

The Airline Industry's Future in COVID-19

Scope: May 17th, 2020 – June 15th, 2020

Key Findings:

As passenger volumes begin to increase, on Twitter, there is a positive correlation between evidence of increased health and safety measures and intentions to travel by air. ([Link](#))

Although the burden for health screening is generally perceived to fall on airports and the government, airline companies that have implemented pre-flight testing have received favorable responses. ([Link](#))

- **Recommendation:** Consider implementing pre-flight COVID-19 testing of all passengers.

Commenters are largely in favor of policies such as empty middle seats and mandatory masks, but the topics are highly politicized on social media. By contrast, conversation around “Disinfecting” is positive and is not highly politicized. ([Link](#))

- **Recommendation:** Emphasize disinfection and sterilization efforts in safety messaging in order to avoid politicization.

Emirates has controlled its social media narrative on increased safety measures, describing itself as an “industry leader,” receiving 2.6k engagements on the topic (other airlines averaged 282). Emirates used real-life, rather than animated, visual content in demonstrating implementation measures. ([Link](#))

- **Recommendation:** Communicate health and safety standards through real-life content as it more tangibly conveys the fact that measures are being implemented.

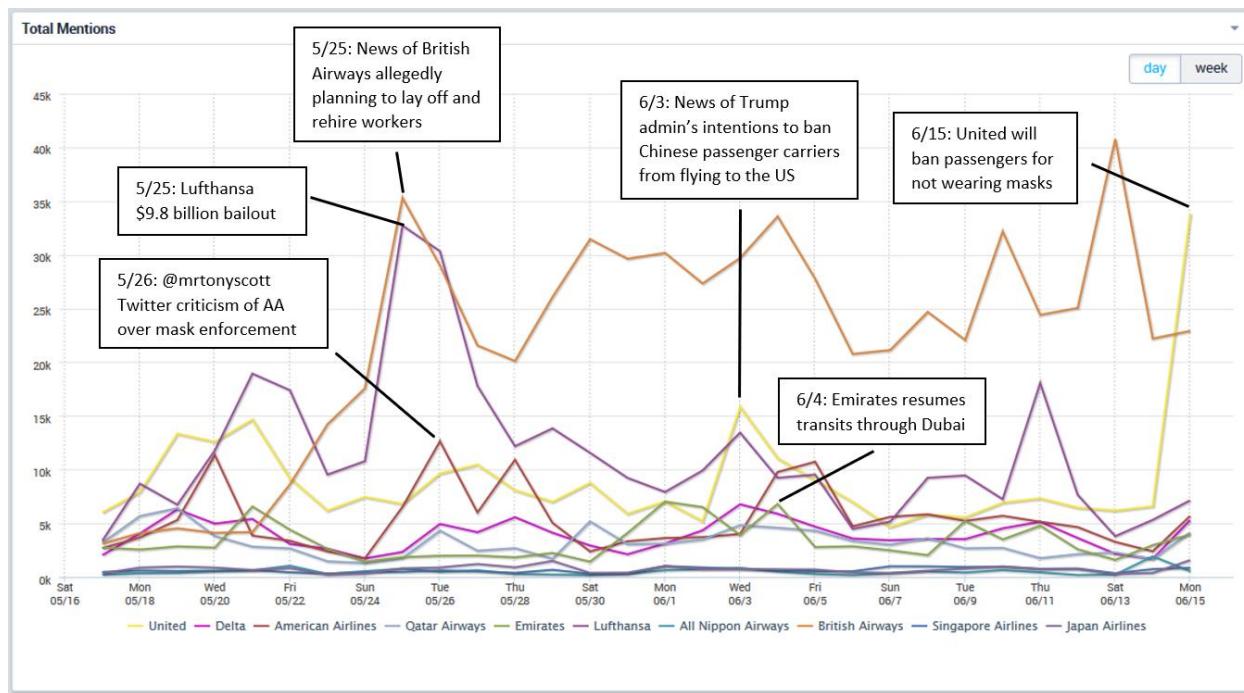
The top discussed narrative related to an individual airline company is that British Airways is using COVID-19 to take advantage of its employees. Furthermore, social media outrage has been directed toward airlines that have not prioritized employee health (e.g. [Tweet](#)). ([Link](#))

- **Recommendation:** Increase messaging on employee benefits and safety measures such as widespread health screenings.

Top COVID-19-Related Issues:

Top Issues by Volume	Number of Mentions	Positive Sentiment	Number of Unique Authors	Authentic Engagement
Screening/Testing	372.9k	48%	109.6k	78.0%
Resumption	305.0k	60%	67.4k	79.9%
Social Distancing	239.6k	21%	109.4k	74.0%
Masks	215.6k	31%	79k	80.0%
Quarantine	204.6k	33%	63.5k	79.6%
Disinfecting	97.9k	71%	16.7k	83.5%
Contactless	59.2k	56%	15.2k	81.3%

Total Mentions Across the Airline Industry:



Top Media Sources: Twitter (5.2m mentions, 85.2%), News (514.6k mentions, 8.4%), Broadcast (147.1k mentions, 2.4%), Reddit (88.5k mentions, 1.4%). On Twitter, 42.8% of mentions are from authors with an Influence score of 40-100.

Volume of Travel

Although air travel volume remains historically low, the [Transportation Security Administration \(TSA\) \(Tweet\)](#) and news outlets have reported a gradual increase in air travel throughput in the US ([MarketWatch, Tweet](#)). The increase in air travel is largely attributed to lessening fears of COVID-19 and “pent up demand to travel” ([CNBC, Washington Post](#)). However, social media commenters’ intentions to fly again are largely predicated on social distancing and mandatory mask policies.

- Various air travel reporters have covered the increase in demand for passenger flights, but have refrained from making claims of its cause ([Tweet, Tweet, Tweet](#)).
- There is generally a positive correlation between support of increased health and safety measures and intentions to travel by air ([Tweet, Tweet, Tweet, Tweet, Tweet, Tweet](#)). Although few, some commenters indicate increased safety measures, particularly mandatory masks, as reasons not to fly ([Tweet, Tweet, Tweet](#)).
- A June 15th [Tweet](#) (104 RTs, 387 Likes) from liberal commenter @thomaskaine5 asking if Twitter users thought it was safe to fly, overwhelmingly received negative replies.

Health Screening and Testing

The social media narrative is mostly in favor of health screening during air travel, and generally demonstrates desire for testing of both passengers and employees.

- English language commenters have praised the COVID-19 response in Asian countries for their rigorous screening, contrasting it with the US ([Tweet](#) - 89 RTs, 385 Likes; [Tweet](#) - 83 RTs, 331 Likes; [Tweet](#) - 16 RTs, 60 Likes).
- Airline companies have largely been exempt from direct criticism regarding health screening as the burden is generally perceived to be on the government ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)) and on airports ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).

Airlines, such as Emirates and Lufthansa, that are offering testing for passengers have received high positive sentiment on the topic (60% positive and 75% positive respectively) and favorable mentions from commenters ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)). In comparison, airlines that have not instituted pre-flight testing such as American Airlines have received lower positive sentiment on the topic (36% positive) as well as calls to begin testing ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).

- Furthermore, there appears to be support for widespread testing of airline employees ([Tweet](#) - 772 RTs, 997 Likes). For example, news of Delta Air Lines testing its employees ([Reuters](#)) has been received favorably on social media with 254 Twitter mentions and 66% positive sentiment ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)). However, various commenters have questioned the viability of the testing, particularly the need for its recurrence ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).

Health and Safety Measures: Face Masks, Social Distancing, and Disinfecting

Twitter commenters generally appear to support mandatory masks on airplanes ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)) and social distancing, such as leaving open middle seats ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)). However, these topics are politicized, with the most outspoken critics being supporters of the political right ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)). Unlike social distancing and face mask policy, conversation involving sterilization is not politicized and has received the highest positive sentiment (72%) among COVID-19 subtopics.

- Face Masks - Expressed refusals to fly when mask enforcement is lacking are a key trend, accounting for 3.6% of mask-related conversation ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).
 - A May 25th [Tweet](#) (6.7k RTs, 21.4k Likes) alleging that American Airlines lacked mask enforcement resulted in some commenters rebuffing the airline ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).
 - On June 15th, news of United and other US airlines enforcing mask policies ([CNN](#), [CNN](#)) provoked a mostly positive response from commenters ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)) with many also stating that the efforts are coming too late ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)). The most substantial criticism of the news appears to stem from supporters of the political right ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).
- Social Distancing - Criticism of American Airlines for allowing full flights received significant traction: [Tweet](#) (7.5k RTs, 3.9k Likes) and [Tweet](#) (85.1k RTs, 368.3k Likes). However, supporters of the political right have engaged extensively on the issue, with 3k mentions mostly opposing the policy ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).
 - News of “a major US airline” potentially dropping social distancing guidelines ([Tweet](#) from ex-FOX News reporter - 2.5k RTs, 5.5k Likes) provoked positive reactions from mostly supporters of the political right ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).
- Disinfecting - While social media users generally applaud sterilization efforts, some point out it is not a priority compared to social distancing ([Tweet](#)).

- United Airlines, which received 50% of all sterilization-related mentions with 68% positive sentiment, established its “CleanPlus” initiative on June 12th ([Press Release](#) - 178 mentions). While some authors praised United for its efforts ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)), many authors criticized the airline for not leaving empty seats ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).

Emirates Proactive Communication on Safety Precautions

Conversation around Emirates and COVID-19 registered 5k Twitter mentions with 62% overall positive sentiment. This is partly due to their ability to control the social media narrative around their brand through their own proactive messaging on safety standards (2.6k engagements). By contrast, sentiment related to Delta Air Lines, which had 4k Twitter mentions on COVID-19, was 32% positive with the company’s own messaging gaining less traction (381 engagements).

- The top shared story on COVID-19 regarding Emirates was the airline’s own [press release](#) on safety standards (5k mentions). @Emirates’ top [Tweet](#) (1.3k RTs, 4.4k Likes) on air travel safety was generally met with positive responses and praises ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).
- Despite having more followers than @Emirates, @Delta’s messaging on the subject gained less traction (its top [Tweet](#) received 149 RTs and 669 Likes) and was met with more criticism than Emirates’ ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).
- Notably, Emirates’ top Tweets ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)) on improving safety standards use photos and live video, whereas Delta’s top Tweets ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)) use graphics and animated video.

Successfully controlling the narrative through owned messaging is key for maintaining positive brand sentiment in relation to the COVID-19 conversation. All Nippon Airways (ANA) controlled the narrative around its measures to address COVID-19 and, though with significantly less mentions, received higher positive sentiment (80%) than Emirates.

- ANA’s own content accounts for its top ten Tweets by retweets (e.g. [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).
- Both the Japanese and English language reaction to ANA’s content is generally positive, showing deep loyalty to the brand ([Tweet](#), [Tweet](#), [Tweet](#)).

British Airways Layoffs

Of the ten airline companies examined, British Airways was the most mentioned due to social media backlash from a May 25th story alleging that British Airways (BA) is planning to lay off and rehire thousands of employees “on reduced pay and worse terms” ([The Guardian](#)). This narrative is heavily pushed by the trade union Unite the Union’s [BA Betrayal initiative](#) (21.9k mentions) and its [Twitter account](#). As with the testing of employees by airline companies, this conversation appears to show that social media users find outrage in airlines allegedly not taking proper care of their employees.

- Celebrities, politicians, and other notable individuals across the political spectrum have also engaged in the conversation and amplified messaging from Unite the Union: Piers Morgan ([Tweet](#) - 4.3k RTs, 13.6k Likes), Huw Merriman ([Tweet](#) - 2.1k RTs, 2.3k Likes), and Thandi Newton ([Tweet](#) - 549 RTs, 894 Likes).

Competitor Breakdown

Airline	Mentions	% Positive Sentiment	% Share of Conversation
British Airways	658.7k	42%	36%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top Issues: Quarantine, Cancellation, Layoffs Top Tweet: @piersmorgan (4.3k RTs, 13.6k Likes) Top Story: babetrayal.com (21.9k mentions): <i>BA Betrayal</i> 		
Lufthansa	342.9k	57%	19%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top Issues: Screening/Testing, Bailout, Resumption Top Tweet: @WillyBrandt11 (2.4k RTs, 11.9k Likes) Top Story: lufthansa.lol (k mentions): <i>Die Lufthansa* soll mit 9.000.000.000 € Steuergeldern gerettet werden</i> 		
United Airlines	272.8k	37%	15%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top Issues: Screening/Testing, Resumption, Cancellation Top Tweet: @gregpmiller (1.8k RTs, 4.4k Likes) Top Story: Reuters (k mentions): <i>Trump administration to bar Chinese passenger carriers from flying to U.S.</i> 		
American Airlines	161.7k	37%	9%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top Issues: Top Tweet: @mrtonyscott (6.7k RTs, 21.4k Likes) Top Story: American Airlines (2.6k mentions): <i>Travel updates</i> 		
Delta Airlines	117.5k	41%	6%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top Issues: Bailout, Resumption, Screening/Testing Top Tweet: @SenWarren (1.7kk RTs, 5.3k Likes) Top Story: Business Insider (8.3k mentions): <i>Elizabeth Warren accuses airlines and the Treasury Department of violating bailout terms as major airlines cut workers' take-home pay</i> 		
Emirates	100.8k	65%	6%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top Issues: Resumption, Screening/Testing, Masks Top Tweet: @HamdanMohammed (1.6k RTs, 7.4k Likes) Top Story: Emirates (5k mentions): <i>Emirates sets industry-leading safety standard for customers travelling as it resumes operations</i> 		
Qatar Airways	96.6k	63%	5%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top Issues: Resumption, Cancellation, Screening/Testing Top Tweet: @spin9 (6.9k RTs, 1.1k Likes) Top Story: Bloomberg (4.8k mentions): <i>Qatar Airways Plans Layoffs and 25% Pay Cut for Pilots</i> 		
Japan Airlines	21.4k	69%	1%

- Top Issues: Screening/Testing, Cancellation, Resumption
- Top [Tweet](#): @JAL_Official_jp (773 RTs, 4.7k Likes)
- Top Story: [Japan Airlines](#) (k mentions): *新型コロナウィルス感染症の発生に関する対応について*

Singapore Airlines	19.5k	70%	1%
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- Top Issues:
- Top [Tweet](#): @spin9 (293 RTs, 71 Likes)
- Top Story: [Mainly Miles](#) (468 mentions): *Goodbye Singapore Airlines First Class... for now*

All Nippon Airways	15.7k	84%	1%
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- Top Issues: Masks, Screening/Testing, Cancellation
- Top [Tweet](#): @ANA_Group_News (2k RTs, 3.7k Likes)
- Top Story: [ANA Group](#) (2.7k mentions): *ANAグループで運航する航空機は、約3分で機内の空気がすべて入れ替わります。*