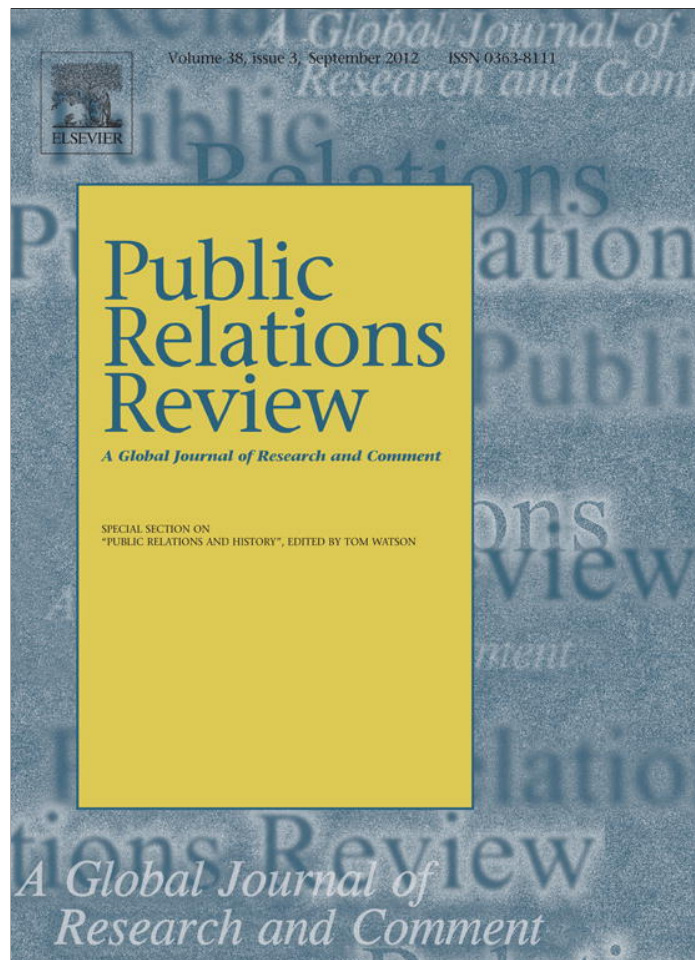


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How publics use social media to respond to blame games in crisis communication: The Love Parade tragedy in Duisburg 2010

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication scholarship has been criticized for its “managerial bias” and for its tendency to marginalize the perspective of publics and audiences. However, the understanding of how publics cope with and interpret crises is crucial for developing the body of knowledge in crisis communication, from both critical and managerial/functionalist perspectives. This case study of the Love Parade crisis in Germany 2010 aimed at exploring how publics perceived the crisis response of the festival organizers and how they used social media to communicate about it shortly after the outbreak of the crisis. A content analysis of 1847 postings at two relevant message boards produced support for the assumption that attributions of cause and responsibility are important predictors of publics’ evaluations of organizations in crisis situations. Findings also revealed that stakeholders actively engage in such attributional inferences spontaneously without being prompted by researchers. The analysis of responsibility perceptions as well as evaluative judgments over time supported the situational crisis communication theory. Blaming others and denying responsibility in the context of a crisis that was perceived as human error accident triggered negative reputational outcomes for the organizations involved in the Love Parade.

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1. Introduction

“I am 100 percent willing to take risks” (Arackal, 2009, p. 140), said Rainer Schaller, CEO of the biggest German gym chain McFit Ltd., in an interview in summer 2009. In 2010 he was the organizer of the largest techno music festival in Europe, the Love Parade in Duisburg. During the late afternoon of July 24, a stampede killed 21 young people after mass panic broke out in a tunnel. More than 500 participants were injured. Quickly, the media remembered Schaller’s statement and asked him whether cost savings regarding security at the festival were part of that business strategy. He denied and blamed the police for having caused the stampede. The police refused to take responsibility and blamed Duisburg authorities as well as the organizer for security failures. Duisburg authorities and the Mayor of Duisburg pointed to the organizer and the police. It was the beginning of a fatal blame game that presumably will serve in future courses on crisis communication to exemplify major failures in crisis response. This study analyzed how publics used internet forums to discuss this kind of crisis response and to decide about causes and responsibility for the crisis.

The understanding of how publics cope with and interpret crises is crucial for developing the body of knowledge in crisis communication, from both critical and functionalist perspectives. Some scholars advocated an audience-oriented approach to crisis communication and applied attribution theories from social psychology to explain the effects of responsibility attributions on organizational reputation in the context of crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Lee, 2004). They were particularly

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interested in the link between stakeholder attributions and the effective selection of crisis communication strategies by public relations professionals as proposed by the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995).

However, as most of the research that has been done to test the SCCT relied on experimental designs, artificial stimulus materials and student samples, we do not know to what extent these findings can be regarded as representative for real-world crises. In particular, the relevance of causal attributions and responsibility attributions as well as their impact on stakeholders' attitudes toward crisis communicators need further external validation. Scholars have usually triggered such attributions artificially by using certain stimulus materials and asking participants about their respective perceptions of causes and responsibility (Försterling, 2001). For crisis communication, however, it is crucial to understand to what extent such attributions are triggered spontaneously among publics during a real crisis and whether they base their evaluations of organizational reputation on perceptions of cause and/or blame.

An ideal non-reactive way to observe publics' responses to crises has become content analysis of social media content. Social networks or discussion boards are considered to be important forums to track spontaneous crisis discourses from the publics' perspective, especially in developed countries like the US and Germany. In both countries more than 70% of the population uses the internet and social media adoption is constantly growing (Eimeren & Frees, 2011; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). That crises are important topics on social media was also demonstrated by Facebook's latest list of the most mentioned topics. In Germany, the *E. coli* outbreak, the plagiarism scandal of the former German Secretary of Defense and the Fukushima crisis in Japan were among the ten most important topics in status mentions in 2011 (Facebook, 2011).

This case study of the Love Parade in Duisburg 2010 aimed at exploring how publics perceived the crisis response of the festival organizers and how they used message boards on the internet to communicate about it shortly after the outbreak of the crisis on the evening of July 24. The case was used to examine the assumptions of SCCT and attribution theory regarding the role of causal attributions as well as their impact on publics' evaluations of organizational reputation. Hence, these findings should help to assess the external validity of experimental research on SCCT. In addition, the study is supposed to shed light on how crisis stakeholders use social media to evaluate the crisis response of certain organizations or persons in the initial phase of a crisis. The resulting specific research questions were as follows:

RQ1. To what extent do publics use social media such as message boards (RQ1.1) to address questions of cause and responsibility and/or (RQ1.2) to express their general attitudes toward crisis communicators in the context of a crisis such as the Love Parade 2010?

RQ2. Who was held responsible for the Love Parade catastrophe in 2010 and how did attributions of cause and responsibility evolve in the first days of the crisis?

RQ3. Was there a difference regarding communicated attributions between those who identified themselves as participants (or their relatives/friends) of the Love Parade and other users?

RQ4. How did participants and other users assess the crisis response of the responsible parties?

To get a better understanding of the crisis, of the possible causes and of the resulting response of different stakeholders, Section 1 will give a short overview on the history of the Love Parade, the parade in Duisburg in 2010 and the involved stakeholders.

2. Background of the Love Parade crisis

2.1. A short history of the Love Parade and the case of Duisburg 2010

The parade was initiated by the techno DJ Matthias Røeighin 1989. It started as a small party with 150 participants in the streets of Berlin that was officially declared as a political demonstration and turned into an annual festival with steadily rising numbers of visitors from Germany and other countries. At its peak in 1999, 1.5 million people participated. However, the festival organizers increasingly had to face financial problems as the Love Parade was no longer classified as political demonstration after 2001. As a consequence, they had to cover most of the security and cleanup costs. In 2004 and 2005, the festival did not take place due to the lack of funding. One year later the largest German gym chain McFit Ltd. became the main sponsor. Its CEO, Rainer Schaller, bought the Love Parade trademark and organized the festival as CEO of the Lopavent Ltd. In 2006, the parade took place in Berlin for the last time with 1.2 million participants. As the senate of Berlin refused to authorize the festival in 2007, the event moved to cities in the German Ruhr Valley in 2007 and 2008. In 2009 the Love Parade was cancelled because the city of Bochum did not authorize the festival. The official reason was the lack of capacity of the city's train station.

In Duisburg 2010, Rainer Schaller and his Lopavent Ltd. organized and promoted the event for the fourth time. The gym chain McFit Ltd. with CEO Schaller sponsored the festival. Instead of a procession through downtown as in the years before, the whole event was planned to happen on the ground of a former railroad depot, a closed area that could solely be accessed from the east and west side through tunnels. Both tunnels met at a ramp that was supposed to be the only entrance to the festival venue. At the same time, this ramp was the only exit point.

At 16:20 CET on July 24, the police closed Duisburg central station as too many visitors were arriving and some were starting to cross the rail tracks. The first participants wanted to leave the festival through the ramp in the center and the tunnels while others pushed the crowd to access the festival area. First panic reactions occurred. At 16:44 CET, the organizers announced that the festival area had to be closed due to overcrowding. Hundreds of thousands of people were still waiting to get access.

At 17:20 CET, more participants breached the barriers to access the festival or to escape the overcrowded areas. Some tried to climb a stairway close to the intersection of the tunnels and the central ramp as the pressure in the crowd became intolerable. Several fell off the stairway onto the crowd below while trying to escape. Half an hour later, the police announced that an accident had occurred and that 10 persons had died, 10 had been revived and 15 had been injured.

At 19:00 CET, the crisis management team of the Duisburg authorities decided not to stop the festival to avoid further panic reactions or aggression among the participants. At 19:45 CET, the first press conference of the crisis management team, the Mayor of Duisburg and the Secretary of the Interior of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) was held. The festival ended at 23:00 CET.

Once the Love Parade had ended, further five participants died in the hospital. Later autopsies revealed that all of the 21 deaths were due to crushed rib cages. Other participants, panicked by the pressure of the crowd, trampled them to death. Among the victims were 13 women and 8 men, aged between 18 and 38 years, 13 from Germany, the remaining from Spain, Australia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Italy, the Netherlands, and China.

2.2. *Situational analysis of the Love Parade crisis 2010*

The analysis of this case will focus on the organizations that were responsible for planning the Love Parade and for the security measures at the festival venue. As this group received most of the public attention and had to face accusations of wrongdoing, they were – from a public relations perspective – the main actors who had to respond to the crisis:

- (1) The Lopavent Ltd. and its CEO Rainer Schaller who, at the same time, is CEO of the festival's main sponsor McFit Ltd.: Lopavent was the organizer and responsible for financing and promoting the event. The company was in charge of setting up a security plan and putting all the necessary security facilities into place (e.g., security cameras, signs). Lopavent also had to contract with private security firms to control the festival area and the access points.
- (2) The authorities of the City of Duisburg with its highest official, the Mayor of Duisburg Adolf Sauerland: Duisburg authorities were responsible for licensing the whole event to take place at the former railroad depot. They had to review Lopavent's security plans, escape way concepts, fire prevention measures, etc. After several meetings between Lopavent representatives, Duisburg authorities, officials of the police, the fire department and others, the permission was granted on July 21, three days before the Love Parade started.
- (3) The police of Duisburg and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) were in charge of ensuring security at the festival area and the city of Duisburg. They were supposed to assist Lopavent's security staff in difficult situations. Before July 24, police officials from Duisburg participated in reviewing and discussing the security plans that Lopavent had submitted to receive the permission for the festival.

The crisis response strategies used by these three organizations and their highest officials were basically the same in the first week of the crisis. They included excuses trying to deny control over the crisis (mild acceptance of responsibility), scapegoating one of the other organizations (no acceptance of responsibility) and expressions of compassion for the victims and their relatives and friends.

The most affected stakeholders in Duisburg were the participants of the festival, especially the ones who were part of the crowd in the tunnel and at the ramp where the fatalities occurred. In addition, their relatives and close friends belonged to that group. Many were traumatized due to long hours of uncertainty and the anxiety between the first media reports on the catastrophe and the news of the whereabouts and the well-being of their relatives.

Further stakeholders who had strategic interests in the consequences of the crisis for one of the three main crisis communicators were identified. First of all, the Department of the Interior of the state of NRW, especially the Secretary of the Interior Ralf Jäger, had a stake in the crisis as his department is the superior authority of the police in Duisburg and NRW. Jäger, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), was held accountable for the decisions and actions of the police authorities, although he was not directly involved in planning the police operation in Duisburg. In addition, the Government of the state of NRW and its Governor Hannelore Kraft (SPD party) were stakeholders of the crisis. Besides political reasons, Hannelore Kraft was personally affected as her son was among the participants of the Love Parade, though not injured.

Regarding the organizer of the festival, especially the Love Parade's main sponsor McFit Ltd. was a relevant stakeholder. The economically very successful gym chain had to fear substantial reputational losses, particularly because its CEO Rainer Schaller was one of the prime figures suspected of being responsible for the catastrophe in Duisburg. Instead of boosting the company's brand, the sponsor's engagement was potentially threatening its profitability as McFit clients – another stakeholder group of this crisis – might decide to boycott the company.

3. Review of the relevant literature

In the last two decades, particularly attribution theories were proven to be useful for explaining how and why stakeholders' attitudes towards organizations are affected by crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Härtel, McColl-Kennedy, & McDonald, 1998; Schwarz, 2008). The way stakeholders ascribe causes and responsibility for crises to certain organizations has been in the center of interest, as these attributions were found to have a substantial impact on organizational reputation. Further research showed that reputation in crisis situations can be positively influenced by matching the "right" crisis response strategy. Coombs (1995) developed a set of communication strategies and used attribution theory as the rationale to propose evidence-based guidelines for the appropriate selection of such strategies.

Reasons for the appropriateness of applying attribution theory to the study of organizational crises can be traced back to its roots. Heider (1958) already assumed that individuals have a fundamental need to reduce uncertainty with regard to perceptions of their environment. By trying to attribute certain causes to observed behaviors, these individuals feel more confident about events or behaviors they observe. Especially unexpected events that are perceived to be personally relevant and threatening are likely to trigger spontaneous attributional activity (Malle & Knobe, 1997; Weiner, 1985) such as organizational crises:

An organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact situation that is perceived by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization and that is subjectively experienced by these individuals as personally and socially threatening. Ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution of the organizational crisis will lead to disillusionment or loss of psychic and shared meaning, as well as to the shattering of commonly held beliefs and values and individuals' basic assumptions (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 66).

As stakeholders are "people who are linked to an organization because they and the organization have consequences on each other" (Grunig & Repper, 1992, p. 125), they are expected to engage in substantial attributional activity in crisis contexts to reduce uncertainty. As a consequence, attributions are likely to influence stakeholders' attitudes and behavior toward organizations.

The basic assumption of SCCT is that stakeholders in contexts of organizational crises make judgments about whether a certain organization is responsible for the crisis and its negative outcomes. The more they consider an organization to be responsible for such negative outcomes, the more negatively they should evaluate organizational reputation. By studying interpersonal perceptions social psychologists consistently found evidence that attributions of responsibility shape feelings and behavior toward persons. If individuals observe a negative outcome of the behavior of another person and attribute responsibility for this outcome to this person, then this attribution will create stronger feelings of anger and a negative view of the person. Accordingly, as organizational crises usually involve perceived negative outcomes as the consequence of an organization's behavior, stakeholders' attributions of responsibility should have impacts on their judgment of the organization. Various experimental studies in the US showed that increasing levels of organizational reputation were moderately to strongly related to more negative perceptions of organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Kim & Yang, 2009). Similar findings were produced by studies in Germany (Schwarz, 2012) and Hong Kong (Lee, 2004).

A few studies of social media content and attributions about organizational crises were found. Choi and Lin (2009) content analyzed 277 postings from two online bulletin boards to assess consumer reactions to the Mattel product recalls in 2007. They found significant relationships between perceived crisis responsibility as well as different kinds of emotions and reputation. Kim and Lee (2010) analyzed 96 online news articles and 88 blog postings on the Samsung oil spill crisis in 2007. Their findings indicated significant differences between journalists and blog users in terms of attributing blame and expressing emotions toward Samsung. Coombs and Holladay (2010) examined 210 discussion board responses on the Amazon/Kindle crisis in 2009 and looked for reactions to Amazon's apology posted by its CEO. They concluded that online postings are worth while objects of analysis to identify stakeholders' unfiltered reactions to crisis response strategies and their behavioral intentions.

Based on these insights, this study aimed at testing the external validity of SCCT and its basic assumptions which are rooted in attribution theory. The following hypotheses which are related to the research questions stated in the introductory section were tested:

H1.1. The more publics engage in attributing causes and responsibility to certain causes and or persons/organizations, the more they will express their attitudes toward these persons/organizations.

H2.1. The more publics attribute responsibility to one of the involved organizations/persons, the more negative attitudes they will express toward this person/organization.

H3.1. Highly involved publics such as victims of the crisis or their relatives and friends, will engage more strongly in attributions of causes/responsibility as well as expressing their attitudes toward responsible parties compared to less involved publics.

4. Methodology

To answer the research questions, a quantitative content analysis of two internet forums was conducted. User comments posted during the initial crisis phase between July 24 and August 2 were included. The first one was set up by the radio channel *WDR-1Live Radio*, which is the biggest radio broadcaster with young target groups in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and reported live from the festival venue. When this message board was started on the evening of July 24, users were asked to comment on the Love Parade catastrophe. From a total of 8566 postings, a random sample of 942 user comments was included in the analysis.

The second message board was a discussion forum at *Spiegel Online*, which is the online edition of the news magazine *Der Spiegel*. At the same time, it is among the most visited online news sites in Germany with 131.4 million visits in July 2010 (IVW, 2011). The board administrator opened the discussion on July 24 at 10:55 p.m. with the question: “Love Parade in Duisburg – a fatal error? The decision was controversial, the concept was doubted, and then the catastrophe happened – was it a mistake, to have the Love Parade at this venue?” Of a total of 6360 user comments, a random sample of 905 postings between July 24 and August 1 was included. Altogether 1847 postings from two message boards were analyzed. These comments stem from at least 948 users with distinguishable user names. In addition, 196 comments were posted by anonymous users. The individual postings were treated as the units of analysis.

The codebook included the following categories and measures:

- Formal categories and user characteristics (e.g., date, time, length of the posting in words, user name, identification as Love Parade participant or relative/friend of one of the participants)
- Mention of one of the involved actors/organizations; scale: mentioned (1), not mentioned (0)
- Mention of certain crisis communication activities (e.g., the press conferences on July 24, 25 and 28); scale: mentioned (1), not mentioned (0)
- General assessment of the crisis response of the involved actors/organizations; 3-point scale with –1 for primarily negative statements, 0 for none or balanced evaluation, and +1 for primarily positive statements within the posting
- General evaluation of the involved actors/organizations; 3-point scale with –1 for primarily negative statements, 0 for none or balanced evaluation, and +1 for primarily positive statements within the posting
- Causal attributions; scale: cause mentioned (1), cause not mentioned (0)
- Attributions of responsibility/blame to a specific actor/organization; scale: actor held responsible (–1), no attribution of responsibility/balanced attribution (0), actor not held responsible (+1)

For the responsibility attributions and the assessment categories, the following persons/organizations were coded: the Mayor of Duisburg, Duisburg authorities, the CEO of Lopavent Rainer Schaller, Lopavent as organization, the police, the Secretary of the Interior of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) Ralf Jäger, the Governor of NRW Hannelore Kraft, the Government of NRW in general, and “a not further specified group of organizations involved in planning and organizing the music festival”. The category of causal attributions included a list of possible causes which might have contributed to triggering the accidents before the event (planning of the event, failure of the security expertise, too much political pressure on the organizers/planners to succeed, media coverage prior to the festival) and during the event (characteristics of the festival venue, the number of participants, technical problems, actions taken by organizers or police at the festival venue, behavior of the festival participants).

The intercoder reliability of the codebook categories was calculated using Holsti’s method. For the two persons who coded the postings an average of .96 was calculated indicating a rather high agreement between coders.

5. Findings

RQ1.1. To assess the relevance of attributions of cause and responsibility, the postings were counted according to the number of respective attributions they contained. Thirty-four percent (625) of the postings contained at least one attribution of responsibility for the crisis to one of the involved persons/organizations. Of these 625 posts, 71% blamed only one person/organization. A total of 48% (882) of the posted user comments contained at least one causal attribution. Of these 882 posts, a majority referred to either one cause (58%) or two causes (31%) that triggered the accidents at the festival venue in Duisburg. The causes mentioned most frequently were failures in planning the festival (53% of 882 postings), actions taken at the festival venue (37%), and characteristics of the festival venue itself (33%). Hence, the perception of the crisis as human error accident prevailed among the message board users. According to Coombs (2006), this crisis type is related to high levels of responsibility attributions of the involved organizations as perceived by crisis stakeholders.

RQ1.2. Only 7% (134) of all postings included at least one general evaluation of one of the persons and/or organizations involved in planning and organizing the Love Parade. Fourteen percent (262) of the user comments contained at least one assessment of the crisis response of one of these persons and/or organizations.

H1.1. To test this hypothesis, the number of causal attributions as well as the number of responsibility attributions contained in each posting was calculated. In addition, dummy variables were calculated where each posting was assigned a value of 1 if

it contained at least one general evaluation of one of the persons/organizations. The same procedure was used for the users' assessment of the crisis response of these persons/organizations. Subsequently, non-parametric correlations (Spearman-Rho) were calculated between the two attribution variables and the two evaluation variables. Significant correlations were found between causal attributions and general evaluations ($r = .09$; $p < .01$) as well as crisis response assessments ($r = .06$; $p < .01$). A much stronger relationship was found between responsibility attributions and general evaluations ($r = .26$; $p < .01$) as well as crisis response assessments ($r = .32$; $p < .01$). H1.1 was confirmed.

H1.2. Furthermore, it was tested whether stronger responsibility attributions to one of the coded persons/organizations were related to more negative general evaluations and or crisis response assessments. With the exception of Governor Hannelore Kraft, who was not blamed for the crisis at all, for each person/organization as coded in this analysis, a significant relationship between attributions of responsibility and general evaluations of the respective person/organization was found, $p < .01$. Responsibility and evaluations were most strongly correlated for the CEO of Lopavent ($r = .48$), Lopavent ($r = .41$), the Mayor ($r = .36$), and the police ($r = .35$). Similar findings were revealed for the relationships between responsibility attributions and crisis response assessments. Strongest correlations with $p < .01$ were found for the Mayor ($r = .47$), the not further specified group of organizers ($r = .4$), Lopavent ($r = .32$), and the police ($r = .31$). Hence, H2 was confirmed.

RQ2. Most of the message board postings that contained at least one responsibility assignment (625) attributed the responsibility for the Love Parade accidents to "a not further specified group of organizations and or persons that were somehow involved in planning and organizing the festival" (45%). Both the police and the Duisburg authorities were blamed in 25% of the user comments, followed by the Mayor of Duisburg (17%). The company that organized the Love Parade was held responsible in 14% of the cases. Its CEO Rainer Schaller was mentioned 28 times (5%) as being blamable for the crisis. The Government of the state of NRW (1.8%) and its Secretary of the interior (.8%) received the smallest amount of responsibility attributions.

The distribution of responsibility attributions over time was analyzed by comparing mean attributions between the first eight days of the crisis. August 1 ($N = 3$) and August 2 ($N = 20$), as well as the Government of NRW including its Secretary of the Interior, were excluded for the low number cases that fell into these cells. The results showed that attributions to the unspecified group of involved organizations/persons strongly increased until July 26 and then started to decrease. On the other hand, attributions of blame to most of the specific organizations and or persons (the Mayor, Duisburg authorities, CEO Lopavent, Lopavent, police) increased until July 29 and then started to get weaker again. However, the attributions of responsibility to the organizer Lopavent Ltd. remained on its average high until July 31. For the police a remarkably large increase in responsibility attributions was found for July 28. This was the day when the police, together with secretary Jäger, held a press conference with its basic message that the police was not responsible for the security at the festival venue and, thus, not blamable for the crisis.

RQ3/H3.1. To test this hypothesis, all postings where the users expressed certain personal involvement with the crisis were assigned to one group and then compared to the remaining user comments. Involvement was coded as high when users identified themselves as (a) participants of the Love Parade and/or as (b) friends or (c) relatives of one of the participants. All in all, 271 messages from personally involved users were identified.

For responsibility attributions, no significant difference was found for the average number of attributions between messages from highly involved and less involved publics ($F(1, 1846) = 2.6$; $p = .11$). A significant difference was found for the average number of causal attributions ($F(1, 1846) = 20.4$; $p < .01$). Highly involved publics engaged more strongly in attributing causes ($M = .97$; $SD = .98$) compared to messages from less involved users ($M = .7$; $SD = .91$). Thus, H3.1 was confirmed with restrictions.

In addition to the number of attributions in general, the average attribution of responsibility to one of the specific organizations/persons was compared between messages posted by involved and less involved publics. Significant differences were only found for the organizer Lopavent Ltd. ($F(1, 1846) = 13.1$; $p < .01$) and the police ($F(1, 1846) = 4.7$; $p < .05$). More involved publics attributed more responsibility to the police ($M = -.11$; $SD = .31$) and less responsibility to Lopavent Ltd. ($M = .00$; $SD = .06$) compared to less involved users and their attributions of blame to the police ($M = -.06$; $SD = .3$) and Lopavent Ltd. ($M = -.05$; $SD = .23$).

RQ4. The analysis of crisis response assessments of the organizations and persons involved in planning and organizing the Love Parade showed that most of them were negatively evaluated by the users. The only positive average assessment was found for Governor Hannelore Kraft. She was especially praised for her very emotional speech at the Salvatori Church in Duisburg on July 31. When users criticized crisis communication activities they did so in most cases with reference to "a not further specified group of organizations and persons involved in organizing the festival" ($M = -.06$; $SD = .24$). For the remaining categories, the Mayor of Duisburg ($M = -.04$; $SD = .19$), the police ($M = -.02$; $SD = .15$) and Duisburg authorities ($M = -.02$; $SD = .14$) were evaluated most negatively regarding their crisis response. Rather low average negative assessments were found for the organizer Lopavent Ltd. ($M = -.01$; $SD = .09$), its CEO Rainer Schaller ($M = -.01$; $SD = .1$), and secretary Jäger ($M = -.01$; $SD = .09$). No significant differences were found for crisis response assessments between the group of postings from highly involved publics compared to messages from less involved publics ($p > .05$).

6. Discussion

The aim of this study was twofold. First, some general assumptions of SCCT as well as attribution theory were tested for external validity by using a non-reactive method such as content analysis of social media content. Second, on a more case-specific level, the study was supposed to produce insights into publics' perception of fatal blame games in crisis response as in the case of the Love Parade in Duisburg.

Substantial evidence was produced for the external validity of the SCCT hypothesis that attributions of cause and responsibility have an impact on stakeholders' evaluation of organizational reputation. Publics that used the internet to discuss about the Love Parade crisis expressed significantly more evaluations of one of the involved organizations and/or persons when they engaged in such attributions. However, responsibility attributions had a much stronger impact compared to causal attributions which supports the notion that both concepts should be treated as distinct, though correlated constructs (Schwarz, 2012). In line with SCCT, stronger attributions of responsibility were related to more negative evaluations of the organization or person held responsible. These findings support the assumption that attributional inferences are important cognitive processes that explain reputational outcomes in crisis contexts.

The study also showed that publics engage intensively in attributing causes and responsibility rather spontaneously without being asked by a researcher and, thus, it supports one of the underlying assumptions of attribution theory. Situations that create uncertainty among individuals such as organizational crises, trigger substantial attributional activity to reduce that uncertainty and to make more confident judgments about the situation and of the involved actors.

On the case-specific level, the findings suggest that blaming others for the negative outcomes of a crisis, is not an effective strategic crisis response. This applies at least to crisis situations that are perceived by publics as human error accidents. The Mayor of Duisburg (including Duisburg authorities), the police, as well as the organizer Lopavent Ltd., shifted blame to one of the others and occasionally attacked their accusers. All of them received negative attributions of responsibility by publics that were actively commenting on the case on the internet. These attributions were related to negative assessments of their crisis response as well as to negative general evaluations. However, the organization that was almost invisible in public in the first week of the crisis, namely Lopavent Ltd. and its CEO Schaller, received rather weak, though negative attributions of responsibility. On the other hand, Duisburg authorities, the Mayor, and the police who were more active by giving interviews and press conferences, were much more criticized on the message boards. One might assume that the lack of visibility of the organizer Lopavent in the first week triggered the perception that this organization did not take part in the public blame game as actively as the others. However, many users did not name specific organizations or persons in their postings and often referred to a more general group of persons and/or organizations involved in planning and organizing the festival. This category was related to a high amount of responsibility attributions in the first days of the crisis. Certainly, Lopavent and its CEO were part of that group, even though they were not named explicitly. The analysis of how responsibility attributions evolved over time seems to confirm this assumption. The findings suggest that users increasingly felt they had to blame someone for the crisis but they were undecided who in particular was most responsible in the first days. When the involved persons and organizations started to publicly blame each other for the tragedy, they increasingly fueled the public's attribution of responsibility to more specific persons and/or organizations including Lopavent. Irrespective of legal guilt, a joint and coordinated crisis response of the Duisburg authorities, the police and Lopavent would probably have triggered less reputational damage and less anger among the stakeholders of this crisis.

6.1. Limitations

The use of online content analysis has several limitations. Although the two samples of postings are representative for the respective discussion on the message boards, they are not necessarily representative of public opinion or all stakeholders of the crisis. Users who commented the Love Parade crisis on the internet are only those, of course, who have internet access. Moreover, they are supposed to be more active, more involved, and more aware of the crisis compared to other stakeholder groups or the general public. Nevertheless, from a public relations perspective, such publics are often the most relevant to address as they are the most active, sometimes represent opinion leaders in their social environment, and/or are somehow affected by the crisis. This assertion is also supported by the situational theory of publics that predicts publics with higher levels of problem recognition and involvement to be more aware and more active regarding a certain issue and a certain organization (Grunig & Repper, 1992).

Another limitation concerns the time frame. Up to now, the Love Parade crisis has not been settled. The attorney's investigation is still ongoing. Also the weeks after August 2, that were not included in this analysis, were important in terms of media coverage and crisis response. Future studies on this case will have to extend the time frame to later phases of the crisis to draw a more complete picture. For testing SCCT, an additional analysis of media content and unfiltered crisis response materials of the involved organizations should be included in order to relate specific public statements and strategies to certain characteristics of the message board content.

6.2. Conclusion

From an applied perspective, the case study is a good example of the usefulness of social media monitoring in the context of a crisis. Involved organizations that have the necessary resources should apply such tools to understand their relevant

publics and the reactions to their crisis response, including crisis type perceptions, responsibility attributions and attitudinal expressions. In addition, some social media channels are used by directly affected stakeholders as in the case of the Love Parade, and can be used to observe and address them.

In general, “online postings provide real-time, unobtrusive feedback. The results suggest this type of data set holds promise for future investigations” (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 217). Refined sampling strategies, as well as methods of data collection for online content, should be developed to test available theories in crisis communication. A non-reactive analysis of user-generated content in crisis contexts has much potential to contribute to an audience-oriented approach to crisis communication, either from a critical or managerial perspective. This kind of methodology is also helpful to increase the value of case studies, which in the past have often suffered from their descriptive and anecdotal character.

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