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# “We Look Forward to Seeing You”

## Air Travel Digital Discourse in the Post-peak Pandemic Period

### Abstract

*The unfolding of the Covid-19 crisis has had a detrimental impact on global travel and tourism. In particular, the air transport industry has been affected severely and will need to undergo radical change to still be operating in the aftermath of the pandemic. Within the framework of Corporate Discourse Studies, and relying on a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach, the current article explores how airlines use online language to neutralize the discourses that create distrust and to highlight their achievements and commitment in order to encourage air travel in the post-peak period. This analysis is meant to empirically contribute to the existing literature on the topic of trust in corporate discourse and communication by shedding some light on the discursive strategies employed by airline companies to (re)construct travel experience in time of crisis.*

**Keywords:** *corporate discourse, trust, air travel digital discourse, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, Coronavirus*

### 1. Introduction

The unfolding of the Covid-19 crisis has severely affected global travel and tourism, both directly (e.g. through the industry’s loss of revenue and jobs) and indirectly (e.g. by changing mobility and tourism patterns). The emergency has obliged several governments to prohibit unnecessary movements and to adapt to the mobility needs of essential workers and goods, in order to safeguard health and contain the spread of the virus. The extensive travel restrictions, and the other measures taken by a majority of countries worldwide, have had an unprecedented impact especially on the air transportation system. While the situation may improve for the travel industry towards the end of 2021, the road to a full recovery is not straightforward. Covid-19 has the potential to be far more damaging to airlines, than either the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or SARS, due to the global reach of the virus. Experts and observers estimate that a return to 2019 levels in terms of international arrivals could take up to four

years, and this recovery will also depend on the ability of organizations and countries to support consumers regaining confidence in travelling, through widespread vaccination programmes and the adoption of clear and unified travel protocols (ACI 2021).

However, crises “may also be forces for constructive change, growth, resilience, and renewal” (Sellnow and Seeger 2021, 1). In this respect, the pandemic has also presented air companies with the opportunity to reinvent themselves in line with future health and environmental challenges (OECD 2020). The changeable nature of corporate identity is highlighted by Breeze who claims that “the construction of corporate identity is constrained by the external, profit-seeking goals of the corporate world, and that these may change from time to time as new economic problems or opportunities arise” (2013a, 24). In the present context, initiatives have focused on the implementation of more sustainable transport options, digitalization and contactless solutions aiming at making the system more efficient, while at the same time safer and secure. As recent studies (Scheiwiller and Zizka 2021; Edwards 2021) testify, these new demands have compelled a review and re-strategizing of existing communication methods, practices and marketing techniques during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, this research seems to agree on the fact that, although the airline industry has been traditionally well-equipped to handle crises, unforeseeable and unprecedented situations such as Covid-19 have initially resulted in an abrupt cessation of communication with customers. Despite the paucity of research, available findings reveal that as restrictions on travel were lifted and connectivity began to return, airlines managed to adjust their communication strategies to convey information on comprehensive and coordinated actions and operational guidelines for the health and safety of passengers and the staff.

Following Fuoli and Paradis’ (2014) theoretical framework on trust-repair discourse, the current study seeks to explore how airlines use language to neutralize the discourses that create distrust and to emphasize a positive view of the corporate values and related strategies, objectives and plans to face the post-peak pandemic period. To this purpose, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods is adopted, with data collected from the official webpages of fifteen international aviation companies. This study is meant to empirically contribute to the existing literature on the topic of trust in corporate discourse and communication by shedding some light on the discursive dynamics employed by airlines to (re)construct travel experience in time of crisis. In analyzing the communicative resources and meaning-making practices at work in digital communication about air travelling, the current study also provides linguistically-informed insights to the growing field of crisis communication research in the tourism and travel domain (Ou and Wong 2020; Su et al. 2019; Avraham 2015; Ritchie et al. 2004). It primarily

lays its theoretical foundations in post-crisis communication theory (Sellnow and Seeger 2021; Seeger et al. 2005) and is based on the methodological insights offered by a corpus-based approach to discourse analysis. The rest of the article is organized as follows. The next section sets the theoretical background of the study, providing a literature review pertaining to research on trust-repair strategies in corporate discourse. Then, section 3 will provide an account of the methodology and a description of the corpus. Key findings are presented and discussed in section 4. In particular, an investigation of the trust-repair discourse strategies that are manifested in text by the use of dialogic engagement and evaluative and affective language (Fuoli and Paradis 2014) is presented.

## **2. Trust-repair discourse in corporate communication**

Corporate communication is a dynamic and vast domain, as evidenced by several evolving expressions of business social actions, practices and discourses. The main aim of corporate discourse as a field of study is to explore the way corporations communicate with individuals (being them customers or possible investors), with other companies and with the world at large (Breeze 2013). Research in this area is particularly devoted to exploring how corporations build a trustworthy, favourable and successful corporate self-representation suiting their own interests while exercising measures of persuasion targeting the public's expectations and needs (Beder 2012; Fox and Fox 2004, among others). With reference to the scientific insights of Mayer et al. (1995), Gill et al. (2005), Jahansoozi (2006), Schoorman et al. (2007), Rawlins (2008; 2009), Xie and Peng (2009), Pirson and Malhotra (2010), Greenwood and Van Buren III (2010), Park et al. (2014), Fuoli and Paradis (2014), Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2014), it is stated that trustworthiness of the organization can be defined by five basic dimensions: competence, benevolence, integrity, transparency and responsibility.

Companies attempt to construct a distinctive image and market themselves in today's fast-changing world through a tactical choice of communicative resources across official websites, social media channels and detailed reports. To this date, several studies from a linguistic and discursive perspective (Petroni 2020; Fuoli and Hart 2018; Bondi 2016; Brei and Böhm 2014; Breeze 2012; Catenaccio 2012; Fuoli 2012; 2018; Fuoli and Paradis 2014; Lischinsky and Sjölander 2014; Mason and Mason 2012; Evangelisti Allori and Garzone 2010; Koller 2007; 2008) have been carried out on the specific lexico-syntactic as well as socio-pragmatic resources (Bhatia 2008) that serve to build and strengthen corporate identity. Specifically, scholars suggest that when facing legitimacy threats, companies may attempt to repair image via denying negative aspects and foregrounding positive aspects of corporate actions or performance

(Fuoli and Paradis 2014; Hahn and Lülfs 2014; Coombs 2007; Merkl-Davies and Brennan 2007; Benoit 1997; Suchman 1995). Several other strategies, including minimizing negative aspects, rationalizing or justifying the problem, evading responsibilities, offering apologies, demonstrating corrective actions, and admitting guilt have also been identified as the communicative tactics companies may use when negative incidents occur (Fuoli and Paradis 2014; Hahn and Lülfs 2014; Coombs 2007; Merkl-Davies and Brennan 2007; Benoit 1997; Suchman 1995). More generally, as Incelli (2013) points out in her article analyzing the crisis which affected the diamond industry in the period 1997-2011, in times of crisis and economic distress it is of pivotal importance for any firm to adopt “a socially responsible attitude and new discourse strategies” to restore their image in the eyes of the stakeholders (2013, 215). Following this line of thought, it is reasonable to assume that issues of image restoration and renewal may emerge as more of a central theme in the post-Covid travel discourse. This may lead air travel companies to review their communication strategies to position themselves anew in the market in order to regain the trust of their customers and demonstrate their alignment with public health and social concerns.

### 3. Data and methods

The data for the analysis derive from the official webpages of a selection of airline companies, ranging from ultra-low-cost-carriers to global carriers, including Emirates, Virgin Atlantic, Qatar Airways, Lufthansa, Finnair, Japan Airlines, KLM, Korean Airlines, Hawaiian Airlines, British Airways, Delta Airlines, Etihad Airways, United Airlines, EasyJet, and Norwegian. The choice of companies was guided by the aim to give a representative picture of the air travel market. However, to avoid choosing material on the basis of personal preferences, the companies were selected according to available rankings, taking into account different criteria including flight refunds, reliability, customer rating, and safety. The rankings consulted for this purpose were taken from reliable rating review websites. In particular, *Airlineratings* and *eDreams* provided slightly different information through their studies based on customer reviews and data from hundreds of airlines.<sup>1</sup> In order to investigate as many websites as possible, it was decided to select all the companies featuring in the consulted rankings. The total number of airline websites included is, thus, fifteen. On each website under study a screening search was carried out using the lemmas *Covid* and *Coronavirus* in order to detect textual resources dealing specifically with Covid-related protective measures. All the information and recommendations

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.edreams.com/best-airlines/](http://www.edreams.com/best-airlines/) and <https://www.airlineratings.com/safety-rating-tool/>. All websites last visited on 06/04/2021.

concerning Covid-19 were found in specific sections and/or webpages within the websites, commonly introduced by a title containing *Covid* or *Coronavirus* in its wording. These samples were collected to build a small-scale specialised corpus comprising 21,249 words, which is intended to be indicative of post-pandemic air travel digital discourse. The texts in the corpus were in fact captured in the period between May 2021 and June 2021 when pandemic disease levels in most countries with adequate surveillance dropped below peak observed levels and lockdown restrictions were eased allowing people to fly and travel again.

To comply with the study aims, a corpus-based approach has been adopted. It is a method where the corpus is interrogated and data is used to confirm pre-set explanations and assumptions (Tognini-Bonelli 2001). All the texts contained in the corpus were uploaded to the linguistic analysis software *AntConc* (Anthony 2018): the wordlist of the corpus was generated and the concordances of the most frequent lexical items were analyzed looking for patterns of use (Sinclair and Carter 2004). In Corpus Linguistics, when collecting a corpus for analysis, the material to be included has to meet specific criteria, such as function, size, representativeness, and authenticity (Biber and Reppen 2015; Tognini-Bonelli 2001; Biber et al. 1998), in order for the study to be reliable and the aim of the investigation to be fully achieved. The specificity of the small-scale corpus under investigation allows to meet all these essential parameters. Moreover, the corpus search was conducted on the corpus as a whole, since the interest in the present study lies in the detection of patterns and tendencies in post-pandemic air travel digital discourse, not on the individual linguistic choices of each company. The quantitative analysis was then followed by a qualitative interpretation of the findings.

As mentioned earlier, Fuoli and Paradis' theoretical framework (2014) of corporate trust-repair discourse is of particular interest to this analysis. Although their study focuses on corporate reporting, its conceptual underpinnings and findings can be applied to digital discourse in order to examine how language is shaped for persuasive aims in the context of a crisis and a gradual recovery. In fact, corporate websites, in general, can be considered a hybrid discourse genre (Fairclough 1992), which blends purely referential elements with affective elements to advertise and provide information about their companies, effectively and efficiently. In particular, Fuoli and Paradis have identified two fundamental discourse strategies available to organizations to respond to crises and repair trust, which are particularly relevant to this study: (1) the neutralize-the-negative strategy aiming at engaging with and acting upon the discourses that represent a potential source of distrust and (2) the emphasize-the-positive strategy used to convey a trustworthy discourse identity. As Fuoli and Paradis claim, “these strategies are realized in discourse through the use of dialogic engagement and evaluative/affective language,

respectively. The ultimate communicative goal of the strategies is that of promoting the addressees’ positive (re)assessment of the speaker’s ability, integrity and benevolence” (2014, 52). Both strategies may be used simultaneously and interact in a single instance of trust-repair discourse. In the current study, it will be considered how these strategies are applied within the very particular context of air travel digital discourse following an unprecedented crisis, such as Covid-19.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the results of the analysis. It begins by showing the ten most frequently used words in the dataset, which were initially used to interrogate the corpus. As a starting point, both content and grammar words were considered as indicators respectively of aboutness and style. It then proceeds to discuss the main findings for both trust-repair strategies identified by Fuoli and Paradis (2014), i.e. the neutralize-the-negative strategy, the emphasize-the-positive strategy.

No.	Frequency	Word
1.	311	you
2.	192	your
3.	185	our
4.	175	we
5.	141	travel
6.	92	can
7.	62	airport
8.	59	mask
9.	59	will
10.	51	safety

**Tab. 1:** The ten most frequent words in the corpus

The table shows that first-person and second-person pronouns are the most frequent words in the corpus. At this stage, it appears that there may be a systematic use of ego-targeting techniques in the texts under analysis. Content words such as *travel*, *airport*, *mask* and *safety*

clearly indicate what the corpus is about. After a preliminary inspection of the concordances and collocations of the individual keywords, *airport* and *mask* were excluded from further analysis, since they were used in informative and explanatory contexts, being therefore less significant as indicators of persuasive communication. Then, one aspect of the table worth noting is that *can* and *will* are significantly more frequent than any other modal verb in the corpus.

Previous research has shown that ego-targeting is a specific technique of the language of tourism aimed to transform the readers targeted by the promotional text into individuals, thus making them feel special, or at least privileged (Maci 2020; 2017; Manca 2016; Dann 1996). This technique is realized with specific linguistic strategies such as direct form of address, informal tone and the imperative mood which are commonly adopted to shorten the distance between the author and the addressee creating an illusion of informality and familiarity (Maci 2007, 60). Ego-targeting is also employed in order to reduce tourist anxiety about travel protecting him/her from the ‘hazards’ associated with unknown places and people (Dann 1996, 16).

As the discussion will show, the texts under analysis exploit first-person and second-person pronouns such as *you*, *we*, *your* and *our* to foreground corporate understanding of travellers’ needs and challenges as well as the airlines ability and commitment. For example, some of the ego-targeting samples detected in the analysis tend to establish an equal author-recipient relation converting to the reader a sense of empathy with the aim of gaining his/her trust and willingness to travel again:

- (1) We know travel looks a little different these days, but rest assured that we’re here for you every step of the way.
- (2) We understand that travelling at the moment may seem overwhelming. To ensure you are prepared for your journey, we have updated our pre-travel recommendations.
- (3) We know that for many it may be the first time for a while that you’ve travelled internationally.

In particular, empathy is realized in stance-taking acts involving the epistemic verbs *know* (1), (3) and *understand* (2) which specifically indicate an intersubjectively shared perspective (Fuoli and Hart 2018, 6) and are often used to acknowledge the stakeholders’ perspective, and to show that the company is sympathetic to their concerns. As Fuoli and Paradis suggest, the demonstration of empathy and expression of shared feelings can be interpreted as an emphasize-the-positive strategy contributing to the “promotion of an image of the company as

truly caring and benevolent” (2014, 64). Examples (1) and (2) can also be interpreted as an instance of affect, which is one of the categories of resources that are directly relevant to the emphasize-the-positive strategy (Fuoli and Paradis 2014, 60). Affect refers to the linguistic expression of emotions. Here, it is mainly employed to describe the emotions felt by third parties—*non-authorial affect* (Martin and White 2005). In particular, this is achieved through the adjectives *assured* (1) and *overwhelming* (2), which are used to communicate proximity with the interlocutor and to convey the idea that his/her feelings are taken into account. However, these affective elements also create a sense of shared reality—the perceived commonality of inner states (feelings, beliefs, and concerns)—giving the impression of both social connection and understanding of the world.

In (1) it is also possible to note the use of the adversative discourse marker *but*. Together with negation/denial and epistemic modals, adversative discourse markers are among the linguistic devices expressing dialogic engagement (Martin and White 2005; White 2003; 2012) by which speakers mark their stance towards other opinions. This range of resources may be used to respond to and seek to neutralize the discourses that represent a source of distrust (Fuoli and Paradis 2014, 59), as this example of epistemic stance from the corpus shows:

- (4) At Korean air, we believe your health should come first before anything else.

As previous research on corporate discourse indicates, the verb *believe* is commonly used to foreground “the company’s ideological commitment to the principles of corporate social responsibility” (Fuoli 2018, 23), supporting the view that the company is sensitive to society legitimate concerns during a pandemic. Although *believe* constitutes a relevant example when considering how commitment is transmitted to stakeholders, it is important to note that it only occurs once in the corpus. To meet the expectations of the customers who may be concerned with health risks, a strong degree of willingness is foregrounded though a wider range of linguistic resources. In particular, to portray the companies in a positive light as trustworthy and responsible organizations, authors often make use of emotion words, including verbs such as *want* (5), (9) and *promise* (6), adjectives such as *committed* (7) and nouns such as *efforts* (8), (9) which carry meanings of firm intentionality, determination and obligation and may contribute to strengthen the impression that the company can be trusted:

- (5) Because we want you to feel comfortable and cared for when you travel with us.
- (6) We promise you a safe journey.

- (7) You're at the center of everything that we do. That's why we're committed to providing you with layers of protection for a safer, more flexible travel experience.
- (8) The safety and health of our customers is our priority, and we will continue our best efforts to make your travel safe with us.
- (9) As part of the effort, we want you to know that we've implemented a comprehensive range of new measures to give you even greater peace of mind when you take to the skies.

The substantial use of certainty verbs discussed above appears to be coherent with the relatively higher frequency of the permission/possibility/ability modal *can*, which expresses a more assertive stance if compared to *may* and *could*, as in (18):

- (10) We can together make travelling safer by acting responsibly while travelling and during the time of the destination.

It can also be observed that in the corpus the modal verb *can*, listed in Table 1, is mostly used in positive constructions (90 occurrences) and only a small proportion in negatives (2 occurrences). An inspection of the immediate-left collocates of this modal verb reveals that *can* is more frequently associated with *you* (32 occurrences) than with *we* (5 occurrences). The *you+can* combination is mostly used (25 occurrences) to indicate what actions passengers can perform. In particular, the analysis of the data reveals that *can* is mostly employed to convey the idea of the numerous possibilities passengers will have if they choose the proposed airline, as in (11):

- (11) On selected routes you can have your Covid-19 travel documents checked in advance.

The idea behind this is that the potential customer is the real protagonist of the travel experience: passengers are the ones who decide what to do and when to do it. Freedom and flexibility are constantly offered to them in various ways, as in (12):

- (12) Alternatively, you can also submit the proofs digitally or by letter to your competent health office.

Another significant aspect that is worth noticing is that *can* is much more frequent in the corpus than any other modal conveying the idea of obligation and duty. The fact that the subjective

deontic *mustn't* expressing prohibition is never found in the corpus, while *must* is relatively more frequent (23 occurrences) than other weaker forms of obligation or necessity such as the ones exemplified by *make sure* (15 occurrences), *recommend* (18 occurrences), *need to* (20 occurrences), *should* (9 occurrences), *have to* (5 occurrences), *is/are required* (8 occurrences) can be plausibly explained by the “general tendency to avoid the face-threatening force of expressions with an obligation meaning” (Biber et al. 1999, 489). In this respect, a reason may be that the predominance of the modal auxiliary *can* responds to the persuasive function of the texts under analysis which are used not only to inform passengers about safety measures and what they are required and/or can do, but also to gain their trust by neutralizing the discourses that represent flying as a stressful activity governed by tougher regulations and controls and placing emphasis instead on corporate ability, as in (13) and (14):

(13) Doing everything we can to protect our guests and keep them smiling.

(14) We're here to guide you through your journey so you can travel with confidence.

When considering the word *travel*, which is unsurprisingly prominent in the corpus (141 occurrences), further insights can be obtained on the ways airlines construct their corporate identity and frame the whole experience of the journey during the post-peak pandemic period. A collocation analysis reveals that *travel* as a pre-modifier is frequently used in conjunction with *experience* (30 occurrences). When this type of description is provided, the language is mostly evaluative and is characterized by attributes and adjectives, including *new*, *safe*, *safer*, *secure*, *best*, *pleasant*, *flexible* and *comfortable*, which present the provided service in times of Covid as an appealing novelty and a change from traditional air travelling:

(15) Delta has also put in place more than 100 layers of protection to ensure a safer, more flexible travel experience.

(16) A new travel experience with safety as our number one priority.

(17) We are doing everything we can to provide all our guests with a safe and secure travel experience.

(18) Delta CareStandard focuses on creating a safer travel experience for everyone.

(19) The entire Korean Air team is working together to deliver you the best travel experience.

(20) You will find all the information here for a safe and pleasant travel experience.

(21) Our aircraft cleaning teams are trained to meet our high cleanliness standards to provide our customers and crew with a safe and comfortable travel experience.

Not only are these adjectives evaluative, since they add positive judgment and evaluation to the *travel experience* being described, but they may be strategically deployed to emphasize the company’s ability in the implementation of safety measures that under risky and uncertain circumstances as the current ones, are presumably the quality potential passengers consider when assessing the trustworthiness of an airline company. As it has been shown at the beginning of this section, there is a highly exploited usage of *safety* (51 occurrences) within the corpus. It is marked as a *priority* (25 occurrences) and conventionally found in conjunction with *health* (14 occurrences) as in the example “your health and safety come first,” but it is explicitly indicated as the result of measures and procedures that have been *enhanced* (37 occurrences), *maintained* (38 occurrences), and *ensured* (39 occurrences), as the examples below show:

(22) Follow the journey through our enhanced safety and disinfection measures at the airport and on your flight.

(23) And on board we’ve made a few changes to maintain strict levels of hygiene and safety.

(24) We’re doing our utmost to ensure your health and safety at every step of the journey.

To complement the current investigation, besides exploring the most commonly used words in the corpus, it is worthwhile to consider some other lexical resources—irrespective of their frequency—that are instrumental in minimizing the negative and maximizing the positive in the selected texts. In corporate discourse (Breeze 2013), and in promotional texts more generally (Wernick 1991), negatively connoted words are commonly avoided. It is therefore not surprising that, in the texts under analysis, negative emotion words are rarely found. For example, when faced with the need to discuss adverse circumstances, authors tend to use vague language which has an inherently unspecified or underspecified meaning in the context in which it occurs and can be utilized as a communicative strategy (Zhang 1998). An example of vague language in the corpus is the euphemistic adjective *different* in example (1), which frames the problem in rather vague conceptual terms as neither positive nor negative. Another form of inexplicitness can be observed in the use of *overwhelming* in example (2), which possesses both positive and negative connotations. However, the language of airlines websites is not always overtly positive. For

example, when companies address the passengers’ responsibility, a less optimistic tone is employed as (25) and (26) exemplify:

- (25) In these difficult times, it remains essential that everyone who chooses to travel does so with full adherence to rules and regulations, while also thinking about sensible ways they can reduce risks for themselves, and for others.
- (26) In today’s environment, with COVID-19 at the top of everyone’s mind, travel also comes with responsibility.

However, the authors of the corporate websites try to mitigate the negative connotations framing the problem as contingent upon timing and circumstances.

Overall, positively charged words and expressions are more frequent in the corpus also because the sudden and threatening aspects of crisis demand reassurance, as in *you can rely on us* (27), through the enactment of familiar discourses such as the comforting effects of expertise:

- (27) As one of the largest and most experienced global airlines throughout the COVID-19 crisis, you can rely on us to take you on your next journey safely.

Furthermore, when dealing with the description of unpleasant travel conditions (i.e. travel restrictions, mask wearing, waiting times at security, restrictions on carry-on baggage), the authors tend to support their arguments with details and facts with the aim of making claims more acceptable to readers:

- (28) A mask is mandatory on all Finnair flights as, in addition to our aircraft’s efficient air ventilation, masks provide another barrier against the virus.
- (29) Some authorities and airports are currently restricting the amount of carry-on baggage you can take with you. This is to reduce waiting times at security and speed up boarding and disembarking.
- (30) Packing light is a good idea, as baggage handling increases the time you spend and the contacts you have at the airport.

In a similar vein, they also reassure the reader by providing third-party evidence. Awards from well-known organizations and references to renowned partners have the credibility of an objective third-party endorsement. This outside evaluation of corporate conduct also lends credibility to corporate claims as the following examples show:

- (31) More information about how you're in safe hands can be found here along with our award winning cleaning onboard, recognised by a recent Diamond status award in Health and Safety from APEX and SimplyFlying.
- (32) KML has been rewarded with the APEX Diamond Award Health safety powered by SimplyFlying. The highest level of certification in the area of health and safety confirms that we have made health and hygiene priority number 1 for our customers, employees and society. And it is an important guarantee that you are flying safely with KML at the highest possible level worldwide.
- (33) United is the first airline among the four largest U.S. carriers to be awarded Diamond status by APEX Health Safety powered by SimplyFlying for our cleanliness and sanitation efforts. See what we're doing to make every step of the travel journey safer for you.
- (34) JAL is the first airline in Asia to achieve the highest rating in safety from both SKYTRAX and APEX, two leading international airline advisory organizations.
- (35) We've partnered with trusted experts from the medical field and leaders in disinfection and sanitation to help us revolutionize a safer and cleaner travel experience for all customers and employees.
- (36) Through this commitment, we're teaming up with Clorox to redefine our cleaning and disinfection procedures and working with the experts at Cleveland Clinic to advise us on policies that prioritize your well-being.

To evoke the excitement of travelling and the discovery of new ways of experiencing flying, airlines also tend to use emphatic language which aims to trigger the readers' emotive response. In the following examples it can be noted the use of emotion words and positive evaluative expressions that frame the travel experience as joyful (37), motivated by passion (38) and the need of closer human relationships (39):

- (37) There have never been more reasons to rediscover the joy of travel. With more planning tools to keep you informed, flexibility to protect your travel plans and our continued commitment.
- (38) We are keeping at the center of everything we do and giving you even more reasons to get back to doing what you love.
- (39) In an increasingly polarized world, travel helps build deeper human connections and greater understanding.

To reassure customers and strengthen the corporate image, companies make future-oriented declarations of the organization’s purpose and aspirations. These statements are often presented “as categorical assertions expressed with ‘will,’ and with use of verbs that imply positive actions” (Breeze 2013, 160), as in (40):

(40) Remember, we will implement our own guidelines to keep you protected.

Significantly, *will* is mainly collocated with the durative verb *continue* (8 occurrences) followed by an infinitival clause to encode the continuation of a process (Girard-Gillet 2016) that is positive—*best* (41), *highest standard* (42)—and offers the options of rebuilding customer relationships which were abruptly interrupted due to the Covid-19 outbreak:

(41) The safety and health of our customers is Korean Air’s top priority, and we will continue our best efforts to make your travel safe with us.

(42) We will continue to ensure that our safety and hygiene measures are of the highest standard.

This example is also useful to highlight how *we* is generally used in the texts under analysis. By marking the presence of the author’s voice, the plural, first-person pronoun contributes to deliver an image of corporate union and teamwork, where every member of the organization is represented as personally committed to the prioritization of passengers’ safety and wellbeing.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Much of the tourism industry built its financial strategy around a trouble-free future, planning for eternal blue skies and open borders. How companies in the aviation industry use language to rebuild confidence with travellers to still be operating in the aftermath of the pandemic while maintaining trust and credibility has been the object of this study.

As the corpus-based analysis of a selection of official webpages has revealed, companies use positive evaluative language to describe and highlight their achievements and commitment in order to encourage air travel in the post-peak period. Although they admit the crisis occurrence and the change in the way today travel is experienced, emphasize-the-positive strategies are employed in combination with neutralize-the-negative strategies to foreground corporate ability in responding to safety and health issues imposed by the pandemic. The analysis has also shown

that to maintain a dialogic connection and construct a more emphatic and benevolent rapport with the customers, companies use affective language and ego-targeting techniques. In particular, significant instances of emotive language have been identified, whereby the references to Covid-19 were found. These choices seem to underpin an emphasize-the-positive strategy aimed at humanizing the customers travel experience and the challenges that confront passengers on the basis of a common threat. Although these interactive features are typical of both corporate discourse and of texts with a marked promotional function, it seems plausible to claim that these discursal trends found in the corpus are likely to be more prominent in times of crisis.

Drawing on data from a small corpus of airlines websites, the present investigation seeks to contribute to the existing literature on the topic of trust in discourse and to research on digital communication on tourism and travelling. In particular, being the first linguistic study, to the author’s knowledge, devoted to air travel digital discourse in the post-peak pandemic period, it can be also considered as a valuable contribution to the field of crisis communication focusing on how airlines restore the company’s image after periods of distress. Yet some limitations can be identified. Multimodal elements (e.g. logos, images, music, videos) play a significant role in contemporary digital communication; however, this study only focuses on the written discourse of official airlines websites. Future research may be expanded and address both textual and visual representation in order to obtain a broader view of today’s aviation corporate discourse.

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