

# Southwest's Christmas Catastrophe

Using social media intelligence to track a public relations crisis and response

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# What happened to Southwest?

Over the last fifty years, Southwest Airlines has gained a reputation as a reliable, non-traditional domestic airline. That reputation came crashing down in December 2022 after a pre-Christmas snowstorm shut down two of the major airports in their point-to-point route model. The flood of scheduling and re-routing that followed overwhelmed the primitive software that the airlines used to schedule and coordinate flights, resulting in mass flight cancellations the week of Christmas. While other large airlines like United and Delta suffered only minor scheduling issues, Southwest passengers were stranded for days or were prevented from holiday travel at all.

In this brief, we examine how consumers reacted to Southwest's crisis, and track the fallout of the mass flight cancellations as they occurred on social media.

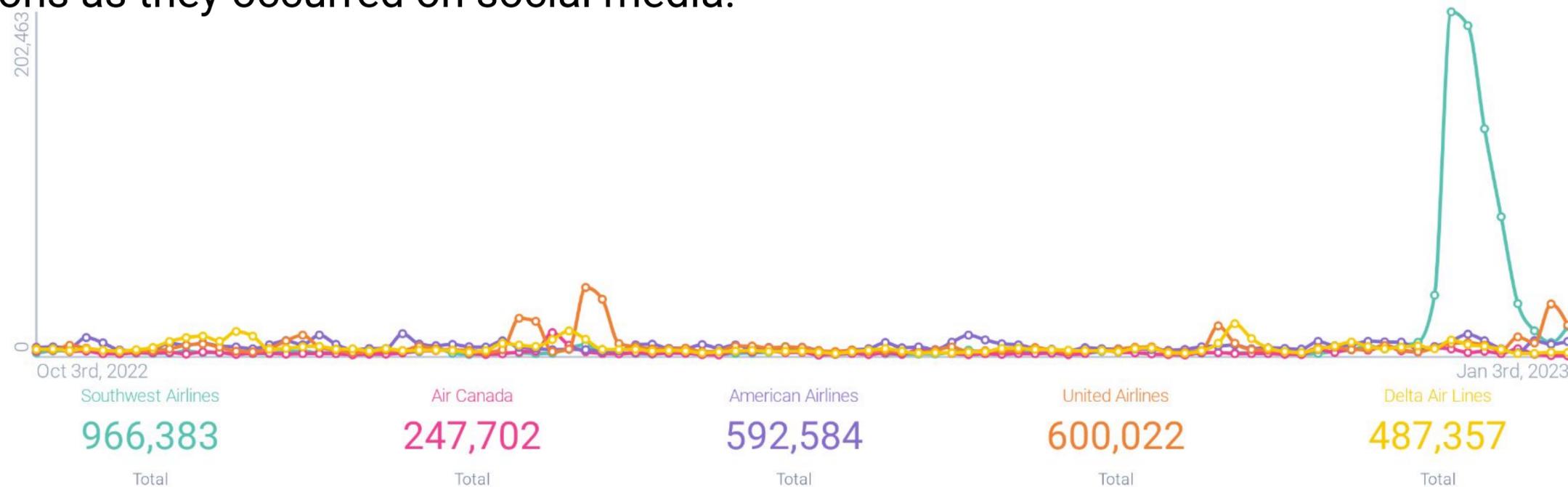


Figure 1: Last three months of post volume for the top five North American airlines; Infegy Atlas data.

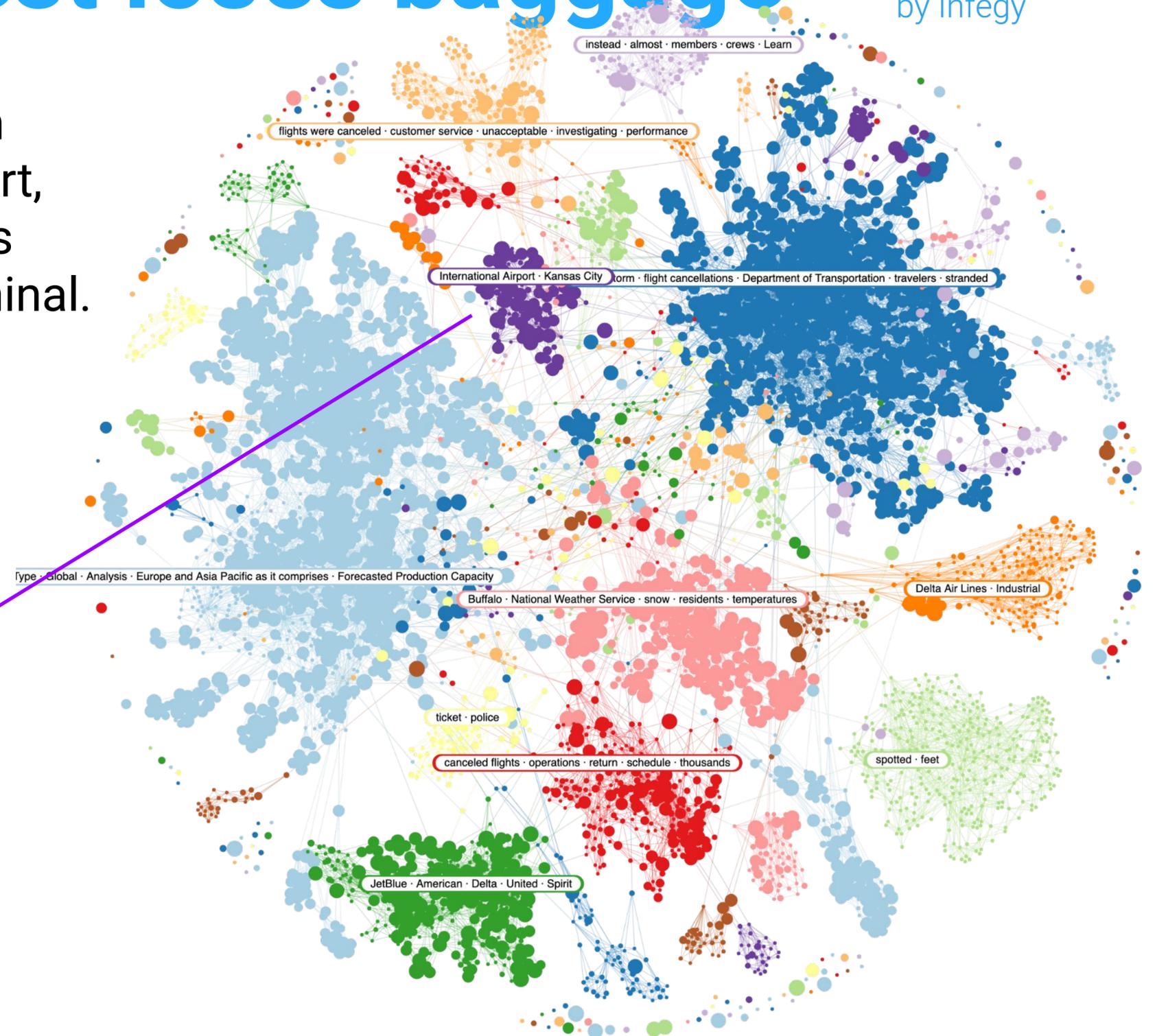
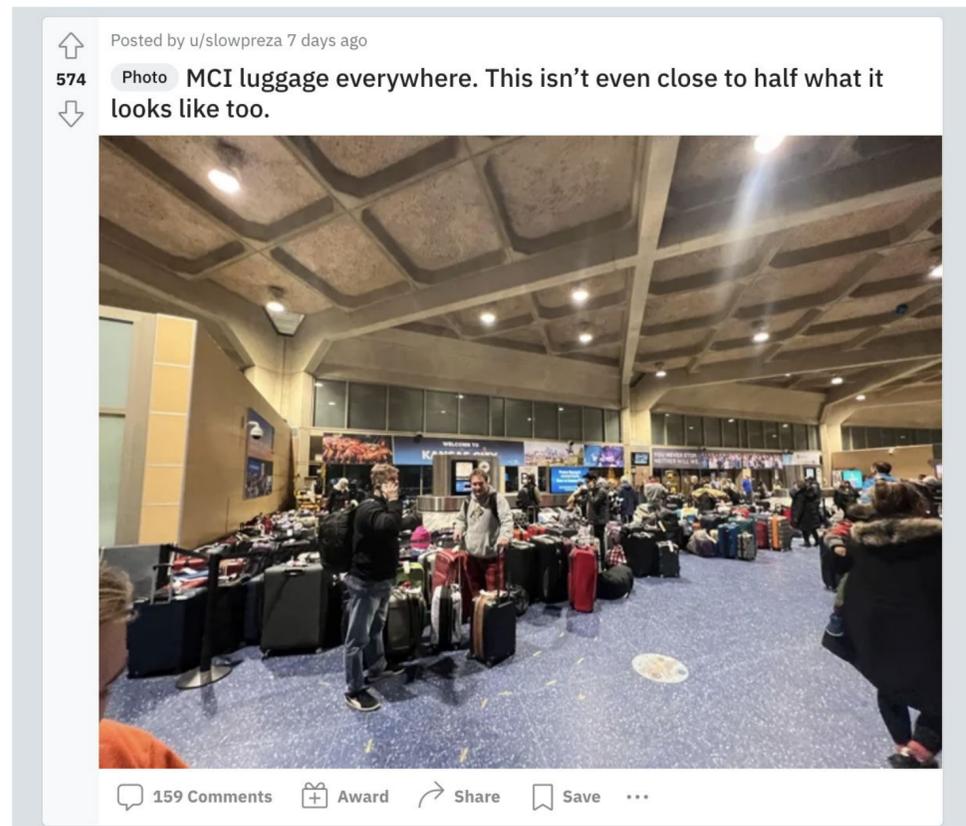
# Brand sentiment: How does Southwest compare?

While all airlines receive weather-related blowback, the late-2022 winter storms caused even more drops in Southwest consumer sentiment and brand health. Infegy Atlas sentiment data shows that consumers spoke about Southwest Airlines with the least positivity compared with the four other top North American airlines. Additionally, Southwest consumers had the highest passion percentages when speaking negatively, suggesting that consumers were particularly angry with the airline.



# A top topic: Southwest loses baggage

Much of the Southwest-related conversation dealt with lost baggage. Infegy's home airport, Kansas City International (MCI), went viral as thousands of lost bags crowded up the terminal.



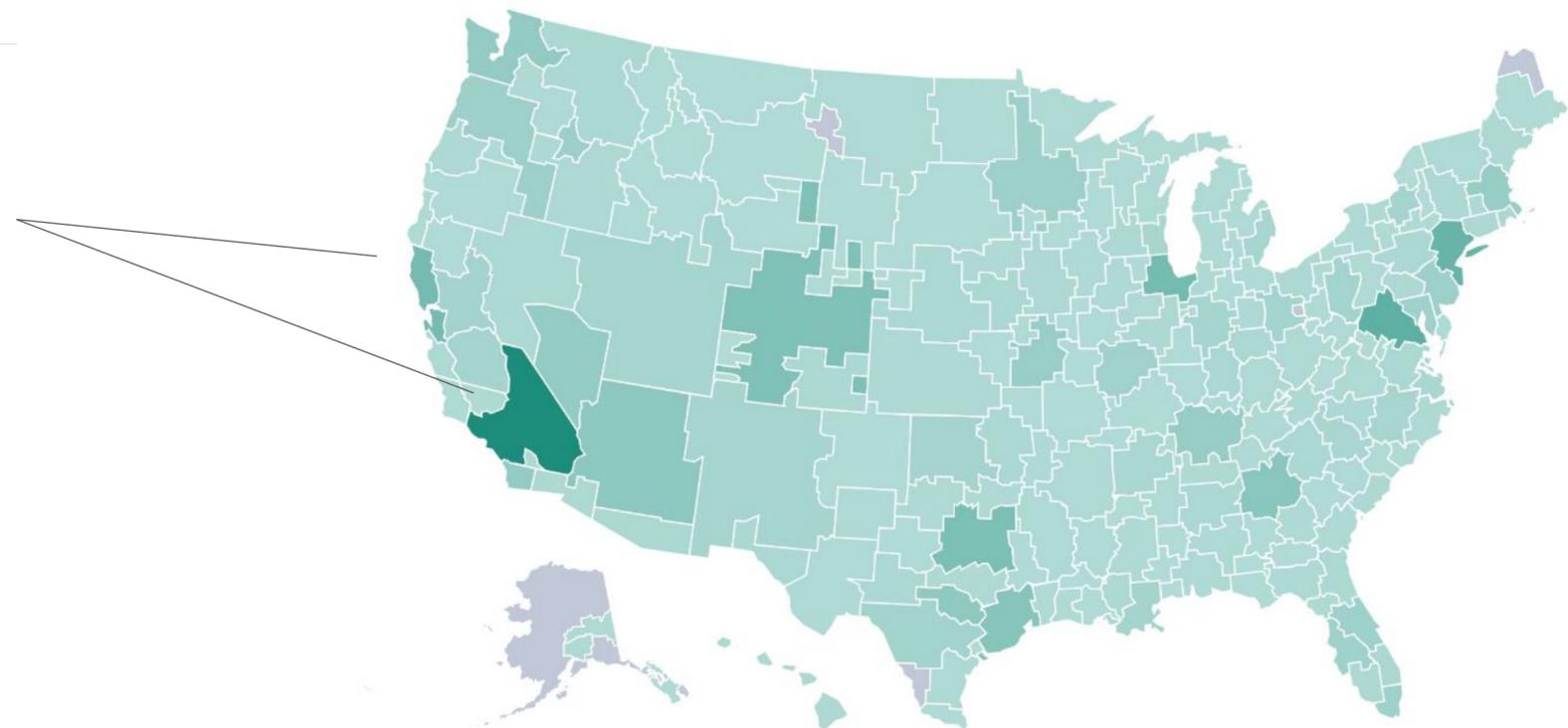
# Geography of the conversation

While Kansas City's airport enjoyed some viral fame, Infegy Atlas geographic data shows that a large volume of consumer complaints came from California. This highlights a geographic segment of Southwest's consumer base. Southwest began as a Texas-based airline in the 1960s, but expanded aggressively to California where air travel is in high demand (the state's size and geography make driving between cities more difficult). The heavy volume of conversation from California corroborates a *New York Times* article explaining how California residents rely on Southwest airlines for intrastate travel.

*The New York Times*

***Southwest Is California's 'Unofficial Airline.' The Meltdown Has Residents Anxious.***

Once a Texas mainstay, Southwest has become a major airline that many Californians rely upon to travel across their vast state.



# Who's to blame?

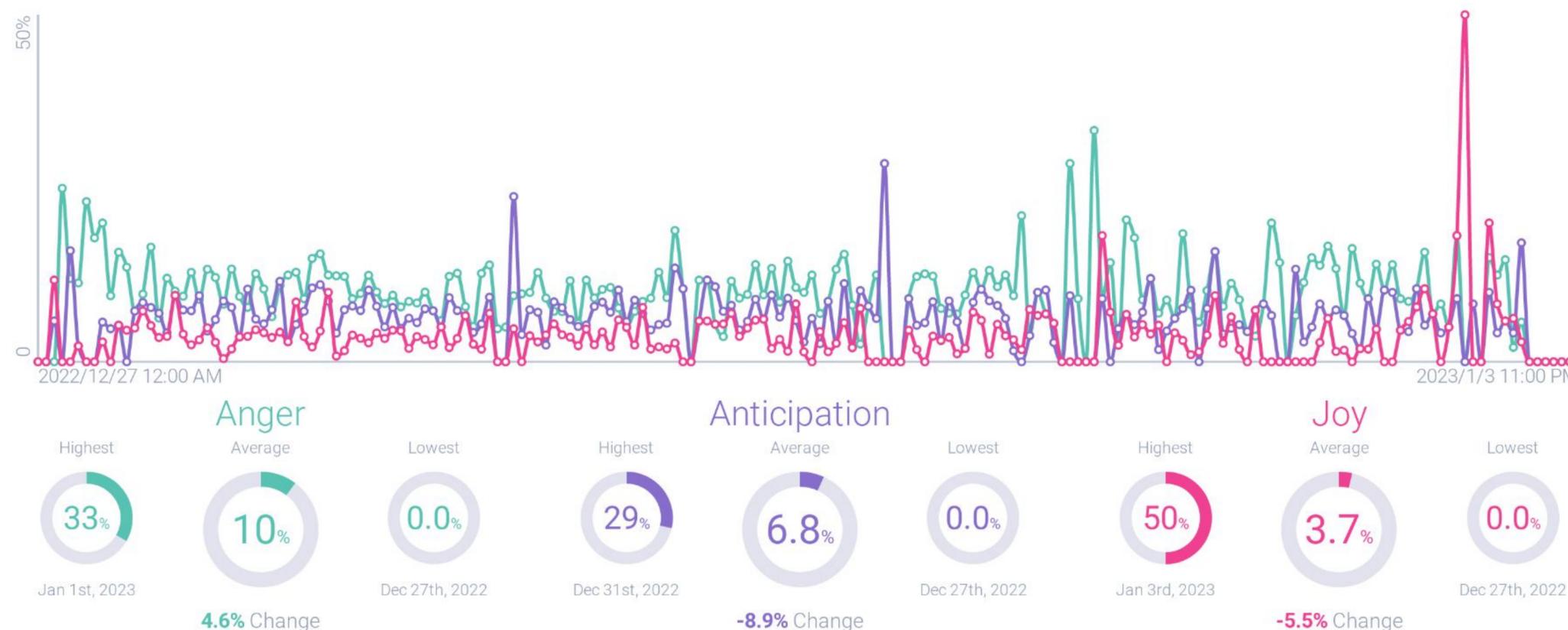
Passengers directed their ire at Southwest's new CEO, Bob Jordan: within the context of Southwest-related conversation, Jordan was discussed with a 88% negative sentiment rating. The criticism towards Jordan isn't entirely justified. Jordan only took the reigns in February 2020, whereas Southwest's outdated software and infrastructure issues have been raised as a company issue for decades. Pete Buttigieg, the US Secretary of Transportation, is the second highest mentioned entity in the conversation. Buttigieg's administration has promised investigations into the Southwest cancellations, but his 40% positive sentiment rate on Infegy Atlas suggests that consumers deem his actions to be "too little, too late."

Entity	Trend	Change	Sentiment	Universe Posts	Appearances Per Post
Bob Jordan		767%	 12%	8.90k	1
Pete Buttigieg		487%	 40%	6.03k	1.1
FlightAware		-40%	 4%	4.56k	1.4
Elon Musk		59%	 20%	4.48k	1
Delta Air Lines		-89%	 80%	2.59k	1.1



# Using Emotions to track recovery

Infegy Atlas shows that Anger was the leading emotion in conversation occurring on Southwest Airlines' subreddit during the last week of December 2022. However, as Southwest began to rectify the issues by making reimbursements to customers and recovering lost baggage, Joy began to surge in the conversations taking place early in the first week of January 2023



Sourced from r/SouthwestAirlines

# Conclusion

The winter storms of late 2022 had a significant negative impact on consumer sentiment and brand health for Southwest Airlines.

The high passion percentages in the conversation show that consumers were very angry and disappointed when speaking negatively about Southwest. The majority of consumer complaints occurred in California, and the new CEO of Southwest, Bob Jordan, received a low sentiment rating. However, as the airline worked to make customers whole and recover lost baggage, consumers expressed joy and shared that online as well. Overall, the crisis was a difficult time for Southwest, but the airline has begun to take steps to address the issues and regain the trust of its clients.

Social media audience intelligence can help you track a PR crisis like this, and also help you measure the impact of your response efforts.

# About Infegy

We're changing the way companies listen to consumers, and what they do about it.

- Robust social listening data and analysis
- Quickest view of consumers' thoughts and sentiments
- Unmatched client experience and support
- Agile approach to products and services



ENDEAVOR



qualtrics<sup>XM</sup>



## Our dataset

- Social dataset spanning hundreds of billions of posts and growing fast.
- Data collection that best mirrors varied real-world populations.
- Unlimited data access provides flexibility to obtain the context that matters.
- In-house data storage allows for unmatched speed to insight.

