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Navigating Turbulence

A qualitative analysis of United Airlines' external
crisis communication strategies

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We hereby confirm that both authors have contributed equally to the conducting of this thesis.

Gratefully,

Annika Sparre & Linn Winberg

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Abstract

United Airlines is a major American airline company founded in 1926, which operates both domestic and international routes. They have experienced past reputational damage, and have suffered a loss in legitimacy as critics have questioned their practices. Using the Legitimacy Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as basis, a thematic content analysis (specifically template analysis) was conducted to examine United Airlines efforts to sustain and rebuild their legitimacy during two subsequent crises. This study focused on the company's self portrayal in their external communications, consisting of four social media statements and one financial report, in order to draw comparisons between the two mediums as well as between the two crises. The study found that United Airlines failed to identify vulnerabilities and understand the external stakeholders' perception, resulting in less effective communicative efforts. This thesis highlights the outcomes of strategies from the chosen theories used on social media as well as in financial reporting during a crisis. Furthermore, this thesis reflects on the motivations behind these decisions. Illuminating how the crisis communication strategy varies depending on the platform, to enable an organisation to manage public perception.

Keywords: United Airlines, organisational legitimacy, crisis communication, crisis communication strategies, situational crisis communication theory, legitimacy theory, social media, financial reporting, Twitter.

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1. Introduction

This chapter begins with an introduction to crisis communication. Then an overview of the case studies used as the foundation for this thesis is outlined. The problem discussion, followed by relevance and research gap will highlight the importance of examining the chosen subject of this study. This is followed by the purpose and research question. Delimitations and the outline of this thesis is presented at the end.

1.1 Background

Throughout history, crises have been a part of societies. However, the subject of organisational crisis management and communication has never been more pressing, as crises are now considered imminent (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). It is no longer a question of if it will happen but instead of when. A crisis often results in a loss of the organisation's reputation and social licence, or in other word legitimacy, which hinders their possibility to function in a society (Crowther et al., 2019). How an organisation is perceived in their context is directly connected to their “right” to exist, as their actions should be considered to be within the society’s norms (Suchman, 1995). While a positive reputation enables an organisation as it helps them stay competitive and enhance relationships with stakeholders (Benoit, 1997), an absence or loss of legitimacy would result in the avoidance of the organisation in regards to stakeholders (Crowther et al., 2019). Protecting an organisation’s reputation from damage in a crisis would involve crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996), making crisis management a vital part of any organisation (Pheng et al., 1997).

36% of crises are caused either by digital security failures or negative new media publicities (Cheng, 2016). In addition, it's highly likely that negative publicity spreads on social media after an organisation experiences a crisis (Wang et al., 2021). While social media tools also provide great flexibility to communication as well as offer the possibility for global outreach (Shari, et al., 2011), misuse can add fuel to the fire and deteriorate an organisation’s image (Wang, 2016). On social media, people have the ability to disseminate information rapidly

and express their opinions to a large audience. This means that companies not only have to manage the crisis itself but also the spread on social media (Wang et al., 2021). However, when social media is appropriately used, it becomes an important indicator to help an organisation restore its reputation and increase public's trust (Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2020).

Because of the increase in digitisation and globalisation, the expectation of corporate transparency and external communication is increasing (Bukh, et al., 2005). Corporations have started using their financial reports as a communication tool, to create and maintain a corporate image (Palmer-Silveira & Ruiz-Garrido, 2014). Whereas financial reports previously have been viewed solely as a statutory document where companies demonstrate their financial responsibility. Now, financial communication is one of the most important functions of a public relations professional, since it can improve credibility resulting in an increase in stability and growth (Bowen, et al., 2017).

1.2 Case Study: United Airlines

United Airlines is a major American airline company founded in 1926, which operates both domestic and international routes. Today, United Airlines Holding (United Airlines parent company), has a strong market position with a market capitalization of over 18 billion dollars (companiesmarketcap, n.a). In 2017, United Airlines accounted for 20% of the total U.S - China traffic, as well as being involved in a partnership with the third largest Airline in China; Air China (Cho, et al., 2021). Approximately 2.7 million people fly in the U.S every day. Generally, Americans have a complicated relationship with airlines. Most experience a lack of customer service as well as a constant revenue chase, but still travel with the airlines because of the indispensable utility.

1.2.1 Leggings-Gate

On March 26 2017, a United Airlines gate agent had refused two girls from boarding based on their policy of appropriate travel attire. Their dad, who was flying along with them, was allowed to board even though he wore shorts that were above his knees. An eyewitness tweeted about the incident and the backlash against United Airlines handling of the situation started immediately. The backlash on social media was mainly due to the sexist implication

of the incident, and United decided to respond to the backlash on Twitter the same day. Initially, United Airlines stated that they “*acknowledge the severity of the situation*” and that they “*appreciate your honest feedback*” (Appendix A). Less than two hours later United Airlines decided to issue another statement on twitter but this time in defence of the gate agents decision. United Airlines stated “*The passengers this morning were United pass riders who were not in compliance with our dress code policy for company benefit travel*” (Appendix A) (Stack, 2017). In this thesis this crisis will be referred to as “Leggings-Gate”.

1.2.2 Dr. David Dao

Two weeks after the “Leggings-Gate” crisis, passenger Dr. David Dao was forcibly removed from a United Airlines flight after refusing to disembark. United Airlines had overbooked their flight and needed to accommodate other passengers, so they were offering vouchers to takers. There were not enough takers so United Airlines decided to use an electronic process to determine who would be removed from the aircraft. The system identified Dr. David Dao and his wife, but they refused. United Airlines then decided to call Chicago Aviation authorities and Dr. David Dao (Hearit, 2021), who has been identified as Vietnamese-American (Cho et al., 2021), was forcibly removed. The incident was captured on video by fellow passengers and quickly circulated on social media, sparking widespread outrage. As a result of the altercation, Dr. David Dao suffered a concussion, a broken nose, and lost two teeth (Hearit, 2021). According to an article published by the Guardian (Walker, 2017), it was the United Airlines booking system, specifically their employee booking policy, that created the overbooking.

Following the incident, United Airlines CEO and then-chairman Oscar Munoz, issued a few statements. Initially, Munoz took a defensive stance, attributing the incident to Dao's behaviour. However, the initial statement was an internal document which was leaked (Independent, 2017). This sparked an outrage, leading to the first public statement posted by Munoz on Twitter. In this statement, Munoz reconsidered and apologised, which backfired due to his use of careless words that did not address the issue directly (Gregoire et al., 2015). A few days later, Munoz issued a second statement apologising and saying that United Airlines bore full responsibility for the incident while promising that such behaviour will not be repeated (Creswell & Maheshwari, 2017). Despite this shift, the damage had already been done, and United Airlines parent company United Airlines Holding incurred significant

financial losses. Nearly a billion dollars loss in market value the following day, while also facing a highly negative public perception (Czarnecki, 2017). Surveys found that over 40% of American millennials would avoid flying with United Airlines in response to the incident. In addition, the incident brought up a lot of concerns among Chinese and Vietnamese who fly with United Airlines. The news was spread on Chinese social media where 160 million Chinese read and 100,000 commented on the news within three days. Even though United Airlines denied the incident as being racially or ethnically motivated, many believed otherwise (Cho et al., 2021). In this thesis this crisis will be referred to as the “Dr. David Dao incident”.

1.3 Problem Discussion

The Legitimacy Theory clearly emphasises the organisational need for legitimacy in order for the organisation to continue existing. Legitimacy is considered a resource, on which an organisation is dependent for survival (Deegan, 2002). When United Airlines deferred from socially accepted norms during “Leggings-Gate” they harmed their legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), and when they caused physical harm to their passengers, they experienced what Massey (2001b) describes as “a crisis of legitimacy”. These incidents can result in an avoidance of stakeholders, such as investors and consumers (Crowther et al., 2019), making it difficult for the organisation to operate. As United Airlines is a consumer dependent company, as well as a publicly traded company traded under the parent company United Airlines Holding (United, n.a), they are dependent on attaining legitimacy in order to continue existing. This study is based on the assumption that United Airlines knows their legitimacy has been tarnished.

In order for United Airlines to manage the threats caused by the crises, they must be perceived as actively taking steps to build its social legitimacy (Hearit, 1995). This entails a connection between the company's rhetorically constructed values and the social systems in which the company operates (Hearit, 1995). How can a company dependent on their consumers use communication to rebuild trust when they are continuously criticised for their actions towards them? And how can United Airlines present themselves as an attractive investment option, when the value of an organisation is increasingly based on the company's knowledge and the ability of employees (Bukh, et al., 2005)?

1.3.1 Relevance and Research Gap

Our research intends to contribute to theoretical refinement within strategic communication, focusing on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Legitimacy Theory. Deegan (2002) argues that the Legitimacy Theory can be considered to be an under-developed theory, with many gaps in literature. For example, in regards to which legitimising efforts work (Deegan, 2002) Simultaneously, SCCT fails to consider the impact of social media. This is because social media was changing the crisis communication field by creating both risks and crises, while enabling interactive, rapid and dialogic communication (Cheng, 2016). Since the usage of social media is constantly increasing, social media and organisational communication is progressively becoming synonymous. Organisations need to know the best way to utilise social media platforms in order to effectively communicate with their stakeholders (Austin & Jin, 2018).

Even though crises are regarded as imminent in today's society (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017), studies show that most corporations believe their crisis communication capabilities need improvement (PWC, 2021), highlighting the need for knowledge and tools within crisis communication. The constant growing number of social media users combined with the need for crisis communication capability improvement, clearly shows the need for information on the subject.

Even though there is considerable research on organisational legitimacy, Massey (2001b) believes that the relationship between crisis and legitimacy is still uncertain. The combined research of crisis management and organisational legitimacy, is in order to examine organisational communication processes during crises of legitimacy. According to Massey (2001b) there is a need for empirical evidence of the effects of inconsistency in communication, as well as theoretical development within crisis management (Massey, 2001b).

1.4 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine United Airlines's external crisis communication strategies following their two subsequent crises in the early months of 2017. The media to be examined are Twitter, as well as their 8-K report. This thesis aims to detect the strategies used

in their crisis communication based on SCCT and the Legitimacy Theory. The study will look at the similarities and differences that can be identified in the crisis communication between their Twitter statements and 8-K report, as well as the difference in the strategies used on Twitter during each crisis.

By examining United Airlines's crisis communication across different media, as well as during different crises, we can contribute knowledge about how a public company chooses to manage its communication during a crisis. By analysing how the company portrays itself, recreates, more knowledge can be gained about how strategic communication can be used in relation to different stakeholder groups and its effect. It gives further insight into how organisations act as part of a strategy with the goal of influencing stakeholders' perceptions.

This study will contribute to theoretical refinement within strategic communication, with the aim of creating both educational and professional value. Our research can help illuminate strategies within external communication in relation to crisis communication, a topic highly relevant to both scholars and practitioners.

1.4.1 Research Questions

Based on the purpose, the following research questions have been formulated:

- *RQ1*: What differences and similarities in the use of strategies from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Legitimacy Theory can be identified in the crisis communication in United Airlines social media statements between the 2017 crises regarding the crises Leggings-Gate and Dr. David Dao?
- *RQ2*: What differences and similarities in the use of strategies from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Legitimacy Theory can be identified in United Airlines 8-K report in comparison to their statements on Twitter during the 2017 crisis regarding passenger Dr. David Dao?

1.5 Delimitation

This thesis is limited to focus solely on United Airlines, a choice made to enable a deeper analysis of the empirical material by concentrating on a specific organisation. Additionally, the study will centre on two subsequent crises that United Airlines encountered during 2017,

focusing on their communicative efforts during this time. Within the scope of this study, Twitter has been used as the only social media, as it is the platform chosen by United Airlines for their crisis communication during both of the chosen crises. This study also focuses on United Airlines financial communication, but only in regards to the Dr. David Dao incident, since no financial report was published by the organisation in relation to “Leggings-Gate”.

Although this phenomenon could be analysed from various perspectives, this study has chosen to focus solely on a communicative standpoint. Additionally, the work is restricted to explore only the theories of SCCT and Legitimacy Theory.

1.7 Thesis Outline

The thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter one provides the reader with a background of the subject crisis communication, introduces the case studies and the objectives of this thesis. Chapter two reviews previous studies related to the topic, providing background information for the current research. Followed by chapter three that consists of the theoretical framework. How this study will collect data and present the research is presented in chapter four. In chapter five the collected data will be analysed and compared to the theories. This will be followed by further analysis. Chapter six consists of a discussion of the analysis. A conclusion about the findings will be presented in chapter seven. Lastly, chapter eight suggests areas for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of literature on the role of legitimacy within organisations, which is followed by crisis communication and crisis management. Then an overview of how social media impacts crisis communication and the role of crisis communication within financial communication will be presented. The chapter ends with exploring the effect communication has in financial reporting.

2.1 Legitimacy's Impact on Organisations

An organisation's reputation is a major element of their survival, and a part of the process of social legitimisation (Watson, 2007). According to Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), legitimacy is an important concept when analysing an organisation's relationship with its environment, as legitimacy is something that has different effects depending on the organisation's visibility and how dependent they are on public support. In regards to financial reporting, studies show that larger companies face greater pressure regarding organisational legitimacy, leading them to emphasise socially relevant goals in their reports (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

Legitimacy is resilient to certain events, but is dependent on the organisation's history (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is the collective representation of an organisation's past behaviour and outcomes (Watson, 2007), a statement supported by Suchman (1995) who states that an organisation can defer from societal norms on occasion, if the actions are dismissed as unique.

2.2 Crisis

A crisis is defined as a sudden and unexpected event (Coombs, 2007), which brings consequences such as financial loss and damage to the company's reputation (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007). A crisis generally is considered a sudden and uncontrollable event, or a major occurrence that can have potentially negative consequences for an organisation and its stakeholders (Joseph and Larsen, 2006)

2.3 Crisis Management

The purpose of crisis management is to protect the organisation from crisis that can cause the organisation harm, as well as prevent crises from happening (Coombs, 2007). It is about planning and strategizing how to react if a crisis occurs (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Numerous theories have been developed to explain crises and crisis management, with staged approaches that divide the crisis into different stages being among the most recognized. Coombs (2007) call these stages pre-crisis, crisis response and post crisis. The pre-crisis stage involves how to prevent crises by identifying risks, making efforts to diminish them, and formulating a crisis management plan. In the crisis response stage, the focus lays on taking action when an organisation faces a crisis. Finally, the post-crisis stage typically involves communication with stakeholders and may include reputation repair efforts.

As part of crisis management, organisations need to develop a plan that fits into their overall strategic management approach (Johnson & Peppas, 2003). A positive reputation enables organisations to stay competitive, accomplish objectives, and enhance relationships with stakeholders (Benoit, 1997). Additionally, Ashcroft (1997) highlights that an organisation's reputation holds equal importance to other assets, despite not being explicitly mentioned in financial reports.

2.4 Crisis Communication

Crisis communication is defined as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 20). It is focused on how an organisation utilises language to protect itself during and after a crisis (Dunn & Able, 2015), as it is imperative that the organisation uses the right kind of communication during a crisis (Larsson, 2014). The biggest difficulty is not the crisis itself, but rather how the organisation choses to respond to it (Taylor and Perry, 2005). Although the recovery of stakeholders' trust can be complicated, it is possible with the right strategy (Dietz and Gillespie, 2009).

Hearit (1994) characterises crisis communications role as to reduce anger and hostility towards the organisation, whereas Allen and Caillouet (1994) argue that it aims to restore

legitimacy by portraying the actions of the organisation as less inappropriate or to convince the public not to judge the organisation as harshly.

2.5 Social Media's Impact on Crisis Communication

With the development of social media, the field of crisis communication has gone through a significant transformation (Austin & Jin, 2018). Twitter and other interactive social media platforms are creating a new era of crisis communication between organisations and their audience. Even though organisations can utilise social media in a positive way to interact with a wide range of stakeholders, it comes with a potential risk. Previous research shows that 36% of crises are caused either by digital security failures or negative new media publicities (Cheng, 2016). Additionally, there has been a shift in control between the public and the communicators when it comes to the message in question, since a larger number of people can access messages (Austin & Jin, 2018). Even though social media have the potential of helping an organisation during a crisis, it can also be detrimental to underestimate the communication crisis that can follow an ill-thought-out response. Aggergaard (2015) especially highlights Twitter, claiming that its main function is to pass information along as the events unfold, rather than a tool for crisis communication.

2.6 Communication's Role in Financial Reporting

One of the more common ways organisations communicate with stakeholders is through financial reporting, which have previously been solely viewed as required documents, but there has been a shift in expectation in these documents (Palmer-Silveira & Ruiz-Garrido, 2014). Now, the value of the company is increasingly based on the company's knowledge, skilled employees etc. instead of physical assets such as stocks and equipment (Bukh, et al., 2005). Ashcroft (1997) states that an organisation's reputation holds equal importance to other assets, despite not being explicitly mentioned in financial reports. Financial reporting is now seen as a tool to present themselves favourably to current and potential shareholders (Palmer-Silveira & Ruiz-Garrido, 2014), and Bowen et al. (2017) even argue that financial communication is an important function within communication as it directly contributes to the organisation's stability, growth and credibility. These statements showcase the importance of financial reporting as a mass communication tool, and should be considered an influential source (Hooks, et al., 2002).

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter will address the theoretical foundation for this research. In order to give an insight into the selected theories and their application within this thesis. The chapter begins with exploring Situational Crisis Communication Theory, followed by Legitimacy Theory.

3.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), is a prominent framework in crisis communication aimed at safeguarding an organisation's reputation during tumultuous times (Coombs, 2019). This theory offers strategies for managing crises effectively.

SCCT entails a two-step process that influences the level of responsibility assigned to the organisation, thereby impacting its reputation. Initially, it involves identifying the type of crisis among three categories. Coombs (2007) states that the second step is to examine the organisation's crisis history and reputation. These elements enhance the crisis's repercussions on the organisation's reputation.

3.1.1 Types of Crisis & Crisis Responsibility

To gain insights into a crisis situation, it is imperative to examine the concept of crisis responsibility within SCCT. This aspect delves into determining who bears responsibility for a crisis, classifying them into distinct clusters: victim, accidental, and preventable (Coombs, 2006). Organisations may find themselves categorised as victims of a crisis, typically resulting from factors like natural disasters or rumours. Alternatively, those falling into the accidental cluster experience crises without intentional misconduct, often due to technical errors or accidents. Lastly, the preventable cluster signifies situations where a company knowingly puts individuals at risk by disregarding laws or engaging in improper actions.

In communicating with stakeholders, it is crucial for organisations to explicitly address responsibility for the crisis (Dietz & Lockey, 2014). According to Coombs (2015) and Dietz and Gillespie (2009), evaluating organisational responsibility is a critical step in the

trust-building process. The more stakeholders attribute responsibility to the organisation for the crisis, the greater the damage inflicted on the organisation (Coombs, 2015).

3.1.2 Intensifying Factors

Coombs (2015) argues that crises are influenced by two intensifying factors: crisis history and reputation history. Crisis history refers to whether a current crisis can be linked to past similar crises, with the absence of such connections attributing greater crisis responsibility and reputational damage. Similarly, reputation history pertains to the prior relationship between a firm and its stakeholders, where an unfavourable history increases reputational threat. These intensifying factors affect the reputational threat posed by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Coombs and Holladay (2001) found that negative crisis or reputational histories influence crisis responsibility and institutional reputation. The collective assessment of an organisation's past actions determines its overall reputation, which stakeholders use to identify with the firm. Managers must anticipate how past and current crises or reputation histories influence stakeholder perceptions of a crisis. Therefore, maintaining a healthy institutional reputation is vital in mitigating the impact of crises (Coombs, 2007).

3.1.3 Crisis Response Strategies

Coombs (2007) outlines diverse crisis management strategies within SCCT, categorising them into primary and secondary approaches. The primary strategies includes three different approaches: denial, diminishment, and rebuilding. The secondary crisis response strategy which is usually an addition to the primary response strategy includes the bolstering crisis response strategies.

Table 1

Crisis Response Strategies	Explanation
Diminish crisis response strategies	Coombs (2007) explains that the <i>justification strategy</i> is when an organisation minimises the perceived impact of the crisis. <i>The excuse strategy</i> is when an organisation minimises the organisation's responsibility by disclaiming any intent to cause harm or asserting a lack of control over the events causing the crisis.

Deny crisis response strategies	According to Coombs (2007), there are different forms of crisis response strategies that include denial. One is the <i>scapegoat strategy</i> , which is when an organisation blames a person or a group outside of the organisation as the cause for the crisis. The <i>denial strategy</i> is when an organisation claims that there is no crisis. Lastly, the <i>attack the accuser strategy</i> is when an organisation confronts the person or the group claiming that there is something wrong with the organisation or that there was something wrong with the organisation's actions.
Rebuild crisis response strategies	Coombs (2007) state that utilising the <i>compensation strategy</i> , an organisation provides monetary compensation or other forms of restitution to the affected parties. Another approach in this category is the <i>apology strategy</i> , wherein the organisation assumes full accountability for the crisis and seeks forgiveness from stakeholders.
Bolstering crisis response strategies	Coombs (2007) explains that organisations utilise the <i>reminder strategy</i> to highlight their past positive accomplishments to stakeholders. The <i>ingratiation strategy</i> involves organisations praising stakeholders. The <i>victimage strategy</i> entails organisations reminding stakeholders that they are also affected as victims of the crisis.

3.1.4 Applicability to This Thesis

This thesis entails research questions that examine how SCCT is applied in the United Airlines crises regarding “Leggings-Gate” and the incident involving Dr. David Dao in 2017, as well as the differences and similarities of how the theory has been applied between Twitter and financial reports. Therefore, this research is limited to only explore crisis response strategies within this framework.

3.2 Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy Theory assumes that an organisation is a part of a broader system and is affected by, and has an effect on, the society in which it operates (Deegan, 2002). It is regarded as a social construct and contract, built on the perceptions of the organisation's actions (Suchman, 1995). On one hand, legitimacy is given externally, and on the other hand it is organised internally (Deegan, 2002). Legitimacy plays a crucial role in providing an organisation with a

social licence to function in a society (Crowther et al., 2019), and serves an organisation in ways of raising commitment with investors and employees, along with increased sales. In contrast, the absence of legitimacy results in avoidance of stakeholders, such as investors and consumers (Crowther et al., 2019).

3.2.1 Strategies

Lindblom (1994) presents four types of strategies for how organisations can use external reporting to either maintain or strengthen their legitimacy, which can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Source: Deegan, C. (2002). The legitimising effect of social and environmental disclosures – a theoretical foundation (s. 297). *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability*.

Strategy	Description
1	Inform the public about changes in the organisation's achievements and activities
2	Try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour
3	Manipulate the public perception by diverting attention from certain issues to other areas where the organisation is perceived more favourably
4	Try to change external expectations of the organisation

3.2.2 Legitimacy and Financial Reporting

It is often argued that a business's main focus is to generate sufficient returns for its shareholders, with a large organisation such as United Airlines, the pressure from shareholders can be considered significant. In addition, the diversity of the shareholders are also considerable. In addition to the increased pressure larger organisations face regarding legitimacy leading to them highlighting socially relevant goals in their financial reporting (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975), public disclosure of information in financial reports can be employed by an organisation in order to implement the above mentioned strategies (Deegan,

2002). This highlights the importance of financial reporting when reviewing organisational efforts in relation to legitimacy.

3.2.3 Legitimacy and Crisis Communication

Legitimacy is an important tool for handling crisis situations, as the stability and comprehensibility leads to persistence since legitimacy is resilient to certain events. However, it is dependent on a history of events (Suchman, 1995), as it is a collective representation of the organisation's past behaviour and outcomes (Watson, 2007). Therefore, an organisation can defer from societal norms if the actions are deemed as unique (Suchman, 1995). Coombs (2004) also follows this line of reasoning, as his theory on crisis communication (SCCT) argues that past crises form a reputational threat to organisations (Watson, 2007).

3.2.4 A Crisis of Legitimacy

An organisation can experience “a crisis of legitimacy”, when an unwanted result, such as harm to humans, is in direct correlation with the organisation's actions. However, repairing it is reactive rather than proactive (Massey, 2001b). Organisations have two primary strategies from which to choose from: 1. The organisation can restructure themselves. 2. The organisation can provide a “normalising account”. A normalising account is something that will separate the organisation from the unwanted action (Massey, 2001b). Furthermore, Massey (2001a) highlights the importance of consistency in crisis response. This means giving the same account to all stakeholders, as they should not contradict each other. If inconsistent statements are given, stakeholders might question its genuineness and credibility. Such actions can damage the organisation’s reputation more than the initial crisis (Massey, 2001a).

3.2.5 Applicability to This Thesis

This research is limited to only explore how United Airlines comply with the Legitimacy Theory within this framework. Which legitimacy strengthening or rebuilding strategies have been applied by United Airlines when facing the crisis, and if different ones have been used on Twitter and in financial reports.

3.3 Theoretical Delimitations

This thesis exclusively focuses on the theories Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Legitimacy Theory. These theories were chosen due to their widespread recognition within their respective fields. Moreover, the combination of SCCT and Legitimacy Theory offers a comprehensive framework for addressing the chosen research questions. SCCT provides insights into crisis communication strategies, emphasising the importance of tailoring responses to different crisis situations. On the other hand, Legitimacy Theory offers perspectives on how organisations can maintain or restore their legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders amidst a crisis. By incorporating both theories, this study aims to provide a well-rounded analysis of how organisations navigate crises through communicative means. The study's focus lies specifically on examining how organisations handle crises through communicative strategies. Therefore, the theories are delimited to only use the strategies of the theories in the analysis, as this aspect is most relevant to the research objectives.

4. Research Methodology

This chapter starts with outlining the research approach- and design. It proceeds by explaining the data collection process, as well as presenting the selected data. Thereafter, an explanation about the methodology used for data analysis is presented, followed by the coding. The chapter ends by addressing validity, reliability and generalisation.

4.1 Research Approach

4.1.1 Abductive Approach

The abductive approach is considered a combination between the inductive- and the deductive approach. (Saunders et al., 2007). In an inductive approach, researchers begin with empirical observations or practical elements and subsequently derive theories or generalisations. Conversely, in deductive research, hypotheses are formulated based on existing theories or hypotheses, which are then tested and either confirmed or refuted through empirical investigation (Bryman, et al., 2011). The abductive approach allows researchers to easily transition between induction and deduction, enabling the discovery and confirmation of new insights and reflections. This approach results in research that is not exclusively limited to just one approach (Paton, 2002).

Taking into consideration that this thesis is based on both theoretical frameworks and empirical data gathered from Twitter and a financial report, the abductive approach has been selected for this study. This choice appears to be the most suitable option, as Bryman and Bell (2017) notes that this approach enables researchers to draw nuanced conclusions and enables them to shape the study with emphasis on both empirical data and theory. By starting with established theories and hypotheses, the aim is to test their applicability and validity in the context of the United Airlines crises, while grounding the analysis in empirical evidence. The abductive approach therefore enables the evaluation of the empirical alignment with established theoretical concepts, which is the aim of this thesis.

4.1.2 Qualitative Research

Bryan and Bell (2005) explain that qualitative research places greater emphasis on words, whereas quantitative research focuses more on numerical data. Qualitative research tends to adopt a more open approach, with less structured processes that prioritise participant experiences, whereas the quantitative approach is characterised by a higher degree of structure. Guthrie (2006) argues that in the field of strategic communication, qualitative content analysis is the preferred method for finding an explanation of the meaning and purpose of a message.

Qualitative studies are valuable for understanding perceptions of the world rather than objective realities. Kumar (1999) defines a study as qualitative if its primary aim is to describe a situation, phenomenon, problem, or event. When collecting the data, it typically involves variables measured on nominal or ordinal scales, and the analysis focuses on discerning variations in the phenomenon without quantifying them.

Embracing a qualitative approach allows for the exploration of subjective interpretations regarding United Airlines' crisis communication efforts. Through the analysis of social media statements and financial reports, hidden themes, diverse perspectives, and nuanced strategies can be uncovered that quantitative methods alone may overlook.

4.1.3 Social Constructivist Approach

In this thesis, a social constructivist approach will be adopted. This is based on the idea that everything is socially constructed, thus reality becomes a reflection of people's perception of reality (Rasborg et al., 2014). Central to this approach is that knowledge and reality are contextual (Collin and K ppe, 2012), meaning that ontology and epistemology shape social constructivism.

Furthermore, one type of framing identified by Persson (2019), is described as the opportunity for individuals to create frames to influence others to benefit themselves intentionally. This process involves creating and conveying various narratives to represent an event (Sch n and Rein, 1994), used to influence and form public opinion (Persson, 2019). Framing is often used within media, as it seeks to present a problem or issue in a certain light

to make individuals associate different concepts with different situations or meanings (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

The social constructivist perspective is relevant to this study as the objective of this thesis is to examine how United Airlines use frames, or in this case strategies from chosen theories, to shape the response of the chosen crises. Analysing how United Airlines uses strategies to try to shape narratives about the crises enables for a better understanding how an organisation during a crisis can shape perceptions and impact the organisation's reputation and legitimacy. As stated by Weber (2002) that reality is created by the media, this is especially interesting due to the digital age of today. Examining how an organisation can frame established or ongoing narratives on social media by using different strategies to try to influence stakeholder perception and steer the narrative surrounding the crisis.

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 Case Study

A research design is a frame of gathering and analysing data (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In order to determine an appropriate research design, Yin's (2008) approach of deciding the relevant method will be applied. To establish the proper method involves answering (1) the type of research question posed, (2) the extent of control over the events and (3) the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events. This is illustrated by Table 3.

Table 3

Source: Yin, R. K. (2008). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (s. 42). Sage Publications.

METHOD	(1) FORM OF RESEARCH QUESTION	(2) REQUIRES CONTROL OF BEHAVIORAL EVENTS	(3) FOCUSES ON CONTEMPORARY EVENTS
EXPERIMENT	HOW, WHY?	YES	YES
SURVEY	WHO, WHAT, WHERE, HOW MANY, HOW MUCH?	NO	YES
ARCHIVAL RESEARCH	WHO, WHAT, WHERE, HOW MANY, HOW MUCH?	NO	YES/NO
HISTORY	HOW, WHY?	NO	NO
CASE STUDY	HOW, WHY?	NO	YES

Yin's (2008) first consideration involves determining the type of research question to be addressed. In this thesis, the aim is to address "how" research questions, thereby narrowing down the available methods to three: experiments, histories, and case studies. Given that this thesis does not necessitate control over events, both the historical and case study approaches are viable options. Since the focus of the thesis is on contemporary events, the case study method emerges as the most suitable choice.

Bryman and Bell (2015) refer to case studies as primarily qualitative research oriented, emphasising a focus on words rather than numerical data. This approach typically aims to describe the qualities and attributes of individual phenomena. Additionally, Swanborn (2010) highlights that the case study design enables a comprehensive and detailed examination of the subject matter. Given the qualitative and in-depth nature of this study, the case study method is further affirmed as the appropriate choice.

Case studies serve as a valuable tool for scientists to test theories, provide detailed descriptions, and develop new theoretical frameworks across various topics (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Yin (2008) argues that the case study method has been used frequently when researching into social sciences due to its ability to comprehensively capture the nature of the studied phenomena. Despite sometimes being viewed as primarily exploratory, this perception overlooks its versatility in serving both exploratory and explanatory purposes. In reality, many significant case studies have fulfilled various roles, including exploration, description, and explanation.

4.2.2 Multiple Case Study

In this thesis, a multiple case study approach has been adopted. This decision was made primarily because a multiple case study offers the opportunity for a deeper examination of how United Airlines responds to a crisis. The advantage of multiple case studies is the ability to analyse data both within each situation and across situations (Yin, 2003). They can yield diverse outcomes, either confirming expected differences or revealing surprising similarities (Yin, 2003), thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of the findings (Eisenhardt, 1991). Moreover, multiple case studies offer a more robust basis for theory-building as they draw on

a wider range of empirical evidence, enhancing the depth and breadth of theoretical exploration (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Because of limited time and resources this study focuses on two crises, as opposed to a larger number of crises. Multiple cases allows for a deeper analysis of the strategies being used as a crisis response, while still offering insights into the specific context of each case.

4.2.3 United Airlines as Choice of Case Study

In order to select case studies relevant to the research questions and to provide the reader with examples, certain criteria needed to be established. A crucial criterion was to identify an organisation that had experienced events demonstrating the common elements of a crisis: a situation that posed a threat to the organisation, occurred unexpectedly, and required prompt attention (Seeger, et al., 1998). Additionally, the availability of information played a significant role in the selection process. It was imperative for this thesis that the chosen organisation had responded to the crisis on social media and as well as through some form of financial communication.

4.3 Data Collection Design

4.3.1 Documentation

Bryman et al. (2011) states that a research method serves as a means of data collection, and the selection of an appropriate research methodology relies on the specific data requirements of the study. This thesis will exclusively use documentation, which is a form of secondary data (Kumar, 2014).

Documentation was chosen for this study because it is the most suitable form of data to address our research questions. Silverman (2015) highlights the relevance of documents in exploring crisis communication strategies as they can be considered social products, and therefore reflect the interests and perspectives of their writers. Considering that crisis communication is often conveyed through some form of documentation, since its data consists of words (Silverman, 2015), this choice aligns with our objective of researching this aspect of communication.

4.3.2 Purposive Sampling

For this thesis, a purposive sampling method has been used. Purposive sampling is used when researchers want to discover, understand, and gain insight into a certain problem (Denscombe, 2010). This method involves researchers selecting samples they believe valuable for the research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Researchers must define the attributes they seek in the samples, ensuring these criteria align with the study's purpose (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). In qualitative studies, the focus isn't on statistical generalisation but on forming a foundation for deeper understanding and perception of the subject being studied (MagneHolme and Krohn-Solvang, 1997).

A non-probability sampling technique is used in this thesis, allowing for in-depth research of a small number of samples, selected for a particular purpose (Bryman and Bell, 2015). This approach enables researchers to use case studies as a way to gain theoretical understanding about the relevant research questions (Saunders et al., 2019).

The empirical material consists of two tweets posted by United Airlines in relation to the Leggings-Gate incident, as well as two tweets posted by Munoz in relation to the Dr. David Dao incident and one United Airlines 8-K report, all from the year 2017. This material was selected because they were either published in direct relation to the crises and convey important information in regards to United Airlines communicative strategies across mediums. The tweets regarding both crises incidents were sampled because they convey important information about their communicative efforts, which helps to answer the first research question. The 8-K report was sampled because the organisation experienced economical disturbance in relation to the incident involving Dr. David Dao. It was reported that United Airlines shares dipped four percent the following day, a loss of 1 billion dollars in market value (Kottasova, 2017). These statements in conjunction with their financial report provide insight into the organisation's chosen strategies as well as contributing to a deeper analysis by providing another perspective and dimension. An analysis of this material will make light of the use of crisis communication practices associated with legitimacy in financial reporting and social media.

4.3.3 Empirical Delimitations

The study focuses on crisis communication strategies employed by United Airlines in response to the two crisis incidents described in chapter 1.2.1 and 1.2.2, exclusively through Twitter statements and a 8-K report issued by the organisation in close proximity to the incidents. The choice to include different mediums as well as different crises, was made in order to gain further insight into the organisation's crisis communication strategies. Likewise, the choice to restrict the material to two mediums and two crises was made due to limitations of time and resources.

As mentioned in chapter 1.2, internal documents regarding the incident involving Dr. David Dao, written by Munoz, was leaked. This internal memo will not be analysed as it was not written with the intention of being official or with the purpose of affecting the public's opinion. By narrowing the scope to specific communication channels, this thesis can offer a more in depth analysis of the crisis communication strategies utilised on these channels.

According to the SEC (n.a) a public company must file an 8-K in addition to annual and quarterly reports. This type of report is filed when a company has to announce certain types of events that shareholders must be aware of (SEC, n.a). As United Airlines is a publicly traded American company, they must comply with regulations in accordance with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. According to the United Airlines report, they filed the 8-K in accordance with *Item 2.2 Results of Operations and Financial Condition*, as well as *Item 7.01 Regulation FD Disclosure*. A form 8-K report includes both formal and information. The formal information is referring to information that is mandatory and regulated by law. This study does not analyse how well United Airlines adhere to these regulations as this study focuses mainly on analysing the information presented on the medium.

4.3.4 Empirical Findings

In Appendix A, the two tweets published in relation to the Leggings-Gate crisis are presented according to date. The two Twitter statements regarding the crisis involving the Dr. David Dao situation will be described and presented according to the date of the crisis and the published material in Appendix B. In the 8-K report, the data is sorted and presented by chronological order in Appendix C.

4.4 Data Analysis

An abductive and collaborative thematic content analysis was chosen, because it is an efficient way to identify patterns, as it offers a clear process for categorising data. Furthermore, a thematic content analysis allows for reproduction by other researchers within strategic communication (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study focuses on analysing both financial and social media communication, which allows for a wider context since it focuses on two mediums. Therefore, we can illustrate how different elements of communication interact and support each other, which allows for a comparative analysis in portrayal.

The method of thematic analysis is one of the most used techniques in qualitative data analysis (Bryman et al., 2011). The abductive thematic analysis uses theory as its basis of investigation (Pearse, 2019). This method initiates the coding process with a predefined framework, yet retains flexibility for inductive adaptations as new insights emerge (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021). This is applicable to this study as the aim is to draw out themes from the empirical data while being able to connect it to the previously chosen theories.

4.4.1 Template Analysis

Template analysis (King, 2004) is used for thematic text analysis, where researchers compile codes representing identified themes. Themes, as described by Drisko and Maschi (2015), encompass the purpose or message of the data. Categories within themes organise data to align with thematic objectives. Each category contains codes that offer detailed descriptions of studied phenomena, offering a nuanced understanding. Codes, defined as words or brief phrases suggesting attributes of data (Saldana, 2013), are based on the two theories.

King (2004) writes that the initial steps of template analysis involve predefined themes and codes. Based on chosen theories, the analysis of Twitter statements and the 8-K report began with predetermined themes and codes chosen by the first and second author. Subsequently, the data was coded, following King's (2004) definition where codes serve as labels for text segments, linking empirical material to the theoretical framework. This process organises data into categories representing similar coded data with shared characteristics. During this

phase, the first and second author independently identified relevant sections of Twitter statements and the 8-K report that aligned with research questions, assigning codes from predefined themes.

If no prior theme existed, a new theme was developed or modified. This was analysed through a collaborative analysis between the first and second author, with findings discussed and revised. The two authors' themes mostly overlapped with some nuances, but inadequacies of the template were discovered. King (2004) states that the identified texts that are important for the aim of the research need to be assigned one or several appropriate codes from the initial template. The template was therefore collaboratively modified. This was repeated until consensus had been reached between the first and second author and all text relevant to the research questions were coded.

King (2004) states that the template is not the final results of the analysis, but serves as a tool to help researchers in interpreting the data. The final template structure, presented in Appendix D, was used to interpret the data.

4.5 Coding

The data from the Twitter statements and the 8-K report was organised into six main themes, with a total of twelve categories identified through the template analysis. This organisation was designed to improve the methodology and help connect the findings to the strategies outlined in the theoretical framework.

Theme 1 “Restoring Confidence Among Stakeholder”		
Category Apology	Category Acknowledgement	Category Commitment to Improvement
Codes Apologising	Codes Demonstrating accountability and awareness	Codes Acknowledges the need for learning and improvement

Theme 2 “Initiatives to Enhance Credibility”	
Category: Action	Category: Customer Experience Improvement
Codes Demonstrates taking corrective action	Codes Emphasises actionable ways to enhance customer experience

Theme 3 “Establishing Faith Among Stakeholders”	
Category: Trust Building	Category: Resolution
Codes Demonstrating transparency and ethical values	Codes Effort to resolve issues for all parties involved

Theme 4 “Bolstering Esteem Among Stakeholders”	
Category: Financial Performance	Category: Operational Performance
Codes Highlighting positive financial trends	Codes Highlights advancements and achievements

Theme 5 “Putting the Lid On”	
Category Minimisation	Category Blame
Codes Showcasing lack of responsibility	Codes Redirecting blame

Theme 6 “Strengthening Stakeholder Relations”	
Category Praising Stakeholders	
Codes Gratitude	

4.6 Validity, Reliability and Generalisation

Since qualitative research is interpretive, attaining analytical reliability can be challenging. Differences in interpretation can be more prevalent in qualitative content analysis, since meaning is contextual and complex. For that reason, different backgrounds and understandings of each coder may have a great influence (Drisko and Maschi, 2015). However, since this study is done through collaborative analysis this ensures that the study reflects the views of others (Drisko and Maschi, 2015). As this study is focused on analysing previously published text, the data is already available and has not been influenced.

Our research processes have been made transparent through clear description of our theoretical standpoint, research methodology and data analysis methods. Transparency as well as following template analysis allows for reproduction by other researchers. Additionally, it shows the interpretation of the material according to the theories (Silverman, 2015).

In regards to representativeness, purposive sampling allows us to choose the material and case that best answers our research questions in regards to our phenomena, which allows for generalisation (Silverman, 2015). Case studies are an attempt to learn from one case in order to understand many cases Yin (2013). This study is focused on one organisation but two events, making it a multiple case study. A multiple case study allows for cross references, which makes the study gain generalisability (Firestone and Herriott, 1983).

4.6.1 Ethical Considerations

When conducting research based on social media, it is important to consider the limitations of the medium (Silverman, 2015). Twitter has its limitations when it comes to communication, considering the character limit and the likely loss of context (Aggergaard, 2015), which can limit the understanding of the communication. Furthermore, it is important to consider if consent is needed in order to use the material (Silverman, 2015). As our empirical material has been published by either United Airlines or their then CEO Oscar Munoz, with the intent of reaching their stakeholders, we consider the tweets and the 8-K report as public material in which we don't need consent to analyse.

5.0 Analysis

This chapter will start with a descriptive overview of the different themes and categories derived from the template analysis, showing their connection to the strategies within SCCT and Legitimacy Theory. Following this, two tables will be presented, illustrating in which empirical data these categories and strategies have been identified. Finally, a more comprehensive analysis will be conducted of the two crises.

5.1 Comparing Data to Theory

This analysis is structured based on the sampled empirical data's relevance for each of the themes, sorted by category and theme. In this chapter the theoretical strategies presented in chapter 3.1.1 and 3.2.1 will be analysed and connected to the collected data presented in Appendix A, Appendix B and Appendix C.

5.1.1 Theme 1: Restoring Confidence Among Stakeholders

Category: Apology

The Apology category revolves around expressing regret for an incident. It involves admitting fault or wrongdoing for any harm caused by offering a formal apology for the specific actions or events that transpired, and does not necessarily include broader expressions of empathy or understanding. Examples of this are: *"I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers"* and *"...my deepest apologizes for what happened"*.

In accordance with Coombs (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory, apologies are a part of the apology crisis response strategy. This category does not entail both aspects of this apology strategy as it consists of two parts: (1) taking accountability and (2) apologising. The Apology category only refers to the second part of the strategy, which is the apology. For the apology strategy by SCCT to be applied correctly, the statement therefore also needs to include the aspect of taking accountability.

This category is connected to the legitimising strategy; "try to change external expectations of the organisation". By apologising, United Airlines aims to demonstrate care and empathy.

This can influence the public's perceptions of the organisation's future behaviour, potentially leading to a reassessment of their expectations and view the organisation more positively.

This category can also partly be connected to the legitimising strategy "try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour". United Airlines issued apologies in an effort to shape public perception which can lead the public to view the organisation more positively, even if the organisation's underlying behaviour remains unchanged. This is decided by the organisation's subsequent actions in terms of addressing the factors that led up to the incident.

Category: Acknowledgement

This category entails the acknowledgment of shortcomings in the organisation and the recognition of organisational accountability for the incident. This may involve acknowledging any deficiencies in current practices and procedures that may have contributed to the crisis. It does not necessarily include the incentive to take measures to make sure the situation will not be repeated. An example of this is: "*we take full responsibility*".

This category aligns the closest with the rebuild crisis response strategy outlined by Coombs (2007). Specifically, it reflects elements of the apology strategy, where the organisation assumes full accountability for the crisis and seeks forgiveness from stakeholders. This category does not fulfil both requirements as it only includes the accountability aspect.

Just as in the previous category, the Acknowledgement category is connected to the strategy "try to change external expectations of the organisation" as well as partly connected to the strategy "try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour" from Legitimacy Theory. By acknowledging deficiencies and taking responsibility for past incidents, the organisation aims to influence external expectations of the organisation's future behaviour and performance. This is a strategy that can be used even if the organisation's actual behaviour and actions remain unchanged.

Category: Commitment to Improvement

This category encompasses United Airlines stating that there is a need for improvement and exhibits a commitment to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future. This does

not necessarily include outlining concrete actions or steps in how these improvements can be made. An example of a statement is: “...to fix what’s broken so this never happens again.”

The improvements are mentioned in order to express United Airlines' ambition to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future, aligning with the apology strategy in terms of accountability. Stating the need for improvements also represents the legitimacy strategy of informing the public about changes in the organisation's activities.

5.1.2 Theme 2: Initiatives to Enhance Credibility

Category: Action

This category demonstrates United Airlines dedication to ensure that the crisis will not be repeated by outlining specific actions. These actions revolve around the incident and the factors that contributed to the crisis, excluding other operational aspects. This category does not necessarily include statements where United Airlines is simply stating a need for improvement, but focuses on statements revolving specific actions and measures to be made to make sure the crisis will not be happening again. An example of this is: *This will include a thorough review of crew movement?*

This category is partly aligned with the compensation strategy from SCCT, which Coombs (2007) describes as an organisation that provides monetary compensation or other forms of restitution to the affected parties. While the compensation strategy typically focuses on providing restitution to specific individuals impacted by the crisis, this category is acting to benefit consumers as a whole. By addressing underlying issues, the organisation aims not only to compensate for the negative impact of the crisis but also to strengthen trust among all consumers.

United Airlines are expressing specific actions, such as policies and procedure reviewing, as well as stating that they are addressing the situation with a sense of urgency. These statements fall in line with the legitimising strategy of informing the public about changes in the organisation's achievements and activities.

This category also aligns with the strategy "try to change external expectations of the organisation" from the Legitimacy Theory. By demonstrating efforts to address issues and

publicly outlining concrete actions to prevent similar occurrences in the future, the organisation seeks to reshape external perceptions.

Category: Customer Experience Improvement

This category emphasises the organisation's dedication to improving the customer experience by outlining specific actions, both past and future. This does not entail statements focused on outlining specific actions in relation to preventing a similar crisis from happening again, but focuses solely on customer experience improvement that is not in relation to a crisis. Neither does it include simply stating that there is a need for improvement, thus focusing only on outlined measures to be made. This is shown with statements, such as: "*we need to do a much better job serving our customers*".

As this category primarily focuses on the organisation's dedication to enhancing the customer experience, it aligns with the reminder strategy from SCCT. Coombs (2007) describes this strategy as a way for organisations to highlight past positive accomplishments to stakeholders, in order to build credibility and shift the focus. By reminding stakeholders of its past successes and ongoing efforts, the organisation can reinforce positive associations and maintain its reputation, even in the face of a crisis.

In addition to highlighting past achievements, United Airlines also showcases its ongoing efforts. For example the statement. By incorporating the organisation's ongoing efforts, this category goes beyond recollection and actively demonstrates their commitment to further develop the organisation. This category aligns with the legitimacy strategy of informing the public about changes in the organisation's achievements and activities. By outlining specific actions aimed at enhancing the customer experience, the organisation is effectively communicating its ongoing efforts to improve its services.

This category also aligns with the legitimacy strategy of manipulating public perception by diverting attention from certain issues to other areas where the organisation is perceived more favourably. Highlighting achievements and future incentives also serves as a means to change external expectations of the organisation, connecting it to the legitimising strategy with the same name. By outlining specific actions aimed at enhancing the customer experience, both past and future, the organisation signals that they are actively addressing areas of concern and working towards positive change.

5.1.3 Theme 3: Establishing Faith Among Stakeholders

Category: Trust Building

This category entails integrity building statements, aiming at fostering a sense of trust in United Airlines. These statements include focusing on building confidence among stakeholders by emphasising transparency, ethical values, and a commitment to honesty and integrity. This does not necessarily outline any specific actions to be made. This is shown with statements like “*no one should ever be mistreated this way*”.

These statements reflect a sense of remorse, an element of the apology strategy from SCCT. The apology strategy emphasises taking full responsibility for the crisis and seeking reconciliation with those affected. This category therefore aligns with the seeking reconciliation aspect.

This category also aligns with the strategy "Try to change external expectations of the organisation". By publicly expressing a commitment to ethical conduct and transparent communication, United Airlines seeks to influence how external stakeholders perceive its actions and behaviour.

This also aligns with the strategy of informing the public about changes in the organisation's achievements and activities. By outlining concrete steps for improvement, the organisation demonstrates a willingness to address issues and rebuild trust.

Category: Resolution

This category refers to communication that includes an aim of resolving the situation in a satisfactory manner with stakeholders. It entails a commitment to address the concerns and reach a resolution of affected parties. It does not necessarily include how the organisation will resolve the issue with the affected parties or if they have reached a resolution. This is shown with statements like: “*We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation.*”

This category aligns the closest with the compensation strategy from SCCT, which includes some form of restitution to the affected party. However it is unclear whether this was an empty statement. This can therefore be connected to the strategy of “trying to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour” from the

Legitimacy Theory. This also aligns with the strategy of trying to change the external expectations of the organisation from the Legitimacy Theory. By publicly stating that United Airlines wants to resolve the situation with the affected passenger, is an attempt to change the public opinion about the organisation.

5.1.4 Theme 4: Bolstering Esteem Among Stakeholders

Category: Financial Performance

This category entails statements of United Airlines financial performance, especially the highlighting of positive revenue trends and revenue growth. It does not include other aspects of the organisation. This is found with statements like: “*we expect to see quarter consolidated PRASM to be up 1.0 to 3.0 percent*”.

Although an 8-K report usually includes a summarised version of financial statements (SEC, 2021), diverting attention from certain issues to other areas where the organisation is perceived more favourably is an legitimising strategy worth noting because of the effect the crisis had on their market value. This is closely aligned with the strategy of manipulating the public perception by diverting attention from certain issues to other areas where the organisation is perceived more favourably. Because of this, this category also effectively connects with the strategy of informing the public about changes in the organisation's achievements and activities by providing clear updates on financial performance and outlook.

Additionally, the category aligns with the legitimacy strategy of "trying to change external expectations of the organisation". By showing optimism about future performance, United Airlines might aim at rebuilding trust among stakeholders. Which also aligns with the strategy of trying to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour, as their future accomplishments are not yet known. This category also connects with the reminder strategy from SCCT by reminding stakeholders of United Airlines' operational strengths and achievements, thereby maintaining or enhancing the organisation's image.

Category: Operational Performance

This category includes statements about United Airlines operational performance, highlighting their accomplishments. This includes the extent of their route and fleet, their

environmental engagement and expansion of services. It does not include financial aspects of the organisation. This is seen with statements like: “*Launched United Jetstream*”.

By highlighting positive accomplishments, United Airlines aims to remind stakeholders of their achievements, which aligns with the reminder strategy from SCCT. As it seeks to shape external perceptions by strategically framing the narrative around the organisation's operational performance, United Airlines seeks to alter or manage external expectations of the organisation, presenting itself in a favourable light.

This category also aligns with the Legitimacy Theory's strategy of "Try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour", by focusing on showcasing strengths and achievements. Which is also closely connected to the legitimacy strategy of manipulating the public perception by diverting attention from certain issues to other areas where the organisation is perceived more favourably.

By providing detailed updates on initiatives such as launching new online portals, this category also aligns with the strategy of informing the public about changes in the organisation's achievements and activities by providing clear and transparent updates on operational development.

5.1.5 Theme 5: Putting the Lid On

Category: Minimisation

This category includes statements by United Airlines where they are making efforts to evade responsibility by diminishing the gravity of the situation. This is found in statements such as: “*I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers.*”

This category highly aligns with the excuse strategy from SCCT. This strategy seeks to distance the organisation from wrongdoing by portraying the incident as an unfortunate event that is outside of United Airlines control rather than an avoidable error, which characterises the excuse strategy.

This category also aligns with the category “try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour” from the Legitimacy Theory. By

statements trying to manipulate stakeholders' perceptions of the situation, United Airlines tries to maintain a favourable image despite the real issues remaining unaddressed and managing the narrative surrounding the incident.

Category: Blame

This category includes statements by United Airlines where they are trying to avoid responsibility by avoiding blame from the organisation. This is found with statements like: *"United pass riders who were not in compliance with our dress code policy"*.

This category aligns with the scapegoat strategy from SCCT, which Coombs (2007) explains as when an organisation blames a person or a group outside of the organisation as the cause for the crisis, as a means of deflecting accountability for the crisis. By employing this strategy, United Airlines attempts to shift the focus away from internal shortcomings or mistakes by framing external factors as the cause of the incident.

This also aligns with the strategy of "try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour", from Legitimacy Theory. Stating that the crisis occurred because of a group outside of the organisation that did not behave in accordance with the organisation's policy is a strategy of shifting blame.

5.1.6 Theme 6: Strengthening Stakeholder Relations

Category: Praising Stakeholders

This category centres on expressions of gratitude or appreciation towards stakeholders during the crisis. This involves acknowledging efforts, feedback, or assistance received from various individuals or groups. This is found with statements like: *"We appreciate your honest feedback."*

This category aligns with the ingratiation strategy from SCCT, which Coombs (2007) explains as when an organisation is praising their stakeholders. By publicly stating that the organisation appreciates stakeholders' feedback, United Airlines seeks to cultivate a positive relationship with the public and enhance its reputation.

This can be connected to the strategy “try to change external expectations of the organisation”, from the Legitimacy Theory. By expressing gratitude towards stakeholders, the organisation seeks to influence external expectations regarding its responsiveness and relationship with stakeholders.

This category can also be connected to the legitimising strategy “try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour." By expressing gratitude towards stakeholders, the organisation seeks to influence the public perception positively without necessarily altering its actions or behaviours.

5.6 Categories Found in Data

The categories that have been identified in each empirical data is shown below in Table 4.

Table 4

Category	Twitter Statement 1 Leggings-Gate	Twitter Statement 2 Leggings-Gate	Twitter Statement 1 Dr. David Dao	Twitter Statement 2 Dr. David Dao	8-K Report Dr. David Dao
Apology			✓	✓	
Acknowledgement	✓			✓	✓
Commitment to Improvement					✓
Action			✓	✓	
Customer Experience Improvement					✓
Trust Building				✓	
Resolution			✓		
Financial Performance					✓
Operational Performance					✓
Minimisation	✓		✓		

Blame		✓			
Praising Stakeholders	✓				

5.7 Strategies Found in Data

Table 5 is illustrating the strategies that have been used in each empirical data. For a strategy to be considered properly applied, one or more categories must be utilised to meet the criteria of a specific strategy. Therefore, the presence of a category related to a particular strategy does not necessarily imply that all requirements for that strategy have been met.

Table 5

Strategy	Twitter Statement 1 Leggings-Gate	Twitter Statement 2 Leggings-Gate	Twitter Statement 1 Dr. David Dao	Twitter Statement 2 Dr. David Dao	8-K Report Dr. David Dao
Excuse strategy (SCCT)	✓		✓		
Apology strategy (SCCT)				✓	
Reminder strategy (SCCT)					✓
Scapegoat strategy (SCCT)		✓			
Ingratiation strategy (SCCT)	✓				
Try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour (Legitimacy Theory)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Inform the public about changes in the organisation's achievements and activities (Legitimacy Theory)			✓	✓	✓
Manipulate the public perception by diverting attention from certain issues to other areas where the organisation is perceived more favourably (Legitimacy Theory)					✓
Try to change external expectations of the organisation (Legitimacy Theory)	✓	✓	✓	✓	

5.8 United Airlines' Crisis Response

In this part of the analysis United Airlines crisis responses during the two crises will be analysed and compared.

5.8.1 Leggings-Gate Crisis

In accordance with SCCT, this crisis is defined as a preventable crisis, which means that United Airlines is perceived as having a high level of responsibility (Coombs, 2007). Something United Airlines did not deny, but rather stood behind as they claimed responsibility for the incident while denying any wrongdoing. In accordance with the Legitimacy Theory, this incident is far from actions that can be perceived as desirable, proper, or appropriate (Suchamn, 1995). United Airlines used their social media platform to inform the public about the situation on the same day of the incident. A strategy supported by Seeger (2006) who believes it is essential for the organisation to inform stakeholders in a timely manner. However, an organisation also needs to use the right kind of communication

(Larsson, 2014) as the biggest difficulty is not the crisis, but how United Airlines chooses to respond to it (Taylor & Perry, 2005).

5.8.2 Categories and Strategies Used: Leggings-Gate

The Twitter statements employed very different categories. The first Twitter statement used the categories; Acknowledgement, Minimization and Praising Stakeholders. The category of Acknowledgement is typically well-received among stakeholders in the response to a crisis, as it demonstrates some form of responsibility for the situation that unfolded. Praising Stakeholders is another category that often leads to a more positive response, as the organisation tries to cultivate a better relationship between them and stakeholders. The category of Minimization is a typically not well-received tactic since the organisation in some way tries to avoid responsibility. Even though the statement employed two categories that often leads to a positive response, the category of Minimisation might have led to these two categories having less of a positive effect. This might also have led to that the use of Acknowledgement seemed insincere, possibly leading to the necessity for a second response to the crisis.

The second statement however, only used one category which was Blame. This category is often not well-received since the organisation tries to avoid responsibility by shifting blame to someone outside of the organisation, in this case to the girls who were barred from boarding. Since the categories in the first statement did not result in a great response, United Airlines might therefore have decided to try something else: the tactic of blaming someone outside of the organisation. Even though stakeholders are of the understanding that the organisation bears full responsibility for the event. A strategy that did not land very well with the public and did not calm the crisis. Negative responses to statements during a crisis may therefore be influenced if the tactics used fall within categories that are generally poorly received by stakeholders. This could occur both when only less favourable categories are utilised or when they are combined with more positively perceived categories.

Both statements also employed different crisis strategies from SCCT. Under 5.7, it is outlined that the first Twitter statement used the strategies excuse and ingratiation while the second Twitter statement solely used the scapegoat strategy. By using the excuse strategy, United Airlines were trying to downplay the severity of the situation. This was used in combination

with the ingratiation strategy, which might help make stakeholder perceive the statement more favourable but might also be perceived as insincere. The second Twitter statement however, that used the scapegoat strategy is an often not well-received strategy as it is a strategy used to shifting blame. By employing this strategy, United Airlines tried to avoid taking any responsibility for the incident by blaming the girls for the situation that occurred.

Both Twitter statements used the same legitimising strategies; “try to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour” and “try to change external expectations of the organisation”. These strategies are due to the avoidant nature of the statements, as United Airlines tried evading responsibility. Trying to change the external expectations is a strategy used as the organisation wants to make the incident seem less severe than what it was. By thanking stakeholders, United Airlines made further efforts to build a relationship with stakeholders and the public, trying to make the perception of the organisation more positive. By not taking accountability and recognising the shortcomings of the organisation in the first Twitter statement, the strategy of trying to change the public's perception of the organisation without changing the actual behaviour was employed. This strategy is evident in the second statement as United Airlines tried, by blaming outside individuals for the crisis, that the public would resonate with the organisation and shift their perception of the situation. By making the public agree with the airline's actions, United Airlines would therefore be able to not have to change their behaviour while having the support of stakeholders.

5.8.3 Dr. David Dao Crisis

Based on the theories it is clear why the incident with Dao resulted in considerable damage, as there are both situational and historical factors that play a part. United Airlines were aware of the existing criticism regarding their treatment of customers, yet this crisis is identified as a preventable crisis. As mentioned, a preventable crisis results in a higher level of responsibility for the organisation, which means it is crucial for them to express accountability in their communication with stakeholders (Dietz & Lockey, 2014). In chapter 3.1.1, the direct link between trust building and expressing accountability is highlighted, especially if a high number of stakeholders blames the organisation (Coombs, 2015).

Since the incident caused harm to an individual it can be argued that they suffered “a crisis of legitimacy” (Massey, 2001b). In the face of a crisis involving mistreatment of customers, highlighting the organisation's prioritisation of customer welfare has added significance when formulating a statement. As the mistreatment of customers can severely damage an organisation's reputation and damage trust among stakeholders, it becomes crucial for the organisation to demonstrate its commitment to rectifying the situation and prioritising the welfare of its customers. This signals to stakeholders that addressing their concerns and improving their experiences remains prioritised.

In both of the Twitter statements Munoz expressed sorrow about the incident and issued some form of apology. In contrast, it is worth noting that there is no apology stated in the 8-K report, resulting in an inconsistent crisis response. Arguably, it could be because the apology is directed at customers and potential customers who might not feel safe flying with them anymore, rather than investors and potential investors. In chapter 3.2 an inconsistent crisis response suggests harm to an organisation's reputation and legitimacy. As presented in chapter 5.1, different strategies were applied to different media. The absence of an apology in the 8-K report indicates a lack of guilt towards their investors. Even though they expressed accountability, their account of the incident lacks in regards to the rebuild strategy. As their financial report is mostly aimed at their investors, it speaks to an inconsistency in accounts depending on the stakeholders. As explained in chapter 1.2, United Airlines suffered a great financial loss in relation to the incident, which consequently affects investors. Still, United Airlines made the choice to not include an apology in the 8-K report.

In chapter 2.5, the increase of transparency in organisational communication, especially financial communication, suggests a change in value of organisations. In the 8-K report, it's worth noting that the first voluntary information displayed is regarding the incident. The choice of placement represents the aim of disclosing information and exhibiting transparency. This makes it apparent that United Airlines knows and believes it is important to portray themselves as a company that values transparency. Furthermore, in chapter 3.2.2, it is suggested that public disclosure of information in organisations financial reporting could be a way of implementing legitimising strategies (Deegan, 2002).

Oscar Munoz made the decision to communicate on United Airlines behalf on his social media account on Twitter the following day of the incident. The choice may be viewed as a logical choice, since the incident had already sparked an outrage on Twitter. Social media is also viewed as a tool to communicate and create dialog with their audience (Cheng, 2016), which could be the reason behind the choice of media. This proved to be a miscalculated decision as his lack of acknowledgement added fuel to the fire. The lack of control the company had of the spread of the message and the videos regarding the Dr. David Dao incident might be a social media consequence United Airlines did not take into consideration. Most significantly, United Airlines might have intended their statements to their American stakeholders. As mentioned, social media has enabled a quick spread of information which means that people can access messages not intended for them (Austin & Jin, 2018). This can be viewed as quite naive, as United Airlines probably did not expect the added backlash stemming from the perception of racial motivation.

5.8.4 Categories and Strategies Used: Dr. David Dao

As seen under 5.6, both the first and second Twitter statements utilised similar categories, such as apology and resolution. These categories are typically well-received by stakeholders as they demonstrate accountability and a commitment to address the situation.

There are notable differences between the two statements concerning the additional categories used. The first statement included the category of Minimisation alongside Apology and Resolution, which might have led to that the statements effectiveness in fostering positive reactions may have been reduced. Minimisation tactics, such as downplaying the severity of the incident or deflecting blame, have the potential to undermine stakeholder trust and intensify negative perceptions. The presence of the minimisation category might therefore have weakened the use of the apology and resolution category, leading to a less positive response by stakeholders.

In contrast, the second statement incorporated additional categories like acknowledgment and trust-building, further bolstering the efficacy in addressing stakeholder concerns. By combining well-received categories such as apology, resolution, acknowledgment, and trust-building, the second statement likely resonated more positively with stakeholders. The exclusion of the minimization category contributed to its effectiveness by avoiding elements

that could potentially undermine the sincerity of the apology or the organisation's commitment to addressing the issue.

According to the categories, there are therefore two different factors that might explain the difference in how the statements got perceived. It is either (1) the amount of often well-received categories being used that results in a statement being well received or (2) it is the exclusion of often not well-received categories, even if they are used in combination with the more well-received ones. The combination of these might result in the best outcome. The difference in stakeholder perception between the two statements can therefore be connected to the combination of well-received categories and the exclusion of categories that may cause criticism.

In chapter 5.7, it is outlined that the strategy connected to the first Twitter statement from SCCT is the excuse strategy, while the second Twitter statement used the apology strategy. With the first Twitter statement only using the excuse strategy, United Airlines were downplaying the severity of the incident or deflecting blame. This may be perceived as evasive or insincere by stakeholders, leading to a less positive response. In contrast, the second Twitter statement was taking full responsibility for the incident and expressing remorse. An approach more likely to resonate positively with stakeholders as it demonstrates accountability and a commitment to address the issue.

When looking at which strategies from the Legitimacy Theories that have been used in the Twitter statements, the same ones have been identified. Therefore, one can question the amount of impact these strategies have had on the response of stakeholders. There is a possibility that the use and different combinations of these strategies, just like the strategies from SCCT, have a big impact on stakeholder response. Since the same strategies are used, the deciding factor in the response of the different Twitter statements might therefore have been the different SCCT strategies that have been used.

The 8-K report has, compared to the Twitter statements, used very different categories. The categories used in the report are: Acknowledgement, Commitment to Improvement, Customer Experience Improvement, Financial Performance and Operational Performance. This shows a big difference in focus compared to the Twitter statements. On Twitter, United Airlines focused on addressing the incident by using different strategies in respective

statements. The 8-K report instead takes an approach much more focused on the organisation's performance and development. While the categories Acknowledgement and Commitment to Improvement shows that the organisation takes responsibility for the incident and shows that there is a need for improvement, the remaining categories only focus on performance and achievements. This difference in focus might be because the 8-K report targets investors and other financial stakeholders, aiming to show the company's financial stability and operational efficiency to maintain long-term confidence. On the other hand, Twitter statements target a wider audience, like customers and the general public, focusing more on addressing immediate concerns and rebuilding trust after the crisis. The difference in the categories used is reflected in the difference in the strategies employed. While the Twitter statements included the excuse strategy respectively the apology strategy, the 8-K report utilised the reminder strategy which is focused on reminding stakeholders about the organisations past positive accomplishments. When comparing the strategies from Legitimacy Theory used in the Twitter statements compared to the 8-K result, there is also a difference. Both Twitter statements used three of the four legitimacy strategies while the 8-K report utilised all four, by adding the strategy “manipulate the public perception by diverting attention from certain issues to other areas where the organisation is perceived more favourably.” Which is connected to the categories and SCCT strategy that have been utilised in the report.

5.8.5 Comparing Strategies Used in the Case Studies

There is a big difference in the choice of strategies used during the two crises. While the first statement during both crises employed the excuse strategy, the statement during Leggings-Gate also used the ingratiation strategy. As the first post might not have gotten the reception United Airlines probably were aiming for, they might have thought that it would be in their favour to change how the public would view the crisis by blaming the girls instead, as they did not follow their policy. The second statement could therefore be used as a way of portraying their actions as less inappropriate in order to convince the public to not judge so harshly (Allen & Caillouet, 1994).

In the second Twitter statement during the Dr. David Dao incident, United Airlines employed the strategy of apology from SCCT. A change in tactic from the first crisis, as United Airlines went from thanking stakeholders for feedback and stating that they acknowledge the severity

of the situation to avoid all responsibility of the crises and redirect all of the blame to the girls. In comparison, United Airlines went from trying to evade responsibility in the first Twitter statement during the Dr. David Dao incident to apologising. This might be due to Leggings-Gate being an intensifying factor for the Dr. David Dao crisis, as well as the internal memo being leaked, as no such events occurred during the first crisis. United Airlines might therefore have had to use a strategy where they took responsibility, as their reputation had just been tarnished. Making the perception of stakeholders during the second crisis even worse. Other factors contributing to this change of strategy might be due to the fact that none of the girls from the Legging-Gate incident were getting physically harmed while Dr. David Dao suffered several injuries.

Furthermore, there is one difference when it comes to the legitimising strategies utilised. The only difference is regarding the strategy of informing the public about changes in the organisation's activities and achievements. While both Twitter statements during the Dr. David Dao incident used this strategy, none of the Twitter statements during the Leggings-Gate situation applied this strategy. This might be connected to both of the statements not acknowledging the severity of the situation and trying to deflect blame, thus not making any change in the organisation. While during the Dr. David Dao crisis, United Airlines took more responsibility in both statements compared to during Leggings-Gate. Showcasing to stakeholders that they try to make a change by outlining specific actions.

Although some strategies differ depending on the medium, some overlap. However, the overlap is only in regards to the strategies presented in the Legitimacy Theory. The reason behind this seems to be that the Legitimacy Theory is complemented by SCCT strategies, in order to directly respond to the crisis more so than rebuild trust. Regarding the mediums, it seems as though each medium employed one strategy from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) each. The Twitter statements addressed the crisis, strategically aiming to shape public perception. In contrast, the 8-K report opted for a strategy geared towards influencing investors' perceptions, with a focus on the operational aspects of the organisation. Additionally, United Airlines employed legitimacy strategies in both mediums, although with differences in usage. While all but one legitimacy strategy were evident in the Twitter posts, the 8-K report used all four. The three strategies used by all of the statements included trying to shape the stakeholder perception of the crisis or the organisation. It also included efforts made by the organisation to improve the organisation in

connection to the crisis. The fourth strategy used in the 8-K report had a focus on other aspects of the organisation that did not address the crisis. The conclusion is therefore that while both theories are employed, strategies with different focus have been employed in the different mediums. The Twitter statements focus more on addressing the crisis, trying to shape the public's perception. The 8-K report instead focuses more on other aspects of the organisation, trying to shape the perception of investors and other stakeholders.

From the analysis it is clear that some of the strategies derived from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory were not used by United Airlines in any way (denial strategy, attack the accuser, justification strategy, compensation strategy, victimage strategy), while all of the strategies presented in the Legitimacy Theory were integrated in either their social media statements, or in the financial report, or both.

6. Discussion

This chapter discusses and interprets the information stemming from the conducted analysis, as well as providing answers for the research questions.

The Legitimacy Theory clearly emphasises the organisational need for legitimacy in order for the organisation to continue existing. United Airlines current strong market position implies that they have been able to navigate their challenges.

In the initial part of the analysis it was clear that United Airlines communication strategies substantially differ depending on the medium. The answer to the second research question in this paper seems to be that the financial report consists more of strategies focused on manipulating public perception and reminding the public about past achievements. While the social media statements consisted more of strategies focused on apologising and excusing their actions. In the final part of the analysis the sampled data was compared between the two cases, in regards to the theories. Based on this the answer to the first research question seems to be that the strategies used in Leggings-Gate focused on evading responsibility, while the strategies used during the Dr. David Dao incident focused more on repairing stakeholders' perception of the organisation. The largest difference in the events is the apparent difference in harm to the customer. However, there are differences in external and internal factors that could give rise to the public's perception as well as United Airlines strategies. As the two crises occurred in close proximity to each other, it served as an intensifying factor as the relationship with stakeholders was already damaged. It could mean that United Airlines crisis history played a large part for the negative publicity, and failed to anticipate how past crises can affect the perception of a future or current crisis.

United Airlines is under pressure from a large diversity of stakeholders. During this time, their market position was to some degree dependent on China. Some stakeholders viewed the Dr. David Dao incident as being racially motivated. From a social constructionist perspective, the perception of the public creates a perceived reality. This means that it does not matter if United Airlines actions were racially motivated or not, as long as their stakeholders believe it was, it is treated as such (Cho, 2021). These factors could explain the increase of negative responses, as well as the change in communicative strategy from United Airlines. Even

though United Airlines seem to have a bad reputation among their customers, their investors might not have been affected by the damaged reputation until the Dr. David Dao incident. This also explains why United Airlines did not address Leggings-Gate in any financial communication. The economical aspect of the incident might have prompted United Airlines to address the situation in their 8-K report. To assume that investors want United Airlines to adhere to the social norms of the society might be too simple, since it seems as their economical connection reaches far across the globe.

United Airlines' recent Twitter statements posted on 26th of March and 10th of April, reveal a disconnect between their and the public perception, resulting in counterproductive statements. This oversight underscores the importance of legitimacy in crisis management, as public support is crucial (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). United Airlines crisis management is shown to lack in regards to identifying their own vulnerabilities and to view crisis communication as an interactive dialogue (Banks, 2007), which could explain the inconsistency in their communicative efforts. This can be viewed as a failed approach to social media, as its main usage is to act as a tool in order to create dialog (Austin & Jin, 2018). While their initial statement on 26th of March expressed gratitude for feedback, subsequent statements lacked acknowledgment of stakeholder concerns. As the criticism was largely published on Twitter, it is logical for them to address the situation there, but their choice of Twitter as a communication medium may have limited their ability to effectively address the situation due to space constraints (Aggergaard, 2015). Making it harder for United Airlines to inform customers about the situation and its potential impact (Seeger, 2006). Instead, United Airlines decided to only respond directly to the criticism.

While SCCT strategies are used in crisis response, not all must directly address the crisis to be considered utilised. For example, the reminder strategy emphasises past achievements. SCCT uses specific criteria for strategy implementation, whereas Legitimacy Theory strategies offer more flexibility. In this study, Legitimacy Theory strategies identified in empirical data are connected to the crisis and theoretical framework due to the study's abductive nature. This open interpretation can be seen in the comparison of categories and strategies used. Although the 8-K report shares only one category with one Twitter statement, all four legitimising strategies are applied, with three out of four used in both statements. Some categories are noted to connect with multiple legitimising theories based on United Airlines' subsequent actions. This broad framework complicates interpreting the strategies'

impact on stakeholder response during a crisis, as well as the long-term effects of Legitimacy Theory strategies on stakeholder perception. While SCCT strategies can affect immediate stakeholder responses, legitimising strategies may lay groundwork for long-term trust rebuilding. Together, these strategies may lead to more thorough improvements in stakeholder perceptions of the organisation.

As previously stated, Americans have a complicated relationship with airline companies but still travel with them because of the indispensable utility (Hearit, 2021). Even though United Airlines have been able to navigate their challenges since they still have a strong market value, it could be argued that it is because of the service they provide, not because of their communicative efforts.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter the key findings and theoretical contributions from this thesis will be presented.

Based on the analysis we can conclude that external and internal factors influenced the perception of the crises as well as United Airlines' strategies. The perception of racial motivation in regards to the Dr. David Dao, highlights the importance of stakeholders' perceived reality when shaping a response. This further illuminates the importance of identifying vulnerabilities and utilising social media as a tool for dialogue. This could have helped them adjust their crisis communication in accordance with the public's need and facilitate meaningful engagement with their stakeholders. This discrepancy in the public perception and United Airlines own initial account of the events, highlights the importance of understanding and acknowledging the public sentiment in communication.

We can conclude that United Airlines' crisis history most likely played a part in the amount of negative consequences, as it intensified the crisis. This can also be attributed to the negative reaction to some of the strategies utilised, such as the excuse strategy, as the public might have a higher demand for responsibility in this instance. Which highlights the effectiveness of accountability in regards to crisis communication.

From the analysis, it remains unclear how big of an impact the legitimising strategies have on the direct perception of stakeholders when used in a crisis response. Although, it seems that the strategies from the two theories complement each other as they might differ in focus. The strategies from SCCT deal with the immediate crisis, as they are designed to be used in response to a crisis, which leads to a direct effect in the response from stakeholders. The Legitimacy Theory focuses on long-term legitimacy building. It seems as though a combination of SCCT strategies and Legitimacy Theory results in a comprehensive and lasting improvement in regards to legitimacy.

8. Future Research

In this chapter suggestions for future research based on the findings in this thesis is presented.

The analysis of the strategic efforts of maintaining and rebuilding legitimacy during a crisis, could benefit from including more mediums such as internal documents and interviews with employees in order to add another perspective of organisational legitimacy.

Future research could continue with theoretical refinement between the two theories. Alternative response strategies need to be explored, as well as further situational factors (Bundy et al., 2017).

It remains unclear how big of an impact the strategies from the Legitimacy Theory have on the immediate stakeholder response during a crisis. Further research could focus on the impact of these strategies by analysing the response of different posts where there is a difference in the use of these strategies.

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Appendix A: Twitter Statements - Leggings-Gate

26th March - 2017 Crisis occurs

26th March - 2017 6.59 PM Statement released on Twitter

“We acknowledge the severity of the situation, and are looking into it. We appreciate your honest feedback.^FS”



26th March - 2017 8.25 PM Statement released on Twitter

“The passengers this morning were United pass riders who were not in compliance with our dress code policy for company benefit travel”.



Appendix B: Twitter Statements - Dr. David Dao

Twitter

9th of April - 2017 Crisis occurs

10th of April - 2017 First statement on Twitter from Munoz

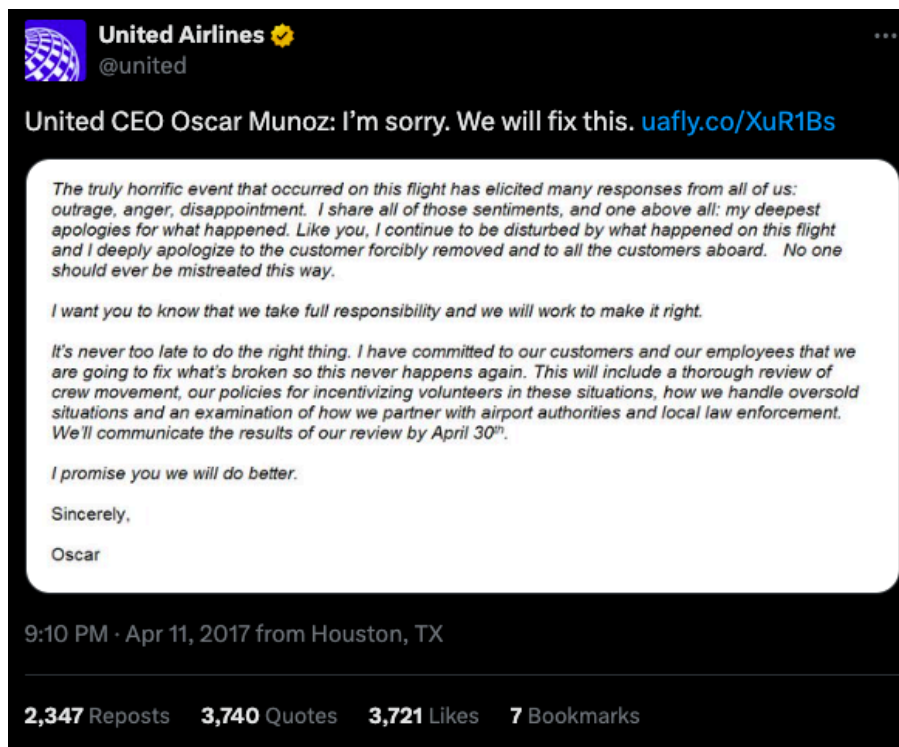
“This is an upsetting event to all of us here at united. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers. Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened. We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation.

-Oscar Munoz, CEO, United Airlines”

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

- Oscar Munoz, CEO, United Airlines

11th of April - 2017 Second statement on twitter from Munoz



“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 continue to communicate the results of our review by April 30th.

I promise you we will do better.

Sincerely,

Oscar”

Appendix C: 8-K Report - Dr. David Dao

8-K Report

17th of April - 2017 First quarter Report of United Airlines published

Page 1, part 1

“It is obvious from recent experiences that we need to do a much better job serving our customers. The incident that took place aboard Flight 3411 has been a humbling experience and I take full responsibility. This will prove to be a watershed moment for our company and we are more determined than ever to put our customers at the center of everything we do. We are dedicated to setting the standard for customer service among U.S airlines, as we elevate the experience our customers have with us from booking to baggage claim.”

Page 1, part 2

“For the first quarter of 2017, revenue was \$8.4 billion, an increase of 2.7 percent year-over-year. First-quarter 2017 consolidated passenger revenue per available seat mile (PRASM) was flat and consolidated yield increased 0.4 percent compared to the first quarter of 2016.”

Page 1, part 3

‘Scott Kirby, president of United Airlines, said “United is delivering on the commitments we made at investor day last year. We saw positive trends in the revenue environment in the quarter and are optimistic about the year ahead. Looking forward, we expect to see quarter consolidated PRASM to be up 1.0 to 3.0 percent. This would mark the first straight quarter of sequential improvement and the first quarter of positive unit revenue growth in two years”.’

Page 2, part 1

“First-Quarter Highlights

Customer Experience

- *Modernized airport screening experience with fully redesigned security checkpoint at Newark Liberty International Airport.*
- *Debuted new Terminal C North at Houston’s George Bush Intercontinental Airport - elevating the customer experience with roomier gate areas, the latest technology and chef-inspired dining choices.*

- *United named “Eco-Airline of the Year” from Air Transport World magazine for its leadership in environmental action.*
- *Launched United Jetstream, a new online portal for corporate and travel agency customers that simplifies the travel management process and gives customers an intuitive suite of self-service tools.*
- *Launched new Basic Economy fare for travel between Minneapolis/St. Paul and any of United’s seven U.S. hubs.”*

Page 3, Part 1

“Network and fleet

- *Began implementing plan to improve the company’s route network with more destinations, more flights and more convenient connections, with expectations to add service to 31 destinations across the U.S and Europe in 2017.*
- *Took delivery of six Boeing 777-300ER aircraft, two Boeing 787-9 aircraft and one used A319 aircraft in the quarter.*
- *Purchased 12 currently operated Boeing 737NG aircraft previously leased to the company.*
- *Entered into a new partnership with Air Wisconsin Airlines to operate 50 regional jets under the United Express brand.“*

Page 3, Part 2

“Operations and Employees

- *Achieved a record-setting 25 zero-cancellation days for the mainline operation in the quarter.*
- *Consolidated completion factor was 97.5 percent in the first quarter, 0.6 points higher than the 96.9 percent from first-quarter 2016. This represents over 2,500 fewer flight cancellations compared to the first quarter of 2016.*
- *Achieved best-ever consolidated on-time departure rate for both February and March and lowest-ever first-quarter mishandled bag rate in company history.*
- *Employees earned cash-incentive payments of approximately \$18 million for achieving operational performance goals in the quarter.”*

Page 3, Part 3

“About United

United Airlines and United Express operated approximately 4,500 flights a day to 337 airports across five continents. In 2016, United and United Express operated more than 1.6 million flights carrying more than 143 million customers. United is proud to have the world's most comprehensive route network, including U.S mainland hubs in Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York/Newark, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. United operated 743 mainline aircraft and the airline's United Express partners operate 478 regional aircraft. The airline is a founding member of Star Alliance, which provides service to 192 countries via 28 member airlines. For more information, visit united.com, follow @United on twitter or connect on Facebook. The common stock of United's parent, United Continental Holdings, Inc., is traded on the NYSE under the symbol "UAL".

Appendix D: Analytical Template

1. Restoring Confidence Among Stakeholders

1.1 Apology

1.1.1 Apologies

1.1.2 Customer concern and empathy

1.2 Acknowledgment

1.2.1 Acknowledgment of deficiency

1.2.2 Accountability and responsibility

1.2.3 Commitment to improvement

1.2.4 Organisational learning

1.3 Commitment to Improvement

1.3.1 Promise of Change:

1.3.2 Continuous Improvement

2. Initiatives to Enhance Credibility

2.1 Action

2.1.1 Collaborating with authorities

2.1.2 Internal review

2.1.3 Corrective actions

2.2 Customer Experience Improvement

2.2.1 Customer experience

2.2.2 Customer-centric approach

3. Establishing Faith Among Stakeholders

3.1 Trust Building

3.1.1 Transparency

3.1.2 Corporate values

3.2 Resolution

3.2.1 Direct communication

3.2.2 Resolution focus

4. Bolstering Esteem Among Stakeholders

4.1 Financial Performance

4.1.1 Financial outlook

4.1.2 Financial metrics

4.1.3 Revenue growth

4.2 Operational Performance

4.2.1 Operational scale

4.2.2 Route information

4.2.3 Fleet Information

4.2.4 Airport enhancements

4.2.5 Environmental incentives

4.2.6 Service offering

4.2.7 Partnerships

4.2.8 Employee incentives

5. Putting the Lid On

5.1 Minimisation

5.1.1 Downplaying impact

5.1.2 Minimising responsibility

5.1.3 Disclaiming intent to harm

5.2 Blame

5.2.1 Redirecting blame

6. Strengthening Stakeholder Relations

6.1 Praising Stakeholders

6.1.1 Recognition of Input