



# Customer Satisfaction: Refunds from European Airlines during COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected most industries globally and has led to many sectors coming to a standstill. One of the major problems it has caused concerns restrictions on movement as well as travel bans. These restrictions have negatively affected the transport industry, and especially aviation, worldwide. This paper analyses reviews given by passengers to different European airlines regarding refunds during the pandemic. The data was extracted during January 2020 and February 2021. According to the results, over 94 per cent of the customers were not satisfied with the services they received. Airline names turned out to be negatively correlated with the final overall ratings of the airlines, indicating that the higher the negative perception of the name, the lower the passengers' ratings of the airline. Ninety per cent of the passengers concerned flew Economy Class and 27 per cent of them were citizens of the United Kingdom: 88 per cent of them were travelling for "leisure". The vast majority of flights originated in London (9%), and the busiest route was London to Stockholm. The city with the highest number of layovers was Istanbul.

**Keywords:** *Airline Refunds, COVID-19, Transportation Industry, European Airlines, Customer Dissatisfaction.*



## 1. Introduction

European countries, in line with most countries worldwide, implemented numerous strategies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures adopted to mitigate the spread of the virus included closing borders and imposing significant limitations on the mobility of people. The pandemic has caused an unprecedented crisis among the world's airlines (Albers and Rundshagen, 2020). More and more studies are focusing on the global effect of COVID-19 on the airline industry. Salman et al. (2020), for example, analyse how the industry adapted to the pandemic, and they examine its impacts on the global performance of airline stock, whereas Albers and Rundshagen (2020) focus on the strategic reactions of European airlines.

Due to the disruption in airline activities and the financial downturn, travel companies are struggling to reimburse the numerous cancellations on time, seeking instead to give consumers vouchers or credit instead of a refund to maintain their own liquidity and therefore ensure their survival (COVID-19, 2020). This has a significant effect on passengers, however, who carry the burden of ensuring airlines stay in business despite government policy on refunds. The European Commission issued a recommendation about vouchers on 13 May 2020, for instance, but still emphasised that EU countries must comply with EU legislation, giving passengers a refund or a voucher (Bristow, 2020). This is not always the case, however, as many airlines offered vouchers instead of refunds, against the wishes of passengers (Dunford et al. 2020; Dada et al. 2020; Suau-Sanchez et al. 2020; Piccinelli, 2021).

In view of the above, the goal of this study is to analyse online reviews of airline refunding during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reviews were written by affected passengers who qualified for refunds because their flights were cancelled due to the pandemic. Two reasons informed our choice of European airlines as a focal point: first, Europe was an epicentre of the virus (Callaway et al., 2020; Mavragani, 2020; Reznik et al., 2020) and second, the region (Europe) accounts for almost half of the world's tourism market (Marinov and Marinova, 2020). We are confident that this research work will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the impact of COVID-19 on various sectors of the global economy and, in particular, the airline industry. A further contribution is to the literature on the effect of pandemics on customers. Specifically, we aim to answer the following set of questions:

- What views do passengers express in their reviews concerning refunds for cancelled flights during COVID-19?
- How satisfied are passengers with being given vouchers instead of ticket refunds?
- How is expectation-confirmation theory useful to our work?

To answer these questions, we collected data from the Skytrax airline ratings platform, and conducted quantitative analyses in an attempt to find correlation among the variables. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature related to the situation of air transportation during COVID-19 and refunds related to air travel; Section 3



describes the methodology we used in the study, including the approach adopted, how we retrieved the data and how it was analysed; Section 4 covers the analysis and the results of the study as deduced from the passengers' reviews; Section 5 discusses the results in relation to the refund policy of the industry; and finally, Section 6 presents the conclusions, including the limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

In this section, we discuss the effects of COVID-19 in the tourism and aviation industries, and highlight passengers' online reviews about airline compensation strategies. As of 27 February 2021, there had been more than 114 million confirmed cases, and 2.5 million deaths worldwide (UN, 2020). Governments of many nations have since implemented measures such as social distancing, self-isolation and travel restrictions to reduce the effect of this crisis on the global economy. The World Health Organization announced the first COVID-19 case in China on 31 December 2019, declaring it to be of worldwide concern. Europe was further reported as its epicentre. The staggering effects of this pandemic have disrupted business operations in almost all industries (Callaway et al., 2020; Mavragani, 2020; Dye et al., 2020; Bontempi et al. 2021). Following the WHO declaration of the outbreak, the US placed travel restrictions on 26 European countries (Dunford et al. 2020; Bielecki et al. 2020; Neuburger et al. 2020).

As one of the significant frontiers within the global tourism industry, Europe accounts for 48 per cent of the world's total outbound traffic (Callaway et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has severely hit European tourism, which has caused an immense economic shock throughout the sector. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) estimated a sharp decline of 60–80 per cent in the international tourism economy. Similarly, industry experts in Europe estimated a profit decline of 11-29 per cent due to measures put in place by governments (Dogra, 2021). Indeed, the impact of this crisis has affected the tourism business worldwide.

### **2.1. COVID-19 and the Aviation Industry**

The aviation industry is one of the critical enablers of many nations' economies. Currently, there are about 1,200 international airports that serve more than four billion passengers per year (Nižetić, 2020; Hodzi et al. 2020; Rich, 2020; Rural, 2020). In many countries, tourism is economically heavily dependent on the aviation sector (Nižetić, 2020; González-Torres et al. 2021). About 80 per cent of tourists to European countries such as Spain and France arrive at its borders by air, and on the global level this ranges from 35 to 80 per cent. According to the European Union Commission (EUC, 2021), the aviation industry has employed close to five million people and has contributed about 2.1 per cent of the EU Gross Domestic Product (GDP).



The aviation industry has been severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected air transportation. Travel restrictions imposed by the EU have led to the cancellation of flights to curb the spread of this highly contagious virus. As a result, traffic in EU airspace fell by almost 90 per cent between March and April 2020 (EPRS, 2021). The knock-on effects have led to many job cuts, reduced wages and changing work patterns. Aer Lingus reduced the wages and working hours of its staff by a staggering 70 per cent. Air France proposed to cut about 7,580 jobs in 2021. Air Italy and Flybe are among the airlines that have filed for bankruptcy. Wizz Air forced all its cabin crew to agree to a 25-per-cent cut in their basic salaries. These challenges have forced the Governments of most EU nations to provide aid through grants and loans with relaxed repayment terms (Latham and Watkins, 2020).

## **2.2. Refunds and Passenger Reviews**

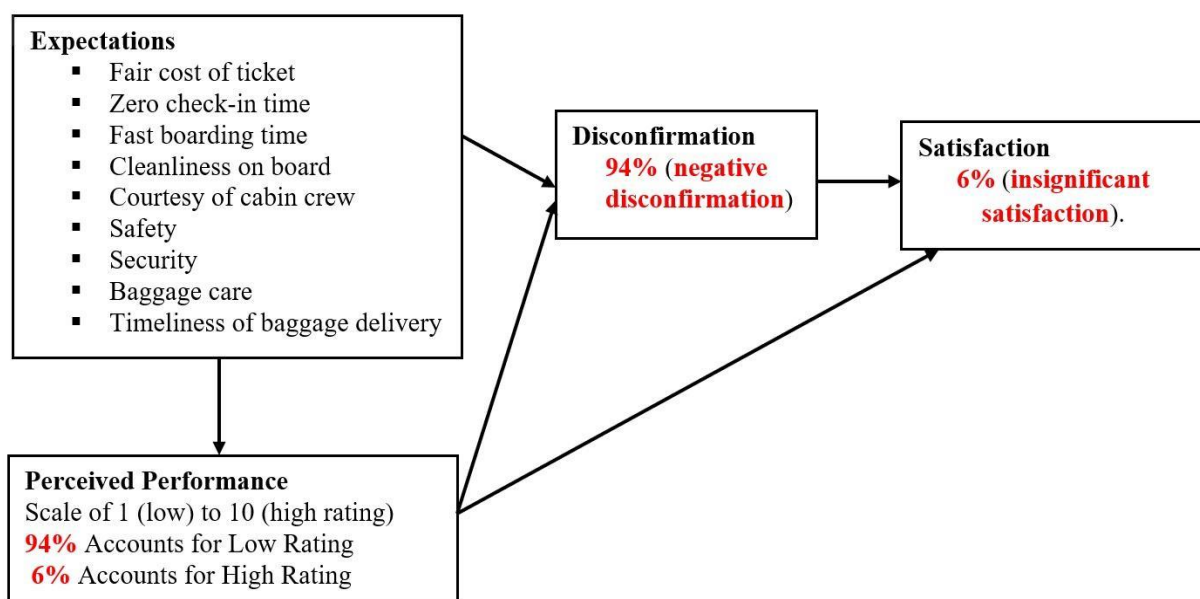
Not only has the economic disruption caused by the pandemic hit airline companies, it has also affected passengers who have had their flights cancelled or who have been restricted from travelling to certain countries. According to EU Regulation 261/2004, a passenger must be compensated in the event of a cancellation (EC, 2004). This compensation may be in monetary form, in vouchers or being re-routed, and must be settled within seven days of the cancellation. Despite this clarification, it is widely acknowledged that airline companies have infringed passengers' rights (Luttenberger, 2020; Stuchlíková and Botlíková, 2021). Some airlines have persuaded passengers to accept vouchers or have failed to inform them about their choices. In 2020, the EU Commission introduced infringement procedures against member nations and airlines in cases of non-compliance with its regulations protecting passengers' rights (ECPC, 2020).

As a result, many passengers have resorted to online forums to express their dissatisfaction with an airline's compensation. According to Zaki Ahmed and Rodríguez-Díaz, (2020), online passenger ratings of a service or brand constitute its reputation. These ratings are in the form of reviews known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM), and passengers freely express their opinions about service offerings. Many scholars attest to the importance of online reviews. According to Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013), online reviews and eWOM are increasingly popular drivers of the choice of airline, and of its services. Yin et al. (2014) found that mishandled transactions and inadequate customer service led to anger and frustration among consumers, expressed in online reviews; Tao and Kim (2019) suggest that customers express their real opinions in their reviews.

It is worth pointing out that these reviews help airlines to improve their strategies in this competitive field. The focus in this study is on passengers' online reviews concerning the compensation strategies employed by airlines in the EU, based on quantitative variables.

## 2.3 Expectation Confirmation Theory

Oliver (1977, 1980) developed Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) as a cognitive theory of customer post-service experience of satisfaction based on expectations such as perceived performance, positive or negative disconfirmation, and satisfaction. Travellers' pre-purchase expectations affect their perceptions and may directly influence the disconfirmation of their beliefs and post-purchase behaviour. ECT sheds light on how initial expectations build upon an airline's promises. Positive expectations motivate travellers to visit the airline's physical office or online store to use their service. The flow in Figure 1 below explains the stages that travellers go through to reach their level of satisfaction.



**Figure 1: Adapted Expectation Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1977, 1980; Bellizzi, Eboli, Forciniti & Mazzulla, 2020; Author's Results).**

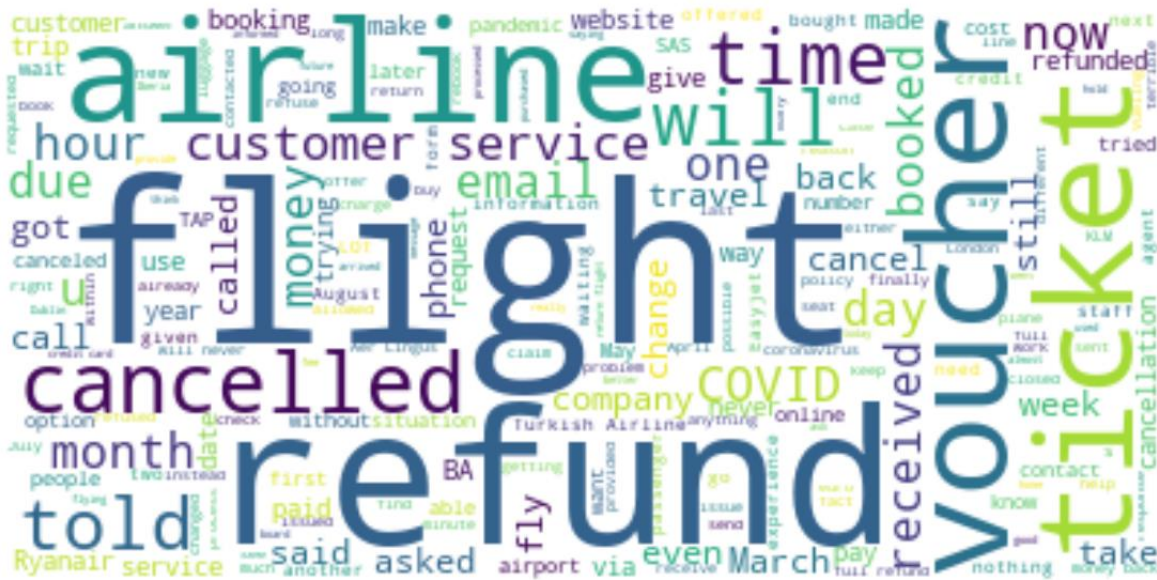
## 3. Methodology

Given the goal of this study to conduct a statistical analysis of reviews by airline passengers regarding refunds for cancelled flights during COVID-19, we decided to use quantitative research methods. We concentrate on the top European airlines according to Skytrax's global airline ratings, which can be accessed via [www.airlinequality.com](http://www.airlinequality.com). Skytrax is a consultancy firm that focuses on the aviation industry worldwide, and it also operates an online forum ([www.airlinequality.com](http://www.airlinequality.com)) for independent airline reviews.

The data extraction was conducted using Python programming language libraries such as BeautifulSoup, requests and pandas. To obtain as much data as possible, all airlines rated between five and three stars were extracted. According to Skytrax's platform, no European carrier rated five stars, but 20 airlines had four and 28 had three. We extracted a total of 1,096

passenger reviews from between 2020 and 2021. However, after further filtering for refunds/voucher specific reviews, we ended up with 311 records.

Having successfully extracted the data, we re-named some fields and removed irrelevant entries (e.g., stop words) for easy processing. We identified the following fields: airline name, flight date, review date, route, passenger's citizenship, seat type, purpose of travel, customer satisfied, status, final airline rating, total reviews, origin, destination and layover. Some fields were further split for more detailed analysis: the 'routes' were divided into 'origin' and 'destination', for example. Extra columns were also added: the country of origin of each airline was appended to the existing dataset, for instance. The following word cloud gives a visual of the dominant text in the review messages:



**Figure 2: Word Cloud of review text**

As Figure 2 shows, the majority of the review messages contain the words “flight”, “refund”, “voucher”, “airline”, “cancelled” and “COVID”. Below are some excerpts.

*“This flight was cancelled by Aegean and I am still waiting for my refund. Where is my money?”*

*“Horrible customer service. Couldn't change my tickets or get a refund. Impossible to contact the company. Calls get hung up. Definitely not recommended!”*

*“It has been 182 days since KLM cancelled my flight. It has been 155 days since my first cash refund request was sent and declined. It has been 65 days since my second cash refund was requested. They're in breach of EU Regulations. Never book with this airline.”*



*“6 months waiting for vouchers. Rang them multiple times but they keep telling me it's not their department. They won't put me through to the correct dept. or give me contact details for them. Just keep putting me off.”*

*“Liverpool to Bucharest. Don't use Blue Air as you can't get a refund. We have been trying since June. Emails are not replied to and there is no way to contact any one by phone. The voucher given is unusable.”*

*“They cancelled my flight and would only offer an 80-euro refund. The flight was 450 euro. The customer service was very poor in dealing with this matter. I was outraged and still haven't received my 80 euro! They're a scamming airline. Very poor service.”*

*“This flight was booked on Monday 16 March. Received an email on 17 March informing me the flight is due to be cancelled. Was phoned on 18 March to say the flight has been cancelled. 204 days later and still no refund! Absolutely shocking customer service. I will never use this airline again. Shame on you.”*

*“Aegean is getting clients to book flights that they proceed to cancel a few hours later. Instead of refunding the money, they either propose to transfer you to more expensive flights or issue vouchers that take a ridiculously long time to be issued.”*

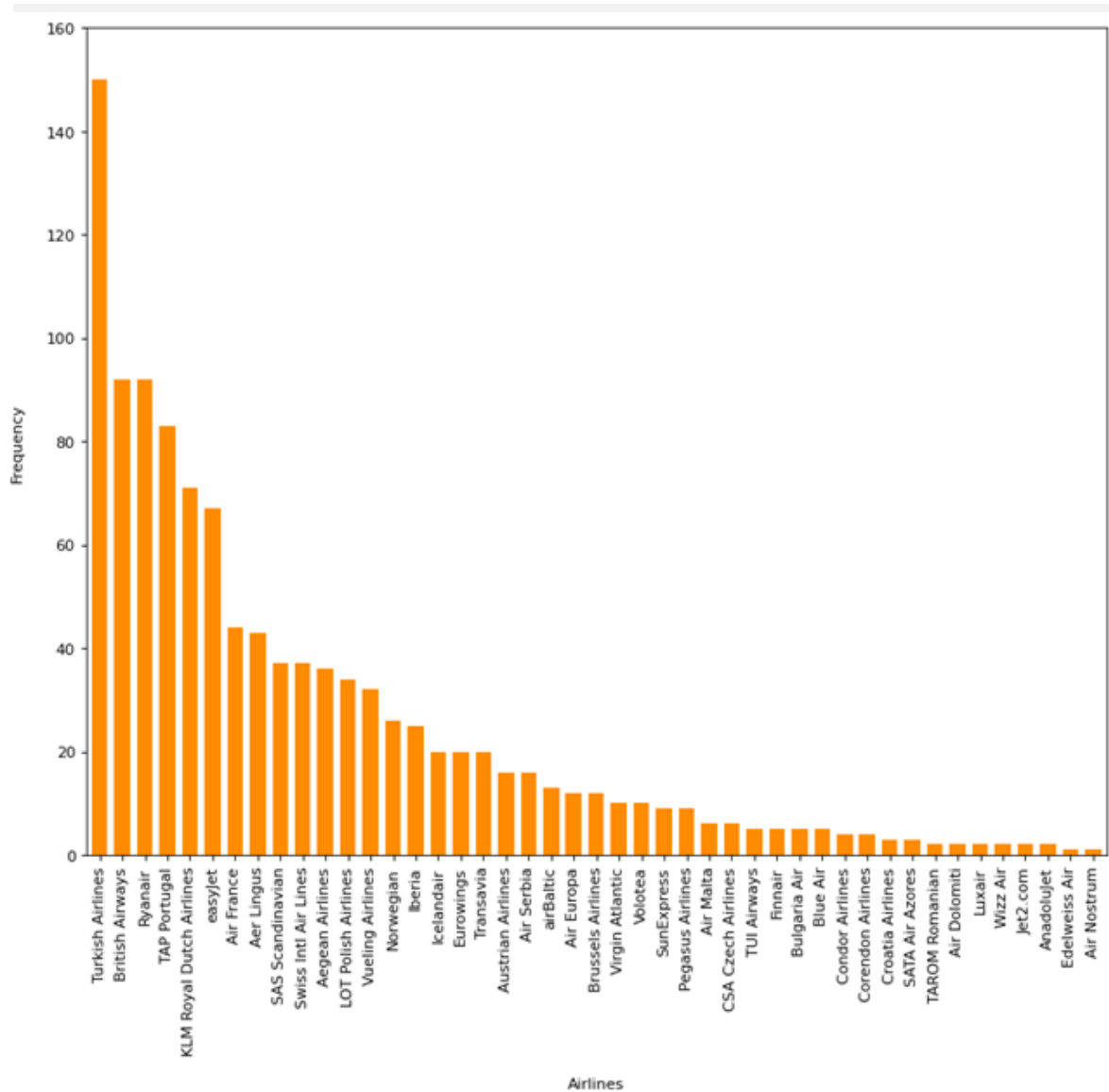
*“Just made my 39th phone call attempting to get refunded for cancelled flights. I can't even get speaking to someone. Keeping my money is obviously more important than keeping me as a customer.”*

Some excerpts of the reviews highlighted above clearly evince the dissatisfaction of various airline passengers within Europe in the period under consideration during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the comments have one commonality, namely the word “refund”. The passengers share a similar story of the non-repayment of their ticket after a flight cancellation. This resonates across several airline operators as well as countries within the study focus, which makes it an issue of concern.

#### **4. Results**

This section presents the result of the study illustrated via frequency analysis.

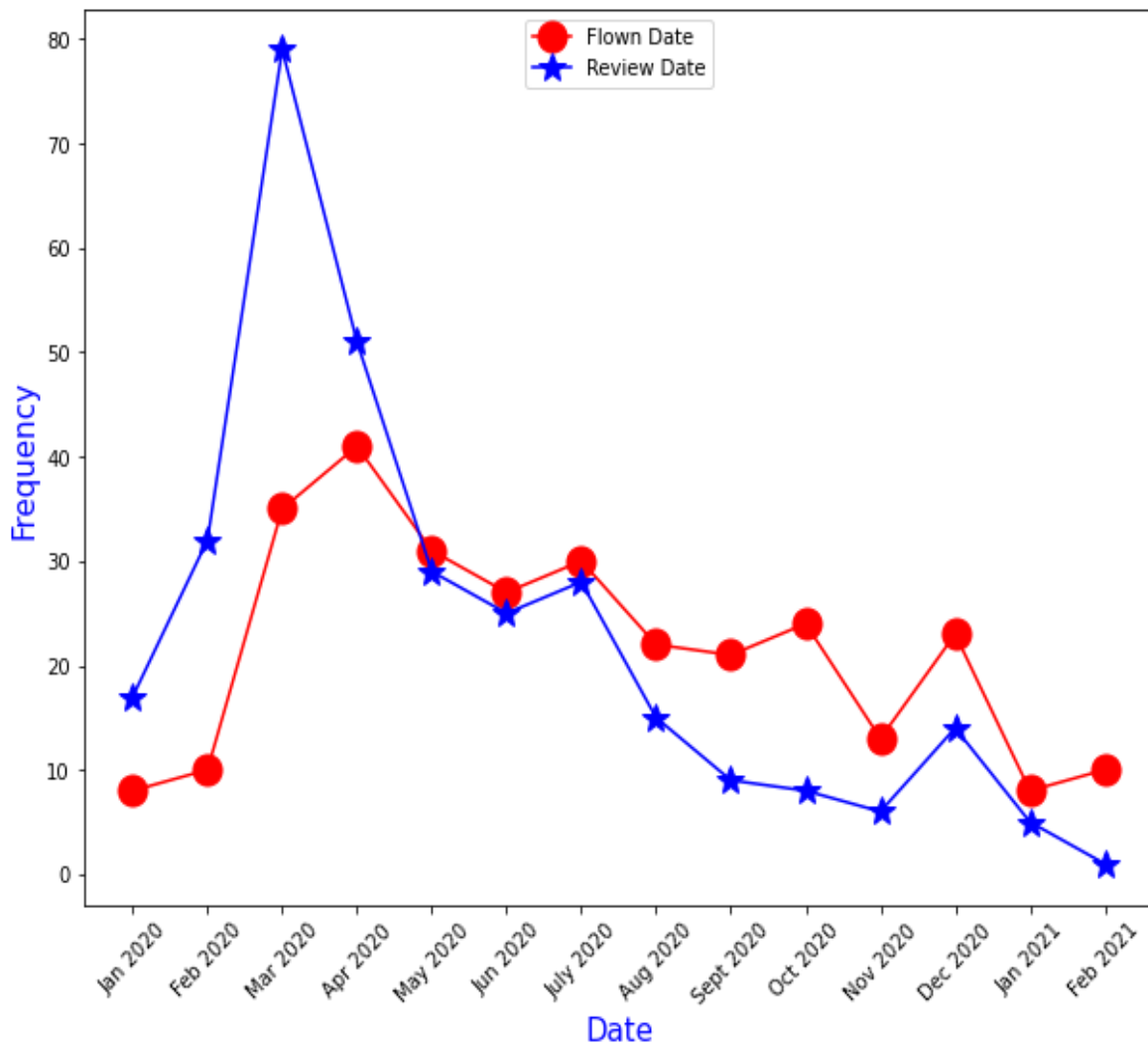
We start by presenting the airline frequency in Figure 3, which shows the number of times a particular airline is reviewed (on the subject of refunds) during the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Figure 3: Airline Frequency**

Turkish Airlines attracted the most comments. It featured in about 10 per cent of the reviews, followed by TAP Portugal (9%), Ryanair (8.5%), British Airways (7.5%) and easyJet (6%). SATA Air Azores, TUI Airways, Bulgaria Air and Blue Air were least frequently mentioned.





**Figure 4: Flown date and review date frequency**

As Figure 4 shows, the highest number of flights was in March 2020, comprising about 25 per cent of all flights as reflected in the dataset. The second and third busiest days were April 2020 (16%) and February 2020 (10%), respectively. The highest number of online reviews was recorded in April 2020 (13% of all reviews on refunds) followed by March 2020 (11%) and then May 2020 (10%).

**Table 1: Most frequent routes**

<b>Route</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage composition</b>
London to Stockholm	3	1
Exeter to Malaga	2	0.6
Los Angeles to Barcelona	2	0.6

The busiest route was London to Stockholm (about 1% of the total routes), followed by Los Angeles to Barcelona (0.6%) and then London to Lisbon (0.6%).

**Table 2: Top origins**

<b>Origin</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
London	17
Amsterdam	11
Boston	8
Paris	8

The largest percentage of flights (9%) originated from London, followed by Amsterdam (4%) and Dublin (3%). The most frequently visited destinations were Dublin (5%), Lisbon (4%) and Barcelona (3%).

**Table 3: Top destinations**

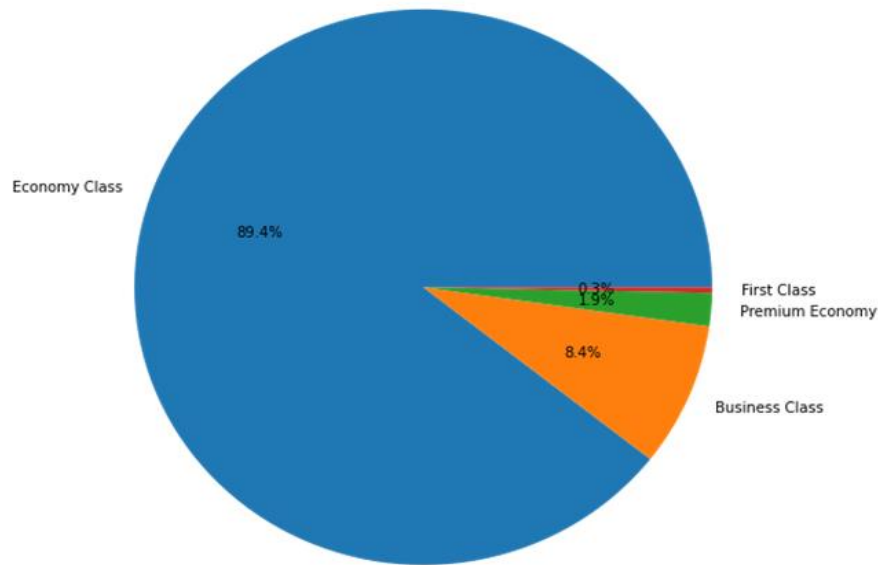
<b>Destinations</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Lisbon	14
Dublin	14
Barcelona	11
Istanbul	11
London	10

In terms of layovers, 67 per cent of the flights travelled directly to their destinations. The city with the highest number of layovers was Istanbul (6% of the total), followed by Lisbon (4%) and Amsterdam (3%).

**Table 4: The most frequent nationalities of the affected passengers**

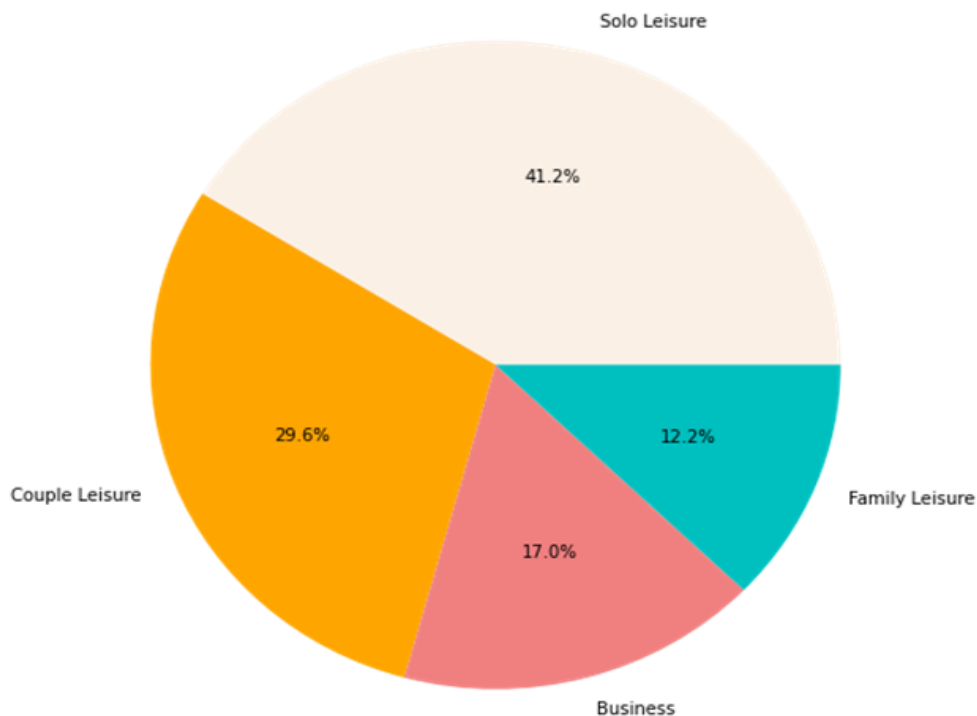
<b>Passenger citizenship</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
United Kingdom	81
United States	70
Canada	16
Netherlands	16
Germany	14

Of the passengers affected by the refunding process, 27 per cent were citizens of the United Kingdom, followed by the United States of America (22%), The Netherlands (5%), Canada (5%) and Germany (4%).



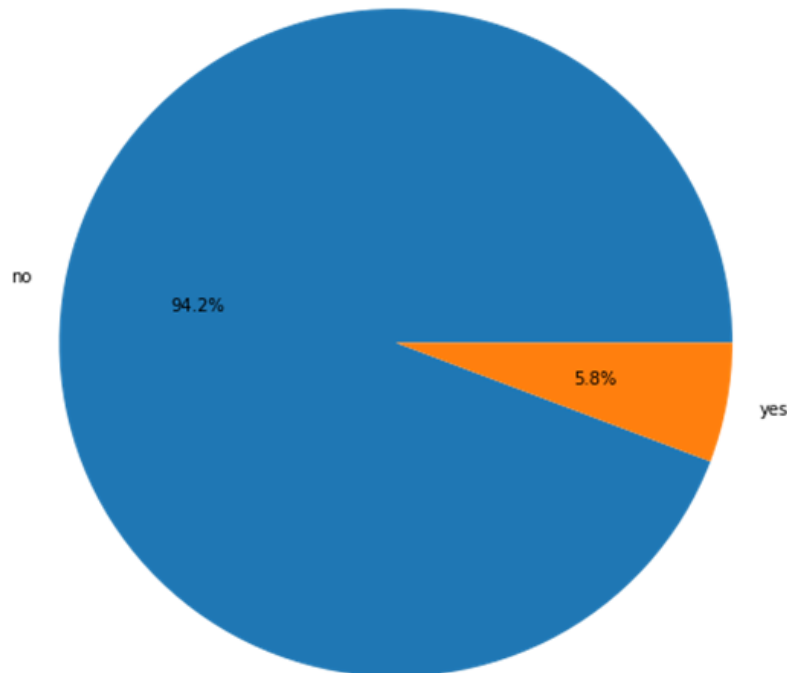
**Figure 5: Percentage composition of seat types**

Ninety per cent of the passengers flew Economy Class, eight per cent Business Class, 1.8 per cent Premium Economy and 0.3 per cent First Class.



**Figure 6: Purpose of journey (percentage composition)**

As Figure 6 shows, 41 per cent of the reviewers were travelling for “solo leisure” purposes, 30 per cent for ‘couple leisure’, 16 per cent for ‘family leisure’ and 12 per cent for business.



**Figure 7: Passengers' response when asked about their satisfaction**

According to Figure 7, over 94 per cent of the reviewers were not satisfied with the services offered to them regarding refunds; the remaining 5.8 per cent expressed satisfaction.

As part of Skytrax's quality assurance, online reviews are often validated as being true as claimed by the reviewers. Within our dataset, 69 per cent of the reviews were stamped "trip verified", but the remaining 31 per cent were not verified.

On a scale ranging from one to 10, about 95 per cent of the passengers rated the airlines below five: 83 per cent gave a rating one (1), and eight per cent gave two (2).

## 5. Discussion

The ongoing global pandemic has created a commingled problem that needs commingled solutions. The aviation industry is one that has suffered heavily from COVID-19 disruptions, not least because of problems related to the refunding of tickets booked for cancelled flights. This study reports a cross-country review of data obtained from Skytrax's global airline ratings between January 2020 and February 2021, showing 311 unique records and including data on airline frequency, flown date, review date, route information, passenger nationalities, seat types, travelling purpose, customer satisfaction, trip verification and customer ratings. Our analysis shows that Turkish Airlines, providing a gateway between east and west, attracted the highest number of reviews from its global customers. The maximum number of scheduled flights may also have contributed to the frequency of reviews.

The highest number of flights was in March 2020, a month that experienced an upward shift in the number of COVID-19 cases. It was also the month in which the UN World Tourism Organisation launched a crisis committee. Travellers were trying to get back to their country of residence because more countries were being affected by the pandemic. Refund-related reviews were at their highest in April 2020, which shows the consequences of flight cancellations in line with restrictions imposed by various countries as counteractive measures. London-Stockholm was the busiest route, all the main airports in the London area (Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted) connecting to Stockholm. Travellers from the United Kingdom were more seriously affected by the refund process than those coming from countries such as the US, The Netherlands and Canada. This result implies that travellers from the UK made more attempts to travel during the period captured in this study.

Economy-Class seats dominated the data, although there were some Business-Class travellers. Some travellers were still able to embark on a business trip despite the COVID-19 disruption. In any case, the airline name correlated negatively with the overall airline rating: in other words, the more negative the perception of the airline's name, the lower were the travellers' overall ratings. Our findings indicate that airlines struggle to adjust their services by trimming their schedules, reducing their headcount, and improving their refund policies. They rely on their reputation and process management to mitigate their losses, and travellers expect service satisfaction, in other words that their expectations of the airlines will be fulfilled. Despite knowing very well the extent of COVID-19 disruption among the airlines, as customers they still want to come first. Oliver's expectation confirmation theory, which originated in 1977 and expanded a year later (1980), applies to the results of this study (Oliver, 1977; Oliver, 1980): travellers' COVID-19-related expectations coupled with the airlines' perceived performance in Europe will lead to post-purchase satisfaction.

Nevertheless, the relationship between travellers and airlines is mediated through positive or negative disconfirmation between expectations and performance. Suppose the traveller's experiences outperform expectations. In that case, positive disconfirmation and post-purchase satisfaction will be established. However, if services fall short of expectations, negative disconfirmation is the result, and the traveller is likely to be dissatisfied with the airline concerned. The results of this study support negative rather than positive disconfirmation, and zero disconfirmation. This is in contrast with the findings reported by Yang & Jiang (2020; Wang, Lin & Su, 2021) that confirmation significantly affects the perceived satisfaction of online platform users and gives hope for continuing usage. Frustration with flight cancellations, being stranded at the airport, and the changing refund policies stirred up negative sentiments and dampened enthusiasm, interest and optimism towards the airlines - experiences that relate to image laundering. Travellers patronise their airline of choice because they desire services that will give them benefits and satisfaction.

Our results show that airline travellers seek different kinds of value (Ukpabi et al. 2020a; Ukpabi et al. 2020b). They need a solution from the airline that meets their needs. They also need the monetary value to strike a balance between the price they paid and their perception of the airline offering's worth. They also expect social value that promotes service engagement. Above all, they need psychological value, meaning that the airline's services should make them feel good. If an airline is to retain its customers and promote customer loyalty, it needs to be customer-focused despite COVID-19 disruption.

## 6. Conclusion

COVID-19 is changing the face of the aviation sector. Disruptions caused by the pandemic have affected the industry, and the effects could last longer than the emergency. Several airports, airlines and other aviation-related service providers have lost a significant proportion of their operations and income since the pandemic's inception. Many of them might need direct or indirect support from governments to recover their losses. Our focus in this paper is on the reviews of airline passengers during the pandemic, mainly within Europe.

It is clear that airlines across Europe have taken a severe knock due to the pandemic's impact. Passengers voiced their frustration through reviews about how difficult it was to obtain refunds for air tickets they had bought. Some of these reviews are highlighted in Section 3. Our main finding is that, between March and May 2020, over 94 per cent of the customers who gave reviews were not pleased with the services offered to them regarding refunds.

Given the high level of dissatisfaction, we list some managerial implications for airline managers and other stakeholders to consider.

1. Given the exceptionally high dissatisfaction level of travellers with the airlines, and the anger of customers, managers should draw up an urgent, reputation-saving action plan. Most airlines have channels for compensation, but payment should be timely and allow for lost time and discomfort.
2. Managers should have real-time complaint-resolution platforms: long silences are harmful to airlines in times of disruption such as with COVID-19.
3. A follow-up mechanism will make travellers feel welcome and cared for. Very Important Person (VIP) treatment may encourage those who are about to or have deserted the brand to rethink and to give a second chance to the airlines concerned.

This study, which is based on empirical data from airline travellers and adapted ECT, focuses on the expectations of airline travellers, how they perceive the airline's performance, negative disconfirmation, and the insignificant amount of satisfaction, thereby contributing to the literature on hospitality.



## 7. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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