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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND LEADER CONFLICT IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: A CASE ANALYSIS OF MUSK – O'LEARY (RYANAIR)

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary digital and media environment, leaders' public communication has become a central element of strategic public relations and organizational reputation management. This paper analyses the public communication conflict between Elon Musk and Michael O'Leary, triggered by disagreements regarding the potential implementation of Starlink satellite internet in Ryanair's aircraft fleet, which evolved into a globally mediated event. The research problem addresses the insufficiently explored role of leader conflict as a potential communication resource in contemporary public relations practice. The study aims to examine how public communication conflicts between leaders can be strategically leveraged to enhance brand visibility and differentiation, and to explore their implications for reputation management. Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative single-case analysis, including the examination of leaders' public statements, media coverage, and market reactions. The findings indicate that public communication conflict, when aligned with brand identity and leadership communication style, does not necessarily produce negative reputational outcomes; instead, it may strengthen brand recognition and generate short-term positive business effects.

Keywords: strategic communication; public relations; conflict; leaders; reputation; brand voice.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary communication environment, the boundaries between corporate, personal, and media communication are increasingly blurred. The development of digital platforms and social media has enabled direct, continuous, and publicly visible interaction between leaders and diverse stakeholders, where communication is no longer exclusively institutionally controlled nor confined to formal channels. In such a context, chief executive officers and other prominent organisational actors become key agents of public communication, and their personal style, tone, and rhetoric directly influence perceptions of the organisations they represent.

Public communication conflicts among leaders are particularly relevant, as they often escalate in the digital sphere into globally visible media events. Such conflicts simultaneously carry reputational risk and the potential to generate increased visibility, audience engagement, and brand differentiation. Nevertheless, classical public relations literature continues to predominantly frame conflict as a reputational threat that must be neutralised or minimised. At the same time, its potential strategic effects remain comparatively underdeveloped, both theoretically and empirically.

The research problem addressed in this paper stems from this theoretical gap between normative approaches to reputation management and contemporary communication practices in the digital environment. In particular, the role of leaders as personifications of organisational brands in situations of public conflict remains insufficiently explored, especially regarding how their communication can transform a reputational threat into a strategic communication opportunity. This raises the question of how leader conflict can be utilised as a strategic communication resource and under what conditions such an approach may have a positive—or at least neutral—impact on organisational reputation.

This paper aims to analyse the public communication conflict between Elon Musk and Michael O'Leary as an example of strategic communication in the digital and media environment. The study seeks to examine how leader conflict can be leveraged to enhance brand visibility and differentiation, how leadership communication style shapes perceptions of the organisation, and the implications of this approach for contemporary public relations practice and reputation management. In line with this objective, the paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do leaders use public communication conflicts as part of strategic communication in the digital environment?

RQ2: How does leadership communication style influence perceptions of the organisational brand in situations of public conflict?

RQ3: Can public communication conflict produce a positive reputational effect when aligned with the organisation's identity and brand voice?

RQ4: What implications does the analysed case have for contemporary public relations practice?

Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative single-case analysis, which enables an in-depth understanding of complex communication processes within their real-life context. A qualitative content analysis was conducted of leaders' public statements, social media posts, relevant media coverage, and Ryanair's communication activities. The analysis focuses on identifying key communication strategies, including provocation, humour, irony, and personalised discourse, and on examining how the conflict was integrated into the organisation's communication narrative.

The analysis incorporates elements of thematic and discourse analysis, with particular emphasis on communication style, rhetoric, and the strategic function of leaders' public messages.

The study relies on secondary data sources and is grounded in the theoretical framework of strategic communication and public relations, which serves as the analytical basis for interpreting the reputational and communication effects of the analysed conflict.

The paper is structured into several thematically connected sections. Following the introduction, the theoretical framework is presented, with particular emphasis on strategic communication, public communication conflict, and the role of leaders as the organisation's brand voice. This is followed by the methodological section, which explains the research approach and applied methods, and then the analysis of the selected case of public communication conflict between Elon Musk, Michael O'Leary, and Ryanair. In the final sections, the findings are discussed in relation to relevant theoretical perspectives, enabling their interpretation within the broader context of strategic communication and public relations. The paper concludes with final remarks, identification of research limitations, and suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strategic Communication and the Role of Leaders

Strategic communication can be defined as a planned, purposeful, and long-term-oriented process through which organisations shape relationships with their key publics to achieve organisational objectives, build reputation, and strengthen trust. Unlike operational or ad hoc communication, strategic communication is integrated into the organisation's overall strategy and aligns communication activities with the organisation's mission, vision, and values (Maes et al., 1997).

Furthermore, strategic communication encompasses the coordinated and intentional management of communication flows both inside and outside the organisation, ensuring that messages are designed and directed to support long-term strategic goals rather than merely serving tactical or operational tasks (Hallahan et al., 2007). In this sense, communication is not treated as a peripheral activity but as a central managerial function closely linked to organisational performance and legitimacy.

In the contemporary communication environment—characterised by digital

platforms, constant media exposure, and accelerated information flows—strategic communication has undergone a significant transformation (Tomaš, 2022). Organisations no longer communicate exclusively through formal institutional channels; instead, they increasingly rely on personalised forms of communication. As a result, organisational leaders have become key actors in communication.

Chief executive officers, board presidents, and other high-ranking leaders increasingly participate directly in public discourse, particularly through social media, interviews, and public appearances. Their communication has become both highly visible and strategically relevant to organisational communication processes (Zerfass et al., 2018). Leadership communication can therefore no longer be viewed solely as personal expression or individual style; rather, it constitutes an integral component of organisational strategic communication.

Leaders' statements, tone of voice, responses to criticism, and behaviour in public situations significantly influence perceptions of the organisation, its identity, and its reputation. Empirical research suggests that stakeholders frequently associate organisations with their leaders, transferring leaders' personal characteristics to the perception of the brand itself (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Men, 2014). In this context, leaders function as the visible embodiment of the organisation's brand voice, reinforcing or reshaping organisational identity through their communication practices.

Particularly in digital environments, leadership communication takes on the characteristics of a continuous, immediate, and personalised process. Social media platforms enable leaders to communicate without the mediation of traditional media, respond rapidly to emerging issues, and articulate organisational positions in real time. While such immediacy can enhance transparency and perceived authenticity, it simultaneously increases reputational risk, as the boundaries between private and institutional discourse become increasingly blurred (Cornelissen, 2020).

The strategic communication literature increasingly emphasises that leaders do not merely transmit organisational messages but also act as central agents in constructing communication narratives. Their communication may carry an innovative dimension, as leaders introduce new patterns of interaction with stakeholders and redefine the role of public relations within the organisation. In this sense, leadership communication becomes a strategic instrument for managing meaning, perception, and reputation, rather than simply a vehicle for information dissemination (Huck-Sandhu & Zerfass, 2007).

The importance of leadership communication becomes particularly pronounced in situations of public communication conflict. In such circumstances, the manner in which leaders respond, the strategies they adopt, and the messages they convey may decisively shape reputational outcomes. Leaders may escalate, neutralise, or strategically redirect

conflict, and their communication becomes a determining factor in whether the conflict will produce destructive or constructive effects on the organisation.

Accordingly, strategic communication in contemporary organisations cannot be adequately analysed without acknowledging the role of leaders as visible, influential, and often personalised communication actors. Understanding leadership communication is therefore a necessary precondition for examining modern public relations practices—especially in the context of public communication conflicts, which this study conceptualises not only as reputational threats but also as potential strategic communication resources.

Proactive and Reactive Strategies in Public Communication Conflict

In contemporary public relations, public communication conflict is no longer viewed exclusively as an undesirable disruption of the communication process, but rather as a situation that requires a strategic selection of appropriate communication approaches. The way organisations and their leaders respond to public conflict significantly shapes its reputational outcomes. Within this context, Ronald D. Smith's (2021) theoretical framework offers a useful distinction between proactive and reactive communication strategies, enabling a systematic analysis of different approaches to managing public communication conflicts.

Communication strategies can be differentiated according to the degree of initiative and control exercised over the communication process (Smith, 2021; Silverman & Smith, 2024). Reactive strategies are employed when an organisation or leader responds to external stimuli such as criticism, accusations, or public challenges, often under time pressure and heightened media scrutiny. These strategies are typically characterised by a defensive posture, in which actors seek to mitigate negative effects, clarify their position, or reduce potential reputational damage. Reactive responses may include rebuttals, denials, justifications, or corrective messages, where the communicative initiative originates externally rather than from the organisation itself (Tomić & Tomić, 2026, p. 192).

In contrast, proactive strategies enable organisations and leaders to assume initiative in shaping the communication narrative. Rather than merely responding to conflict, proactive strategies focus on actively managing meaning, context, and public perception. They involve planned communication efforts, publicity generation, stakeholder engagement, and the strategic use of communication activities to strengthen relationships or reinforce organisational identity (Smith, 2021; Tomić & Tomić, 2026, p. 195). In the context of public communication conflict, a proactive approach allows it to be reframed and incorporated into a broader organisational narrative, rather than being treated solely as a threat.

In practice, proactive and reactive strategies rarely appear as strictly separated categories. Organisations may initially respond reactively to a

public conflict but subsequently develop proactive elements that enable them to regain control over the communication process. In such cases, public communication conflicts may evolve into opportunities for message reframing, enhanced visibility, and brand differentiation—particularly when communication remains aligned with the organisation's established identity.

The distinction between proactive and reactive strategies becomes increasingly blurred in digital and media environments. Social media platforms facilitate rapid and publicly visible reactions that may simultaneously contain elements of defence and initiative, response and provocation. Public communication conflicts often unfold in real time and involve active audience participation, thereby amplifying visibility while simultaneously demanding a high level of strategic consistency. As Smith (2021) argues, reputational outcomes depend less on the intensity of the conflict itself and more on the strategic choices made by communicative actors and their ability to manage public perception.

The application of proactive and reactive strategies in public communication conflicts thus represents a central component of contemporary strategic communication. Rather than automatically avoiding conflict, organisations and leaders increasingly assess whether conflict can be leveraged as a communication resource, provided that it aligns with brand values, leadership communication style, and stakeholder expectations.

This theoretical framework provides the foundation for analysing the public communication conflict between Elon Musk, Michael O'Leary, and Ryanair. In this case, distinct reactive and proactive strategies can be identified in the management of public conflict. Musk's communication primarily reflects a reactive strategy, emerging from immediate responses to external stimuli and unfolding through direct, personalised reactions. In contrast, Ryanair's and O'Leary's communication demonstrates a transformation from an initially reactive response to a proactive strategy, in which the conflict is deliberately reframed and integrated into a broader communication and marketing narrative. This strategic shift will be examined in greater detail in the following sections of the paper.

Conflict in Communication: From Threat to Opportunity

In classical theories of public relations and organisational communication, conflict has most often been perceived as a risk or a threat to organisational reputation that must be neutralised or minimised as quickly as possible. This perspective is grounded in the assumption that public communication conflicts undermine trust, destabilise stakeholder relationships, and may produce long-term negative consequences for organisational image. Within this traditional framework, emphasis has been placed on message control, reducing the visibility of conflict, and preventing public escalation (Sikavica, 2011; Tomić, 2026).

However, contemporary communication approaches increasingly emphasise that

conflict, when consciously managed and strategically directed, may represent an opportunity rather than merely a crisis. Tomić and Jugo (2021) argue that conflict in communication is not inherently negative; rather, it is a process whose outcomes depend on how it is communicatively managed. When handled constructively, conflict can strengthen relationships, clarify positions, increase transparency, and enhance message visibility.

In the context of public communication, conflict can amplify message visibility, stimulate media interest, generate audience engagement, and facilitate clearer brand differentiation from competitors (Cahn & Abigail, 2014). This dynamic becomes particularly pronounced in digital environments, where communication unfolds in real time, and audiences actively participate in shaping discourse. Conflicts between leaders and organisations frequently evolve into media and communication spectacles, amplified by user-generated content, commentary, sharing practices, and reinterpretation of messages. In such settings, audiences do not remain passive recipients but become co-creators of communicative meaning, thereby extending the reach and impact of the conflict (Hodge & Anthony, 1988).

Within this framework, conflict may be conceptualised as a specific instrument of strategic communication, provided it aligns with the organisation's identity and communication style. Such an approach requires a high level of managerial communication competence, careful risk assessment, and the ability to manage meaning and contextual framing in the public sphere (Mescon, Albert, & Khedouri, 1985; Tomić, 2026).

Accordingly, the reputational consequences of conflict are not determined solely by its occurrence, but by the strategic choices made in its communication management. When conflict is integrated into a coherent brand narrative and consistent leadership communication style, it may evolve from a reputational threat into a strategic communicative resource.

Conflict in Organizational and Communication Contexts

Organisational theory traditionally distinguishes between two fundamental understandings of conflict. The first conceptualises conflict as a form of interaction or struggle between individuals or groups positioned on opposing sides. The second defines conflict as a situation in which one party can achieve its goals only at the expense of another party's goals. Accordingly, conflict is understood as a process that begins when one party perceives that another party is negatively affecting, or is about to affect negatively, something it considers important (Hodge & Anthony, 1988).

Beyond structural and interest-based perspectives, contemporary communication scholarship emphasises the communicative dimension of conflict. Tomić (2026) argues that conflict is not merely a state of opposing interests, but a dynamic communicative process in which differences are articulated, interpreted, and potentially escalated through verbal and nonverbal communication. From this perspective, conflict unfolds through communicative

interaction, and its development depends largely on how messages are framed, received, and responded to.

In this context, it is useful to distinguish between a conflict situation and a conflict action. A conflict situation refers to a latent state of tension and potential opposition, whereas a conflict action represents the visible expression of conflict through behaviour, communication, or decision-making. This distinction highlights that not all latent tensions necessarily escalate into open communicative confrontation; rather, escalation occurs when communicative exchanges transform perceived incompatibilities into observable actions.

A defining characteristic of all conceptualisations of conflict is the presence of at least two parties—individuals, groups, or organisations—whose interests, goals, or values are perceived as incompatible. In organisational settings, conflicts most commonly arise from competing interests, misaligned objectives, divergent value systems, and differing approaches to problem-solving. Communication-related factors play a particularly significant role in both triggering and intensifying conflict. Insufficient information, semantic misunderstandings, selective interpretation, and information overload frequently act as catalysts that amplify tensions within organisations (Sikavica, 2011; Tomić, 2026).

Understanding conflict as both an organisational and communicative phenomenon is crucial for strategic communication analysis. While structural conditions may create the potential for conflict, it is communication that determines whether tensions will escalate, stabilise, or transform into constructive outcomes. This communicative dimension becomes especially relevant in public and digital contexts, where conflicts are not confined to internal organisational dynamics but unfold before broader audiences.

Conflict Management and Strategic Communication

Organisational effectiveness largely depends on how conflicts are managed. One of the most widely recognised frameworks for understanding conflict management styles is the Thomas–Kilmann model, which distinguishes five approaches: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration. Among these, collaboration is often considered the most constructive strategy because it seeks to satisfy the interests of all parties involved while preserving long-term relationships (Shell, 2001). Rather than framing conflict as a zero-sum confrontation, collaborative approaches emphasise dialogue, mutual understanding, and integrative solutions.

However, in the context of strategic communication, conflict management extends beyond interpersonal or intra-organisational resolution. It also involves deliberately shaping communicative responses in public settings. Tomić and Jugo (2021) emphasise that the manner in which a conflict is communicated often has a greater impact on relationships and reputation than the original cause of the

conflict itself. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from the existence of disagreement to the communicative framing, interpretation, and presentation of that disagreement to relevant publics.

When conflict is framed as a shared problem rather than a struggle for dominance, space emerges for win–win solutions and for transforming conflict into a communicative opportunity. In such cases, strategic communication does not merely aim to suppress or minimise disagreement but to manage its meaning, narrative structure, and public perception. This approach is particularly relevant in contemporary public and digital environments, where conflicts quickly gain visibility and are amplified through media coverage and audience participation.

In digital contexts, conflict management increasingly involves real-time communication, audience engagement, and the negotiation of meaning within highly dynamic media ecosystems. Strategic communication, therefore, plays a central role in shaping how conflict is interpreted—whether as a reputational threat, a crisis, or a functional element of brand positioning. Under certain conditions, particularly when aligned with organisational identity and leadership communication style, conflict can be reframed from a reputational liability into a resource for strengthening brand identity and public recognition.

This theoretical perspective provides an important foundation for the subsequent analysis of the Musk–O'Leary case, in which public conflict management is examined not only as a defensive mechanism but also as a potential strategic communication instrument.

Leaders as the "Brand Voice" of the Organization

In contemporary public relations, leaders increasingly assume the role of personifying the organisational brand, whereby their public communication becomes a key element of strategic communication (Cornelissen, 2020; Zerfass et al., 2018). Instead of traditional, institutional, and often depersonalised corporate communication, organisations increasingly rely on the personal authority, distinctive style, and public presence of their leaders to shape brand identity and reputation (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). In this context, leaders function as the organisation's brand voice, serving as its most visible and influential communication channels.

Leadership communication reflects the organisation's core values, shapes the tone and style of its messaging, and significantly influences the audience's emotional connection to the brand (Men, 2014). Numerous studies indicate that stakeholders often associate the organisation with its chief executive officer, transferring the leader's personal traits—such as authenticity, decisiveness, humour, or provocativeness—to their perception of the organisation itself (Cornelissen, 2020). Consequently, organisational reputation becomes increasingly intertwined with the individual leader's reputation, representing both a communication advantage and a potential reputational risk.

In this context, increasing scholarly attention has been devoted to the concept of a leader's voice, which further explains the mechanisms through which leadership communication influences stakeholders' attitudes and behaviours. Research emphasises that a leader's voice encompasses not only the content of the message but also its tone, style, consistency, and emotional intensity, all of which significantly shape audience perceptions and reactions (Woo Park & Woo Hahm, 2016). A recognisable and authentic communication style can strengthen stakeholder identification with the organisation, enhance engagement, and positively affect perceptions of organisational identity, even in situations of heightened public exposure or conflict.

Additional insight into leaders' roles as brand voice can be seen in how Elon Musk communicates strategic projects such as Starlink. From the outset, Starlink was not presented solely as a technological or market innovation, but as part of a broader vision aimed at financing SpaceX's long-term ambitions, including the colonisation of Mars. This narrative, combining technological idealism, business pragmatism, and the leader's personal worldview, has become an integral part of Musk's public identity. His tendency to simplify complex technological issues, openly experiment, and publicly test ideas further reinforces the perception of the leader as a powerful and recognisable communication channel for the organisation (Isaacson, 2023, p. 306). In this sense, Musk's "voice" shapes not only perceptions of projects such as Starlink but also public expectations about how he will respond in situations of public exposure or conflict.

Leaders who consciously employ provocation, irony, humour, and public conflict in their communication style stand out. Although such an approach deviates from traditional norms of corporate communication, in the digital environment it proves highly effective in attracting attention, stimulating media interest, and building a distinctive identity (Zerfass et al., 2018). Provocative leadership communication often generates strong audience engagement, including reactions, comments, and content sharing, thereby significantly amplifying message reach without additional financial investment. However, this communication style also entails reputational risks. The boundary between a leader's personal expression and the organisation's strategic communication becomes increasingly blurred, complicating the distinction between private opinions and official organisational messages (Coombs, 2019). In such circumstances, public conflicts involving leaders may be perceived as either impulsive personal outbursts or deliberately planned communication moves. This ambivalence makes leadership communication a relevant subject of scholarly analysis.

From a strategic public relations perspective, leadership communication-related conflict does not necessarily have negative consequences for the organisation. If aligned with brand identity, organisational values, and stakeholder expectations, conflict can function as a planned communication tool (Cahn &

Abigail, 2014; Coombs, 2019; King et al., 2011). In such cases, the leader acts not merely as a message carrier but as a key communicator, shaping the narrative framework in which conflict becomes a means of differentiation rather than solely a reputational threat.

For this reason, contemporary public relations increasingly emphasises the strategic management of leadership communication and the relationship between the leader's personal brand and the organisational brand. Analysing leadership communication in the context of public conflicts deepens understanding of contemporary communication strategies and the evolving dynamics among organisations, media, and audiences.

Leadership Conflict in the Digital and Media Environment as a Strategic Communication Tool

The development of social media and digital communication platforms has significantly transformed the way leaders communicate with the public. The digital environment enables chief executive officers and other visible organisational actors to communicate directly without traditional media intermediaries, to respond quickly and spontaneously, and to engage in public "competition" in real time. Such immediacy enhances transparency but also creates conditions for rapid escalation of communication conflicts (Cornelissen, 2020; Zerfass et al., 2018).

In the digital and media context, public conflicts among leaders often evolve into media spectacles, with audiences actively participating in the dissemination, interpretation, and commentary of messages. Research in strategic communication indicates that such public exchanges have high viral potential and generate substantial media visibility, global reach, and increased organisational presence in public discourse, without direct financial investment in traditional promotional activities (Zerfass et al., 2018). In this sense, conflict ceases to be solely a reputational risk and becomes a potential communication resource.

Contemporary approaches to public relations emphasise that the reputational effects of conflict do not depend solely on its existence, but rather on how it is communicatively managed. According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), conflict is an inherent component of relationships between organisations and their publics, whereas reputational damage occurs only when communication responses are inadequate or inconsistent. Coombs (2019) further argues that conflict in the digital environment does not necessarily escalate into a crisis, particularly when there is no actual operational responsibility on the part of the organisation and when the dispute is primarily symbolic or discursive.

Within this framework, leadership conflict may be regarded as a strategic communication tool when it aligns with the organisation's values and identity, employs a recognisable and consistent brand voice, and generates positive or neutral reputational outcomes. Public provocation, humour, irony, and controlled controversy can stimulate audience engagement and emotional reactions, contributing to brand differentiation and strengthening its

position in a competitive media environment (Men, 2014; Cornelissen, 2020).

Such forms of conflict do not necessarily damage relationships with stakeholders; rather, they reinterpret them in accordance with the organisation's communication strategy. When aligned with audience expectations and the existing brand image, conflict can enhance brand recognition, reinforce organisational identity, and increase the leader's visibility as the personification of the brand. This theoretical framework provides the basis for the analysis of the specific case of public communication conflict between Elon Musk, Michael O'Leary, and the organisation Ryanair, which is examined in the following sections as an example of leadership conflict functioning within strategic communication and contemporary public relations.

CASE ANALYSIS

Chronology of the Public Communication Conflict: Musk – O'Leary – Ryanair

1. Initial Trigger: Starlink and Ryanair's Rejection

The conflict began with a public statement by Ryanair's CEO, Michael O'Leary, who rejected the possibility of installing Starlink satellite internet in the airline's fleet. O'Leary argued that such technology would increase operational costs, add extra weight to aircraft, and be inconsistent with Ryanair's low-cost business model. He further claimed that passengers on short European flights were not willing to pay additional fees for onboard internet services (The Guardian, 2026).

2. Musk's Response: Provocation and Personalised Discourse

Elon Musk publicly responded to O'Leary's statement via the platform X, challenging his arguments. Musk employed a provocative and personalised discourse, using irony and dismissive language to argue that O'Leary's assessments were incorrect. At this point, the dispute shifted from a business–technological disagreement to a personalised public conflict that quickly attracted significant media attention (Reuters, 2026).



Figure 1. Ryanair responds to Elon Musk with humor and irony on platform X. Source: Ryanair, post on platform X, 20 January 2026.

3. Escalation: The Idea of Acquiring Ryanair

The conflict escalates further when Musk, using humour and provocation, publicly suggests acquiring Ryanair. Although such a scenario would be regulatorily unfeasible under European Union ownership rules for airlines, the statement significantly increases the viral dynamics of the dispute. O'Leary responds with rational arguments, yet with a noticeable dose of irony, emphasising the "European regulatory reality" and dismissing the feasibility of such a takeover (Sky News, 2026; Poslovni.hr, 2026).



Figure 2. Elon Musk engages the public in the communication conflict through a poll about acquiring Ryanair. Source: Elon Musk, post on platform X, 20 January 2026.

4. Strategic shift: Ryanair monetises the conflict

In the subsequent phase, Ryanair ceases treating the conflict as a reputational risk and strategically integrates it into its communication and marketing practices. The company launches a promotional campaign offering discounted fares and messages directly referencing Musk's insult, including the so-called "idiot discount," employing humour, irony, and self-irony as part of its recognisable brand voice (Euronews, 2026).

5. Media and market effects: A "PR gift"

In the context of the announcement of quarterly results, O'Leary publicly described the dispute with Musk as a "PR gift" for Ryanair. Media reports indicated increased website traffic and a rise in bookings (approximately 2–3%), while the market perceived the conflict primarily as a communication event without negative operational consequences (BBC, 2026).

Case description

The public communication conflict between Elon Musk and Michael O'Leary emerged from an initial disagreement regarding the introduction of Starlink satellite internet into Ryanair's aircraft fleet. However, it quickly evolved into a broader media and communication phenomenon. Although the trigger of the dispute was of a technical and business nature, the dynamics of the communication indicate that the discussion almost immediately shifted from rational argumentation to a level of personalised public rivalry, which is consistent with the characteristics of contemporary digital leadership communication (Cornelissen, 2020; Zerfass et al., 2018).

In the early stages of the conflict, Elon Musk's communication was characterised by a provocative tone, irony, and personally coloured discourse, with social media as the primary channel for rapid, direct message dissemination. Such a

communication approach stimulates strong audience engagement and intense media attention, while simultaneously blurring the boundaries between the leader's personal stance and the strategic communication of the organisations he represents (Park & Hahm, 2016; Cen, 2025).

On the other hand, Michael O'Leary and Ryanair responded in line with the brand's already established communication identity. Instead of withdrawing or adopting a defensive strategy, Ryanair gradually integrated the conflict into its own communication practice, employing humour, irony, and self-irony as central elements of its organisational performance. In doing so, an individual leadership dispute became part of the institutional communication narrative.

The key communicative turning point in this case occurred when Ryanair stopped treating the conflict as a reputational risk and deliberately used it as a communication and marketing resource. The focus of communication shifted from the technological feasibility of the Starlink system to its entertainment value, media visibility, and brand recognition. This development supports the argument that a public communication conflict does not necessarily escalate into a crisis, but may produce neutral or even positive reputational effects if strategically managed (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Coombs, 2019).

Analysis of Communication Strategies

The analysis of communication strategies in this case reveals significant differences in the communication styles of the involved leaders, as well as their mutual compatibility in generating a strong media impact. Elon Musk's communication style is characterised by a combination of innovation and controversy (Cen, 2025), in which public conflict is not an unintended consequence but an integral part of his communication strategy. Research indicates that Musk deliberately employs provocation, polarisation, and personally colored discourse to stimulate public debate and ensure high visibility of his messages in the digital sphere (Cen, 2025). His communication is marked by directness, impulsiveness, and the absence of traditional PR filters, which reinforces the perception of authenticity while simultaneously increasing reputational risk. Such a style enables rapid dissemination of messages across social media and traditional media outlets, effectively transforming the leader's personal communication into a media event. In this context, controversy functions as a communication resource rather than a deviation from strategy.

In contrast, Michael O'Leary's communication style is grounded in irony, rational argumentation, and consistency with Ryanair's low-cost business philosophy. O'Leary employs humour and sarcasm as defensive communication mechanisms, thereby mitigating potential reputational threats while strengthening brand recognition. This communication style aligns with Ryanair's long-established identity as a direct, unconventional, and communicatively bold brand.

Ryanair's brand voice in this case is expressed through institutionalised

humour, self-irony, and the deliberate use of conflict as a communication tool. Instead of distancing itself from the dispute, the organisation integrates it into its communication practice, transforming an individual leadership conflict into part of the broader organisational narrative. By doing so, Ryanair not only neutralises potential reputational risk but also reinforces its differentiated identity vis-à-vis competitors.

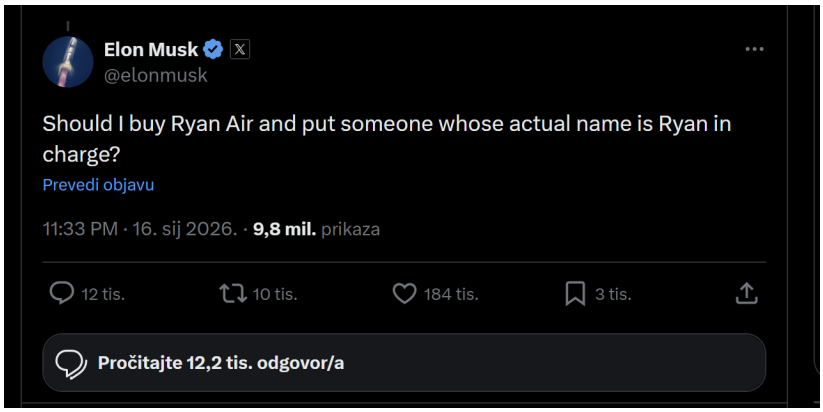


Figure 3. Example of provocation and humor in Elon Musk's public communication. Source: Elon Musk, post on platform X, January 20, 2026.

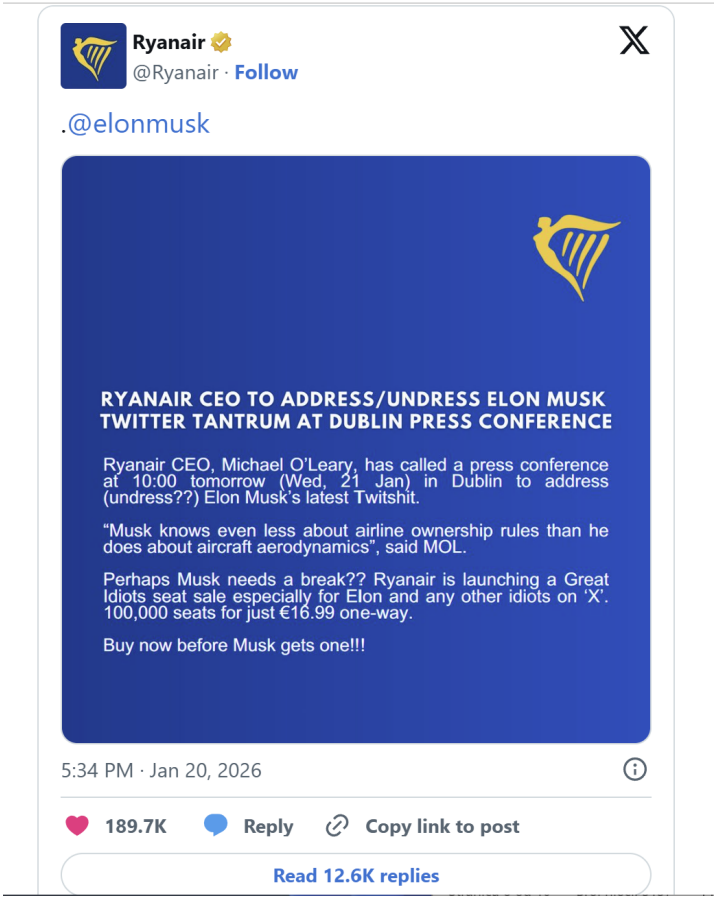


Figure 4. Ryanair's institutionalization of humor and conflict in digital communication. Source: Ryanair, post on platform X, January 20, 2026.

Figures 3 and 4 further confirm the analysis of leadership styles and organisational brand voice presented earlier. Musk's post on platform X, in which he uses provocation and irony to suggest the possibility of acquiring Ryanair, illustrates his tendency toward personalised discourse and deliberate public provocation. Such communication intentionally transcends conventional business rhetoric and serves as a trigger for media attention and high audience engagement, transforming a leader's personal comment into a global communication event.

At the same time, Ryanair's response demonstrates a high level of strategic consistency in communication. Rather than distancing itself from the dispute or adopting a defensive stance, the company institutionalises the conflict through humour, self-irony, and promotional content, thereby integrating an individual leadership dispute into the broader organisational narrative. This clearly reflects Ryanair's brand voice, which is grounded in provocation, directness, and a nonconventional approach to public communication. In this context, the conflict is not merely a response to an external challenge but also a mechanism for strengthening brand recognition and enhancing market visibility.

This dynamic indicates that Musk's and O'Leary's communication styles, although different, are mutually compatible in generating media interest and public engagement. While Musk initiates the dispute through personal and provocative discourse, Ryanair successfully appropriates and transforms it into an organisational communication strategy. This confirms that a public dispute, when aligned with brand identity and audience expectations, can function as an effective tool of strategic communication rather than solely as a reputational risk.

Impact on Reputation and Public Perception

Media attention and public reactions indicate that the analysed communication dispute did not hurt Ryanair's reputation; rather, it further reinforced its recognisable image as a bold and unconventional brand. Instead of causing reputational damage, the public dispute generated strong media and audience interest, being perceived primarily as a communication and marketing phenomenon rather than as an indicator of actual business or operational instability. Statements from company executives and media reports confirm that the increased visibility resulted in higher digital engagement and greater consumer interest, including increased website traffic and a rise in bookings in the days following the escalation of the dispute (The Guardian, 2026; Reuters, 2026).

From a market perspective, investors and the financial community did not interpret the dispute as a genuine threat to the company's performance. Financial results and market forecasts pointed to the stability of Ryanair's business model, while the dispute was assessed as a communication event of limited operational significance. Ryanair's CEO publicly described the disagreement with Musk as a "PR gift," emphasising

that the heightened public attention boosted consumer interest and overall brand visibility (RTE News, 2026).

The analysed case confirms that a public communication dispute, when aligned with brand identity and audience expectations, does not necessarily undermine organisational reputation. On the contrary, under certain conditions, it may contribute to enhanced brand recognition, competitive differentiation, and short-term positive communication and business outcomes. In this sense, the dispute can be understood as a potentially effective tool of strategic communication, whose reputational impact depends on the leader's communication style, the consistency of the brand voice, and the organisation's ability to integrate the dispute into its broader communication narrative.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis of the public communication dispute between Elon Musk and Michael O'Leary confirm the central thesis of this study: that leader disputes in the contemporary digital and media environment do not necessarily produce negative reputational consequences, but may function as strategic communication resources. The analysed case demonstrates that the reputational impact of a dispute depends primarily on the leader's communication style, the alignment of the dispute with brand identity, and the organisation's ability to integrate the dispute into its broader communication narrative.

In relation to the first research question (RQ1), the findings indicate that leaders use public communication disputes as part of strategic communication primarily through direct, personalised, and publicly visible interactions on digital platforms. Elon Musk employs provocation, irony, and a personally infused discourse to stimulate public debate and secure high levels of visibility. In contrast, Michael O'Leary appropriates and reframes the dispute through institutionalised humour and self-irony. This confirms that disputes in the digital environment are not merely spontaneous outbursts, but can represent consciously utilised communication tools.

The second research question (RQ2) is addressed through the clear differences—yet complementary dynamics—between the communication styles of the analysed leaders. Musk's communication, characterised by impulsiveness and the absence of traditional PR filters, enhances perceptions of authenticity while simultaneously increasing reputational risk. In contrast, O'Leary's style is grounded in rational argumentation, humour, and consistency with Ryanair's low-cost identity, thereby neutralising the dispute and transforming it into a brand asset. These findings reinforce theoretical perspectives on leaders as the "brand voice" of the organisation, where the leader's personal style directly shapes perceptions of organisational identity (Cornelissen, 2020; Men, 2014).

The communication patterns observed in this case can further be interpreted through the lens of proactive and reactive communication strategies. Musk's communication largely reflects a reactive strategy, emerging from an

immediate response to an external stimulus and unfolding as an impulsive, personalised reaction in real time. By contrast, the communication approach of Michael O'Leary and Ryanair illustrates a transformation from an initially reactive response to a proactive strategy, whereby the public dispute is deliberately reframed and integrated into a broader communication and marketing narrative. This proactive shift enabled Ryanair to assume control over the meaning and reputational implications of the dispute, effectively transforming a potential threat into a strategic communication resource.

The findings directly support the third research question (RQ3). The public escalation did not negatively affect Ryanair's reputation; rather, it reinforced its image as an unconventional, communication-focused brand. Media reports and executive statements indicate that the dispute generated increased visibility, audience engagement, and short-term positive business effects. These outcomes align with contemporary theoretical perspectives suggesting that disputes become reputational crises not because of their mere existence, but due to inadequate communication management (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Coombs, 2019).

Regarding the fourth research question (RQ4), the case offers important implications for contemporary public relations practice. The role of PR is increasingly shifting from message control and conflict avoidance toward strategic management of meaning, context, and audience expectations. In digital environments, public relations professionals must assess whether a dispute aligns with brand identity and can therefore be leveraged as a differentiator rather than automatically treated as a crisis.

Overall, the analysed case illustrates that in contemporary digital and media contexts, the boundaries between dispute, promotion, and strategic communication are increasingly blurred. Leader communication becomes a decisive factor in determining reputational outcomes, while consistency of brand voice, alignment with audience expectations, and the organisation's capacity to incorporate the dispute into its narrative determine whether the outcome will be destructive or constructive.

This study contributes to the literature on strategic communication by emphasising the need to reconsider public leader disputes not solely within a crisis framework, but also as potentially functional elements of brand strategy in digital environments. The findings suggest that disputes may be normalised and institutionalised as components of an organisation's brand voice, thereby expanding existing theoretical understandings of the relationship between leadership, reputation, and strategic communication. However, such outcomes are not universally applicable. The effectiveness of disputes as communication resources depends heavily on pre-existing brand identity, audience expectations, and the communicative capital of the leader. In this sense, the analysed case represents

a successful, yet context-dependent, strategic approach.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed the public communication dispute between Elon Musk and Michael O'Leary as an example of contemporary strategic communication in a digital and media-driven environment. Starting from the assumption that conflict in public relations does not necessarily constitute a reputational threat, the study aimed to examine how a public leader's dispute can serve as a communication resource and the implications for brand development and reputation management.

The findings demonstrate that a public communication dispute, when aligned with organisational identity and the leader's communication style, may produce neutral or even positive reputational effects. In the analysed case, Elon Musk's communication style—characterised by provocation, irony, and a personally infused discourse—and Michael O'Leary's style—grounded in humour, rational argumentation, and consistency with Ryanair's low-cost identity—proved complementary in generating strong media impact. Rather than experiencing reputational loss, Ryanair successfully integrated the dispute into its communication narrative, thereby reinforcing brand recognition and differentiation.

The study confirms theoretical perspectives that position leaders in contemporary public relations as the brand voice of the organisation, whose personal communication directly shapes perceptions of organisational identity and reputation. The analysis also highlights the evolving role of public relations in digital environments, where the focus is increasingly shifting from conflict avoidance to the strategic management of meaning, context, and stakeholder expectations.

Although based on a single case study, the results suggest broader implications for contemporary public relations practice. In particular, they underline the need for a deeper understanding of leaders as key communicators and for developing strategies that recognise the potential of conflict as a communication resource rather than exclusively as a crisis. The limitations of the study stem from its qualitative design and focus on a single case, which restricts broader generalisation. Future research may therefore include comparative case analyses and the application of quantitative or experimental methods—such as audience perception studies—to further examine the long-term reputational effects of public leader disputes.

In conclusion, public communication disputes in the contemporary digital environment should not be viewed solely as reputational threats but as potential tools of strategic communication. The analysis further indicates that the transition from a reactive to a proactive communication strategy represents a crucial turning point in managing public disputes, enabling organisations to regain control over the meaning and reputational outcomes of the conflict. Consistency in the leader's communication style, alignment of the

dispute with organisational identity, and the organisation's ability to incorporate the dispute into its broader narrative are key factors determining whether the outcome will be destructive or constructive. The analysed case demonstrates that, within a personalised, digitally mediated communication landscape, conflict can become a functional element of brand strategy and modern reputation management—provided it aligns with organisational values and stakeholder expectations.

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STRATEŠKO KOMUNICIRANJE I SUKOB LIDERA U DIGITALNOME OKRUŽJU: ANALIZA SLUČAJA MUSK – O'LEARY (RYANAIR)

U suvremenome digitalnome i medijskome okružju javna komunikacija lidera postaje ključan element strateških odnosa s javnošću i oblikovanja reputacije organizacija. Ovaj rad analizira javni komunikacijski sukob između Elona Muska i Michaela O'Learyja, potaknut neslaganjem u vezi s uvođenjem satelitskoga interneta Starlink u flotu zrakoplova kompanije Ryanair, koji je prerastao u globalno medijski eksponiran događaj. Problem istraživanja odnosi se na nedovoljno razrađeno razumijevanje uloge sukoba lidera kao potencijalnoga komunikacijskoga resursa u suvremenoj PR praksi. Cilj je rada ispitati na koji se način javni komunikacijski sukob lidera može strateški koristiti za povećanje vidljivosti i diferencijaciju brenda te kakve implikacije ima za menadžment reputacije. Rad se metodološki temelji na kvalitativnoj analizi pojedinačnoga slučaja, koja uključuje analizu javnih izjava lidera, medijskih objava i reakcija tržišta. Rezultati analize upućuju na to da javni komunikacijski sukob, kada je usklađen s identitetom brenda i komunikacijskim stilom lidera, ne mora nužno imati negativne reputacijske učinke, nego može pridonijeti jačanju prepoznatljivosti brenda i ostvarivanju kratkoročnih pozitivnih poslovnih učinaka.

Ključne riječi: strateška komunikacija; odnosi s javnošću; sukob; lideri; reputacija; brand voice.