

# RYANIZATION: HOW ONE EUROPEAN AIRLINE EXEMPLIFIES THE “MCDONALDIZATION” MODEL

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**Abstract.** *The low-fare airline business has dramatically changed the face of commercial aviation in Europe. The main idea and strategy of airlines following this approach is to focus on cheap fares rather than comfort for passengers. However, the majority of low-fare airlines do not simply copy a given system of their competitors; rather, they design their own strategy by implementing various elements which can be considered as “low-fare”-related. The authors of this article seek to lay a theoretical groundwork in the analysis of low-fare airlines. We employ the “McDonaldization” model of economic sociologist George Ritzer, which was heavily influenced by the German economist and sociologist Max Weber, to analyze cost-saving methods of the Irish airline Ryanair. The authors show how McDonaldization is able to mirror and describe this current trend in the aviation business. According to the results of this study, ‘Ryanair’ (and not its American counterpart Southwest Airlines often used as a synonym for low-fare airlines) is the airline which has most radically applied the low-fare idea.*

**Keywords:** *Ritzer, Weberian social theory, rationalization, McDonaldization, Ryanair, Southwest Airlines*

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## Introduction

The concept of McDonaldization was first used by G. Ritzer (1998) to illustrate that society takes on characteristics of the fast food business. In the public opinion, a term like McDonaldization stands for the simplification of work-processes and has a rather negative image. In fact, the methodology is a contemporary use of Max Weber’s seminal analysis of bureaucracy (Weber, 1934). Whereby Weber’s approach identified rationalization as a process “by which the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures”, Ritzer stresses McDonaldization as a synonym for modern rationalization (Ritzer, 2007).

According to Ritzer, “McDonaldization, ...is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world” (Ritzer, 2007). McDonaldization is therefore likely linked to the process of globalization and Americanization (Ritzer, Stillman, 2003).

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Although these concepts have various attributes, all result in increasing homogeneity and support the idea of standardization. For many people, globalization stands for the intensification and extension of world trade. This view is mainly dominant among supporters of neoclassical economic theory, who respectively argue that globalization gives every country a vote on the world stage. On the other hand, it allows, mainly leading and dominant economies, the possibility to enlarge their market power; an imbalanced outcome may be the case (Chase-Dunn 1991). As the American economy by its sheer size is among the most powerful, the dominance of its industrial model may be a result. Therefore, many scholars put Americanization on the same level as globalization (Iriye, 2007). Americanization, however, cannot be limited to the process of McDonaldization, as it includes various other elements as well (export of movies or dominance in popular music). McDonaldization, as based on Weber's bureaucracy model, on the other hand, has German roots and needs to be discussed in a wider context.

### **Weber's concept of rationalization**

The conception of rationalization and bureaucratization has become the subject of several contemporary books in popular sociological literature. For example, neo-Weberian George Ritzer (2007) uses the fast food restaurant McDonald's to epitomize the modern rationalizing processes and defines rationalization as the process in modern society, which promotes calculability, controllability, efficiency, and quantification. Ritzer also explicates an earlier six-dimensional definition of rationalization and adds two additional components to his characterization: the replacement of humans by technology, and the production of irrational consequences (Ritzer, 1988). This characterization of irrational consequences of dehumanization bears a striking similarity to aspects of Weber's idea of disenchantment (Ritzer, 1988).

Levine (1981a, 1981b) finds rationalization to be a process which generally inhibits freedom. Levine writes that, contrary to Kant, Hegel, Toennies and Simmel who see rationalizing processes as being central to the liberating experience for people, Weber sees the processes of rationalization as decimating freedom, as is clearly alluded to in his conception of the "iron cage."

Tenbruck (1980), in his discussion of rationalization, stresses that the rationalization of worldviews could take many different forms and could not be only seen as extensions of the various religious orientations and their zweckrational (instrumentally rational) counterparts. Tenbruck here seems to make the argument that rationalization is not unidirectional, i.e. that there are different forms of rationalization, an idea which agrees with Weber's qualitative explanations of the specific nature of Western capitalism.

On the other end of the spectrum, neo-functionalist Alexander sees rationalization as a possible saving force for the future rather than purely confining and constraining features of social life (Whimster, Lash, 1987).

Rationalization is at once enervating disenchantment and enlightening empowerment. It has led to increased freedom and at the same time facilitated internal and external domination on an unprecedented scale. This ambiguity is intended. Rationalization is at once a terrible condition, the worst evil, and the only human path for liberation (Alexander, 1998).

The first category, which can be considered a “micro” interpretation, is rationalization as it is related to Weber’s theory of individual action. Here rationality “means technically adequate calculation of how to get from point A to point B”. In other words, Collins sees this type of rationalization as being what Weber terms instrumental rationality. An example could be the way an individual chooses the most direct and efficient method to complete a task.

A second type of rationalization exists in Weber’s comparisons of different types of institutions. It is most often experienced in the day-to-day experiences of individuals in agencies and organizations. Existing on a meso-level, this type of rationalization occurs between micro and macro categories. The rationalization that occurs in bureaucracies, for example, reflects the micro-rationalizing processes within it, as well as its macro-level context. Collins (1986) elaborates on this relationship between rules and policies on the one hand and their relation to economic systems on the other.

One negative influence is the “irrational” consequence of disenchantment (Ritzer, 1988). As Levine (1981a, 1981b) notes, this result, partly through the process of disenchantment, serves to ultimately inhibit personal freedom and human potential. Disenchantment is of central importance because it is both a result and part of the process of rationalization. Another effect of rationalization is what Whimster and Lash (1987) see as a restriction of personal action.

From Weber’s assertions, and those of the scholars discussed herein, it seems logical that Weber’s image of rationalization (as manifested in bureaucracy) is that of an “iron cage.” As has been discussed, this “iron cage” is seen as having detrimental effects on personal freedom – and in the case of airlines on passenger comfort.

### **The determinants of the airline business**

The airline market is a very specific case of globalization, as no other industry is so strongly connected with national prestige as civil aviation (Huettinger, 2008). On the one hand (in terms of operations), it is the most globalized of all industries; on the other hand (in terms of ownership and control), it is almost exclusively national. This systematic imbalance hindered a truly global and organic growth of world standards by pushing airlines to copy the standards that had been successfully implemented by another airline. As airline passengers have rather universal needs, the pressure to respond to local divergences was rather low. Considering the high competitive pressure in liberalized markets, most operators therefore drive a rather global-oriented strategy.

Preliminary research by the authors has shown that the way organizations work in the airline industry can be best described by the national culture of the home country, the occupational culture of the employees, the degree of liberalization and economic transformation (“open skies”), the role of the state within the stakeholder structure (privatization), the application of the low-fare strategy, and the cooperation with other airlines (Huettinger, 2008; Doganis, 2006). As a prerequisite to understand the way in which decisions are made within the branch, it is necessary to evaluate and separately analyze the mentioned aspects. The most important factor for the recent changes in the European aviation has been the evolution of the low-fare / no-frills idea.

The system, originally developed by the U.S. Company *Southwest Airlines* in the 1970s, was to make flights so cheap that the airline could compete not only with other airlines, but even with alternative forms of surface transportation (Buyck, 2008). The business model stresses on serving mainly secondary airports, multiple short-distance routes and using only one type of aircraft, as well as minimizing on-board service and administration costs. *Southwest Airlines*, with its unique strategy, even had the effect of increasing the demand for passengers in the region – which is termed in the literature “*Southwest effect*” (Vowles, 2001).

*Ryanair* was one of the first European airlines to implement the low-budget system; however, its strategy varies slightly from its American competitor. From the organizational cultural perspective, *Ryanair* is much more top-down driven than *Southwest Airlines*. Herbert D. Kelleher, the former CEO and Chairperson of *Southwest Airlines*, established in contrast a culture of fun, participation and job security (Box, 2007).

### **From McDonaldization to Ryanization**

The four dimensions of Ritzer’s McDonaldization model were often applied to describe the corporate culture and business strategies of various companies like IKEA, Disney or Starbucks. (Ritzer, 2007; Bryman, 2003). The “izing” was added to many company names by analogy with McDonaldization to demonstrate that the system of a particular corporation has an impact on society. Negolisms like “Coca-Colonization” evoke the conception that society undergoes a process of merchandization or Americanization (Wagnleitner, 1994).

The idea to describe the no-frills system according to the criteria set by Ritzer is based on statements which are spread in society and might be applied to both systems: “A product for many people”, “using the product is not considered to be an expression of uniqueness”, “low quality for low price” or “less service for lower price.” “Doing a Ryanair” is in Ireland meanwhile an increasingly popular expression for using a “cheap-and-nasty” airline (Boru, 2006).

## **Component one: efficiency**

Ritzer describes efficiency as the “optimum method from getting from one point to another” (Ritzer, 2007). In the case of McDonald’s it stands for the best and quickest method from being hungry to be full. The system is designed to minimize the waste of time while undergoing the process of food consumption. “McDrive” (customers do not have to leave their car to eat their meal) or “McWalk” (customers do not have to enter the restaurant to order their food) are a practical implementation of this idea.

In the case of the low-fare system, efficiency is a keyword for the airline management, as well as for customer service. The main elements include: reducing service standards to a minimum and cutting costs and increasing efficiency wherever possible (Sommer, 2005). Particularly for customer, these attributes play an essential role. Most passengers see the flight solely as a short time meant to travel from one place to another for the lowest possible fare.

Efficiency and effectiveness have become more important than high-standard-oriented service in the last decade (Dennis, 2007). In broader terms, the entire low-fare system is based on an increase of efficiency and effectivity. Doganis (2006) describes the Southwest model according to several criteria, and how it can be used to explain the cost reduction techniques of low-fare airlines. By analogy with Ritzer’s “bringing the customer from one point to another” in a short time, low-fare providers are concentrating on reducing the costs for this service. This includes using a standardized fleet and preferably secondary airports with lower charges and higher punctuality rates. A standardized airplane fleet allows lower training costs for pilots and a lower cost level for equipment costs – without having any significant impact on consumer welfare (Doganis, 2006). Maximizing aircraft utilization through higher frequencies and punctuality rates are a classical example of a direct efficiency increase from the operational side. Cheaper product design in the form of reducing amenities such as free food or assigned seating are reducing the on-board-related cost factors. The exclusion of frequent-flyer programs furthermore helps to reduce administrative costs, which would have otherwise to be added to each flight ticket.

## **Component two: calculability**

According to Ritzer, calculability refers to the quantitative aspects of products sold and the service (in terms of time) it takes to obtain this product (Ritzer, 2007). This principle is based on the American believe that “bigger is better” or “quantity equals quality”. The combination of the meal menus not only enables speeding up the production process, but also allows to calculate immediately the “value for money”.

In the case of airline travel, the quantity of the product is fixed (one flight). For many passengers it is relevant how much money they will have to invest for this one unit. As safety issues in the case of airlines are market-wide comparable, the quality variations

are for most passengers rather of philanthropic nature. Using Ryanair became meanwhile a European-wide symbol for more short-holiday, trips per year.

Passengers are, moreover, willing to sacrifice quality issues (goods, services, primary airports) for lower ticket prices. Tickets are sold separately (one-way tickets and not as combined return flights), giving clients the impression that they are in the position to change prior travel plans for a lower fare.

Ritzer's (2007) remark that people "often conclude, rightly or wrongly, that a trip to the fast-food restaurant will take less time than eating at home" may be applied in the case of low-fare airlines as well. Low-fare passengers are constantly trying to minimize travel costs by using no-frills carriers, disregarding the fact that travel costs to regional secondary airports in many cases exceed the travel costs by traditional airlines.

### **Component three: predictability (standardization)**

Ritzer's "predictability" dimension is about striving to standardize every possible element of the McDonald's system. This includes the behaviour of employees or job descriptions, as well as the taste of products around the world, the restaurants' design, or the offered products. An ethic approach is based on the believe that consumer behaviour around the world has homogenized in the last decades, and that clients value the minimization of risk and uncertainty (de Mooij, Hofstede, 2002).

Predictability and standardization can only to a limited extent be seen as applied by the low-fare branch. In case of the highly regulated market of the aviation industry, norms and standards play a high role throughout the various branches. There are, however, some Ryanair standards which can be seen as particularly normed (Lawton, 2000). The first is the seat pitch, which means that in all planes (since no class system exists) all seats are equal. Ryanair used a uniform fleet which reduces the uncertainty for passengers concerning the comfort. The uniform fleet allows lower maintenance for the aircraft and reduced training (type rating) costs for cockpit personnel. Furthermore, Ryanair offers a standardized European-wide in-flight service when it comes to the in-flight menu. Most traditional carriers offer regional food specialities, one cost factor which was systematically excluded by the on-board catering managers. The one-way ticket, furthermore, does not permit passengers to book transfer flights. Ryanair focuses on a point-to-point system network by which every flight needs to be treated as a separate unit.

### **Component four: control**

Control is exercised in direct and indirect ways. Uncomfortable seats give the consumer the impression not to spend too much time in the restaurant, and rubbish bins with a "thank you" on the flip indicate what the restaurant owner expects from its customers. According to Ritzer, McDonaldization is moreover based on the desire to replace the human workforce by non-human technology. For example, an automatic dispenser con-

trols the quantity of soft drinks which is filled in the cup and given to customers. Also, automatic grills guarantee that the time the meat roasts in all McDonalds worldwide does not deviate.

The no-frills system applies the control component in two ways: customers should get used to wait in lines, check-in online and avoid any personal contact. In order to reach this aim, most airlines push customers to avoid personal services by adding an additional fee on these. As a result, it helps to reduce employees in administration and check-in, lowering the total salary expenses of the airline. Moreover, the *Ryanair* management, directly and indirectly, pushes pilots to reduce fuel consumption by flying in a fuel-conserving fashion, shutting off engines as soon as possible or reducing ventilation for passengers (Boyd, 2001).

Relatively high fees for checked-in baggage shall force consumers to get used to travel with hand luggage only. This minimizes the handling time at the airport and allows to negotiate lower ground handling fees (Buhalis, 2006). The CEO of Ryanair, *Michael O'Leary* was recently even considering to charge an extra fee for passengers who would like to use the toilet on board (Williams, 2009). O'Leary states it must be the aim of the airline to control the behaviour of passengers and, if necessary, even to force its customers to adapt their behaviour to the system. (Deckstein, 2009). A further approach to educate customers to punctuality is to systematically reject customers arriving late at the boarding gate (Hoffmann, 2006). Computers and designed-in systems handle much of the daily processes which were formerly controlled by human workforce.

## Conclusions

The low-fare system contains many elements which can be grouped among Ritzer's four components of McDonaldization. Ritzer describes several aspects that influence the way in which society is changing. In the case of airlines, the implementation of low-fare elements is currently the dominant strategic development. In Europe, most airline managers see the system of *Ryanair* as the most extreme implementation of no-frills ideas. This is, however, only partially true.

In many ways, *Ryanair* is more McDonaldized than *Southwest Airlines*, as the American airline has significantly changed its strategy in the last 30 years (N.N., 2006). According to Sellers (2006), various aspects can be identified, showing that both carriers have actually more differences than similarities among them.

One of the core ideas of the initial low-cost model is to avoid flying to expensive primary airports. Both airlines have inspired their strategy by this element; however, a crucial difference is visible. *Ryanair* is trying to find a regional airport which offers the lowest landing fees. In practical terms, the airline is serving airports nobody has ever heard of – flying often from “nowhere to nowhere”. *Southwest Airlines*, on the other hand, is flying from airports which are situated close to the centers of population, but have lost in the last decades their position as primary international airports (Klophaus, 2005).

In the field of customer service, *Southwest* and *Ryanair* have a fundamentally different understanding of the term. Whereby the European carrier defines “punctuality” or “value for money” as essential elements, its American counterpart is focusing on guaranteeing customer satisfaction. *Ryanair* has systematically downsized amenities, customer friendliness and training of flight attendants, making it in the eyes of many customers to be the worst airline in Europe. *Southwest*, on the other hand, is routinely ranked by many airline specialists and reports as an airline with the highest level of customer satisfaction, resulting in the lowest level of complaints among its competitors. *Ryanair* focusses on passengers who concentrate on desperately seeking the lowest fare, whereby *Southwest Airlines* attracts higher-yielding middle-class passengers and workers. As a consequence, the US-airline has adapted its strategy by offering a complementary on-board drink, introduced a frequent-flyer program and offers a “business select fares” to its customers.

Another element of the low-cost system is the network strategy of airlines. Initially, both carriers focused on a “point-to-point strategy” by serving only specific and profitable routes. This fundamental approach is still valid for *Ryanair*; *Southwest Airlines*, however, has evolved to a “hub-and-spoke provider”. This can be illustrated in two ways: whereby *Ryanair* explicitly discourages connecting flights, *Southwest* facilitates and even encourages connections through its hubs. Moreover, *American Airlines* stress regular and daily flights, whereby *Ryanair* still tries to react to short-term demand.

Opaque and excessive ancillary charges for checked baggage, airport check-in and credit card fees are meanwhile a famous element of the *Ryanair* system. Particularly the hefty and often unclear penalties, in case set limits are exceeded, upset passengers and consumer protectionists. *Ryanair* pushes consumers to adapt to the strategy of the airline and not vice versa. *Southwest Airlines*, on the other hand, offers its passengers to check-in one baggage free of charge, no change fees when changing connections and, as mentioned, also free on-board drinks and snacks.

Whereby the “*Southwest effect*” has as a term entered encyclopedias and “Southwesternization” slowly enters academic literature, it is in fact rather *Ryanair* that stands for the pure implementation of the low-fare idea. The authors propose therefore the term “*Ryanization*” to explain and summarize the ongoing changes in the airline business. Whereby *Ryanair* has implemented the full range of possible low-fare elements, several other airlines tend to copy only elements of the *Ryanair* success model. Future researchers might therefore concentrate on the extent to which single airlines got “*Ryanized*” and on the consequences this has for travelers and society.

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