The Daimler-Blog – A Case Study

An Analytical Approach to the Benefits of Corporate Weblogs with Respect to Company Intentions & Expectations

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Abstract. Companies are increasingly taking advantage of the high speed and flexibility of the internet to optimize their communication strategies. Most recently they have started to implement weblogs which allow communicating with a variety of stakeholders. Compared to other countries German companies are cautious in applying corporate weblogs to their communication repertoire. The Daimler AG is one of the few companies successfully hosting a lively weblog, which is attentively observed by the public. German and American studies, however, suggest that corporate blogs are not seen as particularly credible. This raises the question whether the Daimler-Blog improves the company's reputation and whether its communication benefits from this platform. Triangulating a systematic content analysis, qualitative interviews and an online survey its success was assessed and conclusions were drawn about its benefits for the company.

Keywords: Corporate Weblogs, Web 2.0, Google World, Social Media, Corporate Communication, Reputation, Human Voice, Dialogue, Authenticity

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the internet with features such as e-mail, instant messenger, online news services and social software has become an important communication tool of everyday life. This online evolution, prominently called *Web 2.0*, provides recipients with new power in communication processes. The flood of available information online allows anyone with Internet access to select information sources independently and individually. This has made many recipients much more critical towards institutions and companies. Consequently, the Internet offering personalized, low-cost communication combining reciprocity, transparency and service has become an important communication vehicle for most organizations. Weblogs hosted by organizations as a means of public communication providing flexibility and dialogue orientation are one of the youngest applications in the repertoire of corporate communications. However, a predefined strategy is important for a corporate weblog to avoid negative consequences. Unfortunately, individual organizational structure does not allow a one-fits-all solution and measures for benefits of corporate blogs do not exist so far. With regard to this lack, the study summarized and presented here approached and measured the effectiveness of corporate weblogs. Those new insights may add to strategic considerations of companies and increase knowledge in practical communication research. The research was conducted as a case study of the *Daimler-Blog*, the corporate weblog of the German vehicle manufacturer Daimler,[1] applying a three-step multi-methods design. The company is considered a pioneer in its hosting of a lively corporate weblog in the German blogosphere. The main foci of analysis were the organizational intentions and expectations tied to the corporate weblog, the structure of the medium and the benefits evolving from it for the company regarding the expected key benefits identified in advance. This strategy of performance measurement addressed and tested important key principals of corporate weblogs from the academic literature in order to validate or falsify their relevance.

2. Theory

The theoretical foundation of the case study comprised a basic understanding of *Web 2.0*, *weblogs* and the current shift of communication paradigms as well as a definition of *corporate weblogs*. These sections rely on the work of E. Fischer [23], Schmidt [61] and T. E. Fischer [24] which provide detailed overviews about weblogs, their emergence and functions.

2.1. Web 2.0 & Weblogs

Weblogs in general belong to the means of online communication compiled under the umbrella term *social software* which is seen as a key-evolvement of *Web 2.0*, the so called "new web" [24, p. 162]. Introduced by Tim O'Reilly in 2004, the latter term reflects the significant changes on the web which have evolved over the course of the last decade. O'Reilly observed that the initially one-sided communication and passive reception of 'top-down' content on the Internet, which was comparable to traditional mass media, slowly began to be replaced – or at least complemented – by applications allowing active participation and interaction [56]. These applications facilitate discussion, communication, building networks and publishing self-created content by means of simple interfaces which are easily understood and provide readily programmed layouts for everyone to use. Since communication via social software channels is flexible in time and space, Web 2.0 stands for multidirectional, social interaction beyond physical borders and independent 'micropublishing' activities [18; 23; 47; 67]. Emphasizing the platform character of Web 2.0 communication tools, O'Reilly [56] focuses on user participation and reciprocity as a technological as well as social and societal phenomenon online.

[1] A detailed corporate profile of the company is available on http://www.daimler.com/, retrieved February 14, 2010.

The emergence of weblogs has been part of the proceeding online revolution from the very beginning. In the meantime, they have become one of the most popular means of communication on the interactive web and have expanded from 'geek' logbooks to means of public discourse in political, journalistic and interpersonal communication. This evolvement indicates that the medium combines relevant qualities which led to its rapid and so far enduring success. But since the barriers for participation in public discourse are low in this field content quality strongly depends on the authors' efforts, interests, opinions or intentions. Information is often blended with personal opinions or subjective estimations which make weblog content unreliable at first glance. Nevertheless, subjectivity is not necessarily a disadvantage but can also be an asset. Weblogs are a personal form of writing which features individual positioning combined with informative content. In this regard, the author's personality and human voice is highly authentic and serves as a measure for credibility that invites critical and constructive exchange, attracts an audience and evokes trust. As Sixtus [65] argues: "To infer the content of 'weblogs' from just one single blog is as acceptable as judging all paper media from leafing through a dime novel or a telephone book."[2]

T. E. Fischer [24, p. 171f.] defines the core constituents and additional characteristics of weblogs by the applied *technology*, the *structure* and the *content*. His definition represents the basic understanding of weblogs in the presented study.

> Weblogs are personal or thematic news services which are published as webpages by means of easy content management systems, regularly updated with new entries and hyperlinked in multiple ways with other blogs and websites. Constitutive elements are the reversed chronological order of entries and the opportunity to post comments provided for users. Based on the standardized software additional information (sounds, pictures, videos, text) can be embedded and sent to other users via standardized syndication formats. […] Additional characteristics of weblogs are the automatic storage of older contents in archives and the assignment of a distinct and permanent URL to each entry that can be referred to, the so-called permalink. Furthermore, trackbacks belong to the constitutive elements of weblogs which allow a simple cross-reference to other weblogs at the push of a button. […] By means of ping each blog entry can automatically be announced to other services, such as RSS or other weblogs. Consequently, interactive interconnectedness of content is possible throughout the whole network.[3]

In addition to this definition he mentions a list of strengths in comparison with traditional mass media:[4]

- easiness to contact the author
- demonstration of personal perspective
- multifaceted and intense exchange of opinion
- current commenting on events
- entertainment value
- up-to-dateness

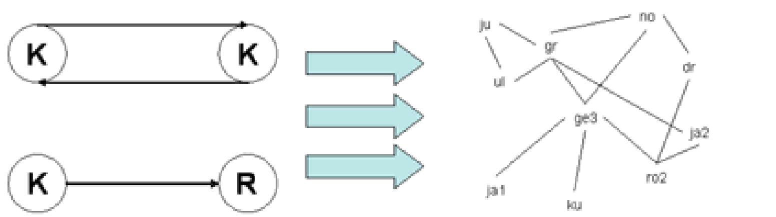
[2] Translation by the author.
[3] Translation by the author.
[4] Translation by the author.

He emphasizes the unfiltered condition of information which is controlled and enhanced in quality retrospectively as the main difference to traditional information services. Based on this definition the impact and developments that have emerged from weblogs as new communication media are discussed subsequently.

2.2. The Blogosphere: Changes in Public Communication

As a highly connective medium weblogs build a continuously evolving, nonlinear network of hyperlinks, cross-references, trackbacks and interactive exchange: the so-called *blogosphere*, which reflects societal trends such as individualization, transition to higher flexibility, multimedia-based communication and entertainment. This results in a fundamental change of traditional communication structures, since ‘top-down’, ‘one-to-one’ and ‘one-to-many’ communication models are losing validity in the global, horizontal and diverse environment of Web 2.0. As visualized in figure 1 they are replaced by network models depicting ‘many-to-many’ communication that allows multidirectional, reciprocal exchange between individuals and groups at any time [12; 20; 58].

Classic Communication Model **Network-Communication**



K = communicator
R = recipient

ge3 ETC. = participants

Fig. 1. Classic- and network-communication structures [58, p. 108f.; translation by the author]

According to Stone [68, p. 221] blogs have ‘kickstarted’ hyperconnectivity in communication and they are “the spark of life that the internet was missing.” Through Web 2.0 platforms recipients and consumers are increasingly gaining a voice in public communication and are turning around the ‘pyramid of influence’ from the bottom up. Peter Hirshberg, Executive Vice-President of *Technorati*, describes this shift of paradigms regarding weblogs as follows:

> Because bloggers blog simply because they want to they are passionate, opinionated, enthusiastic and they appreciate being listened. In many respects, this is a far more genuine, broad-based and conversational form of communications than ever existed in the era of trade publications and mainstream media [20, p. 6].

Surveys confirm this profile of bloggers. As well as former studies,[5] the *Technorati* report 'State of the Blogosphere 2008'[6] revealed that self-expression, giving advice and expertise as well as exchange with others were the most important reasons for bloggers to write online [69]. Furthermore, they attract an interested audience that looks for information containing personal opinion in order to form an own opinion [13; 24; 77].

These results show that traditional mass media, their gatekeepers and traditional public relations messages are losing influence. Trust in all kinds of organizations as well as advertising and press releases is constantly eroding while credibility of online sources, peer-to-peer networks and interpersonal exchange is increasing. The so-called word-of-mouth and cross-influence of individuals and groups play more important roles than ever before for the reputation of products and organizations [20]. Zerfaß and Boelter [75] describe these circumstances in terms of a new paradigm in communication, the *Google world*, explained in the following section.

2.3. A New Paradigm: The 'Google World'

Increasingly trusting subjective content recipients are adapting to information abundance and availability. They turn to 'constant computing' and seamlessly integrate digital devices, software and networks in their everyday lives. They surround themselves with an 'information cloud' that is accessible at any time and overcomes traditional linearity in communication [23; 61]. Indeed, most recipients still use traditional mass media as usual. But especially the young, adult, native 'onliners' called *net-geners*, *generation X* or *netizens* are conversant with the online world [43; 49; 51].They feel comfortable with computer use, have grown up with digitalization and the communication revolution and make effective use of Web 2.0 as a 'pull-medium' actively retrieving information that is only provided by communicators. This, however, also means that in contrast to traditional push media, weblogs and other online content do not have a specific audience. As a consequence of the 'information overload' attention has become a scarce good. This circumstance is the subject of the *attention economy theory*, developed by Franck [25] and Goldhaber [28], who describe the lack of attention and selection capacities in an environment of supply abundance. Accordingly, attention has become a basic target of corporate online communication and exclusiveness becomes more and more important.

In the process of tailoring the abovementioned 'information cloud' to individual needs and distinguishing between high and low quality content search engines play crucial roles. Based on the name of the most frequently used search engine worldwide, Zerfaß and Boelter [75] have developed the *Google world* paradigm.[7] It coexists with earlier paradigms in communication studies describing the evolution of

[5] E.g. the studies conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project [57] and Edelman & Technorati [20].

[6] The report is based on an online survey with a random sample of 1,290 adult bloggers (aged 18 years or older) registered on Technorati from 66 different countries [69].

[7] *Google* is worldwide the preferred search engine with more than 80 per cent of all queries (status quo June 2009; [66]).

the media landscape: the *Gutenberg galaxy*, the *McLuhan galaxy* and the *Internet galaxy*.[8] Essentially, the *Google world* exceeds the *Internet galaxy* in connectivity, participation and accessibility, as recipients use search engines to retrieve content from the unstructured supply on the Internet. In many respects the *Google world* is in line with O'Reilly's [56] concept of *Web 2.0*: users publish self-created content using social software, contents are strongly interconnected via hyperlinks, linearity in communication is overcome and networked 'many-to-many' communication is dominant. However, in contrast to *Web 2.0*, the *Google world* explicitly factors in the significant influence of search engine results on recipients' selection processes. The authors argue that only listed content 'exists' for users within the interactive web. This implies that attention scarcity remains but, now, depends on search algorithms. Consequently, attention can hardly be forced online but is aggregated through reputation of content producers. This *digital reputation* must be earned and is the key concept of the *Google world*. It emerges from trust of recipients, who usually express their favor via comments, recommendations and hyperlinks. Consequently, the connectedness of a weblog or website is the 'currency' that proves competence, identity, passion and authenticity and results in digital reputation [75]. These new circumstances online also have the potential to strongly influence the reputation of organizations. Critic and negative buzz spread fast and the *Google world* demands drastic revision of communication strategies.

2.4. Consequences for Organizations: Threats & Opportunities

In times of convergence and changed media use online communication is more relevant for organizations than ever before. They have to cope with more competition in public communication, loss of influence, more critical recipients, a lack of attention, individuals spreading subjective reviews being more credible than corporate messages and new, instable communication arenas emerging spontaneously and disappearing as fast again [24; 47]. Furthermore, they need to learn and keep up with new rules to create public visibility, earn trust and establish online reputation. It becomes apparent that traditional organizations cannot ignore the recent developments in public communication without paying a heavy price. Stakeholders and organizations have become almost equal in communication and organizations that do not monitor the Internet risk losing control over their reputation. On the web, customers find other sources discussing the organization and, unfortunately, critical blog entries – correct or not – often create big buzz that spreads fast in the hyperlinked network and beyond [18; 24; 29]. The interconnectedness of the blogosphere can act as an accelerator for negative reviews, harsh critic and resulting image crises. The serious consequences of prominent cases[9] illustrate that organizations cannot risk to provide low quality products or to lack service online or offline due to this momentum and speed of the blogosphere.

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[8] For detailed discussions of these paradigms see Zerfaß & Boelter [75] and McLuhan [53].

[9] The most prominent case of an online-crisis was the case of *Kryptonite*, an American manufacturer of premium bicycle locks in 2004/2005. The organization underwent the most disastrous corporate crisis emerging from the blogosphere so far after a customer complained online about the insufficient quality of a product [42; 59; 71; 75].

Apart from such intimidating threats valuable chances can arise from the interactive web if organizations take the chance to participate. Analyst Josh Bernoff summarized: “The corporate world has slowly gone from un[a]ware to fearful to, now, curious about […] how to participate in the blogosphere, and so on” [67, p. 580]. This curiosity is a first step towards the changed situation and construction of online reputation. Accordingly, communication should be understood as a process to generate meaning similar to a conversation instead of a transfer of meaning [61]. Following this approach, Web 2.0 offers attractive opportunities to use the bloggers’ strategy and establish a means of direct and personal communication with stakeholders. If weblogs are personalized, applied honestly and provide transparency stakeholders recognize this effort and perceive credibility and authenticity. Such communication channels are priceless, since they allow to influence the public opinion and contribute to the organization’s online as well as offline reputation [18; 24; 29; 47]. However, to maintain a *corporate weblog* is not as simple as it may sound from the inviting opportunities. There are numerous functions an organizational weblog may serve but also many strategic mistakes to be made that can transform all chances into backfiring threats.

2.5. Corporate Weblogs

As well as most types of weblogs, corporate blogs describe an Internet platform where personal and/or topic related messages are published. Building on the previously provided definition of weblogs, the definition of corporate weblogs applied in the presented study can be formulated as follows:

> A corporate weblog is an internal and/or external blog which is officially initiated by and maintained in the name of an organization in order to broach its products, services, strategies, processes or related events. It is updated regularly and serves as a continuously available information channel and a means of communication with stakeholders. Authors on the blog are usually employees of the company who are identifiable by a photo, the name and sometimes a description of the position within the company. Corporate blogs, therefore, differ from traditional, rather impersonal means of corporate communication. The emerging relations between authors and readers are their main success factor [11; 29; 47].

Corporate blogs are part of integrated organizational communication which serves to plan, coordinate and manage all communication activities and instruments of an organization. Reduced to a general level, Schmidt [61, p. 172f.] argues that the communication via corporate blogs serves three aspects on the internal and external level:

(1) identity management (presentation & image, personalization, authenticity, credibility),
(2) information management (flexible reach, construction of multiple, topic related publics, satisfy variable stakeholder needs), and
(3) relationship management (hypertextual links, social networks, dialogues, services).

Based on these functions, especially external corporate weblogs can be seen as new organizational communication arenas which potentially reach a diverse audience.

Spreading organizational content through this open and highly connective channel can serve to increase public awareness for and reputation of a company [41]. Blog entries published on corporate weblogs are usually less conditioned and controlled than traditional forms of external communication (e.g. press releases). Furthermore, they are written in a personal, rather informal style in order to create authentic and credible content that evokes trust. Still, a corporate blog is embedded in and ideally contributes to the complete communication repertoire of a company in order to achieve business objectives. Accordingly, corporate weblogs necessarily overlap in formal, professional and personal content and combine all three aspects [23; 44]. Hence, the less formal language can either be a personal expression or serve to cover the strategic character of communication [49]. However, a study conducted at the University of Hohenheim, Germany, revealed that credibility is key to engage in direct, unfiltered and dialogue oriented communication with stakeholders and address them personally [18]. If a corporate blog is applied thoroughly and combined with high quality content, products, and services it constantly increases the connectedness of the blog and its embedment in the blogosphere. Thus, corporate weblogs potentially enhance online as well as offline reputation, which are important success factors and part of the company value [4].

But the use of implementing a blog depends on the company's specific situation, communication strategies and guidelines. Risks as well as necessary efforts and resources to maintain a blog should be considered before implementation. Depending on these aspects a corporate weblog is not a good fit for every company without limitations. With regard to 'top-down' control strategies and strictly consistent one-voice policies, corporate weblogs are often located in a field of tension between censorship and self-expression [49]. Small and mid-sized companies are usually more suitable for corporate blogging than large organizations due to flat hierarchies and a manageable number of employees. However, a blogging guideline can help to ease such problems and contribute to position the new medium within organizational culture [31; 40; 41; 74; 75].

Zerfaß and Boelter [75] have developed a typology for corporate weblogs depicting possible different functions. They locate eight different types of corporate blogs within a grid that covers three different aspects of corporate communications: *internal communication*, *market communication* and *public relations*. As shown in figure 2 those three areas are related to communication purposes intending to *inform*, *persuade* and *argue*.

Each of the eight predefined types of corporate weblogs covers a different position within the grid. Some of them fulfill specific functions (e.g. 'Crisis Blogs') while others combine a set of rather general functions (e.g. 'Topic Blogs'). The authors emphasize that this typology is not exhaustive but was developed as a frame of reference for organizations that can be expanded with additional sub- and hybrid types [75].

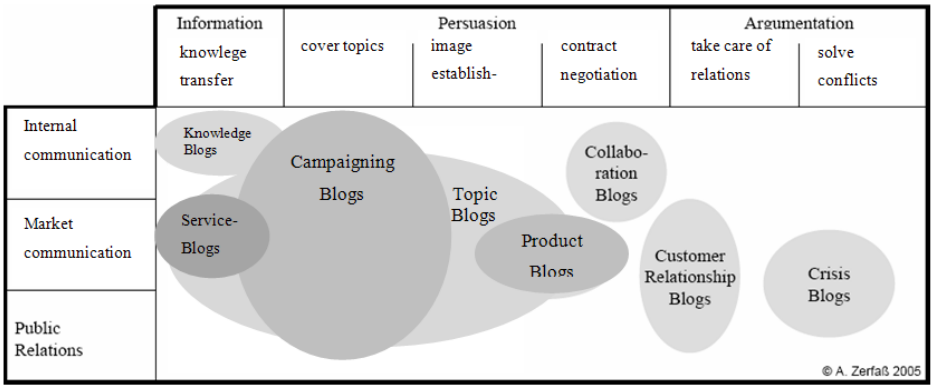

Fig. 2. Typology – functions of corporate weblogs [75, p. 127; translation by author]

3. The Daimler-Blog

The company Daimler[10] employs about 270,000 people and is necessarily hierarchically structured and complex due to its size [1]. It is one of only five of the 30 largest corporations in Germany[11] providing a corporate blog [23]. The Daimler-Blog was started on October 16, 2007 as an experiment of the German company to create an open space for employees to report from their everyday worklife and provide insights in the company's structure and diversity [47].[12] Uwe Knaus, 'Head of the Daimler-Blog', furthermore specifies the idea behind this project as "increasing the company's attractiveness and reputation giving it a personality by means of its employees"[13] [55].

The start of the Daimler-Blog attracted many curious readers and was observed widely in the German blogosphere and in traditional mass media (e.g. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* [7], *Horizont* [38]). After the initial hype, the process of establishing in the blogosphere and attracting regular readers took much longer. König [47] explains this phenomenon by means of the Gartner 'hype cycle for emerging technologies' [27]. Provided a new technology is adopted, this model describes the classic cycle of adoption through the different phases from hype to correction and finally reputation of the medium. As displayed in figure 3, the Daimler-Blog ran through those three phases measured by means of the incoming links. The hype phase lasted 26 weeks before the correction phase began and the incoming links decreased. From the 45th week on the incoming links increased constantly and the reputation phase began.

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10 From 1998 until 2007 Daimler was called DaimlerChrysler but changed its name after separating from the Chrysler corporation.

11 These corporations are called the 'DAX30-corporations' and are important to measure the German market.

12 Partly retrieved from the official statement on the blog that is available on http://blog.daimler.de/hier-bloggen-mitarbeiter. Retrieved February 14, 2010.

13 Translation by the author.

Due to the success and liveliness of the weblog, Daimler as a large company has a unique status in the German blogosphere and is widely observed by bloggers, journalists and competitors [2]. In June 2008 the blog was awarded with the 'Best-of-Corporate-Publishing-Award' in the category 'electronic publishing' because of its exceptional position in the German-speaking blogosphere, its diversity and authenticity.[14] The company is aware of the special position the Daimler-Blog takes in the German blogosphere and conducted an online survey of five questions with 228 users in December 2008 aiming to locate the readership of the weblog [46].[15]

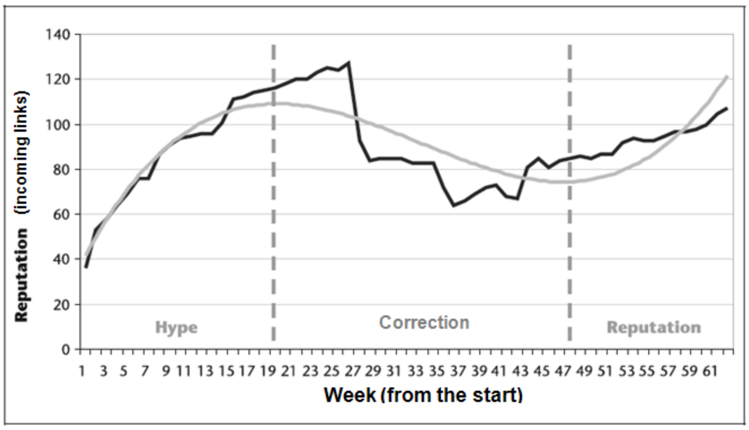

Fig. 3. The Daimler-Blog in the Gartner 'hype cycle for emerging technologies' [47, p. 4; translation by the author]

4. Problem Definition, Relevance & Research Questions

In contrast to other countries and regions where corporate weblogs are already a widespread phenomenon (e.g. USA, UK, France, Asia), German organizations are rather cautious in integrating this online communication tool in their communication repertoire. By estimation, the country is two years behind the development of the USA [18; 23; 40; 41]. However, this restraint might be reasoned, since a study conducted by Zerfaß and Bogosyan in 2006/2007,[16] revealed that only 30 per cent of German blog-users estimate corporate blogs as influential regarding the public opinion. In addition, more than 26 per cent said they do not trust the content of corporate blogs [77]. Surprisingly, the numbers in the USA are even lower [8]. This negative public opinion towards corporate weblogs, the necessary effort and commitment, organizational barriers and possible threats to control and reputation as

[14] See *Best-of-Corporate-Publishing* website http://www.bcp-award.com/preistraeger08/pdf/bcp2008_preistraeger.pdf. Retrieved September 22, 2009.
[15] For the questionnaire and the detailed results see König [46].
[16] The study was conducted in December 2006 and involved a sample of 605 internet-users who were asked for their opinion towards and use of weblogs.

discussed before, are often the reasons for large companies to react reserved towards integrating this new medium. Meanwhile, customers increasingly make purchase decisions online. In Germany more than half of the consumers retrieve information online before buying electric devices, going on a journey or buying a car [39]. In this field of tension and insecurity of organizations Daimler implemented a corporate weblog. One may wonder how substantial the benefits emerging from the blog are for the company. Considering this concern, three research questions were formulated to approach the Daimler-Blog from different angles: its constitution, the expectations and intentions related to it and the benefits/losses evolving from it for the company. Those three aspects served the detailed analysis of the Daimler-Blog as a case study in order to provide communication science with rich data on the particular case and allow comparison with other corporate weblogs. Hence, the results may contribute to answering the numerous questions still connected to corporate weblogs in Germany and elsewhere.

RQ1: *How is the Daimler-Blog constituted with regard to rules and regulations, editorial processes, target audience, authorship, readership, topics discussed, reciprocal exchange with readers, multimediality and hypertextuality?*

RQ 2: *Which reason(s) for implementation, expectation(s) and intended function(s) did and does Daimler tie to the Daimler-Blog?*

RQ 3: *To what extent does Daimler benefit from the Daimler-Blog with respect to the company's expectation(s), reason(s) for implementation, and intended function(s) regarding the blog?*

Following Efimova and Grudin [21], a case study is a suitable approach as it reveals tendencies for successful implementation and integration of corporate weblogs into existing communication-repertoires of companies. However, case studies focusing on the German blogosphere are very limited and mainly analyze weblogs in small or mid-sized companies [40]. The presented study contributed to revealing tendencies regarding the profitableness of corporate weblogs for large companies in this part of the blogosphere. The multi-step approach of analysis facilitated to provide an understanding of the Daimler-Blog as a complex communication tool. Apart from the practical value of a detailed analysis, the academic relevance rested in contribution to a field of communication research which has not been addressed sufficiently, since corporate weblogs have been the least analyzed type of weblog to present [40; 62]. This research gap results in a vast variety of assumptions towards guidelines, key principals and strategies which mostly lack adequate exploration. Consequently, the approach served to test concepts and information provided in recent literature. In this regard the study provides insights, as Zerfaß [74] argues recent models and typologies merit refinement.

In sum, the exploratory approach applied in the presented study is theoretically and socially relevant as it offers latitude to generate scholarly understanding and practical knowledge of organizations regarding corporate weblogs and organizational communication. The interface between practical and theoretical relevance is especially reflected in RQ3, since organizations were not provided with reliable instruments measuring the benefits of corporate weblogs until now.

5. Method

The three different methods applied for analysis were closely intertwined and conducted sequentially to allow building on previous results. This was especially relevant for the online survey which was considerably based on the findings of the interview analyses. All three methods were equally important to elicit detailed understanding of the blog and contributed to answer at least one of the three research questions. The results complemented each other and depicted the different dimensions of the Daimler-Blog leading to a multifaceted understanding of the medium.

5.1. Method I: Systematic Content Analysis

The first step of data collection was a systematic content analysis of the Daimler-Blog. It comprised all 205 blog entries published during the first 561 days of the blog between its release on October 16, 2007 and April 30, 2009. Applying this method the most important structural aspects visible on the Daimler-Blog were categorized. Following definitions by Berelson [5] and Holsti [36], the content analysis was not restricted to textual material but embraced objective, systematic and quantitative description of content including pictures, videos and links. Although the content on a weblog is constantly in motion, the data published on the Daimler-Blog are archived and retrievable to the full extent. Accordingly, the analysis served answering the aspects as addressed by RQ1 conducting a replicable description of the constitution of the Daimler-Blog within the given timeframe. The system of analysis was operationalized in a codebook in advance to the analysis using distinct categories that facilitated drawing interpersonally verifiable conclusions from the data [26; 48; 60; 73].

The codebook to conduct the content analysis ascertained ten different characteristics of the blog's content which served the analysis of *authorship*, *topics addressed*, *reciprocity* and *frequency of commenting* as well as *maintenance*, *hypertextuality* and *multimediality* as addressed in RQ1. In addition, the length of blog entries in words was coded.

5.2. Method II: Qualitative Interviews

The second step of data collection was a qualitative interview with Nils König who is part of the team in charge for the Daimler-Blog. The interview analysis served to identify the company's reason(s) for implementing the corporate weblog, expectation(s) related to it and intended function(s). Consequently, the interview served to answer RQ2 and facilitate construction of the instrument for the subsequent research step measuring the benefits/losses emerging from the Daimler-Blog as addressed by RQ3. In addition, the interview complemented the content analysis regarding structural characteristics of the blog.

The interview with Nils König served to identify the status quo of the blog and was conducted by the researcher in English as a semi-structured e-mail interview [6; 22]. The interviewee was adept at applying e-mail to his professional as well as personal communication and the interview served to explore a form of native online communication, similar to the studies of Hodgons [34] and Kennedy [45]. Consequently, this method was considered to be most adequate for the purpose of this study. The interview schedule contained 11 questions and was sent to the interviewee in a word document using an organized table structure offering space for each reply. Following the tests and experiences of Meho and Tibbo [54], Curasi [16], Hodgons [34], Kennedy [45] and Lehu [50] all questions were sent in one e-mail as it fitted the factual focus of the interview.

For analysis, the interview was complemented by four additional interviews with persons in charge of the Daimler-Blog (Christian Fachat, 'Head of the Web Communications department'; Uwe Knaus, 'Head of the Daimler-Blog').[17] Those interviews were conducted in German language by journalists in advance to and independent of the study and were retrieved from publicly accessible sources.[18] This analysis of previous interviews allowed retrospective understanding of developments, changes and initial points regarding intention(s), expectation(s) and intended function(s) tied to the Daimler-Blog.

The analysis of interview material was conducted following Boeije [10] who discusses the 'constant comparative method'. Following this approach, all data were compared within and between the interviews in order to examine consistency and inductively derive overall categories and subcategories from similar patterns.

5.3. Method III: Online survey

The third step of data collection was an online survey with readers and non-readers of the Daimler-Blog. It served the analysis of benefits/losses evolving from the blog regarding the company's expectation(s) and intention(s) as well as readers' motivations and patterns of use. Consequently, the method contributed to answering RQ1 measuring the constitution of readership, the respondents' patterns of use and contribution to the blog. RQ3 was addressed measuring the benefits/losses of the Daimler-Blog in relation to the company's expectations and strategic intentions indentified by means of the qualitative analysis of interviews as explained before. The data of non-readers served the comparison with readers of the blog where applicable. Following Van Selm and Jankowski [72], the decision to employ an online survey was primarily based on the subject under study and respectively the population, since an internet connection is the necessary prerequisite to access the Daimler-Blog.

The duration of data collection comprised 4 weeks from May 27 to June 30, 2009. The sample for this survey was necessarily purposive, since the screening characteristic for data of readers was the at least sporadic use of the Daimler-Blog [52]. The survey was unrestricted in participation but data were screened during and after data collection. Recruiting a representative probability sample of Daimler-Blog users is generally impossible, since there is no registration or identification connected to the use. Coverage errors were kept low employing multiple recruitment strategies

[17] Boeije [10] points out that external data can be beneficial for qualitative research due to its heterogeneity and independence from the researcher.
[18] For the references see Ebenführer [17], Eck [19], Hoffmann [35] and Meyer [55].

to reach potential respondents [3; 72]. Cooperation with Daimler facilitated announcement of the survey directly on the Daimler-Blog including the URL of the survey for easy and direct access. Additionally, Nils König published the same information once on his personal weblog *KingNils*[19] and several times on his *twitter* account.[20] Twitter was also used by the researcher to make active use of the broad network and get in touch with opinion leaders and multiplicators. Finally, a list of readers who commented on blog entries and revealed their e-mail addresses was contacted and asked to participate. Some of the Daimler-Blog readers contacted via e-mail spread the URL on twitter subsequently to their participation. Therefore, their personal and/or professional networks contributed to recruiting respondents.

The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions applying different structures (e.g. closed- and open questions, ranking scales), an introduction and a 'thank you' page. It was presented on 19 separate screens to provide a structured and clearly arranged screen for each question [63; 64]. The complete survey was pretested with seven native German speaking subjects of differing age, gender and profession before implementation.

Overall, aspects of the subjects' opinions, behaviors and sociodemographic data were collected. For screening purposes they were asked if they knew the blog and if they ever visited it. Furthermore, their frequency and habits of using the blog as well as the comment function on it were collected. Besides classic demographics and characteristics (connection to Daimler, level of education, gender age, location), the participants' level of activity online was collected. This question was used in correspondence with the survey conducted by Daimler (see [46]) who adopted this typology from the Forrester 'Social Technographics Ladder' [9]. This measure hierarchically distinguishes six user types by their level of participation online and ranges from no participation (*inactives*) to high participation and creation of content (*creators*) (see figure 4).

The two central questions of the survey addressing RQ3 collected respondents' opinions about the *dialogue orientation* and *authentic human voice* of the Daimler-Blog and the company's *reputation*. As discussed in the theoretical framework *dialogue orientation* and *authentic human voice* are seen as crucial for successful implementation and maintenance of corporate weblogs. Further, the analyses of qualitative interviews revealed both aspects to be central strategic intentions and expectations of Daimler implementing a corporate weblog (see section 6.2 Results Method II). The scale applied a 7-point Likert scale with randomization of items to avoid any systematic response error [14; 44]. The items to measure both constructs were adopted from Kelleher and Miller [44] who developed and tested a scale for measurement of several relational maintenance strategies in online public relations focusing on corporate weblogs. Among other relational maintenance strategies, the authors identified the construct *conversational human voice*. To measure this construct, they formulated 11 items and applied a 7-point Likert scale. For the present study, the items were translated into German and directly related to Daimler and the Daimler-Blog. It was considered to divide the 11 items into the two constructs

[19] His blog thematically focuses on corporate communication, social media and corporate weblogs.
[20] The twitter account of Nils König can be retrieved from http://twitter.com/KingNils.

dialogue orientation and *authentic human voice*, since the construct *conversational human voice* was found to be a mixture of both components not selectively differentiating between reciprocal conversation and human authenticity in conversation. Those aspects are usually discussed separately in theoretical literature focusing on corporate weblogs. Consequently, the scale was implemented and analyzed with the intention to present two scales, one consisting of five items (*dialogue orientation*) and the other of six items (*authentic human voice*).

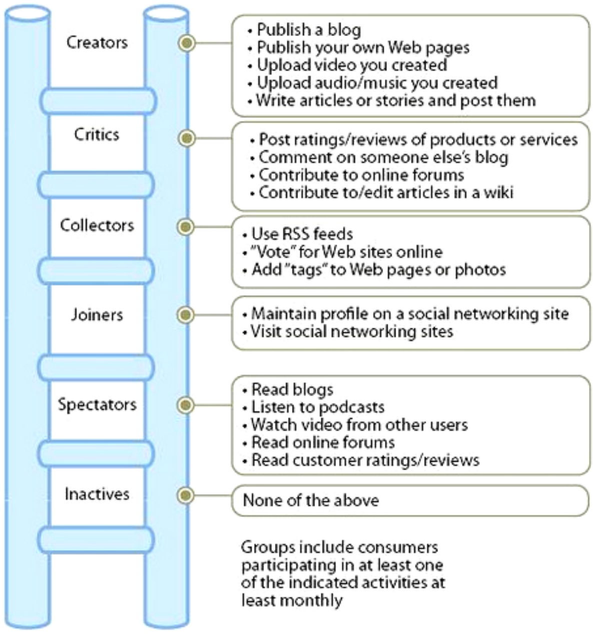

Fig. 4. Forrester 'Social Technographics Ladder' – Typology of Internet user types structured hierarchically by the level of activity & participation online [9]

As regards *reputation* the qualitative analyses of interviews revealed in line with the theoretical framework that reputational benefits are one of the main intentions and expectations Daimler tied to the corporate weblog (see section 6.2 Results Method II). The scale was adopted from Hon and Grunig [37] and served to measure six constructs identified by the authors based on previous research literature. Four of the constructs are indicators for *outcomes of an organization's longer-term relationships* to its stakeholders and, thus, for its *reputation*. Those are *trust*, *control mutuality*, *commitment* and *satisfaction*. The other two constructs represent different perceptions of *quality of relationships to organizations*. They were included to find out whether the participants perceived their relationship to Daimler rather emotional/loyal (*communal relationship*) or practical (*exchange relationship*). The scale developed and tested by Hon and Grunig [37] consists of 24 items and was reduced to 21 items for the online survey. In addition, the items were translated into German and the formulations of some items were changed slightly based on the pretest, as they were observed as confusing by the participants and were additionally expected to evoke third person effects.[21] The items of the final scale were randomized in the survey to avoid systematic response errors and the Likert scale was reduced from nine to seven points since a 9-point scale was too differentiated for an online survey [14; 44].

6. Results

In this section the results of the three single methods are presented separately.

6.1. Results Method I: Systematic Content Analysis

Authorship & Topics Addressed
For the content analysis 205 blog entries were analyzed published between October 16, 2007 and April 30, 2009. The majority addressed the topic *brands & products* (*n* = 43, 21%) followed by *job & career* and *miscellaneous* (*n* = 35, 17.1% each). In sum 120 authors were identified, most of them being male (*n* = 71, 59.2%), one-third being female (*n* = 37, 30.8%) and 10 per cent (*n* = 12) being groups of authors undefined in terms of gender.

For categorization by authorship three authors were counted double, since they changed their status in the company during the analyzed period of time. This increased the number of authors to 123. The great majority of blog entries was written by *employees* (*n* = 148, 72.2%) followed by *student trainees* (*n* = 17, 8.3%) and *interns* (*n* = 15, 7.3%). In accordance with the high number of blog entries written by *employees* the great majority of authors belonged to this category (*n* = 83, 67.5%). They were followed by *groups of employees* (*n* = 12, 9.8%), *interns* (*n* = 10, 8.1%) and *student trainees* (*n* = 7, 5.7%).

Reciprocity & Frequency of Commenting
Within the period of analysis 1,845 comments were written on the Daimler-Blog. The mean number of comments for each blog entry was 9 (*SD* = 12.49) of which about one was written by the author(s) (*M* = 1.1, *SD* = 2.04). Most entries (*n* = 78, 38.1%) received between one and five, followed by six to ten comments (*n* = 50, 24.4%). 26 entries (12.7%) did not receive any comments. Not all commented entries (*n* = 179, 87.3%) were commented by authors. The more often entries were commented, the higher was the percentage of comments written by the author(s). Consequently, authors usually wrote comments subsequent to one or more readers. This correlation was significant based on the non-parametric Kendall-Tau-b correlation coefficient ($r = .578$, p *(2-tailed)* $< .01$). This procedure was applied using a Kolmogorov-Smirnov

[21] To avoid this error the formulation ‘people like me’ asking subjects for generalized estimations was removed from seven items.

test with Lilliefors significance correction (KS-test, hereafter) due to not normally distributed data.

Maintenance

On average, circa every third day an entry was published on the Daimler-Blog (0.37 per day) and 10.8 entries were published per month with seven being the lowest amount in April 2009 and 16 being the highest in June 2008 (see Figure 5).

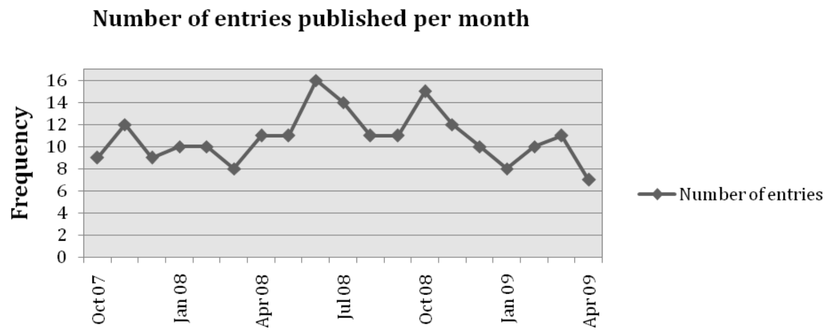

Fig. 5. Frequency of publishing on the Daimler-Blog during the first 561 days

Each of the 120 authors wrote 1.7 blog entries on average during the analyzed period of time (*SD* = 1.99). However, 88 (73.4%) wrote only one blog entry and another 17 (19.3%) wrote two entries. The four most active bloggers wrote together 22.4 per cent (*n* = 46) of all entries and about one-third of all blog entries (*n* = 62, 30.3%) were written by the eight most active authors. Six of the most active authors were *employees*. In general, males were more active than females, since only two out of 37 females wrote more than two blog entries and none of them belonged to the four most active authors.

Structured by categories of authorship, *student trainees* were most active authors with 2.4 blog entries per author, followed by *employees* with 1.7 entries, *interns* with 1.5 and *apprentices* with 1.3 entries average per author.

Structural Characteristics: Multimediality & Hypertextuality of Blog Entries

The length of entries varied on a range from 1,681 to 40 words with a mean length of 489.9 words (*SD* = 258.9). About two-thirds of the blog entries contained one or more picture(s) (*n* = 135, 65.9%), while the embedment of videos was much more unusual (*n* = 44, 21.5%). However, only 25 blog entries (12.2%) contained both, picture and video material. One-quarter of all entries (*n* = 51, 24.9%) contained neither pictures nor videos. Furthermore, the analysis of hypertextuality revealed that more than 80 per cent of blog entries (*n* = 171) contained at least one link. In more than half of those (*n* = 98, 57.3%) different *external & company related* links were embedded and one quarter (*n* = 42, 24.6%) contained exclusively *external links*.

Overall Analysis by Authorship & Topic

Structured by *topic*, the analysis showed that entries written in the category *brands & products* seemed to be more diversified in multimediality than entries written to other topics. However, it is important to note that the number of entries written in each category varied strongly. 'Pictures only' were dominant in entries of most categories with 40 to 100 per cent of entries in each category. One-third of 'Videos & pictures' in blog entries were written in *brands & products* (n = 9, 20.9%) as well as more than half of those containing 'videos only' (n = 10, 23.3%).

The number of comments posted to entries written by the different categories of *authorship* varied strongly. The group of *interns* received the highest mean of comments with 10.5 per entry (n = 15, SD = 11.83) followed by *student trainees* (M = 10, n = 17, SD = 8.80) and *employees* (M = 9.4, n = 148, SD = 13.66). The same categories of authors that received most comments also wrote most comments per entry. Here *student trainees* (M = 1.6, n = 17, SD = 1.97) were followed by *interns* (M = 1.2, n = 15, SD = 1.78) and *employees* (M = 1.2, n = 148, SD = 2.18). Further, the average of comments written by each author in a group was analyzed. With a mean of 3.9 comments per author (n = 7, SD = 1.77) the group of *student trainees* showed much higher activity than the other groups. They were followed by *employees* (M = 2.1, n = 83, SD = 2.57) and *interns* (M = 1.8, n = 10, SD = 1.93). In all other groups the averages of comments per single author were below one. The non-parametric correlation coefficient Kendall-Tau-b indicated significance of those differences (n = 123, r = -.148, p *(1-tailed)* < .026).

For the different categories of authors the topics addressed by each group varied. *Groups of employees* showed the most distinct focus on a topic[22] with 91.7 per cent (n = 11) of their entries written in the category *interviews*. The next higher foci showed *interns* (n = 6, 40%) and *apprentices* (n = 6, 75%) both on *job & career topics*. *Student trainees* also focused on this category (n = 5, 29.4%) closely followed by *brands & products* and *miscellaneous* (n = 4, 23.5% each). The entries written by *employees* as the dominant group of authors were distributed over all topics except *surveys*.

6.2. Results Method II: Qualitative Interview

In this section the results as regards reasons and expectations related to the implementation of the Daimler-Blog are presented. The constant comparative analysis revealed six main categories each of them structured and defined by a number of subcategories. Three of the categories directly focused on intentions and expectations tied to the implementation of the Daimler-Blog (*integration in communication repertoire*, *reputation management* and *adoption of new technology*) while the other three categories focused on the practical implementation of the blog and its constitution (*structural characteristics*, *rules & regulations* and *blog management*). The information found in the categories focusing on intentions and related expectations were mainly relevant to answer RQ2 while the information found in the

[22] *CEOs*, *undefined* and *other* with only three entries or less each are excluded from this reflection.

categories focusing on the practical implementation and constitution of the blog mainly contributed to answer RQ1.

Practical Implementation & Constitution of the Daimler-Blog

Structural characteristics

The interviews revealed that the *target audience* of the Daimler-Blog was not defined in advance, but was and is aimed at readers internal as well as external to the company. The company intended to reach young people which are familiar with and affiliated to online media, although this target audience was not aimed exclusively. Consequently, the *readership* of the blog is constituted of internal and external stakeholders of the company. Proportionately, internal and external readers steadily grew more equal since the start of the blog, while in the beginning only about 25 per cent of the readers were employees. Blog entries are *commented* ten times on average and the total *visits* tripled since the beginning of the blog. As regards the *topics* addressed entries published in the category *job & career* are reported to be frequented more often than those published in other categories. The *authorship* on the blog explicitly embraces all employees, but since authorship is voluntary employees can decide themselves if they want to participate.

Rules and regulations

Within the interviews *regulated* as well as *unregulated* aspects of the Daimler-Blog were identified. On the one hand, free and open access to the blog and the comment function is provided for all readers without a registration being required. On the other hand, readers are expected to adhere to an official comment policy which is available on the blog. Although comments are published automatically, editorial staff may erase comments retrospectively which are not focused on the topic or offensive in tone. The interviews consistently revealed that an internal guideline for authors does not exist, since the contracts of employment contain general security and secrecy standards, which embrace the authorship on the blog. In addition, authors may not write about specific, critical topics such as religion or politics and may not use racist or other harmful expressions on the blog. The topics addressed in blog entries should be of common interest but are not set by Daimler in advance. Thus, employees can propose topics and send articles to editorial staff that prioritizes and publishes them.

Blog management

To *practically implement the blog*, editorial staff provides help and assistance for authors who are insecure or unsure how to go about writing on a blog entry. The staff furthermore prioritizes blog entries, develops a publishing plan, administers and publishes the entries to centralize these processes. Finally, the staff monitors the blogosphere and incoming comments.

Intentions & Expectations tied to the Implementation of the Daimler-Blog

Integration in communication repertoire
In the interviews the *reasons for implementing* the Daimler-Blog were clearly related to a growing fragmentation of stakeholder groups and consequently to an improvement of the company's internal and external communication. Daimler intended to provide a flexible platform communicating a variety of small topics in order to attract all types of stakeholders. In addition, the blog was intended to establish a direct, reciprocal communication channel to stakeholders allowing a more personal and dialogue-oriented exchange without gatekeepers being interposed. The *expectations* related to the implementation were, in the first place, to fulfill these intentions. Generally, the company expected the blog to serve as a bridge for exchange between internal and external communication and to establish constructive dialogue with and between stakeholders. Furthermore, the blog was meant to contribute to destruction of steep communication hierarchies in order to familiarize departments with each other and facilitate easier internal exchange. The main *functions* of the blog were to accompany corporate events and allow quick reactions to critics, questions or feedback. In addition, it was employed to set themes on the public agenda, develop and gain experience with corporate blogging culture and be a means to cope with stakeholder fragmentation. However, the interviews revealed that Daimler was aware of a number of *potential risks* related to the blog. Success and longevity could not be predicted in advance and it was not foreseeable if it would be accepted and adopted by employees within the company. Furthermore, private discussions and arguments on the blog as well as blurriness between the company's corporate voice and individual opinions of authors could threaten professionalism and transparency in communication and, thus, the company's reputation.

Reputation management
The interviews revealed that r*easons for implementing the blog* were to improve the company's reputation making it more tangible, personalized and human providing transparency and authenticity. The intention was to employ a human voice and provide insights in the company by means of employees' personal entries. The *expectations* closely tied to these intentions were coexistence of the company's and the authors' individual opinions. Furthermore, the entries were meant to be authentic, honest and open. The blog in general was expected to increase attention and coverage in 'traditional' mass media especially in the beginning of the project. The company hoped for positive internal and external reactions as well as a positive effect on reputation and attractiveness of Daimler. *Potential risks* for the company's reputation stated in the interviews were a lack of authentic human voice on the blog threatening its credibility, an imbalance between the authors' and corporate interests leading to conflicts and a low level of internal adoption threatening the project from the very beginning. Furthermore, it was unforeseeable if the blog would serve as a forum for external critics, competitors or personal disputes.

Adoption of new technology
Finally, the interviews revealed that the company implemented the Daimler-Blog to keep up with technological innovations. *Reasons* for this were the changing media landscape and accordingly new consumption patterns of stakeholders. In addition, employees should be familiarized with new technologies to adapt the company's communication structure to the changing media landscape. The *expectation* mainly was to gain hand-on experiences with blogging and to be an early adopter of this new means of corporate communications. The company hoped the Daimler-Blog to successfully *function* as a flagship project for further corporate blogging activities.

6.3. Results Method III: Online Survey

In this section the results of the online survey based on the findings of the previously outlined methods are presented.

Sample Description
The acquisition strategies generated 136 entries of which 52 subjects dropped out of the questionnaire during the first four questions. Another three were removed from the sample due to an assumed response set (indication of the same values for every question). Of the 81 subjects that built the sample for analysis 71 (87.7%) completely finished the questionnaire and ten finished about half of it. The total dropout was rather high which is typical for online surveys [15; 32]. However, the dropout of those who started answering the questionnaire beyond the first few questions was with 12.4 per cent rather low. Due to the ten dropout cases the sample varied for the different steps of analysis. In addition, 11 subjects were identified as non-readers of the Daimler-Blog by means of filter questions. They skipped all inapplicable questions and served the comparison between readers and non-readers during the analysis where applicable.

The sample was divided in 80.3 per cent male (n = 57) and one-fifth female (n = 14) respondents of which 94.3 per cent (n = 67) were located in Germany.[23] The mean age was 34.8 years (n = 71, SD = 8.55) with a range from 23 to 55 years and almost half of the participants (n = 35, 49.3%) being 26 and 35 years old. 77.5 per cent had a university degree (n = 35, 49.3%) or a degree from a university of applied sciences (n = 28.2%, n = 20). None of the remaining respondents (n = 16) had a degree lower than a secondary school level I certificate (*Realschulabschluss* in Germany).

Principal Component Analysis & Internal Reliability of the Replicated Scales
The items of both scales replicated in the presented study were fundamentally manipulated in language and formulation. Hence, principal component analysis (PCA, hereafter) applying varimax rotation was employed to test the variability of the single items with regard to the intended underlying variables. Adequacy of this procedure

[23] The remaining four subjects were located in Austria, Switzerland, and Egypt.

was proved applying a KS-test which revealed normality in distribution of both scales.[24]

For the scale measuring *conversational human voice* derived from Kelleher and Miller [44] the PCA revealed two factors as intended: the perceived *authentic human voice* and *dialogue orientation* of the Daimler-Blog. However, two items intended to measure *authentic human voice* were removed due to factor loadings higher than .450 on both factors. Only factor loadings above this benchmark with a minimum distance of .100 to the other loading were accepted as distinct. After removal the PCA revealed two distinct factors with Eigenvalues above 1.0 for the reduced 9-item scale. Both constructs were tested for internal reliability applying Cronbach's α[25] which was adequate for *authentic human voice* (.765, n = 70) and excellent for *dialogue orientation* (.917, n = 70).

The new, reduced combinations of items were repeatedly tested for normality using a KS-test. The complete scale was normally distributed again (p = .200). Measured separately, only the construct *authentic human voice* was normally distributed (p = .094).

The scale to measure *reputation* by means of the constructs *trust*, *control mutuality*, *commitment, satisfaction*, *communal relationship* and *exchange relationship* derived from Hon and Grunig [37] was filled in by 71 subjects of which 11 were non-readers. The PCA for the scale revealed that one item each intended to measure the constructs *control mutuality*, *communal relationship*, *satisfaction* and *control mutuality* did not load on a single factor. After removal of the items the PCA for the reduced 17 items scale revealed distinct factor loadings following the standards and determining values as explained above with Eigenvalues above 1.0 on five instead of the six intended factors. Only the constructs *communal relationship* and *exchange relationship* loaded as intended. Consequently, the components of reputation were not measured as intended. This problem may have evolved from translation or adaption but may also be a problem of the initial scale, since Hon and Grunig [37] do not provide any information about conduction of a PCA or factor analysis during scale construction. However, the factor loadings were not arbitrarily but revealed logical measurement of constructs based on their definitions formulated by the authors (see [37, p. 3]). Therefore, the item constellations were rearranged resulting in the constructs: *control mutuality, commitment* and *trust/satisfaction.* These item combinations resulting from the rotated PCA were tested for internal reliability applying Cronbach's α. The internal reliability of all constructs was adequate and above .700: *control mutuality* (.748), *commitment* (.849), *trust/satisfaction* (.836), *communal relationship* (.776) and *exchange relationship* (.817).

Repeatedly using a KS-test for the new complete scale revealed normality (p = .064). The single constructs, in turn, did not show normality of data with *commitment*

[24] The KS-test proved normality for the reputation scale derived from Hon and Grunig [37] with p = .066 and for the scale measuring *conversational human voice* derived from Kelleher and Miller [44] with p = .200.

[25] This measure allows analyzing the internal consistency of scales and shows how well the items measuring the same characteristic correlate with each other. Generally, a value below .60 is seen as not very reliable while .70 is acceptable, .80 is good and .90 and above are excellent [37].

(p = .076) being the only exception. Therefore, non-parametric tests were applied for further analysis of the constructs.

Comparative Univariate & Bivariate Analysis

In this section the results for readers and non-readers of the Daimler-Blog are presented separately and compared where applicable.

Non-Readers

In total, there were 11 non-readers of the blog which were split about half in male (n = 6) and female (n = 5). The mean age was 33.8 years (n = 11, SD = 11.34) and the respondents were spread equally on all age groups. Two-thirds of them (n = 7, 63.6%) had a university degree or a degree from a university of applied science. The residual third at least had a vocational diploma (*Fachabitur* in Germany). Three of them (27.3%) knew the blog but never visited it while the other respondents did not know the Daimler-Blog at all. More than half of the non-readers categorized their connection to Daimler as *other* (n = 6, 54.5%) and one third specified it as *journalists* (n = 3; 27.3%).

The analysis of *user types* following the Forrester 'Social Technographics Ladder' revealed that many non-readers were highly active on the Internet. No respondents categorized themselves as *inactive* on the Internet while one-third (n = 4, 36.4%) carried out all of the named activities. Generally, most non-readers participated in social networks (*joiners*) and consumed content on the Internet (*spectators*). The least performed activities were reading RSS-Feeds and tagging websites (*collectors*).

All non-readers ran through the scale measuring their estimation of the reputation constructs. The level of *trust*/*satisfaction* with Daimler was rather high with a mean level of 4.6 (SD = 1.09) on a 7-point Likert scale. The perceived *control mutuality* (M = 3.52, SD = 1.24) in the relationship with Daimler was rated rather negative and the company's *commitment* (M = 3.02, SD = 1.39) was estimated even lower. Still, the relationship with Daimler was rather seen as a *communal relationship* (M = 4.23, SD = 1.03) than as an *exchange relationship* (M = 3.94, SD = 1.39). However the distance between the two values was marginal and both results showed a trend towards the neutral center of the scale.

Due to the low number of responding non-readers these results were not generalizable. They were, still, used for comparison with readers' results where applicable in order to locate tendencies regarding differences between the two groups.

Readers

The 70 Daimler-Blog readers were split in 85 per cent males (n = 51) and 15 per cent females (n = 9). In comparison to the non-readers this distribution was significantly more heterogeneous (p *(2-tailed)* = .02) applying a non-parametric Mann-Whitney u-test (u-test, hereafter) due to lack of normality in data distribution revealed applying a KS-test. The mean age of readers was with 35 years slightly higher (n = 60, SD = 8.05) than the age of non-readers. Half of them (n = 30) were between 26 and 35 years and one-third (n = 17) were between 36 and 45 years old. The educational level was equal to the level of non-readers with 80 per cent (n = 48) having a degree from a university or a university of applied sciences and half of the residual 20 per cent (n =

7) having at least a vocational diploma. Similar to the non-readers, almost half of the readers categorized their connection to Daimler as *other* (*n* = 27, 45%). However, due to multiple selection about 20 per cent (*n* = 6) of those who ticked this option also ticked another one. Of those who had direct connection, the great majority were *employees* (*n* = 17, 28.3%) followed by *customers* (*n* = 10, 16.7%) and *shareholders* (*n* = 7, 11.7%).

As regards the analysis of user types, none of the readers categorized themselves as *inactives* but 50 per cent (*n* = 30) carried out all mentioned activities and belonged to all user types. Generally, almost all readers consumed content online (*spectators*) and more than three-quarters each were active in social networks (*joiners*), commented on content online (*critics*) and published content on the Internet (*creators*). The least performed activities with still more than 70 per cent of the readers were reading RSS-Feeds and tagging websites (*collectors*). Consequently, readers were even more active Internet users than non-readers, especially in publishing content, commenting on content, subscribing to RSS-Feeds and tagging websites.

Frequency of Visiting the Daimler-Blog and RSS-Feed

26 Daimler-Blog readers (37.1%) were subscribers to the RSS-Feed. About half of the male readers (*n* = 23, 45.1%) but only one of the nine female readers (11.1%) were subscribers. This negative correlation was significant (Kendall-Tau-b correlation coefficient, *n* = 60, *r* = -.248, *p (1-tailed)* = .029).

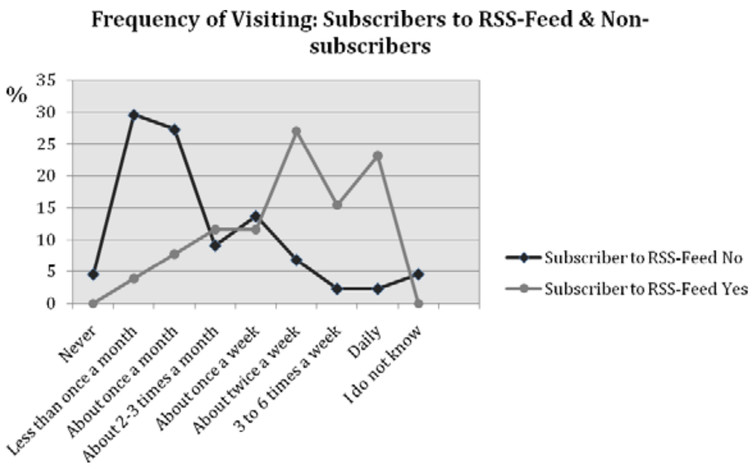

Fig. 6. Online survey: Frequency of visiting the Daimler-Blog – Comparison of RSS-Feed subscribers and non-subscribers

On average readers usually visit the Daimler-Blog or read the RSS-Feed between once a week and 2-3 times a month. A crosstabulation applying Pearson's chi-square revealed that subscribers to the RSS-Feed visit the Daimler-Blog significantly more often and regularly than readers who do not maintain a subscription (*n* = 70, x^2 =

26.68, *p (2-sided)* = .001). A correlation was found between the variables using Kendall-Tau-b (*n* = 60, *r* = .449, *p* < .01). About two-thirds of the subscribers (*n* = 17, 65.4%) visit the Daimler-Blog twice a week or more often and about one-quarter of them (*n* = 6, 23.1%) visit the Daimler-Blog daily. As visualized in figure 6, the majority of readers without subscription, in turn, visited the Daimler-Blog about once a month or less often than once a month (*n* = 25, 56.8%).

Parts Usually Read on the Daimler-Blog

When visiting the Daimler-Blog almost 75 per cent of the respondents (*n* = 52) usually read the most recent blog entries but only about half of them (*n* = 27) also read the comments on them. About one-fifth (*n* = 13, 18.6%) of respondents usually read blog entries topic oriented, but only three of them (4.3% of complete *n*) also read comments that touch upon that topic. The fields of interest specified most often in this context were ‘technology & innovation’, ‘job & career’ and ‘internal workaday life of the company’. Further mentioned were ‘motorsports’ and ‘products’. About half of the respondents (*n* = 33, 47.1%) read whatever spontaneously draws their attention and the great majority of them (*n* = 29, 87.9%) usually do not read blog entries topic-oriented. In turn, one-third of those reading topic oriented (*n* = 4, 30.8%) also read spontaneously.

Subscribers and readers without subscription to the RSS-Feed generally do not differ strongly in reading the Daimler-Blog. About half of both groups read whatever spontaneously draws their attention (subscribers: *n* = 12, 46.2%, non-subscribers: *n* = 21, 47.7%). Still, there is a tendency that readers without subscription read more topic oriented, since one fourth of them (*n* = 10, 22.7%) but only half as much of subscribers (*n* = 3, 11.5%) reported to do so. This tendency is furthermore emphasized by the difference that almost all subscribers (*n* = 24, 92.3%) but only two-thirds of other readers (*n* = 28, 63.6%) usually read the most recent blog entries.

Use of the Comment Function on the Daimler-Blog

More than half of the participants (*n* = 40, 57.1%) had already used the comment function on the Daimler-Blog and wrote 1.6 (*SD* = 1.77) comments on average during the last two months before filling in the questionnaire. Via multiple selections 85 per cent (*n* = 34) of the users reported to give their opinion about a blog entry in comments. Of those, about 30 per cent (*n* = 11) also use it to give their opinion on comments written to blog entries. About half of all participants writing comments (*n* = 22, 55%) use them to communicate and discuss with others, 35 per cent (*n* = 14) use them to ask questions and another 30 per cent (*n* = 12) supplement something to the content of blog entries.

Comparing subscribers and non-subscribers to the RSS-Feed the differences in use of the comment function further underlined the different levels of activity of the two groups. About three-quarters of subscribers to the RSS-Feed had used the comment function (*n* = 19, 73.1%) while less than half of the other readers did so (*n* = 21, 47.7%). As regards the purposes of using the comment function, readers receiving the RSS-Feed make more interactive use of it. A u-test revealed that significantly more subscribers (*n* = 15, 78.9%) use the comment function to communicate with the author and/or other readers than readers without subscription (*n* = 7, 33.3%) (*n* = 40, *p*

(2-tailed) < .004). In addition, significantly more subscribers use the comment function to ask questions about blog entries (*n* = 10, 52.6%) compared to readers without subscription (*n* = 4, 19%) (*n* = 40, *p (2-tailed)* < .028). The great majority of both groups (subscribers: *n* = 16, 84.2%; non-subscribers: *n* = 18, 85.7%) furthermore use it to give their opinion about blog entries. But more than 40 per cent of subscribers (*n* = 8, 42.1%) compared to only 14 per cent of usual readers (*n* = 3, 14.3%) also use it to give their opinion on comments written by others. This relation was just under the cut off for significance and showed a noticeable level of correlation (*n* = 40, *p (2-tailed)* < .052).

Perceived Dialogue Orientation & Authentic Human Voice of the Daimler-Blog

On average the readers perceived the Daimler-Blog to be rather *dialogue oriented* with a mean of 4.8 on a 7-point Likert scale (*n* = 70, *SD* = 1.33). The level of *authentic human voice* was perceived a bit lower but still positive with a mean of 4.23 (*n* = 70, *SD* = 1.17).

Reputation Components and Quality of Relationship to Daimler

The mean level of *trust/satisfaction* with Daimler was quite positive with 4.74 on a 7-point Likert scale (*n* = 60, *SD* = .85). *Commitment* of Daimler was estimated slightly positive, but close to a neutral value (*M* = 4.03, *n* = 60, *SD* = 1.23). *Control Mutuality*, in contrast, was perceived rather negative by the readers with a mean of 3.66 (*n* = 60, *SD* = 1.11). As well as the non-readers, the average of readers perceived the relationship as a *communal relationship* (*M* = 4.66, *n* = 60, *SD* = 1.26) instead of an *exchange relationship* (*M* = 4.13, *n* = 60, *SD* = 1.17).

Due to not normally distributed data for the scale a u-test was applied to compare readers and non-readers. All constructs were rated higher by readers than by non-readers. However, the u-tests revealed that the differences between the two groups (readers and non-readers) were only significant for the construct *commitment* (*p (2-tailed)* = .023). This difference was identified as a negative correlation using Kendall-Tau-b (*n* = 71, *r* = .282, *p (2-tailed)* < .05).

Comparing the reputation scale, *authentic human voice* and *dialogue orientation* for subscribers and non-subscribers of the RSS-Feed, subscribers rated all constructs higher than non-subscribers. A u-test revealed significance of the difference only for *dialogue orientation* (*n* = 70, *p (2-tailed)* < .001). This relation was identified as a correlation using Kendall-Tau-b (*n* = 70, *r* = .337, *p (2-tailed)* < .01). This result is in line with the significant correlation between subscription to the RSS-Feed and use of the comment function for communication with others found above.

7. Discussion

The study was conducted to generate comprehensive understanding of the Daimler-Blog as a successfully implemented corporate weblog. Several theoretical constructs were addressed to facilitate measurement of benefits/losses evolving from this medium for the company in relation to the intentions and expectations. The approach was designed to contribute to a detailed understanding of corporate weblogs in communication research as well as testing and development of theoretical key concepts. Furthermore, indications for practical implementation of corporate weblogs especially in large organizations were expected from the results.

7.1. RQ1: Constitution of the Daimler-Blog

All three methods employed for the study gave results regarding the structure and constitution of the Daimler-Blog as addressed in RQ1, providing a basis for further analysis.

RQ1: *How is the Daimler-Blog constituted with regard to rules and regulations, editorial processes, target audience, authorship, readership, topics discussed, reciprocal exchange with readers, multimediality and hypertextuality?*

In line with the Daimler-Blog being declared as an employee blog, the majority of the 120 predominantly male authors were *employees*. Following the qualitative interviews, any employee may write voluntarily on the blog and only minimal internal regulations are tied to blogging in the company. However, the employees' contracts of employment regulate the necessary issues. The entries are prioritized and published by a team of editorial staff that further monitors the blogosphere and incoming comments. Still, the Daimler-Blog appeared to be a multifaceted and highly diverse medium during analysis. Most blog entries addressed the different business units and products of the company (*brands & products*) or told success stories and gave employment insights (*job & career*). Also addressed frequently were company decisions, initiatives or internal processes (*the company*) and contemporary issues of development (*technology & innovation*). Some types of authors on the Daimler-Blog showed preferences in writing. *Groups of employees* mainly wrote *interviews*, while the typically younger authors, namely *interns, apprentices* and *student trainees*, preferred *job & career* topics. Following the interviews, entries in this category are frequented higher by readers than other topics.

On average 11 entries were published on the blog per month mostly including multimedia-based content. Pictures were diverse and embedded three times as often as videos. The latter were usually related to products or new technologies, introduced advertisings or showed video clips of car reviews, events and expositions. Such entries focusing on *brands & products* were most diversified in multimedia-based content. Compared to popular and highly frequented blogs the level of hypertextuality was rather low, since almost one-fifth of entries did not contain any links and less than 60 per cent were hyperlinked internal and external to the blog. However, a corporate blog of a large company written by many authors who have published less than two blog entries on average cannot comply with such standards. Furthermore, Herring et al. [33] found that most weblogs link to external content much less than often affirmed or assumed. From this perspective, the measured level of hypertextuality may be acceptable. Still, data comparable to the presented study for the German blogosphere approaching this aspect do not exist to date which complicates interpretation of the results.

Although the blog was maintained frequently, most authors showed low levels of activity and reciprocity. The most active authors in both regards were *student trainees* and *interns*. Consequently, the presumably younger authors were not only most active in maintaining the blog but also used its opportunities for dialogue and exchange most intensely and reciprocally. Analyzed per single authors, *student trainees* wrote significantly more comments than all other authors and entries written by *interns* and *student trainees* received most comments on average and were commented significantly more often by the authors.

Following the interviews, the Daimler-Blog is targeted at all types of company stakeholder, especially, but not exclusively, focusing on a young audience. The interviewees claim that half of the readers are *employees* and the survey conducted on the Daimler-Blog indicated an even higher percentage. In the presented survey, in turn, only 30 per cent of readers were *employees*, still being the majority compared to other categories. The non-readers, in turn, mostly were *journalists* and *customers*. However, in both respects half of respondents categorized themselves as *other* compared to less than one-third in the Daimler study. These differences may be due to the recruitment practices reaching more readers without direct connection to the company visiting the blog less often than the study of Daimler that was exclusively announced on the blog itself.

Similar to the Daimler study the great majority of responding readers were male, which may be due to the company's products in the technology sector. However, Schmidt [62] argues, that corporate weblogs generally attract more male readers than other weblogs which usually have readership balanced in gender. He also found readers of corporate blogs to be slightly older and higher educated than readers of other weblogs. This is in line with readers' average age of 35 years in the present survey and the high level of education with 80 per cent having a college degree. Although the respondents in the Daimler survey were slightly younger, both studies document the relevance of the Daimler-Blog for the lucrative core target audience of advertisers.[26] The survey furthermore revealed that the readers visit the blog between 2 and 4 times a month on average and mostly read the most recent entries. Although spontaneously driven reading strategies were alternative and generally preferred to topic oriented reading habits, both strategies embraced reading the most recent entries as well. Subscription to the RSS-Feed further divided the readers in groups with different habits and levels of activity. More than one-third were subscribers and visited the blog significantly more often than non-subscribers. In addition, three-quarters of the subscribers used the comment function, while less than half of the non-subscribers did so. All readers who write comments do so to express their opinion, but subscribers use it significantly more to ask questions and communicate with others. Hence, RSS-Feed readers are more frequent readers of the blog and use the comment function more intensely and dialogue oriented than other readers.

The Forrester 'Social Technographics Ladder' applied to measure readers' general level of activity online revealed three-quarters to be active *creators* on the Internet besides reception of content and networking activities. This exceptionally high level

[26] In the marketing sector this target group is defined as the group of consumers between 14 and 49 years of age, which possesses purchasing power and is regarded as susceptible to advertising messages.

of activity online compared to the German average (10% *creators*; [46]) emphasizes the Internet affinity of Daimler-Blog readers which represents the 'investigative multiplicators' following Zerfaß [76]. These users are highly information seeking, networked and distribute information actively. The word-of-mouth of such disseminators and opinion leaders usually enjoys high reputation online and offline and considerably influences customers, the media and public opinion. Establishing exchange with and maintaining relationships to such readers is highly worthwhile for a company especially to establish online reputation. Consequently, reaching this audience is a relevant benefit evolving from the Daimler-Blog for Daimler.

Based on these overall results the Daimler-Blog can be classified as a *topic blog* following the typology of Zerfaß and Boelter [75] introduced in the beginning. It embraces all areas of corporate communications addressing and maintaining relationships to all types of internal and external stakeholders. The blog is used as a tool for informative and persuasive communication providing service and availability, telling personal stories of employees and informing about products, internal processes and projects. This diverse mixture of content provides stakeholders with insights they would not find in any other communication medium. Reports on the company's social engagement in Africa or on development of new technologies coexist effectively with personal stories of employees, interns and apprentices or with discussions between employees and the management on the consequences of the economic crisis. This complex and multilayered structure serves to generate customer contact, form a public opinion and demonstrate competence, expertise and soft skills.

7.2. RQ2: Intentions and Expectations of Daimler regarding the Daimler-Blog

The intentions and expectations related to the Daimler-Blog as addressed in RQ2 were identified by means of the qualitative interviews in order to facilitate measurement of benefits/losses evolving from the blog.

RQ 2: *Which reason(s) for implementation, expectation(s) and intended function(s) did and does Daimler tie to the Daimler-Blog?*

The *reasons* for implementing the Daimler-Blog communicated in the interviews were the changing media landscape, the resulting stakeholder fragmentation and changes in communication habits. Daimler decided to counteract the increasing competition, decreasing trust in organizations and attention scarcity for corporate messages in the *Google world* by means of a corporate weblog. Familiarizing employees and company structures with online communication facilitated to gear the company towards recent and evolving communication arenas. The *intention* tied to this medium was to use the chances social media provide through networked, multimedia-based and reciprocal communication. Consequently, the company aimed to create a flexible platform addressing all types of stakeholders by means of personally communicated diverse topics. The content was meant to demonstrate expertise and competence in the various sections of the company and facilitate to establish a direct and reciprocal communication channel providing dialogue oriented communication. Daimler aimed to provide improved, transparent and authentic communication increasing the company's credibility and reputation, making it more tangible and personal by means of insights and a human voice. The *expectations* in the first place embraced to fulfill these intentions and to gain hands-on experience as an early adopter of the technology. This eminently included internal and external adoption of the blog and the natural coexistence of private and professional opinions. Featuring open and honest content the medium was further expected evoke positive reactions and improve reputation and attractiveness of Daimler. Finally, it was aspired to destruct hierarchical structures and encourage exchange between the different departments. Besides these general *functions* the blog was aimed to accompany corporate events, set themes on the public agenda and serve as a quick reaction tool to potential critics. Implementing this new means of communication the company was aware of its low predictability and the risk that the intentions and expectations could fail accordingly transforming the weblog into a threat for the company's reputation.

7.3. RQ3: Benefits / Losses Evolving from the Daimler-Blog for Daimler

The benefits/losses emerging from the Daimler-Blog as addressed in RQ3 were analyzed by means of the online survey based on the intentions and expectations identified in the qualitative interviews. For this purpose appropriate scales from academic literature were adapted, tested and implemented to measure the constructs *dialogue orientation* and *authentic human voice* as well as the *reputation* components and the quality of relationship.

RQ 3: *To what extent does Daimler benefit from the Daimler-Blog with respect to the company's expectation(s), reason(s) for implementation, and intended function(s) tied to the blog?*

The survey revealed that Daimler-Blog readers perceive the blog as rather *dialogue oriented* and *authentic in human voice* whereas authenticity is perceived lower than dialogue orientation. This positive tendency shows that Daimler benefits from the blog in both respects as intended with potential for development. RSS-Feed subscribers estimated both characteristics higher with dialogue orientation being estimated significantly higher compared to non-subscribers. This is in line with the significantly more reciprocal and dialogue oriented use of the comment function RSS-Feed subscribers showed. Consequently, the company benefits from the blog attracting a frequent and faithful readership that is persuaded of the medium's qualities and initiates an 'information push'. This regular, reciprocal contact with stakeholders may increase the company's reputation and stakeholder advocacy.

The scale measuring *reputation* revealed that stakeholder contact via the Daimler-Blog measurably increases reputation, as blog readers generally perceived all constructs more positive than non-readers of the blog. This is a worthwhile benefit for Daimler, but there is still potential to improve communication of the company's *commitment* and *control mutuality* in relationships to stakeholders. Those constructs were perceived rather negative or neutral by readers and non-readers compared to *trust/satisfaction.* Nevertheless, stakeholders generally seemed to have a satisfactory relationship with Daimler independent of the Daimler-Blog. This is further substantiated by the perceived quality of the relationship to Daimler. Both parties rather estimated the relationship to be a *communal relationship* which emphasizes the emotional factor in the relationship instead of pure material exchange.

This generally positive perception of the company may be based on its role as a German global player. Tödtmann [70] argues that continuity and tradition increase strength and value of a brand. The Daimler-AG was founded in 1883 and is recognized as a manufacturer of traditionally high quality vehicles worldwide. In 2008, *Mercedes Benz*, the best known vehicle brand of Daimler, was among the 15 strongest brands worldwide [30] and in 2007 Daimler was the third strongest German brand [70]. This high esteem of the products and the brand value may evoke the generally perceived satisfaction with and trust in the company. However, Daimler-Blog readers' generally more positive perception of all reputational constructs and the relationship quality shows that the blog relevantly influences the company's reputation.

Besides these constructs, many benefits evolving from the blog following the intentions of the company were approved by means of the online survey. The blog for example facilitates to provide a multitude of topics addressing all types of stakeholders establishing intense contact and reciprocal exchange. This increases the company's tangibility and facilitates to cope with changing consumption patterns and circumstances in the media landscape. Furthermore, the blog reaches rather young stakeholders and activates exchange of internal departments. Facing employees' uncertainty with the emerging economic crisis, the company management gave all stakeholders openly account on the blog regarding Daimler's plans and procedures to cope with the crisis. In this respect the blog has proved beneficial as a quick reaction tool and an open and authentic means of exchange.

8. Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that the Daimler-Blog represents a successful component of the company's overall communication strategy and evokes numerous benefits in this respect. Adapting and improving existing measures from academic literature this study revealed that the blog enhances reciprocity, personalization and authenticity of the company consequently increasing its reputation. It reaches a broad readership that is predominantly male, highly Internet affine, educated, young and active in retrieving and distributing content online. These disseminators and opinion leaders actively contribute to improving the company's reputation. Although few young and motivated authors are highly active in maintaining the blog, its variety in content provides insights in the company's diversity and demonstrates expertise in many respects. Important success factors are the blog's well cultivated condition, up-to-dateness and the compliance to rules and regulations. Although many bloggers criticize the often low level of polemic and critic on the blog, the comprehensive analysis exposed numerous examples contradicting this critic. This authenticity in blogging also appears in authors' voluntary efforts to contribute to the blog and establish contact with its readers. Furthermore, Daimler's courage of addressing critical issues on the blog proves that the company is aware of its potential positive and negative impacts and faces critical situations with well-considered preparation. An important resource of Daimler in establishing this blog was the brand value of the company and its products, which most probably accelerated and enhanced the success of the medium. Consequently, a strong brand or company value is advantageous for organizations implementing a corporate weblog since this asset and leap of faith is transferred to the new medium. Compared to smaller organizations, this aspect may be especially relevant for large organizations which struggle with personalizing a blog. Those practical insights may be beneficial for organizations aspiring to implement corporate weblogs following suit of Daimler. However, a one-fits-all concept does not exist and corporate weblogs are individual means of communication reflecting an organizations profile and objectives. Nevertheless, general findings, as for example the predominantly male readership of corporate weblogs, the dichotomous typology of spontaneous and topic oriented readers or the value of young, Internet affine and motivated authors on a blog, are most probably generalizable.

From a theoretical perspective, the Daimler-Blog confirms the typology of Zerfaß and Boelter [75] and fulfills all aspects of the sub type *topic blog*. The different methods employed for the study furthermore prove that the Daimler-Blog covers the three functions *identity*-, *information*- and *relationship management* as formulated by Schmidt [61]. In relation to academic literature on corporate weblogs and organizational public relationships the study confirms the relevance of several key concepts for practical implementation in times of the *Google world* to increase attention for and trust in organizations, compete successfully and gain digital reputation. Expectations and intentions of Daimler are consistent with theoretical assumptions with regard to authenticity, human voice, dialogue orientation and reputation components. Through adaption and improvement of scales the study could generate reliable measures for these dimensions and confirms the value of the company's blogging practices. In general, the study contributes to a systematic understanding of corporate weblogs and provides data for comparison with other cases.

Nevertheless, the study has a number of limitations which provide suggestions for further research. Due to the case study nature and the analysis of a non-probability sample the results are not generalizable, but can only provide tendencies for interpretation and comparison with other cases. Furthermore, the results cannot serve as single indicators for improvement of typologies and theoretical frameworks in this field of communication research. Further studies replicating this approach, but focusing on other cases, would enhance opportunities for comparison and interpretation and contribute to gaining knowledge and more reliable data regarding corporate weblogs. In addition, the scales adapted in this study could be further improved or verified by means of replication. Finally, as a triangulation of methods, this study could not provide large scale qualitative data. Consequently, it was not possible to conduct detailed measurement of reciprocity and exchange on the Daimler-Blog. In this respect, an in-depth analysis of dialogues exploring the multifaceted nature of exchange would be an interesting and relevant approach for subsequent research to this study. Further empirical studies analyzing critic and polemic on corporate weblogs and the quantity, quality and relevance of hyperlinks would generate relevant insights and serve interpretation of these dimensions.

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