



## **Challenges for brand value from social media in the airline industry**

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<p><b>Abstract:</b>  With onset of the digital age, the world has become increasingly influenced by instant global communications. There has been a transformation to the way companies and customers communicate with each other in social media: use of modern communication technologies becomes immense. Social media has become a 'battleground' where public can get information and share own experience. Considering that International Air Transport Association forecasts airline passenger numbers to double to 8.2 million by 2037, review and study of user generated content and electronic word of mouth about customer experience and decision journey for one of the world's prominent airlines, is taken as an aim of the research. Onwards, any airline can evaluate challenges brought by customers and estimate its opportunities and integrity in terms of proper social media marketing activities and communication that provide opportunities for building and reinforcing its brand identity. The thesis is dedicated to analyzing modern communication technologies for engagement initiatives with a customer in social media within the airline business, examining effect of positive and negative electronic word of mouth and its challenges for brand value. The goal would be to demonstrate for airline business that engagement initiative with customers in social media is vital: it lets co-produce marketing content for reinforcement and betterment of the airline brand. Furthermore, the objective would be to contribute to knowledge on how through the correct use and analysis of user generated content in popular social media platforms an airline can improve conversations with travelers, customers and potential customers in social media, thereby increasing customer service quality, brand awareness, have new customers acquisition through the medium of social media tools and, subsequently, tend to increase sales and maximize revenue.</p>	
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

It has become increasingly significant for companies to give the public a strong impression about who they are and to create a solid brand positioning (or reputation). Nowadays, in the era of digital age, impression creation and brand positioning happen not only through customer management, delivery of promotional and marketing events and initiatives, competitive combination of quality products and services, technology driven innovations, but also through the right communication and reinforcement of brand identity via popular social media platforms. In the era of modern marketing environment and social media, company blogs and official pages in social networks have become standard elements of integrated communication. These activities are related to **commercial electronic word of mouth** (eWOM) and are called ‘social media marketing activities’ (hereafter SMMAs). Social media platforms and search engines by their very nature encourage users to be actively engaged in organizing and finding content through such activities as comments, hashtags, content reposting, tagging, embedding, which, in turn, automatically create an ever-growing link structure on the Internet (Gretzel 2006 pp. 9–11).

Nonetheless, in the digital age, development of brand positioning and image has the nature and formation of different dimensions. Businesses of all sizes and scales started to heavily rely on social media and perform activities to interact and engage with their customers in order to create brand awareness, build a strong brand identity, and, ultimately, increase sales. While businesses do it, at the same time, recent development of technologies for electronic communications has led to the rise and influence of **personal electronic word of mouth** which can lead to both: ‘skyrocketing’ of a brand (service or product) recognition, and, ultimately, sales, as well as grave threat to the brand and its reputation.

According to Litvin S. W. et al. (2008 p. 458), eWOM has an anonymous, ephemeral nature, eWOM diffuses rapidly, and is available anytime and anywhere. eWOM has let consumers be actively involved in interaction, opinions and experience sharing, as well as content sharing, joint working, etc. The platforms include social networks (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn), Blogs and Microblogs (e.g. Twitter, Google Buzz, Tumblr), Internet Forums and Discussions (Message) Boards (e.g. Google Groups, Reddit, Quora), Video and Photo Sharing (e.g. YouTube, Flickr). People are also involved in finding reviews and feedback in search engines (e.g. Amazon, Glassdoor), etc.

Thus, the Internet has let consumers (customers or users) use social media as a huge source of user-generated content (UGC) (also known as customer-generated content (CGC) or user-created content (UCC)). This big ‘space’ of social media is constructed by consumers themselves.

Back in 1967, Arndt J. (p. 291) stated that word of advertising has been thought to be an “almost mysterious force”, that exposures as a factor intervening purchase. Marketers (e. g. Arndt, J. 1967; Henning-Thurau et al. 2015) indicate that consumers, perceiving WOM, get certain perceptions about products; it is noted that negative WOM may have stronger influence on product/service evaluation and possibility of purchase decision compared to positive WOM. Also, such marketing researches as Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) note that effect of eWOM is somehow similar to that of traditional WOM.

## **1.2 Background and need**

In the pre-digital age, there were not many possibilities for consumers to bundle a protest demonstrating dissatisfaction with the brand. It was possible only through face-to-face word of mouth, talking over phone or writing letters and email back and forth; and talking to very limited audience like friends and colleagues. Before the Internet existed, social media conversations, firestorms and brand crisis were traditionally spread mostly by journalists’ contributions in analog mass media, such as newspapers and magazines, television and radio, rarely through public demonstrations and protest marches.

This brings me to the conclusion that a certain digital form of brand crisis is in the state of development, and it brings vital importance for discussion and analysis.

The emerged importance of social media marketing activities is visible in various fields, including the airline industry. According to Eun-Ju Seo & Jin-Woo Park (2018 p. 36), passengers' use of airline social media is expected to continuously increase, so the proportion and importance of social media in the marketing activities within the airline business are expected to be substantially upscaled in the future. Recent researches in the airline business industry demonstrate influence of both positive and negative WOM on products offered by airlines. For instance, Nikookar G. et al. (2015) investigated influential factors on WOM in a case study of one of the airline companies from Iran where findings showed that WOM influences personal attitude towards company and referral intention, further, that satisfaction, loyalty, perceived value, service quality, and trust have a significant impact on WOM. Kim Y.-S. and Park J. W. (2017) analyzed the impact of online WOM for airlines on the behavioral intention of airline customers through information acceptance and satisfaction where results indicated that online WOM has indirect effects on passengers' behavior intention by the medium of satisfaction, pointing out that online WOM about airlines could contribute to increasing the satisfaction with airlines, which in turn increases the intention to use and recommend those; Berger, J. & Milkman, K. L. (2012) used psychological approach and examined diffusion of content, reasons for having some content more viral than other with negative customer service experience with United Airlines as an experiment story where a musician, flying with the Airline, witnessed the Airline employees throwing his guitar into the airplane cargo which ended up damaged without receiving any compensation. Randomly assigned participants read either a high- or low-anger version of the story. The two versions were used to ensure they evoked different amounts of anger. The results confirmed Berger, J. & Milkman's K. L prediction that high-arousal negative (anger or anxiety) emotions content was more viral as participants reported that they would be "more likely to share the customer service experience when it induced more anger", and this was driven by the arousal it evoked.

### **1.3. Statement of the problem**

Due to the nature of eWOM, social media is developing into a life of its own. Some suggest that “social buzz” has a positive impact. It generates sales increase and improves efficiency of communication campaigns. However, there are contributors and authors with the opposite point of view; they sense that social media may affect reputation through ‘firestorms’ with high volume of social media messages (eg. tweets, reposts, comments) (McKinsey & Company 2012), so this could be a grave threat for the brand and its reputation. A company may easily lose its reputation or brand image.

Considering the airline industry to be a service sector where growth of air transport market is rapid, understanding, predicting behavior of passengers and forecasting effects of online WOM is crucial as it provides opportunities for airlines for service improvement, growth of brand identity and profit creation.

Since word of mouth is acknowledged to be a social phenomenon, the circumstances in which it takes place, facts and the actors involved, everything affects the type and amount of WOM generated. The rapid growth in aviation traffic and tourism together with influence of unpacified social media, consumer generated content and electronic WOM, raises questions that are presented in the next subsection.

### **1.4. Research questions**

- 1) How does electronic WOM in social media challenge airlines’ brand identity and value? What impact does positive and negative electronic WOM activity have towards the brand?**



- 2) **How does electronic WOM in social media challenge Finnair's brand identity and value?**
- 3) **How can an airline, through the medium of social media tools and analysis of user generated content, improve conversation with travelers, acquire new customers, and thereby increase brand awareness, customer service quality, and maximize revenue?**

## **1.5. Significance to the field**

In this thesis, I will analyze modern communication technologies for engagement initiatives with a customer in social media within the airline industry. In general, using social media is far-sighted and vital, as it allows co-producing of marketing content for the betterment of the airline brand. I aim to contribute to knowledge on how airlines can reinforce their brand identity and protection through the right marketing strategies in managing online environment and, as a positive consequence, maximize revenue through the correct use and analysis of user generated content in popular social media platforms.

In particular, I will analyze user generated content by customers and outline the main strengths and weaknesses, potential threats and growth prospects and opportunities for the case airline Finnair within its social media marketing activities.

The research results suggest that the public mostly has a positive attitude and brand perception of the case company Finnair. However, this achievement can be enforced by an increasing amount of customer engagement through the company's social media channels and profiles. This can be done by reacting to inquiries, by asking for feedback on flight experience and through other two-way interaction. Thereby an airline can increase customer service quality, brand awareness, have new customers acquisition through the medium of social media tools and, as mentioned above, increase sales.

Due to the rapid growth of social media usage in everyday life among consumers and potential customers, and rapid spread of information through social media networks, access to such information for consumers has become a source for customer behavior influence towards brand image.

## **1.6. Research process and methodology**

The paper starts with a theoretical review of user generated content and word of mouth in social media, its roots and its major tendencies in the era of the digital age. It is followed by a presentation of the methodology: compilation of tools for measuring eWOM sentiment and study of challenges that are brought to the airline industry by user generated content through social media activities. The thesis continues with introducing the case company Finnair and an empirical analysis of its eWOM, i.e. in one of the most popular social media platforms - Twitter. The empirical research is done through analyzing posts and sentiment ‘shade’ evaluation. It is followed by conclusions and suggestions based on the results, specifically for Finnair. Finally, there is a discussion on general suggestions for airline industry on how to understand and predict behavior of eWOM of passengers and how, relying on social media and WOM, to implement and change marketing approach in order to create a positive brand awareness and, ultimately, increase sales. There are suggestions on how modern communication technologies can change a company’s behavior and provide a “wow” experience to the customer, how to turn an unsatisfied angry consumer into a happy and satisfied repeat customer and let him become a ‘brand ambassador’ willing to spread WOM: recommend and promote the brand both online and offline.

## **2. SOCIAL MEDIA**

### **2.1 Social media marketing activities & user generated content**

As presented in the Introduction section of this paper, the rise of the World Wide Web and phenomena called *social networking platforms*, in particular, have created a new

environment where consumer discussions and debates take place. Social media interaction is free and extremely effective, its opportunities include information seeking and problem solving. The environment of social networking has set new, digital forms of word of mouth. It has let various content, such as images, videos, opinions, comments and articles to spread across the globe and be real-time accessible to large number of persons: friends, colleagues, followers, etc.

Literature sources point out differences between social media interaction by users through the user generated content and social media marketing activities that are performed by the company. Literature sources also show differentiation for the types of WOM and understanding its preconditions and detrimental factors.

## **2.2 Word of Mouth**

Marketing research of WOM dates to the 1960s' (Arndt, J. 1967). In the early years, WOM has been defined as "informal communication between private parties concerning evaluations of goods and services" (Anderson 1998 p. 6). Later, in the era of digital age, WOM evolved into *electronic* word of mouth and has become a part of user generated content. Information started to be spread and diffused quickly and widely, thereby achieving mass reach from a few people at a time. Phelps, J. et al. (2005 p. 346) compare consumer-to-consumer interaction with a two-way street, where bad news travel just as fast, if not faster, than good news. Electronic WOM started to be considered as an influential marketing tool because consumers started to seek information on products and services, which was posted online by previous users before purchasing a product, in order to review information and, in some way, relieve anxiety towards the product or service (Bickart, B. & Schindler, R. M. 2001 pp. 31-40). In terms of SMMAAs, it can have significant impact on consumer behavior.

Nowadays electronic WOM is defined as a social media objective. Consumers have engagement through interaction, content sharing, joint works via different platforms: social networks, blogs, microblogs, Internet forums and discussion (message) boards, video and

photo sharing, review search engines, etc. Consumers communicate their opinions to other consumers.

Henning-Thurau et al. (2015 p. 14) noted systematic differences between traditional, face-to-face word of mouth and its digital forms. Among them are articulations on review/retail sites where consumers review or use electronic WOM are different from those on social media platforms (social media or microblogging word of mouth). Hansen, N. et al. (2018 p. 3) noted the speed of reach of message and the speed with which messages can spread. Digital (or electronic) WOM can reach an unlimited number of consumers. In traditional WOM the reach is limited to a small group of consumers where quite long time is required for information to spread. Digital messages can be shared and picked up immediately, particularly on social media platforms. Another defining characteristic of WOM is that it is considered credible due to the fact that the source has no commercial interest and that it is perceived as an independent source: it has personal influence made by opinion leaders (Arndt, J. 1967 pp. 291–295). Thus, these are the key defining characteristics of WOM.

Consumer-to-consumer interaction increases knowledge and awareness about products and services. Marketers encourage communication among consumers, thus affecting consumers' perceptions about products, including compelling triggers for purchase. From this perspective, WOM used by marketers becomes *word of mouth marketing* (WOMM). Marketers are integrating WOMM into their routine marketing communications plans. Trusov et al. (2009 p. 91) state that WOMM involves seeding products to targeted groups of consumers with a goal to encourage consumers spread positive WOM, which, in turn, increases brand awareness and sales. However, despite the aim of marketers, emotional aspect of WOM exists and can be either positive or negative and can be either posted/left on the company page in the social media or in private discussion boards, user web pages in social media.

## 2.3 The emotional aspect of WOM behavior

Satisfied and loyal consumers communicate their positive viewpoint towards the company or brand on both: social media applications created by the company (Facebook group or Twitter presence) and joint networks created by users themselves. Dissatisfied and annoyed consumers share their opinion and feedback, in this particular case, negative one. The examples below would best demonstrate both notes of attitude: positive and negative word of mouth marketing cases in the world of social media.

In 2005 journalist Jeff Jarvis blogged about his perceived low-quality service by Dell calling it “My Dell Hell” experience. His critical consumer opinion went viral: it “snowballed into a saga” in blogs and social media (The Guardian 2005). This case forced Dell to make the effort to listen to its customers: the company’s executives acknowledged need of enhancement in customer relationship management. Particularly, Michael Dell, the CEO of Dell Technologies has said that the company is “at the beginning of the turnaround” and would be making “fundamental changes” bringing in a \$150 million investment. The company’s response was driven to the new World of Social Media, and creation of the official corporate blog called *Direct2Dell* (Fung M. L. 2008).

Another case is an example of successful, positive word-of-mouth marketing. Starbucks is now a 1.4-billion-dollar company which avoided investing in various forms of marketing such as advertisements in magazines, billboards, newspapers and celebrity endorsements in favor of traditional, face-to-face word of mouth marketing. Bringing the best Italian coffee to the US, the company offered high quality beverages, instilled a sense of community in their cafes creating a ‘third home’ and offered an excellent customer service. Those satisfied customers who had a good experience told their friends, family and work colleagues: the brand quickly grew. This led to organic word of mouth marketing. Since entering the digital era, Starbucks prefers to be active online, extending their sense of community through social media channels via WOM rather than using celebrities participating in advertising campaigns or having large outdoor advertising eg. billboards (Social Marketing: Word of Mouth Case Studies from Superdry and Starbucks 2014).

## 2.4 Measuring Word of Mouth

According to Hoffman, D. L. & Fodor, M. (2010 p. 47), traditionally companies can either estimate word of mouth through surveys that measure the likelihood of recommendation or examine customer satisfaction, loyalty and the likelihood of purchase decision which are approximate estimates of WOM. Online WOM can be measured directly. However, due to the fact that word of mouth can occur either offline or online via private or group chat communication, direct measurement becomes less possible, so that more sophisticated methodologies are often required to measure it.

Sweeney J. C. et al. (2012 p. 251) suggest performing measurement and comparisons across positive and negative messages, as well as across giving and receiving messages.

Zhang, Y. et al. (2013 p. 2) suggest that while users generate content, they contribute to WOM. The research results show that, firstly, consumers embed or broadcast favorite brands in posting videos on YouTube, loading photos on Flickr and Instagram, sharing on Facebook or tweeting on Twitter, secondly, consumers are more likely to rebroadcast content that closely fits with their own interests, thirdly, consumers may also rebroadcast (eg. repost, retweet) a message, a photo or video to friends and followers.

These are ways of measuring WOM using embedded and rebroadcasted (shared) posts.

Table 1 below is adapted from Metrics for Social Media that was suggested by Hoffman, D. L. & Fodor, M. (2010 p. 44). It classifies social media according to its field of application, and its key performance objectives. Social media applications can fulfill objectives for sales, cost efficiencies, product development and market research, where the appropriate set of metrics depends on the objective. The table suggested by Hoffman, D. L. & Fodor, M. may be a starting point for marketers for measuring the effectiveness of social media efforts, and, as a consequence, it may provide an insight into measuring brand value. The authors use terms '*brand awareness*' and '*brand engagement*'.

In the social media environment brand awareness is measured by the number of times a person uses a brand name while searching or talking about the company, e.g.: having an average brand (company) mentioned every fifth or tenth second on Twitter brings a ‘skyrocket fame’ for a brand and a considerable increase in brand exposure. The following two can be good examples of brand awareness and engagement marketing campaigns that went viral in Video and Photosharing: #HonorYourDays campaign by Reebok where it was told that an average human lives 25,915 days in life and Reebok wants a human “to use those days to continuously honor and push his or her body to their physical limits”. Another example is GoPRO advertisement where a fireman saved a kitten: this was a contradistinction step done by GoPRO brand when usually their brand was associated with adventurous and extreme user-generated content (Kolowich., L. 2018).

There are various ways for enhancement of *brand engagement* through social media, and the results can be outstanding. As an example of success, marketers from Southwest Airlines constantly find new ways to make their brand relevant, engaging and positive in the social media. One example would be “Nuts About Southwest” blog with podcasts, videos and other social media tools where the blog engages customers on touchy subjects and employees share what it’s like ‘behind the scenes’ (Hoffman, D. L. & Fodor, M. 2010 p. 46).

<b>SOCIAL MEDIA APPLICATION</b>	<b>BRAND AWARENESS</b>	<b>BRAND ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>WORD OF MOUTH</b>
<b>Blogs</b> (e.g. LiveJournal, Blogger, WordPress)	number of unique visits number of return visits number of times bookmarked search ranking	number of members number of RSS feed subscribers number of comments amount of user-generated content average length of time on site number of responses to polls, contests, surveys	number of references to blog in other media (online/offline) number of reblogs number of times badge displayed on other sites number of “likes”
<b>Microblogging</b> (e.g., Twitter)	number of tweets about the brand valence of tweets +/- number of followers	number of followers number of @replies	number of retweets
<b>Forums and Discussion Boards</b> (e.g., Google Groups)	number of page views number of visits valence of posted content +/-	number of relevant topics/threads number of individual replies number of sign-ups	incoming links citations in other sites tagging in social bookmarking offline references to the forum or its members in private communities: number of pieces of content (photos, discussions, videos) number of “likes”
<b>Product Reviews</b> (e.g., Amazon)	number of reviews posted valence of reviews number and valence of other users’ responses to reviews (+/-) number of wish list adds number of times product included in users’ lists (i.e., Listmania! on Amazon.com)	length of reviews relevance of reviews valence of other users’ ratings of reviews (i.e., how many found particular review helpful) number of wish list adds overall number of reviewer rating average reviewer rating score	number of reviews posted valence of reviews number and valence of other users’ responses to reviews (+/-) number of references to reviews in other sites number of visits to review site page number of times product included in users’ lists (i.e., Listmania! on Amazon.com)



<b>SOCIAL MEDIA APPLICATION</b>	<b>BRAND AWARENESS</b>	<b>BRAND ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>WORD OF MOUTH</b>
<b>Social Networks</b> (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn)	number of members/fans number of application downloads and installations number of impressions number of bookmarks number of reviews/ratings and valence +/-	number of comments number of active users number of “likes” on friends’ feeds number of user-generated items (photos, threads, replies) usage metrics of applications/ widgets impressions-to-interactions ratio rate of activity (how often members personalize profiles, bios, links, etc.)	frequency of appearances in timeline of friends number of posts on wall number of reposts/shares number of responses to friend referral invites
<b>Video and Photosharing</b> (e.g., Instagram, Flickr, YouTube)	number of followers number of views of video/photo valence of video/photo ratings +/-	number of replies number of page views number of comments number of subscribers	number of embeddings number of incoming links number of times republished in other social media and offline number of “likes”

*Table 1. Adapted from Metrics for Social Media (Hoffman, D. L. & Fodor, M. 2010 p. 5)*

### **3. WORD OF MOUTH IN THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY**

#### **3.1 Airline industry overview**

The world of the airline industry the XXI century is characterized by improvements and changes. Furthermore, there are certain trends in airlines' business activities that are observed on the market. The trends include development of a market share and reduction of expenses for customers: setting up loyalty programs for frequent flyers, development of airline alliances and strategic partnerships, development of new technologies, such as new aircraft, reservation and ticketing systems, departure control systems, e-commerce tools, etc. Among other trends are the following success-oriented ones: focus on strategically important regional routes, innovative management and marketing, increased attention to customers' needs, customer-centric strategies and service, building positive company image and reputation and application of yield management. The latter includes pricing strategy, which is commonly utilized by airline business in order to generate maximum revenue from a perishable inventory (e.g. airline seats).

#### **3.2 Threats & drivers from social media for brand image & value**

With recent dynamics and growing demand for air travel, quick global changes in technologies and consumer behavior that impact distribution and accessibility of travel-related information, strong airline brand positioning has become increasingly important.

Strong brand positioning can increase customer trust in product or service. In addition, such factors as price, punctuality of flights, baggage handling, in-flight services and facilities are taken into consideration by a passenger when booking a flight, and, as stated by Campbell, B. & Vigar-Ellis, D. (2012), so may contribute to brand image.

The aviation industry has become more competitive than it has ever been. Airlines now operate in a fierce environment with a diverse global audience. Among the key drivers of change that IATA and airlines should be thinking about in terms of preparation for future opportunities and challenges over the next 20 years are: governmental, economic, demographic, technological and environmental ones that are shifting borders and sovereignty, strength and volatility of global economy, expansion of human potential, urbanization and growth of megacities. For instance, among demographic drivers are global population and middle-class growth fueled by Africa, Asia and Asia Pacific regions; among economic are: increasing market share of low-cost carriers, effects of oil price volatility, level of integration along air industry supply chain. Among technological drivers are: Internet of Things (IoT), alternative fuels and energy sources, new aircraft designs (*Future of the Airline Industry 2035*. 2018 pp. 5-6).

Aviation is rapidly growing and the International Air Transport Association (IATA) revealed that present trends in air transport suggest passenger numbers could double to 8.2 billion in 2037 (IATA 2018. *IATA Forecast Predicts 8.2 billion Air Travelers in 2037*).

On the one hand, social media is helping drive tourism through the power of image highlighting sightseeing attractions using social media platforms like Instagram (that counts more than 500 million active users) popularizing sites and destinations (Airbus 2018. *Airbus Global Market Forecast 2018-2037* p. 27). On the other hand, despite the fact that social media has fueled tourism, it has also become a sort of a battleground where travelers can get information and share positive and negative travel experience.

As noted previously, recent studies on SMMAAs show that there is a definite importance of a company's brand equity. A while ago, there was an incident with United Airlines where a passenger was forcibly removed from an airplane. The video rapidly went viral in social media, the company's stock price fell, and a boycott campaign threatened United Airlines' sales. Such incident demonstrates both the importance and potential threat of social media in the airline industry and the urgency of research of the effects of airlines SMMAAs (Stewart, J. B. 2017).

According to Deloitte's 2013 Global Executive Survey on Strategic Risk, it was discovered that reputation damage is the No. 1 risk concern and a key business challenge. The survey highlights that reputation problems trigger loss in revenue and brand value. It also highlights that customers have become the most important stakeholders for managing reputation risk as the world has become increasingly influenced by instant global communications and social networking. Managing customer expectations and perceptions has become of paramount importance for business executives around the world representing every major industry (Deloitte. Global Survey on Reputation Risk 2014 pp. 2-3).

Every corporation has a unique operational approach, characteristics and qualifications based upon its business model and brand reputation. Airline business models range from low cost to full-service carriers, networks and hybrid models which are heavily influenced by operations, sales and distribution, fare structure and partnerships, as well as such external factors like economic and political upswings and downturns. Inherently, within each nation, the airline transportation cluster of business has always been highly visible within its strategy and reputation based upon business model, communication with customers at all touch points. Most countries have one or two flag carriers as symbols of international presence, economic growth, and commercial success.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction: Social Media & User Generated Content in the Airline Industry**

The above discussion attests the importance of instant global communications, social networking, the rise and influence of personal electronic WOM and its effect on brand value and revenue. Airline industry as a sphere of business, has a high visibility, strong growth globally and further growth forecasts for the XXI century. These facts along with the theoretical background arise interest of mine for an in-depth study of one of the social media platforms and one of the world's prominent airlines.

## 4.2 Setting and the case company

I will use **Finnair**, the flag carrier and the largest airline of Finland, as a subject for analysis for this thesis. With its Helsinki hub ideally placed as a gateway between the Far East and Europe, Finnair's focus lies in transporting passengers and cargo between Europe and Asian megacities. The company is offering a unique Nordic experience for its customers and is ranked by Skytrax number eight among the Best Airlines in Europe 2018 (Skytrax. World Airline Awards 2018). All the above makes Finnair an excellent subject for research and analysis.

For Finnair I decided to take **Twitter** for analysis of user generated content and word of mouth in social media. Such decision was made based on the fact that that every second, on average, around 6 000 tweets are tweeted on Twitter, which makes 500 million tweets per day (Internet Live Stats. Twitter Usage Statistics), number of average monthly active users (MAUs) which counted 326 million in Q3 of 2018 (Twitter. Quarterly results, Twitter Q3' 2018 Fact Sheet p. 1) is impressive, and considering expectancy for long-term growth of the Twitter platform (Twitter Q3 2018 Earnings Transcript, p. 2). As stated in the theoretical part, Twitter has become a gold mine for companies not only for managing communication with customers, but also for monitoring company's reputation in the eyes of consumers and listening to consumer WOM by extracting data from Twitter and analyzing sentiment of tweets posted by the public. Customers talk about anything and everything, so it makes Twitter 'bursting' with valuable data. It lets obtain and analyze key information using hashtags as keywords.

## 4.3 Twitter

Interaction and newsfeed monitoring in Twitter can be done through various features. Hash mark (sign #) (known as 'hashtag') is a type of metadata used in Twitter in order to identify a keyword, contribute to a specific topic of interest and facilitate search for it, monitor and track conversations. 'At' (sign @) is used for replying to users' posts as well as to mention a profile: typing "@ " drops down autocomplete list of links to profiles, groups or pages.

Tweets (messages) from a profile (group or page) can be shared (retweeted) by other followers to their own profiles to exchange information with own followers by clicking a “retweet” button within the tweet.

As stated in the theoretical part of the thesis, brand awareness, brand engagement, word of mouth in Twitter can, for instance, be measured while studying number of tweets, semantic meaning of such tweets about the brand, valence of tweets, number of followers, number of mentions (@replies) and number of retweets. Various Twitter datasets would be taken for further analysis in this research paper.

Various tools exist for watching social media, getting social insights, helping to monitor positive and negative review, thereby track word of mouth ‘life’ and activity, to name a few: Hootsuite, Brand24, TweetDeck, SentiOne, Radian6, Sysomos, Buzzsumo Awario, etc.

I will use the following tools to run the analysis: SentiOne, Brand24, TweetDeck and Awario. The tools’ algorithms gather and analyze all online statements, opinions and comments in Twitter that contain specified keywords (stated in subsections 4.6.1 and 4.6.2 of Chapter 4 of the research paper) within the defined period of time.

## **4.4 Finnair**

Finnair started its operations in 1923, has headquarters in Vantaa on the grounds of Helsinki Airport and is currently known as the largest airline in Finland. Finnair has an extensive network that connects 19 cities in Asia and 7 cities in North America with over 100 top destinations in Europe (Finnair. Finnair Flights. Destinations). It is the only network airline in Northern Europe holding a 4-star Skytrax rating for the quality of its onboard product and staff service, and the Finnair home base airport service (Skytrax. Certified Ratings. Finnair) - this rating is a representation of global benchmark of excellence. The Finnish government is a major shareholder with a 55.8 % holding. Other shareholders include public bodies, financial institutions and private companies. Its shares are traded on the Nasdaq Nordic (Finnair. Finnair in Brief). During January - September 2018 period its revenue grew by 11.9

% to 2,151.5 million euros compared to 1,923.1 for the same period of 2017 (Finnair. Finnair Group Interim Report. 1 January - 30 September 2018 p. 6). Finnair employed 6 447 people by the end of September 2018 (Ibid p. 12).

The Airline's aim is to 'safeguard the continuation of profitable growth' focusing on improvements that simultaneously increase efficiency, increase revenue and improve customer experience of Finnair. Among improvements are: prioritization, new ways of working and tools, simplifying processes, introduction of new technologies (Finnair. Q3 2018 - Finnair's growth continued 2018 p. 10). Finnair's strategy is to continue using its geographical position to link Asia with Europe via Helsinki hub, Vantaa Airport.

#### **4.5 Possible Finnair competitors**


There are several reasons for mentioning Finnair's competitors in this research paper. Firstly, there is the customers' decision making and purchasing power; competitors' behavior which intensifies competition. Secondly, customers become more demanding, for example, desirous for modern fleet, for custom-made services, like digital solutions (ex. The Finnair mobile app, SkyPay - inflight contactless payment system for customers, Nordic Sky entertainment portal), and the ones for environmental responsibility. Thirdly, I suppose that competition on the European routes for Finnair is mainly driven by price. Travelers are looking for an optimal price/performance/time configuration. However, I presume that the airline's reputation is also taken into consideration. In case with long-haul flights to Asia and Northern America, I think that competition is mainly driven by quality of service, comfort, smooth transfer, reputation and perception received from social media, other ways of WOM, other incoming information and news towards Finnair.

SAS - Scandinavian Airlines (official name: Scandinavian Airlines System Denmark-Norway-Sweden); Norwegian (official name: Norwegian Air Shuttle ASA) and Aeroflot (PJSC Aeroflot - Russian Airlines) can be seen as Finnair's main competitors. The region of Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark is a corner of Europe where these three significant airlines have homes, except for Aeroflot. Two of them, Finnair and SAS are considered as

flag carriers: in terms of ownership, they have government-held controlling stakes. Norway has given birth to the most significant new player in the region: Norwegian is an independent airline owned by institutions and the general public (Centre for Aviation CAPA: *Finnair, SAS and Norwegian, The Nordic Three: is consolidation on the way?*). SAS and Norwegian are generally taken for consideration as Finnair's peer group due to equal market share in the Northern Europe and short-haul flights to the rest of Europe. SAS as well competes with Finnair on the Transatlantic and Asian routes, however, at the same time, SAS has larger number of destinations and flights to European cities, if compared with Finnair. Norwegian adds competition to Finnair on North America routes, routes to Asia (ex. Bangkok, Singapore) and by lower ticket prices. Aeroflot has routes to Europe, Northern America and Asia, like Finnair does. Currently Aeroflot operates the youngest fleet of new Airbus and Boeing jets in Eastern Europe. For 2018, Aeroflot also won the Skytrax awards for the Best Airline in Eastern Europe (Zhang B. 2018). Still, in fact, the airlines cannot be directly compared by number of fleets, number of routes, seat capacity and load factor, operating profit margin, revenue passenger kilometer (RPK) or by alliances as some of these properties and conditions might be incomparable.

## 4.6 Analysis of Twitter for Finnair

### 4.6.1. General analysis

Finnair's Twitter profile will be taken as the main source for analysis. Other social media platforms will be evaluated as secondary sources. Finnair has several official and verified accounts on Twitter. Verified means the blue verified badge  on Twitter, it lets people know that the account of public interest is authentic. Finnair has several accounts registered on Twitter, however, the following accounts have the 'verified' status:

- @Finnair (<https://twitter.com/Finnair>) - main page, run in English, has 97 808 followers (as of January 04, 2019),
- @FinnairSuomi (<https://twitter.com/FinnairSuomi>) - official page run in Finnish, has 14 051 followers (as of January 05, 2019),



- @FinnairHelps (<https://twitter.com/FinnairHelps>) which is the official Finnair customer service account used for direct messaging regarding existing reservations as well as publishing urgent information regarding delays and flight cancellations. There are 10 922 followers (as of January 05, 2019).

The following keywords will be used for the analysis: *Finnair*, *FlyingWithFinnair*, *FeelFinnair*, *FinnairHelps*, *Finnairsuomi*. I will analyze top social media consumption resources for the total amount of mentions across major social media platforms. Then, after the general analysis of social media resources, I will focus the analysis on Twitter.

#### 4.6.2. Sentiment analysis

I used sentiment analysis to measure the number of positive, negative and neutral statements. The analysis was based on cutting-edge natural language processing technologies offered by above mentioned tools (specified in subsection 4.3) and manual annotation of mine of negative and positive phrases and words. Review of mentions regarding the certain brand and its reach was called ‘dataset’ that subsequently gave a picture of potential success and its scale. Below, the analysis is described in more detail:

- 1) In phase 1, datasets were built by me with the conditions described below. Based on the data, discussion intensity chart, sentiment analysis chart; as well as other metrics.

**Keywords:** crawling tweets/mentions that contained the following hashtags (#) or mentions (@) in Twitter and keywords in other social media platforms: *Finnair*, *FlyingWithFinnair*, *FeelFinnair*, *FinnairSuomi*, *FinnairHelps* (Condition: “*Finnair*” OR “*FlyingWithFinnair*” OR “*FinnairSuomi*” OR “*FinnairHelps*” OR “*FeelFinnair*” as keywords, phrases and operators)

**Excluded words** (none of which could appear while collection of mentions (@) or hashtags (#): N/A

2) Language: specific languages tracked: English and Finnish

**Period:** I examined data created and generated for the period of two years from January 01, 2017 through January 01, 2019.

**Locations:** All,

**Authors:** All,

3) Engagement score: All posts and mentions were taken into account for the analysis, even those that had the following score, in order to get a wider picture for the analysis:

- At least 0 retweets,
- At least 0 like(s),
- At least 0 reply.

4) In phase 4 influence or so called ‘reach’ score of profile (for those profiles who shared (retweeted or mentioned Finnair)) was built by the tool: algorithm was based on followers’ number, unique visitors and their further activity. Influencer profiles were highlighted.

5) In phase 5, in order to analyze sentiment, additionally to system language processing technology, I manually annotated subsets with four polarity labels: *positive*, *neutral*, *negative* and *undefined* sentiments.

6) In the next phase, additionally to the system language processing technology, the following negative keywords (any of the specified keywords next to the keywords *Finnair*, *FlyingWithFinnair*, *FeelFinnair*, *FinnairSuomi*, *FinnairHelps*: in English: “bad”, “awful”, “never”, “disappointment”, “disappointing”, “distressing”,

*“stressed”, “lost”*; in Finnish: *“huono”, “kauhea” “ei koskaan”, “pettymys”, “ahdistava”, “stressaantunut”, “kadonnut”* were set by me.

- 7) Neutral and unidentified tweets were analyzed as well for the general overview.
- 8) Lastly, the results were evaluated. Additionally, I took one of the competitor airlines, Norwegian, its Twitter official page [https://twitter.com/Fly\\_Norwegian](https://twitter.com/Fly_Norwegian) and hashtag #FlyNorwegian for the superficial analysis and further comparison with Finnair.

## 4.7 Limitations in data gathering

While and after the analysis was run, I came across some limitations described below. In general, if compared to analysis of conventional block text, like articles and review documents, sentiment analysis of Twitter data was complicated due to the data being scattered and the language being unclear at times.

1). Limitations for analysis were brought by out-of-vocabulary words (unknown words), so such words were ignored, and analysis could not have been run for them. Some words could still have been a probabilistic language models which are called “N-grams” and be predicted by computer analysis, for example “..., t, o, \_, b, e, \_, o, r, \_, n, o, t, \_, t, o, \_, b, e, ...” in computational linguistics is “to be or not to be”. In that case N-grams (which, in linguistics, is a contiguous sequence of  $n$ -items from a given sample of text or speech) could be used for efficient approximate matching and word prediction by converting strings with letters into English alphabet (Basic Text Analysis. N-Gram Models). Microblogging features also comprise abbreviations and intensifiers such as emoticons and all-caps typed words which might have been recognized incorrectly.

2). Limitations for analysis were also brought by language. Tweets in English were analyzed for sentiment analysis. Tweets in Finnish were analyzed manually as the analysis could not have been run by the tools. Tweets in Swedish language (potentially produced by Swedish-speaking population of Finland) were not analyzed. Tweets in other languages (other than

Finnish and English) spoken and used by Finnair customers from Europe, Asia, Middle East, Asia-Pacific and South America regions of the world were not studied as well but potentially might have contained vital data.

3) Identifying neutral tweets was excluded from the analysis in order to set focus on positive and negative tweets.

4). Private accounts and privacy concerns: data and sentiment analysis were unavailable for such kind of profiles due to users' set privacy restrictions.

5) There was a possibility that sentiment algorithm could have caught sarcasm within the mention (#) or reply (@) incorrectly, so that the semantic meaning, which was automatically done by the tool, might have been applied incorrectly.

Drawing conclusion, datasets compiled from clauses 1) and 2) can be evaluated in future plans by other individuals interested in the subject.

## **5. FINDINGS**

The following chapter presents the results from the conducted analysis of Twitter in terms of user generated content and word of mouth about Finnair and its peer group received through a list of tools for watching social media and getting social insights, as well as results that were received manually by me. Results are summarized in graphical presentations: charts and diagrams of the collected data. Findings are divided into subcategories by results: specifically, for Finnair, findings for Finnair over its peer group. The findings are followed by compiling answers for the research questions, recommendations and general discussion.

As I stated in the theoretical part, the analysis showed that WOM indeed is diffused quickly and widely, achieving the public at a time. Comparison of Phelps, J. et al. of consumer-to-consumer interaction with a two-way street, where bad news travel just as fast, if not faster, than good news (2005 p. 346) is accurate and precise. The analysis proves that consumer behavior and WOM can indeed be influential and have significant impact on brand value, as well as have impact on other consumers seeking information about products and services, which were posted online by previous users.

## **5.1 Findings for Finnair**

SentiOne, Brand24, TweetDeck and Awarrio crawling engines went across Twitter platform in order to analyze discussions and opinions held by the public about Finnair. Together with the manual analysis performed by me, the below results are presented as an insight to the online presence during the period from 01 January 2017 through 01 January 2019.

**Source analysis** was done with SentiOne tool for various number of social media, forums, platforms, blogs and reviews in order to evaluate general characteristic aspects of online presence and main sources of Finnair discussion. Most of discussions about Finnair take place on Instagram 31.43%, Twitter 26.47% and Facebook 16.82% which is presented in the figure below (see Figure 1). I draw a conclusion that in terms of consumption, Twitter is among top resources and one of the most popular consumption channels among those who used social media regularly for discussion of Finnair. Facebook is ranked third (16.82%).

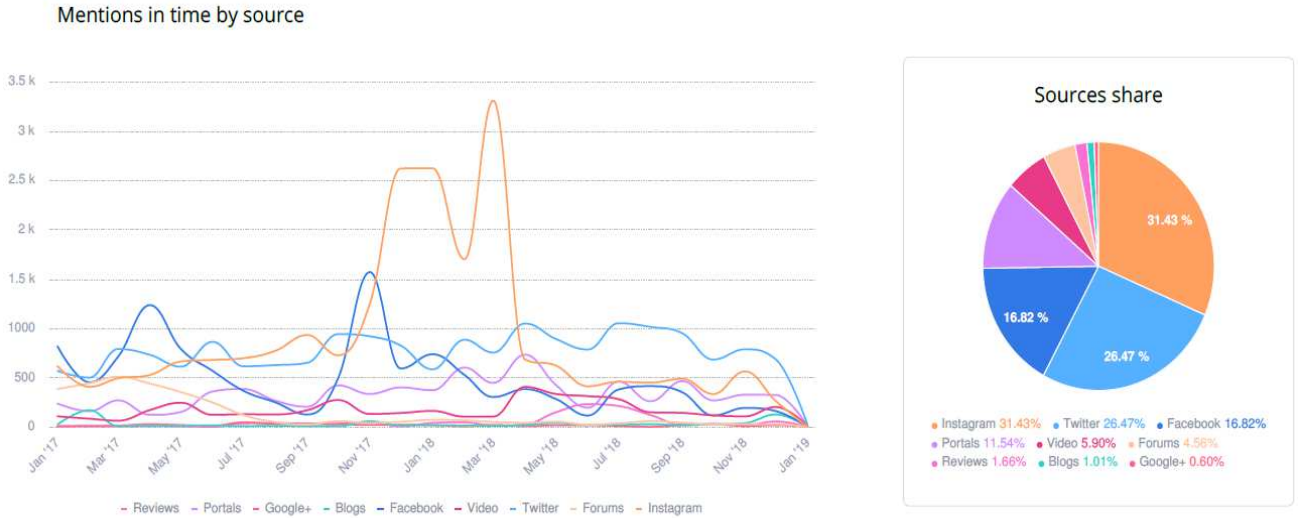


Figure 1. Source Analysis: Mentions in time by source and source share for Finnair

In the analyzed period there were 71 636 mentions about Finnair across major online social media resources such as video and photosharing platform Instagram, microblog Twitter, social network Facebook, other Portals, Forums and Discussion Boards like Google+.

Source breakdown shows that **19 121 tweets** out of 71 636 posts were done in Twitter. 12 232 posts (~18%) out of 71 636 (100%) total posts in social media environment are having **positive semantic evaluation**. 3 751 (~5%) out of 71 636 (100%) have **negative semantic meaning** (Figures 2 and 3 below).

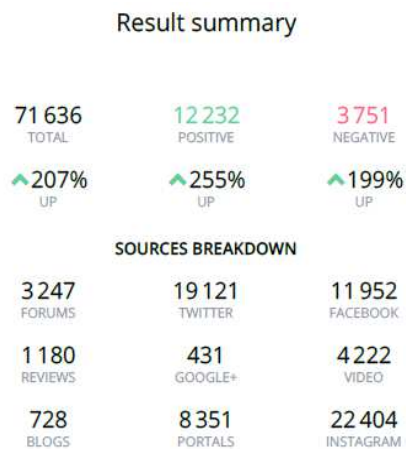


Figure 2. Source breakdown and result semantic search for Finnair

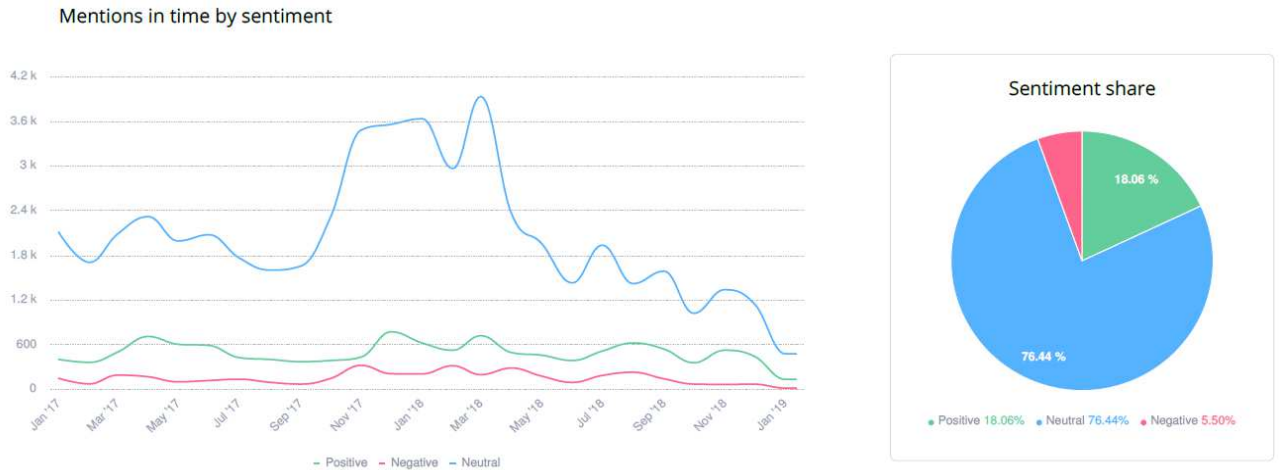
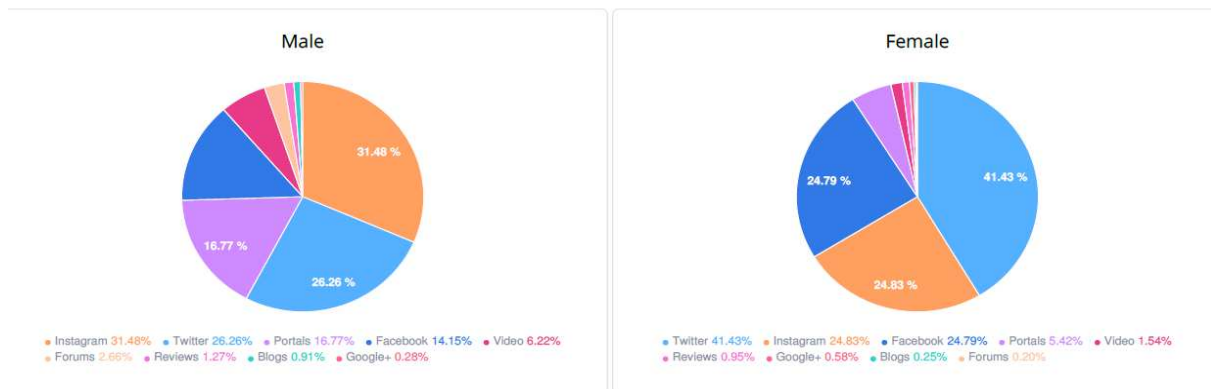


Figure 3. Mentions in time by sentiment and sentiment share for Finnair discussion

Diagram for **gender** participating in the discussion (Figure 4 below) shows some notable difference in social media use: females prefer Twitter (41.43%) as a platform for discussion, compared to men preferring Instagram (31.48%) over Twitter (26.26%). However, it may be roughly concluded that both female and male participants found no limits or obstacles to use social media. Gender share analysis can be used by an airline as a part of further targeted marketing campaign process.

Where do men and women participate in the discussion?

Finnair, Feelfinnair



*Figure 4. Gender share for Finnair discussion*

In terms of word of mouth marketing, the pictures in the Appendix 1 are good examples of pure customer experience that is shared with the public: there are posts with: photos of modern Finnair Airbus 350 XWB fleet with cabin mood lighting innovations; another – from the business class passenger telling about unique culinary experience delivered by Finnair’s Chief; photos describing perception of a splendid holiday starting above the clouds hashtagged #feelfinnair; photos describing gladness about flying on Marimekko themed airplane which livery is decorated with flowers and feeling of being amazed by “funky color schemes” in business class. Such posts and recommendations from the public about products and services, the use of hashtag words let the public obtain and analyze information. It positively results in airline perception by the public and may turn into a snowball effect which, in this case, is advantageous for the airline.

Examples of **well-done and productive SMMAs** and communication from Finnair and Finnair staff with customers and reaction of many followers to the posts may be found in the Appendix 2. The examples show that: Finnair captain is posting sunset above the skies view from the flight deck saying that on that day Finnair celebrates 95 years of legacy and that the Airline is donating 1 euro to UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) for every #Finair95 hashtagged post. The post was liked 108 times, shared 17. The profile has over 1000 followers. This means that every tenth follower reacted to the post. Another example of productive SMMAs from the Airline towards the public is that Finnair starts 2019 year with the new CEO visiting and talking to Finnair Kitchen and Finnair Cargo. It illustrates that these spheres are well taken care of by the company. Another example is that Finnair brings the public ‘behind the scenes’ of delivery of their new Airbus 350 aircraft from the factory in Toulouse and proudly saying that Finnair is the first European airline that is starting operation of the new A350 XWB aircraft which is named by Airbus to be the “the most modern and efficient aircraft” having ““Xtra” efficient design and state-of-the-art technologies” and “shaping the future of air travel” (Airbus. A350 XWB Family). Finnair also suggests travel inspiration by advertising one of its vibrant travel destinations, Goa, for “feeding mind, body and soul”. The Appendix 3 shows examples of Finnair’s collaboration



and co-partnering with influencer profiles: @MoominOfficial profile tells that Finnair is renewing its concept for a family travel, which includes the popular Finnish Moomins in various segments of its customer journey for families travelling with Finnair. @Shell\_Aviation is supplying Finnair with sustainable aviation fuel to reduce carbon emissions during flights. @thisisFINLAND profile that promotes stories about Finland posting astonishing nature, inspirational arts and design and having over 80 000 followers is proud to have Finnair be named one of the world's safest airlines in 2018.

Appendix 4 comprises negative experience or attitude from public towards the case Airline. The analysis showed that most of the negative tweets are adjacent to luggage loss, damage or long passenger queues at airport check-ins. It is noted by me that negative tweets mostly take place when airlines and airports are in need to add extra capacity to handle a holiday rush, for example, Christmas. Surprisingly, there was a disgruntled person that posted a picture of the advertisement of Finnair is hot deals on flights abroad in the newspaper saying Finnair is polluting the world. This is despite Finnair being known for its commitment to protecting the environment using the combinations of modern fleet which has a lower fuel burn (when compared with previous-generation aircraft), cutting-edge building materials and technologies (Airbus. A350 XWB Family) and sustainable aviation fuel from @Shell\_Aviation to reduce carbon emissions during flights. Negative tweets have a high reach for the public. Sentiment analysis showed that one of the negative tweets posted by @carr\_davec reached ~1 200 views. The Appendix 5 includes examples of negative posts with opposition towards Norwegian Air Shuttle: one passenger got back a destroyed skateboard at passengers' baggage delivery and was encouraging the public to fly with Finnair, another said the New Year holiday start is horrible as his luggage (apparently, with gifts) is lost, yet another says she flew on a plane full of unhappy customers.

## **5.2 Findings for Finnair & the peer group**

Table 2 presents general statistics data for Finnair and its peer group. As mentioned above, a superficial analysis of Norwegian was done, so the statistics table particularly comprises more data for Norwegian Airline. Finnair has registered its account in Twitter earlier, than

Norwegian, but later than SAS. SAS and Aeroflot have more followers which means that there is a prospect for Finnair to attract a wider audience which may be gained from the competitors.

Twitter page name	@Finnair	@Fly_Norwegian	@SAS	@Aeroflot
Language	English	English	English	Russian
Profile created on	11 October 2008	19 August 2010	17 March 2007	21 July 2010
Number of followers (Data as of Jan 4, 2019)	97 808	102 437	106 321	197 330
Number of tweets (Data as of Jan 15, 2019)	17 715	72 801	45 758	67 301
Total number of mentions in social media	71 636	66 216	-	-
Number of mentions in Twitter (Period 01 Jan 2017 - 01 Jan 2019)	19 121	33 634	-	-

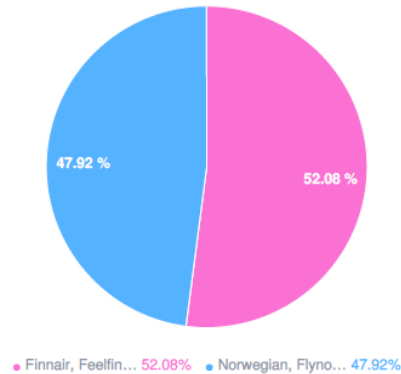
*Table 2. Statistics data for Finnair and its peer group*

All the accounts except for Aeroflot are run in English which is notable for the other three airlines considering that auditorium of travelers is multinational.

The analysis shows that social buzz **across major social media platforms** about Finnair and its possible competitor Norwegian is almost equal by its volume (Figure 5 below), nevertheless, buzz volume about Finnair (71 636 mentions) overweights buzz volume about Norwegian (66 216 mentions).

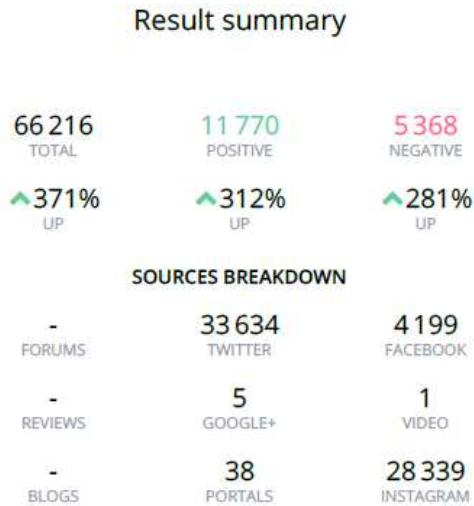
## How do the discussions spread?

### Buzz comparison



*Figure 5. Buzz comparison: Finnair vs. Norwegian*

Breakdown performance per source brought evidence that **Twitter platform** is used more often for buzz generation about Norwegian (33 634 posts) (Figure 6 below) if compared to Finnair (19 121 posts) for the same period of time (Figure 2 above). Having less tweets by Finnair means less amount of interaction by the case Airline with its followers and customers, consequently, less customer engagement. I suggest that raising amount of posts and tweets by Finnair would let increase quality of communication with customers and have a higher targeted audience outreach.



*Figure 6. Source breakdown and result semantic search for Finnair*

It is noted by the me that both Finnair and Norwegian actively handle customer complaints in Twitter. Airline representatives interact with customers on solving issues, positively building relationships. Such examples are introduced in the Appendix 6.

While comparing Finnair and Norwegian in terms of communication with the public, the results show (see Appendix 7) that Norwegian does communicate in Twitter with the public too, and it is assessed by me as ‘very good’. However, similarly to Finnair, Norwegian also has negative mentions and replies produced by the customers, such examples are introduced in the Appendix 5.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Finnair**

The case Airline’s aim is to focus on improvements which was stated in the media file for Investors in Q3 2018 called *Finnair’s growth continued* (2018 p. 10) and described in the Chapter 4 of this thesis. Among other aims were: increasing efficiency, enhancement of customer experience, prioritization, new ways of working and tools, simplifying processes

and the introduction of new technologies. In terms of securing brand value in the era of digital age and considering that eWOM has life of its own is suggested:

### **Targeted WOMM**

Drawing on expertise of Trusov et al. (2009 p. 91) who suggested that WOMM lets promote products to targeted groups of consumers with a goal to encourage consumers spread positive WOM. This in turn, increases brand awareness and sales, and having in place analysis results of gender share participating in the discussion in social media platforms that show notable difference in social media use lets Finnair organize targeted marketing campaigns.

### **Handle inquiries & post urgent information via Twitter**

Considering the fact that smartphones connected to the Internet and various social media platforms have become as essential to our pockets as wallets and driver licenses, it is noted that customers are expecting their inquiries and problems to be handled in a smooth and fast way by companies via social media platforms like it is done with purchasing airplane tickets, gifts, ordering food delivery and making hotel reservations. It is noted that customers are becoming more demanding for the level of customer service and engagement opportunities from the company towards the customer. Also, considering the fact that global airline traffic continues to grow strongly and Finnair has a large number of international routes to Asia, North-Atlantic and Europe, it is recommended for Finnair to continue consider Twitter as an important source communication and consumption channel with customers in terms of sharing urgent information, for example, regarding delays, flight cancellations and access to airport terminals (@Finnair main profile and @FinnairHelps).

It is suggested to continue considering Twitter as an additional way of handling customer inquiries (@FinnairHelps) as Twitter is one of the most popular microblogging platforms in the world, meaning that for a customer, interacting with airline representatives and solving

problems might be much easier via the Internet rather than via service counter in the airport or agency or waiting over telephone. Again, in the peak period, when telephone lines are busy, the social media channel should be among key interaction channels.

### **Collaborate with influencers**

In the above analysis it was noted that mentioning Finnair on influencer profiles has a facilitative impact: such collaboration and exposure helps generate attention to Finnair brand, its high-quality products and services. Such profiles as @ShellAviation (Twitter profile of Shell brand refueling aircraft) and @thisisFINLAND (Twitter profile that promotes stories about Finland posting astonishing nature, inspirational arts and design, buzzing business, etc.) have a positive influence on customers and potential clients: for example, @ShellAviation shows that Finnair collaborates with Shell for using sustainable aviation fuel to reduce carbon emissions during flights; thisisFINLAND, having 79 847 followers, promotes Finnair for tourist destinations such as Lapland and is proud for having Finnair as one of the safest airline in the world in 2018. I suggest considering more partnerships with influencer profiles in order to have greater exposure in the social media platforms.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

In the thesis I aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How does electronic WOM in social media challenge airlines' brand identity and value? What impact does positive and negative electronic WOM activity have towards the brand?**

Firstly, brand value is not just a marketing campaign and a hallmark name for an airline. It is quality assurance and safety and service level standard. Based on this study, I recommend for airlines to gather audience in the social media platform, to communicate with customers by sharing news, and making them aware about marketing campaigns and privileges. Digital marketing is a powerful tool for retaining current and attracting new customers in the digital

age. Social media marketing communication is recommended to be used for personalization of advertisements and as an instrument for airlines to satisfy the needs of a customer any time in any place; as well as for content update in social media. It allows increased brand recognition, awareness and facing challenges without fear or hesitation. It is suggested for airlines to plan advertisement and communication campaigns thoroughly in order to meet the customer needs.

Secondly, the analysis performed for the case Airline proved that positive and negative WOM have almost the same level of impact: negative news travel along the public almost as fast as good news. Hence, positive WOM still plays in favor of purchase decision, which means that WOM marketing and managing communication is crucial in the modern world. Based on the analysis, I surmise that it might sometimes be so that what a company *thinks customers like* and *what customers actually like* are two different things. Having access and consideration for negative mentions across the Internet lets an airline, and, in fact, any company, see where the actual weaknesses are, and allows it to be prepared better to respond to any potentially unhappy customer. Those profiles and users who have a lot of subscribers and followers can boost additional attention to the brand and its products and services. The brand can receive valuable insight from a high-end user profile, as well as get advantageous exposure. Further, monitoring social media platforms provides additional KPIs that help track marketing progress of the company.

I note that, if negative feedback from an unhappy customer especially in the social media platform Twitter is handled properly, it may turn a customer into happy and surprised one having his inquiry resolved. However, the analysis showed that negative tweets about the Airline and its service are spread as fast as positive posts and have wide audience reach. Triggers for negative tweets and its impact will be discussed further.

## **2) How does electronic WOM in social media challenge Finnair's brand identity and value?**

The performed analysis acknowledged that Twitter is considered by Finnair as a social media marketing activity and brand promotion tool for interaction with the public, shedding light on the ‘behind the scenes’ activities, such as delivery of the new latest-generation aircraft that offer both unforgettable in-flight experience and assuring customers that Finnair is operating modern and efficient aircraft and using sustainable fuel to help ensure a healthy future for the planet. Twitter is used by Finnair as a communication medium in terms of sharing urgent information, for example, regarding flight delays and cancellations and access to airport terminals. It is also acknowledged that Finnair is using social media platform Twitter for co-partnering with influencer profiles to enhance its marketing activities and reach wider audience. Interaction with the public regarding urgent information, travel inspirations, ‘behind the scenes’ activities of the airline are well-perceived by the public and, through retweets and shares, may turn into a snowball effect which, in its turn, is advantageous for the airline.

The analysis showed that Finnair (and Norwegian and, probably any other airline) have a certain number of negative tweets and posts towards the airlines and their service. Most of the negative tweets are adjacent to low-quality service which is delivered in ways of luggage loss and damage, flight delays and cancellations. Number of tweets from dissatisfied and annoyed customers increases in the periods of holiday rush and severe weather conditions when the airline needs to add extra capacity to on-ground services. As was suggested by Phelps J. et al. (2005) and Bickart, B. & Schindler, R. M. (2001) in the theoretical part of this work, dissatisfied customers may indeed make negative posts spread across the world as fast as positive ones, which result in negative impact for the company’s brand value. Annoyed customer may prompt pulling a company from ‘skyrocketed’ fame and recognition to a grave threat.

- 3) How can airline, through the medium of social media tools and analysis of user generated content, improve conversation with travelers, acquire new customers, thereby increase customer service quality, brand awareness and maximize revenue?**



As the outcome is quite wide and multidirectional, the answer to the third research question is generally presented in the subsections: 5.3, current part (Discussion) and Conclusion parts of this work. In fact, there are two types of recommendations: recommendation for Finnair as the case company and recommendations for the airlines in general. Both types of recommendations may be used vice versa, for Finnair and other airlines and for other airlines and Finnair.

Answering the last research question, the performed analysis confirmed Kotler's P. & Armstrong's, G. (2000 p. 58) attainments towards failure in creating the right reputation which may affect overall company image. There should be certain input and costs in terms of time and capital that airlines take upon to establish reputation. Harvard Business Review publishes that in economies where 70% to 80% of market value comes from such intangible assets as brand equity, intellectual capital and goodwill, organizations are especially vulnerable to anything that damages their reputation. In the era of digital age, it is indeed observed that an insufficient job may be done by airlines to manage their reputations in general and risks to their reputations in particular. Certain scope of the risks come from social media. It is suggested for airlines to focus their resources on handling threats to reputation which is 'more a crisis management rather than a proactive management' (Eccles R. G. et al. 2007).

With the increase of customer loyalty, word of mouth increases along with positive attitude and non-traditional methods of promotion. For an airline, retaining customers, increase of loyalty and amount of positive sentiment of word of mouth is a key for success for business activity. Having brand recognition, having customers being informed of company products and services, become an indirect KPI for sale increase.

In the peak season (eg. Christmas, in the busiest ever getaway), the one when queues are the longest at check-in, when flights are delayed due to possible Christmas snowstorms, traffic load both on the ground and in the air, when luggage is lost and retained, it is recommended for airlines to enforce efforts on responding and engaging with customers via the most popular social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram: to have additional staff handling support and providing the best possible service and airport experience. If a customer

is taking interest in a flight, time and processing with payment, the airline can engage with a customer on social media. The data may be processed in such CRM platform, like Salesforce. Cabin crew can see passengers' profiles via onboard iPad in order to personify communication, services and offers.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This study had the objective of exploring challenges for airlines' brand identity and value brought by WOM in the social media. The idea was to outline trends for creation positive brand awareness for the airlines.

It may be concluded with certainty that the Internet has become a medium to share opinions, experiences, as well as a source to seek advice and recommendations. Among all the Internet users, travelers are one of the most active and engaging ones in terms of sharing, seeking advice, posting positive and negative travel experience. Travelers' posts, by nature, are considered by me to be honest and relevant.

Social media marketing activities has not become just a tool to manage reputation value but has transformed as comprehensive business service that deliver value.

Performed analysis has proved that social media monitoring tools may tremendously help an airline to access the public mentions about the brand, product and service and, having this medium, create positive brand awareness. Receiving any kind of feedback whether it is positive, negative or neutral is beneficial for any company. Social media monitoring, listening to customer requests and feedback helps boost business and improve quality, work effectively on deficiencies aiming to meet customer expectations. Using social media monitoring by any airline lets the company discover conversations about own business and business of competitors: interaction with customers, reaction to posts, getting to know

customers and their preferences better, finding out reasons why customers may like or dislike the brand, therefore improve business and increase revenue.

### **It's time to tweet and post**

The analysis performed for the case airline and its peer group showed that Twitter, Instagram and Facebook are the most popular information consumption channels for both genders, and Instagram has most content sharing towards airlines. The benefit of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook consists of relatively low commitment required from its users and its mobility. Anybody can register and set up their profile in several minutes and start following other users from a smartphone: statistics says that there are about 17 billion connected devices that are in use worldwide (IoT Analytics. 2018). Tweeting and posting is easy unless the purpose is to write a blog.

Taking into consideration impressive amount of 326 million of monthly active Twitter users (Twitter. Quarterly results, Twitter Q3' 2018 Fact Sheet p. 1) and stated above amount of connected to the Internet devices, I suggest airlines to use one of the most popular microblogging platforms such as Twitter as an additional method (beside official ways of communication) for handling customer inquiries. It means that interacting with airline representatives and solving problems accessing digital service (the Internet) rather than service counter in the airport or waiting over telephone helpline might be a lot easier and much more successful in terms of customer satisfaction. Such innovative approach of an airline towards handling customer queries would be a “wow moment” for a customer experience. Such company behavior and policy across social media platforms would also help an airline to increase customer satisfaction and number of happy customers who can become ‘brand ambassadors’ and be willing to do spread word of mouth: recommend and promote the brand both online and offline.

It is recommended for airlines not to hush up negative customer responses in social media, but to offer an apology to an unhappy customer, to try to resolve any problem, and to provide

a reply that a problem is taken care of or resolved. Due to the nature of social media interaction, engagement and its easier boundaries, a customer receiving a response from the company on social media can become very happy and get this ‘wow moment’ mentioned above. Such activity of an airline would make a good impression on those other travelers, customers and potential customers, who observe public conversations in social media platforms where the company engages with its customers. Such activity would definitely have an airline to stand out among its competitors by reaching out to its online audience.

I presume that sometimes what a company *thinks customers like* and *what customers actually like* are two different things. Having access and consideration for negative mentions across the Internet lets an airline, and, in fact, any company, see where the actual weaknesses are, and it allows to be prepared better to respond to any potentially unhappy customer. It is notable that Twitter is a platform that can be adroitly used by an airline as an information channel and for conversations with customers, journalists, etc. The performed analysis acknowledged that Twitter is indeed an important source for monitoring brand image and communication with customers in terms of sharing urgent information, for example, regarding delays, flight cancellations, access to airport terminals, etc. It is acknowledged that social media platforms can also be used by airlines for co-partnering with influencers in social media channels or blogs. Those profiles and users who have a lot of subscribers and followers can boost additional attention to the brand and its products and services. The brand can receive valuable insight from a high-end user profile, as well as get advantageous exposure. What is more, monitoring social media platforms provides additional KPIs that help track marketing progress of the company.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CGC - customer-generated content

eWOM - electronic word of mouth

IoT - Internet of Things

MAUs - monthly active users

RPK - revenue passenger kilometer

SMMAAs - social media marketing activities

SNA - social network analysis

UCC - user-created content

UGC - user-generated content

UNICEF - United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

XWB - eXtra Wide Body

WOM - word of mouth

WOMM - word of mouth marketing

## **SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING AND ANALYTICS TOOLS**

Awario <https://awario.com/>

Brand24 <https://brand24.com/>

Buzzsumo <https://buzzsumo.com/>

Hootsuite [www.hootsuite.com/](http://www.hootsuite.com/)

Radian6 [www.radian6.com/](http://www.radian6.com/)

SentiOne <https://sentione.com/>

Sysomos <https://sysomos.com/>

TweetDeck <https://tweetdeck.twitter.com/>

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## APPENDIX 1. GOOD EXAMPLES OF PURE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE SHARED WITH THE PUBLIC VIA eWOM



**Leonard Miron** @Leonar... 28 Dec 2018

Absolutely fantastic hard&soft product today with @Finnair to Dubai. A350 is s gem and the crew was superb @airlinequality

🗨️ ↻️ 3 ❤️ 26 ⋮



**John Walton** 🇪🇺 ✈️ 🛫  
@thatjohn

Follow

Best flight NRT-HEL, @Finnair A350.  
Worst: LYS-OTP, @BlueAirWeb 737. Most surprising: @flydubai DXB-PRG. Most purple: @peach\_aviation.



1:43 PM - 1 Jan 2019

18 Likes

🗨️ 5 ↻️ ❤️ 18 ✉️



**JJLehto** @Magnum44Gm · Jan 10

Hieno iltapäivä above the clouds 🌆. #feelfinnair #finnairsuomi. Matkalla Miamiin 🇺🇸 #finnairbusiness @FinnairSuomi #AY07

Loistava palvelu 🍷

Translate Tweet



🗨️ ↻️ ❤️ 1 ✉️



**Lasse Salo** @Oh\_LZE · 31 May 2018

A Chef works his magic on the Business Class hot meals on board @Finnair Celebration flight to Beijing. #feelfinnair #FinnairChina30



🗨️ 6 ↻️ 10 ❤️ 46 ✉️

**London Cornish** @London\_cornish · Jan 11  
Time to fly on a decidedly flowery Finnair plane 😊✈️



🗨️ ↻️ ❤️ 2 ✉️

**London Cornish** @London\_cornish · Jan 7  
Funky colour schemes in Finnair Biz Class that's for sure !!



🗨️ 1 ↻️ ❤️ 7 ✉️



## APPENDIX 2. WELL-DONE & PRODUCTIVE RECOMMENDATION AND COMMUNICATION FROM FINNAIR AND FINNAIR STAFF WITH CUSTOMERS





**Finnair** ✓  
@Finnair

Follow

A350 XWB test aircraft no2 @Airbus factory in Toulouse. @Finnair will be 1st European airline w/ A350's in H2/2015.



40 Retweets 34 Likes



**Finnair** ✓ @FinnairSuomi · 8 янв.

Uusi vuosi ja uusia alkujä! Eilen oli uuden toimitusjohtajamme @TopiManner ensimmäinen konttoripäivä. Tutuksi tulivat niin Finnair Kitchen kuin Cargokin. Tervetuloa Topi! #feelfinnair



5 58



**Finnair** ✓ @Finnair

3d

#EatLocal and feed your mind, body, and soul in #Goa. #BlueWings shares local insights into Goa's vibrant veggie scene [ow.ly/fqIS30mJCMz](http://ow.ly/fqIS30mJCMz) We fly to Goa twice a week during the winter season until 13th of March #travelinspiration #foodietravel

1 2 8

## APPENDIX 3. POSITIVE WAYS OF COLLABORATION AND CO-PARTNERING WITH INFLUENCER PROFILES



 **Shell Aviation**   
@Shell\_Aviation

Follow 

Shell Aviation and @SkyNRG are supplying #sustainable #aviation fuel sourced from @worldenergy to @KLM, @SAS and @Finnair to reduce carbon emissions at @flySFO. This initiative embodies the spirit of collaboration, key to delivering a #lowcarbon future.  
[go.shell.com/2RyZo3P](https://go.shell.com/2RyZo3P)



7:51 PM · 6 Dec 2018

112 Retweets · 640 Likes



 89  112  640 



**Moomin** @MoominOfficial · 5 Dec 2017

The Finnish airline Finnair, has today announced that it is renewing its concept for family travel, which will include the Moomins in various segments of its customer journey for families travelling with Finnair! 🇫🇮 ✨ 🧸 @feelfinnair #finnair #finnairpr... [moom.in/2km4NzJ](https://moomin.in/2km4NzJ)



8

79

238



## APPENDIX 4. NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE OR ATTITUDE TOWARDS FINNAIR





Sustainate.com  
@Sustainate\_com

8m

@hsfi you must choose #sustainable advertisers already today, not tomorrow. Air travel is one of the top #greenhousegas #polluters.  
@Finnair do you compensate your #pollution? #wedonthavetime  
#nytonpakko #climateaction #climatechange #sustainablebrands  
#SustainableLiving



 **chris Davies** 2h  
@carr\_davec • 📍 Aivōç, Greece

@FinnairHelps My whole booking experience with Finnair has been extremely distressing

1.2K reach

 **Professional Idiot** 🐾🐾🐾 9m  
@RidingWolf

Payed 20% more for a flight by selecting exit row seats so that that my knees would not be crammed against the row in front. Arrive on the plane to find out the row number is 1 behind the exit rows. #notamused @Finnair



**Betseyph** @betsabeyona · Jan 7



@Finnair @feelfinnair is the worst airline ever. They broke my bag, I call the customer service in Finland and they say they don't handle that, I sent a report in their website and no one replies to me. I need to solve my problem ASAP



1





## APPENDIX 5. NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE OR ATTITUDE TOWARDS NORWEGIAN



**Pekka Ollula** @pollula · 24 May 2017

Welcome to Hel #norwegianairlines destroyed my #skateboard 🙄🙄  
#flywithfinnair @ Helsinki Vantaa... [instagram.com/p/BUc\\_mGUF3Ev/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BUc_mGUF3Ev/)



**Gaurav Kumar** @totalgaurav · Jan 10

They boast of being one of the 'best' airlines in Europe and still have this inefficient and negligent outlook towards their customers. Thank you Norwegian for starting my New Year on this horrible note with your horrible service. #worstairline #lostluggage Don't #FlyNorwegian



1



**Lesley Grogan** @lesley\_grogan · Jan 5

#flynorwegian how on earth can you Downgrade tickets when tickets were bought last March? Awful service cabin crew same and rude. You will be bust by end of year! Plane full of unhappy customers



## APPENDIX 6. INTERACTION BY FINNAIR & NORWEGIAN WITH CUSTOMERS ON SOLVING CUSTOMER ISSUES

 **chris Davies** @carr\_davec 1h  
Replying to @FinnairHelps  
My whole booking experience with Finnair has been extremely distressing

 **FinnairHelps** @FinnairHelps 1h  
Replying to @carr\_davec  
Hi, we are sorry to hear about your disappointment. Br Henna

 **Sarah** @niri\_sarah 31 Dec 2018  
Replying to @Finnair  
I flew 11 times with you during 2018 and loved every minute. Happy New Year to you all 🥰🥰💜

 **FinnairHelps** @FinnairHelps

Replying to @niri\_sarah  
Hi Sarah, thank you, Happy New Year to you as well. Looking forward seeing soon again :) /Keijo

10:18am · 1 Jan 2019 · Zendesk

1 Retweet 1 Like

**Dario #17** @DarioSanguigni · 14 Dec 2018  
 @Fly\_Norwegian so my flight DY1933 from Dubai to Alicante has just had to make an emergency landing in Shiraz, Iran due to oil/engine fault where one engine had to be shut off mid flight.  
 Any updates for us on what is happening?  
 #NorwegianAir

2 1

**Norwegian** @Fly\_Norwegian · 14 Dec 2018  
 Hi Dario, we have answered you to your direct message. Kind regards, Katarina

2

**Meredith** @Mer\_dith · 3 Dec 2018  
 If you're looking for the poorest customer service across all industries, try talking to someone from @Fly\_Norwegian. #poorservice #flights #flying #travel #customerservice #norwegianair

2 2

**Norwegian** @Fly\_Norwegian · 3 Dec 2018  
 Hi Meredith.  
 We are sorry you feel this way, but thank you for your honest feedback. If you still need any help, you can send us your booking reference in a DM, and we will see what we can do for you.  
 /Alex

1

**Meredith** @Mer\_dith · 3 Dec 2018  
 Hi, Alex - I've DM'd multiple times and have been fed the same cookie cutter response by your team. I'd prefer to be put in contact with someone from upper level management at #norwegian to discuss my issues.

1

**Meredith** @Mer\_dith · 4 Dec 2018  
 Good morning, if I DM, will I someone be able to give me management level contact information to discuss my claim? Or do managers still "never speak to customers"?

2 2 2

**Norwegian** @Fly\_Norwegian · 4 Dec 2018  
 You can contact our customer relations department here: [ms.spr.ly/6012rhqrk](https://ms.spr.ly/6012rhqrk)  
 Monday to Friday 09:00 to 18:00 CET. Br, Mac.

## APPENDIX 7. WELL-DONE COMMUNICATION FROM NORWEGIAN WITH ITS CUSTOMERS



Norwegian @Fly\_Norwegian · 19 Dec 2018

Thank you to all our passengers who have helped children in need with #UNICEF donations in 2018. Let's join forces and continue to make a difference in 2019. Go to [norwegian.com/unicef](https://norwegian.com/unicef) to help ❤️ #flynorwegian #norwegianair



5 4 30

**Norwegian** @Fly\_Norwegian · 6 Dec 2018

Norwegian reported strong passenger growth as it carried almost 2.9 million passengers in November, an increase of 14 percent compared to the same month previous year. Thank you for flying with us! [#flynorwegian](#) [#norwegianair](#) [ms.spr.ly/6019rhxnN](https://ms.spr.ly/6019rhxnN)



20 21 106

**Norwegian** @Fly\_Norwegian · 19 Dec 2018

Thank you to all our passengers who have helped children in need with [#UNICEF](#) donations in 2018. Let's join forces and continue to make a difference in 2019. Go to [norwegian.com/unicef](https://norwegian.com/unicef) to help [#flynorwegian](#) [#norwegianair](#)



5 4 30