

# **Master thesis**

Strategy employment in the aviation industry



## **Legitimizing the aviation industry and the influence of stakeholder salience**

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Faculty	Nijmegen School of Management
Study	Master Business Administration
Specialization	Strategic Management
Date	8-7-2020

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## **Abstract**

Climate change is a pressing issue in modern civilization. The environmental impact of the aviation industry and their respective contribution to climate change has become part of public debate. The growing societal awareness on the negative consequences of flying has resulted in a more sceptical view on the aviation industry, which resulted in aviation companies that are actively addressing these concerns. Given the importance of being perceived as legitimate by the various groups an organisation interacts with, aviation companies are employing a variety of legitimacy strategies towards their stakeholders. By conducting extensive document analysis this study examined the employment of legitimacy strategies by aviation companies, while assessing the influence of stakeholder salience on this process. The findings indicate that aviation companies heavily rely on generating legitimacy by enhancement of their reputation, and prioritize their most important stakeholders in these efforts. Stakeholder groups that are low in salience are often neglected or not prioritized in the legitimizing efforts.

**Keywords:** “legitimacy”, “strategy employment”, “stakeholder salience”, “aviation industry”.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Problem indication**

Organizations are depended on society when it comes to achieving their legitimate status (Cho, 2009). Deegan (2000) states that organizations constantly attempt to ensure that their activities are perceived as legitimate by relevant parties. The reason for this is that groups in society are simply not willing to engage in any activity with illegitimate organisations, regardless of the services that the organisation provides (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017). Organizations that cannot establish a legitimate status will see their very basis for existence and survival endangered (Deegan, 2002). However, even organisations that are considered legitimate have to be aware of shifting perceptions on their legitimacy, which could result in being avoided by society (Deephouse et al., 2017). Therefore, the survival of a company is depended on whether the society in which they conduct business recognizes that their business activities are aligned to its current value system (Gray, Owens, & Adams, 1996). Luckily for organisations there are a variety of strategies to employ which could influence public perception and thus build or maintain their legitimacy, in order to comply to current values and securement of long-term survival (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

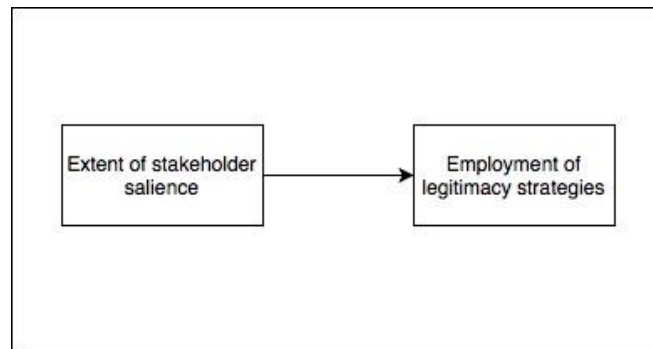
The issue of tackling climate change is being researched more thoroughly than ever and a growing body of literature addresses the significant contribution of the aviation industry to global warming and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Peeters & Dubois, 2010). The increasing negative exposure on the industry in literature and media contributed to the development of a more sceptical view on the aviation industry by its stakeholders. Rosenthal (2010) investigated this trend and identified a newly developed view, i.e. when aviation costumers experience the perceived personal benefits of flying versus the collective climate change consequences, naming it the “flyers’ dilemma”. Developments like this indicate that the aviation sector is starting to be seen in a more critical daylight where the sector is starting to get questioned in costumer discourses (Cohen, Higham, & Cavaliere, 2011). Not only aviation customers’ value system seemed to have shifted. The growing awareness for climate change has resulted in a society which criticizes products, services and developments that produce a negative ecological impact. There is an increasing demand of groups in society that organizations need to act towards enhancement of environmental welfare and that they subsequently provide information about their corporate responsibility efforts (Arvidsson, 2006). Hence, the environmental impact of the aviation industry has become an ongoing topic in public debate.

Society's environmental assessment of the aviation industry's legitimacy is likely to have changed in recent years. Organisations in the aviation sector that want to stay in line with the shifting value systems of society have to make sure that they are perceived as legitimate by the various groups they interact with, namely their stakeholders (Gollant & Sillince, 2007). But in modern society where everyone is able to assert their opinion, it is recognized that not all stakeholder groups are equally as important and that gives organizations the strategic choice to which groups it should focus on (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Suchman, 1995). Moreover, Gray and Balmer (1998) argue that organizations should only focus on creating a favourable reputation in the minds of important stakeholders, since their perception of the company will influence the willingness to provide or withdraw active support. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) state that the interests of important stakeholders should be tackled with greater effort and an increased responsiveness. These statements indicate that differentiation in legitimizing could be necessary when targeting stakeholder groups that differ in salience. So how do aviation companies legitimize their business towards stakeholders, and does differentiation take place based on the extent of stakeholder salience? In the light of climate change, the growing awareness of aviation industry's environmental impact and declining legitimacy in the eyes of society, it becomes evident that there is a growing need for the aviation sector to engage in these developments by optimally addressing stakeholders with their legitimizing efforts.

The growing environmental awareness brings challenges for all companies conducting business in industries that are fundamentally considered non-friendly to the environment. Due to the growing negative exposure on flying, airlines within the aviation sector have taken action in order to maintain their organizational legitimacy and stay in line with shifting values in society. This study will focus on the legitimacy strategies that are employed towards stakeholders in the aviation industry and moreover, will evaluate the influence of stakeholder salience on this process. This study will start with an introduction to the concept of legitimacy in more detail, followed by an assessment of several legitimacy strategies that aviation companies could employ. Thereafter the role that different stakeholder groups play will be elaborated upon. The methodology chapter will include the research design, way of data collection, the operationalisation and data analysis. Based upon data generated from document analysis, the results will be discussed and interpreted in chapter four. This study will come to an end after the research question has been answered and a discussion on the contribution, practical implications, limitations and suggestions for further research is presented.

## 1.2 Problem statement

*How does the extent of stakeholder salience influence the employment of legitimacy strategies in the aviation industry?*



*Figure 1: Visual representation of the research question*

## 1.3 Relevance

### 1.3.1 Practical relevance

The influence of legitimacy on performance, social and financial activity and ultimately organizational survival is fundamental (Deephhouse et al., 2017). The outcome of this research can create valuable insight for aviation companies who are experiencing the effects of changing societal perception on their business due to climate change, and for those who are concerned with the long-term survival of their organization due to these developments. This research provides managers insight in the strategic options available to influence stakeholders' perception on legitimacy, while the relative importance of different stakeholder groups is taken into account. Since the aviation sector is only one of many sectors contributing to the consequences of climate change, the outcome of this research could possibly be of value to a variety of organizations who have to legitimize their business to a field of stakeholders as a result of the negative ecological footprint they leave behind.

### 1.3.2 Theoretical relevance

Past research concerning this topic is often focussed at deducting legitimacy strategies based out of environmental reports (Borgstedt, Nienaber, Liesenkötter, & Schewe, 2019), identifying legitimacy strategies for new ventures (Fisher, Kuratko, Bloodgood, & Hornsby, 2016) or building legitimacy in impact investing (Lehner, Harrer, & Quast, 2018). However, Lamin and

Zaheer (2012) suggest that there is a need for more understanding of the different strategies firms use to defend their legitimacy and moreover, there is a need to assess how these strategies resonate within a field of stakeholders. Miller and Michelson (2013) state that finding studies that research on an industry level are not very common. Since the industry a company belongs to might define the way interaction with stakeholders is conducted, further studies on specific industries can provide valuable insights on the extent to which the legitimacy strategies applied depend on a company's industry (Borgstedt et al., 2019). Last, research on legitimacy has had a focus primarily on attaining initial legitimacy for organizations (Rao 1994; Sine, David, & Mitsuhashi, 2007). A fraction of the attention has been paid to defending the legitimacy of organizations after accusations or societal developments that caused organizational legitimacy to decline (Lamin & Zaheer, 2012).



## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 The concept of legitimacy**

The concept of legitimacy has a widespread application and popularity (Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2015) and therefore several definitions of legitimacy are present in literature. The definition that will take a central place in this research is given by Suchman (1995), where he captures legitimacy as “a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (p. 574). The relevance of the defined situation lies in the fact that having socially accepted organizational activity results in the organization gaining access to resources that are essential for survival and growth (Zimmermann & Zeitz, 2002). These resources are provided by the stakeholders an organisation interacts with. The reason of failure for a substantial amount of organizations is not because their products were bad, but because of their lack of legitimacy (Chen, Griffith, & Hu, 2006).

Organizations can earn their legitimate status by being perceived as such by the public at large; so, an organization strives to honour a social contract that defines their responsibility towards society (Cho, 2009). A companies' survival is endangered when the society in which they conduct business does not recognize that their business activities are aligned to its current value system (Gray, Owens, & Adams, 1996), so organizations constantly attempt to ensure that their activities are perceived as legitimate by relevant parties (Deegan, 2000). An observation by Suchman (1995) about the purpose of organizational legitimacy judgements indicates that they are formed to provide active support or only passive acquiescence for business operations and activities. Since the idea of societal perceptions and values is a crucial element in organizational legitimacy, O'Donovan (2002) points out a direct relation between the likelihood of major shifts in public perception of the organization's social responsibility, and the need for organizations to actively address these shifting societal attitudes.

The relation legitimacy has to society's ever developing value system gives an indication of the dynamic nature of the concept (Lindblom, 1993), and therefore suggests that this resource can be manipulated by organizations (Woodward, Edwards, & Birkin, 2001). The assumption that managers have a high degree of control over the process of legitimation is in line with the strategic tradition on legitimacy in literature, where the general perception is that managers can actively alter their business' performance to meet society's changing expectations (Suchman, 1995). Prior research argued that consumer's perception on the products of an

organization are positively influenced when the organizations conducts certain actions aimed at improving their legitimacy, such as engaging in corporate social responsibility programs (Brown & Dacin, 1997). On top of that, studies into legitimacy show that organizational activities focussed on maintaining or gaining legitimacy actually increase firm performance (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002).

## 2.2 Legitimacy strategies

### 2.2.1 Definition

Organizations can decide to employ strategies that will maintain or build organizational legitimacy, for the purpose of complying to society's value system and thus secure their long-term survival (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Organizations could employ a variety of strategies when their legitimacy is being threatened (Rindova, Petkova, & Kotha, 2007). An overview of the categorization of relevant legitimacy strategies is provided below.

### 2.2.2 Categorization of strategies

Through evaluating case studies and conducting literature review, different scholars were able to identify responses and strategies that organizations could potentially employ in order to appear legitimate. The overlap in many of these strategies allows this study to proceed with the grouping of relevant strategies into categories, and use previous studies as a point of departure. The main categories that will take on a central place in this study are the result different strategies compiled together by Cho (2009). According to Cho (2009), there are 3 broad types of communication tactics used by organizations that are attempting to generate legitimacy. For the purpose of insight into a more complete set of strategies that aviation companies could use, the 3 categories identified by Cho (2009) will be expanded with additional strategies and concepts found in literature.

#### **Image Enhancement (IE)**

Business activities of an organisation that impact the environment can directly affect an organisations' image (Roome, 1994). By engaging in the IE strategy, organizations will attempt to appear legitimate by linking the organizations as a whole to positive social values (Cho, 2009). Arvidsson (2010) states that by disclosing information about environmental initiatives and

commitments, organizations can actively manage the need for information of its stakeholders and subsequently gain their support. The Image Enhancement (IE) strategy by Cho (2009) will be deepened by integrating the concept of 'impression management' (Van Halderen, Bhatt, Berens, Brown, & Van Riel, 2014), which includes three kinds of organizational actions aimed towards influencing the perceptions of stakeholders. These kinds of actions are "purposeful" and "goal-directed" (Carlson, Carlson, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 498). Key motivations for organizations to implement impression management into their business activities are to maintain corporate environmental legitimacy and the management of stakeholders' expectations and informational needs (Bansal & Clelland, 2004). Impression management recognizes that organizations should pay "simultaneous attention to the legitimate interests of all appropriate stakeholders" as they could provide the organisation with key resources (Donaldson & Preston 1995, p. 67).

To influence stakeholders' perception, (aviation) companies could use *symbolic actions* when they are extensively elaborating on changing their business activities (Cho, 2009). Additionally, organizations will provide their stakeholders with information about the commitments and accomplishments they have attained, in order to secure long-term relations with these groups. The most important form of symbolic actions is through verbal accounts; like communication through annual reports, websites, news articles and spokespersons (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Beelitz, & Merkl-Davies, 2012).

Next, (aviation) companies could engage in *symbolic behaviours*; which are "routine or special actions that are used to indicate something about an organization's image" (Elsbach 2003, p. 313). Examples that are provided of symbolic behaviours include: donations to charity, adoption of quality control programs and the treatment of employees. These kinds of actions are purposeful on their own, but generate the beneficial side-effect that the organization's image gets polished up. Symbolic behaviours often lie not within the core practise of the organization, but can be used to express a certain commitment or goodwill (Elsbach, 2003).

Impression management is not only a symbolic approach. Next to symbolic actions, *substantive practices* also contribute to influence the perception on organizations (Highhouse, Brooks, & Greguras, 2009). Substantive actions are much more demanding and require actual changes in core business practices, structures and goals (Berrone, Gelabert, & Fosfuri, 2009; Bansal & Kistruck, 2006). For instance, one could think of substantive actions like strategies to prevent pollution and other environmental innovations (Berrone et al. 2009; Berrone and Gomez-Mejia 2009). Prior research of Bansal and Kistruck (2006) on the ethical side of impression management found that when symbolic accounts are not in line with substantive

activities (i.e. when an organization says one thing but does another), this could endanger the legitimacy of the company (MacLean & Behnam, 2010).

### **Avoidance / Deflection (AD)**

The AD strategy focusses on shifting negative attention away from key problems at hand, like environmental concerns surrounding an organization. By redirecting or deflecting attention to different matters (related or unrelated), an organization tries to be perceived as legitimate (Cho, 2009). Bansal and Clelland (2004) indicated that it is possible for organizations to use the AD strategy in combination with the beforementioned IE strategy. They illustrate that when organizational legitimacy is low, organisations could express their commitment to the environment in order to “deflect the negative criticism by signalling that it does actually care about the environment” (p. 96). However, not following up on those commitments will tend to negatively impact legitimacy.

The most important element in the AD strategy is to show their targeted groups that the organization is not to blame and therefore should not be the focus of the issue. In this context, the *decoupling strategy* can be employed. Lamin and Zaheer (2012) states that when an organization encounters specific allegations, it will respond by carry out corrective actions like for example terminate contracts with questionable suppliers. The goal is to create a ‘buffer’ between the organizations as a whole and the allegations, by minimizing the link between the organization and the source of the problem to ultimately secure organizational legitimacy.

When organizations strive to maintain their legitimacy but lack the resources or ability to actually make any actual internal adjustments, they could opt for the ‘proactive’ legitimacy strategies by Lindblom (2010). Focussing on environmental disclosures, this strategy may essentially be seen as a *misleading strategy* for organizations in their quest for legitimacy (Borgstedt et al., 2019). In practice, organizations try to maintain their legitimacy by communicating ecological objectives that indicate a stronger commitment to the environment than in reality. Gray and Bebbington (2000) found that disclosing information in this case can be seen as a ‘legitimation device and not an accountability mechanism’ (p. 16).

Another strategy on how to deal with threats on organizational legitimacy in this context is provided by O’Donovan (2002). Being named the *avoid strategy*, this tactic emphasizes the lack of responsibility an organization would take in any problematic situation. O’Donovan (2002) states that organizations will not participate in the public discussion after an incident has taken place and finally, the organization would not publicize any information the public could perceive as negative on the matter. Jaworski (1993) indicates that the withholding

communication and avoidance of the public debate can be seen as powerful strategies of social control, and therefore making it a relevant strategy to include and consider in this study.

### **Disclaimer (DS)**

By using the disclaimer strategy, organizations will attempt to appear legitimate by simply denying their involvement and responsibility concerning negative events or matters (Cho, 2009). Often identified in literature, this strategy can be seen as the most defensive and least effort demanding approach an organization could adopt. Lamin and Zaheer (2010) say the starting point in this *denial strategy* “is a dismissal of the allegation, most often in the form of a denial that a problem exists or has existed with the firm’s labor practices and contractors” (p. 50). The reasoning behind this strategy is, according to Suchman (1995), that by denying all the problems organizations try to alleviate their stakeholders’ concerns. This will then give the organization time to come up with the necessary solutions or resources to tackle the problem in a better way.

<b>Image Enhancement</b>	<b>Avoidance / Deflection</b>	<b>Disclaimer</b>
Symbolic actions	Decoupling strategy	Denial strategy
Symbolic behaviours	Misleading strategy	
Substantive practices	Avoid strategy	

*Table 1: overview legitimacy strategies*

### 2.3 Legitimacy towards stakeholders

A definition by Dunham, Freeman and Liedtka (2006) states that a stakeholder represents a “group that the firm needs in order to exist, specifically customers, suppliers, employees, financiers, and communities” (p. 25). This study takes a slightly broader definition by additionally include groups that advocate specific environmental objectives like non-governmental organizations, and the media. Through the evaluation of these groups, the social judgement that is the assessment of legitimacy is generated (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Bitektine, 2011). In other words, individual actors or groups make their own social assessments on the desirability and appropriateness of organizational activities. Suchman (1995) claims that these kind of assessments of legitimacy are group dependent, and therefore can differ. Gollant and Sillince (2007) back this statement up by stating that when organizations want to secure their legitimacy, they must be perceived as such by the groups they target. On top of that, Lamin and Zaheer (2012) say that organizational legitimacy may not be interpreted the same by different

groups of stakeholders. One could assume that the above described statements provide an indication of the need to use different strategies to address a field of stakeholders in the process of building and maintaining organizational legitimacy. Since stakeholder groups are likely to have different claims on an organization, it seems logical to address these groups in ways that fit their needs.

These assumptions could be even more true for the time we are living in today, where reaching out to stakeholders is an essential part of business operations. Organizations have to deal with the growing pressure of different stakeholder groups in society (Boiral & Gendron, 2011). These stakeholder groups expect the modern organization to have transparent considerations in terms of their environmental activity (Senaweera, Ab Yajid, Khatibi, & Azam, 2019). This is even more of a concern to organizations that have “visible environmental impacts”, since these organizations are now being monitored even more close by its stakeholders (Bansal & Kistruck, 2006, p. 167). However, in modern society where everyone is able to assert their opinion, it is recognized that not all stakeholder groups are equally as important and that gives organizations the strategic choice to which groups it should focus on (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Suchman, 1995). Additionally, Suchman (1995) proposes that it is not possible to satisfy all audiences and thus, the organization could make evaluations on which stakeholder groups are relevant and whether there is a need to specifically address them.

### 2.3.1 Stakeholder salience

Claims in recent literature identify the increased influence of external stakeholders on the strategies of organizations (Sharma & Henriques, 2005; Rodgers & Gago, 2004). In this study, the extent of stakeholder salience is assumed to play a role in the employment of legitimacy strategies by aviation companies. Stakeholder salience is ‘the prioritization of stakeholder claims by managers based on their perception of the degree of power of the stakeholder and the degree of moral legitimacy and urgency of the claim’ (Neville, Bell, & Whitwell, 2011, p. 369). The first attribute in this definition is *power*, which means that powerful stakeholders can produce significant impact by coercively force organizations to follow up on their claims. Eesley and Lenox (2006) further develop this attribute by stating that powerful stakeholders are able to sustain their claim for a long period of time. Moreover, van Halderen et al. (2014) argue that organizations do not directly conform to all pressures from stakeholders, but will adapt quicker when the pressures continue to exist and comes from relatively powerful stakeholders. The second attribute of stakeholder salience is *legitimacy* and is described by Neville, Bell and

Whitwell (2011) stating that ‘legitimate claims warrant managerial attention because of the managers’ perceptions and considerations of the net benefits, rights or justice, and so on implicit within the claim, and not because of the impact upon the organization’ (p. 369). Driscoll and Starik (2004) claim that the *urgency* attribute is influenced by the actual probability that the content of this claim will occur. Furthermore, when the claim is time sensitive and deemed critical, the stakeholders’ claim will be perceived with greater salience.

Thus, the extent of stakeholder salience is indicated by the three attributes and by combining them a typology of stakeholders can be formed, where organizations create insight into the stakeholders’ importance and the potential implications this has on strategy formation (Aaltonen, Jaakko, & Tuomas, 2008). As stated by Gago and Antolin (2004), the number of attributes that any stakeholder possesses determines their importance, prioritization and salience for the organization and therefore will indicate the specific level of attention it will receive from corporate managers. Stakeholders that possess all three attributes (i.e. that are powerful, exert legitimate and urgent claims) are considered to be highly salient stakeholders and therefore demand to be targeted by a legitimacy strategy that is aimed at securing their support. Moderate stakeholders possess a combination of at least two attributes and low salient stakeholder groups possess at least one attribute.

Gago and Antolin (2004) state that in order to define (socially responsible) strategies, it is crucial to know who the relevant stakeholders are for an organisation with respect to environmental issues. Secondly they pose the question; to what degree should an organisation focus on satisfying the claims of these different stakeholder groups? Gray and Balmer (1998) argue that organizations should focus on creating a favourable reputation in the minds of important stakeholder groups, since this image of the company will influence their willingness to provide or withdraw active support. Both authors go even further by stating that an organization could secure its survival in sensitive business environments by building this favourable reputation, and should therefore engage in strategies that enable them to do so. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) argue that the interests of the most important stakeholders should be tackled with greater effort and an increased responsiveness. Finally, Bossoe and Kumar (2009) state that “It appears logical that the more importance a firm attaches to a stakeholder group, the higher will be the level of interaction between the firm and the stakeholder group and the more will be the stakeholder dialogues addressing the interests of the group, through a variety of communications.” (p. 63). A legitimacy strategy that requires high interaction towards stakeholders is Image Enhancement, an approach that applies a focus on addressing stakeholder concerns by emphasizing the positive activities of the organisation. This

strategy is designed to actively engage in various activities towards stakeholders that illustrate the goodwill of an organisation. Through various communication channels Image Enhancement can be employed towards stakeholder groups in order to address and alleviate their concerns, enabling the organisation to secure their important support. The following proposition has been drawn up as a result of the statements described above.

*Proposition 1: Aviation companies will employ Image Enhancement strategies towards high salient stakeholder groups.*

The findings of Bossoe and Kumar's study (2009) illustrate that "the greater the priority accorded to a stakeholder group, the greater the efforts aimed at engaging the stakeholder groups" (p. 62). This statement can be inverted and applied to the stakeholder groups that are low in salience for organisations. As stated by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997), these low salient stakeholder groups can be addressed with strategies that are less demanding in terms of time, energy and other resources. Baba and Raufflet (2017) state that stakeholders who possess few attributes of stakeholder salience are often neglected and are subsequently not prioritized in being addressed over more salient stakeholders by managers. When organisations want to address the claims of these stakeholder groups, they could employ legitimacy strategies that are not designed to have high levels of interaction with stakeholders', but rather focus on denying their allegations and shifting negative attention away from the organisation. Both Avoidance / Deflection and the Disclaimer strategy are designed to make an organisation appear legitimate by focussing on these kinds of actions, and when employed both strategies require low effort and time. Proposition 2 therefore illustrates how these low salient stakeholder groups are likely to be neglected and not prioritized by the legitimizing efforts of organisations.

*Proposition 2: Aviation companies will employ Avoidance / Deflection and Disclaimer strategies towards low salient stakeholder groups.*

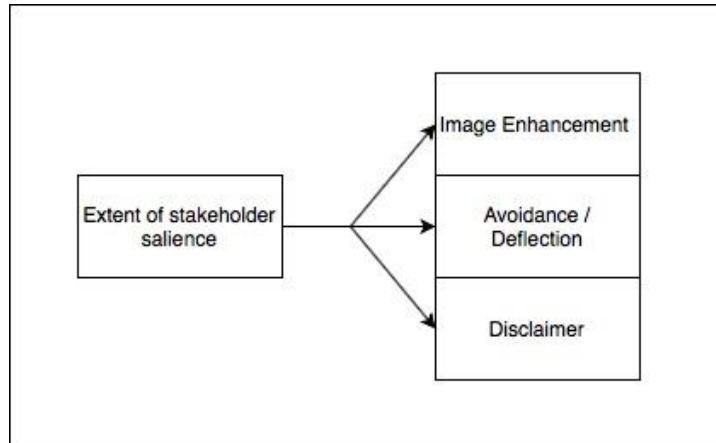
Finally, organisation should consider to monitor changes in stakeholder salience over time, since the concept is influenced by the issue at stake and the dimension of time. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) elaborate on this by stating that "managers should never forget that stakeholders change in salience, requiring different degrees and types of attention depending on their attributed possession of power, legitimacy, and/or urgency, and that levels of these attributes (and thereby salience) can vary from issue to issue and from time to time" (p. 879).



This study will look into stakeholder salience in relation to one specific issue, i.e. stakeholders' concerns regarding the environmental impact of the aviation industry. This implies that the attribution of stakeholder salience will be based on this single event, and therefore stakeholder groups will be evaluated on the extent to which managers perceive their claims to be powerful, legitimate and urgent with regard to this topic (Boesso & Kumar, 2016). However, this study will take the dynamic aspect of stakeholder salience into account by examining how legitimizing efforts possibly have changed over the years, due to changes in stakeholder salience for aviation customers. An assessment of stakeholders and their salience in relation to the environment (based on the study of Gago and Antolin (2004)) is provided in the following chapter.

## 2.4 Conceptual model

The conceptual model below illustrates the assumed influence of the extent of stakeholder salience on the employment of the three legitimacy strategies in the aviation industry. Based on empirical data, chapter four will examine this relation.



*Figure 2*

### **3 Methods**

This chapter will elaborate on the methodology of this research. First, the research design (3.1) will be discussed. Thereafter the data collection (3.2) will be explained. This chapter will provide an overview of the operationalisation (3.3) and next, the data analysis section (3.4) will give an interpretation of relevant stakeholders and their salience for the aviation companies. Finally, this section will come to an end with an assessment on the quality of this study (3.5), by examining the validity and reliability.

#### **3.1 Research design**

To gain more insight into the employment of legitimacy strategies in the aviation sector, research is conducted for the collection of qualitative data. Qualitative methods, which can apply a focus on collecting and making sense of written data, will allow this research to interpret the occurring strategizing process in its natural setting (Denzel & Lincoln, 1994). The theory as presented in the literature review section will serve as the guiding reference point for evaluation of the strategies employed by the aviation companies. Since a purpose of this research is to generate more knowledge in the field of strategy employment, this study can be characterised as being a descriptive research (Vennix, 2010). Qualitative data is gathered and combined from a variety of sources, and thus will contribute to the understanding of the case at hand (Yin, 2014). Data gathered from document analysis will be combined with information gathered from a variety of media sources, which therefore implies that this research achieves triangulation. Bitektine (2011) argues that the media is a platform where organizations try to influence their legitimacy. Through combining information from media with various documents produced by aviation companies, an assessment will be formed that links the empirical data to the literature and propositions that were previously stated.

#### **3.2 Data collection**

To be able to deep dive into the employment of legitimacy strategies by aviation companies, a qualitative research design is used. All collected information will consist of secondary qualitative data, which has been collected through extensive online search in multiple data bases. The use and choice for secondary data in this study will be further elaborated on below.

### 3.2.1 Sample

The employment of legitimacy strategies in the aviation industry has been studied by examining the activities of 10 aviation companies, within a timeframe of approximately 14 years (2006-2020). When it comes to choosing a sample, Becker et al. (2002) state that the goal is to include a selection that allows the study to investigate the processes of interest. The choice to include the selection of aviation companies was based upon their different countries of origin, so that the efforts of the aviation industry could be studied across borders and thus without limiting the findings to one specific country / region only. The availability of useful documents was another factor that influenced the sample. Furthermore, the list presented below indicates that most of the included companies appear to be well-known and established names in the aviation industry.

- Air France – KLM (France / The Netherlands)
- British Airways (United Kingdom)
- Emirates (United Arab Emirates)
- KLM (The Netherlands)
- Lufthansa (Germany)
- Qantas Airways (Australia)
- Ryanair (Ireland)
- Southwest Airlines (United States of America)
- Transavia (The Netherlands)
- TUI FLY (The Netherlands)

### 3.2.2 Document analysis

Secondary data will be the main source of information for this research, more specifically, qualitative media content analysis will be conducted where online documents and informational content is analysed (Bleijenberg, 2016). Given (2008) states that documents take up the form of files that are text-based. These files are the work of others and made available for a wider public. An often-heard advantage of document analysis is that it allows for the continuous delving into data that has been collected over time, making it a durable method for studying any case (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2007). The documents for identifying the legitimacy strategies are found on websites of aviation companies, in their reports and often through published news articles. An overview table (table 2) that summarizes the different consulted secondary data sources can be found below. The list of all included secondary data sources is provided in Appendix I. Through analysing the aviation companies' strategies in these sources of information, insight is gained in their strategizing practices. By using relatively simple

quantitative frequency methods, statements on the patterns in the data can be made (Mayring, 2004). Next, document analysis will be the method of choice since it allows this study to examine the legitimizing efforts of aviation companies that are operating in different regions of the world, e.g. information on the legitimizing efforts of Qantas Airlines (Australia) could be included in the results of this study. This means that the activities of aviation companies can be studied through a wider lens, which creates more generalizable results that could better represent the international operating industry as a whole.

<b>Data sources</b>	<b>Methods</b>
Media	<i>News articles, informational websites</i>
Documents	<i>Annual reports, company websites, press statements, CSR reports, annual reports</i>

*Table 2: Data collection sources*

### 3.2.3 Interpretation of documents

Documents are used to identify and count the legitimacy strategies that are employed towards specific stakeholder groups. Analysed documents that potentially would be included in this study had to meet two important criteria. Documents contained valuable content when (1) information was provided about activities of aviation companies that related back to their environmental impact and (2) when it was evident that aviation companies deliberately addressed certain stakeholder groups. After meeting these criteria, the useful documents were analysed to identify the use of *Image Enhancement*, *Avoidance / Deflection* and the *Disclaimer* strategy. Data sources were analysed by labelling useful fragments with codes that were derived from the operationalization of the strategies, a process of analysis that Bleijenbergh (2016) named ‘open coding’. The coding tree that was used in the process of measuring the strategies can be found in Appendix II. Finally, Bleijenbergh (2016) states that these codes help to make a connection between empirical data and the general statements that can be derived from this. The following steps were taken in the process of analysing a potentially relevant document.

1. Reporting information on the potential data source (type of document, company, date of publishing).

2. While reading through the content, highlighting fragments of the document that contain information about environmental issues and noting down the mentioning of a specific stakeholder group.
3. Scanning the document for phrases and indicators that can be used to identify legitimacy strategies in practise so that these fragments could be labelled with codes, the so called 'open coding' (Bleijenbergh, 2016).
4. Marking of useful and relevant information in the document and placing it in a spreadsheet for interpretation purposes.
5. Allocation of documents based on the stakeholder group addressed and identified strategy for the purpose of analysing patterns.

### 3.3 Operationalisation

This study includes 3 strategies that organizations employ to appear legitimate towards certain stakeholder groups. These strategies were identified earlier on by other scholars but slightly expanded for this study. Each strategy consists out of several theoretical components. In order to make a transition from concepts in theory to observable outputs, indicators in the process of operationalisation need to be identified (Vennix, 2010). In this study, the indicators that are used to identify the components in empirical data were already included in literature and can therefore serve as a reliable tool to connect literature with real-world practices. The operationalisation (table 3) shows how the legitimacy strategies are built up from the components, and are identified in practise by the indicators in the last column. Since the operationalization of the legitimacy strategies is based upon literature, it can be seen as a deductive approach. The coding tree that was mentioned earlier (Appendix II) provides another visual representation of what is presented below.

Legitimacy strategies	Components	Indicators
Image Enhancement	Symbolic actions	Verbal accounts in annual reports, websites, new articles and spokespersons
	Symbolic behaviours	e.g. donations to charity, quality control programs, treatment of employees
	Substantive practices	e.g. strategies to prevent pollution, environmental innovations
Avoidance / Deflection	Decoupling strategy	Corrective actions, e.g. terminate questionable contracts
	Misleading strategy	e.g. communicate strong commitments
	Avoid strategy	e.g. no participation in public debate, not taking responsibility
Disclaimer	Denial strategy	Dismissal of allegations, denial of problem

*Table 3: operationalisation legitimacy strategies*

### 3.4 Data analysis

#### 3.4.1 Assessment of stakeholders and their salience

The identification of relevant and salient stakeholders will be primarily based upon an earlier assessment made by Gago and Antolin (2004). They state that the salience of stakeholders can be classified in different ways, depending on the issue at stake. By conducting quantitative analysis their study looked into the salience of stakeholders in relation to organizations dealing with environmental issues. A survey was held that questioned 227 managers to assess and score different stakeholders and their attributes in relation to environmental issues. This allowed them to gain insight in the relative importance of stakeholders for organizations in relation to environmental activities, as perceived by companies' sustainability managers. Based on their evaluation, the study was able to classify a variety of stakeholder groups on the three different attributes of salience: (1) power, (2) urgency and (3) legitimacy. Their findings that classified

the salience of different stakeholder groups in relation to environmental issues will serve as a point of departure for this study.

For conformation purposes only, a CSR report from Air France – KLM (2014) presents a visual stakeholder mapping image (Appendix III). This image shows that the stakeholder salience assessment of Gago and Antolin (2004) is equivalent to the evaluation of a big aviation company. An important side note is that this image can only provide partial conformation, since different aviation companies may produce different stakeholder mappings. This study will proceed with the classification of stakeholder salience for the aviation sector that is presented below.

### 3.4.2 High / moderate salient stakeholders

The first and most salient stakeholder is the *government*, scoring highest on all three attributes. Reason being is that this actor is able to coercively force aviation companies to follow up on the laws they impose and can even proceed to economically punish companies that fail to comply. Their power originates from a certain position of legitimacy that no other stakeholder possesses. Additionally, their claims are considered to be high in urgency which demands that fast satisfaction is preferred, which therefore results in this stakeholder being at the top of the listing.

Naturally, *customers* are another salient stakeholder group with vital importance to the sector. An increase or decrease in their buying decisions will produce a direct effect on the performance of aviation companies. This makes them a powerful group, where the probability of declining demand is realistically high enough for this claim to be considered urgent and be addressed swiftly. Compared to the high attributes of power and urgency, the legitimacy attribute thought to be fairly moderate.

The *local community* surrounding the aviation companies is also considered to be a stakeholder of high salience. This group is directly affected by growing levels of activity of the aviation companies, and therefore has a particularly legitimate claim. Often unified in interest groups, their demands for rapid action and change is heard by aviation companies, politics and various media platforms giving them the ability to influence public opinion. This also contributes to making their claims have a higher sense of urgency.

### 3.4.3 Low salient stakeholders

*Non-governmental organisations*, or environmentalist groups fall in the category of low salient stakeholders. Although exerting urgent claims about their concerns for climate change and high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, organizations have a limited urge to satisfy their wishes with great effort or speed. Their influence in terms of power on the aviation companies remains limited, where protesting is the most often used method for making change. This also holds for the legitimacy attribute, which is close to being absent for this stakeholder group.

The *media* is the last stakeholder group that is included in this study, and is considered to be low in salience for aviation companies. Their claims lack urgency, since in most cases their core activity lies within the reporting of news rather than advocating environmental concerns. The legitimacy attribute is not in their possession, although there is something to be said for the power attribute since they have the ability to actively influence public perception on matters.

<b>Attributes→ Stakeholder ↓</b>	Power	Urgency	Legitimacy	<b>Stakeholder salience</b>
Government	High	High	High	<b>High</b>
Customers	High	High	Moderate	<b>High / Moderate</b>
Local community	Moderate	High	High	<b>High / Moderate</b>
NGO's	Low	High	Low	<b>Low</b>
Media	Moderate	Low	Low	<b>Low</b>

*Table 4: Stakeholder salience overview*

## 3.5 Research quality

### 3.5.1 Validity

By securing validity, a researcher ensures that the study measured what it set out to measure, and therefore more accurately produce results that are close to the truth (Boeije, 2005). A tool to help ensure validity is triangulation. By combining information from multiple sources of media with various documents and thus evaluating the subject from different perspectives, the internal validity is enhanced. To ensure internal validity even further, the connection between literature and empirical data is based upon indicators that were provided by the literature. This implies that the concepts in the empirical data can be identified with higher certainty. As mentioned earlier, this study is going to make statements on the patterns in the empirical data



based upon quantitative frequency tables (Mayring, 2004). Bleijenberg (2016) states that patterns can be generalized in qualitative research, which will enhance the external validity. External validity refers to the extent to which results on a study can be generalized to similar situations that are not part of the research (Yin, 2014). This type of validity is enhanced by studying and including the legitimizing efforts aviation companies that are operating on a worldwide basis, and conducting their business from different countries. The findings of this study are therefore likely to have more power to be generalized to a wider range of aviation companies. However, external validity is also influenced by the size of a study's sample. The relatively small number of aviation companies that was included in this study, compared to the high number of aviation companies in the world, does not benefit the external validity.

### 3.5.2 Reliability

According to Boeije (2005), reliability is secured when the same results will appear after multiple measurements of the same phenomenon. The evaluation of stakeholder salience for this study contributes to the reliability of this study, because this assessment of salience was based upon earlier work by other scholars. Thus, the reliability of correctly attributing stakeholder salience is ensured by using already established measures. Additionally, this assessment is partially confirmed by the stakeholder mapping of Air France – KLM (Appendix II), which shows that the stakeholders this study includes are indeed in the zones where one would expect them to be after reading this methodology section. In terms of the repeatability of this study, an advantage can be derived from the use of document analysis. A benefit of document analysis is that it allows for the continues delving into data that has been collected over time, making it a durable method for studying any case (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2007). This means that the legitimizing efforts by aviation companies are permanently archived online and can be consulted at any point in time in the future.

## 4. Results

This chapter analyses a variety of media sources and company documents. A total of 22 news articles were found useful to include in this study, 20 times aviation companies' websites provided information. Next, 16 annual reports and 4 CSR reports by aviation companies provided valuable content. Finally, 3 unrelated informational websites and 1 press statement are included in the data that was evaluated to identify the legitimacy strategies used by the aviation companies. The view of stakeholders on the aviation sectors efforts will be discussed as well. A short description of their point of view will be included to gain a more holistic understanding of the interaction between the two actors. The identified legitimacy strategies will be made explicit by providing a selection of examples, these will be indicated by numbers between brackets (e.g. [1]), and displayed in an overview table.

This analysis will start by looking at how the high / moderate salient stakeholders i.e. the *government*, *costumers* and the *local community* are being addressed. Stakeholders that are low in salience like *non-governmental organisations* and the *media* will be discussed thereafter. Finally, this chapter will provide an evaluation of the overall employment of legitimacy strategies, and the employment of strategies in relation to stakeholder salience. An assessment that describes the employment of legitimacy strategies over time will make this chapter come to an end.

### 4.1 Analysis of stakeholder 1 - The government (high salience)

<b>Strategy→</b>	Image Enhancement	Avoidance / Deflection	Disclaimer
<b>Stakeholder↓</b>			
Government	10	2	0

Table 5: Frequency of being addressed with strategy – x.

Table 5 shows that the aviation sector primarily employed the Image Enhancement strategy towards the government. Two times the Avoidance / Deflection strategy could be identified and in no occasion the Disclaimer strategy was used. To more specifically analyse how individual strategies are used, the frequency that the components are found is added up (table 6). The aviation sector most often used symbolic actions in their attempt to appear legitimate towards the government. The communication of substantive practices appears to be the second most used strategy to interact with this stakeholder group. A selection of examples is provided to illustrate how Image Enhancement and Avoidance / Deflection are employed in practice.

#### 4.1.1 Zooming in on the strategies

Legitimacy strategy	Component	Frequency	Example
Image Enhancement	Symbolic actions	6	[1], [2], [3]
	Symbolic behaviours	1	-
	Substantive practices	3	[4], [5]
Avoidance/ Deflection	Decoupling strategy	1	[7]
	Misleading strategy	0	-
	Avoid strategy	1	[6]
Disclaimer	Denial strategy	0	-

Table 6: frequency table government

#### 4.1.2 Legitimacy strategies in practise

##### *Symbolic actions*

[1] A coalition of Dutch aviation companies presented an action plan to Minister Van Nieuwenhuizen of Infrastructure and Water Management (I&W), that was aimed at making the aviation sector more sustainable (KLM Cares, 2018). According to the companies involved, the “Smart and Sustainable” plan was designed to transform the Dutch aviation industry into the most sustainable and smart sector in the world. The action plan was a product of aviation companies joining forces with other transport institutions and knowledge centres for the purpose of accelerating the development of sustainable transformation of the sector. The plan that was presented to Minister Van Nieuwenhuizen consists of seven commitments that the aviation sector has set out in their pursuit of becoming a more eco-friendly and sustainable industry.

[2] The article of van Woerkom (2019) illustrates how the General Manager of TUI The Netherlands, Arjan Kers, sees the future of sustainable aviation. Aviation companies are already making the first steps in this transitional process. Kers states that TUI Fly is using the most efficient airplanes, and that from fall 2020 TUI will no longer fly to several short distance destinations. The airliner hopes that by publicly communicating environmentally friendly gestures, governmental willingness to actively participate in the development of making aviation a more sustainable sector will be stimulated.

[3] Qantas Airlines from Australia reported in their ‘Annual Review’ (2017) that they supported a resolution where governments were asked to implement policies that would accelerate the

deployment of biofuels for the aviation sector. The review states that Qantas is committed to work with Australian governments to design policies that will benefit the sustainability of the sector.

#### *Substantive practices*

[4] KLM and their partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management illustrate a different form of interaction. In their annual report, the Dutch airliner (KLM, 2019) claims that a solution had to be found for making sustainable fuels more accessible. To accomplish this, KLM partnered with government authorities (and other interested parties) to ‘stimulate the availability of sustainable aviation fuel on a larger scale and to help make it economically more competitive to kerosene’. The collaboration between the two actors leads to the affordable use of biofuels, which has led to lower emissions for the airliner.

[5] The same goes for British Airways, on their website stating that they have been working alongside governments for the past decade for the development of a roadmap to reduce the aviation industry’s emissions. The plan includes steps to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by investing in a range of worldwide projects. Together with government authorities British Airways succeeded in bringing down several important indicators that represent their emissions.

#### *Decoupling & avoid strategy*

[6] A statement is made by CEO Fritz Jousen of TUI Group (de Reus, 2019), where he speaks out about the need for international political cooperation for the efficient development and production of aviation fuel that can be used in the future. Jousen believes that airlines are not the only actor responsible to address sustainability, but it should be the task of governments to offer adequate incentives for the realization of production facilities that are needed to make green fuel for airplanes. [7] He argues that governments should stand along aviation companies and those airlines that are making steps towards eco-friendliness, and proceeds to argue that governments should impose sanctions on the few that are not making any efforts to become more sustainable.

#### 4.1.3 Stakeholders' view

In the light of the recent developments concerning the corona-virus outbreak, the aviation sector has been hit particularly hard. The Dutch government is stepping in by providing financial support to KLM, the biggest airliner in the Netherlands (NOS, 2020). The Minister of Finance Hoekstra mentions the essential role of the company for the Dutch economy, given the high number of employment it creates. However, the financial support (that could range from 2 to 4 billion euro) will only be provided on several conditions. The government expects to see big improvements in areas like sustainability, noise pollution and the use of cleaner airplanes. This article could indicate how the government has an interest in strong functioning aviation companies due to economic reasons. However, the government acknowledges the fact that aviation remains an industry that has a big impact on the environment, and therefore should actively implement changes to secure their sustainable future.

Additionally, on a Dutch government website (Rijksoverheid, n.d.) a statement is being made that says: 'the government together with the aviation sector wants to stimulate efficient, clean and quite flying'. The article elaborates on the support the government gives to the aviation companies for the goal of drastically lowering CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. It appears that aviation companies in the Netherlands are supported by the government, in a way that the industry is now actively working together with this salient stakeholder.

#### 4.2 Analysis of stakeholder 2 - The customers (high / moderate salience)

<b>Strategy→</b> <b>Stakeholder ↓</b>	Image Enhancement	Avoidance / Deflection	Disclaimer
Customer	18	0	0

Table 7: Frequency of being addressed with strategy – x.

Table 7 shows that exclusively Image Enhancement strategies could be identified when the aviation sector legitimized their business towards the customer. The Avoidance / Deflection strategy and Disclaimer strategy could not be identified. Overall, customers appeared to be the stakeholder group that was most often addressed by aviation companies. To more specifically analyse how Image Enhancement is employed towards this group, the frequency that the individual components are used is presented (Table 8). A selection of examples that illustrate all three components of Image Enhancement is provided to illustrate Image Enhancement in practice.

#### 4.2.1 Zooming in on the strategies

Legitimacy strategy	Component	Frequency	Example
Image Enhancement	Symbolic actions	5	[1], [2], [3]
	Symbolic behaviours	6	[4], [5], [6]
	Substantive practices	7	[7], [8], [9]
Avoidance/ Deflection	Decoupling strategy	0	-
	Misleading strategy	0	-
	Avoid strategy	0	-
Disclaimer	Denial strategy	0	-

Table 8: frequency table customers

#### 4.2.2 Legitimacy strategies in practise

##### *Symbolic actions*

[1] KLM's service for compensating passengers' flight emissions is active for over 10 years. The airliner decided to dedicate an article (KLM Takes Care, 2018) on the facts and figures of the department, where they would share information on their activities. The article starts to list several achievements about the airlines efforts to reduce their CO<sub>2</sub> footprint. Customers are informed about how their contribution is used, and get to read what ambitious goals the airliner has set for the future.

[2] KLM has reached out to their stakeholders in aviation with an open letter that was published in June 2019 (KLM Takes Care, 2019). The goal was to share ideas to benefit the development of sustainable solutions for the industry. By inviting customers, among others, to share in KLM's existing practices and tools, the airliner expresses their commitment to the interests of the group. After the invitation, the 'green' commitments and achievements of the airliner are stated. A message of President and CEO Pieter Elbers is used to close the article, where he states that all relevant parties are welcome and invited to join in on KLM's environmental initiatives.

[3] Air France-KLM's CSR report of 2018 (Air France-KLM, 2018) informs the customer on how they are involved in sustainability initiatives. The airliner set up online platforms for all their subsidiaries (i.e. Transavia, KLM, Air France, Hop!) in order to provide information on environmental topics, engaging in dialogues and provide a 'forum for discussions on sustainability'. Additionally, Air France – KLM's informs their customers on its placement on

the 2018 Fortune's list of Worlds Most Admired Companies (4<sup>th</sup> place). In particular their excellent performance on social and environmental responsibility was praised.

### *Symbolic behaviours*

[4] Carbon offsetting is an important tool for aviation companies to lower their overall CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by investing in 'green' projects elsewhere. Qantas Airways (n.d.) specifies their commitment to accelerate this activity, by claiming that for every dollar spend on carbon offsetting by its customers, the airliner will effectively match that dollar. This doubles the income of their programme and allows them to do more for the preservation of the environment.

[5] A donation of € 250,000 to the Renature Monchique in Portugal has been made by Ryanair's customers (Ryanair, 2019). This money was generated through the companies' Carbon Offset Initiative and will pay for the planting of thousands of trees in the Algarve area, demonstrating the companies' commitment to the environment. Ryanair's CEO Michael O'Leary said: "Ryanair, our people and our customers are proud to support this reforestation initiative in the Monchique region of the Algarve".

[6] Qantas Airways (2019) claims to study scientific data to optimally engage in their customers' expectations and wishes. The airlines states on their website that they have created 'unique partnerships' to evaluate critical consumer insights on environmental issues and sustainability. Qantas joined forces with Harvard University to study in depth what customers attitudes on sustainable goods and services are. The airliner shows to put great effort in getting to know their customer, since they planned on repeating this research annually.

### *Substantive Practices*

[7] KLM made a sustainable upgrade to their fleet of aircrafts. The article focusses on customers, stating that "If you're on your way to Kilimanjaro, Dar es Salaam, Dubai, Delhi or Curacao in the coming months, there's a good chance you'll find yourself aboard this brand-new aircraft" (KLM Takes Care, 2019). The new aircraft allows the customer to travel more sustainable, more energy-efficient, while producing less noise pollution.

[8] Lufthansa Group (n.d.) developed a platform where passengers can track their travel activities and subsequently compensate for their emissions. The passenger has the choice to either replace fossil aviation fuels with a sustainable version, or support reforestation projects for 'positive long-term climate effects'.

[9] An article by Mooyman (2018) describes the renewal of the fleet of TUI Fly. Their new aircrafts will be quieter and more fuel efficient. The aviation company claims that by investing

in their new fleet they are able to offer the best comfort to their passengers, while at the same time drastically reduce the environmental impact. Their social responsibility is a key factor in their pursuit for growth.

#### 4.2.3 Stakeholders' view

The growing numbers of passengers every year could be indication to what extent the customer actually is affected by the environmental concerns surrounding the industry. According to calculations of the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (van Toorn, 2019), all airports in the Netherlands handled record breaking numbers of passenger in the summer of 2019. Either the aviation companies did an excellent job of legitimizing their business, or the average customer is not very bothered by the environmental impact they produce with their trip. Probably the second statement is more likely to be true, since the BBC (Lee & Foster, 2019) reported that when airlines offer customers to compensate for their emission, generally fewer than 1% of flyers makes use of it.

#### 4.3 Analysis of stakeholder 3 – The local community (high / moderate salience)

<b>Strategy→</b>	<b>Image Enhancement</b>	<b>Avoidance / Deflection</b>	<b>Disclaimer</b>
<b>Stakeholder ↓</b>			
Local community	10	0	0

*Table 9: Frequency of being addressed with strategy – x.*

Table 9 shows that strategies aimed towards the local communities exclusively belong to the Image Enhancement strategy. The Avoidance / Deflection strategy and Disclaimer strategy could not be identified. To more specifically analyse how Image Enhancement is employed, the frequency that the individual components are found is added up, and examples of ‘symbolic actions’ and ‘substantive practices’ are provided. Most often the aviation companies turned to the use of substantive practices towards this stakeholder group, emphasizing their use of several new developments and innovations that should benefit the living standards of locals.



#### 4.3.1 Zooming in on the strategies

Legitimacy strategy	Component	Frequency	Example
Image Enhancement	Symbolic actions	3	[1], [2]
	Symbolic behaviours	1	-
	Substantive practices	6	[3], [4], [5]
Avoidance/ Deflection	Decoupling strategy	0	-
	Misleading strategy	0	-
	Avoid strategy	0	-
Disclaimer	Denial strategy	0	-

Table 10: frequency table local community

#### 4.3.2 Legitimacy strategies in practise

##### *Symbolic actions*

[1] In order to protect their local communities from high levels of noise pollution, Lufthansa supports ‘numerous activities and measures over the long-term in order to decrease aircraft noise perceptibly’ (Lufthansa Group, n.d.). To achieve this, Lufthansa takes part in dialogue forums with local residents to make their voices heard and informs the reader that it is partnering up with aircraft noise commissions. Lufthansa’s efforts so far are successful, in 2019 almost their entire fleet fulfilled a strict ICAO decibel test, so they claim and state on their website.

[2] The growth of an aviation company inevitably causes high levels of aircraft activity around airports. KLM acknowledges that this specifically could affect local communities in terms of (noise) pollution (KLM Takes Care, 2012). The article states that KLM is committed not to turn a blind eye by working together with representatives of local communities, participating in knowledge initiatives and engaging in discussions with residents. The airline reports that they don’t want to focus on prevention and compensation of (noise) pollution only, but also want to be socially involved in the surrounding area.

##### *Substantive Practices*

[1] The CSR report of British Airways (British Airways, 2006) devotes several pages to address the most pressing issues for their local communities. The report describes an extensive evaluation of local air quality, and proceeds to inform which subsequent steps are taken to

improve the quality of air for their locals. The airliner recognizes that noise continues to be another major source of the social and environmental impact of the industry on locals. By investing in quieter aircrafts, noise management, planning management and optimizing flight procedures the issue is being tackled.

[2] A study by TU Delft provided KLM with the newest innovation to fight their problem with noise pollution (KLM Takes Care, 2019). The article illustrates how the airliner has taken an interest in the realization of the concept, since noise disturbance for the local communities will be reduced by half with the construction of small hills near the runways. Together with Schiphol Airport and in consultation with local residents the airliner is working to improve local living standards.

[3] In combination with expressing their commitment to work alongside the locals and information on their achievement in terms of noise reduction, Lufthansa (Lufthansa Group, n.d.) describes their active approach to noise abatement. This includes fleet renewal, innovation in engines, optimization of departure procedures and continues research on quieter flying.

#### 4.3.3 Stakeholders' view

After the reporting of financial support for aviation companies by governments due to the corona crises, multiple interest groups that represent local communities echoed their voice (Sajet, 2020). They issued a statement that demanded airports to drastically downsize their activities. The local communities claim that 'green' operations by aviation companies like compensation of emissions, green bio fuels and electric flying are unachievable and will not produce the outcome that is needed for them. This article gives reason to believe that the local communities are not convinced by the environmental efforts of the aviation companies, and thus demand further attention of the airlines.

#### 4.4 Analysis of stakeholder 4 - Non-governmental organisations (low salience)

<b>Strategy→</b>	<b>Image Enhancement</b>	<b>Avoidance / Deflection</b>	<b>Disclaimer</b>
<b>Stakeholder ↓</b>			
NGO's	3	3	1

*Table 11: Frequency of being addressed with strategy – x.*

Analysis shows that the aviation sector employed a combination of Image Enhancement, Avoidance / Deflection and Disclaimer strategies towards non-governmental organisations. To

more specifically analyse how these strategies are used, examples of all three strategies are provided that will help illustrate how each strategy was employed.

#### 4.4.1 Zooming in on the strategies

Legitimacy strategy	Component	Frequency	Example
Image Enhancement	Symbolic actions	1	[1]
	Symbolic behaviours	1	[2]
	Substantive practices	1	[3]
Avoidance/ Deflection	Decoupling strategy	2	[4]
	Misleading strategy	0	-
	Avoid strategy	1	-
Disclaimer	Denial strategy	1	[5]

Table 12: frequency table non-governmental organisations

#### 4.4.2 Legitimacy strategies in practise

##### *Symbolic actions*

[1] The annual report of KLM in 2019 (KLM, 2019) gives a brief description of how non-governmental organisations are included in the environmental activities of the airline industry. In order to define a long-term plan for the future of the aviation sector, sounding boards are organised with representatives of the airline branch, local residents and environmental organisations. Together in these meetings various scenarios are developed to gain combined insights in the possible developments for the Dutch aviation industry.

##### *Symbolic behaviours*

[2] KLM has been partnered with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) since 2007. To publicly emphasize their support for the organisation, KLM decided to join their worldwide movement that is called Earth Hour (KLM Takes Care, 2015). Famous buildings all over the world turn their lights off for 1 hour, and as a sign of their dedication to sustainability, the environment and the WWF, KLM will turn their lights of in buildings and offices.

### *Substantive practices*

[3] Qantas Airways engages in knowledge intensive collaborations with several leading environmental NGO's (Qantas Airways, n.d). The purpose of these collaborations is to accelerate the development of biofuels for the aviation sector. This has resulted in the realization of commercial flights operating on biofuels. Qantas committed an additional \$50 million dollar in the development process.

### *Decoupling strategy*

[4] Emirates Airline President Tim Stark has spoken out his admiration for environmental activist Greta Thunberg (Cole, 2019). He praises her for having brought the focus that the industry isn't doing enough at the speed they should be doing. Tim Stark claims that it took some time for him to be convinced by the evidence of climate change science, but now he states to be a 'climate change believer' and says the climate change has to be dealt with.

### *Denial strategy*

[5] Ryanair refutes a report by Transport & Environment as guesswork (Ryanair, 2019). The report basically stated that the airliner was exploiting small regional airports to ultimately generate more income for their shareholders. Ryanair refutes their acquisitions by providing information about the commercial agreements, their payment of environmental taxes, their environmental commitments which are all backed up by numbers and graphs.

### 4.4.3 Stakeholders' view

After announcements of government support for KLM due to the corona crises, Dutch environmental organisations made statements that illustrated their disapproval (NOS, 2020). Three organisations together state that the airline has to change direction and effectively lower their number of flights. Greenpeace does not understand how billions could be spend without any conditions, on a company without a climate-plan which isn't future-proof. Since this stakeholder group is possibly not that well informed by the aviation company on all of the environmental innovations and activities the airliner engages in, they are not satisfied at all.

#### 4.5 Analysis of stakeholder 5 – The media (low salience)

<b>Strategy→</b>	<b>Image Enhancement</b>	<b>Avoidance / Deflection</b>	<b>Disclaimer</b>
<b>Stakeholder ↓</b>			
Media	0	4	1

Table 13: Frequency of being addressed with strategy – x.

Analysis shows that the aviation sector primarily employed the Avoidance / Deflection strategy towards the media, the Disclaimer strategy was only found once. The Image Enhancement strategy could not be identified. To more specifically analyse how Avoidance / Deflection and the Disclaimer strategy were employed, examples of the two strategies in practise are provided.

##### 4.5.1 Zooming in on the strategies

<b>Legitimacy strategy</b>	<b>Component</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Example</b>
Image Enhancement	Symbolic actions	0	-
	Symbolic behaviours	0	-
	Substantive practices	0	-
Avoidance/ Deflection	Decoupling strategy	0	-
	Misleading strategy	2	[1], [2]
	Avoid strategy	2	[3], [4]
Disclaimer	Denial strategy	1	[5]

Table 14: frequency table media

##### 4.5.2 Legitimacy strategies in practise

###### *Misleading strategy*

[1] President of KLM Pieter Elbers speaks out in an interview with Trouw about what is needed for the company to make their transition towards sustainability (Hermanides, 2019). He strongly emphasizes the need to grow and the need for technical innovations to arise. Nine days later Trouw released a follow-up article (Moratis & Melissen, 2019) where a connection was made between Elbers' statements and study that looked into misleading statements of CEO's that represent polluting industries. The article by Moratis and Melissen (2019) concluded that Elbers' statements could all be assigned to well-known defence mechanisms that this study had identified.

[2] Up in the Sky (2019) reports about an earlier article of NOS that the overall emissions of Dutch aviation companies have dramatically risen over a 5-year period, according to the Dutch Authority of Emissions (NEa). Looking at Dutch aviation emissions worldwide, this increase is possibly 5 times higher. TUI responds by stating that the media cannot judge their environmental impact so easily, since they claim it's the 'emission per passenger' what counts. However, the article shows that TUI is the airline that experienced the highest increase of emissions of all Dutch aviation companies (+74%).

#### *Avoid strategy*

[3] Several aviation companies offer their customers the possibility to pay an additional fee to compensate for the CO<sub>2</sub> emission of their trip. However, Trouw reports that companies like KLM who offer these compensations don't do enough to make up for the damage they create, since the damage to the environment is greater than what is contributed to CO<sub>2</sub> only (NOS, 2020). KLM responds to the newspaper by stating that since they are not aware of a definitive consensus on the harm of aviation companies, they will not extent their efforts and only compensate for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

[4] The effects of climate change are to blame for the increasing numbers of flight delays and cancellations of Qantas Airways, said an executive of the company in The Australian. (SBS News, 2019). With increased wind velocities and dealing with closed runways the problems are getting more frequent every year, while at the same time the airliner does not mention their contribution to the problem and continues to grow every year. The article proceeds to reports that emissions that are contributed to Australian aviation are likely to grow 1,5 times faster than earlier estimated.

#### *Denial strategy*

[5] Dutch multinationals have donated considerable amounts of money to climate-sceptic Böttcher, a professor in physics and chemistry (Goudsmit, 2020). In public appearances Böttcher would deny the impact of humans on our climate, and would diminish the role that CO<sub>2</sub> has in global warming. After Böttcher died, researchers found that KLM was amongst the multinationals that payed the professor to actively deny their potential impact on the environment.

#### 4.5.3 Stakeholders' view

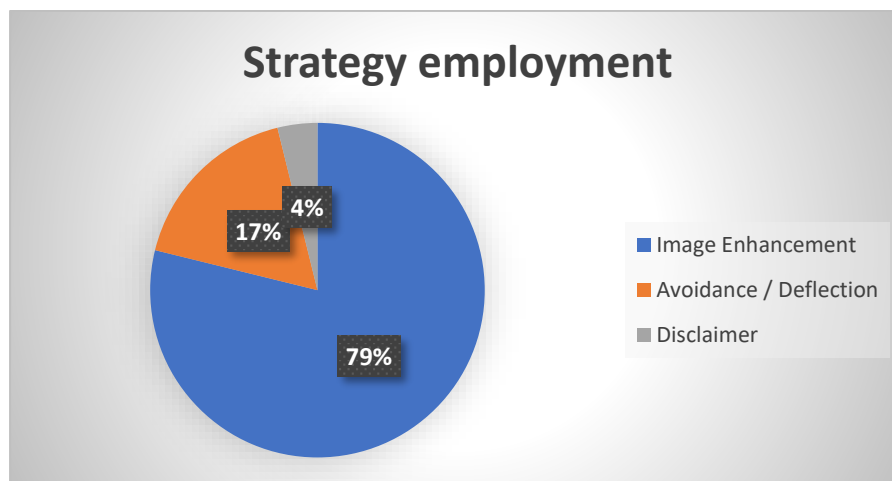
The earlier mentioned article by Moratis and Melissen (2019) can be seen as direct criticism on the legitimizing efforts of KLM. An article by Missler (2020) in Trouw investigates the CO<sub>2</sub> compensation practices of Dutch aviation companies and concluded that the effectiveness of these activities is highly questionable. The media is likely to remain an actor that will hold a critical view on the industry, while at the same time realizing that asserting a critical view over developments in society lies within the core practices of the media. However, traditional newspapers often stick to reporting about the pollution of aviation and are not frequently occupied with spreading their opinion on the matter.

#### 4.6 Combined analysis

<b>Strategy→ Salience ↓</b>	<b>Image Enhancement</b>	<b>Avoidance / Deflection</b>	<b>Disclaimer</b>	<b>Total</b>
High / Moderate	38	2	0	<b>40</b>
Low	3	7	2	<b>12</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>52</b>

*Table 15: combined overview*

Given the overview of table 15, it becomes clear that a substantial difference between the 'high / moderate' and 'low' stakeholders is present in terms of times a legitimacy strategy could be identified. While recognizing that the low salient stakeholders are only represented by 2 groups (versus 3 high / moderate stakeholder groups), the variance remains striking. The choice for Image Enhancement appears to be popular, followed by the use of Avoidance / Deflection and finally the Disclaimer strategy. Figure 3 shows the overall employment of these strategies towards all stakeholder groups.



*Figure 3*

To further analyse the empirical data of this chapter, a connection will be made to the assessment that was presented in the literature review. Two graphs that visually illustrate the employment of legitimacy strategies towards the ‘high / moderate’ and ‘low’ salience groups are provided. These graphs will help to underpin statements on the previously formed propositions, and will thus contribute to the answering of the research question.

*Proposition 1: Aviation companies will employ Image Enhancement strategies towards high salient stakeholder groups.*

Aviation companies that attempted to legitimize their business towards stakeholder groups that are categorized in the ‘high / moderate’ salient category have almost exclusively addressed them with the Image Enhancement strategy (figure 4). In most cases aviation companies communicated about the *substantive practices* (16 times) that they were engaging in, followed by the use and communication of *symbolic actions* (14 times). As stated in literature (van Halderen et al., 2016), the use of these two practices should be in balance, which implies that emphasizing strong commitments should be followed up by actual actions, otherwise legitimacy is likely to be negatively impacted. To a lesser extent aviation companies communicated about their *symbolic behaviours* towards specific stakeholder groups (8 times). The use of Avoidance / Deflection and Disclaimer strategies towards these stakeholders only accounts for a few percentages of total, where Disclaimer strategies’ contribution is equal to zero. The significant high representation of the Image Enhancement strategy in the total employment of legitimacy strategies towards the high and moderate stakeholders show that *Proposition 1* is likely to be accepted. However, quantitative research is needed to fully confirm the proposition.

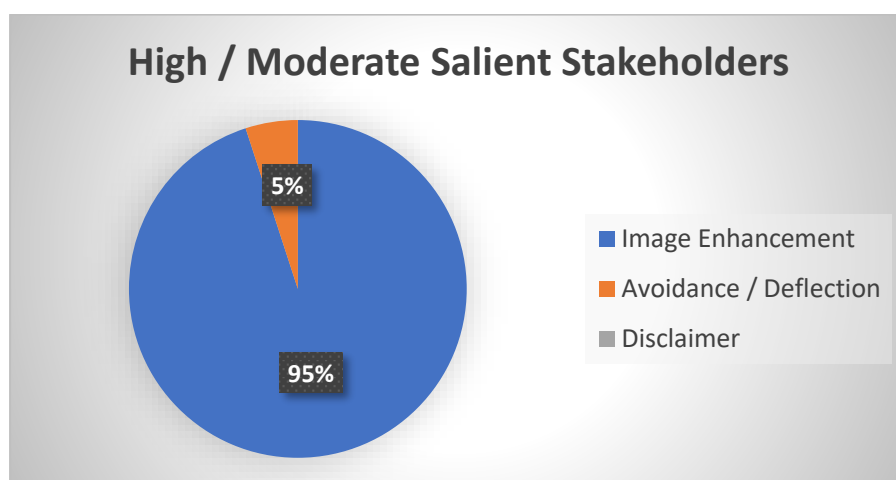
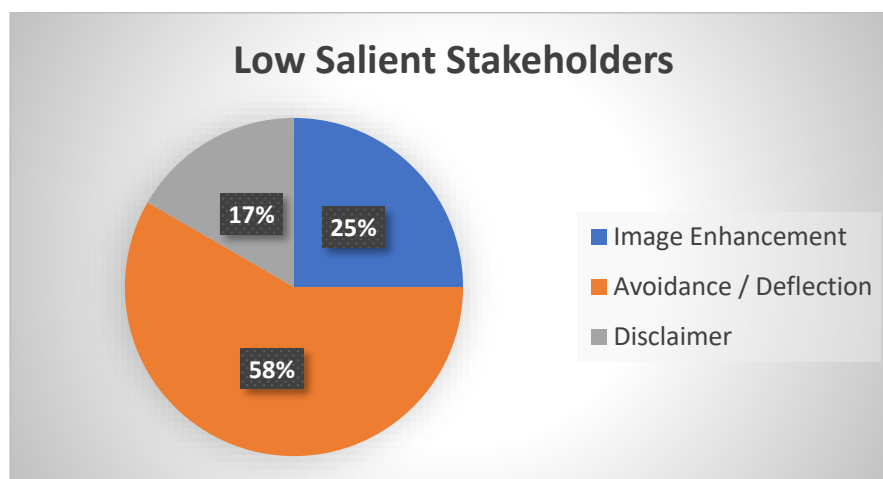


Figure 4



*Proposition 2: Aviation companies will employ Avoidance / Deflection and Disclaimer strategies towards low salient stakeholder groups.*

Aviation companies that attempted to legitimize their business towards stakeholders that are categorized in the ‘low’ salient category have addressed them with a combination of all three legitimacy strategies. The strategy that could be identified most was Avoidance / Deflection, which accounts for more than half of the strategies found. The Disclaimer strategy could be observed in 17% of the cases. The use of the Image Enhancement strategy towards these stakeholders appears to be less frequent in relative and absolute numbers, compared to the ‘high / moderate’ group. When the salience of aviation companies’ stakeholders is low, aviation companies used Avoidance / Deflection and Disclaimer strategies in 75% of the observed cases. This result appears to confirm *Proposition 2*, however additional quantitative research needs to be conducted in order to fully accept the statement.



*Figure 5*

#### 4.7 Employment of legitimacy strategies over time

As described earlier on, climate change is being researched more thoroughly than ever and a growing body of literature addresses the significant contribution of the aviation sector to the problem (Peeters & Dubois, 2010). Cohen, Higham and Cavaliere (2011) stated that the industry is starting to be seen in a more critical daylight by an important stakeholder group, i.e. their customers. Moreover, earlier mentioned customer trends like the “flyers dilemma” (Rosenthal, 2010) are beginning to arise. This could imply that the *urgency* attribute of this already high salient stakeholder group is increasing, and therefore aviation companies could be experiencing an increasing pressure to legitimize their business. By looking at the annual reports of aviation companies’ over a time period of the last 10 years, their (changed) legitimizing efforts and way of communication on sustainability is examined. A brief summary and description of the environmental activities as described in annual reports will be highlighted for 3 big aviation companies over the years. An overview table shows how often certain search terms appeared in these reports, revealing their increasing attention and coverage of environmental issues in ‘*Figure 7*’.

##### **Air France - KLM**

*2010:* The company devotes 1 page on communicating about their environmental commitments. Customers are offered the possibility to compensate for their emissions. The airliner states that it keeps engaging in dialogues with government authorities and local communities.

*2013:* The annual report devotes 4 pages on information about sustainable and responsible developments of the company. It entails topics like biofuels, optimized flights and greener taxiing.

*2016:* This year a similar tone and topics are present in the annual report. The amount of detailed information on environmental matters appears to be more extensive.

*2019:* This annual report devotes the most attention to climate change. In at least 6 pages information is provided, and the new campaign ‘Fly Responsible’ is launched as well.

Search term ↓	2010	2013	2016	2019
“Environmental”	2	2	8	19
“Sustainability”	2	2	4	44
“Emissions”	8	6	19	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>87</b>

Table 16: Search term appearance in KLM’s annual reports

## Lufthansa

2010: Throughout the whole report information is provided on the environmental protection strategy of the company. Numbers and tables that illustrate the reduction of their emissions are included.

2013: At least 5 pages are devoted to inform the reader about the environmental innovations and commitments. Lufthansa again provides overview tables that show their reduction of emissions.

2016: This year a different approach is present in the annual report. Only 2 pages are used to inform about the corporate responsibility efforts and R&D work.

2019: An enormous increase in attention to environmental concerns is present in this report. At least 8 pages are devoted to the subject, where the company informs the reader on all relevant subjects.

Search term ↓	2010	2013	2016	2019
“Environmental”	37	34	15	72
“Sustainability”	15	30	9	74
“Emissions”	25	43	18	71
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>217</b>

Table 17: Search term appearance in Lufthansa’s annual reports

## Southwest Airlines

2010: General information on the environmental impact are provided. Several commitments and innovations for future operations are included.

2013: Very similar approach has been taken compared to the report that was issued 3 years ago. No noteworthy changes are present, and the same topics are discussed in a similar fashion.

2016: The company does not appear to be changing direction in its attention for environmental matters yet. It communicates on all relevant topics without elaborating to extensively.

2019: Compared to the annual report of 2010, more information is devoted to inform the readers on the environmental activities and innovations. No drastic changes in tone or way of communication are present.

Search term ↓	2010	2013	2016	2019
“Environmental”	11	12	11	13
“Sustainability”	4	4	4	4
“Emissions”	9	9	11	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>33</b>

Table 18: Search term appearance in KLM’s annual reports

The overview tables as presented above are combined in the graph of figure 7. All 3 included aviation companies show an increase in attention devoted to environmental matters in their annual reports over a time period of the last 10 years. The topics that are discussed in these reports do not appear to change over the years, since aviation companies are constantly relying on the enhancement of their reputation by informing readers on their environmental commitments, innovations and actions. However, the changed amount of attention devoted on the environment is increasingly higher for almost every included year. Since aviation companies’ customers are likely employing higher urgent claims and therefore increasing in salience, aviation companies are responding by increasing their efforts to address this.

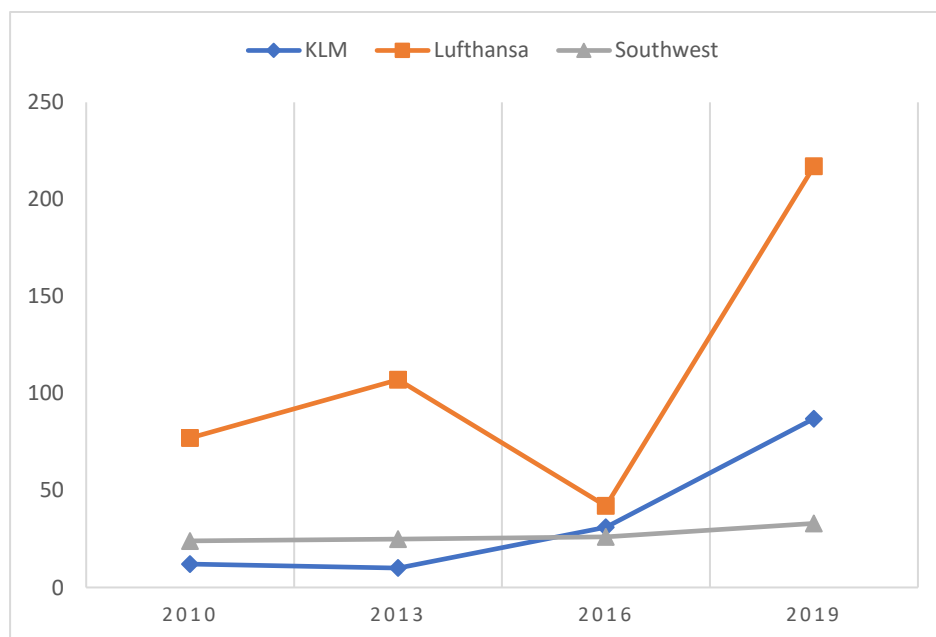


Figure 7: Search term appearance 2010-2019

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the interpretation of the findings of this study, this final chapter will reflect on answering the main research question (5.1). A discussion of this study's contribution (5.2), practical implications (5.3), the limitations (5.4) and suggestions for further research (5.5) will be provided thereafter.

### 5.1 Answering the research question

*How does the extent of stakeholder salience influence the employment of legitimacy strategies in the aviation industry?*

As a response to the shifting values in society and of its stakeholders, aviation companies are heavily relying on the use of legitimacy strategies that are aimed towards positively influencing perceptions on their business. By doing so these companies have the possibility to actively manage the need for information of their stakeholders which allows them to subsequently gain their support. The overall use of legitimacy strategies that focus on denial or deflection of negative attention appears to be less popular in the aviation industry. However, aviation companies that use these strategies to legitimize their business towards their stakeholders appear to be differentiating in the process of strategy employment. The extent of stakeholder salience affects the aviation companies to almost exclusively engage in strategies that enhance their reputation towards high salient stakeholder groups. The vital support that these stakeholder groups are likely to provide could be a probable interpretation of these efforts. In contrast, stakeholders that are not considered to be highly important are addressed with a combination of legitimacy strategies, where most often the interaction between the two actors had no focus on creating a favourable reputation but rather on avoiding, deflecting or denying problems. Stakeholders that are low in salience are more likely to be neglected or not prioritized in the legitimizing efforts of aviation companies. Furthermore, aviation companies appear to increase their legitimizing efforts when the salience of their stakeholders' claims increases. Possibly an increase of customers' urgency attribute and therefore a higher overall salience results in higher efforts of aviation companies to address these claims by providing them with more information on their environmental commitments, innovations and activities.

## 5.2 Contribution

This study tried to make a contribution to the field of legitimacy by addressing several gaps that were present in literature. Earlier research on legitimacy had focussed on a variety of different topics related to the concept. Work by Borgstedt et al. (2019) looked into deducting legitimacy strategies based out of environmental reports and Fisher et al. (2016) had identified legitimacy strategies for new ventures. While many more studies into legitimacy have been conducted, this study tried to make progress in less developed areas of legitimacy research. As mentioned by Lamin and Zaheer (2012), very little attention had been paid to the employment of legitimacy strategies that can be used to maintain and / or defend the legitimacy of organisations that had to deal with accusations and social developments which caused their legitimacy to decline, a focus that this study specifically applied. Furthermore, insight was created in the employment of legitimacy strategies towards different stakeholder groups while assessing the salience they have for the organisation, a unique combination of concepts that had not been studied before. This unique insight was created within the scope of a single industry, a focus that Miller and Michelson (2013) believe is not very common to find. Having studied the employment of legitimacy strategies within the aviation industry, this study contributed to research into the creation of knowledge that can be used to determine to what extent the application of legitimacy strategies is depended on an industry, which is a relevant subject to focus on according to Borgstedt et al. (2019). Finally, it was recognized by Elsbach and Sutton (1992) and Suchman (1995) that not all stakeholder groups were equally as important, which would give an organization the strategic choice to which groups it should focus on. This research gained insight in the application of this strategic consideration by aviation companies.

## 5.3 Practical implications

The aim of this study was to create insight in how companies in the aviation industry legitimized their business, while looking at how stakeholder salience influenced these efforts. The results show that aviation companies primarily rely on reputation enhancing legitimacy strategies and tend to focus on prioritizing the interest of their most salient stakeholders. This implies that aviation companies could be aware of the importance of creating a favourable reputation in the minds of these stakeholder groups, for the purpose of gaining their important support. This valuable insight could possibly be of use to a variety of organizations in different industries who have to legitimize their business to a field of stakeholders as a result of the negative ecological footprint they leave behind. Furthermore, aviation's stakeholders that are low in salience will gain a better understanding of their role for aviation companies in the legitimizing

process. A negative perception of the industry from their side could possibly partially be contributed to not being informed about the environmental efforts and innovations that these companies are engaged in. Because stakeholder salience was captured as a dynamic concept that could change over time, these low salient stakeholder groups could try to actively influence their importance to aviation companies in order to gain more traction and thus be able to better advocate their claims.

#### 5.4 Limitations

Limitations of this study can be found in the availability of relevant documents. While analysing online content it became evident that the majority verbal accounts, actions and other practices by aviation companies had no reference or indication that a specific stakeholder groups was being addressed. This resulted in less documents and data being included and analysed, which means the external validity of this study is less high than initially was hoped for. The relative low availability of documents was especially true for stakeholders that were in the ‘low salient’ category. A limited amount of information was available on the efforts aimed towards these groups, which made analysing of results more difficult and implies that any additional information will have a relatively greater impact on the distribution of their data. To some extent this low availability might be contributed to the underreporting of the ‘avoid strategy’, where organisations would deliberately choose not take part in public dialogue and ignore the interests of specific groups in society. As stated by Baba and Raufflet (2017), stakeholders in the low salience category are often neglected and not prioritized in being addressed over more salient stakeholders. Furthermore, a focus was applied on deducting legitimizing efforts out of secondary data that was available online. This means that internal communication between aviation companies and stakeholders has not been taken into account. The extent to which these dialogues take place and whether legitimacy strategies are being employed here is not included in this study. By conducting research based on primary data (interviews), information on these hidden activities could be revealed. This could be an interesting topic to study in future research. Initially this study attempted to conduct interviews with a variety of aviation companies and stakeholder groups. When potential respondents were asked for their participation to this study, the vast majority had to decline. The outbreak of the coronavirus impacted the aviation sector particularly hard, which meant that these companies did not have the time or capacity to participate.

Other limitations are present in the research design. A selection of five stakeholder groups were studied in total, a more comprehensive analysis would include a much larger number of stakeholder groups. This would allow the study to make more generalizable statements on the impact of stakeholder salience on strategy employment. Since aviation companies are deeply embedded in society and thus have to manoeuvre within a large field of stakeholders, there is potential insight left on the table by only studying the employment of strategies towards a relatively small selection. Next to that, the legitimizing efforts of 10 major aviation companies that operate on a worldwide basis have been studied. Conducting research into a higher number of airliners gives more certainty that results are valid for the entire industry.

Finally, while this study tried to include a range of legitimacy strategies by combining them in overlapping categories, it is recognized that not every available legitimacy strategy in literature is included. The amount of known strategies is high, so therefore a selection was made to include overlapping legitimacy strategies that would fit this study's context. Aviation companies are possibly applying more strategies to build or maintain their legitimacy, however these efforts are not within the scope of this research.

## 5.5 Suggestions for further research

The concept of legitimacy strategies allows for many interesting topics to be studied in the future, but in the context of this study quantitative research should be conducted to confirm the propositions that were previously formed. Furthermore, researchers may want to examine the development of (different) legitimacy strategies in the aviation industry. To establish this a research design could be drawn up that would start at  $t=0$ , when environmental concerns had just begun to surface and aviation companies had to deal with the issue for the first time. This could provide insight in the initial efforts of the sector, and possibly illustrate that in the early days the aviation companies relied on different approaches. Linking the usage of different legitimacy strategies to the respective amount of societal awareness on climate change in a given period will generate unique insight that has not been studied yet. Additionally, a more in-depth evaluation of how stakeholder salience for all relevant groups developed overtime could illustrate the dynamic nature better, as identified by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997). By studying this aspect, insight is created on how overall strategy employment towards these stakeholder groups is influenced by changes in their salience over time. Moreover, knowledge



will be created for stakeholder groups that could illustrate what effective approaches are available to increase their respective salience to an organisation.

This study applied a specific focus that created insight in the employment of legitimacy strategies and in this context limited attention was devoted to measuring the effect that they had. Future research seems necessary to look into the effectiveness of legitimacy strategies for the aviation sector. Additionally, a comparative study on the legitimizing efforts and effectiveness of strategies between industries that are considered to be non-environmentally friendly should be conducted. This could possibly illustrate that specific efforts and strategies of one industry are more / less effective than other industries. Difference in effectiveness that might surface could be contributed to the importance that an industry might have for society.

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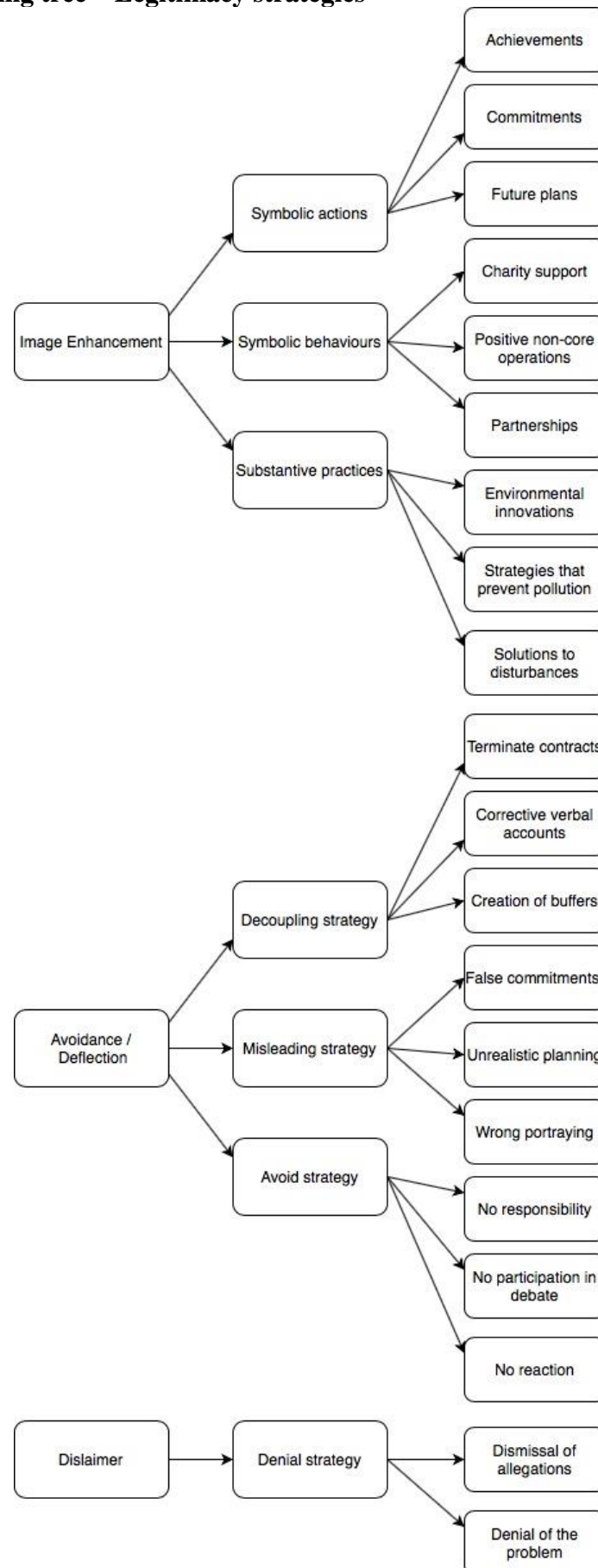
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## Appendix II: Coding tree – Legitimacy strategies



Appendix III: Stakeholder mapping by Air France – KLM

