The Game Giants and the "Frat Culture" Crisis:

A Three-Way Crisis Management Comparison within the Game Industry

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ABSTRACT

Within the game industry, systematic issues regarding toxic work environments, sexual misconduct, and gender discrimination have been brought to light within the "frat culture" crises. Three major game development studios triggered the same "frat culture" crisis between 2018 and 2022 after the development of the #MeToo movement on social media. Crisis communication in the juvenile game industry and digital environments remain two academically unexplored areas. Using the Situational Crisis Communication theory and the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication, this research examines how different game companies handled the "frat culture" crisis and how the public reacted to it. A thematic analysis was used to answer the research question and sub-questions. To analyse the companies' conducted crisis communication strategies, data was collected from the corporate perspective. The data consisted of 47 written materials (31 public statements, 6 e-mails, 6 tweets, 2 interviews, 1 letter, and 1 Reddit post) and revealed the five themes of reputational mending, the promise of change, accountability, rapport building, and lowering crisis intensity within the crisis communication of the three companies. To identify how the stakeholders made sense of the corporate response, data was also collected from the stakeholder perspective. The stakeholders were identified as employees, victims, consumers and shareholders. The data consisted of 450 tweets and comments (400 tweets and 50 Reddit comments). The seven identified themes were the themes of leadership accountability, diminished trust, inaction over time, scepticism toward authenticity, support for the company, support for stakeholders, and lack of involvement. The more favoured crisis communication by the public contained themes of accountability, reputational mending, and the promise of change. The less favoured crisis communication contained solely the themes of reputational mending and lowering crisis intensity. The findings suggest that the SCCT can be expanded in multiple ways. The first recommendation is to start considering the crisis timeline to account for crisis developments. Especially in cultural crises, problems require slow, long-term solutions and developments within the crisis can

influence the effectiveness of consequential crisis communication. Secondly, this research found ways to expand the SCCT's rebuild strategies by suggesting strategies that convey the themes of the promise of change, reputational mending, and accountability. The practical implications of this research suggest that appropriate crisis response strategies at the beginning of a cultural crisis can provide more time to solve the crisis, but inadequate actions to solve the crisis can lead to the reduced effectiveness of crisis response strategies. Based on the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model, reporters for digital news outlets were identified as the influential social media creators who frequently reveal new information to the social media followers during the crisis. These consequently create new developments within the crisis such as an escalation or a shift in public opinion. In order to properly control the public opinion, controlling the information flow towards these influential social media creators is of high importance for companies engaging in crisis communication.

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1. Introduction

In the past decades, the gaming industry has made incredible technological advances as games that started with just a few pixels on a black screen have evolved into fully 3D realistic renditions of worlds with more and more people playing them, making it a multi-billion industry (Jin, 2010; Wesley, 2010). It was a huge shock for the industry when three of the biggest game developers and publishers who are all responsible for hundreds of millions of monthly players, were all swept up in misconduct scandals between 2018 and 2021 (Fenlon, 2021). These companies consist of Riot Games, Ubisoft, and Activision Blizzard. Victims went online and shared their experiences on Twitter and had their stories published through news outlets. Within their stories are accounts of workplace toxicity, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and power abuse. As the employees of these studios have been predominantly male, the work environment has often been described as a "frat boy" or "bro" culture (Allsup, 2021).

The first mention of a "frat boy" or "bro" culture within the game industry was in august 2018 when Kotaku published an exposing article on the sexist and toxic work culture at Riot Games (D'Anastasio, 2018a). Riot Games is the studio behind the game League of Legends, which had around 100 million monthly players in 2016. The article revealed that the culture harboured cases of sexual harassment and hiring and promotion discrimination based on gender. This included assigning women to lesser-paying jobs and promoting similarly or less-qualified men to positions that women were not eligible for (Fox, 2021). Another company that faced the "frat culture" crisis was Ubisoft. Ubisoft is the developer behind popular games such as the Assassin's Creed series, the Just Dance series, and the Tom Clancy's video game series. The studio employs over 20.000 employees in various offices all over the world. The first allegation surfaced on Twitter about a creative director that utilised behind-the-scenes information to engage in sexual relationships with women while also lying about his marital status. Like with the #MeToo movement, this tweet gave courage to others to speak up and instigated a flood of allegations directed toward other high-level Ubisoft employees. Many of Ubisoft's top employees either quit or were forced to step down from their position. In July 2021, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a lawsuit against the game development and publishing company Activision Blizzard, alleging that female employees faced unequal pay and sexual

harassment within the "frat boy" culture fostered by the company (Bankhurst, 2022). Activision Blizzard employees staged a walkout a week after the lawsuit. This walkout was supported by 500 Ubisoft employees who publicly announced in a letter that they stood with them in solidarity. The U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission also filed its own lawsuit, which was settled for $18 million. Within five months, Activision Blizzard had lost 37 executive employees, and disciplined 44 more, for misconduct (Grind, 2022). Many employees left the company as they were "mad and traumatised" and "rendered unable to keep making a great game" (Hamilton, 2021).

The fact that these "frat culture" crises are happening at the same time and within the same industry could be an indication that a big cultural revolution is occurring. In 2017, the #MeToo movement motivated women to openly speak about their experiences with sexual harassment and started a year before the first frat culture crisis (Atwater et al., 2021). With this movement, a new standard has been set in which sexual misconduct towards women is no longer tolerated and leaders within organisations are pressured to change the work floor cultures as rapidly as possible. It would be interesting to analyse how the organisations that are the first to be experiencing this cultural change have confronted their crises. This research aims at understanding what communication strategies these three companies employed when facing these crises and how the public perceived the corporate responses. This paper will propose the research question:

RQ: How did different game companies handle the "frat culture" crisis and how did the public react to it?

Then, the next sub-questions will be proposed:

SRQ 1: How did different game companies handle the "frat culture" crisis?

SRQ 2: How did the public make sense of the corporate response?

SRQ 3: Which crisis communication strategies were more favoured and less favoured by the public?

This research will adopt Coombs' (2007) *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT) as the fundamental framework to guide the analysis of the data from the corporate perspective. The SCCT helps identify the type of the crisis and recommends certain crisis

communication strategies accordingly. Therefore this research will first use the SCCT to identify the type of crisis that these companies faced and also what kind of strategies they employed. Then this research will analyse if the utilised strategies match the recommended strategies by the SCCT. This research will then analyse the stakeholder reactions for a complete analysis. To properly analyse the stakeholder reactions, the *Social-Mediated Crisis Communication* (SMCC) model by Austin et al. (2012) will be used. The SMCC model helps identify the groups which produce and consume information before, during, and after a crisis. Additionally, the SMCC model also aids in mapping the flow of information that goes from one stakeholder to the other.

Yet as Coombs (2007) mentioned, online crises are handled differently as online actors set the tone of the crisis instead of more traditional media. These actors can include stakeholders, critics or online news outlets. Moreover, risk and crisis management within the cyberspace is still considered an emerging field (Heath et al., 2009). As mentioned earlier, the "frat culture" crises were triggered through the #MeToo movement on social media. Research has found that the number of crisis triggers has globally risen with the interplay between social media and socio-political movements (Mak & Song, 2019). This indicates an increasingly important research gap in the area of digital crisis management within the context of cultural crises such as the "frat culture" crisis. Additionally, recent research by Coombs and Tachkova (2019) introduced the concept of a new crisis type called *scansis.* It is considered a combination of a scandal and a crisis. Different to regular organisational crises, a scansis takes into account the moral accountability of a scandal. More importantly, the public is in a state of moral outrage through media coverage of the controversial behaviour of the accused and demands the appropriate punishment. This indicated that stakeholder perceptions becoming increasingly important when defining a crisis and that the media is an important factor in the transformation of a crisis towards a scansis. Combined with the relatively infantile state of the gaming industry and the active communication channels between companies and stakeholders, there are yet a lot of uncharted territories left to be explored when it comes to digital crisis management in the gaming industry. It would be interesting to analyse how the three game development companies approached their crisis so that a precedent can be set on how crisis communication on diversity should be managed within the game industry. By studying this topic, this research can contribute to the further understanding of the extent to which crisis

communication models such as the SCCT and SMCC could be used to explain the emergence of the "frat culture" crisis within the game industry.

With more and more workplaces being revealed as cultures in which sexual harassment is commonplace, managers are facing a new challenge in solving these issues. Yet, these toxic work cultures are difficult to recognise as issues as practices that have been standard for a long time are now being revealed as inappropriate. The predominantly male-dominated game industry has been revealed to harbour toxic work cultures in prominent companies and has now changed its practices into ones that fit this modern society with zero tolerance for sexual harassment. Within this juvenile industry, the appropriate communication challenges have not been established yet and the HR employees are not trained yet to handle these kinds of issues optimally (Totilo, 2021). It is of utmost importance that an organisation can protect its employees. From the earlier description of the "frat culture" crisis, it became clear that improper crisis communication can lead to a lack of trust, demoralisation, and a negative impact on mental health in the form of stress or anxiety. Therefore companies must engage in proper crisis communication so that employees can regain their trust. The three aforementioned organisations are the first to be facing this new cultural challenge within this relatively infantile industry. It is important to analyse their strategies and results to properly advise organisations on how they can solve their potential crisis in their adaptation to this new culture while prioritising the best interest of their stakeholders.

This research will present the theoretical frameworks in chapter 2. It will introduce Coombs' (2007) SCCT and the SMCC model by Austin et al. (2012). Then, the chapter will synthesise the current literature on the importance of stakeholder perceptions, the role of diversity and inclusion in the emergence of cultural crises, and the current state of crisis communication within the game industry. To answer the research question and the sub-research questions, qualitative content analysis will be conducted. In chapter 3, the research design and the method for data collection will be explained. This research will also discuss the potential issues of the research design regarding reliability and ethics. Finally, the chapter will explain the method for data analysis. In chapter 4, the results of the research will be presented. Themes from the thematic analysis from the corporate perspective will be presented along with the themes from the stakeholder perspective, which consists of the victim, employee, consumer and shareholder perspectives. Through these themes, chapter

4 will answer the research question and each sub-research question. In chapter 5, the findings will be discussed and the research will provide the theoretical, societal, and managerial implications. Finally, in chapter 6, this research will conclude with a summary of the findings, discuss any limitations and discuss directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the crisis communication literature will be synthesised. First, a crisis definition will be provided. Secondly, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model will be introduced to aid in answering the research question and its sub-questions. Then, this research will explain the importance of stakeholder perception and establish who the most important stakeholders are within the frat-boy culture crisis. Finally, this research will explore the unique aspect of diversity and inclusion within the "frat culture" crisis and explore the current state of crisis communication within the game industry.

2.1 Defining a crisis

When exploring crisis literature, it is important to establish a definition of what a crisis entails. For example, important distinctions have to be made when comparing a crisis and an issue, or the concepts of crisis management and risk management. Namely, a crisis has specific constructs. Coombs (2007, p. 164) defines a crisis as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organisation's operations and poses both a financial and reputational threat". Mitroff (2005, as cited in Jaques, 2009, p. 282) has a more drastic definition by saying "a crisis is an extreme event that may threaten your very existence. At the very least, it causes substantial injuries, deaths, and financial costs, as well as serious damage to your reputation". Meanwhile, an issue has three distinct constructs. According to Jaques (2009), an issue is a matter of difference in opinion. Secondly, there's a mismatch between the company's actions and the stakeholders' expectations. And finally, it is an event or trend that has the potential to create a significant impact affecting the company. Compared to Jaques' (2009) definition of an issue, we can deduct that a crisis: (1) happens unexpectedly through a trigger event; (2) is more severe than a difference in opinion and can negatively impact stakeholders; and (3) is no longer about a potential threat but has rather developed into a matter that cannot be ignored without severe damage to the company. With these conditions taken into account, Coombs' (2007) definition of a crisis is deemed to be more accurate and will be used from this point on.

The act of managing a crisis aims to reduce the financial and reputational consequences of the crisis. This is similar to the act of risk management as both aim to

protect the corporate reputation. By making an important distinction between crisis management and risk management, a better idea can be given of what a crisis entails. According to March and Shapira (1992), a risk is often more seen as something leading to a potential problem or a failure, rather than the uncertainty of a precise outcome. A common definition of risk is the likelihood of something undesirable happening in a given time (Merna & Al-Thani, 2011). Yet, it is not known what this undesirable and unexpected event is. However, within risk management, one aims to reduce the uncertainties to minimise the chance of a potential crisis. Based on this we can deduce that risk management focuses on the events before the trigger, while crisis management focuses on the event after the trigger. This confirms the earlier finding in which the unexpectedness and abruptness in the form of a trigger is a crucial factor in defining a crisis.

2.2 The Situational Crisis Communication theory

With a crisis defined, it is important to investigate how to identify a crisis and determine the appropriate crisis communication strategies. Coombs (2007) introduces the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as a framework for understanding crisis communication during a crisis. The SCCT is used to identify the type of crisis through the degree of a corporation's crisis responsibility. Then, based on the type of crisis, the SCCT recommends the appropriate crisis response strategies. According to Coombs (2013, pp. 262-263), "crisis response strategies are what managers say and do after a crisis occurs and are a subset of crisis communication. The crisis response strategy research emphasises reputation repair and protection". Within the SCCT, different crises are categorised under three different clusters with each a different attribution of crisis responsibility (see Appendix A). The three clusters consist of the *victim*, *accidental* and *preventable* crisis clusters (Coombs & Tachkova, 2022). The victim crisis cluster has a low attribution of crisis responsibility, the accidental crisis cluster has a minimal attribution of crisis responsibility, and the preventable crisis cluster has a strong attribution of crisis responsibility. As the stakeholder perception of crisis responsibility becomes stronger, so does the threat of the crisis (Coombs & Tachkova, 2022). Within the clusters, there are multiple crisis types. Under the victim crisis cluster, crises consist of natural disasters, rumours, workplace violence, or product tampering/malevolence. The accidental crisis cluster consists of challenges, public challenges, technical error accidents and technical error product harm. The preventable

crisis cluster consists of human error accidents, human error product harm, and organisational misdeed. Each crisis falls under a different cluster and requires a distinct strategy according to the SCCT.

In the case of the "frat culture" crises, the crisis type can be considered to be one of an organisational misdeed. Coombs (2013, p. 264) described an organisational misdeed as "management knowingly violates laws or regulations or purposefully places stakeholders at risk. This would include knowingly selling a product that is dangerous or engaging in risky behaviours that could harm stakeholders in some way". Although it can be argued whether a workplace culture is something one participates in consciously or not, numerous whistleblowers have stated that the frat-boy culture has remained despite numerous reports (Dealessandri, 2021). The neglect of tackling the frat-boy culture has led stakeholders, who in this case are employees, to suffer from workplace harassment, power abuse, or unfair treatment. This matches Coombs' definition of an organisational misdeed as management has failed to address risky workplace behaviour that is harming stakeholders. An organisational misdeed crisis type is part of the preventable crisis cluster, meaning that it has the highest level of crisis responsibility attribution. This also means that the threat to the corporate reputation is high. It can also be argued that the "frat culture" crisis is a scansis as the behaviours within the "frat culture" crisis are (1) morally offensive, (2) appear to be intentional, and (3) are linked to highly controversial social issues (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019). Categorisation of the "frat culture" crisis as a scansis implies that the stakeholder responses tend to be more morally outraged as highly controversial issues trigger a more emotional response (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019). As this research focuses more on the SCCT rather than the exploration of the scansis crisis type, the "frat culture" crisis will continue to be identified as an organisational misdeed.

After identifying the crisis as a specific crisis type, managers require to identify the intensifying factors of crisis history and performance history. Crisis history is considered to be whether or not an organisation has experienced a similar crisis in its past and performance history is determined by how well or poorly the organisation has treated its stakeholders in the past, which is similar to the organisation's historical reputation (Coombs, 2013). When the organisation has experienced a similar crisis in the past or has treated its stakeholders poorly, it creates a pattern of poor behaviour from the stakeholder's perspective. Once one of these two intensifying factors is present, the attribution of crisis

responsibility is increased by one level, meaning that a victim crisis is treated as an accidental crisis, and an accidental crisis is treated as a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2013). In the case of the "frat culture" crises, all three companies had no prior crises or negative encounters with the stakeholders. Therefore, no intensifying factors were deemed to be present within the "frat culture" crises.

Once the final level of attribution of crisis responsibility level is established, the SCCT proposes different crisis response strategies. There are three main types of strategies, consisting of *denial*, *diminish*, and *rebuild* (see Appendix B). Each strategy progressively accommodates more to the victims' needs. The more accommodative the strategy, the more the perception is increased that the organisation is taking responsibility for the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). According to the SCCT, the higher the attribution of crisis responsibility, the more accommodative the crisis response strategy should be. For example, a crisis within the victim crisis cluster should use denial crisis response strategies. By using denial crisis response strategies, the reputational damage can be completely negated if the organisation is considered to have no responsibility for the crisis. However, denial can be a risky response strategy as reputational damage will be intensified if the organisation is proven to be responsible for the crisis (Ferrin et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2004).

Earlier, the "frat culture" crises have been identified as preventable crises. According to Coombs' (2013) SCCT, a highly accommodative crisis response strategy would be appropriate within this context. As recommended by the SCCT, the preventable crisis should use a rebuild crisis response strategy. This could be either *compensation*: compensation for the victims, or an *apology*: an acceptance of responsibility and asking for forgiveness. Rebuild strategies aim to rebuild the reputation of an organisation as reputational damage is a given. It is important to note that rebuild strategies should only be used when appropriate as overreacting with apologies or compensation can lead to unwanted consequences. Coombs and Holladay (2002, p. 166) state that these strategies "require an organisation to publicly accept responsibility for a crisis, thereby weakening its legal position in the event of a lawsuit". Additionally, an over-response to a crisis when there is a low attribution of crisis responsibility can lead to a negative response from stakeholders to the apology (Ferrin et al., 2007; Siomkos and Shrivastava, 1993). Therefore, the appropriate crisis communication strategy should be carefully chosen according to the crisis type, as either under or over-reacting to a crisis can lead to negative consequences. Finally, the organisations can also

supplement their strategies by using the ingratiation crisis response strategy. The reminder crisis response strategy has a high risk of creating the impression of the organisation as egocentric, especially and is therefore not recommended by the SCCT when there is a high attribution of crisis responsibility. Additionally, the SCCT also provides bolstering crisis response strategies, which supplement any of the three main strategy types. As opposed to the standard strategies, these bolstering strategies can usually be used regardless of the crisis type. However. these strategies are not recommended to be used on their own as they can create the impression that organisations are avoiding the crisis by shifting the attention to other aspects.

However, these "frat culture" crises originate in digital environments such as social media and news outlets. Coombs acknowledges that crises in a digital environment behave differently but does not offer any specific recommendations for online crises. This is further explored by various research showing that the SCCT might not be as effective in every scenario, leading to the dubiousness of the universal applicability of the SCCT. For instance, Guerber et al. (2019) conducted a 2 x 2 experimental design with the magnitude of harm (high versus low) and the linguistic style of the response (consultative versus formal) as the variables. The findings indicated that the linguistic style played an important role in India and the US. Additionally, in the US the linguistic style influenced not only the public perception of the organisation but the CEO as well. In India, the linguistic style only influenced the perception of the organisation. Another finding was that none of the variable manipulations mattered within the Chinese context. This difference in results between the US, India, and China, leads to the conclusion that the linguistic style of the response strategy mattered and that it was strongly impacted by the cultural context in which the strategy was applied. This implies that the SCCT should consider linguistic context and is not universally applicable in its current form.

Furthermore, research done by Barkley (2020) gives an interesting addition, who tested the applicability of the SCCT within the Japanese context. This research was based on the notion that there are significant cultural differences between Japan and the United States in terms of the SCCT's foundational aspects such as responsibility attribution and account giving. The study tested the impact of crisis type and crisis response on the corporate reputation and found that the SCCT has limited applicability within the Japanese context. This is because the Japanese have a different manner of attribution responsibility.

Barkley (2020) found that Japanese responsibility attribution is less causality-focused and that an employee's actions fall within the responsibility of the organisation. This means that a crisis is quick to be attributed to the organisation rather than to the individual. This leads to the notion that the SCCT insufficiently takes into account the cultural context of a crisis.

These findings are supported by research by Borden and Zhang (2019). Their research has shown that linguistic choices matter not just in different cultural contexts but also contexts of different communication channels. This research explored the relationship between linguistic choices and the perception of organisational crisis responsibility in digital environments. The results indicated that language used by the media reporting organisation may influence the public perception of the crisis. This relationship also works both ways. Within the social media era, the crises both drive and are driven by the linguistics of media reporting and public discussions of a crisis. This is the main mechanism behind social media "firestorms", in which a public outrage continues to fuel itself. Borden and Zhang (2019) concluded that attribution is driven in part, not by the content of the message, but by how the message was conveyed. For instance, framing an incident involving an employee as "mishandled" instead of "racism" conveys two different stories and presents the public with two different frames for perceiving the crisis. This research gives an interesting perception of how the social media environment and the involvement of stakeholder communication can influence the standard procedures of the SCCT.

The previous research suggests that the SCCT has different degrees of effectiveness in a digital environment in which stakeholders play a crucial role in the crisis communication flow. Prahl and Goh (2021) conducted research regarding the effectiveness of SCCT crisis response strategies regarding AI crises in a digital environment. Their findings suggest that although the SCCT provides a sufficient base response, the relatively novel and different nature of the AI crises required a new crisis response strategy to receive a positive response from the digital public. Within this research, Prahl and Goh (2021) suggested an addition to the SCCT in the form of the *mirror* crisis response strategy. Within this strategy, the company turns the accountability for the AI failure right back at the public themselves. This is done by mentioning that the failure of the AI is a consequence of the public's behaviour or actions. The effectiveness of this strategy indicates that the way crisis management in the field of AI needs innovation. Although the mirror crisis response strategy is fairly niche, it brings the further implication that additions can always be made to the SCCT with the

development of new communication channels and crisis contexts. Perhaps new additions to the SCCT can also be made within the context of the game industry or the "frat culture" crisis.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the SCCT is not universally applicable and that additions may be necessary with the continuous evolution of businesses and society. The aforementioned research focussed on the applicability of the SCCT within different linguistic, cultural, communication and industry contexts. One must ask the question of whether different cultural contexts within industries or online platforms can lead to the limited applicability of the SCCT. Little research has been conducted on the applicability of the SCCT within different cultures such as in different industries or within the digital medium. Therefore, this paper will look at the applicability of the SCCT within the digital, "frat culture" crisis and see if any suggestions can be made to improve the applicability of the SCCT.

2.3 Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model

Coombs' theory briefly mentions how digital communication channels have different consequences for crisis management approaches, but does not fully incorporate it in the SCCT model. Jordan-Meier does take digital channels into account within the Four Stages of a highly effective crisis management model, but does differentiate different types of public and does not provide strategies for approaching these different types. Austin et al. (2012) introduced the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model (SMCC). This model differentiates the public who produces and consumes information before, during, and after crises. It is important to note that this model can map the flow of crisis information amongst stakeholders (Jin & Liu, 2010). Within the #MeToo movement, many victims use social media to spread their messages. The same is true during the "frat culture" crises within the game industry. These corporate crises originate from stakeholders, who are these organisations' employees, telling their stories to news outlets. These stories are then spread throughout social media and backed by other employees who have experienced similar stories. All these employees that come out with their stories could be identified as influential when using the SMCC model. Therefore, it is important to see how crisis communication strategies elicit responses and how these responses flow through social-mediated communication amongst stakeholders.

The SMCC model poses that there are (1) *influential social media creators*, who create information for others to consume; (2) *social media followers*; people who consume information from influentials, and (3) *social media inactives*, people who do not consume information directly from social media or are exposed to the information directly or indirectly from other sources. The SMCC model makes an important distinction between the different kinds of groups and the type of information relationship that they have. For example, a social media inactive consumes information directly from traditional media, who in turn consumes information directly from an influential social media creator. Therefore, there is an indirect relationship of information between the social media inactive and the social media creator.

Additionally, the SMCC model poses different stakeholder behaviours during a crisis. For example, stakeholders who receive crisis information through a certain medium would also tend to use the same medium to search for more information (Austin et al., 2012). Stakeholders who received information from a third party through social media would also seek further information on social media, while stakeholders who received information from a third party through traditional media would seek further information through traditional media. It is interesting to note that stakeholders who received information directly from the organisation tend to seek no further information regarding the crisis. In terms of credibility, Austin et al. (2012) also found that traditional media was considered more trustworthy during crises than social media. Although this would imply that traditional media is the most important communication channel for an organisation, other research has shown that social media usage increases during a crisis, making it detrimental to neglect (Austin et al., 2012; Lu & Jin, 2020).

To answer the research question and its sub-questions, this research has adopted the SCCT and the SMCC model to help understand what crisis type the "frat culture" crisis was and which corporate crisis communication strategies were used. Although there are other theoretical frameworks specified for digital crises such as Jordan-Meier's Four Stages, they are more focused on solving practical solutions rather than providing a theory for analysis. Coombs' framework is still more useful when it comes to identifying crises and the communication strategies that were used, which is deemed more useful when it comes to a comparative study between three different crises. Additionally, Austin et al. (2012) provided the social-mediated crisis communication model which will be used to analyse the

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stakeholder data. Research has shown that employee crisis communication is potentially more harmful than consumer crisis communication (Opitz et al., 2018). As employees play a significant role in the "frat culture" crisis, it is important to use the SMCC model to explore how stakeholder perspectives were managed through the chosen crisis communication strategies and to establish which stakeholders are the most important by analysing the crisis information flow.

2.4 The importance of stakeholder perceptions

During a crisis, multiple parties are facing danger in many different forms. The safety of the public is of utmost importance and crisis communication efforts should prioritise protecting people from crisis hazards (Coombs, 2013). After public safety has been secured, the highest priority for the organisation is repairing and preventing (further) reputational damage. Coombs (2013, p. 271) defined corporate reputation as "how positively or negatively stakeholders perceive an organisation". An organisation's reputation is deemed a valuable resource threatened during a crisis (Chun, 2005; Winkleman, 1999). A crisis can lead to corporate reputation damage and means in other words that stakeholders perceive an organisation more negatively. To prevent corporate reputation damage, stakeholder perception needs to be managed correctly. This is done through two important aspects of crisis communication: (1) crisis knowledge management and (2) stakeholder reaction management. During a crisis, managers need to understand the situation by acquiring information and turning it into knowledge. Only then can an appropriate crisis communication strategy be formed. Secondly, managers need to understand the current stakeholder perception, and especially the current attribution of crisis responsibility. Through this, the manager can estimate stakeholder reactions to each potential crisis communication strategy (Coombs, 2008). The manager can manage stakeholder perceptions and therefore minimise reputational damage through these two aspects of crisis communication.

Stakeholder perceptions are also important in determining what can be considered a crisis in the first place. Especially with cultural crises, many of the problems might only surface due to societal changes. What was once regarded as the status quo, might shift into something unacceptable by modern standards. An example of this is how social attitudes towards smoking have changed dramatically since the mid-1960s (Rabin & Sugarman, 1993),

meaning that what was once socially accepted is now considered taboo. Within the "frat culture" crisis, a workplace consisting of large amounts of sexual innuendos and jokes with physical touch is considered no longer normal. In the modern stakeholder perception, it has surfaced as taboo. Therefore, it is important to explore which crisis management strategies can manage the stakeholder perceptions within a crisis.

Additionally, in the case of the "frat culture" crisis, the employees are an important stakeholder group next to the consumers. The crises are triggered as the employees are the ones who are suffering and decided to share their stories through news outlets. What makes the "frat culture" crises especially threatening to these organisations is that employees attacking their organisation can cause disproportionally cause more damage to their corporate reputation than consumers can (Opitz et al., 2018). Therefore, in the case of the "frat culture" crises, it is of utmost importance to explore stakeholders' perceptions and how these perceptions spread amongst them to choose an appropriate crisis communication strategy to manage the spread of these stakeholder perceptions to limit corporate reputation damage.

2.5 Diversity and inclusion

The prevention of workplace harassment has been a point of attention for organisations for decades (Dominick, 2018). Yet the consistent sexual harassment of women in workplaces is something that has only been revealed with the #MeToo movement in 2017. New digital communication channels and social media platforms allowed women to speak up about their experiences. On social media, stories could be told in a relatively anonymous manner. Social media allowed these women to connect with other victims who shared the same experiences. The connection between these victims allowed for the painting of a bigger picture in which a systematic issue at a workplace could be brought to the public's attention. And although the victims could speak up anonymously if they chose to, the perpetrators did not always have the option to hide their identity. Allegations on social media against high-level employees, combined with the revelation of a systematic issue at a company, enabled triggers to be formed for a corporate crisis. A systematic issue that has existed for a long time has now developed into a risk factor that many organisations have to mitigate, including organisations within the game industry. Many organisations have found this risk factor triggers a crisis within the game industry and requires proper management

through crisis communication. For a predominantly male-dominated industry, the alienation of women is a big problem as multiple studies have found that cultural and gender-diverse teams have more potential benefits than homogenous teams (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Hoogendoorn et al., 2013). Additionally, a greater gender, racial, and ethnic diversity within a team can lead to increased organisational profits as the team can draw from a wider range of fresh ideas and backgrounds (McElhaney et al., 2019).

Not only the women suffer from the toxic work environment. Men are often pressured to participate in this toxic culture in order to be part of the in-group. With more gender equality on the work floor, men will not be pressured to participate in unwanted behaviour, allowing them to be free from social pressure or stigma and relieve stress burdens (McElhaney et al., 2019). Furthermore, with the #MeToo movement mainly being based on social media, it is difficult to differentiate between truthful and false accusations, with innocent men occasionally being cancelled in the crossfire. Even when guilty men are terminated from employment, they are often high-profile men and the low-level individuals will continue their toxic practices (Dominick, 2018).

When it comes to preventing sexual harassment on the work floor, it is not simply enough to target individuals but to change the workplace culture. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "workplace culture has the greatest impact on allowing harassment to flourish, or conversely, in preventing harassment. The importance of leadership cannot be overstated – effective harassment prevention efforts, and workplace culture in which harassment is not tolerated must start with and involve the highest level of management of the company" (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016, p. V). To properly change the workplace culture, it has to start with the leaders and the way they communicate. Within this "frat culture" culture crisis specifically, the workplace culture of harassment has developed from a risk factor into a full-fledged crisis. Now, it requires proper crisis management, with the appropriate crisis communication strategies, and proper leadership communication from the top management to prevent reputational damage and to prevent any further workplace harassment.

2.6 Crisis communication in the game industry

This research has established that the game industry is relatively young. A game developer survey conducted in 2021 revealed that 61% of the responding game developers are male,

while 30% were women, and 9% identified as "other". (Clement, 2021). Although this is an improvement from 21% in 2017, it still shows that the game industry is male-dominated. Despite this, the game industry still attempts to slowly engage more and more in D&I campaigns. For example, the game studio Respawn Entertainment participated in D&I campaigns such as Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, Pride, and Suicide Prevention within their games (Shepard, 2021). Yet, Respawn Entertainment managed to trigger outrage from the public about cultural insensitivity despite these campaigns. Fans were outraged about a Korean character in the game doing Chinese cultural references, mentioning that Asia is not a single country and that Korea has its own culture unrelated to China (Khan, 2021). This outrage indicates that racism is something that may seem harmless to some and that cultural insensitivity is subtle. It also shows that despite the company promoting Stop Asian Hate, actions are more important than words. This is also the case for other companies when it comes to D&I and crisis triggers. The game industry has engaged in communicating diversity and inclusion before the first trigger of the "frat culture" crisis. This was not limited to D&I communication regarding gender only but included topics such as ethnicity and sexuality too. For example, Riot games celebrated through a statement the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia on May 17th 2018 (*Celebrating an Inclusive Gaming Community with IDAHOTB*, 2018). Engaging in such corporate social responsibility communication has been found to have the potential to offset the negative impact in the case of triggering a crisis (Ham & Kim, 2017). Despite their efforts and the campaign, the triggering of a D&I-related crisis could not be completely mitigated.

As the effectiveness of crisis communication differs per industry, it is important to research what effective crisis communication is within the game industry. The crisis communication strategies in the game industry are often underdeveloped as PR is often hindsight and something that is not done by people trained in PR or crisis management (Chan, 2019). This is especially noticeable in smaller studios in which PR is sometimes managed by one single person. Additionally, these specialists are also tasked with marketing responsibilities, making the workload even worse (Chan, 2019). Eventually, crisis management is something that is only thought about after the crisis is triggered. This is frustrating for many crisis managers within the game industry as it has been established that crisis management is better done pre-emptively rather than reactively. Proper crisis management does not only look at the required communication afterwards but also

engages in pre-crisis communication to reduce potential reputational damage (Heath &
O'Hair, 2008).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This research aims to explore how different game companies handled the "frat culture" crisis and how the public reacted to it. To understand people's perceptions and experiences, a qualitative research method was preferred over a quantitative research method. Through a content analysis, the deeper content within a communication source can be revealed and analysed (Neuman, 2010). In other words, qualitative content analysis helps achieve a deeper understanding of people's experiences while taking into account the context. This research method was deemed fitting for multiple reasons. For one, the gaming industry is strongly connected to digital media. Consequently, many of its communities share information through news outlets and social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit. This means that most, if not all, crisis communication done by the companies is publicised as written texts online. Secondly, the crisis topic is a sensitive one for the victims and any ethical issue with the research method should be avoided. The "frat culture" crisis entails cases of sexual harassment, bullying, and discrimination. Many of the victims experience trauma, depression, stress, and anxiety (Liao, 2021). Additionally, many of the employees have faced large amounts of stress after repeatedly receiving media exposure due to media journalism or legal investigations (*Riot Games Reaches Agreement in Principle to Settle Class Action Gender Discrimination Lawsuit*, 2019). Based on the aforementioned, it was deemed unethical to contact the employees and victims for this research. Therefore, a qualitative content analysis was deemed preferable over interviews. Finally, there is a lot of data available with a great variety between them. To organise the amount of data and to approach the analysis systematically, it is necessary to have a way of categorising the texts. As Schreier (2012, p. 171) describes it, a "qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data". This research does not simply count the number of times a word is mentioned, but it aimed to categorise themes within a large amount of data. Based on this, a qualitative content analysis was deemed to be more suitable as it goes beyond counting the number of appearances of certain words (Weber, 1990, as cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Based on the three aforementioned points, a qualitative content analysis was deemed to be the most viable method. As mentioned in the research question, the crisis communication from the corporate perspective and the

reactions from the stakeholder perspective were analysed.

For this comparison, the game development and publishing companies Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, and Ubisoft were chosen. The reasoning behind this comparison is grounded in the many similarities between the three companies. All three companies are well-known within the game industry, having developed famous games such as *League of Legends, World of Warcraft, Overwatch, Just Dance,* and *Assassins' Creed*. These companies also employed thousands of employees spread over numerous offices worldwide. This led to a huge uproar when it was revealed that all three companies harboured a "frat boy" culture. At Riot Games, a high-level employee continuously engaged in inappropriate behaviour such as "*ball-tapping* (flicking or slapping testicles), farting on employees or humping them for comedic effect" (D'Anastasio, 2018b). In the case of Ubisoft, information surfaced that one of the co-founders allegedly choked a female employee at a work party (Gach, 2020). It was quickly revealed that the company houses a strong toxic work culture that transcends international borders as allegations about sexual misconduct came from multiple offices across the world. Incidents related to the Ubisoft offices in Vermont, Paris, Singapore, Toronto, Montreal, Montpelier, San Francisco, and Sofia (Gach, 2021). Activision Blizzard faced the same allegations with male employees being seen to be drinking high amounts of alcohol and engaging in inappropriate behaviour towards female employees. The DFEH specifically mentioned in their lawsuit against Activision Blizzard an incident involving a female employee who committed suicide during a work trip due to being subjected to intense sexual harassment. To summarise, all three companies faced allegations of the same nature between 2018 and 2022 and would collectively provide a substantial amount of written materials for a crisis communication strategy comparison.

It is necessary to identify what the expected crisis communication was for each company according to Coombs' (2007) SCCT. In the case of Riot Games, the crisis started with an ex-employee publishing her story regarding the toxic work culture at Riot Games in the news outlet *Kotaku*. According to the SCCT, this crisis could be identified as an organisational misdeed as the management allegedly knew about the issues and chose to ignore them, putting the employees at risk. An organisational misdeed is categorised under the preventable crisis cluster with strong attributions of crisis responsibility. As the gaming industry is relatively juvenile and Riot Games was only founded in 2006, there was no intensifying factor for crisis history present. From the written materials, the stakeholders

expressed emotions of shock and disappointment due to Riot Games' historically good reputation. Based on this observation, no intensifying factor performance history. Based on the aforementioned, the SCCT recommends the following crisis communication strategies: The first step is to inform and adjust information as this crisis contains victims or potential victims. The second step is to use rebuild crisis response strategies. Within these strategies, managers can opt to compensate or apologise. By compensating, "managers offer money or other gifts to victims " (Coombs, 2007, p. 266). Through apologising, "managers accept responsibility for the crisis and ask stakeholders to forgive them" (Coombs, 2007, p. 266). Finally, the ingratiation crisis response strategy can be used at any time if stakeholders have helped in addressing the crisis. Within the ingratiation crisis response, "managers thank stakeholders and/or praise stakeholders" (Coombs, 2007, p. 266).

The crisis Activision Blizzard is facing started through a lawsuit by the California Department of Fair Employment. By Coombs' (2007) SCCT definitions, Activision Blizzard faces a similar crisis to the one Riot Games is facing. This crisis is also about a toxic work culture in which the management, allegedly, knowingly put stakeholders at risk. Therefore, Activision Blizzard's crisis is also categorised as an organisational misdeed, belonging to the preventable crisis cluster with strong attributions of crisis responsibility. This was also the first crisis of this nature that Blizzard Entertainment faced and has therefore no intensifying factor in crisis history. From the analysis, stakeholders mentioned historical issues regarding the "frat boy" culture. The vast majority of the stakeholders, however, still expressed notions of disappointment and shock as Activision Blizzard developed various popular gaming titles. Therefore, there was no intensifying factor of performance history deemed to be found. Based on the aforementioned, Activision Blizzard should follow the same steps as Riot Games. The first step is to inform and adjust information. The second step is to rebuild. The optional third step is to ingratiate stakeholders.

Although Ubisoft's crisis is similar in nature as it has been about a toxic "frat culture" and sexual misconduct, the start of the crisis is different to the previous two mentioned crises. Ubisoft's crisis started with a high-management level employee engaging in unethical behaviour in his personal life. Although this incident reflects badly on Ubisoft's image, there's no direct involvement or responsibility from Ubisoft. Therefore, Ubisoft's crisis is identified as a challenge as some stakeholders claim the organisation, or its employees are acting inappropriately or irresponsibly. The challenge crisis belongs to the accidental crisis

cluster with minimal attribution of crisis responsibility. Ubisoft does not have any history with other crises and has no intensifying factor of crisis history. Due to its good reputation, Ubisoft also has no intensifying factor of performance history. Based on the aforementioned, Coomb's (2007) SCCT recommends the following strategies: The first step is to inform and adjust information. The second step is to utilise the diminish crisis strategies. Within this, the manager can opt to excuse or justify. By excusing, "managers minimise the organisation's responsibility for the crisis by denying any intent to harm and/or claiming an inability to control events that led to the crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 266). When justifying, the managers minimise the perceived damage caused by the crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 266). As Ubisoft has low attribution of crisis responsibility, they also have the option to use the reminder crisis response strategy in which "managers tell stakeholders about past good works of the organisation" (Coombs, 2007, p. 266). Finally, Ubisoft can also utilise the ingratiation crisis response strategy.

Table 3.1.1

Riot Games' appropriate crisis response strategies

Riot Games			
Crisis type	**Crisis cluster**	**Intensifying factor of crisis history**	**Intensifying factor of performance history**
Organisational misdeed	Preventable (strong attributions of crisis responsibility)	No	No
Measures to be taken:			

1. Informing and adjusting information as the initial response

2. Rebuild crisis response strategies, including compensating and apologising

3. Ingratiation crisis response strategy in case stakeholders helped within the crisis

Table 3.1.2

Blizzard Entertainment's appropriate crisis response strategies

Blizzard Entertainment			
Crisis type	**Crisis cluster**	**Intensifying factor of crisis history**	**Intensifying factor of performance history**
Organisational misdeed	Preventable (strong attributions of crisis responsibility)	No	No
Measures to be taken:			

1. Informing and adjusting information as the initial response

2. Rebuild crisis response strategies, including compensating and apologising

3. Ingratiation crisis response strategy in case stakeholders helped within the crisis

Table 3.1.3 Ubisoft's appropriate crisis response strategies

Ubisoft			
Crisis type	**Crisis cluster**	**Intensifying factor of crisis history**	**Intensifying factor of performance history**
Challenge	Accidental (minimal attributions of crisis responsibility)	No	No
Measures to be taken:			

1. Informing and adjusting information as the initial response

2. Diminish crisis response strategies, including excusing or justifying

3. Reminder crisis response if deemed appropriate

4. Ingratiation crisis response strategy in case stakeholders helped within the crisis

Now that an expected crisis response has been established for each company, this research can continue to analyse what the actual crisis response was. If they matched the SCCT's recommendations, conclusions can be drawn on the effectiveness of the recommendations. If they do not match the SCCT's recommendations, we can examine if the chosen strategies were an improvement over the SCCT's recommendations or not.

3.2 Data collection

The data collected for the corporate perspective consists of written materials, namely public statements, public letters, in-house e-mails, tweets, and Reddit comments. This research has collected 47 online written materials from the corporate perspective. These were found on company websites, Twitter, Reddit, and news outlets. 12 Of these written materials were by Activision Blizzard, 18 by Riot Games, and 16 by Ubisoft. As there are three companies in this comparison, this research has attempted to collect an equal amount of written materials from each company. Due to company procedures, different events within the crises, and the varying durations of the crises, not every company released crisis statements as frequently. To be eligible for the analysis, the written materials had to be directly sourced from the company itself or an (ex-)employee with a managerial or leadership position.

Table 3.2.1

Dataset from Activision Blizzard and its stakeholders

Activision Blizzard			
Type	**Quantity**	**Length** **(words/statement)**	**Source**
Public statement	8	483-623	News outlets, Company website
Public letter	0	-	-
In-house e-mail	3	217-528	Journalists on Twitter (employee leak)
Tweet	1	7	Twitter
Reddit comment	0	-	-
Activision Blizzard Stakeholders			
Type	**Quantity**	**Length** **(words/statement)**	**Source**
Tweet	150	1-70	Twitter
Reddit Comment	0	-	-

Table 3.2.2

Dataset from Riot Games and its stakeholders

Riot Games			
Type	**Quantity**	**Length** (words/statement)	**Source**
Public statement	12	99 to 1643	News outlets, Company website
Public letter	1	3451	Company website
In-house e-mail	1	637	News outlet (employee leak)
Tweet	4	25 to 48	Twitter
Reddit comment	1	625	-
Riot Games Stakeholders			
Type	**Quantity**	**Length** (words/statement)	**Source**
Tweet	100	1-70	Twitter
Reddit Comment	50	6-207	Reddit

Table 3.2.3

Dataset from Ubisoft and its stakeholders

Ubisoft			
Type	**Quantity**	**Length** (words/statement)	**Source**
Public statement	11	119 to 884	News outlets, Company website
Public letter	0	-	-
In-house e-mail	2	121 and 441	News outlet (employee leak)
Tweet	1	65	Twitter (via news outlet)
Interview	2	899	News outlet, Company website
Ubisoft Stakeholders			
Type	**Quantity**	**Length** (words/statement)	**Source**
Tweet	150	1-70	Twitter
Reddit Comment	0	-	-

Each written material differs wildly in terms of word count. A tweet is 140 to 280 characters long, while statements are two to four paragraphs, and letters can be multiple A4 pages in length. The written materials were found through the use of the companies' official websites, news outlets, Twitter, and Google search engine using the keywords *Ubisoft, Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, crisis, timeline, sexual misconduct, harassment, frat boy, frat culture,* and *scandal*. The final requirement was also that the written materials were published after the first publication or accusation within the crisis.

From the stakeholder perspective, 150 tweets were collected for the Activision Blizzard and Ubisoft stakeholders. From the Riot Games stakeholders, 100 tweets and 50 Reddit comments were collected. This was done as Riot Games' initial statement was made on Reddit. This means that in total, 450 written materials have been collected for this research. Written materials were chosen for analysis through four conditions. The first condition is that each written material was a direct reply to a direct source of a corporate crisis statement. This means that the written material could not be a reply to another reply. Secondly, the first 50 posted replies were selected in chronological order to eliminate the possibility of selection bias as much as possible. Finally, only a maximum of 50 replies were collected per corporate statement to collect a more complete data set with a diverse range of crisis communication statements. Written materials were also excluded from the selection if they had an image to convey meaning, were deemed to be trolling/irrelevant, or were deemed to be ambiguous.

3.3 Reliability and ethics

This research is subject to a couple of potential biases. For one the research method qualitative content analysis leads to a heavy dependency on the researcher for the interpretation of the data. This could be mitigated by having a second coder to check for intercoder reliability. Due to time constraints, this research was unsuccessful in recruiting a second coder. Therefore, potential researcher bias could be present due to the lack of second-coder reliability. Another potential bias lies within the data collection. Bias has been reduced as much as possible by collecting the comments and replies sorted in chronological order and limiting the amount to be collected to 50 per crisis statement to stimulate the acquirement of a more holistic set of data. However, data was only collected from communities on social media platforms and news outlets of which the researcher was aware. There might have been groups of stakeholders commenting on the crisis communication on platforms such as Facebook, Tumblr, or Youtube, of which the researcher was unaware.

As this cultural crisis involved victims, ethical issues were avoided as much as possible by conducting a qualitative content analysis. Any research method involving the interviewing of the victims or employees of the companies would lead to ethical issues as sexual misconduct and discrimination are sensitive topics. Additionally, the long-term nature

of this cultural crisis has led to many of the people involved being subjected to media attention repeatedly. For this reason, a hands-off approach was deemed to be more respectful to the victims and therefore more ethical. No sensitive materials were used in this research as most of the data were available publicly. Most data were taken from social media platforms such as Twitter or Reddit, or news outlets. It is important to note that the leaked in-house statements were not meant to be publicised, but due to a large number of recipients of these statements and the fact that there was no sensitive or confidential information within these statements, the materials were not deemed to lead to ethical issues.

As mentioned earlier, it was not possible to utilise the help of a second coder for this research. Instead, to strengthen the reliability of this research, an initial codebook was created and tested on ten per cent of the data (see Appendix C and D). This initial codebook was tested for exhaustiveness, mutual exclusiveness, and unidimensionality. Adjustments were made to the initial codebook when necessary to create the final codebook. Then, the final codebook was used on the whole dataset. Additionally, deviant data that did not contribute to the research were filtered to ensure that the quality of data remained consistent. Data that were filtered were comments that did not mention anything related to the crisis, consisted solely of images, or were so little in word count that the meaning was ambiguous (e.g. "?", "great").

3.4 Data analysis

To analyse the data, a thematic analysis was deemed to be the best approach. Thematic analysis is a method that aims to identify themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). By analysing a large number of written materials, this research had a lot of data that needed proper categorisation so those accurate and reliable findings could be found. The thematic analysis uses a coding frame to reduce the amount of noise within the data and helped to properly categorise them. Through the usage of a coding frame, the data can be filtered and the variety of meanings can be reduced so that the most meaningful data can be collected (Schreier, 2012). The analysis was inductive and data-driven, which means that the analysis remained close to the data but that personal biases might have a bigger influence on the interpretation and conclusion. After the data collection, initial themes were identified based on the theory and initial codes were created. After getting familiar with the written

materials initial codes were further developed. This was done by marking important parts within the written materials that were deemed relevant to the themes. Based on the markings, open codes were developed. Open coding encourages a thematic approach as it encourages the researcher to break up the text into pieces so that they could be compared and categorised into themes (Boeije, 2010). Once all open codes were deemed to be found, each open was grouped into axial codes. These axial codes were then grouped under selective codes. Once code saturation was reached, an initial codebook (see Appendix C and D) was created using the found codes.

Table 3.4.1

Two examples of the coding process

Corporate perspective

Selective code	Axial code	Open code	Example
Taking responsibility	Apologising	Apologising to stakeholders, acknowledging shortcomings	"To Rioters, contractors, former Rioters, and past contractors: We're sorry. We're sorry that Riot hasn't always been—or wasn't—the place we promised you. And we're sorry it took so long for us to hear you."

Stakeholder perspective

Selective code	Axial code	Open code	Example
Diminished trust	Disbelieve in the given information/scenario	Finding the information illogical, finding the given scenario hard to believe	"I'll believe it when I see it. There's no excuse for this having gone on for so long with no effort to fix things until it went public."

Then, ten per cent of the written materials were chosen at random. Using these written materials, a thematic analysis was done with the initial codebooks (see Appendix C and D). By doing this, the initial codebook was tested for unidimensionality, mutual exclusiveness, exhaustiveness, consistency and validity (Schreier, 2014). Appropriate alterations were made to the initial codebook to create the final codebooks (see Appendix E and F). Finally, the final codebooks were used to analyse all written materials and to identify the themes within the data. During the analysis of the data with the full codebook, parts within the written materials were marked when deemed relevant.

4. Results

4.1 The five themes of corporate crisis communication

In this chapter, this research will identify the themes from the results of the thematic analysis. Then, the three sub-research questions will be answered using the identified themes. The first sub-research question that will be answered is: how did different game companies handle the "frat culture" crisis? To answer this sub-research question it is important to identify the themes that were found in the data. Five themes were discovered through the analysis of the crisis response strategies of the corporate perspective, which consisted of 1) *reputational mending*, 2) *the promise of change*, 3) *accountability*, 4) *rapport building*, and 5) *lowering crisis intensity*.

Figure 4.1.1

Corporate themes
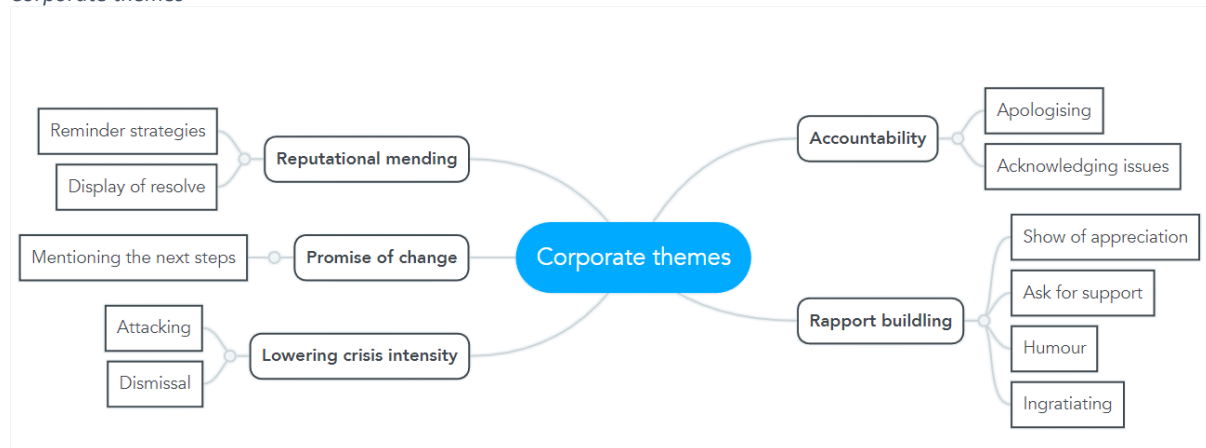
The first theme that was identified was *reputational mending*. All companies engaged in reputational mending as it improves reputation and limits escalation at the same time. The fact that all three companies engage in reputational mending is reasonable as a company's reputation is one of the most valuable resources during a crisis and is immediately threatened after a crisis trigger (Chun, 2005; Winkleman, 1999). The companies engage in reputational mending by strongly emphasising the company's values, ethics, and goals, as well as mentioning the historically good reputation of the company (e.g. "We value diversity and strive to foster a workplace that offers inclusivity for everyone. There is no place in our company or industry, or any industry, for sexual misconduct or harassment of any kind"). This is also a way of controlling the framing of the initial crisis information towards the public. As found earlier by Borden and Zhang (2019), the manner in which crisis information

is conveyed is important in influencing the public perception of crisis attribution. The mentioning of earlier good deeds and participation in CSR communication could mitigate parts of the negative consequences of the crisis (Ham & Kim, 2017). Additionally, the companies also emphasise their commitment to solving the crisis and occasionally announce the actions that were already taken. All three companies conducted reputational mending in every single statement during the crisis. Both Riot Games and Activision Blizzard chose to create an initial response with mostly reputational mending. The SCCT (Coombs, 2013) recommends every crisis start with informing and adjusting information, which only Ubisoft did in their initial response.

The second theme was the *promise of change*. This was to reassure the stakeholder that the crisis is being taken seriously, that change is coming, and that the crisis will not happen again. Companies did this by announcing the next steps that will be taken (e.g. "We will be adding additional staff to our Compliance and Employee Relations teams, strengthening our capabilities in investigating employee concerns. We are creating safe spaces, moderated by third parties, for employees to speak out and share areas for improvements"). All three companies communicated the promise of change in almost all of their statements but two significant statements did not communicate any promise of change. These were Riot Games' initial response and Activision Blizzard's initial statement. Ubisoft decided to communicate the promise of change in their initial statement and the statements afterwards. Personal statements also included the promise of change. The promise of change is not something that the SCCT mentions as a recommended strategy.

The third identified theme was *accountability.* This was prevalent in the initial responses during the crisis as an apology, or the final response of the crisis as a settlement (e.g. "We want to start by apologising to everyone affected by this – we are truly sorry"). Accountability was often also communicated in personal messages by high-level employees. Another way for companies to show accountability was to acknowledge their problems historically or acknowledge the upcoming challenges and responsibilities (e.g. "Management -- myself included -- have a responsibility to act as role models and be exemplary for our teams"). In the initial responses, Ubisoft was the only company to communicate accountability. Both Riot Games and Activision Blizzard avoided communicating accountability completely in their initial statements. Interestingly, the SCCT recommended rebuilding strategies that included taking accountability and apologising to preventable

crisis types only, meaning that only Riot Games and Activision Blizzard were supposed to apologise. Yet, neither of the two took accountability and Ubisoft, the company with a low attribution of crisis responsibility, was the only company to communicate accountability.

The fourth theme was *rapport building*. This is a method to evoke sympathy with the stakeholders. A way to build rapport is by showing appreciation through tanking stakeholders (e.g. "We're humbled by the time you've spent with us"). Another way is to ask for support from the stakeholders to indicate that the company and the stakeholders are building towards the same goal (e.g. "But we also need you now more than ever. We need people who will drive change and fight for what's right"). This is also done by ingratiating stakeholders to show that the stakeholders have historically been on the same side as the company. The SCCT (Coombs, 2013) mentions the ingratiation of stakeholders as a supplemental crisis communication strategy. Finally, there is also the possibility of using humour to evoke sympathy. This was only present in Riot Games' statements and is something not mentioned in the SCCT as a possible strategy.

The final identified theme was *lowering crisis intensity*. By downplaying the crisis, the company attempts to limit reputational damage. This is primarily done by dismissing claims. These could be dismissed by calling them false, fabricated, or inaccurate (e.g. "The DFEH includes distorted, and in many cases false, descriptions of Blizzard's past"). Additionally, if claims were made by a third party, companies also opted to lower the credibility of the third party. This is done by denouncing the third party's actions or emphasising the negative consequences that followed the actions of the third party (e.g. "We are sickened by the reprehensible conduct of the DFEH"). Lowering crisis intensity is something that only appeared in the initial statements by Riot Games and Activision Blizzard. The lowering of crisis intensity is something that never occurred in personal statements. Lowering crisis intensity is similar to the SCCT's diminish crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2013). The SCCT mentions dismissing claims as a way to lower crisis intensity through denial response strategies. The data also showed that it was possible to attack the credibility of third parties making claims against the company, which is similar to the SCCT's attacking response strategies. Both Riot Games and Activision Blizzard used this strategy in their initial statement. Other statements by these two companies refrained from using the strategy. Once again, this diminish crisis response strategy was recommended to Ubisoft and not to Riot Games and Activision Blizzard. Ubisoft however refrained from using the strategy.

From these results, it is concluded that the companies did not follow the recommendations made by Coombs' (2007) SCCT closely. Ubisoft used crisis communication strategies that were recommended for high attribution of crisis responsibility despite going through a crisis of low attribution of crisis responsibility. Ubisoft conveyed themes of reputational mending, accountability, and promise of change. This was done by using the rebuilding crisis strategy. Reputational mending and the promise of change do not correspond to a specific SCCT crisis strategy. Both Riot Games and Activision Blizzard used crisis communication strategies that were recommended for low attribution of crisis responsibility crises despite experiencing a crisis of high attribution of crisis responsibility. Both companies conveyed the themes of reputational mending and lowering crisis intensity in their initial statements. This would correspond to the diminish crisis strategy. Now that it has been established how the different game companies handled the "frat culture" crisis in their communication, it is important to analyse how the public interpreted the communicated strategies.

4.2 The seven themes of stakeholder reactions

Figure 4.2.1

Stakeholder themes

Now that the themes from the corporate perspective have been discovered, it is important to identify how the public made sense of the corporate response. The stakeholders had a great variety of responses as the chosen crisis communication strategies varied greatly as well. Seven themes have been discovered from the analysis of the stakeholder responses,

namely 1) *leadership accountability*, 2) *diminished trust*, 3) *inaction over time*, 4) *scepticism toward authenticity*, 5) *support for the company*, 6) *support for stakeholders*, and 7) *lack of*
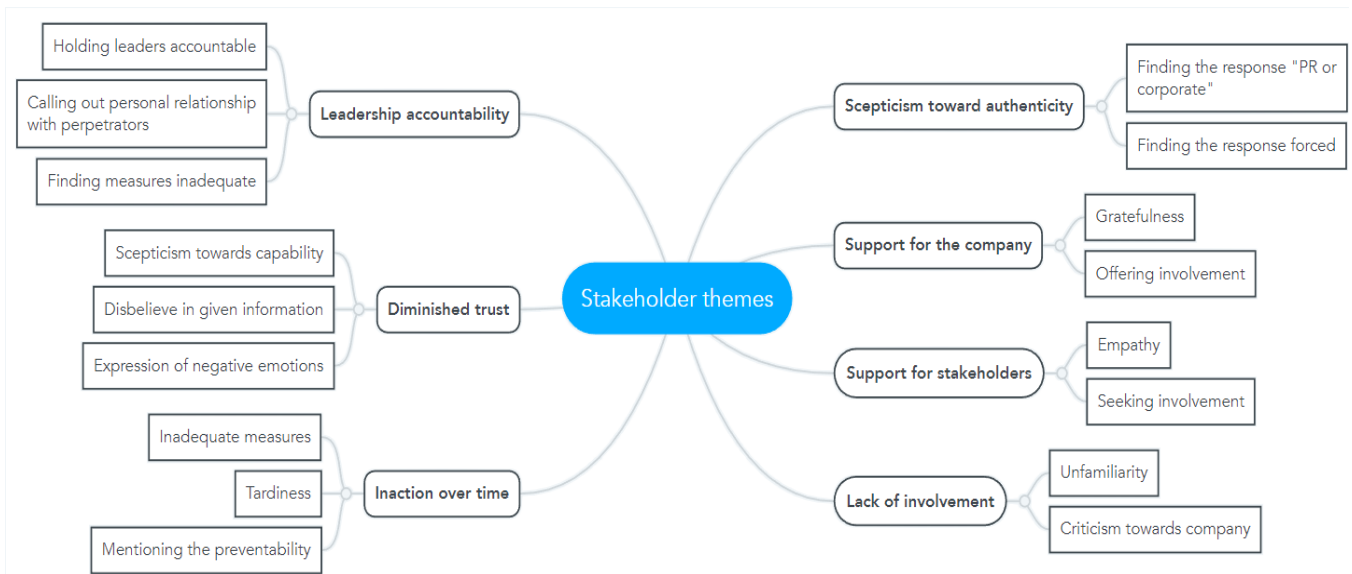
involvement.

The first theme that came forward was *leadership accountability.* Through most of the corporate statements, the CEO was held the most accountable (e.g. "Yves, please Leave. Resign. You are not wanted"). This was due to multiple reasons. The first is that most issues were already known for a very long time and that the CEO allegedly chose to ignore the issues. If measures were taken, the public often deemed them inadequate. Additionally, the main perpetrators were often high-level employees and remained employed at the company despite being sanctioned. Additionally, they often had close relationships with the CEO. This led to many stakeholders being convinced that nepotism is dominant within the workplace and that the first solution would be the dismissal of the CEO.

These notions also led to the theme of *diminished trust*. When statements made promises of announced actions to be taken, many stakeholders replied with a sense of scepticism (e.g. "Words are words. Until visible action can be seen, this doesn't mean anything"). The game companies all had a good historical reputation. Yet, the knowledge that the "frat culture" issues have been around for years led to many stakeholders believing that the taken measures were a failure and that any future attempt would be just as futile. Additionally, many stakeholders found the statements that informed that the company was unaware of the issues very unbelievable. This also led to many stakeholders losing trust in the leadership and the company. It is important to note that both the themes of leadership accountability and diminished trust were more often present at the later stages of Ubisoft's

crisis than in the beginning.

Many stakeholders also expressed the theme of *inaction over time* (e.g. "After years of an internally bred toxic community both in game and out this is a hilarious tweet"). The crises were deemed preventable by the stakeholders since many of the issues were taken to HR in the years before. Yet, the company decided not to act on it and if measures were implemented, the changes were hardly perceivable by the stakeholders. Although the company announced to make changes rapidly following the crisis, many stakeholders call the promised actions to be too late since the damage was already done. In the end, the actions should have been taken without the need for a crisis to be triggered.

The next identified theme was the *scepticism toward authenticity*. Many found the statements overtly "PR" or "corporate". This was expressed as sarcasm or the imitation of standard PR responses (e.g. "Look at all those buzzwords! What a paradigm shift! Honestly this response kinda made it worse"). The timing of the statements was also detrimental to the authenticity of the message. Many stakeholders attributed the main motivation for the statements to be damage control after the crisis trigger instead of genuine concern for the stakeholders.

Some stakeholders displayed s*upport for the company*. This was expressed as confidence in the CEO who made a public statement or in other high-level employees who were not directly responsible for the crisis (e.g. "Don't dismiss the stories, the truths, and work towards a better future. It's all we can do and I can't think of anyone better for that than you"). Support was shown in many different ways. Some stakeholders even asked for ways to help solve the crisis or advised key actors on what they deemed to be good steps toward solving the crisis.

Aside from support for the company, the data also showed the theme of *support for stakeholders*. The crisis came as a shock for many. Consequently, many stakeholders empathised with the victims or employees who were affected directly by the crisis. These stakeholders then asked for ways to help the victims and employees (e.g "What can WE, as players, do? Where do we need to post, who do we need to contact?"). Another way for stakeholders to show support is by sharing their own experiences with sexual misconduct, power abuse, or gender discrimination.

Finally, there was also the *lack of involvement* from certain stakeholders. Not everyone was aware of the crisis. Some stakeholders would simply react with a question,

asking for more information from other people who were more involved in the crisis (e.g. "What the hell happened? Did he have an affair with an underaged woman?"). Some stakeholders criticised the company for being unnecessarily involved in the crisis (e.g. "Since, at this time, are only allegations and everyone is innocent until proven guilty, there's nothing to be sorry about. Furthermore, I care about the games and not internal affairs of the studio"). According to some stakeholders, the company should prioritise the development of their games rather than participate in "highly political matters".

From the data, it becomes apparent that there was a wide variety of responses due to the great variety of crisis response strategies. Many stakeholders had a negative opinion of the company or the CEO and had no faith in the competency of the company. This extreme response can be explained by the emotional involvement of the stakeholders in this crisis and its highly controversial issues (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019). Especially after it was revealed that the issues were already known for years. Some crisis communication strategies were met with support and gratefulness. Finally, some stakeholders were unaware of the crisis that the company was involved in, even though these stakeholders were a very small minority. The vast majority still had a negative opinion of the conducted crisis communication.

By adopting the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model, different groups have been identified through the data. There were many *influential social media creators* within the "frat culture" crisis. This group of people were the ones who provide information for others to consume. The organisations wrote their statements on their websites and spread them on social media. Additionally, there were the stakeholders. These were (high-level) employees who share their experiences within the crisis or victims who want to share their stories. Finally, there were the reporters. These reporters work for digital news outlets (e.g. Bloomberg, Polygon) and share important documents that may not be available publicly. These leaked documents were provided to the reporters by employees. *The social media followers* were the ones who consume the information from the influential social media creators, and they consisted mostly of the fans of the games and the studios. Most comments and reactions expressed a range of emotions following their history with the company as consumers. Other social media followers were industry colleagues who sometimes shared a similar experience and who could empathise with the victims. *The social media inactives* were the group of people who do not consume information directly

but instead receive it indirectly from others. These could be considered to be people who do not consume the products of the companies. Within the crisis communication reactions, there were few to none from social media inactives. Reactions to a post were generally homogenous and indicated that the general public shared a common sentiment.

4.3 The more and less favoured crisis responses

Finally, this research examined which crisis communication strategies were more and less favoured by the public. Through the data, it is possible to make some important observations. The crisis communication strategy that was most favoured by the public seemed to be the messages that exclusively contained the themes of accountability, promises of change, and reputational mending. The less favoured crisis communication strategies were the statements that exclusively contained the themes of reputational mending and lowering crisis intensity.

It was already mentioned that Riot Games and Activision Blizzard entertainment both opted to use diminish crisis strategies despite having a high attribution of crisis responsibility. Ubisoft opted to use rebuild strategies despite only having a low attribution of crisis responsibility. As opposed to Riot Games and Activision Blizzard, Ubisoft's initial statement contained the themes of accountability, promises of change, and reputational mending. The statement started with an apology toward the stakeholders, followed by the company's values and the steps that were to be taken to fully live up to these values. This statement was received positively with many stakeholders expressing their faith in the CEO and thanking the company for its commitment. The statement successfully acknowledged the problems and conveyed to the stakeholders that the company was determined to solve the problems. Based on this information it can be concluded that a crisis communication strategy that contained rebuilding, improving, and mending was the most favoured strategy by the public. This statement, however, was also met with the theme of lack of involvement from the stakeholders. Some stakeholders were criticising Ubisoft for being overly involved in what they perceived as a small issue. This criticism could stem from the fact that Ubisoft utilised crisis communication strategies that were fit for a high attribution of crisis responsibility, even though Ubisoft was experiencing a crisis of low attribution of crisis responsibility. Despite this finding, the majority of the respondents were still overtly positive toward Ubisoft's statement.

From the data, it was apparent that the two least favoured statements were the initial responses from Riot Games and Activision Blizzard. Riot Games' statement was a combination of the two themes of reputational mending and lowering crisis intensity. Reputational has the downside of appearing to be overtly "corporate or PR", as continuously repeating one's values and mission seems like prepared sentences full of buzzwords without any real substance. The attempt to lower crisis intensity has however not been well in any case. Any attempt to lower crisis intensity has been met with the response of holding the leadership accountable and diminishing trust and no support towards the company. This diminish strategy in the scenario of a high attribution of crisis responsibility leads to the impression that the company does not take the problems seriously. The combination of elevating the company while at the same time dismissing the problems conveys a problematic image. Consequently, this statement was disliked by nearly a thousand people on Reddit (RiotSmileyjoe, 2018).

Activision Blizzard had the same themes in its initial statement. At least half of the statement was spent lowering the California Department of Fair Employment's credibility as this organisation filed the lawsuit. Once again, this combination of reputational mending and lowering crisis intensity was received poorly by the public. Many employees signed a letter stating that the leadership's response to the lawsuit was "abhorrent and insulting" (Van Allen, 2021). This is especially dangerous for the corporate reputation as employee attacks can have more reputationally damaging consequences than consumer attacks (Opitz et al., 2018). Later, the CEO Bobby Kotick admitted that this initial statement was "tone deaf" (Kotick, 2021). It is important to note that both Riot Games and Activision Blizzard's initial statements had no promises of change or accountability. Therefore, the crisis communication strategy of reputational mending and dismissal only is strongly discouraged as it lacks any acknowledgement of the crisis and the resolve to solve the crisis.

5. Discussion

From these results, it becomes apparent that crisis communication strategies that exclusively contained themes of accountability, promises of change, and reputational mending were favoured by the public. Accountability was expressed in two ways. The first was to apologise. This is a strategy that is already present in the current SCCT by Coombs (2007). The second way to express accountability was to acknowledge current and future problems. This could be interpreted positively by the public as identifying the problems accurately indicates the capability to properly handle the crisis. This is a crisis communication strategy that is not currently included in the SCCT. Another theme that was received well was the promise of change. This theme signals to the public that the company is aware of the problems and that they will be acted upon. This should give a sense of reassurance to the public. Currently, the SCCT does not contain a crisis communication strategy that is similar to the companies utilising the promise of change.

Secondly, the theme of lowering crisis intensity could be considered as the exact opposite of the first two mentioned themes. The theme of lowering crisis intensity can be communicated through the dismissal of claims or the lowering of a third party's credibility. The dismissal of claims displays a lack of understanding or recognition of the problems and, in turn, the absence of the intention to solve the crisis. This generates frustration and a lack of trust from the public, as seen within the themes of the stakeholder data. These strategies were met with the themes of leadership accountability, diminished trust, inaction over time, and scepticism toward authenticity from the stakeholders. Secondly, some companies opted to lower the credibility of third parties. This was also received poorly as the third parties often sided with the victims within the crisis or consisted of the victims themselves. The attack on these parties' reputations indicates the lack of intent to solve the crisis and displays disrespect towards the victims. Finally, there is the theme of reputational mending and this was expressed through various methods. The most common method is the reminder of company values and positive reputational history. This reaffirms the public to trust in the company to solve the crisis. However, when this is combined exclusively with the dismissal crisis communication strategy, it comes over as boastful and even overtly "corporate" or "PR". The SCCT already mentioned that the reminder crisis response strategy has a high risk of creating the impression of the organisation as egocentric, and is therefore

not recommended by the SCCT when there is a high attribution of crisis responsibility. Combined with the attack on another party, it could be the stark contrast of lowering others and the elevation of one's reputation that creates a message that is received poorly by the public.

Secondly, Ubisoft used highly accommodative crisis response strategies in a low attribution of crisis responsibility context. An aforementioned mentioned theory suggested that an over-response to a crisis could lead to a negative response from stakeholders to the apology (Ferrin et al., 2007; Siomkos and Shrivastava, 1993). Although a small number of respondents reacted negatively or indifferent, the vast majority still had a positive reaction. Interestingly, it was the most favoured crisis statement of all three companies. Although this does not dismiss the fact that a negative response could be generated from an over-response, it does suggest that the potential benefits of an over-response can outweigh the negative consequences.

Finally, it is also important to note that crises can change over time as apparent from Ubisoft's case. At the start of the crisis, Ubisoft had a low attribution of crisis responsibility. Their communication strategies consisted of accountability and promises of change. This gave the public faith in the company and the strategies were received well by the public. However, by the end of the crisis, the themes in the stakeholder responses have changed. From the stakeholder data, it becomes apparent that many find the changes that were made after the start of the crisis insufficient. With this, the perception of the crisis has changed as well. It is no longer an accidental crisis, but a preventable crisis. Ubisoft has publicly acknowledged that they were aware of the problems and made plans to solve those problems. These plans were neglected and the public holds Ubisoft and its CEO accountable. This means that the crisis type has been elevated from a low attribution of crisis responsibility to a high attribution of crisis responsibility. This should in theory determine that different crisis communication strategies are more suitable for the crisis. Additionally, many of the stakeholders' comments referenced corporate statements given earlier during the crisis. This could indicate that statements could play a magnifying or diminishing factor in subsequent crisis communication. This suggests that the crisis timeline might be an important consideration when choosing an appropriate crisis communication strategy.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This research has attempted to understand the chosen crisis communication strategies within the "frat culture" crisis and the public's reaction to it. Consequently, the findings were compared to suggestions made by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory to gain a better understanding of the universal applicability of the SCCT by Coombs (2007). The findings indicated that multiple suggestions can be made for the SCCT. The first suggestion is to consider the *crisis timeline*. The "frat culture" crisis is the type of crisis in which the timeline is very important. The "frat culture" crisis has a very distinct trigger, but just as with the #MeToo movement, the problems have been present for years before. Additionally, a cultural crisis takes a very long time to solve as culture changes at a relatively slow pace. For these two reasons, it is important to consider the timeline when it comes to a cultural crisis. As seen with Ubisoft's crisis, the crisis type can change over time with inaction or the addition of new information. What started as a crisis with low attribution of crisis responsibility evolved into a crisis with high attribution of crisis responsibility. At that point of the crisis, earlier high attribution crisis communication strategies that elicited positive reactions did not work in the new context of a high attribution crisis. It is unclear whether the crisis-type development served as an intensifying or dominant factor regarding the public's reaction. Therefore the suggestion can be made for the SCCT to start considering the timeline of crises. Especially in the context of cultural crises which have become more relevant with the coming of the #MeToo movement.

Additionally, suggestions can be made to the crisis communication strategies of the SCCT. Through the analysis, it becomes apparent that successful crisis communication utilised strategies that implied the theme of the promise of change. By communicating their plans for solving the crisis, companies implied an intent to change to the public. It also serves as a way to acknowledge the presence of problems within the company. This could be considered to be a part of the rebuild strategies recommended by the SCCT as the promise of change aims to rebuild the corporate reputation. However, it is not the same as the strategies of (monetary) compensation or apologising. Yet, the promise of change was present in the most favoured communication and absent in the least favoured communication. Therefore the promise of change should be an important consideration to add to the SCCT.

Another suggestion to the crisis communication strategies of the SCCT would be to

add reputational mending as a crisis response strategy. This is something that was done in almost all crisis communication. The cultural nature of the crisis might have been a reason to question the company and its employees' integrity. Therefore, much of the communication focussed on reiterating the company values, principles, dreams and historically positive reputation. This also serves as a way to dismiss the idea that stakeholders were put in harmful situations with any intention. It could be argued that reputational mending is similar to the reminder crisis response under the bolstering crisis response strategies. However, the SCCT states any bolstering crisis response strategy is a supplemental strategy. The fact that every crisis response from all three companies included reputational mending might be an indicator that it is an important crisis response strategy. It was not always well-received, with overt reputational mending being perceived as unsubtle "PR" or "corporate" talk.

The last addition that will be suggested is the crisis response strategy of acknowledgement to convey the theme of accountability. This crisis response strategy was used in the most successful crisis communication. It would fall under the category of rebuild crisis response strategies and be similar to an apology. There is an important distinction to be made between acknowledging and apologising. Issuing an official apology could be seen as an admission of guilt. This could lead to legal or financial liability (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Acknowledging existing problems or upcoming challenges is another way to reassure the public that the crisis is being taken seriously and that steps will be taken to solve it without admitting to any guilt or fault. This is a valuable crisis response strategy that has had positive results and would be a good addition to the SCCT in the context of a long-term crisis.

Finally, this research has revealed an important consideration concerning the attribution of crisis responsibility and the appropriate crisis response strategy clusters. At the moment, the SCCT recommends a specific crisis response strategy depending on whether there is a minimal, low, or high attribution of crisis responsibility and if there are any intensifying factors present. Earlier research suggested that an over-response to a crisis has the potential to generate a negative response from stakeholders to the statement (Ferrin et al., 2007; Siomkos and Shrivastava, 1993). From this research, it became apparent that low attribution crisis response strategies do not work for high attribution crises. This is not true, however, for the opposite. The data showed that high attribution crisis response

strategies do work for low attribution crises. It is not clear whether the dominant factor in influencing the public reaction is the crisis response strategy or the level of crisis attribution. It could be that high attribution crises tend to elicit more negative responses while low attribution crises tend to elicit a more positive response as long as any crisis response is given. Still, the findings imply a significant change in how crisis response strategies can be chosen depending on the level of crisis attribution.

5.2 Societal and managerial implications

This research has found multiple societal and managerial implications. The first managerial implication is to control the information flow towards the influential social media creators. Based on the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model, reporters for digital news outlets were identified as the influential social media creators who frequently reveal new information to the social media followers during the crisis. This consequently creates new developments within the crisis such as the escalation toward an outrage or a change of public opinion. The opinions among the social media followers tend to be relatively homogenous but the tone is quickly set by influential social media creators such as reporters. Therefore, it is important that the company controls which documents and which statements reach the reporters to control the developments within the crisis.

Additionally, the data showed that all three companies engaged in reputational mending in their communication. Although it is important to rebuild the corporate reputation, it should be done carefully as overtly engaging in reputational mending can give the impression that the message is too "PR" or "corporate". The data also showed that crisis communication that conveyed accountability and a promise of change was received the most favourable by the public. Within a cultural crisis, this communication strategy can provide more time to solve the crisis. It is important to note that accountability is easier to take when the problems are relatively small and the level of crisis attribution is low. The promise of change and the next actions that are to be taken are also easier to communicate at the beginning of the crisis. However, as seen with Ubisoft's case, if the crisis is deemed to remain unresolved after a certain period, the level of crisis attribution can escalate. Problems can escalate as well. What was once seen as a simple solution might now escalate into a problem with leadership, leading the public to demand the stepping down of the CEO and other leaders. At this point, the escalation has led to a situation in which accountability

and a promise of change are difficult to communicate. Any solution that is promised from that point on might be perceived as insufficient and a way to avoid accountability as the public only sees the stepping down of the CEO as the next viable solution. Therefore, although crisis communication can provide more time at the beginning of the crisis, companies need to implement effective solutions to prevent an escalation of crisis attribution. At that point, accountability and change become more difficult to convey and other crisis communication efforts have been shown to provide little to no positive effect.

6. Conclusion

The rapid advancements in technology have made the gaming industry a multi-billion industry within the span of a few decades (Jin, 2010; Wesley, 2010). Culture, however, is much more rigid and changes at a slower pace than technology. This has led to big corporations having relatively undeveloped HR departments that are insufficiently trained to handle more complex issues. When issues remain unsolved, a trigger can expand these issues into a crisis. The #MeToo movement has set a new standard for diversity and inclusion and served as a catalyst for the triggers of the "frat culture" crisis in 2018. Social media served as a platform for many women to share their stories and to reveal the lack of diversity and inclusion within the three biggest game development companies in the game industry. For these companies, their issues have manifested themselves as a complex crisis that required a rapid cultural change to prevent any further harm to their employees and to limit reputational damage. Companies are pressured to change their culture in a rapid fashion and research has shown that this has to start with the leadership (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016, p. V). For the game industry, this became problematic as allegations were directed at the leadership team and many had to step down. Research has mentioned that an organisation's reputation is a valuable resource threatened during a crisis (Chun, 2005; Winkleman, 1999). With the jeopardised leadership and the organisation's reputation being threatened, it becomes of utmost importance for crisis managers to identify the best approach of action to prevent any further reputational damage. Using Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication theory, crises can be identified as either having low, medium, or high attribution of crisis responsibility. Then, the SCCT recommends certain crisis communication strategies accordingly. With the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model by Austin et al. (2012), the most influential groups of people can be identified so that the flow of crisis information can be controlled. This research serves as a way to identify how crisis communication in the game industry was conducted and the kind of effect that it had so that the SCCT and the SMCC model can be expanded upon. Therefore, the main objective of this research was to answer the following research question: how did different game companies handle the "frat culture" crisis and how did the public react to it? To answer this research question, three sub-research questions were posed: how did different game companies handle the "frat culture" crisis?

How did the public make sense of the corporate response? And finally: which crisis communication strategies were more and less favoured by the public?

6.1 Summary of the findings

Sub-research question one aimed to understand how the different game companies handled the "frat culture" crisis. This question was answered through the thematic analysis of the corporate perspective data. These themes were associated with certain crisis communication strategies of the SCCT by Coombs (2007). Two gaming companies, Riot Games and Activision Blizzard, utilised crisis communication strategies for crises with a low attribution of crisis responsibility, despite being identified as crises of high attribution of crisis responsibility. The identified crisis communication strategy was the SCCT's denial strategy. From the thematic analysis, however, other crisis communication strategies were identified that were not included in the SCCT. One of these strategies is the reputational mending strategy in which a company reminds the public of the company's values and principles. This strategy was present in all crisis communication strategies. Some statements consisted almost completely of reputational mending only. The second identified strategy that is not included in the SCCT is the promise of change, which could be considered to potentially be a part of the rebuild strategy. This strategy was present in the initial statements by the company Ubisoft with an identified crisis of low attribution of crisis responsibility. It is interesting to note that the promise of change usually comes with the crisis strategy of taking accountability and was rarely paired with denial strategies. One can deduce that the third company used strategies suited for high attribution of crisis responsibility despite having their crisis type being identified as low attribution of crisis responsibility. Based on the aforementioned, this research has identified that the game companies did not handle the crises as recommended by the SCCT. Now it is important to look at the findings of the second sub-research question to establish if public reaction matches the outcome when following, or deviating from, the recommendation by the SCCT.

Sub-research question two explored the public reaction to the chosen crisis communication strategies. Using the SMCC by Austin et al. (2012) the most important groups were identified to map the dynamics of information flow within the crisis. The influential social media creators were identified as the (high)-level employees who share their opinions and the reporters and news outlets who provide new information about the

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crisis. The influential social media creators were rarely referenced by the public, but any new information could change the tone of the crisis. The social media followers were the fans of the games and the companies, as well as industry colleagues. Within the social media followers, opinions were relatively homogenous. Further findings indicated two important moments in which crisis communication differed greatly. As mentioned earlier, crisis statements that were made at the beginning of the crisis utilised crisis communication strategies meant for crises of low attribution of crisis responsibility despite being identified as a crisis of high attribution of crisis responsibility. These statements used denial strategies combined with reputational mending strategies. These were met with animosity and scepticism. This leads to the conclusion that low attribution crisis strategies do not work in the context of high attribution crises. The misuse of the crisis strategies led to even more reputational damage and diminishing trust in the companies. One company, however, utilised crisis strategies that were deemed to be suitable for high attribution crises by the SSCT while being identified as a low attribution crisis. The company Ubisoft took accountability, apologised, acknowledged the issues, and promised change by announcing the actions that were to be taken. This was received well by the public. Many of the stakeholders expressed gratefulness, appreciation, and support towards the leadership and the company. This leads to the conclusion that a mismatch in which high attribution crisis strategies are used in a low attribution context can still result in favourable public reactions. After a year of the crisis, public reaction changed towards Ubisoft's statements. The initial statements were received well by the public as they promised change after identifying and acknowledging the issues. After a year, a French news outlet investigated Ubisoft and reported that few effective changes have been made and that many of the issues remain. This led to another public outrage. As Ubisoft had a year to make changes, the failure to do so is seen as the company putting stakeholders in harmful positions intentionally. The attribution of crisis responsibility has shifted from a low attribution to a high attribution as the crisis identity shifts from an accidental crisis to a preventable crisis with possible intensifying factors. As the proceeding statements covered the taken action over the past year, very little accountability and plans were communicated. Company statements regarding the article were received poorly and were met with a general sentiment from the public that the leadership has not taken enough accountability. This finding indicates that the public was not looking for an apology as stated in the recommended rebuild strategy by

the SCCT. The public shared the same opinion and was looking for the most extreme form of accountability which entails the stepping down of the CEO.

Sub-research question three explored which crisis communication strategies were more and less favoured by the public. The data showed the public favoured the initial statement by Ubisoft more than other statements. This was a low attribution crisis using crisis communication strategies for high attribution crises. To be more specific, the crisis communication strategies conveyed accountability and the promise of change while also accomplishing reputational mending. This was received well as the public can perceive the company identifying the problems correctly and taking fitting actions accordingly. The less favoured statements solely used denial and reputational mending crisis communication strategies. Within these statements, the companies deny any allegations and attack the credibility of any third party making claims. Additionally, the company elevates its reputation by reminding the public of its values, principles, and historically good reputation. The public reacts negatively to this as denying and attacking the allegations while simultaneously elevating itself is a sign of not being able to identify the problems and lacking the competency to handle the crisis. Especially in a crisis with victims, the attacking strategy was seen as inappropriate.

6.2 Limitations

This research faced many limitations that may have influenced the outcome of the research. For instance, when gauging the public's reaction, this research method took into account replies only. There could be a group of stakeholders that may have formed an opinion based on the crisis communication but decided not to voice their opinions and decided not to reply to the statements on social media. It is unclear what portion of the consumers decided to voice their opinion in the form of a reply and what portion decided to remain silent. There is also the possibility that the ones who decided to reply to the statements are the vocal minority who may have been so opinionated to feel the need to reply. This might skew the data in the more extreme directions. It is however important to note that the replies were relatively homogenous, giving the impression that the replies can still be seen as the general opinion.

Additionally, all the data from the stakeholder perception were collected on Twitter and Reddit. Although these platforms are where most of the crisis communication is taking

place, it remains unclear what the opinions are from the readers on other social media platforms such as Facebook or the readers on news outlets such as *Kotaku*, *The Verge*, or *Bloomberg*. It is also unclear how different the demographics are between social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, or news outlets.

From the data collection, certain limitations may influence the outcome of the research. The first thing that is important to note is that not an equal amount of written materials were found between the companies. Some companies engaged more in crisis communication and provided more written materials than other companies. Secondly, every crisis statement varied greatly in length. Some companies engaged more in tweets, which are relatively short in terms of word count. Some companies engaged more with open letters, which can be multiple pages in length. These two factors were difficult to control for. In the end, this research attempted to understand what was conveyed and not how much was conveyed so it is unclear what role the word count of crisis statements had but it should be taken into account when considering limitations. Finally, there was also a limitation in the data collection from the stakeholder perspective. Not every crisis statement was published on a platform on which comments were able to be made. Therefore, it was impossible to gather responses from every crisis statement that was made. In order to minimise the effect of this limitation, a maximum was put on how many responses could be gathered from one crisis statement. This way, one statement would not dominate the data with a large number of responses. It should still be kept in mind that it is potential difficulties to generalise a finding may arise as it was not possible to collect responses for every written material.

6.3 Directions for future research

Based on this research, many additions were recommended to the current SCCT. First, it would be interesting to analyse other cases to see if the additions to the crisis response strategies can be found in different crisis contexts and different industries. Doing more research on the additions would see if the updated crisis response strategies would be mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

Secondly, next to the additions there were also many questions found. For instance, it is unclear how much of the public's response can be attributed to the chosen crisis communication strategy and how much can be attributed to the level of crisis attribution.

Crises that have a high attribution of crisis responsibility may tend to evoke a negative reaction, regardless of the communicated crisis response strategy. It is also possible that crisis response strategies do have a diminished effect in the context of high attribution crises. Therefore, this research recommends that future studies should analyse the effectiveness of crisis response strategies in different crisis contexts.

Thirdly, as suggested by the findings of this research, a cultural crisis tends to be more continuous and spread over a longer period in which the crisis can escalate. It might be necessary for the SCCT to take into account the crisis timeline and the effects of a crisis escalation. It is unclear whether a crisis escalation acts as an intensifying factor and whether the currently recommended crisis response strategies are sufficient. As seen in the Ubisoft case, the public only saw the firing of the CEO as the only possible solution left after the escalation of the crisis. In this scenario, any existing rebuilding strategy would be received poorly and the SCCT cannot recommend taking accountability by firing the CEO. This scenario provides an incredible challenge for crisis managers and it might be interesting to expand the SCCT to cover this scenario as well.

Fourthly, taking into consideration the crisis timeline does not only allow for the preparation for development within the crisis, but it also takes into account the context in which a crisis statement is delivered. For example, many crisis statements referred to previous statements, meaning that crisis statements do not function within a vacuum, but instead that one statement can influence the public's reaction to another. Therefore, it might be interesting for the SCCT to take into account the crisis context of a given statement. This could be done by taking into account not only intensifying factors from outside the crisis but intensifying factors from within the crisis as well.

Finally, it could be interesting to do a new analysis of the "frat culture" crisis classified as a scansis. As mentioned earlier, the crisis possibly meets the criteria of a hybrid between a crisis and a scandal made by Coombs and Tachkova (2019), leading to new possibilities of crisis communication suggestions. Therefore, future research could do a comparison between the three game companies and their crisis communication within the "frat culture" scansis. It would be interesting to see if the alternative classification of the crisis leads to different findings compared to the current research. To conclude, the way that crisis information is communicated keeps evolving with the development of digital channels and new types of crises. There are still a lot of areas to explore regarding the

development of crisis communication theories and ultimately, solutions must evolve along with the problems.

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Appendices

Appendix A: The SCCT's crisis types

Victim crisis cluster (very low attributions of crisis responsibility)
Natural disaster: acts of nature that can damage an organisation or disrupt operations such as a hurricane. **Rumours**: false and harmful information is circulating about the organisation. **Workplace violence**: a current or former employee harms current employees at the workplace. **Product tampering/malevolence**: an external actor purposefully damages the organisation by actions such as product tampering or computer hacking.
Accidental crisis cluster (minimal attributions of crisis responsibility)
Challenges: some stakeholders claim the organisation is acting inappropriately or irresponsibly. The public challenge is based on moral or ethical grounds, not legal concerns. **Technical error accidents**: an industrial accident is caused by a technological or equipment failure. **Technical error product harm**: a product is produced improperly through a technological or equipment failure. The defective product then poses a threat to consumers.
Preventable crisis cluster (strong attributions of crisis responsibility)
Human error accidents: an industrial accident is caused by human error. An employee causes the accident because of improper job performance. **Human error product harm**: a defective product is created due to human error. An employee's improper job performance causes the defect and the defective product poses a threat to consumers. **Organisational misdeed:** management knowingly violates laws or regulations or purposefully places stakeholders at risk. This would include knowingly selling a product that is dangerous or engaging in risky behaviours that could harm stakeholders in some way.

Appendix B: The SCCT's Crisis response strategies

Denial crisis response strategies
Denial: managers claim that no crisis occurred. **Attack the accuser**: managers confront the person or group that claims the organisation is in a crisis. Scapegoat: managers blame some outside person or group for the crisis.
Diminish crisis response strategies
Excuse: managers minimise the organisation's responsibility for the crisis by denying any intent to harm and/or claiming an inability to control events that led to the crisis. **Justification**: managers minimise the perceived damage caused by the crisis.
Rebuild crisis response strategies
Compensation: managers offer money or other gifts to victims. **Apology**: managers accept responsibility for the crisis and ask stakeholders to forgive them.
Bolstering crisis response strategies (supplemental strategies)
Reminder: managers tell stakeholders about past good works of the organisation. **Ingratiation**: managers thank stakeholders and/or praise stakeholders for their help during the crisis. **Victimage**: managers remind stakeholders that the organisation is a victim of the crisis as well.

Appendix C: Preliminary codebook (corporate perspective)

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Reputational mending	Lowering attribution	Dismissing allegations, informing on taken actions during the crisis,
	Rebuilding organisational image	Organisational values, zero tolerance of harassment, inclusion of women, appreciating diversity, good intentions, promotion of historical reputation
Building a better future	Organisational direction	Goals for the future
	Proof of change	Actions to be taken
Rapport building	Emotional connection	Display empathy or understanding, ask for support, convey personal (negative) emotions,
	Taking responsibility	Apologising, acknowledging fault, conveying organisational challenges
	Humour	Make a (gaming) joke
Shifting blame	Condemning third parties	Convey negative emotions towards third parties, disapprove third party actions
	Condemning stakeholders	Explain the negative consequences of stakeholder actions

Appendix D: Preliminary codebook (stakeholder perspective)

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Dislike of the response	Inadequate response	Mention of tardiness, mention of inadequate

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		crisis handling, seeing no meaning in the response, expressing distrust
	Finding the response illogical	Finding the taken actions paradoxical or hypocritical
	Reading negative intent	Interpreting it as a threat or as dismissal
	Incompetence	Questioning knowledge of the messenger,
	Disdain of the comment	Ridicule, shock, sarcasm, loss of trust, disgust
	Questioning authenticity	Distrust towards the messenger
Stakeholder empathy	Informing stakeholders	Warning stakeholders of the organisation
	Expression of victim empathy	Expression of empathy, expression of negative emotions
Response appreciation	Messenger appreciation	Expression of appreciation, gratitude,
	Supporting messenger	Support towards messenger
Stakeholder involvement	Seeking involvement	Asking how to help
	Participating in the discourse	Sharing personal experience

Appendix E: Final codebook (corporate perspective)

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Reputational mending	Stating values, standards, aspirations and zero-tolerance	Mentioning values, policies, and company goals, denouncing bad practices
	Display of the will to solve the crisis	Mentioning acting in a quick manner, stating taken actions
	Show of resolve	Mentioning

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		determination, commitment, or confidence, mentioning swift handling
	Reminder of good history/reputation/achievements	Mentioning good reputation and actions taken
Promise of change	Mentioning the next steps	Talking about the next actions
Accountability	Apologising	Apologising to stakeholders, acknowledging shortcomings, settling financially
	Acknowledging issues	Acknowledging the issues, acknowledging challenges, acknowledging the past
Rapport building	Show of appreciation	Thanking stakeholders for the support
	Ask for support	Mentioning the need for support from stakeholders
	Humour	Using gaming language
	Ingratiating stakeholders	Saying stakeholders have helped during the crisis, stating to have listened to stakeholders
Lowering crisis intensity	Attacking credibility of third parties	Convey negative emotions towards

		third parties, disapprove third party actions and mentioning the negative consequences
	Dismissal of claims	Dismissing claims as fabricated, false, or inaccurate

Appendix F: Final codebook (stakeholder perspective)

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Leadership accountability	Holding the leadership directly accountable	Asking for the firing of the CEO, saying it's the CEO's fault
	Finding measures taken inadequate	Saying which actions need to be taken, calling out the perpetrators still working at the company
	Calling out the inaction	Saying the CEO chose to ignore, saying the CEO tried to avoid the problem, referencing the time the CEO had with the company
	Calling out personal relationships with perpetrators	Saying the CEO is friends with the perpetrators, saying the CEO favours the perpetrators
Diminished trust	Scepticism towards the capability of handling the crisis	Sarcasm towards the proposed measures, reference to previous failures
	Disbelieve in the given information/scenario	Finding the information illogical, finding the given scenario hard to believe
	Expression of negative emotions	Expression of shock or sadness, disappointment in the company
Inaction over time	Inadequate measures taken	Referencing lack of change, referencing time frame
	Tardiness of the measures	Saying it's too late, referencing

		consequences
	Mentioning the preventability of the crisis	Referencing past signs or warnings
Scepticism towards authenticity	Finding the response too "PR/Corporate"	Referencing other PR disasters, imitating a "PR" response,
	Finding the response forced	Calling out being forced to respond due to the crisis, use sarcasm to explain the response
Support towards the company	Having faith in the actors	Saying the actors can handle the crisis
	Thanking the company/messenger	Messages of appreciation emotes of appreciation
	Seeking involvement	Asking how to help, advising
	Appreciation of taking responsibility	Thanking the actor for taking responsibility
Support towards stakeholders	Seeking involvement	Asking how to help
	Informing stakeholders	Warning stakeholders of the organisation
	Expression of victim empathy	Expression of empathy, expression of negative emotions
	Participating in the discourse	Sharing personal experience
Lack of involvement in the crisis	Unfamiliarity with the crisis	Asking what happened, Asking about consequences
	Criticising the company for addressing the crisis	Finding the issue insignificant, criticising the company's priorities