Whose Crisis Is It Anyway?

Examining Complexity in Blame Attribution and Reputational Risk in the Airline Industry

## Abstract

### Purpose and Relevance

The airline industry has long been identified as crisis prone (Gonzales-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). Yet in recent years, the industry has faced an increasingly difficult task in managing issues, not least of all because of the complex international audiences and situations facing it. The complexity surrounding catastrophic events is not limited to the different global audiences to whom the airline might be speaking but also the level of coordination required to respond as was demonstrated by the March 2015 crash of the Germanwings flight in France where the world heard from the leaders of France, Spain, and Germany along with the Spanish King all before hearing from the company itself.

These dramatic catastrophes are, of course, the exception rather than the rule in the airline industry. More common issues, risks, and crises are emerging in the industry over questions of health and safety such as communicable diseases and smart security endeavours (IATA, 2015). Yet, little is known about the implications on the industry of crises like those emerging from security problems or more recent questions about the spread of communicable diseases, like Ebola from Western Africa or the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus or influenza. In each of these cases, questions have emerged about the relative responsibility of the airline industry and local governments for managing the health and safety concerns related to air travel (Bacchi, 2014; Martin & Weikel, 2014; Watt, 2015).

Thus, as airlines increasingly face pressures to manage global health and security issues on a routine basis, the appropriateness of their responses may well shape consumers' willingness to travel or use particular airlines. When confidence is shaken in the safety of flying, as we saw after 9/11, the stability of the entire industry can be shaken, taking the industry three years to recover (IATA, n.d.).

Therefore, the present study's purpose is to examine blame attribution and reputational risk in the global airline industry by analysing respondents' reactions to health and safety crises. This study directly compares these two crisis contexts and the influence of defensive versus

accommodative response strategies from airlines to assess blame attribution and different aspects of reputational risk from a stakeholder relationship management perspective in a cross-national context.

**Theoretical Approach**

The study will evaluate blame attribution, reputational, and consumer behavioural intentions regarding flying, the airline, and the industry using frame of the stakeholder relationship model (Diers, 2012), assessing the relationships between the airline, consumers, and the issue of health or safety to predict the outcomes (see figure 1 for the conceptual model for the study).
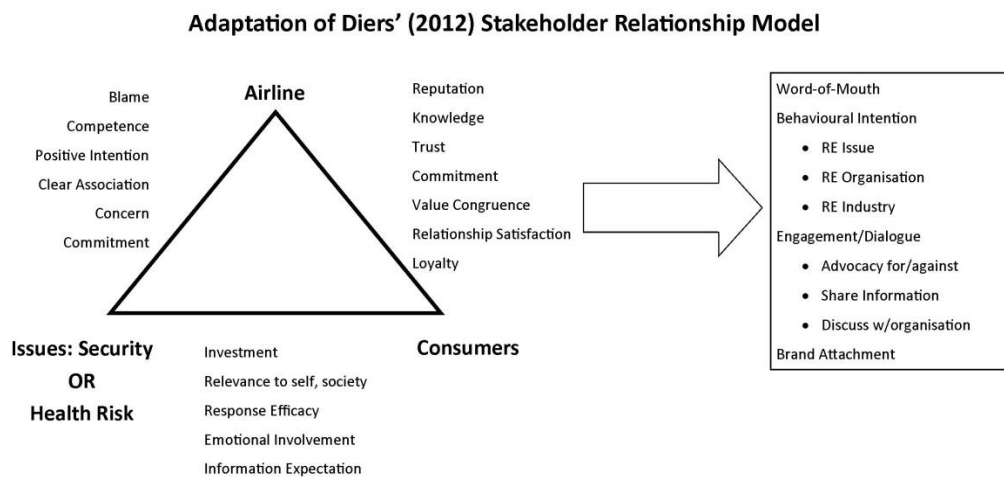


*Figure 1. Adaptation of Diers' (2012) Stakeholder Relationship Model*

**Methods and Anticipated Results Discussion**

In a 2x2 experimental design, approximately 200 respondents from each of the following countries – Bulgaria, Nigeria, Oman, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the US – were exposed to a news article customised to their region reporting on either a health or safety crisis with either an accommodative or defensive response from the airline.

It is anticipated that type of crisis, and relational factors will significantly influence the outcomes.

**Originality**

In recent years, there has been increased recognition that national identity matters in crisis response (e.g., Chen, 2009; Rovisco, 2010), yet there are few cross-national studies of crisis response and most analyses of crisis response focus on western perspectives. This study provides a global comparison of the implications of crisis response in addition to providing a stronger understanding of the outcomes of particular crisis response strategies including industry-level implications.

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