Resume

Formålet med den følgende kandidat projektrapport har som udgangspunkt fokus på krisekommunikation. For at belyse emnet, er det amerikanske flyselskab United Airlines udvalgt, da den internationale virksomhed gennemgik en krise tilbage i 2017. Krisen udbrød, da en videooptagelse florerede af en mand på diverse nyhedsmedier, der blev slæbt ud af et United Airlines fly af selskabets medarbejdere. Udsmidningen medførte, at passageren brækkede sin næse, fik slået tænder ud, samt fik en hjernerystelse. Begrundelsen for, at passageren var påtvunget til at forlade flyet, var, at der skulle gøres plads til fire af United Airlines' medarbejdere. Efter begivenheden udstedte flyselskabets CEO, Oscar Munoz, en formel undskyldning til offentligheden. Dog blev det afsløret for offentligheden, at Oscar Munoz med det samme sendte en intern e-mail til sine medarbejdere, hvori den pågældende passager blev beskyldt for at være "forstyrrende og krigsførende". Hans måde at takle episoden på, vakte endnu større furore på de sociale medier, efter den første undskyldning blev udstedt samt den interne e-mail blev offentliggjort.

Dette speciale har til formål at undersøge, hvordan United Airlines har håndteret denne krise, samt finde potentielle årsager til Oscar Munoz' dybereliggende årsager for drastisk at ændre sin krisekommunikation under kriseforløbet. Ydermere, har dette speciale til formål at bese hvordan nyhedsmedierne har fremstillet episoden, for at undersøge om hvorvidt medierne har kunne influere mennesker ved brug af retoriske virkemidler.

Specialet er metodisk udarbejdet fra den socialkonstruktivistiske tilgang, hvor det grundlæggende omdrejningspunkt er fænomener, der er både historisk og socialt skabt, igennem interaktioner med andre mennesker. Dette underbygger specialet undersøgelsesfelt, der i høj grad tager afsæt i menneskers konstruktioner af kriser. Her undersøges hvordan United Airlines' krisekommunikation udspiller sig, på blandt andet sociale medier, ved at undersøge og vurdere den kommunikative interaktion mellem private mennesker og virksomheden, da fænomenet er konstrueret gennem kommunikative handlinger. Derudover bliver den hermeneutiske cirkel anvendt, idet specialet bygger på en empirisk tilgang, hvor fortolkning er påkrævet og yderst nødvendigt for at kunne besvare problemformuleringen. Helt konkret, optræder ideen om cirkelstrukturer, hvor der tages udgangspunkt i basal baggrundviden for så løbende at opnå ny viden ved at analysere på den udvalgte data ved hjælp af teoretiske værktøjer.

I forhold til empirien, består den primære data af udtalelser på vegne af United Airlines i form af pressemeddelelser, samt et interview. Heraf kommentarer på sociale medier i forbindelser med krisen som er skrevet af private personer. Ydermere, statistiske målinger samt kommentar fra spørgeskemaer. Det sekundære data består af nyhedsartikler.

Som teoretisk grundlag er tre teorier anvendt, som består af Timohty Coombs' *Situational Crisis Theory*, Michael Hearit's Crisis Management by Apologia og Robert Entman's *Framing theory*. Timohty Coomb's teori benyttes til at analysere United Airlines anvendte krisekommunikationsstrategi under den pågældende krise, samt det offentliges syn på dette. Hearit's teori benyttes for at undersøge om United Airlines multiple undskyldninger til det offentlige lever op til Hearit's forslag om karakteristisk for en ideel og etisk undskyldning. Endvidere benyttes Entman's teori for at påvise hvordan nyhedsmedier fremstiller krisen under forløbet.

Ud fra disse teorier, er der undersøgt, hvordan United Airlines har håndteret deres krisekommunikation. Samt flere fortolkninger af dybdeliggende årsager til, hvorfor Oscar Munoz ændrede sin krise-kommunikations-strategi under forløbet.

Sammensat gav delelementerne af analysen et fyldestgørende svar på problemformuleringen, som lød på, at United Airlines krisekommunikation mislykkedes, hvilket kan afspejles i det faktum, at United Airlines' CEO forværrede krisen ved at udstede en yderst uetisk undskyldning i den første pressemeddelelse. Dette kan konkluderes ud fra analysen af det offentliges syn på pressemeddelelsen belyste, at folk var vrede over håndteringen af episoden og den dårlige undskyldning. Til trods for at United Airlines ændrede deres krisekommunikationsstrategi til den korrekte under forløbet, kan der konkluderes, at offentligheden havde dannet sig et negativ syn på virksomheden, hvilket gjorde det svært at ændre på folks syn og holdninger. Der kan samtidigt konkluderes, at der er stor sandsynlighed for, at nyhedsmedierne har været med til at influere menneskers fortolkning af episoden til det værre.

Table of content

1. Introduction

1.1 Crisis Management – An Opportunity or a Risk to Failure?

Due to globalization, the world in the twenty-first century is an open system in constant motion. It has caused many changes in the way the world is constituted. As a part of this open system, where external factors continually cause a disturbance in the surrounding environment, organizations of all sizes seek to maintain a state of equilibrium. International organizations are therefore making an effort to communicate with their stakeholders to diminish external forces that cause a disturbance. Today, organizations are facing severe challenges due to the digital age, as it has become paramount for large companies to understand the media landscape across the globe. Due to the rapid technological progress over the last 25 years, advanced technology, such as the Internet, has become accessible from almost any location on the globe. The Internet is a public web of computer networks that enables individuals to connect with one another (Kotler 2014, 26). The shift from the mechanical world to the digital world is having a profound impact on the consumers and producers. This entails significant changes and requires organizations to rethink how to communicate with their stakeholders (Kotler 2010, xi). This shift has forced organizations to become aware that the majority of consumers have made the Internet and social media their primary channel for expressing themselves and sharing information and their experiences. Hence, consumers are able to put organizations under a magnifying glass, which makes it easier to notice bad corporate behavior (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011, s. 209). This has created a demand for organizations to be transparent and capable of communicating with stakeholders in a sincere way. Organizations that are not embracing the Internet or are not able to accommodate stakeholders' expectations are likely to fail in becoming successful—or even worse, they risk getting trapped in a crisis.

Moreover, as a part of the process of globalization, information is being transmitted and communicated faster than ever before. Thus, crises today are more likely to be seen by the entire world than they were just a decade ago, when events would largely have gone unnoticed. Thus, managing a corporate crisis requires extreme caution and consideration in terms of choosing the correct response strategy and which channels to communicate through (Coombs 2015, 14). Managers not being able to provide the necessary information can give stakeholders a sense of uncertainty, which is the amount of ambiguity associated with the given issue or crisis. The greater the level of ambiguity surrounding the crisis, the more uncertainty it generates. Hence, the manager's effort in crisis communication differs, as low-uncertainty problems can be corrected by

explaining common organizational procedures and rules. On the other hand, high-uncertainty crises demand a higher sense of crisis management effort. Regardless, people who are feeling uncertainty will most likely have the urge to seek information from external sources that are providing some sort of information as a way to reduce their uncertainty. Thus, providing open dialogue and engagement has become more relevant than ever before. Nonetheless, organizations facing a crisis must be prepared to communicate and explain correctly. Managers must perform adequate and appropriate crisis communication to in order to seek reconciliation with stakeholders. In failing to do so, stakeholders are likely to seek alternative sources of information from the web. In a potentially worse situation, they might create their own interpretations shaped by how the news media frames the wrongdoing (Holladay & Coombs, 2010, s. 383). Consequently, failing to meet stakeholders' expectations can critically damage an organization's survival.

1.2 Case Presentation – What is it all about?

As mentioned above, in terms of economics, it appears that United Airlines have managed to become highly successful in conquering the airline industry across the globe. However, United Airlines' success has not come easily or without issue, as the company has experienced and undergone a recent crisis.

The United Airlines crisis unfolded on April 9, 2017, as viral videos swept the web of a man being violently removed from United Airlines flight 3411. The violated man, David Dao, was dragged down the aircraft aisle, causing the man injury and bleeding to parts of his face. This was the result of a common seating problem. The incident had escalated due to United Airlines overbooking the flight. In this case, the issue arose as the company had decided to fly four of its staff members to a connection point in the last minutes before the plane was scheduled to take off. Thus, four passengers had to give up their seats to make space for United Airlines' staff members. Passengers were offered an incentive of $400 to volunteer to take a later flight the following afternoon, including a hotel room for the night. As no passenger volunteered to take the offer, the amount of the offer was raised to $800. The airline could, in fact, have raised the offer to a maximum of $1,350 or asked other passengers to leave the plane, however, this was not the case. A manager of United Airlines informed the passengers that four of them would be selected to leave the flight, which resulted in a couple who volunteered to leave the plane. As the third and fourth passenger, a married couple, were selected to leave the plane, the man refused. He stated that he was a doctor

and had to see a patient the next morning (BBC News 2017). The man, Dr. David Dao, a 69-year-old doctor was dragged screaming out of the plane by several security officers while bleeding. Dr. Dao later announced plans to sue United Airlines, as the incident caused him to sustain a broken nose, the loss of two front teeth, and he suffered a concussion, resulting in the need for medical treatment and reconstructive surgery (Independent 2017).

As a result of the incident, videos of the man being violently dragged out of the plane went viral, which led to United Airlines being heavily exposed and framed on the web and social media, as online news picked up the story quickly. This triggered major negative publicity, as customers accused United Airlines of mistreating their passengers (La Times 2017). Nonetheless, customers expressed their opinions and experiences of United Airlines on social media. The first official response regarding the incident came from United Airlines' CEO, Oscar Munoz, where apologized for having to 're-accommodate' the passengers. Oscar Munoz added fuel to the fire, as an internal email revealed that the CEO had described the man as "disruptive" and "belligerent." At this point, the lack of empathy by the airline caused people to express discontent with United Airlines. Later, the CEO chose to change its initial response, opting for a seemingly more sincere apology (Netimperative 2017).

This has lead to the following problem statement:

Why did the CEO of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz, change his initial apology to the public in connection with the incident of a the passenger being forced out of a United Airlines plane, and how did the public receive it?

2. Methodology

This thesis is a study of one of the major areas of interest within crisis management: crisis communication. It is a case study that started out by finding a relevant case with an international aspect, after which, problems concerning the case were encircled. Having identified the overall problems of the chosen case and the crisis communication aspect, the aim is then to investigate and to identify necessary and useful methods, which can help find answers to the identified problems. The methodological considerations will be accounted for in this section, where the purpose is to clarify the choices made about the scientific positioning, theories, methods, choices of empirical data and handling of data, and, lastly, thoughts on the validity, reliability and limitations of the thesis.

2.1 Philosophy of Science / Theory of Science and Methodological Approach

Philosophy of science and the methodological approach is the manner in which one understands and conducts data to essentially develop knowledge by utilizing different types of analytic, observational, and theoretical tools. Thus, the overall purpose of this section is to clarify and account for choosing the applied methodological approach, theories, and methods.

According to Allan Bryman, philosophy of science can be explained as a process trying to explain the creation and conceptualization of knowledge within a wide range or sciences. More concretely, it deals with how people experience, observe, feel, and perceive differently, and it aims to create an understanding thereof (Bryman 2008, 6). Moreover, within the field of science, Bryman distinguish between three scientific approaches. These are referred to as social science, natural sciences, and humanities. These approaches all have one thing in common; they seek to understand the phenomena, rather than solely describe it. Despite this commonality, each scientific approach differs by focusing on different areas of science. This thesis will be taking a humanist point of view, due to the educational background and because people are considered to be acting, thoughtful, and communicative (Collin & Køppe, 2012, s. 24). This corresponds to the aim of this thesis, which is to interpret and understand people's actions.

Furthermore, it is relevant to contemplate the fundamental tools of research to outline the creation of knowledge. However, as the creation of knowledge is individually dependent on one's own way of interpreting, developing and understanding knowledge, dissimilar beliefs inevitably arise. Thus,

it is relevant to describe one's scientific approach, which derives from two types of views held by the person conducting the examination.

1) **_Ontology_** **-** refers to 'what is out there to know' and is the starting point when conducting research within a field. The ontological position is based on claims and assumptions concerning the nature of reality. Thus, claiming what exists 'out there' and what it can be interpreted as. In other words, it is based on what people believe constitutes social reality (Grix 2002, 177).

2) **_Epistemology_** **–** refers to 'what and how can we know about it' and comes after the ontology starting point of research, which refers to the given process and ways of gathering knowledge. The epistemological position requires reflecting upon theories and concepts in a general sense. Thus, it is relevant to reflect on where theories or concepts originate, as, for example, there can be cultural differences. For instance, theories originating from a Western society tend to describe phenomena deriving from Western values (Grix 2002, 177). Thus, one needs to take a stance and be critical, as such theories might not apply when investigating phenomena in countries where cultural imperialism and Western values might be non-existent.

Despite the fact that both positions can be combined or used separately in creating knowledge, one approach is more likely to dominate the other one when creating results. This thesis starts out with an ontological position, by gaining knowledge about the nature of reality concerning crisis and crisis communication and its existence. It then moves on to an epistemological stance, where knowledge is gained by examining various crisis communication theories to figure out possible ways of investigating the social phenomena of 'crisis communication.' Nonetheless, the chosen theories will be utilized as a tool to help elucidate the given phenomena. Besides that, this thesis seeks to investigate social interactions, which play a vital role in the developing, understanding, and creating new knowledge. Thus, social constructionism's epistemological position centers on researching people's interactions. This is to be elaborated in the subsequent section.

To clarify further, both the scientific position and role while conducting this thesis is to function and work as an investigator, since the purpose is to investigate a social phenomenon, rather than attempting to solve the related problems. Nonetheless, by investigating the social phenomena—

particularly with web questioners—the findings can contribute with new knowledge reflecting on the field of crisis communication that others can then use.

2.1.1 Social Constructivism

This thesis shall be looked from a constructionist standpoint, which claims a subjective nature of reality in which the truth cannot be fully reached because it is influenced and sculpted by the human interest, which is based on experiences through social interactions. This means that humans construct and shape phenomena, and one should, therefore, look upon it critically since constructionists claim that there is no single truth (Collin & Køppe, 2014, s. 419-420). In the same vein, Kenneth Gergen, one of the leading exponents of social constructivism, focuses primarily on 'language,' as he expresses "(…) as we communicate with each other we construct the world in which we live in." (Gergen 2015, 6). In other words, our human understanding of phenomena stems from relationships with other individuals by acquiring knowledge of the world through careful observations and rational reasoning. Hence, humans move towards an objective and value-neutral truth through systematic observation and careful reasoning, which provides a more accurate picture of the world (Gergen 2015, 6-7).

There are several social constructivist approaches outlined by many different researchers. These can be difficult to distinguish between as they tend to overlap with each other. However, Gergen has contributed to a clarification of social constructivism. Besides, Gergen states that 'organizational identity' is a social construction that derives from ongoing interactions with other people. Here, an organization's identity is constructed by members of the organization's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. Moreover, Gergen states that the interaction between an organization and its members consists of a 'feedback mechanism' where its members have the opportunity to express their impressions and opinions regarding the organization (Gergen & Davis, 1985, s. 181). Drawing upon Gergen's approach to social constructivism within particular 'organizational identity', this approach correlates with the aim of this thesis, which is to investigate the interaction between United Airlines and its members, particularly on interactive environments like social media platforms. Nonetheless, members of the organization and private individuals have a great opportunity to shape and contribute to United Airlines' identity by generating content on different platforms.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention that there are different social constructions created by society; e.g., race, gender, marriage, organized religions, femininity, and masculinity. However, this thesis will emphasize and focus specifically on social constructivism regarding the organization's

identity, as it correlates with the purpose of the thesis and its problem statement. The chosen theories have, therefore, been selected as a means to investigate the social construction 'organizational identity' in particular.

Furthermore, within the social constructivism paradigm, Gergen provides four social constructionist proposals, which are 1) The way in which we describe and explain the world is not required by "what there is." Considering 'what there is' could be any object, as there are no demands on the particular accounts and what language is used to describe a given object or how it is characterized. However, there is a strong tendency from most people to delimit and narrow the range of what the given object in question is and thereby be able to state what is true about it (Gergen 2015, 8). The second proposal is 2) "The way in which we describe and explain the world are the outcomes of relationships." As Collin and Køppe describe in the same vein as Gergen within the social constructionist paradigm, the human understanding of certain objects originates from its social bounds, traditions, and the community an individual is a part of. Thus, due to the relationships people create throughout a lifetime, one can describe the world in a way what would most likely be perceived as being accurate (Gergen 2015, 9). The third proposal is 3) "Constructions gain their significance from their social utility." Following the second proposal, as mentioned above, humans' understanding of the world depends greatly on social relationships. Here, Gergen states that there can thus be multiple constructions for any situation, as humans construct various versions of reality depending on the given community a person is attached to, and where "truth" can be declared (Gergen 2015, 10-11). The fourth proposal is "Values are created and sustained within forms of life – including science," meaning that humans develop values through language, trusted patterns of living, and the manner in which, people relate and interact with each other. Hence, despite values often being implicit, values are presented through actions (Gergen 2015, 12).

Furthermore, as this thesis seeks to find intelligibility of the research question by gaining in-depth insight and meaning of the empirical data, critical sense will be emphasized. By researching and conducting the thesis from a constructivist stance, the possibility of personal biases shaping the outcome of the thesis is possible since the findings will be based on one person's experiences in the world, which are inevitably shaped by interacting with other humans and the development of social relationships. Thus, being aware of this potential issue, the interpretations of the given data when conducting the analysis section will be operationalized by rationalizing and systematizing the data to increase the validity of the findings and counteract personal biases.

Moreover, the thesis focuses on statements from different customers, private people, and the CEO of United Airlines. Each statement or gathered data, in reality, has been explicitly socially constructed through social practices, language, and relationships with other individuals. The gathered statements will be examined considering Gergen's four proposals mentioned above, as it is relevant to examine how consumers perceive and respond to the crisis. Hence, the aim is to acquire knowledge on the phenomenon of 'crisis communication', as human interactions are one of the focal points of social constructivism. Nonetheless, the use of language through comments on social media and the web survey will be examined, which will tap into how individuals describe and characterize the events and their opinions regarding the crisis. Additionally, as mentioned above, there can be multiple constructions for any situation. Therefore, a sufficient amount of data must be collected to account for multiple constructions of the events and, thereby, increase the overall validity of the findings. The data will consist of comments on social media and respondents' answers from the web survey.

2.1.2 Hermeneutic approach

In the same vein, this thesis also has a hermeneutic approach, as it considers the science of interpreting social phenomena and thereby gaining an understanding of a particular construction. By working in 'circles,' one continually acquires new knowledge. (Collin & Køppe, 2012, s. 140). Moreover, the hermeneutic circle provides new knowledge, where the whole of something can only be understood by its parts. This means that a change concerning how one understands one part influences the whole understanding. In regards to this thesis, the initial interpretations when examining the data can change throughout the process, as new aspects can be discovered, which leads to a different interpretation and understanding than the initial understanding. This process is referred to as a continuous loop or circle, as the hermeneutic approach is an ongoing iterative process (Collin & Køppe, 2012, s. 145). As the research question in this thesis has changed various times throughout the process, as it is an ongoing and iterative process of gaining knowledge, the focus of the thesis has changed simultaneously with the process.

Furthermore, there is an interplay between social constructivism and hermeneutics, as the investigator begins the process of possessing basic knowledge about the crisis, to then gain new knowledge by examining the empirical data. When gaining new knowledge, the investigator simultaneously interprets the content of the empirical data. The findings from the interpretations are influences and sculpted by the experiences and knowledge of the investigator.

2.2 Choice of Theory

In this section, an account of how the chosen theories are implemented and the reasons why those theories have been chosen to help answer the research question will be explained. Since the research question concerns United Airlines' crisis communication strategies, the content of its apologia, and how the media has framed United Airlines during the crisis, three theories have been chosen, all of which are applicable in connection with the research question. The theories consist of 1) a theoretical framework based on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)' by William Timothy Coombs, 2) a theory on apologia and apologetic ethics referred to as Crisis Management by Apology provided by Keith Michael Hearit, and 3) a Framing theory by Robert M. Entman. These theories provide a comprehensive tool for analyzing United Airlines' crisis communication effort, how people responded to the crisis, and how the media portrayed the crisis.

2.2.2 Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT)

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based on Timothy Coombs' conceptual model of communication during an organizational crisis. Coombs is mainly occupied with research regarding crisis communication and is both an author and a professor within the field of crisis communication. Based on this background, Coombs' research has been chosen as the theoretical framework. Coombs' theory is considered useful as it is a comprehensive tool for analyzing the crisis that United Airlines was involved in. Additionally, it provides a framework for analyzing aspects both from private people's point of view as well as United Airlines' perception of the incident, which ultimately will draw a conceptual link between people's perceptions and the episode. Furthermore, it has been chosen to omit the aspect of pre-crisis and post-crisis due to the limitations of keystrokes. Additionally, there is little evidence of empirical data to examine in relation to United Airlines' pre-crisis practices, which concerns elements of an organization's efforts in prevention, preparation, and signal detection regarding whether a crisis is about to occur. Thus, Coombs' outlined SCCT model, which concerns examining a full-blown crisis will be utilized. Here, the notion of crisis clusters will help eventually determine the amount of crisis responsibility United Airlines has been attributed. Whether United Airlines is situated within the victim, accidental, or intention cluster will help answer the problem statement at last. By utilizing the SCCT, the theory will also contribute to detecting underlying motives for United Airlines' communication, which received a significant amount of criticism on the Internet and consequences thereof.

2.2.3 Hearit's Theory on Apologia

The second theory utilized in this thesis is Keith Michael Hearit's 'Crisis Management by Apology' theory. Hearit is a pioneer in the field of managing crises and apologia. This theory is, therefore, an inevitable tool for examining crisis communication. Hearit's theory on apologia offers a practical framework for exploring United Airlines' multiple apologetic statements. The purpose of this theory is to investigate the content and manner of two different apologetic statements offered by United Airlines' CEO. This theory seeks to contribute to understanding the hidden motives for changing the initial statement and why the CEO did not succeed in offering an apology that could result in immediate forgiveness from those offended or at least reduce or eliminate the negative media coverage triggered by the company's wrongdoing.

2.2.4 Robert M. Entman's Theory on Framing

The third theory applied in this thesis is Robert M. Entman's theory of Framing. Entman's work has been chosen because, firstly, several researchers, like Timothy Coombs, refer to this particular theory as a useful tool for analyzing and, particularly, issue-based framing. Secondly, it is a useful framework in terms of uncovering and identifying how the media framed United Airlines' handling of the episode. Thus, Robert Entman's theory will be utilized as a tool to explore and make sense of media discourses by examining how the media tampers and distorts information as a means to construct people's interpretations in a specific direction. Lastly, Entman's theory appears to correlate with the aim of this thesis, which is to investigate, among other things, people's perceptions, which could potentially have been influenced by the media. Thus, Entman's theory has been selected as it seems to be an appropriate theory for gaining an understanding of the big picture concerning the crisis. Several other researchers within the field of framing focus on other aspects of framing, e.g., how organizations frame itself. Thus, a theory on news framing was relevant in this connection.

Nevertheless, the consideration for choosing this theory is also based on the assumption that Entman's theory will navigate the analysis in a direction that is expected to contribute to answering the problem statement.

2.2.5 Theoretical Interplay

With a theoretical foundation of social constructivism within Gergen's reference to 'organization identify' and more explicitly investigating the phenomenon of 'crisis communication,' the theories have been selected accordingly on the basis of that. The theories have been chosen as they

complement each other and because each theory contains elements that will eventually help answer the problem statement. Firstly, Coombs' SCCT theory complements Hearit's theory of apologetic ethics, as the SCCT provides useful and varying aspects when examining an organization's crisis communication. Despite the fact that the SCCT provides a theoretical framework for examining an organization's response strategy, it does not cover a detailed framework for analyzing the content of an apology offered by an organization. This gave rise to the implementation of Hearit's theory, as it covers both the content and the manner of an apologia. Thus, it is possible to conduct a more comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of 'crisis communication' by the implementation of both theoretical approaches.

Drawing upon Gergen's statement regarding organizational identity being a social construction consisting of interactions called 'feedback mechanism,' the SCCT and Hearit's theory on apologetic ethics further contribute to examining the interaction between United Airlines and its members. Also, as the SCCT and Hearit's theory on apologetic ethics are both stakeholder-oriented, the theories will, therefore, contribute to gaining an understanding of United Airlines' motives for its offered crisis communication and the multiple apologies offered. Both theories will work as tools for examining the way people have engaged heavily in electronic word-of-mouth as an attempt to interact with United Airlines or other people.

Despite the fact that the SCCT and Hearit's theory on apologia serves as a comprehensive tool for examining United Airlines' strategies and apologia, both theories appear insufficient in examining the potential effects of news media. It is rather important to understand whether or not the media have potentially affected the public's perception and behavior towards United Airlines. Thus, to grasp the bigger picture of crisis communication, Robert N. Entman's theory on framing has been applied to examine how news media framed the episode. The theory will help uncover and identify different type of frames utilized by the media in an attempt to affect people's interpretations of United Airlines' way of handling the incident. Drawing upon social constructivism, framing is a social construction often utilized by the news media. Journalists construct people's perceptions through the use of language, which creates a certain meaning that is attributed to the journalist's use of pictures, videos, words and phrases.

2.3 Choice of Method

This thesis is based on a qualitative approach to research, as the study requires descriptions of the lived world from the organizational members' point of view vs. private individuals' point of view to

scrutinize the crisis and search for an in-depth understanding of the topic in question. This is the main strength of the qualitative research tradition—its ability to study social phenomena. On the other hand, quantitative data is useful for revealing how social phenomena work (Silverman 2006, 43).

2.3.1 Method Triangulation

To provide valid and comprehensive findings for the thesis, the approach will be mixed methods, using triangulation methods as a methodical tool (Silverman 2006, 46). Hence, both qualitative and quantitative research will be utilized in this thesis. The qualitative data will consist of statements from United Airlines during the crisis and private peoples' comments related to the incident on social media.

This method will be utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of the organization's statements and people's comments. This is a real strength within the qualitative research method as it can use naturally occurring data and thereby elicit meaning (Silverman 2014, 18). Moreover, the quantitative data will consist of statistical measurement stemming from private people's comments on social media and online web surveys.

The online web surveys will be formed based on the research of Alan Bryman, a pioneer in research methods and, in particular, within the field of mixed methods. While Alan Bryman's guide to creating surveys will be used as a tool, the rationale of phrasing the questions in the web survey will not rely on it. The investigator will manage collecting data as well as adapting, executing, and revising the content of the web surveys appropriately and critically to suit the needs of the analysis. The purpose is to gain an overview of possible tendencies in behaviors and beliefs amongst customers and private people. The quantitative data will mainly focus on 'how much' as it can provide measurements that can provide certain indications of patterns regarding how people respond to the crisis in question (Bowen 2009, 28). The web survey cannot provide complete contextual information about the social phenomenon 'crisis communication,' however, it can help identify overall patterns (Silverman 2006, 39).

Furthermore, document analysis will be utilized as a method in the qualitative research, as it is a highly useful and practical method for collecting and reviewing a significant number of documents. According to Glenn A. Bowen, document analysis refers to a systematic procedure for a researcher

to review or evaluate different documents, which can be both electronic and printed material. Document analysis requires the researcher, first and foremost, to examine and interpret the given data to then elicit meaning, gain an understanding of the subject in question, and, at last, be able to produce empirical knowledge (Bowen 2009, 27). This method is specifically utilized when a researcher phrases a research question, or when one collects and structures documents based on the given research question. However, to work most effectively, one must be able to clarify the criterion regarding which types of documents that may help answer the problem statement (Lynggard, 2015, s. 157). Additionally, this method is a means of collecting documents by using unobtrusive methods, where one gathers data for a qualitative exploration by using "found" data on the web; meaning data that already exists. Thereby, one avoids the possibility of influencing people by physical presence whose data is to be used in the analysis. The data, which has been "found" on the web, aims to explore people's understanding of the subject in question or a social phenomenon by collecting documents in a neutral way (Duedahl & Hviid, 2010, s. 18).

As part of document analysis, Alan Bryman outlines several examples of what the umbrella term "documents" could consist of, as it can refer to relatively heterogeneous types of sources, e.g., newspapers, letters, autobiographies, diaries, photographs, and magazines (Bryman 2012, 543). The chosen set of sources for this thesis will be further elaborated in the empirical section.

The purpose of using document analysis as a method in this thesis is to systematically gather a significant number of documents that will provide both important and redundant information. From there, only the most useful documents will be applied and examined. The analytical procedure of empirical data handling consists of four processes. The first step is to find all sorts of documents based on the research question. The second step in the process will entail selecting the documents that provide the most relevant and useful information that can be contributed to the analysis. The next step in the process is to appraise the chosen documents. Lastly, the data derived from the selected documents will be synthesized to condense new knowledge and help answer the research question (Bowen 2009, 28). Thus, this method is a helpful analytic tool to help gather all sorts of documents about the crisis then narrow it down to the most necessary and relevant ones. When conducting an analysis based on the document analysis method, it relies on the ability to structure and categorize the chosen set of sources, as it then becomes more manageable and less time-consuming to deal with a significant amount of data. Additionally, a considerable interpretative skill is imperative once the documents have been selected to condense meaning and produce findings.

2.4 Choice and Handling of Data

As a continuous part of the above-mentioned method, this section will explain the analytical procedure of gathering documents regarding the crisis in accordance with the theories. As previously discussed, this thesis consists both of qualitative and quantitative data. Since the empirical data is collected in accordance with the method of document analysis, a detailed description of the four steps is appropriate. The iterative process entails content analysis and thematic analysis elements. In order to apply and analyze the data, the process of handling data will entail of organizing information into categories, which are linked to the focus areas of the research question (Bowen 2009, 32). Thus, the process of gathering and handling the data will be demonstrated in order to show transparency and strengthen the validity of the thesis.

2.4.1 Collecting Data

As mentioned above, data is collected on behalf of the phrased problem statement. In light of this, United Airlines' statements about the crisis have been collected through the search engine Google. As an attempt to avoid searching for news articles, which often purposely distort the incident in a negative light, the search consisted of neutral wording as: "United Airlines' statements." The result was a large number of news articles related to the episode. In the search of private people's accounts, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been looked upon, as both organizations' communications efforts appear mostly on those platforms. Data stemming from United Airlines has been collected from its own website.

2.4.2 Selecting Data

As a large number of both general and relevant documents have been collected, one shall then select only those documents that provide the most useful information to establish a manageable collection of documents. The process of selecting data requires careful consideration of the type of documents, what is redundant, and, eventually, which data to select to strengthen the overall validity of the thesis. Thus, the selected data will stem from statements from United Airlines' CEO and comments from private people and customers on social media platforms where there is the highest activity from individuals expressing themselves. In addition, statements selected from the web survey. However, having to select comments is an unmanageable task if one is to gather every comment made on Twitter and Facebook regarding the crisis because there are thousands to be found. Thus, to execute this step purposefully, the selection was delimited by entering United Airlines' official

accounts. Hence, the aim was to find all relevant posted material of statements regarding the crisis and to then look at people's comments in connection with those statements.

The process of selecting comments allows different options regarding comments; e.g., whether the most popular comment shall come first or last. When looking at people's comments on Facebook, one can choose between three options about the comment filtering, which are: 1) most recent, 2) top comments, and 3) unfiltered comments. The unfiltered comments are the ones that will be selected, as it is deemed that unfiltered comments are the most representative ones to examine. In contrast, comments on Twitter are presented in chronological order and are unfiltered. Hence, starting from the top of the unfiltered comments section, 100 comments will be gathered from each platform, which will eventually provide a complete sample of a total of 200 comments.

2.4.3 Appraising the Selected Documents

After having collected a significant amount of data and then selecting the most relevant ones, the next step requires the researcher to make sense of the chosen documents. To accomplish interpreting an individual's vision of the crisis transparently, the 200 comments from social media will be categorized. Otherwise, it would be difficult to make sense of the complete sample, and the comments would be immeasurable. The complete sample of a total of 200 comments concerning the crisis will be structured and categorized based upon the theoretical framework of the thesis.

The chosen categories are framed upon the SCCT model and are: 1) crisis responsibility, 2) crisis type, 3) emotions, 4) behavioral intentions, and 5) how people perceived United Airlines' initial and second response. Thereafter, each comment from both Facebook and Twitter will be categorized in accordance with the five categories. The comments will be placed within a category and will be further divided into subcategories, which are: 1) no or yes, 2) intentional, accidental, or victim, 3) positive, negative or neutral, and 4) anger, schadenfreude, sympathy, or neutral. The four subcategories are also based upon the SCCT model, which will be the foundation for interpreting the data and applying it to the analysis section. Moreover, by connecting theory and data and by systemizing and categorizing the selected data, it will contribute to the strengthening of the validity and reliability of the data handling and the overall thesis.

2.4.4 Synthesizing Data

Lastly, the data must be synthesized. A considerable interpretative skill is imperative, as the one attempting to make sense of the data relies on their own intuitions and skills to filter data and elicit meaning through an interpretive lens (Bowen 2009, 36). The process of interpreting data is highly

relevant as it demonstrates the thesis' theoretical and systematic approach to the analysis and also strengthens the reliability and validity of the overall findings.

Considering the adverse effects of possibly interpreting on behalf of personal bias', general knowledge stemming from the selected theories shall direct and help rationalize the data. The aim is then to amplify and enrich the interpretations of the selected data. Nonetheless, it is essential for the interpreter to emphasize critical commonsense in order gain an in-depth understanding. Moreover, the interpretation of data regarding United Airlines' statements and the accounts of private individuals will be interpreted in accordance with the chosen theories and general knowledge within the field of crisis communication. The handling of empirical data seeks to provide a high degree of transparency about the data.

2.5 Validity, Reliability and Limitations

Two of the most prominent criteria for evaluating social research are validity and reliability, as they can question the findings if the researcher is not able to provide transparent and trustworthy handling of data and the overall findings (Bryman 2012, 47). Validity concerns provide an accurate representation of the social phenomenon in question. When looking into a series of various representations, validity is claimed, as it is ensured that the obtained accounts accurately represent the 'real world' (Silverman 2014, 90). The series of representations should be able to 'prove' and 'speak' for itself. Hence, the more valid the research, the more trustworthy the knowledge is considered to be. Reliability is concerned with whether or not the results of the findings are repeatable by another researcher (Silverman 2014, 83). In fact, if a researcher was not able to describe the exact procedure of how the study has been conducted in detail, the findings would not be perceived as reliable findings. To assess the reliability of the study in question, the procedures for executing the same measurements must be replicable by someone else (Bryman 2012, 46). Thus, being able to show a high degree of transparency of data handling is pivotal, as it will increase the trustworthiness of the overall findings.

According to Allan Bryman, there are two forms of validation that are especially appropriate within the qualitative research paradigm. The first form of validation is by utilizing the triangulating method when the investigator compares both qualitative and quantitative data, as mentioned above in Section 2.3, Choice of Method. The second form of validation is respondent validation, where one takes the findings of a given study back to the original subject that was studied to verify the

findings (Bryman 2016, 91). As mentioned above, this thesis utilizes triangulation as a method by combining qualitative data consisting of various documents with quantitative data consisting of statistical measurements and web survey. Hence, it seeks to produce more comprehensive, accurate and objective representation of the social phenomenon 'crisis communication' in the study.

Considering limitations and comparing two crisis events could have provided a more comprehensive examination and representation of the social phenomenon of 'crisis communication.' However, analyzing two cases rather than one could have resulted in an insufficient examination given the limited keystrokes.

Moreover, the researcher is limited in empirical data, as internal documents from United Airlines could have provided more useful information during the time of the episode, which, in fact, could result in more solid findings.

3. Empirical Data

As this thesis investigates the social phenomenon of 'crisis communication' by examining United Airlines' recent crisis, most of the data is based on information obtained on the web. The collected data constitutes both primary and secondary empirical data. This section of the thesis will first outline the primary data, which consists of official documents, virtual documents and web surveys. The secondary data consists of news articles. The following summarization of the empirical data will be indexed in accordance with Alan Bryman's categorization for different documents as sources of data.

3.1 Primary Data

As this thesis aims to illuminate United Airlines' crisis communication effort and people's perception thereof, the primary data consists of direct statements from representative parties. Thus, statements from United Airlines are relevant to gain an understanding of each step of the crisis communication process. However, solely examining United Airlines' point of view is not representative. Thus, private people commenting on social media are highly relevant, as the effects of a crisis greatly depend on how the public views it. The quantitative data of this thesis are made up of web survey and, as such, the examination creates the opportunity to form concrete questions to receive precise answers.

Moreover, Bryman points out a vital issue that might cause implications for interpreting documents. This issue concerns the tendency to assume that documents, and in particular organizational documents, uncover underlying social realities. In other words, such documents would be seen as representable and trustworthy information about organizational practices. However, some experts have expressed skepticism concerning which documents can, in fact, be viewed as representative of the reality. Documents are, in some cases, written for the purpose of conveying a particular impression and often favor the writer of the document and those it represents (Bryman 2016, 560). Thus, the authenticity and credibility of documents have great importance and these motives must be considered by the reader.

3.1.1 Official Documents Deriving from Private Sources (App. 2).

Official documents consist of heterogeneous types of documents. This type of document is mostly used when accessing organizational documents, as there often is confidential information in such documents and only certain types of documents are to be made available in the public domain, e.g.,

press releases, annual reports, advertisements, mission statements, and public relations material. These types of sources are to be found both on the web and in print. Since only some documents are accessible for the public to reach, one must rely on the trustworthiness and authenticity of the available documents. In that sense, Bryman points out that representatives for organizations writing documents for the public to read might angle information in a certain way to construct positive associations with the organization. Thus, readers must take a critical stance regarding its representativeness and sincerity.

1) Initial press release

On April 10, 2017, Oscar Munoz issues a press release on behalf of United Airlines on its website and its official Facebook and Twitter account. In it, Oscar Munoz apologizes for having 're-accommodated' passengers.

2) The internal letter to employees

On April 11, 2017, the same day Oscar Munoz issues its initial statement to the public, an internal email to United Airlines employees had been leaked. In it, Oscar Munoz informs employees about the episode. Oscar Munoz states that employees followed the established procedures when dealing with the episode. In addition, Oscar Munoz states that he emphatically stand behind all employees, and shows support for how the episode was handled. In the last part of the letter, where a summary of the episode has been provided, Oscar Munoz referred to Dr. Dao as 'disruptive' and 'belligerent'.

3) Second press release

On April 11, 2017, two days after the episode occurred, Oscar Munoz issues a second press release, also on its own website, and its official Facebook and Twitter account. The second statement contains more information than the initial one. In it, Oscar Munoz takes responsibility for the episode and promises to do better in the future. Nonetheless, apologizes for what happened.

4) Third press release

The third press release was issued on April 13, 2017, and contains somehow the same remarks from the second press release. In it, Oscar Munoz apologizes for the third time and states that the episode had provided a harsh learning experience. An overview of a corrective action plan is also provided.

5) Fourth press release

On April 27, 2017, United Airlines issued its fourth press release. In it, there is stated that United Airlines have reached a resolution with Dr. Dao. The press release consists of four sentences.

6) Fifth press release

The fifth press release is also issued on April 27, 2017, and concerns United Airline's corrective action plan. The airline outlines 10 changes regarding how United Airlines intends to fly, serve and respect its customers in the future as a result of the episode with Dr. Dao.

7) The Interview

On April 12, 2017, Oscar Munoz appeared in an interview with a news channel called ABC 'Good Morning America'. In the interview, Oscar Munoz expresses concern for Dr. Dao and took full responsibility for the wrongdoing.

3.1.2 Documents Appearing on the Internet (App. 3).

The changes in technology, particularly the widespread use of the Internet, have increased interconnectedness across the globe. In regards to virtual documents, Bryman distinguishes between different types of sources stemming from, first of all, chatroom, discussion forums, and online communities. Messages posted on these kinds of platforms can be a fertile source of empirical data. This type of research would be referred to as online interaction or online communities, where the researcher would function as an observer (Bryman 2016, 557). Moreover, virtual documents deriving from social media are another type of document that is becoming an increasingly interesting area to study, as research on social media is still in its infancy.

3.1.3 Web Surveys (App. 4).

As mentioned in the methodological section, this thesis includes a web survey concerned with people's perception of United Airlines' handling of the passenger removal incident.

Questions presented in the web survey concerning people's perception of United Airlines' response regarding the episode are based on the SCCT theory by Coombs. Questions concerning how people perceived the CEO Oscar Munoz' apology are based on Hearit's theory on apologia. The final question considers the way in which people were first exposed to or heard about the episode and is based on Entman's theory on framing. The survey was conducted through the website

www.surveymonkey.com and was accessible for the respondents from April 16, 2018 until May 2, 2018. The target group was individuals living in the US, as the event occurred in the US. This was also because United Airlines is an American-based company and, therefore, most of their customers would be Americans. Thus, it is preferable to assume that it would be more relevant to include respondents from the US rather than individuals from other countries. Thus, the target group comprises of 30 respondents from the US and five from Denmark. However, it is essential to mention that the five respondents from Denmark are American citizens who are only studying in Denmark temporarily. Therefore, they are viewed as being representative.

The underlying purpose of the web surveys is to explore corroborating or dissenting patterns concerning the findings emerging from the qualitative data collection. Also, by utilizing web surveys, one can gain new knowledge as specific questions concerning the thesis's subject will be answered contrary to the selected comments on social media. The questions in the web survey have been revised and adapted according to the context of the thesis' problem statement. The questions are also designed in such a way that the respondents can take a position ranging from 'yes' or 'no' or mark between multiple options. Hence, respondents can make an additional comment to explain further, which is entirely optional.

3.2 Secondary data

The aim with the secondary data is to enhance the primary data in its limitations, e.g., understanding potential effects of news framing.

3.2.1 Mass-media outputs (App. 1).

This type of documents is referred to newspapers, magazines, films, and television programmes. In regards to mass-media outputs, it is essential for the reader to look at whether or not the source can be considered credible. Although mass-media documents may seem truthful, there is a tendency amongst, e.g., journalists to angle a story a certain way due to having a hidden agenda (Bryman 2012, 552). The secondary data consist of 12 different newspapers, which comprise a total of 21 news articles. All the news articles are found on American news sites, as the crisis occurred in The US. The news articles are found on the Internet, where only articles written in the time of the crisis has been selected.

4.0 Theory

The subsequent section accounts for the theoretical framework of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Timothy Coombs. Additionally, Hearit's theory on Crisis Management by Apology will be presented in order to examine whether or not the offered apologies can be considered ideal an ethical. In accordance with the SCCT, both theories will help examine United Airlines' underlying intentions of offering multiple apologies. Lastly, Robert M. Entman's theory on framing will be described, which serves as a comprehensive tool for analyzing how the media has portrayed the episode.

As this thesis concerns crisis communication, it was relevant to consider several theorists' research on response strategies. Another pioneer in this field, in addition to Coombs, is William Benoit, the developer of the theory called Image Restoration Theory (IRT). This theory outlines several communicational strategies an individual or a representative of an organization may utilize as a tool to resolve the problems caused by a public crisis. Another theory that concerns crisis communication is the Contingency Theory (CT) by Fred Fiedler, which examines the personality and characteristics of leaders. Although these theories are suitable tools for investigating crisis communication, the theories do not comply with the subject of the problem statement of this thesis.

It could be argued whether or not the Image Restoration Theory could be an appropriate tool for the purpose of this thesis; however, it seems more suitable as a guideline for how an organization should manage a crisis. Meanwhile, the Contingency Theory, being primarily leadership-oriented, could be a relevant theory if the primary research focused on crisis management rather than crisis communication. Thus, Coombs' theoretical framework of the SCCT seems more appropriate in regards to the problem statement, as it helps connect a conceptual link between the crisis event and how people perceived it. Furthermore, the theory covers both private people's point of view and the organization's point of view.

4.1 Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Timothy Coombs, a professor from Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida, USA, developed a theory called the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) in 1995. The SCCT provides an evidence-based framework as a tool for identifying how key facets of a given crisis event influence people's attributions when an organization is undergoing a crisis. In other words, the overall purpose of the theory is to gain an understanding of the way

organizations communicate to their stakeholders and the public during a crisis in an attempt to reduce the negative impact of the crisis. The theory offers a theoretical linkage between the attributed type of crisis, which determines the correct type of response strategy used to manage the crisis (Coombs 2007, 163). According to Coombs, a crisis can be defined as:

> *"A crisis can be viewed as the perception of an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact the organization's performance. Crises are largely perceptual. If stakeholders believe there is a crisis, the organization is in a crisis unless it can successfully persuade stakeholders it is not."* (Holladay & Coombs, 2010, s. 6).

The SCCT is a comprehensive model featuring several factors, which shall be examined in chronological order in this section. The model is shown below:
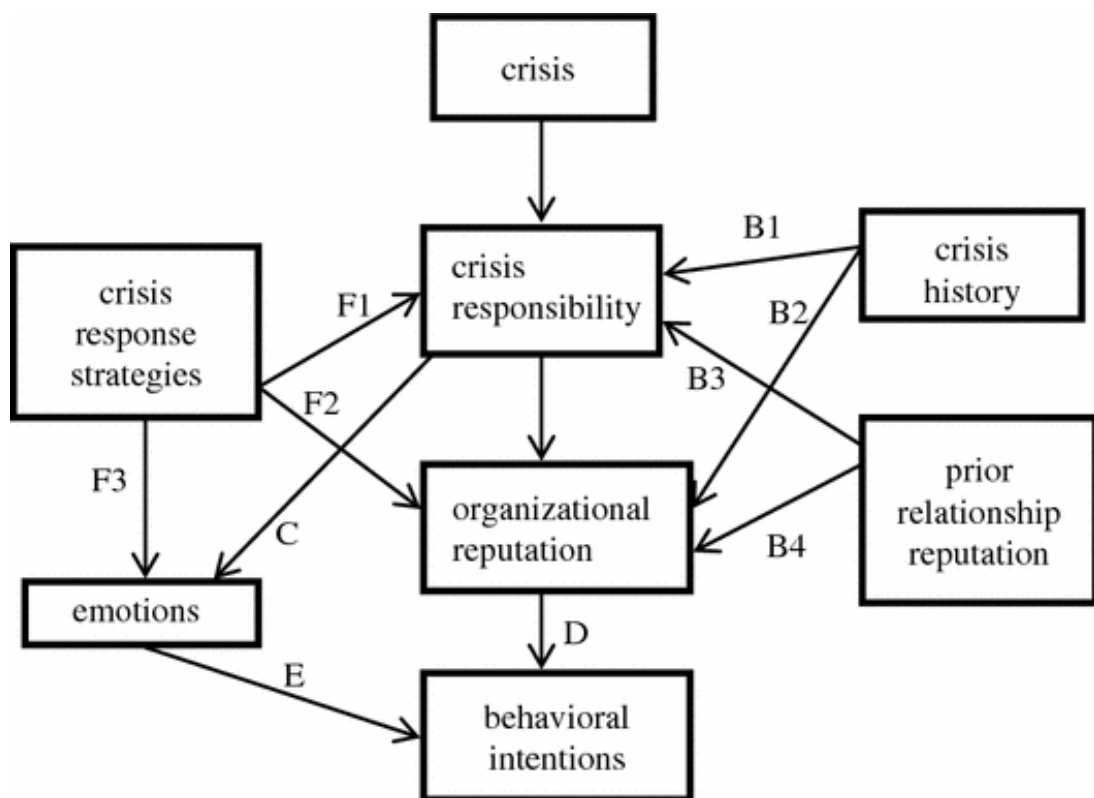
Coomb's SCCT model

4.1.1. Crisis Responsibility

The fundamental element in the SCCT concerns crisis responsibility, as it draws a conceptual link between people's perception of a crisis, which affects their behavioral intentions. Thus, the degree of attributed crisis responsibility is a crucial factor in determining the amount of reputational threat posed by a crisis. Regardless of the incident that has occurred surrounding an organization conducted, e.g., unethical misbehavior, the amount of responsibility attributed depends greatly on how the public perceives the given episode. Despite having acted wrongly or unethically, an organization will avoid damage to its reputational image if the public does not hold the organization responsible in their perception of the incident (Coombs 2007, 170).

Coombs' development of the SCCT was inspired by the Attribution theory developed by Bernard Weiner, an American social psychologist. The general concept of the Attribution theory posits that people have a strong tendency to search for the causes of a given crisis event, due to crises appearing unexpected and often being associated with unethical behavior. Consequently, people are likely to experience some sort of an emotional reaction, depending on the amount of attributed responsibility (Coombs 2007, 165). The attributed crisis responsibility causes people to engage in behavioral intentions. An organization deemed to have high levels of responsibility would experience reputational damage due to people engaging and creating negative word-of-mouth as a means to ending their relationship with the organization (Coombs 2006, 136). The focal point of attributions of responsibility is the core of the SCCT because it involves people's emotions, which is the underlying reason for a crisis to be evoked. As people attribute responsibility to an organization, it becomes the motivation for people to act in a certain way; e.g., engaging in negative word-of-mouth on social platforms (Coombs 2014, 45).

Furthermore, when assessing the SCCT, one must follow a two-step process by examining the crisis situation to assess the amount of reputational threat the crisis could inflict on the organization's reputation. The first step is to determine how people interpret and perceive the crisis type, e.g., sabotage, accident, natural disaster, or malevolence (Coombs 2006, 137). As the initial step is based on the type of crisis, one can thereby generate predictable levels of crisis responsibility. Moreover, the second step of the process involves two intensifying factors 1) crisis history, and 2) unfavorable prior relationship reputation (Coombs 2007, 168).

4.1.2 Determining the Crisis Type

In relation to the aforementioned, Coombs contends that there are three crisis clusters, which are based upon the amount of attributed crisis responsibility people assign to an organization. The first of the three clusters is the victim cluster, which indicates low levels of attributed responsibility, as the organization is viewed as being a victim of the crisis. This could be related to workplace violence, natural disasters, rumors, and product tampering. The second cluster is the accidental cluster, which implies that the organization can be held accountable to some degree, as the crisis events can be considered an unintentional act. This could concern a technical-error accident, product harm, or technical-error product harm. The third cluster is the preventable cluster, which suggests considerably strong attributions of responsibility, as people will hold the organization accountable for the crisis event because the incident could have been prevented by the organization. Therefore, the incident and any harm resulting from it are considered purposeful. This could concern human-error product harm, human-error accidents, or organizational misdeed (Coombs 2007, 167). Coombs argues that identifying the type of crisis between each of the three clusters can help determine whether or not an organization will be ascribed high or low levels of responsibility. Ultimately, one can determine the most appropriate response strategy to apply when facing a crisis. The three clusters provided by Coombs are to be seen in appendix 5.

4.1.3 Consistency - The Crisis History

As previously mentioned, the second step in the process of assessing the amount of threat the organization is facing, concerns with two intensifying factors, consistency, and distinctiveness. The factor consistency refers to crisis history, which looks upon whether or not an organization has had either similar crisis or negatively associated incidents in the past. In fact, research states that if a given organization is experiencing multiple crises or incidents during its lifetime, it is a sign of an ongoing organizational issue that must be addressed. As shown in the SCCT figure, the arrows B1 and B2 state that an organization, where the factor of consistency is high, is more likely to experience direct and indirect reputational damage and is attributed more responsibility due to its past crises or incidents.

4.1.4 Distinctiveness - The Prior Relationship Reputation

The second intensifying factor, distinctiveness, is operationalized as an organization's prior relationship reputation. This factor also concerns an organization's history; however, in this context, it refers to how poorly or well the organization has treated its customers in the past. If there is a case

of treating customers poorly in the past, the distinctiveness is thereby low. Thus, that proves that the organization in question has shown low levels of consideration for its customers (Coombs 2006, 137). The arrows B3 and B4 illustrate, in the same vein as crisis history, that having treated customers poorly in the past will result in being attributed more crisis responsibility. Nonetheless, an organization will suffer more direct and indirect reputational harm than organizations that hold either a positive or neutral prior relationship reputation with its customers. Moreover, both propositions of crisis history and prior relationship reputation illuminate how an organization's considerations and handling of customers in the past can intensify the reputational threat when facing a current crisis. Also, it can amplify a crisis due to an unfavorable prior relationship and history (Coombs 2007, 169).

4.1.5 Emotions Causes Affective Reactions

As a crisis is a complete stimulus for attributions, it evokes emotions from customers and private individuals that can have severe implications for the organization in question. As people assign an organization's crisis responsibility, they trigger affective reactions that will thereby pose a threat to the organizational reputation. According to Coombs, people tend to search for causes of an unexpected and negative crisis event. This results in people making attributions in regards to the crisis, which generates certain emotions from customers and private people. In accordance with the attribution theory, there are mainly three types of emotions that are salient to a crisis event, which are: Sympathy, which is apparent if people view an organization as being a victim of the crisis. On the other hand, feelings of anger are evoked when people assign the organization responsibility for the crisis, as it could have been prevented. In more severe cases, people will feel schadenfreude towards the organization, particularly if the crisis is considered to be an intentional act as the organization is perceived to have purposefully placed customers at risk. Hence, in such extreme cases, people will draw pleasure from the suffering of the organization as it tries to recover from the crisis. As shown in the SCCT figure by arrow C, the greater the crisis responsibility that is assigned to an organization, the more the feeling of schadenfreude and anger will become intensified, as emotions of sympathy will be reduced drastically (Coombs & Holladay, 2005, s. 264-265).

Moreover, as arrow E illustrates, the proposition emotions correlate with the proposition behavioral intentions, since emotions trigger an effective reaction and affect how they interact with the organization facing a crisis.

4.1.6 Behavioral Intentions

Eventually, negative emotions will cause people to interact with an organization, mostly through the web. Research demonstrates that there are two factors in particular that will increase the possibility of people performing behavioral intentions.

As shown by arrow D in the SCCT figure, an organization's reputation posits that an organization with a negative reputation is more likely to experience customers or private people being less supportive if a crisis was to occur. This means that customers and community members are less likely to use its products or services and thereby stop being supporters of the organization. Thus, establishing and maintaining customer relationships are crucial, due to the risk of people changing their perception of an organizations reputation as it can cause behavioral ramifications. Likewise, arrow E in the figure posits that people who have increased feelings of anger or schadenfreude are also less likely to show supportive behavior towards an organization facing a crisis. The propositions, organizational reputation, and emotions are closely linked and have a certain effect in regards to purchase intentions and engaging in word-of-mouth (Coombs 2007, 169).

Thus, the voices of the receivers play a critical role during an organizational crisis. First and foremost, the responses from people are an indicator of whether or not the public has accepted the organization's crisis communication response. Secondly, the new Internet landscape of Web. 2.0 and, in particular, social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook are remarkable platform facilitators for people to voice opinions and interact with others across the globe (Coombs 2014, 44-45). Thus, it is vital for organizations undergoing a crisis to strategically use and embrace social media platforms when communicating to the general public. This entails careful consideration of the type of response strategy to utilize when a crisis has been exposed to the public. This leads to the question of how organizations facing a crisis can reduce or repair the reputational damage caused by a crisis.

4.1.7 Crisis Response Strategies

Having identified the type of crisis and the amount of attributed crisis responsibility towards an organization, the SCCT outlines several crisis response strategies that can be employed when facing a crisis. According to Coombs, utilizing the most suitable crisis response strategy can reduce the negative impact of a crisis. Coombs points out the importance of providing information to private people individuals in the initial stages of a crisis. Providing people with necessary and appropriate information will help them to cope psychologically with a given crisis. This could be performed by, for example, showing sympathy or concern for the affected ones, providing a corrective action plan,

or offering compensation. Performing otherwise, for example, by disclosing irrelevant information, can lead to crisis uncertainty among those affected (Holladay & Coombs, 2010, s. 40).

In a full-blown crisis, the perception of threat is accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty, as crisis happens unexpectedly and is therefore often shocking, dramatic, and chaotic for people. Uncertainty refers to the inability to define the present or predict the future. In fact, uncertainty and threat are closely linked as there will be questions about whether or not the organizational goal can be met due to the crisis. Moreover, research posits that people have two underlying needs when being involved in a crisis, either psychically or mentally, as uncertainty clouds the search for solutions. Firstly, it is suggested that people have predictive needs, which involves the capacity to predict what will happen in the future. Secondly, it is suggested that people have explanatory needs, which involves the capacity to understand the creation of the crisis. Thus, information value in a crisis should contribute to reducing people's uncertainty by keeping them informed, both during and after the crisis event. Organizations not being able to provide relevant and adequate information leads to uncertainty, which will result in people feeling a lack of control. Consequently, feelings of lack of control will become a motivator for transmission and creation of rumors and gossip. Rumors typically help people to make sense of crisis events, as they are uncertain situations. Unfortunately, rumors also lead to unfavorable behavior, which is mostly expressed on social media platforms (Ulmer 2015, 91-92).

The SCCT forms three primary groups of crisis response strategies and a supplemental response strategy, which are based on people's perceptions and attributed responsibility. The primary crisis response strategies are: 1) deny, 2) diminish, and 3) rebuild. The supplementary strategy is the 4) bolstering crisis response strategy (App. 5, p. 2).

1) The deny crisis response strategy attempts to prove that the organization in question had no responsibility for the outbreak of the crisis. Thus, the communication effort will rely solely on explaining that the crisis is in fact not a crisis, but rather a small incident or that an external factor is responsible for the crisis. Hence, if the organization manages to remove any suspicion or connections regarding the crisis towards the organization, it will thereby not suffer from any negative effects stemming from the crisis (Coombs 2007, 171).

2) The diminish crisis response strategy attempts to minimize or reduce the responsibility attributed towards the given organization or the perceived seriousness of the crisis. Likewise, in deny strategies, if an organization manages to persuade people into perceiving the crisis to be less negative or reduce the connection between the crisis and the organization, the organizational reputation is spared. However, utilizing the diminish strategy includes reliable evidence to support claims about, e.g., inability to control the situation that triggered the outbreak of the crisis. Failing to do so will have consequences as news media and the public eye will reject the organization's attempts to diminish its responsibility. Hence, people will seek other information sources, which can be viewed as being either credible or a persuasive source, but this is most likely to be news articles (Coombs 2007, 172).

3) The third strategy is the rebuild strategy, which seeks to improve or change any negative perceptions of the organization. This is performed by offering compensation to those affected or by offering an ideal apology. Another method of the rebuild strategy is to provide positive information during the crisis, particularly regarding the positive and decent work the organization has done in the past. Here, people might change their perception of the organization for the better, as they are reminded of previous positive actions (Holladay & Coombs, 2010, s. 41). The rebuilding strategy is more likely to be utilized with crises placed within the intentional crisis cluster, with a severe past crisis history, and unfavorable prior reputation, where the crisis presents a severe threat to the organizational reputation (Coombs 2007, 172).

4) The supplementary strategy is the bolstering strategy, which does not offer the same function as the primary strategies, such as rebuild strategy, as the supplementary strategy offers minimal opportunities to improve reputational assets. The key is to draw sympathy from people by emphasizing that the organization is, in fact, a victim (Coombs 2007, 172).

4.1.8 Critical reflections of the SCCT

The SCCT is limited in regards to addressing how information form (word-of-mouth, traditional media, and social media communication) may influence people's crisis communication behavior. The SCCT model does not take into consideration the channel or sender of the crisis information, which is an important factor to consider, as people interpret messages differently depending on the source, e.g., information being shaped by a journalist versus a supporter of the given company (Austin, Fisher, & Yan Jin, 2012, s. 191-192). Another limitation concerns the fact that the SCCT

does not incorporate tools for analyzing different stakeholder groups, which might perceive a crisis differently, depending on the type of relationship each stakeholder group has with a company.

4.2 Theory of Crisis Management by Apology

Within the field of crisis response strategies and crisis communication theories in general, apologia plays an important role in understanding organizations' responses. Theories regarding apologia constitute another relevant area of research within crisis response literature. Thus, Keith Michael Hearit's theory on apologia will be utilized in this thesis, as several crisis communication researchers, such as Coombs and Benoit, refer to Hearit's theory. Additionally, Hearit is one of the few scholars who has managed to outline detailed research of how to utilize apologies as a strategy when organizations, institutions or individuals are facing a public crisis. Hearit's theory on apologia is a practically-oriented and theoretically-oriented framework, which concerns the communication after the apparent wrongdoing, rather than looking at the unethical aspects of the wrongdoing itself. The theory consists of two procedures explaining and describing the process of apologizing, which is referred to as the content and manner of apologia or communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2007, s. 89). Thus, Hearit's theory seems suitable for the purpose of this thesis, as it will help give insight into United Airlines' apologia as the theory is a conceptual tool to help investigate organizations' crisis responses when apologizing. Furthermore, parts of the theory will not be utilized, as the SCCT covers those aspects, which concerns crisis communication strategies.

4.2.1 Apology Versus Apologia

In order to fully grasp Hearit's theory on apologia, a distinction between the terminologies of 'apology' and 'apologia' is relevant, as the terms serve different meanings. Considering the term apologia, the first inclination is to confuse the word with the term *apology*. The term *apologia* derives from the Greek apologia, a derivative of a word meaning "defense" or "speech in defense." Apology, on the other hand, is the modern wording, which refers to "to acknowledge and express regret for a fault without defense" (Hearit 2006, 2-4). This means that the wording apology refers to someone who is representing themselves or an organization acknowledging guilt and thereby presenting themselves or the accused ones as defenseless. This is performed by expressing concern for the victims and affected ones; however, it is typically presented by offering a vigorous counteroffensive.

Hearit's distinction between the two terms is crucial. He uses apologia as a broad term that indicates that the organization facing a crisis responds to public criticism by bringing a vigorous and compelling response as a defense. Hence, the distinction between the two terms does not suggest that the word *apology* is the antonym of apologia. However, as their roots are closely related, there is a tendency among people to use the terms interchangeably. This means that the broader term *apologia* may, in fact, contain an apology by offering a persuasive speech that, in reality, attempts to reduce the reputational threat of the organization (Hearit 2006, 4-5).

4.2.2 The Process of Offering an Apologia

According to Hearit, the process of offering an apology to the affected ones and the public eye consists of a complicated process—one that involves a series of stages. This section will present Hearit's outlined apologetic ethics, often referred to as communication ethics and the manner of communication.

4.2.3 Communication Ethics

In collaboration with Hearit's colleague, Sandra L. Borden, a communication ethic—also named apologetic ethics—is elaborated in connection with the process of offering an ideal and ethical apology. Here, there is an emphasis on the organization's communication after the claimed wrongdoing, rather than looking at the ethics of the given offense. By using this model as a tool, a more specific evaluation of an apologia can be examined by evaluating which criteria of Hearit's ideal communication ethics lives up to the standards of an appropriate apology (Frandsen & Johansen, 2007, s. 91). In this regard, Hearit and Borden outline two methods of procedures when investigating an organization's apologia, which are the manner and the content of the communication. These two procedures will be elaborated in the subsequent section (Frandsen & Johansen, 2007, s. 93).

4.2.4 Manner of the Communication

According to Hearit, an apology offered during a crisis must live up to certain ethical standards. Thus, an apology must, firstly, be *truthful*, which indicates that the spokesperson offering the apology must not lack or leave out important information. Lack of relevant information can result in making the situation more severe due to people changing their perception negatively if relevant information is not provided. In addition to that, it is important that the spokesperson offering the apology does not lie or deceive when providing information in connection with the apology (Hearit 2006, 64).

Secondly, the ideal apology must also be *sincere*, as the apology aims to express a sense of regret for the wrongdoing and the negative impact it has caused. By offering a sincere apology, the spokesperson also typically seeks to make things right again and restore relationships with customers and stakeholders (Hearit 2006, 65). Hearit posits that there are three components for the ideal apology to be sincere. First of all, the spokesperson offering the apology must demonstrate a sense of good-faith effort as an attempt to reconcile with customers and stakeholders. Here, the apologist would typically prove their sincerity by carrying out actions in the form of offering and implementing a corrective action plan as a means to solve the given issues. Secondly, the spokesperson's sincerity must not be solely rooted in the organization's operational performance, but must also focus on the communicative performance. This means that execution of the corrective action plan must be announced by informing the public of each step that will be implemented to solve the problem. The final component of offering a sincere apology involves the spokesperson demonstrating evidence of the apology being voluntary. This is a vital component, as otherwise, people might perceive that the apology is offered due to coercion or to address the media, rather than being rooted a genuine desire to reconcile with customers (Hearit 2006, 66).

The third characteristic of an ideal apology concerns the apology being *timely*. This consists of the spokesperson performing the apology at the point of time when customers or the public recognizes the wrongdoing. Delaying the apology can result in people doubting the sincerity of the apology. Likewise, an apology must not be performed too early either, as this can lead to doubts regarding the motives behind the response. Similarly, if it is offered too late, people may perceive the apologist as being repellent and lacking empathy. Additionally, offering an apology too late can also be interpreted as the apologist or organization lacking a true commitment to reconciliation with customers and stakeholders and only offering an apology due to people requiring one (Hearit 2006, 67).

Moreover, an apology must demonstrate evidence of it being *voluntary*, which means that an apology is offered due to moral reflection, rather than it being any form of coercion. If the apology is viewed as being involuntary, the offender's trust towards the apologist and organization will be jeopardized. As a result, the affected ones will typically feel insulted and unvalued (Hearit 2006, 67).

The fifth characteristic concerns the apologist being able to *address all stakeholders*, which is related to people who have been either directly or indirectly affected by the wrongdoing. In other

words, it concerns people who have been affected by the wrongdoing either morally or physically. There is a propensity among organizations and individuals to offer an apology to solely address their closets constituencies, rather than addressing all relevant stakeholders that could have been affected or offended by the wrongdoing (Hearit 2006, 68).

Finally, an apology must be performed in an *appropriate context*, which is concerned with the accessibility for the offered apology. This means that the apology must be accessible for all individuals, for example, on the organization's website (Hearit 2006, 68).

Even though the listed characteristics of what is to be considered an ethical and ideal apology are significant, the manner of an apology is, in fact, incomplete without considering the content of the communicated apology (Hearit 2006, 69).

4.2.5 Content of the Apology

According to Hearit, considering that the given content of the offered speech must live up to the listed features, the perception of an ideal and ethical apology:

- Explicitly acknowledges wrongdoing
- Fully accepts responsibility
- Expresses regret
- Identifies with injured stakeholders
- Asks for forgiveness
- Seeks reconciliation with injured stakeholders
- Fully discloses information related to the offense
- Provides an explanation that addresses legitimate expectations of the stakeholders
- Offers to perform an appropriate corrective action
- Offers appropriate compensation

At the very least, the spokesperson offering the apology must 1) *explicitly acknowledge* on behalf of the organization or the apologist itself being responsible or having some responsibility for an unethical act. Thereby, the apologist validates the moral claims of those affected. By acknowledging the wrongdoing, the spokesperson also has to 2) *fully accept responsibility* by stating their guilt of committing the wrongdoing. By doing so, the apologist proves that it is not attempting to shift the blame by pointing fingers at external or internal scapegoats. Moreover, in order to attempt to restore trust between the apologist and the offended ones, it is essential to

convey dismay for having acted wrongly, which is performed by 3) *expressing regret*. In addition to this, the apologist must prove they are capable of showing empathy by 4) *identifying injured stakeholders*. Here, it is essential to frame the wrongdoing from the affected individuals' point of view by using the appropriate context, words, and tone when expressing empathy towards the affected, which shows the apology is proportionate and legitimate, and thereby increasing the chances of restoring trust.

The fundamental purpose of offering an apology is to take responsibility for the harm that the offense has caused and to take steps to resolve the problem. The damaged relationship can be restored by 5) *asking for forgiveness* for the wrongdoing. Eventually, this aims to 6) *seek reconciliation* between the offender and those affected, as it is most likely that reconciliation is of interest for both parties (Hearit 2006, 71). Another crucial element when seeking reconciliation is to 7) *fully disclose information* related to the offense. However, disclosing information must be carefully considered, especially when publishing confidential information, which can lead to legal and financial penalties or unduly harm those affected or offended by the incident.

Moreover, an ethical apology must also 8) *provide an explanation that addresses legitimate expectations of the stakeholders*. In other words, the apologist must be able to express the apology in such way that is meaningful to those impacted. Thus, effects and causes of the offense must be discussed to meet the expectations of those affected (Hearit 2006, 72). Ultimately, the apologist must 9) offer to perform the appropriate corrective action. Here, the apologist expresses how the wrongdoing has taught them an important lesson and, thereby, declare that the apologist will neither repeat the offense nor engage in any type of wrongdoing actions in the future (Hearit 2006, 72-73). Finally, the apologist must 10) *offer appropriate compensation*, which often consists of a financial settlement; however, other forms of compensation are also possible (Hearit 2006, 73).

4.4 Robert M Entman's Theory on Framing

Organizations facing a crisis involve crisis managers specifically to gain a clear understanding of the crisis situation before issuing a response. Therefore, there should be an emphasis placed on considering the correct and appropriate crisis response, as the crisis type depends on the amount of attributed responsibility. However, there is a tendency amongst crisis managers to overlook how the public eye perceives the event—not the actual facts concerning a crisis event, but rather the facts constructed and shaped by the media. The way a crisis event is framed or described by the media can influence people's evaluation of an organization and they can attribute more or less

responsibility due to being influenced by the media's persuasive use of rhetoric (Cho & Gower, 2006, s. 420). This can cause emotional responses by the public, which likely influences judgmental and negative perceptions of the crisis. Thus, the way news coverage frames a crisis is a relevant predictor of understanding and uncovering how frames can influence people's emotional feelings and attributions of crisis responsibility. Studies on framing are, therefore, essential and beneficial to consider when managers communicate about a given crisis (Cho & Gower, 2006, s. 421).

In connection with this, media framing is particularly relevant, as it is concerned with how news stories are framed and portrayed in news stories released by the media. The way news media incorporate frames when publishing stories is a subject that has been massively overlooked. However, over the past decade, and as a result of the rapid progress in digitalization, e.g., the Internet, framing of news has received more attention than ever before. In fact, in recent years, it has become highly relevant to understanding the functionality of news and its effects. The effects of news media can shape people's perceptions because journalists utilize framing to construct social reality by providing meaning to visual elements, words, and phrases. This part of the journalist's functionality is referred to as 'symbol handlers,' as they use framing selectively to shape how people define the content in news articles.

Moreover, media frames cover a wide span of topics, as people across the globe are more interconnected than ever before and news is, thus, more reachable through several electronic devices. Topics can consist of, e.g., international disputes and conflicts, environmental issues, and risk communication. Thus, media framing is viewed as a powerful tool and is most beneficial for the journalist or the media as framing in the news is often used to define whose point of view or social reality is predominant in a hassle or struggle between different groups (Hallahan 1999, 223).

Robert M. Entman, professor of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University, has outlined a theory that provides insight into the elements of framing by examining the elements of priming and agenda setting in an effort to gain an understanding of media power. In connection with this, Entman emphasizes the concept of 'media biases.' As biases in accordance with media are a newer concept being investigated by researchers, Entman proposes three major meanings to define biases. The first type of bias is referred to as distortion bias, which indicates that news media distorts or falsifies fact-based information to favor the news. The second type of bias is content bias, which is utilized when news media purposely highlights one side of a disagreement or argument, rather than presenting the news equally, which would provide the best presentation of a

topic. The third type is decision-making, which refers to the mindset and motivation of the journalist writing about a given topic in an attempt to construct a particular bias (Entman 2007, 163). According to Entman, media framing involves news media selecting aspects of how people perceive 'reality' and then connecting those chosen aspects in a narrative that constructs a specific interpretation which will favor either the news media or the journalist. As Entman defines framing:

"Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." (Entman 1993, 52).

Furthermore, as Entman states, fully developed frames typically perform one of the four functions, which are outlined as: *define problems, specify causes, convey moral assessments, and endorse remedies*. The common purpose of all the four outlined functions is to alter and construct people's preferences and interpretations through priming (Entman 2010, 391).

The first distinct function of framing, 'define problems,' is a frequently employed tool for practitioners and researchers to examine public discussion regarding a certain issue. Here, the journalist will focus on particular bargaining and negotiation between, e.g., the disputants. Moreover, researchers within the field of organizational behavior also employ framing of issues as a tool to analyze and gain an understanding of decisions made by the disputants and underpin why and how those decisions were made. Framing, therefore, is a vital component when seeking to determine social problems and morality when dealing with issues.

The second type is 'causal analysis,' which concerns responsibility and cause. In other words, who is to blame or credit for a given event. This could regard either environmental or personal issues, which can be crucial factors considering the media's power in amplifying people's interpretation in a certain direction, which indicates whom to blame. Nonetheless, the negatively perceived interpretations people construct due to causal frames may not always reflect actual facts, but rather how the journalist has framed the story. Thus, this type of framing can have crucial consequences if an episode is framed negatively, or where a large amount of responsibility is attributed despite the facts potentially not being true (Entman 2010, 391).

The third type of framing is 'make moral judgments,' which is how news media make a moral judgment regarding a particular problem. The underlying aim here is to pass on the preferred moral judgment onto the news media's audience. The news media thereby constructs what people perceive as morally right and appropriate on the one hand, and, on the other hand, what is perceived to be immoral (Entman 2010, 391-392).

The fourth type is 'remedy promotion' where the media promotes and outlines suggestions for certain actions, which the given organization should endorse to resolve the issues surrounding the organization. The media thereby persuade readers to hold a specific belief by promoting the desired result and by making use of strategic messaging in, for example, news articles (Entman 2010, 395).

5.0 Analysis

The analysis section is split into three separate but interconnected subsections to provide a transparent structure. Nonetheless, by working hermeneutic, is another reason for separating the analysis section into three main sections. This is a deliberate choice in order to gain an understanding of each section, and thereby, a greater understanding of the crisis a whole.

In the first section, an examination of United Airlines' crisis communication during the passenger removal versus people's perception of United Airlines' communicative effort will be conducted. The analysis of United Airlines' response strategy shall consolidate the theoretical framework of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Timothy Coombs. The second section will comprise of an examination of Michael Hearit's Crisis Management by Apology, which will be utilized to analyze United Airlines' apologetic effort during the crisis. The third and final section will consist of an examination of the frames presented by the media, which will be analyzed to gain an understanding of how the media has portrayed the crisis and the potential effects thereafter. The findings from the analysis will create the foundation for a discussion of the evidential consequences of United Airlines' crisis communication. Hence, the analysis and the forthcoming discussion aim to answer the problem statement.

5.1 SCCT– How may the passenger removal crisis be defined?

As previously mentioned, the SCCT is a comprehensive tool for investigating the impacts of a crisis by tapping into perspectives of the given organization and also people's perceptions and reactions to the crisis. As the theory features seven factors, the SCCT section will be looked upon in chronological order, as Coombs proposes a step-by-step process to follow to eventually assess the attributed crisis responsibility and thereby the reputational threat. The initial assessment is to identify the crisis type as it generates a predictable amount of crisis responsibility (cf. section 4.1.2). In connection with this, Coombs outlines three crisis clusters, which are based on the attributions of responsibility ascribed to an organization. The crisis can either be categorized as falling within the victim, accidental or intentional cluster.

    The crisis broke out on social media on April 10, 2017 as videos showed Dr. Dao, a 69-year old Vietnamese-American doctor, being violently removed from the United flight 3411. As mentioned in the introduction, the removal of the passenger had happened the day before, on April 9, 2017. According to United Airlines, the episode escalated after a common issue of overbooking

passengers occurred and Dr. Dao refused to give up his seat. Notably, it came apparent that Dr. Dao and his wife had to give up their seats for United Airlines employees to be seated.

In connection with the above-mentioned CEO of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz, publishes a press release regarding the episode on the airline's website and on United Airlines' official Facebook and Twitter accounts. The media across the world managed to pick up the statement by Oscar Munoz the exact same day, and several news articles were released for the public to see. The statements made in the published press release was expressed as the following:

"This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers. Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened. We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation." – Oscar Munoz, CEO., United Airlines" (App. 2, p. 1).

The general opinion from the public is highly relevant to examine, as Coombs argues that the attributed crisis responsibility greatly depends on how people react and respond to a crisis. Starting the analysis with the initial statement, a predominant but not an exclusive amount of responses from private people have been collected from social media platforms. The comments are based on their perception of the type of crisis cluster United Airline can be categorized as. Here, it is particularly interesting to examine people's reactions and perceptions in connection with Oscar Munoz's initial response, as presented above. Notably, United Airlines' received a total amount from both Facebook and Twitter of 163,000 comments from private people. In addition, 12,000 people have shared the initial statement from United Airlines' official Facebook page. Nonetheless, on Tuesday, April 11, 2017, the episode was one of the top-trending topics occurring on the social media platform, Twitter. Here, people utilized the platform to express their perception and feelings towards United Airlines and Oscar Munoz's statement (CBS News 2017). This is clearly a massive amount of attention, which apparently is unusual, as United Airlines Facebook page's highest amount of comments was visible back in May 2016, where it had received only 556 comments.

Based on the collected data both from social platforms, Facebook and Twitter, and the online web surveys, a clear illustration of people's attributed crisis responsibility is evident. Among the collected data stemming from Facebook and Twitter, the examined comments revealed that 95% hold United Airlines accountable for the episode, while 5% remain neutral. The examination from

the web surveys showed that corresponding indications. 100% of the asked respondents in the web surveys share the opinion that United Airlines is responsible.

Furthermore, no fewer than 89% share the same opinion of United Airlines having acted intentionally. On the other hand, 11% remain neutral. Between the collected comments, there were 0% who perceived United Airlines neither victims nor as the episode being an accident. The pie chart to the right shows data from the web survey, revealing that 100% of the respondents place United Airlines within the intentional cluster.
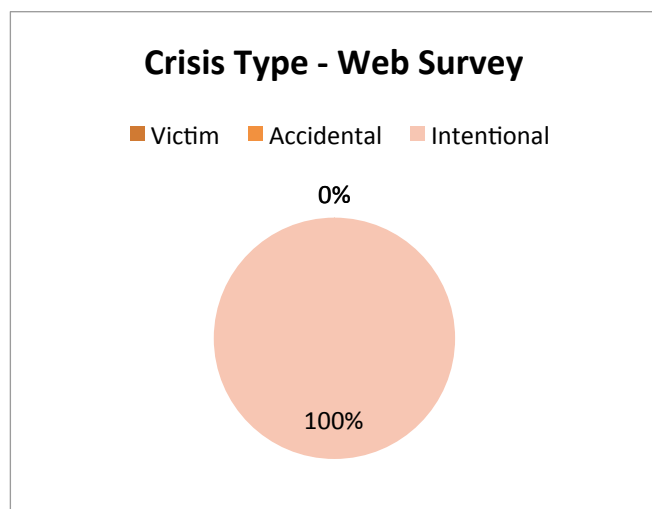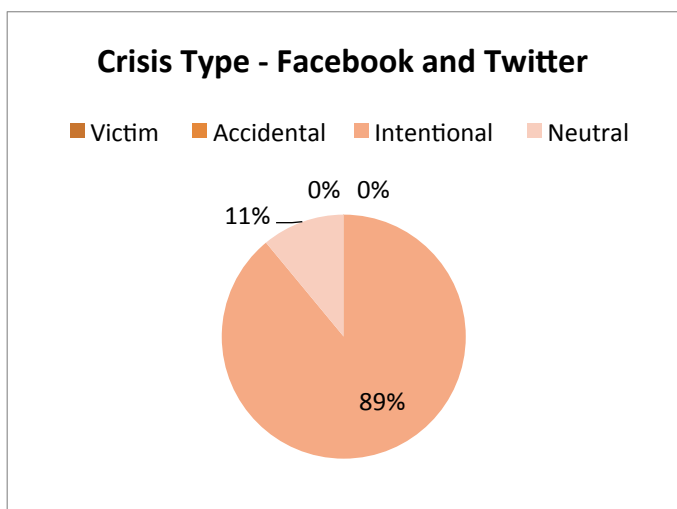
Among the collected comments and answers from the web survey, there is a clear indication of people having a negative perception towards United Airlines, as this statement exemplifies a general opinion concerning the episode being an intentional act.

The following is a statement from a private person, Zebrafinch, who expresses negatively about the episode on United Airlines' official Twitter page in connection with its initial statement, as shown here:

"Not enough. Outrageous behavior by the airline. What we and the entire world saw harms the whole country. And at this time, too. VERY BAD." (App. 3.1, comment 1)

This person clearly expresses that United Airlines is responsible for the crisis by describing United Airlines' way of handling the situation as 'outrageous.' This indicates that the person holds the perception that United Airlines went beyond all standards of what is perceived as decent handling of the episode.

Another example is taken from the web survey, as Raquel Rodrigues Roque poses the following statement concerning the crisis type:

"This was a terrible behavior by UA, and obviously an intentional act by UA employees! Difficult to actually understand how this can happen in the US." (App. 3.3, comment 11).

This particular customer perceives United Airlines for being responsible, due to perceiving the act as being intentional. This is expressed by the words 'terrible' and obviously.'

The examination suggests that the United Airlines episode can be placed within the intentional cluster. This is especially evident because a higher percentage of people perceive United Airlines as being responsible for the episode. Nonetheless, respondents and comments express that since crewmembers forced the man involuntarily by dragging the passenger out twice, it clearly shows an intentional act. The episode is being placed within the intentional cluster and can further be categorized as *Organizational misdeed with injuries,* which the SCCT proposes in connection with the intentional cluster, *where stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur* (App. 5, p. 1).

The examination indicates that people ascribe a high degree of *initial crisis responsibility attribution* based on the examination of the initial statements offered by the CEO, Oscar Munoz. Consequently, United Airlines is placed within the intentional cluster, which serves the highest form of reputational threat, versus, e.g., the victim cluster, which only generates mild reputational threat.

5.1.1. Crisis History – Consistency

According to Coombs, the next step in the process of assessing the levels of reputational threat an organization may face during a crisis is to examine two highly intensifying factors: *consistency and distinctiveness* (cf. section 4.1.3). The examination of consistency factor, now referring to United Airlines' past crisis history, the examination revealed several negative associated episodes and

crises. A few of the most noticeable crises and incidents will be examined in this part of the thesis to gain an understanding of how severe its previous episodes were and effects thereof.

United Airlines is no stranger to issues and crises—especially on social media. In regard to this, one particular episode generated massive attention on social media platforms across the world. The episode occurred in 2008 and concerned the Canadian musician, Dave Carroll, who was a passenger on a United Airlines flight, waiting for takeoff. However, the young musician witnessed the baggage handlers throwing his guitar with no considerations. Thus, Carroll called for assistance but was told there was nothing they could do. This resulted in the guitar being broken into pieces, and thus, Dave Carroll claimed for compensation and negotiated for months. Hence, Dave Carroll was denied compensation after one year of negotiating with United Airlines. Due to the denied compensation and United Airlines' mishandling of the episode, the offended passenger released a music video "United Breaks Guitars" on YouTube in July of 2009 (The Guardian 2009). The video went viral across the world, as people reacted negatively towards United Airlines' handling of the episode and thereby supporting the young musician. An example of a private person's reaction to this is shown here:

A well-known Hollywood filmmaker Ava DuVernay expressed the following in connection with the episode:

"This could be me or you next time. Shame on @United who broke customer trust + instigated this. Shame on the airport cops. Cowardly assault." (App. 3.1, comment 2).

Here, Ava DuVernay expressed her disgust towards United Airlines on Twitter, where 3,481 others expressed support for the statement and 1,933 people commented in regard to the content of Ava DuVernay's comment. The words 'shame on' 'broke,' and 'trust' indicate that Ava DuVernay criticizes both United Airlines handling and its employees for breaking the guitar. Hence, the episode generated negative perception towards United Airlines. Nonetheless, it can be assumed the massive negative attention paid off as Dave Carroll was compensated with 3000 US dollars (Tran 2009).

This was one negatively perceived episode out of several controversial episodes that United Airlines have caused over the years. To illustrate the degree and number of issues caused by the airplane, some are listed here:

- In 2012, United Airlines was facing a crisis on social media due to a United Airlines passenger, Jim Stanek, a disabled Iraq war veteran, who was mishandled by a United Airlines staff member. It was reported that the staff kicked his service dog and asked if he was 'retarded' – referring to his inability to stand up in line with the other passengers. The war veteran was returning home from war and had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and had gone through a traumatic brain surgery. Jim Stanek posted a video about the episode on YouTube, which caused massive attention (Huffington Post 2012).

- In 2013, United Airlines was once again the headlines in news articles and the media. This time, United Airlines staff members almost killed a dog, as they left Janet Sinclair's greyhound racing dog for an hour in the 35-degree heat. She also witnessed the baggage handlers kicking her dog's crate repeatedly (Daily Mail Online 2013).

- In 2015, a 15-year-old girl with autism and her family were removed from a United Airlines flight during an emergency landing. The staff members did not provide a reason; however, later, United Airlines stated that it was due to 'safety and comfort' of the other passengers, despite the fact that no other passenger on the flight had complained (Daily Mail Online 2015).

- On March 26, 2017, two girls were denied access to a United Airlines flight due to wearing leggings. This resulted in United Airlines becoming wrapped up in a social media firestorm, named 'leggingsgate.' The episode quickly went viral, in large part due to celebrities expressing their disgust towards United Airlines' mishandling of the episode (The Washington Post 2017).

- The above-mentioned episodes were a few out of many instances caused by United Airlines. However, the controversial way of handling customers continues after the crisis with Dr. Dao, the removed passenger.

- On May 9, 2017, a rabbit was found dead after a United Airlines flight, which resulted in owners of the rabbit to take legal action against the organization (Reuters 2017).

- On May 10, 2017, a woman allegedly claimed that she was told by United Airlines crew members to urinate in a cup while on board the plane, as the staff denied access to the toilet (The Independent 2017).

- On May 27, 2017, United Airlines offered an apology after a staff member accusing a gay father of fondling his child (CNN World 2017).

- On July 6, 2017, United Airlines offers an apology after giving away a two-year-old's purchased seat (CNBC 2017).

- On March 15, 2018, a French bulldog puppy died in-flight after a United Airlines cabin attendant ordered it be stowed in an overhead bin. In this latest crisis, U.S. Senator John Kennedy interfered by introducing a bill that prevents animals from being stored in any heated areas of an aircraft (The New York Times 2018).

The examination of United Airlines' consistency factors revealed that the organization has many negatively related episodes in the past. The examination also revealed that a predictable level of people holds the airline accountable for mishandling the episodes. This is apparent from the above-shown comment, where a celebrity expressed how United Airlines should be ashamed and have broken people's trust. In fact, this was one out of many comments where people expressed the same point of view as Ava DuVernay. Thus, the examination indicates that people have attributed more responsibility towards United Airlines, due to its past negatively related episodes.

5.1.2 Distinctiveness Factors - Prior relational reputation

The second intensifying factor has to do with distinctiveness factors, which refers to how well or poorly a given organization has treated its customers in the past. In multiple cases of having treated customers badly, the trustworthiness of an organization will be low, as it indicates a low concern for customers. This means a negative prior relational reputation will most likely have a negative impact on the amount of attributed crisis responsibility in regards to a current crisis (cf. section 4.1.4.).

The examination of people's perception of distinctiveness factors revealed that people had ascribed the airline with several negative associated nicknames on social platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Additionally, it was apparent that private people, both on Facebook and Twitter, have created pages referring to the organization negatively. A few of the most striking pages are named 'Boycott United Airlines', where a total of 13 different groups with the same name were to be found. The page with most subscribers was created in 2012 and contained a total of 15,000 private accounts. Another page on Facebook is named 'United Airlines Memes' where people are joking negatively about the organization. This page was created in 2016 and has a total of 2914 subscribers. Nonetheless, another striking page was named 'United Airlines Sucks', where seven different pages with that name were to be found. Here, the largest page accounts for 5,300 people who have subscribed on the page, which was created in 2009 (Facebook).

Adding to the investigation of United Airlines' treatment of former customers, statements from private people commenting about their experience with United Airlines is rather relevant to

examine. Hence, the examination revealed a widely consistent perception regarding United Airlines having treated its customers poorly in the past, as some examples show evidence of here:

A previous customer named Sharon Dvorkin Solotky expressed a poor experience with the organization in the year of 2014, as shown below:

"Shame on you United. I understand full well weight restrictions, but do not tell me you had no choice but to boot a 91 year old WW11 vet from that flight. Definitely poor judgment. United must hire complete idiots. I will never fly United." (App. 3.2, comment 3).

The customer clearly states discontent with the organization, as United Airlines removed a 91-year-old passenger due to weight restrictions. This statement illustrates a widely held perception about the airlines having treated its customers poorly. It could be argued that an individual stating 'I will never flying United' had generated a negative perception due to the given experience. Noteworthy, this example represents a widely held perception among the examined comments.

Another example is from a previous customer named Trent Mcbride, who expressed multiple poor experiences with the airlines, as shown here:

*"I have flown for the past 25 years, and United is by **FAR the worst** carrier on the planet!! **Rude people** and **horrible service. Constantly overbooking** and **delayed flights. No compensation** for spending the night on the airport floor. **What a joke of an airline. United sucks** gorilla balls. This has the be **the worst end to a vacation in my life.** A week in Vegas with my wife was wonderful until the **jackasses at United screwed the pooch on our flight**."* (App. 3.2, comment 4).

The customer writes multiple negative experiences with the airline. Firstly, the customer expresses that United Airlines are the worst carrier in the world. Secondly, the person expresses an unacceptable experience with United Airlines staff members by stating that the staff were rude and provided horrible service. Overall, from the customer point of view, it illustrates how the airline has treated its customers extremely poorly.

The examination of comments from private people on social media revealed a commonly held view regarding United Airlines having treated its customers exceptionally poorly in the past. As people are highly aware of United Airlines' previous incidents and crises, they are more likely to attribute more crisis responsibility towards the ongoing crisis, since people already had negative associations with the airline. Thus, the organizational reputation is at a higher risk to be harmed. As the SCCT model illustrates, the more attributed crisis responsibility, the greater the damage to the organizational reputation. Since the examination revealed high levels of attributed crisis responsibility, it is more likely that United Airlines' reputation will be damaged, as it is placed within the intentional cluster and there is the existence of crisis history and an unfavorable prior relationship reputation.

5.1.3 Emotions

As a crisis tends to evoke emotions among private people, the type of emotions people generate tends to be sympathy, anger or schadenfreude (cf. section 4.1.5). In order to understand people's emotions, both comments on social media in connection with the initial statement and the web survey were examined. The examination of private people's comments regarding the episode with the passenger removal on Twitter and Facebook, revealed accordingly: 2% express a sense of sympathy towards the airlines, while 77% express emotions of anger and 15 % express schadenfreude, as shown in the pie chart. An addition, 6% is somehow neutral towards the airline in regards to the episode. The examination from the web survey revealed that 0% express sympathy, 93% express feelings of anger, and 7% express feelings of schadenfreude.
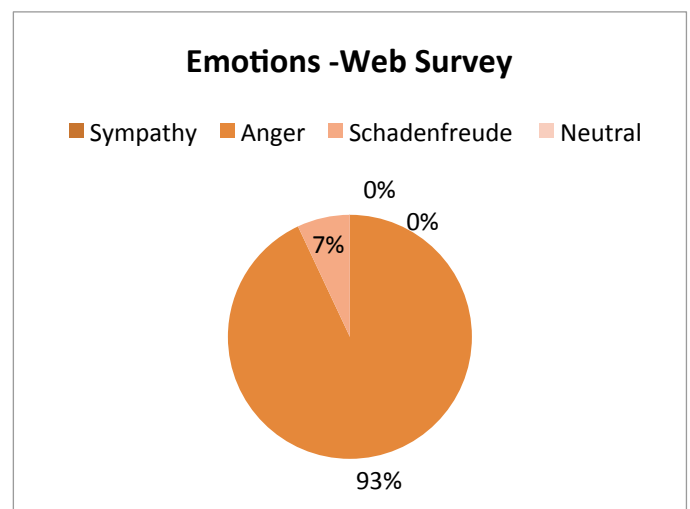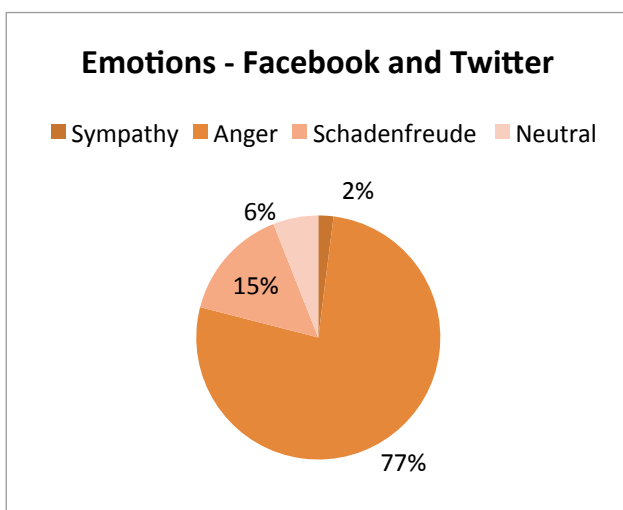
The pie chart shows little sympathy towards the airlines was apparent. However, as anger and schadenfreude emotions are more harmful towards the organizational reputation, those types of comments will be examined. Also, as there is a higher percentage of people having negative feelings, thus, it is more relevant to investigate.

Moreover, examples of private people's emotions are shown here:

*"That man was **forcibly dragged** from his seat by two large men, he ended **up bleeding and terrified** because **you needed seats for your employees?** What part of the definition of "volunteer" do you not understand? And this is your **comment on the situation?** What is the matter with you? I will never subject my family to your airline again. BOYCOTT UNITED."* (App. 3.2, comment 5).

A previous customer, Carol Callicotte Belmon, expressed emotions of anger on Facebook regarding the episode. The way this person chooses to phrase the episode as 'forcibly dragged' and 'ended up bleeding and terrified' referring to Dr. Dao shows clear evidence of this person expressing that the episode was unacceptable. This person continues the statement, drawing upon United Airlines' reason for dragging Dr. Dao out of the plane, which was to have its employees seated on the plane. Additionally, this person also criticizes Oscar Munoz's statement regarding the episode and encourages people to boycott the airline. In addition, it is evident that 16,000 people have pressed a button stating that they 'like' the given comment. This could be interpreted as those people liking the comment, and that they support and hold the same perception of the content of what the customer wrote.

Other examples of more severe expression are shown here:

"I hope he sues you so hard you go out of business. My family flies several times a year and we will NEVER fly United. You're a disgusting company." (App. 3.2, comment 6).

And:

"Hope he sues the bejesus out of your company. I'm cashing out my frequent flyer miles and never using you again! (…)". (App. 3.1, comment 5.)

The above two comments are both previous customers who have written their discontent towards the airline, as both customers write that they hope the removed passenger sues United Airlines. Also, both customers are expressing that they will never fly with the airline again. By the wording

'hope' in connection with 'sues,' it indicates emotions of anger and especially schadenfreude. Hence, the customers would feel satisfied to witness United Airlines suffer from the crisis. Moreover, the above comments have reached 1.3 thousand 'likes', while the second comment has reached an astonishing number of 21,000 'likes.' This could be interpreted as there being a widely held perception among thousands of people hoping that United Airlines will be sued and thereby suffer due to the episode.

5.1.4 Behavioral Intentions

People tend to generate negative emotions due to a crisis, which thereby triggers behavioral intentions in the form of purchase intentions and word-of-mouth. There are particularly two factors, which will increase the possibility of behavioral ramifications, which are organizations prior reputation and emotions (cf. section 4.1.6). The examination of comments from Twitter and Facebook revealed that 4% of private people expressing a sense of favorable behavioral intentions towards United Airlines. On the other hand, 86% expressing unfavorable intentions, and 10% remaining neutral as shown in the pie chart. Additionally, the measurements from the web survey correlate with the statistics from the gathered comments, as the web survey showed that 6% expressing favorable intention versus unfavorable intentions were at 57%, and 37% were neutral.

The high number of unfavorable intentions in the form of negative word-of-mouth towards United Airlines is most likely the effect of people feeling anger or schadenfreude towards the airline, as the examination revealed. Nonetheless, United Airlines' several episodes of prior crisis history have caused negative ramifications for its prior reputation. Consequently, people utilize platform facilitators to voice their opinions and engage in word-of-mouth by attempting to interact with the organization or with others. The examination of comments on social media also revealed that the way people expressed unfavorable behavioral intentions was by urging other people to boycott the airline due to the crisis. In fact, the word 'boycott' among the examined comment was apparent 78 times. Also, people expressing that the airline should be sued were expressed 61 times.

The examination shows high levels of reputational ramifications for United Airlines in the form of people boycotting the airline, which most likely will lead to a financial decrease. This will most likely be the result of suffering from severe reputational damage. Arguably, this should give rise to conduct its business in a more ethical way by providing a suitable response strategy to reduce the reputational damage and seek reconciliation with customers.

5.1.5 United Airlines' Response Strategies

It is paramount to choose the most appropriate response strategy when facing a crisis. The type of response strategy an organization employs depends greatly on the identified crisis type and amount of attributed crisis responsibility. The most suitable response strategy can reduce people's negative perception and, thereby, reduce the negative impacts of a crisis (cf. section 4.1.7).

5.1.5.1 United Airlines' Initial Response Strategy

United Airlines' first response was published on both Facebook and Twitter on April 10, 2017 (App. 2.1, p.1). The statement was published by the CEO of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz, offering an apology for having "re-accommodated" four customers. It could be argued that the CEO, on behalf of United Airlines, was utilizing the *justification* response strategy, which belongs to the *diminish* response strategy. By utilizing this type of strategy, the aim is to attempt to minimize the damage associated with the crisis (cf. section 4.1.7). The response strategy was an attempt to minimize the crisis by minimizing the seriousness of the damage caused by United Airlines. This is clear because the CEO addressed the episode by stating its team will conduct its own review of what happened, rather than addressing Dr. Dao's injuries caused by United Airlines employees. Instead, Oscar Munoz referred to Dr. Dao as "customer" and "passenger," which might come across rather impersonal. Nonetheless, Oscar Munoz attempts to minimize the seriousness and gravity of the crisis by using the word "re-accommodate" to describe Dr. Dao being dragged through the plane violently while bleeding. Here, the choice of phrasing the violent episode comes off as overly bureaucratic insensitive.

Furthermore, adding fuel to the fire, an internal email from Oscar Munoz to its employees at United Airlines was leaked on April 11, 2017. In it, Oscar Munoz describes the passenger, Dr. Dao as "disruptive and belligerent." and further wrote that *"employees followed established procedures for dealing with situations like this"* (App. 2, p. 1). This was an unfortunate mistake by Oscar Munoz, as the content of the email was picked up by several news articles and was instantly broadcast all over social media platforms. This email supports the argument regarding United Airlines utilizing a justification response strategy. Also, as Coombs argues, organizations or spokespersons using this type of response strategy might also claim that the victim deserved what happened (cf. section 4.1.7). Thus, it could be argued that Oscar Munoz implies that the episode was Dr. Dao's own fault, as he did not comply with the airport authorities and employees. Here, Oscar Munoz attempts to

justify the episode by blaming Dr. Dao for being responsible himself for the episode to escalate. This supports the claim regarding the use of justification response strategy mentioned above.

The examination of United Airlines initial crisis response strategy shows that the Oscar Munoz was utilizing the justification posture in an attempt to minimize the attributed crisis responsibility towards United Airlines. This signifies an attempt to reframe the episode to change people's perception of the reasons for the episode escalating by focusing on the issue of overbooking and, thus, having to re-accommodate passengers. Assumingly, the attempt to lessen the perceived seriousness of the episode, Oscar Munoz's aim was to spare damage on the organization's reputation.

5.1.5.2 United Airlines' Second Response Strategy

Oscar Munoz released the second statement on behalf of United Airlines on April 11, 2017, on both its official Facebook and Twitter accounts, as illustrated below:

Statement from United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz on United Express Flight 3411
April 11, 2017

"The truly horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment. I share all of those sentiments, and one above all: my deepest apologies for what happened. Like you, I continue to be disturbed by what happened on this flight and I deeply apologize to the customer forcibly removed and to all the customers aboard. No one should ever be mistreated this way.

I want you to know that we take full responsibility and we will work to make it right.

It's never too late to do the right thing. I have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what's broken so this never happens again. This will include a thorough review of crew movement, our policies for incentivizing volunteers in these situations, how we handle oversold situations and an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement. We'll communicate the results of our review by April 30th.

I promise you we will do better.

Sincerely,

Oscar" (App. 2, p. 2).

By offering a second statement only one day after having published the initial press release, it is evident that Oscar Munoz on behalf of United Airlines changes its initial response strategy from the justification posture to a *rebuild* response strategy. This is evident from the second issued statement, which is phrased and articulated in a different manner than the initial statement. Here, Oscar Munoz is expressing the episode as being a "truly horrific event," and offers his "deepest apologies," as the CEO expresses emotions of "outrage, anger, and disappointment." Moreover, notably, Oscar Munoz takes "full responsibility" and promises to correct the organization's mistakes and offers a corrective action plan for a future prospect. Thus, it is clear that the second statement seeks to change the negative perception in regards to the episode by fully admitting the airline's mistakes and asking for forgiveness. According to Coombs, the *rebuild* response strategy is the most appropriate posture to utilize within the intentional crisis cluster, especially when an organization has a past crisis history and an unfavorable prior reputation (cf. section 4.1.7).

Despite the fact that Oscar Munoz provides an assumingly appropriate statement, it might raise questions in regards to its sincerity. It could be argued that United Airlines realized its initial communicative efforts failed its attempt to justify the episode. Also, the realization of its initial statement caused more damage than the initial attempt to control the episode for escalating. It could be assumed, the phrase "It's never too late to do the right thing" refers to its realization of the mistake concerning the initial statement issued a day before. Another crucial factor, which might have influenced United Airlines' realization of its way of handling its communicative effort, could regard its financials aspect. In fact, on April 11, 2017, the United Airlines stock fell five percent, which resulted in a loss of 1 billion dollars in market value (CNN Money 2017). The second statement from Oscar Munoz was released after the stock dive, which could raise ethical questions concerning the motives behind the second release. Was it because of pressure from society? Alternatively, the realization of not managing to justify the episode with the first statement and, thus, changing its response strategy?

United Airlines' true motives behind the second statement may be difficult to examine, as there can be underlying reasons, which cannot be investigated. However, it could be argued that United Airlines' highest concern and priority would be to protect its brand, and more importantly its stock

value. It could be assumed that Oscar Munoz would have provided the second statement in the first place if there were a true and sincere consideration for Dr. Dao and the rest of the passengers.

5.1.6 How did the public perceive the response strategies?

For us all to gain an understanding of whether or not people perceive Oscar Munoz' response strategies as being adequate, it is relevant to assess people's emotions as illustrated in the SCCT model with arrow F3. The examination of people's emotions revealed that the initial statement caused negative ramifications towards United Airlines. As a result of the feeling of anger and schadenfreude, people generated unfavorable behavior in the form of negative word-of-mouth. Besides this, the examination revealed that people did not perceive Oscar Munoz's initial response positively, which is also illustrated in the comments from social media and the web survey above.

Moreover, according to Coombs, the initial response is the most crucial to the organization's livelihood, as the levels of attributed crisis responsibility depend more on the initial statement than the following ones (cf. section 4.1.7). People's initial interpretation and perception can be difficult to change after having attributed levels of responsibility. Since it is apparent that United Airlines changed its initial statement, it is relevant to examine whether Oscar Munoz's second response helped change people's perception. In connection with this, 50 comments from Facebook and 50 comments from Twitter were examined in regards to the second statement. As shown in the pie chart, 6% show supportive emotions, 68% express angry emotions, 8% express schadenfreude, and 18 % remain neutral. As the examination revealed, the percentage of angry and schadenfreude responses had been reduced, which could indicate that the second statement has changed people's perception to a small degree.

Emotions - Facebook and Twitter

■ Sympathy ■ Anger ■ Schadenfreude ■ Neutral

6%
18%
8%
68%
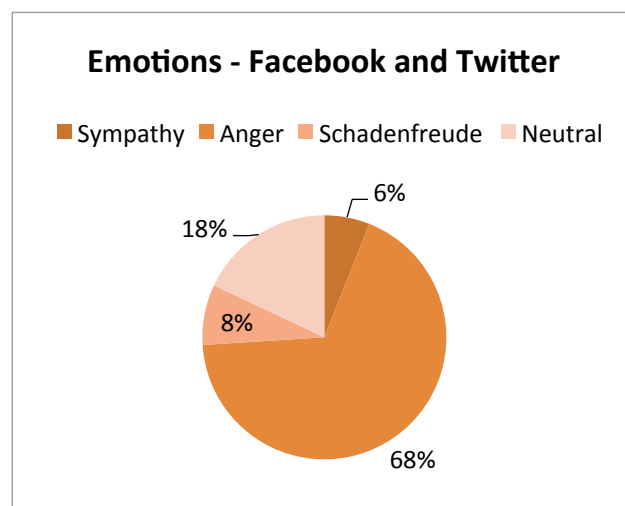
A few examples of people's shared opinions regarding the second statement are shown below here:

A private person named Courtenay Garcia wrote on United Airlines' Facebook account on April 11, 2017, as follows:

"There was no overbooking. Your assaulted an elderly doctor to deadhead a crew. Now that your stock is tanking, you're apologetic. What about your email yesterday? You think that's all forgotten." (App. 3.2, comment 7).

This person does not seem convinced in Oscar Munoz's attempt to apologize in its second statement. Also, this person is apparently aware of United Airlines' actual reason for removing Dr. Dao was due to securing seats for United Airlines' employees, and not an issue of overbooking as stated in its initial press release. Besides that, the person also refers to United Airlines' stock dive and to Oscar Munoz's leaked internal employee letter.

On April 11, 2017, Tiffany Hagstrom wrote a comment on United Airlines' official Facebook page as follows:

"This is a result of the 115k negative comments yesterday and the one billion loss in market value, not an actual belief that United has done something wrong." (App. 3.2, comment 8).

Here, the phrase *"this is a result of the 115k negative comments"* implies that Tiffany is referring to the second statement not being sincere since 115,000 people have commented negatively regarding the initial statement. Thus, it can be assumed that the person believes that United Airlines' motives for releasing another statement were due to the massive reactions from the public. Also, as it is stated, *"the one billion loss in market value"* implies that neither of the responses are satisfying or accepted.

And:

On April 11, Ariel Fernandes wrote on United Airlines' Twitter page as follows:

"It took you over 24 hours to say this? This should have been your FIRST statement! Your should #resign! #BoycottUnitedAirlines." (App. 3.1, comment 3).

In this comment, the person implies that the second response from Oscar Munoz was more acceptable, as it is stated: *"This should have been your FIRST statement!"* However, it can be interpreted as the person still not accepting the second statement, as it was not offered in a timely

manner, which is indicated by the statement *"it took you over 24 hours to say this?"* The comment also implies being unsatisfied with the overall handling of providing a timely and sincere response, and, thus, does not accept either of the statements provided by Oscar Munoz as expressed "You should resign!" and "BoycottUnitedAirlines." Moreover, this supports the aforementioned argument, regarding the difficulties of changing people's onset negative perception, even though the organization changes its communicative effort to the better.

It is evident that people continued to voice their disappointment and discontent through social media after the second response offered by Oscar Munoz. People's non-receptive reactions from the second response show evidence that United Airlines' use of the justification crisis response strategy worked counterproductively, despite changing its response strategy to an appropriate one. If, in fact, people had to some degree shown supportive manners and less angry emotions, the justifications posture could have protected United Airlines' organizational reputation and caused less harm to their image.

5.2 Hearit's Apologetic Ethics

When investigating crisis response strategies, apologia plays an important role in understanding an organization's response. An apologia seeks to restore an organization's social legitimacy, as a crisis is a threat and tends to affect its image negatively, as the wrongdoing violates people's expectations regarding how an organization should operate (cf. section 4.2). As it is apparent that United Airlines has offered two different types of apologetic statements, this section of the thesis seeks to examine both the *manner of its communication* and *content of its communication*, where all its factors will be examined.

5.2.1 Manner of United Airlines' Communication

5.2.1.1 Truthfulness

According to Hearit, an apology must be truthful, which indicates the spokesperson offering the apology must not leave out important information (cf. section 4.2.4). Starting with the initial, the first sentence in the press release was performed by referring to the passenger being dragged off through the aisle by referring to it as *"an upsetting event"* (App. 1, p. 1). The choice of wording was assumedly not a coincidence, as Hearit refers to this type of reference as 'strategically naming'

their wrongdoing. Arguably, this was an attempt to downplay the episode and an attempt to reduce the gravity of the offense.

Moreover, Oscar Munoz continued the statement by disclosing useful information, as shown here:

"Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened" (App. 1, p. 1).

This information shows some degree of truthfulness on United Airlines' behalf, as the public is informed that the airline is investigating the cause of the episode. However, it could also be argued that this is a strategic choice, and preferably an excuse to evade responsibility. Hence, Oscar Munoz stated:

"We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation." (App. 1, p. 1).

Here, Oscar Munoz outlines relevant information by informing the public that the passenger is reached out to in order to address and resolve the issue. However, it could be argued, that despite disclosing information, more concrete information lacks. It could seem as though Oscar Munoz is attempting to solve the issue solely amongst United Airlines and Dr. Dao, as further information is not provided. Thus, one could question its trustfulness, as the statement does not indicate whether an apology or compensation will be offered to Dr. Dao or other passengers.

As Coombs argues, in order to seem truthful, disclosing relevant and important information is a necessity. Firstly, the press release consists of only 4.5 sentences, which arguably could make it difficult to provide important information. Secondly, Oscar Munoz does not manage to provide concrete information about the organization's next steps in order to resolve the issue or providing an action plan for a future prospect. Thus, it can be argued that Oscar Munoz, on behalf of United Airlines, did not manage to engage in truthfulness in the initial statement.

5.2.1.2 Sincerity

Another characteristic of an ideal apology is to offer a sincere apology, where the apologist attempts to demonstrate regret for the given offense. Here, Coombs posits three components, which are 1) providing a corrective action plan, 2) demonstration of sincerity that is rooted in communicative performance, and 3) providing evidence of a genuine and sincere desire to reconcile with customers (cf. section 4.2.4). Expressing sincerity is not vivid until the second statement was released. Here, Oscar Munoz demonstrates sincerity by providing a corrective action plan, as it is stated:

*"This will include **a thorough review of crew movement,** our **policies for incentivizing volunteers** in these situations, **how we handle oversold situations** and **an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement."** (App. 2, p. 2).*

Oscar Munoz provides several corrective actions for a future prospect. The first action consists of a review of its crew movements. The second action concerns a review of its policies regarding its incentivizing volunteers. This could help prevent unnecessary situations where people are forced to leave the plane, as the wording 'volunteers' implies, a person who willingly offers to do something, without being forced. It could be assumed that Oscar Munoz considers changing the value of compensations that are being offered to a passenger, for passengers to willingly and voluntarily leave a flight if an overbooked situation was to occur again. Here, Oscar Munoz emphasizes the third corrective action regarding its handling of oversold situations. Lastly, he states that it will carry on an examination concerning how United Airlines partner with relevant authorities. As the above citations shows, four different corrective action plans are provided, which shows evidence of sincerity by providing evidence of step-by-step actions, which seeks to resolve the problem and protect customers in the future for similar problems.

Moreover, Oscar Munoz manages to demonstrate its sincerity is rooted not solely in *operational performance*, but also in its *communicative performance*. This was apparent as Oscar Munoz chooses to appear in a news interview with ABC news regarding the episode with Dr. Dao on April 12, 2017. The interview with Oscar Munoz apologizing seems more sincere and effective, as people view Oscar Munoz's facial expression, mimic, and his dedication to volunteering to be interviewed. Once again, corrective action plans are also offered in the interview, which consisted of the four actions mentioned above.

On behalf of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz also managed to perform the third component of sincerity, where evidence of a true desire to reconcile with customers is performed, rather than attempting to seem sincere. By appearing in the interview, it might be an attempt to reduce negative media coverage to protect the airline's image; thus, his motives for appearing on TV can be questioned. Moreover, the following statement demonstrates the way Oscar Munoz shows sincerity:

"I have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what's broken, so this never happens again." (App. 2, p. 2).

Here, Oscar Munoz shows a sincere desire to resolve the issues and promises such episode will not be apparent in the future. This is apparent as Oscar Munoz states 'this will never happen again' in the second and third press release and in the interview. It seems sincere, as it shows consistency in the given information regarding such episode will not occur again. However, the way Oscar Munoz attempts to reconcile with customers was not performed in the initial statement, which could call into question the motives behind this statement. One could assume that his initial motives were to escape from the media glare, as the examination revealed many people having negative emotions towards the initial statement since it did not come across as sincere.

5.2.1.3 Timely

The third characteristic when examining the manner of offering an apology concerns the apology being performed timely, meaning the apologist releases a response before the public starts requesting one. Consequently, offering an apology too late will likely to upset people and they will rely on the media's information about a given offense (cf. section 4.2.4). Regarding the initial response, United Airlines managed, to some degree, to offer a timely apology, as it was provided less than 24 hours after the episode occurred. However, despite the fact Oscar Munoz offered an apology in the initial statement, there are two factors that show the response did not compile as an ethical and ideal apology. Firstly, Hearit states that there is a distinction between the terminologies of 'apology' and 'apologia.' An apology refers to acknowledging guilt by expressing for instance concern for the offended ones. On the other hand, 'apologia' is a derivative of a word meaning 'defense' and 'speech in defense,' where the apologist may offer an apology, however, is executed by offering a vigorous counteroffensive (cf. section 4.2.1). As the examination revealed, United Airlines utilized the justification response strategy, which clearly worked counterproductively. In connection with this, the second factor concerns the examination, which revealed that people did not accept the initial apology. Thus, the initial response cannot be perceived as an apology, but rather an apologia.

However, as the examination so far shows evidence of United Airlines changing its response strategy to the rebuild posture, an ideal apology to some degree was provided starting with the second press release. Despite the fact that Oscar Munoz managed to perform a more appropriate

apology, it was not performed in a timely way, as it was released two days after the episode had occurred. As Hearit states, an apology must be performed before people start requesting one. In connection with this, it could be argued that the second, more appropriate apology was offered too late, as the examination shows, as it came after the first statement.

5.2.1.4 Voluntarily

Hearit states that an ideal apology must be based on moral reflections, which shows the apologetic response is voluntary without anticipated coercion (cf. section 4.2.4). The initial response contained an apology, which could be viewed as being voluntary. However, when examining the manner of whether the apology was ethical and an ideal apology, it can be argued that the initial response was to be considered involuntary. This is apparent as Oscar Munoz stated:

"I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers." (App. 2, p.1).

Here, Oscar Munoz apologizes for having to rebook the passenger on the flight, as word 're-accommodate' refers to. Thus, it can be argued that the statement lacks moral reflection, as the statement arguably was an opportunistic attempt at damage control, rather than expressing a genuine desire to reconcile with the offended passenger.

Interestingly, the second response issued one day after the initial one was articulated in a more thoughtful manner, as Oscar Munoz states as follows:

"(...) my deepest apologies for what happened. Like you, I continue to be disturbed by what happened on this flight, and I deeply apologize to the customer forcibly removed and to all the customers aboard." (App. 2, p. 2).

Here, the way the apology is expressed seems voluntary, as it refers to the concrete episode with Dr. Dao being removed from the plane by force. Also, as it is stated that Oscar Munoz is disturbed by the episode; thus, a sense of moral reflection is attached to the statement. Additionally, according to Hearit, part of the process of offering an apology is to show remorse containing some degree of humility. This is demonstrated as the second response states:

"The truly horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment. I share all of those sentiments" (App. 2, p. 2).

By Oscar Munoz stating that he feels disappointed shows remorse and feelings of humility, which can be seen as an attempt to reconcile with customers, as this statement shows the ability to truly reflect upon the episode with Dr. Dao being forcibly dragged out of the plane, rather than an issue of 're-accommodating' a passenger.

5.1.2.5 Addressing All Stakeholders

A fifth criterion for providing an ideal and ethical apology is that it must speak to the concern of those who feel affected either morally or physically (cf. section 4.2.4). The manner in which Oscar Munoz addresses the ones who have been physically affected is stated as aforementioned: "apologizing for re-accommodating 'these' customers." In addition to this, Dr. Dao was referred to as:

"We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation." (App. 2, p. 1).

Notably, Dr. Dao is referred to as 'customer' and as a 'passenger,' rather than addressing him by name, which appears impersonal and insincere. The initial statement was solely focusing on the four customers who had been affected directly by the issue of 'overbooking.' Despite the fact that the other passengers on the flight arrived at their destination, it could be assumed those passengers were affected morally as well, solely by witnessing Dr. Dao being dragged through the aisle, while screaming and bleeding. Nonetheless, the video of the episode also shows people's concern as they attempted to stand up and help Dr. Dao, however, in vain.

As the headline criterion indicates, the apologist should address all stakeholders. Thus, it could be argued that United Airlines' shareholders, in the same vein, should be addressed. In fact, a large amount of financial decrease on its stocks after the initial statement shows indications of shareholders being affected morally. Therefore, United Airlines could have made a communicative effort headed towards its shareholders by issuing a press release solely directed to them; however, this was not apparent.

5.1.2.6 The Choice of Context

The final paradigm characteristic within the manner of the communication concerns the context in which the apology is offered, e.g., medium, location, or site. Also, the chosen context must be assessable for everyone interested in gaining information (cf. section 4.2.4). It is apparent that United Airlines issued the initial press release and the second one on its own webpage and on its largest social media platforms, which are Facebook and Twitter. As the press releases were released on three different platforms, it can be argued that United Airlines manages to provide relevant information in an appropriate context. This is evident as the initial statement posted on Facebook has received 141,000 reactions from private people, and 98,000 reactions on Twitter. The second press release received 44,000 reactions and 31,000 on Twitter. Additionally, private people on their own private pages have shared both press releases thousands of times. This clearly indicates that many people have seen the press releases, as it is accessible for everyone.

5.2.2 Content of United Airlines' Communication

Hearit posits that the given content of the offered speech when apologizing must live up to certain features in order for an apology to be truly ethical (cf. section 5.2.5).

5.2.2.1 Explicitly Acknowledges Wrongdoing

The examination revealed that United Airlines did not acknowledge its wrongdoing in its initial statement released on April 10, 2017. This indicates that United Airlines did not own up to its wrongdoing. Instead, the offered apologetic statement misleads the recipients, as the content lacks the ethical aspect. In this connection, Oscar Munoz states:

"Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened" (App. 2, p. 1).

Instead of United Airlines acknowledging its wrongdoing by, e.g., expressing how the episode with Dr. Dao was a wrongful and unethical act, it seems that United Airlines attempts to escape from taking responsibility by expressing that it will conduct its own review of what happened. Nonetheless, one could assume that Oscar Munoz and the board of United Airlines had seen the video with Dr. Dao being dragged through the aisle screaming and bleeding since it had become viral on the day before United Airlines published its initial statement. Thus, one would assume that

the video speaks for itself in terms of employees of United Airlines clearly mishandling the situation. Therefore, acknowledging wrongdoing would have been appropriate.

However, it was not until the second statement where Oscar Munoz, on behalf of United Airlines, validates the moral claims of the injured passenger, as it is stated:

"I continue to be disturbed by what happened on this flight" and continue *"No one should ever be mistreated this way."* (App. 2, p. 2).

Here, Oscar Munoz expresses being 'disturbed' by the episode shows evidence of acknowledging the wrongdoing by not 're-accommodating,' but rather acknowledging wrongdoing by violently dragging Dr. Dao. The next statement supports this, by *"that no one should be treated such way"* (App. 2, p. 2).

5.2.2.2 Fully Accepts Responsibility

As previously mentioned, Oscar Munoz apologizes by describing the incident as 're-accommodating' in his initial statement. This shows responsibility to some degree, as an apology is offered in the same sentence. However, taking responsibility for re-accommodating the passenger does not imply that he takes responsibility for the episode with Dr. Dao. The letter from Oscar Munoz, which were sent to employees of United Airlines, supports this point of view. In it, Oscar Munoz characterized Dr. Dao as being "disruptive and belligerent." Nonetheless, continued the letter with:

"Our agents were left with no choice but to call Chicago Aviation Security Officers to assist in removing the customer from the flight." (App. 2, p. 1-2).

This indicates the opposite of accepting responsibility, by referring to the reason for the rules being overridden, which was due to the situation seeming to be under appropriate circumstances, as the agents lacked the ability to do otherwise. Here, Oscar Munoz attempted to stress the good intentions of United Airlines employees, as there apparently were no other options than removing Dr. Dao with force.

Ultimately, the initial response was not well accepted by people, along with the revealed employee letter, which arguably forced Oscar Munoz to reverse into a better position by accepting responsibility. This was evident in the second statement, as it was stated as follows:

"I want you to know that we take full responsibility and we will work to make it right." (App. 2, p. 2).

This statement shows that Oscar Munoz attempts to express honesty and, simultaneously, the opportunity for self-improvement, as it stated that United Airlines will 'make it right.' By providing such a statement, it also shows respect towards the offended passengers to validate their moral claim. In addition, it demonstrates that United Airlines and its CEO fully accepts responsibility for the wrongdoing. However, in the use of the personal pronoun 'we', one could interpret it as Oscar Munoz utilizing the common practice of 'scapegoating,' which is a strategically attempting to rhetorically and purposefully displace the fault onto the entire organization. This could be argued to be a deliberate ambiguity to distance himself from the wrongful act. Nevertheless, the aim could be to mitigate and avoid accepting full responsibility.

5.2.2.3 Expressing Regret

Admitting the wrongdoing and taking responsibility is not solely adequate for an ideal apology, as the apologist shall express regret by conveying dismay for causing damage and failing in matters on being responsible (cf. section 4.2.5). There is no evidence of expressing regret in its initial statement, which is interesting as an apology does occur. Once again, one could question the motives behind its initial apology. As the examination has revealed, Oscar Munoz changed its crisis response strategy after issuing its initial statement alongside with the employee letter being revealed to the public. Hence, Oscar Munoz expresses regret in the interview with ABC news, as the news reporter asks Oscar Munoz what his thought was when he saw the video with Dr. Dao being dragged out of one of United's planes. Here, Oscar Munoz answered as follows:

"(…) it's not so much what I thought, it is was what I felt, part of the word shame comes to mind (…)" (App. 2, p. 5).

As the word 'shame' is expressed to describe Oscar Munoz's thoughts, indicates feelings of guilt, regret, embarrassment or sadness due to being responsible for the employees' way of handling the situation. Thus, by explicitly using the wording 'shame' shows remorse and regret. Ultimately, it

could help restore trust with the offended ones and particularly Dr. Dao, by acknowledging the episode being a moral offense.

5.2.2.4 Identifying With Injured Stakeholders

Having apologized and expressed regret, the apologist must also show the ability to express empathy with the injured stakeholders. In other words, the apologist must frame the wrongdoing from the injured person's point of view to truly show that the apologist 'gets it' (cf. section 4.2.5). There is no sign of expressing empathy towards Dr. Dao in the initial statement. It could be argued that expressing empathy to some degree would have shown Dr. Dao appreciation, which could have reduced the negative impacts of the episode. However, Oscar Munoz identifies with Dr. Dao in the interview with ABC news and herein expresses empathy in the following sentence, when asked whether Dr. Dao was considered to be in fault in any way:

"No, he can't be" and continues, *"the initial, my initial words fell short in truly expressing what we were feeling"* (App 2, p. 5).

Looking at this statement, it can be assumed that Oscar Munoz attempts to show that he truly 'gets it' by stating that Dr. Dao cannot be at fault and continues the sentence by pointing to his initial response that "fell short." However, there is particularly one interesting observation when looking at this sentence and the tone when articulating the sentence. In connection with this, Hearit states that in order to honor the injured ones and show regret, "the apologist must choose the appropriate words, context, and, tone to convey regret in a way that feels legitimate and proportionate to the offense." (Hearit & Borden, 2005, s. 70). Notably, there is a long pause, which is apparent in the interview, after the news reporter asked the question. In fact, there is a six-second gap before he states "No, he can't be." Pausing for a long six seconds might raise doubts concerning Oscar Munoz's credibility in showing empathy, as it could be argued such question should be an obvious answer. Here, the public might have expected Oscar Munoz to answer quickly that Dr. Dao was not at fault and such an offense should never have happened.

5.2.2.5 Asking Stakeholders' Forgiveness

The overall aim of offering an apology is to 'make things right again' among stakeholders, which must be executed by asking the offended ones to forgive in order to reconcile. Looking into the initial press release, there were no signs of asking for their forgiveness. However, this was expressed in the second press release, as Oscar Munoz stated:

"(…) we will work to make it right" and ended the letter with *"I promise you we will do better"*

(App. 2, p. 2).

Even though a future relationship between United Airlines and several stakeholders realistically might be over, the sentence shows an ethical desire to prove to its stakeholders that the offended ones and Dr. Dao are valued.

5.2.2.6 Seeking Reconciliation

As mentioned above, Oscar Munoz states that United Airlines 'will work to make things right,' which shows an effort to restore the broken trust. Additionally, it is stated in the interview:

"(…) this can, this will never happen again on a United Airlines flight, that's my premises, and that's my promise" (App. 2, p. 5).

By promising such an episode will never take place in the future, Oscar Munoz hereby validates the worth on the injured and offended ones. However, it could be argued that Oscar Munoz does not manage to fully seek reconciliation, as the expression comes across short and non-concrete. Here, Oscar Munoz arguably could have made a better attempt to show a sincere attempt to reconcile with Dr. Dao and the offended ones.

5.2.2.7 Fully Disclosing Information Related to the Offense

As mentioned previously, it is apparent that the initial response does not disclose appropriate information. In fact, the provided information works counterproductive, as Hearit states in this connection "(…) information should be evaluated carefully to determine whether it is accurate, whether its release would violate someone's confidentiality or unduly harm someone" (Hearit & Borden, 2005, s. 72). As the examination had revealed, the initial response questioned United Airlines' credibility and Oscar Munoz's motives behind the release. Consequently, the disclosed information caused more damage than it arguably would have caused if the initial response managed to issue pertinent information in an appropriate way. As mentioned, Oscar Munoz states in the interview that his words came off short and acknowledged that the initially released information was not considered to be accurate or appropriate. Ultimately, there is evidence of fully disclosing information related to the offense in the second press release and in the interview.

5.2.2.8 Providing an explanation that addresses legitimate expectations of United Airlines' stakeholders

When offering an apology, the legitimate expectations of stakeholders must be met. In other words, the apologist must provide a discussion of the wrongdoing, its effects, and its causes regarding the apologist's responsibilities that have been violated. This appears in the interview, as Oscar Munoz explains how the cause of the episode was his responsibility as states:

"It was a system failure. We have not provided our frontline supervisors and managers and individuals with the proper tools, policies, procedures that allow them to use their common sense (…) this issue could have been solved by that. That's on me; I have to fix that" (App. 2, p. 5).

Looking at this statement, Oscar Munoz discusses the main cause of the episode, by describing it as a 'system failure' and further stating that it was due to improper policies and procedures. Thereby indicating its employees not having received the correct or enough learning sessions of how to deal with situations regarding, e.g., overbooking. Interestingly, the U.S. Department of Transportation reports in its Air Travel Consumer Report that of the 22.4 million passengers of United Airlines who boarded one of its planes in its fourth quarter of last year in 2016, a total of 15,696 voluntarily gave up their seats due to the common issue of overbooking. Nonetheless, 891 United Airlines passengers were denied or removed from a plane involuntarily. The year of 2016 to 2017, passengers being denied boarding or removed, a total of 62,895 were voluntary, while 3,765 were involuntary (Air Travel Consumer Report 2017).

Despite the fact that Oscar Munoz does manage to provide an explanation that addresses legitimate expectations of its stakeholders, it could be argued that the statement comes off as untrustworthy by firstly blaming a 'system failure' for the episode. Secondly, it could be assumed that an airline experiencing situations with passengers being denied boarding to such a degree would experience passengers being discontented, as it is evidential that there are a high number of involuntary passengers being either denied boarding or re-accommodated. Thus, United Airlines employees should be accustomed to handling the issue of overbooking. Nonetheless, from a leadership perspective, being aware of the high number of denied passengers should also prompt that policies should be reevaluated to reduce the numbers and, thus, employees should be taught and informed regarding handling the issue of overbooking.

5.2.2.9 Offering to Perform an Appropriate Corrective Action

Providing an appropriate action plan is a particularly important characteristic, as the apologist hereby expresses having learned their lesson and is therefore committed to taking action to avoid the offense being repeated (cf. section 4.2.5). On behalf of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz offers a corrective action plan in his second and third press release and the interview with ABC news. In both his second and third press release, it is stated in the above sentence before providing a corrective action plan:

"It's never too late to do the right thing. I have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what's broken so this never happens again." (App. 2, p. 2-3).

This implies that United Airlines has learned its lesson and seeks to make things right again, both to its customers and employees. The content of its corrective actions concern, e.g., a thorough review of United Airlines' crew movement, policies for incentivizing volunteers, handling of situations concerning overbooking, and how United Airlines' partners with airport authorities and local enforcement (App. 2, p. 2-3). Lastly, in the letter, people are informed that concrete results of the above-mentioned topics will be communicated on April 30, 2017. In connection with this, United Airlines issued a fourth press release on April 27, 2017, with the heading 'United Airlines Announces Changes to Improve Customer Experience.' In it, as promised, United Airlines announced ten substantial changes to how it serves, flies and respects its customers (App. 2, p. 4). Ultimately, this can help rebuild trust with its customers, as people have a reason to have confidence in United Airlines again. Providing such substantial corrective actions affirms the public that United Airlines has good intentions by finally taking responsibility.

5.2.2.10 Offering Appropriate Compensation

The last characteristic for offering an appropriate an ethical apology concerns compensating the injured ones, which mostly comprises of financial aids (cf. section 4.2.5). It is apparent that Dr. Dao has not has been offered compensation for the injuries nor have the passengers on the flight for having to witness such a violent episode. The airline solely states that Oscar Munoz has attempted to contact Dr. Dao to resolve the issue by offering a personal apology, as expressed here in its third press release:

"United CEO Oscar Munoz and the company called Dr. Dao on numerous occasions to express our heartfelt and deepest apologies." (App. 2, p. 3)

In addition to this, in his interview with ABC news, Oscar Munoz was asked specifically what he thought Dr. Dao deserves in all of this, where the answer was as follows:

*"Well, certainly an apology" (*pauses) *"and from that point on we have to see"* (App. 2, p. 5).

Oscar Munoz apologizes multiple times to Dr. Dao in the interview; however, it could be assumed that truly being sorry would consist of offering compensation. Interestingly, United Airlines issued a fifth press release on April 27, 2017, with the heading 'Statement form United Airlines Regarding Resolution with Dr. David Dao'. The press release consists of three sentences and its resolution with Dr. Dao is described in one sentence as shown here:

"We are pleased to report that United and Dr. Dao have reached an amicable resolution of the unfortunate incident that occurred aboard flight 3411." (App. 2, p. 3-4).

Looking at this statement, it implies that Dr. Dao has been given some sort of compensation. However, United Airlines' motives behind this amicable resolution are questionable, as it is apparent that neither of the press releases issued during the crisis or the interview contained statements about compensation. Despite this fact, the news reporter asked Oscar Munoz very specifically what Dr. Dao deserved after the episode. Here, only an apology was adequate according to Oscar Munoz. Interestingly, Dr. Dao was ultimately given compensation, as the press release indicates above, after having sued the airline company on the fourth day after the episode had occurred. Thus, it could be argued that the motives behind the settlement were to escape a lawsuit, which most likely would harm United Airlines more severely.

Additionally, neither of the other three passengers who were also removed involuntarily nor the passengers witnessing the violent episode were mentioned relating to being given any sort of compensation. Interestingly, an internal email to passengers was released by news media CNN Money as a passenger forwarded the email, and in it, United Airlines stated:
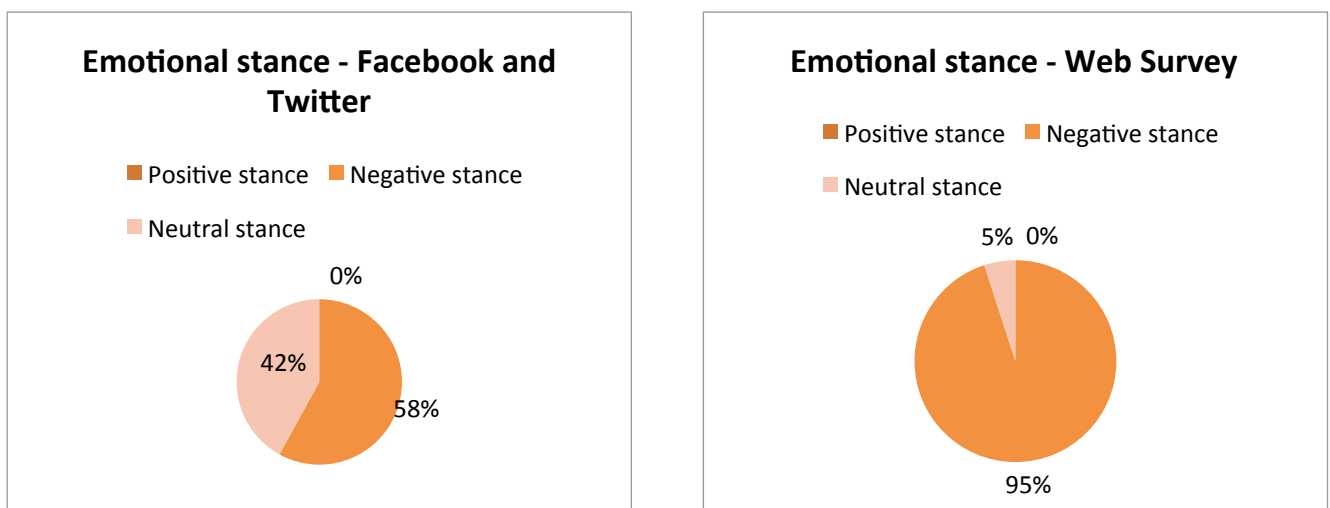
"Customers are eligible for vouchers toward future flights if they "release" the airline from lawsuits." (CNN Money 2017).

5.2.3 How did the public perceive United Airlines' apology?

In the same vein as examining people's perception of United Airlines response strategies, people's perception of the two very different apologetic statements is equally relevant to examine. The degree of effectiveness of an apology depends solely on how people perceive the offered apology.

5.2.3.1 United Airlines' Initial Apology

The examination above regarding United Airlines' initial apology concerning manner and content of its communication revealed that the apology did not live up to Hearit's characteristics of offering an ideal and ethical apology. In accordance with this, the data gathered from both comment on social media and the web surveys correlates with the above examination of United Airlines' initial statement not living up the Hearit's standards. This is evident by looking at the overall results of the data, which is shown here in the pie charts:

Emotional stance - Facebook and Twitter

- Positive stance
- Negative stance
- Neutral stance

0%
42%
58%

Emotional stance - Web Survey

- Positive stance
- Negative stance
- Neutral stance

5% 0%
95%

The data was collected from the initial statement posted by United Airlines on its official Facebook and Twitter account and the web survey. The collected data clearly indicate people perceived the initial apology negatively, 0% have a positive stance, and 66% have a negative stance, while 30% remain neutral towards the apology. The examination from the web survey revealed that 0% was positive towards the statement, and 95 %had a negative stance, while 5% remained neutral. The high number of people being categorized as neutral is due to several comments focuses on other elements of the statement. Only those comments expressing some sort of feelings about the apology can truly be utilized, whereas other comments have been categorized as neutral. In order to grasp

the way people are expressing themselves regarding the initial apology, some examples are provided here:

A previous customer named Liz Addison states on Facebook:

"Inadequate response. Talking first about how this is upsetting to "all of us here at United"??? How about how upsetting it was to the passengers on the flight, for starters? How about apologizing for failing to have adequate policies and procedures in place so that "assault passengers and drag their subdued bodies off the flight" is never an option for opening space to accommodate United employees? Other airlines (…) sweeten the deal by offering vouchers for travel in increasing amounts, like an auction, until all seats are VOLUNTARILY obtained. (…)What a disaster of a corporate culture you must have. I will never, never fly this airlines."
(App. 3.2, comment. 9).

The above comment represents a widely held perception among the examined comments. The comment is a clear expression of taking a negative stance towards the initial apology, as Liz Addison criticizes the communicative effort and provides her perception of what the response should have contained. This previous customer's opinion of an appropriate statement should focus more on the given passenger by apologizing for failing its policies and procedures. Here, a reference to other airlines is made, by stating that other airlines manage to comply with the correct policies by increasing the amount money vouchers offered to volunteers when the issue of overbooking occurs. Assumingly, this person refers to United Airlines' choice of not increasing the offered vouchers to Dr. Dao and the other passengers before they were forced to leave the plane.

Moreover, Harrison Roberts writes on Facebook:

"You apologize for "re accommodating" but not for bashing a customer's face in? Trash response. Trash company." (App. 3.2, comment 10).

And in the same vein, a responder from the web survey named Jake Pham writes:

"You apologize for overbooking the plane but not for your horrible and violent treatment of Dr. Dao? This is what we call a tone-deaf apology!" (App. 3.3, comment 12).

These two comments share the same point of view, by expressing that United Airlines should have apologized for its violent treatment of Dr. Dao, instead of apologizing for 're-accommodating' and 'overbooking.' Thus, the apologetic statement is referred to as 'trash response' and 'tone deaf.' Noteworthy, the statement provided by Harrison Roberts has received 62.000 'likes', indicating people support the statement.

5.2.3.2 United Airlines' Second Apology

As the analysis has revealed, United Airlines changed its initial response strategy from the justification posture to a rebuild response strategy. In accordance with this, a second apologetic statement was issued two days after the episode had occurred. Since the examination of United Airlines' second apology did, in fact, live up to several of Hearit's characteristics of an ideal an ethical apology, one would assume that people would feel more accepting of the second apology. However, the results indicate otherwise, as shown here:
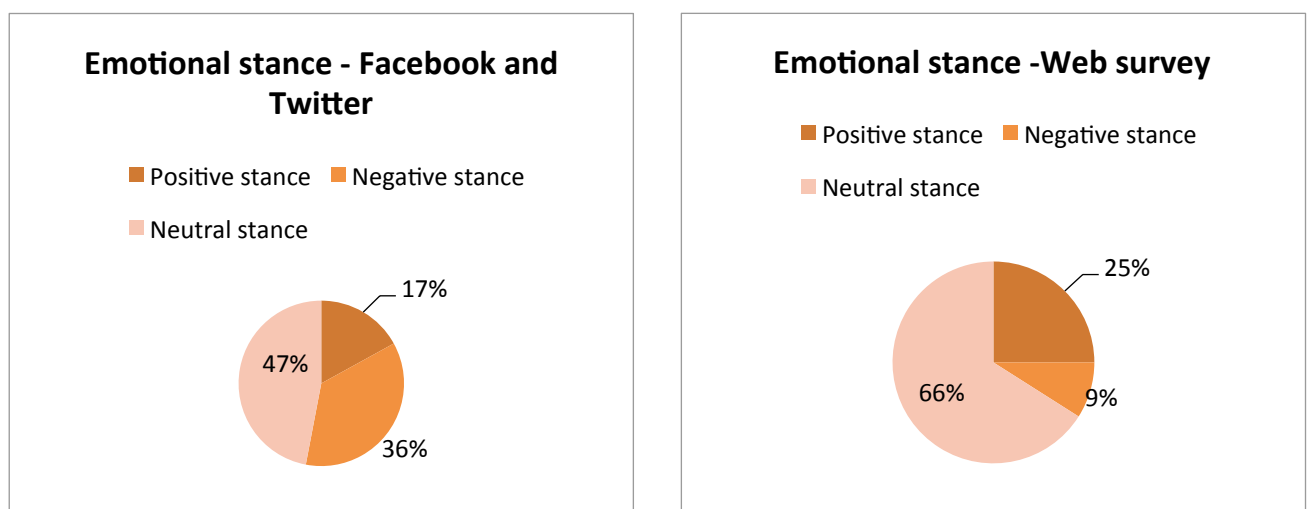
Interestingly, the amount of negative perception of the second apology offered is to some degree similar to the initial one, as comments on social media 17% have a positive stance, 36% negative stance and 47% remain neutral. Looking at the respondents' results from the web survey, 25% have a positive perception and 66% have a neutral perception, while 9 % have a negative perception. As it appears from the results, the majority of private people have not accepted United Airlines' second apology, despite it being more appropriate and ethical. The large, widely held opinion is illustrated with a few examples here:

A private on called 'Hesh' writes on Twitter:

"Dear Oscar. Your 'apology' is textbook. Heartless. Corporate BS. But the beating your share price is getting, that hurts doesn't it?" and continues, *"Your new apology has me more triggered than the last. We have to wait till April 30th for your internal BS? Stop treating us all like idiots."*

(App. 3.1, comment 4).

This person implies that the second apology does not seem sincere by referring to the statement as being 'textbook' heartless,' and 'corporate.' In fact, this person states the second apology 'has me more triggered,' which is a slang word that refers to an emotional reaction caused by some sort of action, which offends the person (Urban Dictionary 2016).

Another person named Brad Walsh writes on Twitter:

"Too bad it took billion dollar loss for this guys to finally apologize to the person who walked away beaten and bloody. A paying customer" and continues, *"Nobody is fooled. This apology came after repeatedly blaming the victim and a subsequent billion dollar loss. Munoz has to go."* (App. 3.1, comment 5).

The statement here implies that United Airlines' motives for offering the second apology are due to financial ramifications, as aforementioned, it lost 1 billion dollars in stock share. Also, supporting his beliefs of the second apology being issued for economic motives, it stated that *"this apology came after repeatedly blaming the victim."* Assumingly, this person refers to Oscar Munoz's letter to its employees blaming Dr. Dao by calling him 'disruptive' and 'belligerent.' Notably, the person phrase 'finally apologize,' which implies that this should have been their initial apology. This also indicates, if the second apology had been issued at first, this person would be more likely to have accepted United Airlines' effort in apologizing.

The examination of how people perceive United Airlines' initial and second apologies shows that people's expectation of United Airlines' communicative effort when offering an apology has not been met. In fact, seems disappointed and angry in the way United Airlines has handled the entire episode. Despite the fact the indications of several people sharing the opinion that the second apology is more appropriate and would have been more accepted, it does not seem to change their widely held opinion of being dissatisfied. This shows how crucial the initial statement is when

facing a crisis. As the examination shows that people's negatively charged perception is highly difficult to reverse into a positive perception, even though an organization like United Airlines eventually utilizes the correct response strategy.

5.3 Framing

In the subsequent analysis section, examinations of media frames will be conducted in order uncover potential effects from the news media during the crisis. This is because frames construct social reality and thereby shape people's perceptions and interpretations in a certain way. Frames presented by news media are composed of strategic, emotionally charged words, images, or videos, which have great potential to influence people's sensemaking and eventually behavioral intentions. Thus, it is relevant to examine how some of the largest news media outlets in the US presented the episode by means of framing, to gain an understanding of potential positive or negative effects thereof.

As there are hundreds of news articles to be found concerning the episode, only the most popular news websites in 2017 have been chosen. Especially the largest news media websites have the enormous potential in influencing people's beliefs due to the high number of visitors on its website. Thus, the top three news websites with the most visitors will be examined. The chosen news outlets are, CNN with 112 million monthly visitors, next is The New York Times with 95 million monthly visitors, and lastly The Washington Post with 92 million monthly visitors, all in 2017 (The Statistics Portal 2017). Moreover, the headlines of news articles will be chosen for the primary examination to undercover frames since people tend to read headings more than the content of the article. In fact, web users spend 80% of their time on the Internet searching for the information above the page fold, which is the initial page showing without scrolling further down. Despite those who do scroll down on a webpage, e.g., news website, only allocate 20% of their attention to the below content (Nielsen Norman Group 2018).

5.3.1 Defining Problems

After the video of Dr. Dao being forcibly removed went viral, and in accordance with Oscar Munoz issuing his initial statement, the news media picked up the story quickly on April 10, 2017—just one day after the incident occurred. The first function of framing 'defining problems' is present in all three news websites. CNN published its first news article regarding the episode on April 10,

2017, with the heading: "Passenger dragged off overbooked United flight" (CNN 2017). Here, CNN defines the problem by emphasizing the common issue of overbooking and connecting it to United Airlines' handling of the episode by using the word 'dragging,' which implies an intentional act.

5.3.2 Causal Analysis

The second type of framing concerns matters of 'responsibility' and 'cause,' meaning who is to blame or credit for a given event. The attributed responsibility, which the news frames purposely, may not be based on facts (cf. section 4.4). In examining the above, regarding how the news media has framed the problem, it is clearly emphasizing that United Airlines has conducted an unethical act. News media having first and foremost defined that the problem will eventually hold someone or an entire organization responsible for the wrongdoing. The second type of framing also appears in all three news websites, where, e.g., The New York Times wrote an article on April 11, 2017 about Oscar Munoz's statements. The heading of the articles was phrased: United Grapples With PR Crisis Over Videos of Man Being Dragged Off Plane" (The New York Times 2017). Interestingly, two days after the episode occurred, news articles have shifted their focus from defining the problem to blaming Oscar Munoz's way of handling the episode on behalf of the entire organization. This is evident in the content in the news article written under the heading: "A few hours later, United seemed to go on the offensive when it circulated a letter in which Mr. Munoz appeared to blame Dr. Dao, saying he "defied" the officers" (The New York Times 2017). This statement is a clear example of how the news ascribes Oscar Munoz responsibility for its miscommunication after the episode.

5.3.3 Moral Judgments

The third type of framing appears when the news media makes a moral judgment concerning a particular problem. By utilizing this type of frame, the news media constructs what people perceive as morally or immorally appropriate (cf. section 4.4). This type of frame appears on all three news websites, where the common focus is on Oscar Munoz's statements. This appears, e.g., in The Washington Post's heading of an article phrased as: "'Re-accommodate?' United ridiculed for corporate speak response to passenger dragging." (The Washington Post 2017). The heading contains a quotation by Oscar Munoz, including his reason for apologizing, which was for 're-accommodate.' By using specific wording, the heading with 'ridiculed' indicates that The Washington Post judges United Airlines' initial press release, which is further described in the
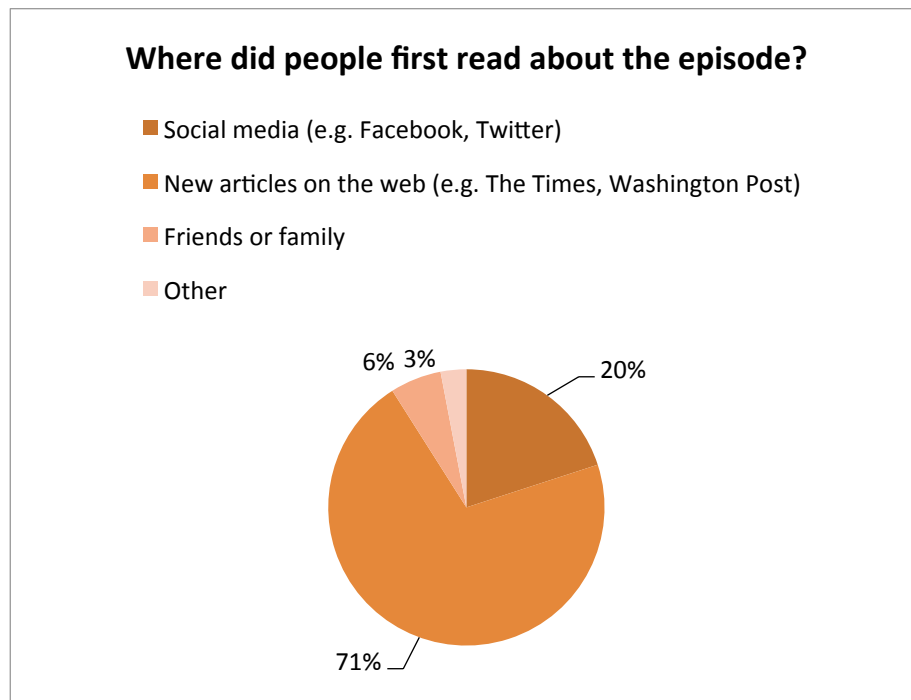
articles by as: "But United seemed to invite ridicule with a pair of awkwardly worded responses to the incident" (The Washington Post 2017). This statement clearly represents The Washington Post's moral judgments.

5.3.4 Remedy Promotion

The fourth type of frame is performed when the news media promotes certain actions, which an organization in question should endorse to resolve the issue (cf. section 4.4). The final type of frame is noteworthy as The Washington Post published an article and phrased the heading as: "'tone-deaf' and 'textbook.' Experts review the United CEO's first – and latest – apology" (The Washington Post 2017). Here, an expert's statement was quoted for describing Oscar Munoz's statement about the episode went from 'tone-deaf' to 'textbook.' The Washington Post chooses to cite an expert who has more credibility versus a journalist's statement, due to an expert having more experience and knowledge on the given subject. Thus, the news media promotes both moral judgments and remedy promotion. This is evident as The Washington Post uses the credibility of an expert to spread the belief that United Airlines' statement is perceived as 'tone-deaf.' Nonetheless, this article is an example of the function remedy promotion as experts outline possible solutions that United Airlines should have employed in its press release.

However, as aforementioned, the content of information stemming from news media may not reflect upon facts, as information can be angled in certain ways to construct people's interpretations. In fact, this is apparent in the above-mentioned article published by The Washington Post as it is referring to experts. However, the expert stating Oscar Munoz's press release went from 'tone-deaf' to 'textbook' and the experts stating how United Airlines should have handled the episode are neither mentioned by name nor provided with a link to the source of the statements. This is apparent in the content of the article as stated in the article, "After an initial apology that public relations experts called "astonishing," "sterile" and "tone-deaf," (The Washington Post 2017). Notably, there is no evidence of identification of the given expert having stated this, as they are simply referred to as multiple 'public relations experts.' Thus, the credibility of the given statements appearing in the article could be questioned.

Furthermore, the collected data from the web survey showed that 70% became aware of the episode through news articles posted on social media, and 20 % read about the episode on news websites, whereas only 9% were informed about the episode from friends or family.

Where did people first read about the episode?

- Social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)
- New articles on the web (e.g. The Times, Washington Post)
- Friends or family
- Other

6% 3% 20% 71%

The examination of how news media framed the episode gave insight into news media's way of framing the United Airline crisis. The analysis revealed that Entman's emphasized concept of 'distortion bias' was evident in The Washington Post's news article with the unidentified experts, as this could indicate that the news website falsifies information to favor the news. Arguably, it would favor the news by inserting the word 'experts' in its heading, as it assumingly would attract more readers. Thus, it would favor the news website financially. Moreover, a 'content bias' in connection moral judgments is apparent in, e.g., the heading: "'Re-accommodate'? United ridiculed for corporate speak response to passenger dragging." (The Washington Post 2017). By choosing to phrase the heading with 'ridiculed' the news media purposely highlights Oscar Munoz's 'ridiculed' statement, which implies purposely supporting one side of the argument, rather than presenting the news equally and without biases, which would have provided the best presentation by writing the news in a neutral way. Additionally, 'content bias' is evident in several news articles, where the media purposely highlights Oscar Munoz's insignificant statement. This shows how the media shifts its focus from the actual episode to holding Oscar Munoz responsible for both the episode and its lack of communicative effort.

Furthermore, the third type, 'decision-making bias,' is rather difficult to detect, as it is concerned with the journalist's mindset and motivation for writing about the given topics. However, it could

be argued that the journalist's choice of inserting statements from experts is the mindset of the journalist. However, by using experts only to increase the validity of the statements, it can be argued that media frames could have affected people's negative perceptions of United Airlines' way of handling the episode. Overall, the analysis revealed that the most dominant type of frame appearing were 'causal analysis'. This was evident as the examined news articles showed that the media clearly blamed Oscar Munoz for being responsible. This was also apparent as the examined articles showed that the media shifted its attention quickly towards Oscar Munoz after having issued the initial statement.

6.0 Discussion

In this section, a discussion of consequences of the UA crisis will be made. The discussion is based on noteworthy findings from the analysis section, and topics will be discussed within the theoretical frame of the thesis. The purpose of this section is to discuss important aspects of the thesis that have not been explained thoroughly in the analysis. First section discusses the importance of international enterprises embracing the new media landscape. The second part will discuss how lack of information leads to uncertainty, as it became apparent that United Airlines did not provide relevant and accurate information. The third part is a discussion about Hearit's notion between an apology and apologia, as the analysis revealed that Oscar Munoz offered an apologia without an apology.

6.1 Embrace the rapid rise of new technology or fail not trying

As previously mentioned in the introduction section, the world is in constant motion due to globalization, which results in significant changes in the way the world is constituted. Particularly changes in information-based infrastructure and the power of media have created a demand for organizations to show high levels of transparency. Throughout the examination of United Airlines' crisis communication, especially one notable implication has been obvious, however, not discussed. This concerns the fundamental aspect of the new landscape 2.0. In the 21st century, contemporary society has made the Internet and social media their primary channel for expressing themselves and sharing information. People's ability to record instant photos or videos with their smartphones has increased the chances of being caught of conducting misbehavior; especially as critics and people using persuasive ways to attack a company of misconduct has become a central component of the media atmosphere. Thus, companies must immediately react to an upcoming crisis.

The examination revealed that United Airlines has suffered tremendously with previous crises and evidence of having treated its customers poorly in the past. One particular episode was striking. The incident with the offended passenger, David Caroll and the baggage handlers who destroyed his guitar. The episode was filmed on video and went viral, forcing United Airlines to address their wrongdoing. As United Airlines' reputational image suffered after this crisis, one would assume that United Airlines learned its lesson in the way passengers should be treated and nevertheless how to manage crisis management. However, the company had apparently not learned its lesson, as the crisis with the removal of Dr. Dao was once again managed wrongly. It could be argued that due to

its past crisis history, the board of United Airlines and CEO Oscar Munoz would be aware of the upcoming consequences of the episode with Dr. Dao. Especially as Oscar Munoz has experienced his share of issues and crises unfolding on social media with both pictures and videos of the airline conducting misbehavior towards passengers have went viral multiple times. Thus, one would assume that Oscar Munoz would have been aware of how quickly this episode would go viral on social media in the same vein as all the other prior crisis episodes. Thus, it can be argued that the board of United Airlines and Oscar Munoz neither understand the power of the media nor embrace the opportunity for 'making it right' when facing a crisis.

6.2 Consequences for lack of providing appropriate information

An organization facing a full-blown crisis should utilize the *rebuild strategy*, according to Coombs. This entails providing positive, appropriate, and the correct set of information. By failing to do so, people will feel a lack of control and try to compensate for it by seeking information from other informal sources. As a result, rumors and inaccurate information will be produced, and yet more uncertainty will arise. This is evident in what happened at United Airlines during the crisis. If the claim be made that Oscar Munoz withholds information as a means to exercise control of the crisis. However, the analyses clearly indicate that it worked counterproductively to its intended effect of withholding information. People expect information is offered timely, meaning before having to ask for an explanation and an apology. As the video went viral before Oscar Munoz issued a statement, people had generated uncertainty and were seeking news articles to gain information. Thus, complying with people's uncertainty was no longer in Oscar Munoz's control. Therefore, it can be argued that accurate, timely, and appropriate information about the crisis would have reduced people's uncertainty, which could have limited the amount of angry and schadenfreude emotions among people, as shown in the examination.

Moreover, referring to the theory section in connection with uncertainty, where two underlying needs outlines that people have when being either psychically or mentally involved in the crisis. Firstly, it is suggested that people have *predictive needs*, which involves the capacity to predict what will happen in the future. Secondly, it is suggested that people have *explanatory needs*, which involves the capacity to understand the creation of the crisis (cf. section 4.1.8). Thus, information value in a crisis should contribute to reducing people's uncertainty by keeping them informed, both during and after the crisis event. The analysis showed that United Airlines changed its initial statement to a more appropriate and ethical apologetic statement. Also, as the second statement

lived up to several of Hearit's characteristics, it could be assumed that the second statement would reduce people's uncertainty. However, people's predictive need and explanatory needs have not been met. Thus, it can be argued that people hold onto the status quo and reject the second more appropriate response, which the examination showed evidence of. Arguably, people's predictive needs could have been met by providing a corrective action plan in its initial statement, so people would be able to predict future actions and thereby be certain that the company acts immediately. In addition, it could be argued that people's explanatory needs would have been met, if United Airlines had issued its second statement instead of the initial response and continued providing useful information. Since the examination of the content of the communication in Section 5.2.7 showed that the second statement fully disclosed information related to the offense, and thus, it would meet people's explanatory needs. Thus, one could argue that United Airlines could have reduced the reputational damage by incorporating accurate and appropriate information, as it would have reduced people's uncertainty.

6.3 Offering an apology without truly apologizing

Referring to Hearit in Section 3.2.1, the term Apologia is a derivative of a word meaning "defense" "speech in defense," while the word apology refers to "acknowledge and express regret for a fault without defense." The examination of Oscar Munoz's apologetic statements revealed that its initial apologia did not live up to Hearit's characteristics. Additionally, there was a justification response strategy utilized, which was not appropriate because the episode was within the intentional cluster. Through the analysis of people's perception of both United Airlines response strategy and its apology, it became clear that the majority of people held the company accountable and criticized its way of handling the episode. Only one day after having issued the initial statement, Oscar Munoz came out with an entirely different apologetic approach. Thus, one could argue that Oscar Munoz had hidden motives for changing its initial statement. Firstly, Oscar Munoz attempted to minimize the offense by characterizing it as "re-accommodating" due to a case of overbooking. Secondly, the employee letter where Oscar Munoz calls Dr. Dao 'disruptive' and 'belligerent' and further stated in the letter that its agents and employee "followed the established procedures," indicating his support for the removal of Dr. Dao. This is also apparent as the employees were told, "I empathically stand behind all of you" (App. 2, p. 1.). In contrast to this, Oscar Munoz states in the interview that the front line of the company has not been provided "with the proper tools, policies, procedures that allow them to use their common sense." (App. 3, p. 5).

Thus, it can be argued that Oscar Munoz supports how employees handled the situation, as there is clear evidence of support and empathy towards the offending employees. This is also apparent, as Oscar Munoz did not apologize for injuring Dr. Dao, but rather apologized for overbooking and therefore having to re-accommodating the four passengers. Notably, the flight was not overbooked, despite apologizing for it. In fact, the reason for removing Dr. Dao and the other three passengers was so United Airlines employees could be seated.

Additionally, in the 24 hours after having issued the initial statement on April 11, 2017, the company's stock fell enormously to almost five percent. Meaning that United Airlines lost 1 billion dollars in market value. Shortly after the stock dive, Oscar Munoz issued the second, more appropriate, however, completely different apologetic statement. This sparks the argument that Oscar Munoz's hidden motive for offering the second apology was due to the initial statement backfiring, which resulted in massive financial ramifications. This would most likely have destroyed the company in terms of its reputational image.

7.0 Conclusion

The scope of this thesis is to identify United Airlines' crisis communication upon its incident of the removal of Dr. Dao. In addition to this, an attempt to uncover the underlying reasons to why the company changed its response to a different, however, more apologetic statement than its initial statement. Moreover, the aim was to examine how the general public perceived United Airlines' communicative effort and whether or not the media potentially have affected how people interpret the incident.

The analysis of United Airlines' crisis communication revealed that people held the company responsible for the episode. This was clear as the collected data stemming from social media showed that 95% of people hold United Airlines accountable for the episode, and 100% shared the same opinion from the web survey. People therefore ascribed initial crisis responsibility to United Airlines, which places the company under the 'intentional cluster,' in accordance with Timothy Coombs' SCCT Theory, this can further be categorized as 'organizational misdeed with injuries'. Within the intentional cluster, the organization knowingly placed people at risk and, therefore, serves the highest form of reputational threat.

The next step in the process was to examine United Airlines' consistency and distinctiveness factors, which refers to prior crises or incidents in the past and how well or poorly the company has treated its customers in the past. The analysis revealed that United Airlines had experienced numerous crises and issues in its past. Nonetheless, evidence of treating customers exceptionally poorly in its past was also apparent. This was obvious with the number of private accounts created prior to this episode on both Facebook and Twitter where, e.g., 13 accounts named 'Boycott United Airline' with people expressing discontent towards the airline's treatment of its passengers. Consequently, people were more likely to attribute United Airlines more crisis responsibility during the crisis with the passenger removal. This is due to the fact that people already had negative associations with the airline. In fact, the collected data regarding people's emotions and comments revealed that 77% express emotions of anger, while 15% express schadenfreude. In addition to this, the data from the web survey showed that a total of 93% express feelings of anger and 7% express schadenfreude. This results in people generating negative emotions, which thereby trigger unfavorable behavioral intentions. This was evident, e.g., as the word 'boycott' among the collected

comments appeared 78 times out of 200 collected comments. Also, the phrases expressing United Airlines should be sued were stated 61 times.

The analysis revealed that United Airlines was utilizing a justification response strategy as the CEO, Oscar Munoz, attempted to minimize the offense in an attempt to reduce the perceived seriousness of the episode. However, the initial statement became counterproductive as the examination showed that people had not accepted his initial response. Interestingly, on April 11, 2017, one day later, United Airlines changed its response to a rebuild response strategy. According to Coombs, this is the most appropriate strategy to apply when being placed within the intentional cluster.

Furthermore, in the examination of United Airlines' manner and content of its communicative effort in apologizing, it was revealed that the initial statement did not live up to Hearit's characteristics of offering an appropriate and ethical apology. In fact, the initial apology only managed to comply in being truthful by disclosing useful information; and only to some degree. Even though the initial response was issued timely, it did not work accordingly, as people did not accept it. The statement did also comply with the choice of context, as the press release was issued on Facebook, Twitter, and United Airlines' official webpage. Nonetheless, the data collected on social media of how people perceived the initial statement showed that 58% were negatively charged towards the response, 42% were neutral. Thus, the analysis shows that United Airlines' initial apology was not appropriate or ethical in accordance with Hearit's theory of apologetic ethics. The examination from the web survey revealed that 95 % had a negative stance, while 5% remained neutral.

Ultimately, United Airlines changed its response strategy and issued a second apologetic statement in both a press release and in the interview with ABC news. Here, the analysis revealed that by changing its strategy, the second apology lived up to several characteristics of offering an ideal apology. Thus, one would assume people would be more accepting towards the second apology. Interestingly, the collected data showed otherwise, as comments on social media revealed that 36% were negatively charged towards the second statement, and 47% were neutral and only 17% were positive. Also, the web survey showed that 25% were negatively charged, 66% were neutral, and 25% were positive. Despite the fact, that the numbers indicate an improvement, the statistical measurements also shows how crucial the initial statement is when facing a crisis, as people's negatively charged perceptions are highly difficult to reverse into a positive perception.

Despite eventually utilizing an appropriate response strategy and offering a sincere apology, the public did not accept the apology according to the examination. Thus, it can be argued that United Airlines failed in its crisis communication effort.

The examination of the news media frames provided insightful clues on how the crisis had been portrayed by the media. The examination of news articles revealed that most of its articles focused more on Oscar Munoz's lack of communicative effort, rather than focusing on the actual episode. This was evident as Entman's outlined four types of frames were detected in all the examined articles. Therefore, it can be argued that the media managed to construct people's perceptions and interpretations regarding the crisis. Also, by using and promoting certain aspects and distorting information, the media assumingly manage to change people's judgments, allegedly for the worst.

Lastly, it is noteworthy to mention that the concluding findings are based on the social constructivist approach. Thus, it is acknowledged that the problems identified could have been different, as the findings are based on the interpretations of the investigator of the thesis. Nonetheless, the critical reader might ponder upon whether or not the investigator have selected fragments of data in order to support certain arguments, or might doubt the persuasiveness of the claims made on basis of the selected examples. Thus, the findings from the analysis cannot be considered as the absolute truth or an objective reality. This is simply not feasible due to the claim of a subjective nature of reality from a social constructivist point of view. As the thesis also used the hermeneutic approach by interpreting new knowledge in order to gain an understanding, the investigator attempted to interpret critically as an attempt to counteract subjectivity and personal biases. Since, the way the investigator interprets with a circle structure, the interpretations of what the truth is, is in fact, influenced and sculpted by the experience and knowledge of the individual conducting the thesis. The findings shall, therefore, be looked at as instructive, and importantly, the reader shall take a critical stance.

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