OUTRAGE, SOLIDARITY, COUNTERATTACK: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TWEETS ON TWO POLITICAL SCANDALS IN GERMANY

Jan Dvorak

ABSTRACT *The prevalence of politicians' scandals on social media has become an integral part of contemporary political life, presenting a challenge to existing scandal research. The formerly passive audience is given new opportunities for participation that have not yet been comprehensively described either theoretically or empirically. This study contributes to filling this gap by developing a taxonomy to describe offensive and defensive forms of audience participation during scandals. I analyze a sample of 500 influential tweets, taken from a corpus of more than 55.000 tweets related to two scandalizations of German politicians. The proposed taxonomy is shown to be suitable for describing both offensive and defensive forms of audience participation in scandalizations on social media.*

KEY WORDS

Author's note

Jan Dvorak :: University of Hohenheim, Computational Science Hub (CSH), Department of Food Informatics **::** jan.dvorak@uni-hohenheim.de

INTRODUCTION

Most scandals arise from norm violations, but not all norm violations lead to scandalization (Kepplinger, 2018a, p. 31). For scandalization to succeed, the misconduct must first be communicated to an audience and labelled as a relevant problem. In scandal research, this role is usually ascribed to journalists (Burkhardt, 2006, p. 139; Pörksen & Detel, 2012, p. 20). Scandals can therefore be seen as mediated events in which hidden, morally reprehensible activities are revealed (Thompson, 2000, p. 52). For this reason, scandalization processes have always been oriented towards the possibilities of conveying information via the media (Burkhardt, 2006, pp. 82-111). The most recent milestone in this development is the establishment of the Internet. Detached from the logic of traditional mass media, the scandal reaches a new stage of evolution and escalation (Pörksen & Detel, 2012, p. 23). The traditional division of responsibilities during a scandal, according to which journalists encourage scandalization (Kepplinger, 2018b, p. 35) and the audience voices public outrage (Neckel, 1989, p. 594), is radically challenged by the opportunities for participation in online media. Above all, the role of the audience changes under these conditions. They become a *journalistic superpower* (Pörksen & Detel, 2012, p. 23), which significantly influences the scandal. In previous research, scandals have often been interpreted as a means of control by ordinary citizens over the political elite (Hondrich, 2002, pp. 31-31; Neckel, 1986, p. 600). It remains to be seen what social function the scandal will fulfil under the changed communication conditions of the networked society. One thing is certain: the rather passive role assigned to the audience in the *scandal triad* (Käsler, 1991, p.13; Neckel, 1986, p. 585) is changing.

This study examines how internet users make use of the new opportunities to participate in scandalizations. Drawing on scandal research literature and taking into account the conditions of communication on the Internet, I develop a taxonomy of offensive and defensive forms of audience participation during scandalizations. I then use quantitative content analysis to examine whether these forms of participation can be observed in two scandals involving the German politicians Philipp Amthor (Christian Democratic Union) and Sarah-Lee Heinrich (Alliance 90/The Greens).

THE SCANDAL ON THE INTERNET

The affinity between media and scandals can be seen in their parallel development. The extent to which changes in media systems create new opportunities for scandalization and thus influence the occurrence of scandals has been described in detail as far as the past centuries are concerned (Bösch, 2011, pp. 36-38; Burkhardt, 2006, pp. 82-111; Thompson, 2000, pp. 31-60). However, with the global triumph of the Internet and the establishment of social media in the 21st century, a transformation of scandals is taking place that has not yet been fully explored by scandal research. Previous research assumed that it was journalists and traditional mass media that gave scandals the necessary reach for collective outrage (Kepplinger, 2018a, p. 35). Scandal research has long regarded the traditional mass media as the most important producers of scandal due to their sovereignty

of interpretation (Burkhardt, 2006, p. 4). This assumption is being challenged in the 21tst century. Participatory forms of journalism have blurred the distinction between producers and audience in the digital age (Hermida, 2011, pp. 30-31). The Internet offers all users the opportunity to publish and redistribute scandalous material themselves (Pörksen & Detel, 2012, p. 23; Stegbauer, 2018, p. 42). The new opportunities for participation, for example through social networks or user comments on news websites, shape the scandal landscape of the Internet (von Sikorski, 2018, p. 3124). Zulli (2020) terms this construction of scandals across multiple platforms "socio-mediated scandals" (p. 4) that are characterized by increased collaboration, personalization, partisanship and liveness (pp. 5-14).

This development generates new content whose distribution channels are no longer subject to the traditional logic of the mass media. It is no longer the journalists, in their role as gatekeepers with established selection patterns, who decide what becomes a scandal and what does not. The assessment of what is scandalous and thus socially relevant is now made by individuals (Stegbauer, 2018, p. 43; Zulli, 2020, p. 5). If violations of norms no longer have to be universally recognized, any circumstance that has the potential to outrage at least a small part of society can theoretically become a scandal. The Internet fuels this process in two ways. First, by publishing private content, its users become more accessible and easier to criticize (Stegbauer, 2018, p. 43). Due to the permanence of communication on the Internet, this can happen years after a piece of content has been created.[1] Secondly, the establishment of social networks has fundamentally changed the social communication system. The platforms offer their users new forms of visibility and participation as well as various possibilities of articulation and organization (Jarren, 2021, p. 43). This creates new opportunities for the dissemination of scandalous content and forms of collective outrage (Burkhardt, 2020, p. 11; Pörksen & Detel, 2012, p. 23).

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

The audience's agency has expanded dramatically in the Internet age. Although scandal research has investigated some scandalization on the Internet in recent years (e.g., Herbers & Lichtenstein, 2021; Pörksen & Detel, 2012; Stegbauer, 2018), there are still no methodological approaches to systematically capture audience contributions. Therefore, in the following sections, I will explore which forms of participation are conceivable for social network audiences during internet scandals.

Outrage for All

The elaboration of possible offensive forms of participation is based on the descriptions of audiences in traditional scandal research. In addition, the few research findings on the behavior of audiences during scandalizations on the Internet are taken into account. Since private individuals can now play an active role in the scandalization process that was previously reserved for journalists in the traditional mass media (Stegbauer, 2018, p. 43), research approaches on the motives and behaviors of accusers are also considered.

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[1] It is very difficult to delete public content from the Internet. For example, the Internet Archive has archived over 855 billion pieces of content that can be easily searched (Internet Archive, n.d.).

In the following two sections, these aspects collected from the literature are divided into two categories.

The Moral Focus

This category of participation describes the sincere indignation about the norm violation of the scandalized person. What is decisive is the perceived injustice resulting from the violation of morality (Burkhardt, 2006, p. 142). At the center of the uproar is transgression and what it means for central values of society. In this context, scandals often function as an escalating moment for deeper conflicts between competing values (Hondrich, 2002, p. 63). The negotiation process that follows the outrage leads to an affirmation or differentiation of society's normative guidelines (Burkhardt, 2020, p. 4; Hondrich, 2002, pp. 28-31; Kepplinger, 2005, p. 148). In traditional scandal research, this process is often interpreted as an act of governance (Hondrich, 2002, pp. 31-33; Neckel, 1998, p. 600). Scandalization thus represents the moral counter-power of social groups that otherwise have only a few opportunities to participate (Stegbauer, 2018, p. 46). Orientation towards moral concepts can also be identified as the motivation for scandalization (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1044; Tiffen, 1999, p. 137). Thus, reporting on moral grievances is part of the professional self-image of investigative journalists (Thompson, 2000, p. 82).

The Instrumental Focus

Scandalization can also be seen as a means of power. The interests of the attackers in this context go beyond mere scandal. The scandal is to be seen as a method of maintaining, extending or limiting power (Pflügler & Baugut, 2015, p. 317). Here, the scandal moves away from the normative claim of the controlling authority and the self-serving motives of the accusers come to the fore. This is most evident when considering the immediate personal benefits that can accrue to those involved in the scandalization process. For example, media companies can expect financial gains from the sale of their products and journalists can expect a gain in prestige for their investigative research (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1044; Thompson, 2000, p. 79). Scandalizing others can also provide benefits in a political context. Damaging political opponents can be done for various reasons: for example, to intimidate the scandalized person (Stegbauer, 2018, p. 106), to eliminate competitors (Jenssen & Fladmoe, 2012, p. 67), or to damage the reputation of established politicians (Burkhardt, 2020, p. 5). Another motivation would be the *reactionary scandalization of political activists* in order to delegitimize their protest (Allen, 2016).

Networked Solidarity

So far, there is no systematization of the forms of participation that the audience can use to support the person at the center of a scandal. In scandal research, however, there are various systematizations of defenses for scandalized persons. These are so-called *Image Repair Strategies* (Benoit, 2015, pp. 22-31), *Practical Explanations* (Scott & Lyman, 1976, pp. 73-105), or simply *Defenses* (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1045; Kepplinger, 2018a, p. 160; Tiffen, 1999, pp. 124-135). What all approaches have in common is the overarching goal of influencing the outcome of the situation in a way that is beneficial to the scandalized

person. The following sections explore which of these defenses are conceivable for social network audiences in the case of online scandalizations.

Denial

Denial of the allegations represents a simple form of defense that has been extensively described in scandal research (Benoit, 2015; Kepplinger, 2018a; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). This defense has the potential to completely absolve the scandalized person of the accusations, provided it is accepted by the audience. On the other hand, this defense carries a high risk, as it often leads to additional investigations. If the attackers conclude that the defense is based on lies, the scandal is further fuelled (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1045).

Justifications

Scandalized individuals have various techniques at their disposal to justify their actions (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1045; Kepplinger, 2018a, p. 160). The various approaches in scandal research can be summarized in three categories:

>The *denial of responsibility* is based on various aspects for which the scandalized person is not responsible. These include, for example, accidents, lack of information, and provocation (Benoit, 2015, p. 23; Scott & Lyman, 1976, pp. 76-81).

>The *reassessment* can refer either to the norm violation or to the entire scandal. Thus, it can be argued that the criticized act is based on good intentions (Benoit, 2015, pp. 23-24), does not violate any law (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1045), or causes only minor damage (Benoit 2015, p. 24; Scott & Lyman, 1976, pp. 83-84). Moreover, a reinterpretation of the whole scandal is possible by shifting the conflict to a more abstract level (Benoit, 2015, pp. 24-25; Tiffen, 1999, p. 134; Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 278).

>The *focus on positive aspects* aims to strengthen the relationship between the scandalized person and the audience by focusing on positive attributes or actions (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 277). Although this does not change the evaluation of the norm violation, it may help to reduce the audience's negative feelings towards the scandalized person (Benoit, 2015, p. 24).

Counterattacks

These defenses shift public attention from the scandalized person to the accuser, sometimes with different aims. First, the motives and methods of the attacker(s) can be exposed in order to discredit them and remove the weight of their accusations (Benoit, 2015, p. 25; Tiffen, 1999, pp. 125, 129). For example, if the scandalized person can convey to the audience the message that their critics are acting from selfish motives or are going too far with their criticism (for example, by threatening violence), the outrage can quickly shift to the critics. Another form of counterattack refers explicitly to norm violations by the attacker(s), which may have occurred some time ago (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1045). The scandalized person uses public attention to point out the misbehavior of the other party. This is particularly effective if their actions can be portrayed as more serious, as this makes their own norm violation seem less relevant (Scott & Lyman, 1976, p. 84).

RESEARCH INTEREST: AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION
IN SCANDALIZATIONS

Internet audiences have new ways of participating in scandalizations that have not yet been fully described in scandal research. This study attempts to fill this research gap by identifying the ways in which the internet community participates in scandalizations. The various forms of audience participation in political scandals on the Internet have been systematized in the previous sections (Figure 1).
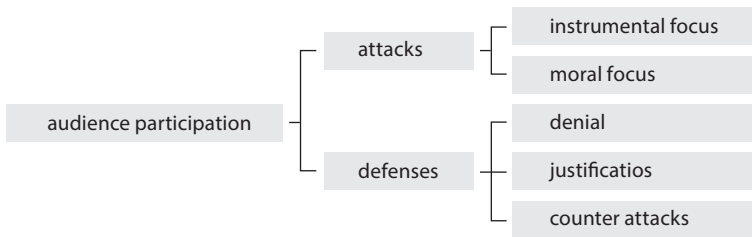
▲ *Figure 1*
Forms of audience participation in political scandals on the Internet
Note. Source: Author.

This study examines the extent to which these theoretically based communication patterns can be empirically determined in two scandalizations of German politicians on Twitter (now called X). The German political system lends itself to the study of scandal, as the number of scandals has increased steadily in recent decades (Kepplinger, 1996; von Sikorski, 2017). In recent years, several high-profile politicians have resigned in the wake of scandals, including former German presidents Horst Köhler and Christian Wulff. Twitter is a good medium for monitoring audience participation in scandalizations. In Germany, just under 10% of the population use Twitter regularly (Koch, 2023). This study tries to understand, how Twitter is used to participate in political scandals by the German public. This leads to the first overarching research question:

RQ1: How does the Twitter audience participate in the scandalizations of Phillip Amthor and Sarah-Lee Heinrich?

In order to gain a detailed understanding of the different forms of participation, the following more specific research questions will be addressed:

RQ 2a: What forms of instrumentalization and moralization are used by the Twitter audience during the scandalizations?
RQ 2b: What forms of denial, justification and counterattack are used by the Twitter audience during the scandalizations?

METHOD

Case Selection

A quantitative content analysis is used to capture offensive and defensive forms of participation. Two cases are examined, as this may reveal similarities and differences between the participations. Similarities point to potentially universal patterns, while differences help to understand the specifics of the respective scandalization. On the basis of these considerations, two comparable cases were selected.

In both cases, young politicians are at the center of public outrage, and the scandalizations take place on the social network Twitter through the publication of content that testifies to the norm violations of the scandalized persons. Both cases are located in the German political system.

Philipp Amthor and the Photo With a Neo-Nazi

Philipp Amthor is a 30-year-old politician (Christian Democratic Union) and has been a member of the German parliament since October 2017 (Amthor, n.d.). On 19 July 2021, at 11:02 am, the Twitter account *Antifaschistische Linke Bochum* posted a picture of Philipp Amthor and two other men at a horse show in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (Antifaschistische Linke Bochum, 2021). One of the two men was wearing a T-shirt that reads *Solidarity with Ursula Haverbeck.*[2]

### *Sarah-Lee Heinrich and the Disgusting White Majority Society*

Sarah-Lee Heinrich is a 22-year-old politician from the Green Party (Pausch, 2021). On 09 October 2021, she was elected federal spokesperson of the party's youth organization at its federal congress (Reuter, 2021). At 16:02 on the same day, the Twitter account *GreenWatch* published a video of Sarah-Lee Heinrich in which she answered the question to what extent the success of climate activism was related to the skin color of the protesting activists (GreenWatch, 2021a)[3]. In this context, Heinrich spoke of a "disgusting white majority society" in Germany that would find it easier to identify with Greta Thunberg, for example. A movement of People of Color, on the other hand, would not have been able to achieve the same success as *Fridays for Future* due to societal racism. A few hours later on the same day, *GreenWatch* followed up by publishing a collection of juvenile, sometimes vulgar tweets posted by Sarah-Lee Heinrich when she was a 13-14 year old teenager (GreenWatch, 2021b). Over the next 24 hours, various accounts spread more screenshots of the politician's old tweets containing homophobic, ableist and violence-glorifying statements.

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[2] Ursula Haverbeck is a far-right activist and convicted Holocaust denier.
[3] The clip is part of an edition of KARAKAYA TALK entitled "Fridays for Future: too white?". The format is produced by Funk and is part of German public broadcasting. The full video can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXtzy2RLjc8&t=267s

Data Collection

All analyses in this article refer to the audience communication on the social network Twitter. Both scandals originated on Twitter, and in both cases, there was active audience participation. The open-source software R (R Core Team, 2021) and the package *academictweetR* (Barrie & Ho, 2021) are used to collect data via the Twitter API. The start of the study period is set to the day when the scandalous material was published on Twitter. The end of the study period is set to seven days later, as the number of tweets decreased significantly after that time. For the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, a dataset of 28,714 tweets was collected. The dataset for the case of Philipp Amthor case contains 28,225 tweets. Figure 2 shows an overview of the scandals.
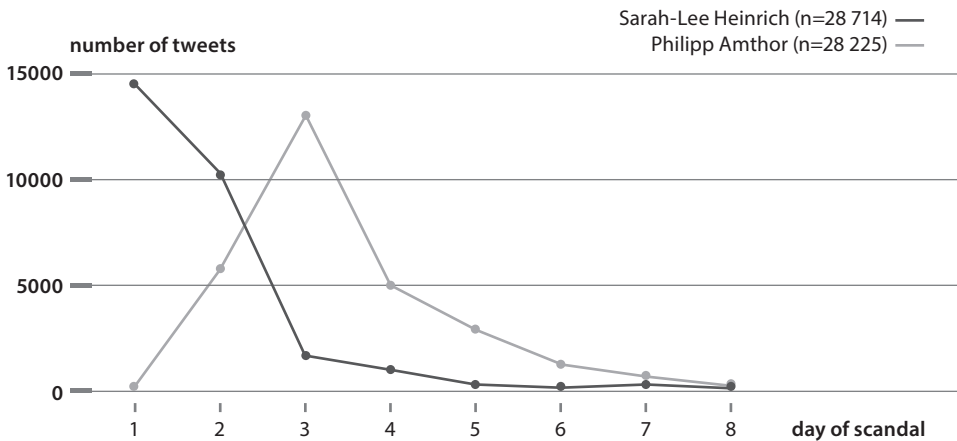
▲ *Figure 2*
Number of tweets on the days of the scandal for both cases
Note. Day 1 Sarah-Lee Heinrich = 09.10.2021, 0-24 hrs. Day 1 Philipp Amthor = 19.07.2021, 0-24 hrs.
Tweets with the hashtags #sarahleeheinrich and #philippamthor and #amthor are considered.

Quantitative Content Analysis

In order to identify different offensive and defensive forms of audience participation, the data are processed using quantitative content analysis based on Rössler (2010)[4]. Due to the large amount of material available, the first key decision is to weigh the effort and the expected gain in knowledge of the coding. I decided on a sample of 250 tweets per case to satisfy both aspects. For the sampling, all retweets were first removed from the datasets, as this could introduce bias into the analysis. The popularity of the tweets was then determined and ranked based on the number of likes. In this way, the 250 most popular posts for each scandal were selected.

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[4] The codebook (in German) created for this purpose contains detailed considerations for all steps of the coding process and can be accessed via the online appendix.

Category Formation

Based on theoretical assumptions and taking into account initial empirical observations of the two scandals, I developed a system of categories. This system was validated in a pre-test ($n = 60$). The reliability of the category system was determined after the content analysis had been conducted. For this purpose, the intracoder reliability was calculated by repeating the measurement with the same material ($n = 60$). For both scandals, at least eight out of ten codings from the two measurement time points agreed in each category. The average for all categories was nine out of ten codes.

General Categories. Each tweet was given an identification number to facilitate later analyses during data preparation and evaluation. In addition, the time of publication and various popularity statistics (likes, retweets, quotes) were automatically coded for each tweet.

I assume that all offensive forms of participation show a negative attitude, while all defensive forms a positive attitude towards the scandalized person. Therefore, in the context of a global assessment, the *tendency of the tweet towards the scandalized person* was evaluated. This assessment determined the further course of coding. For example, for tweets with a negative attitude towards the scandalized person, only the offensive forms of participation were coded. If a tweet could not be assigned a clear attitude, it was coded as neutral, and both offensive and defensive forms of participation were coded.

Offensive Forms of Participation. To operationalize the *moral focus*, it was first recorded whether the tweet addressed the norm violation of the scandalized person. The formation of this category follows the consideration that the motivations described for the moral focus, for example, pointing out grievances (Thompson, 2000, p. 82), controlling power (Hondrich, 2002, pp. 31-33), and updating the normative codes of society (Burkhardt, 2020, p. 4), require the thematization of the norm violation of the scandalized person.

In order to capture participations with an *instrumental focus*, I first created two open categories based on my theoretical considerations. The first category referred to aspects that are intended to strengthen one's own group, such as increasing prestige, financial gains, or positive self-presentation. The second category includee content that harmed the scandalized person or his or her camp, such as references to further norm violations by the scandalized person or damage to the reputation of his or her party. After the pre-test I divided these categories into four categories based on the most frequently observed patterns:

>The *reference to other norm violations* records whether other misconduct on the part of the scandalized person is addressed.
>The *criticism of competence* records whether the violation of the norm is used to classify the competence of the scandalized person as low.
>The category *extension to other people* covers the extent to which the tweet expands the scandalization to other people. This can take different forms, such as extension to other politicians or extension to the entire party of the scandalized person. Open coding is used here to additionally record the target of the extension.

>*Positive self-portrayal* describes the extent to which users use the norm violation to present themselves or their camp in a good light. This can be done, for example, by thematizing one's own moral integrity.

One form of participation that should be observed in both moral and instrumental focus participation is *extension to other topics*. Based on the theoretical considerations of the *moral focus*, this category is intended to capture whether the tweet establishes a connection to a deeper conflict. With regard to the *instrumental focus*, I will examine the extent to which the publicity generated by the scandal is strategically used to negotiate issues that have nothing to do with the actual norm violation, but which additionally damage the scandalized person or his or her camp. Open coding is used here to capture the issue to which the tweet relates.

Defensive Forms of Participation. Defensive forms of participation were first examined with five categories. The *denial* category captures whether the tweet denies the norm violation of the scandalized person. The theoretically described mechanisms of *justification* are captured by three categories that closely follow the theoretical explanations:

>*Denial of responsibility* captures whether the tweet cites circumstances that exonerate the scandalized person. Since denial can occur in a variety of ways, open coding is used here.
>The *reassessment* category captures whether the tweet reassesses the norm violation of the scandalized person or the entire scandalization. Again, open coding is used to capture the type of reassessment.
>The category *positive focus is* used to examine the extent to which a tweet addresses a positive aspect of the scandalized person. Open coding is used to capture different forms of this technique.

The category *counterattack* refers to confrontational forms of defense. After the pre-test, this category was divided into three categories, as some counterattacks were multifaceted and different forms of confrontation were often mixed. The first category examines whether the *attacker's motives* to participate in the scandal are thematized and negatively evaluated. The second category covers the extent to which the *attacker's methods* are criticized, for example by interpreting them as an unjustified or transgressive reaction. The third category examines if a tweet shifts the attention to *norm violations of the attackers*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to determine the forms of audience participation in scandalizations on the internet, a sample of 250 tweets was systematically analyzed for two scandals. To answer *RQ1*, these tweets are divided into offensive, defensive, and neutral forms of participation based on the *attitude* category (Table 1).

Table 1. **Percentages of the forms of participation used in both cases**

	Philipp Amthor (n = 232)	Sarah-Lee Heinrich (n = 236)
Offensive forms of participation	84	67
Defensive forms of participation	8	28
Neutral forms of participation	7	6

Note. The basis of this table is the coding of the *attitude* category. Some tweets had to be removed from the analysis because they were part of a thread and could not be interpreted without their respective contexts.

In both scandalizations, users most often choose offensive forms of participation. In the case of scandalizations on the internet, too, the audience thus seems to fulfil its role as defined in the scandal triad and provides the public reaction of outrage (Neckel, 1989, p. 594).

However, there are clear differences between the two cases in terms of the relationship between offensive and defensive forms of participation. In the case of the scandalization of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, approximately every fourth tweet contains a defensive form of participation – in the case of Philipp Amthor, it is not even every tenth tweet. There are two possible explanations for this difference. In the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, there is no consensus in the audience regarding the evaluation of the norm violation. Stegbauer (2018) has called this process as *cultural conflict* (p. 105). Resistance to the attacks arises, particularly when the scandals are politically motivated (p. 101). In the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, the scandalizing material was published on the day of her election as national spokesperson for the Green Youth (GreenWatch, 2021a, 2021b), although some of the norm violations criticized took place many years ago. This *instrumental updating* (Kepplinger, 2018a, pp. 85-88), i.e. the planned creation of a scandal at a certain point in time, can be interpreted as an indication of a political motivation on the part of the accusers, which in turn could explain the greater willingness of the public to defend Sarah-Lee Heinrich. Another explanation has to do with the popularity of the scandalized persons on Twitter. Philipp Amthor does not have his own Twitter account, whereas Sarah-Lee Heinrich can rely on a network of more than 37,000 followers (sarah-lee, n.d.). There are also clear differences between the accounts of the politicians' parties: the account of Alliance 90/ The Greens has 639,000 followers, which is more than that of the Christian Democratic Union with 373,000 (BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN, n.d.; CDU Deutschlands, 2022).[5]

Neutral forms of participation are only sporadically used by the audience. In the traditional scandal, the role of neutral reporting is assigned to the so-called *chroniclers* (Kepplinger, 2018a, p. 105), who do not make any accusations of their own, but merely document the events. The audience seems to take on this chronicler's role only to a limited extent. There are only a few contributions that do not take a clear position on the scandalized person.

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[5] The figures stated here refer to the status on 19/03/2022.

Offensive Forms of Participation

To describe the offensive forms of participations (*RQ2a*), the attacks are divided into participation with a moral focus and participation with an instrumental focus. Participation with a moral focus is only present if the tweet *addresses the norm violation of the scandalized person* and does not include any form of *instrumentalization*.

Table 2. **Percentages of offensive forms of participation used with a moral and instrumental focus for both cases.**

	Philipp Amthor	**Sarah-Lee Heinrich**
Offensive forms of participation	**(n = 196)**	**(n = 158)**
Moral focus	30	43
Instrumental focus	70	57
Forms of instrumentalization	*(n=136)*	*(n=90)*
Positive self-expression	*14*	*11*
Reference to other norm violations	*32*	*1*
Criticism of competence	*17*	*2*
Extension: thematic	*36*	*44*
Extension: people	*31*	*76*

Note. Only tweets that show a *negative attitude* towards the scandalized person are shown here.

Moral Focus

Sincere indignation at the violation of norms by the scandalized person was used less frequently by the audience in both cases than instrumentalization. There are also similarities in the content of the tweets. In both cases, about one in five posts makes a connection to a more abstract conflict, which comes to light on the basis of the criticized norm violation. In the case of Philipp Amthor, the focus is on his insufficient demarcation from right-wing positions and the normalization of right-wing extremism. In the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, an alleged double standard is criticized, which becomes apparent in the context of scandalization (Figure 3).

Schräg genug, dass #PhilippAmthor ein zum himmelschreiendes rechtsextremes Shirt nicht erkennt (von der Frisur ganz zu schweigen). Aber dass er im Nachhinein keine klaren Worte der Abgrenzung von Neonazis findet und sie als „Bürger" normalisiert ist das eigentliche Desaster.

Das, was #sarahleeheinrich jetzt entgegenschlägt, ist genau die hasserfüllte Cancel Culture, an der sie sich Jahrelang beteiligt hat – und auch in Zukunft wahrscheinlich noch beteiligen wird. Da sie die Unschuldige spielt, wird sie wohl nicht aus der Erfahrung lernen.

▲ *Figure 3*
Tweets with moral focus and thematic extension

Annotation. Translations: (1) Weird enough that #PhilippAmthor doesn't recognize an appallingly right-wing extremist shirt (not to mention the hairstyle). But the fact that he doesn't find any clear words of demarcation from neo-Nazis afterwards and normalizes them as "citizens" is the real disaster. (2) What #sarahleeheinrich is now facing is the very hateful Cancel Culture she has participated in for years – and will likely continue to participate in the future. Playing the innocent, she is unlikely to learn from the experience. Source: Twitter.

Instrumental Focus

Tweets with instrumentalizations no longer focus on the violation of norms by a person, but on other content in the public sphere created by the scandal. Some forms of instrumentalization can be identified for both cases. Others, however, differ significantly in their use between the two cases.

One common feature is the *positive self-expression* in offensive tweets. In both cases, the users affirm that they themselves would not have committed the norm violation. In the case of Philipp Amthor's scandalization, other politicians stated that they themselves had recognized the two men as neo-Nazis or had never been asked for photos by people with this attitude. In the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, the attackers often emphasize their own moral integrity in their teenage years and stress that they would not have committed the norm violation at that age.

The two cases studied are also similar in terms of the *extension of the debate.* In both cases additional topics are frequently introduced into the discussion. In the case of Philipp Amthor, the indignation about the misconduct is justified by (partly fictitious) scandals of other politicians. It is often emphasized that people from other political camps are likely to be much more outraged in similar cases. The instrumentalizations in the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich often refer to current political debates, for example as an argument against lowering the voting age (Figure 4). In addition to these specific issues, more abstract conflicts are also addressed. For example, some attacks refer to a harmful left-wing identity politics, which is reflected in the politician's statements about the white majority society.

> *Die Versuche der #Grünen und der Guten ™ , die abscheulichen Tweets von #sarahleeheinrich mit ihrem jugendlichen Alter zu entschuldigen, sind das beste Argument GEGEN ein #Wahlrecht ab 16!*

> *Man stelle sich vor, Habeck oder #Baerbock würden sich aus Versehen mit einem Typen fotografieren lassen, der ein Stalin-Porträt mit blutroter Faust auf seinem T Shirt trägt. Zehn Tage Springer-Headline-Hetze mindestens. #Amthor*

▲ *Figure 4*
Tweets with thematic extension

Annotation. Translations: (1) The attempts of the #Greens and the good people™ to excuse the vile tweets of #sarahleeheinrich with her youthful age are the best argument AGAINST a #voting right from 16! (2) Imagine if Habeck or #Baerbock accidentally had their picture taken with a guy wearing a portrait of Stalin with a blood-red fist on his T-shirt. Ten days of Springer headline agitation at least. #Amthor. Source: Twitter.

In both cases, attempts are made to *extend the scandals to other persons*, although this kind of instrumentalization is used twice as often in the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich. The aims of the extension are also different. In the case of Philipp Amthor, the tweets equally contain extensions with reference to other persons and to the entire political camp. On the one hand, violations of norms by other politicians are criticized, on the other hand, links are made to the CDU as a whole, for example by describing the entire party as corrupt or open to right-wing ideology. In the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, there are only a few references to politicians. Much more often, the scandal is extended to the entire political camp. These attacks not only refer to the Greens, but often construct an abstract *left-green camp,* to which various negative and derogative attributes such as low intelligence, racism, dishonesty or ideological delusion are attributed.

In the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich[6], the *reference to other norm violations* is very rare, whereas in the case of Philipp Amthor it is used in about every third instrumentalization. Most tweets refer to his lobbying activities for the company *Augustus Intelligence* and his derogatory remarks about Muslims.[7] Looking at the specifics of the Sarah-Lee Heinrich case, a similar pattern emerges for both scandals: the attackers use all incriminating material they can gather when scandalizing. This communication pattern has been described in classical scandal research as *serial scandalization,* in which several norm violations are presented as a major grievance because of their bundled nature (Kepplinger, 2018a, p. 87).

The *criticism of competence* is used almost exclusively in the scandalization of Philipp Amthor. Because of his role as a domestic politician, it can be assumed that he has in-depth knowledge of anti-constitutional organizations and symbols. Many of the attackers consider this competence to be lacking, since Philipp Amthor agreed to pose for a photo with the two men, even though their right-wing leanings were obvious from the clothing typical of the scene, especially the T-shirt with the imprint of a prominent Holocaust denier.

Defensive Forms of Participation

In this section, the forms of participation aimed at defending the scandalized person are presented (*RQ2b*). Table 3 shows how often the three different approaches (*denials, justifications, counterattacks*) could be identified through quantitative content analysis.

There are clear differences between the two scandals in terms of the number of tweets using defensive forms of participation. However, there are some similarities in terms of the content of the defenses. In both cases, counterattacks are the most popular defensive form of participation, followed by justifications. Denial of the norm violation is not used in either scandalization. The following sections describe the defenses in more detail.

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[6] This finding is due to methodological difficulties. In the analysis, all of her scandalized tweets were considered as a single norm violation since for most attacks it could not be determined to which specific content they refer.
[7] More about this norm violations, cf. (Reyher, 2021) and (Laggai, 2018).

Table 3. **Percentages of defensive forms of participation used in both cases**

	Philipp Amthor	Sarah-Lee Heinrich
Defensive forms of participation	(n = 19)	(n = 65)
Denials	-	-
Justifications	63	63
Type of justification	*(n=12)*	*(n=41)*
Denial of responsibility	*67*	*56*
Reassessment	*17*	*41*
Focus on positive aspects	*55*	*12*
Counterattacks	74	71
Type of counterattack	*(n=14)*	*(n=46)*
Criticism of the attacker's methods	*14*	*45*
Criticism of the attacker's motives	*35*	*28*
Focus on other norm violations	*64*	*39*

Note. Only tweets that show a *positive attitude* towards the scandalized person are shown here.

Denials

The defensive participation form of denying the norm violation was not used by the audience in either scandalization. This is probably due to the low chances of success of this form of defense. Denial has already been described as a weak form of defense in traditional scandal research (Kepplinger, 2005, pp. 115-116). In the case of internet scandals, the potential of this defense is likely to be even lower. This can be justified by the fact that both Sarah-Lee Heinrich and Philipp Amthor experience what Pörksen and Detel (2012) call a *loss of control*, in which the evidence of the norm violation circulates virally and becomes impossible to erase (pp. 232-233).

Justifications

The most popular form of justification in both cases studied is the *denial of responsibility*. In the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, the defenders largely refer to the age at which the politician wrote the criticized tweets. It is often argued that scandalization is inappropriate because young people should not be held responsible to this extent. Others emphasize the politician's development in recent years and point out that she herself now condemns the content of the tweets. In Phillipp Amthor's defense, external factors are used to deny responsibility. In particular, the circumstances in which the photo was taken are described. For example, it is argued that the politician cannot be held responsible for the misconduct because he did not have enough information. This finding is in line with existing research, which describes the reference to a lack of information as a popular defense strategy during scandals (Benoit, 2015; Scott & Lyman, 1976).

The clearest difference between the forms of justification can be seen in the case of *reassessment*. This form of defense is used more often in the case of Sarah Lee Heinrich.

Most often, the scandal is reinterpreted as a form of discrimination: The scandal is not accepted as an appropriate response to the norm violation but is interpreted as an attack on Sarah-Lee Heinrich because of her identity as a (female) Person of Color (Figure 6).

In Wirklichkeit regen sich Leute nicht über einen Tweet einer damals 14 Jährigen auf, der 6 Jahre alt ist. Sie regen sich einfach auf, dass eine junge Schwarze Frau Politik macht und suchen sich einen Vorwand, um zu hetzen. Solidarität mit @xsarahleee! #sarahleeheinrich	*Du wirst 500 Jahre beschimpft, bespuckt, beleidigt, gefoltert, versklavt. Dann sagst Du Deine Meinung und der Shitstorm geht los. Die Sklavenhalter sind völlig empört und reagieren zornig. Die BILD vertritt sie alle. Dummes Deutschland #sarahleeheinrich #noAfD*

▲ *Figure 5*
Reassessment of the scandalization in the case of Sarah-Lee Heinrich.

Annotation. Translations: (1) In reality, people don't get upset over a tweet from a then 14-year-old that is 6 years old. They are just upset that a young Black woman is doing politics and are looking for an excuse to agitate. Solidarity with @xsarahlee! #sarahleeheinrich (2) You will be insulted, spat upon, insulted, tortured, enslaved for 500 years. Then you speak your mind and the shitstorm starts. The slave owners are completely outraged and react angrily. The BILD represents them all. Stupid Germany! #sarahleeheinrich #noAfD Source: Twitter.

Tiffen (1999) describes this technique of transforming the conflict to a more abstract level as refusing to fight on the accuser's ground (p. 134). Reassessing the scandal as discrimination opens up many new possibilities for participation that do not have to do with norm violation. In the case of Philipp Amthor, similar communication patterns can be observed in few cases. Here, the scandal is interpreted as a form of *cancel culture*, which can also lead to new debates that do not have to deal primarily with norm violation.

The *focus on positive aspects* is more often used in the Philipp Amthor case. However, the positive content of both cases can be compared. In both defenses, the political commitment of the scandalized person is emphasized, and personal qualities are praised. This communication pattern has already been described in traditional scandal research and can be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the negative feelings of the audience towards the criticized person (Benoit, 2015, p. 24).

Counterattacks
In both cases, the audience most often uses counterattacks to defend the scandalized person. All three forms of counterattacks derived from the literature can be observed. In both scandalizations, criticism of the *motives* and *methods* of the attackers is voiced and *violations of norms by others* are addressed. In the defense of Sarah-Lee Heinrich, most of the counterattacks are criticizing the methods of the attackers. Especially the vehemence of the attacks is thematized, for example that the attacks contain racism or death threats. In the case of Philipp Amthor, this form of counterattack is only used sporadically. Here, the focus is more on addressing norm violations of other people. However, there are similarities between the two cases when it comes to criticizing the motives of the attackers.

These are criticized with similar frequency in both cases. For example, the enemy camp is accused of not participating in the scandalization out of sincere indignation. Instead, the attacks are attributed to base or strategic motives (Figure 7).

Dass die Tweets von #sarahleeheinrich verbreitet werden, zeigt, wie tief der braune Hass in der Gesellschaft verankert ist. Die Angst vor einer eloquenten und klugen Woman of Color ist enorm. Wir dürfen diesen Angriff auf die Demokratie niemals zulassen. Volle Solidarität!

#Amthor ist ne Konserve und hat nichts mit antisemitischen Neonazis gemein. Wer das nicht erkennt will einfach nur Konserven aus dem demokratischen Diskurs verdrängen. Jedes Mittel recht.

▲ *Figure 6*
Counterattacks, in which the motives of the attackers are criticized.

Annotation. Translations: (1) The fact that the tweets of #sarahleeheinrich are spreading shows how deeply anchored brown hatred is in society. The fear of an eloquent and smart Woman of Color is enormous. We must never allow this attack on democracy. Full solidarity! (2) #Amthor is a conservative and has nothing in common with anti-Semitic neo-Nazis. Those who do not recognize this simply want to oust conservatives from democratic discourse. Any means will do. Source: Twitter.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a contribution to the understanding of scandal on the Internet. In particular, it highlights the relevance of the audience for digital scandalization processes. In both observed cases, the audience predominantly uses offensive forms of participation. The majority of the attackers instrumentalizes the incident by using norm violation as an argument for political demands or to inflict various forms of damage on the scandalized person or his or her political camp. Justifications and counterattacks are the dominant forms of defensive participation. Defenders use justifications in an attempt to gain interpretive power over the events and thus to completely reassess the scandal. Counterattacks, on the other hand, criticize the behavior of the accusers, such as their methods, their motives, or their own violations of norms. The overarching patterns that link both scandals and offensive and defensive forms of participation are confrontation and the tendency to extend the scandal to other issues and persons. Many of the communication strategies identified have already been described in scandal research for the role of the accuser or the scandalized person. This study extends that research by considering the changing role of the audience, proposing a taxonomy of possible forms of participation, and validating this taxonomy through quantitative content analysis of two scandals.

The quantitative content analysis only looked at communication on Twitter, as this is where both scandals originated and where lively public participation could be observed. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether completely different forms of scandalization might occur elsewhere on the Internet. Moreover, not all communication

could be captured on Twitter either. Here, hashtags, retweets, replies, quotes and threads form a complex sphere of communication that could only be considered to a limited extent. The restriction to the 250 most popular tweets also leads to certain limitations. The trade-off between a comprehensive analysis of the scandalization phenomenon as a whole and an in-depth understanding of the individual content required adjustments in both aspects. Thus, only the content that significantly shapes the public perception of the scandalization is captured and blind spots arise with regard to content that is less visible. The extent to which, for example, there are other relationships between attack and defense, or other forms of participation, could not be determined in this way. Future studies should take these problems into account and use automated procedures to process larger datasets.

In addition to larger data sets, the individual contents could also be examined more closely. Through many open codings and adjustments to the category system after the pre-test, this study already contains a certain openness to the material studied. Nevertheless, it was by no means possible to decode all aspects of communication and many phenomena were only examined at an abstract level. For example, it was not possible to consider the contexts of the tweets, such as whether they were published in response to another tweet. References to content outside of Twitter were also not included in the analysis. These and other aspects could be addressed in future studies using a qualitative approach. In this context, it is also conceivable to conduct surveys to gain insight into users' motivation for engaging in scandalization.

Despite these limitations, the proposed taxonomy has proven to be suitable for systematically categorizing audience participation during scandalization processes within the German political system. The taxonomy should now be applied and further developed in future research, especially to understand its generalizability beyond the German setting.

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BIJES, SOLIDARNOST, KONTRAUDAR: ANALIZA SADRŽAJA *TWEETOVA* O DVA POLITIČKA SKANDALA U NJEMAČKOJ

Jan Dvorak

SAŽETAK *Politički skandali na društvenim mrežama postali su sastavan dio suvremenoga političkog života, što predstavlja izazov dosadašnjem istraživanju skandala. Nekada pasivna publika dobiva nove mogućnosti za sudjelovanje koje još uvijek nisu cjelovito opisane, ni teorijski ni empirijski. Ovo istraživanje pridonosi premošćivanju tog jaza razvijanjem kategorija za opis uvredljivih i obrambenih oblika sudjelovanja publike tijekom skandalizacija. Analiziram uzorak od 500 utjecajnih* tweetova, *izvučenih iz korpusa od preko 55 000* tweetova, *koji su povezani s dva skandala vezana uz njemačke političare. Predložene kategorije pokazale su se prikladnima za opisivanje kako uvredljivih tako i obrambenih oblika sudjelovanja publike u skandalizacijama na društvenim mrežama.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

SKANDAL, SUDJELOVANJE PUBLIKE, TWITTER, ANALIZA SADRŽAJA

Bilješka o autoru

Jan Dvorak :: Sveučilište u Hohenheimu, Zavod za računarsku znanost, Odsjek za informatiku hrane **::** jan.dvorak@uni-hohenheim.de