

# Heathrow Airport's Sustainability Communication in Turbulent Times

A study on Heathrow Airport's Sustainability Communication on  
Facebook and in its 2.0 Plan

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# Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
PROBLEM FORMULATION: .....	6
<b>STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 IMPLEMENTING CSR IN THE AVIATION INDUSTRY .....	7
1.2 GREENWASHING IN THE AVIATION INDUSTRY .....	9
<b>2. THEORY .....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 CORPORATE COMMUNICATION .....	11
2.2 STAKEHOLDER THEORY .....	13
2.3. SUSTAINABILITY.....	16
2.3.1 Sustainability in the aviation industry .....	18
<b>3. METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1 PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE.....	20
3.2 ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY .....	21
3.3 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH .....	22
3.4 DATA COLLECTION .....	23
3.4.1 Sample size and technique .....	23
3.4.2 Data collection method.....	24
3.4.3 Ethical considerations and limitations .....	24
3.5 QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS .....	25
Coding process diagram for the “Heathrow 2.0 Plan”. .....	29
3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	32
<b>4. ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>34</b>
4.1 CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK POSTS .....	34
4.1.1 Local community posts .....	35
4.1.2 Climate action and sustainability communications posts .....	38
4.1.3 Solutions to environmental problems posts.....	39
4.1.4 Ethical food practices posts .....	41
4.2 CONTENT ANALYSIS OF HEATHROW AIRPORT’S 2.0 PLAN .....	42
4.2.1 Local community.....	42
4.2.2 Strategic planning.....	44
4.2.3 Environmental sustainability .....	45
4.2.4 Solutions to environmental problems .....	46
4.3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM BOTH CONTENT ANALYSES .....	47
<b>5. DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>49</b>
5.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS .....	52
5.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH.....	52
5.3 LIMITATIONS .....	54
<b>6. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>7. REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>56</b>

## Abstract

As climate change is a critical global challenge today, organizations, airports in particular, are increasingly pressured to focus on, implement, and communicate different sustainable initiatives. Previous studies have addressed the issue of airport sustainability from different perspectives; however, Heathrow Airport's social media communication in a sustainability context is novel. The aim of this study was to assess what strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its sustainability initiatives and how they align with its 2.0 plan. Qualitative content analyses were performed. First, 14 sustainability-related Facebook posts from Heathrow Airport's Facebook page were analyzed. Similarly, the 2.0 plan was then analyzed. The findings revealed Heathrow Airport's strategy of communicating its initiatives supporting the local community and a significant focus on communicating its sustainability goals in its Facebook posts, which generally aligns with the 2.0 plan. Furthermore, the study found that a consistent strategy across both platforms is to avoid disclosing concrete calculations on how to achieve sustainability goals. However, the findings also uncovered a few misalignments. For instance, the Facebook posts solely focus on positive aspects, whereas the 2.0 plan does include a more nuanced depiction of Heathrow Airport's sustainability challenges. Furthermore, the 2.0 plan also includes economic sustainability aspects, which the Facebook posts exclude, revealing a misalignment. This thesis has theoretical contributions, as few studies focus on airports' social media communication with regard to sustainability and its alignment with other platforms or reports. It also has several practical implications. For instance, the findings can benefit airports that aim to improve their sustainability communication, by providing an understanding and overview of central concepts in the communication of sustainable initiatives that can affect the airports long term. This could give organizations in a similar position as Heathrow Airport a competitive advantage. This study has limitations as well. For instance, the infrequency of posts on sustainability by Heathrow Airport presented a challenge and limited the data sample. Future research could include consumer perceptions and engagement to understand how stakeholders view and engage with Heathrow Airport's communication of sustainable initiatives.

Keywords: Sustainability, aviation, content analysis, Heathrow Airport, Facebook, challenges.

## Introduction

In today's world, flying is a popular and convenient mode of transport, providing a way to travel effectively between destinations (Dierikx 2008). However, as the aviation industry continues to grow, concerns over environmental damages have too (Arikan & Günay 2020). Extreme weather events, contamination of the oceans, urban pollution, et cetera, have increased awareness of the existential climate crisis (Horton & Horton 2019). Overall, it has become apparent that many of the causes of climate change are directly linked to modern lifestyles and choices that exploit important resources in ways that are unsustainable, such as flying (Pandve et al 2011). Consequently, more individuals are seeking ways to be more environmentally conscious and live sustainably (Ibid). A study by Glocalities and Global Citizen showed that 78% of people worldwide, across all demographics, are increasingly expressing concerns about man-made environmental damage (Sheldrick 2021). The global focus on sustainability is problematic for the aviation industry, as it is known to be environmentally damaging. However, the literature describes some ways in which airports adapt to the pressure that exists within the aviation industry today to become more sustainable. For example, Raimundo, Baltazar and Cruz's (2023) study describes the current state of airport sustainability practices. This includes water conservation, waste management, greenhouse gas emissions, et cetera. In that and related studies, the increased interest in airports addressing sustainability practices is emphasized. (Raimundo, Baltazar & Cruz 2023). However, airports can navigate through the increased focus on sustainability by communicating their sustainable initiatives and demonstrate social responsibility (Pishdar et al 2019). In fact, some airports have started to highlight their sustainable initiatives both on social media and on their own websites. For instance, Heathrow Airport has, through its website and social media channels, been communicating its sustainable practices (Heathrow Our Company, n.d.). However, it is not possible to examine Heathrow Airport's communication of its sustainability initiatives without noticing that Heathrow Airport is facing a paradox. As Heracleous & Wirtz (2014) state, the ability to master the paradox and balance contradictory competencies and positions is increasingly necessary (Heracleous & Wirtz 2014). The words airport and sustainability are not typically two words that one would connect to each other. There is a contradiction between Heathrow Airport's pollution and its presentation of its sustainability initiatives. Consequently, it can seem counterintuitive for airports to communicate their sustainability practices. Simultaneously, it is necessary for the aviation industry to openly communicate its various

sustainability targets. This need is emphasized by the environmental regulations across the UK (Environment Act, 2021). Poor air quality is considered by the UK government to be “the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK” (Smith & Bolton, 2024). The government has set two targets concerning fine particulate matter in England. First, an annual mean concentration target of 10 micrograms per cubic metre is to be met across England by 2040. Second, a population exposure reduction target: – 35% reduction in population exposure by 2040, compared to 2018 (Ibid.). These targets further underscore the importance of Heathrow Airport’s sustainability communication because it indirectly adds pressure to be more sustainable. The present study seeks to examine what strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its environmental and social sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page and how these align with its 2.0 Plan. Social media platforms like Facebook are key tools for organizations to utilize in order to communicate with a large audience. In particular, Facebook, created in 2004, is the most used social media based on monthly active users (Statista n.d). Consequently, it is valuable to gain insight into Heathrow Airport’s sustainability messaging on its Facebook page. Furthermore, Heathrow Airport is a significant airport to examine because its size makes it a central figure in the industry. Heathrow Airport is one of the busiest airports in the world and a well-known brand that handles millions of passengers every year (Stacey, Harrison & Pope 2021), allowing it to reach a wider audience through its different platforms. Consequently, its sustainability initiatives can have a great impact. As mentioned, this study also investigates the alignment of the sustainability content on Heathrow Airport’s Facebook page with its 2.0 plan, which is significant because it provides an insight into whether Heathrow Airport’s sustainability communication is consistent. Hossain et al (2019) highlight the importance of organizations using sustainability reports to communicate their commitment to important societal issues, which demonstrates reliability and credibility (Hossain et al 2019). This emphasizes the significance of including Heathrow Airport’s sustainability strategy, the 2.0 plan, and examining its alignment with the Facebook posts. In general, there is still little research on airports in terms of their sustainability communication on social media. This represents an important topic to study because both the aviation industry and social media are powerful components. Furthermore, the findings contribute to the existing literature by linking the field of sustainability communication on social media with airports. These insights are relevant as communication on platforms like Facebook requires strategic assessments regarding sustainability messaging (Carpenter et al, 2016). Moreover, evaluating Heathrow Airport’s sustainability communication on social media is part of a broader recognition of the important connection between the aviation industry and sustainability practices.

## Problem formulation:

*What strategies does Heathrow Airport employ to communicate its sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page, and how do they align with its 2.0 Plan?*

To provide a more nuanced answer to the problem formulation, the sub-question is as follows,

How can Heathrow Airport communicate its sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page and in the 2.0 Plan more effectively?

## Structure of the study

The structure of this study is presented to improve the understanding of the various sections. This study follows a simple structure in which the literature review is presented first in Chapter 1 which will elaborate upon the implementation of CSR in the aviation industry and greenwashing. Following this, Chapter 2 elaborates upon the theories; corporate communication, sustainability and stakeholder theory. The theory chapter also provides a framework for building arguments. Chapter 3 elaborates upon the methodological choices adopted. This encompasses the philosophy of science, the collection of empirical data, the ethical considerations that were considered, and the analytical process. Chapter 4 presents the qualitative content analyses that provide the basis for Chapter 5 where the findings will be considered and interpreted, theoretical contributions and practical implications along with limitations affecting the study, will be reflected. Finally, I will conclude on the findings of this study and reflect on its significance.

# 1. Literature review

This section provides an overview of the current state of knowledge in the field and serves as a critical review of existing research related to the topic. To inform the analysis, it is important to examine current research on key aspects that affect the aviation industry in a sustainability context. Consequently, the first topic of this literature review is implementation of CSR in the aviation industry. This is included because CSR and sustainability are closely connected and have significant overlaps. Greenwashing in the aviation industry is the second topic included in this literature review because it addresses the challenges connected with genuine sustainable practices. When communicating sustainability, there is a fine balance between presenting one's practices in a positive manner and greenwashing thus, greenwashing in the aviation industry is important to include, as it provides insight into this perspective.

## 1.1 Implementing CSR in the aviation industry

It is undeniable that CSR plays a significant role in the context of sustainability and the aviation industry. The term Corporate Social Responsibility can be traced back to the 1920s, according to Windsor (2001), when accountability and responsibility practices were being discussed (Vertigans & Idowu 2021, 4). In 1953, CSR was theorized by Howard Bowen, who argued that large companies are important centres of power and therefore their actions can influence people's lives greatly. He claimed that the "social responsibilities of businessmen" are their obligations to adopt policies or make decisions that are desirable for society (Sharma, Kaur & Syan 2021). However, the meaning and recognition of corporate responsibility have changed significantly over the last century, and it is limiting to characterize CSR as the social responsibilities of businessmen and viewing it as an obligation. A more modern take is by the EU Commission which defined CSR as "a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis" (Atrey 2020). The primary aim of CSR initiatives is to encourage companies and governments to implement socially responsible practices in their actions, assisting them in adapting to social and environmental challenges. Objectives and aims may differ, however, the overall purpose is to promote responsible behavior that benefits the company as well as society (Jones, Tench & Sun 2014, 4). The literature in this chapter acknowledges the

increasing focus on CSR in the aviation industry in recent years and a growing acknowledgment of the need for sustainable practices. Ovdiienko (2023) bridges the gap between CSR and the aviation industry, as she stresses the importance of aviation companies enhancing their reputation and contributing to a more sustainable industry through the implementation of CSR (Ovdiienko 2023). Ovdiienko (2023) emphasizes that implementing CSR can positively impact the environment and local communities. This is an important point, as it also suggests that implementing CSR in the aviation industry can give it a competitive edge. Ovdiienko (2023) further states that, CSR can have economic benefits for aviation companies, such as reducing energy consumption, which can lead to cost savings (Ovdiienko 2023). Generally, aviation organizations are interested in the long-term benefits CSR can bring. Aviation companies can demonstrate their commitment to sustainability and social responsibility by promoting employee volunteerism, engaging with stakeholders and choosing suppliers who share their values (Ovdiienko, 2023). Overall, Ovdiienko (2023) emphasizes that the use of CSR is significantly advantageous to organizations as well as society (Ovdiienko 2023). This is echoed by Zhang & Ahmad (2021) who found that CSR activities positively affect customers purchasing intentions directly and indirectly through improved trust (Zhang & Ahmad 2021). Consumers generally reward companies that take part in CSR practices and are more likely to help socially responsible companies (Ibid). A study by Sorsa and Bona-Sánchez (2024) reveals a shift towards integrated CSR strategies in the airline industry, highlighting stakeholder inclusion, sustainability and reporting. Furthermore, they argue that employees' engagement and perception of CSR positively impacted satisfaction and job performance (Sorsa & Bona-Sánchez 2024), emphasizing the need for CSR in the aviation industry. These studies show the advantages implementing CSR can bring. Nevertheless, there is also an increased pressure on organizations to implement CSR. Anttila and Kretzschmar (2010) conducted a study regarding global airlines implementation of CSR. Their study revealed that because of increased media coverage of environmental issues, airlines are pressured to implement practices that contribute to business sustainability (Anttila & Kretzschmar 2010). Moreover, it is also important to note that there are challenges regarding CSR in the aviation industry, as it is highly regulated and faces complex technical and operational challenges. Despite this, stakeholders today demand transparency and genuine commitment to CSR; however, authentic CSR can be difficult to obtain with the risk of 'greenwashing' (Sorsa & Bona-Sánchez 2024). Porter and Kramer (2007) argue that CSR efforts are counterproductive. They believe that it pits organizations against society when, in fact, they are interdependent. Thus, they have provided a framework for organizations to identify the consequences



of their actions, find new opportunities to benefit society, and determine which CSR initiatives they should focus on (Porter & Kramer 2007). These perspectives holistically create a view of CSR in the aviation industry through different perspectives and interests.

## 1.2 Greenwashing in the aviation industry

Greenwashing occurs when companies mislead consumers about their environmental practices or the environmental benefits of their products or services (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Gregory (2023) offers a more sophisticated view and defines greenwashing as “a strategic decision made by a company to mislead investors and consumers that the company is committed to environmental, social, and governance policies that increase the value of the company through the products and services it sells.” (Sari & Windijarto. 2023). Making misleading environmental claims that give the idea that a service or product is less damaging or environmentally friendly compared to competing services or goods is greenwashing (Neureiter et al, 2024). A greenwashing company engages in two actions at the same time: having inadequate environmental performance and promoting positive information about its environmental efforts (Delmas & Burbano 2011). Limited and flawed information about a company's environmental practices, as well as uncertainty about potential regulatory consequences for greenwashing, directly contribute to greenwashing (Ibid). The aviation industry focuses significantly on technological improvements and carbon taxes. However, low-carbon aviation technologies are nascent. Generally, carbon trading schemes and carbon taxes are insufficient to facilitate sustained reductions to achieve net-zero emissions (Guix, Ollé & Font 2022). However, a study by Vollero (2022), connected theory and practice by analyzing three organizations accused of greenwashing and discovered common communication errors and practices of corporate misconduct. Based on the findings, Vollero (2022) presents solutions to contrast the various types of greenwashing risks and how to reduce the negative effects on corporate image and reputation (Vollero 2022). Similarly, a study by Sari and Windijarto (2023) presents factors that can minimize greenwashing through their systematic literature review of 21 relevant articles. They found that support-oriented environmental regulations, product market competition, and transparency are all mitigating factors (Sari and Windijarto 2023). Neureiter et al (2023) investigated the effects of greenwashed advertisements for airlines with a quota-based sample (N=329) and examined consumers perceptions of greenwashing in airline advertising. They found that consumers did not associate concrete compensation claims with greenwashing; however, abstract compensation claims did (Neureiter et al

2023). Thus, this study also reveals crucial insight into how the aviation industry should communicate. They also identified three different types of misleading green claims. First and foremost, “false claims” are based on outright lies. “Vague claims” are when the meaning is unclear or very broad, for instance, when a company claims to use ‘all-natural ingredients. The third type is “omission claims” which is when important information is left out, for example, by not mentioning the environmental downsides of a service or product (Ibid). Previous content analyses conducted within the context of green advertising have revealed that most of the environmental advertisements that were analyzed, can be classified as deceptive (Ibid). In the last two decades, however, the debate about greenwashing has been changing constantly, and the term has acquired different meanings (Vollero 2022). A study by Hemmings et al (2023) found that most net-zero strategies do not have a clear plan for offsetting. Without a detailed idea of how to reach the “net” in net-zero, most plans fail to deliver. Thus, they claim that UK airports have to be concrete about their plans to avoid being accused of greenwashing (Hemmings et al, 2023). Budd, Kambari and Ison (2023) conducted a study investigating the existence and content of net zero strategies at UK airports to assess their net zero “readiness”. The findings revealed that UK airports are in the early stages of developing net zero strategies and uncovered a lack of standardized emissions categorization and methods concerning reporting (Budd, Kambari & Ison, 2023). This study supports the findings by Hemmings et al (2023) as it also indicates a general lack of an effective approach towards communicating targets. Thus, it is useful to consider the role of transparency and concrete calculations when describing targets. Furthermore, the aviation industry increasingly misleads through green advertising strategies, or, in other words, greenwashing strategies. For example, when highlighting their pro-environmental performance while hiding environmentally damaging aspects of flying. For consumers, it can be difficult to identify sustainable services or products if the information is unclear (Neureiter & Matthes, 2022). These perspectives create a comprehensive view of greenwashing in the aviation industry by combining studies concerning the effect of greenwashing and its minimization.

## 2. Theory

This section will account for theories relevant to the analysis. The theory chapter aims to explore key theories, examining their significance and implications, along with providing a comprehensive overview of the theoretical framework for this study, establishing a solid foundation upon which the findings and analysis will be based. First, this section will explain corporate communication. Second, stakeholder theory will be expanded upon and finally, sustainability theory will be explained.

### 2.1 Corporate communication

As mentioned, this chapter will elaborate on corporate communication, which offers an understanding of various aspects regarding internal and external communication with stakeholders. Most modern communication theories can be traced back thousands of years to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. His observations on communication laid the foundation for modern communication theory, including corporate communication (Argenti 2013, 30). Corporate communication can be defined as “an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonized as effectively and efficiently as possible...” (Cornelissen 2010). This perspective of corporate communication captures the importance of aligning communications to enhance efficiency, and since this study aims to understand what strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its sustainability initiatives on Facebook and how they align with its 2.0 plan, this is well-supported. Cornelissen (2004) argues that corporate communication concentrates on how an organization is presented to all of its key stakeholders, both internal and external (Cornelissen 2004, 21). Thus, overall, corporate communication encompasses all of the communication sent to internal and external stakeholders. Generally, there are three different ways to view how the process of communication works: communication as a one-way process, which is sender to receiver, communication as a two-way process of meaning construction, where two or more people construct new meanings together, and lastly, communication as an ongoing process that evolves over time (Ruler 2018). This study will focus on communication as a one-way process because, as mentioned, it aims to examine what strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its strategies, not how

the audience reacts to the posts or the sustainability report. Furthermore, social media has significantly influenced the style of corporate communications and the dissemination of information. Platforms can be personalized, self-managed and interconnected. As Vasquez and Velez (2011) state, communicating corporate messages through social media is crucial to improve and promote conversations between organizations and stakeholders. Social media allows stakeholders, organizations, society, et cetera to have a voice (Vasquez & Velez 2011). Organizations can also add images, videos and links as these features can support organizations in promoting their content online (Camilleri 2021, 4). This emphasizes the importance of also examining Heathrow Airport's approach to that. It is crucial for organizations to communicate strategically, and it can determine the success of organizations (Argenti 2013, 16). Herd (2024) emphasizes the importance of transparency and consistency to ensure stakeholders can understand the organization's standpoints and reduce misunderstandings (Herd, 2024). Argenti (2013), echoes this by claiming that the public expects organizations to be transparent when communicating. Furthermore, Bishop (2006) also emphasizes the importance of clear and consistent communication to increase authenticity (Sharma 2018). Moreover, messages, products, activities and reports are being analyzed by the public with remarkable inspection (Argenti 2013, 50). Consequently, it is particularly crucial for Heathrow Airport to be transparent and clear when communicating, as Asensio et al (2014) argue, transparent communication, especially when communicating with the local communities, can help airports build trust with stakeholders (Heyes et al 2021). Moreover, for organizations, it is crucial to anticipate if their messages fit with the expectations of their stakeholders. Airports, in particular, should publish data on their financial performance and how they contribute to welfare while balancing facts and corporate pathos (Ibid). Including corporate communication theory builds a framework for understanding how Heathrow Airport shares information internally and externally, as it can reflect Heathrow Airport's initiatives and how it communicates them to its stakeholders, in this case, particularly external communication.

## 2.2 Stakeholder theory

This chapter will elaborate on stakeholder theory, which will provide an understanding of different key stakeholder aspects. Moreover, this may offer an insight into Heathrow Airport's communication of its sustainability initiatives to its stakeholders on Facebook and in its 2.0 plan. Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of a corporation's or organization's purpose." (Wasieleski & Weber 2017, 24). Fares et al (2021) argue that a stakeholder is an individual or group who can influence or is influenced by companies with a mission-oriented approach looking to accomplish specific goals (Fares, Chung & Abbasi 2021). The definition by Fares et al (2021) points to stakeholders both being internal and external and that stakeholders play a role in the achievement of goals. Through a review of literature Schaar and Sherry (2010) have made a comprehensive list of airport stakeholders (Schaar & Sherry 2010).

<b>Stakeholder Group</b>	<b>References Citing Group</b>
Passengers	(Upham 2003; Rhoades et al. 2000; Neufville & Odoni 2003)
Air carriers	(Upham 2003; Rhoades et al. 2000; Offerman; Neufville & Odoni 2003; Sarkis & Talluri 2004)
General aviation users	(Rhoades et al. 2000)
Airport organization	(Upham 2003; Rhoades et al. 2000; Offerman; Sarkis & Talluri 2004)
Investors and bond-holders	(Neufville & Odoni 2003)
Concessionaires	(Rhoades et al. 2000; Neufville & Odoni 2003)
Service providers	(Upham 2003; Rhoades et al. 2000; Neufville & Odoni 2003)
Employees	(Upham 2003)
Federal government	(Upham 2003; Offerman; Neufville & Odoni 2003; Sarkis & Talluri 2004)
Local government	(Upham 2003; Offerman; Neufville & Odoni 2003; Sarkis & Talluri 2004)
Communities affected by airport operations	(Upham 2003; Offerman)
NGOs, such as environmental bodies	(Upham 2003)
Business, commerce, tourism, arts, sports, and education organizations	(Upham 2003)
Parking operators and ground transportation providers	(Upham 2003; Neufville & Odoni 2003)
Airport suppliers	(Upham 2003; Neufville & Odoni 2003)

Table 1. (Schaar & Sherry, 2010).

Table 1 illustrates the various stakeholders Heathrow Airport deals with, based on literature. Moreover, the general aim of the stakeholder approach is for organizations to find a fit between the organization and the interests of its stakeholders to enhance the organization's performance (Isa, Hamid & Leong 2016). The aviation industry consists of countless stakeholders (Wittmer & Walls, 2022, 6) It could, for instance, be government, employees, locals, suppliers and customers (Gaur 2013), who all have a multiplicity of expectations, interpretations, and informational needs regarding sustainability (Hanna 2016). Consequently, Heathrow Airport deals with various types of stakeholders who all have different interests. Airport stakeholder goals might conflict with each other, for instance, local community concerns about noise and emissions versus a commercial wish to increase route activity, which benefits the local economy (Hiney, Efthymiou & Morgenroth 2023). While stakeholders look for organizations to understand, acknowledge, and protect their interest, stakeholders can have a crucial impact on the survival and performance of the organization as well (Guttermann, 2023). Freeman et al (2020) describe stakeholder framework as a management approach that focuses on business issues, communicating how stakeholder management can lead to greater organizational results by adding stakeholder interests into business strategies (Langrafe et al 2020). In this regard, it is important to note that stakeholder theory is different from CSR theory, as stakeholder theory focuses on ethical treatment of stakeholders instead of encouraging actions like corporate philanthropy (Ibid). Moreover, stakeholder theory encourages an effective, efficient, practical, and ethical way to manage organizations in a tumultuous and complex environment (Harrison, Freeman & Cavalcanti Sá de Abreu 2015). Generally, stakeholders are important to organizations, as they cannot reach their goals and implement strategies without, for instance, the employees' time, efforts, and knowledge. Organizations also provide jobs, money and pension schemes to the employees. Harrison et al (2015) argue that stakeholders that are shown consideration are more likely to respond with positive behaviors and attitudes towards the organization (Harrison, Freeman & Cavalcanti Sá de Abreu 2015). This could, for example, be remaining loyal to the organization, buying more products, sharing valuable information, et cetera. This indicates that it is important for Heathrow Airport's communication to include aspects of interest to the stakeholders. Treating all stakeholders with honesty, fairness, and generosity is an important aspect, according to stakeholder theory (Ibid). Organizations are expected to produce favorable results based on

accomplishing morally important goals (Phillips et al, 2019). Alhumaymidi (2021) argues that an organization functions as a citizen that has responsibilities and obligations towards the public (Alhumaymidi 2021). Moreover, stakeholder theory has a few limitations. First, it does not provide clear ethical principles for business managers in dealing with the natural environment, which do not directly involve humans (Orts & Strudler, 2015). Additionally, it relies on regulations to balance any negative impacts it may have (Narbel & Muff 2017). Despite these limitations, stakeholder theory remains valuable as a framework because of the interests of various stakeholders. For example, for the local community near Heathrow Airport, it is important that Heathrow Airport follows sustainable regulations. Furthermore, stakeholder theory is relevant to include in this study because it highlights the value of communicating with different stakeholder groups like customers, local communities, environmental groups, et cetera. It emphasizes that by using sustainable messaging on Facebook and in its 2.0 plan, Heathrow Airport can build credibility and trust with its stakeholders. One of the most important steps an organization should take is to be transparent to stakeholders, as transparency is key to building trust, managing risk, and enhancing and maintaining the organization's reputation. Stakeholders are increasingly aware of organizations strategies and activities, which has caused an increase in pressure for in-depth information regarding how organizations face community challenges (Nilawati, Purwanti & Nuryaman 2018). Thus, transparency is key for organizations when communicating (Baraibar-Diez & Odriozola 2015). Generally, transparency refers to openness and the communication of information in a manner where it is straightforward to see what actions are being performed and which are not. As sustainability reporting becomes increasingly mainstream for organizations, a lack of credibility is more observable (Gold & Hekkuri, 2018). If an organization has poor management, it will be difficult to transparently present sustainability reports. (Nilawati, Purwanti & Nuryaman 2018). Bushman et al (2004) defined transparency as the availability of adequate information to stakeholders (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson 2014). Transparency is an evaluation of the quality of information disclosed by the company and is used to shape stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's ability, integrity and virtue. Even if the information disclosed can inherently threaten the interests of the organization, the organization may recognize that disclosing information to stakeholders is appropriate since it helps stakeholders make decisions based on the information received. Organizations in environmentally sensitive industries will present sustainability reports with a high level of transparency, and the more sensitive the company is to the environment, the more important is the sustainability report for the company (Nilawati, Purwanti & Nuryaman 2018). Many stakeholders consider sustainability reports lacking basic characteristics of

reliability and accuracy. They generally contain a lot of information; however, it is unclear what it means. Emissions data is often reported, for instance, without benchmarks, which makes it difficult to interpret (Tang & Higgins 2022). Including Stakeholder theory provides a framework for further understanding Heathrow Airport's sustainability communication strategies. It gives insight into important aspects that are important to stakeholders in terms of communication, which can help provide perspectives into Heathrow Airport's sustainability communication.

### 2.3. Sustainability

This chapter will account for sustainability theory, providing an overview of key aspects such as the three pillars of sustainability. Furthermore, it will also elaborate on sustainability in the aviation industry, which provides a framework for understanding Heathrow Airport's integration of sustainability practices.

Several scholars have addressed different aspects of sustainability; however, it is difficult to determine a precise meaning and provide a single definition of the term sustainability (Becker 2011, 9). The most common definition of sustainability is from the Brundtland World Commission Report (1987), which defined it as "the development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.". In 2019, sustainability was defined as "satisfying the needs of current and future generations, depending on appropriate circumstances of human, natural, and economic capital to provide for human welfare" (Hajian & Kashani 2021), which represents a modern take on the definition. Purvis et al. (2018) state that due to various academic fields having different perspectives, a clear universally accepted theoretical concept of sustainability has not been established (Purvis et al. 2018). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that "sustainability" is a complex concept that has different interpretations depending on the context. Nevertheless, the fundamental premise of sustainability is how organizations can generate more profit, while using fewer harmful toxics and producing less greenhouse gas emissions, et cetera (Hedstrom 2018). CSR and sustainability are strongly related; however, sustainability incorporates environmental, economic and social dimensions and CSR is more focused on management practices within organizations. It does not ignore the social, environmental and economic aspects, nevertheless, its central focus is on how to manage these aspects in a corporate context (Rasche et al 2023, 9) It is important to note that this study regards CSR as a part of the



broader concept of sustainability, thus the theory related to CSR is considered from the perspective of sustainability. According to the Bundtland report in 1987, the key aspects of sustainability consist of environmental, economic and social contexts (Purvis, Mao & Robinson 2018). There are several ways to illustrate these three interchangeable elements of sustainability. The most commonly used is the three circles model illustrated below (Figure 1).

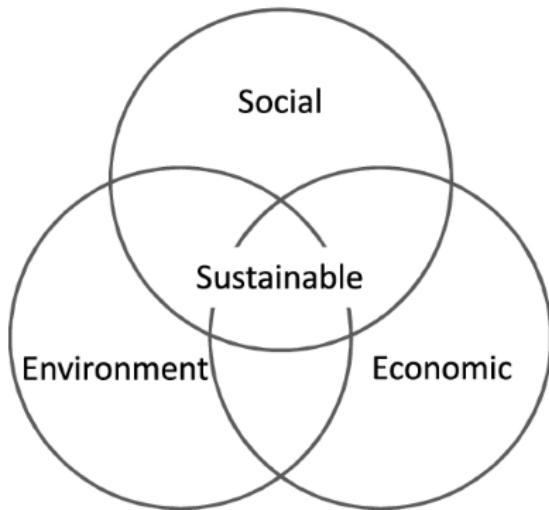


Figure 1. Three circles model (Purvis, Mao & Robnsinson 2018).

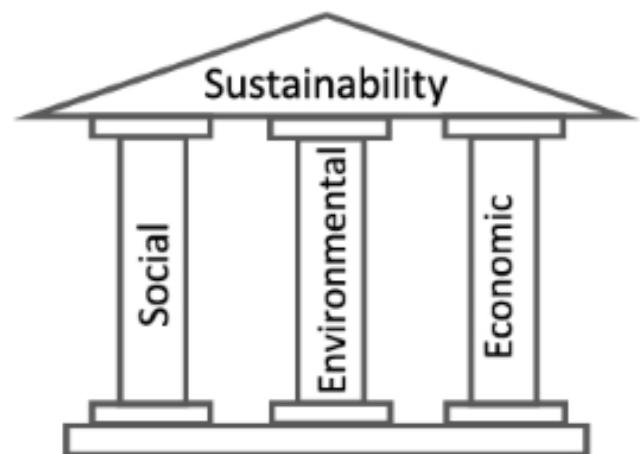


Figure 2. Three pillars model (Ibid).

Despite the various interpretations of sustainability, they all emphasize the importance of balancing environmental, economic and social elements. Commonly, the most notable pillar is the environmental. It covers the organizations interactions with the physical environment and typically encompasses reduction of pollution, efficient recourse usage and the general environmental footprint from the organization's operations (Gimenez et al 2012. For Heathrow Airport the focus criteria would typically be energy efficiency, noise, air pollution, and land use (Upham et al, 12). The economic pillar refers to shareholder value and economic growth (Székely & Knirsch 2005). This could be job creation and growth contribution, travel time, cost recovery, productivity, et cetera which Heathrow Airport should focus on (Upham et a, 11). Lastly, the social pillar covers the organizations impact on the local communities (Reilly & Hynan 2014). It often encompasses ethical business practices and building value for stakeholders (Székely & Knirsch 2005). For Heathrow Airport this would be local participation procedures, safety, the involvement of the public within legal decisions,

et cetera (Upham et al, 11). Furthermore, Greer (2020) argues that airport sustainability contains a fourth pillar, operational efficiency, which involves accounting for life-cycle costs (Greer 2020). Sameh & Scavuzzi (2016) claim that operational measures are one of the strategies to reduce effects of aviation on the environment. This could for instance, be shortening routes (Sameh & Scavuzzi 2016). However, this study will mostly focus on the environmental, and social elements because the study aims for a more focused approach. Furthermore, a problematic aspect of the three-pillar concept is the lack of theoretical development. Its origins have been attributed to the Brundtland Report, Agenda 21, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, however, these documents do not present a clear theoretical background (Purivs, Mao & Robinson 2018).

### 2.3.1 Sustainability in the aviation industry

Eid et al (2022) argue that for airports, in particular, it is difficult to decrease environmental damage, improve operational expenses, and satisfy customers simultaneously. Airport sustainability involves environmental protection and natural resources, while also considering the needs of airport officials and the public (Eid et al 2022). For airports, applying sustainability, is of great importance, because it affects the local community and generally reduces the negative environmental impact caused by the airport (Ibid). Sameh & Scavuzzi (2016), argue that environmental concerns have always affected local communities and been a reason for opposing airport growth. This has also affected Heathrow Airport, which, for instance, had to cancel the plan to add a new runway (Hayden, 2011). Thus, as mentioned, maintaining a healthy relation with local communities is important for airports, since it can affect the airport's development (Sameh & Scavuzzi, 2016). Several steps can be taken by airports to maintain good relations with local communities. First, the airport should diminish its negative effects (Ibid). This implies identifying the environmental problems and then measuring the negative effects such as noise, air quality, waste, traffic congestion, et cetera. Second, is to develop plans to reduce these effects and sketch out preventive measures, while setting goals. The airport should continuously monitor and publish reports that are transparent and accessible to enhance trust among local communities (Ibid). However, it is important to note that reports, for instance, annual and CSR reports, are commonly used for disclosure, but transparency and reporting are not the same thing. Reporting is solely one of the ways for organizations to partly communicate transparency (Gütürk & Hahn 2016). This also emphasizes that it is important that Heathrow Airport having a sustainability strategy plan is not to be mistaken for transparency. It is necessary for the aviation industry to assess

the effectiveness of their environmental strategies, as stakeholders are pressuring them to examine their negative impacts and manage them sustainably (Dimitriou & Karagkouni 2022). Generally, balancing sustainability and a profitable organization can be difficult. It is an issue for a lot of organizations, how can they expand, make money, and satisfy their customers with a lower impact on the planet (Ibid). Thus, it can have negative impacts for organizations to implement sustainable practices (Voci & Karmasin 2024). For instance, reducing environmental impact is expensive, and it is not a guarantee that consumers are willing to pay higher prices for sustainable solutions. It is therefore important, when communicating sustainability, to convey truths about the challenges regarding sustainability. It is more than just showcasing the positive aspects (Ibid). This theory provides an understanding of the development of communication strategies regarding sustainability, and the connection between environmental and social elements, Heathrow Airport deals with.

Thus far, in this section, the importance of corporate communication has been emphasized, as it builds a framework for understanding how Heathrow Airport shares information internally and externally, since it can reflect Heathrow Airport's initiatives and how it communicates them to its stakeholders. Furthermore, this section explained stakeholder theory, which provides insight into the various stakeholders in the aviation industry and important communicative perspectives such as the emphasis on transparency. Additionally, this section explained sustainability in an aviation context, which provides key aspects that are important for this study such as communicating challenges. Notably, these theories have significant similarities, such as the emphasis on the importance of transparency in communicative contexts. The next section will present the methodology of this study.

### 3. Methodology

This section will delineate the methodology that underpins this study. First the philosophy of science will be explained along with the ontology and epistemology that guided this study. The data collection will also be elaborated on, including the sample size, method and data collection limitation. Furthermore, the content analysis that guided this study will be explained, as well as ethical considerations.

#### 3.1 Philosophy of science

As mentioned, the following chapter will present the interpretivism, ontology, and epistemology paradigms used in this study. It is important to understand the philosophical perspectives from which the study was conducted because they affected the approach. Moreover, including the philosophy of science provides transparency regarding assumptions and allows for a nuanced analysis.

This study had an interpretivist approach, which means that it is indirectly influenced by the researcher's own interpretations and perspectives. The interpretivist paradigm acknowledges that reality is not a definite concept, but is rather shaped by the various perspectives of individuals within society (Acharya, 2024). Furthermore, interpretivism argues that researchers cannot be completely separate from their own beliefs and values, which will inevitably affect the way in which data is collected, interpreted, and analyzed (Blackwell, 2018). For instance, when I collected Facebook posts for this study my own beliefs about what counted as a sustainability post affected which posts were collected. Furthermore, other researchers might have different methodologies for evaluating sustainability posts. In this study, the interpretation of what counted as a sustainability post may differ from that of other researchers, which can lead to biases in the data. Oates (2006) echoes this, as she claims that researchers are not neutral, since they have their own beliefs and values, which will shape the research process (Munkvold & Bygstad 2016). Researchers employing interpretivism aim to understand motivations, human beliefs, and reasoning in social interactions. In this case, the study

aimed to understand what strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its environmental and social sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page, and how these align with its 2.0 plan. Correspondingly, this study aimed to understand how Heathrow Airport can more effectively communicate its sustainability initiatives on Facebook and in its 2.0 plan. Interpretivism was valuable for this study because the meanings and interpretations associated with Heathrow Airport's sustainability communication could be explored. The interpretivist paradigm helped highlight the various aspects of Heathrow Airport's communication from a nuanced perspective.

### 3.2 Ontology and epistemology

Ontology focuses on understanding what is real. It is the study of how things exist in reality, whereas epistemology is the study of how everyone obtains knowledge about reality. It examines how we seek to uncover the truth and understand reality (Alharahsheh, Pius 2020). This study adopted a relativist ontology and subjective epistemology. Relativist ontology is the notion that nothing exists outside of our thoughts and that reality is a subjective experience (Levers 2013). This means that what is real for one individual may not be the same for another, and everyone's reality is unique to them. Consequently, there are multiple interpretations of experience and, therefore, multiple realities (Ibid). Because this study adopts a relativist ontology, personal biases, subjectivity, and assumptions are acknowledged. This is useful because it allows for transparency about potential influences on the research and lets other researchers assess the credibility of this study. Furthermore, it encourages critical reflection during the writing process. Moreover, relativist ontology encouraged considering the social, cultural, and historical contexts in regards to Heathrow Airport and its sustainability communication. Subjective epistemology links the study to the researcher by assuming that people cannot be inseparable from their knowledge. An external reality exists according to subjective epistemology, but knowledge is influenced by beliefs and values (Levers 2013). It is impossible to have an unaffected knowledge of reality beyond personal interpretations. Therefore, observations are not entirely objective (Ibid). These factors could have influenced the way knowledge was produced and understood in this study. For instance, as mentioned, it is possible there was an interpretation bias. To minimize this, critical reflections are important (University of Waterloo, n.d). Therefore, throughout the study, critical reflections on the interpretive process were made. Specifically, this meant being self-reflective of my beliefs and how it can influence the outcomes.

### 3.3 Qualitative research

This chapter will provide an exploration of the qualitative research employed in this study. Moreover, this chapter will discuss the rationale for selecting qualitative research.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005), state that “Qualitative research is a multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them...” (Aspers & Corte 2019). As the quote states, since this study applied qualitative research, it focused on interpreting phenomena and, specifically, finding patterns concerning the strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its sustainability initiatives. Tenny et al (2022) echo this and claim qualitative research’s strength is the ability to explain patterns, which can be difficult to quantify (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan 2022). Furthermore, a characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the main tool for analysis (Merriam & Tisdell 2015). For instance, as Soiferman (2010) argues, qualitative researchers identify their personal stance concerning how their background and experiences form the interpretations they make through coding and the theme process (Soiferman 2010). Thus, in this study, I played a central role in analyzing the data. I collected information and made sense of it with my own observations. For instance, when collecting sustainability posts on Facebook, I played a central role in determining what was deemed sustainable. Furthermore, this study followed an inductive process. This means that data is gathered to build theories instead of testing hypotheses, as in positivist research (Zalaghi & Khazaei 2016). Inductive reasoning starts with specific observations and ends with general conclusions (Ibid). Moreover, qualitative research is exceedingly focused on non-numerical data such as words and pictures, as qualitative researchers are looking for meaning. The social meaning people attribute to experiences, situations, and circumstances, as well as the meanings people put into texts and other objects (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2010, 4). Qualitative research allows for methods such as in-depth interviews, observations, focus groups, discussions, content analysis et cetera (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011). Due to the explorative nature of qualitative framework, which can provide an in-depth exploration of alignments in Heathrow Airport’s sustainability messaging, it was applied in this study.

Furthermore, the topic of the present study was difficult to quantify, and there was a need to capture the complexities concerning Heathrow Airport's strategies and how those align with its 2.0 plan; hence, qualitative research was appropriate.

### 3.4 Data collection

The following chapter will explain the data collection of this study. First, the sample size and technique will be elaborated on to ensure credibility and applicability of the findings. Second, the data collection method will be explained to give an understanding of how the data was gathered. Lastly, the ethical considerations as well as the limitations that occurred during data collection will be elaborated on to provide transparent insight into the challenges that arose throughout the data collection process.

#### 3.4.1 Sample size and technique

The important question is what criteria were used to collect the data (Sloan & Quan-Haase 2017, 113). This study utilized purposive sampling to collect the Facebook posts. Purposive sampling is a non-randomized sampling technique where the researcher solely selects the subjects that satisfy the aims of the study (Obilor, 2023). Thus, in this study, specific criteria were established for the collection of Facebook posts. Heathrow Airport's "Sustainability Policy" acted as the foundation for the Facebook post criteria, as it provided a baseline of important sustainability elements. The "Sustainability Policy" emphasizes three overall sections. First, "Net zero aviation" which encompasses the work towards its vision of sustainable aviation at Heathrow, for instance, goals and aims. Second, "a great place to live and work" which involves the improvement of the locals' quality of life and making a positive impact on the local community. Lastly, "responsible business foundations", this encompasses Heathrow Airport's involvement with key issues such as environmental compliance, safety, security, and ethics (Sustainability Policy – Heathrow Airport). Furthermore, the posts had to be directly related to either environmental or social aspects of sustainability. The rationale behind this criterion was that environmental and social sustainability was the focus point of this study. This could, for instance, be posts containing aspects of the local community. biodiversity, et cetera. Posts that contained one or more of these elements were identified as a "sustainability" posts and therefore included in the dataset. Moreover, a critical consideration in

this study was the sample size. The appropriate sample size in qualitative research is often an area that is debated and of uncertainty as well (Vasileiou et al, 2018). According to qualitative research, there is not a concrete answer to “how many” samples should be included in a study; however, it is recommended that the sample size is large enough to allow new understandings of the phenomenon being studied (Ibid). Although, it is important that the sample size is small enough to allow for in-depth understanding. This study sought to go in depth with each post and give a detailed analysis, hence, only 14 posts were collected. The reason for this number specifically, was also to avoid including posts further back than from 2019, as Heathrow Airport posts infrequently about sustainability. Thus, from the start of 2019 to April 2024, there were approximately 14 sustainability posts based on this study's criteria.

#### 3.4.2 Data collection method

As mentioned, the data was collected from Heathrow Airport's official Facebook page and the sustainability strategy the “Heathrow 2.0 Plan” was extracted from Heathrow Airport's website. Facebook was chosen as the social media platform for this study due to its status as the leading social network worldwide in terms of monthly active users, as of January 2024 (Statista 2024). This was relevant for this study because by including Facebook it gave insight into how Heathrow Airport communicates its sustainable practices to a large audience, as it has 500.000 followers on its official Facebook page. It is crucial to note that there are numerous Facebook pages dedicated to Heathrow Airport, emphasizing the importance of collecting data only from the official Heathrow Airport Facebook page. To ensure the data was collected from the official Facebook page, the Facebook link on Heathrow Airport's website is used (Heathrow n.d). The “Heathrow 2.0 Plan” was selected as a part of the data because it was able to provide a comprehensive overview of Heathrow Airport's sustainability goals and strategies, supporting the interpretation of the Facebook posts. Furthermore, by including the sustainability strategy, it was possible to compare and contrast it to Heathrow Airport's Facebook posts, which provided an insight into alignments in its sustainability communication, and offered a comprehensive overview.

#### 3.4.3 Ethical considerations and limitations

Ethical issues were also taken into consideration when collecting the data. For example, the names of people liking or commenting on Heathrow Airport's Facebook posts were excluded for privacy



reasons. Furthermore, Sloan and Quan-Hasse (2017, 108) argue that data collection on social media can be influenced by external factors and lead to technical limitations. (Sloan & Quan-Haase 2017, 108). This study was also affected by technical limitations. A limitation was the infrequency of the sustainability posts on Heathrow Airport's Facebook page. There was a significant time gap between each sustainability post, which resulted in the posts being spread over several years. Consequently, several Facebook posts date back to 2019, and the 2.0 plan was made in 2022, thus if Heathrow Airport had posted more frequently about sustainability, it could have provided more thorough insight. However, in this regard it is important to note the dataset is still highly relevant because comparing posts from different years, might provide insight into patterns that have persisted over time, which can reveal long-term significance of ideas and strategies. Also, including posts from 2019 up to 2024 gives an insight into consistency, which is one of the most important things on social media (Digidamin 2020, 64).

### 3.5 Qualitative Content Analysis

The following chapter will first and foremost account for qualitative content analysis as the chosen method of analysis for the study. Second, the coding process diagrams for both the Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan will be presented following a description of the final categories, starting with the Facebook posts, then the 2.0 plan. This helps provide an overview and transparency of how the final categories were reached. Furthermore, a description of each category is included to provide clarity.

This study sought to examine what strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its sustainability initiatives on Facebook and how they align with its 2.0 plan. To do this, a qualitative content analysis was applied, which entailed organizing data into distinct categories (Zhang & Wildemuth n.d). Schreier (2012) defines qualitative content analysis as "QCA is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material. It is done by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame" (Kuckartz & Rädiker 2023). In other words, the aim of qualitative content analysis is to systematically convert a large amount of text or content into an organized and pithy summary of key results (Vears & Gilliam, n.d). In this regard, this study employed inductive reasoning, meaning that categories emerged from the data based on the researcher's careful examination (Zhang & Wildemuth, n.d). This was advantageous, as there are no

preconceived perspectives, and the categories are obtained directly from the data (Moretti et al, 2011). The content analysis was conducted to examine communication patterns based on posts from Heathrow Airport's Facebook page and text from "Heathrow 2.0 Plan". This approach provided a way to analyze and interpret Heathrow Airport's sustainability communication and its complexities. It offered a deeper understanding of patterns in communication as well by systematically analyzing the Facebook posts and sustainability report. Generally, a qualitative content analysis can be divided into the following steps. The first step is to read and re-read the Facebook posts and the sustainability report "Heathrow 2.0 Plan" in order to get a broad understanding of the data (Bengtsson 2016). This is an effective way to become familiar with the data as well. In this first step, there was an emphasis on what stands out in the posts and the sustainability report, as well as what the overall message was, in order to gain a sense of the texts. As mentioned, the final categories were identified using inductive reasoning. This means that the categories were found through exploration of the data rather than being predefined. Accordingly, I examined all 14 Facebook posts, allowed codes to emerge, and thereby identified the final categories. The coded data was then analyzed to identify patterns and common categories. Lastly, the results were interpreted and findings reported (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). The process of establishing the final categories for the Facebook posts is illustrated in the diagram below.

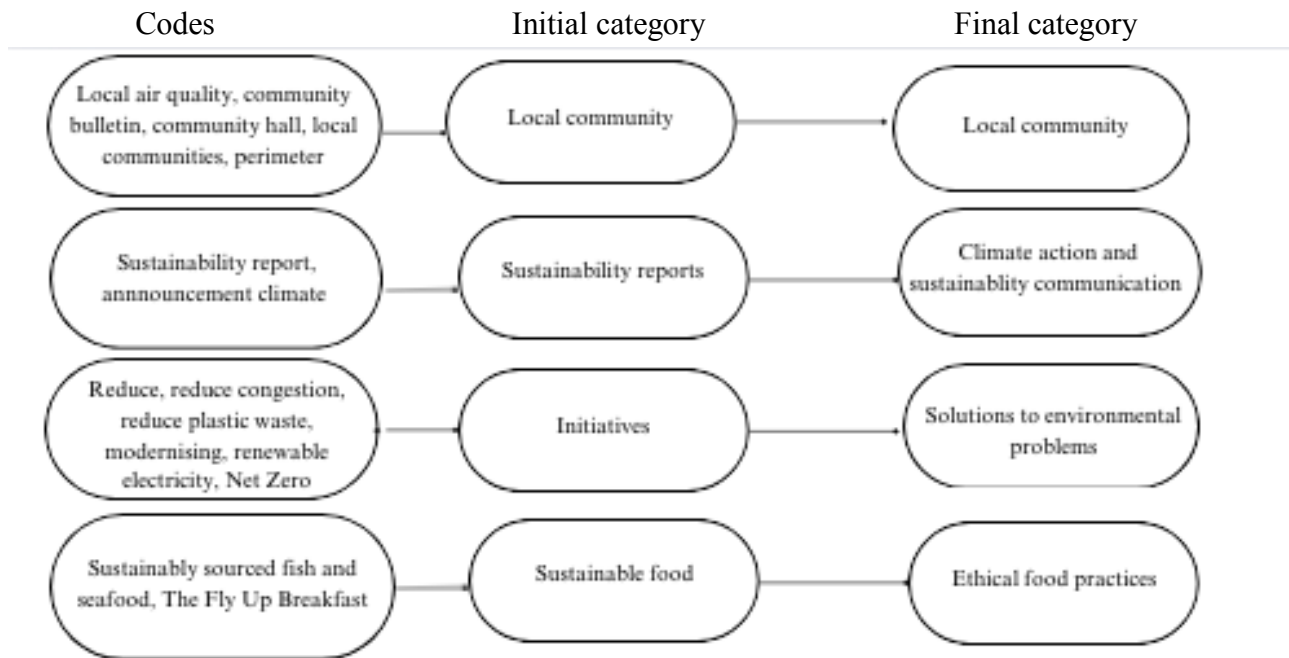


Figure 3. Coding process diagram, Facebook posts.

As illustrated in the coding process diagram the codes “local air quality”, “community bulletin”, “community hall”, “local communities”, “perimeter” became the initial category “Local community”, as all of the codes address the overall theme of local community. “Local community” became the final category as well because it addresses the problem formulation regarding Heathrow Airport’s sustainability communication, highlighting the local community as one of its strategic approaches to communicating its sustainability. Furthermore, the codes “sustainability report” and “announcement climate” became the initial category “Sustainability reports”, as both codes cover Heathrow Airport’s disclosures and its communication related to sustainability practices. However, after evaluating, this initial category became the final category “Climate action and sustainability communication” because this covers a broader meaning of its communication of both climate action and sustainability communication through reports. Moreover, the codes ‘reduce’, “reduce congestion”, “reduce plastic waste”, “modernizing”, “renewable electricity”, “Net Zero” became the initial category “Initiatives” because all of the codes encapsulate aspects of concrete initiatives. This then became the final

category “Solutions to environmental problems”, as it highlights that these specific codes focus on the environmental aspect concerning solutions, and not initiatives of economic or social issues. Lastly, the codes “sustainably sourced fish and seafood”, and “The Fly Up Breakfast” became the initial category “sustainable food” because both codes encapsulate sustainability. It is important to note that even though ‘The Fly Up Breakfast’ code in itself does not mention sustainability, in the context, it is used in conjunction with other sustainable terms. “Ethical food practices” became the final category because the ethical part of sustainable food is covered more appropriately. Furthermore, this final category highlights “Ethical food practices” as one of the strategies Heathrow Airport utilizes to communicate its sustainability.

Below are the descriptions of each final categories.

#### Local community

- This category includes elements of local community topics related to Heathrow Airport. This could, for instance, include environmental, social or political concerns affecting the local community. This could, for example be about how Heathrow Airport manages the noise impact on the local community.

#### Climate action and sustainability communications

- Includes elements of Heathrow Airport’s sustainability report and includes links directly to the sustainability report. Furthermore, it also contains elements of Heathrow Airport’s climate actions.

#### Solutions to environmental problems

- Explains Heathrow Airport initiatives to reduce its environmental impact. This could be posts related to Heathrow Airport’s aims to use renewable energy, and its focus on greenhouse gas emission reductions as well as other environmental measures, et cetera.

### Ethical food practices

- Includes elements of sustainable foods at Heathrow Airport. For instance, sustainably sourced food, reduction of food waste or recycling/preserving of food.

Coding process diagram for the “Heathrow 2.0 Plan”.

All 46 pages of the “Heathrow 2.0 Plan” were read and re-read to get a broad understanding of the plan (Bengtsson 2016). Codes were derived and the final categories were then identified. The process of establishing the final categories for the 2.0 plan is illustrated in the diagram below.

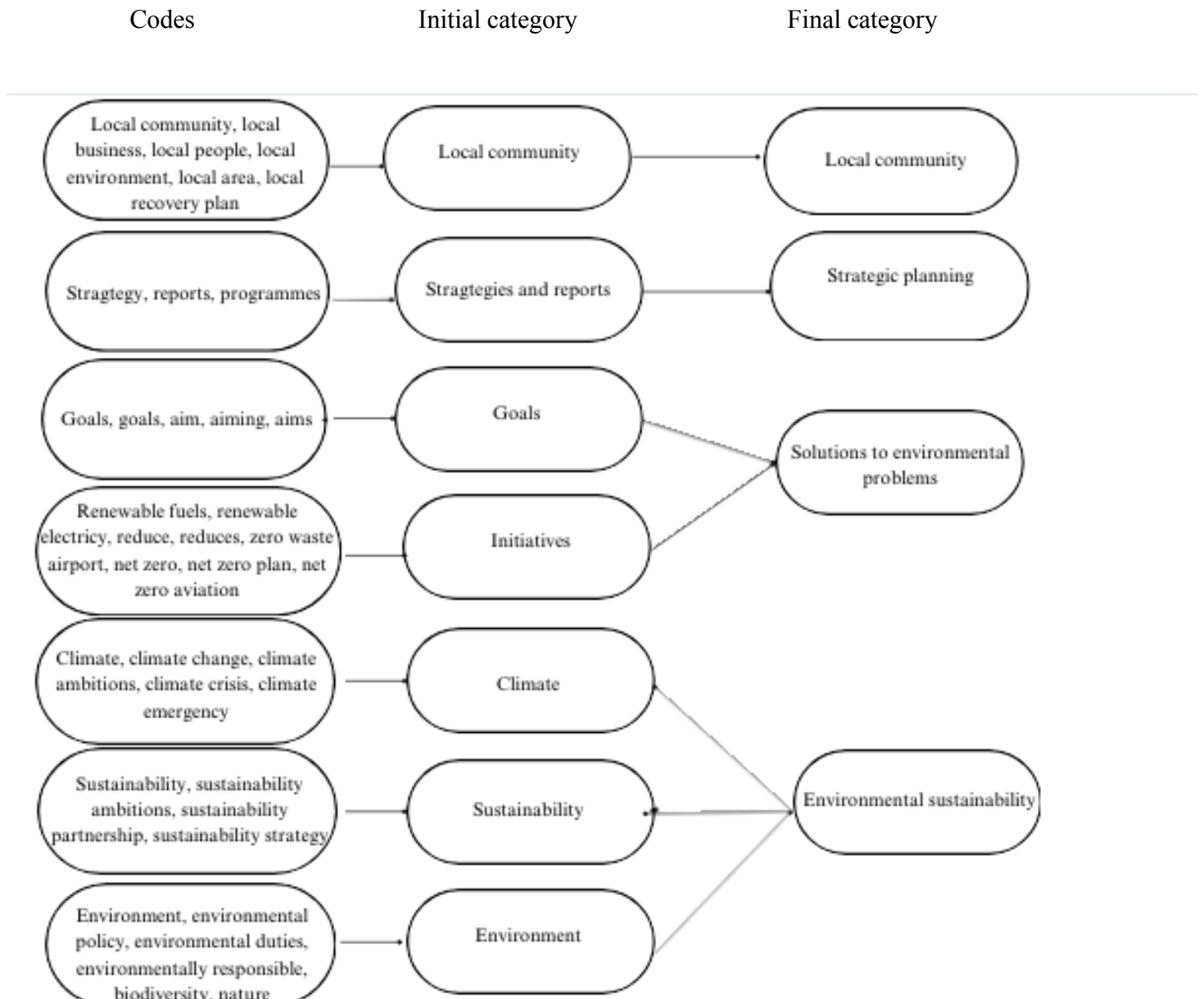


Figure 4. Coding process diagram, 2.0 plan.

As illustrated in the coding process diagram for the 2.0 plan, the codes “local community”, “local business”, “local people”, “local environment”, “local area”, “local recovery plan” became the initial category “Local community”. Similarly, to the coding process of the Facebook posts, the final category became “Local community” as well because it covers the overall significant aspects of the

codes. Again, this category addresses the problem formulation regarding Heathrow Airport's sustainability communication, highlighting the local community as one of its strategic approaches to communicating its sustainability. Furthermore, the codes 'strategy', 'reports', 'programmes' were present throughout the 2.0 plan. The initial category became "Strategies and reports" because it encapsulates the meaning of the codes, however, this was then changed to the final category "Strategic planning" in order to provide a more abstract and broader view. Furthermore, the codes "goals", "goal", "aim", "aiming", "aims" became the initial category "goals", as this category covers the overall meaning of the codes. However, as seen in the coding process diagram, the final category for "goals" is combined with the initial category "Initiatives" into the final category of "Solutions to environmental problems". It is important to note that the goals described in the 2.0 Plan mostly are connected to environmental goals, thus it is part of the final category "Solutions to environmental problems". The codes "renewable fuels", "renewable electricity", "reduce", "reduces", "zero waste airport", "net zero", "net zero plan", "net zero aviation" became the initial category "initiatives". As mentioned, the initial categories "goals" and "initiatives" were combined because they ultimately cover the same aspects, thus they became the final category "Solutions to environmental problems". As illustrated in the coding process diagram for the 2.0 Plan, three initial categories were combined into the final category "Environmental sustainability". First, the codes "climate", "climate change", "climate ambitions", "climate crisis", "climate emergency" became the initial category "Climate", as "Climate" covers the overall context of the codes. Second, the codes "sustainability", "sustainability ambitious", "sustainability partnership", "sustainability strategy" became the initial category "Sustainability", as again this initial category covers the general aspect of the codes. Lastly, the codes "environment", "environmental policy", "environmental duties", "environmentally responsible", "biodiversity", "nature" became the initial category 'Environment'. The three initial categories "Climate", "Sustainability" and "Environment" were then combined into the final category "Environmental sustainability" because they all reflect an interconnection and therefore, combining the codes into a final category is relevant.

Below are the descriptions of each final category.

#### Local community

- This category includes elements of local community topics related to Heathrow Airport. This could, for instance, include environmental, social or political concerns affecting the local community. This could, for example be about how Heathrow Airport manages the noise impact on the local community

#### Strategic planning

- Includes elements of Heathrow Airport's strategies, programs and reports regarding sustainability.

#### Environmental sustainability

- This category covers more broad and abstract aspects of climate change, sustainability and the environment.

#### Solutions to environmental problems

- Include elements that explain what Heathrow Airport does in order to reduce its environmental impact. This could be related to Heathrow Airport's aims to use renewable energy, and its focus on greenhouse gas emission reduction as well as other environmental measures.

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

This chapter will account for ethical considerations that impacted this study, particularly the dimensions of dependability, credibility, and confirmability. It will be explained how these dimensions contributed to the trustworthiness of this study's findings.

"Ethics is an ever-present concern for all researchers; it pervades every aspect of the research process from conception and design through to research practice, and continues to require consideration during dissemination of the results" (Iphofen & Tolich 2018).



As the quote implies, it was important to consider ethical concerns that affected this study. Particularly, the element of trustworthiness was a critical factor within this study. Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which the data could have been affected by the researcher in such a way that it leads to a misleading conclusion (Mirza, Bellalem & Mirza, 2023). The dimensions of dependability, credibility and confirmability are used to discuss trustworthiness in qualitative research. These dimensions all stem from careful interpretation and use of literature, careful justification of methods used in the study, and ensuring a structured data analysis to ensure a descriptive assessment (Carson 2001). To achieve dependability this study sought to provide in-depth methodological descriptions in order to allow the study to be repeated (Chowdhury n.d). To ensure confirmability in this study, there was emphasis on an in-depth methodological description to allow integrity of the results. Furthermore, limitations in this study's methods and the potential effects were highlighted to emphasize confirmability (Ibid). Credibility refers to the alignment between theory, research questions, data collection, analysis and results. It demands that one's methodology should be justified and clarified. (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett 2020). In this study the credibility was emphasized through examining previous research to frame the findings (Chowdhury n.d). Although it can be challenging to assess the quality of qualitative research the focus on credibility, confirmability and dependability in this study can help enhance trustworthiness. As mentioned, assessing the trustworthiness of the methodology can present challenges since it has a qualitative approach. Nevertheless, this study sought to make the methodological choices transparent by explaining how results were obtained. For instance, the data collection process was explained thoroughly, and the process of conducting the qualitative content analysis and how it is done in this study was described to be transparent about how the data was analyzed.

Overall, the methodology section of this study is important since it presents the ontological and epistemological stances that this study applied. Furthermore, it describes in-depth how the research was conducted, how the data was collected and how the it was analyzed through content analysis. Additionally, the ethical considerations affecting this study were addressed. More specifically, the dimensions of credibility, dependability and confirmability. In the next section, the findings of this study will be presented.

## 4. Analysis

In this section, the findings will be presented. It is important to note that the Facebook posts and the “Heathrow 2.0 Plan” were analyzed separately before a final collective assessment of the findings was made. This section will first present the analysis of the Facebook post and, afterwards, the analysis of the “Heathrow 2.0 Plan”.

### 4.1 Content Analysis of Facebook posts

To answer the problem formulation effectively, it was important to investigate what strategies Heathrow Airport uses to communicate its environmental and social sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page, hence a content analysis of Heathrow Airport's Facebook posts was made. It is important to note that text and images were analyzed jointly to get a comprehensive understanding of the posts. For instance, if a post contains both text and image it was analyzed together. By analyzing both text and image jointly, it provides a deeper understanding of the sustainability messages in the posts, as images are powerful communication devices and useful for conveying concepts and information (Harvard University n.d). It is also worthwhile to note that some posts were placed in multiple categories if they their messages merged with other categories. Moreover, as mentioned, this study has an interpretivist stance, thus there were multiple interpretations of experience and therefore multiple realities (Levers 2013) This means that in this analysis, the posts were interpreted by the researcher. Consequently, the reader might hold a different interpretation. Therefore, to overcome these issues, it was clearly explained why each post were assigned to the specific category, to facilitate transparency (Tuval-Mashiach 2016). In qualitative research, the readers need more than access to a source to track the interpretation and analysis (Moravcsik 2019) Thus. it was important in this study, to present pieces of textual data where the readers can recognize the patters identified by the researcher (Tuval-Mashiach 2016). Moreover, it is worthwhile to note that some of the Facebook posts include links. However, the content of the links is not analyzed, as this study aims to examine the immediate content being communicated. It also helps to keep the analysis focused. This chapter proceeds as follows. The next section provides an overview of the content analysis of the Facebook posts. A detailed analysis of each final category is presented, highlighting what strategies Heathrow Airport employs in its communication of sustainability

The pie chart below illustrates the distribution of the Facebook posts dataset.

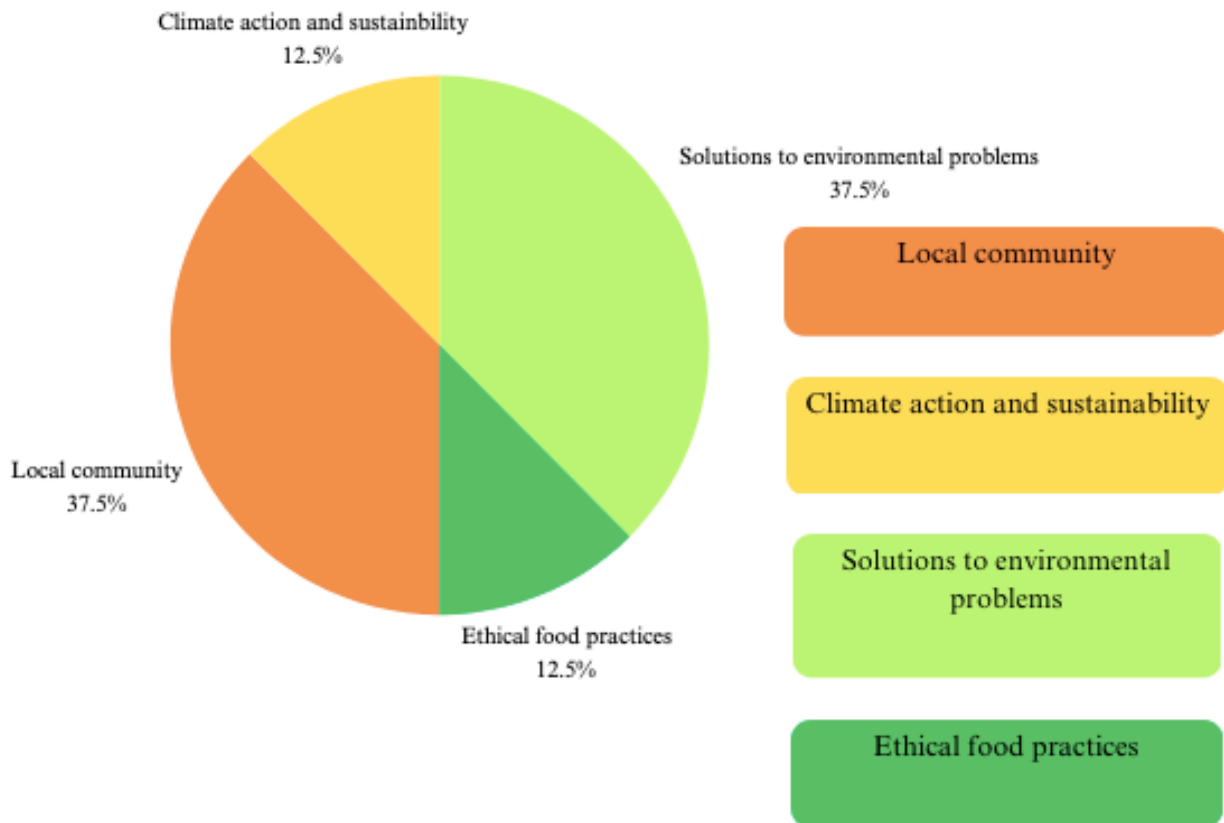


Figure 5. Pie chart, Facebook posts.

#### 4.1.1 Local community posts

The findings reveal that a significant part of Heathrow Airport's strategy is emphasizing the local community in its sustainability posts on Facebook, as 37.5% of the posts in the dataset were assigned to the "Local community" category. This is also in accordance with sustainability theory, which states that maintaining a good relationship with local communities is important for airports (Sameh & Scavuzzi 2016). In some ways, Heathrow Airport's communication of these local community initiatives is quite vague, as the posts lack concrete information concerning how these initiatives have helped the community. Nevertheless, this suggests it may be a communication strategy to present the information in a simplified manner and then provide further information in the links. Post 6 illustrates Heathrow employees helping the local community, emphasizing "giving back". It highlights

Heathrow Airport's volunteer work, where Heathrow Airport employees are gardening, litter picking, painting, et cetera. Also, according to Cicyota et al (2016) employee volunteerism can strengthen Heathrow Airport's connection with the local community (Cicyota, Ferrante & Schroeder, 2016). Therefore, communicating this initiative can be beneficial for Heathrow Airport. Furthermore, the post includes a link to Heathrow's Community Bulletin, providing an overview of Heathrow Airport's initiatives in the local community. The video attached showcases Heathrow Airport employees volunteering for the local community. This is also in accordance with stakeholder theory, which argues that the organization must uphold ethical standards towards the local communities (Alhumaymidi 2021). However, it is important to note, with these types of local community posts, it can be difficult to recognize how genuine Heathrow Airport is since the text is quite vague in terms of what is specifically being done; nevertheless, the link may offer a bit more transparency. Post 4 emphasizes the biodiversity around Heathrow Airport, including various species such as, snakes, bats, flora, fauna and fungi. Moreover, the text states, "Find out more about them in our blog", referring to the link (Appendix 1, 4). Through this post, Heathrow Airport illustrates its support of biodiversity in the local community. From the perspective of the local community, seeing the acknowledgement of the importance of biodiversity communicated publicly may strengthen the relationship with Heathrow Airport. This is based on stakeholder theory that states stakeholders appreciate organizations that acknowledges them (Gutterman, 2023). However, it is worthwhile to note that even though Heathrow Airport claims to be home to over 3,000 species, it is possible that there would be even greater biodiversity in the area if Heathrow Airport was not situated there. This is also in accordance with greenwashing theory, which explains that "omission claims" is when important information is left out, for example, by not mentioning the environmental downsides of a service or product (Neureiter et al, 2024). Post 8 was assigned to the "local community" category as well. The post states: "Last month, our Finance and Baggage teams came together for our biggest colleague volunteer project ever! With 81 dedicated Heathrow volunteers, we lent helping hands to refurbish the beloved Hanworth Community Hall." (Appendix 1, 8). The text clearly emphasizes volunteer and community attributes by mentioning that employees from Heathrow Airport volunteered in refurbishing the local community hall. Furthermore, the post also mentions the CEO, COO, and Chief of Staff who volunteered at a school for the Heathrow Young Explorers program. By mentioning the CEO's participation in the volunteer work at Heathrow Airport, it emphasizes the whole organization's involvement with the local community. Also, it mention that the link attached offers further stories about helping the local community in the Heathrow Community Bulletin. Post 13 was

also categorized as a “local community” post as it contains elements of supporting the local community. For instance, it states “Discover our latest Community Bulletin, where we explore how we connect communities to work opportunities, drive sustainability efforts, and much more.” (Appendix 1, 13). However, it also mentions Heathrow Airport’s sustainability report, but since the emphasis is on how they connect communities, as well as a link to the Community Bulletin, it is categorized as a “local community”. Post 7 addresses Heathrow Airport’s focus on protecting the local air quality and congestion around the airport. Therefore, it was assigned to the local community category as well. The text states: “Find out more about new measures we’re taking to protect local air quality and reduce congestion around the airport” (Appendix 1, 7). A link to read more about the initiative and an image are also attached. The image shows a spacious airport filled with trees, which illustrates good air quality and a focus on the enhancement of a green facility with an eco-friendly design. The linked article that states “Heathrow takes bold action to reduce airport-related vehicle emissions” emphasizes the message of Heathrow Airport aiming towards a reduction in its emissions (Appendix 1,7). The post itself does not have a significant amount of information. However, it is uncertain whether link provides more transparency. The air quality around Heathrow Airport is in all probability a significant concern for the local community; hence, it is important for Heathrow Airport to address this issue according to sustainability theory, which states that organizations should diminish their negative effect on local communities (Sameh & Scavuzzi, 2016). Post 12 was also assigned to this category. The post addresses modernizing Heathrow Airport’s airspace in order to help manage the impact of noise on local communities. It is important to note that, it also mentions cutting carbon emissions and reducing flight delays, as the text states: “Making our flight paths more efficient could help cut carbon emissions, reduce delays, and help manage the impact of noise on local communities” (Appendix 1, 12). However, the post was assigned to “local community” because, in this post, Heathrow Airport recognizes the need to reduce noise to show its support for the local community. It also encourages people to read further about its airspace modernization through the link. In this case, it is important to emphasize that, as mentioned, this study focuses on immediate communication; therefore, it cannot be stated whether the content of the links provides more transparency. However, based on the immediate communication, the post is vague. Additionally, the attached video reiterates the aspects explained in the accompanying text. Though the information is vague, focusing on communicating the impact of noise on the local community is an aspect that may have a great influence on Heathrow Airport’s stance among the local community. This is in accordance with stakeholder theory, which claims that stakeholders are more inclined to have positive

attitudes towards organizations that acknowledge them (Harrison, Freeman & Cavalcanti Sá de Abreu 2015). Overall, a part of Heathrow Airport's communication strategy in the local community posts is a considerable focus on images, videos, links and sparse information. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the posts are indeed social media posts and therefore the information is sparser, however, this should not exclude transparency. Moreover, in the local community posts, it is clear that a part of Heathrow Airport's strategy is to highlight the positive initiatives but does not mention its failures or challenges, which from an organizational viewpoint is understandable, however, according to sustainability theory (Voci & Karmasin 2024), Heathrow Airport could benefit from also highlighting its struggles.

#### 4.1.2 Climate action and sustainability communications posts

Two posts were assigned to the "climate action and sustainability communications" category. Post 5 is quite simple and contains a short text encouraging people to read about how Heathrow is becoming more sustainable via its "2018 Sustainability Progress Report" while including a link as well (Appendix 1, 5). For Heathrow Airport, this is an opportunity to communicate to its stakeholders that it has concrete results of its sustainability initiatives though highlighting the "Progress Report". For instance, for investors, Heathrow Airport showcasing its commitment to sustainability through a sustainability progress report can be an attractive attribute, potentially enhancing interest among investors who focus on sustainability. Not to mention, by publishing the Sustainability Progress Report, it can also enhance Heathrow Airport's relationship with the local community, as according to Gütürk and Hahn (2016), reporting is a way for organizations to partly communicate transparency (Gütürk & Hahn 2016). Furthermore, post 9 was also identified to belong to this category, as it highlights Heathrow Airport's climate action. The post states, "Find out how we're tackling the greatest challenge of our time" (Appendix 1, 9), and contains a link offering more information on the topic. More importantly, there is also an image attached to the post with a text that says, "We need to talk about the elephant in the airport. Climate change" (Appendix 1, 9). The elephant in the image acts as a metaphor for the climate issues we are facing, which indicates that the climate crisis is something most are aware of however, it can be difficult to discuss and cope with. By highlighting 'the elephant in the room', Heathrow Airport tries to show it is not afraid to talk about the issues openly, and acknowledges its own responsibility. This is also in accordance with sustainability theory, which claims that it is crucial when communicating sustainability to also convey truths about the

challenges the organization faces (Voci & Karmasin 2024). Nevertheless, this post contains contradictions. It emphasizes the “elephant in the room”, namely that airports are significant contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. By highlighting this issue, Heathrow Airport does acknowledge that it is aware of the negative effects that the airport has, which shows environmental responsibility. However, it also gives Heathrow Airport the possibility to define and portray “the elephant” in a less damaging way. For instance, as mentioned, Heathrow Airport provides a link where people can gain insight into how it is “tackling the greatest challenge of our time”. Through this, Heathrow Airport can control the discourse, minimize environmental issues, exaggerate sustainability achievements, and spin how “the elephant in the room” is tackled. Furthermore, despite the link with additional information regarding how Heathrow Airport tackles the challenge, there is a lack of information and depth in the post itself, thus it presents surface level communication, particularly for a bold post like this one.

#### 4.1.3 Solutions to environmental problems posts

The findings reveal a frequent emphasis on Heathrow Airport's solutions to environmental problems among the dataset, as six posts were assigned to “solutions to environmental problems”. Post 1 communicates Heathrow Airport's actions to reduce plastic waste. The text states, “Did you know, we have over 100 water fountains across our terminals located at most toilets, as well as water refill stations where you're welcome to refill your bottles. Find them on our interactive maps:” (Appendix 1, 1). Two links to the interactive maps are attached to the post. Furthermore, the post also contains a video that reiterates the message in the text about Heathrow Airport's reduction of plastic waste regarding water bottles. Reducing plastic waste is a sustainable initiative, although it is important to acknowledge that Heathrow Airport still sells large quantities of plastic bottles in its shops. For instance, in the shop, “WHSmith” sells different kinds of foods and drinks wrapped in plastic (Heathrow Reserve and Collect). Thus, the message in the post can seem contradictory and acts as greenwashing according to Neureiter et al (2023). Furthermore, encouraging passengers to refill their own water bottles can be seen as pushing the responsibility onto others. On the other hand, this post showcases some of the small steps Heathrow Airport takes to be more environmentally friendly. Post 2 was assigned to “solution to environmental problems” as well because it addresses renewable electricity efforts. The text states, “Did you know that our terminals have run on 100% renewable

electricity since 2017? Every day we are trying to improve our airport for a sustainable future.” (Appendix 1, 2). A link is attached, providing information about the initiative. Moreover, a video attached states, “It is our first step towards being a zero carbon airport.” In this post, Heathrow Airport presents itself in a more nuanced manner by stating “it is our first step...” (Appendix 1,2), which shows Heathrow Airport is honest about the current status of the process. However, it is essential that Heathrow Airport does not hide behind making minor progress and thus being slow to make a positive change. Post 7 was also assigned to this category because it addresses the reduction of airport-related vehicle emissions. The post states: “Find out more about new measures we’re taking to protect local air quality and reduce congestion around the airport” (Appendix 1,7) along with a link, encouraging people to read about the specific actions. Also, an image is included with the text “Heathrow takes bold action to reduce airport-related vehicle emissions” (Appendix 1,7). The image depicts an airport full of trees and green scenery as an integrated part of the airport atmosphere. By including the image, it is a way of acknowledging stakeholders, particularly passengers and employees. This also aligns with stakeholder theory, which states that stakeholders who are shown consideration are inclined to respond with positive behaviors and attitudes towards the organization (Harrison, Freeman & Cavalcanti Sá de Abreu 2015). Although it is important to note, that Heathrow Airport has used an AI image to present itself as an eco-friendly airport. Moreover, post 10 was also assigned to this category as it presents a way to reduce pollution near Heathrow Airport. It addresses the airport’s preparation to become an “ultra-low emission zone”, which means that all vehicles entering the airport have to meet emissions standards to avoid paying a charge (Appendix 1, 10). A link is attached where one can read more about the initiative. Generally, there seems to be no exaggeration regarding the impact of the low emission zone and therefore the communication seems more genuine and transparent, which is advantageous. This aligns with Corporate communication theory which argues that the public expects organizations’ to be transparent when communicating. On the other hand, the post states that vehicles that do not meet specific emissions standards have to pay a charge, and this can seem like a way to push the pollution issue onto the passengers. In this regard, some might also interpret the message of the post as using the pollution issue to increase earnings. Post 11 was also assigned to this category, as it addresses Heathrow Airport’s initiative to modernize its airspace to make flight paths more efficient and reduce its carbon emissions. A video is included as well, which depicts Heathrow Airport’s flight routes seen from above (Appendix 1, 11). Generally, the immediate communication about the initiative is limited and vague. According to literature on greenwashing this is called “vague claims”, which occur when the organization’s



information about a service or product is too broad or unclear (Neureiter et al 2024). This applies in this case since, as mentioned, there is no clear information about what is being done, and it is “easy” for Heathrow Airport to communicate this without executing it in practice. Post 12 was assigned to this category as it addresses the reduction of carbon emissions. This post also focuses on making flight paths more efficient, cutting carbon emissions, and reduce delays (Appendix 1,12). The video attached states that Heathrow Airport is modernizing its airspace since the paths were designed in the 1960s, however, other than that, there is no additional information being communicated in the video. There is a link attached where people can read more about Heathrow Airport’s airspace modernization. However, as mentioned, this study focuses on the immediate communicating, and the post in itself does not provide specific information in terms of what is being done. Generally, there is a communication issue concerning transparency. Specifically, there is a lack of evidence that the solutions will, in fact, have a positive outcome. This is also in accordance with stakeholder theory, which argues that it can be difficult for people to thoroughly understand what is being reported (Tang & Higgins, 2022).

#### 4.1.4 Ethical food practices posts

Two posts were assigned to the “ethical food practices” category. Generally, the “ethical food practices” posts highlight some of the actions Heathrow Airport has taken to have more sustainable food options at the airport. First, post 3 highlights Heathrow Airport’s achievement of being the first airport to serve sustainably sourced fish and seafood. The text states, “We are proud to be the first airport to only serve sustainably sourced fish and seafood accredited by Sustain.” (Appendix 1,3). Furthermore, a link is included that provides more information about the sustainable fish and seafood at Heathrow Airport. By announcing it is “the first airport” to embrace such practices, Heathrow Airport positions itself as an initiator of environmental practices within the aviation industry. Moreover, there is an image attached with a text stating: “We now only serve sustainably sourced fish and seafood at Heathrow” (Appendix 1, 3). This emphasizes Heathrow Airport’s message regarding its sustainably sourced fish and seafood. However, according to sustainability theory, it is crucial to communicate inconvenient truths as well (Voci & Karmasin 2024). In this regard, it is important to note, that although this initiative is positive, it is still important to recognize that there might be aspects of Heathrow Airport’s general food practices that are significantly more unsustainable compared to other airports, as Heathrow Airport highlights the positive aspects.

Furthermore, Heathrow Airport has other restaurants that are not sustainable, and therefore elements of greenwashing are present (Neureiter et al 2024). Generally, in this post, Heathrow Airport tries to communicate persuasively. An example of this is the sentence “Enjoy a meal that doesn’t harm our ocean”, which emphasizes its commitment to sustainable causes. Overall, this post is an example of Heathrow Airport’s communication strategy which has a significant focus on positive aspects while lacking a nuanced balance. Secondly, post 14 was also assigned to “ethical food practices”. It is concerned about Heathrow Airport and Heston Blumenthal’s The Perfectionists’ Café which have partnered up to launch “The Fly Up”, which is a full English breakfast cooked with oil, then recycled into renewable biofuels, including sustainable aviation fuel (Appendix 1, 14). According to Heathrow Airport, the goal is to increase the understanding of sustainable aviation fuel because it is as a part of hitting Net Zero by 2050. A link is included in the post, providing more information about sustainable aviation fuel. Furthermore, a video is attached introducing “The Fly Up” breakfast showing how it is prepared. The post emphasizes the long-term goal of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF), which is a part of hitting net zero by 2050. This shows a long-term commitment to sustainability, which might benefit Heathrow Airport. However, once more, it is crucial to acknowledge that Heathrow Airport highlights the positive aspects of this initiative, while many of its other restaurants and cafés are not sustainable, such as “Big Smoke Taphouse & Kitchen” that serves various meals that includes beef. (Big Smoke Taphouse & Kitchen n.d) As (Neureiter et al 2023) state, this falls under “omission claims” because Heathrow Airport fails to address the environmental disadvantages of its other restaurants (Neureiter et al 2024).

## 4.2 Content analysis of Heathrow Airport’s 2.0 Plan

In the previous section, a content analysis of Heathrow Airport’s Facebook posts was made. Accordingly, a content analysis of Heathrow Airport’s 2.0 plan will be presented in this chapter.

### 4.2.1 Local community

Within the 2.0 plan, a significant emphasis is placed on the local community. An example of this is in the introduction, stating: “This strategy is not just about the huge global issues facing our planet. It has a meaningful impact on the everyday lives of individuals, families, and communities in and around Heathrow.” (Appendix 2, 4). This statement highlights Heathrow Airport’s focus on the local

community and therefore recognizes the negative impacts living near an airport can have. It also emphasizes the importance of maintaining good relationships with the local community. For instance, it states, “We recognise that our airport impacts those communities, and we want to make sure it is as positive as possible” (Appendix 2, 22). This focus on the local community is in accordance with sustainability theory, which emphasizes how important it is for the local community that organizations consider their negative impacts on local areas, et cetera (Dimitriou & Karagkouni 2022). Generally, there is a lot of focus on managing noise from Heathrow Airport and how it affects the local community. As it states “We will continue to focus on improving adherence to these procedures, as well as exploring opportunities to manage airspace differently, working with local communities to identify changes that could benefit them” (Appendix 2, 27). As referred to in this statement, engaging in a dialogue with the locals is fundamental for Heathrow Airport. This also corresponds with sustainability theory, which highlights the importance of acknowledging locals. (Dimitriou & Karagkouni, 2022). The plan also addresses Heathrow Airport’s desire to connect with young locals in order to encourage them to develop careers at the airport. For example, it states, “It is critical to ensure our airport is a diverse and inclusive workplace for all, and that we provide the skills, education and long-term employment opportunities that make Heathrow the local employer of choice.” (Appendix 2, 22). Generally, Heathrow Airport’s desire to be the main employer for locals is an ongoing subject in the 2.0 plan. Furthermore, it communicates the importance that the surrounding Heathrow area is a good place to live. In this regard, Heathrow Airport communicates as though it is, as a matter of fact, beneficial for the local community to live near the airport. This can be seen in the statement: “And we’ll give back to at least one million local people in those communities, providing support to school and community projects that lead to improvement in quality of life.” (Appendix 2, 3). Moreover, it also emphasizes the local air quality and acknowledges the importance of protecting the locals’ health. Thus, Heathrow Airport highlights its commitment to improving local air quality. For example, it states, “We’ll improve quality of life through cleaner air, quieter nights and taking care of our local environment...” (Appendix 2, 3). Heathrow Airport also highlights its support for the ‘Heathrow Community Trust’ in the 2.0 plan stating “The Heathrow Community Trust (HCT) is an independently run grant-making charity that funds projects that improve the quality of life in the communities near the airport.” (Appendix 2, p 35). The “Heathrow Community Trust” helps improve the local environment, supports young people in the local community, and generally improve the quality of life in communities near the airport. Heathrow Airport claims it works closely with the “Heathrow Community Trust” and will generate a minimum

of 6.5 million pounds in funds by 2030 (Appendix 2, 35). The 2.0 plan highlights Heathrow Airport's support of the local community's recovery from the impacts of the pandemic as well (Appendix 2, 38). Notably, economic elements are mentioned several times alongside local community aspects. For instance, "This includes residents continuing their education and learning new skills, rebuilding apprenticeship programmes and providing individuals with the resources needed to help them re-enter the local jobs economy" (Appendix 2, 38). In another example, the text states: "Heathrow is at the heart of our local economy..." (Appendix 2, 33). This is in contrast to the Facebook posts, which exclude the economic element.

#### 4.2.2 Strategic planning

In the 2.0 plan, Heathrow Airport emphasizes on communicating its strategic planning. The 2.0 plan frequently refers to Heathrow Airport's sustainability strategies, and although the 2.0 plan is a strategy in itself, it contains smaller strategies within the plan. In the introduction chapter, Heathrow Airport provides an overview of its general strategy for the organization, containing of purpose, vision, beacons, foundations and values (Appendix 2, 9). According to Heathrow Airport, the strategies in the 2.0 plan are long-term and support sustainable growth for the airport. It states: "Our refreshed strategy refocuses our long-term goals and clarifies the impact we want to make on our most material issues and targets." (Appendix 2, 11). Moreover, a full strategy overview is presented (Appendix 2, 40). Heathrow Airport also claims that it has strategically chosen its suppliers, who have set their own net zero targets (Appendix 2, 20). According to CSR theory, aviation companies can show their commitment to sustainability by choosing suppliers who share their values (Ovdienko 2023). The 2.0 plan reveals that it is important for Heathrow Airport to partner with suppliers who have their own sustainability targets. This might be a way for Heathrow Airport to stay up to date with laws and future compliance. Furthermore, Heathrow Airport also communicates that it shapes its sustainability strategy through meetings with groups such as "Heathrow Noise and Airspace Community Forum", focus groups, surveys, et cetera (Appendix 2, 27), which may be advantageous. This is also supported by Haleem et al (2022) who claim that stakeholders play an important role in hindering or enhancing sustainability practices (Haleem et al, 2022). Moreover, throughout the plan, Heathrow Airport emphasizes its strategic priorities. According to Heathrow Airport, the 2.0 plan lays out a clear direction for sustainable travel at Heathrow in the 2020s (Appendix 2, 3). Heathrow

Airport's former CEO states, "We want to protect the benefits of aviation as a force for good in the world, and face challenging issues head on, with the conviction that we can be successful if we stay true to our values and work together." (Appendix 2, 3). In this statement, Heathrow Airport highlights the importance of aviation and that it aims to protect the benefits of aviation by facing the environmental and social challenges that come with being an airport today. Nevertheless, the message is also quite vague, as no concrete examples on how to achieve these aspects are given. The statement indirectly also highlights the paradox of concentrating on sustainability while being an airport because, by stating, "We want to protect the benefits of aviation as a force for good in the world", it implies that the aviation industry has negative impacts if it is not managed.

#### 4.2.3 Environmental sustainability

As highlighted in the introduction chapter in the 2.0 plan, climate change is an existential threat to the aviation industry, to us all personally and it has to be addressed (Appendix 2, 6). In the 2.0 plan, Heathrow Airport claims that aviation has a positive impact on the world, as it supports tourism, the global economy, and delivering trade to all corners of the world. However, it also states that climate change has to be addressed, explaining that the flight sector is not just at risk of flight shaming and opposition to airport expansion; the impact of climate change can cause tropical islands to be underwater, which would harm the aviation industry. This revealed an egotistical outlook on climate change from Heathrow Airport. On the other hand, highlighting why it is also important for the aviation industry to protect the environment may help make it seem more genuine, as it shows that Heathrow Airport has a "personal" stake in the issue. In this regard Heathrow Airport also mentions that protecting nature is a crucial way to slow climate change. It highlights Heathrow Airport's interest in helping the climate, as the consequences would negatively harm it. Moreover, it emphasizes significantly how the aviation industry relies on travel destinations to maintain their nature and beauty, so people still want to travel. An example of this is "Aviation relies on people travelling, so it is crucial we protect and look after the world we travel and live in". (Appendix 2, 29). This statement underlines how the aviation industry also has a stake in protecting nature, as many popular tourist attractions, like the Great Barrier Reef, relies on action from big polluters. However, it is also worthwhile to note that it does mention the wider impacts climate change has, such as food and water shortages (Appendix 2, 14), which may counter the more egoistical perspective

#### 4.2.4 Solutions to environmental problems

As described by stakeholder theory, organizations prioritizing the needs of their stakeholders, demonstrate ethics and fairness, develop strong relationships with stakeholders (Phillips et al, 2019). Due to this, communicating its goals and aims is important for Heathrow Airport to demonstrate its involvement with sustainable practices. The 2.0 plan reveals its various goals and aims to become a more sustainable airport. The goals and aims are generally described throughout the whole plan. However, for instance, it has an outline of several goals it aims to reach by 2030 (Appendix 2, 10). One of the goals is to become “a zero-waste airport” which it aims to achieve by 2030 through maximizing reuse, recycling, and recovery of materials used at Heathrow (Appendix 2, 10). It also states that it aims to cut 45% of carbon emissions by 2030 compared to 2019 (Appendix 2, 15). However, not all goals are set to 2030. In the 2.0 plan it also addresses a goal set by 2050, for example, to reduce the amount of carbon emissions from flights by over 80%. It states: “By 2050, our goal is that carbon from flights falls by over 80%, even with a new runway” (Appendix 2, 16). In this statement, Heathrow Airport tries to communicate its ability to expand while still being sustainable. Furthermore, it also highlights the goal to replace 90% of the remaining kerosene by 2050, “However, our collective goal should be to reach absolute zero by 2050 if possible” (Appendix 2, 16). By claiming the goal should be reachable by 2050, Heathrow Airport waives its responsibility and, in a way, tries to justify that there is a probability it does not reach the goal. As mentioned, in the 2.0 Plan there are various goals Heathrow Airport aims towards; however, in reality, it is “easy” to present goals and harder to execute and reach the goals. Nevertheless, Heathrow Airport does acknowledge this as it states: “These are not short-term goals or ones that are easy to attain” (Appendix 2, 12). According to stakeholder theory, an organization's behavior may be judged based on results. In other words, organizations are expected to achieve morally important goals (Phillips et al, 2019). Consequently, it could be beneficial to also communicate what has been achieved. Also, immediate in-depth explanations of how Heathrow Airport will, for instance, reduce carbon emissions in order for stakeholders to gain insight. This is echoed by Nilawati, Purwanti & Nuryaman (2018) who claim that stakeholders have a need for in-depth information (Nilawati, Purwanti & Nuryaman, 2018), and in the 2.0 plan, the solutions are explained in rather general terms and no specific calculations to achieve this are communicated. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to note that in the 2.0 plan, Heathrow Airport indirectly highlights the paradox of airport growth and sustainability, as it states: “Our goal

is for 2019 to be the year of “peak carbon” from Heathrow, even with a third runway in the future.” (Appendix 2, 3). This statement is contradictory because it highlights Heathrow Airport’s desire to pollute less going forward, however, building a new runway in the future is significantly environmentally damaging.

The following chapter will summarize the findings from the content analyses of the Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan.

#### 4.3 Summary of findings from both content analyses

The findings uncover Heathrow Airport’s strategic approach to the Facebook posts, which revealed an extensive focus on initiatives in the local community and its solutions to environmental problems. This strategic approach is, in all probability, advantageous for Heathrow Airport, as Harrison et al (2015) claim that stakeholders, in this case, the local community, that are shown consideration are more inclined to be positive towards the organization. How this works is twofold: stakeholders can have a crucial impact on the survival and performance of Heathrow Airport (Guttermann 2023), and they can also form the organization’s reputation (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene 2015, 81). As mentioned, the findings also revealed an emphasis on communicating Heathrow Airport’s solutions to environmental problems on Facebook, particularly, addressing the reduction of emissions and its use of renewable energy. Besides the findings of its strategic approach, the analysis also disclosed alignments between the sustainability Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan. The content analysis of the 2.0 plan reveals a significant focus on supporting the local community and Heathrow Airport’s sustainability goals and achievements, which aligns with the Facebook posts. For instance, the promotion of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) and particularly the aim of reducing emissions is frequently mentioned in both the Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan. Furthermore, not surprisingly, a part of Heathrow Airport’s communication strategy on Facebook is also to include images and videos to emphasize the messages and aid comprehension (Dewan 2015). This aligns with the communication in the 2.0 plan, which uses a significant amount of imagery as well. A pattern across the Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan was the sparse information, as Heathrow Airport does not go in depth about how it concretely aims to achieve its goals on both platforms. Overall, there is a lack of

transparency in terms of concrete numbers and calculations regarding the solutions. For instance, in the 2.0 plan, it states, “We will invest to achieve almost zero carbon buildings and infrastructure including factoring decarbonization targets into investment plans. Our electricity network will be upgraded and improved, and we will introduce a hydrogen supply where there is demand.” (Appendix 2, 20). This example shows a lack of numbers and calculations, which is persistent throughout Heathrow Airport’s communication of its sustainable initiatives. This may suggest it is a strategic communication approach for Heathrow Airport to keep the information light; however, this could backfire if stakeholders see it as holding information back from the public or being misleading according to stakeholder theory (Nilawati, Purwanti & Nuryaman 2018). The findings, however, also revealed a slight misalignment between the Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan. As mentioned in Chapter 3 Heathrow Airport infrequently posts about its sustainability initiatives on Facebook. This revealed a misalignment with the 2.0 plan because the infrequency of the sustainability posts does not correspond with the message of the 2.0 plan. The findings also revealed that Heathrow Airport solely focused on the environmental and social elements of sustainability in the Facebook posts, excluding economic elements. Post 10 mentions a daily charge; however, the focus in the post is explicitly on the expanded “Ultra Low Emission Zone” (Appendix 1,10). Therefore, it is not regarded as having economic elements per se. However, it is worthwhile to note that the 2.0 plan does contain economic elements. For instance, it states, “We want to ensure that SMEs and local businesses in particular, can share in the economic benefits generated by Heathrow” (Appendix 2, 33). Consequently, this indicates a misalignment between the Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan.



## 5. Discussion

The following section will discuss the major findings. Furthermore, the theoretical contributions will be explained, which provide new insight into the understanding of airports' communication of sustainability initiatives. The practical implications and future research will also be discussed, as well as the limitations. The central aim of this study was to examine what strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its environmental and social sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page and how they align with the goals in its 2.0 plan. Furthermore, to provide a more nuanced answer, the sub-question "How can Heathrow Airport more effectively communicate its sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page and in the 2.0 plan" will be answered based on the content analyses findings.

The findings are novel, as few studies focus on the link between social media content and an organization's strategic plan. The analysis revealed Heathrow Airport's strategy primarily relies on communicating its initiatives in the local community and its solutions to environmental issues on its Facebook page. Generally, this aligns with the 2.0 plan, as the local community and solutions to environmental problems are recurrent themes. Based on theory, it is reasonable for Heathrow Airport to focus its strategic approach on the local community. Emphasizing solutions to environmental problems is also relevant. As mentioned in the introduction, the UK government has set air quality targets, consequently, it is logical for Heathrow Airport to communicate its targets as well. Moreover, as mentioned in the former chapter, the findings revealed a lack of transparency in terms of concrete numbers and calculations in both the Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan. Consequently, Heathrow Airport might enhance its sustainability communication initiatives through increased transparency regarding how and what is being done. As the theory states, stakeholders are interested in knowing concrete information, thus Heathrow Airport could in all probability benefit from providing specific information on how it plans to reach its goals, as the initiatives directly impact a lot of stakeholders' everyday lives. The question then becomes how to enhance transparency. I propose that increasing openness concerning its limitations and the challenges it faces when addressing sustainability, might

enhance Heathrow Airport's transparency in communicative contexts. This is in accordance with corporate communication theory, which states that organizations should publish their financial reports, for instance so stakeholders can make their own judgements on the organization (Heyes et al, 2021). Furthermore, the word "sustainable" has been widely used to a point that it can seem meaningless (Pforr, Weaver & Hughes 2015, 75). Thus, bringing a focus to transparency is an important strategy for Heathrow Airport when communicating its initiatives. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, to some extent, it is logical for Heathrow Airport to emphasize the positive aspects in its Facebook posts, since there is limited capacity for text. As stated in the former chapter, the dataset reveals Heathrow Airport's infrequent posts about its sustainability initiatives. This observation is inconsistent with the general message in the 2.0 plan, as it presents Heathrow Airport as an organization that is fully focused on sustainability. Whereas the infrequency of the sustainability posts on its Facebook page does not indicate that. In this context, it is worthwhile to note that Heathrow Airport publishes approximately one post per day on Facebook, commonly about where to eat, shopping, and general information. Thus, a general infrequency of posts cannot be regarded as a cause for the infrequency of sustainability posts. However, in all probability, people who visit Heathrow Airport's Facebook page are more inclined to look for important updates, shopping ideas, where to eat, et cetera. Consequently, the infrequency might be partially explained by Heathrow Airport's desire to please the large audience. However, I propose that Heathrow Airport should emphasize posting more frequently to communicate its sustainability initiatives more effectively. The importance of organizations' communication of sustainable initiatives on social media is underscored by communicating with stakeholders to demonstrate acknowledgement and responsibility. This is echoed by Harrison et al (2015), who state that stakeholders' value being shown consideration. Furthermore, as stated in the introduction, individuals are increasingly looking to become more environmentally conscious (Pandve et al, 2011). Moreover, there is a possibility that those who solely follow Heathrow Airport on Facebook for regular updates on places to eat, general information et cetera might become interested in sustainability initiatives if it is posted more frequently. Based on the stakeholder list presented in Chapter 2, the 2.0 plan broadly focuses on communicating to and about various stakeholders. Contrarily, it appears the Facebook posts are more limited concerning which stakeholders it communicates to and about. Although it is important to note that naturally, there is a difference between how the communication in general works between social media posts and plans/reports.

This study indirectly reveals the paradox of airports communicating sustainability, since it can be stated that effectively communicating sustainable initiatives is challenging for airports, given that it is common knowledge they are significant polluters, particularly affecting the local area (Bendtsen et al, 2021). The paradox lies in the contradiction between Heathrow Airport's negative environmental impact and promoting sustainable initiatives. Heathrow Airport is clearly aware of the need to reduce its carbon emissions, as the findings reveal that it focuses a lot on solutions to environmental problems in the posts and in the 2.0 plan. However, the spaces Heathrow Airport takes up, air travel, tourism, et cetera is still inherently unsustainable. As mentioned in the analysis, there is a clear example of this in the 2.0 plan, where Heathrow Airport expresses its desire to pollute less in the future while highlighting its plan to build a new runway (Appendix 2, 3). Despite efforts to reduce emissions and other harmful elements, it is difficult for airports to be deemed sustainable. On a global scale, it is paradoxical that the deadline of zero emissions by 2050 approaches while tourism is increasing (Statista 2024). Post 9, also indirectly emphasizes the paradox of airports and sustainability by commenting on "the elephant in the room" in a sustainability context (Appendix 1, 9). This underscores the argument that Heathrow Airport clearly is aware that it needs find a way to balance being an airport in these climate-focused times. Extreme weather increases the risk of flight disruptions and delays (Ibid). Shifting wind patterns may modify optimal flight routes, consequently affecting travel times. Furthermore, clear-air turbulence may increase as well due to stronger jet-stream wind. Observational studies in the field of aviation turbulence support the hypothesis that there is a high probability that climate change will increase the prevalence of turbulence (Williams 2017). Climate modeling studies also have great indications that moderate or greater clear-air turbulence on transatlantic routes will increase by 40%-170% compared to pre-industrial times. As I am writing this, there has recently been an incident involving a plane from Heathrow Airport to Singapore, where unfortunately one person died and at least 71 were injured due to sudden severe turbulence. Another incident occurred a week later, when 12 people were injured due to severe turbulence on a flight from Doha to Dublin. This is relevant for Heathrow Airport because an increase in turbulence-related injuries and delays can ultimately mean they might experience a drop in passenger numbers. Williams (2017) supports this by claiming that an increase in clear-air turbulence can have consequences for aviation (Williams 2017). One of the specific reasons is that many people fear turbulence. Extreme turbulence incidents make headlines and likely increase people's fear of turbulence (Ibid). Estimates indicate there are about 697 injuries to flight attendants annually and 17 serious passenger injuries. However, this number is likely to be much higher due to underreporting (Ibid). Also, there are

significant economic consequences of turbulence, including crew and passenger injuries, flight delays, damage to cabins, et cetera (Ibid). Consequently, this further underscores the importance and actuality of Heathrow Airport not only communicating its sustainability initiatives but also, in fact, implementing the initiative in practice. Nevertheless, as mentioned, the results of this study did indicate that Heathrow Airport has a significant focus on how it aims to handle important sustainability issues, particularly, environmental. Both in the Facebook posts as well as the 2.0 plan, which is advantageous because as we will likely see more turbulence related incidents in the future, Heathrow Airport communicates how it tries to minimize its damage.

## 5.1 Theoretical contributions

The findings of this study have a clear impact on existing theoretical literature. While general literature on airport and in particular airline communication has been researched in depth, the literature on airports' sustainability communication on Facebook is yet limited. Most research attempts to investigate airports' communication on social media from the perspective of the users. Furthermore, few studies focus on airports' social media communication and its alignment with other platforms or reports. The findings demonstrated in this study offer a new perspective on effective communication concerning sustainability initiatives. For instance, in which aspects the communication between an airport's social media page and report or strategies may misalign. This is valuable for organizations aiming to improve and considering new strategies regarding their sustainability communication. The findings align with existing theories, particularly, stakeholder theory, and provide valuable insights that contribute further to the academic discussion.

## 5.2 Practical implications and further research

The findings have practical implications. First, the findings can help airports aiming to enhance their sustainability communication, by providing an understanding and overview of central concepts in the communication of sustainable initiatives that can affect the airports in the long run. This is important, as airports have great power and responsibility with regard to sustainability. Secondly, the findings can help airports gain a competitive advantage as stakeholders, such as the local community, passengers, and government, are increasingly pressuring organizations to become more sustainable

(Shahzad et al, 2020). Related to this is governments' increasing demand for organizations to be held accountable for their pollution. The UK's government's decarbonation plan has begun aiming for net-zero targets for the aviation industry (Frost & Sullivan, 2023). Thus, communicating sustainability initiatives effectively is crucial for organizations such as Heathrow Airport. Also, investors might evaluate their decisions based on strategy plans, examine initiatives, and generally assess to what extent the organization acts regarding sustainable practices. Therefore, clear communication, particular in sustainability strategy plans, might enhance investor trust, which can benefit the airports. However, expanding the evidence and creating greater comprehension of Heathrow Airport's communication of environmental and social sustainability initiatives could be advantageous. This opens up several opportunities for further research, for example:

- Including consumer perceptions and engagement to understand how stakeholders view and engage with Heathrow Airport's communication of sustainable initiatives. This would provide further insight into what aspects Heathrow Airport could improve with respect to its sustainability communication. Investigating stakeholder engagement on its Facebook page posts could be accomplished by examining comments and likes.
- Examining Heathrow Airport's direct communication with users on its Facebook page and how it responds to potential critics could also be examined. This could reveal Heathrow Airport's ability to directly communicate with its audience and how it adapts its communication.
- Another research gap could be filled by assessing Heathrow Airport's brand image in relation to sustainability, as having a strong brand image can give Heathrow Airport a competitive edge. A sustainable airport is, in all probability, not the majorities' top priority when flying, as other factors, for instance, price, play a larger role. However, having a strong sustainable brand image may present an opportunity to improve airports' goodwill among stakeholders, such as, the local community; thus, this is an interesting potential path of further research.

### 5.3 Limitations

It is imperative to acknowledge the limitations in this study. First, Heathrow Airport's infrequency of sustainability posts was a limitation. Consequently, several posts date back to 2019, and an updated dataset could improve results. The infrequency affected the sample size, as the inclusion of additional posts could lead to more representative findings. However, in qualitative studies, small sample sizes can be justified (Boddy, 2016). Second, linked to the former limitation, is the time constraint, as working with a deadline determines the time extracting posts. The 2.0 plan contains goals set by 2030 and this study cannot explore the sustainable posts Heathrow Airport post until 2030 in order to have a complete overview, as this would require further six years of data collection, which is not possible. However, overall, if Heathrow Airport included sustainability more frequently, the dataset would contain more updated posts which would have been relevant and might provide further depth to the analysis.

## 6. Conclusion

This section will provide a brief overview of the study and summarize the main findings.

The aim of the study was to assess what strategies Heathrow Airport employs to communicate its sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page, and how they align with its 2.0 Plan. The study also included the sub-question concerning how Heathrow Airport more effectively can communicate its sustainability initiatives on its Facebook page and in the 2.0 plan. The findings of this study yielded compelling evidence indicating that Heathrow Airport draws on the local community and its solutions to environmental problems when communicating initiatives on its Facebook page. Notably, this also aligns with Heathrow Airport's 2.0 plan, although the plan goes more in-depth, offering further information about initiatives and aims as well. The findings also pointed to a general lack of transparency in both the Facebook posts and the 2.0 plan. According to the theoretical framework of

this study, it is important for stakeholders to have comprehensive insight into how organizations concretely plan to achieve aims. This highlighted the importance of including specific information in the Facebook posts and in the 2.0 concerning how Heathrow Airport can achieve its aims and goals in order to display clear communication, which, as mentioned, the literature in the field also points towards. Therefore, I propose that for Heathrow Airport to communicate its sustainability more effectively on Facebook and in the 2.0 plan, first and foremost, it must emphasize specific information concerning how it aims to reach its goals, and as stated, this is also a way for Heathrow Airport to communicate more transparently. Additionally, it allows stakeholders to make their own judgments about the achievability of the initiatives as well. Moreover, this study revealed Heathrow Airport's infrequency regarding its Facebook posts about its sustainability initiatives. This also uncovered a misalignment, since this infrequency does not correspond with how it seeks to be perceived in its 2.0 plan. The communication in the 2.0 plan reflects an airport that is greatly concerned and involved with sustainable practices; however, the infrequency of the sustainability posts does not reflect that. This infrequency also uncovered another way for Heathrow Airport to more effectively communicate its sustainability on Facebook, since it could, in all probability, benefit from posting about the initiatives more frequently. Furthermore, this also presents an accessible way for Heathrow Airport to enhance its sustainability communication. Moreover, the 2.0 plan includes economic elements, revealing another misalignment between the Facebook post and the 2.0 plan. However, it is also important to note that from Heathrow Airport's perspective, it may want to keep the communication on its social media light, and including economic elements on the posts could impart an excessive level of seriousness. Additionally, Heathrow Airport communicating its sustainability initiatives is a paradox, as its core function as an airport is environmentally damaging. However, this emphasizes the importance of its communicative efforts regarding its initiatives because organizations are increasingly held accountable for their actions today, specifically in terms of their sustainable practices. The conceptual framework developed is relevant for organizations, particularly airports seeking to improve their strategies concerning sustainability communication with stakeholders.

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