

Sound or Silence? Current Developments in Organizational Communication

Godulla, Alexander (Ed.); Ehrlinspiel, Miriam (Ed.); Gulich, Simona (Ed.); Leißner, Valentin (Ed.); Müller, Annika (Ed.); RÜth, Antonia (Ed.); Sauer, Moritz (Ed.)

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SOUND OR SILENCE

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Edited by
Alexander Godulla, Miriam Ehrlinspiel,
Simona Gulich, Valentin Leißner,
Annika Müller, Antonia RÜth and Moritz Sauer

Imprint

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Communication

Edited by Alexander Godulla, Miriam Ehrlinspiel, Simona Gulich,
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Book design by Miriam Ehrlinspiel and Simona Gulich

Editorial proofreading by Miriam Ehrlinspiel, Simona Gulich, Valentin
Leißner, Annika Müller, Antonia Rüth, and Moritz Sauer

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In the digital age, where information travels at an unprecedented speed, communication is important as ever in the business world. With effective communication, organizations can gain a competitive advantage by using multiple channels to shape narratives, build a preferable reputation, and demonstrate corporate responsibility. The framework for organizational communication is generally well established, but in a constantly changing world, strategic communication must also evolve to be effective. This book looks at organizational communication in a variety of contexts, all related to current developments in our modern world. To cover a wide range of relevant topics, the chapters provide insights into situations that require different communication strategies and methods with varying urgency and priority.

In some cases, the need to communicate may be based on policies and laws that organizations must follow to avoid serious legal consequences. In other cases, the need to communicate can be less regulated, but based on the demands of stakeholders and the public to be transparent, to speak out, and to take positions on current issues. Failure to communicate in critical situations could be fatal for an organization. Situations in which the pressure to communicate eases and organizations have room for maneuver in their communication efforts, provide an opportunity to reallocate resources to less urgent concerns. An example of this is the exploratory testing of new communication tools, which can help to identify and implement innovative ways of communicating and conveying information.

Effective communication management is undoubtedly a crucial factor for a company's success. However, in today's fast-paced business world, where information is abundant and technology enables constant accessibility, organizations often tend to get stuck in a continuous stream

of communication. Integrating a purposeful interruption of communication into the business strategy not only presents an opportunity for a more profound understanding of stakeholders but also carries the potential to enhance efficiency, both internally and externally. The relevance of a communication break becomes particularly clear when considering the dynamics between organizations and stakeholders. Often, organizations tend to spread their messages in profusion without creating the space for genuine dialogue. Strategically interrupting this unilateral communication stream allows for a deliberate shift in focus, redirecting attention from the company's standpoint to the needs and expectations of stakeholders. In a time where transparency, authenticity and social responsibility are increasingly seen as cornerstones of corporate success, it is essential not only to know the needs of target groups, but also to take them seriously. A break from messaging provides an opportunity to pay attention not only to the obvious concerns, but also to more subtle signals and trends that may be crucial for the company's long-term prosperity.

Rather than solely concentrating on the external propagation of information, the second part of this collection revolves around the deliberate act of not communicating. This not only facilitates the transmission of more impactful messages but also fosters understanding and trust among all pertinent stakeholders. Coupled with the refinement of active communication strategies, this approach can culminate in a sustained competitive advantage for companies.

While the subjects covered in this book are quite varied and diverse, they can be categorized into two distinct yet closely interrelated blocks. Following the theme of *Sound or Silence*, we will initially delve into the avenues of communication within and by companies and subsequently emphasize the until now hardly considered potential of strategic silence.

The Art of Strategic Sound

The first chapter is dedicated to a topic that requires active communication, since the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) of the EU Commission presents a new challenge for companies in Germany and their sustainability communication. Starting from the fiscal year 2024, large companies are obligated, ahead of others, to disclose their sustainability information in accordance with the new EU directive. In their qualitative study, the authors Melissa Birkmann, Judith Funke, Julia Gulbin, Lisa-Marie Meyer, Moritz Sauer and Lara Wegmann raise the question of the extent to which the new EU directive influences the sustainability communication of large companies in Germany. Their research thus provides early insights into the expectations of communicators from both companies already reporting and future reporting large companies regarding the CSRD. Furthermore, the perspective of external service providers on the issue is also considered. Finally, the chapter identifies three main opportunities and risks that the CSRD poses for sustainability communication.

The following chapter then deals with geopolitical crises, in which it is necessary for organizations to position themselves. The authors Anja Carstens, Enrico Gerhart, Vanessa Huster, Karolin Kelm and Julian Schick investigate the decision-making basis on which German companies developed their positioning in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war. In light of organizational advocacy and issue management, their study also includes insights for future communicative measures. First, the process of the positioning of a company on the meso-level is examined with the help of 11 qualitative guided interviews with communicators from 11 different affected industries. The results shed light on the concrete procedures of the interviewed companies. Furthermore, the external and internal factors that play a role in the conception of the public statements published by companies are discussed. Finally, the study is rounded off with implications on how to manage future crises that could have an impact on a company's public statement as well as considerations for

further research regarding the changing demands on communicators and the associated understanding of the role of PR practitioners in crisis situations.

In the paper by Simona Gulich, Tammo Heinemann, Emma Starke, Franziska Wehr and Leonie Weiß, the focus is on communication that is rather voluntarily initiated. The authors aim to assess the impact of internal sustainability communication on the Corporate Culture of sustainable enterprises due to the growing significance of sustainability in contemporary society and its parallel relevance within companies. Departing from the conventional emphasis on external sustainability communication, their study seeks to shift the perspective inwards. The primary research question centers around the potential of internal sustainability communication, with three subordinate questions dedicated to exploring its goals, measures, and effects concerning Corporate Culture. To address these inquiries, the researchers conducted 15 qualitative expert interviews, selecting participants based on an existing ranking of the 200 most sustainable companies in Germany.

The first thematic section of this book closes with a chapter on immersive media and its strategic use. While immersive technologies are not a new phenomenon, the strategic use of immersive media in the third sector is still largely unexplored in research. In a qualitative study, Kim Brückner, Miriam Ehrlinspiel, Sina Huneke and Marie Henny Prien explore the extent to which NGOs in Germany use immersive media as part of their strategic communication. The paper provides new insights into the current state of immersive applications in the third sector. While there is a general openness towards the use of innovative ways to communicate with stakeholders in the NGO field by providing new communication opportunities, the results also shed light on the challenges NGOs are confronted with when it comes to new forms and technologies within the multimedia landscape. Based on the findings, the authors provide an outlook and implications for communication professionals in the third sector.

The Power of Silence

Exploring the shift from communicating through sending messages to a focus of listening, Valentin Hausmann, Amelie Heinz, Mirjam Hörl, Antonia Rüth and Meike Schröder investigate the extent and methods of Corporate Listening employed by German medium-sized companies. The work focuses on the organizational prerequisites and measures for Corporate Listening, as well as the rationale for implementing such practices and the impact obtained through Corporate Listening within organizations. To achieve this goal, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with communication managers from eleven medium-sized companies. Macnamara's Architecture of Listening and the Communication Value Circle serve as the primary theoretical basis for this study.

Finally, this work concludes with a paper by Emily Korsch, Valentin Leißner, Annika Müller, Sophie Sieghardt and Elena Weiß that explores the role of strategic communication pauses in the internal corporate communication of large German companies. Since the escalating influx of emails, messages, and meetings within the internal communication is steadily increasing, driven in part by the impacts of digital transformation, a deliberate interruption of communication flows within a company is becoming increasingly important. Utilizing a qualitative research framework and conducting semi-structured interviews with communication managers, the study gains insights into the adoption and motives behind communication pauses. Furthermore, the term 'communication pause' is introduced and defined for the first time within the study, accompanied by practical recommendations for its effective integration into the internal communication strategies of companies.

Part 1

The Art of Strategic Sound

CSRD – Burdening Regulation or Opportunity for CSR Communication?

A Qualitative Study on the Influence of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive on Large German Companies

Melissa Birkmann, Judith Funke, Julia Gulbin, Lisa-Marie Meyer,
Moritz Sauer, Lara Wegmann

Abstract

The recently implemented Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) of the EU Commission fundamentally changes previous reporting practices. In this context, this study examines to what extent the CSRD influences the CSR communication of large German companies. To answer the research question, 14 qualitative interviews were conducted with communication experts from companies that are either already reporting or will be required to report in the future, as well as with consultancies. The research results provide indications of organizational changes due to the CSRD, which are reflected in the growing interest of management and the associated hierarchical repositioning of CSR communication within the company. Resource-specific and structural challenges arise particularly for companies that will be required to report in the future. In addition, the long-term handling of external service providers is generally unclear for companies. The study results suggest an increasing demand for communication experts in the future, which represents an opportunity for CSR communication. Ultimately, this study recommends the use of alternative communication channels, in addition to the sustainability report. Collected indicators should be prepared and disseminated in a channel-specific manner in order to reach a broader audience.

Keywords: CSR communication, CSRD, sustainability report, sustainability reporting, Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive

Introduction

On January 5, 2023, a new directive of the EU Commission came into force that will fundamentally change sustainability reporting (European Commission, 2023). The so-called Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) is intended to lead to more corporate transparency by setting precise standards. Furthermore, it aims to provide more comparable and relevant information on sustainable business activities for external stakeholders (European Commission, 2023).

The new directive increases both political and societal pressure on reporting companies to pay more attention to sustainability issues and to participate in the sustainability discourse (Lee & Cho, 2020, p. 436). This emphasizes the importance of CSR communication for companies, as it helps to engage the public in discussions about sustainability. The CSRD further increases the significance of sustainability reporting, which plays a crucial role in CSR communication by providing important information and by taking on an appeal function (European Council & Council of the European Union, 2022; Heinrich & Schmidpeter, 2018, p. 4; Fifka, 2018, p. 142). This suggests that the new guideline not only affects how companies report on sustainability, but also influences their CSR communication. However, there is currently no research available on the influence of the CSRD on CSR communication. Due to the actuality of the directive, the focus of research so far has been on the general impact on companies (e.g., Baumüller, 2022; Lanfermann & Baumüller, 2022). At this point, there is a clear gap in scientific research, which this paper aims to fill. Therefore, the research interest lies in investigating the communicative changes resulting from the planned CSRD to find out what influence they have on the CSR communication of companies. This research-related claim can be concretized by the following overarching research question:

RQ: To what extent do the planned regulations of the European Commission's "Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive" (CSRD) influence the CSR communication of large companies in Germany?

Due to the low research density in the context of this paper's topic of interest, the research question will be investigated with the help of qualitative interviews. For this purpose, it is necessary to illuminate the theoretical background. Therefore, a theoretical overview of CSR communication and the CSRD of the EU Commission will be provided first. After a description of the methodology, the research findings will be presented, discussed, and interpreted based on the literature. Finally, the present work will be critically reflected, limitations will be presented, and a conclusion will be drawn.

Literature Review

CSR communication

CSR communication is based on the concept of sustainability communication, which, following the sustainability concept, is understood as the social process of understanding the careful use of resources (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011, p. 6; WCED, 1987, p. 37). As a subfield of corporate communications, CSR communication deals with the corporate contribution to the social sustainability discourse (Brugger, 2010, p. 95; Prexl, 2010, p. 147). With the focus on public relations (PR), the function includes all external communicative actions of profit-oriented companies that deal with the topic of sustainability in terms of content and thus touches social, governmental, and ecological aspects (Brugger, 2010, p. 3).

The main task of CSR communication is to inform stakeholders about activities and developments in the context of corporate sustainability actions (Heinrich & Schmidpeter, 2018, p. 4; Prexl, 2010, p. 149). The aim is to make sustainability concepts known to the public as well as to gain social legitimacy (Brugger, 2010, p. 95). It also supports the identification, internalization, and processing of relevant issues as well as the corporate influence on social development (Brugger, 2010, p. 95).

In line with its objectives, CSR communication is considered to play a significant role in highlighting the value-adding contribution of corporate

sustainability practices, with which the function contributes to corporate success (Heinrich & Schmidpeter, 2018, p. 2). Through the positive influence of these practices on corporate image, corporate reputation, stakeholders, legitimacy, corporate risk, and innovation potential, support for financial goals can be derived (Crane & Glozer, 2016, pp. 1232-1233; Vishwanathan, van Oosterhout, Heugens, Duran & van Essen, 2020, pp. 316-318).

In addition to opportunities for corporate success, CSR communication also entails various communicative risks. First, the low level of social awareness of the sustainability mission statement and the high complexity of sustainability issues make communication difficult (Brugger, 2010, p. 187; Prexl, 2010, p. 184). Within the company, internal sustainability awareness, internal coordination processes and the process of information procurement and evaluation can also inhibit CSR communication (Prexl, 2010, pp. 187-188; Brugger 2010, pp. 170-176). Further challenges are the problem of social attention and of credibility (Prexl, 2010, p. 191). In addition, as communication increases, so does stakeholder attention, which maximizes the pressure on companies (Weder, Einwiller & Eberwein, 2019, p. 200). The diverse stakeholder expectations further amplify this pressure, so that successful CSR communication faces various hurdles (Prexl, 2010, p. 186; Karmasin & Apfelthaler, 2017, p. 245).

Based on existing literature, CSR communication is usually located in special CSR departments, corporate communications, or PR (Bruhn & Zimmermann, 2017, p. 8). The survey by Pollach, Johansen, Ellerup Nielsen and Thomsen (2012), which is one of the only empirical studies on the organization of CSR communication, confirms similar findings. The results show that CSR activities are often located in separate CSR departments, but there is close consultation with corporate communications (Pollach et al., 2012, p. 211). CSR activities are thus integrated into corporate communications, "but not vice versa" (Pollach et al., 2012, p. 213). Furthermore, the results illustrate that communication

departments are less involved in sustainability reporting. They are more likely to be involved in advertising and sponsorship (Pollach et al., 2012, p. 210). Regarding reporting channels, it becomes clear that in half of the cases the CEO is responsible for CSR issues, so that the CEO is strongly involved in the internal coordination processes (Pollach et al., 2012, p. 211).

A central instrument that contributes to fulfilling the information function of CSR communication is the sustainability report (Fifka, 2018, p. 139). The publication reports on events, strategies, and goals in accordance with applicable laws and guidelines (Schach, 2015, p. 184). Sustainability reporting has been gaining relevance for years and is encountering various guidelines and regulations, which further emphasize the importance of CSR communication (Golob, Verk & Podnar, 2017, p. 170). This also applies to the recently published CSRD of the European Commission. Before examining the influence of the CSRD on CSR communication, a brief insight into the contents of the CSRD and its impact on the companies concerned will be provided.

Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive

The CSRD, which came into force in January 2023, is considered a revised, improved version of its predecessor, the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (2014/95/EU), short NFRD. The NFRD obliged large public interest entities to provide information on environmental aspects, social issues, corruption prevention and diversity measures at management and control levels (European Commission, 2023). According to its own statements, the EU Commission allowed the companies concerned a great deal of freedom in the implementation and design of the NFRD (Europäische Kommission, 2017). To increase company transparency and the comparability of information in the future, the NFRD was comprehensively revised (The European Parliament & the Council, 2022, p. 14). The aim was to adopt a mandatory set of guidelines which defines the information to be published from the sustainability categories of environment, social affairs, and governance as well as the integration of

the sustainability report into the management report (Wulf & Velte, 2022, p. 232; The European Parliament & the Council, 2022, p. 31).

The fundamental driver behind the comprehensive reporting required under the CSRD was the European Green Deal, which sealed the climate neutrality target by 2050 with its set of measures (The European Parliament & the Council, 2022, p. 2). As part of this package, the CSRD supports the achievement of the target by obliging large companies and listed small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to comply with detailed and standardized sustainability reporting in the future (The European Parliament & the Council, 2022). The number of reporting companies will thus be increased to approximately 50,000 (European Commission, 2023). In addition, the CSRD puts sustainability reporting on an equal level with financial reporting through its mandatory integration into the management report (Wulf & Velte, 2022, p. 232).

The CSRD standards define the information to be published from the sustainability categories of environment, social and governance (The European Parliament & the Council, 2022, p. 31). These include, for example, a description of the relevant business model and strategies, the companies' plans for a more sustainable economy, and of the companies' time-bound sustainability objectives (The European Parliament & the Council, 2022, p. 91f.). Furthermore, information on social factors must be provided, explaining the influence and impact of the company on people and human health (The European Parliament & the Council, 2022, p. 52).

According to the EU Commission, the new CSRD will primarily offer affected companies enhanced opportunities to access the capital market and engage in more effective stakeholder communication. This, in turn, can lead to a positive reputation boost for the companies involved (The European Parliament & the Council, 2022, p.14). The existing literature also shows that the integration of sustainability aspects in companies can contribute to securing their license to operate (Baumüller, 2022, p. 67). Furthermore, the CSRD enables business models to be transformed and

reported on according to sustainability criteria (Lanfermann & Baumüller, 2022, p. 2755).

However, previous literature also reveals various challenges for reporting companies. Establishing new processes to comply with the reporting obligation results in major corporate changes, which in turn lead to massive investments, especially in human resources (Baumüller, 2022, p. 67; Lanfermann & Baumüller, 2022, p. 2754). According to a study by Zülch, Schneider and Thun (2021), this affects a large proportion of companies. Especially for those companies that have not reported yet, the introduction of reporting will be a challenge (Zülch et al., 2021, p. 456). Regarding the audit of the reports, which will be expanded in scope by the CSRD to a reasonable assurance audit, Zülch et al. (2021, p. 456) also assume extremely high efforts and high costs. They will be particularly high for those companies that have not provided the non-financial reports audited so far (Zülch et al., 2021, p. 456).

The new reporting obligation resulting from the CSRD will fundamentally change corporate sustainability reporting and thus also CSR communication. Due to the recent publication of the CSRD and the lack of research especially in the field of sustainability communication, the objective of this study is to gain an overview of the influence of the CSRD on CSR communication. For this purpose, the investigation of opportunities and challenges is particularly appropriate.

From the perspective of the European Commission, the CSRD presents a promising opportunity for corporate success, highlighting the growing importance of sustainability and its impact on CSR communication. Consequently, it is crucial to explicitly examine the opportunities of CSRD in the context of CSR communication. This leads to the following question:

RQ1: What opportunities does the CSRD offer for CSR communication?

In addition to opportunities, the current literature primarily discusses challenges that the CSRD will pose to the companies concerned in the

coming years. In this context, it is interesting to research challenges explicitly concerning CSR communication:

RQ2: What communicative challenges arise because of the CSRD?

Furthermore, the CSRD is accompanied by structural changes in companies. The extent to which these changes also affect the organization of CSR communication will be answered in the context of the following research question:

RQ3: How is the organization of CSR communication changing in light of the CSRD?

Methodology

To effectively address the purpose of this research and to be consistent with the epistemological focus, a qualitative research approach was applied. Semi-structured guided interviews were conducted with experts in CSR communication to gather specific insights on the subject of inquiry. The interviews are based on an interview guide that incorporates the theoretical base and the research question, providing preformulated narrative stimuli. To design the interview guide, the SPSS principle of Helfferich (2011) was used. As a result of this principle, the six topic blocks *Organization of CSR communication*, *Importance of sustainability reporting*, *CSRD in companies*, *Organizational changes*, *Opportunities* and *Challenges* were developed.

Two interview guides were developed based on a sample that included communication experts and external consultants. The first interview guide is intended for professionals from CSRD reporting companies. The second interviewing guide is made for communication consultants, who support companies in the process of fulfilling the CSRD. Each guide consists of four sections. To provide a common ground, the introduction of the interview included a definition of the crucial term "CSR communication". In the second section, background data on the industry and the structure of CSR communication are gathered to portray the status quo. Questions

about potential changes in the workplace, the organization of CSR communication, as well as advantages and disadvantages related to the CSRD were covered in the main section. Finally, the last section requested an outlook on the impact of the CSRD on CSR communication.

To ensure the intentional selection of representative cases, predetermined criteria were established for the sample selection. On the one hand, the sample consists of experts from (future) CSRD-reporting companies and, on the other hand, of experts who assist these companies in sustainability reporting as external consultants. The total sample includes two groups: Firstly, communication managers who are specialized in sustainability and employed by large German companies (§267 HGB) that are obligated to report according to the CSRD guideline. Secondly, communication consultants from consulting firms assisting major German enterprises with CSRD reporting. Expert selection criteria encompassed both organizational and individual factors. 14 of the 67 experts contacted agreed to participate in an interview. Therefore, 14 experts make up the sample (n=14). Table 1 shows the sample composition:

Table 1
Sample Composition

Type of enterprise and reporting obligation	Part of the sample	Sector	E.g. professional positions
DAX companies (already reporting and the first group to be CSRD-reportable)	4/14	Chemical and pharmaceutical industry; Insurance; Fashion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead Sustainability Communications • Senior Manager Sustainability Communications
Future CSRD-reporting large German companies	6/14	Energy; Consulting; Finance; Construction; IT; Food industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media Spokesperson Sustainability • Sustainability Manager • Head of Sustainability, Recruiting and Employer Branding • Head of Sustainability
Communications consultancies (supporting function regarding reporting obligations)	4/14	Communications Consulting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEO • Senior Associate • Managing Director

The sample division allows a comprehensive and multifaceted exploration of the research topic. Considering the unique experiences shared by the interviewees, the order of the interview guide's questions was modified to facilitate deeper insights. Furthermore, additional follow-up questions were asked to delve further into the discussions. The 14 interviews were conducted by only two interviewers to enhance data comparability. With the experts' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded for transcription. Subsequently, the interviews were anonymized and transcribed verbatim.

Mayring's (2015) method of qualitative content analysis was adopted for the examination of the collected data material. A category system with main categories and subcategories was developed to filter the contents. This system was documented as a coding guide, which includes detailed descriptions, coding rules, and anchor examples for each category. The purpose of the coding guide is to ensure the effectiveness and precision of the categories. The main categories were deductively developed based on the theoretical framework. The category system consists of the following 15 main categories: structures; use of external service providers; resources; relevance; value contribution; visibility of importance; structural change; corporate policy changes; changes in tasks; changes in the use of external service providers; challenges; stakeholder communication; increase of relevance; increase of value contribution; outlook. The category "challenges" was inductively split into the following nine subcategories: overload of human resources; data collection; internal processes; competences of communicators; standards; transparency; scope of reporting requirements; auditing; public perception.

After coding, the categorized data material was paraphrased and summarized.

Findings

Organization of CSR Communication

To answer RQ3, the interviewees were asked about the organization of the CSR communication in general. The interviews show that CSR communication and thus also sustainability reporting are located in different departments of the companies, such as corporate communications, finance departments, in a staff unit of the executive board or in marketing. Some companies have already established their own sustainability departments, where the sustainability report is done. In those cases, the communication department acts in a supporting role and is primarily responsible for the external communication of the sustainability report. This was mainly observed in companies already subject to reporting requirements. Many future reporting companies state that CSR communication is a sub-area of corporate communications. Consequently, in these companies it could be observed that sustainability reporting is, to a large extent, the task of corporate communications. Another task of corporate communications is to prepare the sustainability report contents for external and internal communication. Some companies organize the preparation of the report by setting up project teams with experts from different departments. The interviewees generally stated that the preparation of the sustainability report requires cooperation with different departments, such as investor relations, public affairs, PR, and marketing, and that they work with a variety of interfaces. A very important interface for the communicators interviewed is the one to the sustainability department, as that is where the thematic expertise lies. On behalf of the other interviewees, one respondent reported: "We work very closely [...] with the sustainability colleagues. That means we always work as tandems or in teams and so on. That works well".

In most of the surveyed companies, sustainability reporting is positioned as a strategic topic at board level, typically within DAX companies and voluntarily reporting entities. A similar pattern applies to corporate communications, with most DAX companies directly reporting to the

management board. The following statement exemplifies this: "So the communication is connected in such a way that it reports directly to the CEO. And the Chief Sustainability Officer, who leads the sustainability department, also reports to the CEO".

The interviews also showed that external service providers play an important role in CSR communication. While only half of the DAX companies surveyed consider using these services, future reporting companies are more likely to use external service providers. One of the external service providers stated: "So two essential streams are simply advice on setting up a sustainability management system and the necessary structures. And number two is actually the implementation of individual CSR communication measures from sustainability reporting to stakeholder dialogue or CSR communication". Different companies and consultancies stated that external service providers are also used for the following reasons: external editing, coaching, stakeholder communication, digitalization, conducting materiality analyses, and graphic design.

According to some interviewees, the companies rely on external service providers due to a shortage of personnel in their teams. Future reporting companies mentioned that their sustainability and CSR communication teams are relatively small. While these companies believe they have inadequate human resources, most companies that already comply with reporting requirements consider their resources to be sufficient. Overall, respondents appear to be satisfied with the available financial resources.

Relevance and Value Contribution of CSR Communication

As emerged from some interviews, corporate sustainability action is generally gaining a lot of relevance, which can be attributed, among others, to the publics' increased sustainability expectations. Therefore, companies set high sustainability targets, integrate sustainability into their overall business strategy and report on their sustainability activities partly on a voluntary basis. One of the respondents illustrated this as follows:

"We believe that in the future you can only survive and be successful as an organization, as a company, no matter in which industry, if you have integrated sustainability into your business model accordingly". This also implies the external communication and the reporting of the companies' sustainability goals. Consequently, this influences the stakeholder management and creates transparency, which has a particularly positive effect on customers, the employee market, and the exchange with NGOs. Furthermore, the experts reported that the topic of sustainability also has an impact on the economic value of the company. For investors and shareholders, sustainability rankings are already decisive indicators for orienting themselves in the market. Sustainability criteria also play an important role when granting bank loans and for sales partners. Additionally, the majority of the interviewees indicated that CSR communication has a significant impact on corporate success. Within the company, the importance of CSR communication becomes visible to the respondents through the increase in human and financial resources.

CSRD in Companies: Corporate Policy Changes

After the brief overview of the status quo of CSR communication in large German companies, the effects of the CSRD are presented: Firstly, the CSRD places new demands on sustainability reporting, which leads to changes in corporate policy, according to the interview partners. These include, for example, the development of a stable sustainability management system, the allocation of new responsibilities, and the establishment and expansion of control systems. In general, the experts assumed that some companies would have to restructure and align even closer with the topic of sustainability. Respondents from companies already reporting stated that the existing structures are sufficient for writing the report according to CSRD.

CSRD as an Influencing Factor of CSR Communication: Organizational Changes

Based on all interviews conducted, the new CSRD will have an impact on the structures, the use of external service providers and the distribution of tasks by the companies concerned. Previous structures must be questioned and rethought. In addition, it became clear that the organizations and processes responsible for the sustainability report, as well as the personnel and external service providers involved, need to be adapted to meet the comprehensive requirements of the CSRD in companies.

Likewise, according to the experts, a sustainability department should be set up in companies if it does not yet exist. In addition, many of the interviewees pointed out that new interfaces must be created, and the corresponding responsibilities defined. About one third of the interviewees stated that the departments must work closely together in the future and should be even better connected. The importance of one special interface was reported as well: "I just see this as a very important one [...] that there is a very close exchange between communication and sustainability, if this is not already integrated with each other in a department anyway". Resource allocation should also be reconsidered in view of the increased reporting requirements. In the interviewed DAX companies, strong structures already exist. Therefore, they do not expect any major changes due to the CSRD.

The CSRD also impacts the utilization of external service providers, which varies among the interviewed companies: From the perspective of the consultancies, companies would increasingly seek support for both advisory and operational tasks because of their expertise for CSRD. Most of the companies interviewed, primarily those with a reporting obligation in the future, agreed with this. Additionally, respondents indicate that the CSRD not only necessitates organizational, process, and personnel adjustments at the company level but also leads to changes in corporate communications. Especially the unprecedented transparency and comparability between companies will have an impact on the tasks of CSR

communication, according to the experts. The consultants interviewed highlighted that communicators should therefore expand their knowledge of sustainability in general, sustainability management and reporting, and inform themselves about the CSRD.

CSRD as an Influencing Factor of CSR Communication: Challenges

The survey highlighted challenges that companies and consultancies face in CSR communication because of the CSRD. These challenges demand significant effort and adaptability from both companies and communicators, who are confronted with new expectations, requirements, and risks. Limited human resources emerge as one of the key challenges, with both mid-sized companies and reporting companies expressing the need for additional resources on the side of future reporting companies. Moreover, the lack of skilled personnel is a recurring concern, attributed to insufficient professional experience among communicators. Another major challenge, highlighted by nearly half of the respondents, is data procurement. Obtaining as well as preparing and presenting the necessary data proves to be a particularly significant obstacle. Internal processes also present challenges for CSR communication considering the CSRD. Most consultancies and companies interviewed, that are forced to report in the future, acknowledged the CSRD's influence on internal processes. This includes the efficient adaptation of internal processes to comply with the new directive and the need to raise awareness within company divisions. Especially inexperienced companies face an additional obstacle if they have not yet established certain structures for and knowledge about detailed sustainability reporting. The impact on communication and internal time budgets was also mentioned as a difficulty.

Disclosure of grievances was identified as a fundamental threat to companies by a large number of respondents. Problematic information that should not be made public could come into focus. Another major impact of increased transparency cited by one third of the respondents was the greater vulnerability of the company and the increased potential for critical inquiries. The following statement illustrates this: "As a company, I

become more vulnerable. I have to reveal more in terms of numbers, statements, and messages, which will be critically scrutinized. Consequently, it is possible that I may provide more vulnerability and become a target for attacks.” In addition, according to the statements of half of the future reporting companies, public perception could be highlighted as another challenge: On the one hand, there could be misinterpretations due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the public, and on the other hand, due to the amount of information, the public could be overwhelmed by. Respondents also noted that the public is hardly interested in the topic and is not expected to read the sustainability reports.

According to the interviews, the scope and length of the CSRD report are responsible for a profound change. The extent of this change was illustrated representatively by one of the consultants: "Sustainability reporting is changing fundamentally. That's causing a lot of concern and a lot of work for all of us and our clients right now. [...] So this is a complete upheaval. Really a world change that is coming our way." In addition to the scope of the report, the interviews highlight the auditing of the sustainability report according to the CSRD guidelines. Almost as many companies as those that saw an audit as a challenge stated in the interviews that they were already well prepared due to a previous audit. Future reporting entities also face challenges regarding the selection and implementation of reporting standards. They fear, for example, that the high reporting effort will lead to the neglect of other sustainability measures, that no sufficient reportable changes will occur within a reporting cycle, and that they will face hurdles in working out the requirements of the CSRD.

CSRD as an Influencing Factor of CSR Communication: Opportunities

Besides the challenges, the companies and consultancies surveyed also reported about opportunities for CSR communication through the CSRD. One third of the interviewees viewed the reporting obligation under the CSRD as an opportunity to enhance the quality and quantity of content

and data for both internal and external communication. This was further affirmed by four interviewees from different companies who highlighted the significant impact of the CSRD on CSR communication. They specifically mentioned the reporting obligation and the disclosure of key figures as contributing factors. Two companies currently obligated to report and one company that will be obligated to report in the future emphasized the growing significance of CSR communication due to the CSRD, particularly at the management level.

Most of the prospective reporting companies also anticipated that resources allocated for reporting and communication would be augmented or reorganized due to the implementation of the CSRD. They acknowledged the accompanying increase in workload because of the reporting obligation, leading to the expectation of additional resources being dedicated to these tasks. Some interviewees saw these circumstances as opportunities for CSR communication. For example, one respondent from a future reporting company declared: "So, I believe that this increases the importance of CSR communication because reporting has now transitioned from being optional to mandatory." Another expressed factor was the public pressure for organizational transformation: The emphasis of the CSRD on the importance and resulting transparency drives the need to integrate sustainability into corporate strategy, compelling companies to actively pursue transformative change. Four interviewees also referred to a higher measurability and quantifiability of the company's contribution through sustainability issues, resulting from the higher amount of valid data for CSR communication.

In terms of stakeholder communication, CSRD was found to lead to greater comparability among companies. This provides stakeholders with better access as well as tracking of information, thus facilitates transparency. Consultancies commented on the inclusion of stakeholders. Half of the interviewees addressed the importance of CSRD in the capital market and among investors. All consultancies interviewed understood

capital market players as stakeholders. They also emphasized that investors were increasingly concerned with environmental, social and governance issues and would use the sustainability balance sheet and reports as a basis for investment decisions. It was also underscored that increased capital market interest in sustainability information was driving increased interest in sustainability data among Chief Financial Officers and investor relations departments. Not only institutional investors but also private investors have an increased interest in sustainability data.

Transparency in reporting plays a significant role in stakeholder communication, as some respondents confirmed. Three of them emphasized that transparency is perceived positively by the public, as companies and their actions become more comprehensible, open, and clear to them. More open and comprehensible communication is brought about by the fact that the CSRD standardizes sustainability reporting. Closely linked to a company's transparency is its credibility. According to one consultancy, credibility for stakeholders would increase due to the focus on relevant issues and greenwashing accusations would decrease. A respondent from an already reporting company expressed positivity regarding the CSRD's mandate for companies to address sustainability in the future: "CSR communication has always been said to be authentic, credible, and ideally substantiated. And now, with the CSRD, we are getting all of that". The significance of niche companies being impacted by this obligation was also highlighted, as the CSRD would result in comparable information within the competitive landscape of CSR communication.

A high impact of the CSRD on corporate and CSR communication was predicted by some representatives of future reporting companies. Also, a couple interviewees emphasized the issue of greenwashing as an important aspect in the increase in value, which was decreasing or phasing out because of CSRD. In addition to the aforementioned increase in relevance, the interviews point to an increase in the value of CSR communication as a result of the CSRD: Almost all DAX companies as

well as two future reporting companies suspected that CSRD will have an impact on a company's corporate reputation and/or credibility.

The interviewed companies and consultancies gave a personal assessment of the future impact of the CSRD. They predicted an impact of the CSRD on the measurement and evaluation of metrics, fact-based and rational communication on sustainability, corporate rethinking, and the importance of necessary resources for communicating sustainability issues. Also, the CSRD would affect the need for qualified personnel, the elevation of sustainability reporting to a level with financial reporting, and the scrutiny of sustainability efforts by politicians and NGOs.

These implications show that the CSRD can bring about a fundamental shift in CSR communications that presents both challenges and opportunities for companies and communicators.

Discussion

RQ 1: What opportunities does the CSRD offer for the CSR communication of organizations?

As opportunities are arising from the new reporting obligation for CSR communication, three key aspects were addressed in the guideline interviews: The increase in relevance and value as well as the positive influence on stakeholder communication.

As the theory implies, there were already signs of an increase in the relevance of CSR communication before the introduction of the CSRD. The finalization of the directive continues this process, which is also perceived by the experts surveyed. According to their observation, the increase in importance is reflected, for example, in the fact that the general visibility of the sustainability topic is increasing in some companies and a rise in importance is also apparent on a management level. In addition, companies with a future reporting obligation expect more resources to be available for reporting and communication, which also reflects the increased relevance of CSR communication. It is interesting to note that

the greater importance of the topic has not yet translated into general internal acceptance of the subject, as stated by almost half of the companies surveyed. Nevertheless, a prospective increase in internal acceptance can be expected, which goes hand in hand with the rising relevance of CSR communication.

Another opportunity highlighted was the value added to CSR communication by the introduction of the CSRD. While previous research attributes a contribution to both corporate image and reputation to CSR communication, companies already subject to reporting requirements primarily mentioned only the impact on corporate reputation. From this it can be concluded that in practice, it is primarily the effect of CSR communication on the collective judgment of the company that is seen as significant and interpreted as a possible opportunity. In addition to reputation, some respondents mentioned the increasing credibility of CSR communication as a positive consequence of the CSRD. In particular, the improved comparability of data for investors as well as the constant, standardized and transparent reporting would pay off in terms of credibility. The sustainability communicated and the sustainability practiced by the company are easier to compare and greenwashing is identified more easily. It can thus be concluded that sustainability as a pure PR measure without reference to actual corporate activities will be used less in the future. At the same time, it can be assumed that the basic skepticism of stakeholders toward corporate sustainability efforts identified in the literature can be countered with the help of the CSRD.

Regarding the relationship between companies and their stakeholders, various opportunities can be derived from the respondents' answers. For example, the aforementioned widespread collection of sustainability indicators can not only contribute to the credibility of CSR communication, but also offers the potential to better inform stakeholders about CSRD content. Among these, investors represent a particularly important stakeholder group, who show an increased interest in sustainability reports. Besides, capital market-oriented companies noted

that a company's sustainability is no longer only of increasing relevance to institutional investors, but also to private investors. According to the respondents, existing as well as potential employees also represent important stakeholder groups on which a company's sustainability strategy and thus also its communication can have a positive influence. In particular, the respondents see great potential in the recruitment of young talent and in employee retention, which can be seen as an opportunity for the whole company beyond CSR communication.

RQ 2: What communicative challenges arise because of the CSRD?

Challenges mentioned in the interviews relate to the resources available, data procurement and the transparency that will be created. A majority of the DAX companies see the problem regarding human resources for the report preparation primarily on the side of the previously inexperienced companies. They themselves feel adequately staffed for future requirements, but face other challenges with resources, such as the additional burden on communication and time budgets. This point was not explicitly mentioned by future reporting companies, but it can be assumed that it also applies here. The increasing amount of sustainability-related data to be obtained was also mentioned as a difficulty by respondents. In line with the challenges for the procurement already identified in the literature, evaluation and provision of sustainability-related data, interviewed representatives of the companies described the preparation and playout of data as particularly challenging. A congruence between theory and practice is also evident regarding the predicted risks that increased transparency entails for companies. According to the interviewees, transparency is not only seen as an opportunity, but could also contribute to the disclosure of grievances and thus promote critical inquiries and the vulnerability of companies. Thus, the increased communication of sustainability aspects leads to increased observation by different stakeholders. When publishing content, potential risks must already be identified beforehand and thus be minimized. Additionally, standardized response processes for critical queries should be established.

The conversion of internal processes changed the competence requirements for communicators and the specification of a reporting standard are primarily seen by future reporting companies as challenges associated with the CSRD. They also increasingly report challenges regarding the scope of the reporting obligation and the auditing of the reports. In the interviews, they attributed the changed competence requirements to the large number of new tasks that communicators will have to deal with in the future. In some cases, they reported a lack of competencies on the part of those responsible for communications, which is also taken up in the literature as an effect of the CSRD. Lanfermann and Baumüller (2022), for example, predict a need for training and further education that will affect all corporate levels in the long term.

Furthermore, future reporting entities are concerned about choosing and applying reporting standards that may require high reporting effort, be repetitive and complex under the CSRD. A challenge for both companies already reporting and those that will be required to report in the future is the readership of sustainability reports. Interviewees addressed a knowledge deficit among the public that could lead to misinterpretation of sustainability information. Derived from this, the complexity of the topic should be reduced by experts to such an extent that there is as little room as possible for misinterpretation. In addition, respondents mentioned a possible overload due to the amount of information and the fact that it is more difficult for sustainability measures to stand out in the public eye due to the standardization of reports. It can therefore be deduced that topics with a particularly high priority for the general public should be communicated in an easily understandable way in addition to the sustainability report via alternative communication channels if the company wants to achieve awareness among the broad public.

RQ 3: How is the organization of CSR communication changing in light of the CSRD?

Aligning with existing research findings, the interviews showed that sustainability reporting is hierarchically high in many companies, as it is created in consultation with the management level. In some of the companies surveyed, the communications department is also closely linked to the management level. The organizational positioning of CSR communication varies among the examined companies: Departments responsible for CSR communication and reporting are found not only within corporate communications but also within other corporate departments like finance or sustainability departments. This distribution of responsibilities largely aligns with recommendations of previous research. Furthermore, the findings showed the importance of interfaces between those responsible for reporting and the specialist departments across companies.

The findings also revealed differences regarding the role of corporate communication in the preparation and publication of sustainability reports. The interviewed DAX companies only utilize corporate communications for disseminating report content through external communication measures. However, companies that will be subject to reporting requirements in the future involve corporate communications earlier and more closely in the sustainability domain: While the relevant metrics are still collected separately from corporate communications, the overall process of report creation is predominantly managed by the corporate communications department. This is because the interviewed companies perceive CSR communication as an organizational subset of corporate communications. Meanwhile, DAX companies express concerns about maintaining these structures in the context of the CSRD, given larger reporting volumes, stricter audits, and potential consequences for inaccurate reporting.

Considering these factors, external service providers and companies that will be subject to reporting requirements in the future predict an increased

relevance and the emergence of entirely new interfaces with the CSRD, especially between the communication and the sustainability departments. Expectations for sustainability communicators also rise within these companies: Communicators must be trained in the field of sustainability to understand and translate CSRD-related topics. Additionally, they need to be able to independently derive communicative and strategic themes from the sustainability report. These requirements indicate a specialization within the field of communication that could experience a strong demand in the job market in the short to medium term, offering long-term job prospects. DAX companies did not express these expectations towards future communicators and mostly stated that they already have sufficient structures in place to handle the scope of CSRD reporting. Furthermore, most of these companies do not anticipate any changes in their responsibilities due to the CSRD for the time being. The self-assessment of these companies is interesting, as previous research claimed that only one in ten companies from DAX, MDAX, and SDAX are adequately prepared for the changes brought about by the CSRD (Zülch et al., 2021, p. 456).

Across companies, external service providers are also engaged in the creation of sustainability reports. Companies primarily perceive the support of consultants to be more operational in nature, while consultants emphasize the strategic value they bring. All surveyed consultancies report a significant increase in demand for their services, both at the operational and strategic level. Companies that will be subject to reporting requirements in the future express their intention to rely on external service providers in the long run. The expertise of external consultants is highly sought after, but only until companies can develop internal capabilities, structures, and allocate sufficient personnel and financial resources to handle report preparation internally. This presents a challenge for consultancies to remain relevant in the long term, while companies are confronted with the task of creating the necessary prerequisites to independently meet the scope of sustainability reporting.

Most companies that are already subject to reporting requirements indicated that they have sufficient personnel resources, whereas future reporting companies tend to observe the opposite. This self-assessment of the less experienced companies aligns with the evaluations of DAX companies, which critically view a potential lack of personnel resources in non-reporting companies. Considering the planned expansion of internal resources, it can be assumed that sustainability experts and communication professionals with knowledge in sustainability will become increasingly attractive to companies and will be in higher demand in the job market.

Limitations

It is important to note that the work is based on a narrow definition of CSR communication, primarily focusing on external communication activities. This limited perspective may not fully capture the complexity and nuances of CSR communication within organizations. Furthermore, the qualitative study was conducted at a very early stage regarding the decision of the EU Commission. As a result, there is limited literature available on the research topic, and many companies are only at the beginning of their preparations for the comprehensive reporting obligation. This could potentially impact the depth of insights and experiences gathered.

Methodologically, it should be mentioned that the sample selection was based on typical cases. Communication managers with prior experience in sustainability and knowledge of CSRD were specifically contacted. This selection method may introduce a bias and may not represent the full spectrum of perspectives and practices in CSR communication. Moreover, despite the research topic being classified under CSR communication, the interviewees often made statements on sustainability at the overall company level. While this provides valuable context, it may limit the depth of analysis specifically related to CSR communication activities.

Overall, these limitations highlight the need for further research and a more comprehensive examination of CSR communication, considering a broader range of organizations, timeframes, and perspectives.

Conclusion and Outlook

With the final resolution of the CSRD in November 2022, fundamental changes to corporate sustainability reporting in Germany were enshrined in law. The sustainability report is thus strengthened in its information and appeal function, which in turn can be transferred to its overriding field of action of CSR communication. However, there is a lack of scientific findings on the influence of the directive on CSR communication since its finalization was in the recent past. Therefore, in this respect, this paper provides an important first insight by focusing on large companies in Germany.

The expert opinions from companies already reporting as well as future reporting companies and consultancies partly overlap with theoretical assumptions from scientific literature, but in some cases unexpected results also emerged. In particular, the influence of the CSRD on corporate structures is currently difficult to predict according to expert assessments. This is largely due to the fact that CSR communication and reporting have been inconsistently anchored in companies so far. There are major differences between companies that are already obliged to report and companies that will be obliged to report in the future. Whether the introduction of the CSRD will lead to a unification of the organization of CSR communication in different companies is not yet clear. However, what can already be predicted is the high hierarchical level of CSR communication as well as the need for increased interconnectivity of different departments within the company. The future participation of external service providers in the creation of sustainability reports remains uncertain, as discrepancies were observed in the information provided by company representatives and consultancies.

An important finding regarding the first two research questions of this paper is that the CSRD is predominantly perceived as a "burdening regulation". In addition to opportunities such as the increase in relevance and value of CSR communication as well as the positive influence on stakeholder communication, the interviews frequently addressed challenges associated with the introduction of the CSRD. The directive seems to pose different difficulties for companies that are already obliged to report and for companies that will be obliged to report in the future. However, overlaps can also be found in challenges such as the resources available, data procurement and the newly emerging transparency of sustainability activities. From a communications perspective, the lack of human resources as well as specific competencies in the area of CSR communication is of particular interest. This was primarily mentioned by future reporting companies and points to a short- to medium-term increase in the need for experts in this area. Training communicators who already have the relevant skills when they start their careers will become the task of pertinent degree programs in the future, as well as other training opportunities for young talents. In addition, further training opportunities for experienced communicators should be promoted by companies. This is the only way to meet the new requirements for CSR communication in the long term.

With regard to communicating the information collected on corporate sustainability efforts, it is recommended not only to include it in the sustainability report, but also disseminate it through communication channels with broader coverage. In this way, it is possible to reach not only the audience of specialists or experts but also the general public so that their demand for more transparent corporate information can be met. However, the complexity of the content should be significantly reduced compared to the sustainability report. The task of CSR communication is to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the essential information. Additionally, it involves identifying the specific channels and formats that are appropriate for effectively communicating relevant CSR topics alongside the sustainability report.

Apart from implications for practice, this work also provides implications for further scientific research of the topic. It allows predictions about the possible influence of the CSRD on CSR communication, which should be quantified in subsequent studies. Due to the topicality and the early stage of the topic, long-term studies with selected companies would also be suitable in addition to a cross-sectional design in order to show the influence of the directive over time. This could help to determine how the corporate structure adapts to the reporting obligation in the long term and whether, after it has been successfully established in the companies, it is increasingly perceived as an opportunity or continues to be perceived as a challenge. During the process, it will become apparent to what extent companies that have not yet reported can catch up with the reporting and the associated know-how of companies that are already subject to reporting obligations.

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Taking a stance

A qualitative analysis on how major German corporations developed their position regarding the Russia-Ukraine war

Anja Carstens, Enrico Gerharth, Vanessa Huster, Karolin Kelm, Julian Schick

Abstract

In light of organizational advocacy and issue management, this study examines on which decision-making basis large German companies have developed their positioning in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war and sheds light on the resulting insights for future communicative measures. The process of positioning is considered from the meso-level of the organizations. Eleven qualitative guided interviews with communicators show that while in many cases the positioning of a company is based on catalogues of decisions and criteria, it is usually carried out in an ad hoc manner. Above all, external factors, such as time or active demands from stakeholders, as well as internal factors, such as perceived positioning pressure, have an impact on a company's public statement. Regarding potential future crisis cases, each communicative challenge is seen as an opportunity for learning and further development. In summary, the article shows that dealing with an issue or crisis – depending on the perspective – such as the Russia-Ukraine war, cannot be carried out according to generally valid criteria, but must always be configured individually to the respective case and the affectedness of the company. The study expands the current state of research by taking a deeper look at the underlying processes of companies' positioning in crisis situations. At the same time, it opens possibilities for further research.

Keywords: Corporate Communication, Corporate Positioning, Corporate Political Advocacy, Crisis Communication, Russia-Ukraine war

Introduction

Pandemics, civil wars, culture wars – numerous crises have shaken the world over the past years. One of the most recent examples is the Russia-Ukraine war, which started on 24 February 2022 with Russia's attack on Ukraine and is still ongoing, as of summer 2023. Communicators of companies all over the world were suddenly faced with the challenge of adequately taking a public stance concerning their political views, values, and business operations with or within the two countries.

The increasing number of socio-political events as well as global meta-trends such as globalization, mediatization and polarization illustrate the necessity of determined communication based on crisis-proven decision-making principles by companies. Additionally, these global events and trends highlight the relevance of public trust for globally operating companies, which can significantly influence the communication on the micro as well as on the meso-level. However, the meta-trends are also transforming communication at the macro level. With the increasing importance of the general public's trust, it becomes clear that there is a growing necessity and demand for adequate issue management and crisis communication. Recently, corporations have experienced a significant loss of trust from the public (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022): This has a considerable impact on the stability of society. There is also a general agreement that companies still have a lot of catching up to do when it comes to addressing socio-political issues (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022, p. 32). Nonetheless, a significant increase in the number of companies positioning themselves on a wide range of issues has already been observed over the past few years (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021, p. 1). These positioning efforts were mostly related to topics of high emotionality, such as political developments, equal rights, or anti-racism. Thus, for companies, a public positioning concerning socio-political issues is a “[...] challenging economic and communicative balancing act [...]” in which success and failure lie closely together (JP I Kom, 2018).

Despite all this, the positioning of companies on specific political topics and issues and its underlying internal processes have, so far, only been examined briefly in academia. This is particularly true regarding the Russia-Ukraine war due to its high topicality. For this reason, this study examines the public stance of large German companies on the Russia-Ukraine war based on the theoretical background of issue management and organizational advocacy. Furthermore, the aim is to provide insights for future communicative positioning regarding other upcoming issues and crises that companies will face.

Issues Management: Dealing with Uncertainty and Risks

In times of a global and strongly networked media society, companies as social actors are under constant critical observation of the public and are confronted with a multitude of different topics and concerns by their stakeholders (Ingenhoff, Borner & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 14). Considering that today not only political actors but also companies can influence public opinion (Ingenhoff & Röttger, 2008, p. 325), it is necessary to identify and evaluate relevant socio-political issues and to take a position towards them (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 14). Issues management is a concept which can support companies in meeting these challenges and gives them the opportunity to anticipate relevant topics of public discourse and to act with foresight. It goes back to W. Howard Chase, who developed issues management in the 1970s as a PR consultant to protect his clients from damaging entanglements in social conflicts (Lütgens, 2015, p. 773).

About Issues and Issue Arenas

Ingenhoff, Borner and Zerfass (2020) define issues as socio-critical topics that are of public interest and are therefore discussed in mass media or social media (S. 1). As potential irritants of public debates, issues can trigger conflicts between companies, their environment, and stakeholders, which can potentially restrict companies' ability to act (Wiedemann & Ries, 2014, p. 495). This is also described by Lütgens (2015), who describes several characteristics of issues. According to him, one of them

is that issues arise in the relationship between a company and groups of other actors confronting it, where both sides hold different opinions and thus conflict potential arises (Lütgens, 2015, p. 775).

Closely linked to the term *issue* is the concept of *issue arenas*. Vos, Schoemaker and Luoma-aho (2014) understand issue arenas as arenas which focus on the public debate about a specific issue between different actors in traditional and virtual media (p. 3). According to them, an issue arena is not related to the company or other actors, but on the issue itself. The use of the term *arena* also reflects the fact that issues contain conflict potential and actors representing different points of view compete against each other (Vos, Schoemaker & Luoma-aho, 2014, p. 3).

The Issues Management Process

According to Lütgens (2015), issues management is a systematic management process (p. 773), with which companies can optimally recognise which issues they will be confronted with in the future at an early stage and how critical these can potentially become for their own reputation (Wiedemann & Ries, 2014). Laying the groundwork for these issues prematurely also opens up the possibility for companies to not only prepare for conflictual and potentially reputation-damaging issues out of self-preservation, but to turn them into opportunities leading to an increase in legitimacy and reputation in the eyes of the public (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 8). In the literature, the connection between issues management and the corporate management of crises is emphasized. Jaques (2010) argues that companies should focus more on anticipating crises than on managing crises which have already arisen (p. 474). Accordingly, issues management, if implemented correctly, can serve as an effective tool for crisis prevention (Jaques, 2010, p. 474).

Since this study addresses the internal decision-making processes of companies in dealing with the Russia-Ukraine war as a concrete issue, the issues management process of Lütgens (2015) can be applied. The process includes the identification of issues (p. 780), their evaluation and

prioritization (p. 783), an analysis of the selected issues as well as a decision on the strategy to be chosen in dealing with the issues (p. 785). Furthermore, it comprises the planning and implementation of concrete actions by the company considering the case (p. 786) as well as an assessment and evaluation (p. 787). Since one of the objectives is to find out which decision-making units and persons are responsible for managing a specific issue in companies, it is important not only to describe the process, but also to find out who is responsible for its implementation, since this is usually not solely the responsibility of communication departments. For this very reason, it seems important to prevent internal company disputes about competences as far as possible and, for example, to contribute to the creation of a central department that coordinates the individual steps of the issues management process (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 14). All these aspects are to be captured by the first research question.

RQ1: What decision-making and coordination processes substantiated the positioning regarding the Russia-Ukraine war?

Why Companies Take a Stance Towards Socio-Political Issues

To shed light on the reasons for why companies enter issue arenas and on the importance of applying the issue management process in an appropriate manner, a closer look at the concepts *Social License to Operate (SLO)* and *legitimacy* held by corporations is inevitable (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 8). SLO describes the degree to which a corporation is compelled to live up to societal norms and refrain from behaviors that societies (or powerful individuals within them) see as unacceptable, regardless of them being codified in law (Gunningham, 2004, S. 307). The social license is therefore a significant factor that also influences *corporate behavior* (Gunningham, 2004, S. 309). Mercer-Mapstone, Rifkin, Moffat und Louis (2017) point at the importance of dialogue with stakeholders to both obtain and maintain SLO (p. 137). Following this, companies see themselves exposed to an increasing pressure (hereinafter referred to as positioning pressure) to monitor their political environment, to enter issue arenas and to take a stance on socio-

political issues to ensure not only their SLO, but also their legitimacy (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 1, 5). According to various socially created systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions, legitimacy is the broad belief or assumption that an entity's activities are preferable, legitimate, or acceptable (Suchman, 1994, S. 574). Legitimacy thus serves as the basis for a company's actions and existence.

As social issues, values and expectations towards companies change, companies have no choice but to constantly balance their own actions with the expectations of stakeholders (Yim, 2021, p. 62). If the two differ too much, a so-called legitimacy gap may appear (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288). On the one hand, this gap influences the ability of an organization to speak out on issues and on the other hand, its power, and resources (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288). Consequently, a company's positioning on socio-political issues is not only directed at the organization's existing stakeholders but can also attract new stakeholders (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288), who attribute legitimacy to the company. However, in terms of SLO and legitimacy, the goal of companies cannot be to meet all stakeholder needs. It is rather necessary to focus on the most relevant target groups of the company including their values and convictions and to strengthen the corresponding relationships (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 4). Concerning socio-political issues, the latter can be achieved by following the concept of advocacy and different related approaches, which gain importance when companies take a stance in the public discourse.

Applying different advocacy concepts

Browning et al. (2020) define *organizational advocacy* as taking a stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue, with the risk of alienating stakeholders and, at the same time, the opportunity to signal to other stakeholders what values and commitment the parties share (p. 1030). Both reactions can impact the achievement of organizational goals (p. 3) and the financial performance of the company (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 15).

In the context of organizational advocacy, however, it does not matter whether the sociopolitical issue is relevant to the operational business of the organization or not (Browning et al., 2020, p. 1030). Thus, the motives for positioning can be both normative and instrumental (Browning et al., 2020, p. 1030) and be reflected in the action concepts of corporate political advocacy, political corporate social responsibility (political CSR), and corporate political activity.

Corporate political advocacy refers to expressing or demonstrating public support for specific people, organizations, or principles with the intention of encouraging others to do the same (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, S. 200). In this sense, taking a stance on a socio-political issue by a company is understood as a political commitment that goes beyond the company's immediate, economic interests and business activities (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 6; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, S. 200). This emphasizes the company's understanding of values in terms of SLO and promotes the position taken regarding third parties (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 6; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, S. 200). This effect is most attainable if companies' actions and messages are consistent, plausible, and authentic, as well as rather reactive than proactive (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, pp. 6, 8). Thus, companies should primarily focus on third-party issues and positions, and enter pre-existing issue arenas rather than creating them themselves (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 8). The latter enables them to counteract potential normative concerns of stakeholders regarding the companies' political statements (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 8).

Corporate political activity places the company at the center of attention (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 5). The aim is to use corporate political activities to increase the value of the company and at the same time to achieve specific business objectives (Hillman, Keim & Schuler, 2004, p. 847). With its positioning, the company thus intends to influence a political decision in a favorable manner (Hillman et al., 2004, p. 847). Hence, increasing the value of the company is a main motivator for a company to enter an issue arena (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 5).

Thus, issues management in the context of corporate political activity is seen as instrumental, where legitimacy and the SLO are gained through business success (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 5). Nevertheless, corporate political activity and corporate political advocacy are linked by the interest of the company to influence politics and the focus on power- or pressure-based political activities albeit driven by different intentions.

Political CSR adds the political component to the *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)* approach. Following this approach, SLO is understood as the outcome of inclusive and holistic deliberation and communication processes to balance stakeholder interests (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 5; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, pp. 204-205). Thus, it is a form of (global) dialogic governance wherein companies play an active role in regulating market transactions and seeking to influence socio-political situations for the better (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 6).

Political CSR and corporate political advocacy unite the positioning on issues in the public sphere beyond economic interests (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 204). However, both activities are based on a different understanding of legitimacy. As for Political CSR, stakeholder dialogues are at the core and are considered the most important mechanism for weighing and balancing competing stakeholder claims (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 204). At the same time, they serve as the basis for creating legitimacy (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 204). In contrast, corporate political advocacy implies that a position is taken vigorously and publicly without gaining its legitimacy in comprehensive stakeholder discussions beforehand (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 204).

The discussion of the issue management processes and the advocacy concepts, implying the underlying terms of SLO and legitimacy, brings up the question whether and especially how these concepts have been applied by German companies concerning their positioning towards the Russia-Ukraine war. This question, in turn, requires consideration of the extent to which the topic has been covered in recent research.

State of Research

Regarding previous research on this study's interest, there have only been a few other studies that elaborate on the topic so far, also due to the high topicality of the crisis. However, a study by Pajuste and Toniolo (2022) provides comprehensive insights. The authors analyzed the reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war of companies belonging to the S&P500¹ and STOXX600² indices and examined whether managers decided mostly on ethical and moral or other grounds to withdraw from Russia – with special focus on the influence of stakeholder pressure.

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that corporate leaders tend to promote stakeholder interests when they face potential reputational damage that could affect shareholder wealth, or when it appears to be a good marketing move. Following this, the analysis supports and reinforces the view that stakeholder pressure can successfully influence the corporate positioning or decision making to pursue certain social goals and not only profits. Nevertheless, the research shows that firms which quickly announced their withdrawal from Russia only had little revenue exposure to the country. Following this, the findings underline that especially the size of the companies matter in decision making: Stakeholder pressure on the management can be an important and effective factor in achieving a socially desirable outcome, but tends to focus on large, high-profile companies. Meanwhile, smaller market participants are left free to operate without meaningful managerial constraint. Additionally, Pajuste and Tonioli find evidence that the decision to withdraw from Russia is significantly and positively associated with the boycott of campaigns. This matches the matter of research by Jungblut and Johnen (2021), who conducted a study to shed light on the consumers' approval or disapproval regarding the general actions taken by companies in political issues. Their

¹ The S&P 500 is a stock index comprising the shares of 500 of the largest listed US companies. The S&P 500 is weighted by market capitalization and is one of the most widely followed stock indices in the world.

² The STOXX Europe 600 or STOXX 600 is an equity index of the 600 largest European companies. It is published by STOXX Limited, a Swiss subsidiary of Deutsche Börse AG.

results suggest that boycotting occurs more often than boycotting. Consumers' political interest and category involvement, which mediates the association between satisfaction and purchase intention, thereby function as moderating variables. Thus, the authors describe political brand communication as a strategy which implies certain risks and stakeholder pressures and can impact the legitimacy and SLO that companies gain from their stakeholders.

Another research approach is provided by Asemah-Ibrahim, Nwaoboli and Asemah (2022) with their study on the use of CSR activities by multi-national companies in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. The results show that companies used CSR activities to support Ukraine, but there is no focus on other communication activities or concrete positionings. An interdisciplinary contribution by Hübner (2022) focuses on a business ethics approach regarding the engagement of companies in times of war, where the author also refers to the Russia-Ukraine war. Again, there is a lack of focus on the communicative positioning and the underlying basis for decision-making. Further research that deals with the positioning of German companies on socio-political issues in general is provided by the study by Blenninger et al. (2022). However, it makes no reference to the Russia-Ukraine war. The relevance of a prevailing positioning pressure and the different ways for companies to deal with it is thereby highlighted and also important for the research subject. Derived from this, influencing factors concerning the companies' behavior and positioning are examined with the second research question.

RQ2: To what extent did a perceived pressure influence the decision of companies to take a stance on and/or to take action concerning the Russia-Ukraine war?

Research Guiding Question and Methodical Approach

As part of a globally oriented economic system, a greatly increased media presence and social visibility, companies are increasingly forced to adapt their internal processes and patterns of action to be able to cope with new

challenges (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 1; Wiedemann & Ries 2014, p. 494). In order to ensure the long-term survival and economic success of an organization in such an environment, as well as the acceptance of its own activities by stakeholders, it is indispensable for companies to continuously prove themselves as legitimate social actors and the compatibility of their actions with social norms. Therefore, companies must both recognize and accordingly fulfil social needs beyond legal regulations and own interests (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). In doing so, companies enter the socio-political discourse and issues arenas and are pressured to take a public stand.

Against this backdrop and in conjunction with the current global political crisis, the research interest for this paper has emerged including the following research guiding question:

RQ: What is the basis for decision-making by large German companies with regard to the Russia-Ukraine war and what insights can be gained for future communicative positioning from this?

In addition to this guiding question and the two subordinated research questions already named, the third research question explores the conclusions drawn by companies from the crisis:

RQ3: To what extent does experiential learning influence deliberations to continue to speak out and/or take action on policy issues in the future?

The method of qualitative guided interviews was used to investigate the central questions of this study. The interviews were conducted with 11 communication experts from large companies that are active in various sectors. The companies in the sample have their headquarters in Germany, but also operate on a global scale. This method enables an explorative approach to the public communication of an attitude and positioning of businesses.

The sample of the survey is based on the ranking ‘The Top 500 - Germany’s Largest Corporations’ of the German newspaper ‘WELT’

(Gneuss & Lehmann, 2022), which lists the 500 largest companies in Germany and also represents the statistical parent population of this survey (N = 500). The population was then narrowed down again using three criteria: Turnover strength, activity in the B2C market, and issuing a public statement concerning the Russia-Ukraine war. The final sample comprised 61 companies, 11 of which agreed to be interviewed. A detailed representation of the sample, including economic sectors and job titles can be found in table 1. The interviews took place over a period of six weeks from December 2022 to February 2023.

To answer the research questions, an operationalization was done with an interview guide. All research questions were addressed with a thematic block within the questionnaire and thus referred to concrete ways of coordinating rules of action (RQ1), influencing factors regarding positioning (RQ2) as well as learnings from the situation for future measures (RQ3). After the interview was conducted, transcription and a subsequent content-structuring qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2022) was carried out, applying the analysis software tool MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software, 2023). The analysis is based on a category system that was deductively derived from the research questions and the interview guide in a first step and inductively expanded in a second step, in accordance with the explorative approach of the work.

Table 1

Overview of the companies, their positioning, and the job titles of the interviewees

Industry	Declaration of solidarity / condemnation of the war	Donations (money / goods)	Support for refugees	Business- and goods-related	Holistic cessation of business with / in Russia	Partially cessation of business with / in Russia	Cessation of advertising in Russia	Job description of interviewees
Automobile	x	x	x		x			Head of Integrity and Sustainability Communications, Group Communications
Telecommunication	x	x	x	x		x	x	Head of Corporate Communications
Technology	x	x			x			Regional Spokesperson, northern Germany
Health and agriculture	x	x	x	x				Head of Communications
Transport and logistics	x	x	x		x			Head of Group Communication
Energy	x	x	x			x		Head of Corporate Relations
Hygiene articles	x	x						Vice President Corporate Communications & Government Relations
Precision mechanics and optics	x	x				x		Head of Communications
Groceries	x	x		x			x	Global Head of Corporate Communications
Agricultural technology	x	x	x					Head of Public Affairs
Software	x	x		x				Communications Manager

Findings

This research paper aims to investigate the communicative positioning of large companies in times of crisis as a fundamental act of defiance for their communicators. In the following, the results of the investigation will be presented.

Different Approaches – Individual Outcomes

Fundamental for answering the first research question is that a large majority of the respondents generally perceived the war as a crisis for themselves and their companies. The experts reported that, in response to the outbreak of the war, crisis committees and crisis teams were convened to develop measures and responses. These teams comprise employees from various departments, including communications, public affairs, sales, procurement, production, logistics, human resources, security, and sustainability. Additionally, the teams follow internal guidelines for issue management and the dealing with crisis situations. These guidelines are formulated to ensure that the company's values are upheld even under special circumstances. Nevertheless, there are no concrete and detailed regulations or pre-formulated statements provided for different issue and crisis scenarios, as each of them is unique.

However, there are differences in the specific processes for assembling crisis teams: Some companies reported having used a bottom-up process, while others preferred a top-down approach. The latter is predominantly adopted by internationally operating companies, which initially established a central crisis team. This central team coordinates the crisis communication for the whole organization by leading individual crisis teams on national level. These teams are working closely together, which is described as a particular challenge. As reported by the interviewees, local communicators play a crucial role as sources of information and on-site crisis managers. Consequently, they are empowered with decision-making authority to enable swift responses.

Since the Russia-Ukraine war is framed differently in the mass media, depending on the country they operate in, companies face the challenge to communicate adequately. This poses additional difficulties, which affect local communication. Employees in Poland and the Czech Republic, for example, are calling for a hard line against Russia. In China, conversely, a position against Russia is criticized. Regardless of the varying conditions and sizes of the companies, it can be concluded that final decisions regarding crisis management are made at a high management level. Occasionally, the executive board is directly involved, while in other cases, they are informed, but the decision-making authority is up to the communication department. Experience gained from previous crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is reported to be particularly helpful in the coordination and decision-making processes described. The similarity between the pandemic and the war is emphasized, as both crises primarily concern the well-being of the company's employees. This social and humanitarian approach is predominantly cited as the basis for companies' positioning. One respondent summarizes: "That was actually the main reason for our communication, yes. We were driven by the well-being of our employees, their families, and their children for a long time." Humanitarian reasons are also mentioned as arguments against withdrawing business from Russia. For example, it is referred to the responsibility towards local employees and customers in Russia, whom companies do not want to and cannot abandon. Economic reasons are also listed as motivations for taking a position, comprising the impact of the war on supply chains and the effects of sanctions against Russia, which prompted companies to act.

Pressure from the Outside

Regarding the second research question, several factors need to be considered, with time being one important aspect. Nearly all respondents state that a company must quickly react and position itself during a crisis. The definition of 'quickly' varies from reacting immediately on the same day to responding to requests about the reaction and further actions of the

company within several days. Since the outbreak of the war, companies have been receiving numerous requests from the media and their representatives. These requests significantly increase depending on three criteria: the company's level of business involvement in Russia and Ukraine, political decisions and sanctions imposed that affect the company's business and industry as well as the general development of the war. The media enquiries require many resources from the communicators, who therefore mainly focus on their own company. Thus, they give only little attention to the actions of competitors when positioning themselves. One respondent succinctly puts it as follows: "So in a situation where human lives are at stake, we neither have the time nor the desire to see what others are doing. It is not relevant."

However, legislators may be an exception: Their actions are closely observed by affected companies, particularly in terms of the introduction and expansion of sanctions against Russia. If a competitor subsequently decides to withdraw its business from Russia, this reinforces the decision of one's own company to have done so or to do the same in the future.

Further requests are put forward by employees, customers, and investors who expect to be informed about the company's future actions or comment on the current actions.

In terms of content, the requests demand more information on the effects the war has on the company and the actions taken by the organization. In this regard, employees are particularly critical towards their employers. One respondent states: "There was clear pressure to take a stance, especially from employees in Poland who felt that our wording was too soft." Similar requests were submitted by media representatives, using social media, and traditional media, such as email or phone. Consequently, the respondents report that the number of inquiries to be answered by companies has significantly increased compared to the time before the war, which puts additional pressure on the employees in the communication departments.

Further difficulties brought forward by the communication experts encompass the sensitivity of the topic and the constantly changing information landscape, leading to the need to correct or modify statements made only a few days earlier. Moreover, the companies received many emotional comments that needed to be addressed at short notice, especially via social media. In summary, the combination of these factors results in a communicative pressure on the surveyed companies during the Russian-Ukraine war.

Key Takeaways for Potential Future Crises

Most of the respondents report a general gain in experience, which may help them react appropriately to future crises. The interviewees emphasize the process-oriented learnings that will have a positive impact in the future. Furthermore, it is recognized that more expertise should be developed for crisis situations due to the advantages. This is achieved through additional staff or targeted exercises. Additionally, communication departments are expected to work together more closely with other departments in order to promote a mutual understanding and improve collaboration in times of crisis.

Another learning put forward by the experts is that in retrospect, the focus on internal employees was the right decision and will be followed again in the future. The employees build the core of the company and their safety and well-being are of utmost importance in such crisis situations. Similarly, it is noted that a great deal of positive commitment and willingness to overcome the crisis was perceived within the interviewed companies. Consequently, employee participation is intended to be further encouraged in the future. Moreover, it is predicted by the experts that companies will no longer be able to remain detached from societal issues in the future. They expect that there will be a need to engage more intensively with socio-cultural topics. A consistently higher pace of communication is observed, necessitating situational, agile, and swift responses to changing circumstances in the future.

Overall, this war is considered a too specific issue to draw general conclusions for defining future recommendations for corporate positionings. Therefore, existing guidelines remain in place. The individuality of the crisis is also the reason why the communicative measures regarding the war were not explicitly evaluated by most of the companies. Other reasons include the focus on employees and crisis management. Despite the lack of evaluation, many of the respondents rate their own crisis response positively. They are highly satisfied with their own communication and handling of the challenging situation. Two respondents commented on their own actions: “Absolutely well-executed’ and ‘Well, we would actually do the same thing one-to-one in a comparable situation.”

However, this very positive self-assessment was perceived with mixed feedback in the companies’ environment. All respondents experienced both positive and negative reactions to their own communicative actions, which became visible through the reactions toward the corporate behavior via social media and internal channels. Despite such cases, the handling of the situation was evaluated positively in retrospect.

Discussion

The presented findings are further discussed to shed light on the implications they entail for future research and the dealing with issues and crises on behalf of companies.

Voting Processes and Foundations for Communicative Positioning

As highly critical issues, crises put companies under temporal and content-related pressure, blurring the line between issue management and crisis communication (Lütgens, 2015, p. 780). This is also reflected in the results of the conducted research, as most companies evaluated the Russia-Ukraine war as a crisis, and crisis communication or crisis management was mentioned in interviews at several points. However, efforts to anticipate crises instead of just dealing with existing ones (Jaques, 2010, p. 474) were not reflected. Many companies only started considering their

position on the matter immediately after the outbreak of the war. The implementation of the first steps of the process described by Lütgens (2015), issue identification and prioritization (p. 781), is only partially reflected in practice. It needs to be critically questioned to what extent a more precise monitoring of issues and potential crises and an earlier preparation for all eventualities could benefit companies in terms of the idealized issue management process. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that the examined case of the Russia-Ukraine war is a highly exceptional and a dynamic event that is hardly comparable to other events companies have faced in the past. It is therefore worth questioning whether the normative issue management process provides a universally applicable solution for dealing with such events, or if it is primarily applicable to routine and less critical issues in practice.

The characteristic collaboration of different organizational functions in the process becomes clear in the study (Lütgens, 2015, p. 791). Companies formed crisis teams consisting of various departments, thus creating an interface between corporate communication and other functions. However, it must be questioned to what extent these crisis teams can be considered a central department that coordinates the individual steps of the issue management process, as described by Ingenhoff et al. (2020, p. 14), since at least the first two steps of the process were not carried out by them. Nevertheless, the formation of crisis teams successfully prevents competency disputes. This is particularly true for the broad involvement and consideration of the opinions and demands of employees from individual Eastern European countries, who thus have an influence on the company's positioning. Although these insights only pertain to dealing with a specific issue, they could imply that the creation of cross-functional teams and collaboration across different departments and locations is a general recipe for success in handling issues for internationally operating companies. This way, a wide range of opinions and a high input of information are generated, and employee motivation is strengthened through participation.

Furthermore, one case demonstrated the successful delegation of decision-making authority to individual country subsidiaries and an international collaboration characterized by high mutual trust. This highlights both the positive effects of effective leadership and constructive corporate culture, which impact daily cooperation and issue management. It is also associated with the successful broad involvement of employees from different hierarchical levels, which, however, does not occur in all companies and therefore needs to be examined more closely. On the one hand, a bottom-up process became evident in many cases, where lower-level departments or individual country subsidiaries did preparatory work and prepared information, indicating a weak link between the issue management process and hierarchical levels. On the other hand, the final decisions regarding positioning were mostly made at the board or top management level, which contradicts this point. However, it can be assumed that important decisions during crises will still be made at higher management levels. For the formation of crisis teams, a top-down process can ensure that decisions are directly legitimized, and coordination is thus shortened, which is in line with efficient and rapid issue management.

Clearly defined voting processes and reliable anticipation of emerging issues or crises are essential for companies. While guidelines and internal protocols are available in most companies and have already been used in issue management processes in the past, they cannot be directly applied to specific crises such as the Russia-Ukraine war due to their general nature. This is reasonable due to the uniqueness and novelty of the situation. However, it is also necessary to consider how guidelines or instructions for crisis management can be designed to be both universally applicable and adaptable to specific situations. This could ensure that companies do not have to react purely situational to events such as the outbreak of war but can also handle novel situations with proven processes.

Influence Potential of Perceived Positioning Pressure

In terms of the demands from stakeholders to take a position on the war, it became clear that companies generally perceived some form of pressure.

Stakeholders such as employees, journalists, and customers were actively approaching the companies. The fact that this positioning pressure arises as a result of macroeconomic meta-trends (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 1) becomes evident in the context of this study. Companies see themselves as actors who must engage in communication with their global environment (Sriramesh, 2008, p. 421). This becomes particularly apparent when their international activities, including locations and employees in Russia, Ukraine, or neighboring countries, encounter different expectations towards the company, resulting in pressure.

This positioning pressure can be described with two aspects: the observation of stakeholders by the companies and the direct demands placed on the company by stakeholders regarding positioning. The mere observation of stakeholders alone does not yet constitute a significant pressure factor for most companies. This is especially true for the stakeholder group of competitors. In situations like the Russia-Ukraine war, companies prioritize dealing with their own challenges, mainly because of limited time to react during crises, rather than observing how competitors behave. Instead, companies orient themselves towards political actors and government regulations, particularly since sanctions that have been imposed impact the closure of locations in Russia. Therefore, the observation of stakeholders primarily exerts strong influence through regulatory and legally binding requirements, while other factors influencing positioning have less weight for the time being.

In terms of the demands placed directly on companies by stakeholders, it can be generally noted that not all companies face such demands and feel pressured by them. For many companies, based on their experience from previous crises, it is expected that stakeholders anticipate a position even without actively demanding it. However, it is important to highlight the positioning pressure that arises from employees in various countries within internationally operating companies. An issue like Russia's attack on Ukraine is evaluated differently depending on the companies' locations. As a result, stakeholders' expectations regarding appropriate

positioning by the company, the company's behavior, or its labelling of the war can vary. The conflicting ideas and opinions of different stakeholders also reflect societal meta-trends such as societal polarization, which forces companies to carefully consider their stance. However, the varying expectations of stakeholders can pose potential problems for companies when making decisions about positioning. Similar to the preceding explanations, these problems could be addressed through better preparation and analysis. This includes a detailed and early observation of all relevant stakeholders. Companies often focus primarily on political demands and the economic impact of the crisis, which is understandable. However, it is also important to consider 'softer' factors, such as the sentiments of their own employees in different countries, which some companies tend to address belatedly. A more precise adherence to the issue management process could help alleviate this. It would also facilitate dealing with two other pressure-building aspects: time and the mediated environment in which companies operate. Rapid responsiveness is a factor that puts pressure on most companies in terms of positioning. In addition to the expectations of their stakeholders, there is a general public expectation for companies to respond quickly and appropriately to relevant issues. For these reasons, it appears essential to understand the expectations of all actors early on.

In terms of answering the second research question, it can be concluded that perceived positioning pressure generally influences a company's positioning. However, this pressure is composed of various internal and external factors and enhances companies' awareness of relevant issues. Stakeholder pressure is an influencing factor but not the sole trigger for positioning by companies, as some would have done so regardless. By actively listening, however, the pressure can be used to find the right positioning and thereby contribute to the success of the company's communication.

Experience as Influencing Factor on Future Positioning

Communication professionals in companies have generally observed that societal developments affect individual organizations and their communication during the Russia-Ukraine war. Time and speed are attributed with a high level of importance in this regard. However, it is predominantly found that the evaluation of their own positioning plays a very minor role for companies. This contradicts the sixth step of the issue management process, which calls for outcome evaluation and process evaluation. Companies justify this by citing the uniqueness of the situation and the priority of other tasks, such as ensuring the safety of their own employees in war-affected areas. Thus, guidelines are not developed or changed based on the current crisis. Therefore, it can be assumed that communication surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war will not have far-reaching implications for how companies handle other socio-political issues in the future, as they will continue to be considered as individual and specific cases.

The perceived feedback from the company's environment is diverse and includes both positive and negative responses from various stakeholders. The fact that different perspectives on the war emerge within an increasingly polarized society and are accordingly brought to the attention of companies aligns with occurring meta-trends such as polarization and politicization. It is striking that most of the respondents state that they have dealt with the crisis in a predominantly positive way. Therefore, it is worth questioning to what extent there was a bias tendency to give oneself and one's own team a positive assessment. This is especially relevant since only little evaluation took place and that the self-assessment is therefore more likely to be subjective than fact based.

However, it should be mentioned that some experts also critically evaluated their own work, admitted mistakes, and made revisions. Therefore, it cannot be said that all companies only praised their own positioning. Here, the individuality of different companies in dealing with the crisis is evident as well. While some companies focus on political

CSR, prioritizing the comprehensive engagement and satisfaction of their stakeholders, others adopt an approach based on corporate political advocacy, advocating for their values and ideals decisively and intuitively. Corporate political activity is improbable to have been applied extensively and may have had only minor implications regarding the handling and interpretation of sanctions. The findings from the study suggest that companies are aware of their responsibility towards their stakeholders (including their SLO) and the need to publicly represent them. It is unlikely to be possible to react to similar political issues completely neutrally and without a stance. However, the factor of a company's involvement in an issue plays a significant role, both in terms of business relationships in the crisis area and the impact on the employees. When these circumstances are present, it appears inevitable for a company to take a stance publicly.

Limitations

In retrospect, the present study contributes new insights regarding the context of research on the topic of positioning companies in socio-political events. However, the acquisition of interviewees was hampered by the fact that the topic under consideration is not completed and is also fraught with conflict. Regarding the interviewees, it should be noted that, depending on their individual position within the company, some of them were not able to give their full opinion on the topic in question, either due to the topic's actuality or their own expertise.

Furthermore, although the chosen method enabled an explorative approach to the topic with detailed insights into the underlying processes of a positioning of the interviewed companies, the interview situation was artificially created, and the results might have been unintentionally influenced by the interviewers. This is due to the chosen reactive procedure in which the interviewee reacts to the interviewer and gives corresponding answers (Brosius, Haas & Koschel, 2016, p. 123). Accordingly, as with other empirical data collection, it cannot be guaranteed that the answers given correspond to the truth, as there is

always a certain degree of subjectivity. Furthermore, phenomena such as the so called looking good tendency or social desirability cannot be ruled out, as people often aim to convey a good impression about themselves or their company. It is also fundamentally problematic to evaluate measures that have been implemented in an unbiased and objective manner. These phenomena were also observed in the present research project.

There are also limitations on the side of the researchers in the present study. For example, it must be noted that so-called interviewer effects (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 127) can significantly influence the results. Social situations in which interaction takes place between two parties bear various effects. For example, responses can be influenced by the phenomenon of ‘social desirability’, among other factors. Biases can also occur in the subsequent evaluation and analysis of the research results due to potential subjectivity on the part of the researchers (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 16f.) – despite preventive measures such as following the generally applicable coding guide.

Regarding the acquisition of companies and interview partners, several challenges were faced. Since the topic under consideration is both current and conflictual, many companies did not agree to an interview. On the one hand, they did not want to provide insights into their internal processes, on the other hand, they did not want to comment on the political and sensitive topic of the Russia-Ukraine war. In addition, the time frame in which the acquisition took place (December 2022) proved to be unfavorable, as many potential interviewees were either already on Christmas holiday or were busy with other company-related tasks that had to be completed before the end of the year. With respect to the interviewees, it should also be noted that, depending on their individual position or hierarchical level within the company, some of them were not able to express themselves fully on the topic in question. Limitations of the study can also be attributed to the topicality of the entire issue: Since the Russia-Ukraine war is a still ongoing crisis, the experts were not yet able to make any generally valid statements on certain processes and,

above all, on the evaluation of the procedure. In addition, it is always difficult to evaluate measures that have been implemented in an unbiased manner.

Another limitation was the comparability of the results. On the one hand, the companies surveyed can only be compared with each other to a limited extent as they belong to different sectors. Depending on the sector and the structure of the company, the economic and social impact the war shed on the company varied, which made general comparability difficult. On the other hand, strong discrepancies regarding the positioning procedures became apparent when a business was heavily dependent on its international parent corporation and, as a result, decisions were not made in Germany.

A higher comparability could have been ensured by a differentiated formation of the sample, including companies from the same sectors and with similar economic and social impacts. This means, for example, that only companies should have been surveyed whose positioning is not based on the economic effect of the Russia-Ukraine war, but purely on social and societal reasons. In retrospect, it also became clear that there was no questioning of economically affected companies as to whether they would also have positioned themselves if it had not been necessary for economic reasons. This question and the responses to it would have been insightful for the in-depth classification of the positioning.

Finally, there are also limitations regarding the theoretical basis of the study in connection with the topic of the Russia-Ukraine war and the previously criticized composition of the sample. The complexity of the topic and the multi-layered economic and social concerns and motivations of the companies make it difficult to clearly refer to the concepts of corporate political advocacy, political CSR and corporate political activity and thus to clearly delineate and compare the positioning.

Conclusion

This study examined the public positioning of large German companies regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Besides the basis of decision making on which the statements were developed, the study also focused on insights for future communicative measures. Concerning the positioning process, a differentiation emerges regarding the way in which companies take a stand. Also, the decision-making processes behind such a positioning usually remain hidden for stakeholders and, together with the public statements, belong to issue management according to Lütgens (2015, p. 791).

Based on this study's findings, it can be generalized that crises are too individual for prefabricated templates to be universally applied to all cases. Mostly, general prescriptions for action serve as helpful orientation. However, these basic documents highly vary from company to company in terms of depth and length – precise strategic plans or an application of the scenario technique in advance were rarely used. Nevertheless, to be able to manage the crisis, crisis teams were often formed within the companies, which did not only consist of communicators but were put together across departments.

Furthermore, the given empirical study shows that in the context of socio-political crises and issues, companies are always confronted with a dichotomy. On the one hand, economic factors must be considered, based on the respective crisis, which have the potential to significantly influence the liquidity or the commercial actions of the company. On the other hand, the focus must always be on the common good, including the well-being of the employees, the stakeholders, and the public. In this context, the human factor stands first and foremost. Even before reflecting on communicative measures, the safety of affected persons and especially employees must be ensured. For future learnings, it is common practice that previous experiences are incorporated into the communicative handling of crises. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, it became apparent that additional staff needed to be recruited for crisis

communication and that there was a need for deeper interdepartmental cooperation in some companies.

To implement these findings in the future, a constant evaluation of previous crisis communication is indispensable, also in the sense of self-reflection. What matters is that the totality of stakeholders cannot be satisfied equally. Here, references to the concepts of political CSR and corporate political advocacy are evident (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 6; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 205). In contrast, the focus is rather on representing the company's values and aligning communication with them, even if this can lead to alienating some stakeholders. The time factor is also significant: Current times are so fast-moving that companies must always adapt flexibly to new requirements and conditions. It is important to question the extent to which standard processes and an all-encompassing stakeholder approach are useful and feasible in the event of such crises. Regarding the perceived positioning pressure from the stakeholders and the actual positioning of a company, a variance in relation to the companies surveyed became apparent. In the case of the present survey, three groups could be identified within the sample: Companies that made a statement even without being economically affected, companies that made a positioning or adjusted existing ones due to active demands from stakeholders, as well as companies that positioned themselves rather neutrally and only on demand. When conducting the study, it also became evident that many of the surveyed companies were not (yet) focusing on an evaluation of their previous crisis management and communication in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war. On the one hand, this is because the war is still present. On the other hand, companies saw no necessity for an evaluation. However, for future potential crises that may become relevant for the companies, as previous crises can be seen as an opportunity for self-reflection. The Russia-Ukraine war is not the last crisis that requires a communicative positioning – whether they take a stance is up to the companies themselves. The decision of a positioning requires expertise within the company. While in some cases this expertise already exists, others have highlighted its necessity.

This research paper cannot fully shed light on the positioning processes of companies in times of crisis. Nevertheless, it shows the importance and necessity of adequate communication measures. For this reason, further research is desirable, for example to take a closer look at the B2C sector, to highlight possible differences between varying economic sectors or to examine the changing roles of communicators. A further differentiation of the question could be made by additionally comparing small and medium-sized enterprises with large companies in order to find out whether the focus of positioning is set differently.

In summary, the constant changes in the world, including all meta-trends, bring complex requirements for companies to which the communication departments must adapt. As active and influential players in the social fabric, companies are required to apply and adequately implement concepts such as political CSR and corporate political advocacy. Communication must be fast and to the point to ensure economic survival. However, no matter how relevant the economic perspective seems, the welfare of affected colleagues and others must always be of highest priority.

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Internal Sustainability Communication and the Influence on Corporate Culture

A Qualitative Survey of Sustainable Companies in Germany

Simona Gulich, Tammo Heinemann, Emma Starke, Franziska Wehr,
Leonie Weiß

Abstract

Nowadays, sustainability is becoming increasingly important not only in society but also in companies. The objective of this study is to determine the potential of internal sustainability communication in shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies. The research questions are dedicated to the goals, measures, and effects of internal sustainability communication with regard to Corporate Culture. To answer these questions, 15 qualitative expert interviews were conducted. A ranking of the 200 most sustainable companies in Germany was chosen as a sample to recruit the interview partners. The study was able to identify diverse potentials of internal sustainability communication with regard to shaping Corporate Culture. When considering the three dimensions of sustainability, it became clear that ecological and social sustainability are increasingly dealt with, while the economic dimension is neglected. This study shows that internal sustainability communication can positively influence the Corporate Culture as a whole and ultimately also individual employees in their attitudes and actions with regard to sustainability issues. However, the potential identified must be considered in the context of the individual Corporate Culture, such as the structural and personnel premises, to be able to discuss the extent to which the potential can be exploited in the best possible way. This study provides starting points for further research in this dynamic field as well as practical insights for application in employee communication.

Keywords: Internal Sustainability Communication, Corporate Culture, Triple Bottom Line, Sustainable Companies, Employee Communication

Introduction

"Sustainability must be one of the most widely used buzzwords of the past two decades" (Scoones, 2007, p. 589).

As this quote illustrates, almost anything can be described as sustainable or associated with sustainability these days. "We have sustainable cities, economies, resource management, business, livelihoods - and, of course, sustainable development" (Scoones, 2007, p. 589). Hence, sustainability assumes a pivotal role in society, with the understanding that life for future generations is only feasible through sustainable development (Ernst, 2022, p. 14). However, there is no consensus in society as a whole on what exactly is meant by sustainability. Additionally, the fact that the topic of sustainability is far more complex than it appears at first glance, even from a corporate perspective. This is shown, among other concepts by the *Triple Bottom Line of Sustainability* (TBL) defined by Scoones (2007), which encompasses the three dimensions of ecology, economy, and social issues, and thus narrows down and clearly defines sustainability.

As research on sustainability in a corporate context makes clear that the specific field of sustainability communication is gaining in importance, paying tribute to the ever-increasing relevance of sustainability in terms of corporate communication as well (Fischer et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). However, not only the topic of sustainability, but also the area of internal corporate communication has gained relevance in research and practice in recent years. Despite this, there has been little research at the interface between internal communication and sustainability communication, or it ends to focus on internal branding strategies in the context of sustainability communication (Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016). The research in this field is predominantly dominated by qualitative and

quantitative studies on external sustainability communication (Borkowski, Welsh & Wentzel, 2012). In light of this, this research project aims to bring about a shift in perspective by directing its focus towards internal

sustainability communication within sustainable companies, instead of the usual emphasis on external sustainability communication.

Derived from these values and norms, a consideration of Corporate Culture in the context of internal sustainability communication is also relevant. The aim of this thesis is to answer the following overarching research question:

RQ: What potential does internal sustainability communication offer for shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies?.

To answer the research questions, 15 qualitative expert interviews were conducted with communicators from the middle and upper management levels of the 200 most sustainable companies in Germany (Statista commissioned by Stern, 2022), followed by a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2016). The results illustrate that the participation and activation of all employees is crucial for achieving sustainability goals. Another finding is that the internal sustainability communication measures taken, such as events or town hall meetings, have a lasting impact on the Corporate Culture. The impact of internal sustainability communication on Corporate Culture is also shown by a strengthening of already existing values with regard to sustainability or a further development of existing corporate values, which then also include sustainable aspects. The study thus focuses on the general objectives of the communicators, the measures already taken regarding sustainability communication, and observable effects on Corporate Culture. Finally, the results are discussed, recommendations for action are derived, and the limitations and implications of this study for future research and corporate communications are explained.

Literature Review

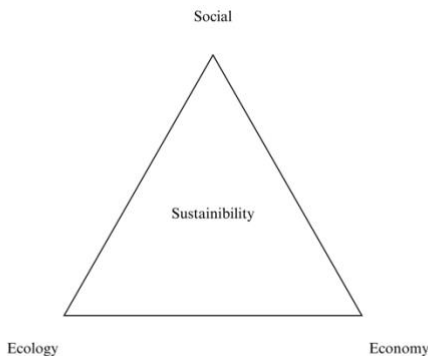
Sustainability as Part of Corporate Communications

When looking at the theory, it becomes clear that the topic of sustainability is becoming increasingly important in the context of corporate

communications. For a company to achieve long-term success, sustainability must be incorporated into corporate thinking in the form of integration into strategies and practices (Craig, 2013, p. 292). John Elkington (1998) defines sustainability from a business perspective using the TBL (see Figure 1). According to this, sustainability consists of the three dimensions of ecology, economy, and social (Elkington, 1998, p. 19). This is also accompanied by sustainability communication, which deals with various sustainability topics and can be classified as a task or instrument in the company (Fischer et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). In the corporate context, it is described by the term Corporate Sustainability Communication, as introduced by Signitzer and Prexl (2007, p. 2). Corporate success is deemed truly sustainable only when all three dimensions of sustainability are duly considered. It is through this comprehensive approach that the desired level of legitimacy can be attained among all stakeholders (Schaltegger, 2011). These stakeholders serve as the recipients of sustainability communication, and it is imperative to engage and educate them across diverse social, economic, and ecological domains.

Figure 1

Triple Bottom Line according to Elkington (1998)



A fundamental aspect of sustainability communication in relation to its stakeholder relations is internal communication within the company. In this context, internal sustainability communication represents a subarea of internal communication (Bolton, Kim & O'Gorman, 2011, p. 61). Its function is to communicate company-related sustainability issues from the three areas of sustainability (Crane & Matten, 2007, p. 29) and the associated values and norms (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011, p. 6) to all internal stakeholders and creating a common understanding about them (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 184). Crucial stakeholders in this area are the employees, as they produce, consume, and communicate sustainability knowledge (Kataria, Kataria & Garg, 2013, p. 47).

In addition to internal sustainability communication, there are also companies that identify themselves through sustainability based on the TBL. According to Errichiello and Zschiesche (2022), these companies should commit to *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) as a form of corporate responsibility in which ecological as well as social aspects are included in economic concerns and decisions from the very beginning (pp. 17-57). In principle, there is as of now no uniform definition of sustainable companies. However, there is a broad consensus on the inclusion of the three sustainability dimensions (Errichiello & Zschiesche, 2021). Accordingly, the task of sustainable corporate management is to pursue goals of the ecological, economic as well as social dimensions while achieving a balanced relationship (Souren, 2016, p. 135).

Interplay between Corporate Culture and Internal Communication

However, sustainable companies are not only characterized by the observance of the TBL but are also characterized by a special Corporate Culture as an informal and mainly immaterial part of the company. Corporate Culture can be divided into three levels according to Schein (2010, p. 4). The top level are artifacts, which appear as visible and tangible structures and processes and include symbols and signs. At the second level are the beliefs and values held, which include ideals, goals, ideologies, or rationalizations. On the third and last level, Schein describes

the basic assumptions, which exist unconsciously and naturally (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Three levels of Corporate Culture according to Schein (2010)

1. Artifacts
 - Visible and tangible structures and processes
 - Observed behavior, which is often difficult to decipher

2. Represented Beliefs and Values
 - Ideas, goals, values and aspirations
 - Ideologies
 - Rationalizations that may or may not be congruent on behavior and other artifacts

3. Basic assumptions
 - Unconscious, taken-for-granted-beliefs and values, such as:
 - Certain behavior
 - Perception
 - Thinking
 - Feeling

According to Sackmann (2021), there is a dynamic and reinforcing interplay between Corporate Culture and internal communication (pp. 79-116). Based on this assumption, Bauschke (2014) argues that sustainable companies in particular need a Corporate Culture that appropriately establishes the idea of sustainability (p. 179). He also argues that as soon as sustainability is an essential value of a company, it should also be reflected in the perception and actions of the organization's members and thus in the Corporate Culture (p. 179).

State of Research

The current state of research will be presented further by bringing the areas of sustainable companies, internal sustainability communication and Corporate Culture closer together, based on three research strands. In

general, it should be noted that similar to sustainability being an inter- or transdisciplinary research area, sustainability communication is also in an interface position between different fields and disciplines (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). Previous studies highlight two streams of sustainability communication. On the one hand, it is referred to as a concept and, on the other hand, as sustainability advertising (Golob, Podnar & Zabkar, 2022; Hoppe & Wolling, 2016). In their study, Edgeman and Eskildsen (2014) present a simple model of sustainable business excellence to unite the movements and drive a triple bottom-line strategy for equity, ecology, and economy, resulting in triple bottom-line performance for people, planet, and profit. In their study, the authors assume that dwindling resources and environmental degradation are realities that must be addressed (Edgeman & Eskildsen, 2014).

Goals of Internal Sustainability Communication and Corporate Culture

The strand of research to be considered first is devoted to goals to be pursued through internal sustainability communication in conjunction with Corporate Culture. To this end, Edgeman and Eskildsen (2014) state that sustainable corporate excellence is the result of balancing the competing and complementary interests of key stakeholders, including society and the natural environment. This aims to increase the likelihood of a superior and sustainable competitive position and thus long-term business success (p. 166). Previous studies have primarily focused their investigations on external sustainability communication. In contrast, only a few studies have examined internal sustainability communication. For example, the study by Barendsen, Muß and Silvius (2021) is worth mentioning here, which shows that there is no uniform understanding of sustainability among project members in corporate departments and that more targeted and increased sustainability communication is desired. Studies such as that of Kataria, Kataria and Garg (2013) indicate that employee participation is necessary for the implementation of goals regarding internal sustainability, as the effectiveness of internal

communication measures depends to a large extent on these very employees. In a study by Graham, Grennan, Harvey and Rajgopal (2022), it was shown that Corporate Culture is an important value driver of companies and serves their goal achievement (p. 554). They examined the extent to which Corporate Culture influences value creation, ethical decision-making, and innovation. The researchers were able to demonstrate that former executives believe that culture is significantly important for their company.

Measures of Internal Sustainability Communication and Corporate Culture

As already addressed by Kataria et. al (2013), the achievement of internal sustainability communication goals is also accompanied by the implementation of internal communication measures. Therefore, the research strand on internal sustainability communication measures and Corporate Culture will now be highlighted in more detail. A study by Samans and Nelson (2022) describes the value creation of sustainable companies with some core elements. These include (1) robust, sustained profitability and (2) decent work and adequate compensation. In addition, the authors include (3) respect for human rights in general, (4) internalization of significant external environmental impacts in the production and sale of goods and services, and lastly (5) high standards of ethics and corporate governance among these core elements (Samans & Nelson, 2022, p. 21). According to the authors, companies are sustainable if their actions create sustainable corporate values for stakeholders and shareholders. Furthermore, a company's sustainability must not only be communicated to those around it, but also passed on internally. Previous studies have often focused on external sustainability communication, examining, for example, how sustainability reports are structured as well as presented and how sustainability measures are communicated in the form of organizational values and mission statements (Borkowski et al., 2012). Complementing this, in the area of internal sustainability communication, Strottner and Huck-Sandhu (2021) took a look at the role

of internal behavioral communication when sustainability strategies are to be established in the company. Here it becomes apparent that internal communication measures must be implemented strategically and in a structured manner for them to succeed (p. 212). It is not only important to inform employees, but also to motivate and involve them so that sustainability can be implemented in the company. Sustainability should therefore take place in every part of a company. For this to happen, it is important to consider sustainability as part of the measures of the Corporate Culture.

Effects of Internal Sustainability Communication and Corporate Culture

Following the measures, the third strand of research brings together previous findings on impacts arising from internal sustainability communication and Corporate Culture. Biedenbach and Manzhynski (2016) were able to show through their research that effective internal branding strategies can support the successful implementation of sustainability measures (p. 302). If successful, employees' perceived identity with the organization is strengthened and commitment can be increased. Linnenluecke and Griffith (2010) also examined the relationship between an organization's cultural orientation and its pursuit of sustainability principles. The authors note as implications that members of each subculture of an organization may have different attitudes toward corporate sustainability. It is suggested that changes on the surface can create a conducive context for changes in employee values and beliefs, or even baseline assumptions (Linnenluecke & Griffith, 2010, p. 364). Taking this further, Signitzer and Prexl (2007) examined the role of communication in the corporate sustainability process. Here, it was found that Corporate Culture has an impact on sustainability management and communication (p. 11). It is shown that Corporate Culture is important for the formation and continuation of values. In this context, employees in particular are a significant influencing factor that can be reached via internal communication. In summary, it has been shown that sustainability

as a value of a company can be supported by internal sustainability communication in order to be perceived as an attractive institution, to be competitive or to contribute to societal goals in general.

Derivation of the Research Questions

The derivation of the research guiding question and its sub-research questions follows from a consideration of theory and the current state of research. As already presented, it is clear that not only the field of sustainability, but also the field of internal corporate communication has become increasingly important in research and practice in recent years. However, the linking of both topics in the form of internal sustainability communication and its influence on Corporate Culture has hardly been researched so far, especially in terms of goals, measures, and effects. This research therefore aims to investigate in more detail the influence of organizations' internal sustainability communication on Corporate Culture. For this purpose, the following *research question* (RQ) was formed:

RQ: What potential does internal sustainability communication offer in shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies?

From this research guiding question, three *sub-research questions* were derived to investigate in more detail how and to what extent there is a relationship between internal sustainability communication and Corporate Culture in companies. Due to the previous focus on external sustainability communication, the fact that there is no uniform understanding of the topic of sustainability and the recognition that corporate culture is a value driver of companies needs to be taken into account. Also Kataria et al. (2013) examined framework conditions for the successful implementation of internal sustainability goals, but did not define these goals in concrete terms. Therefore, the following sub-research question was derived:

RQ1: What are the goals of internal sustainability communication with regard to corporate culture?

In the area of measures, mainly external sustainability communication has been considered thus far. However, sustainability communication should not only take place for stakeholders and shareholders, but also for the employees of a company. The role of internal sustainability communication with regard to corporate culture has already been examined by Strottner and Huck-Sandhu (2021), but this paper will take a closer look at concrete sustainability measures and their implementation in communication for employees, which is why the following sub-research question can be formulated:

RQ2: What measures are used to design internal sustainability communication with regard to Corporate Culture?

The third question examines what has been achieved with the previously examined measures. Here, both value and behavioral changes of employees are taken into account, as well as changes at the overall company level. Signitzer and Prexl (2007) examined the role of communication in the corporate sustainability process, but they again did not take the internal communication of sustainability into account. Therefore, the third sub-research question examines how exactly the support through internal sustainability communication looks like and what influence it has on corporate culture:

RQ3: What effects can be seen from internal sustainability communication with regard to Corporate Culture?

Method

Research Design

In this research project, the method of partially standardized guided interviews was used. The data obtained were subsequently evaluated and analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2016). In order to present the methodological approach in detail, the qualitative data collection method, the recruitment and compilation of the sample as well as the qualitative data analysis strategy are considered below.

Qualitative Data Collection Method

The semi-structured guided interview was chosen for data collection because it is considered a structured interview method and allows for comparability of findings. The guide provides questions and order but allows for certain individual adjustments and flexibility during the interview (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 184). The topics and questions of the interview guide were derived from the research questions and underlying theoretical considerations as part of the operationalization process and aim to elicit information and self-disclosure needed with a view to answering the research question(s). The guide is structured by main questions in such a way that in each case only questions that are essential for answering the research questions are included. The questions are intentionally phrased in an open-ended manner to avoid suggesting possible answers to the interviewees. Sub-questions were also formulated for most of the main questions, which may or may not be asked depending on the course of the interview. The structure used, which is determined by the main questions and sub-questions, is flexible and can thus be easily changed depending on the situation, which makes it possible to compare the findings afterwards.

Based on the main research question "What potential does internal sustainability communication offer in shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies?" and the three sub-research questions, the operationalization of formal questions (research questions) into test questions (interview questions) took place in the further course to approach the research object in the best possible methodological way (Meyen, Löblich & Pfaff-Rüdiger, 2019). The guideline was structured according to the aspects taken up in the sub-research questions (RQ1) goals, (RQ2) measures, and (RQ3) impacts to ensure the best possible stringency in interviewing.

Recruitment and Composition of the Sample

All sustainable companies based in Germany are considered to be the basic population of the research. Since a specially constructed measurement instrument for measuring the sustainability factor of companies appeared to be difficult to implement for the formation of the sample, an existing ranking was used to recruit interview partners. In 2021, the German magazine STERN, in collaboration with Statista, published a ranking of the 200 most sustainable companies based in Germany (Statista commissioned by Stern, 2021). In this, the dimensions of sustainability (ecological, economic, social) were used, which also form the theoretical basis of this work and thus ensure the suitability of the sample for the following research. Based on the field access, the recruitment of at least 12 interview partners was aimed for. Ultimately, a total of 15 communication and sustainability managers were recruited for the interviews. The study's sample thus consists of communications and sustainability managers from companies that employ at least 500 people, have particularly high sales or are listed in an index of the DAX family. The companies are mostly among the market leaders in Germany in the areas of insurance, energy, finance, chemical industry, digitalization, industrial technology, materials manufacturing, sporting goods manufacturing and waste services (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Sample

Interview No.	Official Position of the Interviewee	Industry Field
1	Vice President Group Communications	Tech
2	Senior Manager Corporate Sustainability	Chemics
3	Head of Culture and Sustainability	Engineering
4	Sustainability & DEI Manager	Online-Marketplace
5	Head of Corporate Communication & PR	Public service
6	Manager Corporate Communications	Intralogistics
7	Sustainability Manager & Lead Global Sustainability Communications	Multi-industry
8	Group Communications & Brand	Multi-industry
9	Sustainability Officer	Finance
10	Global Corporate Media Realtions, Sustainability and HR	Material manufacturer
11	Senior Head of Corporate Sustainability	Sports
12	Head of Organizational Developement & Sustainability	Public service
13	Head of Internal Communication & Engagement	Multi-industry
14	Press Officer Sustainability Issues	Energy
15	Head of Corporate Communications & Brand	Insurance

Since thematic expertise of communications managers must be queried in order to answer the research questions, cases were included in the sample

that appear to be particularly meaningful for answering the questions. The sampling strategy of targeted selection of certain types of cases according to Döring and Bortz (2016, p. 304) was thus used for the study. This is characterized by the fact that the underlying questions relate to a specific target group, in this case the group of experts on internal sustainability communication with reference to Corporate Culture. The sample generated through the chosen method does not claim to be representative with regard to a precisely defined target population, but rather aims to represent the range of manifestations of the social issue under investigation as exhaustively as possible through the targeted selection of a few cases (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 302). All interviews were conducted and recorded over a period of one month via videoconferencing platforms. The length of the interviews varied between 27:23 minutes and 45:32 minutes.

Qualitative Data Analysis Method

Qualitative content analysis was used to evaluate the 15 interviews conducted by first transcribing the audio tracks in their entirety and then cleaning them up to correct transcription errors. The interview transcripts resulting from this process were analyzed via computer-assisted qualitative data analysis using MAXQDA. The qualitative content analysis was primarily theory-based deductive as well as partially data-based inductive. To create the category system, as a central component of the evaluation strategy, categories were derived from the research questions using the deductive approach. Another category was formed by inductive procedure after reviewing the transcripts, as it turned out to be suitable and necessary. The interpretative evaluation of the documents was done through the systematic process of coding. The transcripts were coded using a category system consisting of five main categories. Coding was conducted by two researchers and achieved intercoder reliability of 60 % agreement after test coding and training. Following the coding, paraphrasing of the coded text segments was conducted as a baseline for the subsequent presentation of results and discussion. In order to highlight

possible connections between individual codings within an interview and thus to be able to link individual paraphrases, the paraphrasing was implemented by those who also conducted the interview. The following chapter presents the concrete results, which are then examined in more detail in the discussion section.

Findings

In order to be able to present the results adequately, they are organized below on the basis of the three sub-research questions: Goals, measures and effects of internal sustainability communication.

Goals of Internal Sustainability Communication

In general, the results show that it is important for those responsible for communications to first communicate sustainability issues internally before they can be authentically sold externally. Five different goals can be identified across the interviews conducted. First, the general goal of (1) creating more awareness for the topic of sustainability and thus creating awareness, understanding and commitment for the abstract topics in the workforce is increasingly emphasized. Internal sustainability communication should thus make topics "more lively and more tangible" and thus show positive examples from practice, as said by an interviewee. There is also a particular focus on (2) informing and educating employees. Specific goals mentioned include encouraging employees to take initiative, reducing the complexity of content to make it easier to understand, and regularly informing employees so that they can, for example, communicate the values to customers. The overriding goal is thus for the topic of sustainability to become an attitude that everyone in the company shares, that is present in all actions, and that plays a role in all decision-making within the company. To achieve these goals, those responsible for communications rely on special training and education. In addition, (3) educating management is a clearly expressed goal of the respondents. For example, the topic of sustainability should be brought to the attention of managers so that it increasingly finds its way into internal

communications through four fixes. This should enable faster progress in the implementation of sustainability measures. Furthermore, the intention is expressed to also (4) establish a link between corporate strategy or goals and sustainability through internal sustainability communication. Thus, sustainability is to be integrated into strategy communication and in the future, the challenge of an internal sustainability strategy is to be tackled across all brands in order to generate uniformity. Here, the communications department should act as a link. The fifth and final objective relates to the internal drive of the communications departments. The aspiration of the communication departments is to (5) holistically consider the topic of sustainability as "the driver topic for the future" (interviewee), on which companies should focus with regard to all dimensions of the TBL. The reason frequently cited for this is the ongoing development of climate change, which requires decisive action. For this, further resources for sustainability communication need to be built up within the company in order to be able to tackle these challenges in the future.

In conclusion, with regard to the assessment of the future role of the topic of sustainability in internal communications, 14 out of 15 communications managers see an increased importance. On the one hand, with a view to more frequent thematization in the communications departments, but on the other hand also in the company in general. Special sustainability departments could thereby become obsolete in the future according to estimates since the topic of sustainability is communicated and thought about holistically across all departments.

Measures of Internal Sustainability Communication

Sustainability is communicated internally via many different channels, such as the *intranet*, *town hall meetings* or *information screens*. However, the results also show that it is not enough to simply publish an information article on the intranet, for example. Successful sustainability communication requires a variety of communication channels that involve employees in different ways and encourage them to make changes

themselves. In addition to the classic information texts on the intranet, *videos* and *events* on the topic of sustainability are also used. The aim here is for employees to contribute their own ideas, plan actions and gain experience themselves. The employees are thus of crucial importance, as they produce, consume, and communicate sustainability knowledge.

Above all, employees' own initiative and comprehensible communication play a major role. Particular importance is attached to events that encourage active involvement. Various events on the topic of sustainability use concrete examples to show employees the changes sustainability can make and the effects such changes can have on them personally. This makes it easier to create an awareness of environmental changes and also makes knowledge, shared values and corporate goals accessible and tangible for all employees. Examples of sustainability events include *environmental practice days*, *sustainability weeks*, *specific awards* and *online events*. However, sustainability can only be achieved if all three dimensions are considered. The results on the individual dimensions show that the companies surveyed attach importance to aspects from all areas of sustainability. On the ecological level, *regional canteens*, *job bikes* and the *reduction of CO2 emissions* are communicated as concrete measures. On a social level, the majority of the measures relate to support for *social projects* outside the company, *diversity issues* and *working conditions* for employees. The main points on the economic level are *energy efficiency*, *savings potential of the company* and *optimization of the supply chains*. However, results reveal that less attention is often paid to the economic dimension.

Internal communication should motivate and retain employees and give them access to shared knowledge and values. This is shaped by employee engagement, which is why events contribute to this development. According to Schein's model of Corporate Culture, corporate values belong to the second level. This is about representative convictions which, in relation to the topic of sustainability, are part of the goals and ideologies of the workforce. Internal sustainability communication can lead to

changes in attitude among employees. For sustainability to bring success to the company, the topic must be included in all corporate considerations. The support of the top management is therefore seen as essential in getting new topics on the agenda and driving sustainability communication forward within the company. When communication comes from the very top, it is seen as particularly credible and encourages imitation. The involvement of top management in the area of sustainability is very high in most companies, so that support can be built on from this side.

The perspective of employees toward internal sustainability communication measures can be seen as very positive overall. Most employees are open to the topic of sustainability and the measures taken by the companies and are prepared to support actions and courses of action. Employee awareness of the topic of sustainability has risen sharply, which has its origins in the fact that companies are trying to show a connection between sustainability measures and corporate strategy. The feedback from employees in this regard is mostly positive and employees are very motivated to change their actions on the topic of sustainability. In addition to the many positive voices, there is also negative feedback. But this can also be used for the further development of internal sustainability communication, because sustainability is always evolving and must always be rethought. In addition, most of the interviewees do not consider it realistic to be able to convince all employees of a company of this topic. Nevertheless, values and standards associated with sustainability can be communicated to all internal stakeholders and a common understanding of this can be created if sustainability communication is perceived internally as predominantly positive.

The topic of sustainability will continue to play a special role in internal communications in the future. Sustainability communication is to be implemented in a more comprehensible way, as sustainability topics are often very abstract and thus often incomprehensible to employees. The more comprehensible and approachable the communication is, the more likely employees are to adopt the behaviors presented. In the future, more

attention will be paid to diversity, which shows that sustainability is not only thought of on an ecological level, but also on a social level. Overall, it could be confirmed that internal sustainability communication measures have an influence on corporate values and thus also on Corporate Culture in the long term, as they shape employees' attitudes and behaviors.

Effects of Internal Sustainability Communication

Internal sustainability communication can bring about particularly positive behavioral changes among employees. This can be seen, for example, in the form of increased engagement with sustainability issues or the introduction of new ideas for improving or implementing sustainability in the company. There are five specific causes that have led to behavioral changes among employees: (1) the launch of a new corporate strategy highlighting sustainable aspects of the company, (2) the establishment of internal sustainability awards, (3) initiatives by works councils, and (4) holding conferences on sustainability topics. Another reason cited was (5) employee awareness of changes in products, operations, locations, as well as markets. These changes are driving cultural change within the company, which manifests itself in an interplay between internal sustainability communication measures and changes in employee behavior. Thus, it can be stated that through continuity, internal sustainability communication can contribute to the anchoring of changed and sustainability-oriented basic assumptions in the long term, which profoundly shape the Corporate Culture. For behavioral changes to take place, communication must appeal to employees' self-interest and common sense. In addition to positive feedback, there is of course also criticism, for which solutions are subsequently found in dialog with those responsible for sustainability.

The previous explanations show that internal sustainability communication can lead to behavioral changes among employees that are fundamentally positive. As a result, the company-related goal of readiness for change can be fulfilled in internal communication. A contribution is also made to internal relationships and increased commitment, and

awareness of sustainability issues is created. The behavioral changes can be described as part of a cultural change, whereby influence can be exerted on the Corporate Culture. In this context, they can be located in the third level according to the model of Corporate Culture in the basic assumptions and thus contribute to a profound change for sustainability anchored in the company. Through the reaction of employees to continuous internal sustainability communication, e.g. in the form of *participation in discussions*, sustainability can in turn develop further, resulting in a dynamic interplay.

The results make it clear that internal sustainability communication, primarily in the form of *participatory calls*, should contribute to the activation of employees and aims to promote their commitment. Through the various forms of internal sustainability communication to activate employees, visible structures and processes of the first level of Corporate Culture can be manifested, co-designed and changed. Based on the statements, it becomes apparent that communication plays an important role in Corporate Culture and in this case, for example, the participation of all employees is crucial for achieving sustainability goals.

Through measures of internal sustainability communication, the corporate values in relation to sustainability can be consolidated or even further developed on the second level of Corporate Culture. Integrating sustainability into corporate values can also create greater awareness of environmental change among employees as they gain an understanding of the need for their company to evolve its goals in response to environmental change. The impact of internal sustainability communication on corporate values can be seen by a strengthening of already existing values that are coupled with sustainability or by a further development of values that now include sustainable aspects. In order to be able to classify the results and make recommendations for action, a brief discussion is required.

Discussion

Integrating Internal Sustainability Communication at All Levels of a Company

The results have clearly shown that internal sustainability communication is gaining in importance and that this is closely linked to external communication. Since the topic must be treated holistically across all departments of a company so that it also becomes part of the Corporate Culture, the following *discussion thesis* (DT) can be established:

DT1: In order to successfully communicate the topic of sustainability internally and thus establish it as part of the Corporate Culture, the goal must be to inform and educate all levels of the company equally.

Based on this thesis, recommendations for action can be drawn up for the individual hierarchical levels. Starting with the employees of a company, it can be stated that a reduction in complexity must take place. The goal must therefore be to make scientific topics in the context of sustainability more comprehensible. Here, it should always be considered which department is being addressed, since there must be differences between the communication for employees in the production versus the office, for example. This is the only way to promote awareness, understanding and commitment. Additionally, it is also important to educate the management in order to integrate the topic of sustainability into internal communication and achieve faster progress. This is particularly relevant so that people in management positions can communicate the main topics to the respective departments. Management thus has the function of an intermediary between top management and employees. Therefore, the goal here should be to clarify the focal points in the area of sustainability so that the management level can reduce the complexity for employees. Linking corporate goals to sustainability is also important. Here, it is important not to view sustainability as a separate issue, but to think about it in every process and every action. Once again, the ecological, social, and economic dimensions all play a role. The thesis confirms that it is of great

importance to integrate all levels of the company, as this is the only way to ensure that sustainability can be thought of holistically. In order to ultimately achieve this, financial, human and time resources are required, which must be approved by the top management. That being the case, it is also essential at this level to position sustainability specifically as part of the corporate strategy so that it has a permanent place on the agenda in the future and can find its way into the Corporate Culture. Sustainability officers, for example, can help here by dealing specifically with the topic and thus making concrete recommendations.

Involving Employees for a Successful Internal Sustainability Communication

The present results make it clear that a variety of communication measures are necessary for the successful implementation of internal sustainability communication. It became apparent that employees must be involved and encouraged by means of various communicative measures in order to promote proactive action. Companies should therefore diversify their communication channels with regard to sustainability communication in order to address a broad range of employees. In this context, communication should be as transparent, approachable and comprehensible as possible, since sustainability communication usually deals with abstract subject matter that highlights complex interrelationships between social, economic and ecological factors. The following discussion thesis can be derived from this.

DT2: For successful internal sustainability communication, it is necessary to use a variety of communication measures to actively involve employees and thus stimulate a change in their behavior.

The results particularly refer to communicative measures that promote employees' own initiative and at the same time convey information in a comprehensible way. In-house events, for example, play a crucial role here, as they show employees concrete examples of sustainability, create awareness of environmental changes and also communicate shared

knowledge, values and corporate goals. Furthermore, in the context of internal company events, employees can be directly involved through certain actions, for example by presenting their own ideas in relation to sustainability goals. This could lead to greater commitment and a change in behavior. Accordingly, the concrete recommendation for action is to hold regular events and give employees the opportunity to contribute their own ideas through interactive formats, thus actively motivating them to take action. The finding that events work well for communicating sustainability topics could be due to the fact that sustainability is not only communicated as an abstract construct, but it can be made tangible on a personal level. In addition, events are always a break from everyday working life, which could be conducive to proactivity on the part of employees.

The evaluation also reveals that sustainability can only be achieved if all three dimensions (ecological, social and economic) are taken into account. However, companies do not focus equally on all dimensions. In particular, the economic dimension often receives less attention. This could be due to the fact that it is less tangible and emotionally appealing to employees. A concrete recommendation for action in order to communicate the concept of sustainability in its entirety is to also communicate the economic effects of sustainability measures and make them tangible in order to sensitize employees to the economic savings potential of the company. Particularly in this dimension, a focus should be placed on making complex topics comprehensible to all employees.

It also becomes clear that the support of the management is of great importance for internal sustainability communication. The reasons for this presumably lie in the role model and authority status of the company's management. The involvement of top management therefore represents a clear recommendation for action. The goal should be to carry out the communicative measures with the involvement of top management in order to signal the relevance of the topic to employees. These findings are directly related to the conclusion that sustainability measures should be

linked to the corporate strategy and corporate values in order to generate an optimal impact. Employees should understand how sustainability can be seen as an integral part of the Corporate Culture and what contribution they can personally make to benefit from it strategically.

Top Management as an Important Factor for Successful Internal Sustainability Communication

The results show that continuous internal sustainability communication aimed at activating and engaging employees can bring about positive behavioral changes and drive cultural change within the company. These behavioral changes include, for example, increased engagement with sustainability issues, such as interest in healthy food from local supply chains and sustainable transportation, bringing new ideas to improve or implement sustainability issues, or participating in collaborative initiatives.

DT3: The extent to which successful effects of internal sustainability communication are evident depends strongly on the involvement of the top management.

It becomes clear from the results that, for example, the introduction of a new corporate strategy in which the importance of sustainability is emphasized can be classified as a cause of behavioral changes among employees and a triggered cultural change. A new, sustainable corporate strategy is often decided at the level of top management or by the supervisory boards, i.e., from the highest hierarchical position, which can have an enormous influence on employee behavior. It can be argued that the internal impetus from top hierarchical positions creates a framework for broad employee participation. Employees feel encouraged to raise their voices on sustainability issues and actively participate in shaping a participatory Corporate Culture.

However, the results also indicate that it is not only corporate management that should be singled out as a central factor for successful internal sustainability communication. For example, the introduction of

sustainability awards can lead to changes in employee behavior as well. They encourage employees to actively engage with sustainability issues and contribute innovative ideas. Recognition for their commitment will likely serve the employees' reward system and thus reinforces their motivation to continue to deal with sustainability issues in the future and thus actively help shape the change in Corporate Culture. It can therefore be assumed that employees are more willing to engage intensively with the topic if they can contribute their own ideas and thoughts, which are perceived and valued by the (top) management. Furthermore, the results show that internal conferences have a significant influence on the behavioral changes of employees. The dialog-promoting character of a conference stimulates discussions and joint learning, which could be used to explain a change in employee behavior and Corporate Culture. In conclusion, it can be deduced from the results that a change in perception on the part of employees towards company products, operating sites, locations, and markets plays a central role in the change of employee behavior. It is possible that the change in perception leads to employees being encouraged to adapt their behavior to new circumstances, which inevitably results in a change of their own behavior.

In summary, further research is needed for a deeper understanding of the causes concerning the effects of internal corporate communications described above to be able to make clear statements about changes in employee behavior and the influence on Corporate Culture. However, it remains clear that although the influence of corporate management on Corporate Culture and employee behavioral change is significant, change processes and behavioral changes cannot be initiated solely from above. This means that corporate communication measures in particular, which activate employees and aim to promote their commitment, can imply desired effects. Through these measures, internal sustainability communication helps to manifest, shape, and change the structures and processes of the Corporate Culture. Communication thus plays an important role in shaping the Corporate Culture, and the inclusion of all employees in this is seen as crucial to achieving sustainability goals.

In this context, the effects of internal sustainability communication on corporate values can consist of strengthening existing sustainability-related values or integrating new sustainable aspects into corporate values in the long term.

Limitations and Future Research

As a limitation, not all sustainable companies in the general population could be surveyed due to limited research resources. In addition, the survey is not representative, as it was decided to deliberately select a sample that does not reflect the basic population. In the interviews, it became apparent that the basic assumptions underlying Corporate Culture are difficult to interrogate. This also represents a reason for a rather low direct reference to Corporate Culture in the interviews. The interviewees also did not have a uniform understanding of the concept of Corporate Culture, so that a bias in the answers can also be assumed. In retrospect, a difference was also found between commercial companies and public-sector companies. Public sector companies focused more on the "environmental" pillar of sustainability and did not have as strong a separation between external and internal communication in terms of their organizational structure and communication goals compared to the rest of the for-profit companies. Overall, however, the study met the essential quality criteria of scientific qualitative research.

Further research should address the perspective of employees in addition to the focus on corporate communication officers set here. Their perspective was neglected in the context of this project but is highly relevant for the holistic presentation of the potential of internal sustainability communication for Corporate Culture. In particular, a longitudinal study to assess the long-term impact of internal sustainability communication measures on employee behavior and attitudes would be of research interest. In addition, a qualitative study of the role of managers in promoting a sustainable Corporate Culture could provide further interesting insights and complement and consolidate previous research.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to take a closer look at the impact of internal sustainability communication on Corporate Culture. For this purpose, three sub-research questions on the (RQ1) goals, (RQ2) measures and (RQ3) effects of internal sustainability communication on Corporate Culture were formulated, which contribute to answering the overall research question “What potential does internal sustainability communication offer in shaping the Corporate Culture of sustainable companies?”. In general, it should be noted that internal sustainability communication has a high priority in all companies surveyed. This form of communication pursues various goals, such as informing and educating employees and promoting Corporate Culture. An authentic and consistent presentation both internally and externally is particularly important. According to the respondents, internal sustainability communication offers the opportunity to strengthen the Corporate Culture and position the company as an attractive employer.

Communication takes place via various channels and is mainly illustrated by videos and interactive events. These measures are intended to encourage employees' own initiative and enable them to gain their own experience in the area of sustainability. In order to perceive sustainability holistically, communication measures are carried out on the three levels of ecology, economy and social issues, with comparatively less attention being paid to the economic dimension. The impact of the communication measures is particularly evident in relation to corporate values. In particular, the personal attitudes of employees are influenced by sustainability communication. In order to communicate and reinforce sustainability values, the support of the company and top management is crucial. Top management is strongly involved and employees generally perceive the measures as positive. Accordingly, it can be concluded that internal sustainability communication leads to a positive change in behavior among employees. In the long term, this change can help to firmly anchor changed and sustainably oriented basic assumptions,

especially if communication is continuous. The impact of internal sustainability communication on corporate values can be seen both in the strengthening of existing values associated with sustainability and in the further development of values that now include sustainable aspects.

Therefore, the central question of this research can be answered to the effect that targeted measures within the framework of internal sustainability communication, such as sustainability events, can actively contribute to changing employees' attitudes and behaviors. In the long term, this in turn can lead to a change in corporate values and ultimately also in the Corporate Culture towards more sustainability. By demonstrating sustainable action alternatives, supporting regional canteens, promoting social engagement, achieving energy savings and similar measures, employees are met at their individual points of view and encouraged to shape their actions in the direction of sustainability, all on a voluntary basis. The study shows that with internal sustainability communication tailored to employees, influence can be exerted on the Corporate Culture, even if not all employees support these measures holistically, as they have their own experiences. The results show that in practice, comprehensible, consistent, and credible sustainability communication is particularly important and that its content should be identical both internally and externally.

From a research perspective, this work contributes to linking internal sustainability communication to Corporate Culture. The findings show that it is time to rethink the way companies communicate about sustainability and shape a sustainable future together with employees from within. With this insight, companies can create a culture of awareness and responsibility, where sustainability is not just a marketing tool, but a fundamental value that is embedded in all areas of the business. This paradigm shift will not only change the way companies operate, but also the expectations of consumers and society at large.

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Breaking Barriers: Exploring the Power of Immersive Media as a Strategic Communication Tool in NGOs

A Qualitative Analysis on the Current and Potential Applications of Immersive Media in the German NGO Landscape

Kim Brückner, Miriam Ehrlinspiel, Sina Huneke, Marie Henny Prien

Abstract

The change in media has shaped our society for decades and new forms and technologies for mediated communication have been created. This paper explores the use of immersive media in the context of strategic communication of non-governmental organizations in Germany. The research, based on semi-structured interviews with communication officers, reveals that immersive media is not yet widespread in the NGO landscape and remain in a trial phase. Most NGOs do not consider immersive technologies suitable for their target groups, preferring traditional communication measures. However, a general openness towards the development of immersive media has been identified when financially justifiable and appropriate for the target groups. The primary purpose of immersive media projects is to generate public attention, supporting NGOs in their organizational goals. Although immersive media are partly implemented in the communication mix, they do not serve a predefined strategic objective within the strategic communication management of NGOs. This research contributes to existing literature by analyzing the use of immersive media in the third sector from a strategic communication perspective.

Keywords: Immersive Media, Strategic Communication, NGOs, NGO Communication, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality

Introduction

Immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) have taken a firm place in the multimedia landscape, offering a wide range of possible applications (Bitkom, 2021, p. 9). Due to its potential to dissolve boundaries between a medium and its environment, immersion is attractive and omnipresent (Kolesch, 2017, p. 62). Technologies that enable immersion, or those that allow for some level of immersion in a virtual setting, have recently matured to a high degree and provide a variety of potential applications (Bitkom e.V., 2021, p. 9). Through a wide range of trends, such as the hype around the AR technology-based app Pokémon Go, immersive media have long since reached society. As a result, various industries and companies have started to address the issue, for example for automobile production, virtual shopping worlds, and training purposes (Bitkom e.V., 2021, pp. 24-48). Hence, immersive media have arrived in reality and are already beneficial to various areas (Bitkom e.V., 2021, p. 82).

Along with that, the third sector has started to adapt to these developments, as it is particularly dependent on people empathizing with their mission to understand their issues and goals. A growing number of well-known NGOs such as Greenpeace (Greenpeace, n.d.) or Amnesty International (Amnesty International, n.d.) have used immersive technologies to implement projects and raise awareness about their mission among their target groups. As the competition for donations and media attention becomes more intense, NGOs must work more resourcefully and cannot neglect the threats and opportunities presented by trends in the system environment in which they exist (Stötzer, 2008, p. 406). Furthermore, innovative communication is a key way to draw attention to the organization and its specific issues (Stötzer, 2008, p. 404), which is becoming more relevant to stand out within the sector.

Previous studies in the field of immersive media in NGOs mainly focus on the user's perspective, investigating the reception level (Breves & Schramm, 2021; Chen & Yao, 2021). Instead, this paper aims to take the

communicator's perspective and look at it through a strategic lens by examining the strategic use of immersive media in the communication department of NGOs. Therefore, the following research question was developed: *To what extent do NGOs operating in Germany use immersive media as part of their strategic communication?*

For this purpose, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with communication officers from German NGOs and evaluated with a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2022). The interviewees provided insights into the forms, contexts, or immersive technologies as well as challenges and objectives of implementing immersive media projects in their organizations. Since not only NGOs that have implemented projects with immersive media were included in the sample, the paper also examines the decision criteria of NGOs when considering the possible implementation of immersive media for their communication. In return, these provide interesting findings about the reasons against projects involving immersive technologies.

Thus, the study focuses on the types of immersive technologies used in the NGO sector, their potentials, and risks as well as the strategic communication goals related to immersive media projects.

Literature Review

In order to better understand the use of immersive media as part of the strategic communication by NGOs operating in Germany, existing theoretical and empirical research, such as technological trends and developments are closely examined and elaborated upon. This literature review will be used to derive three research questions that will be answered throughout this study.

Immersive Media – A Future Trend?

Immersive media draw a picture of different approaches, influences, and fields of application. The discussion usually begins with the phenomenon of immersion as such. Immersion is considered as an umbrella term that

includes concepts such as involvement, illusion, presence, and interaction (Hochscherf et al., 2011, p. 10). Immersive media are referred to as medium whose perceptual-sensory properties on a technical and architectural level (e.g. holographic sound systems, 360° projections, S-3-D visualizations) eliminate the separation of physical and virtual space through illusionistic processes (Hochscherf et al., 2011, pp. 15-16). This applies to multiple types of immersive technologies in the field of immersive media in which VR and AR are the two most common examples (Bitkom e.V. & Deloitte, 2017, p. 44). Additionally, the combination of AR and VR is known as mixed reality (MR) (Bitkom e.V., 2021, p. 13).

Typically, immersive media are characterized by increased immersion in the digital environment, which distinguishes immersive media from established media such as radio, television, cinema, or video games (Kaplan-Rakowski & Meseberg, 2019, p. 144). Immersive media blur the boundaries between a medium and its user, dissolving the separation of physical and virtual space (Hochscherf et al., 2011, p. 9). Next to that, the technology of immersive media stimulates the physical senses to such an extent that the user can feel completely absorbed in a so-called virtual reality (Kaplan-Rakowski & Meseberg, 2019, p. 144). Sensory perceptions such as seeing, hearing, or touching and smelling that mimic reality consequently create a feeling of immersion (Li, 2020, p. 20). Literature frequently refers to this as an altered experience of presence (Li, 2020, p. 19; Kaplan-Rakowski & Meseberg, 2019, p. 152; Hochscherf et al., 2011, p. 9). Accordingly, Hochscherf et al. (2011, p. 15) describe immersion as an ambivalent phenomenon in which users both feel present in the virtual and real world, while constantly being aware of the unique user experience. Li (2020, p. 20) adds to this by highlighting the importance of visual stimulation for creating immersion, as 90% of human perception occurs through vision.

Immersive media often serve as a starting point for discussions regarding the significance of these technologies in everyday life in the future

(Bitkom e.V., 2022, p. 16). The extent to which such technologies could become an integral part of everyday human life or even lead to full-immersion technologies as a direct exchange of information between humans and machines (Gandorfer, 2019) remains to be seen in the future.

With all these factors considered, this paper thus aims at investigating the use of immersive media in NGOs operating in Germany. In this research context, an NGO is understood as “an organization that tries to achieve social or political aims but is not controlled by a government” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). However, to generate deeper insights, it is essential to first examine the forms and contexts of the use of immersive media in this field. Thus, the question to address is:

RQ1: What forms and in what context are immersive media used by NGOs operating in Germany?

NGO Communication – Maximum Impact with Minimal Resources

According to the McKinsey Technology Outlook 2022 (Chui, Roberts & Yee, 2022), an annual market growth of approximately 20 % can be predicted in the private sector due to increasing investments in immersive media technologies. This could create an impact on organizations in the third sector, which direct their communication strategies towards the market more frequently (Barz et al., 2018, p. 132). Since the competitive environment makes innovative media formats such as immersive media more significant for the communication strategies of NGOs organizations (Yoo & Drumwright, 2018, p. 11), international NGOs such as Greenpeace (Greenpeace, n.d.) or Amnesty International (Amnesty International, n.d.) have already implemented projects that incorporate immersive media to create awareness for specific issues. The latter will be explained briefly to demonstrate the strategic relevance of immersive media for NGOs: In 2015, with the help of 360-degree videos and VR glasses, the human rights organization Amnesty International developed the immersive project "360 Syria" to enable recipients to experience the destruction of the Syrian capital, which was bombed by IS terrorists. The

aim of the project was to create a more memorable and lasting connection with the beneficiaries, which would preferably also translate into higher donations (Amnesty International, n.d.). This example is a relevant indicator about the consideration and use of immersive media as a strategic tool within NGO communication to support the organizations' goals and objectives.

However, since this case cannot be generalized without empirical evidence and an answer to the question about the potentials and problems of using immersive media as a communication tool remains largely unanswered (Kandaurova & Lee, 2019, pp. 571-572), further research is needed. Based on the initial efforts of Amnesty International to use immersive media projects as a strategic tool, an analysis of the general integration of immersive media in the communication departments of German NGOs represents the second step of this study. Thus, the following research question was posed:

RQ2: What opportunities and challenges do NGOs see in the use of immersive media?

Strategic NGO Communication – Communication that Matters?

For the purpose of exploring the use of immersive media from a strategic communication point of view, it is essential to first determine the use of strategic communication in general before elaborating on the strategic communication objective of NGOs.

Strategic communication is frequently considered in the context of for-profit organizations and corporate success (Bruhn et al., 2016, p. vii). The term is defined as communication that encompasses all communication forms which are substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Additionally, it is used for purposeful communication by an organization or other entities to engage in conversations of strategic significance for its goals (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). However, not all targeted communication is strategic, as it is highly dependent on the changing dynamics of communication landscapes and new technologies

which in turn can have an impact on the communication. One technological transformation in the communication field is the development of immersive media, which have set new forms of communication.

When taking a closer look into the current NGO communication, it is also crucial to examine the extent of its strategic background. Through non-profit communication, views, perspectives, and actions are addressed, questioned, and attempted to be changed (Bürker, 2018, p. 461). Yet, the communication of NGOs differs from classic corporate communication due to the following unique characteristics of NGOs:

- 1) *A qualitative character of the objectives* (Bruhn & Herbst, 2016, p. 606), instead of quantitatively measurable profit figures, such as the fight against hunger for example (Brot für die Welt, n.d.),
- 2) *no material nature of the product or service*, since the service of NGOs is rather defined in activities such as the transmission of certain values (Bruhn & Herbst, 2016, S. 606),
- 3) *a more complex web of stakeholders* (Stötzer, 2008, S. 407),
- 4) *a tight communication budget*, as financial resources are scarcer in the non-profit sector than in commercial industries (Remus & Rademacher, 2018, p. IX),
- 5) *the omission of the increase in demand by the target group as a central goal*: NGOs often even act against the resistance of these groups in order to change certain behaviors or values and to mobilize social forces for their purpose (Bruhn & Herbst, 2016, p. 619),
- 6) *the public as an amplifier of NGO communication*, which helps the organizations to exert pressure on politics and the corporate sector (Bürker, 2018, pp. 462-463).

Thus, these differentiating characteristics have a direct influence on the management, and ultimately also on the communication of NGOs, since

the setting and formulation of their objectives generally differ to those of for-profit organizations (Stötzer, 2008, p. 405).

The increasing role of online communication and social media further reinforces these unique characteristics (Bürker, 2018, pp. 462-463). This enables the emergence of new possibilities, which affect the quantity, quality, type, and content of media used in NGO communication (Stötzer, 2008, p. 406). One of these are immersive media technologies.

Additionally, NGOs face changing conditions in their environment with a socio-political competition for donors, volunteers, and media attention. NGOs therefore operate in an extraordinary field shaped by unique and challenging conditions as well as tensions that force them to achieve the greatest possible benefit with a relatively small communication budget (Bruhn & Herbst, 2016, p. 614). Accordingly, communication tools in the NGO sector are assessed based on their return on investment and outcome due to their generally low communication budgets (Bruhn & Herbst, 2016, p. 614). In this respect, an increasing professionalization among NGOs can be observed: The choice of certain communication measures over others is based on strategic decisions. Thus, communication strategies that have been considered standard practice in corporate management have also been adopted by NGOs (Barz et al., 2018, p. 132). While previous research has provided evidence that the need to define strategic objectives in NGO communication is now more prevalent, there is currently a lack of knowledge on the role that immersive media play in relation to certain strategic communication objectives. Therefore, the third research question addresses the following:

RQ3: How do NGOs understand the use of immersive media for strategic objectives?

As a last step, this research paper analyzes the strategic perspective of the implementation of immersive media, which have primarily been used in the corporate context and are now gaining ground in the third sector.

Methodology

For this study, a qualitative approach was chosen to analyze the use of immersive media as part of the strategic communication in German NGOs. Due to the relatively new and theoretically underdeveloped research area of immersive media in the non-profit sector and the contextuality as well as individuality of immersive media applications, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to allow for a more flexible conversation with an explorative nature. With the intention of adequately answering the central research question of this research, 14 people from NGOs operating in Germany were interviewed. The interviewees were mainly communication officers from NGOs, most of whom held the position of head of communication and public relations or press officer.

Sampling Procedure

The sample was formed using the criterion sampling method by Patton (2002, p. 238) and extended by the snowball principle during the sampling process. To be included in the sample, the organizations had to be operating in Germany and registered as a non-profit organization in the German Commercial Register. Additionally, only NGOs with the highest donation sum were included in the sample. The sample was taken from a study on impact transparency in non-profit organizations, which contains a list of the 50 NGOs with the highest donation amounts in Germany in the year of 2016 (von der Ahe & Lüdecke, 2016).

Communication professionals at the upper management level from every NGO on the list were chosen as contact people, since it was assumed that communication officers with higher positions have more insights into the communication measures and strategies of the NGOs as well as decision-making authority. The sample acquisition was done via email and *LinkedIn* between December 2022 and January 2023. Four additional organizations were recommended by employees from NGOs in the original sample and were thus included in the sample via the snowball sampling method.

The final sample includes 14 NGOs (n=40) based in Germany that receive some of the highest donation amounts with the interview partners from the respective NGOs predominantly holding leadership positions in communications, marketing, or fundraising. An overview of the final sample can be found in Table 1, which includes the field of operation and the present or absent experience with immersive media for each interviewed organization in an anonymous manner.

Table 1.

Final sample of interview partners.

Interview Number	Field / Area of Operation	Experience with Immersive Media
1	Humanitarian aid	yes
2	Inclusion	no
3	Denominational / missionary	no
4	Medical and humanitarian aid	yes
5	Health	yes
6	Medical aid	no
7	Environmental / nature conservation	yes
8	Health	no
9	Denominational / missionary	yes
10	Environmental	yes
11	Human rights	yes
12	Animal rights	yes
13	Environmental / nature conservation	yes
14	Nature conservation	yes

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted virtually between January and February 2023. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with an interviews guide consisting of two versions: version one was used for NGOs with experience using immersive media and version two for NGOs that have not worked with immersive media technologies so far. Both versions contain three blocks of questions that each address one of the three research questions. The first version includes eight main questions with one subordinate question in an open response format and the second version consists of seven open-ended questions. Both interview guides followed a similar structure and logic to enable a combined analysis of the interview results, while still being able to evaluate differences among the NGOs and their immersive media experiences.

The interviews were analyzed and evaluated using the qualitative content analysis approach according to Mayring (2022). Prerequisite for this method is a category system whose categories were deductively derived from the three research questions as well as from the interview questions. The final category system consists of eight main categories and twelve subcategories, which are all subject to one of the three research questions (see Table 2). To further understand the research process, the questions from the two interview guides were added next to the according subcategories in Table 2.

Additionally, a coding manual with definitions and anchor examples for the respective categories along with coding rules was created during the early stage of the coding process to increase the reliability and validity of the results.

Table 2.

Section of the final category system.

Research Question	Main Category	Subcategory	Interview Questions V1 = experience with immersive media V2 = no experience with immersive media
RQ1	<i>Forms of Immersive Media</i>	Technologies	What immersive media were used in your project(s)? (V1) / From your observations, what immersive media are organizations currently using? (V2)
		Technological tools	
RQ2	<i>User Context</i>	Physical setting	What is your organization's experience related to immersive media? (V1)
		Social setting	
RQ2	<i>Chances and Challenges of Immersive Media</i>	Challenges in Planning and Implementing Immersive Media	What challenges did you face during planning and implementation? (V1)
		Chances of Immersive Media	What new opportunities do you see for your organization by using immersive media and what does this mean for the future work of your organization? (V1)

<i>Potential Chances for the Application of Immersive Media</i>	Chances for the Organization	What opportunities would you see in the use of immersive media for your organization? (V2)
	Probability of the Use of Immersive Media in the Organization	How likely is the use of immersive media in your organization in the future? (V2)
	Chances for the Third Sector	Regarding the third sector, do you see the use of immersive media as a promising communication measure in the future? (V2)

Concerns about intercoder reliability were eliminated since only one coder executed the coding. The coding and subsequent evaluation was done using MAXQDA Analytics Pro data analysis software and lays the groundwork for the key implications of the research findings.

Findings

The following findings were clustered according to the three research questions to identify the extent to which German NGOs use immersive media as part of their strategic communication.

Forms and Contexts of Immersive Media

The results for the first research question show that the most frequently used immersive technology within NGOs was virtual reality. It was

noticeable that the majority of NGOs used two or three technologies in their immersive media projects. Furthermore, a direct connection between VR and 360-degree videos could be identified, as 360-degree videos can be integrated into VR experiences using VR glasses. AR and MR technologies played a subordinate role in NGOs. In terms of the technologies chosen, NGOs most frequently used VR glasses for technical implementation, followed by 360-degree videos. In accordance with immersive media forms, VR glasses and 360-degree videos were the most common combination of immersive media technologies used in the NGO sample. This is clearly demonstrated by the following quote of one interviewee: “We produced 360-degree content during the event. Then we put foldable VR-glasses, the ones you put your smartphone in, into the goodie bags for the guests. So they could watch the same evening on their way home and move 360 degrees through the event.”

To analyze the context of immersive media applications, both the physical and social setting were considered for the research. In this study, the physical setting is understood as the actual place of the use and reception of immersive media content, while the social setting is defined as independent of the physical environment and focuses on the system or sector in which the immersive projects might be taking place. Regarding the physical setting of the projects in the sample, the majority of the immersive media content was distributed online - partly at several access points in the network: “It is embedded on our website and [...] also the 360-degree videos via the HTTP store [...] and via the app.”

The second most common physical setting for immersive media was the display and application in other organizations or companies. This was followed by projects in educational institutions, such as schools, and in their own NGO environments for training staff. The display of immersive media projects in public places played a minor role in the sample.

In terms of the social setting, the majority of NGOs applied immersive media projects in the educational sector. Only a few NGOs applied immersive media in a political or professional context in which the

immersive media were presented to employees of other organizations or companies.

In summary, the first research question can briefly be answered as follows: NGOs operating in Germany mainly used VR and 360-degree applications, mostly distributed online, with the educational sector being the most common context for immersive media.

Opportunities and Challenges in the Use of Immersive Media by NGOs

To fully assess the opportunities and challenges of immersive projects, the results include data from the entire study sample. This includes NGOs that have had no experience in projects using immersive media. Therefore, their input was based on predictions about opportunities and challenges, which simultaneously serve as arguments against the past use of immersive media.

The organizations in the sample saw the greatest challenges of immersive media in the implementation process of such projects as well as in the application and understanding of their technologies. Another difficulty was the uncertainty about the sufficient reach and marketing of the projects. Additional challenges were the high personnel costs and financial expenditures associated with immersive media projects. One interviewee named several of these points: “[...] it was very difficult and extremely lavish to get the footage [...] you can count the photographers who can do this with one hand.”

However, the greatest potential of immersive media, as stated by the subjects, was the ability to raise awareness of the organizations’ issues. As said, for example, in one interview: “[...] I think that immersive media offer a great chance to make topics accessible, for which I would not have the time to wrap my head around. That offers the starting point and shows that this [topic] has a relevance.”

Aspects such as the higher emotionality, the liveliness of immersive media content and the fun factor were emphasized as additional potentials that immersive media have for organizations and their communication. Furthermore, immersive media represented an opportunity for fundraising and the communication with (potential) donors since they were able to present complex issues of NGOs in a comprehensive and vivid manner. Linked to this, some NGOs saw these projects and the associated storytelling strength as another promising possibility for their membership recruitment. Interviewees also highlighted immersive media as a potential tool for positioning an organization as an innovative pioneer or for transferring knowledge internally as well as retaining their target groups.

In addition to the organizational view of the NGOs regarding the immersive media trend, the interviewees were asked about the opportunities for the third sector in general. The results are in line with those in the corporate sector, as both for- and nonprofit organizations see the greatest opportunity in the ability to increase awareness for the mission and respective issues. An increased perception of the NGO at the organizational level and increased funding opportunities through the implementation of immersive technologies were also frequently mentioned by the interview partners as future prospects for the third sector.

The Use of Immersive Media for Strategic Objectives of NGOs

The challenges NGOs face during the process and implementation of their projects with immersive media were revealed by the results of the third research question. Further challenges voiced by NGOs, which have not implemented any immersive media projects, provide insights into the reasons against the use and the general hesitation towards the use of immersive media in NGOs.

In general, all NGOs that have had implemented immersive media projects commissioned external companies to fulfil the projects for or with them, mainly due to lack of know-how or personnel resources. The lack of

experience and knowledge about immersive technologies was also an argument of the NGOs in the sample that did not use immersive media for their communication. The main argument against the application of immersive technologies was the unpredictable cost-benefit calculation of such projects and the doubts about their suitability for the target groups. Financial reasons were also frequently mentioned as hindering NGOs from realizing projects with immersive media so far. Other less dominant reasons were lack of personnel resources and procedural difficulties for the preliminary rejection of immersive projects. While the findings on the challenges of immersive media were provided by the entire NGO sample regardless of their experience with immersive media, the results on strategic objectives needed to be differentiated.

For the purpose of this study and in order to adequately answer the third research question on the strategic use of immersive media in NGO communication, the results were limited to insights from NGOs that have already implemented projects involving immersive media. Regarding these organizations, the majority had strategic objectives for their projects with immersive media but none with concrete performance indicators or other measurable goals. Furthermore, the majority of the NGOs could not provide any evaluation of these objectives, as most projects were still in the field or evaluation phase.

To gain a better understanding of how immersive media are used to achieve strategic objectives in NGO communication, the results must be interpreted in relation to the general goals encompassing all communication measures of the organization. As mentioned, the most important goal for the use of immersive media was to create public awareness for the issues of the NGO and the respective organization in general. Thus, immersive media projects were frequently implemented or planned with the intent to create greater public attention to the projects and issues involved. However, the results also show serious challenges that NGOs had or foresaw in relation to immersive media projects. Accordingly, in several NGOs, immersive media were part of projects

aimed at meeting strategic NGO communication objectives, but they were not considered a strategic tool or strategic objectives by themselves. One interviewee summed up the hesitating position of NGOs towards immersive media: “For sure the media will get more popular [...] But for now we do not see a priority to use them.”

It can be summarized that immersive media projects play a part in the strategic NGO communication but are not implemented explicitly as strategic tools to reach predefined goals.

Discussion

This discussion addresses the results of the study in order to answer the overarching research question concerning the extent to which NGOs use immersive media as part of their strategic communication. In summary, the study revealed that while immersive media currently do not play a dominant role within the NGO landscape, they show great potential in respect to organizational objectives, such as increased awareness towards the organization and its issues. While the majority of NGOs subject to this study have had first experiences with immersive technologies, there are general challenges that mainly relate to the unique characteristics of NGOs, such as tighter communication budgets (Remus & Rademacher, 2018, p. IX). The results will be closely discussed by looking at the three research questions regarding 1) the forms and context of immersive media applications in NGOs, 2) their opportunities and challenges and 3) the use of immersive media in a strategic communication context by NGOs.

Forms and Contexts of Immersive Media in NGOs: VR and 360-Degree Videos in Diverse Application Settings

VR and 360-degree videos are the main immersive media applications within the research sample; understanding this tendency is multifaceted. One explanation for the frequent use of 360-degree videos lies in their low-threshold applications, as no additional equipment other than cameras for recording are needed. Since NGOs usually have a tight communication budget, the use of 360-degree videos represents a reasonable entry point

into the world of immersive media. Additionally, there is a clear link between the use of VR and 360-degree videos in the surveyed NGOs that have implemented several immersive media projects. This can be attributed to the fact that 360-degree formats can be further developed by receiving the 360-degree films through VR glasses. At the same time, the technology opens up a wide range of design possibilities for NGOs. However, it remains unclear why certain immersive technologies were used instead of others, as interviewees could not always give complete insight into the decision process, since the choice was often made by an external service partner.

The dominant online distribution for the immersive media projects, often through several media channels, aligns with the increasing importance of online communication and social media for NGOs (Bürker, 2018, pp. 462-463) as well as the general trend of digitalization within society. Furthermore, the results highlight the diverse application possibilities of immersive technologies for NGOs. The varying contexts in which immersive media are used was mainly determined by the thematic field and objectives of the NGOs. Therefore, physical and social settings differed depending on the organization.

Yet, a tendency towards the educational field for the application of immersive media by NGOs could be identified. These findings generally align with a preliminary analysis by Bitkom e.V. (2021, p. 16) in which education was identified as a popular application context for AR. Even though the immersive technologies in this study were mainly VR and 360-degree videos, a trend towards the use of immersive media for educational purposes within the third sector becomes evident from the results. In contrast to expectations that immersive media would be used mainly to address potential donors in public, the professional educational sector turns out to be a relevant and promising field for NGOs.

Moreover, the immersive projects examined in this study were frequently employed in multiple social settings. One possible explanation for this finding is rooted in the complex and multi-faceted nature of NGO topics,

as well as the need to engage with a diverse field of stakeholders (Stötzer, 2008, S. 407). Furthermore, the analysis related to the social setting reveals that immersive media projects of the surveyed NGOs primarily focus on specific target groups and serve particular purposes. For instance, immersive media were utilized in companies, schools, or as a training tool for employees.

Additionally, NGOs that have already used immersive media technologies all collaborated with an external service partner. This was mainly due to the lack of know-how within the organization on the use of immersive applications. Some NGOs even sought additional support concerning the dramaturgy or budget planning of immersive projects. This further highlights the early stage that immersive media are still in within the third sector. In summary, the majority of NGOs expressed a greater need for both human and financial resources, indicating that implementing immersive projects entails a considerable additional effort for them.

Opportunities and Challenges for the Third Sector: Attention Generation and Complex Technologies

Results about the challenges of immersive media also revealed that NGO communicators are still not familiar with and properly trained for applying immersive media into their communication strategy. This lack of experience and training creates an uncertainty in dealing with immersive technologies, especially with regard to the technical requirements and the assessment of the necessary resources. Thus, familiar and traditional communication measures remain the ordinary means of choice. If immersive projects were implemented in an NGO, they generally served as an additional measure in the communication mix but were not seen as equivalent to established measures.

In terms of the procedural challenges, there are differences within the sample, which is mainly due to the individuality of the immersive projects. Marketing methods and public placement are additional challenges for NGOs, which further highlights the expressed doubts of NGOs about the

general reach of immersive media. On a broader level, NGOs are uncertain about the extent to which immersive media will become an established trend at all. They do not consider the medium as a common everyday technology yet. This is a decisive reason that discourages both the first-time and repeated implementation of projects using immersive media. According to Bitkom e.V. (2022, p. 14), VR glasses are occasionally used in a private context by 18 % of the German population aged 16 and over. Thus, not even a quarter use VR glasses privately. This generally low application within society supports the hesitations voiced by the NGOs. Simultaneously, the small percentage of immersive media users has an impact on the relatively high acquisition costs of such technologies. This in turn is a key challenge for NGOs given their limited financial resources. Additionally, it is difficult for NGOs to set realistic budgets for immersive projects, since most of them are implemented as pilot projects or trials and do not provide proper benchmarks for the NGO sector as a whole. This further slows the spread of immersive media in the non-profit sector. It can be concluded that immersive media are not yet established media formats, as most NGOs are skeptical about the high costs of such technologies and often do not consider their application as justified in terms of reach and outcome.

However, the NGOs surveyed also see potential for their organizations and the third sector in general. The key potential of immersive media lies in attracting attention for the organizations and their missions. Applications with immersive media enhance the accessibility for civil society issues for people, which is a considerable finding of this research. Thus, immersive media have the chance to contribute to a main goal of NGOs, which is to increase awareness for their causes.

The discovery that emotionality, liveliness, and enjoyment are further potential advantages of using immersive media aligns with the findings of a study conducted by Bitkom e.V. and Deloitte (2017, p. 46). They claim that VR should be understood as a technological means to create compassion and empathy. Contrary to findings of Yoo and Drumwright

(2018) and practical experiences by Greenpeace (Greenpeace, n.d.) and Amnesty International (Amnesty International, n.d.), that immersive media contribute to the objectives of membership recruitment and donation acquisition, this research shows that immersive technologies are not primarily used for fundraising purposes in German NGOs. Rather, they support the overall objective of increasing awareness. The pioneer position created through the use of immersive media offers further potential for gaining and retaining members or volunteers as well as transferring internal knowledge through in-house training for staff members. Therefore, immersive media could indirectly contribute to the overall objectives of NGOs. However, these findings are not statistically significant and would require further research to validate their significance. NGOs that do not prioritize the use of immersive media for future projects currently feel uncertainties caused by factors such as the high costs involved in realizing immersive projects. Additionally, the unpredictable development of the immersive media trend leads to a certain ambivalence about the use of immersive media by NGOs in the future. In summary, immersive media are considered as supporting measures but do not play a leading role in their use by NGOs today. However, the general engagement with immersive media is considered as relevant by the NGOs of this study's sample. This provides ground to further observe and pursue the potential and experienced opportunities of immersive media for NGOs analyzed in this research.

Another challenge for NGOs lies in the skepticism about immersive media being adequately able to address target groups. For them to be effective tools within NGO communication, they must engage with the relevant stakeholders. In most cases, immersive media are currently not suitable to address the target groups of NGOs. The primary reason for this is that the stakeholders do not use VR glasses or similar technologies required for an immersive experience in a private context. Since individuals such as new members, volunteers or donors form the most important target groups for German NGOs, traditional communication activities such as e-mail communication or written letters are mostly preferred at this point. The

results of the study show that immersive projects can be used for specific purposes or target groups, but less for the general approach of individuals in the fundraising context. Therefore, immersive media are not primarily used to address the mass media, instead they are specifically used to inform, raise awareness and educate about certain topics for specific target groups. Even though there is a general openness towards the (future) implementation of immersive media projects in NGOs, the balance between the costs and benefits is decisive for the (potential) use of immersive media for NGOs. The planning, implementation and conception of immersive projects requires high expenditures which cannot be responsibly implemented by non-profit organizations that are mainly financed by donations. The significant costs associated with immersive technologies represent one of the key factors that discourage the utilization of immersive media in NGOs. The findings in this study align with Bruhn and Herbst (2016, p. 614), who claim that NGOs use their communication tools based on a high potential benefit at a justifiable cost, which is clearly reflected in the argumentation of the surveyed NGOs against the first or recurring use of immersive media in their communication strategy.

Immersive Media for Strategic Goal Setting: Supporting Role and Evaluation Problems

To examine the strategic role of immersive media for the objectives of NGOs, the nature of goal setting in non-profit organizations should be taken into account. Information on predefined strategic goals were formulated very vaguely by the interview partners and included no concrete key indicators on the performance of immersive media projects. This can be explained by the trial phase in which most of the projects are currently still in. There is no prior experience or available benchmark for NGOs to base their objectives on when first experimenting with immersive technologies for their communication. The uncertain outcome and impact of such innovative and fairly new projects additionally contribute to a rather vague or even missing formulation of goals or strategic objectives by NGOs. At this point, it is relevant to mention Bruhn

and Herbst (2016), as they highlight the rather qualitative character of NGO objectives in comparison to those of for-profit organizations (p. 606). This reveals that projects involving immersive technologies do not follow certain key point indicators (KPIs) or quantitative goals and objectives within NGO communication have a rather qualitative nature.

For these reasons, the strategic objective for immersive media technologies in NGOs cannot be explained by measurable figures and must be viewed from a different angle. Instead, NGOs assess their communication strategy based on the opportunities that certain measures provide for their organization. Therefore, qualitative objectives such as gaining public attention and strengthening the positioning usually prevail in NGOs. Accordingly, immersive media contribute to overarching strategic communication goals of an NGO, but do not have an independent strategic role within the communication strategy of the third sector. It should also be noted that this does not have to be understood as a problem, since the value of immersive media can generally lie in supporting the overall communication strategy of NGOs by adding an innovative and unique dimension to the commonly used communication measures. This would imply that immersive media on their own do not determine the strategy of communication, but indirectly support it by contributing to the communication mix.

While this study offers valuable insights into the use of immersive media in the third sector, there are some limitations that need to be addressed. Methodologically, qualitative semi-structured interviews bear inevitable limitations due their subjective nature and the small sample size (n=14) does not allow for generalizations about the results (Herczeg & Wippersberg, 2021, p. 119). This was mainly due to the fact that immersive media are not yet widely used, especially in the third sector. However, since the aim of this predominantly unexplored research field was to generate initial findings and patterns for further research, the method presented here is best applicable. Furthermore, only communication officers within the NGOs were interviewed, excluding

any outside perspective on the use of immersive media in the third sector. Many NGOs in the sample were still in the testing or evaluation phase at the time of the interview, which is why no verifiable insights on the level of success regarding the use of immersive media as a strategic communication measure could be obtained.

The two versions of the interview guide, which were created due to the mixed sample of NGOs both with and without experience in dealing with immersive media, led to a further limitation. The interview partners answered the questions based on different levels of experience and knowledge. Therefore, a separate consideration of the answers between NGOs with and without experience on immersive media could have generated closer insights but would have reduced the comparability among the sample. Furthermore, future studies should eliminate the separation between technology and technical tools within the immersive media field since interviewees could not distinguish between them. The sole use of the term technical tool would have been sufficient in regard to the validity. However, the limitations are not exclusively a weakness of the present study but offer a basis for future research on immersive media in the NGO sector.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The study reveals that immersive media can be seen as an innovative and valuable contributor to the communication mix of NGOs to pursue strategic objectives and generate more attention for the organization. Although initial approaches to the use of the immersive media as a strategic communication measure could be identified, immersive technologies in the non-profit sector are still at an early stage and not a firm part of the organizational strategy so far. NGOs are still wary about the development of the immersive media trend and favor conventional communication strategies. The underlying problem for this pattern lies in the high costs of immersive media technologies. Therefore, more affordable and generally accessible VR and AR technologies are needed to reduce the inhibition threshold. In addition, NGOs that have experience

with immersive technologies lack adequate evaluation of project outcomes, which is related to the general lack of sufficient evaluations of non-profit communication interventions, as already pointed out by Bürker (2018, pp. 463-468). Although immersive media are not yet equivalent to traditional communication tools in NGOs, the results show that the interviewed NGO communication managers see the potential of immersive media to enrich and complement traditional communication tools to generate attention for the organization, as immersive media can be used in diverse and innovative contexts.

Managerial Implications

While the trend of immersive media has not undergone a large breakthrough within society, NGOs should not sit back, but instead use the potential of immersive media with their innovative and diverse applications as an advantage in a highly competitive fundraising market to stand out in the third sector and offer new approaches beyond mainstream communication measures. This implies that NGOs have to be courageous and invest financial and personnel resources such as hiring external service partners or training staff in the use of immersive media. In addition, innovative, proactive NGOs are needed in the third sector to pioneer the successful use of immersive media to overcome skepticism about the use of immersive media, highlight its benefits and build the currently missing benchmark in the NGO landscape.

Future Research

Since the research field of immersive media in the third sector is fairly new, this study reveals some areas that could be relevant for future studies. Firstly, it would be interesting to analyze the individual technologies of immersive media separately, since their different technological properties could bear different outcomes, especially regarding strategic goals and potentials for NGOs. Secondly, understanding common arguments against the use of immersive media and their interrelation can offer further insights into the cautious engagement with immersive media in the third

sector. Thirdly, the study reveals an uncertainty within NGOs about the effectiveness of immersive media, which can be explained by the lack of evaluation for the existing immersive media projects. The development of analytical tools and methods to measure the outcomes of immersive media applications in the field of research, but also in collaboration with the practical non-profit sector, can therefore fill a major gap in research and practice.

Additionally, the results demonstrate a tendency towards the use of immersive media for educational purposes suggesting the need for a closer empirical understanding of the reasons and potentials of immersive media in an educational context. Lastly, research can be extended to an international sample to gain a deeper understanding of the potential of immersive media for non-profit organizations in general.

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Part 2

The Power of Silence

Do Medium-Sized Companies Listen?

The Importance of Corporate Listening in the Communication and Strategy Development of Medium-Sized Companies in Germany: A Qualitative Study

Valentin Hausmann, Amelie Heinz, Mirjam Hörl, Antonia Rüth, Meike Schröder

Abstract

Medium-sized companies make up a large part of the German corporate landscape and have often been the subject of empirical research. However, the corporate communication of medium-sized companies has hardly been studied to this day. This paper, therefore, deals with the corporate communication of medium-sized companies in Germany. The concept of Corporate Listening is at the center of the study. The research interest lies in creating an overview of the use of Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies, including organizational prerequisites, measures, reasons, and effects. For this purpose, communication managers from eleven medium-sized companies were interviewed. Macnamara's Architecture of Listening and the Communication Value Circle serve as the primary theoretical basis for this study. The results show that mid-sized companies possess a general awareness of the necessity of Corporate Listening and achieve listening to stakeholders and the public to at least some extent. Various reasons for this awareness could be identified. However, the existing prerequisites in the companies to carry out Corporate Listening measures still reveal potentials for optimization. The study shows that companies include insights gained through Corporate Listening in the planning of future actions; however, these insights are rarely considered for strategic measures.

Keywords: Corporate Listening, medium-sized companies, Architecture of Listening, Communication Value Circle, Corporate Communication

Introduction

More than 99 % of companies in Germany belong to the SME [small and medium-sized enterprises] sector. They are the backbone of the German economy in terms of value creation, employment, and training (Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft, n.d.). This assessment is confirmed by the Institute for SME research [Institut für Mittelstandsforschung Bonn/ IfM Bonn]. In 2020, 99.3 % of German companies were SMEs, they generated 33.7 % of the total turnover in Germany and 54.4 % of all dependent employees worked in SMEs (Institut für Mittelstandsforschung Bonn, 2023b). Since small and medium-sized enterprises have such a special position in the German economy, they frequently attract the attention of academics (Moog & Witt, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, it is surprising that corporate communication in SMEs has received very little academic attention so far, especially since there is agreement on its relevance. The increase in the importance of corporate communication is undisputed, numerous empirical studies show that communication is considered a strategic success factor in business (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 70). Small and medium-sized enterprises are not unaffected by this development. Above all, the growing pressure of competition, the striving for competitiveness and the will to survive on the market are forcing medium-sized enterprises to devote more attention to the topic of corporate communication (Winkler, 2020, p. 3). Nevertheless, the communication of medium-sized companies has been neglected in research thus far (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 36).

According to the understanding of Borner and Zerfass (2018), corporate communication is divided into the strategic modes of Corporate Messaging and Corporate Listening. While Corporate Messaging describes the communication of corporate messages, Corporate Listening involves the conscious and selective reception, interpretation and evaluation of articulated stakeholder impulses and environmental factors with the intent to support corporate decisions. Up until now, the academic focus has undoubtedly been on the mode of corporate messaging (p. 13).

The concept of Corporate Listening receives comparatively little attention: “Research shows that listening by organizations, including corporations, is under-studied and under-developed” (Macnamara, 2020, p. 389). In addition to the small attention Corporate Listening has received theoretically, even less empirical research has been done in this field. The few available empirical studies often focus on large companies (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 13; Burnside-Lawry, 2012, p. 107). The analysis of Corporate Listening in German medium-sized enterprises therefore represents a research gap, from which the epistemological interest of this work arises. Thus, the following research question can be derived:

RQ: What role does the use of Corporate Listening play in the communication work and corporate strategy of medium-sized companies?

To answer the research question, the concept of Corporate Listening will first be described in more detail. The Communication Value Circle (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017) subsequently serves as a basis to show how communication and especially Corporate Listening can create added value for companies. The study continues by explaining Macnamara’s Architecture of Listening, which describes the necessary prerequisites for target-oriented Corporate Listening (Macnamara, 2015). This is followed by the definition of medium-sized companies and an investigation of the current state of medium-sized companies with regard to strategy formation and corporate communication. The overall research question and the subordinate research questions are based on these theoretical descriptions. The methodological part provides an overview of the sample, the method in use as well as its implementation. The study closes by presenting the results and a discussion answering the research questions, followed by limitations of the study and a conclusion.

Theoretical Foundation

From Organizational Listening to Corporate Listening

Macnamara describes listening as a cognitive engagement with another person’s statements that requires attention, recognition, and interpretation

to identify meaning and generate understanding, as well as a possible response. Thus, listening is an active effort (Macnamara, 2013, p. 163). According to Macnamara, the importance of listening stems from the fact that it is the logical consequence of speaking. Only through listening can organizations achieve desired goals such as two-way communication, stakeholder dialogue, engagement, and the maintenance of stakeholder relationships (Macnamara, 2015, p. 12). However, Organizational Listening has a limited theoretical foundation. According to Borner and Zeffass (2018), this concept implies that communication aims at mutually consensual relationships between organizations and stakeholders (p. 6). However, this normative understanding is too narrow and one-sided; it goes beyond the mere cultivation of relationships (Ingenhoff et al., 2022, p. 580). Additionally, the further value creation of Organizational Listening needs to be considered (Borner & Zeffass, 2018, p. 6). Based on this criticism, Borner and Zeffass adjust the idea of Organizational Listening and develop the theoretical concept of Corporate Listening, which is used in this research project (Borner & Zeffass, 2018, p. 8).

As a basic principle, companies should learn about the interests, opinions, and values of their environment. Borner and Zeffass (2018) describe this process as the *inbound perspective* of companies. The inbound component of corporate communication is represented by the strategic mode of Corporate Listening. To support corporate decision-making, articulated impulses from stakeholders as well as pertinent context variables are consciously and selectively perceived, analyzed, and evaluated (p. 9-13). The authors contrast this concept with corporate messaging, which is associated with the *outbound perspective* of organizations due to the distribution of corporate messages. They also explain that Corporate Listening is often an essential part of dialogues in the communicative sense and can occur together with corporate messaging (Borner & Zeffass, 2018, p. 15). Depending on the industry and corporate strategy, some companies focus more on Corporate Listening than others, and the various Corporate Listening activities of different companies vary accordingly (Borner & Zeffass, 2018, p. 17).

Communication Value Circle and Architecture of Listening

The Communication Value Circle (Borner & Zerfass, 2017) and Macnamara's Architecture of Listening (Macnamara, 2015) are the primary theoretical basis for this study. Following Borner and Zerfass' definition, Corporate Listening can impact the planning and execution of corporate messaging and influence corporate decisions and strategies (Ingenhoff et al., 2022, p. 579). Considering the aforementioned critique, the question arises as to what additional value Corporate Listening can contribute to companies. This is where Zerfass and Viertmann's Communication Value Circle comes into play (2017). Based on this multidimensional concept, Borner and Zerfass define various areas where Corporate Listening can benefit companies. Transferring Corporate Listening into the individual dimensions of the circle reveals various ways in which it contributes to the value-creation process of a company. Regarding tangible assets, Corporate Listening can support the integration of customer and employee interests into the company's decision-making process. Corporate Listening can also help identify intangible assets, such as the company's reputation. In addition, internal Corporate Listening can strengthen corporate culture. Macnamara's understanding that listening improves the relationship between companies and their stakeholders relates to the dimension of room for maneuver. Thus, Corporate Listening can contribute to the public acceptance and legitimacy of the company. Finally, it can help companies to be resilient in crises and to identify new trends at an early stage. Thus, Corporate Listening can strengthen the company's innovation potential and seizing opportunities for development (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, pp. 18-19).

As there is little research on Corporate Listening and its characteristics, aspects of Organizational Listening are used as a further basis for this study. Macnamara has developed an Architecture of Listening containing eight elements that aim to support companies in conducting listening at an organizational level (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47). Although Organizational or Corporate Listening is based on interpersonal listening and requires

cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills from the responsible employees, it also requires appropriate structures, technologies, and processes on an organizational level (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47).

According to Macnamara, this Architecture of Listening starts with a *culture of listening* in an organization. Such a culture is significant since Organizational Listening only truly occurs when the organization recognizes that its stakeholders have the right to express their opinions and the organization is open to listening to them (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 247). How effectively and distinctively an organization listens is also highly dependent on this culture (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47). Based on an organizational culture that is open to listening, *policies for listening* need to be established to define a listening framework within the organization. These policies should be embedded throughout the organization and demonstrated externally through listening activities (Macnamara, 2016a, pp. 252-254). Next, Macnamara adds the recognition of the *politics of listening* to the Architecture of Listening. Only when companies acknowledge their stakeholders' right to be heard, genuine and ethical Organizational Listening can take place (Macnamara, 2015, p. 48). Organizations can learn to be aware of the *politics of listening* by employing the before-mentioned policies and specific *structures and processes for listening*. The latter are particularly important in organizations where several people or departments are involved in listening. The aim is to record important aspects of listening activities, analyze them and pass them on to decision-makers (Macnamara, 2015, pp. 49-50). Overall, if there are no specific *structures and processes for listening* in departments and work processes, it is unlikely that listening will take place (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 264).

Following the structures and processes, Macnamara includes *technologies for listening* in the Architecture of Listening. They can be helpful for implementing listening activities in companies as well as for collecting information (Macnamara, 2015, pp. 50-51). Such *technologies for listening* include, among others, (social) media monitoring programs and

analysis software. A particular focus in terms of listening technologies lies on social media. Although it is a very accessible technology that enables organizational listening, many companies do not exploit this potential. They only use their channels to disseminate their own messages (Macnamara, 2016a, pp. 265-266). All in all, it is central to note that technologies for listening cannot take over the concrete assessments and evaluations for which empathy is required (Macnamara, 2015, pp. 50-51).

These first elements of the Architecture of Listening raise the question about *resources for listening*. According to Macnamara, Organizational Listening requires human and financial resources as well as a changed time allocation (Macnamara, 2015, p. 51). For example, media monitoring or other listening activities and dealing with specific technologies require hiring appropriate staff. The elements *culture of listening*, *policies for listening*, *structures for listening* and *resources for listening* form the core of the architecture of listening (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 254). A new focus on Organizational or Corporate Listening also provokes a change in intellectual resources or the skill profile of employees in positions with strong stakeholder engagement (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 269). In addition to basic interpersonal abilities, these *skills for listening* include aspects specific to Organizational Listening. For example, knowledge about quantitative and qualitative research methods and analytical tools is essential. However, simply listening to opinions and interests does not mean that an organization is practicing Corporate Listening. Without the last element of the architecture, precisely *articulation of listening to decision-making*, listening cannot be considered Corporate Listening. This can only be the case if what is heard is adequately communicated and incorporated into the decision-making and strategy-development process of an organization (Macnamara, 2015, p. 52). However, it is important to emphasize that passing on stakeholder views to decision-makers does not mean unreflective endorsement (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 269).

A Lack of Corporate Listening in Theory and Practice?

The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management urged communication and PR managers to foster a culture of listening and involvement as early as 2012 (Global Alliance, 2012). Nevertheless, several empirical studies have demonstrated that organizations, businesses, and governments employ little, if any, listening methods (Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Macnamara, 2016b). Organizational and Corporate Listening is understudied. The concepts have gotten very little attention in empirical studies, which have mostly focused on Corporate Messaging (Macnamara, 2020, p. 389). Additionally, research on Corporate Listening frequently concentrates on a particular area, such as large companies in the English-speaking world (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 13; Burnside-Lawry, 2012, p. 107). As a result, there is still very little research in the field of Organizational or Corporate Listening in small and medium-sized businesses.

In a review of the literature, Macnamara was able to find only a small number of publications and articles discussing the idea of listening. This is despite a general understanding of the importance of listening in dialogues or communication processes (Macnamara, 2016b, p. 135). The call for more empirical research runs through all existing studies.

The German “Mittelstand”: Definition, Strategies and Corporate Communication

So far there is no generally applicable definition of the German term “Mittelstand”. In numerical data, it is usually grouped with so-called small and medium-sized enterprises [SMEs]. Micro-enterprises and small enterprises, which are part of the SMEs alongside the “Mittelstand”, are deliberately not included in this work. However, much of the available literature does not refer explicitly to medium-sized companies, but to SMEs as a whole.

The definition of medium-sized companies that will be used for this study comes from the IfM Bonn. The following qualitative criteria must be met

to qualify as a medium-sized company according to the IfM Bonn: In the respective companies, up to two natural persons or their family members hold (directly or indirectly) at least 50 % of the company shares. In addition, these persons must be part of the management (IfM Bonn, 2023c). The unity of ownership and management is therefore particularly important. Quantitatively, medium-sized enterprises distinguish themselves from other types of enterprises by the number of employees of 50 to 499 and an annual turnover of up to 50 million euros (IfM Bonn, 2023a).

In order to consider the role of strategy development in SMEs, the next step is to define the term “strategy”. In the field of corporate communication, the term strategy in the business context means the long-term planned behavior of a company to achieve its goals (Crespo et al., 2009, p. 125). Earlier empirical studies in the 1980s showed a clear picture regarding strategy formation in SMEs: Only 11 % of German SMEs were conducting strategic planning at that time (Crespo et al., 2009, p. 126). More recent research results from a nationwide company survey in 2007 have started to show an upward trend. About 42 % of the companies surveyed have a corporate strategy that is at least partially written down (Held, 2007, p. 26). Almost half of the companies surveyed also see strategic planning as an essential success factor in SMEs (Held, 2007, p. 22). A tendency towards increased strategic action in SMEs is thus visible, even if the development is only progressing slowly. Obstacles are, for example, insufficient knowledge as well as scarce personnel and time resources, which prevent SMEs from developing systematized strategies (Crespo et al., 2009, p. 126). In SMEs, actions and decisions are often not comprehensively planned and prepared in advance (Welter, 2003, pp. 51-52), but it is frequently the case that a sum of operational and ad hoc decisions or actions can only show strategic relevance when viewed retrospectively (Welter, 2003, p. 52). As a result, the strategy development process in SMEs usually looks different from the ideal proceeding outlined in theory. SMEs are therefore often accused of lacking a basic strategic orientation and a lack of medium- and long-term planning

(Winkler, 2020, p. 32). More often there seems to be a tendency to make pragmatic or spontaneous decisions that usually have only a short-term orientation (Crespo et al., 2009, p. 126).

A lack of strategic planning is also found in the communication work of SMEs. Before presenting characteristics of corporate communication practices in SMEs as described in the literature, it is important to mention that SME communication has so far received comparatively little attention in research (Winkler, 2020, p. 61). The main interest of PR and organizational communication focuses on large companies and corporations (Winkler, 2020, pp. 79-80). Medium-sized businesses are usually left out, not seldom due to their heterogeneous nature (Zerfass & Winkler, 2016, p. 267).

The lack of appropriate communication structures is often identified as one of the overarching characteristics of corporate communication in SMEs (Winkler, 2020, pp. 80-85). Nevertheless, there is an overall agreement that communication is a strategic success factor for SMEs and that professionalizing corporate communication is essential (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, pp. 70-71). In the study *Corporate Communications in medium-sized companies 2016*, in which medium-sized companies in Germany were surveyed online, four-fifths of the respondents stated that communication and the public opinion are indispensable for their company's success (Zerfaß et al., 2016, p. 20). In practice, however, the picture is different. The integration of the PR function can, to a certain extent, provide information about the importance ascribed to communication work in the company (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 70). The size of the company seems to play a significant role in the organization of PR tasks, which is why a negative picture emerges, especially with regard to medium-sized companies. Most companies without their own PR department can be assigned to medium-sized companies according to their turnover size, where PR is usually conducted by the management itself (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 71). At first glance, communication that is located at the management level could be an

indicator that communicative concerns are included in strategic corporate management (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 71). However, this is not the case in reality. Rather, the reasons for locating it at the management level are the unity of ownership and management as well as scarce financial and human resources (Zerfass & Winkler, 2016, p. 283).

Another aggravating factor is that communication tasks in medium-sized companies are often in the hands of single persons (Winkler, 2020, p. 84). The responsibilities of PR officers are usually not limited to these communicative tasks but are carried out in addition to other tasks in the company. The expectations towards communication managers in medium-sized companies are correspondingly high: They are expected to master not only strategic communication planning but also the operational activities based on it (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 73). However, those in charge not seldom have a low level of PR training and their core competencies do not lie in the area of public relations (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 74). Despite such deficits, only a fraction of SMEs resorts to the expertise of external service providers (Zerfaß et al., 2016, p. 28).

Zerfass and Winkler draw a clear conclusion about corporate communication in SMEs: “Concepts employed often depend on the situation and occasion, and individual communication dominates the use of overall strategies and professionalized communication departments” (Zerfass & Winkler, 2016, p. 283). In 2016, the lack of an overarching communication strategy remains the biggest hurdle to the professionalization of corporate communication in medium-sized companies, right after the scarcity of financial resources (Zerfaß et al., 2016, p. 34). Three-quarters of respondents in 2016 do not have a formulated overarching communication strategy (Zerfaß et al., 2016, p. 43). However, a positive development is now visible. Compared to the study in 2015, medium-sized companies already see fewer obstacles to the further development of their corporate communication (Zerfaß et al., 2016, pp. 35-40).

Derivation of the Research Questions

To provide an answer to the main research question “*What role does the use of Corporate Listening play in the communication work and corporate strategy of medium-sized companies?*”, this study draws on the research and theory already available for large companies on the topic of corporate listening (see chapter *Communication Value Circle and Architecture of Listening*). This is combined with previous findings on communication and strategy formation of medium-sized companies (see chapter *The German “Mittelstand”: Definition, Strategies and Corporate Communication*). Macnamara’s Architecture of Listening, Zerfass and Viertmann’s Communication Value Circle, as well as the question of strategic planning in medium-sized companies are taken into account. The research questions pursue three different goals, thereby breaking down the three topics of corporate listening presented above.

The first question focuses on the current state of Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies and is thus primarily descriptive. Based on the Architecture of Listening (Macnamara, 2015), which is important for the success of Corporate Listening, the question considers the existing framework conditions in the company and the measures implemented.

Borner and Zerfass (2018) describe four possible dimensions in which Corporate Listening can contribute to a company’s value creation process: tangible assets, intangible assets, room for maneuver and opportunities for development. Based on these dimensions of the Communication Value Circle, the second research question deals with why medium-sized companies implement Corporate Listening measures. This question thus fulfils an explanatory function and explores the reasons behind the use of Corporate Listening.

In the third research question, the unique situation of communication work and strategy development in medium-sized companies and the impact Corporate Listening has on them is being analyzed. On the one hand, SMEs are accused of lacking strategic planning and instead implementing

ad-hoc decisions, both for their overall corporate strategy and their communicative activities. On the other hand, however, there is a clear trend of more and more SMEs having a corporate strategy that is at least partially laid down in writing and that professional communication is seen as essential for corporate success (see chapter *The German "Mittelstand": Definition, Strategies and Corporate Communication*). Accordingly, the research interest of the third question is to determine to what extent the insights gained through corporate listening are considered in strategic decisions of medium-sized companies.

This leads to the following research questions that deal with the prerequisites and measures (RQ1), the reasons (RQ2) and the influence of Corporate Listening on strategy development (RQ3):

RQ1: What are the prerequisites for conducting Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies and what measures do they implement within the framework of Corporate Listening?

RQ2: Why do medium-sized companies use Corporate Listening?

RQ3: How do the insights gained from Corporate Listening influence the strategy development and communicative activities of the companies?

Methodological Approach

In order to find an answer to the aforementioned research questions, a qualitative approach was chosen for this study. Data was collected through expert interviews with a partially standardized procedure. This choice is based on the early state of research on Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies. Therefore, an exploration of the research field was necessary first.

The guideline for the expert interviews was developed based on the previously presented research questions and their underlying theoretical constructs. In total, the guideline consisted of 19 questions and was

divided into four topics: measures, reasons, strategy/handling of the findings from active listening, and forecast. Within the questions, the specific term “Corporate Listening” was not mentioned, instead synonyms such as “active listening” were used to avoid potentially putting off the interviewees.

The total number of all medium-sized companies in Germany represents the basic population for this study. This population was ultimately limited by the previously established definition and the premise that there had to be a person responsible for communication within the company. Furthermore, it was considered reasonable to select companies that operate in the B2C sector for the survey. Taking all the above factors into account, a deliberate selection procedure was finally applied for the sample based on typical cases.

Through online research, the contact details of a total of 131 companies were collected, all of which fulfilled the aforementioned criteria. The aim was to find the person responsible for corporate communication within the company. Contact was established both via telephone and email. In the end, a total of eleven interviews were conducted. The companies of the recruited interview partners were active in the food, tourism, toy manufacturing, healthcare, bathroom equipment and publishing sectors (see Table 1).

The interviews took place between December 2022 and February 2023. The plan was to conduct all interviews via video call. However, due to technical difficulties, two interviews had to be conducted by telephone. There was also one face-to-face interview at the request of one of the interview partners. The interviews were conducted by a total of three people from the research team and lasted between 19 and 47 minutes. On average, the interview length was 34 minutes. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Table 1

Overview of the interview partners and the sectors, their companies are active in

Interview	Position/Department	Sector
I#1	Press & Marketing Manager	Bath equipment
I#2	Marketing & Controlling Manager	Food
I#3	Head of Communication	Food
I#4	Head of Marketing and Product Management	Food
I#5	Senior Manager Public Relations	Tourism
I#6	Management	Publishing
I#7	Head of Public Relations	Tourism
I#8	Marketing Manager	Healthcare
I#9	Marketing & Sales	Tourism
I#10	Co-CEO	Toy manufacturing
I#11	Marketing and Sales Management	Food

In order to analyze these transcripts, the qualitative analysis method according to Kuckartz was chosen. The categories were formed deductively from the underlying theory and were inductively tested and expanded with subcategories throughout the text. This resulted in the system of categories, described in Figure 1, for analyzing the collected material.

In this analysis, Corporate Listening measures include the activities and circumstances that companies create, carry out and use to listen to stakeholders, both internally and externally. It must be said that the concept of Corporate Listening measures has been broadly interpreted here. This was done due to the current situation of measures in medium-sized companies, as described earlier.

Figure 1

Category system of the qualitative content analysis on Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies

Prerequisites	Measures	Reasons	Impact	Forecast
culture of listening	media-based	opportunities for development	no change necessary	
policies for listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ qualitative ○ quantitative 	room for manoeuvre	change necessary	
politics of listening	personal	intangible assets	no statement possible	
structures and processes for listening		tangible assets		
technologies for listening				
ressources for listening				
skills for listening				
articulation of listening to decision-making				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ storage ○ processing 				
other				

Findings

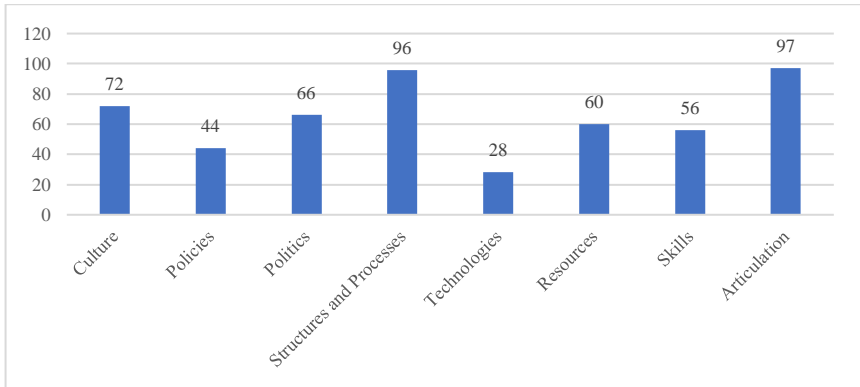
The results for each research question are analyzed separately. However, to gain a better understanding of the situation and importance of Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies, connections between individual codes and aspects are looked at, as well.

Prerequisites and Measures

The first research question to be answered is: *What are the prerequisites for conducting Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies and what measures do they implement within the framework of Corporate Listening?* This question consists of two parts: 1) the prerequisites, i.e., the framework set by the company for Corporate Listening and 2) the concrete measures that are implemented to actively listen to stakeholders and perceive their voices. First, an analysis of the prerequisites was done.

Figure 1

Architecture of Listening



Note. Quantities of the codes regarding the Architecture of Listening.

The companies seem to have an open ear for external stakeholders who want to get in touch. They also encourage employees to listen. Only one interviewee focused on the fact that the awareness and openness for listening are not sufficient within their company. There seem to be connections between the mention of *Culture* and *Politics of listening* (13 overlaps), *Structures and processes* (10 overlaps) as well as *Personal measures* (10 overlaps). As far as guidelines and *Policies for listening* are concerned, the interviewed companies seem to have very different prerequisites. For example, it is said that employees can inform themselves, but they do not have to do so. In other companies, guidelines can be identified, such as a predefined regularity in which Corporate Listening measures are conducted.

Regarding *Politics of listening*, medium-sized companies recognize the need to listen to stakeholders and the public and seem prepared to offer the necessary openness. However, in the execution of the measures, a few companies still show potential to address the issue further and to expand the way they deal with the topic. The awareness of employees for such topics seems to be increasing.

A lot of statements were made about the next prerequisite: *Structures and processes for listening* (see Figure 2). Received information often ends up with the responsible person through a detour rather than directly. It might be obtained by field staff, who in turn pass on what they consider important. In other companies, it is ensured that all feedback and information received ends up in the right places in the company where it is further processed. Overall, however, there seem to be few standard processes. *Structures and processes* correlate with statements regarding the *Culture of listening* (10 overlaps), *Resources* (12 overlaps), the *Articulation of stakeholder voices* (15 overlaps with *Storage* and 16 overlaps with *Processing*) and *Qualitative media-based measures of Corporate Listening* (11 overlaps).

In the next category, *Technology*, there are particularly large differences between the individual companies interviewed. Overall, this category received the least attention (see Figure 2). While three companies in particular show some mention of technical tools for Corporate Listening, three other companies have none, unless websites and emails are included. However, the advantages that technology can offer in this area are more widely known. Technologies used in medium-sized companies in the context of Corporate Listening are social media channels, evaluations via Google, Meta Business Suite, or a quality management system.

There is not only a lack of technology, but also a lack of *Resources* for the interviewed communication departments and thus for the implementation of Corporate Listening measures. This applies to all interviews and is also often stated when asked about the possible development of Corporate Listening; with more resources, more would be possible. But a quick change seems unlikely.

The next prerequisite looked at are *Skills for listening*. The interviewees appear to know who they want to listen to for their company. Certain listening skills can be found in all companies. In some cases, however, external expertise is also called upon as agencies are hired to support the

communication department. *Skills for listening* seem to be relevant when it comes to the *Processing* of obtained information (10 overlaps).

At last, interviewees had a lot to say about their company's storage and processing of information, belonging to the prerequisite *Articulation of listening to decision-making* (see Figure 2). In some companies, the information is keyworded, filed, and regularly evaluated. Another interviewee says, that some information is written down while other information has to be remembered. The overall picture shows that the data storage could become more consistent and is not always recorded in writing and articulated. Further use of the data does not seem to be uniformly designed either but rather consists of individual responses to stakeholder voices. This often means forwarding the data to the respective person in charge, who deals with it independently.

Regarding the second part of the first question, only a few measures could be identified as *Quantitative, media-based*. These measures were overall mentioned 24 times. Online ratings, such as Google Reviews, were mentioned most often. Other quantitative measures include large-scale internal or external surveys and evaluations of media exposure.

Far more frequent are *Qualitative listening measures*, which were mentioned 81 times. Media monitoring and social media monitoring in particular were often mentioned. The most common way for stakeholders to contact a company are through email and telephone. However, companies also listen to their stakeholders via contact forms on their website, webinars, newsletters and monitoring activities of industry associations, WhatsApp or by post. Internally, there are additional qualitative media-based measures, i.e., letterboxes or regular (online) meetings.

Personal measures are mentioned 62 times in all interviews. Visiting trade fairs stands out as a particularly frequent personal measure, with the interviewed experts citing the personal conversations and easy access to stakeholders as especially valuable. The role of sales representatives or

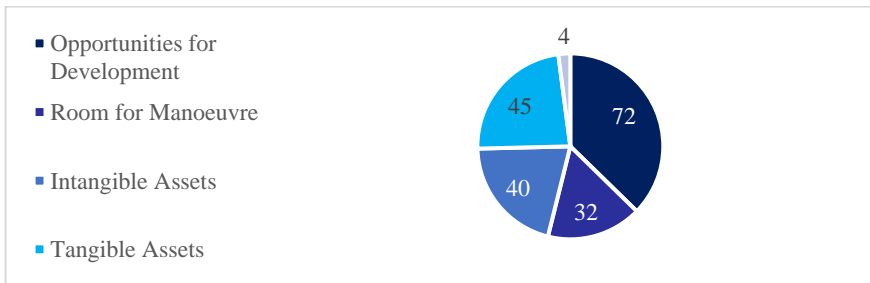
direct contact in branches are also important. Here, long-term contacts are established, which enable stakeholder voices to be gathered more quickly. The situation is similar for meetings of associations of which the respective companies are members. Another way to listen to stakeholders is to invite external and internal stakeholders to the company. Additionally, companies listen to employees and tend to implement fixed measures for this, such as regular employee appraisals. In addition, the so-called grapevine is important for identifying the employees' moods. Especially for companies located in rural areas, personal contacts and residents of the company location can also be relevant sources of feedback.

Reasons

The second research question to be answered is: *Why do medium-sized companies use Corporate Listening?* As Figure 3 shows, all subcodes of the category *Reasons* were allocated. All sub-categories were coded in ten of the eleven interviews. There was only a single interview where *room for maneuver* was not mentioned as a reason for Corporate Listening. The fallback category *Other* was only coded four times. The reasons for Corporate Listening mentioned in the interviews were often based on examples from the companies and could be derived from them.

Figure 3

Reasons for Corporate Listening



Note. Quantities of the codes regarding the reasons for Corporate Listening, based on the dimensions of the Communication Value Circle.

The most frequently coded sub-category was *Opportunities for development*, which was assigned 72 times. It includes the early identification of trends, innovation potential and crisis resilience. In this context, relatively few companies reported engaging in Corporate Listening to be crisis resilient. One company also noted a focus on innovation potential. Far more companies stated that Corporate Listening enables them to identify trends early on. It is interesting to note that, regarding measures, the code *Opportunities for development* appears relatively often together with *Media-based, qualitative Corporate Listening measures* (6 overlaps). This suggests that when Corporate Listening is conducted to discover opportunities for development, there is an increased use of media-based, qualitative measures.

The least coded sub-category was *Room for maneuver*, which was assigned 32 times. This code is composed of managing stakeholder relationships, trust, and legitimacy. Most segments coded under *Room for maneuver* relate to managing relationships with different stakeholders and maintaining or building trust. Similarly, some companies stated that they engage in Corporate Listening to gather feedback from stakeholders. However, they also try to gauge the current public mood on specific issues and act accordingly. This behavior allows companies to maintain their legitimacy.

The sub-categories of *Tangible assets* and *Intangible assets* were almost equally represented, *Tangible assets* being assigned 45 and *Intangible assets* 40 times respectively. In the case of *Intangible assets*, the coded segments focused heavily on the reputation of companies and their products. In the case of tangible assets, the opinions of customers and the interests of employees are taken into account in the company's decision-making process. Here it is important to note that *Media-based, quantitative measures* are often used to identify customer interests and to include them in corporate decision-making processes. Accordingly, the codes *Tangible assets* and *Media-based, quantitative measures* appeared in the same sections (5 overlaps).

Strategy Development

Overall, the *Impact* category contained the fewest statements compared to the other categories. On the one hand, this indicates a low level of consideration of Corporate Listening findings, but on the other hand it could also be due to a lack of strategy of SMEs. The partial lack of a systematic approach is reflected in the way that opinions of the stakeholders are dealt with. Since not all obtained information is passed on (see chapter *Prerequisites and measures*), not all insights from Corporate Listening can lead to action. Nevertheless, at least five statements could be made in each interview on the extent to which findings from Corporate Listening influenced company actions.

A total of 79 segments could be assigned to the category. The results show that, if influences could be determined, by far the most answers describe a change in behavior. The category *No Change Necessary* was coded eight times, while in comparison 57 statements described a *Change* in behavior and 14 times *No statement was possible*. It can therefore be said that when Corporate Listening findings were used by companies, they usually led to a change in behavior or strategy. Furthermore, it was more often claimed that change existed, but no concrete example could be given, while confirmation of action was rare. Due to the number of categorizations, some interesting correlations emerge, especially in the *Change Necessary* category.

Changes, based on Corporate Listening findings, were numerous and can be fundamentally divided into two categories. First, there are adjustments to the strategic orientation of the company. Here, recognized trends or the demands of customers are used for the development of new offers and products. Second, there is the adjustment of the company's communicative activities. To achieve more effective communication and to prevent possible risks or questions, the company's adaptations and adjustments are made regarding the changed information demand of customers. This is also reflected in the fact that strategic *Changes* were coded particularly often in connection with *Tangible assets* (9 overlaps).

The *Strategy* was frequently *adapted* to consider customer preferences, and *Opportunities for development* (11 overlaps). Above all, the innovation potential in the form of new offers and crisis resilience was promoted through strategic changes.

Statements that the current corporate strategy is confirmed by Corporate Listening responses and that *No change is necessary* are found in six interviews and were coded a total of eight times. All codes regarding the dimensions of the Communication Value Circle were coded equally often, namely two times. Only *Opportunities for Development* falls outside the grid with zero codes, which seems logical given the contradiction between identified opportunities for further development and those not implemented. Overall, however, it must be said that confirmations were mentioned significantly less than changes, probably because the interviewees remember changes much more clearly than a simple continuation of current behavior.

The category *No statement possible* offers a very good representative overview of the significance and influences of Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies. Companies that take the findings seriously and repeatedly claim they are playing an important role in corporate strategy. However, when asked directly they are often unable to name any examples of this or attribute a more important role to other influencing factors. For example, five of the interviewed experts explicitly state that Corporate Listening influences corporate strategy, but at the same time, they repeatedly mention that it is not always easy to implement the findings in practice. The lack of examples also explains why no notable correlations could be identified in the coding. However, the lack of examples could also be based on the ad hoc nature of the interview. Five of the interviewees specifically stated that if they would have had more time, they could have provided an example, but in the limited reflection period within the interview they were unable to do so.

Discussion

How Medium-sized Companies Listen

The companies surveyed show different characteristics regarding the aspects of the Architecture of Listening. The picture that emerges is that all companies have a corporate culture that is open to listening. The situation is similar for skills for listening, where it is also clear that all companies possess certain competencies. All companies also deal with listening. Regarding the corporate culture, listening skills and engagement with the topic of listening, it can be stated that the prerequisites for the implementation of Corporate Listening have been fulfilled.

The situation is different for the remaining prerequisites in the Architecture of Listening. The companies surveyed hardly ever state that they have fixed guidelines or structures and uniform processes regarding Corporate Listening. The articulation of stakeholder voices is not very uniform among the companies surveyed. While a few companies write down and organize the opinions of stakeholders, other companies do not show any clear rules or processes. Looking at the forwarding of stakeholder voices, a similar picture emerges. Only a few companies stated that they pass on Corporate Listening findings internally. If insights are gained but not passed on accordingly, no action can follow. Thus, the prerequisites of Corporate Listening in terms of policies, resources, structures, and processes of listening and articulating stakeholder voices cannot be assessed as sufficiently fulfilled. Although some companies show signs of planned structures and policies, they are poorly developed.

The technologies used for Corporate Listening are a special case; here, the interviewed companies form two poles. On the one hand, the code concerning technology use was recorded relatively frequently in three interviews. On the other hand, three other companies did not indicate that they use technologies, except for their websites and emails, for Corporate Listening. Therefore, it is not possible to make a general statement on the technological requirements for Corporate Listening.

Regarding the second part of the first research question, it becomes visible that media-based, qualitative measures are particularly popular among medium-sized companies, followed by personal measures such as trade fair visits. Media-based, quantitative measures are less prominent. While most measures refer to external stakeholders, employees can also make their feedback heard. While medium-sized companies use different ways to offer stakeholders the opportunity to approach them, measures in which the companies actively ask for feedback, suggestions, or other stakeholder voices to actively listen to, are still few and far between.

Why Medium-sized Companies Listen

The results of the study show that most medium-sized companies conduct Corporate Listening measures to identify opportunities for development. Here, the clear focus lies on possible trend developments for the company's products or services. Less frequently, the companies monitor communication trends. As one interviewee noted: "In general, these things are important in order to know where you need to develop and can identify trends or demands, which sector is developing in what way, and which small segments are developing in others" (I #11). Only a few medium-sized companies use Corporate Listening to be resistant during crises, both in communication and concerning products, services, or processes. It can be stated that if the reasons behind Corporate Listening lie in the dimension of opportunities for development, media-based, qualitative measures are increasingly used.

Furthermore, Corporate Listening is often utilized to incorporate customer voices and preferences into product development or corporate communications. These reasons relate to the dimension of tangible assets. In addition to employees and customers, some companies also emphasize Corporate Listening measures, which are more likely to be devoted to the press. Here, media-based, quantitative measures are often used to identify customer interests and to incorporate these into the decision-making processes of the company.

Reasons regarding the dimensions *Room for maneuver* and *Intangible assets* were mentioned comparatively little in the study. Concerning the intangible assets, it can be concluded that Corporate Listening is used particularly to maintain the relationship between the companies surveyed, their customers and, in some cases, other stakeholders. At times, Corporate Listening also strengthens the corporate culture by incorporating the opinions of employees. In addition to basic relationship management within the dimension of *Room for maneuver*, medium-sized companies made use of Corporate Listening to establish their reputation with customers. Although legitimacy was also sometimes cited as a reason for Corporate Listening measures, it is not so prominently featured.

All in all, it can be concluded that medium-sized companies mainly use Corporate Listening regarding their products or services and less to improve their reputation and image or to expand their room for maneuver through legitimacy. Apart from products and services, medium-sized companies concentrate their Corporate Listening measures on improving relations with their customers and sometimes with the press, intermediaries or competing companies.

How Listening Influences Strategies

Concerning the last research question, it should be emphasized once again that medium-sized companies often lack a general strategy or a communication strategy. The influences described here, therefore, refer to strategy development in medium-sized companies, which is characterized by ad hoc operational decisions and actions that are assigned strategic relevance in retrospect. This is also evident in the use of Corporate Listening findings, with several interviewees describing that they use customer voices to retrospectively confirm or justify decisions that have already been made.

Interestingly, Corporate Listening is also used by companies to pretend that they are incorporating the opinions of their stakeholders into the decision-making process even though this was not actually the case. For

example: “In principle, we are responding to a customer request, but we are not responding to it now because we say 'Oh, that's a customer request', but because we say it's the more sustainable way to go” (I#3).

Beyond that, however, it results show that Corporate Listening findings are taken seriously, even if they are only a confirmation of the current strategy. This becomes particularly clear in the product policies of the companies interviewed, with several interviewees stating that they include a product more frequently in their product portfolios as a result of customer feedback.

The focus on trends and customer voices is also evident in relation to influencing strategy development and communicative activities. It must be emphasized that the influence of Corporate Listening insights is critically questioned in processes that affect the products or services of the companies. Several times, the companies noted here that the influence of customer feedback and trends is not unlimited and must be compatible with the company's ideas. An attempt is made to create a combination of the customers' demands and the company's ideas, whereby one of the interviewees emphasized: “We stay true to ourselves” (I#9).

Findings from Corporate Listening that concern the company's communication are more often implemented directly. They are used, for example, to be able to inform proactively when an increased need for information on the part of consumers has been identified for certain topics. The interest of the customers was often described as an important factor for both the content and the external form of communication. In terms of content, for example, the topic focus of communication shifts due to the expectations of the users; externally, adjustments to the wording as well as to the format of the content could be determined.

All in all, it becomes clear that the findings from Corporate Listening influence the strategy development of medium-sized companies according to the way that their strategy development works, namely in retrospect. Here, the influence relates primarily to possible trends and customer

preferences. Medium-sized companies allow for influence, especially in the context of communicative activities. With regard to product-related processes or optimizations, medium-sized companies evaluate all options more thoroughly before making changes. Furthermore, by improving various prerequisites for Corporate Listening, it may also be possible to increase the influence on strategy development and communicative activities.

Limitations

This research project faced several challenges, including the definition of medium-sized companies and the difficulty of contacting them. The search for medium-sized companies that met the predetermined qualitative and quantitative criteria was time-consuming, as there was no unified overview of medium-sized companies as defined by the IfM Bonn. Additionally, the accessibility of medium-sized companies was limited, with only a small number of responses to the interview requests being received. Additionally, a broad understanding of Corporate Listening and the associated measures was applied. Due to the lack of professionalism concerning corporate communication in medium-sized companies, most Corporate Listening measures stated in the interviews did not correspond to the ones ideally described in the literature. Therefore, the understanding of Corporate Listening measures was broadened for this research project. Additionally, the method itself was adapted to the circumstances of medium-sized businesses, and different interview formats were used. The interviews were conducted online, by telephone and in person, which might have affected their content and length.

Conclusion and Indications for Future Research

The aim of this study was to find an answer to the overarching research question: *What role does the use of Corporate Listening play in the communication work and corporate strategy of medium-sized companies?* In order to achieve this, the research team started the project with a literature review of the concept of Corporate Listening mainly considering

the texts by Borner and Zerfass and Viertmann and Zerfass, as well as Macnamara's Architecture of Listening. In a next step, it was necessary to gain a better understanding of the term "medium-sized companies". Therefore, a definition for the use in this study was established. Through a detailed examination of the state of research, an insight into strategy formation and corporate communication in medium-sized companies was gained. Qualitative expert interviews were chosen as a methodological approach and analyzed accordingly. The research process ended with a discussion of the outcome of this analysis.

The results of this study show that medium-sized companies are aware of the importance of Corporate Listening but lack an understanding of the concepts behind it. All medium-sized companies surveyed carry out either media-based or personal Corporate Listening measures and use some of the insights gained in their strategy development or communicative activities. However, some of the companies surveyed lack technologies that support Corporate Listening, which affects the further use of the insights gained and their influence on corporate decisions. Possible reasons for the lack of structures are assumed to be the absence of resources and communication strategies or specific listening strategies. Since the prerequisites mentioned in the Architecture of Listening build on each other, it can be said that there is currently no Corporate Listening, as described in academic literature, in place in medium-sized companies in Germany. However, less strategic versions of Corporate Listening in the interviewed companies were found.

The companies surveyed are increasingly concentrating on recognizing possible product and communication trends, integrating customer opinions into corporate decisions, and maintaining relationships with customers. However, Corporate Listening can also support other value-adding processes, such as maintaining relationships with other stakeholders or building trust. Additionally, it offers potential in the context of legitimacy and reputation, which have not yet been utilized by medium-sized companies.

Thus, it can be concluded that the aim set at the beginning of this research project, which was to find an answer to the overarching research question, has been achieved.

In terms of future research, the question is now, where to go from here. In the present study, the hardly existing use of Corporate Listening measures is often justified by a lack of resources. Based on this finding, a comparison between medium-sized and large companies would be conceivable, as it can be assumed that more resources are available there. A similar study could first be conducted in large German companies to subsequently compare those results to the results in this study. Furthermore, it can be noted that so far research on Corporate Listening has mainly been conducted in English-speaking areas, more precisely on large companies in the English-speaking world. Therefore, a study that primarily refers to medium-sized companies in the English-speaking area could be of interest. In addition, companies from other cultural regions such as South America or Asia could be studied. Additionally, only companies from the B2C sector were included in the basic population of this study, as the probability of using Corporate Listening was considered higher in this area. Whether this is the case could be examined in a further study that also takes the B2B sector into account. Thus, there could be a more detailed comparison between the B2B- and B2C-sector as well as differences between industries within a sector.

In conclusion, this study has made an important contribution to the research in the field of corporate communications of medium-sized companies and thus forms a basis for other strands of research. Through possible follow-up research the “Mittelstand” will hopefully soon receive the amount of academic attention that would be adequate due to its economic relevance in Germany.

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Let's Break It Down

A Qualitative Analysis of the Role of Communication Pauses in the Internal Corporate Communication of large German Companies

Emily Korsch, Valentin Leißner, Annika Müller, Sophie Sieghardt, Elena Weiß

Abstract

The rising flood of emails, messages and meetings in the internal communication of large German companies is growing steadily. The growing number of daily messages as well as their frequency are causing employees to feel stressed. As a result, their productivity and job satisfaction decrease. This paper analyzes the role strategic communication pauses play in the internal corporate communication of large German companies. Using a qualitative research framework, based on semi-structured guided interviews with communication managers ($n = 9$), insights are gained into the use of communication pauses and reasons for implementing them in companies. The results show that the main reasons are the growing number of communication channels and the increasing quantity of communicated information. Both developments have been further driven by the digital transformation in particular. Furthermore, it is shown that communication pauses are defined and implemented very differently in companies, which is due to various factors, such as digital transformation, corporate culture and internal communication tools. Within the framework of the study, the term 'communication pause' is successfully defined for the first time. In addition, practical recommendations for the implementation of communication pauses in the internal communication of companies are provided.

Keywords: communication pause, internal communication, corporate communication, communication overload, digital transformation

Introduction

Under the term ‘calendar purge’, Shopify founder and CEO Tobi Lütke rang in the year 2023. For the company, this meant: All recurring meetings with more than two people will be permanently canceled, there will be no meetings on Wednesdays and all other meetings will be squeezed into a fixed time slot (Hofmann, 2023). "The best thing founders can do is subtract" is the rationale behind the measures that are largely intended to increase Shopify's efficiency (Hofmann, 2023). Other companies, such as SAP SE, who already introduced a ‘Focus Friday’ in 2022 with the aim of reducing stress and "finally working uninterrupted for two or three hours” (Martin-Jung, 2022), also show a similar tendency. In some countries, these developments are supported by the introduction of the ‘Right to Disconnect’, which has already been in force in France since 2017. The focus here primarily lies on the right of every employee to be unavailable after the end of working hours, as explained in a working report of the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2020). It seems that more and more companies are trying to increase their efficiency and reduce stress through concentrated internal communication. The fact that the rising flood of emails, messages and meetings in the internal communication of companies has been growing rapidly for years - additionally pushed by the digital transformation - has been documented in numerous scientific papers (see Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Rose, 2014). At the same time, this creates a feeling of not being able to keep up among employees (McCurry, 2014, p. 31). In addition, they have to filter out the relevant information for them from a large pool of information (Marchionini, 2010, p. 1), and at the same time there is pressure to instantly respond to all messages (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015, p. 173).

All of this leads to employees experiencing stress (Malhotra et al., 1982, p. 27), reduced productivity, and increased job dissatisfaction (Dean & Webb, 2011, p. 4). Although the introduction of communicative relief measures, such as communication pauses, is becoming abundantly clear, the introduction and implementation of them is currently still an exception

rather than an observable action by companies. The same applies to the scientific treatment of the topic. Up to now, there is no research on what communication pauses are, what measures they currently comprise or for what reasons and with what consequences they are used. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research-guiding question:

RQ: What role do strategic communication pauses play in the internal communication of large German companies?

The aim is not only to answer this question, but also to define the term for the first time and to assemble recommendations for further implementation of the measures through supporting insights into practice. The present paper is structured as follows:

First, the term *communication pause* and its components will closely be analyzed. Consequently, the term *pause* and a first definition are examined. This is followed by an explanation of the concept of digital transformation, as this area will be focused on in the research process. The theoretical groundwork is completed by an examination of the effects of digital transformation on corporate communication. This section is followed by the methodological procedure, in which the chosen methodology of semi-structured guided interviews is explained. Afterwards, the transcription and analysis procedures are illustrated. Subsequently, the results are systematically presented, interpreted and discussed in terms of the overarching research question. The study is concluded with a view on the limitations of the procedure as well as an outlook in the direction of future scientific and practical implications.

Theoretical Background

This paper examines the current state of research on communication pauses, focusing on the definition of key terms and looking at possible further developments that could be an influencing factor on the use of communication pauses, such as digital transformation. Taking into account relevant journals and literature, it is noticeable that there has neither been any scientific consideration of the topic of communication

pauses, nor has it been defined. For this reason, one goal of this study is to develop a definition. First, an initial working definition of communication pauses will be formulated independently by looking at the existing theoretical basis. However, this definition will be adjusted during the course of this work by taking into account the statements of the communication experts from the interviews.

Since the term ‘communication’ has already been widely researched and applied in everyday life and scientific contexts, this paper will not provide a definition of this term. Likewise, an understanding of the concepts of internal and strategic corporate communications is assumed. Of greater importance is a look at the term ‘pause’ and its definition: Similarly to the term ‘communication’, ‘pause’ is defined differently in various disciplines and from various perspectives. Particularly in psychology, the term finds special attention: For example, Buchholz (2018) and Bruneau (1973) studied the effect of pauses in conversations. The latter refers to pause-like interruptions, called interactive silences, in dialogues, conversations, discussions and debates that relate to affective, interpersonal relationships or serve to solve problems. Natural science disciplines also study pauses. These include the work of Kohashi et al. (2021), who studied communication through electrical signals from fish. They discovered that such pauses in electrical communication have a facilitating effect on behavioural responses from the receiver when signals are resumed (p. 3149). However, when comparing all previous definitions of pauses, it becomes apparent that the perspectives from the humanities and social sciences are generally outdated, and that there is a lack of cross-disciplinary definitions. For this reason, this paper relies on the definition of the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines ‘pause’ as follows: "To stop talking or doing something for a short time before continuing" (Oxford English Dictionary editorial office, n.d.). Combining the theoretical considerations, a first working definition of communication pauses is derived: *communication pauses are understood as the intentional interruption of a communication process.*

One goal of this paper is to verify and adapt this definition with the opinions of communication experts from the executive level of large German companies. Thus, the first research question (RQ1) can be derived:

RQ1: How are communication pauses defined and implemented in the organization?

The question focuses on the definition and implementation of communication pauses in the internal corporate communication. Another important theoretical perspective are the reasons for the emergence of communication pauses. It has been observed that since the spread of the digital transformation, entire work environments, processes and business strategies have changed due to the overload of information (Fitzgerald et al., 2014, p. 2; Matt et al., 2015, p. 339). Mergel et al. (2019) describe digital transformation as a "term adopted from the private sector, most often associated with the need to use new technologies to remain competitive in the Internet age" (p. 2). Other researchers, such as Fitzgerald et al. (2014), define the term as "the use of new digital technologies (e.g., social media, mobile, analytics or embedded devices) to enable significant business improvements (such as improving customer experience, streamlining operations or creating new business models)" (p. 2).

Digital transformation has had a significant impact on the workplace, blurring physical boundaries and increasing the diversity of information (Kéfer, 2021), and in this way leading to an information overload (Schick et al., 1990, p. 199). This overload is associated with an inability to process large volumes of messages (Marchionini, 2010, p. 1), a lack of perspective (Schick et al., 1990, p. 212), cognitive stress (Malhotra et al., 1982, p. 27) and an increased tolerance for error (Sparrow, 1999, p. 144). Thus, previous literature shows that digital transformation not only involves new technologies, but also the consideration of employee factors, changes in corporate strategy, structure and processes (Kane et al. 2015, p. 14-16). Digital transformation is an ongoing process, but one that has significantly

been accelerated since 2020, primarily due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Trennery et al., 2021, p. 1). Not only the health sector but also the business sector has faced challenges. The way of working and operating as an organization has fundamentally changed (Irawanto et al., 2021, p. 1). Increasing digitalization and globalization have contributed to this development (Jämsen et al., 2022, p. 2). One of the most significant changes was an increase of the work setup 'home office', which was voluntary at first in April 2020 and then became mandatory in Germany starting in January 2021 (German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2021). "Working in a home office [...] refers to a flexible and location-independent form of work" (Weber et al., 2022, p. 3). Beno (2021) summarizes that the factors of increased productivity, efficiency, flexibility and job satisfaction lead to an improved work-life balance and can be attributed to working in a home office (p. 16). The benefits of increased efficiency and constant accessibility are not only limited to employees and managers. Above all, the high level of availability significantly accelerates the communication process and thus ensures a higher overall pace of work. If employees are always available, new work orders can be issued non-stop. The constant barrage of emails, messages and telephone calls can thus leave workers feeling overwhelmed, exhausted and powerless. The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the fact that working from home can be the cause of the constant merging of work and private life. People who work under these conditions often find it difficult to structure their workday and define clear breaks and free time. The work-life balance is thus put under enormous pressure. Also, the growing 'always-on' culture increases the pressure on employees to be available at all times and to respond to emails, phone calls and intranet messages as quickly as possible. Employees are finding it increasingly difficult to truly disconnect and utilize their free time for rejuvenation. In addition, the number of overtime hours is increasing, which further increases stress levels (Irawanto et al., 2021, p. 2). Extended periods of uninterrupted work caused by constant accessibility can lead to long-term

health problems for workers. Symptoms such as stress can result in mental illnesses, like burnout, over time (Lockwood, 2003, p. 6).

A turnaround in internal corporate communication appears necessary to address the persistent communicative burden caused by information overload. Therefore the two research questions:

RQ2: To what extent has the importance of communication pauses changed as a result of digital transformation in the workplace?

RQ3: What challenges and potentials do communication pauses offer as a strategy for internal corporate communication?

can be derived. They aim to explore the influence of digital transformation on the introduction of communication pauses and to examine the challenges as well as potentials of communication pauses as a strategy for internal corporate communication.

Method

Because of the explorative design of the study, qualitative in-depth interviews were utilized. This method was considered particularly suitable since the phenomenon of communication pauses has largely been neglected in empirical studies. Also, because internal communication practices within organizations are rarely made public, it was necessary to engage practitioners who possess decision-making authority regarding the internal communication within companies and could therefore provide insights into potential forms of communication pauses in this context. To gain an understanding of communication pauses and their implementation in the internal communication of large German companies, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 12 practitioners holding middle or higher management positions in the internal communication departments. The interviews were held from December 2022 to March 2023. The recruitment only concerned companies that already have experience with communication pauses. However, it was discovered that three out of the twelve companies did not actually employ any form of communication

pauses in their internal communication, and thus could not be considered for the study (marked grey in table 1 ‘Overview Interviewees’). The selection process for suitable participants involved sending standardized cover letters via email, LinkedIn or the respective corporate websites of companies that met the predefined criteria. These criteria encompassed companies from all sectors headquartered in Germany with over 250 employees. Typically, these companies have hierarchically structured communication departments, carry out strategic internal communications measures and possess the necessary resources to consider and implement communication pauses.

In Germany, there are approximately 12,000 companies meeting these criteria (Oppermann, 2019). Of these companies, only those that implement communication pauses in their internal communication are of interest for the study. The exact number of these, however, is unknown so far. Since the study aims to examine the significance of communication pauses, their development and use within a company as well as the opportunities and risks in the present and future, it was crucial to involve communicators within departments who are responsible for implementing and advancing communication pauses. These experts had to have the necessary knowledge to answer the questions posed in the interview, the practical experience within the organizational structures of their company as well as the required expertise to critically evaluate communication pauses in a communicative context.

Therefore, special attention was given to practitioners' job titles, with a particular interest in communication officers with HR responsibilities. As indicated in Table 1 ‘Overview Interviewees’, the respondents held positions such as Internal Communications Manager, Director Internal Communication, Director Corporate Affairs, Employee Communication Specialist, PR Manager, Communications and Change Manager, Senior Manager Corporate Communications & PR, Senior PR Specialist as well as Global Corporate Affairs. All interviewees work in large German companies in the following industries: Banking, Real Estate, Pet Food,

Technology, Logistics, Insurance, Sporting Goods, Automotive and Software. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Table 1
Overview Interviewees

Inter- viewee	Position	Company	Industry
1	Internal Communications Manager	DKB AG	Banking
2	Director Internal Communication	Vonovia SE	Real Estate
3	Director Corporate Affairs	Mars Pet Nutrition	Pet Food
4	Employee Communications Specialist	Siemens AG	Technology
5	Senior Advisor	Deutsche Telekom AG	Telecom- munications
6	Senior Manager Internal Communications & Digital Publishing Corporate Communications	Hermes Germany GmbH	Logistics
7	Communications & Change Manager	HDI Group	Insurance
8	Head of Communications	Lufthansa Group	Aviation
9	Head of Internal Communications & Director Internal Communications	Volkswagen AG	Automotive
10	Senior Manager Corporate Communications & PR	Puma SE	Sporting Goods
11	Senior PR Specialist	BMW Group	Automotive
12	Global Corporate Affairs	SAP SE	Software

For all the interviews, the researchers used a semi-structured interview guide based on a category system to foster the dialogues in the direction of the study's objectives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The guide consists of three sections corresponding to the three research questions. The first section focuses on exploring the internal communication practices of the interviewee's company, including measures already in place to reduce communication overload among employees. In addition, the interviewees were asked to discuss a possible definition of 'communication pause'. The subsequent section examined the impact of digital transformation in the workplace on communication pauses and asked about the reasons behind the establishment of communication pauses within the company. The third section of the guide, aligned with research question three, explores the opportunities and risks associated with the implementation of communication pauses.

The interviews were transcribed using the transcription software *Trint*, reviewed individually, and then analyzed again within the research group to compare narratives across all transcripts. With the help of MAXQDA, the appropriate statements from the transcripts were then assigned to the respective categories. After several rounds of coding and analyzing the data according to the categories for each research question, the researchers collectively identified the most significant and recurring themes for the research investigations, as outlined in the findings. This process of analyst triangulation aimed to mitigate potential individual biases and eliminated blind spots, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the analyses and findings (Patton, 1990).

Findings

The final sample of nine interviews was coded and classified into eight categories of an inductively augmented category system. Five categories were derived directly from the three research questions. Another three categories were derived from the interviews and the interview guide. An overview can be found in table 2 'Overview of all categories'.

Table 2*Overview of all categories*

Research Question	Top Category
RQ 1	Definition of communication pauses + Implementation of communication pauses
RQ 2	The meaning of communication pauses changing through digital transformation.
RQ 3	Challenges of communication pauses as an Internal corporate communication strategy + Potentials of communication pauses as a strategy of internal corporate communication
Other	Reasons for communication pauses + Structure of internal corporate communication + Digital transformation in the workplace

Classified according to these eight categories, the key findings of the study are presented below.

Reasons for Communication Pauses

Before discussing the definition and implementation of communication pauses, it is important to consider why the need for communicative relief measures has evolved in companies. This serves as a fundamental basis for evaluating the implementation of such pauses. Understanding the specific needs within a company helps to understand the diverse nature of the implementation of communication pauses and the potential variations in the definitions of the term. In summary, it can be stated that employee surveys and employee feedback in particular have provided initial clues for addressing communication pauses. Particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of telecommuting, not only did the number of channels increase, but also the frequency of how often communication

took place through those channels. Noteworthy in this context is the overarching description of "too much", "so much" or "very much" in relation to communication streams and channels. This persistent and uncontrolled overflow of channels and information created a desire for "more structure [...], a clearer understanding and use of individual channels, less information overload, and above all, more prioritization and clustering in terms of what is really relevant to individual employee groups" (Mars Pet Nutrition).

Also signaled was the need for "a reduction and better clarity" (DKB AG). Consequently, the seamless communication among employees and the absence of interruptions caused by constantly being online in the digital realm have resulted in excessive demands, overload and disorientation. As a result, the introduction of communication pauses has become necessary in many cases.

Structure of Internal Corporate Communication

In order to understand the individual implementation of communication pauses within a company, an examination was conducted on communication flows, channels and the individuals responsible within the surveyed companies. The top category 'internal corporate communication' has been divided into three subcategories: Tools, Responsible Parties as well as Wishes and Potentials for Internal Communication. The most frequently mentioned internal tools and channels among the interviewees were emails, the intranet and applications of the Office 365 package. The responsibility for internal communication differs within the interviewed companies. Teams often work in separate communication departments and are responsible for editing and disseminating information to employees and maintaining communication channels. Other structural approaches such as the deployment of communication officers in the respective departments or communications as a subsection of the corporate affairs department were also identified. Some companies also worked with external agencies that provide support in the creation of content. Referring to internal corporate

communication, one interviewee further stated that "every employee [...] can share something at any time from any location" (Hermes Germany GmbH).

The subcategory 'Wishes/Potentials' captured the interviewees' desires concerning their internal communication structures, as well as the potentials that could facilitate the introduction of communication pauses. One notable factor that emerged was the role of managers as role models. Their behavior sets an example and carries significant importance. Additionally, there is a recognized need for communication leaders to firmly embed communicative changes within the company, such as planning and implementing communication pauses in a deliberate manner. Merely allowing measures to occur sporadically and self-determined is deemed insufficient. One interviewee was convinced that "communication as a whole in the company must develop towards working in a much more integrated way" (Hermes Germany GmbH). One of the interviewees recognized the responsibility for advancing personalized information in internal communication and expressed a desire to enhance opportunities within the intranet. This includes the aspiration to personalize the individual start page more extensively, allowing for a tailored user experience.

The balance between delivering company-relevant and identity-building information to employees was also considered important, while also allowing for autonomous selection of relevant messages. In particular, the authors of messages on internal platforms should first think about for whom the message is relevant before publishing it, thereby assigning responsibility to community managers.

Definition of Communication Pauses

During the study implementation, it became clear that there is still no unified definition and implementation of the communication pause phenomenon. Thus, this paper aims to provide the first ever definition of communication pauses in a corporate context, based on the findings of the

interviews. For this purpose, an initial definition was first approached theoretically at the beginning of this paper. Following the interviews, it became evident that certain companies generally agreed with the initial working definition of communication pauses as an intended interruption of a communication process. Other interview partners enriched it with further aspects. These included the communication pause as a deliberate and strategic process as well as support for employees in their daily work. This top-down approach is extended by bottom-up offers to support employees in taking breaks and resting in a self-determined manner. A general overview can be found in Table 3 ‘Overview statements on the definition of communication pauses’.

Table 3*Overview statements on the definition of communication pauses*

Definition for communication pauses	Interviewee
We actually also call it a content freeze.	BMW Group
Possibility that a specific topic can simply shine because everything else stands still.	BMW Group
Is something that affects everyone for me.	DKB AG
I can work for myself and am not in communication with my colleagues.	HDI Group
Consciously accompanied and moderated processes in communication, resulting in interruptions in the communication flow.	Hermes Germany GmbH
Actually there are no communication pauses at all.	Hermes Germany GmbH
Strategic tool to make corporate communication more effective.	Mars Pet Nutrition
Period or measure that results in the work process being suspended.	Puma SE
We empower our employees to allocate their time freely.	SAP SE
Results from the nature of the thing. For example, if you don't send anything out in the summer months.	Siemens AG
Helping employees take their own breaks.	Siemens AG

Based on the findings from the interviews, the first proposal of the definition can be concretized as follows:

The term 'communication pause' is understood as an umbrella term for all deliberate measures aimed at temporarily relieving employees' communicative burden. These measures are controlled both top-down and bottom-up in the hierarchy of companies.

Implementation of Communication Pauses

The category 'Implementation of communication pauses' names different practical application possibilities for the implementation of communicative pauses in the company. A total of 19 subcategories were inductively derived from the interviews. Most companies rely on measures such as the bundling of information in order to make it consumable and to avoid a flood of information. Time limits for meetings or meetings not taking place at all, for example, on days when there are no meetings, are mentioned remarkably frequently. Several interviewees also said that they have fixed release times for intranet messages, emails or news. This is particularly useful for balancing.

Selecting the communication channel represents another way of implementing communicative breaks. Other ways of implementing communication pauses include training managers, focusing on main messages or not having fixed response times. Seven of the interviewees used measures such as clustering information in order to "make information as consumable as possible" (Siemens AG). Topics and news on the intranet as well as the sending of emails were mentioned here. The reasons given for this measure are the excessive demands due to a permanent flow of information and the risks of information overload.

In contrast to the previously presented measures, which can all be described as planned and strategic, other measures have emerged that relate to the individual and self-determined actions of employees. These include the view that each employee is responsible for their own breaks. At the same time, companies support their employees in this regard by

offering health services or access to psychologists for instance. For example, through "a health team that covers everything from work-life balance, to sitting properly, burnout, the whole spectrum. We have a wide range of measures to support our employees to be well" (SAP SE). Another example is a news feed compiled by employees, which adds to the supportive initiatives.

Digital Transformation in the Workplace

The category 'Digital transformation in the workplace' centers around aspects that allow conclusions to be drawn about the changes occurring in the interviewees' respective companies as a result of the ongoing digital transformation. What is notable within the described category is the frequency with which the COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned as a catalyst for digital communication. Nearly half of the interviewees said the pandemic had spurred the development or evolution of digital tools and processes in the company related to corporate communications.

"And the main focus [and especially now] also during the pandemic period was the introduction of a new internal content and collaboration hub. So basically an intranet. But I always refer to it as a content and collaboration hub, because it no longer has much to do with this intranet as a preliminary stage, but is actually a new evolutionary stage towards a digital workplace where everything is really integrated" (Hermes Germany GmbH).

Overall, a trend towards more digital communication in the workplace was observed among the surveyed companies. This trend is accompanied by enhanced flexibility and speed in communication. However, it also entails a reduction in face-to-face interaction between employees.

The Influence of Digital Transformation

In order to be able to make statements about the connection between digital transformation and communication pauses, sections were also marked in the transcripts where indications of the influence of digital transformation on the implementation of communication pauses could be

identified. In general, the impact of digital transformation on the implementation of communication pauses can be viewed from two perspectives: On the one hand, the new opportunities and advantages brought by certain digital applications, such as digital meetings, were recognized and praised. On the other hand, the effects such as increased speed and flexibility but also more stress and the need for pauses are also perceived. Various opinions have emerged on this matter.

"For one thing, we also keep hearing that there are just too many channels or too many options" (Siemens AG).

Based on the findings from the interviews, it can be concluded that the significance of communication pauses has evolved due to the digital transformation of the working world. The need for measures to alleviate the communication burden on employees has intensified as a result of the shift towards digital channels for communication activities. In addition, the volume of communication has intensified due to new channels and formats, which in turn has led to more stress and excessive demands on employees.

Potentials of Communication Pauses

The category 'Potentials of communication pauses' captures the various benefits that interviewees see in communication pauses and their implementation. Communication pauses can assist in alleviating the workload of communication departments and enhance the overall effectiveness of corporate communication. Continuous messaging can overwhelm communication professionals and the reduction in information flow ensures that pertinent messages are not overshadowed by numerous, less relevant messages.

Furthermore, a major future advance through the introduction of communication pauses is seen in the independent setting of priorities and the rethinking of meeting culture. Not every meeting is of equal relevance and the introduction of such communicative relief measures can help to eliminate particularly inefficient, rather routine arrangements to gain a

new focus. It is also noticeable that the implementation of communication pauses is basically seen as a competitive advantage in the employee market, "because a company that does not offer these breaks will sooner or later, I believe, stagnate in employee satisfaction" (Vonovia SE). In addition, employee satisfaction increased shortly after they were introduced to companies.

Challenges of Communication Pauses

The category 'Challenges of communication pauses' brought together all statements that expressed concerns, challenges, difficulties and problems regarding the implementation of communication pauses. What is remarkable here is the diversity of challenges mentioned in the interviews. In summary, three major challenges related to communication pauses can be identified: Firstly, the overall global situation, particularly during crisis scenarios, necessitates communication within and on behalf of the company. Secondly, the workplace has a considerable influence on the implementation of communication pauses. Distinctions must be made between in-office work and remote work, as both face their own set of challenges. In the office, both formal and informal exchanges occur among employees, leading to uncontrolled information flows. Above all, the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional communication is a significant risk, which may result in breaks being used for private conversations rather than for communicative relief. In addition, rigid corporate cultures are a particular obstacle to the implementation of communication pauses, as they require a complete re-evaluation of standardized processes and structures.

In addition to these most frequently mentioned challenges, a wide range of other obstacles to the implementation of communication pauses could be identified. These include the industry structure in which the company operates, the feedback culture within a company, the personal resilience of employees and the lack of support from management: "If you are a board member, you have consciously taken this position that you are just

always available" (SAP SE). More challenges can be found in Table 4 'Overview of all challenges'.

Table 4

Overview challenges for communication pauses

Challenges for communication pauses	Interviewee
So many different job profiles that you can't lump them all together.	DKB AG
Everything that external influences are with regard to digitalization, naturally also have a major influence.	DKB AG
Then they don't get it because they don't claim it.	DKB AG
There are always issues that take priority because they need to be solved.	HDI AG
For this to happen, everyone must first be trained to understand.	HDI AG
It can be endangered by the fact that perhaps management changes and is no longer behind it.	HDI AG
At our company, umpteen channels have been added.	Hermes Germany GmbH
That there is not somehow an intention of control behind.	Hermes Germany GmbH
People have to get used to it first and you have to move people from the mindset.	Mars Pet Nutrition
There was no clear channel strategy and these channels did not interlocked in such a way that they functioned in an optimized way.	Mars Pet Nutrition
Push meetings to another time, where a little meeting congestion might build up.	Puma SE

Especially in internal communication, you also have to have a certain visibility.	Puma SE
If you are a board member, you have consciously taken on this position. that you are always available.	SAP SE
It is then often somehow lacking in self-discipline.	Siemens AG
This feeling that they are missing out.	Siemens AG
Private and professional become even more blurred.	Vonovia SE
This also has a lot to do with a cultural change in the company.	Vonovia SE

Finally, it should be noted that not all respondents can report specific changes since the introduction of communication pauses, as further surveys and research are needed to be able to measure clear effects. This suggests that companies should carefully consider whether the potential outweighs the current challenges before introducing communication pauses. Nevertheless, there are also ways to overcome these challenges and reap the benefits of communication pauses within the company. Open and clear communication, targeted employee training and clear management support can help ensure that the introduction of communication pauses is successful and sustainable.

Recommendations for Practical Implementation

Since the topic of communication pauses in internal corporate communication was approached exploratively for the first time, the results do not allow for representative statements about the importance of communication pauses for a multitude of companies in general. Nonetheless, the qualitative results from the interviews with experts have already revealed challenges and opportunities in the implementation of communication pauses, which allow initial assumptions to be made about

recommendations regarding practical implementation for internal corporate communications.

Clear Strategy:

A look at the results of the present study shows that communication pauses are often not used consciously, but rather unconsciously. This kind of arbitrary implementation and the lack of strategic planning behind it jeopardize the optimal implementation of breaks in everyday work and can be the cause of further barriers for a consistent implementation. The results also show that the desire to be constantly available or the "Fear of Missing Out" prevents employees and managers from integrating communication pauses into their daily work routine. To counteract these fears, it is important for employees that the implementation of communication pauses is clearly regulated within the company. Trust in the internal communications department also plays an important role here. To increase employees' self-discipline in the practical implementation of communication pauses and to reduce their need to be constantly reachable, it is important for them that the communication department accompanies and manages these processes well. The implementation of communication pauses in the strategic planning and especially a clear communication about breaks towards employees can help to create this trust. The possibility to show employees spaces for communication pauses should therefore also be considered when choosing tools and communicative measures.

Support of the Management:

The results of the study also show that a lack of support from management can be the reason why the implementation of communication pauses fails in practice. On the one hand, it is important that managers can trust their employees to actually implement the pauses. On the other hand, this self-discipline of employees is negated if it is not exemplified by their managers. Managers should therefore actively and consistently implement the strategically selected form of communication pauses themselves as far as possible in order to set a good example.

Create Understanding:

Further results have shown that, in addition to self-discipline, the personal resilience of employees also plays a major role in the implementation success of communication pauses. The introduction of new and existing communication pause measures can cause resistance to change. This can be the result of a firmly anchored corporate culture. It is therefore important to create a uniform understanding of the problem of communicative relief and the need for breaks. Thus, it is advisable to actively approach employees and offer appropriate learning opportunities, seminars, information materials or training courses in order to specifically draw attention to the topic and show employees their options for action. In addition, it may be necessary to offer employees a familiarization phase in which they are given the time to reorganize themselves and their work and clear up any uncertainties. Those responsible must also provide information about the changes in advance and communicate clearly about the changes.

Regular Employee Surveys:

The novelty of the communication pause phenomenon meant that interviewees sometimes found it difficult to make statements about the implementation success. Some companies interviewed, perceived their employees' need for pauses due to increasing digital communications during the pandemic. The results have thus highlighted the importance of regular employee surveys. When redesigning internal communication processes, for example by adding or deleting channels or formats, attention should always be paid to the acceptance by the employees. Regular employee surveys can and should be used to find out about aspects such as overload or the need for communicative relief.

Limitations

Because of the following limitations, this study is not able to clarify the existence, application and role of communication pauses in the internal communication of large German companies in an all-encompassing way. It should be noted that the qualitative study design means that no generally

valid statements can be made. However, the study is able to reveal initial interpretations and patterns that can form the basis for future research projects. Furthermore, the truth of the statements made in the interviews cannot be completely confirmed. Especially the clear naming of the companies in which the interview partners are active limits the study. The purpose of naming these companies is to enable the statements to be traced back to the respective industry. With this approach, recommendations for action can also be made in compliance with the industry. However, this carries the risk that answers were given in such a way that a particular company is portrayed as positively as possible.

Regarding the method of this study, two significant limitations should be mentioned. Due to the subjectivity of the individuals, both in the interview discussions and in the subsequent evaluation and interpretation of the results, the reliability can be considered as weakened. Interviewer effects may also occur, influencing the interviewees in their answers through factors of social desirability (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 127-128). In the course of conducting the interviews, three acquired cases did not actually meet the requirements for participating in the interviews, which were the use of communication pauses in internal corporate communication. Despite sending a briefing on the content, background and requirements after contacting the companies, they agreed to an interview. It only became clear during the interviews that these companies were not qualified for contributing to the research interest. For this reason, these three companies and interviews were not considered in answering the research questions.

Conclusion

This study is the first to examine communication pauses in the internal communication of large German companies. In order to answer the research question "What role do communication pauses play in the internal communication of large German companies?", communication managers from various companies were surveyed by means of semi-standardized interviews. Another focus lied on the definition and

implementation of communication pauses as well as on internal corporate communications and the influence of the digital transformation. Regarding the central findings of this research, it becomes clear that communication pauses are implemented in internal corporate communications in very different ways. Due to a variety of reasons, the implementation measures are controlled both top-down and bottom-up.

A major goal of this study was to generate a definition for the term communication pauses. With the help of a working definition and the findings from the interviews, the following definition was formulated:

The term 'communication pause' can be understood as an umbrella term for all deliberate measures that are aimed at temporarily relieving the stress of employees, caused by communication. These measures are controlled both top-down and bottom-up in the hierarchy of companies.

The definition is the first scientific attempt at a description of the phenomenon of communication pauses in companies and can consequently be enriched and improved by future studies. Further scientific projects should follow up on analyzing the implementation of communication pauses in internal corporate communication between different industries. Due to the limitations mentioned above, further research in the field of communication pauses is necessary. It remains to be explored how the implementation and use of communicative pauses differ from industry to industry. During the interview with the Lufthansa Group, which is part of the negative examples, it became clear that service companies cannot have any pauses in their communication due to the absence of breaks in the business process. Due to the non-fulfillment of the requirements, Lufthansa Group, among other companies, is not considered part of the sample. Such industry-dependent differences, as well as criteria that determine the implementation, should be highlighted in future research. In addition, it is necessary to specify the patterns and methods identified in this work and to test them using quantitative research methods. It would also be of interest to examine how the strategic use of communication pauses in the large companies examined in this

study varies when compared to medium-sized and smaller companies (such as start-ups), especially regarding their differing numbers of employees and organization of internal communication. Furthermore, the focus could be placed on the implementation of communicative pauses. The question of how such pauses are integrated into the daily work routine could be examined regarding different work and time models (such as shift work, working in different time zones, etc.). Additionally, employees themselves should be asked about the introduction and implementation of communication pauses. It becomes clear that a close cooperation between science and practice is necessary to fully understand, analyze and concretize the concept.

In addition to this theoretical achievement, practical recommendations for the implementation of communication pauses in the corporate context could be established. These can be summarized into four points: 1) clear strategy, 2) management support, 3) creating understanding and 4) regular employee surveys. With the help of these findings, practitioners from internal corporate communications can be enabled to appropriately evaluate the topic of communication pauses and its value for their company as well as effectively implement it, if necessary. Showing communication professionals the relevance of communication pauses in internal corporate communication is therefore an important concern of this study and at the same time justifies its contribution in communication science. The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the reasons for implementing communication pauses in everyday professional life are primarily due to the growing number of communication channels and the increasing mass of communicated information. According to the interviews, this leads to a desire for a reduction and clear structuring of internal communication activities. So far, the companies surveyed have implemented measures such as regular days without meetings, shortened meetings, shortened messages, flexible scheduling of meetings or even health offers to train mindfulness.

Since these measures vary greatly among the surveyed companies, it is important to differentiate between the mentioned measures in terms of challenges and potentials. The interviewees see positive effects of communication pauses primarily in employee satisfaction through communicative relief and thus a more targeted effect of communication. Additionally, several challenges were mentioned, which can certainly be explained by the lack of discussion regarding communication pauses in research and practice. The negative examples clearly show which arguments speak against the implementation of communication pauses and that certain industries such as aviation are inhibited from the implementation due to the specifics of the industry. In addition to the industry, corporate culture seems to play a decisive role in determining whether measures to reduce the stress of communication can be implemented and are accepted by the members of the companies.

In addition to fixed communication pauses, some of the companies surveyed are increasingly relying on self-determination of their employees. With many communication channels available, employees need to decide for themselves which ones they want to use. A catalyst for the importance of communication pauses undoubtedly is the digital transformation in the workplace, which has been enormously accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all interviewees stated that they have clearly felt this development in their company. As a result, some companies have derived measures like communication pauses, to limit excessive internal communication activities.

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