

### Your Car, My Content, Our Post: Strategic Communication Using Prosumers in Shared Mobility

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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Benz, L., Borchardt, B., Klute, T., Mirea, J., Sickert, T., & Siegel, C. (2021). Your Car, My Content, Our Post: Strategic Communication Using Prosumers in Shared Mobility. In A. Godulla, S. Doberts, C. Müller, & H. Ötting (Eds.), *Communicating with, through, and as the Recipient: Changing the Rules in Strategic Communication and Journalism* (pp. 167-206). Leipzig <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-75405-7>

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# IMPRINT

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Communicating with, through, and as the Recipient. Changing the Rules in Strategic Communication and Journalism

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First Edition Leipzig 2021



# **YOUR CAR, MY CONTENT, OUR POST**

## **Strategic Communication Using Prosumers in Shared Mobility**

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**Larissa Benz, Bjoern Borchardt, Tim Klute, Johanna Mirea, Tabea Sickert, Caroline Siegel**

### **Abstract**

The scarcity of resources is a central challenge of the 21st century. Companies, therefore, rely on innovative and sustainable business models. For example, shared mobility is a booming sector of the sharing economy experiencing a high competitive pressure among suppliers. A concrete solution to survive in the market is to integrate prosumers more closely into corporate communication activities. Hence, this work examines to what extent communication experts of shared mobility companies use prosumers for strategic corporate communication to date. For this purpose, guided expert interviews were conducted. Knowledge about the utilized tools and channels, requirements as well as existing standardized processes with regard to communication with and via prosumers was gained. The results confirm that prosumers are used in the strategic communication of shared mobility companies, but their potential is insufficiently exploited. The measures used in dealing with prosumers do not differ from those used for other multipliers. Nevertheless, it is clear that a stronger professionalization of the practice can strengthen stakeholder loyalty and thus secure long-term company success. In addition, best practices were identified and recommendations for action were made.

**Keywords:** prosuming, sharing economy, shared mobility, strategic communication, trust

## **1 Introduction**

Building up trust between companies and their stakeholders is a central objective of strategic communication (Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2008, p. 49). To achieve this, many companies use social media influencers as authentic and credible multipliers (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 264). When it comes to the shared economy, in which trust is a particularly important success factor (Hawlitschek et al., 2016, p. 27), another group of stakeholders reveals new potentials to support the communications' trust-building function: prosumers.

As a portmanteau of the words producer and consumer, the term prosumer refers to a group of stakeholders that is not only consuming a product or service but is actively involved in its value chain (Toffler, 1980, pp. 282-285). Since communicative activities are also part of the value creation process (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 502), prosuming includes communication about the company's products or services on social media.

Although prosumers have great potential for use in strategic communication, there have been hardly any publications on the subject to date. Marketing theory studies examine the practical relevance and use of prosumers (Lang et al., 2020b), but they do not consider their strategic integration into corporate communications (Dellaert, 2019; Eckhardt et al., 2019).

Concerning the sharing economy, Costello and Reczek (2020) as well as Lang et al. (2020a) highlight the existence and benefits of prosumers from a business perspective. Thus, in terms of communication science, the use of prosumers in the corporate communication of shared mobility companies offers a broad field of research that requires fundamental stocktaking.

Therefore, this study investigates to what extent communicators of shared mobility companies in the German B2C market use prosumers for strategic corporate

communications. By researching established tools and channels, exploring the requirements companies have for prosumers and their content, structuring existing standardized processes, and looking at the prospectively planned use of prosumers, existing best practices will be identified and recommendations for practice will be made.

To answer the above-mentioned question, guided expert interviews with 12 communication experts from shared mobility companies in Germany were conducted. The data was collected and analyzed using a qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2014).

Overall, this study provides an overview of the use of prosumers in the corporate communication of sharing economy companies. While discussing the strategic communication of shared mobility companies, a special focus will be placed on the construct of trust, which will be considered both in terms of its influence on the success of the sharing economy and with regard to the use of prosumers and their content. Furthermore, the stakeholder orientation as a bridge between the use of prosumers and trust-building measures in corporate communication will be examined in more detail.

## **2 Prosumers in the Corporate Communication of Shared Mobility Companies**

More and more creators and companies provide content and services very cheaply or even for free, and emerging business models are taking advantage of this opportunity. Hybrids formed from the established capitalist economic system and collaborative commons (Rifkin, 2014, p. 7) have established a new industry: the sharing economy. These businesses are based on the concept of sharing instead of owning, as well as on the integration of prosumers into corporate (communication) activities – in contrast to traditional business models which place the consumers at the end of the value chain.

Prosumers are the central actors in this post-industrial age (Toffler, 1980, p. 282-285) and increasingly replace the passive role of the consumer (Kotler, 1986, p. 510).

Prosuming takes place complementary to the sphere of gainful employment and follows the pre-industrial logic of production for the purpose of self-consumption (Toffler, 1980, p. 282-285). It attacks the aspect of productivity inherent in consumption (Ritzer, 2014, p. 10). Prosumers are therefore customers actively involved in the production process and thus in the value chain (Kleemann et al., 2008, p. 8).

The twofold role of prosumers is interdependent with other prosumers within a system or business model, who cooperatively exchange (in)tangible resources for mutual benefit and profit (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3), such as the sharing economy. In addition, there are other concepts such as the *working customer* (Rieder & Voß, 2013, p. 177) or *productive consumption* (Laughey, 2010, p. 107). New hybrid terms as mentioned by Bruns (2008) such as *produser* (p. 266) and *co-creator* (p. 341) have now entered academic usage to emphasize the increased production capabilities of users. The fact that so many different terms exist is evidence for the increasing interest and relevance of the prosuming phenomenon. The reason for the increase in importance in recent years (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 16) is the close connection to the so-called user-generated content (UGC) (Bickart & Schindler, 2001, p. 33; Popek, 2010, p. 4).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007, p. 8), UGC must meet three basic requirements: First of all, content must be published on either a publicly accessible website or a social network where it mostly influences and describes products in terms of individual usage situations and evaluates product performance based on personal experience. Secondly, it must show some level of creative effort, and finally, it must have originated outside of professional routines and practices (Bickart & Schindler, 2001, p. 18). Therefore,

the product of prosumers' actions is UGC in a narrow sense with regard to the inclusion of prosumers in the value chain. Business models based on prosuming use UGC in broader contexts. Compared to traditional media, the use of UGC is shown to be more effective in attracting new customers (You & Joshi, 2020, p. 228). It should be used in combination with the company's own media products to enable an optimized integrated marketing communication (You & Joshi, 2020, p. 228). This way, prosumers become opinion leaders and potential tools for new customer acquisition (Trusov et al., 2009, p. 93).

Although a rising number of companies recognize prosumers as a strategic advantage (Martínez-Sala et al., 2018, p. 151; Tapscott & Williams, 2006, p. 128), current studies on the topic remain sparse. Much of the literature focuses exclusively on either consumers (Böcker & Meelen, 2017, p. 28; Edbring et al., 2016, p. 5; Neunhöffer & Teubner, 2018, p. 221) or producers (Hawlitschek et al., 2016, p. 26; Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016, p. 159; Schreiner et al., 2018, p. 366), whereas only a few deal with the direct interaction of both groups (Dellaert, 2019, p. 238) or with prosumers themselves (Lang et al., 2020a, p. 58; Martínez-Sala et al., 2018, p. 137).

However, research is increasingly devoted to consumers' attitudes toward user-generated content (Lee et al., 2017, p. 849) and the extent to which trust emerges in advertising as opposed to user-generated content (MacKinnon, 2012, p. 20). These effects are also prevalent in influencer marketing practices. Companies take advantage of the mostly high trust of buyers in online reviews and recommendations (Ventre & Kolbe, 2020, p. 293; Zhang et al., 2017, p. 7) as well as influencers as opinion leaders (Momtaz et al., 2011, p. 19) and multipliers (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 274).

The difference to the group of prosumers lies mainly in the size of the networks, however, "a high number of followers may not always translate into true influence" (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 813). Unlike prosumers, the business relationship between companies and influencers is also subject to a network of contracts (Sekara,

2018, p. 338). If a service is provided by an influencer, such as the creation and distribution of authentic posts on the social media channels of the influencer or the company (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 263), German law states that the influencer must receive payment or remuneration as agreed to in advance (Lehmann, 2017, p. 772).

When looking at all media producers, i.e. prosumers themselves, the potential created by media and technical developments has to be considered. It has never been easier to produce high-quality content in a short time and get in touch with companies: powerful cameras on cell phones are just one example of high-quality, yet cost-effective content production. Filters in social media and the widespread use of hashtags also make products easy to find, sort, and reproduce on the Internet. As already mentioned, cultivating prosumers is of particular importance for sharing economy companies, who can only use the network of their platforms with the greatest possible potential in this way.

Transitioning to prosumers means that users become a manifestation of the sharing economy and its potential. In other words, the power to grow the sharing economy not only lies in increasing the overall population of providers and consumers, but also in the ability of platforms to convert one to the other by leveraging trust and gratitude (Lang et al., 2020a, p. 6).

In order to explore the use of prosumers in corporate communication, the focus of this paper is deliberately placed on the sharing economy, as prosumers are an integral part of the business model (Oermann, 2015, p. 116). If, for example, drivers of the car sharing company FREE NOW Ride make their private vehicles available, they are both producers and consumers of the service. On a less conventional level, employees of sharing services can also belong to the group of prosumers if they are simultaneously users of the service. If we extend the concept of prosumers to the entire value chain, as explained in the previously, communication is also part of the enrichment of a service: If users communicate about an offer in the form of UGC, they contribute to the value chain and can therefore be described as prosumers.



### 3 The Economy of Sharing

Sharing instead of owning – that is the fundamental principle of the sharing economy. Martin Weitzman, one of the first economists to deal with the “share economy” (1984), coined the term in the context of employee profit-sharing as a solution to the then persistent inflation.

Over time, the sharing economy’s business model has created an alternative to traditional ownership concepts. At its core, the sharing economy describes “collaborative consumption made by the activities of sharing, exchanging, and rental of resources without owning the goods” (Lessig, 2008, p. 143). These goods can be tangible such as money, space, or tools, but also intangible resources such as time, ideas, and knowledge (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018, p. 322; Kathan et al., 2016, p. 663). The goal of the sharing economy is to increase wealth for all market participants (Kreutzer & Land, 2017, p. 245).

One of the most important drivers of the sharing economy were the new technical possibilities of the Internet: technological achievements like electronic payment as well as communication and information access via smartphone, laptop, or tablets fostered a new form of market and exchange economy, which can be handled via online platforms (Hira & Reilly, 2014, p. 176).

The various business models of the sharing economy can be sectioned into three different types (Petrini et al., 2017, p. 45). In *product-service systems*, the benefits of a product can be used without the necessity of becoming the owner of this product. Products or services are professionally mediated or offered and usually sold via corresponding online platforms. With the help of *redistribution markets*, objects that became obsolete in one place are transferred to another place where they can be used again (Rinne, 2013, p. 7).

Models for a *collaborative lifestyle* refer to the non-commercial collaborative consumption of products or services that are not offered through a company with the aim of making profit. Instead, they are shared exclusively within a community (Shaheen & Cohen, 2013, p. 2), for example, when a car or intangible goods such as skills or experiences are neighborly shared (Rinne, 2013, p. 7).

In addition, sharing economy offerings can be differentiated along their business relationships: these include peer-to-peer (P2P), business-to-consumer (B2C), and business-to-business (B2B) concepts (Rinne, 2013, p. 9).

In the B2C concept, which will be the focus of this study, a company simultaneously owns the inventory and coordinates access to it for its customers (Rinne, 2013, p. 9). This form of sharing has enjoyed particular popularity in recent years, which is why more and more providers are entering the market (Steinmetz, 2019, p. 238).

Today, the sharing economy plays an essential role in our society as a rapidly growing industry (PricewaterhouseCoopers GmbH, 2018, para. 3). Rinne (2013, p. 9) groups the commodities of the sharing economy into *services* (e.g. Time Banks), *finance* (e.g. GoFundme), *entertainment* (e.g. Spotify), *accommodation* (e.g. AirBnB), *goods* (e.g. eBay Classifieds), and *transportation* (e.g. Uber).

This paper deals with the mobility sector of the sharing economy, the “Shared Mobility” (Laporte et al., 2015, p. 342). The increasing need for mobility is accompanied by the expansion of the transport infrastructure (BMVI, 2020, para. 2) and offers a correspondingly large market potential for alternative mobility concepts (BMW, 2018, p. 11). In addition to station-based and free-floating car sharing services, this category also includes ridesharing and carpooling concepts, e.g. the online carpooling service BlaBlaCar. Furthermore, ride hailing companies such as FREE NOW Ride arrange professional rides from private individuals as a cost-effective alternative to cabs (“The Sharing Economy“, 2013, para. 2). Even more efficient is the concept of ride pooling as with CleverShuttle and BerlKönig, where

several passengers share a professional driver. In addition to motorized private transport, bicycles and electric scooters have become widely available means of transportation. The Shared Mobility Report by MOQO (2020) provides an overview of the industry and its various sharing offerings. In a so-called “Shared Mobility Diamond” (MOQO, 2020, p. 6), the report differentiates the individual shared mobility offerings into goods- and service-sharing concepts.

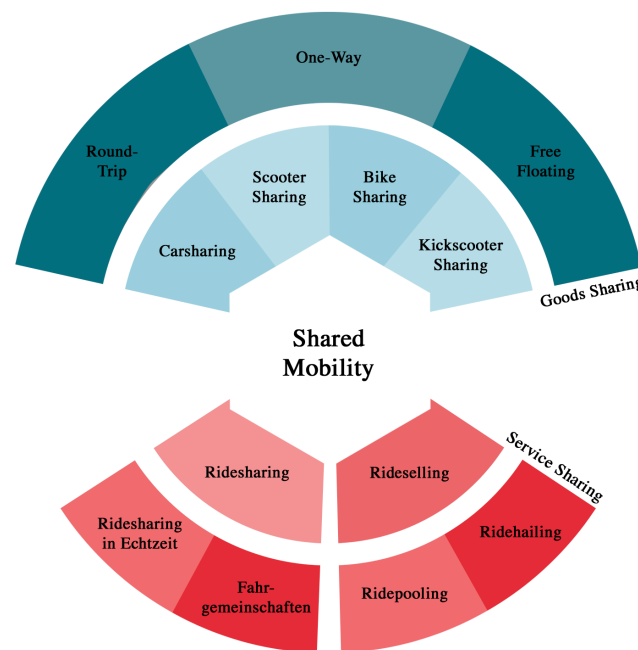


Figure 1: Shared Mobility Diamond from the Shared Mobility Status Report 2020 providing an overview of the market differentiation (MOQO, 2020, p. 6).

As the study by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi, 2018, pp. 12-19) shows, the carsharing and ridesharing sectors are particularly expanding in Germany. Moreover, a study conducted by the automotive industry in 2017 forecasts a continued increase in the market volume of shared mobility “by a quarter annually between 2017 and 2030 to 1.3 billion euros” (Gelowicz, 2017, para. 3). In January 2021, car sharing companies in Germany alone recorded approximately 2.9 million registered new customers – a 25 percent increase over the previous year.

#### 4 Strategic Communication of Shared Mobility Companies

Whether sharing offers are made or used depends on various influencing factors that must be thoroughly considered from a company perspective. While external influencing factors refer to the offer, the platform, and other social and political factors, user-related influencing factors include all motives that can be attributed to individual users (Georgi et al., 2019, p. 35).

The external influencing factor *communication and marketing*, which is the focus of the impact model, affects the user-related influencing factors, trust and *perceived benefit*. How a product or service is marketed or communicated can therefore also determine whether and how they are used and/or offered. A lack of knowledge and trust can accordingly lead to fewer users participating in the sharing experience. Following Hawlitschek et al. (2016, pp. 34–35), trust in the platform, in peers who also use the platform, and in the product's ability have significant influence on the decision of consumers to make use of the offer.

Additionally, aligning a company's communication with its stakeholders' interests is a key success factor (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). Following this view, prosumers can be seen as a separate stakeholder group, differing from customers as well as social media influencers (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Archer & Harrigan, 2016). Nevertheless, some parallels between multipliers such as journalists or influencers and prosumers can be identified regarding the goals intended by their use or involvement in corporate communications. Third-party reports by multipliers are used to overcome the perceived bias and create trust and credibility, which arises primarily from the authenticity of self-representation in social networks (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 266).

To gain the trust of potential customers in the platform, peers who also use the service, and product ability, companies rely on tools that are often directly integrated into the platform and its functionality. Online reviews offer the possibility to track

previous experiences of other users (Zamani et al., 2019, p. 1950). Compared to quality certificates, for example, they are considered more useful because they reflect actual experiences of individual users (Cheng et al., 2019, pp. 372–374).

With regard to communication measures such as online reviews and quality ratings, prosumers play a decisive role as they help to build up trust, and therefore, the economic success of the company (Teubner & Dann, 2018, p. 2). In direct comparison to social media influencers, the use of prosumers is not diminished by the disadvantages of a visible contractual relationship and the associated growing lack of credibility (Du Plessis, 2017, p. 98).

In view of this potential, from a corporate perspective, the question to what extent prosumers are already being used in strategic communication arises. There are hardly any publications on the study of prosumers in corporate communication. Publications in related disciplines, such as marketing, tend to examine the practical relevance and use of prosumers only and thus focus on ways to motivate customers to become prosumers as well (Lang et al., 2020a, p. 6). However, these studies do not further elaborate on their strategic integration into the company's communication (Dellaert, 2019; Eckhardt et al., 2019).

From a communication science perspective, this opens up a broad field of research that should first be mapped out by a fundamental investigation of the use of prosumers in strategic corporate communication. The sharing economy is particularly suitable for this purpose since both the existence of prosumers and their strategic benefits for companies can be identified from a business perspective (Costello & Reczek, 2020, p. 24; Lang et al., 2020a, pp. 3–4).

Due to the paucity of literature and the scarce research, the integration of the research into already existing approaches proves itself to be difficult. Hence, the focus of this study rests on the exploratory investigation of the field, approaching the guiding research question:

“To what extent do communicators of shared mobility companies use prosumers in strategic corporate communication?”

To ensure precise operationalization, subordinate research questions including adjacent fields are derived, which make it possible to determine and investigate further relevant aspects.

*RQ 1:* Which tools and channels are used when prosumers are engaged?

*RQ 2:* What requirements do companies have for prosumers and their content to be used for strategic corporate communication?

*RQ 3:* To what extent do standardized processes exist for the use of prosumers in strategic corporate communication?

Due to the industry often consisting of an exchange of resources between the parties involved via online platforms (Hira & Reilly, 2014, p. 175–176), the specific tools and channels of communication can be designated as a relevant influencing factor. Furthermore, as parallels between prosumer communication and the targeted use of social media influencers for communication activities exist, the definition of criteria or requirements for the selection of suitable influencers is particularly important (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 271). As a result of the assumption of these parallels between communication with and about prosumers or influencers, the question about management of contents and processes arises. Zerfass et al. (2018) conceive the management of corporate communication as communication management analogous to the management process (p. 502), while Enke and Borchers (2019) also formulate the process of managing social media influencer communication as a management process (p. 271).

## **5 Methodology**

### **5.1 Qualitative research approach**

This study is based on a qualitative and explorative approach to examine the hardly researched area of prosumers in strategic corporate communication of shared mobility companies. This methodology was chosen to inquire into the topic as exploratively as possible and adequately answer the research questions.

### **5.2 Data collection**

Guided interviews with experts were performed as a data collection instrument to acquire, secure, and compare existing knowledge of the topic area (Bogner & Menz, 2018, p. 654). Interviews such as these should be conducted with performance role bearers from societal subareas, further referred to as experts (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Relevant experts for this study were representatives of corporate communications, who already had experience with the use of prosumers and have the corresponding internal expertise. Due to their adaptability to the interview partners, guided expert interviews are particularly suitable for explorative data collection and advantageous for checking the validity of the information by asking individual follow-up questions, if necessary (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 21). The interviewees thus also have the opportunity to proactively contribute their subjective experiences to the interview (Bogner & Menz, 2018, p. 655), which allows for a flexible approach to the different levels of experience in dealing with prosumers.

The sample (n=12) is based on a 2018 study by the BMWi (2018) and the Shared Mobility Status Report, which classifies shared mobility into its subsectors (MOQO, 2020). Except for one carpooling provider, which couldn't be acquired in the process, all subsectors are represented in the sample which can be reviewed in the table below.

|    | <b>Company</b> | <b>Position of the Interviewees</b>                   |
|----|----------------|---|
| 1  | Anonymized     | Marketing & Communications Manager                    |
| 2  | BerlKönig      | Head of Marketing Transport Companies Berlin          |
| 3  | BlaBlaCar      | Community Relations Agent                             |
| 4  | Call a Bike    | Specialist for Online Marketing                       |
| 5  | Clevershuttle  | Spokes Person   |
| 6  | FREE NOW       | Senior Public Relations Manager                       |
| 7  | SHARE NOW      | Team Lead Global Communications                       |
| 8  | Stadtmobil     | Executive Board Member and Managing Director          |
| 9  | stella         | Corporate Communications and Public Relations Manager |
| 10 | teilAuto       | Managing Director for Sales, Marketing & Finance      |
| 11 | Voi            | Communications Manager Region DACH                    |
| 12 | WIND Mobility  | Policy & Communications Manager                       |

Table 1: An overview of the participating companies (sample: n=12) and the positions of the interview partners.

Data collection took place between December 14, 2020 and March 23, 2021. The twelve guided expert interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes each and were conducted digitally in the form of video calls via Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom.

### 5.3 Data analysis

In preparation of the subsequent data analysis, the audio recordings of the conducted interviews were fully transcribed. Based on Kuckartz (2014, pp. 37–64), a qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the interviews of this research. This data analysis approach proves to be most suitable, since the category system can be constantly adapted to the analysis material which makes the analysis of guided interviews more convenient. The following section is entirely based on his suggestions in this regard.



Following this analysis process model, the first step was to carefully examine the existing data material. In the second phase, thematic main categories were derived from the interview guide. To ensure research quality, short descriptions with anchor examples were created for each of the deductively derived categories, which served as a benchmark for the coders and subsequently ensured intercoder reliability. In addition, the derived themes as well as their definitions were reviewed for their suitability to the material. For this purpose, 25 percent of the entire material was pre-coded.

In the third phase of Kuckartz's process model the comprehensive material was coded for the first time. After the collection of uniformly coded text passages in the fourth phase, the next step was to inductively determine subcategories. In the sixth phase, the material was coded a second time based on the revised categories. The final coding process confirmed an accurate dimensionalization of the category system. All coded segments were tabulated by category at the end of the analysis process. The coding scheme is available upon request.

#### **5.4 Ethics**

Written information about the project was given to the participants prior to the data collection. All participants gave their consent and it was emphasized that the participation was voluntary. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The option to fully anonymize the company and the interviewee was offered to ensure anonymity in case further publications result from the project. One participant made use of this option. All personal information, audio files and other materials were stored in accordance with the research privacy policy and deleted at the end of the project.

## 6 Results

The following chapter will focus on the results of the three research questions, which addressed (6.1) tools and channels, (6.2) requirements, and (6.3) standardized processes of prosumer content into strategic communications.

### 6.1 Tools & Channels

The first research question refers to tools and channels used to communicate content from or about prosumers within strategic corporate communication measures of shared mobility companies.

#### 6.1.1 Tools

Overall, the tools used for organizing prosumer content do not differ from the already established tools of corporate communication, whereas some interviewed companies do not currently use any organizational tools at all. They rely on analog and intuitive organization of content instead. However, some specific tools for organizing and distributing prosumer content could be detected: For the internal processing of prosumer content, the editorial tool *Trello* as well as the social media management tools *Socialbakers* and *Hootsuite* are being used.

As an internal knowledge database, interviewees referred to the web-based *Google Docs Editors Suite* and *Google Drive*, in order to organize prosumer content across teams and to disseminate it via link sharing through third channels, such as e-mail. In addition, platforms for customer support such as *Zendesk* are used to collect, cluster and filter prosumer content thematically. Furthermore, hashtag search is a helpful tool function to quickly find thematically related posts on internal or external platforms.

### 6.1.2 Channels

The internal acquisition of prosumer content is mostly covered by the direct contact with colleagues, be it in a personal conversation, by phone, or in the context of (video) conferences in order to exchange ideas and implement possibilities. For the internal distribution, newsletters or internal wikis with an integrated newsfeed function are used to disseminate prosumer content. Non-official meetings help to distribute content as well, whereas the latter offer the advantages of entering a dialog. Some internal channels are utilized for both acquisition and distribution of prosumer content such as internal employee apps or the instant messaging tool Slack as well as email exchange. Via these channels, prosumer content can be easily acquired with the help of feedback surveys and call-to-actions, and subsequently shared internally.

External channels for acquiring prosumer content include direct communication via email or phone, or via instant messaging tools such as *WhatsApp* or *Telegram*. However, it is not necessarily the company itself that gets in contact with the prosumers via these channels, but sometimes third parties such as PR agencies.

The overlap between external acquisition and distribution channels becomes clear when having a look at the usage of social media platforms, including *Facebook*, *LinkedIn*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*. Regarding *Instagram*, the function of creating *stories*, in particular, offers prosumers the opportunity to link companies in their posts which, in turn, can be reposted by the companies themselves. Moreover, *Instagram*, *Facebook* and *Twitter* are suitable platforms for collecting customer feedback and stories through short surveys, although *Facebook* is increasingly losing relevance due to declining reach and data protection reasons. *Twitter*, on the other hand, is suitable for the distribution of prosumer content, for example in the form of an account *takeover*.

Distributing-only channels for external use are the video portal *YouTube*, the new audio-based social network app *Clubhouse*, or social media platforms like *LinkedIn*, which is primarily used for employer branding activities and the dissemination of business topics. Social media channels in general appear to be particularly suitable for disseminating prosumer content due to their speed and influence. Apart from that, newsletters or external blogs are rather used than the press in this context. Advertising media might be an alternative to include prosumer content in external communication efforts.

## **6.2 Requirements**

The requirements that companies place on prosumers and their content in order to select them for their strategic corporate communication activities can be divided into demands on people and standards for content. However, these are usually only implicit and not recorded in writing.

### **6.2.1 Requirements for prosumers**

Most companies do have requirements for prosumers as human individuals with specific characteristics. The communicators point out that, above all, a friendly appearance is a criterion for the selection of prosumers. In contrast, an overly unnatural appearance is rather undesirable. Furthermore, those prosumers who visually stand out from the crowd and appear interesting are of particular interest to the communicators. Factors such as age, gender, and cultural background should be represented as diversely as possible. The respondents want to counteract the image that only young and dynamic people use shared mobility by integrating prosumers of different demographics.

The interviewees attach great importance to prosumers matching the brand and external image. Employees as prosumers prove to be particularly suitable in that regard, since they are assumed to be in line with the corporate philosophy per se.

With regard to authenticity, it seems more credible when a company communicates with or about prosumers instead of just doing classic PR. It is especially beneficial for corporate communication when prosumers show themselves in their everyday lives. They are perceived as authentic if they radiate that they stand up for the service or the company. Furthermore, the essential personality traits and skills of a person are important criteria. One requirement is, for example, that the prosumers are able to present themselves in front of the camera. Thus, already in the selection process, attention is paid to who can be considered a *media personality* or a *voice of the company*.

In terms of reputation, people are not considered as prosumers for corporate communications if they take up positions in public that could harm the company's reputation. In contrast, personalities who enjoy a positive public perception are readily shown.

Prosumers who use the product or service above the average frequency are considered heavy users. The first point of contact with them is often social media. Their experience and recognition value should encourage potential users more effectively than new customers who are used as prosumers. In some cases, heavy users even offer to help out voluntarily. The companies reward them by offering discounts or even exemptions from contributions.

### **6.2.2 Content requirements**

To fully capture which requirements need to be met by prosumers in order to be considered for the companies' strategic communication, a closer look needs to be taken at the prerequisites for their published content. For the most part, pictures and videos are shared, e.g. selfies. In addition, texts in the form of quotes and feedback are also relevant to reflect a balanced overall picture of the company. Depending on the communication channel, suitable and coordinated content is published in high quality, such as a high image resolution.

Special content is used in order to generate the attention of recipients and build trust. These are interesting stories standing out from the average and thus attract the attention of recipients. These include, for example, romantic experiences, unusual events such as a ride with an animal or a special bond with the sharing economy provider. Bizarre stories can be used to generate follow-up communication via word-of-mouth. Also, the entertainment value plays a decisive role for the use of prosumer content in strategic corporate communication. Often it is simply a matter of humorous contributions or the *meme factor*. In addition, it is important to the communicators that the content matches the tone of the other communication measures.

Special communication measures are carried out on holidays such as International Women's Day, Christmas and Easter. This also includes events organized by the company, for example anniversaries and content generated as part of sweepstakes or other marketing campaigns.

Content with a product reference is used preferentially, meaning that the product or service should be seen or described favorably in the prosumer content. In addition to bicycles, kick scooters, scooters, or cars, the focus also lays on the company's good service. This includes customer support as well as the handling and flexibility of the application and how prosumers evaluate this publicly.

The content provided by the prosumers must match the overarching values of a company, such as a lifestyle or the sustainability concept. Prosumers are expected to have already engaged with the brand. Further information about corporate values can be derived from criteria based on which content is rejected, e. g., content that shows forms of discrimination or the consumption of alcoholic beverages in road traffic.

In terms of the relevance of the content provided by prosumers, sharing economy companies focus on current events and overall social trends. These involve aspects

such as the innovation of hydrogen as a driving force for cars amongst others. Specific feedback can be used to identify issues that are relevant to the company in the present or future.

In terms of content requirements and feedback contributing to the further development of product and service, constructive feedback is shared on social media channels, which is explicitly passed on by prosumers to other users. Complaints in the classic sense are explicitly not shared but only answered. Constructive feedback from prosumers is also shared internally, ensuring continuous improvement of the product and the service.

There is no guide or evaluation matrix for prosumer content. In summary, people and content must be consistent with the company's values to ensure a consistent image.

### **6.3 Standardized processes**

Since communication with prosumers is subject to only a few regulations, there is also an overall lack of existing organizational processes. However, the interviewees mentioned the execution of a few isolated recurring campaigns to achieve more consistent prosumer communication. For these recurring formats, the regularity of communication as well as the frequency of embedding prosumers and their content in communicative measures of the companies should be examined, as both factors contribute to the standardization of processes.

Furthermore, restrictions and possible obstacles in the design or implementation of communication processes were investigated. For example, data protection-related restrictions potentially hinder or even prevent prosumer integration into communication. In terms of workload distribution, jobs tasked with editing and organizing prosumer content were not specifically assigned to a certain position, division or unit, but rather divided between communications, marketing, and or social media teams.

When it comes to processes related to prosumer content, existing standardized processes and sequential steps of communication of shared mobility providers could be identified. Firstly, acquisition of prosumers and their content can be achieved via direct calls, through PR, direct contact with potential prosumers, participatory campaigns or challenges, a company newsletter, or reactive acquisition. The latter usually refers to gathering information on social media through customer interactions via hashtag searches or social media monitoring and social listening. In some cases, additional incentives are advertised ahead of the interaction or during the course of acquisition. This, in interplay with the inherent sharing economy community spirit, creates an incentive to participate.

Secondly, to prepare the collected content for further distribution, editorial work is mostly done internally, sometimes utilizing existing tools and in individual cases supported by an external agency. Simultaneous collection of customer feedback as part of prosumer content has great potential and should be integrated in this step. During this evaluation process, maintaining authenticity of the selected contributions plays a central role. Furthermore, in the context of content analysis, key performance indicators (KPIs) such as reach, ad equivalent value (AVE), and tone, but also engagement were mentioned as the most important success and resonance measurement tools by the communicators. Overall, the interviewees share the impression that prosumer content in particular is very well perceived compared to more advertising-heavy content.

Finally, the commitment of prosumers to a company and thus the integration of prosumers into the value creation process was investigated. Through loyalty campaigns, exclusive events, and other forms of direct communication, retention can be reinforced. A company's recognition and gratitude for the created content, feedback, support or actions should be expressed in appreciative interaction with prosumers, for which these formats offer a valid platform.



In many of the interviews, it was recognized that prosumer communication yields great potential, but is far from reaching its full impact. The perception of the interviewed professionals is supported by the sporadic implementation of recurring processes in prosumer content management.

#### **6.4 Implications for Future Research**

Regarding the current state of research, there is a great need to reappraise prosumers and their suitability for corporate communication. Hence, companies need empirically based recommendations for action to successfully integrate prosumers into their strategic communication.

The present paper offers starting points for quantitative empirical research regarding the actual ability of companies to reach prosumers most effectively when choosing the right tools and channels. Furthermore, it stands to question if corresponding communication measures have an impact on the loyalty of users when companies did select prosumers to achieve the highest authenticity. In addition, it can be assumed that companies increase the influx of prosumers if they advance their acquisition measures through greater standardization of the processes. These assumptions lead to the following three hypotheses:

*H1:* Companies reach prosumers most effectively when they make use of social monitoring tools.

*H2:* Loyalty of users increases if companies select prosumers according to the main criterion of authenticity.

*H3:* Influx of prosumers increases if companies advance their acquisition measures through greater standardization of the process.

## **7 Discussion**

The process dimension of prosumer communication proved to be one of the greatest challenges for the surveyed companies. Communication with and about prosumer content is characterized by intuitive action. Due to the novelty of the subject and therefore sparse research on the topics, there is little evidence for industry-wide standards. With regard to the definitional proximity, the processes for working with social media influencers can certainly be used as guidance in designing the workflow for ordinary social media users, i.e. prosumers. Thus, strategic prosumer communication could be designed as a management process along the phases of planning, organization, and controlling (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 270). This way, not only goals could be set and reviewed, but also an increase in trust towards the company could be better understood and strategically evaluated.

Some companies already possess internal strategies that are mainly based on reactive acquisition. These are, for example, based on hashtag searches to find and utilize all content that matches a predetermined pattern. They are to be generated in advance through targeted communicative measures. However, internal strategies also show a lack of strategic planning of these actions (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 271).

Diversity, a stereotypical norm appearance, as well as a breaking away from the norms were emphasized as criteria for content selection. This can, however, lead to an irregularity in the external presentation of the company, and subsequently to a diminished perceived authenticity of the measures. Nevertheless, authenticity of the prosumers was emphasized by most companies as an essential criterion. If this characteristic could be operationalized more clearly and tied to additional features, a similar catalog of requirements could be derived. In addition, companies can specifically control concrete requirements through their own calls and initiatives to generate content, such as recurring formats or events.

On the other hand, the lack of procedural cornerstones of prosumer communication also affects its regularity, since one must always rely on active acquisition by the company, time-intensive analysis, and selection of the content. In addition to these process-related problems, unclear competence structures and widely distributed responsibilities were often apparent within the business units. In smaller companies, this occurred mainly due to a smaller number of employees. In larger companies, however, additional hurdles, such as coordination difficulties, arose during implementation due to a lack of positions exclusively entrusted with prosumer communication. Still, the novelty of the field must be taken into account, although awareness of the necessary expansion and centralization of competencies rises.

Apart from this, the use of tools and channels could also be improved by such an advancement of the field, as currently no specific software can be found to structure prosumer connections. Establishing contact and interaction with prosumers primarily takes place in social networks. Therefore, the use of social media management tools for the organization and preparation of content is highly feasible.

However, the reactive mode of action proves to be problematic since monitoring or researching content can only take place after initiatives have been conducted. Nevertheless, the future viability of the topic and the positive response by customers and recipients to existing measures were emphasized above all.

### **7.1 Best Practices & Recommendations for Action**

The search for prosumer-generated material through reactive acquisition can be seen as a starting point for further developments in the strategic sourcing of prosumer content. As a rule, companies carry out reactive acquisition, which can also be expanded to include an active component. This could lead to full exploitation of the potential of the acquisition of prosumable content which companies manage to generate targeted attention and content, i.e. through direct calls, personal contact, participatory campaigns, and corporate newsletters. Willingness to participate as a

prosumer can be supported by additional incentives such as free goodies, bonuses, free usage of goods and services, loyalty campaigns, and multiplier meetings. Ideally, these measures are linked to specific hashtags or other searchable and filterable characteristics to make social monitoring as efficient as possible.

Regarding the type of content, authenticity plays a main role in the selection of prosumer material. It manifests itself in the voluntary documentation of the everyday life of prosumers. Most frequently mentioned as a requirement, communication experts are seemingly aware of its potential: authentic content encourages the effective generation of trust. De Veirmann et al. (2017, p. 813) also define authenticity as an important criterion to collaborate with and choose social media influencers. Since SMI are denied their independence due to monetary incentives and also considering strategic interest (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 266), authenticity plays an even more important role with prosumers. It is a decisive advantage, which must be maintained and leveraged for effective generation of true-to-life content. Nevertheless, other criteria should be developed and fixed in order to promote and encourage this type of content.

Furthermore, holistic planning integrated with other communication activities through tools such as Zendesk or Trello as well as subsequent coordinated distribution through e.g. Socialbakers or Hootsuite is shown to be suitable for aligning communication measures.

In order to coordinate the aforementioned steps of prosumer communication, a fundamental strategy is required to manage and control the standardized processes, requirement catalogs, and technical prerequisites jointly. This way, effective dealing with prosumers becomes possible and their extensive potential harnessed.

## **7.2 Future Perspectives**

Communication experts generally expect the importance of prosumer content to increase. One reason for this is the change in consumer behavior with regard to social media use. Through increasingly democratized communication, more customers participate in the communication process. Prosumer content will be increasingly integrated in order to represent companies through likeable faces people can identify with. Authenticity plays an important role here. The lifestyle networks Tiktok and Instagram are becoming more popular and focus on people instead of corporate content. Consequently, more consumer-focused content from groups such as taxi drivers and passengers will emerge, as they interact directly with the product.

It will become increasingly difficult to work in strategic communication without showcasing employee or external prosumer voices, which have been proved as a very powerful tool. Moreover, a stronger sense of community, triggered by the community aspect of prosumer content, makes customers feel more responsible for the fleet in question.

As far as the quantity of usable material is concerned, the interviewed experts foresee an increasing influx, so that the topic will continue to occupy communications departments. In terms of response, the interviewees stated that prosumer content was much better received than regular posts. Individuals and customer groups should be involved in order to build credibility. This is the only way to maintain trust if prosumers expect to be an active part of communication in the future.

## **8 Limitations**

Generally, conducting guided interviews with experts was an appropriate method of collecting data in the context of the intended research interest. However, reactivity, social desirability, and interview effects possibly tainted results as consequences of this methodological approach. Apart from that, the study cannot fully represent

the population with regard to the scope of twelve expert interviews. Moreover, only experts from communications departments were selected as interview partners, with companies deciding independently who was ultimately chosen. Consequently, perspectives on prosumers in strategic communication may be preconceived.

In order to achieve reliable and valid results with six researchers, several measures were taken: Complete transcripts of the interview records, the joint development of a system of categories with the associated definitions and the technique of *consensual coding* to ensure intercoder agreement (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 74). Despite these efforts, there remains a residual risk of subjectivity during the coding process. In order to adhere to the validity of this research, the construct of prosumers was precisely defined in advance and delimited from related topics. Furthermore, the research questions were derived from the theoretical foundation, from which the test questions of the expert interviews emerged. In order to prevent misinterpretation of the term and misunderstandings during the interviews, the interviewed experts were provided with both definitions of key concepts and the guideline before their interview.

## 9 Conclusion

Sharing resources can make a significant contribution to curbing the culture of overproduction and thus proves to be forward-looking for ecological reasons. This is taken up by the business model of the sharing economy industry. Shared mobility, in particular, is experiencing a boom (Bundesverband CarSharing, 2021, para. 1). To remain competitive in the constantly growing market, service providers can add value to the company through strategic communication (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 502).

For shared mobility companies, the integration of prosumers – an integral part of the business model (Lang et al., 2020b, p. 178) – into corporate communication is an opportunity to optimize their value chain to increase user satisfaction and trust in the company (Eckardt et al., 2019, p. 9).

Although prosumers are used in the strategic communication of shared mobility companies, their potential is not sufficiently exploited. Neither tools nor channels specifically tailored to prosumers could be identified. The acquisition and distribution of prosumer content is done via the same communication tools that are used for other communication activities, especially in the area of social media. The shared mobility companies do not have specific catalogs of requirements for the use of prosumers. Nonetheless, the keywords *authenticity* and *trust* are particularly relevant in this context: The authentic external image of prosumers is used specifically in corporate communications to strengthen user trust. To achieve long-term success potential through the involvement of prosumers, shared mobility companies must consolidate and professionalize their acquisition measures. There are hardly any existing standardized processes in this regard. A significant reason for this could be the lack of awareness of the opportunities and potential of involving prosumers in strategic communication.

This initial review of the use of prosumers in corporate communications is intended to facilitate the transfer of findings into practice. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that this study is an initial exploration of the research field. Thus, it only represents a condensed section of the sharing economy industry. A starting point for further research could be to investigate whether the advantages of including prosumers in strategic communication identified by the companies in this study have the desired resonance on the user side. Investigating the actual amount of prosumer content that companies use in strategic communication also seems particularly informative in light of these findings.

The research also offers starting points for quantitative empirical studies: Do companies actually reach prosumers most effectively when they increase usage of social monitoring tools and hashtag searches? Do corresponding communication measures increase the loyalty of users if companies select their prosumers according to the main criterion of authenticity?

Overall, it can be stated that the surveyed communicators of shared mobility companies have an inkling of the potential of using prosumers in corporate communications, but are by no means using them across the board and only partially on a strategic basis. Finally, two things remain to be seen over the coming years. First, whether strategic activities from the corporate side will increase. Second, whether corresponding acquisition measures will be accepted and implemented on the less controllable prosumer side.



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