A SAMPLE RESEARCH PROPOSAL BY DISSERTATION MASTER

Strategic Adaptation and Sustainability in British Airways: Navigating Post-Pandemic Trends, Digital Transformation, and Competitive Resilience in the UK Aviation Industry (2020–2030)

A case-study analysis of strategic renewal, decarbonisation and digital change at British Airways

Prepared by: Jonathan A. Whitfield

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the

MSc in Strategic Management (Aviation Management Pathway)

June 2026

Word count (main body, excl. references & appendices): c. 3,180

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic represented the most severe demand shock in the history of commercial aviation, compelling legacy carriers such as British Airways (BA) to undertake rapid and far-reaching strategic adaptation. This proposal sets out a research design to investigate how BA, the flagship subsidiary of International Airlines Group (IAG), has reconfigured its competitive strategy across three interdependent domains—operational and financial recovery, environmental sustainability, and digital transformation—during the turbulent decade from 2020 to 2030. Adopting a qualitative, single-case-study approach, the study triangulates secondary evidence (IAG and BA annual and sustainability reports, IATA and UK Civil Aviation Authority data, and peer-reviewed literature) with a small number of expert interviews where access permits. The theoretical framework integrates Porter's competitive positioning, the Resource-Based View (RBV) and the Dynamic Capabilities perspective to explain how BA senses, seizes and reconfigures resources under conditions of sustained uncertainty. Analytical techniques include thematic analysis, PESTLE and SWOT, supported by documentary and financial trend analysis. The research addresses a recognised gap: the limited integrative scholarship examining how recovery, decarbonisation and digitalisation interact as a single strategic agenda within one legacy carrier. Findings are expected to yield theoretical contributions to dynamic-capabilities scholarship, practical guidance for airline managers, and policy-relevant insight for UK aviation regulators.

Keywords: British Airways; strategic adaptation; dynamic capabilities; sustainable aviation; digital transformation; competitive resilience; post-pandemic recovery.

1. Introduction and Background

Commercial aviation occupies a strategically significant position within the United Kingdom economy, contributing to trade, tourism, employment and global connectivity. At the centre of this sector sits British Airways (BA), the UK's largest international carrier and the principal operating subsidiary of International Airlines Group (IAG), formed through the 2011 merger of BA and Iberia. As a full-service legacy carrier built around a hub-and-spoke network centred on London Heathrow, BA has historically competed through scale, network breadth, premium-cabin revenue and brand heritage. Yet the operating environment in which these advantages were forged has been profoundly destabilised since 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented collapse in passenger demand. According to the International Air Transport Association, global passenger traffic fell by roughly two-thirds in 2020, producing industry-wide losses without modern precedent and forcing carriers into emergency cost reduction, fleet retirement and workforce restructuring. BA grounded large portions of its fleet, retired its entire Boeing 747 sub-fleet earlier than planned, and implemented contentious workforce changes that attracted public and political scrutiny. Recovery from 2022 onward has been uneven, shaped by volatile fuel prices, inflationary cost pressures, constrained airport capacity and shifting patterns of business and leisure travel.

Simultaneously, two structural transformations have accelerated. First, the decarbonisation imperative has hardened from reputational concern into a binding strategic and regulatory constraint. The UK's legally binding net-zero-by-2050 commitment, the introduction of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) mandates, and the reform of carbon pricing have placed environmental performance at the heart of airline strategy. IAG has publicly committed to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 and set interim SAF and efficiency targets. Second, digital transformation—spanning retailing,

personalisation, operational analytics, biometric processing and artificial intelligence—has become a primary battleground for cost efficiency and customer experience.

These pressures do not operate in isolation; they interact. Investment in fuel-efficient aircraft simultaneously advances financial recovery and decarbonisation, while digital platforms enable both cost discipline and the data infrastructure required for emissions reporting. Understanding BA's strategic trajectory therefore requires an integrative lens rather than the siloed treatment that dominates much existing commentary. This study examines how BA is navigating these intersecting trends and what its response reveals about competitive resilience in a mature, highly regulated and increasingly contested industry.[1]

2. Problem Statement and Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on airline strategy, three limitations motivate this study. First, much post-pandemic analysis remains descriptive and journalistic, cataloguing measures taken without theorising the underlying capabilities that enable—or constrain—adaptation. Second, the academic literature tends to treat recovery, sustainability and digitalisation as separate research streams, obscuring the trade-offs and synergies that managers must reconcile in practice. Third, single-firm, theory-driven case studies of UK legacy carriers in the explicitly post-pandemic period (2020–2030) remain comparatively scarce, with much empirical work concentrating on low-cost carriers or on the immediate 2020–2021 shock rather than the longer adaptation horizon.

The resulting gap is conceptual as well as empirical: there is limited integrative understanding of how a single legacy carrier orchestrates simultaneous strategic agendas through dynamic capabilities under sustained uncertainty. By examining British Airways as a critical case across the full decade, this research seeks to connect strategic-management theory with the lived strategic reality of a major UK carrier, generating insight that is both theoretically grounded and practically actionable.

3. Aim and Objectives

Aim. To critically analyse how British Airways has adapted its competitive strategy between 2020 and 2030 in response to post-pandemic recovery, sustainability imperatives and digital transformation, and to evaluate the implications for its long-term competitive resilience within the UK aviation industry.

The aim is pursued through the following SMART objectives:

1. **To examine** the strategic, operational and financial measures BA adopted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, using documentary and financial-trend analysis of IAG/BA reports for 2020–2025.
2. **To evaluate** BA's sustainability strategy—including fleet renewal, SAF adoption and net-zero commitments—against UK and international regulatory benchmarks and stated targets.
3. **To analyse** the role of digital transformation in BA's strategy, assessing how digital retailing, operations and customer-experience initiatives contribute to efficiency and differentiation.
4. **To apply** Porter's competitive framework, the Resource-Based View and the Dynamic Capabilities perspective to interpret BA's strategic behaviour and identify its sources of advantage and vulnerability.
5. **To assess** the interdependencies and trade-offs among recovery, sustainability and digitalisation, identifying synergies and tensions in BA's strategic portfolio.
6. **To develop** evidence-based recommendations for BA management and policy-relevant observations for UK aviation regulators concerning competitive resilience to 2030.

4. Research Questions

Primary research question. How has British Airways adapted its competitive strategy between 2020 and 2030 to navigate post-pandemic recovery, sustainability pressures and digital transformation, and with what implications for its competitive resilience?

Secondary research questions.

1. What strategic and operational responses did BA deploy to recover from the pandemic-induced demand shock?
2. How credible and effective is BA's sustainability strategy relative to regulatory requirements and competitor benchmarks?
3. In what ways does digital transformation reshape BA's cost base, customer proposition and competitive positioning?
4. How do recovery, sustainability and digitalisation interact as a single strategic agenda, and what does this reveal about BA's dynamic capabilities?

5. Literature Review

This review critically synthesises four bodies of scholarship—competitive strategy, the resource-based and dynamic-capabilities perspectives, sustainability in aviation, and digital transformation—before identifying the gap the study addresses.

5.1 Competitive strategy and positioning

Porter's (1980) framework of generic strategies and the five competitive forces remains a foundational lens for analysing industry structure and firm positioning. Applied to aviation, it illuminates the intense rivalry, low switching costs, powerful airport and manufacturer suppliers, and the persistent threat of low-cost substitution that characterise the European short-haul market. However, critics argue that Porter's essentially static, structure-driven model is poorly suited to turbulent environments where advantage is transient and industry boundaries are fluid (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997). For a carrier such as BA, pursuing premium differentiation on long-haul routes while contesting cost-sensitive short-haul markets, the limits of a single generic strategy are particularly apparent.

5.2 The Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities

The Resource-Based View (RBV) shifts attention from industry structure to firm-specific resources, contending that sustained advantage derives from resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991). For BA, candidate resources include Heathrow slot portfolios, brand heritage, a transatlantic joint business and accumulated network scale. Yet the RBV has been criticised for being comparatively static and for under-explaining how firms renew their resource base amid disruption. The Dynamic Capabilities perspective addresses this by theorising the higher-order capacities to *sense* opportunities and threats, *seize* them through investment and reconfiguration, and continuously *transform* the asset base (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997; Teece, 2007). This framework is especially apposite for a study of pandemic-era adaptation, where the central analytical question is not what resources BA holds but how effectively it reconfigures them under sustained uncertainty.

5.3 Airline business models and sustainability in aviation

A substantial literature distinguishes full-service network carriers from low-cost carriers, charting the competitive convergence and hybridisation that has eroded once-clear boundaries (Doganis, 2019).

Within this stream, sustainability has moved from periphery to centre. Scholars and industry bodies emphasise that aviation's decarbonisation depends on a portfolio of levers—fleet modernisation, operational efficiency, SAF, market-based measures and, prospectively, novel propulsion—each with differing cost, maturity and abatement potential (IATA, 2023; Sustainable Aviation, 2023). A recurring theme is the credibility gap between ambitious net-zero pledges and near-term delivery, alongside concern over "greenwashing" where communication outpaces measurable progress (Becken and Carmignani, 2020). Critically, much of this work treats sustainability as an environmental-management question rather than as a core component of competitive strategy, leaving its strategic interdependence with recovery and digitalisation under-examined.

5.4 Digital transformation in aviation

Research on digital transformation highlights its dual contribution to operational efficiency and customer-experience differentiation through data analytics, dynamic pricing, modern airline retailing, biometrics and artificial intelligence (Vasigh and Rowe, 2020). For legacy carriers, digitalisation is frequently framed as a route to closing the cost gap with low-cost competitors while monetising premium service. Nonetheless, empirical accounts of how incumbents build the organisational and data capabilities required to realise these benefits—and how digital investment intersects with sustainability reporting and post-pandemic cost discipline—remain comparatively thin.

5.5 Synthesis and identified gap

Taken together, these literatures provide robust but largely *parallel* accounts of positioning, capabilities, sustainability and digitalisation. What is missing is an integrative, theory-driven analysis of how one legacy carrier orchestrates these agendas simultaneously over the full post-pandemic decade. This study addresses that gap by deploying the Dynamic Capabilities perspective, complemented by Porter and the RBV, to interpret British Airways as a critical case of strategic adaptation, thereby connecting competitive-strategy theory to a concrete and consequential empirical setting.[2]

6. Proposed Methodology

6.1 Research philosophy and approach

The study adopts an interpretivist philosophy, appropriate for understanding the meanings, rationales and strategic logics underlying organisational behaviour, combined with a predominantly inductive approach that allows theory to inform—rather than rigidly dictate—analysis. Reasoning is best described as abductive, iterating between the dynamic-capabilities framework and emerging empirical patterns.

6.2 Research design: a single-case study

A qualitative single-case-study design is selected because the research questions are explanatory ("how" and "why") and concern a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context, for which case study is widely regarded as the appropriate strategy (Yin, 2018). British Airways constitutes a *critical* and *revelatory* case: a large, mature UK legacy carrier confronting the full spectrum of post-pandemic, sustainability and digital pressures. The single-case design permits depth and contextual richness that a broader comparative design would sacrifice.

6.3 Data sources and collection

The study primarily employs **secondary data**, triangulated across source types to enhance validity:

- **Corporate disclosures:** IAG and BA annual reports, financial statements and investor

presentations (2020–2025) and BA/IAG sustainability and ESG reports.

- **Industry and regulatory data:** IATA economic and sustainability publications, UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) statistics and policy documents, Department for Transport and ICAO materials.
- **Academic literature:** peer-reviewed articles, principally from the *Journal of Air Transport Management* and cognate outlets.
- **Reputable media and analyst commentary** for triangulation and event chronology.

Where institutional access and ethical approval permit, a small number (4–6) of semi-structured **expert interviews** with aviation analysts, sustainability professionals or former industry managers will supplement the documentary base. The proposal treats primary data as a desirable enhancement rather than a precondition: given the well-documented difficulty of securing access to senior managers at a major listed firm, the design remains robust if interviews cannot be obtained, relying on the rich public record.

6.4 Sampling

Documentary sampling is purposive, selecting sources by relevance, authority and recency. Any interview participants will be recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, targeting individuals with direct, relevant expertise.

6.5 Analytical techniques

Multiple complementary techniques will be triangulated:

Technique	Purpose within the study
Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke)	Systematically code documents and interview transcripts to identify themes of sensing, seizing and reconfiguring capabilities.
PESTLE analysis	Structure the macro-environmental forces—political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental—shaping BA's strategy.
SWOT analysis	Synthesise BA's internal strengths and weaknesses against external opportunities and threats.
Financial & documentary trend analysis	Trace recovery indicators (capacity, load factor, revenue, margin) and sustainability metrics over 2020–2025.

Analysis will be organised using the sense–seize–transform logic of dynamic capabilities, providing a coherent theoretical scaffold linking the four techniques.

6.6 Validity, reliability and limitations

Triangulation across multiple source types strengthens construct validity, while a transparent audit trail of coding decisions supports reliability and dependability. Limitations include the single-case design's constraints on statistical generalisation (the study claims analytical, not statistical, generalisation), potential bias in self-reported corporate disclosures, and the contingent nature of interview access. These are mitigated through corroboration and reflexive interpretation.

6.7 Ethical considerations

The research will obtain institutional ethics approval prior to any primary data collection. Interview participants will receive a participant information sheet and provide informed, voluntary consent; data will be anonymised, securely stored and processed in compliance with the UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. Secondary data will be used in accordance with source terms, with full and accurate citation to avoid misrepresentation.

7. Significance and Expected Contributions

Theoretical. The study extends the Dynamic Capabilities perspective by applying it to the simultaneous orchestration of recovery, sustainability and digital agendas, offering a rare integrative case that connects three normally separate literatures.

Practical. Findings will yield actionable insight for airline managers on balancing competing strategic priorities under uncertainty, and a transferable analytical template for evaluating legacy-carrier resilience.

Policy. By assessing the credibility of decarbonisation commitments against regulatory benchmarks, the study informs UK aviation policy debates on SAF mandates, carbon pricing and the design of effective net-zero incentives.

8. Work Plan and Timeline

The research is scheduled across twelve months. The Gantt-style schedule below maps the principal phases; shaded cells (▉) indicate active months.

Phase / Activity	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12
Proposal refinement & ethics approval	▉	▉										
In-depth literature review	▉	▉	▉									
Secondary data collection			▉	▉	▉							
Primary data (interviews, if approved)					▉	▉	▉					
Data analysis (thematic, PESTLE, SWOT)						▉	▉	▉	▉			
Drafting of findings & discussion								▉	▉	▉		
Revision, proofreading & submission										▉	▉	▉

9. Resources and Indicative Budget

The study is deliberately designed to be low-cost and feasible within a postgraduate context, relying chiefly on publicly available data and institutional library subscriptions. Indicative costs are summarised below.

Item	Indicative cost (GBP)
Academic database & journal access (via institution)	Provided by university
Industry reports / data subscriptions (selected)	£150
Interview transcription software / services	£120
Travel & communication for interviews	£100
Printing, binding & contingency	£130
Total estimated cost	**£500**

References

Barney, J. (1991) ‘Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage’, *Journal of Management*, 17(1), pp. 99–120.

Becken, S. and Carmignani, F. (2020) ‘Are the current expectations for growing air travel demand realistic?’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 80, 102840.

Belobaba, P., Odoni, A. and Barnhart, C. (eds.) (2015) *The Global Airline Industry*. 2nd edn. Chichester: Wiley.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) ‘Using thematic analysis in psychology’, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77–101.

British Airways (2024) *British Airways: Better World – Sustainability Report*. London: British Airways.

Civil Aviation Authority (2024) *UK Aviation Consumer and Market Data*. London: CAA.

Doganis, R. (2019) *Flying Off Course: Airline Economics and Marketing*. 5th edn. Abingdon: Routledge.

Eisenhardt, K.M. and Martin, J.A. (2000) ‘Dynamic capabilities: what are they?’, *Strategic Management Journal*, 21(10–11), pp. 1105–1121.

Grant, R.M. (1991) ‘The resource-based theory of competitive advantage’, *California Management Review*, 33(3), pp. 114–135.

International Airlines Group (IAG) (2024) *Annual Report and Accounts 2023*. London: IAG.

International Air Transport Association (IATA) (2021) *Annual Review 2021*. Geneva: IATA.

International Air Transport Association (IATA) (2023) *Net Zero 2050: Sustainable Aviation Fuels*. Geneva: IATA.

International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) (2022) *Report on the Feasibility of a Long-Term Aspirational Goal for International Aviation CO_2 Emissions Reductions*. Montreal: ICAO.

Lee, J. (2019) ‘Effects of operational performance on financial performance’, *Management Science Letters*, 9(1), pp. 25–32.

Porter, M.E. (1980) *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*. New York: Free Press.

Porter, M.E. (1985) *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. New York: Free Press.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2019) *Research Methods for Business Students*. 8th edn. Harlow: Pearson.

Sustainable Aviation (2023) *Net Zero Carbon Road-Map: A Path to Net Zero for UK Aviation*. London: Sustainable Aviation.

Teece, D.J. (2007) ‘Explicating dynamic capabilities: the nature and microfoundations of (sustainable) enterprise performance’, *Strategic Management Journal*, 28(13), pp. 1319–1350.

Teece, D.J., Pisano, G. and Shuen, A. (1997) ‘Dynamic capabilities and strategic management’, *Strategic Management Journal*, 18(7), pp. 509–533.

Vasigh, B. and Rowe, Z.C. (2020) *Foundations of Airline Finance: Methodology and Practice*. 3rd edn. Abingdon: Routledge.

Wernerfelt, B. (1984) ‘A resource-based view of the firm’, *Strategic Management Journal*, 5(2), pp. 171–180.

World Economic Forum (2023) *Target True Zero: Delivering the Infrastructure for Sustainable Aviation*. Geneva: WEF.

Yin, R.K. (2018) *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Appendix A – Indicative Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. How would you characterise BA’s most significant strategic shifts since 2020?
2. Which capabilities proved most decisive in BA’s pandemic recovery?
3. How credible and well-resourced is BA’s decarbonisation strategy in your assessment?
4. What role does digital transformation play in BA’s cost and customer strategy?
5. Where do you see the greatest tensions between recovery, sustainability and digital investment?
6. How resilient do you judge BA’s competitive position to be through to 2030?

---

[1] For a related sample dissertation on consumer behaviour and brand loyalty, see: *The Influence of Childhood Brand Exposure on Adult Brand Loyalty*.

[2] Sample sources are illustrative and should be verified against the latest editions and reports prior to final publication.

About This Sample

This document is formatted for direct conversion to PDF. Use professional templates (e.g., Times New Roman 12pt, 1.5 spacing, Harvard referencing) for final publication on the website.