



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Q. Evaluating the transformative power of political consumerist talk online: A
content and micro-linguistic investigation into the public response to the 2015
Volkswagen emissions scandal on Twitter

Lina Baumstark

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
BA (*Hons*) Journalism and Media (Ind.)

School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds

May 2019



Word count: 11,998

Abstract

Both case-study and anecdotal evidence have suggested the significance of political consumption as a form of market-based political activism, illustrated in its inclusion of communicative supporters and a robust illocutionary force. But what happens in cases when this political activism fails? The current study examines the content and micro-linguistic details of Twitter responses to the Volkswagen emissions scandal of 2015. The deceit involved manipulation of vehicle software to falsify emission test results and resulted in a groundswell of Twitter activity. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this study ascertains which features of the discourse can be seen to have annulled its communicative potential to hold Volkswagen accountable. Theoretical interpretations and findings indicate five key demises: a lack of focus dedicated to post-materialist values, varied and insincere ethical stances, a hyper-emotional receipt and resonance of the scandal with users, a high degree of speculation and insufficient and fragmented calls-to-action. A recurrence of personalisation and individualisation in the discourse is suggested to impart polyvocality and dispersion to the public voice, annihilating its transformative potential. These results arguably represent a failure of political consumerism and question its validity as a political tool and its function in democracy.

Keywords

Political consumerism, political participation, social media activism, online mobilisation, content analysis, discourse analysis

Contents

1. Introduction	6
1.1. <u>Research aims and objectives</u>	7
2. Literature Review	9
2.1. <u>Introduction</u>	9
2.2. <u>Theoretical context: Post-modern politics</u>	10
2.3. <u>Political consumerism</u>	12
2.4. <u>Citizen consumers and new media</u>	14
2.5. <u>Online activism and twitter</u>	15
3. Research Focus and Design	20
3.1. <u>Sampling</u>	24
3.2. <u>Coding and operationalisation</u>	27
3.3. <u>Reliability and validity</u>	31
3.4. <u>Ethics</u>	32
3.5. <u>Limitations of research</u>	32
4. Findings and discussion	34
4.1. <u>The Volkswagen scandal and political consumerism</u>	34
4.2. <u>The tweeting political consumerist: motivations and values</u>	40
4.3. <u>Transformative potential</u>	49
5. Conclusion	52
5.1. <u>Summary of Findings</u>	52
5.2. <u>Limitations and Direction for Future Research</u>	54
References	56
Appendices	64

List of Figures

Tables:

Table 3.2.1. Breakdown of coding categories for content analysis.....	30
Table 4.1.1. Sentiment distribution per day.....	35
Table 4.1.2. Primary topic of tweets per day.....	38
Table 4.2.1. Purpose of tweet per day.....	40
Table 4.2.2. Use of sarcasm per day.....	44

Figures:

Fig 3.1.1. Volkswagen 2015 emissions scandal: Timeline of events.....	26
Fig 4.1.1. Positive sentiment: emergent themes.....	36
Fig 4.2.1. Mapping purpose of tweet vs. communicative pressure against Volkswagen.....	43
Fig 4.2.2. Mapping sarcasm tools vs. strength of ethical stance.....	47

1. Introduction

On 18 September 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found German car manufacturer Volkswagen had deliberately set out to falsify emissions test results by instating a "defeat device" into diesel engines that was able to detect emissions tests and actively alter the performance accordingly. The exposé of Volkswagen's corporate fraud led stock prices to plummet and caused significant harm to the automobile manufacturer's brand reputation (L2 Think Tank, 2015).

Despite being classed as both a corporate social responsibility crisis (Zhang et al., 2016) and a product-harm crisis, due to the detrimental, yet so far unknown, effect the deceit has had on the environment and the health of consumers (Lai et al., 2015), the political and economic aftermath appears largely inadequate. Numerous scholars and economic reporters have noted the lack of punishment and sanctions imposed by European governments for the contempt of Volkswagen, with the company's 2018 annual report boasting record-breaking sales (the Guardian, 2018). Despite US authorities imposing a \$4.3bn fine, Volkswagen is yet to pay compensation to European customers and government authorities and industry regulators have failed to put any motion into place to tighten monitoring of vehicle emissions (Gude et al., 2018). Although many scholars have noted Volkswagen's perceived strategic shift towards the production of emission-free engines, mimicked by the consumer trend away from diesel vehicles, the sale of diesel is steadily increasing, especially in Eastern Europe and China (the Guardian, 2018), with Volkswagen enduring no long-term implications for its deceit.

Placing Volkswagen's scandal within the growing body of literature surrounding post-modern politics, this study aims to pinpoint the downfalls of political consumerist mobilisation within the online talk generated in response to the news of the scandal. Attempting to justify how citizens failed to mount sufficient communicative pressure online to hold Volkswagen and government bodies accountable, this research assesses the responses

published on Twitter in terms of their motivators, linguistic tools and communicative power. Looking at the role of online networking sites, such as Twitter, in enabling political participation and mobilising social action as a means to exert pressure on those in power (Graham et al., 2013; Procter et al., 2013; Jungherr, 2016), this study uses the example of Volkswagen to contribute to a typology of success and deficiency markers of online talk. This helps to establish the validity of social media sites as insights into public opinion and informing public debate in the context of a public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Scammell, 2000; Bennett, 2003; Stolle et al., 2005). Taken in context of the rise of political consumerism as a new form of political participation (Dahlgren, 2005; Ward and de Vreese, 2011), this case-study questions the capacity of political consumerism to uphold democratic processes and replace dwindling traditional citizenship duties (Strømsnes, 2009). Ultimately, this example of a derelict political consumerist backlash serves as a valuable barometer for gauging the relevance of participatory democracy as the dominant political system in contemporary society.

1.1. Research aims and objectives

This study aims to investigate the responses on Twitter in an attempt to extract motivations, behaviours and collective calls-to-action exhibited as representative of the political consumerist reaction to the Volkswagen emissions scandal of 2015. Specifically, this study will investigate content, textual and micro-linguistic features of the discussions generated, aiming to theorise characteristics of the public voice that can be seen to have annulled its communicative potential to instigate social change. Interpreting the findings of the textual analysis within its theoretical framework, this research aims to identify success and deficiency markers of online talk in terms of their mobilising potential, addressing the implications of

this in terms of its validity as a form of political participation. The research questions are as follows¹:

RQ1. How were sentiments towards Volkswagen and the scandal distributed?

RQ2. Which aspect of the scandal was most tweeted about?

RQ3. What are the main functions of the tweets in response to the scandal?

RQ4. To what extent and in which ways was sarcasm used to intensify or mitigate the opinions expressed in the tweets?

RQ5. In which way and to what effect were linguistic features employed to emphasise or mitigate the expression in the tweets?

RQ6. If and how are ethical stance markers used in tweets and what do they tell us about underlying values of the Twitter users?

RQ7. If and how are calls-to-action incorporated into Twitter messages?

RQ8. If and how do public sentiment, topics of focus, function of tweets and use of sarcasm shift in the context of the development of the scandal over time?

Hence the current study makes valuable inferences into the field of post-modern politics and political communication, suggesting insights from the Volkswagen scandal to inform perceptions of the efficacy of the contemporary participatory democratic system.

¹ Research questions will be unpacked and discussed in detail in Section 3.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

This section thematically examines literature available on the contemporary citizen and the consensus around the shifting forms of political engagement towards extra-parliamentary settings, as well as the affordances of the Internet in aiding these emerging modes of engagement. Next, the controversy around the validity of political consumerism as a contemporary form of political participation and the contingencies for which it is proficient at replacing more traditional, ‘duty-based’ citizenship features are explored. Political consumerism in practice serves as an archetype for contemporary and emerging motivators for political participation and pathways of action. It forms the immediate political context against which the Volkswagen scandal and resultant political consumerist reaction, motives and messages can be mapped.

Moreover, this review evaluates the information available regarding online networking and micro-blogging sites, such as Twitter, in their role as political tools, their affordances for mobilising political consumerism movements and their communicative power to instigate social change. Additionally, this review will consider the sociological aspect of hosting public discourse and debate, to justify both content and linguistic investigation of Twitter content. The existing literature is mapped to demonstrate its lack of close, textual investigation into political consumerist discourse and voicing activity, which disregards extra-parliamentary contexts and is limited to deductive approaches of perceived successes of political movements resulting in social or policy change. As such, studies are argued to discount cases in which no such change occurs, especially for a corporate responsibility deceit as significant in magnitude and detriment as the Volkswagen emissions scandal of 2015.

2.2. Theoretical context: Post-modern politics

The first serious discussions and analyses of normative expectations of citizenship emerged in the 1960s with Habermas' (1989) 'public sphere' theory within the context of a deliberative democracy. This was characterised by openness and plurality and informed by a direct conversation in the process of political deliberation.

Habermas' (1989) deliberative theory has since been critiqued for idealising a somewhat elitist form of political life (Curran, 1990) and has since been challenged by communitarian, liberal-democrat counter-interpretations (*e.g.* Nozick, 1974; Sandel, 1982). Recent studies paint a more realistic picture of the applicability of the deliberative public sphere in contemporary society, with regard to the rise of mass communication and information technology. This has effectuated greater access to public debate, a curbing of communicative barriers of time and space and the unfettered provision of information (Dahlgren, 2005).

In light of such developments, as the mediasation of the public sphere and related aspects of transformation in industrial sectors, as well as rising levels of individualism and risk society, today's public can be seen as increasingly organising social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and personal narratives (Bauman, 2008). The subsequent amplified communicative heterogeneity plays a vital role in challenging the monopoly of government over politics and the thematic constraint on public debate to a narrow P-political focus, opening doors to new, non-governmental pathways of political action (Dalton, 2008). In combination with the twin and related impacts of globalisation and individualisation, this has caused a shift in the understanding of normative citizenship.

In attempts to justify and account for the apparent and widely-cited erosion of traditional, so-called 'formal manifest' capacities of citizenship (Bellamy, 2008), including low election outcomes, disconnected citizenship and wavering trust in government, numerous scholars account for a redistribution of citizenship norms (Dahlgren, 2005; Dalton, 2008).

They report a move towards more individualised, direct, participatory and expressive action located beyond the confines of electoral politics, ultimately expanding the repertoire of political action into extra-parliamentary arenas (Scammell, 2000; Bennett, 2003; Stolle et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2007). In this way, Dalton (2008) finds an increase in ‘engaged’ citizenship, encompassing liberal norms of solidarity, activity in civil society groups and political autonomy. Corroborated by numerous scholars, this paradigm shift has been termed as “life-politics” (Giddens, 1991), “post-modern politics” (Inglehart, 1997), “lifestyle politics” and resultant “cosmopolitan global activism” by Bennett (2003) and “sub-politics” by Beck (1999) – all of whom recognise ‘political consumerism’ to be one of the most common forms of modern, extra-parliamentary civic duty. Hence it is the one considered in this study.

This historical context of shifting norms of citizenship and rising politicised consumption collectively forms the theoretical foundation for this study. The efficacy of politicised consumption in its role of replacing dwindling traditional notions of participation is vital to consider when analysing political consumerist talk, partially responsible for upholding democratic systems.

Looking at media effect research on political participation, the Internet-era and its affordances for citizen mobilisation and activism is widely seen as unrelated to traditional, ‘duty-based’ citizenship but strongly associated to norms of engaged citizenship (Dalton, 2008, p.88), such as political consumerism – thus, justifying the media object under scrutiny with the ideological political movement in question.

Arguably, this sociological shift in normative citizenship values, in combination with the effect of new media in emphasising and assisting new forms of political engagement, has expanded the spectrum of political deliberation (Coleman and Blumler, 2009) and culminated in the new strand of political participation research: ‘discursive constructivism’. This ‘talk-building’ approach can be seen as an offspring of a digitalised deliberative democracy (Micheletti, 2004), celebrating the role of communication and opinion formation in politics.

Goodwin et al. (2001) emphasise the increasing importance of investigating how a discursive constructivist communicative form characterised by expression of emotion, cognitive framing and storytelling can lead to social and political mobilisation.

Bringing the triad of developments detailed above together, the discursive intricacies contained within informal, testimonial and ‘mundane’ conversation are now perceived not only as valuable but central to the formation of public opinion. Capitalising on the notion of discursive constructivism, this study aims to combine these emerging strands of political communication research to investigate the discursive construction of political consumerist talk on Twitter, triggered by a political consumerist scandal.

2.3. Political consumerism

Evidenced through the proliferation of politically conscious environmentalists, consumer watchdogs and action groups (Scammell, 2000), political consumerism is a growing movement that involves the day-to-day activity of citizens’ “conduct of leisure and consumption with an ever-stronger political edge” (Scammell, 2000, p.352). Political consumption perspectives are seen to “explore the ‘citizen experience’ identity politics anchored in lifestyle and consumer choices” (Bennett, 2003, p.137).

The origins of political consumption have been explored from a variety of different perspectives, ranging from Bennett’s (2003) reasoning of socio-cultural changes and citizen identification to Ward and de Vreese’s (2011) insight into transforming power dynamics and increasingly blurred boundaries between the state and economy. Bringing these factors together, political consumerism can be seen to be anchored in social fragmentation and a breakdown of civic institutions (Putnam, 2000), weakening social (for example, class) and political (for example, national or party) identifications (Inglehart, 1997), increasing freedom of choice over social identities and lifestyle (Giddens, 1991), as well as the rise of globalisation and corporate power (Ward, 2008). Stolle et al. (2005) dig even deeper in their

theoretical approach to uncover the emerging attitudinal and behavioural predictors of political consumerism. They identify an upsurge of post-modern and post-materialist values, embodied in concerns for the environment, the inclusion of minorities, sustainable development and values of personal integrity and choice. In this way, political consumers make market choices based on considerations of justice and fairness, calling upon ethical and environmental values (Micheletti et al., 2003). Hence, the Volkswagen scandal, representing not only corporate fraud but also baring substantial environmental harm, incorporates many of the underlying social values and motivations of the contemporary citizen, inviting analysis of these ethical stances in emerging discourse.

What remains disputed, however, is the validity of political consumption as a form of political participation, and more specifically, a substitute for traditional notions of citizen duties. While the validity of political consumption as a form of wider civic involvement and social contexts remains largely unchallenged (Bennett, 2003; Stolle et al., 2005; Dalton, 2008), there is an on-going debate with regard to the connection between political consumerism and participation, convoluted primarily through the conceptualisation of political participation in terms of actions directed at the state. Verba and Nie's (1972) somewhat canonical definition of participation, "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (p.2), leaves little room for the notion of political consumption when conceptualised as a voice-based, non-institutional channel of participation that sidesteps government to target corporations directly. Considering these opposing directions of action and hypothesising civic and political activities as mutually exclusive, de Zúñiga et al. (2014) argue "political consumerism [to be] more closely associated with civic engagement than it is with [...] acts of political participation" (p.492).

However, as established above, political participation overlaps with modern theories of citizenship. Thus, it is crucial to consider the policy change power of political consumption

acts, such as boycotts. Stolle et al.'s (2005) empirical investigation provides evidence for this, reporting that "political consumerist activism has spurred the government to take legal and legislative actions" (p.249). Similarly, Dalton (2008) asserts a substantial political power of political consumption, calling upon the interdependence of state and capitalist market in today's neo-liberal democracy, to create the link between public scrutiny on business practices and pressure on political elites to conform. Hence, despite not being directly aimed at parliamentary politics, political consumerism is granted the potential to instigate policy change. Thus, political consumption fulfils Coleman and Blumler's (2009) criteria for effective participatory democracy, classifying it as "a means of engendering the collective production of policy decisions worthy of public consent" (p.15).

2.4. Citizen consumers and new media

Extant literature largely agrees that the Internet has opened new worlds for the socio-cultural context of the citizen-consumer (Scammell, 2000; Bennett, 2003; Ward, 2008). The rise of online platforms has not only increased consumer choice and provided opportunities for exchange for communities of consumption (Scammell, 2000), but also lowered the cost of activist communication (Bennett, 2003). Similarly, Hölzen and Meier (2018) report positive affordances for social movements, mobilisation and collective action.

When bringing the self-expressive and individualistic communicative nature of social media into the picture, the effect is duplicated in its overlap with the motivations and social values behind political consumption. In de Zúñiga et al.'s (2014) investigation into the role of social media for political consumers, self-expression was reported to take the form of an "exchange of information about organised consumer actions, product interests, stores, sales, brand affinity, or aversion, and other aspects of consumption of goods." (p.493). Thus, social media has been reported to encourage self-expressive, individualistic and postmaterialist-driven participation in politics (Rainie et al., 2011).

Yet, scholars such as Morozov (2009) remain critical of social media activism, characterising it as ‘slacktivism’, that is, “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (p.1). Clark (2016) and Shirky (2011) effectively refute this argument, placing ‘slacktivism’ at the margins of online activism, underlining its effectiveness and deeming it a ‘powerful tool’, based on its mobilisatory power. Recent findings in Shah et al.’s (2012) study into the collective action potential of social media support this, reporting the political consumerist movement to make effective use of social media to coordinate viewpoints and action, such as boycotting. In this way, many scholars have found the high popularity and visibility of social media to be a vital component for exercising pressure on corporations and governments (Shah et al., 2012; Makarem and Jae, 2016; Hölzen and Meier, 2018). Due to the resounding prevalence of accounts of positive correlations between new media and the mobilisation of political consumerist movements, this study adopts de Zúñiga et al.’s (2014) view that the “social influence and social information-sharing functions of social media [...] are important mechanisms in linking media use to this form of political participation” (p.494). This finding forms the vital link between the role of content on Twitter as a form of political deliberation informing public debate within the context of a public sphere (Coleman and Blumler, 2009) to the justification of its relevance to mobilising and documenting political consumerism movements in the digital age.

2.5. Online activism and Twitter

One site for social and political interaction is the real-time micro-blogging service, Twitter, that boasts a massive reach of more than 645 million users in 2014 (Makarem and Jae, 2016), providing an immense amount of textual data. The open platform allows users to post ‘tweets’, which, up until 2017, were limited to 140 characters each. Tweets are public, discoverable and collectable through Twitter search tools (Procter et al., 2013). As noted by Makarem and Jae (2016), tweets usually have an informal writing style. They are expressions

of all users, citizens and consumers, and are regarded as vital for the mobilisation of political movements and activism, due to Twitter's real-time dissemination of information, enormous reach and instantaneous sharing and trending function (Hoffmann, 2011). Allowing individuals to aggregate information about previous actions, Twitter has been reported to increase the likelihood of success of the movement (Kiss and Rosa-García, 2011), thus representing a prominent example of a social media channel for political consumption activism (Bennett, 2003; de Zúñiga et al., 2014). In this way, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014) identify emerging global, independent, horizontal, and self-organised 'cyberactivism 2.0' hosted on sites such as Twitter as a new form of grassroots activism.

The validity of Twitter as an arena for political consumption mobilisation is duplicated when considering its value for a sociological insight into the discursive constructivism of debate in the public sphere, representing a net-based space for public deliberation (Hölzen and Meier, 2018). Extant literature attributes this to the unfiltered, honest and self-expressive nature of tweets (Zappavigna, 2012, p.170).

Existing studies on mobilisation and activism on Twitter have, on the one hand, focused on large-scale quantitative content analyses of messages to investigate motives and targets of online activism. These include Makarem and Jae's (2016) study into consumer boycott behaviour and investigation of the salience of calls-to-action. They find instrumental motivations in the form of a clear expression of goals or desired action to be more effective than non-instrumental and mixed motivations aimed at fulfilling psychological needs (for example, venting frustration and expressing anger), whereby the latter retains a high emotional intensity (Makarem and Jae, 2016). As such, measurable motivators embedded within calls-to-action serve as indicators of the efficacy of activist discourse online. Similarly, a large-scale Systemic Function Linguistic method was used by Konnelly (2015) to study the use of hashtags in online activism, using the case study of the #YesAllWomen and #HeForShe movements, finding linguistic and social facilitative aspects of the deployment of

hashtags, primarily with the aim to assert identity and political affiliation, as a common trope amongst activism on Twitter. Adopting a similarly large-scale sentiment approach whilst taking a marketing business perspective, Zhang et al. (2016) investigate the case of the Volkswagen scandal, revealing a high negative peak following the breaking of the scandal and insights into apologetic strategies employed by Volkswagen's public Twitter account. Quantitative tracking of tweet-mentions reported spikes of Twitter activity around the topic of Volkswagen with each new development in the uncovering of the scandal, from Volkswagen's statement admitting to wrongdoing on 21 September to the news of the resignation of CEO on 23 September (Parsons, 2015).

While large-scale, automated content analyses are valuable to quantify public responses and sentiment, they "only harness a small fraction of information that language use can reveal about people" (Schwartz and Unga, 2015, p.80). While they can reveal useful information concerning purpose and mood of a tweet, little is exposed about the characteristics of social-media based voicing behaviours, the salience of calls-to-action, the reasoning behind large-scale sentiments and ethical stances of the users.

Recognising the downfalls of large-scale content analyses, a few scholars have moved towards closer, qualitative analyses, aiming to reveal the discursive tenets and motivations embedded within quantitative findings. In this way, Potts et al. (2014) explore activists' conception of success on Twitter, finding that activists are aware of the potential but also the dangers of social media activism; however, they struggle to achieve their activist goals. Narrowing down the object of study even further, Knoblock (2016) investigates the use of sarcasm and irony as a political tool during the on-going debate regarding the social crisis in Ukraine. A positive effect of sarcasm on online mobilisation was reported, used to encourage the formation of social bonds and rallying like-minded people.

While there is a distinct gap in the literature surrounding success markers for social and political movements online demanding a small-scale discourse analysis of tweets, there is

general agreement amongst scholars concerning the value of a homogeneous, collective public voice. In their investigation into the responses to the release of the Panama papers in 2016, Neu et al. (2018) pinpoint features of public discourse on social media required to get the attention of the government. Their study investigates the ‘when’ and ‘how’ of a cohesion of public voice in communication media, termed ‘speech genres’, which have been found to “provide the impulse for social activism and positive social change” (p.3), a process which Butler (2015) terms “spilling out”. Scholars have hypothesised that an increased interrelation, resulting in fewer differentiable ‘speech genres’, are more likely to ‘spill out’ into the surrounding communication medium and serve as a stimulus for social change. Tufekci (2017) deconstructs this process, to show how large-scale collective stakeholder voices on social media gain traction with government and corporate agents in a way that requires them to respond. In this way, a dispersive public voice is deemed to fail to result in accountability demands. This is corroborated with Else’s (2012) report of a heterogeneous public voice to damage the potential for social change, instead focusing on the horizontal, decentralised structure of e-movement which necessitates a ‘consistent message’. This suggests that a lack of cohesion in public voice and more polyvocal and overlapping speech genres, with a high discrepancy in the thematic topic and linguistic features of the messages, lie behind the corresponding lack of accountability of Volkswagen and government action. All these extant studies neither regard the political consumerist context of online activism nor involve an evaluation of transformative power, to gauge their ability to uphold democratic systems.

Moreover, most case studies deductively investigate discourse behind perceived successes of activism. Examples include the #MeToo movement, which resulted in the prosecution of several Hollywood figures upon accusations of sexual harassment, or the political consumerist example of the SeaWorld boycott in 2017 (Makarem and Jae, 2016), leading to the agreement to end orca breeding programmes. There is a distinct lack of case studies in which the efficacy of political consumerism as a political tool appears flawed.

Hence, it is important to take a micro-linguistic look into the responses and political consumption mobilisation on Twitter in response to an extra-parliamentary and political consumption impetus, such as the Volkswagen emissions scandal of 2015.

3. Research Focus and Design

In order to construct a corpus of both the public mood and the corresponding micro-dynamics of discursive activity on Twitter, the analysis of the data possesses a bifurcated strategy. This study blends deductive coding of content with an inductive discourse and micro-linguistic analysis, in order to afford a rich investigation of meaning-making in a single domain on Twitter. The historical data dates back to 2015, at which point the length of a tweet was limited to 140 characters, thus representing a highly compressed textual format, while containing sufficient information for researchers to extract data on both content and linguistic practices (Zappavigna, 2012). There is yet a typology to emerge that documents the appearance and construction of political consumerist movements on social media platforms, such as Twitter. However, existing research has identified various other success factors and variables that serve as useful indicators for assessing the responses to the Volkswagen case. On the one hand, this research seeks to explore how political consumerist concepts and practices identified in the existing literature are manifested in responses on social media; and, on the other hand, aims to build upon the notion of discursive constructivism to capture practices that are unique to political consumerist stimuli and have thus not yet appeared in the extant literature.

Three sets of research questions were developed. In the first part, the content analysis dissects pre-determined categories to test the prevailing public mood, mapping basic patterns of meaning in a comparative perspective. As the conceptual exploration has demonstrated, political consumerists are guided by values of environmental protection, social inclusivity, sustainable innovation and civic impact (Stolle et al., 2005). Thus, in order to provide context to the following textual analysis and investigate the responses with regard to their political consumption edge, it is important to consider what is being tweeted about:

RQ1. How were sentiments towards Volkswagen and the scandal distributed?

RQ2. Which aspect of the scandal was most tweeted about?

The investigation into the direction of criticism (*RQ2*) builds upon Zhang et al.'s (2016) findings of an overwhelmingly negative sentiment of the responses, bearing significant implications on the political consumption values and practices and their relative efficacy. Furthermore, the study investigates levels and types of expression, looking at the motivators and aims of a tweet. As outlined in the literature review, affordances of new media to online activism includes knowledge-sharing to inform consumer choice, coordination of consumer actions and circulation of critique of corporations (Hölzen and Meier, 2018). Furthermore, sarcasm was found to be a powerful tool for mobilisation, especially in its ability to create communities (Knoblock, 2016). Findings from these tweeting behaviours will reveal further layers of understanding into how political movements are constructed on the Twitter domain:

RQ3. What are the main functions of the tweets in response to the scandal?

RQ4. To what extent was sarcasm used to intensify or mitigate the opinions expressed in the tweets?

This concludes the content analysis of this research. Overall, the content dissection of the tweet data is deductively performed to test the hypothesis of the product-harm aspect of the scandal to be most heavily criticised, based on the political consumption theory of post-materialist values, including increasing concerns about the environment. A categorisation of phenomena of interest (Bryman, 2016), in the discrete yet latent dimensions of sentiment, purpose, sarcastic usage and primary topic, is operationalised. This approach provides the

research with a degree of objectivity and reliability, being more transparent, systematic and quantitative, thus allowing less room for bias and the possibility for replication (Bryman, 2016).

The second set of research questions aims to build upon the first set and answer the question of ‘why’ and ‘how’ in relation to the ‘what’, employing a linguistic discourse analysis of the Twitter content. Here, the research focus lies in the correlation of linguistic activity and voicing behaviour characteristics to the relative dominance of thematic categories in the data, drawing conclusions concerning their relative efficacy within the immediate political context. It requires an explorative and inductive investigation into the linguistic features of the discourse.

This social linguistic analysis is guided by markers identified by Neu et al. (2018) and looks at the discursive construction and direction of communicative pressure, nature of calls-to-action, motivators and forcefulness of opinion, investigating if and how a cohesion in public voice materialises. The researcher analyses rhetorical strategies employed by Twitter users in their response to the news of scandal and the ‘conditions of possibility’ (Foucault, 1972) that were present, looking at how collaboration can be generated discursively. Building upon the notion of discursive constructivism as political participation, the corresponding research questions examine if and how the construction of shared understanding materialises through conversational activity and their potential for action:

RQ5. In which way and to what effect were linguistic features employed to emphasise or mitigate the expression in the tweets?

RQ6. If and how are ethical stance markers used in tweets and what do they tell us about underlying moral values of the Twitter users?

RQ7. If and how are calls-to-action incorporated into Twitter messages?

RQ5 addresses linguistic strategies employed to intensify expressions within tweets, investigating the meaning-making processes and forcefulness of expression behind Twitter responses. This understanding is aided by insights from *RQ6*, unpacking the employment of ethical stance markers that indicate pre-existing values and moral standpoints of the users. Taken in combination with results from *RQ2*, the researcher is able to gauge the degree of political consumerist motivators (Stolle et al., 2005) and the employment of identified affordances of new media to mobilisation (Hölzen and Meier, 2018). *RQ7* addresses the signposts of mobilisation expressed in the tweets, if and how they are employed, and whether these suggest collective or individualised action, utilise non-instrumental or instrumental aims and evaluate the degree of emotional intensity (Makarem and Jae, 2016). All in all, these research questions address the extent of cohesion in public voice on Twitter, tackling Tufekci's (2017) findings of the importance of a univocal voice to instigate social change.

This linguistic approach is based on Straussian grounded theory and is both constructivist and text-based (Strauss, 1987). It is performed by iteratively and inductively coding and detecting emerging patterns of 'social intersubjectivity' in the linguistic features and voicing characteristics (Ruiz, 2009), grouping reoccurring themes of codes into broader concepts. This study conducts a fine-grained exploration of the way in which the social reality of a lack of communicative 'spill' into the surrounding space has been constructed (Phillips and Hardy, 2002), accounting for an annihilation of the transformative power of the discourse that would have otherwise coerced long-term consequences for Volkswagen. The investigation of the micro-dynamics of discursive activity is considered only in its immediate context, that is, in the context of the debate on Twitter, rather than the broader political context, which is considered in the content analysis approach. This part of the analysis is more subjective and will undoubtedly be induced by the researcher's interpretation; however, it allows for a more in-depth investigation into communicative power and a higher validity.

The final set of research questions operates along a longitudinal axis, investigating Twitter content posted at various points in time corresponding to crucial developments in the uncovering of the scandal. This allows the researcher to detect any changes in patterns of content and voicing behaviours during this time and assess the relative longevity of activist salience, thus considering another factor that might have contributed to barring the ‘spilling out’ of public voice into the public sphere (Tufekci, 2017):

RQ8. If and how do public sentiment, topics of focus, function of tweets and use of sarcasm shift in the context of the development of the scandal over time?

This triangulation approach is in line with methodological literature, which sees content analysis as valuable for positivistic assessments of frequency distributions (Krippendorff, 2004), and qualitative inductive analyses as useful for grounded theory building (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

3.1. Sampling

To aggregate the dataset for this study, the researcher first conducted a keyword and hashtag search using the Twitter Advanced Search (<https://twitter.com/search-advanced?lang=en-gb>), applying relevant exclusion criteria, which included selecting representative days that account for different developments in the uncovering of the scandal. In order to ensure the tweets adhered to probability and random sampling methods, the resulting search results were set to ‘All’ (instead of ‘Top’) tweets, generating a randomised set of tweets from the desired date. This setting increases the certification for a relative representation of the responses in the dataset in the chosen timeframe of a day, following the breaking of news on the development of the scandal, whilst concretising the sample to a manageable size. Random sampling has been found to serve as a more efficient and representative sample of Twitter datasets, as

opposed to a stratified sampling method, involving, for example, a constructive selection of a certain number of tweets per hour (Kim et al., 2018). The resulting webpages containing the data from each day were saved in a password-protected PDF format to avoid alterations to the dataset due to a reloading of the webpage before the tweet content was manually copied and pasted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

The digital dataset is primarily defined by the presence of the hashtags #dieselgate, #VW, or #Volkswagen, chosen as sampling criteria for the strategic utilisation of the semiotic resource of the hashtag, applied by users to ‘socially tag’ the tweet and serve as a topic-marker, allocating to it a thematic debate on the platform (Zappavigna, 2015). Zappavigna (2015) reports hashtag-use to pre-organise talk on Twitter, thus a hashtag search would generate a largely topical dataset surrounding the scandal. All three hashtags were amongst the trending themes on Twitter on the dates 18 to 28 September 2015, implying a high public engagement on these days.

The dataset was further filtered through a time-stamp filter, classified for four days in September 2015, each representing an approximate 24-hour timeframe of responses following a news breaking of development in the scandal. This study adopts Parsons’ (2015) quantitative digital trace results of spikes in Twitter mentions around the topic of Volkswagen, with findings of a total of 2,040,834 tweets posted between 18 September and 28 September. Tweet volumes were first reported to peak on 21 September, following the news breaking of Volkswagen’s statement admitting to wrongdoing, resulting in a significant stock crash at 7.35am BST. This was followed by more details of the scandal, released by the press continuously throughout the following day, 22 September, to the news of the resignation of the CEO at around 4 pm BST on 23 September, generating 414,473 tweets about the crisis on that day alone (Parsons, 2015). As the REST API keyword search only accounts for date and not timestamps, the reactions to the news of the CEO resignation was collected from content posted the following day, 24 September. Adding a sequential dimension to the content

and corresponding linguistic activity under investigation, this research will also look at data from 28 September, for which Parsons (2015) reports yet another spike of topicality on Twitter. This corresponds to the appointment of Porsche chief, Mathias Müller, as new company CEO and the launch of the investigation into Winterkorn by German authorities the day before. The timeline of events during the development of the breaking of the scandal is visualised in Fig 3.1.1.

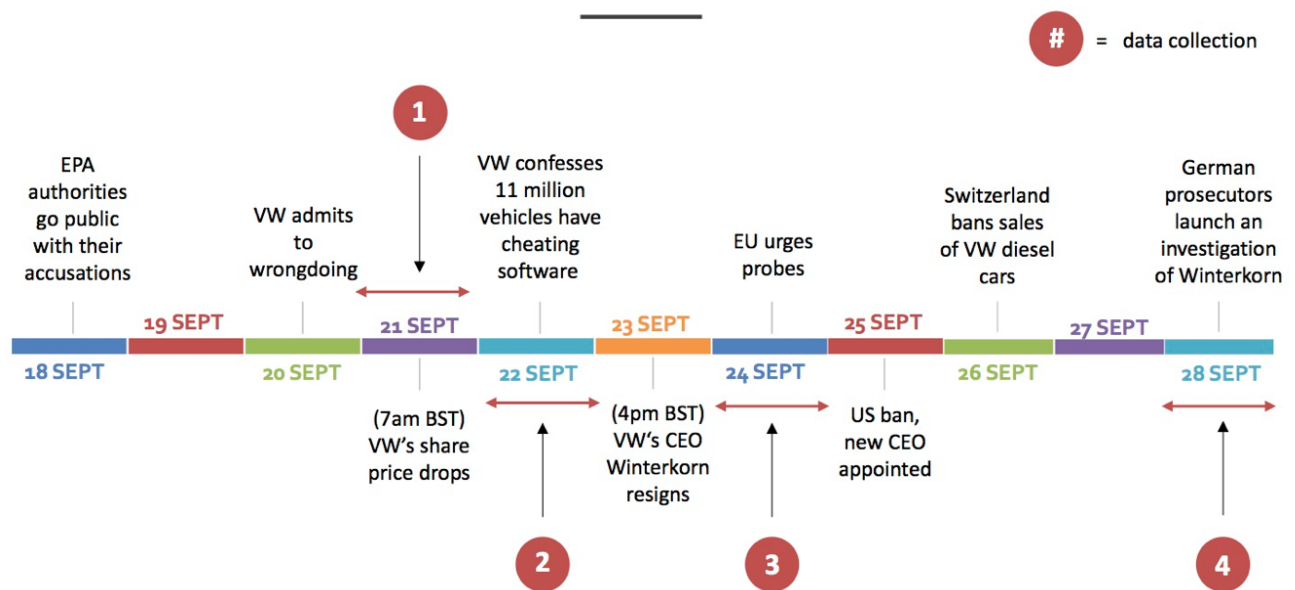


Fig. 3.1.1. Volkswagen 2015 emissions scandal: Timeline of events

Thus, the statement entered into the Twitter Advanced Search engine for each day, was as follows:

21 September: *#dieselgate OR #volkswagen OR #VW since:2015-9-21 until:2015-9-22*

22 September: *#dieselgate OR #volkswagen OR #VW since:2015-9-22 until:2015-9-23*

24 September: *#dieselgate OR #volkswagen OR #VW since:2015-9-22 until:2015-9-23*

28 September: *#dieselgate OR #volkswagen OR #VW since:2015-9-28 until:2015-9-29*

Further to the keyword search for either hashtags #VW, #Volkswagen and #dieselgate for each of the four days (21, 22, 24 and 28 September), several additional exclusion criteria were applied in order to filter out the dataset. These included a language filter set to English,

an exclusion of retweets and @-replies, as the tweets are studied outside the context of their conversational sequence, as well as manual filtering of tweets based on topicality. Finally, upon randomisation, the first 150 tweets for each day were selected for analysis, resulting in a total of 600 tweets.

3.2. Coding and operationalisation

For the deductive coding stage, a coding manual was set up (see Appendix 2) using a pilot study of 50 tweets to determine a complete listing of coding categories and numerical codes for each dimension. The manual was devised specific to this investigation and case study and includes guidance on how to interpret the dimensions and any grey areas or peripheral factors that should be considered.

The tweets were coded according to the manual, focusing on four distinct dimensions, as represented in Table 3.2.1 (*see p.30*). Addressing *RQ1* and *RQ2* correspondingly, tweets were coded for sentiment to the scandal (1 positive, 2 negative, or 3 neutral), and primary topic of tweet (1 environmental implications, 2 personal assets, 3 brand reputation, 4 corporate deceit, 5 criminality, 6 consumer action, 7 stock prices, 8 VW's competitors, 9 future of diesel engines, 10 capitalist forces, 11 undefined). Taking a look into the types of expression as outlined in *RQ3*, the purpose or function of the tweet category was delineated (1 inform, 2 criticise/blame, 3 mock/ridicule, 4 express emotion, 5 defend, 6 speculate, 7 neutral comment), in conjunction with the use of sarcasm (1 yes, 2 no or 3 undefined) (*RQ4*). These areas were subsequently analysed to identify relative occurrence over time, tracking the extent to which any such coding categories occur together, in order to identify patterns of co-occurrence and interrelationships between categories, speaking to *RQ8*.

Although certain linguistic features, such as syntax, punctuation and grammar, could be defined as manifest content and encourage a deductive coding, this study bases the discourse and linguistic analysis around the more latent linguistic features of intersubjective

‘speech genres’. Neu et al. (2018) define ‘speech genres’ as patterns of unique linguistic styles for expressing emotion and opinion on social media, such as Twitter, resulting in differing orientations and ethical stances across genres. These include descriptors, forms of intonation, ethical stance markers and calls-to-action, all of which will be considered in terms of their effect on the top-line message of the tweet.

Descriptors consider the process of using words or phrases that evaluatively index or describe and serve as underlying frames of meaning and own a predication linguistic effect. For example, descriptors such as “thwarted”, “rigged”, “screwed”, “shameful”, used to describe either the deceit, those accountable or environmental issues, frame the subject in a way that lends insight into the construction of meaning. Intonation refers to the use of expressive punctuation and other emotive linguistic practices, such as excess of carnivalesque voicing, that serve as methods of intensification or mitigation of meaning. For example, exclamations such as “Wow!” or “wtf?!?” convey certain emotions and influence the communicative resonance of the tweet. Results from the coding in these categories lend insight into *RQ5*.

Ethical stance markers are symptoms of perspectivisation and pre-existing value systems, looking at implied norms of right and wrong. For example, assumptions such as “you’re supposed to be the good guys” is insightful when looking at traces of post-modern and materialistic values that are premeditated by political consumerism, thus useful to resolving *RQ6*. Finally, calls-to-action consider explicit indications of a path of action, including a look at who the appeal is targeted towards. This linguistic marker connects the content signs to concrete actions and is arguably the most prominent signal of how and if the communication is able to accumulate sufficient transformative pressure to ‘spill out’ into the material world. This coding category aids insight into *RQ7* and includes phrases such as “they should be driven out of business & jailed” or “I expect a change...”.

CATEGORY	CODE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES	
T1 - Sentiment				
	1 - positive	The nature of the subjective opinion that is expressed, forming the general mood or affective state of the response towards either Volkswagen, the scandal in general or those responsible. Positive sentiment is seen to defend Volkswagen or identifying any other personal benefit or positive outcome. Statements of fact with no emotional and ethical stance are classed as neutral.	"diesel is life"; "still a VW fan"; "Thank you for making awesome cars"	
	2 - negative		"Guess I'm lucky I drive a gasoline"; "seems like a good day to shop for a new car"	
	3 - neutral		"I'm 'exhausted'; "shame on VW"; "worse than..."; "what a rip off"; "crushed by this news"	
			"another totally unforeseen event"; "will be interesting to see how reputation of fossil fuels is affected"; "as a consumer, I really couldn't care less"	
T2 - Purpose/Aim		Look at the underlying aim of the posting of the tweet and its role within the public debate surrounding the scandal		
	1 – inform	Neutrally share or provide information, evidence or facts on the scandal. This can be the replication of news of developments in the scandal that just broke or include links to news organization's online articles.	"#Volkswagen says 11 million vehicles are affected and it's already set aside \$7.3 billion to remedy the situation."; "#VW is faces an \$18billion fine for smart software" or "#Volkswagen emissions scandal will cost billions and could tarnish the entire German auto industry."	
	2 - criticize	Include tweets that condemn and target their criticism at a certain subject, condemning actions or attributing blame with intent to take action. For example, "Shady stuff from VW" or "shame on VW", with no reference to personal effect.	"#VW should be shut down and its executives go to jail for this fraud"; "Real people go to real jail for a really long time for lesser crimes than this" or "#Volkswagen is just the latest scandal from an epic decade of white-collar criminality"	
	3 – mock/ridicule	Include tweets that intend to be humorous at the expense of a certain subject, for example using sarcasm (see T3). Content treated with contempt or derision, possibly also mimic speech, slogans or messaging.	"In the #VW scandal, the #driving force was to make money."; "For Halloween I'm going to take a massive amount of diuretics and go as a #Volkswagen Passat" or "I wish my grades were curved as high as the emissions testing results of @Volkswagen"	
	4 – express emotion	Include tweets that take a passive yet personalized and individualized stance to explicitly or implicitly express evoked and responsive feelings to the scandal, sometimes referring to anecdotal evidence to mention how the individual is affected. The personalization of the issue is subcategorized by feeling:	4a. betrayal Reference to how the scandal has changed perception of brand and consumption behaviour.	"Trust gone over a cliff."; "Nothing like finding out there's a major recall on the new car you bought a month ago" or "I drive #Volkswagen Diesel. Bought it specifically for emissions & milage reasons. They cheated. I was cheated"
			4b. disappointment Framing of scandal as a personal attack against the consumer, feeling of letting down, sadness.	"I am so sad!"; "Crushed by this news" or "Very saddened by one more corp thinking they can fool consumers"
			4c. frustration Reference to exhaustion, tiredness, passive resentment and urgency of action.	"I wonder what's the point of #climate negotiations, if very few things agreed so far are not enforced."; "This is not the time to abandon your customers #VW !" or "I'm "exhausted" from this VW emissions scandal."
			4d. anger Active expression of irritation, outbursts of hateful/offensive language and swearing.	"Serves them right. Lying sods"; „Earth says fuck you." Or "Fucking idiots. #Volkswagen"
			4e. acceptance/resignation	"#DieselGate who cares if @Volkswagen cheated, diesel is life"; "Is anyone surprised #Volkswagen manipulated their emissions data? We know car-makers always understate consumption" or "As a consumer, I really cannot care less... #VW"
			4f. disbelief	"So hard to believe that auto manufacturers would lie to maintain/increase their market share"; "I must admit I'm pretty floored by #Volkswagen." Or "The depths of the deceit are just shocking. #VW scandal"
	5 - defend	Include tweets that intend to support the accused in the face of criticism, express upholding of loyalty or warding off or contesting attacks by maintain argument, evidence.	"Volkswagen we are always with you we are sure u will find a #solution to the biggest problem of emission"; "#VW shouldn't be judged too harshly for lying about its emissions. Everyone does it." Or "Shocker alert: "Vehicles pollute." That is all. #VW"	
	6 - speculate	Include tweets that question the nature of the scandal, indulge in conjectural thought, theorizing alternative or additional outcomes. This can involve the extent of the scandal within Volkswagen itself as well as on other car manufacturing firms.	"I'm very curious how much @VW will lose in Diesel Car Market share"; "I highly doubt #Volkswagen is the only carmaker cheating emissions tests" or "How is it possible that the #VW TDI pollutes "10-40" times more than other equivalents modern engines? Is that really accurate?"	
	7 – neutral comment	Include tweets that do not match to any of the above categories, and place no value on their comment, maintaining a factual and objective stance	"#vw got themselves in a serious pickle"; "VW shares plunge on emissions scandal as probe widens to other carmakers #Volkswagen" or "#VW's diesel problems could end in criminal prosecution"	

T3 - Use of sarcasm			
	1 - yes	Look at tone of tweet to detect harsh or bitter derision or ironical taunt, to emphasize the emotive response. Explicit expression of emotion and opinion is coded as 'no'. Sarcastic linguistic features include: hyperbole, oxymorons, uncommon collocations, polysemy, neologisms, and the stylistic contrast of slurs and vulgarisms mixed in with neutral lexis. Questions that can both be understood as rhetorical or ironic as well as explicit and valid query are coded as 'undefined'.	"are we 100% sure Hitler is no longer running #Volkswagen?"; "Guess who just wrote the book How to Severely Damage Your Brand Credibility"
	2 – no		"Totally shocked by @Volkswagen"
	3 - undefined		"Could #VW be the Lance Armstrong of the motor industry?"; "Is this the car industry's horse meat moment?"
T4 – Primary topic			
	Look at primary focus of the message, aspect of the scandal that is addressed.		
	1 – environment	Include tweets mentioning any allegations of pollution, environmental harm as well as health risks	"@VW Blue skies obscured by the black diesel exhaust from ur fraudulent clean diesel cars!"; "#Volkswagen you do realize youre screwing up our environment?" or "Sucks that they cheated to sell cars and ruin the environ."
	2 – Personal assets	Include tweets concerned with the value of their Volkswagen vehicle, mentions of re-calls or demands for refunds	"I loved our Jetta Sportswomen TDI- Never has a company had such enthusiastic ambassadors. I am so done."; "VWcanada so what do you expect me to do with my 2 week old 2015 Jetta TDI?" or "VW - so so so annoyed to know I own one of affected #VW diesels"
	3 – brand reputation	Include tweets with a focus around the effect of Volkswagen's brand and image, marketing approach and laments of flailing reputation	"Guess who just wrote the book How to Severely Damage Your Brand Credibility#Volkswagen"; "Reputations are hard to win and easy to lose." Or "Another corporate scandal reinforces the importance of #corporate #culture."
	4 – corporate deceit	Include tweets focused around the betrayal of customers and stakeholders, through untruthful corporate messaging and fraudulent marketing and selling strategies	"so hard to believe that auto manufacturers would lie to maintain/increase their market share"; "Automobile companies don't accidentally install software designed to fool regulators and consumers" or "#Volkswagen - the latest corporation that thinks it can lie and cheat its way to profit at everyone else's expense"
	5 - criminality	Include tweets focused around the unlawfulness or the scandal and legislative accountability of actors involved, including calls for government or legislative action	"US corporate criminal liability + death by diesel = homicide charges for VW?"; "#Volkswagen is just the latest scandal from an epic decade of white-collar criminality" or "German prosecutors announced the launch of a criminal investigation of recently resigned #VW"
	6 – consumer action	Include tweets focused around the consumer reaction of the tweet, expectations of boycotts or calls to action directed at Volkswagen customers	"In an act of direct action against #VW's corporate deceit, we deliberately 'de-fuelled' the van this evening"; "Tampering like this required authorization from top brass.!! Boycott VW!" or "I'd be happy to join a class action lawsuit."
	7 – stock prices/VW's revenue	Include tweets topical to the decrease in share price of Volkswagen and/or mention VW's monetary losses	"VW shares plunge on emissions scandal"; "#Volkswagen cars are about to get a lot cheaper." Or "#dieselgate #Volkswagen emissions scandal will cost billions and could tarnish the entire German auto industry."
	8 – VW's competitors	Include tweets that focus around other carmakers harnessing scandal for own profit, including encouragements and recommendations of other car manufacturer brands, as well as speculations on their involvement in the scandal	"The folks at Toyota got the last laugh. #fuelcell #hybrid"; "After #Volkswagen is #Audi next? -/;" or "Guess @Porsche will admit their #dieselgate issues next."
	9 – future of diesel engines	Include tweets that discuss the implications on diesel as a fuel, its quality, efficacy or any other quality	"#VW sees technical solution for diesels"; "Will be interesting to see how reputation of fossil fuels affected." Or "Will this be the end of diesel cars in America #dieselgate"
	10 – capitalist forces	Include tweets that mention, blame or criticize the capitalist and neo-liberal pressures behind the deceit including the succumbing to these pressures by VW.	"Are we again victims of the filthy capitalists?"; "capitalism shows it just can't resist an exploitative, corrupt, swindling move in name of profit #Volkswagen" or "how the #RuleofLaw reacts to mass killing by profit greed #Volkswagen"
	11 - undefined	Include tweets that don't identifiably reference a particular aspect of the scandal	"How quickly things can change. #TDI #dieselgate" or "Disappointing news from VW #fahrfromgreenengine" or "Cmon, #Volkswagen, I really expected better"

Table 3.2.1. Breakdown of coding categories for content analysis

3.3. Reliability and validity

Several measures were taken to increase the reliability of the findings and the replicability of the study, and to ascertain confidence in the researcher's deductive coding. Once the initial coding categories were determined, a pilot study was conducted – 50 tweets were selected by means of a cluster sampling approach – in order to identify and rectify any grey areas, test the functionality of the coding manual and construct mutually exclusive and exhaustive coding categories (Bryman, 2016).

For the content analysis, all categories in question classify as latent coding categories, intended to uncover the underlying meaning behind manifest and tangible content, again allowing room for a degree of interpretation. In order to increase stability and replicability of the study, the coder completed an intra-coder reliability test, which assessed the reliability of the coding manual. Two coding tests were conducted for the deductive categories allowing for a week time difference, resulting in a 0% discrepancy rate across all categories but 'function/purpose', for which a 4% discrepancy rate ($k=2$; $n=50$) was found. To iron out the discrepancy, the coding scheme for the 'purpose' dimension was refined to include the category of 'neutral comment'. A re-test for intra-reliability resulted in a 0% discrepancy rate, indicating a high stability in coding behaviour of the researcher.

Utilising a researcher lens when establishing validity encourages a process of "validity-as-reflexive-accounting" (Altheide and Johnson, 1994) and prompts a look into validation processes of researcher reflexivity and transparency (Creswell and Miller, 2000). The linguistic analysis takes a critical realist perspective, assuming "social reality [...] to exist independently of people's awareness of it" (Deacon et al., 1999, p.10), thus addressing the relationship between social and cultural practices – i.e. discourse and linguistic construction – and social order (Bryman, 2016). The researcher was able to identify a critical paradigm assumption in combination with a researcher lens and therefore, drew upon validity procedures that include the self-disclosure of assumption and biases. These were inspected in

the process of self-assessment and in reflection of personal, cultural and historical biases and reported on concerning their potential to nuanced results and interpretations. The operationalisation of researcher reflexivity was incorporated into a narrative account, employing an “interpretative commentary through the discussion of the findings” (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.127).

3.4. Ethics

Both deductive and inductive methods employed for this study are entirely unobtrusive and non-reactive, and thus require little ethical scrutiny (Bryman, 2016). The tweets are readily accessible, public and open data hosted on the Twitter domain, thus agreeing to observation by third parties. By using hashtags, the users have annotated their message, published with the intention to be observed by strangers and contribute to a topical debate (Zappavigna, 2015). The content of the tweets does not communicate a sensitive subject; thus, it is reasonable to assume a low risk of harm (Bryman, 2016).

Nonetheless, the research will ensure anonymisation of the user ID and other collected metadata and potential identifying factors – e.g. age, location and DOB – to safeguard the anonymity of the Twitter users involved, eliminating the information from the dataset instantaneously. Please refer to the signed ethics form in Appendix 3.

3.5. Limitations of research

Despite adopting a mixed-methods approach and thus offering mutually corroborated findings that can be argued to offset individual weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative approaches, there are several structural limitations to this study. Firstly, while this research is primarily concerned with the individual construction of meaning and the content of responses to a political consumerist stimulus, political consumerism can be argued to be a collective action (Ward and de Vreese, 2011). This prompts a look into responses in relation to their interaction

with other comments and users and the construction of online communities, suggested to provide a more comprehensive picture of the mobilisation of like-minded communities online. Furthermore, the scope of the research is limited by its sample size, which cannot be taken as wholly representative of all responses and reactions to the scandal. Moreover, the English language exclusivity arguably restricts the sample in its prioritisation of certain geographical areas, in particular, Western countries such as the U.K., U.S.A., Canada and other European countries. However, studies have shown that the extent and nature of political consumerist developments in other parts of the world differ substantially, highlighting the importance for “scholarship on political consumerism to be sensitive to different structural and cultural characteristics” (Böstrom et al., 2018, p.14). Fundamental societal structures and political contexts, such as a social-liberal welfare state and market-based capitalism, have been found to be inherently linked to the advent of political consumerism (Oosterveer et al., 2007; Hoi et al., 2009). Therefore, the reactions cannot be generalised to account for the transformative power and implications of a failed political consumerist uprising for a global population, and a future study should consider a cross-cultural analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

This chapter combines a presentation of results with their interpretative discussion within the conceptual framework, grouping quantitative content findings and discussion with qualitative findings of emergent concepts and categories. The mixed-methods approach revealed a range of findings regarding the thematic focus of the discourse and its relation to political consumption. This includes the strategic employment and relative efficacy of sarcasm, the underlying ethical values and motivators of users responding to the scandal, and finally, characteristics of calls-to-action and discursive construction that lend insight to the extent of a coalescing public voice and its transformative potential – or, as in this case, its distinct lack thereof. Quantitative findings are combined with micro-linguistic and discursive findings and explored in relation to existing literature on online mobilisation and activism in Twitter, to theorise the main downfalls of the transformative potential of the discourse generated.

4.1. The Volkswagen scandal and political consumerism

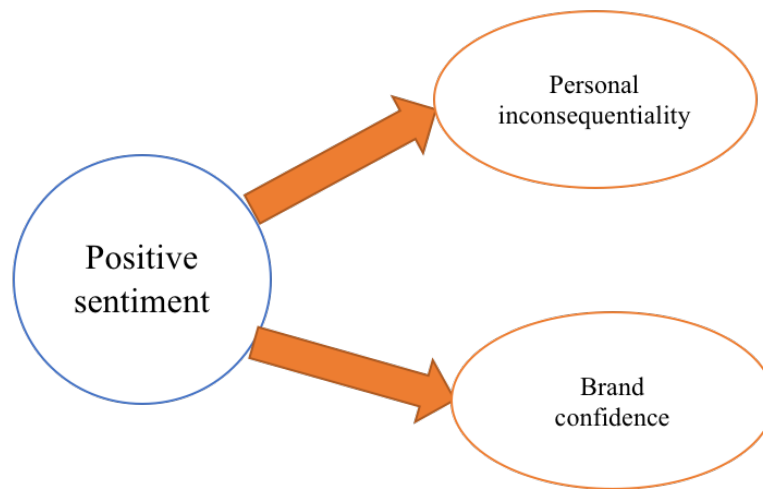
When assessing the extent of political consumerist bestowal in the reactions to the scandal, it is essential to look at the distribution of sentiment (*RQ1*) towards Volkswagen, as well as the principal topic of the tweets (*RQ2*). In combination with descriptors and intonation, this lends insight into the discursive construction of sentiment regarding the corresponding thematic concerns. Providing an overview of the volume and frequency of sentiment in the tweets posted, these findings, rather unsurprisingly, corroborate previous findings of a high degree of negative sentiment over all four days (Zhang et al., 2016), arguably to an even greater extent than previously reported. As Table 4.1.1. indicates, over the four days, 64% of tweets were coded as negative, with a spike recorded for 22 September, accounting for over 81% of tweets on that day. For the same period following the publication of the scandal, Zhang et al. (2016) reported a mere, yet still majority, 16,000 of the 31,000 topical tweets identified as negative, equal to 51%. This discrepancy can defensibly be traced back to the over-representation of

positive sentiments by automated, large-scale sentiment analysis, due to its reliance on word usage (such as ‘bad and ‘good’) and its limitations in recognising the immediate context of words, as noted by Zhang et al. (2016) themselves. A manual coding procedure allows for a more accurate, yet interpretative, narrative of sentiment discovery, taking factors such as sarcasm, personal complaints and references to unlawfulness into account.

Table 4.1.1. Sentiment distribution per day										
	21 SEPT		22 SEPT		24 SEPT		SEPT 28		Total	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>
FOR	7	4.6	4	2.6	5	3.3	7	4.6	23	3.8
AGAINST	96	62.9	123	81.5	85	56.3	82	54.3	386	63.9
NEUTRAL	48	31.8	24	15.9	61	40.4	62	41	195	32.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>604</i>	<i>100%</i>

The zenith in negative sentiment on 22 September is mirrored in a corresponding prominence in criticism (purpose), use of sarcasm and thematic focus on personal assets and corporate deceit (primary topic). Whilst the expression of a positive sentiment towards Volkswagen, accounting for between 2.6% to 4.6% of tweets per day, embodies a definite minority, an examination of these responses in combination with the employment of descriptors and intonation, lends a valuable insight into the counter-expressions and reasonings that represent a clear departure from any conferral with political consumerism. Patterns of discursive features in this subset reveal two main thematic concepts: personal inconsequentiality and confidence in the brand, as visualised in Fig. 4.1.1.

Fig 4.1.1. Positive sentiment: emergent themes



Expressions of ethical indifference, an emphasis on personal affect and a trivialisation of the scandal were revealed as common discursive constructive tools of positive sentiment, sequential to descriptors of loyalty, trust and gratitude:

No matter what, will always be proud to be part of the family

#Volkswagen. (22 Sept)

Guess I'm lucky I drive a #Volkswagen #Passat that runs on

#gasoline! (28 Sept)

You didn't break my trust #Volkswagen. Thank you for making

awesome cars. (21 Sept)

In a similar defensive and nonchalant approach, narratives surrounding confidence in Volkswagen to uphold its positive brand reputation and a naivete towards its ability to refute accusations made against the brand were also a prominent mechanism used to express positive sentiment and defend users' standpoints. This typically included tweets framing the scandal as a commonplace, passable incident, for which users expressed trust and confidence in Volkswagen's ability to uphold its reputable status, thus defending the brand from the backlash it was supposedly unjustly incurring:

#VW shouldn't be judged too harshly for lying about its emissions. Everyone does it. I mean, come on. "He who smelt it, dealt it"? SAME IDEA (28 Sept)

Volkswagen we believe in you we are sure you will find a #solution #trust #Volkswagen (28 September)

@Volkswagen will get through this, all these claims are just hot air #VW (21 Sept)

These defensive approaches to the scandal are important to consider due to their stark negation to values one would expect from a growing political consumerist movement online. They reveal a focus on personal effect, or shortcomings thereof, that, in some instances, is still able to surpass growing post-materialist concerns.

Meanwhile, the significant margin of neutral sentiment (15.9% to 41%) represents the substantial degree of informational approaches exhibited in the tweets, especially evident in the latter two datasets. Users were found to incorporate the expression of either factual information or a strong sense of disbelief or surprise to the uncovering of the scandal, exclusive of any suggestion of moral bearing or sensation (explored further in Section 4.2).

As extant political consumerist theories report, shared areas for concern are grounded in post-modern and post-materialist values of sustainable development and protection of the environment. They suggest that if a political consumerist movement were to assemble, the hitherto unknown environmental implications of Volkswagen's deceit would be a pivotal driver to political consumerist's expressions of critique, concern and comment online. As Table 4.1.2. demonstrates, the distribution of thematic concerns is highly conflicting and dispersed, and although around one-eighth of tweets analysed referenced the environment (11.9%), the lion's share lies with personal assets (16.6%), corporate deceit (16.7%) and criminality (16.1%).

Table 4.1.2. Primary topic of tweets per day										
	21 SEPT		22 SEPT		24 SEPT		SEPT 28		Total	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>
ENVIRONMENT	13	8.6	21	13.9	19	12.6	19	12.6	72	11.9
PERSONAL ASSETS	41	27.1	22	14.6	23	15.2	14	9.3	100	16.6
BRAND REPUTATION	8	5.3	15	9.9	20	13.2	13	8.6	56	9.3
CORPORATE DECEIT	32	21.2	35	23.2	9	5.9	25	16.6	101	16.7
CRIMINALITY	16	10.6	24	15.9	22	14.6	35	23.2	97	16.1
CONSUMER ACTION	3	1.9	6	4	5	3.3	3	1.9	17	2.8
STOCK PRICES	7	4.6	5	3.3	15	9.9	7	4.6	34	5.6
COMPETITORS	3	1.9	2	1.3	11	7.3	17	11.3	33	5.5
FUTURE OF DIESEL	17	11.3	1	0.7	5	3.3	1	0.7	27	4.5
CAPITALISM	0	0	11	7.3	13	8.6	14	9.3	38	6.3
UNDEFINED	11	7.3	9	6	9	6	3	1.9	29	4.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>604</i>	<i>100%</i>

Noticeably, the results indicate a high concern for the corporate deceit throughout all four days, denoting elevated feelings of personal attack and duplicity, placing the betrayal and deceit by Volkswagen at the centre of the scandal. Working along a longitudinal axis, the first two days, 21 and 22 September, reveal a high level of concern around the value of personal assets and the fraudulence of the prevarication committed by Volkswagen. This mirrors a positive correlation with findings for the purpose of tweets, predominantly in the form of expressions of disappointment and betrayal, revealed in Section 4.2.

This focus shifts quite dramatically in the final two days towards a proliferation in concern around brand reputation, stock prices, capitalist forces and criminality. Indicating anxiety for the future of the industry as a whole, the effect of Volkswagen's and Germany's reputation is topicalised, accounting for the plummet of stock prices and mentioning capitalism and competitors as part of the high speculative discourse emerging, explored in Section 4.2. Epitomising the move from a personalised expression of emotion to a passive, business and institutional-focused perspective, a focus on criminality of the scandal is substituted as the principal means for expressing negative sentiment, which was previously

tied to an emotive narrative. This typically included an emphasis on possible jail sentences for Volkswagen's executives, designating the scandal as 'fraud' and liable for criminal action.

In the context of exposing a political consumerist narrative, a look at the findings of an overall comparatively low level of environmental and health concerns suggests a distinct lack of political consumerist values. Nonetheless, the high awareness of the criminality arguably points towards the presence of ethical values that condemn a wrongdoing by Volkswagen; however, taken in combination with the substantial degree of focus around business and financial issues and lower emotional charge in responses at this end of the analytic timeline, these are rendered almost meaningless. Additionally, in the wider picture of discursive construction, the high degree of speculation explored in Section 4.2 arguably negates any meaningful concerns about the environment and criminality, as it opens the floor to alternative scapegoats and conspiracies, ultimately questioning the legitimacy of any consequential pressure exerted on Volkswagen.

Conversely, the thematic ubiquity of personal anecdotes and devaluation of material equity, such as Volkswagen vehicles, especially in the first two days of analysis, suggests a predominance of materialistic and possessive values, which, despite standing in stark contrast to the values held to fuel political consumerism, can be traced back to emerging political trends. While some may argue that this sense of possession and object-oriented approach signposts a somewhat superficial values system, it arguably resonates with values of personal integrity and choice. These values have also been identified to be rooted within the emergence of political consumerist movement and encompass the key drivers towards extra-parliamentary, individualised political engagement, classified as 'lifestyle politics' (Bennett, 2003, *see also* Giddens, 1991). Thus, it seems that in the case of the reveal of the falsified emissions by Volkswagen, post-materialist values concerning the environment conflict with increasingly personalised political engagement, which nevertheless still serves as an indicator of a political consumerist movement. Hence, although the environmental and health issues are

comparatively low in topicalisation, the personalised interpretation of the scandal can still be classed as driven by political consumerism.

4.2. The tweeting political consumerist: motivations and values

Delving deeper into the underlying motives and drivers of users' expression on Twitter, this section centres around the purpose of the tweet (*RQ3*), the prevalence and discursive construction and resultant relative efficacy of the use of sarcasm (*RQ4*) as well as the qualitative findings of concepts surrounding ethical stances (*RQ6*). As Table 4.2.1 shows, the highest proportion of tweets were critical, which is largely expected due to a correlation with a majority of negative sentiments.

Table 4.2.1. Purpose of tweet per day										
	21 SEPT		22 SEPT		24 SEPT		SEPT 28		Total	
	Frequency	Per cent (%)	Frequency	Per cent (%)	Frequency	Per cent (%)	Frequency	Per cent (%)	Frequency	Per cent (%)
INFORM	8	5.3	11	7.3	33	21.9	43	28.5	95	15.7
CRITICIZE	28	18.5	45	29.8	23	15.2	25	16.6	121	20
MOCK/RIDICULE	13	8.6	13	8.6	9	6	7	4.6	42	7
EXPRESS EMOTION:										
<i>BETRAYAL</i>	20	13.2	15	9.9	13	8.6	3	2	51	8.4
<i>DISAPPOINTMENT</i>	10	6.6	11	7.3	9	6	4	2.6	34	5.6
<i>FRUSTRATION</i>	17	11.3	9	6	10	6.6	8	5.3	44	7.3
<i>ANGER</i>	4	2.6	4	2.6	11	7.3	13	8.6	32	5.3
<i>ACCEPTANCE</i>	9	6	2	1.3	5	3.3	3	2	19	3.1
<i>DISBELIEF</i>	10	6.6	1	0.7	1	0.7	0	0	12	2
DEFEND	1	0.7	13	8.6	0	0	7	4.6	21	3.5
SPECULATE	13	8.6	17	11.3	23	15.2	25	16.6	78	12.9
NEUTRAL COMMENT	18	11.9	10	6.6	14	9.3	13	8.6	55	9.1
Total	151	100%	151	100%	151	100%	151	100%	604	100%

Other high-scoring categories include inform (15.7%) and speculate (12.9%), and although the expression of emotion was coded according to the specific feeling detected, these accounted for almost a third of the tweets in total (31%). Significant incongruities can be detected when comparing the former and latter days of analysis, signalling a shift in tweeting

patterns during the development of the scandal. Prominent tweeting aims of users posting on 21 and 22 September included expression of emotion, specifically betrayal (9.9% to 13.2%), disappointment (6.6% to 7.3%) and the solitary presence of disbelief (6.6%), whereby a definite spike in critical tweets is reported for 22 September, juxtaposed to a culmination in defensive tweets. This apparent controversy in tweeting motivators arguably lays the foundation for a wave of speculation in the latter two days of analysis. Here, the purpose of the tweets is predominantly speculative (15.2% to 16.6%) and informative (21.9% to 28.5%), prioritising the sharing of knowledge. Considering the expression of emotion, a shift from feelings of disappointment and betrayal to an emphasis on anger and frustration becomes apparent. This builds upon the findings of a shift in primary focus from corporate deceit and personal assets to brand reputation, competitors and criminality, involving explicit expressions of legislative action and often accompanied by expressions of annoyance. In terms of their relative communicative pressure, derisive, critical, and negative emotional tweets suggest explicit attacks on Volkswagen, whereby speculation can be seen to detract attention and accountability away from Volkswagen (*see Fig 4.2.1. on p.43*).

Taking a closer, inductive look into the speculative discourse, tweets can be categorised into five themes: alternative blame attribution, the future of the brand and industry (mirroring increased mentions of brand reputation), Volkswagen's plans for pacification, and speculations ranging from accusations of an over-exaggeration of claims to a complete plausible deniability, exemplified in the following data extracts:

"#Volkswagen is just the first one to get caught. Let's guess the next..." (21

Sept, alternative blame attribution)

"How will #Volkswagen make amends? VW parks w/ ubermensch trees?

Oxygen masks?" (21 Sept, VW's plans for pacification)

"If this scandal goes beyond VW, the wheels will come off an entire industry #VW #fraud" (28 Sept, future of brand/industry)

“How is it possible that the #VW TDI pollutes "10-40" times more than other equivalents modern engines? Is that really accurate?” (24 Sept, over-exaggeration of claims)

“#VW it's a fake. If VW pollute, how periodic controls of car can't see it? They just want to fire workers.” (22 Sept, plausible deniability)

Combining these findings with their corresponding sentiment, interesting themes of linguistic argumentative styles emerge. All but one of the above themes principally map to a neutral or positive sentiment, with only alternative blame attribution consistent to a strong negative stance. This concept involves tweets in which users mostly agree on the depravity of the issue at hand; however, see the cause and sequential culpability to lie elsewhere than with Volkswagen and its executives. These charges were directed either towards government and regulatory bodies or strategically employed as a means of demonising the capitalist market system as a whole, corroborating findings of high topicality of capitalism in Section 4.1.:

“If we had less strangulating regulations on corporations, companies like #Volkswagen wouldn't have to cheat to fuck us over”

and

“The biggest failure is not having independent checks.”

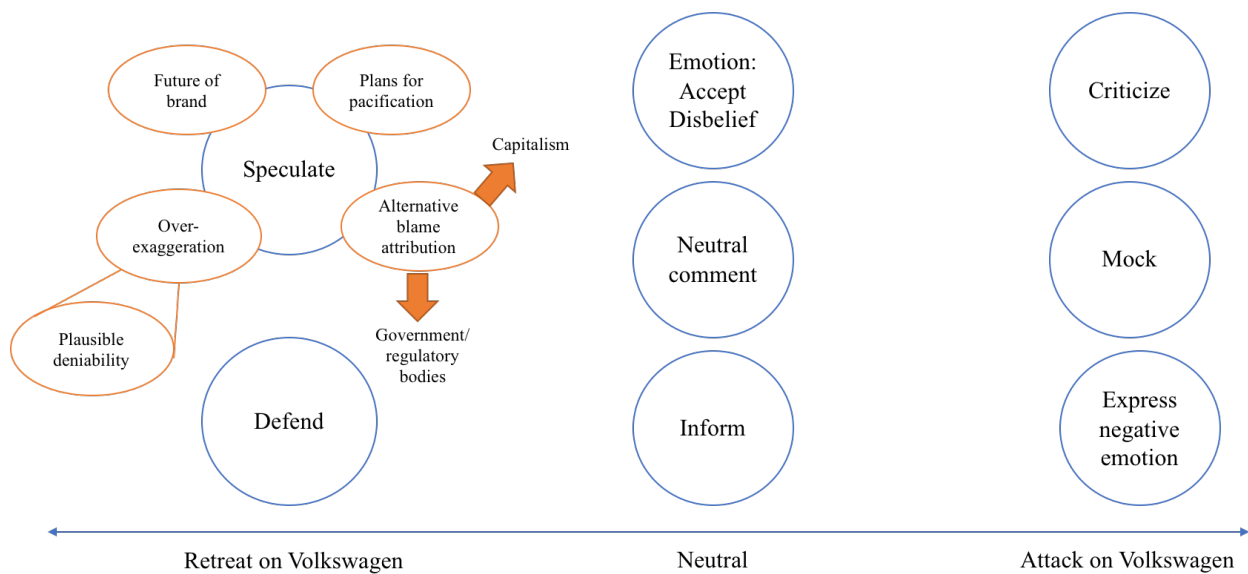
(28 Sept, alternative blame attribution: government and regulatory bodies)

“Is it #VW's fault or the corrupt system that maximise profit from loopholes they found. Morals and values don't compute in #capitalism”

(24 Sept, alternative blame attribution: capitalism)

This closer look into speculative discourses lends insight into argumentative discursive reasoning that, in conjunction with defensive narratives, distance the scandal from Volkswagen as a corporation. This has important implications on the efficacy of the political discourse on mounting communicative pressure. This relationship is visualised in Fig 4.2.1.

Fig 4.2.1. Mapping purpose of tweet vs. communicative pressure against Volkswagen



In the context of political consumerist ideology, the focus on criticism in the tweets collected on the first two days is arguably replaced by a high degree of speculation in the latter datasets. This represents an inclination away from an explicit attack on Volkswagen, moving instead towards a retreat from Volkswagen’s accountability. The accompanying high degree of informative aim of the tweets indicates a passive stance to the scandal, which stands in stark contrast to the findings of elevated emotionally charged tweets in the first two days and indicates an initial personalised interpretation of the scandal, corroborating findings explored in Section 4.1. This heavier focus on ‘neutral’ stances towards Volkswagen in the latter days, embodied by informative aims, further angles the communicative pressure away from Volkswagen’s liability and indicates a more instructive, impartial and flaccid attitude.

Nonetheless, information sharing is widely held to be a vital tool for online mobilisation and a principal affordance of new media to activism (de Zúñiga et al., 2014), questioning whether the trend towards informative aims serves as a precursor for collective action in a more long-term assessment of the scandal and its resulting reactions. However, while a critical motive remains relatively high throughout all four days of data collection, the trend towards other neutralising or even offsetting focuses in terms of communicative

pressure on Volkswagen discredits a critical pursuit of Volkswagen and arguably expunges any mounting pressure to hold the corporation to account. Although there is no existing literature on the role of communicative pressure in the success of online political consumerist movements, these results represent very highly fluctuating and polyvocal public voices with a high degree of speculation and multiple identified evildoers, aside from the corporation in question, suggesting a weakening of communicative pressure.

Looking at the use of sarcasm in tweets adds a dimension to the investigation into the frequency and discursive value of a reported success factor for online mobilisation (Knoblock, 2016). As Table 4.2.2. reveals, the overall employment of sarcasm was minor, with only a total 8.1% of tweets coded as sarcastic, whereby results from individual days unsurprisingly map to the high levels of derisive tweets.

Table 4.2.2. Use of sarcasm per day										
	21 SEPT		22 SEPT		24 SEPT		SEPT 28		Total	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent (%)</i>
YES	13	8.6	17	11.3	9	6	10	6.6	49	8.1
NO	135	89.4	132	87.4	142	94	132	87.4	541	89.6
UNDEFINED	3	2	2	1.3	0	0	9	6	14	2.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>151</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>604</i>	<i>100%</i>

Nevertheless, a closer look into the discursive construction of sarcastic tweets is important to consider when assessing the motivators and values of the tweeting political consumerist, due to its significant ability to intensify or mitigate the meaning-making process and ethical stance taken. Taking descriptors and intonation into account, four themes emerge, three of which correspond to existing typologies of sarcasm tools (Knoblock, 2016): oxymoron, uncommon collocation and neologisms, and an additional, new concept of hyperbolic comparisons. Oxymorons were discursively constructed by strategically juxtaposing a positive and negative concept to emphasise the users' disapproval of the scandal and/or Volkswagen, thus taking a strong ethical stance and effectively conveying a negative

sentiment. In this case, the German quality seal was often utilised as a benchmark to mock Volkswagen, to point out the inherent contradiction and emphasise their disappointment, placing the scandal in conjunction with the perceived high positive expectations attributed to the brand:

“The plonkers at #VW are bringing new meaning to the phrase 'Made in Germany'... #Fail #Deutschland”

(28 September, oxymoron sarcasm)

Uncommon collocations often involved tweets mocking Volkswagen by juxtaposing the scandal to a seemingly unrelated, mostly trivial aspects, such as references from popular culture or personal anecdotes, to mock the severity and absurdity of scandal. In this way, users appeared to be desensitised to the scandal, conveying a sense of trivialisation of the scandal and its moral implications, thus indicating little ethical concern:

“The #Volkswagen issue reminded me of #FightClub for some reason: "My job was to apply the formula."”

and

“For Halloween I'm going to take a massive amount of diuretics and go as a #Volkswagen Passat.”

(22 and 24 September, uncommon collocations)

The humorous employment of neologisms lent tweets a creative lens, again distracting from any serious ethical concerns, whereby most examples incorporated aspects of the environment and pollution:

“#Volkswagen's new ad tagline in the wake of Dieselgate:

Fahrwe'repollutin'”

and

“In light of recent events I have named my car Pollutasaurus Rex”

(22 September, neologisms)

Other common humorous tools included puns, vulgarisms and the sarcastic use of emojis to represent a fake smile, functioning as an ironical taunt. A concept that surfaced and has not been previously identified in extant literature involves the discursive construction of hyperbolic comparisons. Operationalised through the combination of the scandal with an unequivocal negative, they emphasise condemnation of scandal, resulting in the arguably strongest delivery of ethical stance. These comparisons were largely divided between associations found in the history of the brand and negative stereotypes about Germany, referring to Hitler or Nazism, and references to the perceived negativity of capitalism, building on earlier findings:

*“Cmon, #Volkswagen, I really expected better from a company founded in
1930s Germany.”*

and

*“You'd think it'd be hard to further damage the reputation of a company
formerly run by Nazis #Volkswagen”*

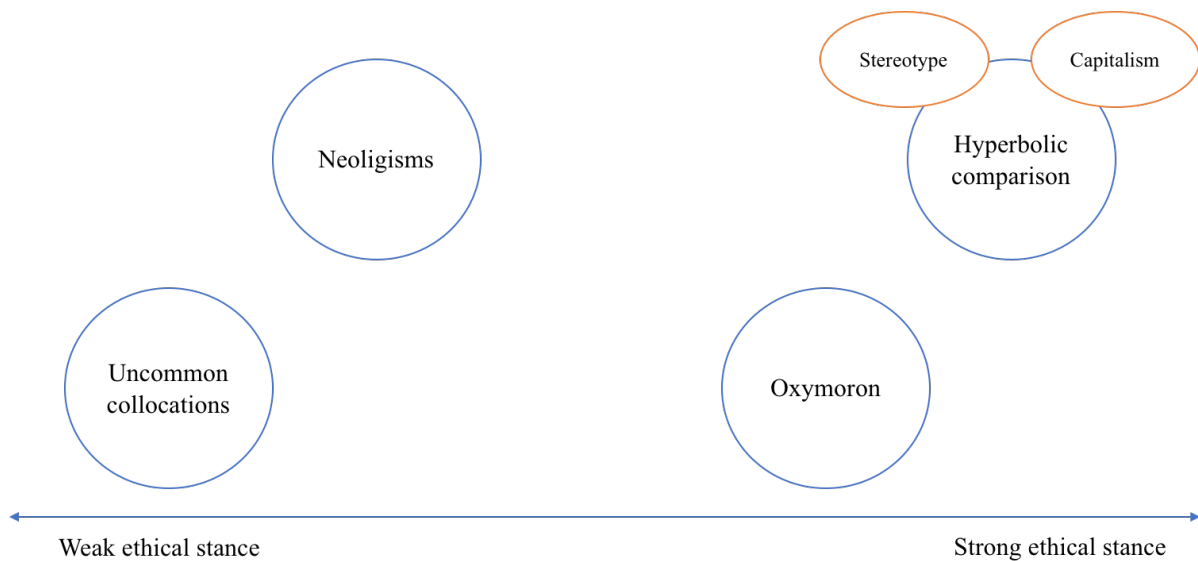
(24 September, hyperbolic comparison: stereotype)

*“Whoa! #Volkswagen cheated after a corporation was allowed to police
itself!? Shocker. God bless #Capitalism”*

(21 September, hyperbolic comparison: capitalism)

The distribution of the relative effectiveness of these sarcasm tools to convey an ethical stance is visualised in Fig 4.2.2.

Fig 4.2.2. Mapping sarcasm tools vs. strength of ethical stance



In general, the majority of sarcastic tweets do not reference a specific topic, but demonstrate a clear aim to mock, supported by findings of a high correlation to a neutral sentiment, resulting in a lack of critical expression at a specific aspect of the scandal. Thus, although both oxymorons and hyperbolic comparisons conveyed a strong ethical stance, they failed to convey an explicit, well-defined critique, questioning their effect on intensifying the meaning-making process of the discourse.

A look into the ethical stances of non-sarcastic tweets offers an insight into conceptual themes according to their sentiment. Neutral sentiments often fail to convey an ethical stance at all, in that users frame the scandal as a more or less natural occurrence in an accepted progression of corporate advancement, constructing it within a framework of inevitability and ultimately generating a sense of sympathy to Volkswagen. These tweets include descriptors surrounding an ‘unsuccessful risk’ and ‘unfortunate turn of events’, whereby concerns, if any, can be attributed to the future of the industry:

“#VW #dieseldgate: another totally unforeseen event showing the risk of individual #shares, even of companies that seem as tough as old boots!”

(21 September, neutral: inevitability)

In the context of a negative sentiment and specifically, a topicalisation of corporate deceit, prevalent ethical stances are seen to call upon underlying Western moral expectations that lying is wrong. Meanwhile, tweets referencing criminality largely assume that ethicality is dependent on and determined by the legislative outcome, providing no evidence to own ethical stances:

“In a world of fair-minded people, we'd need no regulation. But look at how people act. #TuringDrugs #Volkswagen”

(21 Sept, ethical stance, corporate deceit: ‘lying is wrong’)

“#Volkswagen defrauded 11 million diesel buyers...are orange jumpsuits in their execs’ future? Should they be?”

(22 Sept, ethical stance, criminality: dependency on legislative outcome)

Looking at explicit political consumerism references to the environment, a textual analysis revealed that although these tweets were largely coded for negative stance, they revealed only loose connections to the environment and climate change, indicating little knowledge of the link between exhaust fumes and air pollution. This is evidenced by negligible mentions of pollution, greenhouse gases, the ozone layer or any other displays of scientific understanding that would ground post-materialist values. More often than not, these loose ties are coupled with harsh accusations of death related consequences, hyperbolic in their blame attributions:

“I’ve done my research... VW’s #dieseldgate scandal probably killed ~106 people!!!! Volkswagen we thought you cared about the environment”

(24 Sept, ethical stance, environment)

These findings suggest almost insincere and feeble arguments that, although supporting a negative ethical stance, generate a sense of disingenuousness, affecting their communicative pressure potential.

4.3. Transformative potential

Having established the relationship to political consumerism and assessed the tweets in terms of their underlying motivators, ethical values and aims, the final factor to consider when evaluating the resulting communicative pressure lies within the salience of the calls-to-action. As established in Section 4.1., the frequency of thematic concern around consumer action retains a modest share in the datasets, with only 2.8% of tweets explicitly centring calls-to-action as their primary focus. Furthermore, the quantitative findings report a decrease in the frequency of appeal for actions throughout the four datasets. This can arguably be traced back to the high degree of speculation and resulting controversy in the discussion regarding blame attribution, explored in Section 4.2. However, as the micro-linguistic analysis revealed, calls-to-action were commonly packaged in more covert and implicit ways, necessitating a closer look into their discursive construction. On a basic level, calls-to-action can be classified in terms of their expectations, directed towards a request for the jailing of the Volkswagen executives, a class action case, a boycott or making and joining of a Facebook group for Volkswagen's customers.

On a closer, textual level the emergent themes around mobilisation that materialise are primarily centred around the degree and expression of advocacy and auxiliary and the instrumentality of their requests. Four thematic concepts emerge: non-auxiliary 'need', extra-instrumental requests, individualised auxiliary action and collective encouragement.

Tweets that reference a non-auxiliary 'need' typically take a passive stance, despite expressing a clear goal, as they rarely indicate any logrolling activity on how to achieve the perceived aim. In this way, these users express a 'need' for action with little indication of the intention of contribution, taking a flaccid, neutral and non-emotive standpoint:

*“There should be criminal cases brought up against @Volkswagen
#Volkswagen for intentional fraud.”*

*“VW have put a stop sale on diesels in the US and the EPA shouldn’t
certify 2016 models. This the biggest auto scandal in many years!
#dieselgate”*

(21 Sept, calls-to-action: non-auxiliary ‘need’)

Similarly, though more overt and self-effacing in nature, extra-instrumental requests include tweets, in which users explicitly distance themselves from any responsibility to act, whilst expressing criticism towards Volkswagen and calling upon other bodies or individuals to counter. These encouragements are characteristically more emotionally charged and critical, arguably overlapping with categories of alternative blame attribution:

*“#VW have not "screwed up", they have committed fraud. I’m so angry.
They should cop a serious monetary fine and jail for at least some
executives.” (24 Sept)*

*“Instead of fining the manufacturer the EU court should be sending those
responsible to jail. Massive fraud, I feel cheated #VW” (22 Sept)*
(Calls-to-action: extra-instrumental requests)

Individualised auxiliary, on the other hand, utilises the expression of emotion as a tool for the reverse purpose: to justify their own, singular act of retribution against Volkswagen. These commonly appear either in reference to a personalised act of boycott, joining a class action suit or any other solitary act. Emotionally charged narratives are used to justify their actions, indicating no desire to belong to a wider collective movement or even awareness of such:

*“#VW shame on VW... will prevent me from buying my next VW or Audi...
#VWcheat #dieselgate.” (22 Sept)*

*“In an act of direct action against #VW's corporate deceit, we deliberately
'de-fuelled' the van this evening -fake those emissions cheaters!” (28
Sept)*

(Calls-to-action: individualized auxiliary)

The final concept, collective encouragement, arguably encompasses tweets that meet the requirements of Makarem and Jae's (2016) instrumental and collective features of successful mobilising narratives. These involve tweets that move beyond a focus on the self towards an unequivocal communication of encouragement towards others in the discussion to do the same, whether it be boycotting or joining a Facebook group:

"Boycott time: Punish #VW and #Audi in the marketplace. Don't buy any.

"VW Denied Deception to #EPA for Nearly a Year" (22 Sept)

"We all need to join a class action suit against #Volkswagen. This is a massive fraud and we deserve compensation" (24 Sept)

"Everyone join this FB page for owners of VW TDI. I am feeling the shame of driving. #VWGate #VolkswagenScandal #Volkswagen" (28 Sept)

(Calls-to-action: collective encouragement)

Considering the overall low proportion of advocacy and action in the tweets analysed, combined with the overwhelming indicators of an individualised, de-responsibilising and flaccid approach to act upon the voices of their requests, these pluralised calls-to-action add to the fragmentation of public opinion and direction of communicative pressure, arguably to the extent to which they annihilate their advocacy purpose.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to contribute to the field of online activist mobilisation by exploring the discursive construction and contextual features of response published in the wake of a political consumerism stimulus, namely the 2015 Volkswagen emission falsification scandal. Specifically, its aim was to uncover the textual indicators that are specific to this case and uncover which and how these may have annulled a mounting of sufficient communicative pressure to ‘spill out’ into offline spaces (Butler, 2015), subsequently obstructing traction with government and corporate agents and a potential to generate social change. Taking a mixed-methods approach and combining both a deductive coding of content with an inductive discourse and micro-linguistic analysis, the research questions were defined around prevailing sentiment (*RQ1*), primary topic (*RQ2*), functions of tweet (*RQ3*), the use of sarcasm (*RQ4*), looking at linguistic features (*RQ5*) to evaluate underlying ethical stance markers (*RQ6*) and the salience of calls-to-action (*RQ7*), all of which are assessed along a longitudinal axis across ten days in the progression of the scandal (*RQ8*).

5.1. Summary of Findings

Taking all concluding findings into account, this research theorises five downfalls within textual features of the discussion that, in combination, annul the transformative potential of the discourse generated: insufficient focus dedicated to post-materialist values; varied and insincere ethical stances and emotionally charged resonance of the scandal with users; a high degree of speculation and insufficient and fragmented calls-to-action, resulting in a dispersive, inconsequential and highly individualised public voice. A key theme is reiterated throughout all concepts explored: a highly personalised receipt of the scandal with users and individualised interpretation and application. This theme is found in findings of topic, sentiment, purpose, use of sarcasm and even calls-to-action, ultimately lending the discourse

its inherent polyvocality and dispersion, wholly antithetical to a sense of collectivism or community.

These downfalls are interpreted from findings from each of the research questions, inaugurated with reports of little presence of post-materialist values of ethical concern regarding the environment in Section 4.1. Instead, the connection to political consumerism is suggested to lie within the personalised receipt of the scandal, which conversely, also encapsulates a key demise of the discourse in terms of its communicative potential. Defensive stances and positive sentiment are found to rely on themes of personal inconsequentiality and brand confidence, detracting the direction of communicative pressure away from Volkswagen. Section 4.2. builds on these findings, reporting polyvocal and conflicting purposes of tweets in terms of their degree of attack on Volkswagen, whereby the high proportion of speculation within the tweets serves as a critical agent in further offsetting focus from Volkswagen's accountability. This speculation was found to question blame attribution, other carmakers' involvement, Volkswagen's pacification plans and the brand's future. Moreover, the highly varied, seemingly insincere nature of ethical stances and ineffective use of sarcasm indicates a negation of their potential as positive mobilisation drivers. Section 4.3. focused on calls-to-action, reporting little and fragmented consumer action topicality, suggesting a neutralising emotional charge, in which only themes of collective encouragement were found to be effective in mobilising participants. Considering a longitudinal axis of scandal development, this study finds a decrease in emotional charge, a shift from feelings of disappointment and betrayal to anger and frustration, accompanied by a trend towards neutral, flaccid information sharing and speculation in the latter days of the development of the scandal, combined by an increased focus on competitors, brand reputation and criminality of scandal.

However, it is the recurrence of personalisation and individualisation within all factors, including topic focus, sarcasm, purpose and calls-to-action that ultimately lend the

discourse its inherent polyvocality and dispersion, adversative to a sense of social collectivism. In the context of Tufekci's (2017) hypothesis of an interrelation between few, allied 'speech genres' as essential for accumulating ample communicative pressure to provoke social change, these findings of polyvocal and dispersive responses can be seen to annihilate such potential.

Scaffolding these findings within their wider political and theoretical framework and the role of political consumerism, theorised as a new form of political participation and designed to uphold and replace traditional, "duty-based" participatory patterns (Strømsnes, 2009), these findings inherently question its validity as a political tool. An event of this gravity in environmental impact undoubtedly would have called upon post-materialist values of an emerging population of political consumerists, which theoretically should have utilised their political tools to hold Volkswagen to account. As this failed to substantiate, this case study arguably embodies an example of the failure and collapse of this new form of political engagement, ultimately questioning the functionality of contemporary democratic structures for this case.

5.2. Limitations and Direction for Future Research

There are several shortcomings of this research, first and foremost its sample size, choice of medium and resulting ideological breadth. Insights from a singular communicative medium over a time span of a week, on an issue that is so far-reaching in terms of its ramifications, stakeholders, geographical impact, lasting complex political and economic alliances, for which any consumer and citizen mobilisation will undoubtedly have dispersed into multiple offline and online arenas, cannot be taken as representative of the movement as a whole. Nonetheless, findings of discursive markers identified as mobilising annulments can direct research into a deeper investigation of political consumerist stimuli and the transformative potential of the resultant activist movements. Thus, similarly, it is hard to generalise these

findings within the broader context of citizenship and political engagement, as it only represents a solitary motion in reaction to an event that, theoretically, would have enticed a reaction within an evolving form of political participation. However, these findings are still regarded as valuable in the context of an instance in which evolving forms of political engagement fail to uphold their duty in replacing ‘traditional’ duties of citizenship (Strømsnes, 2009), assessed based on the distinct inconsequentiality for government, corporate or significant legislative action.

Thus, future research could explore the relationship between movements that are successful in ‘spilling out’ of their communicative form and instigating social change and the success markers in the corresponding discourse generated online. Larger-scale analyses, in terms of sample size and time frame, in combination with triangulation approaches, could add a comparative dimension by assessing these factors in relation to different online (and offline) platforms. Taking a look into the production side of this medium by conducting qualitative analyses, such as surveys and focus groups, these studies could gain insight into online activists’ motivators. An interesting approach for online political activism research, especially in terms of political engagement and democratic citizenship in general, is to theorise predictors of a successful social movement in the corresponding online discussions. This would enable social scientists to predict which movements will gain traction and pre-emptively advise corporations and institutions accordingly, to ensure quicker and more efficacious responses, and ultimately cultivate these new forms of political participation to be more legitimate, binding and efficient.

References

- Altheide, D. L. and Johnson, J.M. 1994. Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research. In: Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. pp. 485 – 499.
- Bauman, Z., 2008. *Does ethics have a chance in a world of consumers?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bellamy, R. 2008. *Citizenship: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beck, U. 1999. *What Is Globalization?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bennett, W. L. 2003 'Lifestyle politics and citizen-consumers'. In: Corner, J. and Pels, D. (eds). *Media and the Restyling of Politics: Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*. London: Sage, pp. 137- 150.
- Bryman, A. 2016. *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Butler, J. 2015. *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Böstrom, M., Micheletti, M. and Oosterveer, P. 2018. Studying Political Consumerism. [Online]. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Consumerism*. Oxford Handbooks Online. [Accessed: 26 March 2019]. Available at: <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190629038.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190629038-e-44?print=pdf>
- Clark, L. 2016. Participants on the margins: #BlackLivesMatter and the role that shared artifacts of engagement played among minoritized political newcomers on Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter. *International Journal of Communication*, **10**, pp. 235–253.
- Coleman, S. and Blumler, J. G. 2009. *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Creswell, J. W. and Miller, D. L. 2000. Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry, *Theory Into Practice*, **39**(3), pp. 124-130.
- Curran, J. 1990. The new revisionism in mass communication research: A reappraisal. *European Journal of Communication*, **5**(2), pp. 135-164.
- Dahlgren, P. 2005. The internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication*, **22**(2), pp. 147-162.
- Dalton, R. J. 2008. Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation. *Political Studies*, **56**(1), pp. 76–98.
- Deacon, D., Pickering, M., Golding, P., and Murdock, G. 1999. *Researching communications: A practical guide to methods in media and cultural analysis*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Else, L., 2012. The revolution will be tweeted. [Online]. *New Scientist: Science in Society*, vol. 2850 [Accessed: 13 May 2019]. Available at: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21328500-400-the-revolution-will-be-tweeted/>
- Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. Pantheon Books, New York.
- Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Goodwin, J., Jasper, J. M. and Polletta, F. 2001. *Passionate Politics. Emotions and Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Graham, T., Broersma, M., Hazelhoff, K., and van't Haar, G. 2013. Between broadcasting political messages and interacting with voters: The use of Twitter during the 2010 UK General Election campaign. *Information, Communication & Society*, **16**(5), pp. 692–716.

Gude, H., Hawranek, D., Traufetter, G. and Wüst, C. 2018. Berlin Accomplices: The German Government's Role in the VW Scandal. [online] SPIEGEL ONLINE. [Accessed: 22 November 2018]. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/business/vw-scandal-exposes-deep-complicity-of-government-a-1061615.html>

Habermas, J. 1989 (trans). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. Polity, Cambridge.

Hoi, P. V., Mol, A. P. J. and Oosterveer, P. 2009. Market governance for safe food in developing countries: The case of low-pesticide vegetables in Vietnam. *Journal of Environmental Management*, **91**, pp. 380–388.

Hoffmann, S. 2011. Anti-Consumption as a Means to Save Jobs. *European Journal of Marketing*, **45**(11), pp. 1702–1714.

Hölzen, M. and Meier, H. E. 2018. Do Football Consumers Care About Sport Governance? An Analysis of Social Media Responses to the Recent FIFA Scandal. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, pp. 1-24.

Inglehart, R. 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization. Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jungherr, A. 2016. Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, **13**(1), pp. 72–91.

Kim, H., Jang, S. M., Kim, S., and Wan, A. 2018. Evaluating sampling methods for content analysis of twitter data. *Social Media + Society*, **4**(2), 205630511877283.

Kiss, H. J. and Rosa-García, A. 2011. *Why do Facebook and Twitter facilitate revolutions more than TV and radio?* [Online]. Munich: Magazine New Scientist. No. 33496, [Accessed: 13 May 2019] Available at: <https://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/33496/>

Knoblock, N. 2016. Sarcasm and Irony as a Political Weapon: Social Networking in the Time of Crisis. In: Orwenjo, D. O., Oketch, O. and Tunde, A. H. (eds). *Political Discourse in Emergent, Fragile, and Failed Democracies*. Michigan: IGI Global, pp. 11-33

Konnolly, A. 2015. Activism: Identity, affiliation, and political discourse-making on Twitter. *The Arbutus Review*, 6(1), pp. 1-16.

Krippendorff, K. 2004. *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. London: SAGE.

Lai, C., Yang, C. and Wu, H. 2015. The Influence of Product-harm Crises on Consumer Attribution and Identification: The Moderating Effect of Corporate Social Responsibility. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 207, pp. 553-559.

L2 Think Tank. 2015. Volkswagen Scandal Drives Increase in Social Media Following 2015. [Online]. Newstex, Chatham. [Accessed: 13 May 2019]. Available at: <https://www.l2inc.com/daily-insights/volkswagen-scandal-drives-increase-in-social-media-following>

Makarem, S. C. and Jae, H. 2016. Consumer boycott behavior: An exploratory analysis of twitter feeds. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 50(1), pp. 193-223.

Micheletti, M. 2004. Just Clothes? Discursive Political Consumerism and Political Participation. [Online] *Paper for the 2004 ECPR Joint Sessions, April 13-18, Uppsala Workshop 24: Emerging Repertoires of Political Action*. [Accessed: 13 May 2019]. Available at: <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/faea2793-53be-4573-9b88-778a5eeda26b.pdf>

Micheletti, M., Follesdal, A. and Stolle, D., (eds). 2003. *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press.

Morozov, E. 2009. The brave new world of slacktivism. *Foreign Policy*. [Online] The Foreign Policy Group. [Accessed: 13 May 2019]. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

Neu, D., Saxton, G., Everett, J., & Shiraz, A. R. 2018. Speaking truth to power: Twitter reactions to the panama papers. *Journal of Business Ethics*, pp. 1-13.

Nozick, R. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books

Oosterveer, P. J. M., Guivant, J. S., and Spaargaren, G. 2007. Shopping for green food in globalizing supermarkets: Sustainability at the consumption junction. In: Pretty, J., Ball, A. S., Benton, T., Guivant, J., Lee, D., Orr, D., Pfeffer, M. J. and Ward, H. (eds). *Handbook of Environment and Society*. London: SAGE, pp. 411–428.

Ostman, J. 2012. Information, expression, participation: how involvement in user-generated content relates to democratic engagement among young people. *New Media & Society*, **14**(6), pp. 1004–1021.

Parsons, G. 2015. #DieselGate: How the Volkswagen emissions scandal unfurled online. [online] Visibrain.com. [Accessed: 31 January 2019]. Available at: <https://www.visibrain.com/en/blog/volkswagen-dieselgate-crisis-twitter-analysis/>

Phillips, N., and Hardy, C. 2002. *Discourse analysis, Qualitative research methods*. California: SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks.

Potts, A., Simm, W., Whittle, J. and Unger, J. W. 2014. Exploring “success” in digitally augmented activism: a triangulated approach to analyzing UK activist Twitter use. *Discourse Context Media*, **6**, pp. 65-76,

Procter, R., Vis, F., and Voss, A. 2013. Reading the riots on Twitter: methodological innovation for the analysis of big data. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, **16**(3), pp. 197-214

Putnam, R. D. 2000. *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rainie, L., Purcell, K., & Smith, A. 2011. The Social Side of the Internet. [online] Pew Research Centre. [Accessed: 27 November 2018]. Available at: <http://www.pewInternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Social-Side-of-the-Internet.aspx>

Ruiz, J. R. 2009. Sociological Discourse Analysis: Methods and Logic. [online]. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, **10**(2). [Accessed: 27 November 2018]. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1298/2882>

Sandel, M. J. 1982. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. New York: Cambridge University Press

Sandoval-Almazan, R. and Gil-Garcia, J. R. 2014. Towards cyberactivism 2.0? Understanding the use of social media and other information technologies for political activism and social movements. *Government Information Quarterly*, **31**(3), pp. 365-378.

Scammell, M. 2000. The Internet and Civic Engagement: The Age of the Citizen-Consumer. *Political Communication*, **17**(4), pp. 351-355

Schwartz, H. A. and Unga, L. H. 2015. Data-Driven Content Analysis of Social Media: A Systematic Overview of Automated Methods. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, **659**(1), pp. 78-94.

Shah, D., McLeod, D. and Kim, E. 2007. Political consumerism: how communication and consumption orientations drive 'Lifestyle Politics'. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, **611**(1), pp. 217-235.

Shah, D. V., Friedland, L. A., Wells, C., Kim, Y. M. and Rojas, H. 2012. Communication, Consumers, and Citizens Revisiting the Politics of Consumption. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, **644**(1), pp. 6-19.

Shirky, C. 2011. The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change. *Foreign Affairs*, **90**(1), pp. 28-41.

Stolle, D., Hooghe, M. and Micheletti, M. 2005. Politics in the supermarket: political consumerism as a form of political participation. *International Political Science Review*, **26**(3), pp. 245-269.

Strauss, A. L. 1987. *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Strømsnes, K. 2009. *Political consumerism: a substitute for or supplement to conventional political participation?* *Journal of Civil Society*, **5**(3), pp. 303–314.

The Guardian. 2018. If governments will not punish VW's shocking behaviour, consumers must. [online]. TheGuardian.com. [Accessed: 22 November 2018]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/feb/04/volkswagen-shocking-behaviour-punish-consumers-must-punish-it>.

Tufekci, Z. 2017. *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Verba, S. and Nie, N. 1972. *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. New York: Harper & Row.

Ward, J. 2008. The Online Citizen-Consumer: Addressing Young People's Political Consumption Through Technology. *Journal of Youth Studies*, **11**(5), pp. 513–26.

Ward, J. and de Vreese, C. 2011. Political consumerism, young citizens and the Internet. *Media, Culture & Society*, **33**(3), pp. 399–413.

Zappavigna, M. 2012. *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web*. London: Bloomsbury

Zappavigna, M. 2015. Searchable talk: the linguistic functions of hashtags. *Social Semiotics*, **25**(3), pp. 274-291.

Zhang, B., Marita, V., Veijalainen, J., Wang, S. and Kotkov, D. 2016. The Issue Arena of a Corporate Social Responsibility Crisis – The Volkswagen Case in Twitter. *Studies in Media and Communication*, **4**(2), pp. 32-43.

de Zúñiga, H. G., Copeland, L., and Bimber, B. 2014. Political consumerism: Civic engagement and the social media connection. *New Media & Society*, **16**(3), pp. 488-506.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Data and coding paper trail

Available on request.

Appendix 2: Coding manual: Content analysis

Updated: 26 March 2019

General Note:

This codebook was created for the content analysis part of the research, involving tweets in response to the Volkswagen emission scandal in 2015. For all categories (T1-T4), coders can only choose one option. For dimensions where more than one category may apply, the coder must decide on the most prominent dimension.

The individual tweet is the primary unit of analysis and represents the basic element that will be coded. The context of the Twitter feed is not to be considered when coding, as @-replies and re-tweets are not included in the dataset.

T1 - Sentiment

The nature of the subjective opinion that is expressed, forming the general mood or affective state of the response towards either Volkswagen, the scandal in general or those responsible. Positive sentiment is seen to defend Volkswagen or identifying any other personal benefit or positive outcome. Statements of fact with no emotional and ethical stance are classed as neutral.

1 - positive,

Examples: “diesel is life”; “still a VW fan”; “Thank you for making awesome cars”

Personal benefit “Guess I’m lucky I drive a gasoline”; “seems like a good day to shop for a new car”

2 - negative,

Examples: “I’m ‘exhausted’”; “shame on VW”; “worse than...”; “what a rip off”; “crushed by this news”

3 – neutral

Examples: “another totally unforeseen event showing the risk of individual shares”; “will be interesting to see how reputation of fossil fuels is affected”; “VW shares plunge on emissions scandal as probe widens to other carmakers”; “as a consumer, I really couldn’t care less”

T2 – Purpose/function of tweet

Look at the underlying aim of the posting of the tweet and its role within the public debate surrounding the scandal

1 – inform

Neutrally share or provide information, evidence or facts on the scandal. This can be the replication of news of developments in the scandal that just broke or include links to news organisation's online articles.

Examples: “#Volkswagen says 11 million vehicles are affected and it's already set aside \$7.3 billion to remedy the situation.”; “#VW is faces an \$18billion fine for smart software” or “#Volkswagen emissions scandal will cost billions and could tarnish the entire German auto industry.”

2 - criticize/charge

Include tweets that condemn and target their criticism at a certain subject, condemning actions or attributing blame with intent to take action. For example, “Shady stuff from VW” or “shame on VW”, with no reference to personal effect.

Examples: “#VW should be shut down and its executives go to jail for this fraud”; “Real people go to real jail for a really long time for lesser crimes than this” or “#Volkswagen is just the latest scandal from an epic decade of white-collar criminality”

3 - mock/ridicule

Include tweets that intend to be humorous at the expense of a certain subject, for example using sarcasm (see T3). Content treated with contempt or derision, possibly also mimic speech, slogans or messaging.

Examples: “In the #VW scandal, the #driving force was to make money.”; “For Halloween I'm going to take a massive amount of diuretics and go as a #Volkswagen Passat” or “I wish my grades were curved as high as the emissions testing results of @Volkswagen”

4 - express emotion

Include tweets that take a passive yet personalized and individualized stance to explicitly or implicitly express evoked and responsive feelings to the scandal,

sometimes referring to anecdotal evidence to mention how the individual is affected. The personalisation of the issue is subcategorized by feeling:

4a. betrayal

Reference to how the scandal has changed perception of brand and consumption behaviour.

Examples: "Trust gone over a cliff."; "Nothing like finding out there's a major recall on the new car you bought a month ago" or "I drive #Volkswagen Diesel. Bought it specifically for emissions & milage reasons. They cheated. I was cheated"

4b. disappointment

Framing of scandal as a personal attack against the consumer, feeling of letting down, sadness

Examples:

"I am so sad!"; "Crushed by this news" or "Very saddened by one more corp thinking they can fool consumers"

4c. frustration

Reference to exhaustion, tiredness, passive resentment and urgency of action.

Examples: "I wonder what's the point of #climate negotiations, if very few things agreed so far are not enforced."; "This is not the time to abandon your customers #VW !" or "I'm "exhausted" from this VW emissions scandal."

4d. anger

Active expression of irritation, outbursts of hateful/offensive language and swearing.

Examples: "Serves them right. Lying sods"; „Earth says fuck you." Or "Fucking idiots. #Volkswagen"

4e. acceptance/resignation

Examples: "#DieselGate who cares if @Volkswagen cheated, diesel is life"; "Is anyone surprised #Volkswagen manipulated their emissions data? We

know car-makers always understate consumption” or “As a consumer, I really cannot care less... #VW”

4f. disbelief

Examples: “So hard to believe that auto manufacturers would lie to maintain/increase their market share”; “I must admit I'm pretty floored by #Volkswagen.” Or “The depths of the deceit are just shocking. #VW scandal”

Note: In case in which there is overlap between code 2 and 4, thus criticising with intent to act in combination with expressing emotion and personalized view on effect, 2 trumps 4.

5 - defend

Include tweets that intend to support the accused in the face of criticism, express upholding of loyalty or warding off or contesting attacks by maintain argument, evidence

Examples: “Volkswagen we are always with you we are sure u will find a #solution to the biggest problem of emission”; “#VW shouldn't be judged too harshly for lying about its emissions. Everyone does it.” Or “Shocker alert: "Vehicles pollute." That is all. #VW”

6 - speculate

Include tweets that question the nature of the scandal, indulge in conjectural thought, theorising alternative or additional outcomes. This can involve the extent of the scandal within Volkswagen itself as well as on other car manufacturing firms.

Examples: “I'm very curious how much @VW will lose in Diesel Car Market share”; “I highly doubt #Volkswagen is the only carmaker cheating emissions tests” or “How is it possible that the #VW TDI pollutes "10-40" times more than other equivalents modern engines? Is that really accurate?”

In case in which there is overlap in speculation and any other code, speculation takes upper hand.

7 - neutral comment

Include tweets that do not match to any of the above categories, and place no value on their comment, maintaining a factual and objective stance.

Examples: “#vw got themselves in a serious pickle”; “VW shares plunge on emissions scandal as probe widens to other carmakers #Volkswagen” or “#VW's diesel problems could end in criminal prosecution”

T3 - Use of sarcasm/irony

Look at tone of tweet to detect harsh or bitter derision or ironical taunt, to emphasise the emotive response. Explicit expression of emotion and opinion is coded as ‘no’. Sarcastic linguistic features include: hyperbole, oxymorons, uncommon collocations, polysemy, neologisms, and the stylistic contrast of slurs and vulgarisms mixed in with neutral lexis. Questions that can both be understood as rhetorical or ironic as well as explicit and valid query are coded as ‘undefined’.

1 - yes

Examples: “are we 100% sure Hitler is no longer running #Volkswagen?”; “Guess who just wrote the book How to Severely Damage Your Brand Credibility”

2 - no

Examples: “Totally shocked by @Volkswagen”

3 – undefined

Examples: “Could #VW be the Lance Armstrong of the motor industry?”; “Is this the car industry's horse meat moment?”

T4 - Primary topic of tweet

Look at primary focus of the message, aspect of the scandal that is addressed.

1 - environmental implications

Include tweets mentioning any allegations of pollution, environmental harm as well as health risks

Examples: “@VW Blue skies obscured by the black diesel exhaust from ur fraudulent clean diesel cars!”; “#Volkswagen you do realize youre screwing up our environment?” or “Sucks that they cheated to sell cars and ruin the environ.”

2 - personal assets

Include tweets concerned with the value of their Volkswagen vehicle, mentions of recalls or demands for refunds

Examples: "I loved our Jetta Sportswomen TDI- Never has a company had such enthusiastic ambassadors. I am so done."; "VWcanada so what do you expect me to do with my 2 week old 2015 Jetta TDI?" or "VW - so so so annoyed to know I own one of affected #VW diesels"

3 - brand reputation

Include tweets with a focus around the effect of Volkswagen's brand and image, marketing approach and laments of flailing reputation

Examples: "Guess who just wrote the book How to Severely Damage Your Brand Credibility #Volkswagen"; "Reputations are hard to win and easy to lose." Or "Another corporate scandal reinforces the importance of #corporate #culture."

4 - corporate deceit

Include tweets focused around the betrayal of customers and stakeholders, through untruthful corporate messaging and fraudulent marketing and selling strategies

Examples: "so hard to believe that auto manufacturers would lie to maintain/increase their market share"; "Automobile companies don't accidentally install software designed to fool regulators and consumers" or "#Volkswagen - the latest corporation that thinks it can lie and cheat its way to profit at everyone else's expense"

5 - criminality

Include tweets focused around the unlawfulness or the scandal and legislative accountability of actors involved, including calls for government or legislative action.

Examples: "US corporate criminal liability + death by diesel = homicide charges for VW?"; "#Volkswagen is just the latest scandal from an epic decade of white-collar criminality" or "German prosecutors announced the launch of a criminal investigation of recently resigned #VW"

6 - consumer action

Include tweets focused around the consumer reaction of the tweet, expectations of boycotts or calls-to-action directed at Volkswagen customers

Examples: “In an act of direct action against #VW's corporate deceit, we deliberately 'de-fuelled' the van this evening”; “Tampering like this required authorization from top brass.!! Boycott VW!” or “I'd be happy to join a class action lawsuit.”

7 - stock prices/VW's revenue

Include tweets topical to the decrease in share price of Volkswagen and/or mention VW's monetary losses

Examples: “VW shares plunge on emissions scandal”; “#Volkswagen cars are about to get a lot cheaper.” Or “#dieseldate #Volkswagen emissions scandal will cost billions and could tarnish the entire German auto industry.”

8 – VW's competitors

Include tweets that focus around other carmakers harnessing scandal for own profit, including encouragements and recommendations of other car manufacturer brands, as well as speculations on their involvement in the scandal

Examples: “The folks at Toyota got the last laugh. #fuelcell #hybrid”; “After #Volkswagen is #Audi next? :-/” or “Guess @Porsche will admit their #dieseldate issues next.”

9 – future of diesel engines

Include tweets that discuss the implications on diesel as a fuel, its quality, efficacy or any other quality

Examples: “#VW sees technical solution for diesels”; “Will be interesting to see how reputation of fossil fuels affected.” Or “Will this be the end of diesel cars in America #dieseldate”

10 – capitalist forces

Include tweets that mention, blame or criticise the capitalist and neo-liberal pressures behind the deceit including the succumbing to these pressures by VW.

Examples: “Are we again victims of the filthy capitalists? ”; “capitalism shows it just can't resist an exploitative, corrupt, swindling move in name of profit #Volkswagen” or “how the #RuleofLaw reacts to mass killing by profit greed #Volkswagen”

11 – undefined

Include tweets that don't identifiably reference a particular aspect of the scandal.

Examples: "How quickly things can change. #TDI #dieselgate" or "Disappointing news from VW #fahrfromgreenengine" or "Cmon, #Volkswagen, I really expected better"