

UP IN THE AIR

- a case study of United Airlines' online crisis communication
vis-à-vis modern, empowered consumers on social media

**Michelle Bowen
Petersen
&
Helle Kristine
Kragh**



ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the development of United Airlines' crisis communication on social media specifically in relation to the 'Flight 3411' incident that occurred in April of this year. The reason why we found this incident interesting to investigate was because we witnessed how consumers on social media platforms quickly began to ridicule the company, condemn the company's behaviour or otherwise publicly discuss the incident. It seemed as though thousands were quickly rejecting everything to do with United Airlines on social media. When United Airlines addressed the issue a day later, a sort of social media uprising seemed to put a lot of pressure on the airline. This thesis deals with the communicative challenges during this crisis, which made United Airlines change its crisis communication strategies several times in attempts to appease the many negative voices. This leads us to our research question:

How and why did the modern consumer, empowered by the capacities of social media, affect United Airlines' crisis communication of the 'Flight 3411' incident over time?

To answer this question, we collected data from social media Facebook and Twitter. These are the most popular, text-based social media platforms. Our empirical material included United Airlines' five crises communication statements posted on the company's social media between the dates of April 10 and May 1, 2017. In order to examine consumers' influence on United Airlines, we elected to collect 300 consumer comments for each statement, resulting in a corpus of 1500 consumer comments for analysis. Finally, we also collected news articles from four different online news sources, selected on the basis of their popularity in the US, also gathered within the same timeframe as the statements. In doing so, we had a wide array of perspectives, primarily interesting for us being the organisational perspective vs. the consumer perspective. Using our applied methods of mixed-methods document analysis and qualitative rhetorical analysis, we analysed these perspectives to get insight into how consumers on social media perceived the crisis vs. how the company communicated their perception of the crisis – and how each perspective change over time, if they did. In relation to our quantitative document analysis, we used the news articles to determine the general

tone. Also, we used news in our contextual chapter, situating the crisis in its industry- and organisational history. We analysed United Airlines' five statements – the potentially changing crisis communication – using rhetorical analysis to uncover how the company talked about the incident and its own role in the matter. The consumer perspective was analysed using document analysis, in which we looked at both general reception of United Airlines' crisis communication efforts (positive, negative, sceptical) as well as directly analysed consumer responses in the form of comments on social media. We analysed the comments thematically, identifying 11 emergent themes. By coding the 1500 comments, we were able to consider how many consumers expressed certain themes in their comments. Relating the two results to each other, we followed how United Airlines seemingly reacted to consumers' responses and seemingly tried to adjust strategies of crisis communication and rhetoric in an attempt to match consumers' expectation.

In terms of findings, the thesis concluded that even though United Airlines adjusted its crisis communication three times during the period, all efforts varied from wholly rejected to marginally successful, based on the consumer responses to each. We argue that the general failure of United Airlines to successfully curb the crisis may be due to the company's initial response, which unintentionally resulted in a double crisis. We argue that this double crisis was a result of inter alia the timeliness (*kairos*) and appropriateness of content (*phronesis*) of the first statement where United Airlines might have communicated the wrong thing in what could have been the right time. As a result, the company had both the crisis of the incident as well as a crisis about their failed communication. We found that the statements each changed over time. The first one was merely apologising for the incident, but not specifically to the customer removed, or other passengers, whereas the second statement showed a full apology addressing the incident and all the people involved in it. The last three statements were combined as one, as the content of them were equally a part of a 'bigger' message. This revealed how United Airlines had changed to take preventable actions to avoid future incidents.

Character count: 4723

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	2
CHAPTER 1: Introduction	6
CHAPTER 2: Theoretical framework	9
2.1. Risk Society and Late Modernity	9
2.1.1. Are we living in a risk society?	10
2.1.2. Critical Reflections	16
2.2. The Modern Media Landscape.....	17
2.2.1. A Changed Media Landscape.....	17
2.3. The Modern Consumer	24
2.3.1 Self-Identity in the Late Modern Age	25
2.4. Crises and Crisis Communication	33
2.4.1. Defining a crisis.....	34
2.4.2. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory	36
2.4.3. Critical reflections.....	44
CHAPTER 3: Context Chapter	45
3.1. Profile of United Airlines and the American Airline Industry.....	45
3.2. Profile of United Airlines	46
3.3. Crisis History of United Airlines.....	46
3.4. Review of Flight 3411 Incident.....	47
3.4.1. The apologies.....	48
3.5. Comprehensive Timeline.....	50
CHAPTER 4: Methodological Reflections	51
4.1. Philosophy of Science.....	51
4.1.1. Social Constructivism.....	51
4.2. Research Design	53
4.2.1. Limitations	57
4.3. Methods	58
4.3.1. Document Analysis	58
4.3.2. Limitations and Delimitations.....	65
4.3.3. Rhetorical Analysis.....	66
5: Analysis	72

5.1 PHASE 1	76
5.1.1. Document Analysis	77
5.1.2. Rhetorical Analysis.....	86
5.1.3. Partial Conclusion	91
5.2 PHASE 2	92
5.2.1. Document Analysis	93
5.2.2. Rhetorical Analysis.....	101
5.2.3. Partial conclusion.....	105
5.3. PHASE 3	106
5.3.1. Document Analysis	109
5.3.2. Rhetorical Analysis.....	122
5.3.3. Partial Conclusion	126
7: Conclusion.....	128
8: Bibliography	131

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The idea for the subject of this thesis about social media came to us, naturally, from social media. In April this year, we began to notice a sort of uprising on Facebook (also FB) and Twitter (also TW). Several ‘friends’ on Facebook – from both Denmark and the US – were commenting on videos and posts about a particular issue, as well as directly addressing the American company ‘behind’ the issue. Most of these messages were not friendly towards the company. The fact that people in our friend lists were engaging with this made it visible on our Facebook ‘news feed’, that is, the page that constantly updates itself with the actions of your friends. The issue soon made the Danish news, and we began to notice it even more. Every day for a good few weeks, we would notice friends liking, sharing or commenting on something to do with the issue. It seemed like people on social media were rallying against this company and were actively and publicly condemning their actions on social media. The sentence ‘shame on you!’ appeared numerous times in our casual perusals of our timelines on Facebook.

This issue that we noticed in April was actually a full-blown crisis for the American airline company United Airlines. On April 9th 2017, videos of a passenger being forcibly removed from a United Airlines flight went viral on various social media. The videos, recorded and posted by fellow passengers, showed how a middle-aged Asian man was physically wrestled from his seat on the plane, the process of which resulted in apparent facial injuries that caused the man to bleed from his nose and mouth. The video also showed how the man was then dragged by his hands through the aisle of the plane, presumably to the exit. One of the most shared videos came from Tyler and Audra Bridges, who each posted the video on their social media accounts. According to *The Washington Post* (April 11, 2017), the video posted on Facebook had an astounding 19 million views before it was taken down. Within just two days, one of the videos circulating already had that large an audience. Another passenger, Jayse D. Anspach, shared his video of the incident on Twitter with the caption: ‘@United overbook #flight3411 and decided to force random passengers off the plane. This video had more than 24 million views before it was no longer publicly available. Here's how they did it:’.

While the videos were damning enough, United Airlines seemingly only made it worse for themselves when they addressed the issue in a statement posted on both Facebook and Twitter. United went on to make a total of five statements on these social media platforms. The videos and the subsequent statements sparked what *PRWeek*, a public relations and communication publication, called “the mother of all social media crises” (June 6, 2017).

As we watched this crisis unfold, we quickly realised that it was a very interesting case for studying crisis communication in a social media context. Social media, one of the most recent and most important technological and media advances of the last decade, offer companies a, if not new, then highly evolved way of reaching and interacting with their audiences (e.g. Siah 2010, Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Social media platforms rely on the ‘social’ in their name. That is what it is all about. Being social, sharing, networking and generally communicating with other people. For companies, this can be both a blessing and a curse. This is probably also the case for consumers, if one were to dig deeper into the psychological aspects of using these websites e.g. Facebook. However, for consumers, social media offer much closer access to a company or organisation. Now, consumers and companies can use the two-way communication capabilities of social media – that are quintessential to the media type – to more actively engage with one another.

In this thesis, we mostly view social media as a positive possibility for audiences – e.g. customers – to assert themselves with, as we are interested in the options and possibilities that social media constitute for consumers vis-à-vis organisations and companies in the modern age. For organisations and companies, the ‘social’ of ‘social media’ may pose both an opportunity and a threat. The back-and-forth conversation between company and consumer that social media facilitates is exactly what the present thesis is interested in, focusing on the United Airlines case that was very briefly described above. The purpose of the present thesis is to study social media as a sort of ‘double-edged sword’ (e.g. Siah et al. 2010) for businesses, specifically based on the United Airlines case, and also to evaluate how the two-way communication capabilities of social media affect and influence both consumers and companies. As such, our research question is as follows:

How and why did the modern consumer, empowered by the capabilities of social media, affect United Airlines' crisis communication regarding the 'Flight 3411' incident over time?

We have designed a thesis that starts by introducing theory relevant to our theoretical framework (Chapter 2), which is followed by contextual and background information (Chapter 3) necessary for understanding the specific case that we are focusing on. Chapter 4 introduces and accounts for the methods employed to find, collect and analyse data relevant to the answering of our research question, as well as our philosophy of science and general research design. Chapter 5 contains our analysis, which is divided into three interrelated parts.

This thesis contains a large number of appendices that are very important for our analysis and arguments. For readers' convenience, the table below specifies the contents of each appendix. All appendices have been attached, but due to the nature of the files, our appendices only figure in the table of contents as a matter of formality.

Appendix	Content
Appendix 1	ZIP-file, 750 Twitter screenshots
Appendix 2	ZIP-file, 750 Facebook screenshots
Appendix 3	Coding Manual
Appendix 4A	ZIP-file, New York Times (39 articles)
Appendix 4B	ZIP-file, USA Today (11 articles)
Appendix 4C	ZIP-file, Wall Street Journal (25 articles)
Appendix 4D	ZIP-file, Daily Mail (8 articles)
Appendix 5	Excel, 1500 Twitter comments
Appendix 6	Excel, 1500 Facebook comments
Appendix 7	Excel, 83 articles
Appendix 8	United Airlines Statement 1
Appendix 9	United Airlines Statement 2
Appendix 10	United Airlines Statement 3
Appendix 11	United Airlines Statement 4
Appendix 12	United Airlines Statement 5

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will outline our theoretical basis for answering our research question(s). We have divided the chapter into four sections: 1) Risk Society and Late Modernity, 2) The Modern Media Landscape, 3) The Modern Consumer, and 4) Crisis Communication. Each section will be introduced by a short, subject-specific literature review. The concepts and theories of each section will be considered in terms of both the previous (if applicable) and the next (if applicable) sections in order to provide a coherent framework that shows how the sections interrelate and support each other.

The purpose of this section is to give an overview of previous research within relevant fields, as well as to provide a detailed account of our selected theories that we find relevant to our subject matter. In conjunction with our methods, which will be accounted for in Chapter 3, the section which considers the case of United Airlines (hereafter 'UA').

2.1. Risk Society and Late Modernity

This section will present the theories of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, both well-known sociologists. We present Beck's theory of Risk Society and Giddens' theory of contemporary society, a period which he denotes late (or high) modernity. We include this section because social theories will help us understand what happens, at a social level, in organisational crisis situations. Crisis communication is one of the overarching themes of this thesis, and while social theory is often excluded from crisis communication research, we thought it necessary to include. We could have chosen to write the present thesis based purely on the work of business-school authors such as Benoit and Coombs, who many would consider to be very prominent figures in crisis communication theory, but we took heed of critiques of this sort of approach, notably one included in the introduction to the 1997 English translation of Beck's *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (in English *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*). The introduction, written by Scott Lash and Brian Wynne (with backgrounds in sociology and risk assessment, respectively), heavily criticises the research field of risk communication for shallowly including issues of trust, but simultaneously ignoring the full

depth of the issue, which could relate to forms of power and social control (Lash and Wynne 1997, 4). Although the authors are specifically writing about risk communication, we think this criticism may apply to the crisis communication field as well. This criticism illustrates why the inclusion of relevant social theory is favourable in a thesis such as the present one. As mentioned, we include the theories of Beck and Giddens, which can be linked quite closely.

Lash and Wynne (1997) point out that the parallels between the works of Giddens and Beck are quite remarkable, especially because “the major part of this parallel development has been quite independent” (8).

2.1.1. ARE WE LIVING IN A RISK SOCIETY?

Beck’s *Risikogesellschaft*, published in 1986 and first translated in 1992, became very popular among sociologists and made Beck famous for his theory about risk society, wherein he expresses his concerns about how the different risks in our society have changed over time. For Beck, “[t]he semantics of risk refer to the present thematization of future threats that often are a product of the successes of civilization” (Beck 2009, 4). According to Lash and Wynne, Beck’s theory of risk society “consists of two central interrelated theses” (1997, 1), which are: 1) the issue of risk and 2) reflexive modernisation. These two theses will be elaborated in the following.

To explain the issue of risk, the first thesis of his theory, Beck divided our history into three periods: 1) pre-modern society, 2) industrial society, and 3) risk society. Within these three distinct periods, he outlines examples of the types of risks/hazards which existed in the different periods and elaborates on how these risks/hazards are caused and how they might be avoided. Sørensen and Christiansen (2013) have organised Beck’s thoughts on the matter into a table (cf. Table 1). The table provides a convenient summary of Beck’s distinctions between the three periods, and it exemplifies how Beck conceptualises society’s shift from a pre-modern society, into an industrial society, and finally into a risk society. For example, as the table shows, the different periods entail different forms of threats – what Beck calls risks and hazards (Beck 1997). We will elaborate on this development of society and risks in the following section.

Table 1: Risks and hazards in different periods

<i>Period</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Term</i>	<i>Cause</i>	<i>Possibility of avoiding harm</i>
Pre-modern society	Natural disasters, epidemics	Hazards	External causes	People are exposed to the events and cannot avoid them
Industrial society	Unemployment, accidents (traffic, work etc.)	Risks	Man-made	People can (in principle) avoid or insure themselves against them
Risk society	Radioactive leaking, gene technology, holes in the ozone layer, global warming, terrorism	Self-jeopardy, man-made disasters	Man-made	People are exposed to the events, cannot avoid them and cannot insure themselves against them

(Source: Sørensen and Christiansen 2013, 16)

In his theory, Beck makes a distinction between what he calls classical modernisation and reflexive modernisation (Beck 1997, 11). In short, classical modernisation refers to how the traditional agricultural society transforms itself into an industrial society. This reflects the shift from the premodern to the industrial society. Reflexive modernisation refers to how an industrial society transforms into a more modernised one, which Beck denotes a risk society. According to Beck, “[risk] may be defined as a *systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself*” (Ibid., 21).

This distinction between classical and reflexive modernisation relates to Beck’s second thesis. Beck describes late modernity as a risk society within which reflexive modernity aims to ‘tame’ the risks that modernity brought society (Ibid.). Beck argues that “while in classical industrial society the ‘logic’ of wealth production dominates the ‘logic’ of risk production, in the risk society this relationship is reversed” (Ibid., 12). Beck calls it reflexive modernisation, as he believes that “[m]odernization is becoming reflexive” (Beck 1997, 19), as “[q]uestions of the development and employment of technologies (...) are being eclipsed by questions of the political and economic ‘management’ of the risks of actually or potentially utilized technologies” (Ibid). This indicates that Beck believes that people are starting to question whether new technologies, procedures, and the like in our society are without risks and that people do not just blindly trust and accept changes without reflecting upon them. This also represents how people are active in a different way today than they were previously. As Beck describes it, “[w]e become active today in order to prevent, alleviate or take precautions against the problems and crises of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow – or not to do so” (Ibid., 34). This can be connected directly to crises and crisis communication today, as well as to our specific case. Nowadays, people are likely to write a claim to the organisation directly,

e.g. on its social media pages, if they are dissatisfied with something, e.g. customer service, products, or – as in our case – the treatment of a paying customer.

The changes in society and the risks involved with these changes have also been discussed by Anthony Giddens. He acknowledges Beck's thoughts by stating that "[m]odernity is a risk culture" (Giddens 1991, 3). Before explaining Giddens' thoughts on the new risks of contemporary society, it is important to present how he believes society has changed. According to Giddens, three main elements can explain the prominent changes in modern social life. He calls them: 1) 'separation of time and space', 2) the 'disembedding of social institutions', and 3) 'institutional reflexivity' (Ibid., 16).

The first element, *separation of time and space*, is the foundation of today's modern society wherein every individual in every culture has "a sense of future, present and past" (Ibid., 16). Giddens explains that the development of technology in pre-modern society, in which time and space were connected through the positioning of place. In modern life, however, the 'when' and 'where' are directly connected, but not linked to a place (Ibid. 17). Our modern world of universal dating systems, standardised time zones and global maps – which do not "[privilege] place" (Ibid.) – is "socially and experientially different to all pre-modern eras" (Ibid.). Space and time, though separated, are constantly being reintegrated, but a distinct place is never necessary for this recombination (Ibid.).

The second element, which Giddens calls "the disembedding of social institutions" (Ibid.), is closely connected to the first element. Giddens explains that the "lifting-out of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time-space" (Ibid., 18) is what late modernity introduces. Giddens talks about two types of disembedding mechanisms: 1) symbolic tokens and 2) expert systems. These two types of disembedding mechanisms together are what Giddens refers to as *abstract systems* (Ibid.). He explains the symbolic tokens as being "media of exchange which have standard value, and thus are interchangeable" (Ibid.). An example of symbolic tokens is money, as "[m]oney brackets time (because it is a means of credit) and space (since standardised value allows transactions between [...] individuals who never physically meet one another)" (Ibid., 18). Expert systems, on the other hand, "bracket time and space through deploying modes of technical knowledge" (Ibid.), which are accessible for anyone and have validity regarding the ones

using them. Both types of abstract system – that is, symbolic tokens and expert systems – depend heavily on the issue of time and space as well as on the concept of trust. According to Giddens, trust is an essential thing in our society, and as Giddens puts it, the “[a]ttitudes of trust, in relation to specific situations, persons, or systems (...) are directly connected to the psychological *security* of individuals and groups” (Ibid. 19). In modernity, people tended to trust experts, technology and institutions to do the right thing and make the right decisions. In late modernity, individuals are becoming more aware of the fact that these expert systems can withhold information from society at their discretion, especially if the information could reflect badly on the system (Ibid., 19-20). This suggests that people do not just blindly trust, but rather acknowledges a factor of doubt and (un)certainty that permeates late modern people. As Giddens succinctly puts it, “[e]ven the most reliable authorities can be trusted only “until further notice”” (Ibid., 84), referring inter alia to the research or health care communities in which experts frequently disagree about best practice or course of action; a situation that would make it hard for a patient to decide between courses of treatment for a health issue, for example (Ibid., 84).

Finally, the element of institutional reflexivity is based on how modernity is, in essence, a post-traditional order of society in which the transformation of space and time as well as the disembedding of mechanisms work together to “propel social life away from the hold of pre-established precepts or practices” (Ibid., 20). According to Giddens, “modernity’s reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity (...) to chronic revision in the light of new information and knowledge” (Ibid, 20). Modern institutions, which include for example family, marriage, government, capitalism, and organisations, are then constantly adjusting and readjusting themselves vis-à-vis new knowledge. In terms of production organisations, this can perhaps be exemplified in the way that producing methods may be overhauled in light of new information on how to optimise production. The transformation of time and space as well as the disembedding of mechanisms form the context of this reflexivity, which influences modern institutions. Institutional reflexivity, the third and last element, is then “the regularised use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constitutive element in its organisation and transformation” (Ibid., 20).

Beck's theory of risk society suggests that we are living in a society in which people experience an increased presence of uncertainties, as new, man-made risks – such as nuclear power and global warming – cannot be controlled. According to Beck, we have gone from the “production and redistribution of wealth to the production and redistribution of risks” (Beck 1997, 20). During the famous Chernobyl accident in the former Soviet Union in 1986, explosions caused a leakage of radioactive gasses into the atmosphere, a prime example of the man-made risk which concerns Beck (Beck 1999, 23). As nuclear power is man-made and people in a large geographical area did not have a chance to escape the lethal gasses, it can be argued that risks in contemporary society are somehow worse than the ‘old’ risks of pre-modern society, as they involve a much larger population and are usually things we cannot control. Another example of risks in contemporary society could be pesticides and additives in foodstuffs, which also reach large numbers of people. People today, compared to when Beck wrote his theory, are more aware of these ‘risks’ and are able to somewhat control them, e.g. by consciously purchasing or growing organic foods, a market that has exploded over the last decade.

The reason that Beck describes modern society as a risk society is not that he believes that risks constitute a new phenomenon. Rather he argues that the new risks in our society are different from the old risks, proposing that old risks were caused by natural disasters or epidemics, whereas new risks are defined by global warming and/or radioactive leaking, for example, as shown in the previous Table 1 by Sørensen and Christiansen. Beck denotes modern society as a risk society because of the rise of public debate about these new risks. People in contemporary society know about these risks and ask questions about them. But even if people are aware of e.g. the risks of driving, of which one is air pollution, which then results in damages to the ozone layer, this does not mean that people would stop driving their cars, as they would then have to give up this kind of comfort in their everyday life. This specific risk still remains relevant in our society, and will grow even more prominent if nothing is done to reduce this risk. Nowadays, hybrid or electric cars are ways of reducing this kind of risk, but the risk will not disappear until everyone drives one, which is not the case at the moment.

In contradiction to Beck's critical reflections on risk society, where he describes himself as a pessimistic optimist (1999, 8), Giddens' view of modern society is more positive and he

believes that “[t]he idea of ‘risk society’ might suggest a world which has become more hazardous, but this is not necessarily so. Rather, it is a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety) which generates the notion of risk” (Giddens 1998, 209). However, Giddens directly agrees with Beck’s characterisation of modernity as a risk society (Giddens 1991, 28).

According to Giddens, not all new types of risks are necessarily bad, and there is not a greater number of risks in today’s society – people just tend to notice them more as people are more reflective about society. Another example of Giddens’ optimism, in contrast to Beck’s perspective, is his elaboration on anxiety in the risk society. Giddens says, “I do not think it is true that, as some have suggested, the modern age is specifically one of high anxiety, as contrasted by preceding eras [...] but the content and form of prevalent anxieties certainly have become altered” (Ibid., 32). Although he is more positive about modern society than Beck, he still points out some of the disadvantages it has created. Individuals in the traditional, pre-modern societies had less choices, which resulted in ‘alternative’ patterns, whereas in late modernity the ‘alternative’ patterns, Giddens exemplifies, could be the option of ignoring research findings that e.g. state that fibre-rich foods are good for you (Ibid., 82).

As previously mentioned, one of the primary elements of Giddens’ conceptualisation of late modernity is the separation of time and space. This element has undoubtedly seen an intensification since the advent of social media, which allows us to instantly reach vast numbers of people, often across borders, through our social networks. In 1991, Giddens wrote that “the intrusion of distant events into everyday consciousness” was a characteristic of mediated experience in modern times (Ibid., 27-28). This was true when Giddens was writing this statement, but is especially true today. The vastness of the internet and the speed with which information travels make it possible to follow news or events happening – live, and often recorded by non-journalists – on the other side of the planet (if one can stay awake due to the difference in time zones, that is). So even something that may seem remote or foreign – e.g. by virtue of not being something happening in one’s own society – is suddenly quite close and becomes something ‘everyday’ (Ibid., 27). This ties into a part of Beck’s definition of risks, as he argues that risks in late modernity “induce systematic and often

irreversible harm, generally remain *invisible*, are based on *casual interpretations*, and thus initially only exist in terms of the [...] *knowledge* about them” (Beck 1997, 23). Furthermore, Beck believes that these risks can be “changed, magnified, dramatized or minimized within knowledge” (Ibid.), and therefore people are able to make their own definition and construction of them, with mass media exerting a powerful influence. As mass media helps define risks, these risks become the subject of public debate where people have the opportunity to gain more knowledge of the given risk and also create their own definition of it. In connection with our case, the risk of being forcibly removed turned into a crisis, as social media made it (even more) possible to turn the risk into a public debate and give their own definition of what happened and what they thought about this specific case (along with voicing many other negative sentiments about UA).

2.1.2. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The work on the changes of society herein also the changes of risks has been criticised by several other theorists. One of these is Gabe Mythen (2007) who writes, “the risk society argument is plagued by both theoretical and empirical deficiencies” (180), and that Beck is unwilling “to engage in the process of empirical validation” (Ibid.). Beck does not attempt to hide the fact that his theory is written from his own observations; he admits his book *Risk Society* “contains some empirically oriented, projective social theory – without any methodological safeguards” (Beck 1997, 9). This can be problematic to some degree, as the theory draws solely from Beck’s own observations and perceptions, and it is therefore necessary to be critical towards it. One criticism of Beck’s theory is that, according to Tierney (2014), Beck is “focusing too narrowly on techno-scientifically produced risk and [...] overlooking the importance of non-technological risks such as epidemics, financial risks, terrorism, and climate change” (Frandsen and Johansen 2017, 33). We believe it is important to be aware of non-technological risks as they can influence a lot of people without warning, but we also think it would have been more applicable if Beck gave some more ‘downsized’ risks that people could relate too, instead of always focusing on the worst-case scenario.

2.2. The Modern Media Landscape

The previous section delineated a conceptualisation of the world in which we live. It demonstrated the complexity and dynamism of the late modern age, as Giddens would term it. However, both Beck and Giddens wrote their seminal works, which we lean on, in the 80s and 90s, meaning that the ‘age’ that they spoke of has progressed even further into the ‘late’ of the ‘late modern age’. Although much has changed since these texts were written, we do believe that the theses are still applicable today – though they might need an update of sorts. A particularly relevant update – at the very least for this thesis – is the significant developments that have occurred (and currently occur) in the media landscape. By *landscape*, we simply mean the media channels, platforms etc. that are presently available, both to consumers and organisations. As such, this section is meant to relate to and ‘update’ the previous section, while also providing a relevant background for the following sections, which revolve around concepts that are also deeply affected by changes in the media landscape.

2.2.1. A CHANGED MEDIA LANDSCAPE

According to ITU¹ (2009), the origins of the internet can be traced back to 1969, but it was not until 1993-94 that browsers made the internet accessible to the general public and that the internet began to enter everyday use (Couldry 2012, 2). However, though made more accessible at this point, the internet was not exactly ‘everyday’. According to the World Bank, only 0.254 percent of the world’s population used the internet in 1993. Since then, the curve has risen steeply. In 2001, a decade after Giddens’ *Modernity and Self-Identity* was published, the percentage read 8.095. In 2016, 25 years after Giddens’ book, almost 46% of the world’s population was using the internet (World Bank, n.d.).

However, the percentages here hide the stark differences in user distributions according to regions. This also explains why we – as part of the so-called ‘Western’ or ‘developed’ world – may think that the number of internet users is lower than we would expect based on our

¹ International Telecommunication Union, United Nations specialised agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs)

experience in our own country-specific contexts. According to Internet World Stats (2017), internet penetration rates (by percentages of population in seven world regions) vary from 31.2% (Africa) to 88.1% (North America). We are focused on the US, so albeit a conspicuous difference between African and North American internet usage, we mainly use the US statistic to illustrate how the internet is a very integral part of everyday life in the US for the vast majority of people. We also use it to emphasise how Giddens' concept of the disembedding of time and space, previously mentioned, has seen a significant intensification. In 1991, the internet was still in its infancy, and the technologies thought to be driving this disembedding were e.g. phones and television, both of which made physical distance relatively inconsequential. Since then, as the internet rapidly became entrenched in everyday life, new technology and media have developed, and even the internet itself developed into a new configuration which many denote *Web 2.0*. We will return to this concept, but first we will briefly account for how the internet has constituted a change for how we understand media.

According to Shirky (2008), the internet prompted a divide in the way we talk about media: “[p]rior to the internet, when we talked about media, we were talking about two different things: broadcast media and communications media” (86). To Shirky, broadcast media, e.g. radio, television, and newspapers, “are shaped, conceptually, like a megaphone, amplifying a one-way message from one sender to many receivers” (2008, 86) whereas communications media – traditionally telegrams, phone calls and the like – represents two-way conversations (ibid.). The change, Shirky argues, lies in the way that we now have the tools for *many-to-many* conversations, for example emails, which blur the sharp distinctions between the two mentioned patterns of communication. This stance is echoed from an organisational perspective by González-Herrero and Smith (2008), who note how companies until recently addressed audiences through mass media, e.g. TV and newspapers, under a ‘one-to-many model’ that afforded audiences little to no voice. Because of the internet, this model has been inevitably changed to a group discussion (144).

The authors mentioned are talking about the same thing, although they use different terms; *broadcast media* and *mass media* respectively. Denis McQuail, a mass communication theorist, also considers this change and calls it a *communications revolution* (2010, 39).

According to McQuail, the terms 'mass communication' and 'mass media' became commonplace in the early 20th century to "describe what was then a new social phenomenon and a key feature of the emerging modern world" (2010, 4). Mass media, both then and now, refer to "the organized means of communicating openly, at a distance, and to many in a short space of time", and include inter alia newspapers, radio and TV (Ibid., 4). The revolution of mass media, according to McQuail, comes in the form of *new media*, which chiefly differ from the traditional mass media in being "more extensive, less structured, often interactive as well as private and individualized" (Ibid., 4, 39).

New media, as a term, is hardly new and has been in use since the 1960s to describe many new developments in communication technologies (Ibid.). Similarly to the previous description of differences between 'old' and 'new' media, McQuail lists the main features of new media as "their interconnectedness, their accessibility to individual users as senders and/or receivers, their interactivity, their multiplicity of use and open-ended character, and their ubiquity and 'delocatedness'" (2010, 39). The 'delocatedness' of new media is especially interesting, as it seems to support what Giddens established in 1991. Like Shirky (2008) and González-Herrero and Smith (2008), McQuail also comments on how this revolution has affected how we talk about and consider media today. He concludes that the revolution, as he calls it, has affected the balance of power in audiences' favour rather than the media's, and that the new forms of communication are interactive whereas the traditional forms were one-directional (2010, 40). We return to a discussion of media and audiences at the end of the section.

Having considered the differences between 'new' and 'old' media, we will now establish what the term *new media* actually means. When we talk of new media nowadays, we are talking about media formed and/or facilitated by the internet (McQuail 2010; Shirky 2008). New media in this sense (and time) is *social media*. But how do we conceptualise social media?

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), two seemingly interrelated and interchangeable (with social media) terms are essential to understanding social media: 1) Web 2.0, which we mentioned earlier, and 2) User Generated Content (UGC).

Web 2.0, which we previously related to an evolution of the internet itself, is exactly that. The term was first used in 2004 to describe the changing way in which both developers and users used the internet as a “platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61). Web 2.0 is not, as the name may suggest, an outright update of Web 1.0, though it does include technological advances (e.g. Flash). Rather, the term essentially denotes a change in ideology (Ibid.), in the way that “users, as a collective intelligence, co-create the value of platforms like Google [...] in a “community of connected users”” (Fuchs 2014, 33).

Secondly, the term UGC is used to describe media that is publicly available to and created by internet end-users. This is not a new phenomenon, but it has seen an intensification in the Web 2.0 age due to a variety of factors, e.g. increased internet access and ‘born digital’ young people. Nowadays, UGC can be considered “the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61). Social media is then neither of these terms, but reliant upon both. As such, for Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) social media “is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (61). While Kaplan and Haenlein clearly relate social media to the concepts of Web 2.0 and UGC, Luttrell (2015) more generally connects them to the concept of conversation. For Luttrell, the term ‘social media’ refers to the:

[...] activities, practices, and behavior among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, video, and audio. (Luttrell 2015, 22).

The specification of *conversational media* again echoes the above discussion of new media as tools for and a shift towards *many-to-many, group discussion* ways of communicating. This notion of a ‘group discussion’ and many-to-many is reflected in what Meikle (2016) calls the convergence of the personal and the public (xii, 20). According to Meikle, social media

“combine what we used to think of as public with what we used to think of as personal communication” (xii) because both now happen within the same frame (e.g. Facebook) and within the same interaction, e.g. by *sharing* a public post with a friend while attaching a personal message. For Meikle, this shows how public media are now personalised, while personal communication also takes on a public dimension (2016, xii).

Social media platforms as we know them today can be traced back to an early platform called SixDegrees.com, which was launched in 1997, the functionalities of which are reminiscent of a simplified Facebook (Boyd and Ellison 2008, 214). Nowadays, social media include platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Snapchat and many others. These platforms or applications constitute conversational media for Luttrell, and users of these platforms gather and communicate different content through text, video, and audio, all the while developing relationships (Luttrell, 2015, 22-23). Shirky also tackles social media, asserting that the core behind the idea of social media is that “we are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations” (20). As noted by McQuail above, the new media are often individualised (2010, 39), and Shirky’s inclusion of both cooperation and collective action is interesting for our case. We will return to these themes in the next section on the modern consumer.

McQuail also lists ubiquity as a feature of new media, under which we group the so-called social media (2010, 39). Social media, like the internet in general, do seem to have become entrenched in daily life, both for consumers and companies. In 2017, the top five daily activities of adult US internet users while on the internet consisted of 1) sending or reading emails, 2) using a search engine, e.g. Google, to find information, 3) using social media, 4) checking the news, and 5) checking the weather forecast (Statista, 2017a, 35). According to Statista, 66% of the North American population are part of a social media platform (2017b, 10, 14). In social media, there are a few giants and numerous smaller platforms. Based on visitor numbers, Facebook and Twitter were the leading social media sites in the US in 2015 (Statista 2017c, 16). In this thesis there is a strong focus on examining reactions to crisis communication on social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter. Facebook was launched in

2004, but was not available to the general public until 2016, the year in which Twitter also began its operations. These applications are just over a decade old, and yet more than 58 million Tweets (posts on Twitter) are sent daily, and if Facebook was a country, it would constitute the third largest country in the world (Luttrell, 2015, 23, 27).

The ubiquity of social media is interesting for this thesis because it has brought new opportunities and challenges for companies. These new opportunities and challenges relate directly to the change that new media constitute to the 'old' communication models, as mentioned. And if communication in general is affected, then crisis communication is also impacted. González-Herrero and Smith (2008) relate the capabilities of social media to companies by noting how companies have to be aware of the highly fragmented nature of their audiences. Nowadays, audiences have many media options available to them, and the unique capacities of these media make it easy for audiences to voice their own opinions, both to peers (e.g. customer to customer) and to organisations (144). Cornelissen also claims that new media constitute both opportunities and challenges for organisations and further claims that "the basic trend associated with the development of these new media is that it highlights the democratization of the production and dissemination of news on organizations, enabled by web technologies" (2017, 36). In this, Cornelissen signifies how audiences cannot be thought of as passive anymore, but rather as *participants* in communication, empowered by new media (2017, 40).

As such, social media represent a game-changer for many companies. Corporate communication cannot follow the rules of previous communication models of one-to-many, and it is difficult to retain the kind of control that disseminating through more traditional media afforded. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are making it possible for the general public to have interactive and free-flowing conversations with other customers as well as with an organisation. This also means that content about a given organisation is no longer solely produced and disseminated by the organisation in question (Cornelissen, 2017, 37-38). Customers, for example, now have the means, the opportunity and sometimes the motives to create content in various forms about an organisation. Sometimes this content is negative, sometimes it is positive – commonality is that it is public,

when shared on social media. In relation to this, Siah et al. (2010) have dubbed social media a 'double-edge sword' for organisations. Simply, while social media capabilities and functionalities can be a strength in corporate communication, they are simultaneously its Achilles heel (Ibid., 143).

If we are to consider this in relation to crisis communication, a significant aspect of this thesis, we may consider social media as both facilitators and challenges to organisations. To give an example, social media may constitute a facilitator for crisis communication by enabling an organisation to quickly and transparently share the latest information regarding a given crisis with the public. At the same time, social media also represent a major challenge for an organisation, taking some control of communication away from the organisation. This is because, as mentioned, social media communication does not adhere to traditional top-down systems of communicating (Romenti et al. 2014, 12). González-Herrero and Smith (2008) liken how organisational crises spread today to viruses: "Like viruses, they now mutate, acquiring new and dangerous forms in (...) social forums like Facebook" (98). According to González-Herrero and Smith, this virus-like ability is in part due to how social media affords the public much greater communication power. Someone dissatisfied with something about an organisation can easily find like-minded people and then mobilise against the organisation with equal ease, e.g. in the form of a barrage of complaints. We return to this potential problematic development for organisations in later sections in this chapter. For now, we find it interesting to revisit Giddens. The notion that social media constitute both risk and opportunity is remarkably encapsulated in the thoughts of Giddens, who claims that late modernity, our contemporary time, is "characterised by widespread scepticism (...) coupled with the recognition that science and *technology are double-edged, creating new parameters of risk and danger as well as offering beneficent possibilities for humankind*" (Giddens 1991, 28, own emphasis).

This section has demonstrated how media have changed since Giddens formulated his ideas of late modernity. We use this update to more accurately talk about modern consumers and organisational crises in our contemporary time. The capabilities and functionalities of social media – and indeed the internet, more generally – have impacted both how we live as

consumers and how organisations reach and communicate with relevant stakeholders, e.g. customers.

2.3. The Modern Consumer

The previous sections of this theoretical framework help us consider the circumstances of identity in contemporary society in which social media plays a significant role. The first section provides us with an understanding of the circumstances that frame both society and the self, whereas the second outlined the evolution of media, something that is very relevant in both general society and more specifically in contemporary studies of consumption. All of this lays out the foundation for us to characterise consumers in contemporary society, which is the aim of the following section.

We begin this third section with a continuation of Giddens' thoughts on modernity, here specifically in relation to the formation of the self – in Giddens' terminology, *self-identity*. The first section outlined Giddens' and Beck's theses on the shift that transformed modernity into late modernity/risk society, which provide us with a broader understanding of the societal circumstances that frame the concepts which we work with in this thesis, inter alia social media, organisational crises, and the field of crisis communication. It also provides us with a way of characterising modern consumers' lives and construction of the self, which is what we look at in this section on the modern consumer. Beyond providing a backdrop of social theory, the second section illustrated the history and significance of advances in internet technology, as well as the prevalence of social media in our contemporary time.

We supplement the sociological perspective with perspectives on consumer identities from consumer research, to provide a more concentrated focus. This leads us to an examination of the concept of ethical consumers and consumers on social media, which leads to an examination of how social media has afforded the modern consumer a certain degree of power in relation to corporations and organisations. All in all, the present section seeks to combine major themes of the previous two sections, while creating an even more detailed backdrop for our consideration of crisis communication theory, which is the final section of our theoretical framework.

2.3.1 SELF-IDENTITY IN THE LATE MODERN AGE

In modern society, however we imagine it, we all consume in some shape or form. Consumption is ubiquitous. By now, one would be hard-pressed to find someone who is *not* a consumer to some degree or other. One may be a consumer of many things, e.g. foodstuffs, entertainment, clothes etc. When studying consumption, one may focus on many different aspects. Here, we start by considering the self behind the consumer.

For Giddens, self-identity is – as is obvious from the title of one of his most famous works, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) – a focal point in relation to modernity, which was addressed in general terms in the previous section. For Giddens, self-identity is seen as a reflexive project, meaning that it is always in progress and that we continuously work on ourselves and our understanding of our ‘selves’ (Ibid., 75). To borrow a phrase from Giddens, “we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (Ibid., 75). This notion of the self, which emphasises individuality, differs massively from pre-modern culture, in which identity was more fixed in terms of general attributes, e.g. gender and social status (Ibid., 74). The claim that we are what we make of ourselves is reflected in Giddens’ assertion that self-identity presumes a narrative – a sort of autobiography, whether written down or not – which “is actually at the core of self-identity in modern social life” (Ibid., 76). This narrative or biography is made up of the ‘content’ of self-identity by which Giddens means traits of a person – e.g. one’s name, which is a primary and basic element of the narrative. Parts or events of life are sorted into this “ongoing ‘story’ about the self” (Ibid., 54-55), resulting in a self-identity which is constantly being constructed and reconstructed, created and sustained, in the way that people have to ask themselves how to behave, what to wear, what to project – every day (Ibid., 14, 52). As Giddens claims, “[m]odernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices” (Ibid., 80). This multiplicity of choices in late modernity is derived from different influences or factors that condition it, but this multiplicity also has consequences. Let us start with these consequences.

A consequence of the plurality of choice is how *lifestyle* is both important and inevitable in late modernity. Lifestyle, in Giddens’ sense of the notion, is more complex than simply thinking about what one consumes. Rather, lifestyle indicates how we, in late modernity, are forced to make decisions based on our plurality of choices. According to Giddens, lifestyle can

be defined as “a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (1991, 81). If we apply this to the perspective of consumption, this means that small decisions such as ‘what should I eat’ and ‘what should I wear’ are “decisions not only about how to act but who to be” (Ibid., 81). A lifestyle is then something we choose through our habitual decision-making, and a deviation from this pattern or ‘cluster of habits’ would be disturbing to both the individual’s sense of self and to the people around the individual – some choices would simply seem ‘out of character’ (Ibid., 82). Thus, lifestyle patterns are a part of an individual’s narrative of self-identity, and lifestyle choices “form institutional settings which help to shape [an individual’s] actions” (Ibid., 85). Such an action, in relation to consumption, could be a purchase or even the decision not to purchase.

But how does this plurality of choices come to be? It is derived, in part, from living in a post-traditional social order which allows – or forces – us to “opt for alternatives, given that the signposts of established by tradition now are blank” (Ibid., 82). Alternative choices, mentioned in the first section, are then reflective of a chosen, distinctive lifestyle (Ibid., 83). Another factor is the doubt and (un)certainty that permeate modernity – something which we may call *risk*. As Giddens succinctly puts it, “[e]ven the most reliable authorities can be trusted only ‘until further notice’” (1991, 84), referring inter alia to the research or health care communities in which experts frequently disagree about best practice or courses of action; a situation that would make it hard for a patient to decide between courses of treatment for a health issue, for example, or which diet to follow to be healthier (Ibid.).

Yet another factor that influences the pluralism of choice in late modernity, Giddens claims, is mediated experiences. He draws upon the increasing globalisation of media as a cause, while leaning on the work of Meyrowitz, a communications professor, to indicate how electronic media makes it possible for anyone, anywhere, to get information on events happening anywhere in the world, without being physically present (Giddens 1991, 84; Meyrowitz 1985, 5). The electronic media that both Giddens and Meyrowitz talk about here were technologically advanced at the time the two books were published; 1991 and 1985

respectively. As outlined in the previous section, the technological advances since then have been quite significant. This means, obviously, that our conceptualisations of 'new media' differ quite a bit to Meyrowitz' and Giddens'. Nowadays, we can keep the narration of our self-identity going by way of how we express ourselves in 'our' new media, which includes to some extent the internet and more specifically social media. But these advances also mean that we have even more choices to make than those Giddens may have imagined in 1991. We need to choose which traits we should include in our narratives that 'live' online – for example, how should we present ourselves on Facebook today? A thing that has not changed, though, is that we communicate these narratives about our own selves through language, whether spoken or written. Giddens defines the spoken (or written) word as a medium that preserves meanings across time-space distances (1991, 23), indicating that it does not matter when or where a message was uttered. The medium of language and the capabilities of modern electronic communication channels ensure that we can keep our narrations going indefinitely. As mentioned, electronic communication channels have now gone beyond mass communication through e.g. television, printed media and radio and also beyond early internet message boards and e-mails, which are probably the channels that were the most prevalent at the time of Giddens' book (1991). The narrative or autobiography of the individual, which we previously said could be written down or not, has in recent times been more often written down than not in this age of social media. By this we refer to how thoughts and opinions, when expressed on social media, are no longer ephemeral utterances, but rather are 'frozen' in time for others to stumble upon. We can relate this to Meikle's (2016) notion of the convergence between the public and the private, as mentioned in the previous section on the changed media landscape, as well as Giddens' notion of time and space in the first section.

Another concept of Giddens' that is relevant to identity is his notion of *demeanour*. To introduce this term, we must acknowledge that Giddens does not think of self-identity as an entirely 'internal' project, however self-reflexive the (re)construction is. The body, a deceptively simple notion, also has relevance to the construction of self-identity, and Giddens accordingly presents us with the term *demeanour*, which he claims "determines how appearance is used by the individual within generic settings of day-to-day activities" (1991,

99). Here, *appearance* denotes “features of the surface of the body, including modes of dress and adornment, which are visible to the individual and to other agents, and which are ordinarily used as clues to interpret actions” (Ibid.). Bodily appearance was once, in pre-modern cultures, mostly an expression of social identity rather than personal identity. In modernity, however, appearance is “a central element of the reflexive project of the self” (Ibid., 100). All of this comes together to signify how bodily appearance and demeanour are important aspects in the formation and expression of self-identity. As such, we can relate the interrelated notions of demeanour and appearance to consumption, as we form and adapt our appearances through consumption of goods, e.g. clothes, jewellery, make-up and in some cases even plastic surgery.

We have presented a sociological perspective on the identify formation of individuals in the late modern world. Our considerations of self-identity, lifestyle (in Giddens’ sense of the word) and demeanour are relevant to the concept of the modern consumer because they illustrate how consumers in late modernity constantly have to make choices in order to create and recreate a narrative – both inner and outer – of the self. This relates to consumption in many ways, as the purchase or the refusal of purchase of a specific brand, service or product, for example, may be considered a part of the individual’s ongoing narrative. Thus, self-identity is about a selection of self-image and how a person chooses to project this image to others (Mathur 2014, xv). In terms of consumption, one could project certain values or images of self through buying high-end brand clothes or through solely purchasing second-hand clothing.

Seemingly echoing many of Giddens’ thoughts (or vice versa) is Russell W. Belk, who considered the self in relation to consumption. According to Belk (1988), consumption is a central facet of life (160) and he claimed that “knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves” (139). This fits well with the thoughts of Giddens. Especially as Belk later writes that he “posited an individual self with an inner core self” (2013, 477) and that possessions enhance the construction of self (Ibid.). Trentmann (2006) notes how the past few decades have included a shift in how consumption studies view the consumer. Whereas the consumer was previously seen as a passive being who received advertising, the consumer is now spoken of as an ‘active’ or ‘citizen consumer’

who articulates personal identity through consumption (2). This shift highlights the “agency, resistance and transgression that consumers bring to processes of consumption” (3). Belk is also representative of this development as he notes that consumers should be viewed as “coproducers of desire and identity and active participant[s] in consumer self-seduction” (2004, 70), which again emphasises the agency of consumers and how consumers are not mindlessly led by advertising. This notion of an active consumer will be elaborated on later in this section.

In the previous section on the changed media landscape, we saw how the internet and social media has afforded the public – e.g. consumers – a voice, simply through the capabilities and characteristics of social media which build two-way as well as many-to-many types of communication. However, consumers of course had ways of expressing their opinions in the past. In 1970, American economist Albert Hirschman introduced the concepts of *voice* and *exit* as a response to an observation that every society tolerates a certain amount of misbehaviour (e.g. from businesses, but also from other organisations and states), but that every society must also “be able to marshal from within itself forces which will make as many of the faltering actors as possible revert to the behavior required for its proper functioning” (1970, 1). With this, Hirschman means that society in some way must put a stop to ‘excessive’ misbehaviour in order to avoid a “general decay” of society (Ibid.).

Hirschman introduces the two terms *voice* and *exit* to characterise two methods or channels for setting the individual (or many individuals) against a larger body, in our case a business. Voice and exit are then, according to Hirschman, the two ways in which individuals may wield influence over organisations. The exit option is reflected in e.g. customers refusing to buy the products or services of a certain business, which results in a loss of revenue for this business. Voice is expressed by customers articulating their dissatisfaction – e.g. with a product – directly to the business or to “anyone who cares to listen” (Hirschman 1970, 4). One may also combine the two, e.g. by using voice to threaten to exit, or exiting while using voice to express dissatisfaction. This, we argue, is an expression of consumer agency and of the active consumer. Of course, as with Giddens, a lot has happened since Hirschman first posited voice and exit as responses. Hirschman wrote his book years before the internet became widely available (cf. Section 2.2).

Kucuk (2008) attempts to revise Hirschman's conceptualisations of voice and exit in light of what he calls 'rising consumer power' on the internet (1). Similarly to Belk (2004) and Trentmann (2006), Kucuk also thinks of the consumer as an active participant, rather than a passive being, and he conceptualises consumer power as either exit-based or voice-based, both of which essentially signal that a customer is not satisfied (2008, 1-2). Exit-based power is, as Hirschman first described, expressed through the refusal to consume the products or services of a business (Ibid.). The difference that the advent of the internet – and later social media – signified for the concept of exit, Kucuk notes, is found in how consumers now have a rich and diverse range of options in the market (simply, we have more to choose from), which allows for an ease of exit as one may simply replace one supplier with another. Beyond this, internet technologies also empower consumers to connect and organise, which may result in collective action in the form of a collective exit. While small businesses may feel the exit of the individual consumer, large businesses will only experience an immediate loss of revenue if the exit is undertaken as a collective action; that is, a lot of people leaving at the same time (Ibid., 2-3). According to Kucuk, this kind of organised, collective exiting may signal – to lawmakers, for example – that there is a need for new regulations in the market (Ibid., 2). As participation in a collective exit increases, facilitated largely by the internet and its online social networks, so does the economic pressure on the target due to the increasing number of "severed exchange relationships" (Ibid., 5).

Voice-based consumer power, Kucuk notes, is also enhanced through the internet. The active consumer expresses themselves on the internet, but the consumer voice is not used to indicate preference alone; instead voice on the internet constitutes "a way for responsible and ethical individuals (...) to express themselves" (2008, 6). As such, voice may be used by ethical consumers to indicate when they are expressing dissatisfaction with something beyond simply the quality of a business's product, but rather with the way that product has been produced – an obvious example here is child labour. We return to this idea of the ethical consumer shortly. First, however, we account for how the idea of consumer voice has been strengthened by the advent of the internet and social media. According to Kucuk (2008), voice may be expressed directly through a business's comment or complaint options, something

that a lot of companies offer. By doing this, businesses are essentially enhancing consumers' voices by providing a direct line of communication to the business itself (6). An example of this kind of option is seen on Facebook, for example, where a business cannot disable the built-in function for customers to leave a rating of a service, product or the like on their company page.

As with exit, the organisational faculty offered by internet technologies also affects how voice may be expressed nowadays. Consumers may organise themselves and share similar views on a business's perceived unethical behaviour. Such views are easily circulated and shared, e.g. through social media or more traditional message boards (Ibid., 6). These various forms of sharing messages essentially comprise word of mouth (WOM), which has been described as the "oldest, newest marketing medium" as it has existed since oral tradition but has gained especial prominence today due to online connectedness (Kimmel and Kitchen 2015, 4). Contrary to traditional WOM, which is likely to reach a small number of friends or family, online WOM (e-WOM) can potentially reach limitless individuals (Kucuk 2008, 6). In this way, consumer voice can be considered a hugely important and influential tool for consumers to exert influence on an organisation or business with.

In conclusion, Kucuk notes how "exit is a relatively more silent mechanism than voice (...) unless the idea of exiting reaches the minds of a majority of consumers in society" (2008, 8). Voice, in essence, may be a more advantageous tool for effecting actual change, especially in the modern media landscape in which the organisation of likeminded people is facilitated (Ibid.).

As we mentioned, ethical consumers may use voice to express themselves. The notion of the 'ethical consumer' arose in the 1990s and at the turn of the century (Harrison, Newholm and Shaw 2005; Johansen and Frandsen 2016, 160). According to Harrison, Newholm and Shaw (2005), ethical consumers apply different criteria to their decision-making and purchase behaviour – that is, the intention to buy something – than simply price in relation to quality, which is reflective of traditional purchasing (2). The authors also argue that consumers have not suddenly become more ethical, and by drawing on the thoughts of Beck and Giddens, they claim that "[a]ll consumers are forced to consider the increasing consequences of their existence" (Ibid., 5) as today more of our risks are derived from human activities (cf. Section

2.1). As mentioned earlier in the present section, we are all faced with a multitude of choices every day; choices that also relate directly to consumption. For example, should I buy this cucumber from Spain or this locally-grown, organic one? Our personal reflexivity forces us to consider choices, as well as the consequences of them. A consequence of choosing the non-organic cucumber in the previous example could be general pesticide contamination of watercourses, for example, not, of course, on the basis of a single purchase, but on the basis of many making the same choice. As such, ethical consumption means thinking about factors beyond the price/quality relationship.

Harrison, Newholm and Shaw (2005) note that ethical consumption may be exemplified by, for example, the boycotting of a certain company because of something the consumer read in the news (or, as in our case, on social media) (2). The term *boycott* is of course very similar to Hirschman's (and Kucuk's extended version of) concept of *exit* (Hirschman 1988; Kucuk 2008). According to Hoffmann (2011), "boycotts can be considered a type of anti-consumption, which is a means of consumer resistance" (1703). More narrowly focused on particular organisations and businesses, consumer boycotting is "an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace" (Friedman 1985, 97). Based on this, we see the concepts of exit and boycotting as largely synonymous terms. According to Friedman (1999), boycotting is one of the most effective actions that consumers can take against businesses which they feel are engaged in practices or behaviour that is unethical or unjust (1999). Makarem and Haeran (2016) summarise Friedman (1999) by stating that a "boycott may occur when boycotters feel that their well-being or a third party's well-being is threatened by egregious behaviour" (194). As such, we see that boycotts may result from the actions of a business that 'ethical consumers' perceive as unethical. Boycotting, when considered synonymous with Hirschman's exit, may likewise be strengthened by the capabilities of internet technologies. Frandsen and Johansen note how modern consumers, empowered by the internet, can turn into activists. A campaign under this could be a boycotting campaign, whether formal or informal, one which consumers may utilise the internet and social media as global platforms to disseminate (2016, 160-161). However, the authors also note that the ease of using social media as an example, also allows consumers to outwardly support a

campaign without actually committing to the cause, in this example a boycott. Since a boycott campaign like this may result in collective action, it can cause financial loss for the company being boycotted. Understandably, some damage to the company's image is also likely to result from the (perhaps) widespread negativity of the boycott campaign.

To sum up, the capabilities of social media (cf. Section 2.2) afford consumers a louder, more literal and collective voice than could previously be imagined. This voice is sometimes led by the ethical consumer, who sees something that needs to change in a situation. Relating this to the case of this thesis, we may then theorise that the consumers who made the biggest and most visible outcry on social media after the videos of the incident surfaced saw something they deemed unethical or unjust. Considering the nature of the incident, this is not wholly surprising. The incident, of course, involved a customer who first refused to give up his seat – to which he felt he had a just and legitimate claim due to his purchase of a ticket – as ordered, and who was then practically physically assaulted to make him comply with orders to disembark. In the eyes of a consumer, this may seem entirely unjust, and many could perhaps imagine themselves in the passenger's stead. The incident is 'close to home' for Americans; it happened to a regular person. This perception of something truly unjust and unethical, which was the fault of the business in question, might have prompted some individuals to express their views by boycotting the business or by voicing their outrage publicly – or indeed both. As mentioned in the previous section, social media offers many-to-many modes of communication. With the means, the motive and the opportunity, consumers in this case had ample possibilities to organise themselves and use both voice and exit as a response.

2.4. Crises and Crisis Communication

The following section will provide an understanding of relevant and supplementing factors within the crisis communication field, as well as offering an introduction to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by W. Timothy Coombs, which we will use to analyse United Airlines' communication strategies.

As discussed earlier, according to some theorists, people have become more aware of risks and how their lives can be affected by them. The concept *risk* has always been part of our society, but during the last few decades it has become a common term in academic research together with the concept of *crisis*, as it is believed that “[w]hat informs one is likely to be relevant to the other” (Heath and O’Hair, 1). According to Frandsen and Johansen, “[t]he fact that the number of crises has increased – or the belief that this is the case – does not come about by chance or coincidence” (2017, p. 20-21). This quote relates very well to our risk society theory; if people are more aware of increased risks, then, according to Beck, there will most likely also occur more crises, as risk and crises follow each other. However, we are well aware that not all risks turn out to be crises; this would mean that all the risks that exist in people’s minds would turn into actual crises.

2.4.1. DEFINING A CRISIS

In order to examine the circumstances of a crisis situation, determine the type of crisis, and when and how it appeared in order to examine crisis communication, it is important to provide a clear definition of what a crisis is. Before we start discussing crisis communication theory, we find it prudent to reach a definition of a *crisis*.

Different authors give different definitions of a crisis. Charles F. Hermann, who was an American political scientist, gave one of the very first definitions of an organisational crisis more than 50 years ago, writing that “[a]n organizational crisis (1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization” (Hermann 1963, 64). His definition includes three dimensions: threat, short response time, and surprise, all of which are still relevant in crisis communication today; Hermann’s definition is still used by many contemporary crisis communication researchers (Frandsen and Johansen 2017, 35). Friedman (2002) has provided a different definition, maintaining that a crisis “is not necessarily a bad thing. It may be a radical change for good as well as bad” (5). Friedman’s definition indicates that he believes a crisis should not always be perceived as being a negative thing, whereas Barton’s (2001) definition can only be interpreted as such, stating that a crisis

is “an incident that is unexpected, negative, and overwhelming” (2). Thus, there are many different ways of interpreting a crisis. In this thesis we will use the latest definition used by Coombs, which will be introduced later in this section.

Before proceeding with the two definitions of crisis made by W. Timothy Coombs, we find it necessary to set out a definition of what stakeholders are. According to Freeman (2010), a stakeholder can be defined as “any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of a corporation’s purpose” (6). This is a very broad definition, which is why we will also examine what Coombs defines as stakeholders, as he includes the term in both his definitions of crisis and in his Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which we will address later. According to Coombs, stakeholders are “[c]onsumers, shareholders, employees, community groups, and activists” (Coombs 2015, 13), which still includes a lot of different people, making it necessary to look at the actual situation in order to establish what the term *stakeholder* refers to in the following thesis.

Going forward, Coombs offers two definitions of ‘crisis’, the latter of which is an expansion of the first definition. In his book *Ongoing Crisis Communication* from 1999, he defines a crisis as an “event that is an unpredictable major threat that can have a negative impact on the organization, industry or stakeholders if handled improperly” (Coombs 1999, 2). The word *unpredictable* can be related to the risk society, where risks cannot always be controlled and can happen unexpectedly. In his definition, Coombs emphasises that a crisis is not only important to the organisation, but also to the industry and stakeholders. Again, this can be related to the risk society, as Beck believes that risks in contemporary society influence society in general, not only specific institutions or parts of society. This suggests that a crisis only exists if stakeholders of the organisation perceive that the organisation is in crisis. This gives the stakeholders, which in this case refers to the consumers, a sort of power, as they can be the judges of whether an organisation is in crisis or not. It is important to note the last three words in the definition: *if handled improperly*. This indicates that Coombs thinks a crisis can be handled in a ‘correct’ way, and that a crisis can be ‘averted’ by way of good/effective communication, so that it does not necessarily have to become a crisis for the organisation. In Coombs’ fourth edition of his book (2015) his definition has been revised, stating that, “[a] crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of

stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs 2015, 3). The word *perception* is important to notice, as it means that Coombs now believes that different people can interpret a crisis in different ways, which also refers to Giddens' and Beck's reflexive modernisation. Our society is not made up of just one unit, but of different individuals, who all have different opinions. This means that people will not necessarily form the same impression of a crisis, as can be seen from e.g. social media, where people comment on organisations' pages with different opinions about customer service, products, etc. We believe that Coombs found it necessary to change his definition of a crisis, as e.g. the internet makes it possible to identify how people express different meanings and exposing them on e.g. social media.

The above definitions are probably adequate, but as we are ascribing social media a large focus in this thesis, we find it prudent to consider how researchers dealing with crisis communication on social media define a crisis. As the previous definitions were made before the advent of social media, we believe that social media may seriously limit their application to contemporary areas of crisis communication.

When dealing with crisis communication the word *reputation* will appear many times, which is why we find it necessary to provide a definition of what the word actually refers to. According to Coombs, "[a] reputation is an evaluation stakeholders make about an organization" (Coombs 2015, 34). This means that a reputation can be either good or bad depending on the expectations stakeholders have about the organisation, and if the organisation lives up to these expectations.

Now that we have working definitions of a crisis, a stakeholder, and reputation, we will now address Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory more specifically.

2.4.2. THE SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY

The strategic and context-oriented research tradition within the field of organisational crisis communication provides guidelines for what the most effective crisis response strategy would be within a crisis situation (Frandsen and Johansen 2017, 107). As mentioned earlier, one of

the representatives of this tradition is Coombs, as reflected in his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). According to Coombs, the main purpose of the SCCT is to offer a framework for understanding how crisis managers can use crisis communication to protect organisational reputation during a crisis by identifying how stakeholders will react to the different crisis response strategies (Coombs 2007, 163). SCCT is inspired by previous theories on crisis response strategies, such as the one outlined by Benoit, called Image Repair Theory (Coombs 2010, 31), which is organised from the perspective of attribution theory. The general idea of attribution theory is that people within an organisation will make attributions to a given event, especially negative and unexpected attributions toward the event – in this case the event would be a given crisis. People make attributions based on the information available to them, and these attributions shape the effect of the stakeholders on and their behaviour toward the organisation in crisis (Ibid., 37). The SCCT builds upon attribution theory to “predict the reputational threat presented by a crisis and to prescribe crisis response strategies designed to protect reputational assets” (Coombs 2007, 166). As such, Coombs claims to provide a framework for understanding a crisis situation by drawing on attribution theory, which he claims enables managers to determine the most effective strategy for protecting the reputation of the organisation (Ibid.).

While crisis communication theory may seem incredibly unethical at first glance, Coombs (for one) does actually explicitly consider the ethical responsibilities of crisis communication and response: “[t]he first priority in any crisis is to protect stakeholders from harm, not to protect the reputation” (2007, 165). He includes 1) instructing information (e.g. do not eat our product, it has been contaminated), 2) adapting information (informing stakeholders in order to mitigate the psychological stress of uncertainty), 3) corrective actions (stakeholders want to know what is being done to protect them in the future), and 4) expressions of concern for the victims (expected by stakeholders and recommended, not the same as admission of guilt). Coombs divides these four concerns into two categories: 1) instructing information, which “focuses on telling stakeholders what to do to protect themselves physically in the crisis” (Coombs 2015, 139), and 2) adjusting information, that “helps stakeholders cope physically with the crisis” (Coombs 2015, 142).

Coombs emphasises that the core of SCCT is perceived crisis responsibility. In order to identify the factors shaping crisis responsibility, and thereby determine the level of threat a crisis poses to the organisation, the theory offers a two-step process for crisis managers to follow. The first step is to determine what type of crisis the organisation is dealing with. In order to do so, Coombs has identified 12 crisis types, which are clustered according to responsibility attributed and reputational threat. The three clusters are: 1) the victim cluster, 2) the accidental cluster and 3) the preventable cluster (Coombs 2007, 167), as can be seen in Table 2 below:

Table 2: SCCT crisis types by crisis cluster

<p>Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis. (Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Natural disaster:</i> Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake. <i>Rumor:</i> False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated. <i>Workplace violence:</i> Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite. <i>Product tampering/Malevolence:</i> External agent causes damage to an organization.
<p>Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional. (Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Challenges:</i> Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner. <i>Technical-error accidents:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident. <i>Technical-error product harm:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.
<p>Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation. (Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Human-error accidents:</i> Human error causes an industrial accident. <i>Human-error product harm:</i> Human error causes a product to be recalled. <i>Organizational misdeed with no injuries:</i> Stakeholders are deceived without injury. <i>Organizational misdeed management misconduct:</i> Laws or regulations are violated by management. <i>Organizational misdeed with injuries:</i> Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

(Source: Coombs 2007, 168)

Coombs directly links perceived attributed responsibility to the level of reputational threat. In the following we will give an explanation of the three different clusters and the type of crisis they relate to.

1) In a *victim* crisis, an organisation is perceived as being a victim of the event, as the crisis is created by e.g. natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering or rumour. According to Coombs, this means that minimal responsibility will be attributed to the organisation, resulting in only mild reputational threat. As seen in Table 2, natural disasters refer to e.g. an earthquake, and workplace violence refers to an employee who has been attacked by a current or former employee onsite. In these examples Coombs sees the organisation as a victim of a crisis, but one can argue if it is not really the employees of an earthquake or the employee of the attack who is the real victims/victim in these cases. It could also be argued that Coombs is biased in favour of organisation managers, as these examples indicate.

2) The circumstances of an *accident* crisis, which can be triggered by technical-error accidents, technical-error product harm or challenges, will generate a low degree of responsibility resulting in moderate reputational threat, if the circumstances of the event are perceived to have been beyond the organisation's control. If we look at Table 2, technical-error accidents refer to industrial accidents caused by technology or equipment failure. If this industrial accident, in worst-case scenario, would turn out to be a nuclear accident that was caused by a breach in the organisation's control system, like the one Beck refers to in his risk society theory, then the reputational threat would not just result in a moderate one. Again, Coombs does not seem to take situations like these into account, and it is therefore important to be critical towards some of his definitions and explanations relating to SCCT.

3) The last cluster, *preventable* crisis, has on the other hand very strong attributions of crisis responsibility resulting in severe reputational threat, as the organisation is perceived to have been able to prevent the crisis from happening. This kind of crisis is generated by human-error accidents, human-error product harm and organisational misdeeds (Coombs 2007, 167).

According to Coombs, the second step in assessing reputational threat relies on two intensifying factors: 1) crisis history and 2) prior relationship reputation of the organisation. Crisis history "is whether or not an organization has had a similar crisis in the past" (Coombs 2007, 167); if they have, it is likely the reputational threat of the current crisis will be intensified. Moreover, it signifies that the organisation has an on-going issue, which it has failed to address properly. The second factor, prior relationship factor, is "how well or poorly

an organization has or is perceived to have treated stakeholders in other contexts” (Coombs 2007, 167). If the organisation has treated its stakeholders poorly, it shows that an organisation has shown little concern for its stakeholders, meaning that the trustworthiness of the organisation is limited in a crisis (Coombs 2007, 167). In this case we believe that Coombs’ use of ‘stakeholders’ may refer to consumers, employees, and shareholders.

After identifying the type of crisis and thereby the crisis responsibility and threat toward the organisation, SCCT provides different crisis response strategies to match the crisis type, which Coombs believes will more effectively repair reputation, reduce negative effect and prevent negative behaviour (Coombs 2007, 170). These negative effects or negative behaviour could be for example customers boycotting the organisation, or sharing negative comments about their experiences with the company on social media, or in other public places.

Based on whether crisis response strategies are used in altering attributions about a crisis or the stakeholders’ perceptions of the organisation, according to Coombs, response strategies can similarly be organised into clusters according to shared traits. These clusters are 1) denial strategies, 2) diminish strategies, 3) rebuild strategies, and 4) bolstering strategies (Coombs 2007, 170). To get a better overview of the specific strategies within each cluster, see Table 3 on the next page.

Table 3: Crisis Response Strategies by posture

Denial Posture	
Attacking the Accuser	The crisis manager confronts the person or group that claims that a crisis exists. The response may include a threat to use force (e.g., a lawsuit) against the accuser.
Denial	The crisis manager states that no crisis exists. The response may include explaining why there is no crisis.
Scapegoating	Some other person or group outside of the organization is blamed for the crisis.
Diminishment Posture	
Excusing	The crisis manager tries to minimize the organization's responsibility for the crisis. The response can include denying any intention to do harm or claiming that the organization had no control of the events that led to the crisis.
Justification	The crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis. The response can include stating that there were no serious damages or injuries or claiming that the victims deserved what they received.
Rebuilding Posture	
Compensation	The organization provides money or other gifts to the victims.
Apology	The crisis manager publicly states that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks forgiveness.
Bolstering Posture	
Reminding	The organization tells stakeholders about its past good works.
Ingratiation	The organization praises stakeholders.
Victimage	The organization explains how it too is a victim of the crisis.

(Source: Coombs 2015, 145)

As seen in Table 3 above, there are different strategies within each cluster. In short, the purpose of the first cluster of strategies, which includes *attacking the accuser*, *denial*, and *scapegoating*, is to remove any connection between the company and the crisis. The second cluster of strategies, including *excuse* and *justification*, is designed to reduce attributions, whereas the purpose of the third cluster, including strategies such as *compensation* and *apology*, is to improve or repair an organisation's reputation by accepting full responsibility. The final cluster, including the strategies *reminder*, *ingratiation*, and *victimage*, is seen as a secondary supplementary to the first three groups and seeks to establish a positive relationship between stakeholders and the organisation (Coombs 2007, 171-72). According to Coombs, strategies involving attacking the accuser and denial should be used in situations where the crisis has not yet evolved and is only a rumour, whereas the scapegoating strategy

should be avoided in all situations. Excusing and justification strategies should be used if the crisis is relatively small and has a low level of crisis responsibility, e.g. if an organisation has made an error in customer service due to internet breakdown. Compensation and apology strategies should be used when an organisation is actually responsible for what happened, e.g. something was broken during baggage handling, or in our case, staff removed a passenger from the plane after boarding.

If the crisis manager follows the guidelines for identifying crisis type, crisis history and prior relational reputation, Coombs has set up recommendations for making use of the various response strategies. These recommendations are based on the theoretical framework of SCCT and validated through tests on stakeholders (Coombs 2010, 41). However, it is important to note that the 'best' strategy for a crisis can be affected by financial constraints within the organisation, which means that a crisis manager may not be able to afford to follow the recommended guidelines presented by SCCT, and therefore will have to choose the next best strategy (Coombs 2007, 173). So even though the outcome of the crisis communication is not necessarily the best one, Coombs claims that SCCT guides crisis managers through the different options and provides the opportunity to get an overview of a suitable solution for the organisation.

As laid out in the social media part section of the thesis, crisis circumstances may have changed since Coombs' publication of his theory due to the capabilities of social media. Thanks to the rise of the internet and social media it has become very easy for stakeholders to express and share their opinions online, which means that what we are dealing with in our specific case with UA, likely does not easily fit the 'usual' definition of crises. Perhaps we need to consider social media more directly, as this is a crisis that was triggered online and also very much exacerbated online (but also offline, of course). Coombs works with the concept of *paracrisis*, and explains, "[a] paracrisis appears similar to a crisis but is actually a situation in which an organisation is forced to manage a crisis risk publicly" (Coombs and Holladay 2015, 56). This means that a paracrisis is not an actual crisis, but can turn into one if the organisation ignores it. Coombs also notes that the afflicted organisation is forced to keep all aspects of its crisis communication publicly visible, whereas in the past crisis managers could manage the situation behind closed doors. Coombs also says that the response strategies for paracrisis

(risk) are not the same as for crises. Our case is obviously not just a little issue that needs to be superficially addressed for it to go away, as it has already turned out to be a full-blown crisis, which means that the term paracrisis does not entirely fit, but it is still valid insight. Our case may have been a paracrisis for a scant ten minutes, but we believe the risk/issue became a full-blown crisis before UA could have actually done anything to stop the spread of attention or mitigate the effects. Furthermore, it might be interesting to look at the concept of double crisis as envisaged by Frandsen and Johansen (2017, 38), as this is more suited to our case. A double crisis is “a crisis where communication crisis overlaps the original crisis in so far as the organization in crisis is not able to manage the communication processes that should contribute to the handling of the original crises” (Frandsen and Johansen 2017, 38). In our case the original crisis is the forcible removal of the passenger, Dr Dao, whereas the communication crisis is the communication carried out by UA to its consumers on social media, which then results in a double crisis. As Frandsen and Johansen explain, the second crisis in a double crisis is a communication crisis, “caused by poorly executed communication [...], or even a wrongful communication” (ibid., 39), which results in the organisation having to deal with two crises simultaneously.

We are in a position where the crisis in our case is not triggered by social media as in misuse of social media, but as a trigger of a crisis. Our crisis happened the ‘old-fashioned’ way because it happened in ‘the real world’, meaning in the physical world and not just online. Of course, we can easily argue that social media triggered the crisis insofar as that was the medium used to spread awareness of the issue in the first place, but the crisis itself was a ‘real-world’ issue. Coombs has also developed a typology of social media crises where he distinguishes between three types of crises based on two sources (stakeholder vs. organisation) and the nature of the crisis. The three types are 1) misuse of social media (organisation), 2) customer complaints (stakeholder), and 3) challenges (stakeholder) (Coombs and Holladay 2015; Johansen and Frandsen 2017, 43). None of these three types of social media crises entirely match our situation, since the focus is on social media as the entire framework of the crisis, that is, it begins on social media, it is ‘treated’ on social media, and perhaps ends there too. As mentioned, our case is not strictly a social media crisis. It did not derive from a consumer complaint (as such) or from social media misuse.

Though Coombs has tried to include social media capabilities in his research and writing on crisis communication, we conclude that none of his writings quite 'fit' the case of UA, especially since he does not include alterations to crisis types and their response strategies etc. As such, we instead adhere to the concept of the double crisis, which we feel more aptly describes and defines the situation of UA. This, of course, does not do anything to change the SCCT beyond what we make of it. Our attention to the notion of a double crisis is more loosely applied to when we consider if and how UA's crisis communication changed within the timeframe of our study.

2.4.3. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

W. Timothy Coombs' SCCT theory is based on guidelines for how a crisis should be handled; however, it does not address the fact that no crises are alike and that stakeholders' reactions are always different depending on the crisis. His recommendations do not take into account that individual stakeholders perceive a crisis differently, even though this exact issue is embedded within his latest definition of a crisis. The SCCT does not allow different perceptions and instead the crisis is put into boxes that generalise the attributions of all stakeholders. Another criticism made by Lucinda Austin et al. (2012), is that SCCT does not "address how information form (traditional media, social media, or offline word-of-mouth communication) can impact publics' crisis communication behaviours" (192). This indicates that Austin et al. believe that it is important to acknowledge type of information form the crisis communication comes from, as people perceive messages differently depending on the source it comes from. For example, followers of a blogger would perceive the bloggers statement according to an organisation differently than if the same statement came from a journalist in a newspaper. Nonetheless, they note that though Coombs acknowledges this issue, arguing that, "that social media make the channels used to deliver crisis responses more complex, but did not incorporate this complexity into SCCT" (Coombs 2012; Austin et al. 2012, 192). Moreover, it can be criticised that even though Coombs emphasise the importance of the publics' protection at one of the first things when a crisis occur, the SCCT model always sees the crisis from the organisations perspective when moving further in using the model in practice.

Despite various criticisms of SCCT, the theory still presents high value within studies of reputation, and it does provide a prescriptive guideline for crisis response strategies.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT CHAPTER

In this chapter, we provide information about the airline industry in the US in general, together with a profile of United Airlines and its crisis history. We have also given a full description of the Flight 3411 incident and visualised it in a table.

3.1. Profile of United Airlines and the American Airline Industry

Over the last ten years, the airline industry in the US has undergone tremendous consolidation. Today there only ten large carriers remain, down from eighteen, due to the merging of various airlines. This leaves the industry structure as follows.

Four airlines represent over 80% of domestic capacity: American, United, Delta, and Southwest, where the latter is a 'low cost' carrier (Eyefortravel Reporter 2017). Furthermore, there are six smaller carriers with less than 5% of the market share each: Alaska, jetBlue, Hawaiian, Spirit, Frontier, and Allegiant, where the last three mentioned are categorised as 'ultra low cost carriers' (Ibid.).

Since the 1930s and until the deregulation in 1978 (Kuttner 2017), the Civil Aeronautics Board regulated both the US airlines' fares and routes and promised them a decent amount of profit (Ibid.), which resulted in more competition amongst the airlines and thereby prices dropping at a faster rate than today. Airlines are no longer competitors to each other because they experienced loss of fortune after the deregulation. Since the deregulation airlines does not have to compile to different laws, which has resulted in some pretty bad decisions when it comes to service and handling of passengers in general. This results in overbooking, charge of different fees connected to service, less space, as airlines want to cramp as many as possible into one plane, etc. (Ibid.).

3.2. Profile of United Airlines

United Continental Holdings owns and operates United Airlines, which merged with Continental Airlines in May 2010. United Airlines, together with its brand name, United Express, is one of the four big airlines in the US. Together they operate approximately 4,500 flights a day to 337 airports (United 2017a). According to United Airlines, it operated more than 1.6 million flights in 2016, carrying over 143 million customers (Ibid.). Furthermore, United “is a founding member of Star Alliance, which provides service to 190 countries via 28 member airlines” (Ibid.).

United Airlines is also represented on social media platforms. As our focus in this thesis is on Facebook and Twitter, we will only account for these. On Twitter UA has been a member since March 2011 and has since then posted 873,000 tweets. It has 963,000 followers, but only 2,927 users have actually liked UA’s Twitter account. On Facebook the numbers of followers are nearly similar to Twitters with 1,094,322, whereas the number of likes (1,120,463) of UA’s Facebook profile is remarkable high compared to Twitter.

3.3. Crisis History of United Airlines

United Airlines has had previous crises or controversial instances over the years, with a significant number occurring in 2017 alone. Some of these will be elaborated in the following.

- In 2008, a Canadian musician, Dave Carroll, found his guitar had been broken during United Airlines’ baggage handling. After nine months of trying to resolve the situation without any success, Dave Carroll wrote three songs about the incident. The first song, United Breaks Guitars, was put on YouTube in 2017 and went viral with over 150,000 views (Wilson 2008).
- In 2012, a United Airlines customer service staff member asked an Iraq war veteran, Jim Stanek, if he was retarded and kicked his service dog. Jim Stanek had just returned from Iraq with a traumatic brain injury and severe posttraumatic stress disorder (Hibbard 2012).
- In 2013, a retired greyhound racing dog nearly died of heatstroke as it was left on the tarmac for nearly an hour in 35-degree weather (Daily Mail Reporter 2013).

- In 2015, a teenage girl with autism and her family were removed from a flight without being given any apparent reason (Evans 2015).
- In March 2017, two teenage girls wearing leggings were denied boarding, as the gate attendant said that they did not comply with United's dress code policy (Lazo 2017).

Since the incident of Flight 3411, there have been further instances where United has been under the microscope due to controversy:

- In April 2017, a woman claimed that UA denied her access to the onboard toilet and forced her to urinate in a cup (Holley 2017).
- In April 2017, a giant rabbit was found dead after flying with United between Heathrow and O'Hare (Bennhold 2017).
- In June 2017, United crew accused a gay, male passenger of inappropriately touching his son (Edwards, 2017).
- In July 2017, United gave away a toddler's seat, resulting in a lot of criticism, as the toddler was then forced to sit on its mother's lap throughout the flight from Houston to Boston (ABC News Reporter 2017).
- In August 2017, another animal – this time a dog – died on one of United's flights due to malfunctioning air conditioning (KHOU Reporter 2017).

All in all, United has experienced a number of issues and crises, although none of the above are directly comparable to the Flight 3411 crisis that this thesis is based on.

3.4. Review of Flight 3411 Incident

This section is written in order to give the reader a short introduction to the case we are writing our thesis about. This summary of the United Airlines' Flight 3411 incident is based on news articles and an explanation from United Airlines itself in order to show both the media's and United's perspectives on the incident.

On 9th April 2017, United Airlines called for four volunteers to give up their seats due to overbooking. The overbooking was caused, as four cabin crew members had to be assigned seats on the flight, because their initial flight experienced maintenance issues. The crew

members were scheduled to operate another flight the following Monday morning, which was why they could not be late, and wait for another plane to board. If they did not arrive at their destination on time, “there was the prospect of disrupting more than 100 UA customers by cancelling at least one flight on Monday and likely more” (United Airlines 2017b). With this in mind, United found it necessary to identify four customers who would have to be removed (ibid.).

As no one volunteered to give up their seat, United Airlines was forced to follow procedure and instead let the computer randomly select four passengers to disembark the aeroplane. Four passengers were selected and told to leave, but one of them refused. This passenger, who was later identified as David Dao and was a doctor from China, refused to leave the aeroplane and United Airlines had to call in security to remove him – another standard procedure according to United Airlines itself.

The first video of the incident was uploaded on Twitter at 7.30 p.m. EST the same day the incident happened. On Facebook the video was viewed 19 million times before it was removed from the platform. On both platforms the videos were shared and commented on by millions of people and went viral over a very short time.

3.4.1. THE APOLOGIES

Late at night on the day of the incident United Airlines’ first official statement about the incident was sent to *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Ohlheiser 2017), but it did not state any apology for what had happened.

On Monday, 10th April, United Airline’s chief executive Oscar Munoz issued a statement on the airline’s website, as well as on its social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. This statement was not taken as an apology, but instead a poor excuse for what happened on the plane. Munoz referred to the incident as a “re-accommodate”, which stirred up public outrage and led to calls to boycott the airline. This can be seen in the many comments on the UA statements posted to Facebook and Twitter.

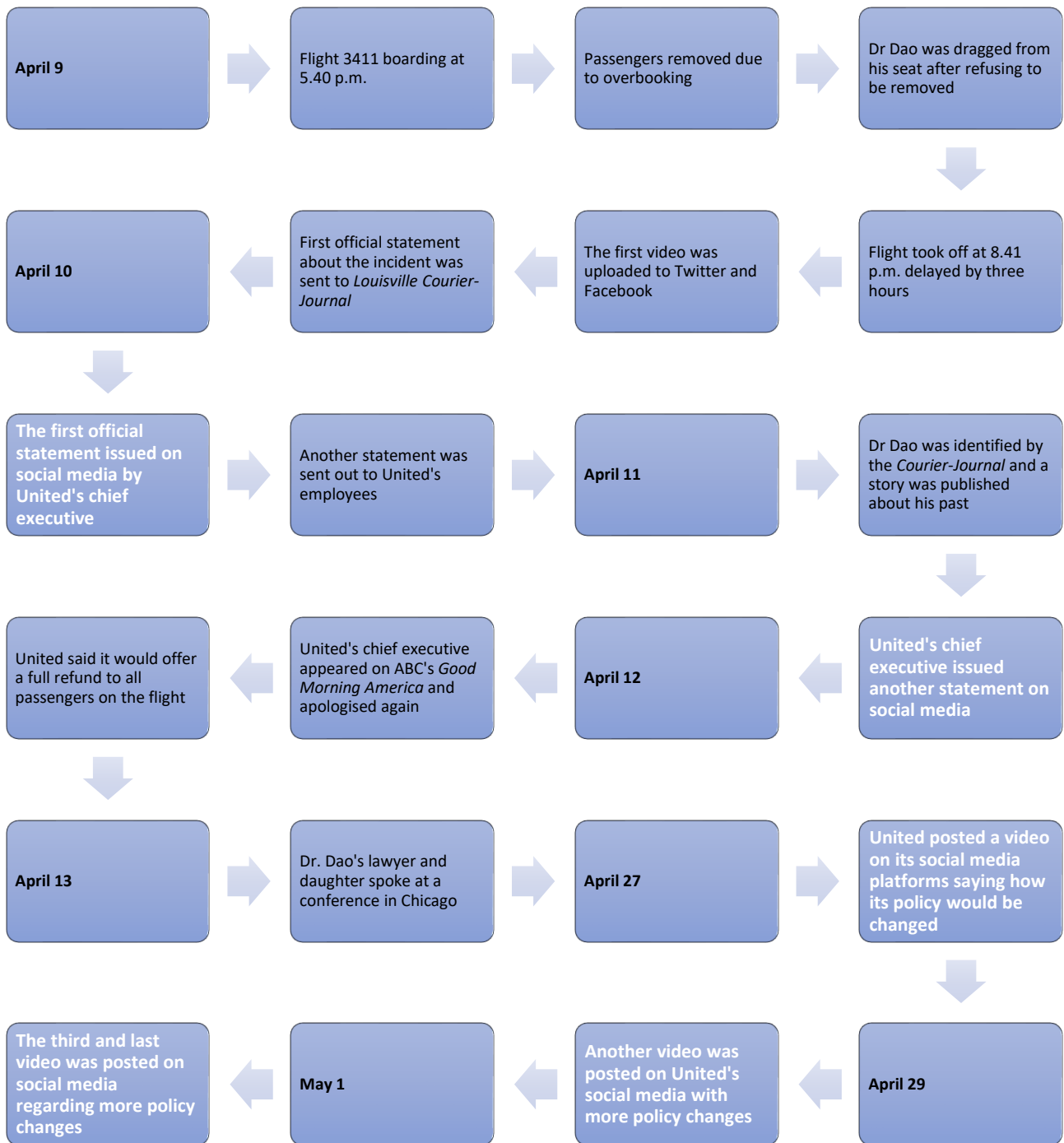
Another statement was sent out as a letter to the company’s employees, which was later shown to the public. This letter received a great deal of negative attention, as people claimed

that Munoz implicitly blamed the victim in the letter by calling him “disrupted and belligerent” (Ibid.).

Overnight, the incident became a top trending topic in China and concerns that Dr Dao was being targeted because he was Asian went viral (Ibid.). The same day (11th April) The *Courier-Journal* identified Dr Dao and at the same time published a story about his past that included details of a previous arrest for writing fraudulent prescriptions and how he was forced to surrender his medical licence in 2004, but had been allowed to practice medicine in Kentucky since 2015 (Ibid.).

Later that day United Airlines issued another statement from its chief executive, Munoz, explaining what had happened on the day of the incident and promising a review of the company’s policies. The same statement was also posted on United Airlines’ Facebook page and Twitter account, once again receiving thousands of comments. On 12th April, Oscar Munoz appeared on ABC’s *Good Morning, America* where he stated that “This can never — will never — happen again on a United Airlines flight. That’s my premise and that’s my promise” (McCainn 2017). The same day United Airlines said it would offer a full refund to all the passengers Flight 3411, which was where the incident had taken place. The next day Dr Dao’s lawyer and daughter spoke at a news conference in Chicago explaining the incident from their perspective. United Airlines’ responded to this by once again apologising directly to Dr Dao. Two weeks later, United Airlines posted a video on its Facebook and Twitter accounts explaining how policy would be changed and stating, “once on board, you will not be asked to give up your seat” (Appendix 10). Two days later another video was posted outlining more policy changes, saying, “we’re increasing the incentives for rebooking” (Appendix 11). And finally, an additional two days later a final video was posted with further policy changes, stating that if United ever needed a volunteer to rebook a seat, “a dedicated team will find other travel option” (Appendix 12) for the passenger.

3.5. Comprehensive Timeline



The above timeline is a comprehensive outline of events for the incident and the actions which followed it. We include this in order to give an overview of the incident. However, as we will elaborate upon in the following methods chapter, we follow a more focused timeline in relation to our data collection and analysis. This more focused timeline is included in the

comprehensive timeline above. As our focus is on UA's communication on social media and the responses made by consumers, our focused timeline follows the five statements made on social media. The five statements have been marked with white in the comprehensive timeline.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In this chapter, we will present our philosophy of science and methods for data collection and analysis. First, we will present our philosophical stance and worldview in the Philosophy of Science section. This is followed by our Research Design, which is meant to transparently present how we plan to answer our research question. Finally, we explain in detail our applied methods for data selection, collection and analysis. We are working with two different methods. Each method is addressed in a separate section.

4.1. Philosophy of Science

In this thesis, we are operating within the field of humanistic and social sciences as we endeavour to understand specific areas within our research. One of the things the human and social science view deals with is how people's actions, thoughts, and dreams can be interpreted through human activities (Holm 2011, 84). There are different views within the humanistic one, e.g. positivism and phenomenology, which believe that there is only one truth based on what people have seen and experienced in their lives. For our thesis we wish to keep an open mind with regard what the truth and reality are and therefore believe that a social constructivist approach is the most appropriate one to use in our case.

4.1.1. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

This thesis is based on a social constructivist worldview. Social constructivism can be looked upon as an umbrella term that includes a large number of contemporary theories concerned

with the social construction of shared understandings, meanings and interpretations of social phenomena presented in the world (Collin and Kjøppe 2003, 248). This means that phenomena in the world are constructed by human beings and subjects, and that we both shape and affect these phenomena by our interest in them. An example of such a phenomenon is gender, which we approach on the basis of our knowledge about it, which we have obtained from the society we live in. Human interest often builds on social factors and stems from certain ideologies or influential political groups (Collin and Kjøppe 2003, 249). Therefore, we can argue that a phenomenon can stem from discrimination, but that discrimination can never stem from a phenomenon. The reason for this is that the phenomenon of e.g. gender or race would never have existed if it had not been for discrimination. This explains that discrimination can be said to be a human construction which from a social constructionist point of view we can decide to change or even abolish, if we determine it to be dysfunctional (Collin and Kjøppe 2003, 249).

This thesis focuses on consumer opinion as a part of reality that is being constructed through people's thoughts, language, and social practices. This reflection of a constructivist approach, as reality is understood as something that is created through social activities, here e.g. interaction on social media (Collin 2007, 115).

Human interaction is a focal point of social constructivism as it is through these interactions that we create a common reality. At the same time, language also has a significant meaning as it is seen to be one of the conditions to be able to gain knowledge to and from others (Fuglsang and Olsen 2005, 349-351). Not only do we acquire knowledge through language, it is also through language that we provide other people with knowledge. Due to the fact that different people have different perceptions of phenomena depending on their individual perspective, this affects the knowledge that they offer to others through the use of language. In this thesis our focus is on American consumers' opinions about United Airlines, which will be gathered through written language on social media. The purpose of social media is for people to be social and exchange ideas and thoughts with each other by communicating mostly through written language, often supplemented by images and videos etc. Human interaction is therefore at the heart of social media and how knowledge can be gained and provided to others.

We specifically study the interactions that took place on social media between business and consumers and stakeholders, as well as the presentation of the case in selected news sources, all within a certain timeframe. This represents the participants' common reality, and it is on this 'reality' that we have based our analysis. This thesis does not seek 'the truth'; we are interested in how people construct reality around themselves, and how the understanding of the incident affected United Airlines and their crisis communication efforts online.

As we have decided to use the social constructivism approach, we are aware that our analysis and subsequent conclusions are constructed from our choice of methods and theories, and are therefore only one of various possible results.

4.2. Research Design

This section will present the research design of the present study in order to transparently outline our methods and how our methods contribute to our overall analysis. According to Bryman (2012), a research design is meant to guide the collection and analysis of data, which then makes a research design "a framework for the generation of evidence" (45). Research design then means a plan for conducting a study, which is what we will present in the following.

An important component of a research design is the study's questions (Yin 2009, 27). Although previously presented in the introduction, we repeat our research questions here for convenience:

How and why did the modern consumer, empowered by the capabilities of social media, affect United Airlines' crisis communication regarding the 'Flight 3411' incident over time?

In order to answer this research question, we have applied the case study design as research design. Case studies allow us to explore issues or problems by using specific case(s) as a specific illustration of this issue or problem (Creswell 2013, 97). In this study, as

mentioned, we are specifically illustrating the 'issue' of social media for United Airlines within the scope of the 'Flight 3411' case in order to examine the power of social media for organisations and stakeholders in crisis situations.

Creswell (2013) presents a typology of case studies according to the intent of the case analysis, which yields three types: 1) the single instrumental case study, 2) the collective/multiple case study, and 3) the intrinsic case study. In type 2, the collective/multiple case study, the intent is to illustrate an issue through multiple cases, while the intrinsic case study, type 3, focuses on a case itself because it represents a unique or unusual situation. The first type, the instrumental case study, seeks to illustrate an issue or concern through one selected, representative case (99-100). The instrumental case study is variously described as *instrumental* (Creswell 2013), *representative* or *typical* (Yin 2009), and *exemplifying* (Bryman 2016); we use the word 'instrumental', but they are all talking about the same thing. Yin (2009) sees an instrumental case as one possible rationale for choosing a single case study design as opposed to a multiple case study design. He mentions that the objective of an instrumental case is to "(...) capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation" (2009, 48). This means that a relevant case is chosen because it, as Bryman calls it, "exemplifies a broader category of which it is a member" (Bryman 2016, 62). Our case exemplifies something that is quite commonplace, namely organisational crisis communication on social media. Therefore, we identify our study as a single, instrumental case study.

Yin defines the scope of a case study as "(...) an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (2009, 18). According to our philosophical worldview of social constructivism, we understand Yin's real-life context as the 'realities' that both consumers and a company each create in relation to each other. We emphasise this context in this study through our focus on the mutually influencing communication between both stakeholders and company. This focus is represented in our case study design's two chosen methods, which include 1) document analysis, and 2) rhetorical analysis. Our two methods have been chosen to adequately answer our problem formulation, all within the overarching design of our single, instrumental case of United

Airlines' 'Flight 3411' incident and subsequent social media problems. The two methods will be presented and elaborated on in the following two sections of our method section.

Yin (2009) identifies four basic types of case study designs: 1) single-case holistic designs, 2) single case embedded designs, 3) multiple-case holistic designs, and 4) multiple-case embedded designs (46). A major distinction in these designs is between single or multiple-case designs, which indicates how many cases are included in a single study. The second distinction comes in the form of holistic vs embedded designs, in which a holistic design only focuses on one unit in the analysis, whereas the embedded designs have both an overall unit, together with a subunit (or multiple subunits).

The present thesis operates upon a single-case, embedded design, as we are exploring a single case in which we have multiple, embedded units of analysis that we study at different but closely connected points in time. More specifically the exemplifying case is appropriate for this thesis as the purpose is not to generalise but to examine and understand the specific circumstances in relation to United Airlines and its customers. Because of this, we can also identify our case as an *instrumental* case in which we "(...) focus on an issue or concern, and then [select] one bounded case to illustrate this issue" (Creswell 2009, 99). Our bounded case is United Airlines, and the incident of 'Flight 3411' and subsequent reactions on both sides is our 'issue'.

Yin (2009), a prominent proponent of case studies, presents a twofold, technical definition of case study research, with the claim that the definition "shows how case study research comprises an all-encompassing method—covering the logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis" (18). Yin defines the scope of a case study as "(...) an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (2009, 18). This first part of the definition emphasises 'real-life' context, which we, according to our philosophical stance, understand as the 'realities' that both stakeholders and the company each create. We emphasise this context in this study through our focus on the mutually influencing communication between both consumers and

company. Secondly, Yin also claims that case study inquiries often rely on multiple sources of evidence and that it benefits from prior theory developments in guiding data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009, 18). The present study collects data from a variety of sources, namely through document analysis, which allow us to examine the different perspectives viewed on the case.

The procedures for this case study can be separated into data collection, data analysis, and lastly interpretation. The data collection draws on two types of empirical data – documents and responses – which is congruent with the second part of Yin’s twofold definition of case studies, which calls for multiple sources of evidence. We have chosen to limit our examination to only focusing on the communication represented by United Airlines on social media during the crisis period –and therefore our data collection—to the date of the first statement to the last statement made by United Airlines on social media regarding the issue. This creates a timeframe of April 10th, 2017 to May 1st, 2017, both dates included.

Our overall unit, referring to the case study design, in our analysis is the five statements made by United Airlines on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) in the wake of the videos from ‘Flight 3411’, which is where we have gathered the statements for our data collection. The overall unit is held against the subunits of our analysis, which consist of consumers’ reactions to the statements shared by United Airlines. We collect and consider these reactions (data) through a document analysis spanning 21 days from the day of the incident. This data lets us examine the kind of responses United Airlines’ crisis communication garnered on the selected social media sites. Similarly, we also collect online news articles from select news sources through the document analysis to contextualise further (cf. ‘Document analysis’). Our embedded units make it possible for us to look at the change in United Airlines communication seen from both an organisational perspective and a consumer perspective, which forms the basis of our analysis. Moreover, our analysis is divided into three phases – all representing both perspectives – and related to our theoretical framework.

We find the present study mainly qualitative in nature. According to Creswell (2013),

“Qualitative research beings with assumptions and the use of interpretative/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. [...] qualitative researchers use [...] data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (44).

Yin (2009) notes that some case studies do use a mix of evidence, and that case studies are not intrinsically a form of qualitative research (19). We believe that a mix of qualitative and quantitative will only help us to answer our research question. In-depth descriptions of our data collection and analysis will be presented in the methods section below.

4.2.1. LIMITATIONS

When using an embedded design one of the downfalls can be if the case study only focuses on the level of its subunits and fails to return to the overall unit of the analysis (Yin 2009, 52). It is, therefore, necessary to always have the overall unit in focus, as the purpose of it can be buried in information from the subunits in the process of defining it.

A common criticism about using a single-case study is usually about the conditions surrounding the chosen case (Creswell 2013, 101), which could be the amount of information and data that can be collected to the specific case. It is therefore always a question of whether to include more cases in order to have enough in-depth information; however, more cases can also result in too much information, which leaves the study to be lack in-depth in each case.

4.3. Methods

Here we present and account for our two methods.

4.3.1. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

According to Yin (2009), documentary information (herein referred to as documents) is most likely relevant to every case study topic (101). Document analysis is “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic” which requires that “data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen 2009, 27).

According to Bryman (2012), documents consist of a variety of, usually fairly heterogenous, sets of data that are naturally occurring and non-reactive, meaning that they have not been produced at the behest of a researcher and the possibility of a reactive effect due to the researcher is minimal (543). Reactive effect describes “the response of research participants to the fact that are being studied” (Bryman 2012, 715). Examples of documents, which is merely an umbrella term for data, could be e.g. letters, news articles, photographs, memos and more. Documents are, as mentioned, not produced for research, but nevertheless they must be preserved and accessible in order to be available for analysis (Bryman 2012, 543). A type of document that in recent years has become a more popular subject of analysis is virtual documents – that is, documents that appear on the internet. The internet provides easy access to an incredible quantity of relevant documents. According to Bryman (2012), there are two major types of virtual documents, namely websites or internet postings on e.g. message boards or forums (2012, 554).

Document analysis provides a means of tracing change and/or development (Bryman 2012, 30). This is echoed by Curtis and Curtis (2011), who note that content analysis (which we have concluded is a part of document analysis) can be used to e.g. “demonstrate changes in messages over time” as well as to “show how messages are constructed or encoded by their authors” (196).

The question of which documents to collect depend on the research question, cf. Chapter 1. As we are interested in the effect of social media on crisis communications efforts, our primary documents are easy to define: social media comments. In this thesis, we use document analysis to examine if and how consumer responses change over time—from statement to statement—in order to track any change or development in the way stakeholders and news sources ‘receive’ UA’s communication during the crisis.

We will now present a detailed description of our data selection and collection. As mentioned, our research question has already very clearly defined our type of primary document; that is, comments made on social media, as these constitute direct responses to a piece of communication. For the collection of these comments, we rely on publicly available documents on UA’s corporate social media channels Facebook and Twitter. We also collect online news articles (mass media outputs). We now delineate our procedures for the collection of these in the following.

In order to execute a transparent and clear collection of social media documents, we drew up well-defined criteria of data collection. First of all, we selected Twitter and Facebook as channels because they are two of the most popular, text-focused social media. In order to create a manageable collection of data and to more accurately track responses to statements, we limited our selection of reactions to direct responses made on the respective statements made by UA. The five statements were cross-posted on UA’s main social media channels, Facebook and Twitter, at the same time. The specific dates are April 10th, April 11th, April 27th, April 29th and May 1st (2017). This spread of dates constitute the general timeframe of the entire thesis. The comments ‘belonging’ to a statement were not always limited to one day. For example, in the comments made on statement 5 (posted May 1) we observed comments made in June. What guides our collection here is merely the statement date, not the date of a comment.

Starting out with these criteria, we quickly realised that our collection would have yielded a positively unmanageable amount of data if we were to include every single response made. For example, the first statement on Facebook has an astounding 111,000 comments. The

lowest comment count is on the fourth statement posted on Twitter, which garnered 181 comments. To gather manageable data, we needed to further delimit our selection. Therefore, we decided to exclude 'replies to replies'. This means that only 'original' comments and not those made as a reply to another comment will be included. Furthermore, we decided to delimit the number of collected comments to 150 from each comment section on each statement on each platform. This would provide us with a complete sample of a total of 1500 comments, 750 collected from Facebook and 750 from Twitter.

The collection of social media responses was random insofar that it was the algorithms of the respective sites that ruled the selection of the top 150 comments – we had limited options for controlling this. Twitter's algorithm is seemingly random, with different dates of commenting intermingling, resulting in a comment section that seems neither chronological nor based on popularity of comments. We were able to choose between three different comment filtering options on Facebook's comment sections: 1) top comments, most recent, and top comments (unfiltered). We chose the latter as we deemed it the most random of the three. We divided the task of data collection in two, so that one of us was responsible for Twitter and one for Facebook, which resulted in two separate collections. The collection itself was performed by taking screenshots of individual comments using the Windows 'Snipping Tool', saving the screenshot in a folder according to the platform and statement and numbering them for ease of cross-referencing. These screenshots – proof of our collection – can be found in Appendices 1 and 2. Each comment was then copied (plain text) into an Excel sheet. Due to our distribution of the collection task, this resulted in two Excel sheets, one for each platform (cf. Appendix 4 for Twitter, Appendix 5 for Facebook). Each Excel contain the five statements and their respective comments. After copying the plain text of a comment into the right Excel, under the right statement, we indexed the comment. For example, the 22nd comment to be collected from statement 1 on TW was called '22', and the corresponding screenshot was named '22_(date)' in the Twitter comment folder (cf. Appendix 1), and it would correspondingly be indexed as 22 in the Excel-file for Twitter comments.

We also noted the comment date and described pictures, GIF², videos and the like, if applicable, in brackets. We will now present the data collection method for news articles.

The news articles are included to collect the context of the case beyond social media. Social media does not exist in a vacuum, and commenters are exposed to and find information about the case not only through what United Airlines or other people on social media write, but also through traditional news sources such as newspaper. Based on a statistic showing leading multiplatform print media websites in the United States (below), measures on market share of visits, we have selected four news sources to assist our case description and contextual chapter.

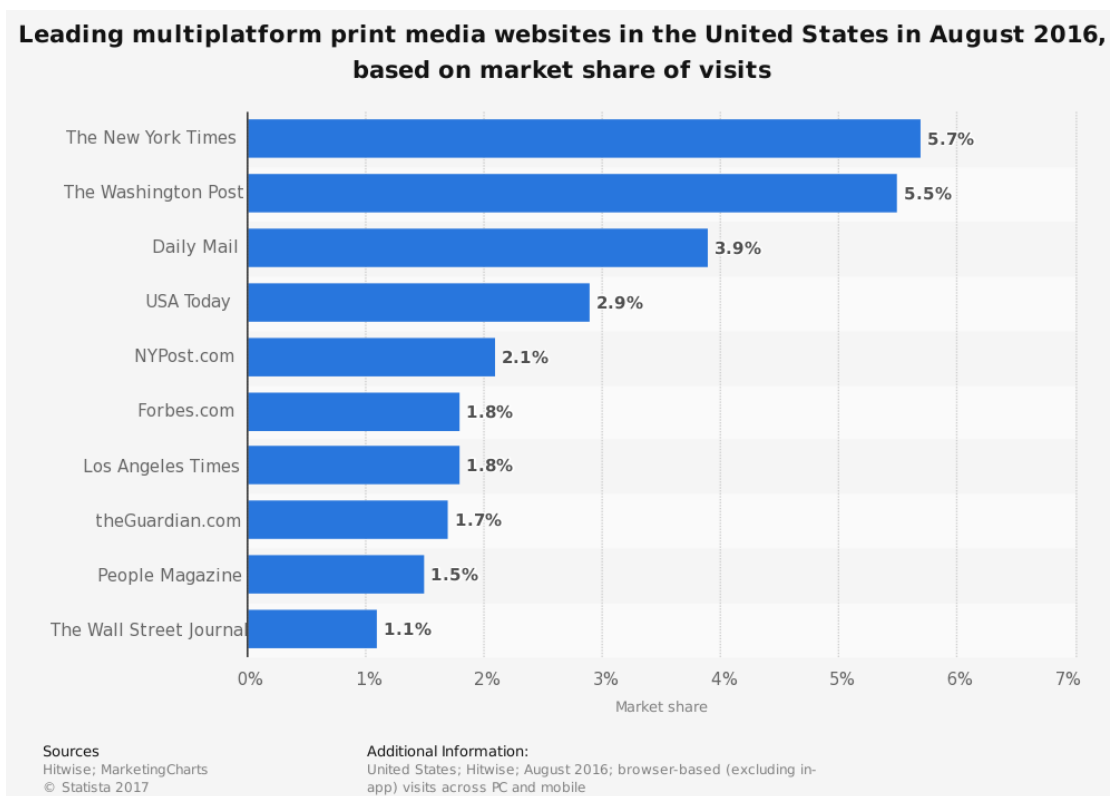


Figure 1: Leading news sites, US (Statista, 2016)

² GIF stands for Graphics Interchange Format. Are often animated, which makes it seem like a short, looping soundless video. Popular online for reactions.

The statistic above, accessed through Statista, shows leading multiplatform print media websites in the United States in August 2016, based on market share of visits. Next, we investigated if the University Library (AUB) subscribed to some of these news sources, and selected news sites that fulfilled both criteria (most read and availability). This resulted in the selection of the following news sources USA Today, New York Times, Daily Mail, and Wall Street Journal. Interestingly, a British news source – Daily Mail – is included as the third most leading news source. According to BBC News (2012), the Daily Mail has a US edition of its website, which could be a reason for it being so popular in the US.

We then accessed the individual sites through the University Library's licences, and used the search functions, using the keywords "united" and "united airlines" as well as the previously mentioned timeframe of April 10 until (and including) May 1, 2017. This resulted in 103 articles. We excluded those that did not concern UA directly, e.g. if the airline was mentioned but not the focus. This resulted in the present collection of 83 news articles (Appendix 6) across the four news sites.

Having accounted for the data collection, we now are able present our materials more succinctly in a table and present an overview of the data collected (next page):

Social media			
Social media	Number of documents	Dates	Appendix
Twitter	750	April 10—May 1 2017	Appendix 1 (screenshots) & Appendix 4 (Excel)
Facebook	750	April 10—May 1 2017	Appendix 2 (screenshots) & Appendix 5 (Excel)
News sources			
Newspaper	Number of articles	Dates	Appendix
New York Times	39	April 10—April 28 2017	Appendix 6 (articles) & Appendix 7 (Excel)
Daily Mail	8	April 11—April 28 2017	
USA Today	11	April 11—May 1 2017	
Wall St. Journal	25	April 11—April 28 2017	

As the table shows, only New York Times covered the incident on the same day of statement 1, approximately a day after the incident itself occurred. Also, except USA Today, none of the sources wrote about UA after April 28.

Having provided description of the method itself, our process of data collection and a presentation of the collected material, we will now describe how we analysed our data. Document analysis combines elements of content analysis, which is the process of organising information into categories related to central questions, and thematic analysis, analysis in that it firstly requires researchers to read the material several times, and with different levels of attentiveness (Bowen 2009, 32). The thematic analysis is the iterative process consisting of

skimming (superficial), reading (thorough), and interpretation) (Bowen 2009, 32). Bowen (2009) recommends skimming the documents in order to identify relevant passages of text. Thematic analysis is essentially pattern recognition wherein emerging themes may be identified and become categories for analysis, and it is represented in the element of more thorough reading. It is also in this phase that we form codes for our data (Bowen 2009, 32). Document analysis is a versatile method, which can be adapted to a study's needs as the method is not specifically located within the traditions of quantitative or qualitative (Whittaker 2012, 83). Our design of the document analysis is a mix of the quantitative and the qualitative traditions in that we analyse our document from both traditions. Qualitatively, we are interpreting the comments to draw out themes reiteratively. This lets the documents 'talk'. Through a thematic analysis, which includes reading, rereading and rereading again, we began to be able to see recurring themes in the different comments. Constantly reading, redoing and readjusting the themes according to the text, we found a total of 11 themes. Please refer to Appendix 3, our coding manual, for a detailed account of themes, how they are represented as well as the shorthand that we use to indicate the respective themes in the analysis.

We also consider, qualitatively, the general positioning of each comment. In this latter endeavour, we interpret the general content of a comment and identify the dominant stance or position according to 1) positive, 2) negative, and 3) sceptical. These are mutually exclusive categories, as we of course cannot code something as both being positive and negative. For example, a comment interpreted as a negative stance was reflected by a '1' in the appropriate column. This enabled us to use the tallying ability of Excel to find out how many under a certain statement wrote from a negative position. By doing so, we are quantifying our qualitative results and indicate a percentage of comments for each positioning. Themes are quantified in the same way; a given comment was given a '1' in the appropriate column, likewise enabling us to say look at how many, out of our sample of consumer comments, are drawing upon this theme in their comment to UA.

Because our collection was divided according to social media platform, we have two Excel sheets with these separate quantitative and qualitative findings. In order to talk about social media reactions and responses as a whole, these results are collapsed into one in the

analysis. For example, comments collected from the comment sections of statement 1 on both FB and TW are combined, meaning that every analysis of statement response is based on analysis of 300 comments across platforms, rather than 150 from each. We combine reception and themes by simply adding the pure numbers and then recalculating percentage from this new number.

In the analysis chapter, we always look at the dominant themes present in the comments for each statement as the themes help to illustrate the – if any – general development in the reception and themes brought up in response to UA’s different crisis communication efforts. The dominant themes likely change over time, comment section to comment section. However, we also look at the most significant increases and decreases in distribution of themes, as this may also illustrate a change over time, perhaps even more so than merely analyzing the dominant themes. We also qualitatively analyse examples of dominant themes and relate our findings to our theoretical framework.

4.3.2. LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

Document analysis is only effective if the ‘right’ documents are included, over an appropriate timeline, resulting in an appropriate amount of data (Bowen 2009). Bowen (2009) also warns against treating documents as precise or accurate recordings, e.g. of an event (33). Our social media documents are very subjective and often emotional in nature. We do not expect to find accurate recordings of events in these documents, and neither are we very interested in doing so. Essentially, we are here more interested in what people think happened, and their opinions about this—and then tracking the change, if any is observable. This relates to a possible limitation of document analysis: biased selectivity (Bowen 2009, 32). Biased selectivity on our part is circumvented by our clear procedure for collection of comments, which is as random as the algorithms of social media allow. We also collected all news articles in which UA was the focal point within the timeframe, and as we collected from four news sources, probably of different political leanings, we also believe that we circumvent any bias in the news.

Other possible limitations of document analysis include 1) insufficient detail, and 2) low retrievability (Bowen 2009, 32). Insufficient detail may pose an issue in news articles, but we believe that they provide a relatively reliable source for accurate description of events as we are using multiple articles across four different news sites, which enables us to observe both discrepancies and similarities. In terms of retrievability, social media documents are both very easy and very difficult. They are easy to find, but can be difficult to select. We chose criteria for our selection, mentioned earlier, in order to make the collection feasible. Difficulty could also arise in the form of deleted posts, comments and the like. Comments may have been deleted, but it would be impossible to tell. Retrieving news articles proved challenging due to most online news sources either limiting access or demanding fees. We chose the ones most readily available to us through the University Library in order to circumvent this, which means that our selected sources may not be the absolute top-read newspapers in the US.

Our data collection yielded a large amount of material for analysis. Our material is representative and valid as we have avoided selection bias by including the first 150 comments from each statement comment section on both social media. By applying specific procedures and criteria (as outlined above, we are not ‘plucking’ data based on subjective opinions about the material, but rather ensuring that the material is ‘pure’ from our influence. This method of collection plus the nature of the documents collected also result in data that is non-reactive. Presumably, consumers posted comments on UA’s crisis communication efforts in order to express their opinions to the company, and maybe to all of the social media platform, and not in response to a researcher prompting them to do so.

4.3.3. RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

According to Mark Zachry, “[t]he general focus of rhetorical analysis is to arrive methodically at insights into the performance of a communication event [...] through an investigation of select features of the event” (2017, 68). A rhetorical analysis can include many different things, but we are very specific in what it is we want to use our rhetorical analysis for – to see *how* UA communicated during the crisis, and even more importantly, how this communication *changed* over the period of time we have selected. We will therefore elaborate on the

different rhetorical approaches we have used in our thesis to emphasise UA's communication to stakeholders.

Before we begin this elaboration, we find it prudent to give an overview of the three general theoretical perspectives in which a rhetorical analysis relies on one of them: 1) traditional, 2) new rhetorical, and 3) critical-postmodern (Ibid., 70). We account for the two first, as the new rhetorical perspective builds upon the traditional one. The first perspective is the traditional one, which includes the work of individuals in the classical period, such as Gorgias, Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian (Ibid., 71), where the most important aspect "is the recognition that people are able to persuade others to believe things through communication" (Ibid.). Furthermore, the traditional theory also offers a way of "conceptualising the overall performance of a communicative act" (Ibid.), by offering a framework representing the *five rhetorical canons*, which will not be elaborated further, as we do not use these in our analysis. Another analytical approach within the traditional perspective is using other concepts, which have been "explored for providing different perspectives on understanding what is at play in a given communicative event" (Ibid., 72). These concepts include e.g. *kairos* and *phronesis* that "situate the practice of rhetoric within human activity, investigating such issues as the place of skill, art and ethics in the practices of communication" (Ibid., 73). Only the ones relevant to our analysis will be elaborated later.

The second theoretical perspective is the new rhetorical one, a revision of traditional rhetorical theory. In the early and mid-twentieth century, a group of people, including Kenneth Burke, Cham Perelman and Lucy Olbrechts, began "to re-establish rhetoric as a sophisticated framework for analysing and thus making sense of how human beliefs and behaviours are shaped by patterns of communicative practices as well as by discrete communication events" (Ibid.). As we will be using some of Burke's work in our analysis, this perspective will be described later in this section. When working from a new rhetorical perspective the focus is "less on an exhaustive cataloguing of textual elements [...] and more on understanding communicative events in complicated social terms" (Ibid., 74). With this said, the new rhetorical perspective offers a different approach to that of the traditional one, in the sense of "gaining insight into the complicated relationship between communicative practices and the beliefs and behaviours of people" (Ibid.).

We will now address and account for how we collected our data. We limited our criteria for data collection to a focus on Twitter and Facebook, as UA has a profile on both of these social media platforms, and the statements they posted here were similar to each other. Another criterion for our data collection was the time frame, which we decided should begin with the first statement that UA posted after the crisis, and end with the moment when UA stopped mentioning the crisis on its Facebook and Twitter pages. The specific dates on which statements were issued by UA on social media are 10th April, 11th April, 27th April, 29th April and 1st May 2017. Ten statements were collected from these two criteria; with five statements from each social media platform, but as the statements on Facebook and Twitter are the same we will only be using five statements altogether in our rhetorical analysis.

It is though important to mention that together with the videos posted as the third, fourth, and fifth statement, there was also posted a link that lead directly onto UA's homepage. In this link there is a video of Oscar Munoz' apology and a more elaborating text of UA's changes appear. We have decided not to include this as it exits the social media sphere that we are interested in. Also, we have no way of knowing how many have clicked the link.

Our material, the five statements, also presented in Appendices 8-12, are statements made as responses from UA to the Flight 3411 incident that was filmed and posted on social media. The statements are UA's communication to the public addressing the crisis. Three of the statements, posted on the last three dates, where actually posted as videos (no sound), but we disregard the multimodal aspects of the communication and extract the text as a transcript in order to perform a text-oriented rhetorical analysis.

For the analysis of our collected material, we first of all rely Aristotle's work on persuasion, together with other parts of rhetorical tools outlined by Higgins and Walker (2012), who note that Aristotle provided a foundation for rhetorical analysis but not a specific model for analysis of persuasive communication and forms of appeal. Higgins and Walker provide a 'model' derived from their own analysis, into which they have "incorporate[d] aspects of persuasion from impression management and strategic communication studies and also

other recent rhetorical analyses to elucidate Aristotle's key rhetorical elements of ethos, logos, and pathos" (Higgins and Walker, 2012, pp. 197). Under each rhetorical appeal Higgins and Walker have categorised different elements relating to the general appeal. In accordance with pathos we will be using the elements, similitude, self-criticism, and inclination to succeed (Ibid. 198). Similitude appeals "to similarities between the author of the text/speaker and the audience [...] and is most evident with the choice and use of pronouns" (Ibid. 197-98). Self-criticism, or self-deprecation, is the element that "suggests the honesty of the organisational author, who can admit to past or present mistakes or shortcomings" (Ibid.), whereas on the other hand, the inclination to succeed draws "attention to past accomplishments or forecast of future organisational success" (Ibid.). In relation to pathos we will be using the element metaphor, as it "work[s] to construct [...] the emotional appeals that link to identification" (Ibid.), which means how the author of the text expresses a form of mutual understanding and thereby "relates to the needs, values and desires of the audience" (Ibid.). Please refer to Appendices 8-12 for the five statements; they have been color-coded to visualise the presence of any of the three appeals. Orange for ethos, green for pathos and pink for logos.

We supplement our analysis with the classical Greek rhetorical concepts of *kairos* and *phronesis*, both of which are related to the virtues of ethos as examples of the sender's attitude, also known as stance (Helder 2015, 50). *Kairos*, translating to the 'opportune moment', essentially refers to the timeliness of a persuasive text (Herrick 2005, 37; Bazerman et al. 2000, 212); *phronesis* refers to the appropriateness of a persuasive text (Herrick 2005, 85; Bazerman et al. 2000, 212). Two other concepts related to the virtues of ethos are *arete* and *eunoia* (Helder 2015, 53). *Arete* reflects the way that the author of the text is able to be sympathetic by sharing the same values as the audience (Ibid.), whereas *eunoia* refers to the author's "benevolence or good will" (Ibid.) towards the audience by e.g. choosing words that are familiar to the audience to show that the author understands the situation the audience is in (Ibid., 54).

Lastly, we will work with Kenneth Burke's pentad. Springston et al. (2010) state that Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism can be particularly useful in crisis communication research as it may illustrate how an organisation designates responsibility (270). Burke's theory is concretised in his *pentad* (essentially a pentagram) which is made up of five

constituent elements: 1) *act*, 2) *scene*, 3) *agent*, 4) *agency*, and 5) *purpose*. These five elements are explained in the following, “the *act* is what transpired, the *scene* is the setting of the act, the *agent* is the person or kind of person responsible for the act, the *agency* is the instrument used to perform the act, and the *purpose* is why that act was carried out” (Springston et al. 2010, 271). This pentad can be used to analyse the rhetorical situation to reveal the way an organisation perceives and constructs a reality based on which elements of the pentad are privileged in the organisation’s crisis communication (Ibid., 271). This means that the included, excluded and prioritised elements of an address may reveal the motivations of the speaker as well as its perspective on a situation, e.g. a crisis. As Springston et al. note, “[d]ramatistic analysis of crisis communication may reveal the motivations of the communicator and the reality that he or she sought to create post-crisis” (271), something that is possible as the “rhetoric used to describe a crisis situation illustrates the organization’s perspective on the situation and possible courses of future actions” (Ibid., 271).

To get an overview of how we have used the statements in our rhetorical analysis, we have made a table of the rhetorical tools we find interesting to look at according to each statement.

Table 4: Elements of rhetorical appeals.

Appeal	Examples of persuasive techniques:
ETHOS: credibility (perceived character of the author)	Similitude
	Self-criticism
	Inclination to succeed
	Kairos
	Phronesis
	Arete
PATHOS: emotion	Eunoia
	Metaphor

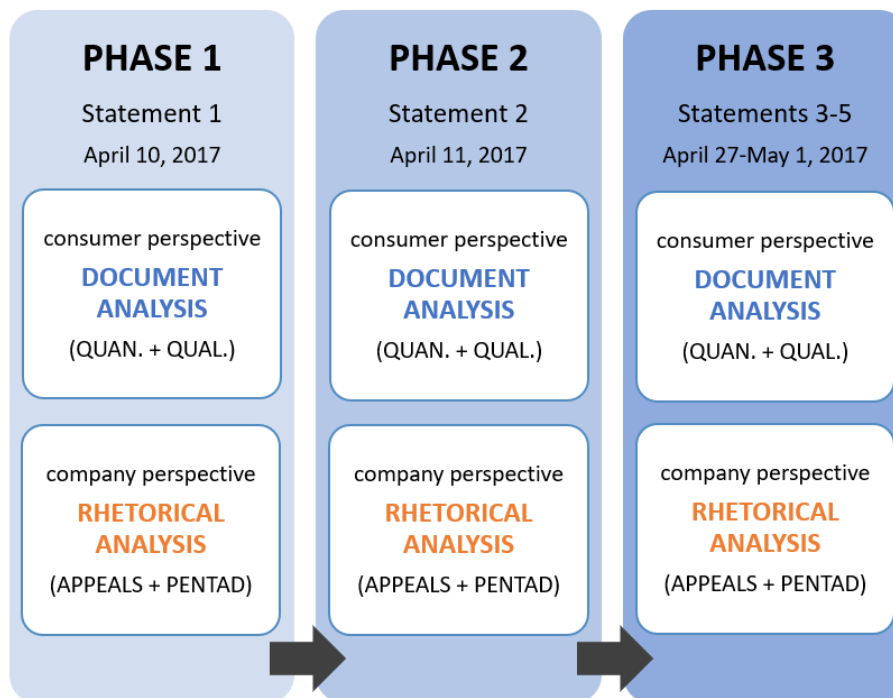
(Own creation with inspiration from Higgins and Walker 2012, 198 and Helder 2015, 50-54)

We will now consider the validity of this. The five statements posted on Twitter and Facebook are not the only ones communicated to the public by UA after the crisis. The five statements only represent the communication from a social media perspective, whereas

other statements from the organisation will not be used in this thesis. Even though some of the statements uploaded on UA's homepage are quite similar to the ones on Facebook and Twitter, there is still more material to be read on the webpage, with more details of UA's perspective on the incident, policy changes, address to Dr Dao, etc. Although there is a lot more material available on the crisis that could be analysed, we believe that the five statements we have collected represent the communication outlined on social media, which is what our purpose is to find out – and not what UA have communicated elsewhere.

5: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, we will conduct an analysis of both crisis communication performed by UA on social media (per our previously specified timeline), as well as the consumer responses and reactions³ that this crisis communication prompted, also on social media. We do this to uncover the interplay between the two ‘players’ or perspectives, i.e. UA versus consumers, as well as to identify possible changes and developments in both perspectives over time. The figure below visualises the overall structure of the analysis chapter. In this introduction to the analysis chapter, we further provide a detailed outline of the structure of analysis as it is somewhat complex.



³ The words ‘reaction’, ‘response’ and ‘comment’ all signify consumer response in relation to UA crisis communication. Reaction is used to signify metadata (e.g. number of likes, shares or retweets), while ‘response’ and ‘comment’ are used interchangeably to refer to the comments made directly to each statement on social media.

As the model above shows, the analysis is, at the overall level, split into three separate but interconnected parts. For a transparent structure and ease of reading, we call these parts *phases* as they describe a new part of a sequence of crisis communication. Each phase examines statements posted by UA on social media as well as the consumer comments made as a response to the individual statements. Following the chronological timeline of UA's social media crisis communication – the sequence – allows us to identify developments and changes made over time.

As the model illustrates, *Phase 1* involves the analysis of the *first* statement made by UA as well as the associated consumer comments. Accordingly, *Phase 2* analyses statement 2 and its associated comments. *Phase 3*, however, encompasses statements 3, 4, and 5. This is because the last three statements are parts of one whole statement. We reached this conclusion as the three statements seem to be a part of a posting schedule for the launch of new policies. Each of the last three statements includes a link to the same page on UA's website, which contains a detailed version of what the three statements include. As such, we view these last statements as part of one whole communication effort. For that reason, we find it unnecessary to work with five different phases. The collection of the statements and their respective comment sections were split into five, but we analyse the statements according to three phases rather than five. Of course, consumer comments are not as predictable, which is why *Phase 3* is designed differently from the first two. Each of the three phases is then divided into 1) *document analysis* of consumer comments, which comprises the consumer perspective, and 2) *rhetorical analysis* of UA statement, which illustrates the organisational (UA) perspective.

The document analysis is further divided into a *quantitative* part and a *qualitative* part, which is reflective of the mixed-method approach to document analysis that we have adopted. The document analysis contained in each phase is an analysis of both news articles and consumer reactions on social media, all within the timeframe of the specific phase. We are mostly focused on consumer reactions, and the news articles collected are primarily used to create a context for our case (cf. 3 Context Chapter). As such, the news articles are only

analysed according to the general presentation of the content, coded as either positive, negative or sceptical.

The *quantitative* part of the document analysis within a given phase includes a presentation of our quantitative, generic findings from the document analysis. This includes the general tone of news articles as well as consumers reception of UA communication, both of which are coded as either *positive/negative/sceptical*. These are tallied (e.g. 100 out of 150 comments were coded as negative) and percentage of the total is calculated to show distribution. Furthermore, as outlined in the methods chapter, we also identified 11 emerging themes in the consumer reactions. These are similarly tallied, and percentages are calculated. We then start our analysis by accounting for the dominant or primary responses of consumers in the specific phase. Tables at the beginning of each phase provide an overview of these results, but we only address and provide examples of the most dominant codes (e.g. negative or a theme). For the handling of the 11 themes, we have created a shorthand which we will use both in tables providing an overview of the quantitative data, as well as in the discussion of the data in the later qualitative part. All themes will be presented using the full label the first time that they are used, the shorthand in brackets; afterwards, only the shorthand will be used. Please refer to the coding manual (Appendix 3) for a description of the themes as well as the shorthand.

The *qualitative* part of the document analysis is inspired by and takes its starting point from the themes identified and quantified in the quantitative analysis. This enables us to use the results of our quantitative analysis as a starting point, and effectively move from the generic to the specific. In this part, we analyse the comments on the basis of which themes that are expressed in the comments. We provide examples of comments reflecting the dominant themes, and we then analyse how these themes are in fact expressed in those comments. As 11 themes are unmanageable to include in each phase, and likely not relevant either, we focus on the dominant themes under each phase, as identified by the preceding quantitative analysis. However, where relevant, we also reserve space for the 'minority' to be addressed. In this part of the document analysis, we furthermore actively relate and consider our findings to our theoretical framework.

Next, and within the same phase, we shift our focus to the organisational perspective by moving on to a rhetorical analysis of the specific UA statement in each phase. We start with an analysis of rhetorical appeal forms utilised in the individual statements, drawing our point of departure from Higgins and Walker's approach to the analysis of rhetorical appeals (cf. 4.3.2 Methods). Beyond this, we also analyse the rhetorical situation based on Burke's pentad, which is made up of five constituent elements: 1) *act*, 2) *scene*, 3) *agent*, 4) *agency*, and 5) *purpose*. This procedure is repeated across each of the five phases.

After each phase has been analysed, we summarise the individual parts of analysis and key findings to illustrate what we learned in each phase. After all three phases have been analysed, we enter into a more general discussion of the analyses to try to establish a broader picture of the interplay between UA and consumers, and how consumers may have influenced the crisis communication efforts made by UA. As such, we attempt to delineate a possible development over time. This discussion is continuously related to and supported by our theoretical framework.

Our analysis as a whole, of course, seeks to answer our research question. One goal is then to uncover how and why modern consumers, empowered by social media, may have affected UA's crisis communication. With this in mind, as well as a detailed outline of our analysis structure, we will now begin, as one is wont, at the beginning: with Phase 1.

5.1 PHASE 1

Phase 1 takes its starting point in the first statement posted by United Airlines on the social media Facebook and Twitter on April 10th 2017. Below are two screenshots of the statement in question, one from Twitter, and one from Facebook. The statement is posted the same way on both platforms.

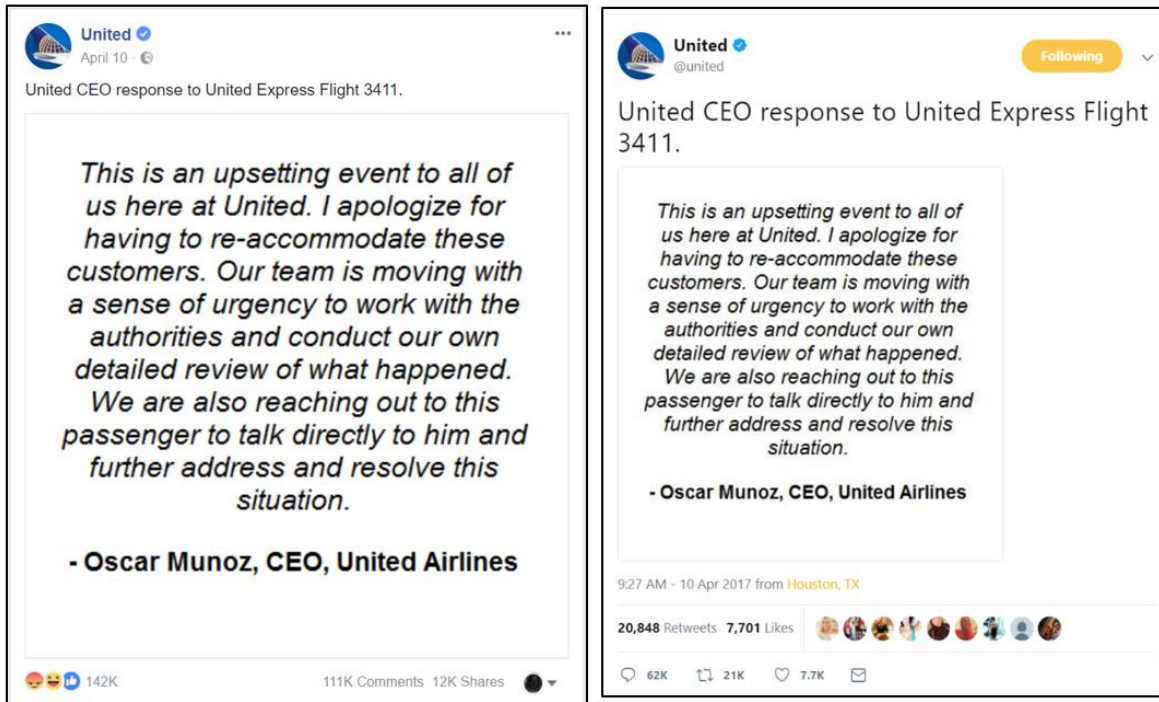


Figure 2: Statement 2 on Twitter (left) and Facebook (right)

Though very interesting, we are not particularly interested in the similarities and differences between the platforms and their engagement counts (i.e. comments, shares, likes, etc.). As such, we comment on the total comment count (FB + TW). Talled together, UA received 163,000 comments to this first statement, as well as 149,701 reactions and 32848 retweets/shares. This is a huge response that seems unusual for UA. Quickly glancing at UA's FB profile, the company's most popular post in May – before all the debacle – garnered a total of 540 comments.

In line with the above, the comments collected from each platform are, as previously described, also collapsed into one sum (FB + TW), resulting in a total of 300 consumer comments associated with statement 1. We will now present our findings of these comments.

5.1.1. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

We start the quantitative part of the document analysis by presenting our quantitative data (cf. Appendices 4, 5 and 7 for full analyses). Below is a table depicting the results of our coding of either positive, negative or sceptical on all three sources. ‘News’ of course denote our collected news articles. Only one article was found in our four news sources within the timeframe of this phase. ‘Social Media’ denotes the 300 consumer comments collected on each platform.

	NEWS			SOCIAL MEDIA		
	Positive	Negative	Sceptical	Positive	Negative	Sceptical
Out of 300	0	1	0	2	296	2
% of 300	0 %	100 %	0 %	1 %	98 %	1 %

As we can see from the table above, the vast majority has been coded as negative. We only see four comments outside of the negative reception code. As such, we conclude that consumers are clearly not, at this point, viewing UA in a favourable light. Because only one news article was found within the timeframe, we do not feel that we can conclude anything on the basis of this.

As outlined in the structure of our analysis, we next look at the emerging themes found in the comments. The second table below is comprised only of consumer responses on social media; news articles have not been analysed for emerging themes. Please refer to Appendix 4 for a full analysis of Twitter (TW) comments and Appendix 5 for a full analysis of Facebook (FB) comments.

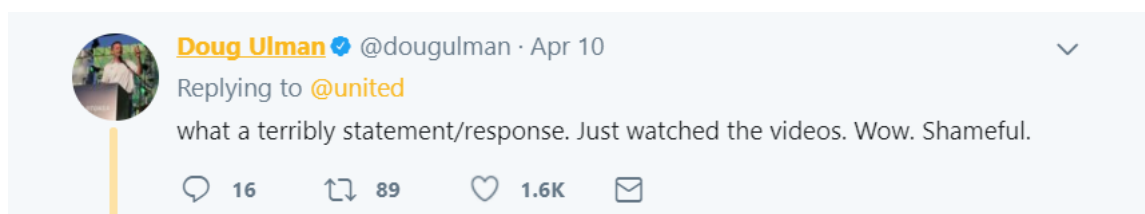
	HUM O	BOY	RES	COM	HUMA	CORP	RAC	IND	INC	DAO	UA
Out of 300	29	115	16	110	113	37	3	7	5	1	2
% of 300	9,6%	38,3%	5,3%	36,6%	37,6%	12,3%	1%	2,3%	1,6%	0,3%	0,6%

The table shows the combined results of Facebook and Twitter, shown horizontally. These have been calculated by simply adding the results from the two platforms together, and then calculating the percentage based on the new number. As such, this table shows us the dominant themes of Phase 1. The columns each indicate one of the 11 emergent themes, using the shorthand for each (for a detailed presentation of our codes, please refer to Appendix 3). In the following qualitative focus, we provide screenshots of comments that represent the dominant themes. For ease of using the attached appendices, the screenshots are labelled with a platform of origin (FB or TW) as well as a number that corresponds to its placement in the two Excel-files. For example, the comment “TW 74” can be found in the Twitter document analysis Excel-file (Appendix 4) at comment number 74, as well as in Appendix 1, which contains the screenshots of Twitter comments (filename ‘74’, Appendix 1).

In the social media comments of Phase 1, we found three dominant themes: ‘boycott’ (BOY), ‘humanity’ (HUMA), and ‘communication critique’ (COM) (marked in the table). As the themes are not mutually exclusive – such as in the case of the initial reception coding of either positive, negative or sceptical – we see a lot of comments with a variety of themes expressed. In terms of percentages, the three dominant themes are very equally represented. At 38,3 percent, the BOY theme is the slightly more dominant theme expressed through the consumer comments, closely followed by the theme BOY (37,6 percent). Finally, at just one less percentage point, we find the COM theme (36,6 percent). The least represented themes are ‘UA support’ (UA) at 0,6 percent and ‘critique of Dao’ (DAO) at 0,3 percent.

We now move on to the qualitative part of our document analysis, which is based on and inspired by the key themes that we have found in the above. As mentioned, multiple themes can be coded for a single comment.

For example, both HUMA and COM are expressed in the following comment:



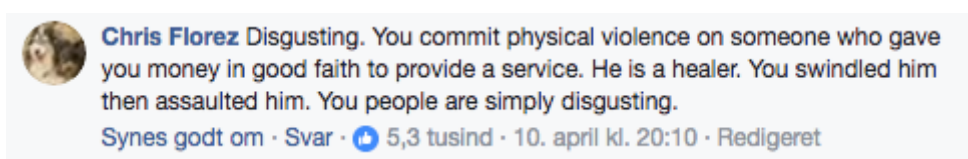
In this negative reception of UA's statement, Doug is indicating that he views both the incident and the UA statement as something morally wrong ("Shameful") while commenting his opinion of the statement itself: "terribly statement/response". He has seen the videos posted on social media, and he feels that the company's statement regarding the incident was completely lacking and inappropriate. This indicates that he had certain expectations for the behaviour of the company, both regarding conduct and communication. His view seems to be shared with a lot of other consumers, as his reply to UA has garnered 1,600 likes and 89 retweets.

The HUMA theme is also reflected in this comment:



TW 93

In this negative reception, Eve is judging the incident from a moral or ethical perspective and similarly expresses sympathy or pity for Dr Dao "That poor person!". By calling it "disgusting and upsetting", she makes an emotional evaluation of the incident, but not directly of the statement. She also implicitly expresses an expectation for the (humane) treatment of customers in her comment, as she viewed it as "upsetting", meaning that it was not reflective of how she thinks people should be treated.



FB 16

Similarly negative, Chris' comment also expresses the HUMA theme. This is reflected in his expression of disgust for the incident. However, contrary to the previous two comments, he more explicitly states that it is the "physical violence" on a customer that he finds offensive. Implicitly, he also comments on the common policy of overbooking and seems to be referring to the rebooking of Dr Dao as a kind of deception. By saying "someone who gave you money

in good faith to provide a service”, he seems to be commenting on what he perceives as a breach of the exchange relationship that customers expect (I pay for something, company provides it). The deception is also clearly marked in his claim: “you swindled him”. Interestingly, Chris finds it relevant to include the profession of Dr Dao, as if it imbues Dr Dao with more value as a person to be a “healer”. In his view, it seems, the violence was made even more offensive as it was inflicted on a person who earns his living from helping and healing other people. This comment is also quite ‘popular’ as 5,300 people liked it.



FB 110

The above comment is a clear example of the COM theme. Quite plainly, Rosemarie criticises the communication efforts made by UA and claims that she has a better way of tackling the issue. She even provides UA with a response, saying the this is “What the statement should have said”. She does not think that the original statement is appropriate for the issue that it is supposed to handle. In her opinion, a statement reading: “I’m upset and outraged by this incident and I pledge to track down how this happened and to make sure it doesn't happen again. This is not consistent with United's values” would be a more appropriate response. This reveals what Rosemarie thinks is important to address in this case. The first part which expresses upset and an intention to find out how this happened is actually already present in the UA statement, e.g., “I’m upset and outraged by this incident” (line 1 of Rosemarie’s comment) vs. “This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United” (line 1 of UA statement 1, cf. Appendix 8). The only sentiment that is not already represented in the original statement is the second part of line 2: “to make sure it doesn't happen again” and the entire last sentence: “This is not consistent with United's values”. As such, Rosemarie is missing a form of reassurance for consumers (“never happen again”) as well as a clear dissociation from the nature of the incident (“this is not consistent with United’s values”).



FB 3

We have coded the above negative comment under the theme of COM, which is clearly indicated by the very succinct and direct “Trash response”. His critique of UA’s communication is focused on what he deems an inappropriate apology. He questions the decision to apologise for rebooking a customer, and not, as he deems more appropriate, for the violence inflicted on the said customer (“bashing a customer’s face in”). Also, he criticises UA’s word choice “re accommodating”, followed by an emoji which, in its usual usage means a positive ‘OK’, but here probably meant as a sarcastic taunt. Harrison’s comment is, like the few previously, expressing a perceived misalignment regarding customer’s expectations, here towards the company’s way of apologising. A lot of other Facebook users (a whopping 63,000) have indicated their agreement with this comment.



TW 24

The above comment is also coded as negative as well as both COM and BOY under emergent themes. The critique of communication is clear in that Jen both rejects the statement and uses words taken directly from it to, in a way, taunt UA with their own words. By putting quotation marks around the word apology, she indicates that she does not, in fact, view UA’s apology as a valid one. She also explicitly indicates an intention to boycott the company with the hashtag #BoycottUnitedAirlines.



Jorah Kai @therealjorahkai · Apr 11



Replying to @united

I hope we can #ReAccommodate our business away from United so they get the message this brutality and egregious #nonapology is pathetic.



TW 132

This comment is, like the majority, also coded as a negative reception. It has further been coded as BOY, COM and HUMA. COM is expressed through the use of the hashtags #ReAccommodate and #nonapology. HUMA is expressed through the words “this brutality” as a way to describe what happened, i.e. the forceful removal of Dr Dao. Brutality indicates callousness or cruelty or unnecessary violence, which is then what Jorah perceived as the characteristic of the incident. By calling the statement an “egregious #nonapology”, Jorah perceives the statement as an inadequate reaction to the “brutality”. BOY is then articulated, in a somewhat more implicit way than the previous example, using the COM theme of “#ReAccommodate”, which is a critique of UA’s word choice. He also indicates a wish for this – the boycott – to impress upon UA that they missed the severity of the incident in their statement in his “so they get the message [that] this brutality and egregious #nonapology is pathetic”.



Joshua Pierce Just canceled six tickets through United. I advice everyone to do the same. Now they wont have to worry about overbooking again.

Synes godt om · Svar · 👍👎👏 81 tusind · 10. april kl. 18:33

FB 1

This comment (negative reception), is a very clear example of the BOY theme, while also drawing on HUMO. BOY is not just something that could be an empty threat here, but an actual action as Joshua cancelled already bought tickets. Furthermore, his ‘call for action’ for others to follow his lead (“I advice everyone to do the same”) also expresses BOY. HUMO is connected to the BOY theme. Joshua jokes that, if everyone does boycott, the policy of

overbooking will be a non-issue as UA then will not have enough customers to fill a plane. This comment, posted on Facebook, is the one that has received the most reactions on both platforms within Phase 1. A total of 81,000 Facebook users have liked the comment. This number is quite significant. As figure 2 shows, the statement itself received 142,000 reactions from users, of which the vast majority were negative reactions (i.e. the 'angry' emoji reaction). While a difference of 61,000 users, it is still interesting and significant that a customer's negative response to UA's statement garnered so much support from others (only positive reactions, mostly the traditional 'likes').

We found four 'outliers'. Two comments were coded as positive, and two as sceptical, each amounting to approximately 1 percent of all comments in Phase 1. These are obviously not a part of the dominant reception code of Phase 1, which is negative, but they represent an alternative view that might be interesting to examine and follow through the different phases. We have chosen to only include the positive receptions, as these constitute the polar opposite to the dominant code.

The two examples of positive reception are:



TW 1



TW 2

The first is a declaration of continued patronage. The second contains a positive view of UA and rather paints Dr Dao in a negative light by calling him a "convict" as well as "adamant, oppositional". By doing so, Mario places the blame on Dr Dao for the incident and also draws

on information from a news article that ‘dug up’ Dr Dao’s personal and professional history (cf. 3 Context Chapter). This is reflective of an emergent theme that we have labelled critique of Dao (shorthand: DAO). He also supports UA (another emergent theme, shorthand: UA) by emphasising businesses’ rights to refuse service, though this may not be what the incident was actually about.

We now relate the document analysis of Phase 1 to our theoretical framework. In this qualitative analysis, we have focused on the three dominant themes of HUMA, COM, and BOY. We have also mentioned and seen examples of the themes HUMO, DAO, and UA. We focus here on the dominant three.

HUMA is coded when a comment talks about the issue of morality or ethics. It encompasses instances wherein a commenter is explicitly or implicitly referring to either a perceived ‘wrongness’ or ‘rightness’ of something. We believe this relates to Giddens’ concept of basic trust (1991, 39). Giddens believes that people have been imbued with a ‘basic trust’ that screens us from the risks and dangers of our changing surroundings, both in terms of actions and interactions. An action could be boarding a plane, and an interaction could be between the security at an airport and a passenger. Out of all the comments collected, we coded 113 under the theme of HUMA. The majority of all of these comments reflect in some way an expectation of acceptable behaviour, i.e. when a comment describes something as being “shameful” (TW 2) or “disgusting” (TW 93 and FB 16). This is in line with how Giddens ascribe us with basic trust which forms a protective cocoon around us. This protective cocoon allows us to function in day-to-day life, without becoming overwhelmed by anxiety (Giddens 1991, 40). As we note in the analysis of the first comment – TW 2 – it seems that the commenter is expressing an unmet expectation for how humans should be treated. She expresses upset because her basic trust has been violated.

The HUMA theme can also be related to the ethical consumer. Ethical consumption means thinking of something beyond the relationship between price and quality between a product or service (Harrison, Newholm and Shaw 2005, 2) (cf. 2.3 The Modern Consumer). In this case, ethical consumption is not about choosing a less polluting option or an organically grown vegetable. Here, consumers – that is, the commenters – are reacting to what they perceive

to be a company engaging in unethical or unjust behaviour (cf. 2.3 The Modern Consumer). As such, ethical consumption is here reflected in boycotting, which is the denial of purchase of a certain brand, product or service. This leads us to the BOY theme.

BOY themes are coded in comments that either explicitly or implicitly indicates that they will not patronise UA. Comments TW 24, TW 132, and FB 1 all are coded under BOY. Explicit declarations of boycotting may be seen in, e.g. TW 24, who uses a very specific hashtag (“#BoycottUnitedAirlines”). A less explicit version of the boycotting intentions can be seen in, e.g. TW 132, which uses the phrase “#ReAccomodate our business away from United”.

As mentioned above, declarations of boycotting form as a reaction to the incident, which is perceived as unjust or unethical. Boycotting is essentially an expression of Hirschman’s exit as well as voice, we argue, which means that this is commenters way of exerting influence on UA. They believe their exit will result in revenue loss for UA, and that their criticism expressed in declarations of boycotting will influence the company.

Exit is a silent mechanism if the idea of exiting is not shared with a lot of people (Kucuk 2008, 8). The sharing of the exit intention happens through voice. All the comments are made on social media, which enables a ‘group discussion’, which allows consumers to organise and connect. This ease of communication affects voice and exit; collective action, e.g. mass boycotting, is easier to organise and disseminate.

Comment FB 1 actively cancelled already purchased tickets because of the incident, and he calls for others to do the same, i.e. boycott. As mentioned, the comment has 81,000 likes, indicating that many agree with the commenter. This makes FB 1 an especially ‘loud’ voice, in the sense that he is both popular and actively calls for others to follow his example. His comment could be considered a part of an effort to collectively exit from UA. This again relates to consumers as activists. The ease of commenting and expressing support for a collective boycotting of UA could, however, allow consumers to outwardly support without committing to the boycott. Declaring to boycott UA may also relate to Giddens’ idea of lifestyle choices, which help shape a consumer’s self-identity. A lifestyle choice can be the refusal of buying from a company. An ethical consumer, as an identity, would likely refuse to buy from UA, as it would give “material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (1991, 81).

As a side note, we can argue that every single comment constitutes an expression of voice, as per Hirschman's and Kucuk's definition of the term.

We code a comment as COM if a commenter in some way comments on UA's communication itself. This kind of comment can be both positive and negative. As such, we have coded COM in comments that either express satisfaction with the statement, as well as in comments that provides negative criticisms about UA's communication effort. In statement 1, we only see examples of negative COM, and the four examples above are therefore also all negative criticism of the communication. A negative view on the communication here reflects that UA does not meet consumers' expectations for what such a statement should say. This negative association to UA's communication could represent that UA is dealing with a double crisis (cf. 2.4 Crisis Communication). The negative comments indicate that the commentators believe that UA's communication is poorly executed by stating "[w]hat the statement should have said", (FB 110) and then gives an example of what she believes UA should have written instead, or even a wrongful communication, as others express it as, "your "apology" is not accepted" (TW 24), or referring to the statement as being a "[t]rash response" (FB 3).

5.1.2. RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

We now move on to the second part of Phase 1: the organisational perspective, which is comprised of a rhetorical analysis of the first statement. As explained in the structure of analysis, we begin by analysing the forms of rhetorical appeals utilised in the statement to examine the persuasive nature of the text. We are here inspired by Higgins and Walker's approach to the analysis of rhetorical appeals. Please refer to Appendix 8 for a colour-coded version of the statement with line numbers provided.

This first statement is very short and to the point, the point of which could be to stall while internal investigations are being conducted, as seen from lines 5 to 8, which outline the company's plans for action. We argue that UA is essentially only utilising the strategy of *ethos* in this statement. This is done through establishing the sender's – that is, Oscar Munoz's – position as the CEO. The fact that they highlight the CEO as the sender may be an attempt to

impress the credibility of the sender, as the CEO is arguably the main representative of UA. This is seen twice in the short statement, once in the heading (line 1) and once in the closing “- Oscar Munoz, CEO, United Airlines” (line 13). This statement is not exactly rife with techniques of rhetorical persuasion. It does not address a given audience directly, nor does it seemingly appeal to any emotions. Beyond building on the (supposed) credibility of the CEO title, the statement does not employ much else.

We also consider the classical Greek rhetorical concepts of *kairos* and *phronesis*. Together, the two concepts may be thought of as communicating the exactly right thing for that exact moment. UA posted this first statement approximately 24 hours after the videos of the incident appeared online. UA did also address the situation by other means beforehand (cf. 3 Contextual Chapter), so the *timeliness* (*kairos*) of the communication may at first glance be appropriate. What may not be appropriate, is the content. *Phronesis* is exhibiting ‘good sense’ and appropriate communication (Herrick 2005, 85; Bazerman et al. 2000, 212). In the case of this first statement, we conclude that UA did not grasp the *phronesis*, which also affected the *kairos*. We argue this on both the basis of consumer reactions, the vast majority of which were negative, but also by considering the rhetorical situation, the rhetoric of which reveal a passive and an almost hesitant stance. The *kairos* of the situation was gone, not because the statement was exactly late (though one could consider 24 hours a long time on social media), but rather because UA communicated the wrong thing at what could have been the right time.

Beyond this, we also analyse the rhetorical situation by using Burke’s pentad, which is made up of five constituent elements: 1) *act*, 2) *scene*, 3) *agent*, 4) *agency*, and 5) *purpose*. The analysis reveals UA’s perspective of the situation, as well as how UA sought to construct reality through examining which elements of the pentad that are privileged in the organisation’s crisis communication (Springston et al. 2010, 271) (cf. 4.3.2. Rhetorical Analysis).

The statement is quite vague, and only three of the five elements of the pentad are more or less explicitly addressed. First of all, UA describes the *act*, which is the first element of the pentad, as a ‘re-accommodation’ (line four: “re-accommodate these customers”). We argue that this word choice borders on euphemistic. As the contextual chapter explains, the videos

clearly show Dr Dao being physically dragged out of his seat and along the aisle of the plane. The word choice of 're-accommodation' in this case seems lacking at best and disingenuous at worst.

The second element, *scene*, is also included, though only in the heading (line 1), wherein the context of the statement is mentioned: "United Express Flight 3411", which denotes the setting of the act.

Finally, we see a very implicit allusion to the fifth and final element, *purpose*, which denotes the 'why' of the act. We argue that the 'why' may be implicitly found in line 4: "having to". This is a passive description of the 'why' of the incident that also suggests that the act was somehow necessary or forced. Also, when considered in tandem with the first element, act, we may wonder why the statement refers to "these customers" when the "upsetting event", as mentioned in line 2, for most would be the forceful removal of Dr Dao. The plural reference to 'customers' indicates that Munoz is not necessarily apologising for the scene of Dr Dao being removed, which was filmed by passengers, but rather for the general 'necessity' of removing passengers in favour of crew members (as noted in the contextual chapter). From the above, it seems that the first element, act, is slightly more prioritised than the other elements included, though it is hardly a marked difference.

The excluded elements of *agent* and *agency* are just as important to consider as the included elements, as what is left unsaid sometimes tells us more than what is said. The third element of the pentad, *agent*, denotes the person responsible for the act. The statement does not mention whom they perceived to be responsible for the forceful removal of Dr Dao. Munoz does apologise, though not for the act, but rather for the "re-accommodation", as mentioned before. This way of apologising without accepting responsibility for the actual issue is called a 'non-apology' (Coombs 2015, 149). Interestingly, a commenter directly criticised the first statement for being an "egregious #nonapology" (TW 132). Comment FB 35 also expressed disbelief at the direction of UA's apology in this statement, quoting the "re-accommodate"-euphemism. The fourth element, *agency*, denotes the instrument used to perform the act and should answer the question of 'how?'. How Dao was removed (by instrument) is not addressed in the statement. At a very large stretch, line 2 may indicate something about the 'how' by describing it as "upsetting". This is, however, incredibly indirect

and not likely to be understood as an explanation of agency. All in all, the two excluded elements reveal a hesitation on UA's part, as though they are reluctant to say too much or implicate themselves before they conduct their own "detailed review of what happened" (line 8). According to Coombs (2015), this may not be an unusual situation as companies often do not apologise due to the fear of legal liability. A direct and full apology would be an admission of guilt, which could be used against the company later on. Coombs also notes that partial apologies are prevalent because of this fear of legal liability, which is a strategic response (2015, 148-149).

As such, we may argue that the first statement is not an example of a successfully persuasive text. We are, perhaps, rather examining what could be described as an example of *rhetorical failure*. We partially base this conclusion on responses from consumers; a dominant theme in the comments is even critique of communication (COM), mixed with a dominant negative reception. We also base it on our above analysis of the rhetorical situation. It reveals UA's perspective on the situation and their view of possible courses of action, which is – in a word – careful. The rhetoric is passive and carefully bland, which may explain why we were unable to identify many modes of appeal.

In this next part of the organisational perspective, we relate our findings so far to Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory, as detailed in section 2.4 in Chapter 2.

Coombs' theory provides recommendations for appropriate response strategies according to crisis type. We start by considering if some of Coombs' listed response strategies are 'present' in the statement. One of the sentences in the statement reads as follows: "our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened" (line 5-8, cf. Appendix 8). The strategy that best exemplifies this excerpt is the *excusing* strategy (cf. 4.3.2. Rhetorical Analysis). UA tries to minimise its responsibility for the crisis by excusing with the need for further investigation of what happened, as mentioned in the rhetorical analysis. We also argue that UA uses *apology* as a sub-strategy, reflected in line 3-5: "I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers" (line 3-5). According to Coombs, using the apology strategy indicates that an organisation is

taking full responsibility for a crisis while simultaneously asking for forgiveness. However, this is not the case here. As mentioned in the rhetorical analysis, Munoz does not apologise for the incident itself, and then specifically to Dr Dao, but rather for the necessity of removing customers, reflected by the use of the plural in line 4-5.

According to Coombs, identifying a crisis type is one of the first steps for a practitioner to find an 'appropriate' response strategy. Similarly to the above response strategies, we do not think that any of Coombs' crisis types fit perfectly with what we have seen from UA. Coombs' provides an overview of crisis types, under which he also notes the level of reputational threat that such a crisis, according to him, is likely to pose. Based on the above rhetorical analysis, it seems likely that UA understood their crisis situation as something resembling the crisis type of *malevolence*, which belongs in the victim cluster. This type is a result of an "external agent [causing] damage to an organization" (Coombs 2007, 168). As mentioned, the statement reflects a hesitant stance in which UA is careful not to say too much.

However, whereas a victim cluster crisis type is, according to Coombs, supposed to result in mild reputational threat, our analysis of consumer comments tells a different story. As the previous parts of this Phase 1 have shown, consumers are very critical of this first statement, and most (98 percent) negatively receives it, indicating that UA and consumers do not agree on who is to be attributed responsibility for the crisis. This means, in Coombs terms, that UA and consumers do not agree on a crisis type for this incident. As the communication is reflective of an understanding of the crisis situation that differs wildly from consumers' understanding of the same, it is not surprising that the first statement is not an example of successful and effective crisis communication; the goal of which must be to mitigate a crisis. Rather, we argue that UA created what is known as a double crisis, as also reflected in our analysis of the COM theme. A communication crisis happened because UA was unable to handle the original crisis to the satisfaction of consumers. As such, what was meant to remedy the original crisis became a crisis in itself. This is seen clearly from both our quantitative and qualitative analyses of consumer comments made in response to this first statement. Based on the comments, we argue that consumers likely perceived the crisis much more along the lines of what Coombs identifies the crisis as an example of an "organizational misdeed with injuries", which belongs to the preventable cluster and involves inappropriate actions taken

by an organisation (Coombs 2007, 168). This fits with the consensus of the consumer comments; consumers strongly attribute responsibility for the crisis to UA, but as UA does not address issues of responsibility (as seen in the rhetorical analysis), their communication fails.

As such, Coombs may be used as a guiding tool for considering the connection between a crisis situation, crisis type and the response made, but, as we see here, Coombs' simplified 'boxes', meant to encapsulate reality, does not always match the complexity of crisis situations and human responses to this.

5.1.3. PARTIAL CONCLUSION

Phase 1 analysed both consumer reactions to statement 1 as well as the statement itself. As such, we have analysed the crisis from both a consumer perspective (document analysis, both quantitative and qualitative) and an organisational perspective (rhetorical analysis). From this analysis, we have found that consumers are almost entirely negative towards UA's first crisis communication effort. The three dominant themes (BOY, HUMA, and COM) were analysed, revealing how consumers' trust was broken and that consumers perceived the crisis, as well as the communication, as something unethical or unjust. We use the concepts of voice and exit, related to social media, to indicate how consumers exerted influence, both of which are reflected in the dominant theme 'boycotting' (BOY). We also relate the concept of a double crisis to another dominant theme, 'communication critique' (COM), and further elaborate on this in the rhetorical analysis, concluding that UA failed to meet consumers' expectations in their communication. This is supported by a key finding in the rhetorical analysis, in which we conclude that UA communicated the wrong thing at what could have been the right time. The rhetorical analysis furthermore established that this first statement probably is unsuccessful because it does not address the elements of agency and agent, which reveal hesitation on UA's part. This hesitation, we argue, is part of why we conclude this first statement to be a rhetorical failure, as also expressed by the vast majority of the consumer comments.

5.2 PHASE 2

Phase 2 takes its starting point in the second statement posted the day after the first statement (April 11, 2017) by United Airlines on the social media Facebook and Twitter. Below are two screenshots of the statement.

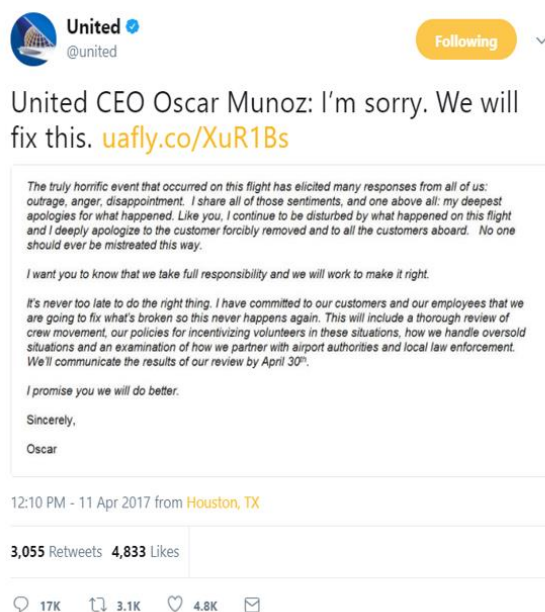


Figure 3: Statement 2 on Twitter (left) and Facebook (right)

Once again, we must conclude that consumers on Facebook have been more active with a total of 38,000 users commented on the Facebook statement, though this number is relatively low compared to the 111,000 users commented on the first statement. On Twitter 17,000 users commented on the post to this second statement, in relation to the 62,000 users commented on the first statement. Together there is an increase in comments on 66 percent from the first statement, which indicates that the users are less active towards this second statement. Another way of viewing this change is by looking at the number of reactions towards the post; Facebook has 44,000, which is nearly 100,000 less than the reactions to the first statement that was 142,000. The vast majority of these reactions to this second statement are though still the 'angry' reaction with 32,000. On Twitter, the number of likes where not to the same extent as different from each other with its approximately 4,800, compared to the 7,7000 people who had liked the first statement.

5.2.1. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

We will now start with presenting the quantitative data (cf. Appendices 4 and 5), which is the first part of the document analysis. The table below shows our coding results of positive, negative or sceptical on all three sources. In this second phase, 18 news articles were found 18 within the timeframe.

NEWS			SOCIAL MEDIA		
Positive	Negative	Sceptical	Positive	Negative	Sceptical
1	13	4	10	278	12
5,6%	72,2%	22,2%	3,33%	92,6%	4%

In statement two the majority of our data has been coded as negative, but not as vast as it was in the previous phase. As seen in the table, the number of news articles and comments coded under sceptical and positive have increased in this phase. By looking at the news articles coded under sceptical, we can estimate that the authors' sceptical tone perceived in the articles may have influenced the reader to perceive the incident sceptically. At this point, we can still conclude that consumers are not viewing UA in a favourable light. However, it is not as negative as it was in Phase 1.

	HUMO	BOY	RES	COM	HUMA	CORP	RAC	IND	INC	DAO	SU
Out of 300	16	76	41	153	86	66	1	9	11	2	7
% of 300	5,3%	25,3%	13,6%	51%	28,6%	22%	0,3%	3%	3,6%	0,6%	2,3%

We will now move on to look at the emerging themes found in the comments. As stated earlier, the columns each indicate one of the 11 emergent themes, using the shorthand for each of them. Below we will provide screenshots of comments representing the three dominant themes.

The three dominant themes in the comments were ‘communication critique’ (COM) with 51 percent, ‘humanity’ (HUMA) with 28,6 percent and ‘boycott’ (BOY) with 25,3 percent. The same three themes were also dominant in the comments to the first statement.

It is interesting to see that over half of the consumers’ comments (51%) were coded under the same theme, COM, but for now, we cannot conclude anything from this, just observe it.

Based on the dominant themes above, we will now move on to the qualitative part of our document analysis. We will start by introducing comments coded under the three dominant themes, following by including examples of comments coded under the themes ‘resignation’ (RES) and ‘corporate culture’ (CORP), as these are the ones that have increased the most from the previous phase.

In the following comment COM is expressed:



FB 191

Tiffany implies that the statement written by UA does not seem sincere by referring to it as “[t]his is a result of the 115K negative comments yesterday”. She believes that UA only posted this statement because of the negative feedback they have received the day before, together with their market position; “the one billion dollar loss in market value”. Tiffany’s expectation to UA’s communication has not been met, and she seems disappointed in the way UA that handled this situation by saying “not an actual belief that United has done something wrong”. Moreover, this last sentence indicates that she does not accept the statement as being an apology for the incident.

The next comment is also coded under the theme COM:



TW 152

Here, Chris comments on how UA's CEO, Oscar Munoz, seems biased in the way he communicates: "[h]e's sorry or he supports what happened?". Chris is referring to an email Oscar sent to his employees (cf. 3 Context Chapter), with the words "[t]he day before he said he stood behind the employees". This shows that Chris does not only criticise UA's social media communication but also communication shared elsewhere. Though it is interesting to note that he blames UA for the violated removal of Dr Dao, "the employees", which indicates that Chris is not fully up to date knowing that it was not UA employees who carried out the actual physical removal of Dr Dao (cf. 3 Context Chapter). Another observation is his use of "horror", as it refers to UA's statement calling the incident a "truly horrific event" (cf. Appendix 9). The use of quotation marks around the word 'horror', shows that Chris does not accept this word to be an appropriate way to address the incident.

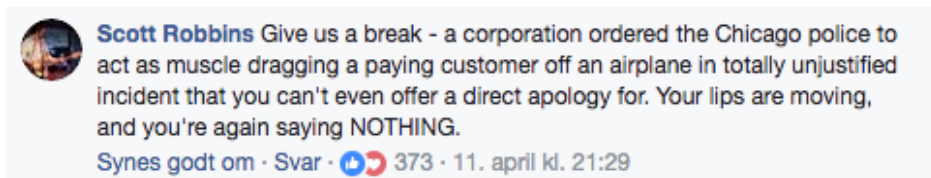
In this positive reception the COM theme is also represented:



TW 170

It is interesting to get a positive comment to see what the minority of the commenter's think about UA's communication toward this second statement. In this comment, Stuart expresses acceptance towards UA's statement by saying, "[f]inally, @united seem to get it". By using the word "finally," it indicates that Stuart did not accept the first statement posted by UA, which means that he believes that a change in the way UA communicates has changed.

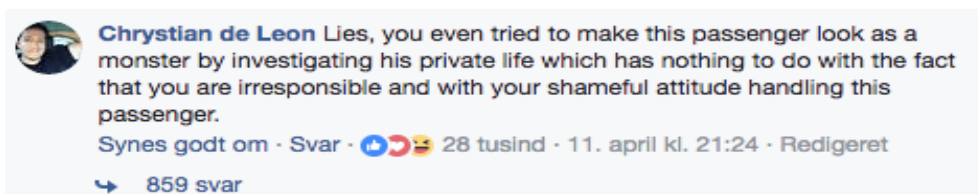
We will now introduce a comment expressing both themes COM and HUMA:



FB 210

In this negative reception of UA's statement, Scott is judging UA's way of handling the incident by saying "a corporation ordered the Chicago police to act as muscle dragging a paying customer off an airplane". In this sentence, the theme HUMA is expressed, together with the word "unjustified", which he uses in connection with the incident. It is important to notice that Scott knows that UA did not physically remove Dr Dao, but still believes that UA is to blame for the removal as they were the ones ordering it. The other theme represented in this comment is the COM, where Scott denotes, "you can't even offer a direct apology", indicating that he does not accept the statement as being an apology for what happened. He also criticises UA's communication implicit in the last sentence stating, "[y]our lips are moving, and you're again saying NOTHING". This is a common phrase used to emphasise that a person is speaking, but that the words coming out has no meaning and/or are lies.

The next comment is also coded under the COM and HUMA themes:

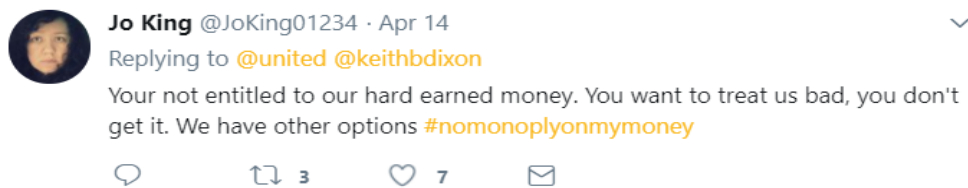


FB 151

Chrystian's comment is a negative reception where the coded COM theme is expressed immediately in the first word by saying, "[l]ies", directly accusing Oscar Munoz of not being sincere with the things he communicates. The last part of Chrystian's comment signifies the HUMA theme in his word choice of "you even tried to make this passenger look like a monster by investigating his private life" and "your shameful attitude", which shows that Chrystian believes that UA is inhumane in the way they have treated the passenger, even after the incident. The part where Chrystian says, "investigating his private life", refers to an article

brought by The Courier-Journal (cf. contextual chapter) about Dr Dao's past. As this comment shows, it is clear that Chrystian thinks that it was UA who was responsible for writing the article, and it seems that a lot of other users think the same, as the comment has received 28,000 likes. This accusation is of course not good for a company's reputation and puts UA in an even more unfavourable light, than before.

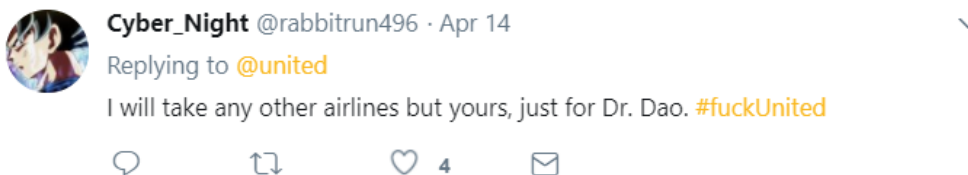
In the following comment HUMA is represented again, together with the BOY theme:



TW 211

In this comment, the HUMA theme is represented in the line, "treat us bad". Jo states that if UA "want to treat us bad, you don't get it", meaning that if UA does not want to treat its costumers in what Jo believe is an appropriate way, then she will take her "hard earned money" and spend it elsewhere. By using the phrase "hard earned money", instead of just 'money', Jo somehow finds it necessary to state that she will not spend something that she has worked hard to get on a service that treats its customers poorly. Consumers have multiple opportunities to chose between different companies. If that consumer is not satisfied with a certain company, it has the choice of another, as Jo indicates by saying, "[w]e have other options". This implicitly expresses the theme BOY and is why a company always should seek to meet the consumers' expectations, which is clearly not what UA does, according to Jo.

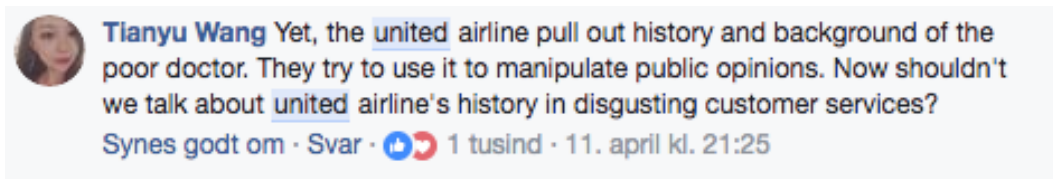
In the next comment the theme BOY is expressed more explicitly:



TW 203

In this negative comment, Cyber_Night indicates an intention to boycott UA by stating, “I will take any other airline but yours”. His intention to boycott is a result of his support for the passenger, as he states “just for Dr Dao”, which indicates that Cyber_Night feels an urge to express his sympathy for Dr Dao by taking action.

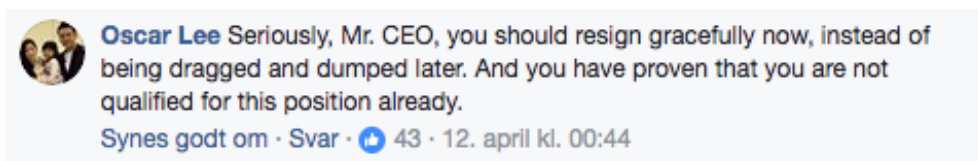
We will now move on to the CORP theme, which is not one of the dominant themes in this document analysis, but instead a theme that has increased a lot from the previous phase.



FB 194

Tianyu refers to the article written of Dr Dao’s past (cf. 3 Context Chapter), as one of the other commenters above by saying, “united airlines pull out history and background of the poor doctor”. This indicates that also she believes that UA is responsible for the written article, which adds further negative perception towards the company. Tianyu draws on the article of Dr Dao to talk about UA’s history of what she believes is “disgusting customer service”, which represents the CORP theme. This is also reflected in UA’s prior crisis history (cf. contextual chapter), where UA has had a numerous of other crisis or instances of controversies. This can be very bad for UA’s reputation, and as consumers continuing to bring up previous incidents every time a new one occurs, it just adds more fuel to the fire, resulting in a continuing spiral of consumers perceiving the company in a negative way.

The next example is also a comment that does not represent the dominant themes, but instead expresses the two most increased themes coded under CORP and RES.



FB 297

In this negative reception of a comment, Oscar says, “you have proven that you are not qualified for this position”, which is coded under the theme CORP. Oscar feels that the CEO, Oscar Munoz, does not live up to how a CEO is expected to behave. Furthermore, the commenter implies what we have coded as RES, as he states, “MR. CEO [...] should resign”, which he also relates this the incident with Dr Dao by saying “instead of being dragged and dumped”. By stating that Oscar Munoz should resign by referring to the incident in that way, the commenter is mocking the way the incident occurred.

A comment coded under the three themes BOY, COM and RES, will now be introduced:



TW 167

Ariel criticises UA’s communication by commenting, “[t]his should have been your FIRST statement”. He believes that this second statement is better than UA’s first statement, but does not understand why UA did not choose to post this as the first statement. It is interesting to see that Ariel comments at the time of the statement by saying, “[i]t took you over 24 hours to say this?”. Obviously, he was not satisfied with UA’s response from the previous day (like many others, as we established in phase 1), but somehow it seems that he accepts this statement more as an apology. Furthermore, this failure in communication from UA’s side makes Ariel call for the resignation of Oscar Munoz declaring “[y]ou should #resign”, which presents the RES theme in this comment. The last theme stated in this comment is in the last sentence where Ariel uses the hashtag in “#BoycottUnitedAirlines”. So even though it seems that he accepts this statement by UA to be more of an apology than the previous statement, he still seems upset over the way UA has handled the communication and therefore wants Oscar Munoz replaced, together with the call for a boycott of the company. This indicates that if a customer believes that the company took a wrong decision, it is difficult to change this negative perception of the company, even if the company is starting to do ‘the right thing’.

We will now relate our document analysis of Phase 2 to our theoretical framework. We have presented examples of comments representing our three dominant themes: COM, HUMA and BOY, but also given examples of CORP and RES, which are the two themes that have increased the most since the second statement in Phase 1. As we already related our relevant theory to the same three themes in the previous phrase, we will only elaborate on them if we have discovered something new regarding the comments under this phrase. Our focus will therefore also include the two other theories, CORP and RES.

Compared to the first statement analysed in Phase 1, in which no positive COM comments were found, there are two positive comments made as a response to statement 2. These represent the theme COM. One of them is presented above. The vast majority is still negative, which shows that there is very little change in how consumers perceive UA's communication –negatively. Some of the commenters comment on other responses made by UA outside their social media platforms stating “[t]he day before he said he stood behind the employees” (TW 152), referring to an email sent to employees. This shows that McQuail's (2010) claim that new media have become entrenched in daily life, by finding information and checking the news (39) and thereby gaining more knowledge, is quite fitting in this situation. However, some of the critique of UA's communication is also a lack of knowledge, as commenters say that UA was responsible for the exposure of Dr Dao's past saying, “you even tried to make this passenger look as a monster by investigating his private life” (FB 151), when, in fact, it was another newspaper that brought this article.

In Phase 1, we related the HUMA theme to the ethical consumer and to the expectations of acceptable behaviour from a company. In this phase, we build upon this and concentrate more on Giddens' concept of creating and recreating a narrative (1991, 100), which we have related to consumption in our theoretical section. Commenters have commented on the incident by describing it as “unjustified” (FB 210) and “shameful attitude” (FB 151). In doing so, existing customers of UA may choose not to use their service, if they perceive UA to be an unethical organisation, and this does not correspond with how the customers want to project themselves.

The theme BOY was related to our theoretical framework through Hirschman's concept of exit and voice, in which we concluded that the commenters believe their exit will result in revenue loss for UA and that the criticism expressed in declarations of boycotting will influence the company. This is also represented in the comments to statement two explicitly by saying "I will take any other airline but yours" (TW 203), and implicitly "[w]e have other options" (TW 211). We will not further address the BOY theme in this phase, as we have already referred to the relevant theory in relation to this in Phase 1.

Instead, we will now focus on our two new themes and draw relevant theory towards these. CORP themes are coded if a commenter in some way comments on UA's corporate service, including policies, the customer service, behaviour of employees, etc., which is exemplified by this comment: "disgusting customer service" (FB 194). As Cornelissen (2017, 36) emphasises, new media constitute both opportunities and challenges for organisations as consumers now are more like active participants in communication rather than passive audiences. This means that content about a given organisation is no longer just produced and disseminated by the organisation. Instead, consumers now have the means, the opportunity and sometimes the motive to create and share content about an organisation. This content can be both positive and negative. This is shown through the negative coded comments to statement 2 within the CORP theme, like when a commenter says "disgusting customer service" (FB 194) or "you [the CEO] have proven that you are not qualified for this position" (FB 297). The latter comment can also be said to represent the RES theme, which is coded if a consumer somehow indicates a wish or demand for someone to resign or be fired. In both the comments shown as examples the RES theme is very explicit stating by saying "you [the CEO] have proven that you are not qualified for this position" (FB 297) and "[y]ou should #resign" (TW 167).

5.2.2. RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

We will now move on to the organisational perspective – the second part of Phase 2 – by introducing a rhetorical analysis of the second statement. Once again, we begin by analysing the forms of appeal utilised in the statement to examine the persuasive nature of the text.

This second statement is very different from the first one, both regarding length, but also in terms of the use of the rhetorical appeals. We argue that UA is mostly using the appeal form *ethos* in this statement, which is already a change from the last statement as that only included *ethos* very briefly. The same way of using *ethos* appears in this statement like in the previous one as seen in the heading “United CEO Oscar Munoz” (line 1). In contrast to the first statement, this statement only refers to Munoz’ title as CEO once. The salutation of this statement is much more personal, using simply “[s]incerely, Oscar” (lines 15-16). In the first statement, he used his title as CEO. The personal salutation combined with the many self-mentions (I, we, our) indicate an attempt at sincerity that the last one did not. We have further established elements within the rhetorical persuasion taken from Higgins and Walker’s framework. All the ones mentioned in the following go under the appeal of *ethos* until differently is stated. Together with the use of the already mentioned pronouns, one of the rhetorical appeals that appear in this statement is *similitude*, which means appealing to similarities between the sender and the audience. This is expressed through phrases such as “all of us” (line 3), “I share” (line 4) and “[I]ike you” (line 5). This is meant to signify a mutual understanding of the incident. An interesting observation is an amount of *self-criticism* used in the statement, e.g., “I’m sorry” (line 1), “[w]e will fix this” (line 1-2), “my deepest apologies for what happened” (line 5), “we will do better” (line 14). This means that Munoz admits that UA has done something wrong and is honest about it. Also interestingly, there is a development in the way Oscar apologises. In the previous statement, Munoz apologised for the ‘re-accommodation’ of four customers, whereas in this statement he explicitly apologises for the incident, to “the customer forcibly removed” (line 6), and to the other “customers aboard” (line 6). This indicates that UA has adjusted their communication, expressed through accepting responsibility for the incident.

The last element we observed within *ethos* is *inclination to succeed*, which we observe in sentences like: “we will work to make it right” (line 8), “[i]t’s never too late to do the right thing” (line 9), “fix what’s broken so this never happens again” (line 10), and “I promise you we will do better” (line 14). These expressions stress how actions will be taken to somehow ‘make it right’.

The next rhetorical appeal form we will analyse in the statement is *pathos*. We see the element of *metaphor* has been used to talk about the incident by saying, “fix what’s broken” (line 10). With this, Munoz expresses an understanding of what some of the consumers are seeking – policy changes, so this kind of incident does not happen again.

We also consider the classical Greek rhetorical concepts we find in the statement. Opposite to the last statement in the previous phase, we argue that the *kairos* of this statement is off by approximately 24 hours, as the content of this communication should have been the first statement, something also expressed in some of the comments above criticising UA’s communication. The *phronesis* is, on the other hand, more appropriate. The statement addresses the issues head-on rather than passively hedge. The vast amount of ethos used in this statement would mean that consumers perceiving Munoz to be a credible man would perceive the second statement as much more sincere.

The second statement used a lot more elements than the first. We also see the use of *eunoia*, in how UA uses specific words that consumers can relate to, e.g. “customer [was] forcibly removed” (line 6). However, this is not shown in our document analysis in which 92,6 percent of the commenters were negative towards the statement, which might indicate that the commenters still perceive UA in negatively. In the last phase, we concluded the *kairos* of the situation was gone, not because the statement was late, but because UA communicated the wrong thing at what could have been the right time. In this phase, we conclude that UA communicated the right thing at the wrong time, as this should have been the one presented a day earlier.

We will now analyse the rhetorical situation by using Burke’s pentad with the five constituent elements: 1) *act*, 2) *scene*, 3) *agent*, 4) *agency*, and 5) *purpose*. In the previous phase, we concluded that only three of the five elements of the pentad were more or less explicitly addressed (*act*, *scene*, *purpose*). In this second statement, four out of the five elements are represented: *act*, *scene*, *agent*, and *purpose*. First of all, the *act* is described five times in the statement (lines 3-7), one of them as a “truly horrific event” (line 3). By addressing the incident as ‘horrific’, it seems as UA is using the words of how the commenters have perceived the incident, and have replaced their own word choice (re-accommodate) from the

first statement to address the commenters' perspective instead. Another way UA refers to the act is by saying that a "customer [was] forcibly removed" (line 6). Again it looks like UA has changed communication strategy in order to appease their customers. However, as already mentioned, UA use these words to persuade the audience by the use of *eunoia*, which we argue is a more appropriate way of addressing the act than in the previous statement.

The next element, *scene*, is denoted in lines 3 and 5 as "on this flight", which indicates the setting of the *act*. Furthermore, the *agent* that is the person responsible for the *act* is seen explicitly in the note of "we take full responsibility" (line 8). Here there is no question of what is meant as it states it very clearly.

Finally, the last element addressed in the statement is *purpose*, which tells something about why that *act* was carried out. This is found in the text in a very implicit way by saying "we are going to fix what's broken" (line 10). The word 'broken' refers to the incident in terms of that some policies were followed, which was why, according to UA, the incident happened. These policies, which are elaborated on in lines 11-12, will now be changed, so they can prevent other incidents at the one that happened on Flight 3411.

Last, we will mention the element of the pentad that is not present in the statement, which is the *agency*. This element is the instrument used to perform the *act*, which in this case would be the police officers that removed Dr Dao from his seat. We argue that UA does not mention them in the statement in order to not blame someone else for fulfilling the orders instructed by UA's employees. According to Coombs (2015), this is called scapegoating (147), which should always be avoided by companies in a crisis communication situation.

We view this statement as a response to the double crisis that resulted from the unsuccessful communication of the first statement.

We will move on to the next part of the organisational perspective to relate our findings to Coombs' SCCT. We will start by considering if some of Coombs' response strategies are 'present' in the statement, and if so, which ones. As we have already concluded in the rhetorical analysis, this statement differs a lot from the previous one, in which we expect to see some changes in the use of strategies. As already addressed in the rhetorical analysis,

Oscar Munoz apologises in various ways in this statement, and one of them reads as follows: “I deeply apologize” (line 6). The strategy that best exemplifies this excerpt, together with the other quotes expressing a form of apology, is the *apology* strategy (cf. crisis communication chapter). From these quotes, it is clear that UA takes responsibility for the incident, which is nearly consistent with the way Coombs suggest the response strategy should be used. According to Coombs, this strategy indicates that an organisation takes full responsibility for a crisis while at the same time asking for forgiveness. However, this is not the case here, as Munoz does apologise, but he does not ask for forgiveness. Moreover, based on the responses from the consumers, in which COM was coded as a dominant theme, it seems as the customers still do not accept this ‘apology’.

In terms of establishing the crisis type, we think that UA has changed the view on how they understand their crisis situation. They are now operating within the preventable cluster which, according to Coombs, notes a high level of reputational threat and is now resembling the crisis type of *organisational misdeed with injuries*. This crisis type is a result of that “stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur” (Coombs 2007, 168).

This view on the crisis situation from UA’s perspective is in accordance with our analysis of the users on social media’s comments. As already stated in the first part of phase 2, consumers are still very critical towards this second statement and still perceives it in a negatively way (92, 6%), which indicates that the strategy did not work according to plan.

5.2.3. PARTIAL CONCLUSION

In this second phase, we analysed both consumer reactions to statement 2, as well as the statement itself. As such, we have analysed the crisis from both a consumer perspective (document analysis, both quantitative and qualitative) and an organisational perspective (rhetorical analysis). Like in the previous phase, we have once again found that consumers are almost entirely negative towards UA’s second crisis communication effort in this phase. The three dominant themes (COM, HUMA, and BOY) were analysed, revealing how consumers’ trust was still broken and that consumers still perceived the crisis, as well as the

communication, as something unethical or unjust. We use McQuail's (2010) claim that new media is entrenched in daily life to gain more knowledge, as reflected in the 'communication critique', where the users comment on other things related to UA's communication, such as the email sent to employees. We also relate Giddens' (1991) concept of creating and recreating a narrative to another dominant theme, 'humanity'. Consumers who do not perceive UA as an ethical organisation, and thereby chose to boycott them, dissociate themselves from UA in the comments. In the 'corporate culture' theme, we talked about Cornelissen (2017), who emphasises that new media constitute both opportunities and challenges for organisations. In our rhetorical analysis, we concluded that UA communicated the possibly right thing at the wrong time, indicating that this statement should have been the first one, which is also echoed by consumers. Furthermore, the analysis established that the vast amount of ethos should have resulted in well-received communication, even though this was not the case as seen in the document analysis. Moreover, the rhetorical analysis established that this second statement could have been a successful communication in the way that UA addressed the elements of *act*, *scene*, *agent*, and *purpose*. According to Coombs' strategies, UA seems to be using the most appropriate strategy according to the crisis situation. However, consumers still perceive UA in a negative way, as seen from their comments.

5.3. PHASE 3

As mentioned, Phase 3 encompasses statements 3, 4, and 5 even though these statements are posted individually on different dates and as such have three different comment sections. However, as they represent parts of one whole, we analyse the statements together in this phase. Phase 3 is overall designed along the general lines of our analysis model, but with slight differences from Phase 1 and 2 as a result of it involving three statements and associated comments rather than a single one.

First of all, we first present the different statements across the platforms and note differences and similarities. Then, we present the quantitative findings (reception and themes) for each of the three statements' consumer comments, as done in Phase 1 and 2, here just with three sets of tables to reflect the three comment sections. We then compare these three sets of tables with each other; if any of the quantitative findings of the three comment

sections closely overlap, we collapse these into each other. We consider UA’s communication across these three dates as one whole, but consumers are met with the individual statements one by one, over a total of six days, which means that we cannot analyse the consumer comments as one whole. Doing so would potentially ignore developments over time. An exception to this is only possible if the overlap is very close – e.g. if comments for statements 2 and 3 are remarkably similar, resulting in no observable change or development. Having accounted for the major changes, we now begin.

Phase 3 takes its starting point in three statements posted by United Airlines on both FB and TW on respectively April 27, April 29 and May 1, 2017. Below we present screenshots of the three statements. Obviously, as we have collected from two platforms, we have present six screenshots – three from Twitter and three from Facebook. First up is statement 3, which was posted on both social media on April 27, 2017:

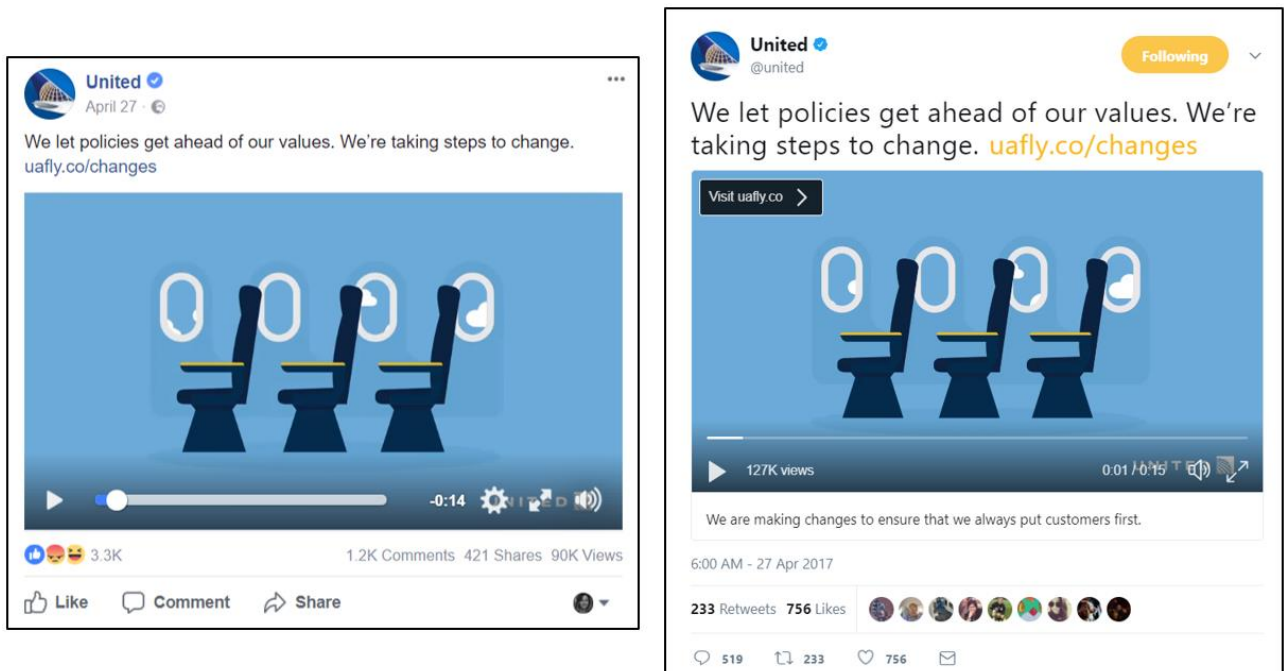


Figure 4: Statement 2 on Twitter (left) and Facebook (right)

Engagement numbers (e.g. comments and shares) have dropped dramatically. Across platforms, statement 3 received a total of 1719 comments. From the previous statement 2, this means a dramatic 96 percent decrease in comments. The drop from statement 1 to 2 was

quite significant at 66 percent, but a little less ‘free-fall’. The videos do, however, have a large number of views. In total, the video has been watched 217,000 times, indicating that it has probably reached more people than what the comment count reflects.

Based on these numbers, it seems that interest for the matter – and therefore the crisis – at this point is dwindling.

Statement 4 was posted two days later, April 29, on both sites as well:

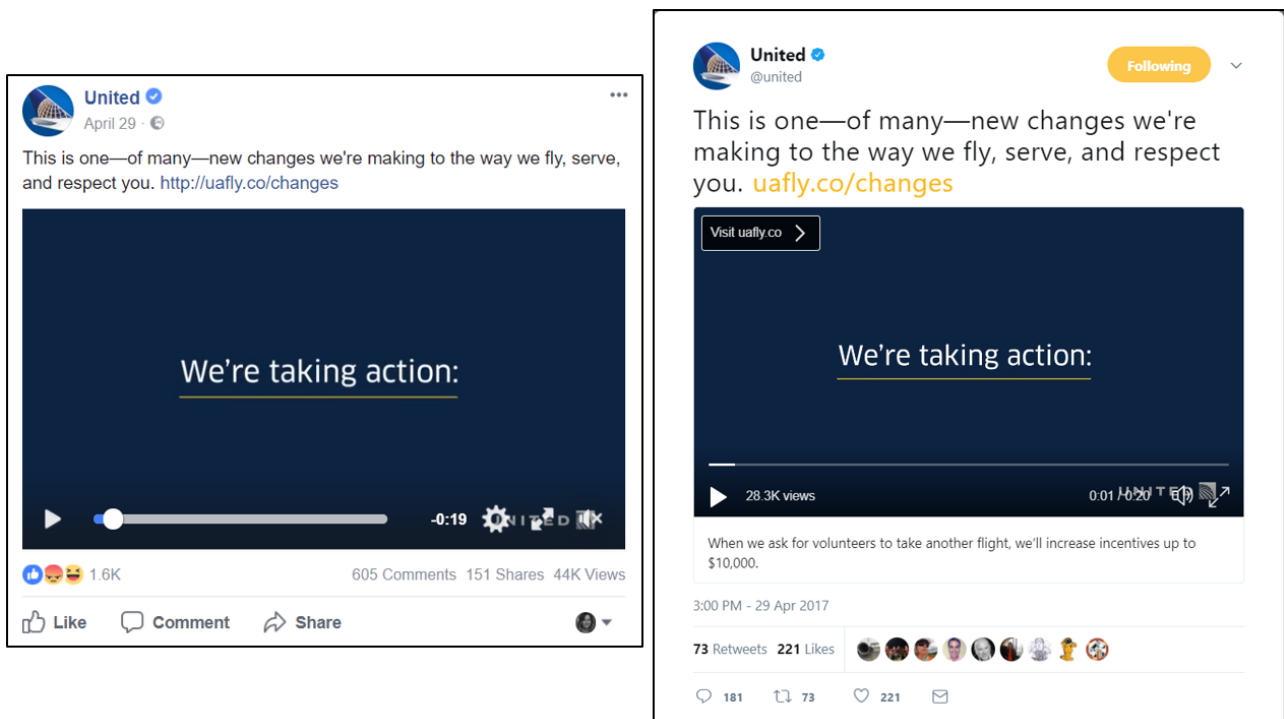


Figure 5: Statement 2 on Twitter (left) and Facebook (right)

Here we see a total of 786 comments, which amounts to a 54 percent decrease from statement 3. This is yet another quite significant drop in apparent consumer engagement and interest in the crisis. As in the previous, the view count of the videos – 72,300 views in total – is significantly larger the number of people who actively interact with the content. From this, it seems that the crisis may be dwindling even further.

Finally, statement 5 was posted May 1, again two days after the previous post.

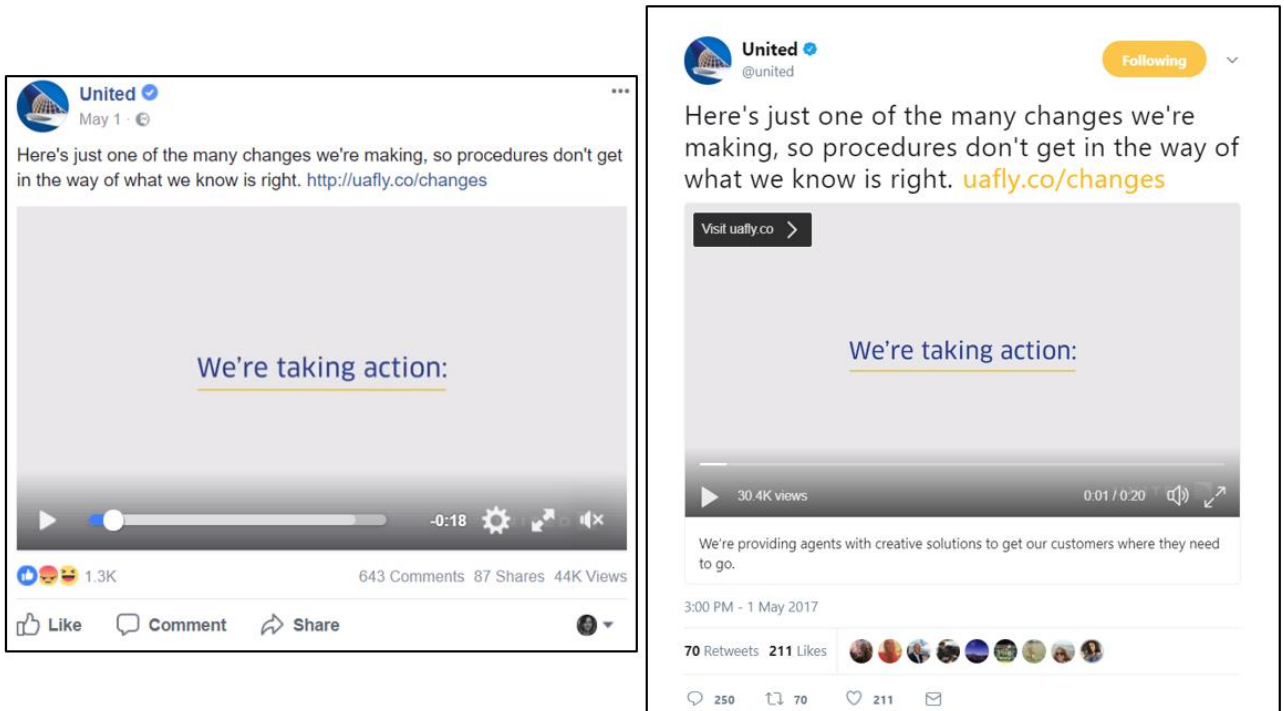


Figure 6: Statement 2 on Twitter (left) and Facebook (right)

In this final statement made by UA on their social media profiles FB and TW, we see a slight uptick in the total comment count compared to the last statement: 893 comments, equalling a slight 13 percent increase. Though slight, this is the only instance of a comment count deviating from the pattern of quite steep decreases. Considering the small size of the uptick, we do not think that it signifies a sudden renewed interest UA's handling of the crisis. Especially when compared to the first two statements, this uptick does not immediately seem to constitute more than a coincidence. We may, however, reach a better understanding of this deviation through the later rhetorical analysis of the actual content.

5.3.1. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

We start, as the other phases, by presenting the quantitative findings of the three statements (cf. Appendix 5 and 6). As mentioned, this part of analysis deviates slightly from Phases 1 and

2 in order to accommodate the larger pool of data. Below we provide two sets of tables, each presenting coding results of comments from statement 3, statement 4 and statement 5, respectively. As in the previous phases, each set includes one table for the reception coding (both news and comments) as well as a table depicting the themes coded in the comments. We conclude this presentation by concluding whether there is a close enough overlap between statements' comment sections, which would enable us to collapse those together. Below, we present in order of the statements, meaning that the reception and theme analysis for the comments collected on statement 3 is first up.

The results of the reception analysis corresponding to statement 3 are as follows:

NEWS			SOCIAL MEDIA		
Positive	Negative	Sceptical	Positive	Negative	Sceptical
7	26	25	69	201	27
12,1%	44,8%	43,1%	23%	67%	9%

As the table above shows, the negative reception is in the majority, here with 67 percent.

In terms of the 58 news articles during the timeframe, coding resulted in a slight majority count for negative. This indicates that news sources are still framing the crisis in a negative light, but the amount is a clear decrease from statement 2, in which 72 percent of news articles talked negatively about the incident. We see an increase in the more neutral positioning, which accounts for the significant change. Also, positive articles, mostly ones that quote the UA CEO, saw an increase during this period, but it is still the clear minority.

Reception of statement 3 on social media is 67 percent negative. While still a marked majority, it constitutes a significant drop from statement 2 in which 92,6 percent took a negative stance to UA's communication. Especially the positive reception saw a big increase from 3,3 percent positive reading of statement 2 to 23 percent for this statement 3. People are also expression more sceptical readings, which indicates that more consumers are 'on the fence' about the communication. While the negative coding is still the majority, this marked

increase in positive comments rather indicates that more consumers are accepting the new communication.

Now, we present a table of emergent themes coded in comments for statement 3.

	HUM O	BOY	RES	COM	HUM A	CORP	RAC	IND	INC	DAO	SU
Out of 300	11	32	5	80	23	159	1	9	6	12	52
% of 300	3,6	10,6%	1,6%	26,6%	7,6%	53%	0,3%	3%	2%	4%	17,3%

The above table shows the distribution of emergent themes. The dominant themes (marked with yellow) are CORP at more than half with 53 percent, followed by COM and then the theme ‘UA support’ (SU). This constitutes a big change from statement 2 comments, in which COM was the most dominant theme at 51 percent, followed by HUMA (28,6 percent) and BOY (25,3). Beyond the dominant themes, Phase 2 also looked at the RES theme as it constituted the most prominent change from Phase 1 at 13,6 percent.

In this case, RES has dropped significantly and is barely represented. As the most prominent increases happen to be in dominant themes, this part will not include a fourth theme in qualitative analysis. The themes that increased the most from statement 2 to 3 is CORP and SU, of which SU constitutes the biggest change in simply because it is an inherently positive theme (from UA’s perspective), as it is coded when commenters express support for UA. Instead, we include a quick look at two of the alternative codes, ‘industry’ (IND) and ‘Dao critique’ (DAO), of which IND has held steady, and DAO has seen an increase. To compare reception and emergent themes across the other statements in this phase, we do not launch the thematic analysis now, but after having presented all three quantitative results of receptions and themes.

Thus, we now turn our attention to the reception of statement 4, the results of which are as follows:

NEWS			SOCIAL MEDIA		
Positive	Negative	Sceptical	Positive	Negative	Sceptical
3	0	2	68	195	37
60%	0%	40%	22,6%	65%	12,3%

The numbers for news are very noticeable in this timeframe (April 28 – April 30) in which we found five articles across our four news sites. Surprisingly, in this period we see no ‘negative’ codes, but rather a 60 percent positive-sounding news reporting about UA and the incident. The positive articles reported on the changes UA were planning to implement at this point (to be addressed in the rhetorical analysis) (cf. Appendix X (news excel)), and they let UA do a lot of the talking through quotes. In this period, we have to conclude that the majority of news articles are positive towards UA. Compared to news articles during statement 3, this is, of course, a drastic change as the slight majority previously was the ‘negative’ code. For now, we take this result with a pinch of salt.

Statement 4 did approximately as well as statement 3. ‘Negative’ and ‘sceptical’ swap 2 percentage points, but overall the comments show a very similar reception. The positive stance is then maintaining its position from statement 3.

Moving on to the emergent themes coded in the comments for this statement, we get these results (table below):

	HUM O	BOY	RES	COM	HUM A	CORP	RAC	IND	INC	DAO	SU
Out of 300	21	27	3	74	25	141	2	9	11	8	58
% of 300	7%	9%	1%	24,6%	8,3%	47%	0,6%	3%	3,6%	2,6%	19,3%

This table depicting emergent themes exhibits, like the reception table, remarkable similarity to the results from the previous statement 4. Dominant themes are identical to the previous.

People are then not only receiving the communication similarly but also including the same themes in their comments to the new statement. The distribution is very close to the previous table. We see slightly less COM, slightly less CORP and slightly more SU. Such a close overlap yields no interesting changes to analyse; as such, we collapse the comments (and their codings) from statements 3 and 4 into one for further qualitative analysis, wherein we analyse examples of comments coded with the dominant themes. Next, we present results from comments on statement 5.

Finally, news during statement 5 and readings of the same indicated as follows:

NEWS			SOCIAL MEDIA		
Positive	Negative	Sceptical	Positive	Negative	Sceptical
0	0	1	23	249	28
0	0	100%	7,6%	83%	9,3%

The timeframe of this statement is only one day, and we only found one article. As such, it is difficult to extract much other than it may support the previous, in which we saw a shift from the negative presentation as a majority. Consumers, however, seem to have performed what may accurately be described as a complete about-face. We see a dramatic return to a marked 'negative' majority, which makes this more reminiscent of results in of Phases 1 and 2 than the previous in this phase. While the receptions of statements 3 and 4 seemed to indicate a shift to the more positive and sceptical stances, consumers' reception of this final statement invalidates this could-have-been positive continuous development for UA. As mentioned, statement 5 saw a 13 percent uptick in comments compared to statement 4. It would seem that this increase did not indicate a new, positive interest, but rather a return of consumers who, once again, did not view UA in a positive light.

Next, we look at the emerging themes found in the comments of statement 5 (below).

	HUM O	BOY	RES	COM	HUM A	CORP	RAC	IND	INC	DAO	SU
Out of 300	17	35	5	104	38	153	2	2	18	6	15
% of 300	5,6%	11,6%	1,6%	34,6%	12,6%	51%	0,6%	0,6%	6%	2%	5%

The drastic change in reception is also reflected in the themes present in the comments. In this, the dominant themes are CORP (51 percent), COM (34,5 percent), and HUMA (12,6 percent). While CORP and COM are generally the same as in the previous, these two have likely changed angle due to the shift to the negative reception. As mentioned, these two themes encompass both negative and positive assertions about UA communication and corporate culture, respectively. The shift to the negative, while the same themes are kept, indicates this shift. Also, UA support fell drastically, now only constituting 5 percent. While BOY has kept steady at around 9-10 percent, we do see a slight increase here, though the shift in distribution mainly goes from SU to HUMA. This renewed focus on the HUMA theme is interesting as it also emphasises a shift back to reception and themes more alike statement 1 and 2. In 3 and 4, HUMA accounted for around 8 percent.

As we have seen, comments in response to statements 3 and 4 show remarkable similarity, as well as a shift towards a more positive reception. As mentioned, these two are now collapsed into one. Conversely, comments from statement 5 bore more similar to the previous two phases. As such, we now operate with two different ‘groupings’ for all of the consumer comments made on the encompassed three statements: 1) collapsed comments of statements 3 and 4 (with a total of 600 comments exhibiting the same dominant themes CORP, COM, and SU), and 2) comments made on statement 5 (total of 300 comments, the dominant themes of which are CORP, COM and HUMA).

With this, we now proceed to the qualitative textual analysis, in which we analyse comments that reflect the dominant themes as well as some outliers. As in Phases 1 and 2, we included examples of the themes present in the two groupings.

We start with the first grouping, which is both statement 3 and 5 comments. Inspired by the dominant themes, we now present examples of those. Again, multiple themes may be apparent in a single comment. For example, the comment below includes three themes:



FB 376

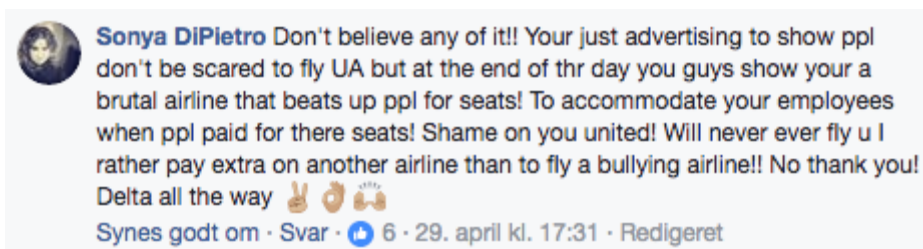
Obviously, this comment is a positive one. The themes expressed here are CORP, SU, and DAO. CORP is a dominant theme in these newly collapsed comment sections. Deb is expressing, in accordance with the positive reception, a positive CORP theme. She expresses how she has always felt respected and gives examples of “amazing customer service”. By starting with “I [heart] United”, she is also firmly situating herself in support of UA, which is why we found the theme SU. The support is firmly based on her own nice experiences with the company. Also represented is the DAO theme, which is seen in the last sentence “How can one sue-happy obstinate passenger change your travel plans is beyond me!!”. In this, and by calling him obstinate, Deb is essentially placing the fault of the incident on Dr Dao and that he was in the wrong. By calling him “sue-happy” she is also expressing that she does not think that Dr Dao’s lawsuit was legitimate or just, which further indicates that she did not see the incident as something essentially horrible. This is echoed in her incomprehension for other commenters’ boycotting declarations, expressed in both “if all of you really fly other airlines” and “How can [Dr Dao] change your travel plans”. Deb is strictly in favour of UA and expresses huge loyalty to the brand which is based on her own positive experiences.

Next, we see an example of themes COM and RAC (below):



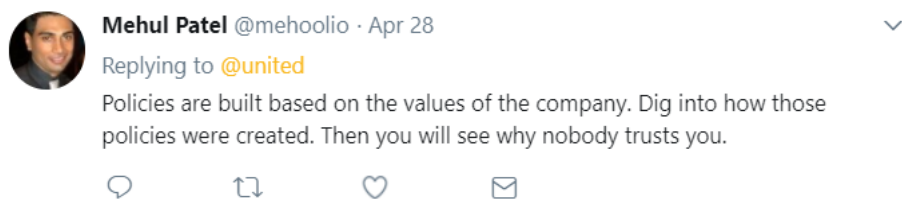
TW 571

The RAC theme is rarely expressed, and here it is used in tandem with the dominant theme COM to express a very clear negative reception of UA's communication. Here, COM is expressed with the words "Save it", which seems to mean 'be quiet' or 'I am not willing to listen to you'. Jack then qualifies that by calling UA a "racist biatch", indicating that he may be among some of the people that doubted that Dr Dao's selection for rebooking was not random, but rather an expression of racism towards Asians.



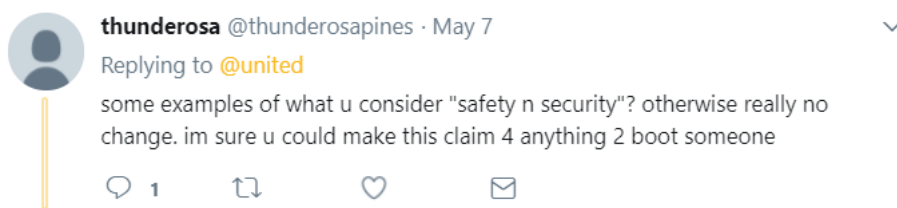
FB 512

Sonya expresses a very clear negative reception of UA's communication here. The dominant theme COM is expressed, as well as both HUMA and BOY. She explicitly states that she does not believe UA's communication, which in this case is the announcements of policy changes, which she calls "advertising". In doing so, she expresses that she does not think that anything has changed, merely the rhetoric: "at the end of [the] day you guys show [you're] a brutal airline". HUMA is expressed in this, as well as in both "Shame on you United!" and "bullying airline". By saying "To accommodate your employees when [people] paid for [their] seats", Sonja also seems to be commenting on a breach of the exchange relationship between customers and companies, which is followed up with the "shame on you". She also expresses BOY in the very clear "Will never ever fly [with you]", which is further emphasised by her claim that she would rather pay more to fly with another airline.



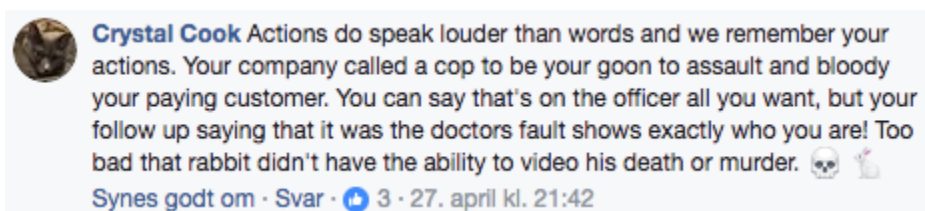
TW 416

This one is another negative reception, that clearly comments on UA's communication. It expresses both COM and CORP, two of the dominant themes. COM is expressed in his assertion that "Policies are built based on the values of the company", which is a direct rebuttal to UA's third statement which begins with the words: "We let policies get ahead of our values" (cf. Appendix 10, line 1). He critiques the corporate culture, as well as questions the communication, by implying that the policies mentioned do, in fact, reflect UA as they were created on the basis of their values.



TW 302

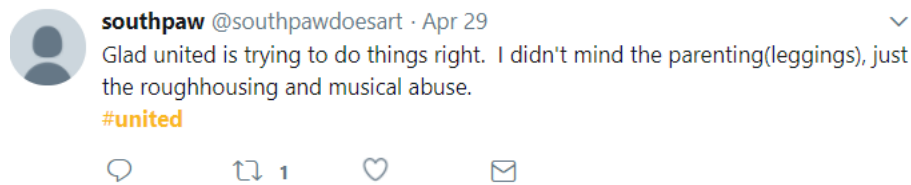
This comment expresses the dominant theme COM, and is coded as sceptical. The commenter is taking a sceptical stance in asking for a clarification of UA's exception "safety and security" (cf. Appendix 10, line 5). He criticises the communication for being vague, in essence, and expresses doubt that UA is actually making changes rather than just talking about them.



FB 396

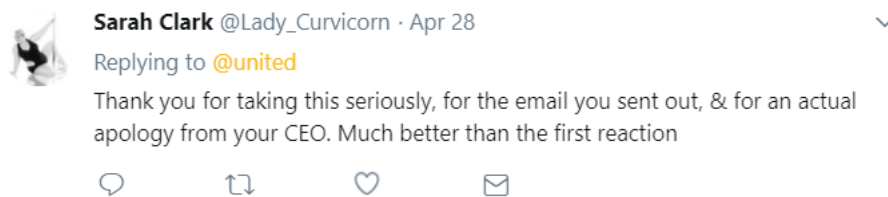
This comment expresses the dominant theme COM as well as HUMA and 'other incident' (INC). Crystal uses UA's words against themselves by saying "Actions do speak louder than words and we remember your actions". Throughout Phase 3, UA uses this phrase "actions speak louder than words" (cf. Appendix 9-12). Crystal refers to the airport police as "goons" for UA. She, like some others we have seen others emphasise that Dr Dao was a paying customer, indicating that it is not just the violence that is seen as unjust, but the instance of a company not respecting its customers who have entered they have entered into an equal exchange

relation with. This expresses our HUMA theme, along with “assault and bloody”, which morally condemns the violence. We also see a reference to another UA incident (INC), in which a rabbit that died while in UA care (cf. 3 Context Chapter).



TW 588

This comment also refers to other incidents (INC), as well as expresses the dominant theme COM and HUMO. The commenter is “glad united is trying to do things right”, which reflects both a positive reception and a positive stance towards the UA communication. He then goes on to say that he did not “mind” some UA incidents, but that this incident, as well as an incident with a guitar, were too much for him. “Musical abuse” refers to a previous incident in which a band’s guitar was broken, and “parenting(leggings)” refers to an incident in which two girls were refused boarding because of their clothes (cf. context chapter). By referring to the incident involving Dr Dao as ‘roughhousing’ and the broken guitar as “musical abuse”, he is expressing HUMO, if a slightly dark form of humour. However, in essence, the comment is positive and in favour of UA’s communicated changes.

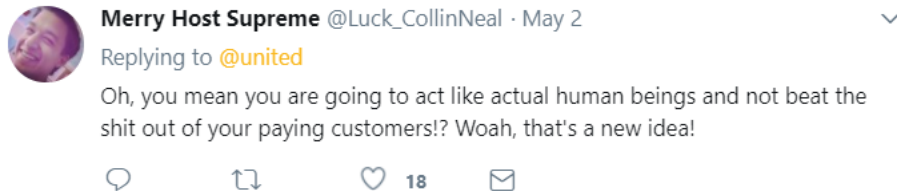


TW 347

This positive comment refers to an email sent to customers from UA (cf. contextual chapter), but also specifically relates to the social media communication. The dominant theme COM is represented in “Thank you [...] for an actual apology from your CEO. Much better than the first reaction”. Here, she is criticising the initial UA response to the crisis, but saying that UA

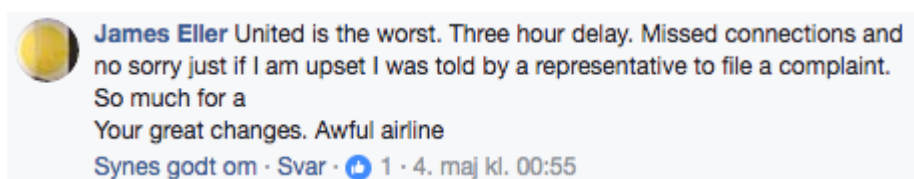
got it right by finally taking it seriously (policy changes), which also indicates that Sarah did not perceive UA to be taking the crisis seriously in the first response.

Next, we look at comments for statement 5.



TW 623

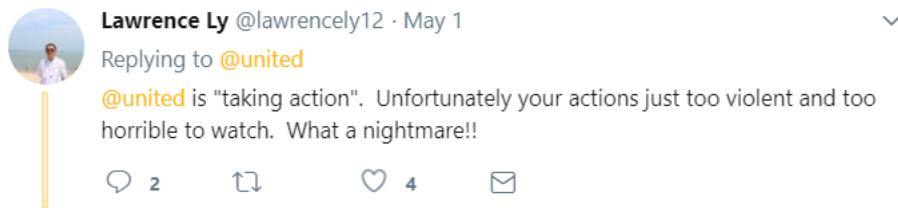
This negative comment uses a very sarcastic tone to evaluate UA's communication in statement 5. The comment expresses the dominant themes of COM and HUMA. The HUMA is especially apparent when he says "going to act like actual human beings and not beat the shit out of your paying customers", as it indicates an inhumane behaviour beforehand. This is also an expression of COM, especially when combined with the closing remark "Woah, that's a new idea!", which signifies that the commenter thinks UA's statement should be common sense and not something to be announced as a change. Again, the phrase "paying customer" appears, again seemingly as an intensifier in terms of the moral wrong of beating a person; as in, beating a paying customer is worse than beating anyone. This comment has been liked 18 times, indicating that people agreed with his evaluation.



FB 676

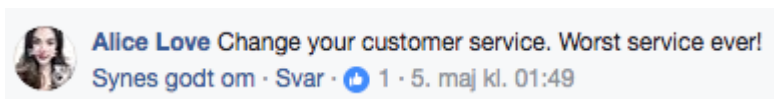
This comment is another example of a negative reception. It expresses dominant themes CORP and COM. CORP is expressed in his assessment of United as the worst and awful airline, and supported by his experience of customer service. He relates this, negatively, to the UA

statement: “So much for [your] great changes”, indicating that he now believes the changes outlined in UA’s communication is nothing but talk.



TW 702

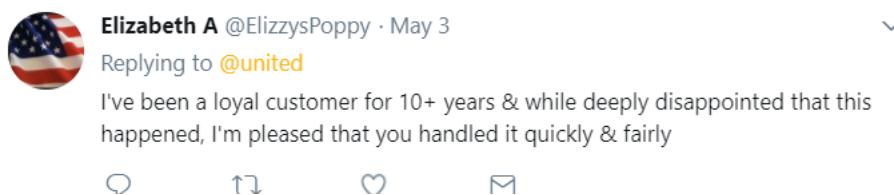
This negative comment reflects the dominant themes COM and HUMA. He directly quotes UA’s post with “@united is “taking action”” and uses it to condemn the company’s actions, which are the circumstances of Dr Dao’s forcible removal. HUMA is clearly expressed in his assessment of the incident as “just too violent and too horrible to watch”.



FB 630

This negative comment expresses the CORP theme. In response to the UA statement, it seems that she finds another area to be due for a change as well. CORP is essentially the whole comment.

One theme that saw a drastic decrease in these comments is SU. We do find examples that are incredibly supportive of UA, but they are ‘drowned out’ again by the uptick in negative comments. One such supportive comment is this:



TW 667

Elizabeth does not blindly support UA (SU) as we have seen some do, but in this positive comment she both indicates her loyalty to the company and that she thinks that the incident was handled “quickly and fairly”. This expresses COM. The comment also expresses HUM in “deeply disappointed” and “fairly”. The word ‘disappointed’ sound almost maternalistic, and ‘fairly’ indicate a weighing of the incident vs the efforts made by UA, which she found satisfactory.

Finally, we attempt to relate our findings of the document analysis to our theoretical framework. In the previous, we focused on the variously dominant themes of CORP, COM, SU and HUMA. We have also mentioned and seen examples of the themes HUMO, DAO, INC, RAC, and BOY. We only focus on the dominant themes. Because we have already extensively talked about HUMA and COM, we focus here on the SU theme that saw a significant uptick in statements 3 and 4.

SU is expressed in supportive comments directed at UA. These comments in some way either take UA’s side, express their satisfaction with the company or in some other way praise the company. Positive comments do not always include SU theme. According to Beck, risks can be “changed, magnified, dramatized or minimized within knowledge” (1997, 23). The risk of a flight being overbooked and the company rebooking consumers was the risk here in this case, an additional risk being the forceful methods for involuntary removal.

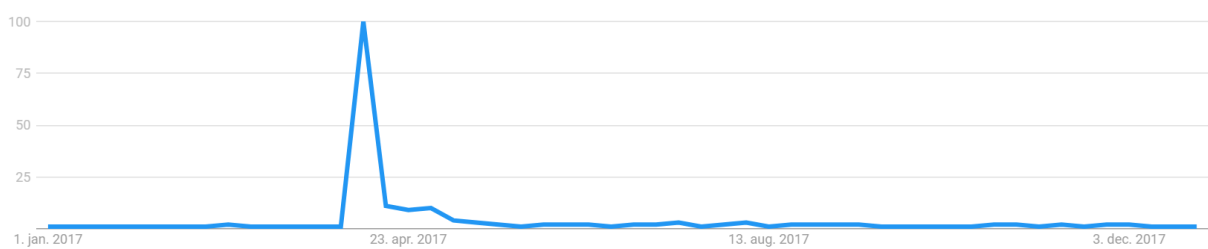


Figure 7. Source: Google Trends

This table shows interest over time for the search term ‘overbooking’ on Google in the US. The great spike in interest is mainly between the dates April 9 to April 15. This shows that people are researching the phenomenon of rebooking and depending on the news they find, they may draw some sort of conclusion about the incident. The risk of overbooking, and why

it is a part of the airline industry's modus operandi are addressed in a lot of our news articles, cf. Appendix 5. Consumers knowledge about and perception of the risk would be, according to Beck, "open to social definition and construction" (Ibid.) through mass media. Mediated experiences, according to Giddens, are a part of why we have so many choices in late modernity (1991, 84). Through our media, we can become direct audiences to seemingly remove events. If new information becomes available through mass media, our mediated experience also changes over time. We cannot comment on individual commenters' commenting patterns as we did not follow specific users, but such a thing could have enabled us to also consider reflexivity of consumer in the face of a complex situation that was both heavily covered by media and fiercely commented on social media. SU could have arisen as a result of consumers' reflexivity.

5.3.2. RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

We now move on to the second part of Phase 3: the organisational perspective, which is comprised of a rhetorical analysis of the last three statements. As mentioned in the methods chapter, we 'ignore' that fact that statements 3-5 are partially made in video-form. Statement 3 to 5 were posted end to end, two days apart each time. We analyse all three in this section, back to back, in terms of forms of appeal, relevant rhetorical concepts and the pentad. For statements 3-5, please refer to Appendices 10-12.

The three last statements are all quite short and succinct. They all have in common that they present new initiatives and changes in the company. The brevity could be a measure for holding consumers' attention on social media, where people often quickly scroll past posts.

Statement 3, posted April 27, is – like all the other statements – mainly using ethos appeals. This is done through the techniques of *self-criticism*, which "suggests the honesty of the organisational author" (Higgins and Walker 2012, 198) and *inclination to succeed*, which draw attention to "forecasts of future organisational success" (Ibid.). In statement 2, we saw a lot of self-criticisms. We see one in this third statement as well, in the very first sentence: "We let policies get ahead of our values" (line 1). This constitutes a clear self-criticism, while the

following “We’re taking steps to change” (line 1-2) indicate both an implicit self-criticism as well as inclination to succeed through the implementation of changes to the organisation.

Lines 3, 4 and 6 in statement 3 are all ethos expressed through *inclination to succeed*. We also see one instance of pathos in line 7, in which the metaphorical wording “actions speak louder than words” (which is more accurately an example of personification) may create identification between sender and receiver, which conveys that the sender understands and relates to audiences’ needs and values (Ibid.). This is repeated on all three statements. In statement 4 (cf. Appendix 11), we see an even clearer shift away from self-criticism, which was rampant in statement 2 and opened statement 3. Self-criticism makes a small return in statement 5 in which the first sentence reads “Here’s just one of the many changes we’re making, so procedures don’t get in the way of what we know is right” (Appendix 12, lines 1-3,). The latter part of this sentence is an implicit self-criticism – like in the first sentence of statement 3, but the rest is inclination to succeed. Inclination to succeed, which expresses ethos, is expressed in the nearly all of both statements 4 and 5. This shift from self-criticism to a more forward-looking inclination of success-ethos may mean that UA is now done with apologising and owning up to the mistake fully by making organisational changes to prevent it from happening again. They are trying to present a better version of themselves.

UA is seemingly responding to a lot of the criticism that they received from consumers for previous statements. UA has been receiving a lot of feedback directly from their audiences, which could be the reason why they are using the phrase “actions speak louder than words”, which is articulated in many of the consumer responses during the first two statements. For example, TW comments 35 and 183 (Appendix x, but included below for convenience) both use the phrase, though less directly, which may be something UA reacted to:



TW 35



Keegan Allen @KeeganAllen · 12 Apr 2017

Replying to @united

Sorry doesn't update planes, policies or customer service. You're done. Whole company needs reworking. Keep the sorry and fix with actions.

2 29 232

1 more reply

TW 183

We can relate this to the concept of eunoia, which is, e.g. expressed through word choices that are familiar to an audience and thus demonstrating to audiences that sender understands the audience (Helder 2015, 54). By utilising words that the consumers themselves use to describe what is lacking in the previous communication, UA may be attempting to create identification between them and consumers. While the reception was still primarily negative, we did see a significant uptick in the percentage of positive receptions and general support for UA both in response to statement 3 and 4. Based on the larger percentage of positive comments, we may also conclude that UA exhibited better phronesis, i.e. 'good sense'. This is also expressed through the first line of the statement, which acknowledges the issue and promises change. Of course, since the majority of comments are still negative at this point, we may consider if kairos is what is missing in this case. The statement is made 18 days after the incident occurred, and as mentioned, we see a dramatic drop in number of comments. If interest for the matter has gone down rapidly, and UA then posts something that consumers find too late, we may argue that they fan their own fire. TW comments 322, 327, 353 and 355 (Appendix x TW EXCEL) are a few of the comments that all say "too late", e.g. TW 322:



Mya Anderson @baywatch242000 · May 4

Replying to @united

Too little too late. There is nothing that turns me off more than the smug initial response of your CEO and staff. Nobody will ever forget.

29 232

TW 322

Moving on, we relate the statements to Burke's pentad. Regarding the pentad, we can see the first element, *act*, however implicitly. The act is described as "We let policies get ahead

of our values” in statement 3 (line 1), as “When we ask for volunteers to take another flight” in statement 4 (line 5) and as “(...) so procedures don’t get in the way of what we know is right” in statement 5 (lines 2-3). This is a very implicit way of talking about the incident, but it still refers clearly to it in the sense that they present it as something ‘wrong’ and, as in statement 4, a description of the situation that triggered the incident. The scene is also implicitly addressed in statement 3, line 4: “Once on board” and in statement 4, line 5: “take another flight”. These both which denotes the setting of the act. The third element of *agent* is expressed in all three statements. It lies in the pronouns, e.g. “WE let” and “WE’RE taking steps to change” in statement 3 (line 1) and “new changes WE’RE making” in statement 4 (line 1) as well as “one of the many changes WE’RE making” (line 1). This indicates that UA has taken full responsibility and that it is also their responsibility to change. The fourth element, *agency*, is not addressed in any of the statements. We argue this is because UA already identifies themselves as agent at this point, thus taking the blame. They were, however, not the ones physically doing the act, and so we argue that UA seem reluctant to implicate the police officers that constituted agency. The final element, purpose denotes the why. UA explains the why by ‘blaming’ on policies (statement 3, line 1) and procedures (statement 5, line 2).

In this part of the organisational perspective, we relate our findings so far to Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory. We start by attempting to relate the statements to Coombs’ response strategies to see if any are ‘present’.

Statements 3-5 build upon the sentiments expressed in Phase 2, and also extend them by explicitly stating how the company is changing itself. Coombs does not seem to include a crisis communication strategy that covers changes a business makes as a response to its mistake, only bolstering strategies that talk of past good deeds (Coombs 2007, 170). As such, we cannot directly relate a communication strategy to the actual communication. However, even if there is no explicit apology, we can still see that UA continues to attribute themselves with the full responsibility for the crisis, as they expressed in statement 2 with that apology strategy. In these last three statements, we implicitly observe a continued apology: In statement 3 (cf. Appendix 10), line 1-2 reads as follows: “We let policies get ahead of our values. We’re taking steps to change”. Together with line 1-3 in statement 4 (cf. Appendix 11)

and lines 1-3 in statement 5 (cf. Appendix 12), this reveals a continuation of statement 2, but extended with changes made to the organisation. However, Coombs clearly states that an apology strategy includes an apology, and as such, this form of communication is not represented in Coombs' list of possible strategies. Again, this indicates that the SCCT theory and its many components may simplify crises and crisis communication to a degree.

As such, it is not possible to use the SCCT to identify strategies utilised in these last statements. Maybe because Coombs does not consider this form of communication as crisis communication, or perhaps because the SCCT offers very simplistic views of type, strategies and causality. Therefore, we are also unable to directly relate the statements to a perceived crisis type, as no strategies of crisis communication, only according to Coombs' lists, are 'present'. However, as the statements build on statement 2 – which include very overt apologies – we may conclude that the last three statements also reflect the *apology* strategy, and also the *organisational misdeed with injuries* crisis type.

5.3.3. PARTIAL CONCLUSION

Phase 3 analysed consumer reactions to statements 3-5 as well as the statements themselves, representing both the consumer perspective and the organisational perspective. We saw an attempt at alignment with consumers from UA's side in that they tried to adopt language that consumers had previously used to criticise UA's crisis communication. For the first grouping, we found a marked drop negative positioning, followed by a marked uptick in the theme SU. The negative positioning was still the majority with 65 percent, but responses to statement three meant a significant change in that more positive voices were now being raised, praising UA for its efforts. Responses to statements 3 and 4 were so remarkably similar that we pieced the two together to form one whole for analysis. In the second grouping, however, we saw a distinct change back to the major dominance of the negative positioning, successfully halting what could have seemed like a positive 'spiral' of development. This is all expressed in the dominant themes in responses to statements 3 and 4, of which the SU theme saw a significant increase. The negativity was still there, but positive voices were no longer drowned out in massive floods of negative positioning, as especially in the case of statement 1.

Though positive consumers were stepping forward, we still saw much criticism for UA, especially regarding CORP and COM. UA may have been inspired by consumers in the comment sections of the first two statements, as they in the last three statements repeat the phrase “actions speak louder than words”. This sentiment was variously expressed by consumers who asserted the sincerity behind actions, rather than words. This backfired a little with new communication criticism that found UA’s actions plenty loud.

Overall, despite managing to have many consumers express their positivity towards UA’s efforts or the company itself, UA’s statements were still received mostly negatively by consumers.

7: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, we attempted to identify how United Airlines' crisis communication regarding the 'Flight 3411' incident changed over time. Furthermore, we attempted to uncover whether modern consumers on social media affected United Airlines' crisis communication and if so, how this was achieved.

In our analysis, we analysed consumer responses to United Airlines' communication as well as the crisis communication itself. Doing so allowed us to identify changes in both consumer responses and United Airlines' crisis communication over time. We argued that the first statement resulted in a double crisis for United Airlines, as it failed to address the concerns of consumers and rather communicated the wrong thing at what could have been the right time. Consumers expressed their heated condemnation of both the company, the incident and the company's handling of the incident, and flooded the first comment sections with 173,000 comments, of which a very convincing 98 percent were negative. The dominant themes of 'boycotting', 'communication critique' and 'humanity' reflected how commenters perceived and evaluated the incident, as well as the subsequent crisis communication, as something morally wrong and unjust, which made consumers hurry to declare their intention to sever relationship with the company through boycotting.

It seemed that United Airlines had been listening to their consumers on social media, and come to realise that the first statement regarding the incident had only incited consumers to loudly and publicly criticise the company and its reaction to the incident, rather than solve or temporarily halt the situation.

United Airlines then released a new, second statement that expressed a very different stance than the first. In the second statement, United Airlines apologised profusely several times, and explicitly accepts responsibility for the incident. This constitutes a very noticeable change in United Airlines' crisis communication efforts. However, the drastic about-face expressed in the new statement still did not appease consumers, and rather resulted in consumers questioning the sincerity of the new statement, as seen in the negative responses

to this second attempt. As such, we conclude that United Airlines communicated the right at the wrong time, effectively reversing the rhetorical failure of the first statement, in which the time was right, but the content was wrong. This is argued on the basis of a rhetorical analysis and supported by consumers' responses that indicated that the second statement should have been the first one made. However, as it was not the first statement, the change in rhetoric seemed jarring and insincere. This is also reflected in the dominant themes, which were identical to the first statement, indicating that this second statement – while at the surface a more appropriate response for the situation – was not accepted by consumers. The second statement was received with a vast majority of negative comments, but there were much fewer comments in total. At a total of 55,000 comments, interest for the incident and United Airlines' responses seemed to have declined by more than two-thirds.

In the last three statements, United Airlines adjusted their communication yet again, although not in such a drastic manner as before. Posted in relatively quick succession, the last statements align well with the communication of the second, but expand to address how the company will adjust its policies to ensure that a similar incident never happens again. While the third and fourth statements were more well-received than any other attempt – almost a quarter of comments expressed a positive positioning – the fifth and final statement received reactions and responses more reminiscent of the fierce responses to the first statement.

As such, United Airlines' crisis communication shows a transformation from a deliberately vague and passive response with little to no actual apology or recognition of crisis responsibility to a much more active accept of crisis responsibility, expressed through repeated and full apologies to both the forcibly removed passenger as well as the witnesses of the incident, as well as general apologies for allowing the incident to happen. This constitutes a very drastic change in attitude, and we argue that it may have been a result of consumer pressures, which were exacerbated by the nature of the double crisis. Finally, the last statement constitutes a change toward a more action-focused United Airlines. Having profusely apologised, United Airlines shifted their focus to convey the changes in operations that were meant to prevent a similar incident from happening again.

We argue that the development of United Airlines' crisis communication over time shows signs of having been influenced by consumers' comments. Consumers exerted power and influence over United Airlines by harnessing the power of social media. Conversely, United Airlines found itself unable to successfully influence consumers in turn, so as to mitigate the backlash of the crisis. We conclude that modern consumers may have been able to force the company to quickly adjust its crisis communication strategies through their exerting of influence through voice on social media. We hedge this conclusion as we cannot account for other forces – internal or external – that might have influenced the changes in United Airlines' crisis communication.

8: BIBLIOGRAPHY

Academic sources:

- Austin, Lucinda, Brooke Fisher Liu, and Yan Jin. 2012. "How Audiences Seek Out Crisis Information: Exploring the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model". *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 40, 2: 188-207. DOI:10.1080/00909882.2012.654489
- Barton, Laurence. 2001. *Crisis in organisation II* (2nd edition). Cincinnati: College Divisions South-Western.
- Bazerman, C., T. Cole, U. Eco et al. 2000. "Rhetorical Analysis." *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*, edited by Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell, 208-226. London: SAGE Publications. DOI: 10.4135/9781849209731.
- Beck, Ulrich, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash. 1994. *Reflexive modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Cambridge: Poliy Press.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1997. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1999. *World Risk Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Belk, Russell W. 1988. "Possessions and the Extended Self." *Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (2), 139-68. DOI: <http://www.jstor.org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/stable/2489522>.
- Belk, Russell W. 2004. "The Human Consequences of Consumer Culture" in *Elusive Consumption: Tracking New Research Perspectives*, edited by K.M. Ekström and H Brembeck, 67-85. Oxford: Berg.
- Belk, Russell W. 2013. "Extended Self in a Digital World." *Journal of Consumer Research* 40 (3), (2013), 477-500. DOI: doi:10.1086/671052
- Bowen, Glenn A. 2009. "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method." *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2: 27-40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Boyd, Danah M., and Nicole B. Ellison. 2008. "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (1): 210—230. DOI: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x
- Bryman, Alan. 2012. *Social Research Methods*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryman, Alan. 2016. *Social Research Methods*. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Clouder, Scott and Rob Harrison. 2005. "The Effectiveness of Ethical Consumer Behaviour." In *The Ethical Consumer*, edited by Rob Harrison, Terry Newholm and Deidre Shaw, 89–104. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Collin and Køppe. 2003. *Humanistisk videnskabsteori*. Viborg: DR Multimedie.
- Collins, Finn. 2007. "Konstruktivistisk erkendelsesteori" in *Teorier om læring – en læringspsykologisk antologi*, edited by Tom Ritchie, 115-135. Værløse: Billesø & Baltzer Forlagene.
- Coombs, W. Timothy. 1999. *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*. 1st edition. Sage.
- Coombs, W. Timothy. 2007. "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory" in *Corporate Reputation Review Volume 10 Number 3*, 163-176. Palgrave Macmillian.
- Coombs, W. Timothy. 2010. "Parameters for Crisis Communication" in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 17-53. Blackwell Publishing.
- Coombs, W. Timothy. 2015. *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*. 4th edition. London: Sage.
- Cornelissen, Joep. 2017. *Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, SAGE.
- Couldry, Nick. 2012. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Creswell, John W. 2013. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Curtis, Bruce and Cate Curtis. 2011. *Social Research: A Practical Introduction*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Frandsen, Finn and Winni Johansen. 2017. *Organizational Crisis Communication*. London: SAGE.
- Frandsen, Finn and Winni Johansen. 2017. *Organizational Crisis Communication*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Freeman, R. E. (2010). *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. New York: Cambridge

- Friedman, Milton. 2002. *Everyday crisis management: How to think like an emergency physician*. Naperville, IL: First Decision Press.
- Friedman, Monroe. 1985. "Consumer Boycotts in the United States, 1970–1980: Contemporary Events in Historical Perspective." *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 19 (1), 96–117.
- Friedman, Monroe. 1999. *Consumer Boycotts*. London: Routledge.
- Fuchs, Christian. 2014. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Fuglsang, Lars and Olsen, Poul Bitsch. 2005. *Videnskabsteori i samfundsvidenskaberne på tværs af fagkulturer og paradigmer*. Roskilde: Universitetsforlag.
- Giddens, Anthony and Christopher Pierson. 1998. "The Politics of Risk Society" in *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*, 204-217. Polity Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- González-Herrero, Alfonso and Suzanne Smith. 2008. "Crisis Communications Management on the Web: How Internet-Based Technologies are Changing the Way Public Relations Professionals Handle Business Crises." *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 16, 3: 143—153. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-5973.2008.00543.x
- González-Herrero, Alfonso and Suzanne Smith. 2010. "Crisis Communications Management 2.0: Organizational Principles to Manage Crisis in an Online World." *Organizational Development Journal* 28 (1): 97—105.
- Harrison, Rob, Terry Newholm and Deirdre Shaw. 2005. "Introduction." In *The Ethical Consumer*, edited by Rob Harrison, Terry Newholm and Deirdre Shaw, 1–8. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Helder, Bodil. 2015. *Textual Analysis: An Approach to Analysing Professional Texts*. 2nd ed. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Hermann, Charles F. 1963. "Some Consequences of Crisis Which Limit the Viability of Organizations." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 8, 1: 61-82.

- Herrick, James A. 2005. *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Higgins, Colin and Robyn Walker. 2012. "Ethos, logos, pathos: Strategies of persuasion in social/environmental report." *Accounting Forum* 36, 3: 194—208. DOI: 10.1016/j.accfor.2012.02.003
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hoffmann, Stefan. 2011. "Anti-Consumption as a Means to Save Jobs." *European Journal of Marketing*, 45 (11/12): 1702-1714. DOI: 10.1108/03090561111167342.
- Holm, Andreas Beck. 2011. *Videnskab i virkeligheden – En grundbog i videnskabsteori*. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Kimmel, Allan J., and Philip J. Kitchen. 2015. "WOM and Social Media: Presaging future directions for research and practice." In *Word of Mouth and Social Media*, edited by Allan J. Kimmel and Philip J. Kitchen, 4—19.
- Lash, Scott and Brian Wynne. 1997. "Introduction." In *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, by Ulrich Beck, translated by Mark Ritter, 1-8. Thousand Oaks: SAGE
- Lynggaard, Kennet. 2015. "Dokumentanalyse." In *Kvalitative metoder*, 2nd ed., edited by Svend Brinkmann and Lene Tanggaard, 153-167. Hans Rietzels Forlag.
- Makarem, Suzanne C., and Haeran Jae. 2016. "Consumer Boycott Behavior: An Exploratory Analysis of Twitter Feeds." *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 50, 1: 193-223. DOI: 10.1111/joca.12080.
- Mathur, Nita. 2014. "Introduction" in *Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity*, edited by Nita Mathur, ix-xi. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- McQuail, Denis. 2010. *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 6th edition. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Meikle, Graham. 2016. *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Meyrowitz, Joshua. 1985. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mythen, Gabe. 2004. *Ulrich Beck: A Critical Introduction to the Risk Society*. London: Pluto Press.

- Romenti, Stefania, Grazia Murtarelli, and Chiara Valentini. 2014. "Organisations' conversations in social media: applying dialogue strategies in times of crises." *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 19, 1: 10—33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2012-0041>
- Shirky, Clay. 2008. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Sørensen, Mads P. and Allan Christensen. 2013. *Ulrich Beck: An introduction to the theory of second modernity and the risk society*. Routledge.
- Springston, Jeffrey K., Elizabeth Johnson Avery and Lynne M. Sallot. 2010. "Influence Theories: Rhetorical, Persuasion, and Informational." In *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication*, edited by Robert L Heath and H. Dan O'Hair, 268-284. New York: Routledge.
- Trentmann, Frank. 2006. "Introduction" in *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, edited by Frank Trentmann, 1-27. Oxford: Berg.
- Whittaker, Andrew. 2012. *Research Skills for Social Work*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Yin, Robert K. 2009. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Zachry, Mark. 2009. "Rhetorical analysis." In *Handbook of Business Discourse*, edited by Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini, 68-79. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Web sources:

- ABC News Reporter. 2017. "United Airlines gives away toddler's seat, forces mom to hold him during flight." *ABC News*, July 6, 2017. <http://abcnews.go.com/US/united-airlines-toddlers-seat-forces-mom-hold-flight/story?id=48463404>
- Bennhold, Kathrin. 2017. "United Airlines Faces Questions Over Death of Giant Rabbit." *New York Times*, April 26, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/us/united-airlines-rabbit.html>
- Daily Mail Reporter. 2017. "United Airlines Almost Killed My dog!: Pet owner says her pet was 'near death' after airline left the animal on a 94F tarmac for nearly an hour." *Daily Mail*, November 23, 2017. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2512223/United-Airlines-Almost-Killed-My-Greyhound-Dog-left-hot-tarmac.html>

- Edwards, Valerie. 2017. "United Airlines accuses a gay father of inappropriately touching his own SON on their flight home." *Daily Mail*, June 1, 2017.
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4547956/United-apologizes-accusing-gay-father-touching-son.html>
- Evans, Carter. 2015. "Autistic girl removed from flight after emergency landing." *CBS News*, May 10, 2015. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/autistic-girl-removed-from-flight-after-emergency-landing/>
- Eyefortravel Reporter. 2017. "US airline consolidation: what happens next?" *Eyefortravel*, March 7, 2017. <https://www.eyefortravel.com/revenue-and-data-management/us-airline-consolidation-what-happens-next>
- Hibbard, Laura. 2012. "Jim Stanek, Disabled Veteran Says United Airlines Staff Kicked His Service Dog, Asked if He Was 'Retarded'." *The Huffington Post*, updated July 23, 2012. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/22/jim-stanek-united-airlines-service-dog-sarge_n_1692951.html
- Holley, Peter. 2017. "United passenger says crew forced her to urinate in cup on 'worst flight' ever." *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2017.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dr-gridlock/wp/2017/05/10/united-passenger-says-crew-forced-her-to-urinate-in-cup-on-worst-flight-ever/?utm_term=.06ea9f3b3adf
- International Telecommunication Union. 2009. "Anniversary year for the Internet and the World Wide Web." Accessed December 1st, 2017.
<http://www.itu.int/net/itunews/issues/2009/10/34.aspx>
- Kaplan, Andreas M., and Michael Haenlein. 2010. "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media." In *Business Horizons* 53 (1): 59–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>
- KHOU Reporter. 2017. "Houston family says dog died on United flight." *KHOU*, August 8, 2017. <http://www.khou.com/news/local/houston-family-says-dog-died-on-united-flight/462905137>
- Kucuk, S. Umit. 2008. "Consumer Exit, Voice, and 'Power' on the Internet." *Journal of Research for Consumers* 15: 1-13.
http://jrconsumers.com/Academic_Articles/issue_15/Exit-Voice-Power-academic2.pdf

- Kuttner, Robert. 2017. "How the Airlines Became Abusive Cartels." *The New York Times*, April 17, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/17/opinion/how-the-airlines-became-abusive-cartels.html>
- Lazo, Luz. 2017. "Two girls barred from United flight for wearing leggings." *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dr-gridlock/wp/2017/03/26/two-girls-barred-from-united-flight-for-wearing-leggings/?utm_term=.6f78454a6931
- McCain, Erin. 2017. "United's Apologies: A Timeline." *The New York Times*, April 14, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/14/business/united-airlines-passenger-doctor.html>
- Ohlheiser, Abby. 2017. "The full timeline of how social media turned United into the biggest story in the country." *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/04/11/the-full-timeline-of-how-social-media-turned-united-into-the-biggest-story-in-the-country/?utm_term=.1ce9aa65002b
- Patel, Neil. 2017. "14 Ways to Increase Your Clickthrough Rate on Twitter". Last modified August 25, 2017. <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/twitter-increase-clickthrough-rate>.
- Statista. 2016. "Leading multiplatform print media websites in the United States in August 2016, based on market share of visits." Accessed October 11, 2017. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/203948/us-market-shares-of-selected-video-and-multimedia-websites/>
- Statista. 2017a. "Internet usage in the United States." Accessed December 1, 2017. <https://www-statista-com.zorac.aub.aau.dk/study/24290/internet-usage-in-the-united-states-statista-dossier/>
- Statista. 2017b. "Social Media Usage Worldwide." Accessed December 1, 2017. <https://www.statista.com/study/12393/social-networks-statista-dossier/>
- Statista. 2017c. "Social Media Usage Worldwide." Accessed December 1, 2017. <https://www.statista.com/study/40227/social-social-media-usage-in-the-united-states-statista-dossier/>

- United Airlines. 2017a. "United Airlines Announces Changes to Improve Customer Experience." *United Airlines*, April 27, 2017. <http://newsroom.united.com/2017-04-27-United-Airlines-Announces-Changes-to-Improve-Customer-Experience>
- United Airlines. 2017b. "United Express Flight 3411 Review and Action Report." *United Airlines*, April 27, 2017. <https://hub.united.com/united-review-action-report-2380196105.html>
- Wilson, Richard. 2011. "A Public Relations Disaster. How saving \$1,200 cost United Airlines 10,772,839 negative views on YouTube." *Sentium*, 2011. <http://sentium.com/a-public-relations-disaster-how-saving-1200-cost-united-airlines-10772839-negative-views-on-youtube/>
- World Bank. n.d. "Individuals using the Internet (% of population)". Accessed December 1, 2017. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS>