

**A Comparative Content Analysis Of Airline Responses To The Covid-19 Pandemic On
Instagram**

Kaela Brandi

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Southern Utah University

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Dr. Lijie Zhou

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Abstract

This relative study of how two airlines, Delta and Spirit, respond to the COVID-19 pandemic will feature a content analysis through their Instagram posts. This analysis investigated how brands present themselves to the general public and determined how their customers feel about the companies. The results will show that others support Spirit Airlines more than Delta through examining public comments and imagery content on their social media page. The research shows how companies can effectively communicate with their consumers post-pandemic. This study will provide further context for how airlines will continue to deliver communication in the upcoming years.

Signature Page

I certify that I have read this thesis and that, in my opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality
as a thesis for this degree of Master of Professional Communication.

Dr. Lijie Zhou, Capstone Chair

Dr. Kevin Stein, MAPC Graduate Director

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A Comparative Content Analysis Of Airline Responses To The Covid-19 Pandemic On Instagram

When businesses are forced to deal with issues that affect their customers, they must communicate the situation and a solution to fixing it so customers are not panicked or worried. In the event of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, everyday life was put to a halt for many individuals worldwide, including Americans. This pandemic left many people and businesses to face the unknown at a compromising time. According to Busette (2022), millions lost their jobs and employer-sponsored healthcare due to America being isolated for most of the pandemic. First responders and medical care providers set aside their health worries to save as many lives as possible. Industries, such as airlines, were impacted significantly due to guidelines from government officials to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Millions were left to worry about traveling plans as this illness was reported it could severely affect the elderly and auto-immune compromised passengers. With airlines reducing the number of flights going out due to the government's protocols, many were anxious, confused, and angry. Based on the study by Twann et al. (2020), the pandemic's effects resulted in declining air travel, which prompted airlines to cut their flight capacity. International governments closed their airports to travelers hoping to contain the virus's spread.

When news broke that there would be a mass two-week lockdown for all Americans and no one could enter or leave the country, many scrambled to get the essentials and make necessary arrangements for this period. "The Trump Administration declares a nationwide emergency and issues an additional travel ban on non-U.S. citizens traveling from 26 European countries due to COVID-19" (CDC, 2023, para. 72). When the changes were implemented, many brands

communicated with their customers about the new protocols they put in place to ensure and to show they were contributing to protecting everyone's safety. Many brands have made statements and demonstrated their new rules through public marketing on social media platforms, websites, and other communication channels.

For the two years following the initial COVID-19 outbreak, many had to adjust to the new ways of daily life that included many policies such as wearing a mask, social distancing, quarantining if affected, and being more mindful to prevent the spread of this illness. "Mask-wearing and social distancing are the two critical measures to mitigate the transmission of respiratory diseases" (Kim et al., 2022, p. 2). The government strictly enforced these policies in many industries, including the airline industry. With the guidelines being less-enforced and unyielding, individuals and brands resumed their lives similarly to before the pandemic broke out. "Now that many countries have reopened and restrictions are being lifted, getting back to traveling is a priority for many" (Hassan, 2022, para. 2). Many brands did not practice the original messaging they communicated to their consumers following the lockdown.

Once government officials lifted restrictions for the airline industry in June 2022, brands such as Delta and Spirit Airlines focused less on promoting masks and other policies on their social media pages. They started to focus more on passengers returning to pre-pandemic traveling, which included posts that promoted the opposite of social distancing and masks. Brands have been focusing on marketing efforts to welcome back more travelers that were too nervous about flying in the last few years due to the pandemic. From the point of view of Fox (2022), Americans started prioritizing travel post-pandemic, resulting in increased demand for more flights.

This comparative analysis of how Delta and Spirit Airlines responded to the COVID-19 pandemic will showcase how major corporations contribute to preventing viruses and taking their customers' safety into the effect of their business decisions. This research is essential to highlight due to the lack of companies post-pandemic disregarding safety protocols. Companies must also be held accountable for their actions by how they react in a large-scale crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis will contribute to future studies by giving more context to how customers feel publicly towards the two airlines and how other airlines can prevent mistakes or improve certain behaviors based on the data.

Literature Review

The Influences of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic considerably impacted the travel and airline industries worldwide and in the United States. The implementation of travel restrictions and lockdowns in many countries affected the airline industry, drastically reducing travel. "In many service-oriented economies and industries such as air travel and tourism, the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying social distancing measures have virtually hampered business activities" (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020, p. 1).

Airline companies saw a quick drop in bookings, resulting in many flights being canceled and revenue losses. As a result, many airlines had to reduce their capacity, cut services, and lay off employees to stay afloat. "After the COVID-19 outbreak worldwide starting in February, airlines have been forced to cut capacity on a scale that we have never seen before" (Vinod, 2020, p. 228). As restrictions on international travel meant that airlines could not generate revenue from their international flights, resulting in significant losses.

The pandemic also affected consumer behavior, with many travelers canceling or postponing their travel plans due to health concerns and uncertainty about traveling. This resulted in a decrease in both leisure and business travel, further impacting the industry's revenue. Airlines enforced healthy safety measures and flexible booking and cancellation policies to address the situation. The US government also supplied relief for the industry through the CARES Act, which included financial assistance to airlines:

The U.S. government has passed a large stimulus bill to assist the crippled industry.

Despite this stimulus to aid the wounded industry, the labor impacts of COVID-19 in the industry following the expiration of stimulus-imposed requirements remain to be seen.

(Sobieralski, 2020, p. 1)

In addition to the direct effects on the airline industry, the pandemic also impacted related sectors such as hotels, restaurants, and tourism. Many hotels and restaurants closed temporarily or permanently due to decreased demand, while the tourism industry suffered from reduced travel and visitor spending. "The travel and hospitality industry in general, and airlines in particular, are in dire straits: more than 60 percent of the world's commercial aircraft were grounded" (Albers et al., 2020, p. 1). The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly and deeply affected the travel and airline industry, and many airlines struggled and the operational challenges posed by the pandemic.

The Public Opinion on The Covid-19 Pandemic

General opinion regarding the COVID-19 pandemic has been varied, with beliefs often influenced by personal experience, political affiliation, and access to information. Initially, there

was some skepticism about the severity of the pandemic, with some individuals and groups dismissing the threat of COVID-19 as exaggerated or even a hoax:

A regained sense of respect for the authority of experts, not only in the health professions, has been observed. At the same time, very vocal social circles, such as groups opposed to vaccination and, more generally, believers in conspiracy theories, have lost momentum in the broader public opinion. (Clark et al., 2021, p. 530)

However, as the virus spread rapidly and the number of cases and deaths increased, public opinion shifted, and many people took the pandemic more seriously.

There have been differing views on mask-wearing, social distancing, and vaccination throughout the pandemic. Some individuals and groups have firmly opposed public health measures such as mask mandates, arguing that they infringe on personal freedom and are unnecessary. According to Asare et al. (2021), specific techniques, such as subjectivity and polarity, were used in one study that analyzed public tweets across different countries and showed the public reactions to how the world population had an optimistic approach initially, while there were other tweets demonstrating fear, anger, sadness, disgust, and surprise. Others have been more supportive of these measures, recognizing their importance in reducing the spread of the virus and protecting vulnerable groups such as elders and auto-immune compromising individuals.

The pandemic has also been politicized, with attitudes towards the pandemic often reflecting more general political and ideological sectors. For example, in some countries, there has been a sharp divide between those on the left and right of the political spectrum, with those on the right more likely to oppose public health measures and those on the left more likely to

support them. Based on the study conducted by Gollust et al. (2020), health issues such as COVID-19 became political targets integrated into presenting the virus to the general public. Because of this, individuals likely understood information from a particular political standpoint.

Despite these differences, there has been overall recognition of the devastating impact of the pandemic, including the emotional toll on human lives and the economic and social disturbance it has caused. Many individuals have expressed that the crisis's uncertainty and prolonged nature have caused frustration and anxiety. "Negative sentiments mainly stem from the public's panic about COVID-19 and the shortage of medical resources, followed by the impact of lockdown and isolation on life" (Xia et al., 2022, p. 6).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have shown how public opinion has been influenced by complex and multifaceted issues reflecting a range of attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. While there have been differing views on issues such as public health measures and vaccination, individuals recognize the sincerity of the virus and the need for more adequate efforts to prevent this in the future.

The Airlines' Message during The COVID-19 Pandemic

Delta and Spirit Airlines have responded differently to the pandemic, as they have different business models and resources. Delta Airlines, one of the world's largest airlines, quickly adapted to the challenges presented by the pandemic. "The air transportation system has had to progressively put itself to a semi-comatose state to address fast-growing sanitary and economic concerns" (Monmousseau et al., 2020, p. 2). The airline implemented several measures to help protect its passengers and crew, including enhanced cleaning procedures, mandatory face mask policies, and social distancing measures at the airport and onboard its planes. Delta also

provided flexibility for customers to change or cancel their travel plans without penalty, offering additional options for customers to use their tickets in the future. According to Monmousseau et al. (2020), airlines such as Delta had the highest rating regarding their passengers' tweets regarding service compared to Delta being rated the lowest due to public tweets about their unfavorable customer service out of the four big airlines.

In addition, Delta took steps to reduce its costs and conserve cash as travel demand declined during the pandemic. The airline reduced its flight schedules, retired some of its older aircraft, and cut back on non-essential spending. Despite these challenges, Delta maintained its strong financial position due to the support it received from the U.S. government's CARES Act. The CARES Act is a U.S. government economic stimulus package passed in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Some rescue policies also cover emissions-intensive firms, such as airlines, that face bankruptcy or significantly reduced revenue resulting from the pandemic. Examples include US\$32 billion in bailouts (including grants and loans) for US airlines (through the CARES Act)" (Abate et al., 2020, p. 10). The Act provided financial relief to individuals, businesses, and state and local governments, including direct payments to individuals, expanded unemployment benefits, and gave loans/grants to businesses struggling.

Spirit Airlines, a smaller airline, encountered more significant difficulties during the pandemic. The airline had to suspend or cancel many of its flights due to travel restrictions and reduced demand, leading to a substantial decline in revenue. Spirit also faced challenges in implementing safety measures due to its low-cost business model, which relies on packing as many passengers as possible onto each flight to keep fares low. As mentioned by Lu et al. (2022), airlines offering low-cost flights to passengers, such as Spirit, saw a negative financial impact

from COVID-19, and due to this virus, passengers increased their trust in the company due to Spirit's public actions regarding health safety.

To address these challenges, Spirit enforced measures similar to Delta to protect passengers and employees, such as required face mask protocols, deep-cleaning procedures, and vaccination notices. "To control inflight transmission, the United States airline industry has taken various preventive measures, including mask use, temperature screening, and boarding requirement of negative testing results" (Lu et al., 2022, p. 4). Despite having little notice, Spirit Airlines also allowed individuals to cancel their flights without fees or charges. Still, it faced criticism for not providing enough options for customers to use their tickets in the future.

While the two airlines had different reactions in the initial days of the pandemic outbreak, both faced significant challenges due to the unprecedented nature of the crisis. Delta could adapt more quickly and maintain its financial position, and Spirit had to make difficult choices to navigate the situation and ensure its survival.

The Framing Theory

Framing theory is a channel used by professionals that examine how information is given, and it can influence people to understand specific topics. The theory suggests that how an individual presents the details of that topic can shape opinions and behaviors by emphasizing particular aspects of an issue while ignoring others. The use of the framing theory has been expansive and has the potential to benefit new information given to others:

Frames in the news may affect learning, interpretation, and evaluation of issues and events. This part of the framing process has been investigated most elaborately to explore

the extent to which circumstances audiences reflect and mirror frames made available to them. (De Vreese, 2000, p. 52)

One benefit of the framing theory is its impact on public opinion and policy outcomes. “Framing effects occur when small changes in an issue or an event produce large changes of opinion” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). For example, media outlets can use framing to deliver information to influence the public's stance on issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This theory can promote specific policies or oppose others, such as how individuals were for and against the mask mandates and the social distancing guidelines.

The framing theory can also increase the effectiveness of advertising campaigns. By understanding the values and beliefs of the target audience, individuals or businesses can articulate messages to resonate with their consumers and encourage them to take the desired action. “Journalists often subconsciously engage in the same process when deciding how to describe the political world. They choose images and words that have the power to influence how audiences interpret and evaluate issues and policies” (Tewksbury et al., 2019, p. 17). For example, a public health campaign developed to encourage individuals to get vaccinated or to use health safety protocols regarding COVID-19 might formulate the message to emphasize the personal responsibility to protect themselves and others rather than focusing solely on the risks of the illness.

In addition, framing theory can improve communication between experts and the general public. By understanding how different groups may interpret additional information, experts can tailor their messaging to ensure it is accessible and understandable to a broader audience. "News messages are textual and visual structures built around a central axis of thought from a particular

perspective and by information professionals who provide an interpretive framework for the audiences exposed to the news messages" (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2015, p. 424). This is particularly important in fields where technical wording can hinder effective communication.

The framing theory can help new information distributed by mass media to provide a framework for understanding how the presentation of data can affect individuals' mindsets and behaviors. By using the framing theory strategically, experts can expand the significance of their messages and enhance public understanding of complex issues.

In this analysis, the framing theory will be used to interpret the data collected to detect the possibilities of what customers felt publicly towards Delta and Spirit, along with how the content posted on public social media pages can impact the messaging from each airline. In conjunction with the content analysis, this theory can analyze images and gather themes used to influence the public's opinion of the airlines and their messaging. The framing theory can also determine how much of an impact the airlines' messaging left on individuals and their perception of the companies' stance on COVID-19 and their safety measures.

RQ1: Are there any significant differences between Delta Airlines and Spirit Airlines regarding using the image content?

RQ2: Do the airlines' public messages on social media match their actions?

RQ3: What does mask mandates and policies do to impact public attitudes towards mask-wearing?

Method

For this research, the process by which we analyze and understand the data will be through content analysis. Content analysis is a research method used to examine different types

of communication, including text, images, audio, and video. The content analysis aims to identify patterns and themes within the data and draw conclusions about the meaning and importance of those patterns.

Sampling

There have been 160 posts that have been collected through Delta and Spirit Airlines' Instagram pages to determine the comparative content analysis of the airlines' public responses. It was essential to select the correct time frame post-pandemic to see if airlines were still implementing their once heavily enforced policies. The time used to analyze these posts was from January 1st, 2022, to December 31st, 2022, to receive and demonstrate the varying messages from the airlines and customers expressing their experiences.

Coding Categories

The best way to create a precise and detailed result was to assemble different diverse coding categories that individuals can use the data collected, such as the Instagram posts from Spirit and Delta Airlines, to investigate what is significant and what is insignificant regarding the content analysis. Coding categories include the image subjects, public emotion, imagery background, intent, the use of emojis, the use of tagged locations, and if there were any interactions between the airlines and other brands/celebrities. The image subject was necessary for this research because it represents the important symbols used in social media content and how it relates to the airline's messaging. Such symbols include masks, social distancing signs, logos or relevant branding, employees, and passengers.

Public emotion was another vital category to include because it determines the general tone of each post and how people reacted to the content being promoted by the brands. The

emotions used were fear, anger, relief, confidence, sadness, stress, and support. Imagery background was used to determine the surroundings around the photo's main focal point, which can tell much about what the company promotes to its employees and passengers. The research examines vital aspects such as people wearing and not wearing masks, city landscapes, natural landscapes, and windows. The intent was meant to play the role of if the company was being deliberate with certain elements, such as people not wearing masks or if people were social distancing.

Using emojis tells the reader how digital, artistic icons can help explain emotions or words without defining them in a caption. For this study, the number of emojis in each caption was analyzed. It then fell into a subcategory of whether descriptive, positive, or negative to the topic and the follower's standpoint. Along with that, tagging locations was used to show where travelers were going most. This idea was to show if they were going to heavily populated areas that could impact the viruses' spread or if they were going to not-so-crowded places to help contain the spread. Lastly, the study examined the interaction between airlines and big brands/celebrities. This was to show how the brands impacted the other brands. If there were a lack of interaction, Delta or Spirit Airlines would be incapable of promoting their core values, making them disliked or not as popular as other airlines.

Results

RQ1 asks if there are any significant differences between Delta and Spirit Airlines regarding their social media content. The results show a significant difference regarding the subjects' images and public comments expressing their feelings towards the brand due to their experience. The purpose of RQ2 was to explore if the airlines' public messages hold up to their

actions. The data implies that the two airlines, Delta and Spirit, have not kept their original messaging post-pandemic. RQ3 aims to investigate if mask mandates and policies have impacted public attitudes towards mask-wearing or if it has not. The study shows that it has affected how people feel negatively towards the mask mandates and procedures that were once enforced.

Two years after the COVID-19 illness spread, many individuals have used Delta and Spirit Airlines to travel. With government policies about the strict guidelines lifted, many businesses, including airlines, removed the mask mandates, vaccination requirements, and COVID-19 testing requirements. Delta and Spirit began concentrating on welcoming passengers back as if it was before the pandemic.

The content analysis of Delta and Spirit Airlines' social media postings regarding their actions against the COVID-19 virus in 2022 shows a significant difference in the advertised content. In 18 (11.4%) posts between both airlines show individuals wearing masks, 82 (51.9%) posts show individuals not wearing masks. For 40 (25.3%) posts, they used a city landscape as the image background, 114 (72.2%) used nature landscape backgrounds, and 53 (33.5%) used windows for imagery backgrounds. The content analysis also demonstrated the use of emojis. Throughout 158 posts, 110 (69.6%) positive emojis were used, along with 88 (55.7%) posts using descriptive emojis.

When analyzing the content of the posts, company branding/logo (66.5%) was commonly used as the main focal point, followed by the airlines' employees (24.1%) and social distancing signs (1.3%). The public emotion from Delta and Spirit Airlines' posts caused customers to be supportive (79.1%), confident (62.0%), stressed (36.1%), fearful (23.4%), and relieved (15.2%).

There is a significant difference in the two airlines' content regarding the image subjects. For Delta's social media posts, their logo/branding was shown significantly less than Spirit had promoted in their content ($\chi^2 = 32.194$, $df=1$, $p<.001$). As shown in Table 1, Delta had incorporated its branding into 35 (33.3%) posts compared to Spirit's 70 (66.7%) posted content.

For travelers with Spirit or Delta, there was little to no presence of the masks that were heavily enforced compared to the beginning of the pandemic ($\chi^2 = 1.003$, $df=1$, $p=.317$). In 6 (37.5%) posts of Delta's content, masks were present. As indicated in Table 1, Spirit had incorporated masks in 10 (62.5%) posts. Both airlines used the COVID-19 symbol in similar amounts of posts.

Both airlines used their workers in the posted content ($\chi^2 = 13.203$, $df=1$, $p<.001$). Within 9 (23.7%) of Delta's content were images of employees. In 29 (76.3%) posts, Spirit employees were used in their pictures. Comparing these two airlines shows that Spirit used more workers in their Instagram postings.

Another COVID-19-related symbol is social distancing signs ($\chi^2 = 2.078$, $df=1$, $p>0.05$). Delta used these signs in 2 (100%) posts, and Spirit used them in 0 (0%) of their digital posts. There was a lack of presence in the images of both companies. However, Delta did promote the signs more than Spirit had.

Due to the content of the posts, customers expressed their public emotions, including support, confidence, stress, fear, and relief. In Table 2, most flyers were supportive (79.1%), followed by feeling confident (62.0%). They also felt stressed (36.1%), fearful (23.4%), and relief (15.2%).

For Delta travelers, the supportive feeling was expressed 48 times (38.4%) in comments. For individuals traveling with Spirit, the sense of support was expressed 77 times (61.6%) in comments. Customers of Spirit left more supportive comments than they did with Delta Airlines' content ($\chi^2 = 28.798$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$).

Another public emotion displayed in both airlines' social media comments was confidence ($\chi^2 = 11.582$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$). Spirit travelers communicated their confidence regarding the airline 60 times (61.2%) compared to individuals traveling with Delta. Customers of Delta Airlines had expressed their confidence regarding the airline 38 times (38.8%).

There is a significant difference in how customers expressed feeling stressed from Spirit and Delta Airlines ($\chi^2 = 67.861$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$). Delta customers had voiced their frustrations 53 times (93.0%). Unlike Spirit Airlines, their customers expressed their frustrations 4 times (7.0%).

Other emotions publically spoken about were fear and relief. Many individuals had more fear-based comments regarding Delta than Spirit ($\chi^2 = 8.446$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). The fearful expression was voiced 26 times (70.3%) in Delta's comments compared to customers saying their fears to Spirit Airlines 11 times (29.7%). Individuals expressed relief to Spirit than Delta Airlines ($\chi^2 = .671$, $df=1$, $p>0.05$). Flyers commented on their ease 14 times (58.3%) to Spirit, and Delta commented on relief 10 times (41.7%). This data shows Delta had similar but fewer customers than Spirit regarding relieved feelings.

Table 1.***Image Content***

Image Content	Delta		Spirit		X ²
	N	%	N	%	df=1
Logo**	35	33.3	70	66.7	32.194
Masks	6	37.5	10	62.5	1.003
Employees**	9	23.7	29	76.3	13.203
Social Distancing Sign	2	100	0	0	2.078

Note. *p<0.05; **p<.001

Table 2.***Public Emotions***

Public Emotion	Delta		Spirit		X ²
	N	%	N	%	df=1
Supportive**	48	38.4	77	61.6	28.798
Confident**	38	38.8	60	61.2	11.582
Stressful**	53	93.0	4	7.0	67.861
Fear*	26	70.3	11	29.7	8.446
Relief	10	41.7	14	58.3	.671

Note. *p<0.05; **p<.001

Table 3.***Masks***

The Use Of Masks	Delta		Spirit		X ²
	N	%	N	%	df=1
People With Masks	7	38.9	11	61.1	.892
People Without Masks	40	48.8	42	51.2	.023

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < .001$

Discussion

The results indicated that the data collected from the airlines' Instagram pages suggest significant differences in the content used in 2022 and how people reacted to it. As a researcher, individuals often have a preconceived idea of how the study will turn out before researching. The expectations prior to this analysis being conducted were that Spirit Airlines would be disliked or have more of an adverse reaction than Delta Airlines because of the media's portrayal of how Spirit cancels their flights which leaves thousands stranded for days or does not have the greatest customer service when a customer needs it.

However, Delta had more negative interactions than Spirit once the data was collected and processed. Many people voiced their upset, angry, and worried emotions in Delta's public comments. The complaints expressed frustrations and worries over flight delays, poor customer service, high fees for their carry-ons, checked bags or for other traveling elements, and lost luggage. Interestingly, many complained to both airlines about the lack of mask mandates and the large capacity of how many people were on each flight. This left many to worry about their

health and whether they would receive the COVID-19 virus themselves or pass it on to someone at a higher risk of complications due to the illness. During the peak of COVID-19 in 2020, many airlines, including Delta and Spirit, had regulations that the government did not enforce. Some regulations included spacing out seats for passengers as a social distancing precaution. “In the midst of the pandemic, three of the four biggest US airlines—American, Delta, and Southwest—adopted an initiative that sought to “block the sale of middle seats” to offer inflight social distancing as an early response to the crisis” (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020, p. 3). In 2023, all passengers must pay extra to have a separate seat between themselves and other individuals. Some solutions that Delta and Spirit can take to ensure their travelers' health and safety based on the data are to continue to implement more frequent cleanings of their planes, improve their air filtration systems to decrease the spread of viruses, continue health screenings that take the temperature of passengers and ensuring they test negative for any illnesses including the COVID-19 variants, implementing more of touchless check-ins and boarding procedures to lower the contact between employees and travelers and to continue effective communication so individuals are educated on the health safety protocols.

When analyzing the images published to the airlines' customers, there is a lack of masks and social distancing signs. Since the government lifted restrictions in June 2022 that were enforcing individuals to wear masks in public spaces like airports, the airline companies could keep enforcing these masks or let people decide independently, which would result in more customers showing their public emotion of anger. Other customers who expressed anger were frustrated over using masks after the mandates were lifted. There are two reasons why people could be upset over the two stances on mask mandates. The first reason is that many felt that if

people were not still careful and mindful, the pandemic would put another lockdown on the world, which would be a longer recovery time. “Passengers’ willingness to travel may be restored if infection concerns can be reduced through vaccine distribution and air travel safety” (Kim et al., 2022, p. 2). The second reason people were outraged over the mask usage was that they might have felt it would keep people fearful of this illness due to the media's perspective of how severe and deadly it was initially. “The case of the COVID-19 epidemic (the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered human coronavirus) shows the critical role of information diffusion in a disintermediated news cycle” (Cinelli et al., 2020, p. 2).

The majority of data from Spirit and Delta's Instagram posts showed that the airlines promoted the images of employees and passengers not wearing masks. The thought process behind this could be that since COVID-19 had significantly impacted the traveling industry, resulting in millions of lost profits, the airlines' marketing strategy could be to welcome their passengers back to compensate for the financial loss they experienced during 2020 and 2021. “It’s difficult to overstate how much the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated airlines. In 2020, industry revenues totaled \$328 billion, around 40 percent of the previous year’s” (Bouwer et al., 2021, p. 2). To encourage passengers to travel more, Delta and Spirit Airlines can improve on making the focus on their travelers and giving them different opportunities to use them, which builds trust and adds value to their business. Such opportunities can be lowering pricing on international or domestic flights, which can expand to other travel options such as additional routes to other destinations, improving their customer-loyalty programs by offering free flights once passengers have flown with them for a certain number of times. Another opportunity to

build trust could be having the airlines unite with hotel and car-rental companies to provide a discount or lower rate specifically for the individuals flying with them as a way to thank them.

In conjunction with the framing theory and content analysis, it helps determine how other researchers processed and understood the coding. This theory allows the study to be seen from different angles, such as the public emotions displayed in the comments and how individuals can view various points developed and constructed after the data analysis. This theory also allows monumental events such as COVID-19 to influence how the media portrays and people who receive their messaging. “Framing effects occur when small changes in an issue or an event produce large changes of opinion” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Due to the media portrayal of COVID-19 and how it affected different aspects of daily life, many individuals feared for their health and the safety of their loved ones. “The Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has garnered great attention from media outlets all around the world. Media reporting inclines heavily towards highlighting high-impact events such as infectious disease outbreaks leading to public panic” (Haroon et al., 2020, p. 1).

In the data, Delta had more people who feared flying with them due to these continuous unexpected flight cancellations/delays or lost luggage, which left people worried and anxious about missing a personal event such as a wedding, family event, or a pre-planned vacation. They were also concerned about what Delta was doing post-pandemic to ensure their safety since they had stopped enforcing masks in the airports and on the flights directly. In terms of why Spirit had significantly less amount of worried complaints, a few individuals were upset about the delays of flights. Most individuals expressed their gratitude and support to Spirit Airlines for their customer service when needing to cancel or reschedule a flight. When it comes to customers

being anxious, what airlines can do is address their concerns about traveling. To relieve concerns, Delta and Spirit Airlines need to create proactive approaches when it comes to flying, such as offering flexible booking and improving their cancellations policies, providing information on how their air filtration systems make the risk of passengers getting any virus very low along with data regarding the reported cases of viruses like COVID-19 spreading on planes.

As the analysis was conducted, there were feelings of confusion due to how the media displayed Spirit Airlines as a subpar airline to travel with and how the data contradicted the media's displays of customers, leaving a majority of supportive and confident comments. When investigating deeper into why there could be such a vast difference between the comments on Delta's Instagram page and Spirit's Instagram page, this significant change can be because of the internal settings a Spirit's employee used when monitoring their pages. The internal Instagram profile setting can enforce filters to block any words the profile does not want in their comments, and this would display only positive comments instead of negative ones. This could offset the data by Spirit Airlines purposely not showing or allowing individuals to publicly express negative emotions towards the company.

The differences in the airlines' pages could have a deeper meaning regarding what people have encountered while traveling with them. Blocking comments containing specific keywords prevents potential customers from reading real experiences and testimonials from previous or current travelers, which can make potential customers go to a different airline. As mentioned earlier, airlines want to make up for the financial loss due to the COVID-19 virus. If Spirit's display negative comments on top of the media's negative news stories and testimonials from real customers, it could ruin the company long-term. Regarding Delta's reputation of its

customers' negative input, there are few news stories to showcase how inadequate Delta is, which can make potential flyers think more highly of them. Additionally, when potential customers look for airlines to book flights through, they will ask for referrals from friends, family members, and co-workers to see which is best. This results in customers trusting them more due to word-of-mouth reviews which can be problematic if the individual looks at the comments left on their Instagram page.

The main conclusion is since Delta is an older airline that's been around since 1929, more people have higher expectations since it's one of the leading airlines people use. Since Spirit is a relatively newer airline, many people have low expectations. However, if Delta has an upset customer, the reaction is more significant in how they express their opinions. Many take to social media not only to express their unmet needs or wants but also to get a bandwagon of people who might relate and do something severe like contribute to cancel culture where they want Delta or Spirit Airlines to close down operations. When individuals look at this in the greater scheme of things, humans are emotional beings. The research shows a grander scale of anger, fear, and stress towards Delta Airlines than Spirit Airlines.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study or what can be improved is the lack of material on the airlines' social media pages. As this research contained almost 200 Instagram posts, there were more biased comments on Spirit's social profile. The analysis could not be sure if the airline altered any comments by blocking specific keywords or deleting comments. However, fewer adverse reactions can make the data look suspicious or tampered with due to their actions. One solution to ensuring the data is accurate is taking other reviews from different social media pages

into account, such as taking reviews from their Google page and Facebook page, as many people use those to leave their reviews for others.

Another limitation can be the need for more previous content analysis similar to this study. Since there is little to no prior research regarding this comparative analysis of the two airlines, a solution may be to research more of the airlines' actions and look deeper into the individuals' testimonials to search for more themes and mistakes that the companies have made as it can give more context to future studies.

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