis*. Montréal, Canada, 19 October 2021, Economic Development – Air Transport Bureau, p. 8.

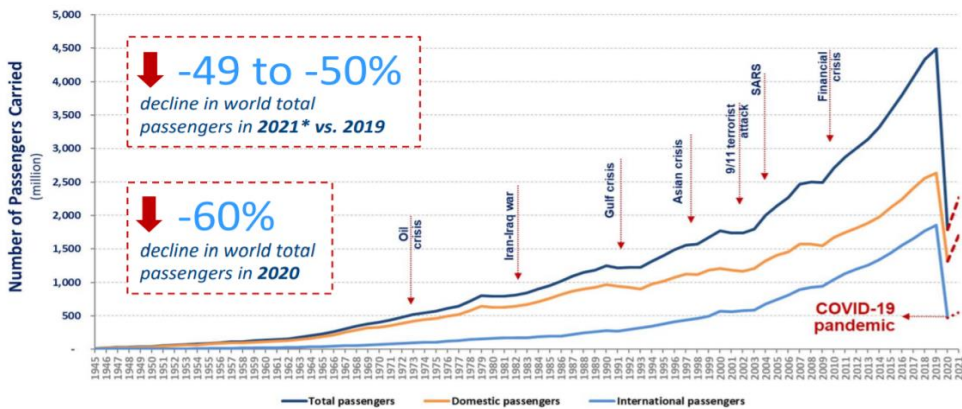
As a result, commercial carriers were forced to reduce operations by more than 60%, resulting in a 55% drop in revenue compared to the previous year. The airline industry had previously faced a number of threats, but these were mostly regional in nature. The COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, spanned the globe, causing aviation to experience greater damage than ever before (Suk and Kim, 2021). The first six months alone showed that the spread of the virus led to a global recession, and COVID-19 is among the most damaging pandemics in recent history (Scheiwiller and Zizka, 2021), as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 3. Number of COVID-19 confirmed cases and destinations with COVID-19-related travel restrictions



Source: ICAO. 2021. *Effects of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Civil Aviation: Economic Impact Analysis.* Montréal, Canada, 19 October 2021, Economic Development – Air Transport Bureau, p. 99.

Figure 4. World passenger traffic evolution 1945 – 2021



Source: ICAO. 2021. *Effects of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Civil Aviation: Economic Impact Analysis.* Montréal, Canada, 19 October 2021, Economic Development – Air Transport Bureau, p. 4.

The deepest crisis that hit the airlines was caused by the closure of national borders, the sharp decline in demand for travel and the consequent loss of trust among travellers, which resulted in most flights being cancelled and the fleets eventually being grounded (Deloitte, 2020). Numerous restrictions were imposed by government agencies, reducing the number of available seats on aircraft to nearly 50% by 2020, passenger numbers declined by 60% and operating revenue from ticket sales fell by \$370.609 million. The estimated impact of COVID-19 for 2021 is slightly more optimistic, due to improving metrics from quarter to quarter, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Estimated impact of COVID-19 on passenger traffic compared to 2019*

Compared to 2019	Seat capacity (%)	Passenger number (thousand)		Passenger revenue (USD, million)
	Total (International + Domestic)			
1Q 2020	-14,8%	-233,909	-22,7%	-29,389
2Q 2020	-78,1%	-984,447	-86,4%	-129,747
3Q 2020	-54,8%	-821,282	-67,2%	-115,838
4Q 2020	-47,6%	-659,012	-60,2%	-95,635
Total 2020	-49,5%	-2,698,650	-60,2%	-370,609
1Q 2021	-49,6%	-636,246	-61,8%	-91,453
2Q 2021	-43,2%	-590,863	-51,9%	-87,187
3Q 2021	-36%	-55487825%	-45%	-8169601%
4Q 2021	-30,5% to 28,0%	-463,092 to 415,507	-42,3% to 37,9%	-69,165 to 63,075
Total 2021	-39,7% to 39,1%	-2,245,079 to 2,197,494	-50,0% to 49,0%	-329,501 to 323,411

Source: Own study based on: ICAO. 2021. *Effects of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Civil Aviation: Economic Impact Analysis. Montréal, Canada, 19 October 2021, Economic Development – Air Transport Bureau, p. 34.*

Despite the fact that aviation was the hardest hit by the deepening crisis and faced many difficulties, it was able to turn them into opportunities (chances) to strengthen joint efforts in overcoming the dangers that occurred (Suk and Kim, 2021). In the first instance, adequate communication, in line with the most recent stage of the pandemic and the guidelines imposed by individual countries, was most crucial. The airline industry often uses crisis management and crisis communication to deal with ongoing threats, and uses tools developed by the parent airline associations (AAPA, ICAO). When communicating with stakeholders, it posts the most relevant information in newsletters, on its own websites and on social media. Through the experience it has gained, it handles plane crashes skilfully. However, facing the COVID-19 pandemic, airlines are still affected by it, in their actions they focus mainly on ensuring passenger safety and thus aim to rebuild lost trust (Nittmann, 2021).

In the early days of the pandemic, airlines reduced or stopped operations altogether, making rapid changes to cut costs and protect their interests. There have been drastic declines in terms of fleet size, network coverage and staff numbers. Consequently, the nature of the airline industry coming out of the crisis, will be different from initial assumptions (Budd *et al.*, 2020). Many economists believe that the global crisis will contribute to the collapse of many companies (Scheiwiller and Zizka, 2021), while other researchers strongly emphasise that the pandemic will ruin the entire international travel market (Thams *et al.*, 2020). As a result, COVID-19 will have a much more severe and lasting impact on the airline industry than other pandemics (IATA, 2020). The most optimal path for aviation recovery is considered to be mid-2022 and the most pessimistic 2026 (Gudmundsson *et al.*, 2020).

Consequently, the airline industry is facing a huge crisis, where the customer, their needs and the uncertainty associated with travel, which are the determinants of a company's survival in the market, deserve special attention. In turn, the negative nature of the economic effects of the crisis may lead to historic changes in aviation and contribute to the collapse of many competing companies. However, it should be remembered that the starting point for crisis management in the industry is the skilful transformation of a threat into an opportunity, which in the future will enable the development of effective communication practices allowing for effective building of trust among contractors and will contribute to the acquisition of loyal customers, who will remain with the company even during such a severe crisis.

4. Research Method

In the face of a crisis on an unprecedented scale, airline management has an extremely difficult task. The universality and scale of the crisis and its independence from the corporation's own actions make it extremely difficult to maintain a good image and especially to convince shareholders of the safety of their investments. In communicating the COVID-19 aviation crisis to key stakeholders and shareholders in particular, airlines will mainly play down the significance of the crisis and build an image of a strong brand capable of surviving it. From this assumption, the first hypothesis follows:

H1: Airlines mostly rely on diminish and bolstering crisis response strategies in their COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with shareholders.

Although virtually all passenger airlines have been affected by the COVID-19 aviation crisis, not all have been affected to the same extent. Some airlines could have counted on a greater degree of public assistance, easier credit, or greater diversification of their services towards cargo operations. The main dividing line seems to run between traditional and low-cost airlines. On the other hand, the operating model of low-cost airlines assumes greater flexibility and ability to dynamically adapt to changing conditions, while the involvement of public entities in legacy airlines limits their scope for potential decisions. This difference is reflected not only in the actions taken by airlines in times of crisis, but also in the topics addressed in communication by top management. Hence, the second hypothesis follows:

H2: Low-cost airlines include themes of new and adjusted services and future of aviation more often than legacy airlines in their COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with shareholders.

The context analysis method was used to verify these hypotheses.

4.1 Sample Description

To compare how EU airlines communicate COVID-19 related aviation industry crisis to their key stakeholders 5 big EU-based airlines were selected (Ryanair

Group, Lufthansa Group, Air France – KLM, Wizz Air, SAS Group). The selection process was conducted regarding both airline significance to EU commercial passenger aviation and to reflect EU aviation market diversity, information on selected airlines can be found in Table 2. Such selection allowed to reflect the general trend in the EU airlines COVID-19 crisis communication to key stakeholders, while allowing for heterogeneous representation of airlines from different cultural backgrounds as well as balanced representation of low-cost and traditional models. As the COVID-19 aviation crisis has mostly affected commercial passenger flights, airlines specializing before march 2020 in cargo transportation were excluded from this selection. The regional restriction of EU-only airlines was introduced to allow for easier comparison – as the nature of the crisis was heavily influenced by dynamically changing governmental restrictions and regulations of respective countries, the European Common Aviation Area creates the level field for the airlines operating within, in contrast to those operating outside of it.

Table 2. Selected airlines comparison

No.	Airline name	Type of airline	Number of passengers in 2020 (in millions)
1.	Ryanair Group	Low-cost	51,7
2.	Lufthansa Group	Traditional	36,4
3.	Air France - KLM	Traditional	34
4.	Wizz Air	Low-cost	16,7
5.	SAS Group	Traditional	8,8

Source: Own study based on Statistica.com data, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1094759/largest-airlines-in-europe-based-on-passengers/>

C-level executives' letters to shareholders were used in the study, collected from the available annual reports covering the period of COVID-19 aviation crisis (from march 2020). All the data was collected in the period of 1-11.10.2021 from the official English language version reports published on the respective company websites. C-level executives' letters within annual reports are specific tool of communication - they can be used to shape the image of organization, at the same time staying within formal frames of report, but yet unrestricted by regulatory constraints of the report formal part (Hooghiemstra, 2010).

Unrestricted by time constraints of ad-hoc crisis communication, they can be carefully crafted to convey an exact message about past crisis, and its influence on organization that the company c-level executives would perceive as desired. Although targeted primarily toward shareholders, it has to take into the account the reception of other both external (e.g., potential investors, business partners) and internal (employees) stakeholders. Information on selected sources from each annual report is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Selected letters from company annual reports

No.	Airline	Report	Letter name	Date	Letter length (number of words)
1.	Ryanair Group	Annual Report 2021	Chairman's Report	July 23, 2021	680
2.	Ryanair Group	Annual Report 2021	CEO Report	July 23, 2021	2727
3.	Lufthansa Group	Annual Report 2020	Letter from the Executive Board	February 2021	823
4.	Air France - KLM	Universal Registration Document 2020 Including The Annual Financial Report	Message from the Chief Executive Officer	April 7, 2021	523
5.	Wizz Air	Wizz Air Holdings Plc Annual report and accounts 2021	Chairman's Statement	June 2, 2021	1673
6.	Wizz Air	Wizz Air Holdings Plc Annual report and accounts 2021	Chief Executive's Review	June 2, 2021	2517
7.	SAS Group	SAS Annual and Sustainability Report Fiscal Year 2020	Comments by the CEO	January 2021	1366

Source: Own study.

Data analysis of the available body of text was conducted in the dual procedure – to identify SCCT crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007), following approach proposed by Scheiwiller and Zizka (2021) and aggregate dimensions of themes as proposed by Nittmann, (2021). First the available body of text was purified to include only communication related with COVID-19 aviation crisis – such common themes as sustainable aviation, CO2 reduction, sustainable aviation fuels (SAF), climate change or diversity, although present in the body of text were excluded from the further analysis.

Second step was to divide the bodies of text into causal statements – “one or more coherent sentences or phrases (i.e., parts of a sentence) in which an outcome (e.g., increasing profits or declining sales) is connected to a cause or reason.” (Hooghiemstra, 2010). Furthermore, these phrases need to appear in close proximity to be accounted as a casual statement. These casual statements were analysed in line with SCCT crisis response strategies presented in Table 4. and in terms of themes identified by Nittmann (2021) presented in Table 5.

Table 4. SCCT crisis response strategies

Primary crisis response strategies
Deny crisis response strategies
<i>Attack the accuser:</i> Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.
<i>Denial:</i> Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.
<i>Scapegoat:</i> Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.

Diminish crisis response strategies
<i>Excuse:</i> Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.
<i>Justification:</i> Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.
Rebuild crisis response strategies
<i>Compensation:</i> Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.
<i>Apology:</i> Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.
Secondary crisis response strategies
Bolstering crisis response strategies
<i>Reminder:</i> Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.
<i>Ingratiation:</i> Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.
<i>Victimage:</i> Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

Source: Coombs, 2007.

Table 5. Aggregate dimensions and 2nd order themes

Aggregate dimensions	2nd order themes
Status quo	Cargo Effect on company Impact on the industry Operations State support
Emotional	Emotional
Future of aviation	Reopening Future changes Predictions
Responsibility to the stakeholders	Collaboration Community service Company dedication Medical shipments Role of Airline Needs of customers Repatriation
Travel safety	Cleaning HEPA filters Hygiene & health measures Masks Pilot training Safety Social distancing Recommendations to customers Temperature check
New and adjusted services	Additional services to customers Capped fares Communication with passengers Delay in service Flight cancellation Service expansion Voucher Website reference

Source: Nittmann, 2021.

5. Findings

5.1 Crisis Response Strategies

In the surveyed body of text 113 causal statements were identified as corresponding to particular SCCT crisis response strategies, of which 44,25% were primary and 55,75% were the secondary crisis response strategies. Out of primary crisis strategies the most often used ones were the diminish crisis response strategies (28,32% of total relevant), mostly through justification strategy (19,47%) minimizing perceived damage caused by the crisis to the airline, although excuse strategy was also among the most used ones (8,85%). Second most used primary crisis strategies were deny crisis response strategies (10,62%), with scapegoat strategy (7,96%) used three times more often than denial strategy (2,65%), which out of the researched airlines was only identified in case of Wizz Air. Noteworthy attack the accuser strategy was not present in the top-level executive's communication of any airline.

The least popular group of identified crisis response strategies remained rebuild strategies (5,31%), of which majority were compensation strategies (4,42%), and apology strategy (0,88%) was identified only once in case of SAS airlines. Out of secondary crisis response strategies most popular was reminder strategy (34,51%) followed by ingratiation (11,50%) and victimage (9,73%). Reminder and victimage crisis response strategies were the only ones out of all strategies present in communication of every airline. Notably KLM used only bolstering crisis strategies within their communication. The complete list of crisis response strategies identified in the body of text can be found in Table 6. The examples of causal statements representing each strategy can be seen in Table 7.

Table 6. Crisis response strategies identified in the data

Airline	Lufh ansa	Ryanair (Chairman)	Ryanair (CEO)	SAS	Wizz Air (Chairman)	Wizz Air (CEO)	KLM
Primary crisis response strategies							
Deny strategies	2	2	2	1	3	2	
Attack the accuser							
Denial					2	1	
Scapegoat	2	2	2	1	1	1	
Diminish strategies	6	3	7	8	2	6	
Excuse	2		2	5		1	
Justification	4	3	5	3	2	5	
Rebuild strategies			3	2		1	
Compensation			3	1		1	
Apology				1			
Secondary crisis response strategies							
Bolstering strategies	12	8	7	15	8	8	5

Reminder	9	5	4	7	5	5	4
Ingratiation		2	2	5	3	1	
Victimage	3	1	1	3		2	1

Source: Own study.

Table 7. Examples of airline crisis responses according to SCCT strategies

Response strategy	Airline	Example
Denial	Wizz Air	“This said, Wizz Air proved to be very resilient during F21. Wizz Air entered the pandemic from a position of strength, with an investment grade balance sheet and strong liquidity position, with the lowest cost business model, and strength from its culture of entrepreneurship, agility and can-do mentality personified in each and every one of our employees. This not only allowed us to better weather the storm, but positioned Wizz Air for even bigger wins in the future.”
Scapegoat	Ryanair	<p>“Without notice or warning, our monthly traffic collapsed from 10.5m in February 2020, to 5.7m in March, and then to just 0.04m in April 2020, as many EU Governments grounded flights and banned air travel.”</p> <p>“(…) but a second Covid wave across Europe in the Autumn, followed by a third wave in the Spring created enormous challenges for our guests and our people, who faced constantly changing Government guidelines, travel bans, and movement restrictions.”</p>
Excuse	SAS	“But in March the situation changed overnight, when the full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic became evident, and quickly resulted in lockdowns, closed borders and strict travel restrictions.”
Justification	Lufthansa	“And even if the impact of the crisis continues to weigh on the entire sector for a long time, we are convinced that we will emerge stronger from this crisis than our competitors.”
	Ryanair	<p>“Throughout the Covid-19 crisis we minimized job losses through agreed pay cuts (with pay restoration from years 3 to 5 of multi-year agreements) and participation in Government job support schemes, while at the same time keeping our pilots, cabin crew and aircraft current and ready to resume service once normality returns.”</p> <p>“Our teams have conducted detailed negotiations with all our core suppliers of aircraft, engines, airports, handling, maintenance & engineering to adjust our cost base to reflect this unforeseen collapse in flights and traffic over the last year.”</p> <p>“Looking forward into the post Covid recovery, we have negotiated lower airport & handling costs and traffic recovery incentives.”</p>
	SAS	“As a direct response to the pandemic crisis, SAS embarked on a massive transformational journey, to ensure a more sustainable future for our business – both financially and environmentally.”
	Wizz Air	“While dealing with the crisis exceptionally well, with a relentless focus on minimising cash burn, the Company also invested time and energy in three key areas (…)”

		<p>“Outlining these events and our actions reminded us of what a difficult year this has been, yet at the same time we have positioned ourselves to emerge from the crisis as a structural winner.”</p> <p>“The strength of our balance sheet and fleet order allowed us to grow our footprint – even during this crisis. While doing so, we not only improved our odds for a faster recovery once restrictions lift, we also improved our structural cost. In total we increased our number of announced or operating bases from 25 pre-COVID-19 to 43 point in time.”</p>
Compensation	Ryanair	<p>“When our offices reopened, we quickly increased Customer Service staffing to eliminate what was an unprecedented backlog of over 30m customer reaccommodation and refund requests. Over the last 9 months, we have issued travel vouchers and cash refunds worth over €1.5bn to our customers and their families whose travel plans were disrupted by Covid travel restrictions.”</p>
	SAS	<p>“I also want to stress that we will not rest until all rightful claims have been settled.”</p>
Reminder	Lufthansa	<p>“At the same time, we accepted our particular responsibilities as one of Europe’s leading airlines in these challenging times. In cooperation with the governments of their respective countries, our airlines carried out hundreds of repatriation flights to bring travellers home from all over the world. They also maintained Europe’s supply chains and transported urgently needed medical equipment.”</p>
	Ryanair	<p>“Our Group responded promptly, and effectively, to this unprecedented crisis, which is the first global pandemic we have suffered since the growth of mass market air travel after the Second World War.”</p>
	SAS	<p>“We began our fiscal year in November 2019 with a strong tailwind, with high demand, strong passenger numbers, increased revenue and improved market shares.”</p>
		<p>“Despite closed borders, SAS continued to play a vital role in society.”</p> <p>“SAS ensures Scandinavian connectivity, even in these troubled times, and access to air travel means that Scandinavian companies can prosper and continue to have access to global customers, without having to move their business to other countries.”</p>
	Wizz Air	<p>“Wizz Air remains committed not only to offering the lowest fares and a safe, reliable service, but also committed to inform, assist and help passengers in this current environment of ever-changing restrictions, and run our service deploying superior health protocols.”</p>
		<p>“Operational efficiency, cost leadership, innovation and service excellence are the cornerstone of Wizz Air’s success, and to this day continue to inspire Wizz Air’s future growth.”</p>

		“Maintaining this strong cash position has only been possible through our ultra-low-cost base, which has allowed two things: 1) to sustain periods of severe business interruption significantly longer than other airlines in terms of cash burn, moreover 2) to operate cash-positive flights serving our customers and helping the cash position of our Company even during periods of restricted demand.”
	KLM	“As the crisis developed, Air France, KLM, Transavia, HOP! and KLM Cityhopper demonstrated their strategic national and European importance, which has been our true strength since our creation.” “The Air France – KLM Group has unique and undeniable assets to help traverse this crisis: our people with proven professionalism and expertise, the dual strategic and powerful hubs of Paris-Roissy Charles de Gaulle and Amsterdam-Schiphol, three historic and highly-differentiated brands with Air France, KLM and Transavia, and an extensive and diversified network of destinations which contributes to the performance of the Group’s airlines.”
Ingratiation	Ryanair	“I wish to personally thank our dedicated team of over 15,000 aviation professionals and my Board colleagues who worked tirelessly throughout the past year to ensure that the Ryanair Group emerges strongly from the Covid-19 crisis.” “Finally, I would like to thank you, our shareholders, for your ongoing support.”
	SAS	“The support from our major owners – the Danish and Swedish governments, the Knut and Alice Wallenberg foundation – together with our other investors, has been vital for us.” “I would like to thank all colleagues at SAS for their fighting spirit and dedication in these challenging times. I also would like to thank customers, investors and partners for their patience and vital support during the years.”
	Wizz Air	“I would like to thank our ccash utomters for their trust in Wizz Air. The year to 31 March 2021 was a turbulent one where passengers saw their flight schedules altered or cancelled and flight refunds faced delays.”
Victimage	Lufthansa	“The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic dealt an unprecedented blow to the entire airline industry and this also to the Lufthansa Group.”
	Ryanair	“There is no doubt that the airline industry in general, and the Ryanair Airline Group in particular, has suffered a traumatic 12 months, during which our business, our schedules, our profits, our guests and our people have been devastated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.”
	SAS	“The entire aviation industry was heavily impacted, and SAS was no exception.”
	KLM	“2020 was undoubtedly a difficult year for all of us, on both a professional and a personal level. The Covid-19 pandemic continues to disrupt our lives. In its long history, this is the most severe crisis ever experienced by Air France – KLM and by the airline industry as a whole.”

Source: Own study.

5.2 Aggregate Dimensions

Out of body of text 186 causal statements were identified and classified into related aggregate dimensions on the base of included themes. Most popular dimensions being status quo (36,56% of all classified causal statements), future of aviation (18,28%), new and adjusted services (18,28%) and responsibility to the stakeholders (16,13%). The less popular dimensions were emotional (6,99%) and travel safety (3,76%). Out of the analysed body of text aggregate dimensions of travel safety were not identified in case of Lufthansa and Ryanair, and new and adjusted services in case of KLM.

There is also an observable difference in theme occurrences between traditional and low-cost airlines. For the dimension of responsibility to the stakeholders the identified themes were accounting for 23,94% of classified causal statements in traditional airlines communication, but for only 11,30% of classified causal statements in case of low-cost airlines. Similarly, the dimension of travel safety accounted for 7,04% of traditional airlines causal statements while only 1,74% for low-cost. The low-cost airlines preferred to include themes from the dimensions of new and adjusted services (26,09% of their classified causal statements) and future of aviation (20,87%) more often than traditional airlines (respectively 5,63% and 14,08% of their causal statements). The more detailed information on distribution of aggregate dimensions can be found in Table 8.

Table 8. *Aggregate dimensions identified in communication*

	Status quo	Emotional	Future of aviation	Responsibility to the stakeholders	Travel safety	New and adjusted services
Lufthansa	11	2	4	6		1
Ryanair (Chairman)	9		2	1		1
Ryanair (CEO)	11	3	12	5		16
SAS	13	3	4	7	4	3
Wizz Air (Chairman)	6	2	4	5	1	3
Wizz Air (CEO)	13	2	6	2	1	10
KLM	5	1	2	4	1	

Source: Own study.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The uniqueness of the COVID-19 crisis in the history of the airline industry provides an opportunity to examine what crisis communication strategies different airlines are adopting and what themes they are addressing in this communication. The unprecedented scale of the crisis resulted in a diverse range of responses and highlighted the differences between the traditional and low-fare airlines. As

Scheiwiller and Zizka (2021) observed the COVID-19 airline crisis can be classified as a SCCT framework victim crisis as such types of crises are characterized by minimal attributions of crisis responsibility. In line with SCCT crisis response strategy guidelines (Coombs, 2007) victim crises call for use of diminish crisis response strategies, while rebuild crisis response strategies should be applied in case of accident crises preventable crises. Moreover, victimage strategy is relevant in case of natural disasters, and COVID-19 pandemics can be qualified as such.

This in fact does reflect in the analysed communication as out of primary crisis strategies the most often used ones were the diminish crisis response strategies across all the selected airlines with the exception of KLM (due to use of bolstering crisis response strategies only). Noteworthy within the diminish crisis response strategies the occurrence of causal statements related to justification strategy (19,47%) was more than twice of these related with excuse strategy (8,85%). There is a visible preference in the airlines top-level executives' communication with shareholders to minimize the impact of COVID-19 crisis over admitting that they were not able to control the crisis.

Although according to Coombs (2007) deny crisis response strategies should be used for rumor and challenge crises, yet the echo of this approach is also visible in the airlines COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with shareholders, mostly through scapegoat strategy – either directly blaming the governmental measures (such as changing regulations, travel bans or restrictions) for aviation crisis, or doing so indirectly presenting the virus as the original source of unprecedented scale reduction of air passenger traffic, while listing flight restrictions as one of the pandemic consequences.

None of the airlines decided to use attack the accuser strategy, yet the appeal of disconnecting the organization from the crisis resulted in Wizz Air's use of denial strategy. Both in the Wizz Air Message from the Chief Executive Officer and in the Chairman's Statement it's possible to identify an attempt to communicate that the COVID-19 aviation crisis hasn't caused any significant losses to the Wizz Air, or even that it made it stronger – especially in competition with its competition. In this narration, a crisis is presented rather not as a deadly threat but rather as an opportunity for Wizz Air.

The least applied of primary crisis strategies were rebuild strategies - in line with SCCT crisis response strategy guidelines, as they tend to be expensive, do not provide extra benefit to organization and can even lead to worsening the stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). In the case of rebuild strategies the executives were more eager to apply compensation strategy, rather than apology strategy taking responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness. The only airline that included the causal statement related to apology strategy was SAS.

According to Coombs (2007) the role of bolstering strategies is to supplement the primary strategies. However, it seems that limiting them to this scope does not fully reflect their role in COVID-19 aviation crisis communication. Not only the causal statements related to bolstering strategies were most common among identified, but also reminder strategy and victimage strategy were the only strategies used by every examined airline. Notably KLM used only secondary crisis strategies within their communication. Within this group the reminder strategy is the one appearing the most often. In contrast with harsh crisis realities the executives seem to have strong preference toward stressing both the importance and past accomplishment of the company.

The results of the study confirm H1: *Airlines mostly rely on diminish and bolstering crisis response strategies in their COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with shareholders.*

In relation to the themes present in the communication there is an observable difference between traditional and low-cost airlines. Traditional airlines tend to include causal statements related to responsibility to the stakeholders and travel safety relatively more often than low-cost airlines. The general rate of occurrence of travel safety themes in airlines communication is the lowest of all themes for all the airlines with the exception of SAS. Surprisingly Lufthansa and Ryanair did not even include travel safety among their themes. This may point to the observation that the perception of the COVID-19 crisis by top-executives and shareholders remains outside of the health and safety spectrum.

The increased occurrence of aggregated dimensions of new and adjusted services and future of aviation in the low-cost communication allows for confirmation of H2: *Low-cost airlines include themes of new and adjusted services and future of aviation more often than legacy airlines in their COVID-19 aviation crisis communication with shareholders.*

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