

**WINGS OF RESILIENCE:
EXPLORING CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY
LEADING ROMANIAN AIRLINES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Abstract

This study investigates the crisis communication strategies employed by the leading Romanian airlines - TAROM, WIZZ Air, and Blue Air - on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), this research analyzes the content and frequency of the airlines' Facebook posts from February to July 2020. The findings reveal how airlines navigated the crisis by adopting specific communication strategies and engaging with stakeholders, highlighting the importance of digital platforms in maintaining customer relationships during unprecedented challenges.

Keywords: *crisis strategies, communication, airlines, customer relationship, Covid-19, resilience, social media.*

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019 marked the beginning of an unprecedented global health crisis that had a profound impact on numerous industries, most notably the aviation sector. The ensuing travel restrictions, border closures and quarantine measures led to a drastic drop in passenger traffic, posing an existential threat to airlines worldwide. The aviation sector was one of the hardest hit industries by the COVID-19 pandemic, facing significant operational disruptions and financial losses (Ellis et al., 2020; International Air Transport Association [IATA], 2020). This paper examines the crisis communication strategies of Romanian airlines, focusing on their resilience and adaptive measures on social media platforms. Drawing on the Situational Crisis Communication

Theory (SCCT), this research examines the communication strategies used by leading Romanian airlines - TAROM, WIZZ Air and Blue Air - to manage the crisis narrative and maintain stakeholder engagement (Coombs, 2019). The SCCT framework provides a theoretical basis for evaluating the effectiveness of TAROM, WIZZ Air, and Blue Air's communications during the pandemic, with a focus on the role of digital engagement in crisis management.

Against the backdrop of COVID-19, a 'victim' crisis according to the SCCT classification, airlines faced the challenge of articulating responses that neither admitted responsibility nor alienated their customer base (Scheiwiller & Zizka, 2021). This study conducts a qualitative analysis of 280 Facebook posts, from February to July 2020, the time when nearly 90% of airlines worldwide were grounded. By examining the content, frequency, and strategic direction of these communications, the research aims to shed light on how Romanian airlines aligned their crisis messaging with the SCCT recommendations and the evolving digital communication landscape. Furthermore, the study aims to contribute to the burgeoning discourse on crisis communication in the digital age and provide valuable insights for academic, operational and policy audiences interested in crisis management in the aviation industry and similar high-profile sectors.

Literature review

Crisis and crisis communication

The search for a universally accepted definition of crisis has continued among scholars, but as Coombs (2019) points out, consensus remains hard to achieve. Each definition often highlights a distinct characteristic of the concept, with Heath and Millar (2004) discussing around twenty definitions. The development of crisis communication shows that it is also described as a threat that requires an immediate response (Fearn-Banks, 1996; Pearson & Clair, 1998). However, communication research is not only concerned with the rapid management and mitigation of a crisis, but also with its subsequent recovery. Scholars in the field often address crisis communication strategies, the effectiveness of different types of messages, and the role of stakeholders in this communication (Coombs, 2019).

Fink (1986) defines a crisis as a turning point, either positive or negative, and emphasizes the importance of prompt response by an organization to avoid potential disaster. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) add to this by highlighting the transformative potential of crises, noting that effective crisis communication can turn a significant threat to an organization into an opportunity for improvement and renewal. These perspectives highlight

the potential and variability inherent in crises, going beyond the traditional focus on mitigation and containment.

According to Coombs (2019), crisis communication is the dialogue between the organization and its public(s) before, during, and after a negative event. This dialogue aims to shape perceptions, restore reputation, and promote understanding and support among stakeholders.

Pearson and Clair (1998) argue that crises are unpredictable and complex to manage, requiring attention to both organizational and stakeholder needs. They suggest that strategic ambiguity may be necessary in some cases to maintain flexibility in messaging.

Littlefield and Quenette (2007) focus on the role of communication in maintaining an organization's legitimacy during a crisis. They highlight the importance of consistent, clear, and timely information dissemination to reduce uncertainty and align stakeholder expectations with the organization's response efforts.

Based on these academic contributions, the literature review therefore asserts that crises are dynamic events that challenge organizations not only to communicate effectively, but also to adapt, transform and potentially capitalize on unexpected changes. Each crisis presents a unique set of circumstances that require tailored communication strategies, as posited by the SCCT (Coombs et al., 2007). What's more, it is vital for organizations to assess not only the immediate impact of a crisis, but also its long-term effects on public safety, financial stability and reputation, and to develop a communication strategy that addresses both current needs and future implications.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed Timothy Coombs, provides a strategic framework for organizations to communicate effectively during a crisis. SCCT suggests that the way an organization responds to a crisis can either mitigate or exacerbate the damage to its reputation (Coombs, 2007). Central to SCCT is the notion that the crisis response should be aligned with stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's responsibility for the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

At the centre of SCCT is the crisis response strategy, which is divided into three types of crisis - victim, accident and preventable - each of which requires different communication tactics. Coombs (2007) outlines that organizations perceived as victims warrant expressions of concern without admission of responsibility, whereas preventable crises require more accommodating strategies such as apologies or restitution.

The extension of SCCT includes the integration of social media as a dynamic platform for crisis communication, reflecting the theory's adaptability to contemporary communicative practices (Coombs, 2019). Coombs (2019) further explored the role of SCCT in digital environments, acknowledging the rapid dissemination of information and increased stakeholder engagement facilitated by online platforms.

SCCT highlights the importance of a crisis communication plan tailored to the specifics of the crisis situation and stakeholder expectations (Coombs, 2007). This contingency approach is consistent with the findings of Claeys and Cauberghe (2014), who suggest that SCCT-informed strategies can mitigate reputational damage when organizations select and implement crisis responses that are congruent with stakeholder attributions.

The airline industry and the Covid-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant challenge to the aviation industry, requiring a rapid reassessment and adaptation of crisis communication strategies. In this context, airlines and aviation authorities were forced to navigate a changing landscape characterised by uncertainty, travel restrictions and changes in consumer behaviour (Scheiwiller, Zizka, 2021).

In the early stages of the pandemic, airlines were faced with a sudden drop in travel demand and the rapid implementation of travel restrictions (Fontanet-Perez, Vasquez, Carou, 2022, p. 647). This required clear and transparent communication with passengers about flight cancellations, refunds and rescheduling options. At the same time, companies had to communicate with employees and stakeholders about safety measures, operational changes and financial implications (Chevtaeva, Guillet, 2021, p. 168).

According to Chevtaeva and Guillet (2021, p. 168), the pandemic accelerated the use of technology in airline crisis communication. Social networks, mobile apps and websites have become key channels for rapidly disseminating information and interacting with travellers. These platforms have enabled airlines to provide real-time updates, answer travellers' questions and manage expectations.

Fontanet-Perez, Vasquez and Carou (2022) highlighted the challenges faced by the US airline industry, including the need to navigate a landscape of ever-changing restrictions and fluctuating demand. This required clear and dynamic communication to manage traveller expectations and respond effectively to change.

By analysing the pandemic crisis communications of the 20 most profitable airlines (by net profit), researchers Scheiwiller and Zizka (20/21) confirmed the importance of transparent

communication of safety measures. They found that these airlines provided detailed information on hygiene procedures, use of protective equipment and on-board safety protocols throughout the pandemic.

Chevtaeva and Guillet (2021) found that rapid adaptability to changes in policies and regulations was key to maintaining traveller confidence, and that clear and consistent communication was essential to manage the uncertainty created by frequent changes in travel restrictions.

In conclusion, one of the key lessons learned was the need for proactive and transparent communication. Companies that were able to effectively communicate security measures and policy changes were able to maintain higher levels of customer confidence. Effective use of digital channels, such as social media and mobile apps, was also crucial to reach a wider audience and provide real-time updates (Chevtaeva, Guillet, 2021, p. 168).

Research on airlines operating in Romania during the COVID-19 period could provide valuable insights into how the local context influenced crisis management. This could identify gaps in research, such as how cultural perceptions and expectations of Romanian customers influenced the effectiveness of communications. Such studies could provide valuable information to improve crisis communication practices in Romania and globally, helping to better prepare airlines for future crises.

This study aims to examine the applicability and efficacy of SCCT in the airline industry by addressing the following two research questions:

RQ1: Have the airlines communicated correctly according to the SCCT?

RQ2: What was the most common crisis response strategy used by the airlines?

Data collection and analysis

The data collection for this study focused on investigating the crisis communication strategies adopted by airlines during a period of unprecedented industry disruption. The sample consisted of Facebook posts by various airlines from February to July 2020, a critical window of time when nearly 90% of airlines worldwide were grounded, resulting in an estimated industry loss of \$252 billion in 2020 (Perez, Vasquez, & Carou, 2022). The rationale for selecting Facebook as a data source was its widespread use as a corporate communication platform, enabling real-time interaction between airlines and their stakeholders.

An initial corpus of 280 Facebook posts from official airline pages was compiled using a manual retrieval method. This period was characterised by a high volume of communication from airlines to their stakeholders, providing a rich dataset for analysis. The selection of posts was driven by relevance to crisis communication, including announcements, policy changes, safety measures and customer service responses related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on airline operations.

Prior to analysis, data cleaning procedures were undertaken to ensure the quality and relevance of the dataset. Posts that did not directly relate to the crisis communication or were duplicates were removed. This process was completed using a combination of automated filtering algorithms and manual inspection. Upon completion of these procedures, the final sample size was reduced to 197 Facebook posts. These posts were in the public domain and readily accessible for analysis, thus aligning with the ethical considerations of research transparency and public data usage.

For data analysis, qualitative content analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the crisis communication strategies reflected in the Facebook posts. A coding framework was developed based on the principles of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which allowed posts to be categorized into SCCT's crisis response strategies: deny, diminish and rebuild (Coombs, 2007).

Quantitative analysis was also used to measure the frequency of each crisis response strategy. This allowed the identification of the most frequently used strategies by the airlines during the specified time period.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the airlines' communication approaches during a significant crisis period. The findings of this study are intended to contribute to the body of knowledge on crisis communication in the airline industry, particularly in the context of digital media platforms.

Methodology

This study used deductive thematic analysis to investigate crisis communication strategies used by airlines on their Facebook platforms. The analysis followed W. Timothy Coombs' (2019) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework, with a focus on crisis response strategy classification (Fig. 1).

The study collected a large dataset using Crowdtangle, a comprehensive social media monitoring tool. A total of 280 Facebook posts were collected from the official pages of Wizz

Air, Tarom, and Blue Air. These posts were selected to cover a diverse array of communication actions related to crisis management during the research period.

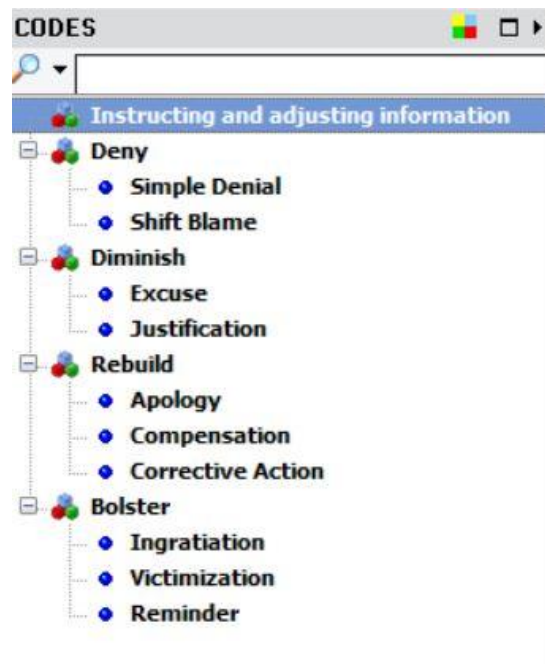


Figure 1. Coding schemes – SCCT framework

The qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner 6.0 was used for the coding process. The collected files were initially imported into QDA Miner 6.0. A systematic coding procedure was implemented following Coombs' SCCT. The data was classified into Coombs' established crisis response clusters and strategies using a structured and theory-driven coding scheme.

To ensure methodological integrity, QDA Miner 6.0 was used for coding, facilitating a nuanced and in-depth examination of the Facebook posts. Each post was coded individually, using the software's capabilities to efficiently manage and analyze the qualitative data. The analytical tools provided by the software allowed for the operationalization of Coombs' crisis response clusters and strategies within the data set, resulting in a thorough and focused analysis (Fig. 2).

To gain initial insights into the prevalent themes in crisis communication by airlines during the pandemic, we conducted an analysis of the most frequently used words in their Facebook posts. This examination of lexical choices provided a preliminary understanding of the focus areas in the early stages of the study.

Category	Code	Description
Deny	Simple Denial	The organization flatly denies any involvement or responsibility for the crisis.
Deny	Shift Blame	Blaming others, external factors, or even the victims to deflect responsibility.
Diminish	Excuse	Offering explanations or justifications to mitigate the perceived severity of the crisis.
Diminish	Justification	Acknowledging the crisis but arguing that the actions were necessary or unavoidable.
Rebuild	Apology	Issuing a sincere apology and taking full responsibility for the crisis.
Rebuild	Compensation	Offering compensation to victims or affected parties.
Rebuild	Corrective Action	Demonstrating a commitment to addressing the issues that led to the crisis and preventing a recurrence.
Bolster	Ingratiation	Emphasizing positive aspects of the organization to counterbalance the negative image created by the crisis.
Bolster	Victimization	Portraying the organization as a victim of external forces or unforeseeable events.
Bolster	Reminder	Involves reminding stakeholders of the positive contributions and past successes of the organization.

Figure 1. Codes explanation - SCCT (QDA Miner 6)

The frequency analysis showed that airlines focused their communications during the pandemic on key topics such as 'travel policies', 'safety measures', and 'flight schedules'. This linguistic pattern reflects the urgency with which airlines needed to inform their stakeholders about the dynamic changes affecting travel plans and operational protocols (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. Airlines posts Wordcloud (QDA Miner software)

Furthermore, the airlines' responsiveness to external regulatory changes and public health mandates was highlighted through their significant emphasis on 'travel restrictions' and 'health protocols'. This aligns with the need for airlines to comprehensively address traveler concerns and keep the public informed of the latest developments and safety procedures.

The airlines prioritized communication related to customer support, as evidenced by frequent references to cancelled or rescheduled flights. This focus suggests a commitment to providing clear guidance and assistance to passengers affected by the disruptions caused by the pandemic, highlighting the airlines' dedication to customer service during a crisis.

Results

The study's results support the airlines' successful implementation of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) guidelines in communicating about their crisis. The content analysis showed that the airlines were aware of the potential for the crisis to continue and used a variety of crisis response strategies beyond basic responses, which aligned with their communication needs (Fig. 4).

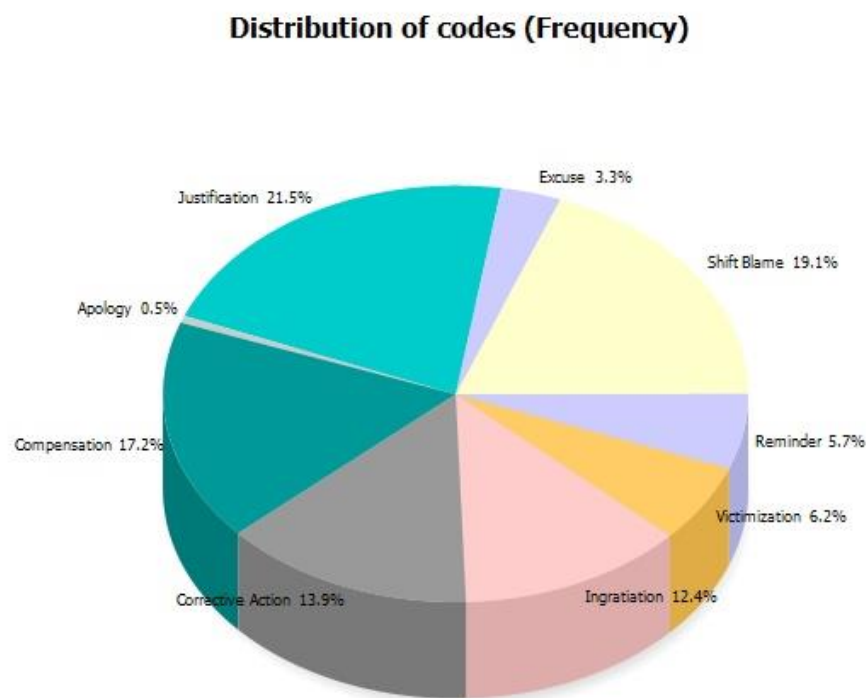


Figure 3. Thematic deductive analysis of airlines Facebook posts (QDA Miner software)

The analysis of the airlines' Facebook posts identified the use of five crisis response strategy clusters, consistent with SCCT: (1) providing information and updates, (2) denial, (3)

minimization, (4) rebuilding, and (5) bolstering. These strategies aim to offer guidance, correct misinformation, express denial or shift blame, offer compensation or apologies, and improve the organization's image through reminders of past good works, respectively.

Figure 4 demonstrates a varied approach to crisis communication, with the following frequencies observed:

- Justification, as a form of diminish strategy, was the most frequently observed at 21.5%.
- Shift Blame, another diminish strategy, followed closely at 19.1%.
- Compensation, associated with the rebuild cluster, accounted for 17.2%.
- Corrective Action, integral to rebuild strategies, was implemented in 13.9% of the posts.
- In the study, ingratiation was noted in 12.4% of cases, victimization in 6.2%, reminders in 5.7%, and excuses in 3.3%.
- Apologies, a key aspect of rebuild strategies, were rare, comprising only 0.5%.

This distribution suggests a preference for strategies within the diminish cluster, signifying an attempt by airlines to reduce the perceived severity of the crisis or their responsibility in it. The relative rarity of apologies may indicate a cautious approach to accepting blame or the complexity of liability in crisis situations.

The study's findings emphasize the changing nature of crisis communication in the digital age, highlighting the significant role of social media as a platform for engaging with stakeholders during crises. The airlines examined in this study demonstrated the strategic use of Facebook posts, showing that timely, relevant, and supportive communication can greatly contribute to building relationships and gaining stakeholder support during difficult times.

The airlines were able to maintain an ongoing dialogue with their stakeholders through digital channels, which provided constant connectivity. This ensured that stakeholders received up-to-date content addressing the unfolding crisis, reinforcing the relevance of the airlines' communications. By disseminating content that was responsive to the crisis and relevant to stakeholders' concerns, the airlines created a sense of community and shared understanding.

This, in turn, led to increased engagement with their content. Furthermore, the communication strategies employed by the airlines created an environment that facilitated the satisfaction of information needs. The frequent interactions with the airlines' posts indicate that stakeholders were not merely passive recipients of information, but active participants in the communication process, seeking clarification, reassurance, and support.

During the crisis, the airlines' posts did not solely focus on immediate recovery and renewal, but also emphasised growth and transformation. This reflects a strategic pivot from mere survival to leveraging the crisis as a catalyst for positive change. The airlines' communication strategies revealed an intention to not just return to the status quo, but to evolve and improve, positioning themselves for resilience in the future.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significance of stakeholder-centric communication strategies for airlines when using social media for crisis communication. These strategies should focus on meeting information needs, supporting stakeholders, and building relationships that can withstand the challenges posed by crisis events. The airline communication during this period exemplifies the transformative power of crisis communication. It not only manages a crisis but also paves the way for organizational growth and transformation.

Limitations

Although this study offers valuable insights into the crisis communication strategies employed by airlines on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has several limitations that must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study exclusively focused on Facebook posts. While Facebook is a widely used platform for corporate communication, airlines also use other social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. These platforms have varying user demographics and engagement patterns, which could affect the type and reception of crisis communication content. By excluding these platforms, the comprehensiveness of the assessed communication strategies is limited.

Furthermore, the study only analyzed posts from three airlines, which may not be representative of the entire aviation industry. The crisis communication strategies of these airlines may have been influenced by their corporate culture, size, geographic location, or customer demographics. However, this limited scope may affect the generalizability of the findings to other airlines or the industry as a whole.

Additionally, the analysis was based on quantitative frequency counts of SCCT strategies, which may overlook the nuances of how these strategies were implemented and received by stakeholders. The text is already objective, clear, and concise. The language is formal and free from grammatical errors. The sentence structure is logical and the technical

terms are used consistently. The text adheres to conventional structure and formatting features. Therefore, no changes are necessary.

Finally, the time frame of the study spanned from February to July 2020, capturing the early stages of the pandemic. As the pandemic progressed, airlines likely adapted their communication strategies in response to changing circumstances. A longitudinal approach that examines the evolution of crisis communication over the entire course of the pandemic could provide a more dynamic view of how airlines adjust their strategies over time.

Future research could address these limitations by including a broader range of social media platforms, a more diverse sample of airlines, and a longer time frame. Moreover, incorporating qualitative analyses and considering cultural factors could deepen the understanding of crisis communication in the aviation industry during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

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Appendix 1. Textual example

Category	Code	Case	Text
Deny	Shift Blame	Blue Air	We know this is a particularly difficult time for all those affected by the flight cancellations. And we know that all our colleagues in the support department are working hard to respond to the extraordinary number of requests and to limit waiting times.
Deny	Shift Blame	Blue Air	As a result of the authorities' decision to extend the national state of alert until 15 August 2020, and the ban on all flights to/from countries not in the "Green Zone" mentioned in the list issued by the CNSU, Blue Air is forced to cancel flights to/from Stockholm (ARN) until 15 August and to/from Tel Aviv until 31 August.
Deny	Shift Blame	Blue Air	Due to restrictions imposed by the Italian and Cypriot governments on passengers arriving from Romania, Blue Air is forced to cancel a significant number of flights between Romania and Italy and between Romania and Cyprus.
Deny	Shift Blame	WIZZ Air	In accordance with the decisions of the Romanian authorities, Wizz Air announces that, as of 18 March, it is suspending all flights to and from Spain.
Deny	Shift Blame	WIZZ Air	Given the current epidemiological context, we are obliged to limit interaction on board our aircraft by applying protective measures, namely: temporarily suspending in-flight catering and offering free water on request.
Deny	Shift Blame	TAROM	TAROM, like all airlines operating flights to and from the countries affected by COVID-19, is currently facing an unprecedented situation. The measures taken at global level to prevent the spread of the new virus and limit the epidemic are also having an impact on TAROM's flight schedule.
Deny	Shift Blame	TAROM	Given the current epidemiological context, we assure you that we are making every effort to keep as many flights as possible open. We are obliged to limit interaction on board our aircraft by applying protective measures, namely: temporary suspension of in-flight catering and the provision of free water on request.

Appendix 2. Textual example

Diminish	Justification	According to the decisions of the Romanian authorities, Blue Air announces that, as of 18 March, it is suspending all flights to and from Spain.
Diminish	Justification	Given the current epidemiological context, we are forced to limit interaction on board our aircraft by applying protective measures, namely: temporarily suspending in-flight catering and offering water, free of charge, on request.
Diminish	Justification	TAROM, like all airlines operating flights to and from the countries affected by COVID-19, is currently facing an unprecedented situation. The measures taken at global level to prevent the spread of the new virus and limit the epidemic are also affecting TAROM's flight schedule.
Diminish	Justification	Given the current epidemiological context, we assure you that we are doing our utmost to keep as many flights open as possible. We are obliged to limit interaction on board our aircraft by applying protective measures, namely: temporary suspension of in-flight catering and provision of water, free of charge, on request.
Diminish	Justification	We know you want to be informed and we are working on this all the time. But due to the sheer volume of requests, we cannot respond as quickly as we would like.
Diminish	Justification	Due to entry restrictions imposed by the Jordanian authorities in order to limit the COVID-19 pandemic, TAROM suspends operations to/from Amman as of 16 March 2020.

Appendix 3 Textual example

Category	Code	Text
Bolster	Ingratiation	We stay at home these days, and this is the best way to show our solidarity with our doctors, with the authorities, our neighbors and with the whole community.
Bolster	Ingratiation	We are alone, but not lonely We are now spending more time with friends and family, even if it's just on the phone or through video calls
Bolster	Ingratiation	Social distance = love Instead of big hugs, handshakes and getting together downtown, we show we care by keeping the distance and protecting our loved ones. #TheCoronaParadox #COVID19 #stayathome #SocialDistance #love #together #BlueAir
Bolster	Ingratiation	We have the best seats at every show The greatest theatres and opera houses are broadcasting their shows for free, and we have the best possible seats, right in our living room. The Metropolitan Opera Bulandra Andrew Lloyd Webber #TheCoronaParadox #COVID19 #stayathome #theatre #musical #together #BlueAir
Bolster	Ingratiation	Grandparents are not allowed to go out and play It's our turn to watch our grandmas and granddads: they are not allowed to go outside and meet their friends #TheCoronaParadox #COVID19 #stayathome #family #grandparents #together #BlueAir
Bolster	Ingratiation	Until we can fly again together, we wish you to enjoy the holidays! At home.
Bolster	Ingratiation	We know you have questions about your flight status and we assure you that we work continuously to cover all requests
Bolster	Ingratiation	We fly you home! The priority mission of Blue Air at the moment is to help Romanians who were caught by the announcement of the state of emergency stranded away from the country return home. Between March 17 and March 20th ,

Appendix 4 Textual example

Category	Code	Text
Rebuild	Apology	We know you want to be informed and we are working on this all the time. But due to the sheer volume of requests, we cannot respond as quickly as we would like.
Rebuild	Apology	We apologize for the inconvenience and assure you that passenger safety is our priority.
Rebuild	Apology	The #Tarom company apologises for the inconvenience caused to passengers of flight RO647 and we assure you that we will take all necessary measures to ensure that such inconveniences do not happen again.

Appendix 5 Textual example

Category	Code	Text
Rebuild	Compensation	Change date or voucher? From today, if your flight has been cancelled, it is much easier to change a booking or request a voucher.
Rebuild	Compensation	From today, we are introducing a new individual booking management system, and everything will be much easier.
Rebuild	Compensation	Each affected passenger will receive details of travel options on the email provided at the time of booking the ticket. The options are: 1) free rebooking which can be done directly on the website 2) return of the money to the individual Blue Wallet. If you are unable to rebook for free on the website, please write an e-mail to zbor.anulat@blueair.aero
Rebuild	Compensation	So that you get home safely to your family, we have taken all safety and security measures on board the aircraft and can offer optimal travel conditions. Book now!
Rebuild	Compensation	Future trips can be rescheduled without a change fee or you can request a refund
Rebuild	Compensation	If you wish to reschedule your trip, you can do so without paying the change fee.