A New Episode of Podcasting: The Strategic Implementation of Corporate Podcasts in External Communications as an Innovative On Demand Medium

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Abstract

Podcasts are enjoying a growing number of listeners and increasingly represent an additional channel through which companies can address target groups. Due to its on demand, time-shifting, and mobile characteristics, the medium is predestined for today's demanding media users. Despite their growing importance, corporate podcasts as well as their implementation remain an empirically understudied phenomenon. In order to close this research gap, 13 interviews with German podcast managers were conducted. Overall, the results reveal that the medium's implementation along the lines of strategic communication management still needs to be developed further. Due to the novelty of the usage for organizational purposes, experience is still being gathered. Nevertheless, planning and implementation phases are already well thought through and established. Deficits, however, do exist in the analysis of the situation and in result control. Based on the weaknesses revealed, the study provides hypotheses for further quantitative testing as well as implications for practice, which should be considered to help unfold the potential of the innovative audio format, making podcasts become a tool to strengthen stakeholder relationships more widely.

Keywords: corporate podcasts, podcasts, communication management, strategic communication, corporate communication

1 Introduction

While podcasts were still a niche phenomenon just a few years ago, the audio format has now found a permanent place in the current media landscape and everyday life of many people (Bonini, 2015, pp. 27-28). As listeners are able to choose the time and place of their podcast consumption, consumers gain greater control and possibilities for personalization (Morris & Patterson, 2015, p. 222). Furthermore, podcasts allow for intimate relationships to be built between hosts and listeners (Berry, 2016, p. 13). Due to its increasing popularity in society, interest in podcasts is also growing among companies, which are profiting from the trend in their communication portfolio by producing so-called corporate podcasts themselves (Schreyer, 2019, p. 11). But while expectations towards the medium as a success factor for corporate communications are high in theory, corporate podcasts are still a largely unexplored phenomenon in academia. Research mainly focuses on podcasts in general, examining its evolution (Berry, 2016; Bonini, 2015), its use in various contexts such as education (McNamara & Drew, 2019), health (Turner-McGrievy, Kalyanaraman, & Campbell, 2013), and journalism (Lindgren, 2016) as well as investigating characteristics and motives of its users (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020; Reichow & Schroeter, 2020), and producers (Markman & Sawyer, 2014). An analysis of the literature on corporate podcasts revealed that publications are limited, as they largely consider the medium's strengths and weaknesses (Berr, 2012), fields of application (Deseniss, 2011), formats and strategic premises for its successful use (Hammerschmidt, 2020; Schreyer, 2019). Yet, these statements lack empirical evidence, which highlights the need for more in-depth research. One of the few empirical studies conducted in Germany is provided by Huber, Matthes and Stenneken (2008), who investigated possible effects and success factors of corporate podcasts. Taking theory's constant emphasis on the great relevance of a strategic podcasting concept for the tool's success (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 23; Schreyer, 2019, p. 11) into consideration, this study is dedicated to analyzing the creation process of corporate podcasts and examines the question:

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To what extent do companies in Germany implement corporate podcasts along the four phases of strategic communications management in external corporate communications?

To investigate the topic, this paper builds on a theoretical approach by Krugmann and Pallus (2008). The authors transfer the four phases of the management process (situation analysis, planning, implementation, control) to the podcast production process, the so-called podcasting. After an introduction to the topic of corporate podcasts and a review of the state of research, this management process is outlined. Secondly, the results of 13 semi-structured expert interviews with communication experts responsible for corporate podcasts are presented, followed by answering the research questions and deriving hypotheses. Finally, an outlook on further research and applications in practice is provided.

2 Podcasting: From a Niche Phenomenon to a Trend Medium

The term *podcast* was introduced by the journalist Ben Hammersley in 2004 and originated from a blend of the apple MP3 player's name *iPod* and the noun *broadcast*. It "generally refers to an episode or series of audio content downloaded or streamed from the internet on demand or via subscription service" (Brown, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, podcasts are based on three key technologies: just like MP3 files, they are audio formats published on the internet, which can be subscribed to as they include a Really Simple Syndication feed. Moreover, podcasts consist of several episodes (Brown, 2020, p. 1).

While the market developed rapidly in the U.S., mainly due to Apple's iTunes music platform, the medium spread only gradually in Germany (Ruisinger, 2011, pp. 203-204). It was not until 2005/2006 that podcasts triggered a boom in this country. At first, they were mainly published by radio and TV stations or hobby podcasters and were characterized by amateurish use (Schreyer, 2019, p. 2). Since 2014, however, podcasts have transnationally entered what Bonini (2015) calls the "second age of podcasting" (p. 22): a phase that is characterized by professionalization and

commercialization of the new media format. Reasons that led to this resurgence were a steady proliferation of smartphones and mobile Internet usage as well as a change in general media consumption towards a more self determined and flexible use (Hammerschmidt, 2020, p. 13).

In line with the professionalization of podcasts, companies also started to increasingly use the format for their own corporate communications (Deseniss, 2011, pp. 129-130). These podcasts, published by companies or brands, are called corporate podcasts. Their goal is to enhance a company's positive image, which can be achieved through a strategic orientation and the conceptual embedding of the medium in the company's communication and marketing strategy (Schreyer, 2019, pp. 4, 11). In this context, a corporate podcast represents a direct channel to all relevant internal and external stakeholders and can be used in marketing and corporate communications in different ways (Ruisinger, 2011, p. 205). Specifically, corporate podcasts can function as instruments of direct product information, as product-supplementing services in the context of sales promotion, as customer loyalty tools, or as instruments for building up experience brands (Deseniss, 2011, pp. 132-136).

They are characterized by an authentic DIY-character, even in today's professionalization of podcasting (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021, p. 3). In addition, the audio format offers the chance of unadulterated and authentic communication, because communication takes place directly and is not subject to an editorial filter and gatekeeper (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 14). Due to its informal, conversational style and the focus on serial storytelling, a podcast can build a loyal audience. Moreover, the focus on stories leads to a high narrative absorption and a high listener involvement (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021, p. 3). An additional strength is the personal and emotional appeal to the recipients, which is made possible by the audio form. The focus on sounds and voices paired with the time and space independent consumption can create closeness and a deep intimacy with the

listeners (Berry, 2016, p. 13), bring about a lasting bond between brand and listener, and have a positive impact on brand perception (Schütz, 2014, pp. 9-10). That is why they are ideally suited for persuasive communication in a company's external communication.

3 The Standpoint of Corporate Podcasts in Literature

Empirical research on podcasts began in 2004, shortly after the emergence of the first digital audio files (Bonini, 2015, p. 24). Research thereby mainly focuses on the medium's usage in contexts such as education, health, and journalism. The educational podcast literature for example is concerned with the potentials and uses of podcasts in the education sector (Kay, 2012; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011) investigating among other things the impact of podcasts on learning (McNamara & Drew, 2019). In addition, some studies have researched demographic characteristics and motivations of podcasters (Markman & Sawyer, 2014), while others studied the media format itself, discussing its evolution (Berry, 2016; Bonini, 2015) and the impact of digital audio platforms such as Apple and Spotify on the podcast industry structure, content and governance (Sullivan, 2019). Moreover, the influence of podcasting on the broadcasting market and especially its relationship with radio has been scrutinized. In 2016, Berry raised the questions whether podcasting can be regarded as a form of radio or radiogenic practice and whether it is displacing traditional radio listening. Despite similar formats, content, and duration, he concludes that podcasts have developed certain characteristics that distinguish them from radio. While he already refers to radio as an intimate medium, he argues that podcasts go one step further and convey a "hyper-intimacy" (p. 666) through an intimate listening environment and form of communication. Bonini (2015) also states that podcasts not only exist complementary to radio but are an alternative to it (p. 23).

In the context of journalism research, the effects of podcasts on non-fictional audio storytelling formats were also investigated. Thereby, the format of personal narrative

journalism in podcasting could be identified as a new, informal genre (Lindgren, 2016, p. 23), which forces a strong relationship between presenter and listener (McHugh, 2016, p. 66). Taking those findings into account, Schlütz and Hedder (2021) analyzed listeners' parasocial relationships to podcast hosts, the causes thereof and its persuasive effects. The study showed that podcasts do not differ strongly from other mediums when it comes to building parasocial relationships, but, nevertheless, a hosts' opinion and the topics they are talking about might put certain topics on the agenda of the listeners and can be thought provoking and action leading (pp. 9-11). These results give reason to believe that companies that manage to build a good relationship with their listeners through their podcast can also inspire follow-up actions.

In addition to studies that refer to specific areas within the use of podcasts, there is also a steadily growing number of studies that regularly survey the socio-demographic characteristics of podcast listeners and their behavior (Reichow & Schroeter, 2020) as well as reveal their respective motives for consumption (McClung & Johnson, 2010). Recent studies show that typical podcast listeners are young, well-educated, and hold purchasing power (Podstars, 2021, pp. 4-7). When it comes to their consumption motives, Chan-Olmsted and Wang (2020) provide the newest empirical research, aiming to draw a comprehensive picture of the motivation and usage of podcast users in the United States. They found out that the three most popular motives for podcast consumption are entertainment, information and audio platform superiority, which the researchers define as "the desire to use an audio platform that is perceived to be superior to other audio alternatives" (p. 9). According to the study, respondents for whom the entertainment motive is particularly important use podcasts to relax and be entertained. The information motive relates back to the respondents' desire to learn new things about the world around them through the podcast (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020, p. 9). These findings should be considered by companies when choosing the format and content of their corporate podcast. Overall, however, it can be stated that the studies as well as the metrics and

indicators are not yet as pronounced and meaningful compared to other media genres (Hammerschmidt, 2020, p. 26). Currently, there is still a lack of uniform benchmark instances with regard to podcasts (Reichow & Schroeter, 2020, p. 513).

Among the different fields of study concerning podcasts, corporate podcast research is especially fragmented and scarce. The literature is limited to publications on the medium's strengths and weaknesses, fields of application, formats, and strategic premises for its successful use (Schreyer, 2019). Empirically, however, little consideration is given to corporate podcasts and their implementation which stresses the importance and need of further research. Huber et al. made a first attempt to counter the research deficit in 2008. In their study, they investigated possible effects and impact processes of corporate podcasts and identified success factors for their use. When interpreting those results today, however, it is important to keep in mind that the study dates back to the first podcast era, meaning that the findings therefore might not be accurate anymore today. Nevertheless, they can serve as a first base from which to start researching further. Within Huber et al.'s (2008) study, the listeners' attitude towards corporate podcasts is seen as a central construct in the impact process. Thus the authors researched to what extent said process is again determined by the information content, entertainment value, perceived value of the corporate podcasts as well as the mood of the podcast listeners and the general attitude towards online advertising. The results showed that the constructs of information value, entertainment value and the perceived value of the corporate podcast have a significant influence on attitudes towards the corporate podcast and thus can represent success factors. Listeners' attitudes towards online advertising and their mood, however, have no influence on stances towards corporate podcasts (Huber et al., 2008, pp. 147-149).

In addition to the impact of corporate podcasts, other focal points in the previous literature are producer's viewpoints on the format and initial theoretical considerations about the creation process within companies. Krugmann and Pallus (2008) emphasize

the importance of strategic planning by highlighting that podcasting requires a management process in order to be able to fully exploit acoustic impact potentials (p. 23). The authors classify the communication instrument as a part of acoustic brand positioning and transfer the four phases of communication management to the creation process of corporate podcasts. In doing so, they assign the individual steps of podcasting to situation analysis, planning, implementation, and control, analogously to the phases of communication management. The authors' theoretical considerations serve as the basis for this study.

4 Theoretical Background: Podcasting as a Management Process

The theoretical assumptions of podcasting as a management process by Krugmann and Pallus (2008) will now be examined for its application in practice. Figure 1 shows the individual steps of the respective phases. However, in this study, the design of each phase of strategic communication management is supplemented by considerations from current publications on the subject of corporate podcasts (see Hammerschmidt, 2020; Schreyer, 2019).
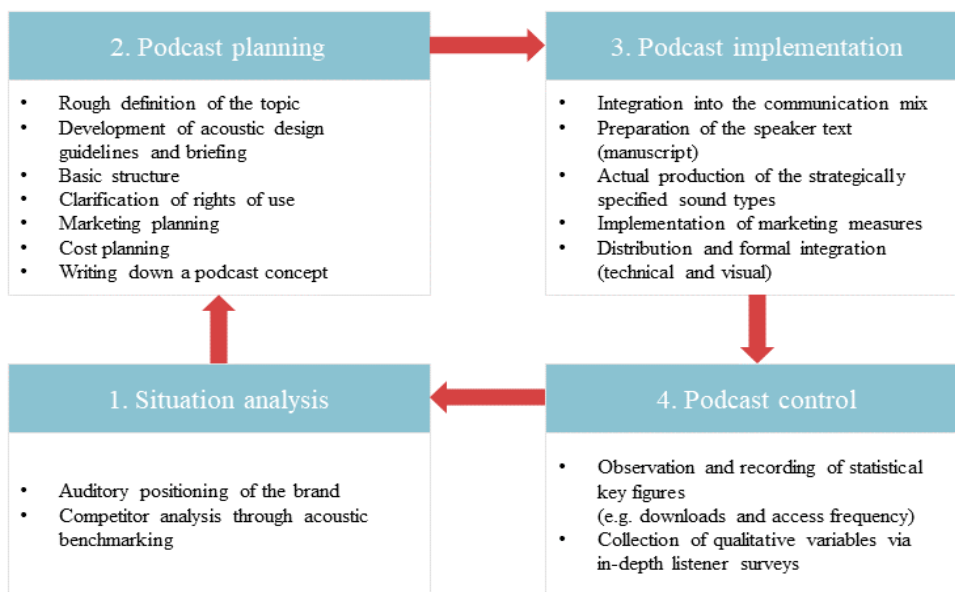

Figure 1. Podcasting as a Management Process *Source*. Own illustration based on Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 20

According to Krugmann and Pallus (2008), the auditory positions of the brand or company, as well as podcasts from competing brands and companies, are analyzed within the situation analysis (p. 68). In the course of podcast planning, the overall topic of the podcast is roughly defined, acoustic design guidelines are developed, the structure is determined, the rights of use of the music used are clarified, marketing planning and cost planning are carried out, and a podcast concept is established (pp. 21, 74, 77, 87, 89, 96-97). Moreover, the goals of podcasting are determined (Schreyer, 2019, pp. 16-18) and target groups are defined (Hammerschmidt, 2020, p. 68). Following the argumentation of Krugmann and Pallus (2008), all planned measures to publicize the podcast are realized within the implementation phase (p. 21). Furthermore, another part of the implementation phase is the production of the planned sound types, the preparation of speaker texts (pp. 20-21) as well as the determination of the distribution platforms (p. 130) and the frequency of publication (Hammerschmidt, 2020, pp. 76-77). Finally, quantitative indicators, such as the number of downloads per episode, are recorded in the last phase of podcast monitoring, and qualitative data is collected through surveys distributed to listeners (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 21). In addition, a process control is carried out to reflect on selective decisions in the individual phases, to adjust the actions aligned to the achievement of objectives and to check the validity of the formulated objectives (Zerfass, 2014, p. 69).

Based on the four phases of the podcasting management process according to Krugmann and Pallus (2008), four research questions (RQs) were posed in the given research to verify in how far the phases are actually implemented by companies hosting a corporate podcast.

> *RQ1:* To what extent is a situation analysis conducted to position the corporate podcast?

> *RQ2:* To what extent is the concept of corporate podcasting based on strategic planning?

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RQ3: What criteria are taken into account in the implementation of the corporate podcast?

RQ4: To what extent does a result and process control of the corporate podcast take place?

5 Method: Qualitative Expert Interviews with Communication Executives Responsible for Corporate Podcasts

Due to the exploratory character of the study forming the basis for this research and in order to fill the research gap described above, qualitative expert interviews were conducted. The sample comprises 13 communication executives responsible for a corporate podcast in external corporate communications. To ensure comparability between the strategic communication management of the respective corporate podcasts, the selection criterion of the companies with the highest revenue in Germany was set. In addition, media organizations were deliberately excluded from the sample because the focus was placed on companies whose core business does not lie in the provision of communicative means. To draw the sample, German companies from the "Fortune Global 500 2020" list (Fortune Media IP Limited, 2020) and the "GLOBAL 2000 - The World's Largest Public Companies" ranking, also from 2020 (Murphy, Tucker, Coyne, & Touryalai, 2020), were taken into consideration. In the period from December 8th, 2020 to December 15th, 2020 a total of 22 experts with the above-mentioned characteristics had been contacted through various channels, and interviews were conducted with 13 of them (equalling a 59 percent success rate). The surveyed companies and their corporate podcasts are listed in table 1.

Company	Interviewed Communication Expert	Podcast Name	Launch
BASF SE	Digitalization in Communications and Manager Corporate Social Media	ELEMENTary	2020
BMW AG	Digital Audio & Voice Strategy	HYPNOPOLIS	2020
Daimler AG	Editor-in-Chief Daimler Podcast	HeadLights − Der Daimler-Podcast	2019
Deutsche Bahn AG	Head of Media Cooperation and Content	Unterwegs mit...	2020
Deutsche Bank AG	Media Spokesperson	PERSPEKTIVEN To Go	2018
Deutsche Boerse AG	Senior Executive in Group Communications & Marketing	Boersenplatz − Der Podcast rund um die Finanzwelt	2020
Deutsche Post DHL Group	Senior Managing Editor internal Online Platforms, Formats and Storytelling	Living Logistics	2020
Deutsche Telekom AG	Press Officer	Telekom Netz	2019
Henkel AG & Co. KGaA	Corporate Communications Employees in the Corporate Branding & Communications Strategy Team	Fritz for Future	2020
Merck KGaA	Senior Manager Brand Communication	Future Talk	2018
Porsche AG	Head of Corporate Publishing	09:11. Porsche. Podcast.	2020
SAP Deutschland SE & Co. KG	Customer Advisory Lead	SAP Experts Podcast	2019
Siemens AG	Communications Manager	Talking Digital Industries	2019

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

The interview guide developed included 14 open-ended questions, which could be formulated differently or adjusted in the respective interview situations. Therefore, it is possible to speak of a partially standardized survey (Scholl, 2018, p. 77). For the conception of the interview guide, the most important steps in the respective phases of podcasting as a management process according to Krugmann and Pallus (2008) were retrieved and formulated as interview questions (pp. 20-22, 67-138). In addition, relevant aspects from communication management according to Zerfass (2014) as well as the basic works on podcasting by Schreyer (2019) and Hammerschmidt (2020) were consulted in order to enrich the four phases and consider them extensively. Moreover, further interview questions were generated based on identified research gaps.

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The test questions were partially supplemented by contingency questions to ensure that the most important points needing to be found out were mentioned (Scholl, 2018, p. 70). In addition, some test questions included examples or specification questions for illustration purposes. The examples and specification questions were optional and only mentioned if the interviewee did not know what the question asked was intended to address. The contingency questions, on the other hand, were asked if an interviewee did not address a significant aspect of the main question. To check whether the questionnaire is comprehensible, a pretest was conducted with the person responsible for the corporate podcast "Der Apothekenpodcast".

The interviews were conducted via video conference softwares. No test questions were sent to respondents in advance to avoid strategic planning of question responses by study participants (Scholl, 2018, p. 207).

The interviews were evaluated using a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2014). The development of a category system, containing both deductive categories derived from theory as well as inductive categories extracted from the text material, ensured a structured, rule-based, and comprehensible evaluation (Mayring, 2014, p. 97). For each research question, one specific deductive main category with corresponding deductive subcategories was modeled. The main categories represent the four phases of podcasting as a management process according to Krugmann and Pallus (2008, p. 20). Moreover, the categories and subcategories were inductively further developed, differentiated or complemented in the course of the first coding and afterwards were revised again so that the existing material could be exhaustively mapped with the final category system in the following coding run. Before the actual coding of the interviews, the research group carried out a reliability test. For this purpose, all research group members test-coded the same interview and discussed the coding afterwards. This ensured the quality criterion of intercoder reliability (Mayring, 2014, p. 42). It was also made sure that the members of the research group did not code the interviews that they conducted themselves.

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6 Results

When presenting the results, the names of the specific companies are given as representatives for the corporate podcast. However, as some individual companies operate several podcasts, results cannot be equated with the attitudes and approaches of the entire companies and instead should only be seen as representative for the respective podcasts in the sample.

6.1 Situation Analysis

The first research question considered here is dedicated to the conduct of a *situation analysis* for the positioning of the corporate podcast. With regard to the *competitor analysis* as part of the situation analysis, it can be stated overall that only a very small proportion of companies from the sample would classify their own approach as strategic. Nevertheless, a majority of the companies specified that they had checked on relevant podcast platforms to see to what extent companies in the same industry, or on the German market in general, already publish a corporate podcast. In addition, some of the podcasters indicated that a competitor analysis was hardly implementable when they were planning their podcast, due to the small number of corporate podcasts on the German market. Other corporations, however, stated that they had taken a more in-depth look at the German corporate podcast market. The motives for a more detailed investigation of the podcast market can again be distinguished in two ways. BASF SE noted that this step served as a basic orientation for the planning of their corporate podcast. At the same time, the competitor analysis also helped the companies to differentiate themselves from the existing competition in a targeted manner. In general, it can be seen that many of the interviewed companies indicated that they had carried out an analysis of the general podcast landscape rather than a competitor analysis.

When looking at the *auditive analysis*, some of the respondents stated that they use the corporate jingle in their respective podcasts without having consciously thought

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about the intention of this use. At the same time, many of the companies noted not having a corporate jingle, an overarching sound strategy, no corporate sound, or a sound identity that could have been used for a corporate podcast. In contrast, the use of melodies was thought through in detail by many of the respondents. Here, the focus was often laid on the fact that the melodies used should fit the topic and format of the podcast and do not necessarily need to have a direct connection to the company.

6.2 Planning Phase

When determining the overarching theme of the corporate podcast in the *planning* phase, some of the companies surveyed stated that they had derived their theme from the overarching communications strategy and thus from the *corporate strategy*. Other companies in turn derived the *overarching theme* of their podcast from other communication measures, such as their customer magazine. With regard to the corporate reference of the corporate podcast, a distinction could be made on the basis of the sample between a *direct* and an *indirect corporate reference*. About half of the respondents chose a topic for their corporate podcast that has a direct connection to their company. For them, it was primarily important to highlight their own expertise through the podcast and to position themselves as credible experts in their respective subject area. Those companies whose corporate podcast only indirectly references their company largely pursued the intention of focusing on a topic of direct interest to the listeners.

In terms of the podcast *format,* most of the companies surveyed chose a *talk* or *interview format* for their podcast. This was mostly justified by the possibility of being able to explain a topic in greater depth by referring back to experts. Also, the efficiency advantage was given as a reason for choosing this format. Only two of the interviewed companies opted for different podcast formats, but with the same intention in both cases. The BMW AG developed a *fiction podcast* in order to "practically stand out

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from the competition"[1] (BMW). The Deutsche Post DHL Group decided in favour of a *reportage podcast*. Nevertheless, it was noted in this regard that the production of the reportage podcast as a "lead format or concept [...] for corporate communication is rather difficult to realize" (Deutsche Post DHL Group).

Differences in the companies' approaches can also be seen in their choices of *speakers*. The choice of an *internal moderator* was made either for reasons of efficiency or to ensure a direct link to the company. When deciding on an *external moderator*, many companies pursued the intention of introducing a questioning external perspective into the podcast or to have the podcast be moderated by a person who is already known to the audience. The *number of speakers* varies across the sample between one and two. Interestingly the companies with two moderators mention the creation of a casual discussion atmosphere and the representation of different views on a topic as the reason.

In this context, it is also interesting to take a look at the *objectives* pursued within corporate podcasts. The majority of companies pursue, among other things, the goal of *positioning* their company through the podcast. Here, the respondents are primarily concerned with providing a deeper insight into the company. Through the podcast, the company's values and commitment or employee engagement should be reflected and made visible. Furthermore, it is equally important to the companies surveyed to create a certain *added value* with their corporate podcast. The corporations are not interested in promoting products or brands, but instead want to share expert knowledge, provide an insight into the industry, present more complex issues and thus make the company's world of topics accessible to the interested public.

> [T]hat's why I call it an expert podcast, because I'm not pitching a product here or anything. The best case szenario for corporate podcasting would be: If somebody says to me, 'Yeah, I've got a new product and I want to pitch that,' I'm like, 'Do that somewhere else, this is not the right place to do that.' [...] Because no one listens to a podcast because of a product pitch (SAP).

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[1] All quotations from German interviews were translated into English by the authors

Some of the companies also hope for a positive effect on their *image* in order to gain the trust of the target group through expertise, to strengthen the brand or to be perceived as an attractive employer. Furthermore, for some of the respondents it was particularly important to create a novelty experience for the listeners with the help of the podcast and to gain a new communicative touchpoint with the target group.

The responses to the measures taken to *promote* the podcast indicate that many of the podcasters use *paid advertising* and *paid content* on all social media channels to draw attention to their podcast. The *corporate social media channels* of the companies are also mostly used to promote the podcast. At the same time, however, several of the respondents noted that the company's own social media channels are judged to be an unsuitable advertising medium because they are not authentic and hardly any positive impact could be determined. Thus, Deutsche Boerse noted: "You need ambassadors!" (Deutsche Boerse). Many podcasters therefore rely on the promotion of their podcast via *private social media channels*, such as the channels of the moderators or podcast guests, as these are more personalized, have their own audience and can therefore be classified as more effective.

6.3 Implementation Phase

As part of the implementation phase, it was firstly analysed which criteria were used to determine the *topics of the individual podcast episodes*. The most frequently mentioned criterion for a topic was its fit with the *topics of the company*, though why said fit is important was often not reflected. If a reason was given, it was, for example, that the podcast should represent the company or that cross-promoting effects should be brought about across departments. Other frequently mentioned reasons for selecting a topic were the *currentness* and *social relevance*. In contrast to this, several companies stated that in their choice of topics for the individual episodes they focus on topics that do not need to be published timely. Instead, *timeless topics* were chosen especially when a series of podcast episodes were to be

pre-produced in order to ensure regular publication. Another aspect of planning the individual episodes of the podcast is the *time planning*, which is often handled very differently: While some companies only have a short planning horizon in order to be able to react flexibly to current topics, others rely on long-term planning of their episodes so that a regular publication rhythm can be maintained.

Examining the *relevance of a podcast* in comparison with other communication measures, it becomes clear that for the majority of respondents, corporate podcasts have established themselves as an equal instrument in the communication mix and are used supplementary to other channels. However, it was emphasized that corporate podcasts cannot replace other communication channels, as each channel can reach different relevant target groups. With regard to the relevance of corporate podcasts, the *advantages* of the *depth of the topic* and the *high involvement* of the recipients were pointed out, especially in comparison to social media. Generally, a tendency could be observed that an increasing relevance of podcasts is assumed, but the exact development is still difficult to assess.

Another aspect of the strategic implementation podcasts is the *distribution*, where various strategic commonalities can be observed in all companies. All respondents distribute their podcasts via several well-known audio *platforms* and some additionally via internal or personal channels such as the corporate website or the intranet. All respondents distribute their podcasts via platforms that are often referred to in the survey as "classic podcast channels", namely Spotify, Deezer and Apple Music. It was often mentioned that the respondents publish their podcast via hosts such as Podigee, which then in turn publish the podcast on various platforms. With regard to the chosen *time cycle* of the publications, it becomes clear that all companies chose a publication cycle varying from at least once a month to at most once a week. Of particular relevance here is that a regularity of the publication must be ensured in order to not lose any long-term listeners: "We took a bit of a break [...], which showed itself in our audience figures. [...] [S]o you need to maintain the regularity as much as possible" (Siemens).

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6.4 Control Phase

In order to evaluate the strategic *control* of results conducted by the corporate podcasters, the first step was to ask to what extent clear *Key Performance Indicators* (KPIs) were defined in advance of the podcast production or publication. A striking realization was that by far the largest proportion of the podcasters surveyed did not define any KPIs they were striving to achieve in advance. Instead, the focus often rested on trying out and learning how a corporate podcast can develop in the first place.

Overall, the respondents mainly use *quantitative key figures* to monitor success. The *number of streams* or *listeners*, *downloads per episode*, and *subscribers* were listed as particularly relevant. In addition, the *listening-through rate* was emphasised as a decisive metric. Many of the companies attribute greater importance to this than to, for example, the number of accesses and the reach of the podcast. BMW, for example, stated in this context that the

> listen-through rate is worth more to us than the reach itself. One listener who is enthusiastic about the topic and engages with our brand for 120 minutes is worth more than 1,000 who only tune in for one minute (BMW).

To date, however, there has hardly been any monitoring of results by means of *qualitative methods*. Only a few companies proactively collect direct *feedback from listeners*, for example via surveys. Rather, *colleagues* are informally asked for their opinion on an episode or *social media reactions*, such as comments, are analysed. Many respondents also addressed the *challenges* of monitoring results in this context. The two most frequently mentioned difficulties were *access to data* and the lack of *comparability* resulting from said lack.

From a strategic point of view, the companies surveyed draw different *lessons* from the monitoring of their respective results. Often, the monitoring of results is used to draw conclusions for future podcasting productions. In addition to monitoring results,

the survey also considered *process monitoring*, which usually concerns questions such as: "What went well, what went badly, what can we perhaps optimise? How can we develop the format further?" (Deutsche Bank). The *frequency of process control* varied within the sample from frequent and detailed to once or twice a year. Contrary findings included that there are no fixed *times for the process control* conducted by the interviewees, but rather it is carried out as needed. Within the framework of the process control, it is reviewed, for example, what one is currently satisfied with in the podcasting process and where there is still room for improvement. In addition, it is checked how well the cooperation (internally as well as with external partners) works and has worked in the past. The *insights gained from the process control* were far-reaching and varied. Several companies cited the importance of good sound quality as a finding. Others also stated that in the future they would like to rely on guides rather than scripts when preparing for interviews, so that the podcast comes across as naturally as possible. At the same time, it was once again established that a regularity in publication must be maintained in order not to lose listeners.

7 Discussion and Implications

The results of the study revealed the overarching tendency that the planning (RQ2) and implementation (RQ3) phases of strategic communication management tend to be more well established and are often implemented according to the recommendations from literature. Deficits, on the other hand, exist in the situation analysis (RQ1) and the control phase (RQ4).

The situation analysis corresponded with the theoretical considerations by Krugmann and Pallus (2008) in such a way that the results of the survey show that it was mostly considered whether and to what extent companies in the same industry use corporate podcasts and which best practices dominate the podcast market. However, hardly any companies conducted a strategic benchmark based on the criteria recommended by the authors (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, pp. 70-71). Despite this, the differences found within the sample with regard to the extent of the conducted

competitor analysis could be explained by varying first implementation periods: Those companies that first started publishing their podcasts in the period from 2018 to the beginning of 2019 did not have the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive competitor analysis, as only a minimal number of corporate podcasts existed on the German market at that time. Companies that have been publishing their corporate podcast since 2020 have a much more comprehensive approach in this regard. In doing so, they pursue the conscious goal of differentiating themselves from the existing competition through new formats and of utilizing the knowledge of best practices for their own podcast.

With regard to the auditory analysis in the context of the situation analysis, the results show that many of the companies surveyed do not possess the auditory elements recommended for acoustic brand management, such as sound logos and brand songs. Although a consistent acoustic brand presentation to the target group is assessed as an important recognition feature (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, pp. 25-30), being able to create a sustainable connection between host and listener (Schütz, 2014), this approach is not reflected in the information provided by the sample.

In view of RQ1, asking to what extent a situation analysis for the positioning of the corporate podcast was conducted, it can be stated that this first phase of communication management was only carried out extensively and strategically by very few of the interviewed companies. One possible reason for this finding could be the trial-and-error character of corporate podcasts, which many of the companies attribute to this still rather new communication instrument. These considerations are also reflected in the further research questions. The discrepancy with the literature, which emphasizes the integration of the corporate podcast into acoustic brand management, gives rise to a need for further research. One hypothesis to be tested is:

> H1. *Corporate podcasts that are strategically embedded in a company's acoustic brand management contribute more to brand loyalty.*

In the first step of podcast planning, the overarching theme of the podcast should be roughly defined, since this already results in a primary selection of potential listeners (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 74). At this point, a strategic approach can be observed across the entire sample, since both the fit to the own brand and the interest of the target group were considered by the companies in their choice of the overarching topic.

With regard to the objectives of the podcasts, it can primarily be seen that they were rarely derived from the corporate strategy and noted in a defined manner. Accordingly, the influence of the corporate podcast on the corporate strategy seems to hold less meaning in practice than it is assumed in theory. Nevertheless, many of the theoretically stated goals can be found in the information provided by the sample. The goals mentioned most frequently were corporate positioning (e. g. by providing a look into the internal works and values of the company) and to use the podcast to create an added value in society. In addition, a frequently mentioned goal was to create an Experience Brand, which suggests that companies do not use podcasts to promote their products or brand. Instead, the aim is to share expert knowledge and provide insight into the industry. This corresponds with the most frequently mentioned target group, the people interested in the topic, as well as the characteristics of podcasts as a medium of pull communication. Moreover, this result reflects a success factor for corporate podcasts identified by Huber et al. (2008): information value. In addition, the most frequent motives of podcast listeners investigated by Chan-Olmsted and Wang (2020) could be confirmed. The need for entertainment, information, and continuing education are cited by companies as the most common reasons for listening to podcasts.

The choice of format for corporate podcasts seems to often be derived from the objectives pursued. Thus, companies with the goal of positioning themselves as experts in a subject area opted for the expert interview. Companies whose goal was to present themselves as particularly innovative, however, wanted to stand out from

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the competition by implementing more elaborate formats such as the fiction podcast. It is striking at this point that the younger podcasts in the sample in particular opted for a more elaborate format and that a more strategic approach can also be found across further planning steps compared to the rest of the sample. Overall, these findings lead to the following hypothesis:

H2. *The objectives pursued with the corporate podcast determine the choice of format.*

Regarding the planning of advertising measures to publicize the corporate podcast, the results show that the podcast episodes were advertised on all channels listed by Krugmann and Pallus (2008, pp. 96-97). In particular, the communication channels listed in more recent sources, such as social media, paid advertisements, and a dedicated landing page, can be found in the information provided by the companies surveyed (Hammerschmidt, 2020, pp. 128-129, 137; Schreyer, 2019, p. 32).

With regard to RQ2, to what extent corporate podcasts are based on strategic planning, it was evident across the individual planning steps that the podcast as a communication tool is still a relatively new channel for most companies. Due to its characteristics, the podcast format differs from other classic communication channels, which is why individual planning steps also seem to differ. However, particularly in the case of the newer podcasts in the sample, some of the planning steps seemed to be thought through more strategically and derived from the knowledge conducted in the situation analysis priorly.

Looking at RQ3 and the criteria that are taken into account in the implementation, it becomes clear that despite some recommendations from the literature, there do not yet seem to be any regulations for the best possible implementation that are applied equally by all companies. Nevertheless, it can be observed that the realization of corporate podcasts seems to be linked closely to the different objectives of the respective company. This is reflected, for example, in the selection of topics for the individual episodes. The selected topic can often be considered as the basis for

further strategic decisions. For example, those companies whose podcast topics are directly related to the company's core business preferentially choose their own employees as podcast guests. One presumed intention behind this approach could be to underscore the company's desired role as an expert. Another strategic connection can be seen on the basis of the results between the selection of topics and the time planning. The surveyed companies either chose to distribute podcasts on current topics, or make regular publication their priority. Here, topics that are detached from current events can be planned further in advance and are sometimes scheduled as "buffer episodes" in order to be able to keep to the publication rhythm. Accordingly, the hypothesis can derived:

> H3. *The more current the topics covered in the podcast, the shorter the time horizon for planning the individual episodes.*

In addition to the timing of the podcast publication, the choice of distribution platforms was considered by many companies. Here, too, the results from the literature coincide with the findings obtained from the survey and appear to be broadly similar across all interviews (see Hammerschmidt, 2020, pp. 130-131; Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 130).

Regarding the monitoring of results in the context of RQ4, it is noticeable that clear quantitative KPIs were rarely set as objectives in advance to the development of the podcast. This finding does not correspond with the statements by Zerfass (2014), according to whom the objectives should clearly be set in advance and should be reviewed as part of the results monitoring process (p. 69). This observation can also be justified by the lack of experience with the medium, which makes a prior assessment difficult, for example with regard to a desirable reach and an appropriate number of subscribers. As a result, the monitoring of results was less concerned with checking for the fulfillment of predefined goals but instead aimed at a more general monitoring of the individual episodes in order to observe the timely development and to gain a feeling for the medium. However, it can be assumed that the regularly

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collected key figures will serve as a measure of success in future seasons and thus will also possibly have an influence on further situation analysis and planning. In addition to the number of streams and subscribers, the listen-through-rate was mentioned as the most important qualitative metric for monitoring results, as fewer listeners who engage intensively with the podcast were considered more valuable than a large number of consumers who quickly switch off again.

Feedback from listeners was named as the most important qualitative method for monitoring results, however, that feedback does not often seem to be actively gathered by the companies. Rather, the assessment of listeners' perceptions is based on feedback that reaches the podcast managers unsolicited, for example in the form of comments on social media platforms. Thus, at least in some areas, the qualitative methods for monitoring results do not seem to be strategically well founded and need further development. Over the course of the interviews, it was often critically emphasized that the result control is accompanied by some challenges, which could explain the mostly not strategically made decisions. It was frequently mentioned that podcast operators do not have sufficient access to the data surrounding their podcast. Among other things, this is reflected in non-transparent rankings, which also means that producers cannot compare their own success with that of others (Morris, 2021, p. 3). Hypothetically, it can be assumed at this point that:

> H4. *Better access to data also goes hand-in-hand with an increased and more active KPI setting.*

This is due to the fact that increased access to data gives companies a point of reference for their podcast success.

Some overlaps with recommendations from Zerfass (2014) were also found in the context of process control. Most companies seem to carry out operational process control, however, the attributed importance varies greatly: While some companies were unfamiliar with the term process control, others informally discussed the

process and gave feedback after each episode, yet others only implemented a process control when a problem was actively noticed.

In summary, to answer RQ4, all companies surveyed perform both success and process control of their corporate podcast. However, the extent of the strategy behind the control varies greatly from company to company, which could be related to the question of the extent to which the corporate podcast should actually be integrated into a company's communications mix or whether the podcast is still considered to be an experiment. This assumption could be tested as part of future research.

8 Limitations

When interpreting the findings of the given study, some limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the literature review revealed a prevailing theoretical focus of the state of research with a lack of empirical work on corporate podcasts. Therefore, in the context of this study, the theoretical considerations of Krugmann and Pallus (2008) on the strategic management of corporate podcasts were mainly used for operationalization, with the inclusion of other sources. However, the study as a whole lacks a more in-depth theoretical background. Furthermore, due to the lack of similar studies on the topic of corporate podcasts, the results cannot be sufficiently discussed and put into perspective.

The sampling of the present study is another aspect that must be critically reflected upon. Using a qualitative research design is always accompanied by comparatively small samples. No representative data in the statistical sense were collected. The results can therefore only be claimed for the individual respondents. Furthermore, the selection of the sample is limited to companies with the highest turnover in Germany. Hence, no conclusions can be drawn about the podcasting process among small and medium-sized companies or companies that are established in other countries. As already described in the framework of the method, the quality

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criterion of intercoder reliability, which is suitable for content analytic research, was implemented in the context of this study. In contrast, intracoder reliability was neglected. Ensuring intracoder reliability could have increased the quality of the research project.

9 Conclusion and Further Research

Corporate podcasts represent an innovative form of pull communication with a particularly involved and interested target group which is primarily young and educated with a high purchasing power. Due to the fact that the audio medium meets today's recipients desire for a flexible and self-determined media consumption, corporate podcasts will continue to gain relevance in the future. Despite their increasing importance, the literature review showed that there is still a lack of current, well-founded findings on corporate podcasts, their implementation and effects. Thus, this paper aimed at examining the trend medium of podcasts in external corporate communication. By determining the extent to which companies in Germany implement corporate podcasts along the four phases of strategic communication management in external corporate communication, the study provides one of the first scientific inputs for the newly emerging field of research on corporate podcasts.

Altogether, it was shown that the implementation of corporate podcasts along the lines of strategic communication management still has room for development. Due to the novelty of the usage for organizational purposes, experience is still being gathered. While the planning and implementation phases are already well thought out strategically, there is a lack of strategy in the situation analysis and control.

Almost all companies conducted neither a differentiated competitor analysis nor an auditory analysis ahead of the concepts development. Especially in view of the fact that podcasts can have an effect via acoustic stimuli that are associated with the brand, decisions on acoustic design should not be left to chance. A first step for

companies here would be to deal more consciously with their own acoustic brand positioning and to implement an auditory analysis as a fixed component of the situation analysis in practice.

As podcasts are a medium that is able to hit the current nerve of times, it is important that companies really think through the podcasting process strategically. In view of the experimental nature of podcasts, it is advisable to have a more consistent process control and to record the insights gained from the start onward in order to build up knowledge step by step. With regard to the control of results and the problem of lack of comparability often mentioned in this context, more transparency must be created on the market in the future and corresponding usage data must be made available by the streaming platforms. In addition, there is a need for overarching guidelines and standards which could give orientation to those responsible for corporate podcast communications.

The study also shows that companies are aware of the increasing importance of podcasts. Overall, however, there is agreement that corporate podcasts are not a substitute for other means of communication, but rather complement the variety of communication options. Altogether, it can be assumed that a more strategic approach, particularly in the first and last phases of communication management and the associated greater integration of corporate podcasts into the communications mix, will allow the potential of the audio format to be developed more broadly and podcasts to be used more successfully to achieve corporate goals.

Next to these valuable insights, the above-mentioned limitations of the study can be used as a starting point for further research on the strategic use of corporate podcasts. To begin with, future research could quantitatively verify the results and hypotheses obtained in this study to ensure their representativeness. In addition, prospective studies could target the strategic implementation of corporate podcasts in small and medium-sized companies and above that, take a look beyond Germany's national borders. In particular, a more in-depth comparison with the U.S. represents

an attractive research project, since here corporate podcasts have been used as a communication tool for a longer period of time and in line with this, more expertise has been built up.

All in all, as the popularity of the medium grows, so will the research field of corporate podcasts, where there are currently still many gaps to be filled. Having this study's results in mind, it remains interesting to observe if and to what extent the strategic communication management of corporate podcasts will become more professional in Germany.

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