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# Diffusion of the Airport Health Accreditation Program in the COVID-19 period: An Assessment with Institutional Logic And Legitimacy Approach

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to reveal the reason for the diffusion of Airports Health Accreditation among airports. Institutional logic and legitimacy literature are used in the research. The research area consists of 56 airports from different parts of the world. In the research, a qualitative research method was used. Document analysis was used as a data collection method, and descriptive content analysis was used as a data analysis method. According to the results of the research, there are two basic logic and legitimacy seeking that lead airport to this certificate. The first of these is moral legitimacy and professional logic. Accordingly, airports want to be seen as legitimate by professional actors in their institutional environment by certifying that they have taken the necessary measures against COVID-19 threats. The second is pragmatic legitimacy and market logic. According to this remarkable result of the research, one of the important reasons for the airports to turn to this accreditation is to meet the expectations of the customers and gain legitimacy in their eyes. Airports use this accreditation to rebuild trust in the eyes of customers and passengers, to create an airport reputation that took the necessary measures during the pandemic period, to be preferred again, and to revitalize airports.

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak has brought the whole world to the brink of an unprecedented crisis. This crisis has forced individuals, societies, industries, and states to take measures that have never been encountered before. Countries have closed their borders to prevent the spread of the virus, and the global circulation of people has been blocked. All these developments have deeply affected the aviation industry, and the industry has come to a standstill. For example, in April 2020, world passenger traffic decreased by 94.3 percent compared to the previous year (Tabares, 2021, p. 2; Flight Safety Foundation, 2020, p. 4; World Tourism Organization the United Nations, 2020, p. 3). According to the pre-COVID-19 scenario, airport passenger traffic decreased by about 60 percent and revenues by 61 percent in 2020, meaning that an estimated US $ 104.5 billion was lost in airports.[1] The almost complete cutting of both aviation revenues and non-aviation revenues causes great economic losses for airports. The fact that airlines reduce the capacity to a great extent reduces the aviation revenues received by airports due to services such as plane landing - takeoff - accommodation and security. The reduction in flights also reduces non-aviation revenues from airport parking lots, restaurants, or duty-free sales (International Finance Corporation, 2020).

This effect causes difficult economic losses not only for airports but also for all stakeholders of the sector, such as airport service providers and airline organizations (ICAO, 2020). Various stakeholder groups that want to reduce the possibility of COVID-19 transmitted by air, regain trust in the eyes of customers and revitalize the sector also put forward measures for these purposes. Several aviation authorities such as the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the Federal Aviation Administration, the International Civil Aviation Authority (ICAO), and the International Air Transport Association (IATA) publishes various guidelines to inform their parties[2],[3] Airports Council International (ACI) also carries out efforts to reduce the effects of the pandemic for airport organizations, whose members were in the COVID-19 period. One of the most precautions of these efforts is the ACI Airport Health

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[1] https://www.icao.int/sustainability/Documents/COVID-19/ICAO_Coronavirus_Econ_Impact.pdf (Date of Access: 4 December 2020).
[2] https://www.iata.org/en/programs/covid-19-resources-guidelines/(Date of Access: 18 November 2020).
[3] https://www.easa.europa.eu/newsroom-and-events/press-releases/first-companies-sign-easa-programme-monitor-covid-19-operations# (Date of Access: 19 November 2020).

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Accreditation (AHA) program, which is the subject of this research. This program, which was put forward for the purposes such as taking health measures to prevent this epidemic at airports, controlling and encouraging the measures, and sharing good examples, quickly attracted the attention of the airports[4,5] For this reason, it has become a popular certificate program among airport organizations in a short time. In the literature, issues such as the reason for the diffusion of new practices in certain institutional environments (organizational areas), the ways organizations adopt and implement these practices are explained with concepts such as institutional theory, legitimacy theory, and institutional logics. Legitimation in particular is closely related to diffusion (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008, p. 58). These approaches, which try to understand and explain the behavior of organizations, form the framework of this research. There are studies in the literature that reveal that organizations carry out some of their activities in search of legitimacy. According to these studies, these activities sometimes take place in search of moral sometimes pragmatic legitimacy (Shnayder et al., 2016; Howton et al., 2010; Khan et al., 2015; Beddewela and Fairbrass, 2016).

For these reasons, this study, which aims to reveal why airport organizations prefer the ACI - AHA program, draws on the basic assumptions of legitimacy and institutional logic. Basically, *"What are the reasons for the diffusion of ACI Airport Health Accreditation among airport organizations?* Looking for an answer to the question.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Legitimacy

The theory of legitimacy, which has become one of the most used topics in revealing the relations of organizations with their environment (Tilling, 2004, p. 3), is based on the idea that there is a social contract between organizations and society live. According to this theory, if organizations violate the part of the contract concerning them, they are punished by society (Jupe, 2005, p. 6; Fernando and Lawrence, 2014, p. 152). Conversely, organizations are seen as legitimate by society if they comply with this convention. The main point that differentiates legitimacy theory from theories such as agency or resource dependence is that it is related to the effort to comply with the expectations of the society, not the shareholders or investors. Legitimacy is the assumption about the conformity of the behavior of organizations to a system of socially formed norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). In other words, compliance with the values of society brings legitimacy to the organizations. Legitimacy is to act under socially accepted norms and reason (Wicks, 2001). It is about being understood and accepted by the environment and society (Deephouse, 1996, p. 1025).

There are various classifications in the legitimacy theory. It is possible to encounter discourses such as internal-external, macro-micro, managerial - technical, strategic - institutional legitimacy in different fields (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Pfeffer, 1981; Ruef and Scott, 1998; Suchman, 1995). According to most of these approaches, legitimacy is an operational resource that organizations extract from their cultural environment - usually through competition - and use to achieve their goals (Suchman, 1995, p. 575).

However, institutional legitimacy emphasized in the new institutional theory is an indispensable element for the survival of the organization (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1991). Businesses that are deemed legitimate by the institutional environment they are in can access other resources they need and are evaluated as reliable and reputable by their institutional environment, thus assuming a primary role in the survival of the business (Parson, 1960; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

For this reason, organizations that want to be seen as legitimate by their environment tend to adapt to the structures that emerge in their institutional environment. Organizations operating in the same institutional environment tend towards practices that spread through normative, cognitive, or coercive institutional pressures (Scott, 1995, p. 33). The orientation of organizations in the same institutional environment to the same practices leads to institutional isomorphism in the field (Zucker, 1987, p. 452; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In other words, organizations want to be seen as legitimate by actors, uniformly with the organizations in their institutional environment (Selznick, 1996, p. 273). Institutional actors that make up this environment are the viewers who have the power to reveal new structures or destroy existing structures, and at the same time decide whether the organization is legitimate by evaluating those practices (Deephouse, 1996, p. 1033; Scott et al., 2000).

Suchman (1995) explains institutional legitimacy in three types. These are cognitive-cultural, moral, and pragmatic legitimacy. Cognitive legitimacy is about being taken for granted and not questioned even otherwise. Pragmatic legitimacy is about the organization's actions following the rational interests of itself and its followers. It is based on concrete rewards, cost-benefit analysis. Moral legitimacy is related to the compliance of the activities of the organization with the value judgments of society. It is about ethical decisions that focus on whether the activity is "the right thing to do", not whether the activity of the organization provides rational benefit.

### 2.2. Institutional logics

One of the concepts used to explain the reasons for organizational behavior is institutional logic (Cobb et al., 2016, p. 2104; Vickers et al., 2017, p. 1757). Institutional logic enables organizations to make decisions by offering frames to actors for their elections (Friedland, 1991, p. 248; Corbett et al., 2018, p. 263). Actors can be the source of change in institutional environments by destroying stereotyped institutional logic and building new ones.

Institutional logics first gained a framework with the work of Friedland and Alford (1991). In the research, institutional logics are classified as capital market, family, bureaucratic state, democracy, and religion. Thornton et al. (2012), on the other hand, added society and profession to this classification. Freidson (2001), on the other hand, made three classifications of logic: market, bureaucracy, and professional. Although there are different classifications on the subject, four basic logic are briefly explained as follows (Wall, 2017, p. 393; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Brown et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017, p. 676; Thornton et al., 2012; Freidson, 2001).

#### 2.2.1. Professional

This rationale is concerned with organizing and supervising the institutional space of professionals with specialized knowledge. Professional associations inspect each other, reveal new structures, set accreditation standards. In this logic, experts in the professional network interact and they are cooperation partners. According to this logic, it is an ethical obligation to provide professional work in subjects that are experts on behalf of others, to do the job correctly, and to supervise that things are done correctly.

#### 2.2.2. Community

This logic is not related to professional organizations or specialties such as professional logic. What is important here is that organizations make decisions by considering the well-being of society first while performing their behavior. In other words, it is about the organization's efforts for the well-being and satisfaction of all segments of society, without commercial profit, without prioritizing any stakeholder group. Collaborations are primarily made with non-profit associations.

[4] https://aci-lac.aero/news/aci-launches-accreditation-programme-to-assess-airport-health-measures/# (Date of Access: 22 November 2020).

[5] https://aci.aero/about-aci/priorities/health/aci-airport-health-accreditation-programme/(Date of Access: 01 November 2020).

#### 2.2.3. Market

This logic is about the organization prioritizing its market rather than prioritizing the well-being of society. According to this logic, it is not society, non-profit organizations, or professional expertise, organizations that shape the institutional environment. What matters is the market itself and the customers' preferences. Therefore, what regulates this logic is the expectations of the market. Organizations engage in activities that will prioritize their customers. The focus of the organization is on concepts such as economic interests, competition, and productivity. Therefore, organizations implement practices with the logic of gaining a competitive advantage in the market and giving them a reputation in the eyes of their customers.

#### 2.2.4. State

According to this logic, the regulators of the institutional space are the state and the authorities. The practices and rules of the authorities such as laws and regulations shape the behavior of organizations. In other words, according to this logic, the role of the state is effective among all stakeholder groups of the organization. Accordingly, compliance with the structures emerging in line with the demands of the authorities is a priority. For this reason, the institutions cooperating during the activities are the authorities, professional organizations, not non-profit organizations.

### 2.3. Airport Health Accreditation Program

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the most influential crisis, pointing to an unprecedented crisis in the aviation industry, and threatening the industry globally to date. The rapid transport of this virus between distances with air transport has brought air transport to a standstill. ACI, on the other hand, took action to reduce the diffusion of the virus at airports and made efforts to protect the health of passengers, employees, and the public. For example, it shared the best examples of this subject with newsletters.[6] One of the most important steps of ACI in this regard is the AHA program.

The main purpose of this program is to take effective measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 disease at airports, to inspect these measures, to make them measurable, and to relieve employees and users. In this sense, it is to show the authorities and regulators the precautions taken regarding health and safety during the pandemic process. In this accreditation program, issues such as cleaning and disinfection, physical distance, protection of personnel, physical settlement, passenger communication, and passenger facilities are emphasized. If member airports want to obtain this certificate, they apply to ACI and the process is evaluated by ACI. As a result of the evaluation, it is checked that these processes are carried out safely and hygienically and the Airport Health Accreditation certificate is given to the relevant airport. Airports that want to obtain the relevant certificate are obliged to take the necessary health measures against the pandemic in all passenger areas such as terminal access, check-in areas, security screening, boarding gates, waiting rooms, eating and drinking areas, boarding bridges, escalators, and elevators, border control areas. Many of the ACI member airports have taken action to ensure this accreditation as restrictions on air transport are reduced during the pandemic. With this program announced in July 2020, Istanbul Airport became the first airport to be accredited and certified. By November 30, 2020, a total of 189 airports from many regions around the world were rapidly accredited by obtaining this certificate. This new application, which has become popular and diffusion among airports in such a short time, continues to be acquired by many airport operators from all regions of the world. Fig. 1 illustrates this diffusion:

## 3. Method

In this research, the qualitative research design is used. In the research, document analysis is used as a data collection method. The relevant documents were obtained from the posts of the airports, which constitute the field of research, in the sections such as press releases, announcements, and news. In the study, data were collected by the purposeful sampling method. In the selection of airports, first of all, the websites of all 189 airports that were certified until the end of the data collection process were examined. Later, all airports whose websites were accessible and shared on the subject were included in the study. The data collection period continued from 1 September 2020 to November 30, 2020. At the end of the period, a total of 56 airports from different parts of the world were included in the research area. The names of the relevant airports are shown in Table 1 with their three-letter codes.

Descriptive content analysis is used as a data analysis method in the research. Research findings are described by enriching them with direct quotations, which is one of the methods to increase the trustworthiness in qualitative research. All direct quotations are obtained from the website of the respective airports and the posts on the ACI website.

## 4. Findings and interpretations

As a result of the analysis of the qualitative data collected in this study, various findings were reached. These findings reveal the reasons that led airport companies to this accreditation with the approach of legitimacy and institutional logic. According to the findings of the research, there are two different institutional logics that direct airport companies to this certificate. These are professional and market logic. It has also been found that airports operate in pursuit of moral and pragmatic legitimacy.

### 4.1. Moral legitimacy seeking and professional logic

ACI is the only global representative of airports in the world, it is a global airport community. It carries out representation and advice activities for airports on matters such as safety, security, economic interests, and health. It tries to protect the interests of its members with the standards, policies, and training opportunities it develops for airports.[8] In other words, ACI focuses on protecting the interests of airports and airport users. It also carries out efforts to ensure cooperation and solidarity between airports. It tries to provide its members with services that will support their knowledge and professionalism in sectoral issues related to airport management. Its members consist of airports in 176 countries as of January2, 019.[9] The fact that ACI is a community of organizations that strive for their members to do their jobs better, and contributes to the correct performance of works for its members through certificates, training, accreditations, certification makes it an actor in the institutional environment that creates institutions with normative dimensions towards ethical values (Scott, 1995, p. 33; Scott, 2008, p. 225–226). For the same reasons, the reason for the spread of AHA accreditation also relates to the pursuit of moral legitimacy. It is related to moral legitimacy to create perceptions about whether the activity is the *"right thing to do"*, not necessarily conforming to ethical considerations and procedures (Suchman, 1995, p. 579). All of the organizations that make up the research field shared these certificates on the home

[6] https://aci.aero/about-aci/priorities/health/(Date of Access: 05 November 2020).

[7] https://aci.aero/about-aci/priorities/health/aci-airport-health-accreditation-programme/(Date of Access: 30 November 2020).

[8] https://aci.aero/about-aci/(Date of Access: 05 November 2020).

[9] https://aci.aero/about-aci/overview/mission-objectives-and-structure/(Date of Access: 05 November 2020).


**Fig. 1.** Diffusion of AHA certified airports.[7]

**Table 1**
List of airport organizations.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. İstanbul Airport (IST) | 2. Sarasota Bradenton International Airport (SRQ) |
| 3. Winnipeg Richardson International Airport (YWG) | 4. San Diego International Airport (SAN) |
| 5. Victoria International Airport (YYJ) | 6. Quito International Airport (UIO) |
| 7. Velana International Airport (MLE) | 8. Puerto Vallarta International Airport (PVR) |
| 9. Toronto Pearson International Airport (YYZ) | 10. Polermo Airport (PMO) |
| 11. Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport (MRU) | 12. Piarco International Aırport (POS) |
| 13. Shannon Airport (SNN) | 14. Perth Airport (PER) |
| 15. Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA) | 16. Pafos International Airport (PFO) |
| 17. New York Stewart Airport (SWF) | 18. Krakow Airport (KRK) |
| 19. Miami International Airport (MIA) | 20. José Joaquín de Olmedo International Airport (GYE) |
| 21. Macau International Airport (MFM) | 22. John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) |
| 23. Lynden Pindling International Airport (NAS) | 24. İzmir Adnan Menderes Airport (ADB) |
| 25. Luxembourg Airport (LUX) | 26. Zagreb Airport (ZAG) |
| 27. London Luton Airport (LTN) | 28. Indianapolis International Airport (IND) |
| 29. London City Airport (LCY) | 30. Incheon International Airport (ICN) |
| 31. Larnaka International Airport (LCA) | 32. Hyderabad International Airport (HYD) |
| 33. Hong Kong International Airport (HKG) | 34. Edmonton International Airport (YEG) |
| 35. Halifax International Airport (YHZ) | 36. Dublin Airport (DUB) |
| 37. Guarulhos International Airport (GRU) | 38. Cincinnati Kentucky International Airport (CVG) |
| 39. Guanacaste Airport (LIR) | 40. Curaçao International Airport (CUR) |
| 41. Gimpo International Airport (GMP) | 42. Cork Airport (ORK) |
| 43. Genève Aeroport (GVA) | 44. Clark International Airport (CRK) |
| 45. Gazipaşa Airport (GZP) | 46. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (BOM) |
| 47. Evansville Regional Airport (EVV) | 48. Cheddi Jagan International Airport (GEO) |
| 49. Changi Airport (SIN) | 50. Bonaire International Airport (BON) |
| 51. Calgary International Airport (YYC) | 52. Bologna Guglielmo Marconi Airport (BLQ) |
| 53. Cairns Airport (CNS) | 54. Baltra Seymour Airport (GPS) |
| 55. Brussels Airport (BRU) | 56. Ankara Esenboğa Airport (ESB) |

pages of their websites, press releases, or news columns. They use this accreditation as a means of legitimation, using the emblem for the relevant certification or the visual of the certification or the discursive explanations on the subject. By obtaining this certificate, airports organizations gain legitimacy in the eyes of the ACI professional community on the one hand, and the other hand, they create *"the reputation of the airport operator that does its job well and following the ethical values"* and try to create legitimacy in the eyes of all stakeholders. Mentioned emblems and certificates are exemplified in Figs. 2 and 3:

In addition to the use of certification or emblems as a means of legitimacy, many airports also make statements that associate achieving this certification with achievements such as achievements, awards, and honors. While making these shares, many of them try to strengthen their legitimacy with statements emphasizing that they are among the first airport organizations to receive this accreditation. Table 2 illustrates this situation with direct quotes from the relevant statements on the websites of the airports.

While airport operators share general information regarding this accreditation in their press releases, they also share the meaning attributed to this certificate by the airport managers with their stakeholders. These shares are exemplified in Table 3.

Airport organizations not only convey this accreditation with emblems, certificates, or the views of airport managers. The majority of the airports that constitute the research area, try to further reinforce their moral legitimacy by including not only their statements but also the statements of the ACI officials on their websites. Table 4 illustrates the statements of airport operators that they are appreciated, rewarded, and approved by ACI.

As exemplified by direct transfers in Tables 2–4, all of the airports accredited with this certification have achieved moral legitimacy against ACI by certifying that they are airports that provide the necessary hygiene and protection measures during the pandemic period, do the work as recommended by the professionals, pass inspections and approvals. Airports have tried to reinforce this legitimacy by making this approval accessible to other stakeholders with the direct statements of ACI (Suchman, 1995, p. 579). In other words, airport organizations are trying to reach the legitimacy that is seen as an indispensable resource for the sustainability of their assets by rapidly turning to this new certification that emerged in their institutional environments (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1991). According to this result, ACI is in the position of framing the AHA certification process with

[10] https://macl.aero/passengers/covid19/updates# (Date of Access: 29 November 2020).
[11] https://www.macau-airport.com/en/media-centre/news/news/26146 (Date of Access: 29 November 2020).


**Fig. 2.** Emblem example.[10]


**Fig. 3.** Certificate example.[11]

**Table 2**
Statements emphasizing that it is one of the first airports to receive the certificate.

| |
|---|
| Istanbul Airport has become the first airport in the world to receive certification under the "Airport Health Accreditation" program launched by Airport Council International (ACI). |
| Quito airport is the first in South America to obtain this accreditation. |
| Bologna Marconi Airport has obtained - the first airport in Italy and among the first in the World - the Airport Health Accreditation issued by Airport Council International (ACI) World and from ACI Eur. |
| Cork Airport Is The First Irish Airport to Achieve ACI Airport Health Accreditation. |
| Evansville Regional Airport (EVV) is the first airport in the state of Indiana, and only the sixth in the U.S., to receive an industry-approved global Health Accreditation. |
| Zagreb Airport, among the first airports in Europe, successfully passed the accreditation program for providing health safety measures at the airport in the conditions of COVID-19. |
| Luxembourg Airport was certified first in Central Europe for its COVID-19 preventive measures by the ACI. |
| MIA is the first airport in Florida, second in the U.S. to receive health accreditation from ACI World. |
| Cairns Airport has become the second airport in Australia to receive a global stamp of approval for its COVID-safe travel measures. |

**Table 3**
Statements of airport organization managers.

| |
|---|
| "Passenger safety has always been our paramount concern at CVG. Our CVG community, comprised of the airport, airline and tenant staff continue to go above and beyond for travelers," said Candace McGraw, Chief Executive Officer, CVG. |
| "The safety of our passengers and employees is and always has been our top priority at EVV, and this important accreditation is another testament to our unwavering commitment," said Nate Hahn, EVV Executive Director." |
| "With the "safe airport in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic" certificate, among the first airports in Europe, we have proven our commitment to protecting the health of passengers, employees and all users of our services, which is a precondition for the gradual recovery of the airport traffic"- said Huseyin Bahadir Bedir, President of the International Zagreb Airport Management. |
| "GRU Airport is proud to receive this important certification. We have always adopted the strictest health and hygiene measures, recommended by official agencies, to promote a safe environment for passengers and employees," said Gustavo Figueiredo – CEO GRU Airport |
| "Aviation is an important industry that is bound to international rules and committed to continuous improvement as aimed at maximized passenger experience. We continue our efforts to offer our passengers a 'safe travel at maximum hygiene' in the new normal." said, Kadri Samsunlu, Chief Executive Officer at IGA Airport Operation Inc, |

professional logic (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thorton et al., 2012; Freidson, 2001; Wall, 2017). In summary, the role of professional logic in the emergence and diffusion of this practice is evident.

One of the most important findings of the study is that airport operators do not use this certificate solely in search of moral legitimacy and professional logic. It is seen that the search for pragmatic legitimacy and the logic of the market play an important role among the reasons that lead airport operators to this certificate.

### 4.2. Pragmatic legitimacy seeking and market logic

As a result of the research, another institutional logic that causes the spread of AHA certification among airport operators is the market logic. According to this logic, the most important issue that shapes the

**Table 4**
ACI's statements about airport organizations that received AHA certification.

| |
|---|
| "By earning their ACI Airport Health Accreditation, Indianapolis International Airport has reaffirmed its commitment to protecting passengers and airport workers and limiting the spread of COVID-19. We are proud to recognize Indianapolis International Airport's Airport Health Accreditation," said ACI-North America President and Chief Executive Officer Kevin M. Burke. |
| "We congratulate Perth Airport for becoming the first airport in Australia to obtain the Airport Health Accreditation," said Stefano Baronci, Director General, ACI Asia-Pacific. |
| "After reviewing the evidence presented through our evaluation process, Dublin Airport has shown that it is providing a safe airport experience for all travelers," said ACI Director-General Luis Felipe de Oliveira. |
| "We congratulate Rajiv Gandhi International Airport for being accredited through ACI's Airport Health Accreditation program which demonstrates that they are focused on the health and welfare of travelers, staff, and the public" said Mr. Luis Felipe de Oliveira, Director General, ACI World., |
| "I wish to extend my congratulations to you and the team at Maldives Airports Company Ltd accreditation in the Airports Council International (ACI) Airport Health Accreditation program." Says ACI World's Director General Mr. Luis Felipe de Oliveir. |

behavior of organizations is the tastes and expectations of the customers. Organizations carry out practices that will satisfy the expectations of the market by considering their rational interests (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thorton et al., 2012; Freidson, 2001; Wall, 2017). Therefore, organizations act with the logic that will gain a reputation in the eyes of their customers and provide them with a competitive advantage in the long run. The rational interests mentioned here are related to the pursuit of pragmatic legitimacy based on cost-benefit analysis (Suchman, 1995). Statements by airport operators regarding AHA accreditation support these findings. The majority of airports consider this certificate as a measure to protect the health of employees and customers who serve the continuation of their activities, rather than expressing it as an application that will benefit the whole society. In summary, this practice for airports is related to creating an airport's reputation that has taken the necessary precautions for COVID-19 precautions in the eyes of customers, being preferred by customers in their travel times and providing benefits that will increase their economy in the long term. The explanations exemplified in Table 5 support this finding.

As seen in Table 5, the majority of airport operators associate this certificate with regaining the trust of the market and invite customers to travel safely from the airports. These statements illustrate the market rationale behind accreditation. Airports make the market logic more clear by using the expressions of "traveling people" instead of expressions that include all stakeholder groups that may indicate the logic of community. The description below exemplifies this:

> "Clark International Airport (CRK) was recently awarded the Airport Health Accreditation by the Airports Council International (ACI), in recognition of its efforts in making the airport a safe and secure place for the traveling public."

Among the 56 airports in the research area, an expression that covers the whole society without discriminating any stakeholder and draws attention to the logic of society has been found in only one airport:

> "Quiport has worked diligently in the development of protocols and sanitary prevention measures for the Quito International Airport, and when we learned about the ACI accreditation program, we immediately applied. We believe that it is essential to enact sanitary measures common to the industry to guarantee the safety of our passengers, airport personnel, and the society as a whole", commented Andrew O'Brian, President and CEO of Quiport.

According to all these findings revealed in the research and supported by numerous direct transfers, the airports want to be preferred by their customers during their travels by regaining their trust in air transportation. A small number of airports have made statements that this accreditation will contribute to being seen as legitimate, even in the eyes of the authorities. All these behaviors relate to the pursuit of rational interests during the COVID-19 period and beyond. Press releases of airport operators sometimes emphasize the contributions of this certification to economic recovery based on rational interests, sometimes in statements made by the managers of the enterprise, and sometimes in statements made by ACI officials. Table 6 contains expressions that illustrate this situation.

**Table 5**
Statements to passengers to influence their preferences.

| |
|---|
| Tourists contemplating to visit our island can verify via this accreditation that we have their safety as a high priority and that our airport is a 'safe zone' to start and end their travels on Curaçao … We can say that we are an accredited airport in health, and we hope you will visit our airport soon to and from Curaçao! |
| "Airports Council International's Airport Health Accreditation program is an important step in rebuilding passenger confidence and providing further assurance to travelers that they are in safe hands at Cairns Airport", Mr. Carter said |
| "I hope this award, alongside our continued focus on delivering safe, careful, and speedy journeys, will give passengers more confidence to travel and to choose London City Airport when they do so." Said Alison FitzGerald, Chief Operating Officer |
| "This accreditation shows that the processes and systems that Dublin Airport has put in place are world-class and fully aligned with best practice in our sector. As a result of their hard work and dedication, passengers can confidently enjoy their journeys in a safe environment." |
| Brussels Airport makes every effort to ensure that the airport's facilities are hygienic and safe to welcome passengers … The Health Accreditation Programme was set up to restore confidence in travelers about the safety of airport facilities and the effectiveness of the precautionary measures implemented to prevent any risk to their health. |
| Passengers can be confident in COVID-19 precautions taken at the airport. Extensive health and safety precautions at Edmonton International Airport (EIA) have landed it the top global accreditation for its COVID-19 response. |

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

The purpose of this research is to understand and explain the reason for the diffusion of the ACI-AHA program, which has evolved into a rapidly spreading certification among airports. For this purpose, the institutional logic and legitimacy literature were used in the research. As a result of the analysis, important results were reached in the research.

The first of these is that the AHA-certified airport organizations transform this gain into news value through corporate communication tools on their websites. In addition to sharing, visual emblems, and certificates, they also included discourses that would make them legitimate in the eyes of target stakeholder groups by providing them with a reputation. According to these discourses supported by direct transfers in the research, there are two basic institutional logics and two basic legitimacy pursuits that direct airport organizations to this practice.

First of all, ACI emerges as an institutional actor that outlines, inspects, and certifies the health, safety, and hygiene measures taken at airports during the COVID-19 process. The supervision and certification of work by professionals, as recommended by experts, transforms ACI

**Table 6**
Statements on rational interests and economic recovery.

| |
|---|
| "Airports are vital to the UK's economic recovery, and as we welcome back more passengers we are taking every measure possible to ensure that everyone in the airport is as safe as possible. This accreditation provides peace of mind to our staff and the passengers who choose to fly with us …" said Alberto Martin, CEO of London Luton Airport. |
| Aviation and tourism are key economic drivers for national economies and society at large, particularly in island nations. "We are pleased to have obtained this health accreditation which is a positive milestone on our road to economic and tourism recovery," said Ms. Vernice Walkine, President and Chief Executive Officer at the Nassau Airport. |
| Aviation is a critical driver of the global economic recovery from the impacts of COVID19, and accreditations like this are an important role in promoting an airport's health and safety measures to promote confidence and overall peace of mind in air travel. Evansville Regional Airport (EVV). |

into an institutional entrepreneur that triggers expansion with normative institutional pressures and frames professional logic (Scott, 1995, p. 33; Scott, 2008, p. 225–226; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thorton et al., 2012; Freidson, 2001; Wall, 2017). Conducting the work in a way recommended by experts, correctly and properly, also corresponds to gaining moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995, p. 579). For all these reasons, airport organizations are turning to this certification with a professional logic and seeking moral legitimacy.

Another important finding in the study is that airports tend not only to seek moral legitimacy but also to seek pragmatic legitimacy. All businesses that make up the research field express this certification as an achievement that will give passengers the confidence to choose their airports and develop discourses that will motivate them to choose themselves when they travel. This approach, based on gaining a reputation in the eyes of its customers, meeting the expectations of the market, gaining competitive advantage by being more preferred, and economic recovery in airports, also reveals the market logic and the pursuit of pragmatic legitimacy (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thorton et al., 2012; Freidson, 2001; Wall, 2017).

The market and the professional logic that emerged in the research do not conflict with each other, nor contradict the interests of the airports. Both logics reveal a pattern of behavior that gives moral and pragmatic legitimacy to the AHA certificate and legitimizes these airports (Suchman 1995; Thornton 2002). The fact that institutional logics, which are sometimes in conflict with the same institutional environment, sometimes strengthen each other as cooperation is also supported by the literature (Xu et al., 2018; Egels et al., 2015, p. 349).

This research was carried out by analyzing data collected from secondary sources. To increase the trustworthiness of the research, a large number of direct quotations, sometimes shared by the airport, corporate communication units, sometimes by managers' statements, and sometimes by ACI's statements about these airports, are included. However, it is recommended to support the reasons that lead airports to this certificate with different studies. To better reveal the perceptions of managers who take and implement such decisions, data collected through semi-structured interviews, and studies conducted with inductive analyzes based on in-depth exploration are also needed. Besides, the long-term social and operational impacts of adopting the AHA program on the airport operation and its environment are also important issues to be explored.

## Author statement

All processes of the study named "Diffusion of the Airport Health Accreditation Program in the COVID-19 Period: An Assessment with Institutional Logic And Legitimacy Approach" were carried out by Yeşim KURT.

**Yeşim KURT:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data collecting, Writing- Original draft preparation, Visualization, Data Analysis, Editing and Revision.

## Ethical approval

Not required.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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