

*Original Research*

# Navigating Turbulence: Crisis Communication of Airlines in the Philippines during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The recent coronavirus pandemic was a black swan event, and the airline industry was one of the most stricken. The crisis that airlines had to face during the pandemic was not just a health-related crisis but a consequential one within their own canceled flights, rebooking concerns, and a surge in refund requests they lacked the liquidity to address. Communication with stakeholders is even more crucial in times of distress. How airlines respond to the crisis shapes their reputation and future engagements. This study aims to discuss what the pandemic prompted in the Twitter communication of the three leading airlines in the Philippines, providing an insight into how they behaved before and during the pandemic, focusing on their message content and delivery strategy. Utilizing a descriptive-qualitative research design, the study thematically analyzes airlines' tweets and customer responses. The study contributes communication strategies that can help airlines instill confidence among passengers during and after a crisis, with an emphasis on instructing information, human connection, empathy, and responsiveness, and demonstrates how airlines can strategically optimize the microblogging platform in crisis communication and customer service support.

**Keywords:** Airline industry, COVID-19, Crisis communication, Twitter.

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## Introduction

### *Background of the Study*

The reality is that no organization is immune from a crisis, and its reputation is on the frontline every time. Crises are a significant threat to operations when not immediately and properly addressed, and how a company responds to these shapes public perception and influences engagement (Coombs, 2007).

Communication is central to the pursuit of crisis management, as this can either repair or damage reputation. How these are crafted is a turning point, and a good grasp of effective strategies would benefit an organization considerably. Crisis management literature supports the relevance of effective communication in handling crises (Khodarahmi, 2009). Given this, it is essential to have a robust communication system and a crisis communication plan informed by evidence-based research.

A recent crisis is the coronavirus pandemic. In December 2019, China reported cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, later identified as a novel coronavirus. It was publicly announced by the World Health Organization in January 2020. They disseminated information on detecting and managing potential cases following what they knew at the time and based on their experience with previous respiratory viruses. The same month, Thailand confirmed a case of COVID-19 in their locale. This informed concerned teams of a possible wider outbreak and led to the series of events following the declaration of the virus as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). As more cases were confirmed outside China around March 2020, the novel coronavirus was declared a global pandemic. (Archived: WHO Timeline- COVID-19, 2020)

The United Nations Development Programme refers to the coronavirus pandemic as far more than a health crisis (COVID-19 pandemic, n.d.). The preventive and control measures observed have shifted societal flow and changed the landscape. Global economic impacts include transport disruption, trade restrictions, and work suspension (Shang, Li, & Zhang, 2021). Companies that are not quick to adapt will likely struggle (Pantano, Pizzi, Scarpi, & Dennis, 2020). Organizations are advised to consider objective reevaluation to account for the changes brought about by the crisis and to integrate digital communications, given their exponential relevance during the pandemic (He & Harris, 2020).

Suffice it to say that all shared the adversity, but the airline industry was one of the most affected. Travel facilitates the spread of the virus (Yu, Li, Yu, He, & Zhou, 2021), and authorities immediately mandated restrictions. In compliance, airlines had to cancel flights, resulting in a \$168 billion loss in revenue within the same year coronavirus was declared a pandemic alone (Bouwer, Krishnan, Saxon, & Tufft, 2022).

In the Philippines, a flag-carrier airline filed for bankruptcy while others sought government assistance, i.e., waiver of airport charges and credit guarantees (Ocampo, 2020). The Civil Aeronautics Board reported that air travel complaints surged by 278% — 91% concerning refunds (Mercurio, 2021). Airlines sought an astounding increase in

payables, which they lacked the resources to address with the decline in passenger demand and consequent loss of revenue. Airlines had to plead for consumers' patience and understanding. The crisis that airlines had to face during the coronavirus pandemic was not just a health crisis but a consequent one within their own. Recent headlines show that airlines in the Philippines are still in turmoil with the issues they have encountered during the pandemic, to the point of the Senate discussing a franchise suspension over insurmountable complaints (Adel, 2023).

Crisis management must be done swiftly to prevent escalating issues and harmful speculations (Khodarahmi, 2009). Here, social media introduces itself as a promising avenue, particularly Twitter, a platform that offers instantaneous and real-time information exchange. Taking into the context of a crisis where there is an overbearing weight of instability and uncertainty surfaces the need for immediate response.

This paper discusses what the pandemic prompted in the Twitter communication of the three leading airlines in the Philippines. This study explores the platform as a potential medium for crisis communication, providing a glimpse into what can be articulated with only 280 characters during turbulent times. This paper provides insight into how they behaved before and during the pandemic, focusing on their message content and strategies. It advances the propositions of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Lastly, this study concludes with recommendations for airline crisis communication drawn from open-ended customer perspectives and insight.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Communication with stakeholders is even more crucial in times of distress. They need to know what is being done to protect them and how they, too, can protect themselves from the threat of the crisis. Dissemination of helpful information and expressions of sympathy and concern can alleviate psychological threats and stress. Knowing how to communicate is as important as what to communicate. Informed strategies exhibit competence and put an organization at an advantage.

Organizations are bent on maintaining a good reputation. It is a valuable organizational asset where the degree of stakeholder involvement is dependent. It also has implications for financial performance. Literature on the relationship between the two variables provides consistent and validated positive results (Gatzert, 2015).

The global pandemic has had a cascading effect to the point of creating a new normal for everyone, and as the landscape changes, so does how we communicate. Message strategies reflect economic conditions (Lee, Taylor, & Chung, 2011). Consequently, there exists an imperative to craft messages opportune to the social situation.

The findings from this study would inform organizational strategies that can be applied in image restoration and reputation management in crises with a similar scope and magnitude as the coronavirus pandemic. It would also contribute to crisis communication literature, particularly on airlines amidst COVID-19.

### *Research Questions*

This study examines Philippine airline companies' Twitter crisis communication, focusing on their response strategies and how customers reacted. It aims to answer the following questions:

1. What were the communication strategies of airlines prior to the pandemic?
2. What were the market/ consumer sentiments prior to the pandemic?
3. What were the communication strategies of airlines during the pandemic? Were these consistent with SCCT recommendations?
4. What were the market/ consumer sentiments during the pandemic?
5. Are there differences in airlines' communication strategies prior to and during the pandemic?
6. Are there differences in the market/ consumers' sentiments prior to and during the pandemic?

### *Brief Literature Review*

#### **Crisis Communication**

Crises are non-routine events that involve social disruption and physical harm (Kreps, 1984), characterized by high levels of uncertainty, a severe threat to goals and values, and a restricted time for a response (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003).

In a crisis, communication is recognized as a key emergency response activity and crucial, as poor communication can worsen the situation (Seeger & Griffin-Padgett, 2010). Crisis communication focuses on responses or what organizations say and do after a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Research on the concept is rather vast, considering it has three stages: pre-crisis, crisis communication, and post-crisis, which respectively translates to preventing crises, responding to crises, and gaining knowledge from past crises (Coombs, 2014). Pre-crisis interventions include identifying potential threats, reducing the likelihood of them occurring, and preparing responses in the event they occur. Crisis communication is the actual use of crisis response strategies to influence evaluators' crisis perceptions. Post-crisis communication concerns organizational learning and social evaluations, e.g., reputation and trust assessment. Previous research on the subject supports that these evaluations are influenced by response strategies (Bundy, Pfarrer, & Coombs, 2016).

A comprehensive examination of the literature supports crisis response as the most researched aspect of crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). It explored image restoration and ideas from rhetorical criticism (Benoit, 1995). It also advanced an evidence-based framework that offers practical implications for public relations practitioners (Coombs, 1999), which extended to become the notable Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Widely applied typologies are from Benoit and Coombs. While the former is the widely-applied typology (Seeger & Griffin-Padgett, 2010), it has been argued to be speculative and limited to case studies (Coombs, 2007).

Renewal is an intentional divergence from image restoration. It concerns how the organization can move forward from the crisis (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2006). The same proponent developed the Discourse of Renewal, recognized as the most optimistic crisis communication theory (Marsen, 2019).

This paper discusses what the pandemic prompted in the Twitter communication of the three leading airlines in the Philippines, focusing on their message content and strategies. Given that it is concerned with communication strategies, a more fitting school of thought for this study is image restoration. It is important to mention that while the coronavirus pandemic is considered an unexpected event that is entirely outside organizational control and is more fitting for a renewal narrative, what the airlines had to face during the pandemic was not just a health crisis but a consequent one within their own. In compliance with control measures, travel was restricted, and flights were canceled. Airlines had to deal with a surge in refund requests, and with the decline in passenger demand, they lacked the liquidity to make immediate refunds, resulting in more reproach.

### Aviation Crises, Response Strategies, and Communication Practices

Previous research on airlines' crisis communications studies plane crashes, power outages, and the infamous 9/11 attacks. Analysis of a press release from Air Asia following a plane crash incident in December 2014 discusses the impact of crisis communication using three rhetorical appeals (Adi & Kartikawangi, 2016) and another demonstrates the integrated use of accommodative and defensive strategies in preventing escalation of a crisis (Ngai & Jin, 2016). A comparison of two major airline crashes in Japan and the United States endorses cultural sensitivity in developing an effective crisis communication plan (Haruta & Hallahan, 2003). A case study of Southwest Airlines' crisis communication strategy during the 15-hour power outage in July 2016 strengthens the case for adopting multiple social channels during crises and readiness to respond swiftly on social media, especially to negative comments or posts (Boamah, 2019).

The September 11 attacks modified security measures for the airline industry. A study of the United Airlines and American Airlines crisis communication presented that both provided instructing information through facts, how the public should act, how the problem is being corrected, and adjusting information through messages of condolences and links to relief organizations (Greer & Moreland, 2003).

A paper relevant to this study examines how four European airlines communicated to their stakeholders during the coronavirus pandemic, analyzing respective web pages, newsletters, and press releases. Findings present the main topics addressed, which included rebuilding and bolstering, e.g., travel safety and new and adjusted services (Nittman, 2021).

## Research Gap

This paper explores the crisis communication of airlines in the Philippines during the coronavirus pandemic. This study contributes to crisis communication research and public health crises—an area yet to be explored, as well as corporate communication during global crises (Nittman, 2021).

Studies on the coronavirus pandemic and local airlines are limited to the effects of the health crisis on airline practitioners and customers. A survey on the effects of the pandemic on practitioners reveals that it has affected airlines' products and services, financial status, and stakeholder relations (Bautista, Canasa, Laurente, & Ashipaoloye, 2022). An assessment of passengers' intent to return to air travel reveals that this correlates with health protocols and that local passengers perceive these measures as far from being exceptionally implemented (Montalbo, 2022).

Airlines in the locale are still in turmoil with the issues they have since encountered. Recently, the Senate discussed possible franchise suspension due to insurmountable complaints (Abarca, 2023). In September 2023, the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines conducted a Media Crisis Management and Communications training where participants from the sector were taught the basics of crisis communication and how it can be managed on social media (Cabayan, 2023). They emphasized the importance of concise and immediate communication during a crisis. From an Emergency Broadcast Training organized by government media outlets and disaster response agencies, the need for the Philippines to improve disaster response communication activities was mentioned (Sevillano, 2022). This study aims to provide recommendations for improvement in crisis communication practices within the local industry and explores Twitter as a potential medium.

Most studies on airline crisis communication analyzed press releases and news articles. However, this form of narrative disclosure is formalistic and undergoes screening and revisions before publication. What a crisis entails are real-time updates, an aspect that is not squarely apparent in press releases. This paper explores Twitter as a potential medium for crisis communication, providing a glimpse into what can be articulated with only 280 characters during turbulent times.

This study also contributes to the literature on Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Further research is required for greater confidence in the framework (Coombs, 2007). This study employs the theory in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, and findings would apply to other victim crises.

### *Theoretical Framework*

#### Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is an evidence-based framework that explains the dynamics of post-crisis communication and reputational protection and offers practical insights derived from experimental research.

Determining initial crisis responsibility and identifying the crisis type is the first step in SCCT (Coombs, 2007). SCCT crisis clusters are victim, accidental, and intentional clusters. These are identified according to salient cues in crisis frames and reflect crisis responsibility and reputational damage.

Victim crises are natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering, and rumors with weak attribution of crisis responsibility, and the organization is perceived as a victim. Accidental crises are unintentional or uncontrollable events, and there is only minimal attribution of crisis responsibility toward the organization, e.g., technical-error accidents and technical-error product harm. Intentional crises are purposeful events with firm attribution of crisis responsibility, e.g., human-error accidents, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeeds.

In this study, the coronavirus pandemic is identified as a victim crisis. First, there is a weak attribution of crisis responsibility toward airline companies, and second, airline companies are likewise considered a victim of the crisis.

Primary crisis response strategies are denial, diminish, and rebuilding (Coombs, 2007). Denial strategies intend to liberate the organization from being responsible for the crisis. Diminish strategies portray the crisis as manageable and that the organization is in control. To effectively deliver solid evidence supporting claims is imperative. Rebuilding strategies aid victims, improve organizational reputation or generate new reputational assets. Secondary crisis response strategies are bolstering strategies. These are further elaborated in Table 1.

Table 1. SCCT Crisis Response Strategies (Coombs, 2007)

<b>Primary response strategies</b>	
<i>Deny crisis response strategies</i>	
<b>Attack the accuser</b>	The crisis manager confronts the person or group, claiming something is wrong with the organization.
<b>Denial</b>	The crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.
<b>Scapegoat</b>	A crisis manager blames some person/group outside of the organization for the crisis.
<i>Diminish crisis response strategies</i>	
<b>Excuse</b>	A crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to harm or claiming an inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.
<b>Justification</b>	A crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.
<i>Rebuild crisis response strategies</i>	
<b>Compensation</b>	Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.

<b>Apology</b>	A crisis manager indicates that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.
<b>Secondary crisis response strategies</b>	
<i>Bolstering crisis response strategies</i>	
<b>Reminder</b>	Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.
<b>Ingratiation</b>	The crisis manager praises stakeholders and reminds them of past good works by the organization.
<b>Victimage</b>	Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is also a victim of the crisis.

SCCT recommends instructing information alone or a deny response strategy under the victim cluster, diminish under the accident cluster, and an apology in the intentional cluster. Ethically, the priority in any crisis is to protect stakeholders from harm before the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Releasing general information about safety measures is recommended before selecting a crisis response strategy.

The more research tests the theory, the more confidence organizations can gain with its application. SCCT is the most widely applied crisis communication theory (Macnamara, 2021), and extant literature supports it as a valid and reliable framework for predicting stakeholder perceptions and communicating appropriate responses (Effiong, 2014).

### *Conceptual Framework*

Collated data were thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. This study employs an inductive analysis of the semantic themes of the corpora.

The tweets were analyzed for communication strategies prior to and during the pandemic, answering research questions 1 and 3, respectively. These were then compared for emerging differences in the attempt to address research question 5 and the first hypothesis. Consumer responses and sentiments for both phases were also analyzed, answering research questions 2 and 4. A comparative analysis addresses research question 6 and the second hypothesis. This is illustrated in Figure 1.



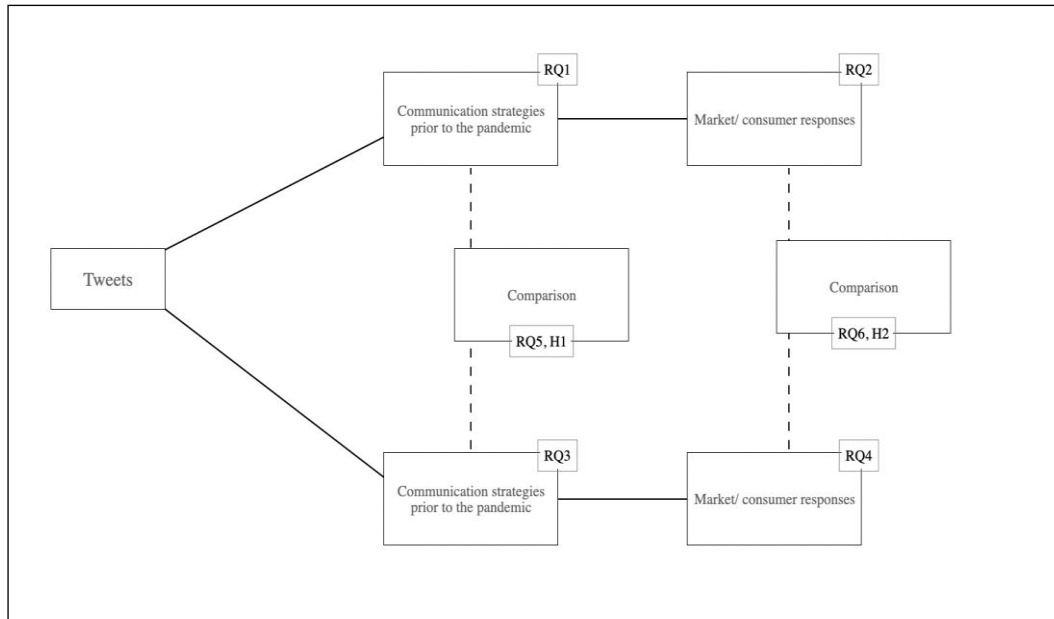


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

### *Hypotheses*

A crisis causes instability and uncertainty, which creates a need for information (Coombs, 2007). He added that this uncertainty produces stress for stakeholders and that expressions of sympathy and concern help alleviate this. An informed crisis communication plan can address these concerns, and an effective one proves productive for the audience and the organization that disseminated them. How these are crafted is a turning point for organizations. These reflect their values, show their priorities, and influence how they are publicly received or shape their reputation. The degree of stakeholder involvement is dependent on this aggregate evaluation. The literature review supports that organizations craft messages opportune to the social situation. Given the mentioned motivations, it can be hypothesized that:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is a difference in the communication strategies of the Philippine airline industry on Twitter before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coombs also asserted that communication affects stakeholders' perceptions in a crisis, which provides for the second hypothesis:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** There is a difference in the market's responses to the communication strategies of the Philippine airline industry on Twitter before and during the pandemic.

## Methodology

A descriptive-qualitative approach was used to conduct the research. The corpus of the study is a collection of tweets and replies from the official Twitter accounts of the leading airline companies in the Philippines in two phases: prior to the pandemic (November 2019- January 2020) and during the pandemic (February- May 2020). The timeframe follows news headlines in the country. These companies are Cebu Pacific, Philippine Airlines, and Air Asia Philippines.

Cebu Pacific is famous for their games that provide entertainment to passengers on board. Philippine Airlines is a flag-carrier airline with a significant role in boosting the tourism industry and stimulating economic growth. Their promotions are not limited to offered products and services but also include local travel destinations. Air Asia Philippines is a subsidiary of the Air Asia group, hailed as the world's best low-cost carrier.

A total of 1129 tweets were collated—218 tweets and 159 replies prior to the pandemic and 211 tweets and 541 replies during the pandemic. The replies were gathered through a systematized random sampling, selecting one after every five. Notedly, only replies to main tweets were considered, and for every main tweet, there were five replies. It is important to note that not every main tweet could be collected with five replies due to the limited data.

The corpus was thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis phases. Their analysis deliberated the following decisions: inductive or theoretical thematic analysis, semantic or latent themes, and realist or constructionist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher decided with an inductive analysis of semantic, realist themes. This means that the analysis is data-driven, and the themes coded are explicit data, allowing investigation for motivation and experiences. The tweets were then coded following this and sorted to form an overarching idea. The coding process was not linear and demanded a constant review of initial codes. Finally, these were named and defined.

The replies were analyzed for sentiments and themes. The development of sentiment analysis concurs with the proliferation of social media and user-generated content (Zhang & Liu, 2016). This is useful in feedback research, which helps companies improve their products and services and their relationship with customers and other external stakeholders (Cambria, Schuller, Xia, & Havasi, 2013). This study performs sentiment analysis manually and according to polarity, allowing comparative analysis. Five degrees of intensity are assigned— positive, slightly positive, neutral, slightly negative, and negative. This is to capture the nuance and multifaced characteristics of human emotion. Like thematic analysis, the process demanded a constant review of coded data according to context and intensity.

Both analyses, which required coding, are performed by a single coder. This is one of the weaknesses of this study. Qualitative research often requires at least two coders to enhance the credibility of findings. However, the researcher ensures careful attention to the data and validates codes through a constant review. Given that this is descriptive-

qualitative research, no variables are manipulated, and a position of neutrality is maintained.

## **Findings**

### *Airlines' communication strategies prior to the pandemic*

Following an inductive thematic analysis, the researcher recognized three overarching semantic themes: informing, promoting the organization, and appealing to the audience's emotions.

Informing is an act of conveying relevant details and important knowledge to a group of individuals. The emergence of informing tweets suggests that airlines are concerned with passengers' convenience, as informing them of changes and providing relevant information helps them avoid unnecessary troubles later. Informing has two sub-themes: advisory and announcements. Advisories provide status updates following live events such as typhoons and lightning warnings. These also provide guidance and recommendations on how the public or their customers should act about specific situations. Advisories are often tweeted in threads for a more coherent presentation and to include as much relevant information as possible, given the platform's character limit. Conversely, announcements provide status updates but do not necessarily follow up a call to action. These are often flying reminders and lists of canceled flights.

Organizational promotion serves to attract new customers and retain existing ones. This is achieved by employing strategies and tactics that can situate an organization in a favorable light. There are four sub-themes under organizational promotion: conscientiousness, compensation, promotion, and gimmicks. Conscientiousness projects quality service, instilling confidence in existing and new customers. It shows how responsible and reliable an organization is and how it is worthy of customers' loyalty and trust. It is important to mention that this is only evident within the Cebu Pacific data set, the same with compensation. Compensations in this context often follow inconveniences beyond the airlines' control, i.e., typhoons and phreatic eruptions. Airlines are not necessarily obliged to make recompenses for such. For this reason, it appears as a gesture of goodwill, projecting a positive image of the organization.

Promotions here focus on offered products and services. These are designed to attract an audience, increase sales, and enhance organizational image. Gimmicks are attention-grabbing tactics and are promotional by nature. These have entertainment value and invite the audience to participate, e.g., by sharing travel photos, dream destinations, and personal experiences with the airlines. This engagement, in turn, creates more exposure for the organization.

Creating an emotional connection with customers fosters loyalty and retention. Appeal to the audience's emotions gives a human character to these airlines, making them more relatable and deserving of customers' understanding and patience. Extending warm wishes for holidays and local festivals displays festive spirit. These create a seasonal demand for air travel, so airlines promote such events. Airlines resort to appeals for patience and understanding after announcing a disruptive and inconvenient situation to

ask for passengers' empathy during such troubling times. These are often followed by airlines' plans for resolution. Expressions of gratitude convey appreciation for customers' support and patience.

### *Passengers' sentiments prior to the pandemic*

Replies were analyzed for sentiments according to polarity (positive, slightly positive, neutral, slightly negative, negative). Positive replies generally consisted of positive sentiments and expressions of appreciation and gratitude towards the airlines. Slightly positive tweets expressed understanding of the situation and the necessary flight cancellations. Neutral-sentiment replies were mostly inquiries, clarifications, requests for seat sales, assistance, and responses to direct messages. There were also suggestions, i.e., preferred celebrity endorsers and participatory responses to gimmicks.

Slightly negative replies were complaints about airlines' unresponsiveness and lack of information, technical problems, i.e., system glitches, poor customer service, and complaints about automated agents. Negative-sentiment replies consisted of expressions of frustration and complaints. Comparatively, the language is stronger here, and there is a persistent use of the exclamation point.

### *Airline communication strategies during the pandemic*

Analysis of the dataset from February to May 2020 presented two new overarching themes: public welfare and organizational identity. Public welfare concerns passengers' health and safety, providing peace of mind and instilling confidence in air travel. It is an emerging theme during the pandemic and an indispensable attribute. Government agencies and regulatory bodies emphasize public safety amid the current crisis. As with any organization, they expect airlines to employ proactive measures to achieve the common goal of managing the risk of infection and flattening the curve. This is achieved by changing operations to adapt and ensuring preventative measures are observed. There are four sub-themes under public welfare: advisories, announcements, changes in operations, and compensations. Changes in operations are safety precautions and preventative measures, conveying a sense of security and assurance of safer travel. This is an emerging theme during the pandemic. Airlines were expected to adapt their operations to manage the risk of infection.

Organizational identity highlights character and values and reflects organizational culture, influencing how internal and external stakeholders perceive the organization. Both organizational identity and organizational promotion situate an organization in a favorable light. Only that the latter takes a less aggressive promotional tone and is well-suited to the situation.

Organizational identity sub-themes are conscientiousness, promotions, and collaborations. Explicit promotions still emerged during the pandemic. What was particular to the pandemic were promotions of products and services that offered flexibility to passengers, such as unlimited rebooking and travel funds. Collaborations intend to enhance credibility and foster trustworthiness. This is an emerging theme during the pandemic. It also shares the responsibility with other regulatory bodies following

announcements and advisories, projecting that decisions result from careful deliberation with experts.

Appeal to the audience's emotions still emerges, which consisted of appeals for patience and understanding, apologies, and expression of gratitude. Apology is an emerging theme. These are expressions of regret made by airlines following a disruptive event that may cause inconvenience to passengers. Excerpts for each sub-theme are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes, sub-themes, and excerpts

Theme, sub-themes	Airline	Excerpts
Informing, Advisories	Cebu Pacific (January 12, 2020)	"#CebuPacificAdvisory. Taal Volcano eruption. As of 630pm, January 12, 2020. Airport authorities have requested airlines to hold flights to and from Manila as ash caused by the phreatic eruption of Taal Volcano falls over the Ninoy Aquino International Airport."
Informing, Announcements	Cebu Pacific (December 20, 2019)	"Cebu Pacific and Cebgo remind all passengers to allot ample time to get to the airport and go through security inspection, immigration screening, check-in, bag drop, and other pre-departure requirements. To read the full text of the peak season reminder, please see <a href="https://bit.ly...">https://bit.ly...</a> "
Organizational promotion, Conscientiousness	Cebu Pacific (December 14, 2020)	"We are working with the authorities to try to resolve the situation as soon as possible and minimize inconvenience to all our passengers."
Organizational promotion, Compensation	Cebu Pacific (December 23, 2020)	"Passengers booked on these canceled flights may avail of the following options: Rebook flights within 30 days without penalties, Refund tickets in full Store value of the ticket in a Travel Fund for future use."
Organizational promotion, Promotion	Air Asia (January 19, 2020)	"The long-standing best low-cost carrier worldwide has gotten all aspects down pat when it comes to giving a great sky experience—from hassle-free check-in, cheap airfare, and flight connectivity to good food catering. - Manila Bulletin <a href="https://lifestyle.mb....">https://lifestyle.mb....</a> "

Theme, sub-themes	Airline	Excerpts
Organizational Promotion, Gimmicks	Cebu Pacific (December 26, 2020)	“Celebrate your year of travels with these #CEBTravels stickers! Log in at <a href="http://mycebtravels.com">http://mycebtravels.com</a> , take a screenshot of your stickers, and reply to this tweet with your screenshot!”
Appeal to the audience’s emotions, Festive spirit	Philippine Airlines	"What is a better way to celebrate this day of cheer and togetherness than spending it with your loved ones? Merry Christmas from the #HeartOfTheFilipino, #TravelPAL!"
Public welfare, Advisories	Cebu Pacific (February 2, 2020)	"Cebu Pacific Advisory February 2, 2020 (8:00 PM) In support of the PH government's efforts to manage the risks of the Novel Coronavirus (NCoV) virus, Cebu Pacific will cancel flights between the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Macau effective immediately, until February 29, 2020."
Public welfare, Announcements	Air Asia (March 16, 2020)	“AirAsia is opening an emergency help desk in Manila to assist guests whose travel plans are affected by a disrupted service following the Covid-19 outbreak. Click the link below for full information. <a href="http://newsroom.airasia...">http://newsroom.airasia...</a> ”
Public welfare, Changes in operations	Air Asia (May 2, 2020)	"This modified customer journey is rooted in our mission to provide you with a reassuring travel experience, following the highest health and safety standards. Here is what you can expect from us to ensure you enjoy a healthy, safe, and clean environment when we fly again."
Public welfare, Compensation	Air Asia (March 15, 2020)	"[Travel Advisory: March 15, 2020] AirAsia is set to mount special recovery services from Puerto Princesa to Clark and Cebu for passengers affected by the government’s recent restrictions on travel due to the current public health situation.”
Organizational identity, Conscientiousness	Philippines Airlines (April 8, 2020)	“Rest assured that we are doing our best to respond to your messages in a timely manner.”

Theme, sub-themes	Airline	Excerpts
Organizational identity, Promotion	Cebu Pacific (March 3, 2020)	“Book your PISO seats NOW! Grab P1 flights and plan for trips ahead with no worries when you add CEB Flexi upon initial booking. Rebook for free up to 2x and pay only for the fare difference. <a href="http://bit.ly...">http://bit.ly...</a> ”
Organizational Identity, Collaboration	Air Asia (February 14, 2020)	"AirAsia is glad to cooperate with the Philippine government following its recent decision to relax travel restrictions. From the Philippines, AirAsia flies to Taipei and Kaohsiung. Click the link for more information: <a href="https://air.asia...">https://air.asia...</a> ”
Appeal to the audience’s emotions, Apologies	Cebu Pacific (March 13, 2020)	“As we experience higher volume of calls and messages at this time, we ask for patience from our passengers. We are exerting all effort to assist all our affected passengers as we can.”
Appeal to the audience’s emotions, Appeal for patience and understanding & Expressions of gratitude	Philippine Airlines (March 15, 2020)	“We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience and thank you for your kind cooperation during this very challenging time.”

The strength of the thematic analysis is that it can offer a richer interpretation of data. However, the SCCT framework also has advantages as it provides practical insights from experimental research. Instructing information as the most frequent strategy is consistent with SCCT recommendations, denoting successful crisis management. This was followed by compensation, justification, and reminder. Ingratiation, adjusting information, apology, and victimage are among the least employed. It is important to mention that relative to other studies, this paper considers instructing and adjusting information separately, with the former concerned with coping with the crisis physically and the latter psychologically. All three deny response strategies were not evident in the data. Table 3 presents respective coding frequencies and excerpts.

Table 3. Crisis response strategies, coding frequencies, and excerpts

Crisis response strategy	Coding frequency (n=231)	Excerpts	Airline
Instructing information	68%	“[Updated February 6, 2020] AirAsia wishes to inform its guests that it has implemented a mandatory temperature screening of all passengers prior to boarding any domestic and international flight.”	Cebu Pacific (March 6, 2020)
Compensation	12%	“Meanwhile, passengers who book flights until April 30, 2020 (regardless of travel date and route) will get to avail of CEB Flexi for FREE. CEB Flexi allows passengers to rebook their flights up to two times. Simply select the “CEB Flexi” add-on during booking. #COVID19”	Cebu Pacific (March 13, 2020)
Justification	9%	“AirAsia is canceling selected flights between the Philippines and China until March 1, 2020, considering the current health situation.”	Air Asia Philippines (February 1, 2020)
Reminder	4%	“Cebu Pacific has always been committed to upholding the safety of all our passengers and personnel.	Cebu Pacific (March 10, 2020)
Ingratiation	2%	“Our sincerest appreciation for your continued support and patience.”	Air Asia Philippines (March 19, 2020)
Adjusting information	2%	“When the skies open up once again, travel with peace of mind with our enhanced measures and procedures that we've put in place for everyJuan's safety. Let's all work together, so #EveryJuanWillFlyAgain!”	Cebu Pacific (May 23, 2020)
Apology	1%	“We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience...”	Philippine Airlines (March 15, 2020)
Victimage	1%	“Cebu Pacific flights continue to operate as scheduled; however, we have received rebooking and cancellation requests from our passengers in light of COVID-19.”	Cebu Pacific (March 12, 2020)



### *Passengers' sentiments during the pandemic*

Positive replies during the pandemic likewise consisted of positive sentiments and expressions of appreciation and gratitude towards the airlines, and slightly positive tweets expressed empathy considering the situation. Neutral-sentiment replies were mostly inquiries, requests for repatriation or sweeper flights, requests for assistance, and responses to direct messages sent.

Slightly negative replies point out poor decisions taken by the airlines while providing suggestions for improvement. Some have even shared personal narratives on how they are being affected by airlines' actions. Here also, airline practices are compared to those of other airlines, and government agencies are mentioned in the attempt to raise a complaint. Complaints here are about charged fees on rebooking and delayed refunds.

While negative sentiment replies also consisted of complaints, the language is stronger here, and there is a persistent use of the exclamation point. Aside from expressions of frustration, there were also accusations of fraud.

### *What the coronavirus pandemic prompted in airlines' communication*

This section addresses research question no. 5 and the first hypothesis of the study, concerning whether differences emerge in the Twitter communication of the three airlines in comparing employed strategies prior to and during the pandemic. This study supports the first hypothesis.

What the coronavirus pandemic prompted in airlines' communication is the inculcation of confidence among passengers. Organizational promotion prior to the pandemic turned into organizational identity during the pandemic, taking a less aggressive promotional tone.

Promotions prior to and during the pandemic differed. For the latter, products advertised offered flexibility—a conducive attribute considering the uncertainty of times, and the word itself is mentioned in the tweets. Compensations prior to the pandemic were merely law-mandated recompenses. During the pandemic, special and repatriation flights were offered. The former is delivered in a manner that enhances the corporate image, the latter in a way seemingly concerned with passengers' welfare. Conscientiousness during the pandemic emphasizes safety and public welfare, which are indispensable factors.

Sub-themes that were present prior to the pandemic that did not emerge during the pandemic are gimmicks and simulations of festive spirit. This suggests that the airlines are not tone-deaf to the situation and realize which content does and does not resonate well with the audience at such a time.

### *Passengers' sentiments prior to and during the pandemic*

This section addresses research question no. 6 and the second hypothesis on whether differences emerge in passengers' sentiments or reactions to the communication strategies employed by the three airlines prior to and during the pandemic. Findings support the second hypothesis.

Prior to the pandemic, the neutral tone was the most frequent coded sentiment for the three airlines. During the pandemic, neutral and slightly negative sentiments have the same occurrences for Cebu Pacific and Philippine Airlines, while slightly negative sentiments have the most frequency for Air Asia Philippines. This is illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Sentiment Analysis

Positive and slightly positive replies have similar themes for both phases and negative replies. Positive replies generally consisted of expressions of appreciation and gratitude towards the airlines. Slightly positive tweets expressed understanding of the situation. Negative-sentiment replies consisted of complaints, but the language during the pandemic is stronger, and there is a persistent use of the exclamation point. Aside from expressions of frustration, there were also accusations of fraud.

Neutral sentiments shifted from requests for seat sales to requests for repatriation/sweeper flights. Slightly negative sentiments prior to the pandemic were complaints mostly about technical difficulties; during the pandemic, complaints were on refund requests and rebooking fees. These reveal a change in priorities during the health crisis, and the significant number of neutral and slightly negative sentiments suggest that passengers' needs were yet to be addressed or were long overdue. This reflects the airlines' performance and passengers' satisfaction with it.

In this study, the replies do not appear to be directly in response to the message content of the tweet. The reply section of the three airlines became an avenue for passengers to unload their frustrations due to canceled flights and delayed refunds. While it may not provide valuable information about audience reactions towards message content and strategy, passenger outlook can be gathered from the replies, which can impart airline companies with recommendations for improvement.

## Twitter as a viable customer service platform

One of the most recurring complaints was airlines' lack of information and unresponsiveness. Tweets with just attached links were received poorly. This suggests that the airline does not see Twitter as a platform for communicating with customers or instead sees it as supplementary to its other social media accounts. The fact that users are complaining about the seeming lack of information implies they rely on the platform for announcements and updates. A passive response to a crisis reflects the untapped potential of social media and could also lead to negative consequences for the business, such as weakened interactivity and lessened opportunities for public insight (Kim, Chon, & Miller, 2014).

## Being responsive is imperative during crises

Being responsive shows how valuable customer satisfaction is for organizations and may foster loyalty and long-term engagement. Additionally, promptly attending to queries and concerns can benefit a business as it can contribute to developing relevant and up-to-date decisions. There are resources in question in these situations: financial and time. The lack of information only alleviates customers' anxiety and stress.

## Human connection over automated services during crises

There were technical difficulties and complaints, such as problems with the website and system glitches. Problems with website usability are linked to negative sentiments (Misopoulos, Mitic, Kapoulas, & Karapiperis, 2014). During times of crisis, when people are anxious and frustrated, bots are not preferred. People need human connection. The importance of incorporating empathy is emphasized in crisis responses (Slagle, Chatham-Carpenter, McIntyre, & Reed, 2021), an ability that bots have not yet perfected to convey. It may be economical for some organizations, but sometimes it sacrifices customer satisfaction.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study discusses what the pandemic prompted in the Twitter communication of the three leading airlines in the Philippines, providing insight into how they behaved before and during the pandemic with a focus on their message content and strategies. It concludes with recommendations for airline crisis communication drawn from open-ended customer perspectives and insight.

Following an inductive thematic analysis, the researcher recognized three overarching semantic themes in airlines' Twitter communication before the pandemic: informing, promoting the organization, and appealing to the audience's emotions. During the pandemic, emerging themes were public welfare and organizational identity. Appeal to the audience's emotions still materializes. Responses are consistent with SCCT recommendations, denoting successful reputation management. However, this study demonstrates that a positive response is not guaranteed regardless of alignment with SCCT recommendations. The replies were not necessarily in response to the content of the tweets. Nevertheless, the concerns and issues raised are valuable insights and provide

airlines with opportunities for continual improvement. The analysis supports that people need human connection and empathy during crises and prefer live agents over bots. They value responsiveness from businesses at such times, and complaints on this aspect suggest the need for customer service support improvement. On this note, this study supports Twitter as a viable customer service platform. With its convenience and increasing relevance, airlines should leverage the platform and not treat it as supplementary to other social media networks.

What the coronavirus pandemic prompted in airlines' communication is the inculcation of confidence among passengers. There was an emphasis on safety and public welfare, which were indispensable factors during the crisis. A comparison of sentiments before and during the pandemic reveals a change in priorities during the health crisis. The significant number of neutral and slightly negative sentiments reflect airlines' performance and passengers' satisfaction.

Recommendations for further research include extending the timeframe to include post-crisis communication or airlines after travel restrictions and investigating airlines from other regions to compare emerging themes and employment of crisis response strategies from a cultural context.

For management practice, the study recommends that airlines practice responsiveness, especially during crises where levels of uncertainty are high. This study emphasizes public safety for crisis communication, which can be achieved by disseminating instructing information. This study also proposes Twitter as a viable crisis communication channel and customer service platform.

For policy, this study recommends a mandate for the employment of live agents during crises as they are more conducive to passengers' concerns over bots. Conclusively, chat boxes and bots may be economical for organizations, but sometimes they sacrifice customer satisfaction. This study also recommends that airlines coordinate with the Department of Trade regarding prices, fees, and charges and make this information more accessible as a concern of transparency and credibility to avoid escalation of complaints.

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