

## Crisis Communication in the Context of Rational and Emotional Benefit: The Case of the Aviation Sector

Ebru Nilgün Serengil<sup>1\*</sup> , Belis Gülay<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1\*</sup>Maltepe University, Ph.D Independent Scholar, İstanbul, Türkiye. (serengilebru@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Maltepe University, Civil Aviation and Cabin Services Department, İstanbul, Türkiye. (belisgulay@maltepe.edu.tr)

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Corresponding Author: *Ebru Serengil*

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of crisis communication strategies in the aviation sector, specifically within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, by evaluating both rational and emotional benefits. It emphasizes the importance of considering both aspects of crisis communication to effectively address the negative effects of the pandemic on the Turkish aviation industry. A quantitative research method was employed to determine the validity and reliability of the factors under investigation. The study utilized a questionnaire-based approach to collect concrete data and assess the levels of crisis communication in relation to emotional and rational benefits within the Turkish aviation sector. The research findings highlight that airlines in the Turkish aviation sector have responded to the pandemic by implementing strategies focused on health and safety measures, flexibility policies, customer relationship management, and empathy. These strategies aim to address both rational expectations and emotional needs of customers. Consequently, evaluating and integrating rational and emotional benefits within crisis communication processes is a crucial step for airlines to enhance customer satisfaction, establish trust, and maintain their reputation. This study adds to the current body of literature by emphasizing the significance of crisis communication strategies that consider both rational and emotional benefits. It recognizes the specific challenges faced by the Turkish aviation sector due to the COVID-19 pandemic and explores approaches to mitigate the negative effects. Evaluating and integrating rational and emotional benefits within crisis communication processes is deemed crucial for enhancing customer satisfaction, establishing trust, and maintaining a favourable reputation.

## 1. Introduction

Crisis communication is considered a fundamental element of crisis management. The crisis communication strategies, policies, and practices of organizations hold significant importance in terms of customer satisfaction. Pre-crisis communication practices play a crucial role in guiding the identification of crisis elements and taking preventive measures. Post-crisis communication is necessary for preserving and rebuilding a positive image and influencing perceptions. Organizations that recognize the importance of crisis communication during a crisis exhibit successful crisis management, while those that neglect it may suffer serious damages. Therefore, crisis communication holds great importance for organizations to ensure their continuity and sustainability.

The aviation industry is a sector that contributes significantly to the development of modern society. It allows people to shorten their travel times, enabling them to spend their time more efficiently and travel long distances. Additionally, the transportation of commercial goods through air cargo has made significant contributions to the field of commerce.

However, globally, the aviation industry has entered an unprecedented period of contraction since World War II. Air transportation is more prone to crises and disasters compared to other sectors. Crises such as plane crashes, hijackings, terrorist acts, and sabotage are frequently observed in the aviation sector. These crises, due to the significant position of airlines in the global economy, have also affected other sectors and undermined the foundations of some companies. The aviation sector has faced a major crisis, experiencing stages of complete shutdown, limited operations, and carrying out flights under specific conditions.

Crisis communication within the aviation sector has been a focal point of research due to the high impact of crises on public safety, trust, and the industry's financial stability. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has underscored the critical importance of effective communication strategies in navigating the unprecedented challenges faced by the aviation industry. The literature on this subject is extensive, exploring various strategies and their effectiveness in mitigating adverse outcomes during and after a crisis (Nittmann, 2021; Chmielewska-Muciek et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2023).

Butler (2021) utilizes a grounded theory approach to explore the impacted public's perceptions of crisis

communication within organizations, using the Boeing 737 MAX 8 crashes as a case study. The study identifies a core category of public expectations, which includes Cognitive Empathy, Crisis Communication expectations, and Decision-Making complexities. Findings reveal that the impacted public displays a higher level of empathy towards organizational challenges than previously thought, suggesting a shift in how culpability and responsibility are perceived in crises. This insight is crucial for developing balanced crisis communication strategies that address public expectations and organizational interests, offering a nuanced perspective relevant to the aviation sector's crisis communication practices. Erdoğan (2023) explores the effectiveness of crisis communication during the Boeing 737 MAX crisis, focusing on the impact of emotional versus rational messaging and crisis severity on organizational reputation. The study, involving 210 participants, revealed no significant influence of message framing or crisis severity on reputation, highlighting the limited effect of traditional communication strategies in altering public perception post-crisis. This finding suggests the need for a more tailored approach to crisis communication, considering individual differences and context-specific factors. In the context of rational and emotional benefit, Butler (2021) and Erdoğan (2023) together illuminate the nuanced balance required in crisis communication strategies. Their findings advocate for an integrated approach that values empathy and customization, emphasizing that understanding and addressing the public's rational information needs and emotional states are crucial for maintaining organizational reputation during crises.

In crisis processes, solution strategies that yield lasting results both rationally and emotionally are important. This study examines how to cope with crises in the context of a global pandemic crisis.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study aimed to investigate the mediating role of rational and emotional benefits in the relationship between crisis communication and customer satisfaction. In this regard, crisis communication was considered as the independent variable, customer satisfaction as the dependent variable, and rational and emotional benefits as the mediating variables.

The study developed a theoretical model (Figure 1) suggesting that crisis communication influences customer satisfaction, and this influence is mediated by rational and emotional benefits.

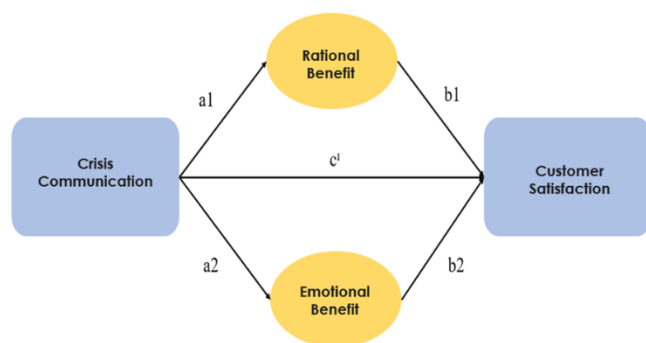


Figure 1. Research Model

The total effect (c) is equal to the sum of the direct effect (c') and the total indirect effects (a1 x b1 and a2 x b2). The sum

of the two indirect effects separately represents the total indirect effect.

$$c=c'+ a1 \times b1 + a2 \times b2$$

The total of 10 hypotheses developed in line with the research model are presented below:

H1: Crisis Communication has a significant effect on Customer Satisfaction.

H2: Crisis Communication has a significant effect on Rational Benefit.

H3: Crisis Communication has a significant effect on Emotional Benefit.

H4: In the effect of Crisis Communication on Customer Satisfaction, Rational Benefit acts as a mediator.

H5: In the effect of Crisis Communication on Customer Satisfaction, Emotional Benefit acts as a mediator.

H6: Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' gender.

H7: Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' age.

H8: Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' monthly income.

H9: Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' educational status.

H10: Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' preferred airline company.

The study primarily investigates the recovery processes of the aviation sector at the global level and then on a national scale, evaluating these crises in terms of emotional and rational benefits. Furthermore, by examining the rational and emotional benefits of customers receiving services from the aviation sector, the study aims to determine the level of customer satisfaction with the services they receive. For this purpose, a crisis communication scale consisting of 7 items developed by Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn (2022), a scale for rational benefits (consisting of 4 items) and emotional benefits (consisting of 7 items) presentations developed by Sarıoğlu and Taşkıran (2021), and finally, a customer satisfaction scale developed by Çelikkol and Bakır (2022) consisting of 4 items and a single dimension, were used. In Turkish studies related to crisis communication, it was observed that most of the research was conducted using a qualitative data analysis design. No quantitative scale study was encountered that tested validity and reliability. This study aims to contribute to the development of a scale that has been tested for validity and reliability in the field of crisis communication. In this regard, the research is expected to make a significant contribution to the literature.

Permission to utilize the scales mentioned has been duly obtained from the respective authors, ensuring compliance with the requisite intellectual property guidelines. Furthermore, it is pertinent to mention that the study has received approval, affirming our commitment to adhering to ethical standards and safeguarding participants' rights throughout the research process.

This study was conducted using a quantitative research design. The survey method was used to collect data from participants. Convenience sampling method was preferred for sample selection. The population of the study consists of customers who received services from the Turkish Aviation sector during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Criteria were established for participants to voluntarily participate in the research, have experience in the aviation sector, and have received services during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Face-to-face interviews and communication technologies were used as data collection methods. The data was collected from 376 participants and prepared for analysis using SPSS 23.0 and Smart PLS 3.9.2 software. Participants' socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, monthly income level, educational status, and preferred airline company were examined.

A survey form consisting of 27 statements was used in the research. The survey included statements related to socio-demographic information, crisis communication, brand preference, customer satisfaction, and other topics. The statements in the survey were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale.

A pilot study was conducted for the reliability and validity analysis of the scales, and the findings obtained were positive. The external measurement model was evaluated, and the criteria for convergent and discriminant validity were met. It was concluded that the scales used in the research are valid and reliable.

The data obtained from 376 participants in the main study were analyzed using SPSS and PLS-SEM methods. Descriptive statistics were conducted, and the effects of the research model were evaluated. According to the results, it was determined that the airline companies the participants received services from performed crisis communication, customer satisfaction, and brand preference activities above average.

Validity and reliability analyses were conducted, and it was found that all scales were above the threshold values. Therefore, all scale statements were retained in the model, and the analysis continued.

The analysis of the research model was conducted using the PLS-SEM method. The data was analyzed using the SmartPLS 3.2.9 statistical program. Path coefficients and R<sup>2</sup> values were calculated using the PLS algorithm.

### 3. Discussion And Conclusion

According to the results, it was determined that rational benefit and emotional benefit have a statistically significant effect on customer satisfaction. Additionally, a significant effect between crisis communication and customer satisfaction was also identified. It was observed that crisis communication has a significant effect on rational benefit and emotional benefit as well.

According to the results of the Structural Equation Model analysis, it was observed that rational benefit and emotional benefit variables mediate the relationship between crisis communication and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, it was determined that crisis communication has a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction.

The analysis revealed that both rational and emotional benefits significantly influence customer satisfaction, with crisis communication playing a pivotal role in enhancing these benefits. The results align with Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke (2010), who emphasized the positive influence of clear and empathetic communication on customer perceptions and satisfaction, highlighting the necessity of balancing factual

information with emotional understanding. This balance echoes the propositions of Coombs and Holladay (2002) in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which also supports the strategic benefits of crisis communication on stakeholder reactions, including satisfaction.

Further, this study found that crisis communication significantly affects rational and emotional benefits, supporting Liu et al. (2010) findings on the influence of organizational communication on public emotions and perceptions of competence. This underlines the importance of addressing rational understanding and emotional resonance during a crisis.

The investigation into the mediating roles of rational and emotional benefits enriches the discussion initiated by Kim et al. (2010) on the mediating role of affective responses in crisis communication. Rational comprehension and emotional resonance are crucial to enhancing customer satisfaction post-crisis.

Finally, the empirical evidence on the positive outcomes of effective crisis communication strategies corroborates with Kim and Cameron's (2011) findings on the significance of transparent and timely communication in building stakeholder trust and satisfaction during crises.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing literature by quantitatively demonstrating the significant roles of rational and emotional benefits in mediating the relationship between crisis communication and customer satisfaction within the aviation sector. It reaffirms the necessity of a dual-focused approach in crisis communication, catering to customers' informational and emotional needs to effectively navigate crises and enhance satisfaction. Future research could explore these dynamics across different crisis contexts or sectors to further validate and expand upon these findings, offering valuable insights for academic and practical applications in crisis management strategies.

The flow diagram demonstrating the mediating effect of the research is shown in Figure 2. Based on the obtained results, it can be stated that rational and emotional benefit play a partial mediating role in the impact of crisis communication on customer satisfaction.



Figure 2. Mediating effect of the research

The research examined the differences between variables based on participants' gender, age, monthly income, and preferred airline company. According to the analysis results, it was determined that gender did not create a significant difference in terms of all variables. In terms of age, significant differences were found among Crisis Communication, Emotional and Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction. Significant differences were also found among these variables based on monthly income. Regarding educational status, no significant difference was observed between Crisis Communication and Customer Satisfaction, but differences

were found between Emotional Benefit and Rational Benefit. Based on the preferred airline company, significant differences were found among Crisis Communication, Emotional and Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction. The analysis also identified the groups from which these differences originated.

The test results for the accepted or rejected hypotheses based on all the findings are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Hypothesis Test Results for the Research Model

Hypothesis	Analysis Result
H <sub>1</sub> Crisis Communication has a significant effect on Customer Satisfaction.	Accepted
H <sub>2</sub> Crisis Communication has a significant effect on Rational Benefit.	Accepted
H <sub>3</sub> Crisis Communication has a significant effect on Emotional Benefit.	Accepted
H <sub>4</sub> In the effect of Crisis Communication on Customer Satisfaction, Rational Benefit acts as a mediator.	Accepted
H <sub>5</sub> In the effect of Crisis Communication on Customer Satisfaction, Emotional Benefit acts as a mediator.	Accepted
H <sub>6</sub> Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' gender.	Rejected
H <sub>7</sub> Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' age.	Accepted
H <sub>8</sub> Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' monthly income.	Accepted
H <sub>9</sub> Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' educational status.	Partially Accepted
H <sub>10</sub> Crisis Communication, Emotional Benefit, Rational Benefit, and Customer Satisfaction create differences based on participants' preferred airline company.	Accepted

This research examines the impact of crisis communication strategies of airline companies in Turkey on customer satisfaction and emphasizes the role of rational and emotional benefits in service and product delivery. The study ensured the Turkish language validity of the crisis communication scale developed by Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn (2020) and used the scale in a unidimensional structure with seven statements. This study identified the lack of quantitative scale usage in the literature research conducted in the field of crisis communication and it is predicted to contribute to future studies by leading communication-focused research in different sectors and crisis situations.

The research investigated the flight services of three different airline companies during the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of customers' emotional and rational benefit expectations. Within this scope, it was determined that the contribution of airline companies' crisis communication strategies to customer satisfaction was examined and well-managed crisis communication can play an important role in customer satisfaction.

Ten different hypotheses were formulated in the research. The first five hypotheses aimed to examine the effects between independent variables, dependent variables, and mediator variables through path analysis, while the other five hypotheses focused on whether the used variables differed according to the participants' socio-demographic characteristics. Except for the hypothesis related to gender, all other hypotheses were accepted. According to the research results, it was found that crisis communication has a significant and positive impact on customer satisfaction, and consumers' rational and emotional benefit behaviors partially mediate this impact. Thus, the research model was confirmed.

According to the research findings, it was observed that implementing the correct strategies in crisis communication positively influenced customers' satisfaction and their rational and emotional benefit behaviors. This study conducted specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of strategic communication in turning crises into opportunities.

When reviewing the existing literature, it is emphasized that studies conducted on crisis communication particularly highlight the importance of communication, dialogue, and mutual understanding, and it is predicted that this communication plays a significant role in coping with crises.

The study's socio-demographic analysis of participants reveals a diverse age distribution, with a majority being between 46-55 years. Gender-wise, females constitute a significant majority. Income levels vary, with a notable portion earning between 10,001-20,000 TL monthly. Educational backgrounds are high, with a significant number holding postgraduate degrees.

Based on the results of the research, the following recommendations can be made:

**Analysis of customer expectations:** Particularly in extraordinary situations like crises, it is essential to analyze and understand customer expectations. Businesses should use communication tools to meet customer expectations and focus on increasing customer satisfaction.

**Communication and transparency:** Businesses operating in the aviation sector should prioritize transparency and good communication. Especially during crisis periods, businesses should establish good communication with customers and enhance relationships. Trust should be instilled in customers through communication, and the level of satisfaction should be increased.

**Sector-wide generalizations:** This research covers only a specific time period in the Turkish aviation sector. Conducting more comprehensive research to reach similar results in all sectors, especially during crisis periods, is important. The differences and similarities between businesses in different sectors should be identified.

**Research in different sectors:** Similar studies can be conducted on various businesses in different sectors to reveal the differences and similarities between businesses. This way, more comprehensive results can be obtained in terms of generalizability.

**Quantitative measurement tools:** This research has provided the use of a quantitative measurement tool for crisis communication in Turkish literature. This measurement tool

can contribute to the field by being used in different sectors and with different variables. The use of quantitative measurement tools can lead to a more comprehensive understanding.

Furthermore, the development and reasons for loyalty are considered important topics in marketing. Brand loyalty is widely agreed to offer specific advantages such as reduced marketing costs, increased customer acquisition, and greater business leverage. Building customer loyalty is an important factor in increasing market share and gaining sustainable competitive advantage, particularly in competitive markets.

The importance of brand loyalty has long been recognized in marketing literature, but the complete understanding of this concept is still ongoing. Therefore, future studies should focus on developing and validating a more effective loyalty model. A crucial factor in retaining customers is maintaining their trust in the seller.

In the process of building loyalty, factors such as establishing trust with customers, ensuring customer satisfaction, delivering quality service, providing personalized experiences, and offering products and services that meet customer needs are important. Businesses need to focus on these factors to gain and maintain customer loyalty.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes the importance of crisis communication and highlights the need for businesses to evaluate rational and emotional benefits together in order to increase customer satisfaction. Effective management of communication strategies is crucial in enhancing customer satisfaction, building trust, and maintaining reputation.

The scope of the study is limited to airline companies in Turkey, which limits its international perspective. A more comprehensive analysis could be conducted on crisis communication strategies of airline companies in different countries.

The scale used in the research has been adapted through validity testing only in the Turkish language. The validity and reliability of the scale should be investigated in different languages and cultures.

A comprehensive study can be conducted on crisis communication strategies in different sectors. Such a study can provide the opportunity to make generalizations by highlighting the differences and similarities between sectors.

An international perspective study can comparatively examine crisis communication strategies of airline companies in different countries. This can help understand the effects of cultural differences and international crisis situations.

Validity and reliability studies can be conducted on different scales used in crisis communication. The comparative analysis of scales used in different languages and cultures can enable broader generalizations.

Research can be conducted on the relationship between crisis communication and other factors (such as brand reputation, customer loyalty). This can contribute to a better understanding of the overall impact of crisis communication on business performance.

#### Ethical approval

Not applicable.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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