Tweets of Wrath: Assessing Social Media Influence in Organizational Crisis

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TWEETS OF WRATH:
ASSESSING SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE IN
ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS

by
Megan Courtaney Kendall

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This thesis is dedicated to friends who offered their unending encouragement and family who continually supported me.
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ABSTRACT

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For businesses and organizations, public perception is a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of crisis response strategies in mitigating reputational damage. However, current crisis literature offers little investigation into how public response found on social media can be measured and assessed. This case study seeks to better understand the role of online public perception in crisis and how social media are disrupting crisis communication strategies. On April 9th, 2017, United Airlines faced global outrage in an exceptional case that is both relevant and interesting in considering how online publics engaged with the crisis via social media after a video was shared on Twitter showing a passenger being forcibly removed from the plane.

Utilizing Coombs’ (2015b) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) framework, tweets, corporate press releases and news articles are assessed to establish a crisis timeline and analyze how United and publics responded to the crisis. This case study suggests social media influence crisis communication, requiring a shift in crisis communication to more effectively interact with engaged online publics. While it’s not clear if social media direct strategy change, the online platforms are undeniably a driving force in sending and receiving information surrounding a crisis and allow publics to participate in crisis in new ways. In considering public perception, organizations may be able to better anticipate and prepare more effective crisis strategies.

Keywords: Crisis communication, situational crisis communication theory, social media engagement
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In today’s rapid-fire media environment, when a crisis occurs organizations face new challenges to determine how to strategically and quickly communicate as the situation escalates and goes viral. In going viral, the crisis enters public conversation as information spreads online—garnering opinions, demanding attention, and becoming a trending topic on social media platforms. In this case, going viral, defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) as an “electronic word of mouth” (p. 255) where messages relating to an organization are transmitted exponentially, is not desirable for organizations, as publicly-driven messages overshadow an organization’s crisis communication efforts on a global scale. The purpose of crisis communication is to develop strategies that are intended to combat the negative outcomes and restore a level of order for organizations (Coombs, 2015b), and “are expected to play a vital role in the alleviation of a crisis situation. Specifically, communication assists in reducing the damage incurred by the impacted organizations due to the crisis event” (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2012, p. 635). Social media meddle with those intended communication goals as online publics are granted space to interject and offer their own perspective.

A crisis causes unanticipated disruption with the potential for negative outcomes for an organization (Coombs, 2015b). Social media have exacerbated how online publics react and interpret the crisis information—effectively altering how organizations share information and interact with various publics surrounding the crisis. Up until this point, the focus of crisis communication research has been on organizational responsibility and crisis communication strategy, with little focus on public response via social media in a crisis (per Coombs, 2015b). Pertinent questions for crisis communication, including questions about the influence and power of social media, have been left unanswered as the pervasiveness of social media have continued to
grow. In the immediacy created by that media accessibility, organizations are left to handle new questions of communication and how to strategically communicate in the middle of a crisis. Social media play a definite, but difficult-to-determine, role in crisis communication as crisis after crisis often emerge on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter and are widely shared. More research examining online public response in a crisis is needed to determine influences of social media on crisis communication efforts. This study examines the crisis communication strategy and online public responses that played out on Twitter after an incident occurred with United Airlines in April 2017.

Social Media Influence and Crisis

Online social media platforms allow for nearly instantaneous access, reaction and commentary to events that are happening globally. This shifting power dynamic opens new challenges in handling a crisis situation as organizations quickly lose control of their intended message or are left unprepared with the direction of public interpretation. Social media no longer operate in an isolated communication space, but intersect across all channels, including traditional outlets to become an integrated, collaborative information source (Coombs, 2015b).

In the case of United, #NewUnitedAirlineMottos was an organic reaction that was an online public response to the events that transpired. That hashtag became a trending topic and dominated both social media feeds and traditional media headlines for weeks following the crisis event. Conversations about the crisis event became linked to online publics’ messaging focus: mocking United’s branding. Social media shift perspective to online publics who control content that is being shared and commented on. By examining online public perception, organizations may be able to develop crisis strategy plans that more effectively mitigate the crisis and integrate social media responses into their messages in order to better understand public sentiment. In exploring
the messages shared on Twitter, this study aims to demonstrate a need to connect social media influences to ongoing crisis communication practices.

**Theoretical Framework**

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) stated, “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). Using an interpretive lens, this case study looks at the role of social media within a specific crisis context and makes observations on the interactions that are occurring between the organization and online publics in order to understand the influence social media play in crisis communication. A qualitative framework is appropriate here because the research goals are interested in identifying and understanding deeper meanings of ‘how’ and ‘why’ within the established nature of events, consistent with qualitative imperatives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Specifically, this study employs a case study approach because, as Yin (1994) wrote, “the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristic of real-life events” (p. 3). Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster (2000) provided further support for a case study framework by observing that “quantification of data is not a priority. Indeed, qualitative data may be treated as superior” (p. 4) when comparing case studies to other research approaches. In short, for a qualitative approach “researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 2). A case study provides groundwork for an interpretive, qualitative study. Multiple texts, documents, and sources stand as evidence in building the case.

This interdisciplinary approach adapts the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) framework (Coombs, 2015b) to understand why and how social media interact within the existing
crisis model. Public voices are frequently missing from crisis models, which can become problematic as social media are more popularly used for communication purposes. In this interpretative approach utilizing SCCT, which assumes organizational reputation is a “valued resource threatened by crises” (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 167), public perception is linked with social media communication. SCCT accepts that public perception and attribution affect organizational reputation and suggests that the higher the perception of crisis responsibility, the worse hits toward reputational damage. Additionally, there’s evidence in the model that shows a history of previous crisis or negative reputation can have an impact on a new, emerging crisis situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

A Video Goes Viral: A Crisis Case from United Airlines

United Airlines faced unexpected public backlash after an overbooking incident turned violent on a plane at Chicago O’Hare Airport on Sunday, April 9th, 2017. After attempted efforts to find a willing volunteer to give up their seat for the flight (with an offered monetary incentive), United employees enacted their involuntary denied boarding process procedures to have passengers removed. Dr. David Dao was one passenger chosen to leave the plane, but he refused. Security was called, and he was forcibly dragged from the plane, acquiring multiple injuries from the incident (United Airlines, 2017).

When cell phone footage was shared online, the incident quickly turned viral and United Airlines faced a communications crisis. Dr. David Dao, the injured passenger, was filmed being forcibly and violently removed from the plane by airport security. After the video went viral, negative public sentiment quickly spread across social media channels. The topic began trending Sunday night, and United Airlines responded with a series of press statements from both the organization and CEO in an attempt to mitigate reputational damage. As criticism continued to
spread and the incident remained a trending topic, United faced the wrath of public outrage (McCann, 2017; Carey & Cameron, 2017).

Soon after the release of the video, the hashtag #NewUnitedAirlineMottos began trending on Twitter as users co-opted United’s motto, “Fly the friendly skies” to show how this incident was decidedly unfriendly (Phelon, 2017). Social media publics quickly mocked United’s motto and corporate response to the incident with calls of callousness and violence toward its customers (Creswell & Maheshwari, 2017). The news covering the incident wasn’t relegated only to social media and quickly spread to traditional media as well with “the incident dominating news shows and social media as travelers began live-tweeting [other] overbooking incidents” (Selk & Aratani, 2017). In other words, United found all its actions, not just the Flight 3411 incident, under a microscope as online publics became not only aware, but quick to pass judgment.

United Airlines had to utilize crisis strategies to control the crisis narrative and attempt to reclaim the messaging surrounding the event. Oscar Munoz, current United CEO, was forced to step forward and offer statements on behalf of the organization, asserting clarification, blame and sympathy for the incident. After this crisis event, United Airlines announced changes to organizational policy regarding overbooking situations (Carey & Cameron, 2017).

**Summary and Overview of Chapters**

In review, the purpose of this study is to extend the field of crisis communication by exploring the influence social media have in current crisis strategies by focusing on United Airline’s April 2017 case. Current social media platforms allow news to travel faster and stories to be widely shared, so both organizational and online public responses are reviewed in a qualitative content analysis to identify how Twitter plays a role within the crisis narrative.
United Airlines presents a case that is both relevant and interesting in a new digital age of social media as United’s crisis response messages abruptly shift in a matter of days, and ultimately end with the enactment of corporate-wide policy changes (Yin, 1994). This case study demonstrated how United Airlines adjusted crisis communication strategies in accordance with online public responses, thus suggesting social media influence and a shift in crisis communication that intercepts and redirects the communication coming from online publics. While it’s not clear if social media directed strategy change, they are undeniably a driving force in sending and receiving information surrounding a crisis and allow online publics to participate in the crisis in new ways.

In this case, parody is used to cast blame on the organization. This engagement from online publics redistributes power and exhibits the importance of also analyzing how social media publics respond to a crisis and perceives a crisis. In considering online public perception, communication responses may help organizations anticipate and prepare more effective crisis strategies, particularly in the viral nature of a digital age. It’s suggested that social media should be included as a measure of organizational reputation based on previously established history with the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) framework to understand online public response (Coombs, 2015b).

In this first chapter, an introduction to United’s case was outlined with an overview for the thesis project. In Chapter 2, a literature review is provided, with previous literature on crisis communication and situational crisis communication theory tied to ongoing social media research. The literature review reveals a need for a qualitative approach to ask critical how and why questions that provide valuable insight for both research and practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).
Chapter 3 explains the method for this study. A qualitative content analysis is utilized for the case study with a triangulation of data sources: tweets in response to the crisis, corporate documents released in response to the crisis, and news articles pertaining to United’s history with crisis. This chapter outlines specific procedures, a rationale for this method, and further explains how the data was interpreted.

Chapter 4 reviews the findings of the case by establishing a timeline of events and chronologically reviewing the documents using the pre-established codes to identify themes and patterns. Research questions are reviewed in depth as both United’s and the publics’ responses are analyzed. Chapter 5 is the discussion and further response to the research questions. In this chapter, the results found in the collected case study texts is reflected on and thought of in a broader context. Social media as an influencer in crisis literature is discussed. The discussion adapts situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2015b) to the established case from United Airlines to look at organizational response and public response. This framework helps organize and evaluate the crisis, crisis response, perceptions surrounding the crisis, and how social media operate within the crisis context.

Definition of Terms

In a brief definition of terms in this study, I refer to crisis as a serious, unpredictable event facing an organization (Coombs, 2015b). Social media are defined as online platforms that enable public connections and interactions among users (boyd & Ellison, 2008) and engagement as social interactions that note a level of involvement (Smith, 2015). Crisis communication is the process required to gather, interpret and communicate information in order to address a crisis situation (Heath, 2012). Finally, the concept of publics refers to a group of individuals that “face or recognize a similar problem and organize for action” (Sung, 2007, p. 177). For the purposes of the
project, *online publics* are defined as individuals that are present and familiar with online spaces (such as social media platforms), and are publicly visible and accessible.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Crisis?

Crisis as a phrase, event or strategic response can mean different things across industries, organizations or even circumstances. Various definitions of crisis and discussions surrounding crisis exist in current literature, particularly with organizations responding to a crisis event. Heath (2012) pointed out that discussion on organizational crisis and communication practices vary widely. However, he maintained a common thread in defining crisis was “one can find the focus on control—whether the organization knew, appreciated, planned, and appropriately enacted sufficient control over operations to prevent, mitigate, respond, and learn from a crisis” (p. 3). An entire body of literature surrounding crisis response emerged to account for both “widespread and systematic disruption. But they may also be forces of constructive change, growth and renewal” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 1). In other words, crisis facilitates some kind of change or impact on an organization.

Multiple definitions of crisis exist in current literature. There’s a literal, straightforward definition that a crisis is an unexpected event that happens (such as natural disasters or workplace accidents). Another approach is to view crisis as risk factors that led to a failing event of some kind. While other definitions of crisis take a purely communicative approach looking at system breakdowns (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). For the purpose of this study, Coombs’ definition of crisis will be used, which is “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact and organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 19, as cited in Heath, 2012). This definition draws attention to how various publics are involved in a crisis situation, as well as the organization facing an
unprecedented event. Sellnow and Seeger (2013) added, crisis “by definition, defies any systematic explanation” (p. 3). Crises are unpredictable, and when facing a crisis, organizations are faced with the challenge of constructing a meaningful message to account for the events that transpired, as well as justify the organization’s role in those events.

Perception is an important factor in the crisis definition as it allows for forces outside of the organization to play a role in crisis response. In considering crisis as a perspective with publics, “the question of the magnitude of a crisis is best understood as a matter of personal, community and even cultural perception” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 4). In considering both organizational and public responses, the interchange demonstrates shifting communication practices that can be reexamined for effective crisis communication strategies.

In defining crisis as a multi-perspective event, Coombs shifted the definition away from the event itself and instead allowed discussion to center on the meaning surrounding the event. The crisis that emerged is an unexpected event that establishes risk, but more broadly enacted change. Coombs defined that these events can be a natural, breakdown(s), human error, damage, organizationally-driven, workplace violence or rumors, among others (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Coombs, 2015b).

**Communicating in Crisis**

In crisis, organizations strive to create a space that establishes normalcy and returns lost reputation (Coombs, 2015b). Issues of responsibility, blame and foresight play a part in the crisis narrative as organizations consider response strategies as “communication during and after a crisis affects long-term impressions” (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011, p. 115). Considering crisis as perception is important because the crisis for an organization extends beyond the event and can transcend to be identified with the organizational brand itself. Communication surrounding the
A crisis disrupts an entire organization, while crisis communication develops strategies that are intended to combat the negative outcomes and restore a level of order through reputation management (Coombs, 2007). In the case of crisis, organizations face a threat to their reputation, so crisis communication is an organizational effort to reach publics to influence their perceptions and view of the organization (Coombs, 2007). Communication establishes “the construction of meaning, sharing some interpretation or consensual understanding between senders/receivers, audiences, publics, stakeholders or communities” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 11). Crisis communication is a response system that allows for objectives to be made and met through messaging strategies (Coombs, 2015b).

Communication response becomes important as an interpretative, meaning-making aspect of the crisis. A crisis situation spreads on social media due to the share-ability of the message and the environment conditions currently facing the organization (Coombs, 2015b). As organizations communicate in crisis, multiple channels are engaged in order to curb the resulting crisis “dysfunction” and limit public action (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 2007). Strategies around crisis response work to reinforce the status quo, which necessitates the use of mass media to reach publics.

In facing a crisis event, organizations must understand not only response strategies, but why they are communicating the way they are. Therefore, the meaning and messaging established in the communication that erupts from the crisis becomes as important, if not more important, as the precipitating event. An organization is forced to respond both quickly and appropriately to the crisis event, the “communication during those first few hours and in subsequent days can alter the
future of the organization, the management team, and the individual public relations practitioner” (Hagan, 2007, p. 417).

Communication strategies incorporate multiple facets that should be considered. Coombs (2015b) suggested that multiple publics hold sway over an organization, so messaging must reach all groups in a collaborative effort in order to maintain organizational credibility and repair the damaged reputation. Social media are an inevitable means of both sharing information and spreading information (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011).

**Crisis Response: The Organization**

Simply communicating in crisis doesn’t restore order. According to Coombs (2015b), the goal of crisis communication is to maintain and protect the organization’s reputation and reduce negative public sentiment. Therefore, effective crisis communication response seeks to influence and persuade publics to reorient to a positive view of the organization, rather than control or manipulate public sentiment (Coombs, 2015b). Heath (2012) shared that control is a common theme throughout existing crisis literature and signified a key desirable outcome for organizations. Control over reputation, messaging, event discourse, internal communication and public community relations play key roles here. While the organization seeks control in the messaging, that control is ultimately reliant on public sentiment. Current strategies (such as Benoit’s image restoration) “focuses on explaining and interpreting what has happened and who is at fault, renewal is concerned with what will happen and how the organization will move forward” (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007, p. 132).

Benoit (1997) offered image restoration theory as a method for addressing corporate image concerns. Corporate image and reputation are core concepts that an organization strives to protect when facing crisis and was a dominant strategy in dealing with the crisis aftermath (Ulmer, Seeger,
Corporate image, as described by Benoit (1997), is about how an organization is viewed. In his view, Benoit asserted that “perceptions are more important than reality” (p. 178). Reputation is a collective assessment of an organization, or an attitude towards that organization. Coombs (2015b) added “competence and integrity are two critical elements of corporate reputation” (p. 144).

Reputation is a matter of how organizational identity is viewed by people outside of the organization (Coombs, 2007). It is an “extremely valuable intangible organizational resource” that is formed through shared information and messages from the organization to its various publics (Coombs, 2015b, p. 12). Coombs (2007) described that while organizations have control over messaging and can shape or build their identity, reputation is a power that’s outside of their control and rests in the perception of publics. Interactions and public perceptions based on those interactions are important components of establishing an organizational reputation (Coombs, 2015b). Traditionally, crisis communication has focused on organizational response, but with social media allowing for bidirectional communication channels, public perception becomes an important variable in assessing reputation (Schultz, Utz & Goritz, 2011).

While reputation repair is a key communication goal for organizations in crisis, it’s important to note that may not be the only goal in crisis strategy. “The focus of image restoration is limited primarily to post-event discourse and to that communication specifically associated with a crisis event, both in terms of time and scope” (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007, p. 131). However, reacting only to the immediate crisis limits an organization’s ability for ongoing reputational success. Particularly, in an era when social media have enabled online publics to have a much stronger voice to participate in the conversation and messaging surrounding the crisis.
Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Crisis response is an “ongoing and dynamic process of system operations” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 29) in matters of response, both from a public and organizational perspective. Literature has provided multiple theoretical approaches that establish crisis response models and steps to combat the unpredictability nature of the crisis event. Crisis has been established as a concept that is perceived as risk-filled and uncertain. Therefore, response measures focus on taking action in order to move the perceived risk and crisis away from the organization (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is one framework that considers public attribution and is an important consideration when handling the spread of information via social media (Coombs, 2015b).

![SCCT Diagram](image)

**Figure 1: Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory Model**

SCCT discourse offers direction for effective crisis communication responses so organizations can regain control of the situation and repair or protect their reputation. SCCT
focuses on attribution and public blame because it constrains how the organization can respond as “the organization may defend its interpretation of the crisis, but such an interpretation is unlikely to have much appeal with its nonvictims, resulting in the further erosion of the organization’s reputation” (Coombs, 2004, p. 285). SCCT accomplishes this by considering public perception and previous crisis events that have impacted the organization’s current reputational state (Coombs, 2004).

SCCT addresses all aspects of a crisis (before, after and during) in order to best determine a response strategy that will be most effective. In this model, an organizational crisis response is based on defining the immediate crisis type, establishing a history of crisis, and evaluating the organization’s reputation [See Figure 1]. This framework suggests that organizational history plays a significant role in determining public perception towards organizational reputation. Levels of crisis responsibility can be determined from public perception, and from that designation, reputation response strategies are recommended in a crisis communication strategy (Coombs, 2004).

The crisis event is concerned with actions surrounding the crisis itself, and ideas of blame, responsibility and communication strategies are evaluated (Coombs, 2015b). Crisis type is linked to crisis responsibility: low, moderate, and high levels of responsibility as determined by public perception. Low responsibility orients the organization as the victim, moderate responsibility positions the organization as being in an accident, and high responsibility situates the organization in a preventable occurrence. For example, a low-level designation may include an organization being in crisis due to a natural disaster (something that is out of their control), a moderate level may be an equipment malfunction due to technology (not human) error, while a preventable high level is due to human error or organizational misdeed (Coombs, 2012).
Public perception plays a role as SCCT recognizes that it is publics that determine crisis responsibility and seeks to mitigate organizational damages by crafting a response strategy that will build the best image. “SCCT is audience oriented because it seeks to illuminate how people perceive crises, their reactions to crisis response strategies, and audience reactions to the organization in crisis” (Coombs, 2012, p. 38). Response strategies from SCCT for organizations facing a crisis are focused on changing perception surrounding the crisis and best addressing the level of responsibility attributed by publics. *Attacking the accuser* is an outright refusal that a crisis exists. *Denial* is an outright rejection of the claim or potentially shifting the blame to another party, while *scapegoating* is eliminating all responsibility for a crisis. *Excusing* is taking steps to reinforce the minimal responsibility for the crisis and *justification* reinforces minimal damage. *Compensation* accepts responsibility for the crisis and offers some monetization to the victims. *Apology* is another form of accepting responsibility as a public recognition of wrongdoing. Finally, *reminding, ingratiating*, and *victimage* are bolstering strategies that help diminish crisis blame (Coombs, 2015b).

Coombs’ situational crisis communication theory “suggests that the public’s attributions of corporate crises can be influenced by information about crisis and relationship history” (Yum & Jeong, 2015, p. 163). The SCCT model is focused on determining organizational responsibility and attributing blame (Coombs, 2004). The model measures crisis responsibility as an effect against information and reputational distinctiveness—both positive and negative recognition. SCCT suggests these measures by establishing prior organizational history and assessing public response to a crisis event. A history of crisis has shown that the threat against reputation may be more intense in a later, current crisis regarding public perception (Coombs, 2004). Previous studies have found that reputational “distinctiveness” may direct how publics view an organization’s level
of responsibility and ultimate attribution for the crisis, which, in turn, drives how organizations communicate in a crisis (Yum & Jeong, 2015; Coombs, 2004).

**Crisis Response: Online Publics**

While SCCT does acknowledge public input in attributing responsibility, very little investigation and crisis research focuses on public response. Despite it being shown that public perception is a strong influencer “that is difficult to change,” public voices remain excluded from crisis theories (Coombs, 2004, p. 285). Crisis response messages need to consider these perceptions because “people will expect responses that fit the demands of the situation. Both case study and experimental research have found little success when crisis managers offer information that contradict expected response” (Coombs, 2004, p. 285). In a previous case study, researchers suggested that a knowledge gap remains in crisis research since current crisis response tends to be reactionary, rather than strategic and anticipatory (Xu & Li, 2013). They concluded that an analysis of publics may better anticipate, and therefore avoid, crisis response fallout from public perception.

Understanding public response and ongoing sentiment is a critical assessment of crisis communication. In establishing publics as involved crisis participants, organizations have to take their thoughts, feelings and reactions into account (Sung, 2007). Crisis events are no longer able to be exclusively contained by the organization. Various factors are at play, but technology, social media, and the way news is disseminated play a role in disrupting the control previously held by organizations. Instead, reputation repair is reliant on how “key stakeholders prior to the crisis are able to draw on the reservoir of goodwill to help gain support for the rebuilding enterprise” (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007, p. 133). Organizations now need to reach out for help from their communities and networks for reputational support as they respond to a crisis with new messaging.
“It is essential that organizations know who their publics are and address them appropriately throughout the relationship, but most importantly, during a crisis” (Hagan, 2007, p. 430).

In crisis, people generally want to know who is responsible and why the event occurred. Weiner (1985) introduced attribution theory as a means of reconciling emotion and event outcomes. Generally, the theory illustrated the mechanism individuals undergo to appraise and determine an outcome of success or failure based on what happened following the event. This theoretical approach is again, connected to public perception and a consequence of some previous action. In effect, attribution theory explains what drives people to find an explanation for the event that occurred and assign appropriate blame once a plausible cause has been accounted for (Coombs, 2015b). Essentially, the theory deals with how responsibility and blame are assigned during a crisis.

Emotions in a crisis are another critical variable in crisis attribution because they can shape how the crisis is presented (Coombs, 2015b). Emotions follow a similar development pattern as attribution and are assigned by publics based on their perceptions of what is happening (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2012). Generally, the most commonly used emotions in attribution research are: pride, anger, pity, guilt, gratitude, shame and hopelessness. Pride is knowing one’s merits in a positive outcome, anger is assigning blame in a negative outcome, pity is linked with uncontrollable situations, guilt is an emotion that wrestles with ethical and moral accountability, gratitude is granted if help or a gift was intentionally given, and hopelessness is a goal-oriented trait with negative outcomes (Weiner, 1985).

In crisis, emotions are typically negatively oriented. Jin and Pang’s (2012) emotion research cited the importance of emotions as helpful indicators of what publics need and their involvement in the crisis. Anger, fright, anxiety and sadness are four common negative emotions
established in their model. Additionally, sympathy and schadenfreude are two emotions that are connected to crisis situations. Sympathy is more common if the organization is seen to not be at fault, while schadenfreude is a German word meaning ‘taking joy from others’ pain’ (Jin & Pang, 2012). It is from these emotions that public response to the crisis can be seen based on their emotional coping strategy. Jin and Pang (2012) utilized emotions from publics to interpret meaning from the crisis itself in a coping model of emotions and engagement.

**Social Media in a Crisis**

Before social media there was a clear separation between media and audience: sender and receiver. However, with the inclusion and acceptance of social media, the separation of media are lost as “individuals become sources of information online” (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011, p.110). Social media changed the media experience from passive to active media consumption as online publics were given an online space to engage with information that was shared.

Social media are comprised of diverse social network sites, or network systems where individuals build a profile, establish connections, and interact, including the use of blogs, content communities, virtual worlds, and other collaborative projects (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argued that social media allow “continuous modify[cation] by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (p. 61). Social media enable widespread distribution and collaboration of content that moves away from individual ownership. Veil et al. (2011) discussed the participatory aspect of social media and how organizations must engage with their public in order to effectively share their message. This creates a dialogue that exchanges information, instead of the more traditional directed media flow patterns. As organizations share with their online publics, online publics share amongst themselves, but also respond directly back to the organization. Reputation management and trust-building have been
two strategies that have seen success on social media due to the ease of reaching multiple publics with focused, personal messages (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011).

The import of social media to a crisis is the way social media enable the spread of opinions, garnering attention through the open accessibility and visibility of social media platforms. Social media provide “a variety for organizations to engage directly with the audience, [and] the outlets are well suited for monitoring and responding to rumors” (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011, p. 114). As social media content garners more attention, it is often described as being viral. Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) share three components are at work in creating a viral condition: the messengers, the message and the environment. Basically, these are conditions that make the content shareable and interesting (something that is extremely hard to predict).

Social media distribution and the potential for content to go viral continue to grow and impact organizations (Hughey, 2015). In fact, Coombs (2015b) suggested that a social media crisis may warrant a separate crisis designation from a traditional crisis due to the complexity and challenge of handling the situation. However, that kind of designation limits and constrains how social media currently interact and engage with information sources. A crisis spreads on social media due to the share-ability of the message and the crisis conditions facing the organization. Dialogue, discussion and interpretation on a topic become less controllable on social media which lead to fracturing perspectives on an event (Shan et al., 2013). Spontaneous conversation of an event takes the message out of the organization’s hand and allows it to be reconfigured and recreated for online public consumption (Husain et al., 2014). Messages are inserted into an increasingly interconnected media space that blurs the line between organizations and publics. There’s an increasing, “ability to communicate directly and immediately with stakeholders”
Connections are made and added to an already developed network that may (and can) develop into bona fide relationships (boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Counter to the positives of social media, organizations face potential drawbacks because of social media’s immediacy, access, and open-sourcing. Essentially, anyone with a cellphone and a membership on a social media platform can provide video evidence for an organization’s failure, even if such evidence is out of context (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Social media cannot be discounted for the simple reason that online publics “are already using social media to communicate about crises” (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011, p. 118). It’s not so much a battle of if social media should be used by an organization, but how can they play the game effectively in their crisis strategy response.

Because social media are platforms that online publics use for communication and online publics have influence over crisis response, it is critical to understand the concepts underlying social media that affect an organization’s crisis response. Two critical concepts are engagement and power.

**Engagement**

Broadly, engagement is involvement from publics in decision-making bodies or mechanisms (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Social media are “about engaging others in open and active conversation” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 66). Kang (2014) suggested trust and satisfaction are two critical components of engagement, while also linking individual and organizations together in a way “that is characterized by affective commitment, positive affectivity, and empowerment that an individual public experiences with an organization over time” (p. 402).

For this study, Taylor and Kent’s (2014) definition of engagement is used as “a two-way, give-and-take between organizations and publics” (p. 391). Smith, Strumberger, Guild, and Dugan
(in press) argued that online engagement needs to look beyond social media activities and behaviors and go deeper to consider information flow and motives for why information was shared. There are levels of engagement that lead online publics to immerse and interact with information more than others. These factors are influenced by interest, type of information, and social interactions. This leads online publics to consume, participate or create content as means of engagement (Kang, 2014; Smith, 2015).

Engagement necessitates an involvement with the organization that opens channels of communication and can lead to a sense of power, but that sense of power is built on the relationship (Kang, 2014). Engagement is a level of involvement that shows emotional attachment, a sense of belonging and ongoing interactivity on a platform (Smith, 2015). Furthermore, Smith (2015) explained engagement can exist between individuals and organizations. An important and powerful connection that “grants publics accessibility to media channels and empowers them to distribute messages in a publicly visible platform” (p. 83). On social media there are conversations happening and understanding the meaning and decision-making factors behind an empowered public response is important, especially when an organization is facing a crisis event.

**Power**

In crisis, there are publics that have power to influence what is happening. Power is a concept that denotes the capacity to affect change (Smith & Place, 2013). Previous literature addressed the need to include different publics in crisis strategy to effectively mitigate crisis (Xu & Li, 2013). And yet, social media and external media sources are currently not being reviewed as a public perspective or means of engagement. Online media holds a particular power and influence as both gatekeepers and sharers of information. This influence attributed to the creation
of shared value was measured by reciprocated online recognition. Another study “concurred that social media is becoming powerful for crisis communicators” (Husain et al., 2014, p. 226).

In considering the airline industry specifically, McCartney (2010) from the *Wall Street Journal* tackled social media-borne power in an article where he found customers “making complaints public on social-media sites can get travelers better tweet-ment” (McCartney, 2010). His article shared several anecdotes from customers across multiple airline carriers that resulted in superior service due to action seen on social media. Social media can accelerate support or calls for change as individuals come together to understand and disseminate information that is being shared about a situation. Therefore, one’s sense of power, or empowerment, grows when online publics feel ownership in the content being shared and ongoing relationships with one another (Smith, Men & Al-Sinan, 2015). Kang (2014) linked empowerment to decision-making, and that publics influence organizations with their support. This is an important link between organizational crisis and online engagement as power connects organization responses to online publics’ responses.

**Social Media and SCCT**

SCCT seeks to protect organizational reputation by considering public perception and “an organization is served better by accepting and working within the constraints of crisis responsibility attributions” (Coombs, 2004, p. 285). Considering social media as a vehicle for measuring public perception is an assumption that is suggested in this study to assess a bridge between crisis history and ongoing crisis response (Coombs, 2004). Social media platforms open a dialogue between publics and organizations and is currently not widely investigated within crisis literature as a variable for public response. The SCCT framework focuses on crisis responsibility and accounts for public perception, without offering a means of analyzing public voices (Coombs,
2015b). Social media could be considered as platforms impacting both organizational reputation and previous history as online publics draw conclusions, grant attributions, and respond directly to the event at hand.

**Research Questions**

1. How did United and online publics respond to the Flight 3411 crisis?
2. How does Twitter influence crisis communication strategy?

Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to assess the importance of social media and how online publics may have influenced United’s response to their crisis situation. These research questions have been chosen to enable the research to examine the case holistically.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This project takes a qualitative, interpretive approach in understanding the role of Twitter in a crisis, specifically the influence of Twitter. A case study examines three sources of data: Twitter reactions, documents from the organization, and news media. Specifically, tweets rallying around United Airlines, documents from United in response to the crisis, and news articles pertaining to this and previous United Airlines crises were used as sources of analysis for this case study. Codes include crisis response, attribution, emotion, and engagement. As established in previous chapters, how social media play a role in organizational crisis is limited in current research practices and is becoming necessary as an expanding means of media consumption and engagement (Coombs, 2015b). To analyze the response to this ongoing crisis on social media, tweets were gathered from a Twitter hashtag (#) search utilizing API search apps. Corporate documents were found on United’s official website, internet search queries or from a Mileage Plus member, and news articles were gathered from the Factiva database.

Case Study as Method Design

According to Schramm (as cited in Yin, 1994), “the essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (p. 12). Berg (2012) further stated, “[a] case study approach to this problem-solving process can reveal both the shared and the unique sensemaking decisions” (p. 328) of the case subject. Yin (1994) established that a case study design includes five components: (1) research questions, (2) criteria to interpret findings, (3) unit of analysis, (4) linking data to propositions and (5) criteria for interpreting data findings. Case studies provide a research design structure to gather and interpret from multiple
data sources. In this case, research questions have already been established. Research questions ask for information about both online publics and organizational response, so it was important that the documents collected for the case reflected both responses. This helps guide criteria in setting boundaries for the case and appropriate documents to utilize in analysis (Yin, 1994). For United Airlines, documents released from the corporation in response to the crisis were collected, while tweets from online publics were also gathered for analysis.

Using Coombs’ crisis framework, data was also collected in the postcrisis stage for evaluation purposes. In measuring impact and evaluating what lessons can be learned, indicators in the data help express the messages being told by the organization and online publics involved with the crisis (Coombs, 2015b).

United Airlines’ crisis served as the unit of analysis. This case, specifically, looks at the United Airlines organization and actions taken surrounding an event that occurred on April 9, 2017 and the resulting video footage that emerged showing security officers dragging a passenger from the plane against his will. Utilizing the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) framework, United’s actions were reviewed to establish a history of reputation and timeline of crisis response.

A content analysis assisted in identifying patterns to answer the research questions in an explanatory case study (Yin, 1994). Berg (2012) expanded on an explanatory case study explaining how multiple factors are used to “build a causal explanation for the case…but we don’t yet understand the uniqueness of the present case” (p. 337). This is an appropriate approach here with United Airlines as multiple factors and sources of information are observed for crisis response.
Data Collection

Data collection was sourced from publicly available documents and designed to achieve triangulation (Berg, 2012) and a means of validity in analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This is an in-depth, single case study that focuses on one organization and the sources of data look at both the response of the organization and of online publics through Twitter interactions.

Tweets

Tweets are used to assess online public responses and how that changed over the course of the crisis event timeline and compared to the organization’s response. Utilizing API search applications, TAGS and NodeXL, 87,803 tweets were collected. Search parameters included “United” and “United Airlines” between the dates of April 10, 2017 and April 15, 2017. These dates corresponded to the release of the viral video showing the forceful removal of Dr. Dao from Flight 3411. To collect Twitter data, a Twitter app account was created to gain access to the limited API data Twitter makes freely accessible (Twitter Developer, n.d.). This is a free service available to all registered Twitter App users. TAGS is a script software programs that is freely available online for download. NodeXL is a licensed software that is connected with Microsoft Excel. Once proper accreditation was established for Twitter API and the proper software was downloaded specific searches were conducted (Smith, M., et al., 2012, Hawksey, 2014).

In the TAGS search, a total of 82,543 tweets were retrieved. NodeXL mined 5,260 tweets to reach a total of 87,803 tweets. All tweets were consolidated into a combined excel document and organized chronologically. It should be noted that API collection measures provide access to data, but is limited in its capacity and leads to an inevitable loss of data. API limits are set in place for number of tweets that can be collected as well as archive limit access. In this case, the event
and resulting crisis was happening in real time so tweets were gathered within the two-week API archive limit. In reporting, Twitter handles are removed to maintain a level of anonymity and to keep the focus on the messages shared.

**Crisis Strategy Response Documentation**

All corporate documentation was gathered by a convenience sample based on accessibility and alignment with the case event timeline (Miles, et al., 2014). Corporate documents gathered include video footage of United CEO Oscar Munoz speaking with Good Morning America, four press releases from United’s website that were widely shared on multiple media channels, and an email sent from the CEO to United’s Mileage Plus members (United’s frequent flyer program). All documents emerged after the crisis event and were part of organizational efforts to respond to the crisis. These documents were chosen because they were released on United Airlines’ website and used on multiple social media channels to announce communication about the crisis.

These documents are of public record and were freely accessible via the web. The email was obtained through a personal connection who is a Mileage Plus member, however multiple news sources did report on the email that was sent out. Corporate documents established the timeline for the case study, as well as provided information on the organization’s response to the crisis [See Figure 2 for timeline].

**News Articles**

The Factiva database gathered news articles relating to United Airlines. Factiva is an online search database from Dow Jones that aggregates news articles from over 32,000 news sources to provide one of the largest, most comprehensive news resource archives (ProQuest, n.d.).
In seeking articles outside of the crisis, a crisis history can be established leading up to the crisis event to assess brand reputation and previous crisis experience (Coombs, 2015b). For the search, “United Airlines” was inputted as the keyword with no date restrictions. Entries were filtered to “United Continental Holdings, Inc.” and “United Airlines, Inc.” for a total of 2,819 articles to sort. For consistency and to further limit search results, articles were only chosen from national or global news outlets (ie. *New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post*, etc.) and word length had to be at least 500 words. A second search was conducted with “United Airlines Crisis” as the keywords and same company filters applied for a total of 2,607 entries. All entries from both searches were reviewed for crisis-focused news events that impacted United’s reputation. While all headline and lead line options were reviewed from the initial search, the final options gave the best summaries and all-encompassing look at United’s past crisis events and major organizational events. This aspect was intended to establish an intentional context, so sampling methods were not utilized (Coombs, 2015a; Miles, Hubermann, & Saldana, 2014). A total of 14 articles were downloaded to establish a snapshot of United Airline’s reputation history.

**Data Sampling**

This study employed purposive sampling methods as is common with qualitative inquiries. Purposive sampling was employed by establishing a conceptual frame bound by the research questions and grounded in theory (Miles, et al., 2014). Purposive sampling is more strategic in the approach to parsing through the data so a firm number cannot be stated for analysis. Rather, the content analysis provided a set of conditions to search for and was analyzed until a point of saturation in themes was acquired. This is a single case, so dependence on theory was important in crafting conditions and addressing a strategic approach. For this case specifically, all sources were organized and assessed chronologically. This approach established the crisis timeline and
answer the research questions by observing how United Airlines and online publics reacted to the crisis.

**Figure 2: United Response Timeline to Flight 3411 Crisis**

**Data Sorting**

News articles, tweets and corporate press releases (and other responses) were used for this case study. Data was sorted chronologically and then analyzed with Coombs’ SCCT framework to fully understand the full scope of this case and answer the research questions. The data was placed into categories of precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis, separated by date [See Figure 3]. The precrisis stage was determined to be the time period leading up until the posting of the video on Twitter by Tyler Bridges. The crisis stage included the posting of the video, resulting chaos and responses from the United. The crisis stage was concluded determined to move into post crisis when United released their press statement on April 27th announcing actions they would be implementing to fix the crisis. Coombs definition was taken into account here. The organization was moving on from the crisis event, so it makes sense for the crisis stage to also shift.
Additionally, while online publics may still be talking about the event, it was not at as critical of a level where the organization had to regularly respond to the incident (Coombs, 2015b).

**Precrisis**

Fourteen total news articles were chosen from the Factiva database from an initial search of over 5,000 entries from a blanket search for “United Airlines.” The span stretched back to 1980 and moves to present day. This component of the study aimed to establish a history for the organization, so the chosen articles provided ‘feature’ stories that impacted United as an organization. Information from these articles was used to establish a history and identify United’s reputation as an organization.

Only one tweet was captured prior to the event taking place (which was outside of the initial mining protocols anyway), so while that was coded, it offers a limited look on public response prior to the crisis event. However, the articles offer a substitute for organizational reputation and a look at both organizational and public response.
Finally, the video that sparked viral outrage was reviewed. This video was posted to Twitter by Tyler Bridge (a passenger) on the evening Flight 3411 was scheduled to take off, April 9th. His footage was widely shared and became the tipping point that presented United Airlines with a global communication crisis. The video is only about a minute long and is shot on a cell phone, but gives a clear view of Dr. Dao being removed from both his seat and the plane (Bridges, 2017).

Crisis

With the enormous amount of raw tweet data gathered, tweets were divided into more manageable subcategories. This data was chronologically organized with United’s official crisis responses: press releases and interviews. The crisis was broken down into six days: April 10-15. Not all 87,803 tweets were evaluated in this analysis. Purposive sample methods were used with the goal of achieving saturation in tweet content. Especially as the tweets moved further away from the crisis event, no new themes were emerging. It should also be noted that the total tweets collected were raw data and while being reviewed, some were tossed out of the sample due to being in another language or for not being content about the United Airlines crisis (a risk in searches for “united” and “united airlines”). Those totals are noted.
Table 1: Data Sort and Analysis of United Airlines Flight 3411

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 10</td>
<td>United’s initial statement was shared as a statement from CEO, Oscar Munoz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50 tweets were coded (of 57 total collected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 11</td>
<td>United’s 2\textsuperscript{nd} statement was a longer message in a letter format from CEO, Oscar Munoz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>157 tweets were coded (of 178 total collected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 12</td>
<td>United’s 3\textsuperscript{rd} response was an exclusive interview with ABC News featuring CEO Oscar Munoz that aired on Good Morning America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>132 tweets were coded (of 167 total collected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 13</td>
<td>United’s 4\textsuperscript{th} statement was a press release issuing further apologies on behalf of the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>121 tweets were coded (of 151 total collected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 14</td>
<td>No United statement was released</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26,188 total collected, 7,500 tweets reviewed and 6,020 coded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 15</td>
<td>No United statement was released</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62,351 total collected, 6,000 tweets reviewed and 2,886 coded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On April 14, saturation was being met considering United Airlines was not contributing to the conversation. Tweets were beginning to repeat themselves or share similar theme ideas. This was reiterated on April 15. Saturation had been met. This batch of tweets also was particularly messy because it included the search simply for ‘united,’ which was bringing up a large number of unrelated tweets. In total, 9,366 tweets were coded in the week following the incident.

\textit{Postcrisis}

United remained silent as an organization from April 13 until a new press release on April 27. With the press release they announced ten new changes the organization would be implementing. Additionally, an email was sent to frequent flyer members the following day. This closed the case and allowed for final evaluation on actions taken by both online publics and the organization. Tweets were not collected at this time. However, it should be noted all statements from United were shared on their website and across multiple channels of social media.
Data Analysis

This case study utilized a qualitative content analysis coding protocol to answer the research questions and help establish patterns (Miles et al., 2014). Collected data was analyzed using the following codes.

Response [of organization]. These codes identify how United Airlines responded and why that matters. Coombs’ (2015b) comprehensive list of crisis response strategies was used: attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating, excusing, justification, compensation, apology, reminding, ingratiating, and victimage.

Response [of public]. These codes identify how publics are interpreting and responding to the crisis to better gauge how United Airlines controlled messaging throughout the crisis. Coombs (2015a) was used to code how online publics held United responsible for the crisis on Twitter, as well as, the type of crisis implied: no crisis responsibility, minimal crisis responsibility, and strong crisis responsibility.

Emotion. Similar to tone, emotion is another theme that aims to understand how publics are responding to the crisis. Using a model from Jin and Pang’s crisis theory (2012), the following was coded: sympathy, anger, schadenfreude (joy in others’ pain), fright, anxiety, and sadness.

Engagement. Identifying different levels of involvement are factors of engagement, which in turn may explain why online public responses to the crisis happened. Lower levels of engagement include retweets or comments between individuals, while higher levels of engagement include unique content creation. Codes were for the following content: Participatory in hashtag, information-sharing (retweets), information-seeking, content creation and call for action.

Power. Power can lead to decisions and a shift in the communication structure between organizations and their publics. Power is reflected in various ways. Consistent with other studies,
this study used the six forms of power established by French and Raven (1968), and coded based on coercive power, or threat of force; reward power, or the promise of reward; legitimate power, or the use of official authority or title; referent power, or reference to group or network memberships; expert power, or power through skills or talents; and information power, or power through information and access to information.

In this study, each text item was considered an individual unit and codes were applied to each unit to find emerging themes and patterns (Berg, 2012).

Table 2: List of Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Response of Organization:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Engagement:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attacking the accuser</td>
<td>Participatory in hashtag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Information-sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scapegoating</td>
<td>Information-seeking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excusing</td>
<td>Content creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>Call for action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Victimage</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Response of Public:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No crisis responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal crisis responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong crisis responsibility</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Emotion:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sympathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schadenfreude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Power:</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coercive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information</td>
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CHAPTER 4: THE UNITED AIRLINES CASE

This project is a case study of United Airlines Flight 3411 on April 9, 2017. In an effort to understand the role of social media and the nature of this specific type of crisis event, Coombs’ (2012) SCCT framework is applied to answer RQ1 and RQ 2.

Using Coombs’ crisis definition, United Airline’s crisis can be categorized as organizational misdeeds, or “when management takes actions it knows may place stakeholders at risk or knowingly violates the law” (Coombs, 2015b, p. 68). Employees were following protocol, but a passenger was injured, so the organization was considered at fault. Flight 3411 was a major incident that had global implications for United Airlines. United’s dismal reputation and the immediacy and effectiveness of social media made this a critical case for United, which influenced their crisis communication strategy.

Before considering the organization and public responses of the United Airlines Flight 3411 crisis, it is important to consider United’s pre-crisis history and reputation (Coombs, 2015b).

United’s History and Reputation

How a crisis is perceived, and ultimate crisis responsibility is the main idea behind SCCT. However, this framework recognizes that circumstances outside the current crisis event itself can impact public perceptions, organizational response and overall reputation as “intensifying factors alter attributions of crisis responsibility and intensify the threat from the crisis” (Coombs, 2012, p. 39). Flight 3411 represented one crisis event that threatened United Airline’s reputation as a credible organization.

United has long struggled with a negative reputation due to labor disputes and poor customer service. Additionally, United’s merger with Continental airlines in 2010 did not go
smoothly and exacerbated many ongoing complaints: customer service, delays, and cancellations. This most current crisis perhaps only reaffirms what publics had already long assumed: United has a “reputation for poor customer service” (Carey & Cameron, 2017, n.p.).

*Early United History*

Briefly looking back at United Airlines’ organizational history, there is an ongoing pattern of strategic, leadership, labor, financial and economical-driven crisis events that have perpetuated a negative reputation of the organization. Throughout most of its history, United Airlines has and continues to be one of the largest, and longest-standing, domestic airliners in the United States. In the 1980s, United demonstrated an uncertainty in their business strategy, abruptly changing tactics, which angered employees. In 1981, United Air implemented the Friendship Express service as a competitive answer to low-budget carriers entering market competition, when the year before, these routes had been eliminated from their travel plan (Salpukas, 1981). These situations demonstrated inconsistencies in management and United’s response was rarely to offer an apology, but opted toward response strategies of diminishment, offering excuses for organizational actions or providing justification for certain actions and changes. Williams (1980) highlighted early troubles and emerging commercial competition for the airline:

> United’s troubles have eroded its leadership in the industry. Last year, when United tried to take the lead in putting a cap on travel agent commissions, no one paid, much attention. United still suffers the agents’ ire. And then there is Delta, whose success seems to dazzle the United chairmen. (n.p)

United was left to provide justification for these actions and remind publics why certain actions needed to be taken as well as defend their actions to their own employees. Later in the 1980s, United Air faced a class action lawsuit of sex discrimination brought forth by flight
attendants. A previous no-marriage rule enforced by United Air caused many women to quietly resign from their positions in the 1960s. The lawsuit claimed if not for that rule, the flight attendants would have kept their jobs and not felt compelled to resign. This lawsuit, affected not only past employees, but was “causing hard feelings among the airline’s current flight attendants” (Lewin, 1984, n.p). And while United did achieve a level of success throughout the 1990’s, labor disputes came back to plague the airline and lead to system-wide disruptions again and again:

The nasty labor sore, bandaged, but never healed, oozed with all the ugliness of the past.

The pilots refused to fly overtime; some of them taxied at 3 knots instead of 15; others flew low, to burn more fuel, or opened landing gear prematurely, adding to wear and tear. Delays and cancellations soared. (Lowenstein, 2002, n.p.)

9/11 History and Impact

Leading up to and in a post-9/11 world, “United Airlines overcame attacks by terrorists. Now the question is whether United can overcome the distrust of its unions” (Adams, 2002, n.p.). United faced ongoing labor strikes from various labor forces, including the mechanics’ union in 2002 and a pilot strike several years earlier.

It can’t be understated the impact September 11th had on the airport industry as a whole, but specifically on United Airlines. United’s unwitting participation in the September 11th attacks resulted in the loss of two planes and all passengers aboard, and the ousting of their CEO at the time seven weeks later. While United was not held responsible for the terrorist crisis, the CEO was left to answer for the financial and labor dispute fallout that had precipitated the 9/11 crisis. The day before and the morning of 9/11, United was in the midst of heated labor union re-negotiations as rising wages battled against operating costs, keeping low fares, and the pilots’ control of the company (as United is employee-owned) (Lowenstein, 2002).
In a post 9/11 world, the airline industry took a financial hit, and United was not excluded from the financial burden. Many airlines requested federal bailout loans, but United was denied federal assistance from the Federal Air Transportation Stabilization Board, which caused an immense challenge in limiting service interruptions and maintaining regular operations (Alexander, 2002). United, again offered little in means of organizational rebuilding, but maintained responses of diminishment or, in the case of 9/11, bolstering tactics in explaining how United was a part of the industry fallout.

United and Continental Merger

United and Continental Airlines announced a merger in 2010 (after United’s previous US Airways merger attempt had been blocked by the government). This was an enormous collaboration that would consolidate two airlines into the largest global airline carrier. It was largely considered a response to the struggling airline industry in a post-9/11 world, and United Airlines was hoping to combine their struggling brand reputation with Continental’s well-regarded reputation. “United and Continental talked about merging two years ago, but Continental pulled out, worried that United’s financial problems and a bleak industry outlook then made a deal too risky” (Chon & Carey, 2010, n.p.).

However, any merger is complicated and United and Continental faced years of crisis after the merger was announced with United’s less-than-stellar reputation continuing to haunt the organization. Ongoing problems “led to a series of technical glitches that frustrated customers, lead to long wait times to reach reservations and required adding staffing” (Carey, 2012b). One glitch emerged from a Continental database where flight numbers from 9/11 that were supposed to be permanently retired were brought back into use for new flights (CNN, 2011). Other “operational headaches over the weekend such as late flight departures and arrivals, missed
connections, problems at check-in kiosks, long lines and extended wait times to reach reservations agents as United agents tried to master the new system” (Carey, 2012a, n.p.).

United Airlines struggled to find a solution to these ongoing operational issues. Ongoing programming errors, technical glitches, human error and employee disputes led to the massive organization to be labelled with the “worst operational record among the nations’ top 15 airlines” (Mouawad, 2012, n.p.). “But two years on, United still grapples with a myriad of problems in integrating the two airlines. The result has been hobbled operations, angry passengers and soured relations with employees” (Mouawad, 2012, n.p.).

In facing many of these issues, United maintained strategy responses of justification and excusing, or in some instances, denial for problems caused. While technical errors and other challenges attribute low crisis responsibility according to SCCT, as errors continue to accrue, responsibility grows for mismanagement and accidents start to be viewed as intentional misdeeds (Coombs, 2012). “In large part, the merger is still a work in progress. Labor relations are sour, customer satisfaction is low and the basic measurements of the airline’s operational performance are dismal compared with its main rivals” (Mouaward & White, 2015, n.p.).

Perceptions in a Social Media Age

Moving into the present day, United faced an uphill battle fighting back against the negative reputation perceived by its publics. This becomes especially difficult in a social media age where online publics have the capability to express their opinions easily and share them widely. These “perceptions may be tough to fight, particularly online and in frequent-flier forums, where criticism of United’s service and performance has been particularly bitter” (Mouaward, 2012, n.p.).

Corruption cases, government influence and oversight, and changing organizational leadership influenced and challenged United’s ongoing reputation of being inconsistent in strategy
and translated into inconsistent service, which “turned into an exercise in frustration for United fliers, with frequent delays, canceled flights and lost bags” (Mouawad & White, 2015, n.p.). Fliers expected bad service and continually felt underappreciated by the airline, especially when news highlighted their perpetually bad service. With social media, United fliers had outlets to share their grievances.

Just weeks before Flight 3411, United faced backlash over a dress code policy that restricted two teenage girls from getting on a plane in Denver. The ‘legging controversy’ was widely shared on social media channels, especially Twitter. The girls were wearing leggings, which were deemed inappropriate by the gate agent because they were pass travelers, rather than regular customers. They both had to change clothes to board the plane. This left many customers angry, and also anxious that United would be enforcing new dress codes that passengers had been previously unaware of. United approached the backlash by explaining their actions, outlining the policy and not accepting any wrongdoing in employee actions (Stack, 2017).

United demonstrated that it is not a novice to crisis situations and has a long history of facing crisis after crisis, as well as facing some long-standing organizational issues with employees, customers, and leadership. United weathers a negative perception among publics as organizational practices affect public perception. Their history shows response strategies that typically don’t include apologies, but instead a strategy that leans toward diminishment of the actual crisis by offering justifications or excuses for why the event is taking place. This reduces or seeks to minimize the perceived level of actual crisis that is present (Coombs, 2012).

**RQ1: How did United and online publics respond to the Flight 3411 crisis?**

SCCT is a framework that seeks to identify crisis responsibility and how publics place attribution and perceive crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2012). Part of the framework identifies
crisis history as an intensifying factor that can affect how the crisis is perceived and ultimately how crisis responsibility is identified with “past crises to help establish a pattern of ‘bad behavior’ by an organization” (Coombs, 2012, p. 39). In considering this case, United’s history with crisis and low reputation suggests that public perception will be more likely to attribute responsibility for current (and future) crisis events to the organization.

**The Crisis Event: United Airlines Flight 3411**

**April 9**

United Airlines faced global backlash and Internet infamy on Monday, April 10th, 2017 as a video went viral of a man being forcibly dragged off one of their flights so that his seat could be replaced by a crew member (Zdanowicz & Grinberg, 2017). The plane left Chicago O’Hare Airport bound for Louisville, Kentucky the day before (April 9th, 2017 at 5:40 CST) and was overbooked because unexpected United crew members needed a ride. United was facing maintenance issues on another plane that made the route regularly between Chicago and Louisville and needed to get crew members to Louisville for the next day’s flights in order to prevent further delays. Gate agents asked for four willing volunteers but received no participants. Involuntary boarding procedures were then followed to choose the passengers who would de-board the plane. Dr. Dao was one of the chosen passengers involuntarily chosen to give up his seat on the plane and did not leave willingly, so airport security was called (United Airlines, 2017).

A video posted to social media showed three Chicago Department of Aviation security officers forcibly removing a man off the plane by pulling his arms and carrying his legs. Twitter user Tyler Bridges posted the video to his feed saying, “not a good way to treat a Doctor trying to get to work because they overbooked” (Bridges, 2017). United, Fox News and CNN were all tagged in the tweet and the thread attracted a high count of favorites and retweets, with millions
eventually seeing the captured video of the incident. The video showed the man visibly resisting and screaming while being removed by security from his seat. He was shown injured on the video with blood on his face and apparent unconsciousness towards the end as he was dragged from the plane by security officials. Other passengers seen in the video are visibly upset stating “oh my God” repeatedly, while also getting their cell phones out to record (Bridges, 2017). Eventually, the man was removed and the plane did take-off to Louisville Sunday evening. The identity of the passenger, Dr. David Dao, was later identified in a legal statement as he was being treated for sustained injuries (Zdanowicz & Grinberg, 2017).

As the video spread, the circumstances that led United personnel to enact this specific scenario began to emerge. United Airlines was left in an “involuntary denied boarding selection process” where the flight crew had asked for passenger volunteers to de-board with a compensation incentive and received no willing participants. So, passengers were chosen at random, per protocol (Zdanowicz & Grinberg, 2017). United’s involuntary system chooses passengers by sorting them into a list by the amount of fare paid, if they had a seat assignment and the time they checked in. Frequent flyer status and special needs passenger receive priority in maintaining flight status (per United Airlines, 2017).

What made the resulting reaction inflammatory and detrimental was general public misunderstanding surrounding airliners’ contract of carriage clause. It was a little-known clause that gave airliners the ability to intentionally overbook and change terms of ticketing contracts, which included involuntarily transferring passengers if no volunteers presented themselves (United Airlines, 2017). It should be noted that in this somewhat unusual circumstance, this flight to Louisville was already boarded and the overbooking situation involved a United flight crew needing seats, instead of stand-by passengers.
April 10

United CEO, Oscar Munoz, responded to the video by defending crew actions and sharing the following statement:

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. (United, 2017)

This response was widely panned as lacking compassion and for not being a proper apology, which was compounding the online crisis narrative that was emerging around United Airlines (Petroff, 2017). In this first organizational response, Munoz offered an apology, but with concessions as he reiterated that an investigation is looking into the incident, and the specific passenger who was dragged off of the plane was not addressed specifically. Rather, all passengers were “re-accomodated” and apologized to for the inconvenience of their experience.

Initial public response immediately showed a strong negative sentiment with anger and disgust in their tweets, as well as a collective call to boycott United.

Table 3: Sample of April 10 Twitter Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tweet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is how they treat their paying passengers? Like cattle? Disgusting. #Boycott #UnitedAirlines if you can. <a href="https://t.co/jbNvF49psO">https://t.co/jbNvF49psO</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is appalling. Sickening to treat people in such a way. Definitely time to boycott #unitedAIRLINES <a href="https://t.co/5OjDXL7KwJ">https://t.co/5OjDXL7KwJ</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#BoycottUnitedAirlines Shame on you #unitedAIRLINES! Your airlines should be shut permanently! #worstairline @united <a href="https://t.co/mK0e9gJO2e">https://t.co/mK0e9gJO2e</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are two emotion response categorizations that emerge: anger or humor (schadenfreude). Interestingly, schadenfreude becomes a popular coded emotion that drives the popularity of creating new content such as memes, videos and other sarcastic brand messaging related to the video.

Table 4: Sample of April 10 Schadenfreude Tweets

| #UnitedAirlines turning flights into the hunger games. Volunteer as tribute or get dragged out. |
| Travel tip: getting dragged off the plane is cheaper if you book it at least a day in advance. #UnitedAirlines |

In this immediate online public response, there are strong consistent calls for a boycott against the organization, fueled largely by anger for what has happened. The schadenfreude element is an interesting commentary to the state of United’s reputation. There’s a lot of information being shared, but also a lot of content being immediately created by online publics in response. Power is seen here in that information flow and how it is perceived, read and shared.

April 11

Munoz released a full apology, fully condemning the incident two days following the release of the video. This was after his first statement previously spoke in defense of United Airlines’ protocol, which some viewed as condemnation rather than compassion. United announced and enacted policy changes that limited the protocol for calling law enforcement to handle customer service requests to only matters of security (Creswell & Maheshwari, 2017). His full apology statement was released by United in a letter format:

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. (United Newsroom, 2017)

In direct response to public backlash, a rephrased full apology from United’s CEO came a day after their first statement. Apology and ingratiating tactics are used here to begin reputational rebuilding measures. United promised a full internal examination to “fix what’s broken so this never happens again” as well as “deepest apologies” where he says “I want you to know we take full responsibility” for the incident of the flight.

Online publics don’t accept United’s apology and continue to hold the organization to a high level of crisis responsibility in continuing a call for a boycott and the ongoing creation of new airline mottos in tweets following the release of the second statement. The schadenfreude element finds its stride with a unifying, trending hashtag of #NewUnitedAirlineMottos and online publics creating content that finds humor in the crisis. Building on an idea that United is parody. The hashtag #NewUnitedAirlineMottos continued to top trending charts after official crisis responses from United Airlines were widely shared (Petroff, 2017).
Table 5: Sample of April 11 Tweets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tweet</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#UnitedAirlines releases new ad in wake of Chicago incident</td>
<td><a href="https://t.co/dKqtIWuMJZ">Video of scene from Airforce One</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loving the new #UnitedAirlines training video #NewUnitedAirlinesMottos</td>
<td><a href="https://t.co/mjUnkpW05L">Video includes fighting elements</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#unitedAIRLINES would like you all to go back to when you were joking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about the banning of the tights worn by the child of an employee.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

United is not let off the hook for the crisis incident and there’s some pushback on their organizational actions response, as well as mention of a previous mild incident that had occurred a couple of weeks previously. The tweets demonstrate a negative effect in reputation perception, as they blame United for this crisis, while also remembering previous infractions.

April 12

United Airlines offered another apology with an exclusive interview with ABC News between interviewer Rebecca Jarvis and United CEO Oscar Munoz that aired on *Good Morning America*. It was Munoz’s first public interview after worldwide calls to boycott the United brand.

In the interview, Munoz reiterated his apology saying, “It’s not so much what I thought, but what I felt—shame comes to mind” (ABC News, 2017). He, and therefore United, continued to take full responsibility for the crisis. Additionally, Munoz fully absolved Dr. Dao from all responsibility by stating that he was mistreated and did not do anything wrong. When pushed on what explicitly went wrong, Munoz cited “system failure” that didn’t give employees proper resources to act. He maintained that this is, “not who our family at United is” and an incident like this “will never, can never happen again” (ABC News, 2017). He outlined how the organization was currently conducting a thorough review of current involuntary boarding policies, the use of
law enforcement, and that his organization needed to better empower the “front line folks” (ABC News, 2017).

He explained the failure of the initial apology was due to the organization seeking facts about what actually occurred but stated that an important part of the crisis conversation was “true expression.” It was this proper sentiment that was initially missed from United’s response and fueled passenger concerns for safety on a United flight.

Twitter response continued to push back against United and stress their responsibility for the crisis and the damage to their reputation. Parody and schadenfreude were the dominant emotions seen as online publics addressed the crisis, and attacked United directly.

Table 6: Sample of April 12 Tweets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tweet</th>
<th>Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I wanna make a joke about this #UnitedAirlines issue but I think all PUNCH lines have been used and we shouldn't DRAG this further</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No seatings, prepare for beatings. #UnitedAirlines</td>
<td><a href="https://t.co/SLduG1e5dm">https://t.co/SLduG1e5dm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These airlines reveal what they really mean by unbeatable prices. #UnitedAirlines</td>
<td><a href="https://t.co/lpZDu3ILW1">https://t.co/lpZDu3ILW1</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wednesday also showed additional video footage emerge from other plane passengers, other news outlets weighing in, and celebrity updates. While content was still being created, there was a shift as new information emerged about the incident. There’s also a broader shift as crisis-specific tweets transitioned to criticism against United Airlines directly.

April 13

United released another response, but rather than being from the CEO, this was the first organizationally-voiced press release [See Appendix A for full text]. The press release reiterated
CEO Oscar Munoz’s statements from the previous day, while also issuing another message of apology. United identified next steps for the organization and how they plan to move forward.

Twitter publics showed limited acceptance of United’s repeated apologies, and in fact, voiced anger and frustration with CEO Munoz’s actions as leader of the company, perhaps explaining United’s efforts to present a more unified organizational voice.

Table 7: Sample of April 13 Tweets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tweet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#UnitedAirlines CEO: “The public relations firm we just hired informs me that I deeply regret my earlier lack of sympathy for the dragee”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RT: It only took plummeting stocks for the CEO of @united to apologize to the transgressed passenger. 😒😢 #UnitedAirlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hey @United, my ex is flying from Boston to Chicago, Flight 2140, Row 14, Seat E... do your thing. #UnitedAirlines #UnitedAirlinesMemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The only reason I get out of bed every morning is to see what new disaster #UnitedAirlines is dealing with now #SCORPION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@BBCWorld #UnitedAirlines - A kinder way of freeing of seats for their employees. Scorpions will drop from above in event of an overbooking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There’s a loss of hashtag coherence, specifically the #NewUnitedAirlineMotto hashtag and #boycott hashtag; only #UnitedAirlines remained consistent throughout all tweet data. Anger returned as Dr. Dao’s voice is heard and criticism mounted against CEO Munoz. Parody and schadenfreude continued to keep online publics engaged in creating new content, and new information kept online publics engaged sharing information. Additionally, United faced a much smaller incident, that would probably have escaped national reporting, but due to the intense scrutiny facing United, it gained some traction. A scorpion fell on top of a passenger (Phelon, 2017). This fueled schadenfreude and further meme creation that affected United reputation and crisis attribution.
April 14

From April 14th to April 27th United released no further statements relating to the crisis. There was no activity on their website or social media channels. However, Twitter remained active as online publics expressed anger and backlash for what was seen as an attack of Dr. Dao’s character, and speculated on United’s next move. The crisis event continued to facilitate conversation online as new voices entered the conversation and new information became available, while the previous responses from United were widely critiqued and criticized by online publics.

Table 8: Sample of April 14 Tweets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tweet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#UnitedAirlines deserves every financial loss they're experiencing. You violate &amp; humiliate a passenger then attack his character? #Boycott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@united Disgrace! I look forward to watching your scum Airline BURN! #unitedAIRLINES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@United Fight Club + Scorpions on a Plane. No. Hell no. I'm good.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Virality reaches a certain saturation point where information begins to be repeated, rather than newly created, called social cascades. These social cascades occur when the growth of content matches how much content is being shared (Cheung, She, Junus & Cao, 2017). This was demonstrated as the sheer number of tweets sharply escalated and the repetition seen in both tweet themes and ideas was repeated (or retweeted). Previous tweets started to be reshared or updated and reshared with similar ideas rephrased. With this in mind, saturation of ideas and themes in tweets was noticed (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

April 15

Saturation was decidedly reached. Themes continued to replicate and circle back to already shared ideas. United remained silent in their response, so there was little additional information
being added to the discussion. Although, it should be noted that United’s silence was noticed and discussion began looking forward to how this crisis would impact the airline.

Table 9: Sample of April 15 Tweets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#UnitedAirlines The thunderous silence from @united is most eloquent. #DavidDao #OscarMunoz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RT I guess United doesn't have to worry about being overbooked going forward. Problem solved!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Postcrisis and Organizational Action

Ultimately, United offered compensation, changed protocol and accepted full responsibility for the crisis, while also absolving Dr. David Dao of any wrongdoing. On April 27, United offered a final press release that shared all upcoming changes that resulted from their own internal investigation. This press release was paired with an interactive, user-friendly video that highlighted and explained how United will be making changes. This largely acted as United’s re-commitment to their stated values and a follow-through on their apology to all consumers. Some of the stated policy changes included customers already seated will not be involuntarily de-boarded unless in security situations, and on April 28, United increased compensation for volunteers to be up to $10,000. It should be noted that other airlines also made compensation policy changes after the United incident (as per Jan, Heath & Ingraham, 2017). Additionally, United promised to increase customer service, lower overbooking situations and find a better system to solicit volunteers (United Airlines, 2017).

After being silent for a couple of weeks, United created a small campaign, with communication going out on their website, social media and an email to MileagePlus members [see Appendix B for full text]. While the press release covers all shared material, the email to
frequent flyers reiterates United’s commitment to customers and their strategy to promote their actions and ongoing ingratiation tactics to rebuild their brand. CEO Oscar Munoz in his email says, “we can never say we are sorry enough for what occurred, but we also know meaningful actions will speak louder than words” [emphasis added] and “our goal should be nothing less than to make you truly proud to say, “I fly United.”

In summary, United responded to the crisis with a series of press statements and interviews. CEO Oscar Munoz was the initial spokesperson, but a shift occurred with the final statements on April 13th and April 27th coming directly from United, the organization as a whole.

United’s crisis response initially took a more conservative approach, as previous history had shown was a common method for them to try to lessen the crisis responsibility, rather than accept it. However, their strategy rapidly shifted and took an apologetic approach, noting the high level of responsibility accrued in this crisis situation and how that perception was being communicated on Twitter. This was a noted deviation from previous approaches where the organization took a more conservative, diminished stance that focused on minimizing crisis damage (Coombs, 2015b). While Mr. Munoz’s initial response did indeed include an apology, it also contained elements that sought to separate United from the crisis at hand and lessen the events that had taken place by justifying ongoing action that is taking place as the organization “re-accomodates passengers” and “conduct our own detail review of what happened” (United, 2017).

In regard to the response of online publics, three main ideas emerged on Twitter: specific commentary on the crisis event, expressed anger towards United, and engaging with the parody of the brand as a form of enjoyment. While there are several trending hashtags over the course of the week (#NewUnitedAirlineMottos and #boycottUnited), simply giving attribution to the brand, #UnitedAirlines was enough of a unifier in online public discussion.
In short, United’s crisis response tactics appeared to do little to alleviate public perception as blame was quickly attributed to the organization and CEO. Online publics expressed their power in information dissemination. In engaging with the crisis, online publics had a pattern of sharing and seeking information in order to create new information. There was never an emergent hashtag that linked all public discussion, but United faced enough reputational damage that their name seemed to be a strong enough link to trigger a viral cascade of information. The most popular hashtags attacked the United motto (#NewUnitedAirlineMottos) and called for a boycott of the airline (#BoycottUnited).

RQ2: How does Twitter influence crisis communication strategy?

In United’s case, Munoz’s initial apology was widely criticized due to a lack of compassion. While it’s not being suggested that United directly responded or drove strategy because of Twitter, I think it would be hard to argue against the importance Twitter played in distributing information and engaging with crisis events. This is evidenced by United’s rapid back to back response. Days later Mr. Munoz said, “It’s not so much what I thought, but what I felt—shame comes to mind” (ABC News, 2017). United gauged the emotions being expressed and corrected their messaging to meet what was being asked by online publics. United and their CEO responded to expressed feelings from online publics with a discussion of feelings included in their response. Mr. Munoz addressed these emotive responses when he says, “The truly horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment.” Those responses he addresses were widely shared and distributed on social media.

To help assess these trends on Twitter, codes were used as a guide [See Table 2 & 10].
As noted in the table, not all initial codes ended up being found in the final tweet data. United’s response as an organization was limited to compensation, apology, ingratiating and justification tactics. These were coded based on examples from Coombs (2015b) and determined by press statements from the organization. Codes were assigned based on ideas of the text (rather than words or sentence structures). For response of publics, Coombs (2015b) was also used as a model for highlighting tweets. This code ended up being interesting because although the crisis was placed at a high level of responsibility according to literature and theory, it proved difficult to code without making a lot of assumptions. Tweets, that were purely informative, or just new-driven, were cited as no responsibility, while tweets that explicitly blamed United were given high

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tweet Totals</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>6020</td>
<td>2886</td>
<td>9366</td>
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<tr>
<td>RESPONSE OF ORGANIZATION</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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levels of responsibility. The vast majority discussed the crisis and placed at least some blame on United, but were not explicit with their thoughts so were placed in the middle, minimized crisis category.

For emotion, fright and sadness were dropped and not seen in the tweet sample, while anxiety and sympathy had very low frequencies. The most common emotions coded were anger and schadenfreude. There was some interpretative measures taken here, but for anger, expressions of hate, disgust or violence towards the organization by text, hashtag, or image were considered. For schadenfreude, some leaps of logic had to be made, but the use of memes, sarcasm, commentary on the crisis with a humor element, or a manipulation of the United brand for humor purposes were all considered. This emotion was a bit harder because there were some assumptions that online publics were at least somewhat informed on the crisis event.

For engagement, codes looked for online publics who used trending hashtags, shared information (via tagging or retweeting), seeking information by asking questions, creating new content to share, and explicit call to action messages. Finally, power was coded. Referent and legitimate power was dropped, while the other codes were seen at low frequencies. Power was difficult to code for because it’s commonly not explicit stated. However, information power was the most frequent with online publics referring to their access to information sources.

**Influence Trends on Twitter**

To consider influence, trends of emotion and engagement were evaluated over the crisis timeline. In both instances, Twitter shows a spike of activity before settling into a more settled pattern. For emotion [see Figure 4], anger quickly dispersed, while schadenfreude saw growth, then sustained levels over the crisis timeline. This leads to interesting conclusions about the state
of United’s reputation and how it is perceived online. While anger over the incident appears to quickly recede, mocking sentiment grows and then maintains a steady presence over time.

![Figure 4: Emotion Trend Over Crisis Timeline](image)

Engagement may account for this sustained growth with a look at how online publics engage over the crisis week [see Figure 5]. Again, there’s a burst of activity at the outset of the crisis, but with the exception of sharing (via retweet or tagging), there’s a slow decline to low engagement activity within days of the crisis event. The sharp decline of content creation is especially interesting, but coincides with the sharp increase of tweets and noted repeats observed through the coding process. Unique engagement subsides, but online publics sustain conversation by continuing to share created content, which increases distribution and the number of people who will see and hear about the information. Twitter’s influence appears to be in the initial response and content creation, but perhaps more importantly, in the sustained sharing and fostered emotions that develop perceived organization reputation over time.
Figure 5: Engagement Trend Over Crisis Timeline
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Using SCCT to Understand Crisis Response

Online publics responded as they did because SCCT assumes that organizational reputation is empowered by public perception, and their reactions to a crisis event is valued because it helped shape crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2012). Following Coombs’ framework, the Flight 3411 incident is categorized as an organizational misdeed, which places the organization at fault (Coombs, 2015b). SCCT says that in this type of crisis, the organization assumes a high level of responsibility so faces a higher reputational threat from publics. In this case, organizational crisis response should work toward rebuilding the reputation with publics, typically seen through apology or compensation tactics. However in United’s case, they are perceived as holding a high level of responsibility, but initially responded with justification tactics that sought to diminish the level of responsibility. This didn’t fit the SCCT crisis frame, therefore, online publics were set to reject United’s response.

This rejection is witnessed on Twitter as online publics engage with the event to present a unifying voice that fosters certain trends against United’s reputation with calls to action, expressed anger and parody against the brand. Social media are used to see a connection more readily between the variables of SCCT: specifically the key factors of organizational history and reputation perception. In considering Twitter, the SCCT frame may be altered to better address levels of attribution and understanding how online publics are linking the current crisis to previous organizational events or perceptions. There’s less guesswork in anticipating public perception because social media offer an opportunity to directly communicate and engage with both organizations and publics.
Social media grant informal insight to the attribution of blame directly from online publics, rather (and before) other official attributions of blame come in (i.e., from investigators, crisis managers and traditional media). Therefore, a company should monitor social media channels to understand how blame has been attributed before responding to the crisis. Furthermore, social media keep organizations honest, so to speak, as the constant dialogue can overshadow organizational efforts to protect reputation, and therefore, organizations may have to own up to their errors and respond to online publics’ wrath.

Utilizing Coombs’ SCCT model, social media are plugged into the model as a means of observing public perception and assessing how online publics are addressing the crisis. Social media connections are imagined as a proposed link to the previously established measures of organizational history and reputation as it creates an amplified space for engaged online publics to consume, create and share information about the organization.

![Figure 6: Proposed Reimagining of Coombs’ SCCT Model](image-url)
Social media are audience-driven and vehicles for public consumption and engagement of information. Platforms draw attention to the situation, allow information to be rapidly shared and build organizational reputation—both good and bad. In considering social media contribution within organizational crisis communication, it’s important to consider platforms as propagators of information and sources of engagement [see Figure 6]. Remembering Taylor and Kent’s (2014) definition of engagement as “a two-way, give-and-take between organizations and publics” (p. 391) social media create a space for dialogue that empower online publics and lead publics to engage by consuming, participating or creating content (Smith, 2015). There’s also a new level of transparency and openness that prompt crisis strategy response because immense value is placed on public perception. Social media only serve as a vehicle to amplify those voices. As such, there is value in crafting a crisis strategy around public response (Hangan, 2007; Feduik, Coombs & Botero, 2012).

Coombs’ SCCT framework stresses the importance of organizational reputation and audience perception of that reputation. Social platforms create a space for public response and for publics to vocalize crisis responsibility, while also reflecting on what is already known about the organization—have there been previous crisis incidents, bad messaging, or feelings toward the organization’s reputation that is being connected to the current crisis? Social media provide a space for messages to be shared and integrated into crisis communication efforts. It facilitates a discussion between organizations and online publics that prompt unprecedented engagement among all publics involved with the organization in an immediate manner that is largely outside of the organization’s control. Social media create and share meaning as soon as information is able to be rapidly shared, consumed and recreated. This allows crises to ‘go viral’ and for meaning to be created in real time.
Social media provide organizations a litmus test to check how online publics are receiving and responding to the crisis response strategy. Here, social media response via tweets were utilized as a gauge to measure public emotion and engagement to assert crisis perception and response. SCCT prioritizes organizational reputation and recognizes the power of public perception, however online publics’ input is currently not plugged into the framework as a factor, despite the role of perception (Coombs, 2015b). The reimagined model helps address that knowledge gap to visualize how social media could influence crisis communication responses.

**History of Badness**

United faced an uphill battle in overcoming this crisis situation because of their crisis reputation and established history. As SCCT states, “organizations with negative prior reputations are attributed greater crisis responsibility for the same crisis than organization that is unknown or has a positive prior reputation” (Coombs, 2012, p. 39). United faced previous negative sentiment, and so when in crisis, was given little leeway in public perception for attribution of blame. This history of badness influenced their crisis attribution and overall public perception.

History showed that in the past, United usually took minimizing tactics to try to mitigate the crisis damage. A similar approach could be seen in the specific case when CEO Oscar Munoz, offered an apology to all customers, while still “moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened.” However, in this case, that approach was ineffective and Mr. Munoz was pushed to offer ongoing apologies, with United eventually announcing wide-ranging policy changes and taking full responsibility for the incident within a day of the initial statement.
**Strategy of Action**

Based on the actions on Twitter, and how online publics co-opted the United brand and crisis events, United was faced with the pressing problem of needing to reclaim their organization name and control of the message. Rather than engaging in a battle of words with the online publics, they made the strategic decision to offer an apology, promise action, then be silent until they were ready to take action. This attempt to take the conversation back with measures of action over messaging is interesting, considering the viral nature their crisis reached. By addressing public concerns, they offered an apology and then attempted to back up that apology with actions to demonstrate their brand values and reclaim their reputation. This strategy of action deserves further review, but could be a method considered for organizational crisis response when also considering the influence of social media.

**Engagement and Power**

Online publics expressed views and emotions through their online engagement. Perception towards United was identified as online public voices opted into conversations by seeking, sharing, and creating content about the organization or crisis. As information was widely distributed both on and off social media, online publics expressed emotions, proposed action and promoted a united voice through self-organization. Online publics finds referent and information power on Twitter as individual voices become networked and then shared at a global level (French & Raven, 1968).

Three personas of public engagement emerged as the discusser, the mocker or the disrupter. The discusser focused on the events of the crisis, offering opinions about new information coming out and typically expressing anger at the actions of the organization. The mocker engaged in the creation or sharing of content that attacked or co-opted United’s branding. The disrupter called for followers to boycott or to somehow take some actions against United. These different positions all
facilitated active social media presences that prompted a global communication crisis for United as information and opinions were quickly and widely shared.

**Online Activism**

Online publics took to online mediums to share, engage, inform, seek and organize against the crisis event. Coombs (2015a) attributes the efficiency of this type of messaging to the usage of social media. Immediately following the incident there were general calls to boycott the airline, declarations of anger, and general agreement against United. Online activism is driven by the development of social media and the power in quickly sharing and participating in conversations.

The effectiveness of online activism can definitely be questioned, but it is also important to point out that United changed tactics rapidly and responded directly to the emotion being widely shared and critiqued online. There’s power seen in the information being shared by the collective online public voices in this case.

**The Power of Parody**

Jin and Pang (2012) suggested that emotion could be a predictor of public needs in a crisis, while Kang (2014) suggested trust and satisfaction as two critical components of engagement. If considering emotion, trust and satisfaction as indicators of public perception, in this case, it’s observed that the use of schadenfreude was a large source of satisfaction for public consumption of the crisis, and a driving force of conversation around crisis messaging. While anger, anxiety, and even sympathy were also observed as emotions expressed by online publics, they quickly shifted, changed or disappeared as the crisis continued over time. There’s a flashpoint of various emotions, especially anger at the onset of the crisis, but within days the strength of those emotions diminished (with the exception of schadenfreude) [see Figure 4].
Within a day of the crisis event, online public responses shifted to the use of parody to attack the airline. Twitter responses changed to mocking adaptations that attacked the brand’s corporate messaging with the crisis events. It led to a dark, humor-driven critique that was possible because United suffered a poor reputation. Parody allowed people to express sentiment and make comments about the event in a way that was easily accessible and shareable. It’s also a commentary on how online publics approached United as an organization: not seriously. There is a power in the coded schadenfreude emotion because it was the only emotion that showed sustained growth throughout the crisis, suggesting a power in online publics’ use of parody and humor to share their thoughts. Schadenfreude dialogue on social media offer insight to how publics discuss and connect organizational history to organizational reputation in a way that’s replicable, accessible and easily shared.

**Conclusion**

United carries a long and storied history of a bad reputation. So, when crisis strikes, no one is necessarily surprised, and instead is quick to assign blame and mock. While in the past, United has adopted a more conservative minimalization strategy of lessening or negating the blame, in this specific case, apologies and sweeping policy changes were the result.

Social media play a part in this, due to their ability to prompt online publics’ engagement on a massive, viral-inducing scale. It elevates the crisis and placed United in a position where they had to respond for days with a message that was slightly tweaked each day. It opens up a dialogue between online publics and organizations to empower publics to engage with the information they are receiving and create new meaning. In this case, online publics engaged via parody. But the crisis event and resulting backlash was enough that not only United, but other airlines were prompted to respond with policy changes of their own.
United is not the only recent corporation to face global backlash. Pepsi, Toyota and Volkswagen all faced crises events in 2017, and all companies are moving forward with limited fallout from the initial crisis event (Petroff, 2017). However, the influence of Twitter, and perhaps social media at large, can be seen as amplifiers and sharers of information. Online publics remember and connect these crises to one another, again as parody.

The power of Twitter exists in public engagement and perception, and it arguably influences organizations. If it is not a leading force for change, certainly, the wrath and vitriol found shared online is a force to be reckoned with and can be a helpful tool in measuring public sentiment towards organizational reputation.

This case demonstrated that Twitter tied crisis history, organizational reputation, and the current crisis into something that mattered to online publics. SCCT states that these interconnected factors determine attribution and can help drive organizational response (Coombs, 2004). In considering Twitter as a dialogue with online publics, the SCCT framework could demonstrate public perspectives that interact and engage with organizational actions.

Limitations

There are several limitations noted in this study. The first is validity on the findings of the study due to both the qualitative nature and the single-case approach. To best mitigate that, multiple sources of documentation have been gathered as evidence to achieve triangulation. An effort was made to represent both the organization and publics. Although United Airlines may be the only organization in this study, the intent was to provide an in-depth analysis with a wide array of documentation and coding. Furthermore, United Airlines presents a critical case that offers a unique example on the intersection of organizational crisis response and social media public
response in a very rapid time period. By grounding the analysis in established theory, the single-case approach is believed to be sufficient for this case.

Finally, the means of mining tweets is limited, in part because of the vague search parameters used. Because there wasn’t a strong unifying hashtag, “united” and “united airlines” were used within the set date limit. While this did allow for a more holistic approach to the chatter surrounding the crisis, it also brought in a large subset of tweets that were entirely unrelated to this specific case.

Finally, case studies are limited in research takeaways due to their lack of generalizability in being bound to a single case example (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2012). Additionally, “case studies typically focus on public statements and press releases offered by the organization. Media coverage is used only to create the ‘storyline’ of the crisis by recreating the sequence of events that unfolded and the crisis communication efforts used by the organization” (Holladay, 2012, p. 160). For this case, efforts were made to establish a timeline, but then make the point that online public response is an important part of crisis communication strategy.

**Future Directions**

In considering future research, there were numerous pop culture influences in this case study as online publics linked this crisis to other crisis events (ie. Kylie Jenner and Pepsi) and the *Walking Dead*, the *Hunger Game* franchise, *Indiana Jones*, *Air Force One*, and countless others. It would be interesting to consider how these images, memes, GIFs, and short clips informed the conversation without necessarily saying anything explicitly about the crisis. Additionally, looking more into the use of sarcasm, parody and mocking commentary to offer a critique could offer interesting insights into organizational reputation and crisis communication.
Final Thoughts on Social Media

Social media have irrevocably changed how organizations respond in a crisis situation because social media have fundamentally changed how communication works on a global scale. In a crisis, there’s little time to prep as publics can instantaneously jump into the conversation as videos, stories and images are shared in real time. As the organization is finding out about the incident, so too are various publics. This transparency and rapid response changes the dialogue and shows the importance of understanding public perception because online publics lead online discussion and interpretation as information is shared. Organizations cannot simply react to this news, but need to be prepared to take quick, but strategic action that includes and anticipates social media context.
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APPENDIX A: APRIL 13\textsuperscript{TH} PRESS RELEASE

“We continue to express our sincerest apology to Dr. Dao. We cannot stress enough that we remain steadfast in our commitment to make this right.

This horrible situation has provided a harsh learning experience from which we will take immediate, concrete action. We have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what’s broken so this never happens again.

First, we are committing that United will not ask law enforcement officers to remove passengers from our flights unless it is a matter of safety and security. Second, we’ve started a thorough review of policies that govern crew movement, incentivizing volunteers in these situations, how we handle oversold situations and an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement. Third, we will fully review and improve our training programs to ensure our employees are prepared and empowered to put our customers first. Our values – not just systems – will guide everything we do. We’ll communicate the results of our review and the actions we will take by April 30.

United CEO Oscar Munoz and the company called Dr. Dao on numerous occasions to express our heartfelt and deepest apologies.”
APPENDIX B: APRIL 28TH EMAIL TO FREQUENT FLYERS

“Each flight you take with us represents an important promise we make to you, our customer. It’s not simply that we make sure you reach your destination safely and on time, but also that you will be treated with the highest level of service and the deepest sense of dignity and respect.

Earlier this month, we broke that trust when a passenger was forcibly removed from one of our planes. We can never say we are sorry enough for what occurred, but we also know meaningful actions will speak louder than words.

For the past several weeks, we have been urgently working to answer two questions: How did this happen, and how can we do our best to ensure this never happens again?

It happened because our corporate policies were placed ahead of our shared values. Our procedures got in the way of our employees doing what they know is right.

Fixing that problem starts now with changing how we fly, serve and respect our customers. This is a turning point for all of us here at United – and as CEO, it's my responsibility to make sure that we learn from this experience and redouble our efforts to put our customers at the center of everything we do.

That’s why we announced that we will no longer ask law enforcement to remove customers from a flight and customers will not be required to give up their seat once on board – except in matters of safety or security.
We also know that despite our best efforts, when things don’t go the way they should, we need to be there for you to make things right. There are several new ways we’re going to do just that.

We will increase incentives for voluntary rebooking up to $10,000 and will be eliminating the red tape on permanently lost bags with a new "no-questions-asked" $1,500 reimbursement policy. We will also be rolling out a new app for our employees that will enable them to provide on-the-spot goodwill gestures in the form of miles, travel credit and other amenities when your experience with us misses the mark. You can learn more about these commitments and many other changes at hub.united.com.

While these actions are important, I have found myself reflecting more broadly on the role we play and the responsibilities we have to you and the communities we serve.

I believe we must go further in redefining what United's corporate citizenship looks like in our society. You can and ought to expect more from us, and we intend to live up to those higher expectations in the way we embody social responsibility and civic leadership everywhere we operate. I hope you will see that pledge express itself in our actions going forward, of which these initial, though important, changes are merely a first step.

Our goal should be nothing less than to make you truly proud to say, "I fly United."

Ultimately, the measure of our success is your satisfaction and the past several weeks have moved us to go further than ever before in elevating your experience with us. I know our 87,000 employees have taken this message to heart, and they are as energized
as ever to fulfill our promise to serve you better with each flight and earn the trust you’ve given us.

We are working harder than ever for the privilege to serve you and I know we will be stronger, better and the customer-focused airline you expect and deserve.

With Great Gratitude,

Oscar Munoz’”