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TOURISM IN TIME OF EPIDEMICS

The role of crisis communication on the reputational image of tourism organisations operating in Denmark, Sweden and Norway

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TOURISM IN TIME OF EPIDEMICS

*The role of crisis communication on the reputational image of tourism organisations
operating in Denmark, Sweden and Norway*

by

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ABSTRACT

- Title** TOURISM IN TIME OF EPIDEMICS - The role of crisis communication on the reputational image of tourism organisations operating in Denmark, Sweden and Norway.
- Author** Davide Celotto
- Supervisor** Jan-Henrik Nilsson
- Purpose** The aim of this research project is to study the role played by communication strategies on organisational reputation among the different stakeholders involved during the current COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. In doing so, this master thesis aims to understand how crisis communication aids the management of service processes and the construction of organisational image during crises.
- Methodology** This study has been based on the following qualitative research methods: observations, document analysis, surveys and semi-structured interviews. The surveys have researched employees' and visitors' response to the communication strategies adopted by tourism organisations in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Whereas, the semi-structured interviews have analysed the responses provided by 12 high executives in charge of marketing and communication departments belonging to public and private organisations in the aforementioned countries.
- Results** Stakeholders value the importance of constant, coherent and honest communication from organisations in time of crises. Hence, understanding the role played by organisational communication on the formation of reputational images is pivotal to both scholars and managers alike. The outcome of this study enables academics to understand image formation processes in light of the organisational communication strategies adopted by enterprises. Furthermore, its results equip organisations with the know-how to tackle positively future crises. Indeed, through this study I have found out that the communication strategies adopted by an organisation shall be consistent with the reputational threat level of a crisis. When the

channels, frequency and strategies adopted are not in line with the threat level constituted by a crisis, the reputation of the company will be negatively affected in its stakeholders' eyes.

Keywords Tourism organisations; Crisis Communication strategies; Situational Crisis Communication Theory; Organisational reputation; Service Management.

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1 INTRODUCTION

“This is law enforcement. We will whip you. You know, to make you comply. We tell you not to go there, and you go there, we are going to whip you” (Weekend Marathon, 2020).

“The Swedish model is showing you can get very far by voluntary measures. I think we started out using the methods that we always use in public health. Having sort of a conversation with the public, putting a lot of trust in the public and giving a little responsibility to the individuals, which is exactly what our communicable disease laws are telling us to do. And by following the pattern. Doing this, we could keep the number of cases down, and we could keep our health services working” (Tegnell, 2020).

“Misinformation about the coronavirus might be the most contagious thing about it” (Depoux et al., 2020:1).

With nearly one million deaths, millions of infected and trillions of dollars lost due to the current pandemic in different economic sectors, the respiratory disease known as COVID-19, or commonly referred to as Coronavirus, has reached over few months global proportions (WHO, 2020). To date the overall effects of the pandemic outbreak are still partially determined and according to socio-economic forecasts it may take years to completely recover from it (ibid.). The aforementioned quotes describe some completely diverging ways of approaching the current health crisis and how misinformation influenced negatively people’s perception of its management. Hence, this master thesis will discuss the role of communication strategies on the reputational image attributed by stakeholders¹ to enterprises from a service management perspective.

Crises play an important role in service management studies as these last ones aim to understand and address organisational processes. Communication, by addressing the threats to organisations’ reputation, is fundamental in crisis management. Diseases are considered external and unstable threats as they cannot be forecasted nor they are internal to a specific organisation (Beirman, 2003; Jiang et al., 2018). According to Weiner’s Attribution Theory (1986), individuals tend to associate neutral reputation to destinations and companies affected

¹ Although stakeholders are considered: employees, investors, suppliers and clients, this thesis focuses solely on employees and clients of the organisations contacted.

by external and unstable factors. Thus, the research in the role of communication in crisis management has so far focused on internal and foreseeable elements as they have a stronger impact on the reputation of companies or destinations (Clift and Grabowski, 1997; Beirman, 2003). Bundy et al. (2017) claim that, by studying the interaction between internal and external stakeholders, it may be possible to prevent, or at least diminish, the negative effects of crises on organisations. To countenance this increasing amount of crises (Faulkner, 2001), all actors involved by the tourism industry are bound to communicate among each other in a coherent and open way. The Korean word for crisis (위기) can be translated in two forms: threat and opportunity. Indeed if appropriately managed crisis can become an opportunity for growth. As communication covers a pivotal role in the way crises are understood and shared at local and global scale, the way communication is conducted can represent, as aforementioned, a threat or an opportunity to organisations and their stakeholders. As stated by a high executive from Visit Denmark (interviewee 3, personal communication, 2020), the current COVID-19 crisis has brought organisations and states worldwide “*to reach levels of digitalisation and networking never seen before*”, which helped strengthen, in many organisations, their resilience capacity and ability to face crises.

“Corporate crises are disasters precipitated by people, organisational structures, economics, and/or technology that cause extensive damage to human life and natural and social environments” (Mitroff, Shrivastava and Udwadia, 1987:283). This definition of crisis, already spelled out by Mitroff, Shrivastava and Udwadia in their article “Effective Crisis management” published in 1987, has remained an “effective” definition of crisis over time. Crisis management is vital to the survival of institutions, organisations and individuals alike (Lesenciuc and Nagy, 2008; Heide and Simonsson, 2014; Murty and Subramanian, 2014). Mikušová and Horváthová (2019:1859) claim that the crisis management process can be divided into three parts: “prevention, self-realisation in a time of crisis and post-crisis activities” or pre-, during and after the crisis. Communication is of paramount importance during all steps of crisis management as it can strengthen or destroy the image and reputation of states, destinations and the tourism industry (Lesenciuc and Nagy, 2008; Heide and Simonsson, 2014; Murty and Subramanian, 2014; Mikušová and Horváthová, 2019). An updated and coherent communication flow provides a sensemaking response to crises (Mikušová and Horváthová, 2019). Nevertheless, until present there has been very little research in the field of crisis communication and its role in preventing and managing crises,

particularly in the tourism industry (Beirman, 2003; Heide and Simonsson, 2014; Jiang et al., 2018; Mikušová and Horváthová, 2019).

Yi and Singh (2000) inferred in their article that communication should be considered part of service management as it affects this last one on different levels. Thus, although the topic chosen in this master thesis may be placed as well under the Strategic Communication studies, it can be discussed that communication covers a fundamental role in service management too. Additionally, the focus provided by this paper is on the role of reputation on employees' and customers' behaviour towards organisations rather than on communication per se; hence, it can be considered a transboundary research aimed at providing a holistic and multidisciplinary insight on the roles of communication and reputation on the survival of service organisations during crises.

Using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, hereby SCCT, of Timothy Coombs as theoretical framework for this study, I intended to explain the relationship between the role of communication and the reputational image associated to tourist organisations during and in the aftermath of health-related crisis management as the current one. Thus, this thesis explores the communication frequency, the channels and the strategies adopted by different organisations in Denmark, Sweden and Norway to understand the previously mentioned relationship. In doing so, it studies how such organisations have communicated among them and with their stakeholders. Taking into account Danish, Norwegian and Swedish tourist organisations, I researched the role of communication in shaping tourists' and employees' reputational image of those enterprises. Indeed, I found an academic and, often, social gap in understanding how the reputation of a group of stakeholders (e.g. employees, managers, investors, clients) of a determinate organisation may influence the stance of other internal and/or external members of the enterprise.

1.1 Research Problem

Crisis communication research is designed to add knowledge to the crisis management field (Coombs, 2013). Crisis management is concerned with anticipating and preparing states, organisations, individuals and destinations to tackle anthropogenic or nature-borne crises (Pforr and Hosie, 2008). As tourism is vulnerable to external threats, the role played by crisis management is vital to the survival of the industry (Clift and Grabowski, 1997; Beirman,

2003; Jiang et al., 2018). According to Beirman (2003:6), crises in tourism can be created by one or more of the following factors:

- “international wars or conflicts;
- specific act(s) of terrorism;
- major criminal act(s) or crime wave(s);
- natural disaster(s);
- health concerns related to diseases and endemics/epidemics/pandemics.”

Although, most of the studies have been focused on the first four of the aforementioned points, not so many of them have analysed the role of communication in crisis management. Even fewer researches have been conducted on the impact of communication during health crises on the reputation of tourism enterprises (Beirman, 2003; Jiang et al., 2018). Another important point to consider refers to transboundary analysis of communication from both a service management and strategic communication perspective, which can add interesting holistic insights into crisis management in the service industry. Insofar, all studies on crisis communication have been conducted from a strategic communication perspective; however, a service management discussion on this topic is missing. Finally, it is worth to study the role of communication on the reputational image attributed to organisations by their stakeholders and how this may be affected from the method and type of messages communicated during crises by the different actors involved. Indeed, by researching these points we may be able to understand social processes behind the formation of organisational image in stakeholders’ minds and how the service industry can manage them effectively through communication strategies. According to Coombs (2007) the image associated to an organisation has a direct relationship with the behaviour adopted by stakeholders towards such entity.

1.2 Aim and Scope

Using Coombs’ SCCT as framework of this study, I discuss how the reputational image attributed to tourism organisations depends upon the communication channels, frequency and strategies adopted among internal and external stakeholders. Coombs’ theory has been mostly centred on the internal factors leading to crises. The scholar states that customers tend to have neutral or favourable attitudes towards an organisation, when this is affected by external factors (Coombs, 2007). Through data analysis I studied the relevance of Coombs’ theories in

light of the communication strategies adopted by micro², small³, medium⁴ and large tourism organisations⁵ in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Accepting the fact that reality is socially constructed, I adopted a constructionist approach in understanding the results obtained by the messages conveyed from tourism enterprises to their stakeholders.

Hence, using a triangulation⁶ of research methods (document analysis, observations, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires) I have studied how different messages have been communicated in Denmark, Norway and Sweden and received by tourist stakeholders. Successively, by interviewing and surveying public companies, tourists, service providers and tour operators connected with the 3 countries, I have gathered data regarding the different messages communicated during the current covid-19 crisis. This allowed me to evaluate whether the communication adopted by organisations has been successful in strengthening the organisational image in stakeholders' eyes.

This research project sought to identify the above mentioned issues and research gaps through the following research questions:

- What types of communication strategies have been adopted by Danish, Swedish and Norwegian tourism organisations during the COVID-19 crisis?
- To what extent have the crisis communication strategies influenced stakeholders' reputational image of the organisations?

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided in five parts introduced and resumed in the current subchapter.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the topic discussed in this thesis, the aim and scope of it and a short resume of the different sections of it.

² Micro enterprise: company that employs between 1 and 9 individuals (OECD, 2020).

³ Small enterprise: company that employs between 10 and 49 individuals (ibid.).

⁴ Medium enterprise: company that employs between 50 and 249 individuals (ibid.).

⁵ Large enterprise: company that employs 250 or more individuals (ibid.).

⁶ Triangulation is the combination of 2 or more research methods. It is a strategy used to increase validity and reliability of a research.

Chapter 2 lays forward the theoretical framework of this project on crisis communication. A brief introduction to the Attribution Theory of Weiner (1986) is provided to understand the later development of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (hereby SCCT) by Timothy Coombs in the first decade of the twenty-first century. From a definition of crisis management to a historical and academic background on the development of the SCCT, this chapter reports the evolution of the studies on the role of communication in preventing and managing crises in progress and their aftermath. It also presents limitations and academic gaps in the studies on this topic.

Chapter 3 discusses the methods used in this research project to gather the data the reader. It also briefly explains the philosophical reasoning behind the typology of research methods used in this context. It analyses as well strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the research conducted in this thesis.

Chapter 4 presents and analyses the data collected in this research with the different research methods outlined in the previous chapter in line with the theoretical framework discussed in chapter 2.

The final chapter (chapter 5) discusses the findings presented and analysed in the previous chapter in relation with the research questions of this research project. Furthermore, it outlines the conclusions of my investigation and it highlights the gaps unanswered by this thesis. Finally, it draws recommendations for further studies in the field of crisis communication related to service management.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pfarr and Hosie wrote already in 2008 that the globalization phenomenon has been increasingly affecting businesses and communications. Rapid improvements in technologies and transports have aided the growth of the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2019). Despite the positive effects on the industry, the aforementioned factors have as well contributed to highlight the importance of studying crisis management, as the industry is very vulnerable to internal and external threats (Beirman, 2003). External threats as: safety-, security- and health-related negative events (e.g. terrorist attacks, epidemics and pandemics, piracy and crime) have all led to periodic crises in tourism (Clift and Grabowski, 1997; Beirman, 2003; Nilsson, 2005; Pfarr and Hosie, 2008; Jiang et al., 2018). The same can be said about the internal ones, which are often created by mismanagement of an organisation (Beirman, 2003; Jiang et al., 2018). Although crisis management has been studied for quite some time, there have been only few studies about the role of communication in the prevention and management of crises. To a lesser extent it is possible to find interdisciplinary studies regarding the interconnectedness between communication and the service studies.

As previously stated in the introduction, albeit this study could be considered as part of the Strategic Communication studies, the pivotal role played by communication in marketing and in addressing issues within the service industry makes this thesis an important contribution to Service Management studies. Hence, the lack of theories from the service management department on this field has been compensated by adding a departmental perspective to SCCT. This chapter presents the theoretical framework discussed in the thesis and aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary research gap on the role of communication on organisational image.

SCCT has been founded on Weiner's Attribution Theory, which posits that the result of an action or event depends upon internal (within the actor), e.g. organisational structure, or external (within the environment of belonging of the actor) factors, e.g. climate, geo-political events (Weiner, 1986). Depending upon the results of the event (either stable or unstable) on the customer (audience), these elements can be further divided into positive or negative expectancy (ibid.). Unstable elements are generally associate to non-predictable acts, thus crisis generated by internal or external unstable factors tend to create a neutral expectancy in individuals (Frandsen and Madsen, 2017). On the opposite, crisis generated by stable elements, which could have been predicted, led clients to negative expectations towards the

management of the situation by the organisations in charge (ibid.). Under these premises Timothy Coombs states that the way of controlling communication is pivotal to the expectancy created in customers by the organisation (Coombs, 2007). Coombs through his Situational Crisis Communication Theory aims to create an academic framework, where the role of communication is studied in relation to the management of crisis. The theoretical chapter introduces the reader to the aforementioned theories, their applications in service management as well as the gaps and limitations of such theories.

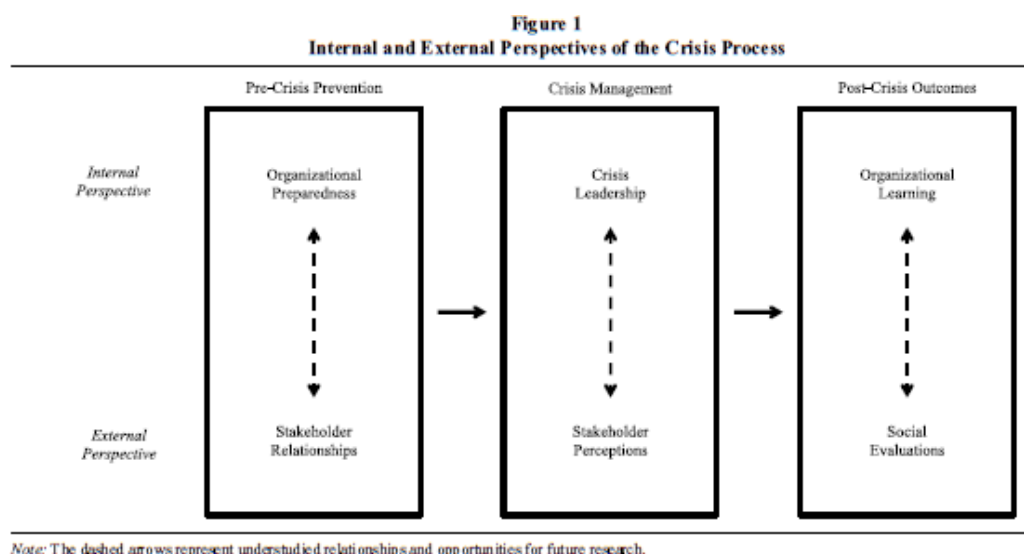
2.1 Previous Research

A univocal definition of crisis has not yet been determined, which on one hand may lead to difficulties in determining exactly what has to be studied, but on the other hand it can leave the researcher more open to interpretations (Jiang et al., 2018). However, the most used definition belongs to Bill Faulkner (2001), who stated that crises are generated by acts (either external or internal) or failures to act, which affect the functions, viability and survival of an organisation or the perception of the stakeholders towards it. Crises are behavioral phenomena that constitute uncertainty and existential threats for any organisations; they undermine the image of the last ones in the eyes of the stakeholders (Bundy et al., 2017; Dowling and Weeden, 2017). Furthermore, in a globalized environment, where Information and Communication Technologies, hereby ICTs, allow to reach every corner of the world in a matter of seconds, the spread of negative events and unverified information, called rumours, have a heavier toll on the tourism industry (Pforr and Hosie, 2008; Han and Ciravegna, 2019; Agnes, 2020).

Crisis management is defined as a research field apt to adjust the organisational know-how to each specific crisis and adequately prevent and manage crises to reduce the reputational damage to an organisation (Alberghini, 2016). The study of crisis management presents us with two perspectives: internal and external, which develop during the three stages of a crisis: pre-crisis, during and post-crisis (Heide and Simonsson, 2014; Bundy et al., 2017). In the internal perspective Heide and Simonsson (2014) and Bundy et al. (2017) have studied the internal dynamics of organisations in preventing (pre-crisis stage) and managing crises as well as handling the post-crisis phase. Type of communications analysed by the previous researchers included: inter-employee communication, inter-managerial communication and

communication between employees and managers, considered the three different levels of an organisation. In the external crisis communication studies, it has been studied how organisations interact among them and with their stakeholders to prevent and solve current issues, learn and grow from them, as well as to improve their future responses in the three aforementioned stages of crises (ibid.).

In the daily processes of an organisation there are plenty of situations that may lead to an error in communication, thus to crises for organisations (Tartabini, 2003). Albeit its importance for the survival of organisations, the first studies on the management of communication have been conducted only from the end of the 20th (ibid.). Below in figure 1, Bundy et al. (2017) highlight with the dashed arrows the understudied possibilities for future research. This research seeks to understand the interactions between internal and external communication and whether these ones influence each other in constructing the reputational image of an organisation in stakeholders' mind. Studies conducted on the direct relationship between the image of an organisation and its marketing results have shown that enterprises may be able to strengthen their image through good communication and marketing strategies. Communication as a vital part within marketing through its strategies aims to manage the internal processes in companies and improve their efficiency; whereas, on an external level it aims to portray the image and message of the organisation (Ahmed, 2019). It also aims to display a coherent and consistent message to stakeholders in order to market the services sold by companies (ibid.).



Figur 1: Internal and external perspectives in crisis management (Bundy et al., 2017:1665).

Crisis communication is vital for the correct management of organisations and for supporting the recovery of the damages on the reputation in the aftermath of negative events (Murty and Subramanian, 2014). It has been noted that when the communication within companies (or destinations) and between them and their stakeholders is not properly understood by the audience, the results may be devastating (Tartabini, 2003; Brundin and Mattson, 2017; Gori, 2017; Lohiniva et al., 2020). Different case studies, e.g. foot-and-mouth disease, Ebola, SARS, MERS epidemics, have demonstrated that, albeit the limited spread of contagion and amount of victims related to it, wrongful messages sent through social media and official channels have led to negative perceptions of the situation (Dombey, 2003; Knobler et al., 2004; Lo et al., 2006; Monterrubio, 2010; Cahyanto et al., 2016; Morford, 2016; Larson, 2018; Gallivan et al., 2019). The spread of insecurity among tourists brought the global tourism industry during the aforementioned crises and the current one to a near stand-still with economic damages in the order of billions of US dollars and millions of job lost on global scale (ibid.). On the other hand, the lack of initial communication from national and international authorities during the current COVID-19 pandemic was contrasted by an overload of conflicting rumours on media and social media (Cowper, 2020; Depoux et al. 2020; Lohiniva et al., 2020). This situation contributed to an initial underestimation of the gravity of the issue with prevention and containment measures communicated late (ibid.). According to the WHO (2020), delays in communication and in the adoption of containment strategies led the epidemic outbreak to reach global proportions becoming a pandemic.

2.1.1 Crisis Communication Theories: A brief introduction

The aforementioned cases help to shed a light upon the importance of communication in the prevention and control of crises and the management of their aftermath. Sturges (in Frandsen and Johansen, 2017) defines crisis communication as the process of internalising, instructing, and adjusting information to prepare organisations to face and tackle crises achieving a positive outcome from the communication strategies adopted. The two main theories dominating this field are Benoit's Image Repair Theory (hereby IRT) and Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (ibid.).

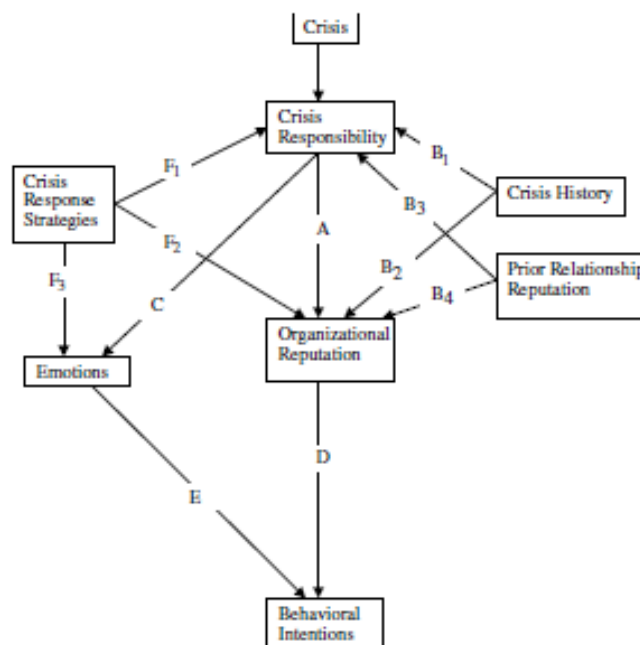
By characterising different actors and response strategies provided to crises, Benoit's IRT focuses on an ontological approach to crises management, where the scholar tries to identify

the different entities and categories in reality (Silverman, 2013). Ontology studies the different categories and entities, which construct reality, whereas epistemology is focused on the learning process or the way to acquire knowledge (Pernecky, 2016). The latter, reflective or second order consciousness is not necessary for being conscious as a first order state, which attempts to explain conscious experience primarily in terms of world-directed (or first-order) intentional states (ibid.). Benoit's IRT is based on a 2-phases' process, where, in the first stage, an actor's image is threatened by another actor or an event and, in the second one, image repair strategies must be implemented to protect its image and reputation (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Heide and Simonsson, 2019). This theory, and the complementary ones connected to it, can be framed within the role of rhetoric in crisis studies. Indeed, under this perspective crises are considered "terminological creations" (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017:102) and as such they shall be tackled linguistically through rhetoric strategies. The main arguments used from critics against this theory is related to the fact that it tends to be case-oriented rather than univocally applicable and that it simplifies the whole image restoration process to 2 phases (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Heide and Simonsson, 2019).

SCCT aims to understand and present the relationship between crises and communication. It has been established by Coombs (2007:163) to provide an "evidence based framework", which acknowledges the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication". SCCT differently from IRT shifts from a case-centred research towards evidence-based analysis of crisis communication (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017). Reputation represents, according to Coombs (2007), an overall evaluation of the organisation's ability to meet its stakeholders' needs. Thus, his theory gives an important tool to managers and scholars alike in understanding how to appropriately communicate information to enhance the organisational reputation with stakeholders after crises and to manage services and marketing strategies coherently (Coombs, 2007; Pforr and Hosie, 2008). The theoretical framework aimed to unite the different studies and findings obtained so far and set guidelines in the way of conducting communication among the different stakeholders in a global environment (Coombs, 2013). Indeed, the US scholar claimed that the lack of theoretical and evidence-based studies contributed to the lack of understanding of "how stakeholders react to crises" (Coombs, 2007:163).

2.1.2 Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) explained

According to Pforr and Hosie (2008) “all crises are different”, thus the strategies adopted to tackle each of them must be adjusted to the situation. Thereby, it is of great importance an in-depth understanding of the “crisis situation” to estimate the risk level (degree of threat) for the reputation of the organisation (Coombs, 2007:166). Crisis communication is the theory developed by Timothy W. Coombs in 2007, who, inspired by the Attribution Theory of Weiner of 1987, studied how crisis communication can be used “to protect the organisation’s image or reputation” (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017:108). Figure 2 below portrays how stakeholders attribute reputation to an organisation through their perception of crisis responsibility and the factors behind it.



Figur 2: Crisis situation model of SCCT (Coombs, 2007:166).

In addition, SCCT studies how the interaction between individuals’ emotions and the organisational reputation contributes to create or destruct the behavioral intentions towards the organisation (see fig. 2 above) (Coombs, 2007). In figure 2 above are shown the three factors affecting the reputational level of organisations:

- 1) initial crisis responsibility;
- 2) crisis history;
- 3) prior relational reputation.

The first factor is associated to the level of responsibility over the crisis conferred by the stakeholders to the organisation; the reputational threat is directly correlated with such degree. Purchase intention, instead, is negatively correlated to the degree of responsibility attributed to the organisation. This means that at increased level of responsibility attributed to a specific entity, the threat to the image of a brand will be higher, while the possibility of maintaining the same level of sales may be compromised negatively (Coombs, 2012). Thus, Coombs claims that the organisational message is of paramount importance and shall be tailored to the threat level to help companies from compromising their image. Crises can be divided into three groups: victim, accidental and intentional, while in the first cluster the degree of responsibility attributed to the company under the spotlight is the lowest, in the last group (intentional) it is assigned a strong sense of responsibility to it (ibid.).

Crisis history regards the type of crises affecting an organisation and their frequency. This factor relates to how frequently an organisation has been involved in crises in the past and which crisis' type has affected it. When an organisation X has been frequently affected by a type of crises belonging to the same category, it means that its communication strategies have not been good enough in educating its management about crisis handling.

The third factor is rather related to how well an organisation has communicated with its stakeholders in the past and the reputation it has built over time with them (ibid.). The strategy adopted by the organisation can either help strengthening or weakening the reputation of its stakeholders towards it.

In Coombs' research these last two characteristics are considered "intensifying factors", which "have both a direct and indirect effect on the reputational threat posed by the crisis" (Coombs, 2007:167-168). Thus, good management shall study the type of crisis facing the organisation and the intensifying factors involved in it to determine the level of reputation ascribed by the stakeholders to the company.

Emotions interacting with the aforementioned elements influence the intentions of individuals. Indeed, when stakeholders attribute higher responsibility to an organisation for the crisis, this situation tends to generate "schadenfreude⁷" diminishing the positive attitudes

⁷ Schadenfreude represents the sense of pleasure by an individual towards the misfortunes of another individual or organisation.

towards the organisation (Coombs, 2007:168). This means that when there are stronger negative feelings towards an organisation and the reputational level of it is low, stakeholders will be less likely to take side with the organisation, defend it and purchasing its services or products (ibid.). To minimise the reputational damage the management from a threatened organisation must adopt a proactive and flexible response strategy that should be proportional to the reputational threat brought by a crisis (McDonald and Mitra, 2019).

Coombs (2007) and McDonald and Mitra (2019) identify three primary response strategies (see table 1 below): denial and/or scapegoating, diminish and rebuild. Bolstering techniques are considered by Coombs (2007) secondary strategies to be used in combination with one of the three primary methods. Table 1 below presents the different crisis response strategies, how and when to use them effectively depending upon the prior crisis history of an organisation and the level of responsibility attributed to it by stakeholders during a negative event.

Tab. 1: Primary and secondary crisis response strategies (based on SCCT).

Primary crisis response strategies	Level of blame attributed by the organisation to itself	Degree of responsibility, attributed from the stakeholders to the organisation
Attack the accuser	Shifting the blame away ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	Highest level of responsibility ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓
Denial		
Scapegoat		
Excuse		
Justification		
Apology	Full acceptance of accountability	Lowest level of responsibility
Compensation		
Secondary crisis response strategies	How do they work?	How to use them?
Reminder	Reminds previous reputation of the organisation for its work	They can be used interchangeably with the primary crisis response strategies to improve the reputation of an organisation in the post-crisis phase
Ingratiation	Reminds good work done, communication & cooperation with stakeholders	
Victimage	Remind that the organisation is also victim of the crisis	

The first set of 3 primary strategies (see tab. 1 above) is composed by these different options: denying the existence of a crisis (Denial), attributing it to an external agent (scapegoat), or attacking the accuser blaming it for generating unfounded rumours. This set is called the denial stage and it allows organisations to escape from the possible attribution of the crisis at very low cost. Adopting denial strategies is suggested to organisations with a strong reputation on the market and positive crisis management history, when the reputational threat from an event is not severe. Diminish techniques (Excuse and Justification), similarly to the aforementioned one, albeit accepting responsibility for the crisis, they only partly accept attribution of it. Finally, the rebuilding approach (Compensation and Apology) claims liability by the organisation for the damage(s) created and offers a public apology, often followed by compensation schemes for the affected stakeholders. This last set of strategies should be adopted by organisations under severe reputational threat and/or by those ones with a negative reputation on the market and past crisis history. As mentioned above bolstering strategies are generally not used on their own, but together with one of the three techniques discussed previously. These last ones tend to be a reminder for all stakeholders about the work done by the company and the fact that the same organisation is a victim of crises (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 2012; McDonald and Mitra, 2019). This last group of strategies seeks to show empathy towards the stakeholders and boost the connection between them and the organisation.

Coombs (2007 and 2012) highlights the difference of effects in the three strategies, with the first two (denial and diminish) denying (or partly limiting) responsibility for the crisis, whereas the last typology attributes all the responsibility to the organisation and its crisis management team. The US scholar claims that in a globalised world, where ICTs allow a fast spread of information, when companies are discovered as being responsible for the crisis, contrasting what they had claimed, the negative effects of adopting denial or diminish strategies will be intensified (Coombs, 2007; Bundy et al., 2017; McDonald and Mitra, 2019; Agnes, 2020). On the other hand, when a company is offering compensation and accepting the blame for a crisis, it generally tends to receive a positive evaluation from its stakeholders (ibid.). Finally, Coombs claims that all the aforementioned strategies can be integrated among each other to create a dynamic response to the type of crisis encountered by the organisation (Bundy et al., 2017).

2.1.3 Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT): criticism and limitations

Since 2007 there have been several socio-economic and technological changes with these last ones contributing to fast spread of information-sharing over the globe and easier interconnectivity among stakeholders (Coombs, 2013). Stakeholders are no longer passive receptors of news, but thanks to online communities⁸ they are generating and spreading content at a pace often faster than that of an organisation (Coombs, 2013; McDonald and Mitra, 2019; Agnes, 2020). The birth and fast spread of social media and forums have helped to disseminate information about the performance and reputation of virtually all companies (ibid.). Thus, it is pivotal to the survival of organisations to understand the importance of communication channels and frequency in the messages being spread out, which should both be adapted to the reputational threat of a crisis. In doing so enterprises need to adopt dynamic strategies adaptable to the different crisis' types and the needs of the stakeholders. It is as well essential to understand the value attributed by stakeholders to the communication passed through online communities compared to official information released by organisations. Indeed, according to McDonald and Mitra (2019) age differences may influence users' trust in official or users' generated content with younger groups generally accrediting the same reliability between the two of them.

Coombs (2013) highlights the fact that social media can be used to either create or prevent crises. Indeed, online communities can reveal inappropriate behaviour carried on by organisation contributing to create a reputational crisis for them or, contrastingly, reinforce the image of the organisation, when this matches or exceeds stakeholders' expectations of it (ibid.). Furthermore, they can be steered by organisations to facilitate narratives between stakeholders and the organisation, allowing a two-way communication and empowering stakeholders in a controlled environment. Social media can as well be used by companies to monitor and prevent risk and disseminate official information to boost the credibility of the organisation among its stakeholders (McDonald and Mitra, 2019).

Another critique moved by Carroll (2013) and Bundy et al. (2017) against the SCCT is connected with the fact that the majority of the studies have focused on the denial and rebuilding approaches and that little has been researched into other response strategies. The scholars also claimed that several situational factors may influence positively or negatively

⁸ Online communities are defined as any group with common interests who communicate online through one or more media and that may perform activities off-line as well (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2017).

the effects obtained by the strategies adopted, including exposure time to a crisis, affection towards the organisation and stakeholders' biases towards it (ibid.).

Moreover, being a new field of study, crisis communication has been mainly researched through contextual analysis as it focuses on one specific country and it does not need variables to use as points of comparison (Coombs, 2013). Comparative analysis, instead, by using different points of comparison, seeks to analyse two or more countries in order to create theories that can be generalised (Schultz et al., 2012). Thus, there is so far a lack of research in the field to cover the under-explored themes in Coombs' theory. Furthermore, collaboration among different academic fields may help providing a multifaceted perspective on the role of crisis communication on the survival of organisations threatened by crises.

In this research, I have addressed some of the criticisms moved against Coombs by studying how the different strategies have been implemented during the current crisis in three different countries. Although this cannot be considered a comparative study, the research conducted has provided a discussion of Coombs' theory from its application in Denmark, Sweden and Norway by companies with similar characteristics. I have also researched the role played by communication channels and frequency on the reputational image created in stakeholders' eyes during the current pandemic.

3 METHODOLOGY

Epistemology, the study of how to create knowledge, and ontology, the debate over the nature of reality and how to classify it, are the two philosophical models when carrying research (Silverman, 2013). Albeit research methods may usually be associated with one of the two strains, Bryman (2012) states that this is not often true in practice. Thus, depending upon the way of constructing and conducting the study a method of data collection may be used within an ontological or epistemological perspective (ibid.).

In the thesis I decided to use a triangulation⁹ of qualitative, case-based research methods to analyse the role of crisis communication in (de-)constructing the organisational reputation in the tourism industry in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. This allowed me to compensate for weaknesses in the study, increase confidence in it adding validity and reliability to the research conducted. According to Silverman (2014), qualitative research is used to analyse and interpret social phenomena and processes, as the ones researched in this thesis, and apply theoretical concepts to them to understand how reality is socially constructed. Through a description of the process conducted in data collection and interpretation, the writer will introduce the reader to the research methodology followed and enable further researches to mirror the process adopted. This will enable academics to study the gaps in my study and further develop cross disciplinary research to understand the role of communication in the service management field. In this chapter I will also present the limitations and ethical consideration within my research to increase the transparency and accuracy of the information presented and reduce the possibility of voluntary or involuntary biases.

The different research methods chosen for this project are:

- observations;
- document analysis;
- questionnaire;
- semi-structured interviews.

In addition, I will analyse the limitations and ethical considerations in the present study. Finally, by combining interviews and document analysis of official communication among the

⁹ Triangulation in research methods is defined as the application of 2 or more: methods or data set or theories or researchers' perspectives (Flick, 2011).

stakeholders belonging to the tourism industry, I seek to provide a holistic picture of the role of communication in the current COVID-19 crisis.

Considering the fact that reality is socially constructed, this master thesis has collected data in Denmark, Sweden and Norway during the COVID-19 crisis, through the aforementioned research methods, to inductively understand whether the theoretical framework discussed above is applicable in this context. To do so, I will use constructionist ontology to explore how communication in the tourism industry has been understood by customers, creating different perceptions and affecting their responses to the crisis. I will also use an interpretative epistemology, where the social world is understood through the examination of participants' interpretation of that world (Bryman, 2012:380). In other words, there is a need to contextualize the multiple realities created by the messages delivered during the crisis to provide a proper interpretation of their meanings and uncover their hidden connotations (Bryman, 2012). Thus, to understand actions and reactions, and their meanings in a particular context, I will use different qualitative research methods. I will then use as the main theme the communication strategies described by the SCCT and their effects on stakeholders' reputation towards organisation to analyse the results obtained by my data collection.

In the following lines, I will describe the diverse methods used in this thesis to collect and analyse data, their advantages, and limitations, as well as the ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Methods

To respond to my research questions, I have used the following qualitative research methods: observations, document analysis, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Covered, field observations were conducted in Sweden and Denmark in public places and at my different work places. During the interviews I analysed the behaviour of travellers, managers and workers from tourism organisations in the 2 countries mentioned above to understand the role played by organisational messages on the actors studied. Questionnaires were distributed among workers and middle-managers from different tourism companies in Norway, Sweden and Demark, to understand whether the employees' perception of their organisation's reputation is similar to the external stakeholders' one. The semi-structured interviews have been conducted with high executives in charge of the marketing and/or the

communication departments from different tourist organisations in the 3 aforementioned countries.

Data has been collected and analysed during the coronavirus outbreak in Scandinavia. Therefore, to protect the physical and mental integrity of my participants as well as my own, some of the research methods, which I would have normally carried in person, were then conducted in virtual format e.g. semi-structured interviews; while other types of participation e.g. events, conferences, forums, meetings and trips have been either limited to webinars and online conferences or cancelled. A further explanation from the different methods will be provided below. In addition, I have also participated in a 15-credits course organised by Lund University on the topic of “Crisis Communication in Organisations and Societies”. The course has helped me understanding and applying to the practical field the knowledge acquired during the studies. It has also offered me the opportunity to discuss with some of the scholars behind the crisis communication theories presented in chapter 2 their insights on the current COVID-19 crisis.

3.1.1 Reasons behind the cases chosen for the study

The choice of my subjects of investigation has been based on the importance of the Scandinavian market in the European tourism industry. In the decade 2010 – 2020 this market has experienced the fastest growth in arrivals of the whole continent and offered hundreds of thousands of jobs in the Scandinavian region (UNWTO, 2019). Thus, the high popularity of these destinations to global tourists increases their impact and relevance to the industry.

It should also be noted that Denmark, Norway and Sweden share similarities in cultures, languages, history, traditions, which allow comparing more easily the strategies adopted in both countries. The reason behind the choice of private and public organisations of different size has been taken for understanding if SCCT can be generalised and applied to enterprises of all sizes. Finally, the following factors have facilitated my research and data collection: knowledge of local cultures and languages, employment history and network of contacts in the tourism industry of both countries, accessibility to data.

3.1.2 Observations

Observation is a research method used to capture signs, expressions and ways of behaving, which cannot be studied in other ways (May, 2011). By mixing observations in Denmark and Sweden with the other research methods used in this project, I have been able to garner different types of data that enabled me to obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied.

For this thesis, I have decided to take a covert participating role during my observations, which have been carried out over an 8-months period in Denmark and Sweden in public spaces. Whereas, I opted for a participant observation, when conducting this research method at my work place. According to Bryman (2012), the covert role allows the researcher to be part of the group activities without interfering with the participants or disturbing them; thus, it has enabled me to catch their way of behaving or acting in their natural environment disrupted by the new restrictions in place due to the pandemic. The same author describes overt participant observation as a great way to observe people in their natural settings with their consent, therefore without the risk of violating their privacy and with the possibility of openly taking notes of what is observed. During the observation period I was dedicating 3 times 1-hour observation every day from Monday to Sunday for a total of 728 hours over the whole period. The reason for extending the observation has been due to the fact that the pandemic is not over yet at the moment of compiling this thesis, thus the strategies implemented are constantly adapting to the situation.

I used my mobile phone as research diary to write down my ideas and my observations without attracting the attention of those observed. I was also taking pictures of signs, symbols and buildings, without showing individuals' faces to avoid violating their privacy, in order to understand the language and information contained. Some of the pictures shot (annexed in Appendix A1) were also taken by other researchers in Norway, part of my network of contacts, as, due to the entry restrictions imposed by the Norwegian government, I was not able to travel to the country to collect those data personally. In addition I was looking at the way of communicating important information to people with different language abilities and at facial expressions portraying people's reactions to such information. I paid particular attention to service centres, screens, mobile signs and information points on the route, to study their distribution and the type of message provided.

Finally, without paying attention to the private communications between individuals, I studied the way of interacting between public officers and individuals as well as between persons in the day to day relationships in public transports, venues and events prior and during the restrictions set in place to prevent the spread of the pandemic. This helped me understand whether the rules established and communicated were accepted and followed by tourists and citizens alike in both countries selected for this study.

3.1.3 Document Analysis

The study of official documents takes a core place in the understanding of communication in times of pandemic. By using qualitative content analysis and following Hsieh and Shannon (2005) indications, I focused on the characteristics of language used, paying particular attention to the hidden meanings found in the documents and the position of power of those who published them. Document analysis has helped complementing the gaps left by the observation of behaviours and signage distribution. Through documents, images and signage encountered, I have been able to clarify the doubts left by the observations of societal behaviour and public signage.

I collected 67 official documents derived by public tourism organisations, including official acts and reports, and 53 documents derived from private sector and individuals involved, such as printed newspapers, online magazines, companies' internal and external communication as well as blogs, Facebook public groups and reviews on TripAdvisor. The words selected have been: "COVID-19 and tourism", "communication in tourism under covid-19", "covid-19 and Scandinavian tourism", "effects of COVID-19 on Scandinavian tourism". Following the guidelines provided by Bryman (2012), while assessing the quality of the collected documents, I took into account their authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. Hence, I had carefully looked at their origin of the documents, the evidence provided by the source, any possible errors and atypical evidence, as well as the clarity of the message (Bryman, 2012). Once I had identified the documents that fulfilled all the four characteristics mentioned above, then I proceeded to identify the main themes and patterns to codify them (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

Language together with the categories representing objects and thoughts replicate structures of power according to Foucault (Bryman, 2012). Indeed, the French philosopher

argued that categories of thought constitute our way of perceiving reality. When these categories become shared by a group of persons, they end up creating the justification to specific behaviours. Hence, by researching how language is used and how power is attributed to it, it is possible to interpret the way of functioning of a determinate society (ibid.). While reading the documents I wrote down reflexive notes and added some keywords, which were later used to identify categories. The categories generated were determined by comparing the recurring themes encountered in the documents with those highlighted by SCCT. Those categories were later compared among each other to establish the links between them. The categories created here, will be later merged with the categories that emerged from the other research methods used for this thesis: surveys, interviews and observations. To do so, I created a spread sheet (see tab. 2 in Appendix A) divided by topics, sub-topics and their respective codes.

Once the documents were divided into categories, I proceeded to codify them according to the categorizations used for the other methods to aid my understanding of the topic studied. By doing so I have been able to integrate the findings from my different research methods in order to complement the results obtained and achieve an in-depth knowledge of the topic studied. Additionally, by grouping the different documents retrieved according to the author's role in the tourism sector, I have been able to compare and contrast the messages sent at the distinct stakeholder's levels. This helped me grasp the role played by official communication delivered by tourism organisations in shaping reputation among the involved stakeholders.

Finally, it is important to point to the importance of audio-visual messages, which, albeit not written, are rich in information and messages. These messages, often in the form of announcements made through loudspeakers or signage placed at public venues and on public transports, have added noticeable material to my document analysis. Indeed, they have revealed an important role in spreading institutional messages to the market segments involved by the current crisis thanks to their strategic locations in the cities.

3.1.4 Questionnaires

I collected 100 answers from qualitative questionnaires sent to: travellers, tourism organizations and public organizations involved in tourism. All questionnaires were distributed online through my network of contacts' and my social media profile on: Facebook,

Messenger, LinkedIn and via e-mail. Respondents were informed about the academic nature of the study and different ethical considerations taken into account while collecting, analysing and presenting data.

For this research I have written 2 set of questionnaires, one directed to entry-level employees and middle managers and the other one to travellers (see Appendices D1 and D2). Each questionnaire was composed of 17 questions that I formulated by basing them on the theories presented in the previous chapter. The questions 4 to 9 (see Appendix B2) directed to employees within the tourism sector regarded the marketing and communication strategies used by organisations during the corona outbreak through internal channels. Questions 10, 14 and 15 regarded employees' perception of the effectiveness of the strategies adopted by the organisations. The second questionnaire looked at travellers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the communications adopted by the organisations involved in the tourism industry through questions 14, 15 and 16 (see Appendix B1). Question 10 asked the communication channel used by the tourists and the 13 served to understand whether the service providers were aligned with the customers in the type of channels used to communicate their messages. The questionnaires were randomly spread via internet (through LinkedIn and Facebook) and in person (in written form). In total 10 interviewees working in the tourism industry responded versus 90 travellers and potential travellers to Scandinavia. Before the questions' section, a description of the scope and data management was given to inform respondents regarding their privacy rights and how these were being handled during the study.

The responses gathered were then inserted in an Excel spreadsheet, which allowed me to identify trends according to the categories used for the different research methods. Indeed, by quantifying qualitative data, I have been able to discover whether the strategies and communication channels adopted by organisations were considered positively (or negatively) by my respondents.

3.1.5 Semi-structured Interviews

Finally, through semi-structured interviews targeting executives within the tourism industry, I aimed to address the unexplored gaps left by the previous research methods. The choice of the interviewee was made through purposive sampling technique in which, according to Silverman (2014), the researcher chooses the cases to be studied because they

display certain features of interest. In my research I have chosen the samples according to their knowledge and role played in the marketing and communication departments of the company or authority represented. The current restrictions on contacts, meetings and gatherings, due to the COVID-19 pandemic have albeit affected my interviews and the way of carrying them. The first point of contact with my possible interviewee has been through LinkedIn or Facebook. I wrote to 13 executives: 1 from a private company, 2 officers with managerial role from public enterprises and 1 executive from a transport company from each country discussed in my study (companies' name and classification available in appendix A3).. In addition, I have also contacted the UNWTO, through my network of contacts, and I have been in the process of scheduling an interview with the Director of Communication from this institution. The purpose of it would have helped understanding how crisis communication has been conducted by the highest international tourism authority to reduce the impact of the crisis on the global tourism industry. Nevertheless, due to the lengthy administrative times of the organisation, after a first delay in delivering my thesis hoping to conduct the interview, I was finally obliged to cancel it.

To structure my interview guide I referred to the SCCT, thus the questions 5 and 7, in Appendix C, asking about the strategies implemented at organisational level to inform the different stakeholders involved, aimed to present the different approaches adopted by the entities participating to my study. Whereas, questions 6 and 8 looked at the response given by the different stakeholders to the strategies adopted by the organisations. The questions were firstly tested through a pilot interview on an executive of a Danish tour operator, who agreed to participate and provide his feedback to improve the quality of my questions. Questions that were deemed difficult to understand were rephrased and shortened to be easier to understand, particularly in consideration of the fact that English was not the first language for the majority of my interviewees. By doing so, I was able to reduce the possibilities of biased interpretations of the responses obtained. In some cases I even conducted the interviews in Italian or translated my questions to Swedish or Norwegian to make the questions easier to understand to my interviewees. Additionally, following Silverman's and Bryman's tips, I have maintained myself open to the respondents adjusting the questions in my interview guide to the answers received. This method, coupled with questions asking interviewees' personal experiences in their workplace, has often elicited comprehensive responses that enhanced my understanding of the themes studied. In concluding each interview, I have been resuming what was discussed during it, this gave the opportunity to my interviewees to either modify

their comments or complement them accordingly. After transcribing all interviews, as I did in the previous research methods, I highlighted words and phrases describing communication strategies, channels and frequency in communication adopted by the different enterprises. In doing so I was able to compare and contrast the different ways companies behaved during the COVID-19 outbreak, when communicating with their stakeholders.

Each interview guide was sent beforehand to the interviewees to give them time to prepare and it had an approximate duration of 1 hour, although some interviews lasted up to 2,5 hours and some as less as 31 minutes. None of the interviewees decided to withdraw his/her participation during the interview and they all showed interest in the research being carried ahead. Finally, some of the interviews were conducted in Italian, the mother tongue of the writer and a couple in Swedish and Norwegian, whereas the majority were conducted in English. Translation of the interviews is reported in both the data presentation and their analysis, although carried out by the same writer and not verified through official translators. The interviewees were informed of the aim of the research project and they have voluntarily participated. They were as well informed about their right to withdraw during the study and that all data provided would be anonymous, confidential, safely stored and erased upon termination of the study. All interviewees agreed to being recorded and the interviews were accurately transcribed with the help of Otter, transcription software. A list of the interviewees with their organisation and role has been provided in Appendix A3.

3.2 Limitations

Carrying out the research during the pandemic outbreak allowed me to collect first-hand information, which could not have been collected otherwise. It also permitted me to see the synchronic reactions from companies working in the tourism sector, as well as tourists' responses, and governmental policies. Data collection and data analysis have been completed within 8-months period, covering the first wave of the pandemic outbreak and part of the second one. The period chosen was due to the fact that I needed approximately 6 weeks to compile this thesis. However, at the conclusion of this thesis, I will not be able to observe the full reactivation of the tourism sector or the strategies applied in the post-pandemic stage, neither will I fully observe the factual response of travellers to the measures adopted by both public and private sector to guarantee public safety and reduce risk of contagious.

Furthermore, I have also been working full-time with a Danish tour operator during 3 out of the 8 months used to fulfil this thesis. This time helped me to have a good insight of communication management in times of pandemics in the tourism sector. On the other hand, it may have partially influenced my data collection as the observations were mainly conducted while working for a tour operator; thus, my perception may be biased by subjectivism. Furthermore, being an overt participant observer while at my work place increased the threat to reliability of the study as, according to Bryman (2012), it is impossible for another researcher to repeat the same study as this relies on the personal skills of each researcher. Nevertheless, to reduce this risk I have taken abundant notes and pictures in order to provide at different times multiple analyses of the observed data, compare the analyses among them and reduce the risk of biases.

Another issue encountered during the research was the lengthy bureaucratic procedure to obtain interviews with policymakers and top management officials of the different tourist organisations contacted. Indeed, due to organisational commitments several officials from the UNWTO and other transnational tourism corporations were not able to participate to my interviews within the time frame available for this project; hence, I needed to extend my research project and I had to renounce to an interview with the UNWTO. To manage productively my time, I set weekly goals, defining the number of interviews to run, the places to visit, the transcriptions and coding to perform, and the literature to read. In addition, I decided to take part in a 15 credit summer course organised by Lund University on the topic “KOMC60 – Organisational Crisis Communication in Organisations and Societies”. The course covered theories and strategies adopted by societies and organisations at both internal and external levels to effectively tackle issues and crises.

Language became another limitation as the largest groups of tourists traveling to Denmark, Norway and Sweden are from Germany, Asia and the Netherlands. I fluently speak Norwegian, English, Spanish and Italian and I also have an intermediate level of Swedish, however, some of the interviewee did not master any of the aforementioned languages. This has been particularly reflected by the responses received in my questionnaires, with 14 surveys excluded from my analysis as they showed lack of understanding of the questions posed; thus, the message delivered was limited or not in line at all with what was asked. Another consideration that I made during my study was that my current level of Danish and Swedish allows me to hold daily conversations without problems, but not to understand in depth technical jargon used by public authorities. For this reason I needed to use a translator

or search for news in English as well as I had to request technical support to Swedish and Danish friends in deciphering few specific messages. This may have hindered my analysis of the communication studied.

Finally, due to the nature and effects of COVID-19, the illness itself could also be portrayed as a limitation to this research. In conducting my study I had to adjust my plan to the recommendations provided or the regulations set by public authorities. However, the authorities in the 3 countries studied have differed in regulations and protocols adopted to combat the pandemic. Hence, I had to maintain myself always updated to avoid breaching the laws in any of the country studied.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This project has taken place during the COVID-19 outbreak. Hence, to preserve the integrity of my informants and my own physical integrity, I opted to change all the face-to-face interviews to an online format. I also followed all the different recommendations provided by the public authorities, avoiding unnecessary trips, keeping social distancing, and following all the health and safety protocols advised by Region Skåne and Folkhälsomyndigheten. It implies that scheduled trips to Norway and Stockholm between February and May were cancelled; instead, clients and organizations were contacted through phone, email, LinkedIn, Skype, or Zoom. Because of my work, I commute everyday between Malmö and Copenhagen; thus, I used my trips to observe people's behaviours, reactions, as well as I noted how public servants adapted themselves to new regulations and applied them on their place of work.

Having chosen a covert observator role in public spaces and an overt participant one while at work exposed me to the risk of violating the privacy of the individuals observed. However to avoid doing so, pictures taken by me or third parties have not shown faces of other individuals. Additionally, the documents collected at the work place were not including any sensitive data to avoid breaching the confidentiality clause of my employment contract or disclosing data that may favour competitors. Indeed, these were solely used to understand how the company I worked for communicated with suppliers, employees and clients alike during the pandemic outbreak and how these last ones responded to such messages.

Communication in times of pandemics may contain sensitive information. Thus, to guarantee anonymity, the names of my informants, as well as any possible detail that may lead to their identification have been modified. All my informants were informed about the academic nature of my research, the use of data, and their right to withdraw. I have also requested verbal consent to record different interviews. And all the interviews were transcribed by me and no personal names or identifiable information were included in my transcripts; instead, I used a series of codes to replace them. Confidentiality is applied in this thesis under the regulations established by the Swedish Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act, Chapter 24, Section 8.

For this project, I have also taken, together with the support of other researchers, a series of pictures in public areas including airports, train, bus and metro stations. In doing so, the photographers involved have been careful to avoid any type of privacy invasion. Pictures were taken to the spaces, symbols and messages and they avoided showing people's faces. All the information collected has been transferred to a password protected device, accessed and analysed solely by the writer and it will be destructed upon conclusion of this project.

3.4 The Approach

This thesis is constructed over two research questions (hereby RQs), with the first of them aiming to define the role of communication in the (de-)construction process of organisational reputation. In order to study the crisis type, I have carried out a literature review of English, Italian, Swedish and Spanish publications discussing similar health related crises, which happened in the period 2002 – 2016. Articles and books covered: the first respiratory epidemics (SARS and MERS), the avian influenza, and the recent Ebola outbreak that reached the US in the last quarter of 2014 (Dombey, 2003; Knobler et al., 2004; Lo et al., 2006; Monterrubio, 2010; Cahyanto et al., 2016; Morford, 2016; Larson, 2018; Gallivan et al., 2019; Bruberg, 2020). The reasoning behind the choice of these specific cases was based on the fact that they were among the first studied health related threats to international tourism in academia. Indeed, as Beirman stated in 2003, among all threats to tourism, health related issues are the least studied. It must also be noted that the aforementioned diseases had noticeable negative effects on global travels; thus, they can be taken into consideration for comparison with the current pandemic.

I have also contacted three different categories of enterprises: 6 public institutions (of which 3 medium- and 3 small-size, respectively: Visit Denmark, Visit Sweden and Innovation Norway; Visit Malmö, Visit Sognefjord and Wonderful Copenhagen) involved with marketing local or national destinations, 1 medium-size (Via Hansa & Borealis), 1 small (European Cruise Service, hereby ECS) and 1 micro (Gone Paddling) tourist service providers and 3 large transport companies: Norwegian Air Shuttle, hereby NAS, Svenska Järnvägar, hereby SJ, and Danske Statsbaner, hereby DSB. These three last ones operating in a highly volatile environment¹⁰ shared several characteristics among each other: company's size, type of strategies implemented, national support and type of operations. The 4 medium-size enterprises (both public and private) contacted, albeit not sharing many characteristics except their size and the fact that they provided tourism services in one (or more than one) of the three countries studied in this thesis, were selected for their willingness to contribute to my research. The public institutions represented national (medium-size) and regional (small) organisations marketing local destinations. The local public organisations represented the most visited regions in each country (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway). In selecting enterprises with similar features and different sizes on one hand it was possible to discuss the feasibility of the theories to companies of different size and, on the other hand, it gave me the opportunity to find similarities and differences in their modus-operandi. The theoretical model chosen to conduct the study was the Situational Crisis Communication Theory – SCCT – of Timothy Coombs built upon the Attribution Theory of Weiner. SCCT is used as a framework to analyse how communication is used to create ad-hoc response strategies for crises, such as the current COVID-19 one.

¹⁰ Highly volatile environment is considered as such when the threats to the enterprises operating in it are constant, with high frequency and on daily basis.

4 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

While in the previous chapter I discussed the research methods chosen and the reason for adopting them, in chapter 4 I will introduce and analyse the data collected and the background of the different actors involved in this study. This will allow the reader to understand the insights provided by the different actors in relation with their role and the type of stakeholder represented. Thereafter, in light of the Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT) theory introduced in chapter 2, I will analyse the themes encountered through my data collection and proceed to discuss whether the theory is applicable to this study. In the following subchapters I will present and analyse: the communication channels (4.1) used by the organisations studied and the frequency at which they communicated (4.2), the strategies adopted by their management teams and the feedback obtained by their stakeholders (4.3) to the implementation of the crisis communication plan. In these subchapters I will respond to the two research questions of this master thesis:

- What types of communication strategies have been adopted by Danish, Swedish and Norwegian tourism organisations during the COVID-19 crisis?
- To what extent have the crisis communication strategies influenced stakeholders' reputational image of the organisations?

Communication in crisis management has been described by my interviewees as an important tool to understand crises and identifying the right strategies to manage them. In their own words, interviewee 10 (Norwegian) has indicated that communication in crisis management is *“crucial to succeed as a business”*; while interviewee 1 (Innovation Norway) perceived it *“as a tool to understand what the crisis is all about and cope with it”*; and interviewee 11 (SJ) argued that it is as well as *“a mechanism to quickly establish channels for communicating crucial information”*. Hence, as indicated by the three participants, crisis communication needs channels to spread out an organisational message and a strategy to make it a useful tool to decode crises and tackle them accordingly. These will be presented in the following subchapter (4.1) and discussed in relation to their effectiveness to spread the desired message during the current crisis. Whereas, in the subchapter 4.2, I will discuss the frequency at which enterprises communicate internally and externally in relation with the threat level constituted by the current crisis. This will help to address the limitation in

Coombs' theory discussed in chapter 2 regarding the relationship between frequency and the reputational threat represented by a crisis.

The success of the communication strategies, finally, can be measured through the satisfaction index of the involved stakeholders. When the satisfaction towards the measures implemented is low, the reputation of a company is negatively affected; thus, it is advisable to conduct a post-crisis analysis of the results obtained to assess the results obtained and eventually adjust the organisational communication strategies to safeguard the reputation of the enterprise in question. The strategies adopted by the companies researched in this project will be presented in the last subchapter (4.3) of the data presentation and analysis.

The main themes I have taken into consideration while conducting my observations, questionnaires, interviews and document analysis were those related to the organisational communication channels and strategies adopted by the enterprises during the current crisis in line with the SCCT. Moreover, I studied the response given by their stakeholders to such strategies.

Although, the current crisis has no previous history of similar outbreaks, the reaction to the first SARS outbreak and the communication maintained in that occasion provide points for comparison with the current pandemic.

4.1 Communication channels in the tourism industry

In this chapter I present and analyse the data retrieved through document analysis, observations, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to identify the communication channels used by tourist enterprises. Different communication channels are used in the tourism industry to communicate and engage with the different stakeholders. Among the most common ones we find TV, magazines, social media, and newspapers. Through these different channels tourism organizations seek to advertise services, promote destinations, and establish a closer relationship with customers. Additionally, they can also maintain a faster communication with internal clients (employees, providers, managers...). The use of these channels becomes an important managerial tool in times of pandemic. Indeed two of my interviewees (high executives from Norwegian Air Shuttle, NAS, and from the Danish Railways, DSB) indicated that their companies have produced frequent newsletters and

designated a place in their intranet to communicate all the updates regarding the Covid-19. In doing so, the companies sought to maintain informed all employees about local and international regulations, public restrictions, and any organisational adjustments. In addition to that, the interviewees depicted the importance of using social media, printouts, small movie adverts, and other sorts of marketing and brand tools to maintain a constant communication with current and prospective customers. In their opinion, these channels reduce the time to contact different stakeholders and help strengthening or maintaining positive relationships.

Therefore, through the use of different media channels the organisations contacted tried to reach their market segments. However, the collected data shows that not all tourism companies decide to use the same communication channels. For instance, while *Gone Paddling*, a kayaking, micro enterprise from Norway uses Facebook, Instagram and e-mail; other bigger companies communicate not only through these three channels but through LinkedIn, Twitter, SMS, press releases and several other means. It has been also observed that other tourism companies use more traditional forms of communication such as newspapers, magazines and flyers to send messages to clients and employees. While asking the reasons behind using determined communication channels, interviewees argue that communication is somehow adapted to their clientele in terms of age, origin, language, and so on. So, they need to adjust their channels to find the most suitable ones to establish effective contacts with their internal external networks. Hence, this information suggests that the use of different communication channels shifts from company to company according to their audience as well as the size of the company. It could be also due to the cost represented by these channels. For instance, while online communication through social media have lower management costs and can reach a wider audience, companies incur costs when releasing ads and news on TV and newspapers. Besides the costs, TV and newspapers are generally written in the local, national language; therefore, companies targeting mainly foreigner stakeholders, by adopting these types of channels, risk alienating their customers and employees due to the language barrier created. This justifies the reason behind the choice of adopting either only a limited range of communication channels, as in the case of *Gone Paddling*, or an ample one, as in the case of transport companies or national tourism organisations that aimed to reach a wider array of customers.

The communication channels display differences in the way they are used for communicating organisational messages. Facebook as well as Instagram tend to have short posts with different photos or videos attached to them. They also provide a space for chatting

with the customer service department and they use hyperlinks in their texts to make direct reference to governmental webpages. Posts on these channels are generally published on daily basis in the national language as well as in English to fill the communication gap with their stakeholder, often of immigrant background. The language used in these social media channels is generally easy to understand and less formal than on LinkedIn or emails as these last ones are seen by the organisations and their audience as official channels for communication. LinkedIn and emails, instead, have longer texts (1 to 3 pages) with fewer pictures. The texts are generally written with a more technical and informative language and are published less frequently than on Facebook.

A high executive from DSB (interviewee 12) also claimed that, while previously the Danish train company had a customer satisfaction level slightly over 60%, during the management of the crisis its support increased by nearly 20 points percentage thanks to its proactive stance and constant communication through different channels. Indeed, by collecting newsletters, press releases and live updates through the company's app, I could detect that its communication frequency increased uniformly across the channels used during the crisis. This was confirmed by the tourists who responded to my questionnaire, with various respondents defending the way Danish public institutions (including transport services) communicated the updates. Concurrently, visitors from some of the countries heavily affected by the crisis, such as China, Latin American states, Italy and Spain, often criticised the way national or regional governments handled the crisis. Albeit governments are not the focus of this thesis, by establishing regulations that affect tourism services, they end up affecting the modus operandi of companies as well. As a matter of fact, some travellers from China and Italy claimed at the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that the Scandinavian governments were not providing "*correct and appropriate information*" and that they considered this a "*criminal negligence*". The strong wording used by travellers from the two aforementioned countries is in stark contrast with the opinion of citizens living in the Scandinavian countries. Nevertheless, there can be found a distinction among those without immigrant background and the immigrants, as these last ones have often criticised the measures taken onsite as too soft. Contrastingly, the majority of the people without immigrant background tend to believe their governments. Many of those interviewed in Denmark, Sweden and Norway claimed to have received sufficient information through different channels and they believed that the measures taken were strong enough to successfully tackle the situation. By analysing posts in public and private groups online, I have even discovered

pages created to support the strategies enacted by local governments. They advocated to the principles of: trust in public institutions and personal responsibility towards society as polestars to follow during the pandemic. In light of these last thoughts, it can be said that the same message endorsed and supported by certain groups in society, it can be disapproved by other groups. These results can vary according to ideological standpoints, level of trust towards public institutions and several other factors, but particularly upon the coherence and consistency of the message sent out. When a message is not consistent or coherent with the communication being conducted by other enterprises (or states) onsite or, as in this case, on global scale, it creates dissatisfaction and unease among the audience. In this research I have noticed that when the reputation attributed to a government is low, although private and public companies may communicate well with their customers, the institutional message affects (either positively or negatively) the sales and image of local organisations. Furthermore, it affects the expectations and perception of them among their stakeholders. When restrictions are enacted by governments and travel services are forcibly disrupted, dissatisfaction is generated among customers and furloughed employees, particularly when it is not clear if and when those services will be reinstated. Thus, companies must strengthen the message sent through their communication channels to clarify to their stakeholders when their services will come back to normality.

During the pandemic outbreak the situation evolved continuously and I had the opportunity to observe an increasing amount of signs and communication channels being used by public authorities in Scandinavia to inform both locals and visitors about the situation. Banners from the national health authorities were distributed in public places, indicating the different symptoms presented by people with Covid-19 including dry cough, fever and breathing difficulties. These banners also show preventing measures to spread the virus such as washing hands, keeping the distance, avoiding handshakes, and they recommend to stay home if any symptoms are experienced. These types of banners combine graphic information and text and are often written in Danish (figures 3 and 4 in Appendix A1) [or Swedish (figures 7 and 8) or Norwegian (figures 5 and 6)] and English. In doing so, they make the information provided easier to comprehend for locals and foreigners regardless of their knowledge of the local language. The banners were printed in blue and white colours, giving them a sober look and, during my observations at metro and train stations, I have detected that travellers (as well as employees) were not attracted to read the texts written on the signs (or find news and updates on the situation in the case of the employees). However, when signs

were not placed in visible and strategic places like the entrance of the metro, then the information was somehow less visible due to the colours and therefore attracted a lower number of readers. It leads me to determine that symbols and colours play an important role in communicating messages and engaging the audience. Thus, the power of this content depends not only on the authority that shares the content but on the format in which the information is provided.

By comparing figures 3 and 4 taken at different public transport station in Denmark with figures 5 and 6 taken in Norway and figures 7 and 8 shot in Sweden, it is possible to notice that Norway has used eye-catching colours in its signage, compared to Denmark and Sweden, which maintained colours similar to their national health authority's webpages. Furthermore, albeit not visible from the photos attached in this thesis, while Denmark and Norway generally used central and highly-visible places to set their signs, Sweden often placed them in less visible zones (e.g. figure 7 was a banner hanging from the roof of Malmö central station, whereas figure 8 is taken from the screens available on public transports). The pictures show norms to follow when in public places to avoid spreading the contagion. All signs are both in English and the local language with the exception of figure 6, which, albeit being written in Norwegian, shows through pictures what is said in written. Figure 8 shown on the displays of public transports and venues in Skåne is displayed not only in English and Swedish, but in the different languages of the main immigrant communities living in the region. From the previous points I deduced that the signs aimed to reach as many users as possible and they have been one of the different channels used by public and private organisations in the Nordic countries. Indeed, as revealed by all executives interviewed, signage has been the most visible and direct way to communicate with users onsite. This method has been complemented by digital town-halls, newsletters (see figures 9, 10, 11 and 12 in appendix A2), text messages, emails and live updates through mobile applications/platforms or loudspeakers to reach both internal and external stakeholders. According to my questionnaires directed to travellers, I have found out that the majority of the tourists that aimed to visit Scandinavia in 2020 felt well informed by either their tourism service provider or the destination. Nevertheless, as stated as well in the previous paragraph, those dissatisfied with the communication strategies chosen by Scandinavian tourism service providers came from South American, South European and Eastern Asian countries. Some of them even claimed that the lack of information from their providers was related to unclear governmental strategies, which left their providers in a limbo.

The main complaints addressed the frequency and the accessibility of the information and updates. Indeed, some of my respondents to the questionnaire even suggested that enterprises shall have information always updated in different languages and contact their stakeholders rather than waiting to be contacted by them. One of my respondents claimed:

“It must be a constant communication flow, in which the tourists shall not be the ones contacting their providers, but the provider should do it either via email or text messages or other forms.”

This confirms the fact that travellers ask to be informed and updated constantly, with 39 out of 90 respondents suggesting that the positive formula for enterprises to adopt during crises is a mix of “active”, “honest”, “updated constantly” communication. Travellers and employees alike expect a proactive stance by tourism organisations, where these last ones shall not wait to be contacted to spread information. On the contrary, enterprises must be honest and explain what is going on to maintain their stakeholders updated about the consequences for them of the actions being taken to reduce the spread of the virus. Words such as: constant, coherent and honest are often repeated by my respondents in line with SCCT. As a matter of fact, the theory highlights the importance of the aforementioned values to preserve the reputation of organisations. Indeed, Coombs claims that once the image and reputation of an enterprise is negatively affected, stakeholders, losing the trust in the company, will no longer support it during the crisis. Through my semi-structured interviews to different companies offering services in Sweden, Denmark and Norway, I have discovered that those who followed the aforementioned tips sent by the travellers or employees obtained improvements in their reputation score during the pandemic among their stakeholders. Indeed, as reported from interviewee 12 (high executive from DSB)

“Our employees enjoyed our newsmail, because everything was on one page and the same was with our customers and we have carried out several surveys and we have been trending positively among both customers and employees during this period” (personal communication, 2020).

According to the quote above, stakeholders did not want to read long messages, but they rather preferred to find all the updates in a one-page text.

The fact that employees and tourists alike wanted to be kept constantly informed was confirmed as well from the questionnaires sent out to tourists and workers of the companies

contacted. 60% of the employees requested better communication from their employer and public institutions, whereas 45% of the travellers felt that they were not enough or partly informed on the situation. Employers, who guaranteed a constant flow of updates reflecting developments on the crisis, achieved strengthened brand image as confirmed also during my interviews with high executives of different enterprises. One of the high executives from SJ (interviewee 11, personal communication, 2020) said:

“We have used media, direct contact with customers and not least our social channels. We also have updated information on our website at all times. We are constantly doing customer surveys that show that our customers are becoming more and more satisfied with our actions.”
(personal communication, 2020)

and one from Visit Denmark added that:

“What I can say is from following our Facebook account in Italy, particularly when we closed our borders, is that the Italians had many positive comments about our decisions and they were very supportive”
(*ibid.*).

Similar feedback was provided by the majority of the executives of the large enterprises contacted. By looking at these two quotes we can distinguish some important similarities. Customers expect empathy from an organisation and that the actions being taken are in line (or coherent) with the situation experienced. They want to be co-creators by being directly contacted in regards with any development or strategy being implemented. They also need a constant information flow as stated by a high executive from DSB, who claimed that his company informed at all times its stakeholders, also when the train company had no updates. In doing so, the organisation mirrored SJ strategy of informing its stakeholders “*at all times*” (interviewee 11, personal communication, 2020). These findings, in line with SCCT, point to the importance of bolstering strategies connected with informing all actors about the past and present work being done by companies to successfully tackle crises (Coombs, 2009). The feedback, provided by surveys conducted by the aforementioned enterprises among customers and employees, has played an important role in confirming the successfulness of the communication strategies implemented.

Another important distinction that I have uncovered through my interviews consisted in the existence (or no-existence) of a communication department responsible for the promotion of the brand image on the market. While the large enterprises displayed the existence of specialised departments, all medium-, small- and micro-organisations did not have any distinction between the marketing and communication departments. This also led to a difference in use of the communication channels. Indeed, large corporations addressed through the different channels their wide range of market segments representing their vast clientele. Each channel was used with a specific market segment. Differently, medium-sized (and particularly small and micro) companies, as the ones that I contacted, had a very limited overview, due to limited data gathering from their side regarding clients' opinions of their crisis handling. These last ones, in addition, often adopted all communication channels to communicate a message, but without tailoring this last one to specific segments according to the channel used.

The three transportation companies (large size) in the countries studied claimed that thanks to their continuous updates of both employees and the public through different channels led them to achieve increased customer satisfaction during the current crisis. Moreover, their communication department acknowledged the existence of different market segments among their clients; hence, they adopted personalised messages, strategies and specific communication channels to address them. I have also found out that the channels adopted by the different users vary according to the region of belonging with Latin American travellers and organisations preferring: social media (7 respondents out of 17), emails (8 respondents out of 17), WhatsApp and phone calls (4 respondents out of 17) as primary communication channels, whereas European and North Asian tourists tend to update themselves through the news and are mostly informed through email (12 out of 24), social media and company's webpage (respectively 8 each). Hence, for companies aiming to satisfy their stakeholders, it is a must to address their customers and employees through those channels with higher visibility and use in the region. It is also of vital importance that they acknowledge their business and *"the needs of the community"* (interviewee 5, *personal communication, 2020*) to be *"much liked from media and readers"* (interviewee 3, *personal communication, 2020*). In doing so, enterprises can employ communication strategies tailored to their clients' expectations and emotions, which in turn help them strengthening their own reputation among the stakeholders. Indeed, in reading the literature behind the theoretical framework of this research, I have found out several examples of failed communication

strategies of companies that did not take into consideration cultural values of their employees and clients. Those enterprises had to invest plenty of energies and capitals to recover the damages to their image created by bad publicity and dissatisfaction among their stakeholders (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017).

Contrastingly, customers of micro, small and medium size enterprises that did not tailor their messages and communication channels according to their market segments, received negative feedback from some of their customers. For example, a Danish traveller complained about the fact that she needed to find the information regarding her trip on her own and that she was not provided directly with updates. Thus, as a Lithuanian respondent claimed:

“People sometimes don't get enough information so they don't know how to react properly in situations.” (personal communication, 2020).

When the lack of information leads to uncertainty, the reaction of customers (or employees) cannot be predicted. In such situation, threats from misinformation and rumours increase substantially as the information vacuum can be easily replaced by wrongful or misleading announcements spread intentionally or unintentionally either from internal or external sources (Cook and Lewandowsky, 2011; Han and Ciravegna, 2019; Cowper, 2020; Depoux et al., 2020). Therefore, a strategy, such as the one followed by DSB of informing its stakeholders *“even when there is no news” (interviewee 2, personal communication, 2020)*, fills those vacuums and by owning the story, it allows to strengthen the credibility and reputation of the organisation (Agnes, 2020). In light of the previous quotes, it is possible to highlight the negative perception built among users from companies without clear communication channels or where a stakeholder had to obtain updates on his/her own. Hence, the proper use of communication channels as tools to spread a constructive and positive image of organisations is of paramount importance to the reputation of these last ones.

4.2 Communication frequency

When studying communication conducted by enterprises towards the public during the crisis, the texts were nearly all showing similarities in length, content and language types. Additionally, they were easily understandable for all kinds of readers and varied according to the channel used to inform a stakeholders' group. The average length of the texts was between

1 and 4 pages. Most of the official communication from public authorities has been spread through: travel advisories, bulletins, billboards and signs across the territory, regulations and press releases to reach a larger number of individuals. Moreover, the frequency of releases has increased from once every 2 weeks at the beginning and the incubation phase of the crisis, to daily basis at the peak of the crisis, according to my document analysis. A high executive from Visit Denmark claimed that during the pandemic the media release increased of several folds to adjust to the customers' requirements and to preserve the communication with them in order to share feelings and build support among them. She also added that Visit Denmark decided, under the current situation, to increase its communication at all levels to keep all "posted" (interviewee 3, personal communication, 2020) about what is constantly happening in the country with links to the National Police and Health Authority websites. In this way, the national entity for the promotion of tourism aimed to frequently update all actors involved (employees, tourists and suppliers) to keep everybody on the same line. Visita, representant of the Swedish hospitality sector, adopted a multi-level strategy with a very high-frequency of news release ["We increased the volume of it" (interviewee 2, personal communication, 2020)]. The same respondent reported that the company has

"a section, where members can log in and find most of the information they need as well as necessary documents and it is active on social media, sharing the current development to anyone who follows" (ibid.).

Visita has made its documents accessible and it has increased its presence online. By doing so, the Swedish company has strengthened its presence and incremented the frequency of its messages to deal with the new situation, where face to face encounters are not recommended by national and international institutions. The enterprise passed from having a post on average every other day on its social media to two (up to 4) during the peak of the first and second wave. Similarly the Norwegian national (interviewee 1) and regional (interviewee 4) public institutions involved in marketing for the tourism industry claimed respectively that they communicated "more often" and that

"When the crisis exploded it was extremely important that all people in Norway received all essential information to keep traveling" (personal communication, 2020).

This standpoint has been shared also with small, medium and large private companies contacted in this study. Hence, I can deduct that frequency in communication has a direct relationship with the threat constituted by a crisis, where an increase in the threat level towards an organisation leads to an increase in communication frequency. I also noticed that a concise message is vital to make it easy to digest avoiding misinterpretations of it. This point, regarding the importance of the frequency of communication in filling the knowledge gap during crises, albeit under researched, deserves further research. According to the respondents of my questionnaires and interviews, providing complete, continuously updated and easy information is of paramount importance to build trust in an organisation. Indeed, one of the main criticisms moved by travellers concerned the lack of coherent and consistent communication. A Colombian traveller even claimed that organisations “*just care about their economy*” (personal communication, 2020), meaning with it that the service providers focused on their interests rather than on their clients’ ones. Thus, according to the same respondent, after an initial phase in which they were constantly updating the involved actors regarding any new development; they suddenly shifted their focus away from the whole situation.

Frequency changed also according to the communication channel used, with billboards, street signage and public screens having generally a lower frequency of updates, whereas social media portraying the highest frequency with daily news being released. Press releases, although less frequent than social media, varied in frequency during the crisis passing from one every two or three months (prior to the crisis) to one per week at the peak of the crisis (interviewees 3, 4, 5 and 8, personal communication, 2020). This difference is also constituted by the fact that public signage takes longer to be modified to address the new situation compared to press releases and online pages. Nevertheless, as stated by interviewee 12

“During the current situation we have been able to reduce drastically the times, otherwise long, to replace and update all signs (physical and luminous) at DSB’s venues and transports. Generally the same operation would have taken more than 3 months, even up to 1 year, but our horizontal structure and the message spread by our Communication Department allowed us to make it happen within 3 weeks” (personal communication, 2020),

We can observe that processes, which would generally take a long period of time to be completed, could be completed in shorter time given the improved communication strategies adopted. Finally, organisations have reinforced the internal relationships between departments to reduce the response time. Hence, networking within and among organisations has increased and improved during the current crisis as reported by several interviewees. This topic will be discussed in depth in the following subchapter covering the strategies adopted by enterprises to protect and strengthen their reputation during the current crisis. In chapter 4.3 I will also compare the strategies encountered through my research with what discussed in the theory part of this thesis.

4.3 Communication strategies and stakeholders' response

In this subchapter by analysing the research questions reported in the introduction of chapter 4, I aim to discuss the approach taken by different enterprises in Scandinavia to crisis management under the current pandemic, in relation to my findings and the theoretical framework introduced in chapter 2. I will also analyse, where data are available, the results obtained by the strategies adopted among their stakeholders.

The COVID-19 outbreak is undeniably an external threat to any enterprise, a threat that could not be forecasted, let alone planned ad-hoc; thus, organisations have been placed in the role of victims during the pandemic. Another important point to highlight regards the exposure time to the current threat as state by interviewee 12, who claimed that

“crises normally last few hours, one day or at maximum 1 week and in this last case it is already a difficult situation for the management... this crisis has lasted already, what?! 6-7 months?” (personal communication, 2020).

In this context the response strategies adopted by companies are vital to their survival. Indeed, the longer is the exposure time to a crisis, the higher is the threat for a company (Coombs, 2009). Under these circumstances the techniques adopted by managers to steer their organisation out of the storm can determine the success or failure of the enterprise. Different interviewees with different stakeholders' roles have all highlighted the importance of timely communication in preventing the spread or deepening of crises. For example, a high executive

from NAS confirmed Melissa Agnes' statement that a good communication strategy can help protecting the reputation of an organisation (2020). He affirmed that

“Communication is crucial in any crisis situation because you have to ensure that your key stakeholders are continuously informed about how the company is responding to the crisis and what it means to them. If you communicate well, your reputation will be maintained.” (Interviewee 10, personal communication, 2020).

In his message the interviewee claims the importance of constantly keeping all stakeholders informed. This might be at times challenging for companies with presence in the Stock Market, as due to financial rules, companies are obliged to report structural changes or threats to their stability to the Stock Market first. Nevertheless, the executive adds, in another statement later in the interview, that his company has been very present on the different media and it has used different tools (e. g. software, town halls, press releases among others) to reach out to its clients and employees.

A further step was taken by displaying messages from the Chief Executive Officer (hereby CEO) on video letters sent to his employees and on press releases. In the public interview the CEO apologised to all involved stakeholders for the issues created. This technique has been chosen as a way to dispel rumours and concerns of the stakeholders by selecting the person covering the highest role in the company to present the strategies adopted to counteract the crisis.

Coombs' SCCT describes the aforementioned strategy as a rebuilding posture assumed by organisations when highly damaging crises threaten their survival (Coombs, 2009). This posture presents the company with either the possibility to compensate its affected stakeholders or offer them an apology or both of them. The apology can be a full one, if the executives admit the full responsibility of the company, accept responsibility and claims/court cases from the stakeholders. The partial apology leads to less substantial compensation requests from those affected. This posture is usually adopted, according to the theory, when an organisation has a high reputational threat from the crisis, due to its past crisis history and the responsibility attributed to it in the current crisis by its stakeholders. An example of full apology can be encountered in the strategies adopted by NAS, where the airline admits its responsibility in the service discontinuance and offer its clients extra rewards to compensate

for it. Whereas, DSB or SJ offer only the possibility to modify or cancel the ticket for a reduced fare, compared to their normal standards. Therefore, these two companies accept only limited responsibility for their breakdowns during the current pandemic crisis. Coombs has demonstrated that, although it may be quite costly for an organisation to provide compensations, when the crisis has a higher reputational threat, this strategy is seen as the most effective to protect the image of a company. This is confirmed by the interviewee, who highlights the connection between communication and reputation claiming that with good communication strategies an organisation can preserve its reputation.

In Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), we have seen that companies may adopt one or a blend of more than one strategies (Diminish, Denial, Rebuilding and Bolstering) suggested by Timothy Coombs to overcome the reputational threat constituted by crises. During my field study I have found out that all of the companies have pointed out to the fact that the virus could not be forecasted (diminish technique) and they highlighted their own efforts to combat the current obstacles in traveling (bolstering technique). Although some countries, like United States, United Kingdom and several others, denied the dangers of SARS-CoV-2 (Reston, 2020), in Scandinavia the approach adopted by public and private entities was at first a diminishing approach followed by rebuilding and bolstering ones. None of the enterprises contacted has ever denied the existence of the virus. Indeed, Coombs claims that denial strategies should be adopted when the negative event threatening an organisation does not exist and when the reputational threat level is very low. Under the current circumstances, given the easy verifiability of the existence of the virus and its very high reputational threat, adopting such posture can increase the damage to a company's reputation.

An example of failed denial strategies, non-related to Scandinavia, can be identified in the plan set-up by the former President of the United States (hereby POTUS), blamed for weeks from global news channels of being short-sighted. The US was split between those supporting the President and those against him. Nevertheless, according to Bennett and Berenson (2020), once Trump was infected by the virus, many of those who supported him lost their faith in him and according to the journalists it may have been the major cause of his failure at the elections. Thus, it can be seen as the denial strategy followed by the President backfired causing him a loss of credibility among his voters (ibid.). Similarly, the lax measures adopted initially by the Scandinavian governments, the initial lack of coherence and the slow response provided by tourism organisations, as reported in the two previous subchapters, shed negative light upon them among all stakeholders. Particularly, employees

and travellers felt that national governments in Norway, Sweden and Denmark took long to respond and that coordination between them and the tourism industry was non-perceptible. This was perceived by the aforementioned actors as a lack of care towards them from the Scandinavian governments and the tourism organisations.

After this initial lack of coordination and communication on the situation, press releases from the national and regional institutions in Norway, Sweden and Denmark increased of several folds during the crisis, from once a month to daily releases at the peak of the crisis. The Prime Ministers of the 3 states together with spokespersons from regional and national Health, Tourism and Transport ministries provided updated information on the situation and the measures taken by the respective states and regions during the crisis. The communication type and frequency used by the authorities, as previously discussed, has been similar among the different countries with frequent, sober and easy to understand messages, where the same officials and all other individuals onsite maintained social distances¹¹ among each other. Each press release had similar physical and communication settings among the different nations, with an introduction to the situation in the country (or region), the developments, the results obtained through the measures enforced and the prospects for the future. In the introduction, the spokespeople draw attention on the fact that the disease was unforeseen and often introduced by foreigners visiting the country or nationals who went to another state for work or leisure. After the introduction the health expert described the developments and the recommended measures to avoid the spread of the contagion in the society and he (or she) was generally followed by the other spokespersons introducing the new measures adopted at state (or regional level) to maintain the situation under control. Similarly to the governments, tourism organisations adapted promptly to the negative events by defining spokespersons and communication strategies to tackle the threat. The press releases from the governments have been summarised by national tourism and transport organisations through their webpages and links to the national police and health authorities were provided by the majority of the companies contacted. Indeed, as reported in comments from travellers that responded to my questionnaire and in the majority of the interviews with the executives, it is virtually impossible for any company to keep a constantly updated record of where and how the disease spread and the amount of infected individuals. Hence, by providing a link to the national authorities, organisations could spread the official message being communicated by

¹¹ Social distancing: is the recommended safety physical distance to keep from people not belonging to the same household to prevent the spread of the virus.

the country they represented, avoiding in this way the spread of rumours and misinformation regarding the developments of the situation. This strategy has received conflicting responses by the interviewees. Some of them liked the effort made by companies to allow their stakeholders to access constantly updated news by clicking on the link provided on their webpage. Others, instead, criticised this strategy claiming that they would have rather preferred to be contacted directly every time that a new change affected their journey.

Some organisations opted for a different approach, as reported by interviewee 2, focused on *“finding solutions rather than only directing attention to the crisis itself”* (personal communication, 2020). This approach consists of three stages: focusing on proven, core facts, describing the false elements in the rumours (myths) and replace these last ones with easily verifiable truth (Cook and Lewandowsky, 2011; Coombs, 2012; Frandsen and Johansen, 2017). By adopting this strategy, companies, like Visita, aimed at shifting the focus from the myth: the *“crisis itself”* (interviewee 2, personal communication, 2020), to the work being done by the company to solve the issue (bolstering strategy). This last point has been also outlined by Coombs in the bolstering strategies, where it is suggested to both remind stakeholders of the good work done by the company and of the positive cooperation between the last one and its stakeholders. This technique has been followed as well by Visit Denmark, Innovation Norway, Visit Malmö, DSB and NAS, which, during the crisis, have provided information to their clients and employees about the structural changes and what the company has been doing to safeguard them and return to business as normal in the shortest time. Keeping in mind that *“more want more”¹²* (interviewee 1, personal communication, 2020), the aforementioned enterprises turned the highlights from the COVID-19 crisis to their achievements obtained during this period. The entities aimed to provide a positive rhetoric to their stakeholders centred on their results rather than on the negative global imagery related to the crisis. This technique has been well received by several tourists as highlighted by the responses obtained to my questionnaire and by some of the executives interviewed. According to interviewee 3, indeed,

“South Europeans citizens said you did well Denmark and they showed empathy and understanding in their comments about the strategies we adopted” (personal communication, 2020),

¹² More want more: it means that the more information people get, the more they want to receive.

which was also reflected in Visit Denmark's customer satisfaction survey portraying the company with an improved organisational image compared to before the crisis. Indeed, as described in SCCT, enterprises must acknowledge the service disruption created and consequently the unease created among their stakeholders. When empathy is shown to these last ones, companies portray themselves as caring for their clients and employees. On the other hand, when enterprises do not share empathy stakeholders build a negative image of it pointing to the fact that enterprises are selfishly focused on their business rather than on the interests of their stakeholders, as indicated by some of my respondents to the questionnaires.

As discussed in the previous subchapters, organisational communication channels, frequency and strategies have been conditioned by national and/or regional governments, as reported from all the high executives interviewed. Micro, small, medium and large enterprises shared the standpoint that the tourism sector is

“connected to government decisions” (interviewee 7, personal communication, 2020).

Additionally, one of the top managers from Visit Denmark added that the responsibility of informing all actors involved in (or by) the tourism sector is up to the government. In this way Scandinavian organisations shift the responsibility of the issue on the government (scapegoat), applying the denial strategy prescribed by the SCCT. In doing so, entities justify (justification) the disruptions created during the crisis as negative events generated by external and unpredictable events and they compromise themselves to find a viable solution for those affected by the discontinuation of services (rebuild strategy).

Nevertheless, under current circumstances employees and clients did not react positively when companies shifted their own responsibility on an external party. Some of my respondents for example claimed that private and public entities have provided links to the government's webpages without assuming accountability during the crisis to inform directly their clients. Hence, the message delivered was often not efficient and limited in scope as it described what the government (and not what the company) has been doing and the eventual restrictions. The stakeholders had to carry their own research to figure out the strategies adopted by the enterprise. They claimed that, if the company in question would have informed them directly, they would have felt cared for from the organisation.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While chapter 4 presented and analysed the data gathered through the research methods used in this thesis and discussed in details in chapter 3, the current chapter introduces a critical discussion of the findings in light of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory examined in chapter 2. In doing so, I will respond to the two research questions outlined in the introductory chapter, with the first one inquiring about the types of communication strategies adopted by tourist organisations in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Whereas the second question aims to investigate how such strategies have influenced stakeholders' reputational image of the organisations.

Throughout this study I have found that large enterprises have reacted proactively to the crisis embracing a mix of response methods to tackle the crisis, which included some of the denial, diminishing, rebuilding and bolstering strategies enlisted in SCCT. Medium and small companies, instead, had a reactive approach to the crisis and in the majority of the cases they adopted principally denial, diminishing and bolstering strategies.

While the approach taken by the medium and small organisations has often led to a negative reputational image of them by their stakeholders; large entities reinforced their image thanks to the measures endorsed during the crisis. However, stakeholders' response has been conditioned by the previous crisis management history and the prior reputation of the companies. Indeed, albeit some of the enterprises were very proactive and provided immediate compensation to their stakeholders, due to their previous negative reputation and crisis history their image did not come out as strengthened as the one of other organisations.

Finally, I will present my conclusions and the recommendations for further research on the subject studied.

5.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory and COVID-19 pandemic

SCCT studies the role of crisis communication strategies in shaping stakeholders' reputation of an organisation. In Coombs' theory denial, diminishing, rebuilding and bolstering strategies are outlined. The American scholar writes that the first three approaches should be adopted in order of reputational threat level, with the denial techniques to be used when the threat is low and the full apology when it is high (Coombs, 2009). He also suggests

complementing the effectiveness of each measure by mixing them according to the situation. Another important point discussed by Coombs regards the interconnection between frequency and reputational threat. Indeed, according to the scholar communication should be more frequent when the threat to an organisation increases.

In my study I have researched the communication strategies adopted by Scandinavian tourist organisations and their influence on the reputational image created among internal and external stakeholders. In my thesis I have analysed private and public entities of different size, with the purpose of understanding the applicability of SCCT to all kinds of organisations. In doing so I have found out that Scandinavian enterprises, depending upon the size of them, have tackled differently the current crisis. Thus, their communication strategies have varied from a reactive to a proactive stance, with the first one being adopted by micro and small companies, as reported by the executives from Gone Paddling and ECS, and the second approach being shared by all the medium and large organisations contacted.

Executives from micro and small companies have evidenced that, due to their size, they lack a communication department and often a crisis management plan. Although planning for every type of crisis is nearly impossible as, according to Agnes (2020), crises happen on nearly daily basis, due to a globalised society, where ICTs allow spreading news on global scale within milliseconds; the Canadian communication strategist suggests that having a general plan in place helps establishing guidelines to follow when negative events pop up. Therefore, missing a prearranged strategy, the response to crises, provided by the micro and small enterprises contacted in my study, has been slow and reactive, where the companies have shaped their organisational messages to the developments in real time. The frequency of updates being released by these companies has been very low throughout the crisis, according to the executives interviewed. This has been due to the fact that most of the workers responsible for the marketing department were sent home. Travellers and employees have displayed negative feelings towards this type of approach. As a matter of fact, according to my questionnaires the majority of my respondents claimed that they did not favour those companies that either did not keep them updated or shifted the responsibility of informing to national governments. For example a Portuguese man, who stated that “*unfortunately nobody cares about us*” (*personal communication, 2020*), gave a very low feedback about the service provided by flight companies and tour operators. His opinion was shared among half of my respondents, which points to a general dissatisfaction towards private and public organisations that did not opt for a proactive stance during the crisis and left their stakeholders in the

darkness. Indeed, as reported by Agnes, Frandsen and Johansen and by Coombs, proactivity helps organisations diminishing the negative effects generated during crises. Hence, enterprises need to publish their version of the story and, in doing so, own the rhetoric concerning the situation. Contrastingly, companies that opted for a proactive communication strategy, where the frequency of news releases and updates has been high, have obtained an increase in the satisfaction rate among their stakeholders. For instance, all of the large companies contacted (Innovation Norway, Visita, Visit Denmark, DSB, NAS and SJ) asserted that, by taking charge and maintaining constantly updated employees and clients alike, they obtained a higher loyalty level among their stakeholders. Albeit this distinct approach to crisis communication between entities with different size, all the executives interviewed shared the opinion that the current pandemic outbreak has been the longest and toughest challenge for their organisations. Indeed, as discussed by Coombs (2009), the longer a crisis lasts the higher is the reputational and structural threats for a company. While the majority of crises may last between one (or few days) and few weeks, the current pandemic outbreak has started at the end of December 2019 and is still threatening global markets and societies across the world.

Due to the high organisational and reputational threats constituted by the current crisis, enterprises must have a crisis management plan ready, which shall include the communication strategies enlisted by Coombs. Nevertheless, according to the different executives interviewed a plan is not sufficient if the personnel does not practise how to act according to the various scenarios reported in it. Furthermore, it shall be clear and easily accessible through the channels used by the stakeholders. Indeed, the communication channels vary according to the organisation in question as each company has its own market segment(s) and this last one changes according to the size and type of services of the enterprise. In this study I have shown the difference between large, medium, small and micro enterprises with these last ones having a smaller audience compared to medium and large entities. Therefore, while companies like Gone Paddling or ECS employ a limited amount of communication channels (e.g. e-mails and social media accounts) to contact their clients, medium and large companies adopt an increasing quantity of channels directly proportional to the size of the enterprise, with online town halls, newsletters, press releases, traditional media, social media being the most popular channels being used by large organisations. This point is also related to the fact that smaller companies have a limited amount of employees and operations to run; thus, the relevant information can be easily shared to their stakeholders by using few channels that best suit their stakeholders' demographics. On the other hand, during the peaks of the COVID-19

pandemic, large companies had a constant rotation of employees between those having to work in the offices and those who could perform their duties from home. For this reason certain channels (e.g. online town halls) based on internal networks, which are solely accessible from the offices, were not as effective as newsletter to reach furloughed employees.

Public signage, despite the fact that it had the highest visibility and reach compared to all other channels, could not be updated constantly due to the lengthy procedures required to adapt them. TV and radio channels, contrastingly, showed high success rate in updating travellers, organisations and their employees regarding new developments and regulations set at regional, national and international level. However, given the fact that the news were given out in the national language, this was not often understandable by all interested audience; thus, when no simultaneous translation was provided, sectors of the population and incoming visitors felt excluded. Not being able to grasp the correct meaning of the messages being sent out, several tourists and employees, who responded to the questionnaires that I distributed online, perceived organisational (or governmental) communication difficult to understand and incoherent. Thus, the success rate of the communication channels employed has been quite low, when the meaning of the displayed message has been unintelligible to their targeted audience.

As previously discussed, the length of the current crisis has constituted an extremely high organisational threat to enterprises all over the world with trillions of dollars and millions of jobs lost during 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). Thousands of companies have gone bankrupt, so what has made the difference between successful and unsuccessful organisations? According to my literature review of similar past crises, among several determining factors, communication strategies play a pivotal role in building the reputational image of entities. As written by the different scholars introduced in the theoretical chapter (chapter 2), when private or public institutions send out coherent and consistent messages and they have a structured crisis management plan in place, they attain positive results. Hence, enterprises tend to use crisis communication strategies to build and strengthen their relationship with their customers, besides informing them constantly about the developments during crises.

Across this study we have seen the different strategies prescribed by SCCT, which should be adopted by organisations when threatened by crises. SCCT ascribes each strategy to a different threat level. However, Coombs' theory also says that when other intensifying factors, such as the previous history of crisis management or the prior relationship reputation,

are aligned against a company, the reputational threat level is increased of one step (e.g. from low to medium or medium to high). For this reason, communication strategists and/or marketers shall ascertain those factors, besides the reputational threat constituted by a specific crisis, to endorse effective strategies to tackle the crisis. Denying the negative event, attacking the accuser for the issues affecting a company or scapegoat are three types of techniques belonging to the denial strategies defined in Coombs' theory. These ones can be used solely when the reputational level is very low, for example when rumours have been spread. Denial measures, however, have low effectiveness in shielding the image of a company, when this last one has a previous history of mismanagement during crises. During the current pandemic, as written previously, the threat represented by the crisis in place is extremely high, hence if these measures should be applied unaccompanied by other strategies their outcome would be adverse. The American scholar adds that if such measures are used under circumstances similar to the current ones, they would result in increased damages to the image of an entity as the stakeholders would perceive the approach taken by a company as fraudulent. From the data collected in this research project I have observed that the majority of the companies have used the scapegoat strategy in combination with diminishing and rebuilding ones. As reported in the previous chapter, indeed, by interviewing high executives of several Scandinavian companies, I could identify as common theme the fact that they blamed governmental regulations and the SARS-CoV-2 virus for the service disruptions caused to their clients as well as for having to furlough their employees. Notwithstanding the high threat brought upon the companies by the current crisis, in line with what I discussed in the introduction of this study, the stakeholders have clearly understood that the situation was unforeseeable. The pandemic can be included in the external threats that challenge the tourism, among other economic sectors. Over time, however, I have noticed that stakeholders' trust in those entities, which focused principally on this denial strategy, has nearly vanished as their expectations have increased. Indeed, although clients and employees supported the first wave of restrictions and the consequent service disruptions, they successively demanded further efforts to tackle the issue from the companies.

Diminishing strategies are in the middle stage between the denial and the rebuilding ones. They are composed by two different techniques: excuse and justification. The first of them aims to lessen organisational responsibility asserting that the event is non-controllable by the company. Justification, instead, entails a rationalisation of the events that have affected the service level offered by an entity to its stakeholders. Timothy Coombs suggests that this set of

measures should be used when the crisis is generated by causes easily verifiable as external to the enterprise and when the threat level can be considered intermediate. During my research I have pinpointed the use of both strategies in all companies studied. Moreover, the way in which these techniques have been embraced by the organisations has been similar among these last ones. They have been made clear throughout the messages sent via the different channels used that the current pandemic has been difficult to control, particularly in light of the fact that in a globalised world the movement of people from a location to another increases the spread of the virus. Under these circumstances national and local governments have felt compelled to restrict the freedom of movement, which in turn has affected tourism companies by limiting their ability to provide services to their clients. Additionally, due to the restrictions imposed by public authorities, enterprises have seen their operativeness curbed, which has led to a reduction in the number of employees being hired. In the situation experienced, the entities, which have only used diminishing strategies, have over long term obtained strong criticism from their stakeholders. This has been aggravated by the fact that the majority of the organisations, which have adopted only denial and/or diminishing techniques, have also communicated infrequently any development during the period. Indeed, an Italian traveller and a Danish worker surveyed, albeit understanding the difficult situation affecting enterprises, claimed that companies thought

“about their own business rather than customers’ and employees’ well-being” (personal communication, 2020).

Hence, the diminishing as well as the denial strategies adopted have both contributed to undermine the reputation of organisations among their stakeholders. However, when these have been accompanied by bolstering strategies, the results have improved substantially. Examples of this way of handling the crisis have been represented by the national and regional public organisations responsible for promoting tourist destinations of the 3 Scandinavian countries studied. They have indeed empathised with their stakeholders by reminding them about the good cooperation developed with them and by recalling previous positive crisis management stories to refresh in their stakeholders’ mind the work done by the entity. Concurrently, they presented the measures being taken by the national and local governments, as well as by the enterprise, to guarantee tourists’ employees’ safety during the pandemic. Although they admitted that they have been unable to steer the company out of the crisis, blaming the crisis on an unforeseeable event that the crisis management plan did not

account for. In doing so, these organisations obtained the support from both employees and clients alike.

The last group of measures enlisted by Coombs' theory includes compensation and apology techniques in the rebuilding strategy, which aims, as the word says, to reconstruct the tarnished image of an organisation (Coombs, 2009). The scholar alleges that when the threat to the organisational image is high, these are the most effective measures that an enterprise can enforce to protect itself from loss of trust and reputation among its stakeholders. Apology entails the recognition of responsibility for the mismanagement of a negative event and the related damage associated to it (ibid.). Apology can be full or partial, with the first one being issued when the company admits the entire responsibility for a service disruption; whereas, partial apology is expressed when an organisation does not accept being held completely responsible for the interruption in the services provided (ibid.). Compensation, instead, is a technique that is used when the reputational threat is at the highest level and aims to refund through monetary or material rewards the victim for the damage endured.

In this study I have evidenced that organisations operating in a highly volatile environment, such as the transport companies, are generally prone to adopt these kinds of measures. Indeed, as these enterprises endure crises on nearly daily basis, they are also compelled to have a structured management plan that must aim to address different scenarios threatening their survival. Put it in the words of DSB's and NAS' executives

“you must consider different possible scenarios and train for them to be able to survive crises when they pop out” (personal communication, 2020).

This means that albeit forecasting all possible crises is unattainable, a company shall be prepared to face different events; hence, a plan including several crisis response measures is needed to preserve the reputational image of the entity, ergo its survival on the market. To this end, SCCT affirms that, albeit costly, the compensation and apology strategies help conveying a strong message to the stakeholders that the organisation is committed to find a compromise with those affected by the service disruption. By doing so, the company reinforces the bonds with its stakeholders and, as claimed by the theory, it maintains a positive image among employees and customers alike. Having said that I have noted that the intensifying factors, above all the prior relationship with the stakeholders (trailed by organisational crisis history), play a pivotal role in determining the results of the strategies adopted. Indeed, as I could

discover through my document analysis, the crisis history of Norwegian Air Shuttle hindered the outcome of its strategies; notwithstanding the fact that it was the enterprise with the strongest crisis management plan and communication strategies.

To conclude, crisis communication strategies and the related studies play a fundamental role in understanding crises and steering marketing decisions that can help organisations survive when under threat. Through an adequate use of them an enterprise can maintain its reputational image, when negative events endanger it. Finally, the current research aimed to explain how communication strategies can aid the service industry, specifically the tourism sector, to manage organisational processes when exposed to crises.

5.2 Future research possibilities

In the research and writing processes of this thesis several additional questions have come out in connection with the topic studied. Although this investigation has focused on the communication strategies adopted by organisations to successfully tackle crises, those questions remain open for future research.

In responding to the question regarding the type of strategies adopted by enterprises during the current COVID-19 pandemic, I have found out that, besides SCCT's strategies, the current crisis has taught companies about the importance of networking. Networking among companies has helped them support each other and has contributed to find shared solutions to provide fast responses to maintain the own position in the market, when crises occur. For example I found a post online from a company that recommended its clients to purchase a service either with the same organisation in question or with any of its competitors as a way to bolster the industry. So far the only research on networking has been principally connected to the way social media have been used among customers to build positive (or negative) attitudes towards entities (Ki and Nekmat, 2014). Nevertheless I have not been able to identify academic research on the topic of networking as a method shared among companies to design common crisis response strategies. Hence, SCCT would benefit from studying the role of networking among enterprises to create shared communication strategies in the management of service processes during crises.

Another important point for further discussion regards co-creative communication. Although most of the crisis management studies have been directed towards either the internal or external communication, very little has been discussed about a holistic approach to crisis communication. The Rhetorical Arena Theory exposed by Frandsen and Johansen by focusing on a multilevel approach to crisis management could be an initial step in this direction. Nevertheless, this framework can be further expanded to study the influence a determinate stakeholders' group has on the reputational image present in another group. In a globalised society as Agnes (2020) states: information spreads across the globe in milliseconds. Thus, the voices of all actors affected by a crisis can be easily accessed by the different stakeholders' groups, which can in turn influence the narrative exposed by the different individuals. By studying how the narrative of a specific group can be co-created by the interaction among the different actors involved, researchers can understand how communication processes are shaped in our time. Furthermore, this can assist marketers and communication specialists to design crisis management plans to reflect on these processes.

I have also highlighted in the limitations of Coombs' theory that a comparative analysis would add a more comprehensive insight over the efficiency of the strategies prescribed by the American scholar during crises. Indeed, albeit this study has discussed data collected among companies with similar characteristics in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, it cannot be considered a comparative research as it includes companies with different size and objective. Finally, further studies on crisis communication would benefit from a holistic approach to them. Indeed, so far this topic has been approached mainly from a strategic communication academic perspective. Additionally, this subject has received limited attention from organisational management. Therefore, an interdisciplinary research into the role played by crisis communication in preventing and managing crises would help academics to understand the service processes behind the formation of organisational image and reputation among the involved stakeholders.

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APPENDIX A: Document Analysis

Colours attributed to each category	Description of the different categories	List of Categories	Keywords encountered in the texts
	Words describing how effective crisis communication should be	Elements of effective crisis communication	e.g. quickly, honest, proactive
	Words describing what effective crisis communication is for	Scope of crisis communication	e.g. respond to issues, prevent reputational damage
	Words describing what is required to achieve effective crisis communication	Strategies adopted	e.g. networking
	Words describing the crisis communication channels used	Channels used	e.g. media
	Words describing challenges to crisis communication	Challenges for organisations	e.g. intense media pressure

Tab. 2: List of categories and keywords used in the document analysis.

List and description of the different categories used in my document analysis together with the frequently encountered keywords, which refer to crisis communication under the COVID-19 outbreak. The categories have been chosen according to the strategies described in SCCT, the type of channels adopted by enterprises and the challenges brought by the current pandemic to companies.

The table above describes the different categories and keywords encountered in the texts, questionnaires and interviews collected in this research project. The words, which were frequently repeated in each text and that referred to crisis communication, have been highlight. Once they were detected in a significant percentage (present in at least 50% of the texts, questionnaires and interviews), they were selected as keywords.

Clusters of keywords were later studied to determine the category that better defined them. The categories have been listed in the third column of the table above, whereas the main keywords retrieved have been reported in the last column of the table.

APPENDIX A1: Signage on public transports and venues

The following pictures have been shot by either the author of this thesis or his network of contacts in Scandinavia, when the location was not accessible to the author due to the restrictions imposed by local/national government. Requests for their use have been asked to the photographers, when not the author himself. Reference to the photographers, when not directly taken by the author of this project, has been provided. The pictures represent public signage available at different venues, e.g. busses, bust/train/metro stops, stations. The signs have been analysed in chapter 4, when discussing communication channels and language used by enterprises in Scandinavia.



Figur 3: Public poster displayed at metro stations in Copenhagen.



Figur 4: Sign available at train, metro and bus stations in Copenhagen.



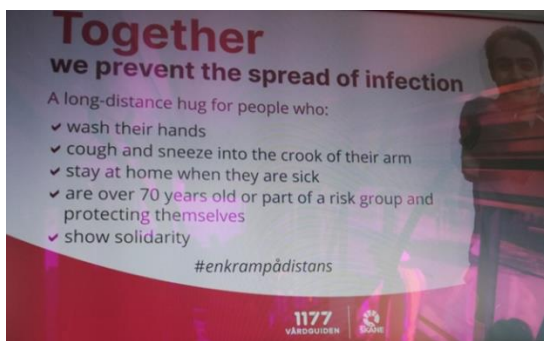
Figur 5: Public sign available on busses in Bergen (Nedrotti, 2020).



Figur 6: Public sign available at all public transports (with the exception of trains) in Bergen (Nedrotti, 2020).



Figur 7: Public sign displayed at Malmö central station.



Figur 8: Screen displaying prevention measures on all public transports in Skåne.

APPENDIX A2: Public documents from Scandinavian Airlines, Norwegian, DSB, SJ

The following pictures and written online documents have been retrieved by the author and his network of contacts in Scandinavia. Figures 3 to 8 represent official communication from public transport entities used in the analyses.

SAS Newsletter

The following appendix displays one of the SAS newsletters (fig. 9) sent to the email addresses of its clients with updates on the current COVID-19 situation and its effects on the

air operations of the company. In addition, it shows messages sent by DSB (fig. 11, Norwegian Air Shuttle (NAS) (fig. 10) and SJ (fig. 12) either directly through text messages, email or available directly on their websites. The following messages, studied in chapter 4.3, represent some of the communication strategies adopted by Nordic enterprises during the current pandemic.

Hei Davide,

Vi i SAS gjør alt vi kan for at du som passasjer skal føle deg trygg når du flyr med oss. Sikkerheten til våre reisende og kolleger har høyeste prioritet, og helt siden utbruddet av coronaviruset har vi fulgt utviklingen svært nøye. Slik jobber vi i denne ekstraordinære situasjonen:

- Vi har en nær og tett dialog med alle involverte myndigheter, og tar alle nødvendige forholdsregler som de anbefaler oss å ta.
- Luften i flyene våre filtreres gjennom avanserte luftesystemer og høyeffektive filtre.
- Medarbeiderne i SAS er trent til å håndtere sykdomstilfeller om bord, og flyene våre er utstyrt med medisinsk utstyr.
- Rengjøring av flyene gjøres etter gitte anbefalinger.

Avgiftsfri ombooking

For deg som vil ut og reise, og ønsker å være ekstra fleksibel, tilbyr vi nå avgiftsfri ombooking for reiser i Europa og til USA og Japan. (Gjelder ikke reiser i Skandinavia). Avgiftsfri ombooking gjelder også for deg som har bestilt en reise til Europa for avreise mellom 10. mars – 30. april 2020. Les mer om reglene for ombooking, bestillingsperioder og reisedatoer [her](#).

A fly med oss i SAS

Vi fortsetter å fly, og vi tilpasser trafikkprogrammet vårt til den aktuelle situasjonen. Vi kontakter de kundene som blir berørt av innstilte flyvninger, og vi oppdaterer hjemmesidene våre kontinuerlig med aktuell trafikkinformasjon. Hvis du har spørsmål rundt de aktuelle reiserestriksjonene som gjelder, henvises det til Utenriksdepartementet.

Vi ber deg som passasjer å følge anbefalingene fra myndighetene – blant annet å vaske hendene nøye med såpe og vann, unngå å berøre ansiktet og bli hjemme i tilfelle sykdom.

I SAS er alltid vårt mål å gi deg den aller beste flyopplevelsen, og vi ser fram til å snart ønske deg velkommen om bord igjen.

Med vennlig hilsen,
Rickard Gustafson
Konsernsjef og CEO, SAS Group

Figur 9: SAS Newsletter.

Kære Davide,

Hos os i **Norwegian** er din sikkerhed altid vores højeste prioritet. Jeg ved, at der er mange, der har ubesvarede spørgsmål om sikkerheden omkring spredningen af coronavirusen. Jeg er også klar over, at mange har rejseplaner, og jeg forstår, at det skaber bekymring.

Det er en meget udfordrende tid for hele luftfarten, og desværre går det ud over jer – vores kunder. Vi har været nødt til at aflyse mange afgange, og vi kan blive tvunget til at aflyse flere, fordi rejserestriktionerne ændres hele tiden. Derfor giver vi dig nu mere fleksibilitet, sådan at du kan bestille og rejse ubekymret med os.

Hvad gør vi?

Jeg vil fortælle dig lidt mere om, hvad vi i **Norwegian** gør for at beskytte dig, når du rejser med os.

Vi følger situationen tæt og har allerede taget flere initiativer, siden de første rapporter om virussen blev kendt. Hvis situationen kræver det, er vi klar til at skride yderligere til værks.

Alle fly i vores unge flåde er udstyret med den nyeste luftfiltreringsteknologi. Flyenes HEPA-filtre fanger tæt på 100 procent af luftbårne mikrober, inklusiv bakterier og virus, og er ligeså effektive som de filtre, der bruges på sygehusenes operationsstuer.

For at beskytte dig, vores kolleger i cockpittet og i kabinen og vores øvrige kolleger, har vi forbedret vores rengøringsrutiner, og alle vores fly har beredskabsudstyr ombord. Skulle der opstå mistanke om coronavirus ombord på et af vores fly, har vores ansatte gode rutiner til at håndtere det.

Der er også nogle enkle, men vigtige ting, du selv kan gøre, når du rejser: Vask hænderne med vand og sæbe, når det er muligt, eller brug hånddesinficerende middel. Brug albuen til at nyse og hoste i, hvis du ikke har et papirlommetørklæde. Sådan bidrager du til at beskytte dig selv, vores kabinepersonale og de andre passagerer.

Sådan holder du dig opdateret

Vi forstår, at du kan have mange spørgsmål om din rejse. Derfor anbefaler vi, at du tjekker vores [CoVid19-side](#) for opdateret rejseinformation og for at se hvilke muligheder, du har for at ombooke online. Vores hjemmeside opdateres løbende og er den bedste kilde til information om din rejse. Du vil også få SMS og e-mail fra os, hvis din flyvning skulle være ændret.

Vores kundecenter kan kontaktes via Twitter, chat og telefon, men vær opmærksom på, at vi får mange henvendelser, og at ventetiden desværre kan være længere end normalt.

På vegne af mig selv og alle mine kolleger i **Norwegian**, ønsker jeg at takke dig for al forståelse og tålmodighed i denne ekstraordinære situation. Vi glæder os til at byde dig velkommen ombord igen!

Med venlig hilsen

Jacob Scram
Koncernchef

Figur 10: Norwegian Newsletter.



Husk pladsbilletten

Hej

Vi har genindført pladskrav, så du igen skal have pladsbillet til alle rejser med InterCity- og InterCityLyn-tog. Dermed sikrer vi, at togene ikke kører med for mange passagerer. Pladskravet gælder ikke i regionaltog og S-tog, hvor der er en større udveksling af passagerer, og hvor rejserne typisk er kortere.

Alle pladsbilletter koster 0 kr. I DSB app, på dsb.dk eller i automater på stationer. Bestil kun 1 pladsbillet pr. person pr. afgang. Du kan afbestille billetten helt op til den planlagte afgang, så du ikke optager plads for en anden.

Vi tilpasser tiltag løbende ift. myndighedernes anbefalinger til kollektiv trafik.

Rigig god rejse og lad os passe på hinanden 

Guide til bestilling af pladsbillet i app

På denne side finder du en videoguide til bestilling af pladsbillet i appen. På siden kan du også læse mere om, hvordan pladserne i toget fordeles.

Hvorfor er der genindført krav om pladsbillet på InterCity- og InterCityLyn-tog?

Transportministeren ønsker, at pladsbilletkravet bliver genindført på InterCity- og Lyntog. Det ligger i tråd med vores egne konklusioner efter yderligere dialog med Sundhedsstyrelsen og efter at have lyttet til reaktioner fra de togrejsende. Læs mere om gratis pladsbilletter [her](#)

Hvorfor er der ikke pladsbilletkrav i regionaltog og S-tog?

Pladskravet gælder ikke i regionaltog og S-tog, hvor der er en større udveksling af passagerer, og hvor

etkrav genindført i InterCity- og InterCityLyn-tog

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0?ik=acb1efc2a6&view=>

rejserne typisk er kortere.

Sundhedsstyrelsen anbefaler brug af mundbind

Sundhedsstyrelsen anbefaler brug af mundbind i den kollektive trafik, når der er trængsel. I foreløbig seks midtjyske kommuner er der mundbindskrav i den kollektive trafik, på stationerne og i togene. Læs seneste nyt om mundbindskravet på dsb.dk/coronavirus.

Der kan købes mundbind, der opfylder Sundhedsstyrelsens anbefalinger, i DSB's 7-Eleven butikker. Læs mere om brugen af mundbind på Sundhedsstyrelsens hjemmeside.

Figur 11: DSB Newsletter.

Så reser du tryggt med SJ

Sidan uppdaterades senast 2020-11-10

Läs mer om coronaviruset på [folkhalsomyndigheten.se](https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se), [krisinformation.se](https://www.krisinformation.se) och [who.int](https://www.who.int)

På SJ har vi ett stort fokus på att det ska vara tryggt ombord på våra tåg både för våra resenärer och vår personal i samband med coronapandemin. Här har vi samlat tips och fakta om vad vi på SJ gjort för att minska risken för smittspridning och vad du som resenär kan bidra med. Tillsammans gör vi tågresan trygg!

En nyckel i vårt arbete för trygga tågresor är att vi följer Folkhälsomyndighetens rekommendationer. Vi för löpande diskussioner med myndigheten för att säkerställa att vi gör rätt saker. Allt för att skapa så trygga resor som möjligt tillsammans med våra resenärer.

Det är viktigt att även du som resenär tar ditt ansvar och följer Folkhälsomyndighetens riktlinjer. Läs mer om vad du bör göra för att skydda dig själv och andra på [Folkhälsomyndighetens hemsida](https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se).

1. Vi har begränsat antalet bokningsbara sittplatser

För att göra din resa med oss tryggare har vi begränsat antalet bokningsbara sittplatser ombord. Detta för att minska risken för trängsel i både vagnarna och vid ombordstigning.

2. Välj ensam plats på SJs snabbtåg

Käns det otryggt att sitta bredvid någon som du inte känner på snabbtåget? I vår platskarta ser du enkelt vilka platser på snabbtågen som är spärrade och inte kan bokas. Du som reser på egen hand kan därför vid bokning välja en plats bredvid ett säte som är römmarkerat och spärrat och därigenom få sitta ensam.

På vissa linjer (Stockholm-Karlstad, Stockholm-Sundsvall och Avesta Krylbo-Borlänge-Falun/Mora) tillåts lämningsbiljetter med fri sittning på delar av sträckan och därför kan vi inte alltid garantera att platsen bredvid förblir tom.

3. Boka egen kupé på SJs nattåg

Vill du inte dela kupé med personer som du inte känner? Om du reser ensam eller är i ett sällskap på 2-3 personer kan du/ni boka Egen sovplatskupé. Om ni är 4-6 personer kan ni boka Egen liggvagnskupé helt för er själva.

4. Välj rätt avgång med regionaltåg

På flera av SJs regionaltåg är det inte möjligt att boka sittplats och därför är det svårt att veta hur det ser ut från dag till dag. För att hjälpa våra resenärer att undvika rusningstrafik och välja avgångar med mindre risk för trängsel har vi sammanställt en lista över de avgångar som vanligtvis har flest resenärer. Listan finns på [sj.se/belaggnng](https://www.sj.se/belaggnng)

Informationen gör det lättare att planera din resa och välja avgångar på tider då färre reser.

5. Välj en ombokningsbar biljett

I denna oroliga tid är det viktigt att våra resenärer väljer en flexibel biljett som ger dem möjlighet att boka om sina resor om de har minsta förkylningssymptom. Vi har tillfälligt sänkt priset på våra ombokningsbara biljetter för SJ-resor från 8 februari 2021 så att dessa som mest kostar 30 kronor mer* än en ej ombokningsbar biljett. För resor fram till 7 februari 2021 kommer vi fortsatt erbjuda fri ombokning som tidigare kommunicerat**.

Kom ihåg att du måste avboka din resa innan avgång om du inte tänker resa, även om biljetten är ombokningsbar. [Läs mer om att boka om din biljett här](#).

* Gäller dagtåg och sittplatser på nattåg. För ligg- och sovplats gäller ordinarie ombokningstillägg.

** Gäller för resor med SJs tåg. För andra tågoperatörers biljetter, som SJ är återförsäljare till, gäller respektive bolags biljettvillkor. Kontakta den operatör som anges på din biljett.

Figur 12: SJ policies available through their webpage and mobile platforms.

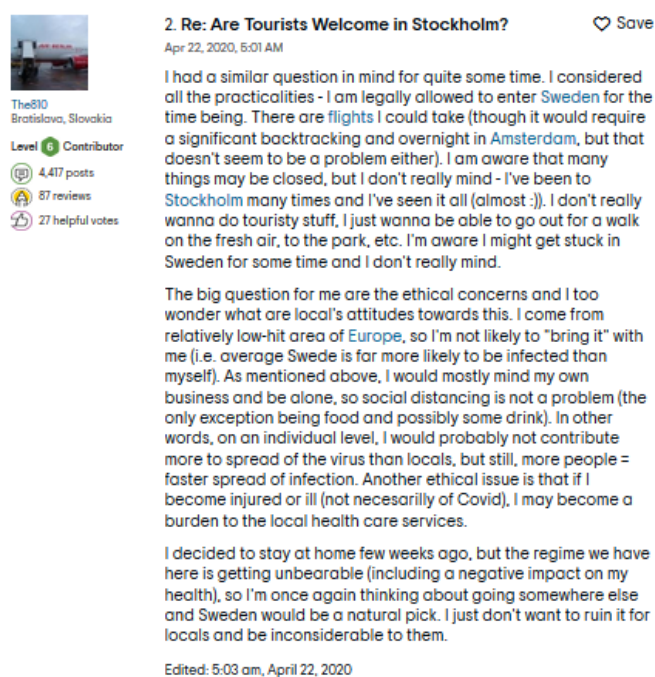
APENDIX A3: Interviewee list

Interviewee	Country Represented	Organisation Represented	Company size	Role	Date	Duration
1	Norway	Visit Norway	Medium	High Executive	04 May 2020	30'58"
2	Sweden	Visita	Medium	High Executive	30 April 2020	31'57"
3	Denmark	Visit Denmark	Medium	High Executive	20 May 2020	51'30"
4	Norway	Visit Sognefjord	Small	High Executive	11 May 2020	35'
5	Sweden	Visit Malmö	Small	High Executive	15 May 2020	39'01"
6	Denmark	Visit Copenhagen	Small	High Executive	15 May 2020	59'45"
7	Norway	Gone Paddling	Micro	High Executive	22 April 2020	158'49"
8	Denmark	Via Hansa & Borealis	Small	High Executive	18 March 2020	52'33"
9	Sweden	ECS	Medium	High Executive	06 May 2020	65'11"
10	Norway	Norwegian	Large	High Executive	12 May 2020	45'18"
11	Sweden	SJ	Large	High Executive	21 May 2020	37'38"
12	Denmark	DSB	Large	High Executive	08 May 2020	52'21"
13	Global	UNWTO	Large	High Executive	n.a.	n.a.

Tab. 3: List of the interviewees with their role and company of belonging.

APPENDIX B: Public posts available on TripAdvisor

The following screenshots taken from public posts available on the online travel-related platform TripAdvisor describe the perception of locals and tourists regarding the strategies adopted in Sweden in order to counter the spread of the pandemic. These posts have been discussed in chapter 4 in relation with the public opinion about the Swedish national strategies to tackle the spread of COVID-19. They display opinions of individuals, both citizens and foreigners residing in the country, regarding their acceptance level towards tourists visiting the Scandinavian country. The following comments contain the opinion of citizens with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds about the Swedes' acceptance towards eventual visitors coming to their country during the current pandemic.



Figur 13: Are Tourists Welcome in Stockholm? (TripAdvisor, 2020).



BogdanNeacsu
Stockholm, Sweden

Level 6 Contributor

57 posts

10 reviews

2 helpful votes

5. Re: Are Tourists Welcome in Stockholm?

Save

Apr 22, 2020, 3:14 PM


I am currently EU (non Schengen) tourist in Stockholm right now so can tell you at least a bit of personal experience (note that even though I am non Schengen I actually got here from Germany so was already inside Schengen area, but I assume even when coming from regular EU at airport there will be 0 problems.

At airport there was 0 checks at all and very few people around. Some smaller shops were still open and some restaurants but very very empty as most people stay at home even if it's not mandatory as in other countries. Hotels and airbnbs are open, but as expected very little business and they have adjusted breakfast schedules to avoid congestions of people anyway.

In city itself outside of things like museums, cinemas and the like things seem to be open, just a lot emptier than usual. I was a bit surprised at how many people are actually still outside (biking, jogging or just relaxing in parks) and also that no one wears a face mask!! (I recently got here from Argentina through Germany and was used to almost 100% mask wearing).

Just keep in mind that statistically you will be way more likely to actually get covid here than anywhere else in Europe. Their models predict ~30% of Stockholm will already have it by May 1st.

Figur 14: Different responses gathered through TripAdvisor about the previous thread - part 1 (ibid.).


 **7. Re: Are Tourists Welcome in Stockholm?** Save
 Apr 23, 2020, 11:05 AM

I would think that if the authorities sees a big influx of EU tourists traveling to [Sweden](#) to enjoy the freedom here, Sweden will soon be on lockdown with the rest of [Europe](#). Just because we are not on lockdown does not mean that life goes on as if there isn't a pandemic raging. Most Swedes have gone into voluntary quarantine and avoid all unnecessary travel.

I personally would hate to be punished with a lockdown by our government just because people from other EU countries travel to Sweden and think that they can live their lives as normal here, while us Swedes are doing our best to practise social distancing and quarantine ourselves.

Edited: 11:06 am, April 23, 2020

[Reply](#) Report inappropriate content


 **8. Re: Are Tourists Welcome in Stockholm?** Save
 Apr 23, 2020, 2:40 PM

Im a little bit worried by these attempts. Me and my family did not get together for easter as we always do. Just to minimize the risks. And what happens if you get sick while you are here!? That seems totaly forgotten . Are you to take a very precious intensive care bed from someone who have followed our not mandatory rules? I think you are abusing our relative freedom!

And i am not going to [Turkey](#) on a planned work visit. And im not going to Åland islands as i often do! I take the beating but try to endure, so can you!

Edited: 2:43 pm, April 23, 2020

[Reply](#) Report inappropriate content

 **9. Re: Are Tourists Welcome in Stockholm?** Save
 Apr 23, 2020, 3:50 PM

I'm a Swede, living in a city far away from my family. I'm rather proud of our "soft measures", but they actually contain expectations that we do not go on unnecessary travel, that we keep our two metre distances, that everybody 70+ completely abstain from social contacts, work from home if that's possible and so on. I've cancelled countless small and large trips the previous and coming months, I didn't see the family over easter as we traditionally do and I'm very careful with other social contacts. But I'm happy that it's still possible to have a coffee somewhere, as long as the cafe has the appropriate measures in place and I'm happy that my favourite wine bar is still open (with proper distancing and hygiene measures). But as [@AndersE](#) wrote before, if Swedes and tourists abuse our situation, going on unnecessary travel and not respecting our guidelines, we will no doubt get harder measures in place. So please, for now, stay home.

Destination Expert for Norrköping

Level 6 Contributor
 1,573 posts
 54 reviews
 31 helpful votes

Figur 15: Different responses gathered through TripAdvisor about the previous thread - part 2 (ibid.).



EAKE75
Sweden

Level 3 Contributor

61 posts

10. Re: Are Tourists Welcome in Stockholm?

Save

Apr 23, 2020, 6:52 PM

I really don't understand how you even can think about coming here for a vacation! Or going on vacation at all!

Yes, we have more lax rules, but that doesn't mean that we just go around living like we used to.

This is an pandemic, people are dying in the thousands and you're thinking about going on vacation just because the rules/laws in your country are more strict and you can't live like u used to.

We're not forbidden to go out, but it's strongly recommended to stay at home. Everyone who can works from home, people over 70 or in a riskgroup are very strongly recommended to stay at home. If you are 70+ or in a riskgroup and if it is possible let someone else do the grocery shopping for u. If you can avoid buses and trains. In stores they have put up markers so you don't stand to close in line at the cashier. Restaurants that are open have had to limit the number of guests, you have to be served at the table you can't go to the cashier to order. If you want take out, have it delivered or at foe McDonalds they go out to your car so you don't have to go in. In a lot of stores they have put up a plastic "shield" at the cashier so you can't infect them the person who works there. Many stores don't accept cash anymore cause it's safer to use a creditcard there's less contact.

Life here is anything but normal!

One thing that separate Swedes from other nationalities are that if we're told to do something, most follow that and the government don't have to forbid it.

If you travel to [Sweden](#) now, that it's selfish and you are already going against the Swedish recommendations, stay at home, work from home if you can, don't visit elderly people even if they are family, keep a distance of aprox 2 meters, avoid any unnecessary travel in Sweden especialy to the bigger cities like [Stockholm](#) and [Gothenburg](#) and don't go abroad.

This will pass, yes it may take a while but it will pass, it's not forever. Just accept the situation.

And before you say that it's hard to be housebound, I defintaly know how hard it is. 9 years ago I got a chronic disease that made me more or less bed/housebound, that is aprox 3200 days of unwanted forced "quarantine"... and since it's chronic it will probably last forever...

So please stay in your own country, wait until this is over, then you are very very welcome!

Edited: 6:54 pm, April 23, 2020

Figur 16: Different responses gathered through TripAdvisor about the previous thread – part 3 (ibid.).

APPENDIX B1

The image below (figure 17) has been taken from a Widerøe's public post shared by Norwegian's employees. The Norwegian airline, part of SAS, through the post encourages customers to fly, independently of the company they choose, as in doing so they can save the workplace of thousands of Norwegians. The post is a good example of collaborative actions being taken by companies to support each other during crises.



Figur 17: Post from Widerøe airline on LinkedIn.

APPENDIX C

Interview guide

The following interview guide has been conducted with high executives managing the marketing and/or communication teams of different organisations involved with the tourism industry in Scandinavia. The following questions do not represent an exact reproduction of what was contained or asked during the different interviews. Indeed, given the fact that each guide was personalised to the role covered by the interviewee, the introduction to each question and the wording of these last ones were tailored to the participant. Furthermore, as the interviews were semi-structured, the interviewees often incorporated more than 1 question in the responses provided. Additionally, some of the responses have led to additional questions to further deepen the topic being discussed.

1. Could you please describe your role?
2. How is to be in your position in times of crises as the one that we are affronting nowadays with the COVID-19 outbreak?
3. What does crisis communication mean to you?
4. Could you please explain how the current COVID-19 crisis has affected your company (what challenges were brought to your department)?
5. Could you describe the strategy used to inform your clients about the current situation?
6. What has been your clients' reaction to the strategy you have adopted?
7. How did you inform your employees about the crisis and its effects on their employment?
8. What has been your employees' response to your message?
9. Which tools or channels have shown higher success in updating your customers and employees?
10. Could you please explain why communication is vital to mitigate the negative impacts caused by global crisis?
11. As a highly qualified person in the management of crisis communication, could you please explain what could be further implemented and what should be avoided in communication processes to improve the reputation of a company?
12. And finally, what will be your advice for marketing students seeking to improve communication management?

APPENDIX D1: Questionnaire directed to employees and middle managers of companies offering services in Denmark, Sweden and/or Norway.

The following questionnaire has been spread through social media and available on Google Forms to those who worked in or for the Scandinavian tourism industry. It has been spread through social media and available on Google Form to respondents. This and the next questionnaire (appendix D2) have been designed to research the effectiveness of the strategies adopted by tourism companies and study the way stakeholders have responded to them.

1. Please introduce your organisation and type of services provided:
2. Does your company offer tourist services in Denmark, Sweden and/or Norway?
3. Can you explain how COVID-19 crisis has impacted your organization?
4. How is your company managing the current crisis to keep its presence on the market?
5. How does your company communicate the situation on the marketed destination(s) to your clients?
6. How did the company communicate to the employees the situation on each destination?
7. What measures have been taken to incentivate tourists to reschedule rather than cancel booked holiday packages and services?
8. What communication strategy has been used to inform and update your clients about the current developments on their destination?
9. What measures have your company taken to convince your clients to reschedule their trip(s), e.g. rewards, extra services, gratuities...?
10. How did your clients generally respond to the message sent by your company by postponing or cancelling?
11. Did they choose any other destination among those offered by you?
12. How did national regulations in the 3 Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark) affect the service provided by your company? (not applicable if you do not sell tourist services in any of the Scandinavian countries)
13. Which strategy (strategies) have you adopted during this crisis to maintain a stable and constant communication with your clients?
14. In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, do you feel properly updated by the public authorities on the preventive measures adopted to reduce the risk of contagion for your clients on each destination? Why or why not?

15. Have you perceived any difference in the communication provided by the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian public authorities? Why or why not? (not applicable if you do not sell tourist services in any of the Scandinavian countries)
16. How could the communication between the government and companies involved in the tourism sector be improved to reduce the impact caused by the crisis?
17. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX D2: Questionnaire directed to travellers planning to visit either Denmark or Sweden or Norway in 2020

The following questionnaire has been generated through and available on Google Forms. It has been available or sent through social media to people traveling in 2020 until the end of August 2020. It aimed to identify the channels used by the travellers to get the information regarding developments of the current pandemic situation, their satisfaction level towards their service providers or the institutional message spread by public authorities at their selected destination(s). Finally, it sought tourists' suggestions regarding what could be improved in the communication strategies adopted by enterprises.

1. Please, select your gender:
2. Please, select your age range:
3. Please, state your country of citizenship:
4. Please, state your current country of residence:
5. What is the highest educational qualification that you have obtained?
6. How many times do you travel per year inside and outside your country of residence?
7. Have you planned any travel to: Norway, Sweden, Denmark and/or any other country for 2020 before the current COVID-19 crisis?
8. Where to?
9. How did the current COVID-19 outbreak affect your travel plans?
10. How do you keep yourself updated on the evolution of the current crisis of COVID-19 and the possibility of traveling again (e.g. e-mail, travel advisories, TV, blogs...)?
11. If you were forced to cancel or postpone your trip, are you planning to reschedule it once the travel restrictions are removed?
12. Why?

13. How did the public authorities and your tourist service provider inform you about the current situation on your selected destination?
14. Do you feel properly informed by public authorities and your tourist service provider (travel agency, tour operator, transport companies, accommodation...) on the preventive measures undertaken to reduce the risk of contagion for tourists?
15. How satisfied are you with the way your service provider has communicated with you during the current COVID-19 crisis?
16. Why are you (un-)satisfied with the communication hold by the public authorities and/or your service provider?
17. In your opinion in which way the communication between companies and tourists could be improved to provide higher safety and security on the destination: