



A Study on Airlines' Marketing Messages in the Middle of Covid-19

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<p>Sammandrag:</p> <p>Detta slutarbete undersöker Covid-19-relaterade marknadsföringsmeddelanden publicerade av fyra europeiska flygbolag: Finnair, Norwegian, KLM och Lufthansa. Syftet med detta slutarbete är att studera och analysera marknadsföringsmeddelanden, som publicerades på Instagram av fyra utvalda flygbolag, under mars 2020 fram till mars 2021, för att få svar på forskningsfrågan: Hur har flygbolagen kommunicerat på Instagram under en global pandemi? Denna uppsats omfattar endast analys av marknadsföringsmeddelanderna på Instagram. Den kvalitativa forskningsmetoden valdes för att få en fördjupad förståelse av resultaten, liksom kriterieurval användes, eftersom författaren på detta sätt kunde analysera fyra specifika flygbolag baserade i Europa. Materialet kategoriserades i fem olika teman, vilket möjliggjorde analyser av deras aktivitet, inläggstakt och skillnader och likheter mellan de publicerade Covid-19-relaterade Instagram-inläggen. De viktigaste resultaten var att flygbolagen mest fokuserade på säkerheten ombord och på flygplatsen. Lufthansa var den mest aktiva, med sina 78 Instagram-inlägg relaterade till Covid-19, medan Norwegian var minst aktiv, med sina tre Instagram-inlägg relaterade till Covid-19. En signifikant trend märktes när man analyserade dessa marknadsföringsmeddelanden. De flesta av dessa flygbolag försökte skapa olika situationer och minnen som var bekanta för passageraren. Flygbolagen använde ett slags varumärkesaktivering i sina marknadsföringsmeddelanden för att hålla kontakten med sina kunder.</p>	
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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>This thesis investigates Covid-19-related marketing messages published by four European airlines: Finnair, Norwegian, KLM, and Lufthansa. This thesis aims to study and analyze the marketing messages published on Instagram by four selected airlines from March 2020 until March 2021, to get an answer to the research question: How have airlines communicated on Instagram during a global pandemic? The scope of this thesis is limited to analyzing the marketing messages on Instagram only. The qualitative research method was chosen to get an in-depth understanding of the results, as well as the criterion sampling method. This way, the author could analyze four specific airlines set in Europe. The material was categorized into five different themes, which allowed for analyses of their activeness, the pace of posting, and the differences and similarities between the published Covid-19-related Instagram posts. The main findings were that the airlines focused chiefly on safety on board and at the airport. Lufthansa was the most active, with its 78 Instagram posts related to Covid-19, while Norwegian was the least active, with its three Instagram posts related to Covid-19. A significant trend was noticed when analyzing these marketing messages. Most of these airlines attempted to create different situations and memories that were familiar to the passenger. The airlines were using a sort of brand activation in their marketing messages to keep in touch with their customers.</p>	
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<p>Tiivistelmä:</p> <p>Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii neljän eurooppalaisen lentoyhtiön: Finnairin, Norwegianin, KLM:n ja Lufthansan julkaisemia Covid-19-markkinointiviestejä. Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena on tutkia ja analysoida markkinointiviestejä, joita neljä valittua lentoyhtiötä julkaisi Instagramissa maaliskuun 2020 ja maaliskuun 2021 välisenä aikana, saadakseen vastauksen tutkimuskysymykseen: Kuinka lentoyhtiöt ovat kommunikoineet Instagramissa maailmanlaajuisen pandemian johdosta? Tämän opinnäytetyön laajuus rajoittuu vain Instagramin markkinointiviestien analysointiin. Kvalitatiivinen tutkimusmenetelmä valittiin saadakseen perusteellisen käsityksen tuloksista, ja myös ositettu otantaa, koska näin kirjoittaja pystyi analysoimaan neljää Euroopassa sijaitsevaa lentoyhtiötä. Materiaali luokiteltiin viiteen eri teemaan, joiden avulla voitiin analysoida niiden aktiivisuutta, lähettämisen vauhtia ja eroja ja yhtäläisyyksiä julkaistujen Covid-19-aiheisiin liittyvien Instagram-viestien välillä. Tärkeimmät havainnot olivat, että lentoyhtiöt keskittyivät enimmäkseen turvallisuuteen lentoaluksella ja lentokentällä. Lufthansa oli aktiivisin, 78 Instagram-viestiä liittyi koronavirukseen, kun taas Norwegian oli vähiten aktiivinen, kolme Instagram-viestiä liittyivät koronavirukseen. Merkittävä trendi havaittiin näitä markkinointiviestejä analysoitaessa. Useimmat näistä lentoyhtiöistä yrittivät luoda erilaisia matkustajalle tuttuja hetkiä ja muistoja. Lentoyhtiöt käyttivät markkinointiviesteissään eräänlaista brändin aktivointia pitääkseen yhteyttä asiakkaisiin.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis will analyze the marketing messages during the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of four chosen European airlines. The focus will lie on the marketing messages posted on Instagram that are either slightly or totally related to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

A company's most important factor is the consumer. The reasoning behind this is because companies are here to provide solutions to problems. Therefore, the company should be able to adapt to the changes in customer demands, which can again force the company to seize new messages in marketing to maintain its position in its current market (Fifield, 1992).

During the century that commercial aviation has existed, 2020 has left a considerable mark in its history. In the middle of lockdowns and crises that have affected hundreds of millions, the aviation sector has found a way to manage itself (Finnair, 2021 p. 3). According to Finnair's Annual Report 2020 (2021 p. 12), their marketing costs decreased by 84 % because of a decline in sales commissions and payment costs. Some airlines in the aviation sector managed better than others. Norwegian claims (2021 p. 3) 2020 to be its most challenging year so far, as it had to file its cabin crew and pilot companies for bankruptcy (Norwegian Air Shuttle ASA, 2021 p. 6). KLM was prepared for the successful year of 2020 thanks to preparations done between 2014 and 2019 and its 100th anniversary in 2019 (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, 2021 p. 6). According to KLM's Annual Report 2020 (2021 p. 18), compared to previous crises (such as the terrorist attacks in 2001 and SARS in 2003), Covid-19 has had the most impact, having the most significant influence in the world. Lufthansa states in their Annual Report 2020 (2021 p. 5) to have welcomed 36 million passengers on board their flights, which is only a quarter of their usual passenger number.

Approximately 60 % of tourists arrive by plane, and the suspension of air activity has a significant detrimental impact on that industry. This has led to jobs in the aviation sector to have fallen by 46 million, which is a 52.5 % decrease (Airlines IATA, 2021).

Adaptability is an essential skill to possess in the business world. That is because we live in an era of risk and uncertainty, so not being able to adjust to the current norm is an issue. It all comes down to creating successful messages that represent the company and fulfill the criteria set by society (Reeves, Deimler, 2011). Due to the pandemic, marketers have had no other option but to press the restart button and start thinking creatively. Airlines are seeking new ways to build trust between their brand and the passenger. It would be extremely alarming if airlines did not address the problem and strive to create reliable solutions. After all, traveling by plane used to be as mundane as taking the train, for instance. Today, traveling is considered irresponsible if it is just for fun, considering factors regarding Covid-19 (Bogomolov, 2020).

1.1 Research aim and questions

This thesis aims to study and analyze the marketing messages (image + text) published on Instagram by four selected airlines from March 2020 until March 2021. It is vital to remember that we are still in the middle of a pandemic, so there will most likely be even more changes. The focus of the study will lie on the shifted priorities as a means of travel and why it was inevitable to make changes in the first place to the marketing messages before the pandemic struck. Consumers are looking for an airline that takes this pandemic seriously and attempts to ensure virus-free travel, meeting further customer needs.

The author of this thesis decided to make a study about analyzing marketing messages by four airlines in the aviation sector due to interest in the field in question and enhancing the improvements airlines have made to create an updated and responsible traveling mindset. As mentioned above, the focus of this research study will lie on the shifted priorities as a means of travel, which would be the effects of Covid-19 on marketing messages. This study was written in the middle of the pandemic. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic feels more relevant than ever. The pandemic has heightened awareness of health, responsibility, and sustainability.

This thesis aims to give an answer to the following research question:

Q How have airlines communicated on Instagram during a global pandemic?

1.2 Limitations

The scope of this thesis is to collect information through primary and secondary sources to study the marketing messages airlines have reinvented to retain their customers during a global pandemic. This research does not provide a future insight or a financial aspect on the outcomes. To support this study, the author has decided to compare the marketing messages of four different airlines. The four airlines that will be analyzed and compared are the following: Finnair, KLM, Norwegian, and Lufthansa. Rather than analyzing several different social media platforms and websites, the author will be analyzing Instagram only. Doing like so, we will receive a clear but still relevant result. The timeframe will be between March of 2020 until March 2021. The reason for this is because Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020 by WHO (World Health Organization, 2020). The research methodology is done as qualitative research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following chapter will present the theoretical framework of this thesis. This chapter aims to provide an insight into the key concepts that support the results later in this thesis. The marketing mix, as well as marketing communications mix, in addition to digital marketing, demarketing, and CSR, will be explained.

2.1 Marketing mix

The design, price, promotion, and distribution mechanism of concepts, products, and services are designed and implemented to generate and exchange value and to achieve individual and organizational goals. The marketing plan tools need to be determined according to the marketing targets and goals, the target markets, and the marketplace to be defended. The marketer has some resources at his disposal: the marketing mix instruments (Pelsmacker, Geuens, Van den Bergh, 2021). These instruments are divided into four

categories, and they are called the 4 P's: *product, price, place, and promotion* (Kubicki, 2016).

There are three layers in the product tool. The core benefit being sold is the main product. It is the only position in the customer's mind, which has been concentrated on. A brand is a summary, an overview of the core benefit, and all the connections to which it leads. The core product must be converted into a concrete product. The characteristics of the product, a certain degree of quality, the choices available, design, and packaging are essential instruments that make a core benefit tangible. Lastly, the increased product brings more value and consumer appeal to the tangible product. The augmented product on top of a tangible product can be described as a 'service layer'. It includes such elements as delivery time, installation, post-sales services, and concerns about management (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

Once there is the product, there must be a price. Price is the set value of the product, which is what the customer must have to buy it. Each customer has their perception of a product's value. Therefore, the price of a product can be negotiable, which then can be a competitive advantage because the tailored price might be the final factor for purchase (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, He, 2019). There has never quite been as big of a range in selection as there is today, which has led to the customers' skill to evaluate their perception of value to a product. When setting a price for a product, the most significant task is to set the price high enough to make a profit without making the customers feel like they did not receive value for money (Kotler, Armstrong, Parment, 2017 p. 303).

The third 'P' in the 4P's is place, also known as distribution. Place discusses the way to get the product to the customer. In order to do so, the company needs distribution channels. Once there are ideal distribution channels, the company can deliver, distribute or sell the product. However, an ideal distribution channel does not exist just like that. It might take years until the ideal distribution channels are in usage (Kotler, et al., 2017 p. 327-328).

The final 'P' is promotion. There are five categories in promotion; advertisement, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations, and direct marketing (Kotler, et al., 2017

p. 59). When talking about promotion in terms of advertisement (see also chapter 2.3) the highlight is presenting the products, ideas, and services for the consumers through different channels. Channels for this purpose can be social media or radio, for instance. Public relations discuss the importance of creating good relationships with the consumers with intentions to raise a good sort of awareness for the company. Sales promotion is when the company hands out discounts, which they will do in the hope that the consumer will purchase with that discount. Personal selling is when the company reaches out to the customer personally. The marketing in personal selling is personalized to a specific consumer. This can be done in person, or electronically. Direct marketing is when the company contacts the consumer via email, letter, or phone. The marketing that is done through direct marketing is tailored to specific consumers. The company hopes to build long-lasting customer relationships through this. In addition to these five categories, there are other things to consider as well. The marketing mix should be coordinated perfectly, so it makes an impression on the consumer. Things that have been proven to make an impression are form, design, placement, and price (Kotler, et al., 2017 p. 362).

2.2 Digital marketing

Digital media has been around for 25 years, so it is no longer considered as anything new. However, during this quarter of a century, we have seen massive improvements as what comes to digital media and digital marketing. Businesses have found new ways to communicate with their customers. More than 3 billion people worldwide are now actively using online platforms to find products, entertainment, friends and romance, and consumer behavior. The core way businesses market to both companies and consumers has had a significant development over these years (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Today, digital marketing comprises many more forms of interaction with the audience and not just websites. It includes making use of the following '5Ds of managing digital marketing experiences' to enhance consumers' acceptance and to endorse marketing objectives by our enterprises. The 5Ds are the following: digital devices, digital platforms, digital media, digital data, and digital technology. Consumers interact with businesses on the internet with the help of smartphones, tablets, laptops, desktop computers, TVs, gaming devices, virtual assistants, amongst other things forming the Internet of Things (IoT).

Once a consumer has a digital device, they can interact with them through browsing on different apps. Apps used for this cause can be Facebook, Instagram, Amazon, Twitter, Google, etc. For consumers to engage with businesses and businesses with consumers, there are different communication channels. Examples of communication channels are advertising, email and messaging, search engines, and social networks. Businesses need to stay up to date and find their right target markets, and in order to do so, they collect digital data. This data must be protected by law. Businesses use digital technologies to build in-store newsstands and email promotions with immersive experiences from websites and mobile apps (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

2.2.1 Instagram as a social media platform

For this case study, the author has decided to analyze the marketing messages that the airlines have published on Instagram. The reason for this is because Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms today, with over a billion users worldwide. As a result, it has become a part of the daily routine to scroll through Instagram (Antonelli, 2020).

Instagram was created in October 2010 and bought by Facebook two years later. Instagram is considered a great way to stay updated on what other people are up to, as one can follow other accounts and see what they are posting. In the beginning, the users were only able to post pictures on their feed. Now, a user can post videos, add customizable and temporary posts to their stories, upload longer clips to IGTV, shop, scroll through Instagram Reels, and much more (Antonelli, 2020).

The app can be downloaded for free on both iOS, Windows, and Android devices. A desktop can be used to scroll Instagram, but it is very limited compared to a phone. When setting up a profile, a username must be set, a profile picture, and a bio. The profile is customizable from the start until the very end. For instance, if the user is not happy with their username, it can easily be changed into another available one. Adding a location is convenient if the user is creating an Instagram profile for their business. Once the profile is created, the user is set to start following, posting, and scrolling. Since Instagram is a highly visual social media app, one can show appreciation to posts by other users by

physically tapping on the heart icon below a post or leaving a comment by tapping the speech bubble icon. Pictures and videos the user posts on their feed are there forever (unless they are deleted or archived). However, posts uploaded on stories are only available for the next 24 hours unless saved on the user's profile when anyone can go back and watch them. IGTV is where the user can upload and watch videos of a longer format. There is even an app dedicated only for this specific feature. A new feature that was recently added was Instagram Shopping. With this feature, the user can easily purchase items directly from the app without having to exit at any time. Instagram Reels is a feature where the content never ends. Just by swiping up, one can watch video after video. It is also possible to privately message other profiles. This feature is called Direct Messaging (DM) (Antonelli, 2020).

Instagram is a comprehensive tool to analyze posts by airlines within the timeframe of March 2020 and March 2021, because it offers multiple ways to communicate through marketing messages.

2.3 Marketing communications mix

There are several different instruments for marketing communications, each with their own characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021). The following subchapter will present the marketing communications mix by Pelsmacker, Geuens and Van den Bergh.

Advertising is the only form of communication that covers five of our six senses. Therefore there is no other that tries to catch our attention harder. Advertising brings brand awareness and promotes causes, but it also informs, educates, and motivates. The problem is that the markets are full of competition, and advertisements and promotional messages are increasing every second. This means that it becomes even more challenging for brands to stick out and raise brand awareness (Jerome, 2017).

Brand activation can be described as bringing a brand to life through creating brand experience. It involves integrating all available communication resources into an innovative medium to encourage curiosity, initiate experiments, and ultimately secure customer

loyalty. As part of *brand activation* is *sales promotions*. *Sales promotions* involve price reductions, discounts, loyalty programs, competitions, free samples, etc. *Point-of-purchase communications* are also a part of *brand activation*, and those are communications at the point of purchase. They have several methods for communication, for example, displays, advertising within the shop, etc (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

When a brand wants a personal and direct way of communicating with its current customers and new possible customers, it utilizes *direct marketing communications*. Personal ways of reaching out to customers through communications are personalized brochures (with feedback potential, email campaigns, direct response advertising, etc (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

Sponsorships are a way of providing funding, products, resources, and/or knowledge. The organization that is being sponsored has a task that will help the sponsor build brand awareness or reinforce brand or corporate image. This can be done through events, because events are often linked to sponsorships. Media, education, science, and social projects and institutions (amongst others) can also be sponsored (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

All contact between an organization and its audiences or stakeholders comprises *public relations*. Stakeholders are groups of individuals or organizations for which a company wishes goodwill to be created. Some of the essential methods in public relations can be attention generation in press releases and conferences. Publicity is impersonal mass media, but a company does not pay for it, and journalists write the content (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

By communicating a message, marketing communications attempt to influence or convince potential customers. This message transmission can be guided, in which case it is called *personal communications*, to some individually administered individuals. Several recipients who cannot be detected by using mass media to reach a broad audience can also be directed to message transmission. This is called mass *communications*. The most important aspects of personal contact are direct and digital marketing and personal sales. Mass communications are just other advertising instruments (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

The differentiation between *thematic communications* or *image communication* and action communications is another way of categorizing the marketing communication instruments. The advertiser tries to tell the target audience about the brand or the products and services provided through the communication of image or theme. The objective of image communication may be to increase customer loyalty, increase customer recognition and brand choice with target audiences. This may ultimately lead to a positive effect on the target group's behavior (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Integration of marketing communications

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is designing and introducing different ways of convincing consumer and prospect communications systems in the longer term. IMC aims to impact the actions of the chosen audience or to affect the behavior directly. IMC takes possible distribution channels for future communications, all outlets of brand or corporate connections that the client or prospect has with the product or service. IMC also utilizes all means of communication that relate and may be receptive to the consumer or prospect (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

A successfully managed IMC should become a strategic business process. This means that IMC should not only be a way of communicating with customers. IMC is the driving force for the business at any level. It not only promotes products but focuses on the view from the consumer's perspective and operationalizes it for successful brand building. The main characteristics of IMC consist of a profound customer insight and profitable partnerships for marketing communications. In other words, a business should concentrate on learning deeply about the target markets and building profitable marketing communications programs. It is vital that this profitability should be monitored closely (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

IMC consists of six categories, and those are the following: *advertising*, *sales promotion*, *brand visibility*, *public relations*, *digital platforms*, and *personal contact*. They can be used alone or as combinations to maximize the delivery of brand messages. This has shown to be very effective because each category has its strengths and purpose, and

combined, their effect is multiplied. The six categories of IMC are described in '*the communications mix*' chapter above (Jerome, 2017).

2.4 Building trust as a corporate

Trust is, according to this definition, a belief that the person in power exercises this in a way that is favorable to the other, even though there are no possibilities to control the action. To accept a position of dependence is to harbor trust. For instance, an individual cannot know for sure what a can of baby food contains, even though all ingredients are listed on the label, but they feed their child that specific food (Borglund, de Geer, Sweet, 2017 p. 32).

There are four ways for corporations to win over a consumer's trust, but the corporations cannot create trust directly, but indirectly. First, corporations should work on their *trustworthiness*. If they are perceived as credible, the trust of stakeholders or the outside world comes as a response (Borglund, et al., 2017 p. 32).

The first way to build trust is to create opportunities for control, and it is done through increased openness and transparency. It has to do with corporate communication. It is not about passively making all possible information about the business available. On the contrary, transparency is very much an active, communicative act, which also includes assessments of what is worth knowing and what is superfluous (Borglund, et al., 2017 p. 32).

The second way to strengthen credibility is to know what to do. If an actor proves competent, knowledgeable, up-to-date, and experienced, trust increases. Getting an external confirmation of this further increases the value: this is when various certifications come into the picture, which authorize, license, legitimize or otherwise certify educational levels and follow up business results (Borglund, et al., 2017 p. 32).

A third way to increase trust is to strengthen the organization's overall integrity, i.e., the ability – and the employees' – to act rationally, to follow the rules and guidelines that

apply and that the organization has adopted, and to resist various temptations of a corrupt nature (Borglund, et al., 2017 p. 32).

The fourth and final way is *benevolence*. This is about the company showing that it is looking for long-term relationships with its stakeholders to the satisfaction of all parties. Not to put oneself first the expense of the other, not to let short-term profit opportunity control and sacrifice what in the long-term perspective would be preferable. One way to do this is to develop your CSR responsibility (Borglund, et al., 2017 p. 33).

2.4.1 Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

Corporate social responsibility, also known as CSR, has many definitions. However, according to World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2002) CSR is defined as “... *the commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life...CSR is a fundamental concept – like liberty or equality – that is always being redefined to serve changing needs and times.*” (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2002). Piacentini, et al. (2000) on the other hand, define CSR as “...*the voluntary assumption by companies of responsibilities beyond purely economic and legal responsibilities*”. The core meaning of corporate social responsibility is always the same, even though it can be defined in multiple ways with stress on different things. The core responsibility in CSR is always the social and environmental matter (Borglund, et al., 2017 p. 8).

2.5 Demarketing

Demarketing is a phenomenon that occurs when less marketing is made for a product or service, or making a product or service look less worthwhile to purchase. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). Demarketing commercials can be made in places where supplies are highly cost-effective and with little or no profit on demand of a product (Favour, 2020).

There are five reasons for companies to demarket. Occasionally, companies experience that there are too many competitors in the market, so they try to restrain from it through

demarketing. Another reason for demarketing in this matter is to minimize demand at a specific location to which the company is not capable of providing its goods or services. For example, companies might be located in an area where their business is dependent on natural resources; therefore, demarketing comes in handy if the raw materials are not available. A company needs a proper distribution channel in order to get the product or service to the customers and the market. Companies might find demarketing as a solution until they find a distribution channel that is the most suitable for them and their business. Whenever a business operates in an area where the selling price is higher than usual, the company might choose to demarket because selling is not considered beneficial. The final reason for companies to choose to demarket is also one of the biggest reasons, and that is for health reasons. A cigarette company, for instance, might choose to encourage their customers to refrain from their products through commercials. The core purpose of demarketing is to try to make a profit from selling less, and there are a few ways of doing so, as stated above (Favour, 2020).

3 METHOD

The following chapter presents the research method used as a tool to collect information for this study. There are three types of research methods: qualitative research, quantitative research, and mixed-method research. Qualitative data describes the qualities or characteristics of a given topic (Bryman, Bell, Harley, 2019 p. 356). The qualitative research method was chosen to get an in-depth understanding of how the airlines changed their marketing messages to be more fitting during Covid-19.

3.1 Using the qualitative research method

When obtaining information through a qualitative research method, it is considered highly crucial to explain to the reader how the information was collected and interpreted. This is to ensure that the reader can understand it in the context of how it came to be (Taylor, Bogdan, DeVault, 2015 p.189).

Qualitative research is to understand the written or spoken words the way they were meant to be understood. Researchers must be able to set aside their own perspectives of the

world in order to understand how the author sees things. The reader could almost imagine that things are happening for the first time (Taylor, et al., 2015 p.18)

Inductive analysis is used in qualitative research. Rather than gathering data to test pre-conceived models, hypotheses or theories, qualitative researchers derive principles, observations, and understandings from trends in the data. Researchers start with just a few broad research questions. They do not know what to look for or what specific questions to ask until they have spent some time in an environment. They will make decisions about additional data to collect based on what we have already learned about an environment and how participants perceive their interactions as we learn more about it (Taylor, et al., 2015 p.18).

In qualitative methodology, the researcher examines environments and individuals holistically; people, settings, or groups are not reduced to variables but are treated as a whole. The qualitative researcher investigates individuals in the light of their histories and the contexts in which they find themselves (Taylor, et al., 2015 p.19)

For the qualitative researcher, all points of view are worth investigating. Qualitative research aims to investigate how things appear from various perspectives. For instance, the viewpoint of the student is as significant as the view of the instructor. This way, the researcher can create a comprehensive study with different viewpoints, and this way, the study will not lack any crucial information that might affect the end result (Taylor, et al., 2015 p.19)

3.1.1 Comparative content analysis

A systematic approach to media content analysis is vital for the area of media and communication (Esser, Hanitzsch, 2013). According to Neuendorf (2002 p. 10) comparative content analysis is “...*summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented*”. It is typical for content analysis to differ from other types of

analysis; the aim is to mimic the standards of the scientific method (Neuendorf, 2002 p. 11).

The criteria for that are the following:

In scientific research, the primary purpose is to explain a phenomenon by eliminating the most common biases of the inspector, that is, objectivity. Nonetheless, what is socially accepted are "knowledge" and "facts." We agree to believe something is the way it is. Therefore, the question "do we agree it is true?" is rather asked than "is it true?". This is called intersubjectivity. Idiographic and nomothetic investigations are also commonly used in comparison with each other. Idiographic research attempts to completely characterize a particular item or case from a phenomenological point of view, as well as to connect the case's unique characteristics with more universal truths or principles. Nomothetic research seeks to establish generalizable conclusions from many cases and necessitates precise and well-defined questions that must be answered using standardized criteria with well-defined features (see Neuendorf, 2002 p. 11).

The airlines in question for this case study will be the following: Finnair, KLM, Norwegian, and Lufthansa. The observations will be done on Instagram from March 2020 until March 2021.

3.2 Collection of data

The author chose the criterion sampling method because this way, the author could analyze four specific airlines that are set in Europe. The author chose three types of criteria for this specific type of method that all the airlines must fill. The airline in question must 1) be a commercial airline, 2) have an Instagram account, and 3) have been communicating via Instagram during the pandemic. This way, it is intended to ensure that the airlines examined are representative of an authentic research population (Taylor, et al., 2015, p.39)

These four airlines were chosen based on their geographical location and recognizability. The author wanted to analyze four well-known European airlines with different

reputations and follower bases in order to obtain a comprehensive result. The process of collecting the data went as following. Primarily, the Instagram accounts of these four airlines were analyzed. After analysis, the author became aware of a pattern that was repeated multiple times on one or more Instagram accounts; the Covid-19-related posts could be categorized into five categories, which they were later put into.

Sampling is an evident part of the research process. A successful sampling design process should be able to answer the following questions: 1) is a census or study to be used? 2) if the answer to the previous question is a sample, which sampling approach is the smartest? 3) How large should the sample be? These questions help the researcher to fight any errors that might occur in the sampling process. There are three types of sampling (Hair, Page, Brunsveld, 2019).

A successful sampling process goes as following: defining the target population, choosing the sample frame, selecting the sample method, determining the sample size, and finally implementing the sampling plan (in this particular order). The first step, defining the target population, comprises the scope of the study. The second step, choosing the sample frame, gives a working description of the target population. The third step, selecting the sample method, is decided and the decision is dependent on related theoretical and practical issues. The fourth step, determining the sample, which is simply the number of units in the sample. The fifth and final step, which is implementing the sampling plan, is when we take all information we have obtained from previous steps and create a sample (Hair, et al., 2019).

3.2.1 Sampling

In addition to help strengthen the stratified research process, observations of the case companies' social media posts and marketing messages related to Covid-19 were analyzed. The platform used for this was Instagram because it is one of the most popular platforms today. The samples the author chose to observe are Finnair (@feelfinnair), KLM (@klm), Norwegian (@flynorwegian), and Lufthansa (@lufthansa). As of August 2021, Finnair had approximately 218 thousand followers, KLM had approximately 1,3 million followers, Norwegian had approximately 336 thousand followers, and Lufthansa

had approximately 1,4 million followers. Lufthansa is considered the second-largest airline in Europe with operations worldwide, 110,065 employees, and revenue of 13,589 million euros in the financial year of 2020 (Lufthansa Group, 2021).

3.3 Design and processing of the measuring instrument

Like with any of the other data collection methods, this one has its strengths and weaknesses. There is no particular method that is better than the others, but one method might work better in a given situation. The analyzation processes the author chose to use are the following. After choosing four airlines to whose marketing messages were going to be analyzed, the author kept a detailed book of all Instagram posts, the date they were published and if the message of the post was practical or emotional.

After that, the author noticed that the Instagram posts can be put into five categories, and so she did. The five categories are: 1) customer service, 2) border control, 3) safety on board and at the airport, 4) common goals and 5) emotional posts. The posts that were most suiting to be categorized as “customer service”, discussed the informative interaction between the airline and the passenger regarding the outbreak of the virus. Posts that were most suiting to be categorized as “border control”, discussed the safety measures that should be taken into consideration and done before or at the border of a destination. Posts that were most suiting to be categorized as “safety on board and at the airport”, discussed discuss the recommended safety measures that should be taken by both the crew and passengers to ensure a safe environment for everyone. Posts that were most suiting to be categorized as “common goals”, discussed everything that the airlines can do to stop spreading the virus and for the better good. Finally, posts that were most suiting to be categorized as “emotional posts”, the emotional aspect that the virus has caused.

After categorization, the author created tables and counted the posts in each category to get clear results and to be able to put the results into perspective. That way, the author was able to notice some differences and similarities as well, which will be presented later in this thesis.

3.3.1 Trustworthiness in qualitative research

Traditionally, the terms' reliability and validity are considered helpful criteria in research. However, there has been a discussion that these two criteria are not optimal for researchers in qualitative research. In qualitative research, it is more common to use trustworthiness as a tool because the intention is not to measure something but rather to understand a phenomenon (Bryman, Bell, 2007 p. 410).

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this research, the author made sure that the Instagram accounts were authentic. The authenticity was confirmed before analyzing the Instagram accounts when noticing that the account had the official blue verification badge next to the username. Furthermore, to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the author has proceeded with a systematic and transparent documentation of this thesis. In order to ensure trustworthiness, the author has been explaining every single step as detailed as possible, such as the categories where the posts were put, why these four specific airlines were picked in addition to their Instagram usernames as well as the number of followers they have. The author has checked this thesis' grammar and correct spelling in order to ensure trustworthiness furtherly.

4 RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings and results of the four case companies Covid-19-related material (from March 2020 until March 2021). This chapter then proceeds to discuss the findings with the purpose of providing answers to the research question in this thesis:

Q How have airlines communicated on Instagram during a global pandemic?

4.1 The themes defined

The themes that the posts were divided into are explained as following. Posts categorized as "customer service", discuss the informative interaction between the airline and the passenger regarding the outbreak of the virus. Posts in "border control" discuss the safety measures that should be taken into consideration and done before or at the border of a

destination. Posts in “safety on board and at the airport” discuss the recommended safety measures that should be taken by both the crew and passengers to ensure a safe environment for everyone. The theme "common goals" discusses everything that the airlines can do to stop spreading the virus and for the better good. Finally, posts in "emotional posts" discuss the emotional aspect that the virus has caused.

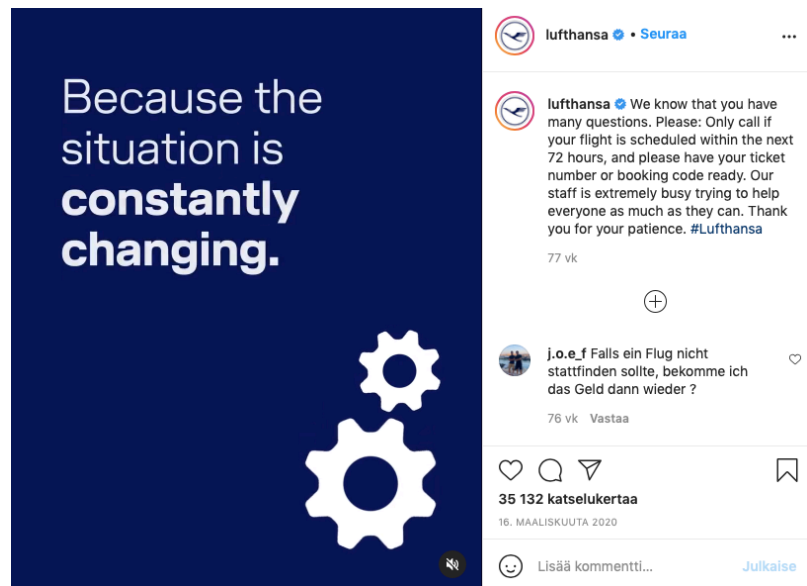


Figure 1 Example of a “customer service” post. Screenshot from Lufthansa’s Instagram (2020).



Figure 2 Example of a “border control” post. Screenshot from Lufthansa’s Instagram (2021).

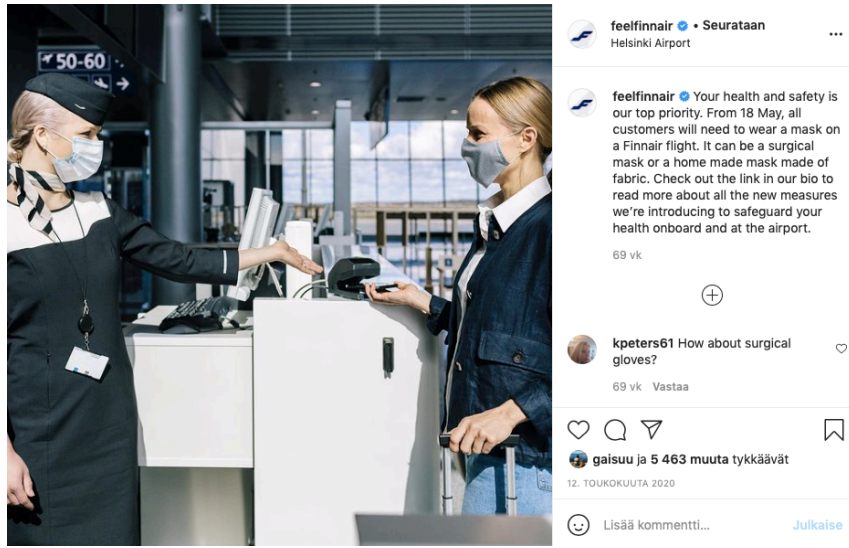


Figure 3 Example of a “safety on board and at the airport” post. Screenshot from Finnair’s Instagram (2020).

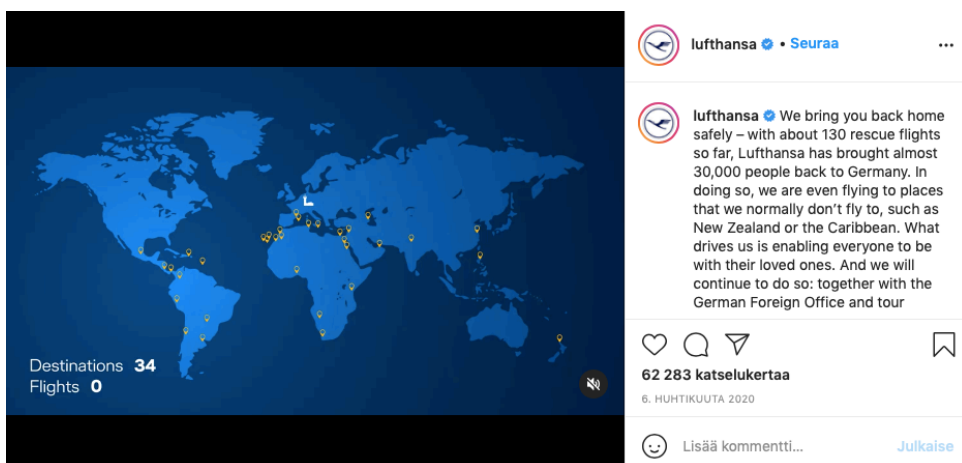


Figure 4 Example of a “common goals” post. Screenshot from Lufthansa’s Instagram (2020).

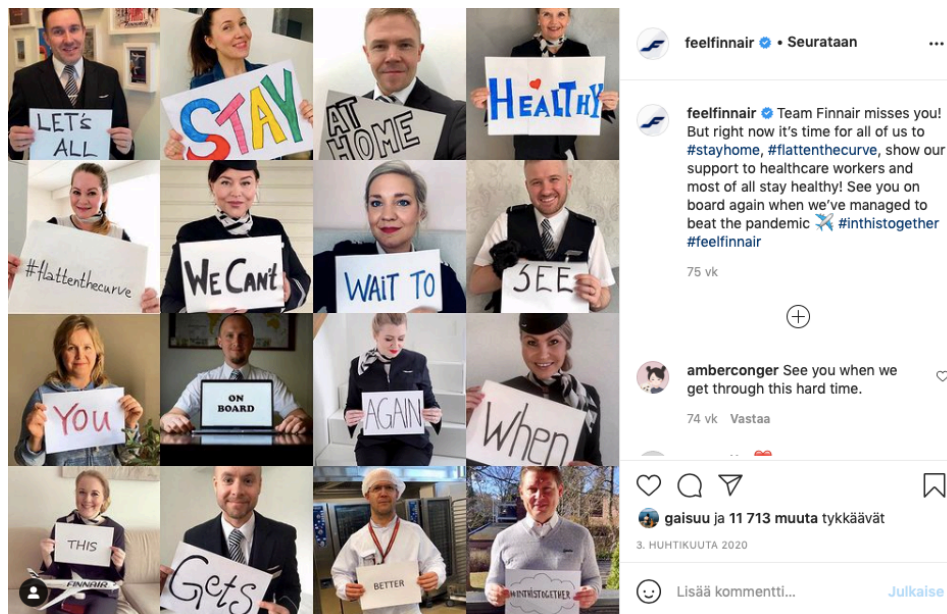


Figure 5 Example of an "emotional" post. Screenshot from Finnair's Instagram (2020).

4.2 Airlines' marketing messages related to Covid-19

The airlines whose Instagram posts were studied were Finnair, Norwegian, KLM, and Lufthansa. Each airlines' relevant Instagram post to this thesis has been studied in terms of five categories: customer service, border control, safety on board and at the airport, common goals, and emotional posts. The gathered material is from March 2020 until March 2021.

4.2.1 Finnair

Table 1 Finnair's Covid-19-related Instagram posts

FINNAIR														Total
Themes	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Customer service	5	1	1				1							8
Border control	1				1									2
Safety on board and at the airport			3		2		1	1						7
Common goals regarding Covid								1						1
Emotional posts		2	1					2						5
Total	6	3	5	0	3	0	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	23

In the timeframe of March 2020 until March 2021, Finnair published 23 Instagram posts in total that were related to Covid-19 (see Table 1). Most of the posts, eight in total,

discuss customer service. The second most occurring theme was safety on board and at the airport, which were seven in total. The remaining three themes, border control and common goals regarding Covid-19 and emotional posts, were covered once or more. Finnair was clearly more active at the beginning of the timeframe. Finnair posted 14 posts in total during the first three months. The posting pace reduced gradually to zero during the rest of the ten months.

While publishing these 23 Covid-19-related posts, the focus has mainly lied on customer service. Their customer service-related posts discuss the lack of responses from their side regarding flights, the possibility to cancel or rebook flights, and what to do in case a flight is canceled, for instance.

4.2.2 Norwegian

Table 2 Norwegian's Covid-19- related Instagram posts

NORWEGIAN														
Themes	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Customer service	2													2
Border controls														
Safety on board and at the airport														
Common goals														
Emotional posts	1													1
Total	3													3

In the timeframe of March 2020 until March 2021, Norwegian published 3 Instagram posts in total that were related to Covid-19 (see Table 2). There were only two themes covered, and those were customer service and emotional posts. Two posts were published regarding customer service. The remaining post was regarding emotional posts. The remaining three themes were not covered a single time. Norwegian posted its only three posts about Covid-19 during the month of March 2020. For the rest of the twelve months, Norwegian did not post anything about the pandemic.

During the set timeframe, Norwegian posted three Covid-19-related posts, two of which discussed customer service. Their customer service-related posts solely discuss the lack of responses from their side regarding flights. The remaining emotional post discusses how the airline and its crew are longing to welcome passengers back on board.

4.2.3 KLM

Table 3 KLM's Covid-19-related Instagram posts

KLM														
Themes	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Customer service	1					3	1							5
Border controls							1		1		1		1	4
Safety on board and at the airport			2			3	3	2	1					11
Common goals										1				1
Emotional posts		1	2	2	1			1					2	9
Total	1	1	4	2	1	6	5	3	2	1	1	0	3	30

In the timeframe of March 2020 until March 2021, KLM published 30 Instagram posts in total that were related to Covid-19 (see Table 3). Most of the posts, eleven in total, discuss safety on board and at the airport. The second most occurring theme was emotional posts, which were nine in total. The remaining three themes, border control and common goals regarding Covid-19 and customer service, were covered once or more. Thus, KLM succeeded in keeping a steady pace throughout the whole timeframe.

While publishing Covid-19-related posts, KLM focused mainly on safety on board and at the airport. The purpose of these posts was to inform their passengers how to protect themselves and others with the help of safety measures, such as wearing a mask, for instance.

4.2.4 Lufthansa

Table 4 Lufthansa's Covid-19-related Instagram posts

LUFTHANSA														
Themes	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Customer service	3	3	2	2	1							1		12
Border controls				1	2	2	1		4			2	1	13
Safety on board and at the airport	2	2	2	3	3	3	6	2	4			3	2	32
Common goals	1	4												5
Emotional posts	1	1	2	5	1	1				1	1	2	1	16
Total	7	10	6	11	7	6	7	2	8	1	1	8	4	78

In the timeframe of March 2020 until March 2021, Lufthansa published 78 Instagram posts in total that were related to Covid-19 (see Table 4). Most of the posts, 32 in total, discuss safety on board and at the airport. The second most occurring theme was

emotional posts, which were 16 in total. The remaining three themes, border control and common goals regarding Covid-19 and customer service, were covered more than once. Thus, Lufthansa succeeded in keeping a steady pace throughout the whole timeframe.

Lufthansa focused on a theme over the others, and that was safety on board and at the airport. The purpose of these posts was to inform their passengers that the airline has taken upon safety measures for everyone’s safety. These safety measures discussed the air circulation on board, the usage of a mask, and the distancing measures at the airport, for instance.

4.1 Differences and similarities in the airlines’ marketing messages

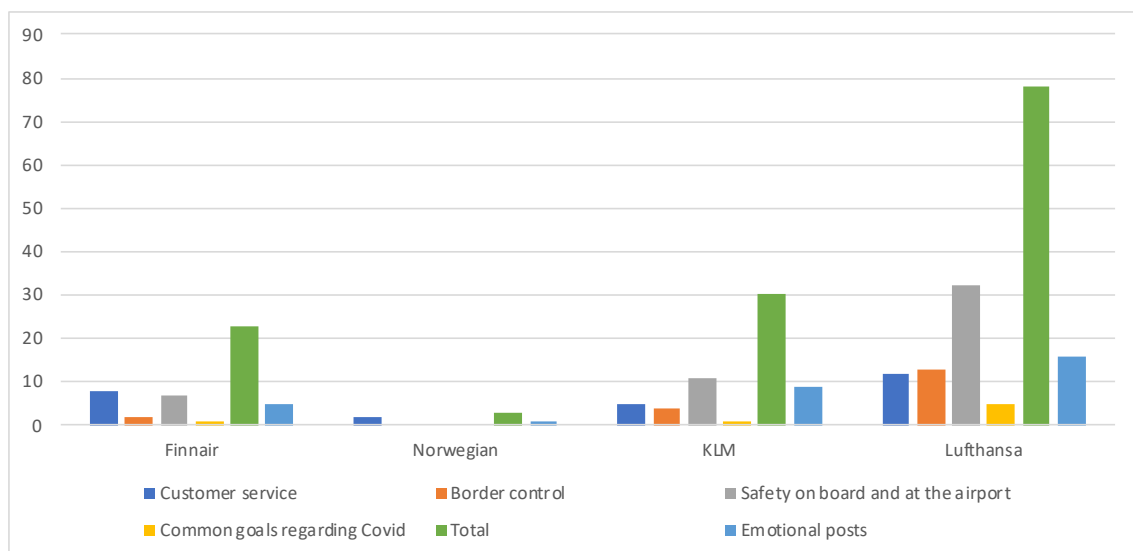


Figure 6 Case companies’ Covid-19-related Instagram posts.

Some differences, as well as similarities, were able to be noted between the four airlines' Covid-19-related Instagram posts (see Figure 6). The most active airline was Lufthansa, with 78 Covid-19-related Instagram posts from March 2020 until March 2021. Conversely, the least active airline with only three Covid-19-related Instagram posts was Norwegian.

Table 5 Case companies' Covid-19-related Instagram posts

FINNAIR + NORWEGIAN + KLM + LUFTHANSA														
Themes	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Customer service	11	4	3	2	1	3	2					1		27
Border control	1			1	3	2	2		5		1	2	2	19
Safety on board and at the airport	2	2	7	3	5	6	10	5	5			3	2	50
Common goals regarding Covid	1	4						1		1				7
Emotional posts	2	4	5	7	2	1		3		1	1	2	3	31
Total	17	14	15	13	11	12	14	9	10	2	2	8	7	134

The most popular theme to discuss when looking at the four airlines as a whole was safety on board and at the airport, with 50 Instagram posts in total (see Table 5). The least discussed topic with only seven Instagram posts was common goals regarding Covid-19. The overall posting pace for two out of the four airlines (KLM and Lufthansa) was relatively steady through the whole timeframe of March 2020 until March 2021. Finnair was clearly more active posting Covid-19-related posts during March 2020 until October 2020 and likewise was Norwegian, posting its only three Covid-19-related posts during March 2020.

5 DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the relation between the results (chapter 4) and the key concepts from the theoretical framework (chapter 2). The role of trust and responsibility, as well as marketing during a pandemic, will be discussed. Overall, this chapter presents the reliability of this study and offers further ideas for the research of this thesis topic.

5.1 Building trust through marketing

The consumer will not know when it will be okay to travel again; therefore, it is the responsibility of the airlines to market their services according to the state of the pandemic.

All four airlines chose a realistic approach to marketing, even though they possibly ran a risk for loss in some other way. Borglund et al. (2017 p. 32-33) state that there are four ways to build trust as a company; 1) openness and transparency, 2) an actor proves competent, knowledgeable, up-to-date, and experienced, 3) to follow the rules and guidelines that apply and that the organization has adopted and to resist various temptations of a

corrupt nature, and finally, 4) *benevolence*. This is about the company showing that it is looking for long-term relationships with its stakeholders to the satisfaction of all parties. Even though all of the four airlines did follow these four steps of building trust, Lufthansa, KLM, and Finnair seemed to have been the most loyal and active in keeping and building their relationship with their customers through marketing. It is believed that Norwegian was not as active as the other three airlines because Norwegian had to file its cabin crew and pilot companies for bankruptcy.

5.2 Marketing a service in the middle of a pandemic

Demarketing is a phenomenon that occurs when less marketing is made for a product or service, and the core intention is to try to make a profit from selling less (Favour, 2020). For example, in the middle of a pandemic, it would be bizarre to encourage customers to travel as usual or more. Hence the focus has been more on building trust and long-lasting relationships.

Three out of four airlines expressed that there will be time for travel via their Instagram posts, but that time is not now. They chose both practical and emotional approaches to their marketing messages. Norwegian on the other hand, did not show as much activeness as Finnair, KLM and Lufthansa. A significant trend was noticed while analyzing these airlines' marketing messages. That trend was to stay active and share pictures and videos about the aircrafts or the airport, i.e. the attempt to remind their passengers about familiar places and situations. According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) businesses try to create in-store newsstands and email promotions with immersive experiences through digital technologies, such as Instagram. KLM and Lufthansa were actively trying to keep in contact with their passengers with their steady posting paces to keep their followers engaged and waiting for the day when traveling would be admired rather than frowned upon (Pelsmacker, et al., 2021).

According to Pelsmacker, et al. (2021) brand activation can be described as bringing a brand to life through creating brand experience. It involves integrating all available communication resources into an innovative medium to encourage curiosity, initiate experiments, and ultimately secure customer loyalty. During the timeframe of March 2020 and

March 2021, the three airlines were encouraging their customers not to fly with them right now. Therefore, the airlines were using a sort of brand activation in their marketing messages to keep in touch with their customers. The marketing messages were also educational or informing, which is a form of advertising (also a part of the marketing communications mix). Advertising is there to bring brand awareness and promote causes, but it also informs, educates, and motivates. By educating and informing, the author means that the airlines were educating their customers about the safety measures on board and at the airport, in addition to border control measures. This can be observed and understood by looking at some of the airlines' activeness and pace of posting Covid-19-related Instagram posts.

Norwegian published posts that were relevant and similar to the other airlines' posts, but Norwegian lacked activeness. It is possible for Norwegian to have taken a different route than the other airlines. What is meant by this is that Norwegian might have chosen to demarket their services completely by not publishing Covid-19-related posts. As Favour (2020) states, a reason for companies to choose to demarket is also one of the biggest reasons, and that is for health reasons. It is inevitable to know that this is only a theory, and not necessary how it is. Norwegian also stated in its annual report that they were forced to file their cabin crew and pilot companies for bankruptcy, which might be a reason for being inactive.

5.3 Discussion about the method chosen

The author chose qualitative research method and comparative content analysis to support this research. Qualitative research seemed very suitable for this sort of research, since the author chose to analyze descriptive data.

However, it would be interesting to conduct an interview in which marketers in the aviation sector would explain their takes and perspectives into marketing an airlines services during a pandemic (in this case Covid-19). Do they think airlines are obligated for demarketing in case of a pandemic, if we look from the customers' point-of-view?

5.4 Recommendations for further research

Further research for this thesis topic is recommended in order to find out why the differences between these airlines' marketing messages exist. A couple of research suggestions for the future would be to use the marketing messages from before the pandemic and compare them with the marketing messages that were published during the pandemic or count and list the total amount of posts (not only Covid-19-related) published during the timeframe and that way analyze the activeness in posting Covid-19-related posts. By doing so, you would be able to see the change in priorities and tone in their marketing messages.

6 CONCLUSION

To answer the research question on how airlines have adapted their marketing messages due to a global pandemic, the airlines analyzed for this thesis market their services in various but similar ways. While writing this thesis, the author gathered all Covid-19-related Instagram posts published during March 2020 and March 2021 by the four airlines and categorized them into five categories. The focus of this thesis was to analyze the posts that were solely published on Instagram.

After analyzing the Instagram posts, the author noticed a pattern. All the 134 posts by the four airlines were able to be put into five themes: customer service, border control, safety on board and at the airport, common goals regarding Covid, and emotional posts. The sole difference between these airlines' marketing on Instagram was activeness in posting Covid-19-related material, with Lufthansa being the most active and Norwegian the least active. Lufthansa and KLM were active throughout the whole timeframe, while Finnair and Norwegian both seemed to be more active to post Covid-19-related posts during the first months of the timeframe. The most common theme to discuss amongst these airlines was safety on board and at the airport, and the least common theme was common goals regarding Covid-19.

The topic of Covid-19 and flying is without a doubt a trendy topic for airlines to discuss on their Instagram accounts. It would be rather odd not to discuss significantly when the

aviation sector (amongst others) has been affected the most. In times like these, airlines have no other option but to act responsibly and think about social and environmental matters first not to be considered ignorant.

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