

MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF RAILWAY PASSENGER CARRIERS ON THE SOCIAL NETWORK FACEBOOK IN TIMES OF SARS-COV-2 EPIDEMIC

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Abstract

The SARS-CoV-2 epidemic became a challenge for many companies and marketers because it was necessary to revise marketing communication tactics and not lose contact and relationship with customers/consumers even in times of epidemic related restrictions. This paper focuses on marketing communication of railway passenger carriers on the social network Facebook in times of SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. The aim of this paper is to analyse Facebook marketing communication of the Czech Railways, RegioJet, and Leo Express in 2020 and compare the results with the 2019 study. This paper is prepared as a comparative study with the paper of Chocholáč and Becková (2020). The qualitative content analysis and comparative analysis was used for analysing the profiles of selected passenger railway carriers on the social network Facebook. The results of the analysis clearly show that the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic affected railway passenger carriers' marketing communication on Facebook on several levels. The first significant level was the content of individual posts, which were logically significantly influenced by the epidemiological situation. The second level was the number of published posts, with some carriers (RegioJet and Leo Express) publishing significantly fewer posts in 2020 than in 2019. Czech Railways tried to maintain contact with customers/consumers as much as possible even in epidemically difficult times and increased the number of published posts. The paper's main contribution is a comprehensive analysis of marketing communication of selected railway passenger carriers on the social network Facebook and an assessment of the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic.

***Keywords:** online marketing, social media marketing, social network marketing, Czech Railways, RegioJet, Leo Express*

1 INTRODUCTION

The SARS-CoV-2 epidemic has been and continues to be a challenge for the whole world, countries, economic sectors, and for individual companies. It has had and continues to have direct and indirect impacts especially on companies, particularly economically. As countries had to take many restrictive measures during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic, individual economic sectors were also affected. The most affected sectors were transport, tourism, accommodation, automotive, retail, and manufacturing. However, the extent of the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic on individual sectors varies from country to country. Due to the implementation of restrictive measures by countries, direct contact with customers and consumers has been significantly reduced in many sectors, in some cases to zero. It was at this time that the importance of marketing communication, especially in its online form, was further strengthened. Online marketing communication makes it possible to be in contact with customers and consumers through the online environment. This can partially replace direct contact, which was not possible during the epidemic due to restrictive measures. This paper focuses on how the three most important companies in the Czech passenger railway transport market faced this challenge. This paper is standardly divided into six

sections: Section 2 – Theoretical background, Section 3 – Methodology, Section 4 – Results, Section 5 – Discussion, and Section 6 – Conclusion.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The rapid development of social networks has enabled people to easily establish friendships without the constraints of geographic borders or time zones (Zhou, 2011). Currently, people have more communication channels through which to link up (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) (Shen et al., 2016). Nowadays, the use of marketing communication tools is essential from the perspective of every marketer (Šerić, 2017). People are spending more and more time using social media, and it implies the fact that their importance for advertising purposes is growing (Breuer and Brettel, 2012). The image of a successful company is currently created under the strong influence of social media, especially social networks (Hristache, Paicu and Ismail, 2014). Companies today have a significant advantage because they can use digital media or social media like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube in promoting their business (Febriyantoro, 2020). Social networks marketing is defined as a process of gaining customers' attention and acceptance through social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, etc. (Li, Lai and Lin, 2017). Social networks have changed the media landscape and marketing communication, as new communication channels have complemented and sometimes even replaced traditional ones (Pan, Torres and Zúñga, 2019). Traditional media like television and newspapers have lost viewers or readers (Duffett, Edu and Negricea, 2019).

2.1 The importance of social networks for companies

Social networks offer companies the opportunity to communicate more effectively to target consumer groups in social network communities than in other types of media (Shen et al., 2016), and represent for companies a relevant marketing tool that affects marketing strategies and practices (Valos, Maplestone and Polonsky, 2017; Klepek and Starzyczna, 2018; Pantano, Priporas and Migliano, 2019). Grewal et al. (2016) stated that social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, today attract hundreds of millions of users. At the same time, social networks allow companies to acquire informal source for understanding customers' preferences, competitors' activities, market trends and product feedbacks (Rojas, Garrido-Moreno and García-Morales, 2020). Within social networks, companies can listen to consumers directly and to develop a deep consumer knowledge (Arrigo, Liberati and Mariani, 2021). There are many scientific studies that confirm the positive impact of social networks on brand awareness, customer engagement, and customer loyalty (Leung et al., 2013; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2017). Customers interact with companies through digital channels encouraging the company to realize the need to record interactions with customers and measure performance to serve as a reference for designing effective marketing strategies (Febriyantoro and Arisandi, 2018). Raji, Mohd Rashid and Mohd Ishak (2018) verified that positive brand equity is a fundamental indicator that shows the effectiveness of each used marketing communication tool. Customers interact with brands through social networks for several reasons, such as product information, access to customer service and content, entertainment, brand engagement, and promotions (Shawky et al., 2020). Voorveld (2019) reviewed the main challenges facing brand communication in social media and assumed that future content would be more organic, more social, and less commercial. Shen et al. (2016) recommended the use of interactive content. Liu et al. (2015) highlighted the need to engage influencers for support electronic word-of-mouth marketing activities and Abri and Valaee (2020) considered it important to engage influencers to support

viral marketing activities. On the other side, Shen et al. (2016) point out the risk of social networks where customers may start to ignore the content because of the more advertising.

Facebook's rapid growth is due the Facebook role in helping people connect online in this vast virtual social network (Shu and Chuang, 2011). Facebook provides a way to increase the effectiveness of Internet advertising (Shen et al., 2016). Facebook contains some tools and features such as likes, comments, and posts to simplify the users' identification of relevant information (Koroleva and Kane, 2017). On the other side, the Facebook's system to register likes, comments, and shares measures brand-consumer interactions (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013; Hinson et al., 2019). The number of likes is practically considered as a measure of customer response (Kim, Spiller and Hettche, 2015; Ding et al., 2017).

2.2 Marketing communication in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has a substantial impact on global economic, political, and sociocultural systems, and particularly, on travelling and transport (Sigala, 2020). Travelling and tourism were among the most affected sectors of national economies worldwide due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (Darázs and Šalgovičová, 2021). Because of the SARS-CoV-2, countries have imposed travel restrictions that have impacted all transport modes and related value chains (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2021). The effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on travelling, tourism, and transport are due to three specific reasons: official travel restrictions, event cancellations, and travellers' fear of the risk (Wang and Su, 2020). This situation described Gössling, Scott and Hall (2021) as moving from over-tourism to non-tourism transferred to the transport sector as moving from over-transport to limited transport. The travel demand has significantly decreased and has created a great deal of uncertainty about future passenger transport behaviour (Li, Nguyen and Coca-Stefaniak, 2020). In the context of this situation, an additional and more pressing challenge for companies has emerged, as companies needed to maintain communication with their clients (González, Camarero and Cabezudo, 2021). Social networks and online communities have enabled companies to stay in touch with their customers even during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic crisis (González, Camarero and Cabezudo, 2021). They also illustrated on the example of online travel agencies that during the state of SARS-CoV-2 epidemic emergency, marketing communications have proven essential to maintain emotional ties with online communities even though sales have plummeted to zero.

2.3 Social media marketing communication in railway transport sector

Very few authors have addressed the issue of social media marketing communication in railway transport sector and there are also very few scientific studies. Narayanaswami (2018) examined the situation in the Indian Railways environment. Yang and Anwar (2016) evaluated railway services in New South Wales in Australia and dealt with the issue of digital social media and their use in the practice of railway companies. Gabore and Xiujun (2018) focused on the impact of online news on the views of social media users and give an example of the construction of the first modern international line in Africa, namely Ethiopia-Djibouti.

In the environment of the Czech Republic, this issue was addressed by Chocholáč and Becková (2020). They analysed Facebook marketing communication of the selected railway passenger transport companies (České dráhy, a.s. – further in the text Czech Railways or abbreviated “CR”, RegioJet a.s. – further in the text RegioJet or abbreviated “RJ” and Leo Express s.r.o. – further in the text Leo Express or abbreviated “LE”) in 2019. The main findings of the study of Chocholáč and Becková (2020) were as follows: RegioJet chooses the path of an intensive communication strategy, Czech Railways has chosen a conservative

strategy, and Leo Express a defensive strategy. Further differences were identified in terms of post content, frequency of posting and audience interaction. Finally, it should be noted that the period analysed (year 2019) was not affected by the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. This fact opens a great research gap for the processing of this comparative study which will focus on comparing railway passenger carriers marketing communication on the social network Facebook in 2019 and 2020, when the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic is already fully underway. The aim of this paper is to analyse Facebook marketing communication of the Czech Railways, RegioJet, and Leo Express in 2020 and compare the results with the 2019 study.

3 METHODOLOGY

This paper is conceived methodologically like to the study of Chocholáč and Becková (2020) to be able to compare the results of both papers with each other and then discuss them. Based on the literature review conducted in social media marketing communication, marketing communication in the context of SARS-CoV-2 epidemic, and social media marketing communication in the railway transport sector, the research question was set.

Research question: How has the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic affected railway passenger carriers' marketing communication on Facebook? Subsequently, related hypotheses were established.

Hypothesis 1: The SARS-CoV-2 epidemic affected the content of Facebook posts in 2020 compared to 2019. *Hypothesis 2:* The number of posts published by individual carriers on Facebook decreased in 2020 compared to 2019. *Hypothesis 3:* The number of fans posted by individual carriers on Facebook decreased in 2020 compared to 2019. *Hypothesis 4:* The number of likes to posts by individual carriers on Facebook decreased in 2020 compared to 2019. The processing methodology is presented in Fig. 1.

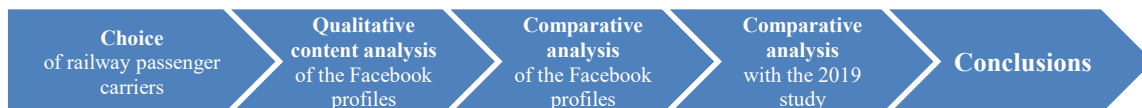


Fig. 1 – The processing methodology. Source: authors

In the first step, relevant railway passenger carriers operating on the Czech market were selected. These companies control the largest part of the market and carry the most passengers. These are Czech Railways, RegioJet, and Leo Express. In the second step, a qualitative content analysis of the Facebook profiles (České dráhy, 2022; Leo Express, 2022; RegioJet CZ, 2022) of these three carriers for the year 2020 was processed by three independent researchers. According to the study of Chocholáč and Becková (2020), the researchers' attention was focused on the total number of posts; the number of followers; the frequency of posts (by days); the total number of likes; the total number of comments and shares; the average number of likes, comments, and shares; the content of the posts. In a third step, a comparative analysis of the results between the three carriers analysed for 2020 was carried out. In a fourth step, the results were compared with an identical study by Chocholáč and Becková (2020) in 2019. Finally, the conclusions were defined in the context of the hypotheses and the stated research question.

The following standard scientific methods were used in the preparation of this paper: qualitative content analysis (second step) and comparative analysis (third and fourth step). The method of qualitative content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts or other meaningful matter to the context of their use

(Krippendorff, 2003). Kibiswa (2019) defined qualitative content analysis as a research method carried on in either an inductive or a deductive way. Inductive approach or indirect approach is based on the principle that researchers draw themes from data they collected to start their research; in deductive approach, also known as direct approach, they rather draw them from existing theory / theories to set up the themes that guide their research (Kibiswa, 2019). The method of qualitative comparative analysis is a non-statistical research data analysis technique for determining which logical conclusions a data set supports (Ragin, 1987). This method begins with listing all the combinations of variables observed in the data set, followed by applying the rules of logical inference to determine which descriptive inferences or implications the data supports (Ragin, 1987).

4 RESULTS

Table 1 presents the basic overview of data from Facebook profiles of analysed railway passenger carriers. This data was obtained using the scientific method of qualitative content analysis. Subsequently, the 2020 data from each railway carrier was compared to each other and compared to the 2019 study data using a comparative analysis method.

Tab. 1 – The basic overview of data from Facebook profiles of analysed railway passenger carriers.
Source: České dráhy (2022), Leo Express (2022), RegioJet CZ (2022), Chochořáč and Becková (2020), authors

Facebook social network	CR 2019	CR 2020	RJ 2019	RJ 2020	LE 2019	LE 2020
Number of people who like this	73 461	100 165	86 232	93 165	81 040	81 242
Number of people who follow this	75 289	103 201	85 558	93 768	81 266	81 559
Total number of posts	204	264	256	189	150	138
Total number of likes	51 997	182 556	35 659	44 510	11 696	11 758
Total number of comments	11 993	16 817	16 263	14 024	4 615	4 472
Total number of shares	10 056	30 175	1 714	14 005	1 285	759

The following key conclusions emerging from Table 1 can be divided into six sections: number of people who like this, number of people who follow this, total number of posts, total number of likes, total number of comments, and total number of shares.

In terms of the number of people who like the profiles of railway carriers, it is evident that Czech Railways had the most fans in 2019 and 2020 (73 461 in 2019 and 100 165 in 2020), followed by RegioJet (86 232 in 2019 and 93 165 in 2020) and Leo Express (81 040 in 2019 and 81 242 in 2020). However, it is interesting that Czech Railways managed to increase the number of users by 36.35% year-on-year even in the epidemic period, while RegioJet only by 8.04% and Leo Express only by 0.25%. This fact may be due to the significantly higher market coverage of Czech Railways compared to other carriers and to the fact that users needed to obtain up-to-date information on railway passenger transport in times of state restrictions. The situation is similar for another monitored parameter – the number of people who follow this. Again, it is evident that Czech Railways had the most followers in 2019 and 2020 (75 289 in 2019 and 103 201 in 2020), followed by RegioJet (85 558 in 2019 and 93 768 in 2020) and Leo Express (81 266 in 2019 and 81 559 in 2020). However, it is again interesting that Czech Railways managed to increase the number of users by 37.07% year-on-year even in the epidemic period, while RegioJet only by 9.60% and Leo Express only by 0.36%. Based on these two monitored parameters, it can be clearly stated that Czech Railways managed to attract significantly more new Facebook users than the other analysed railway carriers even in the epidemic period. Czech Railways gained 26 704 new

fans and 27 912 new followers year-on-year in absolute numbers, while RegioJet gained only 6 933 new fans and 8 210 new followers and Leo Express only 202 new fans and 293 new followers. From this Czech Railways managed communication on the social network Facebook in the epidemic period significantly better than the other analysed carriers and managed to keep in touch with their customers/consumers.

The results of the total number of posts parameter are presented in Fig. 2. The results show that Leo Express reduced the number of posts year-on-year from 150 to 138 (year-on-year decrease by 8.00%), RegioJet also reduced the number of posts year-on-year from 256 to 189 (year-on-year decrease by 26.17%). Only Czech Railways increased the number of posts year-on-year from 204 to 264 (year-on-year increase by 29.41%). Other metrics can be directly or indirectly linked to this parameter, such as number of likes, number of fans, number of followers, number of shares and number of comments.

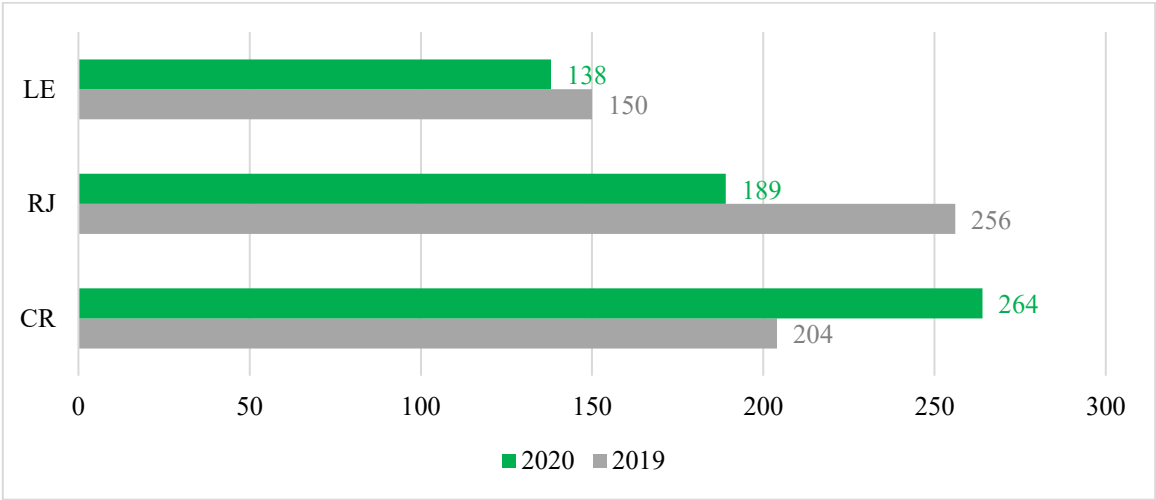


Fig. 2 – The total number of posts on Facebook in 2019 and 2020.

Source: České dráhy (2022), Leo Express (2022), RegioJet CZ (2022), Chocholáč and Becková (2020), authors

Figure 3 shows a comparison of the average number of Facebook posts per day per railway carrier in 2019 and 2020. The data shows that the average number of new posts at Leo Express is very similar (0.411 in 2019 and 0.378 in 2020).

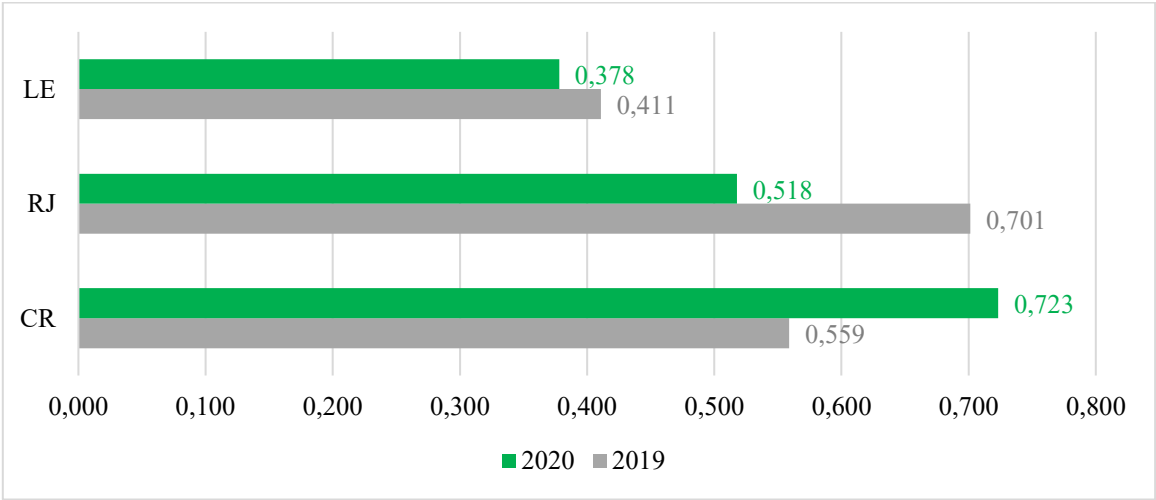


Fig. 3 – The average number of posts per day on Facebook in 2019 and 2020.

Source: České dráhy (2022), Leo Express (2022), RegioJet CZ (2022), Chocholáč and Becková (2020), authors

In contrast, RegioJet has seen a significant decrease in the average number of posts per day. In 2019, RegioJet published 0.701 posts per day, but in 2020 it was only 0.518 posts per day. In contrast, Czech Railways increased the value of the indicator year-on-year from 0.559 in 2019 to 0.723 in 2020.

In terms of the total number of likes, Czech Railways was significantly successful year-on-year. The company gained 251.09% more likes in 2020 than in 2019, namely 51 997 likes in 2019 and 182 556 in 2020 (an absolute year-on-year increase of 130 559 likes). RegioJet and Leo Express also recorded a relative year-on-year increase in the number of likes, but very low compared to Czech Railways. RegioJet gained 8,851 more likes in absolute terms (a relative year-on-year increase of 24.82%) and Leo Express gained only 62 more likes in absolute terms (a relative year-on-year increase of 0.53%).

In terms of the total number of comments, Czech Railways again recorded a significant year-on-year increase, with a relative increase of 40.22% and an absolute increase of 4,824 comments. The other carriers analysed saw a sharp decline in the number of comments on posts. The number of comments on RegioJet posts decreased by 13.77% year-on-year in relative terms and by 2,239 comments in absolute terms, while the number of comments on Leo Express posts also decreased by 143 comments in absolute terms and by 3.10% in relative terms. This indicator reflects the fact that RegioJet and Leo Express have not been able to generate user interaction as well as Czech Railways.

In terms of the total number of shares, RegioJet and Czech Railways recorded a significant year-on-year increase. RegioJet's post sharing has skyrocketed year-on-year by 717.09% in relative terms and 12,291 in absolute terms. Czech Railways posts were shared by more than 20,119 users in absolute terms year-on-year (a relative year-on-year increase of 200.07%). This is very likely due to the need of Facebook users to share information of railway carriers (especially information related to the epidemiological situation) among their contacts within the social network. Paradoxically, however, it is interesting to note that Leo Express has seen a rapid decline in post sharing from 1,285 in 2019 to 759 in 2020 (an absolute decline of 526 shares and a relative decline of 40.93%). On the other hand, it must be added that this parameter is closely linked to the parameter of the number of posts and their content.

Fig. 4 shows the posts with the highest number of likes in 2020 for all three carriers analysed.



Fig. 4 – The posts with the largest number of likes on Facebook in 2020.
Source: České dráhy (2022), RegioJet CZ (2022), Leo Express (2022)

The most liked post with video at Czech Railways was that of retiring employee Libor Vobořil, who had worked for the company as a driver for more than 50 years. This post received about 24 000 likes, 693 comments and over 1 600 shares.

RegioJet scored a major success with a very funny video post in relation to the current epidemiological restrictive measures, which tried to make light of the situation as much as possible and thank all passengers for their consideration and acceptance of the epidemiological measures. This post received about 5 000 likes, 291 comments and over 11 000 shares. Leo Express' most successful post focused on thanking a passenger who, as a doctor, saved another passenger on board the train who had suffered a cardiac collapse. This post received about 603 likes, 49 comments and 50 shares.

Fig. 5 shows the results of the content analysis of Facebook posts in 2020 by individual railway carriers. The results of the analysis clearly show that destination promotion (156 posts in total) and information related to the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic (140 posts in total) were the dominant themes. These other topics have been the subject of around 50 posts in total: competitions – 54 posts, photos taken by fans and employees – 52 posts, vehicle fleet – 48 posts. Czech Railways published in 2020 the most posts related to the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic (90 posts), followed by destination promotions (54 posts) and vehicle fleet information (44 posts). RegioJet mostly highlighted destination promotion (79 posts), photos taken by fans and employees (32 posts) and competitions (28 posts). Leo Express focused most on the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in 2020 (32 posts), destination promotion (23 posts), and the loyalty programme and photos taken by fans and employees (20 posts).

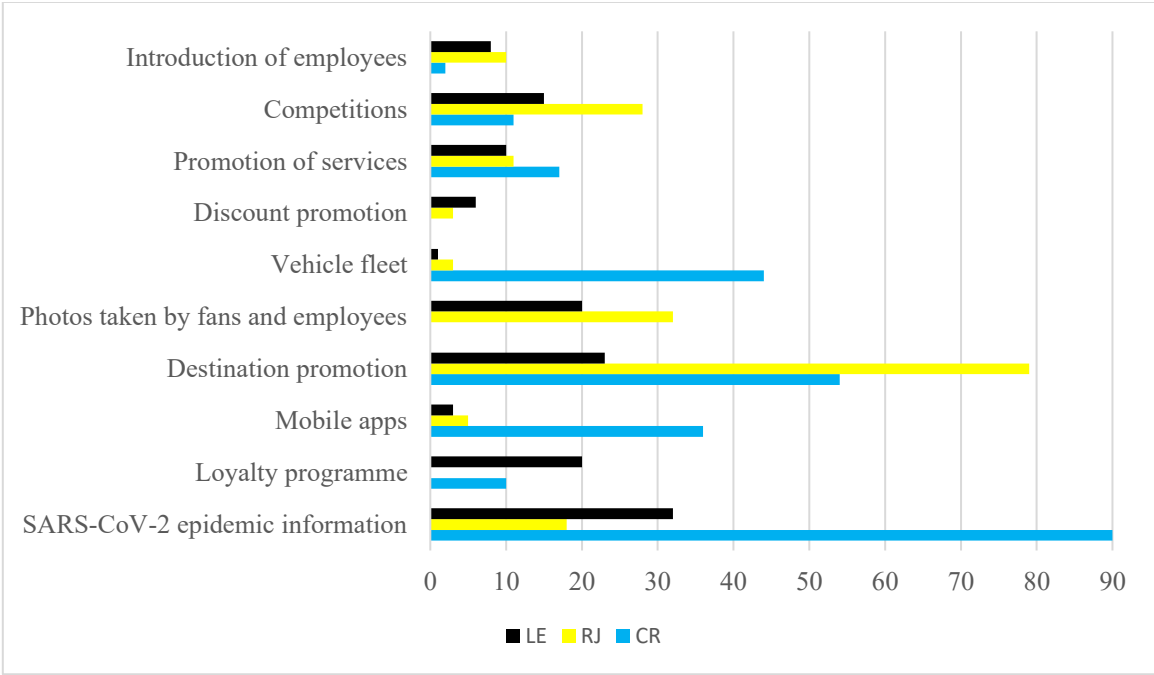


Fig. 5 – The content of the posts on Facebook in 2020.
 Source: České dráhy (2022), Leo Express (2022), RegioJet CZ (2022), authors.

In the case of comparing the results from Fig. 5 with the results from 2019 according to Chocholáč and Becková (2020), it is evident that the issue of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic has come to the forefront of the content of the posts, which is understandable in the context of events. The topic of destination promotion has also been strengthened with more posts to promote train travel at a time when the epidemiological situation was not critical and restrictive measures allowed for standard train travel (especially summer 2020). For very

understandable reasons, event promotion, recruitment marketing activities, and partnership promotion were significantly reduced as the epidemic period was highly unpredictable.

5 DISCUSSION

The following *research question* was stated in the introduction of the paper: How has the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic affected railway passenger carriers' marketing communication on Facebook? Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic affected railway passenger carriers' marketing communication on Facebook on several levels. The first significant level was the content of individual posts, which were logically significantly influenced by the epidemiological situation and 23.69% of posts were thematically devoted to the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. The second level was the number of published posts, with some carriers (RegioJet and Leo Express) publishing significantly fewer posts in 2020 than in 2019. Czech Railways, on the other hand, tried to maintain contact with customers/consumers as much as possible even in epidemically difficult times and increased the number of published posts by 29.41%. This fact is consistent with the opinion of González, Camarero and Cabezudo (2021), who suppose that social networks enabled companies to stay in touch with their customers even during the pandemic crisis. It is also in line with the statement of Pan, Torres and Zúñiga (2019) that new communication channels have complemented and even replaced those traditional ones. The post count parameter is also related to other parameters such as the number of likes, shares, comments, new fans, and followers. Furthermore, the individual hypotheses will be confirmed or rejected.

Hypothesis 1: The SARS-CoV-2 epidemic affected the content of Facebook posts in 2020 compared to 2019. Hypothesis 1 was confirmed because the content of the Facebook posts of the analysed railway carriers was significantly affected by the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. There was not a single post dedicated to the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in 2019 because the epidemic was not a media issue for the Czech Republic. By contrast, in 2020, 29.41% of posts (140 posts in absolute terms) were already dedicated to the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic, of which Czech Railways 90 posts, Leo Express 32 posts and RegioJet 18 posts.

Hypothesis 2: The number of posts published by individual carriers on Facebook decreased in 2020 compared to 2019. Hypothesis 2 was confirmed only for Leo Express and RegioJet and rejected for Czech Railways. The results show that Leo Express reduced the number of posts year-on-year from 150 to 138 and RegioJet also reduced the number of posts year-on-year from 256 to 189. Only Czech Railways increased the number of posts year-on-year from 204 to 264. In epidemiologically non-standard times when many restrictive measures are in force, it is necessary to either maintain the number of posts as in the standard period or to increase the number of posts to avoid weakening or complete loss of connection with the customer/consumer.

Hypothesis 3: The number of fans posted by individual carriers on Facebook decreased in 2020 compared to 2019. Hypothesis 3 was rejected. All three railway carriers analysed have seen an increase in the number of Facebook fans between 2019 and 2020, specifically Czech Railways managed to increase the number of fans by 36.35% year-on-year even in the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic period, while RegioJet only by 8.04% and Leo Express only by 0.25%.

Hypothesis 4: The number of likes to posts by individual carriers on Facebook decreased in 2020 compared to 2019. Hypothesis 4 was rejected. Czech Railways was significantly successful year-on-year. The company gained 251.09% more likes in 2020 than in 2019, namely 51 997 likes in 2019 and 182 556 in 2020 (an absolute year-on-year increase

of 130 559 likes). RegioJet and Leo Express also recorded a relative year-on-year increase in the number of likes. RegioJet gained 8,851 more likes in absolute terms (a relative year-on-year increase of 24.82%) and Leo Express gained only 62 more likes in absolute terms (a relative year-on-year increase of 0.53%). In accordance with the studies mentioned above (Kim, Spiller and Hettche, 2015; Ding et al., 2017), it is possible to state that customer response increased, especially in the case of Czech Railways. Moreover, the posts with the highest number of likes were videos, which corresponds with studies talking about the need for more organic, social, and interactive content (Voorveld, 2019; Shen et al., 2016).

This paper and research contain the following limitations that need to be mentioned and discussed. The first limit is the choice of the social network Facebook. However, there are more communication channels people can use nowadays as Shen et al. (2016) point out. Railway undertakings are also active on other social networks (Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.). Therefore, this paper does not aim to compare comprehensively the marketing communication of the analysed carriers on social networks but focuses only on Facebook. Moreover, the paper follows the study of Chocholáč and Becková (2020) where Facebook was also analysed. Another limitation is the choice of railway passenger carriers, as there are other carriers on the Czech market. The selection of railway carriers was chosen again according to the study of Chocholáč and Becková (2020) for the sake of results comparability. At the same time, the three most important carriers on the Czech market in terms of market share and number of passengers carried were selected.

6 CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to analyse Facebook marketing communication of the Czech Railways, RegioJet, and Leo Express in 2020 and compare the results with the 2019 study. The paper's main contribution was a comprehensive analysis of marketing communication of selected railway passenger carriers on the social network Facebook and an assessment of the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. The results of the analysis clearly show that the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic was a challenge in terms of marketing communication on Facebook also for the analysed railway carriers. In 2020 the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic has significantly affected the number and content of posts and other related indicators. Czech Railways published more posts year-on-year and did their best to inform and maintain contact and relationships with customers/consumers in times of SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. This tactic may have resulted in a sharp increase in fans, followers, and other types of interactions with posts. On the other hand, RegioJet and Leo Express reduced the number of posts year-on-year.

Further follow-up research in this area may focus on the analysis of other social networks such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, etc. and their use in the passenger railway segment. Further, other domestic railway operators may be included in the research or comparisons may be made with foreign countries. A major challenge is to compare marketing communication with other transport segments, such as air or bus transport.

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