Disrupt Adapt: New ways to deal with current challenges in media and communication

Godulla, Alexander (Ed.); Beck, Leonie (Ed.); Christiansen, Eva (Ed.); Johe, Pauline Anna (Ed.); Krüper, Torben (Ed.); Niemsch, Victoria (Ed.); Saxinger, Fabian (Ed.)

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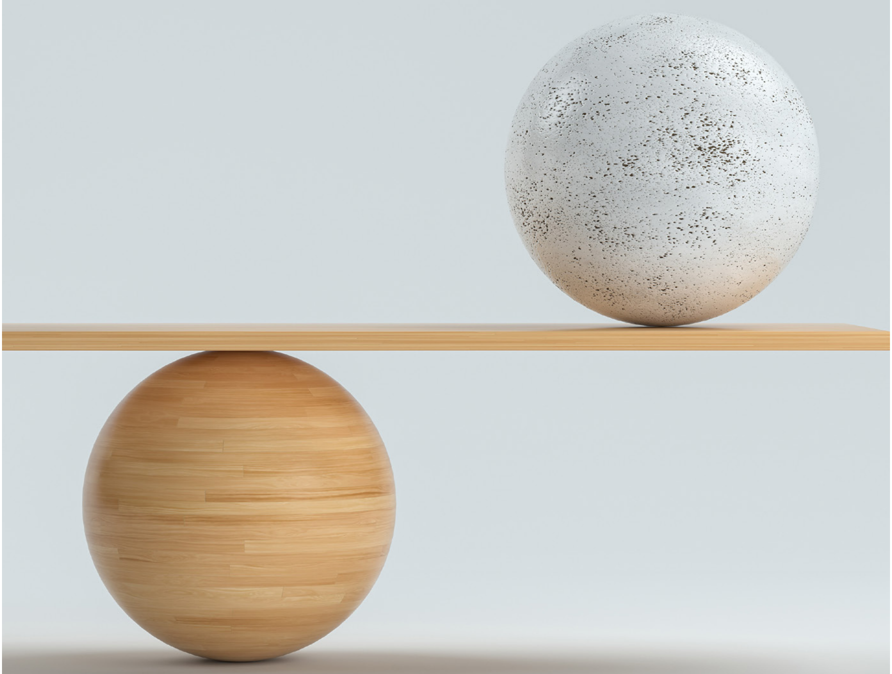

NEW WAYS TO DEAL WITH CURRENT CHALLENGES IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Edited by
Alexander Godulla,
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Imprint

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Edited by Alexander Godulla, Leonie Beck, Eva Christiansen, Pauline Anna Johe, Torben Krüper, Victoria Niemsch, and Fabian Saxinger

Book design by Amelie Baryal, Xenia Grohmann, Leonard Landau, and Friederike Rummeni

Editorial proofreading by Paula Christoph, Katharina Cremers, Sophia Heinl, Nick Hoffmann, Jakob Irler, Christina Lehmann, Kathleen Lehmann, Adrian Liehr, Stefanie Lörch, and Sabrina Zierer

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The Communication Management Masterclass of 2021

Contents

Editorial

Adapting in a Field of Constant Change

Alexander Godulla,
Leonie Beck, Eva Christiansen, Pauline Anna Johe,
Torben Krüper, Victoria Niemsch, Fabian Saxinger

The digital transformation is one of the major phenomena identified to constantly change society and business (Parviainen et al., 2017). The increased use of technological advances changes the ways of working in corporations and media companies alike. In the globalized world we live in today, news from all over the world are more accessible than ever before. Thus, it seems that nowadays, the worrying news are piling up: A seemingly never-ending pandemic, an increasingly polarized public, major political conflicts, the existential threats of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and a looming environmental catastrophe. All these developments lead us to see things we used to take for granted with different eyes: Peace, stability, economic and social well-being. Studies support this assessment and show that many people look anxiously into the future and struggle to adjust to the disruptions of their normal way of life. Every year, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network publishes the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2022). It measures how people in more than 150 countries across the globe rate their current emotional state and feelings. It is not very surprising that the report found out that sadness, stress, and worry are on the rise almost everywhere (Helliwell et al., 2022). We are living in truly challenging times and have been confronted with rapid and far-reaching changes to our world in the last couple of years.

In light of these developments, the world of communications is also changing. Technological advances and societal challenges have the potential to be obstacles for professionals in both strategic communication and journalism. Adapting to disturbances of known work processes can be difficult – but it is possible. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said: “There is nothing permanent except change” (Greek philosopher, c. 535 BCE – c. 475 BCE). So, if change is an unavoidable part of life, why not embrace it?

Instead of feeling intimidated by these developments, why not see them as chances and face them head on? If there is one thing humanity has always been good at, it's adapting to new circumstances and seeing even major crises as opportunities for development.
This mindset of seeing change as an opportunity for growth instead of an insurmountable obstacle is the first step in mastering these challenges. Especially in times of transformations, science points the way in developing new strategies and finding innovative ways to adapt to the changes in our world. Science thus functions as a trusted advisor to society in transition. This is why the publication at hand is titled "Disrupt – Adapt". In a world, where the only constant is change, adapting is the key to shaping the communication of tomorrow.
Each paper in this book deals with a different aspect of the changing field of communications. However, they all focus on how professionals are acclimating to the fast-paced environment of a modern, globalized, and digitalized world, bringing new insights and impulses for theory and practice. The studies were developed by students of the Master's programs Communication Management and Global Mass Communication at Leipzig University over the course of one year. The papers are the result of a profound research process and a deep passion for the examined topics. Working on these projects still under the shadow of the pandemic didn't always prove to be easy, but the dedication of everyone involved made them possible in the end. The results of the studies were already presented in an international conference and are now being published. The issues covered in this publication are very diverse: Some describe the adaptations to polarization, others to digitalization of our world, but all of them have a focus on a timely and relevant topic in common.

Polarization in a Changing World

In their contribution to corporate socio-political positioning, Lina Blenninger, Paula Christoph, Chantal Herrmann, Pauline Anna Johe, Friederike Rummeni, and Sarah Willer deal with a topic very present in today's public discourse. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the respective vaccination debate, discrimination against minorities, or the rights for LGBTQIA+ people, companies increasingly take a stance on socio-political issues. These communicative activities that are not directly related to the actual business of companies are described by the term corporate social advocacy. The paper gives answers to the question whether the public pressure put on companies to position themselves on such issues influences their external corporate communications. By looking at the general perception of an increasing pressure, the criteria, and the strategic planning process of corporate positioning, the paper sheds light on an under-researched topic. Focus lies on the internal procedures in corporations in communication of a corporate positioning. Conducting qualitative guided interviews with 19 corporate communications professionals in leading roles of internationally operating German B2C companies, the researchers observed three patterns in corporate behavior (skeptics, adapters, and pioneers) describing how companies deal with socio-political issues.

Exploring the sphere of political communication in the digital age, Katharina Cremers, Laura Goyn, Torben Krüper, Christina Lehmann, and Adrian Liehr are focusing on social media in the context of the 2021 federal election in Germany. Starting with a synopsis of the theoretical concepts of political communication, social media, mediatization, and disintermediation, the paper identifies a research gap with regard to the relatively small number of German projects on social media in political communication. Conducting interviews with officials of all parties represented in the German Bundestag, this paper aims at shrinking this gap. It provides an overview of the understanding and significance of social media within German political parties and an outlook into the future of social media usage within these parties.

The impact of the increasing violence against journalists on editorial work in Germany and the USA is examined in the study by Eva Christiansen, Sophia Heinl, Jakob Irler, Stefanie Lörch, and Victoria Niemsch. Using guided qualitative interviews with journalists from Germany and the United States, they provide an overview over journalists' experiences of violence and the resulting consequences on a personal and professional level. According to the theory of the chilling effect, pressure and threats of violence can influence the work of journalists and bring about changes in the content and style of reporting. However, journalism and press freedom are important pillars of democracy, and the consequences of increasing violence against journalists is therefore a highly relevant social issue. Consequently, journalists must balance self-protection and professional obligations. In doing so, they experience stress and psychological problems due to the increasing dangers, but fulfill their journalistic duties despite the risks involved.

Digitalization in a Modern World

The authors Sophia Blau, Agapi Giagozidou, Jule Klausmeyer, Fabian Saxinger, Laura Wettengel, and Catherine Danielle Winkel conducted a qualitative study to investigate how the use of digital storytelling in sustainability communication can influence strategic corporate success. There are hardly as many votes raised for a topic as for sustainability. Environmental catastrophes, human rights abuses, and resource shortages are just a few exemplary reasons why sustainability has become a social megatrend. Therefore, it is not surprising that companies are facing increasing pressure to take responsibility for people and the environment. Consequently, sustainability communication is becoming progressively more important within corporate communication and has a strategic significance for corporate success. Thus, communication formats are needed that are suitable for transmitting the sustainability commitment of companies transparently, appealingly, and authentically to the outside world. Digital storytelling has already proven to be a promising communication format in other fields and will finally be examined more closely in this context.

Digitization is increasing the variety of potential communication channels for businesses. The generally growing popularity of podcasts means that they are also an increasingly relevant on-demand medium for corporations as well. In their paper, the authors Leonie Beck, Sophie Dietrich, Tanja Graf, Xenia Grohmann, Kathleen Lehmann, and Sabrina Zierer deal with the rather unexplored research field of corporate podcasts. Nowadays, corporate podcasts are not only found more frequently in the communication mix of companies – the format also offers great potential as a branding tool. In this way, corporate branding can contribute to the beneficial coordination of all communication channels. In the course of a qualitative interview study, the authors interviewed experts from large companies and, on the basis of this, investigated the extent to which corporate podcasts are currently seen, used and evaluated as a branding tool. This results in interesting suggestions for practice and research.

Finally, the book concludes with a paper by Amelie Baryal, Julia Burghaus, Felix Gasteyer, Nick Hoffmann, and Leonard Landau focusing on remote work. In the ongoing New Work debate, the flexibilization of the world of work is playing an increasingly important role in terms of improving the compatibility of family and career. Working parents are increasingly demanding the option of working remotely as a measure to overcome work-family conflicts. The authors examine the extent to which remote work is seen as a suitable measure by employers in this context, and highlight the scope to which German companies communicate about this as part of their strategic planning and implementation of employer branding. The research team therefore uses the theoretical concepts of strategic communication, employer branding, and terms related to family orientation and remote work. Based on semi-structured guided interviews with communications and HR professionals from various industries, this study outlines the solutions practiced by employers and how these can be expanded to meet their demands.

Now, without much further ado, we want to dive into the topic and are excited to see how our studies can make an impact and contribute to the future of communications.

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Part 1

Polarization in a Changing World

Under Pressure

An Analysis of the Perceived Positioning Pressure on Socio-Political Issues and its Influence on the External Communication of German Companies

Lina Blenninger, Paula Christoph, Chantal Herrmann, Pauline Anna Johe, Friederike Rummeni, Sarah Willer

Abstract

Today, more and more companies tend to position themselves with public statements on socio-political issues such as racism or discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community represented through popular movements like Black Lives Matter or the Pride Month. According to surveys, most consumers expect companies to take a stand on such polarizing topics. Despite this apparent relevance in society, there is only little research on companies taking public stances, yet. Moreover, the existing studies addressing the topic predominantly focus on the influence of corporate positioning on customer attitudes and only a few studies examine the impact of companies speaking out on socio-political issues, their communication and decision-making processes, and their attitudes. In order to close this research gap, 19 semi-structured interviews with communicators of internationally operating German B2C companies were conducted. As the results show, the interviewed companies are all perceiving societal pressure, but up to different degrees. Equally different is the associated impact of positioning on external communications and strategic planning. In general, three initial patterns can be identified on how companies deal with positioning pressure: The *skeptics*, who do none or almost no positioning, the *adapters*, who speak out on specific issues and closely observe the current debates, and the *pioneers*, who feel less pressure and are the first companies to speak out and even initiate debates themselves. It remains to be seen if these patterns will be established in future research and if uniform strategies in corporate communications will develop when it comes to the topic of socio-political positioning.

Keywords

Socio-Political Issues, Social Pressure, Corporate Positioning, Corporate Social Advocacy, External Communication

Introduction

LGBTQIA+, Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 vaccination – when talking about topics like these, society today is more polarized and differentiated than ever before. Companies, too, more and more take part in debates related to such topics – and that is not without reason. According to a recent study by the University of Münster, the contemporary German society is shaped by a fundamental conflict based on different concepts of identity (Back et al., 2021). The study showcases that in Germany, as in other European countries, there are two opposing societal groupings characterized by seemingly irreconcilable social positions and corresponding solidified opinions (Back et al., 2021, p. 5). Looking at the figures, almost 34% of German citizens feel that they belong to one of these two divergent groupings, as Back et al. (2021, p. 12) point out. It is therefore not surprising that, as societal demands and their articulation become increasingly present, companies are expected to take a stance on virulent social issues. Due to meta trends like globalization and mediatization which influence today's society, companies become more and more visible and are therefore increasingly inclined to speak out on topics heavily discussed in societal debates. This becomes particularly clear when comparing surveys: While in 2018, around one in three German citizens expected companies to take a stance on socio-political issues, by 2020 the proportion had doubled to 66% (Theobald, 2018; Inhoffen, 2020).

Although the topicality of corporate positioning is clear from a social perspective, science has so far only dealt with it superficially (Hoffmann et al., 2020, p. 157). Studies primarily pursue quantitative approaches and focus on different fields, for example the influence of corporate positioning on customer opinions and attitudes or consumers' purchase intentions (cf. Hong & Li, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). However, hardly any attention is paid to the way in which the ever-increasing expectations of a polarized society influence companies, especially regarding the company's decision to take a stance on socio-political issues. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on the influence of the perceived positioning pressure regarding socio-political issues on the external corporate communication of international B2C companies.

For this, 19 semi-structured guided interviews with communicators from internationally operating German B2C companies were conducted followed by a qualitative content analysis. The experts gave insights into the internal processes taking place when companies are facing socio-political issues. The study focuses on the general perception of positioning pressure, the considered criteria when taking a stance, and the internal planning procedure of corporate positionings.

Literature Review

Companies are currently influenced more than ever by the three meta trends of globalization, mediatization, and polarization, especially with regard to the acquisition of (social) legitimacy. This results in the phenomena of corporate social responsibility and, if we go a step further, corporate social advocacy. The topics which are parts of these phenomena need to be monitored, for which issues management becomes relevant. In the following sections, these theoretical concepts are defined and their coherence is presented.

Societal Meta Trends: Globalization, Mediatization, and Polarization

To better understand the concept of corporate positioning on socio-political issues, it is important to understand the three meta trends globalization, mediatization, and polarization, as they influence companies in their daily business. They play an important role in gaining legitimacy since they affect the social environment in which corporations are operating today (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3). Globalization can be described as the increase in "economic, social and political interdependencies around the world" (Verčič et al., 2015, p. 785). Globalization leads to a weakening of national-state regulation, which also means that there are fewer standards of action from governments. Companies are therefore increasingly engaging in self-regulation to fill the void created by globalization (Cragg, 2005, p.15). In addition, the growing transparency of corporate activities worldwide due to the increase in media coverage means that companies' undertakings are being examined more thoroughly, resulting in changed legitimacy commitments (Dryzek, 1999, p. 48). This leads to the second trend, mediatization, which can be described as the process in which media are getting integrated more deeply into all levels of society (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014, p. 4; Strömbäck, 2008, p. 241). A kind of interdependent relationship between media and institutions of society emerges, as corporations have to follow the logic of the media to reach their relevant stakeholders (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 113). On the other hand, mediatization ensures that the reporting on companies increases and with that their visibility, while the coverage focuses particularly on sensationalism or conflicts (Altheide, 2004, p. 294).
Through processes of mediatization, companies need to cope with a media sphere that is dominated by political divisions on socio-political issues to get to address their relevant audiences, which takes us to the third meta trend, polarization: This describes the simultaneous existence of opposing viewpoints (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008, p. 566). The opinion or ideology becomes the focus of the identity of citizens (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3).

Companies, in turn, are also influenced by the polarized society, as they are part of it and can no longer sit back due to their increased visibility caused by mediatization (van der Meer & Jonkmann, 2021, p. 3).

Gaining and Maintaining Legitimacy: The Concept of the Social License to Operate

As pointed out before, meta trends are heavily influencing companies in their daily business, which is why it is important to consider the relationship between companies and society as well as the necessary attribution of legitimacy by a company's stakeholders. Only then one can better understand corporate positioning on socio-political issues. Through the fabrication of products and/or services and in their role as employers, companies have a direct influence on individuals and society as a whole, and thus represent an actor with agency (Thummes, 2020, p. 2). To secure this agency in the long term, it is necessary to constantly maintain and renew the social acceptance, and thus to generate a social "permission" for the enterprise and its actions. Precisely, this social permission for a company's activity encompasses the concept of the social license to operate (SLO) which "is defined as the ongoing acceptance or approval for a development granted by the local community and other stakeholders" (Hall & Jeanneret, 2015, p. 214).

With the aim of obtaining the SLO companies must, in addition to fulfilling legal and governmental obligations, meet the moral expectations of their environment and society as a whole (Gunningham et al., 2004, p. 307). Moreover, the volatile nature of the SLO is particularly important to understand the construct: The social acceptability attributed to the company by its stakeholders can be revoked at any time by a change in the perception of the company (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3). Hence, a loss of the SLO can have serious negative consequences for companies (Hurst et al., 2020, p. 3).

Referring to the meta trends of globalization, mediatization, and polarization mentioned above, companies in current times are gradually more in the focus of media coverage and are further operating in an environment characterized by a multitude of socio-political issues. These developments put companies under increasing pressure to take a stance on societal issues, in order to secure their SLO on an ongoing basis (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 1). In sum, it can be stated that for companies in the context of mediatization, polarization, and globalization not only the preservation of their SLO is relevant, but also its continuous renewal (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 4).

Corporate Social Responsibility as a Basis

An important factor in maintaining legitimacy is corporate social responsibility (CSR). The work “The Responsibility of the Businessmen” by Howard R. Bowen from 1953 is usually cited as the scientific basis for CSR, since Bowen is considered one of the first to have dealt with possible responsibilities on the part of companies (Bowen, 1953). The public demand for it gains momentum especially from the 1970s onwards. Moreover, it cumulates in the 1980s/90s with the increasing globalization and its challenges as well as the establishment of the stakeholder theory by Freeman (Freeman, 1984; Jarolimek, 2014, p. 1270; Schultz, 2011, p. 30). According to Freeman, the focus of corporate goals should not be exclusively on the financial interests of shareholders. All persons who are influenced by the company, and therefore stakeholders, must be considered (Freeman, 1984).

The19onection between Freeman’s stakeholder theory and CSR becomes particularly clear in the definition of the Commission of the European Union from 2011: “A concept that serves as a basis for companies to integrate, on a voluntary basis, social concerns and environmental issues into their corporate activities and interactions with stakeholders” (European Commission, 2011, p. 8).

This definition emphasizes that companies should not only act economically and legally correct but also adhere to moral standards in order to obtain the legitimacy of their stakeholders, while still operating in a voluntary way. When considering the aspect of voluntariness, the question arises as to why companies pursue CSR activities and communicate them. According to empirical studies, in addition to increasing legitimacy and achieving a competitive advantage (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010, p. 15), stakeholder pressure coming from employees, customers, and investors also plays an important role (Helmig et al., 2016; Mohr et al., 2001).

When corporate social responsibility is considered in the context of how companies can maintain and renew legitimacy from their stakeholders, it becomes clear that this can happen in relation to social and environmental concerns. However, looking at today’s corporate world, one can see that this can also be done through positioning on socio-political issues (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 8), bringing the concept of corporate social advocacy into focus.

Corporate Social Advocacy

The concept of corporate social advocacy (CSA) was first defined by Dodd and Supa (2014). Their definition of CSA goes beyond the traditional understanding of CSR, as it refers to the conscious public positioning by a company on socio-political issues that lie outside the scope of interest of traditional CSR communication (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288; Gaither et al., 2018, p. 179; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 6). CSA and CSR therefore primarily differ in terms of the topics communicated. In the area of CSA, these are not directly related to the company or its core business. Instead, they can be found in the socio-political spectrum and have the potential to outrage stakeholder groups (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5).

Furthermore, CSA is seen as a communication measure, which can be accompanied by corporate activities, but can also stand on its own (Gaither et al., 2018, p. 179). CSA clearly belongs to public relations, as the company's socio-political positions are disseminated by the PR department via various communication channels (Dodd & Supa, 2014). However, the question of the motives for positioning cannot be answered clearly in the studies available to date. Nevertheless, CSA can help build legitimacy, reputation, and trust while maintaining and continually renewing corporations' SLOs (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 8). CSA can also be seen as a help for companies to navigate in today's globalized, mediatized, and polarized world (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 6). In order to be able to withstand this (in)direct positioning pressure exerted on companies, van der Meer and Jonkman (2021, pp. 7-8) propose to orient oneself to the company's internal values and own moral standpoints. This is one way to maintain the SLO while preserving the integrity of the company. On the one hand, these values should provide companies with guidance in assessing the relevance of socio-political issues. On the other hand, they help them decide which of these issues to take a stand on.

The field of CSA is still relatively under-researched, especially compared to the body of studies that can be found in the CSR field. Among the few studies dealing with CSA, the majority focuses on the influence on customer attitudes. Dodd and Supa (2015) asked participants about their (dis)agreement with the legalization of same-sex marriage and the influence of a company's positioning about this issue on consumer buying behavior. The study revealed that high consumer agreement with an organization's CSA measures triggers high purchase intentions and vice versa. Hydock et al. (2019) found that consumers are more likely (less likely) to choose a brand that participates in CSA, if its position is (dis)aligned with their own. Moreover, CSA is more likely to increase the loss of customers than to excite and attract a new consumer through positioning (Hydock et al., 2019). Overton et al. (2020) examined the influence of CSA on consumers, using Nike's Racial Equality campaign as an example. The results suggest that Nike's CSA initiative has a positive effect on purchase intentions, among other factors. CSA can also increase stakeholders' willingness to support the organization in a positive way (Browning et al., 2020). When looking at the body of studies, it is also apparent that the focus lies mainly on U.S. respondents and organizations. Song and Lan (2022) are the first to examine the effects of CSA on consumers in the Chinese market.

Issues and Issues Management

Against the backdrop of the consequences of companies' work environments and the necessity of constantly securing their legitimacy and SLO, it is essential for corporations to identify socially relevant topics at an early stage in order to address them in their corporate positioning. More accurately: the integration of these topics into their corporate communications is vital to permanently ensure their survival (Mast, 2020, p. 90). This anticipatory and proactive approach to corporate communications describes the concept of issues management. It helps companies to identify potential threats related to social, economic or political contentious issues in their environment and anticipate the chances of success of positioning themselves on such issues (Wiedemann & Ries, 2014, p. 494).

These strategy-critical topics, known as issues, that companies are trying to determine cannot be uniformly defined, but are generally understood to include topics of public interest and transcendent concerns between companies and their environment or stakeholders (Röttger & Preuße, 2008, p. 164). Therefore, issues have an impact on acceptance, legitimacy, and thus the exercise of entrepreneurial action in their very nature which makes them particularly significant for companies (Röttger & Preuße, 2008, p. 164). Further, issues can be described as topics that allow opposing views and thus have a conflictual substance that potentially harbors risks but also opportunities for companies (Mast, 2020, p. 92).

In order to identify and anticipate issues at an early stage, companies follow a recurring systematic process, named issues management process, originally introduced by Howard Chase (1977) which can be represented in "a six-step process chain" (Lütgens, 2015, p. 780). The first step is the *search and identification of issues* where companies observe and evaluate their environment in order to determine issues, or even signs of such, which might be relevant for them (Lütgens, 2015, p. 782). In doing so, companies use a variety of methods which can be roughly assigned to three groups: issue scanning, describing a less targeted and more exploratory study of the company's environment, issue monitoring, referring to a targeted observation and investigation of the issue topics, and forecasting methods, with the purpose of predicting trends and future developments that have the potential to form issues (Lütgens, 2015, p. 782).

In the second step of the issues management process, *the prioritization of identified issues*, companies then rank the determined issues according to their relevance to identify the top ones. The assessment and prioritization of the identified issues varies between companies, but in practice, two central characteristics of issues form the main evaluation criteria: impact and urgency of issues (Lütgens, 2015, p. 784).

In the third step of the process, the results of step two are used to *analyze the prioritized issues* in relation to the most important criteria to establish a precise understanding of their substance and significance (Lütgens, 2015, p. 784). The prioritized issues are analyzed in terms of their content and associated effects, the parties and groups involved and the relationships among these, as well as their development over time and signs of future development. In addition to the three units of analysis mentioned, the relationship of the company to an issue also plays a decisive role, especially in view of the respective strengths and weaknesses with regard to the issue (Lütgens, 2015, p. 785).

The fourth step in the process describes the *strategic decision on how to deal with the most relevant issues*. In theory, there are ideally five different strategic response options available: By deliberately disregarding an issue, a company acts *reactively*, an independent anticipation of the issue by a company is equivalent to an *adaptive* strategic response option, according to Lütgens (2015, p. 786). In a *proactive* approach to an issue, a company strives to actively shape the issue in its own sense by actively influencing it, while an *initiative* response option represents a company's effort to derive its own benefit from it and to anticipate it accordingly. Finally, an *interactive* approach to an issue represents a company's efforts to deal with it in collaboration with its competitors in such a way that a mutual benefit is created (Lütgens, 2015, p. 786).

In the fifth step of *planning and implementing action and communication programs*, companies finally develop programs for internal company actions which (may) result from an issue, as well as programs for external corporate communication in dealing with the identified issues (Lütgens, 2015, p. 787).

As a final step, the *evaluation of the issues management process* concludes the ideal-typical process by evaluating the results conducted and assessing the effectiveness of the separate process steps (Lütgens, 2015, p. 787).

Research Questions

As described above, societal meta trends have strongly shaped the environment in which companies operate today. Thus, companies not only have to deal with diverging interests and different requirements of their various

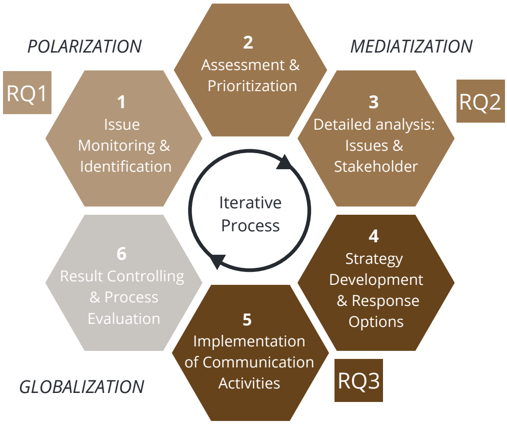
stakeholders but are also confronted with increased social visibility (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 1). These new circumstances are accompanied by changed demands regarding the actions of companies and specifically the execution of their business (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3). In order to ensure entrepreneurial success and the survival of companies in general, they are dependent on securing the acceptance of their actions and thus their legitimacy on the part of their stakeholders in the sense of a societal "permission" for their actions (SLO) (Hall & Jeanneret, 2015, p. 214).
This process of adaptation can only be successful when companies recognize and anticipate societal needs and demands. Consequently, companies are confronted with increasing pressure not only to comply with legal norms and to deal with corporate social issues (CSR), but also to address and take a stand on socio-political issues in their communications that are not directly related to the company (CSA) (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5). This development represents the guiding research interest of this paper: *What influence does the perceived pressure to take a stand on socio-political issues have on the external corporate communication of internationally operating German B2C companies?*
Specifically, this study aims to address this question based on three derived research questions:

***RQ1**: How is the pressure to position oneself on socio-political issues perceived?*
***RQ2**: What criteria are used to decide which topics to take a position on?*
***RQ3**: How is external positioning on socio-political issues strategically planned?*

In order to answer the research questions presented, this paper uses Lütgens' (2015) issues management process as a theoretical framework, with the first research question referring to step one of the processes, RQ2 focusing on steps two and three, and RQ3 relating to steps four and five. The final step of the process, the evaluation, has been excluded from this work, as it is not directly related to the research interest. Figure 1 illustrates the connection of the research questions to the steps of the issues management process and how this is embedded in a company's environment characterized by the meta trends in society outlined above.

Figure 1.

Theoretical framework and research questions.



Own depiction based on Lütgens (2015, p. 781).

Methodology

To answer the research question, 19 communicators from internationally operating German B2C companies were interviewed. This sample was developed using the criterion sampling strategy (Patton, 2002, p. 238) to select particularly information-rich cases strategically and intentionally. The basic population, which includes all German companies, was reduced to a relevant sample by three predefined criteria. The first criterion defines that the analyzed companies must be among the 120 German companies with the highest turnover, according to the listing of the F.A.Z.-Institute (Fehr, 2021, p. 19). It can be assumed that companies with a high turnover serve the demand of many customers, have a high level of awareness, and might then potentially be more exposed to a positioning pressure. In addition, it can be assumed that these high-turnover companies have sufficient resources to establish strategic processes for socio-political positioning which can be described in the interviews. The second criterion specified that the corporations surveyed must operate at least partly in the business-to-consumer sector, as these organizations have a larger public arena and potentially face particularly higher positioning pressure due to their presence in the public (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 21). Finally, the third criterion determined that only companies operating internationally would be considered in the sample, as these face particularly high challenges in positioning themselves in an international context due to globalization and therefore represent an interesting object of research. This approach reduced the data base from 120 companies to 50 companies relevant to the research interest. From each of these selected companies, communicators with managerial authority were requested as interview partners, as they can provide detailed insights into the internal decision-making processes due to their decision-making authority. The final sample of interview partners can be found in table 1:

Table 1.
Final sample of interview partners

Official Position Title of the Interviewee	Industry Field	Annual Revenue Rounded in Mil. € (2020)
Head of Reputation Management and Strategic Communication	Automotive	50.000
Head of Corporate Communications	Automotive	155.000
Project Manager Communication Strategy and Reputation	Automotive	30.000
Director Corporate Communications	Automotive	225.000
Head of Global Media Relations and Executive Communications	Conglomerate	60.000
Spokesperson & Head of External Corporate Communications	Conglomerate	15.000
Senior Vice President Corporate Communications, Corporate Marketing and Public Affairs	Energy Supply	20.000
Global Head of Corporate Communications	Food	10.000
Director Public Relations & Affairs	Food	10.000
Communications Director Continental Europe	Food	5.000
Head of Strategic Affairs	Media	20.000
Head of Communications	Mobility	15.000
Head of Corporate Communications and Media Relations	Pharmacy	40.000
Senior Vice President Corporate Communications	Pharmacy	35.000
Head of Digital Communications (groupwide)	Retail	20.000
Head of Public Relations & Spokesperson	Retail	5.000

Group Vice President Corporate Communications and Political Affairs	Retail	15.000
Senior Vice President Brand and Communications	Technology	10.000
Head of Corporate Sponsorship and Communications Strategy	Telecommunication	100.000

The interviews were conducted using a questionnaire divided into three sections according to the three research questions and the connection to Lütgens' issues management process (2015, pp. 781–787). The first section refers to the perception of a positioning pressure by companies (corresponding to RQ1 and step 1 in the issues management process), the second section refers to the criteria that play a role in a positioning decision (corresponding to RQ2 and steps 2 and 3 in the issues management process), and the third section refers to the strategic implementation of positioning (corresponding to RQ3 and steps 4 and 5 in the issues management process). The validity of the instrument was tested by a scientific expert opinion replacing a pretest. A total of eleven open-ended questions were predefined, further specified by sub-questions and the option of potential follow-up questions adapted to the conversation (Springer et al., 2015, p. 55). The virtual interviews took place between January 7, 2022, and February 3, 2022, using video conferencing platforms and were recorded. The key questions of the guideline were provided to all interviewees before the interviews took place.

The interviews were evaluated with Mayring's (2015) qualitative content analysis. Within this, a set of categories and the guideline referring to the derived research questions – all based on Lütgens' issues management process (2015, pp. 781–787) – were created. Four main deductive categories and eight additional preliminary subcategories were implemented. This first version of the category system was tested in an initial coding process, by analyzing all interviews and subsequently deleting unnecessary or adding missing categories inductively (Mayring, 2015, p. 64). In accordance with the exploratory approach of this paper, the categories were thus deductively pre-structured and then inductively extended based on the material (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 169; Mayring, 2015, p. 97). Further, a coding manual was created that contains definitions and anchor examples for the respective categories (Mayring, 2015, p. 49). Initially, this was developed theory-guided and supplemented on the material during the trial coding. In order to increase validity and reliability, a coding guide was defined, whose adherence was mandatory for all participants of the research group during the coding process. With this finalized category system and the coding guide, a second, and final coding process was conducted. The contents relevant to the research question were then systematically assigned to the category system.

Results

In the light of the societal meta trends of globalization, mediatization, and polarization and based on the theoretical framework of the SLO and the issues management process, the study aims to examine the internal processes taking place in corporations when taking a stance on socio-political issues. The findings are clustered according to the three research questions dealing with the general perception of a positioning pressure, the criteria for decisional processes, and the strategic planning of corporate positioning.

The Perception of a Positioning Pressure

The first research question examines how the pressure to position oneself on socio-political issues is perceived. Almost all interviewees agree that corporate positioning is gaining importance and that there is a clear trend towards more, louder, and bolder corporate statements. It is perceived that companies are speaking out more consciously, especially when it relates to their own customer sector, summarized by one interviewee saying that they are developing "*a voice*".

When it comes to the question where the pressure to position oneself as a company comes from, the experts name different sources. Internally, the communicators primarily notice expectations from employees and the top management. Much more central, however, seems to be the pressure from societal discourses and the expectations of the general public. These expectations are expressed by younger generations in particular as well as by politicians, and NGOs. Some of the interviewed companies also perceive increasing pressure from customers – this is especially true for companies that are highly active in the consumer goods sector and have many contact points with their customers. Also, journalists put pressure on companies since many believe that corporations must take a stance and expect them to do so. Therefore, the media looks "*more closely at companies and points the finger at them*", as one interviewee observes. Furthermore, the companies surveyed name competitors and their statements on an issue as a source of pressure. Nevertheless, not all of the interviewed communicators feel such an expectation of positioning coming from external demands. In fact, some say that the positioning decision has to come from an intrinsic motivation and should not be demanded from outside.

In general, most of the interviewees emphasize that the positioning should be aligned to the company's internal attitude and should be based on its value system, business model, or employees. Furthermore, not responding at all to inquiries is no longer an option, they say. When it comes to positioning, it is important not to jump on every issue, but to find the right balance. According to the experts, companies should rather focus on a few issues appropriately instead of dealing with many at the same time.

Contrasting statements were made on whether companies – being part of society – have a social responsibility or whether they have no responsibility to deal with social conflicts. Still, some interviews show that there is a shift concerning the responsibility of corporations: "*We have to do more than just [...] manufacture products and sell products. We are in a social context and have to prove ourselves as a corporate citizen there*". The attitude that positioning is correct and important tends to prevail in the sample.

When it comes to the general attitude toward corporate positioning, the opinions diverge: Some respondents are of the opinion that corporate positioning has no impact, some companies rarely position themselves and instead act more in the background. Others embed clear statements in their corporate culture. Opinions also differ on the extent to which positioning can have a (positive or negative) impact on profitability. Still, companies tend to be cautious to not jeopardize their business by taking a stance on socio-political issues.

In general, most interviewees agree that social media is a driving force in this development and that the USA play a leading role. With the meta trend of mediatization, communication arenas have changed which makes silence on the corporate side more noticeable and dialog orientation increasingly important.

In sum, it can be noted that an increased positioning pressure is perceived. Still, the companies surveyed weight the various sources and stakeholders differently in their decisions.

Corporate Positioning Decisions: Key Criteria

The second research question examines the criteria companies consider deciding which issues to take a stance on. External, internal, and issue-specific factors are considered, with the fundamental criterion being meeting the expectations of various stakeholders.

First, customers and their demands are the most important criterion for corporate positioning, according to the communicators interviewed. Second, observing competing companies and their positioning is central – although the respondents do not agree on whether this results in a positioning of their own company or not: One of the interviewed companies sees its competitors as a benchmark and also takes a position when they do. Some of the respondents perceive increased pressure from the positioning of others, but this does not necessarily lead them to position themselves as well. Others state that the competition plays no role in their positioning decision. Other factors are general expectations of society and the current relevance of the debate, as well as statements from politicians, the capital market, Investors or shareholders, suppliers and business partners, neighbors, or journalists.

In terms of internal factors, the respondents state that the topic must primarily fit with the company's values and activities. Topics are therefore of greater relevance the better they align with the company and its core principles, otherwise there is a risk of authenticity deficits or even reputational damage. Employer branding is also cited as an important criterion for a positioning decision. In fact, such decisions should always be tailored to the employees in order to strengthen the identification with one's company. If this is not the case, positioning will be avoided, according to the respondents.

However, it is not only internal and external factors that influence the positioning decision of the companies surveyed, but also the issue itself. For example, an issue seems to be particularly relevant if it has a temporal urgency, triggered by ad-hoc journalistic inquiries or social virality. On top of that, corporate positionings become more attractive to companies if they have the potential to immediately impact society. As one interviewee points out: "*[W]hen I show a positioning, I also want to achieve an impact with it*".

Regardless of the criterion, a particular challenge for internationally active companies remains: the difference in value systems and cultures in which they operate. Not only stakeholder expectations vary according to nationalities, but so do socio-political issues and their relevance. To counter this problem, one communicator indicates that they either develop country-specific guidelines if the issue is of particular corporate relevance, or that they pursue a globally uniform brand identity. Regardless of the approach used, maintaining authenticity is the top priority for the interviewees. In sum, according to the respondents, the most important criteria influencing corporate positioning are authenticity, credibility, employer branding, impact on society, and the urgency of the issue.

However, the communicators do not decide for or against a positioning solely on the basis of these criteria. When deciding on a corporate positioning, the interviewees state to always weigh the possible opportunities and risks of positioning their company on socio-political issues. Most frequently, the respondents mention that corporate positioning bears the opportunity for social acceptance of their company, followed by reputation and image gains. By this, they hope to increase the attractiveness and reputation of their company in society and create long-term resilience among the public.

Respondents also mention the possibility of potentially influencing politics as well as the opportunity for identity formation through positioning. Employer branding is not only a key criterion for the positioning decision but is also mentioned as having great potential for companies: Creating employee approval and identification with the company turns employees into representatives to the outside world. In addition, meeting customer expectations is cited as an opportunity that generates customer identification and thus loyalty to the company. Accordingly, the company benefits not only from this growing trust but also from increases in sales, as some communicators point out.

Along these opportunities, respondents consider potential risks of positioning before making a public statement. The most frequently mentioned risks were alienation of stakeholders, loss of reputation and credibility, risk of misperception of an issue and the unpredictability of reactions to positionings and the evolution of an issue in society. In terms of balancing the interests of (global) stakeholders, a misperception of corporate positioning could jeopardize supply and business relationships. Only a few respondents mentioned a lack of positioning or an approach that is too slow and cautious as a potential risk, in the sense that silence can generate just as much criticism. Almost all respondents agreed that socio-political statements entail risks, but that the opportunities outweigh them and that corporate positioning "*is living up to the responsibility that we bear as a company and that is sometimes associated with chances, sometimes the risks outweigh them – but that is not the criterion*".

However, whether or not a company takes a stand depends to a large extent on how it deals with socio-political issues in general and the strategic orientation pursued by the company. Some communicators describe a reactive tactic, namely a fundamental refusal to participate in socio-political discussions. This happens when either the issue is not relevant to the company, is not consistent with the company's values and business, or the debate is perceived to be moving too fast.

Others mentioned an adaptive strategy. In this case, companies proceed according to the agenda-surfing principle and decide on a topic-specific basis whether or not to take a stance on an issue that is already being heavily discussed in the public discourse. Further, other communicators mention proactive tactics pursued by their companies. That is, when companies behave as social players who actively drive issues and help to shape social change, resulting in opportunities for the company. They see themselves as *pioneers* and pursue an agenda-setting strategy.

The Internal Planning Procedure of Positioning

The third research question examines how external positionings on socio-political issues are strategically planned. The strategic planning process starts with the identification of relevant issues. The companies surveyed report that in this process, either employees or the communications department may unintentionally become aware of relevant socio-political topics, or communicators may deliberately search for new important issues, sometimes with the help of tools or external service providers. As a third option, interviewees mentioned inquiries from outside, such as from NGOs, customers, press, or politics, as a way of becoming aware of issues.

In most cases of the companies interviewed, there is no set, uniform scheme for the further treatment of these identified relevant topics. Most of the interviewees emphasize that positioning is a matter of individual decision-making and that it is therefore not possible to make any general preliminary decisions or action plans. Only a few companies have emerging strategic approaches such as lists of topics on which they should or should not take a stance. Some of the respondents stated that they already integrate predictable topics into their annual planning and therefore practice agenda-setting. Others deliberately leave room in their annual planning for unanticipated topics they might encounter and therefore practice a more reactive agenda-surfing strategy. A third group of companies states that they do not strategically integrate their positioning into their annual planning at all.

If a strategic planning process exists, it is very similar to Lütgens' (2015, pp. 781–787) issues management process and includes the following steps: Discussion of positioning decision, formulation of messages, selection of communication channels, and evaluation. Only a few companies have further emerging approaches of strategic planning: One respondent indicates that they have prepared statements on issues addressing fundamental corporate values, some other companies are forming special teams responsible for socio-political issues, and in some companies, rapid response procedures are developing. The decision-making authority on whether to take a stance often lies with the top management: Depending on the topic, the head of communications may also decide on a positioning decision. In addition, it depends on the topic and situation in which the company speaks out. Regarding the planning process, the interviewees also emphasize the aspect of time pressure, as positioning decisions often have to be made promptly. Another major challenge is that there are only few benchmarks for orientation and a general lack of resources. Since positioning decisions are often subject- and situation-dependent, the strategic planning process has so far been dominated by "*trial and error*", as described by one respondent.

Overall, from the interviews conducted it can be observed that there are still no overarching patterns of strategic planning, no uniform departments, and no general job-positions for socio-political positioning. Most companies stated that positionings are individual decisions and are so far not strategically planned. This clearly contrasts with the urgency and the risks of the topic previously described by many companies but might be caused by the novelty of the field and the different priorities that companies assign to issues.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how the perceived pressure to take a stand on socio-political issues affects the external corporate communication of internationally operating German B2C companies.

The findings of this study fundamentally show that companies today affirm the existence of positioning pressure. Additionally, the attitude that positioning is correct and important prevails. But according to the respondents, it is not (yet) possible to speak of strategic planning for positioning on socio-political issues. The companies show very heterogeneous responding approaches to emerging issues. Dealing with socio-political topics has not yet been professionalized. It can be assumed, that this is related to the novelty of the field of CSA. Therefore, the guiding research question cannot be answered uniformly for all companies involved in this study. As outlined in the findings the companies follow three different strategic orientations. Those approaches can be drawn back to Lütgens' (2015) issues management process (p. 789). By deliberately disregarding an issue, a company acts reactively; an independent anticipation of the issue by a company is equivalent to an adaptive strategic response and a proactive approach to an issue means a company endeavors to actively shape the issue by unilaterally influencing it in its interest (Lütgens, 2015, p. 789).

Considering the strategic decisions about the treatment of issues described in theory, the corporate behavior in dealing with socio-political issues of the companies analyzed can be divided into three patterns based on the statements of the interviewees. The findings show similarities in perceiving positioning pressure, observing, or initiating current debates and deciding on taking a stance on socio-political issues, which allows the classification of the companies analyzed into *skeptics, adapters*, and *pioneers*.

The *skeptics*, to which two of the companies studied were assigned, behave reactively, and take little or no stance on socio-political issues. In one of the two companies, pressure from society, the competition, and NGOs is perceived. Albeit the communicator reported that this does not lead the company to take a public position on the issues in question. Rather, the general attitude of avoiding risks and the goal of not providing a target for attacks often leads the company to not take a stand. Exceptions are made if issues are raised through direct inquiries, but only in terms of neutral statements which do not communicate an attitude too explicitly. This was justified by not having sufficient expertise to make well-founded public statements on socio-political issues. The second company that fits this pattern stands out in the sample. The respondent stated to not feel any corporate responsibility to speak out on socio-political issues if they do not concern the target audience. This company does not perceive any pressure to position itself, nor does it see any need for action to take a stand on socio-political issues. It can be assumed, that these companies do not perceive themselves as active members of the social discourse, yet, and therefore do not see the necessity of following moral and social expectations in order to generate their SLO in the first place.

The *adapters* alternate between a reactive and adaptive approach of dealing with socio-political issues. They generally observe public debates actively but decide on an issue-specific basis whether to take a position or not. This approach can be described as agenda-surfing. *Adapters* perceive positioning pressure from a broad spectrum of different stakeholders, especially from general societal expectations and customers. They see public stances on socio-political issues and debates as a chance to utilize opportunities. However, the extent to which the values of companies play a major role in relation to their economic interests remains to be questioned. Consequently, for this pattern, it can be summarized that the perceived positioning pressure on issues is only partly driving the analyzed companies to communicate their attitudes externally. Albeit value and attitude communication depend on the issue in question. It can be assumed that the corporations belonging to this type do consider themselves as active members of society and know that a corporate positioning can help maintain their SLO. Since the field of CSA is not yet fully established in companies, however, they still seem to be in the process of learning how to handle such issues in the best interest of their company and society.

The *pioneers* have an attenuated perception of pressure in comparison to the *adapters*. Explanations could be the lack of competition in the German market – as is the case for two companies – or the position in the top third of the 120 top-selling companies and hence having become accustomed to positioning pressure already. It could also be because these companies have such a high profile that they can act more confidently than smaller, less well-known companies without risking the loss of their SLO. The perception of pressure alone does not determine the positioning decisions for these companies; instead, the *pioneers* attribute themselves a social responsibility because they consider themselves an active part of society, which is why they are among the first to take up issues and speak out about it. The initiation of public debates can be understood as an attempt of agenda-setting. Some even stated to make use of the possibility to influence politics and/or society.

Two of the companies analyzed cannot be classified into the three patterns and thus form special cases: Within the structure of a holding company the diversified subsidiaries are perceived as separate businesses by the public. Therefore, positioning activities of the holding company would not benefit the overall business. In this case, some of the subsidiaries do at times take a stance, but the holding company refrains significantly from positioning itself. The second special case is a family-run company which – on the instructions of the family – generally tends to keep a low profile when it comes to positioning itself on socio-political issues. It can be assumed that this is due to the importance of family values when it comes to the renewal and maintenance of their SLO. However, for issues that are particularly relevant to this company, such as equal rights for men and women, active positioning and consistency across the various international markets was reported. An overview of the clustering into corporate behavioral patterns of the interviewed companies can be found in table 2:

Table 2.
Interview partners clustered according to corporate behavioral patterns.

Skeptics	Adapters	Pioneers	Others
Technology, 10.000*	Automotive, 225.000	Telecommunication, 100.000	Media, 20.000
Food, 5.000	Automotive, 155.000	Automotive, 50.000	Retail, 5.000
	Conglomerate, 60.000	Pharmacy, 40.000	
	Automotive, 30.000	Retail, 15.000	
	Pharmacy, 35.000	Mobility, 15.000	
	Retail, 20.000		
	Energy Supply, 20.000		

	Conglomerate, 15.000
	Food, 10.000
	Food, 10.000

*Annual Revenue (in hundred Mil. €).

When the patterns emerged from the sample initial assumptions were made about correlations of features of the companies analyzed. But contrary to those assumptions, no direct correlations could be derived between the following characteristics and the patterns identified: The industry is not decisive for a consistent approach to positioning pressure; for example, some of the automotive manufacturers studied are among the *pioneers*, while others are among the adaptors. Nor can the patterns be clearly mapped according to a company's sales figures. Here, it must be considered that all the companies in the sample are among the 120 top-selling companies in Germany, but it seemed reasonable to assume that within this sample companies with higher sales and consequently more customer contact could be among the *pioneers*. Brand awareness also does not seem to have any influence on whether a company is classified as a pioneer, adapter, or skeptic. Initial assumptions about the logic behind the patterns suggested that companies with higher brand awareness could generally be among the *pioneers*, since they are active in larger public arenas. However, this assumption has not been confirmed either. An explanation could be that the field of socio-political positioning and CSA is fairly new, and the companies are still in a discovery phase, which is why no clear associations can be identified for now. Further, the companies interviewed have different structures and perceive issues in different ways – Lütgens' (2015) issues management process is a model that exemplarily outlines how companies deal with issues but is not applied uniformly in all companies.

Regardless of which pattern the companies analyzed were assigned to, it is apparent that none of them have a clear CSA strategy. Only two respondents reported the beginnings of schemes to deal with socio-political issues. This can be reasoned by the process of becoming aware of the new role as an active player with socio-political responsibility and the need to further negotiate how to face this role in order to maintain their SLO. It is also interesting that although many of the communicators stated attitude communication should be selective about topics, most of them do not have a strategy for determining these topics. This could be because CSA is only beginning to be perceived in corporate communications and in academia and has yet to gain acceptance alongside the almost ubiquitous principle of CSR.

Overall, the perceived positioning pressure not only leads companies to take a public stance, but also influences the following points of corporate communication: The communicators surveyed are becoming more aware of the entire issue of attitude communication. This in turn, could lead to a rethinking and change of internal processes integrating CSA into the daily business of communication departments. Because nearly all respondents stated that socio-political positioning is important, it can be assumed that such debates could be more strongly included into external corporate communications in the future. Furthermore, it was noticed that in the case of attitude communication, a differentiation between external and internal communication can be diffuse since external corporate communication also reaches employees. This again illustrates the importance of involving employees in a positioning decision to ensure their identification with the company. Additionally, globalization, mediatization, and polarization strongly influence positioning decisions, especially with regard to the positioning of internationally operating companies in different markets. As companies are more in the focus of media coverage than ever before, they are being put under increasing pressure to take a stance on socio-political issues.

In sum, it can be concluded that there are notable differences between the individual companies in dealing with socio-political issues, which suggest the emergence of the three patterns described. CSA is a young concept, not only in research but also in practice, which will continue to develop in the coming years and could gain in popularity. All companies analyzed are grappling with the extent to which they should include positioning on socio-political issues in their communications but generally acknowledge the relevance of CSA.

Besides the novelty of CSA and outlined struggles of the companies with their positioning decisions, this paper faces some limitations. When trying to clarify the influence of societal expectations on the positioning decision of companies, this methodological approach was an appropriate method for investigating the research interest. Nevertheless, conducting guided interviews consequently bears the limitations of social desirability, reactivity, and interviewer effects (Brosius et al., 2016, pp. 127–128), which can influence the results. Further, interviews have the weakness that respondents only report what they actively remember or what is in their recent past. In addition, interviews with communicators at different positions limit the comparability of the answers given, since sometimes they are unable to give substantiated answers as the specific task lies outside their area of responsibility or because they enjoy different decision-making power. Respondents tend to answer deliberately, as the topic of positioning decisions on socio-political issues carries the potential risk of negative repercussions for companies, despite the signed confidentiality agreement. Aiming at reliable and valid data, with six researchers working on this project, complete intercoder agreement cannot be granted as subjectivity cannot fully be eliminated during the coding process. By using a codebook, the research team sufficiently counteracted these subjectivity issues.

Following on from this paper, possible future research can be devoted to quantitatively verify the patterns shown and to gain insights into how the perception and influence of pressure differs between large, medium-sized, and smaller companies. In addition, the question arises if increasing societal pressure can possibly shape the job descriptions of communicators in the future and whether new internal processes and additional qualifications will be required to ensure ideal corporate positioning. For the future, therefore, a more intensive corporate engagement with the topic of positioning on socio-political issues and a professionalization of attitude communication are foreseeable, as companies will become more aware of their responsibility and their new role as active socio-political players.

Conclusion

This study shows that the companies surveyed not only perceive the pressure to position themselves differently, but that this pressure also influences their external communication as well as their international orientation and strategic planning otherwise. According to the interviews conducted, it was possible to define initial patterns for the influence of societal expectations towards companies and their positioning on socio-political issues: *pioneers*, *adaptors*, and *skeptics*. Although these patterns can be identified for the companies in this sample, it remains open whether and to what extent these will form established approaches of how to deal with social pressure towards corporate positioning on socio-political issues in the future. Therefore, this paper proposes great potential for further research on this specific topic.

As explained, only patterns, and no clear typologies, can be identified in the way companies deal with the positioning pressure they face. It can be assumed that companies must first learn how to deal with this newly perceived pressure, societal expectations and the emerging field of CSA. As a result of these increasing social expectations, companies are being called upon to take an active stance on socio-political issues in public and to participate in related discourses. In doing so, they are challenged to rethink their actions as they operate in an area of tension: they must take positions that are in line with corporate values, maintain their SLO through social responsibility, and at the same time ensure their profitability. To meet these demands, it is inevitable to take a stance on socio-political issues, but, as Thomas Koch (2021) points out, it takes courage to take a stance.

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Cheapest Is Dearest, Though Far From Professional

A Qualitative Study on the Use of Social Media During the Federal Election 2021 in Germany

Katharina Cremers, Laura Goyn, Torben Krüper, Christina Lehmann, Adrian Liehr

Abstract

Like in other areas, the importance of social media in the German political communication landscape has rapidly grown in recent years. The purpose of this study is to examine how the communication professionals of the different parties of the German Bundestag describe and characterize the role of social media in their political communication, especially in the last federal election in 2021. This research fills a critical gap by investigating 13 semi-open qualitative interviews with both political and strategic officials of the eight parties represented in the German Bundestag. By doing so, it provides insights into current and future social media practices and their level of professionalization in the German political sphere. Both the sample and focus of this study are, to our knowledge, unique in their nature. The results indicate that, while social media is seen as one of the most important channels to both inform and communicate with potential voters, the professionalization in the field seems to be on a relatively low level. Namely, both strategic and political professionals criticize a lack of human, time, and financial resources. Therefore, the parties lack behind in their practices, particularly considering the newest trends and possibilities of social media like big data, algorithms, or monitoring practices. These results suggest that previous assumptions regarding social media as a cheap and resource-efficient practice are outdated. However, the communicators voice future efforts to catch up on these topics. Further research is needed to investigate how the parties meet these intents.

Keywords

Social Media, Political Communication, Election Campaign, German Bundestag, German Federal Election 2021

Introduction

Social media is not an innovation anymore – it has become a necessary communication tool for not only companies, but also for political parties to reach their target audience and to keep up with their competition. To this end, studies show that the importance and use of social media in the German political landscape has rapidly grown in recent years. Meyer et al. (2021), for example, prove this trend with many considerable figures: In the last federal election in Germany, the FDP generated over 160 million views with paid campaigns on social media, while the AfD counts over 500.000 fans on Facebook and the green party uses 25 % of their budget on digital formats.

McNair (2017) defines political communication as "all forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives" (p. 4). With the rising importance of social media, the view on the objectives related with these communication tools has shifted. While Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) have described social media as an "ideal vehicle and information base to gauge public opinion on policies and political positions as well as to build community support for candidates running for public offices" (p. 1279) almost a decade ago, researchers now have a much more differentiated focus. Aside from informing the public, they for example also direct their attention on the possibility of social media to mobilize and engage with citizens (Fitzpatrick & Jöst, 2021, p. 419).

Nevertheless, many researchers still share the stance that social media is a cheap, yet efficient way to communicate with masses (Leung & Yildirim, 2020, p. 1). With rising practices and professionalization in the field of social media communication (for example microtargeting or segmentation in advertising (Elías Zambrano et al., 2019, p. 1052)), however, the question arises whether this argument still stands.

Previous studies in this field mainly focus on quantitative content analyses of either visual campaign elements (e.g., Haßler et al., 2021) or with the aim to draw a comparison between different campaign formats (e.g., Steffan & Venema, 2020). Thus, the topic of political communication is mainly viewed from an outsider's perspective rather than questioning the professionals in this field. In the few studies where interviews are conducted (e.g., Geise & Podschuweit, 2019), the scholars solitarily question the strategic communicators of the parties. Many studies also seem to focus on particular platforms like Facebook (e.g., Farkas & Schwartz, 2018), instead of general challenges and trends of social media. Additionally, the different studies mainly focus on the United States and its politics and politicians. However, lessons learned from U.S.-election campaigns cannot be transferred congruently to

German election campaigns for numerous legal, political, financial, and cultural reasons.
Taking the rapid changes and development of the political communication landscape into consideration, a differentiated view of the state-of-the-art of the usage of social media in the German political sphere is missing in prior research. Based on this research gap, the following paper is dedicated to answer the following research-leading question:
To what extent do the communication officers of the parties represented in the Bundestag (= the German parliament) describe and characterize the role of social media applications within their overall, party-specific communication?
To answer this question, 13 semi-open qualitative interviews with both political and strategic officials of the eight parties represented in the German Bundestag were conducted. Following, a systematic literature review mainly focused on key developments such as mediatization and disintermediation, a comprehensive description and discussion of both methodology and findings provide insights into current and future social media practices of the eight parties represented in the German Bundestag. Finally, limitations are considered, as well as the implications of this study for both future research and the practitioners in the political landscape.

Literature Review

Political Communication

From a historical point of view, the origins of the research field of political communication go back to Aristotle and Plato (Kaid, 2004, p. XIII). Despite this, there is no universally valid definition of the concept of political communication. This has several reasons. On the one hand, the terms "politics" and "communication" are already overall phenomena, which are difficult to delimit and reduce in their complexity (Donges & Jarren, 2017, pp. 1–2; Oswald & Johann, 2018, pp. 1–2; Sarcinelli, 2011, p. 19). Second, as mentioned earlier, a variety of academic disciplines have taken up research on political communication. This leads to a plethora of ways of accessing and scientifically approaching the concept of political communication. The search for an interdisciplinary understanding therefore results in a lack of success (Donges & Jarren, 2017, pp. 1–2; Oswald & Johann, 2018, pp. 1–2; Sarcinelli, 2011, p. 19; Schulz, 2011, pp. 15–16).
Choosing an approach via communication science, the actor perspective thereby forms the "most intuitive" (Zerback et al., 2020, p. 4) type of research approach which is additionally used by McNair, Schulz as well as Jarren and

Donges (Donges & Jarren, 2017, pp. 6–8; McNair, 2017, p. 5; Schulz, 2011, p. 16). With this in mind, both, Schulz as well as Jarren and Donges, highlight McNair's research approach (Donges & Jarren, 2017, p. 7; Schulz, 2011, p. 16).

McNair describes political communication as "purposeful communication about politics" (McNair, 2017, p. 4), while stating that political communication includes any verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal symbols of, with, or about political actors. Furthermore, within his concept, he differentiates between the political actors, the media, and the recipients. Political actors represent "those individuals who aspire, through organizational and institutional means, to influence the decision-making process" (McNair, 2017, p. 4). In addition to individuals in the political system, this classification also applies to political parties, public organizations, advocacy groups, terrorist organizations, as well as governments. Besides political actors, there are recipients who are defined as the audience intended by media and political actors. However, it also includes all people who address the political actors directly or address the political actors via media (McNair, 2017, pp. 10–11).

The third actor is the media. Connecting the recipient and the political actors, it acts as a transmitter for political communication between these groups while also communicating political communication that originates within the media. McNair (2017) emphasizes that this definition includes traditional media outlets such as the BBC or CNN but also services such as Wikileaks and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter which are summarized under the term "social media" (p. 5).

Social Media

Emerging in the early 2000s, the term "social media" has been at the core of a debate within the scientific community. The term is associated with concepts like the Web 2.0, the social web, or social software. Especially the reference to Web 2.0, seems to be relevant (Hohlfeld et al., 2021, p. 14; Pleil & Zerfaß, 2014, p. 748; Schmidt, 2018, p. 16; van Looy, 2016, p. 22 & 27) whereas the term describes a paradigm shift of the Internet. The term was decisively coined by the media entrepreneur Tim O'Reilley, who describes the Internet's change from a pure source of information to a platform with added value through network effects for its users. (Hohlfeld et al., 2021, p. 17; Rankl, 2017, p. 51; Schmidt, 2018, p. 16).

Following this understanding of Web 2.0, social media can be seen as a phenomenon inherent to this development (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012, p. 101). Kaplan and Haenlein thus describe social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Other authors add characteristics to this definition. Social media is therefore characterized by identity management, relationship management, and information management (Hohlfeld et al., 2021, pp. 18–19).

Starting with the election campaign of Barack Obama, who used social media as an integral part of his campaign strategy, social media was considered for the first time as an aspect of political communication (Haller, 2019, p. 49; Ktoridou et al., 2018, p. 33; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 2). Since then, there has been a steady increase in research, especially in the U.S. (Haller, 2019, pp. 49–50; Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018, pp. 11–12), while in Germany the observation of the phenomenon in the context of political communication has been rather sluggish. This is often attributed to the fact that it would take until the 2017 federal election campaign for social media to be widely used within German politics (Haller, 2019, p. 49).

With the constant emergence of new research, the examination of social media in political communication is also becoming more nuanced (Hegelich, 2018, p. 7; Oparaugo, 2021, p. 17). Social media is now primarily seen as a means to inform, engage, mobilize, and interact with people. (Fitzpatrick & Jöst, 2021, p. 419). Emerging research perspectives also address social media monitoring as a tool for analyzing or predicting sentiment for political purposes (Elías Zambrano et al., 2019, p. 1052–1053), as well as the position of social media as a lower-cost, lower-resource alternative to other mass media (Leung & Yildirim, 2020, pp. 1–3). Mediatization is also playing an increasingly important role in various projects to combine political communication and social media. This is also reflected in German projects, which apart from this continue to focus more on fundamental aspects of social media in political communication (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019, p. 1698; Magin et al., 2017, pp. 183–184; McNair, 2017, p. 5).

Mediatization

In general, the term mediatization describes a concept whose focus is on the social change caused by the media and their use (Couldry, 2014; Lundby, 2014). A unified, generally accepted theory or definition does not exist, since mediatization is rather a fundamental approach within communication and media research. Although mediatization research deals with media effects, it does not belong to the field of media effects research but forms a standalone approach. In contrast to media effects research, structures instead of individuals are at the center of research. In addition to direct effects, indirect effects are taken into account. Also, causal media effect explanations are supplemented by functional explanations. The mediatization research assumes that actors act intentionally – with the aim to induce media effects or to avoid them (Kepplinger, 2008).

Within research, Couldry and Hepp (2013) distinguish between two main perspectives: the institutional perspective that classifies media as independent social institution with its own system of rules (“logic”), as well as the social-constructivist perspective, which in turn describes the role of the different media as part of a communicative construction of social and cultural reality. To describe the transformation in the political sphere, most studies refer to the institutionalist perspective (Couldry, 2014, p. 37; Haßler et al., 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). It is assumed that media and politics are two differentiated institutional systems with different goals, actors, needs, interests, rules, and procedures.

Moffitt and Tormey (2014) define the consequences of mediatization on politics as a simplification of political discourse, the emphasis on opposites (“Us against them”) and catchphrase-like solutions (p. 387). However, mediatization is just one of the numerous (meta-)processes which has taken place at the same time as various social developments, which is why the exact influence of individual processes is difficult to assess (Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Doroshenko, 2018; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014).

The undoubted advantage of the internet and social media, especially for populist parties and actors, lies in their low threshold – everyone can create an account on any platform of your choice. The gatekeeping function of established traditional media institutions is no longer applicable, as is the obligation to stick to the established production cycles (Doroshenko, 2018; Engesser et al., 2017). A direct contact with the audience can be established – through disintermediation.

Disintermediation

Disintermediation is the invention of a new medium or the acquisition of an existing one with the aim of replacing a middleman or to omit it entirely (Katz, 1988). The basic model of the theory of disintermediation describes the relationship between three actors A, B and C: A turns to B through which it aims to get in touch with C. Disintermediation eliminates contact with B and A addresses C directly. For example, politician A once had to use the traditional mass media B to get its messages to potential voter C. With the assistance of social media, politician A can now deliver its message directly to the potential voter C without attending a press conference or organize a television appearance first.

The 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign is often referred to as the beginning of a new era of political campaigning because, in addition to the traditional election campaign methods like e-mail newsletters, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube were used (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009; Spaeth, 2009). The 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign marked another turning point in the strategic use of political communication via social media. The 45th president of the United States and Republican Party nominee Donald Trump was already very actively using his Twitter account @realdonaldtrump before his election to deliver his messages and continued to do so after his election – until his suspension from the platform on January 7, 2021 (BBC, 2021). The American journalist Neal Gabler compared Trump in his media use to some of his most famous predecessors: What Franklin D. Roosevelt was for radio and John F. Kennedy was for TV, this was Donald Trump for Twitter and other social media (Gabler, 2016). Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) confirm that social media have made a not inconsiderable contribution, but still, classic election campaigns and television had a large part in his election victory (p. 1402).

However, the lessons of the U.S. election campaigns cannot be transferred congruently to German election campaigns for numerous legal, political, financial, and cultural reasons (Geise & Podschuweit, 2019, p. 158). Especially the strict data protection laws in Germany and Europe are restricting the possibilities of personally addressing voters, whereby the question remains whether micro-targeting would be used by the parties even without these strict guidelines (Magin et al., 2017, p. 1714). In 2013, all parties involved in the federal elections in Germany and the national elections in Austria stated that Facebook is their most important online campaign tool – yet they did not take advantage of the mobilization and interaction potential but relied almost exclusively on the information function of the platform. The reasons given were a lack of resources as well as strategic reasons (Magin et al., 2017, p. 1714).

State of Research and Derivation of the Research Question

Basically, it can be concluded that parties use social media extensively as an opportunity to convey information and encourage political participation, for instance during the 2021 federal election campaign. But the respective structuring of these tasks shows major differences. This also applies to handling challenges such as fake news or social bots (Fitzpatrick & Jöst, 2021, pp. 419–423).

Which strategic role the German parties attribute to social media has hardly been studied in the recent past. Numerous studies look from the outside at

the social media communication of the parties and deal with visual design elements (Haßler et al., 2021; Steffan, 2020; Steffan & Venema, 2020) and textual analysis (Steffan & Venema, 2020; Stier et al., 2018). Exceptions are Geise und Podschuweit (2019) as well as Magin et al. (2017), who conducted qualitative interviews with the election campaign strategists of the Bundestag elections in 2017 and 2013. In both election campaigns, the focus was mainly on informational strategies and unidirectional address.
Following on from these studies, the present work is intended to examine whether and to what extent the social media communication strategy of the German parties has changed since the 2017 federal election. Thus, the following overarching research question is formulated:

To what extent do the communication officers of the parties represented in the German Bundestag describe and characterize the role of social media applications within their overall, party-specific communication?

Based on the research question, three sub-questions were formulated to show the development of the parties' social media use over time. The following chapter will explain the methodology in detail.

Methodology

In this research project, the method of partially standardized guided interviews was used. The data obtained was then evaluated and analyzed with a qualitative content analysis.

Content of the Questionnaires

The aim of the semi-structured guided interviews was to adequately answer the research questions. Two different questionnaires were used for the interviews, depending on the position and function of the interviewees. The questionnaire for the political office holders contains ten questions, while the one for the strategic office holders contains 13 questions. The difference in the number of questions is due to the fact that the "non-politicians" were asked three targeted strategy questions on the use of social media in the respective party. Politicians would hardly have been able to answer these specific questions due to their lack of involvement in strategic social media planning. The remaining ten questions are identical for politicians and strategists and allow a comparison of the views of both groups.
In addition to an overarching research question, there are three sub-questions (RQ1–3), each with a different focus. Based on this overarching interest,

three sub-questions were formulated. The first sub-question (RQ1) deals with the significance of social media over time:

***RQ1**: How is the integration of social media and its development among the parties' communication described and evaluated within the last five to ten years?*

In this section, the participants were first asked to come up with their own definition of the term "social media". They then turned their attention to the 2013 and 2017 federal election campaigns and named the key moments they had noticed in the past years on the topic of social media in the political landscape. The second sub-question (RQ2), on the other hand, focuses specifically on social media as an instrument in the election campaign for the Bundestag elections in autumn 2021:

***RQ2**: How is the integration and use of social media in the BTW21 [German federal election 2021] election campaign described and evaluated by the respective party?*

Here it was ascertained which social media formats worked well for the respective parties, whether there were firmly formulated goals and to what extent individual politicians can control their activities in the social media themselves. The final block of topics is an assessment by the interview partners of the future development of political communication via social media:

***RQ3**: What future trends and developments within the topic area of social media applications are expected in the next few years?*

Of particular interest was which challenges will arise in the future through social media and whether election campaigns will shift exclusively to the digital space in a few years' time.

Final Sample

All parties represented in the Bundestag were included in the study. According to the result of the 2021 Bundestag election, this concerns the following eight parties: the SPD, the CDU, the CSU, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, the FDP, the AfD, Die Linke and the SSW.
Each party was to be interviewed once from a strategic and once from a political perspective. The persons were selected according to their suitability for the topic of the research project. The sampling was therefore a deliberate selection. Of a potential 16 interviews, 13 could be realized in the end. Each

Bundestag party was interviewed at least once. The interview partners have the following job descriptions:

Table 1.
Final sample of interview partners.

Political Representatives	Strategic Representatives
Spokesperson of the Bundestag parliamentary group	Head of Communications Department at the Party Executive Committee
Parliamentary Secretary of the Party	Social Media Manager
State Secretary	Staff member Public Relations online
Federal Executive Director	Head of Campaign & Marketing
Member of the Federal Executive Committee	Head of Department Social Media
Member of the German Bundestag	Senior Manager Social Media
	Head of Public Relations

The interviews did not take place in person but via video conference, which provided a comparable setting. The interview partners did not know the guide beforehand. This reduced the risk of the interviewees being able to anticipate certain answers in advance. Only rough outlines of topics were given upon request.

The interviews were recorded to ensure a detailed transcription in the next step. For this purpose, the interviewees received a privacy statement before the appointments, which they signed and returned to the research group. With this declaration, they enabled the research team to publish their statements anonymously in the project report. In most cases, the interviews lasted about 30 minutes.

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed. Software was used to speed up and simplify the process. The transcribed interviews were analyzed with the help of the text software MAXQDA. In order to evaluate the statements generated in the interviews in a uniform way and to make them interpretable, a category system had to be designed. The group decided to use the same categories and codes for both guides and not to differentiate between politicians and strategists. This made it easier to compare the statements in the evaluation.

Reflection and Methodological Critique

Even though not all 16 interviews could be realized, the internal target of a clear double-digit number of interviews was achieved. Only one person from the CSU, FDP, and AfD was missing in the end. The fact that the SPD, the party of the incumbent Federal Chancellor, could be completely won over for the project is of great importance.

During the acquisition of possible interviewees, some hurdles arose. It often happened that inquiries were either initially rejected or not answered at all. In some cases, it was possible to convince the selected persons to participate in the research project through their employees or in telephone conversations. However, this required numerous attempts; in some cases the contact extended over weeks and several channels. Occasionally, the impression emerged that the communication channels in certain parties could be improved. Coordination and responsibility problems in the parties prevented effective communication between the research group and the party in several cases. As soon as there was a final rejection of a potential interview partner or no response to requests for a number of weeks, alternative persons were contacted.

In a guided interview, it is important on the one hand that the interviewees are exposed to comparable questions and situations. By dividing the questionnaires into political and strategic guides, not all 13 persons had the same questions, but the interviewees in similar positions did. On the other hand, the representatives of the parties were also supposed to be similar in their positions and competences. In practice, it became apparent that not all interviewees were on the same hierarchical level. For example, there was an interview with the federal executive director of one party, while “only” a member of the Bundestag could be obtained from another party without further specification. This supposed inequality was offset by the fact that all 13 interviewees had expertise on the topic of social media communication. In the end, this characteristic is to be valued more highly for the research objective than formal job descriptions, especially since the parties also have very different internal structures and not all positions are also found in all parties.

Results

The different interviews permitted deep insights into the social media communication of the parties represented in the Bundestag, especially concerning the previously postulated research questions. Additional findings could be identified, which exceed the research questions, but are nevertheless considered. These additional results mostly refer to the overall benefits and challenges posed by social media for the parties’ political communication and assist in answering the overarching research question. In the following, the interview results are presented, compared and placed in context.

Development and Characterization of Social Media

To start off the interviews, all interview partners were asked to give a brief and personal characterization of social media, which served as an indicator for the party's understanding of social media and how they position themselves around the topic. Two directions could be identified: One group viewed social media as the most important communication channel available, some others pleaded for social media as simply another communication tool that should not be placed above other tools. Both opinions are rather equally distributed:

"For me personally, this is the most important communication tool available to me in my political work" (Political).	**Vs.**	*"A modern form of political communication. Not to be underestimated, but also not to be overestimated"* (Political).

More in detail, the interviewees stressed the high reach and two-sided communication function provided by social media, including opportunities for direct dialogue, feedback and discussions. This makes social media no longer optional but essential for the parties' overall communication strategies.
However, it has not always been like that. According to our interview partners, the social media landscape has undergone drastic changes within the last few years: New platforms and technologies have emerged and created new ways of digital networking. Just as many other aspects of life, political communication has been influenced by this development, which is why RQ1 aims to investigate, how the incorporation and development of social media in the parties' political communication withing the last five to ten years is described and evaluated.
The interviewees claim that in the past five to ten years, they have become aware of the general increase in social media usage and showed endeavors to adapt to this development. Their statements make it clear that social media has had a much higher relevance during the federal election campaign in 2021 than it had in in 2013, which was almost none. Accordingly, the amount of work and resources allocated towards social media communication has visibly increased, leading to a stronger presence on digital channels. It was also mentioned in many interviews that the COVID-19 crisis was and still is an additional accelerator in this process since many digital formats served as a replacement for cancelled events and analog measures.

“*Well, back then, it really was like that, we more or less didn’t care about it. On Facebook, Instagram, we did the same everywhere. We don’t do that anymore*” (Strategic).

At this point, the strategists were asked additionally whether they detected changes in strategic goals and professionalization in the past decade. Almost none saw particular developments in their strategic goals, which is also due to the fact that now all interviews define such goals (for more see chapter “Integration of Social Media in the German Federal Election 2021”). They generally agreed on a definite increase in professionalization, for example in the form of membership apps, newsrooms, or social media communication coachings for party members. However, the results show that the amount of professionalization is not necessarily congruent with the size of the party: Even smaller parties state that they have become more professional with their available resources.
Social media usage is not only increasing but also constantly changing: The pace of communication is continuously speeding up and platforms and target audiences are constantly in motion. Most interviewees remember that 10 years ago, Facebook was the most important social media platform for a young audience, but nowadays all interviewees claim to address almost exclusively older audiences there.
One interviewee sums up the both positive and challenging development of the social media landscape in relation to political communication like this: “*I believe that this development can’t be reversed anymore and nobody would want to do that”* (Political).
In the following, the positive aspects that these developments are bringing with them for political communication of parties in the Bundestag are further examined, especially in their relation to election campaigning.

Potentials of Social Media

In general, the use that social media has for political communication is considered to be very high. Many interviewees hope to improve the quality and quantity of their reach through social media as even with limited resources, it offers the opportunity to reach target audiences fast and accurately and provides the possibility to adapt to today’s fast paced communication environment.

“*I believe that concerning the effects one Euro can have, the Euro is better spent on social media than for example on a newspaper ad, I see newspapers* *and print media retreating. As I see it, social media took them over long ago*" (Political).

The interviewees name several aspects in which social media brings unique and beneficial advantages. For one, in comparison to non-digital events, social media communication is fit for mass communication, because huge groups of people can be addressed independently of their timely and geographic predisposition. Several parties also pointed out that the platforms open new perspectives on approaching the target audience. According to the interviewees, this makes it possible for audiences to gain detailed insights into politics, stay informed if they are interested, and experience the parties' identities. Concrete content can be transmitted adequately which makes political communication less dependent on traditional media outlets such as newspapers or television. This is an advantage that no matter the reasoning behind it, all parties thought beneficial for their overall communication strategy.

"*Well, this is a big advantage, because one can simply reach people in a better way. And I actually find that if you really utilize it and take it serious, you can establish a good dialogue with people. During the federal election, I am of course always out and about on the election stands, just as everybody else. But of course you can't be everywhere at the same time. […] And in this case I of course find social media to be a great way to establish dialog with people"* (Political).

As mentioned before, the parties consider the opportunities for dialogic communication to be an important feature of social media which enable them to directly contact their target audiences and create connections in the sense of disintermediation. Besides that, the interviewees list further potentials social media offers them, such as options for benchmarking with other parties, launching affordable advertisement campaigns and generating personal data of users. Especially the last aspect opens the gates for a specific potential provided by social media: accurately addressing new or existing target audiences. The main tools social media provides for this, are its wide reach and options for personal data collection and evaluation to further define and reach target audiences.

"*Yes, why? Why do online campaigns exist? We always kind of talk about a grandpa- and grandchild-election-campaign. It's of course more difficult to catch older people through social media or the internet and younger people* *are not met on classic election booths out there somewhere on the market. They walk past. Maybe looking at their phones and not even registering you standing there”* (Strategic).

During the interviews, the most commonly named target group are voters and potential voters, however some parties also address their members on social media. The interviewees explain that the option for mass communication is utilized to address multiple target groups at once and the low barrier of digital formats is used to open the gates to new target audiences of whom the parties cannot get a hold of offline. Getting in touch with younger audiences through social media is a shared aspiration of all parties. They nevertheless acknowledge special challenges with this target group, because they in particular are highly segmented, cannot be addressed on all platforms and tend to switch platforms rather a lot.

However, all parties agree that the reach of social media is limited and that there are certain target audiences that cannot be addressed through social media platforms. Therefore, social media cannot fully replace offline communication: “*One has to do both and address people where they are*” (Strategic).

Integration of Social Media in the German Federal Election 2021

Now that the potential and the possible advantages of social media for political communication are known, the integration of social media during the election campaign for the federal election 2021 and for election campaigns in general can be examined.

All interviewees stated that they integrated social media into their overall campaign strategy and communication from the start of their campaign planning, partly even as their main campaigning tool. Some parties also say that they used social media as a replacement for offline formats during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When putting measures into place, the parties would choose between copying and adapting traditional elements or creating new content. When asked about who the communicators are, the interviewees mention candidates and political actors themselves or professional communicators and departments. According to their recollections, individual communicators such as candidates play an important role by making the party appear more approachable and giving candid insights into political life. Both small and large parties claim that they invest relatively high amounts of financial resources into pushing digital content to achieve more attention. Interestingly, only one interviewee

claimed to use external service providers; all other parties chose inhouse departments.
During the interviews, it becomes clear that most strategic goals of the parties for social media communication align with their previously set political goals. These depend on the target audience and are mainly a wide reach and to convey one's message to the audience. Ideally, they manage to convince them of their message to contrast themselves from other parties and put forward their own program. The interviewees explain that the aspect of conviction becomes more and more important as sole reach becomes less attractive. To achieve this, some parties set clear strategic goals, many parties however refrain from specifying their plans and measures this far. If strategic goals are defined, they are mostly organized in phases throughout the election.
The concrete integration of social media in the political communication of parties during election campaigns is particularly visible through the measures and formats that the parties decided to put in place and which were a successful contribution to their campaigning activities. The parties divide the meaning of "success" into two categories: The quantitative success of their formats, mostly meaning a wide reach, and the qualitative success, meaning for example successfully engaging and convincing the target audience of the messages sent.

"*And then they talk and then, I don't know, 100 people tune in live and can ask questions. And later it's online on YouTube and another 1000 or 500 watch it. Those are not breathtaking numbers, but if you continue like that you can achieve an incredible reach. And also more*" (Strategic).

All interviewees except for one can name specific formats that promise good chances of success in their social media communication. Interestingly, complexity is not a necessity for success; some interviewees elaborate on how entertaining, unorthodox, or even polarizing formats are quite popular independent of their form and complexity. The most important platforms according to the parties are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and sometimes TikTok, alternative formats are used occasionally to address important target groups. The most important formats are pictures, tiles, and motion pictures, whereas videos are especially popular for information and entertainment purposes, for example to portray election topics, the everyday life of a politician, or as a questions-and-answers-format (Q&A). Paid formats were not mentioned as often as organic content and are mostly used when dealing with particularly important content, such as the official election campaigning video. In addition, two parties claim that they support their own reach by cooperating with external actors who have a wide reach themselves.

Controlling Measures

It cannot be said a priori whether the aforementioned formats were actually successful during the federal election or if this is only based on individual perception. Therefore, it is especially interesting to take a look at the communication controlling measures and success rates of the different parties. These questions were exclusively asked during interviews with strategists since communication controlling is rarely a responsibility of politicians.

The majority of parties claim to implement concrete measures to control their communication activities during and after their launch. The reach of their activities is the most commonly measured aspect, and its success factor is discussed ambivalently: Some say that it directly indicates how well the message was conveyed, others are rather skeptical about this connection and do not believe in its efficiency. The interviewees explain that they collect their KPIs through clicks, interactions, likes, number of followers, views, and further usage data. The meaning of these results is often determined in relation to their offline equivalent, for example by comparing YouTube views with the attendance at a live event.

It strikes the eye with some interviewees that on a personal level, they judge and evaluate the success of their social media measures. However, there are no official and reliable measures or instruments that further prove their success. One interviewee claims for example that they estimate the number of supporters for their party through their own interaction with them on different platforms.

Some parties wish to move towards more qualitative measurements that involve a stronger focus on the degree to which measures could actually convince the audience of the conveyed messages. However, this poses a challenge since KPIs can barely provide this kind of information.

The interviewees view the results of these controlling measures generally positively: They describe their own achievements on social media as adequate and overall successful, even if the party was not successful in the overall election. Here it is important to point out that the interviewees claimed that the results of the election campaign do not permit a direct inference to the effectiveness of the social media campaign during the election.

A majority of the strategists that were questioned claimed to conduct benchmarking, including collecting inspirations through success and failures of other parties or comparing KPIs and budgets. It was also mentioned multiple times that the parties are not only comparing each other's success but are actively copying formats, strategies and measures. Only one interviewee actually admitted to this, everybody else only stated that other parties were stealing from them.

"*Well, of course you look at what others are doing. That's out of the question. And how they communicate, what ideas they have, that's evaluated and used as inspiration. It's a constant stealing and being ripped off yourself"* (Strategic).

An interesting controlling measure that we took a closer look at is the internal coordination between the communicators within the parties. With a continuing professionalization of social media communication as described in the chapter "Development & Characterization of Social Media", it is interesting to examine whether such measures exist and how they are managed.
The first part of this question can be answered with both Yes and No for every party. The interviewees claim that the party members are given no specific directions from the communication departments but rather receive support through guidelines for social media communication. They implement this through motivations, coachings or guidelines, in some cases the communicators are even handed specific content like SharePics or Tools with which they can create their own material. Furthermore, only two interviewees stated that candidates' accounts are not run by the candidates themselves.

"*It's not like our Fraction is giving us some guidelines on what they would say and what we can't say, I believe it's up to us and our own judgement to recognize that there's things you should or shouldn't say"* (Political).

In addition, some parties state that the coordination between communicators is more intense during election campaigns. Most interviewees are content with the current coordination measures, some strategists however wish for more and better communication from members before they act on social media.

Challenges

After naming numerous advantages and positive aspects of social media communication, the challenges that the platforms and their functions pose for political communication cannot be forgotten. In previous chapters, we have already discussed the challenges of controlling the success rates of social media communication as well as the difficulties posed by younger target audiences. The interviewees state several further challenges which can be divided into four sections: (1) General problems caused by social media, (2) challenges posed by specific formats, (3) resources, and (4) societal challenges.

The general problems listed by the interviewees are not exclusive for political communication and include numerous difficulties with the fast-paced environment of social media, filter bubbles, and fake profiles. In addition, several interviewees report technical difficulties with social media through data protection measures and complex algorithms.

The formats themselves are posing multiple challenges, beginning with their growing number, which makes it difficult to keep up with current trends, participating everywhere, and keep the upper hand in the broad competition to capture the audience's attention: "*It can be challenging, because there are so many rooms where you could reach people, and so many small groups. I see that as a future challenge*" (Political).

For political communication in particular, the parties complain that it is difficult to fit complex political topics into the sometimes short and simplifying formats social media provides. In addition, all parties agree that social media cannot and probably never will be able to completely replace human contact. The reason for this is mainly that not all target audiences can be addressed online and even if they could, the interviewees explain, many people prefer additional personal contact to a completely digital experience.

The third sector is probably the most pressing challenge which needs to be overcome soon to enable the social media communication of the parties to grow and develop: A generic lack of resources. Throughout the interviews, this appears to be a general problem of all parties no matter their size and does not only concern financial aspects. As described above, social media is relatively cost efficient compared to other communication instruments, however all parties still consider social media communication to be expensive considering financials, time, and personnel. Some interviewees note on this that they experience a reluctance from the party to allocate resources to their department because the necessity of social media communication is not properly understood or appreciated.

"*However, it is also very time intensive if you are serious about it. I mean, if you really have a certain number of followers who regularly want to connect with you, it can of course be very time intensive and you have to pay attention to how much [you invest]. I mean, when does it still make sense and when is it just too much?*" (Political).

The last challenge sector refers to overall societal problems that influence social media communication. All interviewees agreed that the uncivilized tone and treatment of each other have a negative influence on the communication environment, lead to hate and harassment, and need to be addressed in the future. Fake news and populism are identified as problematic issues that arise on different platforms as well as the power inequality between the parties, meaning that bigger parties with more money can affords a further reach. As a solution, the parties plead for more balance between democracy and freedom of speech and equipping social media users with more media competence. Different parties focus on different aspects to be most problematic, however there is generally no real disagreement.

The Future of Social Media in Political Communication

In all previous paragraphs, a detailed picture of the current status quo of social media communication by political parties was developed as well as their interests and intentions with it. To give the foundation for answering RQ3 correctly, we will, in the following, take a close look at the general development of social media communication of political parties as well as the concrete implications for future election campaigns and professionalization. Among the questioned, there is overall awareness that social media is undergoing constant changes, which is why they expect new trends and technologies to arise and other trends to become irrelevant. Interestingly, all parties agree that social media will not replace door-to-door campaigning, election posters and general offline communication in the near future. They expect personal contact to continue to play an important role and older generations are not expected to suddenly join social media.

"*The traditional election poster has a relatively low mobilizing rate, that's what all our studies say. Online communication has a certain effect, but the strongest and really beating other measures by far is reality communication, meaning door-to-door campaigning. We expect door-to-door campaigning to have an enormously higher factorial efficacy than all other forms of advertisement added up"* (Political).

Some interviewees admit they would wish for more digital ways of communication because it has lower barriers for target groups and is better for the environment than for example posters – they do not expect this to become reality though.
The parties plan on reacting to these developments again with further professionalization: Stocking up on staff, expanding social media departments,

increasing and improving their use of data, and making data analysis the foundation of their social media communication. For some parties, strategic planning is a rather emergent process, which is why they could not name precise plans for the future. Unfortunately, in both cases the parties cannot anticipate whether their plans can be put into place due to their great lack of resources.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to determine how the communicators of the parties of the German Bundestag evaluate and characterize the role of social media applications within their overall, party-specific communication. To investigate this, this paper looks at the integration of social media into the political communication in the past (RQ1), in the last federal election in Germany (RQ2) and in the possible future (RQ3). The results of the study reveal that social media is seen as an increasingly important communication channel by all parties. Simultaneously to this, social media practices and departments have gone through a vast professionalization. Consequently, the interviewees report on member apps, sharing platforms (as a way to provide content for politicians), communication courses and the expansion of the social media departments. However, this development goes hand in hand with different challenges. Mainly, communication practitioners struggle with keeping up with the rising time, staff, and money they have to invest into social media communication.

This evaluation partly contradicts previous assessments that view social media as a relatively cheap alternative to the traditional mass media (e.g., Leung & Yildirim, 2020, pp. 1–2.) and points to a stark development of social media communication. This can especially be seen by looking at the results of RQ1. According to the interviewees, the rise of social media as a communication tool in German parties started in 2013. This is fairly late compared to the U.S., where the presidential election campaign in 2008 is often seen as the beginning of using social media as a campaign method (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009; Spaeth, 2009). While social media practices have become more relevant in 2017, the interviewees view the federal election of 2021 as the most digital election campaign. Beside the steady development of social media, interviewees point to the COVID-19 pandemic as another catalyst for the increasing use and importance of social media. This is especially true considering that many traditional election methods like canvassing or public events were not possible. Therefore, the first hypothesis to be tested in future research is:

H1: *The pandemic has led to an increasing relevance of social media in the political communication landscape.*

Aside from the raising use of social media in the political communication landscape, the interviewees also report differences in how social media was integrated into the federal election in 2021. Regarding RQ2, the communicators view social media as a symmetrical and dialogic means of communication as well as a direct channel to the people. However, while this statement is generally true for all parties, there still are many differences in how the parties design their content in detail. This finding confirms statements made by Fitzpatrick and Jöst (2021, pp. 419–423) who stress differences in how the parties realize their digital campaigns.
Still, most parties focus on staying in dialogue with their followers on social media and engaging them through these channels. Consequently, a shift in the functions of social media that are used by the parties can be noted. Magin et al. (2017) report in their study that the parties did not take advantage of the mobilization and interaction potential but rather focused on the information function of mainly Facebook. Back then, they name a lack of resources as a reason for this decision (Magin et al., 2017, p. 1714).
While the parties now focus on the interaction and mobilization function of social media, they still struggle with the same problem. Nowadays, the lack of resources mainly affects the number of social media platforms the parties use for their communication and the way they measure the performance of their activities. The raising professionalization as well as the speed in which new platforms, trends, and challenges for social media develop, bring about the speculation that the problem of lacking resources will only grow in the future. Consequently, these findings lead to a second hypotheses:

H2: *The rising professionalization of social media practices in the political communication increases the need for resources in the respective parties.*

Looking in the future, the results of RQ3 show that the parties rarely have a clear vision or strategy for the future development of their social media communication. Rather, the development and professionalization in this field seems to be an emergent process. Still, the interviewees stress their efforts to further train the members of their parties and to use big data to measure their activities and improve their targeting. The last point also lines up with research by Elías Zambrano et al. (2019, p. 1052), who also stress social media monitoring as an emergent research perspective. This apparent plan of the parties to further professionalize the social media activities, leads to the last hypothesis:

H3: *The increasing relevance of social media will lead to a further professionalization of practices and applications in the political communication.*

The interviewees also note that, while social media is becoming increasingly important, it will not replace traditional political communication methods. Therefore, it can be speculated that social media will remain an additional communication tool.
For practice, social media has lost its status as a simple tool to reach target groups in a cost-effective way. It has become a central measure in the election campaign where political parties have to be present in order to remain competitive. The interviewees especially stress paid campaigns as a method to reach a wide audience. This increasing relevance also shows that practitioners in the political communication landscape need to allocate more resources to social media practices. If parties want to keep up with the arising trends and challenges for social media platforms, they must provide the needed budget to do that. Here, the performance measurement becomes increasingly relevant since it makes it possible to make educated decisions on communication measures and the target groups. Just measuring the coverage of a campaign probably will not be a sufficient data basis in the future. Additionally, the fast transition of the platforms shows that the communicators of the parties need to bear the trends and target groups in mind. Practitioners who know where their target groups are and what kind of content they want to see, will successfully communicate with them. However, this – again – remains a matter of resources and therefore emphasizes that investing in social media will pay off.
While this study offers extensive insights into the political communication landscape, there are also some limitations that need to be considered. Firstly, the sample must be critically reflected upon. Since this research took on a qualitative approach, only one or two representants of each party have been interviewed. Thus, the results offered are vast but cannot be generalized, especially beyond the German political landscape. Additionally, the distinction between "political" and "strategic" officials may be blurred due to the wide differences between the job titles of politicians and communication professionals. Since the job titles of some participants are very traceable, a "clearer" distinction would have caused problems with the anonymization. Another thing that should be added is that the study has been conducted shortly after the federal election in Germany which is why many higher officials could not participate due to a lack of time.

Secondly, the method of semi-structured interviews leads to some limitations. Effects such as interviewer bias, reactivity, and social desirability cannot be ruled out. In order to still achieve variable and reliable results, several measures such as complete transcripts, different coders and a system of categories were taken.

Conclusion

Social media has become an essential communication tool for both strategic and political practitioners in the political landscape. In contrast to traditional channels in the election campaign (like election posters or canvassing), social media offers parties the possibility to target specific audiences and profit from increasing scopes of especially paid campaigns.

In order to examine the state-of-the-art of the usage of social media in the German political sphere, the given paper strives to provide insight in how communication officers of the parties represented in the German Bundestag describe and characterize the role of social media applications within their overall, party-specific communication. To this end, previous research was discussed and subordinate research questions concerning the past, present, and future of election campaigning via social media were formed. To answer these questions, 13 semi-open qualitative interviews with both political and strategic officials of the eight parties represented in the German Bundestag were conducted and analyzed using a qualitative content analysis.

Altogether, a clear increase in both importance and professionalization of social media as a communication tool can be observed. Strategic and political officials consider social media as increasingly important in the election campaigns – though they do not think that these channels can replace traditional campaigning methods like canvassing. With this gain of significance, communication officials also professionalize working with social media.

Practitioners for example offer apps, sharing platforms, or communication courses to the politicians and communicators of their respective parties and work on expanding their social media departments.

However, all parties seem to be facing a common problem: While social media used to be seen as a cheap and easily implemented tool, it is becoming increasingly time consuming, labor-intensive, and costly. This leads to a paradoxical development: Although both political and strategic officials consider social media as highly important in the political communication landscape, the resources that the parties allocate to their social media communication are too slim.

In order to deal and keep up with trends and challenges that social media entails (e.g., the multitude of channels or Big Data), German parties need to increase the resources allocated to social media. This background also opens up directions for further research. Future studies should thus focus on the reasoning behind the scarcity of resources and its effect on the adoption of innovations in the political communication landscape.

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Is the Pen Mightier Than the Sword?

A Qualitative Survey of German and American Journalists on the Professional and Personal Effects of Violence

Eva Christiansen, Sophia Heinl, Jakob Irler, Stefanie Lörch, Victoria Niemsch

Abstract

In recent years, reported violence, both physical and psychological, against journalists in Germany and the United States has increased threateningly. This development needs to be reviewed in more detail, since freedom of speech and freedom of the press in journalism particularly serve the public interest by fulfilling fundamental democratic tasks. The so-called chilling effect describes how pressure and threats of violence can influence journalists' work and cause changes in content and style of reporting. This development is especially problematic, as it interferes with the most basic societal functions of journalism. To explore these developments, a qualitative study of the situation in Germany and the United States was conducted to determine whether editorial work in news reporting is already influenced by violence against journalists. Data for this study was collected in guided qualitative interviews with 22 journalists from Germany and the United States. The study reveals that the most common consequence of increasing violence is the implementation of a wide range of security measures by journalists and news organizations. Nevertheless, effects on reporting are mostly denied. The research unfolds that there is a wide range of individual experiences with violence and consequences for journalistic work. This demonstrates the relevance of further research in this area in order not to endanger the press and freedom of expression in democracies.

Keywords

Violence Against Journalists, News Reporting, Editorial Work, Freedom of the Press

Introduction

Violence against journalists is a phenomenon that increasingly affects countries of the global north, as the "sharp decline in the safety of journalists" in Western Europe and North America indicates (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018, p. 35). The United States is a particularly drastic example of this: The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP, 2021, p. 8) recorded three times as many attacks on journalists here in 2020 as in the previous three years combined. How this surge of violence affects the political stability of these democratic states can be seen in Germany, where according to Reporters Without Borders (2021a) "dozens of journalists were attacked by supporters of extremist and conspiracy theory believers during protests against pandemic restrictions". Because of this development, the organization downgraded the country's rating in the World Press Freedom Index from "good" to "satisfactory" (Reporters Without Borders, 2021a; Reporters Without Borders, 2021b).

This illustrates the high political relevance of the scientific examination of the problem. As violence against journalists is associated with negative effects on press freedom, the consequences of the attacks pose a potential threat for democracy. To allow an appropriate response by democratic institutions from media, politics, and civil society, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon is necessary. However, while the prevalence of violence is relatively well recorded thanks to the monitoring of NGOs (European Center for Press and Media Freedom [ECPMF], 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2021a; RCFP, 2021), there is little research on the impact of attacks against the press in Western democracies. This study aims to contribute to this field of research by comparing effects in Germany and the USA. These states make for compelling case studies, as they are Western countries that are heavily affected by the rise of attacks against the press and have strong democratic traditions, yet very different media systems. We consequently formulate the following main research question:

To what extent does violence against journalists influence editorial work in news reporting in Germany and the United States?

In order to concretize this research interest, central theoretical concepts like the chilling effect as well as the current state of research on violence against journalists are analyzed. On this basis, three subordinate research questions

are developed, drawing on models of the journalistic process, journalists' professional understanding, and frameworks of different media systems.
To investigate these research questions, 22 guided qualitative interviews with journalists from Germany and the U.S. were conducted.

Literature Review

In 2021, after his appearance as a guest in a TV show, the crime reporter Peter R. de Vries was gunned down in the center of Amsterdam and died a few days later (Erdbrink & Moses, 2021). Six years earlier in 2015, twelve people were killed in the attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo including eight cartoonists and authors (Penketh, 2015). Drastic attacks like these have not been commonplace in the Western world. Nevertheless, they are an extreme example of the more general problem of increasing violence against journalists. This will be presented in the following chapter by analyzing the empirical and theoretical state of research to subsequently develop further research questions.

Theoretical Foundations of Violence against Journalists

In order to grasp the issue of violence against journalists, the following section will explain basic terms and theoretical concepts. This will examine why the protection of journalists is of utmost relevance.
As a complex system that is interconnected with many other areas of society, journalism can be defined in diverse ways (Vos, 2018, p. 2). Zelizer (2005) considers one of its core functions to be communicating complex events in an understandable way (p. 69). According to McNair (2005), journalism encompasses three functions (p. 28). First, it provides the necessary information to follow events in a social environment (McNair, 2005, p. 28). Second, it provides a source and aid for participation in public life and in political debate (McNair, 2005, p. 28). Third, journalism also takes on the role of an entertainment, enlightenment, and learning medium (McNair, 2005, p. 28). Objectivity and a claim to complete reporting are of particular importance in journalism: Journalists function above all “as recorders, observers, and scribers, reliably taking account of events as they unfold” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 69). While this is a global quality criterion, the “objectivity norm” is a salient feature of American journalism (Schudson, 2011, p. 163), according to which news reporting should be done without commenting or subjectively influencing it (Schudson, 2011, p. 150). European journalism did not develop this objectivity norm from the beginning and pursued it less intensively than its American counterpart later on (Schudson, 2011, p. 166). On the political

level, news media are also expected to perform democratic tasks, including informing citizens about political actors and their ideas, interpreting those ideas, scrutinizing the powerful, and encouraging citizens' political participation (De Vreese et al., 2016, p. 1). In order to ensure the professional communication process between journalists and their audience via mass media at any time, journalists and other media actors should not have to work under fear of interference or reprisals. However, although freedom of speech and freedom of the press are considered important human rights (Brunetti & Weder, 2003, p. 1801), targeted attacks on journalists and media workers occur time and time again.
For a more detailed examination of violence against journalists, it is first necessary to clarify which types of attacks the phenomenon encompasses. Violence is not only physical attacks – verbal threats also play a role. Violence occurs in many facets and is a universal and complex phenomenon (Miller, 2020, p. 5; Krug et al., 2002, p. 4). Therefore, it is first necessary to clarify which types of attacks violence encompasses. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence in its World Report on Violence and Health as:

> The intentional use of physical force or power threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (Krug et al., 2002, p. 5)

This definition illustrates that violence includes not only the physical act carried out, but also the indented or threatened action. However, verbal threats, insults, and hateful words can also index or provoke violence, which causes concern even for advocates of absolute freedom of expression (Miller, 2020, p. 6; p. 85). Thus, violence includes physical, psychological, and emotional components (Bishop & Phillips, 2006, p. 377). Pressure or threats against journalists can have an impact on the working methods of journalists (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2016, p. 2). If the selection of information to be conveyed and the way in which it is reported consciously undergoes an adjustment, this describes the “chilling effect” (FRA, 2016, p. 2). The underlying basis of the effect is fear of consequences, which prevents a person from engaging in an activity (Schauer, 1978, p. 689). In the U.S. American law, a chilling effect is “when a person, deterred by fear of some legal punishment or privacy harm, engages in self-censorship, that is, censors themselves and does not speak or engage in some activity being lawful or even desirable” (Penney, 2022, p. 1454).

However, this is problematic because any restriction on the individual journalist's freedom threatens the journalist's autonomy and safety (Hamada, 2021, p. 2).

State of Research on Violence against Journalists

Acts of violence and intimidation against media professionals are on the rise worldwide (Geamănu, 2017, p. 123). While research mostly focuses on countries of the global south and war zones (Larsen et al., 2021), the trend is particularly strong in countries that were not previously considered crisis regions (UNESCO, 2019, p. 14). This holds true for Germany, where in 2020 the number of attacks was at the highest level since the beginning of records (ECPMF, 2021, p. 3; Reporters Without Borders, 2021a). In the same year, the U.S. also saw an all-time high of 438 recorded acts of violence and 139 arrests of journalists (RCFP, 2021, pp. 8–12). These numbers can be attributed primarily to the international trend of increasing violence during demonstrations (Smyth, 2020, p. 1). As these statistics do not include verbal or psychological violence, additional evidence can be drawn from surveys of journalists. Papendick et al. (2020) provide numbers in a survey of German journalists, where 16.2 % of respondents had experienced physical attacks, 59.9 % verbal attacks, and 15.8 % death threats in their professional lives (p. 3). It becomes clear that physical attacks make up only a fraction of the violence against journalists. Online harassment in particular has become a common problem in recent years (FRA, 2016, p. 2; Waisbord, 2020, p. 1030). Not all journalists are affected to the same extent, with members of ethnic or religious minorities being particularly at risk (FRA, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, violence against journalists is also gender-specific: Male journalists are more often victims of physical violence, while female journalists experience more sexualized assaults (Clark & Grech, 2019, p. 55) and sexualized online harassment (FRA, 2016, p. 2; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2015, p. 10). Along with racist and sexist motivations, populism is one of the most important drivers of violence against journalists, as it sees the media as part of a self-serving elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 81): “Journalists become targets and enemies” (Le Cam et al., 2021, p. 16). A prominent example of this is former U.S. president Donald Trump, who wrote 632 tweets critical of the media in 2020 alone, calling the image of a journalist injured by a rubber bullet a “beautiful sight” (RCFP, 2021, p. 7). Reporters Without Borders attributes the rise in violence to this rhetoric: “Fueled by years of Trump's demonization of the media, unprecedented violence breaks out against journalists” (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

This hostility increasingly puts journalists under pressure, which stems from a high-risk perception: Many European journalists consider it likely that they will experience psychological (60 %) or physical violence in their work (41 %) (Clark & Grech, 2019, p. 52). This places a high emotional burden on media professionals, with 67 % of respondents reporting psychological consequences ranging from stress to post-traumatic stress disorder (Clark & Grech, 2019, pp. 39–40). At first glance, these mental health effects seem to have only a limited impact on the professional lives of journalists. For example, violent or traumatic experiences in the context of everyday work have little negative impact on professional commitment, job satisfaction, and morale (Beam & Spratt, 2009, p. 432). Brodeală et al. (2020) also find the journalists "have experienced targeted intimidation and harassment but still continue to carry out their watchdog function with determination" (p. 82). Based on these findings, journalists are said to have a special robustness and resilience (Beam & Spratt, 2009, p. 432). This is interpreted as the result of an idealistic understanding of their profession: "The journalists' resilience was powerfully motivated by a sense of responsibility" (Brodeală et al., 2020, p. 121). Remarkably, this does not align with findings from Clark and Grech's (2019) anonymized quantitative survey, where 31 % of respondents reported to tone down criticism due to attacks (p. 44). The apparent resilience of journalists might be a product of social desirability that could even be enhanced by the strong professional ethos of journalists: "Feelings of fear, although experienced, were often difficult to acknowledge. This may be interpreted as a form of identity construction that is an essential part of socialization into the journalistic profession" (Brodeală et al., 2020, p. 73). Journalists thus find it difficult to admit the consequences of experiences of violence, which would damage their idealistic self-image of free critical reporting.

Research Questions

While the main research question already indicates the applied overarching framework of international journalism research, some violence- and profession-related sub-aspects shall be examined in more detail. These can be divided into three subordinate research questions.

Journalistic news selection is a central issue in communication research (Donsbach, 2004, p. 131). Traditionally, journalists have a gatekeeper function, making them central to the process of "selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating, and otherwise massaging information to become news" (Shoemaker et al., 2009, p. 73). In addition, it is often decisive which journalistic product is targeted, since "different kinds of news stories

[…] have different expectations about the kinds of information each highlights, the style in which it is written, the position that it occupies in the newscast or newspaper" (Zelizer, 2005, p. 70).
Thus, many factors exist that are meant to ensure journalistic standards, which could be influenced by violence. This project explores the extent to which violence as an influencing factor on topic choice and task distribution could potentially overpower traditional professional structures or news values. Keeping in mind different stages of journalistic work, it is to be determined to what extent violence changes or even prevents those established processes. This is expressed in the first subordinate research question:

RQ1: *To what extent does the perceived increasing threat to journalists potentially change the selection of topics and areas of responsibility?*

The way journalists handle their professional duties and external influences is not only prescribed through organizational rules or codices, but also by their personal understanding of their occupational obligation. It is necessary to examine the professional understanding of journalists, which on the one hand can be derived from the given definitions of journalism and on the other comes from the journalists' personal perspective. Correspondingly, Zelizer (2005) argues: "by extension, journalism as a frame of mind varies from individual to individual" (p. 66). It can be deduced that classical quality demands are by far not the only factors to be considered when it comes to determining journalistic action. Individual work ethic, as is reflected in the "on-call status" attributed to journalists, also strongly influences occupational decisions, suggesting that tasks should be pursued under all circumstances (Zelizer, 2005, p. 71). In a research context, the distinction between editors and reporters is especially important (Nerone & Barnhurst, 2003, pp. 441–444). This is due to different tasks and potentially varying personal priorities in their professional work. Other noteworthy demands put onto journalists are made by codes of ethics that emphasize journalism's duty to contribute to democracy and the importance of free speech in both Germany and the U.S. (Deutscher Fachjournalisten Verband, n.d., p. 2; News Leaders Association, n.d.).
In the context of this research project, it is therefore relevant to find out what role social expectations, occupational demands, and the professional self-image play in the context of journalists' experiences of violence. This is examined in the next subordinate research question:

RQ2: *To what extent does a conflict arise for journalists between their obligation to report and the perceived danger?*

National contexts are of great importance in the stated research context, on the one hand for the threat posed by violence, and on the other hand for the general professional framework. As has already become evident in the discussion of relevance, the increased potential for violence in both Germany and the United States cannot be ignored. Despite current efforts by the U.S. government to ensure press freedom and government accountability, there are many "chronic, underlying conditions" that limit journalistic work (Reporters Without Borders, 2021c). These include the decline of the local press as well as widespread distrust of media (Reporters Without Borders, 2021c). Contrastingly, Reporters Without Borders (2021a) rates the German constitutional framework in conjunction with an independent judiciary as a "favorable environment for journalists", but also criticizes laws on access to information as weak and highlights the decline of media pluralism.

"The press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures in which it operates" (Siebert et al., 1956, pp. 1–2). Therefore, it is crucial to consider how recorded and perceived press freedom violations, as well as political or economic alignment of media, influence violence perception in the profession. Varying patterns in reporting are often related to differences in the structure of media and political systems, as well as in the professional cultures of media types (Esser et al., 2016, p. 23). This raises the need for international comparative research because editorial orientations and processes may differ in addition to different external influences, including violence. According to Esser et al. (2016), it should be a research responsibility to identify such distinct national and organization-specific news cultures and to distinguish them from remaining elements of divergence (p. 23). The latter are attributed to changes over time and external influences (Esser et al., 2016, p. 23), which can potentially include violence. Differences in the context of this research are to be expected, since according to Hallin and Mancini's (2012) construct of media systems, the U.S. belong to the economy-dominated liberal model while Germany is more socially and politically oriented (p. 11). It thus belongs to the democratic-corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2012, p. 11).

All of this should be considered when putting the results gathered from examining the previous research questions in a binational comparison. In summary, the final subordinate research question is:

RQ3: *To what extent are differences between the effects of perceived danger in German and U.S. newsrooms apparent?*

Methodology

To investigate the research questions developed in the previous chapter, the qualitative guided interview was chosen as a method. Its semi-structured nature on the one hand allows the deductive implementation of the empirical and theoretical considerations. This is achieved by a questionnaire, which determines topic blocks and associated questions in line with the research questions and theoretical preliminary considerations. On the other hand, the method leaves room for an inductive, exploratory approach as it is characterized by open questions and a high degree of flexibility due to the possibility of spontaneous follow-up questions and a free order of questions. This is especially desirable as psychological consequences of violence are very complex and individual topics, for which insights beyond previously defined categories are to be expected.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 main questions, with additional sub-questions and optional follow-up questions. The eight main questions that concerned RQ1 focused on the topics of general editorial processes, the distribution of tasks and the impact of violence on journalistic topic selection. RQ2 was examined through seven main questions, which included journalists' understanding of their profession and their experiences with violence, as well as the personal consequences of violent acts suffered and the respondents' perception of risk. RQ3 was investigated by one question regarding the international comparison and by comparing the responses of US-American and German journalists. A total of 30 to 45 minutes was allotted for the duration of the interviews. Before the survey was conducted, the questionnaire was tested in a trial interview.

Since potential violence affects journalism as a whole, this study’s basic population encompasses all active journalists in the U.S. and Germany. Furthermore, their occupational specialization is considered by focusing on those working in editorial positions and reporting. Editors are thus responsible for selecting topics and assigning tasks, while the journalists’ main job is active reporting. Those occupations were selected to provide an overview of the current situation in as many different areas of diverse media reporting as possible and to avoid biased results. This is also ensured through including journalists who work in professional print, online, TV, and radio journalism, hence covering different types of media for journalism. The drawn sample consists of editorial authorities and reporters who work in press and broadcast journalism, whereby equal representation of both countries was ensured during the sampling process. Both regional and national media were included. The interviewees were recruited in November and December 2021 via email, phone, and several social networks, namely LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram. Finally, all 22 interviews were conducted via Zoom in January 2022.

The final sample includes eleven U.S. and eleven German interviewees from various major media institutions. These are mainly print and online newsrooms, 13 out of 22 in total. Furthermore, six television and two radio newsrooms are included. While the distribution of newsroom types is very balanced in both countries' samples, the German sample furthermore includes a journalistic union. Regarding occupational distribution, six interviewees work as editors or union managers while 16 are reporters.

Qualitative content analysis was used to evaluate the data obtained. The combination of methods is suitable since qualitative content analysis is also characterized by an explorative character with simultaneous standardization. Central to the method is a category system that was created by deriving categories from the literature guided interview questions. Further, a coding definition was created for each of them. This was followed by a trial coding of the material, in which new findings were incorporated into the category system by adding several inductive categories that were not yet adequately represented.

Results

As described above, the study is divided into three parts based on the research questions. Consequently, the results of the research results are also presented according to this order.

Changes Regarding Reported Topics and Areas of Responsibility

Regarding the first subordinate research question, our data reveals that reporters covering events on the scene, especially demonstrations, are at particular risk of experiencing physical violence. According to the interviewees, freelancers are in an especially vulnerable situation. Respondents primarily pointed to the vulnerability of press photographers, video journalists, and freelance reporters. This is consistent with previous research which also suggests freelancers to be a particularly vulnerable group (Clark & Grech, 2019, p. 57). Some newsrooms increasingly rely on photo and video material from news agencies due to security concerns regarding their employees. In addition, agency reports serve as the primary source and point of reference for reporting on controversial issues.

Most of the interviewees stated that security concerns have no influence on the selection of topics and the way of reporting. Nevertheless, it was questioned whether journalists would be aware of changes. Overall, there is a fundamental tendency to be more cautious when dealing with topics that have a lot of potential for conflict. The reason given for this is that journalists are afraid of violent backlash. This applies to the choice of a subject focus, the framing of conflicting issues and the use of opinion-based reporting. Almost all respondents agree that despite increasing dangers for journalists, reporting continues on all important topics.

Increasing violence against journalists leads to greater implementation of security measures. According to the interviewees, newsrooms are getting more cognizant of preparing their reporters. As a result, more time is being invested in the logistics surrounding the journalists' assignment, and the amount of work involved in security measures is increasing.

Those security measures can be divided into two types. Firstly, editorial buildings are being better secured through entry controls, surveillance cameras, bulletproof glass, and door security systems. Secondly, journalists are physically protected. While reporting from the scene, reporters are equipped with safety vests, helmets, pepper spray and bodyguards. In the case of potentially dangerous topics, extensive research on people and places is often conducted in advance. Additionally, many journalists remove their private address from the civil register. Communication about violence is seen as more and more significant by media companies. Most journalists believe that the issue of violence is taken seriously by their employers. Many emphasized the trusting relationship with the editors-in-chief or department heads, who often serve as the first point of contact for those affected. Communication about threats to journalists takes place both internally between journalists and externally with security consultants and psychologists. However, there are significant differences between editorial offices. While some media houses talk openly about the threats for journalists, in others the topic is not discussed at all.

Journalists' assignment to potentially dangerous topics depends primarily on their areas of responsibility. These are usually defined thematically or locally. However, most respondents emphasized that people who do not want to report on a certain topic out of fear are not forced to do so. However, some journalists spoke of an underlying pressure in the professional environment, saying that it is not common in journalism to turn down an assignment even if a journalist fears for his or her safety. The willingness to engage in high-risk missions varies widely among journalists. While some question their reporting obligations due to fear, others speak of a resistance effect that arises after violent acts and motivates them to report critically about the people in question. One respondent stated that she is even more encouraged by violent assaults because she does not want to be treated that way. Overall, the interviewed journalists reported professional changes due to fear of violence primarily in the form of increasing awareness of the dangers in their workplace.

Conflict Between Professional Obligation and Self-Protection

According to the interviewees, journalists see their social task primarily in informing the population about socially relevant topics and ensuring a basic supply of information that is accessible to all people. They want to provide social orientation and help the population to form their own knowledge and opinions on issues. The intention is to help society make its own decisions – in elections, for example. Journalists consider their profession to be a very important task for the protection of democracy. However, most of them assess the current social mood toward journalists as relatively bad. Some respondents assume that this is due to a lack of understanding of the tasks and working methods of journalists among the population. Nevertheless, most journalists do not feel that the performance of their tasks has been impaired by the negative social mood. Journalists consider themselves obligated to neutral reporting to society and their professional ethics and aim to achieve this through balanced reporting of differing opinions.

In terms of experiences of violence, almost all journalists have experienced some form of violence in the course of their work. The respondents consider verbal violence to be an almost daily phenomenon in their jobs, but even more common than verbal assaults is online harassment. This is regarded as the most common form of violence against journalists and includes different aspects, from insults and threats of violence to death threats, as well as hacker attacks and shitstorms. Just like the other forms of violence, physical violence also manifests itself in different ways. Even if not all journalists have experienced physical violence themselves, the victims report attacks that were very severe and traumatic. These attacks range from being jostled and kicked to even being beaten up. In regard to sexual violence, the journalists did not mention any physical assaults. However, some female interviewees mentioned verbal attacks in the form of insulting, sexualized comments and even rape threats.

The personal consequences of violent attacks and threats differ for each journalist. Some experience no consequences, while others report them having a large impact on their lives. Overall, the impact on everyday working life was estimated to be lower than on their private life. Very few respondents reported changing the way they work, but many expressed concerns about their private safety and that of their family. Consequently, many respondents have become more cautious and are more aware of the risks involved in online communication. For instance, some journalists think twice before posting content on social media to avoid conflict. In a few exceptions journalists reported that they developed a resistance to the threat. As a result, they saw the attacks as a confirmation of the great importance of their work. When asked if they would consider changing careers due to the increased threat most interviewees answered in the negative.

Regarding the perceived risk, most interviewees would classify themselves as moderately endangered in their job. Yet, the estimated occupational risk differs greatly. Journalists, who primarily work in an editorial office, rate their occupational risk as rather low, while field reporters see themselves as more at risk. One group standing out in their assessment are investigative journalists. They see themselves and their colleagues as particularly endangered to experience violence. Another risk factor mentioned is how obviously a person can be identified as a journalist – for example, cues such as a microphone or camera equipment increase the risk for journalists in public. As particularly vulnerable groups, women were mentioned, as well as journalists with an immigrant background and those who do not look Caucasian. In the U.S., African American men are considered to be especially at risk.

As the most dangerous groups for journalists the interviewees named above all political extremist groups, especially the radical right. Political motives were mentioned as a very frequent cause for violence against journalists. Also, racism and sexism, conspiracy theories and lies, prejudice, economic interests, and hatred were listed as reasons. Further, the police were named as an aggressor. Their role is assessed very differently, as there are strong differences in journalists' personal experiences with them. On the one hand, the police protect journalists, on the other hand, police violence against journalists was reported by interviewees in both countries – mostly in the context of demonstrations.

Most interview partners named a change in their risk perception as the most noticeable consequence of the rising threat. This does not mean that they are constantly afraid at work, but that they are generally more aware of the potential danger to journalists and security measures are taken consequently.

Differences Between Germany and the U.S.

The research findings reveal both differences and similarities regarding the impact of rising violence against journalists in Germany and the United States. Journalists from both countries said that the rise of social networks is having a great effect on violence against journalists. One respondent even stated that the digital revolution has changed everything. The interview partners see a tendency toward increasing anonymity and a communication characterized by hate. Some mentioned the formation of so-called echo chambers and filter bubbles as problematic developments.

Different social and political events and developments that have influenced the mood toward journalism were named. In Germany, these include demonstrations against the COVID-19 protection measures, the G20 summit in Hamburg, demonstrations on May Day, the increasing distrust of the press, as well as the emergence of the German term “Lügenpresse”, which can be translated into “lying press”. Furthermore, the founding of the Islamophobic, racist and far-right organization Pegida and the strengthening of the far-right political party AfD, which is highly critical of much of the German press, have worsened the general attitude towards journalists in German society. U.S. journalists primarily mentioned the election and presidency of Donald Trump and his rhetoric as key factors that have worsened social sentiment toward journalism. They see this as a major turning point for the way people view the media, especially because former president Trump himself has repeatedly attacked the press directly. The storming of the U.S. capitol on January 6, 2021, marked the peak of this negative trend. In general, the reputation of journalism within U.S. society has worsened, leading to a declining understanding of the function of journalism. Some interviewees see the beginning of this development within the financial crisis of 2008/2009.

In terms of the topics associated with attacks, German respondents named COVID-19 protection measures, the so-called refugee crisis, terror from the right-wing and Islamist milieu as well as feminist and critical or investigative reporting in general. In the U.S., primarily political topics – such as the policies of former U.S. President Donald Trump and anti-racist movements such as the Black Lives Matter protests – were named as leading to violence against journalists. Our results are thereby in line with statistics from both countries: While 71 % of attacks in Germany occurred at demonstrations against Corona protections (ECPMF, 2021, p. 4), the U.S. saw most attacks in context with Black Lives Matter protests. 82 % of incidents were recorded here and were mostly classified as police violence (RCFP, 2021, p. 4). This aligns with the fact that the respondents' opinions on the role of the police in endangering journalists differed in both the U.S. and Germany. While police officers in both countries were seen as having a certain protective function for media professionals, cases of police violence against journalists were also mentioned by interviewees in both nations. However, according to the interviewees, the extent of this police violence seems to be greater in the U.S. than in Germany.

Considering how the situation has changed over time, some German journalists see a worsening of the current situation compared to the past, while others see no major changes or even an improvement of the situation. Their U.S. colleagues, on the other hand, almost universally assessed the situation today as worse than in the past. Still, regarding the assessment of their personal occupational risk, U.S. journalists often downplay or relativize the occupational hazards, as they do not consider themselves to be more at risk compared to other groups of people and professions.

The U.S. journalists didn't express the desire for more government measures to protect journalists. They prefer a strict separation of government and journalism. On the other hand, German interviewees typically complained about the lack of state support. Overall, the U.S. interviewees stated that they had hardly any information about the threat situation for journalists in Germany, while German journalists considered themselves to be in a safer position than journalists in the USA. The respondents noted that the kind of unleashed violence that occurred in Trump's America against journalists does not occur in Germany. One of the reasons given for this was the support within German politics. Accordingly, there is a political consensus in Germany about the great relevance of journalism. Thus, Merkel, for example, had repeatedly emphasized that she considered it important for critical reporting taking place.

Discussion

In order to answer the main research question of this study – to what extent violence against journalists influences editorial work in news reporting in Germany and the United States – it is necessary to examine the findings regarding the three subordinate research questions first. Additionally, the results from the interviewees' answers lead to the formulation of three hypotheses which will be described hereafter.

Changes Regarding Reported Topics and Areas of Responsibility

The first subordinate research question examined to what extent the selection of topics and areas of responsibility potentially change due to the

perceived increasing threat to journalists. It is noticeable that even though violence plays a growing role in the daily lives of journalists, responses suggest that the selection of topics hardly seems to be affected by actual or perceived violence. Most interviewees stated that they experience violence in some form or have experienced it at some point as a result of their work. Many even mention it as a common or daily occurrence which they have gotten used to by now. Even in light of these developments, the interviewees mostly stated that events perceived as relevant continue to be reported on regardless of the threat of violence and that changes in reporting occur primarily in the form of a different topical focus or less emphasis on opinionated reporting. This could be due to the journalists' understanding of their profession and their strong work ethics, which they frequently mentioned during the interviews. Their self-proclaimed obligation to report on relevant topics could be a deciding factor in their choice to fulfill their work duties – even if this endangers them in some way. It is also conceivable that their strong sense of work ethic leads them to not being willing to admit – to themselves or others – if their work is influenced by the growing threat. One U.S. reporter even explicitly mentioned the perceived internal pressure in journalism to fulfill reporting duties. The answers given by the interviewees suggest that there are little to no changes regarding the selection of topics and areas of responsibility.
Nevertheless, the responses clearly show that journalists are increasingly confronted with various forms of violence during and as a result of their work. Based on the interviewees' statements regarding the frequency of violence in their daily lives and the intensity of attacks the following first hypothesis can be formed:

H1: *In Germany and the USA, violence is increasingly part of journalists' everyday work.*

As a result of the increasing amount of violence, some clear changes to the working methods and organizational structure in the editorial offices can be observed. In the workplaces of most respondents, security measures have been increasingly implemented in recent years. The focus is on measures against digital hate, providing safety equipment and training for the physical protection of journalists on field assignments, as well as increased security in the editorial buildings. Apart from these measures, many interviewees stated that violence is talked about in their working environment – both with colleagues and supervisors – and that they feel their employers are taking the problem seriously. The implementation of these far-reaching security measures and the increasing communication about the topic result in the second hypothesis:

***H2:** A growing awareness of the vulnerability of journalists is leading to increased security measures in everyday editorial work.*

Apart from the implementation of security measures and a growing awareness of the phenomenon, the interviewees' answers suggest that the consequences of violence that journalists experience themselves or observe among colleagues primarily affect their private lives. While they are less affected professionally, many reported effects on their psyche in the form of changed behavior and a generally greater awareness of risks in everyday life.

Conflict Between Professional Obligation and Self-Protection

The results of the second subordinate research question – to what extent a conflict arises for journalists between their obligation to report and the perceived danger – suggest a rather minor conflict. Once again, the journalists indicated a very strong professional ethos and a clear understanding of the role of their profession and, as a result, fulfill their obligation to inform. They take this responsibility seriously and carry out the duties set out in their understanding of their profession, despite the risks involved. Topics are dealt with, even in the face of higher associated risk, and precautionary measures are taken rather than refraining from reporting.

Journalists who feel unsafe or uncomfortable in their jobs change the scope and focus of their reporting in some cases, but do not completely refrain from informing society.

A surprising finding here is the apparent contradiction between the additional security measures that were implemented in most cases, and the simultaneous lack of a chilling effect. Instead of feeling intimidated by the rising threat to their safety and adjusting their reporting accordingly, many interview partners remarked continuing with their reporting unperturbed and some even mentioned that they started developing an attitude of resistance. This again can be explained, at least to some extent, by the fact that the journalists interviewed expressed a strong professional ethos which in turn could lead to a high level of resilience. The conviction of the importance of their task would thus help the journalists to withstand the increasing level of stress and to meet their obligation to inform. They therefore fulfill these professional obligations despite the threat of violence. Consequently, the following third hypothesis emerges:

H3: *Journalists continue to fulfill their reporting duties to the best of their ability despite increasing threats.*

Differences Between Germany and the U.S.

In the context of the third subordinate research question – to what extent differences between the effects of perceived danger in German and U.S. newsrooms are discernible – several aspects can be described. First, it should be noted that editorial work in both countries seems to be barely influenced by perceived or actual danger. Nevertheless, the increasing numbers of violent attacks against journalists in both nations are leading to changes in the journalistic profession. In both German and U.S. newsrooms, protective measures are being taken and there is a rising awareness of the problem. Still, journalists from both countries deny these developments having any effect on their actual reporting.

In the same sense, journalists from both countries assessed their own occupational risk as much lower than that of their colleagues or even other professions – like police officers or firefighters. This seems contradictory, seeing that although several interviewees reported serious experiences of violence, most journalists assessed the risk of others as higher than their own. However, differences between editors and field reporters can be noted here, which can presumably be linked to their areas of responsibility differing. According to the interviewees' answers, the occupational risk for reporters who, for example, report on demonstrations in the field is significantly higher than for journalists who primarily work in the newsroom. Correspondingly, answers regarding personal risk assessment were also different. On average, reporters consider their profession to be significantly more dangerous than editors.

When assessing their own professional risk, it is also striking that U.S. journalists do not consider themselves to be particularly at risk – even though the number of reported attacks against journalists is significantly higher in the U.S. than in Germany or other Western democratic countries. This could be attributed to the generally higher level of everyday violence in the United States, which ensures that attacks on journalists stand out less. Journalists could therefore be perceived as not more at risk of dangerous violent attacks than the general public.

Another possible influencing factor is nationality. The general discrepancy between experiences of violence and relatively low safety concerns is noticeably greater among the U.S. respondents than among the German journalists. It is therefore possible that U.S. journalists have an even stronger

understanding of their role than the German journalists. In many cases, references to the First Amendment, which legally guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the United States, were made by U.S. interviewees. In addition, some respondents spoke of increasing economic pressure on editorial departments due to digitization. Perhaps this puts the burden of attacks on journalists into perspective. It is also possible that the shift to more remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic leads to more physical security for journalists, which in turn might lower their risk perception.
Overall, individual factors appear to have a major impact on perceptions of and responses to violence. This leads to the formation of the fourth hypothesis:

H4: *National journalistic culture and professional norms influence the perception of and response to violence against journalists.*

When asked about the general mood towards journalists in society, the U.S. interviewees unanimously assessed the situation as much worse than in previous years, while some German interview partners assessed it as having improved compared to prior years. The results allow only limited conclusions to be drawn about the further development of violence against journalists. It is therefore conceivable that as society becomes increasingly polarized, violence against journalists will also continue to rise. However, it is equally possible that the potential for violence will decrease again in the future. Given that the social context is not the only decisive factor, and the situation of journalists also depends on professional details that vary within the profession, no general statements can be made about future developments at this point.
It can be stated though that the trend seems to be strongly related to the respective social mood, which becomes apparent when examining the topics and events associated with violence. In both countries, political extremists – especially the far right – have been mentioned as the group posing the greatest threat to journalists. Additionally, many attacks on journalists happened during demonstrations and were exercised by dissatisfied citizens. And while there are clear differences in the motives for violence against journalists in Germany and the U.S., it becomes clear that most of the attacks are not based on personal resentment but are instead related to general social and political developments. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis can be formed:

H5: *The general social and political mood in a country has an influence on the potential for violence against journalists.*

Coming back to this study's main research question, it can be stated that the increasing threat of violence against journalists does in fact influence editorial work in news reporting in Germany and the United States.

In most cases, however, this influence does not concern the work itself, but the factors surrounding it – security measures, communication about the topic, or a general higher level of risk awareness in the journalists' private lives.

The research results presented should be considered against the background of some limitations. On one hand, conducting qualitative interviews had the advantage of obtaining detailed and balanced insights from the interviewees, as well as giving them a certain amount of leeway in terms of possible answers. On the other hand, it must be considered that the results from the survey of 22 journalists cannot be transferred to the basic population and thus have no general validity. However, this is a prevalent limitation of qualitative research.

Furthermore, there are indications of specific biases in the sample, as it partly consists of journalists who are at a higher risk due to their work in political or investigative departments. A bias may also have arisen due to the recruitment of a large proportion of participants via Twitter, as it can be assumed that journalists active on social media are more often the target of hate speech. Lastly, reactivity cannot be ruled out in individual questions due to the subject matter. As already explained, the consequences of violence are a sensitive topic for journalists due to their role expectations, which could have led to effects of social desirability in the answers.

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that violence against journalists is on the rise in both the U.S. and Germany and is increasingly becoming part of everyday professional life. Reporters at demonstrations are frequently affected by physical violence. Among them, freelancers are especially in a vulnerable position, as they are often not protected by editorial offices. Violence in the digital space occurs mostly in the form of hate comments and incitement. The consequences have little impact on editorial work but are felt primarily in the private lives of journalists, often in the form of psychological stress.

To answer the main research question – to what extent violence against journalists influences editorial work in news reporting in Germany and the United

States – several aspects can be mentioned. The results reveal that, among other things, newsrooms are being influenced to pay more and more attention to journalists' vulnerability. This is reflected in the fact that threats to journalists are discussed increasingly within editorial departments. That leads to a growing awareness of the issue and more physical security measures and psychological support. These primarily cover the areas of digital security, physical protection of reporters in the field and securing the editorial building.

Changes in the way of reporting occur in rare cases, which is why the influence on news coverage is rather low. If so, it is either in the form of a modification of the topic focus or a lower weighting of opinion in the reporting. As journalists feel a strong professional obligation to report on socially relevant events, they continue to do so despite the growing threat. In some cases, reporting on high conflict topics is seen as particularly relevant and the associated risk of violence is considered as part of the journalistic work. Some journalists are even encouraged in their conviction of the importance of their own work by the experience of violence.

Regarding the practical everyday work in journalism, the results show that there is still a need for raising awareness in the case of violence against journalists. Against the backdrop of journalists' strong self-commitment, communication about violence is seen as a weakness in some cases. Destigmatizing experiences of violence could therefore lead to better processing of the consequences of violence. Cross-editorial security alliances could provide better protection for journalists. Furthermore, increased communication about journalists' work could lead to greater understanding within society and counteract the increasing propensity to violence.

During the study, some aspects have emerged that could be of interest for further research. For example, the role of society could be investigated, especially the question of how the population evaluates the current situation of journalists and what prior knowledge they have about their profession and everyday working life. Since the interviewees mentioned the police in several cases, an investigation of the role of the police in violence against journalists would also be conceivable – both in a protective function and as an aggressor. Lastly, this study drew a comparison between Germany and the USA, but the research could be extended to other countries. Further investigation in this regard could look at the situation of journalists in other democratic countries.

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Part 2

Digitalization in a Modern World

Talking Green Business

A Qualitative Study on the Use of Digital Storytelling in Sustainability Communication to Influence Corporate Success

Sophia Blau, Agapi Giagozidou, Jule Klausmeyer,
Fabian Saxinger, Laura Wettengel, Catherine Danielle Winkel

Abstract

Sustainability is one of the most urgent and relevant topics today, permeating social and economic spheres alike. Especially corporations are faced with high stakeholder expectations, not least to be economically sustainable. To communicate a firms' efforts on ESG issues, a well-known but still underrated way is storytelling – nowadays mostly digital. Answers to the question how digital storytelling in sustainability communication of profit corporations influences their strategic success are provided within this study by the analysis of qualitative data from 14 semi-structured interviews across different communication practitioners of globally operating companies in Germany. As the study found out, digital storytelling in sustainability communication mainly contributes to intangible success factors, fulfilling its goal to foster an improvement of corporate reputation. The study provides evidence that this could further lead to a significant influence on the creation of tangible values, since even the outflow as the highest level of value creation could be traced back to communicative efforts. The findings contribute to the research on value creation through digital storytelling as a method in sustainability communication. They are the first of their kind that combine those three aspects empirically and stimulate the debate on communicative value creation providing an adaption of the *DPRG/ICV Framework.* Furthermore, the study gives practical implications for corporate communication professionals on the emerging format of storytelling.

Keywords

Digital Storytelling, Sustainability Communication, Strategic Corporate Success, Corporate Reputation, Value Creation

Introduction

Awareness has risen sharply in recent years when it comes to environmental problems, which is why the topic of sustainability is progressively being discussed in public (Baar & Ottler, 2020, p. 1). One consequence is that companies are increasingly facing high pressure to justify and legitimize their economic actions (Baran & Kiziloglu, 2018, p. 71). A responsible approach to environmental issues can nowadays be regarded as a basic prerequisite for an organization to maintain a positive public image (Baran & Kiziloglu, 2018, p. 71). To this end, companies are strongly advised to communicate their sustainability efforts to the outside world. However, for sustainability communication to achieve the intended effect, it is necessary for companies to be perceived as credible and trustworthy (Baar & Ottler, 2020, p. 1). If a company fails to position itself as credible with regard to its sustainability activities, it is often accused of greenwashing. Since this can have extensive negative consequences for the company, researchers are increasingly interested in investigating corporate sustainability communication and how to implement it efficiently (Du et al., 2010, p. 17; Huber & Aichberger, 2021, p. 245).

The effectiveness of advertising is rooted in a series of cognitive and affective reactions of the recipients (Fischer et al., 2021, p. 33). Based on this, evidence has been found that the technique of storytelling promotes affective reactions in the form of empathic involvement and thus enables a deep personal connection in relation to sustainability issues (Fischer et al., 2021, p. 33). In addition, there is general consensus that narratives are useful as means of creating persuasive sustainability messages (Coombs & Holladay, 2021, p. 89). When it comes to sustainability communication, research has not yet focused on economic KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) such as increased returns; rather, ideological thinking has been the focus of interest. However, this does not give companies any insight into the economic effectiveness of their communication efforts. While there is sufficient research on the pairwise connections between sustainability communication, digital storytelling, and strategic business success, there is a gap in research on the combination of the three components. Based on the relevance of sustainability in strategic communication, this research paper addresses the question: *To what extent can digital storytelling in sustainability communication influence the strategic success of profit companies?* To this end, a brief overview of the three components and the current state of research regarding a pairwise combination of these will be provided. After the research objective is succinctly stated, the methodical procedure for the qualitative expert interview is explained. In the following chapter, the results are summarized before they are interpreted in the discussion.

Literature Review

Digital Storytelling

Storytelling as a modern communication concept has multiple definitions. Alexander (2017) explains digital storytelling as the telling of stories using digital technologies (p. 3). However, Fordon (2018) points out that it is not just the use of technology that makes analog storytelling digital, but rather the architecture and structure of the story as well as the media in which the story is told (pp. 35–40). Four elements of narrative patterns are relevant in a story: the message, which has an ideological or moral background and thus reflects the identity of the organization, a conflict, which acts as a driving force, concise characters, and a comprehensible plot line (Fog et al., 2005, p. 32). The achievement of a protagonist's goal might be jeopardized by an occurring or anticipated conflict because this is the engine that drives a story forward with propulsion and tension (Cossart, 2017, p. 105). Other definitions, however, focus more on the effect of storytelling. Huck-Sandhu (2004) mentions that stories must always create relevance for the audience by triggering emotions such as empathy, curiosity, excitement, shock, or even understanding (p. 651). With short narratives, storytelling offers a useful extension for websites, blogs, or social media channels and is accessible globally in unlimited quantities in terms of retrievability, creating an intrinsically networked system and simplifying communication with one another (Grünheck, 2019, p. 23).

Herbst (2014) identifies four specific characteristics of storytelling on digital platforms: integration, availability, networking, and interactivity (p. 119). The focus here is on technical, temporal, media and human elements. Integration is about different digital devices, platforms, services, applications, and media channels, all of which are building blocks of a complex system and are interconnected (Herbst, 2014, p. 119). Furthermore, interconnectivity is understood as the linking of different elements, as hypermedia can be achieved by connecting graphic symbols, videos, audio, images, and text, which interrupts the linear telling of a story (Herbst, 2014, pp. 155–160). The final feature, interactivity, combines technical capabilities and human participation in the story through image galleries, audio slideshows, interactive timelines, or infinity photos (Herbst, 2014, pp. 155–160). These special features

offer new narrative possibilities and deliver a high degree of interconnectedness between recipients and the content to be conveyed.
Digital storytelling takes on various roles and functions in corporate communication and is used for diverse topics in different departments. The various effects of storytelling in corporate communication include: strengthening loyalty to the company, promoting interpersonal communication, giving meaning to events, interpreting the past and describing the future (Thier, 2010, pp. 13–14). Furthermore, some aspects like clarifying corporate culture and change processes, convincing customers and employees of new ideas or products, and facilitating the transfer and storage of knowledge are also important potentials of storytelling (Thier, 2010, pp. 13–14). There are several examples of storytelling as a concept in corporate communication where corporate identities, corporate values and the vision of a company are communicated (Simmons, 2006, p. 17; Faust, 2006, p. 7). Through stories, relevant messages are absorbed and further processed, making digital storytelling the backbone of content management (Sammer, 2017, p. 16). The core elements of strategic communication are persuasive messages, which contribute to long-term engagement with sub-publics (Huck-Sandhu, 2014, p. 651). Persuasive messages embody relevant and interesting content on the one hand, and target group-oriented preparation and communication on the other (Huck-Sandhu, 2014, p. 651). To ensure their success, corporate messages should be systematically planned and managed by ensuring that the individual topics can have a strong anchorage (Huck-Sandhu, 2014, p. 651). The stories should be adapted to the respective topics and channels in a target group-specific manner, and finally, a clear editorial concept for the content is advantageous in order to achieve attention (Aßmann & Röbbeln, 2013, p. 185). Examples of message dissemination would be newsrooms, websites, or even the company's own social media channels. Through storytelling as a corporate message, customers can participate in product development, accompany employees in their daily work, or experience the journey of the product to the customer (Aßmann & Röbbeln, 2013, p. 169).
Storytelling is a very effective and popular communication strategy, which is particularly suitable for communicating sustainability efforts in companies. Sustainability communication is a complex and very relevant aspect in this study, which is why more in-depth explanations of sustainability communication in companies are provided below.

Sustainability Communication

With increasing public awareness of the climate crisis, the interest in sustainability in the industrial sector has grown enormously (Baar & Ottler, 2020,

p. 1). A company's success is largely dependent on the acceptance of its stakeholders which is why a responsible approach to the environment is a prerequisite for a positive public image of an organization (Schreyögg & Koch, 2014, p. 36). Therefore, a growing number of corporate communicators care about sustainability (Baran & Kiziloglu, 2018, p. 71; Weder, Krainer et al., 2021, p. vi).

According to the definition of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, p. 43), sustainability means acting in such a way that the needs of the present can be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In this context, environmental sustainability is often placed at the center of the understanding of the term (Ekins et al., 2008, p. 64). In order to capture the full scope of the term, however, this paper draws on the *three-pillar model of sustainability,* which is based on the three dimensions of ecology, economy, and social issues (Brugger, 2010, p. 17). While the ecological dimension relates to the resilience of the environment, the social dimension is based on social justice as a guiding principle (Siebenhüner, 2001, p. 79; Brugger, 2010, p. 18). Lastly, the economic dimension refers to maintaining the viability of an economic community (Brugger, 2010, p. 19). With the growing importance of the concept of sustainability, sustainability communication as a sub-category of corporate communication is receiving more and more attention in research (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011, p. 5). In the context of this paper, the term is to be understood as the corporate communication of sustainability. This means that sustainability communication includes all communication on the part of a company that serves to make the company's commitment to sustainability visible to the outside world (Baar & Ottler, 2020, p. 1).

However, companies walk a fine line: On the one hand, they face stakeholders who want to be informed about the organization's good deeds; on the other hand, these stakeholders also quickly become suspicious if the same organizations advertise their sustainability efforts too obtrusively, which can lead to accusations of greenwashing (Du et al., 2010, p. 17). The term greenwashing refers to misleading activities designed to make a company appear more environmentally friendly than it actually is (Baran & Kiziloglu, 2018, p. 65). In addition, companies have to face challenges that are intrinsic to sustainability communication. These include its complexity as well as dealing with the tension between the short-term orientation of the media and sustainability as a long-term concept.

On the other hand, the concept of sustainability also functions as a kind of moral compass that decides what is good and bad (Weder, Karmasin et al., 2021, p. 1). This is highly beneficial, since studies indicate that stakeholders are increasingly willing to take measures to reward good companies and punish bad ones (Du et al., 2010, p. 8). If a company's sustainability communication is judged to be credible, it can contribute to a more positive attitude and thus to desirable behaviors on the part of stakeholders towards that company (Du et al., 2010, p. 17). In addition, responsible action can result in an improvement of the corporate image and ultimately lead to the extensive creation of intangible values (Hansen & Schrader, 2005, p. 384). However, if a company's sustainability efforts are not assessed as credible, this can lead to a loss of trust on the part of stakeholders and to negative feedback effects. One possible consequence is the emergence of aforementioned greenwashing accusations, which in turn have a negative impact on the corporate image (Du et al., 2010, p. 17). Both positive and negative effects of a company’s efforts towards sustainability communication are not to be underestimated, which is why the following chapter offers a more detailed insight into how strategic corporate success can be driven by communicative activities.

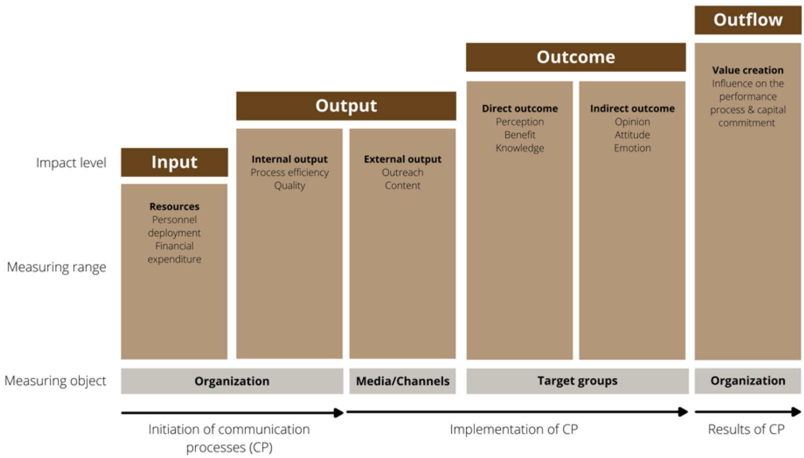
Strategic Corporate Success and the Impact of Corporate Communication

Corporate success describes a desired future state in which the company achieves its goals (Raffée & Fritz, 1997, p. 1214). Tangible success factors (e.g. capital formation) are equally relevant as intangible success factors (e.g. trust; Fombrun, 2007, S. 147). Reputation as an intangible success factor is particularly significant for the strategic orientation of a company, as it influences the behavior of stakeholders towards the company in a "desired way", which in turn has a positive impact on the (financial) success of the company (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2014, p. 237). A good corporate reputation strengthens trust in products or services and advertising claims, reinforces purchasing decisions, and generates competitive advantages (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2014, pp. 234–235; p. 244). Raithel and Schwaiger (2014) have identified four factors that are crucial for corporate reputation: quality (customer market), financial performance (financial market), attractiveness (employment) and responsibility in dealing with society and nature (opinion leader market) (p. 234). Overall, it is clear that a company's profitability increases as its reputation improves and vice versa. Thus, reputation, financial business success, and company value are directly linked (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2014, p. 244). In previous research, sustainability communication, which serves as the fourth reputation factor of Raithel and Schwaiger (2014), is insufficiently addressed in connection with strategic corporate success. With the help of the *German Public Relations Association (DPRG) and the International Controller Association (ICV) Framework* from 2010 (Fig. 1), the intangible success values of sustainability communication are identified and the performance contribution to corporate success is demonstrated. The framework combines the three following decisive perspectives in the impact stages (Pollmann, 2014):

- Controlling: Identification of (financial) success of the company
- Corporate communication: Communication measures that are intended to provide a contact offer for target groups
- Target groups: Behavioral disposition toward the organization

Bearing this in mind, the impact levels input, output, outcome and outflow are structured in the DPRG/ICV Framework as follows:

Figure 1.
DPRG/ICV Framework.



Own depiction according to ICV (2010, p. 35).

The input describes the effort and the outflow the yield of communication processes, while the output represents the provision of content through owned media and earned media (Zerfass et al., 2016, p. 5). The changed opinions, attitudes, and emotions in the indirect outcome turn into acceptance and trust, which strengthens the relationship capital that is essential for corporate activity (Zerfass et al., 2016, p. 6). The *DPRG/ICV Framework* enables a comprehensive evaluation of the results of sustainability communication in conjunction with digital storytelling. A special focus can be placed on the outcome: Through digital storytelling, sustainability communication activates not only the cognitive level via the pure transfer of knowledge, but particularly stimulates the affective level via changing emotions and attitudes (Huck-Sandhu, 2004, p. 651). The extent to which this has a decisive effect on the outflow and subsequently has an impact on the strategic success is examined in this research.

Empirical Correlation of the Theoretical Constructs

Due to the professionalization of sustainability reporting and the rising interest of investors and customers in the topic, companies are confronted with a growing multitude of expectations: In addition to the mere presentation of their commitment to social responsibility, companies nowadays must provide actual credible evidence of their corporate actions (Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 132–133). Authentic photos, videos, and dialogues with relevant stakeholders are more important than ever for the acceptance and transparency of companies as perceived by stakeholders, which in turn strengthen their reputation and secure their *license to operate* (Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 132–133). Furthermore, the consumption of news by stakeholders is shifting more and more to the internet, especially towards social media. The use of digital storytelling can support companies in conveying their sustainability communication in an interactive way in this multimedia environment, while at the same time reducing the complexity of the topic for recipients (Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 132–137). In addition, storytelling can help increase the persuasive potential of sustainability communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2021, pp. 100–101) and get users excited about its messages (Araujo & Kollat, 2018, pp. 427–428). Compared to other forms of communication, storytelling takes recipients on a journey; stories can be designed in a more appealing way and thus have a higher authenticity. It is important here that a clear strategy is recognizable and integrated on different levels and channels.

Since the application of digital storytelling in sustainability communication includes influencing a company's reputation and securing its legitimacy, important correlations can also be detected here. There is agreement that storytelling can not only support relationship management (Nicoli et al., 2021, pp. 168–169) but also convince customers to purchase e.g., commercial products with the effect that companies can increase their sales rate (van Laer et al., 2019 p. 135; González Romo et al., 2017, pp. 145–147). Further, digital storytelling can also be important for employer branding, because recipients, who have viewed stories, describe companies more positively (Crișan & Borţun, 2017, pp. 284–285). According to the current state of research, digital storytelling can have an impact on the intangible success factors of companies. For this purpose, the stories should be as appealing and authentic as possible, otherwise this can damage a company's reputation.

Nowadays, corporate sustainability communication is indispensable for a company. However, aside from all the social projects and appealing images

shown by the company, sustainability communication also poses risks. One challenge in particular is to appear authentic in order to prevent being accused of greenwashing (Brugger, 2010, p. 97). Regarding the strategic level of a company, it is essential for corporate communication to increase the credibility of the company and to build a positive image and therefore reputation. Thus, corporate communication can make an important contribution to value creation in the area of sustainability communication (Brugger, 2010, pp. 101–103).
However, previous research has mainly focused on marketing and therefore has not yet investigated the influence of the combination of sustainability communication and digital storytelling on strategic corporate success. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to closing this research gap. Many studies have been conducted so far to investigate the influence of digital storytelling in sustainability communication with the help of content analysis and interviews, but these tend to utilize quantitative methods. Thus, by conducting qualitative interviews and subsequent content analysis of globally operating, cross-industry companies, we can provide a detailed insight into practice.

Methodology

Our research project employs qualitative expert interviews with communication practitioners in corporate sustainability communication to openly explore the to date unresearched combination of our three research fields. The explorative research design serves to answer the main research question: *To what extend can digital storytelling in sustainability communication influence the strategic success of profit companies?* In total, 14 semi-structured interviews with communication professionals of German companies were conducted that put a focus on

- *Content design*,
- *Methodical implementation*, and
- *Value creation*

of digital storytelling in sustainability communication and aim to answer the three corresponding subordinate research questions:

RQ1: *How do profit companies shape digital storytelling in sustainability communication from a content perspective?*
RQ2: *How is the preparation of digital storytelling methodically implemented in the sustainability communication of profit companies?*
RQ3: *What strategic successes are being pursued and achieved with the use of digital storytelling in the sustainability communication of profit companies?*

Building on the considerations of the first two focus fields, more holistic reflections on the value creation as the main research interest of this study can be made. Due to the partially standardized research method, the outcome is not limited by presuppositions and further leaves open the possibility of a priori disregarded but possible results (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, pp. 38–43). In this study, the research interest was placed exclusively on the companies' point of view since this view is the most important one when it comes to strategic success of companies. However, the goal of this research was to increase the variance of the answers as much as possible in order to get a broad picture of the target group. Thus, questioning corporate communicators seemed suitable since their numerous and frequent touchpoints with digital storytelling in their daily work accredit them as highly informative experts on the topic.

The target group consists of global profit companies which use digital storytelling in sustainability communication. The sample criterion was defined by the strength of sales. By applying this discriminating characteristic to the research population (the strongest companies on sales were selected), a high level of societal awareness on these companies as well as a certain expectation of society in regard to sustainable corporate action can be assumed. As a basis for selection, the list of the “Fortune Global 500” from 2020, which represents the global top 500 companies with the highest sales in the world per fiscal year (Fortune, 2021), was combined with the list of the 100 largest (highest sales) companies in Germany (Boerse.de, 2018). From this, excluding companies that don’t conduct sustainability communication on digital channels at least partially with storytelling, narrows down the maximum sample size further. The final sample includes communicators who were employed in the communication departments of the target companies, had a strategic background in the field of sustainability communication, and had dealt with digital storytelling in their work activities at that time. Further, it shows a high degree of heterogeneity as far as the diversity of the companies' industries is concerned.

The survey was conducted with a semi-structured guideline of open questions. This predefined, systematic specification of the interview procedure follows the principle of maximum openness (Helfferich, 2019, pp. 672–675), while still permitting a high degree of flexibility to deepen the interviews emergently in case of unforeseen, but interesting aspects. The interview guideline is constructed in accordance with the three previously mentioned focus fields of the study in three corresponding and methodically operationalized question blocks. Beginning with clarifying definitions of digital storytelling, sustainability communication, and strategic corporate success and one opening question, the first question block then commences the research content-related questions. First, the focus is on content design of sustainability topics addressed by the companies, their criteria for topic selection and the different aspects that characterize the topics or stories. The second block is devoted to research focus two, concerning the methodical implementation of digital storytelling in sustainability communication. There, the channels used by the companies, the forms and elements of presentation, the recognizability of a sender and the involvement of external service providers are queried. To accomplish the initial research interest of this study to explore the company's success contributions made by digital storytelling in sustainability communication, the third guideline block contains questions about the companies' success criteria in general and in particular those of digital storytelling. In addition, the added value of the combination of digital storytelling and sustainability communication in comparison to other forms of communication as well as possible risks are queried. Lastly, the interviewees were asked to give an outlook on future developments in the field of digital storytelling in sustainability communication.

The survey period extended over seven weeks from December 2021 to February 2022. *N* = 14 communicators were interviewed after a recruitment either via email using a pre-written sample letter or telephone. The interviews took place as virtual video interviews and lasted between 33 and 67 minutes. Restrictively, the interviews solely provide analytical representativeness for the target groups. For the systematic evaluation of the interview transcripts, we conducted a qualitative content analysis in accordance with Mayring and Fenzl (2019), following a theory-based category system (Table 1) with coding guide. Executing an inductive-deductive process, the main categories were derived from the subordinate research questions while the subcategories were derived from the guideline questions. Both were emergently augmented during the evaluation when reasonable categories came up.

Table 1.
Category system with main categories and subcategories.

Main categories	Subcategories
Content design	Topics Prioritization Selection criteria Story characteristics
Methodical implementation	Channels Elements Sender Resource allocation
Value creation	Overall corporate success criteria Success contribution of digital storytelling

	Value added Risks
Outlook	

Results

Content Design

The evaluation of the results is based on the three overarching research fields. In the interviews with the corporate communicators, the triad of ecology, social issues and economics is again evident in terms of thematic orientation, with economic issues being weighted the least. Content on ecological topics is considered to be the "*traditional focus topic*", followed by social topics as the second "*very clear focus topic*". Here, the focus for ecological goals is on decarbonization, environmental protection, resource efficiency and circular economy. When it comes to social issues, the focus lies primarily on community engagement, diversity and equal opportunities. On the economic pillar of sustainability, the majority of corporate communicators choose topics such as governance, supply chains and compliance. Moreover, it is the target groups – internal and external – that are seen as the most decisive selection criterion. The content of the stories depends on the stakeholders and recipients, but also on its relevance for the media and the public. Socio-political trends are also identified as a predominant criterion. According to the respondents, the choice of topic – and the timing – is influenced by current social challenges as well as political or economic trends. Moving on to story characteristics, the results show that companies communicate mainly in personalized stories with protagonists as a centerpiece of digital storytelling. However, there are also many companies that rely on a mixture of events and people. Most respondents report striving for a balance of emotional appeal and factual explanations, with different emphases in the weighting of each. The interviewees also share this heterogeneous picture regarding channel-specific differences. In contrast, there is unanimity in the sample with regard to the realism of the stories. Here, the interviewees mentioned almost exclusively real stories with "*always real people*".

Methodical Implementation

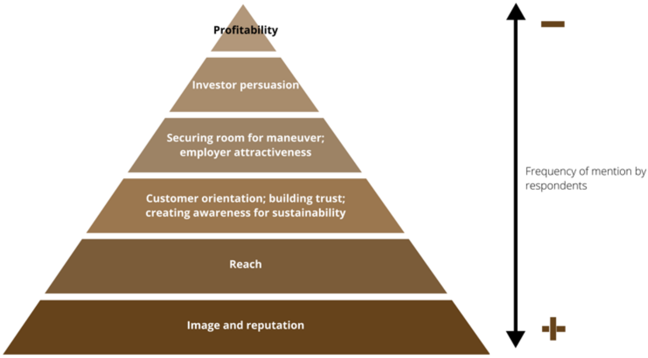
In the context of the methodical implementation of storytelling, the results are summarized in terms of communication channels, design elements, sender selection and resource allocation. The communication channels refer to the digital distribution channels chosen by the companies, while the design elements include digital artifacts such as images, text, audio, video, and multimedia combinations. In regard to communication channels, all interviewees recognize social media as the most important distribution channel for digital storytelling in sustainability communication. The most frequently mentioned platforms are Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. The focus on social media is justified by the multiple strengths of the platforms: Most respondents agree that interactivity in particular is a key decision criterion for selecting a particular channel for stories in sustainability communication. The promotion of dialog and engagement plays an essential role in this context. In addition to interactivity, it is primarily the variety of design options that makes social media a popular communication channel for digital storytelling in sustainability communication. Besides social media, almost all interviewees named their company's own website as an important distribution channel for digital sustainability stories. Some interviewees described the website as a centralized communication channel that acts as a link between all other channels, using terms such as "*hub*" and "*main stage*". Regarding the selection of digital artifacts for the construction of digital stories in sustainability communication, almost all interviewees emphasized the relevance of variety, which could be created by the combination of all available elements as well as through multimedia linking. However, videos and images were mentioned especially insistently. The latter should above all be attention-grabbing, expressive, and authentic. According to many interviewees, however, texts continue to play an important role, and the sender of digital stories in sustainability communication is always the company itself. How superficial this is, however, varies: Many stated that they often put employees at the center of their stories and make them the storytellers. In these cases, the company can still be recognized as the sender, but not as obviously as the employee. According to almost all respondents, the resource allocation for planning and implementing digital stories in sustainability communication is primarily internal. It is also striking that many companies already have their own people or teams responsible for the company's sustainability communication.

Value Creation

Finally, the following results section is devoted to the value creation potential of digital storytelling in sustainability communication in relation to strategic corporate success. Looking at the respondents' assessments, it is striking that the value-contributive effect is being noticed predominantly on the intangible side. Statements such as "*with our sustainability communication we definitely cannot [...] generate more money*" or "*this is not something we do to make money*" make this unmistakably clear. On the side of intangible success criteria, most interviewees agree that digital storytelling in sustainability communication contributes to enhancing the company's reputation and image, increasing general reach, improving customer satisfaction and orientation, and building trust (Fig. 2). In addition, positive influences can be noted concerning the attitudes and behavior of investors, the target group's perception of sustainability as well as the company's acceptance of responsibility, the attractiveness as an employer, and the positioning of the company. Apart from the aforementioned success criteria, the interviewees also saw strengths of digital storytelling in the promotion of commitment, in the cultivation of relationships with stakeholders, and in the effective communication of information. It offers vital added value compared to other communication tools and forms of presentation, especially in terms of conveying information: Sustainability communication can be much more effective in the storytelling format, as complex issues in particular can be presented in a much more comprehensible and simple manner. Overall, most respondents rated the design options in digital storytelling as significantly more varied, resulting in content that is more innovative, exciting and interesting than content in other forms of presentation such as a simple report or press release. In addition, stories are much more tangible and interactive for recipients, and messages are therefore communicated more efficiently. Digital storytelling was also frequently cited as a means of addressing target groups more effectively. Another strength of digital storytelling is that it can achieve a high level of awareness of the significance and importance of sustainability among target groups. But the sustainability commitment of the companies themselves can also be communicated particularly well through digital stories. Overall, digital storytelling can achieve a greater reach in sustainability communication than other forms of presentation, both in quantity and quality – even beyond existing target groups.

Figure 2.

Contribution of digital storytelling in sustainability communication to corporate success criteria, graded by frequency of mention by the interviewees.



Own depiction.

In addition to the many potentials that digital storytelling holds for sustainability communication, this form of presentation also entails various risks. The most frequently mentioned risks are the potential loss of credibility and greenwashing, which are in some ways closely related. Digital storytelling can quickly take a hazardous direction in which many facts are not depicted completely truthfully and are romanticized. In this context, the interviewees also reported a lack of factual relevance due to purely emotionalized presentations. At worst, this could end in "*blind actionism*". Many interviewees pointed out that digital stories in sustainability communication can easily become mere advertising campaigns with no added social value: "*You create noise, you have the feeling that you have done something, but the question is how much of it really sticks*". The many opportunities for interaction that social media in particular holds are also associated with more potential for discussion, more diverse opinions, and thus also with significantly higher potential for escalation like on short news or reports. Digital stories are very fast-paced, especially in social media, so that they are not suitable to provide a detailed overview about a subject as an essential basis for long-term topics. Another danger is the potential lack of a link to corporate strategy. A "*one-hit wonder*", as one interviewee said, without a feasible connection to other areas of the company could not add any value. Another risk mentioned was the perceived loss of professionalism due to a lack of necessary skills to develop such elaborate communication formats. It was also pointed out that some target groups cannot be reached by digital storytelling.

Discussion

Based on the core findings on content design, methodical implementation and value creation of digital storytelling, the three subordinate research questions of this study can be answered as follows:

- *Content design* (RQ1): With a clear focus on ecological and social topics, companies develop stories that relate to socially relevant, real events and are told by strong characters as protagonists. A balance is created between emotionality and factual reference.
- *Methodical implementation* (RQ2): Digital stories in sustainability communication are preferably constructed with internal resources as well as highly multimedia and are primarily disseminated via social media channels and the company's own website as the central link between the channels. In doing so, the companies position themselves clearly and distinctly as the senders of their stories.
- *Value creation* (RQ3): Due to the outstanding potential of storytelling in sustainability communication for generating reach, promoting perception and imparting knowledge, excellent conditions are created for the development of a positive reputation as a decisive factor for the success of a company. Also, due to special positioning potential, digital storytelling in sustainability communication is an efficient format to positively influence corporate reputation. The outstanding relevance of sustainability for a company's reputation makes digital storytelling in sustainability communication an efficient tool for creating intangible values that ultimately promote building tangible values.

The results overlap in many respects with the findings of previous academic work already referred to in the literature review. Both the interviewees in this study and existing literature predominantly mention ecological aspects when talking about sustainability. The reason why ecological topics seem to be the most important can be explained by looking at the main criteria for selecting topics for digital storytelling in sustainability communication: According to the interviewees and previous literature, target group interest and general social trends are particularly decisive factors. Environmental and climate protection is one of today's trend-setting social subjects and thus also the first choice as a topic for corporate communication in order to ensure public acceptance and legitimization. As a consequence, sustainability earns a firm place in the corporate strategy of many organizations and also exerts a strong influence on the choice of topics from there. The target group orientation also seems to have an impact on the chosen story characteristics: According to the respondents, most stories are characterized by a clear reference to reality and a high degree of personalization. Based on the presumption that the lives of target groups are primarily determined by real events and less by fiction, it can be assumed that a reference to reality can generate high attention rates and thus also reach. As well as in science, personalization in the form of concise characters and heroic approaches is considered one of the most important attributes of a successful story. According to the interviewees, the combination of emotionality with factual reference is essential within digital stories in sustainability communication. Complex topics such as sustainability can be communicated in a very understandable manner in this way. The literature also confirms that emotional contexts can have a positive influence on attention and information processing. Thus, the assumption remains that digital storytelling in sustainability communication promotes high attention and reach as well as information processing of recipients, especially when real, ecologically relevant and personalized events are addressed in an emotional and factual way.

Social media was named by interviewees as the most important distribution channel due to characteristics such as interactivity, dialogue and freedom of design. The corporate website with its own sustainability sections as well as structured and detailed information was attributed the function of a central link between all communication channels. Previous scientific findings agree with the high importance of interactivity for the dissemination of digital stories: This increases the readiness for dialogue as well as engagement and thus also the degree of attention of recipients. With regard to the role of the website, the literature also recognizes the centrality of this channel as the most frequent point of contact for information procurement. Thus, it can be assumed that a combination of social media and website communication is needed to efficiently communicate a company's sustainability commitment to stakeholders on a holistic level. This is because a close connection to target groups can be created through high interactivity and detailed information provision. In line with the scientifically recognized fact that digital storytelling has proven to be a particularly suitable format for a pronounced multimedia and design diversity, the interviewees describe the combination of all available elements such as images, video, audio as well as text as indispensable to ensure variety. A special focus is placed on attention-grabbing, expressive and authentic images, video footage as well as (interactive) information graphics to convey more complex issues. This focus appears to be due to the described link between emotionality and objectivity: Expressive images strongly appeal to the emotions of the recipient, while information graphics ensure understanding. It is scientifically recognized that both formats promote interactivity. Thus, it can be assumed that this combination ensures high attention and efficient knowledge transfer.

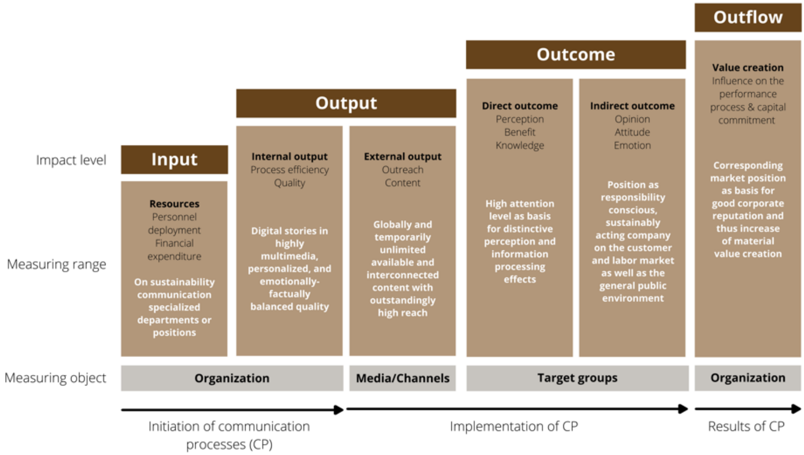
The clear positioning of the companies surveyed as senders of digital stories in sustainability communication can also be scientifically substantiated: Storytelling is an effective means of transporting the identity, values, goals and visions of companies to the outside world. It is therefore conceivable that stakeholders associate the central goals and values of a company much more directly with sustainability. At this point, it should be noted that the combination of social media and website as distribution channels, as well as the clear positioning of the company as the sender of the stories, establishes sustainability as a fixed component of the corporate identity in the perception of target groups.
Finally, a primary objective of this research concern is to highlight the potential value contribution of digital storytelling in sustainability communication to strategic corporate success. Like previous literature, the interviewees see this contribution primarily on the intangible side. According to the respondents, a particular added value of digital storytelling in sustainability communication compared to other communication formats lies above all in the following:

- the outstanding potential for generating attention, conveying knowledge, and increasing interaction,
- the positioning potential in terms of corporate identity, values, goals, and vision,
- the design variety and liveliness of the content,
- the higher reach,
- the effective promotion of the awareness of target groups for the importance and relevance of sustainability and for the sustainability management of the company.

In the next step, this added value is to be linked to company-specific goals that are connected to tangible and intangible success factors and whose achievement determines the strategic success of the company. The *DPRG/ICV Framework* illustrates how immaterial and material value contributions systematically build on each other to contribute to corporate success. At the input level, it is now known that primarily internal human resources are used for digital storytelling in sustainability communication. On the output level, it is evident that these digital stories are characterized by extraordinary multimediality, an emotional, factual and personalized character. Finally, the prerequisite for successful communication processes is the level of external output with a focus on the range of communication content. Digital storytelling is characterized by an excellent reach potential, especially due to the characteristic interactivity as well as the global and temporally unlimited availability and high degree of networking of digital channels. This forms the foundation for the level of direct outcomes with a focus on the perception and knowledge of recipients: Due to the social relevance of the topic of sustainability in combination with the characteristic emotionality, interactivity and multimedia nature of the format, a high level of attention and activity on the part of the recipients can be expected. This forms an extremely advantageous basis for the transfer of knowledge, which in turn builds on the level of the indirect outcome. Focusing on the influence of communication activities on opinions, attitudes and emotions, the level of indirect outcome represents the decisive success factor of corporate reputation. Corporate reputation is formed above all on customer, capital and labor markets as well as in general public society. It has already been explained how sustainability can be anchored in the corporate identity through digital storytelling. In this context, it can be scientifically substantiated that storytelling formats create convincing product-related content for customers, can have a positive effect on the employer image as well as on the image in the general public environment. On this basis, it can be assumed that digital storytelling in sustainability communication is an effective tool for linking the services of a company most convincingly with sustainable quality. Thus, companies can use the storytelling format to position themselves on the customer and labor market as well as in the general public environment as a sustainable company with a special sense of responsibility for society and the environment. The positioning on the financial market, on the other hand, remains less clear, as economic issues play a subordinate role. Ultimately, this positioning or reputation building leads to the last level of outflow: With a good corporate reputation, material values such as profitability and return on investment can demonstrably increase. This is expressed above all in strengthened trust, higher product preference and decisive purchasing behavior on the part of the stakeholders. Figure 3 once again presents the *DPRG/ICV Framework* in an updated form: The additions written in white summarize the findings and derivations presented in this chapter on the value creation contribution of digital storytelling in sustainability communication in a concise form.

Figure 3.

Value contribution through digital storytelling in sustainability communication.



Own depiction adapted from ICV (2010, p. 35).

The value contribution of digital storytelling in sustainability communication is nevertheless limited by various risk factors. According to the interviewees, these lie especially in the loss of credibility in connection with greenwashing as well as in the over-emotionalization and neglect of facts. The danger of losing credibility in the context of greenwashing is also frequently emphasized in the literature. The insistence on sustainable action can, under certain conditions, trigger mistrust instead of trust, especially in view of the fact that financial goals usually have the highest priority in the for-profit sector. It can be assumed that companies will lose credibility if the advertising intention is pursued rather than added social value. It is also interesting that the greatest strength of digital storytelling – interactivity – is also rated as one of the greatest risk factors: The more intense the interactivity, the higher the interviewees rate the potential for escalation. This is partly due to the fact that they attribute a high potential for conflict to the topic of sustainability per se. However, this should not only be seen as a risk factor, but above all as an opportunity: It is known from previous literature that conflict is one of the decisive characteristics of a good story. It is considered a driver of tension and thus attraction. In this respect, the professional handling of conflicts is always also a means of influencing attention.

Despite the risk factors of the digital storytelling format in sustainability communication mentioned in the previous chapter, the most important derivations from the three areas of content design, methodical implementation and

value creation of digital storytelling in sustainability communication are to be combined in the following to form a final judgement. The following answer to the research-guiding question is therefore formulated: Digital storytelling in sustainability communication makes a major contribution to intangible value creation in profit companies. The combination of the enormously attention-grabbing digital storytelling format with the particularly socially relevant topic of sustainability leads to extraordinarily influential reach, perception and information processing effects. These greatly promote the development of a positive corporate reputation. Consequently, digital storytelling in sustainability communication can also have a decisive influence on material value creation. Content-related prerequisites for the release of these potentials are story characteristics such as the focus on real, socially relevant sustainability topics, the personalization through characterful and authentic protagonists, as well as the balance between emotionality and factual reference. From a methodical perspective, the use of internal resources to create high level multimedia content, the distribution via social media channels and corporate websites as well as the clear positioning of companies as senders can be seen as prerequisites for the potential value creation through digital storytelling in sustainability communication.
The results presented previously are accompanied by a number of limitations. Firstly, it must be remembered that this is a qualitative study that cannot be generalized – in order to make generally valid statements, quantitative follow-up research is recommended. In addition, the selection of interviewees only allows conclusions to be drawn about the company's perspective, but not about the perspective of customers or investors, for example. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the interviewees are biased since the measures to be evaluated are products of their own work. It is therefore to be expected that the added value of these products tends to be overestimated rather than underestimated. A further limitation results from the fact that only communication managers from the German-speaking market have been interviewed, which is why no conclusions can be drawn about possible cultural, political or geographic differences. Moreover, the main areas of activity of the participants in this study are very different, which limits the comparability of the results. Another aspect that makes it difficult to compare the results is the fact that the companies are at different stages of development with regard to the implementation of digital storytelling in sustainability communication. As a result, existing potentials can only be exploited to varying degrees, even if the relevance of their use has already been recognized. In conclusion, despite all its limitations, the study not only provides valuable insights into the field of digital storytelling as a corporate success factor, but also offers a solid basis for follow-up research with different focal points.

This study makes a noteworthy contribution to research and practice: Current scholarship so far offers many insights into digital storytelling, sustainability communication, and strategic business success. However, to our current knowledge, our study is the first of its kind which systematically links these three theoretical constructs to reveal interrelationships and interlocking modes of action. Moreover, digital storytelling has so far been studied primarily in the context of marketing concerns. With sustainability communication as part of corporate communication, a big step has been taken into the direction of investigating digital storytelling in other company-specific communication contexts. This study, thus, opens up great potential for follow-up research in the area of corporate communication, since digital storytelling is not only useful in sustainability communication but in other fields of corporate communication and therefore worth researching.
For profit companies – especially for communication departments and managers –, this paper yields several recommendations for action. First, we have shown that digital storytelling is a great guarantor of success for companies to authentically communicate their actions regarding sustainability to the public. This in turn supports the corporate reputation, which is existential for the marketability of a company. In this study, we could show that the internal human and financial resources expenses for digital storytelling seem to pay off. In addition, we found out that employees have specific skills in order to apply storytelling on different channels and formats. Considering the fact that the storytelling format still plays a minor role in the sustainability communication of many companies, this is an extremely relevant finding for practice. Therefore, this study suggests companies to invest more into digital storytelling in sustainability communication, because it pays off for them, especially due to its tremendous positive influence on corporate reputation. Aßmann and Röbbeln (2013) also mentioned potentials of storytelling regarding customers participating in product development, accompanying employees in their daily work or the journey experience from product to customer. These statements we could not confirm in our study as it was not our focus of research but would be interesting to examine in further research.

Conclusion

With this study, we were able to gain new insights for research and practice of digital sustainability communication, since the combination of the three theoretical constructs of digital storytelling, sustainability communication, and strategic corporate success has not been researched sufficiently to date. For profit companies, in particular for communication departments and communication managers, the study results in a number of recommendations for action. For example, digital storytelling is an efficient tool for authentically presenting a company's commitment to sustainability to the outside world. This is especially relevant, because companies are under increasing pressure to justify their economic activities with a sustainable orientation. Sustainability is nowadays a prerequisite for a good corporate reputation, which in turn is existential for a company's marketability. The resource expenditure for digital storytelling pays off in this context, as the corporate reputation is positively influenced. This is a relevant finding for practice, as digital storytelling is not (yet) used by many companies in sustainability communication.

Modern communication technologies are developing just as rapidly as social trends and key topics. New communication technologies themselves have a major influence on socially relevant topics because it is only through them that these are disseminated and weighted independently of space and time. Companies as actors in the midst of society are therefore advised to move forward with these developments and to continuously develop their own competencies in order to meet society’s expectations, thereby promoting reputation and ensuring corporate success. Accordingly, it can be assumed that sustainability topics will be permanently on the agenda in the future. Digital storytelling is a useful tool for reaching target groups and achieving desired effects with them.

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Make Your Brand Heard

A Qualitative Study on the Use of Corporate Podcasts as a Branding Tool

Leonie Beck, Sophie Dietrich, Tanja Graf, Xenia Grohmann, Kathleen Lehmann, Sabrina Zierer

Abstract

As an increasingly popular on-demand medium, podcasts have become more professional and commercialized in recent times. This is also evident from a look at corporate communications, where many companies add podcasts into their communication mix. To align these corporate podcasts with other communication channels, the concept of corporate branding can be helpful. This approach has not been considered by empirical studies so far. Our qualitative interview study wants to investigate the role of corporate podcasts in corporate branding and examines their integration into the communication strategy of nationally and internationally operating companies. 13 experts from large companies responsible for the respective podcast have been interviewed. The research results show that podcasts are mostly integrated into the company's overarching communications strategy and incorporate company-specific branding aspects to varying degrees. Corporate podcasts are primarily used to highlight innovative and modern aspects of the brands, especially through the tone of voice. The intended impact of corporate podcasts is often a personal and emotional connection, interaction, and resonance with listeners. Increasing reputation, visibility, and conveying authenticity is also targeted. As a branding tool, podcasts are evaluated rather implicitly. The general evaluation is perceived as challenging and tends to focus on qualitative performance measurement. This study underscores the high need for research on corporate podcasts as a branding tool as well as for key performance indicators (KPIs) of podcasts.

Keywords

Corporate Podcasts, Branding, Corporate Communication, Podcast Marketing, Branding Strategy

Introduction

From a niche phenomenon to an established channel in the media landscape (Bonini, 2015, p. 27) – the evolution of podcasts in recent years is remarkable. The presentation of image- or audio-based media and the associated virtual world are becoming increasingly important in people's everyday lives. Active consumption and the aim to receive, create and distribute content to one's own wishes paved the way for new communication formats (Rowles & Rogers, 2019, p. 15). Podcasts are an increasingly relevant on-demand medium, an auditory multitasking format that allows recipients to receive information or be entertained while engaged in other activities (BBC Global News, 2019).

In recent years, podcasts have become an important part of the media landscape and, at the latest with the addition of podcast delivery to Spotify in 2016, are in a state of commercialization and professionalization (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021, p. 2). Not only due to a huge freedom of choice and the possibility to stream anywhere and anytime, but also due to the growing popularity of the auditory tool among consumers, the innovative communication channel is gaining importance for corporate communications (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 37). Podcasts are thus en vogue and can complement the communicative portfolio of companies. Rowles and Rogers (2019) emphasize that "podcasting offers a fantastic opportunity to cut through the level of noise that exists online, build an audience, drive engagement and essentially drive your desired outcome" (p. 6). Corporate podcasts consequently enable direct communication with relevant stakeholders without showing clear sales intentions (Schreyer, 2019, p. 11). They are therefore a useful extension of the overall communication mix (BBC Global News, 2019) and should be integrated into the wide range of communication and marketing activities (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 38; Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 105).

The corporate branding is intended to create a clear brand image of a company and to carry it to the outside world. Therefore, the coordination of content across different communication channels plays a major role. A successful corporate brand conveys its values, sets itself apart from the competition, and can increase stakeholder loyalty (Balmer & Gray, 2003, p. 974). As a communication tool, the company's own podcasts can be observed in the context of corporate branding. This can be helpful in classifying podcasts within the overall communication portfolio and aligning them with other channels. Considering podcasts as a branding tool is an approach that has not been illuminated in research to date. This paper aims to contribute to closing this gap and explores the question:

How are corporate podcasts integrated as a branding tool into the communication strategies of nationally and internationally operating companies?

To gain a comprehensive, explorative insight into the field, 13 semi-standardized guided interviews with the main persons responsible for corporate podcasts of various nationally and internationally operating companies are conducted using a qualitative approach. The experts provide detailed insights into the background and goals of the implementation of podcasts in the communication strategy. The aim is to clarify the extent to which podcasts convey the branding of a company. In addition, it is surveyed how branding in corporate podcasts is assessed and evaluated as successful. The extensive input from the guided interviews with selected experts is used to gain new insights into this field.

Literature Review

The theoretical part of the paper introduces the genre of podcast and gives a brief outline of the development of corporate podcasts as an on-demand medium. After a presentation of the branding concept in corporate communications, podcasts are classified as a branding tool and the research questions underlying the paper are presented.

The Development of Podcasts as an On-Demand-Medium

The term podcast describes a British neologism composed of iPod, the Apple-branded MP3 player, and broadcasting (Jham et al. 2008, p. 287). This format is composed of individual episodes, which have an arbitrary time span and are released periodically. The auditory files can be accessed on-demand. That means, they do not have a fixed time for listening, as they can be downloaded via the internet and played by computers, smartphones, iPods, or other digital players at any time (Rowles & Rogers, 2019, pp. 12–14). According to the current state of technology, after a digital subscription via a so-called RSS feed (Rich Site Summary), episodically changing auditory content is made available under a thematic umbrella (Brown, 2020, p. 1). The RSS machine-readable file formats of web pages and XML files form the technical basis for playing and retrieving podcasts and enable new episodes to be displayed to users automatically, in preferred programs or apps, after subscription (Johnson & Grayden, 2006, p. 206).
Since the format's cornerstone was laid by the radio moderator Adam Curry in 2004, a veritable podcast boom developed shortly after, which was significantly supported by Apple's iTunes version 4.9. This update from 2005 allowed users to subscribe and manage their podcast library (Sterne et al.,

2008). The medium has experienced increasing professionalization over the years as well as advancements through new technologies (Berry, 2016, p. 661). However, the podcast format only saw a slight but steady increase in subsequent years and struggled to confirm itself as an established mass medium (Bottomley, 2015, p. 165; McClung & Johnson, 2010, p. 84). Most notably, YouTube, a newly developed platform at that time, and the display of public access videos were competing with auditory content (Bottomley, 2015, p. 165). Only a few years later the untapped potential (Sellas, 2013, p. 18) and lack of research on the format were recognized (Markman, 2012, p. 550). With the establishment of podcasts by major music streaming providers such as Spotify or Google Play and regular smartphone use, this again propelled the spread of the format (Sullivan, 2019, p. 9). Bonini (2015) describes this second wave of podcasts of the former niche medium as "from narrowcasting to broadcasting" (p. 27).

Due to easy access, low production costs, high degree of user-friendliness, relatively inexpensive hardware and software equipment, the auditory format is nowadays increasingly developing and establishing itself as an important tool for online communication (Waddingham et al., 2020, p. 276). Advances in media technology, the ever-increasing popularity as well as the expanded production, entail a diversification of the subject areas and formats of the growing industry (Crider, 2022, p. 12; Waddingham et al., 2020, p. 276). A wide range of genres and subject areas of podcasts is developing from niche topics to content for the masses. Accordingly, they can be differentiated in aspects such as the subject matter, the personality of the speakers, or the style of the interview (Waddingham, 2020, p. 276). Schreyer (2020) divides them into categories such as public service, talk, topic, people, conversation, true-crime, fiction, and corporate podcasts (p. 3). However, many formats have been neglected in the literature to date. Research has increasingly focused on podcasts for educational purposes (Chaikovska et al., 2019; Hew, 2009; Pegrum et al., 2015), or on the media format and its evolution (Berry, 2016; Bonini, 2015).

Companies are more interested in designing and publishing their own podcasts, which are defined as corporate podcasts (Schreyer, 2019, p. 2). This format can serve the internal and external communication of companies and their distribution of information. It also enables direct contact with all relevant reference groups and can be used differently. Corporate podcasts also count as owned media (Schreyer, 2019, pp. 10–11). So far, literature has been published on approaches of the advantages and disadvantages, usage motives and modes of action of the medium as well as success factors for their use (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020; Chang & Chevher, 2007; McClung & Johnson, 2010; Schreyer, 2019). Nevertheless, the empirical study of corporate podcasts has been deficient to date and requires further research.

The Role of Podcasts in Corporate Communication

Traditional approaches to corporate communications and their persuasive, one-sided use have lost much of their validity and relevance over the past few years. The environment of communication, information procurement and dissemination is increasingly changing. Especially due to digitalization and mediatization, companies are dependent on providing novel technologies and channels to communicate digitally with relevant stakeholders in a direct way (Zerfaß & Piwinger, 2007, p. 14).

Chang and Cevher (2007) evaluate podcasts as a useful tool for companies to increase both their online visibility and reach (p. 266). They point out that it can be used as a "[…] pull mechanism", with the goal of attracting a niche audience (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 264). Podcasts also help to reach a younger target group with little scattering loss, as they represent most podcast consumers (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 273). In addition, the auditory medium can make use of the emerging trend of storytelling, which serves as a new narrative format for companies due to its immersive character (Dowling & Miller, 2019, p. 167). Storytelling describes a method in which information is conveyed through stories, thereby building deeper relationships with people (Lindgren, 2021, p. 13). Corporate podcasts enable regular communication with listeners and thus offer the opportunity to gain their loyalty and trust (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 266).

For listeners, information content, entertainment and independent use represent the most important factors for consuming podcasts (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020, p. 684). This individually selected time and listening environment can cause a kind of parasocial relationship between the individual speakers and the consumers (Berry, 2016, p. 13). Parasocial relationships are understood as a connection with a media personality that develops over a longer period through emotional and behavioral processes (Giles, 2002, pp. 279–281). By building parasocial relationships with hosts, podcasts can be used for persuasive communication. Subscribers may be more open to advertising messages and not necessarily perceive advertising as a disruptive factor (McClung & Johnson, 2010, p. 94).

In summary, the growing audio trend, the breakup of traditional communication structures, and the possibility of individual positioning lead to an increasing relevance of podcasts also for corporate communications (Deseniss, 2011, pp. 138–139; Schreyer, 2019, pp. 9–11). One of the initial approaches of researching the use of podcasts in corporate communications is the study by Doberts et al. (2021). The authors concentrate on the strategic implementation of podcasts in external communications. Other than that, there is little research on the integration of podcasts into a company's communication strategy.

The Relevance of the Corporate Branding Concept

When corporate podcasts are considered in the context of corporate communications, it is worth mentioning that they are not a stand-alone medium but rather an addition to the overarching communication mix (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 38). They usually exist alongside other channels such as blogs or websites (Scott, 2011, p. 85), which is why the meaningful integration of a podcast into the communication strategy is seen as a decisive success factor (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 105). One way to align the different channels is to look at them in the context of corporate branding. Especially in marketing research, the concept receives a lot of attention, but there is little agreement on how to clearly delineate it (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012, p. 1052; Cornelissen et al., 2012, p. 1095). According to Balmer (2001), the question "What is the promise inferred from/communicated by the brand?" should be answered in the context of corporate branding (p. 257). A company's brand emerges from and is thus dependent on the identity of a company (Balmer & Podnar, 2021, p. 732). It can be carried outward through visuals and communicative elements (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012, p. 1053). Coherent positioning of the brand anchors a unique brand image, which in turn enables differentiation from the competition (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 374). If the brand experience is consistent and evokes positive associations, this provides the foundation for a company's good reputation and increases the loyalty of stakeholders (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 374; Balmer & Gray, 2003, p. 974). The resulting longer-term interaction with the brand can therefore be seen as a value-creating process (Simmons, 2007, p. 545).

In addition to external features such as the brand name and logo, all the various communication channels play a role in building or maintaining a brand (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 368; Keller & Brexendorf, 2019, p. 165). The communication activities should therefore fit the identity of a company and create a clear image (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 180). For this to be implemented successfully, it is helpful to first reduce the brand to tangible characteristics (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 181). Different models and concepts are suitable for this. The 'brand steering wheel' by Esch (2014, p. 104) is one of these models. It captures five central dimensions: brand attributes, brand benefits, brand tonalities, brand iconography and brand competence (Esch & Langner, 2019, pp. 185–186). The model helps to make different facets of the brand visible and therefore provides a basis for the consistent alignment of various communication activities. Consistency is important to create a strong corporate brand which then successfully builds a clear brand image among stakeholders (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 182; Keller & Brexendorf, 2019, p. 173).

Corporate Podcasts as a Branding Tool

All communication channels can possibly affect the brand awareness and strengthen or create unique brand associations (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019, p. 165). Consequently, podcasts should also be considered a relevant channel in this context. As early as 2005, West writes: “Podcasting technology could be used for both external and internal communications and branding” (2005, p. 267). Chang and Cevher (2007) and Haygood (2007) state shortly after, that podcasts are a new opportunity to convey promotional content and can therefore be seen as a useful tool in marketing. Although the relevance of podcasts for corporate communications and their potential use in branding were highlighted more than ten years ago, there are few empirical studies in this area. The focus of previous research has been primarily on the integration of advertising into non-corporate podcasts – the so-called “podvertising” (Chang & Cevher, 2007; Domenichini, 2018; Haygood, 2007; Moe, 2021). In this case, brand-related content is received in a framework that creates a high level of involvement among users (Domenichini, 2018, p. 48; Haygood, 2007, p. 521). The fact that the entire podcast can be company-owned and used for brand communication is not considered.

The effectiveness of corporate podcasts is demonstrated by the international BBC-Global-News-Study ‘Audio: Activated’ from 2019. Among other insightful information, the study shows that listeners make unconscious, mostly positive, associations with the brand, based on the words they hear in the podcast (BBC Global News, 2019). The intimate and conversational environment of a corporate podcast (referred to in the study as ‘branded podcast’) leads to high engagement with the brand. At the same time, companies can deliver their brand messages at moments that would not traditionally provide an opportunity for this content. This makes podcasts a useful addition to the communication mix (BBC Global News, 2019).

Corporate podcasts are a versatile tool in the brand communication process and can be used in various areas. In addition to classic external branding, they can also be an innovative opportunity for promoting knowledge transfer in internal communication (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 108). Company-related topics can be presented in an entertaining way. In employer branding, podcasts can present a company as an attractive employer and employees can share their personal experiences (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 107). Furthermore, corporate podcasts can be considered under the aspect of acoustic branding where a brand is designed, characterized, and positioned through acoustic elements in communication (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 2). Verbal and non-verbal elements such as jingles, brand voices or sound logos make the brand distinguishable (Kleinjohann, 2020, pp. 7–16). These elements can be integrated into corporate podcasts. The use of podcasts in line with the company's branding can create an auditorily recognizable brand presence (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 47).

Research Questions

Over the last few years, podcasts have become increasingly relevant in corporate communications. They are often added as an additional instrument in the overarching communication mix and therefore need to be coordinated with other channels (Scott, 2011, p. 85). For this reason, podcasts should be regarded in the context of branding to ensure a consistent brand image. This aspect has not yet been sufficiently explored in research and thus provides an ideal starting point for an exploratory approach. To contribute to closing the existing research gap, the following question is explored:

How are corporate podcasts integrated as a branding tool into the communication strategies of nationally and internationally operating companies?

It is becoming increasingly important for corporate communications to be oriented to current trends, new technologies, and innovative channels (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 272). Several authors have already shown that the market for audio media is growing and becoming more professional (Kleinjohann, 2008, p. 38; Schreyer, 2016, p. 3) and that both internal and external stakeholders can be reached (Schreyer, 2019, p. 10). When companies publish their own podcast, they are facing the challenge to fulfil the requirements for a successful podcast: A coherent concept and the alignment of the podcast with other communicative activities (Schreyer, 2019, p. 13; Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 105). The reasons for implementing a podcast and how it is integrated form the first subordinate research question:

RQ1: *What are the companies' motivations for implementing a corporate podcast into the communication strategy?*

All communicative activities can impact the brand of a company (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 368), which is why they should clearly emerge from the corporate brand and not contradict each other (Langner & Esch, 2019, p. 602). Corporate branding should communicate the promises of a brand

(Balmer, 2001, p. 257) and convey the company's identity to stakeholders (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012, p. 1053). Since corporate podcasts should be considered in the context of all other communication and marketing activities (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 38), the question arises to what extent relevant branding content can be found in corporate podcasts:

RQ2: *What aspects of company-specific branding are conveyed in corporate podcasts?*

An important step in corporate branding is the monitoring of success and the resulting adjustment of the brand (Häusler, 2019, p. 11). To optimize communication on an ongoing basis, it is important to evaluate whether the communication mix is designed effectively, efficiently, and to what extent the respective communicative activities contribute to its success (Bruhn et al., 2014, p. 106). As there is little empirical research in this field in general, information about the effectiveness of podcasts is also scarce. Whether and how the branding aspect is considered in the evaluation of the communication channel is focused by the third research question:

RQ3: *To what extent is branding considered in the evaluation of the success of corporate podcasts?*

Methodology

Since the use of corporate podcasts as a branding tool and as part of corporate communications has hardly been examined to date, a qualitative approach can help to gain new exploratory insights (Brosius et al., 2015, p. 86). Therefore, guided expert interviews are conducted to answer the research questions (Brosius et al., 2015, p. 86).

A heterogenous sample is aspired to include as many perspectives as possible. The sampling is deliberate and criterion-driven which makes it possible to compare a wide variety of corporate podcasts and generate new perspectives. The basic population includes companies with more than 249 employees, which in Germany are referred to as large companies (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021, p. 4). In smaller companies, the communications department often consists of only one person whereas large companies have more financial and personnel resources for implementing further communication channels, such as corporate podcasts (Jossé, 2016, p. 759). The companies in the basic population have at least one firmly established external podcast format with at least five published episodes that aren't older than two years. For low language barriers, the podcasts must be in German or English. The corresponding podcasts should be part of the external communication and not be explicitly addressed to current employees. Media companies are excluded from the sample because their knowledge of the provision of communications could distort the results. The inclusion of podcasts in the sample is not restricted in terms of content, which is why different formats such as topic, CEO, talk, or action podcasts are represented. To achieve a global view of corporate podcasts, not only German companies are included, but also multinational companies with German- or English-language podcasts. Under these premises corporate podcasts are searched and a total of 62 companies are contacted.

The final sample consists of 13 corporate podcasts, as shown in Table 1. Having their headquarter in Germany, six companies with a German-language podcast and four companies with an English-language podcast can be acquired. In addition, the sample includes three multinational companies with headquarters outside of Germany and a German-language podcast. The interviews were conducted with experts responsible for the respective corporate podcast as they can offer detailed insights through their professional experience. In favor of spatial flexibility, the interviews were guided via video conference software. Open questions were used to fully grasp the individual subjective perspectives of the interviewees and pick up unexpected impulses (Mayring, 2016, p. 68). To create the interview guideline, the research interest derived from the theory was translated into tangible interview questions.

Table 1.
Final sample of interview partners.

Company	Podcast Name	Launch
Basellandschaftliche Kantonalbank	Was morgen für mich zählt. [What counts for me tomorrow.]	09/2020
Bayerische Motoren Werke AG	Hypnopolis	06/2020
Danfoss	Drehmomente – Der Antriebspodcast [Torque – The Drive podcast]	06/2020
EQUOM Group	heart2heart by AMORELIE	02/2019
Hermes Germany GmbH Executive Communications	Lieferzeit. Der Logistik-Podcast. [Delivery Time. The Logistics Podcast]	02/2021
Mercedes-Benz AG	Let’s Talk Mercedes	05/2020
Otto GmbH & Co. KG Communications, Corporate Marketing and Public Affairs	O-TON [O-SOUND]	11/2019
Philip Morris International	Make Tomorrow New	03/2021

Robert Bosch GmbH	From KNOW-HOW to WOW	11/2020
SAP SE	SAP Experts Podcast	08/2019
Tchibo GmbH	5 Tassen täglich [5 Cups a Day]	01/2020
Vodafone GmbH	Digitale Vorreiter:innen [Digital Pioneers]	10/2019
Volkswagen AG	Shaping Mobility	03/2021

Three research questions arise from the guiding research interest concerning the integration of corporate podcasts as a branding tool into the communication strategy. The research questions are well suited for structuring the interviews, as they each open a separate field of knowledge and logically build on one another. Therefore, they form the basis of the interview guide.
To answer the first research question, general reasons for implementing a corporate podcast in the communication strategy are surveyed. Linked to this is the interest in specific target groups of the podcast and in the relevance of the podcast in relation to other communication channels. The interview questions which are related to the second research question, investigate the specific branding aspects of the corporate podcast. For this purpose, the questions take up aspects of Esch's (2014) brand steering wheel (p. 104). In addition, it is determined whether elements of acoustic branding are integrated into the podcast. Finally, the third research question was operationalized by questions that asked the experts to provide information on the evaluation of the success of using the respective corporate podcast as a branding tool.
Regarding the data evaluation, the interviews are transcribed according to the rules of the transcription system of Dresing and Pehl (2012, pp. 25–27) and reviewed according to Kuckartz (2018) with the content-structuring content analysis (pp. 97–121). Within this qualitative-interpretative technique (Mayring, 2016, p. 66), a final category system is established within two coding rounds as can be seen in Table 2. The entire transcript is coded and analyzed computer-based with the final and differentiated category system via MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 Teaching Software.

Table 2.
The final category system.

Research Question	Associated Main Categories
RQ1	MC1: Motives for the implementation of the corporate podcast MC2: Embedding in communication strategy MC3: Desired target group

	MC4: Relevance within communication channels MC5: Generation of visibility via own channels MC6: Organization of the corporate podcast
RQ2	MC7: Corporate branding MC8 Thematic focus MC9: Tonality in the corporate podcast MC10: Added value of the corporate podcast for listeners MC11: Aufio branding
RQ3	MC12: Evaluation – measurement and tools MC13: Impact intentions MC14: Success factors
Reflections	MC15: Interview situation

Results

The presentation of the findings is based on the research questions. The motivation for implementation is followed by a breakdown of the results on the integration of branding aspects into the corporate podcast. The chapter concludes with a consideration of corporate podcasts in the success evaluation of branding.

Results for RQ1: The Implementation of Corporate Podcasts

Within the first research question, we investigated the motivations for implementing a podcast in the communication strategy of a company with *MC1-MC6* and came to the following conclusions:
For many companies, the trend towards podcasts is one of the main reasons they started one themselves. This was captured under *MC1: Motives for the implementation of the corporate podcast.* Several corporations feel that participating in this movement is valuable and one expert even said that it is important *“that as a brand, you're not just riding the podcast wave, you want to be involved in shaping it”*. Another reason for implementing this purely auditive medium, is to use podcasts as a suitable extension for existing channels with their ability to delve deeper into topics and cover them more intensively.
Most interviewees comment positively on *MC2: Embedding in the communication strategy*. It is emphasized that the medium fits easily into the communication strategy and podcasts are mentioned several times as established and integral parts of corporate communications. For the most part, they pick up the topics of other owned media channels to create a common thread. However, a full embedding is not given in all cases. Some podcasts

were only slightly aligned with other communication activities and thus only integrated to a small extent into the overall communication.
The statements on target groups of podcasts are coded in *MC3: Embedding in communication strategy* and differ a lot. Some companies want to address the media landscape, especially journalists as multipliers. Customers in the B2C sector or business customers as well as decision-makers, clients, and employees of other companies are desired recipients. Some of the interviewees name target groups that were not tapped by their companies before as the intended audiences. In most cases, these groups are characterized by their poor accessibility. Own employees are often considered as a possible secondary target group. One company even notes positive effects of their podcast in employer branding and human resources.
The relevance, advantages and disadvantages of podcasts are assessed under *MC4: Relevance within communication channels*. Most professionals mentioned the relevance as still low but with an increasing tendency in contrast to other communication channels. Others placed the podcasts on the same level as other channels. Especially in the automotive sector, the medium is considered as well established. It is not seen as innovative but more as a must-have with the trend developing towards owning multiple podcasts. The length of corporate podcasts can be optimally used to illustrate topics more profoundly and on a larger scale, as well as to explain complex topics in more detail. This is set in stark contrast to fast-moving social media channels, as these not only hold a short lifespan of topics but can often only provide small snippets. Due to this, the purely auditive medium is a functional addition to the communication mix and, in contrast to moving image material, is quicker and easier to implement. Furthermore, the possibility of entertaining recipients on-the-go is the most frequently mentioned advantage. This makes it possible to reach certain target groups that have fewer opportunities to use visual media. As an on-the-go and on-demand medium, the podcast is easy to consume next to other activities and creates a situation in which the listener spends a lot of time with the respective brand.
While podcasts hold the previously mentioned advantages, the lack of visual stimuli is often mentioned as a disadvantage of the medium, too. This non-existent component makes it more difficult to present certain topics in podcasts, especially, if more complex technical matters are to be explained. It is also emphasized that the audio format is not suitable for short news-like stories. Other interviewees also name the lower speed and smaller reach as a downside of podcasts, as well as the lower intensity of corporate branding in contrast to social media channels. Social media offers faster growing key performance indicators than podcasts if the corresponding media budget is used for this purpose. Another complication is the measurement of success,

which will be discussed in more detail in *Chapter 4.4*. However, several companies emphasize that each channel is different and has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Unlike most respondents, some companies do not promote their podcast through owned media. This was evaluated using *MC5: Generation of visibility via own channels*. The most frequently mentioned owned media channels are various social media platforms, blogs, and newsletters. Some podcasts get promoted in press releases or with either purpose-built or the company's websites. While one company publishes its podcast via an own YouTube channel, another uses YouTube to advertise this audio medium. However, this is only done on a small scale and is still being tested for its effectiveness. Among all surveyed corporations, this is the only paid advertising activity.

Following the key findings of *MC6: Organization of the Corporate Podcast* are reported. The effort expended on a podcast is described very differently. Some companies feel that the capacities required are quite high. Others think that the cost-benefit ratio justifies the effort and state that they are responsible for the support of the podcast in addition to their actual work. Almost all companies are supported by agencies. Some already at the topic identification and elaboration, others get agencies for the production and moderation, and most companies get an external service provider for the evaluation of the podcast. The frequency of releases of podcasts varies, with several companies aiming for one episode per week. With one exception, all podcasts incorporate guests who provide expertise on specific topics as well as authenticity. The guests can be employees, external persons, and sometimes public personas.

Results for RQ2: Company-Specific Branding in Corporate Podcasts

To answer the second research question, *MC7-MC11* are considered to specify company-specific branding in corporate podcasts. The main category *MC7: Corporate Branding* includes aspects that relate to the branding of the companies and contribute to the formation of a coherent corporate brand. For this purpose, statements on concrete brand attributes, the use of the podcasts for corporate branding and disadvantages associated with the format were included. All companies made specific statements about using company-specific branding aspects for their podcast. It appears that all companies integrate these into their audio format in various ways.

One main way to include company-specific branding aspects is to implement brand attributes that characterize the company. Even if the brand attributes differ within the sample, some overlaps can be found. Therefore, sustainability can be highlighted as a central brand attribute for many companies, as well as innovation and future orientation. Furthermore, brand attributes, like the creation of a community, closeness, and approachability, build the foundation of company's branding in corporate podcasts. As an example, within the automotive industry, the brand attributes range from a focus on sportiness and tension over luxury and design to digitalization and electric mobility.

Great importance is attributed to the thematic focus and different topics discussed within the podcasts. The main category *MC8: Thematic focus of the corporate podcast* therefore refers to the companies' choice of topics as well as their motivations for these thematic areas. This also includes information regarding the orientation of the topics to the respective corporate branding of the companies and their choice of format.

Within the podcasts, various topics are covered. It is noticeable that some companies see the topic of sustainability as a focal point, which reaches back to its use as a brand attribute. Among other things, controversial topics like corporate positioning or sustainable action are also specifically highlighted within the podcasts. Moreover, topics such as society and politics are covered, whereby the relevance for the company must always be clarified. One interviewee mentions that the format enables the *"positioning of [the] CEO with a focus on social and political topics that he addresses with people from the public"*, which constitutes a potential of corporate podcasts. Similarly, technology and technical innovations are also perceived as important subjects to be presented within the audio format, that is thereby accessible to everyone, and creates the opportunity to share expert knowledge. Corporate cultural aspects are also mentioned as potentials to position within this audio format.

Several companies do not advertise their products within their podcast because theming the product could be perceived as inappropriate and untrustworthy. Legal ordinances are also factoring into this decision. To what extent the concept of the podcasts follows a strategy, is estimated very differently. Still, the majority of podcasts are aligned with a corporate positioning strategy and the corporate branding. Regarding the format of the podcasts, many companies have opted for a talk format. Various reasons are given for this, such as conveying closeness, the positioning possibilities of the CEO, the creation of authenticity, the appealing conversational character, and the production advantage.

The claims of the companies also form an essential foundation for the content design of the podcasts. Foremost, this concerns the thematic selection, which is adapted to the statement of the claim. Thus, companies with claims, which express for example innovation and progress, also refer to those topics within their podcasts. If a company is characterized by a claim that above all demonstrates closeness, a sense of togetherness or diversity, these aspects are also reflected within the corporate podcast. Values such as community and solidarity are often shown through the integration of many voices and personalities, so that here, too, as expressed in the claim, the idea of a community and the simultaneous brand core can be found. Employer branding also plays an essential role in this context. The positioning as an employer brand does not stop at the claim of the company but is continued within the podcast. In this way, the audio format provides an insight into the corporate culture and creates an image of togetherness, which is often shown through the integration of various employees of the company as contributors to the corporate podcast.

The main category *MC9: Tonality* captures how the brand presents itself in the audio format and what emotional impressions it conveys to its customers. Here, the companies focus on appearing particularly authentic to their listeners. Therefore, most companies deliberately avoid editing the podcasts and using scripts. Instead, broad interview guidelines are developed before recording or leading questions are used. One interviewee says: *"Sometimes the conversation arises in a completely different way, or sometimes a topic comes up that was not even as perhaps intended in the first place, and that is important to us, that it is a nice, authentic exchange and not a question-and-answer format"*.

The editing of the podcast is also important for the authenticity. Only one company completely forgoes cuts, while others mainly use 'soft cutting' whereby the use of the cuts is approached very differently. While some shorten monologues and cut out slips of the tongue, others deliberately leave them in their podcast to create an authentic, open conversation for the listeners. The tone in the podcast should also reflect the brand as well as the company culture, either the current one or the one that is aspired. One interviewee explains: *"[We] see [...] ourselves as a brand that is optimistic, that is inspiring, [...] pioneering, open, and all these are attributes or elements that we also bring across in our podcast"*. Brand changes also affect the podcast and are supported by it. If the tonality corresponds to the current state, the podcast is also suitable for employer branding. In German, a distinction is made between a formal address, which is used primarily in business contexts and often indicates a more distant relationship, and the personal address which is interpreted more casually and indicates a closer relationship. Most of the German-language podcasts use exclusively the personal address 'at eye level' for their interlocutors, some also for addressing their listeners. Others deliberately refrain from addressing their listeners directly. Authenticity is perceived as relevant because it is a way to entertain the listeners and, at the same time, to bind them to the podcast.

MC10: Added value includes the utility that the company provides to the listeners through the corporate podcast. Many companies primarily want to convey knowledge and information to the audience. This includes professional, in-depth knowledge in the subject area of the podcast, which is made accessible to the listeners and goes beyond that of other communication channels, such as insights into the company, additional information, and recommendations. However, this knowledge should, according to one interviewee, *"provide a look behind the scenes in an emotional, entertaining, but also informative way"*. This is important to create a relation to the listeners and a positive brand experience for them. The third added value is inspiration, to broaden one's mind and to evoke new perspectives. This is created by telling exciting and unusual stories and is also related to entertainment.

MC11: Audio branding is a special category because it is important to distinguish between the companies that have an existing brand sound and those that do not. The companies that do not have a brand sound try to reflect their identity with their podcast sound. For the creation they reflect what feelings and impression the sound evokes for the audience to support the corporate brand. If there is already a brand sound, this is used as a basis and, for example, existing audio libraries are used. Other companies put a lot of effort into developing a standalone design for the podcast that still reflects the company's branding to create recognition.

The most important audio element within the podcast is the jingle, which is used in all corporate podcasts and is intended to create both a framework for the audio format and recognition. Most companies exclusively use their jingle for their corporate podcast, only one company uses it for other purposes. Two interviewees say that they are going further with their sound design than the jingle. While one of them relies on small effects to lighten up the information and emphasize what is being said, the other one has a complex sonic branding that is used to create an immersive experience for the audience.

Another important auditory constant in the podcast is the moderation. Here, the interviewees emphasize the professionalism of their external moderators. They have a direct influence on the format through their own anecdotes and increase the podcasts authenticity. The use of a company-internal moderation as a CEO podcast or the concept of various alternating moderators is the exception but can be very useful for employer branding. However, problems can also arise, as untrained moderators can have difficulties in authentically conveying what is being said. Overall, the moderator is deliberately selected based on various criteria, for example that the person fits the brand and hast sufficient knowledge of the topic.

Results for RQ3: Branding within Performance Measurement

To answer the third research question, the categories *MC12-MC14*, are evaluated. The main category *MC12: Evaluation: Measurement & Tools* contains background information on the evaluation of the corporate podcast such as key performance indicators, tools used or perceived challenges in measuring success. Important key figures for the surveyed companies are the click rate and the number of downloads. In some cases, the number of unique listens is also differentiated, i.e., whether a person has listened to the respective episode several times. The retention rate is also an important success indicator for many of the companies as so-called time spent with a brand. Furthermore, the number of subscribers is considered. The increase in sales as a key performance indicator, on the other hand, is only considered in isolated cases, as it is difficult to measure. One of the companies also reflects how many other episodes the listener has heard. In some cases, aspects such as geographic location, regional differences, playback device or the success of the visuals on social media are also observed. Most companies use tools such as Podigee, Google Analytics, Google Data Studio, or Captivate to support the evaluation.

For the interview participants, measuring the resonance and interaction generated by the podcast is relevant for evaluation in terms of successful branding. This is shown by the inductive category *SC12.9: Resonance and interaction* in form of qualitative internal as well as external feedback is particularly emphasized by the interview partners. Also valuable are the evaluation possibilities on platforms or media resonance. Listing in podcast charts or winning awards is also evaluated. One of the companies also proactively conducts a brand perception and advertising impact survey.

The evaluation of the main category *MC13: Impact intention* illustrates the companies' desired impact through the corporate podcast and suggests the extent to which the interviewees are referring to branding. The inductive categories show that the companies increasingly want to use the podcasts to strengthen the emotional and personal connection with the listeners, to promote interaction with them, to increase visibility or reputation, or to convey authenticity. For example, one interview participant describes the podcast as a conversation where someone would sit at a kitchen table. Corporate podcasts are titled as a relationship-building channel and one of the companies wants to emotionally connect its target audience especially through audio design. To generate interaction, for example, a reactive narrative or community involvement through an idea contest is used. In terms of increased visibility and reputation through the corporate podcast, the companies surveyed would like to be considered a trusted advisor or relevant to the market and see an opportunity for greater transparency. One company describes its own podcast as *“a showcase, not only for us as corporate communications [...], but also in particular for the company and the employees”*. For an authentic effect, one of the companies for example deliberately involves critical stakeholders. Other companies also see podcasts as an opportunity to authentically show their own corporate culture – some even see this as a recipe for success.

The main category *MC14: Success factors* asks specifically about the interviewees’ personal key indicators for the success of their corporate podcasts and reflects the extent to which they proactively establish a connection with corporate branding. The interviewees name as success factors that listeners learn something new, are inspired, and that the podcast is varied. Furthermore, professional audio quality is named as a success factor, i.e., that everything the company publishes in the audio area is of high quality and entertaining to listen to, as one interviewee states. A clear target group and choice of topic, the considered selection of host and guests, and the episode length are also seen as critical to success. Finally, the podcast should represent the companies’ values instead of relying on self-promotion. One company also considers it a success that the perception of the brand in the podcast has been positively improved by around 75 % of respondents of their own survey.

The interviewees also expressed lessons learned and critical aspects from previous evaluations. One company was particularly critical of their podcast regarding the low click rate, the insufficient integration into the corporate strategy, and the double role of the CEO as guest and host. Other companies hope for more interaction or more lively guests in the podcast. The interviewees rate the central importance of headlines, regular periodicity, and qualitative evaluation as lesson learned. Most of the companies see their podcast as a rather long-term format with a lot of potential. Only one interviewee is rather doubtful about the future of the podcast in ten years.

The companies cite various challenges in evaluating corporate podcasts. According to the evaluation of the category *MC12: Measurement & Tools*, there is the problem of not being able to track background information such as the profession or gender of the listeners and to differentiate between internal and external listeners. Furthermore, listening time is not measurable on some platforms and the impact of the podcast on sales is difficult to pin down. One interviewee is working closely with Spotify on more cross-platform click rate tracking, which has so far been inconsistent. In general, interviewees see the evaluation of corporate podcasts as very time-consuming and KPIs are still uncertain for this relatively new format.

Discussion

Answering the research question on the motivations for implementing a corporate podcast in the overarching communication strategy revealed the following: According to Zerfaß and Piwinger (2007), companies increasingly need to provide novel channels for communicating with stakeholders to directly meet their needs and successfully communicate with them (p. 14). This is confirmed by many of the corporations surveyed with their various justifications for creating and distributing corporate podcasts. The increase in podcast consumers of all ages in recent years highlights the growing relevance and popularity of the audio format (Kupferschmitt & Müller, 2020, p. 380) and motivates more companies to include this comparatively new channel in their communication strategy. The trend toward corporate podcasts is an essential motivator for producing a company's own audio format. The on-demand medium not only offers the possibility of increasing the organization's online visibility and reach to existing stakeholders, but also provides an opportunity to obtain the attention of previously unreached or hard-to-reach audiences (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 266). Both are significant considerations for the companies that drove the implementation of their own podcast. Chang and Cevher (2007) also mention that podcasts can be used to attract niche audiences (p. 264), which an interviewee confirmed. With their podcasts, companies can specifically address relatively small target groups like technicians and engineers from various industries who are on the road a lot in everyday life and spend little time in the office. Through other diverse advantages such as an intensive and in-depth treatment of topics and a convenient use of the medium on the road or alongside other activities, corporate podcasts represent an attractive addition to other, already established communication channels and thus to the communication strategy of the companies.

Regarding the use of company-specific branding aspects for the corporate podcast, it appears that all companies integrate these into their audio format differently, in the form of their thematic focus, tonality, or auditory features. However, some of this is not strategically intended but rather results from the formats' inherent possibilities. Specific brand attributes can also be found within the respective podcasts, which are integrated through the thematic selection of topics and audibly underpinned with elements of audio branding.

The corporate podcast is particularly important in terms of employer branding. It is used by companies as a tool to retain or acquire current and potential employees and communicate the corporate culture to them. Meffert et al. (2015) already emphasized the relevance of this type of branding in addition to internal and external branding (p. 334). Most companies use the tonality to give an authentic insight to the corporate culture. One company goes further and puts the focus on the companies' people. To create high authenticity, both guests and the moderator are company-internal persons. Even if difficulties can arise due to the excitement of inexperienced interview partners, cuts are avoided as far as possible to be able to record a comprehensively realistic picture within the framework of branding. The claim can also contribute to the branding as an employer brand and enables the sense of a community. Furthermore, the claim is mentioned several times in terms of corporate branding in general and is found to be implemented within the podcasts on various levels.

It is striking that 'corporate branding' is perceived as a concept difficult to grasp for many of our interviewees. The reasons for this knowledge gap were not further explored in the context of this study. Although, in one specific case, the unclarity of the term could be referred to the interviewees' professional background, as the corporate podcast is not located in marketing or communications within their company, but in the area of sales.

In conclusion, differences were found in terms of companies' consistency in using podcasts for corporate branding. One organization stands out as very consistent. Their brand identity focuses on entertainment, which is primarily reflected in the added value and the theme format. Although the company is not named, they try to positively influence brand perception through high quality storytelling and audio design. They do not want to be seen as participants but as leaders in the podcast domain and therefore try to integrate innovative aspect as well as interaction with the audience. In contrast, another company does not consciously implement their corporate branding into their podcast. Although the CEO positions himself within the corporate podcast as future-oriented by discussing topics that will determine tomorrow, and thus referring to their claim, it is emphasized that the choice of topics does not consider the organization's corporate branding concept and audio branding. This is aligned with the corporate identity, but concrete examples of the manner are not mentioned. Only the use of the first name of the interlocutors can be interpreted as fitting to the modern and future-oriented appearance of the brand.

Now, the results regarding branding within performance measurement are discussed. It is noticeable that branding aspects are mentioned implicitly. Examples are that the podcasts should represent the corporate culture or that one of the companies wants to position itself as high-quality in the audio sector. Another interviewee wants all communication activities to contribute to branding but does stress this in the evaluation of their podcast.

Accordingly, there is a need for further clarification regarding the role of branding in the evaluation of corporate podcasts and as a success factor.
In terms of impact intention, the following aspects are frequently mentioned: emotional and personal connection, generating resonance and interaction, an authentic impact, improving reputation, and increased visibility. The former is reminiscent of the concept of parasocial relationships explained in the literature review of this paper (Berry, 2016; Klimmt et al., 2006). Regarding interaction, a reference to the positive correlation between perceived parasocial interaction and willingness to subscribe to podcasts according to Marx et al. (2021) is remarkable.
In short, most of the companies surveyed view podcasts as a long-term tool with one exception. However, there are indications in the performance measurement that corporate podcasts have so far been evaluated too little as a branding tool. This could indicate that their potential here is not yet being sufficiently exploited by companies.
The limitations of this research project are now reflected upon. When interpreting the present research results, it is important to bear in mind that they are not representative due to the qualitative research design (Bell et al., 2018, p. 389). A further limitation of this work is that the desired number of English-language corporate podcasts from companies outside Germany was unfortunately not achieved in the acquisition of the sample due to the lack of availability of these companies. While choosing the interview partners, it was challenging to comprehend whether they had implemented the corporate podcast themselves or at least had background information on their introduction.
The interview guide proved to be complete and comprehensible during data collection. Content-related queries occurred only sporadically but indicate an ambiguity of the branding concept in practical use. This is shown by some coded contradictions in the statements of the interviewees. It therefore is advisable for future research to explain the technical terms used, such as branding or jingle, at the beginning of the interview to ensure a common definition.
In the data analysis it became apparent that in some interviews more data was collected than originally planned, since the interviewees also talked about other corporate podcasts of the organization. For this, the subcategory *SC6.6: Other corporate podcasts of the organization* was created with concrete coding rules. The deductive-inductive approach according to Kuckartz (2018) proved to be very suitable for the data analysis. The well-differentiated category system proved itself during the coding processes and the intercoder reliability was also adequate.

From the present results, interesting implications for practice and research can be derived. They foremost highlight the high need for research regarding corporate podcasts as a branding tool. In addition, there are further starting points for future research. Since this methodological design primarily focuses on large companies, it would be interesting to find out to what extent smaller companies and other institutions use podcasts in their corporate communications and as an instrument for corporate branding. Furthermore, it was confirmed in practice as well as in the current state of research that there is a lack of clarity regarding the branding concept and that there is a need for further studies here as well. To gain more insights into the thematic focus of corporate podcasts, it is recommended to conduct a quantitative content analysis of these organizational audio formats to learn more about the extent of branding practiced within them. Finally, there is a need to define and research adequate KPIs of podcasts in practice. Also of relevance would be a qualitative content analysis of various communication channels used for corporate branding by companies. This would provide insights into the significance of the respective channels and their interaction about a coherent brand image. A differentiation of visual, auditory as well as audio-visual formats would be advisable to assess to what extent certain aspects of branding are integrated within these areas. It is not only the companies that can be addressed, but also the recipients. Above all, media impact analyses on the influence of corporate podcasts on the perception of companies can provide helpful implications for theory and practice. Here, a comparative examination of the impact goals of companies and their actual occurrence among recipients would be of interest to investigate. This could also allow implications about the actual added value for companies and the respective target groups equally.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to answer the question of how corporate podcasts are integrated into the overall communication strategy of companies as a branding tool. With the help of 13 semi-standardized interviews, this can be answered as follows:

The embedding of corporate podcasts in the overarching communication strategy of nationally and internationally operating companies is mostly ensured in the present cases and is actively pursued. This is clearly demonstrated by the frequent promotion of the audio product via other owned media channels of the companies as well as the strong integration of podcasts on corporate websites. The cross-channel thematic focus of the communication activities continues in the podcast, which is seen as a useful and more in-depth addition for this purpose.

Company-specific branding aspects are considered and integrated to varying degrees. The corporate identity usually forms the basis for the podcast, on which brand attributes, the thematic focus and tonality are adopted and adapted to the audio format. The sound design is also based on the brand identity. For this purpose, a suitable moderation is chosen, a jingle is developed, and the brand's slogan is integrated into the podcast. The adaptation of the audio format is shown by highlighting topics that are an integral part of the corporate brand in an authentic way. Often informal tonality is used to keep the listeners' attention and create a sense of approachability. The added value generated as infotainment for listeners coincides with Chan-Olmsted and Wang's (2020, p. 684) factors for podcast consumption.
When successful branding through podcasts is mentioned as a success factor for corporate podcasts by the interviewed companies, this is rather implicit in nature. The focus is primarily on the qualitative measurement of success. The quantitative evaluation focuses on the click rate, downloads, number of subscribers and listening time. Regarding the intended impact, it is noticeable that personal and emotional connection, interaction and resonance, an increased reputation and visibility as well as authenticity are mentioned particularly frequently.
This research shows: Podcasts can make your brand heard! They began as a trend within companies' communication channels and over time have become an integral part of them, helping to communicate the brand to listeners. They enable the realization of corporate branding on various levels and thus serve to position companies on an overarching internal as well as external scale. Corporate podcasts are no longer just an accessory but an important must-have for branding nowadays.

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Remote Work as a Universal Solution for Companies?

A Qualitative Study of German Companies' Employer Branding Between Demands and Challenges of Implementing Work-Family-Flexibility Measures

Amelie Baryal, Julia Burghaus, Felix Gasteyer, Nick Hoffmann, Leonard Landau

Abstract

This research project examined the role of remote work as part of family-oriented employer branding. The literature review indicates that there is no underlying research connecting the topics of remote work with strategic family-oriented employer branding. To gain insights into this rather unexplored topic, this project conducted 17 semi-structured guided interviews with interviewees from both Communication and Human Resource Departments representing different industries and companies of various sizes. The analysis and evaluation showed that there is no strategic connection between the use of remote work in employer branding and family issues within the companies yet. The usage of family-oriented measures depends on multiple factors and puts companies through a serious stress test. Over the last years, the demand for remote work increased significantly. This trend leads to new challenges and issues companies need to tackle. In summary, remote work can be viewed as an important part in a set of family-oriented employer branding measures. The future direction of this topic is uncertain and requires further research.

Keywords

Remote Work, Strategic Employer Branding, Family-Orientation, Work-Family-Flexibility

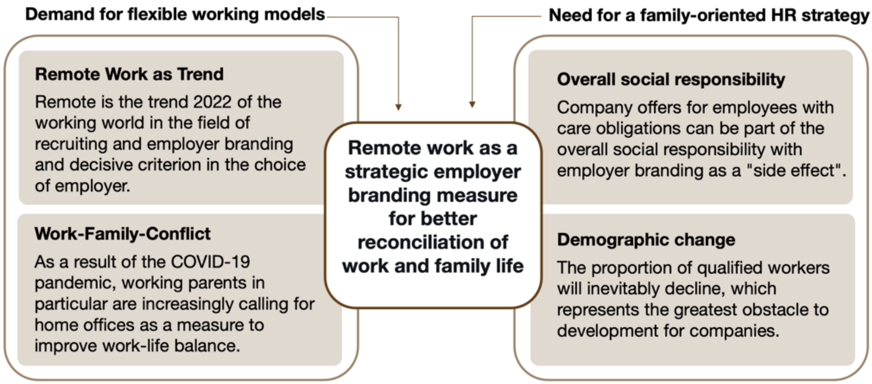
Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic initially slowed down and, in some cases, even shut down working life by sending employees on short-time work and pausing projects. Over time, real leaps in development have become apparent, especially in the area of remote work (Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 4). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has moved from being a decelerator to an accelerator of ongoing trends in the labor market. For example, the desire for home office options has increased very strongly during this time and the flexibilization of the working world is predicted to be the most relevant trend in recruiting and employer branding in 2022 in Germany (Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 5).

As part of the ongoing digitalization and so-called New Work debate, the term remote work was already circulating across industries before, but with the pandemic it has now become a decisive criterion in employer selection (Forschungszentrum Familienbewusste Personalpolitik [FFP], n.d.; Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 5). This is particularly evident among working parents who, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, are increasingly calling for home offices as a measure to better reconcile family and career to counteract so-called work-family conflicts (Ahrens, 2021, p. 368; Bergmann et al., 2020, p. 6). Facing up to this trend an employer is therefore seen as a key success factor in recruiting and employer branding to continue to fill vacancies with suitable professionals (Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 5). This relevance becomes even clearer against the backdrop of the growing shortage of skilled workers, which is already becoming apparent in some industries and represents the greatest obstacle to development from a company's point of view. According to the German Federal Ministry for Economics and Climate Action, demographic change will inevitably lead to a decline in the proportion of qualified workers in Germany (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, n.d.).

In order to still be able to attract and secure skilled workers, it is important to establish a strategy of family-oriented personnel policy, particularly with regard to employees with care obligations (Ahmetovic, 2009, p. 4; FFP, n.d.). However, this does not only affect working parents whose return to work after parental leave or childcare options are influenced by this. Such a strategy can also increase the attractiveness of employers regarding family planning (Berufundfamilie, n.d.). At the same time, company offers for employees with care obligations can also be seen as part of the overall social responsibility of companies and bring employer branding as a "side effect".

Figure 1.
Four central challenges.



Own depiction.

Taken together, this study defines four central challenges (see Fig. 1): Remote work as an employer branding trend, increasing work-family conflicts on the part of employees, the overall social responsibility of companies and the effects of demographic change. To jointly meet this growing demand from employees for flexible work models on the one hand and the need for a family-oriented human resources strategy on the other, the question of remote work as a strategic employer branding measure to improve the compatibility of work and family arises. Based on the current state of research, this question cannot be answered, as there is no research merging these topics. Therefore, to close this research gap, this paper is based on a qualitative empirical research method to investigate the influence of remote work on the strategic employer branding of companies on family issues in Germany.

Literature Review

In this context, different concepts interact with each other: strategic communication and its planning and implementation, internal and external employer branding, as well as family orientation and remote work. To establish this relationship, this chapter aims to contrast the different theories and concepts individually before holistically merging and connecting them in a joint state of research.

Strategic Communication

The definition of strategic communication is traditionally approached through the concept of strategy, although there is no common understanding of the term (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 8). According to prevailing opinion, it nevertheless represents a distinct, interdisciplinary approach that is characterized by various competing views (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 3). In the following, we adopt the understanding of strategic communication as the subject of strategic communication management by Zerfass et al. (2018) to anticipate further developments in the field (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 379; p. 502). Within strategic communication, the overarching focus is on the process of communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 15). This communication process results from an organization's strategic plan and focuses on the role of communication in achieving the organization's strategic goals (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 4). In the context of strategic communication, strategic planning and implementation are therefore of particular importance.

Zerfass et al. (2018) concretize regarding business research that strategic communication addresses the question of how communication can be thought of and managed in terms of its strategic importance as a resource (p. 487). Whether a communication activity is strategic depends on the strategic perspective of the communicator. If the communicator participates in communication processes with the calculus of achieving goals through communication, then communication is strategic. This is especially relevant in complex situations with limited resources. The critical importance of the goals, meaning their strategic significance, is also decisive (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 9; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 487; p. 493). Taken together, Zerfass et al. (2018) thus define strategic communication as "all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493).

In the context of the communication process mentioned above, this suggests an interplay between deliberative and emergent strategies, as reflected in common management theory (Mintzberg, 1994). This means that strategies are not always intentional and planned in advance, as actual success factors can also be due to hidden or invisible ("emergent") strategies – despite strategic planning (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 377; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 494; p. 500). If, on the other hand, strategies are planned in advance and strategic communication is thus understood as a plan, the course of action is deliberately and intentionally determined and formulated beforehand. This step

therefore takes place before the actual communication (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020, p. 38). Its development and adaptation usually result from internal organizational communication processes that include analysis documents, workshops, discussions, and decision rounds (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 219). Consequently, strategic planning involves strategy development and elaboration (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 378; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 499).
Strategy implementation, in turn, is primarily about the allocation of resources "to operational procedures or tactical dispositions" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 500). In this phase, the previously planned measures are implemented by communicators acting and communicating deliberately and consciously (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 500). To this end, organizations 'produce' strategically relevant communications to convey their organizational content by means of messages. At the same time, strategic implementation also involves using various methods to monitor the formation of opinion internally and externally and to analyze the reputation (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, pp. 21–22). These insights can be integrated into the strategic decision-making process, allowing communication to support strategy implementation and contribute to the organizational success (Volk et al., 2017). Nevertheless, strategy implementation is described as something that is often not directly observable. Rather, it is evident in the way operational things are done (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 500).

Employer Branding

The term employer branding was first introduced by Ambler and Barrow (1996) as "the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (p. 8). Therefore, it is important for employers to actively position themselves and build an attractive employer brand. The development of an integrative understanding of employer branding attempts to combine, on the one hand, the external promises of the recruitment process with internal employee experiences, and on the other hand, the development of an employer brand with the corporate and customer brand (Mosley, 2007, p. 130).
The internal perspective of employer branding focuses on positioning the employer brand in all areas, departments, and activities within an organization. Heider-Winter (2014) argues that the credibility of an employer brand increases, the more consistently the value proposition to the addressed target group is adhered to and implemented. This requires a strong acceptance of and identification with the employer brand (p. 155). Internal measures occur at all points of contact in a company and appear in onboarding and

development programs, employee interviews, bonuses or exit interviews (Brast et al., 2017, p. 38).
The external perspective centers around a company's environment and its stakeholders (Stuss & Herdan, 2017, p. 202). In this context, it is not sufficient to communicate above-average salaries or other benefits. Employers must rather create additional reasons for applicants to join and remain with the company (Cable & Turban, 2001, p. 128). Applicants should consider the company relevant in their job search, and "compete" for advertised positions (Latzel et al., 2015, p. 22). External measures can occur by offering workplace flexibility or increasing work-life-flexibility. These measures can also arise indirectly by providing company offerings for employees with care responsibilities outside of the company (Ahmetovic, 2009, p. 69; Wehrmann, 2013, p. 266).
This internal and external dichotomy leads to various challenges, like the strategic implementation of employer branding measures, and questions regarding the responsibility within a company. For this reason, Figurska and Matuska (2013) extend the concept of employer branding to include the aspect of strategic communication (p. 35). Therefore, employer branding requires a holistic integration of all corporate departments to ensure a successful corporate strategy (Minchington & Thorne, 2007, p. 14).

Family Orientation and Remote Work

The extent to which work obligations make it difficult to fulfill family responsibilities falls under the term "work-family conflict" (Ahrens, 2021, p. 369). In addition to employees with care responsibilities of any kind in the family sphere, a distinction is made between working parents and employees in the family planning phase (Berufundfamilie, n.d., pp. 3–5). Furthermore, in the case of working parents, a distinction is made between the topics of parental leave and childcare, as in Germany these are each based on different legal and time-related framework conditions.
The term family planning is principally understood to mean that couples decide at their own discretion how many children they want to have and at what intervals (Schmid et al., 2018). In the corporate context, the focus is particularly on the conflict that professionals may feel that family and career advancement cannot be reconciled, thus postponing family planning (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend [BMFSFJ], 2014, p. 7). Therefore, the concept of family planning is primarily interpreted on an individual level and is not subject to a standard framework in Germany.

In turn, there is a broader consensus on the definition of parental leave based on legal requirements. According to the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, it is time off that parents take to care for and raise their own children (BMFSFJ, 2021). As an employee, each parent is entitled to be released from work by their employer for a total of up to three years (BMFSFJ, 2021). During this time off from work, the employee, as a non-employee, receives the so-called state parental allowance as compensation (BMFSFJ, 2021). Nevertheless, under certain conditions there is the possibility to work part-time (BMFSFJ, 2021). Irrespective of this employment during parental leave, there is special protection against dismissal and the right to return, so that the employee must be employed again in accordance with the contractual agreement (BMFSFJ, 2021). In Germany, the specific arrangements are governed by the Federal Parental Leave Act (Bundeselterngeld- und Elternzeitgesetz, § 1).

In contrast, the legal and temporal framework conditions around childcare are more variable. Statutory regulations only come into play in Germany regarding daycare facilities, as there is a legal entitlement to a childcare place for children from the age of one (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, 2022). In addition to state-run childcare facilities, there is also an increasing number of in-company childcare options (BMFSFJ, 2020, p. 3). In the following, the term childcare is understood primarily in its proper meaning as a supervisory activity towards children, in addition to the supervision of children in external facilities (Die Bundesregierung, 2022).

To reduce any reconciliation conflicts between childcare at home and simultaneous work, the potential of mobile working was already recognized as a suitable instrument by German companies before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was far from being fully exploited (BMFSFJ, 2016; Erfolgsfaktor Familie, 2022). The terms home office and remote work are often used synonymously for this purpose. There is also frequent talk of so-called telework, which was already legally defined in 2016 (Bruhn, 2020, p. VII). These different understandings of the term will also be considered in the further course of this study by primarily referring to the broader definition of remote work to include all forms of mobile working that could offer an opportunity to better reconcile family and career. In fact, remote work encompasses location-independent and irregular work outside the company and thus includes more narrowly defined concepts of mobile work such as home office and teleworking. These specify, among other things, a certain regularity, and fixed premises (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017, pp. 4–5).

State of Research

After the various terms and concepts have been defined and differentiated, this chapter aims to summarize the state of research of strategic communication and employer branding in combination with the different family issues. The research in strategic communication and employer branding is similar with regards to its fragmentation and heterogeneity. The inflationary use of the term strategic communication in theory and practice as well as the vast amount of research streams also support this claim (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 13). Studies regarding strategic communication often operate on a meso-level and focus on analyses from an organizational perspective with strategic processes (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 77; Röttger et al., 2013, pp. 12–13).

For employer branding previous research seldom differentiated between the employer brand itself and the actual process of employer branding (Berthon et al. 2005, p. 153; Davies, 2008, p. 668; Moroko & Uncles, 2008, p. 161). Additionally, employer branding has been part of many different research fields which has led to inconsistent developments of definitions and target groups These factors often inhibited theoretical and empirical advance ((Theurer et al., 2018, pp. 155–156). Nowadays, studies frequently focus on researching the effects and benefits of agile and flexible working models as part of employer branding (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Schall, 2019). Implementing these models can lead to higher levels of engagement, job satisfaction and work-related well-being. Oftentimes, these factors are linked to increased work intensity and the problem of not being able to switch off (Felstead & Henseke, 2017, p. 207). The COVID-19 pandemic forced many employees into working from home and thus increased family related conflicts of compatibility (Ahrens, 2021, p. 363).

The case study by Foreit et al. (1991) was the first to consider family planning in the context of a cost-benefit relation (p. 94). It compared possible costs and benefits for the implementation of family planning programs among mining companies in Peru. The programs included informational campaigns, education about contraceptive methods and showed to be more profitable compared to the costs of earlier absenteeism due to maternity leave. The study by Bächermann et al. (2020) examined the impact of family-friendly measures and structural characteristics in German companies to determine whether family-friendly working conditions influenced the duration of the interruption of employment after the birth of a child. The study showed that family-friendly measures have a particularly positive effect on women's return rates to the labor market, which in turn results in benefits for both employees and employers (p. 801). Wehrmann (2013) describes the importance of day care centers for companies and highlights the connection of employer branding and the needs of working parents. A great know-how of the company combined with offers of company childcare can often result in increased work motivation (p. 277). In summary, the state of research on family orientation often originates from German speaking countries. Even though a distinction is made between the different family issues, as in Germany these are each based on different legal and time-related framework conditions, there are no clear differentiations between them in the literature which in turn highlights the need for a variety of family-friendly measures in all areas of the company to position itself as an attractive employer on the market. Furthermore, there is no research that connects remote work as a flexible work model with strategic family-oriented employer branding.

Derivation of the Research Question

After the presentation of the theory and research status of the subareas of strategic communication, employer branding, remote work and the topics of family planning, parental leave and childcare, these are combined in the following research guiding question:

To what extent does remote work influence the planning and implementation of strategic employer branding of companies in the areas of family planning, parental leave and childcare for employees in Germany?

Two central developments underline the relevance of the research question: On the one hand, the continuing trend among employees to increasingly work from home and, on the other hand, the question of how the use of remote work affects the strategic communication of companies in various family areas.

Methodology

Interviews and Qualitative Content Analysis

To answer the research question, we chose a qualitative research design with semi-standardized guided interviews. This is suitable for explorative research and the combination of the sub-areas of strategic communication, family-oriented employer branding, and flexible work models, such as remote work. It also facilitates the contribution to theory building and follow-up research.
In the following, the interview guideline is explained in detail: First, the interview partners were given a brief introduction to the research project. An

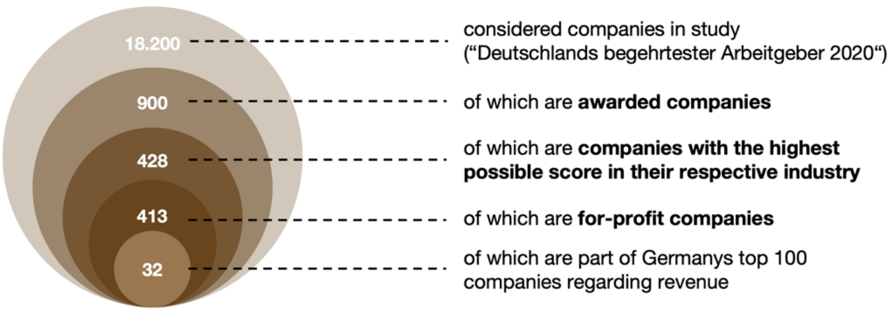
icebreaker question was posed at the beginning to encourage the conversation. The interviewees were asked to report on their changed daily work routine in the COVID-19 pandemic and to explain how their company is structurally organized in terms of employer branding as an interface between the human resources and communications departments. They were also asked about the impact of remote work on the company's communications. After the general questions, the guide was divided into the three subsections of family issues. The first section was about the company's internal handling of family topics, the importance of remote work in employer branding, and the inclusion of family topics in the company's job advertisements. Questions were asked about the internal presentation and sharing of family issues and company attitudes of pandemic-related remote work in relation to family planning. The second section focused on the area of parental leave and asked about the company's level of information on this area. Other questions discussed the return of employees after parental leave and changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The third section dealt with the topic of childcare. Again, questions were asked about the status quo and the impact of the pandemic on childcare. In addition, the role of businesses in the family issue was discussed and a question was asked about the outlook for the future. This also included a question about future measures in the area of family orientation. At the end, the interview partners had the opportunity to add further points to the previously asked questions. The interview guide ended with a clarification of the background of the research project to the interview partners and the possibility to clarify final questions.
The interviews were subsequently transcribed. The transcription rules were adapted from Misoch (2019) and Dresing and Pehl (2018). Following the transcription, we analyzed the interviews using a qualitative content analysis. Referring to Mayring (2010), two-step-procedure with a schema-based first step and an ascending (text-guided) second step was used to develop a category system from the collected data. In the first step, two supercategories were determined, while in the second step, the level of abstraction for the dimensions below the supercategories was determined based on paraphrasing and content reduction of content-bearing text passages (Mayring, 2010, p. 70). The category system is described in further detail under *Results*.

Population and Sample

Our sample consists of two different sub-samples. In the beginning the companies of sample 1 were contacted. Afterwards we used sample 2 to additionally include the perspective of companies, which were awarded particularly for their family-friendliness.

Sample 1 (see Fi. 2) is based on a study conducted by the F.A.Z. Institut in cooperation with the Institute for Management and Economic Research (IMWF) investigating the most coveted employers in Germany in 2020 (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2020, October 29). This study, which includes data from around 18,200 companies in Germany, served as basis for the first sampling. The sample was determined in several steps: The ranking includes over 900 excellent employers. Of these employers, 428 received the highest possible industry rating of 100 points. The highest rating of 100 points was compiled for each industry individually. The individual ratings are therefore not comparable to each other, as they only represent the most desirable employers in each industry. Companies from different industries and of different sizes were included in the survey. Due to our focus on family-friendliness of for-profit businesses, all government agencies, charitable associations, or non-profit organizations were removed from the list. After removing the aforementioned organizations, a list of 413 employers remained.

Figure 2.
Sample 1.

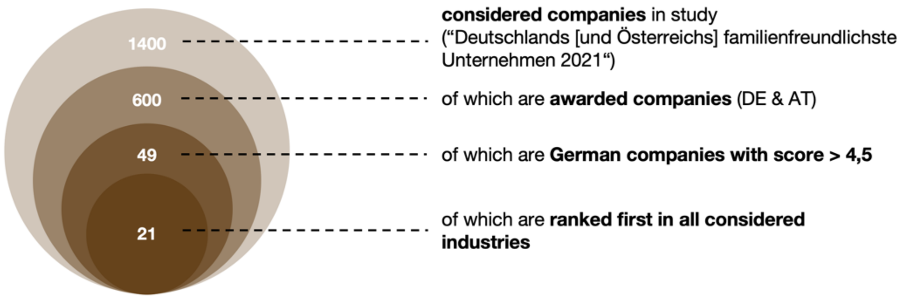


Own depiction.

Subsequently, an intersection of these 413 employers was formed with the "100 companies with the highest turnover in Germany in 2018", based on the expert opinion of the Monopolies Commission 2020. According to Bächmann et al. (2020, p. 800), family-friendly measures increase with the size of a company. Therefore, we intertwined these two rankings. This intersection comprises 32 companies (see Fig. 2). Based on these 32 companies, the potential interview partners were contacted in writing and by telephone.
To include the perspective of companies which were awarded particularly for their family-friendliness, sample 2 was formed from a new population

parallel to sample 1. Sample 2 was based on a study examining the most family-friendly companies in Germany & Austria in 2021. The study was conducted by kununu, an internet portal for employer ratings, and the magazine "Freundin" (kununu, 2021, December 1). The study examined 1,400 companies in Germany and approximately 300 companies in Austria. The ones from Austria were excluded due to their location. The companies examined were included in the study if they had at least 50 reviews on kununu, at least one of which had been submitted since January 1, 2021, had a score of 3.5 (out of five possible stars), and had at least 3.3 stars in certain review categories (kununu, 2021). Sample 2 finally consisted of 21 German companies that could show the first places of all 29 defined industries with a score of more than 4.50 points (see Fig. 2).

Figure 3.
Sample 2.



Own depiction.

Regardless of the sample, the interviewees had to be employed in the company at least since 2019, as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were measured. We interviewed only one person from each company, while it did not matter whether the person was a parent themselves. The interviewees needed to have a managerial position or at least a position with managerial functions. During the interviews the perspective of the company and not the personal perspective of the interviewees was relevant. A total of 17 people from human resources, public relations and communications departments were interviewed. Of these, 14 interviewees were from the sample 1 and three from the sample 2.

Results

From the qualitative interviews with the leading executives of the companies surveyed, several findings were identified. On the one hand, the results focus on family topics as a general field, which are strategically communicated in employer branding, and on the other hand, the statements of the interview partners can be further differentiated into the three family topics: family planning, parental leave and childcare. The present study concentrates on the linkage of the topics: strategic employer branding, remote work and family-oriented communication and measures of companies. In order to analyze this topic in detail, a category system was developed in the present study, which systematically analyses the topic area. This is presented in the following chapter to subsequently cluster and present the results of this study from the interviews conducted using the category system.

Category System

The starting point for the evaluation was a scheme-based procedure relying on the central interest of the research question (Mayring, 2010, p. 69). This was defined as

> causes and effects of social developments and framework conditions on the resulting measures or consequences in corporate contexts of remote work, family and employer branding.

In the literature, current HR challenges for companies are linked to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to preceding factors, which were largely confirmed by the interviewees. This results in the first top category of *challenges/reasons* for change. In response to these challenges, companies take certain actions, which are therefore titled *measures/consequences*.

This way, the category *challenges/reasons* for change was divided into four dimensions that were sorted hierarchically by means of their relevance for companies: *legal requirements/regulations, family orientation, socio-cultural factors*, and *company-specific* factors. Lower categories were only then coded, when a statement could not be assigned to a subcategory of a higher level.

The *legal requirements/regulations* subcategory referred to challenges or reasons attributable to any type of governmental law or regulation. *Family orientation* included those challenges specifically related to specific family issues. The category *socio-cultural factors* included challenges with overall social or interpersonal factors, like work-life-flexibility but also the lack of social exchanges at work during pandemic times. Lastly, the category of *company-specific factors* referred to specific challenges of individual

companies that could not be assigned to any of the three categories above, i.e., strong corporate governance policies of one specific company.
At the second level, the category *measures/consequences* was split up into *measures specific to a family issue* as well as *external measures* and *internal measures* to account for both corresponding dimensions of employer branding. *External measures* were further divided into the categories of *external employer branding* and *measures from external providers* such as family service providers. *Internal measures* were divided into those focused on *remote work* as well as a category for other *issues outside of remote work*. Finally, *information channels* used for the measures were recorded.
In general, answers that included information regarding more than one category were coded multiple times, respectively.

Table 1.
Category System.

1. Challenges/ reactions for change *(Only one item per statement)*	1.1 Legal requirements 1.2 Family orientation 1.3 Socio-cultural factors 1.4 Company-specific factors	
2. Measures/ consequences *(Multiple items for one statement, if necessary)*	2.1 Specific to one family issue	2.1.1 Family planning 2.1.2 Parental leave 2.1.3 Childcare
	2.2 General: External measures	2.2.1 External employer branding 2.2.2 Measures from external providers
	2.3 General: Internal measures	2.3.1 Concerning remote work 2.3.2 Issues outside of remote work
	2.4 Information channels	

Overarching Family Issues

From the interviews conducted, various findings emerged which, with the help of the category system, can be divided into the major sub-areas *challenges and reasons for change* and *measures and consequences*, which are subsequently examined in further detail. Family-oriented positioning poses a great challenge to the communication of companies because the employees' demand for flexibility is growing. In a context of a sharp competition for workforce, out of this arises an increased relevance for effective employer branding as well as the strategic planning of HR departments or supervisors, who need to have an overview of the entire life cycle and availability of an employee in order to make the availability of their workforce plannable to a certain extent.

Particularly in a comparison of internal and external communication, it is noticeable that the compatibility of family and career has a greater significance internally. In external employer branding measures, the topic is considered to be standard and is therefore no longer explicitly mentioned. Another reason in this regard are the individual preferences of the individual (potential) employees. It is often not possible for the company to identify a clear opinion majority regarding flexibility measures. This is also due to the fact that needs change in the respective life phases of employees, which requires differentiated communication on the part of the company. “Lifecycle-oriented communication” is one approach to take into account the individual interests and needs of (potential) employees.

According to the interviewees’ statements, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic partially led to an increase in workers taking parental leave. Furthermore, working together while working from home is a communicative challenge, which, among other things, affects the integration of all members into the teams. In addition, the conditions in home office, such as the working environment and data protection issues, can negatively influence remote work and lead to a preference for working in the company office.

In the closer examination provided by the conducted interviews, challenges to the mandatory introduction of remote work by the German government were also identified for the family issues. The beginning of mandatory remote work during the pandemic created great challenges and influenced childcare as a major family issue with the reconciliation of work and family with the obligation to care as a challenge for employed parents and therefore also for the companies. The blending of work and personal life led to the need for support, especially for employees with children, and demanded flexibility from companies. Remote work represents both an opportunity and a risk. In addition to the inclusion of all team members in the home office in a community, the direct environment is a major influencing factor here. It turned out that parents tended to prefer coming to the office because they had the peace and quiet to work there. Thus, it was not always possible to combine caregiving responsibilities to productive work in the home office.

On the one hand, the variety of offers is limited by the respective liquidity of the companies, since they need financial resources to implement large-scale home offices or similar measures around flexible working. In most cases, these can be provided primarily by larger companies or corporations according to the interviewees. On the other hand, through their own perception and

positioning with their responsibilities, which expand or limit the variety of offers for employees by the companies.
The pandemic-related government measures led to a mandatory remote work requirement in companies. For employees on parental leave and those returning to work, this circumstance meant both new opportunities and further restrictions. Remote work made it possible to slowly re-enter the workforce through the part-time work model from the home office. In this case, the working hours defined in advance must not be exceeded, which gives parents the chance to stay in touch with the company and still be able to take their parental leave. In addition to the option of part-time work, the companies prefer processes that involve maintaining contact with the parents during parental leave and only starting again when they return. Different opportunities are provided for this, such as update meetings between a team member and the colleague on parental leave, as well as coordination with the HR department regarding various re-entry options. Information about these processes, contact partners and coordination channels takes place digitally and enables options for remotely working parents on parental leave.
The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying expansion of digital offerings and communications had no impact on companies' offerings on the one hand, and on the other hand led to the implementation of new opportunities for companies and parents according to the statements of the different interviewees. Related to remote work are implementations such as online platforms for virtual care services from external providers for children of certain age groups or the introduction of digital "family rooms” on the intranet or on communication platforms for parents to exchange information with each other as a measure by the company for its employees. Communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams also support the implementation of flexible working time models. Companies use the platform's status and calendar function to make the respective attendances and absences of an employee working flextime transparent. This makes it easier to organize the interplay between work and private life and to communicate parents’ everyday tasks, such as picking up the children from music lessons and the associated absence of the employee for this time, to the team.
Digital communication tools are also used for strategic planning in companies, as agreements on working time models, queries and sickness notifications can be communicated more efficiently, enabling HR, among others, to coordinate employees and positions in the company. The question of the specific role and use of remote work can be clarified by the interviews conducted. Remote work together with other offers such as flexible working models is a widely used option for parents as well as employees without

children. Working remotely makes it possible to implement flexible working models, such as flextime, in a way that is appropriate for everyday life, since travel times and changes of location can be avoided and the transition from professional to private tasks can be implemented more quickly especially in a family context.
While the measures taken by the companies are largely overlapping across family topics, they differ between the offerings to support employees in part on specific family topics, such as family planning, parental leave and child-care, which are summarized further in the following.

Family planning

The term family planning is not defined uniformly by the companies. While some do not differentiate the term at all, but instead use the standardized term "work-family issues," others also include the organization of care for dependents under the term. Family planning poses the greatest challenge to organizations in the context of flexibility. While parental leave and childcare entail clear basic needs for parents, family planning for employers is highly individual. The fact that an employee's pregnancy must be reported to the employer at a certain point provides a frame. Established processes and communicated information primarily include the opportunity for exchange with experts, HR and the direct supervisor as well as best practice examples. One challenge here is the flexibility and family-oriented positioning of companies.

Parental leave

The term parental leave is partly differentiated from the term maternity leave. Both terms describe a total maximum grace period after birth of three years and are combined in this research project under the generic term parental leave. A special feature of parental leave in Germany is the guarantee of employment upon return to the company. This circumstance is taken into account by companies in their internal communications and is referred to in various expressions, such as the "home port principle". A prominent influence of the COVID-19 pandemic was the return to parental leave after the birth of the child and early return to work. In this context, parents felt the need to take parental leave a second time and felt their return to work had been premature beforehand. While the remote work offer applies to all employees who are not involved in operations, the uptake of the offer and the needs of parents differ. On the one hand, flexible working time models and remote work support childcare from home. On the other hand, parents use work in the office to be able to work in a concentrated manner, as their personal environment at home does not offer the corresponding opportunity. The processes during parental leave are very similar across companies. The ideal process involves regular contact between a contact person in the company and the respective parent. Firstly, the formal return from parental leave is coordinated with a contact person from the HR department, and secondly, attempts are made to maintain contact with the team in order to make it as easy as possible for the employee to re-acclimate and come to terms with the time off within the company. Two measures that are only indirectly related to remote work are the introduction of additional parental vacation in addition to parental leave, as well as opportunities for further development after parental leave, such as extra traineeships for returning employees.

Childcare

The term childcare includes the supervisory responsibilities of parents, which is defined in this research, from the end of parental leave until the child's 18th birthday. Childcare encompasses the largest time frame and presents challenges to employees and employers especially in terms of available childcare places and related flexible work schedules. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to digital offerings and communications had little or no impact on company offerings at some companies but led to the implementation of new opportunities for companies and parents at others. One example of such implementations are online platforms for virtual childcare offerings from external providers for children of certain age groups. Furthermore, internal communication and the networking of parents in digital "family spaces", including on the intranet or on communication platforms, represent a way for parents to exchange information with each other. Likewise, communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams also support the implementation of flexible working time models such as flextime. Companies use the status and calendar function of the platform to make the respective attendances and absences transparent. These are also highly relevant to the issue of childcare, with the combination of private and professional obligations. In this way, parents' everyday tasks, such as picking up their children from school and the associated absence of the employee for this time, can also be communicated to their team.

In the context of employer branding, communicating specific childcare offerings challenges companies to consider the interests of prospective employees. In this context, childcare is not a significantly relevant topic for young career starters, but rather of interest to more professionally experienced candidates. In this regard, lifecycle-oriented communication is an

approach to consider the individual interests and needs of (potential) employees. In the area of childcare, the companies studied offer some measures that are only superficially related to remote work. These include offers of mobile emergency childcare, which can take place both at the employees' homes and externally at the respective providers' facilities. In addition, some companies supplemented their offerings with additional days off, childcare days, or even sick days due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related closure of childcare centers. Since most of the offers cannot be related to remote work, they are not considered further on, but are only briefly listed here to show the variety and adjustments made by companies due to the pandemic. These include childcare subsidies, individual flextime models as well as parent-child offices, child vacation programs, sabbaticals as well as childcare centers close to the company, which were not abolished despite many challenges caused by the pandemic but adapted and expanded depending on the situation.
Overall, the changes in working culture brought about by the pandemic have mostly become established. Most companies even do not plan to return to full staffing. Instead, hybrid models are envisaged, in which some of the employees are in the office while others work remotely.

Discussion

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewed companies were confronted with fundamental upheavals and changes to established structures, work processes and corporate culture. In line with the existing literature, the pandemic had a reinforcing effect on developments that had already been initiated beforehand (Ahrens, 2021, p. 368; Bergmann et al., 2020, p. 6, Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 5). Many of the interviewees confirmed that they had already had established regulations or company agreements on the subject of remote work and flexible working hours in the company before the pandemic. COVID-19 then added acute challenges for companies by bringing about a greatly increased use of home office. This resulted in a greater blending of private and professional contexts, an exacerbation of personal time conflicts among employees and the complication of communicative processes, putting increased pressures on employers to take measures for acquiring and retaining employees. The high relevance of the research gap identified by this paper, which was largely underexamined all in all, could thus be confirmed in the interviews.
In general, family orientation played an important role in the employer branding efforts of the interviewed companies, although it was striking that the was

given significantly greater relevance in internal than in external branding measures. Opportunities to address potential new employees in a needs-oriented manner regarding family orientation and work-life-flexibility were not being fully utilized, which was especially surprising in view of the increasing relevance of the topic for the job selection decisions of applicants. The focus on internal communication of family issues can possibly also be attributed to the fact that the different family areas often have to be addressed with separate measures and thus demand a great deal of attention by leaders in order to manage the existing workforce. As already assumed in the research question, a distinction between family planning, parental leave and childcare was therefore useful to represent these differences in practice.

While the different family topics were not uniformly organized in all interviewed companies, they were usually either addressed as a separate topic or included in the context of other topics such as work-life balance, diversity & inclusion, social services, or similar.

Questions of family planning are of highly individual nature, which are decided at the discretion of each family and therefore generally not regulated by corporations (BMFSFJ, 2014, p. 7; Schmid et al., 2018). Consequently, the negotiation of the topic is largely a matter of individual coordination between the employee and their manager. Many interviewees emphasized a large leeway for decision-making that leaders are granted in this regard. For this reason, the topic can only be marginally associated with an overarching employer branding strategy. For measures and communication regarding parental leave, more clearly established structures and a greater strategical orientation could be identified. These included dedicated content platforms and support offerings for parents, as well as a strategy for maintaining contact with employees taking parental leave, in order to facilitate the re-integration into work. There were various options reported for returning to the company, with the part-time model dominating. Remote work, on the other hand, hardly played a role as a model for returning from parental leave, which contradicts the implicit assumption of the research question in this direction. This might be due to the fact that remote work was often viewed as problematic (Felstead & Henseke, 2017, p. 207). For employers, it means increased difficulties communicating and organizing work digitally, as well as a lacking environment for corporate culture and creativity. Employees on the other hand have to forgo social interactions which are crucial for their mental health when working remotely. This problematic perception of remote work, according to the interviewees, changed over the time since the beginning of the pandemic. More and more executives are now referring to the opportunities of remote work.

Of all the family issues, childcare poses the greatest challenge to employers, as parents are potentially more likely to be absent from work at short notice due to emergency care requirements. In response to this, the companies surveyed strive to ensure the greatest possible degree of flexibility regarding working hours and work location, which is reflected in a high level of acceptance of home office as well as the broad facilitation of part-time and flextime models. Again though, remote work only plays a limited part in this regard, as working from home is no final solution for childcare. In a worst-case scenario, neither the job nor the children receive enough attention in a context where both have to be managed simultaneously – a criticism which was also leveled against parent-child offices. Remote work thus can aid with providing greater work-life-flexibility but has to be viewed with its specific limitations in mind and embedded in a greater context of a variety of measures. While the topic of childcare evidently receives a great amount of attention in strategic planning, the necessity of a supporting informal dimension for a family-friendly working environment was frequently emphasized, as well. Interviewees stated that it is not enough to formally implement the above-mentioned measures; the corresponding principles must also be culturally embedded. This finding is in line with research by Heider-Winter (2014) which suggests that a consistent implementation of an employer brand's value proposition is crucial for its credibility (Heider-Winter, 2014, p. 155).

Among the measures described, some can clearly be assigned to a deliberate practice of strategic communications (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 377; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 494). In some cases, for example, the topics of family and remote work were directly addressed in employer marketing or specifically marketed in job advertisements, although sometimes as part of the overall package of "flexible working". Employer awards were strategically placed in external communications. In contrast, some statements revealed the communication for the relevant areas to be rather strategically emergent (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 378; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 499). Within some companies, family issues were not raised in job advertisements because the family-friendly image of the company in the region is known by the employees. As a result, reliance is placed on the image effect of the company for the effectiveness of the employer brand, and the topic isn't addressed separately. The goal of communicating a family-oriented HR policy in general is present in these cases, but remote work is not necessarily planned as a component of this strategy.

A similar picture emerges at the internal level. From a deliberate point of view, family issues and flexibilization offers are directly marketed in some companies, for which special contact persons, teams or responsible departments are even created, and their availability is concretely communicated to new employees. On the other hand, it could be observed, that, for example in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, strategies aiming at implementing and communicating flexibility measures were not always intentional and planned in advance, but often rather emerged out of practice. Whereas the concept of remote work was met with great skepticism in some cases at the beginning, it has now subsided and turned into broad acceptance, leading to general internal support for the measure. Hybrid work is now communicated as an important component of flexible working arrangements, while this was not the case at the beginning of the pandemic and has therefore only developed out of practice.

In conclusion, a greatly increased demand for family orientation can be confirmed as an overarching trend in business which companies have to deal with. Particularly against the backdrop of the shortage of skilled workers due to demographic change, the need for a family-oriented HR policy that takes into account all the needs of current and potential employees in terms of family orientation and thus encompasses family care obligations of all kinds becomes apparent (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, n.d.).

While there could not be identified a consistent differentiation between family planning, parental leave and childcare in practice, there still were recognizable differences between the three areas in the strategic orientation of the measures and communication in each case. A reason for this might be that the family planning of employees is very individually shaped, while parental leave and childcare are associated with clear basic needs of working parents. Even though the companies themselves did not always explicitly distinguish between the family areas defined here, a distinction is made between family planning and parental leave coordination as one category and care responsibilities as another category, which includes both childcare and care for other family members. Although the latter was not explicitly addressed in this study, this target group seems to receive just as much attention on the corporate side, so that an expansion of the scientific understanding of the term used in this paper may be necessary. Thus, even though not complete reflective of the use in practice, the differentiation of the three family topics in this paper was useful to gain an understanding of the weighting these areas receive within corporate contexts, and to provide starting points for further research.

Finally, as the researched phenomena came about during the COVID-19 pandemic, the results are of preliminary nature and still remain to be verified for post-pandemic contexts. The results may also be limited by the fact that the interviews for this paper were conducted predominantly with large companies that are financially liquid enough to be able to afford respective measures, and also have received awards for their family-friendliness. It therefore could be explored further to what extent the results can also be applied to smaller companies. However, the position of the companies in the sample as leading players in the German economy suggests that this development might be generalizable on a larger scale.

Regarding the ambivalent results on remote work as a measure of flexibilization, future research could be concerned with determining possible ways of strategically leveraging the measure for employer branding in greater detail. A continued normalization of remote work many organizations might lead to it being used even less for branding purposes, like already seen in some instances. In this context, it would also be interesting to find out what requirements employees have looking at a possible long-term implementation of remote work – especially with regards to family issues. Finally, greater detail could be given to the usefulness of the concept of emergence in the context of strategic communication to identify communicative structures in companies. A point of reference of this work would be to test, to which degree taken measures can be defined as part of an 'emergent' strategy.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the possibilities of using remote work as a measure to improve the compatibility of family and work, and to highlight specifically how this is communicated by companies in Germany as part of the strategic planning and implementation of employer branding. In general, it became apparent that the various areas of the research question can be differentiated on the basis of different legal and time-related framework conditions (see chapter *Family-orientation and Remote Work*), but that companies do not consistently adopt this differentiation between family planning, parental leave, and childcare. At the same time, companies consider mobile working as part of their employer brand, but is not usually part of a formulated strategy, although the compatibility of family and career is seen as a central criterion for employer attractiveness. This suggests that these strategies are not always strategically planned in advance but can also emerge (see chapter *Strategic Communication*). It is questionable to what extent the concept of emergence and thus a more management-oriented understanding of strategic communication within employer branding could broaden the perspective. Nevertheless, the interviewees explain that remote work does not exclusively occur in connection with family issues, but that psychological aspects of working together are also addressed. Supportively, the results show that remote work in the family sector is also seen as a challenge, so that mobile working is not a blanket solution for all employees. Rather, the discussions revealed that a broad range of offers must be made available for different phases of life. It must be possible to adapt these measures individually, for example to the care of family members. Remote work was thus recognized in isolated cases as a measure to improve the compatibility of family and career even before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has not yet taken on a central role within the flexible working time models in the family sector. As a result, remote work is described less as a stand-alone work model but is available for selection together with other offers.

The extent to which the communication of remote work as a family-friendly measure will be strategically planned and implemented in employer branding in the future cannot be answered conclusively. This research is limited by the fact that at the time the interviews were conducted, there was a Germany-wide home office obligation. However, the increasing relevance of family orientation as part of the work-life balance, which was also attributed by companies to the demands of today's young professionals and generational differences, also reflects the ongoing flexibilization of the world of work and consequently the need for a comprehensive package of measures. According to the results, a hybrid form of work is also emerging as a future model alongside remote work. Companies should monitor the trends (introduced in Fig. 1) to continue to attract and secure new skilled workers as attractive and competitive employers, especially regarding employees with care responsibilities.

To better understand the ongoing flexibilization of working models, science needs a shared understanding of the topic. Despite the high relevance in practice and increasing thematization in science, a common understanding of the terms remote work, hybrid work as well as future or new work is still missing. Our interviews confirmed this, as the terms were used differently by the companies. This study has provided an initial starting point by qualitatively investigating the entrepreneurial tension between an increasingly flexible working environment and the growing importance of work-family balance to close part of the existing research gap in family-oriented employer branding.

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