# From Crisis to Recovery:
# Analyzing Airline Communication Strategies
# on Social Media Post-COVID-19

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**Abstract:** The aviation industry continues to grapple with the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, making the analysis of post-crisis communication strategies highly relevant even in 2024. As airlines work to regain stability and trust, understanding their initial social media communication efforts during the early post-crisis period of 2022 provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of these strategies in shaping ongoing recovery and stakeholder relationships. This study investigates the social media communication of five of the most profitable airlines in the world (by revenue, according to statista.com)—Delta Airlines, American Airlines, United Airlines, Lufthansa Airlines, and Air France-KLM Royal Dutch Airlines—using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Discourse of Renewal Theory. A content analysis of 98 posts across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram reveals that while the use of SCCT strategies such as bolstering and ingratiation was limited, the emphasis on renewal discourse played a crucial role in promoting optimism, commitment, and a vision for future growth. These findings underscore the ongoing importance of strategic communication in the aviation industry's recovery process, offering lessons that remain pertinent for managing prolonged crises and their aftermath. The study's relevance lies in its contribution to understanding how early post-crisis communication can influence long-term recovery trajectories, making it a significant reference point for future crises in the aviation sector and beyond.
**Keynotes:** crisis communication, airlines, social media, Covid-19.

**Introduction**

The airline industry, a fundamental component of global transportation and economic activity, has demonstrated resilience in the face of numerous crises, including technical failures, natural disasters, and acts of terrorism. However, the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus presented an unparalleled challenge, resulting in operational disruptions on a scale previously unobserved. As airlines grappled with the challenge of adapting and recovering, effective communication emerged as a crucial instrument for navigating the crisis and rebuilding trust with stakeholders.

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This study examines the crisis communication strategies deployed by five major airlines—Delta, American Airlines, United, Lufthansa, and Air France-KLM—during the initial post-crisis phase in 2022. These airlines were selected due to their status as some of the most prominent and profitable players in the global aviation market, which affords them considerable influence in setting industry standards. The communication strategies employed by these airlines have ramifications that extend beyond their immediate stakeholders. Their approaches frequently serve as models for other airlines around the globe, influencing the broader landscape of the global airline industry.

In the context of the ongoing pandemic, these airlines recognized the importance of maintaining public confidence and sought to engage with their audiences on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to convey their responses to the challenges they were facing. The analysis of these airlines' communication strategies offers a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which industry leaders manage crises and navigate the complex landscape of post-crisis recovery.

This research employs the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Discourse of Renewal Theory as analytical frameworks to investigate how these airlines' communication strategies reflected established crisis response principles and articulated a vision of renewal and recovery. The analysis of social media posts provides insights into the effectiveness of these strategies in managing reputational risks and fostering a narrative of resilience.

### Crisis communication

Crisis communication is a critical area within communication studies that has evolved significantly over time. Initially, the focus of crisis communication was primarily on managing and mitigating the immediate effects of crises—an approach aimed at controlling the damage and restoring normalcy as quickly as possible (Coombs 2019). However, over the years, the field has expanded to encompass not just reactive strategies but also proactive measures, including the recovery phase and the management of potential risks before they escalate into crises (Heath & O'Hair 2009; Ulmer et al. 2009; Coombs & Holladay 2017; Coombs 2019).

This evolution in crisis communication reflects a broader understanding of crises not just as threats but as opportunities for organizational learning and growth. Modern definitions of crisis within this domain increasingly incorporate the concept of opportunity, suggesting that effective crisis communication can facilitate adaptation and even foster positive changes within organizations (Heath & Millar 2004). This shift underscores the importance of viewing crises as moments that can drive innovation and improvement, rather than merely as events to be survived.

### *Crisis communication in the airline industry*

Crisis communication within the airline industry is a critical component of organizational management, given the unpredictable and often devastating nature of crises that can impact this sector. From technical failures and extreme

weather conditions to pandemics and acts of terrorism, airlines face a wide range of crises that necessitate effective communication strategies to protect their reputation and maintain public trust.

Initially, crisis communication approaches in the airline industry were predominantly reactive, primarily involving the issuance of press releases following an incident. Case studies such as ValuJet's response to the 1996 crash (Fishman 1999) and USAir's approach in 1994 (Benoit & Czerwinski 1997) illustrate this reactive method. However, with the advent of the 24-hour news cycle and the increasing use of social media, the aviation industry was compelled to adopt a more proactive approach to crisis management. This shift included providing real-time updates during incidents and actively utilizing social media platforms to communicate directly with the public (Coombs 2019). A significant moment in this transition occurred during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when airlines such as United Airlines and American Airlines used their websites to deliver immediate responses and continuous updates, underscoring the necessity of adapting to the digital environment in crisis management (Greer & Moreland 2003).

The evolution of research on crisis communication in the aviation sector, highlighted by incidents such as the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, reflects a multidimensional and complex approach. Academic contributions, including those by Park, Bier, and Palenchar (2016), Changsong, Yiming, and Ahmad (2017), Othman and Yusoff (2020), and Wang (2022), have deepened the understanding of how crises are perceived, managed, and influenced by various factors. The study by Park et al. (2016) emphasizes the importance of media narratives during crises, focusing on how media framing and information dissemination occur in contexts of uncertainty. This perspective is complemented by the analysis of Changsong, Yiming, and Ahmad (2017), which highlighted intercultural differences in how social media users in China and Malaysia perceive the same crisis event.

In recent decades, research has significantly evolved, reflecting both the complexity of modern crises and the need for sophisticated and adaptable response strategies. Recent studies underscore the importance of effectively utilizing social media channels (Hvass 2013; Grundy & Moxon 2013; Kulkarni 2019; Scheiwiller & Zizka 2021; Raza et al. 2023; Thomsen 2023; Upadhyay et al. 2024), implementing appropriate crisis response strategies (Lee 2020; Scheiwiller & Zizka 2021; Macnamara 2021; Ou & Wong 2021; Coombs 2023; Kim et al. 2023), as well as addressing corporate social responsibility and sustainability reporting (Park et al. 2020; Ruger & Maertes 2022).

### The pandemic context

COVID-19, an extremely infectious coronavirus, triggered the most significant global crisis in terms of human health risk, economic impact, and social and political disruptions since World War II (Macnamara 2021: 5). Initially reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, the virus rapidly spread to over 100 countries by March 2020 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. The pandemic led to the

near-total shutdown of essential services and businesses in hundreds of cities, the self-isolation of millions of people, and overwhelming demands on healthcare systems. By the end of 2020, infections were approaching 100 million, and deaths were nearing 2 million worldwide (Macnamara 2021: 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating global impact, requiring emergency management by health authorities and generating secondary crises for various organizations, including airlines, tourism operators, local businesses, schools, and universities (Macnamara 2021: 4). In addition to the direct risks associated with the health emergency, many organizations faced significant financial losses, staff layoffs, and major operational disruptions (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2021: 3). Travel restrictions and the anticipated global recession led to a substantial decline in revenues, undermining the financial position of numerous airlines worldwide and forcing many to file for bankruptcy (Fontanet-Perez et al. 2022: 647). In an increasingly interconnected world characterized by global competition and digitalization, survival became a struggle for poorly performing companies (Chevtaeva & Guillet 2021: 168).

In this context of uncertainty and rapid change, crisis communication became essential for airlines, which had to adapt their strategies to effectively address the concerns and needs of passengers, employees, and other stakeholders.

## Situational crisis communication theory (Coombs 2023)

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Timothy Coombs (1995, 2005, 2012, 2019, 2023), provides a framework for understanding and selecting appropriate crisis response strategies. Coombs emphasizes that initial crisis responses should include instructive information (detailing what happened, how it affects the public, and what the public should do) and adjustment information (explaining the efforts made by the organization to prevent a recurrence of the crisis). Following these initial responses, organizations can implement reputation repair strategies.

Coombs identifies four main groups of strategies for reputation repair: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering (Coombs 2019: 26). Denial involves rejecting the existence of the crisis or minimizing its severity, which can be risky if it leads to perceptions of negligence or a lack of transparency. Diminishment aims to reduce the perceived impact of the crisis by downplaying its consequences or shifting responsibility to external factors. Rebuilding focuses on concrete actions and communication about the steps taken to address the situation, learn from mistakes, and prevent future crises. Bolstering is about maintaining and strengthening public support and trust through active, transparent communication during and after the crisis (Coombs 2019: 29).

SCCT also introduces clusters based on the level of responsibility attributed to the organization: "victim," "accident," and "preventable" (Coombs 2019: 26). These clusters guide organizations in determining the most effective communication strategy based on the context of the crisis and public perception. The theory underscores the importance of adapting communication strategies and messages to the specific characteristics of each crisis, rather than relying on standardized responses. This approach highlights the need for

flexibility and context-specific strategies in effective crisis management, with ongoing refinements to the theory reflecting the evolving nature of crisis communication in a digital world.

### Discourse of renewal theory (Ulmer et al. 2019)

The Renewal Discourse Theory focuses on how "public discourse about a crisis can transform an organization through a process of recovery and revitalization" (Ulmer et al. 2007: 130). This theory emphasizes that some crises are better understood as opportunities for substantial change that ultimately benefit stakeholders (Ulmer et al. 2007). According to Coombs and Holladay (2012), renewal discourse involves acknowledging the crisis, offering apologies for any harm caused, and presenting a plan for moving forward.

The theory outlines four key elements for managing crises: learning from failure, ethical communication, a forward-looking perspective, and effective rhetoric (Sellnow et al. 2023). Central to this theory is the post-crisis phase, where the organization recognizes its failings and commits to renewal. This process involves acknowledging responsibility, engaging in ethical communication, and focusing on a compelling vision for the future. It also includes creating a persuasive and engaging narrative to influence and motivate the public.

The framework provided by Ulmer et al. (2007) emphasizes the importance of sustainable change, continuous interaction of elements, and a focus on long-term renewal. Renewal is defined as a new sense of purpose and direction discovered by an organization emerging from a crisis (Ulmer et al. 2019). This theory is generally applied to organizations with a proactive vision that view crises as opportunities for learning and improvement, rather than in political or health crises (Sellnow et al., 2021).

The research addresses two primary questions:

RQ1: How did the crisis communication from the post-crisis phase reflect the response strategies defined in Situational Crisis Communication Theory?

RQ2: How was the renewal discourse demonstrated in airlines' communication responses during the post-crisis time?

### Methodology

This study utilizes a content analysis approach to investigate the crisis communication strategies employed by five major airlines—Delta Airlines, American Airlines, United Airlines, Lufthansa Airlines, and Air France-KLM Royal Dutch Airlines—during the post-crisis period following the COVID-19 pandemic. The period of analysis spans from January 1st, 2022, to March 31st, 2022, a time frame selected to capture the immediate responses and communication strategies as these airlines navigated the challenges of resuming operations and restoring public confidence.

### Data Collection

The data for this study was sourced from three primary digital channels: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These platforms were chosen due to their

widespread use by airlines for real-time communication, customer engagement, and public relations. Initially, 328 social media posts were collected from the official accounts of the selected airlines across these platforms. The posts were retrieved using advanced search tools and filters (Crowdtangle software) that ensured the relevance and accuracy of the data.

Following the initial data collection, a thorough data cleaning process was conducted. This process involved removing duplicate posts, irrelevant content, and posts that did not pertain to crisis communication or the post-crisis recovery phase. Additionally, posts that were mere re-shares of content without significant changes or context-specific adaptations were excluded to ensure the analysis focused on original and substantive content. After this cleaning process, the final dataset consisted of 98 tweets, which were also cross-posted on Facebook and Instagram with slight variations, such as the inclusion of additional images, videos, or platform-specific hashtags.

### Data Analysis

The study employed a deductive thematic analysis approach to examine the collected social media posts. This approach was chosen because it allows for the systematic identification of patterns and themes within the data, guided by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. In this case, the analysis was grounded in two key frameworks: the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Discourse of Renewal Theory.

SCCT provides a structured approach to understanding how organizations communicate during crises, focusing on strategies that protect and restore reputation. The Discourse of Renewal Theory, on the other hand, emphasizes how organizations can leverage crisis communication to foster recovery, renewal, and long-term growth. By integrating these frameworks, the analysis aimed to uncover how the airlines in question navigated the complex landscape of post-crisis communication, balancing reputation management with efforts to project a forward-looking, resilient image.

The analysis was conducted using QDA Miner software, a qualitative data analysis tool that facilitated the coding and categorization of the posts into relevant themes. The software's capabilities allowed for the efficient processing of large volumes of data, ensuring that the thematic coding was both rigorous and consistent. The coding process involved identifying key themes related to crisis communication strategies—such as denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering—as well as elements of renewal discourse, including messages of hope, recovery, and future-oriented vision.

### Results

One of the key findings from the analysis was the strategic use of hashtags by the airlines to monitor and manage conversations on Twitter. The airlines' communication teams created a series of hashtags, such as #10yearschallenge, #LufthansaAndYou, and #BreaktheBias, to gather all mentions in one place. This approach allowed the airlines to streamline

communication, making it easier for stakeholders to find relevant content and for the airlines to address questions or concerns promptly.

These hashtags were often contextually adapted to the specific situation post-crisis, appealing to the needs and emotions of stakeholders. For example, the hashtag #BreaktheBias was used in posts related to International Women's Day, aligning with broader social movements and demonstrating the airline's commitment to diversity and inclusion. By doing so, airlines not only engaged in crisis communication but also positioned themselves as socially responsible entities, attuned to the concerns of their audience.

The deductive thematic analysis (Fig. 1) of social media posts revealed nine prominent themes that were highlighted by the information provided online. A significant proportion of the posts suggested technological or organizational changes, with airlines focusing on innovation and investment in areas that could help them disconnect from the constraints of the crisis.

For instance, some posts emphasized the implementation of new technologies or operational changes that signaled a departure from the crisis mode towards a future-oriented approach. These posts aimed to inspire feelings of solidarity and hope among the audience, showcasing the airline's commitment to growth and adaptation.
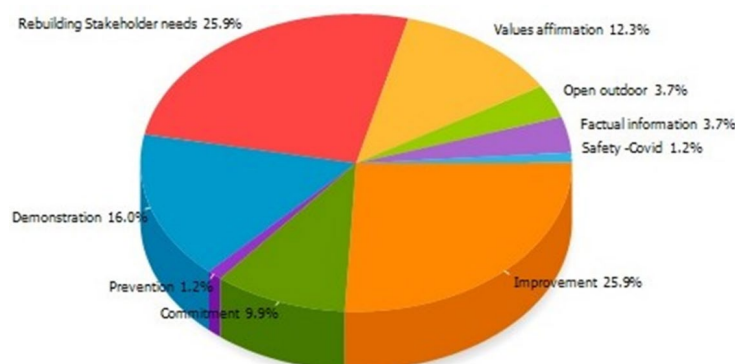


**Fig. 1: Thematic deductive analysis of airline tweets, coding performed by QDA Miner software**

**RQ1**: The analysis of the posts through the lens of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) revealed that the identified strategies were limited in their application. Out of the entire corpus of 98 posts, only five clearly demonstrated SCCT strategies, specifically bolstering and ingratiation. These strategies were typically used to reinforce the airline's positive image by highlighting their involvement in social causes or by expressing appreciation for long-standing relationships with employees and customers.

For example, bolstering was evident in posts where airlines promoted their charitable activities, such as fundraising events for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. This not only reflected the airline's ongoing commitment to social responsibility but also aimed to enhance its reputation by associating the brand with positive societal contributions.

Ingratiation was used in posts that celebrated the achievements of employees or the airline's long history of supporting national events, thereby strengthening the connection with stakeholders and fostering goodwill.

**RQ2**: The content analysis also highlighted a strong presence of renewal discourse in the airlines' post-crisis communication (Fig. 2). The posts largely reflected the dedication and optimism of the airline staff in maintaining professionalism and upholding the company's values.

Many posts included collaborative and dialogic content that treated the crisis as a learning process. For instance, airlines openly acknowledged the challenges posed by external factors, such as weather disruptions and the Omicron variant, and apologized for any inconvenience caused. They also communicated their efforts to prevent future disruptions, thereby focusing on recovery and moving forward with a stronger, more resilient organization.

This renewal discourse was further demonstrated through posts that emphasized the airline's future vision. Posts frequently showcased the airline's commitment to innovation, new initiatives, and the continuous development of its workforce. For example, content highlighting the future of flight training at United Aviate Academy emphasized the airline's long-term investment in the next generation of pilots, thereby projecting optimism and confidence in the future.
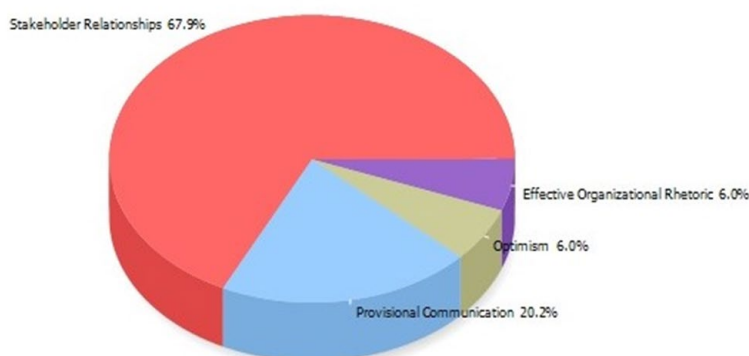


**Fig. 2 : Airline tweet analysis, coding done with QDA Miner software**

**Conclusions**

The findings suggest that in the post-crisis period, airlines have effectively used social media to communicate both crisis response strategies and messages of renewal. While the use of SCCT strategies was somewhat limited, the emphasis on renewal discourse demonstrates the airlines' commitment to rebuilding trust and fostering positive stakeholder relations. Social media has proven to be a vital tool for airlines in maintaining engagement with stakeholders, not only during the crisis but also in the recovery phase. This ongoing communication has helped airlines to not only manage the immediate aftermath of the crisis but also to position themselves for future growth and transformation.

This study has several limitations. The analysis was confined to a specific time frame and a limited number of social media posts, which may not

capture the full extent of the airlines' communication strategies during the entire post-crisis period. Additionally, the focus on only five airlines limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample size, include a broader range of airlines, and extend the analysis to other digital channels to provide a more comprehensive understanding of post-crisis communication strategies in the airline industry.

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